



GUIDE TO

PLAY IN OUTDOOR SPORT



REDEFINE WHAT IS POSSIBLE.



WE NEED PLAY

Outdoor sports are all about going outside to play. Flying downhill on a bike, gliding on skis, crashing through waves in a kayak, floating along a calm lake on a SUP, or hopping from rock to rock on the trail. These activities have the power to let our minds, bodies, and senses freely explore.



Play, however, is the one critical ingredient we find missing when we teach outdoor sports or participate for ourselves. Often the focus is on gear, technical instruction, pushing limits, or sheer physical exertion. While each of these things have their rightful place in the outdoors, if we miss out on play we miss fostering one of the greatest gifts outdoor sports have to offer.

“Play is not a luxury but rather a crucial dynamic of healthy physical, intellectual, and social-emotional development at all age levels.”

- David Elkind, The Power of Play

We tend to think of play as something reserved for children in early stages of development, but play is important at every stage of our lives. It helps us manage stress, tap into our creativity, solve complex problems, and as Stuart Brown points out in his book *Play and How it Shapes the Brain*, “The self that emerges through play is the core, authentic self.”

Research shows that along with exercise and time in nature, play is an invaluable part of a healthy lifestyle. Thankfully outdoor sports can help us combine physical activity, the great outdoors, and a sense of play into one powerful habit that dramatically enhances our daily lives.





INCORPORATING PLAY

Play is often more effective than instruction alone and is more fun for everyone involved. Believe it or not, it's possible for people to learn an incredible amount without us teaching anything. In fact, people often learn better, and with more lasting meaning, through the process of discovery and play. Here are five ways you can encourage more play in your approach to the outdoor sports you enjoy, practice, and share with others.

1. ALLOW FOR ACTIVE EXPERIMENTATION

We learn more through experimentation than we do through instruction. If you want your friends, children, or participants to enjoy the experience, you need to set up an environment that promotes the ability to do so. Remember learning to ride a bike? Someone could explain it all to you, but you still needed to experiment to figure it out. The same goes for paddling a kayak, gliding on skis, biking over the rocks on the trail, and every other aspect of outdoor sport. So try leading with that active experimentation.



TRY THIS

Start with a fun challenge instead of instruction. Rather than teaching someone a sweep stroke in a kayak say “see if you can spin your kayak around in a circle and let me know how it goes!” Present one thing at a time and give people the chance to really play with it. Free, unstructured minutes to try this new challenge or skill - without you shouting directions - allows people to feel what you're trying to teach them and to find their own boundaries.





2. USE NATURAL TERRAIN



Progress is more likely when we're able to start with skills we already have, and through the process of play discover new ones. We can support this process by being thoughtful in choosing the right terrain for people of all ages. But what does that look like?

TRY THIS

Choose terrain that lets people use abilities they're already proficient at in a new environment with relatively little stress. In skiing this might mean moving from a groomed trail to a field of deep snow. On a bike it might take you from riding on smooth gravel to rolling over small roots and rocks. In each case, let the terrain and experimentation do the teaching.

3. CREATE PLAYFUL ENVIRONMENTS

We might not have the diversity of natural terrain at our disposal that we'd like, but we can still get creative and set up fun, playful spaces. Pieces of rope, plastic cones, foam pool toys, wooden boards, or simply some sidewalk chalk in a parking lot can help create interesting terrain that provide hours of entertainment.



TRY THIS

Whether it's riding a mountain bike, paddling a canoe, gliding on skis, or just being on foot, try creating an obstacle course or "terrain park". These are amazing tools for playing and learning. The only limit is our imagination.





4. FORGET THE SPORT, FOCUS ON SURROUNDINGS

Sometimes the most overlooked part of outdoor sports is the outdoors! Meanwhile the paddle strokes, pedal strokes, footsteps, and strides can get tiring or frustrating when learning. At times like this it's worth remembering where bikes, skis, boats, and boots take us in the first place – into a vast and fascinating landscape. It doesn't matter if it's a wilderness area or our own neighborhood, tuning into the world around us invites endless opportunity for exploration and curiosity.



TRY THIS Next time you're finding it difficult to bring about play with participants in the outdoor sport at hand, forget the activity, take a look around instead and try asking these questions:

- What do you notice?
- What does this remind you of?
- What do you wonder?





5. PLAY GAMES

It sounds counter-intuitive, but often the best way to teach people to ski, paddle, or ride bikes is NOT just to go do those things for hours on end. Play games instead. A well-crafted game can put the focus on something less critical than being good at a skill, so that people can actually become good at a skill. Games provide people an opportunity to have fun and engage with others, while processing and applying skills they're still learning.



TRY THIS

Play a game! Not all games are created equal, however. When it comes to encouraging maximum play think about choosing games that meet the following criteria:

1. No one is ever out of the game. This prioritizes participation over all else, and it encourages those that normally self-select out of any kind of competitive environment to keep engaging because it's all about play!
2. The game doesn't end when someone "wins" or "loses." This way those that have less initial success with the skills they're learning aren't penalized because they didn't win.
3. There's no definitive end-point. This allows participants more time to play and practice skills. The game only ends when everyone is ready to move on to a different game.



If you're not sure what games meet these criteria, just think back to the tag games you played when you were younger. In fact, a game of tag adapted to skis, snowshoes, boats, and bikes is a great place to start. For more game ideas check out our game resources in the OSI Community, and ask the kids in your life. You'll be amazed what sort of game experts you already know.



GO PLAY!

In today's world it's easy to forget to play. For children free play is often replaced with highly structured and hyper-competitive programs, activities, and sports leagues. As adults, play is forsaken for exercise, wellness, or any number of competing obligations. Even in outdoor sports we can unintentionally leave play behind in pursuit of skill development or fitness.

Luckily outdoor sports provide a lifetime of opportunity for health, wellness, and play. Better yet, being intentional about play will only increase learning, improve skills, and foster a greater love of outdoor sports which ultimately supports lifelong fitness.

Remember that play is essential at any age and any experience level, and with the outdoor sports we love, it's waiting for all of us right outside our door. So grab your skis, your bike, your sneakers, or even just a friend, and go outside and play!

FOR MORE IDEAS, RESOURCES, AND A NETWORK OF SUPPORT

JOIN THE OSI COMMUNITY!

IT'S FREE! JUST VISIT
WWW.OUTDOORSI.ORG