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September 6, 2016

Re: An Open Letter to Council on Letting Kids Play

Dear Councillors,

As the newly appointed Minister of Children and Youth Services, the former Minister for Tourism, Culture and Sport and more importantly, as the father of two young daughters, I have always been a believer in the ability of sports to teach our next generation lessons that would live on with them as they grow. During the summer, I wrote to Toronto City Council urging them to overturn their ban on road hockey. They voted to do so, with some thoughtful conditions added for safety. On the heels of that vote, I am writing to you today asking that you consider doing the same.

I firmly believe that we should encourage our kids to play. I also believe that sometimes, as government leaders, we focus too much on the details of programs, policies, budgets and statistics, when the best thing we can do is just get out of the way.

While the health benefits of physical activity are well known and obvious, some of the other benefits of play are maybe less so; things such as communication and social skills, an understanding of social rules, relationship building, learning how to compromise with others, patience and perseverance, teamwork and a sense of belonging.

To me, there is no sound more beautiful than children playing with each other outside. It is the sound of a healthy community. Informal play can strengthen community bonds, bring parents together, put more “eyes on the street” and can reduce speeding and reckless driving on neighbourhood roads.

In my new ministry, there has been a lot done in the way of bringing sport to kids in communities around the province; from urban neighbourhoods to remote and rural Indigenous communities. I’m looking forward to pushing these initiatives even further as I begin my new mandate.

The obvious issue at hand is the safety of our children, and I agree that our kids need to be safe, but there has to be a better way than denying them of their right to play. Where regulation is needed to keep kids safe, it should be careful not to discourage their adventurous and active spirit.

Road hockey bans are commonplace in municipalities across Ontario, but they don't need to be. In Calgary, council weighed in by explicitly encouraging road hockey on city streets. Kingston, Ontario allows ball hockey and now Toronto has made it clear that children can and should play safely on neighbourhood streets. I am hoping that your council will be next. A vote to overturn the prohibition and let kids play will challenge other municipalities to abolish similar road hockey bans in their own communities. Let's celebrate our kids and our communities – and what better way to do that than with a province-wide game of ball hockey on our city streets!

Sincerely,

Michael Coteau, Minister of Children and Youth Services