

The Ribena **PLUS** Play Report



Prepared by Trajectory

Foreword

Here at the Ribena headquarters we're celebrating our biggest product launch in 20 years - Ribena Plus; a brand new range of no added sugar juice drinks with added health benefits, specially designed for growing families.

To mark this launch, we have commissioned the Ribena Plus Play Report, to take an in-depth look at a really important part of family life, play. We love play. We think it should be free, open, devoid of rules, exploratory and above all fun. It has countless benefits for children and for parents too.

And the results are fascinating. We found that parents have lost the confidence to play with their children. They love to play with them and know what kind of play is most beneficial but they have trouble putting the theory into practice.

In fact, nearly half of the parents we talked to would like help in playing with their children. A huge amount! Which is why we are providing parents with play ideas on our website and getting people talking about the importance of play in childhood. Visit us at www.ribena.co.uk and get playing!

Verity Clifton

BRAND DIRECTOR, RIBENA

Parents are never happier than when their children are playing.

Adequate time to play in the right environments – especially outside – helps children to eat well, sleep better, make friends, grow in confidence and get the physical activity that is so important to their healthy development. It is also, of course, when they are happiest.

Parents don't need research to tell them this.

The benefits that come naturally from children simply being given the time and space to play are there for all to see and although experts know there is good evidence to support these claims, parents know instinctively that a playing child is an engaged, contented child.

This timely report confirms this. It reveals that parents understand how important playing is for their children. It also shows that they mostly appreciate that play should be free from external expectations, directed by the child for no other purpose than to have fun and explore their world.

So far: so good. Children appear to be in good hands. But there is a more worrying aspect to the research. This is that for all their wisdom about the value of play, many parents are not finding the time or the space to give their children enough of what they know they need.

Pressures on their time, anxiety about safety and their own lack of confidence seem to be contributing to parents moving away from the best play opportunities, compensating for this by a reliance on TV and other screen-based activities.

But if parents already know this, why aren't children playing more?

We know from other research that the outdoor world is no longer as child-friendly as it was for previous generations. Parents are acutely aware of this. Traffic, crime and a culture that increasingly sees children playing outside as a threat or a sign of neglect, all present barriers to outdoor play. Parents may worry about the sedentary lifestyles of their children, but they also want them to be safe.

The previous government responded to these issues in 2008 by producing a ten-year Play Strategy. As well as investing in new and better play areas all over England, the Play Strategy set out to make all residential neighbourhoods safe, child-friendly places where children would feel welcome to play and their parents would feel confident to let them.

In spite of a successful start and much public support, the Play Strategy was abandoned after only two years.

This study shows that parents know playing children are thriving, creative, healthy children – but that they need a bit of help to give kids the time and the space that they need.

We will all have a brighter future if they get it.

Adrian Voce OBE

Chapter One – The State of Play

1. Key Findings

- **Play is vital for physical, emotional and social development in children, but some forms of play are better than others in this regard**
 - Play which is child-led, free, for its own sake and exploratory is the most beneficial for children
 - 4 out of 5 parents (79%) agreed that play should be for fun rather than about achieving a goal and almost every respondent thought it was important for their child to play outside (97%)
- **In theory, parents know how best to play with their children in order to aid their emotional, physical and social development – but they aren't putting this theory into practice**
 - Three in four (75%) parents admit to watching TV with their child when they are together, although only 12% say their child is happiest watching TV
 - Only 36% say that they play with their child outside, when 73% feel that it is an important part of play
- **Pressures on parents and parental anxieties are shaping how their children play**
 - One in seven (13 per cent) say they 'don't know what they're doing when they are playing with their kids'
 - 29 per cent 'feel under pressure to be fun'
 - 17 per cent admit to buying toys and video games for their children to take the pressure off them when playing
 - Almost half of parents (46%) want help and ideas on how to play with their children
- **Children are not engaging in the most beneficial forms of play enough**
 - 9 out of 10 children watch TV, films or DVDs (91%), but only 1 in 3 children engage in non-competitive play that risks bumps and bruises, such as climbing a tree (33%)
 - 1 in 4 parents most often watch TV, films or DVDs when playing with their children (26%), as opposed to 1 in 20 who most often engage in imaginative, make-believe or role-play games (6%)
- **The right nutrition has an important role in ensuring that the whole family is playing well according to expert Dr Becky Lang**
 - A healthy, balanced diet is vital for play, since it provides energy, hydration and healthy bones for all ages
 - Good nutrition also benefits children's functioning, which results in playing more imaginatively and creatively
 - A strong immune system also has an important role in active play, which in turn boosts play experiences for children and adults

