

A Parent's Role in Outdoor Play

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Abstract

This qualitative study used a narrative research design to explore how a parent plays a key role in their child's level of outdoor play, and the factors they consider during their child's engagement in it. Research indicates that outdoor play is an essential part of a child's life as it supports the development of socio-emotional, cognitive, and physical skills. However, research has also indicated that children are not spending enough time outdoors. In this study, five participants (parents of children between 2-12 years) shared their thoughts, experiences and perspectives on the topic of outdoor play. The interviews consisted of eight open-ended questions, and ranged from 11-18 minutes in length. The findings suggested that parents often reflected on their own childhood and the amount of time they spent outside, stating that times have changed drastically since they were young. Findings also suggested that parents are unaware of the potential benefits that outdoor play has to offer. Many parents also acknowledged their fears and concerns regarding their child's safety while outdoors. The themes which were represented in the data, and therefore help answer the overall research question, are (i) **play then vs play now**, (ii) **fears surrounding outdoor play**, and (iii) **benefits**. Implications for future research could include looking closely at the role that technology plays in the decline of outdoor play, as well as examining whether or not parents' lack of knowledge surrounding the benefits of outdoor play translates to a child's overall level of engagement in it.

Introduction

Outdoor play has been proven to provide many benefits for children in multiple areas of their development. "Through their interactions with the environment during play... They learn new skills and concepts, discover the world, and learn about themselves (Little & Wyver, 2008, para. 5). However, children are spending less time outdoors all across the globe. Countless studies have been done in an attempt to identify the primary reason behind this alarming decline, with many researchers looking to the primary caregiver and the potential role they may play. The purpose of conducting research in this specific area of study is to investigate a parent's role, both positive and negative, in their child's exposure to outdoor play. This specific research project specifically focused on the factors that parents consider when their child engages in outdoor play, if any. The aim of the study was to identify the ways in which a parent's thoughts, beliefs, and experiences are reflected in their child's level of engagement in outdoor play through answering the research question, "**What are some factors that parents consider when their child engages in outdoor play?**"

Literature Review

Play Then vs Play Now

Research points to the fact that children aren't spending a lot of time outdoors anymore, and it only seems to be decreasing as time goes on. "Research conducted in the developed, highly urbanised, 'western' world suggests that, compared with previous generations, children spend less time playing outdoors" (Carver, Timperio, & Crawford, 2008, p. 217). There appears to be a large generational shift when it comes to comparing the amount of time children used to spend outside, and how much time they spend outside today. There are many reports that speak to the reasons behind this change in activity level, with a number of them suggesting factors such as busier schedules, parental involvement, and easier access to technology.

Benefits

There is an abundance of literature that speaks to the benefits of being outdoors, not only for children, but for each and every member of the human race. The literature says that although outdoor play is often associated with physical activity and development, it also can foster socio-emotional, fine-motor, and cognitive development. "But there are many benefits of outdoor play such as it allowing children to explore their environment, develop muscle strength and coordination, and gain self-confidence" (Large, 2019, para. 4).

Fears

According to literature, fears such as traffic, weather, and strangers are quite common amongst parents and often hinder children from engaging in outdoor play. "Due to parental concerns about road safety and stranger danger, children nowadays have limited independent mobility, for example, freedom to travel to places and play outdoors without adult supervision and therefore less opportunity to play outside" (Reimers, Schoeppe, Demetriou, & Knapp, 2018, p. 1). Repeatedly, the literature speaks to the importance of children engaging in play outdoors, and the barrier that parents can be to this if allowing their fears and concerns to impact their children's play outdoors.

Summary Statement and Research Questions

Based on the research and existing literature it is clear that children are not spending enough time engaging in play outdoors. In attempt to explore this issue, this study examined a parent's role and influence in outdoor play for their children based on the research question, "**What are some factors that parents consider when their child engages in outdoor play?**"

Methodology

Research Design

This qualitative study utilized a narrative research design through open-ended interviews. The researcher explored parents' experiences of the role they played in their child's involvement in outdoor play. This specific research design was selected because a qualitative study allowed for deeper research to be done on the factors that parents consider when their child engages in outdoor play. Qualitative research is designed to pose open-ended questions that allow the participant to expand on their own views, thoughts, experiences, and opinions. The research question couldn't be answered with a simple yes or no, alternatively, it required additional words and thoughts from the participants as they elaborated on the research topic.

