CHALLENGE PAPER

Children's Right to Play in New Brunswick

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ADVOCATE'S INTRODUCTION

In early 2025, authors Jonathan Haidt and Lenore Skenazy, with research scientist Zach Rausch, collaborated with a top polling firm to ask young people about play and free time. The results are worth considering. The phone-based childhood was continuing to become the norm – 75% of children between the ages 9 and 12 reported being regular players of the online game Roblox and over half reported that their friends had phones and social media accounts. Yet the vast majority of children also reported that they were never, or almost never, allowed to be out in public without an adult. Over half of children under 12 were not allowed to walk down a store aisle alone, over a quarter reported not being allowed to play alone in their yard.

When asked about their preferences, the children told a different story. Overwhelmingly, children responded that they felt they spent too much time on their phones and tablets and craved more time for play. They wanted, by a three-to-one margin, to have free play and organized activities. Yet interviews showed that children often choose screens because that is the only place where children are allowed free, independent exploration.

As a society, we are becoming so afraid of imagined and distant risks of letting children play that we are pushing them into the certain and documented risks of early and unsupervised time online. Rather than manage our fear of the very small chance a child could be harmed playing down the street, we are consigning them to a world that is proven to deliver harm to children's attention spans, intellectual and social development and mental health in most cases.

As we become frightened into steering our children on to screens, the public goods that supported play are beginning to atrophy. Organized activities happen less in public schools and more in paid programs. Sports steer towards earlier and earlier competitiveness and specialization and spaces for young children to learn sports are vanishing. Public spaces for children to meet and play are vanishing, the ones we have draw fewer public investments, and neighbourhoods are less often planned with child's play in mind.

If we do not reverse these trends, we will see children with more anxiety and less exposure to appropriate risk-taking, more obesity and health problems and fewer recreational interests, and fewer social tools and problem-solving skills because of a childhood spent consuming tech product and less time playing.

We need to talk about this.

In this paper, we are kicking off a discussion about what we can all do to bring play back. Some of the ideas worth discussing are:

- Reforming laws and practices to validate appropriate independent play and support parental freedom to let children play

- Supporting parents and families in understanding the role of play in kindergarten readiness and avoiding early academicization of early childhood development

- Supporting community spaces for independent play and appropriate risk taking

- Offering guidelines and support to reduce dependence on screen time and protect children from the predatory practices of social media and tech companies

- Ensuring equitable access to organized sports and recreation for all children, regardless of family status or community

- Creating more space for children to learn sports without specializing in competitive sports at an early age, instead optimizing chances to develop life-long play

- Giving children more spaces for play-based learning even if they are not in a regulated early childhood education facility

- Allowing older children more spaces to socialize and develop strong peer relationships

- Supporting schools in expanding extracurricular and co-curricular activities and restoring the role of the school as a community hub

The whittling away of space for children to play; of zones where children can be children, did not happen overnight. It happened gradually, partly through evolutions in our own communities and habits and partly because of predatory practices of technology and other companies designed to move play from a public good to be shared into a private commodity to be monetized. Reclaiming play is not often a policy challenge that grabs headlines, but it speaks to growing concerns around our health, education and social services as well as how we develop communities. The time has come to get serious about play, and I encourage all New Brunswickers to read this challenge paper, join the discussion, and ask what role each of us can play in returning childhood back to children.

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Children’s Right to Play in New Brunswick

Children’s right to play is more than a matter of leisure. It is a vital part of child-friendly public policy. Play is essential to the healthy development of children, enabling them to build social skills, resilience, creativity, and problem-solving capacity. For young children, play is often where curiosity and problem solving are developed so that skills like reading and numeracy can follow.

For older children, play is an essential part of developing the ability to know one’s own strengths and to work with others. At the community level, play fosters intergenerational connection, social trust, and healthier, more inclusive neighborhoods.

This centrality of play to the child’s holistic development is partly why play is a fundamental human right recognized under Article 31 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child. General Comment No. 17 clarifies the role of governments in protecting the right to play -- to ensure time and space for both free and structured play, to support families in understanding the role of play and in accessing programs and spaces, and ensuring equitable access (United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child, 2013).

In New Brunswick, where children and youth represent a shrinking share of the population, the conditions that support play have been shifting. Rising economic pressures, scarce resources for public schools, evolving cultural norms, and the increasing influence of digital technologies have altered how children spend their free time.

