

Key Issues Paper 2



Contextual Influences on Early Adolescent Play¹

INTRODUCTION

This key issue paper aims to explore the contextual influences that can shape early adolescents' opportunities and choices in connection with play. Children's right to play has been enshrined in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child [Article 31] (UN, 1989). This is not surprising given play's contribution to wellbeing and development in children and adolescents.

Researchers are unanimous in their support for play and leisure activities for children of all ages. "The more children play the healthier and happier they are" (Webb-Williams et al. 2021, p. 2) and "play (or some available free time in the case of older children and adolescents) is essential to the cognitive, physical, social, and emotional well-being of children and youth" (Ginsburg et al. 2007, p. 183).

Examples abound of the benefits of play, for instance, a recent large scale international study found that engagement in organised leisure-time activity in 11, 13 and 15-year-old adolescents from Europe and Canada was associated with subjective wellbeing irrespective of country, age, sex and variance in

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social and socioeconomic factors (Badura et al., 2021). Therefore, protecting and promoting play and leisure-time activity in early adolescence is crucial. However, doing this requires an understanding of contextual influences on play.

THE FOCUS OF THIS REPORT

This key report focuses on contextual influences on play and leisure time activity in early adolescence. We conducted a literature review focused on studies conducted in Australia, New Zealand, North America, the UK, and Europe. The review identified a moderate body of research work focused on play or leisure activities among early adolescents.

When conducting the literature search, we were cognisant of the difficulty in defining play which would impact on our key search terms. While we might describe easy things as “child’s play”, defining ‘play’ or what counts as play is not easy. Moyles (2010) stated that “grappling with the concept of play can be analogised to trying to seize bubbles” (p. 5). Conceptions of play are linguistically and philosophically challenging; studies do not always explicitly articulate what play is; or clearly conceptualise the roles of parents or a child’s social community in play (van Oers, 2012).

Some researchers have focused on characterising play (van Oers, 2012). For instance, play could be described as self-chosen, intrinsically motivated, or imaginative. However, ‘play’ is mutable. The content and style of play as well as children’s understanding and interpretations of play opportunities vary according to cultural and social norms (Child, 1983, van Oers, 2012, Gaskins, 2014). Thus, the nature of play changes with children’s developmental stages (van Oers, 2014) as well as technological developments (Etzel, 2010).

Therefore, this key report conceptualises early adolescents’ play very broadly as any type of play or activity undertaken for recreational purposes or during leisure time.

FACTORS INFLUENCING ADOLESCENT PLAY

This key report identified different factors (e.g. socioeconomic status) and agents (e.g. parents) that can influence play and leisure-time activity choices and opportunities in early adolescence. The review process revealed that these are interconnected. It became clear that disentangling this web of factors and agents would neither be easy nor representative of realities. Thus, they are thematically organised in terms of contextual environments. The contextual environments capture the influences of factors, agents, or a combination of these.

The contextual environments are seen to be fluid, mutable and interacting with early adolescents' individuality and agency (Figure 1). The key report discusses influences emerging from the familial, social, physical, natural and political environments.

