Childhood

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What is This?

Meanings of play among children

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Abstract
The purpose of this study was to examine meanings of play among children. Thirty-eight students aged 7–9 years from a suburban public school in Western Canada participated in focus groups. Data analysis revealed participants saw almost anything as an opportunity for play and would play almost anywhere with anyone. However, they perceived parents to have somewhat different views regarding play. The children frequently described adults as restricting play opportunities. This study therefore revealed that children had a relatively unrestrained view of play and these findings may be useful for helping to ensure that adults facilitate, rather than hinder, children's play.

Play is not only a quintessential childhood activity but has also been described as the most important 'work' of being a child (Piaget, 2007). However, this view of play is not without critique because it reflects an adult perspective and contemporary neoliberal ideology (Schwartzman, 1976; Sutton-Smith, 1966). Such debate regarding how play is defined, understood and categorized is common within the play literature (cf. Pellegrini, 2009; Schwartzman, 1976; Sutton-Smith, 2001; Wood, 2009). Sutton-Smith (2001), reflecting upon scholarship from multiple disciplines, described play as ambiguous. He argued that conceptions of play (i.e. play theory) were rhetorical and revealed an underlying ideological outlook intended to persuade others to believe in and live by similar values.

As researchers have sought to define and understand play they have primarily considered the views of parents, practitioners, and theorists (e.g. Factor, 2004; Schwartzman, 1976; Singh and Gupta, 2012). Accordingly, some have argued play is an adult construction created to make sense out of what children do with their time (Thomson and Philo,

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2004). Although there has been increased attention on children's perspectives (Christensen and Prout, 2002; Thomson, 2005), there remains a gap in the literature when thoroughly understanding children's views of play. The current study sought to address this gap in the literature by examining meanings of play among children.

Related literature

Play can be understood from a variety of perspectives. A brief review of the existing literature related to the meaning of play from three different perspectives (theoretical, parents, and children) is presented. Though these views have been separated for the purpose of this review, theoretical perspectives influence all research endeavors including those re/presenting children's or parents' views.

Theoretical perspectives

Given the dominance of neoliberal and adult perspectives toward play (Sutton-Smith, 1966, 2001), much of the theoretical literature regarding children's play has focused on the 'productive value' of play (i.e. exploring the developmental, cognitive, ecological, biological, and social functions of play; Pellegrini, 2009; Piaget, 2007; Wood, 2009). Nonetheless, researchers from various disciplines generally agree that play serves as an important learning tool during childhood (Isenberg and Quisenberry, 2002; Piaget, 2007; Schwartzman, 1976; Skelton, 2009).

Theoretical definitions of play vary and often reflect the discipline and theoretical outlook from which they originate (Schwartzman, 1976; Sutton-Smith, 2001; Wood, 2009). For example, from an educational perspective play has been defined as a 'dynamic, active, constructive behaviour' (Isenberg and Quisenberry, 2002: 33), whereas from a sociocultural anthropological position play has been described as a *disposition* rather then an activity or behavior (Malaby, 2008). As such, 'providing a comprehensive definition of play remains a theoretical challenge because there are multiple forms of play, which have different functions and characteristics, multiple players and multiple play contexts' (Wood, 2009: 167). For the purpose of this inquiry play was conceptualized *as an activity or behavior engaged in by children and defined by children as play*. Because we sought to understand children's views on play, we did not further categorize the word prior to the inquiry and actively sought to bracket our own personal, adult, theoretical, and academic pre-understandings of the word so that we could come to see how the children might envision it.

Parents' perspectives

Parents' perspectives have been elicited to understand where, what, and with whom children play, as well as identify the barriers to active play pursuits (Singh and Gupta, 2012; Valentine and McKendrick, 1997; Veitch et al., 2006). For example, using surveys with parents, Veitch et al. (2006) found active play was determined by the availability of social networks, facilities at parks and playgrounds, and the built environment. Valentine

and McKendrick (1997) determined there was no relationship between play provisions (e.g. parks, designated play spaces) and actual play patterns. They argued that parental concerns for child safety were moving children's outdoor play toward increasingly institutionalized, home-centered activities.

