Problematising "Play-for-Health" Discourses Through Children's Photo-Elicited Narratives
Stephanie A. Alexander, Katherine L. Frohlich and Caroline Fusco
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What is This?
Have you noticed parks, playgrounds and neighborhood streets are not bustling with kids playing like they used to be? Once known as a regular part of a child’s day, is active play extinct? (Active Healthy Kids Canada, 2012b, p. 1)

Children’s play is attributed a high value in contemporary Western societies, particularly for its role in fostering cognitive, intellectual, social, physical, and psychological abilities (Hirsh-Pasek & Golinkoff, 2008; Pellegrini, 1995; Pellis, Pellis, & Bell, 2010; Sutton-Smith, 1997). Disciplines traditionally preoccupied with children’s play, such as psychology, child development, physical education, and occupational therapy have defined play as any activity that is pleasurable, intrinsically motivated, and pursued without external rewards (i.e., unproductive); inspires imagination and creativity and is concerned with process rather than outcome; and is often unstructured (Gordon, 2009; Huizinga, 1949; Parham & Fazio, 1997; Ramstetter, Murray, & Garner, 2010). Globally, playing is considered so critical to childhood that the United Nations (1990) Convention on the Rights of the Child has declared play to be the right of every child.

Over the past few decades, children’s play has become a popular topic of multidisciplinary research (Cheng & Johnson, 2010). Much of this scholarship has centered on the perception that unstructured, free play is a thing of the past, and has warned of the adverse social, developmental, and health consequences of its decline (Ginsburg, 2007; Gray, 2011; O’Brien & Smith, 2002). Recently, these concerns have been taken up in health research and practice and researchers have begun to advance active playing as a novel way to increase children’s play while addressing growing issues of childhood obesity (Anderson, Economos, & Must, 2008; Brockman, Jago, & Fox, 2010; Kimbro, Brooks-Gunn, & McLanahan, 2011).

For instance, in 2008 the Canadian public health and physical activity organization Active Healthy Kids Canada (AHKC) for the first time included active play in their yearly Physical Activity Report Card (2008) alongside sports, physical activity, and screen time as a health indicator to be promoted and evaluated:

Active play was identified as an important new indicator for 2008 because of increased observations by concerned citizens that children and youth simply don’t play outside as
Active play is critical to the healthy development of our children and youth, but are we making sufficient effort to facilitate this in their lives? (Active Healthy Kids Canada, 2008, p. 23)

Over the past 6 years, this public health perspective on play has been gaining momentum in Canada, and the notion of active play has become a principal force behind a series of childhood physical activity and obesity campaigns (AHKC, 2012b; ParticipAction, 2012). Indeed, the excerpt cited at the beginning of this article is taken from the AHKC’s 2012 Report Card (2012b), and illustrates how active play became the central theme of the report card’s physical activity promotion efforts. What these public health efforts do not address is that the focus on active play for physical health might be reshaping understandings of children’s play (Alexander, Frohlich, & Fusco, 2012).

Furthermore, despite the growing interest in play from within public health, and aside from some notable recent exceptions in the literature (Brockman, Jago, & Fox, 2011; Ergler, Kears, & Witten, 2012; Holt, Spence, Sehn, & Cutumisu, 2008), children’s own perspectives on play are conspicuously absent from the larger public health discourse. Informed by a sociology-of-childhood approach, in which children are viewed as active agents in creating their social worlds (Liegghio, Nelson, & Evans, 2010), in this article we address the absence of children’s voices in the public health discourse by examining a group of Canadian children’s visual and narrative representations of play. By gaining a child’s-eye view of play we can contribute a critical reflection on the conceptualization and increasing promotion of play for physical health.

**Literature Review**

**Public Health Lens on Play: Grappling With “Useful” and “Safe”**

A main concern for many play scholars is the observation that children’s play has changed dramatically over the past century (Burdeette & Whitaker, 2005; Karsten, 2005). Brian Sutton-Smith (1995) observed that there is a growing emphasis among play researchers on “demonstrating that children learn something useful from their play” (p. 279), and that the “notion of progress and scientific rationality” (p. 280) dominates contemporary play research, shaping a conception of play that is largely utilitarian. This is particularly evident in the emerging public health discourse on play, and what is gaining traction is the idea that active forms of play will help children reach the recommended 60 minutes of physical activity per day (Anderson et al., 2008; Brockman, Jago, & Fox, 2011; Davis, 2007; Kimbro et al., 2011; McGall, McGuigan, & Nottle, 2011). Active play is thus increasingly promoted as a useful means to achieve a public health end: combating childhood obesity.

