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## Fearful People: Parental Perceptions and Children's Outdoor Activity

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### Abstract

In an effort to understand and reconcile the reasons for children's diminished outdoor play and physical activity, this mixed method study identifies and describes parents' understandings and concerns regarding children's outdoor security and activity. Questionnaire (n= 128) and interview (n= 27) data were solicited in university and neighborhood contexts. Qualitative analysis of interview data revealed several categories describing parental understandings and concerns regarding children's outdoor play. Findings indicate because of concerns regarding their children's safety, parents believe outdoor play to be different than their own youthful experience. Regardless of location, parents indicate greater need for restriction and supervision of outdoor activities. Parents' anticipated danger for children's safety does not appear to balance realistically with potential risk factors. Quantitative analysis of data indicates divergent views regarding child safety. The binomial test showed significant fear across race and age regarding child safety. However, the same test also showed parents feel their neighborhoods are safe for children's play. Authors describe ramifications of overprotecting children from perceived harmful outdoor activities with respect to individual development, personal interactions, and the environment.

*Keywords:* play; outdoor; parents; fear; safety

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## Background and purpose

Long-standing research findings clearly demonstrate the physical, intellectual, social, and emotional contributions of play toward children's learning and development (Bergen, 1988; Bodrova, 2005; Bruner, 1983; Elkind, 1981; Fein, 1986; Ferguson & Dettore, 2007; Frost, Wortham, & Reifel, 2001; Fromberg, 2002; Isenberg & Quisenberry, 2002; Piaget, 1962; Rivkin, 1995; Stone, 1995; Vygotsky, 1976). In particular, outdoor play provides children with unique learning opportunities not possible in the traditional indoor setting (Bourne, 2000; Burriss, 2007; Burriss & Foulks-Boyd, 2005; Frost, Brown, Sutterby, & Thornton, 2004; Kostelnik, Soderman, Stein, & Whiren, 1993; Reed & Brown, 2002; Rivkin, 1995).

Traditionally, public schools provided children with outdoor recess time to engage in both structured games and unstructured play. Despite the research data supporting children's play, current trends indicate many school districts have diminished and, in some instances, completely eliminated recess time (Alexander, 1999; Schachter, 2005). This trend in decreasing outdoor play also extends to children's after-school and neighborhood play (Guldberg, 2009; American Sports Data, 2006a).

The emphases on children's time-on-task and accountability related to current federal legislation (No Child Left Behind (NCLB)) accounts for additional pressure placed on teachers' scheduling (Pellegrini & Bohn, 2005). Issues related to playground injury lawsuits, adult supervision, and school security also influence school districts to decrease outdoor activity (Chmelynski, 1998; Thian 2006). Children's safety and security also appear to be parental concerns (Guldberg, 2009).

Clements and Fiorentino (2004) reports 85% of mothers say their child(ren) play outdoors less often than a generation ago. Additionally, 70% of the mothers reported, as children, they played outdoors every day as compared with only 34% of their children today. Further, the mothers described how they played outdoors for longer periods (54% played outdoors for three hours or longer) as compared with 22% of their children. Data describing spontaneous outdoor activities (bike riding, swimming, touch football) indicate severe decreases (National Sporting Goods Association, American Sports Data, 2006b).

In an effort to understand and reconcile the reasons for children's diminished outdoor play and physical activity, the current project explores parents' perceptions regarding their child's outdoor play, physical safety, and overall security.

## Generational Changes

Elkind (2007) describes how children have lost 12 hours of free time a week. This includes the loss of eight hours of unstructured play and outdoor activities.

In 1960's children averaged only 27 hours of children's programming a week; most on Saturday morning, and provided by three major networks (Cauchon, 2008). Today, children, ages eight to ten years of age, spend on average six hours daily watching television provided by 14 networks targeting children (Hofferth, & Sandberg, 2001). Additionally, Couchen (2008) points out when children do participate in outdoor activity, it is generally structured and supervised. Time spent in organized outdoor activities (soccer, baseball, swimming) shows a decrease, as does time spent in unstructured

outdoor activity. However, unstructured time has shown a greater decrease. He contends parents and children prefer entertainment rather than the open-ended and unstructured play of the past. But, how did this process of moving toward indoor and more structured outdoor play begin and why is it becoming a national trend?

