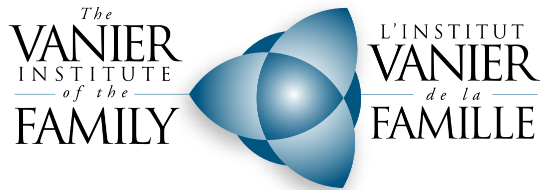

CONTEMPORARY FAMILY TRENDS

"Caution! Kids at Play?"

Unstructured Time Use among Children and Adolescents

by Belinda Boekhoven

Carleton University

OCTOBER 2009

About the Author

Belinda Boekhoven completed a B.A. (Honours) in Child Studies at Carleton University and a B.Ed. at the University of Ottawa. She recently completed her M.A. in Psychology at Carleton University, and this paper originated as part of her practicum research at the Vanier Institute of the Family during that programme. She is currently a PhD candidate in the Psychology programme at Carleton University.

About the Institute

The Vanier Institute of the Family was established in 1965 under the patronage of Their Excellencies Governor General Georges P. Vanier and Madame Pauline Vanier. It is a national voluntary orga nization dedicated to promoting the well-being of Can ada's families through research, publications, public education and advocacy. The Institute regularly works with businesses, legislators, policy-makers and program specialists, researchers, educators, family service professionals, the media and members of the general public.

Contemporary Family Trends (CFT) is a special collection of documents written by Canadian experts on a wide range of issues facing today's families. CFT papers are descriptive, interpretative, and provide a critical overview of relevant topics involving families.

The opinions expressed in this report are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the views of the Vanier Institute of the Family.

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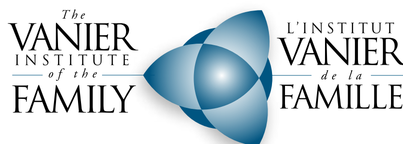

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FOREWORD

I remember walking to school when I was six years-old. The journey was about a half a mile. There was a crossing guard at one point and other children walking along the way. But my mother was at home with my younger brothers. I got to school on my own. My own children are now 9 and 11 and it has only been this last year that they have started to walk to school on their own. We are fortunate to live in an older neighbourhood where the public school is in walking distance and the route to school is fairly direct and safe.

But my kids are in the minority. Today in Canada only a third of children walk to school regularly. In the United States, this figure is even lower. More and more, children are being driven or bussed to school, even over short distances. In the process, children are losing touch with their neighbourhoods, losing the opportunity to discover and explore their communities on their own terms.

Walking to school is one instance in a child's day but it reveals much about our increasingly urbanized world. Two new papers from *The Vanier Institute of the Family* explore the issues of children and urbanization and their use of time. **Juan Torres** from the Université de Montréal's Institut d'urbanisme has written an insightful critique of children's role in our cities. He looks at the ways in which urban planning has evolved to accommodate the needs of motorized adults and what this has meant for healthy child development and the evolution of vibrant, user-friendly communities.

Belinda Boekhoven from Carleton University looks at a related set of issues around the time use of children and adolescents. Traffic congestion and safety issues are but two of the factors behind children's loss of free time, particularly time devoted to outdoor play. Children and adolescents are much more likely to be involved in organized activities than in the past. And while participation in sport, the arts, faith groups and the like has been shown to be very beneficial for child development, Ms. Boekhoven argues, there are risks too if children and adolescents don't have access to opportunities to develop qualities such as self-motivation or self-reliance.

These papers make us step back to consider the communities we live in and the lives we lead – from the perspective of our children. Dr. Torres makes the case that we would all benefit if children and youth played a greater role in urban planning. Agreed. Children have much to contribute in rethinking the ways we live in cities, share neighbourhoods, and grow together.

Katherine Scott
Director of Programs
October 2009

Abstract

Children's free play is recognised as an essential component of childhood which supports a multitude of learning and social opportunities. Participation in organised activities is also considered an important factor for socialisation and general well-being. As children move into adolescence, organised activities are strongly associated with positive outcomes, but may hinder opportunities for developing independence. This paper looks at the allocation and purpose of unstructured time for children and adolescents with respect to environments, activities, expectations and outcomes, and argues for a balanced approach.

Acknowledgements

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"Caution! Kids at Play?" *Unstructured Time Use among Children and Adolescents*

By: Belinda Boekhoven

1. INTRODUCTION

In contemporary Western culture, free and creative play is typically acknowledged as a normal component of childhood that supports physical, cognitive and social development, and maturation. Children are understood to benefit from a range of types of play, in a variety of settings, through which they can explore and interact with their peers creatively, imaginatively and spontaneously.

However, as children move into adolescence, physical activities and involvement in imaginative play tend to decline. Indeed, unstructured activities and time are more likely to be characterised by adults as a threat to adolescent health and well-being and as an antecedent of risk behaviours (Osgood, Anderson, & Shaffer, 2005). At a time when young people are seeking opportunities to assert their independence, parents may seek to further organize their children's free time as a way to protect them from negative influences and relationships (Mahoney, Larson & Lord, 2005; Mancini & Huebner, 2003; McHale, Crouter & Tucker, 2001).