Providing an explicit definition for play as it is being adopted within public health, Brockman, Fox, and Jago (2011) wrote that the distinguishing features of active play are “a playful context, combined with activity that is significantly above resting metabolic rate” (p. 2). In the AHKC (2012b) Report Card, active play was similarly defined as including the “essential qualities of play in general (i.e., fun, freely chosen, personally directed, spontaneous), but . . . differs in one important area: energy expenditure . . . active play involves physical activity at energy costs well above resting levels but often below ‘exercise’ levels” (p. 23). In several articles researchers have suggested that children can achieve greater energy expenditures when they are engaged in active play, including “exergaming” (O’Loughlin, Dugas, Sabiston, & O’Loughlin, 2012), outdoor unstructured activity (Brockman et al., 2010), and playground activities (Farley, Mewiether, Baker, Rice, & Webber, 2008).

These discussions are all part of a growing trend in Canada in which public health efforts to reduce obesity among children have begun to include active play as a distinct, health-promoting form of play (Active Healthy Kids Canada, 2012a; Active Healthy Kids Canada, 2012b; ParticipAction, 2012). However, what is paradoxical in this public health discourse is that although it explicitly adheres to a definition of play as “fun, freely chosen, personally directed, spontaneous” (Active Healthy Kids Canada, 2012b, p. 23), by promoting play as a predominantly instrumental activity for health that is “significantly above resting metabolic rate” (Brockman, Fox, et al., 2011, p. 2), this discourse appears to run counter to precisely those defining qualities of play.

Concurrent with efforts to promote active play, pervasive concerns about risk in all areas of life (Beck, 1992) have emerged and begun to inform perceptions of risk in children’s play (Jago et al., 2009; O’Brien & Smith, 2002). These preoccupations with risk have also struck a chord in public health. For instance, outdoor play, considered by many to have once been a rite of passage of childhood, has become laden with fears about child safety (Brockman, Jago, & Fox, 2011; Gill, 2009; Powell, Ambardeker, & Sheehan, 2005; Sandseter & Kennair, 2011; Timperio, Crawford, Telford, & Salmon, 2004). This is evidenced in recent funding programs such as Active and Safe After School, which promotes safer outdoor active play for Canadian children (Public Health Agency of Canada, 2012a, 2012b), and in organizations such as Parachute (funded in part by the Public Health Agency of Canada), which highlight the importance of unstructured play for children while also emphasizing the need for greater parental surveillance and safety provisions for children on playgrounds (Parachute, 2013).
Examining parental responses to the perceived risks involved in children’s unstructured, outdoor play, researchers have found that fear of risk has led parents to place constraints on how and where their children play, in particular by enrolling them in organized activities and supervising their play (Carver, Timperio, Hesketh, & Crawford, 2010; Jago et al., 2009; O’Brien & Smith, 2002). Even though public health organizations do not exclusively promote organized sports or scheduled forms of play for children, the growing concerns about risk in play and the need for safety and surveillance around play appear to be shaping the tendency for parents to place their children in more organized, adult-supervised play activities (Veitch, Bagley, Ball, & Salmon, 2006). Despite debates emerging about the beneficial value of some risk for child development (Gill, 2007; Sandseter & Kennair, 2011), overwhelmingly, play for children is regarded as an activity that must be safe, and at best, adult-supervised (Herrington & Nicholls, 2007).

Given this literature, it appears that play has become permeated with risk. First, sedentary forms of play have become linked with the risks of childhood obesity. Viewed as contributing to rising rates of obesity, sedentary forms of play have been rewritten as risky, and public health materials addressing children’s play discourage sedentary play in place of play that is physically active (Biddle, Gorely, Marshall, Murdey, & Cameron, 2004; Fullagar, 2009). Second, public health researchers and practitioners are aware of the growing fears about children’s active outdoor play (Brussoni, Olsen, Pike, & Sleet, 2012), and efforts to diminish these risks thus tend to support the increased surveillance of children’s active play and the implementation of safety standards at playgrounds (Herrington & Nicholls, 2007; Jago et al., 2009). What remains unacknowledged in this public health discourse is that the desire to advance active play to improve children’s physical health might be reshaping children’s relationship with their play. For instance, in an analysis of the Canadian public health discourse on play conducted by the authors of this study, we found that children’s play is being normalized within this discourse (Alexander, Frohlich, & Fusco, 2014). This normalization results from children being increasingly encouraged to adhere to particular healthy active play practices, which we argue contributes to the construction of a privileged, actively playing child subject. We suggest that this might, in turn, stigmatize children who do not or cannot adhere to these normative play practices (Alexander et al., 2014).

