



Changing with the Seasons: Understanding Free Play Among Children, Youth, and Families in a Small Rural-Urban Community in Alberta

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Summary

There were two goals for this project. First, we wanted to learn more about free play among children, youth, and families in rural communities in Alberta. Second, we wanted to use that information to identify strategies for increasing unstructured free play in rural communities all year round.

Background

There is a growing concern in Canada about childhood obesity and the amount of time children spend in front of computers and televisions rather than “freely” playing. It has been found that children who spend less time playing outdoors are also less physically active overall – but outdoor play may be easier in warmer climates. Much of the current research on how to support unstructured or free play has been based in large urban cities with warmer climates or in warmer seasons. Yet, there is little known about how to best support free play in smaller and rural communities with colder seasons.

The purpose of this project was to learn more about parents’ perceptions of what makes it easier or harder for their children and families to “just play”, either indoors or outdoors. Our research team partnered with St. Paul MOVES! (Motivation; Opportunities; Variety; Enjoy; Success) to do this project about play. St. Paul MOVES! is an initiative of a group of community partners that came together in 2009 to encourage unstructured free play among children and youth in the community.

Reasons to Play Outside

The outdoors is an ideal setting for unstructured or free play

- Fosters creativity, imagination, and connections to nature and community
- More free play outdoors can improve children’s physical activity levels



Key Terms

- Unstructured play
- Free play
- Rural communities
- Smaller rural-urban communities
- Cold climates
- Barriers to play
- Facilitators to play
- All-season play
- Children, youth, and families





The Project

The Changing with the Seasons project was conducted with mothers and grandmothers in communities around St. Paul, Alberta. Participants were recruited through local newspaper ads, posters around the community, word of mouth, and through community partners (e.g. Parent Link).

This project took place at two time points: in March/April 2011 to understand free play in the spring and summer; and in November/December 2011 to understand free play in the fall and winter. Our team met with the groups of mothers and grandmothers twice during each season.



Photovoice

The Photovoice approach combines photography and story-telling for participants to express their thoughts, experiences, and everyday realities about a particular topic. Discussion groups allowed participants to share their experiences with one another and to build on each other's ideas.

What we did:

- 1) At the first meeting, participants were asked to create a poster about what play meant to them and their family using magazines and craft supplies. Participants then talked about their posters with the group. This was followed by a group discussion about the different ideas presented in the posters and what play meant to the people in the group.
- 2) At the end of the first meeting, each participant was loaned a digital camera and asked to take pictures with the following statement in mind: "what does play look like for your family, especially in winter?"
- 3) Participants submitted the cameras to a local photo-developer for their pictures to be developed (at no cost to participants). Two sets were developed: one for the project and the other for the participants.
- 4) Two weeks later, the participants met again to discuss the photos they had taken. At the second meeting, participants were given both sets of their photos. Again, they were asked to create a poster about play, but this time using their photos (and craft supplies). This method is called photovoice.
- 5) Participants then talked about their posters with the group. This was followed by a group discussion about the different ideas presented in the posters and what play meant to the people in the group.
- 6) A total of ten discussion groups and one individual interview were conducted. Discussion groups were digitally recorded and transcribed to make sure the researchers captured the participant's views correctly.
- 7) Transcripts were read and coded for anything that directly or indirectly related to 'play'. These codes were then organized into broader categories (or themes). The themes are useful for organizing participants' ideas about what makes it easier or harder to "just play" in their community.
- 8) Project information was summarized and is now being shared with community partners to support the development of future initiatives that support free play.

Results

8 themes were found in the discussions:

OUTSIDE PLAY

Participants enjoyed playing outside in all seasons. Many of them live on or know someone who lives on an acreage or farm where they can do activities like quading, tobogganing, and farm activities. Outdoor play occurred at home and around the community.

INSIDE PLAY

Although participants enjoyed the outdoors year-round, extremely cold weather pushed them indoors. Indoor play took place in the home. A variety of indoor play activities were described, including dancing, singing, baking/cooking/eating, playing games (board games, video games, etc.), doing puzzles, reading, and doing arts and crafts.

PLAYING WITH FAMILY

Opportunities to play with family was viewed as very important. Family play was described as 'time for kids to play with siblings, relatives, or friends' and as 'time to play with both mom and dad'. Play with parents included doing different activities around the house (e.g., playing in the garage with dad or cleaning and dancing around the house with mom).

