

# The American Association for the Child’s Right to Play

## POLICY BRIEF

### NATURE IS ESSENTIAL

#### WE BELIEVE

- CHILDREN are the foundation of the world's future.
- CHILDREN have always played in all cultures throughout history.
- PLAY, along with the basic needs of nutrition, health, shelter, and education, is vital to developing the potential of all children.
- PLAY is communication and expression, combining thought and action; it gives satisfaction and a feeling of achievement.
- PLAY is instinctive, voluntary, and spontaneous.
- PLAY helps children develop physically, mentally, emotionally, and socially.
- PLAY is a means of learning to live, not a mere passing of time. (Source adapted from IPAWORLD.org)

#### WHAT YOU CAN DO

- Positive experiences playing in nature in the early years inform children's environmental identity and values and contribute to achieving education for sustainability goals set by the United Nations (Boileau, 2024).
- Scheduled outdoor time should include children spending time in nature.

THE BENEFITS OF DOING SOMETHING	THE COST OF DOING NOTHING
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✓ Regular, repeated time spent in nature allows children to feel in tune with their local environment, gain a sense of place and belonging, and understand natural processes and cycles (Boileau, 2024).</li> <li>✓ Systematic literature reviews affirm that the natural world presents play opportunities with cognitive, social, creative, physical, emotional, and biophilic benefits (Johnstone et al., 2022; Mann et al., 2022).</li> <li>✓ Research suggests that play in nature enhances spatial working memory (Torquati et al., 2017), cultivates executive functions (Carr et al., 2017; Ernst &amp; Burcak, 2019), underpins early science learning (Gomes &amp; Flear, 2020), and fosters environmental identities and stewardship (DeVillie et al., 2021).</li> <li>✓ Playing in nature improves skills necessary for academic success, self-regulation, and executive functioning, and it is tied to improved health and increased happiness (Dargatz, 2024).</li> <li>✓ Nature play and being in nature significantly impact children's overall well-being (Larimore, 2024), including physical health. Its most basic impact on physical health results in children being more physically active outdoors than indoors (Larimore, 2024). Outdoor activities reduce the risk of obesity when green spaces are near children's homes (Larimore, 2024).</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✓ There are increasing concerns about the disconnection between children and nature, risk-averse environments, sedentary technology experiences, and a lack of time for unstructured outdoor play experiences (Moroney, 2024) and about risk-averse environments, sedentary technology experiences, and a lack of time for unstructured outdoor play experiences (Moroney, 2024).</li> <li>✓ An expanding body of scientific evidence suggests that nature-deficit disorder contributes to diminished use of the senses, attention difficulties, conditions of obesity, and higher rates of emotional and physical illnesses (Louv, 2019).</li> <li>✓ “Nature deprivation,” a lack of time in the natural world, largely due to hours spent in front of TV or computer screens, has been associated, unsurprisingly, with depression. More unexpected are studies by Weinstein and others that associate screen time with loss of empathy and lack of altruism (Delagran, 2021, retrieved from <a href="http://www.takingcharge.csh.umn.edu/how-does-nature-impact-our-wellbeing">www.takingcharge.csh.umn.edu/how-does-nature-impact-our-wellbeing</a>).</li> <li>✓ Those with the lowest levels of nature space exposure during childhood have a 55% higher level of risk of developing mental illness (Engemann, K. et al., <i>PNAS</i>, Vol. 116, No. 11, 2019)</li> </ul>



## IPA USA Vision, Mission, and Guiding Principles

### Vision Statement:

A world where all children can play

### Purpose/Mission Statement (from Bylaws):

IPA USA aims to protect, preserve, and promote the child's right to play.

### What is Play?

Play is the work of childhood. Play is biologically driven. There are many types of play. The highest, purest form of play is spontaneous, freely chosen, intrinsically motivated, pleasurable, purposeless, and free from conflicts. For younger children, it also contains symbolism and elements of pretend.

### Guiding Principles

- Play, along with the basic needs of nutrition, health, shelter, and education, is **vital for the development of all children from birth to 18 years**.
- Play is **integral and necessary** for social, emotional, cognitive, language, and physical development.
- Play **facilitates brain growth**, especially in the frontal cortex, where essential cognitive functions reside, including attention, self-regulation, working memory, and cognitive flexibility, all known as executive function.
- Many foundational skills can only be developed **through play** and thus justify the essential need for recess for younger children and breaks for older children.
- Play opportunities are **needed for children both indoors and outdoors**.
- Play needs differ **among the age groups**: birth to age 2, pre-k, early elementary, upper elementary, middle school, and high school.
- Schools, especially pre-K and elementary schools, **need help understanding** that young children learn best through play.
- Schools need help and support in providing meaningful and appropriate play opportunities, such as experiential, inquiry, integrated, and emergent approaches to curriculum.
- **Families need help** recognizing that play is necessary for healthy development, and that family play also bonds the family and helps build happy childhoods.
- **Community services and regulators**, such as parks and recreation, city planning, playground inspectors, and housing developments, need help understanding why opportunities for risky play should be included in their planning.
- All types of play are essential (e.g., physical play, such as running, climbing, swinging, etc.; block and construction play; play within art and music; games with rules; rough and tumble play; risky play; nature play; role-playing; etc.), but **child-directed, spontaneous play** is the most important type of play during the early years of birth through age eight.
- Children have the right to play as guaranteed by the 1989 [United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child](#).

The IPA USA's 50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary White Paper is a comprehensive resource of 57 articles written by a group of dedicated authors to support advocacy efforts in addressing the child's right to play. To learn more about this topic or to review other topics in the IPA USA 50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary White Paper, please visit [IPAUSA.org](http://IPAUSA.org). Questions? Email [ipausa2019user@gmail.com](mailto:ipausa2019user@gmail.com). IPA USA is here to support you in your work.