

Discuss whether there really is a need for children to play freely outdoors.

Children flourish in environments that give them meaning and engagement, they gain positive development when they are able to explore their own interests (Layard and Dunn, 2009). Louv (2005) proposes that the bond between children and nature is breaking, causing a lack of the mental, physical and spiritual support that nature provides. Play allows children to exercise their developing abilities, through cognitive thinking, imagination and social interactions (Cohen, 2006). This essay will discuss the importance of outdoor play and the challenges that can impede the quality of play children have.

The Quote “Play is the natural means of a child’s self-education, an exercise-oriented towards the future” (Vygotsky 1993, p.161. cited in Packer, 2017, p.281) infers that children need to be able to play so that they can develop themselves, this could be in a physical or mental capacity but leads to their important growth into adulthood. Play England defines play as “what children and young people do when they follow their own ideas and interests, in their own way, and for their own reasons.” (Play England, 2020). Play is a means for children to escape reality and explore the differences between their social motivations and social norms (Packer, 2017), contributing various key life skills. Playtime helps children distinguish between appearance and reality, improves their self-control, allows them to explore social settings and improves their language acquisition with those around them (ibid). This demonstrates that playing is fundamental to the growth and development of a child.

The National Health Service (NHS) (2023) defines obesity as “a person who has excess body fat” with health complications that can include strokes, type two diabetes and depression. The NHS (2023) estimates that in the demographic of ten to eleven year olds, one in five have obesity. The total number of children in this age group is unknown, however, the statistic is alarming and reinforces the need for physical, good quality play that encourages young people to get active. Frank *et al.*, (2018) propose that structured play is more beneficial to children who are more sedentary inclined, those who would rather sit down, instead of being active during a period of free play. With a structured playtime, children are more likely to partake in increased physical activity, especially in a gymnasium where it is easier for adults to control the children (ibid).

Despite this, Bilton *et al.*, (2005) suggests young people learn more effectively with the movement of their bodies. Children will often run around, unsolicited, in open areas; this helps them explore their body’s limits and feel how their limbs and heart react to physical activity (ibid). This indicates that children need space to have this experience, indoor spaces may be limited, making outdoors more ideal for this type of play.

Forest schools are a fantastic example of why free, outdoor play is important for child development. These schools promote exploratory learning that encourages curiosity towards unfamiliar objects, contributes to their understanding of themselves and their impacts on others, and provides an atmosphere that allows child-led solutions to problems (O’Brien, 2009). In this outdoors environment, children are witnessed to have increased self-confidence, more motivation and concentration, developed social skills and language proficiency (ibid). Cudworth and Lumber (2021) emphasise Forest schools provide free play and give the opportunity to play and

explore in nature. While there is still a structure to Forest schools, there is less of a focus on a curriculum, this relieves the pressure on young people to achieve results and leaves more opportunity to play (Kraftl, 2015 cited in Cudworth and Lumber, 2021).

Bilton *et al.*, (2005) observed children who had the opportunity to play outside and were encouraged to look at creatures in the environment, feared them less and found enjoyment in watching Woodlouses and other creepy-crawlies. The children would have more to talk about and communicate more with their peers and the adults around them (*ibid*). A study on a forest school in Wales found that children learnt about how to manage risk and be empathetic towards others from getting themselves wet and muddy in a puddle, they were learning properties of water and about nature (Rekers and Waters-Davies, 2021). This shows that time in the outdoors, with the ability to play, gives children the opportunity to learn more about the world around them.

On the other hand, spending time indoors playing videogames and spending time on social media is potentially advantageous to young people. Through social media, adolescents have opportunities to engage with their communities, enhance their personal creativity, build upon their ideas through online mediums and augment their online connections (O’Keeffe and Clarke-Pearson, 2011). Children also have access to video games which improve their social skills and develops their creativity (*ibid*). Additionally, in the last two decades, children have had a better quality of life, with access to better homes, education and limitless technology with the ability to communicate effortlessly with their peers (Layard and Dunn, 2009). Media and entertainment expose young people to commercial influences and display a growth in individualism in our society (*ibid*). By being indoors and engaging in online activities, children can explore the world beyond geographical and cultural boundaries and keep up to date with present information (Siddiqui and Singh, 2016).

