

The intensification of parenting and generational fracturing of spontaneous physical activity from childhood play in the United Kingdom

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Abstract

Despite an increased drive over the past two decades in Western societies to promote children's physically active play to improve their health, there are concerns that childhood has become less physically active. There are also fears that a previously naturally occurring aspect of childhood has become less authentically playful. Both trends highlight changes over time in the amount and type of play practiced by children and are often cited as consequences of generational shifts. Yet, research which analytically employs the concept of generation to connect changes to childhood with relevant social transformations is lacking. Inspired by Mannheim's conceptualisation of generations, this paper draws on life history interviews with 28 United Kingdom residents born between 1950 and 1994 to propose a fracturing of naturally occurring physical activity from childhood play. As shifts in childhood and parenting have become inextricably linked, this argument illustrates the impact of an intensification to parenting upon greater parental surveillance of increasingly organised

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forms of childhood physical activity at the expense of spontaneous play. Future physical activity policy should be sensitive to the social climate in which recommendations for children are made, as this places expectations upon parents due to how childhood is currently understood within neoliberal contexts.

KEYWORDS

childhood, dialectic tensions, generations, parenting, physical activity, play

INTRODUCTION

Despite play featuring as a strategic part of the World Health Organisation's (WHO) (2018) *Global Action Plan on Physical Activity 2018–2030* to produce more active and healthier societies, most research on physically active play amongst children in the Western world is motivated by fears that participation rates have decreased over the past few decades and performed a prominent role in the growth of obesity (see Brussoni et al., 2015; Holt et al., 2016; Kimbro et al., 2011; Loprinzi et al., 2013; Tremblay et al., 2015). Moreover, the feared state of decline in physically active play during this time is not only a case of more children being more sedentary, but there are also concerns that the nature of children's play has become less authentically spontaneous (Alexander et al., 2012, 2014a, 2014b, 2015; Brussoni et al., 2015; Holt et al., 2016; Tremblay et al., 2015). Social influences cited as changing the practice of children's play include greater sensitivity to the safety implications of what is now deemed 'risky play' (Alexander et al., 2012, 2014b; Brussoni et al., 2015; Holt et al., 2016; Tremblay et al., 2015), the emergence of neoliberal rationalities in public health (Alexander et al., 2014a, 2014b, 2015) and children's increased everyday use of technology (Holt et al., 2016). At a time when parenting has become notably intense and discursively positioned as the sole determinant of childhood experiences and outcomes, parents also find themselves implicated as architects in the erosion of authentic childhood play (Faircloth, 2014). Some authors in this area have been conscious of conflicting demands experienced by parents (see Holt et al., 2016), but in most research parental demographics and behaviours are uncritically correlated with the frequency of children's physically active play (see Burdette & Whitaker, 2005; Kimbro et al., 2011).

Given fears that the nature of children's physically active play is in a precarious state as impacted by various social transformations, it is perhaps surprising that research has yet to explicitly draw upon a generational approach to contextualise such changes within relevant social processes. Thus far, the concept of generation has only been mentioned fleetingly and uncritically, with no scrutiny as to what a generation constitutes. This is a significant omission, as prevailing understandings of childhood and parenting are generationally dependent, and, in the current historical moment, any mention of children's health carries immediate connotations for parents. Associated with this, research with a health-focused agenda to promote children's physical activity has continued with little recognition of how it forces a health-dominated structure upon childhood play and potentially rouses further tensions in the practice of parenting. Drawing upon Mannheim's (1952) conceptualisation of generations to make sense of life history interview data, this article contributes to the intensive parenting literature and offers a more

sociological and deliberately generational perspective than most research on children's physical activity, which has unnecessarily complicated the very nature of childhood play. By utilising the generational concept of dialectic tensions to do so, the analysis also highlights how generational consciousness is permanently open to being reworked through human agency, which is important as parenting is currently constrained by a culture of risk consciousness. Central to this argument is the intensification of parenting, a process which developed over the course of the twentieth century culminating in parents spending both a greater amount and a more intense quality of time with their children (Smyth & Craig, 2017). While intensive parenting is particularly evident and increasingly dominant within contemporary neoliberal societies, the degree to which it is practiced varies both within and between neoliberal societies according to national context and intersectionality (Faircloth, 2020). Data analysed in this article were collected in the United Kingdom (UK), considered a typical case of how neoliberal politics and intensive parenting overlap, simultaneously reinforcing one another (Faircloth, 2020).