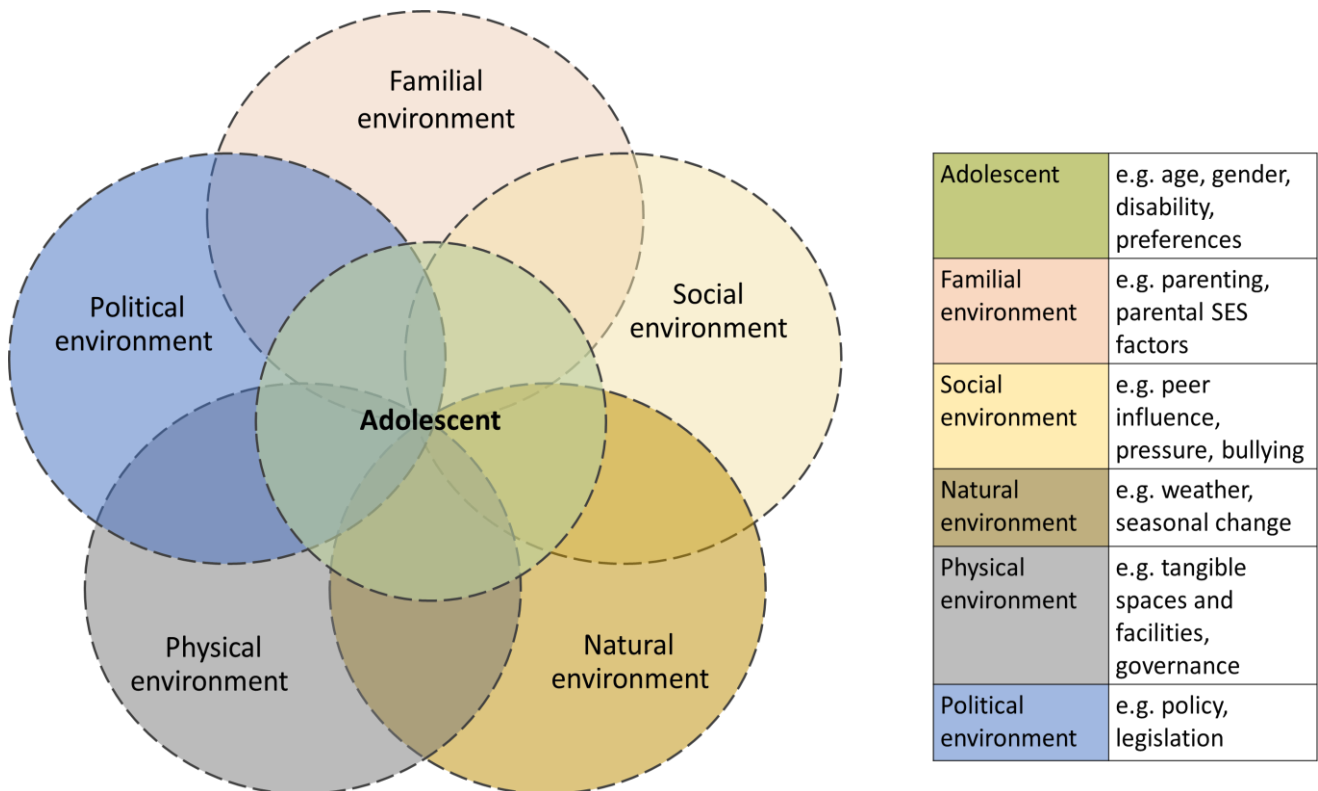


Figure 1: Representation of contextual environments and adolescent individuality

ADOLESCENT INDIVIDUALITY

Early adolescents are not an abstract group. They are real individuals whose ages, genders, abilities, disabilities, preferences and individualities are potential reasons for variation in patterns of play. We found that age and gender variations are particularly pronounced in the literature.

1. Age and transition into adolescence appear associated with a decline in numerous activities. Outdoor play, park use and physical activity decline with the transition into adolescence (Sember et al., 2020, Marquet et al., 2019, Mulhall et al., 2011, Pellegrini, 1992), and so does interest in reading for pleasure (Nippold et al., 2005). In Australia, the decline was observed in non-organised physical activity like active play or informal sport (Kemp et al., 2022). Saunders et al. (2018) also found that Year 5 boys and girls engaged in similar activities at comparable frequencies, but that their participation declined significantly in Year 7.

2. Gender differences appear to influence patterns and choices. Studies indicate that boys can be more physically active than girls (Maric et al., 2020, Evans et al., 2018, McGovern, 2021, Kirby et al., 2011, Badura et al., 2021). Nippold et al. (2005) found that 11-15-year-old boys were more likely to report spending no time reading for pleasure than girls of the same age. Additionally, boys are likely to play computer games and use gaming consoles more than girls (Auhuber et al., 2019, Griffiths, 1997).

3. Age and gender differences were also found to impact young people with disabilities. For example, Shikako-Thomas et al. (2013) analyzed leisure-time activities in children and youth with cerebral palsy. They found that adolescents with cerebral palsy greatly valued an ability to participate in activities of their choice; they enjoyed social activities the most; their participation declined with age; and that girls participated in more self-improvement activities than boys.

FACTOR 1 – FAMILIAL ENVIRONMENT

The familial environment within which an adolescent is embedded impacts their opportunities and choices of play and leisure-time activities. The familial contextual environment emphasizes the role of parents. However, it also captures the influences of siblings, the overall family environment, and access to media and technology in the home environment.

THE INFLUENCE OF PARENTS

Various studies suggest that parents can have a direct or indirect influence on their children's play or leisure-time activity (Johansen and Green, 2019, Van der Eecken et al., 2020, Xie and Li, 2019, Dodd et al., 2021, Brewer and Kimbro, 2014, Côté, 1999, Best et al., 2017, Doggui et al., 2021, Kirby et al., 2011, Tur-Porcar, 2017).

In connection with physical activity, for instance, several studies demonstrate parents' influence. Johansen and Green (2019) found that Norwegian parents believed sports were beneficial and thus encouraged their children's participation. Parents provided emotional support (e.g. sharing their sporting stories with children) and instrumental support (e.g. driving their children to activities) (Johansen and Green, 2019). However, Virgona et al. (2021) found that participation in structured physical activity could be constrained due to parents' financial burdens or their cultural or religious identities. Moreover, Brewer and Kimbro (2014) found that parents' perceptions of physical and social disorder in their neighborhoods were linked to greater probabilities of physical inactivity in children.