Singh and Gupta (2012) drew on observations and qualitative interviews with parents from diverse communities within India to understand their views on children's play. Findings indicated that although nearly all parents valued children's play many expressed greater value for children's educational pursuits. Aspects of the built environment (i.e. parks) and supervision were also cited as important factors with regard to children's play. Such research has provided interesting insights into adults' perceptions of play and highlighted potential restrictions parents might put on children's play activities. However, whether children share these views is, arguably, yet to be thoroughly examined.

Children's perspectives

Findings from ethnographic studies have shown children play in a range of spaces from playgrounds to building sites and busy streets (Factor, 2004; King, 1979; Oke et al., 1999). Children sometimes re-purpose accessible spaces into places to play, including those created for entirely different purposes (Factor, 2004; Rasmussen, 2004). Children played with an extensive social network, including peers and adults – and even family pets (Oke et al., 1999). Such studies are beneficial because they characterize the activities children are playing, where they are playing, and with whom they are playing. However, the classification of activities as play has been based upon researchers' definitions representing theoretical/paradigmatic perspectives (see Rubin et al., 1976; Sutton-Smith, 2001) rather than children's understandings. Without an understanding of children's perspectives of play it can only be assumed that adults accurately identify children's play activities.

Recognizing the limitations of observational studies and studies examining parents' perspectives of play, a movement has occurred toward participatory research methods where children's views and voices are elicited (Berinstein and Magalhaes, 2009; Holt et al., 2008). Children's opinions have also been gathered using traditional interview methods (King, 1979). Although these studies have taken important steps toward engaging with children in research, misrepresentations may arise because researchers and children may not have the same understanding of the word 'play' (Pellegrini, 2009; Schwartzman, 1976). It is therefore essential to step back and consider what play means to children. This understanding may add context to current and future play-related research, helping to ensure that policies developed from such research are fulfilling children's needs. As such, the purpose of this study was to examine meanings of play among children.

Method

Participants

Participants were sampled from a primary school located in a suburban neighborhood of a city in Western Canada. In total, 38 children, aged 7–9 years old participated in the

study (20 boys; 18 girls). The institutional research ethics board and the school at which the research was conducted approved all study procedures. Parental/guardian signed informed consent was received for all participants and all children provided oral assent. Children were reminded throughout the data collection activities that participation was voluntary and they were free to stop or not respond to any or all activities/questions without penalty. No children withdrew from the study.

Data collection

We used a child-focused approach, whereby the children were seen not only as the participants in the research but also as social actors with their own experiences and understanding of their lives (Christensen and Prout, 2002). We selected the methods appropriate for answering our research question and suitable for the participants. Data collection involved an integration of multiple methods including arts-based techniques, group activities, and storytelling (Darbyshire et al., 2005). Such activities have previously been used to examine play among children (Holt et al., 2008). We hoped that providing children with multiple opportunities to express their ideas would help them feel comfortable communicating and expressing themselves (cf. Grover, 2004).

Data collection commenced with an arts-based activity. Six to eight children from a single classroom (i.e. grade) participated in the activity at a given time. In total, six group sessions were conducted. A secluded area of the school library was set up for the study. One table was covered in a variety of images and stickers (toys, nature, equipment, technology, animals) that were provided by the researchers. Another table had a workspace designated for each child including a large Bristol board, scissors, glue, tape, pencils, markers, crayons, and other drawing and coloring materials. The children were informed they could use any of the materials provided as they liked.

During each small group session children worked individually to create collages, drawings, pictures, or a combination of such visual images. In creating their artwork they were asked to respond visually to questions such as: 'What do you play?' 'Where do you play?' 'Who do you play with?' and 'What does the word play mean?' The children responded to these questions in very different ways. For example, one child spent his time drawing a hamburger because, he said, his favorite play activity was drawing. Another child chose to list the names of all the people he liked to play with, and other children attempted to find stickers to represent every activity they classified as play.

During the creation of the artwork two researchers separately engaged individual children in conversations asking about what they were creating and why. These conversations were informal and based on the children's artwork rather than on a structured interview guide. The researchers were also careful not to provide any evaluation of the children's work other than general supportive comments. The informal nature of the conversations was intended to help put the children at ease so they would be comfortable sharing their stories with the group (the next part of the data collection protocol, reported below). As we did not use a structured interview approach there was considerable variation in the children's creations and explanations. This was acceptable given that we were interested in the children's meanings rather than our own predetermined views. The

informal approach may also have helped to reduce any feelings children had of being evaluated or completing a schoolwork task.

