Sport Parents' Perspectives of Children's Free Play and Sport and their Accompanying Messages

by

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Abstract

The purpose of this thesis was to explore the perspectives of sport parents to understand factors, in particular messages that impact parents and their decisions within the context of children's sport and free play. Guided by interpretive description (ID), data were collected through interviews with 12 parents who had children between the ages of 8 to 10 years old, registered in a club soccer program. A socioecological framework applied to this study highlighted a multitude of factors, from various levels of influence that impacted parents' perspectives and decisions within the contexts of children's sport and free play.

In the first manuscript, interviews revealed that parents' perspectives on children's sport and free play were influenced by their own personal childhood experiences and framed within the notion that times have changed. Parents viewed competitive team sport participation as a priority over free play, particularly for the development of life skills, socialization, and a sense of community. Free play was primarily viewed for the benefits of relaxation and down time, yet was also associated with increased opportunities for problem behaviours. Schools were seen to play an important role in the sport and free play opportunities and experiences of children. Broader levels of influence in social and physical environments (i.e., sport organizations, coaches, local parenting norms, parenting ideologies) impacted the decisions and behaviours of parents within the context of sport and free play, particularly the accelerated pace of children's sports, and safety concerns in free play. Parents generally embraced the busier lives that are prevalent in our current milieu. Furthermore, parents generally viewed the multitude of opportunities for children to be involved in, positively. The findings of this study highlighted a gap in the literature with regard to free play in middle childhood, and parents' understanding of the benefits of it.

Furthermore, this study points to the need to consider addressing broader levels of influence, such as physical and social environments in supporting healthful and positive behaviours in the context of children's sport, free play, and IAM.

In exploring the impact of messages in the second manuscript, interviews suggested that formal messages (i.e., mass media commercials, social media, etc.) had limited direct impact on parents' decisions within children's sport and free play except to validate decisions already made. Parenting ideologies, local parenting norms, and parenting labels inherent in children's sport and free play (i.e., helicopter parent, hockey parent, etc.) did influence parent behaviours and decisions. Parents wanted to be the 'good parents' rather than 'that' parent which are often highlighted in popular media and empirical studies. These parents observed, and opposed the strong presence of the 10,000 hours of deliberate practice theory (Ericsson, Krampe, & Tesch-Römer, 1993) influencing children's sports experiences, and felt that it challenged their decisions to have multisport children. Furthermore, parents expressed how messages and the information they received were often contradictory. The findings of this study acknowledge that parents recognized the importance of sport and free play yet suggest a tension exists between them highlighting the notion that play is often presented in opposition to sport.

Preface

This thesis is an original work by Tina Watchman. This research project, of which this thesis is a part, received ethics approval from the University of Alberta Research Ethics Board, Project Name "Impact of Children's Physical Activity Messages on Parents", ID Pro00059183, October 7, 2015. Chapters 3 and 4 of this thesis are co-authored manuscripts to be submitted for publication. I am the first author on both manuscripts. I collected and analyzed the data and assumed primary writing responsibilities. N. Spencer-Cavaliere was the supervisory author and was involved with concept formation, theme determination, and manuscript composition.

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Tina Watchman

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Glossary of Terms

Free Play: Play is difficult to define (Pellegrini, 2009). Pellegrini (2009) stated that "much of the confusion surrounding the definition of play is related to the fact that in the child development literature the term play [sic] is often used to label most forms of children's social and nonsocial behavior, regardless of whether it is play or not" (p. 8). For the purpose of this study, and in aligning with the common discourse of children's play, free play is defined as unstructured, child-led activity that takes place indoors or outdoors in the child's free time (Gray, 2011).

Health Communication: Health communication is "the study and use of methods to inform and influence individual and community decisions that enhance health" (Freimuth & Quinn, 2004, p. 2053). There are different types of health communication, including persuasive/behavioural communication, risk communication, media advocacy, entertainment education, interactive health communication, and communication for social change (National Collaborating Centre for Methods and Tools, 2010).

Independent Active Mobility (IAM): Child independent active mobility encompasses active transportation behaviours (such as walking and cycling) but may also include modes such as scootering and skateboarding (Badland, 2012). Child independent mobility involves the concept of 'independence' and is considered freedom to move around without adult supervision but may be with other children (Badland, 2012). In this thesis I utilize the term 'independent active mobility' (IAM) because it includes the constructs of active transportation and childhood independence.

Messages: Messages is broadly defined as "a communication containing some information, news, advice, request or the like" (Dictionary.com Unabridged, n.d.).

Organized Sport: Organized sports are "all types of adult-structured competitive sport opportunities that are provided for children and adolescents" (Smith & Biddle, 2008, p. 351).

Over-parenting: Over-parenting is "very high levels of parenting responsiveness and high demands for child success, often resulting in parental behaviours that reduce demands on the child to undertake actions that would effect change in their own life" (Locke et al., 2012, p. 261).

Physical Activity: Physical activity is defined as "any bodily movement produced by skeletal muscles that results in energy expenditure" (Caspersen, Powell, & Christenson, 1985, p. 126).

Sense of Community. Sense of community is often defined as "a feeling that members have of belonging, a feeling that members matter to one another and to the group, and a shared faith that members' needs will be met through their commitment to be together" (McMillan & Chavis, 1986, p. 9).

Social Networks: Social networks is defined as those people outside the household who engage in activities and exchanges of an affective and/or material nature with the members of the immediate family (Cochran & Brassard, 1979).

Sport: Sport "is a regulated form of physical activity organized as a contest between two or more participants for the purpose of determining a winner by fair and ethical means" (Sport Canada, 2011).

Chapter 1: Introduction

Parents have a tremendous responsibility in raising children. In the current social milieu, new parenting ideologies have emerged over the last few decades that "put emphasis on the ever-increasing (and changing) responsibilities that parents bear, related to ensuring their children follow a healthy developmental pattern and achieve overall success in life" (Shaw, 2010, p. 10). Beyond providing the necessities of food, clothing, and shelter, current social expectations of parents include providing a variety of experiences that enrich a child's cognitive, emotional, social, and physical development. This is particularly true of experiences within the context of sport and physical activity.

Parents are "gatekeepers" to their children's opportunities and access to physical activity (Welk, Wood, & Morss, 2003, p. 19) whether through sport, free play, active transportation, or independent mobility. Although decisions about what physical activities children participate in are often a collaborative process between parent(s) and child (Macdonald, Rodger, Abbott, Ziviani, & Jones, 2005), parents, particularly mothers, assume a key role in the decision-making process (Howard & Madrigal, 1990).

The choices parents and children make regarding children's sport and physical activity engagement is particularly relevant given a number of alarming childhood trends. The trend of childhood obesity and physical inactivity has become one of the most widely recognized public health crisis (Lobstein, Baur, & Uauy, 2004). The U.S. Surgeon General made a poignant statement in 2004, that "because of the increasing rates of obesity, unhealthy eating habits, and physical inactivity, we may see the first generation [of children] that will be less healthy and

have a shorter life expectancy than their parents" (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2004, para. 9).

Along with the alarming trend of childhood obesity and physical inactivity, there are a number of other disturbing trends in children's social, emotional, and psychological health that are increasingly being acknowledged. Some of these trends include the 'professionalization' of children's sports (Gould, 2009; Wall & Côté, 2007); the decline of children's outdoor free play (Clements, 2004; Gray, 2011; ParticipACTION, 2015), children's 'hurried' and 'overscheduled' lifestyles (Elkind, 2007), and the 'overprotection' of children (Malone, 2007). Various studies have suggested that these trends contribute to an array of negative psychological outcomes in children, such as psychological 'burnout' (Wall & Côté, 2007), a 'rise of psychopathology' (i.e., anxiety, narcissism, depression, etc.; Gray, 2011), increased feelings of loneliness, a loss of sense of community, and an increased fear of crime (Gray, 2011; Prezza & Pacilli, 2007).

These childhood trends and outcomes have captured the attention of researchers, advocates, media, and organizations across various disciplines (e.g., play, sport, health, child development, etc.). This has led to an abundance of messages directly and indirectly focused on parents to not only increase children's physical activity levels but to also improve their experiences in physical activity and sport for optimal development. Various organizations such as Active Healthy Kids Canada (AHKC), The Canadian Society for Exercise Physiology (CSEP), ParticipACTION, and Canadian Sport for Life (CS4L) have issued campaigns, guidelines, and reports towards increasing and improving children's health through sport and physical activity.

Parenting is complex. When it comes to decisions regarding their children's health and wellbeing, parents face a multitude of messages (Radey & Randolph, 2009) and "wrestle with

competing sets of social expectations, as well as their own rational and emotive judgments" (Jenkins, 2006, p. 379). This is especially evident in the context of children's sports and physical activity. Parenting behaviours are in response to a "complex blend of family, community and cultural expectations and circumstances" (Witten, Kearns, Carroll, Asiasiga, & Tava'e, 2013, p. 226). Furthermore, parenting behaviors are often motivated by the desire to be good parents and to be perceived by others as a good parent (Valentine & McKendrick, 1997).

Often, the well-intended and informed decisions of parents exist in contradictory discourses that define good parenting. This is apparent when comparing messages from across media and various disciplines of research in sport, free play, and active transportation. For example, good parents encourage their children to participate in a variety of activities (e.g., sport sampling; Côté, Horton, MacDonald, & Wilkes, 2009). Yet, 'sport sampling' is difficult to definitively define. A contrary discourse of good parenting simultaneously judges this behaviour as negative. These good parents are sometimes perceived as overscheduling parents (Honoré, 2009), and those who are raising a "backseat generation" (Karsten, 2005, p. 275) because they drive their children from one activity to another. Furthermore, parents are often portrayed as being 'misguided' by acting on the belief that "good parents expose their children to every opportunity to excel…and ensure their children participate in a wide variety of activities" (Ginsburg, 2007, p. 184).

Another example of the contradictory discourses of good parenting involves the subject of children's safety and protection. It is a moral and legal responsibility of parents to protect and keep their children safe (United Nations, 1990). Yet, the parenting behaviour of 'protection' is often perceived negatively in the discourses of play and independent mobility, such as in these

popular media headlines, “Children being raised in ‘captivity’ due to health and safety paranoia” (Paton, 2013) or “Overcautious parents ‘damaging children’” (O'Sullivan, 2015). Numerous studies substantiate the claims of these headlines and have found that parental safety concerns are barriers to children’s active transportation, independent mobility, and free play opportunities (Alparone & Pacilli, 2012; Veitch, Bagley, Ball, & Salmon, 2006).

The complexities of parenting are evident when the behavior of ‘protection’ is viewed along a continuum of the two extremes of overprotection and neglect. The appropriate levels of parental protection are difficult to judge and are often mediated by current, as well as contradictory social and cultural expectations (Pimentel, 2012). For example, media reported that parents in the United States made an informed decision to allow their 10 year old son and six and a half year old daughter to walk home from a playground, about a mile from their house, by themselves. Many researchers and health advocates would applaud this parental behaviour because it supports free play, active transportation, and independent mobility. However, because individuals and authorities within the community deemed it unsafe for their children to be unsupervised, the parents now face a child neglect investigation (Wallace, 2015). Given what we know, this incident highlights the opposing discourses and subjectivity of good parenting and the complexity of parenting. The decisions that parents make with regard to their children are both scrutinized and applauded. Parenting is often an invisible balancing act and a constant negotiation between personal values and beliefs and broader contextual influences such as, community, social norms and expectations.

Good parenting is not well-defined, yet it is expected. What defines the elusive good parent has received a tremendous amount of attention in light of the alarming trends in children’s

health, and has consequently highlighted parenting behaviours and practices. Although messages designed to encourage, support, and improve children's physical activity and sport are well-intended and invaluable (Evans, 2008; M. Huhman et al., 2005; M. E. Huhman et al., 2010), they have also inadvertently led to judgements of parenting behaviours and practices. Parents have been told they are raising a generation of 'helpless' kids (Goodman, 2012), a 'risk-averse generation' (Spears, 2012), an overscheduled, and a heavily pressured generation (Elkind, 2007). These judgements of parenting behaviours are also inherent in parenting labels that exist in our current social milieu and transcend into all aspects of children's lives where parents and children make decisions. Labels such as 'helicopter parents', 'tiger parents', and 'bubble wrapped children' are often applied to parents who, with the best intentions, have 'bought' into the heavily marketed messages of the importance of child development and preparing children to reach their full potential through a range of experiences such as participating in children's sport programs, physical activity programs, music lessons, and academic tutoring programs. Children's sport and physical activity messages often neglect to consider parenting behaviours, practices, and decisions from a socioecological perspective that acknowledges the complexity of parenting and the impact that an abundance of messages have on parents in our current society.

A few studies have briefly mentioned the impact of children's sport and physical activity messages on parents. They have found that parents experience feeling guilty (Carson et al., 2014), insecure (Stokes, 2009), pressured (Wiersma & Fifer, 2008), overwhelmed (Wiersma & Fifer, 2008), and powerless (Anderson & Doherty, 2005; Brown, Nobiling, Teufel, & Birch, 2011). However, to my knowledge, there are no studies that have explored if, and how an abundance of messages, some of which are opposing as well as negative towards parenting

behaviours, impact parents and their decisions in children's sport and physical activity. Furthermore, there is little research that gives parents a voice about the complexity of these decisions and the factors that influence their decisions.

Purpose and Research Objectives

The purpose of this thesis was to explore the perspectives of sport parents to understand factors, in particular messages that impact parents and their decisions within the context of children's sport and free play. In doing so, a critical step was to examine parents' perspectives about children's physical activity (i.e., sport and play) more generally. A socioecological model (SEM) was used as a framework to explore children's sport and physical activity messages in the environmental systems (e.g., macrosystem, mesosystem, exosystem, microsystem, chronosystem) that influence parental behaviours (Bronfenbrenner, 2005). Interpretive description (Thorne, 2008) guided this study. This approach allowed for a greater understanding of parents' individual experiences within the broader contexts that they are a part of, such as social networks, communities, and sport organizations (Thorne, 2008). A primary goal of this thesis is to better understand the complexities of parents' decisions in the context of children's physical activity. It may also generate knowledge of how best to shape and project children's sport and physical activity messages that empower and support parents in their responsibilities of raising children.

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Chapter 2: Review of Literature

This review of both academic and gray literature explores the many physical activity messages that parents hear in the context of children's sport, physical activity, free play, and IAM. I discuss the literature that establishes the important role that parents play in their children's health and wellbeing and the notion of being a good parent, particularly in this current society where parenting ideologies are ever-changing. Furthermore, I highlight the impact that the alarming trend in childhood obesity has played in the abundance of messages from the various contexts that comprise children's physical activity. In reviewing the vast amounts of literature from children's sports, free play, and IAM, what is evident is the importance of each of these components to children's health but also the contradictions and the opposing nature of many of the messages when considered together. This review briefly introduces the intentions, techniques, and strategies that shape the many messages intended for parents. Furthermore, I explore the research related to the complexity of parenting and the impact messages have on parents. Parents are not exposed to simply one message in any aspect of their lives. Given that parents live in a message saturated society, and do not live in isolation from external systems of influence, I conclude by drawing on the viability of using a socioecological framework to explore parents' perspectives on children's sport and free play and the messages they hear using interpretive description.

Parents

Parental responsibilities. Parents have a tremendous responsibility in raising children. There are many messages from popular media and research that support the ideology that "parenting [is] the most important job you'll ever have" (Cuthbert, 2012, Title) especially those

responsibilities related to healthy child development (Shaw, 2010). Professional medical organizations such as the Royal College of Psychiatrists (RCP) suggest that "parenting is an important part of loving and caring for your child" (RCP, 2015, para. 1) and that it is "probably the most important public health issue facing our society" (Hoghughi, 1998, p. 1545). Parenting is the "single largest variable implicated in childhood illnesses and accidents; teenage pregnancy and substance misuse; truancy, school disruption, and underachievement; child abuse; unemployability; juvenile crime; and mental illness…the importance of parenting arises from its role as a buffer against adversity (such as poverty or delinquent influences) or mediator of damage (as in child abuse)" (Hoghughi, 1998, p. 1545). These beliefs around parenting have led to an ideology of good parenting which has become an expectation in our society as well as a 'standard' for parents to achieve (Shaw, 2010).

Although many sources and messages attempt to define good parenting, there is no consensus as to what it entails (Hoghughi, 1998). This is particularly true in a diverse and rapidly changing society where good parenting has been redefined, but it is also true in the context of children's sport (Coakley, 2006; Hoghughi, 1998).

Regardless of the lack of a definitive definition for good parenting, evidence suggests that parents in our current social milieu strive diligently to be good parents. Parents are investing greater amounts of time and resources in children. Sayer, Bianchi, and Robinson (2004) found that parents are spending more time with their children in child care activities in the late 1990s than in the "family-oriented" (p. 1) 1960s. Furthermore, there is an expectation of mothers to put the needs of the "sacred child" (Johnston & Swanson, 2006, p. 510) above their own individual needs, and to provide a level of nurturance and series of developmentally supportive activities

that become all-consuming (Pedersen, 2012). In addition, fathers view their role in parenting as "equally influential" (Pedersen, 2012, p. 230) to that of a mother's. Coakley (2006) posited that fathers are also "held responsible for…their children 24 hours a day, seven days a week" (p. 153). He suggested that there has been an increase in the involvement of fathers in youth sports that has changed dramatically over the past two generations as a response to complex cultural changes within our society (Coakley, 2006). Thus, the role of mothers and fathers appear to be equally important to their children's participation in physical activity and sport, and in the discourse of good parenting.

Parenting ideologies - the good parent. Parenting behaviors across the contexts of children's sport, free play, and independent mobility are often motivated by the desire to be good parents, and to be perceived by others as a good parent (Alparone & Pacilli, 2012; Niehues et al., 2013; Valentine & McKendrick, 1997; Veitch et al., 2006; Wheeler & Green, 2014). Substantial evidence suggests that social norms exert pressure on parents and influence their decisions regarding their children's sport, free play, and IAM opportunities. Wheeler and Green (2014) found that a norm was generated and regulated by parents that good parenting required children to be involved in "at least two organized sport activities outside school at any one given time, and to have taken swimming lessons from a young age" (p. 279). Studies across the context of independent mobility found similar pressures and norms; good parents are expected to accompany their children to and from school (Alparone & Pacilli, 2012; Carver, Timperio, & Crawford, 2008). Similarly, free play studies found that "strong social norms existed regarding parents' allowing their children to play in the street and at times disapproval of parents who allowed their child to do this was expressed" (Veitch et al., 2006, p. 388). An earlier study by

Valentine and McKendrick (1997) similarly found that mothers whose childcare practices were out of line with local norms were stigmatized and marginalized by other parents.

In these studies, the "benchmark of good parenting" (Wheeler & Green, 2014, p. 274) was determined by parents themselves and other parents, and by how closely behaviours and practices were aligned with social norms. Furthermore, social norms were often found to be locally established through social interactions among mothers (Valentine & McKendrick, 1997). Consequently, social networks of relatives, neighbours, and friends become an important influence both directly and indirectly on parenting practices (Cochran & Brassard, 1979; Honoré, 2009) and the messages that parents receive.

The impact of the notion of good parenting on parental behaviours is particularly relevant in the context of children's sport, free play, and IAM given that parents play a significant role in how their children spend their free time. Literature has suggested that parents are both "gatekeepers" (Welk et al., 2003) to their children's physical activity opportunities and "agents of change" (Golan, Weizman, Apter, & Fainaru, 1998) to improving their children's health. Although making decisions about what physical activities children participate in is often a collaborative process between parent(s) and child (Macdonald et al., 2005), parents, in particular mothers, assume a key role in the decision-making process (Howard & Madrigal, 1990). Furthermore, parents support their children in sport and physical activity through providing encouragement (i.e., signing their children up for programs), instrumental support (i.e., transportation, paying for fees, equipment, etc.), and opportunity (Pugliese & Tinsley, 2007; Sallis, Prochaska, & Taylor, 2000). Pugliese and Tinsley (2007) found that "the odds of being an

active child or adolescent are almost two times greater with supportive versus unsupportive parents" (p. 338).

Health of Children

A growing body of evidence indicates that the health of children in Canada has deteriorated in the past several decades (Colley et al., 2011). Childhood obesity has become a growing concern across Canada. Tremblay, Katzmarzyk, and Willms (2002) assessed changes in the prevalence of overweight and obesity among Canadians between 1981 and 1996, and found that the "problem is particularly pronounced among children" (p. 538). Over that 15 year time period, they found the corresponding increases were from 11 to 33% in boys and from 13 to 27% in girls for overweight, and from 2 to 10% in boys and from 2 to 9% in girls for obesity (M. Tremblay, Katzmarzyk, & Willms, 2002) .

The increasing prevalence of childhood overweight and obesity as well as the deteriorating health of children has been associated with low levels of physical activity (Janssen et al., 2005; Tremblay & Willms, 2003). Tremblay and Willms (2003) conducted an epidemiological study examining the relationships among physical activity participation, sedentary behaviour (video game use and television (TV)/video watching), and body mass index (BMI) on a nationally representative sample of Canadian children. They found that "both organized and unorganized sport and physical activity are negatively associated with being overweight (10-24% reduced risk) or obese (23-34% reduced risk)" (Tremblay & Willms, 2003, p. 1100), supporting the belief that a link exists between physical inactivity and childhood obesity.

