

October 29, 2012

## Right To Play goes on the attack to stress importance of sports to kids

By TRALEE PEARCE

### *Organization unveils awareness campaign called Level the Field*

In its 10-year history, Johann Koss's Right To Play organization has taken its iconic red soccer balls to refugee camps and war-torn communities in hot spots such as Sudan, Uganda and Sierra Leone. Yet despite the group's successes – by the end of this year, Right To Play expects to reach one million children and teens worldwide on a weekly basis – Koss hopes to convince more Canadians that the right to play is just as critical to a child's success as their right to food, shelter and safety.

Koss argues that play can help kids overcome trauma and develop life skills. In addition to the physical and mental upsides to sports, other Right To Play initiatives include stealth health messages about handwashing, vaccinations and malaria treatment.

On Tuesday, the four-time Olympic gold medalist unveils a social-media awareness campaign on Facebook called Level the Field at [www.facebook.com/RightToPlayCAN](http://www.facebook.com/RightToPlayCAN). The campaign will feature a mash-up of parent bloggers and famous athlete ambassadors, including Heather Greenwood-Davis ([globetrottingmama.com](http://globetrottingmama.com)), Jill Amery ([urbanmommies.com](http://urbanmommies.com)), speed skater and cyclist Clara Hughes, soccer player Kaylyn Kyle and hockey player Hayley Wickenheiser.

And Koss is further driving the point home with some unsettling Canadian statistics. An Ipsos Reid survey commissioned by Right To Play found that while we believe in the power of play for our own children, we rank it very low as a priority for kids in developing countries. Koss says that, especially for children under 5, this needs a major rethink. "You can make or break a child by how much you play with him or her in the first five years of their life."

### **What did you learn from the survey?**

I'm a little shocked and surprised. Ninety-five per cent of Canadian parents realize the importance of play for building their own children's lives. But only 5 per cent prioritize it for international children. Health care was 36 per cent, and being in a conflict-free environment was 24 per cent, education 23 per cent.

There is a huge discrepancy in how important they feel it is for children in need. We want to emphasize that to the Canadian public. Canada has a major role internationally to play in the evolution of play and the continued importance in building civil society. We can export that to countries who are trying to build civil society after conflict.

### **Do people see play as a luxury if children are facing other major issues?**

It might be. What we are trying to say is this is not a luxury, it's a fundamental for child development. You see improvements in health care, education and in conflict-free environments when you have access to safe play.

### **Play can actually reduce conflict?**

It's the same in our society. If you don't have any activities to do in your free time to drive you, where are the boys going? Into gangs and hanging out at shopping malls and causing trouble. There's no difference anywhere in the world.

What we see with child soldiers is a lack of rules due to their upbringing in rebel groups. When you go on the playground and teach them the game of soccer, they realize you can't have fun if you don't have rules. They become the guardian of the rules. It clearly creates an improved ability to solve conflicts outside violence.

**Do you see play to be a good first step, or way in, for those hoping to encourage other reforms?**

We have a big opportunity here to make play a way of introducing our values without telling people what they should believe. All of our programs are local, through local individuals trained by us. Through our methodology, they're developing their own goals, targets and understanding of the importance of play.

It's global: There is no difference for a child if it's in China, Africa, the Middle East or Canada – or Norway for that matter. The child is the same and it needs the fundamentals at all age groups. The fundamentals in the early age from 0-5 is where most of the language skills, motor skills, intellectual capacity, all of that is developed through play. You can make or break a child by how much you play with it in the first five years of their life.

**The red soccer ball is the dominant Right To Play symbol globally, but what other kinds of play do you promote?**

We have games of tag to explain vaccination, malaria treatment and prevention. One part of a game is, "How do you protect yourself from mosquitoes?" The answer is using mosquito netting at night. So in the game of tag, the children put their hands over their heads to be the mosquito netting. So you see the children who are "mosquitoes" running around, they can't tag anybody. You repeat this over and over again and they go home to the parents and say, "Where's my net? I don't want to be infected because I want to play tomorrow."

**And it works?**

We have such a high level of compliance. In Uganda, we did a study of our children and 85 per cent were sleeping under the nets at night, while the national average is 10 per cent. This is what these programs can do.

*This interview has been condensed and edited.*