

Outdoor environments for children must offer sun protected areas

A joint statement from the Nordic radiation protection authorities

Exposure to ultraviolet radiation (UV) from the sun can cause severe negative health effects. For example, up to 90% of melanomas can be attributed to sun exposure. Despite the fact that most skin cancers may be prevented, incidences of skin cancer are high and on the increase in the Nordic countries. Another worrying factor is that this serious disease has started to occur at even younger ages. Repeated sunburn episodes in childhood can increase the risk of developing skin cancers later in life. Preventive measures regarding children's sun exposure, which have been proven to be effective, should therefore be prioritized and given more attention.

For many years now, the Nordic radiation protection authorities and other organizations have advised the public to reduce the risk of sunburn by following specific sun protection advice. This advice includes seeking shade, limiting time in the midday sun, wearing protective clothing and sunglasses, as well as using sunscreen. Information is clearly important, but it is evident that information combined with other preventive measures is even more effective. Some pre-schools and schools apply adequate sun protection policies and measures. However, the Nordic radiation protection authorities believe that joint efforts in addition to further preventive interventions are required in order to ensure sufficiently sun protected environments for all children.

The Nordic radiation protection authorities advise municipal administrations, urban planners and those responsible for children in pre-schools, schools and outdoor recreational settings to incorporate measures that improve sun protection for children. These measures should be in accordance with international recommendations:

1. Increase the availability of shade in outdoor environments in pre-school and school playgrounds, public parks and recreational areas.

Children should have access to outdoor environments that contain both sunny and shaded areas, as these provide a combination of sun protection, daylight as well as enjoyable temperatures. Municipalities, urban planners and sports and leisure organizations, etc. should include shade planning when designing facilities and for land use development.

2. Provide children and their caretakers with the information they need in order to make informed and healthy choices regarding UV exposure from the sun.

Increasing people's knowledge increases their confidence for making healthy choices. Children and their caretakers require tailored information regarding risk situations and suitable sun protection measures. Pre-school and school administrations as well as managers of sports and leisure activities outdoors should integrate sun safety into health education and promotion programmes.

3. Establish sun protection policies.

Important sun protection strategies include timing of outdoor activities to avoid peak hours, seeking shade, wearing protective clothing, hats and sunglasses, and generously applying and reapplying sunscreen. Pre-school and school administrations in addition to managers of sports and leisure activities outdoors should include sun protection aspects in their policies and planning.