Guldberg (2009) blames several groups. She claims politicians, policymakers, and parents no longer encourage children to seize initiative, take risks, and assume responsibility. Referred to as risk-aversion behavior, schools also prohibit traditional outdoor games (Guldberg, 2009).

Mintz (2006) argues that never before in history have children been so supervised and regulated. He contends adult overprotection leads to an extended emotional and psychological dependency. Parents who over-protect and over-regulate their children's behavior are sometimes described as "helicopter parents" (Mercogliano, 2007) or as engaged in "hyper-parenting" (Elkind, 2001). Guldberg (2009) argues regulating and protecting children from possible harm or risk makes them potentially less effective in their ability to relate with others. For example, the definition of bullying has expanded to include anything that might be unpleasant (Guldberg, 2009). Admittedly, name-calling and pushing are unpleasant, but Guldberg questions whether or not this child-like behavior justifies eliminating recess, outdoor play, and physical activity.

## **A Culture of Fear**

Guldberg (2000) points out we live in a time of heightened suspicion. "Teachers are encouraged to question the behavior of parents; parents are encouraged to keep a watchful eye on teachers; sports coaches are distrusted, and so on" (p. 127). Chmelynski (1998) cites issues regarding questionable/suspicious adults in a play vicinity as a reason for schools decreasing children's outdoor playtime.

Some argue our current society lives in a constant state of anxiety and worry - a culture of fear (Furedi, 2002; Siegel, 2005). Furedi (2002) argues the notion of safety is a value representing the times. For example, he believes that the prevalent practice of describing drinking and sex as "safe" implies an attitude toward life more than simply describing responsible behavior. With respect to outdoor play and physical activity, creating safe environments refers to supervision, age-appropriate equipment, fall surfaces, and equipment and surface management (National Program for Playground Safety, 2006). Despite the efforts taken toward safety and supervision, there always remains a chance for some risk. The critical question is, when do adults not allow children to take a risk because of some possibility of injury? Despite the chance for risk, Guldberg (2009) believes over protection is not the answer and, in fact, causes other issues and concerns. For example, she describes how, when overprotected and not able to play outdoors, children are not street-wise when negotiating traffic, and are not intuitive when responding to strangers. It is the responsibility of adults to prepare children to competently maneuver traffic as well as effectively communicate both with age-mates and elders.

Guldberg (2009) points out in our "safety-obsessed culture," there is a concern for the children as our future. What lies ahead for the society if outdoor play and physical activity are framed in such negativity and fear? What kind of society can maintain such constant anxiety and suspicion?

Mercogliano (2007) cautions as society eliminates risks for children, the perceived dangers compel parents to greater efforts toward security. Guldberg (2009) believes society has gone too far. She describes how our cocooning, protecting, and supervising may deny children the opportunities to grow into capable and confident adults.

Daily radio and television news brings information directly into homes, so that reports of terrorist activities, mass killings, and conspiracy plots represent significant parts of media broadcasts. Gerbner (1998) states "humans are the only species in a world created by the stories they tell" (p. 175). He describes how in the past, the storytelling process was personal and homemade; each community created its own story. Instead of a local flavor, however, current news stories are generated by broad and complex communication networks. Gerbner points out "for the first time in human history, children are born into homes where mass-produced stories can reach them on the average of more than 7 hours a day" (p.176). As media provide the stories, the process of socialization continues at a mass level. This refers to the media's potential ability for the "Creation and cultivation of shared ways of selecting and viewing events and aspects of life" (Gerbner, 1969, p. 140). Although these publicized stories may not be directly relevant with local family life, the news becomes the common culture; "through which communities cultivate shared and public notions about facts, values, and contingencies of human existence" (Gerbner, 1969, p. 138).

As society experiences greater stress, people demonstrate irritability, worry, insomnia, anxiety, and depression. In addition, people experience chest pains, shortness of breath, dizziness, and headaches (Siegel, 2005). Siegel (2005) describes a further dilemma related to a culture of fear. He believes our society, instead of drawing upon reliable information, has a predilection to identify a quick fix.