2. Research Methods

The research for this report was carried out in three key phases:

- **An in-depth literature review to provide background for the report and to identify the experts most appropriate for the study**
- **Interviews with nine experts in fields ranging from child nutrition to play consultancy**
- **A nationally representative quantitative survey of 2,004 parents of children between the ages of 3 and 15, conducted in February 2012**

3. The Importance of Play

3.1 The Benefits of the Right Kind of Play

Play has a vital role in the physical, emotional and social development of all children. According to Catherine Prisk, Director of Play England, ‘play reduces obesity, increases physical strength and increases dexterity; it provides resilience around friendships and dealing with arguments; and one of the causative factors in the massive rise in children’s mental health issues seems to be that children have less time and space to just do what they want to do’.

Yet play comes in a variety of different forms and how a child plays has an effect on how great the benefits he or she receives are. Play at its most basic and traditional level can be described as:

‘a physical or mental leisure activity that is undertaken purely for enjoyment or amusement and has no other objective’ (PLAY THERAPY UK)

‘what children and young people do when they follow their own ideas and interests, in their own way and for their own reasons’ (DCMS, 2004)

‘[arising] from children’s innate need to express themselves, to explore, learn about and make sense of their world’ (PLAY ENGLAND)

‘[when] children have a certain freedom and autonomy from adult direction’
(PLAY ENGLAND)

These definitions of play emphasise that it is child-led and free, for its own sake and exploratory.

According to Janet Moyles, exploratory play ‘is about first-hand experiences, trial-and-error learning and sensory encounters. Children engaged through their play in exploring the world, learn to develop a perception of themselves as competent, self-assured learners who know that it’s all right to ask questions, make mistakes and discover things for themselves. Whilst gathering information about objects through exploration, children acquire skills including problem-solving and understanding of the characteristics of each object.’

She points out that ‘exploratory play is important and has benefits for all ages – including adults. If we’ve never encountered something before, for example a new car, we have to ‘play’ with it by touching and operating the various knobs, levers and pedals. It would be extremely dangerous to drive the car without first exploring these aspects and learning about them.’

‘exploratory play is important and has benefits for all ages – including adults.’



And it is in this form that children are thought to derive the greatest benefits from play. According to Siobhan Freegard, the founder of Netmums (the UK’s largest online parenting site, with over 1.2 million members), ‘child-led play is beneficial because otherwise children won’t use their own instincts to develop their play in a way they want to. This could prevent them from working through a problem to a solution or developing spatial awareness’.

Sally Goddard Blythe, a consultant in neuro-developmental education and author of *The Genius of Natural Childhood*, agrees. She says ‘the danger [is] that adults see play as aiming to achieve goals. Play in itself is valuable. The most important aspect of it is the pleasure and the joy in it. When children have fun, they learn - whether that’s the goal or not.’

Janet Moyles, an Early Years Consultant and author of *Excellence of Play*, describes how ‘children engaged through their play in exploring the world learn to develop a perception of themselves as competent, self-assured learners who know that it’s all right to ask questions, make mistakes and discover things for themselves.’

There are many benefits in the more specific aspects of play too. Janet Moyles highlights some of these: where play is sociable, ‘it ensures children learn how to collaborate and co-operate with others and use a range of language skills’; when it is active, it has benefits for children’s physical health; when play is creative or imaginative, as it is in drawing or dressing-up, it ‘encourages creativity and innovative thinking’, whilst play which involves risks is important since ‘it is only through taking risks that children learn how to stay safe’.

when play is creative or imaginative, as it is in drawing or dressing-up, it ‘encourages creativity and innovative thinking’



It is more traditional forms of play, such as using building blocks, making dens, dressing-up and active group games (for example tag), which most commonly contain these aspects and therefore provide children with the most benefits. Although newer forms of play based on more prescriptive toys or screen-based technology may not be damaging (and can provide some benefits), they are certainly not as beneficial as traditional play. According to Janet Moyles, video-games are ‘rule-bound’, and therefore children do not benefit from the freedom and autonomy of traditional play.

Diane Levin, Professor of Education at Wheelock College and author of *Remote-Control Childhood*, points out that children ‘are often not engaging in creative play when they’re using screens, but are being ‘remote-controlled’ by the screens’. Screen-based play is also far more likely to be sedentary than more traditional forms of play; thus children do not benefit from the physical aspects of traditional play, such as increased physical strength. Robin Balbernie, a Child and Adolescent Psychotherapist, also discounts claims that screen-based play is a form of sociable play: ‘Sociability involves three-dimensional touching, feeling and smelling - everyday things you can’t do on screen.’

