# Unstructured Outdoor Play is Essential for Sport Readiness

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## Introduction

Children do not necessarily know what their brains and bodies need; they depend on their parents, teachers, and other influential adults to provide developmentally focused movement opportunities. Unstructured outdoor play is fundamental for healthy brain and body development in childhood. Sadly, adults sabotage children by bypassing the developmental process and replacing unstructured outdoor play with sports.

Overall, adults want children to be healthy and happy, but the opposite trend is growing among children. If we pause to reflect on why this generation is the most unhealthy and unhappy of all, it is due to the removal of play from children's lives and the adult push for children to participate in sports and competition before they are developmentally, physically, and emotionally ready (Forrest et al., 2025).

Unstructured outdoor play lays the foundation for a child to be sport-ready. Sport readiness is the child's overall state (physical, mental, emotional, social) to meet the demands of a sport (Purcell, 2005). Therefore, parents need to understand that sport readiness develops naturally through daily outdoor play, which provides valuable opportunities for long-term motor skill development (Aicinena, 1992; Kochanek et al., 2019).

Consider the following two scenarios of park spaces a child might have access to. Which of these scenarios would lay the foundation for healthy development, and which one would fall short?

**Scenario One:** A parent working on soccer drills with their two sons (ages 7 and 10). The parent sets up cones, an agility ladder, and a soccer goal as a circuit. The sons would do the explained circuit drills– with eyes down and seemingly uninspired – receive a few minutes of feedback from the parent before trudging back to the start of the circuit to run robotically through the exact same sequence again.

Return to Table of Contents

**Scenario Two:** Parents sitting on a blanket while their kids (10 and under chase birds, climb a tree, swing, or dig for fossils. They use physical skills such as running, dodging, stopping, starting, skipping, accelerating, and strategizing, as well as laughing, throughout their play.

Scenarios One and Two can be seen throughout the United States. The first scenario is adult-directed, repetitive, and boring. This is NOT the secret formula for children's health, fitness, and sports readiness. The second scenario illustrates the joy, excitement, laughter, physical challenges, and strength-building that occur when children lead their play.

## Problem Statement

For children to develop physically, emotionally, cognitively, and socially, unstructured outdoor play is essential to healthy development. Children's bodies demand the opportunity to be physically active every day. Adults, not children, have led the trend we have seen over the past fifty years. This has created a developmental model that is counterproductive to a child's health and may, ultimately, destroy their enthusiasm for life. This cultivated developmental model assumes that sports can replace unstructured outdoor play and produce similar holistic developmental outcomes.

In reality, substituting structured sports for free play can hinder development in significant ways, as unstructured, self-directed outdoor play is crucial for developing balanced limbs (Webb & Rhea, 2023a), motor skills (Campbell-Pierre & Rhea, 2023; Sutapa et al., 2021), brain neuroplasticity (Cebolla & Cheron, 2019; Pedersen, 2019), social negotiation (Rhea, 2021), and emotion regulation (Rhea et al., 2025). While sports can provide physical activity, they often lack the imagination, intrinsic motivation, and autonomy found in unstructured outdoor play (Gray, 2017).

Adults assume that if children participate in sports early enough and maybe even specialize in one sport, they will develop more quickly and become better athletes than those who do not participate in sports early in life. Specialization at an early age has been shown to increase muscle imbalances and injury rates, and to decrease physical performance over time (Puzzitiello et al., 2021; Rugg et al., 2021; Stricker et al., 2020).

Return to Table of Contents

Participating in a sport at an early age does not produce sport readiness; unstructured outdoor play does. To improve a child's overall health and fitness so they can lead a healthy life and succeed in sport, we must consider how to appropriately develop sport readiness in children.

## Background

Sport readiness means a child has established baseline health and will navigate childhood and, eventually, adulthood with confidence, functioning at the advanced levels of movement, mobility, and explosiveness needed for sports. These positive elements increase the likelihood of lifelong physical activity while reducing injury risk (Basso et al., 2021; Rosengren et al., 2021a; Rosengren et al., 2021b).