Guldberg (2000) believes adult perceptions are informed by fears for children's safety; prominent concerns include stranger danger, abduction, child abuse, and bullying. Government authorities, charities and schools respond to this increased perceived risk by encouraging further guidelines. Consequently, children are understood to be vulnerable and at intense risk (Guldberg, 2000).

Most crimes against children involve people they know and not from the highly publicized "stranger" (Guldberg, 2000).

[...] in incidents where knowledge of perpetrators allows their identification as family member, acquaintance, or stranger, most offenders against juveniles (eighty percent) are known to the victim (i.e. the offender is a family member or an acquaintance). Only eleven percent of the child victimizers in violent crimes are strangers, suggesting that while "stranger danger" may be an important concept in child safety training, it is far from sufficient (Finkelhor & Ormrod, 2000, p. 7).

But not all strangers are intent on hurting children. Guldberg (2009) believes the notion of being safe- rather-than-sorry (referred to as "the precautionary principle") reaffirms an exaggerated belief in children's vulnerability. She asserts not only will the precautionary principle limit children's unsupervised play, but, in the process, parental fears and worries will be transmitted to their children.

Findings indicate children would like to spend more time outside, but are concerned about public space issues related to traffic, strangers, getting lost, bullying, and vandalism (Thomas & Thompson, 2004). This transmission of fear reinforces vulnerability in the next generation. A constant reaffirmation of danger ensures that a culture of fear continues (Guldberg, 2009).

Gill (2006, 2007) cautions the consistent attempts to regulate children's contact with others undermines the concept of community. Community is built on welcome and safety. Gill and Guldberg believe all strangers are not harmful to children. Mercogliano (2007) describes the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century child as a perceived potential accident waiting to happen. Informed adults ask "Are the benefits children derive from unstructured outdoor play worth the risk or should outdoor play and physical activity be avoided because the risks are too great?"

### **Outdoor Play and Physical Activity**

Outdoor play and physical activity ensure children a range of risk-taking experiences which provide opportunities to apply skills, extend prowess, and develop new competencies. Professional early childhood programs prioritize the developmental characteristics of the young child. The literature describes the benefits of play as integral to children's learning and development (Van Hoorn, 2007). Play is central for optimal development and learning in young children. There is a developmental association between the activity of play and the characteristics of child development. This support for children's growth is not possible from a teacher's direct instruction (Van Hoorn, 2007). Despite some definitional differences, most play scholars agree on particular characteristics distinguishing play from other human behavior (Fromberg, 2002). Play is intrinsic, motivational, voluntary, active, means instead of ends, symbolic, nonliteral, enjoyable, and rule bound (Isenberg & Jalongo, 2001).

Play is a powerful alternative for learning. During play, children use language to communicate with one another, independently solve problems and interact collaboratively with peers toward a common goal. Children learn to interpret and express the complex interplay of both verbal and nonverbal behaviors. Children learn to do things for themselves. They develop confidence and control by practicing skills and rehearsing with others (Isenberg & Jalongo, 2001). Children make sense of their world by building and refining existing concepts. Through play, children gain more complex notions of the world and its people. Children take risks, enhance social skills, gain emotional support, and assume responsibility for their own learning (Isenberg & Jalongo, 2001). Play provides children with numerous and varied opportunities to develop essential life skills.

### **Outdoor Play**

Rivkin (1995) describes outdoor settings as providing children with possibilities for privacy and independence. She describes how in the out-of-doors children take control of their physical environment by merely arranging sticks and stones. Frost et al. (2005) describes transcendental play - "play in which the child loses contact with the outside world, places herself into mental oneness with the activity, loses inhibitions,

revels in physical risk and mental challenge, and creates a miniature world of magic and intrigue.” In so doing, the child rises above or transcends ordinary limits of play and becomes one with the social and environmental milieu” (p. 9). Frost et al. go on to explain only adults, who as children experienced such transcendental play, can appreciate what this means. Such play is recalled as being timeless, risky, obsessive, ecstatic, and mentally intense (Frost et al., 2005). The point Frost and co-authors make refers to the quality of the outdoor play. In order for children to achieve this deeper quality of outdoor play, knowledgeable adults prepare the playscape, and supervise, but not control the play activity.

