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### Paper:

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### Meanings of play among children

Journal:	<i>Childhood</i>
Manuscript ID:	CHD-11-0111.R3
Manuscript Type:	Original Manuscript
Keywords:	play, children, child-centred, qualitative, arts-based-methods
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.

*Original Article***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.

**Keywords**

Play, children, child-centered, qualitative, arts-based-methods

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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 neo-liberal ideology (Sutton-Smith, 1966; Schwartzman, 1976). 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 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, 2011). Accordingly, some have argued play is an adult construction created to make sense out of what children do with their time (Thomson and Philo, 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 neo-liberal 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).

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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 socio-cultural anthropological position play has been described as a *disposition* rather than 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*

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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, 2011; 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 (2011) 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 regards to child'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, Khattear, Pant and Sarawathi, 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, Maioni and Hornung, 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 towards participatory research methods



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9 where children's views and voices were elicited (Berinstein and Magalhaes, 2009; Holt,  
10 Spence, Sehn and Cutumisu, 2008). Children's opinions have also been gathered using  
11 traditional interview methods (King, 1979). Although these studies have taken important  
12 steps towards engaging with children in research, misrepresentations may arise because  
13 researchers and children may not have the same understanding of the word 'play'  
14 (Pellegrini, 2009; Schwartzman, 1976). It is therefore essential to step back and consider  
15 what play means to children. This understanding may add context to current and future  
16 play-related research, helping to ensure that policies developed from such research are  
17 fulfilling children's needs. As such, the purpose of this study was to examine meanings of  
18 play among children.  
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## 36 **Method**

### 37 *Participants*

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40 Participants were sampled from a primary school located in a suburban neighborhood of a  
41 city in Western Canada. In total, 38 children, aged 7-9 years old participated in the study  
42 (20 boys; 18 girls). The institutional research ethics board and the school at which the  
43 research was conducted approved all study procedures. Parental/guardian signed informed  
44 consent was received for all participants and all children provided oral assent. Children  
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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, MacDougall and Schiller, 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

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10 was covered in a variety of images and stickers (toys, nature, equipment, technology,  
11 animals) that were provided by the researchers. Another table had a workspace designated  
12 for each child including a large Bristol board, scissors, glue, tape, pencils, markers,  
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14 for each child including a large Bristol board, scissors, glue, tape, pencils, markers,  
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16 crayons, and other drawing and coloring materials. The children were informed they could  
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18 use any of the materials provided as they liked.  
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23 *During each small group session children worked individually to create collages, drawings,*  
24 *pictures or a combination of such visual images. In creating their artwork they* were asked  
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26 to respond visually to questions such as; ‘What do you play?’ ‘Where do you play?’ ‘Who  
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28 do you play with?’ and ‘What does the word play mean?’ The children responded to these  
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30 questions in very different ways. For example, one child spent his time drawing a  
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32 hamburger because, he said, his favourite play activity was drawing. Another child choose  
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34 to list the names of all the people he liked to play with, and other children attempted to find  
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36 stickers to represent every activity they classified as play.  
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45 During the creation of the artwork two researchers separately engaged individual children  
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47 in conversations asking about what they were creating and why. *These conversations were*  
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49 *informal and based on the children’s artwork rather than on a structured interview guide.*  
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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 pre-determined 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 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: (a) Movement-focused activities (e.g. sports, rough and tumble activities, general physical activities and outdoor adventure activities); (b) Creative/Imaginative activities (e.g. building and construction, arts and crafts, and make-believe activities); (c) Games and entertainment, traditional games (e.g. board games) technological games, amusement parks, and listening to music); (d) 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