In practice, the free time of children, and adolescents, is frequently assigned to organised activities in pursuit of beneficial physical, cognitive, social and maturational outcomes. Many such activities occur away from natural environments and are necessarily circumscribed by the requirements of family logistics, budgets, parental preferences and availability for transportation and other forms of facilitation (Green & Chalip, 1997; Howard & Madrigal, 1990; Jambor, 1999). Moreover, the urbanisation of the population has reduced opportunities for spontaneous exploration and experience of the natural world. As a result, unplanned opportunities for learning and socialisation through play appear to have

diminished. This risks the reduction of life experiences which could otherwise promote qualities such as self-motivation and self-reliance.

The research shows that choices made on behalf of children and adolescents with respect to free time activities have implications for their future educational and recreational experiences, their physical and mental health, and their maturation into adulthood (Kuo & Faber Taylor, 2004; O'Brien, 2007; Sebba, 1991; Ward Thompson, Aspinall, & Montarzino, 2008). This paper explores the debate around free time for children and adolescents, highlighting the advantages and disadvantages of structured and unstructured time for their health and well-being. It argues that there is a need for greater balance in the approach to children's free time and broader access to both natural and urban environments for play and recreation.

2. HISTORICAL ORIGINS OF FREE TIME FOR YOUTH

Our collective understanding and valuing of children's opportunities for play and recreation originates from deep social, cultural, economic and spiritual attitudes about childhood. These attitudes reflect a blend between the current state of beliefs about the importance of children's developmental needs, and the legacy of views and philosophies regarding childhood which have evolved over time. The concept of children's recreational time exemplifies this process of coalescing ideas and practices.

Children's recreational time is a relatively recent notion, and parental efforts to organise it for the benefit of their children even more so. During pre-medieval and medieval eras, in western cultures, recognition and knowledge of children's developmental needs was minimal. Families often hovered at the margins of survival, which meant that resources and attention were concentrated on the effort of obtaining and providing the essential requirements for existence. In this context, little distinction was, or could be, made between the needs of the child and the survival of the family. Parents of this era typically established what would now be described as authoritarian[1] relationships with their children, usually enforced by physical punishment. Children were seen as property and were expected either to contribute to the household through their labour or were sent out to service (See deMause, 1974).

As such, the worlds of children and adults at this time were rarely separate and children were often present when adults played or held celebrations. This phenomenon is illustrated in contemporary art work, such as the 16th century paintings of Bruegel the Elder (Janson, 2007: 655). *The Wedding Feast,* for instance, depicts a child sitting on the floor eating from a plate while, seated at tables, adults celebrate the event.

Despite the fact that recreation was a nascent concept, the historical record indicates occasional recognition of its importance for children, suggesting that there was some diversity among existing beliefs. Writings from the 11th and 12th centuries illustrate shifting attitudes towards children and their role within families and society. For example, Bartholomew of England recommended ample play for boys (McLaughlin, 1974), and boys assigned to monasteries for education were given time to rest and play (Nicholas, 1991).

[1] An authoritarian parenting style requires children to submit, unquestioningly, to rigid requirements of compliance and obedience, which are enforced punitively (Baumrind, 1968).

By the 16th century, attitudes towards child-rearing began to reflect increased concern for the well-being of children. Ariès (1962, cited by Johansson, 1987; Marshall, 1991) has been credited with describing the French aristocracy as the originators of a new interest in the raising of children, including the concept of children as individuals. Concurrently, in North America, a stern approach towards raising children developed from concern for their moral well-being. Children were considered to be sinful themselves and also to carry the burden of their parents' sins. The Protestant ethic of strict discipline and hard work was seen as protective, and precluded frivolous activities such as recreation and play. Interestingly, it is from these ideas of purposeful and wholesome activity that organised leisure and sporting activities originated at the beginning of the 20th century (Larson & Seepersad, 2002).

With the onset of the Industrial Revolution in Europe (from the late 18th to the early 19th centuries) came the establishment of child labour laws and the advent of universal schooling (Miller, 2002; Qvortrup, 1995). In many countries, children were no longer required to work to ensure the survival of the family, as they had been prior to industrialisation; nor could they be used as factory labour. Consequently, while many hours in the day were allocated for education, there was time before and after school that was essentially unassigned. [2]

These fundamental changes in the allocation of space and time use for children and adolescents gave way to a new understanding that children were not adults in miniature, and that childhood comprised a lengthy process of development and maturation. A more popular appreciation for the importance and meaning of play as part of children's learning and development emerged in the wake of groundbreaking research in the field of developmental psychology. Researchers such as Piaget (1896-1980), Vygotsky (1896-1934), Erikson (1902-1994) and Bandura (1925-) contributed enormously to our understanding of the 'ages and stages' of human development. Further, from this body of knowledge emerged an understanding that adolescence was a continuation of this developmental process, during which individuals explore their identity, social and moral orientations, and test their role in society (Larson & Seepersad, 2002).