CHILDREN'S PHYSICALLY ACTIVE PLAY AND THE NEOLIBERAL RATIONALITY OF PARENTING

Over the past two decades, mainly in the United States (US), UK and Canada, there has been an escalation in utilising and researching childhood play to increase children's physical activity participation and subsequently improve their health (see Burdette & Whitaker, 2005; Duncan & Staples, 2010; Kimbro et al., 2011). This is informed by a belief that play is a naturally occurring aspect of childhood, but that contemporary trends, such as parental fears about the safety of outdoor play (Burdette & Whitaker, 2005; Kimbro et al., 2011), video game popularity (Duncan & Staples, 2010), increased engagement with digital technologies (Loprinzi et al., 2013), reduced risky play opportunities (Brussoni et al., 2015) and changes to 'good parenting' ideals (Holt et al., 2016) now restrict the extent to which its enactment is physically active (Brockman et al., 2011; Brussoni et al., 2015). Although previous studies acknowledge generational transformations to physically active dimensions of childhood play, such claims are either hypothetical rather than empirically founded (see Witherspoon & Manning, 2012) or cite 'generational' changes supported by data but neglect to consider what constitutes a generation (see Brockman et al., 2011; Brussoni et al., 2015; Holt et al., 2016). Research by Holt et al. (2016) is indicative of the latter but does make some important observations in respect of how shifting ideals about the make-up of good parenting has seen physically active childhood play become more restrictive and subject to greater parental surveillance. For Holt et al. (2016), constantly monitoring children's whereabouts and activities is a central tenet of contemporary understandings of good parenting, while allowing children to roam free has become synonymous with lesser parenting. Holt et al. propose that aligning the promotion of children's physically active free play with contemporary conceptions of good parenting might be a feasible remedy to this scenario. Yet this proposition downplays the significance of long-term generational changes to the expanding social expectations and increased scrutiny now placed upon parents in Western societies (Jezierski & Wall, 2019; Romagnoli & Wall, 2012), which includes pressure to somehow oversee children's 'free' play. In line with the twentieth century inflation of parenting from a descriptor of what someone is into something one does, striking an acceptable balance between monitoring and allowing children to roam free represents a conflicting dualism for parents (Bristow, 2014; Smyth & Craig, 2017). Rather than a matter of personal agency, contemporary notions of good parenting are infused with neoliberal rationalities, encouraging intensive parental organisation

and supervisory control of children's lives to socialise future generations into responsible and productive citizens (Jezierski & Wall, 2019; Shirani et al., 2012; Wall, 2022). Thus, altering the make-up of good parenting as suggested by Holt et al. (2016) would not address the fundamental problem of subjecting contemporary parenting to performative judgement in neoliberal societies.

Work by Alexander et al. (2014a) is more sensitive to how contemporary neoliberal values in Canadian physical activity policies, especially productivity and self-governance, have converted elements of childhood play into health practices that now feature within public health debates. With the implication that physically active varieties of play are now perceived as more legitimate than other forms of play via the place physical activity commands within public health discourse (Alexander et al., 2014a). Further publications by Alexander et al. (2014b, 2015) hint at a disconnect between existing public health obesity prevention discourses of how children in Canada *should* play and empirical evidence of children's joy when given the choice to practice both more and less physically active varieties of play in a purposeless yet imaginative fashion. By utilising and promoting children's physically active play as an obesity prevention strategy, public health authorities reframe childhood play as needing to be instrumental and productive, which may have reshaped the meaning of play amongst children to the detriment of their social and affective wellbeing (Alexander et al., 2014b, 2015). Although Alexander et al. (2014a, 2014b, 2015) offer a broader health-focused explanation of recent transformations to children's active play than Holt et al.'s (2016) good parenting thesis, the generational mechanisms behind such changes are less clear.

THE INTENSIFICATION OF PARENTING AND CHILDREN'S HEALTH AND WELLBEING

Since Hays (1996) outlined the ideology of intensive mothering to conceptualise the increasingly intense and expanding set of demands placed on mothers to perform parenting appropriately under public and political scrutiny (Faircloth, 2014), its scope has been broadened to delineate an intensification to parenting more generally in Anglophone countries over the course of the twentieth century (Faircloth, 2020; Smyth & Craig, 2017). Subsequently, the notion of intensive parenting has predominantly been used to make sense of the constraints, anxieties and practical conflicts of contemporary parenthood according to class (Lee, 2021), gender (Shirani et al., 2012) and nation state (Faircloth, 2020). As a key hallmark of the intensification of parenting concerns how parents are now positioned as and feel increasingly responsible for their children's outcomes (Faircloth, 2014; Sivak, 2018), some researchers argue that parenting and childhood have gradually aligned to the extent that they now mirror one another (Dinsmore & Pugh, 2021). Smyth and Craig (2017, p. 109) see contemporary parenting and childhood as 'two sides of the same coin' due to the implications for childhood that have originated from the intensification of parenting. Central to the close connection between parenthood and childhood is not only the increased amount of time parents spend supervising children but the shift in the type of time parents and children now spend together, which has become centred around parents identifying and responding to children's individual needs (Dinsmore & Pugh, 2021). Due to the emergence of the perceived need amongst parents to exhaustively watch, notice and respond to their children's behaviours and desires, it is argued that children now spend more time under parental supervision or doing structured activities organised by parents and less time engaged in spontaneous self-directed play (Dinsmore & Pugh, 2021).

