



Children's time to play: A literature review

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1. Summary

This study was commissioned as part of a wider body of research to inform the Playday *Make time!* campaign. Playday is the annual celebration of children's right to play. The following literature review collates evidence on the importance of play in children's lives, and the current political and social issues that impinge on children's free time. Literature was selected using Children's Play Information Service (CPIS) and the online British Library search engine in March 2009. It should be noted that there is a shortage of UK based evidence into this area.

Free time and the importance of play

The research suggests:

- Play is key to physical, mental and social wellbeing, but has been 'overlooked' in many areas. Play may be viewed as an 'unaffordable luxury' in modern society, and instead children attend more organised activities which are thought to be more educational.
- Children's definition of leisure time is associated with playing, freedom and the ability to do as they wish under their own direction.

How children spend their time

There is a lack of available data in the UK examining children's use of time and space in the UK, however some research indicates:

- 74 per cent of children have spent some time during the past four weeks at the local park or playground.
- Fifty-eight per cent of children took part in a sports club or class and 56 per cent had visited the cinema or theatre during this time period.
- Other popular activities included youth clubs or organised youth events, meeting up with friends and visits to a library or museum.
- 18 per cent of children said that they do not have the opportunity to visit their local park or playground, even though they said they would like to.
- 16 per cent of children stated that they wished to take part in a youth club or group.

Trends in children's play patterns

- Research from the US suggests that children's free time has declined more than seven hours per week from 1981 to 1997 and a further two hours per week from 1997 to 2003. It seems children have nine hours less free time than 25 years ago.
- Further research from the US also suggests children's time to play has decreased. The 2002 research suggests children have 12 hours less free time every week than they did 20 years ago. This includes a 25 per cent decrease in play and 50 per cent decrease in outdoor activities.

The following themes were also highlighted in the literature:**Play has become more organised and structured**

Play experts have expressed concerns that children's free time has become associated with learning, rather than enjoyment. Structured play could reduce the control children have over their free time.

Play has become 'institutionalised'

This means that children's play is increasingly carried out in specialised centres, with allocated times and activities, rather than in public space.

Children are spending less time in outdoor space

Children value time spent away from adults in public but have less opportunities to do this, because of a combination of other commitments. One researcher used the term 'backseat children', to describe how children are escorted to and from places by their parents and attend adult-organised activities.

Children have limited independent mobility. Some depend on adults taking them to parks and open spaces as there are not any play spaces near their homes. This puts a strain on adults who also have very busy lifestyles.

Children's time could be 'over-scheduled'

A shift towards more structured forms of play alongside other family and school obligations may have led to the 'over-scheduling' of children's lives. While some children are excelling academically from this, over-scheduling children's time has also been linked to stress and depression, amongst other mental health issues.

Differences in children's time to play

Constraints on children's free time may vary in accordance with age, gender and ethnicity, amongst other social factors. Research indicates that:

- Older children in secondary schools were more likely to have more homework commitments than the primary aged children.
- Older girls were also more likely to have more responsibilities in terms of childcare and housework.
- Disabled children may encounter further barriers that prevent them from spending their free time playing. Fifty-five per cent of parents with disabled children stated that taking their children out to play meant travelling for miles to find appropriate facilities.

Modern technology

- In 2006, 87 per cent of children have a home computer, 62 per cent have a digital television and 82 per cent own a games console.
- There are mixed opinions about the health and social implications of modern technology. Some evidence suggests that the use of some technologies can enhance a range of skills, while other sources argue excessive use of technology leads to inactive lifestyles.
- A combination of easy access to endless entertainment games and expensive manufactured toys may have left children with very little

time for play that involves creativity and imagination, although other research indicates that the shift has been from television to computer games.

The family

- Investing time into playing with children is important to children.
- Changes within the family structure may have contributed towards a decline in free play.
- This may have led to an increase in child-care and other formal settings.
- This may be partly why organised clubs have become more popular.

Schools

- Playtime could offer children a unique opportunity to advance their interacting skills and social cognitive recourses through informal self-directed play.
- Playtime may have decreased by as much as 50 per cent since the 1970s.
- Children's free time at school may decrease as children get older.
- Reducing break times could impact on children's anxiety levels.
- Children accomplish around a third of their recommended daily amount of physical activity during school break times.
- In the mid eighties, approximately 21 per cent of children travelled to school without an adult; by 2005, this number had dropped to 6 per cent.
- Children play and explore their environment and play more when they travel to school without an adult.

Conclusion

From the evidence, we can conclude that children's play is vital for their social and physical development, and play is a way they wish to spend their free time. Children associate free time with freedom, independence and choice; however, play of this nature is often limited.

Although we must acknowledge the merits of academia in children's lives and understand the health benefits of organised activities, a balance must be struck between this and more informal and unstructured play, where children are free to enjoy themselves and do as they wish without adult control.

2. Introduction

This study was commissioned as part of a wider body of research to inform the Playday *Make time!* campaign. Playday is the annual celebration of children's right to play. The following literature review collates evidence on the importance of play in children's lives, and the current political and social issues that impinge on children's free time. Published literature on the themes of this study was selected using the Children's Play Information Service (CPIS) and the online British Library search engine in March 2009.

The terms 'play', 'time', 'family', 'child', 'recreation' and 'school' were used to identify papers. From this, research articles and theoretical texts were selected based on their relevance to the theme of this year's Playday campaign. Research reports that were carried out before the year 2000 were not included, unless they were comparable to more recent evidence. As the search terms were rather general and brought up many results, text was only included if it was relevant to the current topic. This included: how much free time children have; how they spend their free time; the ways in which children wish to spend their spare time; how much of children's free time is spent playing; a discussion about structured and unstructured play; and what stops children from spending their free time playing. The review examines children's use of time with reference to the family, the school day and out-of-school activities. A total of 40 texts were used in this review, including matches from the search criteria and any relevant original reports referenced in the articles.

An examination of the literature found that children's use of time, with particular reference to play and recreation, is relatively under-researched and suggests scope to seek more empirical evidence relating to children's free time and play. Most noteworthy was that there seemed to be a particular shortage of UK based evidence examining children's time for play.