3.2 Benefits to parents of play

There are a number of benefits to parents involving themselves in play with their children in the right way, both for parents and for children. According to Robin Balbernie, a parent needs to be

Nine out of 10 parents enjoy playing with their children, similar numbers feel happy that their child and they are bonding when they play together and three quarters of parents agree that they learn things from playing with their child.



responsive to a child when it comes to playing with them, since a 'child only gets a sense of self through viewing how a parent perceives them and responds to them. If they get no response or one that frequently does not match their internal state, they have a shaky sense of self.' He describes a parent and child playing as 'a natural channel of communication. An adult who plays with their child is creating secure attachment in that child, and secure attachment is the best predictor of just about everything positive in a child's life'.

Parents' involvement in play has benefits for parents too. Nine out of 10 parents enjoy playing with their children, similar numbers feel happy that their child and they are bonding when they play together and three quarters of parents agree that they learn things from playing with their child.

3.3 The Importance of Nutrition for Active Families

A central aspect of active, exploratory play is ensuring that a child gets the right nutrition. This is also just as important for parents when they play with their child – a healthy, balanced diet and active lifestyle is important for everyone, regardless of age.

A properly balanced diet will provide plenty of energy, hydration and healthy bones. Furthermore, good nutrition benefits cognitive functioning, which can result in playing more imaginatively and creatively. A strong immune system also has an essential role in active play, which in turn will boost play experiences for children and adults alike.

Nutrients from a healthy, balanced diet - such as iron, vitamins A, C, E, B6 and folic acid - are all key for bodily functions such as immune responses, and therefore provide benefits to the quality of children's play.

National nutrition surveys however have highlighted the need for increasing some vitamins and minerals in children's diets. Public health nutritionist Dr Rebecca Lang points out that 'Some issues in children's nutrition are a lack of calcium, iron and Vitamin D. Calcium is a particular issue in teenage girls.'

It's also vital for children taking part in active forms of play to drink enough fluids



It is important to consume foods which are rich in a wide range of vitamins and minerals from a variety of sources and fortified products, for example, some breakfast cereals and yoghurts, are available to buy for those times when it is difficult to get all the nutrients needed from diet.

It's also vital for children taking part in active forms of play to drink enough fluids. Lang says: 'Children need to drink more during the day. I would always recommend water and milk first, but if a limited amount of soft drink increases the amount a child drinks overall and it doesn't replace water and milk, then it's a good thing'.

To maintain a healthy body weight, it's important for children to take part in various activities. NHS advice states that children under five should do some light to energetic exercise each day, and that children over the age of five should be doing an hour's moderate physical exercise every day. This can be incorporated into exploratory play to ensure that they are meeting guidelines while still having fun, for example playing hide and seek or going for a bike ride.

4. The State of Play

4.1 In theory, parents understand the importance of the right kinds of play but find it difficult to act on it

Our quantitative research suggests that most parents understand many of the accepted principles about play. Four out of five parents believe 'that play should be for fun rather than about achieving a goal' and three fifths of parents believe that 'play should be led by a child rather than an adult' (see Fig. 1).