Somewhat juxtaposed with fears inferred in physical activity research that the increased time children now spend under parental supervision will bring about detrimental health outcomes, one of the founding justifications underpinning the trend in intensive parenting over the

past century is the optimisation of children's health and wellbeing (Faircloth, 2014; Smyth & Craig, 2017; Yerkes et al., 2021). However, Yerkes et al. (2021) recently found little evidence to substantiate the claim that the practice of intensive parenting results in healthier outcomes for children in comparison to alternative approaches. Using longitudinal data tracking over 18,000 children born in the UK in 2000–2001, this study suggests that there are no significant long-term benefits in children's health to be gained from intensive parenting when compared with less attentive and more balanced styles. This calls into question the movement towards intensive parenting and whether the additional time, financial, labour and emotional sacrifices made by parents to support their children's development are really reflected in improved outcomes. Overall, it appears intensive parenting persists as a social norm within neoliberal contexts through the exaggerated omnipresent risks of not parenting in this fashion, such as child abduction, criminal behaviour, poor health, restricted development and educational underachievement (Dinsmore & Pugh, 2021; Shirani et al., 2012). As the long-term process of the intensification of parenting is closely connected to contemporary parental organisation and surveillance of children's play, this transformation provides a useful context in which to situate a generational understanding of changes to children's physical activity and play within neoliberal social conditions.

DIALECTIC TENSIONS AND SHIFTING GENERATIONAL CONSCIOUSNESS

Karl Mannheim's (1952) concept of generation remains an outstanding contribution to understanding sociological transformation (Bristow, 2016, 2021; Woodman & Wyn, 2015). Moreover, at a time when careless use of conflict-laden discourse targeting millennials and baby boomers has become increasingly common and many researchers still conceive generations as objective concrete cohorts, perspectives that engage with generations as continuous long-term processes are much needed (Bristow, 2016, 2021; Woodman & Wyn, 2015). For Mannheim (1952, pp. 311–2), generations are not only marked by the repetitive naturally occurring 'constant factors' of birth and death but subjectively experienced via the 'dynamic factors' of historical and social circumstance,

... biological data constitute the most basic stratum of factors determining generation phenomena; but for this very reason, we cannot observe the effect of biological factors directly; we must, instead, see how they are reflected through the medium of social and cultural forces... Dynamic factors operate on the basis of constant factors... but on each occasion the dynamic factors seize upon different potentialities inherent in the constant factors. If we want to understand the primary, constant factors, we must observe them in the framework of the historical and social system of forces from which they receive their shape.

In contrast to the positivist conceptualisation of generations as distinguishable concrete groups periodically occurring at the same quantifiable intervals, Mannheim argues that members of a generation are bound together by the collective historical timing of their lifespan, which determines the range of their potential experiences. Subsequently, for people who are exposed to and participate in a similar historical and social location, there exists a capacity for a 'similarly "stratified" consciousness' to develop, and for Mannheim (1952, p. 297), it is this collective and forever shifting consciousness which characterises the nature of generations as manifested in

distinct modes of behaviour, thought and feeling. In contrast, positivist indicators of generations are conceptualised as no more than definitive extensions of chronological time, carrying external forces that act upon people (Mannheim, 1952). Mannheim's (1952, p. 304) approach accounts for and begins to explain the nuances of how people participate in and reshape the 'social and intellectual currents' of a generation at the intersect of historical time and the timing of social action.

From a Mannheimian (1952, p. 298) perspective, the limited and potential time-structured experiences which inform how people encounter and contribute to generational consciousness do not merely accumulate over the life course without interpretation but are already infused with diverse meanings and so are "dialectically" articulated'. Yet, rarely aware that initial experiences are open to alternative interpretations when forming first impressions during childhood, such impressions tend to structure a default world-view from which one judges and negates or verifies all subsequent experiences (Mannheim, 1952). Consequently, beyond their initial interpretations, people are immediately hypersensitive to world-views held by others which directly oppose their own. It is these 'polar opposite' dialectic tensions of an epoch that act as dynamic mutual antagonisms of conflict between and within generations (Mannheim, 1952, p. 314). In a structural sense, dialectic tensions are the continuous mechanism that mean societies and cultures are not reproduced in a unilinear fashion (Mannheim, 1952). Like contradictions, dialectic tensions are defined by a dualistic relationship between opposing poles, but unique to dialectic tension is the nature of the interdependence between these poles, which appear unresolvable and constrain the choices and actions of those encircled within them (Malvini Redden & Way, 2017). Indeed, such is the antagonistic tension of the dynamic interdependence between these opposing positions (Mannheim, 1952) that any attempt to mediate between them only provokes further entanglement (Malvini Redden & Way, 2017; Porter et al., 2018). Whereas contradictions are separable as they do not occur simultaneously (Malvini Redden & Way, 2017).

This article adopts Mannheim's (1952) framework of generations to analyse some of the dialectical tensions that have arisen around children's physically active play in tandem with the intensification of parenting. Specifically, the paper suggests a generational transformation to the function and practice of physical activity within childhood play. This is represented in a dialectic tension expressed by participants that physically active play now lacks the spontaneity essential to the authenticity of play experienced during their own childhoods. Inherent to this tension was a pressure to guide children into regular and organised physical activity participation for optimal health, an instrumental rationality at odds with interviewee's own cherished childhood experiences of play characterised by an authentic sense of freedom. Brought about by the intensification of parenting, this omnipresent strain is understood as a polar tension of consciousness, symbolic of a generational transformation to childhood (Mannheim, 1952). The point of agitating and encountering further social constraints when one attempts to mediate or choose between dialectic positions is important when considered in this context, as in the current historical moment, parenting, and thus childhood, are closely enmeshed within a broader culture of heightened risk consciousness (Bristow, 2014).