The literature review attempts to give a comprehensive overview of current debates and empirical evidence based on the theme of this year's Playday.

3. Is it important to make time for play?

It is commonly believed that play is a vital part of children's development and is fundamental for every child (Ginsburg 2006). Several commentators claim there is substantial evidence to suggest that play is key to physical, mental and social well-being. It has been linked to overcoming fears in everyday situations, decision making, discovering interests, brain development and enhancing academic learning. Not least, many authors contend play is a right for all children and offers them enjoyable experiences (Lester and Russell 2008; Jenkinson 2001).

Play theorists widely argue that outdoor play is of particular importance. Outdoor play is associated with benefits such as acquiring life skills and improving children's emotional and academic development (Ginsburg 2006). It is also associated with a number of health benefits, including essential organ growth and muscle building. Socially, outdoor play allows children to explore their local neighbourhood, learn the rules of everyday life and discover the different textures and elements in the world (Clements 2004).

Despite these benefits, there is evidence to suggest less of children's time is being devoted to play, in favour of structured or educational activities (Hofferth and Sandberg 2000; Doherty and Clarkson cited in Lester and Russell 2008). American writer David Elkind claims the role of play in physical and psychological well-being has been 'overlooked' in many areas. He states:

'School administrators and teachers – often backed by goal-orientated politicians and parents – broadcast the not-so-suitable message that these days play seems superfluous, that at bottom play is for slackers, that if kids must play, they should at least learn something while they are doing it.'
(Elkind 2008, 1)

He claims that because of this, play has become an 'unaffordable luxury' in modern society, pushed aside to make way for organised activities which are seen as more educational, or television and gaming technology that has taken over from more traditional forms of play. He points to research from the US in 2007 suggesting that young children of pre-school age are watching around two hours of television a day (Elkind 2008).

Although children may spend their time in a number of different settings, research suggests that children's own definition of 'free time' involves time spent away from adult supervision and control (Mayall 2000a; Veitch and others 2007). Oksnes (2008) reflects on her own research in Norway, analysing children's perceptions of play in relation to a 'spare time programme', which provides provision for children before and after school. She conducted focus groups with children aged seven and eight years old and observed children's play in the programme over a three-week period. From the data collected, it became clear that the children's definition of play and leisure time was relatively ambiguous, and there was ultimately no agreement over what was meant by it. There was a general consensus that leisure time is associated with playing, freedom and the ability to do as they wish under their own direction, rather than an activity that is compulsory or under adult control. For this reason (and despite children's high regard for

the programme), the children viewed neither school time nor the spare time programme as 'leisure time'. Rather, the programme provided a safe alternative for children to go to while their parents worked full-time. This evidence suggests that although children can enjoy organised activities, children do not necessarily view it as 'leisure time' or 'free time'. This evidence suggests that making time for free, unstructured play is important, even if children have access to more formal recreational activities.

4. How children spend their time

Lester and Russell (2008) note the lack of available data examining children's use of time and space, and therefore exploring whether children's time to play has increased or decreased in the UK is difficult to track. However, evidence from the US suggests that today's children have significantly less time for free play than previous generations. Hofferth and others looked at children's changing play patterns across two time frames; between 1981 and 1997; and between 1997 and 2003. Parents and children kept 24-hour diaries (one for a school day and one for a non-school day) and monitored the amount of time children spent in 18 different activities. The findings indicate that children's free play and discretionary time (in other words, time that is not spent in school, childcare and so on) has declined by more than seven hours from 1981 to 1997 and by a further two hours to 2003. The researchers conclude that children in the US are receiving nine hours less free time a week than 25 years ago (Hofferth and Sandberg 2000; Hofferth and Curtin cited in Children and Nature Network 2006).

In the UK, there is a lack of research into this although some useful information of how children's time is divided can be tracked from the national TellUs survey. This annual survey gives an overview of children and young people's views about their local environment and issues that affect them. The latest report to be made available is TellUs3 (Ofsted 2008), taking data collected in spring 2008. The survey includes 148,988 children and young people, selected from schools in 145 local authorities in England. Selection took account of different kinds of schools within each area and surveyed three school year groups: Years 6, 7 and 10 within each school.

The TellUs survey does not ask the amount of time children spend playing, but it does monitor how many days in the last seven that children have engaged in at least 30 minutes of sport or other active pursuits. Of the respondents, 36 per cent claimed they had been engaged in sport or pursuits things for six or seven days over the previous week; a further 35 per cent said they had done this for three to five days; 21 per cent for only one or two days; and 4 per cent said they had not pursued any sport or active engagement in the last week. This is despite recommendations that to maintain a healthy lifestyle, children should participate in 60 minutes of physical activity every day (Ofsted 2008).

According to the TellUs3 survey, 74 per cent of children spent some time over the previous four weeks at the local park or playground. Altogether, 58 per cent of children took part in a sports club or class and 56 per cent had visited the cinema or theatre during this time. Other popular activities included attending youth clubs or organised youth events, meeting up with friends, and visiting a library or museum. However, 18 per cent of children said that they did not have the opportunity to visit their local park or playground, even though they said they would like to. Similarly, 16 per cent of children stated that they wished to take part in a youth club or group. Better play park and play areas and better activities for children were seen as ways of making their local area a better place to live by almost half the children studied (Ofsted 2008).

Research from University of Oxford recorded children's routines from diary extracts, as part of the larger Time Use Study. The Diaries from Children

and Young People (DCYP) compared children's reports from the UK in the mid 1970s with data collected in 2001. The results show a small decrease in the amount of time children spend in leisure activities for children aged 8–11, and a very small increase for children aged between 12 and 15 (Fisher and Gershuny 2008). The same study also found an enormous growth in computer gaming, but this directly substituted hours that were previously devoted to watching television. Although this does not give us direct information on children's time to play, it does offer an indication of how children spend their free time.