In addition to children exploring new materials, in the out-of-doors they also investigate and test different roles and relationships. In order to do so effectively, they must practice self-control, initiative, and responsibility. In order to appreciate an idea may not be shared by others, thoughts must be considered and modified (Piaget, 1977). This understanding is essential for effective social interactions. As children inhibit aggression, cooperate, and compromise, they form friendships (Pellegrini, 2005). This ability to relate to others and form friendship is an important developmental step toward mature relationships (Kostelnik et al., 1993). Play provides children with learning alternatives, social competence, and physical abilities – all of which cannot be created through direct adult interventions. Play belongs to the child.

When children explore, they ask, “What does this material/equipment/toy do?” In play, the player moves beyond mere exploration of the object and asks, “What can I do with this object?” In the out-of-doors, children ask, “What materials are available and what can I do with them?” “Can I dig and make a dam to hold water?” “Can I climb this tree and make a house?” “Can I roll the snow and make a person?” This is also the time children discover they share the outdoor environment with other living things. As the child begins to interact with the outdoor environment, she asks, “What influence do I have on these living things?” It is the evolving sense of empathy with the living and nonliving environment that allows humans to competently live in harmony with other animals and plants. In other words, children come to appreciate, without fear, their place and responsibilities in nature (Hoot, *in press*).

### **Physical Activity and Play**

More than single-function activity, complex play experience is described as more valued toward children's development. Complex play experiences engage children at different levels. For example, building a snow village is more stimulating than sliding down a hill, constructing a dam to hold back a stream of water and, consequently creating a puddle, is more engaging than merely riding a bike, and building a shelter with clubhouse rules is more interesting than merely pulling a wagon. Although sledding, biking, and wagoning are enjoyable for children, knowledgeable adults prepare play environments to provide children with activities advancing cognitive, social, and emotional potential. In addition to limiting the rise in recent trends in childhood obesity, physical activity also contributes to a child's sense of well-being (Burris & Harrison, 2004). Sothorn and Gordon (2003) point out children's physical activity is linked with family lifestyle; children with inactive parents are likely also to be inactive.

Rivkin (1995) describes how today's children spend most of their time in school or watching television; they do not spend time experiencing nature directly. She describes how children no longer interact extensively with elders who share the oral traditions and learn about wild animals, even those indigenous to the local area. Television and school books remain the mainstay for children's learning. Rivkin argues for different than traditional learning experiences. She cautions the development of children's perceptual abilities is currently undermined because learning is primarily through television, computer, written text, and media. These learning alternatives require only two senses, hearing and seeing. They negate the sense of smell, taste, motion, and touch. Science kits with teacher-directed lessons presume to satisfy sensorial experiences.

Children do not innately know the names or characteristics of living things. Therefore, in the future, Rivkin (1995) asks how can children who are not comfortable or competent in their environment come to feel safe and move to honor and care for it? In order for adults to act responsibly, they first experience an empathic connection with their environment. Children gain a sense of perspective, respect, and responsibility, but not fear, worry, or anxiety. Children, interacting with varied environments and peoples are able to evaluate, predict, and plan wisely. Rivkin asserts children develop insight and learn how to use other resources as well as their own. Outdoor play extends opportunities for children to become competent and not fearful of initiating action upon materials or interaction with others (1995).

In light of both empirical research and apocryphal stories relating increasing levels of fear and decreasing levels of outdoor activities, questions naturally arise regarding parents' perceptions of their child's outdoor safety. That is the focus of this project.

## Methodology

### Participants

Parents voluntarily completed questionnaires and interviews ( $n = 128$  (survey) and  $n = 27$  (interview) ( $N = 155$ )) in university classrooms and neighborhood settings.

### Instruments

**Interview.** In unstructured interviews, the researcher asked a single leading question, "Tell me about your feelings regarding your child's outdoor play." The interviews were audio-taped for coding purposes. Interview time ranged from 10 to 30 minutes.