What we consider problematic is first, that these public health efforts might be neglecting children’s complex experiences of and preferences for diverse forms of play, and second, that when play is promoted predominantly as a health practice, it might not maintain its unproductive, intrinsically motivated, and pleasurable character—the qualities for which play is so often valued. In an attempt to address these concerns, in this article we examine children’s visual and narrative representations of play. Through children’s representations we will gain a necessary and more nuanced understanding of their everyday experiences and meanings of play, and will also be able to problematize the emerging public health discourse, particularly with regard to the normalizing emphasis placed on physical health and safety in public health discussions of play.

Research Rationale: Giving Voice to Children’s Perspectives

We conducted this research from a social constructionist perspective, which suggests that truth and meaning are “not discovered, but constructed” (Crotty, 1998, p. 42). Adopting a basic interpretive methodological approach, we assumed that the social world is always being constructed through interactions, and that social reality can only be understood through the perspectives of social actors who are engaged in and producing meaning (Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2011). In particular, in this study we foregrounded a sociology-of-childhood approach, and this implies the adoption of specific epistemological and methodological positions (Balen, Blyth, Calabretto, Horrocks, & Manby, 2006; Darbyshire, MacDougall, & Schiller, 2005; Matthews, 2007; McNamee & Seymour, 2013). First, by adopting this approach we acknowledge the importance of children’s agency; we view children as competent and active social agents who make sense of and affect the societies in which they live. Second, we understand childhood as being characterized by plurality, and as heterogeneous; and third, we also deem children’s relationships with peers, families, and adults as important (Matthews).

Furthermore, by adopting this approach we also took the view that research concerning children should be conducted with, as opposed to simply on, children (Balen et al., 2006). This not only reinforces the necessity of accounting for children’s perspectives but also stresses giving “voice” to their experiences (Corsaro, 2011). Viewing children as “key informants in matters pertaining to their health and wellbeing” (Darbyshire et al., 2005, p. 419) also means emphasizing a child’s definition of his or her activity, and recognizing children as capable of constructing their own meanings of the world (Burr, 2003); in this case, their meanings of play. In this article we thus seek to gain children’s multiple constructions and meanings of play through the use of several methodological tools: child-guided photography of play, and open-ended interviews with children about their play.

Although the use of photographs has been considered a useful child-centered method (Darbyshire et al., 2005;
Drew, Duncan, & Sawyer, 2010), it is still uncommon practice in public health research. Researchers from other fields have documented that photography can give children the opportunity to voice their perspectives on various social issues (Morrow, 2001) and allow for the depiction of “emotional and exuberant aspects of play” (Darbyshire et al., 2005, p. 424). Furthermore, Clark (1999) suggested that using photographs as the basis for verbal interviews with children is an appropriate way of ensuring that the discussion involves themes relevant to children, allowing them to visually “show and tell” aspects they find important.

Because playing is viewed as an integral component of child well-being (United Nations Children’s Fund, 2012), what children in our study showed and told us about play is deemed critical. We suggest that taking children’s perspectives into account can highlight elements of play important to their social life, elements which might be quite distinct from the instrumental conception of play as being vital for health.

Methods

Participant Profile

We recruited 25 English- and French-speaking boys (n = 10) and girls (n = 15) aged 7 to 11 years living in the urban area of Montreal, Canada. Four children were 7 years old, 9 children were 8 years old, 7 children were 9 years old, 2 children were 10 years old, and 3 children were 11 years old. Of the interviews conducted with the 25 children, 22 were conducted in French and three were conducted in English. Five children spoke a language other than French or English at home (i.e., Bengali, Armenian, Chinese, Spanish, or Greek).