Brady and others examined the amount of time children spend engaging in physically active play in three early years settings across London. The research consisted of observations of children at play; and semi-structured interviews with parents and practitioners. A series of 15-minute observations were carried out with 19 children across the settings, obtaining both quantitative and qualitative data. The observations recorded whether children engaged in physically active play at any point within one-minute periods. The results suggest that out of every 15 minutes, eight of these minutes will include some physically active play. The researchers observed that physically active play seemed to vary depending on both the setting and ethics of the environment. Physically active play increased when children were playing outside in comparison to inside. Although activity levels were lower indoors, settings that offered 'free flow' play, where children were able to move independently and freely in their environment, allowed for more physically active play amongst the children (Brady and others 2008).

In 2005, Poveda and others (2007) studied after-school leisure patterns of middle-class children in the urban city of Madrid. The researchers used surveys to record children's routines and the children were provided with digital cameras to take pictures of their daily lives. Parents and children were interviewed about these pictures afterwards. Children aged nine and under were recruited across three different after-school settings, gaining a sample of 32 children from 24 different families. Parents were interviewed on another occasion on a range of other practical family issues. The participants shared relatively similar backgrounds in terms of demographics and socio-economics.

From the findings, the researchers developed a triangular model to discuss where children spend their time after school. They propose that different 'types' of children have emerged through their family routines depending on how they spend their free time. The three corners of the triangle comprise 'domestic space', 'extra-domestic unregulated space' and 'structured extra-curricular spaces'.

The first category describes children who typically spend time in the company of their family members, usually within the home. The second group describes children whose lives are predominantly unstructured. They tend to spend most of their time outdoors with peers after school. Children in the final category, structured extra-curricular spaces, tend to have most of their time occupied by planned out-of-school activities. Most children did not fit neatly into the three categories, but could be placed in spaces between the three groups. Of the 32 children, around a third were classified under the domestic category and described by the researchers as 'homebound'. These children rarely played out and spent the majority of their time reading, watching TV, doing homework and so on. Any outdoor activities would take place over the weekend.

Less than one in ten were classed as non-scheduled children who spend their time outside with friends after school hours; whereas a quarter were described as fully scheduled children who attend structured activities. Just under a quarter were categorised as both outdoor and scheduled children, who combine structured activities with informal play or activities outside the home. The findings show how children's use of time can vary, despite cultural and socio-economic similarities.

Drawing conclusions from two projects carried out with Danish children between the ages of 6 and 10, Rasmussen makes a distinction between 'places for children to go' and 'children's places' (Rasmussen 2004). The former refers to institutions designed for children where adults are present. 'Children's places' refers to places that children feel they have a connection with or can relate to. This can be both institutions and more informal surroundings. The research looked at the meaning children attached to their surroundings by carrying out informal interviews and using pictures. It found that children's lives are centred around three primary institutions: private homes, schools and recreational institutions – prompting the writer to call them the three corners of the 'institutionalised triangle'. The writer shows how children were actively discouraged from playing in the natural environment, such as climbing trees, and were instead expected to play on the structured equipment that had been designed specifically for children to play on.

Clements explored parental perceptions of how children spend their free time (Clements 2004). On-line surveys were conducted in the US with 830 mothers who had children between the ages of three and twelve. Of the mothers surveyed, 85 per cent agreed that children spend less time playing outdoors than previous generations. The parents' accounts indicate that while they themselves spent large amounts of time playing outdoor games during childhood, such as hopscotch and 'tag', American children today are spending more time in structured activities, watching television and playing video games. Many parents (77 per cent) claimed that their own time constraints prevented them from spending time outdoors with their children, despite recognising the importance of outdoor play for children's health and well-being.

Interestingly, Aitken suggests there is a disjunction between adult's perception of children's use of time and how children's time is actually spent (Aitken cited in Lester and Russell 2008). In fact, evidence indicates that adults have incorrectly estimated the amount of time children spend being physically active. It is recommended that children engage in 60 minutes of moderate–vigorous intensity physical activity (MVPA) every day, such as running or outdoor play. Children's physical activity is monitored in the Health Survey for England and the Health Survey for Scotland, and these findings suggest that children are very active and levels of physical activity have increased. The 2003 Scottish Health Survey, for example, reports that 75 per cent of boys and 70 per cent of girls aged 6–10 are meeting the proposed standard of 60 minutes per day (cited in Basterfield and others). Similarly, the 2002 Health Survey for England found that around two-thirds of children aged between 2 and 11 were meeting or exceeding this recommendation (Department of Health 2004).

However, this evidence relied on parental estimations, collected through questionnaires. Challenging the validity of this data, Basterfield and others fitted 130 six and seven year olds with accelerometers for seven days and compared the levels of MVPA with the parental estimations in the national

survey. They found that the figures taken from the UK health surveys overestimated the amount of time children were engaging in physical activity. It suggests that children spend less time being physically active, through play and in other ways, than their parents' estimates suggest (Basterfield and others 2008). UK health surveys have revised their methodology since the findings of this study.

5. Extra-curricular and structured activities

Theorising about the history of play, Chudacoff (2007), an American writer, argues that across the different eras there have been various constraints on children's play patterns. He points to the impact of social class in shaping play experiences. As working-class children were, historically, expected to contribute towards the family income, Chudacoff believes that play was incorporated into their work. With the emergence of ideas of a romanticised childhood in middle-class culture, play became viewed as something that must teach children certain values. The introduction of compulsory schooling in the twentieth century meant that children of all classes spent a significant proportion of their day in classrooms, but it allowed for time after school for play which was, generally, unsupervised. More recently, it is argued, there has been a shift away from unstructured forms of play.

Whereas children's leisure time once largely consisted of autonomous, 'free' play; Chudacoff suggests that children are increasingly taking part in organised, structured activities. According to the author, there is also a class divide between the less privileged children who spent their 'free' time in after school clubs and gendered sports programmes set up by specialist agencies; and the middle classes in which computer lessons, homework clubs and foreign language lessons are more popular (Chudacoff 2007).