After the children completed their artwork they were asked if they would like to share their creations with their peers. All children agreed to participate. One at a time the children presented their artwork to the group and told their story of play. The group was encouraged to ask questions and respond to questions posed by the researchers resulting from the children's stories. The researchers then engaged the group in a discussion about play prompted by questions such as: 'What are your favorite activities to play?' and 'What is it about that activity that makes it play?' The group interviews were audio recorded.

Data analysis

Interviews were transcribed verbatim and coded to ensure confidentiality. The transcripts were compared to the audio files then read and re-read by the first two authors to ensure their immersion in the data (Maykut and Morehouse, 1994). Data were divided into sections corresponding to the overall topics (e.g. what children played, where children played). This grouping process was used to ensure that consecutive and non-consecutive sections of data, consisting of responses from several speakers, could be coded together (Kidd and Parshall, 2000).

The first two authors analyzed the data through an iterative process of content analysis (Maykut and Morehouse, 1994). During the coding process, we compared the transcripts to the collages the children had created to ensure they had appropriately captured the conversations. These meaningful segments of data were allocated basic descriptive codes, leading to the creation of raw data themes. Once the raw data themes had been identified, we independently grouped the raw data themes into lower-order themes, higher-order themes, and general dimensions. The authors also created essence phrases (statements describing the meaning of themes and the data housed within them) as they generated the higher- and lower-order themes.

Results and discussion

Children provided numerous examples of play activities, places where they liked to play, and people they liked to play with. Through these examples it became clear the children held particular views regarding play and also perceived that parents had specific ideas of what play was.

Play activities: Children saw almost anything as an opportunity for play

Activities children perceived to be play were classified into four categories: (1) movement-focused activities (e.g. sports, rough and tumble activities, general physical activities, and outdoor adventure activities); (2) creative/imaginative activities (e.g. building and construction, arts and crafts, and make-believe activities); (3) games and entertainment, traditional games (e.g. board games), technological games, amusement parks, and listening to music); (4) social-relational activities (e.g. socializing with friends, partaking in family activities).

The children suggested *almost* all activities were or could be play. This was most clearly indicated when children shared the stories of their artwork, listing a broad array of different activities they liked to play. For example, one of the grade two students listed activities ranging from sports to video games:

> I like to play with cats and dogs. I like to play on my Wii. I play soccer out in my backyard. . . . I like horses. I like to ride my bike and I like to build snowmen.

Our findings that play related to lots of types of 'movement-focused activities' are consistent with previous research (e.g. Miller and Kuhaneck, 2008; Oke et al., 1999). Children also reported that more sedentary activities, such as board games and listening to music, were types of play. A common element of these findings was that children did not depict play fulfilling a particular purpose or outcome.

Pellegrini (2009) cautioned researchers about labeling children's general social behaviors as play. He was concerned primarily with the policy and research implications of such mislabeling because 'play' as it is understood by developmental psychologists has particular benefits and functions for child development. Other researchers have critiqued the idea of the 'productive value' of play because it reflects an adult perspective and contemporary neoliberal ideology whereby only productive 'work' is of value (Malaby, 2008; Sutton-Smith, 2001). The current findings were more consistent with the view that play is an activity where the means is more important than the ends (Rubin et al., 1983). Furthermore, we found children clearly regard activities such as games and sports as play, which is important because some views of play would exclude activities that involve rules and structure and are primarily goal-oriented (Malaby, 2008). These findings highlight the value of attempting to understand children's play from their own perspectives.

Though children described a vast array of activities as play it became apparent that children rarely included watching television. Children primarily discussed television as it related to playing video games and watching movies. In fact, when discussing where children did not like to play one child said she did not like to play at her friend's house because, 'we don't really do anything in her house, just watch TV.' Children indicated that watching television was 'boring' and it was not play because, 'You lay on the couch like a lazy potato.' For those children who did classify watching TV as play it was because of its relation to other play activities. Related to our findings, in a recent survey of play activities in 16 countries, Singer et al. (2009) found 54% of mothers reported playing outside at a playground or park were activities that made their children happiest, whereas activities such as watching TV, films, or videos were only reported by 41% of mothers. It may be that children engage in TV play when the TV becomes a repurposed object to be played with or the content of television programming is acted out in a form of imaginary play (Reid and Fraser, 1980). When considering the relationship between TV and children's play it appears that children differentiated between watching TV and using the TV itself or programming as inspiration for playful endeavors.