At the same time, concerns about safety, overscheduling, and unequal access to recreational opportunities are eroding children’s opportunities for free and meaningful play. This challenge paper examines how these issues intersect, why play matters, and how a collective approach to providing play could strengthen the well-being of New Brunswick’s children, youth, and communities.

The Importance of Play

Respecting the right to play includes providing support and guidance for parents and carers so they understand the importance of play and create environments allowing children to play freely and raising public awareness about the value of play and trying to change negative attitudes preventing children from enjoying their right to play. **Protecting** the right to play includes legislation (if necessary) to ensure equitable access, protect children from harm, ensure online safety, and create regulatory pathways for children to complain if their right to play is violated. **Fulfilling** the right to play includes ensuring (via consulting with children and children’s organizations how to best enact) things like:

national action plans, research and data collection, partnership and collaboration between government departments and local authorities, equity in expenditure, design of child-friendly civic environments, provision of training to all who work with children or whose work affects children and their right to play, and guaranteeing schools are adequately prepared to promote the right to play (Playboard Northern Ireland, 2016). In practice, both here and globally, there is more work to be done to integrate children's right to play fully into our contemporary societal fabric.

Children's play is far from a luxury—it's a core driver of healthy development across cognitive, social, emotional, and physical domains. Research demonstrates that unstructured, child-led play is especially potent for building self-regulation, executive function, social competence, and resilience. For example, an Australian longitudinal study found that 1–5 hours of outdoor play per day in early childhood predicted stronger self-regulation later on, regardless of baseline ability (Cankaya et al., 2025; Gray, 2013). Moreover, unstructured environments like loose parts play—a hallmark of child-led play—enhance problem-solving and creative thinking, a pattern confirmed in a 2025 systematic review (Cankaya et al., 2025).

Play's mental health benefits are well-supported. Nature-based or outdoor activities are associated with reduced symptoms of anxiety and depression, improved mood, and stress reduction. A 2021 meta-analysis of 51 studies found that such activities consistently enhanced well-being and lowered affective symptoms (Yogman et al., 2018). Another recent meta-review pointed to declines in anxiety and depressive symptoms through exposure to outdoor nature therapeutic interventions (Beaulieu & Beno, 2024).

Beyond individual benefits, play strengthens community cohesion and safety. Systematic reviews indicate that neighborhood features—nearby green spaces, safe sidewalks, traffic calming—encourage children to play outside, which, in turn, boosts informal social connection among neighbors and supports resilient, connected communities (Woolley & Griffin, 2015).

New Brunswick's Anglophone and Francophone early childhood curricula strongly embrace this evidence. The province's Curriculum Framework emphasizes voluntary, spontaneous, intrinsically motivated play—not just in preschool but as a pedagogical strategy across the early years—recognizing that children learn most deeply through exploration and experimentation (Government of New Brunswick, 2024a). Yet, research shows this emphasis tapers sharply as children transition into elementary school and adolescence, due to pressures from academic expectations, structured extracurriculars, and digital engagement (e.g., Pyle & Danniels, 2017).

However, there has been far less thought into providing parents with tools and information to support early play. Fewer than half of New Brunswick children access regulated Early childhood spaces (Hachey & Maitland, 2022). As noted in last year's challenge on early

literacy, New Brunswick's landscape of supports to parents and families outside of regulated ECE spaces remains an unrealized source of good community initiatives. The public understanding of early childhood development often leans towards "over-academicizing" learning, pushing rote learning of letters, numbers and words without understanding the scaffolding that creative play provides the child in learning these concepts later. In part, this is because corporate marketing of inappropriate toys and products that play to this bias has not been countered by solid public resources and supported community organizations such as Family Resource Centres. Government has a role to play in providing parents with information, support and equalization of access to creative play for young children.

Taken together, the evidence paints clear guidance: play should be non-negotiable, built into time, safe spaces, design, and societal attitudes—not just for young learners, but right through adolescence. It's not extra; it's essential.

Background, Demographic and Community Context in New Brunswick

New Brunswick's population has grown rapidly in recent years. By July 1, 2024, the province reached approximately 854,580 residents, reflecting about 2.5% year-over-year growth—the fastest since the 1970s—with immigration as the primary driver (Beykzadeh, Jones, McDonald, & Miah, 2025; Statistics Canada, 2024). Projections indicate that the population of New Brunswick will continue to increase through 2025.