**Fig. 1: How much do you agree with the following statements?
(strongly agree, slightly agree)**

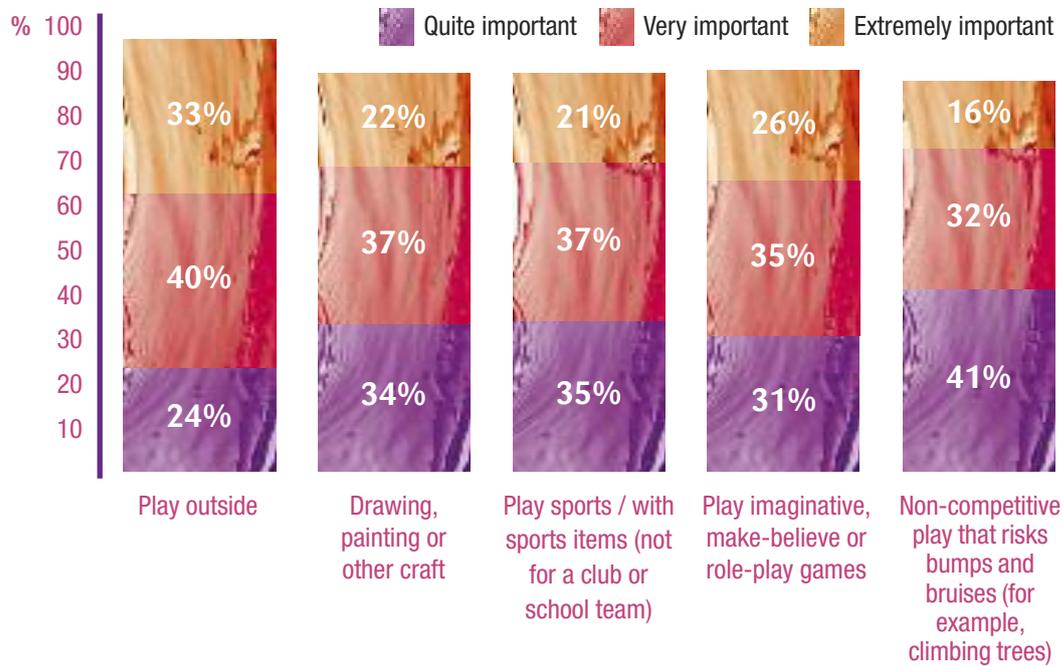


Base: 2004 parents of children aged between 3 and 15 (nationally representative)

Furthermore, they are aware of which are the most important forms of play (see Fig. 2). 97% of parents think it is important for their children to play outside, whilst 9 out of 10 parents think it's important for their children to play imaginative, make-believe or role-play games and a similar proportion believe it's important to engage in play that risks bumps or bruises, like climbing trees.

Similarly, parents believe that forms of play that are less beneficial are less important. Two thirds of parents think it's unimportant ('quite unimportant' or 'not at all important') for their children to go on social media and 6 out of 10 parents think it's unimportant for their children to play games online.

Fig. 2: Please state whether you think each of the following types of play is extremely important, very important, quite important, quite unimportant or not at all important for your child?



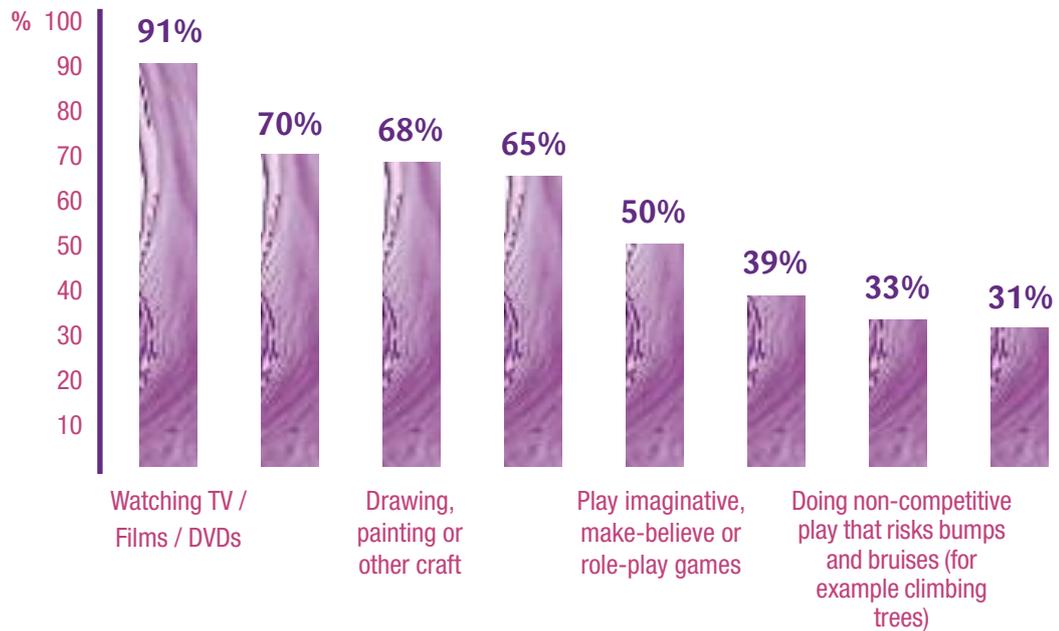
Base: 2004 parents of children aged between 3 and 15 (nationally representative)

4.2 So are children playing in the right way?

As referenced in section 4.1, despite parents being aware of the importance of play being child-led, free and exploratory - and also of the most beneficial forms of play for a child – these are not the most common ways that children in the UK are playing (see Fig. 3).

It is striking just how much electronic media dominates children’s playtime. For example, more than 9 out of 10 children watch TV, films or DVDs, but only 1 in 3 children engage in non-competitive play that risks bumps and bruises, such as climbing a tree. Further, 14% of children play with electronic items or video games and 13% watch TV, films or DVDs most in their free time, as opposed to only 1 in 10 who play imaginative, make-believe or role play games most in their free time.

