

Parents' Understandings of and Involvement in Children's Free-Play

by

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Abstract

There has been a decline in children's free-play participation, despite the importance of this experience for their health and development (Gleave, 2009). Parents can facilitate a range of free-play experiences (Sleddens et al., 2012) through their pivotal role in children's lives (Hertzman & Power, 2004). This study is part of a larger research project assessing free-play based recreation preschool programming. The aim of this thesis is to determine parents' perceptions of free-play, including their understanding of and involvement in this experience. This thesis aligns with a constructivist paradigm, relativist ontology, and subjectivist epistemology, acknowledging that the prevailing culture and environment impact perceptions, which necessitates the researcher to explore multiple constructions within their work. One-on-one semi-structured interviews with parents of preschool-aged children were conducted for this instrumental case study. The results indicate that parents highly value children's free-play. Parents identify free-play as an opportunity for children to make choices and direct their experiences in solitary, partner, or group dynamics. Parents suggest that free-play contributes to several important factors that children can benefit from immediately and later in life. Furthermore, parents are continuously involved in children's free-play through their direct and indirect participation, and intervention. Parents intervene in their children's play to teach and support their children's knowledge, development, and health, and to prevent or protect their children from negative or harmful experiences. There are several implications of this work particularly salient to practice, policy, and future research, which may help to address the decline of children's participation in free-play.

Preface

This thesis is the original work of Keely Stenberg. The larger project received research ethics approval from the University of Alberta Research Ethics Board, under the project name “Evaluation of a Play-Based Preschool Recreation Program: Exploring the Impact of Community Investment in Play-Based Learning on Health and Health Equity”, No. Pro00047981 on July 4, 2014 and from the MacEwan University Ethics Board, under the project name: “Evaluation of a Play-Based Preschool Recreation Program: Exploring the Impact of Community Investment in Play-Based Learning on Health and Health Equity”, No. 14-15-006, on September 8, 2014.

Dedication

To my parents, Carol and Terry, for all of the free-play experiences they have facilitated for me.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank the families in Strathcona County, in particular the parents who participated in the *Evaluation* project, for their invaluable time and without whom this thesis would not have been possible. I would also like to acknowledge the support of the project community partners at Strathcona County Recreation, Parks and Culture and, especially, Doreen Paradis, Erin Gallagher, and the recreation preschool program instructors for their contributions to the success of the project. Further, I would like to acknowledge the project funders the Canadian Institutes of Health Research and PolicyWise for Children & Families (formerly Alberta Centre for Child, Family, and Community).

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List of Abbreviations

AB	Ana Belon, PhD
ARC	Ardrossan Recreation Complex
CN	Candace Nykiforuk, PhD
County	Strathcona County
<i>Evaluation</i>	<i>Evaluation of a Play-Based Preschool Recreation Program: Exploring the Impact of Community Investment in Play-Based Learning on Health and Health Equity</i>
<i>Framework</i>	<i>Curriculum Framework</i>
JH	Jane Hewes, PhD
KLC	Kinsmen Leisure Centre
KS	Kate Storey, PhD
N-PI	Nominated Principal Investigator
NS-C	Nancy Spencer-Cavaliere, PhD
OSRFS	Open Space and Recreation Facility Strategy
PLACE Research Lab	Policy, Location, and Access in Community Environments Research Lab
RA	Research Assistant
SC RPC	Strathcona County Recreation, Parks and Culture
SOC	Strathcona Olympiette Centre

Chapter 1: Introduction

Significance

It is through play that children have the opportunity to develop in the physical, social-emotional, cognitive, and language and literacy domains (Frost, Wortham, & Reifel, 2012; Hughes, 2010). Free-play is particularly important for children's health and development (Santer, Griffiths, & Goodall, 2007) as it fosters, for example, fine and gross movements, creativity, problem solving (Burdette & Whitaker, 2005), social relations (Pellis & Pellis, 2007), excitement, challenge, and pleasure (Alexander, Frohlich, & Fusco, 2012). Free-play, or play that is voluntary, intrinsically motivated, and has minimal adult intervention (Frohlich, Alexander, & Fusco, 2013), is distinguishable from other forms of play: the difference is particularly evident in the (amount of) choice inherent to free-play (King & Howard, 2016; Play England as cited by Santer et al., 2007). Despite numerous benefits, the amount of time children participate in free-play is declining (Gleave, 2009). Hurried family lifestyles (Ginsburg, 2007), a focus on early academic performance (Frost, 2012; Lehrer & Petrakos, 2011), concerns about child safety (Coyl-Shepherd & Hanlon, 2013; Frost, 2012), access to electronics and technology (Frost, 2012), among other factors, are contributing to a decrease in free-play participation during childhood and a change in the variety of play-types children undertake. Changes in free-play participation, however, are not systematic across the globe: there is significant variation across countries and cultures (Frost, 2012).

The relationship between a child and parent is unique in that parents instil values and habits in their children as they grow from infancy to young adulthood (Tremblay, Boudreau-Larivière, & Cimon-Lambert, 2012). Parents are fundamental to their child's adoption of long-term positive health behaviours, such as those accrued through play (Sleddens et al., 2012).

Although children everywhere play in some way, there are variations in the amount and type of play between cultures (Frost et al., 2012; Hughes, 2010). Frost et al. (2012) point out that the “...values, beliefs, practices, institutions, and tools...” (p. 215) for children’s play vary based on culture and relate to the level of support for this experience. While there have been studies from parents’ perspectives (e.g., Coyl-Shepherd & Hanlon, 2013; Lehrer & Petrakos, 2011; Parmar, Harkness, & Super, 2004) and a surge in support for active, risky, and/or outdoor free-play (i.e., The Lawson Foundation, n.d.) in North America, the perceptions of parents living in Canada in regards to free-play is not well understood. Understanding the perceptions of parents is essential to effectively advocating (e.g., to parents and policy-makers (Frost, 2012)) for and facilitating children’s free-play opportunities. Further, this knowledge can contribute to the promotion of free-play for children’s well-being across their life course (Burdette & Whitaker, 2005) and address barriers related to normalized beliefs that may hinder children’s engagement in such opportunities (i.e., Alexander et al., 2012; Alexander, Frohlich, & Fusco, 2014a; Frohlich et al., 2013).

Research Question and Objectives

Foundational Research Question

The foundational research question of this thesis is: what are parents’ perceptions of children’s free-play? The following objectives were used to address the foundational research question and contribute to the currently limited literature from the Canadian context.

Objective 1

Understand the perceptions and value, if any, of parents in regards to children’s free-play.

Objective 2

Understand parent's involvement in their children's free-play.

Theoretical Perspective

Due to the complexity of health-related research, Best et al. (2003) explain the necessity of combining broad framing models and focusing theories in order to gain a comprehensive understanding of health-related activities and behaviours. Broad framing models are more generic and provide context to the wider research dynamic, while focusing theories are more specific or relevant to the research topic.

This thesis is a sub-study of a larger research project and, in part, draws on the theoretical perspective of that project. The *Evaluation of a Play-Based Preschool Recreation Program: Exploring the Impact of Community Investment in Play-Based Learning on Health and Health Equity* research project (herein referred to as the *Evaluation* project; detailed in *Chapter 3*) was developed under the tenants of social ecology to assess free-play based recreation preschool programming in Strathcona County, Alberta. As a broad framing model, the theory of social ecology was used to help justify and organize the larger research project. More specifically, social ecology is used as an analytical framework for the larger research project, in addition to its use as an explanatory theory in the discussion of this work. For this thesis, which concentrates on the relationship between parents and children associated with two recreation preschool programs, the theories of biological embedding and social constructionism provide the focusing theories necessary to explore the underlying circumstances related to children's free-play experiences. The explanatory theories of biological embedding and social constructionism are also used to understand the results in this thesis. These three perspectives are detailed in the following sub-sections.

Social Ecology

The theory of social ecology frames individual health behaviours from a holistic perspective, rather than from isolated areas of influence (Stokols, 1992). Many of the concepts inherent to social ecology stem from systems theory, stipulating that the well-being of individuals is influenced by their wider environments (Best et al., 2003; McLaren & Hawe, 2005; Stokols, 1992). Social ecology highlights individuals' biological, behavioural, and socio-cultural needs in relation to their environmental resources, including the interdependence of environmental conditions, settings, and life domains (Stokols, 1996). This comprehensive and multilevel perspective emphasises the dynamic and reciprocal relationship between humans and their environments (Best et al., 2003; McLaren & Hawe, 2005; Stokols, 1996). The reciprocity inherent to this perspective reinforces that changes in one environment may change individual behaviours, while individuals' behaviours can also impact their environments (McLeroy et al., 1988).

Stokols (1996) suggests that a strength of taking a social ecological approach is the integration of strategies that impact individual behaviours and environmental characteristics. Adhering to this perspective allows health researchers to see behaviours within the intrapersonal and environmental contexts they occur (McLeroy, Bibeau, Steckler, & Glanz, 1988). The analysis of research from a holistic perspective, such as that from social ecology, is particularly important in the field of health promotion because of the complexity of health issues (i.e., individual and environmental determinants of health) (McLaren & Hawe, 2005). In particular, Best et al. (2003) point out that taking a social ecological approach can help to stimulate the creation of more comprehensive and collaborative work in health promotion.

Social ecology is a broad paradigm that amalgamates many different fields of research to

provide a conceptual resource (i.e., model) that is particularly salient to the field of health promotion (Cohen, Scribner, & Farley, 2000; McLeroy et al., 1988; Sallis, Cervero, Ascher, Henderson, Kraft, & Kerr, 2006; Stokols, 1996). A number of models following a social ecological approach have been developed and utilized in health-related research (e.g., Caprio et al., 2008; Cohen et al., 2000; Glass & McAtee, 2006; Liburd & Snizek, 2007; McLeroy et al., 1988; Perry, Hoelscher, & Kohl, 2015; Sallis et al., 2006). These models have been developed to understand behaviours and inform interventions regarding active living and physical activity, chronic disease and childhood obesity, and health behaviours and promotion in general. They showcase the relationship between individual biology and/or behaviours, and various mediating levels of influence. Within each level of influence there are characteristics or factors that impact the target population's (e.g., individuals, families, etc.) health behaviour or area of concern.

According to Cohen et al.'s (2000) model, four aspects relate to health behaviours: the availability of products, the characteristics of tangible structures or products, the social structures (e.g., laws or policies) that govern behaviours, and the messages prevalent in relevant cultural and media channels. In their article, Cohen et al. (2000) point out that exposure to the different components of their model may help to explain disparities in intervention effectiveness between different populations, such as ethnic or income groups: a useful lesson when attempting to impact health behaviours. This model is meant for understanding behaviour change in populations, rather than individuals, which justifies the high-level components. Further, the passive exposure to interventions under the high-level components make this model most appropriate for large populations.

Glass and McAtee (2006) propose a more intricate and biologically-oriented model for interventions and evaluations following a social ecological perspective. With the understanding

that biological and social variables (at micro, mezzo, macro, and global levels) have an impact on health behaviours and disease, this model emphasises that mediating variables, known as risk regulators, have a central role in health-related outcomes. Risk regulators explain the accumulation and distribution of diseases, and their causes. Glass and McAtee (2006) propose that interventions using this framework follow a longitudinal design due to the model's temporal nature. Importantly, however, the authors outline that evaluators must pay close attention to risk regulators, risk factors, moderators, mediators, and confounders, in addition to outcomes, and make hypotheses about the risk regulators as the target for analysis. Glass and McAtee (2006) specifically note that interventions using this approach should pay careful attention to biological factors (i.e., appetite, puberty, stress response, etc.) for the evaluation of changes in health status. This model emphasises and determines how social processes influence individuals' health from a biological, rather than behavioural, lens.

Another model following a social ecological approach is that proposed by Sallis et al. (2006) in *An Ecological Approach to Creating Active Living Communities*. The authors present a model specific to active living and physical activity. Taking a more structured approach, similar to that of Cohen et al. (2000), the five main environmental factors of influence presented in this model include: intrapersonal, perceived, behaviour (in relation to four active living domains), setting, and policy environments, with the interpersonal (i.e., social cultural), natural, and informational environments crosscutting the five main factors in various ways. The interpersonal (social and cultural) environment cuts across all factors of influence while the natural and information environments relate only to the setting and policy environments, which may be due to the focus on active living in the model. The behavioural factor is explicitly included to emphasise the person-environment relationship.

The previously mentioned models provide a useful understanding of practical approaches under the social ecological perspective, however, they are not the most suitable to the *Evaluation* project and this thesis study. The social ecological model proposed by McLeroy, Bibeau, Steckler, and Glanz (1988) is more suitable for this work because of the practical and distinguishable levels of influence, and the focus on health promotion interventions. McLeroy et al. (1988) clearly delineate relevant environmental factors that influence health behaviours in their model: intrapersonal, interpersonal, institutional, community, and public policy (see Figure 1).

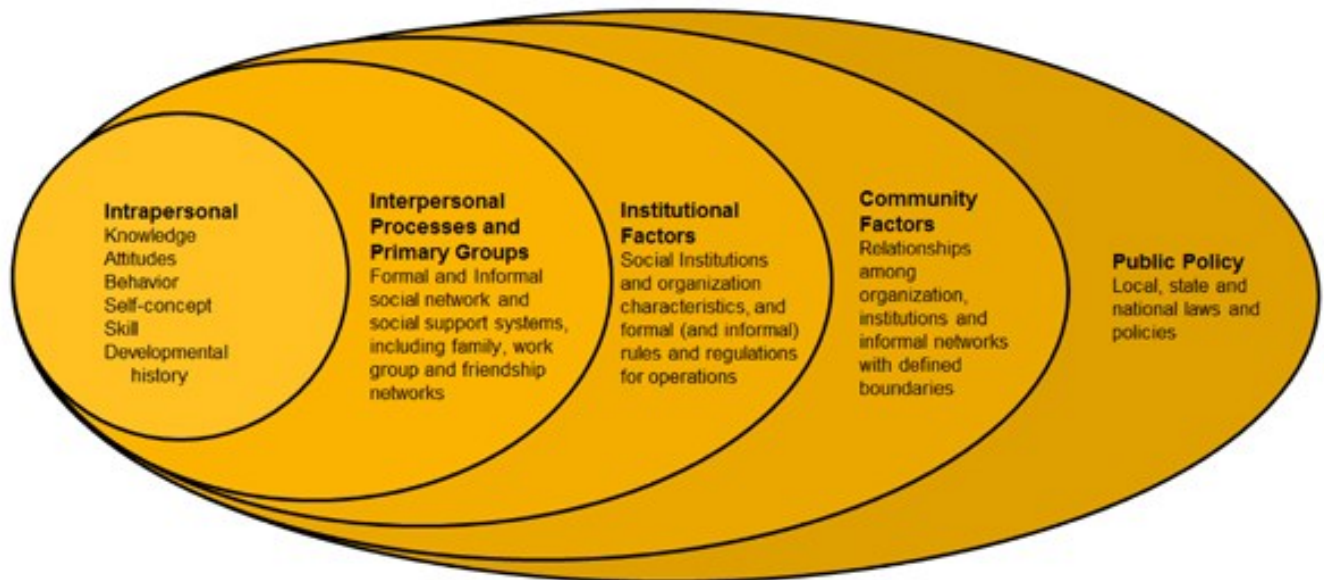


Figure 1. The Social Ecological Model (American College Health Association, n.d.)

McLeroy et al. (1988) identify the intrapersonal level as most proximal to the individual in this model. At this level, health behaviours are directly influenced by an individual's characteristics: attitude, development, genetics, knowledge, personality, and skills. Interventions at this level of the model target the traits inherent to the individual in order to change the way they behave.

Interpersonal relationships are at the next level of McLeroy et al.'s (1988) model. These

relationships include both formal and informal networks, and support systems, such as family, friends, neighbours, and coworkers. Within this model, there is an understanding that the relationships between individuals, such as those within social networks, exhibit influences on one another. These relationships affect the accessibility and acceptability of information, and can impact health behaviours and decision-making. Interventions at this level of the model generally try to impact individuals' behaviour by targeting social influences and manipulating individuals' social identity rather than social norms.

At the next level of the model are factors associated with institutions or organizations, which include the characteristics of groups, formal and informal rules, and operational regulations (McLeroy et al., 1988). All of these factors are used to support behaviour change through organizational health promotion activities and the implementation of programs. This level of the model is particularly salient due to the significant amount of time individuals spend in these environments (e.g., daycare, school, and work settings), which have the potential to influence social norms and values. Changes at this level are particularly important for effective health promotion efforts. While the ability to alter individual behaviours is there, interventions or changes at the institutional level should be applied to the organization itself in order to affect the associated culture, which can then influence individual behaviours.

Community is the next level of the model and includes informal networks, institutions, and organizations with defined relational boundaries (McLeroy et al., 1988). McLeroy et al. (1988) outline three different interpretations of 'community,' each having a unique implication for health promotion: 1) mediating structures, 2) interrelationships among organizations and groups, and 3) geographical and political realms. Mediating structures within communities are the primary groups in which individuals belong: they are important for individuals' social

resources and identity. The interrelationships among community entities (e.g., organizations and groups) are important for service design and delivery in that area. The geographical and political community is essential to defining and allocating resources to community health issues.

Interventions made at the community level must change mediating structures, interrelationships, and/or geographical or political realms in order to impact individuals' health.

The highest or most distal level of McLeroy et al.'s (1988) model is public policy. Laws and policies at the local, state/provincial/territorial, and national levels can be developed and implemented to impact the health of a wide range of individuals, groups, and societies. Changes within this environment not only include the development of policies, but also the advocacy, implementation, and evaluation of policies related to community well-being.

Biological Embedding

With the understanding that the term 'development' includes health (Hertzman, 1999), Hertzman (1998; 1999), Marmot (1996), and Halfon and Hochstein (2002) explain that the development of individuals and populations is impacted by two main factors: 1) the psychosocial environment and socio-economic conditions; and 2) the experiences of individuals during critical and sensitive times in life. The idea that early life experiences influence long-term development is known as developmental programming or biological embedding (Ben-Shlomo & Kuh, 2002; Graham, 2002; Halfon & Hochstein, 2002; Hertzman, 1999; Hertzman, 2012; Hertzman & Boyce, 2010; Nelson, 2013). Grounded in epidemiological research (Ben-Shlomo & Kuh, 2002; Graham, 2002), the theory of biological embedding stipulates that mundane and extraordinary experiences can have a long-term effect on individual life course trajectories (Hertzman, 2012). The influence of different experiences, resulting in (health) gradients, can be attributed to varying levels of access to essential processes and structures that support development (McCain

& Mustard, 1999).

Halfon and Hochstein (2002) explain that different factors (i.e., contexts and mechanisms) influence individual and population health during critical and sensitive time periods or stages of life, and transitional periods during development. Critical time periods are when developmental pathways are determined, whereas sensitive time periods are associated with variations in response to different factors (i.e., when experiences have stronger effects than they would at other times). It is during critical and sensitive time periods in an individual's life that they are particularly vulnerable to environmental variables, both positive and negative, which influence their development. Transitional periods include those when children enter school, and when they develop habits or routines.

Three models of influence explain human development, and health, from the life course perspective: latency, cumulative, and pathways (Hertzman, 1998; Hertzman & Boyce, 2010; Hertzman & Power, 2004). The latency model, according to Hertzman (1998), emphasises the impact of experiences at the beginning stages of life on later development. This model assumes that biological factors or developmental opportunities at early points in life affect later well-being, regardless of other interventions (Hertzman, 1999). Even decades after their initial exposure, these latent factors have the potential to permanently impact the life course and developmental outcomes, which cannot be altered by interventions later in life (Hertzman, 1998; Hertzman & Boyce, 2010; Hertzman & Power, 2004). According to this model, it is during the early stage of life (birth to the age of seven) that children need positive experiences, as they will impact individual well-being in later decades (Hertzman, 1998; Hertzman & Boyce, 2010).

The second model is that of cumulative effects: this model outlines the impact of accumulated exposures on development (Graham, 2002; Hertzman & Power, 2004). The

cumulative effects model suggests that exposure to a single recurrent factor or a series of different experiences can have a cumulative impact on the development of individuals (Graham, 2002; Hertzman & Boyce, 2010; Hertzman & Power, 2004). A key feature of the cumulative effects model is the intensity and duration of exposure(s) that produce a dose-response relationship to impact individual's development (Graham, 2002; Hertzman, 1999).

The pathways model is the third, and final, model associated with the life course perspective. This model proposes that different early life experiences project children onto different life courses or pathways to adulthood (Graham, 2002; Hertzman, 1999). Fundamental to this model is the sequence of a single experience or multiple experiences that influence the probability of other exposures (Hertzman & Boyce, 2010). This model focuses on early life trajectories, whereby exposure to different experiences and opportunities in the first few years of life set children on unique life course trajectories, or pathways, which lead to different developmental outcomes (2010). The pathways model draws explicit attention to the contribution of early life adversity to the risk of disease in adulthood and underlying health inequalities.

Social Constructionism

The theory of social constructionism proposes that all knowledge (and meaning) is developed and transmitted through social interactions, to the point that knowledge is constructed through socio-cultural processes (Crotty, 1998; Lock & Strong, 2010; Young & Collin, 2004). Inherent to this theory is the idea that individuals have an active role in society and, therefore, in the social construction of reality (Puig, Koro-Ljungberg, & Echevarria-Doan, 2008). Puig et al. (2008) clarify that our culturally-rooted realities are manifestations of the social norms created and maintained by people. Further, social constructionism purports that the personal qualities displayed (Burr, 2003) and the language used (Young & Collin, 2004) by individuals are

culturally rooted and relevant to their current circumstances (Burr, 2003; Young & Collin, 2004). According to Levine (1992), there are three major constituents of social constructionism: 1) reality is a production of human interaction, 2) meanings cannot be contested because they change through daily interactions, and 3) people reflect on meanings then discuss and change them through interactions.

Given ambiguity in relevant literature, it is important to distinguish social constructivism from social constructionism. Burr (2003) points out that there are two major differences between constructivism and constructionism based on: 1) the amount of agency in construction, and 2) the amount of structural or interactional (social) forces on constructions. Constructionism includes the social aspect of creating meaning, whereas constructivism holds individuals more accountable for their interpretations (Crotty, 1998). Constructivism is more individually oriented (Young & Collin, 2004) and focuses on individuals' unique experiences, whereby individuals have their own valid realities (Crotty, 1998). Constructionism is concerned with the social processes and interactions that sustain knowledge (Young & Collin, 2004), and emphasises the cultural underpinnings of knowledge (Crotty, 1998).

According to social constructionism, knowledge is culturally relative: it is specific to the economic, social, and temporal contexts of the respective culture (Burr, 2003). Actions must, therefore, be understood or interpreted within their cultural (i.e., economic, social, and temporal) context (Crotty, 1998). Cultural lenses shape and give meaning to our view of reality, which is why people interpret reality differently (Crotty, 1998; Lock & Strong, 2010). Crotty (1998) suggests that without culture people could not function; people depend on culture for the direction and organization of their actions and experiences.

Knowledge is constructed between people through their interactions (Burr, 2003; Crotty,

1998) and mutual agreements (Lock & Strong, 2010), it is not something people have or do not have (Burr, 2003; Puig et al., 2008). Interactions happen between people, but also between people and things (social and material interactions) (Crotty, 1998; Hacking, 1999); these interactions provide meaning and understanding, giving them essence (Patton, 2015). As such, changes in meanings can be made through interactions (Puig et al., 2008). Further, Burr (2003) points out that our behaviours, thoughts, and feelings depend on "...who we are with, what we are doing and why" (p. 31). This view, similarly, aligns with Berger and Luckman's (1966) idea of role typologies. According to them, roles are necessary due to the institutions within our society; it is within a given role that people are responsible for following the rules (or standards) inherent to their respective institutional position.

Raskin (2002) points out that language is an essential component of social constructionism. It is through language that concepts and categories are developed (Burr, 2003), people express themselves (Raskin, 2002), and the nature of experiences are created (2002). Language is more than a way of expressing oneself, it is through discourse that meaning within culture is constructed (Burr, 2003). Further, the frequency and intensity of discourse between humans create our realities (Puig et al., 2008). Discourse, therefore, helps people to understand or 'know' the world in a way that is relative to their position within society (Burr, 2003).

According to social constructionism, culture has a significant impact on what is considered as truth (Burr, 2003; Crotty, 1998; Patton, 2015). Social constructionism indicates that there is cultural relevance to knowledge (or truth) based on what we believe is more or less useful at the time (Crotty, 1998). Because of the historical and cultural origins of meaning, Burr (2003) points out that there can be no one truth. The meanings we make are socially constructed based on shared understandings or consensus (i.e., interactions) between people (Burr, 2003;

Patton, 2015). Knowledge is socially produced from a given perspective (may be based on time, place, etc.), which differs from those who do not share the same experiences (Burr, 2003).

Therefore, it is not safe to assume one way of understanding phenomena is any better or more truthful than another because of the relativity of knowledge to cultural context (2003).

The theory of social constructionism can be used when critically examining understandings of reality and knowledge (Burr, 2003). This systems-oriented approach is particularly salient to research focused on social problems because of the requirement to consider the relevant social conditions or contexts (Thibodeaux, 2014). It is through a social constructionist perspective that researchers can assess roles and dynamics (e.g., family systems) within culturally specific realities (Puig et al., 2008), and be critical of the use of knowledge based on power and control within societies (Hacking, 1999).

Summary

In summary, the foundational research question will be addressed through the objectives outlined earlier in this chapter. The theories of social ecology, biological embedding, and social constructionism will help to explain parents' understanding of children's free-play and parent's involvement in children's free-play in a way that readers can extrapolate for their own purposes. These theories will link the specific research topic (i.e., children's free-play) to wider health promotion and public health concerns in the interpretation of the findings (i.e., discussions).

The following chapters will give more details on the *Evaluation* project and this thesis. Specifically, *Chapter 2: Literature Review* provides a review of the relevant literature on children's free-play, including what is currently known of parents' perspectives. The chapter focuses on general play or free-play research, rather than publications concerned with specific play-types, outcomes of play, health conditions, or (dis)abilities. *Chapter 3: Methodology*,

Procedure, and Participant Information gives a detailed description of the methods and procedures followed in the *Evaluation* project and this thesis, in addition to information about the study participants. *Chapters 4: Parents' Perceptions of Children's Free-Play* and *5: Parents' Involvement in their Children's Free-Play* relay the results and interpretations of this study's findings. Finally, the conclusion to this study, particularly the implications and limitations of this work, can be found in *Chapter 6: Conclusions*.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

Play is an opportunity for individuals to engage in new and exciting experiences (Blasi, Hurwitz, & Hurwitz, 2002). Play is an opportunity for children to be creative and spontaneous in challenging themselves, taking risks, and testing rules (Blasi et al., 2002; Pellegrini, 2009), and is an experience where children can acquire cultural abilities, skills, and values (Holmes, 2013; Odera & Murigande, 2010; Roopnarine, 2012). Through verbal or nonverbal means, play enables children to express themselves (Farné, 2005; Ginsburg, 2007). Further, there are both intra and interpersonal benefits of play because of the embedded opportunity to share experiences, feelings, and opinions, through which outsiders (e.g., parents) can gain insight into children's perspectives (Ginsburg, 2007). As a fundamental part of childhood (Pellegrini & Smith, 1998), the pleasures and rewards children gain through play reinforce their desire to engage in such opportunities (Lester & Russell, 2008a).

Understanding Play and Free-Play

According to van Oers (2014), the difference between play and non-play experiences depends on individuals' intentions, interests, and values (all of which are rooted in culture). Lester and Russell (2010) distinguish between play and playfulness stating, "play is the outward expression or actualisation of a playful disposition..." (p. 8). The characteristics of play, specifically, have been reviewed in a number of works (i.e., Cohen, 2006; Isenberg & Quisenberry, 1988; Pellegrini & Smith, 1998; etc.). Cohen's (2006) review of play literature identified Burghardt's characteristics of human and animal play. While not all are required of humans and not all are necessary, their review identified the following characteristics of play: no immediate purpose, pleasurable, variable, stimulating, safe, energy expending, and physically erratic. A different list of play characteristics, outlined by Isenberg and Quisenberry (1988), is

more straightforward: intrinsically motivated and initiated; process, rather than outcome, oriented; pleasing and non-literal; exploratory and active; and rule-governed. More recently, though, Gray (2013) identified the most widely agree upon characteristics of play as: self-selected and directed, intrinsically motivated, following mental rules, imaginative, and (mentally) active.

In addition to inconsistencies in characteristics, several means of classifying play activities and behaviours have been developed and shared in the play literature. These classifications include forms of play (Pellegrini & Smith, 1998), types of play (Blasi et al., 2002), domains of play (Pellegrini, 2009), stages of play development (Buhler, Isaacs, Piaget, & Valentine as cited by Smilansky, 1968), and categories of social participation (Parten, 1932). One set of classifications, which can be used to understand children's behaviours, for instance, is Parten's (1932) six categories of social play: associative play, cooperative play, onlooker behaviour, parallel play, solitary play, and unoccupied behaviour. Other classifications include Smilansky's (1968) revision of Piaget's four play-types (constructive, dramatic, and functional play, and games with rules) and Pellegrini's (2009) four domains of play (locomotor, object, pretend, and social). These classifications can help users to understand the social dynamics, as in Parten's (1932) and Rubin's (2001) works, or the behaviours undertaken during play, as in Piaget's (as cited by Rubin, 2001) and Pellegrini's (2009) works. Blasi et al. (2002) point out that understanding the different types of play can contribute to understanding their importance and assist in planning for their provision.

As there are many different characteristics and ways of understanding aspects of play, it is no wonder that a number of definitions for this concept have been proposed throughout the academic and practice-based literature (e.g., Blasi et al., 2002; Frost, 2012; Larsen, 2015; Lester

& Russell, 2010; Pellegrini & Smith, 1998), and, further, that a single, widely agreed upon definition has yet to be determined (Lester & Russell, 2008a; Lester & Russell, 2008b; Pellegrini & Smith, 1998; Santer et al., 2007; Smith, 1995). Powell (2009) points out that a definition is difficult to determine because of the complex nature of play. In Powell's (2009) study, play was understood as the activities that children choose and direct based on their personal motivations (these characteristics are also discussed by Lester and Russell (2008b)), whereas Frost (2012) defines play as "...a biological phenomenon for exploring, learning, and adapting cultural roles, values, and rules of society" (p. 117).

While there is some speculation about the necessity of a definition, Roopnarine (2012) suggests that a unified and broad definition would contribute to understanding play's culturally adaptive properties. A definition is, further, important for policy and research clarity (Pellegrini, 2009), and for those who directly provide play opportunities for children (Santer et al., 2007). Roopnarine (2015) has also identified the necessity of discussing play-like behaviours within a broad definition of play in order to gain a holistic understanding of the experience. Overall, Lester and Russell (2008b) suggest that by understanding play we can adjust efforts to support and value this experience.

The difficulty in establishing a single definition of play continues in discussions about free-play. Frohlich et al. (2013) explain free-play as "...forms of play that are intrinsically motivated by children with limited adult intervention" (p. 2), whereas Play England (as cited by Santer et al., 2007) understand free-play as "'children choosing what they want to do, how they want to do it and when to stop and try something else'" (p. xi). Similarly, from the perspective of Vygotsky, van Oers (2014) explains that there are inherent limitations to the amount of freedom participants possess during play because of the rules required. This is why, rather than referring

to activities as free-play, van Oers (2014) stresses that the amount of freedom a person has during play opportunities (i.e., degree of freedom) should be highlighted. This freedom is recognized as one of three play parameters, the others being rules and involvement, that dictate when an experience is considered 'play.'

Play Research

Even though much research on children's play has been conducted, Cohen (2006) outlines that this research has taken one of three general traditions. The first is the Piagetian tradition, focusing on the objects children use during play. This research lens concentrates on what and how objects are used, and the exploratory nature of children. The second tradition of research is rooted in psychoanalysis, whereby children's play behaviours are studied in relation to expressed emotions and coping. The third tradition has an educational focus, looking at the uses of play for children. According to Cohen (2006), however, researchers have more recently focused on developmental psychology in relation to children's play.

Regardless of foci, Piaget's work is still being cited in much of the play literature today: the stages of play development theory is common in play-related works. This theory purports that children go through three stages as they develop, which are reflected in their play activities and behaviours. The sensorimotor (Smith, 1995) or functional activity (Frost et al., 2012) stage ranges from infancy through the second year of life. At this stage children learn to control their bodily movements through repetition and exploration during play (Smith, 1995). The second stage is symbolic or representational play (Frost et al., 2012; Smith, 1995), wherein children develop abilities around the use of symbols and language. Children typically explore this type of play between two and six years of age. It is during this stage of play that children make substantial progress in developmental domains (Smith, 1995). The third, and final, stage

proposed by Piaget is play with rules (Frost et al., 2012; Smith, 1995). This stage is predominantly applicable to children in the school years as that is when socialization within their respective culture and society begins (Smith, 1995). While Piaget's theory has been widely cited, the usefulness of this approach in current work is questionable given more relevant theories, such as Vygotsky's, which account for the social aspect (i.e., role of adults) in children's play (Frost et al., 2012). Piaget's theory, however, gives researchers a helpful starting point in understanding the progression of children's complex play behaviours (Frost et al., 2012). Further, Isenberg and Quisenberry (1988), who describe play behaviours in the context of different age groupings, suggest that knowing a child's age and the 'typically' associated play behaviours is important for the provision of appropriate play environments.

In some of the literature (e.g., Cohen, 2006; Pellegrini & Smith, 1998), play has been discussed as serving no immediate purpose: play is an end in and of itself. Researchers supporting this view believe that children in play are more concerned with the activities they engage in rather than any outcomes of the experience (Blasi et al., 2002; Pellegrini, 2009; Pellegrini & Smith, 1998). Following this belief are theorists who recognize play as having deferred, rather than immediate, benefits to development (Pellegrini & Smith, 1998). This point of view explains why play is often understood through the developmental outcomes seen later in life, though it contradicts other work that indicates children can benefit immediately from play.

Play and Early Childhood Development

While play does not need to be taught and may not appear to have immediate benefits (Farné, 2005), play is still an educational and experiential opportunity through which children develop (Pellegrini & Smith, 1998). The different forms of play help children to learn skills that will be used across the life course (Blasi et al., 2002; Pellegrini & Smith, 1998). For example,

physical developments from (physically active) gross motor play can be seen both immediately and later in life (Pellegrini, 2009). Isenberg and Quisenberry (1988) discuss children's development in their article *Play: A Necessity for all Children*. They outline that play contributes to a child's cognitive, physical, and psychosocial development. Under a different delineation, play has been shown to significantly contribute to an individual's cognitive, physical, emotional, and social domains of development and well-being (Blasi et al., 2002; Ginsburg, 2007).

It is well understood that a child's first six years of life are critically important for their development in the areas of behaviour, emotion, health, and learning (e.g., Alberta Human Services, n.d.; van den Heuvel et al., 2013; World Health Organization, n.d.). According to Vygotsky, it is between the ages of two and six when play acts as the leading contributor to child development (Frost et al., 2012). During these preschool years, (spontaneous and goal-free) play is fundamental to child development (2012). In general, preschoolers demonstrate their understanding of social roles, and participate in play behaviours that meet their needs and desires (Isenberg & Quisenberry, 1988).

In comparison to Isenberg and Quisenberry's (1988), Blasi et al.'s (2002), and Ginsburg's (2007) explanations of developmental domains, a more detailed account of preschool-aged children's development, and the relationship between development and play, can be found in the works of Frost et al. (2012) and Hughes (2010). For these latter authors, child development is grouped into the four domains of: physical, social-emotional, cognitive, and language and literacy. These authors have also discussed how certain types of play contribute to or showcase the developmental progress of children, which will be explained below.

Play and Physical Development

The preschool years are a time for fine and gross motor skill development (Frost et al.,

2012; Isenberg & Quisenberry, 1988). Fine motor skills include the use of hands and fingers, while gross motor skills are related to mobility and body movement (Frost et al., 2012). This is also a time when children develop body awareness (Isenberg & Quisenberry, 1988) and perceptual motor skills, such as spatial, directional, and temporal awareness (Frost et al., 2012). According to Hughes (2010), as children develop they first learn physical skills in isolation and then combine them into more complex and coordinated movements. It is during the preschool years that children develop more control in these areas and movement types.

Different forms of physically active play can impact physical development at this age: these opportunities include free-play activities, such as rough-and-tumble play, and play that is outdoors or adult directed (Frost et al., 2012). Free-play allows children to engage in spontaneous movements, which can also contribute to other areas of development, such as the cognitive and social-emotional domains. Rough-and-tumble play, wherein children interact with others in physical play, is currently undergoing much discussion in the relevant literature; this type of physically active, social play helps children learn about their own physical abilities, while judging the intentions of others (Pellis & Pellis, 2007; Tannock, 2011). Frost et al. (2012) suggest that outdoor play is commonly associated with physically active play as there is generally space for a range of bodily movements in such settings. Directed play activities, such as construction or block play with fine motor behaviours, can be facilitated by adults for children's own personal skill development.