The evidence is undisputed that regular physical activity is necessary for the primary and secondary prevention of several chronic diseases (e.g., cardiovascular disease, diabetes, cancer, hypertension, obesity, depression, and osteoporosis) and premature death in adults (Warburton, Nicol, & Bredin, 2006). Furthermore, numerous studies and reviews have concluded that children also acquire benefits from engaging in physical activity. The evidence clearly supports the inclusion of regular physical activity as a tool in the prevention of chronic disease, the enhancement of overall health, and for optimal childhood development (Janssen & LeBlanc, 2010; Sothern, Loftin, Suskind, Udall, & Blecker, 1999).

Given the relationship between children's health and the increasing prevalence of childhood overweight and obesity, there has been a tremendous amount of focus from researchers, organizations, and media on the specific contexts in which children acquire physical activity. It has been widely accepted that children attain physical activity in three contexts; sport and physical activity programs (organized), free play (unstructured), and active transportation (supervised or independent) (Active Healthy Kids Canada [AHKC], 2012; Heitzler, Martin, Duke, & Huhman, 2006; Sallis et al., 2000).

Children's Sport, Free Play, and Independent Active Mobility (IAM)

Children's sport. Children's sport within our society is often viewed both positively and negatively in the literature and popular media. The abundance of literature and popular media that focuses on children's sport suggests that children's sport has a prominence in our current social milieu and in the lives of families. Studies and media reports have frequently addressed various dimensions of children's sport, whether actual or perceived, such as negative parenting behaviours at children's sporting events (Omli, LaVoi, & Wiese-Bjornstal, 2008), the trend of

children's early sport specialization (Malina, 2010), the professionalization of children's sports (Matz, 2014), the overscheduling of children's activities, including sport activities (Elkind, 2007), and also the decline of children's sport participation (Clark, 2008; Wallerson, 2014). Children's sport is highly present in our current social milieu, yet simultaneously it is often discussed as not being prominent enough when considering the prevalence of childhood overweight and obesity, related to low sport participation rates of children.

Participation rates. Studies that have examined children's sport participation rates and trends are inconclusive or at best weak in their support for the popularity of children's sport in Canada and across various countries. The Canadian Fitness and Lifestyle Research Institute's (CFLRI, 2011a) 2010 Physical Activity Monitor survey suggests that a majority of children in Canada participate in sport. In 2010, they found that 75% of Canadian children and youth between 5 and 17 years of age regularly participated in sports in the previous 12 months (CFLRI, 2011a). However, popular media, as well as various studies have suggested that children's sport participation rates are low and have declined (Clark, 2008; Dollman, Norton, & Norton, 2005; Wallerson, 2014). Statistics Canada found that sport participation rates for children aged 5 to 14 had declined from 57% to 51% between 1992 and 2005; in particular, there was a steep decline for boys from 66% to 56% (Clark, 2008).

Recent reviews which have examined children's sport participation rates and trends substantiate these mixed results (Booth, Rowlands, & Dollman, 2015; Dollman et al., 2005). Nevertheless, inconsistent findings on children's sport participation rates and trends do not accurately reflect the prominence that children's sport occupies (De Knop, 1996) within our society and particularly in the lives of middle class families.

Popularity of children's sport. The importance of children's sport is apparent by the numerous sport bodies, organizations, programs, and businesses devoted to not only administering children's sport programs, but to improving them. Organizations such as the CS4L have made it their purpose to "improve the quality of sport and physical activity in Canada" (CS4L, 2011, para. 1). Sport governing bodies exist for a variety of sports in Canada. Governing bodies such as the Canadian Soccer Association (Canada Soccer, 2015), promote the growth and development of soccer in Canada, "from grassroots to high performance" (para. 4), with a vision to lead "Canada to victory and Canadians to a life-long passion for soccer" (para. 1). Furthermore, an abundance of businesses are devoted to children's sport as well as the economic benefits associated with it. The following sections examine the literature and evidence that supports the popularity of children's sport despite the inconclusive evidence on children's participation rates.

Sport organizations. The existence of an organization such as CS4L is evidence of the importance of sport in Canada and in the lives of families. CS4L's vision is to change the way Canadians lead and deliver sport and physical activity in Canada (CS4L, 2011). Their intention is to shift the way sports has been traditionally delivered and considered in Canada to "keep[ing] more Canadians active for life…and at the same time help Canadians in all sports win more medals internationally" (CS4L, 2015b, para. 3). Their means to accomplish this is through the adoption of an evidence informed framework, the Long Term Athlete Development Model (LTAD), a seven – stage developmental pathway that focuses on children, youth, and adults "do[ing] the right things at the right time to develop their sport or activity…" (CS4L, 2015c, para. 3). Furthermore, CS4L highlights the importance of parents in achieving these goals. They

have intentionally directed messages at parents such as, “kids who have fun playing a sport are more likely to stay active and healthy for their entire lifetime. They also have a better chance of becoming a top athlete. So make it fun, and make it quality!” (CS4L, 2015a, para. 1). This CS4L statement highlights the importance of children’s sport and the important role that parents play.

***Families and children’s sports*.** The importance of children’s sport is also evident in the lives of families. The CIBC – KidSport Report (CIBC, 2014) conducted a national survey in Canada and found that two thirds of those surveyed in 2010 had children who regularly participated in organized sport. They also found that parents in Alberta spent an average of $1,428 per child per year on organized sports (CIBC, 2014) with the average household income of those surveyed at $68,000. In 2014, the Canadian Scholarship Trust Fund conducted a Leger survey to examine how much money Canadian parents spent on their children’s hockey in comparison to saving for their children’s post-secondary education (Canadian Scholarship Trust Plan, 2014). Their findings from surveying 1520 parents found that 46 per cent of parents say they or someone they know are spending more money to put a child in an extracurricular activity like hockey rather than in an education savings plan. Some anecdotal reports in popular media have suggested that parents have spent up to 10.5 % of their annual gross income on their child’s sports (Sullivan, 2015).

Many empirical studies support the anecdotal reports that suggest parents invest a great deal of time, money, and energy towards their children’s participation in organized sports, particularly middle class parents. Wheeler and Green (2014) found that parents invested early and heavily in sport activities for their children and allowed children’s sport to dominate the families’ schedules. Further, the reasons for these choices were that parents highly valued the

perceived benefits children gained from sport participation and also that parents viewed they were "…meeting the criteria for 'good' parenting established in their social networks" (Wheeler & Green, 2014, p. 279). These authors (Wheeler & Green, 2014) along with Wiersma and Fifer's (2008) findings provide some explanations for why parents willingly invest heavily in their children's sport participation. Both studies found that despite the challenges parents face in supporting their children's' participation in sports, such as financial cost, time, provision of emotional support, etc. parents felt it was "worth it" (Wiersma & Fifer, 2008, p. 517) for their children to participate in sports for a variety of physiological, social, and emotional benefits.

Parental intentions and benefits of children's sport participation. Given the current global concerns about childhood inactivity and obesity, sport participation is often encouraged as a means to increase children's physical activity levels. Although the physical benefits are cited by parents as a reason for their child's participation in sport, the perceived emotional, social, and cognitive benefits children gain are cited as equally important and perhaps even more important. Parents believe that the emotional, social, and cognitive benefits children gain through sport participation "…last beyond the scope of athletic participation" (Wiersma & Fifer, 2008, pp. 514-515). Parents are keenly aware of the social, psychological and physical benefits of sport participation (Wheeler & Green, 2014). Wiersma and Fifer (2008) found that parents believed that their children gained valuable life skills (i.e., competiveness, sportsmanship, teamwork, responsibility, etc.), had opportunities to build social skills, establish relationships, and develop self-confidence, self-esteem, and lasting memories through sport participation.

The benefits perceived by parents align with the concept of Positive Youth Development (PYD). Within PYD, positive development is "the engagement in prosocial behaviors and

avoidance of health-compromising and future-jeopardizing behaviors" (Roth & Brooks-Gunn, 1998, p. 426). The PYD movement is a concept that has extended into children and youth sports. There is a growing body of research that supports the notion that sport may provide a context in which youth acquire qualities such as competencies, assets, values, and life skills that also help them thrive away from the field of play (Jones, Dunn, Holt, Sullivan, & Bloom, 2011).

The concepts of PYD have also extended into the context of sports for younger children. Holt and Knight (2014) suggested that because of the adoption of LTAD frameworks and specifically the FUNdamental stage within the framework, sport participation ages of children have begun to decrease (children are entering organized sport programs at younger ages). Furthermore, Neely and Holt (2014) interviewed parents of young children (aged 5 to 8) who participated in organized sports and found that parents perceived that their children gained a range of personal, social, and physical benefits from participating in sport. In particular, these perceived benefits included positive self-perception, opportunities for friendship, teamwork and cooperation, and increased physical activity and development of fundamental movement skills (Neely & Holt, 2014).

Negative aspects of children's sport. However, there is not unanimous support that children gain benefits through participating in sport. Various studies cite the potential negative aspects of sport participation, particularly if sport environments are not optimal. In recent years, studies have cited negative aspects of sport participation on children such as injury, family financial burdens, athlete burnout, unhappiness, and stress (Merkel, 2013). Often the mediators of children's sports experiences (i.e., parents, coaches, etc.) are cited as the cause of the negative outcomes of children's sport experiences, such as negative parental behaviours (Bouzane, 2015),

or poor coaching and coaching behaviours (Barnett, Smoll, & Smith, 1992). More recently, a media article titled, "Making Your Kid Play Organized Sports Could Cost Them Their Creativity" (Bowers, 2014) adds an additional challenge to the claims that "sport participation teaches children the value of hard work, builds character, and develops future leaders" (Bowers, 2014, para. 1). The author of the media article, citing his own study (Bowers, Green, Hemme, & Chalip, 2014), had examined the relationship between time spent participating in organized sports and informal sports during childhood with respect to the development of general creativity (Bowers et al., 2014). They found that hours spent in organized sport setting were negatively related to creativity as an adult. Further, the authors found that time spent in unstructured sport settings was found to be positively related to adult creativity (Bowers et al., 2014).

Although Bowers and colleagues (2014) concluded that their findings "point to the importance of balancing participation across organized and unstructured settings" (p. 314), their claims may be of concern to parents whose children participate in organized sports. Parents' good intentions of having their children participate in sports are challenged by a study such as Bowers et al. (2014) and can potentially leave parents confused, concerned, and uncertain of the decisions they make for their children. Considering a broad range of children's sport and free play messages highlights the complexity of the relationship between sports (structured) and unstructured free play.

Children's free play. Children's sport, which occupies a great deal of academic research and the headlines of popular media is often discussed in comparison to children's play, or the 'unstructured settings' as discussed by Bowers et. al. (2014). The literature and discourse on children's play have grown considerably within the last few decades, and are likely related to the

alarming trend of childhood overweight and obesity. Alexander, Frohlich, and Fusco (2014) highlighted the common discourse of children's play when they posited that "there is an emerging public health position on children's play… that play is predominantly instrumentalized as a means to promote children's physical health" (p. 155). However, the focus on children's play for physical health has also led to an increase in research devoted to the psychological, social, and emotional benefits of all forms of play.

Terms such as informal play, free play, active play, unstructured play, social play, and locomotor play are all used within the discourse of children's play. Play has been discussed as being the business of childhood. It is considered universal (Smith, 1995). It has been studied from various disciplines and seen to exist in various cultures (Roopnarine, Johnson, & Hooper, 1994) and throughout history (Frost, Wortham, & Reifel, 2012). Free play, specifically play that occurs outside with other children, is essential for children's development (Gray, 2011).

Benefits of free play. Outdoor free play is one of the most consistent predictors of children's physical activity levels (Fairclough, Ridgers, & Welk, 2012; Sallis et al., 2000; Timmons, Naylor, & Pfeiffer, 2007). Studies have found that as children increase the time they spend outdoors, their physical activity levels increase (Burdette, Whitaker, & Daniels, 2004) therefore decreasing the prevalence of overweight and obesity (Cleland et al., 2008).

However, equally important to the physical benefits are the psychological, social, and emotional benefits children gain from engaging in free play. Play encourages children to develop intrinsic interests and competencies, learn how to make decisions, solve problems, resolve conflicts, practice self-control, regulate their emotions, enhance their confidence and resiliency, etc. (Ginsburg, 2007; Gray, 2011). Further, play is the means by which children experience a key

relationship, that of friends and friendship, which is essential to children's wellbeing (Rogers, 2012).

The importance of play to optimal child development has been recognized by the United Nations High Commission for Human Rights as a right of every child (United Nations, 1990). The importance of play has also been emphasized by statements such as, "play is not a luxury but rather a crucial dynamic of healthy physical, intellectual, and socio-emotional development at all age levels" (Elkind, 2007, p. 4).

Decline of free play and barriers. However, children's opportunities for play have declined significantly (Clements, 2004; Gray, 2011). A variety of literature suggests that play is virtually nonexistent in children's lives, that its decline from previous generations is alarming, and some have questioned whether children's play is "extinct" (AHKC, 2012; Gray, 2011). The CFLRI (2011b) found that the proportion of Canadian children and youth who play outside between the end of the school day and dinner has decreased since 2000. These findings were further confirmed by a US study that found 70% of mothers reported playing outdoors every day when they were young, compared with only 31% of their children (Clements, 2004).

The decline of free play has often been attributed to barriers such as parental perceptions and behaviours related to children's safety (Lee et al., 2015), children's lack of free time (AHKC, 2012), and children's level of independence (Veitch et al., 2006). A number of studies have cited parental safety concerns as the primary barrier to children's free play (Carver et al., 2008; Jago et al., 2009; Veitch et al., 2006). Veitch and her colleagues (2006) conducted a study with 78 parents and found that the most frequently reported factor (94%) of why children do not play

outside, was safety. Safety was reported to include parents' perceptions of stranger danger, traffic safety, and the presence of older children.

Given that play is vital to children's overall health, the decline of children's play potentially places them at a greater risk for such things as obesity, chronic disease, and childhood psychopathology (AHKC, 2012; Gray, 2011). Disorders such as anxiety, depression, suicide, feelings of helplessness, and narcissism have been posited to have increased sharply in children, adolescents, and young adults over the same time period that free play (with other children) has declined sharply (Ginsburg, 2007; Gray, 2011).

Various studies within the contexts of childhood independent mobility, active transportation, and children's geographies lend support to Gray's (2011) claims of a causal link between the decrease of free play with other children and increase in childhood psychopathology. Prezza & Pacilli (2007) examined the role of childhood play and autonomous mobility to fear of crime, sense of community, and loneliness in Italian adolescents. They found that, "higher autonomous mobility and higher use of public places for play in childhood predicted less intense fear of crime and a stronger sense of community in adolescence. Furthermore, a better relationship with community predicted less pervasive feelings of loneliness" (Prezza & Pacilli, 2007, p. 151).

Independent active mobility (IAM). Independent mobility has similar benefits and barriers to free play due to the commonalities among the two contexts. A systematic review by Schoeppe and colleagues (2013) found that children who engaged in independent mobility (such as outdoor play and active transportation) accumulated more physical activity than those who do not. The psychological, social, and emotional benefits of engaging in independent mobility are also posited to be similar to those of free play, such as developing friendships (Prezza et al., 2001),

new competencies, as well as experiencing autonomy and independence (Hillman, Adams, & Whitelegg, 1990). However, because independent mobility is geographical in nature (e.g., movement from one location to another) it has benefits that are unique from free play, which can occur in one location generally close to home (Veitch et al., 2006), although still unsupervised by adults. The freedom of movement children experience through independent mobility allows them the opportunity to acquire, process, and structure environmental knowledge (Rissotto & Tonucci, 2002). Furthermore, the opportunity to move freely within a child's community reinforces the benefits posited by Prezza & Picilli (2007) of increased sense of community and regaining a place for children in the public realm (Karsten, 2005; Pacilli, Giovannelli, Prezza, & Augimeri, 2013)**.**

Relationship between sport, free play, and IAM. A complex relationship exists between the contexts of sport, free play, and IAM. Various studies have suggested that leisure time that was once devoted to free play and independent mobility has been replaced with organized adult-led and supervised physical activity or sport programs, and enrichment activities (i.e., music lessons, tutoring; Hofferth & Sandberg, 2001a; Mayfield, Chen, Harwood, Rennie, & Tannock, 2009; Valentine & McKendrick, 1997). Several studies posit that children's enrollment in sport clubs and academic programs served several purpose such as meeting the needs of "safety-conscious parents" (Witten et al., 2013, p. 215) while providing optimal environments for child development to ensure future success as adults (Ginsburg, 2007; Witten et al., 2013). Furthermore, "sports participation was at times sought out by parents to increase their children's physical activity in lieu of informal play" (Witten et al., 2013, p. 225). The time required to engage in independent mobility may be at the expense of the time needed to travel to more

distant locations to engage in enrichment activities, as Witten et al. (2013) posits, "…the immediate neighbourhood rarely satisfies parental aspirations for their children's leisure and education…" (p. 216).

Messages

Informed decisions. Given the focus on children's health and development and the emphasis on children's physical activity, parents are faced with an abundance of information about how to encourage and support their children's physical activity and development. Hofferth and Sandberg (2001b) found that "parents often seek informed guidance as to how to direct their children's activities" (p. 307). Furthermore, parents are confronted with countless decisions related to children (Niehues et al., 2013). Within the broad context of physical activity, parents are faced with messages that promote sports and organized physical activity programs (structured) as well as those that support free play (unstructured). Often, choices parents make for, and with their children are informed by messages that represent two ends of a continuum, such as safety and protection versus perceived neglect and childhood independence in the context of play and independent mobility, or the notions of parental encouragement and support versus that of over-involvement.

Marketing techniques. Messages within the field of health are often categorized as being health communication. Health communication uses strategies and tactics drawn from the field of social marketing to improve the effectiveness of and adherence to their messages (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2015). The objectives of children's physical activity messages appear to be aimed at increasing knowledge and awareness; influencing behaviors and attitudes; demonstrating health practices, and arguing against misconceptions (Freimuth & Quinn, 2004) .

Society is saturated with messages about sport, play, and IAM from within the broader context of children's physical activity. With an aim to be effective, strategies and marketing techniques are deliberately used to create messages intended to modify behaviour and improve health outcomes (Latimer, Brawley, & Bassett, 2010). Various types of messages have been-used in health promotion, these include "persuasive" (Latimer et al., 2010), "gain-framed" (Carson et al., 2014; van't Riet, Ruiter, Werrij, Candel, & de Vries, 2010), "brand equity" (Jarvis et al., 2014), and "emotion based" (Colchamiro, Ghiringhelli, & Hause, 2010) approaches.

The rationale of emotion-based messaging is the belief that people make decisions in response to anticipated emotion (Colchamiro et al., 2010). This strategy purposely focuses on the belief that "parenting is a very emotional experience" (Colchamiro et al., 2010, p. S60) and strives to understand parental pulse points which are the "fundamental emotion impulses – or 'hot buttons' – that cause individuals to act and are critical influencers in decisions related to behavior change" (Colchamiro et al., 2010, p. S60). Colchamiro, Ghringhelli and Hause (2010) found that emotion based messages had a positive impact on the delivery of, in their case, nutritional education.

Not only are messages deliberately designed to influence emotions and behavior but they are also heavily marketed (Berkowitz, Huhman, & Nolin, 2008; Ginsburg, 2007) and disseminated widely, often through "mass media, interpersonal channels and events" (National Collaborating Centre for Methods and Tools, 2010, para. 6) to reach large audiences. Mass media campaigns have become a familiar strategy in health promotion and specifically in children's physical activity messaging. Noar (2006) found that there was substantial evidence that "targeted, well-executed health mass media campaigns can have small-to-moderate effects not only on health

knowledge, beliefs, and attitudes, but on behaviors as well, which can translate into major public health impact given the wide reach of mass media" (p. 21). When we consider a ripple effect that can occur with advances in media (e.g., social media, Facebook, blogs, websites, etc.), messages can be far reaching in their exposure. Furthermore, messages originate from a number of distinct sources (e.g., academic research, for-profit businesses, popular media opinion pieces, bestselling books, government, health organizations, national movements, neighbours etc.) that have individual objectives and goals that may conflict with one another even though they all exist within the context of children's physical activity. The following sections highlight examples of messages that parents may encounter within the context of children's physical activity, sport, free play, and IAM.

Messages parents encounter.

Children's physical activity messages. There are a number of children's physical activity guidelines and recommendations from various organizations that parents may encounter. Organizations such as the Canadian Society for Exercise Physiology (CSEP) released evidence informed guidelines in 2011 for both physical activity and sedentary behaviour. These guidelines provided recommendations on the amount and intensity of physical activity that children (ages 5 – 11 years) should acquire for health benefits. In addition, CSEP (2011) also provided recommendations to reduce and limit sedentary behaviour in all ages for healthy growth and development, as well as health benefits. They further suggested what types of activities parents should encourage children to choose, and recommended active transportation and 'play based' activities such as bike riding, playground activities, and active games at recess for children ages 5 to 11 years. For older children ages 12-17, the CSEP's (2011) suggestions were to play a sport,

organize informal neighbourhood pick –up sports, and active transportation. Furthermore, these guidelines informed the Public Health Agency of Canada (Government of Canada, 2015) and have become the national recommendations for physical activity and sedentary behaviour.