Fig. 3: Which of these things does your child do in his/her free time?



Base: 2004 parents of children aged between 3 and 15 (nationally representative)

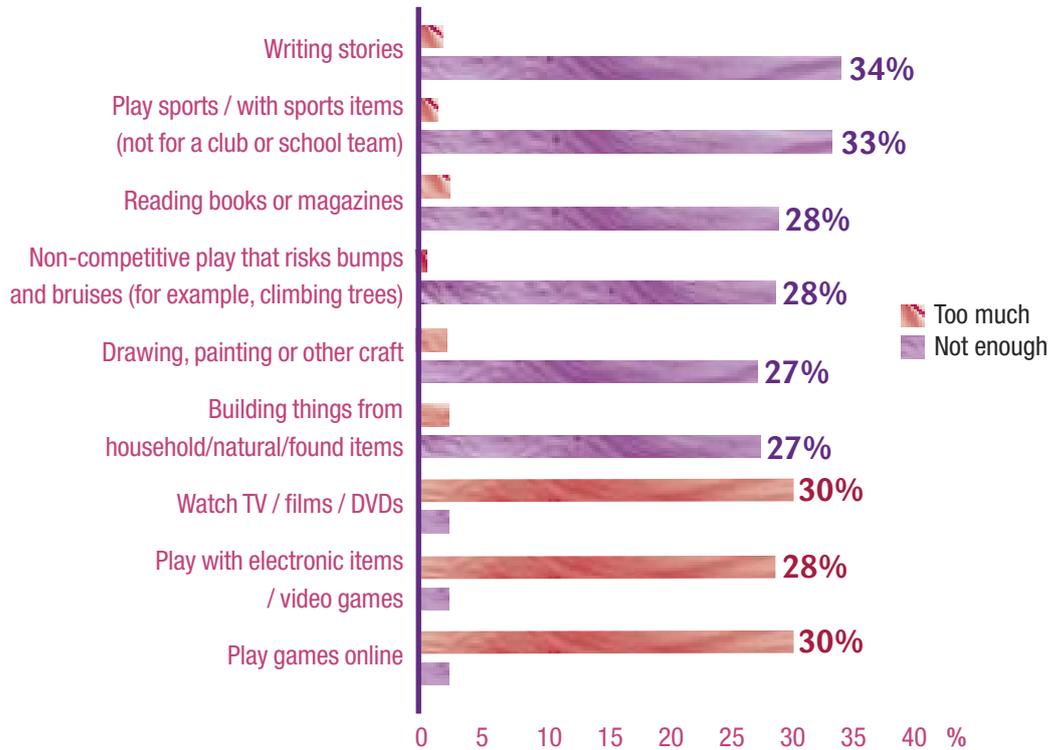
Children are engaging too much in forms of play that are not the most beneficial (see Fig. 4). Indeed Sally Goddard Blythe points out that there is now 'less play that develops gross and fine motor skills, less robust, physical play experiences and less social interaction and communication'.

Three out of 10 parents think their children watch TV, films or DVDs too much; whilst 1 in 3 parents believe that their children do not play sports or with sports items (outside of a team) enough. Similarly 4 out of 10 parents think that their children do not play outside enough and 1 in 5 believe their children play on the home computer too much.

Children are engaging too much in forms of play that are not the most beneficial



Fig. 4: For each of the following types of play, please state whether you feel your child engages in this type of play too much, the right amount or not enough.



Base: 2004 parents of children aged between 3 and 15 (nationally representative)

4.3 How parents play with their children

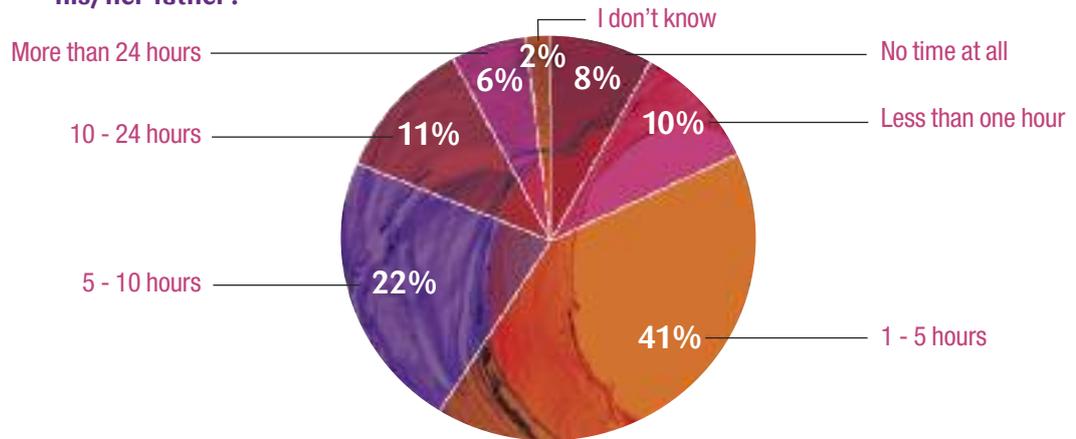
Despite recognising the benefits of playing with their children, both for themselves and for their children, 6 out of 10 fathers and 4 out of 10 mothers play with their child for less than 5 hours

