

Understanding children's free play at home, in school and at the After School Club: A preliminary investigation into play types, social grouping and perceived control

Pete King & Justine Howard

There is a growing adult perception that children have less time and control over their free play. Constraints such as increasing traffic, fear of safety and litigation and more children in childcare environments may reduce the amount of control children have on how, where and who they can play with in their free time. This paper describes small-scale exploratory investigating children's perceived levels of control over their play and the nature of their play activity across three different contexts; the home, the school playground and the After School Club. Using a self-administered questionnaire, 12 children (six male and six female aged between 6 and 11 years) recorded their play activities, who they played with and how much control they had over their free play at home, in the school playground and in their After School Club. Preliminary results indicate that children's control over their free play varies in relation to gender and the number of children or if an adult is also involved in the play activity. Overall, children had less control when playing in the school playground compared to playing at home and in the After School Club. In addition, there are differences in the frequency of play types most commonly noted.

A CHILD'S RIGHT TO PLAY is clearly stated within Article 31 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNICEF, 2009). Historically children's play has been subjected to adult control. During the Middle Ages, play was seen as evidence of 'the "original sin" of mankind, children being considered as "totally depraved" and incited to natural activity by Satan' (Bowen & Mitchell, 1927, p.186). The construction of childhood from an adult perspective has undergone many paradigmatic changes over time (Hendrick, 1996) where each paradigm of childhood will have had an influence on children's free play. This influence maybe in a controlling, nurturing, protective or, as with some television advertising aimed at children, an exploitative way. Childhood construction is always changing in relation to policy, professional practice and which developmental theories are in vogue.

Recent research suggests children are spending less time playing outside and more time under adult supervision (Gill, 2007). If correct, it would appear that children could be having less control over their free play at home, in the school and in After School Clubs. This may in turn relate to the type of play children wish to engage in, who children play with and what aspects of their free play are being controlled by other people.

Ceglowski (1997) describes free play as that where 'children are free to select what to play, when they want to play, and with whom they play' (p.109). However, Steinman (1970, as cited in Ellis 1973), questions whether the element of 'free' in free play is directly related to the behaviour of the child. Steinman asked the question how free is free play? This question remains pertinent today, particularly if we are to believe newspaper articles over the last 10 years where there is a reduction of games such as conkers in the

school playground due to health and safety fears (Davidson, 1999) or that children spend far less recreational time in the outdoors (Asthana & Revill, 2008). There is a suggestion that children have less choice and control in terms of what, where, when and with whom, they want to play.

Constraints on children's free play include differing adult perceptions about the value of free play (Fisher et al., 2008) anxiety about children playing outdoors due to increasing traffic and worry over strangers (DCSF/DCMS, 2008), increased time spent in organised childcare (Smith & Barker, 2000) and fear of litigation (Play Safety Forum, 2002). These constraints are more often than not outside the control of the child. However, they will have an impact on children's free play.

In general free play tends to be studied predominately within pre-school and early years settings. Santer, Griffiths and Goohall (2007) suggest that whilst free play is a *'highly motivating process in which children have participated across cultures and throughout history'* (p.69), there has been an inconsistent approach to the study of free play across sectors. Whilst research of free play in preschool and early year settings is easily obtainable, there is far less information available about the free play of children over the age of 5 years or in alternative environments. Research into children's own perceptions of their play across all contexts and age ranges is also limited (Howard, 2002)

The benefits for children in controlling their free play include the opportunity to make judgments in matching their existing skills to challenges (Rogers & Sawyers, 1998), to engage in peer culture and social organisation (Corsaro, 1997) and to develop important survival mechanisms (Bruce, 1994). If children's free play is being constrained in contemporary society, it raises questions as to; what types of play children engage in during their free time? Who are children playing with? How much control do children actually have over their free play? This pilot research aims to investigate these

questions from the child's perspective in their free play at home, in the school playground and in the After School Club.

Method

This exploratory investigation into children's perceptions of their free play used a self-administered questionnaire – The Play Detective Diary (PDD). The PDD was designed to elicit children's views about their play using a game-like procedure. In total there were 12 participants (six male and six female) aged between 6 to 11 years of age who all attended the same After School Club based in a primary school in south-west Wales. The value of eliciting children's views using play-based methodologies is well established (Howard, 2002) The PDD asked children to record information about one play activity each day that occurred at home, one in the school playground and one in their After School Club. The PDD collected information on three broad areas:

- The type of play;
 - The social aspect of the play;
 - The perceived control over this free play.
- The pilot study was undertaken at an After School Club in south-west Wales and the research participants were aged between 6 and 11 years. After preliminary meetings with the club staff and obtaining parental consent, the researcher met with all of the children over a three-day period to explain the nature of the research and what would be involved. The procedure for completing the PDD was explained and the children were free to ask any questions they needed in order to ensure they had a good understanding about the nature of the work they were agreeing to participate in. It was made clear that involvement in the study was not compulsory and that they could change their mind about taking part at any point.