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9 activities they liked to play. For example, one of the grade two students listed activities  
10 from sports to video games:  
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14 I like to play with cats and dogs. I like to play on my Wii. I play soccer out in my  
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16 backyard. . . . I like horses. I like to ride my bike and I like to build snowmen.  
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21 Our findings that play related to lots of type of ‘movement-focused activities’ is consistent  
22 with previous research (e.g. Miller and Kuhaneck, 2008; Oke et al., 1999). **Children also**  
23 **reported that more sedentary activities, such as board games and listening to music, were**  
24 **types of play. A common element of these findings was children did not depict play**  
25 **fulfilling a particular purpose or outcome.**  
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35 Pellegrini (2009) cautioned researchers about labeling children’s general social behaviors  
36 as play. He was concerned primarily with the policy and research implications of such  
37 mislabeling because ‘play’ as it is understood by developmental psychologists has  
38 particular benefits and functions for child development. Other researchers have critiqued  
39 **the idea of the ‘productive value’ of play because it reflects an adult perspective and**  
40 **contemporary neo-liberal ideology whereby only productive ‘work’ is of value** (Malaby,  
41 2008; Sutton-Smith, 2001). **The current findings were more consistent with the view that**  
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play is an activity where the means is more important than the ends (Rubin, Fein and Vandenberg, 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, Singer, D'Agostino, and DeLong (2009) found 54% of mothers reported playing outside at a playground or park were activities that made their children happiest, whereas as activities such as watching TV, films, or videos were only reported by 41% of mothers. It



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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 A: You have fun doing it.

Interviewer: Fun?

Participant B: Yeah.

Participant C: Fun, inspiration.

Participant A: Energy.

Participant E: You sweat.

Interviewer: But what about when you play video games? Do you sweat?

Participant E: 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 B: Video games.

Participant D: Playing with friends.

Participant A: 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 E: Schoolwork.

Participant A: Car drives.

Participant C: My brother.

Participant D: 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,

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9 the author suggested that the children's definitions of play mirrored those of the teachers  
10 and thus potentially revealed more about language use (and ideology) than meanings of  
11 playful endeavors.  
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19 Particular theoretical understandings of play also include fun or pleasurable as inherent  
20 features (Malaby, 2008). Consistent to all six focus groups in this study, as long as children  
21 did not find the activity boring, then it was fun and consequently it was considered play. As  
22 such, children classified *almost* all activities as play. Similar findings were reported in an  
23 investigation on children's play in urban India (Oke et al., 1999) and an exploration of the  
24 cultural aspects of play in Sweden (Lindqvist, 2001). According to Lindqvist (2001: 7), 'a  
25 child's imagination is not captured by an object itself, but by the story which gives the  
26 object and the actions their meaning.'  
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40 Overall, the children's discussions regarding what play was and what made something play  
41 in the current study overlap with a number of different approaches to defining play. For  
42 example, within the discussion children indicated that something was play when they sweat  
43 and use up energy, which may be consistent with the surplus energy theory of play (Rubin  
44 et al., 1983). However, children also spent considerable time discussing the importance of  
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9 fun in play, which is partially consistent with functional views of play as productive  
10 because fun appears to be a necessary part of play regardless of whether or not it produces a  
11 certain outcome. Additionally, the children's discussions pointed to the developmental role  
12 of play in allowing them to learn and grow, often mirroring adults' activities (such as  
13 pretending to cook or clean the house) or copying activities from the television. However,  
14 this study adds to this literature by highlighting, beyond all other reasons, the critical role of  
15 fun in children's choice of activities.  
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28 *Places to play: Children would play almost anywhere*

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30 Children saw opportunities to play *almost* anywhere – even in spaces that were not  
31 typically designated as children's play spaces. For example, when asked where he usually  
32 liked to play, one boy said, 'Let me think. I don't really care. As long as I have two, four  
33 people and a soccer ball, and enough players or a football or something.' Children generally  
34 distinguished between indoor and outdoor play locations, which could be further separated  
35 into indoor private spaces (e.g. the family home), indoor public spaces (e.g. schools, hotels,  
36 recreation center), outdoor private spaces (e.g. front yard, back yard), and outdoor public  
37 spaces (e.g. parks, fields, playgrounds). Similar to their descriptions of what they liked to  
38 play, children provided numerous examples of where they liked to play that spanned all  
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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 and colleagues (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, 2011; Veitch et al., 2006), the current findings reinforce the fact that children’s 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).

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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 research (King, 1979; Skelton, 2009).

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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, Prochaska and Taylor, 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.