Through their discussions, the children articulated what it was that led to certain activities being playful. The overriding consensus was that play was fun. As soon as an activity was not fun, it was no longer considered play:

Interviewer:	What makes something play?
Participant:	You have fun doing it.
Interviewer:	Fun?
Participant:	Yeah.
Participant:	Fun, inspiration.
Participant:	Energy.
Participant:	You sweat.
Interviewer:	But what about when you play video games? Do you sweat?
Participant:	Yeah my brother sweats . . . He jumps up and down, and like yelling at the TV.
Interviewer:	So it has to be fun. What would make something fun?
Participant:	Video games.
Participant:	Playing with friends.
Participant:	Having a screen and a controller.
Interviewer:	So then what's, how do you know if it's not play?
Unanimous response:	It's boring.
Interviewer:	So what sorts of things are boring?
Participant:	Schoolwork.
Participant:	Car drives.
Participant:	My brother.
Participant:	Watching TV.

Children made a distinction between playful activities (i.e. fun) and activities that were not playful (i.e. boring). The same distinction has been made by children in previous research (Berinstein and Magalhaes, 2009; Miller and Kuhaneck, 2008) although not all studies supported our findings (King, 1979). In the classroom setting, King (1979) found the kindergarteners classified activities that were voluntary and self-directed as play. However, the author suggested that the children's definitions of play mirrored those of the teachers and thus potentially revealed more about language use (and ideology) than meanings of playful endeavors.

Particular theoretical understandings of play also include fun or pleasurable as inherent features (Malaby, 2008). Consistent to all six focus groups in this study, as long as children did not find the activity boring, then it was fun and consequently it was considered play. As such, children classified *almost* all activities as play. Similar findings were reported in an investigation on children's play in urban India (Oke et al., 1999) and an exploration of the cultural aspects of play in Sweden (Lindqvist, 2001). According to Lindqvist (2001: 7), 'a child's imagination is not captured by an object itself, but by the story which gives the object and the actions their meaning.'

Overall, the children's discussions regarding what play was and what made something play in the current study overlap with a number of different approaches to defining play. For example, within the discussion children indicated that something was play when they sweat and use up energy, which may be consistent with the surplus energy theory of play (Rubin et al., 1983). However, children also spent considerable time discussing the importance of fun in play, which is partially consistent with functional views of play as productive because fun appears to be a necessary part of play regardless of whether or

not it produces a certain outcome. Additionally, the children's discussions pointed to the developmental role of play in allowing them to learn and grow, often mirroring adults' activities (such as pretending to cook or clean the house) or copying activities from the television. However, this study adds to this literature by highlighting, beyond all other reasons, the critical role of fun in children's choice of activities.

Places to play: Children would play almost anywhere

Children saw opportunities to play *almost* anywhere – even in spaces that were not typically designated as children's play spaces. For example, when asked where he usually liked to play, one boy said, 'Let me think. I don't really care. As long as I have two, four people and a soccer ball, and enough players or a football or something.' Children generally distinguished between indoor and outdoor play locations, which could be further separated into indoor private spaces (e.g. the family home), indoor public spaces (e.g. schools, hotels, recreation center), outdoor private spaces (e.g. front yard, back yard), and outdoor public spaces (e.g. parks, fields, playgrounds). Similar to their descriptions of what they liked to play, children provided numerous examples of where they liked to play that spanned all four of these categories. For example, a grade three child said her favorite places to play were 'In my, mostly outside and in my room,' while a child in grade two said, 'At the rec center and my friend's house.'