Despite this, excessive volumes of time spent online can lead to short attention spans in young people, a hazy sense of identity and the incapability to empathise (Greenfield, 2006, cited in Davies, 2010). Moreover, frequent online activity shows links to offline behaviours, such as forming cliques, sexual experimentation and cyber-bullying (O’Keeffe and Clarke-Pearson, 2011). There are health implications to staying indoors too, with indoor activities, such as videogames, being less active than playing in an outside environment (O’Brien, 2009). In addition, Layard and Dunn (2009) suggest that the pressure of exams is very prevalent in children, causing preoccupying worries and depression. Louv (2005, p.41) quotes “Nature is often overlooked as a healing balm for the emotional hardships in a child’s life”, suggesting that spending time in nature and engaging in outdoor activities can help heal poor mental and emotional states. This demonstrates staying indoors and not being with nature can have negative effects of children.

A study conducted by Brussoni *et al.*, (2020) discovered that children valued the opportunities to do a multitude of things with friends and engage in risky play. Over-supervision can hinder the development of self-regulation, resourcefulness and autonomy that emanates from outdoor play (Whitebread *et al.*, 2012). Whitebread *et al.*, (2012 p.18) suggests risk play be defined as “rough-and-tumble” which involves kicking and physical interaction, this type of playing, typically loosely supervised, promotes Children’s capabilities to control aggression and allows them to understand emotional and social boundaries.

In Western society, parents are increasingly concerned for their children's safety, and this is causing limited opportunities for young people to play (Cevher-Kalburan and Ivrendi, 2015). Venturing outside proposes these concerns to parents, with the rising fear of heavy traffic, threatening strangers and groups of teenagers (Brussoni *et al.*, 2020). Injury prevention is key for children's safety which involves removing the risk potential (Brussoni *et al.*, 2012). However, Gill (2007) suggests that not exposing children to unpleasant events, that are normal stages of childhood, can hinder their ability to deal with difficult situations; Gill conveys children need to independently develop the skills needed to look after themselves, with chances to reflect upon the mistakes they make. Barton (2007) reinforces this idea stating that in terms of playing in adventurous environments, managing risk is important but must not kill the thrill of the adventure and the benefits that come from having these experiences. This infers giving children the opportunity to play outdoors, with limited supervision, in an environment with an element of risk, allows them to learn about risk and potentially how to manage it.

Tovey (2007) surmises that adults use the outdoors as a convenience, a place to send children while they complete adult tasks. She argues that playtime has been hijacked by parents and teachers and is used as a loose, lazy way of achieving a learning outcome, leaving the adults in charge to structure the play the way they want to (ibid). Cunningham and Jones (1999) cited in Woolley (2008) argue that adults and urban planners believe that the environmental needs of children can be satisfied in the playground. Playgrounds are generic, standardised areas with rules, regulations and the means of keeping children safe by keeping them in an enclosed space (Maxey, 1999. Cited in Woolley, 2008). As a society, people prefer using caged areas that prioritise safety over opportunities for children to develop their critical thinking (Solomon, 2014). This infers that children are essentially imprisoned in an area that makes it easier for adults to control them. Specifically, an area that is predictable with boundaries that doesn't allow for thrilling adventures or problem solving (ibid).

In conclusion, the perspectives on free, outdoor play differentiate greatly, resultantly from a range of physical, emotional and mental components. It seems there is an element of fear that surrounds allowing freedom to children, yet the benefits of letting them explore independently suggests that outdoor play is necessary to the development of key skills. While it can be argued that structured play, in a controlled, indoor environment helps children get active, it can be detrimental to their confidence and independence. Similarly with social media and videogames, while they come with creative benefits, the affects these activities can have on mental health and behaviour is damaging. Forest schools and nature appear to have the greatest positive affect on children and their growth through exploration and experimentation, allowing children to develop.

Word Count: 1596

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