Despite recognising the benefits of playing with their children, both for themselves and for their children, 6 out of 10 fathers and 4 out of 10 mothers play with their child for less than 5 hours a week

a week (see Figs. 5 and 6). Indeed, children spend more time playing alone than they do playing with their fathers, with 1 in 4 children playing alone for more than 10 hours a week, despite the fact that only 1 in 10 is happiest when playing alone.

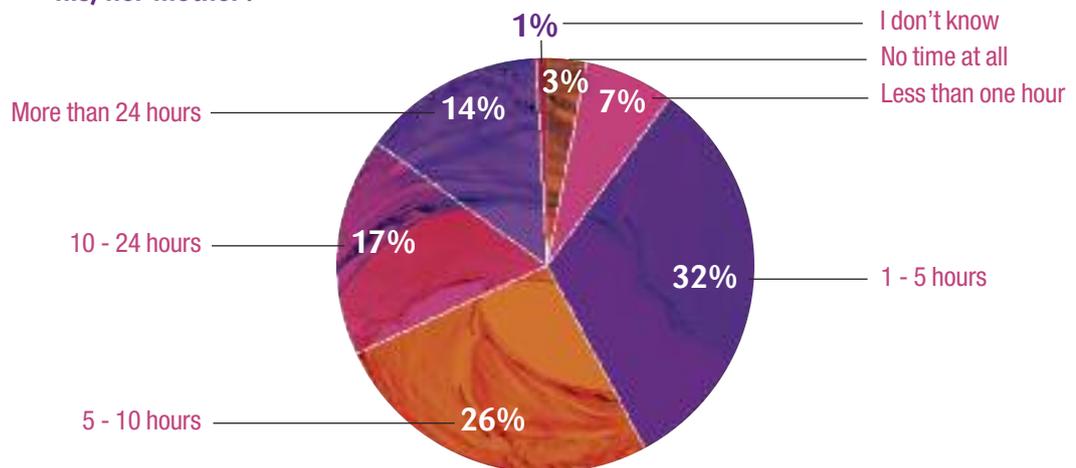


Fig. 5: How much uninterrupted, quality playtime does your child spend with his/her father?



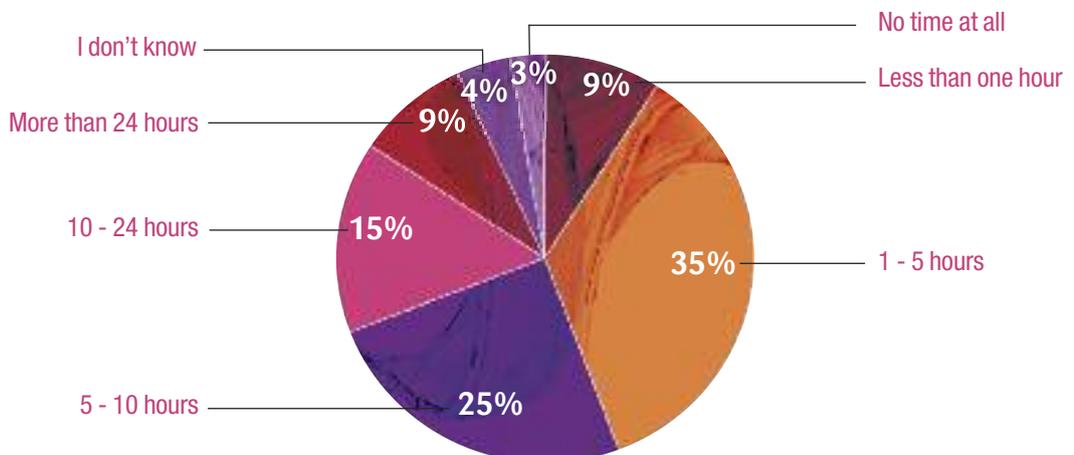
Base: 2004 parents of children aged between 3 and 15 (nationally representative)

Fig. 6: How much uninterrupted, quality playtime does your child spend with his/her mother?



