

OUTDOOR PLAY STATUS FOR CHILDREN TODAY AND PREVIOUS GENERATION

Elisabeta Karamelo

University of Elbasan, Rr. Rinia P583/1 Elbasan, betakaramelo@hotmail.com

Abstract

Most parents and educators agree that outdoor play is a natural and critical part of a child's healthy development. It affects not only physical development of the child but it also strongly affects the mental and spiritual wellbeing. This study discusses the extent to which children in Albania today participate in active outdoor play, compared with the previous generation. Two hundred children, 7-14 years of age, from two schools of the city of Elbasan were surveyed regarding their active, outdoor play experiences today. Two hundred of their parents were interviewed regarding the same issues, their outdoor play experiences as children as well. Questionnaires were filled up anonymously and results were statistically processed. The parents' play experiences, compared with their children's, clearly indicate that children today spend considerably less time playing outdoors than their parents did as children. The study reveals several fundamental reasons for this decline, including dependence on television and digital media, reduction of appropriate spaces and playgrounds where they used to play and concerns about crime and safety. The study also conveys findings related to the frequent use of electronic diversions and discusses several suggestions for early childhood professionals, classroom teachers, and parents for fostering the child's enjoyment of outdoor play as well as for the local and central authorities responsible for preserving existing and creating new and appropriate children outdoor playing spaces.

Key words: Outdoor Play, Children, Previous Generation, Comparison.

Introduction

Through games and physical outdoor activities the child gains some of the skills that are necessary for life as an adult, among which we would mention some of the most important ones such as: social competence, problem solving, creative thinking, and potential risk prevention¹. Through outdoor play children grow emotionally as well as academically².

They develop a natural appreciation of the surrounding environment. Through participation in imaginary games children develop their initiative and need to understand basic academic concepts such as research on the characteristics of objects, of various items and materials or how to use simple tools in order to perform a given task^{3,4}.

Outdoor play offers the opportunity to explore the surrounding environment, experiences of direct contact with basic elements of nature such as dust, water, sand, soil and mud, stones and wood. They offer unique opportunities for finding or creating a proper place for the game, collecting appropriate objects or developing hobbies, and ultimately increasing the desire for physical activities.

Numerous studies show that a child's body undergoes the biggest changes of physical growth between the age of 3 and 12, what is demonstrated by the desire to run, climb and jump in outdoor premises⁵. Such vigorous movements, which are part of the outdoor play, not only contribute to the strengthening of muscles, but also facilitate and support the growth of heart and lungs and of all other organs that are vital for a normal physical development of the child⁶.

Apart from the impact on the motor development, outdoor play affects also the mental and spiritual health, perhaps even more than the physical one⁷. It is well accepted that outdoor or spontaneous play stimulates all aspects of mental and emotional development of the child⁸ much more than indoor or structured play. The opportunities offered by nature with its immense diversity for the development of these skills cannot be compared to any other artificial environment.

On the other hand, we notice a common trend of limitation of time that children spend with outdoor play as opposed to indoor games, especially electronic ones or television⁹. This trend, which was noticed decades ago in the developed countries, has appeared more and more powerful in our country during the last two decades especially in large urban centers.

Leisure time that children today in our country spend playing outdoors is the main object of this study. Also, through comparison with the previous generation, respectively, the time that parents of children today spent when they were children, we create an idea of the changes that have happened in a generation and the future trend of this change.

Content and methods:

In order to achieve these objectives, there were prepared/designed questionnaires for children aged 7-14 years, which were voluntarily filled out by 200 students from two primary schools of

Elbasan city. The survey was conducted during April and May 2012. Also, questionnaires with similar questions were filled out by 200 parents of the children of the same schools.

This was in order to see how it has changed the leisure time spent with outdoor play from the previous generation to that of today. The data of the survey have been statistically processed through SPSS 17.0. The number of respondents was selected so that the results obtained have statistical value for the addressed population.

Questions were selected in order to give us a much clearer picture of the situation, both in terms of frequency of play (day/week) and duration (hours/day). But, on the other hand other questions arose, which would help us identify potential factors that influence this rapport. These are the questions over the physical opportunities/abilities to play outdoors, that is, the existence of appropriate facilities for such activities: do they like nature, do they like playing outside and what type of games they prefer.

Results of the survey are summarized in Table 1.