Since the second half of the twentieth century, an elevated risk consciousness connected to a sense of continuous and erratic social change has initiated a growing belief in the Western world, especially Anglo-American societies, that such social change occurs independent of human agency (Bristow, 2016). This has left many people feeling as though the present is uncertain, the future is unknowable and both are beyond their influence (Bristow, 2016). Consequently, everyday life has become a case of constantly managing and mediating the risks that accompany rapid social change and inform a culture of survival (Bristow, 2016). As a result, parents are now more mindful of the endless hypothetical risks that could impair their child's

development, and while the practice of parenting has become more privatised, it has also been increasingly subjected to public debate and appraisal (Bristow, 2016). As no single approach to parenting is without risk or immune from such scrutiny, parents are currently entangled in what Bristow (2014, p. 204) describes as the 'double bind' of simultaneous expectations to avert children from risk while also allowing them the freedom to play with friends away from adult supervision. Along these lines, the shifting conceptualisation of risk across generations and the competing expectations that result for parents are also explored in depth through the concept of dialectic tensions.

METHOD

As part of a study interested in why people become involved in, drop-out of and re-engage with physical activity participation across the life course, a life history methodology was employed to generate knowledge grounded in lived experience of the interplay between history and biography (Plummer, 2001; Sartre, 1963; Wright Mills, 1959). Although the actual events of recollected experience cannot simply be captured and retold, interpretations and reinterpretations of experience, whether fact or fiction, are greater signifiers of historically situated consciousness (Plummer, 2001; Sartre, 1963).

Pragmatic sensibilities informed the participant sample recruited because interactions between life course stage and generational position, as manifested within participant experiences and world-views, only become apparent at the stage of data collection (Miller, 2000). Nevertheless, rather than rejecting any form of participant recruitment criteria, three recruitment categories of 20–29, 40–49 and 60–69 years of age were used to encourage the identification of continuities and changes over time to physical activity participation shaped by generational positioning and life course stage interactions. Given the life course stages experienced by all three groups, sociological insights were expected to be especially rich within childhood, early adulthood and the transition between these two life stages. To strengthen the transferability of any sociological claims made to the wider population who encountered the same life stage during a similar historical period as the research sample, the recruitment strategy also sought variety in terms of current physical activity involvement. Those with physically active identities were recruited from a triathlon club and a gym in South East England, and those who did not perceive themselves to possess such an identity were recruited through my personal connections across the South East and West Midlands of England. Snowball sampling then increased the number of participants from both groups and was also used to guard against an entirely dichotomous sample by recruiting a third group of interviewees who used terms such as 'casual' and 'inconsistent' to describe their physical activity participation. While existing identities were by no means intended to accurately represent the extent to which participants had engaged with physical activity across their lives so far, accessing different varieties of case served the purpose of maximising comparable and contrasting interpretations of experience to enable more rigorous analytic generalisations (Hammersley, 2011; Katz, 2015).

This strategy generated a research sample of 28 participants, with 8 born 1950–5, 10 born 1968–74 and 10 born 1986–94. For life history studies, Bertaux (1981, p. 37) suggests working towards a saturation of knowledge indicative of 'socio-structural relations' to reveal an original pattern about sociological transformation and that this transformation is supported by at least 25 cases. In the current study, a generational fracturing of spontaneous physical activity from childhood play, along with various other potentially original observations, was noted after 6

TABLE 1 Participant information.

Pseudonym	Year of birth	Gender	Year of interview	Parent
Helen	1950	Female	2016	✓
Fiona	1950	Female	2016	✓
Louise	1952	Female	2016	✓
Rachel	1953	Female	2016	✓
Kevin	1951	Male	2016	✓
Mike	1953	Male	2016	✓
Paul	1953	Male	2016	✓
Henry	1955	Male	2016	✓
Olivia	1968	Female	2016	✓
Paige	1970	Female	2016	✓
Claire	1971	Female	2016	✓
Emma	1973	Female	2016	✓
Maria	1974	Female	2016	✓
Graham	1968	Male	2016	
Harry	1969	Male	2016	✓
Warren	1969	Male	2016	✓
Evan	1970	Male	2016	
Stuart	1974	Male	2016	✓
Charlotte	1986	Female	2016	
Yasmin	1989	Female	2016	✓
Beth	1990	Female	2016	
Becky	1992	Female	2016	
Sophie	1994	Female	2016	
Chris	1988	Male	2015	
Wayne	1988	Male	2016	✓
Will	1990	Male	2016	
Brett	1993	Male	2016	
Grant	1993	Male	2016	

interviews, the point at which at least one interviewee from each of the age-related sampling groups had provided data. After conducting 15 interviews, this working hypothesis was the only one that remained in its initial form. As further cases were collected and examined, data continued to support this finding whilst also adding rich contextual data connecting this transformation to intensive parenting via the morphing of children’s ‘play’ into a parental responsibility. Thus, the intention was to cease data collection after 25 interviews. Although, once 25 participants had been interviewed, snowball sampling meant that three more participants had offered to take part in the research. Therefore, 28 participants were interviewed in total. Within the final sample, the physical activity careers of participants ranged from minimal involvement since attending compulsory physical education classes 40 years earlier to a current international level age-group duathlete. Variety was also achieved in respect of gender, with the final sample comprising 14 men and 14 women, split equally across each age group (see Table 1).