Children were asked to record the name of the play they engaged in, who they played with and judge who was in control of the play based on six factors of free play (spontaneity, choice, time, freedom, choice and goals).

Types of play

Children were asked to record one way in which they played for each environment (for example, watched television at home, played football in the school playground and drew a picture at their After School Club). It was the role of the researcher to place the child's description and name of their play into a category. The five categories adopted were derived from the literature surrounding definitions of play (Piaget, 1962; Smilansky, 1968; Wada, 1978; Hughes, 2002) and included dramatic play, creative play, object play, physical play and static play. Once all the PDD sheets were coded for play types, they were re-coded by two independent play scholars. There was an average match of 86 per cent coding agreement demonstrating high inter-rater reliability.

Social aspect of play

The importance of play for socialisation has been acknowledged for many years (e.g. Parten, 1933). The social aspect of children's free play was investigated by asking children to record whether they played alone, with a friend (which indicated one other child only) or in a group (two or more other children). In addition, children were asked if an adult was involved or not with their play. Both questions used a simple tick box procedure.

Control over free play

The aspect of control is a key component of what makes play quite distinct from other activities where the inherent value of play is dependent on children's perception of choice and control (McInnes et al., 2009). The control aspect of the children's free play was based on children's responses to questions on six factors of free play (King 2007): spontaneity; choice; freedom; organisation; time and goals. The play detective diary asked six questions about the play activity chosen based on these six factors. The first five questions were:

1. Whose idea it was to engage in the play activity (spontaneity)?

2. Who decided this would be played (choice)?
3. Who decided where the play took place (freedom)?
4. Who was in charge of the play (organise)?
5. Who finished the play (time)?

For each of these six questions children had to choose one of four responses of who was in control of that particular factor:

1. Themselves
2. A friend (one other child)
3. A group (two or more children)
4. An adult.

The final question asked whether the play finished how they wanted it to relating to the factors of goals. The choice of answers was yes, kind of, not really and no. All answers of themselves and yes were scored as 1 indicating the child was in control of that factor. For each diary sheet completed a maximum score for overall control would be 6.

Results and analysis

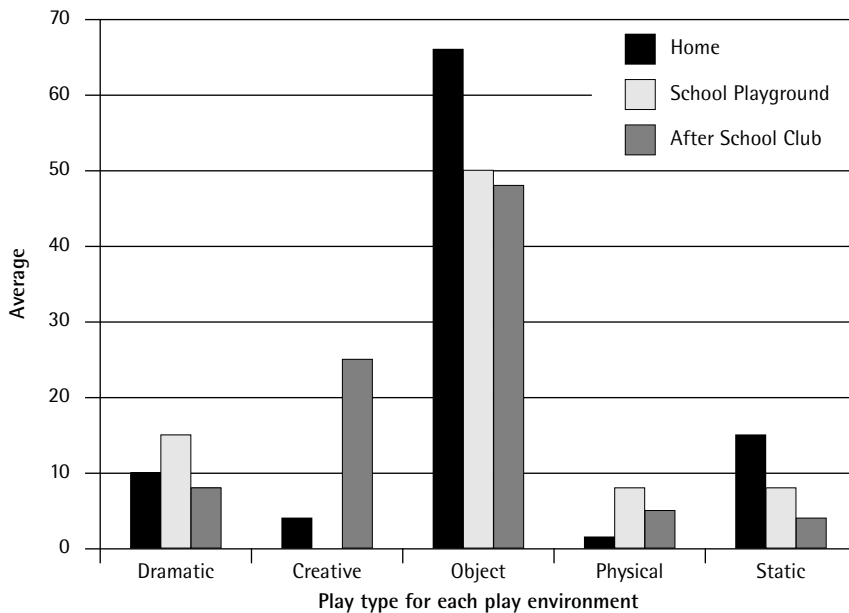
The 12 participants who became play detectives completed in total 179 PDDy sheets (59 for the home environment, 61 for the school playground and 59 for the After School Club). Each PDD sheet was treated as an individual play episode.