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9 Interviewer: So is it a park or is it just like a big pile of dirt that's left there behind  
10 your house?  
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13 Participant: Just a big pile....It's actually supposed to be somebody's big backyard.  
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16 Given children's preference for spending time outdoors we were interested in how the  
17 difference in weather between summer and winter (which is extreme in this region of  
18 Canada) might influence children's preference for play location. Some children indicated a  
19 preference for playing indoors when it was cold and snowing. However, the majority of  
20 children indicated they preferred to be outside whatever the weather. As a child in third  
21 grade explained:  
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30 Interviewer: And where is your favorite place to play?  
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32 Participant: Outside.  
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34 Interviewer: Yeah, you like being outside, even in the wintertime?  
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36 Participant: Yup...Cause I like diving head first into the snow.  
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38 Interviewer: Cool. So where is your favorite place to play outside?  
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40 Participant: Um, in the ice with your head in the snow. In the trees, in the forest,  
41 yeah.  
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47 It appeared that rather than altering where children liked to play (i.e. inside or outside),  
48 weather might influence the types of activities children engaged in (e.g. skating versus bike  
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9 riding). Weather has been an important consideration among research on children's  
10 physical activity because of the assumption that children will spend less time outdoors  
11 during poor weather (e.g. cold, snowy, rainy; Carson and Spence, 2010). Holt and  
12 colleagues (2008) revealed that, according to children, good weather, including sun and  
13 blue skies, were features associated with playing and being active in their neighborhoods.  
14 Providing an alternative conclusion to these studies, the current findings indicate regardless  
15 of weather children would prefer to be outside.  
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28 *People to play with: Children would play with almost anyone*

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30 Children indicated they could and would play with *almost* anyone. Children liked to play  
31 alone, with their siblings and parents, friends, and acquaintances (e.g. neighbors). For  
32 example, one child said, 'I like to play with everyone . . . my friends, my dad and mom.'  
33 Overall though, it seemed that the most preferred playmates were friends and siblings.  
34 These findings are supported by previous research across different cultures and social  
35 contexts (Miller and Kuhaneck, 2008; Oke et al., 1999). Where our findings were able to  
36 expand on previous research was through the identification that children liked to play with  
37 people that wanted to play the same things as them. One girl stated she played with certain  
38 people because, 'They like the things that you like.' Further, they wanted the people they  
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9 were playing with to be fun. For example, ‘They do fun stuff’ and they are nice to them, ‘[I  
10 like to play with] people who are nice.’ The importance of fun was also identified by Miller  
11 and Kuhaneck (2008: 411) who reported, ‘others, both peers and adults, were important in  
12 the children’s choices of what to play. The children did not feel it extremely important that  
13 they chose what to play, as long as they agreed it was fun.’  
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23 Continuing the discussion to consider why children might not play with certain people,  
24 participants consistently indicated they did not like to play with people who were mean to  
25 them or were badly behaved. As one child explained, ‘I don’t like someone that’s a bad  
26 boy.’ Additional characteristics of people children did not want to play with were those  
27 who were boring. According to the children in this study, people that were older or younger  
28 or of the opposite sex often did not want to engage in the same activities. As such, children  
29 often did not want to play with them.  
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#### 42 *Parents and play: Potentially misunderstanding and hindering children’s play*