New Brunswick is also one of Canada's oldest provinces: about 23% of residents were aged 65+ in 2024, compared to 18.9% nationally (Statistics Canada, 2024). At the same time, the province is linguistically and culturally diverse: New Brunswick is Canada's only officially bilingual province, with roughly 30.3% reporting French as their first official language and 41.9% able to converse in French, alongside large Acadian communities and 15 First Nations (Mi'kmaq and Wolastoqey/Wolastoqiyik) (Government of New Brunswick, 2024b). Immigration and interprovincial arrivals have broadened this mix further, with newcomers increasingly settling beyond major cities.

Spatially, NB remains among the most rural provinces—an enduring feature of its settlement pattern. About 317,496 New Brunswickers lived in rural areas and small towns in 2024 (up 3.7% since 2021), underscoring how geography and scale influence everyday access to services, play spaces, and programming (Statistics Canada Rural Data Lab, 2024). Urban centres—Moncton, Saint John, and Fredericton—offer more structured recreation and organized activities, but families also face urban barriers such as transport

costs, safety concerns, and reduced informal green play space. In rural communities, space is abundant, yet organized and accessible programming can be limited, especially for families without reliable transportation or facing fee burdens—an equity challenge the Framework for Recreation in Canada identifies as core to treating recreation/play as essential public service rather than discretionary extras (Canadian Parks and Recreation Association, 2024).

A defining equity consideration is disability. New Brunswick reports the second-highest disability rate in Canada: about 35.3% of residents aged 15+ live with one or more disabilities, with higher poverty rates, lower median incomes, and compounded barriers in access, design, and participation—clear signals of the need for universal design and dignity-first delivery of play spaces and programs (Human Development Council, 2025).

Child poverty remains a pressing concern. The 2024 provincial report card shows about 21.9% of NB children living in poverty—one of the highest rates among provinces—with significant variation by city (e.g., Saint John ~31.2%, Campbellton and Bathurst above 29%, versus Dieppe ~14.4%) (Human Development Council, 2024; CBC News, 2024). These disparities translate into uneven access to safe, affordable play and recreation, compounding existing social inequities.

Taken together, NB's aging profile, bilingual and Indigenous diversity, rural scale, newcomer growth, high disability prevalence, and persistent levels of child poverty create a complex context for children's right to play. Additionally, youth health behaviours themselves further underscore the challenge: only 24% of students in grades 6–12 meet daily physical activity guidelines and just 12% limit recreational screen time to two hours or less (New Brunswick Health Council, 2025).The policy implication is not simply more programs, but structural shifts—embedding play in municipal planning and school operations, removing cost/transport/access barriers, and using rights-based tools (e.g., CPRA's Framework; UNICEF Child Friendly Cities Initiative) to make play an essential, equitable, everyday part of childhood across communities.

How Play Has Changed in the Past 10–20 Years

Children's opportunities for play in New Brunswick have shifted significantly in the past two decades, influenced by cultural attitudes, technology, education systems, and broader social changes. Outlined below are five major areas that have impacted play, as well as examples from both local and global initiatives that are working to combat barriers.

Over-cautious safety culture.

Parents, schools, and municipalities have become increasingly risk-averse. Well-intentioned efforts to protect children from harm have sometimes eroded opportunities for exploration and resilience. Playgrounds are often designed with low-risk equipment, and bylaws or complaints limit noisy or “disruptive” play. The well-publicized case in Montreal, where neighbors sought an injunction against a daycare because outdoor play was “too loud,” reflects a wider societal tension: children’s play is less tolerated in public spaces (Jonas, 2023). Another example from the US highlights a mother who was arrested for reckless conduct after her 10-year-old son walked alone into town within a rural community (Li, 2024), highlighting how societal attitudes to unaccompanied children have shifted and how fear of enforcement may have a circular chilling effect on parents feeling empowered to allow age-appropriate risk-taking. These fears of public perception and interference, leading to law enforcement or child protection involvement, are experienced disproportionately among racialized communities (Watson et al., 2023).