Although participants in the study included families from diverse socioeconomic positions (SEP), most were from middle–high-range SEP, and as such the findings might reflect this bias. For instance, many children exhibited high-level language abilities and this is reflected in the transcript excerpts in this article. We deemed the number of participants in our study sufficient because it permitted a diversity in play perspectives to emerge, and comparable studies conducting photography and interviews with children have included similar sample sizes (MacDougall et al., 2009). We received ethics approval for this study from the University of Montreal’s Health Research Ethics Committee, and collected data between April 2011 and March 2012.

Data Collection

First author Stephanie Alexander recruited children and families from diverse neighborhoods on the island of Montreal using snowball sampling and recruitment posters displayed in youth centers (i.e., YMCA, libraries, convenience stores), and interested parents/guardians contacted her by email or telephone to participate in the study. She collected the photographic, interview, and observational data over two meetings with each child in her or his family home. Both meetings lasted, on average, approximately 1.5 hours.

During the first meeting, Stephanie explained the study to the child with the parent/guardian present, making sure the child understood and could ask questions. The parent/guardian signed a consent form and the child signed an assent form, after which the child practiced taking photographs with the digital camera that was lent to him or her. Stephanie then instructed the child to take photographs of anything inside and outside the home that represented play to him or her, and accompanied the child to all locations where he or she wanted to take photographs. During these sessions, Stephanie took detailed observational fieldnotes about the child’s photography and any conversations she had with the child. No limits were placed on the number of photographs children could take. After the child had taken all the photographs he or she wanted, Stephanie uploaded the photographs onto a laptop computer and viewed these together with the child. She asked the child to select his or her six favorite photographs, which she then printed for the second meeting.

The second meeting took place approximately 2 weeks after the first. It included an open-ended interview with the child about play, using the six printed photographs as the basis for conversation. Stephanie created an informal setting (e.g., sitting on floor, photographs laid out) so that the child felt as comfortable as possible and so that the conversation was as playful as possible (Harrison, 2002). She took observational fieldnotes during the conversation, and referred to a semistructured interview guide to facilitate a conversation around the analytical themes of the research: pleasure in play, physical activity and play, risk in play.

Stephanie began each interview session with the question, “What do you think of when you think about playing?” The child was free to direct the conversation or enact elements of his or her play. To thank children for their participation in the study, each child received a disposable camera.

Data Analysis

Stephanie digitally recorded the interview sessions, and these were transcribed verbatim. She translated interviews that were conducted in French into English, and edited the transcripts for silences or mumbled words that were deemed less informative. For the analysis, we considered photographs and textual interviews together as
illustrations of children’s perspectives on play. The photographs were important visual representations of children’s play activities, and referring to the photographs during the interviews was a means of eliciting children’s stories and meanings associated with play. Although Stephanie asked children to select six favorite photographs, she also encouraged children to discuss other photographs they had taken during the first session. We included up to 14 additional relevant photographs (i.e., for a total of 20 per child) in the analysis to more fully capture children’s visual representations.

Stephanie labeled each digital photograph according to its visual content (i.e., activity, setting) and linked it with the corresponding textual narratives (Miles & Huberman, 1994). She entered the photographs, transcribed interviews, and researcher fieldnotes into the qualitative data analysis program TAMS Analyzer (Weinstein, 2006), which facilitated data management, coding, and analysis. In this article, we have replaced all children’s actual names with pseudonyms.

Stephanie developed the coding framework iteratively using a combination of inductive and deductive methods (Tesch, 1990); that is, she first developed deductive codes from the analytical themes of the research, including “play experiences,” “types of play,” and “prescriptions for play,” and then divided each of these broad themes into subcodes, which were used as question prompts in the interview guide (e.g., risky/safe play, scheduled and unstructured play, physical play). During the coding of the interviews and photographs Stephanie also left room for themes or codes to emerge inductively from the analysis of children’s photographs and narratives (e.g., animals and play, creativity/crafts, nature play, play as challenge, reading, and the notion of resistance to rules in play). All three authors discussed the development of all codes.

Stephanie first coded the textual narratives and photographs, then discussed this with co-authors Katherine Frohlich and Caroline Fusco before analyzing the data again through multiple readings and through the combination and recombination of interview segments and photographs. We present the photographic and narrative data according to four themes: play as an end in itself, play as challenge, creativity/crafts, and nature play. The notion of resistance to rules in play (affective characteristic shaping his enjoyment of play).

