



OUTDOOR COUNCIL OF CANADA
CONSEIL CANADIEN DE PLEIN AIR
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Notes on the Nature of Injury in Outdoor Programming

The Field Leader Program is an integrated program designed to manage both physical and psychological injury. Most of the specific strategies in the program are effective for managing both types of injury, but it is important to recognize that the injury patterns are very different.

Physical Injury in Outdoor Programming for Children and Youth

Unfortunately many administrators and risk managers believe that outdoor educational and activity programming is inherently risky. The facts do not support this belief.

While extreme outdoor sports do carry a very high risk of physical injury, the types of outdoor activity that are suitable for children and youth under custodial care are at least as safe as typical team sports. Activities like skiing and snowboarding carry approximately the same risk as football or basketball. Activities like walking, cross-country skiing, snowshoeing or top-roped rock climbing carry a much lower risk of physical injury.

Currently there are no clear national standards for managing injury risk for outdoor programming for children and youth. This is this deficit that the Field Leader Program is addressing. The absence of such a standard has resulted in a very small number of high profile accidents. These accidents have contributed to the illusion that outdoor programming is dangerous.

These high profile events have been the result of systemic failure at the organizational level. The risk management strategy employed by the Field Leader Program is carefully designed to avoid exactly these sorts of organizational failures.

While serious injuries are rare in outdoor programming for children and youth, the Field leader Program strategies that reduce the chance of such events are also those that reduce the incidence of minor physical injuries. These strategies are also effective in reducing the chance of psychological injury.

Psychological Injury in Outdoor Programming for Children and Youth

All programming for children and youth has a high potential for psychological injury. Outdoor programming is no more or less susceptible to psychological injury than are other types of children's programming. These injuries are common and can be severe although they are typically less recognized because they are less visible. Since psychological injury makes a far larger contribution to the overall injury burden than does physical injury it should be of greater concern.



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Psychological injuries fall into three categories:

- *Direct psychological injury* happens as a result of bullying, insensitive, or demeaning behaviour by other participants or leaders. This is the most acknowledged type of psychological injury.
- *Indirect psychological injury* happens when poor program delivery causes a participant to dislike either the subject taught or outdoor activity. This type of psychological injury risk may be as serious as the more recognized direct injury risk. Participants who dislike a subject suffer reduced academic potential with the life consequences that brings. Participants who come to dislike outdoor activity are less likely to adopt a lifelong active lifestyle and sedentary behaviour is very strongly associated with reduced life span, reduced productivity, reduced quality of life and increased chance of suffering from chronic and serious physical and psychological diseases.
- *Lost opportunity psychological injury* happens when a program fails to deliver quality educational or experiential content because of poor design and/or delivery. This type of injury is the least serious on a small scale, but when it becomes endemic to a program it can also have serious consequences similar to those for indirect psychological injury.

Integrating Physical and Psychological Risk management

Traditionally, risk management programs have focused on reducing physical injury risk. This can be a mistake if we fail to recognize that psychological injury is more prevalent than physical injury in programming for children and youth and fail to give equivalent attention to reducing psychological injury too.

The [Principals of High-Quality Low-Risk Programming](#) which are actually designed to reduce psychological risk are equally effective at reducing physical risk too. However, there are two additional factors that need to be recognized:

- 1) Additional measures have to be employed to ensure that leaders are competent to manage the particular hazards that a particular piece of terrain presents. This is the reason why Field Leaders are initially restricted to defined low-risk terrain, and why demonstrated competence is the requirement for programming in more complex terrain
- 2) Excessive concern for reducing physical injury causes psychological injury. All physical activity has the potential for physical injury but participating in outdoor physical activity brings large physical and psychological benefits. An appropriate balance between injury reduction and benefit maximization should be made.