Play and Social-Emotional Development

Social-emotional development includes aspects of self-concept (i.e., individual character), self-esteem (i.e., competence and worth), self-regulation (i.e., awareness, coping, understanding), and empathy (i.e., recognition of others' feelings) (Frost et al., 2012). Children

from the ages of three to four, particularly, begin to make lasting friendships, learn to resolve conflicts, and understand themselves and their own ideas. As their social-emotional development progresses, children four to six years of age begin to understand cooperation and develop an identity within their relationships; children at this age become autonomous individuals, understanding how they fit into their families and social groups.

Play is a large contributor to the social-emotional development of children (Frost et al., 2012). Pretend and socio-dramatic play are types of play that children can participate in with others, which enables them to express their feelings and emotions. Under the premise that play and learning are interrelated, Farné (2005) explains that children learn through their social play interactions, stimulating their thoughts and decision-making abilities. During the preschool years, younger children typically engage in mutual activities or talk with peers, and borrow each others' toys but do not have set goals or rules for play (Isenberg & Quisenberry, 1988); older preschool children, on the other hand, can work together towards an end goal (Isenberg & Quisenberry, 1988). While based on non-human research (i.e., studies on rats), Pellis and Pellis (2007) point out that rough-and-tumble play (e.g., play fighting) has a positive effect on social competency. They suggest that this association likely also applies to children's rough-and-tumble play with (social competency) implications for later in life.

Play and Cognitive Development

As outlined by Frost et al. (2012), children between the ages of two and four cannot understand that their thoughts differ from those around them, whereas older preschoolers, four to seven years of age, have more emotional intuition, and begin to reason and organize in primitive ways. This cognitive development can be seen as children build on their use of symbols and representation to group objects, for instance, by a single characteristic. Functional, constructive,

symbolic/representational, dramatic, and games with rules are all play-types that contribute to a child's cognitive development. During the preschool years, play with objects (e.g., construction) becomes more complex and goal oriented, and can be enhanced by an exchange in ideas with others. According to Piaget's symbolic stage of play (Frost et al., 2012; Smith, 1995), young preschoolers start to engage in pretend play and begin picturing images in their mind that can be translated into art or other projects. Frost et al. (2012) note that pretend play has the ability to contribute to children's reasoning abilities and potential to infer meaning. Interestingly, children with high cognitive development typically exhibit better use of imagination and creativity in play than their peers (2012).

Play, and Language and Literacy Development

Language and literacy development is related to cognitive development and is characterized by the use of a greater variety of words and longer sentences (Frost et al., 2012). During the preschool years, children begin to learn the rules of their native languages (i.e., morphology, syntax, and semantics), while their vocabulary grows (Frost et al., 2012; Hughes, 2010). Also relevant to development under this domain is the culturally appropriate conversations that develop, and the ability of children to understand that print and pictures in books have meaning (Frost et al., 2012).

According to Hughes (2010), there is a strong connection between literacy and make-believe play that can be seen as socio-dramatic play progresses. This connection is demonstrated as children refer to resources that are not currently within their play setting, and in their engagement in and derivation of meaning from narration and story-telling. Further, this relationship is exemplified as children move from their 'real world' into an imaginary world, a process that can happen several times throughout play. As developmental progress is made,

children integrate linguistic information in their play (2010). Language development is demonstrated by children playing with the language they know and using language in play (Frost et al., 2012). For example, children can be seen using language as a tool in pretend and dramatic play to talk about events and roles.

Play and Culture

Cultural practices can help to understand or account for the play opportunities that are provided for children (Powell, 2009). Rules in society can dictate the playfulness of activities and, therefore, the perception of activities as work or play, while the prevailing culture dictates when and how these activities are performed (van Oers, 2014). van Oers (2014) outlines the importance of culture by highlighting that the internalization of one's cultural environment is processed and then expressed through changes to that environment, reflecting a reciprocal dynamic. The expression of differing play-types and their associated meaning(s) are tied to cultural beliefs and practices that are linked to the visible and invisible aspects of one's (ecological) setting (Roopnarine, 2012).

Play activities and behaviours are rooted in culture (Roopnarine, 2015), as are learning and accomplishment (van Oers, 2014). Culture can help to explain differing perspectives on the value of play, and what parents recognize as developmental outcomes of this experience (Roopnarine, 2011). Extrapolating on this idea, Roopnarine and Davidson (2015) insinuate that the potential for children to develop cognitive and social skills through play, and for play to even be encouraged, is based on the culture of their society. Further, the visibility of changes (i.e., improvements) in skills may be minimal if there is belief that play does not contribute to the respective developmental domain.

While developmental benefits and outcomes of play may be accepted as the norm in one

culture, there are cultures that do not recognize these factors in the same way or to the same extent (Roopnarine, 2011). Further, cultures may differ in the developmental (i.e., cognitive and social) significance they associate with play experiences (Roopnarine, 2015). The view that play is fundamental to children's (cognitive and social) development is generally supported in technologically advanced countries, however, there may be differences between ethnic groups within countries (Roopnarine, 2011). Roopnarine (2011) warns that making universal claims about children's play is problematic because of differing cultural forces (and experiences).

Many cultural differences can be seen in the perceptions of parents in regards to the developmental benefits of children's play. Studies by Holmes (2011), Parmar et al. (2004), and el Moussaoui and Braster (2011) showcase the cultural differences between participants, and their views and actions towards children's play. Based on their study with parents, grandparents and other caregivers of Filipino, Hawaiian, and Japanese descent in Hawaii, United States of American, for example, Holmes (2011) outlines that different cultures may not recognize the same connection (i.e., benefits or outcomes) between play, development, and learning.

Roopnarine (2015) discusses various cultural perspectives on play that include: the use of play for learning and practicing culture-specific activities and behaviours; the opportunity to learn through a combination of work and play; and observing and replicating others' actions in play. People bring their own ideas about play and early childhood development "as they become immersed in new cultural communities or new locales" (p. 4) but it is (relatively) unknown how or if their views change with opposing (i.e., competing) cultural beliefs. Importantly, cultural norms and values may translate into different facilitation, decision-making and co-engagement, and encouragement practices by parents related to play (Holmes, 2011). A difference in values along the spectrum of collectivist to individualistic cultures, for example, may contribute to or

help explain the difference in beliefs and attitudes towards play when comparing parents from different cultural backgrounds (Holmes, 2011). According to Triandis, Bontempo, Villareal, Asai, and Lucca (1988), collectivist cultures demonstrate stable relationships between individuals and the ingroup, individual behaviours concern the goals of the ingroup, and individual goals are subservient to the ingroups.' Within more individualist cultures, which have many ingroups, individual behaviours concern the goals of several ingroups and there is fluidity in ingroup commitment based on the (perceived) demands of individuals. Based on the findings of Hofstede's (1980), Triandis et al. (1988) use their understanding to conclude that Australia, Canada, and the United States of America are home to more individualist cultures.

Parent Perceptions of Play

Research indicates that parents generally view play as important for their children (e.g., Lehrer & Petrakos, 2011; Odera & Murigande, 2010; Singh & Gupta, 2011). Given that parents recognize the importance and value inherent to different play-types, parents have the potential to encourage or discourage a variety of play experiences that will contribute to their child's physical, social-emotional, cognitive, and language and literacy development (Frost et al., 2012; Hughes, 2010) and health (Sleddens et al., 2012). For example, parents can demonstrate the value they have for play through the amount of time and types of play they facilitate, and the spaces they provide for free-play (Santer et al., 2007).

Parents try to encourage play that supports their children's social and intellectual development (Holmes, 2011; Lehrer & Petrakos, 2011), however, some parents emphasise physically active play (and physical development) as being particularly important for their children's healthy lifestyles (Lehrer & Petrakos, 2011). In terms of development, Shiakou and Belsky (2013) found, using questionnaires and interviews, that a number of Greek/Cypriot

parents in their study viewed play as ‘important’ to their (four to seven year old) children and some parents even identified play as ‘absolutely necessary.’ Singh and Gupta (2011), through their interviews and observations with low- and high-income families at an early childhood centre in India, found that nearly 50% of the parents knew that they should encourage play that contributes to their children’s cognitive development and more than half of the parents recognized the importance of play for their children’s social development. While parents typically allowed their children to participate in the play activities they chose, some parental intervention to encourage certain behaviours was acknowledged by parents’ through survey and interview responses in Holmes’ (2011) study. In contrast to the types of play parents encourage, there are also some that they generally discourage. These were related to aggressive and deviant activities, and mean-spirited or anti-social behaviours, such as being rough, watching television/movies, and using computer games (Holmes, 2011; Lehrer & Petrakos, 2011).

Many parents acknowledged the benefits of play, particularly in terms of the social-emotional development of their children. According to parents in a number of research studies, it is through play that children learn concepts such as cooperation, leadership (Holmes, 2011), respect (Lehrer & Petrakos, 2011), and sharing (Holmes, 2011). Lehrer and Petrakos’ (2011) study using questionnaires with parents and interviews with their grade one children in the area of Montreal, Canada found that through their play, children emotionally developed self-confidence and self-awareness, and the ability to express themselves. Other outcomes of play have included boredom cessation, communication, and belonging (Singh & Gupta, 2011). Further, a mixed methods study using interviews and surveys with parents and elementary school children in the North-western United States of America completed by Coyl-Shepherd and Hanlon (2013) found an inverse relationship between leisure activities, such as play, and a

number of child well-being indicators, including anxiety, depression, and social stress.

Children want their parents to play with them, and to provide them with attention and support (Odera & Murigande, 2010). While Roopnarine and Davidson (2015) explain that, regardless of speculation, parents do engage in play activities with their children, Lehrer and Petrakos (2011) found that the proportion of parents who played with their children was just over half their study sample. Parents have reported the importance of dedicating time to play with their children (Homes, 2011) but they may face challenges (e.g., energy levels, spare time) to participate in spite of this understanding (el Moussaoui & Braster, 2011; Holmes, 2011). Parents who are able to spend time playing with their children note benefits for their whole family (Coyle-Shepherd & Hanlon, 2013). According to participants in Odera and Murigande's (2010) interview and observational study in Kigali, Rwanda, caregivers can teach their children (ages five to ten) important skills and impart values through play, while co-participation was thought to enhance their relationship with children. Coyle-Shepherd and Hanlon (2013) also found that certain types of play (e.g., rough-and-tumble play) could contribute to the bond between parent and child. According to Holmes (2011), parents generally support the interests of their children by participating in their child's favourite activities with them, though this contrasts with Lehrer and Petrakos' (2011) discussion of how parents encouraged the play activities in which they preferred to participate. In their report, Santer et al. (2007) detail the role of parents in children's play, highlighting the importance of parents understanding when they should or should not interfere in their children's play, including challenging stereotypes and socially-inappropriate behaviours, and their responsibility as role models to their children.

A number of factors, conscious and unconscious, influence parents' decision-making for and involvement in their children's play (Holmes, 2011; Odera & Murigande, 2010); researchers

have found associations with gender, age, education, and income. Further, these variables are frequently used in data analysis to provide context from which to understand parents' perspectives, and children's play activities and behaviours (Odera & Murigande, 2010).

While many studies conducted with parents have resulted in views markedly expressed through the lens of females (e.g., el Moussaoui & Braster, 2011), when males were also considered, Odera and Murigande (2010) found that male caregivers portrayed a higher value for play than their female counterparts. Gender differences were also found in Coyl-Shepherd and Hanlon's (2013) study, though these were in relation to the types of play that the parents supported, rather than the general value of play. Further to these study findings, Roopnarine and Davidson (2015) report that there is limited evidence on the differences in parents' treatment of boys compared to girls, and inconsistent evidence on the amount of mother- or father-child play participation across cultures. Santer et al. (2007), however, summarize that boys' and girls' play does in fact differ.

Further demographic characteristics related to parents' perceptions of play include child age. Findings from Odera and Murigande's (2010) research study in Rwanda indicated that the younger the children were (ages ranged from five to ten years) the more time caregivers gave them for play. Caregivers in their study felt that as children aged they should be engaging in more domestically oriented activities and schoolwork. Similarly, in Canada, Lehrer and Petrakos (2011) questioned parents regarding their grade one children's play and found that none of the parents felt that their children had grown too old for play. Further, Veitch, Bagley, Ball, and Salmon's (2006) study based on interviews in Melbourne, Australia, found that parents from a range of income groups related child age (average age of children associated with their study was eight years) to their independence and, subsequently, children's opportunities to play away from

the home (e.g., at nearby parks). In their research, older children (nine to ten years of age) were thought to be more independent, so parents allowed them to go out alone, whereas younger children (six to eight years of age) needed their parent(s) to take them to play out of the yard.

Research has also revealed a relationship between parent education and their perceptions of play. Odera and Murigande (2010) pointed out that the more knowledgeable caregivers were about the benefits of play, the more likely they were to encourage and facilitate such opportunities (i.e., higher caregiver education was associated with more positive views of children's play). This point was more deeply explored, however, in el Moussaoui and Braster's (2011) study on stimulating cognitive development in children. This Netherlands-based research using interview data from Berber and Moroccan Arabic immigrant mothers whose primary-school-aged children were between four and six years old, found that those less educated did not see a place for play in the learning process or for gaining knowledge (i.e., cognitive development), and considered play as entertainment for children. On the other hand, middle and highly educated mothers viewed play as a way for their children to gain world knowledge and thought play was essential to the beginning stages of learning. Their study showcased the relationship between parental education, and perceptions of the importance and benefits of play.

The location in which children play and spend their time relied greatly on parents' views of neighbourhood safety, time availability, and child independence. When comparing high- and low-income parents, Singh and Gupta (2011) found that indoor and outdoor play promotion varied. Low-income parents tended to emphasise outdoor play, while higher income parents emphasised both outdoor and indoor play as contributors to their children's physical development, which the authors relate to the necessity of high-income parents to take their children to designated outdoor play locations (i.e., socio-physical geographies). Regardless of

income level, however, safety concerns were related to parents' preference for their children playing close to the home in their study. Parents from both groups identified academic activities and play as competing for time in their children's lives. The authors cite that lower income parents expressed concern for the required academic activities, while higher income parents identified play as young children's primary activity for which they allocated time.

Current Trends in Children's Free-Play Engagement

Despite the benefits of play, relevant literature points out that a number of barriers and a change in societal norms have contributed to a decrease in children's free-play participation. Further, changing opportunities and priorities have resulted in this generation of children free-playing less than any before (Gleave, 2009). Frohlich et al. (2013) identify the "...disappearance of free-play" (p. 2) as very concerning. This declining trend can be seen across the globe, as indicative by Odera and Murigande's (2010) research in Rwanda, which found that 30% of girls and 45% of boys associated with their study did not have time for play due to academic activities and household tasks. Children's decreased participation in free-play can be attributed to a shift towards more structured recreational activities (Gleave, 2009), the type (Frost, 2012) or lack (Odera & Murigande, 2010) of resources, increased participation in passive activities (Coyle-Shepherd & Hanlon, 2013; Odera & Murigande, 2010), concerns for safety (Coyle-Shepherd & Hanlon, 2013), a focus on academic achievement (Ginsburg, 2007; Hertzman, 2010; Lehrer & Petrakos, 2011), and hurried family lifestyles (Ginsburg, 2007).

Several authors have also reported on the impact of the broader ecological environment on children's play (e.g., Burdette & Whitaker, 2005; Lester & Russell, 2008b; Roopnarine & Davidson, 2015; Wood, 2013). Family dynamics and physical setting are important to the play opportunities of children, as they may facilitate or impede such experiences (Roopnarine, 2011).

Children's play experiences can be enhanced by their environments, with more unstructured and naturalistic environments providing richer opportunities for engagement (Farné, 2005). Children feel freer to play and plan for themselves in these settings without adult supervision as they perceive their play changing when adults are present (2005). Further, the most educational and authentic play experiences occur when children are free of adult planning and direction (2005).

In their review, Roopnarine and Davidson (2015) highlight the trend of decreasing outdoor play and increasing indoor, sedentary activities across cultures. Outdoor spaces have been understood to provide a greater range of and less structured opportunities for children's play compared to indoor settings (Burdette & Whitaker, 2005). Coyl-Shepherd and Hanlon's (2013) research found differences in children's activities and behaviours when comparing child socio-emotional well-being using the *Behavioral Assessment System for Children* tool. Children in the low well-being group, which had family characteristics similar to those associated with low socio-economic status (i.e., lower relative education and income), reported safety as a barrier to playing outside, which led them to engage in more passive indoor opportunities. This result was contrasted with the high well-being group that reported more outdoor play participation and parents who felt that their neighbourhoods were safe for such opportunities. In their report, Ginsburg (2007) also identified safety concerns associated with children playing alone or unsupervised as having an impact on the type and location of play in which they could participate.

Parmar et al.'s (2004) study on Asian and Euro-American parents in Connecticut, United States of America, also shared the importance of resources for play. Participants in their research, whose children's ranged from three to six years old, felt that play and play resources (e.g., toys) were essential for the cognitive and social development of children. Similarly, 20% of

girls and 25% of boys in Odera and Murigande's (2010) study did not have playgrounds to use during their free time. This is why the authors advocate for an increase in resources, in addition to play time, in order to enhance child well-being and provide a holistic approach to development in early childhood.

While resources and setting may facilitate (or impede) play experiences, a major barrier to play is time availability and competing activities for children. For example, Singer, Singer, D'Agostino, and DeLong (2009), who interviewed mothers from sixteen different countries and grouped them by economic development (i.e., developing, newly developed, and developed), reported participants' acknowledgement that a lack of time was a barrier to play and experiential learning for children. Participants in developed countries had a significantly higher likelihood of reporting time as a major barrier to play, compared to those in other countries. Roopnarine (2011) concedes that in (western) technologically developed societies play often has academic objectivity that clouds the promotion of this experience.

A focus on the formal education system in the early years of life has detracted from other developmental opportunities that relate to health (Hertzman, 2010). Ginsburg (2007), Hertzman (2010), and Odera and Murigande (2010) reinforce the idea that, as a society, we have been focusing on the developmental aspects needed for academic performance and school readiness, rather than on a holistic upbringing that incorporates various domains and skills, which play can help children develop. Even from the beginning of grade one, parents have reported emphasising the importance of academic activities over opportunities to participate in play (Shiakou & Belsky, 2013). Shiakou and Belsky (2013) found that the activities children were enrolled and participated in outside of school time were oriented towards development that centralized on academic abilities rather than broader developmental opportunities. The dichotomy between play

and academic activities was also showcased by parents in Singh and Gupta's (2011) study who said that, however limited, they set aside or scheduled play time for their children in addition to time for academic activities. In this case the provision of play opportunities could be related to parents' perception that play was primarily for younger children, who may not face the same academic pressures as older children.

Though a variety of play experiences are important for a well-rounded and developed child, there is concern about the amount of passive (entertainment) opportunities available for children. The exposure of children to settings with more passive opportunities has resulted in more time spent engaged in these activities, rather than more developmentally beneficial forms of play (Coyl-Shepherd & Hanlon, 2013; Frost, 2012; Ginsburg, 2007; Odera & Murigande, 2010). According to Odera and Murigande's (2010) research in Rwanda, for instance, televisions, game systems, and computers can now readily be found in playrooms, bedrooms, or basements, which attract children's attention to more passive opportunities. Singer et al. (2009), however, found that children between one to twelve years in developed countries spent less time watching television than those in developing or newly developed countries, even though this was the most common activity across all nations.

Play in the Policy and Public Health Discourse

Play has been recognized as a right for children, so much so that under Article 31, the United Nations (1995) says, "states Parties recognize the right of the child to rest and leisure, to engage in play and recreational activities appropriate to the age of the child and to participate freely in cultural life and the arts." The provision of opportunities for children to play can be done through policies that encourage or facilitate play and, more specifically, free-play (Lester & Russell, 2008b; Powell, 2009). The concern is, however, that policies and public discourse

around play varies and sometimes diverges from the intent of free-play (Powell, 2009). For example, Powell (2009) and Santer et al. (2007) have confirmed that, despite play being a priority area in England, the construction of play varied across government departments. This discrepancy perpetuates the confusion of what is meant by 'play,' what the value of play is, and why play should be supported. Powell (2009) points out that free-play must be promoted for children, and society, to gain any benefits, yet play get less support from policy than other (structured) opportunities. From a policy perspective, Lester and Russell (2008a; 2008b), Pellegrini (2009), and Powell (2009) indicate that policy-makers must recognize the qualities of free-play, such as spontaneity and intrinsic motivation, and ensure that the activities they are promoting align with these values, giving control (back) to the players.

The intrinsic value of play can be difficult to visualize with more extrinsically valued opportunities reinforced from policy documents (i.e., those with performance measures) (Lester & Russell, 2008a; Powell, 2009). Ignoring the intrinsic value, Powell (2009) suggests, could reinforce negative views of (play) behaviours. It is through policy that play opportunities (i.e., in regards to places for play) can contribute to the removal or segregation of people from the general population into designated spaces for play (Powell, 2009). A parallel idea shared by Lester and Russell (2008a), and Wood (2013) was that policy-makers may only promote play opportunities that conform to socially-acceptable behaviours. From an extrinsic view, there is potential harm in identifying and utilizing play for specific purposes (Powell, 2009). A purpose-oriented approach limits the potential of other aspects or types of play to contribute to the holistic well-being of children and represents a narrow view of health. Powell (2009) and Frohlich et al. (2013) discuss how highlighting the extrinsic purpose of play removes the player's control and power, which likely means that the experience is no longer free-play (2013).

When play is discussed and promoted in purposeful ways the other benefits of play are neglected (Alexander et al., 2012). This orientation, further, narrows the concept of health in the context of play to the activity that is predominantly supported and encouraged. In their article, *Playing for Health? Revisiting Health Promotion to Examine the Emerging Public Health Position on Children's Play*, Alexander et al. (2012) explain that playing with purpose (i.e., outcomes-oriented) is contradictory to the proponents of free-play. When public health bodies use this approach, they promote more productive forms of play rather than the potential for free-play to broadly contribute to child development and health (Frohlich et al., 2013).

Discourse analyses of play in public health (Alexander et al., 2012; Alexander et al., 2014a; Frohlich et al., 2013) indicate that play is being instrumentalized for participation in physical activity and the prevention of obesity, rather than being highlighted as a holistic approach to health promotion. The promotion of physically active play has been done to increase the amount of physical activity and exercise children attain, and reiterates that play is synonymous with physical activity. A focus on play as a means of physical activity, however, displaces the characteristics of fun and pleasure associated with play: a troubling paradox that is further dichotomizing mind and body (Burdette & Whitaker, 2005). Further, this displaced notion reinforces physically active play as a means to an end (e.g., health or healthy weight maintenance) (Alexander et al., 2014a), rather than an end in itself (Cohen, 2006; Pellegrini & Smith, 1998). Additionally, the concentration on physically active play has contributed to a lack of emphasis on free-play opportunities (Frohlich et al., 2013).

Alexander et al. (2012) have outlined that play discussions and recommendations have also incorporated language around decreasing the risks associated with play. Risk is inherent to and a primary characteristic of different forms of play, which now require surveillance, control,

and minimization (Frohlich et al., 2013) through streamlining and standardization (Alexander et al., 2012). Unfortunately, limiting exposure to risks in this way reduces participation in free-play and the potential benefits of this experience, such as challenge, excitement, and pleasure (2012).

A purposeful approach to encouraging (active, risk-free) play activities and behaviours may have the opposite affect public health agencies intend; stripping freedom from play activities, removing the pleasurable aspects associated with play, and, potentially, altering the perception and experience of play across the life course (Frohlich et al., 2013). Public health and health promotion professionals and organizations need to be aware of how they contribute to the discourse associated with certain forms of play and how their re-production of specific types (i.e., active and/or outdoor play) may have unintended consequences (2013). For example, the purposefulness in public health's promotion of more active forms of play may result in resentment towards the activity by children and, therefore, further decrease participation. This discourse also reinforces the contribution of inactive children to the obesity epidemic (Alexander et al., 2014a). Burdette and Whitaker (2005) have previously advocated for the encouragement of play for well-being rather than physical activity for physical health. They reiterate the importance of focusing on child well-being, opposed to physical health, in an effort to increase physical activity through play. Within their article, Burdette and Whitaker (2005) also suggest that, if physical exercise can be gained, it may be most effective and sustainable to promote the most immediate benefits of play experiences (i.e., improved mood, increased happiness).

Summary

Play is a natural part of children's lives (Pellegrini & Smith, 1998). A variety of play-types contribute to the physical, social-emotional, cognitive, and language and literacy domains of child development (Frost et al., 2012; Hughes, 2010). Further, different play opportunities can

engage children in behaviours that uniquely impact one or more aspects of their development (Frost et al., 2012; Hughes, 2010). Fundamental knowledge and skills can be gained through play experiences, which can be used over the life course as individuals progress through childhood into adulthood (e.g., el Moussaoui & Braster, 2011; Frost et al., 2012; Hughes, 2010).

Even though children's opportunities to participate in play may differ, they all need play in their lives (Lester & Russell, 2008b). Research has indicated the numerous contributions of play to the well-being of children, however, children's time for and participation in free-play has drastically decreased over the years (Gleave, 2009). Even some (government) policies and public (health) discourse can act as deterrents to children's free-play participation (Alexander et al., 2012; Alexander et al., 2014a; Frohlich et al., 2013; Lester & Russell, 2008a; Powell, 2009).

Given the range of settings and dynamics associated with play, Roopnarine and Davidson (2015) support increasing research on play, including work that focuses "...on the local ecology, economic and work patterns, beliefs about the value of play, existing and changing values systems related to socialization and child rearing, parental sensitivity, and childhood characteristics..." (p. 245) in order to further cross-cultural understandings of parent and child play interactions. There is also a need to understand the impact of culture on parent-child play more thoroughly, including cross-cultural scientific and empirical work (2015). Due to the relationship between parents and children, and the potential of parents to impart values and instil life-long health habits in their children (Hertzman, 2010; Hertzman & Power, 2004), understanding their perceptions of children's play behaviours is essential (Lehrer & Petrakos, 2011).

Pellegrini (2009) suggests that future empirical research should investigate the costs and benefits of play. Comparing data against different setting (e.g., urban versus rural) and family

dynamics (e.g., single or multiple children) may give additional insight into how community resources (Coyl-Shepherd & Hanlon, 2013; Lehrer & Petrakos, 2011) and birth order (Lehrer & Petrakos, 2011) impact children's play opportunities, respectively. Coyl-Shepherd & Hanlon (2013) advocate for longitudinal studies that may advance developmental perspectives on children's play and understand how play behaviours (may) change over time. Such research will help to inform policy-makers about the significance of play and, hopefully, contribute to the needed shift back to a culture that values and encourages these opportunities (Frost, 2012).

Chapter 3: Methodology, Procedure, and Participant Information

Setting

Strathcona County, Alberta is a municipality located directly east of the City of Edmonton. The County consists of an urban centre, Sherwood Park, and outlying area, rural Strathcona. According to 2012 census data (Strathcona County, 2014a), the County has a population of 92,403 people: the urban centre of Sherwood Park has a population of 65,465 and the outlying rural Strathcona area has a population of 26,938. Trends in population data indicate that the number of people living in Strathcona County is increasing (Strathcona County, n.d.-a). According to County (n.d.-a) data, 87.3% of Strathcona County households have an annual income of \$40,000 or more (86.8% in urban Sherwood Park and 88.8% in rural Strathcona County). The average age of residents is 37.9 (37.3 male and 38.6 female) years in Sherwood Park and 39.2 (39.5 male and 39 female) years in rural Strathcona. There are 4,595 (3,541 in Sherwood Park and 1,054 in rural Strathcona) children aged 0-4 and 5,700 (4,048 in Sherwood Park and 1,652 in rural Strathcona) children aged 5-9 living in Strathcona County.

Strathcona County Recreation, Parks and Culture Recreation Preschool Programming

In Strathcona County there are a variety of preschool programs available for children prior to their entry to kindergarten. Public recreation preschool programs are offered through Strathcona County Recreation, Parks and Culture (SC RPC) at Ardrossan Recreation Complex (ARC), Kinsmen Leisure Centre (KLC), Millennium Place, Sherwood Park Arena, and Strathcona Olympiette Centre (SOC) (Strathcona County, 2014b). SC RPC offers un-parented recreation preschool programs to children four to five years of age (three year olds are welcome under special circumstances), after which age children are allowed to enter kindergarten

programs offered by the formal education system. SC RPC recreation preschool programs follow the Canadian school system schedule running from September to June. Three sessions of programming are offered each year: one each during the fall (September-November), winter (January-March), and spring (April-June). Each recreation preschool program runs on a weekly basis with eleven weeks per session and has a maximum enrolment of 20 children.

Strathcona County Recreation, Parks and Culture's Love to Play Program

Strathcona County invested a considerable amount of resources into the redevelopment and improvement of their recreation facilities through their Open Space and Recreation Facility Strategy (OSRFS) (Strathcona County, 2017). In particular, the County used a \$350,000 investment to (re)design a free-play based recreation preschool program and specialized space with the intention of encouraging free-play and healthy lifestyles (Strathcona County, n.d.-b). More specifically, SC RPC used this investment to develop and implement their *Preschool Programs: Curriculum Framework* (herein referred to as the *Framework*), following a free-play based philosophy, at all of their recreation preschool programs, and redesign and construct a free-play based space at the ARC. This investment was made primarily in response to Albertan Early Childhood Development Mapping Project data, which found that 21.4% of children living in rural Strathcona County (Early Childhood Development Mapping Project Alberta [ECMap], 2014a) and 18.4% of those in urban Sherwood Park (ECMap, 2014b) were experiencing great difficulty in one or more areas of development.

The *Framework*, which acknowledges the importance of supportive learning environments for children, identifies instructors as essential to the program experience. One lead and one assistant instructor facilitate each free-play based recreation preschool program. The lead instructor in each program is responsible for implementing strategies to support children and

their development. While strategies differ based on the lead instructor, SC RPC acknowledges that child emotional maturity, social development, language and thinking skills, communication skills and general knowledge, and physical health and well-being are all developmental domains to be incorporated in each program (Strathcona County, n.d.-b). These *Framework* components align with the domains outlined in the EMap project and results (i.e., reports for rural Strathcona County (EMap, 2014a) and urban Sherwood Park (EMap, 2014b)). This new free-play based curriculum was implemented for the first full year from September 2014 to June 2015.

Evaluation Project

Principal Investigators Drs. Candace Nykiforuk (CN) and Jane Hewes (JH), along with their community partners at SC RPC and a larger research team, designed and implemented a multi-method research project to assess the free-play based recreation preschool programs offered by SC RPC. SC RPC identified ARC (which includes the free-play based space, Love to Play), KLC, and SOC as sites to be studied based on their own purposes. This research project was entitled *Evaluation of a Play-Based Preschool Recreation Program: Exploring the Impact of Community Investment in Play-Based Learning on Health and Health Equity* (herein referred to as the *Evaluation* project). Following the social ecological model, where individuals' health behaviours are impacted by interpersonal relationships and their environments (e.g., physical space and program availability) (Best et al., 2003), the *Evaluation* project's intent was to understand the impact of the new curriculum and space, Love to Play, on child behaviours, and assess program implications on child health and development. The *Evaluation* project was comprised of four parts:

1. Instructor and parent interviews;

2. Systematic audit of the indoor physical spaces;
3. Video observations of children; and,
4. Photo-related (photovoice) activities with children.

Purpose

This master's thesis study focuses on one part of the *Evaluation* project: pre- and post-intervention interviews with parents from two of the participating recreation preschool programs. The programs at KLC and SOC, which utilize the free-play based curriculum, were selected for this study with the purpose of understanding parents' perceptions of free-play. The population of parents was of particular interest due to the interpersonal relationship between parents and their children. The specific objectives of this study are two-fold:

Objective 1

Understand the perceptions and value, if any, of parents in regards to children's free-play.

Objective 2

Understand parent's involvement in their children's free-play.

Ethical Approval

Ethical approval for the entire *Evaluation* project was obtained in July 2014 from the University of Alberta Research Ethics Board 1, which "reviews research that primarily involves in-person interviews, focus groups, ethnographies, or community engagement" (University of Alberta, 2014). The MacEwan University Research Ethics Board, also, approved the project in September 2014. Following the principles outlined in the Tri-Council Policy Statement (Government of Canada, 2010), participation in the *Evaluation* project was voluntary.

Data Overview

The data collection strategy for the *Evaluation* project was finalized, and necessary documents and protocols drafted, over the summer of 2014. Data collection activities commenced in early September 2014, before the fall program sessions officially began, with a systematic audit of the preschools' indoor physical spaces. The instructor and parent interviews, and video observations started at the end of September, once the programs were running, and continued as necessary for the entire school year. The photo-related activities with children were undertaken over the winter and spring program sessions. All of the *Evaluation* project data collection activities were completed by July 2015.

Methodology

This thesis study follows a case study methodology, which focuses on a complex phenomenon or situation (Ary, Jacobs, & Sorensen, 2010; Yin, 2014). The case study is a form of ethnographic research with a focus on a single entity (e.g., group, organization, institution, etc.) (Ary et al., 2010). A case study is interested, primarily, in the individual case, not the method used to obtain information: it is a process and product of the inquiry into an entity (Stake, 2003). Edmonds and Kennedy (2013) explain that the purpose of a case study is to develop an understanding (narrative or revelation) of a phenomenon, not to infer causation. Further, case studies aim to provide a comprehensive or insightful understanding of the subject under investigation (Ary et al., 2010; Patton, 2002). Ary et al. (2010) point out that case studies can help to understand the connection between behaviours, and the environment or history.

Depending on the theorist, there are different ways to classify or categorize case studies: for example, single or multiple and holistic or embedded (Yin, 2014); or intrinsic, instrumental, and multiple or collective (Ary et al., 2010; Stake, 2003). This study follows a single, holistic

approach (Yin, 2014), or what Ary et al. (2010) and Stake (2003) would consider as an instrumental case study. There are several rationales (i.e., "...critical, unusual, common, revelatory, or longitudinal" (Yin, 2014, p. 51)) for the common single case study that make this design appropriate to use. This study follows the premise of an unusual case, which is a rationale used for cases that deviate "...from theoretical norms or even everyday occurrences" (p. 52). A holistic approach is "...advantageous when no logical subunits can be identified or when the relevant theory underlying the case study is itself of a holistic nature" (p. 55). The holistic design is suitable for this study because of the specific boundaries of the free-play based recreation preschool programs (Ary et al., 2010): these programs may be considered 'unique' as they do not follow a traditional approach to preschool programming.

This study also falls under the instrumental case study category (Ary et al., 2010; Stake, 2003). An instrumental case study is where the case "...represents some other issue under investigation and the researcher believes this particular case can help provide insights or help to understand that issue" (Ary et al., 2010, p. 455). Stake (2003) recognizes the case in an instrumental case study as a means to some other end; the case provides insight into an issue and is, itself, of secondary interest. In the context of this study, parents at the programs are the unit of analysis because they can provide insight into children's free-play. Further, in alignment with the instrumental case study approach (Ary et al., 2010; Stake, 2003), this study's research question and objectives do not focus on subject matter related specifically to the recreation preschool programs or differences between the two sites.

Participant Sample and Recruitment

The Evaluation Project

In order to address the objectives of the *Evaluation* project, a purposeful sampling

technique for participant recruitment was utilized. The proponents of this technique suggest that the selection of participants is deliberate because they can provide the most relevant information on the topic at the necessary levels of analysis (Mayan, 2009; Yin, 2011). Parents, including a range of adult guardians and caregivers who raise children (Ginsburg, 2007), were sought for this project as they are the primary decision-makers and authority figures in their child's lives (Hertzman & Power, 2004). Further, parents are the primary teachers of their child's behavioural functioning (Gagnon, Nagle, & Nickerson, 2007) and, therefore, an understanding of child behaviours can be gleaned directly from this group.

Participants were recruited directly from the free-play based recreation preschool programs associated with the *Evaluation* project. An advertisement was placed in Strathcona County's Recreation Guides (fall, winter, and spring) informing readers that the programs at ARC, KLC, and SOC were participating in a research project conducted by the University of Alberta. Parents enrolling their children in any of the participating programs were notified of the project upon registration and again when they arrived for their child's first day of programming.

As SC RPC offers recreation preschool programming in the fall, winter, and spring sessions, participants were initially recruited through discussions with program instructors and research team members working on-site during the first few weeks of each session. During this time, those who picked-up and/or dropped-off children at the programs were given an information letter (Appendix A) detailing the parent interview component of the *Evaluation* project. Potential participants were instructed that an interview with one parent per family was adequate for project purposes, however, if more than one parent was eager to participate they were welcome to do so. Parents interested in participating were asked to sign up for an interview using the participant sign-up sheets (see Appendix B for example) or return a completed

demographic form (Appendix C) to the respective program instructor(s). Those parents who used a demographic form to indicate their willingness to participate were called by a Policy, Location, and Access in Community Environments (PLACE) Research Lab Research Assistant (RA) to schedule an interview.