Nevertheless, the overall consensus among the children in this study was that they would play almost anywhere. Our findings corroborate previous research (Oke et al., 1999; Skelton, 2009; Valentine and McKendrick, 1997). Oke et al. (1999: 207) explained, 'what is most impressive and heartening is children's remarkable ability to create their own play space, be it in crowded hovels, community lanes and alleys, construction sites or even the traffic-infested streets.' Despite the fact Oke et al.'s study was conducted in a developing nation, the children in their study and those in the current study demonstrated a common resourcefulness where available spaces become 'places to play.' Although recent studies have focused on places designed specifically for children's play such as parks and playgrounds (Singh and Gupta, 2012; Veitch et al., 2006), the current findings reinforce the fact that children can play almost anywhere. Examining the range of play spaces available to children may yield a more complete understanding of play in their lives than an exclusive focus on adult-designed play areas (i.e. parks and playgrounds).

Playground facilities were scarcely mentioned among the children in this study, unlike, for example, the investigation of Tanzanian children (Berinstein and Magalhaes, 2009) or Australian parents (Veitch et al., 2006). Variation between studies may be indicative of cultural and contextual differences in perspectives on play (Skelton, 2009). However, we suggest the integration of multiple child-focused methods to explore children's perspectives and understanding of play (rather than researchers' or parents' views) might also contribute to the differences between the findings.

Location influenced the children's choice of activity. For example, when children were indoors they often indicated they were engaged in playing video games or creative and imaginative play activities. As one child simply stated, 'At home, um I'm usually either in my room playing or on the computer.' However, when children were outdoors they often described partaking in movement-related activities such as sport, general

physical activity games, and rough and tumble activities. As one child explained, 'in the fields I play soccer, football, baseball . . . Um, I'd play um, tag.' The importance of context to children's conceptions of play has been found among other studies (King, 1979; Skelton, 2009).

When discussing where they liked to play children generally indicated that they preferred to play outside, which has also been identified in other studies (Miller and Kuhaneck, 2008). This is an important finding for health researchers because the amount of time children spend outside has been correlated with children's physical activity and health-related behaviors (Sallis et al., 2000). Children desired spending time outside because outside spaces provided more space to play a variety of different activities. As one child from grade four explained, 'We'll play in the field, 'cause there's a lot of room there.' Another child shared similar thoughts about where he played, 'Usually in a big open field 'cause there's a lot of space.' Additionally, it seemed that children enjoyed playing outside more than inside because it provided them with the opportunity to engage in 'messy' play and risk-taking behaviors. As some children in grade three explained:

Interviewer:	Anywhere you like to play specifically outside?
Participant:	In the bush in the mud holes.
Participant:	In the basement playing video games.
Participant:	On my mud puddle.
Participant:	Outside.
Participant:	I like to play on this back hill behind my house.
Participant:	Death Mountain.
Interviewer:	So is it a park or is it just like a big pile of dirt that's left there behind your house?
Participant:	Just a big pile . . . It's actually supposed to be somebody's big backyard.

Given children's preference for spending time outdoors we were interested in how the difference in weather between summer and winter (which is extreme in this region of Canada) might influence children's preference for play location. Some children indicated a preference for playing indoors when it was cold and snowing. However, the majority of children indicated they preferred to be outside whatever the weather. As a child in third grade explained:

Interviewer:	And where is your favorite place to play?
Participant:	Outside.
Interviewer:	Yeah, you like being outside, even in the wintertime?
Participant:	Yup . . . 'Cause I like diving head first into the snow.
Interviewer:	Cool. So where is your favorite place to play outside?
Participant:	Um, in the ice with your head in the snow. In the trees, in the forest, yeah.

It appeared that rather than altering where children liked to play (i.e. inside or outside), weather might influence the types of activities children engaged in (e.g. skating

versus bike riding). Weather has been an important consideration in research on children's physical activity because of the assumption that children will spend less time outdoors during poor weather (e.g. cold, snowy, rainy; Carson and Spence, 2010). Holt et al. (2008) revealed that, according to children, good weather, including sun and blue skies, was a feature associated with playing and being active in their neighborhoods. Providing an alternative conclusion to these studies, the current findings indicate regardless of weather children would prefer to be outside.

