

{ Position
Statement
Series

**Nature Play
is Everybody's
Business**

Health



**We believe a healthy world comes from
a complete and balanced childhood
incorporating - OUTDOOR FREE PLAY**



Health

**Infra-
structure**

Education

Environment

Community

CHILD

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Health

**The overall healthy
development of a child
requires daily outdoor
free play**

CHILD





HEALTH



Children who play outdoors daily are:

- ✓ Less likely to be obese
- ✓ Less likely to suffer from diabetes or other forms of comorbidity
- ✓ Less sedentary
- ✓ More physically active
- ✓ Building healthy life skills and habits
- ✓ More likely to have increase mental health
- ✓ Less likely to have myopia



Health - Nature Play is Everybody's Business



Outdoor free play is not only fun, it is a preventative health measure. Outdoor free play can contribute significantly to reducing endemic health issues including poor mental health and obesity. Through outdoor free play, children develop their own relationship with outdoor physical activity based on their individual interests and passions. This process is essential for creating lifelong healthy habits.

However outdoor free play is in decline across Australia and the developing world with potential ongoing detrimental developmental impacts. Reasons for this decline are complex and multi-dimensional. Cross- departmental collaboration and wide community support are essential to bridge the growing gap between the lack of daily outdoor free play and a full and healthy childhood. **Nature Play is Everybody's Business.**

HOW THESE POSITION STATEMENTS WORK

This document is part of series of evidence-based position statements focused on childhood and outdoor free play. They intend to demonstrate the importance, benefits, issues as well as actions required to support children to grow healthy, happy and strong through regular daily outdoor free play.

What follows is the product of a thorough examination of key health benefits and issues associated with daily outdoor free play in modern childhood. Central to this document are key considerations and recommendations to enable real and meaningful changes that both safeguard childhood and support child development.

HEALTH BENEFITS - Outdoor Free Play is essential for children's health, wellbeing and development

- Children who are physically active are less likely to suffer from acute or chronic health problems such as diabetes and high blood pressure and are less likely to be overweight or obese (e.g. AEDC, 2016).
- Children who are physically active outdoors have enhanced psychological wellbeing and reductions in stress, anxiety and depression (e.g. AEDC, 2016).
- Increased levels of physical activity occur in outdoor environments compared with indoor environments (Janssen & Rosu, 2015).
- Children's free play develops socialisation skills, reduces feelings of isolation, improves executive functioning and builds resilience and problems solving skills (e.g. Beyer et al., 2014; Burdette & Whitaker, 2005; Hughes, 2007). These are crucial factors in child mental health.
- Children who do not have opportunities to play, particularly outdoors and with other children, demonstrate increased evidence of anxiety, depression, feelings of helplessness and narcissism (Gray, 2011; Jarvis, Newman & Swiniarski, 2014).
- Physical activity and sedentary behaviours formed in childhood influence and predict behaviours and attitudes in adulthood (e.g. Centre for Disease Control & Prevention, USA; Department of Health, UK; Federal Ministry of Health, Germany; The Department of Health, Australia).
- During outdoor free play children develop essential physical literacies required for their life long development (AHKA, 2016).
- While genetics play a role, time spent outdoors is related to reduced rates of myopia in children and adolescents (American Academy of Ophthalmology, 2011; Tideman et al., 2017).

THE PROBLEM- The decline of outdoor free play is a growing health Issue for Australia

- Opportunity for free play in childhood is a predictor of social success and individual adaptability (Greve & Thomson, 2016; Barker et al., 2014; Lillard et al., 2013).
- Children are spending less time outdoors in nature and more time indoors, sedentary, watching or engaging with a screen (Brussoni et al., 2015; Bell et al., 2015; Mc Curdy et al. 2010).
- Only 19% of Australian children aged 5 - 17 years meet physical activity guidelines of at least 60 minutes of moderate to vigorous physical activity a day (AHAK, 2016).
- Less than 20% of Australian children aged 5 -17 meet overall recommended physical activity levels (AHAK, 2016).
- Only 26% of 2 - 4 year olds and 30% of 5 - 17 year olds meet the sedentary behaviours screen time guidelines every day (AHAK 2016).
- According to the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (2016) anxiety disorders form the second highest source of burden of disease among 5 - 14 year old boys and depressive disorders fall within the top 5. For girls aged 5 - 14 years old, anxiety disorders are identified as the top source of burden of disease with depressive disorders identified as the 3rd source (AEDC, 2015).
- Around 26% of children aged 5 - 14 have a body mass index (BMI) score that is above the international scale for 'overweight' or 'obese' for their age and sex (AIHW, 2016).
- According to the Australian Early Development Census (AEDC, 2015), 1 in 5 children are developmentally vulnerable across at least one measured domain. The proportion of children vulnerable in physical health and wellbeing, social competence and emotional maturity increased in 2015 from previous results (AEDC, 2015).
- In Queensland, 1 in 4 children are identified as developmentally vulnerable in one or more domains (26.1%); and the percentage of children developmentally vulnerable in each domain, and in one or two or more domains is higher than any other state other than the Northern Territory (AEDC, 2015).