Data were collected using life history interviews that navigated each participant's physical activity career. Drawing upon Plummer's (2001, p. 145) interview technique of 'grand-tours', participants were first asked to provide an historical overview of their physical activity involvement in relation to type and depth of experience. Interviewees were then asked to recall their earliest memories of physical activity involvement and why they remembered these particular episodes. These recollections provided insight into early experiences and interpretations of physical activity and served as a key point of comparison in the argument developed in this article. During interview, participants were also asked about the influence of relationships with family members upon starting, ceasing and restarting physical activity participation and the extent or lack of enjoyment derived from each physical activity experience mentioned. Finally, interviewees were asked to comment on the widely circulated belief that regular physical activity participation is conducive to improved wellbeing. Interview data of 23 hrs and 17 mins were collected in total, with single interviews ranging from 25 mins to 1 hr 37 mins in duration. I conducted, audio-recorded and transcribed the interviews verbatim. The study was ethically approved in conjunction with the research governance procedures of Canterbury Christ Church University. In the interests of anonymity, pseudonyms are used to present the data provided by interviewees.

Considered an exemplar of rigour in qualitative analysis (Seale, 1999), data were analysed using the comparative logic of analytic induction devised by Florian Znaniecki (1934). Like the constant comparative method of grounded theorising, analytic induction is interested in producing theoretical generalisations (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Although in contrast to constant comparison, which does not extend beyond the point of data saturation, analytic induction also tests working hypotheses in the process of theory development (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Theories generated and tested by analytic induction carry stronger analytical generalisability within and arguably outside of the immediate research sample than the constant comparative method, as analytic induction 'requires consideration of *all* available data' (Glaser & Strauss, 1967, p. 104). Znaniecki's method of analytic induction is concerned with allowing sociologists to get at the cultural systems bound-up in human experience by making clear the connections and distinctions between these systems and those of the natural world (Plummer, 2001). Like Mannheim's (1952) theory of generations, where the biological continuity of generational replacement intersects with the historically specific social locations people negotiate between birth and death, Znaniecki (1934) refers to how analysis of the development of dynamic social laws is structurally dependent upon, yet distinguishable from, the evolutionary classification of natural laws. This approach to data analysis lends well to the design of the study with respect to the age-related sampling of participants into defined groups, structurally determined by the historical timing and natural event of their birth.

The craft of analytic induction demands exhaustively scrutinising each case to build-up a generalised hypothesis that is tested and revised upon encountering negative instances during the process of examining every case (Znaniecki, 1934). To do this, I read each transcript, identifying descriptions and interpretations of physical activity experiences and instances of starting, re-engaging with, or ceasing physical activity participation. In the first phase of analysis, a working hypothesis was developed for each of the three age-related groups. This involved simultaneously coding each transcript and developing memos for theoretical ideas to then test and revise, where necessary, against the rest of the current and subsequent transcripts. Once data collection was complete, the final memos for each of the age-related groups were compared and synthesised, with changes over historical time observed in the practice of physical activity during childhood and, more specifically, changes to the connection between childhood play and physical activity. Here, the increased provision of opportunities for children to participate in organised

physical activity, yet a decline in the authenticity of childhood play were both noted. Each transcript was then revisited to make analytic connections between increased opportunities for organised physical activity participation and a loss of authenticity to childhood play and better understand the contextual influences that impacted upon these shifts. This eventually resulted in identifying the significant influence played by the conditions of increasingly intense expectations on parents to raise healthy children. As such, these findings may only carry wider generalisability to Anglophone societies like the UK and US, where intensive parenting plays out in a neoliberal political environment (Faircloth, 2020).

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The discussion of findings is initially organised around a rise in structured physical activity provision for children and a decline in the spontaneity of physically active childhood play, a scenario which participants were wary of but also found themselves implicated in reproducing. This is then situated in the intensification of parenting that gives rise to dialectic tensions between enhancing children's health through physical activities organised by parents and participant's own revered childhood memories of being physically active as a spontaneous aspect of unsupervised play.

The growth of organised physical activity provision for children and the decline in the authenticity of childhood play

Interviewees born in the 1950s, 1960s and the first half of the 1970s were conscious that more formal opportunities for children to be physically active now existed compared to when they lived through childhood,

There's stuff like junior parkrun they've introduced, which hasn't been going that long, to try and get kids to run two kilometres before they then move up... that's widely available and free... parkrun wasn't around... 'til about ten years ago.

(Stuart, born 1974)

The impetus for this observed change over time was largely attributed by participants to the development of the health-infused contemporary mode of thought that children should be provided with sufficient opportunities and encouraged to participate regularly in physical activity. To the extent that what is now regarded as childhood physical activity was previously considered an innate characteristic of children's naturally occurring play,

It was never something like the light went on and I realised I was doing something physical. I was outside all day really, in the holidays... playing tennis up against the gable ends... you didn't think of it as "oh, I'm out getting exercise", you're just out having fun 'cos you're playing.