PLAYING WITH FRIENDS

Participants valued the social aspect of play. Children needed time away from their parents, and parents needed an opportunity to connect with other adults. Participants described sports and community groups (e.g., Parent Link or mom and tots groups) as offering both parents and children these social opportunities.

ORGANIZED PLAY

Organized sport was very prominent in the discussions of play in rural communities. Sports were described as important for the children and parents, but also for the broader community who supported the children by going to their games and cheering them on.

BENEFITS OF PLAY

The benefits of play included increased imagination, getting exercise, building communication, learning and developing skills, and socializing.

BARRIERS TO PLAY

The barriers to play were weather conditions, lack of indoor facilities, cost, location, and safety issues such as dogs, bears, injury, or isolation.

MOM TIME AS PLAY

The mothers felt that they needed some time away from their families to 'play' and do things for themselves (e.g., going to the gym, eating out, or spending time with friends).



What do these findings mean to smaller rural communities?

According to the 2012 Active Healthy Kids Canada Report Card, Canadian children scored an “F” for active play and leisure. The Canadian Health Measures Survey (2007-2009) found that 46% of children 6-11 years of age are getting three hours or less of unstructured active play per week, including weekends.

These findings show the need to explore facilitators and barriers to free play activities for Canadian children. The results of the Changing with the Seasons: Understanding Free Play among Children, Youth, and Families in a Small Rural-Urban Community in Alberta study show that play can look different for different people.

Understanding what helps people participate in the free play activities of their choice and what stops them was a key goal of this study. Through the discussion groups in St. Paul and surrounding areas we have a better understanding of what hinders and what helps free play for families living in a rural northern Alberta community.



Inside Play Barriers

Cold weather can be a barrier to getting outside during the winter. Carson et al. (2010) found that children who live in cold climates are less likely to be physically active during the winter. As we know, free play can increase opportunities for physical activity. One frequent suggestion made by discussion group participants for improving free play opportunities during the cold winter was to build an indoor playground. This would offer families a play opportunity outside the home and support unstructured play and build community connections. Participants recognized that cost and location could be barriers to building an indoor playground. One idea was that local community groups could work together raising funds to help build this type of facility. Another way to create more indoor play space would be to use the other spaces in the communities (e.g. school gyms). Both of these ideas would provide an increase in at least two of the free play benefits: 1) more indoor play space could increase the amount of physical activity children are getting in the winter, this is important for their physical health, and 2) more indoor play spaces would give children and families an opportunity to come together and socialize, building better communication and community relationships.

Mothers Need Opportunities to Play

Another barrier to play, especially play time for mothers', was a lack of good childcare options, especially at facilities that offer exercise opportunities. The mothers who participated in this study spoke about wanting to use these types of facilities but they felt that the child care was either poor or unavailable. Lewis and Ridge (2005) found that active mothers saw personal activity time as beneficial for their mental health and it improved their ability to be a mother. Improved and accessible child care could increase facility use by mothers; in turn improving their overall health and wellbeing. Again, participants indicated that parents and community groups be engaged to help with the planning and operation of improved child care options within the community.