3. CHILDREN AND FREE TIME

Changing ideas about child and adolescent development, and the amount of discretionary time available to young people, have predictably influenced contemporary patterns of time use, including play and recreation. As the debate shifted to focus on healthy child development, questions emerged about the value of free time for children and adolescents and the desirable balance between "structured" and "unstructured" time. Below, the paper reviews the literature on structured and unstructured time, play and recreation, identifying the aspects that are considered most advantageous to children and adolescents.

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[2] It is important to note that children in many countries still play a vital role in the economic survival of the household. Where life is still largely rural and agrarian or nomadic, where literacy is low, and where there are few alternatives to human labour, children and adolescents remain essential to the completion of chores, housework, and food and income production (Larson & Verma, 1999). Plainly, if youth are engaged in tasks such as these, they have less time for education or play, and opportunities for organised recreation may not exist at all. This is especially true for girls who tend to work longer hours and remain in or close to the home, while boys acquire more play time and more time out of the house.

3.1 Unstructured Time Use in Childhood

Traditionally, unstructured time has presented opportunities for youth to engage in unscheduled activities of their own choosing and creation. During childhood, these aspects of freedom and leisureliness are considered important as they provide time for children to learn from their play experiences (Elkind, 2001). As children mature towards and through adolescence however, physical play activity as an element of recreational time typically declines (Kahn *et al.*, 2008). This shift holds the potential for unstructured time to become unoccupied time, or time in which risk behaviours can become an attractive option, without exposure to the beneficial effects that organised activities afford (Mancini & Huebner, 2003). That said, as the discussion below reveals, these risks should not detract from the importance of providing children and youth with the opportunities to learn and explore that unstructured time affords.

Play in Childhood

Play is recognised as the primary mechanism by which young children learn about themselves, their environment and their place in the world. Unstructured play provides a spontaneous and informal venue for recreation, socialisation and learning, which changes over the course of childhood and adolescence.

Developmental psychologists have described an identifiable sequence of play types from birth onwards, through which children learn by acquiring information and building competence. As outlined by Fernie (n.d.), the process begins with what Piaget (1962) termed *sensorimotor play*, a mechanism for exploration of the physical self and the environment. *Pretend play* (Garvey, 1984, cited by Fernie, n.d.) enables children to experiment with symbolic representation and to explore social roles and relationships. These new abilities are internalised and used to gain further knowledge and skills. Through play, children learn about the physical, cognitive, linguistic, emotional, social and moral domains of their world (Fein, 1981, cited by Fernie, n.d.). As children mature, play becomes more organised to include rules and negotiation (King, 1986; Piaget, 1962, cited by Fernie, n.d.). As a result, children also learn about themselves and how to relate to other people, preparing them for independent life (Isenberg & Quisenberry, 2002).

Play Environments

Although play appears as a natural part of children's development, the environment – the level and types of resources available and the involvement of others – can influence the outcomes of play experiences. Research suggests that the most effective method of supporting children's play is to provide the following: access to settings with physical, cognitive, social and emotional resources; a sense of safety and security through the monitoring and guidance of children's behaviours; and opportunities for children to explore using their curiosity and imagination. In addition, a variety of play environments should also be available to encourage a full range of play activities such as outdoor locations for physical exercise and exploring nature and adventurous play, and indoor settings for creative activities and discussion of ideas with peers. The role of adults in this context should be to maintain the sense of safety, to support play sensitively when necessary, and to respond to initiations to be included in the play when issued by children (Isenberg & Quisenberry, 2002; NAEYC, 1997; Rivkin, 1995). Because play involves opportunities for children to learn and discover on their own terms, excessive adult management and interference can in fact curtail this process (Isenberg & Quisenberry, 2002).

In terms of the play environment, specific equipment and toys may be less important than the fact that resources need to be available to children to provide a variety of experiences and learning opportunities. The category of play environment influences the type of play, with greater physical movement, expenditure of energy and louder voices typically evident outdoors. An outdoor setting provides opportunities to hide, climb, jump, and run with a sense of freedom of movement whereas indoor play settings can provide opportunities for gentler activities and encourage concurrent conversation and discussion (Isenberg & Quisenberry, 2002; Rivkin, 1995).

The characteristics and qualities of play spaces are important. For example, Rivkin has found that hard asphalt yards do not lend themselves to manipulation by children and are not very stimulating to the imagination, whereas sand or soil can be wetted and dug to create a play landscape or story-scape. Trees and other natural elements promote creative use of play space, and can be used as dens, hiding places, or according to the theme conjured up by the imagination (Rivkin, 1995). Additionally, play spaces with natural elements permit children to encounter and investigate flora and fauna, to create and care for gardens, and to appreciate phenomena such as weather and seasonal changes.

That said, children do not all enjoy the same access to varied play environments. In particular, many have very limited access to outdoor play environments. Plainly, children living within urban areas tend to have less green space available to them than those in rural areas; for many urban children, a schoolyard or playground may represent their only opportunity to experience elements of a natural environment. Low socio-economic status can also be a factor limiting access (Wells & Evans, 2003), but this is not universally the case (Tarrant & Cordell, 1999).