Play types recorded for each play environment

Across the three play environments object play type was the most popular (54.7 per cent) followed by physical play type (14 per cent), dramatic play type (10.1 per cent), creative play type (9.5 per cent) and lastly, static play type (8.9 per cent). Figure 1 shows the percentage play types recorded for each play environment (percentages where no play types were provided are not shown).

Object play type was the most popular across all three environments (66.1 per cent home, 50.8 per cent school playground and 47.5 per cent After School Club) where playing football was the most recorded activity. Most dramatic play types occurred in the school playground (14.8 per cent) whilst

Figure 1: Play types recorded for each play environment.



most creative play types took place in the after school club (25.4 per cent). There was no creative play types recorded in the school playground. Static play types were most popular at home (15.3 per cent).

Social aspect

Across the three play environments children played on their own 36.9 per cent of the time, with a friend 31.8 per cent and in a group 30.7 per cent. Children played mostly without an adult (49.7 per cent) compared to with an adult (24.6 per cent). Children did not tick the box 0.6 per cent in relation to which children they played with and 25.7 per cent to whether an adult was involved in the play or not. Figure 2 shows how children played with other children and with or without adults in each play environment (percentages for boxes not ticked are not shown in the graphs).

Children play mostly on their own in the After School Club (54.2 per cent), with a friend at home (40.7 per cent) and with a

group in the school playground (54.1 per cent). The results show that the school playground is an important play environment for group play. Although the After School Club is another environment that would foster group play, children preferred to play on their own. Where an adult was involved in the child's play this occurred more often in the After School Club (55.9 per cent). This would make sense as staff are paid to support and facilitate children's play in these type of play environments.

Control of free play

For each play episode level of control was measured by summing responses to the six related questions in the PDD. Each episode could attract a score of between 0 (low control) and 6 (high control). The overall mean control for free play was 2.98 ($SD=2.14$) for the 12 participants. Girls had significantly more control than boys ($p<0.05$) where for girls mean overall control was 3.43 ($SD=2.23$) compared to boys with 2.33 ($SD=1.84$).

Figure 2: Who children play with.

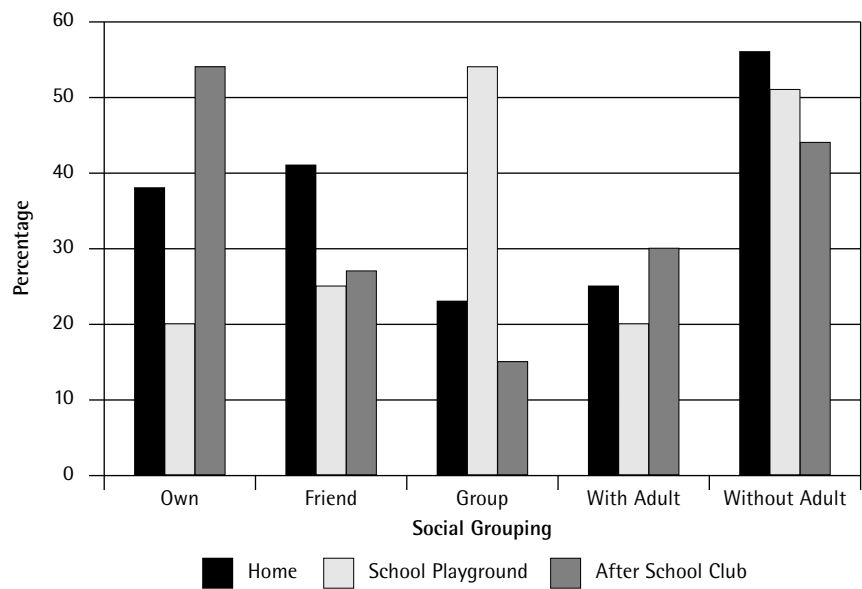
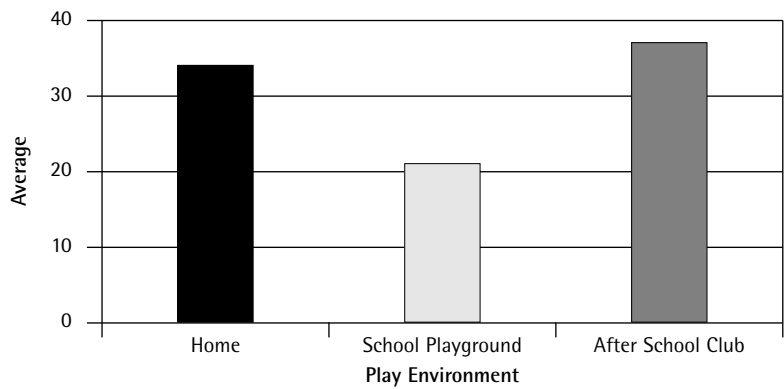


Figure 3: Mean level of perceived control across the different play environments.



