



poverty.

homelessness.

healthcare.

crime.

the economy.

education.

the environment.

welfare.

volleyball.

In a hilly provincial park, a fourteen-year-old girl hikes breathlessly through the brush, feeling the strength of her body for the first time.

In a community centre basement, a bunch of teenage boys hash out their own rules for floor hockey, learning crucial lessons about give and take.

In a sunny classroom, a twelve-year-old girl stands before a blank canvas, and watches it become a place where dreams will play themselves out forever.

This is play at work. Shaping. Inspiring. Transforming. Play works. But play is misunderstood.

Play. It isn't all fun and games.

Play isn't just playing. It's not just in a park or a gym. And it's not just for children. Play is diving off the high board, making pottery, throwing a snowball, dreaming on a lawn, volunteering at a food bank or fighting for a good cause. It's in an alley, on a farm, in a studio, in an arena. It's supervised and unsupervised, structured and free, fun, serious, loud, quiet, creative, silly...

... and crucial for post-adolescent youth. Socially, physically, intellectually, emotionally, even civically. A game of chess ignites reasoning, logic. A run in the park hones coordination and strength. Becoming engaged in the community, developing personal and social responsibility—play is a vital part of the development of youth.

And the development of society. A society where youth have the space, support and freedom to play tends to be one with less crime and more post-secondary graduates. Less people using social services and more people using bike paths. A city where green space, art and civic responsibility bloom is one that's healthier, competitive, artistic. Wherever youth matter, play matters.

Play is a major social issue, one with a huge impact on so many other issues. But we've dropped the ball. And it's landed on our fifteen-year-olds.

Youth has been cancelled until further notice.

All work and no play has made Ontario a dull place for anybody over 10 years old.

Lack of investment and cutbacks in arts and recreation resources, downloading of services to municipalities, and the introduction of user fees have forced schools and communities to eliminate thousands of healthy, positive youth activities. After-school sport and interest leagues, arts activities and youth programs have been shut out of places they once thrived.

Less than 5% of Canada's schools have physical education programs that meet the minimum standards. Music, drama, and other arts programs—hugely important to shaping youth—have been decimated.



We've taken down the basketball nets and put up barriers.

Here's how:

- Fundamentally, we don't appreciate that play isn't just playing. So the arts and youth engagement activities get overlooked.
- Places to play, to be artistic, to meet—green spaces, church basements, school gyms—are unavailable or difficult to access. Basketball courts are padlocked. Loitering laws are enforced in parks. But malls are open.
- Cutbacks have meant that fewer activities are farther between. So transportation, especially in rural areas, has become an even bigger dilemma.
- To meet their developmental needs, youth need to be allowed to run their own activities. Unsupervised. Empowered. But we don't trust them. So we don't let them.
- Unstructured play, such as in drop-in centres, is suffering from inadequate supervision, and seen as too risky, a chance for youth to get into trouble. So it gets shut down.
- Volunteers and leaders are stretched as thin as their resources. Programs are weakened. Volunteers burn out. Youth get discouraged, and stay away.

What does it all mean? Less youth participation. More youth-related crime and drug use. More public complaints about loitering. A 50-percent increase in childhood obesity over the last 15 years.

And an entire segment of the population whose potential, promise, and proper development has gone from a birthright to an option. An option they don't even have.

Ontario needs to come out and play.

The Play Works Partnership is a group of organizations concerned about the future of our youth who have joined forces to bring back the power of play to Ontario's young people.

In order to launch this mission, three fundamental commitments need to be made immediately:

Ontario must become a youth-friendly province. In order to help bring down the barriers to play, we will launch a study of Ontario's communities—to understand where the barriers exist, where they are being overcome, which programs are working and which need help. We will recognize those communities that are open to youth play, and help others understand what resources are available to do the same.

A dialogue with our leaders must begin. Because youth play touches on all aspects of our society—health, social services, education, finance—we will request an immediate, long-term interministerial and intergovernmental dialogue, to understand what policies are in place to support play, and what ones are missing—then work together to fill in the blanks.

A renewed investment in youth play must be made. We are calling for a significant reinvestment across all levels of government, and all sectors that are impacted by this issue, towards youth development through play.

There is much to do. We have to put the basketball nets back up and turn the stagelights back on. We have to put youth workers back with the youth who need them. And we have to be open to the ideas, the energy, and the simple, basic needs of Ontario's young people. Like the need to go out and play.

Nobody cares. Not true anymore.

We are the Play Works Partnership—key representatives from leading organizations concerned about the future of our youth. In 2003, we came together to do something about an issue that has been relegated to the sidelines of society: youth play and activity in Ontario. We come from organizations in the areas of sport, physical activity, civic engagement, arts and culture, rural youth and recreation.

We exist to champion the social, environmental and economic benefits of investing in and maintaining youth recreational opportunities, spaces and programs at the community level. And we envision an Ontario society that values and demands more youth recreational activities in every community, with more youth involvement at the core.

We will be strong and relentless in our pursuit of policies, resources, and practices that make this vision real. Our young people deserve nothing less.