The pre-intervention interviews with parents were held within the first three weeks of each program session or as soon as possible when new families joined the programs mid-session. Researchers were on-site at the programs to conduct interviews from September 23rd through to October 10th, 2014 for the fall session; January 27th through to February 6th, 2015 for the winter session; and April 14th through to May 1st, 2015 for the spring session. Parents who had participated in a pre-intervention interview were specifically asked (via sign-up sheets at the programs) to participate in a second, post-intervention interview during the last few weeks of their child's enrolment at their respective program. Any other parents who wanted to participate at that time were welcomed and scheduled for an interview. Researchers were on-site to conduct the post-intervention interviews between May 26th and June 19th, 2015.

The on-site interviews were offered during each program's hours of operation, when parents' preschool child(ren) were participating in the programs. This was organized to reduce barriers to parents' participation as it would reduce the need for childcare services. As an incentive and thank-you for participating, at the end of each interview, participants were given a \$20 gift card to SC RPC for future programming and/or drop-in activities.

The *Evaluation* project aimed to recruit as many participants as possible in an attempt to reach data saturation. Marshall, Cardon, Poddar, and Fontenot (2013) explain that data saturation is an indication of study quality. Further, data saturation is the most rigorous justification of sample size and to get past the point of saturation, a researcher is required to conduct several

interviews past this point (Marshall et al., 2013). Reaching saturation was especially important given the case study methodology of this work; a particular strength of the case study approach is the depth of the research (Ary et al., 2010). The *Evaluation* project aimed to conduct 12-15 parent interviews (or 60-70% of the total number of children enrolled) from each facility at the pre-intervention interview stage to ensure data saturation.

This Thesis Study

In this thesis, data from two program sites (KLC and SOC) were combined into one data set. There were no anticipated differences between the findings from participants at KLC and SOC because both SC RPC programs utilized the same free-play based curriculum and had similar physical spaces. The only difference between the two sites was geographical location (one in urban Sherwood Park and one in rural Strathcona County) and the instructors implementing the programs. It was the view of the researchers on this project that parents recruited from KLC and SOC could provide insight into the value of free-play because they had enrolled their children in a program based on a philosophy of free-play. This aligns with Stake's (2003) view that cases are frequently selected on the premise of improved understanding of a phenomenon.

The purposeful sampling technique used for the *Evaluation* project supports the instrumental nature of this study (Stake, 2003) in that the actual issue under investigation is children's free-play, rather than the recreation preschool programs themselves (recall that an instrumental case study is more concerned with an issue that participants can provide insight on rather than the case itself (Ary et al., 2010; Stake, 2003)). Information on parent participation by both time periods (i.e., pre- and post-intervention) and sites (i.e., KLC and SOC) is presented in

Table 1. In terms of the participation rate, 14/21 possible families from KLC (66.67%) and 13/15 possible families from SOC (86.67%) were involved in the interview process.

Table 1. Participant Information by Time and Program

	Pre-intervention Interviews		Post-Intervention Interviews		Total
	KLC	SOC	KLC	SOC	
Number of Participants (n)	13	13	4	4	34

Data Generation and Interview Process

Interview Strategy

In order to address the proposed objectives, one-on-one semi-structured interviews with parents were conducted. Interviews focus and rely on collecting the perspective of the participant; they create the opportunity to collect information about peoples' experiences, feelings, knowledge, and opinions (Patton, 2002). Interviews are recognized as a valid form of data generation for case studies (Patton, 2002; Yin, 2014). This strategy aligns with the case study methodology in that researchers gather personal opinions (Stake, 2003) and circumstances (Ary et al., 2010; Stake, 2003), including environments and experiences (Ary et al., 2010), of their participants. A major advantage of interviewing as a means of data generation is the ability to build a rapport with participants and for participants to clearly explain their responses when answers may otherwise be ambiguous or unexpected, in addition to the breadth of possible discussion topics (Pershing, 2006). Disadvantages of interviews include the potential for interviewers to bias responses and produce distractions when taking notes during interviews, the difficulty in summarizing the final data due to the nature of the questions asked, and the time and expense consumed conducting interviews (2006).

Method and Location of Interviews

Parents were offered a choice of in-person and telephone interviews to participate in the *Evaluation* project. Parents who wished to schedule an interview on a day when no RA would be on-site at the program facilities, however, were asked to participate in a telephone, rather than an in-person, interview. On-site interviews took place in private rooms provided by the respective facility, keeping the cost of the project to a minimum and enhancing the comfort of participants due to the inherent familiarity with each site.

In-person and telephone interviews both have a number of advantages and disadvantages. In-person interviews provide more opportunity to build rapport with participants (Pershing, 2006). Interviewers can also see the non-verbal body language and cues that participants express, and use this to understand participants' reactions and adapt each interview's tone and style of conversation accordingly (Neutens & Robinson, 2010; Pershing, 2006). Telephone interviews, on the other hand, allow the interviewer to take notes without distracting the participant (Pershing, 2006), and are more efficient in time and cost than in-person interviews (Neutens & Robinson, 2010; Pershing, 2006). This type of interview is generally more relaxing for respondents who are unfamiliar with the interviewer, contributing to more forthcoming and truthful responses (Pershing, 2006). Telephone interviews also provide more anonymity for participants (Neutens & Robinson, 2010) and may also support free speech because participants are generally accustomed to using this method of communication (Morse & Field, 1995).

There are, however, disadvantages to both in-person and telephone interviews. Under either method, researchers can experience challenges accessing potential participants as interviews may be inconvenient (Neutens & Robinson, 2010) or lack incentive (Neutens & Robinson, 2010; Pershing, 2006). Researchers may also experience difficulties when trying to

summarize interview data, possibly related to a lack of standardization between interviews (Neutens & Robinson, 2010). Disadvantages to in-person interviews, specifically, include a lack of anonymity affecting the truthfulness of responses (Neutens & Robinson, 2010; Pershing, 2006), potential bias of the interviewer (Neutens & Robinson, 2010), the relationship between the interviewer and participant (2010), and the distraction of interviewer note-taking (Pershing, 2006). In-person interviews can also be more expensive due to the duration of time required (Neutens & Robinson, 2010; Pershing, 2006). Disadvantages of telephone interviews include the inability of interviewers to help participants relax or assess participant body language (Neutens & Robinson, 2010; Pershing, 2006).

Type of Interview

Semi-structured interviews are an appropriate form of data generation because researchers cannot predict the responses to research-relevant questions (Morse & Field, 1995). There are numerous benefits to this interview approach, including the opportunity to build a unique relationship with each participant (Yin, 2011) and to have a more conversation-style discussion (Patton, 2002). This approach enables researchers to see and understand relevant contextual aspects across participants' lives (Yin, 2011). Further, it gives interviewers the opportunity to probe and elicit further information on unanticipated, unclear, or vague aspects presented during the interviews (Bernard, 1994; Patton, 2002). Researchers can also control how to use the time allotted for each interview in this approach (Patton, 2002). This style of interviewing is useful in situations where there may not be an opportunity to conduct a second interview with each participant (Bernard, 1994), which was especially important for the *Evaluation* project given that participation in a pre-intervention interview did not commit parents to participating in a post-intervention interview.

This data generation strategy has previously been used in studies on parents' perceptions of children's play behaviours (e.g., Coyl-Shepherd & Hanlon, 2013; el Moussaoui & Braster, 2011; Holmes, 2011). As such, the interview guides from these studies were used to help develop the pre- and post-intervention interview guides for the *Evaluation* project (Appendix D and Appendix E, respectively). The semi-structured guides were developed with the understanding that maintaining continuity between interviews is important (Persching, 2006), particularly because of the number (four including myself) of interviewers involved in data generation for the project (Bernard, 1994). Developing and using a general interview guide helped to ensure that essential topics were discussed with all participants (Morse & Field, 1995; Patton, 2002), and gave participants the opportunity to share and explore ideas on related concepts (Morse & Field, 1995).

Closed- and open-ended questions were included in the interview guides to inject variety and prevent boredom of both the interviewers and the participants (Persching, 2006). The questions in the interview guides were grouped by topic, as suggested by Bernard (1994) and Persching (2006), and in a logical order (Morse & Field, 1995): general questions about the preschool-aged child, intervention specific questions, questions on children's free-play, child health and development, and child/family routines. Probes were also included in the interview guides to assist interviewers in collecting detailed information relevant to the research question and objectives. The use of probes encouraged participants to share more information without biasing their responses (Bernard, 1994) and ensured all relevant questions were adequately addressed (Neutens & Robinson, 2010).

As the interviews were the primary source of data generated with parents involved with the programs, the post-intervention interviews helped to ensure participant views were well

represented (Yin, 2011). These second interviews were conducted as a means of confirming the findings from the pre-intervention interviews. Asking the same questions in the post-intervention interviews as the pre-intervention interviews provided the opportunity to make comparisons between time points, and explore if and why participant attitudes changed (Bernard, 1994).

Yin (2011) identifies several reasons for pilot testing in research projects. While this activity will help to refine numerous aspects of the research, pilot testing interview guides gives researchers the opportunity to practice before interacting with participants (2011). Practicing with the interview guides helps researchers understand when participants are being genuine or more reserved, a potential limitation of conversation-style interviews (2011), and enables interviewers to address such issues, and helps to avoid interviewer bias (Neutens & Robinson, 2010).

The pre-intervention interview guide (questions and probes) used in the *Evaluation* project was pilot tested by all RAs who were intending to conduct interviews. The guide was tested with Co-Principal Investigator CN, who is an experienced interviewer and analyst (traits recommended by Pershing (2006) for a pilot test subject). The test subject also fit the participant inclusion criteria, as a parent of a preschool-aged child but who was not enrolled in any of the participating programs. This helped to ensure that the questions and probes were appropriate for obtaining the necessary information, and that interviews could be successfully completed within the anticipated duration of 45 minutes. The interview guide was revised after pilot testing, as recommended by Morse and Field (1995), to ensure the questions addressed the *Evaluation* project objectives (Mayan, 2009) and for ease of use by all researchers conducting the interviews. The original post-intervention interview guide was revised based on general impressions from the research team (i.e., those conducting the pre-intervention interviews, the

Project Coordinator, and the Co-Principal Investigators). Two of the researchers (myself included) who conducted the pre-intervention interviews conducted the post-intervention interviews; they were instructed to familiarize themselves with the post-intervention interview guide prior to their first post-intervention interview.

Interview Process

Upon meeting with each potential participant for an interview, the interviewer reviewed the information letter with each parent (Appendix A). All researchers conducting the interviews were required to ensure each parent understood their rights, and the benefits and risks so that they could make an informed decision about participating. After outlining the research process, objectives of the interviews, and how the data would be used, all parents were specifically asked if they were willing to participate. If they agreed to participate, participants were then asked if they consented to having their interview digitally recorded. The digital recordings were made to provide an accurate account of what participants said, opposed to having each interviewer take extensive notes from memory, and allowed the researchers to review the interview discussions afterwards (Bernard, 1994). It was explained to those who agreed to participate that they could end their participation or have the recorder turned off at any point during the interview. Each participant was then instructed to read and complete a consent form (Appendix F). Due to the duration of time between the pre- and post-intervention interviews (up to nine months), this process was completed again at the time of the post-intervention interviews.

Similar to the work of Vanderloo, Tucker, Johnson, and Holmes (2013), Lehrer and Petrakos (2011), and Tsitsani et al. (2012), parents were asked to fill out a demographic information sheet (Appendix C) immediately prior to the interview (unless a parent had already completed this form to indicate the family's willingness to participate in an interview) in order to

provide context to their responses. These demographic forms were only required by parents at their first interview for the *Evaluation* project. This information was collected to gather a comprehensive understanding of the parent (and preschool child's) home characteristics (Patton, 2002). Tables 2 through 5 outline the participant demographic information for this thesis study. In accordance with the *Evaluation* project's ethical agreements, all signed consent forms and demographic questionnaires have been kept in a locked filing cabinet with the study nominated principal investigator (N-PI) at the University of Alberta's PLACE Research Lab.

Table 2. Sex of Participants

	Women (n)	Men (n)	Total (n)
Number of Participants	32	2	34

Table 3. Participant Household Characteristics

	Minimum	Maximum	Average
Number of Children (n = 27 households)	1	4	2
Age of Children (n = 62 children amongst families)	0	15	5
Total combined household Income (n = 25 households)	\$40,000 - \$69,999/year	\$125,000 or more/year	\$100,000 - \$124,999/year

Table 4. Residential Opportunities of Participants

Residence Characteristics	Yes	No	Unsure/Don't Know
Playground within walking distance (n = 27)	19	8	-
Greenspace within walking distance (n = 26)	23	2	1
Yard space (n = 27)	26	1	-

Table 5. Participants' Residence Characteristics

Household Type	Semi-detached	Single-detached	Townhouse
Number of Households (n = 27)	1	25	1

After completing the consent and demographic forms, the interviews were then

conducted. In line with standard practices, whereby semi-structured interviews are generally conducted over thirty-sixty minutes (Pershing, 2006), the interviews for the *Evaluation* project were expected to last 45 minutes in duration. In actuality, the interviews for this study averaged 41 minutes in duration, ranging from 26:36 to 65:57 minutes. Upon completion of each interview, the participant(s) were given an honorarium (see the *Participant Sample and Recruitment* section of this chapter for details) and asked to fill out a receipt indicating they had received the gift card (Appendix G).

In addition to receiving consent to have the interviews digitally recorded, interviewers were instructed to take notes on what the participant said and how they reacted to certain questions, a practice advocated for by Bernard (1994) and Patton (2002). Note-taking was done strategically, on important topic areas rather than writing the entire conversation verbatim (2002). This was done to back-up information in the event that the respective digital recording was lost. In particular, interviewers were to note highlights of the interviews or points to go back to in order to confirm statements and key ideas (Pershing, 2006).

A contracted transcriptionist hired by the PLACE Research Lab transcribed all interview recordings; interview recordings were transcribed verbatim to ensure accuracy and quality of analysis (Poland, 1995). Further to this, a RA working on the *Evaluation* project ‘cleaned’ the transcript. In order to ‘clean’ the transcripts, the designated RAs had to listen to the digital recordings while following along with the transcript, and fill in any missing information that was inaudible to the transcriptionist and to correct any inaccuracies as typed by the transcriptionist. The transcriptionist and RAs were instructed to pay attention to major transcription pitfalls that can have a negative impact on data analysis, including sentence structure, quotations, and mistakes (1995). The transcripts were cleaned following criteria outlined in a transcription key (Appendix H); this ensured all interviews were transcribed to the same level of detail, followed a

similar format, and provided the same type of information. During transcription and cleaning, personal identifiers, such as names, were removed from the data to protect respondents' anonymity and conform to ethical standards (Government of Canada, 2010). The cleaning process is more efficient than having each interviewee review their respective transcript (Hagens, Dobrow, & Chafe, 2009). Interviewee transcript review also carries a number of risks, including the potential to send the transcript to the wrong participant, interviewee alterations to the meaning and wording of their responses, and delays in conducting analysis due to the time required for review (Hagens et al., 2009).

For ease of finding and analyzing the data (Mayan, 2009), each transcript included the participant number, time status (i.e., pre- or post-intervention interview), and the facility name where each participant's child was enrolled in programming. Transcripts generated from the interview recordings were saved on a password-protected server at the University of Alberta. The completed consent forms, demographic forms, and transcripts, marked with matching participant numbers, were stored in different locations in the PLACE Research Lab and/or on the University of Alberta server, to help protect the privacy and confidentiality of participants.

Involvement in the *Evaluation* Project

My role as a PLACE Research Lab Research Assistant working on the *Evaluation* project enabled me to be directly involved in the data collection process, including the parent interviews. In relation to the parent interviews, specifically, I assisted in drafting the Parent/Guardian Demographic Form (Appendix C), Parent/Guardian Interview Guides (Pre- and Post-Intervention) (Appendix D and E, respectively), Participant Sign-up Sheets (see Appendix B for example), and Honorarium Receipt (Appendix G). I also helped to create the Participant Thank-You Letter (Appendix I) that was sent to telephone interview participants with their honorarium.

Further, I drafted a Final Report Request Form (Appendix J) for parents to fill out after the post-intervention interviews, which parents could complete to receive a copy of the final *Evaluation* project report.

I was trained by one of the *Evaluation* project Co-Principal Investigators CN and Project Coordinator Ana Belon (AB) on conducting interviews using the pre-intervention interview guide. In terms of the method and location of interviews, I assisted in scheduling interviews with parents who requested telephone interviews and those who agreed to participate in an interview using the demographic forms, rather than the sign-up sheets. Following the interview process, I conducted 12 of the 43 pre-intervention interviews (12/26 pertinent to this master's thesis) and cleaned the transcripts of 22 recordings (12/26 pertinent to this master's thesis). A total of 13 post-intervention interviews were completed, of which I conducted six (2/8 pertinent to this master's thesis) and cleaned the transcript of one (not pertinent to this master's thesis). In total, I conducted 14 of the 34 interviews used for this thesis. Throughout the data collection period, I input all of the demographic information into SPSS and uploaded the cleaned transcripts into QSR NVivo. After all interviews were completed (and at the time of this writing), I coded the data from 37 pre-intervention interviews (26 pertinent to this master's thesis) and 8 post-intervention interviews (all pertinent to this master's thesis), and completed the analysis of all pertinent interviews (26 pre- and 8 post-intervention interviews), a process detailed in the *Analysis* section of this chapter.

Researcher Position Statement

I have gained knowledge and experience from my school, work, and private life that contributes to my understanding of any phenomenon. As a Caucasian woman in her late twenties, with an undergraduate degree in Recreation and Health Education and studying Public

Health (specializing in Health Promotion), I bring my own set of values and beliefs (i.e., perspectives or bias) to all of my endeavours, including this research. Although I attempt to be objective and use inductive content analysis to discuss the main emergent themes, there is implicit bias based on the selection of what I thought was most salient to the research question and objectives.

Within this work I consider myself an outsider in that I do not have any children. As this study's means of data generation was parent interviews, it may have been more difficult for researchers, such as myself, who do not have children to relate to participants' experiences or fully understand the factors surrounding their perceptions. The Co-Principal Investigators, and thesis committee members and examiners (AB, Dr. Kate Storey (KS), and Dr. Nancy Spencer-Cavaliere (NS-C)), however, have children from which they could bring insight to this work during the analysis by providing feedback on thesis drafts. Consultation throughout the analysis process with these individuals helped to mitigate any biases associated with not having children, as they could act as intermediaries between the parents and myself. There is, of course, some subjectivity in what I have considered important or interesting to present as the research findings, however, the use of inductive analysis has helped to mitigate this, in addition to the use of specific research objectives.

Research Paradigm, Ontology, and Epistemology

A research paradigm is a set of "...philosophical assumptions that guide and direct thinking and action" (Mertens, 2005, p. 7). A paradigm holds a set of views or understandings on how research should be conducted, how participants and researchers interact within the research setting, and how researchers' understanding or interpretation of the data is presented (Neutens & Robinson, 2010). The constructivist paradigm emphasises the need to provide the context within

which the data was collected and the background of participants in order to facilitate a complete understanding of the research findings (Mertens, 2005). This paradigm acknowledges that perceptions are contingent on the social world in which we live: culture and environment shape individual perceptions (Patton, 2002). Under this paradigm, it is the researcher's intention and responsibility to find, understand, and honour the multiple constructions inherent to their work (Mertens, 2005; Patton, 2002). Further, each researcher's background and biography (Denzin & Lincoln, 2003), and their individual assumptions, beliefs, bias, and values are inherent to the research project, requiring continuous reflection and monitoring throughout the research process (Mertens, 2005).

Ontology is the nature of reality and what can be known (Denzin & Lincoln, 2003; Mayan, 2009). A relativist ontology, which is associated with a constructivist paradigm, emphasises that reality is socially constructed and that there is no one objective reality (Denzin & Lincoln, 2003; Mertens, 2005; Patton, 2002). This perspective acknowledges that there can be a number of interpretations for similar events (Denzin & Lincoln, 2003; Yin, 2011; Yin, 2014) and that the interpretation of findings depends on the observer (Yin, 2014).

Epistemology is the way of understanding how we know what we do; it is a theory of knowledge within the research paradigm (Crotty, 1998). Within the social constructivist paradigm, researchers take a subjectivist epistemology (Denzin & Lincoln, 2003; Patton, 2002). Mertens (2005), and Denzin and Lincoln (2003) outline that research studies and data generation processes are iterative in that they are influenced by the researcher and the participant. Researcher and participant perspectives, however, will differ based on their age, ethnicity, gender, race, predispositions, and values (Denzin & Lincoln, 2003; Mertens, 2005; Yin, 2011): data generation strategies under the constructivist paradigm are often more interactive (e.g.,

dialogue between an interviewer and interviewee) given this understanding (Mertens, 2005). Interviews are a valid and frequently used method of generating data when conducting research under this paradigm (2005). Further, there is an understanding that the perspectives gained from participants are filtered through that of the researcher (Yin, 2011): the interview "...is not a direct representation of the participant's life but a representation filtered through the participant's relationship with the interviewer and sense of the interviewer's interest" (Mayan, 2009, p. 67).

Analysis

Following an inductive approach to generating a theory about a phenomenon, a thematic content analysis was undertaken to understand parents' perspectives in this study. Using an inductive approach, researchers try to understand relationships within the data without assuming what will be important in advance of the analysis (Patton, 2002). Inductive analysis requires the generation of codes, categories, and themes, which can be compared to relevant literature through an iterative or cyclical process (Kahlke, 2014; Yin, 2014). According to Yin (2011), qualitative analysis consists of five phases: compiling, disassembling, reassembling, interpreting, and concluding.

In order to become immersed in and familiar with the data, I cleaned some of the interview transcripts (see the *Involvement in Evaluation Project* section of this chapter for details) and listened to all of the digital interview recording before beginning the compiling stage of analysis (Yin, 2011). Organization is essential to the first phase of analysis. All data collected throughout the research process needs to be systematically compiled into a database. Yin (2011) believes that thoroughly organized data will contribute to the ease of information access and a stronger analysis of the materials, resulting in more rigorous research. Compiling the data into an electronic database, such as QSR NVivo, enables researchers to meaningfully group data. The

transcripts generated from the interviews and the demographic questionnaires collected from the families were compiled and gathered into QSR NVivo and SPSS databases, respectively.

Keeping in mind the research objectives, the data was categorized in a way that reflected the focus of the study: the interview data was grouped by pre- and post-intervention interview status, and program location.

The second phase of the analysis process is disassembling the data (Yin, 2011).

Disassembling the compiled data was done by breaking the data down into smaller pieces and coding the information accordingly. Coding is the process of assigning a word or making a note on the data (Mayan, 2009; Saldana, 2013), such as on a single word or a full paragraph (Saldana, 2013). While a code captures the essence of the datum, a code can, and should, be repeated throughout the data set due to similarities and patterns in human behaviour: highlighting these consistencies across the datum is the primary goal of the researcher. When starting to code, Saldana (2013) recommends coding one participant's data completely, then progressing to the second, and so forth. This is due to the likelihood that coding will influence the initial coding and recoding of other participants' data. This phase is recursive: coding the information may need to be repeated several times based on fit with the data (Saldana, 2013; Yin, 2011). Importantly, coding the data enables the researcher to methodically move to a higher level of conception from the original work, which allows researchers to sort and group the data (during the reassembling phase) to gain insight and find consistencies (Yin, 2011).

Throughout the disassembling phase, a coding manual was developed. A coding manual is a set of instructions that encompasses a multitude of possible codes (Bryman, Bell, & Teevan, 2012). The development of the manual also helps ensure intra-coder reliability when coded transcripts are analyzed (Bryman et al., 2012). According to Saldana (2013), researchers should

aim to refine their codes throughout the analysis process, giving the researcher a more abstract perspective of the data set. A coding manual helps to keep track of such refinements. A code manual (codebook) with a list of codes and pertinent definitions was created during coding. The codebook was reviewed half way through and at the end of coding to collapse repetitive codes.

Reassembling the data (the third phase of analysis) requires the researcher to reorganize the information gathered from the disassembling process (i.e., codes) into relevant clusters or sequences (Yin, 2011). During inductive analysis, concepts, dimensions, and patterns emerge from the data through the observations or ideas presented (Mayan, 2009; Patton, 2002; Yin, 2011). Central to this phase is the internal (and possibly external) questioning of the data, and the search for patterns (Patton, 2002; Yin, 2011) or connections between codes (Mayan, 2009). The reassembling process enables researchers to consider alternative arrangements and themes within the data until the information is gathered in a conceptually meaningful way (Yin, 2011). Saldana (2013) points out that as analysis progresses from coding to categorizing the researcher transforms the data into a more conceptual format.

Yin (2011) recommends that researchers continue and repeat the disassembling and reassembling phases until broad themes emerge from the data. Through this method, the researcher will determine which themes run amongst the categories, tying them together until roughly three main themes are found (Mayan, 2009; Roden, 2003). It is possible, however, that numerous themes are created, in such case the researcher needs to determine what is most salient and illuminative: “prioritizing is done according to the utility, salience, credibility, uniqueness, heuristic value, and feasibility of the classification schemes” (Patton, 2002, p. 466). In this work, QSR NVivo was used to amalgamate the codes, then the codes written on sticky notes and used to create a visual representation of the data, which offered mobility and fluidity in determining

pertinent themes and categories, and then QSR NVivo was used to group codes into categories and themes. According to Yin (2011), once broad themes have emerged the researcher can move on to the fourth phase of analysis.

Reassembling is when the codes and categories create a framework for the organization and description of the data (Patton, 2002). One method of arranging the data to help determine meaningful themes is through the use of a data array (Yin, 2011). In an array, codes are put into hierarchies of conceptually relevant (abstract) information down to more specific (concrete) information. This method helps to point out associations, relationships, or groupings that may otherwise not be considered, resulting in the assembly of research-relevant concepts.

During the reassembling phase, researchers need to be particularly cautious of their biases. Yin (2011) recommends considering these three procedures as precautions: make constant comparisons while reassembling the data, look for negative cases that may challenge your codes' strength, and constantly be thinking about alternative explanations. Looking for negative cases or rival explanations is a means of strengthening a study; researchers should be skeptical about events or actions, the genuineness of participant responses, and accuracy of personal assumptions.

Interpretation is the fourth phase of the analysis process (Yin, 2011) and is characterized by the use of the reassembled data to create a new narrative, culminating in a full interpretation of the research results. This stage allows researchers to use their critical thinking skills to showcase the study findings. It is in the interpretation phase that meanings, conclusions, comparisons, frameworks, and theories can be extrapolated from the data: this is when the significance of the data is determined (Patton, 2002).

Interpretations can either be a description on its own, a description with a call to action,

or an explanation (Yin, 2011). Regardless of the type of interpretation, this phase can be initiated by using either the main research idea or questions, or patterns found within the data. There are two extreme pitfalls cautioned by Yin (2011) in terms of interpretation: a superficial interpretation of the data and an interpretation that suffocates the data quality. A helpful perspective, as presented by Yin (2011), indicates that the possibilities of data presentation depend on the depth of the relevant research literature: it is important to show how the research will build on relatively ‘weak’ literature; when working with ‘strong’ literature, it is important to show a unique perspective brought about from the research findings; and with ‘moderate’ strength literature, it is important to find middle ground in presenting the data to enhance current literature and demonstrate an individualistic aspect.

The fifth and final phase of the analysis process is concluding in relation to the research findings and interpretations (Yin, 2011). The conclusion can be seen as a way to tie all aspects of the study together in a statement or set of ideas extrapolated from the study findings. It is appropriate at this point to outline what has been learned from the study and infer implications of the research to readers. Yin (2011) outlines several types of conclusions that may be useful to the culmination of the project, which include, among others, the call for future research, challenges to stereotypes, new insights into behaviours, and generalizing to broader circumstances.

Rigour

From a holistic standpoint, rigour is concerned with issues of truth, generalizability, consistency, and neutrality in research (Ary et al., 2010), or what Mayan (2009) explains as “...how and why...” (p. 100) the findings are noteworthy. Rigour is contingent on the credibility, confirmability, dependability, and transferability of a study (2009). There are various tools and process researchers can use to enhance each of these factors to help ensure a study, and research

project, is conducted and completed as rigorously as possible.

Credibility

The credibility of a study is based on the accuracy of finding (Ary et al., 2010) or the “...correspondence between the way the respondents actually perceive social constructs and the way the researcher portrays their viewpoints” (Mertens, 2005, p. 254). Credibility can be enhanced in a number of ways (i.e., peer review/debriefing, investigator triangulation, member checking, prolonged engagement, negative case analysis, etc.). Credibility in this study was enhanced through peer review/debriefing and the use of low-inference descriptors (i.e., quotes) (Ary et al., 2010). Regular peer debriefing was done during the analysis of the data by discussing the findings and possible interpretations with one of the Co-Principal Investigators, CN. The use of verbatim quotes in this work also enhanced the study’s credibility: by using the participants’ own words readers can clearly understand the study findings.

Confirmability

The confirmability of a study is related to the objectivity undertaken when performing analysis; any reader should be able to trace the interpretations back to the source using the logic presented (Mertens, 2005). Mertens (2005) explains that confirmability can be achieved through the use of an audit trail, peer debriefing, and reflexivity. The confirmability of this study was enhanced by the use of an audit trail, along with reflexive journaling (Mayan, 2009). Reflexive journaling provides the researcher with an opportunity to detail their personal values and beliefs, in order to suspend knowledge of the importance and value of the subject. Stating biases or assumptions prior to data analysis also helps to avoid personal thoughts or beliefs influencing the resultant work. Journaling can also be used to note reflections, hunches, or ideas that arise from listening to participants during interviews, and detail any confusion.

Dependability

The dependability of a study is “...the extent to which variation can be tracked or explained” (Ary et al., 2010, p. 502). The dependability of any study can be supported by the production of an audit trail, the consistency of the research findings, and the agreement on coding between researchers (Ary et al., 2010). Kahlke (2014) points out that the use of an audit trail is important for all methodologies in creating solid boundaries and reflecting on any ethical consequences of the research. This study used an audit trail to document how and why decisions were made, which was particularly important given that this study was a portion of a larger research project.

Memo writing was performed throughout the analysis of this study, as recommended by Saldana (2013) and Yin (2011). It is recommended that researchers keep a notebook accessible at all times for jotting down anything related to the research project, such as concerns, ideas, or questions (Saldana, 2013). Memo writing helps to keep track of changes in ideas, and is helpful in tracking what concepts were already considered, and insights or thoughts that may prove helpful later in the analysis process (Yin, 2011). Saldana (2013) discusses the value of memo writing from the start of the research process, particularly when commencing the initial reading or reviewing the data generated for analysis, as these memos may be helpful throughout analysis. Further, notes with ideas and memories, which could be forgotten later in the research process, may be useful during later analysis (Tessier, 2012). This strategy was particularly important during the analysis process due to the large number of interviews conducted.

Transferability

The transferability of a study is related to the readers’ use of the findings in settings outside of the research project (Mayan, 2009). This can be enhanced through descriptive

adequacy and cross-case comparison. By describing the research setting and giving context to the interviews, readers can understand and react appropriately to the data (Mertens, 2005; Yin, 2011). It is important to note that connections made between the study and other settings are the responsibility of the reader, rather than the researcher themselves (Mertens, 2005). In this thesis study, an outline of the *Evaluation* project context, participant demographic information, and the use of verbatim quotes give readers information to assist in understanding the data for their own purposes.

Involvement of Thesis Committee Members

The committee members associated with this master's thesis have been engaged to varying degrees throughout the research process. One of the Co-Principal Investigators and my thesis supervisor, CN, was directly involved through consultation during the analysis of the data (compiling to concluding). Other researchers involved with the *Evaluation* project were also consulted during the development of this master's thesis. The *Evaluation* Project Coordinator, AB, contributed by organizing interviews and materials, providing insight from the entire *Evaluation* project data set, and assisted with compiling the parent interview data. As an expert on early childhood development and the other Co-Principal Investigator, JH, provided expertise on early childhood education and play throughout the development and compilation of the literature review. All thesis committee members, AB, CN, JH, and KS were involved in the later stages of thesis development, by providing guidance and feedback on the drafted versions. There has also been assistance from other PLACE Research Lab staff (e.g., RAs) during the research process, particularly in conducting parent interviews and the cleaning of interview transcripts. Upon completing analysis, the Co-Principal Investigators (CN and JH), Project Coordinator

(AB), and RAs helped with knowledge translation activities through the provision of feedback for conference presentations.

Summary

This chapter reviewed background information on the *Evaluation* project along with the methods and procedures associated with the parent interviews from the play-based recreation preschool programs. Information on the participant sample has been described in relation to this thesis study. Further, the involvement and perspective of the author, the data analysis process, and the rigour of this thesis has been reviewed. This information can be used to understand and contextualize this work, generally, and the research findings, specifically.

The following two chapters present the study findings, in alignment with the objectives of this thesis; *Chapter 4: Parents' Perceptions of Children's Free-Play* aims to address Objective 1, while *Chapter 5: Parents' Involvement in their Children's Free-Play* aims to address Objective 2. These two chapters report both the results from the parent interviews and the interpretation of those results. *Chapter 6: Conclusions* presents the implications of this work and the limitations of the parent interviews from the *Evaluation* project and findings of this study.

Chapter 4: Parents' Perceptions of Children's Free-Play

The objective of this chapter is to understand the perceptions and value, if any, of parents in regards to children's free-play. Detailed within the next four sections are the study results (what is free-play?; what impacts children's free-play activities/behaviours?; why is free-play important?) and the discussion (what are some of the key messages from the results?). These four sections help to understand the value of free-play from the perspective of parents whose preschool-aged children are enrolled in free-play based recreation preschool programs.

Parents' Conception of Children's Free-Play - Results

Throughout the interviews, parents were asked to explain what 'free-play' brings to mind for them. Their understandings focused on three main aspects: self-selection, self-direction, and group composition. These three areas were discussed across the interviews, and were supported or extrapolated on throughout the course of each interview. While parents recognized their involvement in children's free-play, as discussed in *Chapter 5*, their definitions indicated that free-play was a place for children to be independent, enjoy themselves, and use their imagination. Place, in this context, is more than the physical space for free-play, as it also includes the personal autonomy of those involved and the opportunity to participate.

Self-Selected

Parents widely characterized free-play as an opportunity for children to make decisions: this was a time when children had the freedom to explore. Free-play was a chance for children to choose, for example, the type, duration, and location of each activity, the resources (i.e., equipment and materials) to use, and the people with whom to interact. Although parents thought these choices were important, children's decisions had to be made within limitations or

boundaries (e.g., not hurting anyone, not damaging anything, etc.). Parents also saw the opportunity to be involved by giving their children choices.

- “Free-play to me really, in my mind, I don’t know if it’s the right definition, but it just – it’s exactly as it sounds, it’s not rigid rules, boundaries, it’s you know, here’s a bunch of things you do what you want with them.” SOC-09-RP
- “Uh free-play is, I just see them with uh- a bunch of *options* of things to play with, whatever it is... everything there and it’s *whatever* they want to play with and however they want to play with it... So a lot of options of things to do, and them making the choice of what they want to do, and um, and what-how they want to play a certain activity.” SOC-11-RP
- “Yeah do whatever you want, kind of no rules until we need rules. Um, that’s kind of, that’s my philosophy generally, um, yeah that’s how – what I’d define as free-play.” SOC-12-RP
- “Well yeah free-play is what he wants to do, as long as he’s not doing stupid stuff, you know, wrecking things and like that, if he’s playing.” SOC-15-RP

Parents reiterated the necessity of choice within free-play during the post-intervention interviews; free-play was an opportunity for children to make their own decisions and have control in their lives. For example, children have a choice of activities, behaviours, resources, and playmates during free-play. Children’s decision-making during free-play was constrained by the amount of time they were given and the resources that were available. Additionally, parents felt that their children, generally, knew the household rules (e.g., not to play on the road) and would make their choices accordingly.

- “Um, it gives her options and it lets her play with different things that she might not play with, because she’s told to play with them.” SOC-01-OP

Self-Directed

Free-play was fundamentally identified as being self-directed. Children are not forced to engage in a way that they are not ready for or do not want during free-play: children do not need to follow instructions. Even though parents understood that children still need to be monitored or supervised, they felt that free-play should not be interrupted or restricted by adults. While parents could participate as a playmate, they acknowledged that their direction within free-play would take away from their child’s opportunity to make decisions for themselves. This sentiment was particularly salient given the perspective that parents could ‘ruin’ children’s free-play by intervening. There was also mention, though not widely discussed, that parents could be involved in children’s free-play by asking questions (i.e., subtly giving their children ideas) in order to stimulate learning and then removing themselves from the dynamic. In spite of this, there was an indication that parents did not have expectations for their children during free-play other than adhering to household rules.

- “I call it more down time, like free-play it’s, even though they are doing stuff it’s, it’s stuff that’s not like um, necessity, like given to them by an adult or something to do, it’s something that they can just enjoy without pressure, or regulations, or whatever.” KLC-08-RP
- “Um, free-play to me brings to mind no adult led activity, so it’s just kind of okay kids it’s free-play, go find your activity and within that activity or activities, however you feel like you want to go from one to the other, it’s not dictated in terms of when it starts, or yeah if it would be dictated perhaps when it starts and it finishes, but kids can just kind of be free

to go from one activity to the next and engage in that activity on their own, without having an adult present within that activity to direct their play.” KLC-15-RP

- “So they’re not um, being forced to engage in anything in a way that they aren’t perhaps maybe ready to, or desire to, but that’s kind of a way of saying to them be a kid, do what you do best, play with what you want to play – obviously within some – some boundaries [...]”

