

**University of Alberta**

THE EXPERIENCES OF CHILDREN PARTICIPATING IN A  
COMMUNITY RECREATION PROGRAM FOR  
CHILDREN OF LOW SOCIOECONOMIC STATUS

by

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## ABSTRACT

The purpose of this case study was to explore the experiences of children at a community recreation program for children of low socioeconomic status (SES) using place attachment as the conceptual framework. Place attachment is a framework that allows for an exploration of children's experiences in regards to their bonding to a place and the role that social relationships play in the attachment process (Low & Altman, 1992). Seven children took part in semi-structured interviews and drawing activities. Additional data were collected using observations, field and reflective notes, documents, and a focus group interview with staff. One overarching theme of *having opportunities* emerged from the thematic analysis of the data. The children talked about having opportunities in three main ways: (a) *opportunities to do*, (b) *opportunities to connect*, and (c) *opportunities to be*. The results are discussed within the framework of place attachment and the literature on out-of-school programming and SES.

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## **LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS**

Mean: M

Positive youth development: PYD

Socioeconomic status: SES

Standard deviation: SD

## CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

### Personal Background

My interest in learning about the experiences of children of low socioeconomic status (SES) participating in community programs began during the summer of 2007. That summer I volunteered in Vancouver for two months helping to run day camps for children of low SES. As I got to know these children through games of tag, messy lunches, field trips, jump rope, and lots of laughter, I started to develop a passion for working and learning in this field.

Upon returning to Edmonton to finish my degree in Kinesiology, I became involved with an after-school physical activity and literacy program for children of low SES. For two hours each week, children attending this program participated in a variety of physical activities and games, ate a healthy snack and had the opportunity to read with a mentor. I first started as a coach and then took on some additional leadership responsibilities with the program. These past two years I have been directing one of the clubs in Edmonton.

My academic interest in this field of study began when I took a directed study course at the University of Alberta entitled *Children, Hope and Physical Activity*. As part of this course, I became familiar with research on SES and child development, hope theory and physical activity programming for children and adolescents of low SES. Research on hope theory was included in the course as some programs for children of low SES identify fostering hope as part of their organizational mission. This course experience evolved into a summer research project, that explored children's experiences and perspectives on hope in general

and in the context of an after-school program. One participant in this summer study, when discussing his experiences in the after-school program said, “I feel like this is a good place to be” (Langager & Spencer-Cavaliere, 2009). Wanting to gain further understanding regarding what constitutes a “good place to be” from the perspective of child participants, was one of the reasons I decided to pursue this study for my Master’s thesis.

These experiences have influenced my thoughts and assumptions on SES, out-of-school programming, and child development. One assumption I hold is that experiencing low SES has the potential to negatively influence child development. I do not think that children and youth of low SES *always* have poor outcomes, but low SES can significantly increase their risk. However, I also believe that children are resilient. I also think children can be influenced both positively and negatively by many different people and environments, such as their families, their friends, their neighbourhood organizations, and their schools. I want to believe that neighbourhood organizations can have a positive influence on the children and youth that go to them, but at the same time part of me is cynical. McLaughlin, Irby & Langman (1994) talk about how even though there are lots of organizations that have what appear to be caring staff – few organizations are actually effective in reaching the youth they serve. Thus, part of me wonders, as a person who has worked in this field, why do we even try, if we are just going to fail anyways? Why would an organization even want to invest in youth if it is not going to make a difference? Are we just deceiving ourselves, thinking we can contribute positively to the lives of children and youth? But

youth do not want to be seen as *hopeless* (McLaughlin et al., 1994) and I do not want to see youth as *hopeless*. I want to recognize the strengths and abilities of all children and youth. Despite some criticism of programs, McLaughlin et al.'s (1994) book is not encouraging apathy, rather it focuses on neighbourhood organizations that *have* been successful through the eyes of adolescents and the impact these organizations *have* had on the youth who attend them. They go so far as to call these organizations “places of hope” (McLaughlin et al., 1994, p. 8). But if there are effective and ineffective programs, what does it mean to be effective? What does it mean to be a successful support to children, to families, to neighbourhoods, to schools? What are the characteristics of a program that meets the needs of its participants? Can children give us insight when attempting to answer these questions? Are neighbourhood organizations and out-of-school time programming appropriate responses to issues resulting from low SES? Do children even know what their needs are? While I want to recognize the perspectives of children and think they have something valuable to contribute, is there a limit to how their contributions should be considered? I want to believe these programs have a positive influence on children and youth, but what is the real benefit? What can we learn from children about what makes a *good place to be* for them and how can their experiences in after-school programs inform our future practices?

## **Significance of Study and Background**

Low SES can have a negative impact on a child's health, cognitive development, socio-emotional and behavioural development, and psychological wellbeing (Bradley & Corwyn, 2002). As a result, intervention programs have been targeted at children and adolescents of low SES with the intention of providing developmentally beneficial opportunities that may otherwise be unavailable (Posner & Vandell, 1994). Participation in organized programming (e.g., after-school programs, student government, sport, church and volunteer activities, performing arts and academic clubs) has been shown to contribute positively to youth development (Eccles & Barber, 1999; Eccles & Gootman, 2002). Examples of these positive outcomes include the “development of [a] positive identity, increased initiative...positive relationships with diverse peers and adults, better school achievement, reduced rates of dropping out of school, reduced delinquency, and more positive outcomes in adulthood” (Eccles & Gootman, 2002, p. 30). Although researchers have explored a wide variety of topics and outcomes regarding these programs for young people, lacking from this body of research is a focus on the experiences of the participants, and of children in particular. Place is a conceptual framework that has been used to study the experiences of children and adolescents in urban and natural settings. It is starting to be used to study the experiences of young people in social contexts such as schools (Ellis, 2002). Thus, place could provide a promising framework for studying children's experiences in the context of organized programs.

Researchers interested in the influence of community programs on young people of low SES have frequently adopted a positive youth development (PYD) perspective (Eccles & Barber, 1999; Eccles, Barber, Stone, & Hunt, 2003; Eccles & Gootman, 2002; Mahoney, Larson, & Eccles, 2005). The PYD approach focuses on the competencies, “strengths, interests, and future potential[s]” of youth rather than just focusing on their problems or deficits (e.g. disorders, antisocial and delinquent behaviour, low motivation and achievement; Damon, 2004, p. 13). While this particular study is not guided by any particular PYD framework, it will adopt the general approach of viewing children in terms of their strengths and competencies rather than their deficits and weaknesses.

The information collected on community programs and youth development has been based primarily on adult observations (Pierce, Hamm, & Vandell, 1999), surveys completed by parents and teachers (Goldner & Mayseless, 2009; Lerner et al., 2005; Mahoney, Lord, & Carryl, 2005), and on surveys completed by adolescent participants (Anderson, Sabatelli, & Kosutic, 2007; Busseri, Rose-Krasnor, Willoughby, & Chalmers, 2006; Eccles & Barber, 1999; Eccles et al., 2003; Fredricks & Eccles, 2005; Gardner, Roth, & Brooks-Gunn, 2008; Goldner & Mayseless, 2009; Hansen, Larson, & Dworkin, 2003; Larson, Hansen, & Moneta, 2006; Lerner et al., 2005; Simpkins, Eccles, & Becnel, 2008). While this quantitative research presents important information concerning the relationships between participation and various outcomes (e.g. academic achievement, problem behaviour or self-worth; Busseri et al., 2006;

Eccles et al., 2003; Simpkins et al., 2008) there is limited research that explores the experiences of the participants who engage in these programs.

In one of few studies that investigated the perspectives of youth, McLaughlin et al. (1994) used ethnography to examine the success of community organizations from the perspective of young people in those communities. According to study participants, the presence of positive and meaningful interactions between the adults in the organization and the youth participants was identified as one of the major characteristics of a “successful” organization. The “successful” neighbourhood organizations were referred to as “places of hope,” places of belonging and nurturance for youth (McLaughlin et al., 1994, p. 8). This concept of place, and by extension place attachment theory, could provide interesting insight into the experiences of the participants in these programs.

Place attachment is the emotional and cultural “bonding of people to places” that occurs over a period of time (Low & Altman, 1992, p. 2). Various disciplines, including psychology, anthropology, and social ecology, have studied people’s attachment to different places (Low & Altman, 1992). Place has been defined in a number of different ways including a “space that has been given meaning through personal, group, or cultural processes” (Low & Altman, 1992, p. 5) and as “an area or space that is a habitual site of human activity and/or is conceived of in this way by communities or individuals” (Brey, 1998, p. 240). These two definitions reflect the two aspects of place: the physical and the social (Scannell & Gifford, 2010). The physical dimension of place may include homes, cities, geographical locations and religious places (Scannell & Gifford, 2010).

The social dimension of place reflects the influence that social relationships, meanings and experiences associated with a place have on the attachment process (Low & Altman, 1992).

Place allows the researcher to go beyond solely “emphasizing individual agency” (e.g. PYD) to consider the social and environmental contexts of experience (Ellis, 2002, p. 72). Hirsch, Roffman, Deutsch, Flynn, Loder and Pagano (2000) used place attachment in the context of community youth programming to explore the experiences of African American adolescent girls in a Boys and Girls Club. The girls in this study referred to the club as a “second home” signifying an important attachment to this community organization (Hirsch et al., 2000, p. 214). Relationships were found to be particularly important in this ‘home place’, which was a setting where the girls could have positive interactions with adult role models and peers. Adolescents have indicated that social relationships are particularly important to their experiences and participation in community programs (Hirsch et al., 2000; McLaughlin et al., 1994). A concept that emphasizes both the physical and the social may be particularly useful for exploring participants’ experiences in a community organization (a “place”) and the social interactions that occur in that place. Place attachment appears to be a promising framework with which to explore the experiences of participants in recreation programs.

In addition to the issues outlined here: 1. The developmental risks associated with low SES, 2. Lack of emphasis on participants’ experiences in programs designed to counter these risks, and 3. The potential of place attachment

as a conceptual framework to explore these experiences, a final consideration involves the need to explore the experiences of children. To date, the majority of research looking at outcomes tied to participation in organized out of school programs has taken place with adolescents. Limited research has explored the personal experiences of the children who participate in these programs. For example, studies taking a PYD approach have focused primarily on adolescents (Busseri et al., 2006; Fredricks & Eccles, 2005; Gardner et al., 2008; Hansen & Larson, 2007). Bronfenbrenner (1979) states that “it becomes not only desirable but essential to take into account in every scientific inquiry about human behaviour and development how the research situation was perceived and interpreted by the subjects of the study” (p. 30). Thus, it is important to explore the perspectives of children in order to gain insight into how they view their experiences in community recreation programs and thereby gain understanding regarding how to best create meaningful, positive, and developmentally beneficial experiences for them. Children have had limited voice in research and it is important that they have the opportunity to contribute their opinions and perspectives to issues that concern them (Morgan, Gibbs, Maxwell, & Britten, 2002). Place attachment continues to appeal as a conceptual framework for this population as it has been used in previous studies to learn about children’s experiences in other settings (Ellis, 2002).

## **Purpose**

The purpose of this qualitative case study was to perform an in-depth exploration of the experiences of children of low SES participating in a

community recreation program. Place attachment was used as a conceptual framework as it allowed for an exploration of children's experiences in regards to their attachment or bonding to a program place and the role that social relationships play in that attachment process (Low & Altman, 1992). Specific research objectives were:

1. To explore the experiences of children of low SES in a community recreation program.
2. To explore the role of place and place attachment in these experiences.
  - a. To explore the role of social relationships in these experiences.
  - b. To explore the presence or absence of affordances of place in these experiences.
3. To provide an opportunity for children to share their thoughts, feelings and perspectives.

In a research study that examined hope in an after school program for children of low SES, one participant said, "I feel like this is a good place to be" (Langager & Spencer-Cavaliere, 2009). Understanding what constitutes 'a good place to be' in the eyes of participants is likely to help teachers, program leaders and activity planners to structure programs in such a way as to create meaningful experiences for the children who take part in them.

### **Definitions**

*Place.* Place has been defined as "space that has been given meaning through personal, group or cultural processes" (Low & Altman, 1992, p. 5) as

well as “an area or space that is a habitual site of human activity and/or is conceived of in this way by communities or individuals” (Brey, 1998, p. 240).

***Place attachment.*** Place attachment is defined as the emotional and cultural “bonding of people to places” that occurs over a period of time (Low & Altman, 1992, p. 2). Scannell and Gifford (2010) define place attachment as “a bond between an individual or group and a place that can vary in terms of spatial level, degree of specificity, and social or physical features of the place and is manifested through affective, cognitive and behavioural psychological processes” (p. 5).

***Socioeconomic status.*** SES has been defined as a family or individual’s position on a social structure hierarchy, based on their access to, or control over, wealth, prestige and power (Mueller & Parcel, 1981). In many studies, SES is a composite measure of income, level of education and occupation (Bradley & Corwyn, 2002). The children who participated in this study attended a community recreation program for children and adolescents of low SES (UrbanKidz Youth Centre; pseudonym).

***Recreation.*** McLean, Hurd, Rogers and Kraus (2008) summarize the broad array of definitions of recreation when they state that:

Recreation consists of human activities or experiences that occur in leisure time. Usually, they are voluntarily chosen for intrinsic purposes and are pleasurable, although they may involve a degree of compulsion, extrinsic purpose and discomfort, or even pain or danger. Recreation may also be regarded as the emotional state resulting from participation or as a

social institution, a professional career field, or a business. When provided as part of organized community or voluntary-agency programs, recreation should be socially constructive and morally acceptable in terms of prevailing community standards and values (p.45).

***Community youth organization.*** Community youth organizations are places of youth development opportunities in which a wide variety of activities and relationships occur that are designed to improve the well-being of children and youth (Benson & Saito, 2000).

***After-school program.*** After-school programs are safe, structured, and supervised programs for school aged children and adolescents that are designed to promote learning and positive development outside the school hours. A wide variety of activities can be offered in after-school programming including: academic enrichment, tutoring, mentoring, homework help, performing and fine arts, technology, science, physical activity, reading, math, civic engagement and involvement and activities to promote healthy socio-emotional development. Out-of-school time is another term that has been used interchangeably with the term “after-school” (Harvard Family Research Project, 2008).

***Positive youth development.*** “Positive development has been defined as the engagement in pro-social behaviours and avoidance of health-compromising and future-jeopardizing behaviours” (Roth et al., 1998, p. 426). The PYD approach focuses on the competencies, “strengths, interests, and future potential[s]” of youth rather than just focusing on their problems or deficits (e.g.

disorders, antisocial and delinquent behaviour, low motivation and achievement;  
Damon, 2004, p. 13).

## CHAPTER TWO: REVIEW OF LITERATURE

### Socioeconomic Status

Low SES has the potential to negatively influence a child's physical health, cognitive, socio-emotional and behavioural development, and psychological wellbeing (Bradley & Corwyn, 2002; Brooks-Gunn & Duncan, 1997; McLoyd, 1998). While there is much research on the associations between SES and child development, (e.g. Bradley & Corwyn, 2002; Brooks-Gunn, 1995; Brooks-Gunn & Duncan, 1997; Evans, 2004; McLoyd, 1998), there has yet to be consensus on how to best conceptualize and measure the construct of SES (Bradley & Corwyn, 2002). Some researchers think of SES in terms of class or economic position, while others have conceptualized it in terms of social status or prestige (Bradley & Corwyn, 2002). SES has also been defined as a family or individual's position on a social hierarchy, based on their access to, or control over, wealth, prestige and power (Mueller & Parcel, 1981). Psychologists have traditionally viewed the impact of SES within the framework of resource access (Bradley & Corwyn, 2002). Persons of high SES are able to provide their children with goods, services, and social connections that are thought to have a positive impact on child development. Subsequently, persons of low SES lack access to these same resources and opportunities, placing these children at risk for developmental problems (Bradley & Corwyn, 2002). While SES has been measured in a variety of different ways (Coleman, 1988; Entwisle & Astone, 1994) it most often includes measures of family income, education and occupational status (Bradley & Corwyn, 2002; Conger & Donnellan, 2007). Low

levels of income, education and occupational status are associated with lower SES values.

**Impact of low SES on child development.** There are numerous mechanisms thought to influence this relationship between SES and child development and well-being (Bradley & Corwyn, 2002). These moderators and mediators may include aspects related to: the personal characteristics of the child, the child's family and the physical and social environment (Bradley & Corwyn, 2002). The research in the following sections is based on a North American perspective, with the majority of the research coming from American sources.

**Physical health.** Children of low SES are two times more likely to be in fair or poor health compared to children of higher SES (Brooks-Gunn & Duncan, 1997). Low birth weight, disabilities and disorders, injury, and disease, among other physical health issues, are more prevalent among children of low SES than children of higher SES (Bradley & Corwyn, 2002; Brooks-Gunn & Duncan, 1997). Various factors have been proposed to mediate and/or moderate this relationship between physical health and SES (Bradley & Corwyn, 2002). These factors may include poor prenatal care, inadequate nutrition and lack of access to immunizations and medical treatment (Bradley & Corwyn, 2002; Brooks-Gunn & Duncan, 1997; Evans, 2004; McLoyd, 1998). Evans and Kantrowitz (2002) also suggested that environmental quality could play an important role in explaining the associations that exist between SES and health. While researchers have not been able to prove that the adverse impact of low SES on health is mediated by exposure to environmental risk factors, income has been found to be directly

related to aspects of environmental quality such as exposure to pollutants, noise or toxins. Furthermore, environmental quality has been found to be inversely related to various physical and psychological health outcomes, such as respiratory diseases (Evans & Kantrowitz, 2002).

Birken, Parkin, To and Macarthur (2006) used data from Statistics Canada and the Canadian census to determine the influence of SES on rates of death from unintentional injury among Canadian children in urban areas. Their main finding indicated that the risk of death from unintentional injury increased by 12% for each change in income bracket moving from high SES to low SES. The authors recommended, therefore, that a national injury prevention strategy be implemented to help address this inequity for children of low SES.

Nutrition has also been proposed as a factor influencing the physical health of children of low SES. Low quality diets that are energy dense and low in nutrients are more often consumed by people of low SES and this is thought to be detrimental to health (Darmon & Drewnowski, 2008). Willms, Tremblay and Katzmarzyk (2003), in a Canadian study, also found that the likelihood of a child becoming overweight decreases as family income and father's education increase. Preventative interventions (e.g. school based programs promoting physical activity and healthy dietary habits) can be efficacious in combating overweight and obesity (Flodmark, Marcus, & Britton, 2006). However, effective implementation is difficult with these interventions, as many studies show only neutral effects resulting from participation in these programs. Therefore, while low SES has been shown to negatively influence the physical health of children, it

is important that interventions continue to target discrepancies in child wellbeing across varying levels of SES.

**Cognitive and academic development.** Low SES has negative associations with the cognitive and academic development of children. Children in poverty often complete fewer years of school, experience school failure more often, have lower scores on standardized tests of verbal proficiency and academic achievement, and are more likely to have learning disabilities and developmental delays than children of higher SES (Brooks-Gunn & Duncan, 1997). The home environment is thought to account for a large proportion of the effect of SES on cognitive development (Brooks-Gunn & Duncan, 1997). Compared to parents of high SES, parents of low SES have fewer conversations and less complex interactions with their children (Bradley & Corwyn, 2002) and participate in less shared reading (Storch & Whitehurst, 2001). These children often lack access to cognitively stimulating materials (e.g. books) and learning experiences (Bradley & Corwyn, 2002). They experience fewer visits to museums and libraries, attend less theatrical performances, watch more television, and have less access to lessons (e.g. sports or music) for improving their skills (Bradley & Corwyn, 2002; Evans, 2004). Participation in intervention programs, however, can help mediate the relationship between SES and cognitive development. Reynolds, Temple, Robertson and Mann (2002) found that participation in an early childhood intervention program with a focus on literacy (Chicago Child-Parent Centres) was associated with greater school achievement, higher rates of high school completion, and lower rates of remedial education services. Also, Cooper,

Valentine, Nye and Lindsay (1999) found that the participation of adolescents in extracurricular activities and structured groups was associated with higher test scores and class grades compared to adolescents who spent their time working at jobs and watching television. Therefore, it is important to continue to pursue how interventions can best meet the needs of children of low SES who are at risk for reduced cognitive and academic development, due to factors such as limited opportunities.

**Behavioural and socio-emotional development.** Children of low SES often experience more negative life events than children of higher SES. Examples of these events may include child abuse, family conflict, peer aggression, and community violence (Bradley & Corwyn, 2002; Evans, 2004; McLoyd, 1998). These negative life events are beyond children's ability to cope, increasing their risk of emotional maladjustment (Bradley & Corwyn, 2002; Evans, 2004; McLoyd, 1998). As a result, these children may exhibit more aggression, anxiety, social withdrawal, poor adaptive functioning, delinquent behaviour, and depression than children of higher SES (Bradley & Corwyn, 2002; Brooks-Gunn & Duncan, 1997; McLoyd, 1998). In addition, young children of low SES may experience less emotional support (Evans, 2004); lower self-esteem and hope may also be diminished by children's experience of these chronic family strains and stigmas attached to children of low SES (Bradley & Corwyn, 2002; McLoyd, 1998). Bolland (2003) studied 2468 youth of low SES and asked them about hopelessness and their participation in risk behaviours (e.g. violence, substance use). Twenty-five percent of females and 50% of males reported moderate to

severe feelings of hopelessness (Bolland, 2003). The degree of hopelessness reported by the youth predicted the risk behaviours studied. Bolland (2003) suggested that interventions aimed at youth of low SES should promote skills that help them overcome the feelings and effects of hopelessness.

A number of factors have been proposed to mediate/moderate the relationship between SES and behavioural and socio-emotional development. Low income households have lower levels of child monitoring, smaller social networks, fewer organizational involvements and less frequent interactions with others (Evans, 2004). Children also have less stability, as they change houses, schools and daycares more frequently (Evans, 2004). Also, parents of low SES are often involved less in school activities as they volunteer less, attend fewer functions, do not know their child's teachers and are less aware of their child's academic standings (Evans, 2004). Parenting that is punitive, harsh, inconsistent, and domineering is predictive of socio-emotional problems in children (McLoyd, 1998). Parenting, on the other hand, that is strict and highly directive with high levels of warmth helps children to succeed academically in neighbourhoods of low SES (McLoyd, 1998). Low SES does not necessarily indicate poor care giving for children, but chronic low SES stressors may exacerbate the vulnerabilities of caregivers and this has the potential to lead to dysfunctional care giving (Bradley & Corwyn, 2002).

At school, teachers tend to have lower achievement expectations and more negative perceptions (e.g. less maturity, fewer self-regulatory skills) of children of low SES (McLoyd, 1998). As a result, teachers may provide less positive

attention, fewer learning opportunities and less positive reinforcement for good performances (McLoyd, 1998). Unfortunately, this bias may work to exaggerate the differences between lower and higher socioeconomic classes.