Other examples of physical activity messages are from organizations such as Active Healthy Kids Canada (AHKC) and ParticipACTION. AHKC was established in 1994 with the purpose of increasing physical activity among children and youth through influencing stakeholder programs, campaigns, and policies (AHKC, 2012). They have issued annual report cards since 2005 that are comprehensive assessments of physical activity for children and youth through synthesizing data from multiple data sources and research literature. Recent reports cards have highlighted trends within the context of children and youth physical activity, such as the decrease of physical activity as a result of our 'culture of convenience' (AHKC, 2014), the decline of active transportation (AHKC, 2013), and the decline of active play (AHKC, 2012). ParticipACTION has been a national voice of physical activity and sport participation in Canada since 1971 and was re-launched in 2007 as a response to the inactivity crisis in Canada. It has since been actively introducing mass media campaigns (Craig, Bauman, Gauvin, Robertson, & Murumets, 2009) and utilizing 'brand equity' strategies (Jarvis et al., 2014) in their physical activity promotion aimed to educate and create awareness of the alarming childhood inactivity trends. Recent campaigns have included "Bring Back Play" in 2012, (ParticipACTION, 2012) and "Think Again" campaigns in 2011 focused on the message that children who participate in activities such as swimming, organized soccer, and school based physical education are likely not acquiring adequate levels of physical activity (ParticipACTION, 2015).

Contradictory and opposing nature of messages. Children's physical activity messages are often intended for parents, aimed to encourage children's participation in sports, free play, and active transportation in order to acquire adequate levels of physical activity. When a vast array of children's physical activity, sport, free play, and IAM messages are considered, parents may experience confusion and uncertainty in their decisions among sports, free play, and IAM. The following section highlights some of the messages that exist within the broad context of physical activity, as well as within and among the contexts of sport, free play, and IAM.

There is an abundance of messages that both encourage and discourage children's participation in sport. Sports are recommended as a means for children to acquire physical activity. The 2011 AHKC highlight version of the report card titled, "Don't Let This Be the Most Physical Activity our Kids Get After School" (illustrates a short walk for a child between the bus and home) shares evidence that "children who participate in organized sport take 1,600 more steps per day than those who don't participate in these sports" (p. 4). They further cite that "studies indicate that organized sport during childhood is positively related to frequency of leisure-time physical activity in early adulthood" (AHKC, 2011b, p. 4). Yet, simultaneously in the AHKC 2011 long-form report card there is strong encouragement for unstructured play when they state, "an important question to ask is whether organized sport and physical activity is the only way to get children and youth active. Unstructured physical activity and active play may be an equally good, *if not better* [emphasis added], way for children and youth to increase their physical activity" (AHKC, 2011a, p. 22). A possible interpretation of this statement, that play is better than sport for increasing physical activity levels of children, could lead parents to question the benefits of structured sport participation in relation to free play.

Support for children to participate in organized sport programs is evident in literature such as "Children's Sport Participation in Canada: Is it a Level Playing field?" (Trussell & McTeer, 2007) and organizations such as KidsSport whose purpose is "helping our kids get off the sidelines" by providing financial assistance to families who are unable to afford children's sport programs (CIBC, 2014; KidSport, 2015). These organizations, among many others encourage children's sport participation. However, when we examine the literature within sport which cautions of the potentially negative aspects of sport participation, an opposing discourse emerges.

There is a significant amount of research and popular media that project messages about the potentially negative aspects of children's sport. Malina (2010) and Gould (2009) caution against the popular trends of children's early sport specialization and the professionalization of children's sport, and the risks associated with these common trends, such as social isolation, overdependence (on others as a result of a highly regulated life), burnout, and overuse injury. Arthur-Banning and colleagues (2009), and Bouzane (2015) are among the many empirical studies and popular media that project messages about the negative behaviours of parents, who are influencers and mediators of children's sport experiences, and the impact these behaviours have on children's sporting experiences. Coaching behaviours were examined by Shields, Bredemeier, LaVoi, and Power (2005) who found that "problems with coaches, sometimes severe, are not uncommon in youth sports" (p. 55). Leek and her colleagues (2011) examined the amount of physical activity children acquired during youth sports practices and found that less than one-fourth of youth athletes obtained the recommended amount of 60 minutes of moderate-to vigourous physical activity during sport practices. Leek and her colleagues (2011) findings,

along with ParticipACTION's Think Again campaigns, project a shared message that sports participation may not be providing adequate amounts of physical activity in children's lives. Furthermore, various free play and children's time use studies have posited that increased participation in organized activities such as sport and physical activity programs is directly and indirectly related to the decline of children's play (Hofferth & Sandberg, 2001a; Witten et al., 2013), thus leading to an array of negative outcomes for children such as decreased adult creativity and increased childhood psychopathologies (Bowers et al., 2014; Gray, 2011). These studies and popular media reports are a sampling of the many messages that oppose the evidence that exists for the benefits of children's sport participation.

Support versus hyper-parenting in children's sports. Parental support and encouragement are the strongest correlates of children's physical activity levels (Heitzler et al., 2006; Sallis et al., 2000). Accordingly, parental support and encouragement should be viewed positively. However, in studies and popular media, parents are often portrayed as being over-involved in their child's sport experience (Wuerth, Lee, & Alfermann, 2004), "helicopter parents" because of their concern about children's safety and achievements (Locke et al., 2012), or misguided because their encouragement of their children's sport and physical activity involvement appears to be encouraging sport specialization (Malina, 2010), or the overscheduling of a child (Elkind, 2007). Wiersma and Fifer (2008) agree that "much of the attention in the youth sports literature focuses on negative perceptions and influences of parental behaviours, criticizes parents for focusing on competition rather than individual development, and encourages parental education that clarifies the role of the parent in the youth sport setting" (p. 525). However, Wiersma and Fifer's (2008) findings differ from the popular negative messages regarding parents in children's

sport. They found that the parents in their study had a "clear understanding of their role in youth sports, articulated a child-centered philosophy of involvement, and clarified quite cogently how they should behave at youth sport events" (p. 525).

Messages also exist that project a negative perspective that parental encouragement and support for children's participation in sport are misguided opportunities for parents to feel successful in their parenting (Coakley, 2006). These messages are in contrast to positive perspectives of parental involvement, such as parents are supporting their children's own desires to participate in sport (Wiersma & Fifer, 2008) for reasons such as having fun, gaining new skills, and being with friends (Weiss, 2004).

The negative perceptions of parental involvement in children's sports are evident and projected through the many messages that originate in research, popular media, and gray literature. These negative perceptions are generalized toward parents and feed an environment that judges parenting behaviours, thus influencing social norms and expectations. Granted, there are instances of extreme parental behaviours that warrant these negative judgments, however, some studies have suggested that these extreme situations have been sensationalized and overshadow the generally good behaviour of a majority of children's sport parents (Omli, LaVoi, & Wiese-Bjornstal, 2008). As Shields and his colleagues (2005) stated in their study assessing the frequency of good and poor sport behaviors as perceived by young athletes, parents, and coaches, "the playing fields of youth sports are populated neither by angels nor devils, but human beings who often act well, but who sometimes do not" (p. 43).

"Parenting is both a private and public activity; parenting is simultaneously an intensely personal and a commonly shared experience" (Llewellyn, 1994, p. 173). Publicly, parenting

behaviours are heavily judged and often said to be misguided. Literature and popular media often suggest that parents of children who specialize early in sport believe that good parenting has become associated with the achievements of children (Coakley, 2006). Coakley (2006) posited that the worth of parents is tied to the success of one's children, and since sport is a highly visible and popular endeavor that provides objective measures of success, parents feel the need to invest tremendous amounts of time and money to support their young athletes. Furthermore, popular media also cites anecdotal reports that perpetuate the popular belief that parents are misguided. These reports have suggested that parents who are heavily invested in their children's sports are chasing after college scholarships and professional contracts for their children (Woods, 2014).

Yet, numerous studies counter these generalizations and have instead found that parent's intentions for their children's participation in sports are not as misguided as some literature has suggested. Instead, parents invest in their children's sport participation for various reasons that include children gaining positive perceptions of themselves, social benefits, physical benefits, and the opportunity to develop life skills (Neely & Holt, 2014; Wiersma & Fifer, 2008). Furthermore, studies have found that parents are aware of and concerned about the common negative issues often attributed to parent's misguided intentions, such as the pressure of extensive time commitments expected of children, burnout, and the potentially negative or adverse consequences of youth sport settings (Wiersma & Fifer, 2008). Parents may not be as misguided as many messages suggest, yet, they are faced with the abundance of messages that say otherwise.

Safety versus hyper-parenting in children's free play and IAM. Often, popular media and academic literature will collectively categorize parental safety concerns in the context of free play and independent mobility as 'parental overprotection' (Ungar, 2009). Parental overprotection is also often interchanged with terms such as 'hyper-parenting', the parenting style described as intensive parenting, and the lexicon of 'helicopter parenting' (Shaw, 2010). Locke, Campbell, and Kavanagh (2012) conducted a study with those they considered parenting professionals (psychologists and school guidance counsellors) to gain insights into what the professionals considered 'over-parenting' actions. Interestingly, the posited effects of over-parenting on children bear similarities to the consequences associated with the decline of play and IAM, such as "reduced child resilience, a sense of entitlement, child anxiety, reduced life skills, and an inadequate sense of responsibility or self efficacy" (Locke, Campbell, & Kavanagh, 2012, p. 261). The suggested negative results of over-parenting and hyper-parenting, coupled with the decline of children's play and IAM have resulted in the increasing popularity of the use of these labels in the discourse of parenting.

The parental behaviours of over-parenting and hyper-parenting have increasingly come under scrutiny in the academic literature and popular media in all contexts of children's lives (i.e., education, sport, play, etc.). Given the important responsibility that parents have for the safety, health, and overall development of their children, it is understandable that parents who seek to make "informed decisions" (Hofferth & Sandberg, 2001b) would take their parenting responsibilities seriously and therefore invest a great deal of effort into parenting. Yet, in this process, parents simultaneously face messages that suggest they are doing 'too much' for their children, as evident in the discourse of overprotection and hyper-parenting.

The popularity of the overprotection and hyper-parenting labels, along with the focus on these parental behaviours are apparent in the numerous studies that address barriers to children's play. Academic literature such as, "The Bubble-Wrap Generation: Children Growing Up in Walled Gardens" (Malone, 2007), and "'You Can't Wrap Them Up in Cotton Wool!' Constructing Risk in Young People's Access to Outdoor Play" (Jenkins, 2006) are examples that focus on parental behaviours. Gray literature titles provide further evidence of the current beliefs and notions around parental overprotection and hyper-parenting. Titles such as "Let Kids be Kids" (Wilkinson, 2011), and *Free-Range Kids, Giving Our Children the Freedom We Had Without Going Nuts with Worry* (Skenazy, 2009) are examples of one side of the current societal views on parental protection.

The support for children's play as a means to acquire physical activity is also faced with opposing messages. Parents are cited as overscheduling their children's time (Sandberg, 2011) and looking to organized activities to meet their children's physical activity needs. The most commonly cited barriers to children's participation in free play and IAM are parental safety concerns and parental overprotection. These barriers are well known in society and topics that are frequently addressed in literature and popular media. Labels and descriptions of parents, such as helicopter parents, hyper-parenting, risk-averse parents, are common in our society. However, a number of media headlines in recent years suggest that contradictory messages exist. Various media headlines describe instances where parents have been arrested for allowing their children (ages 6 to 10 years) opportunities for unsupervised free play and IAM (walking to school or parks; Boesveld, 2014).

Impact of contradictory messages on parents. Contradictory messages are evident when various messages across the contexts of children's physical activity, sport, free play, and IAM are considered. Furthermore, contradictory messages may be counterproductive in educating and modifying population health behaviours. Hesketh, Water, Green, Salmon, and Williams (2005) conducted a qualitative study of children and parents' views regarding social and environmental barriers in the context of healthy eating, physical activity, and child obesity. They found that contradictory messages created confusion and could hinder children's ability to make healthy lifestyle decisions. Contradictory messages as well as the simple abundance of physical activity, sport, free play, and independent mobility messages could potentially create confusion that impacts parental behaviours and practices.

Parents are a primary target of the messages addressing children's physical activity, sport, free play, and independent mobility. As demonstrated in the previous sections, parents encounter an abundance of child-related physical activity messages through academic and gray literature. Media headlines, guidelines, campaigns, and for-profit businesses etc. become sources to educate, guide, and direct parents on what to do (or not do) *for* their child, what to do (or not do) *with* their child, *where* to do it, *who* to do it with, *why* do it, and *when* to do it. Furthermore, physical activity messages exist alongside a vast array of other messages that market opportunities for optimal child development (e.g., music development, academic opportunities, etc.). Many of these carefully marketed messages focus on the notion of good parenting and the belief that good parents expose their children to every opportunity to excel…and ensure their children participate in a wide variety of activities" (Ginsburg, 2007, p. 184).

The Complexity of Parenting

There are a few studies that acknowledge the opposing discourses of good parenting and the complexity of parenting within the broad context of children's physical activity messages. Pacilli et al. (2013) recognized the "quandary" (p. 379) that parents are in within the context of independent mobility. The authors acknowledged that there is an "increasing social emphasis on children's vulnerability and protection, on one hand, and the promotion of children's independence, on the other…" (Pacilli et al., 2013, p. 379). Furthermore, Pacilli and colleagues (2013), supported by the finding of De Groof's (2008) study about parental influence and fear of crime among children, recognized the pressure coming from beyond the sphere of parental beliefs and values and the complexity of finding a balance between children's safety and autonomy. Benwell (2013) provided a balance to the frequently sensationalized media reports of 'children in captivity' and 'bubble-wrapped' children, and presents a more socioecologically framed perspective. He found that the choice of parents to limit unsupervised play or travel may be based on very real safety concerns, such as unsafe neighbourhoods. In his study, situated in Cape Town, South Africa, the protective behaviours of parents were "positively construed" and led children to have "greater engagement with outdoor space" (p. 38). Similarly, O'Connor and Brown (2013) acknowledged that popular press and academic literature characterized middle class parents as "over anxious toward culturally reinforced dangers [of children's independent active school travel (IAST)] whilst being ignorant of the benefits…during childhood" (p. 157). These authors (O'Connor & Brown, 2013) found that parents were "far from being irrational…and were aware of the consequences of their decisions on a range of outcomes" (p. 157). O'Connor and Brown (2013) acknowledged the complexity of the construction of parental

fear and IAST, and the constant negotiation that parents experience within their specific cultural and environmental context. Carson et al. (2014) examined the perceptions of parents on the Canadian Sedentary Behaviour Guidelines for the Early Years and found that parents perceived barriers included the "need to balance multiple demands of family life, the prevalence and accessibility of screen technology, and the weather and built environment where families live" (Abstract section, para. 3).

Related Research

Various studies have explored children's health messages from a broad epidemiological perspective focused on addressing childhood obesity. These studies have generally considered both healthy eating and physical activity behaviours of children (Colchamiro et al., 2010). In the context of childhood obesity, Thomas et al. (2014), conducted a qualitative study that compared two contrasting anti-obesity mass media campaigns and found that some parents "…had very strong negative reactions to the messages and delivery style used in the advertisement" (Results section, para. 8). Furthermore, Thomas et al. (2014) found that the parents and children in their study recognized that the campaigns were aimed at personal responsibility, and participants were "at times critical of that the campaigns did not tackle the broader issues associated with the causes and consequences of obesity" (Abstract section, para. 3). Although these studies are not specific to children's physical activity messages, they highlight that messages have an impact on parents. Furthermore, they acknowledge the need to apply a broad framework to understanding the impact of messages on parents.

More specifically, research within the area of children's physical activity messaging has focused on the design of messages (i.e., framing, brand equity, etc.) and the believability of the

messages by parents (Berry et al., 2014; Craig, Bauman, Gauvin, Robertson, & Murumets, 2009; Jarvis, Gainforth, & Latimer-Cheung, 2014; Jarvis et al., 2014). Various quantitative studies have explored the impact, believability, and parents' attitudes and behaviours related to children's physical activity messages (e.g., mass media campaigns advertisements; Berry et al., 2014; Jarvis et al., 2014). In sum, these studies have evaluated the effectiveness of various types and strategies used for physical activity messaging aimed to influence parental behaviours. The findings in these studies contribute valuable knowledge on how to best frame physical activity messages directed at parents to modify behaviours that support children's physical health.

There is some academic literature, as well as gray literature that suggest parents are impacted by the messages they face. There are a few studies from the contexts of children's sport, free play, IAM, and physical activity that have explored the impact that a single physical activity message has had on parents. Carson et al. (2014) examined parents' perceptions of the new Canadian Sedentary Behaviour Guidelines for the Early Years (aged 0-4 years) and found that parents experienced "some confusion" and "feeling guilty" (Results section, para. 7). Various authors of best-selling books have discussed parental feelings. Carl Honoré, the author of books such as, *Under Pressure: Putting the Child Back in Childhood* and *In Praise of Slow*, suggested that parents have lost confidence in their parenting (Honoré, 2009). Skenazy (2009) candidly said that "no wonder parents feel so insecure and second-guessed all the time. Someone is always second-guessing! And usually those someones [sic] can find a study or expert that supports their side" (p. 111). Elkind (2007) shared in his book, *The Hurried Child: Growing Up Too Fast Too Soon*, that "after talking with parents all over the country, I have found that many are really trying very hard not to hurry their children, but feel forced into it because of what other

parents are doing, namely, enrolling their children in organized sports and other programs" (p xxi).

Section Summary

Academic and gray literature, media reports, guidelines, and recommendations in sport, physical activity, play, active transportation, and independent mobility compose a vast amount of messages whose intentional and unintentional audiences are parents. Messages within sport, free play, and independent mobility are commonly presented as single entities; some are more effectively marketed and may reach parents more readily, while others may have greater influences on the behaviours of parents. Although these messages are specific to the contexts in which they originate from, they inevitably intersect in parents' message saturated lives.

We know very little about how the vast abundance of children's physical activity messages impact parents within the complexity of their daily lives. As Witten and her colleagues (2013) posited in their study of the intergenerational decline in children's independent outdoor play and active travel, that "too easily", negatively perceived changes in children's lives, such as an increase in structured, supervised and indoor activities, or the increase in parental rules and the decline of children's spatial freedoms, are "attributed to the cumulative effect of individual attitudes and actions" (p. 216). They suggest that "social, cultural and structural explanations warrant attention" (Witten et al., 2013, p. 216).

This thesis aimed to explore these broader 'social, cultural, and structural explanations' in parents' perspectives on children's sport and play, and particularly how various messages

interplay and impact parents. In order to do so, a socioecological model was used as a lens through which to conduct the research.

Theoretical Framework

Socioecological model. A socioecological model (SEM) approach applied to the context of children's sport and physical activity illustrates the abundance of messages that may exist from various sources of influence (see Figure 1). Exploring the impact of children's physical activity messaging on parents would benefit from a systems-level approach that considers messages from various levels of influence, the relationship between various messages, and the impact they have together on parental perspectives and behaviours within their unique contexts. SEM's posit that individual behaviours are influenced by individual characteristics as well as social and environmental factors from various systems. As discussed earlier, all too often changes to children's lives are attributed to individual attributes and behaviours of parents with little consideration to broader contextual factors (Witten et al., 2013).

History of the SEM. SEM's are rooted in the ecological systems work of Bronfenbrenner (2005). Bronfenbrenner's (2005) ecological systems work has evolved since 1979 and fundamentally looked at a child's development within the context of various relationships that are a part of the child's environment. The theory conceptualized an individual's environment to consist of interrelated ecological systems that are nested. The systems ranged from the most proximal being the microsystem, to the mesosystem, the exosystem and lastly the most distal, the macrosystem (Bronfenbrenner, 2005) . The evolution of Bronfenbrenner's bioecological theory of human development has come to include an intrapersonal system which considers the continual change of the biopsychological characteristics of human beings both as individuals and

as groups, as well as the chronosystem which considers the contexts of history and time and the changes over an individual's life span (Bronfenbrenner, 2005). The evolution of his theory has come to be referred to as Person-Process-Context-Time (PPCT) model (Bronfenbrenner, 2005), and consists of the four aforementioned components which are interrelated and influence one another bidirectionally.

SEM in the context of parents, sports, free play, and messages. Bronfenbrenner's (2005) bioecological model has several defining properties that guide this thesis. The first is the element of 'experience'. Bronfenbrenner acknowledges that an individual's environments include objective properties but also the subjective interpretations of these properties, such as positive and negative subjective feelings (i.e., hope, doubt, personal beliefs, etc.). These forces do not always operate in the same direction, and can contribute to shaping the course of an individual's development in the future. The element of experience, particularly subjective experience, is relevant to the main objective of this study, which is that parents have subjective experiences that influence their perspectives about sport and free play and in response to the messages they encounter.

