Children’s Views About the Meanings of Play

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Recently, there has been much discussion and research regarding children’s play activities and the significance of play. This increased focus is partly due to rising obesity and overweight rates among children in Canada and other countries.

This article aims to shed light on children’s views about play, with a particular focus on what children themselves think about play activities and meanings of play.

Background

It has famously been said that play is “the business of childhood” (Piaget, 2007). Given the importance of children’s play, it has often been a focus of public consciousness, policy debate and academic research.

In recent times, there has been a strong interest in children’s play, particularly “active free play,” on the part of governments and other policy-makers, health care agencies, schools, researchers, and many other organizations and stakeholders.

Interested parties have focused their attention on how to better encourage children to be more physically active, and how active play can be a helpful part of reducing overweight and obesity rates among children. As part of this focus, a range of related factors have been examined; such as playground and neighbourhood design, children’s activity programming, and physical activity in school curriculums.

Understanding Children’s Views

Research with parents has shown that play can be organized into three categories: where, what and with whom.

According to parents, children’s play often involves:
- Where: playgrounds and dedicated play spaces
- What: sports and video games
- Whom: with friends

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But how much do parents really know about play?

We recently talked to children from a grade school in the greater Edmonton area and asked them what they thought adults meant by the word "play".

According to these children, parents and children have different views. Children thought:

- **Parents do not understand video games.** As one child said, “They [parents] don’t understand video games.” Another child explained, “Parents don’t understand video games ... they think they melt your brain ... and make us stupid.”

- **Parents think play must take place outside.** One child said, “Um, when my dad says go play, he means go outside.” Another child said, “When you’re playing video games then my mom’s like ‘go outside, ride your bike or something’.”

- **For parents, play activities must be healthy.** One grade three student said “... parents mean something that’s more healthy.”

- **When parents talk about play, they just want children out the way.** One of the grade four children explained, “My parents say go play, they mean stop bugging us, or get out of my way, just stop bugging us.” Another stated, “They said go upstairs, shut up and don’t talk to me, so I can do the taxes.”

**Children Think of Play as Fun**

So what is play to children?

According to the children we talked to, play is any activity that is fun. In fact, their views about this were unanimous, as illustrated in the following conversation:

**Interviewer:** What makes something play?

**Child A:** You have fun doing it.

**Interviewer:** Fun?

**Child B:** Yeah.

**Child C:** Fun, inspiration.

**Child D:** Energy.

Conversely, activities that children considered “boring” were not play. Surprisingly, television fell into this category. As one child explained, watching television is boring because “you lay on the couch like a lazy potato.”

However, video games were not seen as boring or lazy. In fact, children in our study consistently recalled video games as one of their preferred activities. They used terms such as “sweaty” and “energy” to describe their encounter with these technologies.

**Children Like to Play**

It turns out, based on the views of the children in our study, children will play *almost* anything, *almost* anywhere, with *almost* anyone.

The children in our study indicated the following play preferences:

- outdoor activities
- active, movement-based activities
- video games
- playing with peers
- re-purposed spaces (i.e., spaces not intended for children’s play)

When we asked the children in our study where they preferred to play, the following conversation ensued:

**Child A:** In the bush, in the mud holes.

**Child B:** In the basement playing video games.

**Child C:** On my mud puddle.

**Child D:** Outside.

**Child A:** I like to play on this back hill behind my house.

Such responses help to illustrate the point that children like to play almost anywhere.
Considering Some Contradictions

According to our findings, the views of children about play might contradict the views of parents, as reported in other studies. Here are a few examples:

Playgrounds & Designated “Play-Spaces”

Although playgrounds and designated play-spaces were mentioned, they were not the preferred location of play among children. Children in our study preferred to “re-purpose” places and spaces intended for other uses. For instance, rather than use typical or standard playgrounds and equipment, the children in our study indicated they like to use construction sites and sheds as play spaces.

Weather

The cold winter climate of north central Alberta did not appear to have an effect on the preferences for outdoor play among children. Parents may have additional safety concerns associated with the weather – such as excessive cold and icy conditions – however, these factors did not appear to deter the children in our study from desiring outdoor play. Instead, as the weather or seasons changed, it changed what they wanted to play, such as going tobogganing or having snowball fights in winter months.

Parents Can Be a Barrier to Play

Parents who participate in research studies are often asked to comment on barriers to children’s free play and physical activity. Concerns about safety have been most often cited (Carver, Timperio & Crawford, 2008; Davison & Lawson, 2006; Hillman, Adams & Whitelegg, 1990; Veitch, Bagley, Ball & Salmon, 2006). Common safety concerns include:

- Outdoor darkness
- Dangers or concerns about the neighbourhood (e.g., rundown buildings, etc.)
- Crime
- Street traffic
- Lack of adult supervision

We decided to ask the children what stopped them from playing and, maybe naively, expected responses similar to parents. In fact, no such issues emerged.

Instead, children consistently indicated that it was actually their parents that stopped them from playing.

As one child said, “My mom and dad, they don’t let me play outside ... because they want me to go somewhere, because like when I’m playing with my brother, my mom wants to go somewhere, she stops me from playing.”

We found that parents appeared to stop children from playing in a number of ways:

- Parents had other plans for their children
- Children had to come in for dinner
- Children were grounded
- Children had to do homework or chores

A conversation with some grade three children highlighted some of these factors:

**Interviewer:** And is there anything that stops you playing? Why might you not be able to play?

**Participant B:** Parents.

**Interviewer:** When might your parents stop you?

**Participant A:** When we’re grounded.

**Participant C:** When its dinner time.

**Participant D:** When you have to do homework.

The fact that children are sometimes seeing their parents as a barrier to play highlights the importance of talking to children (as well as parents). It also points to the potentially detrimental effect adults might be having on children’s engagement in active free play.
Conclusions, Implications & Take Home Suggestions

Here are some other “take home” suggestions:

• Creating programming and places for children to play should focus on balancing “barriers” (e.g., safety concerns) as perceived by parents and “fun” as perceived by the children.

• Specific, dedicated, purposeful play equipment is not necessarily desired by children. Children enjoy re-purposing spaces, place and things to suit their interests.

• Adults may create new or different play opportunities by reducing structured activities and providing more free time, often combined with social engagements.

• Children’s perspectives should be considered when creating environments for their use.

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