As well, children's access to, and use of, outdoor play spaces is tied to perceptions of safety – on the part of children and parents (Timperio, Crawford, Telford, & Salmon, 2004). Children living in neighbourhoods where there is a high risk of violence experience tremendous constraints; in these circumstances, children and their parents are often reluctant to take the risk of venturing outside (Shumow, Vandell, & Posner, 1998).

Another dimension of the outdoor play environment is the impact of traffic on children's access to play space and on their health. O'Brien (2007) points out motor vehicles are both a source of emissions that reduce air quality to which children are particularly vulnerable as well as a source of noise pollution which has been associated with reduced reading levels. Traffic accidents represent a major cause of childhood fatalities, and for those who survive, the psychological effects can be long lasting. These factors can serve to make outdoor play an unattractive and unsafe proposition for urban children (O'Brien, 2007). As a consequence, children may effectively become strangers in their own locality.

Children's familiarity with their own neighbourhood is further compromised where there is a high level of dependency on the car for transport. O'Brien (2007) cites the findings of Kowey (1999) that children who frequently travel by car are often unable to navigate a route through their neighbourhood, possibly as a result of the differences of speed and perspective between driving and walking. At the same time, chances to interact with neighbours and peers or to make observations about details of the route are curtailed (Berry, n.d., cited by O'Brien, 2007).

Recent evidence of declining levels of physical exercise and the associated rise in the rates of children who are overweight or obese (Canning, Courage, & Frizzell, 2004; Tremblay, Katzmarzyk, & Willms, 2002) can also be attributed, in part, to the ready use of cars. In addition, strong links between television watching and obesity have also been reported (Goldfield *et al*., 2007; Kumanyika & Grier, 2006), while reductions in the amount of time spent watching TV have been identified as a mediating factor on rates of obesity (Farley *et al*., 2007). Affording children the option to walk or cycle to school would help address these risk factors, and would support the development of their sense of independence and self-reliance. Concerns such as these have led to campaigns for substantial reductions in driving as a transport option in favour of walking or cycling (O'Brien, 2007).

Benefits of Outdoor Play

Where access to outdoor play space is feasible, the effects appear to be far reaching. Farley *et al.* (2007) conducted a pilot study, which involved extending the hours of use of a schoolyard, and provided adult monitoring to satisfy the need for a feeling of safety. Results showed that the area was used consistently during out-of-school hours, and that two-thirds of the children were physically active during periods of observation. In fact, the children were more physically active than if they had been involved in physical education classes or programs. Neighbourhood effects were also found in that, within the immediate area, the numbers of children playing outdoors also increased by one third. Additionally, declines in the use of TV and other electronic media were observed (Farley *et al*., 2007). The researchers expressed the view that organising extended and supervised use of schoolyards may be a simple, but economical and effective, method of improving physical activity and health, while also strengthening neighbourhood and social connections.

Interaction with the natural environment, in particular, appears to confer advantageous effects. For rural children, the proximity of natural elements has been shown to moderate a reduction in the levels of stress from life events (Wells & Evans, 2003), while the intensity of natural elements in the environment has been found to increase children's attentional abilities (Wells, 2000). Play in a natural setting, compared with a traditional style of playground, was found to improve motor fitness, balance and coordination (Fjørtoft, 2004), and exposure to natural settings through ordinary after-school and weekend activities has been reported to reduce the manifestations of Attention-Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder (Kuo & Faber Taylor, 2004).

In addition to short-term outcomes, experiences with the natural environment as a child appear to exert long lasting effects into adulthood. Sebba (1991) reported that when adults were asked to nominate their favourite childhood place, 96.4% of them named outdoor sites. Recollections were associated with strong memories of the sensations of interacting with the natural environment, physical freedom, imaginative play and the essential experience of being a child. When children were asked to write about their experiences in natural settings for the same study, their work indicated that their recollections included their activities, as well as their feelings and perceptions of the environment. Responses also revealed the high levels of imagination and creative play that were stimulated by the natural setting. As in the case of neighbourhood interactions and exploration, fostering the use of imagination and fantasy may support creative endeavours in school and work in years to come (O'Brien, 2007; Sebba, 1991).

3.2 Structured Time Use in Childhood

In North America, children's free time is taken up increasingly with organized activities. Research findings indicate that parents are willing to commit considerable time and financial resources to facilitating their children's participation, providing the activity meets specific requirements of logistics and suitability which are generally determined by the mother (Howard & Madrigal, 1990; Jambor, 1999). Although school comprises the major daily activity for children in industrialised countries, the 'how and what' of free time use is also subject to considerable debate, planning and management. Children appear to have a limited role in selecting the activity and little prospect of expressing their feelings about it once their participation has started (Green & Chalip, 1997; Howard & Madrigal, 1990).