Control across the differing play environments

The overall mean control varied across the three environments (Figure 3) where the overall mean control at home was 3.27 ($SD=2.26$), in the school playground 2.03 ($SD=1.76$) and in the After School Club 3.67 ($SD=2.06$). *T*-tests showed that children perceived more overall mean control at home or in the After School Club compared to overall mean control in the school playground ($p<0.05$). There was no significant difference in overall mean control between home and the After School Club ($p>0.05$).

Perceived control and play type

The mean level of perceived control in relation to the five play types varied (Figure 4). The mean control for static play was 5.13 ($SD=0.96$), 4.47 ($SD=1.55$) for creative play, 2.68 ($SD=2.30$) for physical play, 2.50

($SD=2.01$) for dramatic play type and 2.47 ($SD=2.02$) for object play. Children perceived significantly more control in creative and static play than other types ($p<0.05$).

Perceived control and social grouping

Perceived control varied according to social grouping (Figure 5). Overall mean control decreased when children played on their own (4.61, $SD=1.79$), playing with a friend (2.42, $SD=1.78$) and in a group (1.64, $SD=1.60$). The difference in perceived control when children played alone compared to when they played with a single friend or in a group was significant ($p<0.05$). In addition, mean control playing without an adult was 3.43 ($SD=2.15$) and dropped to 2.18 ($SD=2.07$) when playing with an adult, this difference was significant ($p<0.05$).

A summary of the main findings from this pilot study found:

Figure 4: Mean level of perceived control according to play type.

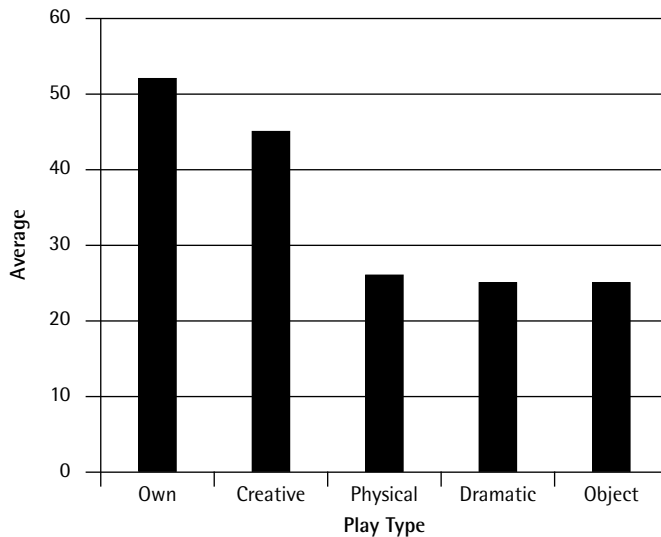
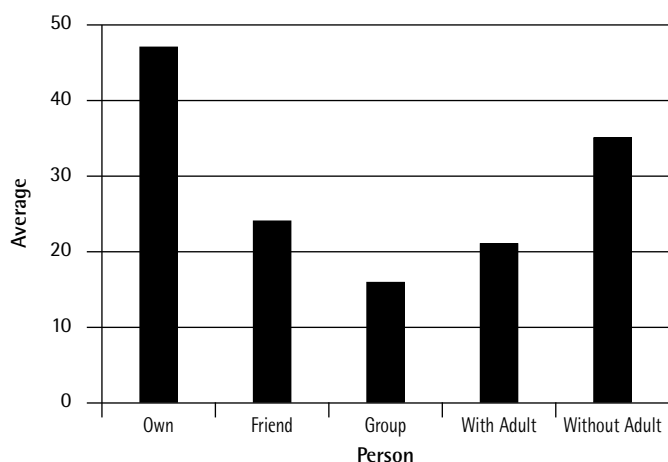


Figure 5: Mean level of perceived control according to social grouping.