The second defining property is the notion of 'proximal processes'. These processes are the reciprocal interactions between an individual and their immediate external environment which includes, people, objects, and symbols (Bronfenbrenner, 2005). Bronfenbrenner (2005) posits that "proximal processes are the primary engines of development" (p. 6). Therefore, in the case of this thesis, the interactions a child has with a parent (who is in the proximal microsystem of the child), are vital to the experiences that children have in sport and free play. Proximal processes, which are the consideration of bidirectional interactions between parents and the

messages from various sources, also underpin this study. Parents can hear a message or multiple messages and subsequently project these messages, and their experiences of these messages to distal environments which can result in influencing community or societal norms regarding parenting.

The third defining property of the bioecological systems theory relevant to this work is the concept of history and time. The contexts of history and time include both an individual's characteristics that change over time, as well as the changes that occur in their society, their communities, their social networks, and their families (Bronfenbrenner, 2005). The notion of changes that occur in society, communities, and social networks are highly relevant to the context of children's play and IAM (although IAM is not a focus of the papers to follow) based on findings of academic literature and the anecdotal stories from gray literature. The findings of various studies on children's free play, time use, and independent mobility support the need to consider history and time in studies of children. The findings of academic studies have posited that the nature of childhood has changed over time (Valentine & McKendrick, 1997), that parenting ideologies have changed over time (Shaw, 2010), and more specifically that children's roam radius' have been shrinking over time (Gaster, 1991). In addition, literature as well as many anecdotal stories and books about children's play and childhood development, have frequently lamented about how their own childhoods were so different from those that their children now have (Karsten, 2005; Laumann, 2010; Witten et al., 2013).

Description of SEM framework. A SEM framework applied to this study consisted of five concentric circles to indicate the intrapersonal, interpersonal, organizational, community and society, and cultural levels of influence on parents (see Figure 1). The intrapersonal system, or

the person component of the PPCT model, involves an individual's biological, cognitive, emotional, and behavioural characteristics (Bronfenbrenner, 2005). The context component of the model is conceptualized as the nested systems, and includes the microsystem, the mesosystem, the exosystem, and the macrosystem. The microsystem is the immediate environment of a child and includes the objects and people that a child interacts with daily (Bronfenbrenner, 2005). Within the microsystem of the bioecological systems theory, children are generally most directly influenced by parents within the context of sport and free play (Howard & Madrigal, 1990; Macdonald et al., 2005; Welk et al., 2003). The mesosystem contains the relationships within the microsystems (Bronfenbrenner, 2005). Subsequently, parents are exposed to a number of influences from the more distal systems, those being the exosystem and macrosystem. This thesis will focus on messages in the external systems of influence on a child, in relation to parents. Equally important in this exploratory research is the consideration of the chronosystem which is the historical context and time in which children live. A number of studies have explored the changing nature of childhood and how children's play, sport, and IAM experiences have changed over time (Valentine & McKendrick, 1997), yet messages projected to parents often fail to acknowledge the influence of time and context.

Because of the exploratory nature of this work, Bronfenbrenner's bioecological theory of human development theory (PPCT model) will be used as a guiding framework. This thesis was not designed to specifically examine the proximal processes of the child and parent, or examine in depth the history in which these families live, nor a child or parents' development over time. Rather, a primary objective was to explore the subjective experiences of parents and their perspectives on children's sport and play in particular and in response to the many messages

from the various systems of an individual's life, while acknowledging the aforementioned elements of Bronfenbrenner's theory. Bronfenbrenner suggested in the application of his model to research that the specific components of Process, Person, Context, and Time to be included in a given investigation should be those that, from a theoretical perspective, are "maximally relevant to the research question under investigation and complementary to each other in relation to the given developmental outcome" (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006, p. 808).

SEM and relevant research. An ecological framework has been applied to various studies in the context of children's health. O'Connor and Brown (2013), in their qualitative study of fear as a regulator of children's independent physical activity utilized a socioecological perspective when examining the influence of messages on parental behaviours and practices to understand fear from a holistic perspective. Holt, Kingsley, Tink, and Scherer (2011) applied a broad ecological framework to their study that examined perceptions of low-income parents and children about the benefits and challenges associated with participation in youth sports. Holt et al., (2011) chose an ecological approach because of the exploratory nature of their study that was not guided by, or testing a theory. Pocock, Trivedi, Wills, Bunn, and Magnusson (2010) in a systematic review of qualitative studies mapped their findings to a SEM model which illustrated how factors at individual, interpersonal, community, organizational, and societal levels interacted in complex ways to impact parental perceptions about healthy behaviours for preventing child overweight. The present study about parents' perspectives of children's physical activity and physical activity messages bears commonalities to Pocock et al.'s (2010) study in that it draws on literature, and more specifically messages from a variety of levels that influence parents while considering the context in which parents live.

Method

Philosophical Position

A qualitative approach is appropriate given that my philosophical positions align with a social constructivist paradigm, that reality is subjective (Creswell, 2013) and that there is a co-creation of knowledge between me, and the participants. A qualitative approach allows for greater understanding of the participants personal experiences of children's physical activity and its messages within the specific contexts in which they live and allows for understanding of their historical and cultural settings (Creswell, 2013). Furthermore, a qualitative approach can give "voice to those whose views are rarely heard" (Sofaer, 1999, p. 1101), specifically parents of children in sport and free play who encounter many messages, sometimes opposing, within these contexts.

Interpretive Description

My philosophical position made interpretive descriptive (ID) an appropriate methodology to explore and generate new insights on parents' perspectives and how the broad array of children's physical activity messages impact parents. An ID approach was used to guide the emergent design of this study. ID is defined as "a coherent methodological framework within which a fairly wide range of options for design decisions can be enacted and justified" (Thorne, 2008, p. 75). Although ID arose from a need for qualitative research that could be applied within the nursing disciplines, it is also an approach that can "generate better understandings of complex experiential… phenomena within…other professional disciplines concerned with applied health knowledge or questions 'from the field'" (Thorne, 2008, p. 27).

Various studies have used an ID approach within the context of children's sport. Neely and Holt (2014) used an ID methodology to identify and interpret commonalities between individual parents' perspectives on the benefits young children gain through sport participation. Clark, Spence, and Holt (2011) used an ID framework to gain insight into the meaning of physical activity in the daily lives of young adolescent girls. Holt et al. (2011) used it to explore the benefits and challenges of sport participation of low-income children and parents. As Holt and his colleagues (2011) posited, ID is "particularly useful for studies that seek to examine patterned relationships between personal and contextual issues" (p. 492). Therefore, the use of ID for this research was appropriate in exploring parents' perspectives on children's physical activity and the impact of children's sport and free play messages within the context of parents' lives.

What follows are two papers that emerged from a set of interviews with sport parents. The first paper focuses on parents' perspectives about children's sport and free play. The second paper emphasizes the messages they hear in the contexts of children's sport and play and how those messages impact them and their decisions.

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Abstract

This study explored parents' perspectives of children's sport and free play using a socioecological lens. Employing an interpretive description approach, 12 semi-structured interviews were conducted with club sport parents of children 8-10 years old in a northern Canadian city. Data, which included the transcribed interviews and reflective notes, were analyzed. Our findings suggest a drastic change in children's sport and free play experiences from previous generations, and an acceptance by parents echoed in the overarching study theme, that 'times have changed'. Within this overarching theme, two primary themes were captured: 1) Not so 'free' play and 2) The privileging of sport. Both free play and sport were viewed as being important to middle childhood, however, experiences gained in children's sport were viewed to be of greater value than those of free play to the overall development of children. Parents acknowledged the changed nature of free play from their own childhoods, and recognized the evolution of the 'play date'. Overall, children's sport and free play experiences were tremendously impacted by numerous factors from external levels of influence as revealed through the socioecological lens.

Chapter 3: Times Have Changed: Parent Perspectives on Children's Free Play and Sport

Understanding factors that influence children's free play and sport experiences is becoming increasingly important in light of a growing body of evidence that indicates the health of children in Canada has deteriorated over the past several decades (Colley et al., 2011). The increasing prevalence of childhood overweight and obesity (Tremblay et al., 2002), chronic diseases, and childhood psychopathology (Gray, 2011) have become growing issues. In fact, the World Health Organization acknowledged childhood obesity as a global concern and "one of the most serious public health challenges of the 21st century" (World Health Organization, 2014, para. 1). These concerns have been linked to a decline in children's overall physical activity levels, the decline of free play, hyper-parenting (Shaw, 2010; Wilkinson, 2011), and the over-protection of children (Malone, 2007), which are associated with new parenting ideologies. These new parenting ideologies "put emphasis on the ever-increasing (and changing) responsibilities that parents bear, related to ensuring their children follow a healthy developmental pattern and achieve overall success in life" (Shaw, 2010, p. 10).

The Current State of Children's Free Play and Sport

Low levels of physical activity have in part been attributed to the decline of free play, particularly outdoors, in children's lives (Burdette, Whitaker, & Daniels, 2004; Cleland et al., 2008) and low rates of sport participation (Clark, 2008; Dollman et al., 2005). Although research specific to children's sport participation rates have yielded mixed results (Booth et al., 2015; Canadian Fitness and Lifestyle Research Institute [CFLRI], 2011; Clark, 2008; Dollman et al., 2005), there is strong evidence that children's opportunities for play have declined significantly from previous generations (Active Healthy Kids Canada [AHKC], 2012; Clements, 2004; Gray,

2011). For example, an American study by Clements (2004) found that 70% of mothers reported playing outdoors every day when they were young, compared with only 31% of their children.

Free play. The decline of free play has often been attributed to barriers such as parental safety concerns (Carver, Timperio, & Crawford, 2008; Jago et al., 2009; Lee et al., 2015; Veitch et al., 2006), children's lack of free time (AHKC, 2012), and children's level of independence (Veitch et al., 2006). Veitch and her colleagues (2006) conducted a study with 78 parents and found that the most frequently reported factor (94%) of why children do not play outside, was safety concerns such as parents' perceptions of stranger danger, traffic safety, and the presence of older children.

The literature and discourse on children's play has grown considerably within the last few decades, and has also led to an increase in research devoted to the psychological, social, and emotional benefits (Canning, 2007; Erickson, 1985; Waite, Rogers, & Evans, 2013) of all forms of play (i.e., informal play, free play, active play, unstructured play, social play, etc.). Specifically, there has been a strong emergence of support for free play that occurs outside with other children and its importance to childhood development (Gray, 2011; Waite et al., 2013). Outdoor, free play is one of the most consistent predictors of children's physical activity levels (Fairclough, Ridgers, & Welk, 2012; Sallis, Prochaska, & Taylor, 2000; Timmons, Naylor, & Pfeiffer, 2007). Equally important to the physical benefits of free play, are the psychological, social, and emotional benefits children gain, such as developing intrinsic interests and competencies, learning how to make decisions, solve problems, resolve conflicts, practice self-control, regulate their emotions, enhance their confidence and resiliency, etc. (Ginsburg, 2007; Gray, 2011). Furthermore, play is the means by which children experience a key relationship,

that of friends and friendship, which is essential to children's well-being (Rogers, 2012). Given that play is vital to children's overall health, the decline of children's play potentially places them at a greater risk for such things as obesity, chronic disease, and childhood psychopathology (AHKC, 2012; Gray, 2011).

Sport. Although free play has declined, the importance of children's sport has increased within our society (De Knop, 1996) and particularly in the lives of middle class families. In a study of the decline of independent outdoor play and active travel, Witten and colleagues (2013) found that "sports participation was at times sought out by parents to increase their children's physical activity in lieu of informal play" (p. 225). Sport participation is often encouraged as a means to increase children's physical activity levels in light of global concerns about childhood inactivity and obesity. Although the physical benefits are often cited by parents as a reason for their child's participation in sport, the perceived emotional, social, and cognitive benefits children gain are cited as equally, if not more important. Wiersma and Fifer (2008) found that parents believed that their children gained valuable life skills (i.e., competiveness, sportsmanship, teamwork, responsibility, etc.), had opportunities to build social skills, establish relationships, and develop self-confidence, self-esteem, and lasting memories through sport participation.

There is a growing body of research that supports the notion that sport may provide a context in which youth acquire qualities such as competencies, assets, values, and life skills that also help them thrive away from the field of play (Jones, Dunn, Holt, Sullivan, & Bloom, 2011). Neely and Holt (2014) interviewed parents of young children (aged 5 to 8) who participated in organized sports and found that parents perceived that their children gained a range of personal,

social, and physical benefits such as positive self-perception, opportunities for friendship, teamwork and cooperation, and increased physical activity and development of fundamental movement skills.

The role of parents. Parents serve the role of "gatekeepers" (Welk, Wood, & Morss, 2003, p. 19) to their children's physical activity opportunities through free play and sport and are considered effective "agents of change" (Golan, Weizman, Apter, & Fainaru, 1998, p. 1130) to improving their children's health. Parents support their children in sport and physical activity by providing encouragement, instrumental support (e.g., transportation, paying for fees, equipment, etc.), and opportunity (Pugliese & Tinsley, 2007; Sallis et al., 2000). Pugliese and Tinsley (2007) found that "the odds of being an active child or adolescent are almost two times greater with supportive versus unsupportive parents" (p. 338).

Despite this positive involvement, parents are also implicated in studies that highlight concerns related to children's free play and sport. Concerns include the increasing prevalence of childhood overweight and obesity (Lindsay, Sussner, Kim, & Gortmaker, 2006); the 'professionalization' of children's sports (Gould, 2009); the decline of children's outdoor free play (Gray, 2011; ParticipACTION, 2015; Valentine & McKendrick, 1997), children's 'hurried' and 'overscheduled' lifestyles (Elkind, 2007), and the 'overprotection' of children (Malone, 2007). Researchers have posited that these trends contribute to an array of negative psychological outcomes in children, such as psychological 'burnout' (Coakley, 1992), a 'rise of psychopathology' (i.e., anxiety, narcissism, depression, etc.; Gray, 2011), increased feelings of loneliness, a loss of sense of community, and an increased fear of crime (Gray, 2011; Prezza & Pacilli, 2007). For example, Valentine and McKendrick (1997) found that parents had the most

significant influence on children's opportunities for independent outdoor play and cited "parental anxieties about children's safety and the changing nature of childhood" (p. 219) as barriers. Their work is supported by that of Malone (2007) who argued that parents are contributing to negative outcomes of children by restricting independent, outdoor free play by being "over protective" (p. 513), "bubble-wrapping their children" (p. 513), and "…speeding-up…the pace of children's lives" (p. 516).

When it comes to decisions regarding their children's health and wellbeing, parents "wrestle with competing sets of social expectations, as well as their own rational and emotive judgments" (Jenkins, 2006, p.379). This is especially true in the context of children's physical activity. Parenting behaviours are in response to a "complex blend of family, community and cultural expectations and circumstances" (Witten et al., 2013, p. 226). Furthermore, parenting behaviors are often motivated by the desire to be good parents and to be perceived by others as a good parent (Valentine & McKendrick, 1997). Substantial evidence suggests that social norms exert pressure on parents and influence their decisions regarding their children's sport and free play opportunities. Wheeler and Green (2014) found that a norm was generated and regulated by parents that good parenting required children to be involved in "at least two organized sport activities outside school at any one given time, and to have taken swimming lessons from a young age" (p. 279). Parents who encourage their children to participate in a variety of activities such as sport sampling (Côté, Horton, MacDonald, & Wilkes, 2009) can simultaneously be viewed as overscheduling parents (Honoré, 2009), and those who are raising a "backseat generation" (Karsten, 2005, p. 275) because they drive their children from one activity to another. Similarly, free play studies found that "strong social norms existed regarding parents'

allowing their children to play in the street and at times disapproval of parents who allowed their child to do this was expressed" (Veitch et al., 2006, p. 388).

While parents are often held responsible for all aspects of their children's wellbeing, Witten and colleagues (2013) present an alternative view. In their study of the intergenerational decline in children's independent outdoor play and active travel they stated that:

> …Too easily, negatively perceived changes in children's lives, such as an increase in structured, supervised and indoor activities, or the increase in parental rules and the decline of children's spatial freedoms, are attributed to the cumulative effect of individual [parent] attitudes and actions. (Witten et al., 2013, p. 216)

Witten and colleagues (2013) go on to suggest that "social, cultural and structural explanations warrant attention" (p. 216) when considering these changes in children's lives. Moving beyond the individual level to also consider how social, cultural, and structural factors shape and influence children's physical activity opportunities and outcomes is critical to gain a deeper and more robust understanding of issues surrounding children's health as it relates to engagement in physical activity and in particular, sport and free play.

Purpose

The issues surrounding children's health, sport and free play, and parenting are complex. Considering the current state of children's health, the central role of parents in children's physical activity engagement, and Witten and her colleagues (2013) recommendations, the purpose of this study was to explore children's free play and sport from the perspectives of parents using a socioecological lens. In doing so, we placed emphasis on the complexity of

parenting in children's free play and sport while giving consideration to current cultural and parenting ideologies. Gaining a deeper understanding of parent perspectives, we hope, will generate critical knowledge toward addressing important issues surrounding child health development, particularly as they are influenced through opportunities associated with free play and sport to which parents are often considered the 'gatekeepers'.

Theoretical Framework

In order to consider parent perspectives within the context of play and sport more broadly, we engaged a socioecological model (SEM). SEM's provide a comprehensive framework to understand factors from various levels of influence including the individual, social, physical, organizational, and policy levels. The SEM applied in this study was guided by the ecological systems work of Bronfenbrenner (2005), Stokols (1996), and McLeroy, Bibeau, Steckler, and Glanz (1988).

Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems work has evolved since 1979 and fundamentally looked at a child's development within the context of various relationships that are a part of the child's environment. The theory conceptualized an individual's environment to consist of interrelated, nested, ecological systems (microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, macrosystem; Bronfenbrenner, 2005). The evolution of Bronfenbrenner's work has come to include an intrapersonal system which considers the continual change of the biopsychological characteristics of human beings both as individuals and as groups, as well as the chronosystem which considers the contexts of history and time and the changes over an individual's life span (Bronfenbrenner, 2005). Stokols' (1996) work offers a social ecological approach to health promotion and in particular addresses the multidirectional influence between individual and

collective behaviours, and their physical and social environments. Stokols' (1996) work also recognizes the multidimensional nature of environments and gives consideration to the actual and perceived qualities of the environments. The work of McLeroy and his colleagues (1988) provides the specific framework to the SEM used in this study. Their variation of Bronfenbrenner's early SEM, categorizes the systems of influence as Intrapersonal Factors, Interpersonal Processes and Primary Groups, Organizational Factors, Community Factors, and Public Policy (McLeroy et al., 1988).

A SEM model guided by the work of Bronfenbrenner (2005), Stokols (1996), and McLeroy et al. (1988) is particularly relevant to this study for a number of reasons. First, SEM's consider the proximal process of a child; therefore the exploration of parents' views is important given the evidence that parents play a pivotal role in how children spend their free time (Hofferth & Sandberg, 2001). Secondly, SEM's give consideration to history and time. There is an abundance of empirical and anecdotal literature within the context of children's free play and sport that lament changed and lost childhoods when reflecting on childhoods of previous generations (Karsten, 2005; Laumann, 2010; Witten et al., 2013). The findings of academic studies have posited that the nature of childhood has changed over time (Valentine & McKendrick, 1997), children's roam radius' have been shrinking (Gaster, 1991), and that parenting ideologies have also changed over time (Shaw, 2010). Therefore, a SEM framework allows for a broader understanding of the multitude of factors that impact children's free play and sport, within our current cultural milieu.

Method

Interpretive Description (ID) was used to guide the emergent design of this qualitative study. ID is defined as "a coherent methodological framework within which a fairly wide range of options for design decisions can be enacted and justified" (Thorne, 2008, p. 75). Furthermore, according to Thorne (2008) ID "…appreciate[s] experiences from the perspective of others, while simultaneously accounting for the cultural and social forces that may have shaped that perspective" (p. 49). ID was therefore a strong match for a socioecologically guided exploration of parent perspectives of children's sport and play.

Participants and Data Collection

Parents with at least one child between the ages of 8-10 years old registered in a soccer program were recruited from three soccer clubs located within a western Canadian city. We focused on parents of this age group given that middle childhood, in particular the ages of 8 to 10 years, is somewhat of a transition period when children's levels of independence allows greater freedom to roam and engage in unsupervised free play (Veitch et al., 2006). At the same time, evidence suggests children, including those in middle childhood, are heavily invested in sport programs (CFLRI, 2011; Wiersma & Fifer, 2008). Within the Canadian context this is particularly the case in the sport of soccer (Canadian Heritage, 2013). While the focus was not on soccer participation in particular, we anticipated that parents of this soccer playing age group would be rich informants about the topics of interest to this study.

The study was approved by a University Research Ethics Board. A total of 12 interviews were conducted with nine mothers and three fathers, ages 34 to 49 years (mean age 43 years),

who provided informed consent to take part in this study. Among the children who were between 8-10 years old, there were 11 girls and five boys. Given that parents in this study also had other children, the total number of children represented by this group of parents was 29, ranging in age from 5 to 15 years. In keeping with a socioecological approach, parents were not limited to speaking only about their experiences with their children who met the study criteria, but were encouraged to speak about their experiences with their other children and their families, providing insight into various levels of influence.