Positive adult-child relations, however, can produce more resilient children, even in low income environments (McLoyd, 1998). Jarrett (1995) in her review of qualitative studies looking at social mobility among African American youth found that a network of supportive adults, stringent parental monitoring, and youth involvement with institutions and organizations that helped build social capital, was particularly important for the mobility of these youth. Access to stimulating materials and experiences can also help mediate the relationship between SES and behaviour problems (Bradley & Corwyn, 2002). Quane and Rankin (2006) found that youth participation in community organizations can be associated with the development of a positive self-concept and in a study by Eccles et al. (2003) participation was associated with lower rates of drinking and drug use. In an ethnographic study of the experiences of youth in community programs, McLaughlin et al., (1994) found that the resilient youth in their study, dedicated time to neighbourhood organizations. These youth “built hope through their participation in neighbourhood based organizations that offer[ed] inner city teenagers support, guidance, safety, companionship, and engagement in ways they [could] accept” (McLaughlin et al., 1994, p. 3).

**Summary for SES and child development.** The influence of SES on child development is a vast and complex topic. There are many factors that influence a child’s development ranging from the child’s own personal

characteristics, to the family, to the school, to the economic, political and cultural systems in which he or she was raised. The different physical and social aspects of a child's environment all have different influences on his or her development. All of these influences, personal, psychological and environmental, work together to mediate and moderate each child's physical, cognitive and socio-emotional growth. This section has provided a glimpse into the influence of SES on child development and the consequences, moderators, and mediators of growing up in this environment. There are many other issues related to growing up in a low SES environment such as: stress and allostatic load, timing and duration of low SES, social causation versus social selection/drift, interaction of genetics and the environment, collective/neighbourhood SES and resiliency (Baum, Garofalo, & Yali, 1999; Bradley & Corwyn, 2002; Brooks-Gunn & Duncan, 1997; Huston, McLoyd, & Coll, 1997; Leventhal & Brooks-Gunn, 2004; McLoyd, 1998; Muntaner, Eaton, & Diala, 2000; Tiet, Huizinga, & Burnes, 2010).

While low SES has been associated with poor developmental outcomes, there are children and youth who still experience positive development despite growing up in suboptimal environments (Tiet et al., 2010). Relationships with family, teachers and other significant individuals as well as involvement in extracurricular activities are two things that have shown to predict resilience among children and youth (Tiet et al., 2010). Interventions with children have shown positive influence on children's developmental outcomes and it is important to continue to explore how these programs can best create meaningful and relevant experiences for children and adolescents.

## **After-School Programs**

In an effort to offset the effects of low SES, after-school and community programs have targeted children and adolescents of low SES to give them developmentally beneficial opportunities that may otherwise be unavailable (Posner & Vandell, 1994). While some of these programs have placed emphasis on reducing risk behaviours (criminal behaviour, substance abuse, dropping out of school, violence; Collingwood, 1997; Martinek, 1997; Martinek & Hellison, 1997;) others have worked to foster positive development (Eccles & Gootman, 2002; Lerner, 2005; Mahoney, Larson et al., 2005).

After-school programs, also known as out-of-school time programs, are designed to be safe, structured and supervised programs that promote learning, wellbeing and positive development for children and adolescents outside the school hours (Benson & Saito, 2000; Harvard Family Research Project, 2008). These settings offer a wide variety of activities for their participants and provide opportunities for youth to develop positive relationships with peers and adults (Benson & Saito, 2000). While some programs have offered activities focused on academic enrichment (Campbell & Ramey, 1994; Posner & Vandell, 1994), literacy (Caughy, DiPietro, & Strobino, 1994), or civic involvement (Pearce & Larson, 2006), other programs have focused on mentoring (Rhodes, 2004; Rhodes, Spencer, Keller, Liang, & Noam, 2006), performing and fine arts, or sport and recreation (Harvard Family Research Project, 2008; Holt, 2008; Johannes, 2003; Posner & Vandell, 1994). Programs have been offered by community organizations (e.g. YMCA, Boys and Girls Clubs), religious

organizations, service clubs, sports organizations, and parks and recreation departments among others (Carnegie Council on Adolescent Development, 1992; McLaughlin et al., 1994).

The after-school hours are a key period during which youth have large amounts of discretionary time (Larson & Verma, 1999) that is often unstructured, unsupervised and unproductive (Carnegie Council on Adolescent Development, 1992). Early adolescents who spend these critical hours in unstructured and unsupervised time with peers report higher levels of aggression, delinquency, substance use and susceptibility to peer pressure compared to adolescents who are at home with their parents, at home alone or who are participating in extracurricular activities (Flannery, Williams, & Vazsonyi, 1999). Participation in structured activities, such as sports and community programs, has been associated with positive development outcomes such as higher academic achievement and attainment, and positive socio-emotional development (e.g. improved communication and relationship skills, decreased depression and anxiety, lower rates of involvement in risky behaviours; Broh, 2002; Cooper et al., 1999; Eccles & Barber, 1999; Harvard Family Research Project, 2008; Larson & Verma, 1999).

**Positive youth development.** Much research on participation in out-of-school time activities and development has taken the positive youth development perspective (Eccles & Gootman, 2002; Mahoney, Larson et al., 2005). This approach focuses on the competencies, “strengths, interests, and future potential[s]” of youth rather than just focusing on the problems or deficits of

adolescents (e.g. disorders, antisocial and delinquent behaviour, low motivation and achievement; Damon, 2004, p. 13). “Positive development has been defined as the engagement in pro-social behaviours and avoidance of health-compromising and future-jeopardizing behaviours” (Roth et al., 1998, p. 426). Previously, much of the research on child and adolescent development has focused on what can “go wrong” among youth compared to examining positive development and how children “become motivated, directed, socially competent, compassionate and psychologically vigorous adults” (Larson, 2000, p. 170).

Many programs have traditionally focused on preventing “problem behaviours” such as drug use and violence (Larson, 2000, p. 170). However, McLaughlin et al. (1994) revealed that youth find these types of programs “demeaning and punitive” (p. 8). Effective organizations view youth as “resources to be developed, not problems to be managed” (Roth et al., 1998, p. 427). Preventing problem behaviours does not fully prepare youth for the future; children and adolescents who are “problem free” are not necessarily prepared for the future (Pittman, 1991 as cited in Roth et al., 1998, p. 426). Therefore, researchers have recommended that programs focus on fostering positive development, not just preventing negative development. “The positive youth development approach aims at understanding, educating, and engaging children in productive activities rather than... [just]...correcting, curing, or treating them for maladaptive tendencies or so-called disabilities” (Damon, 2004, p. 15). At the same time, Eccles and Gootman (2002), caution against developing a polarized perspective of youth programs. While some programs are identified as

“prevention/problem centred” and others are identified as “youth development centred,” it is important to recognize the assets of both approaches (Eccles & Gootman, 2002, p. 4).

**Program quality and affordances.** While some studies have shown programs to be associated with positive outcomes, other studies have found no or even negative effects as a result of involvement in after-school programming (Vandell, Shumow, & Posner, 2005). Some research has examined these associations from a quantitative perspective, looking at which program characteristics lead to more beneficial results. Other research has talked to participants to find out what is important about programs from their perspective. Supportive relationships, psychologically and physically safe environments, support for skill building, efficacy and mattering, opportunities for belonging, autonomy and choice, positive social norms, strong partnerships with schools and families, and appropriate amounts of structure, supervision and organization are some characteristics of quality programs that are thought to support positive development (Eccles & Gootman, 2002; Harvard Family Research Project, 2008; Vandell et al., 2005). There are programs, however, which do not meet their potential and are not associated with positive outcomes (Harvard Family Research Project, 2008).

Barber, Eccles and Stone (2001) examined the relationship between participation in high school activities such as sports, pro-social activities and performing arts, and various developmental outcomes. They found relationships between participation and later substance abuse, psychological adjustment and

educational and occupational outcomes. For example, participation in pro-social activities was associated with lower rates of substance abuse and higher levels of self-esteem, while sport participation was associated with higher rates of drinking and more years of schooling. While participation in activities was not always associated with positive outcomes, Barber and colleagues provided several reasons to help explain the relationship between participation and positive outcomes. For one, these activities provided a context for adolescents to engage in challenging tasks and afforded the participants a place in which they could express and develop their talents. Also, participation in these activities helped adolescents satisfy their need for social relatedness and gave them the opportunity to develop social networks with positive adults.

Strobel, Kirshner, O'Donoghue and McLaughlin (2008) conducted a study exploring the qualities of after-school settings that attract the continued participation of urban youth. Opportunities to learn, to experience autonomy and to experience physical and emotional safety were some of the features the youth cited as being important aspects of community programs. The youth in this study shared that they liked to participate in activities that allowed them to learn and develop personally important skills (e.g. leadership, drawing) and that they valued being able to exercise their autonomy in choosing what they wanted to do at the centre. According to the authors, giving choice to the adolescents was one of the ways the staff engaged the youth at the centre. The youth valued the physical safety the centre provided as the staff kept threatening strangers, as well as drugs and guns out of the centre. The centre was a place where the youth could engage

with peers and adults whom they trusted and where they could work out their problems in a safe and confidential place.

In a qualitative study that looked at factors influencing the commitment of adolescents to extracurricular activities, Fredricks, Alfeld-Liro, Hruda, Eccles, Patrick and Ryan (2002) found that young adults who experienced success and appropriate amounts of challenge in an activity or program were more likely to view those experiences positively. Adolescents' perceptions of competence and their experiences of success in an activity influenced their levels of participation and investment of effort in that activity. For example, adolescents who perceived themselves as skillful in basketball or music were more likely to have sustained participation in those specific programs. Conversely, adolescents who perceived they lacked the necessary skills were more likely to lose interest in an activity over a period of time, eventually ceasing their participation. The level of challenge perceived by participants also influenced their participation. Participants who perceived too little or too great of challenge were not motivated to continue their participation in an activity or program, whereas youth who experienced an optimal level of challenge were excited to continue participating and developing their skills (Fredricks et al., 2002).

Grossman et al. (2002) also argued that for an activity to be beneficial to adolescents it must challenge youth to develop and learn personally relevant skills. Enthusiasm and engagement shown by youth is thought to be one indicator of the degree to which youth find activities interesting and challenging. While engagement does not ensure positive outcomes, it is less likely that youth will

benefit from an activity that is perceived as boring or uninteresting (Grossman et al., 2002). Children's learning is most effective when it is personally meaningful or engaging (Pearce & Larson, 2006). In support of this argument, Mahoney, Lord et al. (2005) found that children who participated in a highly engaging after-school program had higher levels of reading achievement than those children who attended a low engagement after-school program or who were in care with a parent, self, sibling or other adult. Engagement, not attendance, is proposed to be an indicator of program quality (Hirsch, Mekinda, & Stawicki, 2010). There are many children who attend programs due to parental requirements, not personal choice; therefore high levels of attendance do not necessarily equate to positive outcomes and experiences (Hirsch et al., 2010). At the same time, children and adolescents are thought to experience greater developmental benefits when they participate in programs with greater frequency and in a sustained manner (Harvard Family Research Project, 2008). But, in accordance with Grossman et al. (2002) and Hirsch et al. (2010) engagement and sustained participation are thought to occur when programs meet the needs and interests of youth (Harvard Family Research Project, 2008).

**Social relationship with adults.** A positive and supportive social environment, with adults who work to engage and challenge youth, are practices associated with high levels of youth engagement in after-school programming (Grossman et al., 2002). Higher levels of engagement have been reported during activities that involve both peers and adults compared to those activities that involve peers only (Shernoff & Vandell, 2007). Also, staff who are highly trained

and well educated are more likely to produce high quality after-school experiences (Cross, Gottfredson, Wilson, Rorie & Connell, 2010).

Mentoring relationships are thought to contribute to resilience in high-risk youth (e.g. risk for early child bearing, academic failure, delinquency; Rhodes, 1994) and positive social relationships have been found to be a vital component of effective out-of-school time programs (Hirsch et al., 2000; McLaughlin et al., 1994; Rhodes, 2004). The support of an adult role model (e.g. teacher, coach, etc.) can contribute to positive outcomes for young adults including higher educational retention and lower rates of criminal involvement (Hirsch et al., 2000). Participation in a long term (greater than one year) mentoring relationship has been shown to contribute to improvements in a young adult's academic, psychosocial and behavioural outcomes (Grossman & Rhodes, 2002).

In one of few studies that investigated the perspectives of youth, McLaughlin et al, (1994) used ethnography to examine the success of community organizations for the young people in those communities. According to study participants, the presence of positive and meaningful interactions between the adults in the organization and the youth participants was identified as one of the major characteristics of a "successful" organization. These "successful" neighbourhood organizations provided places of belonging and nurturance for their youth participants. Hirsch et al. (2000), in a similar way, explored the experiences of African American adolescent girls in a Boys and Girls Club. Relationships were again found to be particularly important to the girls' experiences in this place, which was a setting where the girls could have positive

interactions with adult role models and peers. These adults were able to provide not only social and emotional support, but also guidance to the girls who participated in the club. Strobel et al. (2008) also found that relationships with adults were important to the experiences of adolescents in a community program. The adolescents in their study particularly valued the adults as mentors, confidants and conflict mediators. Furthermore, when staff did not foster supportive relationships, the youth expressed disappointment. Youth also expressed frustration and confusion over staff turnover. The youth had made the relationships at the centre a priority and when the staff left they felt abandoned and indicated their hesitancy to commit to future relationships with staff (Strobel et al., 2008).

Positive adult-youth relationships in the context of youth development organizations have been associated with positive outcomes (Rhodes, 2004). It is the staff at these organizations, who control the quality of the experience, create emotionally and physically safe environments, and who work to engage the youth and promote their development (Grossman et al., 2002).

**Social relationships with peers.** The youth in Strobel et al.'s (2008) qualitative study also talked about the importance of peer relationships. Adolescents valued the community program as “a supportive place for friendships to develop and flourish” (p. 1692). The provision of a safe place to just *be* with friends was a primary motivator behind participation. The centre was also a safe setting that provided youth with the necessary supports to work through the stresses of peer conflict and learn to collaborate and work with others. They

valued a space in which they could interact with people of the same age without worrying about the stresses of cross-age relationships and developmental differences. Also, the relationships in these settings were perceived as more positive (e.g. friendly & caring) than the relationships characterized by negativity and conflict that they experienced at school (Strobel et al., 2008).

Positive peer interactions have also been shown to have a positive influence on the engagement of youth in after-school programs (Pearce & Larson, 2006). Peer relationships are important to the development of a friendly and welcoming atmosphere, allow for shared experiences and let youth experience camaraderie and support (Pearce & Larson, 2006). Denault and Poulin (2009), in a similar way, found that the participation of friends in sport had a positive influence on the sport participation of adolescents. The opportunity to interact with and meet others is one of reasons why adolescents participate in organized activities, as participation in activities allows young people to find friends that share their same values and interests and allows them to experience belonging (Fredricks et al., 2002). As most of the research on peer relationships in the out-of-school time setting focuses on adolescents, it would be important for future research to explore the perspectives of children in regards to peer relationships in an out-of-school time context.

**Summary for after-school programs.** Participation in extracurricular programs has been associated with positive developmental outcomes such as improved academic achievement, self-concept and social skills. Supportive relationships, psychologically and physically safe environments, support for skill

building, and opportunities for belonging, autonomy and choice are some characteristics of quality programs that are thought to support positive development (Eccles & Gootman, 2002; Harvard Family Research Project, 2008; Vandell et al., 2005). Adolescents state that programs which are “successful” from their perspective provide opportunities for learning and autonomy, are physically and psychologically safe, and provide a space in which they can form meaningful relationships with adults and peers (Strobel et al., 2008). While the qualitative research in this field of study is limited, the research that is available has addressed the experiences and perspectives of adolescents. Research that explores the perspectives of children participating in community programs is still sorely lacking.

### **Place**

Place has been defined in a number of different ways including a “space that has been given meaning through personal, group, or cultural processes” (Low & Altman, 1992, p. 5) and as “an area or space that is a habitual site of human activity and/or is conceived of in this way by communities or individuals” (Brey, 1998, p. 240). A space becomes a place as a person experiences a setting and comes to know it, and attributes meaning to it, through their personal and vicarious experiences (Tuan, 1977).

The literature on place draws on many different domains of research including anthropology, philosophy, psychology, the study of immigration and mobility, urban planning, social ecology, architecture, marketing and sociology (Ellis, 2002; Low & Altman, 1992; Scannell & Gifford, 2010). Since place has

been studied in many different fields, the use of terminology and place concepts lacks consistency (Scannell & Gifford, 2010). Terms such as place attachment, sense of place, place identity, and place dependence have all been used in this field of study (Scannell & Gifford, 2010).

**Place attachment.** Recognizing the lack of a consistent framework in the study of place and using the existent literature on place and place attachment, Scannell and Gifford (2010) developed a three dimensional conceptual framework. Within this framework they defined place attachment broadly as “a bond between an individual or group and a place that can vary in terms of spatial level, degree of specificity, and social or physical features of the place and is manifested through affective, cognitive and behavioural psychological processes” (p. 5). In their model there are three main dimensions: the person, the place and the process (see Figure 1).

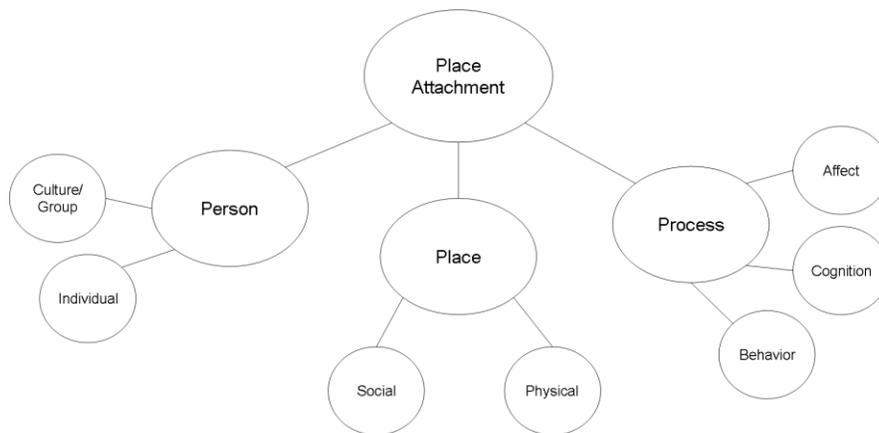


Figure 1: Three dimensional conceptual framework of place attachment (Scannell & Gifford, 2010, p. 2).

According to Scannell and Gifford (2010), the person in this framework refers to the individual or group who is attached to the place. Individual place attachment refers to the personal connections that an individual has to a place. Individual attachments may form on the basis of the place's affordances or characteristics or as a result of personal experiences. Collective place attachments may be due to the symbolic or cultural associations that a group has with a place. For example, a religious group (a collective group) may consider a certain place to be sacred. At the same time, a place can also gain religious significance for an individual as a result of personal experiences (e.g. epiphany). In that way, cultural and individual place attachments are not completely independent, but can influence each other (Scannell & Gifford, 2010).

Scannell and Gifford (2010) identify the psychological processes of affect, behaviour and cognition as the second dimension of place attachment. Affect is reflected in the emotional connection that a person or group may have to a particular place. This affect can be positive or negative ranging from love or contentment to hatred or grief. Cognition refers to the memories, beliefs, meanings and knowledge that persons associate with a place. Place attachment behaviours are attachments expressed through actions. These behaviours may be the desire to remain close to a place (proximity maintaining behaviours), the reconstruction of a place or in the case of movement or displacement, relocation to a similar place (Scannell & Gifford, 2010).

Place is the third dimension of Scannell and Gifford's (2010) framework and refers to that which the individual is attached. Place attachments can occur on

a wide variety of scales. A person could be attached to a room, city, country, park, mountain, lake, trail, forest or even the world. There are two parts to place: the social aspect and the physical aspect. Social attachment may be due to social ties, belongingness or rootedness. People are often attached to places that facilitate social relationships. Sociologists claim that place attachment must be socially based. Attachments can also be to the physical features of a place or to the meanings that those physical features represent. For example, a person may be attached to a place because of what it can afford to him or her (Scannell & Gifford, 2010).

Place attachment has also been defined more simply as the emotional and cultural “bonding of people to places” that occurs over a period of time (Low & Altman, 1992, p. 2). Low and Altman’s (1992) discussion of place attachment is similar to that of Scannell and Gifford (2010) as they identify the role of affect, cognition and action in place attachment, and how places can vary in their features, specificity and scale. Chawla (1992), in her discussion of children’s place attachments, states that

Children are attached to a place when they show happiness at being in it and regret or distress at leaving it, and when they value it not only for the satisfaction of physical needs but for its own intrinsic qualities (p. 64).

Place attachment has an influence over how individuals perceive their environments. For example, Brown, Perkins and Brown (2003) suggested that people who are attached to their neighbourhoods perceive it to have fewer incivilities and have less fear of neighbourhood crime. Furthermore, place

attachment has also been shown to foster pro-environmental behaviours, survival, physiological need satisfaction, security, stimulation, opportunities to relax, comfort, safety, goal support, self-regulation, creativity, continuity and belongingness (Scannell & Gifford, 2010). Place can bring people together, link people to religion, nation or culture, foster self-esteem and self-worth and is important to self-definition and identity (Scannell & Gifford, 2010). Place attachment is also thought to play a necessary role in protecting healthy communities and environments and is essential to the psychological well-being of the people who live there (Derr, 2002).

Bonds to place can also facilitate meaningful relationships which make the place itself more meaningful (Hay, 1992). It may not be the bonding to a physical place that is essential to place attachment; instead it may be the emotional bonding to ideas, people, psychological states, past experiences and culture that is more important (Low & Altman, 1992). Place, as the context of experience, may not be the focus of attachment, but inseparable none-the-less (Low & Altman, 1992).

**Place and Children.** Place has been used to examine the experiences of children in a variety of contexts. Specifically it is been used to explore their experiences in towns and cities (Kyttä, 2002; Lynch, 1977; Rasmussen, 2004; Spencer & Woolley, 2000; Woolley, Dunn, Spencer, Short, & Rowley, 1999), natural and outdoor areas (Blizzard & Schuster, 2004; Castonguay & Jutras, 2008; Derr, 2002; Kyttä, 2002), schools (Langhout, 2004; Turkel, 1997) and programs (Hirsch et al., 2000; Smith & Barker, 2000a; Smith & Barker, 2000b). In a similar

way, place has also been used to involve children in urban planning and sustainable development (Malone, 2001; Spencer & Woolley, 2000). According to Ellis (2004), places provide the context for human experience and the formation of community and can facilitate nurturance and be a source of comfort, security, belonging, meaning and identity. Using the framework of place allows one to study the social context as part of experience and allows for a more complex and holistic study of human experience (Ellis, 2004).

