



# Exploring children's seasonal play to promote active lifestyles in Auckland, New Zealand



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## ABSTRACT

Studies of seasonal barriers for outdoor activities seldom view families' play practices as grounded in the everyday experience of the natural elements. This paper brings 20 families' mundane outdoor play experiences in Auckland's temperate climate to the fore. Through drawings and interviews, families residing in both suburban detached houses and central city apartments revealed locally constituted beliefs about appropriate play spaces (e.g. garden, park). While the majority of participants retreated to indoor activities during winter, some children and their parents viewed the outdoors as the only opportunity for 'real fun'. We advocate the importance of a better understanding of children's seasonal outdoor play. In particular, we argue that in order to promote year-round healthy levels of outdoor activities it is necessary to understand variations in societal, neighbourhood and family values attributed to outdoor activities. Further, to develop a more nuanced understanding of the locational complexities of outdoor play it is important to understand the meanings of, and practices associated with, seasonal and weather conditions in different international locations.

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## 1. Introduction

Research to date has made important contributions to understanding independent outdoor play as one of the most significant activities through which primary school age children can gain environmental literacy and social competence (Malone, 2007; Kraftl et al., 2013; Spencer and Blades, 2006). Active outdoor play has also been promoted as a means to foster children's physical and mental health and counteract rising obesity rates in an environment characterised by the increasing institutionalisation of play (Alexander et al., 2014; Cooper et al., 2010; Wells, 2000; Le-verett, 2011). However, this body of research has tended to be conducted in warmer months of the year (Tucker and Gilliland, 2007). Explicit consideration of seasonality and weather conditions tend to be absent in studies of children's or families' outdoor activities: at best, they are viewed as barriers; at worst they are only mentioned in passing. This neglect has overlooked the potential for recreational activities in colder or rainier months to enhance children's health and development. However, to support activities that extend across the full stretch of seasons, we first need to understand the role of seasonality in perceptions of

outdoor play and how families assess leisure activities and locations differently in summer and winter.

In this paper, we advocate a new research agenda on children's seasonal play by asking how children and their families experience and regard activities and their locations across the seasons. Drawing on data collected in Auckland in 2010, we explore seasonally-specific norms as well as the meanings and practices associated with seasonal weather conditions in order to gain a more nuanced understanding of the complexities of families' outdoor play. We begin by briefly reviewing children's changing play practices in light of the increasing 'institutionalisation' (Zeiber, 2003) of activities (e.g. supervised indoor extra-curricular activities) at the expense of free outdoor play. This section sets the scene for considering children's contemporary pastimes in order to contextualise seasonal play practices. We then review scholarship focussing on what Hitchings (2010) has termed 'geographies of new climatic accommodation'. This review allows us to argue for a twofold necessity: first, understanding the meanings and practices associated with seasonal and weather conditions; and second, understanding embodied societal norms. In sum, these two sets of knowledge will allow development of a more nuanced understanding of the locational and seasonal complexities of outdoor play. A brief introduction to the case study sites and research design is subsequently provided. We then analyse narratives from 20 families concerning their use of local play

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opportunities in summer and winter, in order to explore the complexities of seasonal and locational leisure practices. We conclude that to enhance year-round outdoor activities, change in relation to beliefs about appropriate outdoor activities needs to happen at the family, neighbourhood and city level.

## 2. Institutionalisation and domestication of children's play

Children are spending an increasing amount of time in spaces designed and controlled by adults (Spencer and Blades, 2006). In contrast, previous generations recall the street and surrounds as the locations where most of their play occurred, 'free' of adult control (Karsten, 2005; Skar and Krogh, 2009; Witten et al., 2013). Prevailing concerns about traffic safety, stranger-danger and 'good' parenting practices (Collins and Kearns, 2005; Gill, 2007; Foster et al., 2015) have contributed to children's retreat to spaces under adult surveillance. Such spaces are designed explicitly for children and accessed by widely dispersed families (McKendrick et al., 2000). Zeiher (2003) termed this development the 'domestication' of childhood in order to highlight children's declining opportunity to roam and the way they are increasingly controlled and constrained within indoor settings. Adults have relocated children from "experiential space[s]" (street, neighbourhood) to "closed protected spaces" (Leverett, 2011) reflecting and reproducing the dominant discourse of the innocent child needing protection from 'the evil outside world' (Valentine, 1996; Scott et al., 1998; James et al., 1998). This development has fostered an increase in organised extra-curricular activities and, more specifically, play that reflects adult conceptualisations of 'appropriate' child pastimes (Leverett, 2011; Gleeson and Sipe, 2006; Ergler et al., 2013a). Yet, participation is marked by inequality; not all parents have the means to afford what are perceived to be desirable activities or play destinations (Kimbrow et al., 2011; Tucker et al., 2007).