Table 1: Summary of responses

Question	Children	Parents
1. How many days a week do you play outdoors?		
Every day	32	114
4-6 days	25	44
2-4 days	62	30
1 day	81	12
2. When you play outside, how long do you play?		
More than 2 hours	47	96
1-2 hours	98	92
Less than 1 hour	55	12
3. Where do you prefer to play usually?		
In the street	87	104
In the park	53	26
In the playground	12	14
Other	48	56
4. Which are the favorite games?		
With ball	150	80
With a jumping rope	17	50
Seek and hide	13	26
Other	20	44
5. What do you like most?		
Outdoor play	112	142
Watching TV	9	36
Computer	64	-
Other	15	22

6. In the area where you live are there proper premises where you can play outdoors (eg, park, playground) ?		
Yes	46	182
No	154	18

Results and discussions:

Even at a first glance, we notice immediately that the free time that children spend playing outdoors today has decreased drastically, both, in terms of weekly frequency and daily duration of the activities for the days when they play outside.

Table 2: Frequency (days / week) of outdoor play (in %)

How many days a week do you play outdoors?	Children today	Parents
Everyday	16	57
4-6 days	12.5	22
2-4 days	31	15
1 day	40.5	6

So, it is obvious that today only 16% of children declare that they play outside every day compared to 57% of their parents when they were children, while 40.5% of them say that they play one day a week or less outside, whereas for the previous generation that figure was only 6% (Table 2 and Chart 1)

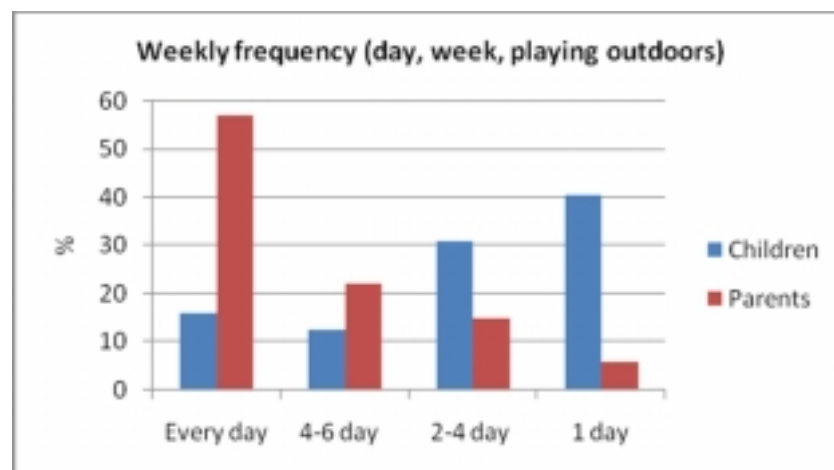


Chart 1: Frequency (days / week) of outdoor play in%

Also the duration of the game for the days when children play outside has been decreased significantly. From Table 3 and Graph 2 we realize that only 23.5% of children today play over 2 hours a day, while for children of previous generation the figure was two times higher, 48%. Also, today 27.5% of children play less than 1 hour while for the previous generation this figure was only 6%.

Table 3: Play duration (%)

When you play outside, how long do you play?	Children today	Parents
Over 2 hours	23.5	48
1-2 hours	49	46
Less than 1 hour	27.5	6



Chart 2: Duration of outdoor play

The average weekly time could probably give us a clearer idea of how has the time spent with spontaneous outdoor games changed just through one generation. This could probably be calculated as the product of frequency (how many days per week they play on average) with daily duration (how long they play during those days). Results are given in Table 4 and are illustrated by chart nr.3.

Table 4: Average time spent with outdoor play

	Days a week	Hours a day	Hours a week
Children today	3.08	1.57	4.86
Parents (previous generation)	5.60	2.16	12.10

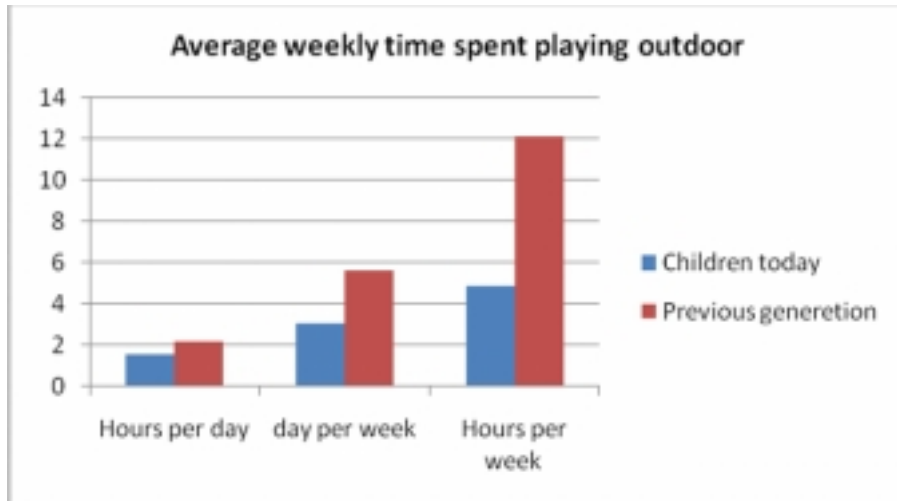


Chart 3: Average weekly time spent playing outdoors

Results of *t*-test for independent samples (independent *t*-test) for the equivalence of averages shows that the frequency (days / week) of outdoor play for parents (previous generation) (5.60 ± 1.87) statistically present significant changes compared with children (current generation) (3.08 ± 2.17), ($t(298) = 10.41, p = 0.000$).