Researchers consistently note that children who are denied the chance to take age-appropriate risks—such as climbing, rough-and-tumble play, or exploring independently—can miss opportunities to build confidence and problem-solving skills (Brussoni et al. 2015; Valentine, G. 2004). Public tolerance of children’s play in shared spaces remains uneven. Attempts to restrict daycare yard play due to noise complaints (as seen in Montreal) illustrate the contested audibility of children in public life. Evidence syntheses and reportage underscore the developmental gains of risk-rich outdoor play—resilience, motor competence, social skills—suggesting policy shifts toward permissive, dignity-first design are necessary (Nowogrodzki, 2025; Beaulieu & Beno, 2024).

The pervasive risk-averse ethos has narrowed children’s everyday freedom to explore. Municipal liability concerns, school regulations, and parental anxiety often default to risk elimination rather than risk management, producing highly controlled environments that suppress spontaneous, adventurous play. Contemporary guidance reframes ‘risk’ versus ‘hazard’, urging age-appropriate risky play while systematically preventing serious injury (Beaulieu & Beno, 2024). Outdoor Play Canada’s 2025 position statement calls for cross-sector action to normalize active outdoor play, including design, policy, and culture change (Lee et al., 2025; Outdoor Play Canada, 2025).

From a policy perspective, the UK and devolved governments offer instructive routes. Wales legislated the world-leading Play Sufficiency Duty, requiring local authorities to assess and, as far as reasonably practicable, secure sufficient play opportunities—supported by refreshed statutory guidance and operational toolkits (Welsh Government, 2025; Welsh Government, 2024). Play England has advocated adopting a similar statutory duty and a National Play Strategy, submitting evidence to parliamentary committees and

proposing clauses that embed play into planning and infrastructure decisions (Play England, 2025a, 2025b). Embedding risk-benefit thinking into bylaws, school codes, and park standards aligns with GC17's call to create enabling contexts for play (United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child, 2013).

Digital displacement.

The rise of smartphones, gaming, and streaming media has transformed how children spend their free time. On average, Canadian children and youth exceed recommended screen-time guidelines by wide margins. This displaces physical and outdoor play, while also reshaping family dynamics. Parents distracted by their own devices may provide less supervision for active play, and children's tolerance for boredom—once a driver of imaginative play—has diminished. While digital environments can foster creativity and inclusion, the imbalance between online and physical play is a growing concern.

Children's leisure has migrated toward screens—smartphones, social media, gaming, streaming—colonizing hours once filled with free, outdoor, imaginative play. Haidt characterizes the post-2010 era as a 'phone-based childhood', arguing that touchscreens act as 'experience blockers' displacing social interaction, exploration, and sleep (Haidt, 2024; Thomson, 2025). A Harris Poll reported in The Atlantic found that children themselves crave unstructured, in-person play and yet they often turn to screens because adult restrictions limit independent freedom (Skenazy, Rausch, & Haidt, 2025). Canadian analyses link exceeding the ≤ 2-hour recreational screen limit to poorer mental-health indicators, while adherence correlates with higher happiness and life satisfaction (Toigo et al., 2025). A previous Challenge Paper by this office on youth mental health as well as a legislative briefing note, have also highlighted the link between digital media use and poor mental health outcomes (NB Advocate, 2024a, 2024b).

In NB, only 12% of youth meet the ≤ 2-hour recreational screen benchmark and just 24% achieve daily physical activity targets—a clear signal of displacement (New Brunswick Health Council, 2025; ParticipACTION, 2024). Canadian non-profit centre for digital literacy MediaSmarts emphasizes that content quality, context, and supervision shape outcomes, with solitary late-night use strongly linked to sleep disruption and emotional dysregulation; family media plans and co-viewing are practical mitigations (MediaSmarts, n.d.; Canadian Paediatric Society, n.d.). Policy levers include phone-free schools, later smartphone age norms, increased public awareness campaigns and school-based toolkits emphasizing digital literacy, and community campaigns that re-open local spaces for independent play, complemented by playful technology (e.g., QR trails) that gets children moving (Thomson, 2025; ParticipACTION, 2024).