*Affordances.* In a study exploring children's places in towns and cities, Kytta (2002) used Gibson's (1978/1986) theory of affordances. Affordances are physical or social characteristics of the environment that are perceived as functional or beneficial by the individual. These affordances, for example, could support social activities, play, or other experiences and activities (Kytta, 2002). Examining the affordances of a place from the perspective of children allows researchers to learn about what children perceive as the essential and important qualities of their environments and everyday places. Kytta (2002) explored the affordances of children's outdoor environments in urban and rural Finland and Belarus. In her study, a structured interview guide based on Heft's (1988) functional taxonomy of children's outdoor environments was used. Heft's (1988) taxonomy is a list of functional properties of children's outdoor environments including characteristics such as flat and smooth surfaces (for walking or cycling), smooth slopes (for rolling, sliding), attached objects (for sitting), climbable features. In using this taxonomy, Kytta (2002) explored the affordances of these different places allowing her to learn about the presence or absence of various

environmental features. She asked children about different activities and asked if there was a place where they could do these activities in their neighbourhood. Children answered yes or no and if yes, described where they were able to perform such an activity. According to the children in Finland, the rural areas offered more affordances than the urban areas. These rural areas had more outdoor public places and the children had more freedom to explore safely and independently. While Kytta's (2002) study identified the presence and location of a defined list of affordances, it did not allow for the children to share what affordances they perceived to be important in their environments. It would be important to let children share their perspectives about the affordances inherent to the places that are a part of their everyday lives.

*Urban places.* Researchers have also been interested in studying children's experiences in, and their perceptions of, the towns and cities in which they live. Woolley et al. (1999) conducted a qualitative study examining children's use and perceptions of their town and city centres in the United Kingdom (UK) and discussed the affordances and resources that the city or town centre had to offer young people. Through questionnaires and focus groups, children shared their dislike of litter, dirt and smells, pollution, disorder and incivilities and their approval of measures taken to increase the safety of urban areas. They supported the aesthetic enhancements of urban areas (e.g. street furniture and fountains) and appreciated the city centre as a place to meet, to be entertained, to shop and to partake in recreation. They also shared a desire for the city to build more child friendly areas that did not require adult supervision or

accompaniment (Woolley et al., 1999). This study illustrated how young people, as inhabitants and users of the town and city centres, were able to share thoughtful and relevant points of view that reflected their usage of and desires for these places.

One large scale initiative addressing issues surrounding children and place is the *Growing Up in Cities Project*. *Growing Up in Cities* is a United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) project that was started with the intention of learning about how children perceive, use and value urban space. The project then involved those same children in implementing their urban development ideas and initiatives (Chawla, 1997; Lynch, 1977). The purpose of this project was to have children involved in improving the environment and in creating “more livable cities” as they are also significant users of these environments and places (Chawla, 1997, p. 247). The United Nations (UN) Convention on the Rights of the Child states that children have the right to express their views and opinions on issues that concern them, including the quality of the places in which they live their lives (Chawla, 1997). Young people are now involved not only in sharing their ideas but in helping these ideas become realized to improve their local environments. Examples of these projects included the development of a radio station to the re-opening of a community centre among many others. The *Growing Up in Cities Project* helped to identify what is important to children and to involve their voices and opinions regarding issues that are important to them.

[Children] expressed satisfaction with their community when it had a positive self-image, friendly adults, available playmates, accessible and engaging public spaces where interesting activities could be found and places that children could claim as their own for socializing and play. When these elements were lacking, they expressed high degrees of alienation” (Chawla, 2002, p. 32).

*Favourite places.* Children have cited numerous different types of places as *favourite*, including natural places (parks, mountains, rivers, and rocky places), special places (forts, clubhouses), commercial places (shops, restaurants, and theatre), recreational facilities (sporting fields, swimming pools, and clubs), playgrounds, bedrooms, streets, and the homes of self, friends or family (Chawla, 1992; Derr, 2002). It used to be that children most often cited natural settings as favorite, but now as access to such settings is becoming more limited, their favourite places have changed to places such as formal play and sport settings, as well as community services and retail places (Castonguay & Jutras, 2008).

According to Chawla (1992) places are thought to satisfy three different needs for children: security, social affiliation, and creative expression and exploration. Also, attachments for places are stronger when children feel positive affect, satisfaction and security compared to discomfort, boredom and fear (Chawla, 1992). Children value certain places for various reasons. For some children, the importance of a place has been related to the activities it affords, its ability to bring together family and friends, the features of the place and its contribution to the child’s mental wellbeing (Derr, 2002). For many children, the

desire to interact with family and friends is more important than the location in which those interactions and relationships occur (Derr, 2002). They may like places that afford access to play materials or other objects. Other children may like a place because it has a natural environment with trees and flowers or because it is close to their home. Children dislike places that threaten their physical or social safety (Castonguay & Jutras, 2008; Chawla, 1992; Derr, 2002).

Castonguay and Jutras (2008) talked to children living in a poor neighbourhood about the outdoor places where they liked to go in their neighbourhood. The children identified their favourite places as parks and playgrounds, streets and alleys, service and retail places (e.g. outdoor spaces of schools or community services, commercial parking lots) and the yards and balconies of their own homes or the homes of friends and family. Children preferred places that allowed them to participate in desired activities or interact with certain people. Children often cited safety threats as a reason why they disliked a place. Children liked the affordances that places provided them such as playground equipment, nature, or opportunities to engage in activities. The affordances of a place increased the value of the place from the perspectives of the children (Castonguay & Jutras, 2008).

Derr (2002) presented the case studies of three children's sense of place in northern New Mexico. The three children, Leo, Theresa and Marcos discussed their experiences of place and some of the factors that contributed to the importance of certain places in their lives. Places that were important to these children included natural places (e.g. mountains, caves, gardens), places close to

their homes, places that had familial importance, as well as places where they spent time with significant others. For these children, the adults in their lives, their culture, and their personal experiences helped shape and give meaning to their sense of place. These important places afforded the children opportunities for play and exploration, as well as solace and escape. Derr (2002) described one child's sense of place as "personal, intimate, and completely constructed...for his own needs and interests for adventure and getting away" (p. 135); a description that had some relevance for each of the children in her study.

*School.* Given that children spend a significant amount of time in school, the relevance of understanding how children perceive this place has also started to receive attention. Ellis (2005) proposed the use of place to explore how children create and re-create their identities in classrooms and schools and how they experience the school and classroom as part of their everyday lives. She states that "if classrooms are to be good places, one might expect that they would provide security, nurturance, meaningful relationships, and opportunities for positive identities while including space for students' creative self-development" (p. 59). Schools as places can provide opportunities for inclusion, support, belonging (Osterman, 2000), stability and safety, support culture, positive identity, and can provide spaces for students to be creative, imaginative and grow (Ellis, 2002). Research on schools as a place can explore the extent to which the school allows for these opportunities. Studies can also look at identifying the affordances of children's places both inside and outside of school from the perspective of children (Ellis, 2002). Ellis (2002) continually reinforces the importance of un-

programmed space for children as it fosters creativity, autonomy, growth, freedom, imagination, and exploration. But, “when places lack such space, people often have to leave in order to escape drudgery or to change who they can be” (Hay, 1988 as cited in Ellis, 2004, p. 84). Ellis builds a convincing case for the use of place to study children’s experiences in a variety of settings as places provide the context for people’s experiences, including the experiences of children in schools.

**Programs.** Limited research has used place to study children’s experiences in programs. One study, while not looking at children, explored the experiences of African American adolescent girls participating in a Boys and Girls Club using the conceptual framework of place attachment (Hirsch et al., 2000). Many of the girls called the club a “second home” (p. 214), signifying an important attachment. The club may have been seen as a home since it provided comfort, safety and space for relationships to form and develop.

Smith and Barker (2000a) explored how place, power, gender, age and ethnicity were a part of children’s’ experience in after school care. Using observations, interviews and other methods, these authors studied the experiences of 367 children in 25 different British out of school clubs. The children saw the out of school club as a place to play, to meet with friends and to have fun. Adult play-workers were thought to control the happenings in these out of school clubs by carefully monitoring the activities and the behaviours of children. Children, however, took steps to contest this adult control by creating their own activities or modifying the ones created by adults. The children also created and maintained

gender and age boundaries. Boys often used their space to play football whereas girls preferred indoor activities, such as arts and crafts, hanging out with friends, and singing and dancing to music. Older children desired their own spaces that were separate from the younger children where they could participate in their own activities (Smith & Barker, 2000a).

Rasmussen (2004) explored the everyday experiences of Danish children in their homes, schools and recreational institutions. As part of this study, 88 children took photographs of places that were meaningful to them and 60 children participated in walking interviews. During the walking interviews, children toured the researchers around their neighbourhoods and shared about their experiences of everyday life. While most of the study addressed those places close to or part of the child's home, Rasmussen also explored children's experiences within recreational institutions. While time spent at the recreational club was "free time," it was not necessarily experienced as free by the children. While at the club, the children were supervised by adults and subjected to a degree of social control. This lack of autonomy may have contributed to the children's perception of the club as boring and their desire to go home rather than attend the club (Rasmussen, 2004). The institutionalized nature of the program appeared to have limited the children's freedom to be creative and to explore (Ellis, 2005) which influenced their desire to be in that place.

Langager and Spencer-Cavaliere (2009) explored the construct of hope with children who were participating in an after-school program for children of low SES. While this study did not explore children's perceptions of place, the

relevance of this conceptual framework was evidenced in several interviews. In reference to the program one child responded “I feel like this is a good place to be.” What constitutes a good place from the perspective of children is a critical question to consider in the development and offering of recreation programs for children.

Ellis (2004) stated that:

Places are good places for children when they provide for their material wellbeing, are culturally rich and provide for positive identity and integration within a cohesive community, and include desirable undefined space and accessible, active public space. Such dimensions of place support belonging and growth for children while also enriching culture” (p. 87).

Furthermore, if a place is a good place it is expected that it would “provide security, nurturance, meaningful relationships, and opportunities for positive identities while including space for [children’s] creative self-development (Ellis, 2005, p. 59).

***Summary for place and children.*** “Researching the places of students’ everyday lives can support understanding of what is meaningful to children and can inform programs and practices intended to enhance their growth and learning” (Ellis, 2004, p, 85). Place and space can be used to learn about children’s quality of life in schools and programs. Researching about children’s experiences using this construct can help educators and programmers learn about where improvements are needed. Learning about places students rely on, or lack, outside

of school, could influence the “practices, programs, events, and use of resources within the school” and within other programs for children (Ellis, 2004, p. 96). The development of children depends on their experiences in places where they can play “explore, create, control, and relate to their physical and social worlds” (Low & Altman, 1992, p. 10). It is important to know what makes a “good place” from the perspective of children and what places do and do not afford for them.

### **Section Summary**

Children of low SES are at increased risk of poor developmental outcomes as a result of growing up in their environments. Therefore, various programs have targeted children of this demographic with the hopes of providing them with developmentally beneficial opportunities that may otherwise be unavailable. While participation in these programs has been associated with positive developmental outcomes, such as improved academic achievement, self-concept and social skills, there are some programs that have shown little to no positive developmental outcomes as a result of participation. Some researchers have started to explore the perspectives of adolescents in order to determine what program characteristics are associated with meaningful and relevant experiences. Some of the characteristics of “successful” programs from the perspectives of youth include opportunities for learning and autonomy, meaningful relationships with peers and adults, and physical and emotional safety (Strobel et al., 2008). While there is some qualitative literature that has addressed the perspectives of adolescents, very little research has examined the perspectives and experiences of children participating in community recreation programs. Place, is one framework

that has been used to explore the experiences and perspectives of children in regards to their experiences in towns, cities and nature, and is starting to be used as a framework to study their experiences in school and programming settings. Using place as a framework to study the experiences of children allows researchers to study the affordances and contexts of children's everyday lives. As after-school and community recreation programs are becoming a greater part of children's everyday lives (Harvard Family Research Project, 2008; Smith & Barker, 2000a) understanding the experiences of the children who take part in them is critical.

## CHAPTER THREE: METHOD

### Methodology

Qualitative studies are naturalistic and emergent in design. They take place in real settings since “qualitative researchers assume that human behaviour is significantly influenced by the setting in which it occurs” (Bogdan & Biklen, 1998, p. 5). The researcher goes to the “field” as she believes that this will help her to understand what the participants are saying (Creswell, 2007, p. 18). In naturalistic inquiry the researcher does not control or predetermine the range of possible responses from the participants. Instead, naturalistic inquiry uses open-ended questions to allow the participants themselves to determine the possible range of responses (Patton, 2002). This flexibility allowed me, the researcher, to adapt the inquiry as my understanding deepened and data emerged (Patton, 2002). Qualitative inquiry allowed me to explore the issues of interest to this study “in great depth with careful attention to detail, context and nuance...[to] produce a wealth of detailed data about a...[small]...number of people and cases (Patton, 2002, p. 227).

I used an instrumental case study design for this study (Stake, 1995). The purpose of an instrumental case study is to gain a deep understanding of a particular issue. In this case, the experiences of children who attended a community recreation centre (UrbanKidz Youth Centre). I chose the case based on its potential to provide insight into the issue I was studying (Stake, 1995). The use of a qualitative case study allowed me to explore “a bounded system (a case)...over time, through detailed, in-depth data collection involving multiple

sources of information...and [report] a case description and case based themes” (Creswell, 2007, p. 73). This methodology was particularly suited to this study as it facilitated an in-depth exploration of the experiences of children within the bounded system (Patton, 2002; Stake, 1995; Stake, 2005) of the UrbanKidz Youth Centre (pseudonym). Furthermore, the use of the case-study allowed for the holistic study of children’s experiences (Ellis, 2004).

### **Setting**

UrbanKidz Youth Centre is a community recreation centre for children and youth of low SES and is located in a neighbourhood of low SES in a large, western Canadian city. UrbanKidz is focused on fostering resilience and providing opportunities to the children and youth in their community. The children who come to the centre face challenges associated with growing up in poverty. The centre desires to break this cycle of poverty and works towards preventing children from participating in deviant behaviours and experiencing abuse and neglect. The centre is open Monday through Saturday during the after-school hours for children and adolescents aged 6 to 17. Participation in the UrbanKidz program is of no cost to children and families, as the centre is funded by donors and grants. UrbanKidz strives to promote the healthy physical, educational and social development of young people and their families through its core programs:

1. Nutrition. The children were given a snack after-school and at 5p.m. The staff tried to make the snack as healthy as possible, but they were limited by the food donations received. The children

were required to eat the 5 p.m. snack if at the centre. While the children could ask for smaller portions, they had to eat everything they were served. The centre was also a food bank depot and served a weekly seniors lunch.

2. Recreation and sports. The children had access to a gymnasium and sports equipment. The children and youth who attended the centre participated in both structured and unstructured activities in the gym. The children also had access to computers, pool tables, video games and movies.
3. Learning and literacy. The children had to read, do homework or write for 15 minutes when they arrived at the centre each day. They were not allowed to participate in any other centre activities until they completed the 15 minutes of literacy activities. When each child finished their reading time, one of the staff would ask the child questions about what was read and then would record the number of pages completed in a reading log.
4. Life skills groups. The centre ran two girls groups that focused on building resiliency, self-esteem, confidence and leadership in young women. The centre also ran a resiliency program for youth at-risk. There were no programs specifically directed at boys only.
5. Arts and culture. The centre tried to connect the children and youth to arts and culture events and centres in the neighbourhood.

**A day in the life of the centre.** I arrived at the centre just before 3pm. The front door was still locked, so I stood there and waited until one of the staff opened the door. I said hello to Mark upon entering the centre and we made some small talk before I headed to my locker to put away my coat and bag. One of the staff was at the desk in the computer lab. A few of the other staff were gathered in the kitchen getting food ready for when the kids arrived after school. Shortly after, a few of the children and youth started to trickle into the building. They hung up their coats on the racks and threw their bags onto the shelves pushed up against the wall. Some of the kids chatted with the staff and some of them grabbed a snack before heading off to find a book to read or their journal to write in. Some of them sat at the tables to read while others spread out on the couches in the computer lab. Fifteen minutes later they put their books and their journals away and headed their various ways. Some asked if they could go on the computers and some headed to the gym to shoot hoops, kick around a soccer ball or get some people together to play a game of “pick-up” ball hockey. A game of pool started as one of the kids took on a staff member. Gradually more kids came, did their reading and then went off to do various activities in the centre. Kids chatted with each other and with staff and some ran around the centre playing an imaginary game. Eventually it was five o’clock and Rachel yelled out, “snack time!” The kids stopped whatever they were doing and headed to the serving area in the snack room. Some ran, some walked and some had to be persuaded to head to the snack line. Everyone has to eat – no exceptions. Today it was burgers, fries and salad on the menu. There was a lot of commotion as the kids got their plates

of food and found a seat at the tables. Some kids ate quickly and some sat and talked to each other more than they ate. A few of the staff also grabbed plates of food and sat down to eat with the kids. Within fifteen minutes it was all over, minus a few of the slower eaters who struggled to finish all the food on their plates. A few of the kids helped to wipe tables and sweep the floor while the rest of the kids headed into the gym to “do laps” until the cleaning was done. A game of pick up hockey started in the gym and a few of the girls practiced their gymnastics moves on the blue mats against the wall. Some kids went to the computers to go on Facebook (social networking website), watch YouTube (user generated video database) or play online games. A few of the kids gathered around the staff desk in the computer lab to chat or colour pictures. One kid practiced his pool skills on the blue table. As it neared eight o’clock, the computers were shut off and the sports equipment was put away. Kids put on their coats and while some left right away, some stalled and made conversation with the staff until they were “kicked out” to go home. With the day over, I grabbed my coat and my bag and said good bye to the staff and headed out the back door where my car was parked and drove home.

## **Participants**

A purposeful, criterion sampling design was used to recruit participants. Purposeful sampling focuses on information rich cases that allow for in-depth understanding of a particular topic, case or question (Patton, 2002). Criterion sampling studies all the cases that meet a certain set of criteria (Patton, 2002). This sampling strategy allowed me to explore the experiences of a specific,

information rich group of children within the “bounded system” (Stake, 1995, p. 2) of the UrbanKidz community program.

Studies that grasp “a profound understanding of the complexity of everyday life” rely on a small number of cases rather than representative samples (Eyles, 1989, p. 114-115). Sample size needs to be based on the quality of the data, the scope of the study, the nature of the topic, the number of interviews, and the design of the study (Morse, 2000). Exploring the experiences of a small number of children was in line with the nature, purpose and design of this study. Usually by the age of 7 or 8 years, children’s communication skills are well developed; they can discuss their thoughts and emotions, and are able to understand the perspectives of others (Stone & Lemanek, 1990). The children in this study were regular participants at the UrbanKidz community program. Each child who participated in the study met the following set of four criteria:

1. Had no intellectual impairments that could interfere with understanding and or answering questions.
2. Was between 7 and 12 years of age at the time of the first interview.
3. Participated in the UrbanKidz Youth Centre.
4. Had sufficient English language comprehension skills for understanding and answering questions.

Consent forms and information letters were sent home with all of the children who met the criteria for participating in this study. Due to difficulties encountered in having the children return the forms, I called the parents and explained the study and organized a time when parents could come in and

complete the forms and ask questions about the research. Since no parents came to the information session, the centre also assisted in talking to parents and in providing aid to get the consent forms returned. Consent forms were received for eleven children at the centre. Two children decided not to participate in the study. Two children stopped attending the centre and thus did not participate in the study. Seven children (four boys and three girls) aged 9 years to 12 years (at the time of interview one) participated in the study ( $M = 11.08$  years,  $SD = 1.18$  years). Seven children participated in first interviews and five of those children participated in second interviews. The children who participated in the study had been attending the UrbanKidz Youth Centre for a range of two to five years (self-report). Demographic information is presented in Table 1.

Table 1

*Demographic Characteristics of Child Participants and Interview Length*

Pseudonym	Gender	Age (years)	Grade	Length of Involvement (years)	Interview 1 (minutes)	Interview 2 (minutes)
Adam	Boy	10.20	5	5.00	30.77	17.50
Alexys	Girl	10.78	6	2.50	34.63	21.90
Faith	Girl	10.69	5	3.00	56.07	23.72
Joel	Boy	9.45	4	2.00	26.97	-
Jordan	Boy	12.98	7	3.00	35.60	26.48
Justina	Girl	11.98	6	4.00	34.57	31.80
Mitch	Boy	11.51	6	2.00	46.43	-
M	-	11.08	5.57	3.07	37.86	24.28
SD	-	1.18	0.98	1.10	10.00	5.32

The adults who participated in the focus group were staff or volunteers at the UrbanKidz program. I gave the centre supervisor information letters explaining the study. Each adult who worked or volunteered at the centre had the

opportunity to participate in the focus group. The focus group interview took place after a staff development day at the centre. The staff was able to choose whether or not they wanted to participate in the group interview. Ten staff from the centre participated in the focus group interview (M = 33.73 years old, SD = 12.40 years old). The staff in the focus group had been involved with the centre ranging from three months to five years.

**Participant biographies.** Adam was a 10 year old boy who came to UrbanKidz every day with his brothers. You could often find Adam in the gym playing hockey or kicking around a soccer ball. While he had limited interactions with me (the researcher), he interacted a lot with the children and staff at the centre. He had many friends and was well known by the staff. He was guarded in the interviews and during the second interview kept his head down on his arms for the majority of the time.

Alexys was a 10 year old girl who came regularly to the centre, but not every day. She and her friends could often be found colouring, doing gymnastics in the gym or just “hanging out.” She was quiet, but social. In the interviews she seemed nervous, yet willing to take part and wanting to do her best in answering the questions.

Faith, who was 10, was one of the first girls I met at the centre. While she was very exuberant and welcoming, she sometimes had trouble concentrating on one task for a long period of time. During the interview she would walk around the room and was easily distracted or side-tracked. She came to the centre

regularly, but not every day and she always left at 6pm to go home. She was enthusiastic, excitable and often had a smile on her face.

Jordan, a 12 year old boy, was also a regular at the centre, though he did not come every day. He was often found in the gym or playing on the computers. He was a friendly boy and would often say hello to me when I arrived at the centre. He was well spoken in the interviews and appeared to give thought to his answers. He had numerous friends at the centre and often left with them in the evening to go swimming at a local pool.