Therefore, it is easily noticed that the frequency (days/week) of outdoor play is almost diminished only after a generation. Today a child plays outside as an average only 3 days a week, while the previous generation played almost 5.6 days or every day. If this is multiplied by the daily duration, the results are astounding. On average a child today plays outdoors less than 5 hours per week while the children during the previous generation played on average of more than 12 hours / week. Which means three times less, and this is just for a generation.

There are a few factors that have affected this drastic decrease. Limitation of space due to drastic socio-economic and structural changes that have experienced especially the large urban areas may be considered as the main cause. The appropriate places, where children used to play carelessly, have been almost totally occupied by legal and illegal constructions, which are generally without any criteria or plans.

Neighbourhood roads or the space between the buildings, which once used to be the most common place or environment where children played carelessly, today are occupied by buildings or cars, what makes children's traditional games and activities impossible. Insecurity and risks have been increased from the realistic, virtual and psychological point of view for parents, who do not allow their children to play as they used to when there was no fear of road accidents or other threats.

This argument is also supported by the results of question 6, table 1, if kids today have appropriate places to play outdoors carelessly. Parents were asked the same question about the time when they were children of the same age. Results indicate that children's opportunities for spontaneous outdoor play have been drastically decreased, or at least this is the perception.

So, today 76% of children think that in their neighborhood or around their house there are no places where they could play without fear. For the children during the previous generation, this figure was 9%. Also the the structure and diversity of outdoor games have changed significantly if we would compare preferences of the two generations. Table 5 and Chart 5 illustrate these changes.

Table5: Children’s and parnets’ favourite games (in %)

Which are the favourite games?	Children (%)	Parents (%)
With ball	75	40
With jumping rope	8.5	25
Seek and hide	6.5	13
Other	10	22

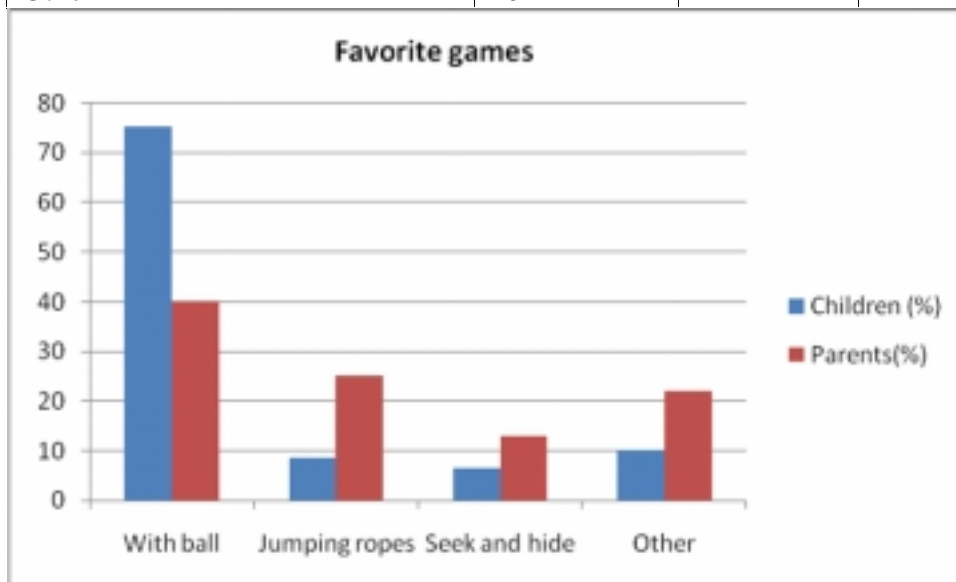


Chart Nr. 5: Children’s preferences regarding different types of outdoor games

It’s quite obvious that the diversity of games of parents was substantially higher compared to that of children today. 75% of children today prefer to play ball as opposed to 40% of parnets, who apparently had many other alternatives than children today. For instance, playing with a jumping rope, which covers 25% of parents’ preferences, has been decreased to only 8.5%, or seek and go hiding, which used to be a very common game, has got a preference of 6.5%. Also other categories, where there could be involved a wide range of games for parents' generation has been reduced to only 10% of children today, which shows the lack of alternatives.