KLC-15-RP

- “So I think sometimes you ruin – you can ruin their play by stepping in and trying to cause it, you know as adults we have our – we see things in, we have our, we want to impose order on something.” SOC-02-RP

- “But um, everybody likes to be able to do what they want to do, um, they don’t want to always have to be told what they have to do. They want to use their brain and learn and yeah.” SOC-06-RP

In the post-intervention interviews, parents reinforced the idea that they should not direct children’s free-play (i.e., not tell their children what to do or use). Parents said that they had to let their children have free-play opportunities (i.e., time for free-play) but they did not plan what was to be done during these periods. Parents could ask questions about what their children were doing to show support or try to understand their child’s play activities or behaviours, but direct adult interference was limited.

Group Composition

Parents identified free-play as an opportunity for children to play alone (i.e., engage in solitary or parallel play), interact with one other person (i.e., partner play), or collaborate with a group of people (i.e., group play). Free-play was an opportunity to spend time with others (e.g., siblings, parents, grandparents, cousins, friends, pets, other adults, babysitters, etc.) in a more

informal manner, regardless of if children were playing the same thing or engaging in different activities. Even though they identified free-play as being fundamentally child-directed, parents understood that they still have a role in their children's play, either as a playmate or a supervisor; free-play was not an excuse for parents to be passive. Differing (contrasting) perspectives were shared amongst parents, where some felt that their children had more free-play opportunities when people were not available (i.e., parents were busy or siblings were at school), while other parents felt that children participated in more free-play when people were around with whom to participate.

- “Um, yeah usually she plays more like with her friends, [...]” KLC-07-RP
- “Free-play to me brings to mind um, grabbing an actual toy or a colouring book, or something and taking it into a group setting, and involving other people I guess.” KLC-14-RP

Parents shared similar sentiments during the post-intervention interviews; children could free-play with siblings, friends, grandparents, parents, or the family pet (i.e., dog). Parents could be involved (i.e., participate) in free-play with their children, however, their direction was often seen as being counter-productive to the independence associated with free-play. Parent involvement could include, for example, stepping in to help resolve conflicts between playmates, or facilitating partner or group play through the scheduling of opportunities (e.g., play dates).

Parents' Understanding of What Impacts Children's Free-Play - Results

Based on parents' observations, several factors internal and external to children were associated with their play* activities and behaviours (e.g., types of activities, quality of

* The interview guides, and recreation preschool programs, were developed on the premise of 'free-play.' Over the course of the interviews, however, parents rarely used the term 'free-play;' this term was used most often when parents were asked specifically about free-play (i.e., when asked what 'free-play' meant). The ensuing results make

interactions, level of engagement, and duration of activities). Playmates, setting, and resources were extrinsic factors that could influence children's play activities and behaviours; characteristics, experiences, and the current state of children were intrinsic factors that could dictate their play activities and behaviours. These extrinsic and intrinsic factors could help to understand changes and variations in children's play from one situation to another (i.e., play opportunities) or differences between children's play, such as that between siblings.

Presence of Playmates

The presence of others could have an impact on the play activities and behaviours of children. Specifically, the availability (i.e., presence and number) and characteristics of playmates were related to differences or changes in the play children participated. In general, parents indicated that children's play with others could impact the type, intensity, and location of activities, and quality of interactions (i.e., behaviours). Parents associated partner or group play with children's opportunities to learn (i.e., new abilities, ideas, and words) or get help from others; children could also share their knowledge with others during play.

The availability of potential playmates could change children's solitary play to partner or group play, though this was not always the case. While parents indicated that children would often take advantage of the presence of others, some examples were given where children decided to participate in solitary play even when a playmate was available. Parents shared that their household pet (i.e., dog) could positively impact their child's activities by getting them outdoors and more active. Further, the number of children present could contribute to changes in

the assumption that when parents spoke of 'play' they were really talking about 'free-play,' despite the incongruence of these terms in the academic literature. When possible (i.e., deemed suitable) the term 'free-play' is used to portray findings that referred directly to this experience.

play with parents indicating that, for instance, the intensity of play (i.e., volume and energy levels) could fluctuate with the size of the group.

- “Um, because when there’s lots of kids it gets overwhelming but, yeah and then when there’s fewer kids it’s great, because then they actually interact with the other kids who are there.” KLC-09-RP
- “I think there’s 20 kids or something. So there’s a little bit more going on than you know, kids everywhere and the more kids there is, the more quiet she tends to be.” SOC-01-RP
- “When I’ve got more than one kid at home, they’re playing together.” SOC-03-RP

During the interviews, parents identified that their children’s play differed based on who their playmates were: the characteristics of others was an important factor in play experiences. Age, development (abilities, such as comprehension and leadership, and physical size), and gender were attributes of playmates, which could potentially impact children’s play. The importance of having playmates of the same age and level of development in order to play ‘properly’ was occasionally mentioned. Parents related age differences between children and their siblings, cousins, or others (i.e., friends, peers) to the quality of their social (play) interactions and types of activities. Some parents attributed large age differences between children to the (poor) quality of their interactions. The presence of older playmates, however, could alleviate the need for parent supervision, giving children more freedom.

- “Um, yeah usually she plays more like with her friends, cause they’re her own age as opposed to like, her brother - well her older brother is *much* older and then her younger brother is three, and he’s not really into playing dolls or anything like that.” KLC-07-RP
- “[...] my sister has the wrong age of kids, if you will (laughs), for my boys really, cause her – eight is the closest, and they don’t really necessarily play together so well.” KLC-

13-RP

- “I *love* how whatever they’re into, they teach him how to create *better* Lego things, or create new games, or um, all that kind of stuff, so it’s neat seeing, you know, his older friends teach him that he had just thought outside the box of yet, so.” SOC-04-RP

The development of potential playmates was important for the type of activities and behaviours children participated in and, even, the amount of group play in which they participated. Differences between playmate ability could give some children teaching and learning opportunities, but could also act as a barrier to interactions due to, for example, limited comprehension for games or physical aptitude for rough-and-tumble play. Playmates’ leadership capacity could also impact children’s play experiences: children could be required to take on leadership roles or act as a follower given their playmate’s abilities or preferences (e.g., leading or listening). Some parents worried that (sibling) interactions would escalate beyond their preschoolers’ level of development, though developmental differences could also provide motivation for children who want to replicate others’ (i.e., their sibling’s) play. Finally, some parents attributed loud, energetic, rough-and-tumble, gross motor behaviours displayed during group play experiences to the heterogeneity of the groups’ (male) gender dynamic.

- “She does things that she knows she’s not supposed to – to get his approval. Once he starts laughing and she has his approval, then he joins in and can escalate it because of his higher developmental level.” KLC-01-RP
- “So I think it’s good for her to have kids that are actually like at that same *level* that she can interact with, and play *properly*.” KLC-07-RP
- “[...] depending on who the children are at the play groups, uh which children are there specifically um, she tends to be a bit more of a follower, she’ll kind of do what an- uh -

an older kid or someone who's pushing a little bit more leadership, will do. Um, if – if there's no one really stepping up, then she certainly will, she'll certainly start, any kids that are willing to do what she's doing, she'll kind of – she'll lead by example for them.”

SOC-12-RP

The potential for playmates to impact the play of children was also discussed during the post-intervention interviews, particularly in relation to what activities were undertaken, how children behaved, and the location of activities. At this time there was an indication that playmates were important to children's free-play experiences, and that children could learn (e.g., communication skills), teach (e.g., share knowledge), and get ideas (on how to play) from others during free-play. Parents shared similar sentiments about the availability (presence and number) and characteristics of potential playmates during these interviews. They noted that their children would join or copy others (especially younger children copying older sibling) and, even, choose to play with others who look bored in order to get them engaged. Despite the potential facilitation of play with the presence of playmates, others could also be a source of distraction for children. Further, the busyness of an environment (i.e., size of group) could be overwhelming and make free-play more difficult for children.

- “Ah, yeah I mean there's big changes in, in their growth mentally I think if they play – get to play with um, peers – their peers their age and and they're learning from them as well on different – um – aspects of play and how to – how to communicate better.”

SOC-10-OP

In terms of characteristics, the age and development of potential playmates was identified as contributing to play experiences. The age and development of older playmates could enable children to move further away from their parents (physically) and ensure that younger children

were looked after. Children's ability to cooperate (i.e., share leadership roles) could impact how they interacted with one another in either partner or group play.

- “You can tell sometimes when he's been playing with kids with older siblings, but (laughs) it's not bad really, it's just. Well like just talking about um, playing things like Zombies or whatever, you know it doesn't – it's not – it doesn't really make me uncomfortable, it's just like oh I didn't know you learned about that yet.” SOC-02-OP

Physical Setting

Parents discussed play happening in many locations, including homes, recreation and childcare facilities, parks and playgrounds, and vehicles. They widely acknowledged that their children's play changed based on their physical setting or location. Parents identified certain spaces for specific opportunities, such as parks for social interactions, though it was noted that visiting spaces away from the home was not a guarantee that children could interact with others (i.e., other children may not be there). Programs were identified as places for children to have new experiences that they did not or could not get at home. Comparisons in children's play were specifically made between the home and other environments, and between indoor and outdoor settings. Some parents felt that their children's independence during play changed between the home and other locations.

- “Um, I guess when they were like at a grandparents house or something, she would be – excuse me, she would be I guess a little more um, attentive to herself. Like she would do more things on her own. While she's at home she tends to want me to participate in a lot of the things that she does. But I guess when she was at the grandparents or friends, like family – other family, that she'll kind of wander off and play on her own a lot more readily than when she's at home.” KLC-12-RP

- “But at the park it, that usually the reason why we go to the park is that she can decide exactly what she wants to do at the park, who she wants to play with, what she wants to do, I will never tell her that no she can’t sit on the swings if that’s what she wants to do.”

KLC-12-RP

- “So it, it’s you know, getting that physical activity every day, the running and playing. Cause I know my son tends to play harder outside than he does inside, so it’s just helping to like burn that energy, [...]”

SOC-03-RP

- “Um, outside I think that – I would say she’s more loud and – I don’t know, more of a free spirit outside. Inside is a little more contained, a little more – I don’t know, a controlled setting I guess you could say. Outside there’s not – not a lot they can’t do.”

SOC-14-RP

Parents identified various factors that contributed to differences in play between settings, which included the features of a location and the environmental conditions. Features of a location that parents related to their children’s play included the natural assets it possessed (e.g., hills for tobogganing, nature to collect objects), the size of the space (e.g., length of driveway for running, open space for riding toys), the privacy of one’s yard (i.e., lack of privacy meant no unsupervised play in a shared green space), and the geographical location (i.e., along a city street for watching passers-by). In terms of environmental conditions, parents identified the season and weather as impacting their children’s play, including the type, duration, and frequency of play (mostly related to outdoor experiences), and the types of equipment that could be utilized. Specific weather patterns that limited outdoor play options, included (extreme) cold temperatures, rain, snow, and wind. Further, some seasons were associated with specific opportunities for play, such as going camping, and visiting lakes or spray parks in the summer.

- “Whatever he comes up with. Um (pauses to think), the good old classic stick, he plays with a stick a lot, thank god, cause that’s um, I don’t know I think it’s one of the best toys in the whole world, you can do a lot of things with a stick. (laughs jokingly) But um, yeah it’s, he plays different things outside than he does inside.” SOC-04-RP
- “Fall it starts to drop off to maybe a third, and winter, you know fall and winter are virtually the same, ’cause they, she really enjoys playing in the snow. So if it’s not minus 30, sometimes there’s more to do when there’s snow than there is say right now where it’s kind of you know it’s, it’s kind of an in between. So I – I’d say still probably an hour or two a day she’d be outside playing unless it’s minus 30.” SOC-09-RP
- “But um, as far as play, and then yeah outside, uh outside’s a little bit less kind of make believe, it’s much more – much more real stuff outside.” SOC-12-RP

During the post-intervention interviews, parents identified that different locations could facilitate different types and intensities of play activities and behaviours in their children. The features of spaces that contributed to children’s free-play experiences included size and natural assets, such as trees and trails. Further, there was an explicit indication that the outdoors was for more physically active play-types (e.g., a place to ‘burn energy’). Specific locations that parents associated with children’s free-play included homes, and parks (e.g., spray parks) and playgrounds.

Tangible Resources

Resources (i.e., equipment and materials) may not be a requirement for free-play, but many parents identified that resources were an important part of (or inherent to) the free-play experience of their children. Parents mentioned that different stations or a variety of resources could impact or facilitate children’s free-play by giving them options from which to choose and,

possibly, by guiding their decisions. Throughout the interviews, discussions indicated that the type of equipment available could impact play dynamics (i.e., solitary or partner/group play), the intensity of the play (i.e., high energy), or the engagement of children in play (some were sources of distraction). Parents also noticed that their children would use resources in ways that differed from their traditional purpose and, even, in ways parents did not expect. Parents discussed the availability, type, and mobility of equipment as potential influencers of their children's play experiences.

Parents identified that children would take advantage of (i.e., use) resources that were available at the places they went. In terms of availability, parents discussed children's potential to independently obtain resources, the set up of resources, and the duplication of resources (i.e., having more than one of the same items) in relation to the duration and quality of children's interactions with others, the type of resources selected, and the type of activities undertaken. Several parents indicated that certain resources were not always accessible, requiring children to ask or request parents for resources to participate in specific activities (e.g., arts and crafts).

While children generally used whatever was available to them, parents discussed factors related to the type (e.g., gender-stereotype, novelty, size, etc.) of available resources in relation to children's play. Children would use equipment typically associated with any gender-type (i.e., 'boy' or 'girl' toys) regardless of their gender. Parents mentioned that children would engage in solitary play when their resources were not interactive or were new to them. Resources that children do not normally have access to were identified as novel items and were, therefore, perceived as being more exciting for children. The size of resources could facilitate different experiences, such as gross motor behaviours. Some video games could also help to facilitate or deter social interactions, though parents often mentioned that too much time using electronics

would negatively impact children's behaviours (e.g., aggression, volume, rationality).

- “Yeah they, when they play apart usually it's when they kind of find a toy that doesn't really need to be interactive with someone else. Um, so they'll – they'll kind of go apart and come together. Like if they're playing trucks, they'll kind of make their own little ramps and drive them, and then they'll see that the other one's doing something fun and they'll join in. So they kind of – yeah come in and go back depending on what they find and what they're playing with, and what the next thing they see is.” KLC-10-RP
- “[...] too much electronics makes them overly aggressive, it stimulates their frontal cortex way too much and they get um, they get abusive to one another. They get loud and obnoxious, and they get, they don't listen as well – like if you want them to do something or change something, they get very snappy. And then they get uh highly irritated for – for anything. Like if someone else wants to do something with them, then they're really snappy and irritated, and they get that way with too much electronics.” SOC-13-RP

The potential mobility of resources helped children to maintain their engagement in play activities or behaviours from one setting to another. Parents explained that their children would move or transfer resources between settings, such as bringing toys with them from home to parks. This allowed children to combine resources from different locations, and to participate in the same activities or behaviours across settings. Children's opportunity to bring resources with them when travelling or to different facilities enabled children to play in areas not typically associated with play (e.g., the car).

- “But um, you know as far as the – the actual play, I think she likes to play those same games that she plays inside, just bringing them out to a different environment.” SOC-11-RP

There was cross over between the setting and resource ideas parents discussed in relation to their children's play. Parents identified that their children's play may change from one setting to another due to the different type of resources available at different locations. Going out to different places was an opportunity to use resources that children did not have available to them at home. Further, different spaces associated with the home environment, such as a basement compared to upstairs, or indoors compared to outdoors, were also mentioned in relation to differences in children's play activities and behaviours, whereby different spaces within the home hosted different types of resources for children to utilize. Parents indicated that the outdoors was for larger equipment, given the space required for such resources. Some parents felt that their children's play did not change from one setting to another because the same resources were available in either location.

- “Um, because the activities outside consist of larger toys, and so yeah so he wouldn't have that same – so we don't have a slide in the house, so then he's got access to the slide outside and his outside vehicles and the trucks that he plays with are larger, and so they kind of have a different capacity for play than what would be inside our home. Um, and that's when he does his running, so his – his more gross motor activity and that stuff takes place outside. And yeah the sidewalk chalk, all those things that yeah wouldn't take place inside the house.” KLC-15-RP
- “Uh I find with her really likes the swings, so when we go to a playground that's the first thing she wants me to push her on the swings, and we don't have swings at home. So, you know that's kind of we don't have playground apparatus at our home, so they she enjoys, you know, going down the slide and things like that. You know we don't have that here, so it's a bit of a novelty.” SOC-09-RP

Conversations during the post-intervention interviews confirmed that resources were an important part of the free-play experience for children and, even, that free-play may be ‘easier’ when resources were available. The availability, type, and mobility of resources were all associated with children’s play in the post-intervention interviews. The availability of resources could make it easier for children to engage in free-play, however, an abundance of resources could also (negatively) impact the duration and depth of play if they presented children with too many choices. A variety of resources could help to keep children engaged in play (and provide some novelty) and give children more choice in the free-play experience. The type of resources (e.g., electronics) could impact children’s behaviours and act as a distraction for children. The potential for resources to transfer from one setting to another enabled children to free-play in locations uncharacteristically associated with this experience, such as the family vehicle, because they could bring toys with them. While minimally discussed, there was mention that resources may not actually be required for free-play to occur because spaces can be set up to support free-play without the necessity of additional equipment or materials.

- “I think it’s fairly easy for children to participate in free-play. Um, we have like a wide variety of things that’s easily accessible for her. Um. Games, books, crafts, things like that. [Interviewer: So would you think that it’s more – it’s important for the children to have those things to play with, that it’s harder if they don’t have things to play with for them to free-play?] Um, well yeah, they can use their imaginations too for some, but I think having a variety of stuff at their level that they can choose from? Is, is good as well.” SOC-14-OP

Children's Characteristics

Children’s own age (maturity), development (abilities and personality), and gender were

discussed by parents in relation to play, and were used to help explain differences in play activities and behaviours. Parents identified that age (maturity) was associated with their children's preferences (e.g., for resources) or decision-making. For example, some parents felt that their child's choices would change over time in regards to the type of activities or social dynamics within their play experiences.

- “Okay (laughs) well, the oldest one he's sort of in that prepubescent, he's like almost 13, so he's very much, he likes his *alone* time now.” KLC-07-RP
- “They do play together, but I'm finding now that [Child], I think [Child] kind of um, he's matured a little bit in the last uh maybe six months, so I think that the gap between them has kind of grown right now. And so he does do a lot more on his own. Like he'll go and get his – his um, he has like a writing book and he'll go and get it and sit at the table and write, and draw and do doodles and stuff on his own.” KLC-10-RP
- “They play really well together. So they – I mean they've come now to an age where they actually can appreciate each other when they play, in terms of keeping a dialogue, actually you know maintaining a stretch of um, role playing – I guess if you will.” KLC-15-RP
- “Um, yeah I think it's more just the maturity for him, that's – it's a big leap from three to four. For – for what they are willing to do, and excited about.” SOC-10-RP

Children's unique and changing developmental abilities, such as their attention span, communication, memory, and physical strength, were tied to the play in which they participated. Parents explained that as their child's abilities increased, they could participate in activities or behave in ways they had not previously. Parents also understood that personality was related to play activities and behaviours, and they identified changes in their child's behaviours based on

personality development. For instance, some parents felt that their children were becoming more confident and willing to engage in solitary play, or more cooperative and willing to act as a follower or leader during group play. Some parents indicated that the amount of their children's partner or group play increased as their development progressed.

Parents also mentioned their child's gender in relation to play. Parents felt that their children would play with all available resources, regardless of the alignment of their child's gender to the gender-stereotype of resources. Some parents, however, mentioned that children of different genders play differently (e.g., the theme or context of play changed). Other parents felt that their children would engage in various role playing scenarios, regardless of their gender.

- “[Interviewer: She’s awesome. Um, I guess then this is a good time to ask the next question, which is that: Um, do you think that like [child] being a boy influences the kind of play that you do with him. [...]] Um, before I had kids I would tell you there was no difference. They all learn and that was my first thing. But now I have kids, yeah they play differently, for sure.” SOC-02-RP
- “I never really had dolls, I played with a lot of Lego as a kid, so I don’t really know what – I honestly couldn’t tell you what girls play with. Like I couldn’t tell you the difference between what girls play with and what boys play with.” SOC-13-RP

Parents who participated in the post-intervention interviews also acknowledged the impact of age (maturity) and development (ability, growth, and personality) as factors relative to their children's play. During these interviews, parents discussed age in relation to the amount of time their children engaged in play (i.e., a decrease in play with age), and their children's attention span and confidence in impacting the content of, interaction within, and vocalization during play experiences. Relative to maturity, specifically, parents reported a change in

adaptability, communication, and coping that related to children's interactions with others during play. Parents explained that their children's play activities and behaviours changed to utilize their increased development, such as improved abilities (i.e., fine and gross motor skills, and comprehension) and physical growth. Some parents also indicated that their child's personality was related to the need for social interactions.

- “Um, yeah I find um, this past year she's gotten a *lot* better about like handling those kind of situations, she's not so focused on *her* vision and what she wants, she's definitely gotten more flexible and willing to share. I guess maybe maturity, she seems to have gotten a lot more mature.” KLC-07-OP
- “Recently he has uh, he started to love our shower, so there's no more bath, and but he showers with his sister still, so everyone – we have – we built a big shower so that's his fun – and he loves doing it on his own now. He's come to this realization he can wash his own hair. (laughs) And it's fantastic actually, but so there's no play right at that time anymore, yeah.” SOC-10-OP

Children's Prior Experiences

Parents understood that children would use their prior experiences during play. They also understood that children's prior experiences (positive and negative) could influence their current and future play. Children would use what they have previously experienced or witnessed by recreating or building upon these experiences throughout their play.

As witnessed by parents, children would use the actions, behaviours, and speech from what they have seen or heard in real or virtual experiences in their play. For example, children were discussed as having mimicked the activities or behaviours (e.g., interactions) of others by

pretending to cook or host tea parties, and acting out their understanding of different roles and responsibilities, such as firefighting, teaching, parenting, and serving.

- “Um, well in the first couple of years of life they’re learning so much, and in order to learn they have to be able to test things out for themselves. And so when she’s playing with her Barbies, a lot of time she’s role playing stuff that she’s seen on T.V., or stuff that she’s uh experienced herself, you know, like at a doctor’s office.” SOC-06-RP
- “[...] and verbally he’s, that’s what he’s saying, I can hear him all the time about um, you know, scenarios that we would do in our life. Probably, and like some of the camping and things like that, that’s – that’s what he’ll usually do.” SOC-10-RP
- “[...] she’s always got work, she’s always got work to do outside, that’s what she says, she’s got things to do. Um, probably cause that’s what I always say (laughs). ‘I have to go outside and do some work and you can come help.’ She loves helping me in the garage, so I guess it’s not really play, but she’ll come out, and she’s got a couple of little projects that she works on. She’s got a piece of wood that she hammers nails into, and uh she’s got a pot of pink paint that she paints her wood with, and um, she’s happy to sit and sort screws and nails into boxes.” SOC-12-RP

Children used their own (first-hand) experiences, from which they have learned and adapted, in their play. Parents related their children’s familiarity with settings (e.g., programs) to their play, such as in their engagement and enjoyment of experiences. Children’s familiarity with other people was also related to their comfort and willingness to interact with potential playmates, and their imagination and engagement in play, generally. Further, parents identified the impact of previous interactions with peers (i.e., knowledge sharing), which children would use during later play experiences. Examples were also shared by parents about their children not

being allowed to participate in activities due to their previous actions (i.e., damaging resources), not participating in activities after having injured them self, avoiding interactions with others who would not cooperate, and, even, taking advantage of rare time and space for solitary activities.

- “[...] even when you watch her role play and some of that and the things that she’ll all of a sudden come up with and say, or the things that she’ll do. And I say (questioning tone) *‘how do you know that?’* You know, because they observe the other kids doing something and then all of a sudden they, you know, start doing that too, and they watch each other and then, yeah it helps them.” KLC-09-RP
- “[...] I think that his quietness, I think that he would not react well if someone was mean to him. I think he would kind of turtle up and it would, it would really affect him for the negative.” KLC-10-RP

Over the course of the post-intervention interviews, parents shared similar ideas about their children’s use of prior experiences in their play. Children would use what they have seen others do, for example, at school and home (e.g., parent interactions), and incorporate or replicate those actions in their play. Children would also incorporate their (learning from) prior experiences, such as events, into their play. In terms of familiarity with other people and spaces, children were identified to more readily joining others in play and using spaces more freely and imaginatively.

- “Um, I just think that there’s things around that they can play with, but they can decide how they want to play with them, and so it’s, they’re trying to use their previous experience or their creativity to try to, yeah have fun with what’s around them.” KLC-08-OP

- “So, or sometimes she’ll just pick stuff up and start doing it on her own, like I just – I think playing is playing, like I don’t think it really matters what kind of playing it is, it’s just um, - yeah you kind of listen to her and you hear stuff that – that’s happened during the day or stuff that’s happened during the week that she’s modeling out in her playing. And it’s kind of for things that I’ve said to her that she’s like talking to her little figurines and stuff. So it’s quite funny.” KLC-08-OP
- “This is, it’s different because of the way – the way he’s started to play now at five, or his friends – his peers have where they’re, they are more into that rough-and-tumble um, which boys are, and so he’s – he’s *seeing* more of that in his peers.” SOC-10-OP

Children’s Current State of Being

Children’s current state of being influences the activities they undertake and behaviours they exhibited during play. Parents associated attitude (mood), energy level (fatigue), enjoyment (fun) and interests (preferences) to their children’s play experiences, which are subject to regular changes or fluctuations. Parents related these variables, for instance, to the type, content, duration, and location of activities, the level of intensity, selection of resources, quest for (specific) playmate(s), and quality of interactions throughout play.

Many examples were given by parents as to the impact of their child’s attitude on the quality and likelihood of interactions between playmates, and the selection of activities. Children’s mood, particularly a negative mood, was widely associated with the quality of play, and was cited as being impacted by their diet, sleep, and the type of activities (i.e., physical activity, screen time) in which they participated. Children’s energy levels (e.g., fatigue) were mentioned in relation to social interactions, the necessity of ‘burning off energy,’ and sleep duration, which could all impact children’s decision-making abilities. A common theme among

parents' responses was the relationship between free-play and the enjoyment of experiences. The opportunity for children to select their play experiences (i.e., make choices) was fundamental to their enjoyment of the activity. Finally, the opportunity to pursue (natural) interests or preferences was necessary for children to avoid boredom (as with enjoyment) but could also change by what captured their attention at the time. Children would make different selections based on their (natural) interests or preferences, which may change over time.

- “Um, - it’s stuff they enjoy I think more than anything, just to keep them engaged cause bored kids get into trouble.” KLC-01-RP
- “Um, I think it can be *negative* in the sense depending on your child. I mean um, every kid has a bad day. So sometimes it can be negative if they’re just not in the right mind set, and you know they’re cranky and they just start being mean to the other kids, or something like that.” KLC-06-RP
- “Um, the only time they’re doing something more independently I’d say is... is if one of them is maybe tired um, kind of annoyed [...]” KLC-06-RP
- “So it seems like she’s really doing the kinds of things that she likes to do.” KLC-07-RP
- “His, his attention span is very, very small on things that he’s not enjoying. So if it’s not playing Lego or building something he generally doesn’t want to sit.” KLC-11-RP
- “And as far as her play, I think it – it’s been um, she’s had to – to like the play part has helped her to learn to deal with others, and at times with a nice for us um, you know we’re early risers, so by the – by the time the afternoon comes along, I’m sure she sometimes struggles a little bit with – with getting along with others, just because she’s starting to get tired.” SOC-11-RP

Conversations during the post-intervention interviews confirmed that attitude (mood),

enjoyment (fun), and interest (preferences) were associated with children's choice of activities, the duration of activities, and the quest for playmates. Further, children's attitude was identified as being important for determining if they were engaged in 'free-play' or not, and the ease of participating in free-play experiences. Enjoyment was fundamental to the free-play experience, as children would get to participate in the activities and behaviours they enjoyed at this time. Finally, parents thought that (natural) interests would dictate changes to the types of play in which children participated.

- “Like even playing by herself she really enjoys doing that, like some kids don't, but making sure that she gets a little bit of time by herself, but not like – not to the point where um, like she needs to have other people around too, to be able to play with.” KLC-08-OP
- “I mean as long as you kind of keep a positive outlook, then it can be seen as play and not work.” KLC-10-OP

Parents' Views on the Importance of Children's Free-Play - Results

Parents widely acknowledged the current and future health and developmental benefits of children's play. The opportunity for children to try new activities and gain self-awareness, create friendships and bonds, express themselves and cope with challenges, practice or master skills, and transfer learning and form habits were all aspects associated with children's play that parents found valuable. According to parents, children's play experiences would be important for their life outside of play experiences, such as in their schooling, careers, relationships, and caretaking. Further, they indicated that play opportunities would contribute to the foundation of children's well-being, so much so, that some parents felt that children might experience stunted or inhibited development without play opportunities.

Try New Activities and Gain Self-Awareness

Parents viewed free-play as an opportunity for children to explore or pursue experiences that wanted to know more about. Free-play was a (safe) place for children to try new things (i.e., activities) and to test themselves. This opportunity would give children a chance to fail and succeed through trial and error, which was seen as important for their learning.

- “It’s good for their mental health too. It’s their way of working out their world and figuring it out. It’s a safe way to try out new things.” SOC-02-RP
- “And that way, you know, they can spend more time doing what they like, um, but there’s also the opportunity to um, try other things out, and you know, they might spend less time or they might decide oh that is something that they would like to try more of.” SOC-06-RP

Parents also thought that this was a chance for children to be independent, and to show and develop their true nature (e.g., personalities or characteristics): parents indicated that play helps to shape children. They also mentioned that children could learn how different environments affect them (i.e., those that frustrate or over-stimulate them) during play experiences. While pursuing interests was particularly salient to free-play, parents saw that children’s opportunity to try new things also helped them to understand what activities they did not like.

- “And I think it kind of forms how they are as they grow up as an adult.” KLC-05-RP
- “[...] especially at this age as they’re learning, then they can kind of figure out what they like the best, or what they don’t like to do, [...]” KLC-10-RP
- “And if they’re frustrated and they’re over stimulated, if they are allowed to go and solo play, they know how to – inadvertently they will go and play by themselves just because

they know they need some down time, and when they get that down time, as they grow they un – they – they can say you know okay, this environment is not good for me. I need to be by myself for a moment, and if they learn that when they're small, and they're learning to play – as they get older they'll recognize the emotions they're having and they'll recognize the emotions they had when they left the situation.” SOC-13-RP

Similar thoughts were shared again during the post-intervention interviews, whereby free-play was seen as an opportunity for children to be independent and act as their true selves. Play was identified as a chance to focus and figure things out, or challenge oneself. Generally, this was an opportunity for children to learn about their own interests, boundaries, comfort zones, limits, and capabilities. Further, parents identified that children could learn about what they enjoy and what they want to pursue in future through play.

- “I guess like, obviously I think it's important because like I said, it's kind of like her outlet to kind of like explore her ideas. So I think that if she didn't have that, then obviously she'd be stunted intellectually.” KLC-07-OP

Create Friendships and Bonds

Parents widely acknowledged the social opportunities within play. Socialization and the development of social skills was an important part of the play experience for children. Through play, children could learn to connect, cooperate, and share, and improve the quality of their interactions with others. It was also noted that children need to learn how to play with others at this age, otherwise (future) group interactions could be very difficult.

- “Um, I think just for a lot of reasons, for them to learn companionship, and how to interact, and – and um, how they should be treating people, and how they want to be treated.” KLC-05-RP

- “But you know I, I think it’s more important to develop those social skills and develop those lifelong skills, that lots of adults don’t even have (laughs). You know when they’re this age, and then, cause they don’t necessarily get that at school...” SOC-02-RP
- “I think it’s good for them to learn how to play well with others, cause I think younger kids need to learn to play with other people, cause that’s how they learn to do better in school, I think, getting along with their peers. So playing together is the best way for them to learn to get along with their peers.” SOC-03-RP

Parents shared that it was important for children to learn to make friends on their own. The ability to form relationships was seen as important for children’s future school and work endeavours. There was also an indication that making friends with others was important for children’s leadership abilities and for feeling accepted. Free-play was identified as a means of bonding with others, however, the duration of play was mentioned as important for getting to know one another.

- “Um, because my - my daughter loves the rough play, like she’s – she’s girly but she’s got a tomboy streak a mile wide and my mom even says, she’s the first baby I ever had to bond with by wrestling on the floor.” KLC-01-RP
- “[...] you know, play with each other for longer, and so they get to get to know each other better.” KLC-08-RP

At the time of the post-intervention interviews, parents clearly identified the impact of social interactions during play on children developing in ways that would help them in the future. The presence of others to interact with was essential to children’s development and was also identified as being important for children’s health: without social play opportunities some parents thought their children could be at a disadvantage compared to others. Social interactions

were seen as being essential for children, given that children could learn from others during free-play and develop skills they would need throughout their lives, such as dealing with or resolving conflicts on their own. Playing with others was important for children to learn how to socialize and gain social skills, such as the ability to communicate, cooperate, share, and build friendships.

- “I’ve noticed a couple times she’s played with new people at um, my other, older kids school and that always makes me happy when she goes up to new kids and to– try to play with them, be – and it’s a positive experience. And that’s something that maybe she maybe wouldn’t have done before, cause she was more liking to play on her own, but now she’s made a few friends and she’s had some good experiences with making new friends. So it’s – that’s something that I always am happy to see when she does that.”

KLC-08-OP

- “[...] the more he can be around kids and the more he can learn different things, it’s going to help him to get through it better.” KLC-10-OP

Express Oneself and Cope

Children’s free-play was identified as an opportunity for them to use their imagination and be creative, but it was also seen as a form of coping: play is a chance for children to act out what they are currently experiencing in their lives. Play was seen as a way for children to process their experiences, which was viewed as particularly important for children due to the extent of learning during the preschool years. Parents identified the potential for children to work through conflicts and grief, relieve stress, and express their feelings, needs, and desires during play. This could be done, for example, through the creation of individual arts and crafts projects, and through physically active play. Parents also shared that the use of imagination in play was important for children as this ability would transfer to experiences later in life, such as through

creativity in problem solving and decision-making.

- “And she’ll usually go, she’s very much, if she’s upset or has some strong feelings, she will go and draw a picture about it. (laughs) And then she’ll bring it to somebody, to be like ‘I drew this picture and I am upset, and this is [child] sad and this is like-’ (laughs)”
KLC-07-RP
- “They maybe just provide the tools, or the equipment, or the, you know, the things that they can do but then they can express that however they want to express it, in the way that they want to. Like I just, so not, people aren’t watching over them the whole time saying okay, like do it like this or you should change it to this, and just let them just, express themselves, [...]” KLC-08-RP
- “[...] because they can act out things that they’re thinking about through play [...]” KLC-08-RP
- “So learning to play and like giving them those tools of how to succeed and teaching them like, how to get out of hard situations through play, and I think it’s pretty cool.”
KLC-13-RP

Perspectives shared during the post-intervention interviews corresponded with the view that free-play is an opportunity for children to think and express themselves as independent beings, and explore their feelings (e.g., cope with grief). Further, free-play was identified as a form of down time where children could physically and emotionally re-charge (i.e., unwind). Parents acknowledged that play is an outlet for children to be creative: the use of imagination was understood to be important for later in life.

- “Um, okay uh yeah for sure like I know when his grandpa died he, he acted out a lot of play like that, and it was kind of you know, he was pretending he was grandpa and he

was sick, and that sounds uncomfortable but it's good and I think that's how they learn, and that's how they figure it out and I think that helped him, for sure.” SOC-02-OP

Practice or Master Skills

Parents identified the potential for children to develop skills through play that they would need later in life. Through play, children can challenge themselves, and practice, progress, and master skills over time. Parents felt that practicing and repeating activities and behaviours would contribute to their child's improvement in the respective area. This was noted, particularly, in regards to fine motor skills (e.g., using scissors), gross motor skills (e.g., hand/eye coordination), social skills (e.g., resolving conflicts), and sensory skills, all of which would be needed in the future. Further, parents felt that play was a way for children to see and be proud of their accomplishments, even though they may not immediately recognize or be aware of improvements. Children's improved abilities were identified as a way for them to gain confidence and independence respective to their skills.