Joel was a nine year old boy who came to UrbanKidz. He was friendly and was often willing to make casual conversation. Sometimes I would see him running around the centre playing imagination games (make-believe) with some of the younger children at the centre. He did not seem to enjoy the interview after appearing to become more and more frustrated as the interview progressed and he asked that the interview be ended early. After putting off the second interview for a period of time he indicated that he did not want to participate in it.

Justina was an 11 year old girl who came almost every day to UrbanKidz. While she was often shy around me, she was enthusiastic and full of energy when she was around the children and staff she knew better. She loved to plan events such as talent shows or colouring contests. While she was nervous to do the interview, she still seemed eager to participate and was curious what the “project” was about. When the study ended and I was preparing to leave the centre she indicated that she liked participating in the interview process.

Mitch was an 11 year old boy who came to the centre. He was very quiet and soft spoken, but seemed to have a good core group of friends at the centre. He came regularly to the centre and was a talented pool (billiards) player. He would sometimes leave the centre in the evening to go swimming with his friends. He could often be found in the gym or on the computers.

### **Data Collection**

In an effort to gain a better understanding of the experiences of the children at UrbanKidz, I collected data using multiple methods including: observations and field notes, reflective notes, drawings, semi-structured interviews, a focus group and program documents and reports. While the children's experiences were the main focus of this qualitative case study, I also conducted one focus group interview with adults who worked or volunteered at the centre to provide a more detailed context for the case.

**Observations and field notes.** I attended the drop in-centre three times per week for one month before starting participant recruitment for the study. Upon beginning my field work, an announcement was made at the centre to tell the children that I had come from the university to UrbanKidz to learn about their experiences at the centre. During my first month at the drop-in centre, I was part participant observer and part onlooker (Patton, 2002). I participated in some activities with the children and, at other times, maintained distance as I observed the functions and characteristics of the program. Most days I took my field notes following participatory observation, but for two sessions I sat and observed and took field notes while at UrbanKidz. According to Patton (2002) the participant

observer is “fully engaged in experiencing the setting (participation) while at the same time observing and talking with the other participants about whatever is happening” (p. 265-266). This participation and observation allowed me to become familiar with the program and organization, and helped me to develop rapport with the children. Since interviews were part of the data collection process, it was beneficial to get to know the children before the actual interview (Kortessluoma, Hentinen, & Nikkonen, 2003). Establishing rapport and working to develop positive relationships with the children likely contributed to the information I was able to obtain during the interviews (Boggs & Eyberg, 1990).

I recorded field notes after each observation session. My field notes contained a description of what I observed and experienced at the program, as well as my feelings, insights and initial interpretations in response to my time at the centre (Patton, 2002). The field notes helped to provide a rich description of the context to aid others’ reading the study to determine if comparisons are possible to other contexts. The field notes contained information related to what was “essential or characteristic” of the UrbanKidz Youth Centre and helped to establish credibility (Guba, 1981, p. 85).

**Semi-structured interviews.** I conducted four pilot interviews (two boys and two girls), with children aged 7, 9 and 11, to develop and refine my interview skills and to test the clarity and functionality of the interview guide. These children were not involved with the UrbanKidz program. Instead I asked them to identify a program, activity or organization with which they were involved. The pilot interviews addressed those experiences. Pilot interviews can contribute to

the reliability and validity of the actual interviews (Kortelnuoma et al., 2003). The pilot interviews were transcribed and two of them were reviewed with a more experienced researcher. I made adjustments to the interview guide in response to those interviews, reviews and discussions. In particular, in addition to the questions addressing good days and bad days at the centre, more general questions were added to the beginning of the interview guide. These included questions about likes and dislikes, favourite and least favourite aspects of the centre and what was important to the children about UrbanKidz. Also, the wording and order of some questions was changed in order to facilitate comprehension and flow. A variety of probing questions and strategies were also identified that could be used to gain further information about the children's experiences at the centre. These included emotional qualifying or feeling questions, hypothetical questions and the use of paraphrasing.

I conducted semi-structured interviews with seven children who assented and for whom consent to participate in the study had been provided. Five of the children participated in two semi-structured interviews. Two children only wanted to participate in the first semi-structured interview. The first interviews lasted between 30 and 56 minutes ( $M = 37.86$  minutes,  $SD = 10.00$  minutes) and consisted of a drawing activity and semi-structured questions. The second interviews took between 17 and 31 minutes ( $M = 24.28$  minutes,  $SD = 5.32$  minutes). I reviewed each of the transcripts from the first interviews before going into the second interview for each child. In reviewing these first transcripts, I created a personalized interview guide for each child's second interview. The

purpose of the second interview was to gain depth and clarity in relation to the children's responses from interview one. Interviews took place in a quiet room on the second floor of UrbanKidz centre during the after-school hours. Each interview was digitally recorded. Following each interview, I downloaded the recording to a computer, backed it up, and erased the file from the digital recorder.

At the beginning of the interviews, each participant had the opportunity to assent or refuse to participate in the research study (Faux, Walsh, & Deatrick, 1988; Kortessluoma et al., 2003). Each of the children completed a child assent form in which the study was explained in a concrete manner appropriate to the children's developmental stage. I read the form to each child. The children were informed that they could terminate the interview at any time (Kortessluoma et al., 2003) and that they did not have to answer any questions that they did not want. I also told the participants that there were no right or wrong answers; I was just interested in learning about their experiences, thoughts and opinions. I explained that the interview was confidential and each child had the opportunity to pick his or her own pseudonym.

Given the children were nervous about the interview situation, it was essential that I spent the initial part of the session in an activity or conversation that was calming and allowed the participants to feel comfortable with me and the setting (Boggs & Eyberg, 1990). I showed the participants the digital voice recorder and gave them the opportunity (if they wanted) to practice talking into the device and listening to the recording. This activity was used to build rapport,

to help the children feel comfortable in the interview situation and to familiarize them with the equipment that was going to be used. Each child then completed the child information form (Appendix A).

*Drawings.* Following the initial period of rapport building, the interview started with a drawing activity. Drawing activities can be relaxing and enjoyable for children and can also be used to help build rapport (Faux et al., 1988; Kortesuoma et al., 2003; Malchiodi, 1998). Talking about the drawings also provided an effective way to begin discussing the topic of the interview (Kortesuoma et al., 2003). Children may also be more comfortable to share their experiences during or after participating in a drawing activity (Malchiodi, 1998). The purpose of the drawing activity was not so that I could make my own interpretations of the drawings, but to provide an opportunity for the children to share their experiences, stories, points of view, thoughts, feelings, perspectives and opinions in a developmentally appropriate way; helping me to understand “meaning from the child’s perspective” (Ellis, 2006; Malchiodi, 1998, p. 43).

I had a variety of sizes of paper, pastels, markers, crayons, pencils, pens and pencil crayons available for the drawing activity. Good quality drawing materials help to engage children in the drawing process (Malchiodi, 1998). After letting each child choose the size of paper they wanted to draw on, I asked the participants to draw a picture of ‘what it is like to be at UrbanKidz.’ Before the activity started, I told the participants that they had up to 15 min to complete their drawing. This is in accordance with Malchiodi’s (1998) recommendation that children be aware of the time available to complete the drawing. I was present

during the drawing activity to respond to the any comments and questions, but did not interrupt the drawing process (Malchiodi, 1998).

After the participants completed this activity, I asked them to describe the drawing (Malchiodi, 1998). I used probing questions to gain further detail and clarification about their descriptions. If the participants were reluctant to discuss their drawing, I started to describe what I saw in the drawing. The children then had the opportunity to contribute information to my description. Sometimes I chose to ask specific questions about certain elements in the drawing or asked for further clarification regarding various details (Malchiodi, 1998).

Few studies have explored what is considered significant and meaningful from the perspective of children (Kortesluoma et al., 2003). Interviewing children provides a way to learn about their subjective experiences (Kortesluoma et al., 2003). Examples of interview questions included:

1. What do you do at UrbanKidz?
2. What do you like/not like about UrbanKidz?
3. Can you tell me about a good day/bad day at UrbanKidz?
4. What is your favourite/least favourite part of UrbanKidz?
5. What is important to you about UrbanKidz?
6. How do you feel about going to UrbanKidz?
7. What makes you want to come back to UrbanKidz each day?
8. What would you change/improve about UrbanKidz?
9. What makes a good place/bad place to be for children/youth?

The complete interview guide can be found in Appendix B. Probing questions can be used to gain more detail, clarification, and depth in regards to responses (Patton, 2002).

**Reflective notes.** I took reflective notes throughout the research process, for example, after interviews and periods of observation. The reflective notes I took after observation sessions included descriptions of the centre activities, as well as personal and subjective information that included my thoughts, feelings and impressions in respect to my experiences and observations at the community recreation program (Bogdan & Biklen, 1998). Also, following each interview, I recorded details, thoughts, and observations regarding the setting, the participants, and the interview process (Patton, 2002) and provided a brief summary of the information collected. This period of reflection is critical to the quality of the study and the data obtained. Reflection can provide important information during the interpretation and analysis of the data (Patton, 2002).

**Focus group interview.** I conducted a focus group with 10 adults who were involved with the community recreation program. “A focus group interview is an interview with a small group of people on a specific topic” that allows high quality information to be gathered in an efficient manner (Patton, 2002, p. 385). Interactions between participants enhance the quality of the data obtained as participants are able to contribute additional comments after they hear the responses of others (Patton, 2002). The focus group interview was 1 hr 38 min in length. The information gained from the focus group helped provide greater understanding regarding the context of the UrbanKidz Youth Centre.

Questions for the focus group included:

1. Can you tell me about your organization and the programs that you run?
2. In general, what are the demographics of your program participants?
3. What do you think are important characteristics of an effective community program?
4. What influence do you think the program has on the children who participate?
5. What do you believe are the strengths/weaknesses of your program?
6. What struggles/challenges do you face when trying to implement your programs?
7. What do you think makes a good place to be for kids?

The complete interview guide can be found in Appendix C. Focus group participants also completed a personal information form which can be found in Appendix D.

**Document analysis.** I collected documents from UrbanKidz in order to gain further information regarding the mission, vision, values, context, and structure of the program and organization. Documents can provide the researcher with information about an organization that cannot be learned through observation (Patton, 2002).

### **Data Analysis**

The transcripts from the children's interviews provided the most important source of information for this study. The data collected in the form of observations, field notes, drawings, reflective notes, the focus group interview,

and reports and documents were used to provide context and add depth to those interviews, as well as to contribute to the trustworthiness of the data obtained.

Interviews were transcribed verbatim and I used thematic analysis to analyze the children's transcripts. "Thematic analysis is a method for identifying, analyzing and reporting patterns (themes) within data" (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 79). Through multiple readings of the transcripts (Rice & Ezzy, 1999), thematic analysis allows for categories to emerge from the data (Ezzy, 2002) as the transcripts are "searched for themes that emerge as being important to the participants" (Daly, Kellehear, & Glikzman, 1997, p. 135). These themes then become the categories for further analysis (Daly et al., 1997). Braun and Clarke's (2006) six phases of thematic analysis were used to guide my analysis process. These six phases are found in Table 2.

Table 2

*Phases of Thematic Analysis* (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 87).

Phase	Description of the process
1. Familiarizing yourself with the data:	Transcribing data (if necessary), reading and re-reading the data, noting down initial ideas.
2. Generalizing initial codes:	Coding interesting features of the data in a systemic fashion across the entire data set, collating data relevant to each code
3. Searching for themes:	Collating codes into potential themes, gathering all the data relevant to each potential theme.
4. Reviewing themes:	Checking if the themes work in relation to the coded extracts (Level 1) and the entire data set (Level 2), generating a 'thematic map' of the analysis.
5. Defining & naming themes:	Ongoing analysis to refine the specifics of each theme and the overall story the analysis tells, generating clear definitions and names for each theme.
6. Producing the report:	The final opportunity for analysis. Selection of vivid, compelling extract examples, final analysis of selected extracts, relating back of the analysis to the research question and literature, producing a scholarly report of the analysis.

I analyzed the transcripts inductively (Fereday & Muir-Cochrane, 2006) to allow themes to emerge directly from the data (Ezzy, 2002). Deductive analysis was used when writing the discussion to compare the results to the tenets of place attachment. Analysis was conducted separately for each individual child (interviews one and two) initially and then themes were compared across children. For each interview, I coded each transcript by writing words in the margins. Then for each child I mapped out the common codes to get an idea of the potential themes. Then I would read through the interview again to see if these emerging themes were relevant to the data. Once each interview had been analyzed separately, I compared them to each other to develop the overall themes. As I

started to write out the results, the themes and theme names became more refined. Within this process, I played an active role in identifying patterns and themes, selecting themes of interest and reporting those themes (Braun & Clarke, 2006). As a researcher I must recognize I can never simply give “voice” to the participants; there will always be interpretation on my behalf (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 80).

Field notes, reflective notes, documents and the focus group interview provided important context and background to understanding the children’s perspectives. Basic coding and preliminary collating of codes into potential themes was conducted on the focus group interview. While not the focus of this study, a more extensive analysis of the focus group interview could provide important information on the perspectives of adults who are involved in running programs like UrbanKidz.

### **Trustworthiness**

Trustworthiness refers to the establishment of rigor in qualitative inquiry, which is important for ensuring the reliability of the results obtained (Lincoln & Guba, 1986). I established trustworthiness (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) in various ways including: data triangulation, rich description, the use of multiple coders, persistent observation, and member checking.

***Data triangulation.*** Data triangulation was achieved through individual semi-structured interviews, reflective notes, field-notes, drawings, a focus group interview, and documents. This allowed for the establishment of consistency by using different data collection methods (Patton, 2002).

***Rich description.*** Rich description can help determine if comparisons are possible from one context to another, supporting transferability (Guba, 1981). I attended the community recreation on a regular basis for thirteen weeks. This presence, along with the multiple sources of data collection, allowed me to provide a rich description of the context to aid others reading the study to determine if comparisons are possible to other contexts.

***Multiple coders.*** The use of multiple coders is also known as triangulating analysts (Patton, 2002). I came up with my codes through multiple readings of the transcripts and then compared my codes to those of my second coders. I corresponded with the second coders in person and by email to discuss the analysis and any discrepancies that arose. This added to the credibility of the data.

***Persistent observation.*** I was on-site at the community recreation program three times per week, one month before the interviews began. I continued to attend the program until after the interviews were completed when I gradually withdrew my participation. I attended the centre a total of 36 times, for approximately 130 hours over 3.5 months. Persistent observation allowed me to gain an understanding regarding what was “essential or characteristic” to UrbanKidz and helped establish credibility (Guba, 1981, p. 85).

***Member checking.*** Member checking of the information shared in the first interview, also known as ‘review by inquiry participants’ (Patton, 2002), was achieved through the use of a second interview. This helped to establish credibility (Guba, 1981).

## **Ethics and Ethical Concerns**

The ethics application for this study was approved by the Physical Education and Recreation (PER), Agricultural, Life and Environmental Sciences (ALES) and Native Studies (NS) Research Ethics Board (REB).

**Informed consent.** Children who fit the inclusion criteria for this study were identified by a staff worker at UrbanKidz. I sent envelopes containing a letter of information (reading level of 4.7) and a consent form (reading level of 7.6) home with those children or their parents or guardians. Children who were in the custody of social services were not allowed to participate in the study. I made it clear in the letter of information that participation or nonparticipation in the study would not affect any child's participation at the UrbanKidz Youth Centre. Consent forms were returned directly to me on-site or to the supervisor or director at UrbanKidz. Parents or guardians provided informed consent on their child's behalf. Each child also had the opportunity to provide assent by signing his or her name on the consent form. Children also completed a child assent form (reading level of 2.7) at the beginning of their first interview. I explained the interview process to the children in a developmentally appropriate way that they could understand (Neill, 2005). I informed the children at the start of the interview that they could choose whether or not to participate in the research project and that they could stop doing the interview at any time (Kortessluoma et al., 2003) without incurring any negative consequences (Neill, 2005). The adults who participated in the focus group interview were given an information letter (reading level of 6.0) and completed an informed consent form (reading level of 7.8) before the focus

group started. As part of signing the informed consent form, these adults agreed to keep the information discussed at the focus group interview confidential. The information letters and consent forms can be found in Appendix E.

**Confidentiality and protection of data.** The study was minimal risk as it was non-invasive and confidential. Children drew pictures, were interviewed and the observations did not interfere with the running of the program. I gave participants and the community program pseudonyms. Interviews took place in a private space at the UrbanKidz Youth Centre.

The data were stored data on a computer that was password protected. Data were also stored in a locked cupboard in a locked office. Only the research team had access to the personal information of participants and the interview data. A transcriber had access to audio interview data.

I told the children that any information they shared would be kept confidential and that pseudonyms would be used to protect their identities in any information released from the study. However, there can be a potential conflict between protecting children from harm and maintaining confidentiality (Canadian Institute of Health Research, Natural Sciences and Engineering Research Council, Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada, 1998 (with 2000, 2002, 2005 amendments); Neill, 2005). I told the children before beginning the interview that any information obtained indicating they were at risk for significant harm must be reported to the proper authorities. For the sake of protecting the child, I could not guarantee confidentiality in the case of risk (Canadian Institute of Health Research, Natural Sciences and Engineering Research Council, Social

Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada, 1998 (with 2000, 2002, 2005 amendments); Neill, 2005).

**Issues of power.** Going into this study, I had to be aware of the power imbalance present between adults and children. Adults have power over children's lives and children have been taught to respect and obey the adults around them (Eder & Fingerson, 2002). In response to this concern, I attempt to avoid controlling behaviours, which would have associated me with an authority figure with power over a child, such as: telling a child to stop fidgeting or being silly (Eder & Fingerson, 2002). Also, during any periods of observation, I did not hold positions of authority or leadership over the children. For example, I had no supervisory power over children at the centre. While I cannot ensure that I was not seen as an authority figure by the children, I did try to limit behaviours that could associate me with a person of power. It was challenging as a researcher to be an adult in a non-traditional adult role while at the centre (Freeman & Mathison, 2008).

## CHAPTER FOUR: RESULTS

The purpose of this study was to explore the experiences of children participating in a community recreation program (UrbanKidz Youth Centre) for children of low SES. The overarching theme of this study was captured by the term *Having Opportunities*. As the children talked about their experiences at the centre, it became evident the important role it played in meeting their needs through providing an array of opportunities. As the children shared their stories, experiences, perspectives and opinions, they talked about having opportunities at the centre in three main ways: (a) *opportunities to do*, (b) *opportunities to connect*, and (c) *opportunities to be*.

The children and the staff discussed the need for positive opportunities that existed among the children in the UrbanKidz community. According to centre staff, the children who attended the centre lived in a neighbourhood characterized by poverty and crime. Some of their families struggled with a variety of issues including unemployment, addictions, and abuse. The children were at risk for future criminal involvement, gang activity, and drug and alcohol abuse. Two of the UrbanKidz staff members painted a picture of the world these children lived in – of their families, their neighbourhood, and the risks that they faced as a result of their environment:

Lori: Obviously our kids are impoverished....a lot of our kids' families have struggled generationally with addictions, with...unemployment, with instability for a number of reasons, whether they're mental health issues, whether they are...a lack of resources, whether they're immigrants...any

of those issues that cause...people to struggle and to hurt and to...not be able to parent well and adequately...those are the families that we serve.

Phil: ....The area that we service is the lowest income area in the city of Iglington (pseudonym) in terms of per capita household income...also, it's the highest crime area in the city. Also, the highest incidence of family abuse and violence. So, police respond here more in our general area to criminal calls and to family violence calls than they do anywhere else in the city....our kids are all attending inner city schools, which face all of the problems of urban inner city schools across North America, really. In terms of the quality of the education that they receive and the educational opportunities that they receive...our population is 70% native, metis and all the inner-status areas that they can have of being on-reserve, off-reserve, non-status and metis. Umm, the vast majority in extent, in excess of 80% of our kids are from single parent families or are not being parented by their biological parents, but by someone else in the family....30% roughly of our kids are in care of the province rather than living in a traditional home situation....so really they are the most disadvantaged or marginalized kids in the city of Iglington are the ones that we're working with.

Lori: These kids are at high risk of...gang activity, gang recruitment...sex trade recruitment...criminal involvement...drug abuse, alcohol abuse...any kind of addiction potential is, they're at very high risk of that. Just because of the families' lifestyles....I wouldn't necessarily say that

we've got homeless families right now but we do have families that are very transient and go from rent to, apartment to apartment to apartment. However, despite the adverse environmental conditions that these children were growing up in, one staff member indicated that the children did show strengths that had enabled them to survive their environments and continue to experience positive development:

They grow up in a very adverse community and I think they exhibit a lot of strengths and lot of positives... a lot of the kids here are really connected into the centre and although they may not exhibit, like, the best behaviour all the time, they obviously are very... good at surviving their community and they don't feel safe... and some of the... girls have expressed that they don't feel safe in the community, but they still function, they're not afraid... they walk home, they walk their friends home, they do what they need to do. They go to school and a lot of them are I think... they're quite successful and graduating and going to school and completing grades. And, and they're tough, they're tough kids. They're strong and their families, for good or bad, make them that way. And so, they're very vulnerable and I think they're really tough as well, so, they're an interesting mix.

The purpose of the centre reflected these needs that existed within the UrbanKidz community and how it worked to care for the wellbeing of the children. As one staff member described:

The original mandate [of UrbanKidz]...was giving them a safe place to be, feeding them and giving them a place to play, but overtime, that grew...the demand, the community need, and...just by virtue of geography, we found ourselves more socially involved in the lives of the kids....but we are doing our best to make sure that they have experiences that would normally be found in a healthy family environment...and because the families are struggling...and simply can't meet the need...to support them educationally and to support them emotionally, to support them financially, and...nutritionally, that's where we pick up the pieces....So, yah, we're very supportive and...we're very caring...if we didn't care we wouldn't be here.

The centre was a place where children had a variety of opportunities, opportunities that more often than not, they did not have at home. It was a safe place, a place to play, a place to be with friends, a place to connect with adults who cared, a place to eat, and a place with rules and boundaries to guide their participation. Adam, when sharing about his drawing (Figure 2) described what UrbanKidz was like:

Interviewer: Can you tell me about your drawing?

Adam: ...Um right here....this guy is saying he didn't know what UrbanKidz is and he said no and then he, he said...it is this way....here....And then, he said there's computers and this guy's saying it's fun....And there's a guy saying hi...and then he's making friends....And then this guy's saying mmm because he's eating

food....And this guy's saying yay 'cause he scored a goal, a goal in hockey....And it's sports in gym....And this is the staff saying hey....'cause there's somebody smoking inside....and then it says no smoking....And then this is the staff. And, and this is a kid.

Interviewer: Awesome....the first person here...he said that it was fun. Can you tell me some things that makes UrbanKidz fun or what is fun at UrbanKidz?