Unstructured outdoor play gives children a perfect space to be physically active, coordinate limb movements, and vary limb movement directions through fundamental skills such as walking, running, jumping, dodging, cutting, crawling, and climbing (Campbell-Pierre & Rhea, 2023; Dankiw et al., 2020; Webb & Rhea, 2023a). School and home are the perfect places to provide outdoor play opportunities. Sadly, these opportunities are missing in both places.

### Recess in School for Sport Readiness

Fifty years ago, the American school system understood the value of whole child development and the need for indoor and outdoor movement breaks. This was evident in play and imagination stations within the classroom, an emphasis on physical education, music, and art, and multiple outdoor recess breaks each day, which provided ample opportunities for physical activity. Over the past 25 years, standardized testing for 3rd through 12th graders, competition-focused physical education opportunities, and the rampant use of technology have prioritized academics over whole-child development (Panieti-Madan & Ranganathan, 2023). These standards quickly removed children's individual developmental achievements and forgot that children are social, physical, spiritual, emotional, and cognitive beings (Stoewen, 2025). Governmental policies imposed on the American school system have caused it to lose its soul and shift from whole-child development to predominantly academic and competitive pursuits. This has left a void in opportunities for children to build sport readiness during the

Return to Table of Contents

school day through the most opportune means: recess, defined as outdoor, unstructured free play.

One highly successful recess intervention, The LiiNK Project® (Let's inspire innovation 'N Kids), focuses on whole child development in elementary and middle school settings. The LiiNK intervention is a multi-year, routinely scheduled, teacher-embraced model that includes four 15-minute recesses (outdoor child-directed play breaks) and 15-minute character lessons (Positive Action®) daily. LiiNK research has shown that children with 60 minutes of daily recess have decreased stress levels (Rhea et al., 2025), improved happiness and positive emotions (Clark & Rhea, 2017), decreased off-task behaviors (Rhea & Rivchun, 2018), and maintained greater attentional focus when returning to the classroom (Lund et al., 2017). The LiiNK research team has also found that children with 60 minutes of recess exhibit exponentially more moderate-to-vigorous physical activity (MVPA) and have significant gains in postural balance, movement skills, and muscular strength development compared to those who receive 30 minutes or less of daily recess (Farbo et al., 2024; Farbo & Rhea, 2022; Rhea et al., 2026; Webb et al., 2025a; Webb et al., 2025b). The increased MVPA, postural balance, movement skills, and muscular strength provided by school recess are essential for enhancing whole health and sport readiness in children and preparing them for structured activities, such as Physical Education (PE).

Physical Education (PE) can play a key role during the school day in supporting sport readiness. PE is a structured, planned, intentional, and adult-supervised environment designed to improve motor and social skills as well as physical fitness and lifetime physical activity. The PE teacher must create a fun, safe, and engaging environment to advance social, emotional, cognitive, and physical skills. Even the best PE programs in the world cannot replace the benefits of recess. For the PE environment to be successful, a child must first practice moving their body and limbs in their chosen planes during free play to build the foundation of strength, coordination, mobility, flexibility, and confidence needed for structured physical activity if recess has been prioritized throughout the child's life. Free play allows children to apply the structured skills introduced in PE.

Return to Table of Contents

**Physical Activity at Home for Sport Readiness**

Before the 1980s, children played outside from the time they came home from school until they were called in to have dinner. Over the past few decades, this has all changed. Parents have become more fearful of their children playing outside due to safety concerns and a lack of areas to play. One key shift to address these issues was introducing sport development to younger children (starting at age 5). Most parents believed introducing their child to sport at a younger age would improve their physical fitness, emotional control, and social well-being. The intent of this early introduction for children was basic motor skill development related to the sport of interest and a safe, healthy place to be physically active. In most cases, it quickly became much more competitive without taking the child's developmental considerations into account. Most children have neither become more physically fit nor appropriately developed social and emotional skills.