- Girls displayed significantly more overall control of their free play compared to boys.
- There was a significant difference in the amount of overall control children had over their free play when playing in the school playground compared to playing at home and in their After School Club. Most control of their free play was in the After School Club and the least in the school playground.
- Although the most popular play type recorded was object play, children perceived significantly more control in creative and static play types.
- Most creative play types were recorded in the After School Club whilst most static play types were recorded at home. Dramatic play type and physical play type occurred more in the school playground.
- Group play occurred mostly in the school playground whereas playing on their own was recorded more in the After School Club. At home, more children played with a friend.
- The amount of overall control of their free play was significantly reduced between playing alone, with a friend or with a group.

- Children's perceptions of control over their free play were significantly reduced if an adult was involved in the play activity.

Discussion

Howard (2002) states that '*considering the complexity of play, particularly the way in which definitions of activities appear to alter according to context, situation and experience, children's perceptions of play command attention*' (p.492). This small-scale pilot study supports this position in that play types, social grouping and perceived control appear inextricably linked.

As discussed in the introduction with reference to pre-school and early years environments, children's control over their free play may benefit in relation to development of socialisation skills, survival skills and meeting new challenges. This study focused on children aged 6 to 11 years (middle years) where variation of overall control in relation to gender, play types and social groupings suggests that complete control by the individual child may not be important in their free play. The play environments children will encounter as they get older will vary in relation to both the physical

surroundings and the people present. Could it be that the different levels of control is a mechanism to enable children to both develop existing skills as well as meet new challenges in the different play environments they encounter? This will be explored further in relation to socialisation and self-identity in the school playground.

Each play environment will offer both different constraints and opportunities in children's free play. The school playground, for example, has a large number of children to engage in group play. Play activities with peers such as football would not be able to take place if each child tried to control the game. To engage in this type of game children would need to negotiate the amount of control such as who plays and what are the rules which would support development in socialisation (Hume, Salmon & Ball, 2005). Alternatively, children engaging in dramatic play types may need to retain more control in relation to the development of their self identity. Self-identity is another aspect of development that takes place in the school playground (Maclean, 1996) and this could take place in smaller groups, or if more control is required, on their own. For boys, group play such as football is very common whilst girls prefer smaller groups in their play. The different amount of control between genders may reflect the socialisation processes that take place between peer play with children in middle childhood compared to pre-school.

Matching existing skills to challenges will relate to the number of play types children can engage with. The After School Club provision is a play environment which aims to facilitate children's play by providing as much choice as possible. Children who attend After School Club provision have stated that the increased play choice (e.g. creative play types) is one benefit of attending this type of provision (Cole-Hamilton, Harrop & Street, 2002) because they do not often get a chance to take part in many types of play, particularly those that are creative and messy. This was highlighted

where creative play types did not occur in the school playground and very little at home and that all play types were well represented in the After School Club. For children, this time playing alone may be an important time for self-reflection on their experiences of life, and often this is best done on their own. At home, often there is not time or the resources for creative play types to take place, or children are happy to engage in more static play types such as watching television.

Children's control over their free play is significantly reduced when playing alone compared to playing with one friend or in a group of two or more children. What appears to be important is that children are able to negotiate the amount of control with their peers without an adult having to give instructions all the time. These are valuable survival skills because as adults, in both social and work situations, there are times when we have to give up elements of control in our work and social activities. It is important that adults do not intervene too quickly in organising children's play, particularly as the results showed that, where an adult was involved in the play activity across all three play environments, children again have significantly less perceived control over their free play. McInnes et al.'s (2009) study of play and learning found that adult presence led to lower levels of performance and differences in children's motivation and engagement compared to when an adult was not present. Could there be a similar relationship in both formal and informal situations where children's control over their play is reduced by adult presence?

For each PDD sheet children were asked to recount and record activities they perceived to be play across the three different environments. Consistent with previous research (King, 1982; Howard, 2002) children in this study were appeared able to distinguish play from other activities, however, the play activity they chose to describe was not always determined by high levels of control. Control varied between

play types, play environments and across social groupings. This supports the proposition by Brown (2009) that play is not necessarily always freely chosen, personally directed or intrinsically motivated. This raises further questions in relation to whether children give up aspects of control voluntarily or involuntarily. Are children developing different play scripts for different play types, play environments and social grouping in their free play for different reasons? These early findings from this pilot study do have a cautionary note, however, as only 12 children were involved in the completion of 179 PDD sheets. A second pilot study is currently underway in a different After School Club in a different part of Wales to increase both the sample size and to provide a comparison between two different geographical areas in which children engage in free play.

The authors

Pete King & Justine Howard

Centre for Child Research
Human and Health Science
Swansea University.

Correspondence

Pete King

Centre for Child Research
Swansea University.
E-mail: 497214@swansea.ac.uk



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