Extra-curricular activities have, in particular, been on the increase over the past 20 years. Taking part in these activities have several reported benefits for children. Indeed, a review conducted by Eccles and Templeton supports the idea that taking part in after school extra-curricular activity can have an important impact on children and young people's physical, social and emotional development. Eccles and Barber, for example, were concerned with the impact of these activities on children's identities and also on peer socialising groups. The study, following sixth grade students in the US through to when they were 29 years old, assessed the link between extra-curricular activities during high school and a range of indicators of development in early adulthood. The research showed that children who took part in sporting activities or 'school-spirit-related clubs' went on to be higher academic achievers, despite other undesirable qualities, such as higher alcohol consumption, which the researchers believed to be a result of a peer group culture (cited in Eccles and Templeton 2002). However, little is known about the control of other factors that may have influenced this finding.

Mahoney and others claim that participation in extra-curricular activities is linked to children's interpersonal skills, learning of social norms, personal enjoyment and emotional connection to school, including long-term educational achievements and a decrease in 'problem behaviour'. Furthermore, Mahoney and Stattin found that leisure time involving activities that were classified as highly structured, and led by adults, had less association with 'anti-social' behaviour than youth centre based activities that are less structured (cited in Eccles and Templeton 2002).

Although this evidence suggests that extra-curricular activities can enhance academic achievement, play experts have expressed concerns that children's free time has become associated only with learning, rather than enjoyment of play itself. This is by no means a new concept, as Elkind quoted in the 1980s:

'Our traditional conception of play was that of free, spontaneous, and self-initiated activity that reflected the abundant energy of healthy child development. Today, however, that conception of play has been relegated to the early childhood years. For school aged children, play is now identified with learning and with the preparation for adult life.' (Elkind cited in Lego Learning Institute 2002)

More recently, Oksnes draws on theoretical work to discuss the role of play in children's lives. Play and leisure time have been described as 'instrumentalised' (Kleiber cited in Oksnes 2008) in the sense that it is simply viewed as a means of learning, rather than something to be enjoyed. This, it is argued, caused the development of 'good' or 'correct' forms of play that contribute towards children's academia or prepares them with life skills, rather than merely playing for enjoyment's sake. Mayall uses the term the 'scholarisation of childhood' to describe the idea that academic learning has crossed into all aspects of children's lives (Mayall 2000b).

Elsewhere, Thomas and Hocking argue that the replacement of self-directed play with organised leisure activities undermines the very nature of 'play' because it reduces the control children exercise over their free time (cited in Lester and Russell 2008). This is backed by research from Italy which shows that the essence of 'play' is the ability to 'lose' sense of time through one's own experience of the world as a place of 'mystery, risk and adventure' (Tonucci in Lester and Russell 2008). Structured activity, Tonucci argues, reduces the element of independence to make way for more adult control.

6. Institutionalising play

With the increase in structured forms of play, Zeiher has argued that children in modern society have become segregated from the adult world (Zeiher 2003). Rather than intermingling, urban societies have specialised centres for children to play with allocated times and activities, instead of accepting playing children as part of the wider community. Based on case study research with Danish 10-year-olds, Zeiher suggests that many children living in urban settings spend their free time in specialised institutions or designated play areas, which they are accompanied to and from by an adult. These play patterns have meant that children have limited time to spend outdoors in their local streets and neighbourhoods. As Zeiher states:

‘In our cities, children play ball games in sports clubs rather than on the streets and climb playground apparatus rather than trees. Where urban areas are formed by functional differentiation, particular opportunities for and constraints on the actions of individuals are spatially fixed in specialist centres.’

(Zeiher in Christensen and others 2003, 66)

Zeiher believes that while these selected places, designed for play, can be attractive to children and important for their social life, it also limits children's free time to a certain range of activities, often doing the same thing from day to day. For this reason ‘the children see no necessity to overcome these restrictions by exploring new activities or going elsewhere to pursue them’ (Zeiher 2003). However, Zeiher contends that children do exercise control over their free time through choosing whether to visit the play areas. Evidence was found of ‘temporal freedom’, as children actually chose when to visit the play sites rather than adhered to the restrictions of organised activities.

The researcher contrasts this with other children who do not have designated play areas close to where they live. It was found that these children seem to have more varied choice in how they spend their free time, and could be more inclined to explore their own interests because of the greater autonomy over their play activities. However, there were other restrictions on the play experiences of these children. Free time has to be organised with peers in advance and if plans fall through, they may then have to spend their free time alone. The children living near fixed play sites tended to simply bump into each other. Again, despite the restrictions, these children still employ their agency over their free time by establishing social rules about meeting arrangements and, like the other children, refused time-scheduled activities. It is argued that children actively defend their temporal freedom in order to leave their time as flexible as possible (Zeiher 2003).

7. Unsupervised, outdoor play

Research carried out in 2004 by Armitage (cited in Lester and Russell 2008), found that children value time spent away from adults and actively seek public areas that can offer this. However, a number of commentators believe that children are spending less of their time in public spaces away from adults (Veitch and others 2007, Mayall 2000a). A review of oral history and statistical evidence research in Amsterdam suggests that outdoor play has largely been replaced with supervised forms of play which, Karsten argues, has transformed the very meaning of childhood. He found the majority of children studied could be described as 'backseat children', in the sense that they are escorted to and from places by their parents and play mostly consists of adult-organised activities. Armitage has argued that more resources should be allocated to children's free play, but that they are instead channelled towards more supervised forms of activities.

Berry Mayall (2000a) was interested in children's daily routines with particular reference to how their time is divided. She conducted conversations with 139 children aged 9–10 and 12–13 during the school day. Children took part either alone or with peers and were given a short topic list as a prompt for conversations. The vast majority of 9-year-olds were accompanied to school, where as only a few 12-year-olds travelled with an adult. Girls were more likely than boys to be accompanied, regardless of their age. Although the children did claim that they could spend some of their free time 'playing out', this was most frequently in their local estate under adult supervision rather than in the public streets or parks. In fact, some children claimed they were not allowed outside the home alone at all. The research concludes that although structured or supervised play can be beneficial, time for play that is self-directed and away from adult control is equally if not more important.