Organised Activities and Parental Motivation

Families turn to organized activities for many reasons. Perceived risks to physical safety from traffic (Timperio *et al*., 2004), along with personal and social safety concerns regarding other users of public spaces (Farley *et al*., 2007, Shumow *et al*., 1998) may prompt some parents to make use of organised activity programs. With increased awareness of, and concern for, the effects of sedentary behaviour among youth, parents may also be motivated to ensure that their children and adolescents have adequate opportunities for physical exercise (Canning *et al*., 2004; Tremblay *et al*., 2002).

The most common extra-curricular activity among children and adolescents is sport (Larson & Verma, 1999). Parents typically expect that participation in sport will: offer the chance to develop activity related skills; promote abilities in co-operating with others through teamwork and leadership roles; offer new social contacts; foster self-motivation, self-discipline and self-esteem; and present a source of positive, rewarding and revitalising experiences (Jambor, 1999, Mahoney *et al*., 2005; Ullrich-French & Smith, 2006; Woolger, 1993). Some parents also anticipate that skills acquired through extra-curricular activities will position children well for future activities and careers (Shannon, 2006).

Child and adolescent expectations with respect to extra-curricular activities appear to be largely similar, although they have been the subject of less research than parental expectations. Generally, fun and enjoyment appear to contribute to sustained participation, along with positive valuations of activity outcomes, including the acquisition of skills useful for future education and career building (Eccles *et al*., 1983; Gould, Tuffey, Udry, & Loehr, 1996; Scanlan, Stein, & Ravizza, 1989).

Research findings suggest that participation in organized activities is associated with positive effects on academic engagement, self-esteem, social competence and adjustment (Bowker, 2006; Fletcher, Nickerson, & Wright, 2003; Horn, 2004; McHale *et al*., 2005). Moreover, the positive association between participation and adjustment has also been found to perpetuate activity involvement (Posner & Vandell, 1999). The best outcomes are achieved when there is an appropriate balance between the level of challenge and accomplishment via coaches and assigned tasks (Gould *et al*., 1996; Hellstedt, 1987). Similarly, children benefit when parents are involved in a way that balances encouragement, support (Kimiecik, Horn, & Shurin, 1996; Weiss & Duncan, 1992), and affirmative appraisal (Babkes & Weiss, 1999; Ullrich-French & Smith, 2006).

The Downside of Organised Activities

In North America, the organisation of children's free-time into structured learning activities has lead to concern about over-scheduling, with the implication that children rarely have an opportunity to rest or to enjoy activities of their own creation and at their own pace. Elkind (1981, cited by Newman, Matsopoulous, Chang, & Kao, 2003) and Sigel (1987) have expressed disquiet about the possible detrimental consequences of hastening children through developmental processes that occur naturally and at an intrinsic pace.

Other research suggests that such concerns may be unfounded. For example, Hofferth and Sandberg (2001) and Newman *et al*. (2003) have reported that children are typically engaged in both structured and unstructured activities, either individually or with peers or family members. Additionally, differences in the type and frequency of activities appear to depend more on factors such as socio-economic status, parental employment and family characteristics (Hofferth & Sandberg, 2001). Variation resulting from these sources would seem to contradict the notion that children are subjected to intense or universal pressure to engage in structured activities at the expense of alternate forms of recreation. However, insufficient or excessive parental support has been shown to undermine children's enjoyment of extra-curricular activities and the benefits they derive from them (Woolger, 1993)[3].

4. ADOLESCENTS AND FREE TIME: A POTENTIAL SOURCE OF TENSION

Recent research indicates that adolescence marks the process of maturation towards adulthood with even greater changes than have been previously recognised. From early adolescence into adulthood, the process of myelination of neurones promotes the speed of neurological impulses. Rapid growth of neurones in the pre-frontal cortex underlies increasing cognitive capacities and the development of executive functions. The subsequent pruning of some of those neurones is subject to some extent on the activities and experiences engaged in by the individual adolescent (Kuhn, & Franklin, 2008). As this varies uniquely for each adolescent, it has been proposed that these processes contribute to the range in capabilities and personal preferences that emerge during adolescence. These, in turn, generate changes such as increasing independence from parents and interdependence with peers (Collins & Steinberg, 2008), and are reflected in progressive shifts of emphasis in the way that recreational time is spent.

One of the most obvious is the decline in physical activity for boys and girls starting around the age of 13 years, irrespective of prior activity levels (Kahn *et al*., 2008). The underlying reasons for this transition centre around the increasing importance of peer relationships, so that social interaction becomes more concentrated on talk and shared confidences than on physical activity and play (Buhmester & Furman, 1987). Concurrent reductions in available time due to increased school and part-time work com-

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[2] In some cases threats or punishment are used to compel children to perform well. The most extreme manifestation of pressure, termed *Achievement by Proxy Distortion (ABPD)* by Tofler, Knapp & Drell (1998), involves parents gaining gratification and status vicariously through their children's achievements.

mitments, minimal understanding of the overall health benefits of exercise, little expectation of fun in organised activities and concerns about personal safety have also been identified (Humbert *et al.*, 2008).