Base: 2004 parents of children aged between 3 and 15 (nationally representative)

Fig. 7: How much uninterrupted, quality playtime does your child spend on his/her own?



Base: 2004 parents of children aged between 3 and 15 (nationally representative)

Nor does parents' understanding of the most beneficial forms of play (see 3.2) translate into how they actually play with their children, as there is once again a strong focus on electronic forms of play at the expense of more beneficial forms of play. For example three quarters of parents watch TV, films or DVDs when playing with their children, but only 1 in 4 engage in imaginative, make-believe or role-play games and even fewer parents (15%) take part in non-competitive play that risks bumps or bruises with their children. Similarly, 1 in 4 parents most often watch TV, films or DVDs when playing with their children, as opposed to 1 in 20 who most often engage in imaginative, make-believe or role-play games.

5. How Parental Pressures and Anxieties Shape Play

The preceding sections reveal that, although parents are well aware of how their children should be playing in order to best aid their social, mental and physical development, their children are not doing enough of these sorts of play, whether a parent is involved or not. There are a number of factors that explain this gap.

Siobhan Freegard highlights time pressure as a factor: 'Parents often find they don't have as much time to play with their children as they'd like due to everyone's daily lives getting busier.' Indeed almost 6 out of 10 parents agreed with the statement 'because of time pressure in my daily life, I do not play with my child' and a similar proportion of parents 'feel guilty about not being able to spend enough time playing with their children'. Further 7 out of 10 'wish they had more time to play with their child'.

Another factor is parents' fear for their children's safety. Sally Goddard Blythe points out that parents restrict what their children do due to fear of things like 'stranger danger' and busy roads, but by doing so parents are harming their children: 'The whole culture of health and safety has made parents risk averse. All these social factors have combined to say that we are going to keep our children closer and safer, but in keeping them safer we don't necessarily develop all the abilities that they need biologically to interact and adapt well to the environment'.

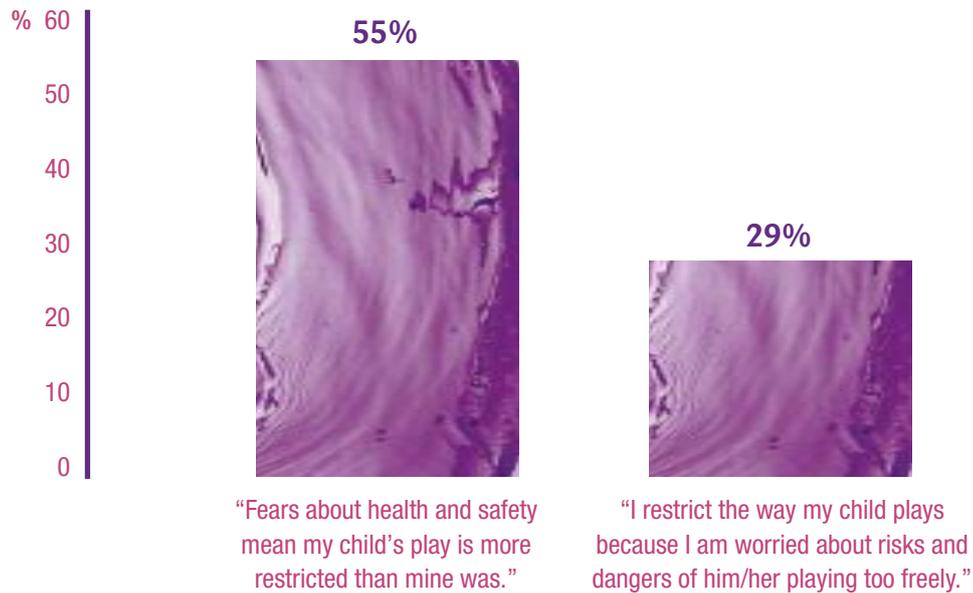
More than half of parents agree that 'health and safety means that their children's play is more restricted than theirs was' and 3 out of 10 parents restrict the way their child plays because

they're worried about the risks and dangers of them playing too freely. Janet Moyles says that this over-protectiveness means that whereas 'children used to play with peers, for example, on the way to school and outside in the street or garden after school, a majority of children are ferried to school in cars and their after-school time is spent in organised activities, such as sports and music lessons.'