Instrument

The researcher conducted face-to-face, semi-structured, open-ended interviews with each participant in order to obtain qualitative data. Each interview had a total of eight questions looking at a parent's role in outdoor play. The interviews ranged from 11-18 minutes in length and followed the interview protocol outlined in Appendix D.

Procedure

1. Received approval from Sheridan's Research Ethics Board.
2. Began recruiting participants by contacting individuals through face-to-face interactions, emails and text messages. Those that were interested received a copy of the Letter of Invitation and Research Consent Form.
3. Once participants agreed to partake in the study, a time and place was arranged. The interviews then took place at the agreed time and place following the interview protocol.
4. Prior to each interview, consent forms were signed and dated by the participant ensuring confidentiality and allowing the interview to be recorded.
5. The collected data was transcribed using the audio recordings and sent back to participants in order to engage in member checking. As soon as each interview had been transcribed, the corresponding audio recording was permanently deleted.
6. Data analysis began as each transcript was read and re-read. Codes were created by highlighting important text. These codes were then combined to create themes that emerged from the data.
7. The researcher went through the triangulation process by consulting a fellow colleague, requesting that they review and provide unbiased feedback about the analyzed data.

Participants

- In total, five individuals were interviewed from the Hamilton, Toronto and Peel Regions
- All participants were parents of children between the ages 2-12 years
- The average age of the participants' children was 7 years old
- The average number of children each participant has was 2
- 60% of the participants were mothers, 40% of the participants were fathers