As such, developing adolescents need time and space to learn to regulate their own behaviour and to experience independence. And, whereas parents would have previously been able to monitor younger children's whereabouts, the desire for greater independence means that adolescents may be away from home on their own or with peers. At the same time, there are risks associated with young people spending greater amounts of time involved in unorganised or unsupervised activities, including reduced academic and family involvement (Mahoney, 2000; Mancini & Huebner, 2003; Persson, Kerr, & Stattin, 2007). As parents face their children's growing independence, research suggests that there is a need to take a hand in facilitating their child's healthy lifestyle, appropriate social behaviour and engagement on the one hand, while stepping back to promote and support their child's emerging self-reliance on the other (Hutchinson, Baldwin, & Caldwell, 2003); Sharp, Caldwell, Graham, & Ridenour, 2006). Herein lies the tension.

4.1 Time Use in Later Childhood and Adolescence

Fantasy Play and Imagination

The benefits of unstructured activity on early childhood development have been well established in the preceding pages, so now to turn our attention to youth and adolescents. As noted, children develop and mature through a process of discernible, systematic changes that have been extensively described and defined (NAEYC, 1997). Observable forms of play featuring imagination, pretending and fantasy emerge from between 11 to 13 months of age. This type of play is thought to provide opportunities for children's development in areas of language, problem solving, perspective taking, emotional control, and social skills and maturity. Imaginative play increases in complexity until approximately 5 to 7 years when a shift to games with conventions can be seen (McCullagh, 1998; Schaffer, Wood, & Willoughby, 2002). As children continue to mature, the onset of adolescence triggers a reduction in the level of physical activity and an increase in the importance placed on relationships and social interactions, with an emphasis on shared ideas, experiences and discussion (Kahn *et al.*, 2008). As such, overt manifestations of fantasy play usually decline and may become part of an internal, descriptive narrative (Singer and Singer, 1990, cited by Harris and Beggan, 1993). Older children and adolescents appear to be aware of these changes when thinking retrospectively about this developmental period (Trotman, 2008).

However, research suggests that some children continue to engage in imaginative play during mid-childhood and beyond. The majority of this play appears to involve role and identity exploration, and seems to support the development of imagination. One study of children aged 7 to 12 years reported that children who regularly engaged in fantasy play describe it as enjoyable, entertaining, and as part of growing up. Those who spent the most time engaged in fantasy play were found to demonstrate greater creativity in writing tasks compared to their peers. Furthermore, the greater the variety of roles adopted during fantasy play, the greater the detail and creativity in the written stories (Harris and Beggan, 1993).

Although levels of imaginative play decline, adolescents report the continuation of imaginative thinking for reflection and as part of their creativity. This appears to involve playfulness of thought that is not necessarily expressed through physical activity. The requirements of the school curriculum are identified as substantial restraints on the use of imagination. The exception to this can be found in arts classes, but this depends on the preference and direction chosen by the teacher (Trotman, 2008).

Other advantages may accumulate for children who demonstrate extended engagement in imaginative behaviour. Adolescents have described using imagination to reflect and relax as there are no preset criteria to satisfy, only a sense of freedom of thought, personal authenticity and ownership of the ideas (Trotman, 2008). Role-playing and self-discovery have been proposed as components of identity exploration and determination, a mechanism by which adolescents seek to establish their preferences for future studies and career direction. Furthermore, a relationship appears to exist between exploratory activities and a keen determination to achieve personal goals (Schmitt-Rodermund & Vondracek, 1998).

The use of imagination may also contribute to adolescent playfulness as a component of an orientation towards self-direction, internal motivation, and a sense of pretence and the non-literal (Barnett, 2005, cited by Staempfli, 2007). These characteristics appear to mitigate personal sources of stress, and promote peer relationships and enjoyment in leisure activities. However, these effects did not extend to relationships with parents (Staempfli, 2007), which may reflect low parental tolerance of overt fantasy play, as reported by Harris and Beggan (1993).

Adolescent Boredom

Not all adolescents are able to recruit resources of playfulness and imagination to assist them in dealing with their daily lives, and for some the most salient emotional marker is boredom. Research into boredom has used a range of theoretical starting points, and has identified a variety of origins and features including a lack of fantasy and imagination in combination with a minimal and poorly expressed sense of affect (Wangh, 1975, Greenson, 1953, cited by Eastwood, Cavaliere, Fahlman, & Eastwood, 2006). This seems to contribute to a persistent level of dissatisfaction with life in general, in association with low emotional awareness and expression, and an external orientation towards sources of relief (Eastwood *et al.*, 2006).

Other proposed explanations for boredom include diminished levels of self-determination and motivation, a low level of challenge in activities, and a lack of knowledge regarding options for more rewarding pursuits (Caldwell, Darling, Payne, & Dowdy, 1999). From their research, Caldwell *et al.* suggest that the perception or reality of little choice in activities is predictive of boredom, whereas self-determination promotes engagement. Concurrent effects of 'the moment' were also noted, so that the circumstances in which an activity occurred also influenced the perceived level of boredom. These effects could be transitory and short lived, however, and so increased the challenge of identifying and engaging in reliably rewarding enterprises.

