



Exploring the Elements, Impacts, and Determinants of Unstructured Outdoor Play in Children: A Literature Review

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Introduction

Play - primary occupation of childhood

UN Convention on the Rights of the Child - children have the right to participate in play (Pope et al., 2021)

Unstructured outdoor play - spontaneous, child-directed play that takes place in the outdoors (Herrington et al., 2015)

Children's engagement in outdoor play is on the decline

- Spending **less time outside** than their parents once did (Tremblay et al., 2015)
- Spending **more time indoors**, engaged in structured play and sedentary behavior (Tremblay et al., 2015)

Purpose

1. Identify elements and characteristics of unstructured outdoor play.
2. Understand how unstructured outdoor play impacts various aspects of childhood development.
3. Understand the interconnectedness of Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems and how multiple factors can have compounding effects, limiting a child's engagement in unstructured outdoor play.

Methodology

Databases: PubMed and PsycINFO.

Keywords: outdoor play, nature play, risky play, parental perspectives, child development

Requirements: Peer-reviewed, published in the last 10 years, covered at least one of the topics or subtopics (elements, impacts: motor, social, cognitive, and determinants)

Organization: Based on the topics and/or subtopics they covered, some articles were used for more than one topic and/or subtopic

Number of Qualifying Articles: 13

Findings

Elements



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Natural Materials



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Loose Parts

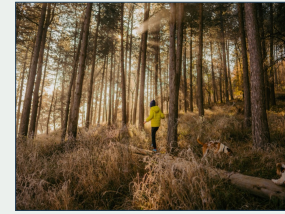


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Opportunity for Risk

Impacts

Motor Skills

- Balance/Coordination
- Fitness and Endurance
- Perceptual Motor Capacity
- Fine Motor Skills

Due to:

- Increased physical activity
- Variation in movements
- Weight-bearing activities
- Testing physical capacity
- Exploratory-sensory play

Social Skills

- Learning Societal Norms, Roles, and Values
- Collaboration
- Sharing
- Self-Advocacy
- Understanding Perspectives
- Social/Emotional Resiliency

Due to:

- Increased social interactions
- Opportunities for conversation, cooperation, and conflict management

Cognitive Skills

- Creativity/Imagination
- Problem Solving
- Decision Making
- Self-Regulation
- Language Development

Due to:

- Reduced behavior regulation requirements
- Autonomy
- Independent Mobility

Determinants

Microsystem

- Hyper-parenting
- Parental attitudes and behaviors
- Parent participation in outdoor time
- Peer influence
- Neighborhood safety

Mesosystem

- Parent vs. teacher perspectives
- Parent and teacher communication
- PCP and parent communication

The Individual:

- Sex/gender
- Race/ethnicity
- Age
- Independent mobility

Exosystem

- COVID-19 restrictions
- Access to environments allowing for outdoor play
- School and childcare perspectives
- Level of trust in neighborhood environment

Macrosystem

- Play is recognized as a human right
- Risk-averse society
- Two working parents
- Value organized sports and academics
- Cultural perspectives on independent mobility

Chronosystem

- Shifting perspectives
- Increase in technology

Conclusions

Profound impacts on childhood development due to:

- Variation in movements and play types
- Increased social interactions
- Testing of physical capacity

Impacts include:

- ↑ motor coordination and endurance
- ↑ creativity and problem-solving
- Development of self-advocacy and language

Factors limiting children's engagement:

- Negative parental attitudes
- Evolving societal norms and values
- Demographic features

Next Steps

- Compare the impact of outdoor play to indoor play as the control
- Examine how engagement in outdoor play can be addressed through occupational therapy and science

Acknowledgements

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References

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