(Louise, born 1952)

The social and historical processes at work when people experience particular life stages limit and enable behavioural, affective and cognitive tendencies, which are constantly prone to dialectic

articulation when current and previous experiences do not align (Mannheim, 1952). Thus, while those born in 1974 and earlier were of the consensus that there is now greater provision of organised physical activities arranged specifically for children than during the historical timing of their own childhoods, there was some uncertainty as to whether this change had been beneficial to childhood and children's long-term development.

Fiona, born in 1950, mother of two adult aged sons and a semi-retired primary school teacher, was aware that childhood play had also become more restrictive and less unplanned,

When my boys were little, I took them [to] swimming lessons every week and there was football every weekend... there wasn't any of that when I was a child... my mum looked after four children and my dad went to work and we went on holidays and days out, but... no formal sporting opportunities... it wasn't available in the fifties. There was more freedom in those days, we used to go off and my mother didn't think to worry... you just went off down the woods, it was a freer time.

(Fiona, born 1950)

Harry, born in 1969 and now the father of three children, entered childhood and parenthood around two decades after Fiona and raised concerns that heuristic learning about thresholds of danger and risk through childhood play had been lost, which could have implications later in the life course,

They (children) now spend their whole life not pushin' themselves because they've not been exposed to that danger, you know... "that didn't work so I'm not guna do that again", or "I'm guna push that little bit further", as we did as kids when I was growin' up. Everything seems to be organised and has to be chaperoned to make sure the kids are alright, there doesn't seem to be that... "just go off and have a bit of freedom, go and do what you wanna do", which I think is a big shame.

(Harry, born 1969)

Similarly, in the neoliberal context of Canadian society, Alexander et al. (2012, 2014a, 2014b) note that as emerging government supported anti-obesity public health agendas privileging physically active types of childhood play are based on a narrow understanding of physical health, more diverse emotional and social benefits are being overlooked, such as spontaneous encounters with pleasure, creativity, discovery and risk.

In many Western societies, based on fears about increasing rates of childhood obesity, an intellectual spirit exists in public health that children would benefit from doing more physical activity (Burdette & Whitaker, 2005; Tremblay et al., 2015). However, the instrumental embedding of this spirit within the lives of children was a troubling scenario for older interviewees, many of whom were parents and saw this development as restrictive to the naturally occurring elements of play they remembered fondly from their own childhoods. Generally, a sentimental concern was expressed about the long-term life course consequences of health-focused and risk-averse alterations to the spirit of contemporary childhood play. Paradoxically, some of these interviewees had themselves been involved in the provision of such activities as parents, and given the omnipresence of this mode of thought, also found themselves concerned their own children were not involved in a sufficient amount of physically active play,

the Xbox generation as they call it... my lad's a prime example of it, I've battled against it since he was a teenager, tryin' to get him involved in stuff, he's given up...

the virtual world is their world. They just sit in their bedrooms. I know that's not the case for all kids... there's still kids that do well in sport, but there does seem to be a larger number now that are not interested in doin' anything.

(Harry, born 1969)

Increased parental surveillance and engineering of children's play

Within the generational consciousness of participants born in 1974 and earlier, the dialectic tensions evident in changes over time they had observed in childhood play were articulated with a sensitivity to growing anxieties about children's health, which is a key feature of the intensification of parenting (Craig et al., 2014; Faircloth, 2014; Yerkes et al., 2021). This was manifested in feelings of increased responsibility amongst parents of the sample born in 1968 and onwards to intervene in their children's play and limit more sedentary activities,

My daughter loves the iPad... it doesn't worry me, I time it... she's allowed it in the mornings. She likes to get up at half past five, so I let her have forty-five minutes on it at that time.

(Yasmin, born 1989)

Maria, born in 1974, pointed out how her generation had lived through an accumulation of scientific knowledge about the beneficial consequences of regular physical activity participation to healthy longevity, a lifestyle principle which she practiced herself and promoted to her two children,

My generation, because they read more about the science [of regular physical activity] and living longer... then, perhaps they involve their children [in physical activity] as well.

(Maria, born 1974)

However, for Maria, this development meant that genuinely spontaneous physical activity stemming from childhood play had now been replaced by more structured sport and fitness activities organised by parents. Associated with the increased popularity of video games, Maria also observed how genuinely child-led forms of play now tend to be more sedentary than during her childhood,

... there is another cluster of kids who just play the PlayStations indoors. There was not so much to do when you come back home after school [when I was a child], you did your homework and then you went out and played... now because I've got children, I see that their friends, some of them... at the age of ten are not so confident on a bike yet, and I find it shocking.

(Maria, born 1974)

An increased generational consciousness of the amount of physical activity and sedentary behaviour involved in children's play were conceptualised by parents as 'polarised components' symbolising more and less healthy forms of childhood (Mannheim, 1952, p. 299). Along these lines, the splitting of children's spontaneously occurring physically active play into

more instrumental forms of physical activity participation in one direction and more sedentary forms of spontaneous play in another has transpired via the emergence of a belief that play is now a 'decisive childhood experience' (Dinsmore & Pugh, 2021; Faircloth, 2014; Mannheim, 1952, p. 298).