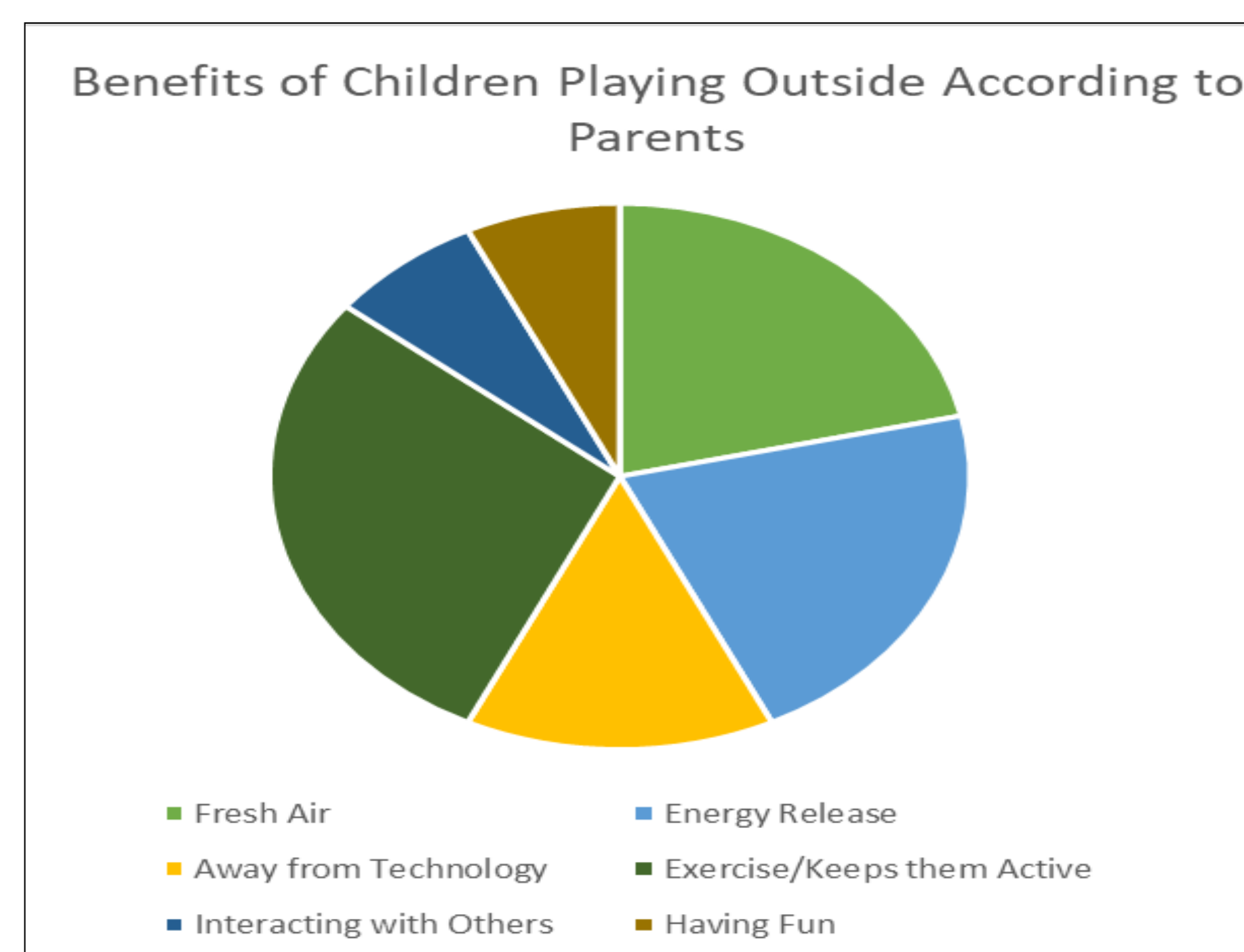


Figure 1

Figure 1, pictured above, is a visual representation of participants' responses to the question, "**What may be some benefits of children playing outside?**" The majority of the responses fell under the category of physical benefits.

Results and Discussion

Results

Based on the analyzed research, parents appear to consider three different factors when their child engages in outdoor play including their experiences as a child, the overall benefits, and their fears and general concerns. Figure 2, pictured below, is the participants' response to the question, "**Did you play outside a lot as a child? Please share some experiences.**" 100% of the participants said that they played outside a lot as child, either with siblings, neighbours or close friends. Throughout the interviews, each participant also made at least one comment to how times have changed since they were children. Figure 3, shows the concerns of outdoor play that participants shared during the interview, with the majority of the responses falling under the category of general safety.