Evidence suggests that children value having time to play outdoors. Veitch and others (2007) conducted a study in Victoria, Australia with 132 children (54 per cent of whom were female) aged between six and twelve. Children were recruited through five primary schools to take part in focus groups, taking into account a range of socio-economic backgrounds. Focus groups were divided into ages and in accordance with children's use of public space. The children who frequently used public open space claimed they liked doing so because they enjoyed the active play, equipment available and they enjoyed the natural setting. Older children also pointed to the freedom away from adult supervision that open spaces can offer them (Veitch and others 2007).

Children who did not use public space on a regular basis, frequently expressed feelings of being 'stuck' indoors and said they would like to spend more time in public areas, although others expressed no desire to 'waste time' outside. The researchers found that a range of intrapersonal, social and environmental factors influenced children's presence in outdoor open space, one of which was a lack of time to play outdoors. Children's commitment to taking part in organised activities or complete homework acted to prevent them from taking part in self-directed outdoor play. Limited independent mobility was also noted, in the sense that many children did not have access to open space near their homes and depended on adults taking them to it. Many adults did not feel they had the time to do so (Veitch and others 2007).

Berry Mayall's study of 57 nine year olds across two schools in London shows that, although children value the freedom from adult responsibilities, housework and homework interfere with children's free time. Despite feeling that they were entitled to free time outdoors and away from adults, it was found that these children had to negotiate to have to time for themselves as most of their time is spent in schools or within the home under adult control. At home, children felt free time can sometimes be negotiated with adults, but at school, the children claim their time is under strict adult management. Parents tended to have the overall say over how children's free time is spent, as one participant states:

'If my Mum wants to go out and I want to stay in, we end up going out.
I have to do what I am told.'

(Mayall 2000a, 2)

Mayall argues that this is partly because of adults' negative perceptions of children as 'irresponsible' (Mayall 2000a). Mayall argues there is a contradiction because, although children are often viewed as untrustworthy, they are still expected to take on responsibilities such as homework, household chores and caring for younger siblings, and have little control over their own lives (Mayall 2000b).

8. 'Over-scheduling' children's time

The shift towards more structured forms of play and other commitments has arguably led to the 'over-scheduling' of children's lives, and while some children are excelling academically, over-scheduling children's time has also been linked to stress and depression, amongst other mental health issues (Lego Learning Institute 2002).

Research in the US from 2002 suggests that children have 12 hours less free time every week than they did 20 years ago. The findings of the study show a 25 per cent decrease in play and a 50 per cent decrease in outdoor activities across the last two decades (Doherty and Clarkson cited in Lester and Russell (2008). Further US research indicates that children are often faced with competing demands to balance time between adult-structured activities, housework, school curriculum and social clubs. Melman and others linked this over-scheduling of children's time with stress and anxiety, the authors state:

'Are we stifling children and youth creativity and self-motivation by involving them in so many structured activities, usually under the direction and control of an adult... Only time will tell if there will be long term effects on the social, emotional, and behavioural functioning of these individuals in adulthood but the results of this study suggest that over-scheduling is an area of possible concern that needs to be examined in greater depth.'
(Melman and others 2007, 26)

In 2002 the Lego Learning Institute (2002) conducted a large-scale quantitative international study, as a response to the academic and public debate over concerns that children's free time is becoming increasingly organised. The research explored parental attitudes towards children's use of their 'free' time, more specifically, balancing structured activities and free-play.

The Lego Learning Institute carried out their research across five post-industrial societies: the US, UK, France, Germany and Japan. Telephone interviews took place with around 3,000 parents with children aged 12 and under using a random selection. The study lends support to the idea that parents across all five countries regard play as a form of learning; with an average of 94 per cent stating that play is important for this reason. However, when parents were asked whether they believed their children's free time is often wasted time, 32 per cent of British parents agreed that it was. This was in contrast to Japanese parents, of whom only 5 per cent agreed with the statement. So there is an apparent cultural divide on this issue. Parents of older children, aged 9–12, most frequently agreed with the statement.

When asked whether they agreed that 'not doing anything in particular is time well spent', differences both across and within countries were apparent. The highest agreement with this statement came from Germany, with 61 per cent of parents acknowledging the value of this free time, whereas in the other four countries agreement ranged from 44 to 48 per cent (in the UK it was 46 per cent). There was a strong consensus amongst parents that structured activities outside of school hours are important for children. This statement was particularly true for British parents, as 86 per cent agreed to some extent with this. Less agreement was evident in Japan (54 per cent) and Germany

(60 per cent). What's more, 95 per cent of parents in the UK stated that organised activities are important for social skills, again the highest score across the five countries.

The authors argue that from the results, parents in the UK, US and France would actively encourage their children to involve themselves in organised activities during their free time and give less encouragement to free-play. The statistics show that 50 per cent of parents in the UK, 54 per cent of American parents and 55 per cent of French parents stated they would prefer their children to take part in planned activities rather than free-play. The opposite attitude was taken by most parents in Japan and Germany, with 83 per cent of Japanese and 61 per cent of Germans stating that free-play would be more commonly encouraged.

Despite this, nearly half of the parents in the UK stated that their child's free time is sometimes or often over-scheduled. Over two-thirds of parents in the US and Germany also said that their children's time is too structured. It seems that over-scheduling children's time increases with age as a higher percentage of older children took part in the most planned activities. However, when asked specifically about the balance between structured activities and free-play most parents agreed the balance is about right and parents from the UK, US and Germany tended to state that their children have chances to express themselves without parental direction. Similarly, these parents believed their children take it upon themselves to initiate play (80 per cent of UK parents).

Over-scheduling children's time could have implications for their health. Research from the late 1990s indicates that hectic schedules disrupt sleeping patterns (Carlskadon in Melman and others 2007) and that pressures of homework and household chores have led to increased stress levels in adolescents (Shaw and others in Melman and others 2007). Rosenfeld used the term 'hyper-parenting' to describe an apparent phenomenon whereby parents aim for perfection from their children, encouraging extra-curricular activities at the expense of the imagination and creativity that is brought about by free-play (Rosenfeld and Wise 2001).