Findings

Playing: An End in Itself

A salient crosscutting theme in children’s descriptions of their playing was the importance they attributed to the affective characteristic of play. In this regard, pleasure and fun were particularly frequent descriptors of play. However, playing was rarely described as an abstract notion, but rather emerged in descriptions of particular instances of fun or in descriptions of emotionally engaging activities. For instance, Lisette illustrated how playing involved engaging in any sort of “fun” activity. During her photography session Lisette played with the camera, taking photographs of strange objects or odd situations that she simply thought were funny. She said that playing for her was akin to “laughing, being silly”:

When I think of playing, what I like to do is to have fun. I like swimming, laughing . . . this one [photograph of a plant] is out of focus, and well, I like laughing a lot so when I saw it, it meant for me laughing and having fun.

Michel talked excitedly about the many different things he liked to do. Although he used to be involved in many formal play activities, such as piano, swimming, circus, and speed skating, when asked how he liked playing best, Michel’s answer highlighted that engaging freely in the play process was important for him:

Well, I like playing freely, because you can do whatever you want. . . . It’s just that sometimes it annoys me when a coach always says, “Okay, do that now, do this, do that.” . . . I prefer to do it slowly, and afterward to do whatever I want. Then it’s me who chooses what I do, and not the coach. There’s no one telling me what to do; I am the one who decides. And I can do whatever I want.

Playing freely for Michel included “doing it slowly,” and having choice in play appeared to be a particularly important characteristic shaping his enjoyment of play.

Simply being interested in an activity also characterized play for some children. For instance Henri, whose mother introduced him as a “boy who doesn’t really play,” talked about playing as being any activity that he was interested in and that “worked his mind”:

Playing for me is having fun, something that is enjoyable. It’s not necessarily funny, but it’s something that interests me. The puzzle for example; why do I like that? Because it works your mind and I find it really fun.

Similarly, Alisha responded to the question of what play is by saying that she “really liked snails and bugs,” and she proceeded to describe all that she knew about snail behavior. During her photography session, Alisha took a photograph of a snail that she named Rapido (see Figure 1) and that she kept in a flowerpot in her backyard.

As with many children, Alisha illustrated that her favorite form of play included an activity that she simply enjoyed engaging in and which was motivated by an intrinsic interest: liking to watch and collect “snails and bugs.” Although play was most frequently associated with positive affect, it is worth noting that several
children talked about playing as something they engaged in when they were not feeling well. For instance, Florence said that playing was something that soothed her: “Sometimes I’m more sad. Say, you don’t feel very good sometimes. Well, you can just play, and this feels good.” When asked what she played when she was sad, Florence replied, “I read more, and I do what relaxes me . . . like knitting, and books . . . . It feels good to do it when you are all alone.” Annelise echoed Florence’s sentiment when she said that drawing was one of her favorite play activities, “because, when I’m angry or I’m sad, I draw and it calms me down.”

Overall, these children illustrated how affective components of play were foregrounded in their experiences of playing. Indeed, playing involved a process of choice, freedoms, and various states of engagement in an activity. Above all, play was an end in itself. As such, these narratives stand in opposition to the overwhelmingly utilitarian and health-focused orientation toward play that currently exists in Canadian public health.

Playing: Much More Than Active Play

Children’s narrative and photographic representations of active forms of play are perhaps most obviously relevant to the public health discourse. Indeed, children illustrated a great diversity of play that is active: soccer, biking, and playing at playgrounds were popular summer activities, and skating and skiing were popular in the winter. However, children made distinctions between play that happened to be active (i.e., acrobatics, games in parks) and sport or physical activity. For instance, Anabella liked to play in parks and do cartwheels in the grass (see Figure 2). She mentioned being “quite the fastest” runner at her school, but also that she did not enjoy running in school races. When Anabella was asked about sports, she replied:

Anabella (A): No, and I hate them . . . just don’t like them. Soccer, no. I don’t like playing tag . . . I don’t really like it. Don’t know why. There’re no real reasons.

Interviewer (I): But you like doing cartwheels.

A: Yeah.

Anabella’s dislike of soccer and running races was not carried over to all active forms of play, and she did not exclusively prefer sedentary play; rather, she simply distinguished between play that happened to be active (i.e., cartwheels, using the playground), which she preferred, and formalized, competitive physical play activities. It is also noteworthy that children frequently illustrated enjoyment of sedentary forms of play. Children represented play with photographs of computer games and TV, favorite books, stuffed animals and dolls, and various arts and crafts. Some narratives illustrated clearly that these sedentary forms of play included important qualities that active play did not. For example, Henri explained why he chose to photograph his favorite magazine, DébrouillARTS:

The DébrouillARTS, it’s a magazine for nine to twelve year olds and it has lot of things I like in it. There are comics, and I love comics. There are fictional reports so you can try to imagine what life in the future is like . . . but it’s really because I love reading, so I thought it represented me well.