KEY CONSIDERATIONS – reducing barriers and enhancing opportunities for outdoor free play

- Parental habits and fears are key barriers to children's outdoor free play.
- Governments, policy makers and health workers can influence a culture of change among parents, educators, architects and planners to positively impact on children's access to outdoor free play space and time.
- Governments and health professionals are essential advocates for revitalising daily outdoor free play.
- Health and safety strategies, policies and messaging should recognise the importance of outdoor free play, while seeking holistic solutions to risk that collectively make society and spaces safer without limiting outdoor play options.
- Children from racial or ethnic minorities, particularly in urban environments and those from low socio-economic backgrounds are disadvantaged in their access to natural areas for play and frequency of visits to natural / green spaces.
- Child health and social workers can identify disadvantages and work with parents to help breakdown access barriers.

NEXT STEPS - ALIGNING NATURE PLAY AND HEALTH

Strengthening children's health and the health of their communities

Fostering communities and institutions that enable, encourage and celebrate outdoor free play aligns with *Children's Health Queensland Strategic Plan 2016 – 2020*. Children's Health Queensland's (CHQ) objectives recognise the importance of engaging with children and families to build health literacy. The Strategic Plan recognises the role CHQ plays in promoting prevention strategies and the value of working with partners in other sectors, including education and housing, to address the determinants of child health and youth health outcomes. The Plan also emphasises CHQ's role to lead, influence and advocate on child and youth health policy at a state and national level.

Promoting outdoor free play also aligns with the *Council of Australian Governments Health Council's National Strategic Framework for Child and Youth Health* with its strategic priorities to equip children and young people to become strong and resilient, living in healthy and safe homes, communities and environments (COAG, 2015).

In addition, *Queensland Health's Health and Wellbeing Strategic Framework 2017 to 2026* focuses on increasing the proportion of Queenslanders who adopt healthy behaviours. It recognises the importance of nurturing the attitudes, motivations and skills needed to help people to live healthy lives. It acknowledges the importance of fostering environments and communities that can positively influence healthy behaviour. *The Overweight and Obesity Prevention Strategy 2017 to 2020* sets specific childhood targets and aims to increase physical activity opportunities and empower individuals to make healthier lifestyle choices.

Health professionals, with their central position in the community, can take a lead in valuing and promoting healthy and active outdoor free play.

Nature Play QLD promotes the health benefits of outdoor free play through presentations, events and resources for educators, organisations and health professionals working with families and children. Nature Play QLD also works with key community health partners such as QLD Health's - Children & Youth Community Health Services, Child Development Paediatricians, Regional Child Development Social Workers Occupational Therapists, Child Psychologists and Social Workers, the Heart Foundation as well as community health organisations. The Nature Play QLD Advisory Committee includes 2 representatives from Children's Health Queensland, Hospital and Health Services who offer useful health related guidance.

Nature Play QLD would like to invite Queensland Health to continue to strengthen its engagement and leadership in relation to outdoor free play as a key health tool for children. Five key suggestions include:

1. Meeting with Nature Play QLD to discuss possible ways outdoor free play could be integrated into relevant policies, strategies and initiatives,
2. Exploring potential resourcing to support augmenting community awareness of the health benefits associated with daily outdoor free play across the diverse areas of the Queensland population,
3. Exploring potential resourcing to support increased advocacy and direct initiatives to increase children's access to outdoor free play,
4. Meeting with Nature Play QLD to discuss developing a suite of resources and fact sheets to be disseminated to health professionals, parents and carers across Queensland,
5. Sending delegates to attend and actively participate in Nature Play QLD's - CHILDHOOD SUMMIT in 2019.

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The Nature Play is Everybody's Business Position Statements were developed by Nature Play QLD

Ph: 07 3367 1989

www.natureplayqld.org.au