Melman and others (2007) studied 90 American children in a school health class with an average age of 15. They completed an activity questionnaire recording the demands children have on their time. A behavioural and personality test was performed on the children, to quantify levels of anxiety, depression and somatisation (complaining about small problems to indicate their physiological distress). Melman found that students report spending an average of 30.5 hours a week engaging in extra-curricular activities including school-related activities, homework, housework and paid employment. According to the findings of the study, there seemed to be a positive correlation between the number of hours spent in structured or scheduled activities and reported levels of anxiety, however, no correlation was detected between scheduled activities and depression or somatisation. The evidence seems to suggest that although some extra-curricular activities can be beneficial for children, a balance must be struck between this and more informal use of free time, such as play.

9. Differences in children's time to play

Constraints on children's free time may vary in accordance with age, gender and ethnicity, amongst other social factors. Mayall (2000a) notes that the older children in secondary schools were more likely to have more homework commitments than the primary-aged children. In Mayall's study it was notable that older girls, particularly those of Asian origin, were also more likely to have more responsibilities in terms of childcare and housework. Academic success seemed to be valued highly amongst Asian families and parents of Asian children seemed to focus their time investing in their children's future career, and had higher concerns over homework. It is unclear whether these findings are supported elsewhere.

Many of the children in Mayall's study emphasised the move from 'child' to 'teen' at the age of 13. Younger children felt this age represented a significant transition in terms of how their free time is organised, believing that their teenage years will offer them greater choice and agency over their free time. In reality, this seemed not to be the case as the 13-year-olds in the study did not feel a greater sense of freedom as, even if they were allowed out of the house more, they had greater homework pressures (Mayall 2000a).

There is evidence to suggest that disabled children may encounter further barriers that prevent them from spending their free time playing. A survey of 1,085 parents across the UK found that parents of disabled children were often wary of taking their children out to play because of the various problems they face in doing so. Amongst other findings, 68 per cent of parents claimed that either they or their children would feel uncomfortable, as the public realm does not accommodate their needs, or represent disabled children. A further 55 per cent of parents stated that taking their children to play meant travelling for miles to find appropriate facilities. Such difficulties could mean that disabled children may find it particularly difficult to spend their free time playing with others (Shelley 2002).

10. Modern technology

Despite evidence from the Time Use survey that suggests gaming technology has simply replaced time spent watching television, some authors maintain that children seem to be spending an increasing amount of free time within the home (Karsten 2005), partly due to advances in television and gaming technology. Research from 2006 found that 87 per cent of children have a home computer, 62 per cent have a digital television and 82 per cent own a games console (Livingstone cited in Lester and Russell 2008). Research into the health and social implications of modern technology has given mixed results. Some evidence suggests that the use of some technologies can enhance a range of skills and help to build peer relationships (cited in Lester and Russell 2008), while other sources stress the health risks associated with inactivity and excessive use of technology.

Sue Palmer contends that the combination of easy access to endless entertainment games and expensive manufactured toys has left children with very little time for play that involves creativity and imagination (Palmer 2007). This is reinforced within the current social climate whereby the outside world is viewed as 'unsafe' for children and young people (Lester and Russell 2008).

Furthermore, research carried out by Clements (2004) revealed that 85 per cent of mothers named modern technologies as the primary reason why children no longer spend their free time playing outdoors.

11. The family

Ginsberg argues that there have been a number of changes within the family structure in the US, which have contributed to a decline in free play. He points to the increase in single parent families and working mothers alongside a decrease in multigenerational families. This shift in family structure, he argues, has led to an absence of available adult supervision resulting in an increase in childcare and other formal settings. Ginsberg suggests this is partly why organised clubs have become more popular. This is combined with social messages, pressuring parents to push their children to excel academically (Ginsburg 2008).

As we have discussed, spending time away from adults seemed to be valued by children, however evidence also suggests that investing time in playing with children is also of great importance. Writers such as Tamis-LeMonda and others (2004) note the difficulties parents, particularly fathers, have in spending quality time with their family in the US. For low-income families this is particularly true because of limited resources and sometimes, unsociable working hours. Tamis-LeMonda and others conducted a longitudinal study with 290 families, who were observed and interviewed when their child was either 24 or 36 months old. Mother-and-child and father-and-child play sessions were observed and video-recorded in the families' homes and followed by interviews. The play sessions included three activities and 10 minutes of free play, in which bags of toys were provided. A Bayley MDI scale (Major Depression Inventory) was administered. The maternal and paternal engagement with their child was then related to the child's language and cognitive development, as measured by MDI and PPVT scores (Peabody Picture Vocabulary Test) calculated through standard assessments.

The researchers conclude that mother and father engagement in play through a supportive approach had a significant impact on the cognitive development and language skills of their child. However, parental behaviour that was too intrusive or detached had negative implications for the child's scores.

Donaldson stresses the importance of adults taking time to play with their children. He argues that becoming a child's playmate involves creating a sense of belonging and honour, in Donaldson's words 'to play with a child is to say yes to the whole joyous and painful, miraculous and ordinary content of our children's lives'. It is argued that putting aside time to play with children is vital and, to do this, adult roles must be left behind for a more balanced relationship (Donaldson 2001).

Ethnographic fieldwork carried out with 70 children and surveys with 489 children aged 10–11 in 2002 examines the time children spend with their families (Christensen 2002). The research, which took place in a small market town and explores children's understanding of 'quality time' in urban and rural areas across north England, found that children have broad and varied ideas about what they mean by 'quality time'.

Christensen's survey showed that children value time spent with their families. This was particularly true for children living in a rural setting, as the figures show that 61 per cent of girls and 62 per cent of boys in urban settings agreed that they enjoyed spending time with their family; and in

rural areas these figures changed to 74 per cent and 68 per cent. A third of children also stated that their parents' work commitments limit the amount of time spent together as a family.