Many parents have substituted outdoor play for organized sport. Organized sport, being another structured active environment, is similar to PE. It is often misunderstood in childhood as an appropriate replacement for outdoor unstructured play. Parents often check off the daily physical activity box for their child when the child attends practice or a game, not realizing the child gets fewer opportunities to be physically active than during recess or unstructured outdoor play at home. The components of sport do not provide the choice and variety of limb movements that outdoor free play offers and therefore lack many of the elements that prepare the future athlete for advanced movement skills and a reduced risk of injury. This is evident in youth sports, where repeated skill sequences often lack variety and intensity of movement for years on end. Increased injuries and surgeries in high school athletics testify to the detrimental effects of this repetition, particularly the lack of physical activity variety that unstructured free play offers (McLellan et al., 2022; Okoruwa et al., 2022).

Early participation in sport, especially early specialization, has led parents to believe their child is fit for a future in sports. The reality is that their child is "skilled" for future sport, but their body is not conditioned or prepared for the impacts of future sport. Negating the variety of movement from outdoor free play in childhood negates

Return to Table of Contents

the muscular, bone, joint-stabilizing, and neuromuscular development needed for success and injury prevention in higher levels of organized sport (Beato et al., 2021; Hulteen et al., 2018; Kokštejn et al., 2017; Payne & Isaacs, 2017; Pedersen, 2019; Rosengren, 2021a; Sutapa et al., 2021; Widodo et al., 2022).

Therefore, PE and/or organized sports cannot replace unstructured outdoor play; they should be secondary and supplemental. Children will be successful, confident, safe, and strong in structured opportunities only after they have developed properly through choice-directed, unstructured free play in the natural outdoor environment. The beauty of this actuality is that outdoor free play is accessible to most children, if purposefully sought, with fewer financial obligations and time constraints than organized sports. Additionally, when children are allowed to play outdoors freely, the vast majority (97%) engage in limb movements that prepare the body for the development of muscular strength and neuromuscular control, thereby enhancing sport readiness (Webb & Rhea, 2023a).

## Appropriate Approaches/Strategies

The key to sport readiness in childhood is increased time spent in unstructured outdoor free play. Strategies to increase time spent playing outdoors at school and home are given below.

### School Setting Strategies

First, every school district should adopt a recess policy that includes at least four components: 1) recess is offered at least twice daily for 20 minutes each; 2) recess is protected from tutoring or punishment; 3) recess is unstructured and outdoors; and 4) electronic devices or any other reading materials should be available during this time.

Second, as a teacher, parent, or coach, identify school board representatives, state legislature representatives, and state boards of education members with whom you can build a rapport about examining procedures and protocols such as those found with The LiiNK Project to provide quality recess settings essential for whole child development and sport readiness. A few sport readiness talking points for school districts to adopt LiiNK practices or similar are:

Return to Table of Contents

1. Children will have fewer discipline issues and be more focused in the classroom, on the field, or in the gym.
2. Children will develop resiliency and intrinsic motivation so they will be much better equipped for school, for sport participation, and for life; children will be more socially responsible and emotionally regulated;
3. Children will develop strong bones, muscles, joints, and nervous systems, prepped and ready for advanced opportunities in physical education and sport.
4. Physical educators should assess muscular strength and neuromuscular control to ensure they are physically ready for complex motor skills and participation in sports.

When children do not have daily time for play and recess, physical issues such as limb imbalances, lateral vs. vertical movement weaknesses, decreased neuromuscular control, and poor bone/muscle/joint development can develop and lead to sport injuries. Therefore, these assessments are essential to develop sport-ready children.