People to play with: Children would play with almost anyone

Children indicated they could and would play with *almost* anyone. Children liked to play alone, with their siblings and parents, friends, and acquaintances (e.g. neighbors). For example, one child said, 'I like to play with everyone . . . my friends, my dad and mom.' Overall though, it seemed that the most preferred playmates were friends and siblings. These findings are supported by previous research across different cultures and social contexts (Miller and Kuhaneck, 2008; Oke et al., 1999). Where our findings were able to expand on previous research was through the identification that children liked to play with people that wanted to play the same things as them. One girl stated she played with certain people because, 'They like the things that you like.' Further, they wanted the people they were playing with to be fun and are nice to them: 'They do fun stuff,' '[I like to play with] people who are nice.' The importance of fun was also identified by Miller and Kuhaneck (2008: 411) who reported, 'others, both peers and adults, were important in the children's choices of what to play. The children did not feel it extremely important that they chose what to play, as long as they agreed it was fun.'

Continuing the discussion to consider why children might not play with certain people, participants consistently indicated they did not like to play with people who were mean to them or were badly behaved. As one child explained, 'I don't like someone that's a bad boy.' Additional characteristics of people children did not want to play with were those who were boring. According to the children in this study, people that were older or younger or of the opposite sex often did not want to engage in the same activities. As such, children often did not want to play with them.

Parents and play: Potentially misunderstanding and hindering children's play

Having established children's views on play, we were keen to identify what children thought might stop them from playing. We also sought to understand what children thought adults meant when they used the word 'play.' Although the children identified a variety of factors that influenced their play opportunities, the one most often cited was restrictions from parents.

The children also highlighted physical and environmental limitations such as injuries, dogs, and broken computers impinging on their play opportunities. For example, one of the reasons a grade two child did not play was, 'Spraining your wrist. And one time I broke my collar bone.' Children also identified general distractions, such as animals

misbehaving and siblings distracting them, as factors that might prevent them from playing.

Other things children commonly indicated would prevent them from playing were parents imposing time commitments and parents' restrictions. Other research has also found that, according to children, parents have a restrictive influence on children's play (Eckert, 2004). In our study, children reported that parents' imposed time commitments included parents having another commitment that children had to attend. As one child explained:

> 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 some[where], she stops me playing.

Other children indicated parents wanting them to do chores, their homework, or eat dinner. As a grade two child said, she stops playing, 'Uh, when my mom says to come and eat . . . That gets me annoyed.'

According to the children, parental restrictions were occasionally focused around injury concerns. For example, according to a boy in grade three, 'if you go with your mom and dad, they always say you can't do the stuff that you like to do like jump off the bridge.' Another aspect of safety was that it appeared that these children lived in an area that they and their parents perceived to be safe from 'stranger dangers.' One child said, 'My mom lets me bike on it and stuff, because it's not that dangerous, because not many people drive on that road.' Children also indicated that parents restricted their play opportunities if they were grounded or because parents did not want children to play video games.

Whereas we asked children about what stops them from playing, research focusing on the parents has asked about the (perceived) barriers to play and physical activity. Safety concerns have often been cited in response including concerns about outdoor darkness, neighborhood deprivation, crime, street traffic, and absence of adult supervision (Carver et al., 2008; Veitch et al., 2006). Children's perceptions of their parents' safety concerns, although mentioned, were not a dominant theme in our findings, perhaps because we recruited children from a suburban school in an area with low crime rates.

Parents' views on video games emerged as one of the main differences between children's and adults' (according to the children) perceptions of play. As one child said, 'They [parents] don't understand video games.' Another child explained, 'parents don't understand video games, they think they melt you brain.' Restriction of time spent engaging in video game play is well supported by recent Canadian sedentary behavior guidelines (Tremblay et al., 2011). However, many participants experienced video games as 'movement-focused' play using words such as 'sweating' or 'jumping' in association.

Children shared two specific ideas regarding parents' meanings of play. Some children indicated when parents told them to play they wanted them to engage in an activity that was outdoors, one child said, 'Um, when my dad says go play he means go outside' and another child said, 'When you're playing video games then my mom's like go outside, ride your bike or something.' Specifically, children indicated play was something

that was active and healthy, as one grade three said, 'They mean something that's more healthy.'