Adam: The, the gym....and there's boys' club and girls' club....And...really, almost every Friday....we watch a movie....on the big wall in the computer lab....And then sometimes when somebody's new....we um, make new friends....We have to read....for 15 minutes, before doing anything....And that's all.



Figure 2: Adam's drawing depicting his experiences at UrbanKidz.

The children were generally positive when speaking about their experiences at the centre, using terms such as “happy” to share their feelings. Joel and Adam commented that they “like everything” at UrbanKidz and Justina said that at UrbanKidz: “I always feel safe.... ‘cause I know it’s a good place to be.” Joel, when describing his picture said, “It’s me smiling... beside UrbanKidz....because I like UrbanKidz.” Affect was an important facet of children’s experiences and was present throughout as the children talked about the centre. The data presented with regard to the subthemes is primarily from the children’s interviews and is in their own words, as evidenced by their use of first,

second and third person to describe centre experiences. Data gathered using reflective notes, observation field notes, documents and a focus group interview with UrbanKidz staff provided critical background and insight into the analysis and are presented in the results where fitting.

### **Opportunities to Do**

The various activities the children participated in at the centre were often talked about as part of their experiences there. For these children, it was important they had something to do, and they discussed how the centre provided opportunities to fulfill that need. This was illustrated in their comments that by comparison, outside of the centre there were not many options for recreation. Alexys said, “It’s fun here because when I’m at home there’s nothing really else to do than come here.” Justina did not like Wednesdays, because the centre closed at 6 p.m. instead of 8 p.m.: “if it’s closed at like 6 on Wednesdays, they go home and...all they do, is like sit down and watch TV or something and there’s like no friends or no games to play.” Justina saw UrbanKidz as her only option for recreation and disliked it when the centre closed early. As the children talked about what they did at the centre, they often referred to everyday activities and special trips and events.

**Everyday activities.** Much of the children’s discussions centred on what they did at UrbanKidz each day. At the centre, the children had a variety of daily recreational opportunities such as gym activities, pool (billiards), computers, movies, and arts and crafts. Words such as “fun” or “boring” were often used to describe the centre’s activities. When describing UrbanKidz, Faith said:

It's fun and we get to run around a lot and get lots of exercise in the gym.

And in the computer lab we can play pool and watch movies on the TV and there's a staff computer....and there's pool and bumper pool and stuff like that.

Justina contributed that, "In the gym you can play hockey, soccer, all those kind of sports....And there was...mats to do gymnastics or something....In the computer lab you're allowed to go on Facebook, YouTube, and stuff like that."

Mitch said that in the gym "we play any sport you want to....basketball, hockey, soccer, and catch." The gym was a critical element for many of the children when describing daily activities. In fact, Justina indicated that the gym was so important that it would "suck" if there was no gym at UrbanKidz. Alexys reflected the opinions of most of the children when she said that her favourite part of UrbanKidz was spending time in the gym with friends:

The gym.... 'cause I like to do gymnastics and play basketball....me and Justina always practice and stretch and...I try to teach her how to do, like something I can't do and she can't do....I'm tryin' to do this, like, flippy thing, like you do a cartwheel and then you flip and then I'm trying to teach her just to go like straight back into the bridge.

The children liked having the choice of multiple recreation opportunities at the centre. When Justina described a good place for children and youth she talked about having many different activities to take part in:

There's games, activities, so if they get bored...if they're doing crafts and then they get bored, all they have to do is go to the gym, then after they can, like watch a movie or something, there's lots of things to do.

Jordan also talked about how he liked having the option to go back and forth between different activities:

I'll check my Facebook. I'll go on the computer....I'll play some games on like other sites maybe....and then I'll go in the gym for a little bit....for like half an hour, come back out, go on the computer....like just go back and forth.

Fun was significant to the children's experiences and the children often used words such as fun or boring to describe certain activities, interactions with people or the centre in general. Jordan summarized his perspective on fun at UrbanKidz, concluding that for him fun was a prerequisite for attendance at the centre:

Interviewer: Is there anything else I should know about UrbanKidz?

Jordan: That it's fun.

Interviewer: Yah? So, what makes it fun?

Jordan: Everything....computers, gym, pool, games, friends, place to hang out, yah.

Interviewer: So...is it important that it's fun?

Jordan: Uh, yah

Interviewer: Yah? What if it wasn't fun?

Jordan: Then nobody would really come.

When asked what they would improve about UrbanKidz, the children mainly talked about the physical spaces and equipment available to them at the centre. They wanted new equipment for the gym, more computers for the computer lab and “more like supplies...and like paints and stuff, like markers” for arts and crafts. Justina said that she would:

Make the gym a bit huger, ‘cause it’s kinda small and the computer lab...would make that bigger, and...I would say 10 more computers, ‘cause there’s only, like 6...‘cause right now [the gym’s] small and there’s only enough room, like if one part of the gym is playing soccer, then one of them playing hockey, it’s a small space. So, if it’s bigger you can have like, huger space to play in.

While most of the activities that occurred at the centre were unstructured and allowed the children time to engage in free play, there were still rules that guided their participation. The children also discussed activities that were mandatory or that were organized by the staff at the centre. The children displayed varying attitudes towards these different rules and more structured activities.

There were many rules designed to govern behaviour and promote positive interactions and experiences for the children while participating in centre activities. Adam talked about “the computers, you’re allowed to play on the computers, but you’re not allowed on bad websites.” Joel talked about how “there’s no high sticking...no hitting, no tripping” when playing hockey in the

gym. When Alexys shared about the pool tables she said that “they’re fun to play on and there’s rules....if you drop a ball, yah, you’re off the table for the rest of the day.” For Jordan, however, a tension existed between his desire for rules and his desire for freedom.

Jordan indicated that sometimes they were required to participate in sports in the gym. However, he did not like that “some days you have to play.” Instead, he liked the freedom that came with doing activities without adult supervision because according to him:

You just get to have fun....And have nobody like watching over you to like call the bad shots or something...Like if you're playing hockey and you slap shot it and hit somebody....like you don't get like called out or get kicked out or something.

At the same time he did not like it when “people like won’t follow the rules.” When staff organized games he liked “that kids have to follow the rules” and “that way they make people don’t cheat and they make it fair,” but he did not like it when “they’re too strict.”

Reading was a mandatory activity implemented to contribute to the educational development of the children at UrbanKidz. Upon arriving at the centre, the children were required to read, write or do homework for 15 minutes before they were allowed to participate in any other activities at the centre. “We have to read....for 15 minutes, before doing anything,” said Adam. There were mixed feelings about reading time. Alexys’ least favourite part of UrbanKidz was “the reading....when you come in you have to sign in and then you have to read

for 15 minutes and then some people don't want to read... 'cause some people don't like reading." Faith, on the other hand, did not mind the reading requirement:

The rule is, you don't get to do anything until you're done your reading or you're done your homework or writing or stuff like that... I like reading, sometimes I'll write, most of the time I write and sometimes when I'm feeling kind of bored of writing I'll read... sometimes when I'm bored of reading, I'll do my homework.

The centre had very specific reasons for instituting the literacy program as one staff member explained:

That literacy program got started because... a dear youth to us... couldn't read, just simply couldn't read... an older child that simply couldn't read... but always... we're looking at those opportunities for these kids for education... because despite what you hear statistically from educators in the inner city... there are many, many youth that are not meeting those milestones, but they get passed along. Part of it is teacher burnout. Part of it is lack of resources and there are many studies that show the disparity between urban schools and non-urban schools... and so there really is a huge difference in the resources... but either way... a great number of those kids are not meeting their milestones and getting passed on, so that it becomes someone else's issue next year and someone else's issue the year after and then we find ourselves with a fourteen or fifteen year old that

cannot read past a grade 2 level and not able to comprehend what they've read...and re-articulate it to you, so...we've got some issues here.

Beyond reading, the staff also organized other activity opportunities for the children. Some of these activities were weekly; for example, the intramural soccer league and the girls clubs: "they...make clubs" such as the "boys club, girls club, and soccer....and there used to be hockey...and...hockey for staff" (Adam). Other activities were one-time events that the staff would put on the monthly calendar or that would happen spontaneously. Justina liked when the staff organized activities at the centre: "I feel happy because they put stuff like on the calendar....and stuff like that....to see what's going on....talent shows, fear factor, and lots of stuff." Faith liked contests and told a story about when she won a hula hoop contest at the centre:

Faith: I like the gym the best....I like the hula hoop contest.

Interviewer: Can you tell me about the hula hoop contest?

Faith: I won the hula hoop contest....Well, you kinda already knew that.

Interviewer: That's okay, can you tell me about it?

Faith: Umm, we had to hula hoop and then some kid made up this idea that Katie [staff member] thought was cool...they made up this cool idea where he set four pylons up, two at one side and two at the other where we were starting and whoever made it back walking and or walking and hula hooping...didn't win, but then it was a running and hula hooping and I won.

Faith, in this example, spoke of how a staff member involved a child in organizing an event and thought that his idea “was cool.” One staff member elaborated on this when highlighting the importance of involving children in organizing activities at the centre:

I think also having...youth initiated activities, helps a lot too...just because there will get...more involvement, more engagement, better sense of responsibility and wanting to be at the centre because...they feel like they're a part of it and I know we try to do a little bit of that, like, some of the smaller activities that we do, little contests that the kids want, like the, when we have drawing contests or colouring contests, pool tournaments, fear factor, it's 'cause the kids want to have it, so they'll pick the date, and they'll do the sign-ups.

Some of the children's comments hinted that they would like more organized activity opportunities at the centre. Adam talked about the UrbanKidz ball hockey team, which was made up of older youth and staff: “UrbanKidz has their own hockey team...it's for the staffs....that work here..., and the team's called UrbanKidz Challengers.” Adam later shared that he wished the children had their own hockey team as well: “a mini hockey team....like facing like the other teams....like the one that UrbanKidz Challengers plays....but facing the mini version of them....like probably their sons or their nephews.” When Justina was asked what she would change about the staff she replied:

All the time I would ask, if we could...play like hockey or something in the gym....or stuff like that, basketball, soccer....it's fun when they [staff]

organize, so all the kids have something to do...instead of just going on the computer and in the gym and playing like a whole bunch of other sports in the gym.

Everyday activities were a significant part of the children's experiences at the centre. The children had the opportunity to partake in both structured and unstructured activities that were moderated by rules and that facilitated interactions with other children.

**Special events and trips.** UrbanKidz not only provided the children with recreational opportunities within the centre, but also offered recreational opportunities, in the form of field trips, outside of the centre. Jordan shared that these trips were important “cause...if like you can't really...primarily afford to go there, you might just be able to go there once,” suggesting that for at least some of the children at UrbanKidz these special opportunities were not always feasible in their lives outside of the centre. These field trips included going to amusement parks, Disneyland, museums and day and overnight camps. “One time we went to [the waterpark] and we went swimming...and then another time we went to Big Creek and another time we went to the Ranch,” said Faith. Alexys shared an experience of going to Disneyland with UrbanKidz: “Six people went to Disneyland and we got chosen and our parents, they knew for like 6 months and then they told us...in May that we're going to Disneyland and then I couldn't wait to go.” There was an excitement and enthusiasm shared by the children who talked about these different trips. Jordan said that a good place for children would “have fun field trips.”

Interviewer: And you mentioned you'd want there to be field trips?

Jordan: Yeah...to like, like the museum or something....we went there like... last month or something....It was really fun.

Interviewer: Nice. Would you want field trips any other places?

Jordan: Like RideLand [amusement park] maybe and in, in February....we had a...field trip to Eastgate Mall....And like some kids were scared when you're goin' on The Drop [waterslide] sort of thing...And you're, like it was really, it was actually really fun. I thought it would be scary....'cause that was my first time on it.

A few of the children also mentioned having parties to celebrate holidays such as Halloween and Christmas at the centre. Alexys said that parties helped to make a good day at UrbanKidz:

Interviewer: Can you tell me about a good day at UrbanKidz?

Alexys: ...where we get sometimes pizza for snack and pop and then sometimes we have movie nights...where the computer lab is. And there's a projector and it goes on the wall. It's like a big screen.

Interviewer: Is there anything else that makes a good day at UrbanKidz?

Alexys: No, like sometimes parties.

Interviewer: Yah. Can you tell me about some of the parties that you've had?

Alexys: We're having a Christmas Party. Um, and then, for Halloween, we had...a haunted maze and like snacks and stuff. And everybody was dressed up.

As the children shared about the kinds of daily activities, special events and trips afforded through their participation at the centre, having choices and opportunities to do different things were especially salient.

### **Opportunities to Connect**

When asked to share their centre related experiences, children often talked about the presence of others and the roles other people at the centre played in their experiences. In particular, the children talked about the positive and negative interactions and relationships they had with friends and centre staff. These interactions and relationships were significant in the children's accounts of their experiences at UrbanKidz as highlighted by Joel who said he would feel "upset" if he was not "able to come [and]....see all the people."

**Friends.** Friends and peers were seen as critical to the children's experiences at UrbanKidz. For Joel, an important part of what created a good day at the centre was seeing his friends, which made him "feel happy." The meaningfulness of centre friends was also shared by Justina who said that if she had no friends at UrbanKidz she "would be sad and lonely." In fact, friends were so integral to Jordan's centre experiences that he indicated he "wouldn't come" if he did not have friends at UrbanKidz. While many of their social interactions with friends and peers were positive, the children also discussed the impact of negative social interactions on their experiences at the centre:

Interviewer: What don't you like about UrbanKidz?

Justina: Well I don't like, 'cause sometimes people tease people....about something....yeah.

Interviewer: And then how do they feel?

Justina: They feel sad and left out.

The children talked about friends and peers at UrbanKidz in two main ways: being and doing together and negative social interactions.

***Being and doing together.*** The children enjoyed having a place where they could see, hang out, have fun with their friends and participate in activities together. Jordan in particular appreciated that UrbanKidz provided “a place to hang out with my friends.” Joel associated friends with having fun:

Interviewer: What would make you want to come back to UrbanKidz each day?

Joel: Umm, me being able to see all my friends and have fun.

Interviewer: Yah? Cool...so what else is fun about coming to UrbanKidz?

Joel: Everything's fun.

Interviewer: Can you give me some examples about what's fun?

Joel: Having fun at UrbanKidz is like being able...to have a whole bunch of friends that you know from your school, come to UrbanKidz each and every day except for some of them don't go to my school.

Justina indicated that she would be bored if she did not come to the centre because all of her friends come to UrbanKidz. She came to the centre:

Because I always see my friends after school...and if I don't come to UrbanKidz I probably won't get to do that, 'cause all my friends come to UrbanKidz...and then...if I don't go to UrbanKidz and my friends do, I'll be at home bored.

Participating in activities with others was often referred to as the children talked about how they enjoyed spending time together. The gym was a popular place for friends to play together. As Mitch said, his favourite part of UrbanKidz was “playing with my friends ....pool....hockey....soccer.” Adam appreciated it when his friends included him in activities and said that he liked the children at UrbanKidz because “[you can] make new friends with them....sometimes they help you with your homework....or you help them....and sometimes whenever you’re like all alone...they ask you...if you want to play.” The importance of friends was heightened when the children talked about the detriment of not having friends at the centre. Alexys indicated that a bad day at UrbanKidz would be “if some of your friends weren’t there and you’ll be all lonely” or if there was “no one to play with.” Justina, in a similar way, said that if she did not see her friends at UrbanKidz it would limit her participation: “I’ll be bored and I would...probably just sit there and watch people play.”

The friendships within UrbanKidz, were not limited to the centre, but extended beyond as the children participated in activities together at other places. For example, Jordan spoke about going swimming at a local pool with his friends from UrbanKidz:

Jordan: I like swimming. I go swimming every Monday, Wednesday, Friday, Saturday and Sunday....I go to the Brinkstown, ‘cause it’s not open on Tuesday or Thursdays....and once, umm, Kingswood, opens up, I’m gonna go there...I like Kingswood.

Interviewer: Do a bunch of people from here go...?

Jordan: Yah, Rick, Peter, Adam, Mitch, Billy, a whole bunch of people.

The centre was a safe place where the children could be with their friends and thus provided the children a space in which their friendships could develop and grow. The centre and its activities facilitated the building of relationships, and one staff talked about how the children had used the term *family* to describe these relationships:

Katie: And the other day...they're [the children] all, let's all get a family picture...a family picture of Rick and Peter and Mitch [children], and you know that's what they called it – a family picture. And, they were all on the couch.

Lori: So it was kids from every possible race on that couch

Rachel: And Lori [staff member] in the middle

Lori: Oh that was funny, but even the ones that did it just with themselves, like the one that they're specifically talking about, was just them and...there was probably maybe 10 boys in that dog pile and only a couple of them were actually blood related. But they called it a family so that was neat.

Furthermore, recognizing the value of the centre, the children desired to share UrbanKidz with others. Justina, like a number of the other children, heard about the centre through a friend:

Interviewer: So, do you remember why you started coming to UrbanKidz?

Justina: Um, one day I was walking home with my brothers and his friend...and then he told us about UrbanKidz...and then we tried to

check it out with my mom....and she said it looks like a good place.

Since starting to come to UrbanKidz, Justina had invited a number of her friends to come to UrbanKidz as well: "...my friends always come here and I told my friends all about it and like all my friends started coming here. Like, I have...10 friends that started coming here because I told them..." The children not only invited their current friends into the centre, but also enjoyed welcoming in children they did not know to make new friends. For example, Jordan liked UrbanKidz because he "usually get[s] to meet new people" and Adam shared that "sometimes when somebody's new....we um, make new friends." The children welcomed in both friends and strangers to be part of the UrbanKidz community.

*Negative interactions.* While most of the children's interactions with friends and peers were positive in nature, some of the children also discussed negative interactions and the impact those interactions could have on a child's experiences at UrbanKidz. These negative interactions included instances of bullying, teasing, spreading rumours, and fighting. These types of interactions compromised the physical and/or emotional safety of the children at the centre and were associated with bad days and not wanting to return to UrbanKidz. Alexis said that she might not want to come back if "some people made fun or like bullied you or something" and a bad day at UrbanKidz would make Mitch "mad" because "people [were] hurting their feelings....talking about their life...spreading rude rumours." Although it was told in the context of theorizing and not from his own centre experience, Jordan shared that a bad day would be "where you're getting teased really bad....and then you get beat up after....like

you just like keep getting teased and teased and teased and beat up and beat up and beat up.” Mitch had some social concerns that made him nervous when he started to attend UrbanKidz:

Interviewer: So, do you remember why you started coming to UrbanKidz?

Mitch: My mom...made me to....To keep me busy.

Interviewer: ....Did you want to come?

Mitch: No.

Interviewer: No? So, why didn't you want to come?

Mitch: Because...I was nervous.

Interviewer: ...So what were some things that made you nervous about coming?

Mitch: Meeting new people.

Interviewer: ....Did you meet some new people?

Mitch: Kind of.

Interviewer: Yah. What were they like when you first started?

Mitch: Mean.

While Mitch now said that UrbanKidz “keeps you happy” because “you see your friends” he did have some social fears and negative experiences when he first attended the centre.

A few of the children spoke of tensions that existed when there were children and youth with a variety of differences (e.g. age, gender, ability) interacting with each other within a limited space. Faith told a story of why some children did not like the gym: “because there's sometimes other big kids that are

supposed to be role models take...the balls and the hockey sticks and the hula hoops away from kids... 'cause they are very, very, very mean.” Jordan, on the other hand, shared the frustrations he faced as one of the older children. He shared about teen night and while he was not old enough to attend thought it was a good idea because you could “still have fun without little kids ruining it.” Jordan also talked about the tension that existed between the boys and the girls in the centre. While there was already a girl’s club, Jordan wished that there was a boys club at the centre as well:

'Cause that way we could play like rough [in the gym] without having somebody get hurt that much....Like soccer like you can't play harsh....Like you can't go really, really hard core....'Cause if there's girls playing, you might hurt them....But like boys they can like sort of take it....more than girls can.”

**Staff.** Children often characterized the centre staff as contributing to UrbanKidz being a good place to be. Jordan said that good staff “actually watch over you...and they actually like take care of you...make sure you don’t get hurt...help if you need help, that sort of thing.” Faith went so far as to say that one of the staff was “like a second mother” and Joel said that “a good day at UrbanKidz would be like when I see Rachel [staff member] each and every day.” Although children shared many examples of positive interactions with staff, negative interactions also occurred. The children discussed the centre staff in two main ways: providing help and care and enforcing rules and providing consequences.

*Providing help and care.* The staff at the centre provided help and care for the children in a variety of ways. According to Justina: “They [staff] care about the kids...and they’re nice...they play activities with us...and they help us with stuff, like to read and stuff like that.” For Justina, in particular, the help and time staff invested in her was very important. She described good staff as those who “care[s] about the kids” and said that a child would likely not return to the centre if “the staff don’t care about you.” She knew that the staff cared about the children because if “something bad’s have happening in their lives...they [the staff] take you up here sometimes and they talk to you about what’s happening...and they do something and they talk to you.” On the other hand, she indicated that a child would know the staff did not care “if you went up to them, if you got hurt and started crying or something and they said, like, go away.” One staff reiterated the importance of trust and care between the staff and the children and how that contributed to a family like atmosphere at the centre:

I think it’s because we care about not only when they’re in the centre, we care about what’s happening about them outside of the centre. And a lot of, like sometimes, maybe their own parent’s don’t even care what’s going on in their school, or other activities, who they’re hanging out with, we kind of know a lot of that, because we’re there, we know...like I said, when we have that trust with them, then, like they’re good, like you said we’re like a family because there’s a lot of trust there. Like, the kids know that, if they’re going to enclose something to us, that they don’t want, like, their friend to know or whatever, we, we don’t, you know and they trust us

a lot and I think that's where, the family part comes in. 'Cause they can go to any youth centre and have a meal and get a free scarf, but we sit with them while they're eating, we ask them how their day was, we look at their report cards, I mean we know who their sisters are, I, like even the siblings that don't even come here we know, you know, so I think that's a big part of the family thing.

The staff indicated that because of the care and trust that they had with these kids, the centre was more than a place that met children's basic needs; it was also a place with adults who cared about and invested time in them. The staff also helped the children in a variety of ways – from homework to dealing with social conflicts. Adam said that “the staff help you when you have homework and help you spell stuff....and when you don't know how to read they help you do ABCs....so you can read.” Jordan shared that staff helped with “homework, or [if] somebody's picking on you...they'll like, help you take care of the problem.” Finally, Jordan shared that help could also be reciprocated back to the staff by the children when he stated that “earlier...I was helping Ed [staff member] clean stuff...and you can like help do dishes or sweep or...help cook or something or help stir...yah, there's lots of things you can do to help.”