At the same time, governments have become less supportive of free and unsupervised play. Child protection legislation, in practice and sometimes in its drafting, has become more judgmental of parents providing unsupervised play time to children. In the internet age, rare but highly publicized cases of harm to unsupervised children disproportionately shape parental and societal perceptions of danger, as media exposure is known to heighten fear responses and inflate individuals' assessments of societal risk (Wilson, 2008; Giovanna Maria et al., 2024). These concerns persist even though such events are statistically unlikely, with national Canadian data estimating the probability of stranger abduction to be approximately 1 in 14 million (Brussoni et al., 2015). Heightened parental anxiety contributes to declining tolerance for children's independent and risky outdoor play, as research demonstrates that parents' perceptions of danger significantly reduce children's opportunities for exploration in neighbourhood environments (McCrorie et al., 2025; Valentine, 1997). As these restrictions become more widespread, neighbourhood play spaces play a diminished role in children's lives, and children increasingly spend more time indoors and online, where the risks—from behavioural and mental health challenges to physical and developmental concerns—are far more prevalent and empirically documented (Beaulieu & Beno, 2024; Yusri et al., 2024). Collectively, this evidence indicates that fear-driven limitations on free play may ultimately expose children to risks that exceed those associated with developmentally beneficial outdoor independence.

Documentary and public-science storytelling can support culture change. For example, CBC's The Nature of Things episode 'The Power of Play' highlights cross-species evidence that play builds brain architecture, social competence and adaptability—reinforcing the societal case for rediscovering daily play (McLean, 2019; Sideways Film, n.d.). Public awareness through extra-jurisdictional legislation may also play a part in the culture shift—Australia's recent precedent-setting ban on social media platforms for children under 16 is currently playing out on the world stage, and other countries (e.g., Denmark, New Zealand, Malaysia, Norway, Ireland, Spain, and France), are watching and introducing or exploring similar protective policies. Much like the evolution of legislation and public awareness around cigarette smoking in the last century, elevating digital awareness and social media use among children to the level of a public health concern may impact how society perceives what was once thought to be a largely benign technological tool.

Cultural and community shifts.

Where earlier generations of children played outside with neighborhood peers, contemporary play is more often mediated through organized programs or occurs indoors under adult supervision. Parents are less likely to form informal support networks with other parents, contributing to feelings of isolation and heightened concern about safety.

This change reduces children's freedom to explore their neighborhoods and weakens the social fabric of communities.

Spontaneous neighbourhood play has waned as families gravitate toward fee-based, adult-directed programs. Social infrastructure that once enabled informal play—nearby friends, trusted neighbours, safe routes—faces pressures from urban design, traffic, and changing working patterns. The Framework for Recreation in Canada positions recreation as an essential public service, urging municipalities to treat play-supportive environments as core infrastructure (Canadian Parks and Recreation Association, 2024). In rural Atlantic contexts, partnership-based models can reduce low-income barriers and rebuild belonging within sport and recreation systems (Oncescu, Fortune, & Frigault, 2023).

To combat the reduction in spaces allowing children and youth to naturally congregate and explore play, some cities around the world have re-imagined streets and civic space to promote play. London's Play Streets movement enables regular resident-led road closures for play via simple council processes and temporary orders, with evidence of community cohesion and physical-activity benefits (London Play, n.d.; Playing Out, 2025). New Zealand has updated regulations through the Reshaping Streets package, establishing 'Community Streets' and traffic-management guidance so councils can routinely support Play Streets (Waka Kotahi NZ Transport Agency, 2023, 2021; Sport NZ, n.d.). Open-streets programs such as Bogotá's Ciclovía—now spanning 100+ km weekly and emulated by 400+ cities—show how routine car-free streets catalyze active mobility, social capital, and healthier air (World Economic Forum, 2024; Urban Cycling Institute, 2024; Triana et al., 2019). UNICEF's Child Friendly Cities Initiative provides a rights-based municipal framework, now in 40+ countries including US cities like Houston and Minneapolis (UNICEF, 2024; UNICEF USA, 2025).

NB exemplars re-normalize play in public space: Fredericton Zig Zag brings free, low-structure play to neighbourhood parks, while Riverview's Equipment Loan reduces cost and transport barriers by delivering gear to families (City of Fredericton, 2025; Town of Riverview, 2025). Scaling similar models province-wide—codifying shared-use agreements and street-play policies—would operationalize CPRA's 'supportive environments' and GC17's enabling conditions (Canadian Parks and Recreation Association, 2024; United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child, 2013).