Other children thought when parents told them to go and play they did not want them to engage in a specific activity rather they just wanted them out of their way. As one child said, 'She [her mum] wants me to play a game that doesn't distract her making supper' and another child said, 'They just want to do stuff without us.' Some of the grade four children went further and explained, 'My parents say go play, they mean stop bugging us, or get out of my way, just stop bugging us' and another said, 'They said go upstairs, shut up and don't talk to me so I can do the taxes.' Through such statements it became apparent that children did not think that parents really understood what play meant to them or why they might want to play certain activities.

Our findings suggested that as children matured, their understanding of play and adults' versions of play became increasingly discordant. Perhaps it was not truly a difference in understandings of play between adults and children that was captured in our findings but a difference in the priorities of children and adults regarding time use and daily activities. Singh and Gupta (2012) also reported parental restrictions on children's play that arose from pressures to focus on academic achievement. Such factors may have an overall restrictive effect on children's play opportunities.

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to examine meanings of play among children. Our findings revealed children have an unrestrained view of play – seeing opportunities to play almost anywhere and with almost anyone. Key findings included the children's desire to engage in movement-focused activities, their limited interest in watching television, and the distinction between fun and boring activities. Capitalizing upon children's ability to see opportunities for fun in almost all activities, particularly movement-focused activities, could be beneficial for researchers and practitioners aiming to enhance children's involvement in physical activity. Children's desire to spend time outside may also be a promising finding given the health benefits associated with spending time outdoors. The interest in video game play, however, could be problematic. In this study we did not seek to understand specifics around types of video games preferred. These details should be considered in future research given the obvious preferences of children, the vast diversity of video gaming systems available, and the potential health benefits/risks associated with video game play (Tremblay et al., 2011).

According to the children in this study, adults have different opinions, agendas, and priorities regarding play activities and time use. Children felt that parents were particularly focused on 'healthy' activities that occurred outdoors. Although this may appear to be a positive parental influence on children's choices of play activities, it was clear that it was just that – the parents' choice. Rather than attempting to understand what children wanted to play and why they might want to play these games, it appeared that parents imposed their views of appropriate play activities upon their children. Previous research has echoed this concern (e.g. King, 1979; Valentine and McKendrick, 1997). This has potential to impact the children's experiences of fun and spontaneity associated with these healthy outdoor activities and may function to create tasks (or 'work') children

have to rather than want to do. Given the considerable benefits associated with children's engagement in play perhaps children would benefit from adults adopting their unrestrained view of play, giving children choice and agency, and providing sufficient time for them to engage in a variety of fun activities.

Limitations

Our findings should be considered within certain limitations. These include a sample drawn from a single elementary school in a suburban community. As discussed, parental safety concerns did not arise as an important factor in play among children in this study. Future research considering the perspectives of children among different neighborhoods, including urban and rural, might be beneficial. Also, interviews took place at a single time point at the end of spring when the weather outside was nice. We asked children about the role of weather but we may have found a difference depending on the season when the study was conducted. Research comprising multiple interviews over an extended period of time might provide further insight into seasonal variation in children's play (Carson and Spence, 2010).

We did not seek to identify age- or gender-related difference in meanings of play in this study, however we recognize the value of such considerations and found some evidence to suggest variation might exist. Future investigations should include a larger sample size where gender and age difference could be assessed. Finally, the study was conducted in a school, which might have restricted the information that we received from the children and their ability to refuse participation (cf. David et al., 2001). The school environment is often seen as a place where children's play is limited or restricted (King, 1979). It is also a context in which children are required to fulfill certain expectations or behaviors. As such, the children may have felt that they had to respond in 'school-appropriate' ways. Future research could benefit from examining this topic in another setting (e.g. clubs, homes) and also combining interviews with observation of children's play.

Conclusion

In conclusion, play-related research often relies on theoretical understandings of play that may be at odds with the lived or common understandings such as those expressed by the children in this study, demonstrating the disconnect between the reality and the rhetoric of play (Wood, 2009). If we, as researchers, rely solely on such theoretical definitions while attempting to include the voices of children in our research pursuits we will no doubt end up speaking two different languages – a child's understanding of play may be much broader than the current theoretical, scholarly understanding. This study therefore revealed that children had a relatively unrestrained view of play and these findings may be useful for helping to ensure that adults facilitate, rather than hinder, children's play.

Declaration of conflicting interests

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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