**Home Setting Strategies**

- Parents must begin monitoring all daily screen time (cell phones, iPads, televisions, etc.) and develop a purposeful plan to replace at least 1 hour of that time with outdoor free play. Parents, be ready for mood swings and resistance as you replace sedentary screen time with unstructured outdoor play. Electronics, similar to drugs, are emotionally and chemically addicting. At first, you'll see irritability and resistance to detoxing, but hold your ground. You will see amazing changes in your child's emotional state and activity levels within a few short weeks, with more gains as time progresses.
- Make sure the outdoors is accessible to children daily. If safe, have children go outside for at least an hour when they first come home from school, as this has many physiological and cognitive benefits for sport readiness and overall child/adolescent health. Outdoor physical movement removes excess cortisol or stress hormones from the body that build up stress after a long day at school, it reboots hormone and insulin sensors for increased energy and moods in the evening (Al Zaki et al., 2023; Li et al., 2023), it brings oxygen to the brain for

Return to Table of Contents

cognitive clarity (Raine et al., 2023), and it allows for much needed reflection time alone, and/or social time with siblings/peers (Qiu et al., 2025). As a parent of four, I feel that the best time for outdoor playtime on weekdays is immediately after school. Children are drained from the sedentary school day and the overloaded focus time. Parents often mistake the first hour at home for a time to rest or do homework, when it's actually the best time to get kids moving. They become more energized and can focus on homework once they have had time to play and refresh their bodies and minds.

- Wait until children are at least 10 years old before introducing them to more competitive sports programs, but keep them playing outdoors in the neighborhood. For children under the age of nine, the goals of participation are to be active, have fun, and have a positive sports experience through learning and practicing fundamental skills. Competition is not the goal. Intense training at a young age can lead to burnout, with an estimated 70% of young “athletes” dropping out of sports by age 13 (Seligman, 2025). Furthermore, sport specialization should not occur until late adolescence, around ages 15-16 (Brenner et al., 2016; Seligman, 2025). This means children should participate in different sports across seasons throughout the year, rather than one sport year-round. Sport specialization for young children increases risk for depression, stress, anxiety, and issues around self-worth and attrition, in addition to compromising joint health and appropriate physical development, leading to sport injuries and mental health issues (Puzzitiello et al., 2021; Rugg et al., 2021; Stricker et al., 2020)

## Conclusions

Sport readiness is a child's ability to meet the demands of participation in sport and to learn the values and skills required to do so successfully (Aicinena, 1992; Harris, 2000; Kochanek et al., 2019). Sport-ready children must meet developmental milestones in muscular strength and neuromuscular control. Setting these milestones for each age group and then testing children for these competencies is necessary to understand their developmental level. Researchers have assessed components such as muscular strength and neuromuscular control in physical education classes (Webb et

Return to Table of Contents

al., 2025a; Webb et al., 2025b). Integrating these assessments into schools and sports programs on a large scale will help determine children's health and identify where intervention strategies are needed to help children become sport-ready. Although some national physical testing standards exist, they need revision to assess the muscular strength components included in the above studies and accurately gauge sport readiness among our youth.

Current trends in state legislation are making strides toward protecting and increasing recess time during the school day. California's Senate Bill 291, passed this year, requires all school districts to provide 30 minutes of daily recess, separately distinct from meal and physical education times (CDE, 2025). School adoption of recess protocols, such as The LiiNK Project, along with legislative recognition of required recess time, will significantly increase the percentage of children who enter adolescence with a sport-ready foundation.

Overall, when children have unstructured outdoor play throughout the school day, parents purposefully trade sedentary time for it. If parents realize sports should not replace outdoor unstructured free play time, the U.S. will present a new generation of sport-ready children who have increased baseline health, a lower chance of future comorbidity, more positive trends in mental health and social-emotional skills, confidence in the ability to move, increased opportunity for advanced skill, and decreased injuries. Outdoor unstructured play opportunities allow children to develop their limbs and muscular strength naturally, thereby increasing sport readiness and lifelong physical activity opportunities for generations to come.

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Return to Table of Contents

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Return to Table of Contents

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Return to Table of Contents

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Return to Table of Contents

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Return to Table of Contents

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Return to Table of Contents