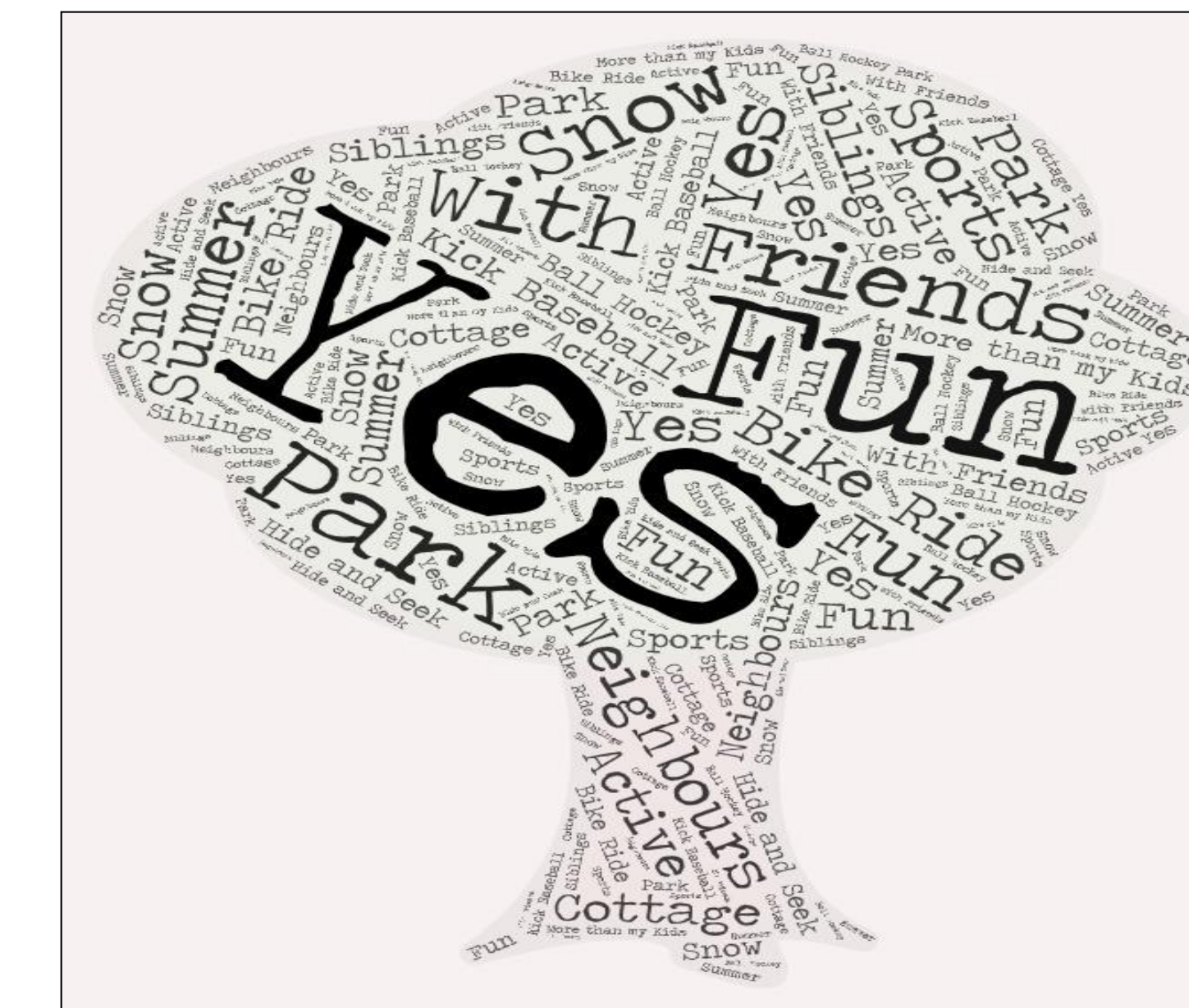


Figure 2

"I mean there's always the usual stuff with, you know, getting bit by something or getting attacked by something or twisting an ankle or getting hurt. You know, obviously there's a certain level of "don't go too far and watch for cars." It's the usual concerns like that." (Grant, Interview, page 3).

"...there's a ton of cars and stuff like that, and that worries me. The idea that, you know, so people are just walking and running down the street. The other thing, like I said, is I don't know the neighbours" (Patrick, Interview, page 3).

"Definitely it's safety, number one. I also don't trust people. And my husbands' job, as you know, he's a police officer so I know for a fact there's a lot of creeps out there and I just have this fear of them getting snatched, right? I just do, and I just don't trust people, it's a different world, and that's my main thing... Not only just the creeps but also like the dangers of just being out" (Lindsay, Interview, page 3).

"I guess just never knowing what's out there. When they play in the backyard, I know they're pretty safe, but even then, like there's a chance of bug bites and sunburns and falling and hurting themselves" (Anna, Interview, page 3).

Figure 3

Discussion

Play Then vs Play Now: The literature presents statistics that look at the comparison of parents' levels of outdoor play, versus their children's levels "American children spend 35% less time playing outside freely than their parents did. 65% of parents surveyed said they played outside every day during their childhood, while only 30% of their children do the same today" (Kamik, 2018, para. 4). When interviewing parents, 100% agreed that they used to spend a lot of time outdoors as a child, either going to the park, riding their bikes, or playing with their neighbours. This supports the literature as this generational shift of play then vs play now is emphasized. 3 out of 5 participants made direct comment to the fact that times have changed since they were young.

Benefits: Although each of the participants associated the benefits of outdoor play with mainly physical benefits, there are numerous other benefits to children's development as well "but there are many benefits of outdoor play such as it allowing children to explore their environment, develop muscle strength and coordination, and gain self-confidence" (Large, 2019, para 4), though areas such as socio-emotional and cognitive benefits were not noted by the majority of the participants. Only 1 out of 5 participants considered the social benefit of outdoor play, stating that it is a good way to learn how to interact with others. 80% of the participants didn't mention the cognitive benefits of outdoor play, which were highlighted within the literature.

Fears: According to the literature, fears such as traffic, weather, and strangers are quite common amongst parents and often prevent children from engaging in outdoor play "parents are the most frequently reported barrier to children's engagement in AFP (Active Free Play), due to their concerns..." (Holt, Neely, Spence, Carson, Pynn, Boyd, Robinson, 2016, p. 829). Based on the researcher's findings, the main fears that were discussed include general safety concerns, strangers, and the volume of cars in their surrounding neighbourhoods. 4 out of 5 of the participants mentioned physical safety as a primary concern. Participants responses also included issues such as the weather, traffic, and strangers.

Limitations

Sample Size and Diversity: Although there were some differentiating factors between the participants, they all reside in fairly populated, suburban neighbourhoods in Southern Ontario. As well, only five individuals were interviewed which is a fairly small sample size and may not have accurately represented the population.

Implications for Future Research

While conducting the research it was interesting that none of the participants discussed using technology when they were younger, but unanimously agreed that they spent ample time playing outdoors during their childhood. This helps support the fact that technology may be a crucial factor to consider when reflecting upon this generational shift taking place. This is perhaps an area to focus on in future studies. As well, another potential implication for future research could be to study if educating parents on the benefits of outdoor play would potentially shift their attitudes towards it.