***Enforcing rules and providing consequences.*** Staff was also viewed as the enforcers of rules and providers of consequences. These roles were viewed both positively and negatively by the children. For Jordan, enforcing rules was closely tied to safety at the centre. He provided the following example of how the staff kept the centre safe: “if you're hitting somebody, they'll [staff] break you

apart and kick you out, but if you're like being bad, they'll like kick you out." He thought that "more...strict staff" would help make the centre safer.

Alexys said that some children may not like the staff at UrbanKidz because "sometimes they put you in a time out or something or they kick you out for the day...if you...were fighting or something...or did something, like mean to somebody and then you got a time out...like swearing, 'cause there's no swearing in here." Alexys thought that mean staff restricted opportunities in that they "don't let you do stuff sometimes."

The staff also thought their relationships with the children were critical to the children's experiences at the centre and were vital to being an effective youth organization. These relationships were thought to be so important that one staff explained how the centre ran more like a family than an organization:

I think, something that I've loved about UrbanKidz...and something that I think is a strength and a value, that is missing from some other agencies, is that...this place almost runs...more like a family, than it does an organization. And...while we have some programs, we're trying to be intentional with that, we really value relationship...with the kids and at times when you know, where we can with the families and we try to be long term with this, like some of the kids that are attending here have been here for years, so it's not like we just have...an intake process, where we'll work with someone for a year and then they're out the door, because it's not so much about providing a service per say, as it is you know a, a safe place where these kids can do life after school and where we can be a

part of their lives...it's not just a numbers game for us. We're not trying to meet a quota, we're not trying to, you know, just fill program requirements for budget purposes, but it's very, it's relationally based, we care about the kids, we care about the families and, and I think that that is a really key ingredient, because I'm not criticising all social service...but too often people fall through the cracks, when it's just a program and, you know, I'll...work with you for six months, you're a client, I'm the provider, I've done for you what I can, sorry you're out the door. And...I don't even know the politically correct term for us to use...for some of the kids that attend here...maybe we'd call them a client, I don't think we really look at them as clients, you know, they're kids and we know them and we care about them and, and so, I don't know, I guess, the relationship and the genuine care that happens here, the family atmosphere...I think is, is a strong assent to the parents.

For this staff member, it was the care that existed between the staff and the children that was the key ingredient to creating a positive place for children to be. Relationships with friends and caring staff were central to the children's experiences at UrbanKidz.

### **Opportunities to Be**

Beyond the opportunities for recreation and relationship building, children also had opportunities to have other important needs met through their attendance at UrbanKidz. When discussing the centre and good places to be, the children also talked about the importance of meeting other basic needs or opportunities to 'be'.

These needs included: feeling safe, having food, and having a place to rest and be when parents were not home.

**Safety.** Feeling safe at the centre was of utmost importance to the children. As Faith said: “kids can come here and...know that they’re gonna be safe.” She went on to share that if it was not safe that she “wouldn’t come here and neither would my brother.” For Faith, as well as for many of the other children who attended the centre, the staff played a major role in keeping them safe there:

Interviewer: How do you feel about coming to UrbanKidz?

Faith: I feel really safe coming to UrbanKidz

Interviewer: ...can you tell me what makes you feel safe here?

Faith: All the staff

Children spoke about the staff and safety in terms of a dichotomy. On the one hand, staff was seen as the guardians of safety at the centre, on the other hand children shared instances where staff was negligent in ensuring their safety.

Justina illustrated this dichotomy quite effectively:

Interviewer: What else makes a good place to be?

Justina: Umm, there’s...supervision. Yah, that’s the word.

Interviewer: ....So, what’s important about supervision?

Justina: Umm, like if people get hurt, they can help you out and get ice or something and...if a bad person comes in, they can just get them out so, so kids don’t get hurt.

Interviewer: ....So d’you think that UrbanKidz is a safe place to be, err?

Justina: Sometimes no and sometimes yes.

Interviewer: ...Can you give me an example of when it's not a safe place to be?

Justina: Like, if like a gang comes in and they have, like, guns and that...and then the good one is like, like a gang comes in and then the staff, just, kick, kicks them out...

Interviewer: Yah. Is it important to you that it's safe?

Justina: Ummhmm, so you don't get hurt.

Interviewer: Yah? What if it wasn't safe?

Justina: I wouldn't come here.

A number of children talked about safety in relation to protection from outsiders. The staff was seen to protect children from "bad people" outside of the centre. "The staff are always...keeping you safe, and if a bad person comes in they ask them to leave...ASAP," shared Justina. Adam said that he liked the staff "cause they're nice, they keep you safe...and whenever somebody [from outside the centre] needs to use the washroom...they make sure that there's no kids in the washroom." Mean staff, on the other hand, was seen to ignore the safety of the children at the centre: "Maybe...a drunk person came in and staff just sat there and did nothing...cause one time this guy came in and he asked me if he can have...my hotdog. It was weird...then...staff kicked him out and he...started saying swears" (Justina). For Jordan it was important that there were "no weapons or...anything that could hurt anybody" at the centre and that the children were physically safe from outsiders.

Justina also associated supervised activities with safety. She liked staff organized activities because “if people get hurt they [staff] always, like help them feel better....but if some kids organize it some people get hurt, like really bad.” But she also acknowledged that at times staff did not always provide a safe environment for activities and she did not like this. She shared that “sometimes when the staff do...dodge-ball....the huge kids always throw hard...like some staff too...like Dave [staff member]....he throws really hard....one time he hit someone and then they started crying.”

Some of the rules at the centre were seen by the children to directly contribute to their safety at UrbanKidz. Adam said that UrbanKidz was safe because “there’s no smoking” and Alexys talked about the limited number of times children can enter and leave the centre each night. “If you leave once and then you leave again, you can’t come back, because some kid, who came here, got jumped.” Even though the rule contributed to her safety, Alexys did not like the rule. “...I don’t like it, ‘cause it used to [be], long time ago...you can leave twice, but the 3<sup>rd</sup> time you have to go home.” Justina wanted to add a new rule to keep the children safe at the centre. “I would say if the kids are over...19....they would probably have like an ID card....to see if they like got into trouble with the cops or anything....so we’re safe.”

The children also desired to protect their centre friends from negative interactions with outsiders. Alexys and Justina went beyond thinking about their own safety to also valuing the safety of their friends. Alexys said, “I protect them” and Justina said that “if they get hurt....I would feel bad....if like a bad person

comes in and hurts them, that'd be bad.”

**Food.** The children also spoke about the importance of having snack at the centre. According to Adam:

At 5:30....they give you snack....to eat....and we're not allowed wasting it....and then when people are cleaning up you have to go in the gym....until everything's done cleaning....and whoever cleans....they get a treat....and they once...get first dibs on anything.

The staff felt that providing a daily snack was a vital part of their programming. “It's important, obviously, that we feed them...that's one of our main goals, if everything else had to shut down, we would still operate food,” said one staff member. Another staff member explained that providing food was one of their main foci, because nourishment was essential to achieving their other goals with the children at the centre:

And for us, part of nurturing, is always food, because we know that's the critical piece, to be able to do anything with them, we need to offer them that nutrition and that...nourishment. It's...also a part of the relationship is the feeding....you feed 'em, you're showing that you care and you can accomplish so much more when, when they have full bellies.

Faith explained why this food was so important: “UrbanKidz serves good meals for kids that can't go home...for a good meal....'cause some kids don't get food at home and if there was no snack it'd be bad.” Justina reiterated Faith's statement when she said that “some kids at home, their families are poor and they don't have any money to buy any food, so then...the kids would be...all hungry.”

While a number of the children discussed the relevance of having snack at UrbanKidz, none of them talked about needing the food personally. Snack at UrbanKidz was not optional, and the children did not like that “you have to eat everything...you get.”

**A place to rest and be.** Some of the children talked about how a good place for children would have a place to sleep or nap. Jordan wished there was a place to nap at the centre and Alexys said the following when she described the best place for children possible, “a place to sleep...like homeless people, like, come and they can sleep and like live there, so in the winter they don’t have to be cold and then food and yah.” Alexys described a place that was more than having fun doing activities or playing with friends, she described a place that met basic needs. Mitch also talked about sleep – associating bad days with a lack of sleep and good days with “getting a lot of sleep.”

For some of the children, UrbanKidz provided a place to go when their parents were not home. Joel said that he started coming to UrbanKidz “because my mom had to work at Roxdales, full, full shift.” Jordan’s parents also worked and while he said that he chose to come, his next words tell of his parents late work schedules: “Because my parents are at work every day....so I don’t really have a chance to go home ‘cause they’re not there.” When his parents were not home he liked “just that you get to have a place to hang out and just, if you’re bored, you have something to do....or if it’s really cold out like a winter...and like your parents aren’t home you can just come like, come here to warm up or something.”

The staff also recognized the opportunities to be that were afforded the children through the centre. As one staff member explained, the centre's location played an important role in this:

And we often say, you know, if this centre was located in Woodburn Park and St. Christopher [neighbourhoods of higher SES] – it would be a very different centre. It would be a hang out. It would be, you know, more of a teen place...where teens could come and have fun, but I don't think it would meet all the needs that we're meeting and that is why they created this place, in the location that they did, because they recognized that there needed to be something here...absolutely, you're right, it's very urban and as Phil [staff member] said, our location is...the worst area of Iglington.

In summary, the findings of this study indicate the critical role UrbanKidz played in the children having opportunity to do, connect and be. As described by the children, these opportunities were often unavailable to them in their lives outside the centre and were critical to their wellbeing.

## CHAPTER FIVE: DISCUSSION

The purpose of this qualitative case study was to perform an in-depth exploration of the experiences of children of low SES participating in a community recreation program. The overarching theme of *Having Opportunities* emerged from the thematic analysis of the data. The children talked about having opportunities at the centre in three main ways: (a) opportunities to do, (b) opportunities to connect, and (c) opportunities to be. These themes, and by extension, the children's experiences, are discussed within the framework of place attachment (Scannell & Gifford, 2010) and the literature on place, SES and child development, and after-school and community programming.

### **Place Attachment**

Place attachment has been a topic of interest in many different fields of research and provided a valuable framework with which to understand the experiences of the children in this study. Scannell and Gifford (2010) define place attachment as:

A bond between an individual or group and a place that can vary in terms of spatial level, degree of specificity, and social or physical features of a place, and is manifested through affective, cognitive and behavioural psychological processes (p. 5).

In its simplest form, place attachment is defined as the emotional bond between a person and a place that occurs over a period of time (Low & Altman, 1992). It is place that structures experience (Ellis, 2002). Therefore, UrbanKidz as a place structures the experiences of the children who attend the centre. Places are sites of

human activity (Brey, 1998) and are made up of physical and social components. While the concept of place attachment considers the role of the individual in the experience (Scannell & Gifford, 2010), it also allows the researcher to go beyond the individual to consider the environment – the social and physical contexts (Ellis, 2002). In the present case, a place framework, allowed me the researcher, to explore the children’s attachment to the centre and examine the role that social and physical characteristics of UrbanKidz played in that attachment process (Low & Altman, 1992). A concept that emphasizes both the physical and the social was particularly useful for exploring children’s experiences at UrbanKidz (a “place”) and the social interactions that occurred there.

Scannell and Gifford’s (2010) place attachment framework has three main dimensions: (a) person, (b) psychological processes, and (c) place. While the three parts of this framework are distinct, they are not mutually exclusive as aspects of one dimension may also be found in another. Place attachment is complex and its dimensions are “interrelated and inseparable” (Low & Altman, 1992, p. 4). The children’s experiences are discussed in the context of each of the three dimensions of the place attachment framework, with place being the dimension most relevant to the findings.

*Person.* The person dimension in Scannell and Gifford’s (2010) framework refers to the individual or group who is attached to the place. For this study, the “person” aspect of the framework refers to each child and his or her personal connection to UrbanKidz. This personal connection occurs as a result of one’s own experiences at the centre that cause it to become meaningful (Manzo,

2005). Each of the children, in response to interview questions, shared their personal experiences at the centre. The children talked about what they liked and did not like about UrbanKidz. They shared their favourite parts and least favourite parts. They talked about the different experiences and memories they had of the centre as it related to the activities they took part in, the friends and staff they interacted with as well as other ways in which their centre experiences were meaningful. A person's individual experiences in a place and the memories that a place evokes can play an important role in developing attachment to a place (Scannell & Gifford, 2010). The individual experiences were most prominent within the person dimension, likely due to the one-on-one nature of the interviews. However, there were collective meanings shared by the children as a group in relation to how they viewed their opportunities at the centre. In a similar way, the focus group interview with staff revealed common understandings regarding the purpose and function of the centre. A final example of the role of the group in the attachment process would be the discussions surrounding the view of the centre as a family.

*Psychological processes.* Scannell and Gifford (2010) discuss how psychological processes play a role in an individual's attachment to a place. These processes include affect, cognition, and behaviour. Cognition was not prominent in the experiences shared by the children. This may be a reflection of the nature of the questions or of the children's ability to share cognitive processes. The two processes most relevant in the context of this study were affect and behaviour. In fact, affect appeared to play an important role in influencing behaviour.

“Attachment to a place is grounded in emotion” (Scannell & Gifford, 2010, p. 3). Affect, as understood within place attachment, refers to the emotional connection that a person has to a particular place (Scannell & Gifford, 2010). This affect can be positive or negative, thus encouraging a person to remain close to or distant from a certain place. People prefer to maintain closeness to places that evoke desired emotions (Scannell & Gifford, 2010). Place attachments are thought to “be stronger for places where [people] feel happy, satisfied, and secure rather than uncomfortable, bored or frightened” (Chawla, 1992, p. 78).

Affect was an important part of the children’s descriptions as they discussed their experiences at the centre. Words such as “fun” and “happy” were used to describe their feelings about the centre and are both terms that have been used to represent positive affect (Diener & Emmons, 1985). In particular, these words were used in discussing good days, participation in activities, and interactions with friends and staff. Children’s positive experiences at UrbanKidz evoked feelings of fun and happiness that led to a desire to attend and remain close to the centre. This is in keeping with Scannell and Gifford’s (2010) prediction that affect influences a person’s desire to remain close to or distant from a place. Fun is often cited by children and youth as a reason for participation in various activities. For example, having fun is one of the most common reasons used by children and youth to explain why they participate in sport (Bengoechea, Streat, & Williams, 2004; Kirk, 2005) and is related to commitment and continued participation (Carpenter & Scanlan, 1998). Conversely, not having fun is cited as a reason why children drop out of sport (Bengoechea et al., 2004). Fun,

therefore, can be a strong motivator for participation. While the centre provided a different setting than the traditional sport environment, fun also appeared to be a strong motivator for participation there. Interestingly, while fun was discussed often throughout the children's interviews, the participants in the staff focus group only mentioned fun once during their group interview. This is an important consideration for future programming, as children's reasons for attending may not align well with staff reasons for offering programs.

Terms of negative affect were used to describe bad days, centre activities, negative interactions with others, and not having friends at the centre. Children often used the word "bored" to describe activities they did not like or when they perceived there were not enough activities to participate in at the centre or at home. In this way, feeling bored or anticipating boredom supported the children's desire to remain distant from the centre or their homes (Scannell & Gifford, 2010). Feeling bored at home also led to a desire to remain close to UrbanKidz.

Children also talked about not wanting to return to the centre, expressing a desire to remain distant, if they experienced negative social interactions, such as bullying or teasing. These negative interactions were associated with emotions such as feeling sad, lonely or left out. Bad days at the centre were also associated with negative social interactions, physical injury and the corresponding negative affect. Despite sharing experiences resulting in negative affect, overall the majority of the children associated the centre with positive affective experiences. Most of the children felt "happy" about coming to UrbanKidz and expressed positive emotions when discussing taking part in activities and being with friends

and staff. Therefore, experiences associated with positive affect tended to contribute to children's place attachment, whereas experiences associated with negative affect tended to diminish children's place attachment.

Place attachment behaviours are attachments "expressed through actions" (Scannell & Gifford, 2010, p. 4). The behaviour most relevant to this study was the desire to remain close to a place (proximity maintaining behaviours; Scannell & Gifford, 2010). It is behaviour that is the observable part of the children's place attachment.

The children who participated in this study displayed frequent and consistent attendance at UrbanKidz (proximity maintaining behaviour). While some of the children's parents made them come to the centre, most of the children chose to be involved and talked about coming to UrbanKidz "all the time" or "every day." Various factors contributed to the children's frequent attendance at the centre. Positive affect, personally relevant experiences, and physical and social affordances of place all contributed to place attachment and the children's decisions to attend the centre regularly. Physical affordances of place included opportunities *to do* and opportunities *to be*. Social affordances of place included opportunities *to connect* with both friends and staff. Another example of observable behaviour was the children's adherence to rules at the centre as well as their willingness to conform to expected norms. Adherences to these standards of behaviour allowed the children to retain access to participation at the centre.

Affect and social relationships played an important role in the proximity maintaining behaviours of the children at the centre. Positive feelings elicited

through their relationships with others (e.g. having fun with friends) contributed to the children's motivation to come to the centre often. Conversely, negative feelings produced by not having friends or negative social interactions (e.g. bullying, teasing) resulted in the children not wanting to return to the centre. Other factors, mentioned above, also contributed to or undermined each child's desire to remain close to or distant from UrbanKidz. It is critical that program providers be aware of the factors that undermine and those factors that encourage children's continued participation in programs.

As McLaughlin et al. (1994) discuss, youth do not want to be involved in organizations that they find "irrelevant or inhospitable....demeaning and punitive" and organizations that view youth as "problems" (p.8). The negative affect associated with these places leaves youth desiring to remain distant from their walls. Instead, McLaughlin et al. (1994) indicate that youth frequent places that recognize their potential, providing them with "support, guidance, safety, companionship, and engagement in ways they can accept" (p. 3), with the purpose of helping them prepare for a positive future. This reiterates the importance of taking a positive development framework when working with children and youth. In a similar way, the children in this study desired to remain close to UrbanKidz because there were adults who provided them with help and who cared about their well-being. They had friends there, with whom they could play, hang out, have fun, and talk. They felt physically and emotionally safe as the staff worked to keep dangerous outsiders from entering the centre and promoted positive social

relations among the children. They were engaged as they enjoyed participating in recreational activities with friends both inside and outside the centre.

*Place.* Place is the dimension of place attachment that provided the most insight into understanding the children's experiences at UrbanKidz. Place refers to that to which the individual is attached. Quite simply, UrbanKidz is a place. It is a space that is an on-going site of human activity, thus becoming a place (Brey, 1998). It is a place where children and youth come together and connect with each other and with staff. It is a place where children have the opportunity to participate in recreational activities and are connected to opportunities outside the centre. It is a place where children's needs are met. It is a place where their experiences and interactions work to create meaning that is now associated with the centre (Tuan, 1977).

There are two dimensions to place: the physical dimension and the social dimension. From the perspective of the children, the centre offered physical affordances related to having opportunities to do and opportunities to be at the centre as well as social affordances related to the opportunities to connect. While a study by Kytta (2002) asked children to identify the presence or absence of pre-defined affordances of place, this study allowed children the opportunity to share, using open-ended responses, the characteristics of place which they thought to be important to their experiences.

*Physical place attachment.* People can be attached to the physical aspects of a place – to its physical features, characteristics, or affordances (Scannell & Gifford, 2010). Much of the children's discussions centred on the opportunities

that they had “to do” activities at the centre. From this perspective, the centre’s physical amenities afforded children the opportunity to participate in a variety of recreational activities. The children also shared how physical affordances worked to meet their needs, giving them opportunities “to be.” The centre worked to meet the needs of the children through the provision of food, of safety and of space to rest and be when parents were not home.

The centre provided the children with opportunities “to do”. The children enjoyed coming to UrbanKidz because they could participate in sports, physical activities and free play in the gym. They liked that they could play on the computers, watch movies, play pool (billiards), or do arts and crafts. It was the physical affordances of the centre that made these experiences possible. While some of these activities were structured, usually the children’s time was unstructured and they were left to decide how to occupy their time. The staff indicated that over the past year, however, they had been trying to be more intentional in their programming at the centre. The children, on the one hand, liked these structured activities and desired more of them. On the other hand, they indicated that they also liked that there were a variety of activities at the centre and that they were able to choose what they wanted to do or that they were just able to “hang out”. Having a place to engage in unstructured leisure and just “hang out” appears to be important to youth who attended other programs as well (Henderson & King, 1999). Along these same lines, Ellis (2002) referred to the importance of places that include “space for creativity and growth” and the need for children to have “unprogrammed” space (p. 84) or as Chawla (1992)

described, “undefined space” (p. 69). The findings of the current study and other studies suggest a tension between children’s desires and need for choice, and the demand or want of program staff to provide structured activities (Henderson & King, 1999).

Given the risks associated with growing up in a low SES situation, having structured opportunities to take part in activities designed to increase positive development may be particularly important. Participation in after-school and organized programming has been associated with improved academic achievement (e.g. improved educational outcomes, less school disengagement and drop-out), skill development (social, emotional, physical), improved socio-emotional development (e.g. increased self-confidence, decreased depression and anxiety), forming connections with supportive adults and peers, and participation in fewer risky behaviours, among other positive development outcomes (Eccles & Templeton, 2002; Eccles et al., 2003; Hansen et al., 2003; Harvard Family Research Project, 2008). Bartko and Eccles (2003) and Osgood, Anderson and Shaffer (2005), however, make clear distinctions between relaxed (little structure) and more organized (highly structured) programs and activities. Highly structured programs (after-school sports) have an order and schedule of activities that is highly defined (children are told how the time is to be spent), whereas relaxed programs have very little structure (drop-in centre) and children can move more freely between a variety of activities (Bartko & Eccles, 2003; Osgood et al., 2005). Research indicates that, “children and adolescents have higher rates of a variety of problem behaviours when their after-school activities are less often

supervised by adults, are less structured, and include more socializing with peers” (Osgood et al., 2005, p. 50). However, for the children at UrbanKidz, choice of what to do was critical to their positive experiences and attachment to the centre. Finding a productive balance between structured and unstructured activities for children and assessing the benefits of these different activities is an important issue facing practitioners and parents. For the children at UrbanKidz, finding this balance impacts not only their experiences at the centre, but ultimately whether or not they form a positive attachment that results in a desire to be there and engage in activities and with others.

Among the activities afforded by the centre, the children had opportunities to participate in physical activity and sport in the centre gymnasium. Sometimes the children participated in structured sport activities, whereas other times the children would participate in unstructured sport or active play. The 2011 Active Healthy Kids Canada Report Card has recommended that the after-school hours (3 p.m. to 6 p.m.) provide a critical period of time to improve the physical activity levels of children and youth. The centre, which is open from 3 p.m. to 8 p.m. on most days, and its gymnasium have the potential to play a critical role in helping the children at the centre achieve their recommended amounts of daily physical activity. There are various barriers to children being active in neighbourhoods of low SES. Parents of low SES may have less disposable income that they can use for providing their children with opportunities to participate in physical activity and sport (Humbert et al., 2006). Neighbourhood safety concerns may also restrict the access of children who live in neighbourhoods of low SES to physical activity

(Holt et al., 2009). However, adult supervised youth programs can provide children access to physical activity programming in these neighbourhoods (Holt et al., 2009).