In addition to a growth in health-related concerns about the sedentariness of children's indoor play, apparent was the emergence of a conflicting social norm to keep children indoors for extended periods of time and guarantee their safety from a perceived threat posed by strangers (Bristow, 2014; Dinsmore & Pugh, 2021). Mike compared the existing scenario for children with the unsupervised freedom to play outdoors he experienced during his own childhood in the 1950s and 1960s,

During my time [as a child] I had a safer environment... there wasn't so many weirdos out there. We'd walk from Blackheath down to Greenwich Park... go down to the [River] Thames, then through the tunnel... just walking around, exploring... the culture's changed, not so many children play out and about now, more culture is inside the house, unfortunately.

(Mike, born 1953)

Although the heightened mistrust of strangers may be more of a media-inflated than evidence-supported risk (Dinsmore & Pugh, 2021), in practice this fear was experienced as real by parents of dependent children and only reconcilable through their involvement in or supervision of children's outdoor play, which they intentionally shaped around physical activity,

It's really important to make physical activity fun... in a family environment without making them realise they're even doing it... it's a laugh, go down the park and throw a Frisbee... getting out there and getting the heart pumping

(Yasmin, born 1989)

The expectations of contemporary parenthood to protect children from the purported risks of excessive outdoor freedom and provide children with sufficient physical activity opportunities for health benefits each represent an intensification to parenting. When understood in tandem, trying to meet both demands created a practical tension for parents (Bristow, 2014). For the most part, increased parental involvement in childhood whether by direct intervention or more distanced surveillance has been construed as a social expectation that brings an unnecessary and unrelenting pressure to the daily lives of parents (Bristow, 2014; Romagnoli & Wall, 2012; Shirani et al., 2012; Wall, 2022; Walper & Kreyenfeld, 2022). A key facet to this argument is that such pressure is difficult to escape within neoliberal social conditions where parenting is currently understood through a performative logic as the main determinant of children's outcomes (Faircloth, 2014; O'Connor & Joffe, 2013). While the data in the present study aligns with a parenting intensification trend, as noticed by older participants and more directly experienced by younger interviewees, close involvement in children's physical activity was not always appraised as an additional burden by parents with dependent children. Although described as 'a battle' to arrange, being physically active with children also provided space and time for family intimacy as described by Paige, mother of three daughters,

With the girls, sometimes I'd take them swimming... they'd be like "oh, I don't wanna go swimming". Then when I actually got them in the water, I couldn't get them out,

but I would watch my three girls and they would be jumping on each other, cuddling, touching, and it was a real bonding session... that's important, that sense of touch.

(Paige, born 1970)

Although still somewhat imbued with notions of healthy development in a parentally engineered and supervised scenario, this also illustrates a longing amongst parents to be closely involved in their children's lives. As parents are aware that their children's increasing and eventual independence from them is considered a long-term successful outcome in the climate of intensive parenting, they cherish some elements of the interdependent and emotionally laborious stages of childhood (Sieben, 2021). Thus, despite the contemporary tensions about raising healthy children presented by the sedentariness of play, unspontaneous physical activity, and children's safety, feeling more responsible for children's development than prior generations may also present opportunities to enhance parental wellbeing through a closer sense of connection with their children. The intimate embodied closeness of even the most organised of physical activities may provide a means through which parents can do so.

'Pushy' parenting: Closeness and distance as polar tensions

Sharing an intimate relationship with children amidst a generational consciousness of intensive parenting requires parents to negotiate a fine balance between ever-shifting socially appropriate ideals of closeness and distance (Faircloth, 2014; Jezierski & Wall, 2019; Sieben, 2021). Parents with a strong personal interest in regular physical activity were cognisant of being labelled a 'pushy parent' by overwhelming their children with too many of their own values, which they felt might have an adverse impact on the relationship and their child's long-term participation,

I've never been a pushy parent... if they don't wanna do it, there's no point 'cos if they don't enjoy it, all you're guna do is have the opposite effect... unfortunately he's (son) still not doing anythin'! (laughs) I'm still tryin'! and still nothing! Maybe he'll get to his late twenties, early thirties and suddenly find something to get active, but... none of my kids have.

(Harry, born 1969)

The dichotomous balancing act between closeness and distance is manifested in the inflated dialectic parents are presented with to purportedly choose between their children's supervised safety and allowing them an element of freedom to explore (Bristow, 2014). Problematic and misleading in this scenario is how children are viewed as passive actors to the wishes of their parents, whom they are yet reliant upon in becoming increasingly independent (Jezierski & Wall, 2019). Within the practical context of parenting, most interviewees specified that they seldom got to the stage of determining the closeness or distance with which they oversaw their children's physical activity due to a lack of interest on the part of children, especially during early adolescence,

I always promote the benefits of exercise to them... the wellbeing, mentally and physically, but it's something they just sort of, at this age, roll their eyes and aren't really that interested.

(Claire, born 1971)

Rife with dialectic tensions between the spontaneity and structure, safety and freedom, and closeness and distance that parents attempt to settle but remain constantly uneasy about (Bristow, 2014), transformations to parenting have ruptured the once unsupervised and playful aspects of childhood physical activity experienced at this same life stage by previous generations. These episodes were not just some of many cherished childhood memories recollected by participants but often appraised as the most valued and memorable,

We were all having a laugh, challenging each other, “Bet you can’t do this jump off here, bet you can’t go down that drive [on your bike] without braking”. Kind of being a bit of a hoodlum... daredevil. You bounce, bend and it doesn’t really matter. That’s my happiest thought from childhood.

