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# Play Across the Generations: Perceptions of Changed play Patterns in Childhood

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## Abstract

While the structure and opportunity for child play has changed across the generations, there is little empirical evidence on how it has changed and the potential impact on child development. Focus group interviews were used to retrospectively explore perceptions of play with 35 participants. Thematic analysis identified themes including active versus passive play, creative play, freedom to play, social / group play and solitary / lone play. Changing play patterns were linked to obesity and health in children. This exploratory data provides some evidence of the ways in which play has changed and provides a basis for future study.

## Keywords

Active Play, Passive Play, Creative Play, Freedom to Play, Social Play

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## 1. Introduction

“Play is a process that is freely chosen, personally directed and intrinsically motivated. That is, children and young people determine and control the content and intent of their play, by following their own instincts, ideas and interests, in their own way for their own reasons” [1]. Play is a natural activity for children and it is how they begin to learn about themselves, others and the world around them. The important role of play in the child’s physical, psychosocial and moral development is widely recognised [2]. Opportunities arise during play for the development of self, learning social values, interpersonal skills and building relationships with others. In addition, when children enjoy the games they play, concentration, motivation, and achievement will appear; further enhancing the child’s sense of self-worth and learning [3, 4, 5].

Play has changed significantly during the past half-century, particularly free and active play [6, 7]. Active free play is generally defined as physical activity that is initiated by the child and is voluntary [8, 9]. It is difficult to measure exactly

how much free play has changed for children over the past 50 years. One study in the US compared children’s use of time in 1981 and 1987 [10, 11]. They found a 25% decrease in time spent playing, a 55% decrease in time spent talking with others at home, an 18% increase in time spent in school, and almost 1.5 times more time spent doing homework. Studies of mothers’ perceptions of their own outdoor play compared with that of their children consistently report much less outdoor play among their children [12, 13].

Active free play contributes a substantial portion of children’s overall physical activity [6, 14, 15, 16], which is generally agreed impacts significantly on children’s health and wellbeing [17, 18, 19]. Some would even argue that reduced play has contributed to the rise in mental health problems among children [20]. Of particular concern currently is the increased prevalence of obesity among children and its impact on child and adult health [21, 22]. A major factor in the development of obesity is lack of physical activity [23, 24], which is in turn linked to passive playtime behaviours including watching television and playing video

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games [25, 26].

Given the role of active free play in physical activity, the decline in physical activity in children provides additional evidence of the decrease in play [3]. There is a wealth of evidence that physical activity has decreased among children, and particularly during the older childhood years [27, 28, 29]. While passive leisure pursuits such as watching television or playing video games have contributed to an increase in sedentary behaviour and less active free play, other factors have also been identified. For example, parental monitoring or encouragement [30, 31], parent's work commitments [32], parent's perception of risk [1], and the neighbourhood (urban versus rural) [33].

Active free play is clearly important for children's health and wellbeing, but not all play is active and not all physically inactive play is bad [34, 35]. These authors review evidence showing the educational and developmental benefits of video game play. All types of play can potentially contribute to healthy development of children as long as it is balanced across active and free play [1].

Play is important for child health and wellbeing and lays the foundation for adult behaviours which are implicated in adult health and wellbeing. Play has also changed over the generations for a variety of reasons. There is still a need to understand better why and how play has changed and in particular how these changes may be impacting on child health and wellbeing. The larger and perhaps even more important question is how will changes in play in childhood impact on adult health and wellbeing in the longer term. This latter question is difficult to address without a clearer understanding of the changes and their immediate impact. The aim of this study was to explore child play using retrospective data gathered from adult participants' own experiences of play and their perceptions of the impact of change on children.

## 2. Method

A qualitative methodology using focus groups was used as this can enable participant's to express attitudes, feelings, experiences and to react to other's discourse in an iterative way. A total of eight focus groups each lasting between 45-60 minutes were facilitated. Ethical approval was granted by the School of Psychology Research Ethics Committee.

### 2.1. Participants and Procedure

A total of 35 participants (12 males and 27 females) with ages ranging from 22 to 82 were recruited for the study. Participants were recruited using a convenience snowball procedure [36], in which an initial sample of participants were asked to recruit family and friends. This ensured a range of ages and a mix of

males and females as shown in Table 1.

**Table 1.** Includes participant and focus group information for each session.

Focus group	Total (N)	Males	Females	Age range
1	6	3	3	27-31
2	5	0	5	47-57
3	3	1	2	25-28
4	3	0	3	65-75
5	6	1	5	22-26
6	5	3	2	20-82

Each focus group session followed the same format. Following an initial introduction, participants read the information sheet and had the opportunity to ask questions before proceeding to sign the consent form. Participants were informed that recording would begin. Participants were then asked to talk freely about their recollections of play as a child and how it compared to children's play currently. Throughout the sessions the researcher was able to facilitate the discussions with few interruptions.