Low income neighbourhoods may also provide children with less access to other stimulating resources and recreational facilities (Bradley & Corwyn, 2002; Humbert et al., 2006). After-school programs can provide children with educational and recreational opportunities that may not be otherwise available with the intent of counteracting the negative influence that low SES can have on child development (Posner & Vandell, 1994). Through UrbanKidz children had opportunities to participate in physical activities and sports in the gym, to receive help with reading or homework and to go on field trips to places such as museums or day and overnight camps. Funding, however, limited the opportunities that the centre could offer. Being part of a place that afforded access to recreational and learning opportunities that may have otherwise been unavailable could contribute to the children's bonding to UrbanKidz.

Along these lines, the children also discussed the mandatory fifteen minute reading time at the centre. While the staff recognized the importance of the children at the centre developing literacy skills, the children often displayed resistance to this reading time, with many of the children talking about how they did not like the mandatory reading component. Research has demonstrated that children of low income have lower reading achievement scores than children not living in a low income home (Pungello, Kupersmidt, Burchinal, & Patterson, 1996). The staff recognizing that there were children without proficient literacy

skills instituted required reading for the children at the centre. From a place attachment perspective, the mandatory reading time might have reduced the children's desire to attend, however, clearly it was not a significant deterrent as children continued to return to the centre. The draw of the other affordances at UrbanKidz appeared to outweigh that which they did not like. This also illustrates a dichotomy between the perspectives of children and those of the adults running the program. It also highlights a potential limitation of the reading program as instituted in that the behaviour was unlikely to carry over into the children's lives beyond the centre. Finding ways to make the reading time more valued by the children would be integral to it having a more significant impact on their lives.

Another factor influencing children's opportunities to attend the centre had to do with the hours of operation. Several of the children spoke about days when UrbanKidz was open late and that this was important to them because it afforded more opportunities to do, be and connect. The after-school period has traditionally been classified as the hours between 3 p.m. and 6 p.m. (Active Healthy Kids Canada, 2011); however, for children of low SES, these critical hours are likely to extend beyond this timeframe. As the children in this study expressed, their parents worked late and they often relied on the centre's late closing to provide them with somewhere to be and something to do. Higher levels of aggression, delinquency and substance use have been found among adolescents who spend these hours with peers in unsupervised contexts

(Flannery et al., 1999). Involvement at the centre is likely to have a positive and possibly preventative impact for the children, particularly during the ‘extended’ critical hours.

Food insecurity is another issue faced by families of low SES and is on the rise in Canada (Tarasuk, 2005). It is defined as the “limited, inadequate, or insecure access of individuals and households to sufficient, safe, nutritious, and personally acceptable food to meet their dietary requirements for a productive and healthy life” (Tarasuk, 2005, p. 300). In addressing this issue, snack which was more like a meal, was mandatory and was part of the daily routine at UrbanKidz. While the children recognized the importance of snack at the centre, many of them did not like that it was mandatory. This aspect was likely to detract from some of the children’s positive attachment to the centre; however, the children also recognized that there were children in the community who did need the food due to financial and food insecurity at home. It is possible that although the children did not express a personal need for the food, that for some it was in fact a characteristic of the centre that helped fulfill of this need and ultimately led to some degree of attachment. The importance of this need was highlighted in the focus group with staff, as providing nourishment was viewed as a prerequisite to improving the lives of the children who attended the centre. Children whose families experience food insufficiency have greater probability of experiencing negative behavioural, emotional and academic functioning compared to families without reported food insufficiency (Alaimo, Olson, & Frongillo, 2001; Kleinman et al., 1998; Murphy et al., 1998). Similar to what occurs at UrbanKidz, various

interventions, such as food charity programs (e.g. food bank, child feeding programs), have been implemented to help meet this need (Tarasuk, 2005). A criticism of these approaches, however, is that they are very much short term solutions that do not address the underlying issues that lead to food insecurity (Tarasuk, 2001).

Safety was critically important to the children in this study and was a need afforded by UrbanKidz. Many of the children talked about the centre being a safe place to be and some indicated that they would not attend the centre if it was not safe. The staff was seen as guardians of safety at the centre and was associated with keeping dangerous outsiders out of the centre, providing assistance to children if they became hurt and helping children to remain safe when participating in activities at the centre. Place attachment has also been related to safety and security (Chawla, 1992; Scannell & Gifford, 2010). Chawla (1992) discussed how place should satisfy a child's need for security and that children tend to be attached to places in which they feel secure. Interestingly enough, many children take security for granted, assuming it to be a characteristic of places they frequent (Chawla, 1992). However, for the children in this study, safety was not taken-for-granted. Safety was important; it was critical, and the children, likely as a result of the unsafe nature of their neighbourhoods valued safety as contributing to a good place to be for children.

Other authors have also discussed the important role that after-school programs can play in meeting youths' basic need of being safe, especially since this is not necessarily provided by their neighbourhoods or schools (Hirsch et al.,

2000; Strobel et al., 2008; Vandell et al., 2005). The youth of low SES in the study by Humbert et al. (2006) discussed how a lack of safety limited their ability to participate in physical activity in their neighbourhood. Youth were afraid of “getting jumped” or feared getting to and from recreational facilities. In another study, children and youth reported people-related safety concerns and indicated that this limited their ability to play outdoors in their neighbourhoods (Holt et al., 2009). However, as was the case in this study, youth associated physical and emotional safety positively with adult supervision (Humbert et al., 2006; Strobel et al., 2008). Safe places can provide freedom from gangs, violence, and the streets thus providing a place youth can hang out with friends, talk about personal issues, work through conflicts or just relax (Hirsch et al., 2000; Strobel et al., 2008). In the neighbourhoods of inner city organizations, safety is not taken for granted and thus the importance of having a safe place to play, be with friends and participate in recreation activities becomes even more pertinent (Hirsch et al., 2000).

*Social place attachment.* People are often attached to places that encourage the development of social relationships (Scannell & Gifford, 2010). Social place attachment is attachment to the people who are in a place and the social interactions that place facilitates (Scannell & Gifford, 2010; Woldoff, 2002). For the children in this study, UrbanKidz was a place of interactions and relationships with both friends and staff. These opportunities to connect were significant to their centre experiences. This finding is supported by other studies of adolescents in community programs who indicated that social relationships,

friendships and peer interactions were a fundamental part of their experiences (Hirsch et al., 2000; McLaughlin et al., 1994; Pearce & Larson, 2006; Strobel et al., 2008).

Positive interactions with friends were crucial to the children's experiences at UrbanKidz and contributed to the strength of their place attachment. Terms of positive affect, such as happy and fun were associated with having friends at the centre. Children liked having fun while participating in activities with friends or just "hanging out." Joint participation in activities or "hanging out" can facilitate positive interactions among peers – encouraging growth and development in relationships (Hirsch et al., 2000; Strobel et al., 2008). Youth in other settings, such as sport and physical activity, have also associated friends with having fun and consider friendship as a factor important for participation (Humbert et al., 2006). Being with friends, making new friends and spending time with peers with similar interests are established reasons for taking part in organized activities from the perspectives of adolescents (Fredricks et al., 2002). The children in this study invited friends from outside the centre to come to UrbanKidz and spoke favourably about making new friends. Welcoming others in is important for the success of youth programs, as it allows a peer group to continue to develop and change, preventing it from becoming stagnant (Hirsch et al., 2000). The children at UrbanKidz desired to welcome new people into the UrbanKidz community – sometimes these were friends from outside the centre and sometime these were children they did not previously know. Although having relationships with peers is important, the nature of these peer relationships is

critical to the success of youth programs (Hirsch et al. 2000). Constructive relationships with friends and feeling confident in those relationships were highlighted by the children in this study in their positive centre experiences and in their reasons for attending.

Alternatively, terms of negative affect, such as feeling sad or left out, were associated with not having friends at UrbanKidz and appeared to lessen the strength of place attachment. Similarly, peer conflict also detracted from centre experiences and compromised the physical and emotional safety of children at the centre. A few of the children also mentioned a tension that sometimes existed between children and adolescents of different genders, ages and abilities. Other studies have alluded briefly to this tension that can exist between children and youth of different genders and ages and the need for children and youth of different ages to have their own space with same-age peers (Smith & Barker, 2000a; Hirsch et al., 2000; McLaughlin et al., 1994). At UrbanKidz, there was occasionally a teen night for the adolescent youth, giving them a special night where they could interact with same-age peers. Girls groups, which met weekly, had separate groups for the older and younger girls. While the boys did not have a group at the centre, several of the boys indicated that this was desired. However, as part of the day-to-day operations at the centre there were no separate spaces for children and youth of different ages. As a recommendation, program providers might consider the needs of children and youth to have separate spaces to interact with same-age peers or peers who have similar interests or life experiences.

Staff at UrbanKidz played a significant role in making the centre a good place to be. While the children did discuss both positive and negative interactions with staff, they mainly talked about the staff in positive terms, thus increasing their attachment to the centre. The children talked about the help and care that the staff provided as well as the role that they played in enforcing the centre's rules and administering consequences. Other studies that have explored the experiences of adolescents in community organizations have found that positive and meaningful interactions between youth and staff were important to their positive experiences (McLaughlin et al., 1994). Rhodes (2004) states that "caring youth-staff relationships may be a key determinant in both retention and success in these programs" (p. 146). Hirsch et al. (2000) also used place attachment as a framework to study the experiences of adolescent girls who attended a Boys and Girls club. The girls in this study called the club a "second home" (p. 214), attributing this "home like" environment to positive interactions at the club. Similarly, at UrbanKidz, one child referred to a staff member as a "second mother" and the staff used the analogy of "family" numerous times to describe the nature of the relationships that existed within their organization. But Hirsch et al. (2000) also talked about the challenges that staff faced in building relationships with girls at their club. There was a high rate of staff turnover and due to the staff's many responsibilities they had limited time to build intentional relationships with the youth. Along these same lines, while some UrbanKidz staff had only been at the centre for a few months, there was other staff that had been there for two, three, five, six years. The long term involvement of staff in the lives

of the children that attend the centre has the potential to contribute positively to their developmental outcomes. Furthermore, one staff member during the focus group discussed the importance of not just providing a service but being invested long term in children and youth.

### **Implications, Challenges and Limitations**

**Program design.** The findings of this study have important implications for the design of programs for children of low SES. These findings also provide an important opportunity to reflect on the purpose of these types of programs and what they can hope to achieve. Much research has explored the relationship between participation in organized programming and positive development (Eccles & Barber, 1999; Eccles & Gootman, 2002; Eccles et al., 2003; Lerner, 2005; Mahoney, Larson et al., 2005). While highly structured programs have an order and schedule of activities that is highly defined, unstructured activities allow a child to move freely between various activities (Osgood et al., 2005). For the most part, the UrbanKidz Youth Centre was characterized by activities that had very little structure. While there is some research to support the use of unstructured programs for children (Anderson-Butcher, Newsome & Ferrari, 2003), most studies have linked structure to positive developmental benefits (Bartko & Eccles, 2003; Eccles et al., 2003; Fredricks & Eccles, 2008; Mahoney & Stattin, 2000). This is an important issue to consider for children of low SES. Given the risks associated with growing up in a low socioeconomic situation, after school programs may better serve these children through structured opportunities for positive youth development. Practitioners, including the ones in

this study, shared the desire to be more intentional in their program offerings in order to have a more positive impact on the children's lives.

However, while the out-of-school time literature discusses the importance of structure, the place literature speaks about the importance of giving children space for unstructured play – giving them the opportunity to be creative and explore. Furthermore, the children at UrbanKidz liked the choice associated with this style of unstructured programming. Children liked that they were able to move freely between a variety of activities; changing what they were doing if they became bored. The children added to this tension further, suggesting from their combined perspectives that there *was* a need to find a balance between both structured and unstructured activities. Some children displayed resistance to the more structured or mandatory activities at the centre. It is important to consider how activities can be both developmentally beneficial from the adult's perspective and engaging from the children's perspective. It is also necessary to consider the terminology surrounding structured and unstructured programs as the research in this field of study continues. While some authors have used the term “unstructured” to discuss unsupervised leisure activities, others have used it to describe “drop-in” programs for children and youth. Clarification and consistency in the use of these terms is critical for program descriptions, interventions and recommendations.

Anderson et al. (2007) draw from the literature to suggest there are two key factors that are critical to positive youth outcomes associated with involvement in community youth centres: structured and engaging activities, as

discussed above, and positive and supportive relationships with centre staff. The children at UrbanKidz all spoke about the importance of their relationships with the staff. For children of low SES, who may be less likely to have constructive relationships with adults, the opportunities to develop trust and have positive adult role models is critical. This leads to important considerations with regard to staff training and turnover. Staff needs to be well educated in the needs of children who experience low SES and be committed to ensuring their wellbeing (McLaughlin et al., 1994). Given that the work involves long hours and low wages, maintaining staff can be difficult (McLaughlin et al., 1994). Difficulty in staff retention was evidenced at UrbanKidz in that of the 10 staff who took part in the focus group, the longest involvement of any of them in the program was only five years. Although relationships with staff have been emphasized in the literature, the opportunity to develop positive relationships with peers should not be undervalued. The children in this study spoke often about the important of having friends at the centre. Returning to the discussion about structure, offering activities designed to encourage positive interactions among peers is also a likely strategy to contribute to positive development for these children.

A final implication for program design based on the findings of the current study is the importance of safety. The children spoke often about the need to feel safe and how the centre accomplished fulfillment of that need in a variety of ways. In particular, caring staff, close monitoring and centre rules led to feelings of safety on the part of the children. For children of low SES, who are more likely to have a range of life experiences that compromise their physical, cognitive,

behavioural and socio-emotional development and health (Bradley & Corwyn 2002) the need for centres to provide a safe place to do, to connect, and to be is critical. As practitioners consider what makes a good place for children of low SES, ensuring a sense of security when in attendance may be the most critical aspect of program design.

Participation is an important issue facing practitioners and researchers (Quinn, 1999). Anderson-Butcher et al. (2003) indicate that children and youth “vot[e] with their feet” (p. 40). If youth do not want to attend a voluntary program, they will not and for youth to experience the developmental benefits associated with these out-of-school time programs they need to be there (Anderson-Butcher et al., 2003). Therefore, it is important to learn from children’s perspectives to know what organizations need to do to ‘get them through the door.’ Providing optimal structure, opportunities for positive relationships with staff and peers, enjoyment, and a sense of safety are critical findings from the children in this study and have important implications for program design and ultimately children’s desire to attend.

**Children and place.** This research contributes not only to the literature on place attachment, but also to the literature that addresses children and place. Much of the research on children and place has addressed larger scale places, such as neighbourhoods, towns and cities (e.g. Castonguay & Jutras, 2008; Chawla, 1997; Woolley et al., 1999). This research adds to the body of place literature that has started to explore children’s experiences in smaller scale places such as program centres and schools. Interestingly, the children’s perspectives regarding this

smaller scale place (UrbanKidz) were largely consistent with the research on children's experiences in larger scale places. Chawla (2002) indicated that children "expressed satisfaction with their community when it had a positive self-image, friendly adults, available playmates, accessible and engaging public spaces where interesting activities could be found and places that children could claim as their own for socialization and play" (p. 32). Derr (2002) also discussed, in a similar way, how children have indicated that the importance of a place is related to its activities, its features and its ability to bring people together. The children in this study shared thoughts that, for the most part, were consistent with Chawla (2002) and Derr's (2002) findings. The children valued having positive interactions with staff, having friends with whom they could play, having the opportunity to participate in enjoyable activities, and having space for socialization and play. While some research has discussed children's dislike of unsafe places (Castonguay & Jutras, 2008; Chawla, 1992; Derr, 2002), the children in this study shared, in a similar way, about the importance of the centre being a physically and emotionally safe place to be. Safety was not taken for granted by the children in this study. Therefore, this research supports and adds to the literature that discusses children's experiences in place and what constitutes a "good place to be" from the perspective of children.

Also, this study contributes to the literature on children and place by applying Scannell and Gifford's (2010) conceptual framework of place attachment to the children's experiences. Place attachment has shown to be a useful framework for exploring the experiences of children in this particular

setting. It takes into consideration the physical and social contexts of the children's experiences at the centre, as well as the role of affect, behaviour and personal influences. Cognition and group processes while present were not as prominent. However, it is unclear as to how this concept could contribute to the understanding of the impact of these programs on child development and how experiencing place attachment itself could contribute to children's well-being. Place attachment also fails to consider how the children's other environments influence their experiences at the community centre. It would be important to consider how children's experiences in other contexts influence their attachment to a place.

Yet, Scannell and Gifford (2010) have made an important effort to bring together a broad array of literature from a variety of disciplines to create this three dimensional framework of place attachment. This framework provides an important platform from which researchers can continue to study children's experiences through the lens of place and place attachment. It is important for future research to continue to use a consistent framework to study children's experiences as they relate to place in order to continue to develop this conceptual understanding as it pertains to children.

**Research with children.** There were various challenges faced during the collection of data for this study. Participant recruitment in particular was difficult. Since parents did not often come to the centre, there was little opportunity to talk to parents or guardians about the study. Children were responsible for handling the consent forms and various challenges were faced having those returned.

Children would forget the forms at the centre, would lose them, or would forget to bring them back from home. The amount of print on the letter would likely have been daunting to parents due to potentially low literacy levels. That said, the staff at UrbanKidz were supportive in helping obtain consents for the study. They talked to parents, helping to make connections so that forms would be returned. These kinds of difficulties experienced in recruiting participants can limit the degree to which researchers can learn about the experiences of children of low SES. While the children who took part in this study provided significant insight into their own experiences, it is important to seek ways to communicate with parents that can increase opportunities to learn from their children. This is particularly challenging, given the struggles families of low SES already experience (Hanson & Carta, 1995). Finding ways to develop trusting relationships with these families may help to facilitate future participant recruitment.

The interviews with these children were also challenging. The interviews took place in a room on the second floor of the UrbanKidz building. This room was not warm or inviting. There was storage piled up against the walls and we sat on plastic chairs next a collapsible table in the centre of the room. Walking up the stairs to a room they rarely went did little to calm the children's nerves. Most of the children seemed nervous during their interviews, despite the time I had spent at the centre in advance of the interviews. It is possible that more strategic efforts should have been made to build rapport with each child immediately before each

interview. One child did not participate in the study because he was “too nervous.” A few of the children kept their head in their arms for much of the interview, not wanting to make eye contact with me. Some children had requested that they bring a friend with them to the interview. While that did not happen, it is a consideration for future studies involving interviews with children. It is also important to consider how the interview process could become more enjoyable for the children. Although drawings were used in an effort to achieve this, the children in this study, as a result of their experiences associated with low SES (e.g. unsafe neighbourhoods, disparities in income equality, less social capital), may have had a diminished sense of trust (Chen, 2004; Evans, 2004, Kawachi, Kennedy, Lochner & Prothrow-Stith, 1997). A longer time to develop their relationships with me would likely have been beneficial. Another consideration is that these children may have had limited experience sharing their personal thoughts and desires with others and that influenced how they approached, viewed and performed in the interview.

Another challenging aspect of this research process involved taking field notes. It was a very time consuming task, especially after long hours of participant observation. While the field notes provided important background information for the analysis of the children’s interviews, they could have been taken more strategically and for a shorter period of time. Field notes taken for the first 4 weeks of the field work process (12 sets of notes) would have been sufficient for providing the background and rich description necessary for this qualitative study. Since, observations were not the primary source of data, the quantity of notes

taken did not add sufficient depth to the quality of the study. Also, it would have been beneficial to be more strategic in the taking of field notes. For example, entering into the setting with specific questions that could have guided observation, participation and the taking of notes would have been useful.

Finally, there were ethical questions that arose while conducting this research. As a researcher I was not to have any positions of power over the children. However, being an adult, still likely influenced how the children and to some extent the staff perceived my role at the centre. For the most part, not having any position of authority was not a problem while at the centre. It was, however, difficult when witnessing negative interactions or bullying between children. While I was not in a position to stop it, it seemed unethical to sacrifice the emotional safety of a child for the sake of this research. While there should have been other staff around to deal with issues like this as they arose – this was not always the case. Freeman & Mathison (2008) discuss the tension that can exist within the researcher when interacting with children within a non-traditional adult role. It can be difficult to negotiate the unknown terrain of interacting with children and adults in a role that is not familiar and sometimes uncomfortable. Continuing to explore the methodological limitations and possibilities when conducting research with children and children of low SES in particular, is imperative.

## CHAPTER SIX: CONCLUSION

### Personal Reflections

While I have wanted to conduct this study for a couple of years now, I found the actual research process challenging and to be honest it has left me nervous about my ability to work effectively with children and youth. There were many days when I did not want to go to the centre. I found it difficult to build relationships with the children and youth at UrbanKidz. I struggled to interact with the children in such a flexible and unstructured setting. I found it difficult to relate with the children in my non-traditional role as an adult researcher (Freeman & Mathison, 2008). As the person who is used to running a program, I found it challenging to take a step back to being just an observer and a participant. I wanted to help out the staff, but that was not why I was there (though I did find myself in the kitchen numerous times helping out). When children slipped by without doing their “reading time” I felt like a “slacker” for not calling them on it. I sometimes wondered what the staff thought of me as I wandered transiently through the centre trying to figure out where I fit in or to see if there was activity in which I could take part. While I was to be there with a purpose – to learn about children’s experiences – I did not always know what that looked like in reality. What does it mean to be a participant observer? What does it mean to be an adult researcher in a child’s world? During one of my first weeks at the centre, one staff member approached me and she asked how I was doing and indicated that when she first started at the centre it was like she was back in school again. She remembered wanting to make a good impression on the other “kids,” hoping that

they liked her. I could relate completely. I was an adult, wanting the acceptance of the children around me. It was an interesting feeling. There were good days and bad days, good weeks and bad weeks. Some days I felt like I was building rapport, getting to know the children and then other days all of the children were off doing “their own thing” and I felt as if I could not think of two words to say to a child. When it came to participant recruitment and data collection it was again challenging. Children did not bring their forms back or even take them home. I called parents and organized a night for parents to come in and discuss the study and despite people saying that they would come – not one parent showed. Some days it felt like I fought for every consent form I received back. Then when it came to do the interviews, some of the children wanted to do the interviews the first time I asked but others indicated that they were busy or that they wanted to do it later. Since children do not necessarily come every day it required patience as I waited for children to be willing to talk to me. Then interestingly enough, when it came time to leave the centre I almost felt guilty. Even though I technically had no commitments to this centre beyond my research, I felt bad leaving and I remember one girl in particular who did not really understand why I was not coming back. Then here I was back at the university, typing out my transcripts and analyzing my data, wondering some days if I had learned anything at all. And then as the analysis progressed and the writing started, the themes started to emerge and the children’s experiences started to take shape and it was exciting to think that maybe I actually did learn something about their experiences at the centre. As the children shared about their friends, the staff and what they

did at the centre, I began to recognize the importance of the opportunities they had at UrbanKidz.