School pressure and overscheduling.

Schools have become increasingly focused on measurable academic outcomes, and families often seek structured extracurricular activities to support achievement or competitiveness. Fee-for-service sports, music lessons, and tutoring occupy time that might otherwise be spent in unstructured play. Early specialization in sports is rising,

despite evidence that early specialization can increase injury risk and burnout (DiFiori et al. 2014; McLellan et al. 2022). While parent's might believe that fee-based, adult-led activities offer a safe and more intentional alternative to organic play opportunities, research suggests that overscheduled children may experience stress, fatigue, mental health issues like anxiety and depression, and reduced opportunities for self-directed exploration all of which can lead to lower levels of resilience that can carry into adulthood (Caetano et al., 2024; Barreiro & Howard, 2017).

A performance-centric school culture, combined with competitive sport specialization, crowds out unstructured play and free time—particularly in the middle years. System change is the lever: adopt whole-of-school frameworks that integrate movement and play across the day, not only in PE. Newfoundland & Labrador's Daily Physical Activity Policy (2023) offers a pragmatic benchmark—mandating daily movement and aligning with Comprehensive School Health (Government of Newfoundland and Labrador, 2023). Scotland's Play Vision Statement and Action Plan 2025–2030 links national investment in playparks to a cross-sector strategy that places Article 31 at the heart of policy and practice (Scottish Government, 2025; Play Scotland, 2025).

NB pilots situating multisport and play-based experiences before school, at lunch, and after school (with snacks and homework support) demonstrate how to reach non-participants and tackle barriers like facility scheduling, cost, and transport (Tourism, Heritage and Culture – Sport & Recreation Branch, pers comm.). Complementary measures—active-recess design; phone-free classrooms; homework policies that protect free time—align with ParticipACTION's calls to rebuild daily movement and resilience amid climate and tech pressures (ParticipACTION, 2024).

Economic and social barriers.

New Brunswick faces persistently high rates of child poverty, disproportionately affecting Indigenous, newcomer, and rural families. For these children, both structured and unstructured play opportunities are often limited. The cost of equipment, transportation, or program fees creates barriers to participation in organized sports and recreation. For children with disabilities, accessibility barriers compound these inequities. At the same time, New Brunswick's recreation system is under pressure to adapt to growing cultural diversity and higher rates of disability, but many families report that options remain limited or isolating.

Structural inequities—poverty, disability, transport gaps, fee burdens—constrain access to both structured and unstructured play. To emphasize again, NB's child-poverty rate rose to ~22%, with city-level disparities; NB also has among the highest disability rates nationally, and longitudinal research shows generational reductions in children's home range, outdoor

activity variety, and companions (Woolley & Griffin, 2015)—reflecting environmental change and parental fear—underscoring the need to rebuild independent mobility. To ensure equitable access for all children to the fundamental right to healthy development through play, we must take a holistic view to accessibility and barrier reduction.

Rights-aligned solutions include eliminating user fees for foundational community programs, province-wide equipment lending with delivery, accessible transport (late buses, shuttles via Regional Service Commissions), and systematic accessibility audits of play spaces. Municipal participation in UNICEF's Child Friendly Cities can embed child-rights impact assessments across budgets and planning (UNICEF, 2024; UNICEF USA, 2025). The CPRA Framework provides policy cover for treating recreation investments as essential services, while NB-specific poverty and disability reports guide targeted action (Canadian Parks and Recreation Association, 2024; Human Development Council, 2024, 2025).

Conclusion

Reversing the erosion of children's free, outdoor, and social play demands culture change and coordinated policy across schools, municipalities, and families. A rights-based approach—grounded in UNCRC GC17 and informed by contemporary evidence and global exemplars—can normalize risk-competent outdoor play, recalibrate digital life, and rebuild supportive environments so every child in NB experiences dignified, daily opportunities to play. This task falls upon, and requires, the collaborative work of joint government departments, municipalities, communities, and society at large. As we look at the research, the challenges, and the data, what may be missing, per the UNCRC fulfilment requirement, are the voices of children themselves in New Brunswick. Perhaps we need to start with asking what they're lacking, what they want, and start working backwards and forwards to both fill the gaps and futureproof the right to play for all children in New Brunswick.

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