### 2.2. Data Analysis

In preparation for analysis, the recording of each discussion was transcribed verbatim. This increased familiarity with the content and meaning of the data. The data was analysed using thematic content analysis. The transcripts were read and re-read to identify important patterns and familiarise with the material. After initial identification of codes, a process of searching for themes was undertaken. Themes were then reviewed in order to define and label them (Table 2).

**Table 2.** Themes and sub-themes emerging from transcripts.

Themes	Sub-themes
Freedom to play	Urban-Rural differences
	Health and safety
	Child protection
	Traffic
	Over-protective parenting
Active versus Passive Play	Outside versus inside play
	Comradeship
	Imagination/making play
Creative / Imaginative Play	Play mates
	Education
	Social roles
	Imagination and satisfaction
	Changing toys
	Intelligence/ responsibility
	Family size
Social / group (team) play	Parent's marital status
	Working parents/ stay at home mothers
	Time
	Finances
	Lack of communication/ face to face communication
Solitary –Lone play	Technology
	Inside play
	Structured activities
	Loss of innocence/ maturing quickly
	Lack of fitness

### 3. Results

Through the discourse around play across the generations and the changes that have occurred some general patterns or themes of play emerged. The most common theme emerging was around free play which encompassed freedom to play, opportunity to play and restrictions on play as major subthemes.

Older participants reported more freedom and perceived the past as less restrictive for children.

*“kids don't have as much freedom.....don't think i would allow my kids have as much freedom”*

*“we used to disappear for hours up the mountain and we just came back when we were hungry”*

*“your parents wouldn't have really known where you were a lot of that time too, ...”*

The past was discussed as a time when children were sent off to play outdoors.

*“We were never allowed to play inside - we were always put out”*

This contrasted with comments from younger participants.

*“you were never allowed to sort of stray too far from home in the evenings. As soon as it got dark you sort of knew to go home. It was an unwritten rule”*

The past was perceived as a safe place for children, a place where parents did not have to worry; whereas the present was seen as unsafe and dangerous.

*“There was no danger then... there was no chance that you were not going to come home,...”*

*“Nowadays ..... it's not a safe environment that our children are living in...”*

*“you weren't afraid of strangers.....left to own devices”*

This dangerous present required vigilance and control which restricted children's freedom to play.

*“i couldn't let my young girl out now, they're too vulnerable now...”*

*“There's more traffic now... you know there was no traffic lights in the town because there was less cars”*

As well as increased fear of crime against children, increased traffic was seen as a common threat.

*“your parents felt that there was far less risk in those days, there was probably a lot less traffic, and em ... which is a big factor I think”*

This fear for children's safety was seen as producing more structured and organised activities as well as heightened

vigilance.

*“When we were kids there wasn't as much organised stuff”*

*“you have to run your kids everywhere now...if i see a little girl by herself i'm like 'where's your mommy?’”*

The restriction of play was seen as coupled with decreased outdoor play and an increase in more passive pursuits such as watching television or playing video games.

*“... that's why video games have exploded cause kids don't go out and feel safe”*

*“cause parents are afraid they're (children) are forced into computer games and tv”*

Types of play in the past were described as more active, but also more risk-taking.

*“they are not as active anymore... they are more sit in front of the TV, sit in front of the computer. They aren't like outside just, running about and playing, like kids used too”*

*skipping, swinging around the lamp post, hopscotch...*

*“..children are driven to school,.....you got a lot more exercise in those days”*

*“crawling across the top of bales in a hayshed... having to go down to where the windows were to get air...”*

Past play was also perceived as more creative and imaginative.

*“... children before used their own imagination because they maybe didn't have computer games...”*

*“We used to pretend our bikes were horses”*

*“We used to play hospitals and they'd have nurses.....everybody did their part and then the next day... you'd try to recreate it and you couldn't... I always remember the disappointment of not being able to recapture that day before”*

*“.. unless they have an electronic game in front of them... they're lost...”*

*“they have all the computer games they want so they don't have to like... think”*

However, others felt play was still imaginative.

*“I watch them play and they're just as imaginative as we were....they just don't have the freedom”*

Modern play was seen as mainly involving technology, in the form of television, video games and mobile phones.

*“....constantly looking at a game on a console....”*

*“don't know how anybody lives without mobile phones..”*

*“.. unless they have an electronic game in front of them...”*

*they're lost..."*

*"they have all the computer games they want so they don't have to like... think"*

This was not always seen as negative.

*"I think their wee brains are smarter..."*

However, as well as reducing active play some saw other damaging effects of video games.

*"after I played (video game)....which was violent, I used to sleep walk"*

*"...he (sleep) walked at nights and all....when he was on his play station"*

There were some suggestions changes were a consequence of increased pressure on parents, particularly if both parents worked.

*"...my mum did plonk me in front of the TV"*

*"A lot of these mums nowadays they don't have time sometimes for their kids and they're just give them anything just to sort of like play with"*

*"...she's happy that her child is sitting playing Playstation or stuff to get her time to catch up...."*

*"... it's a lot to do with parenting both parents having to work because of the [lack of] money..."*

Another theme that emerged was around social / team play as opposed to solitary or lone play.