When Marianne thought about playing, she retrieved a book of drawings and said, “I love doing this.” When asked about how she felt when she was drawing, Marianne replied, “I am proud of myself because I try new things, and if it’s not nice, I don’t get discouraged, I say, ‘Okay, I’ll do another and we’ll see.’ So that’s pretty much it. I’m proud of myself.” These sedentary activities therefore appeared to be important for both Henri and Marianne as
a way to stimulate imagination and instill feelings of pride. Indeed, children described creative sedentary pursuits as particularly engaging, and they often went into detail when describing the activity. For instance, Alain described how he liked to create sketches with his stuffed animals as models:

Like with my penguins . . . well, sketches, I don’t know, like a performance. . . . I get ready, I want to find what I want to present as a story, and then I just start. If I don’t like it, I start again until I have a version that I like. . . . So, little sketches about families, murders, family relations, things like that, stories like that.

Play for children was thus characterized by a number of elements, including creativity, calm, fun, and movement. However, children did not themselves divide play into active and sedentary—a distinction that seems to be more common among health researchers; rather, children were guided by activities that they found engaging and enjoyable, and these included, but were also much more than, active play. This contrasts with Canadian public health discourses in which active play is defined, promoted, and valorized as a central category for children’s play.

Ambivalence About Scheduled Play

A particularly striking finding was that some children were ambivalent about their participation in scheduled or more formalized forms of play. Several children were enrolled in lessons or classes, which they described as enjoyable, but when they began to discuss what they enjoyed about playing, their inclinations tended toward descriptions of less scheduled and formalized play. Henri and Sebastien’s narratives illustrated this well. Henri mentioned being enrolled in piano lessons once a week and taking karate classes several times a week, both of which he said he enjoyed. When asked if he would change anything about his playing, Henri replied, “I’d say to play more and to do more karate.” While elaborating on this, he hesitated:

Henri (H): I mean I want to, but at the same time, I don’t have a lot of time. Mondays I have piano, Tuesdays is one of the only days I have free, Wednesdays I have Karate, Thursday I have off—I just have two days off. Friday I have karate. I’d like to do more karate, but at the same time have some time to rest. Dunno [don’t know] how to say it.
I: What do you do when you’re resting?
H: Play card games, things like that.

Although Henri said he enjoyed his piano and karate lessons, while listing off his weekly schedule there seemed to be a tension between the lessons and also wanting “some time to rest.” However, Henri’s “time to rest” was not time without play; rather, it involved playing “card games, things like that.” For Henri, it appeared that restful play was particularly important in his typical week, in which play activities were predominantly structured and scheduled.

Sebastien similarly exemplified ambivalence about scheduled and formalized play. He mentioned that he played soccer on a team and at school, where he had “opportunities to make friends.” Although he said he hoped to join a team in a competitive soccer league in the coming year, he was not unequivocally enthusiastic about all aspects of playing soccer:

I have a lot of time to play, but sometimes, the days when I’m tired, I’d like it if there was, like, no obligations. Say soccer training: Sometimes I am just so tired that I really don’t feel like doing it. But it’s always an obligation for me. Each time I’m told, “Sebastien, you have to go to the practice,” so even if I really don’t feel like it, I go. But what I like about soccer is that when I go to my practice, each time I start the training, then I start to get motivated and I feel like it again. So, sometimes I don’t feel like training, but I do the training anyway because I have to get better, and all that.

Sebastien’s description of soccer training contrasted markedly with the way he discussed his drawing (see Figure 3):

Drawing is also when . . . I feel that I have to let my imagination out. . . . What I like about drawing is that there are no limits, you can draw pretty much anything. . . . And when I’m done my drawing, what I like is that, well, I’m relaxed. I drew something, I had fun. It lets me draw the things that I imagine in my mind . . . because I really have a lot of imagination.
Near the end of the interview, Sebastien remembered another favorite activity:

Not sure I mentioned this, but it’s the swings . . . they allow me to let my thoughts take off and run free, and allow me to empty my mind and to relax. I really like that. Often I go to the park next to the school, and I always take the same swing, facing a big tree, lots of sky . . . I really do like swinging. One time I went to the park and I stayed for an hour, swinging the whole time . . . I can think of things. Sometimes what I think about is actually drawing.