Nonetheless, the immediate neighbourhood often fails to satisfy parental leisure aspirations for their children who may, in fact, assess the quality of neighbourhood play destinations and safety issues differently (Veitch et al., 2006, 2007; Giles-Corti et al., 2010). Hence, increasingly parents chauffeur their children to spatially dispersed organisations and clubs (Witten, 2005; Freeman and Quigg, 2009a). Transport studies recognise the environmental impacts (e.g. CO<sub>2</sub> emissions) these parenting practices generate (Hjorthol and Fyhri, 2009; Tranter and Sharpe, 2008; Freeman and Quigg, 2009b; Witten et al., 2011). Other studies identify the negative aspects of children's declining independent mobility in relation to their development (e.g. 'environmental literacy') (Tranter and Pawson, 2001; Malone, 2007) and physical ill-health associated with spending more time engaged in sedentary activities (Veitch et al., 2008; Carver et al., 2008; Oliver and Schofield, 2010).

When children's play time becomes predominantly structured by adult perspectives and expectations, it leaves only limited scope for children to delve into imaginative, creative play and to cooperatively construct their identities with local peers (Skar and Krogh, 2009; Malone, 2002). This situation also has implications for children's social capital (Putnam, 2001). Locally formed friendships are frequently replaced by distant friendship nodes and play opportunities are limited by parents' busy schedules and available transport (Smith and Barker, 2000; Dowling, 2000; Zeiher, 2003). Hence, children retreat from the public into the private or commercial domain (Smith and Barker, 2000; McKendrick et al., 2000).

The formalising and 'domestication' of children's free time have been widely addressed (Holt, 2011; Larson and Verma, 1999; Holloway, 2014) as have differences in children's neighbourhood play opportunities (Holt et al., 2008; Lim and Calabrese Barton,

2010; Timperio et al., 2008). However the implications of weather and seasonality on children's outdoor activity, especially the underlying rationales for participation in, and enjoyment (or otherwise) of, organised or independent activities in different seasons have not been granted attention. We address this gap in order to encourage nuanced inquiry into the experiences of seasonal play and its influence upon the broader determinants of wellbeing. Although only a few studies have addressed seasonal dimensions of everyday experiences (see next section), it is easy to speculate on how outdoor play is seasonally different. At the most obvious level, physical aspects of landscapes change between summer and winter, especially in more extreme climates: trees lose their leaves in winter, fields get muddy with the increased rain or are covered in snow, and play equipment becomes wet or icy. Summer and winter offer different affordances for outdoor play (Gibson, 1977; Kytta, 2002; Heft, 2010). However, in order to encourage outdoor play across all seasons, we first need to understand how seasonal play is experienced and what social, physical and locational factors promote or hinder the uptake of outdoor play all-year-round.

## 3. Seasonality and weather conditions: moving towards lived experiences

While built environmental features have been increasingly investigated as determinants of families' outdoor recreation choices (Holt et al., 2009; Quigg et al., 2012; Timperio et al., 2006), climatic variation is seldom examined, especially in cities with temperate climates such as prevails in Auckland (Tucker and Gilliland, 2007; Silva et al., 2011; Castonguay and Jutras, 2010; Sandercock et al., 2010). Reasons for this neglect could relate to the fact that studying seasonal play requires a high time commitment by researchers and funding agencies. Moreover, conducting fieldwork during winter months has inherent challenges due to colder temperatures and shorter daylight hours.

However, climatic and weather conditions are an important aspect of the outdoors (e.g. Hitchings, 2010; Skinner et al., 2009; Ingold, 2007; Vannini et al., 2012; Kis, 2014). As Nash (1981) reports, winter in higher latitudes brings profound transformations in the capacity of a landscape to offer affordances for play and recreation. Changes may range from enhanced capacity for solitude (eg while walking) and a reclaiming of otherwise off-limits spaces (eg sledding on a golf course) to limitations on activity due to cold or the dangers of ice. Despite the important impacts of seasonal change, almost no attention has been paid to weather or seasonal effects on children's play in the large body of research on children's outdoor activities (Børrestad et al., 2011; Holloway, 2014; Holt, 2011; Baranowski et al., 2013). This absence is interesting as studies show that the more time children spend outdoors engaging in free play, the more active they are (Baranowski et al., 1993; Burdette et al., 2004; Cooper et al., 2010). Exceptions to this general observation are studies focusing on children's transport which do take seasonality more explicitly into account (Walker et al., 2009; Ross, 2007) and reveal variations in active travel both in countries with moderate as well as extreme temperature variations (Børrestad et al., 2011; Sirard et al., 2005). In studies that have acknowledged the time of year, climate and weather are often viewed simply, or negatively as external factors or barriers (Panter et al., 2008; Tucker and Gilliland, 2007; Baranowski et al., 2013) and not as opportunities. These studies rarely ground play in everyday experiences (Ingold, 2007) thereby silencing children's voices. Therefore, in order to develop an understanding of the locational and seasonal complexities of leisure, there is a need to address subjective engagements with placed seasonal practices (e.g. Hitchings, 2010; Skinner et al., 2009; Ingold, 2007; Vannini et al., 2012; Kis, 2014). Such an approach would also privilege

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