**Survey.** The survey used a 1-5 Likert scale (1 = Strongly Disagree, 2 = Disagree, 3 = Neither Agree nor Disagree, 4 = Agree, 5 = Strongly Agree). Items included parents' worry about outdoor play dangers, descriptions regarding safe play areas, types of play activity, and time for outdoor play. Data were collected to determine differences between parents' perception of their remembered outdoor play as compared with their child's current play.

## Limitations of Study

The restricted range of participants limits the authors' ability to generalize beyond a predominately middle class, college educated, and Caucasian population. Although other demographic groups participated, their numbers are too low to provide adequate comparison.

Using the constant comparative method, three coders independently analyzed the transcribed narratives to identify common themes. Afterwards, the three coders collaboratively reviewed the agreed upon themes and refined general themes to categories. Next, the three coders identified descriptive examples of participant text to accurately label categories. Interview time ranged from ten to 30 minutes.

## Results

### Interview

The following categories describe common themes emerging from the interview data.

#### “Things are Different Now”

Most parents described how their children's outdoor play is different from their own childhood experiences. They described how their childhood days were spent in long hours of unsupervised outdoor exploration with friends. As children, parents described their ability to travel far distances from their home, their own parents' unconcern for their safety, and the pleasurable experiences they enjoyed with friends.

“I don't think today's society with all of the bad elements . . . I don't think children get out and play enough because I don't think it is safe enough. . . . I can remember growing up and being able to ride my bike to my friends or anywhere I wanted and never considered the ramifications of being alone, without an adult. I don't think it is possible for kids these days.” “So all we really had to do was play outside. . . . I think that shaped my life in a way. I think it's just so important.”

Table 1

*How far from home did you/do your children play?*

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Parent / Child	Block	Mile
Yes/Yes	40 (21.6%)	11 (5.9%)
Yes/No	111 (60.0%)	81 (43.8%)
No/Yes	2 (1.1%)	1 (0.5%)
No/No	32 (17.3)	92 (49.7%)

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Example: Forty respondents said both they and their children play(ed) a block away from home.

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## Well-being

Regardless of location (urban, suburban, rural), parents indicated some understanding of how outdoor play contributes to a general sense of children's well-being. Only a few parents however, provided specific knowledge to explain the relationship between outdoor play and creativity, self-concept, or symbolic representation.

An example of a broadly supportive response includes “. . . sunshine is very healthy for her.” Another mother describes how outdoor play allows her child to better know the environment. A mother of three children provides a more specific example of support for outdoor play, “. . . I think you learn a lot about the world by interacting with other children and solving your problems among yourselves. Other than having a coach telling you – you can't cross this line.”

## Safety-Danger

Traffic and strangers were identified by most parents as the two primary safety concerns. The two issues, traffic and strangers, were often linked as a single concern. Parents referred to a fear of public space in which all cars and strangers could not be identified. They described the risk of children not merely being physically injured in traffic, but expressed concerns of abduction. Related to this safety concern, the backyard was identified as the primary place for children's outdoor play. In identifying the backyard, parents frequently described this area as fenced-in.

Table 2

### *Parental Fears of Injury or Abduction*

	I Worry About My Children Being Hurt While Playing Outdoors	I Worry About My Children Being Abducted While Playing Outdoors
Strongly Agree	4 (2.2%)	31 (16.8%)
Agree	58 (31.4%)	72 (38.9%)
Neither Agree nor Disagree	33 (17.8%)	41 (22.2%)
Disagree	74 (40.0%)	36 (19.5%)
Strongly Disagree	15 (8.1%)	5 (2.7%)

As parents described their concerns regarding children's safety, the data revealed their strong feelings of imminent danger. Despite the precautions taken with supervision and fenced-in backyards, parents continued to allude to potential threats to their children. This perceived danger appeared constant and powerful to parents. For this reason, a continuum of safety to danger labels the category. Most parents began describing safety issues related to children's outdoor play, but in most instances revealed their feelings of potential danger.

It is also interesting to compare various demographic data with fear of being injured or abducted. As seen in Table 3, there was no significant gender difference

regarding fear of being injured or abducted.