Sebastien’s description of swinging and drawing had a very different tone and affective quality than his description of soccer training. Even though he appeared externally motivated to train for soccer, “to get better, and all that,” he also appeared ambivalent about it because it remained an obligation. The motivation for drawing and swinging, however, appeared to be intrinsic, emphasizing limitless space and time to think. These were activities Sebastien was unequivocally positive about. Furthermore, some children mentioned being tired or exhausted by the number of scheduled activities they were enrolled in. Michel, for instance, described his reflections about his various lessons:

I did take diving lessons, but that stopped because I took other lessons. And speed skating, I did that during the winter. . . . For now there’s just the piano lessons. Because otherwise, you can’t really do, “Okay let’s go to speed skating. Okay, now let’s go to diving lessons. Okay, now let’s go to swimming. Okay, let’s go to piano!” Then it would be too exhausting, and I’ll start to say, “Ah, no! Not swimming!” and “Ah no! Not diving!”

Taken together, these narratives indicate the tendency for leisure to be overscheduled in some children’s lives. Children said they enjoyed these scheduled activities, but they also appeared to be ambivalent about them, particularly reporting that they felt exhausted or wanted time to rest or play more freely. In this regard, children’s expressions of ambivalence are critical to consider, because they might indicate that the possibilities for “restful” or “free” play are becoming increasingly limited for some children.

**Risk as Pleasure**

Risk was a particularly challenging topic to raise in the conversations with children, primarily because many children had already learned that risk in play is to be avoided (Gill, 2007; Hart, 2002); however, some children did suggest that they experienced pleasure in play precisely because it involved elements of risk. When asked about his bike, Alain was quite excited to talk about how he learned the stunts he performed:

Alain (A): So, you have a bar that holds your seat, well, I put my feet on that bar . . . and then I stand up, except that I’m still holding the handlebars.
I: So you’re standing on your bike?
A: Yeah, because I’m going really fast, and I don’t fall because I hold on pretty tightly. I’m also kind of used to it . . . It took a long time before I knew how to do it. Before, I used to just put my feet on the bar, and I was afraid of standing up. Then I stood up a little. Then I got used to it, so I did the big standing figure . . . What I really like doing is doing this figure and then shaking my butt . . . to make the others behind me mad, because there’s not enough action!

Given his description, Alain’s bike stunts could be considered risky; however, as he suggested, this form of risky play not only allowed him to experience more pleasure (more action), but also to better judge the risk and learn to safely navigate it.

Risk also came up with regard to play structures. For instance, Sarah mentioned that her favorite place to play was on a large art sculpture in a park close to her home, something her mother was initially worried about and thought was a bit dangerous. Sarah, however, said that she and her cousins had been climbing on the sculpture for years (see Figure 4):

Sarah (S): Well Picture One [sculpture], I chose it because me and my cousin, when she comes over, we play on that sculpture a lot.
I: How do you feel when you’re climbing?
I: What makes that fun?
S: Well, that it’s not really meant to play on!

Sarah thus felt that climbing on this sculpture was fun precisely because it was an illicit activity. Moreover, the...
mind Sutton-Smith's (1997) observation that play “quite simply makes children happier” (p. 32), which highlights the relationship between children’s chosen play and emotional well-being. Consequently, what we consider problematic with regard to the public health discourse is that sedentary forms of play, which were clearly important to the children in our study, are given short shrift, whereas active forms of play are valorized for their physical health impact.

Some children also expressed ambivalence about scheduled play, a sentiment particularly evident among those who were enrolled in numerous formalized activities. Although children reported enjoying and wanting to participate in these activities, discussions about their commitments took on a different tone than discussions about self-initiated forms of play (i.e., card games, swings). This was especially obvious in Henri’s narrative when he said that he wanted to “do more karate, but at the same time have some time to rest.”

Some researchers have suggested that children make distinctions between work and play, delineated in part by the degree of constraint or outcome orientation they experience when engaging in the activity (Patte, 2009; Wing, 1995). For instance, when constraints—in the form of instruction or obligation—are placed on the choice for how, when, and what to play, children tend to view their activities as work, whereas the experience of fewer constraints and more choice is described as feeling free in play (Patte; Wing). Considering this, it is not altogether surprising that some children in our study discussed more organized activities as an obligation or as being exhausting.