- “I think every kind of play enacts different skills and abilities, [...]” KLC-08-RP
- “And maybe they, obviously wouldn't realize it, but if they're doing the same thing, you know, they're – let's go back to the crafts. You know, well the more times you're making crafts and cutting with scissors, well then you're going to get better and it's just going to, you know, next thing you know, you can do it without being, you know having to worry about them cutting something that they're not supposed to, or you know same with um, writing, the next thing you know it's like okay, the more times they do it then all of a sudden now they can write their name. So I think it helps them without them realizing they're developing that way? (questioning tone)” KLC-09-RP
- “I mean if they weren't allowed to play – I don't think that they would kind of develop

the skills to be learners. Really, so I think – yeah if you put them in a situation where they weren't allowed to play at all, I think you would end up with a useless person. I don't know of any better way to say it.” KLC-10-RP

- “[...] but um, you know like I know how excited [child] is when he's playing and he's figured out how to do something that he couldn't do, even the day before. Or that he needed help, and he comes running out of the playroom and he's like 'Mom,' and all excited right. Like, so I – I think that it's, I don't know I think it's important.” KLC-11-RP
- “The more you play, the more you're active, the better you're going to be at things. Um, the healthier your mind and your body's going to be.” SOC-14-RP

Parents identified, during the post-intervention interviews, that children use what they are learning in play; it was through play that children can practice skills, such as sharing and socializing. Further, some parents mentioned that play was even the best way for their children to learn. Some parents, however, indicated that the duration and depth of play may be important for building (motor) skills. While some parents thought that their children may not realize they are learning, children's identification of achievements in play was noted as a way for them to build confidence.

- “But um, he, he'll sit and he'll focus and he'll figure it out, and if he struggles he'll maybe ask for help, but a lot of times he doesn't, he kind of likes that challenge. So I think he kind of is learning about focus and concentration and seeing things through, and that kind of stuff from that kind of activity.” KLC-10-OP

- “Um, yeah definitely emotional – they learn how to share (laughs). They’re not social, they learn how to do those things. Um, practice those skills too through play and especially with other kids, practicing those skills.” SOC-02-OP

Transfer Learning and Form Habits

Many parents identified the potential for play to aid in the formation of children’s habits, however, this was primarily discussed in regards to outdoor and/or active play. Similarly, some parents acknowledged the potential for what is said and done during play to transfer into children’s ‘real’ lives. Parents thought that these play activities or behaviours could transfer to other, future experiences. This transfer of actions was mentioned, particularly, in regards to how children treat each other during play.

- “[Interviewer: And can you tell me why you think it’s important for them to get outside and play, and be active?] Um, just for their own physical health, and to teach them that at an early age, so that later when they grow up, it’s not a job to do that, that they actually have a love of being active, and being outside, and it’s just a natural thing for them.” KLC-05-RP
- “I think it has a huge effect on, on their health. Um, he – it helps his muscles, it helps his brain, he burns energy. Um, I don’t know I think being active, and it’s setting him up for good um, just good habits for as he gets older, you know you’re being active and it’s just part of your life kind of a thing, so.” KLC-11-RP
- “[...] I see that kids when they play, it sometimes does then spill over into um, everyday life. So I don’t want my kids getting used to the idea that they can be disrespectful and is appropriate in play – because it’s not okay. And so they need to learn, I believe anyways, that they need to learn boundaries so that they’re not um, yeah that one – they’re allowed

to say mean things to each other in play, because they're in a character, and then that's okay – but yet I'm not allowed to say that when I'm not playing.” KLC-15-RP

Later, when the post-intervention interviews were conducted, parents also discussed the importance of gross motor play for maintaining physically active behaviours or not always being sedentary, and staying healthy. Parents also identified the potential for children to transfer their learning from play to future experiences (e.g., social interactions).

- “Um, well I mean, for like um, large play that's like staying active and she's going to stay healthy, and it teaches her to like you know, just not be on the couch all the time.” KLC-07-OP

Interpretation of the Research Findings - Discussion

The aim of this discussion is to highlight some of the crosscutting themes from the three prior results sections in order to help readers understand parents' valuation of free-play. The following sub-sections interpret and explain aspects of the results displayed across parents' conception of free-play, the impacts on free-play experiences, and the importance of free-play in relation to the relevant research literature and theories identified as salient to this thesis (as presented in *Chapter 1*). Specifically, children's opportunity to capitalize on free-play during the preschool years, the reciprocal and reinforcing nature of free-play, and the experience of children's active engagement in free-play are discussed, as these ideas were mentioned throughout the parent interview discussions and results presented above.

Capitalizing on Free-Play Opportunities during the Preschool Years

Parents widely discussed that free-play was an opportunity for their children to have fun and enjoy themselves, characteristics children have also associated with play (Alexander, Frohlich, & Fusco, 2014b), however, parents also saw the embedded developmental and health

benefits associated with these experiences. Despite the premise that free-play should prioritize means-over-ends (Pellegrini, 2009; Pellegrini & Smith, 1998), parents implicitly identified play as both an end in itself (e.g., Alexander et al., 2014b; Cohen, 2006) and a means to another end (e.g., Alexander et al., 2014a). This paradox in the purpose of free-play was something that Pellegrini and Smith (1998) identified and "...reconciled by supposing that the apparent lack of immediate function actually conceals either a function delayed in development, or an immediate function of which the player (and even the observer) may be unaware" (p. 53). This view does represent a rather interesting relationship, wherein the preschool years are a time to engage in opportunities purely for pleasure but are also necessary for setting children on a pathway to future success (perhaps representing a contradictory perspective on the purpose of free-play).

Parents' understanding of free-play as 'what children do' emphasised the importance of the preschool years as an opportune time for children to engage in free-play, both for its own sake, and for setting the foundation for positive health and developmental outcomes. Parents implied that the preschool years were a time in life when children could make their own decisions, direct their own actions, and engage with whomever they wished; fundamentally, free-play was what children were supposed to be doing. Parents emphasised the importance of the preschool years and wanted their children to take advantage of this time in life. They recognized the preschool years as a short period of time when children were (relatively) free of responsibilities, such as those associated with formal education and careers. This finding complements that of Singer et al.'s (2009) study from sixteen nations, where mothers across developed, newly developed, and developing countries expressed concern about the loss of childhood as an experience for children.

According to parents, children need to take advantage of the preschool years to be themselves (i.e., act in their true nature) and to pursue their interests. The preschool years are seen as a time for children to capitalize on the self-directed nature of free-play: in doing so, children's free-play is an end in itself. This was a time for children to pursue activities and behaviours that were intrinsically rewarding (e.g., exciting, pleasurable) and that they preferred (e.g., to explore their interests), without an extrinsic focus or any external pressure. This finding may have similarities to Pellegrini and Smith's (1998) summary of play literature in that play has no immediate purpose for children, as they are more concerned with the process rather than the outcome of the experience. Furthermore, parents' identification of self-selection and self-direction as characteristics of free-play indicate that this experience is not associated with a specific activity or behaviour. Given the range of developmental and health benefits of free-play, this would imply that preschoolers do not need to participate in any specific activity or behaviour in order to realise benefits of free-play later in life. In this way children's experiences do not become purpose-oriented and effectually, something other than free-play (Alexander et al., 2012; Alexander et al., 2014a; Frohlich et al., 2013).

Even if children do not recognize the outcomes associated with their experiences, parents understand free-play as a means to another end. Free-play is an opportunity to set preschool children's foundation for their future. Pellegrini and Smith (1998) have identified that the purpose of play is often understood through later developmental outcomes, rather than those during childhood. Similarly, parents in this work stressed the importance of their children engaging in free-play during the preschool years to develop skills and qualities they will need when they enter adolescence (e.g., in the formal school system) and during adulthood (e.g., in careers, relationships, parenting). The opportunity to capitalize on the preschool years was

further emphasised when parents expressed views that their children would experience a deficiency or be at a disadvantage compared to their peers if they did not have the opportunity to engage in free-play.

Parents identified numerous benefits of free-play that help children in situations outside of play and across their life course. Parents' perspectives, however, seemed to vary according to if their children recognized outcomes during and after engaging in free-play experiences. Children may notice improvements without explicitly sharing these achievements with their parents if, for example, they did not want to disrupt their current experience (e.g., stop playing) or they had a different priority in the moment. This questions the ends versus means conflict due to parents' potential to understand children's own perspectives and experiences. As such, understanding the intentions of children (from their perspective) during free-play would help to clarify this issue in future.

Beyond the means versus ends discussion, the preschool years may be a particularly opportune time to engage in free-play because of a decrease in these opportunities over the life course (Pellegrini, 2009). Parents indicated that opportunities for children to engage in free-play are already, and will be further, limited by other experiences (e.g., responsibilities, programs, etc.). They implied that children need to capitalize on this time in life (i.e., the preschool years) because children would spend less time in free-play as they aged and developed, a point also made by Pellegrini (2009). Parents alluded to this decrease in free-play participation in discussions about their older children who do not participate in free-play, and in relation to their preschoolers playing less with increased development and changing preferences. Farné (2005), however, has summarized that humans do spend time playing throughout the course of their

lives, unlike the experience of studying, working, or caretaking, which have more specific time periods in life.

Capitalizing on free-play opportunities during the preschool years, specifically, was inherent to the conversations with parents. Parents identified the importance of free-play at this time of life to set a strong foundation for their child's future, which aligns with the theory of biological embedding in that early life experiences can have an influence over the life course (Ben-Shlomo & Kuh, 2002; Graham, 2002; Halfon & Hochstein, 2002; Hertzman, 1999; Hertzman, 2012; Hertzman & Boyce, 2010; Nelson, 2013). Parents, therefore, recognize the preschool years as one of those 'critical time points' in life, of which children need to take advantage (Ben-Shlomo & Kuh, 2002; Graham, 2002; Halfon & Hochstein, 2002; Hertzman, 1999; Hertzman, 2012; Hertzman & Boyce, 2010; Nelson, 2013). Further, parents' emphasis on the importance of free-play during the preschool years could follow the pathways model, wherein early life experiences set children on a unique trajectory for development (Graham, 2002; Hertzman, 1999; Hertzman & Boyce, 2010). The supportive nature of free-play may help to set children on a path for more optimal development and health, given that parents believe children may be at a disadvantage later in life without the opportunity to engage in free-play during the preschool years.

Reciprocity and Reinforcement in the Experience of Free-Play

McLeroy et al. (1988) purport that individuals' behaviours can be impacted by their environments, but that individuals' behaviours can also impact their environments. Similarly, Lester and Russell (2008a) state: "children's development and well-being cannot be understood as separate from their environment" (p. 3) - a helpful point in understanding children's free-play. In particular, parents in this study identified a fluid relationship between players and their

environment. This relationship emulates a reciprocal dynamic within free-play, whereby the player and their environment influence each other, which changes (e.g., the depth of play, type of activities undertaken, etc.) throughout the course of one or several free-play episodes. Viewed through parents' characteristics of free-play, children's choices and directions are mediated by environmental (e.g., location, people, resources, state of being) factors that act in a reciprocal and evolving relationship.

Under the guise of social ecology, whereby individual health behaviours can be moderated by and understood through their intrapersonal, interpersonal, institutional, community, and policy environments (McLeroy et al., 1988), so too can children's free-play. The dynamic relationships within the extrinsic and intrinsic factors detailed earlier in the results (i.e., what impacts children's free-play) of this work align with different levels in McLeroy et al.'s (1988) social ecological model. Parents identified factors that fall into the intrapersonal, interpersonal, and community levels of the model that relate to their children's free-play and, more specifically, their choices and direction throughout this experience.

At the intrapersonal level (McLeroy et al., 1988), parents described children's characteristics, current state of being, and prior experiences as having a reciprocal relationship to the free-play experiences of their children. Under their current state of being, specifically, this dynamic relationship was identified through children's attitude, energy, enjoyment, and interests. These variables were reflected in the actions (i.e., activities and behaviours) of children, but could also be impacted by their participation in free-play. This relationship was most clearly distinguished in parents' discussion of child attitude and enjoyment. Children's mood was reflected in their choices and direction during free-play, but it could also be impacted by their participation in free-play. In their literature review, Santer et al. (2007) also found that mood was

related to children's play, and reported an association between mood and children's use of creativity in their daily lives. Beyond this, Santer et al. (2007) have pointed out that children who are anxious and preoccupied may not even be able to engage in play.

Throughout the interviews, parents also indicated the reciprocal dynamics between players and their playmates, their physical setting, and their tangible resources, reflecting interactions at the interpersonal and community levels of McLeroy et al.'s (1988) model. King and Howard (2016) have also identified these factors (i.e., people, resources, location) in their review article from children's perspectives on choices during free-play. These authors point out that "the combination of play space, resources, and participation by other children and adults influences children's perceptions of choice when they play" (2016, p. 59). These broader factors could dictate the types of activities and behaviours children engaged in (e.g., physically active play in the outdoors, group play with the availability of others, arts and crafts with the accessibility of resources), but could also be modified through children's choices and direction. For example, parents' discussions revealed reciprocal interactions between children and these factors through the quality or intensity of free-play experiences, and the use and manipulation of these variables during free-play. Santer et al. (2007) have reported that resources need to be open-ended (e.g., adaptable) to support child creativity, however, in this thesis study parents felt that children would use the resources available to them and, eventually, would start to use them in more creative ways, beyond their intended use.

In addition to the reciprocal dynamic, the relationship between players and their environment (i.e., interpersonal, interpersonal, institutional, community, and policy) can help to reinforce (e.g., improve, increase, etc.) the important contributions of free-play that parents have identified (i.e., challenge, bonding, coping, skills, and habits). From an intrapersonal perspective,

Lester and Russell (2008a) attribute the continued engagement of children in play to the pleasure children derive from such experiences. The continuous use of children's abilities during free-play helps to reinforce progress made in these areas. For example, parents in this study discussed that repeated participation in free-play could help to reinforce children's creativity, independence, and (academic) learning. Santer et al. (2007) have also reported on the necessity of children to practice play behaviours. They suggest that development and learning are interrelated in play, such that the complexity of children's play increases with the time they have for this experience.

The idea that learning is reinforced through free-play activities and behaviours, further, aligns with some parents' concern for what happens during play to also happen outside of play experiences. If activities and behaviours are repeated during play, then some of what children are learning from these experiences may be transferred into other aspects of their lives. Given the inherent developmental and health opportunities, children's continued participation reinforces the contribution of free-play experiences to the 'important' aspects parents have identified. Additionally, some parents felt that children may unknowingly select activities and behaviours during free-play that will help them immediately and in future, however, this point needs further research clarification.

In addition to the contribution of free-play to children's development and health, it is also important to discuss the potential of free-play to perpetuate cultural norms. Children's learning through free-play is rooted in the culturally situated practices they participate, perpetuating the social constructions (e.g., what is or is not identified as being important contributions of free-play to child development and health) associated with free-play (Frost, 2012; Roopnarine, 2011; Roopnarine, 2015; Santer et al., 2007). This culturally situated learning is especially salient

given that parents identified the impact of others (e.g., playmates) on children's free-play experiences (i.e., children watching and re-creating what they have heard and seen), which can transpose culturally rooted actions (Santer et al., 2007). Culturally-rooted norms (i.e., gender roles) were mentioned by some parents during the interviews. For example, one parent shared that certain behaviours were more important for girls than boys to practice through (pretend) play because of the associated skills (i.e., caregiving) that would be important for them later in life. Similarly, several parents used the term 'boy' or 'girl' to describe their child's character or actions (i.e., they engaged in 'boy' activities). While parents were reinforcing social norms around gender roles in these instances, they did not discuss the impact of (Canadian) culture on children's free-play experiences. Besides from these examples, however, cultural values and practices were not a widely explored in this work. Future research could consider how and what cultural norms are being reinforced through children's free-play experiences, how cultural norms may restrict opportunities in or for free-play, and from which environments these norms are perpetuated.

Children's Active Engagement in Free-Play

The interviews contained discussion about children's active engagement in free-play opportunities. Parents often referred to 'active play' when they were discussing physical active play, which should not be confused with the active engagement of children in free-play experiences. Active engagement, as a characteristic of free-play, however, was more implicitly than explicitly identified by parents throughout the interviews, which is why it did not appear in the *Results* sections of this chapter. Parents implied that the activities and behaviours children participated in during free-play were more active, and possibly interactive, than other (passive) activities, such as watching television and movies. Gray (2013), and Isenberg and Quisenberry

(1988) have identified active engagement as a fundamental characteristic of free-play, following from the other characteristics of this experience (i.e., self-selected, intrinsically motivated, mentally ruled, imaginative (Gray, 2013)). According to Gray (2013) “play is conducted in an alert, active, but relatively non-stressed frame of mind.”

Some parents referred to the ease of child engagement in free-play and identified, for example, the extrinsic factors of playmates, setting, and resources as contributing to (and potentially hindering) this experience (a similar inference to that made by King and Howard (2016)). The opportunity for children to continuously choose and direct their experiences (characteristics parents associated with free-play, similar to Gray (2013)), require children to be actively involved in their activities and behaviours. Beyond this sense of control, Gray (2013) has also identified that rules and processes require children to be (mentally) active during play. Through choice and direction, parents identified that their children would seek out experiences that engaged them, otherwise the children would be ‘bored.’

Burdette and Whitaker’s (2005) discussion of children’s relative disinterest in sustaining any given physically active play (compared to adult physical exercise), contradicts the view of some parents in this study who emphasised that, given the opportunity, their children would engage in rough-and-tumble play for an extended period of time. Parents’ understanding that children’s opportunity to participate in the activities and behaviours they were interested helped to maintain their active engagement in (and duration of) free-play experiences. Further, the nature of the free-play characteristics that parents identified (i.e., choice and direction) allow children to change their activities and behaviours to sustain their active engagement. In this way, free-play may be viewed as an active opportunity made visible by the characteristics of self-selection and self-direction. Children change play activities and behaviours to maintain their

engagement (Gray, 2013), which, according to Pellis and Pellis (2007), is due to the pleasurable outcomes associated with this experience.

Santer et al. (2007) have suggested that increasing opportunities to participate in play may help to improve the health and quality of life of (ill) children; parents in this study expressed similar views for their (healthy) children. The connection between active engagement and the importance of free-play experiences that parents identified, however, is less clear in the academic literature. According to the findings in this work, the value of free-play is realized through children's active engagement in their experiences (i.e., it is necessary for children to be interested and actively engaged in the experience for children to gain the benefits associated with free-play). Beyond 'learning,' parents expressed that children's active engagement in play was important for attaining health and developmental benefits from this experience. Some parents identified that their children would be 'healthier' if they were engaging in free-play rather than other activities, such as watching television, or that some free-play activities offered more (development and health) benefits than others. This example is congruent with Singer et al.'s (2009) finding that parents from developed countries rarely saw the value in child's television watching, opposed to those in developing and newly developed countries who saw relatively more value for this pastime.

Given that active engagement is a characteristic of free-play for parents, this concept may be a way for caregivers to understand (i.e., differentiate) when children are participating in free-play or in another experience. While children's active engagement in gross motor (i.e., physically active) play can more easily be seen or visualized, active engagement may be more difficult to see in relatively sedentary forms of play, as was frequently the case in this study. Parents in this work more readily identified physically active, outdoor play as a free-play

experience compared to other play-types. In future, research could look to determine if, and when, children are engaging in free-play or something different (i.e., what experiences are or are not ‘free-play’), a topic not deeply explored in the parent interviews associated with this work. Such delineations, however, imply a binary relationship between experiences that are free-play and those that are not, and would contradict the view of van Oers (2014) who suggests that “...it is better to speak about ‘degrees of freedom’ in play, rather than ‘free play’” (p. 62) due to the rules inherent to this opportunity.

Summary

This chapter reported on parents’ perceptions of (preschool) children’s free-play. Specifically, the results focus on parents’ understanding of what free-play is, what factors impact free-play experiences, and what the importance of free-play is for children. Many of the results shared, and discussion points included, reinforce current research literature. Regardless, this work contributes to the play literature by presenting parents’ understanding of free-play for preschoolers, and children in general. It is clear from these findings that parents understand the value of free-play, especially for their preschool children’s short- and long-term developmental and health benefits.

The results presented in this chapter have attempted to provide a holistic overview of parents’ broad understanding of free-play, using terminology and categories that were relevant to parents. The results presented in this work do not specifically relate to the ‘effects’ or ‘outcomes’ associated with free-play, as these terms imply causality in the relationship between free-play, and child health and development. Further, parents understood that multiple experiences (including free-play) can contribute to children’s overall development and health.

Chapter 5: Parents' Involvement in their Children's Free-Play

The objective of this chapter is to understand parents' involvement in their children's free-play. Detailed within the first three sections of this chapter are results of this study with factors related to parents' participation in play with their children, parents' intervention in their children's play, and parents' reasons for intervening in their children's play. The final section of this chapter discusses pertinent themes that ran across the interviews, as related to parents' involvement in their children's play. These four sections help to understand parents' involvement in their children's play outside of their preschooler's free-play based recreation preschool programs.

Parent Participation in Children's Free-Play - Results

Parents widely discussed the importance of participating in play with their children. Their direct participation in play, however, was not always possible or preferable (for the parents or their children). Parents mentioned that their responsibilities (i.e., caretaking, chores, paid work, etc.) and preferences, and their child's preferences often dictated their direct participation in play with their children. Family dynamics (i.e., age, gender, and number of children) were also mentioned in relation to the play parents participated in with their children. Additionally, parents discussed observing or supervising, rather than directly participating with, their children during free-play.

Parent Responsibilities

Parents indicated that their responsibilities impacted their engagement in play. Paid and unpaid work (i.e., household tasks) were widely recognized as limiting parents' opportunity to engage with their children in play. Many parents mentioned that their children, generally, have

more opportunity to play with their parents once they return home from work. This was particularly relevant for fathers associated with this project, who were more commonly identified as working away from the home and, possibly, outside of their community. The opposite work schedules of parents, which limited opportunities for family interactions, were also described as impacting parents' participation in play with their children. Some parents shared that when one arrived home from work they had the chance to participate with their children in play while the stay-at-home parent prepared dinner for the family (i.e., parents would switch off to play with their children).

- “Um, well her dad works out of town, so he’s not really home a lot to play.” KLC-07-RP
- “Um, yeah I guess, there’s probably, to be more play on weekends, and that’s probably just ’cause we’re both – both there, so um, usually there’s always someone – always someone can play with them. No one has to take phone calls, or write emails, or do anything like that, so that be the only real difference on weekends.” SOC-12-RP
- “Um, usually when she gets home from work, she wants to get outside, stretch her legs, do some – do something fun outside with the kids. Um, quite, sometimes I go with them, sometimes I’ll stay and get supper ready. Um, so I guess yeah, because we both, like we’ll go out tobogganing, I’ll go out with them in the afternoon, we’ll go tobogganing in the back, and then we’ll come back and have a hot chocolate and then [parent] will get home and she’ll take them out skating. So we’re both doing the outside activities, just kind of one at a time.” SOC-12-RP

Household tasks (i.e., cooking, cleaning) were also mentioned in relation to parents' opportunities to play with their children. Differing perspectives were shared in that some parents would take care of household tasks before they would play with their children, whereas others

made participating in play with their children a priority. Differences between mothers and fathers in this regard were mentioned; some mothers felt that they were ‘busier’ or would take care of other responsibilities before playing with their children, which they did not identify as an issue for their partners (i.e., fathers associated with this work). When household responsibilities needed to be taken care of, parents often indicated that their children would play independently or were occupied with resources.

- “Whereas I like to get my things, whatever things done, and then I’ll make time to play with him, and do whatever he wants to do.” KLC-05-RP
- “Um, sometimes they want to play with me, so then I will play with them, and then I leave them to play as I’m making dinner.” KLC-11-RP
- “Um, if we don’t really have anything planned for the day, uh usually me and my husband have stuff we have to get done – they can pick to help dad, they can pick to help mom. Um, usually again we’re, we’re doing something and the kids just kind of fit in and help, or they go and play and do their own thing.” SOC-14-RP

In the post-intervention interviews, parents also identified their responsibilities in relation to participating in play with their children, and mentioned the difficulty in finding (or making) time to play with their children. Some mentioned the necessity of scheduling time to interact (i.e., play) with their children. One parent noted the importance of making time to play with their children, specifically, because childhood would not last long. Some parents identified that they had limited opportunities to participate in play with their children, particularly, fathers who have limited time due to work away from the home and whose interactions were more utilitarian (i.e., task-oriented such as changing tires) than playful. When they needed to accomplish a task at

home on their own, parents mentioned using resources (e.g., the television) or spaces (e.g., the outdoors) as a source of distraction for their children.

- “Well I just, I make sure that I – if she wants to play with me, that I make time to do that with her, because I know that she’s only young for a short time, and it’s – I think it’s nice that she wants me to play with her.” KLC-08-OP
- “Yeah um-he um, her dad is gone usually through the week, um, she doesn’t seem him a whole lot he works long days. So on the weekend he’s home, which is nice, so they get to spend some time together.” SOC-14-OP

Parent Preferences in and for Play

Parents also discussed their play participation in relation to different actions or environments. They mentioned that their child’s and their own preferences often dictated their participation in play with their children. Additionally, some parents talked about various locations (e.g., homes, parks, and other spaces), as well as the weather, in relation to their participation.

The play activities and behaviours in which parents participate with their children were frequently cited as the choice of the child. Various perspectives were shared on what activities were undertaken, though parents said that their child’s interests would dictate their interactions and that they would do almost anything their children asked of them. Parents mentioned that they would ask their children what they wanted to do (giving them choice) and would then go along with these decisions. Some parents, however, mentioned that they dictated what play activities and behaviours they participated in with their children. Parents’ dislike for certain activities, behaviours, or outcomes (e.g., messes), or their lack of interest would hinder children’s opportunity to participate in those activities, regardless of parent involvement.

- “Uh really I just open up a bucket and I’m like what do you – and I ask them like what are in you the mood for? You want me to draw you something, build you something, make you something?” KLC-13-RP
- “I’m not very good at make believe play, and that’s what they – that’s what they like to do. I – I prefer *my* things, because of the way that I am, I prefer to play like *games* or things that have rules, because (laughs) it’s what I like to do.” SOC-11-RP

Across the interviews, parents expressed that they would participate in a range of play activities and behaviours with their children, however, the discussions also indicated that some activities were engaged in more by one parent than another. Between parents, their respective niches were often cited as dictating their play participation, where one parent would engage in the activities the other disliked, or parents shared responsibility to engage in a variety of activities and behaviours. There was a general trend indicating that fathers participated in more physically active or rough-and-tumble play (e.g., wrestling, tickling, etc.) than mothers. It was not that all mothers disengaged, discouraged, or prohibited this type of play, but that fathers would participate in these activities and behaviours more than mothers in the family. Differences were also mentioned in relation to a number of other play activities, such as academically oriented activities (i.e., letters, numbers, reading, writing), dramatic activities (e.g., acting out roles), gross motor activities (i.e., dancing, skating, swimming, wrestling, rollerblading), and others (e.g., puzzles, building), though these could not be concretely distinguished by parent gender.

- “Um, we definitely play different, he plays more physical with the kids. I – I play physical with them too, but – he does way more of it than – than me. And – I’m, maybe I don’t know if it’s because I’m more concerned about somebody getting hurt, or

something breaking, or I don't – I don't know, but I – I still play physical with him but he does way more of it." KLC-01-RP

- "Uh my husband's definitely more... of the swimming, so if they're swimming or something like that he'll – he's active and takes the kids right away. I'm a little, I'll go or whatever but um, my husband's more the one to initiate it and to take them, that kind of thing. Um, I more or less would be the one to do more the soccer, the ball throwing, that kind of thing." KLC-06-RP
- "My husband doesn't like going to parks. So that's kind of my area, he'd rather take them to a movie, or um, do that kind of thing with them. So yeah we definitely have different things that we prefer to do. [...] Um, just more kind of exert – exertion or things like that, like he – he would rather just take them to a movie or take them somewhere he could watch them play, or take them out for a bite to eat or something like that, so that's kind of what he enjoys doing more." KLC-08-RP
- "Dad is definitely comes home from work and builds them up, throws them in the air, tossing and wrestling, and things like that. Um, he's, definitely does more of the Lego (laughter) than I do, cause he really enjoys that. Um, yeah I guess I tend to do quieter activities (laughs) and my husband likes to do a little bit of noisier activities." KLC-11-RP
- "Um, I guess um, ah my, my husband is usually the one to um, take them out to say movies and stuff like that. And um, like he'll, he'll take them rollerblading and ice skating. More of like the physical stuff he'll do. And, yeah. Usually I'll, I'm the one that, I don't know plays tea party with them." KLC-12-RP

Differences between parents' participation were mentioned in regards to the location of activities, whereby some parents more readily took their children away from the home environment to play. Further, those parents who would take their children to parks shared contrasting perspectives in relation to their participation in play at these locations. For example, one parent said that they purposefully disengaged from play at parks to allow their children to interact and learn with others (i.e., conflict management, cooperation). Another parent made a point of playing at parks because they wanted to have fun with their children, rather than watching and ruling over them in this setting. Parents also discussed outdoor play participation with their children and the weather barriers they faced. Parents' participation in outdoor play with their children seemed to change based on the weather. Some parents noted that their preference for staying warm dictated their engagement in outdoor play. Despite parents' discomfort, however, they would make sacrifices to ensure children had opportunities to play outdoors, albeit not as frequently or long in duration.

- “Uh in the winter I would, we definitely um, I’ve had – like it’s more me that hates being outside in the winter. So I’ve kind of had to suck that up a bit, cause they – they all love to be outside in the winter. Um, but yeah it changes a bit in the winter, I’d say we weren’t, we aren’t outside as much as – we don’t stay after school and play at the park, and things like that, as much as when it’s nicer weather, for sure.” KLC-08-RP
- “[...] actually yesterday was the perfect snowman snow and I felt so bad, I knew I didn’t want to go. I went outside later and I picked it up and I’m like ooh, they were all so cute and snuggled in.” KLC-13-RP
- “Well I hate going outside in the winter, so yeah. [Interviewer: Oh yeah. Yeah. Does she?] Does she? Um, no, she would probably go out, um, but I don’t, I’m always

apprehensive because, you know, it's ugly and cold and I don't want to be out there.”

SOC-06-RP

In the post-intervention interviews, parents confirmed some of these sentiments. They indicated that children often dictated the play activities and behaviours of their parents, and parents would participate in the play activities and behaviours they preferred. Participants also expressed that fathers engaged in more physically active or rough-and-tumble play with their children than mothers in the household.

- “[...] she'll ask me to play with her sometimes, and so like I'll just kind of go along with it. Like she will have a white board and she'll want to play school and then she'll be the teacher, and she'll just kind of dictate kind of how things are going to be done and I just kind of go along with it just to let her be the leader – and to support her in what she wants to do for playing.” KLC-08-OP
- “[...] I mean I guess it's probably the same in a lot of families, but my husband'll be a little bit more physical with them and a little bit more rough, and he'll go and play soccer and hockey, and do all that stuff. And not that I don't, but I would rather, you know, colour or practice letters, or read books and things like that, so we've always kind of done that.” KLC-10-OP

Child as Gatekeeper to Parent Participation

Several parents indicated that their children acted as a gatekeeper to their participation in play. Generally, children would take the initiative to request or recruit their parent(s) for play, would seek out a specific parent to engage in certain activities or behaviours, or would prohibit their parent(s) from being involved in certain activities or behaviours. Various ideas were shared by parents about their recruitment for play: they indicated that some children would rather play

with their sibling(s) than with their parent(s), some children preferred their parents watch them play (i.e., perform) rather than directly participate in their activities (though children still want their parents' sole attention), and some children recruited their parents to help them with activities or behaviours (e.g., use monkey bars, build Lego sets) until they could undertake them independently. Some parent recruitment was also noted to depend on the environment, with examples shared of children preferring their parents engage with them out at parks rather than at home, and children having their parents play with them at home more than when they are out at other family members' houses.

- “But mostly she likes us to be spectators, like she likes to set up her spaces to perform, like her dances and her songs, and she just wants us to watch, like she sets up chairs for her audience, and then we all have to sit and watch her.” KLC-07-RP
- “Um, yeah for the most part when she’s playing with [younger child], neither of them want me involved, it’s usually my time to do something else, (laughs) and I just let them play.” SOC-12-RP

There were parents who mentioned that the quality of their interactions in certain play activities or behaviours was an important factor for their participation (i.e., recruitment) in play with their children. Parents who did not play ‘right’ were not included in certain play experiences, or those parents who performed well were sought out for those specific play actions. This recruitment was most notably mentioned in relation to rough-and-tumble play (e.g., wrestling), where mothers were deemed not as proficient as fathers in this type of play. Some parents also mentioned that they were not welcome to play when their children were participating in ways they knew were not permitted (i.e., rough-and-tumble play).

- “[Interviewer: What kind of play activities do you do with her?] Um, colouring, um, she really likes to do like the interactive song, like the Wheels on the Bus, and stuff like that, and stories. Like that’s what she likes to do with me, is just colouring, stories, songs.

[Interviewer: Is there anything else?] Not really, I don’t play dolls right apparently, so.”

KLC-07-RP

- “And that is like, if you got – if you gave them the choice, they would do that all night long, they come upstairs and tell me they’re hungry. They kick me out because I don’t, wrestle good enough.” KLC-13-RP
- “Like the boys always kick me out when they’re wrestling, cause they don’t want me to stop them, so what they were trying to do is like more unhealthy play where they’re very – right, by pushing the limits and doing things that they know I wouldn’t like.” KLC-13-RP
- “Oh we play games a lot, um, board games, card games. Uh sometimes we’ll do some imaginary play. Mom’s imagination isn’t quite, I think my four year olds, but we try. Um, we’ll do some colouring together, painting, baking.” SOC-01-RP
- “[...] I’m not a very good skater, but um, I’ll go out – I go out there with them, but that’s, mom does most of the skating.” SOC-12-RP

In the post-intervention interviews, parents also mentioned that their children acted as a gatekeeper to their interactions. Specifically, parents mentioned that their children would request their parent(s) to play with them, though, according to some, this may not happen as often as it had previously. Additionally, some parents mentioned that their children may ask for help, requiring interactions between parent and child in play. At this time, however, some parents mentioned that their children were relying on their own ideas, rather than requiring their parents

to provide solutions, and therefore the interactions with parents differed. Similarly, one parent mentioned that their child would tell them to remove themselves from play when they no longer needed assistance with specific actions.

- “Um, like he doesn’t want me to play with him as much, he hasn’t asked me to very often, I don’t know if that’s a age thing or it just, maybe he knows how to play on his own better. I’m not sure, so.” SOC-02-OP

Family Dynamics and Caretaking

Parents identified factors associated with their nuclear family dynamics as impacting their participation in play with their children. Throughout the interviews, parents discussed various family dynamics that impacted their participation in play with their children. The variety of family dynamics described in relation to parents’ play engagement included: child ages, child gender, and number of children. Sometimes these dynamics enabled or hindered one-on-one play with their preschool-aged children.

- “[...] he’s happy to play by himself, and that could be because he’s a middle child and he *knows* that there’s not as much time as if he were alone with me, or my husband. Um, so he’s happy to play by himself, he loves to play cars and constantly racing them around. And having them talk to each other, and he likes to use his imagination, when his sister’s home they play all these games, imagining all these different places that they are, and so on.” KLC-05-RP
- “Um, so we’re actually, [younger child] going to grandma’s by herself tomorrow and we’ll go, the two of us are going to go skating with [child] uh to give her some time with both of us, cause neither of us can remember when it was just the three of us.” SOC-12-RP

A range of perspectives were shared in regards to parents' participation in play based on their child's gender; child gender was discussed as both having and not having an impact on the types of play parents participated in with their children. Some parents readily acknowledged a likelihood that their play differed between children of different genders or that they perceived there would be differences if they had children of different genders. Parents mentioned, for example, the possibility of unconscious differences in their play or that they participated in 'gender-typical' activities or behaviours with their children (e.g., dress up with girls, hockey with boys). Another perspective shared was that parents learned to approach play differently between their children because of the (different) ways boys and girls play. Further, some participants thought that their child's gender seemed to have more of an impact on one parent than the other (e.g., more on the father than mother), while others felt that their or their partners' play would be the same regardless of their child's gender. Beyond this, having more than one child and having children of different genders were given as reasons why parents felt that their child's gender had no impact on the types of play they participated. A conscious attempt not to segregate play activities and behaviours was acknowledged by some parents in this case.

- “To be honest with you um, and I think that – I’m sure that it’s there in subtle ways, but like I said earlier I have a psych-soc degree, and I took the sociology of gender, and so I – I know that it’s there and I’m very cognizant of it, especially as a teacher, as well. And I know how gender can affect learning, just inadvertently, and all that kind of stuff. So I’m, I pay attention to it. I’m sensitive to it.” KLC-01-RP
- “Yes, I do different things with her than I do with my, I have two boys, as well. So. Yeah we definitely do different things. [Interviewer: Could you give me an quick example of the different things that you do with them?] Well like with my younger son, we play cars

and tractors, and you know he wants to play hockey and all of those, it's the *boy* things, I guess. And with [child] it's more um, just doing all of the girly dress up kind of things."

KLC-09-RP

- "I don't know that it does affect me so much as it does my husband. Although I mean I know girls would still do that role playing and the physical stuff, but I think it would be more princesses and tea parties than fighting and rolling over each other, so I – yeah for me I think it would probably still be the same, maybe the topics would be different."