The authors make an important distinction between time spent together and children's perception of 'quality time'. Children particularly valued five aspects of family time. These were 'ordinariness and routine', 'someone being there for you', having a say over how they spend their own time', 'peace and quiet' and 'being able to plan their own time'. It seems that opportunities for children to express themselves freely through self-directed play are an important aspect of this. Christensen states:

'Children, who experienced themselves as being successful in having a say exposed a sense of their own growing independence.'
(Christensen 2002, 83)

Interestingly, when asked whether they would like to spend more time with their parents, the vast majority of children answered that they would not. Instead, children in this study appreciated knowing that their parents would be there for them if they needed them. The findings show that children wanted time to relax, have privacy and their own independence. Christensen acknowledges that such time for children is often under threat from other demands or commitments, over which they have little choice.

Ginsburg suggests that within the family, current social norms have meant that 'good' parenting is perceived to be about pushing one's child towards achievement, and so the time that the adult and child spend together tends to be used for arranging and travelling to organised activities. This rushed and highly scheduled lifestyle is often seen as the key to 'good' parenting and often occurs at the expense of children's free time (Ginsburg 2006).

12. Schools

Mayall argues that children's school life takes up a substantial amount of children's time, both in and out of the classroom (Mayall 2000b). The children she researched recalled the younger period of their lives when homework was not such a large commitment and they were not under such strict authority at school. The increase in academic pressure may be due to the age of the children or may be due to wider political changes. Children spoke about their disappointment at losing their afternoon break, which was replaced by more classroom learning. The majority of children (around four-fifths) took part in at least one formal extra circular activity, often sport, art, music or drama, which most children claimed they did through choice. Such activities were far less common amongst older children, with only 22 per cent taking part. Instead, these children's free time was filled with homework, socialising indoors or family commitments.

Guimaraes and McSherry (2002) examined how children's time was spent in pre-school education in Northern Ireland. A sample of 71 pre-school centres was selected at random, from which full sessions with three and four year olds were observed. The results suggest that although free play and child-centred activities were most common in nurseries and playgroups, adults tended to direct activities in reception classes. Such findings seem transferable to reception classes in England. Fisher, for example, reported findings which showed that only six per cent of the time in reception classes is spent on play; and elsewhere Johnson notes how the vast majority of reception learning is achieved through adult-lead activities, despite evidence that supports play as an effective learning method (cited in Guimaraes and McSherry 2002). A small-scale qualitative study with 50 children gave an insight into how children perceived play in school (Dockett 2002). The children interviewed felt that teachers in schools did not value play, rather that they saw school as solely a place for learning and where play is regarded more of an interruption than as having any benefits.

13. School break times

Pellegrini (2008) argues that break time has come under heavy fire in both the UK and US. Politically, he argues, playtime is viewed as a waste of time that could be spent on something more constructive. Over recent years, playtime in schools has been reduced as a way of finding increasing time for academic learning (Pellegrini and Holmes in Singer and others 2006). Political figures and super-intendents (senior administrator in education) have claimed that curbing playtime directly results in higher academic achievement but they do not support this with any empirical evidence. In fact, according to Pellegrini and Holmes, this assertion is made despite evidence to the contrary, evidence that suggests eliminating breaks is counter-productive as this may be the only opportunity children have to let off steam and socialise with their peers. Therefore, break times at school are both important and educational. In fact Bjork and Pellingrini have argued that 'playful' breaks from learning, that is, unstructured breaks, actually improve rather than hinder cognitive performance (Pellingrini 2008).

Pellingrini believes that playtime offers children a unique opportunity to advance their interacting skills and social cognitive recourses through informal self-directed play. This interaction with others builds on the cognitive and social skills vital for adulthood. Pellegrini's previous research from the 1980s shows that children's use of language and play operates at a less sophisticated level when adults are present than when children are just amongst one another. A two-year study by the same researcher in the 1990s found that children's behaviour during school break times was directly linked to academic achievement, with high peer interaction being related to high academic achievement and high adult-directed behaviour being associated with lower academic grades.

Reducing playtime at school, some writers have argued, can have implications for children's health. According to research carried out in northwest England, children accomplish around a third of their recommended daily amount of physical activity during school break times. In this study, 112 girls and 116 boys were randomly selected from schools in the region and fitted with monitors to record their physical activity throughout the day. Boys were particularly physically active during break times, spending an average of 28 minutes in being physically active, compared with 21.5 minutes for girls. The researchers conclude:

'These data indicate that recess provided a salient opportunity for children to take part in physical activity of different intensities and provide them with a context to achieve minimum daily physical activity guidelines.'

(Ridgers and others 2005)

The empirical evidence, presented by Pellingrini and others, showing the positive implications of break times, not only for academic achievement but also in terms of social skills and cognitive development, provides a strong argument that break times should be an important aspect of the school day, and the author recommends that playtime at schools should be lengthened. Physical education classes, he argues, would not provide the same benefits,

as the children are under instruction without the kind of peer interaction and self-direction that can only be achieved through play (Pellingrini 2008).

Similarly, other academic literature suggests that excessive structured learning with little time for breaks hinders rather than helps learning ability (Healy 1998 cited in Patte 2006; Jarrett cited in Patte 2006). Patte drew on teachers' and administrators' perceptions of playtime in the US and found overwhelming support for the importance of break times, and that shortening them is both unjustified and anti-productive.

Mackett suggests that school break times are the primary opportunity for exercise for children and so physical activity will decrease if school break times are reduced. He argues that the replacement of unstructured play with structured activities outside of school hours, will not balance this, as children are frequently driven to and from these activities meaning that less physical activity is carried out (cited in Blatchford and Bains 2006).

In the 1990s, Blatchford found that despite lengthening the school day, break time, including lunchtime, had shortened in length. The primary method of data collection was achieved through interviews with pupils, which provided both quantitative and qualitative research. This was combined with observations of teachers and pupils during school lessons. Most of the data was taken from a longitudinal study, using semi-structured interviews with children aged between 7 and 16 years. A field study also looked at playground experiences and games.

Blatchford found that children valued break times during school, especially lunchtime when the break was longer. It provided them with an opportunity for freedom from the rules and regulations of the rest of the school day. He agreed with the previous researchers, that break times during school are often regarded as problematic, and playtime had been cut down to make more time for the National Curriculum. This means the positive experience that most of the children had during breaks have been often overlooked. He suggested that changing the arrangements of break time, including altering the length of the breaks, should take children's high regard for this time into account.

