This qualitative study used a narrative research design to explore how a parent's role 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 responded 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 issues which were present in the interview 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' (Uttley & Whyte, 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 study is specific and focuses specifically 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 engagement in outdoor play. Answers to the research question, “What are some factors that parents consider when their child engages in outdoor play?”

Literature Review

Methodology

Participants

In total, five individuals were interviewed from the Hamilton, Toronto and Peel Regions:

- 4 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

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

Procedure

1. Received approval from Sheridan's Research Ethics Board.
2. Began recruiting participants by contacting individuals through the Research Ethics Board, and 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.

Results and Discussion

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 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, playing with friends, playing soccer and having an active time. Play now is emphasized. 3 out 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 - such as emotional, social, and cognitive development. “Understanding the importance of outdoor play such as allowing children to explore their environment, develop muscle strength and coordination, and gain self-confidence” (Large, 2019, para 4), though areas such as 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 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 in plazas and play outdoors without adult supervision and therefore ‘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 allowing their fears and concerns to impact their children's outdoor play.

Summary Statement and Research Questions

Based on the research and existing literature it is clear that children are not spending enough time engaging in outdoor play. For each participant, 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?”

Benefits of Children Playing Outside According to Parents

- Improved physical fitness
- Improved emotional wellbeing
- Improved mental health
- Improved social wellbeing

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.