KLC-10-RP

- "Um, I don't know so much that it – well I don't know if influences, but it's just that I have to learn how to play different, cause I don't – yeah I don't know how boys play, so that I'm – every day it's a learning thing for me to kind of learn how boys engage, how they – how they think differently than – than girls. Um, so yeah it does, it does change a little bit more so for how I have to approach play with him. Cause my daughter – yeah wasn't like that at all, so." KLC-15-RP

The needs of younger siblings were also mentioned by some parents as impacting the opportunities for them to play with their other children (i.e., in partner play). Several parents identified their youngest child's nap time as a special opportunity to have dedicated time with their older child. One parent shared that their child's nap time limited their ability to go outside with their other children, and, therefore, they were restricted to indoor play activities and behaviours. Another parent shared that while their younger child napped, they had the opportunity to do messy activities with their older children, as their younger child could not participate in these experiences due to their limited abilities.

The preferences of older children were also mentioned in relation to parent-preschooler play interactions. For example, an older child's preference for group play with friends freed up time for parents to engage with their preschool-aged child one-on-one, while parents who needed to look after younger children identified that caretaking a barrier to playing with their preschool-aged children because their younger child was a priority. When this was the case, some parents split responsibilities with their partners, who would play with the older children.

- “[...] and if I’m a little slower getting ready or do having to take care of the baby or whatever, my husband will usually do something with them, get them going on a craft or take them shopping, or go outside to the park, or he does something with them, he can’t handle staying in the house, he goes crazy.” KLC-01-RP

At the time of the post-intervention interviews, some parents also identified family dynamics in relation to play. In particular, they mentioned the nap time of younger children in household, which required older children to participate (with their parent) in quieter play activities and behaviours.

Parent Observation of Children during Free-Play

Parents talked about observing their children throughout episodes of play. Many parents discussed the need to monitor their children's play in some manner, either through direct supervision or with regular check-ins on their children playing out of sight. Parents indicated they would check in on their children playing out of sight in order to see how their children were doing or listen to what their children were saying during play.

- “[...] I listen to conversations that they’re having and making sure it’s like uplifting and things that are like going to be making other people feel – well and I try to get in there

and say like, you know how would that make you feel if someone said that to you – like trying to let them think of it from another person’s perspective.” KLC-08-RP

- “Well they actually um, if I go down, if they’re playing downstairs without me, then I’ll go down and you know check up on them and they’ll be, you know, playing in a closet together, and they’ll have dolls or they’re doing something, or um, I don’t even – they just um, yeah, I think they’re just kind of pretending, again like this is role playing [...]”

KLC-09-RP

- “Um, yeah so it’s just watching him do that was, I was pleased to watch him, you know, figure that out, so it’s neat to see how – to see how good they are with actually using their brains when you make them use your brains.” SOC-04-RP

Observations of children (playing) offered parents the opportunity to learn about their children and to see changes in their child’s development. For example, observations allowed parents to see their children’s decision-making skills in action (e.g., see what children choose to do or use, etc.). Parents indicated they saw the emergence of talents and changes in their children’s abilities (e.g., more social interactions, improved fine motor skills). There was also an indication that observations gave parents insight into their child’s life experiences (e.g., program experiences) through the direction of their play or the language they used during play. There was also mention that the observations of children served a specific purpose. For instance, observations were identified as helping parents assess their child’s health, given their engagement (level) in play. Additionally, parents could see what play activities and behaviours they should encourage or discourage, and determine what their children should learn in future. Based on children’s use and expression of imagination during play, observations even provided entertainment for some parents.

- “So if they enjoy doing something like singing or performing, like I’ll encourage that. Um, and you know, just try to – it’s just fun to kind of see their talents emerging and be supportive of those things and also get them to try things that they haven’t tried, just to see. So I’m kind of like studying them a little bit, as I get them to do different things, just to see if it’s something that we should pursue or something that they should just have a base knowledge of, and then just move onto something else.” KLC-08-RP
- “But if, again if she doesn’t show signs of wanting to actually participate in anything, or to play then that, that to me shows that she’s not feeling very well and not doing very well, that something is wrong. Because she is such an outgoing little girl.” KLC-12-RP
- “[...] with my youngest, or with any of my kids really, that if something’s bothering them you know. So when they’re generally happy kids, right, and they’re playing well together and they’re, you know, doing their own thing and they’re not complaining about being bored, that – you know when that stuff isn’t happening, I know there’s something wrong, and generally it’s something like, you know, someone hurt their feelings or you know, they’re bored or they aren’t letting me play.” SOC-03-RP

The post-intervention interviews replicated these general ideas: parents observe or supervise children during play. Parents expressed that, through play, they have the opportunity to learn about what is happening in their child’s life. Through observations, parents identified increases in their children’s knowledge (e.g., counting or reciting the alphabet during play) and personal developments (e.g., increased self-confidence).

- “So like for her, like she – the first times that I ever heard her like counting or like doing her A.B.C.s, have all been like when she’s playing, because she likes to play school a lot with herself. So I always hear a lot of that stuff like what she’s actually learning, like

that's where she brings it out is when she's playing. She doesn't like to sit down and like do work type stuff." KLC-07-OP

- "So like it's, the stuff is there to play with, but then it's up to like the kids how they want to play with it and what they want to use it for, and that's kind of interesting, just kind of see how they can use their, you know, use their mind to decide how they want to play with the things that they have around them." KLC-08-OP

Parent Intervention in Children's Free-Play - Results

Generally, parents intervened in their children's play to facilitate a balance or variety of activities and behaviours, and to limit the occurrence or duration of some actions (i.e., screen time or violent behaviours). Parents could ensure their children have time to engage in free-play by facilitating such opportunities. In particular, parents identified their potential to independently plan activities for their children, take their children to different places, or provide resources for their children, which would contribute to a variety of free-play opportunities for their children. Parents could also impede children's play activities and behaviours through the creation of household rules.

Planning of Events

Parents felt that a balance between and within scheduled and unscheduled time was important for their children. Some concern was raised in regards to balancing scheduled and unscheduled opportunities as parents wanted to give their children different experiences, but they also did not want to overwhelm their children (or families). Parents acknowledged their role as a gatekeeper to some opportunities, where they needed to schedule or give their children permission for experiences. Parents generally took two approaches to purposefully planning experiences: they either planned opportunities that were child-centered (i.e., that focused

explicitly on the respective child and their experience) or opportunities that were family-centered (i.e., that involved the immediate family for the groups' experience). Over-scheduling children and families was a concern for some participants; parents did not want to over-schedule themselves or their children, and would ensure that children had unscheduled time throughout the week. Further, parents expressed concerns or barriers around planning experiences due to the perceived 'busyness' of their child or family.

- “When we go to town he’s very, he knows that I try to – I do something and then we let him, ‘whatever you want to go do.’ Like so we’re very 50/50 with ‘you do, let me do something and then we’ll go do something that you want to do.’” SOC-04-RP

The child-centered approach to planning experiences included the scheduling of play dates with friends, enrolment in specific programs or activities, organizing outing (e.g., swimming), and provision of free time for children. Play dates, specifically, were identified as a place for group play and, subsequently, social skill development. Some parents would also help to facilitate solitary play time, away from siblings or themselves, where their children could make their own decisions.

- “So it’s, it’s very important for her um, not to be at home all the time, to be out playing with other kids, so I try to schedule play dates and things like that. She does tend to want to play independently, and likes to play independently, so I don’t – and you know for a while there, she just thought kids were there to take away her toys from her. Like that was what the purpose of other kids were, and so I’ve had to really um, give her good experiences in playing, so she can realize that actually making friends is fun and that they’re not just there to take away her toys from her.” KLC-08-RP

- “Um, yeah just when they go to certain activities, the older ones, there’s a, we usually take time and stop at a park beforehand, and so they have time to, you know, do that. And like lots of park play after school and things like that just to give them a chance to unwind and have some time just to have fun before we go home.” KLC-08-RP
- “Oh I think it’s important because it’s helping them build on their skills, and it – if they weren’t allowed to play at all during the day, then you’re going to have a miserable child. And I think it helps them to stay health – happy and healthy, it’s – aah- it’s just, it’s important for every day.” KLC-09-RP

Several parents mentioned that they set aside time in the evenings or on weekends for family interactions (e.g., fun, relaxed, or novelty opportunities). Parents mentioned family experiences at home, such as colouring, Rainbow Loom, board or video games, and television shows or movies, and opportunities to get away from the home environment, such as visiting family or friends. There was also some discussion about family holidays or trips that would take the children away from their home community (e.g., to a major city or lakeside cabin) to play in a different setting or in a different way.

Discussions with parents in the post-intervention interviews reiterated the idea that many experiences were purposefully planned for children and families. Child-centered opportunities included the scheduling of play dates, providing the time to visit parks, or having down time when schedules had been busy. Family time was set aside, particularly on weekends, for members to interact and recharge.

- “Um, we pretty much always just do free-play. I’m not a big structured activity kind of person. Like when she’s at home, she gets to choose what she wants to play with and I

just, if she wants to do arts and crafts, sure we'll do a craft. But, I just, I'm not really into the whole 'lets structure our whole day.'” KLC-07-OP

- “Um, and usually if I'm busy running around, I'll make sure that we go to the park early before we pick up her sisters from school, or we do something to give her like a little bit of downtime and time together. So just to do something fun for her.” KLC-08-OP
- “We usually like to have Friday night as like more of a down, down night, cause it's been a very busy week and they can just kind of choose to – like we do a movie night or just kind of do something more mellow just to let them have some free time, that I'm not dictating to them like okay get ready for bed, okay do this, do that. (laughs) They don't have me like nagging them, that like it's just nice to have a night like that where it's just not um, as – as structured right, you don't have things that you have to get done, so.”

KLC-08-OP

Transportation to Various Settings

Parents discussed environments for play, which indicated that exposure to a variety of settings was important. A number of perspectives were shared throughout the interviews in regards to where parents would take their children, away of their home environment, for play. They mentioned visiting or utilizing a variety of settings including local parks and playgrounds (including slash parks in summer), private businesses (e.g., Ikea, Treehouse, Toy Hutch), and public facilities (e.g., recreation centres, the library, church, swimming pools, arenas). Differing perspectives were shared on where parents would take their children; some parents did not always visit the same spaces in order to give their children new experiences, yet some also mentioned taking their children to spaces they knew and loved.

- “But it isn’t that, really that far away I think, so it’s somewhere that I’d like to try, just to change it up so we’re not always going to the same places.” KLC-08-RP

Parents acknowledged taking their children to places away from the home that would allow them to play independently, or to new places where their children could get out of their comfort zone. These experiences were generally seen as enjoyable and some, even, helped to address perceived child needs. For example, many parents wanted their children to be social, so they took their children to places where they could interact with others. Further, there were parents who felt that taking children to different places would give them opportunities that were not currently available at their homes (e.g., physically active play, group play). One parent explicitly shared that they utilized monthly passes to facilities or would drop-in to other indoor facilities (i.e., jungle gyms), which would help to keep their children physically active during the winter. Additionally, children’s use of spaces away from the home environment (i.e., Ikea) had a dual purpose in that parents could complete tasks while their children played.

- “[...] and we go around lots of places like, the rec centers and stuff, and even the drop in at Ikea, we drop them off. (laughs – laughter) We do stuff with them, cause if you try and keep them out, especially [child] cause he’s not as comfortable being social, so we try to make sure he’s out there. As much as possible.” KLC-13-RP

The interviews contained more extensive discussions about parents and children visiting parks and playgrounds. There were several indications that the frequency of visiting parks and playgrounds was related to their proximity to the family’s home or convince of travel. Many parent mentioned that they would use their backyards more frequently than visiting parks, as these were not always easily accessible. Some parents indicated that they had the opportunity to

walk, rather than needing to drive, to a park or playground. Taking children to parks was also related to the weather, with several parents indicating that visiting parks was weather-dependent.

- “Um, but you know there are times when I will take them to, you know, take her in uh, you know for a treat to go to a playground. Maybe say once a month.” SOC-09-RP
- “[...] when he goes to – on the days that he goes to preschool, it’s um, there is park play on those days, right, cause you’re already out so it’s easier to just take him somewhere to play outside.” SOC-13-RP

During the post-intervention interviews, parents also mentioned taking their children to different settings for play. They recognized that the location of opportunities, particularly facilities or programs, was an important determinant of their visitation and use. Considerations were also made in regards to taking children to a variety of places for play in order for them to have different experiences.

- “Um, you know you’re taking her to different places all the time and that the way that they change up the um, activities at the preschool it’s, it’s like she can use her brain to kind of decide how she wants to manipulate those things.” KLC-08-OP

Provision of Resources

Parents described instances where resources were provided or sought-out for their children. These occurrences were centered on the acquisition of equipment and materials for their children to use, such as play structures and crafts supplies, which would enhance the play experiences of their children. Parents, family members, and others were cited as providing resources for children to use. Parents mentioned that the resources supplied were either generic or related to their child’s gender.

- “Um, yeah he – when he, when he was an only child – excuse me – his toys were definitely more masculine toys. But we have such big families, that it wasn’t necessarily stuff that we had purchased for him, it was just the, you know, societal norm. You’re a boy here’s your truck and stuff like that.” KLC-11-RP
- “[Interviewer: Cool um, are there any nearby parks or sort of] None, no nearby parks for us. We’d have to get in the truck and drive someplace for a park. Which is disappointing but, um, but I, we try to make our yard as fun as possible. He’s- yeah [Interviewer: Oh that’s cool.] Yeah, yeah, making *jumps* and all that fun stuff, on his bike.” SOC-04-RP
- “Um, so for the first little while before she could really state who she was as a person, I’d just kind of buy generic stuff, or I – I would let her play with whatever was left around from when her brother was little.” SOC-06-RP

Parents discussed moderating the availability of resources based on perceived needs of their children and outcomes associated with the use of resources: equipment and materials could be used to facilitate or impede play activities and behaviours. Some parents felt they could prevent their children from fighting by preparing adequate resources (i.e., with several and/or a variety) and by restricting access to certain resources. There were discrepancies between parents on their provision of toy guns, whereby some parents provided access to these toys while others prohibited these objects at home. Further, some parents mentioned that their children have access to toy guns but they were limited as to how they could be used (i.e., children are not allowed to point toy guns at others). Based on child characteristics and behaviours, parents indicated that the resources children were allowed to play with at certain times of the day (e.g., bedtime) may differ. Moreover, while the weather was identified as impacting opportunities to use a variety of

spaces (i.e., outdoors), some parents had novel, ‘rainy day’ resources that were not regularly used by their children.

- “Um, some play stuff I keep just for rainy day activities, when they can’t go outside, and I call it rainy day, but soon it’s going to be cold snow days. Um, so I keep those ones away from the kids, and I pull them out as something special when we’re trapped.” KLC-01-RP
- “I don’t let him bring anything in bed ’cause he’s a fidgeter, fussing, really hard for him to relax at night time. So he’s not allowed to have anything in his bed other than his big shark to hug, and he has like his books and airplanes, and stuff all up on a, a mantle where he can’t touch them, but they’re there and whatever he wants to be keeping him safe.” KLC-13-RP
- “And then she’ll, you know, ask me to bring down a puzzle, or I keep – I keep some puzzles down, but if she wants a new one then I switch it out and – cause I don’t want to have to clean up 50 puzzles every day. So I have a certain sample of them that I keep down. And then other ones I will rotate them out every once in a while, because then I don’t have to clean them all up. And there is something always new.” SOC-06-RP

When parents needed to take care of household responsibilities or look after other (younger) children, they encouraged their (other) children to participate in play independently or occupied their children using engaging resources. The use of the television, for example, was mentioned as a way of preventing conflicts between siblings or having quiet time in the house. Parents used the television or other electronics with screens to distract their children, even though they understood there were negative consequences or drawbacks to these resources. Play

structures in the yard were also identified as a resource to occupy children when parents were unavailable to play.

- “Which I mean I use them, I’m a mom, busy mom with three kids, the T.V. goes on but it’s not on all day.” KLC-01-RP
- “We’ve put the play structure up this summer so that they would have something to do when I was busy with the baby, or I could sit on the deck and watch them play.” KLC-01-RP

During the post-intervention interviews, parents identified their role in the provision of resources for their children. They mentioned that they could moderate the type of resources available to their children through their acquisition, limitation, or restriction. Parents, again, identified the television as a means of distracting or manipulating their children. For example, some parents mentioned using the television to help settle their children when they were being rambunctious or occupying their children so that they would not need parent interactions (i.e., when the parents needed to accomplish tasks).

- “I think it’s important to have different things to play with, and to change it up so they’re not just playing with the same things all the time, and just to keep it interesting for them so they can, you know, really be excited about what they’re learning and interested in what they’re learning.” KLC-08-OP

Implementation of Household Rules

Widely discussed amongst the interviews, household rules restricted children’s play opportunities, or specific activities or behaviours during play experiences. Generally, parents thought that their children understood these rules, though they sometimes needed reminding. Parents mentioned that some play activities and behaviours were designated to specific spaces

around the home environment; children had to gain permission or have supervision to participate in certain play opportunities; and play was restricted at certain times due to other events.

Parents identified that many of their children's play activities, behaviours, and resources were designated to or restricted from specific spaces around their home environment. Many play opportunities were limited to specific locations either inside or outside of the home due to the actions they stimulated. The location of such opportunities was typically related to physically active play, play that created messes, and the noise produced during play: many parents identified these as 'outdoor' actions, which were not permitted inside of the home. When playing indoors, some play actions and resources were restricted to certain rooms (e.g., basement or rumpus room), and limitations were made on using the resources available. Several parents, however, talked about setting up child-friendly areas within their homes where children could be independent. Some indoor spaces were kept 'toy-free,' such as living rooms or kitchens, while other indoor spaces were designated specifically to contain or store toys, such as a child's bedroom or a rumpus room. Messy activities, such as art and craft projects (e.g., colouring, painting, using Play Doh), were identified by several parents as being restricted to the family's kitchen table.

- "Um, and we have upstairs and downstairs toys, uh mainly because we're in a two story and our down stair toys is really our main floor, and I don't necessarily want them through the living room and kitchen area, or doing more damage to the hardwood than has already been done." KLC-01-RP
- "So upstairs, now that they're older, um, I try to keep the upstairs adult space, and not as many toys." KLC-06-RP

- “Um, there are rules about where *toys* go, but there’s not really rules about where you play with those toys, as long as you’re willing to pick them up and put them away. They – they can be played with anywhere, but toys have a certain location to be put away. Um, but as far as – as far as play and um, um, where to play – there’s no restriction on that at all.” SOC-11-RP
- “Um, there’s not a whole lot of other rules around play um, we’ve got a toy room that’s part, that’s actually part of their bedroom and the toys are supposed to stay in there.” SOC-12-RP

Parents frequently indicated that they acted as a gatekeeper to their children’s play. Instances of children’s request for parents’ permission to participate in activities (e.g., to watch television, to use tablets/internet) or behaviours (e.g., to play independently) were outlined during the interviews. Children were often cited as requiring their parent’s approval and supervision in order to participate in desired play experiences, such as having play dates, going outside, or visiting parks. Further, some parents indicated that their children needed direct supervision under specific circumstances, such as outdoor play or messy play. Contrasting perspectives, however, were shared amongst the parents in regards to the necessity of supervision for outdoor play: some children needed supervision when playing in the family’s backyard, while other children could play on their own in this area.

- “[...] honestly my child, unlike some parents I let go play, and I don’t know exactly what he’s doing. He’s (excited tone) *playing*, that’s what he *should* be doing. I’m not right there to see what, yeah, so yeah that’s all.” SOC-10-RP

Parents were asked to touch on play during bath, bed, and meal times, and many indicated that there would be a limitation or restriction on play in these instances. Several parents

said their children had the chance to play experiences in the bath, while some parents restricted this opportunity to avoid messes. Many parents indicated that activities or behaviours before bedtime needed to be quieter (e.g., watching television, listening to stories, or reading books) and less physically active (e.g., no wrestling, running) in order for children to ‘wind down.’ Additionally, several parents mentioned that child nap time required others to engage in quieter opportunities around the house (i.e., colouring, drawing, doing workbooks). Comments were also made in regards to the restriction of play during meal times. Rules around meal time play were implemented by many parents, however, as children could get out of hand or become distracted from eating; meal times, generally, were for family discussions. Children were encouraged to play while meals were being prepared and some were allowed to play with their food to have fun during dinner (though there were restrictions on toys at the table during meal times).

Parents mentioned that play would be restricted on the basis of household responsibilities and tasks of children, with some parents requiring their children to complete tasks before they were allowed to play freely. Parents would allocate responsibilities or tasks that were age and developmentally suitable for their children, in order to create a foundation for success (and praise) and protection from being overwhelmed. There was a contrast, however, where parents’ views implied that the priority for younger children should be on participating in play, rather than undertaking tasks or responsibilities.

- “[...] I think is important with the routine of every day, like with the older children there’s a definite routine where they have to get things done, with her it’s not so much right now, even though she does have jobs that she has to accomplish. She gets a lot more free time to play than the other two. Um, so if there’s – if there is time for down time, then I let them have that time, but if there’s things that need to be done, they need to get those

things done first, and then they can have a little bit of time if there is time after that [...]"

KLC-08-RP

In the post-intervention interviews, parents indicated their role as a gatekeeper to their children's play. The necessity of parent approval was mentioned in that children needed permission to have play dates or go outside to play. Further, parents indicated that in order for play dates and outdoor play to occur they had some requirements for their children. For example, some parents mentioned needing to know the parents of potential playmates before a play date. When playing outside, different rules were shared amongst the parents, which included the necessity of children to be within sight of each other or their parent, the requirement of children to wear appropriate clothing, and the limitation that children were not allowed to play on the road. There was also an indication that there were certain locations for play, such as louder activities and behaviours in the outdoors. At this time, parents also agreed that there was to be no play during meal times and, even, that there are some restrictions around bedtime play activities and behaviours.

- "Yeah most of the time, I – they always know kind of as long as I can see them and they can see me, they're – and they stick together, that helps a lot, cause then we can take care of each other, that they're kind of free to be, you know." KLC-10-OP
- "Um, usually we'll – see if it's yelling in the house or being too loud, we'll remind her you know, 'we're in the house use your inside voice, quiet down.' If that doesn't work we might have to change the activity or you know go outside, find something else to do. Um, but for the most part at her age, I'm finding she's getting better with it if you say no, it's – it's usually stopped." SOC-14-OP

Parent Reasons for Intervention in Children's Free-Play - Results

Throughout the course of the interviews, parents mentioned reasons for intervening in their children's play either during their participation or through more covert methods. Parents identified that these interventions were done through and/or because of their children's play activities and behaviours. Parents intervened in play to teach their children concepts, protect their children's emotional well-being, support their children's development, and prevent any physical harm to children.

Teaching Concepts and Behaviours to Children

Educating children was not necessarily a separate activity as various play experiences provided parents with the opportunity to teach their children. Further, some parents thought that if they incorporated learning opportunities into play that their children would benefit more from the experience. Parents identified their potential to teach their children 'good things,' such as academic concepts, respecting others, reality versus make-believe, gender roles, and, even, how to play properly. Different methods of teaching were identified throughout the interviews, which included talking with children (i.e., asking questions, explaining situations, and interjecting opinions) and showing children how to accomplish tasks in a way they could replicate (i.e., role modeling). Making comparisons between a child's actions during play to real world situations or relaying information in a way that a child could understand, such as in an example specific to a child's preferences, were ways for parents to ensure that what they were trying to teach would be understood by their children.

There were parents who saw the importance of incorporating academic components into their children's play. For example, there was potential for parents to incorporate academic-type learning elements (i.e., colours, directions, letters, numbers, shapes, sizes, and sounds) into play

activities and behaviours such as board games, colouring, flashcards, and Play Doh. The incorporation of these ‘educational’ aspects into play was identified as having greater benefits for children over time.

- “Um, for – well from my experience I know um, I know that when I try to include um, like word games or letters and numbers into the play, they get a little more out of it than just them playing with, say their Barbies or their Legos, or whatever. If I actually put some sort of educational twist on it then they tend to get a little more, a little more out of it in the long run.” KLC-12-RP
- “Whatever he wants to play, whatever he wants to play it in, and if we haven’t done enough – if we haven’t done any reading or counting, or letter recognition in a while, what I’ll do is I’ll tend to suggest Play Doh and I’ll make shapes of letters. If he can make them too.” SOC-13-RP

There was discussion within the interviews about the respectfulness of play (e.g., mean-spirited, intrusive, interruptive, negative, etc.), which depended on children’s actions. Parents mentioned that they would intervene in their child’s play if what they saw or heard was disrespectful, and suggest alternative play activities or behaviours to curb these actions. Several parents indicated that they wanted their children to use forward thinking (i.e., think about the repercussions of their actions) or think about how they would feel if the situation was reversed (i.e., something negative or hurtful was done or said to them). This way, children would gain a deeper understanding of the impact of their actions.

- “So if she’s like, she is playing maybe, I don’t know, I would say example like, playing rough or screaming, or something. I will say ‘no that is not good, that is not healthy, and is not respectful for everybody.’” KLC-04-RP

- “If I catch him doing something that I don’t think is right, we kind of just think like, ‘use your brain, do you think this is a good idea or a bad idea?’” SOC-04-RP
- “Yeah like I – I don’t like um, the negative play where you’re, you know, where someone, or you’re kind of hurting someone or you’re, you know, putting someone down. So if they’re doing something together, and of course, the younger is not as good as the older, where it’s – you know – you’re making them feel bad for it, so you know, ‘I’m – I’m better than you.’ I don’t, I don’t like any of that, so if you’re going to do something together, it – you know you treat each other like equals or you help the one that’s having a hard time. You don’t belittle.” SOC-09-RP
- “And so mentally – when we’re playing often we’ll have conversations. About what – what is *good*, and what, you know, what could hurt you if somebody else did something to you. Would you do that to, it’s more about the *ethical*, and so then mentally they’re thinking about that, those kind of things.” SOC-10-RP

Throughout the interviews, some parents expressed concerned over the content of pretend play due to the unrealistic or harmful outcomes (if) transposed into daily life. For example, there were parents with concerns for their child’s ability to distinguish between reality and make-believe. While this may have been related to age, the ability to differentiate between reality and make-believe was seen as important due to repercussions of this understanding (e.g., asking to go to places that do not exist). One parent, in particular, expressed unease for fairy tales that promoted marriage between two people who did not know each other. This parent identified the unrealistic nature of this portrayal and tried to relay this to their child.

- “Yeah, yeah and I’m just like well until they’re older and they really have like a foundation, like over six, and they have a foundation and understanding and kind of

passion and love, and like the difference between play and reality. The other day we were watching a movie and so they're like, 'can we go there?' It's like 'no.'" KLC-13-RP

- "[...] I think if you want to raise happy, well adjusted, friendly, kind, compassionate people, you should teach them that what they see on T.V. – cause they see that, they see those shows with like the guns or the games, oh my goodness, video games they're shooting there like 'oh I want to like kill all these zombies,' I'm like – okay. (laughs) You, they get nightmares and they get scared, and that's not a good thing, so you have to really teach the more they see it. So really I, I shouldn't say I prohibit them, I should make sure they're not around. They're just, they can't find one, so they never ask for it." KLC-13-RP

Acknowledging that there are 'male' and 'female' play activities and behaviours, some parents mentioned that their children need to understand such differences, and that they should know it is okay to play in a way that is not perceived as congruent with their gender. Examples of teachable aspects associated with gender included types of experiences and different activities (i.e., physically active or rough-and-tumble play). Some parents identified that importance of their children learning gendered roles (and skills) through play, such as girls pretending 'family,' as these would be important later in life. Such gender-stereotypes, however, were contradicted by parents who discussed the importance of their children gaining skills that were typically associated with the role of another gender (e.g., boys learning how to cook and clean).

- "Um, I think it's more, not really so much for *him*, but I would say more so with my daughter, I think we feel like we don't want to - we want her to have like a broad spectrum of skills, not just typical girl things. Like being obsessed with how they look

and blah, blah, blah, we'd like her to be able to go out there and kick a ball around, and build a playhouse, and whatever." KLC-05-RP

- "So I mean I try not to segregate too much. I mean there's certain things that I want them to realize that boys do this and girls can do this." KLC-06-RP
- "They also – they also help um, well especially stuff you do in play, especially for girls I find more though than boys, they relate to real life. So the girls like to play house and Um, she always tries to make her brother the baby. And I think that helps them for when they get older." KLC-14-RP

Beyond the potential to intervene to teach their children during play, some parents felt that their children needed to learn how to play, and that there was a 'right' or 'wrong,' or 'proper' way to play. These parents felt that it was important for children to understand these differences and they mentioned separating their children if they played in a way that was not congruent with these expectations. This was highlighted in an example where a family left a public space because their child was acting in a way that embarrassed the parent. Similarly, one parent mentioned that it was more important for their children to learn to play than learn to work. Several parents also identified the need for children to understand when it is or is not time for play.

- "[...] learning when it's time for play and time not to play." KLC-08-RP
- "At the end of the day don't you want to say you learned how to play more than you learned how to work?" KLC-13-RP
- "[...] everybody watches too much T.V. and you know we're too hooked into electronics as it is. Um, especially when they're young, I think they don't really need it, they should be learning to play instead." SOC-14-RP

Discussions during the post-intervention interviews were consistent with the messages conveyed earlier: parents would try to teach their children what they thought was important through or because of their children's play. While freedom and the opportunity for children to explore on their own would provide learning opportunities for children, parents felt that they could teach their children. For example, parents mentioned that they would talk to their children during play to teach them letters and numbers. Parents would also intervene when their children were engaging in violent behaviours or negative talk, and explain why their actions or words were unacceptable in order to teach them respect. Some parents also indicated that they would intervene in activities or behaviours that they would not allow outside of play or did not align with expectations for their child's future (i.e., intervene based on the content of play) by re-directing the play experience. Finally, there was also an indication that children need to learn how to play 'properly.'

- “So um, I mean I do direct things sometimes, like if there – like if she's playing Barbies or playing whatever, and like the whole fairy tale thing whatever, like sometimes her sisters say like ‘oh let's go get married’ whatever, and I'm always like ‘no you can't get married you don't know each other.’ And like yeah ‘we have to get to know each other better first.’ (laughter) Something like, I like – I kind of direct the conversation when it goes like in those kind of directions where it's something that I want to teach them about, but other than that I just kind of go along with it.” KLC-08-OP
- “Um, well there was a situation the other day where she wants – she was initiating a game with a friend of hers from preschool, and the friend of hers did not want to play that game. And she kept wanting to play the game with this person, and – and um, she was kind of frustrated that her friend didn't want to play the game with her. And so we had to

kind of go through what can you do in that situation in the future? And so it was about making sure that if you're playing with somebody that you both want to play that game, and if they don't want to play the game then find- you can either find someone who wants to play the game with you, or you can compromise and find something you both want to do together. So it's just like I was telling her that you can't, when you're playing with other people you have to be mindful that they might not – not always want to play the same things as you, and you have to either compromise or just like look for someone else that wants to play that game with you. So um, to just to not to be, like domineering I guess, that way if someone else doesn't want to, yeah.” KLC-08-OP

- “[Interviewer: Um. So when you discourage things, how do you discourage them, or when you encourage things, how do you encourage them?] Um, mostly the discouraging is just distracting or kinda having a different idea, I don't necessarily say – I mostly don't say like no that's enough, I mean sometimes I'll talk to them about, 'you know you don't want to do this all day, it's not healthy' or whatever. But mostly I'll just say 'why don't we go this instead or,' so it's mostly just redirecting. And then for encouraging, yeah the same thing.” KLC-10-OP
- “It, he has to be able to play properly to develop properly. Like he has to go through the steps of develop – like the developments of play. I don't – (laughs) how to follow orders, and how to um, organize, I mean how to remember the rules of games and stuff like that.” KLC-16-OP
- “Oh yeah he needs to understand what's wrong. (laughs) I can't just tell him what's wrong, that it's wrong and then he stopped doing it right? I need to teach that what is wrong about it.” KLC-16-OP

Protecting Children's Emotional Well-being

Many parents expressed their support for children to participate in activities and behaviours they found enjoyable as this would help to ensure that their children were engaged and having fun. Parents wanted their children to enjoy themselves, but also wanted to protect them from emotional strain (e.g., being overwhelmed, having nightmares, etc.). Additionally, some parents indicated that their children's play needed to be uplifting for themselves and for their playmates. For example, one parent discussed the importance of ensuring that children were being positive and happy during play, because they wanted their children to recognize that feeling throughout their lives.

- “And um, and I think too just healthy play in terms of building good self-esteem with him, so we, - uh we engage a lot and I like to positively reinforce my kids, so even through play um, there's a lot of positive reinforcement happening.” KLC-15-RP
- “Um, so we don't, it uh -it in our family, it doesn't matter your gender, it just matters what *you* – what you, if you like something, you like it for who you are, so we're happy with whatever that is.” SOC-11-RP
- “[Interviewer: Okay. So my next question is um, are there any particular types of play that you encourage or support, more than others?] No not really, it's whatever they're into, I don't force them to do anything they don't want to do. If they don't want to do it, they don't have to do it. And whatever they're into I encourage them to do it.” SOC-15-RP

Parents discussed the importance of protecting their children's emotional well-being by ensuring that their play was suitable for their age and development. Several parents used age as a reason for the activities or behaviours their children were allowed to participate. Further, parents

tied their child's age to their mental readiness to learn or understand concepts, the acceptability of their actions, and the types of responsibilities they were given. Parents acknowledged that limits or boundaries would be set on children's opportunities for play, though many parents did not want to shelter their children. Parents also mentioned that they could ensure their children get time to engage in the play activities and behaviours they need and enjoy by facilitating such opportunities.

- “I always try to do the *right* game, and just you know, her age. [Interviewer: Are you, um, are you worried that it will be too young for her, or too old for her?] I think it will be not yet for her to learn those things. She doesn't have enough *age* to know about those games. To know *how* to do it, and I think it won't be healthy, maybe for her as well?”

KLC-04-RP

- “You know so I don't want to keep them too sheltered but I, you know, keep it age appropriate as much as possible.” KLC-06-RP
- “I just have to let her be four years old, and not, like she has to be able to learn to do jobs, but I have to make sure it's like for her developmental level and making sure that it's not like overwhelming for her, that they're just little jobs that she, I know that she can do and then I praise her for it after, and um, that like is really helpful, cause every kid likes to be helpful [...]” KLC-08-RP

There was considerable discussion throughout the interviews in regards to the context or content of activities, which was of concern for parents. Particularly, parents mentioned that they limited or restricted their children's engagement in activities that were too mature, which they could not fully comprehend. For instance, there was discussion about restricting children from watching shows or using video games that would give them nightmares, or those that contained

swearing or violence. Parents also mentioned that they discouraged play activities and behaviours with content too mature for their children (i.e., ghosts, goblins).

- “[Interviewer: Are there any kinds of play that you would discourage or even prohibit [child] from doing?] Um, yeah. (laughs) Older game, like the older, you know, they have older cousins, so sometimes their games um, my kids are a little bit scared of. For instance I, some people might think that my kids are a little bit more naïve, which is fine. Um, I don’t expose them to, I want to say like scary things? Like they’re in bed pretty early, so I try to keep, you know, their shows and stuff to what their age appropriate is. So like as far as like um, hide and seek in the dark and um, you know the ghost and goblins, and things like that I try to, yeah I try to really not have them exposed to that until they’re um, I think mentally ready for it or a little bit older, that kind of thing.”

KLC-06-RP

Discussions with parents during the post-intervention interviews reinforced that they wanted to protect their children’s emotional well-being. Parents identified the need to ensure children have down time to recharge, and provide opportunities that align with their child’s needs and preferences to keep them happy. Some parents mentioned that they would intervene (e.g., talk to their children) when their children became upset during play to help them calm down and/or see reason within their behaviours, or encourage their children to participate in ways that they feel comfortable and not to be pressured into following others’ activities or behaviours. Parents also mentioned providing resources (e.g., pets, go-karts), playmates, or ideas to help their children emotionally, or facilitate enjoyable experiences and prevent them from being bored (i.e., occupy them).

Supporting Children's (Skill) Development

Parents saw the potential to encourage or support opportunities that would contribute to their child's development to help them in the future. Parents identified their own role in challenging and progressing their children's abilities, and addressing perceived needs of their children. They could do this, for example, by having children slow their speaking down and repeat themselves to address speaking difficulties, or by facilitating partner or group interactions to improve social skills (e.g., sharing, adaptability, inclusiveness). Based on personality and natural interest, parents felt that they could ensure their children had time to engage in the activities and behaviours that would support their development. For instance, due to their child's personality traits, some parents emphasised the importance of scheduling play dates to encourage socialization and regulate the amount of solitary play time of their children. Contrary to this, though, some parents would ensure their child had time for solitary play based on their natural interests. Although parents said that they would support their child's development how and when they could, they also understood that their children would grow and their abilities improve as they are ready (i.e., at their own pace).