Table 3

*Parental Fears of Injury or Abduction*

		I Fear My Child Will Be Injured While Playing Outdoors			
		Yes	No	N	Sig.
Male		7	11	148	0.521
Female		54	76		
		I Fear My Child will be Abducted While Playing Outdoors			
		Yes	No	N	Sig
Male		17	4	144	0.204
Female		83	37		

Interestingly, though Table 4 shows no significant difference in fear of injury, there was a significant difference in fear depending on the location of the respondents, with the greatest fear expressed by those who live in an urban area.

Table 4

*Fear of Injury or Abduction, Compared With Location*

		I Fear My Child Will Be Injured While Playing Outdoors			
		Yes	No	N	Sig
City		19	17	149	0.515
Suburbs		39	28		
Country		30	16		
		I Fear My Child Will Be Abducted While Playing Outdoors			
		Yes	No	N	Sig
City		26	7	142	0.004
Suburbs		52	13		
Country		23	21		

“I don’t let my five-year-old, even though I am in a safe, I feel, area. It’s what comes into the area that I don’t know. So, we do not let him out of our sight. He has to play in his yard. If he rides his bike in the street, then I have to be where I can see him. I do have concerns about him being outdoors at five without my eyes on him.” “We don’t let them go out to play alone. As far as safety goes, you could probably call me overprotective.”

Although older children were allowed some additional neighborhood play, for the most part, this extended activity beyond the backyard was done with a monitoring strategy.

## Monitoring

Most parents used a monitoring strategy. Parents of younger children (approximately seven-years or younger) typically were told to remain in the play area. But, if parents did not physically remain in visual proximity, children were obliged to “check-in” at assigned intervals. In some instances, parents identified five minutes as a check-in time. Older children (approximately eight years and older) playing at a neighbor’s house might be expected to check-in at 15 minute intervals.

## Lifestyle

A few parents described how outdoor activity was part of the family commitment. These parents provided greater specificity with respect to outdoor activities and contributions for children’s well-being than noncommitted families. “Even before we had children, my wife and I had discussed the benefits of going outdoors and playing. These kinds of factors went into the choice of our house, neighborhood, and location.” This wife/mother responded without knowing what her husband reported in the prior statement: “My children are outside players.... I’ve pushed it.” Another mother commented “I am an outdoors person and so is dad; so we spend a lot of time outdoors. I explained to my little boy, outdoors you have the fresh air, you are not as sick as often when you are outdoors.”

## Discussion

Considering the potential benefits of children’s outdoor play and physical activity, parents’ knowledge and attitudes regarding the outdoors become critical. Parents’ perceptions regarding their child’s physical, social, and emotional safety determine whether or not they choose natural materials or commercial toys. How do they identify areas as safe for play? How much latitude is provided for unsupervised activity?

The current data demonstrate parents’ intense concern for their children’s safety and, as a result, emphasize the enclosed backyard as the primary play arena. With this “one-yard-fits-all” approach, parents run the risk of over-structuring the play environment with traditional equipment and commercial toys. There is a difference between a prepared and an enriched environment. Materials ensuring choice, open-endedness, and imagination nurture creativity, thought, and reflection. However, parents’ comments describing open-ended and creative play activities were anecdotal and infrequent. This lack of relevant information regarding the benefits of quality outdoor activity further suggests greater risk to overplan children’s outdoor experiences. Data reveal parents’ limited specific knowledge associating child development with natural materials and open-ended activities.

This misunderstanding of play as creative process is highlighted with findings indicating parents did not discern the potential difference between outdoor play and structured sports. This may account for many parents substituting structured after-school activities for the neighborhood unstructured play children enjoyed in the past.

Finally, the findings suggest potential risk issues related to parents’ direct supervision and need for constant monitoring strategies. Children need undisturbed time

to consider the possibilities before motive to create. This might include false starts, misapproximations, and failures. Parents attempting to assist may unknowingly interfere in the play process. Play takes thought and reflection.

An important component of the play process is allowing the child time and opportunity to freely explore man-made and natural materials. To the adult, this exploration may appear as unnecessary or possibly harmful. Only after time spent in self-directed exploration can the child begin to assume authority and direct the action in play. But, if the adult directs or interrupts the process because of fear for safety, the child is denied the opportunity to construct meaning for herself. The observing parent may eliminate the child's opportunity for risk or failure, but by doing so, undermines their potential for learning.