When I think back on my experiences at the centre, I did partially realize the role the centre was playing in working to meet the needs of the children at UrbanKidz. Part of this realization came through observation and some through discussions with staff. However, some days I would come to the centre and in my naivety would wonder why the children come back to the centre each day. Why are they not home with their families for supper? Why do they try to play until the last second and then hang around the front doors until the staff make them leave? Why is this place so important to them? Why do they want to be here? While this study has worked to partially answer some of these last few questions, there is still so much about their lives and their outside worlds that I do not understand and that would influence their experiences at UrbanKidz. Experiences that influence how and why they come to the centre each day.

While I recognize the importance of accessing the children's perspectives, I do wonder if there is there a point when as adults we need to recognize the limit of the children's perspectives and make choices to benefit their well-being that they may not like. I think that children have valuable perspectives and it is important to access those thoughts. However, I also want to recognize that they may not always see the "big picture" and it is the job of caring adults in their lives to stand up for their well-being even when it does not meet their standard of "fun". Is there a limit to taking children's perspectives into consideration? What is the balance between considering their perspectives and recognizing them as

important and still acknowledging that they are still developing and sometimes adults do have more experience and a bigger perspective in mind. Is there a place for staff requiring children do things that are good for them even if that is not what they *want*?

### **Future Research Directions**

Participation in neighbourhood organizations can play an important role in the lives of children of low SES. While some research has worked to access the perspectives of adolescent participants, few studies have addressed the perspectives of children. It would be beneficial to continue to explore the experiences of children in a variety of out-of-school time settings. It would be important to talk to children from different organizations and programs. This would provide a wider range of perspectives regarding how children view more structured versus unstructured settings. It would also be important to examine staff-child relationships in other out-of-school time places. It is unknown as to whether UrbanKidz is an anomaly or the norm when it comes to these types of programs. It would also be important to explore the experiences of children from a variety of socioeconomic strata to explore the influence of SES on children's perspectives in out-of-school time programs. Longitudinal studies could be used to study the long term impact of children's involvement in these types of programs, also examining the influence of varying degrees of structure (highly structured versus relaxed programs) on long term developmental outcomes. While this study only did one focus group with staff, it would be important to access the perspectives of a wider range of program providers to get their perspectives on the

role of neighbourhood organizations in the lives of children and youth. As practitioners and researchers struggle with recognizing the need for both structured and unstructured space it would be beneficial to work together with children in participatory action projects to explore what this balance can look like in reality. Studying the perspectives of both children and adults would allow researchers and practitioners to discover dichotomy and unity in perspectives. Furthermore, it is important to recognize the multiple influences on children. Children exist in contexts, in environments. While this study has given insight into the experiences of children at this centre there is still so much that is unknown about how other influences in their lives might contribute to their experiences at the centre. For example, what is the role of the family, the school and the neighborhood in their UrbanKidz experiences? This information would provide greater insight into the role of the centre in the lives of these children and could provide insight into how other experiences and places influence how and why children attend these neighbourhood organizations. In addition to providing insight into their individual experiences, a more holistic understanding of the children's lives may also provide direction as to how families, different organizations and institutions can work together to more effectively meet the needs of children and youth.

### **Summary**

There has been a growth in the number of after-school programs in the past twenty years. Numerous factors have contributed to this change including: the need of child care for working parents, the potential benefits of participation

in organized activities, worries about low academic achievement and concerns related to behavioural problems associated with unsupervised activity (Vandell et al., 2005). Afterschool programs can play an important role in the lives of children who live in neighbourhoods of low SES. Vandell et al. (2005) discuss how these programs can play a role in meeting children's basic need for safety and can provide them with opportunities to participate in skill building activities and interact with supportive adults. To some extent this reflects the opportunities that the children found at the UrbanKidz centre. They had opportunities to do as they played in the gym or on the computers, watched movies or went on field trips. They had opportunities to connect with caring staff and friends. They had opportunities to be as the centre worked to meet their needs for food, for safety and for a warm place to be.

Place attachment was a useful framework for understanding the children's experiences at the centre. The children, likely as a result of the social and physical affordances of UrbanKidz, had developed an emotional attachment to the centre as a place, thus desiring to remain close and wanting to return to the centre on a regular basis. This research can provide insight into those aspects of programs that children deem to be essential and can influence the practices of practitioners and researchers as they work to provide positive places for children to be.

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**APPENDIX A**

**Child Information Form**

**About Me!**

My name is (first and last) \_\_\_\_\_.

Please circle one:            Boy            Girl

I am in grade \_\_\_\_\_.

I am \_\_\_\_\_ years old.

My birthday is (month/day/year) \_\_\_\_\_.

I have been going to UrbanKidz since \_\_\_\_\_.

I would also like you to know that...

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**Thank you!!**

## APPENDIX B

### Interview Guide for Child Interview One (~45 minutes)

Below is a semi-structured interview guide. Probing questions will be used to gain more detail, clarification, and depth in regards to responses (Patton, 2002).

#### Pre-Interview (~5-10 minutes)

- Purpose of interview and what to expect (who I am, where I'm from, what's going to happen)
- Show child the digital recorder and give him/her the opportunity to hear their voice (if desired).
- Remember to turn on the recorder!!
- Explain (using the child assent form):
  - Who you are, where you're from and what is going to happen (purpose of interview and what to expect).
  - Confidentiality
    - 'What we talk about is just between you and me.'
    - Except that 'if I learn that something is happening to you that isn't okay, I have to tell someone'
    - I won't use your real name – only code names will be used.
  - That they can stop 'doing the interview' at any time.
  - That there is 'no right or wrong answer, this not a test, I just want to know what you think'
- Ask if they have any questions/concerns and if they want to do the interview.
- Fill out child assent form.
- Fill out information sheet.

#### Drawing Activity (~15 minutes)

- The child will have access to paper and drawing and colouring materials.
- He or she will be asked to draw a picture of 'what it is like when you go to the UrbanKidz (pseudonym) program'
  - Pretend that I have never been to the UrbanKidz program. Can you draw a picture to show me about what happens at/what it is like to attend UrbanKidz?
  - If you were going to tell somebody about UrbanKidz (using a picture) who had never been to the club, what would you draw/say?
- The child will have the opportunity to explain his or her drawing
  - If having trouble explaining the drawing, ask about each part of the drawing.
- If the child does not want to draw the picture, ask to describe what s/he would draw.

- The researcher will have the opportunity to ask probing questions about the drawing.

Semi-structured Interview Questions (~20 minutes; Derr, 2002; Ellis, 2006; Goodwin & Watkinson, 2000; Strobel et al., 2008)

- Ask child to describe his or her personal experiences at the UrbanKidz program. All of these questions were not necessarily asked at every interview.
  - What do you do at UrbanKidz?
    - If you were going to tell somebody about UrbanKidz who had never been to the club, what would you say?
    - Pretend that I have never been to UrbanKidz before, can you describe a day at UrbanKidz? What do you do each day at UrbanKidz?
  - What do you like about UrbanKidz?
  - What don't you like about UrbanKidz?
  - Can you tell me about a good day at UrbanKidz?
  - Can you tell me about a bad day at UrbanKidz?
    - What could a bad day be like for another kid?
    - Try using hypothetical questions if children have difficulty answering for questions pertaining to them?
  - What is your favourite part of UrbanKidz?
  - What is your least favourite part of UrbanKidz?
  - What is important to you at/about UrbanKidz?
  - Where do you like to spend your time the most at UrbanKidz? What do you like to do the most at UrbanKidz?
  - Are there places you don't ever play? Of all the things you can do at UrbanKidz, is there ever anything you don't do?
  - Who do you spend your time with at UrbanKidz?
  - What made you decide to start coming to UrbanKidz?
  - How do you feel about going to UrbanKidz?
  - What makes you want to come back to UrbanKidz each day?
  - What would you change or improve about UrbanKidz?
- If the interview is going well proceed, otherwise leave this set of questions for the second interview.
  - A Good Place to Be.
    - Do you think UrbanKidz is a good place or a bad place to be? What is good? What isn't good? If you imagined a really good place for kids, what would it be like?
    - What do you think makes a good place to be for kids/youth?
    - What makes a bad place to be for kids/youth?

- If you were going to make the best club/place for kids, what would it be like? What would it not be like? What do you think makes a good club/program for kids?
- What do you think would be an important question to ask a kid about UrbanKidz?
- Is there anything else you'd like to say about UrbanKidz?
- Do you have any questions for me?
- Ask child if they would like to keep a copy of their picture.
- THANK YOU!!

End of interview one.

## APPENDIX C

### Focus Group Interview Guide (~60 to 120 minutes)

#### Pre-Interview

- Explain purpose of interview and what to expect.
- Confidentiality; Information discussed during interview must remain confidential
- Explain that anyone can withdraw from the focus group at any time.
- That there is ‘no right or wrong answer, this not a test, I just want to know what you think’
- Ask if they have any questions/concerns and if they want to do the interview.
- Fill out information sheet.

#### Semi-structured questions

- Can you tell me about your organization and the programs that you run?
  - What is the purpose, goals and mission of the UrbanKidz program?
  - In general, what are the demographics of your program participants?
- What do you think are important characteristics of an effective community program?
- What influence do you think the program has on the children who participate?
- What do you believe are the strengths/weaknesses of your program?
- What would you like to change about your program?
- What struggles/challenges do you face when trying to implement your programs
- What you would picture to be your ideal program)?
- What do you think makes a good place to be for kids?

**APPENDIX D**

**Focus Group Personal Information Form**

Name (first and last) \_\_\_\_\_.

Please circle one:            Male            Female

Age: \_\_\_\_\_

Birth date (month/day/year) \_\_\_\_\_.

I have been involved with UrbanKidz since \_\_\_\_\_.

I would also like you to know that...

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**Thank you!!**

## APPENDIX E

### Information Letter for Organization

**Investigators:** Megan Langager, Graduate Student, Faculty of Physical Education and Recreation, University of Alberta.

Dr. Nancy Spencer-Cavaliere, Assistant Professor, Faculty of Physical Education and Recreation, University of Alberta.

Executive Director  
UrbanKidz Youth Centre

Dear \_\_\_\_\_,

My name is Megan Langager. I am a graduate student at the University of Alberta. I am doing a study with Dr. Nancy Spencer-Cavaliere. We are doing a project looking at children's experiences in a community program. This study is part of my thesis. The children and adults who take part in this study will get to share their thoughts on how to make programs a positive place for children to be. The purpose of this letter is to describe this study and to ask if your organization would be interested in taking part.

The project consists of observations, interviews with children, and a focus group with adult staff/volunteers.

#### **Participants**

About 10 children between the ages of 7 and 12 and about 4 adult staff and/or volunteers will be interviewed.

#### **Data Collection**

**Observations.** I will attend the program three times per week for one month before starting interviews. Sometimes I will participate in activities with the children and sometimes I will just observe what is going on. This will help me to become familiar with your program and allow the children to get to know me.

**Interviews.** Each child taking part in the study will do two individual interviews. The first interview (about 45 minutes) has two parts: a drawing activity and some questions. I will use the second interview (about 30 minutes) as a follow-up to the first interview. The second interview will be about one week after the first interview.

**Focus group interview.** I will conduct a group interview lasting one to two hours, with about four adult staff and/or volunteers. The information gained

from the focus group will help me better understand the context of the community recreation program.

Participation in this study is voluntary. Whether or not children and staff take part in this study should not affect their involvement your program.

We will keep the identity and answers of the participants private. We will keep the data in a locked room or on a computer with a password. The data will be copied from the tapes into written form. Only the research team will hear or read the interviews. We will give all the participants a code name and real names will not be used. All participants in the focus group must agree to keep the information discussed during the interview private. We will keep the data for five years after we have published any papers and then it will be destroyed.

Possible risks of taking part revolve around the disclosure of personal or sensitive information. Participants do not have answer any questions that make them uncomfortable. Individuals, who wish to withdraw from the study, can indicate this to the researcher either verbally or in writing. Their information will be removed from the study upon their request.

Attached is the proposed research timeline. If you have any questions about this project, please feel free to contact:

- Megan Langager
- Dr. Nancy Spencer-Cavaliere

If you have further concerns about this study, you may contact Dr. Kelvin Jones, Acting Chair of the Research Ethics Board. Dr. Jones has no direct involvement with this project.

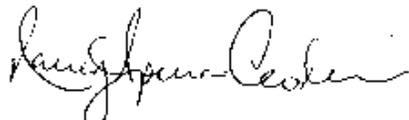
If your organization would like to take part in this study, please contact Megan Langager using the contact information listed above.

Thank you for your time.

Sincerely,



Megan Langager  
Graduate Student  
University of Alberta



Dr. Nancy Spencer-Cavaliere  
Assistant Professor  
University of Alberta

Ethics Package for Children and Parents/Guardians

What can you tell me  
about your program?



A research study that asks kids about  
their community program.



Children 7-12 years old who go to the  
(program name).



One 45 minute interview & one  
30 minute interview with your child  
at the (program name).

**T H A N K   Y O U !!!**

**\*\*NOTE\*\***

Participation or nonparticipation in this study will  
not affect taking part in your community recreation program.

**FACULTY OF PHYSICAL EDUCATION & RECREATION © THE UNIVERSITY OF ALBERTA**

If you have any questions you can contact Megan at [mll4@ualberta.ca](mailto:mll4@ualberta.ca) or 780-248-1426

## **Information Letter for Parents/Guardians**

**Investigators:** Megan Langager, Graduate Student, Faculty of Physical Education and Recreation, University of Alberta.

Dr. Nancy Spencer-Cavaliere, Assistant Professor, Faculty of Physical Education and Recreation, University of Alberta.

Dear Parent or Guardian,

This is a study to find out what children think about their after school program (UrbanKidz). We want to learn about what kids do at their program. We also want to know what kids like about their program. Children who take part in this study will get to share their thoughts on what makes a good program for kids. This study is part of a graduate student thesis.

If your child is in the study, he or she will do two interviews. The interviews will take place at UrbanKidz.

- Interview 1 (about 45 minutes)
  - Children will draw a picture of ‘a day at their program.’
  - Children will share what they think about their program.
- Interview 2 (about 30 minutes)
  - Children will share more about what they think about their program.
  - Will take place about 1 week after interview 1.

We will audio tape the interviews. Children don't have to answer any questions they don't want to. Children can stop taking part at any time without a problem. Children who want to stop can just tell the interviewer. Your child can ask that the tape recorder be shut off at any time.

We will keep your child's identity and answers private. We will keep the data in a locked room or on a computer with a password. The data will be copied from the tapes into written form. Only the research team will hear or read the interviews. We will give all the children a code name and real names will not be used.

We will keep the data for five years after we have published any papers and then it will be destroyed.

There is the chance that the questions might be upsetting to your child. Your child does not have to answer any questions that make him or her feel uncomfortable. If you want your child to stop being in the study, just let the researcher know verbally or in writing. We will remove your child's information from the study upon request.

Being in this study is voluntary. Whether or not your child takes part in this study will not affect his or her involvement in the after school program.

If you have any questions about this project, please feel free to contact:

- Megan Langager
- Dr. Nancy Spencer-Cavaliere

If you have further concerns about this study, you may contact Dr. Kelvin Jones, Acting Chair of the Research Ethics Board. Dr. Jones has no direct involvement with this project.

If you want your child to take part, please fill out the attached form. Your child can also sign his or her name on the form. Return the form to the researcher (Megan) at the program or to a staff member at the program.

Thank you for your time.

Sincerely,



Megan Langager  
Graduate Student  
University of Alberta



Dr. Nancy Spencer-Cavaliere  
Assistant Professor  
University of Alberta

## INFORMED CONSENT FORM

**Title of Project: What can you tell me about your program?**

**Investigators:** Megan Langager, Graduate Student, Faculty of Physical Education and Recreation, University of Alberta.

Dr. Nancy Spencer-Cavaliere, Assistant Professor, Faculty of Physical Education and Recreation, University of Alberta.

**To be completed by the parent/legal guardian of participant:**

- |   |     |    |
|---|-----|----|
| 1. Do you understand that your child has been asked to be in a research study?  | Yes | No |
| 2. Have you read and received a copy of the attached information letter?  | Yes | No |
| 3. Do you understand the benefits and risks involved in taking part in this study?  | Yes | No |
| 4. Have you had an opportunity to ask questions and discuss this study?   | Yes | No |
| 5. Do you understand that your child does not have to take part and can withdraw at any time, without consequence, and that your child's information will be removed at your request? | Yes | No |
| 6. Do you understand the issue of confidentiality and who will have access to your child's information?   | Yes | No |

This study was explained to me by: \_\_\_\_\_

I give permission for my child \_\_\_\_\_ to take part in this study.  
Child's Name

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature of Parent/Legal Guardian    Printed Name    Date

\_\_\_\_\_  
Phone Number

\_\_\_\_\_  
E-mail Address

**To be completed by the child:**

Is it okay for the researcher to keep your picture?                      Yes                      No

Is it okay for the researcher to keep a copy of your picture?      Yes                      No

Is it okay for the researcher to ask you questions?                      Yes                      No

Your child can also sign:

\_\_\_\_\_

Signature of Child

## **Ethics Package for Focus Group**

### **Information Letter for Focus Group**

**Investigators:** Megan Langager, Graduate Student, Faculty of Physical Education and Recreation, University of Alberta.

Dr. Nancy Spencer-Cavaliere, Assistant Professor, Faculty of Physical Education and Recreation, University of Alberta.

Dear participant,

This is a study about children's experiences in an after school program. This study is part of a graduate student thesis. We want to know about the role of after school programs in children's lives. By taking part in this study, you will get to share your thoughts about how to make programs a positive place for children to be.

If you decide to be in this study, you will participate in a focus group with other adult staff or volunteers with the program. The focus group will be about one to two hours long and will take place at the program site. You may be asked questions about:

- your organization
- the programs you run
- what you think makes a good program
- program challenges

Before the group interview starts, we will ask you to fill out an information sheet. On this sheet we will ask your name, age, birth date and length of involvement with program. You will also have the opportunity to write extra information.

We will audio tape the focus group interview. You don't have to answer any questions you don't want to. You can stop taking part at any time without a problem. If you want to stop you can just tell the interviewer.

We will keep your identity and answers private. We will keep the data in a locked room or on a computer with a password. The data will be copied from the tapes into written form. Only the research team will hear or read the interviews. We will give all the participants a code name and real names will not be used. All participants in the focus group must agree to keep the information discussed during the interview private. We will keep the data for five years after we have published any papers and then it will be destroyed.

There is always the chance that you may be asked to share personal or sensitive information. You don't have to answer any questions that make you feel uncomfortable. If you want to stop taking part in the study, just let the researcher

know verbally or in writing. We will remove your information from the study upon your request.

Being in this study is voluntary. Whether or not you take part in this study will not affect your involvement with the after school program.

If you have any questions about this project, please feel free to contact:

- Megan Langager
- Dr. Nancy Spencer-Cavaliere

If you have further concerns about this study, you may contact Dr. Kelvin Jones, Chair of the Research Ethics Board. Dr. Jones has no direct involvement with this project.

If you want to take part, please fill out the attached form. Return the form to the researcher (Megan) at the program.

Thank you for your time.

Sincerely,



Megan Langager  
Masters Student  
University of Alberta



Dr. Nancy Spencer-Cavaliere  
Assistant Professor  
University of Alberta

## INFORMED CONSENT FORM

**Title of Project: What can you tell me about your program?**

**Investigators:** Megan Langager, Graduate Student, Faculty of Physical Education and Recreation, University of Alberta. 780-248-1426, [mll4@ualberta.ca](mailto:mll4@ualberta.ca)

Dr. Nancy Spencer-Cavaliere, Assistant Professor, Faculty of Physical Education and Recreation, University of Alberta. 780-492-9615, [ncavaliere@ualberta.ca](mailto:ncavaliere@ualberta.ca)

**To be completed by the participant:**

- |   |     |    |
|---|-----|----|
| 1. Do you know that you have been asked to be in a research study?  | Yes | No |
| 2. Have you read and received a copy of the information letter?   | Yes | No |
| 3. Do you know the benefits and risks of being in this research study?  | Yes | No |
| 4. Have you been able to ask questions and discuss this study?  | Yes | No |
| 5. Do you know that you do not have to take part and can withdraw at any time, without a problem, and that your information will be taken out if you ask? | Yes | No |
| 6. Do you understand the issue of confidentiality and who will have access to your information?   | Yes | No |
| 7. Do you understand that you must keep the information shared in the group interview private?  | Yes | No |

This study was explained to me by: \_\_\_\_\_

I agree to take part in this study:

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature of Research Participant      Printed Name      Date

\_\_\_\_\_  
Phone Number      E-mail Address

## Child Assent Form

**Title of Project:** What can you tell me about your program?

**Researchers:** Megan Langager, Graduate Student, Faculty of Physical Education and Recreation, University of Alberta.

Dr. Nancy Spencer-Cavaliere, Assistant Professor, Faculty of Physical Education and Recreation, University of Alberta.

**To be completed by the child/youth participant at the beginning of the first interview:**

Hi! My name is Megan and I am a student at the University. I want to learn what kids/youth think about their after school club (UrbanKidz). I would like to ask you some questions about what you do at your club (UrbanKidz) and what you like and what you don't like about your club. I would also like to ask you to draw a picture of what it is like to go to your club. You can tell me about what makes a good club for kids/youth. I would like to ask you questions two times – today and another day. You don't have to answer any questions you don't want to. If you change your mind and don't want me to ask you questions, that is okay too. There are no right or wrong answers. I will keep what you say private.

- |   |     |    |
|---|-----|----|
| 1. Would it be okay if I asked you some questions about your club?                            | Yes | No |
| 2. Would it be okay if I kept your drawing?   | Yes | No |
| 3. Would it be okay if I kept a copy of your drawing?   | Yes | No |
| 4. Do you know that you don't have to answer any questions you don't want to?                 | Yes | No |
| 5. Do you know that it is okay to change your mind if you don't want to answer any questions? | Yes | No |
| 6. Do you know that I will keep what you say private?   | Yes | No |

Please write your name here: \_\_\_\_\_

**THANK YOU VERY MUCH!**