- “So like they’ll all, I think they’ll, I believe they’ll all reach their milestones when they’re meant to, and all you can do is keep encouraging them and pushing them through.” KLC-13-RP
- “Uh and socially, I – I the – the same thing. I think that kids need to learn how to play together. If kids play by themselves all the time, that’s great, but then all of a sudden you put them in a room with five other kids, and all those kids are playing in a different way, and they’re – you know – all of a sudden someone grabs their toy, or someone wants to be the leader and you know wants them to follow along. If – if they’ve never played with

other children, I think that's very difficult for them. So I think it's, they should learn how to play from a young age, with other kids." SOC-09-RP

- "Like when they're playing, like when they start playing football or something there, don't just throw them the ball, give them a route to do or something you know, make them think about – think about more than just catching the ball. Or give them, like when they're building Lego, just don't let them build a, build a line of Lego, build something."

SOC-15-RP

Parents frequently mentioned the importance of children developing and using their own imagination. They saw this as an important skill, which would help their children to occupy themselves and enhance their problem-solving abilities. While parents mentioned that they could help to stimulate their child's use of imagination by providing suggestions, they wanted their children to develop and utilize this skill throughout play and non-play experiences as independent individuals.

- "[Interviewer: And are there particular types of play you encourage or support, and why?] Um, not necessarily, I encourage them to play by themselves and not have my husband or I tell them what to play with, or how to play with it, but if um, you know if [child] can't figure out how to transform his transformer back into a car, like we'll show him and then be like 'okay, like now do you remember now, like now can you – now you can go' kind of a thing." KLC-11-RP
- "And um, I – I do encourage them to use their imaginations, though. Like if they come to me and say they're bored, I give suggestions of what they can try to be less bored. So I guess I really encourage them to – to use their brains, is what we – what we call it. Use our brains or imagination, yeah." SOC-03-RP

- “Um, but other than that, it’s, I try to, you know, tell him all the time you’re, you know, you’ve got to figure out how to go and entertain yourself. Um, I’m not going to be here to tell you these things your whole life, so you have to use, like I say, ‘you have to use your brain and think up something, like go be creative somehow,’ you know. And he says ‘well what am I – what do you mean be creative.’ I’m like ‘I don’t know, this is up for you, whatever your creative juices flow.’” SOC-04-RP
- “So um, I try to be his friend and guide him, but then when he’s starting to do something on his own, I step back and whatever else I’m going to go do at that point, so um, I’m – it’s really important for me to make sure that he is – is doing these things on his own and not, you know, which is hard when you’re seeing them doing something and you know they can do it better, but just step back, ‘let them do it, let them do it.’” SOC-04-RP

The post-intervention interviews confirmed some of these sentiments, with parents indicating that they tried to support their child’s development during or through play. Parents made themselves available to help their children, though children’s changing (fine motor) abilities required varying levels and types of assistance. In particular, parents identified the need for children to learn independence during this stage of life; they expressed various ways and reasons for supporting their child’s independence, sometimes by allowing their children to make decisions on their own.

- “Um, I don’t think you should tell your kids what to do all the time in certain areas. Like it’s important for them also to have that ability to, you know, decide what they want to do with things, and as long as it’s not hurting anyone else, (laughs) um, but yeah I just think always being, like hovering around your kid and always telling them how to do things is not very productive for them, like they need to have some time just to kind of be on their

own and figure things out on their own. And have that expression that they can do when they're not being watched over, telling them how to do things.” KLC-08-OP

- “Uh. I don't know, I think that he doesn't like to be told what to do, and what he should be playing with, or what he should be doing. I mean I try to, if he is just playing I'll sometimes ask him questions, and his – he's up for that cause he likes to talk about what he's doing. But, if I try to tell him, even if it's something he loves, like go jump on the trampoline, he'd be like 'oh not right now.' So I think for him, it gives him a little bit of control in his life and I mean, I guess like anybody you want to be in charge of making your own decisions, and learning the best ways to do that, right, so.” KLC-10-OP

Preventing Physical Harm to Children

The physical safety of children was an important factor for parents deciding what, where, and how children could play. Among the interviews, parents discussed checking to ensure toys were safe for their children, creating household rules to protect their children (e.g., no running in the house), and requiring supervision of their children during play. Toys were often checked and provided based on their safety for a child of a certain age or ability. Many of the household rules, particularly, were implemented to help prevent or reduce the likelihood that children would experience physical harm (i.e., injuries). In the outdoors (i.e., backyards), boundaries and supervision were required so that parents knew where their children were at all times.

- “I usually try to say healthy, especial because I say okay, 'if you are playing with this, don't swallow, don't eat it, don't do it, because if you eat it, somebody is going to take this toy and you getting contaminated, or you are contamination. This toy, so it's not healthy.' Or there's things, uh, always check the – I always check the toys, if they are up it's- it's for her, is it safe for her.” KLC-04-RP

- “Because, yeah you just never know, like sometimes she gets ideas in her head where she’ll go to like my neighbour’s house where they have cats. And go into the backyard, you know, and because she just thinks she kind of, everyone loves her and so that she can just go wherever she wants, which usually – she usually can get away with, because she is cute, but she’ll go into their backyard to see their cats, but she won’t tell me where she’s gone.” KLC-08-RP
- “We used to play tag and stuff, but um, we banned tag in our house and I, it’s just I’ve decided it’s an awful game and we’re not I wish they wouldn’t play it anymore, and I heard schools banned it, and I was like ‘yes’ and people were like ‘no,’ and I was like ‘I dislike tag.’ All they do is get hurt. And toes are broken and things happen, and they get so hyper, it’s like whoa, [...]” KLC-13-RP

There was discussion about monitoring children’s play and allowing them to engage in activities or behaviours (e.g., play fighting) until a point where parents felt they needed to intervene (i.e., actions were no longer deemed safe or they imposed risk of harm). One noticeable difference between parents, however, was in regards to their children’s physical safety during rough-and-tumble play: physical safety was identified as a reason for limiting rough-and-tumble play (i.e., wrestling) by some mothers, though this was less frequently indicated as a concern for fathers given their willingness to participate in this type of play. Additionally, some participants mentioned that they kept their younger children away from others who were rough-and-tumble playing to prevent them from getting hurt.

- “But no, like usually anything that has to do with, yeah anything mean or rough as in, like they can play tag or whatever, but at this age like – tackling each other or you know, playing WWE [sic] out in the middle of the field is not a good thing. [Interviewer:

Right. And why do you think that is?] Just because they can get a little too rough and they don't know, either their boundaries or the other kids boundaries, and more times than not, somebody gets hurt. I like to protect the neighbourhood children from mine."

KLC-12-RP

- "Uh I just want him to know that it's um, it can hurt somebody at some point. And so you have to always be careful around anybody and everybody, so that's why. I just, I think it's good for them at times as boys, to rough play but I just for, it's just knowing that somebody will get hurt, that's about it." SOC-10-RP
- "Um, other than that, as long as they're not um, endangering themselves or someone *else* um, (pauses to think) I don't think that we really prohibit any – anything." SOC-11-RP

In the post-intervention interviews, parents mentioned restricting and intervening in violent behaviours, such as fighting and hitting, if they saw their children engaging in these actions in order to prevent any physical harms from occurring.

- "Yeah sometimes it can get rough um, being an older brother he can tend to pick on her, so she will sometimes get frustrated and want to push back, so it's like well 'just take a minute, let's talk through this before you guys hurt each other.'" SOC-01-OP
- "Yeah I'm pretty laid back as, like I said as long they're not hurting each other or (laughs) getting hurt, they're pretty free to do what they would like to do." SOC-01-OP
- "Yeah I don't like the – the hitting or the, even if they're playing and they're they're pushing, and I discourage that. Um. To a point, I – I've even explained to him, if they're, if *both* friends are have agreed if they want to play like that and wrestle, then I'm okay with that too, because that is part of the free-play that I let them do, but it has to be agreed on, on both sides. Usually it isn't, so (laughter). So he, I hope – like I explain that to him,

hope that he understands that if it is allowed, it's a fun thing at times, but always be careful of how far you go you can hurt somebody.” SOC-10-OP

Interpretation of the Research Findings - Discussion

The following discussion points aim to understand parent's involvement in their children's free-play experiences. Further, this section draws attention to ideas parents shared, which span their participation and intervention, and nuances within their reasons for intervening in children's free-play. Particularly, parents' support for 'appropriate' free-play activities and behaviours, the unique nature of free-play experiences for children, and parents' necessity to balance competing priorities for/in free-play are all explored in the follow sub-sections. A wider interpretation of these ideas is undertaken using the relevant academic and practice-based literature, and the theories associated with this thesis.

Parents' Support for 'Appropriate' Free-Play Activities and Behaviours

Throughout the interviews there were several discussions about the 'appropriateness' of children's activities and behaviours during free-play. Children's participation in free-play (and other) experiences needs to align with their parents' expectations of what is deemed acceptable. This was indicative through parents' explanations of 'good' and 'bad' play activities and behaviours, or 'proper' ways to play. el Moussaoui and Braster's (2011) study findings mirror this sentiment, as they concluded that children need to know or understand the difference between such actions. Even though the participation of children in appropriate play experiences could be understood through the types of play activities or behaviours children were (dis)allowed to participate in, parents in this study did not make a clear distinction between what was or was not appropriate. Isenberg and Quisenberry (1988), King and Howard (2016), Singh and Gupta

(2011), and the United Nations (1995), have also mentioned ‘appropriate’ play experiences in their work without clarifying what activities and behaviours this entails.

Parents’ participation in play with their children and parents’ intervention in their children’s play reinforced the types of activities and behaviours they expected their children to undertake. The enforcement of appropriate activities and behaviours was clear given the examples parents shared about intervening in their child’s play experiences. For instance, one parent emphasised that their child should not interrupt others while out at parks, while another explained that they would leave public places if their children were acting in a way that embarrassed the parent. Parents seemed concerned about inappropriate actions based on the implications of children’s interactions with others and how others would perceive the family. Given these examples, appropriate play activities and behaviours could be understood as those that parents’ perceive as socially acceptable (i.e., those which can be conducted in public).

Isenberg and Quisenberry (1988) have identified that parents’ understanding of the ‘typical’ play activities and behaviours during specific phases of child development enables them to provide environments for appropriate experiences. In this thesis, parents mentioned that they would provide access to playmates, locations, and resources that were suitable to their child’s age and development. The provision of such targeted opportunities, therefore, reinforces children’s engagement in appropriate free-play experiences (i.e., pre-approved opportunities). For example, some parents discussed finding games that were suitable to all players’ level of comprehension in order to involve everyone in an enjoyable experience.

Parents more explicitly enforced participation in appropriate play activities and behaviours through their intervention in children’s experiences. Parents intervened to ensure their children’s play was comprised of desired activities and behaviours. This intervention,

however, could have a substantial impact on the engagement of children in free-play experiences, especially interactions with their parents. As such, this study postulates that parents are adopting social norms and perceived prejudices (i.e., judgements) to enforce acceptable play practices. This is supported by parents' acknowledgement that they were not invited to play in the activities or behaviours children knew were against the (household) rules. Future work could, therefore, look at the impact (i.e., repercussions) of parents' interventions in their children's free-play, with a particular focus on the ways these interventions are intended to align with the norms or values of their respective culture. While children's opportunity to explore and work things out on their own is essential to their development, restricting play to those activities and behaviours that society has deemed suitable for a specific age group may inhibit the potential for free-play to broadly contribute to children's development and health (Lester & Russell, 2008a; Wood 2013).

A considerable amount of the discussions related to appropriate play activities and behaviours were associated with child age, which may be related to concerns for children growing up too quickly (Singer et al., 2009). In this thesis, parents appear to be using expectations about what is suitable for their children, and ensuring play activities and behaviours are congruent with expectations for what children should or should not be doing (or learning) at this time or stage of life. Parents did have expectations about the concepts they thought children should be learning through play during the preschool years. Further, there was explicit concern for the content of some play experiences, which children had obviously learned through their peers (presenting a surprising experience for parents). Given that parents identified ideal outcomes for their children's free-play, later research could also look to determine if parents' support for appropriate play activities and behaviours is congruent with their expectations (or goals) for their child's future.

Through the enforcement of household rules and normalized practices, such as restrictions on the location of physically active play to the outdoors, and quiet or calm play activities and behaviours to the indoors, parents in this study may be unintentionally creating a divide between locations for free-play experiences. When play activities and behaviours can only happen in spaces deemed appropriate (i.e., Powell, 2009), parents create a dichotomy between indoor and outdoor play opportunities. This idea is supported by parents' creation of areas for specific activities or behaviours, and spaces where play is (not) allowed. As such, future research may explore how children navigate spatial limitations on their free-play and the potential impact of this segregation.

Enforcing expectations about appropriate experiences contradicts parents' expressed support for a balance or variety of play opportunities for their children. While a distinction between the play activities and behaviours that are or are not appropriate was not clearly delineated in the interviews, parents are likely reinforcing socially acceptable practices (el Moussaoui & Braster, 2011). This enforcement, however, can create the illusion that any action that does not fall under the category of 'appropriate' is therefore deviant or illicit (Lehrer & Petrakos, 2011; Powell, 2009). This idea reiterates that of Lehrer and Petrakos (2011) who said, "...that play is romanticized on the one hand - as the parents unanimously agreed that play was vital to their children's development - and used as a means of social control on the other" (p. 80). As such, this may limit children's potential to explore opportunities and to learn through a diverse range of experiences and methods. Further, these restrictions may limit children's engagement in free-play experiences in general (King & Howard, 2016), and the embedded spontaneity and exploration that are fundamental components of free-play (Blasi et al., 2002; Frost, 2012; Isenberg & Quisenberry, 1988).

Unique Free-Play Experiences of Children

According to parents, the play experiences of children are unique: not all children play the same way and children have different ways they like to play. There is no one way that free-play can be engaged in, expressions made through, or behaviours exhibited in, regardless of the standard characteristics of self-selection, self-direction, and active engagement on the part of the player (i.e., Gray, 2013). The unique nature of free-play is supported by parents' understanding that self-selection and self-direction are essential for children to reap the benefits of free-play experiences. Cultural differences in the importance of play for specific developmental aspects have been discussed by Parmar et al. (2004), however, the indication that play differs between children within the same culture for their individual (developmental and health) purposes has not been as clearly explored.

Developmental and health needs, some of which can be addressed through play (Frost, 2012), were seen as unique to each child. Parents in this study mentioned that their children could derive a variety of benefits from play (as seen by those in Singh and Gupta's (2011) study), though the type and amount of play necessary to achieve optimal benefits was specific to each child. Further, the play activity or behaviour that is best or most important for health, according to parents in this study, depends on the unique needs of each child. And, in addition to health and development, parents expressed that learning opportunities in free-play should be and are dictated by children's own needs and actions: parents understand that children will learn best at their own level of development at the time of play.

For some parents, the provision of (play) opportunities is done in a unique way or for a unique purpose. Parents often mentioned providing unique opportunities, including play experiences, which would help their respective child in their own way. These included the

enrolment of children in programs to work on specific areas of development. Some parents expressed concerns about their child's perceived 'weaknesses' (i.e., speech) or developmental aspects that they wanted their children to improve upon (e.g., social skills). Parents indicated that they tried to address these limitations by incorporating developmental opportunities into the lives of children. For example, parents mentioned intervening in their child's play in order to facilitate development (e.g., slowing and practicing verbal speech).

The understanding that children will play (and develop) in their own unique way and in their own time, however, contradicts parents' own discussion about providing tailored opportunities to address any areas that may be a limitation to children in their future. The dichotomy between knowing that children will develop as they are 'meant to' and providing specific experiences for children to rectify potential limitations (or to give children an advantage over others') is a contradiction among parents' perceptions. This contradiction was confirmed by parents when they compared their child's development (and play) to other children, to themselves as a child, and to the expected development (e.g., growth charts) of children. Beyond these, parents also made comparisons between different time periods or stages in their child's lives (e.g., current state to previous state). For example, parents made comparisons about their children's speech, physical abilities, and knowledge going into kindergarten as a means of understanding where their children are 'at' developmentally. Why parents feel the need to make such comparisons was not explicitly discussed in the course of the interviews; these comparisons, however, were used by parents to understand their child's play activities and behaviours, development, and health.

Making comparisons between children and others is concerning because it negates the understanding that each child is an individual human being with unique needs, on their own

developmental pathway (Halfon & Hochstein, 2002). Further, this method of understanding one's child goes against parents' own views that their children are unique, and need tailored support for their optimal development and health. These comparisons are also likely to set up unrealistic expectations for children in the present and future, regardless of parents' effort to provide free-play opportunities that will set children up on an ideal pathway. The expectations parents have for their children can be explained through social constructions of what children should be, how they should act, and what a typical childhood 'is.' Parents' use of comparisons can be explained by external pressures (i.e., social norms or societal judgements) in regards to children's abilities and their subsequent impact on interactions (e.g., socialization opportunities based on speaking abilities). This inconsistency is showcased in parents' efforts to support their child's development through the provision of opportunities or intervention in play, in order to create the best version of their child, while also knowing that their child will develop as they are ready.

Despite these contradictions, it is important to remember that the identification of child needs is often based on parents' interpretation (e.g., what they think and worry about), which explains parents' attempt to facilitate free-play opportunities (i.e., provision of resources, transportation to various places, planning of events) that will stimulate desired activities and behaviours. As such, free-play may be even more important than parents have explicitly expressed because children have the opportunity to choose and direct their experiences based on their personal needs in the moment. Given that some parents have expressed that children will (inadvertently) choose what is best for them and what will help to stimulate their development (e.g., learning), minimal restrictions on free-play may enable children to engage in a way that is unique to themselves.

Balancing Opportunities for Children's and Parents' Free-Play Participation

Parents in this study indicated that they are continuously juggling different schedules and activities at and away from home. Between competing preferences, priorities, and family dynamics, wanting and being able to provide opportunities for free-play are very different realities for parents. Parents have to balance competing demands for their time in and outside of free-play, seek a balance in the free-play activities and behaviours they participate, and manage their children's free-play opportunities.

There were numerous discussions within the interviews about parents' (continuous) decision-making and their conscious attempt to balance competing priorities. These cost-benefit comparisons, including financial considerations and the potential impacts of experiences, would help parents to determine what was the best option for themselves, their child, and their entire family at the time. Though play is valued by parents in developed nations, Roopnarine and Davidson (2015) have pointed out that constraints, such as changing roles and paid work, impact parental participation in free-play with their children. Parents associated with this study mentioned that their paid and unpaid work often competed for time against participating in free-play with their children. The balancing of direct participation in free-play and undertaking other responsibilities is indicative of, and potentially mitigated by, parents splitting time to engage with their child in free-play and the scheduling of family activities (Coyl-Shepherd & Hanlon, 2013; Holmes, 2011). Similarly, Holmes (2011) found that caregivers in their study reserved specific times to participate in activities and that the benefits of play experiences were a factor in their decisions to engage with children. Future research, therefore, should consider the short- and long-term impacts of this planning on free-play participation (e.g., on opportunities for parent-

child free-play, and the development and health impacts of (limited) parent-child free-play interactions).

The participation of parents in children's free-play activities and behaviours varies based on their own, and their child's preferences. A difference in free-play participation between parents in a family was clear: parents either participated in different activities and behaviours to provide a variety of experiences overall, or they would (attempt to) equally participate in all activities and behaviours at some point. Differences in parents' free-play participation often followed gender-norms, in that more mothers stayed at home to look after and engage with their children during the day, while fathers worked outside of the home and engaged in more physically active play-types in the evenings and on weekends as their schedules permitted. Gender differences in parent and child play preferences were found in the research of Coyl-Shepherd and Hanlon (2013), which are also reflected in the results of this study. Roopnarine and Davidson (2015) have speculated that responsibilities and socio-economic changes have contributed to a movement towards more egalitarian participation of parents with children during play. While the results in this study trend towards a difference in activities, they also indicate that both parents would directly participate in play with their children. It is possible that the parents who stay at home to look after their children participate in free-play in a more dispersed manner (i.e., throughout the course of the day, in between other tasks and structured activities) and that parents who work away from the home have more focused time with their children when they return: this difference could be a focus for future analysis and research efforts. This idea, however, is supported by parents who mentioned that their partners have the opportunity to play with their children when they come home, giving the stay-at-home parent space and time to prepare the family meal.

The scheduling of organized events and free-play opportunities, and the facilitation of a variety of activities and behaviours for children is also the responsibility of parents, which they have to balance alongside other family members.’ Parents widely discussed the need to balance scheduled and unscheduled (free-play) time for their children, in order to ensure their family was not constantly ‘busy’ and that children had a form of down time. An internal conflict could be identified through parents’ discussions, wherein they want to provide positive and supportive experiences, especially social opportunities, while also maintaining time for free-play in less structured circumstances. The exact amount of time children had for free-play was unclear within the interview discussions, though parents felt that their children had considerable opportunities for this experience (future analysis could explore this further). In Singh and Gupta’s (2011) article, which focused on children’s play in India, parents were conflicted by competing demands for their children’s free-play time and academic needs. Even though children associated with this study had incidental play opportunities, the parents’ scheduling of events away from the home and understanding of children’s need for down-time correspond with Singh and Gupta’s (2011) findings in the need to schedule play time. Parents in this study also identified their responsibility to encourage a variety of activities and behaviours within free-play experiences (i.e., parents did not want their children doing the same thing in all of their free-play opportunities), as was found in Holmes’ (2011) study with caregivers in Hawaii, United States of America. Additionally, parents alluded to the balance between freedom and restrictions (especially subjective rule enforcement) that they needed to find in order for their children to engage in free-play.

Given the requirement of parents to continuously balance (between or within) free-play opportunities, how parents manage competing demands and if they ever feel relief from this situation could be more fully explored. The struggle of parents to find the time to participate in

free-play with their children (i.e., one-on-one) and as an entire family, questions how Canadian cultural norms have constructed priorities for family interactions versus responsibilities in the community. An understanding of how parents can rectify these competing demands may help to alleviate some of the discomfort parents experience when attempting to provide the free-play opportunities they value for their children, including direct interactions between parents and their children. Some of the competing demands for parent's and children's time are beyond their control, therefore the implications of limited parent-child free-play interactions (especially on social bonds) should be more deeply explored in future work. The concern for and barrier of competing demands may be, particularly, salient for single parents who have to manage all of the responsibilities inside and away from the home. This family dynamic was not explored in the course of this work, though the results indicate that even dual-parent households find it difficult to balance competing priorities to fully engage in free-play with their children.

Summary

Presented in this chapter was a description and discussion of parents' involvement in their children's free-play experiences. The first three sections of this chapter identified factors associated with parents' participation in free-play with their children, various methods parents use to intervene in their children's free-play opportunities, and, finally, reasons for parents' intervention in their children's free-play. The results and several aspects of the ensuing discussion reiterate what has recently been discussed in the research literature, however, this work also presents more clarity on aspects that have not been as widely examined. The discussion on 'appropriate' play activities and behaviours, and the unique free-play experiences of children, particularly, provide additional insight into these topics as current research focuses on an alternative insights into parents' perspectives.

It is important to note that the results presented in this chapter may be relevant to all children of each participant, given that the interview discussions could not easily be distinguished between children in the same household: parents often presented a familial perspective unless questions specifically probed about their preschool-aged child. There may also have been overlap in the discussions between play outside and inside of the recreation preschool programs, due to the value and implications of free-play across children's lives.

Chapter 6: Conclusions

This final thesis chapter presents implications for practice, policy, and research, with suggestions for moving forward in understanding and facilitating free-play opportunities. Limitations of the *Evaluation* project and this thesis study are then explored to help readers understand the context of this work. A final summary is then presented to complete this master's thesis.

Implications for Practice

This study outlined parents' understanding of and involvement in children's free-play. In light of the results, public health, health promotion, and childcare practitioners (i.e., programmers, instructors, teachers, etc.) can utilize this information to enhance free-play experiences for (preschool-aged) children. Specifically, this knowledge can be used to promote and increase free-play opportunities by recognizing the individual needs of children and families, monitoring and assessing children's engagement, and communicating expectations with parents.

Free-play can contribute to children's development and health but that does not negate the importance of adults in this experience. Parents have to juggle competing priorities but recognize that their children have individual needs. Practitioners can help by speaking with parents to understand child needs and interests (though they may make their own observations and conclusions), and act as a role model, facilitate opportunities, and provide adult/child one-on-one time for free-play. Practitioners, however, need to be cautious about the types of activities and behaviours they promote, and be mindful of the potential to encourage play activities and behaviours that diverge from parents' expectations.

Parents emphasised that children's self-selection and self-direction were fundamental to free-play, as well as active engagement. Practitioners may be able to facilitate this experience by

adhering to these characteristics and providing children with tools (e.g., people, resources, spaces) to use. While practitioners can provide tools to help enhance free-play experiences, they should be aware of potential negative implications of interactions between children and these variables. In addition to their direct participation, childcare practitioners should monitor and assess children's engagement (i.e., look for indications of distraction, being overwhelmed, etc.), as active engagement is fundamental to attaining development and health benefits through free-play.

Practitioners should discuss expectations for free-play with parents in order to determine their congruency. For example, free-play based programs should be explicit about their understanding of free-play and the role of practitioners within this dynamic (if any). Given the potential for opportunities to contribute to the current and future needs of children, practitioners may consider highlighting the anticipated short- and long-term outcomes of their programs or initiatives in order to more effectively promote and tailor these experiences to match parents' expectations for their children. Further, this communication could help parents assess the fit of their children to different opportunities, given the unique needs of individual children.

Implications for Policy

Supportive, healthy public policy is essential to facilitating free-play opportunities without opt-in requirements and extensive decision-making on the part of parents. Based on parents' understanding that self-selection, self-direction, and active engagement are fundamental components of free-play, policies need to account for and provide opportunities where children can participate in these ways. Increasing opportunities for free-play may be accomplished by establishing new policies (e.g., curriculums): policy can be used to break down structural constraints to free-play participation and promote equitable access to a variety of free-play

experiences in the community. For instance, policies should be developed to include an understanding (i.e., definition) of free-play, clarification on appropriate free-play activities and behaviours, and account for a range of free-play opportunities.

As suggested by Powell (2009) and Santer et al. (2007), policy documents are not always clear on the definition and value of free-play. This thesis study can be used in conjunction with previous academic and practice-based work to build common understanding around free-play and play, in general. Given that parents in this work have identified characteristics of free-play, these can be used by policy-makers to help build programs and services that align with or account for parents' understanding of this experience. Additionally, policy-makers need to be clear on their value of free-play and communicate this value through their work (i.e., providing support from policy) (Powell, 2009).

Lester and Russell (2008a), and Wood (2013) have expressed concern about the promotion of socially acceptable play activities and behaviours through public policy. This thesis reinforces these sentiments, as seen in parents' discussion of 'appropriate' free-play activities and behaviours. It is clear that parents see a dichotomy between appropriate and inappropriate actions of their children within free-play. Policy-makers need to be clear on why or what makes activities and behaviours (in)appropriate for (preschool-aged) children, in order for parents to make informed decisions about the free-play opportunities they facilitate. Otherwise, policy-makers are reinforcing cultural notions about what is the 'right' form of play for children, rather than providing the option for players to determine what is or is not suitable for themselves.

According to the data presented in this work, children will use various spaces, resources, and people as tools for free-play. Further, parents' identified changes in their children's free-play activities and behaviours based on these factors. Parents have identified the importance of free-

play for their preschool children, which included the potential to try new activities, develop bonds, express oneself, practice skills, and form habits. Policies, therefore, need to include opportunities that support, rather than hinder, these aspects. Alexander et al. (2012), Alexander et al. (2014b), and Frohlich et al. (2013), however, have identified that recent public health discourse has focused on physically active and risk-free forms of play. As parents understand that a variety of play-types are essential to their child's development and health, policy-makers need to account for a broader understanding of free-play (e.g., one where children get to determine the type of play activities and behaviours in which to participate). Additionally, governments and organizations need to ensure their policies account for a variety of free-play experiences, including a range of places (Powell, 2009).

Implications for Research

Despite the array of topics discussed during the parent interviews, future research would help in gaining a deeper and more holistic understanding of free-play. Many suggestions for future research were mentioned in the discussion sections of *Chapters 4* and *5*; the questions posed in these chapters can be used to guide future research on free-play. Further to these suggestions, however, later work should compare the perspectives of parents who have not self-selected to enrol their children in free-play based recreation preschool programming. A comparison between these groups may help to understand if the value of free-play for (preschool-aged) children is the same for parents who facilitate different programming opportunities for their children.

Later research could also look at the broader levels of influence on children's play, particularly through gaining a more detailed understanding of how institutions and policies influence parents' involvement and children's participation in free-play. A particular focus on

how parents make decisions related to their children's free-play would be a beneficial contribution to the current literature. Assessments could also be conducted in order to understand how interactions during free-play between individuals in specific situations, such as those with partners, spaces, or programs, contribute to the unique health and developmental goals, or expectations of parents for their children.

Researchers should assess free-play participation and engagement over time (Coyle-Shepherd & Hanlon, 2013). This could include understanding when or if children stop engaging in free-play, and what opportunities are replacing this experience. It may also be valuable to consider the contribution of free-play to development and health at different stages of life, especially given parents' understanding that engagement in free-play changes with age and development (2013). In particular, future research could also look to compare the value of free-play at different stages of life, as this thesis study was primarily focused on preschool-aged children.

The results from this thesis can be combined with the results from other aspects of the *Evaluation* project, particularly the parent interviews from the program at ARC, which followed the same curriculum as the two included in this work but had a different physical environment. Coyle-Shepherd and Hanlon (2013) have identified the need to recruit parents from a range of socio-economic backgrounds, and those from both rural and urban settings to understand the impact of community environments on leisure opportunities. As such, comparisons from within the *Evaluation* project could be made in line with these recommendations (i.e., comparing between parents living in rural Strathcona County with those in urban Sherwood Park, or amongst parents with different household incomes).

Coyl-Shepherd and Hanlon (2013) have advocated for multi-method studies to assess various leisure time activities, including play. The findings from this study and all parts of the *Evaluation* project (i.e., instructor interviews, parent interviews, video observations, and photovoice activities with children) can be combined to, for example, compare and contrast children's opportunities to participate in free-play, and the perceived importance of such experiences. Further, a direct comparison between the understanding of free-play between parents and instructors may help to clarify perceived characteristics of this experience, and to ensure that children have access to the most supportive free-play environments. Additionally, using the video observations in tandem with the parent interviews could help to corroborate parents' expectations for same-age playmates on children's free-play activities and behaviours, and understand the impact of the availability, accessibility, and familiarity of resources and setting on children's engagement in free-play at the recreation preschool programs.

Limitations of the *Evaluation* Project and this Thesis Study

There are some limitations to the *Evaluation* project and this thesis study that provide further context to the results, and can assist in the transferability of the research findings. Participants in this study self-selected to enrol their children in free-play based recreation preschool programming. This suggests that parents may be predisposed to value or understand the importance of free-play in early childhood. The results and discussion presented in this thesis must be interpreted with this knowledge.

Evaluation project participants lived in the area of Strathcona County, Alberta, a location where more than three-quarters (i.e., 87.3%) of residents have an annual household income of \$40,000 or more (Strathcona County, n.d.-a). Parents in this study had an average household income of \$100,000 to \$124,999 per year, indicating that participants are fairly affluent, which

may limit the transferability of these specific results to different communities. As not everyone in the study had the same yearly household income this may be an avenue for future analysis.

This study focused on free-play from parents' perspectives and did not consider the outlook of children, or any of their other caregivers (i.e., nannies, grandparents, program instructors, etc.) who may also contribute to children's free-play experiences. The majority of participants in this study were women (i.e., mothers), which is common for this type of setting and research (e.g., el Moussaoui & Braster, 2011; Lehrer & Petrakos, 2011; Veitch et al., 2006) but leaves potential for gender-biased responses. Further, this study did not take into account the potential contributions of other experiences or influences (e.g., children's programs, parental origin) that may have contributed to participants' perceptions.

The power dynamic between a researcher and participants plays a significant role in any research, and impacts the data generated throughout the process (Mayan, 2009). This dynamic is why building rapport with participants is essential to soliciting detailed and rich data (2009), as was attempted through the general questions posed at the start of each interview associated with this work. Similarly, the lack of anonymity during the interviews may have caused some parents discomfort and contributed to participants giving socially desirable responses, as identified in other studies (e.g., Veitch et al., 2006). While there were no indications of parent discomfort noted by the research team, this is still a possibility.

Multiple researchers conducting the parent interviews may be seen as a limitation of the method followed in the *Evaluation* project. However, the nature of the semi-structured interview guides helped to ensure that all interviewers collected information essential to addressing the research question and objectives (Bernard, 1994; Mayan, 2009). Further, pilot testing of the pre-

intervention interview guide with one of the Co-Principal Investigators (CN) helped to ensure that all RAs conducting interviews were prepared for this responsibility.

Finally, the results and discussion presented in this thesis study are the interpretation of one researcher (e.g., there was no second coder during analysis; no triangulation of data). The large sample size (i.e., number of interviews), however, supports the indication that data saturation was reached by the end of the interviews process. Further, the post-intervention interviews, which were used as a means of confirming that parents' sentiments were genuine, also support the trustworthiness of the study findings.

Summary and Final Conclusion

Various factors have been associated with a decrease or change in children's free-play participation (Coyle-Shepherd & Hanlon, 2013; Frost, 2012; Ginsburg, 2007; Gleave, 2009; Lehrer & Petrakos, 2011), however, these trends are not systematic across or between nations (Frost, 2012). This master's thesis aimed to gather parents' understanding of and involvement in children's free-play from the perspective of those living in Strathcona County, Alberta, Canada. This study, therefore, contributes to the limited literature on the value of free-play from the Canadian context.

The larger research project, of which this study was a part, used the theory of social ecology as a basis for informing the data collection strategy and as an overall understanding of the potential value of free-play for human health. This theory, in addition to those of biological embedding and social constructionism, was used during the interpretation phase of the analysis to help explain the results of this study. These theories were not used during the compiling, disassembling, or reassembling phases of the analysis process.

The study findings suggest that parents have an understanding of free-play and see value for their children participating in such experiences. Parents identified several factors that relate to their children's activities and behaviours during free-play, and highlighted aspects that are important by-products of this experience. Parents, further, directly and indirectly participate in their children's free-play experiences either as a playmate, an observer, and/or a moderator. Parents have identified that their participation or intervention in free-play is done to teach, protect, and support their children, and prevent them from experiencing harm. They see the necessity of capitalizing on the preschool years as a time to engage in free-play, the inherent reciprocity and reinforcing nature of free-play, and the necessity of being actively engaged in free-play to benefit from this experience. Further, parents support appropriate free-play opportunities, understand the unique needs and experiences of free-play for their children, and find it necessary to balance activities and behaviours in and outside of free-play. Despite limitations of the *Evaluation* project and this study, the implications for practice, policy, and research may help to address the declining trend in children's free-play participation.

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Appendices

Appendix A – Parent/Guardian Information Letter

Parent/Guardian Information Letter for “Pre-Post Interviews” (Part 1)

Evaluation of a Play-Based Preschool Recreation Program: Exploring the Impact of Community Investment in Play-Based Learning on Health and Health Equity

Principal Investigators:

*Candace Nykiforuk, PhD - University of Alberta, School of Public Health, Centre of Health Promotion Studies
Jane Hewes, PhD - Grant MacEwan University, Early Learning and Child Care*

Background and Purpose

Three preschool programs, one each at the Ardrossan Recreation Complex, Strathcona Olympiette Centre, and Kinsmen Leisure Centre are involved in a research project to better understand childhood play in preschool settings. We would like to get your (parent/guardian) opinions on how your child’s program works.

To do this, Part 1 of the Love to Play project will conduct pre-post, one-on-one interviews with the parent/guardian of children participating in a preschool program from each site. Parents/guardians will be invited to a semi-guided conversation with a member of the research team in September 2014 to share their perceptions of their children’s play behaviors at home, and perceptions of the benefits of play and how play is linked to health. Pre-interviews will also collect socio-demographic information. In June 2014, parents/guardians will be invited again to a one-one post-interview with a researcher. Post-program interviews will explore parents’ perceptions of their children’s play behaviour in the preschool setting, if/how play behaviour has changed since program involvement and benefits of play to their children’s health. The interviews will be digitally recorded (with your consent) and will last up to 45 minutes in a private meeting room at the preschool or other convenient location, preferably while the children are participating in the program.

Please note: the interviews are completely voluntary and your participation (or not) will not impact your child’s care in any way. We are merely trying to understand the parent/guardian’s point of view. The information collected during the information is solely to help the team understand how the preschool program works. Your specific interview data will be seen only by the research team and will not be shared with program staff or facility managers, in order to protect your privacy. All information collected in the interviews will be grouped so that no individual can be identified or linked to any statement released in the study findings.

Participation

Your consent to participate in this part of the research is completely voluntary. The pre-interviews will take place within 10 days of the start of the preschool program in September 2014 and the post-interviews will be conducted immediately prior to the program ending in June 2015. For each interview that you complete, a \$20 gift certificate to a local establishment will be provided in thanks for your participation (i.e., \$40 for both interviews).

Additionally:

- You may ask questions and clarify your rights at any time throughout the research project.
- You may withdraw your consent for your participation in the study at any time.
- You may refuse to answer any of the questions without fear of ill or unfair treatment.
- At any point of the interview, you may ask to have the digital recorder turned off without explanation.
- You may withdraw the interview data within 10 days after the end of the activities.