Proposed remedies for the presumed causes of boredom range from embracing it until individual emotions and desires become evident and boredom becomes a stimulus in its own right (Brodsky, 1995, cited by Eastwood *et al.*, 2006), to promoting adolescent autonomy and self determination within the

boundaries of authoritative parenting styles, ensuring adolescents are aware of activity options, or to accepting that boredom is a contemporary form of self-expression (Caldwell *et al*., 1999).

However, it cannot be surprising that adolescents express boredom when there are few facilities available to them at all. McIntosh, MacDonald, & McKeganey (2005) found that boredom and lack of stimulation were identified as a cause of drug taking by Scottish children aged 10-12 years. The children described that, as the only available recreational space was a sloping and muddy soccer field, they tended to meet and socialise on the street, and from there moved on to use drugs covertly in their homes to relieve the tedium. Clearly it could also be argued that if such a narrow set of circumstances constitutes the full extent of children's recreational experience, it is not surprising that they lack familiarity with other, more positive and rewarding, activities, and that they may hold low expectations of gaining any enjoyment or engagement from alternative pastimes.

Unsupervised Activities

As this paper has noted, unsupervised time for adolescents is seen as holding both the potential for both positive and negative outcomes. Research has tended to concentrate on the negative outcomes (as outlined above), but it has also looked at the contexts and uses of unsupervised time, and the role of parents in facilitating unorganised activities.

The context of unsupervised activities can be influential in the outcomes of this time use. Research by McHale *et al*. (2001) found that, while activities in middle childhood involving the presence of adults were associated with positive adjustment in early adolescence, reading was associated with depression, possibly because it is a solitary pursuit. Overall, hobbies, which were frequently reported, were thought to promote positive qualities such as self-motivation, self-direction and perseverance, along with perceptions of self-efficacy and competence.

Parents typically continue to influence adolescent behaviour by being accessible and available to offer guidance and support (Hutchinson *et al*., 2003). Research findings suggest parental awareness of activities, including monitoring from a distance, is associated with rewarding experiences for young adolescents with a self-regulated, motivational outlook. This sense of reward can be diminished, however, when parental involvement is perceived as controlling or disinterested, particularly by adolescents with very low levels of motivation (Sharp *et al*., 2006).

Trust building appears to be an important feature of facilitating adolescents' unstructured time, and it seems to be fostered when parents are familiar with their child's friends, likely activities, and venues of choice. From the adolescent viewpoint, trust is built when parents maintain a moderate level of monitoring and demonstrate their confidence in the ability of teenagers to manage their lives effectively. In optimal circumstances, parental monitoring appears to act as a foundation on which a basis of reliability between parents and child can be built. Adolescents may be permitted to visit with friends, or to go out with a vague agenda, so long as they communicate their plans and respond to calls from parents. Parental responses to violations of trust often include reduced levels of freedom and autonomy until an appropriate level of judgement is demonstrated once again (Hutchinson *et al*., 2003).

Additional elements that feed into bidirectional trust-building include parental beliefs and expectations, in conjunction with consistency in the ways parents communicate, model and use them as guidelines. Parents' attitudes towards resources for social involvement, along with their degree of support for adolescents' developing autonomy, were also influential factors. Again, the level of boredom perceived by adolescents, and their motivational style, were found to contribute to this sensitively balanced and dynamic process (Sharp *et al*., 2006).

Notwithstanding the benefits of unstructured time, perceptions that suggest activities without organisation or adult supervision lead to risk behaviours may cause disquiet for parents. Adolescent involvement in unstructured and unmonitored activities has been associated with a greater tendency to engage in undesirable behaviours, increased vulnerability to high school drop-out and delinquency, and a higher likelihood of associating with other rebellious young people (Mahoney *et al*., 2005; Mancini & Huebner, 2003; McHale *et al*., 2001).

Structured Time Use in Later Childhood and Adolescence

It is concerns such as these that often prompt parents to intervene to insulate their children from the detrimental effects of an environment that fails to interest or intrigue in a beneficial sense. This is most typically achieved by either enrolling adolescents, or by fostering their continued participation, in organised extra-curricular activities.

Factors associated with parental support for adolescents' participation in organised activities include the benefits of socialisation, promotion of positive home connections and school commitment, and development of life management skills (Mancini & Huebner, 2003). At the same time, involvement is used as a response to adolescents' desire for independence, and their need for venues in which to interact and expand their social circles (Mahoney *et al*., 2005; Persson *et al*., 2007; Hutchinson *et al*., 2003). This may reflect recent findings that adolescents often take part in several types of activities, including extra-curricular school clubs, sports, arts-based ones (Feldman & Matjasko, 2007).

Furthermore, organised activity participation offers parents a means of supporting adolescents experiencing low levels of social engagement and interaction, boredom and/or depression (Mahoney *et al*., 2005; McHale *et al*., 2005; McHale *et al*., 2001). Overall, this tactic appears to be successful in that participation is associated with positive self-esteem, and affirmative academic and family connections (Bowker, 2006; Mahoney, 2000; Mahoney *et al*., 2005; Persson *et al*., 2007).