As Sutton-Smith (1997) has observed about late 20th Century trends, the increasing value placed on “organized sports, fenced-in school yards, organized clubs . . . and supervision of play” (p. 121) has created an atmosphere in which playfulness might be diminished. This becomes relevant in light of research suggesting that there is a growing tendency for parents to enroll their children in scheduled and organized activities as a way to promote development, and especially to ensure their safety (Carver et al., 2010; Veitch et al., 2006).

Our findings regarding risk and play are therefore also relevant, particularly because children’s unstructured play is increasingly being included under the purview of government policies seeking to protect them in their leisure activities (Health Canada, 2012). However, such safety policies seemed to run counter to children’s descriptions of excitement when overcoming challenges as part of their unstructured play, and the meaningfulness and pleasure they said they gained from mastering an activity that was once difficult, sentiments evident in Alain’s narrative about his bike. Sandseter (2009) argued that the motivation for children to engage in risky play involves “the excitement and the joy of mastering a risky
and potentially dangerous situation” (p. 94). Indeed, overcoming challenges in play activities has been linked with a greater and more profound sense of accomplishment and pleasure than when experiencing the world served on a plate, predictable and easy (Sandseter; Sandseter & Kennair, 2011).

This is also pertinent given the growing emphasis placed on risk avoidance and the safety standardization of play, because it might place limits on the diversity of children’s play experiences and limit the potential benefits that exposure to risk could have for them (Gill, 2007; Hart, 2002). For instance, Sandseter and Kennair (2011) argued that children learn to judge risks by experiencing risky situations, and thus acquire the skills necessary for making better judgments. As such, even if overstructuring play for safety might mean that children are less exposed to injury, they might also have fewer opportunities to gain the competence and skills required to manage and negotiate future risks and challenges in their play (Hart).

Furthermore, and relevant to public health concerns about children’s obesity, Brussoni et al. (2012) suggest that risk-deprived children are more prone to a series of health issues, including “obesity, mental health concerns, lack of independence, and a decrease in learning, perception and judgment skills” (p. 3135). Given this body of research, the increasing restriction, surveillance, and formalization of children’s play should not evade the question: At what cost?

Conclusion

We acknowledge the benefits of physical activity for children’s physical and social well-being, and do not intend to oppose important efforts to promote physical activities that children enjoy; however, we nonetheless find it problematic that public health efforts have increasingly drawn on the concept of play, reframed as active play, as part of a governmental mandate to address children’s obesity. What is ultimately of concern to us is the potential for public health interventions, laden with physical health messages, to normalize and increasingly valorize an understanding of play as a physical activity with the accompanying possibility that diversity in play and less active forms of play—clearly valued by children—will be more readily dismissed. This might in turn restrict children’s possibilities for play more generally.

Our critical sociological focus on a child’s-eye view of play thus brings a new perspective to the public health literature. This perspective not only points to the omission of children’s lived experiences in public health research on play but also highlights a dissonance between the conceptualizations of play for health, and children’s representations of play as emotionally contingent, intrinsically motivated, and purposeless. Indeed, it appears that children play by different values than those present in public health efforts that promote active play and are largely shaped by anti-obesity agendas.

Our findings offer an important point for reflection within public health, and provide a more nuanced response to the concern mentioned at the outset of this article that “parks, playgrounds and neighbourhood streets are not bustling with kids playing like they used to be” (Active Healthy Kids Canada, 2012a, p. 1). We suggest that if there is a genuine concern about the declining opportunities for children to play in diverse and creative ways, the public health response must go beyond the promotion of active play to address physical health concerns.

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References


**Author Biographies**

**Stephanie A. Alexander**, PhD, completed her doctorate (2014) in public health in the Université de Montréal’s School of Public Health in Montréal, Québec, Canada. She is currently research associate in the University of Montréal’s School of Public Health.

**Katherine L. Frohlich**, PhD, is an associate professor at the University of Montreal’s School of Public Health, and a research associate with the Institut de Recherche en Santé Publique, University of Montreal, in Montreal, Quebec, Canada.

**Caroline Fusco**, PhD, is an associate professor at the University of Toronto’s Faculty of Kinesiology and Physical Education in Toronto, Ontario, Canada.