Confidentiality

In order to protect the participant's anonymity, further precautions will be taken to protect the confidentiality of participant information collected in the pre-post interviews:

- Participants will be assigned a number and their name will only appear on a Master List that links their name with their project number. This way, any personal identifying information will only be linked to a number.
- Any direct identifying factors from the pre-post interviews will not be used in the data analysis.
- The use of indirect identification information (i.e. gender) will only be used in data analysis.
- All recorded information from the project and the Master List will be stored on password protected computers at the Centre of Health Promotion Studies, University of Alberta.
- The data will only be accessible for data analysis to the Principal Investigators (Dr. Candace Nykiforuk and Dr. Jane Hewes), their supervised staff, students, and associated research team.
- In the unlikely event of a breach of information, you will be contacted and informed of what information was compromised.

Use of Data

Results from the study will be gathered to create a summary to be shared with parents/guardians and instructors about the preschoolers' experiences in the program. General results may also be shared with program staff and facility managers who may be interested in using the information to help alter or enhance their preschool environments. Results of this part of the research may also be shared in academic presentations, reports, and publications, and possibly combined with earlier results in the study to fully understand childhood play. **Your name will never be associated with the presentation of the results.**

Possible Risks and Benefits

There are possible risks in regards to your participation in this project. While it is not the intent of the project to add pressure to parents/guardians, you still may feel that is the case and experience stress or negative feelings. At any time, you may choose not to answer questions you do not want to, without having to give reason. And at any time, you can choose to stop participating in the project without penalty. A potential benefit of participating in this research is that parents/guardians, instructors, and others involved with the preschool will likely increase their understanding of the effects of the play spaces on children's play behaviours and the instructors will be able to adapt activities and preschool programs accordingly. We hope that future programs, and therefore users, may positively benefit from the study results as programs are improved to enhance childcare experiences.

Funding Agencies

This part of the Love to Play project is funded by the Canadian Institutes of Health Research (CIHR) and Alberta Centre for Child, Family, and Community (ACCFCR).

Contact Information

If you have any questions regarding this study, please contact:

- Ana Belon, Project Coordinator (780-492-0280; ana.belon@ualberta.ca)
- Candace Nykiforuk, Principal Investigator (780-492-4109; candace.nykiforuk@ualberta.ca)
- Jane Hewes, Principal Investigator (780-497-5193; hewesj@macewan.ca)

The plan for this study has been reviewed for its adherence to ethical guidelines by a Research Ethics Board at the University of Alberta. For questions regarding participant rights and ethical conduct of research, contact the Research Ethics Office at (780) 492-2615.

This project has been approved on ethical grounds by the MacEwan University Research Ethics Board on September 08th, 2014. Any questions regarding your rights as a participant may be addressed to the Board at (780) 633-3274 or REB@macewan.ca.

Appendix B – Participant Sign-up Sheet

Parent Interviews

We are looking for parents to talk with us about their children's play experiences!

Where: Location.

For how long: Only 45 minutes.

When: Please sign up using the calendar below to indicate when is convenient for you.

In thanks for your participation, we will be giving \$20 gift certificates to businesses in the area.

Time	Month Date (Day)	
	Room 1	Room 2
9:00 am	Name: Phone or email address:	Name: Phone or email address:
10:00 am	Name: Phone or email address:	Name: Phone or email address:
11:00 am	Name: Phone or email address:	Name: Phone or email address:
12:30 pm	Name: Phone or email address:	Name: Phone or email address:
1:30 pm	Name: Phone or email address:	Name: Phone or email address:
2:15 pm	Name: Phone or email address:	Name: Phone or email address:

Parent Interviews

If none of the time slots fit with your schedule, we would be happy to make alternative arrangements to hear about your children's play behaviours! Please fill in the following information so that we can set up an interview at a time more convenient for you.

Name	Phone or Email Address	Date for Interview	Time for Interview

Parent Post-Interviews

With the end of our research project approaching, we would like to invite parents who participated in the earlier interviews to take part in an end of preschool session interview.

Where: Location.

For how long: Only 45 minutes.

When: Please sign up using the calendar below to indicate when is convenient for you.

In thanks for your participation, we will be giving \$20 gift certificates to businesses in the area.

Time	Month Date (Day)	
	Room 1	Room 2
9:00 am	Name: Phone or email address:	Name: Phone or email address:
10:00 am	Name: Phone or email address:	Name: Phone or email address:
11:00 am	Name: Phone or email address:	Name: Phone or email address:
12:30 pm	Name: Phone or email address:	Name: Phone or email address:
1:30 pm	Name: Phone or email address:	Name: Phone or email address:
2:15 pm	Name: Phone or email address:	Name: Phone or email address:

Parent Post-Interviews

If none of the time slots fit with your schedule, we would be happy to make alternative arrangements to hear about your children's play behaviours! Please fill in the following information so that we can set up an interview at a time more convenient for you.

Name	Phone or Email Address	Date for Interview	Time for Interview

Appendix C – Parent/Guardian Demographic Form**Parent/Guardian Demographic Information****Information about the Child/Children in Your Care and their Preschool Program(s)**

Q1. Number of children in your care: _____

Q2. Age of child/children in your care: _____

Q3. Do **your preschool child/children** in your care live with you:

☐ Part time ☐ Full time ☐ Other arrangement. Please specify: _____

Q4. In a regular week (including weekends), the **preschool child/children** spends approximately _____ hours in your care.

Q5. Your child has special needs:

☐ Yes. Please specify: _____ ☐ No

Q6. Please fill in the table for all of the **preschool child/children** under your care.

	Child's Gender	Year/Month of Child's Birthday	Location of Preschool	First Choice of Program for Child
Child #1	<input type="checkbox"/> Male <input type="checkbox"/> Female	20__ / __	<input type="checkbox"/> Ardrossan Recreation Complex <input type="checkbox"/> Kinsmen Leisure Centre <input type="checkbox"/> Strathcona Olympiette Centre <input type="checkbox"/> Other: _____	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No
Child #2	<input type="checkbox"/> Male <input type="checkbox"/> Female	20__ / __	<input type="checkbox"/> Ardrossan Recreation Complex <input type="checkbox"/> Kinsmen Leisure Centre <input type="checkbox"/> Strathcona Olympiette Centre <input type="checkbox"/> Other: _____	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No
Child #3	<input type="checkbox"/> Male <input type="checkbox"/> Female	20__ / __	<input type="checkbox"/> Ardrossan Recreation Complex <input type="checkbox"/> Kinsmen Leisure Centre <input type="checkbox"/> Strathcona Olympiette Centre <input type="checkbox"/> Other: _____	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No

Q7. Enrollment/registration in the preschool program(s) was:

☐ Easy ☐ Neutral ☐ Difficult ☐ Do not know

Information about Where the Child/Children Live(s)

Q19. Residence type:

- ☐ Apartment ☐ Condominium ☐ Semi-detached house ☐ Single-detached house

Q20. Residence yard space:

- ☐ Yes ☐ No

Q21. Park/green space within walking distance from residence:

- ☐ Yes ☐ No ☐ Do not know

Q21. Playground within walking distance from residence:

- ☐ Yes ☐ No ☐ Do not know

Information about You

Q8. Your age on your last birthday: ____

Q9. Your gender:

- ☐ Male ☐ Female ☐ Prefer not to disclose

Q10. Your relationship to the child (check all that apply):

- ☐ Parent ☐ Legal guardian ☐ Grandparent ☐ Nanny/Sitter
☐ Other: _____

Information about Your Child/Children's Household

If you are the child/children's parent or legal guardian, please complete the following:

Q11. Your current marital status:

- ☐ Legally married (not separated) ☐ Common-law ☐ Registered domestic partnership
☐ Separated (still legally married) ☐ Divorced ☐ Widowed ☐ Single parent
☐ Other: _____

Q12. If you are living with a common-law partner or in a registered domestic partnership, does this partner act in a guardianship role to your child/children?

- ☐ Yes ☐ No ☐ Do not know

Q13a. Highest degree or level of school **you** have completed. If currently enrolled, select the highest level received to date:

- | | |
|---|--|
| <input type="checkbox"/> No schooling completed | <input type="checkbox"/> Elementary School |
| <input type="checkbox"/> High school or equivalent (i.e. GED) | <input type="checkbox"/> Some college |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Trade/technical/vocational training | <input type="checkbox"/> Professional degree |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Associate degree | <input type="checkbox"/> Bachelor's degree |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Master's degree | <input type="checkbox"/> Doctorate degree |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Other: _____ | |

Q13b. Highest degree or level of school **your partner** has completed. If currently enrolled, select the highest level received to date:

- | | |
|---|--|
| <input type="checkbox"/> No schooling completed | <input type="checkbox"/> Elementary School |
| <input type="checkbox"/> High school or equivalent (i.e. GED) | <input type="checkbox"/> Some college |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Trade/technical/vocational training | <input type="checkbox"/> Professional degree |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Associate degree | <input type="checkbox"/> Bachelor's degree |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Master's degree | <input type="checkbox"/> Doctorate degree |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Other: _____ | |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Not applicable | |

Q14a. **Your** current employment status:

- ☐ Full time employed ☐ Part time employed ☐ Self employed
☐ Stay at home parent ☐ Unemployed ☐ Retired
☐ Other: _____

Q14b. **Your partner's** current employment status:

- ☐ Full time employed ☐ Part time employed ☐ Self employed
☐ Stay at home parent ☐ Unemployed ☐ Retired
☐ Other: _____
☐ Not applicable

Q15a. **Your** current occupation: _____

Q15. **Your partner's** current occupation: _____

Q16. Your total **combined household** income for the past 12 months (before taxes and other deductions), including wages, public assistance/benefits, help from relatives, etc.
Please note: this information will be used only to help us understand how our group of respondents represents the diversity of the population.

- ☐ Under \$20,000/year ☐ \$20,000-\$39,999/year ☐ \$40,000-\$69,999/year
☐ \$70,000-\$99,999/year ☐ \$100,000-\$124,999/year ☐ \$125,000 or more/year
☐ Prefer not to disclose

Q17a. Your citizenship:

- ☐ Canadian citizen ☐ Canadian resident/immigrant ☐ Other: _____

Q17b. Your partner's citizenship:

- ☐ Canadian citizen ☐ Canadian resident/immigrant ☐ Other: _____
☐ Not applicable

Q18a. Your ethnic or cultural origin (check all that apply):

- | | | | | | |
|--------------------------------------|-----------------------------------|------------------------------------|------------------------------------|-------------------------------------|---------------------------------------|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Canadian | <input type="checkbox"/> Chinese | <input type="checkbox"/> Colombian | <input type="checkbox"/> Cree | <input type="checkbox"/> Dutch | <input type="checkbox"/> East Indian |
| <input type="checkbox"/> English | <input type="checkbox"/> Filipino | <input type="checkbox"/> French | <input type="checkbox"/> German | <input type="checkbox"/> Greek | <input type="checkbox"/> Inuit |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Irish | <input type="checkbox"/> Italian | <input type="checkbox"/> Jamaican | <input type="checkbox"/> Japanese | <input type="checkbox"/> Jewish | <input type="checkbox"/> Korean |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Lebanese | <input type="checkbox"/> Metis | <input type="checkbox"/> Mi'kmaq | <input type="checkbox"/> Polish | <input type="checkbox"/> Russian | <input type="checkbox"/> Salish |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Salvadorean | <input type="checkbox"/> Scottish | <input type="checkbox"/> Somali | <input type="checkbox"/> Ukrainian | <input type="checkbox"/> Vietnamese | <input type="checkbox"/> Other: _____ |

Q18b. Your partner's ethnic or cultural origin (check all that apply):

- | | | | | | |
|--------------------------------------|-----------------------------------|------------------------------------|------------------------------------|-------------------------------------|---------------------------------------|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Canadian | <input type="checkbox"/> Chinese | <input type="checkbox"/> Colombian | <input type="checkbox"/> Cree | <input type="checkbox"/> Dutch | <input type="checkbox"/> East Indian |
| <input type="checkbox"/> English | <input type="checkbox"/> Filipino | <input type="checkbox"/> French | <input type="checkbox"/> German | <input type="checkbox"/> Greek | <input type="checkbox"/> Inuit |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Irish | <input type="checkbox"/> Italian | <input type="checkbox"/> Jamaican | <input type="checkbox"/> Japanese | <input type="checkbox"/> Jewish | <input type="checkbox"/> Korean |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Lebanese | <input type="checkbox"/> Metis | <input type="checkbox"/> Mi'kmaq | <input type="checkbox"/> Polish | <input type="checkbox"/> Russian | <input type="checkbox"/> Salish |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Salvadorean | <input type="checkbox"/> Scottish | <input type="checkbox"/> Somali | <input type="checkbox"/> Ukrainian | <input type="checkbox"/> Vietnamese | <input type="checkbox"/> Other: _____ |
- ☐ Not Applicable

Pre-Interview Guide for Parent/Guardian (Part 1)

1. Introduction

Hello and welcome.

My name is [*name*], and I am a research assistant working with the Evaluation of a Play-Based Recreation Program for Preschoolers project. The project is a collaboration between the University of Alberta, Grant MacEwan University, and Strathcona County Recreation, Parks and Culture. Thank you again for taking time to be part of our project. Your perspectives will help our team to better understand the needs for pre-school programming in Strathcona County.

Did you have an opportunity to read through the information letter provided to you? [*The information letter will be reviewed with the participant at this time*].

Do you have any questions about the project?

Please understand that you are free to end your participation in the project at any time if you so choose. Before we begin, we need to get your official consent to be part of the project.

Are you willing to participate in this interview?

☐ Yes

☐ No [*conclude interview and thank the participant*]

Also, with your consent, I would like to digitally record this interview to ensure that I accurately interpret the information that you provide to me. Do you consent to be digitally recorded? Remember, you can ask that the recording be paused or stopped at any time during the interview.

☐ Yes

☐ No [*proceed with the interview*]

2. Parent/Guardian Pre-Interview Questions

[Have respondent sign the Consent Form and complete Parent/Guardian Demographic Questionnaire]

I have a series of questions to go through with you today, but the interview will not be more than 45 minutes. As you have consented to, we will be recording this interview. I may also take brief notes throughout our conversation about key points that we have touched on.

This interview will focus on how your child, enrolled in the preschool program *[insert specific name of the program]*, plays. So let's get started.

[Turn on the recorder]

General

1. I'd like to start by asking some general questions: first, how old is your child? - *[If not already stated]* Okay, and are they a boy or a girl?
2. How would you describe your child's personality?
3. What are some of your child's favourite things to do?
4. Why did you decide to enroll your son/daughter this year here at the *[insert program name here]*?
 - What are a few words you would use to describe your child's preschool?
5. Is this the first year your child has been enrolled in a preschool program?
 - If NOT: What has she/he been enrolled in before?
 - PROBE: same program at different facility? Different program at same facility? Different program at different facility?

Case Study Parents Only (Ardrossan Recreation Complex)

6. Had you previously heard about the LovetoPlay program at the Ardrossan Recreation Complex prior to enrolling your child?
 - If YES: What had you heard?

7. Had your child participated in drop-in activities at the Ardrossan Recreation Complex, LovetoPlay program before starting preschool this September?
8. How do you think play-based preschools compare with traditional preschool programs?
[If participant asks for clarification, explain that: (a) Play-based preschools are considered child-centered and focus on open-ended learning where children participate in an intentionally designed free play environment; (b) Traditional preschool programs are considered teacher-directed; that is, teachers guide children to do activities that are more structured]

Control Study Parents Only (Kinsmen Leisure Centre and Strathcona Olympiette Centre)

9. Has your child participated in drop-in preschool activities before enrolling in a full-day preschool this September?
10. Have you heard about the LovetoPlay program at the Ardrossan Recreation Complex?
-What have you heard?
11. Has your child been involved or participated in drop-in or programmed activities at the LovetoPlay facility at the Ardrossan Recreation Complex?
- Did this influence your decision of where to enrol your child for pre-school? If so, how?
12. How do you think play-based preschools compare with traditional pre-school programs?
[If participant asks for clarification, you should explain that: (a) Play-based preschools are considered child-centered and focus on open-ended learning where children participate in an intentionally designed free play environment; (b) Traditional preschool programs are considered teacher-directed; that is, teachers guide children to do activities that are more structured]

In order to better understand children's play, we would like to ask you about how your child plays in different settings. We will begin with 'at home' play.

13. What kinds of things does your child like to do when he/she plays at home?
 - PROBES: Indoor/outdoor play, toys, screen time, silent solitary play, social play, pretend, construction, favourite activities.
14. Are there any rules in your household about where, when, and how play can occur?
 - PROBES: For example, messy projects always in the kitchen or outside?
15. Will this be your child's first time in a daycare or in a preschool program?
 - If NO:
 - Can you tell me a little about how your child plays at the daycare/preschool they were last at?
 - How do you think it will be the same or different at this preschool?
 - If YES: Exciting!
 - How do you think preschool will influence your child's play?
 - So, prior to [*insert program name here*] then, when you needed someone to take care of the child during the day, what happened?
 - i. If CHILD IS AT HOME WITH PARENT: Okay, great!
 - ii. If CHILD WAS AT HOME WITH A SITTER/NANNY: Did your child's play habits change when he/she was being cared for by this other person?
 - iii. If CHILD WAS TAKEN SOMEWHERE ELSE (GRANDPARENTS): Do you notice/hear of any difference in how your child plays [*there – insert the name of the "somewhere else"*]?
16. How does often your child play outside?
 - PROBES: Who with? Where (backyard, parks, playgrounds)? Does this how often/where change in other seasons?
 - What kinds of things does your child do outside (in the backyard,

parks, etc)?

- PROBES: Are the activities they do outside different from the activities they do at home?

17. Are there any other places that your child goes to play? [*if needed, use some examples: green spaces, Cafes, Java Mama, Cafe O' Play*]
- If YES: Where? What kinds of things do they do there?

Thank you! Now I'm going to ask you a few more questions about your child's play, more generally.

18. What kinds of play activities do you do with your child?
- PROBE: Is there anything else? May need to ask this a couple times
- PROBE: As a mother/father, do you share different activities with your child than your partner or husband/wife? Does the partner play different games or do different activities with your child?
- PROBE: How does your child's gender (boy or girl) influence the type of things you do with him or her? (PROBE for brief example)
- PROBE: If you have more than one child, how do your children play individually? Together? Describe how they play together.
19. Are there particular types of play you encourage or support? Why? [*If needed, cite some activities the participants already mentioned their children do*]
20. Are there particular types of play you prohibit or discourage? Why?
21. When you hear the phrase "free play", what does that bring to mind for you? [*Do not give any idea to the participant even if he/she asks for clarification – just emphasize that we want to know what this phrase brings to mind and that there is no right or wrong answer.*]
22. Do you think free play is a positive or a negative thing?
23. How frequently does your child engage in free play? Where does he/she do free play?
- PROBE: At home? In school? In parks?
24. How do you think play is related to your child's health, if at all?

- PROBE: Brief example(s) of “healthy” things you do with your child. Why are they healthy things?
 - PROBE: Are some kinds of play more important for health than others? Why are they important for health? [*Guide them to explain – i.e., why or why not?*]
 - If PLAY IS NOT RELATED TO HEALTH, ask: What is the role of play in your child’s life?
25. When we talk about your child’s health, what comes to mind exactly?
 - PROBE re: physical activity, mental health, stress relief, growth and development, socialization, etc.
 26. How do you think a child’s play influences their development?
 - PROBE [*let them talk before you ask about these specifically*]: physical development?, mental/emotional development?, social development?, intellectual development?
 - PROBE: What do you think is most important to your child’s development during the preschool years? Is there anything else?
 27. How does [*name of child’s*] preschool foster your child’s health and well-being?
 - PROBE [*but briefly*]: Psychological well-being? Physical well-being? Social well-being? Emotional well-being?
 28. Is there anything in the preschool environment that you consider being detrimental to your child’s health and well-being?
 - PROBE [*but briefly*]: psychological well-being? Physical well-being? Social well-being? Emotional well-being?

Fantastic. Thank you. For this last part of the interview, I’d like to briefly ask you about your child’s daily routine.

29. Thinking about a regular week day, can you give me a general sense of your child’s day? [*Regular week day means the day the child does not go to the preschool*]
 - PROBE: Scheduled events, who is the child with, what are they doing? Does your child play with you, your partner, or siblings? Does your son (daughter) play with other children? How often? What about

play activities during bath, meals, bedtime?

30. Great, and now the same thing, but for a weekend?
31. [*If not already stated*] Is your child enrolled in any sports or organized activity (e.g., lessons in dance or music, gymnastics)?
- PROBE: Is there anything else? Does this change throughout the year? If YES, how?

That is all of my questions, is there anything else that you would like to add? Do you have any questions for me?

3. Concluding Comments

Thank you again for speaking with me today. It was great to hear your opinions on this topic. In terms of next steps, once all of the interviews are completed and the data is analysed, we will create a final report of our findings. The report will be shared with the programs as well as local and provincial decision-makers. Again I want to stress that the identities of participants will remain confidential.

If you have any further questions about the project please feel free to contact us. The contact information is provided on the information sheet.

[Turn off the recorder. Have respondent sign the Honorarium Receipt, then hand out the gift card]

Appendix E – Parent/Guardian Interview Guide (Post-Intervention)

Post-Interview Guide for Parent/Guardian (Part 1)

1. Introduction/Backgrounder

Hello and welcome.

My name is [name], and I am a research assistant working with the Evaluation of a Play-Based Recreation Program for Preschoolers project. As you know, the project is a collaboration between the University of Alberta, Grant MacEwan University, and Strathcona County Recreation, Parks and Culture. Thank you again for taking time to be part of our project. Your perspectives will help our team to better understand the needs for preschool programming in Strathcona County.

Have you had an opportunity to review the information letter provided to you? *[The information letter will be reviewed with the participant at this time].*

Do you have any questions about the project?

Please understand that you are free to end your participation in the project at any time if you so choose. Before we begin, we need to get your official consent to be part of the project.

Are you willing to participate in this interview?

__ Yes

__ No *[conclude interview and thank the participant]*

Also, with your consent, I would like to digitally record this interview to ensure that I accurately interpret the information that you provide to me. Do you consent to be digitally recorded? Remember, you can ask that the recording be paused or stopped at any time during the interview.

__ Yes

__ No *[proceed with the interview and take detailed notes]*

2. Parent/Guardian Post-Interview Questions

[Have respondent sign the Consent Form and complete Parent/Guardian Demographic Questionnaire]

I have a series of questions to go through with you today, but the interview should not be longer than 45 minutes. As you have consented, we will be recording the interview. And just to let you know, I may take brief notes throughout the interview about key points we have discussed.

This interview will focus on how your child, enrolled in the preschool program at *[insert specific name of the program]*, plays. We will be having a conversation similar to the one we had when you first enrolled your child at the preschool. So let's get started.

[Turn on the recorder]

I'd like to start by asking some general questions:

1. First, just to confirm, how old is your child enrolled here at *[insert specific name of the program]*?
Follow Up: [If not already stated] Okay, and are they a boy or a girl?
2. What three words best describe your child?
3. What kinds of things does your child like to do? Anything else?
4. Now, what three words best describe your child's preschool at *[insert specific name of the facility]*?
5. Can you tell me why you decided to enroll your son/daughter here at *[insert specific name of the program]*?
6. Can you tell me which sessions your children was enrolled in this preschool program? *[Read all, and check all that apply (confirm session with participant):* ☐ *Sept-Dec 2014 = Fall Session;* ☐ *Jan-Mar 2015 = Winter Session;* ☐ *April-June 2015 = Spring Session]*

Case Study Parents Only (Ardrossan Recreation Complex)

7. How do you think play-based preschools compare with traditional preschool programs?
[If participant asks for clarification, explain that:
(a) Play-based preschools are considered child-centered and focus on open-ended learning where children participate in an intentionally designed free play environment;
(b) Traditional preschool programs are considered teacher-directed; that is, teachers guide children to do activities that are more structured]
PROBE: Do you see a difference between the program here and other preschool programs that you have used?
8. Love to Play is a play-based preschool program. Did you notice any differences in how your child participated/played in this program from other places he/she plays? (e.g., at home, at the playground, at another preschool program)

Control Study Parents Only (Kinsmen Leisure Centre and Strathcona Olympiette Centre)

9. How do you think play-based preschools compare with traditional preschool programs?

[If participant asks for clarification, you should explain that:

(a) Play-based preschools are considered child-centered and focus on open-ended learning where children participate in an intentionally designed free play environment;

(b) Traditional preschool programs are considered teacher-directed; that is, teachers guide children to do activities that are more structured]

10. Would you describe your child's pre-school program as 'play-based'? Why/why not?

11. Has your child been involved or participated in drop-in programs or regular program activities at the Love to Play facility at the Ardrossan Recreation Complex since **September 2014**?

Follow Up: Did this influence your decision of where to enrol your child for preschool? If so, how?

Great! For this next section, I would like to ask you about your perceptions of your child's health.

12. When we talk about your child's health, what comes to mind exactly?

PROBE re: physical activity, mental health, stress relief, growth and development, socialization, etc.

Follow Up: Has the way you think about your child's health changed since your child entered the preschool program here at *[insert recreation facility name]*? *[Remember to ask]* How?

13. How do you think **play** is related to your child's health, if at all?

- IF PLAY IS RELATED TO HEALTH:

Follow Up: Are some kinds of play more important for health than others? (Probe for brief examples) Why do you think so?

- IF PLAY IS NOT RELATED TO HEALTH,

Follow Up: What is the role of play in your child's life?

14. How do you think a child's play influences their healthy growth and development?

Briefly PROBE [let them talk before you ask about these specifically; if not already stated or discussed]:

What are your perceptions of the importance of **play** in terms of:

- a. The impact of **play** on your child's intellectual development? (explain)
- b. The impact of **play** on their social development? (explain)
- c. The impact of **play** on their mental/emotional development? (explain)
- d. The impact of **play** on their physical development? (explain)

Follow Up: What do you think is most important to your child's development during the preschool years? Is there anything else?

Excellent! I'd like to now ask some questions about your opinions of free play.

15. When you hear the phrase "free play", what does that bring to mind for you? *[Do not give any idea to the participant even if he/she asks for clarification – just emphasize that we want to know what this phrase brings to mind and that there is no right or wrong answer.]*

16. Given your description, what value does free play have for your child?
PROBE: Why? How have you tried to teach or transmit that value of **free play** to your child? Can you give me an example?
PROBE: Do you think free play is a positive or a negative thing?

Since enrolling your child in the preschool program...

17. How do you think preschool has influenced your child's play, overall?
PROBE: Have you noticed any changes in your child's play behaviours since **starting at this preschool program**? [*Remember to ask*] Can you explain/provide examples of before and after?
18. What does your child tell you about playing at preschool?
Examples [*Attention these are not probes*]: Solitary play, social play, pretend, creative, construction, favourite activities.
19. How often does your child engage in free play? Where does he/she do free play? With whom?
PROBE: At home? In school? In parks?
PROBE: How do you think preschool has shaped the experience of free play for your child?
20. Are there particular types of play behaviours that you encourage or support? Why/why not?
PROBE: How are you encouraging these types of play behaviours? (e.g., at home? At the park? Etc.)
PROBE: How has this changed since enrolling your child in this preschool, if it all?
[*If needed, cite some activities the participants already mentioned their children do*]
21. Are there particular types of play behaviours that you prohibit or discourage? Why?
PROBE: How are you discouraging these types of play?
PROBE: How has this changed since enrolling your child in this preschool, if it all? (i.e. do you prohibit or discourage different or additional types of play since we last talked?)
22. Has **your** participation in play activities with your child changed since they started preschool?
PROBE: What types of activities have you been doing with your child recently?
PROBE: If you have more than one child, have you noticed a difference in how your children play individually? Together? As a family?
23. In your opinion, what circumstances makes it easier or harder for your child(ren) to participate in free play? (At home, school, other locations) [*If participant needs example suggest familiarity, temperature, locations, noise, etc.*]

Great! My next questions are about your child's experiences in this preschool program.

24. We touched on this before, but we would like to talk about it a little more now. Since the start of preschool, have you seen **changes** in your child in terms of [*go through each one as yes/no, and ask for 'how' or 'brief example'*]:
- intellectual development? [e.g., problem solving skills, communicating their ideas, etc.]
 - social development? [e.g., getting along with peers and adults]
 - mental/emotional development? [e.g., abilities to understand the rules and self-control]
 - physical development? [e.g., motor skills, self-care, growth]

25. Is your child learning the skills and behaviours you think are important to develop during preschool?
Follow Up: What do you think the program has done to support this?

26. At *[insert program name here]*, are there specific activities or experiences that you believe have contributed to your child's health or well-being?
[Examples can be broadly mentioned as psychological well-being, physical well-being, social well-being, emotional well-being, etc.]
PROBE [but briefly]: Can you give me an example? [Or Why/how?]

27. Is there anything in the preschool environment that you consider detrimental to your child's health and well-being?
[Examples can be broadly mentioned as psychological well-being, physical well-being, social well-being, emotional well-being, etc.]
Follow Up [but briefly]: Can you give me an example? [Or Why/how?]

28. Is there anything you think is **missing** from the program or space that you think is essential for a preschool child?
[If participant asks for clarification, ask about health, development, and learning.]

29. Looking forward, is this a program you would consider enrolling your child in again next year if they are not of age to attend kindergarten? Why/ why not?
Follow Up: Would you recommend this program to other parents? Why/ why not?

Now, you may remember giving your child permission to participate in a photo-taking activity as part of this research collaboration with the preschool. I would like to ask you a few questions about your child's participation in those activities. [Note: some parents may not have had the chance to see the photos or photo-books]

30. Have you heard about the photo-activities? (OR Have you had a chance to look at the photos or photo-books?)

- **If YES,** *Follow Up:* How did your child describe the photo-activities to you or to others, if at all?
PROBE: How did your child respond to the photo-taking project? (e.g., excited, disappointed, unsure, etc)
PROBE: What kinds of stories did they tell about the pictures that they took?
PROBE: What do you think *[he/she]* gained from the activity, if anything?
PROBE: Did this give you any new insight about your child's interests or inclinations?

31. What are **your** personal thoughts about the photo-activities?

Fantastic, thank you. Now, I'd like to ask you about your child's daily routine.

32. Thinking about a regular weekday, can you give me a general sense of your child's day? *[Regular week day means the day the child does not go to the preschool]*
Briefly *PROBE re:* scheduled events, who is the child with, what are they doing? Does your *[son/daughter]* play with you, your partner, or siblings? Does your *[son/daughter]* play with other children? How often? What about play activities during bath, meals, bedtime?

33. Great, and now the same thing, but for a weekend day?

34. *[If not already stated]* Is your child enrolled in any sports or organized activity (e.g., lessons in dance or music, gymnastics)? In the summer? What about the winter?

Follow Up: Would you consider these activities to be **play**?

Follow Up: Do you think this activity contributes to your child's development?

Follow Up: Is there anything else? Does this change throughout the year? If *YES*, how?

And finally, my last two questions:

35. In relation to this evaluation project, do you have any advice, suggestions, or messages for the researchers in regards to future research projects of this nature?

Explain if necessary: For instance, projects involved in school setting with multiple components and participants

[Pay attention to the participant's body language and write down any comment(s) you want to share with the research team]

36. Is there anything else that you would like to tell us about your experience with the preschool program, the facility where it was located, and the instruction provided by staff? *[be sure to probe each of these elements as it is a triple-barrelled question]*

That is all of my questions, is there anything else that you would like to add? Do you have any questions for me?

3. Concluding Comments

Thank you again for speaking with me today. It was really great to hear your thoughts about your child's play and their experiences with the preschool program. Data from the first interviews are currently being analyzed. Once all of the post-interviews are completed around June, we will combine this data with the data from the first interviews and create a final report of what we have found. The report will be shared with the programs as well as local and provincial decision-makers. If you would like a personal copy of the report, please let me know and I will add your name and email address to the distribution list.

Lastly, I want to remind you that your identity as a participant will remain confidential. If you have any further questions about the project please feel free to contact us. The contact information is provided on the information sheet.

[Turn off the recorder. Have respondent sign the Honorarium Receipt, then hand out the gift card]

Appendix D – Parent/Guardian Consent Form

Parent/Guardian and Instructor Informed Consent (Part 1)

Evaluation of a Play-Based Preschool Recreation Program: Exploring the Impact of Community Investment in Play-Based Learning on Health and Health Equity

Candace Nykiforuk
Principal Investigator

780-492-4109
candace.nykiforuk@ualberta.ca

Jane Hewes
Principal Investigator

780-497-5193
hewesj@macewan.ca

Ana Paula Belon
Project Coordinator

780-492-0280
ana.belon@ualberta.ca

Do you understand that you have been asked to be in a research study?	Y	N
Have you read and received a copy of the attached Information Letter?	Y	N
Do you understand the benefits and risks involved in taking part in this project?	Y	N
Have you had an opportunity to ask questions and discuss the study?	Y	N
Do you understand that you are free to withdraw from the study at any time without having to give a reason?	Y	N
Do you understand that you may withdraw data within 10 days after the end of the interviews?	Y	N
Has the issue of confidentiality been explained to you?	Y	N
Do you understand who will have access to your responses?	Y	N
I agree to take part in the study.	Y	N
If you agree participate, do you consent to have this interview audio recorded?	Y	N

Who explained the study to you? _____

Signature of Participant _____

Printed Name _____ D

ate _____

The plan for this study has been reviewed for its adherence to ethical guidelines by a Research Ethics Board at the University of Alberta. For questions regarding participant rights and ethical conduct of research, contact the Research Ethics Office at (780) 492-2615.

This project has been approved on ethical grounds by the MacEwan University Research Ethics Board on September 08th 2014. Any questions regarding your rights as a participant may be addressed to the Board at (780) 633-3274 or REB@macewan.ca.

If you would like to be contacted about future projects related to the preschool programs in Strathcona County, please provide:

Your name: _____

Phone number: _____

Email address: _____

3-300 Edmonton Clinic Health Academy
11405 - 87 Ave
Edmonton, Alberta
Canada T6G 1C9
Tel: 780.492.9954
Fax: 780.492.0364
@UofAPublicHlth
www.publichealth.ualberta.ca

Appendix G – Honorarium Receipt

Evaluation of a Play-Based Preschool Recreation Program: Exploring the Impact of Community Investment in Play-Based Learning on Health and Health Equity

Honorarium Receipt

Please Print

Name: _____

Phone number: _____

Email address: _____

I, _____, acknowledge receipt of the \$20 gift certificate to *Strathcona County Recreation, Parks & Culture*, as an honorarium for my participation in the *Evaluation of a Play-Based Preschool Recreation Program*.

Signature: _____

Date: _____

Appendix H – Transcription Key

Interviewer	Interviewer
Indented text	Respondent or Participant
[Name]	Participant using a name in conversation
[Child]	Referring to participant's child, the subject of discussion
(laughs)	Speaker laughing
(laughter)	Interviewer and Respondent both laughing
('word')	Other emotion or bodily behaviour in parentheses, such as (cough)
(overlapping)	Two people speaking at same time
['word?']	Transcriptionist's guess at word
[Inaudible]	If a passage cannot be understood
(emphasis on 'word')	Written after an emphasised word
(role playing voice)	Written before speaker parodies/quotes someone else
<p>Adapted from:</p> <p>Mayan, M. J. (2009). <i>Essentials of qualitative inquiry</i>. Walnut Creek, California: Left Coast Press.</p> <p>Poland, B. D. (1995). Transcription quality as an aspect of rigor in qualitative research. <i>Qualitative Inquiry</i>, 1(3), 290-310.</p>	

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Appendix I – Participant Thank You Letter

[Month Day, Year]

Dear [Participant Name]:

Thank you for participating in our parent interviews on [Month Day, Year]. We appreciate you taking the time to share your perceptions of the benefits of play and how your child plays in different settings. Your perspectives on the [Facility Name] preschool program will help us to understand the needs of preschool programming in Strathcona County and will be used to help enhance preschool programming in the area.

As a token of our appreciation, please accept this \$20 Strathcona County Recreation, Parks and Culture gift certificate. We hope that you will be able to use this certificate to enjoy the facilities and programming in Strathcona County.

If you have any questions about your interview or the Evaluation of a Play-Based Preschool Recreation Program project in general, please do not hesitate to contact our project coordinator, Ana Paula Belon (780-492-0280; ana.belon@ualberta.ca) or ourselves, the principal investigators, Candace Nykiforuk (780-492-4109; candace.nykiforuk@ualberta.ca) and Jane Hewes (780-497-5193; hewesj@macewan.ca).

Again, thank you very much for your participation in our research project.

Sincerely,

Candace Nykiforuk
University of Alberta

Jane Hewes
MacEwan University

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Appendix J – Final Report Request Form

*Evaluation of a Play-Based Preschool Recreation Program: Exploring the Impact of Community
Investment in Play-Based Learning on Health and Health Equity*

Final Report Request

In filling out this form, you are requesting to receive a copy of the *Evaluation* project's final report.

Name (Please Print): _____

Phone number: _____

Email address: _____