Safety & Isolation

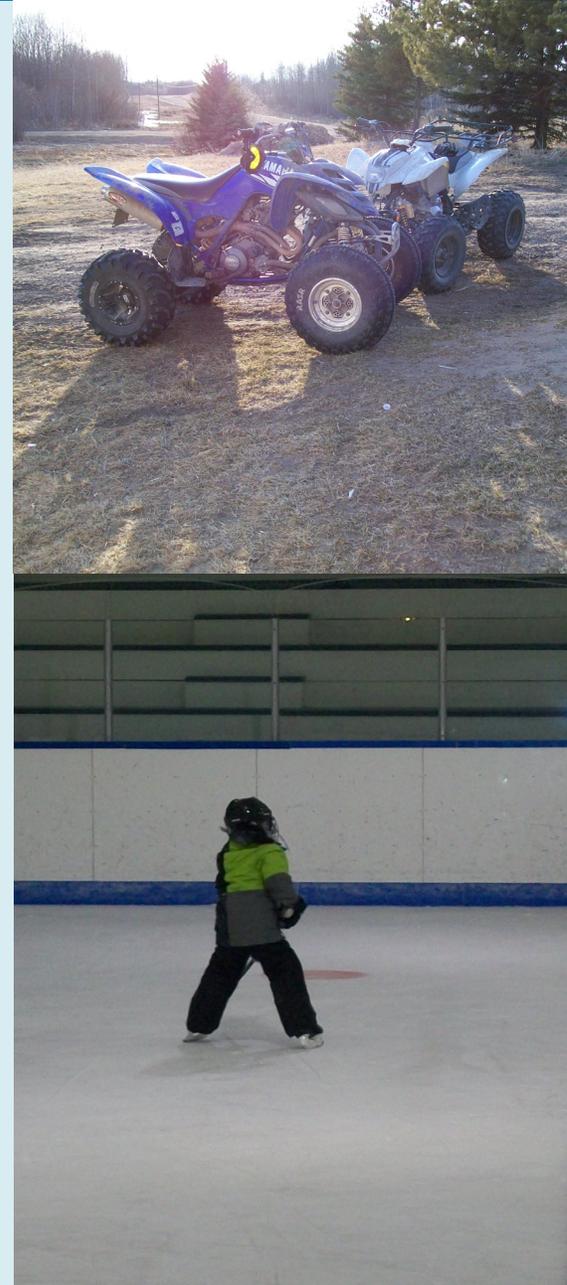
Some participants talked about feeling isolated and un-safe outdoors. New residents to the community felt isolated because they did not know anyone and had not grown up in the area. It may be that as a community, people need to work together to create opportunities for community building across different groups. The 2012 Active Healthy Kids Canada Report Card listed parental safety concerns as one of the largest barriers to children getting outside and playing.

Several participants said there was some danger of running into dogs or bears while walking in rural areas. This may create a barrier for people who would normally go for a walk outside. One way that could increase both the social and physical benefits of playing or walking outside would be to start a playing or walking group. This would provide a better sense of safety because of the group setting. Although some safety issues were discussed, overall, participants indicated that they felt a sense of safety for themselves and their children. Feeling generally safe in your community may be more unique to a smaller rural communities.

Overall the participants in this study felt comfortable with their children playing outside because they knew that their neighbours and friends are looking out for them. According to the 2012 Active Healthy Kids Canada Report Card, this is not necessarily the norm for all parents in Canada.

Organized Sport has a Role in Community

Although the goal of this study was to look at unstructured play, organized sport was discussed as an important part of the rural community. Organized sport offers physical activity and social time for children as well as social time for both parents and community members who come to games. Dorsch, Smith, and McDonough (2009) also found through focus groups that parents with children who played organized sports built relationships with other parents at the games. So activities like hockey games help build community connectedness.



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Conclusion:

Even though participants described several barriers to free play they felt the benefits of living in a rural northern community far outweigh these barriers. Despite talking about their wish-lists for facilities and programs, participants strongly valued the vast outdoor opportunities that they had in the more mild winter temperatures (e.g., tobogganing and snowmobiling) and in the summer (e.g., camping and going to the lake). These are free play assets that emphasize the positive relationship between nature and free play (McCurdy, Winterbottom, Mehta, & Roberts, 2010), which are a clear strength of rural communities.

These findings are important because they can help community partners to develop programs and plan for facilities that will create even more opportunities for unstructured free play for all ages, year round. These findings also help remind the community of the opportunities they may forget that they have (e.g. tobogganing or hiking) in their own backyards. Additionally, they also help bring awareness to issues we might not have known about (e.g. some people in the community feel isolated). This awareness may increase efforts for community connectedness. Findings like these can be used to address barriers and increase access to free play in rural communities in Alberta and across Canada.



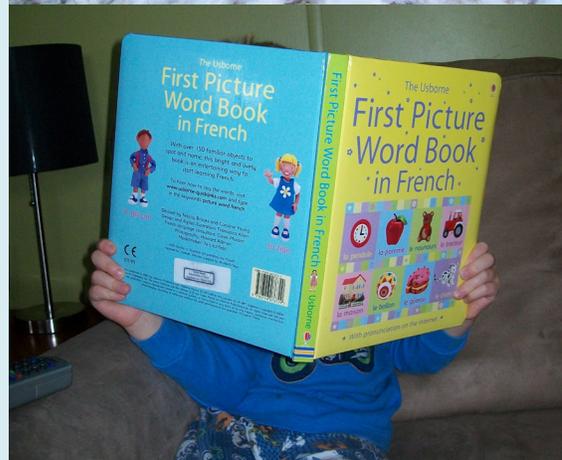
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