Following up their earlier research, Blatchford and Baines (2006) conducted a large scale UK study focusing on break times in schools. The research builds on Blatchford's previous survey and found that, since the original research, break times had decreased and in many cases afternoon breaks had been completely eradicated. This change was most likely because of demands to meet targets through the National Curriculum, and also as a proposed solution to tackle 'behavioural' problems.

Blatchford and Baines extended the 2006 study to include 'extended school' services, and children's views on break times based on their own accounts. As with the former study, data was collected through a postal survey. This obtained a sample of 1,344 students in Years 5, 8 and 10. The survey included seven per cent of primary schools and six per cent of all secondary schools across England and Wales. From the results, it seemed that children's free time at school decreased as children get older, as total break times reduced from 91 minutes per day for ages 4–7, to 77 minutes per day for ages 7–11, to only 69 minutes per day for ages 11–16. The proportion of children aged 4–7 who received an overall break of 65 minutes and over, decreased from 60 per cent to 44 per cent over the last 15 years; for children aged 7–11 this fell from 31 to 12 per cent; and for children aged 11–16 the figures show a decrease from 23 per cent to only 5 per cent.

The decline in child-lead play is not unique to the UK and has also been exposed in the US. Statistics from The National Association of Elementary School Principals show that in 1989, 96 per cent of kindergarten schools offered at least one recess period in the school day, while ten years on this number fell to 70 per cent (Pellegrini and Bohn cited in Ginsburg 2006). Some authors have even suggested that the academic gap between girls and boys is partially to do with the lack of free play in schools. They argue that boys achieve higher with more active forms of learning such as play (Gurian and Stevens cited in Ginsburg 2006; Pellegrini cited in Ginsburg 2006).

Elsewhere, Armitage suggests that playtime during school is getting shorter and shorter because of adult concerns over aggressive behaviour in the playground. Due to this, he claims that children's playtime may have decreased by as much as 50 per cent since the 1970s. The repercussions of this, it is argued, could impact on children's anxiety levels (Armitage cited in Lester and Russell 2008). Data from the 2008 TellUs 3 survey (Ofsted 2008) showed that pressures from school caused high levels of stress for children across England. According to the figures, 57 per cent of children stated that exams are one of their biggest worries, and a further 31 per cent gave homework as an additional worry.

14. The journey to school

Writers such as Brien (cited in Ross 2007) have highlighted the changing patterns of journeys to and from school, notably, the vast decrease in the proportion of children walking to and from school alone and the rising number of children being driven to school by an adult. Evidence has suggested there has been a major drop in the number of children travelling to school independently. According to figures collected from the Department for Transport (DfT), during the mid 1980s, approximately 21 per cent of children travelled to school without an adult, by 2005 this number had dropped to 6 per cent (DfT cited in Mackett and others 2007). This suggests that children's freedom in the local area has decreased over this time period.

This apparent shift in journey patterns could have led to a lost timeframe for children to take part in informal play. Ross (2007) documents the importance of the journey to school as an opportunity for play. She explores this in detail through her account of the meaning children attach to their journey to school. Her research focuses on children aged 10–12 across a diverse selection of areas in Fife, Scotland. Ross noted that in the 1990s it was still common practice among the children in her study to make their journey to school independently (four-fifths of children in Fife travelled without an adult). She conducted activity-based research with approximately 90 children and interviews with 67 children and 22 parents. The activity-based research incorporated a mixture of photography, drawings, writing and mapping work in an attempt to achieve a holistic perception of children's views. In addition to this, questionnaire surveys were carried out with 200 children and 134 parents.

Ross found that children who travelled to school independently exercised a relatively high level of autonomy over their journey, including cycling on and crossing main roads or using public modes of transport. These children were able to use this time to explore the local area in an informal manner. She concludes:

‘These findings situate school journeys as experimental and sensory geographies and demonstrate children's active, emotional and imaginative engagement in and with their environments.’ (Ross, 2007)

The self-directed photos taken of children's journeys to school consisted of routes taken to school, natural surroundings and institutional facilities. Photos taken in the company of friends was common. Children reported that walking to school gave them the chance to have valuable time to themselves. Not only this, but potential play opportunities and play spaces were discovered and used whilst making the journey to school. The journey also makes significant contributions to friendships, with specific places mentioned for meeting up with peers. Two-fifths of the photos involved interaction with friends and the same proportion pictured other children on their way to school at the same time.

Fieldwork carried out in two schools in Hertfordshire, with children aged between 8 and 11 years, examines children's mobility patterns within their local environment (Mackett and others 2007). The research tools consisted of questionnaires with parents and children, activity monitors (RT3 output which

allowed high-activity events to be detected), Global Positioning Satellite monitors (GPS – a device that, when worn, can pick up people's positions by satellite) and activity diaries. The findings show children's tendency to walk at a slower pace when they are alone compared to when an adult accompanies them. This, the authors claim, is because children both explore the environment far more when they are unsupervised and socialise with peers. It seems that children behave rather differently when unsupervised; and walking to school alone provides them with an important play opportunity.

15. Conclusion

From the evidence we can conclude that children's play is vital for their social and physical development and is a way they wish to spend their free time. Children associate free time with freedom, independence and choice; however, play of this nature is often limited. Ginsberg highlights that the combination of busy lifestyles and academic commitments has impinged on children's free time, affecting their cognitive, physical, social and emotional stability. Play that is directed by adults rather than by children themselves does not require the same level of skills, initiative and decision-making, and so does not offer the same learning experience. That is not to say that adults cannot have a vital role in play. Their involvement in child-centred play can offer a unique bonding opportunity that allows adults to see the world through the eyes of a child (Ginsburg 2006). As Ginsberg notes, we must acknowledge the merits of academia in children's lives and understand the health benefits of organised activities, but a balance must be struck between this and more informal and unstructured play, where children are free to enjoy themselves and do as they wish without adult control.

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June 2009

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Children's time to play

A literature review

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