FAMILY ENVIRONMENT AND HOME TECHNOLOGIES

Several studies indicate that in conjunction with parents, siblings and other family members as well as access to digital media or technologies create home environments that influence leisure time activities.

Mulhall et al. (2011) explained that family involvement in physical activity was a predictor of early adolescents' self-reported exercise. Additionally, Badura et al. (2017) identified that adolescents who played sports; went for walks; or played indoor games with their families were more likely to take part in organised leisure-time activities (e.g. individual sports, team sports, art school, youth organizations, leisure centres, church meetings/singing) than ones who spent more time watching television/videos with their family.

Hardy et al. (2006) found that the factors in the family and home associated with a higher volume of television watching among early adolescents were: siblings, access to pay television, eating snacks while watching television, watching television with parents, and having mothers who watched 2 hours or more of television per day. Bahl et al. (2021) identified that access to the internet at home could hinder African American adolescents' physical activity. Smith et al. (2015b) studied influences on adolescents' video gaming and recommended that parents delay adolescents' access to gaming-equipped personal devices and encourage their use in shared rooms, as well as speak to children about cybersafety.

FACTOR 2 – SOCIAL ENVIRONMENT

The social environment captures influences that emerge from early adolescents' interactions with significant others. The literature outlines the notable impact of peers. Social interaction with peers can prompt or inhibit participation in play or leisure-time activities.

Some researchers found that peers can encourage participation in play and leisure-time activities. In connection with physical activity, Salvy et al. (2008), Keresztes et al. (2008), Kirby et al. (2011) and Marks et al. (2015) identified peers as a key influence. For instance, Marks et al. (2015) found that the amount of time adolescents spent in physical activity was positively related to having more friends; more friends with frequent interaction; and more friends perceived to be very active. Marks et al. (2015), also found an inverse relationship between participants' screen time and the proportion of very active friends they had (p. 10). A similar effect was found in gaming. For instance, Brooks et al. (2016) found that higher levels of gaming were linked with the presence of several friends of the opposite sex.

They explained that online games are frequently played by groups and that gaming can be a social activity. Interestingly, they found that for boys regular bullying perpetration or victimization were linked to the highest levels of gaming.

Peers can also have an inhibiting or constraining impact. Fear of bullying or teasing, peer judgement, inactive playground norms could influence early adolescents' physical activity at school (Watson et al., 2015, Wheatley et al., 2018). Similarly, Kemp et al. (2022) explored the social norms related to non-organized physical activity during adolescence, and the associated enablers and barriers. They found that for some adolescents' barriers to participation revolved around "fears of being different, bullying, peer judgement and rejection" (p. 41). Some participants feared "being judged for engaging in 'childish' activities, such as imaginative play and playground games (e.g. tag)" (p. 47); and puberty prompted some girls to withdraw from physical activity due to self-consciousness in the presence of boys. Additionally, Basterfield et al. (2016) found that among 11–13-year-olds barriers to participation in physical activity could be social and exemplified by statements like 'my friends don't go'.

FACTOR 3 – PHYSICAL ENVIRONMENT

The physical environment describes influences connected with access (or lack of access) to suitable spaces and facilities that support safe play or leisure activity. This context also captures school provisions for play and their governance of these provisions.

NEIGHBOURHOODS

Access to suitable spaces and facilities is a major influence on early adolescents' outdoor play and physical activity. Schneider et al. (2019) assessed playgrounds in Mannheim, Germany. They noted that only 47% of all playgrounds were suitable for children and adolescents. About 30% of playgrounds had play equipment suitable for children under 6 years of age. In Ireland, Beckett (2010) identified that in the absence of age-appropriate spaces, many adolescents and youth simply hung out on the streets. Smith et al. (2015a) found that young adolescents were concerned about the availability of "age-appropriate equipment, street or yard space, or nearby community facilities" (p. 4). They also noted that many participants felt that parks were geared towards younger children and park equipment does not meet the needs of adolescents.

Nyström et al. (2019) found that children living in lower socioeconomic status areas were less likely to spend more than two hours outdoors on weekends when compared to children from higher

socioeconomic status areas. Schneider et al. (2019) aptly stated that “the socially disadvantaged are exposed to further structural deprivation by their residential environment” which amplifies their disadvantage (p. 117). Schneider et al. (2019) found that playground availability varied between social areas. In some areas, children needed to walk 140 m to reach the closest playground, whereas in others children needed to walk 1.5 km. Children living in socially deprived areas accessed significantly less playground space and shared playground amenities with more children. Children had “very different opportunities to play and be physically active” depending on population density (Schneider et al. 2019, p. 120).