Although many parents expressed a desire to diminish television viewing and provide the outdoors as an alternative, they did not seem willing to relinquish the control of place, age-mates, or activity. Because the backyard was identified as the primary place for play, children's exploration of tree climbing, water play, and group games is limited. With the identified limitations placed on friends, area, and time allotment, it appears difficult for children to find or create a secret place to hide away and dream possibilities. Children require time, opportunity, and materials in the outdoors to "mess-about."

Despite the safe neighborhood and knowledge of nearby families, parents continued not to feel their child truly safe. Although existing literature demonstrates most abductions involved associated/known persons, current data also demonstrate parents' feeling of an intense and ever-lurking stranger. This pervasive fear of abduction compelled parents to create structured monitoring schedules and enclosed backyards as needed for children's outdoor safety.

The lifestyle theme is telling because data indicate when the outdoors is a family commitment; children are provided greater opportunities to develop comfort in the outdoors, versatility, and adeptness. Parents committed to the outdoor life described various activities they shared with children. With respect to outdoor play, parents, in addition to the physical, described the benefits for children's social, emotional, and cognitive learning. Unrelated to competitive sports, parents were committed to provide a variety of outdoor activities and ensure a range of learning opportunities; parents recognized the limitless potential of the outdoor environment. But, what is the future if a majority of parents continue to limit and restrict children's opportunity to take physical, creative, and social risks in the outdoors?

### **Implications**

In the past, parents possessed no more or no less information regarding outdoor play, and yet, children managed in relative safety to climb trees, interact with neighborhood friends, and create imaginative worlds. Sometimes children cried because of scrapes on concrete, bumps on bike falls, and arguments with friends; but, children survived and learned. Urban children formed clubs, explored vacant lots, joined in pick-up street games; rural children wandered through woods, designed corn mazes, and built marshmallow bon fires; and children in the suburbs examined the vacant lot waiting for construction, shopped in the local strip mall, and rode bikes through local cul-de-sacs.

In the past, parents guarded their children with restrictions and limitations, but rules were made with a regard for age, maturity, and context. Children in the city might be guided by rules such as baseball in the field and not in the street, bicycling not beyond three streets past the house, or street lights signal the end of the play day; children in rural areas might be denied access to water/pond areas or bonfires without adult supervision; and children in the suburbs may be restricted from crossing heavily trafficked streets and not playing on construction sites. Common to all environments, the notion is there are guidelines and rules and they are appropriate to each child. The guidelines and rules are reasonable and well-founded in the child's physical safety and social well-being. In the past, family rules were not based in unwarranted fear resulting in overprotecting, undermining, and stifling children's explorations. Past generations allowed children to freely explore and create their secret places; children, not adults, construct personal magic.

A child in the city explores the underside of a porch, the rural setting provides children with a clearing in the woods, and the child in a subdivision discovers an unusual configuration of trees or a bush with hiding possibilities. In all instances, children learn the potential and limitations of the environment, test their ability to interact and communicate with non-family members, and realize their own strengths and weaknesses.

Despite the limited threat of "stranger danger," data suggest contemporary parents, unlike those in the past, sense an intense need to protect and closely monitor children's outdoor activities. Parents appear convinced their children are in constant potential danger. For the future, what is the cost of such continual scrutiny? What will be the result of limiting our children's exploration and overly monitoring their activities? What distinguishes humans from animals is the ability to adapt; humans change the environment and do not succumb. Yet, in this current culture of fear--fear of physical injury, fear of bullies, fear of strangers, fear of natural environment--it appears parents are less willing to risk their child's safety. The costs are numerous and onerous. This unfounded fear will continue and be carried on by the next generation of fearful children. Children's health is at risk because of diminished physical activity. Children are not innately vulnerable, but can be socialized to become fragile. The outdoors provides children with opportunities to resist and others to adapt. Finally, children who are not comfortable in their own natural environment, children who never test themselves in the outdoors, and children unable to connect with nature are deprived, and this deprivation can only lead to a lessening of our society.

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