



Summary

The experiences and perceptions of children's active free play has changed over the generations.

This article describes findings from inter-generational interviews and provides some suggestions on how to facilitate active free play today.

What grandparents, parents, and kids say about play!

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The landscape of play has changed over the generations. Children have less freedom to engage in unstructured and unsupervised play than children from previous generations. In fact, those parents who let their children play with no supervision may be thought of as "bad parents" by their friends and neighbours. In response to declining rates of children's engagement in play, there has been a recent surge of media campaigns (e.g., Canadian Tire and ParticipACTION) encouraging children to go out and play. Children's play is a hot topic.

Active free play (AFP) is a type of play that is spontaneous with bursts of moderate-to-vigorous physical activity. It takes place outdoors with minimal or no adult guidance.^{1,2,3} Active free play is a major contributor to children's overall physical activity,⁴ which is important for overall health and reducing the likelihood of children developing chronic diseases. A decline in active free play may partially explain why only 4% of girls and 9% of boys meet the Canadian Physical Activity Guidelines.⁵ By understanding children's active free play in the past, we may reveal key influences and considerations that can be used to revive active free play.⁶

Although we might expect children in rural areas to engage in more play than children in urban areas, little is known about how play has changed in rural and urban areas over recent generations. We spoke to grandparents, parents, and children (between the ages of 5 and 12 years) from rural and urban communities in Northern Alberta to learn about their experiences of play and gain their opinions on what makes it more difficult for children to play today.

Experiences of Grandparents' Play in Childhood

Grandparents spoke of little to no regulation or supervision in their childhood play. Often the grandparents would leave the home in the morning and be outside playing all day (regardless of the weather), only to return in time for supper. Many grandparents had siblings or neighbourhood children to play with, and together they would play imaginative games. They rarely mentioned having toys, and they would play with a variety of materials and objects found in the neighborhood.

Experiences of Parents' Play in Childhood

Similar to the responses from grandparents, parents recalled their childhood play experiences as occurring outdoors with siblings and other children in the neighborhood. They were often allowed to go to parks and playgrounds without parental supervision. Many parents remembered using their imagination to create games and build forts with the nature that surrounded them.

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Experiences of Children's Play

The children that participated in this study have had a different experience with play in comparison to their parents or grandparents. All of the children had rules and boundaries that they have to abide by. They are often constrained to smaller play spaces, like their backyard or a school playground, with supervision being a common requirement when they go out and play. Additionally, many of the children are enrolled in extra-curricular activities such as sports or music lessons, which further reduced their time for free play. Apart from siblings, there were not many children who mentioned having other children in their neighbourhoods to play with.

Barriers to Play: What stops children from playing today?

The primary concern from parents and grandparents, in respect to children's free play, was safety. This included:

- stranger danger,
- traffic and road safety,
- risk of injury, and
- wildlife encounters (rural only).

Other identified barriers to active free play were:

- technology and electronic devices (cell phones, iPads, video games), and
- lack of free time (overscheduled in organized activities, such as sports teams and music lessons).

Facilitators to Play: What helps children engage in active free play today?

Parents and grandparents used different strategies to help promote and encourage play for their children. Some of the most common approaches included:

- establishing rules and boundaries to create safe play areas,
- in urban communities, getting to know neighbours so there is always an "eye on the streets",
- in rural communities, taking kids to local parks and green spaces,
- adults being role models and setting a good example by joining their children in play, and
- sparking imaginative play by suggesting fun and creative ideas for free play.

Grandparents remembered — leaving the home in the morning and playing outside all day, only to return in time for supper.



How can we improve children's play?

- Take time to get to know the neighbourhood and identify potential places for children to play.⁷
- Encourage parents to allow their children to explore different play areas, such as open fields or small wooded areas, not just playgrounds.⁷
- Teach children about risks. Parents can walk through their neighbourhood with their children and teach them about hazards and risks specific to their area. This will help the children identify hazards and risks, discover how to avoid hazards and negotiate risks, and to stay safe.
- Make an effort to get to know your neighbours. Research suggests lack of free play is a result of decreasing social connections.⁶
- Create a playground or park patrol system with the parents in your neighbourhood. Parents can create a schedule and take turns supervising the children at the park or play area.⁶
- Suggest parents monitor or limit how much time children spend in structured activities each week. If there is not enough time for free play, they are probably enrolled in too many activities.
- Set a block of time each day for active free play and include it in your daily routine.
- Institute a technology-free hour every night with the entire family. Parents use this hour to be active and play as a family.
- Parents can add a half-hour of outdoor play to the after-school pick up routine.
- Learn how to engage in outdoor winter activities. Take advantage of free public skating, tobogganing and snowfort making this winter.
- Bundle up and explore the outdoor activities hosted by the county, town or city—try a new activity each month.
- Plan family activities that involve active free play instead of movie night—go to the water park or play laser tag!

Parents remembered — using their imagination to create games and build forts with the nature that surrounded them.



Conclusion

The experiences and perceptions of children's active free play has adjusted over the generations. Parents are key players in the development of regular ongoing free play opportunities for children in outdoor spaces. Some keys efforts that support regular active free play are to:

- 1) identify safe outdoor spaces to play,
- 2) make an effort to become connected as a family to your fellow community members,
- 3) schedule time for active free play,
- 4) educate children on risk negotiation, and
- 5) be a role model (adults can play too).

Free play opportunities support the social (negotiation and leadership), cognitive (problem-solving) and physical (health and fitness) growth of children.⁸ Help children have fun and move more!

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