43 Having established children’s views on play, we were keen to identify what children  
44 thought might stop them from playing. We also sought to understand what children thought  
45 adults meant when they used the word play. Although the children identified a variety of  
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9 factors that influenced their play opportunities, the one most often cited was restrictions  
10 from parents.  
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16 The children also highlighted physical and environmental limitations such as injuries, dogs,  
17 and broken computers also impinged on their play opportunities. For example, one of the  
18 reasons a grade two child did not play was, ‘Spraining your wrist. And one time I broke my  
19 collar bone.’ Children also identified general distractions, such as animals misbehaving and  
20 siblings distracting them, as factors that might prevent them from playing.  
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30 Other things children commonly indicated would prevent them from playing were parent  
31 imposed time commitments and parents’ restrictions. Other research has also found that,  
32 according to children, parents have a restrictive influence on children’s play (Eckert, 2004).  
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37 In our study, children reported that parent imposed time commitments included parents  
38 having another commitment that children had to attend. As one child explained:  
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42 My mom and dad, they don’t let me play outside . . . Because they want me to go  
43 somewhere, because like when I’m playing with my brother, my mom wants to go  
44 some, she stops me playing.  
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10 Other children indicated parents wanting them to do chores, their homework, or eat dinner.  
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12 As a grade two child said, she stops playing, ‘Uh, when my mom says to come and eat . . .  
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14 That gets me annoyed.’  
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19 According to the children, parent restrictions were occasionally focused around injury  
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21 concerns. For example, according to a boy in grade three, ‘ . . . if you go with your mom  
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23 and dad, they always say you can’t do the stuff that you like to do like jump off the bridge.’  
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25 Another aspect of safety was that it appeared that these children lived in an area that they  
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27 and their parents perceived to be safe from ‘stranger dangers.’ One child said, ‘My mom  
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29 lets me bike on it and stuff, because it’s not that dangerous, because not many people drive  
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31 on that road.’ Children also indicated that parents restricted their play opportunities if they  
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33 were grounded or because parents did not want children to play video games.  
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40 Whereas we asked children about what stops them from playing, research focusing on the  
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42 parents has asked about the (perceived) barriers to play and physical activity. Safety  
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44 concerns have often been cited in response including concerns about outdoor darkness,  
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46 neighborhood deprivation, crime, street traffic, and presence of adult supervision (Carver,  
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48 Timperio and Crawford, 2008; Veitch et al., 2006). Children’s perceptions of their parents’  
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9 safety concerns, although mentioned, were not a dominant theme in our findings, perhaps  
10 because we recruited children from a suburban school in an area with low crime rates.  
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16 Parents' views on video games emerged as one of the main differences between children  
17 and adults (according to the children) perceptions of play. As one child said, 'They  
18 [parents] don't understand video games.' Another child explained, 'parents don't  
19 understand video games, they think they melt you brain.' Restriction of time spent  
20 engaging in video game play is well supported by recent Canadian sedentary behavior  
21 guidelines (Tremblay, LeBlanc, Janssen, Kho, Hicks, Murmumets et al., 2011). However,  
22 many participants experienced video games as 'movement-focused' play using words such  
23 as 'sweating' or 'jumping' in association.  
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38 Children shared two specific ideas regarding parents' meanings of play. Some children  
39 indicated when parents told them to play they wanted them to engage in an activity that was  
40 outdoors, one child said, 'Um, when my dad says go play he means go outside' and another  
41 child said, 'When you're playing video games then my mom's like go outside, ride your  
42 bike or something.' Specifically, children indicated play was something that was active and  
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49 healthy, as one grade three said, 'They mean something that's more healthy.'  
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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 adult's 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 (2011) 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.

**General 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).

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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



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9 concerns did not arise as an important factor in play among children in this study. Future  
10 research considering the perspectives of children among different neighborhoods, including  
11 urban and rural might be beneficial. Also, interviews took place at a single time point at the  
12 end of spring when the weather outside was nice. We asked children about the role of  
13 weather but we may have found a difference depending on the season when the study was  
14 conducted. Research comprising multiple interviews, over an extended period of time  
15 might provide further insight into seasonal variation in children's play (Carson and Spence,  
16 2010).  
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31 We did not seek to identify age or gender related difference in meanings of play in this  
32 study, however we recognize the value of such considerations and found some evidence to  
33 suggest variation might exist. Future investigations should include a larger sample size  
34 where gender and age difference could be assessed. Finally, the study was conducted in a  
35 school, which might have restricted the information that we received from the children and  
36 their ability to refuse participation (cf. David, Edwards and Alldred, 2001). The school  
37 environment is often seen as a place where children's play is limited or restricted (King,  
38 1979). It is also a context in which children are required to fulfill certain expectations or  
39 behaviors. As such, the children may have felt that they had to respond in 'school-  
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9 appropriate' ways. Future research could benefit from examining this topic in another  
10 setting (e.g. clubs, homes) and also combining interviews with observation of children's  
11 play.  
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### 19 **Conclusion**

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



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