Smith et al. (2015a) found that early adolescents’ neighbourhoods might not encourage physical activity. For instance, areas full of broken fences, holes, garbage, or graffiti/vandalism were less appealing for youth (p. 4). Some adolescents worried about “loose animals, vehicular traffic, and unsafe people” and this made them less comfortable about engaging in physical activity (p. 5). Van Hecke et al. (2018) identified that park upkeep was the most influential factor for 12-16-year-old adolescents’ park visitation and physical activity. Moreover, Molnar et al. (2004) established that neighborhood unsafety and disorder contribute to reduced physical activity in youth aged 11-16.

SCHOOLS

Adolescents could also lack access to adequate space and facilities for play in schools. Shoari et al. (2021) quantified children’s and adolescents’ access to open space and green space in Greater London schools. They found that more “than 60% of children and adolescents in London do not have adequate open and green space at their school” (p. 379). In Australia, Parrish et al. (2009) observed children’s activity in six schools’ playgrounds. They identified that schools often restricted access to playing fields in shorter breaks; and that most of the shaded areas had concrete surfaces which led to children being discouraged from running due to the risk of injury. Parrish et al. (2009) identified that playground surfaces had a significant impact on children’s activity, with activity being higher in areas with soft surfaces, bark or sand. Interestingly, the researchers also found that when teachers were managing or observing schoolyards, activity declined.

FACTOR 4 – NATURAL ENVIRONMENT

Whilst the term ‘environmental’ can be used to refer to a person’s surroundings, in this report the natural environment focuses on less tangible influences on play such as weather. For instance, Belanger

et al. (2009) followed 1293 early adolescent students for five years. They identified that the declines in physical activity during adolescence could be explained in part by declines during winter seasons. Belanger et al. (2009) noted that physical activity sessions declined with rainfall and snowfall. Sallis et al. (2019) surveyed adolescents from lower-income areas in five American states. The researchers found that youth physical activity was lower in the summer. They suggested that the reported lack of enjoyment of physical activity in summer was a possible explanation. Sallis et al. (2019) also found that particularly among African Americans screen time was substantially higher in the summer.

FACTOR 5 – POLITICAL ENVIRONMENT

The political environment relates to macro-level influences on play that emerge from government policies and legislation. Political contexts can have a distant impact on adolescent play and leisure activity. A government's stance and provisions can impact realities on the ground for adolescents.

Internationally we can see examples of this. Beckett (2010) examined the degree to which adolescents in Northern Ireland can enact their right to play and argued that their rights were not adequately recognized, identifying that most adolescents did not have easy access to suitable activities and spaces and that most aspired to have a safe place to “hang out” (p. 233).

The political context can also have a more direct impact such as through the COVID19-instigated school and park closures. Dunton et al. (2020) found that the parents of older children (ages 9–13) “perceived greater decreases in physical activity and greater increases in sedentary behaviours from the pre- to early-COVID-19 periods” (p. 1).

CONCLUSION

This key issue paper explored contextual influences on play and leisure activity in early adolescence. It outlined the potential influence of five key contextual environments based on a modest body of research. It is important to note that the paucity of research in this field is a concern. It is only through research that we can help and support this often-overlooked section of the population. Understanding the experiences and perspectives of adolescents is at the heart of the Play in Early Adolescence project. Key issues paper 4 builds on the contextual factors identified in this paper to provide details of the barriers and enablers of play of early adolescents at school. Key issues paper 5 explores policy and practise recommendations.

PLAY IN EARLY ADOLESCENCE PROJECT OVERVIEW

The Play in Early Adolescence Project investigates play at school for children aged 11 to 13 years. The rationale for this study is grounded in the well accepted view that play is important to children of all ages, but that it declines as children move through the years of schooling. A comparison of how children in their last year of primary school and in the first year of high school interact, socialise and spend their break times will enable clearer understandings to be developed about what children need in this transitioning year, what they struggle with, and how schools can better meet their needs for play in the day. The study aims to investigate:

- How does the play of children in the last year of primary school compare with the first year of high school?
- What are the barriers and enablers to play for young adolescents at school?
- What is available in schools to support and facilitate opportunities for play?
- What are the implications for transition to high school?

The expected outcome of this research is to generate new insights into play for the 11 to 13 age range, an age typically neglected by research. It will provide evidence which demonstrates the contextual impact on play and how the environment limits, promotes or alters play opportunities.

For further information see: playresearch.com.au

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