



Parental Perceptions of Play

Children's unstructured play has an important role in children's healthy development¹ as it promotes mental and physical health, learning,^{2,3,4} social behaviour, and independence.⁵ It also develops conflict resolution and risk management skills, which equip children for risk navigation in adulthood.¹ In spite of these benefits, children's engagement in unstructured play has declined: they are currently spending less time outdoors than previous generations.⁶ In a recent survey, 70% of mothers reported having played outdoors every day as children compared to only 31% of their children, while 56% said they spent three (3) hours or more playing outdoors daily compared to only 22% of their children.⁶ Similarly single, stay-at-home, and gay fathers have stated that they, too, felt less restricted to engage in outdoor risky play when they were younger than their children do at present.⁷

Outdoor play is influenced by factors such as age, gender, the social environment (e.g., parents, peers, neighbourhood cohesion, the number of children playing outdoors), the physical or built environment (e.g. neighbourhood factors, large backyards, cul-de-sacs), and engagement in recreational screen time.⁶ In addition, the child's independence, attitudes (e.g., preferred activities), and the state of facilities (e.g., playgrounds and parks)⁸ have an effect. Parental concerns about "stranger danger" (i.e., parental beliefs concerning their children being harmed by strangers) and traffic may reduce the likelihood of outdoor unstructured play.^{9,10} In this briefing, a summary of findings is provided regarding parental perceptions of children's unstructured play.

Parents' concerns

Neighbourhood Safety

Fifty-one percent of Canadian parents say they want their children to play more outdoors, but are worried for their child's safety.¹¹ American evidence supports this viewpoint: support for outdoor play decreased as their worry increased about neighbourhood hazards, such as traffic, rundown parks, crime, violence, drugs, gangs, and weapons.¹² In addition, urban parents had higher levels of concern for their children and were less likely to allow them to play outside. Furthermore, children in the inner city were less physically active outdoors compared to their counterparts in suburban communities, as their parents' perceptions of safety were higher in more affluent suburban communities.¹³ Similarly, parents with children living on busy streets were more likely to indicate that the streets are not safe for play.¹⁴ Due to the interaction between neighbourhood and social factors, children may be less likely to play away from home, even if they live in walkable areas with ample access to parks, playgrounds, and recreational facilities.¹⁵

One study found that children of families living in low socio-economic neighbourhoods perceived more neighbourhood hazards than families residing in middle to high socio-economic neighbourhoods, but this was associated with higher reported physical activity levels.¹⁶ This indicates that those families living in a lower socio-economic neighbourhood may recognize potential hazards or dangers in their environment, but their recognition does not limit their children's engagement in outdoor physical activity. Further research in the area is needed to better understand the relationship.

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Stranger Danger

Thirty-nine percent of parents who responded to a recent survey noted that being fearful about strangers stopped them from letting their children play outdoors with friends.¹⁷ Child abductions, however, most often occur at the hands of family members and acquaintances, while true stranger abduction is exceptionally rare.¹⁸ In 2014, there were 41,342 missing child reports in Canada, of which only 29 were related to true stranger abduction.¹⁹ This equates to less than 0.1 per 1000 cases.

Traffic

Parents' perception of traffic can negatively influence a child's access to outdoor play as parents may fear that their child could be struck and injured by a car.²⁰ In fact, motor vehicle accidents are a leading cause of injury and death among children;^{21,22} however, Canadian children are eight times more likely to be involved in a fatal motor vehicle accident as a passenger than as a pedestrian.²³ Parents choosing to chauffeur their children to a destination in an effort to avoid this problem may be, in part, perpetuating these traffic concerns,²⁴ as driving their children to play will contribute to the volume of vehicles on the road and reduce the level of neighbourhood supervision that could be provided during children's active commuting.

The Rural-Urban Divide

Growing up in a rural community is thought to promote independence among children.²⁵ Data from England, however, indicate that safety concerns associated with strangers and traffic were prevalent in rural communities.²⁵ Growing up in small, remote, and poorly serviced communities also has challenges, such as limited public transportation and children's feelings of isolation.²⁵ Australian²⁶ and Canadian²⁷ studies did not find a significant difference in children's outdoor physical activity levels between urban and rural neighborhoods.

