

The state of PLAY

By Lakshmi Singh



Australian children do not play in outdoor play spaces as much as they used to in generations past. Not only that, but many who work with children are concerned that the quality of interaction children have with the outdoors is also decreasing.

Recent research by Deakin University showed that the level of physical activity during recess times at schools decreases as a child progresses from primary to secondary school. Increasing emphasis on curriculum has resulted in children spending less time in school playgrounds.

Michael Grose, parenting expert, author and writer of parentingideas.com.au says that many schools are now also offering extracurricular activities at lunchtime like music lessons or stamp collecting clubs and these often take kids away from physical activities.

On the home front, an increase in the number of apartment dwellers across Australia has meant that the traditional backyard that offered many a child the open space to explore and play is not as readily available. Often, council run parks and gardens are the only accessible outdoor area for these children.

The common concerns

These public parks and outdoor play spaces bring with them their own set of challenges in the modern era where the practice of cotton-wool wrapping kids is common. Karen

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Images from Bulimba Childcare Centre, Brisbane

Broomfield, co-director of Bulimba Childcare Centre in Queensland believes that the current Australian parenting philosophy of 'protecting children at all costs' from physical pain and suffering from misadventures as well as at the hands of predators, both real and imaginary is becoming detrimental to their development.

Dr. Shirley Wyver, senior lecturer in child development at Macquarie University agrees and adds that along with parental fear, there is also parental judgement in today's society.

"Parents are constantly feeling like they are being scrutinized by other people and decisions like letting their child walk to school or go to the park independently can be met with social isolation as other parents may feel uncomfortable letting their kids play with them."

The media also plays a role in parenting decisions made, she adds. "If something happens to their child, they are judged because they allowed their child to take the risk. If they don't do it, then they are judged as well because they let their child be indoors or haven't provided those challenges."

In addition, the comfort many parents often felt from the

presence of neighbours casting a protective eye over kids from their house is reduced as modern houses now have family areas at the back of the house, away from the street, she says.

This thought is reflected by Grose who observes that the Australian way of parenting seems to be very much an "individual endeavour", with parents becoming less likely to look out for other people's kids than a generation or two ago.

Certainly, the old saying of "it takes a village to raise a child" now appears to have less meaning in Australian society with a European Early Childhood Education Research Journal article referring to a decrease in the amount of "collective responsibility" present in western countries like Australia. For example, research shows that Australian teachers are more fearful of litigation during outdoor play as society here seeks to place individual blame. By contrast, in regions such as Scandinavia (whose education system is often referred to as best practice), mastery of risks presented by various outdoor conditions is perceived to be very beneficial to childhood development. The focus in these societies is an emphasis that "all citizens" are responsible for the care and support of children.