The semi-structured, face-to-face interviews were audio recorded, lasted between 30 minutes and 2 hours (average 52 minutes), and transcribed verbatim. They were conducted at locations chosen by the participants including coffee shops, community recreation centers, employment locations, and soccer facilities. Interviews occurred over a 4 month time span during the indoor soccer season. The interview questions were informed by the literature and guided by a socioecological model (see Appendix for interview guide). They were further refined through discussion between the authors and pilot-tested. Because definitions of free play vary, we defined free play for parents as unstructured, child-led activity (Gray, 2011; Veitch et al., 2006) that occurs inside or outside. Data were also collected through reflective journaling. This allowed the first author (and interviewer) to detail and regularly examine the ideas (literature, theoretical framework, assumptions) that she brought to the study to ensure they did not influence "…what [is seen and heard in a way that was not intended]" (Thorne, 2008, p.99). Reflective journaling is necessary to seek "…the kind of knowledge that must be inductively generated from within the data, and developed within the context of the data" (Thorne, 2008, p. 99).

Data Analysis

Inductive and deductive analysis was performed concurrently through three analytic stages to establish associations, patterns, and relationships within the data (Thorne, 2008). Induction was supported through the reflective journaling process, while deduction involved deliberate consideration of the literature and SEM in the context of the data. The analytic process was further guided by Thorne's (2008) recommended techniques of comprehending, synthesizing, theorizing, and recontextualizing. The first stage was comprised of repeated immersion in the data during transcription, which was performed by the first author. The second stage of analysis involved reading the transcripts and as Thorne (2008) suggests "jotting down marginal memos" (p. 147). This was particularly valuable in documenting broad themes. The third stage of analysis encompassed returning to the audio recordings and documenting thoughts and impressions of the data. The second and third stages were guided by the broad questions of, "What is happening here?" and "What am I learning about this?" (Thorne, Kirkham, & MacDonald-Emes, 1997, p. 174). During the second and third stages, themes and linkages were identified. The linkages and themes that emerged were then further synthesized, theorized, and recontextualized into presentable findings. The interview data was also supported and challenged by information contained in the reflective journal and multiple discussions with the second author. In presenting the data, we aimed to "include the voices of participants, the reflexivity of the researcher, [and] a complex description and interpretation of the problem…" (Creswell, 2013, p. 44) Pseudonyms have been used to protect the identities of participants.

Credibility

The credibility of this study was sought through the corroboration of multiple sources of data (i.e., interviews and reflective journal) and documenting analytic thinking, which provided an audit trail. An audit trail kept by the first author contained how decisions were made through the research (Mayan, 2009; Thorne, 2008). The audit trail and the reflective nature of the journal also encouraged the questioning and challenging of personal assumptions on the part of the first author. In a similar way, peer debriefing between the authors also served as an important reflective tool during the research process. Lastly, as an insider to the context (i.e., mother of four children engaged in physical activity contexts), the first author uniquely contributed to the authenticity of the research process (e.g., relevance of the research question, development of the interview questions, nuanced understanding and interpretation of the data; Thorne, 2008).

Findings

Times Have Changed

The overarching theme of this study is the notion that times have changed. Parents overwhelmingly expressed that children's sport and free play have changed drastically since they were children. Parents' childhood experiences appeared to play a critical role in informing and determining the importance they placed on children's play and sport currently. This is apparent in the two primary themes that captured parents' perspectives about children's free play and sport: a) not so 'free' play, and b) the privileging of sport.

Not So 'Free' Play.

Across the interviews, parents unanimously acknowledged the importance of free play for children in general, as well as for their own children, in particular. Parents shared a number of benefits they associated with free play, such as opportunities for socialization, positive contributions to health, improving levels of physical activity, and chances for downtime. Although all of the parents acknowledged the importance of free play, and their nostalgic reflections of less-scheduled childhoods were positive, several parents felt their children had little play time between school and activities. A number of these parents recognized that the time allotted for free play was sufficiently less than for sport within their families. Ang shared her view that "[free play] is really good…unfortunately, I think we probably don't have enough time for it. So to the extent that we can do it, we do. …it's important, but it's not something that we make time for."

For many parents, time for free play was impacted by sport and academic schedules and was often condensed into the summer months when school and sports occupied less family time. Tom shared that "on the day…soccer ended…we went out to the rink…put on our skates…and [shot] around with the puck." Similarly, Jen's experience highlighted the impact of sport and academic schedules. She said, "free play…becomes very seasonal...sometimes we get all of our free play in the summer…and the rest of the ten months is…that crazy time for us."

In discussing the benefits of free play, it became apparent that parents' perspectives of free play differed from early to middle childhood. This was observed by Jen who felt that "as soon as kids get [to school age]…[free play] gets a bit lost." Furthermore, the importance of free play for socialization was specifically viewed as being a part of early childhood. Jen spoke of how free

play "is something within our society that happens a lot before the age of probably 6…you're always doing the playdate and that's just socializing your kids with other kids." Although socialization was identified as a benefit of free play initially, further discussions with the parents revealed that as children aged, free play was valued because it afforded for "downtime" (Kim) in contrast to busy lives. As Mary shared, "I think it's relaxing more than anything."

In contrast to the described benefits, parents also spoke about some of the drawbacks of free play. Mike, in speaking of his own childhood of "growing up with a lot of free play" questioned whether the unstructured nature of play was the "…reason why [being active] didn't stick with me? Like as a continuing habit." It was also suggested that free play provided experiences for developing practical skills or "street smart" (Steph) skills but not necessarily 'life skills' that were viewed to be gained through sport (i.e. team work, communication, goal setting, etc.). Steph alluded to this notion when she spoke of a child who she knew experienced a great deal of independent, outdoor free play. She said, "that kid knows how to survive…he can dig a well…he doesn't do well in school, but [he] is the smartest 'street smart' kid I've met...if the world is ending and it's survivor, [I tell my children to] go with [him]." While Steph recognized the value of the specific skills the child had acquired through free play, these skills were viewed as more relevant in unique circumstances.

A number of parents held the view that unsupervised free play, particularly outdoors in middle childhood (similar to free play of their own childhoods) was associated with idle time, and consequently increased the potential to engage in problem behaviours (Julie, Kim, Ang, Mike). For example, Julie, while acknowledging her "overprotective" personality, illustrated her concern about the possibility that her children would get into trouble if they were allowed to

roam the neighborhood freely. She shared, “You what? You threw a rock at that guy’s car? Are you crazy? Not that they would do that, not that they’ve done that, but I’m not prepared to let them make those mistakes yet.” Likewise, Kim observed the lack of supervision in one of her children’s friend’s homes and the accompanying problems such as damaged property and “wild” behaviour. She said, “I worry more about that stuff, I don’t want [my children] getting in trouble.” The perceived need for constant supervision to avoid children getting into trouble and the decrease in time allotted to free play led to the emergence of what a number of parents described as ‘the playdate’.

The playdate. While parents recounted their own play experiences as “just a part of their childhood” (Melissa) and “just go[ing] outside and play[ing]” (Amy), these casual descriptions were posited in high contrast to their perceptions of how play currently manifested in the lives of children. Issues associated with changing neighborhoods, safety, and more structured lives led to parents’ descriptions of free play that was no longer ‘free’ but had evolved into ‘playdates’. These were described as planned and structured opportunities for children to play with each other, often while supervised by parents.

Many parents indicated that their immediate neighbourhoods, unlike their own childhoods, were barriers to their children’s independent outdoor free play due to safety concerns and also because there were very few children to play with. Jen spoke of her child’s experience, “even when he was able to go out for that free play, he wasn’t able to actually find kids to play with.” Although some parents acknowledged stranger danger as a barrier to their children’s outdoor free play opportunities, a number of parents indicated that the changed physical environments from their own childhoods (i.e., neighbourhood design, increased traffic, etc.) played a significant role

in their reluctance to support their children's independent outdoor free play. Parents referred to the busy streets their children would have to navigate in order for independent free play to occur. Jay shared his childhood play experiences of riding down a very steep city street on a skateboard and recognized how the same street had changed. He recalled, "it was quite far, [the skateboards] went really fast…we did that when we were kids but it didn't have near the traffic that's around now… now there's a lot of cars, I wouldn't recommend doing it." Similarly, Kim stated, "I still think it's important for them to go play but it's not the same as when we were young. I can't as easily just send them out on their bikes…cause we're in a city." In contrast, Kim's concerns for her children's safety during free play were considerably less on their yearly summer trips to a lake. She stated, "they get to go experience with their cousins, they go roam in the bush and I don't worry as much there. Here, they're not allowed in our river valley by themselves."

As a result of safety concerns, lack of children to play with, and family priorities, parents described children's current play opportunities as highly "orchestrated" (Steph). Many of the parents associated free play with playdates and expressed that play had become work because of the need to plan, arrange, and schedule it. Getting children together for playdates was characterized as "too big of a commitment" (Amy), and "too hard to fit in with everybody" (Melissa). The work of the playdate is articulated in the following quote from Ang:

> If I was willing to say walk to [your friend from school and soccer]'s house…she'd have to walk across a busy road and walk over to another neighbourhood…there'd probably be a whole lot more free play. But instead, we have to organize playdates which are work for parents. Our parents didn't have to do work when we just played, right? Now you've got to host the kid and you have them for a couple hours…whereas when we were kids,

> people just popped over places and hung out…I think free play just sounds a little bit like work.

Several parents resented the concept and label of the playdate. This was explained by Amy who said, "even the idea, when my kids were really little, I couldn't use the word playdate, I just didn't like that word…it was scheduling." The scheduling of free play highlights an important irony in the way in which times have changed. A final example of how free play has become less 'free' was provided by Lori, when she shared how advances in technology influenced children's current play experiences. In describing the 'free' play of her son, Lori explained, "they'll play videogames on TV with one another while their buddy's at his [own] house and my guy's at home, and I'm like…what are you doing? Oh, I'm playing with Brad. I'm like…that's not playing with Brad!"

Free play and school. In the interviews, parents made ongoing reference to the role of schools in free play, placing significant responsibility on them to provide these opportunities. Parents consistently shared that their children's free play predominantly occurred at school. Steph stated that "recess would be their main time that they do that" and Mary similarly expressed, "…of course she gets the opportunity [to play] at school." While parents viewed schools as facilitators of free play opportunities, they felt that schools struggled to embrace this role as evidenced by policies or practices that created barriers to free play. This was articulated by Steph who observed that "nobody just stays randomly after school [to play]…the school even says you can't just be there." Similarly, Julie criticized a school policy and a common school practice when she said, "I don't like when it's that cut off, if it's a beautiful day but it happens to

be -23 degrees Celsius that kids are kept inside…or when a child stay[s] in at recess because they didn't get their homework done."

Parents shared various benefits of taking part in free play, however, the ways in which times have changed (e.g., safety, busy schedules) led to a reduction in play, the emergence of new forms of play (e.g., the playdate), and greater responsibility placed on schools by parents to ensure children had opportunities to engage in it.

The Privileging of Sport

Apparent in the interviews was the relevance of sport to lives of study participants and their children. Parents spoke at length about the benefits of sport, the ways in which their children gained entry into sport, the role of sport organizations and coaches, and the accompanying commitment and expectations that came with involvement in competitive team sports. While at times parents criticized and resisted these components of sport, they also accepted and appreciated what sport brought to their lives.

Benefits of sport. Drawing on their own childhood experiences within the contexts of sport and free play, parents overwhelmingly viewed sport as vital to the overall development of their children. They cited learning to "communicate" (Julie), "work with others" (Jay), develop "responsibility" (Tom), "time management [skills]" (Lori), "to reach and set goals" (Ang), and learning "commitment" (Mike) as beneficial outcomes. Competitive team sport in middle childhood, in particular, was viewed by parents as an ideal context for the development and acquisition of relevant life skills. In Tom's reflections on his own experiences playing elite sport, he highlighted the value of experiencing success and failure in learning to overcome adversity.

He shared, "[they] need to fail in that environment and be upset and have that angst and work through it…I don't want to take that opportunity away...[sport] is just fantastic for that…the failure is just as much as a success."

The development of friendships and opportunities to socialize were one of the most commonly referred to benefits. Many parents felt that team sport provided a group of "instant friends" (Lori), and a context for "developing strong friendships" (Mary). Jay described these friendships as stronger because they were "battle-hardened" and filled with shared "emotion", while Lori recognized the strength of them because they were built on "common interests." Furthermore, friendships through sport provided "a sense of community" (Mike) and a "sense of belonging" (Amy). Sport friendships were highly valued by some parents because they extended across the contexts of neighbourhoods and schools (Amy). Lori spoke of the connection between friendships gained through sport and the impact those friendships had on her children's free play. She acknowledged that, "you can't have one without the other…they're really connected." Furthermore, the friendships formed through sport, and reinforced through neighbourhood play, were important to the continuity of social support in the context of school. Lori felt that her older children's transition though school was "pretty natural and pretty easy…because they knew half a dozen guys really well, not just acquaintances but really well [through sport teams]."

Sport friendships and sport itself were also perceived as beneficial in preventing engagement in problem behaviours. In speaking about her husband's youth sport experiences, Ang said, he had "likeminded friends" who had "good interests and…goals." Accordingly she suggested this meant that one was "less likely to waste your time doing things that either you shouldn't be doing or are unhealthy for you." In reflection of his own childhood, Mike shared "when we

[friends] weren't playing soccer we were up to no good literally…soccer dragged us away from [trouble]." Finally, opportunities to develop friendships and socialize through sport were also viewed as particularly beneficial in today's society given the nature of children's play and communication that has evolved due to modern technology (i.e., texting, cell phones, social media, etc.). Lori expressed the importance of her children being on a team "even at a young age" and "learning these sort of interactions with people…because kids communicate way differently then we used to…we did a lot more face to face with our friends…they spend a lot more time texting…[and] playing videogames on TV with one another."

Enter…sport. Parents indicated that their children's early entry into structured, organized activities was impacted by the availability of programs for young children. As Melissa said, "…when they're young…I just try to put them in a bunch of different things that were…available for kids that age." For many parents, community soccer was easily accessible and provided the entry point to structured organized sport at a young age. Kim shared, "we could walk to where it was in our community…very easily I could take a baby and a toddler and…we could take [our oldest daughter]." Likewise, Mary spoke of community soccer being "one of the earliest things that kids can get involved in…so we just put her in when she was 3."

The role schools played in children's sport opportunities were also highlighted by parents as an opportunity for their children to become involved in sport. They discussed various sport programs held before, during, or after school as being positive experiences for their children. For Julie, schools played an important part in introducing her children to sport. She said, "most of the interests [her] kids have had [in sports] have definitely been [introduced] through school." Several parents expressed looking forward to the opportunities their children would have to

participate in a variety of junior high sports as they got older. According to Jen, a benefit of school sport was that "…you get the best of both worlds. They're going to get…good coaching, [they will] be able to participate in…more than just two sports." Ang spoke about the importance of exposing her child to a variety of sports now in order to establish a foundation of "background skills necessary" to make future junior high sport teams. Ang's desire to arm her child with the skills needed to be selected for teams was confirmed by parents with older children who highlighted how school sports became more competitive as children moved through junior high and high school. This was illustrated by Mary who said:

> My older daughter played volleyball at junior high school, and lots of her friends started trying out for club volleyball and we thought…we can't really do that…It really eliminated her from playing further in school sports by not going to the club level right? So, that was unfortunate because I feel she's a great volleyball player but she just hasn't been given the chance. And now at high school [volleyball is] very elite.

As evident in the above quotes, as children continued in sport there was a subsequent increase in pressure and commitment.

Resisting, accepting, and appreciating sport. Parents responded to the increasing demands of sport participation through various forms of resistance, acceptance, and appreciation. One of the ways in which these increasing pressures and commitments became apparent was in the competing realms of sport sampling and sport specialization. Parents were unanimous about the benefits of having their children sport sample and participate in multiple sports for overall development. However, they frequently described the pressures to specialize. This was met initially with resistance by parents. Steph said, "they have already said to us multiple times, this

is where you have to choose between a sport. They're 10. I kind of don't want them to have to pick. Not yet anyway." Jen was "a little irritated that I'm being asked to dominate so much of my time with one sport…, even at a competitive level when you are 10 years old…and I'm not going to ask [my child] to make a choice." Finally, Tom recognized the pressure and expressed his firm resistance when he said, "it's becoming so competitive at 10, that your children are forced to stream or choose…well we haven't yet. We've been resisting it but I know it's coming." The expectations to specialize were very different from what Lori recalled of her husband's childhood. She explained, "he played [many sports] all the same year… there was no problem with that. Everybody was okay with that. Now, everyone's like, it has to be this, and you have to give a commitment first."

Along with the pressure to specialize, parents described how sport organizations and coaches promoted "the opportunity for extra training…sign up for this…it's great to build your kid's skill…there always seems to be just one more thing you can add on" (Julie). Tom made a similar observation about hockey opportunities. He expressed, "they have hockey – hockey, then they have spring hockey, and they have 3 on 3 hockey and then they have hockey camps and then the season starts again. There is no stop." Parents often felt guilted into doing more in order to ensure their children kept up with others. Lori's thoughts echoed that of many parents, "I don't know. It's hard. And you do get sucked in cause you don't want your kids to fall behind." Worries about falling behind were reinforced by coaches, as evident in Steph's experience. She said, "what the coaches are saying [is], well if your guys don't do it, these other kids are going to…and at some point those hours [of practice] are gonna matter." Jen spoke of her parent group who pushed back against additional practices because coaches felt that "the kids [weren't]

progressing…and needed to be on the ice more." She recalled the resistance of the parent group who said, "Why do we need more?" She further elaborated that the parents would only support "shinny hockey…for fun, on outdoor ice…not [another] structured practice." Another example of resistance was provided by Amy, who was not prepared to invest in all the sport "extras." She explained:

> Kids are flying to Scotland…and…England…they're extra training, extra this and extra that…I go against the grain…I want her to want to do it for a long time, if that's what she wants to do, so I don't want to put this pressure on her right now.

These types of pressures around specialization and commitment had a significant impact on parents, leaving some of them feeling "stressed out" and "overscheduled" (Jen). Jen articulated:

> Ironically enough, I feel like I have no one to blame but myself…because we want our kids to do these things…so I give them the choice of the sports they want to do and then I try to slot it in as best as I can…and then I also feel like I'm…letting somebody down and every turn I'm…letting a coach, a manager, a team [down].

At the same time, children also articulated a desire for more time, free of the sport schedule. When asked about her child's opportunities for free play Melissa said:

> Maybe not always as much as [she] would want…she does sometime complain that we have to go to [practice]…[she says] I want to go play, can I just play? But then I say…well at the beginning of the year when I asked you what you wanted to do, you wanted to do [soccer].

Despite some resistance among a number of these parents to fully embrace the expectations of sport organizations, clubs, and coaches, parents generally accepted what involvement in children's competitive team sports encompassed. Lori stated, "…I just think, every sport now…is demanding so much from its players, and again, I can't say that's a mistake, I just think it's the way things have gone." Giving in to the expectations of children's competitive sport involvement was also expressed by Jen. She shared:

> You don't really have a choice…If you do choose to not…well, I don't even know how you choose to not participate…The expectation is that you've made this team…you know what it is, you signed up…and we chose it for a reason.

In discussions with parents, it was highly apparent that they were aware of the criticisms of children's sports, such as overscheduling, sport specialization, burnout, and professionalization. Nevertheless, their beliefs in the benefits of sport for child development led to decisions to invest heavily in sport. Tom stated, "what a privilege we have because there are kids that don't have that, any of that." Similarly, Steph shared, "our life is busy, but blessed. [We] definitely, philosophically…believe strongly in health, and sport as a means of learning a lot of life skills and maintaining fitness. So we definitely prioritize it over other things."

Interestingly, when parents spoke about their busy schedules filled with children's sport, a number of them expressed a preference for sport, and the accompanying busyness. Kim felt that the full schedules and structure of children's sport was "almost a little easier" than trying to create opportunities for physical activity and free play. Similarly, Mary recognized that while her family's life sometimes felt like a "rat race", that "most of the time they're [children] more happy when they're busy…I don't think I would want to change it."

Despite accepting and embracing the hectic sport schedule, a number of parents spoke of being mindful to frequently reassess their activities and find a balance "right" (Lori) for their family among their children's sport, free play, and other commitments. They spoke of the "constant battle of trying to find a happy medium" (Jen), and recognizing when children's interests change and "maybe [needing] to make a change" (Lori). Lori reflected on her experience balancing children's sports, family time, and free time. She explained:

> It's not perfect. I don't think that there's a specific balance you have to achieve. I think… you have to do what's right for your family. Sometimes you're gonna make decisions that are best for your family that may go against whatever…team…you're playing for, and you just have to be comfortable with making those decisions.

Discussion

A number of findings from our study support work previously reported on children's sport and free play, such as, children's sport is highly valued by parents, that there is a strong presence of children's sport in families lives, that children's free play opportunities are at low levels, and that parents view free play as important in childhood (Clements, 2004; Gray, 2011; Wheeler & Green, 2014; Wiersma & Fifer, 2008). In addition, our findings also suggest that parental safety concerns (i.e., stranger danger, physical environment) are barriers to children's free play (Carver et al., 2008; Holt, Lee, Millar, & Spence, 2015; Jago et al., 2009; Veitch et al., 2006), yet our findings lend equal support to the proposition that the decrease in children's free time (AHKC, 2012), from previous generations, are barriers to children's free play opportunities.