Changes regarding the time spent outdoors bear all the consequences discussed above for the psycho-motor development of a child. We are all aware that children today, especially in big cities, where there are fewer opportunities for playing outdoors regularly, are physically weaker than their peers in rural areas or those of a previous generation. Simple exercises of strength, which were normal for children of the previous generation, seem very diffuclt to the majority of children today. We can mention exercises such as: hanging through the strenght of arms, push ups, climbing a tree, walking over a very narrow place that requires keeping balance, etc. In addition, reduction of the time spent outside affects children's appetite. We see more and more

children who eat only after parents try hard to convince them or only certain types of food, which are problems that were rarely faced by the previous generation. These have certainly been affected also by the changes of socio-economic conditions, but consumption of energy through outdoor games undoubtedly increases appetite and improves digestion and blood circulation. Changes in the the time spent outdoors, combined with changes in the food structure have started to have their effects on the increase of obesity even among children, which was almost unknown to the previous generation.

Conclusions:

There is a clear tendency of the reduction of time that children spend with spontaneous (not-organized) outdoor play. Compared with the previous generation, it has has been decreased three times. Prospects are gloomy as well, with a trend of a slow but progressive reduction of time that children spend playing outdoors.

The most important factors of this drastic decrease are identified and are divided into two groups:

Factors of lack of infrastructure, which means lack of appropriate places for spontaneous games. The space that was usually used for children's games has disappeared or been considerably reduced especially in the big urban areas, as a result of legal and illegal constructions which are occupying all the space. However, even the space that is not occupied in the ways mentioned above, is not suitable for playing normally as before, because of the heavy traffic or car parking. On the other hand, this loss of space has not been compensated as they should with the creation of new facilities, safe from risks of traffic and relatively close to houses where children can bring their camp of games. This also decreases the opportunities for going out and also the time spent outdoors.

Psycho-social factors: The main one among them would be the fear of parents to allow their children to play outside, "exposed" according to them, to various and ever increasing risks. They consider as such, first, the heavy and partially uncontrolled traffic, which is the main reason for not allowing children to play in the street, second, the fear or danger from "the outsiders" or "unknown people". This fear is increased by the news in the media through which parents hear about various road accidents, kidnapping, fights and so on. Under these circumstances, parents feel more relaxed if they do not allow their children to play outside, or they are forced to accompany or observe them during the game.

The same factors that have their effects on the reduction of time that children spend outside, make them compensate it through the time spent with electronic games or TV shows. Inability to play outside because of lack of proper or safe facilities or because parents do not allow them fearing potential risks, has resulted in the increase of time spent in front of the computer or television.

Recommendations:

Outdoor games are an inner genetic need of children. Their impact on the psycho-motor development of children is big and unquestionable. Therefore, they should be encouraged and promoted. There are two main institutions that may achieve this goal: family and school.

Family has the ability and the duty to create the opportunity for the child to be in direct contact with nature, to become familiar with it and its immense diversity. School, on the other hand, plays a very important role in the further education of the child with the norms and rules of protection of nature and environment. Despite various efforts to integrate topics of nature, preservation and protection of environment, of flora and fauna, school in effect should play a greater role. What needs to be done, besides the strengthening of the theoretic background by improving existing curricula or introduction of new curricula, is the increase of direct contact with nature. This might be achieved through organization of excursions and outdoor camps in the forest, on the mountain, along the sea, lakes or rivers, in an environment where the impact of humanbeing is as small as possible.

Another important aspect of school is the physical training class and organization of games, through which children are introduced to games in general and playing as a team in particular. This role of the school has started to diminish. Sports have increasingly been underestimated and neglected in our schools without taking into consideration its consequences. This phenomenon should not continue and sports should be reevaluated in order to play their significant role not only in the physical education of a child.

Another factor with indirect but still considerable impact is the approach of the community in general and of the local or central government in particular toward the conditions in which children play outdoors. All of us can do something, for instance, to increase safety in the streets or squares by respecting the traffic and parking rules, by strengthening the sense of community in order to feel a shared responsibility and care for children and the places where they play.

Local government can prevent, through enforcement of law, occupation or alienation of parks, lawns or green areas that are appropriate for children and can also take care of their extension and preservation.

The central government can influence through policies that help the promotion of nature and environment in schools, more stringent laws and especially their implementation in the administration of the territory etc.. In this way, everybody can contribute to the decrease of tendency of children to stay inside the house with electronic games and television, away from nature and games, so that we ensure free time that is healthy and useful for their preparation for life.

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