In the case of low income families, however, youth appear to be at double disadvantage in that they are vulnerable to detrimental living conditions and also may have limited access to extra-curricular activities. Research findings suggest that issues of neighbourhood safety for low-income families may lead them to encourage their children and adolescents to return home after school, with television and snacks as an inducement to do so. Additionally, low-income urban environments do not often support physical activity for children and adolescents as recreational areas are lacking or rundown, or these and the local streets are perceived to be unsafe. Neighbourhood behaviour regulations can also restrict play activities (Kumanyika & Grier, 2006; McIntosh *et al*., 2005; Shumow *et al*., 1998; Timperio *et al*., 2004).

These factors, coupled with actual and perceived barriers to participation such as financial requirements, a lack of transportation, or the sense of not fitting with the activity environment can also inhibit initiating or maintaining involvement (Hultsman, 1992). It is also possible that an accumulating lack of exposure to activities limits awareness of the potential options that could be available, leading to television, hanging out with friends or boredom as the end result (Caldwell *et al*, 1999).

Evolving Activities for Adolescents

The presence of various forms of electronic media in the lives of children and adolescents has grown rapidly. Indeed, youth today may not be aware of the changes wrought by the advent of each new form of communication, recreation or entertainment (Wing, n.d., cited by Moscovitch, 2007). The use of media has been found to occupy the majority of sedentary time use by children and adolescents, with an approximate average of 1.5 to 2 hours every day spent watching TV, playing computer games or communicating via the internet. Such activities are often accomplished simultaneously, along with attempts to complete homework (Larson & Verma, 1999; Moscovitch, 2007).

Adolescents appear to co-opt their use of internet communications to facilitate their need to talk and share experiences, possibly as a refuge from other aspects of their increasingly scheduled lives. Moscovitch (2007) refers to Boyd's (n.d.) findings that 55% of American adolescents used social network sites and had devised individual profiles. The creation of a public persona may be one of the most compelling attractions for teens, in that they can test out nuances to their emerging sense of identity (Turkle, n.d., cited by Moscovitch, 2007).

Additionally, physically meeting with peers in order to 'hang-out' may present a challenge for youth with substantial demands on their time from school, part-time work and organised extra-curricular activities. Social network sites offer an alternative venue in which to communicate with friends and discuss daily hassles, away from parental observation and supervision that so often accompanies organised activities (Moscovitch, 2007).

Adolescent media use can be observed or monitored as a function of time spent on the computer. Few parents, however, appear to make more than minimal attempts to influence the quality of this time use. Despite concerns about content, some parents appear to be reluctant to intervene or to regulate usage. Reasons for this may include differences in the level of expertise between parents and adolescents so that parents feel intimidated by the technology; time pressures that interfere with effective monitoring; or naivety regarding the potential risks associated with the internet such as undesirable content, inappropriate contact by people intent on harm, or the onset of an addictive level of use (Moscovitch, 2007). Alternatively, media use may be included within a framework of parental monitoring, accomplished by banning sites or content types, or by locating computers in shared areas of the home (Hutchinson *et al.,* 2003).

One of the benefits of adolescents' openness to connectivity through electronic media is that parents are able to stay in contact and to monitor their activities away from home. This may facilitate parental monitoring, reflecting the findings of Hutchinson *et al.* (2003), and mitigate some of the detrimental outcomes that have been associated with adolescents' unstructured and unsupervised activities.

5.0 CONCLUSION

Children and adolescents are able to take part in a wide range of activities in a variety of circumstances. The settings and types of activities are influenced by children's age and developmental stage, but also by the social, economic and geographical surroundings in which they live. Environments which provide unstructured opportunities to be imaginative and creative have merit, alongside programs which offer goals and challenges within organised situations. Nonetheless, the activities of children and adolescents during out-of-school hours continue to be the subject of research and discussion as researchers and parents seek to better understand the optimum use of this time.

While organised activities are an almost ubiquitous feature of childhood, unstructured and exploratory play should be considered as a possible precursor to self-determination in adolescents. With reference to findings that suggest children's imaginative and creative abilities are fostered when they are able to play spontaneously and imaginatively in varied and natural environments, it can be argued that a high level of activity organisation may hinder their ability to invent games and occupations, and that this may be perpetuated into adolescence (Barnett, 2005, cited by Staempfli, 2007; Harris and Beggan, 1993).

At this point, it appears that an 'either / or' stance is less effective than achieving a balance between structured and unstructured, organised and spontaneous activities; young people may benefit most from an approach which incorporates both aspects of time use. Thus, it is advantageous for individuals and society as a whole to preserve and promote children and adolescents' contact with as wide a range of environments in which to learn and play as possible. This will work to offset the negative effects of sedentary living, economic and neighbourhood restrictions and low levels of rewarding engagement, and will enable to today's youth to maximise their enjoyment and potential as active members of their communities.

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