Sport a Priority over Play

Our findings suggest that tensions exist between the constructs of children's sport and free play, even though both are highly valued and important for the overall health and development of children. Although parents are keenly aware of the criticisms of children's sport, such as overscheduling, sport specialization, burnout, and professionalization (Elkind, 2007; Gould, 2009; Malina, 2010), children's sport was prioritized over free play. Furthermore, within children's sport, parents continually met with pressure for their children to sport specialize. However, the notion of sport specialization opposed parents' views of the importance of sport sampling for children, which is supported by literature (Côté et al., 2009). Regardless of the pressures parents' experienced within children's sport, their value for sport was dominant. Our study confirmed that the benefits of competitive team sport participation were highly valued by parents for the development and acquisition of valuable life skills (Neely & Holt, 2014; Wheeler & Green, 2014; Wiersma & Fifer, 2008). Although the parents in our study also valued free play in early childhood (Clements, 2004), it was not given as high of a priority as sport specifically in middle childhood and for the development of life skills. These notions of free play suggest that although play is viewed as relevant, it continues to be undervalued, particularly in middle childhood.

The Irony of 'Free' Play

Interestingly, parents did not highlight the benefits of free play related to life skills important to adulthood, such as creativity, independence, confidence, decision-making and experiencing friends and friendships, that are often recognized in the literature (Bowers, Green, Hemme, & Chalip, 2014; Ginsburg, 2007; Gray, 2011; Rogers, 2012). This was in stark contrast to the

benefits that parents associated with competitive team sport. The lack of recognizing the opportunities to develop life skills through free play supports the notion posited by Frost and his colleagues (2012), that "once children enter elementary school, parents and teachers seem to place little value on free play and fail to understand its benefits" (p. 178). Our findings propose that parents may not be aware of the developmental benefits of free play, or that parents do not recognize the relevance of the skills and experiences gained through free play for adulthood in today's society. This may suggest a shift in cultural ideologies of what skills and experiences are valuable for success as adults.

Furthermore, an irony exists within the construct of free play. That being, it is no longer free as it was in previous generations. Parents' interpretation of free play was associated with the playdate which is planned and structured, thereby becoming work for parents. This structuring of play was in response to barriers such as stranger danger and safety, but our findings suggest that other factors also contributed to low levels of free play and its changed nature. Factors such as, the increase in the structure of family life (i.e., work, school, extracurricular activities, etc.), the wide array of sedentary free time activities available for children (e.g., screen time, TV watching, video games, etc.; Brown, Nobiling, Teufel, & Birch, 2011), and the focus on competitive team sport for the development of life skills were discussed. Although parents valued play and recognized some of the benefits of play, opportunities for free play as it once existed, particularly in the lives of sport families was not a priority, nor was it 'free'.

Socioecological Considerations

A SEM informed by the work of Bronfenbrenner (2005), Stokols (1996), and McLeroy et al. (1988) was useful for interpreting the findings of the study. The "central tenet of socioecological

models is that all levels of influence are important" (Glanz, Rimer, & Viswanath, 2015, p. 44). The work of McLeroy and his colleagues (1988) provided the SEM framework for this study and categorize the systems of influence as Intrapersonal Factors, Interpersonal Processes, Organizational Factors, Community Factors, and Public Policy (McLeroy et al., 1988) which were fitting for the interpretation of our findings. Furthermore, the assumption of McLeroy et al.'s (1988) model that "appropriate changes in the social environment will produce changes in individuals, and that the support of individuals in the population is essential for implementing environmental changes" (p. 351) were central to our interpretation of the findings.

Although the SEM model employed in this study has five levels, we addressed the three levels (i.e., intrapersonal, organizational, and community) most relevant to our findings. We also emphasized Bronfenbrenner's (2005) chronosystem, which attends to the importance of history and time. This was valuable in understanding children's sport and play across time and the sociohistorical conditions which impact both. Also important to the interpretation of our findings is the acknowledgement of the bidirectional influence within SEM's, that being "physical and social features of settings directly influence [their] occupants' health and, concurrently, the participants in settings modify the healthfulness of their surroundings through their individual and collective actions" (Stokols, 1996, p. 286). This is particularly relevant to this study and the connection between the various levels of a child's environment.

Intrapersonal level. Considering our findings within the intrapersonal level, it was apparent that parents' knowledge and attitudes about children's free play and sport impacted the ways in which they prioritized sport within their daily lives and that of their children. Parents' personal experiences and histories played a vital role in their view of sport and free play and how it had

changed since their own childhoods, an example of Bronfenbrenner's (2005) consideration of history and time. However, the impact of various factors from both the organizational (e.g., sport teams, schools) and community levels (e.g., parents groups, neighbourhoods) were also apparent in parents' values, their decisions, and their behaviours to prioritize sport over play.

Organizational level. The assumption that children and parents spend a great deal of time in organizational settings underlies this level of the SEM. Within this study, the findings suggest that children spend a great deal of time in schools and within sport organizations; most of their waking hours are spent among these two contexts. As such, the impact of these contexts cannot be underestimated. The organizational structures and processes within sport organizations (i.e., clubs, teams) and schools impact the balance and nature of both sport and free play in families and in society. Through policies and practices, physical and social environments are shaped which impact the opportunities for children's sport and play which in turn impact their health, wellbeing, and development (McLeroy et al., 1988). Schools were one example provided by parents of the impact of the organizational level on children's opportunities for sport and play. Given some of the most commonly cited barriers contributing to the decline of children's free play (e.g., stranger danger, traffic safety, lack of friends, space to play, time, etc.; AHKC, 2012; Carver et al., 2008; Gray, 2011; Jago et al., 2009; Lee et al., 2015; Veitch et al., 2006), by their contextual nature, schools can play a key role in affording these opportunities. Schools have the element of time (i.e., children present for 6 to 7 hours of the day), the likelihood of interaction given the element of time and presence of peers, and typically schools have the physical space and/or equipment to facilitate play and sport. As the valuing of sport in childhood appears to

increase over history and time, as evidenced in the responses of parents, the role of schools in providing sport opportunities and in supplementing play is apparent.

Sport organizations, specifically those at the national level, govern most aspects of a sport within Canada (Government of Canada, 2015) and therefore play a role in shaping the culture of children's sport and the structuring of time for children and families. These organizations, as well as schools and municipalities are all "partners and stakeholders" (Dyck, 2012, p. 26) in children's sports, along with children and parents. Parents spoke about the expectations communicated by coaches which accompanied involvement in sport teams and their organizations. The pressures exerted from the organizational level were apparent in discussions of specialization, commitment to training, and the accelerated introduction and pace of competitive sport for children. As evidenced in our findings, the resistance of a collective group of parents did impact their children's sport experience. This speaks to the value of Stokols' (1996) work that individual and collective actions can indeed modify their surroundings. The expressed resistance and reluctant acceptance of parents to some of these pressures, highlights a need for better collaboration among all stakeholders (including parents) when it comes to children's sport participation. The pressures to choose sport and to choose it early also negatively impact the time available for free play.

Community level. Community is viewed as relationships among organizations, institutions, and informal networks within defined boundaries (McLeroy et al., 1988, p. 355). Therefore, our findings draw attention to a concept of community outlined by McLeroy et al. (1988), as the geographically bound neighbourhoods where children's free play should occur. The notion that free play or unstructured play time particularly in middle childhood leads to the potential for

problem behaviours is a view held by not only parents, as highlighted in this study, but also within neighbourhoods. Unsupervised, unstructured play in middle childhood and its association to idle time is viewed with trepidation, especially when compared with the protective factor that competitive team sport participation is thought to provide. Examples of this are restrictions imposed by neighbourhoods and schools on where, when, and how children can play. Although the advocacy for increasing free play in children's lives is apparent, consideration needs to be given to how to create social conditions where free play, particularly for older children with higher levels of independence, are viewed positively by communities as well as parents. Therefore, understanding if, and how parents value free play in middle childhood is important to possibly increasing children's free play opportunities and experiences.

An additional concept of community that is valuable to consider is specific to the context of children's competitive sport. As discussed previously in the organizational level, sport organizational policies and practices are vital to the balance of children's sport and free play. We further propose that the relationships between children's various sport organizations locally and provincially warrant attention, as this lack of coordination among organizations potentially impacts the health and development of children as they balance the increasing demands of multiple sports and activities. Sport organizations are singularly focused on the development of their sport and their athletes, however, we propose that organizations need to collaborate their developmental programs to support sport sampling, multisport athletes, and free play for the overall optimal development of children and athletes.

Limitations and Future Directions

We acknowledge several limitations to our work. A first consideration is the nature of the sample of parents interviewed for this study. Given their recruitment on the basis of their child's sport involvement, it is probable that they were more inclined to value sport and possibly sport over play. In contrast, parents recruited in other ways, (e.g., from schools, community programs, neighborhoods) may highlight other important perspectives. Likewise, a larger sample size may have provided more breadth. While a more diverse and potentially larger sample size may have illuminated new perspectives, the current study provided insight and depth into the experiences and perspectives of sport parents. A final consideration is the first author's positionality as a mother of children currently participating in child and youth sport and the potential it brings for bias. At the same time, this field expertise afforded a deeper understanding of issues facing parents in middle childhood and supported more nuanced interpretations of their perspectives of free play and sport.

Importantly, this study contributes knowledge about play and sport in middle childhood, an age group that is under-researched in comparison with early childhood and adolescence. The bulk of empirical research within the context of children's free play has been focused on early childhood, specifically younger than the age of 8 (Burdette & Whitaker, 2005; Lin & Yawkey, 2013). Our study responds to Bergen and Fromberg (2009) who posited that free play in middle childhood has largely been ignored. Understanding the meaning parents ascribe to free play in middle childhood is of particular importance given that children 9 to 10 years of age are allowed greater independence and unsupervised free play as a result of increased levels of independence (Veitch et al., 2006). This presents a paradoxical relationship in middle childhood (specifically

the age of 9 to 10 years old), when children are allowed more independent free play, parents in our study highlighted sport participation for the development of life skills and to keep children busy, with the intention of minimizing opportunities to engage in negative behaviours. A valuable future direction concerns greater explorations of play in middle childhood from not only the perspectives of parents, but all stakeholders in consideration of the various socioecological levels of influence in families' lives. Given that times have changed, there may be a need to reimagine how free play and sport can coexist in our current cultural milieu.

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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to explore the messages, formal (e.g., campaign messages, etc.) and informal (e.g., parenting networks etc.), heard by parents within the contexts of children's sport and free play and to understand the impact of these messages on their experiences and decisions in these contexts. Guided by an interpretive description approach, twelve semi-structure interviews were conducted with sport parents of children (8-10 years old) in middle childhood. Along with reflective notes, the transcribed interviews were analyzed and interpreted using a sociological lens. Our findings, which included three themes: 1) The 'best', 2) 'That' parent, and 3) Message confusion, suggest that messages from various levels of influence impact parents and their decisions within the contexts of children's sport and free play. Informal messages projected through parenting networks, community norms, and popular parenting labels (e.g., helicopter, free range parent, over-protective, etc.) affected parents' behaviours within children's sport and free play. The impact of formal messages was found to have less of a direct impact on parents. Parents' perspectives of 'good parenting', current parenting ideologies, and the impact of messages are discussed.

Chapter 4: What do Parents Hear?

Parents have a tremendous responsibility in raising children. This is particularly true in our current social milieu where these responsibilities continue to expand with regard to securing their children's overall health and wellbeing and ultimately, their life success (Shaw, 2010, p.10). The significant responsibilities of parents are especially apparent in the contexts of children's sport and free play. Evidence indicates that engagement in sport and free play provide children opportunities to be physically active (Active Healthy Kids Canada, 2012) and to gain numerous psychological, social, and emotional benefits (Gray, 2011; Jones et al., 2011; Prezza et al., 2001; Rissotto & Tonucci, 2002; Rogers, 2012). These discourses of children's sport and free play have gained momentum in our current milieu due in large part to the increased public concern around the decline of children's overall health (Colley et al., 2011), and specifically, the increase in childhood overweight and obesity (Tremblay et al., 2002) and its association with low levels of physical activity (Janssen et al., 2005; Tremblay & Willms, 2003).

Given the relationship between children's health and the increasing prevalence of childhood overweight and obesity, there has been a tremendous amount of focus from researchers, organizations, and media on the specific contexts in which children acquire physical activity. It has been widely accepted that children attain physical activity in three contexts; sport and physical activity programs (organized), free play (unstructured), and active transportation (supervised or independent) (Active Healthy Kids Canada, 2012; Heitzler, Martin, Duke, & Huhman, 2006; Sallis et al., 2000). This study focuses on the contexts of sport and free play.

Children's Sport

Children's sport within our society is often viewed both positively and negatively in the literature and popular media. The abundance of literature and popular media that focuses on children's sport suggests that it has prominence in our current social milieu and in the lives of families. Studies and media reports have frequently addressed various dimensions of children's sport, whether actual or perceived, such as negative parenting behaviours at children's sporting events (Omli, LaVoi, & Wiese-Bjornstal, 2008), the trend of children's early sport specialization (Malina, 2010), the professionalization of children's sports (Matz, 2014), the overscheduling of children's activities, including sport activities (Elkind, 2007), and also the decline of children's sport participation (Clark, 2008; Wallerson, 2014). The topic of children's sport is highly present in our current social milieu, yet simultaneously it is often discussed as not being prominent enough when considering the prevalence of childhood overweight and obesity, related to low sport participation rates of children.

Many empirical studies support the anecdotal reports that suggest parents invest a great deal of time, money, and energy towards their children's participation in organized sports, particularly middle class parents. Wheeler and Green (2014) found that parents invested early and heavily in sport activities for their children and allowed children's sport to dominate the families' schedules. Further, the reasons for these choices were that parents highly valued the perceived benefits children gained from sport participation and also that parents viewed they were "…meeting the criteria for 'good' parenting established in their social networks" (Wheeler & Green, 2014, p. 279). At the same time, negative aspects of sport participation on children have been cited, such as injury, family financial burdens, athlete burnout, unhappiness, and stress

(Merkel, 2013). Parents' good intentions of having their children participate in sports are challenged by such findings and can potentially leave parents confused, concerned, and uncertain of the decisions they make for their children.

Children's Free Play

Children's sport, which occupies a great deal of academic research and the headlines of popular media is often discussed in comparison to children's play. Alexander, Frohlich and Fusco (2014) highlighted the common discourse of children's play when they posited that "there is an emerging public health position on children's play… that play is predominantly instrumentalized as a means to promote children's physical health" (p. 155). Studies have found that as children increase the time they spend outdoors, their physical activity levels increase (Burdette, Whitaker, & Daniels, 2004) therefore decreasing the prevalence of overweight and obesity (Cleland et al., 2008). Furthermore, the importance of play to optimal child development has been recognized by the United Nations High Commission for Human Rights as a right of every child (United Nations, 1990) and is considered "a crucial dynamic of healthy physical, intellectual, and socio-emotional development at all age levels" (Elkind, 2007, p. 4).

However, children's opportunities for play have declined significantly (Clements, 2004; Gray, 2011). A variety of literature suggests that play is virtually nonexistent in children's lives, that its decline from previous generations is alarming, and some have questioned whether children's play is "extinct" (Active Healthy Kids Canada, 2012; Gray, 2011). A number of studies have cited parental safety concerns as the primary barrier to children's free play (Carver et al., 2008; Jago et al., 2009; Veitch et al., 2006). According to the study by Veitch and

colleagues (2006), parental safety concerns were comprised of traffic safety, the presence of older children, and stranger danger.

Considering a broad range of children's sport and free play messages highlights the complexity of the relationship between sports (structured) and unstructured free play.

Messages and Parents

These trends in childhood health and their connection to sport and play have captured the attention of researchers, advocates, media, and organizations across various disciplines (e.g., play, sport, health, child development, etc.). As a result, numerous organizations (e.g., Active Healthy Kids Canada [AHKC]; The Canadian Society for Exercise Physiology [CSEP], ParticipACTION; Canadian Sport for Life, etc.) have issued campaigns, guidelines, and reports in an effort to increase and improve children's health through sport and free play. These campaigns, guidelines, and reports have led to an abundance of messages, directly and indirectly aimed at parents, as they play a critical role in their children's health (Golan, Weizman, Apter, & Fainaru, 1998) and make decisions about their children's physical activity opportunities (Welk et al., 2003). Messages are frequently carefully and heavily marketed (Ginsburg, 2007) to maximize their reach with the hope of influencing parenting behaviours and practices. Furthermore, messages can be created specifically to affect the emotions of parents and "aim for the heart" (Colchamiro et al., 2010, p. S61). Exploring the impact of messages on parents is important given the trends previously described and that "parents often seek informed guidance on how to direct their children's activities" (Hofferth & Sandberg, 2001, p. 307).

The information parents seek and are exposed to originate from numerous sources. In addition to organizations, businesses, friends, communities, media, and the larger society (e.g., norms, expectations, etc.), can be influential. Parents face a multitude of messages (Radey & Randolph, 2009) and information, and often struggle to balance their personal perspectives and desire to be, and be seen by others, as good parents (Valentine & McKendrick, 1997; Veitch et al., 2006; Wheeler & Green, 2014) with social expectations when making decisions that affect their children's health (Jenkins, 2006). Researchers have highlighted how social norms put pressure on parents and their decisions in sport (Wheeler & Green, 2014) and free play (Veitch et al., 2006). In these studies, the "benchmark of good parenting" (Wheeler & Green, 2014, p. 274) was determined by parents themselves, by other parents, and by how closely behaviours and practices were aligned with social norms. Consequently, social networks of relatives, neighbours, and friends become an important influence both directly and indirectly on parenting practices (Cochran & Brassard, 1979; Honoré, 2009), and the messages and information parents receive.

In our current milieu, good parenting is not well-defined, yet it is expected. What defines the elusive good parent has received considerable attention in light of the alarming trends in children's health, and parental behaviours and practices have been highlighted in studies and popular media. Although messages designed to encourage, support, and improve children's physical activity and sport may be well-intended and valuable (Evans, 2008; Huhman et al., 2005; Huhman et al., 2010), they have also led to judgements of parenting behaviours and practices. Parents have been told they are raising a generation of 'helpless' kids (Goodman, 2012), a 'risk-averse generation' (Spears, 2012), and an overscheduled and heavily pressured generation (Elkind, 2007). These judgements of parenting behaviours are also inherent in

parenting labels that exist in our current social milieu and transcend into all aspects of children's lives where parents and children make decisions. Labels such as 'helicopter parents', 'tiger parents', and 'bubble-wrapped children' often refer to parents who have 'bought' into the heavily marketed messages of the importance of child development and preparing children to reach their full potential through a range of experiences (e.g., children's sport programs, physical activity programs, music lessons, academic tutoring programs, etc.; Ginsburg, 2007). Furthermore, messages may be contradictory (e.g., positive versus negative outcomes), leaving parents to question their decisions.

A few studies have briefly mentioned the impact of children's sport and physical activity messages on parents. They have found that parents experience feeling guilty (Carson, Clark, Berry, Holt, & Latimer-Cheung, 2014), insecure (Stokes, 2009), pressured (Wiersma & Fifer, 2008), overwhelmed (Wiersma & Fifer, 2008), and powerless (Anderson & Doherty, 2005; Brown et al., 2011). The landscape of messages around children's health and development has become vast and diverse given the increasing focus on the declining health of children and the increasing prevalence of childhood overweight and obesity. Parents are faced with an abundance of messages that promote sports and organized physical activity programs, as well as those that support free play. As a result, parents are confronted with countless decisions related to their children (Niehues et al., 2013). There is a need to understand if, and how this abundance of children's sport and free play messages and information, some of which are opposing, as well as negative towards parenting behaviours, impact parents and their decisions.

Purpose

The purpose of this study was to explore sport parents' perspectives about messages in the context of children's sport and free play. We broadly defined message as "a communication containing some information, news, advice, request or the like" (Dictionary.com Unabridged, n.d.). The specific objectives were to explore what messages parents hear related to children's sport and free play; the source of these messages; how parents interpret and experiences these messages; and if and in what ways these messages impact their behaviours and practices.

Theoretical Framework

Given that parents live in a message saturated society, and do not live in isolation from external systems of influence, we selected a socioecological lens through which to explore parents' perspectives about messages in children's sport and free play in the environmental systems (e.g., macrosystem, mesosystem, exosystem, microsystem, chronosystem) that influence parental behaviours (Bronfenbrenner, 2005). A SEM approach applied to the context of children's sport and free play has the potential to illustrate the various levels of influence from which messages may arise. SEM's are based on the premise that individual behaviours are influenced by individual characteristics as well as social and environmental factors from various systems. This is relevant as changes to children's lives are often attributed to the individual attributes and behaviours of parents with little consideration for broader contextual factors (Witten et al., 2013). A SEM framework provides a comprehensive approach to exploring factors from various levels of influence, including messages, the relationship between these factors, and the impact they have on parents within their unique contexts.