Parents' concerns and playgrounds

The Canadian Standards Association (CSA) has established a standard for "Children's Play Spaces and Equipment" (CAN/CSA-Z614) that describes technical requirements and practices (i.e., materials, installation, strength of equipment). These requirements contribute to playground safety²⁸ as they are designed to minimize the likelihood of serious and/or life-threatening injuries.²⁸ Although the Standard was developed as voluntary criteria, it has been made mandatory for daycare operators in Quebec and childcare licensure in Ontario.

One study found that the Standard has resulted in a reduction in children's playground injuries.²⁹ This change in injury rates, however, may not be significant. Furthermore, the cost of modifications to meet CSA requirements may not justify their implementation given the rarity of injuries on Canadian playgrounds.²⁷ In addition, several studies have shown that the play structures at many parks developed using this Standard were uninteresting or not challenging enough for primary-school-aged users.³⁰ Early childhood educators have also expressed a desire for more challenging equipment and play structures in outdoor play spaces.³¹

Children's independent mobility

Independent mobility is the extent to which children can travel away from their home and play unsupervised.³² Children with greater independent mobility are more likely to meet and play with peers,^{33,34} and often have higher physical activity levels.³⁵ Parents' perceptions of safety and fear of

crime often limit how far children can walk or bike around their neighbourhood, although older children can often roam unsupervised to a greater extent than younger children. As a result, children's ability for independent mobility outdoors has decreased.

Steep declines have been reported in the distances travelled by subsequent generations of family members.^{36,37} Data from England have shown that in 1971, 86% of primary school children were allowed to travel home from school by themselves, while in 2010 this proportion dropped to 25%.³⁶ In Australia in 2010, 32% of 8-12 year olds were permitted to roam unsupervised up to 100m away from their home, and 64% were not allowed to travel more than 1 km.⁸ A separate study in 2016 showed that 37% of 10-11 year olds were not allowed to walk further than their own street.³⁷

Parental overprotection

Parental overprotection (i.e., "helicopter" or over-involved parenting) may limit children's ability to engage in unstructured play and is negatively associated with children's engagement in physical activity.³⁸ It can also be perceived as a loss of trust between parents and their children,³⁹ which has detrimental effects on children's mental health and can result in more psychological problems and reduced self-esteem.⁴⁰ This research has traditionally focused on the mothers' parenting practice as they are often the primary care provider.⁴⁰ Fathers can also demonstrate over-protective behaviours toward their child's activities, and curtail activities that would otherwise be considered safe and appropriate.^{7,41} These fathers cited pressures placed on them by other parents, as well as anxiety and fear of injury, as reasons for this behaviour.^{7,42}

Societal pressures

Current social norms regarding "good parenting" include constant supervision to ensure children's safety. It is exemplified by incidents involving children being brought to a police station for walking home alone from school,⁴³ and child services being called to speak to parents for letting their children play unsupervised in the backyard or in the street.⁴¹

Parents receive messages concerning the importance of enrichment opportunities that are often costly and require parents to chauffeur their children to organized activities after school and on weekends.⁴⁴ This behaviour is especially true of middle to high-income household parents who spend time chauffeuring children to and from school and after-school structured activities.⁴⁵ It has led to increased time constraints, thereby leaving children with little free time for children's unstructured play.⁴⁶ Organized activities have a developmental benefit but the danger lies in excessively pushing children towards them, resulting in children experiencing high levels of anxiety and stress.⁴⁷ A balance should be established such that academic activities are not prioritized over unstructured, child-led play, as the latter type of physical activity⁴⁵ can help counteract children's experiences of anxiety and stress associated with too much structured, adult-supervised activity.⁴⁸

Summary

Parent's beliefs concerning neighbourhood safety⁴⁵ and worries about traffic and "stranger danger" can limit children's opportunities for independent mobility and unstructured, child-led play. Furthermore, many parents and children believe that most playgrounds do not provide enough challenge³⁰ which discourages children from engaging with playground equipment. As a result, families may travel longer distances to find parks that are more suitable for their children's need for

challenging and stimulating play.²⁷ Similarly, concerns of perceived safety in the neighbourhood appear to be one of the most influential barriers to unstructured child-led play.⁴⁸

Importantly, there is limited research on minority parents' perspectives on these issues and research is required to explore minority parents' perspectives on overprotection, children's unstructured play, and barriers to motivating children to engage in play activity.^{7,49,50}

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