A Survey of Unstructured Play Habits among Irish children: A Parents Perspective

Orla Gallagher
Research & Practice Seminar
Introduction

- Orla Gallagher
- Graduate of B.A. (Hons) in Early Childhood Care and Education
- Research undertaken in 2015 – Final Year Dissertation at the Institute of Technology Blanchardstown
- Research Supervisors
  - Deirdre McGrath &
  - Joanne McHale
Research Context

- Growing interest in the area of outdoor play
- Concern around the amount of sedentary vs. leisure time children partake in – child overweight & obesity concerns (Growing up in Ireland - CRC 2013, p.5)
- Siolta – The outdoor environment affords ‘diverse, creative and enriching experiences for all children’ (2006, p.20)
- Aistear – affordances for learning about ‘the natural environment and its features, materials, animals and plants, and their own responsibilities as carers [for the environment]’ (NCCA 2009, p.44).
- Despite this National Play Policy – Ready, Steady, Play! (2004) has still not been implemented in all parts of the country.
What are the existing practices among Irish Children, aged between 3-6 years, in relation to their unstructured play in outdoor environments?

What type of Play?

Who do they engage with?

What materials are available?

Frequency & Time Spent?
Unstructured Play

- Child led, not adult directed
- Freely chosen by child
- Without excessive imposed rules/restrictions
Outdoor Environments

- Any Environment which is not indoors:
  - Formal - Playgrounds
  - Natural – Fields, Green Areas, Parklands
  - Wild – Seashore, Forests, mountains, woodland areas, and rivers or lakes.

What are the existing practices among Irish Children, aged between 3-6 years, in relation to their unstructured play in outdoor environments?
Research Methods

- Quantitative Methods - Online Survey
- Sample 120 eligible respondents
- Parents or primary caregivers with one or more children aged 3-6 years, living in Ireland
- Ethical clearance sought and granted in line with the Institute of Technology Blanchardstown’s procedures on ethics clearance for research.

- Self-Selected respondents accessed via Parenting Forums and Parenting Peer Support Groups
Findings – Access to the Outdoors

- All respondents had access to some type of outdoor environment, the vast majority within the home (enclosed garden -102)

- Most accessible environment formal – playground (114), followed by natural – green spaces (93), parklands (81), fields (66)

- Least commonly accessible were wild environments – woodlands (62), seashore (61), forests (54), lakes/rivers (41) and mountains (28).

- Almost all respondents had access to formal or natural environments within 5km of their home 95% and 94%, compared to wild environments 77%.

- Most frequently accessed natural environments – over half of respondents (67) at least twice weekly, followed by formal (51) and wild (25).
Findings – Play practices

- **Most time (1.5+ hours) spent** in wild environments (42), least in formal environments (75% less than 1 hour).

- Engaging in **different types of play relative to the environment** – independent play occurred least frequently in wild environments (11), play with adults least frequent in formal environments (11). Play with peers most common in natural environments (71).

---

Play and materials engaged in by children in natural & wild environments

- Other (5)
- Mud & Digging (3)
- Rope Games (5)
- Ball Games (50)
- Sand (56)
- Bikes/Wheeled Vehicles (57)
- Climbing Trees (59)
- Chasing Games (70)
- Water (73)
- Rocks (74)
- Leaves/Flowers/Plants (81)
- Walking (94)
- Running (106)
Findings – Outdoor Play in Educational Settings

- Vast majority of settings (109) had facilities for outdoor play.
- 81 parents reported children spending time outdoors during the day in their educational settings.

- Accessing the outdoors was dependant on favourable weather conditions 77.5% of the time, 5% unsure, one respondent said child-led access.

- ‘attends a steiner kindergarten in the woodland so is outdoors most of the time in all weather’
- ‘weather didn’t matter... they were kitted out with clothes that protected them...’

Educational Settings attended by respondents' children

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Educational Setting</th>
<th>Count</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Full Day Care/Creche</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Part Day Preschool</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sessional/ Ecce Services</td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Primary School Infant Classes</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Home Educating</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Childminder</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not Applicable</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Is accessing the outdoor environment dependant on favourable weather conditions?

- Yes (93)
- No (14)
- Unsure (6)
- Other (1)
- Not Applicable (4)
- No Answer Provided (2)
Findings – Outdoor play in Educational Settings

How long do children spend outdoors in their educational setting?

- ‘2+ hours in warm weather’, ‘in summer up to 4+ hours’, ‘as long as they want’.
- Significant proportion of parents ‘unsure’.

Permitted Behaviours
- Walking (109), Running (86), Chasing Games (75), Ball games (62),
- Climbing (51), Rope Games (30) Rough and Tumble Play (34).

Play features
- Most commonly grass areas, plants and flowers, bikes and wheeled vehicles, push/pull along toys, sand play and water play.
  - Kernan & Devine (2010)
Findings – Parents Perspectives’ Benefits of Outdoor Play

- Vast majority of parents (113) ‘strongly agreed’ that outdoor play is important for their children.
- Parents’ ‘strongly agreed’ affordance for meaningful outdoor play greater in natural and wild environments (102) compared to formal play areas (66)
- Over three quarters of parents (91) agree that it is important for young children to experience risk in their play.
Findings – Parents Perspectives on Barriers to Outdoor Play

- Greatest barriers perceived as Unfavourable weather conditions (45), time constraints (34), need for parental supervision (32), road traffic (26), ‘stranger danger’ (16).
Conclusions

- Children access the outdoors in three main ways – The Home, Local Community and in their Educational Settings.
- Facilities and access may vary considerably according to location, parents aware of this, a sense of privilidge – ‘I feel...very lucky. We have access to the beach, playgrounds and a wooded park nearby, a cul-de-sac with a green’, 'we are lucky. Have access to mountains, horse fields, and seaside in 5 minutes’, ‘so lucky... house on the coast, backing onto fields and wet woodland. Playground within cycling distance’.
- Disparity in access to wild environments at only 77% within 5km of their homes – role of local and national government to address this, aspects of wild environments incorporated within built outdoor play spaces.
- Practitioners attitudes and values may influence access to outdoors and behaviours permitted (Rasmussen 1996) – ‘risky’ behaviours and weather conditions.
- Benefits of outdoor play, as documented, are acknowledged and understood by parents as such we must take action to remove and/or lessen the impact of barriers to children’s outdoor play to support children in Ireland to maximize the potential benefits that outdoor play can provide in their formative years.
- There is a need for further in depth study into children’s play practices within these outdoor environments, including those children younger than 3 years, along with meaningful consultation with children,
- This should form the base on which further outdoor provision is provided at local & national level – continued implementation of the national play policy (2004), ideally all educational settings to access suitable facilities and incorporate outdoor play into planning & child led practice.
Thank you for listening!

Any Questions? 😊
References

- Children’s Research Centre (2013) Growing up in Ireland: Key Findings Infant Cohort at five years: No.3 Well-being, Play and Diet among five year olds. Dublin: Trinity College.

Full Dissertation is available online at: http://itb-dublin-ireland.academia.edu/OrlaGallagher