The SEM applied in this study is influenced by the works of Bronfenbrenner (2005), Stokols (1996), and McLeroy et al. (1998). Bronfenbrenner's (2005) theory conceptualizes an individual's environment to consist of interrelated, nested ecological systems that influence one another bidirectionally. Bronfenbrenner's (2005) bioecological model has several defining properties. The first is the element of 'experience'. Bronfenbrenner (2005) acknowledges that an individual's environment includes objective properties but also the subjective interpretations of these properties, such as positive and negative subjective feelings (i.e., hope, doubt, personal beliefs, etc.). Parents have subjective experiences in response to the messages they encounter. The second defining property is the notion of 'proximal processes'. These processes are the reciprocal interactions between an individual and their immediate external environment which includes, people, objects, and symbols (Bronfenbrenner, 2005). Bronfenbrenner (2005) posits that "proximal processes are the primary engines of development" (p. 6). Proximal processes also consider the bidirectional interactions between parents and messages from various sources. The final element is that of history and time which considers the changes that occur within an individual over their lifetime, as well as those changes that occur in society (Bronfenbrenner, 2005).

Stokols (1996) work emphasizes the importance of environments that support health, and the multidirectional influences between individual and collective behaviours, and their physical and social environments. The work of McLeroy and colleagues (1988) affords a variation of Bronfenbrenner's early model, which was employed in this study, and categorizes the systems, as Intrapersonal Factors, Interpersonal Processes and Primary Groups, Organizational Factors, Community Factors, and Public Policy (McLeroy et al., 1988). Framed by a SEM guided by the

work of Bronfenbrenner (2005), Stokols (1996), and McLeroy et al. (1988), consideration was given to the notion that parents may hear a message or multiple messages and subsequently project these messages, and their experiences of them to distal environments that may impact community or societal norms regarding parenting. A SEM framework allowed for a greater understanding of parents' individual experiences within the broader contexts of which they are a part, such as social networks, communities, and sport organizations (Thorne, 2008).

Method

Situating the Research

This study was approved by a University research ethics board and took place in a western Canadian city. It represents the second part of a two part interpretive description (ID) exploring parents' perspectives and experiences. The first part of the ID emphasized their perspectives on sport and free play. Findings revealed the ways in which sport, play, and parenting practices had changed since parents' own childhoods, as well as highlighting how parental responsibility for children's wellbeing had increased (Watchman & Spencer-Cavaliere, 2016; in preparation). ID, is a naturalistic qualitative approach that views human experience to be constructed and contextual, and possibly shared with others (Thorne, Reimer Kirkham, & MacDonald-Emes, 1997). It affords a flexible and emergent design, which considers the differences between individuals, while supporting the identification of common themes and patterns (Hunt, 2009). ID relies on the scaffolding and questioning of current knowledge (e.g., literature) to inform and generate new insights and understanding (Thorne, 2008). Given the nature of seeking parents' perspectives and experiences, this approach aligned well with our study purpose.

In keeping with ID and in reflection of part one of the study, semi-structured interviews were the primary source of data collection. Twelve parents (3 fathers and 9 mothers) between the ages of 34-49 years (mean age 43 years) consented to take part in the interviews which were 30 minutes to 2 hours in duration (average 52 minutes). The specific inclusion criteria involved parents having at least one child between the ages of 8-10 years old (middle childhood) currently participating in a soccer club. We anticipated this parent group would be able to provide rich information about messages in the context of children's sport and play given that middle childhood represents a transition period with regard to independence (Veitch et al., 2006), and at the same time high rates of structured sport participation are reported (Wiersma & Fifer, 2008), particularly in the sport of soccer (Canadian Heritage, 2013). A semi-structured interview guide was constructed using information from the literature, the theoretical framework, and through collaboration between the authors (see Appendix for interview guide). The guide was pilot tested to ensure relevance and clarity and parents were provided with the same definition of 'message' employed in the literature review. The interviews took place in private locations selected by the parents and were audio recorded. A second source of data collection involved the use of a reflective journal throughout the study in which the first author tracked study decisions and reflections which supported the identification and questioning of personal assumptions during the research process (Thorne, 2008). Journaling also took place immediately following each interview.

Analytical Approach and Credibility

Comprehending, synthesizing, theorizing, and recontextualizing inductively and deductively resulting in repeated data immersion comprise the analytical techniques for ID (Thorne, 2008)

that were applied in this study. The first author, who conducted the interviews, also transcribed the data verbatim. This afforded repeated immersion in the data, building familiarity, the first step in the ID analytical process. Next, guided by the questions, "What is happening here?" and "What am I learning about this?" (Thorne et al., 1997, p. 174), the second and third stages were comprised of noting thoughts and impressions and exploring potential relationship and themes in the data going back and forth between ideas and possibilities for presenting the findings. Together with information from the reflective journal and ongoing discussion between the authors, this repeated return to and immersion in the data led to the determination of the final study themes.

The reflective journal importantly served as an audit trail for decisions made throughout the research process and provided a process through which the first author could realize and challenge her assumptions about the study (Mayan, 2009; Thorne, 2008). In addition to providing another data source beyond the interviews, the journal also helped in responding to the analytical guiding questions. Collaboration between the authors was an important source of peer debriefing for determining themes, as well as in maintaining the credibility and quality of the study processes. Finally, given the first author's experience as a parent within the context of children's sport and play, the relevance of the research question and authenticity in understanding and interpreting the data were enriched (Thorne, 2008).

Findings

Discussions with parents revealed that an abundance of messages, both formal (e.g., mass media campaigns) and informal (e.g., parenting networks), exist within the contexts of children's sport and free play. As Amy shared, "we're surrounded by [it]…if you go on social media you're

surrounded by messages all the time…people are just inundated with information." Similarly, Mike explained, "we're so tied into media these days…I will go to five different devices that I get news on…news when I wake up and news when I go to bed." While only a few parents identified specific message campaigns related to children's physical activity, all parents were highly aware of the continued presence and impact of these types of messages. As Mike stated, "if you ask me when's the last time I saw a message, I couldn't tell you, I couldn't tell you where it came from, I couldn't tell you where I saw it, it's just almost this back of the mind."

Despite acknowledging the overwhelming amount of information on social media, parents indicated that formal messages from organizations had little to no impact on their decisions within children's sport and free play. In speaking of encouraging her children to be involved in sport, Melissa stated, "the stuff in the media hasn't really changed our perceptions…I would do it anyway regardless…my husband [and I], we both like being active." Furthermore, parents primarily sought "the opinion of other parents" (Steph) who they met through sport organizations, such as coaches and friends when it came to making decisions about their children's activities. Other parents were viewed as particularly good sources of information if they had older children and "had been through it [sport] before" (Steph, Mary). Trust was also higher if parents or coaches had experienced elite levels of sports themselves. Mary shared, "we used to trust…a lot of information from the coach because she'd been through the whole system and less so now because [it is] a less experienced coach." Likewise, Mike sought information from friends who "grew up in it [club soccer] and gone on to play internationally."

While parents recognized that messages were profuse and that they relied on particular sources for information (e.g., other parents, friends), apparent across the interviews was how

collectively, these messages from various sources and levels of influence, directly and indirectly impacted parents and their views, decisions, and behaviours within the context of children's sport and free play. Analysis of the data led to the following three themes a) The 'Best', b) 'That' Parent and c) Message Confusion. These themes capture the messages discussed by parents, the impact of these messages, and illustrate the complexity of parenting in today's society.

The 'Best'

Two aspirational ideologies, 'doing one's best' and 'being the best', became apparent when parents discussed messages in the context of children's sport and play. Parents clearly distinguished between these two ideologies. They were unanimous in the desire for their children to 'do their best' in all aspects of life and to develop life skills. For example, Lori referred to the importance of children acquiring life skills through "striving…to put the work…the time…and the effort…into [their] daily life, whether it's school…work…or sport." When it came to the ideology of "your kid needs to be the best" (Jen), parents spoke about being inundated with messages about "getting ahead" (Amy) and "striving for excellence" (Jen) which were particularly prevalent in children's competitive sport. Parents questioned and rejected this way of thinking. Speaking from his own experiences of elite sport and understanding the "small window of opportunity" to reach the highest level of sport, Tom said:

> …What are we chasing?...We're chasing experience…This…laser…focus on one thing. I don't see the value in it…What are you sacrificing if you don't [make it]?...You miss out on opportunities…This sort of pursuit of elite thing is certainly valid but…it shouldn't come at the expense of experiencing life on the way.

Although often attributed to sport, the impact of this ideology where "the bar keeps getting raised" (Amy) for children's performance was felt across a range of children's activity contexts (e.g., school, music).

Despite expressing support for the message of 'doing your best' and against the message of 'being the best', a complex relationship between these ideologies was apparent. Parents recognized how these ideologies were often confused and how some of their choices within children's sport, in actuality, played into the ideology of 'being the best'. For example, several parents expressed uncertainty about how to adequately support their children in a sport context where children are continually doing more. As Jen wondered, "…am I doing enough for my daughter? Am I providing enough opportunities for all these things if everyone else is doing it?" Parents worried their children would "fall behind" (Lori), miss out on opportunities for better coaching or get cut from a team and lose friendships in the process. While motivated to support their children in doing their best, parents' decisions were often reluctantly tied to performance outcomes nested in comparison and associated with being the best, or at the very least, better than someone else. The pressure to do more than others is highlighted in the following quote from Ang. She explained, "it's not realistic to say, I'm only going to play this for the winter or the summer. I know somebody else who gave the whole years commitment is probably going to get that spot [on the team]" (Ang). Amy questioned these decisions that perpetuated being the best, she said, "I do want my kids to have something…they love to do. How much do you support it…[when] the bar keeps getting raised?"

Parents expressed how messages from external influences (e.g., parents of teammates, coaches, organizations, etc.) often contributed to their decisions to do the 'extras' within

children's sport. Jen shared the message that she felt was conveyed to her from other parents on her child's team. She recalled, "everyone should be doing that to make the team better and I'm doing this for my kid, what are you doing for your kids?" Another message that was closely tied to the message of 'being the best' in children's sport was that "the amount of time [spent practicing] is equal to…how well you do" (Jen). A number of parents specifically addressed this as the "10,000 hours of practice" message. Many of the parents objected to its presence in children's sport, as Amy explained:

> So the 10,000 hours…I don't subscribe to that but I just don't know…where this has all come from. Everybody seems to see it when they're looking at it but when you're in the middle of it…you feel like you don't want to let your kids down.

Throughout the interviews, parents shared a range of feelings about the complexity of parenting in the contexts of sport and play, and more broadly. Amy summarized this when she said, "I want to get it [parenting] right", and how she sometimes felt that she had "already screwed up." Steph expressed, "…my difficulty right now, is I am paralyzed by…what I call the intricate fear of not doing everything for my kids…I want to create opportunities for them as much as I can, and all kids." Similarly, Jay expressed, "I give my kids as much as I can….I've fallen into that trap, but…then I also catch myself and say okay, just stop." Finally, parents were so committed to providing multiple opportunities for their children to develop life skills and participate in sport that each one acknowledged how within their families, one of the parents had deliberately adjusted their schedule and or employment to ensure this was possible.

'That' Parent

As parents spoke about their desire and the associated pressures to be good parents, they simultaneously expressed their fear and want to distance themselves from being considered by others as 'that' parent. Being 'that' parent meant fitting the description of one of many parenting labels that have emerged from empirical literature and popular media such as the helicopter parent, crazy sport parent, over-protective parent, hockey parent, and neglectful parent. These research and media generated terms, and the negative connotations that accompanied them appeared to impact parents' behaviours and decisions within the contexts of children's sport and free play.

Within sport, many parents were cognizant of 'that' parent who "pushed, pushed, pushed for kids that definitely were not going anywhere…" (Kim) and were resolved to not do the same. For example, Kim stated, "so I see the parents that push and I don't want to do that, I don't want to take that passion away from my kid. I want it to always be fun." At the same time, parents often felt judged by other parents when they did not push their children and commit to additional activities for the improvement of the team. When Jen made the choice not to have her child participate in extra practices, clinics or camps, she said, "there is a little bit of judgement that you get [from other parents]."

Another message parents attempted to avoid association with was 'that' parent whose sport ambition for their children was geared toward receiving college scholarships or playing professionally. This avoidance appeared to reflect knowledge about messages that highlighted how only a small percentage of people in actuality make it as professional athletes or achieve college scholarships. This is illustrated in the following quote from Mike:

> There was a stat that I was just reading the other day quoting soccer players, I don't remember where it was, but really high percentage of all soccer players that get signed when they're between 16 and 18…by the time they hit 21, they're already out….no longer playing soccer…so the likelihood of [my son] taking it and becoming a pro…is nil. So, I'm not an NHL parent, sort of thing, breathing down his neck.

Within the context of free play, a number of parents indicated they did not want to be the one who "helicopter parented their children" (Steph), providing them little freedom and few opportunities to make decisions. Paradoxically, parents also did not want to be 'that' parent who left their children unsupervised in their neighbourhood or to be looked after by another parent. Although Julie did not refer to any specific campaign messages encouraging free play, she was particularly cognizant of the conversations and informal messages among parents at the playground. She said:

> As a parent, there's a lot of conversation about it. Can you believe so-and-so lets their children walk home by themselves? 'Oh, Johnny got hurt, or Billy got hurt, well, where's his mom or dad? Well, he goes home by himself. You're kidding. Who would let their child walk home by themselves?' …I will take that to heart myself. My children get walked to school by an adult and I pick them up after school and would I ever think of letting them walk home by themselves? My two eldest can, my two youngest…I mean, no, they can't. Although they know how to get home from A to B, they know where the crosswalks are…they're probably very capable.

Providing additional insight with regard to parenting norms, Julie explained:

> I don't want to be the parent that's judged… I don't want to be the parent whose child somebody else has to take care of. You know…I'm so sorry you had to take care of my child, like I put you out. In terms of the child's safety…I really do think the kids are still safe. I don't think they're any more or less safe than they were when we left the house…for the full day…I can't lie, I still like to watch my kids play. I still like to see them, 'Mom, Mom! Watch me do this!' So that, I still enjoy. But for sure, I think there's a social pressure for me personally.

Message Confusion

Parents' struggles to encourage their children to 'do their best' versus 'be the best' and to 'be a good parent' versus 'that parent', in the contexts of sport and play, highlight the complexity of parenting, as well as the potential impact of messages. While some parents explained that messages were helpful, others described how they created confusion and uncertainty when it came to children's sport and play. Amy explained that she "really like[s the messages] that validate what I've thought… [about the importance of play]…that made [my decisions] easier…but I still struggle with it." Kim shared her appreciation for messages about girls' involvement in physical activity because it "reiterates that it's important for them to have it." On the other hand, Jay felt very differently about the messages he encountered about children's sport and play, wondering, "why are you being told what to do with your kids?", and then conceding that, "messaging's stupid…it's just the flavour of the day." Steph expressed that if messages about free play were "a bit more scientific" that she would be more likely "to make a concerted effort." Another perspective parents shared about messages was that they were "very mixed" (Jen) and that it was often difficult to know what to do. Amy explained, "there's so many articles

and things that people will post…and share…and …they can be on either side. You're just getting…messages from so many, so many different places…and a lot of it's contradictory."

To multisport…or not? The nature of these mixed and contradictory messages of children's sport and play led to confusion and discouragement among some parents. Parents experienced making decisions that aligned with one message and then felt judgement due to another message promoting the opposite. This was highly evident around multisport messages. The majority of parents expressed agreement with messages about the importance of children having opportunities to play multiple sports, a message sometimes promoted by elite athletes (i.e., Wayne Gretzky, Bobby Orr) (see Figure 2). Tom stated, "What did Bobby Orr say in his book? He said don't focus, take a break, play baseball, play something else…We're chasing experience, competitiveness, we're not chasing to be the best." However, by encouraging multisport experiences for their children, parents were simultaneously implicated in messages criticizing the overscheduling of children. As Amy articulated:

> There's research that's showing…if you want your kid… to be a good hockey player…they would benefit from playing basketball…being multisport. So now all these parents are like, ok now we need to have my kids in *laugh* two or three [sports]. And I… could see…where you would feel like, okay, I guess I need to fit in basketball now too.

Tom had received criticism from others who said "…oh, you've over-scheduled your kid." He defended his actions by responding that, "she wants to go…and so as long as the kid's interested, they're passionate about what they do, and the parents can drive them there on time *chuckle*, then give them that opportunity."

At times parents felt that some messages did not consider the current context in which families live. Referring to a recent message that featured Wayne Gretzky encouraging multiple sports (see Figure 2), Ang explained:

> I think he [Gretzky] played at a time where sport wasn't the year round focus that it is now...back in the 60's, Wayne Gretzky could do that because all of the kids took the summer off and did free play probably all summer, or maybe joined a community soccer team, lacrosse, whatever, something different. But the reality is, we don't live in that time.

Ang further explained that the multisport messages are often generalized to all sports without regard for context (e.g., geographical locations and seasons). She spoke specifically about soccer and shared:

> But…living here [Northern Canada]… if we could play outdoor soccer as our focus, as soccer's meant to be, it would be a completely different scenario. But because our seasons are so short, and unfortunately we have eight months where we do something else, like we do futsal, or boardless, or whatever it is, I just don't think you can take eight months off… and make the team that you were on.

Children are safe…or are they? Several parents spoke broadly about messages that encouraged free play and acknowledged the importance of free play in children's lives. At the same time, they were hesitant to support it for their own children, and spoke of even being constrained by environments in supporting independent free play. Jay spoke adamantly about the messages he felt were conveyed by "restrictions" and modifications to equipment that existed in

today's playgrounds such as the "safer plastic carousels at the park that don't go as fast [as they once did], or the "shorter [slides] so if you fall, you don't break your arm", and the altered play environments to ensure that "nobody [children] gets hurt."

In addition, stranger danger was cited by some parents as a reason why their children did not engage freely in unsupervised play. Steph shared, "mass media has corrupted me to think that there are more bad people and bad things that can happen than there probably are…My kids are not the kids…walking home at lunch by themselves in Grade 5, they're not." Similarly Mike expressed, "media these days…all you see is the negative stuff, the stuff that makes headlines…I'm super paranoid…it's almost created that in a way [for me]. I see the child abductions in Wyoming… doesn't impact you…but all of a sudden you're…[worried] for your kid." Melissa, who was "not the paranoid type", speculated that her daughter was hesitant to bike ride independently in their neighbourhood because, "I think she had heard messages that she was supposed to have someone with her."

While media was held responsible for a number of the stranger danger messages, not all parents shared these fears about free play. Tom explained, "people think there's a boogeyman out to get our kids all the time...It may not seem like it but the world is a whole lot safer today than it has ever been."

A few parents discussed a specific traffic safety message that made them hesitant to allow their 8 to 10 year old children more independence in their outdoor play. The message, which suggested that children were not able to make safe decisions navigating traffic, particularly when crossing streets and judging the speed and distance of oncoming vehicles, validated some

parents' decisions to ensure their children had adequate supervision during their outdoor play and mobility. Referring to a similar message, Julie said:

> I read somewhere…that children don't have the ability to… understand perception of driving and speed and depth until they're age 12. Where I read that, I don't know *chuckle* where that message came from...But then, I thought to myself oh well, I can't let my kids walk to school on their own until they're 12.

Finally, a few parents were critical about free play messages that were presented in opposition to sport or that suggested "it's better than [sport]" (Ang). Ang elaborated about her perception of these messages and said, "I find…as though…you're meant to believe that putting your kids in the organized sport you're taking away an opportunity rather than adding to it."

Discussion

Socioecological Considerations

The broad nature of our findings in this study illustrate the value of a SEM framework in exploring the impact of formal (e.g., campaign, media, health organization, etc.) and informal messages (e.g., parenting norms, social networks, etc.) on parental views, decisions, and behaviours in the context of children's sport and free play. Given that low levels of children's free play (Clements, 2004; Gray, 2011; ParticipACTION, 2015) and high levels of children's physical inactivity (Verloigne et al., 2012) continue to persist despite a growing abundance of formal messages from organizations aimed to educate and change parental behaviours within the context of children's sport and free play, our findings lend support to the premise of SEM's

which recognize that education alone cannot create lasting change when environments, both physical and social, do not support change (Stokols, 1996).

Given our findings, Bronfenbrenner's (2005) SEM provided a suitable foundational framework for our study, coupled with the works of Stokols (1996) and McLeroy et al. (1988). Given that children's sport and free play are positioned as equally important contexts for health promoting behaviours for child development (Gray, 2011; Jones et al., 2011; Tremblay & Willms, 2003; United Nations, 1990), the socioecological work of Bronfenbrenner (2005), Stokols (1996) and McLeroy et al. (1988) were useful to the interpretation of the findings. The findings of our study particularly resonate with three levels of McLeroy et al.'s (1988) SEM, including 1) intrapersonal factors, 2) interpersonal processes and primary groups, and 3) organizational factors. Furthermore, a bidirectional influence between these three levels (Bronfenbrenner, 2005; Stokols, 1996) is evident in our findings, but more pronounced between the intrapersonal and interpersonal levels. This draws in the work of Stokols (1996) which emphasizes the influence of individual and collective actions on modifying the physical and social health of environments.