*"Us five played together all the time and I can remember we started reading the famous five books... and were going to do you know detective work..."*

*... when Wimbledon was on we all played tennis... when cricket was on we all played Rounder's and then... the football and everything... "*

*"...we had great comradeship in the estate and everybody just got on so well..."*

*"... wasn't playing with other children, that was just me and my dad."*

Overall there was general consensus that play has changed across the generations as summed up by the following quote.

*"My mum was a teacher for like 40 years and she's noticed a real difference in child's play from when we were young to the new generation..."*

However, there was no consensus on how much it has changed.

*"The only thing that has changed about play now and play then is what they're playing with... it's not how they play... children still play together... very much together..."*

Changes were perceived as having some consequences for children.

*"... (play) can affect a child's health"*

*"obesity is a big thing.....less exercise, more smoking and drinking.."*

*"... was keeping us fit... young children now... are not doing the same fitness that we would've done you know..."*

*"none of us were fat.... we never thought about food..... too busy running wild"*

*"they are not as active anymore..."*

*"...their communication skills and everything..... if you're sitting constantly looking at a game on a console it has to be compromised..."*

*"Children nowadays expect to grow up quicker than they did back then"*

*"... their innocence is gone... they think they're grown up!"*

## 4. Discussion

The rich discourse encountered in the focus group transcripts provide an important set of insights on child play across the generations. Clearly there is a perception that children in modern society have fewer opportunities to engage in free play and a concomitant of this is a reduction in active play. In addition, the participants herein interviewed perceive a move to more passive and solitary play along with an increase in the use of technology (video games and television viewing) which in some ways remove the need for children to be creative or imaginative in play. There is no doubt that changes in play patterns may also have positive effects – for example, use of technology has been linked with increased intelligence [37], – however, health professionals are concerned with the impact it may have on a sedentary lifestyle and health behaviour. There is a general consensus that modern play is more sedentary, passive, solitary and indoor, and less likely to be active, creative, and outdoor. The attraction of television and video games plays a part in this but does not provide a complete explanation. Parents would agree that in the first eight to ten years of life the default setting on children is active, exploratory and creative.

One explanation for change is to see it as a product of reduced opportunities to play due to concerns over health and safety of children particularly in urban environments. While it is generally recognised that fear of crime bears no resemblance to actual risk [26], awareness of crime against children is highlighted in the media and leaves many parents unwilling to allow their children to play freely outdoors. In addition, increased traffic in cities and towns has further

restricted the freedom to play. There are clearly urban-rural differences but even in rural areas these have become major issues. Urban / rural differences were also highlighted by participants, suggesting that rural children have more opportunity for free play outdoors. Urban designers need to be cognisant of this as an issue. There is a perception that some parents are over protective but to some extent this may be a result of the way in which cases of violence against children are portrayed in the media [38, 39]. Portrayal of violence in the media can also impact directly on children raising their fear of playing outside [40, 41].

Another explanation offered is the increased concern among parents for their children's academic development which is compounded by competition for the best schools [42, 43]. These authors describe the overscheduled child (or the hurried child) where many parents enrol their children in academic tutoring outside of school hours thus leaving little time for play. It has also influenced the teaching agenda creating an imbalance in time and concern for social and emotional development and play [6]. This is rather self-defeating when there exists strong evidence that children learn more effectively through play, and that play is important for brain development [44, 45].

It is also evident that current child play is seen as more structured and often technology driven and lacks the need for imagination and creativity. This is seen as set within a context of society where academic pursuits are prioritised and where parents feel the need to restrict outside play because of fears for their children's safety. A potentially damaging aspect of video game play is social isolation and a lack of opportunity to learn and practice social skills. This is counteracted by the potential learning associated with technology and access to a greater store of knowledge. However, in the context of restrictions placed on free and outdoor play opportunities this leads to prolonged sedentary engagement which is now recognised as a major contributor to adult chronic conditions and mortality [46].

The data were collected from adults and it is freely acknowledged that there are problems associated with retrospective recall. However there seems to be cross generational agreement that massive change has occurred and that there is potential for these changes to impact on children's health and well-being now and in the future. It is imperative that child play opportunities are placed at the heart of policy if serious attempts are to be made to prevent the growth of obesity and chronic conditions.

## 5. Conclusion

Play is the default setting for children and spontaneous, active, free and creative play just requires the space and

opportunity to develop. Opportunities for free play have and continue to be eroded on so many fronts in our modern society. Concurrent with this is the growth in obesity amongst children with its related health issues which potentially extend throughout life. Despite this we have little empirical evidence on the changing nature of play, and on the potential implications for child and adult health. Arguably if we understood both better we would perhaps not need to worry over interventions. Instead removing the barriers to free child play might resolve the problem.

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