(Chris, born 1988)

Informed by such evocative childhood memories of free play, the emotional charge most participants attached to this generational break in life stage continuity meant that contemporary childhood was largely appraised as being in a state of decline in terms of children’s moral and social development. With some interviewees fearing children have become slower to develop into well-rounded people,

My daughter was probably like I was at nine or ten when she was twelve or thirteen... they might know more but they’re not as wholesome as we were. When I was younger, I could talk to people and had quite a well-rounded lifestyle, whereas my children... they don’t really know how to talk to people. I don’t think that’s so good, and they don’t have to be physical... that’s the times, things have changed.

(Emma, born 1973)

Yet evidence suggests that despite parental fears about a gradual dwindling of ‘wholesome’ childhoods, the shift towards outcome-focused childhoods governed by intensive parenting standards to address these fears does not bring about improved outcomes for children (Yerkes et al., 2021). Instead, it seems that parental worries about the implications for children’s future development are more a consequence of feeling detached from ‘the “up-to-dateness” of youth’, what they perceive to be ‘the “present” problems’ of childhood and the reworking of generational consciousness (Mannheim, 1952, pp. 300–301). Within their everyday social locations, the immediate opponents to parents’ beliefs might appear to be the reluctance of children themselves to follow guidance or worries about the increasing contemporary risks of the outside world. However, the trend which informs both of these constraints, and the very emergence of outcome-focused parenting, is the rise of a neoliberal rationality that positions childhood as a life stage to be managed more or less successfully by parents rather than children themselves (Faircloth, 2014; Romagnoli & Wall, 2012; Shirani et al., 2012). In Anglophone countries of the Western world governed by neoliberal politics, physical activity policies promote making instrumental use of play, framed as a decisive childhood experience, to help deliver public health outcomes (Alexander et al., 2014a, 2014b, 2015). While such recommendations do not implicate parents directly, when located within the receiving context of the current historical moment where parents are construed as solely accountable for childhood experiences and outcomes, this becomes a further task that is absorbed into the expansion of intensive parenting (Faircloth, 2014; Jezierski & Wall, 2019; Romagnoli & Wall, 2012). Furthermore, such means–ends recommendations appear oblivious to how they would alter the fundamental spontaneity and carefree nature of authentic childhood play (Alexander et al., 2014a, 2014b, 2015).

CONCLUSION

Drawing upon life history interviews with people born between 1950 and 1994, this article argues that a fracturing between the previously synonymous childhood practices of play and physical activity has taken place in Anglophone societies where the intensification of parenting is shaped by neoliberal political contexts. Understood via the dialectic tensions of Mannheim's generational consciousness, this fracturing is empirically grounded in a growing parental surveillance of increasingly organised forms of childhood physical activity to the detriment of spontaneous play. As well as the various antagonisms between the once tantamount childhood pursuits of play and physical activity, this analysis draws attention to further polar tensions encountered in the intensified contemporary parenting of children, such as the intimate balancing of closeness and distance. Although parenting has become more of an emotionally laborious task than purely an aspect of who someone is, this generational shift also presents an opportunity for parents to share a closer connection and stronger sense of interdependence with their children. Nevertheless, the contemporary neoliberal accountability that positions parents as sole engineers in their children's development represents an unrealistic burden that brings about unjust pressure and expectation. Along these lines, future physical activity policy and research should be sensitive to the existing social context in which recommendations for children are made, as this immediately places further expectations upon parents because of how childhood is currently understood.

A limitation of the study design is a lack of attention paid to socioeconomic status. Although physical activity participation for health benefits is largely considered a middle-class practice, the intensification of parenting, while reproduced in distinct ways according to class, appears to extend beyond such boundaries (Lee, 2021; Romagnoli & Wall, 2012). Nuances are also likely to be observed in countries of the Western world that are not as strongly guided by neoliberal policies as the UK, such as Nordic states (Faircloth, 2020). Subsequent studies should pay closer attention to interactions between generational positioning and social inequalities within the conditions of particular nations. Future research might also draw on Mannheim's conceptualisation of generations to make sense of changes to childhood physical activity and play over time, which makes apparent how the seemingly fixed modes of thought, action and feeling of generations are continuously susceptible to change. As contemporary childhood is inextricably tied to parenthood, Mannheim's approach offers an opportunity to develop knowledge sensitive to how parents and children could prompt social change if encouraged to embrace their agency and redirect the flow of generational consciousness away from neoliberal notions of individualistic progress and 'good parenting'. Arguably, the most feasible starting point of change could be for parents, children and physical activity policymakers to embed the existing pervasiveness of risk consciousness into physically active play, as an element of childhood to be anticipated, encountered and negotiated together.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

John Day: Conceptualization (lead); formal analysis (lead); investigation (lead); methodology (lead); project administration (lead); writing – original draft (lead); writing – review & editing (lead).

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The author declares no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship and/or publication of this article.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data that support the findings of this study are available on request from the corresponding author. The data are not publicly available due to privacy or ethical restrictions.

ETHIC STATEMENT

Ethical approval was granted by Canterbury Christ Church University, UK.

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