Intrapersonal level. The notion of "good parenting" was highly apparent within the intrapersonal level as characteristics such as knowledge, attitudes, and behaviour etc. (McLeroy et al., 1988) within the context of children's sport and free play were discussed by parents. Similar to the literature within children's sport and free play, the notion of being a 'good parent' (Valentine & McKendrick, 1997; Wheeler & Green, 2014; Wiersma & Fifer, 2008) permeated every interview. Despite the fact that good parenting is not well-defined (Hoghughi & Speight, 1998), and that the expectations and characteristics of good parenting are inconsistent, our

findings echo those of Shaw (2010), that parents have an increasing sense of responsibility in providing deliberately chosen opportunities and experiences for their children to facilitate optimal childhood development. The decisions that parents in our study made for their children were highly motivated and guided by their desire to provide positive childhood experiences, while developing attributes and skills to be healthy and successful adults. Simultaneously, our findings support previous literature that suggests parents are often motivated by the desire to be good parents, and to be perceived by others as a good parent (Alparone & Pacilli, 2012; Valentine & McKendrick, 1997; Veitch et al., 2006; Wheeler & Green, 2014).

Interpersonal processes and primary groups. The interpersonal processes and primary groups level of the SEM consists of formal and informal social networks, such as relationships with family members, friends, neighbours, and acquaintances (McLeroy et al., 1988). In keeping with Witten et al.'s (2013) suggestion that "social, cultural and structural explanations warrant attention" (p. 216) in their exploration of the decline of independent outdoor play and travel, we found that parents' decisions and behaviours were mediated by various factors identifiable through a socioecological lens. One factor highly apparent in the interpersonal level, in the context of sport but more noticeably within the context of free play, was the impact of informal messages from networks. In our findings, these networks were comprised of parents within sport teams, as well as on the playground in the context of free play. Further, the messages conveyed within these networks were identified as informal, often inherent in the parenting labels used in conversations and additionally spread through various forms of social media (i.e., Facebook, Twitter, blogs, etc.).

Similar to the findings of Cochran and Brassard (1979), parenting networks and informal messages from these networks significantly influenced parents' decisions within the contexts of children's sport and free play. Within sport, parenting networks were a valuable and trusted primary source of information, yet simultaneously a source of pressure and judgement for parents. These networks appeared to perpetuate the negative trends within children and youth sports even though parents, at an individual level, rejected notions that children needed to do more to become better, or the best. Similar to previous literature, we found that parenting networks appeared to impact the establishment of local parenting norms across the contexts of children's sport and free play (Alparone & Pacilli, 2012; Carver et al., 2008; Valentine & McKendrick, 1997; Veitch et al., 2006; Wheeler & Green, 2014).

Apparent within the context of children's play was the strong presence of informal messages from 'playground conversations' among parenting networks. The informal messages within these networks highlighted the accepted norms within these specific communities, whether they were schools or neighbourhoods. Furthermore, parents' frequent use of parenting labels (e.g., helicopter parent, free range parent, bubble-wrap children, etc.) highlighted their awareness of popular trends related to children's safety during free play, and parental responsibilities for supervision during outdoor free play. Although we found that safety was not a barrier to free play for all of the parents, the locally established norms that defined good parenting had an obvious impact on parenting decisions and experiences in the context of play (Veitch et al., 2006).

Organizational level. Considering the organizational level of our SEM framework, many of the informal messages that existed within parenting networks resembled the formal messages

projected by organizations. This was evident within the context of sport, where policies and practices within organizations reflected ideologies shaped by messages, such as the '10,000 hours of practice' required for expert performance. These policies and practices within organizations impacted parents and children, and how they responded to demands within sport (e.g., increased practices, additional clinics, expectations of coaches, etc.). Interestingly, the 10,000 hours of deliberate practice used to justify sport specialization and development, was appropriated from a study by Ericsson and colleagues (1993) addressing the development of music expertise. Parents noted the prominence of the 10,000 hours of deliberate practice message within children's competitive sport, and were confused and frustrated by its impact on their children's sport experiences. A recent meta-analysis conducted by Macnamara, Hamrick, and Moreau (2016) challenges this prominent view, even among elite athletes, that the more deliberate sport practice an individual acquires, the better they will perform. Macnamara et al., (2016) also found that "athletes who reached a high level of skill did not begin their sport earlier in childhood than lower skill athletes" (p. 333). This study provides support for studies that advocate against childhood sport specialization (Malina, 2010) and the professionalization of children's sport (Gould, 2009), and for the views of these parents who questioned the 10,000 hours belief. Macnamara et al. (2106) offered the following with regard to the importance of their findings:

> ...Athletes, parents, recruiters, and coaches can use this knowledge to weigh the importance of deliberate practice to the associated time and financial investment against the athlete's enjoyment of the sport; the athletes' desire to engage in other forms of domain-relevant experience (e.g., unstructured play with friends, playing other sports);

> and how well the athlete's physical, cognitive, and psychological characteristics lend themselves to acquiring skill in a given sport. (p. 346)

This transference of formal messages into informal messages was also apparent in parenting labels such as 'helicopter parent' and 'bubble-wrapped generation' that have their origins in empirical literature and have been further used by organizations and media, drawing attention to the negative behaviours of parents. Our findings suggest that these labels imply an inherent and subjective judgement on parenting practices, which parents were aware of, and consequently impacted their decisions and feelings within the contexts of children's sport and free play. Previous literature has suggested that parents experience a range of feelings when faced with formal messages about sport and physical activity, such as guilty, insecure, pressured, overwhelmed, and powerless (Anderson & Doherty, 2005; Brown et al., 2011; Carson et al., 2014; Stokes, 2009). Our study echoes these parental feelings and adds that parents also experience feelings of worry and being judged relative to informal messages. Furthermore, parents felt frustration and were aware of inconsistencies among various messages, as well as the unsupportive environments in which these messages often exist. There appears to be misalignment between social and physical environments within sport teams, sport organizations, playgrounds and communities, with health promoting, and well-intentioned messages in the contexts of children's sport and free play.

Additional Insights

In addition to those messages discussed within the context of the SEM, there are a number of other messages and insights in the context of children's sport and free play highlighted in our study. An interesting finding was parents' expression of the tension between the free play and

sport messages that suggest one may be better for the development of children than the other and vice versa. Some parents indicated they felt they had to choose play or sport for their children, rather than emphasize both. The rivaling of children's sport and free play whether in empirical literature or popular media, formal and informal messages, or parenting labels (Bowers, 2014) may be problematic and counter-productive to promoting health in children given that an abundance of literature supports the unique benefits of both for the optimal development of children (Eime, Young, Harvey, Charity, & Payne, 2013; Fairclough et al., 2012; Ginsburg, 2007; Gray, 2011).

Parents in this study provided a challenge to the popular media messages and empirical studies that implicate parents, particularly those with young children enrolled in club sports, as being negatively motivated by scholarships and goals of their children becoming professional athletes (Malina, 2010; Woods, 2014). Rather, our findings supported those of Wiersma and Fifer (2008), that parents had "a clear understanding of their role in youth sports, articulated a child-centered philosophy of involvement, and clarified quite cogently how they should behave at youth sport events" (p. 525).

We also challenge the literature and popular media which contributes to the overall view that parents within children's sport and free play are misguided, motivated by negatively perceived intentions, or poorly behaved (Coakley, 2006; Ginsburg, 2007; Malina, 2010; Woods, 2014). Rather, we offer support for the findings of Wheeler and Green (2014) that parents are aware of the range of benefits children gain through sport participation, and we propose that the parents in our study were in fact motivated by these beliefs. Our findings also support those of Shields et al. (2005) that "youth sports are populated neither by angels nor devils, but human beings…" (p.

43), and that the generally good behaviour of a majority of sport parents have been overshadowed by sensationalized portrayals of a minority of poorly behaved sport parents (Omli et al., 2008). We support the literature that has examined parenting in the context of children's independent free play and mobility through a socioecological lens, recognizing the complexity of parenting within unique social, cultural, and environmental contexts (Benwell, 2013; O'Connor & Brown, 2013). Lastly, we propose an alternate view, that many parents' decisions are motivated by the intentions of doing the best they can for their children, with the knowledge they have, and in the current contexts in which they live.

Parenting is complex. Perhaps a new approach to promoting healthy behaviours within the contexts of children's sport and play, should consider a concept posited by Winnicott (as cited in Hoghughi & Speight, 1998), which challenges the notion of "good parenting", and proposes the concept of "good enough parenting" (p. 293). This concept recognizes that the notion of 'good parenting' is "unhelpful and unrealistic…and undermines the efforts of the vast majority of parents who are in all practical respects 'good enough'" (Hoghughi & Speight, 1998, p. 293).

Limitations and Future Directions

There are several limitations to this study that warrant discussion. One limitation was the broad definition of the term 'message' used in our research. This posed a challenge in determining precisely which formal messages had an impact on parents. Although parents initially indicated they were not affected by formal messages, in conversations with them it was apparent that in fact formal messages were present and transferred into informal messages that were identified as relevant in their lives. At the same time, this broad definition allowed for an exploration of the subtle connections between formal and informal messages, as well as their

impact on parents as individuals and collectively. Research that targets multiple specific media campaigns in relation to more informal messages can help inform the impact these have on parents. Another limitation rests within the extent to which our findings can inform other sporting contexts, as soccer was a specific reference point for many parents given their recruitment on the basis of their child's participation in that sport. It would be interesting to explore the perspectives of parents' whose children participate in different types of sport (e.g., individual versus team; recreational versus competitive) where local parenting norms and the dominant messages may be different. Finally, another important research direction suggested by our findings is to explore the tension seen to exist between children's sport and free play and the messages that surround them. While the literature provides evidence of the benefits of both contexts for children's optimal development, these discourses are often presented in opposition to one another leaving parents uncertain and questioning about the decisions they make with regard to their children's participation.

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Chapter 5: Overall Conclusion and Reflection

The focus of this thesis was to explore the perspectives of sport parents to understand factors, in particular messages that impact parents and their decisions within the context of children's sport and free play. This study was guided by a SEM model (Bronfenbrenner, 2005; McLeroy et al., 1988; Stokols, 1996). This afforded a broad exploration of multiple factors that influence parents. A wide range of themes emerged from the analysis of the data and it was not possible to contain the themes and data to one manuscript. This created the opportunity to separate the findings into manageable and presentable segments, resulting in the preparation of two manuscripts.

The first manuscript contains findings focused on the meaning parents ascribe to children's sport and free play. IAM was initially included in the interviews, data analysis, and manuscript but did not receive as much attention as sport and free play. This led to the decision to remove it in order to prepare a more cohesive document. IAM is still a valuable area to explore because of its connection to children's free play outdoors, the concepts of parental over-protection, and environmental influences (i.e., traffic safety, neighbourhood design, etc.) on parental decisions (De Meester, Van Dyck, De Bourdeaudhuij, & Cardon, 2014; O'Connor & Brown, 2013; Schoeppe, Duncan, Badland, Oliver, & Browne, 2014; Ungar, 2009; Witten et al., 2013). The concept of history and time, an important component of Bronfenbrenner's (2005) work was central to the interpretation of the data for the first paper. This concept was prevalent in the views of parents as they spoke about the value of sport for their children in developing the life skills to becoming successful adults, as well as the shifting of free play into its modern form, the playdate.

The second manuscript contains the findings around messages within the context of children sport, free play, and IAM from the perspectives of parents. Again, IAM was not a primary focus within the interpretation and therefore received little mention in this manuscript. The decision to have a broad definition of messages (Dictionary.com Unabridged, n.d.) was deliberate, although it was a challenge throughout the course of the study. My decision to leave it broad was based on my understanding that messages come in all forms and from multiple sources, therefore, to narrow the definition would potentially eliminate a vast array of messages and sources of messages. Furthermore, narrowing the definition of messages seemed to challenge the exploratory nature of this study, as well as an objective of this study, which was to bring to the forefront the voices of parents and the complexity of parenting in our current milieu. I was once asked to consider the tendency for individuals to only hear information that echoes their own beliefs and interests and if this was the case, what would be the potential value of a study such as the one contained in this thesis. In reflecting on this idea, I concluded that if parents were to hear only messages that echoed their beliefs, it would still be worth exploring. I found both in this study, some parents did hear messages that validated their behaviours and actions, but others heard messages that did not echo their beliefs and interests but instead, these messages were sources of frustration and confusion.

I embarked on this study with some biases. One of the predominant biases I held was that parents were overwhelmed by the abundance of messages within the context of children's sport, free play, and IAM. I was pleasantly surprised that most of the parents were not, although they were not unaffected by them either. There was one parent whose feelings aligned with my bias,

she was similarly overwhelmed, saw the contradictions among messages, and felt the confusion on what constituted the best choices for her children.

Final Reflection

My overarching conclusion is that parenting is complex and it continues to become more so. Parenting, it seems, was once was a community affair fashioned similarly to the African proverb 'that it takes a village to raise a child'. Everybody, it appeared, was a 'free-range parent' (Skenazy, 2009), at least you might think so from the numerous anecdotal experiences shared by parents and grandparents about the amount and nature of free play they had as children. However, times have changed and we no longer appear to have a village approach to raising children, nor do we consistently have a community that accepts, supports, or facilitates parenting outside of the local and social parenting norms. In today's social milieu, 'helicopter parenting' (Locke, Campbell, & Kavanagh, 2012) has perhaps replaced the notion of a village raising children, or in more academic literature 'eyes on where children play' (Holt et al., 2015). Through a socioecological lens, although messages are one aspect of a SEM model of behaviour change, the parents in this study highlight the need for physical and social environments to support change and healthy behaviours.

As was highlighted in both manuscripts, parental judgement exists, and the impact of those judgments on parents is palpable. Parents are faced with a multitude of factors from various levels of influence as they negotiate parenting in our current society. Times have changed, and with this change are judgements on both sides of various continuums specific to parenting behaviours. These continuums exist as over-protection and neglect, supportive and over-involved, helicopter parent and free range parent, etc. Parents are seemingly all of these labels

and it is unlikely, from the views of others, that they can strike a perfect balance between these continuums.

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Figure 1. Socioecological framework.

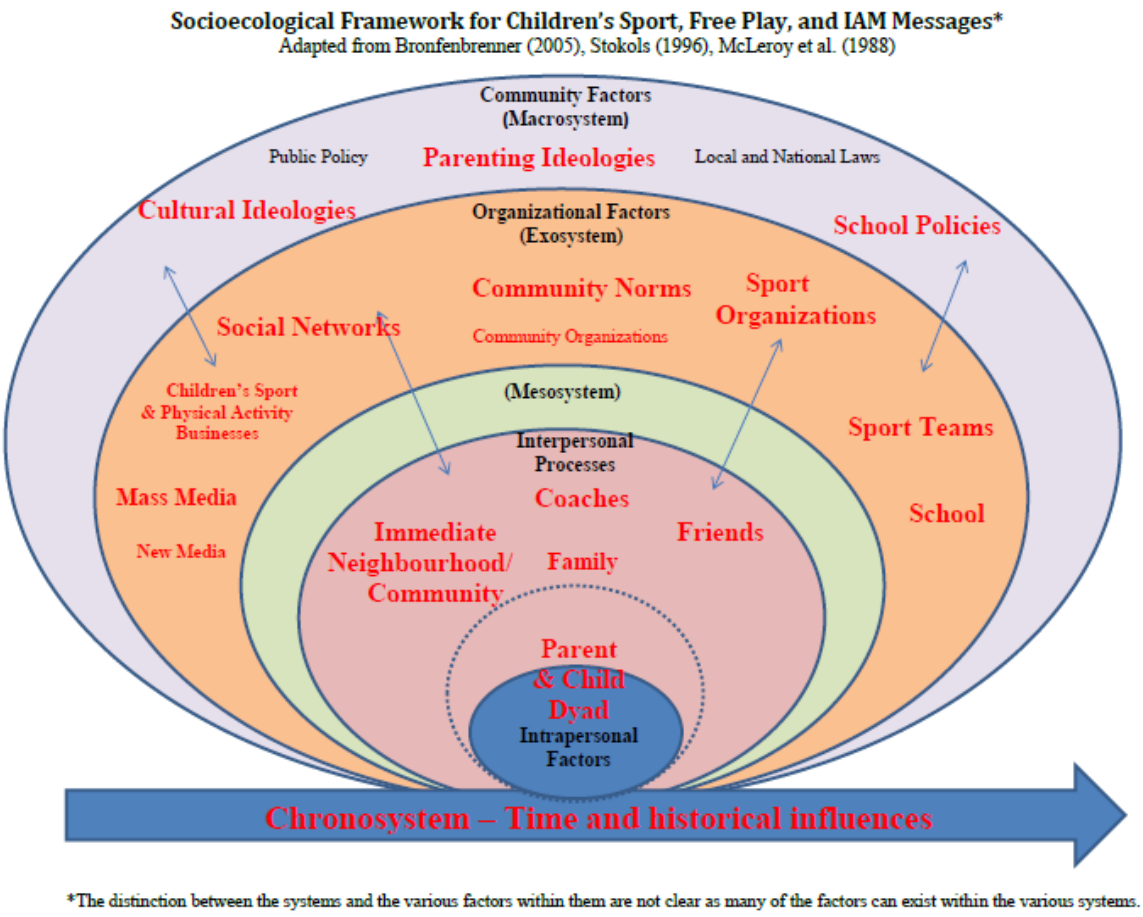
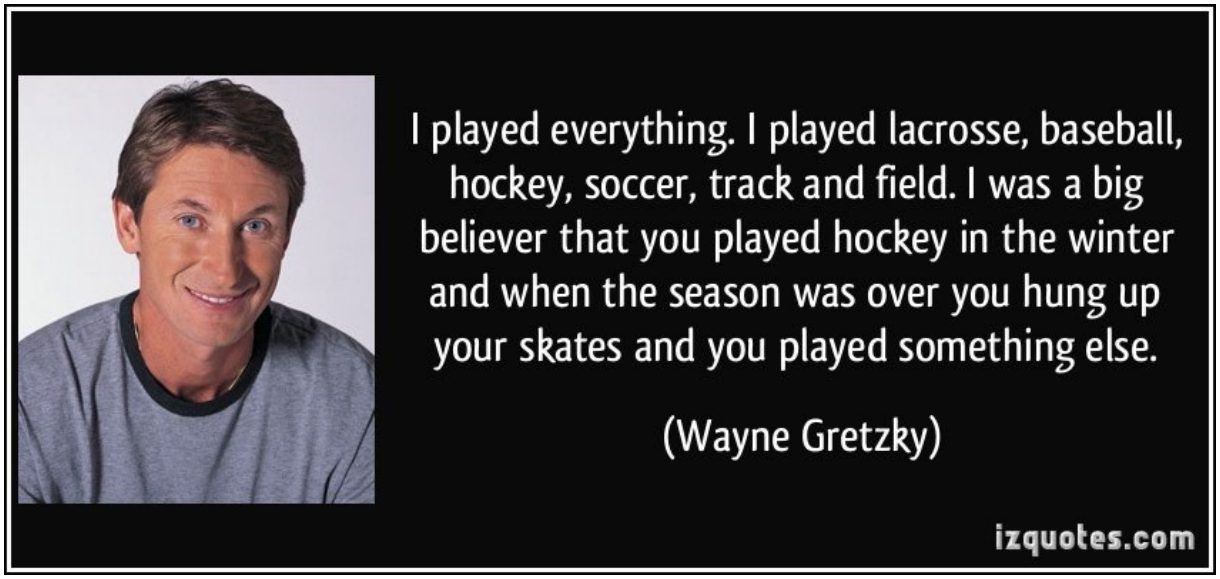


Figure 2. Sample of multisport message.



Appendix

Parent Interview Guide

The purpose of this interview is to understand what messages or information about children's physical activity you, as a parent are hearing. These messages or information can be from larger society, communities, friends, family, sport organizations, through media or newspapers, essentially from anywhere. I'd like to understand what messages or information you hear, are aware of and impact you. I'm using the term physical activity from a broad perspective which includes sports, free play, and active mobility (such as walking to school or friends' houses), any experiences or opportunities your child has to be moving and active.

There is no right or wrong answers - what I am interested in is your opinion, your experiences, and your views. Everything you say will remain confidential. This interview will take approximately 60 minutes. You can stop the interview at any time and you can pass on any questions that you don't want to answer.

I'm interested in exploring the 'whole picture' and to understand what your lives are like, what your views are about physical activity, sport, and play, and then exploring what messages you are exposed to.

Area of Exploration	Questions (Probe all questions)
Context of Lives	• Can you tell me about yourself, your family, and your kids? • Tell me about the community that you live in? • What does a typical day look like for your family? • What activities are you, your family, and your children involved in?

Views about Children's Sport and Free Play	I'm interested in getting some background on your views about physical activity in children's lives. • What are your views about children's sports? • What are your views about free play in childhood?
Exploring Messages	I'd like to talk about children's sport and physical activity messages that exist in society. In speaking about messages, I'd like for you to consider messages from a very broad perspective to include those that you might hear through, television, radio, the internet, newspapers, communities, and friends etc. • Thinking about your child's health and physical activity, what messages come to mind that address what children should be doing to be healthy? • Thinking about children's sports. What messages are you aware of that are specific to you as a parent and how you can support your children in sport? • What messages are you aware of about children and free play? (Probe thoughts, reactions, and how these messages influence the parent.) • When you make decisions about your child and the activities that they participate in, what factors do you consider? • What factors do you consider when you decide about your child and free play?
Closing Questions	• Thinking about your child and physical activity, sport, and free play, describe what your hopes are for your child as they grow up. • How do you envision physical activity, sport, and free play being a part of their lives over the next few years?