16% agree that they 'don't know how to make up stories or create imaginary play for my child' and 13% of parents are anxious that they don't know what they're doing when they're playing with their child



Fig. 8: Thinking about how your child plays how much do you agree with the following statements (strongly agree, slightly agree)?



Base: 2004 parents of children aged between 3 and 15 (nationally representative)

Fig. 9: Thinking about how you play with your child how much do you agree with the following statements (strongly agree, slightly agree)?



Base: 2004 parents of children aged between 3 and 15 (nationally representative)

For some parents, there is the further issue of anxiety over how they should play with their children. Three out of 10 parents feel under pressure to 'be fun' when they play with their child, 16% agree that they 'don't know how to make up stories or create imaginary play for my child' and 13% of parents are anxious that they don't know what they're doing when they're playing with their child. In fact, 17% of parents admit that they have bought their child a toy to take the pressure off them when playing with their child.

Indeed Robin Balbernie describes some of the difficulty parents have in playing with their children that he has encountered in his work: 'One method of bringing about positive change in a family with very young children is to emphasise the importance of play. We try to help them to get down on the child's level and then wait, and not to initiate any play themselves, but just sit and watch their child, think about what they're doing and be interested in it and follow their lead. We then discuss any thought or feelings that have come up - it can take some parents months to be able to do this'.

This combination of a lack of time to supervise their children in more active, risky forms of play, fears over the safety of letting children play too freely and worries over how best to play with their children results in parents either not encouraging their children to play in the best possible

Almost half of parents (46%) 'would like ideas to help improve their children's play' due to being anxious about their own performance as play partners for their children



way or preventing them from doing so. For example, nearly 3 out of 10 parents like their children to have structured play with rules and more than 1 in 6 parents admitted to buying their children toys and video games because it takes the pressure off them when playing together. Siobhan Freegard recognises that, for many parents, not intervening to improve a child's play is simply easier: 'It is difficult for parents to intervene because it can be relaxing if they don't have to deal with kids'.

Yet this is not to say that the quality of children's play is on a downwards spiral. The vast majority of parents enjoy playing with their children and wish they had more time to do so. Siobhan Freegard says what is important is 'to give parents ideas and a start'

for better kinds of play, such as craft materials printable from websites. Our survey research provides strong support for this idea. Almost half of parents (46%) 'would like ideas to help improve their children's play' due to being anxious about their own performance as play partners for their children.

6. Summary

Play which is child-led, free, for its own sake and exploratory is the most beneficial for the emotional, physical and social development of children. It is more common in forms of play that might be described as 'traditional', such as playing with building blocks or playing hide and seek. Parents are aware of this and yet many of their children are not playing in the most beneficial way, whether playing with their parents or not. For many parents this is because they lack time to supervise their children in more active, risky, exploratory forms of play, they are afraid of the dangers of letting their children play too freely and they are worried about how best to play with their children.

7. Expert Biographies

Adrian Voce OBE

Adrian Voce is the former head and founder of Play England, the recognised lead body for the non-commercial play sector. He is also the founder of London Play, an influential and strategic play charity for the London region. Among many notable achievements, Adrian is best known for leading the successful campaign for a national Play Strategy, securing and delivering almost £400m of lottery and government funding for children's play provision. Adrian was awarded an OBE for services to children in June 2011. Adrian now runs his own consultancy firm and a specialist blog site www.policyforplay.com

Catherine Prisk

Catherine Prisk is the Director of Play England, a charity which advocates the importance of time and space in children's play and the role play has in a child's happiness and future well-being. In the past she has worked closely with the Dept. for Education in developing government policy.

Dr Rebecca Lang

Dr Lang is a Public Health Nutritionist, employed part time at Warwick University. She has worked as the research fellow on the EMPOWER project (empowering women to prevent obesity at weaning) and is now a research fellow working on the Families for Health research project.

Siobhan Freegard

Co-founder of Netmums, a UK based network of local websites, providing support, advice and a discussion forum for mothers nationwide.

Professor Diane Levin

Diane Levin is an American author, educator, and advocate known for her work in media literacy and media effects on children. She is professor of education at Wheelock College. She teaches courses on children's play, violence prevention and media literacy, and her books include *So Sexy So Soon: The New Sexualized Childhood* and *What Parents Can Do to Protect Their Kids and Remote Control Childhood? Combating the Hazards of Media Culture*.

Dr. Cheryl Olson

A US public health and education researcher and practitioner. She's a former teen issues columnist for Parents magazine, and took part in federally-funded research on the effects of electronic games on preteens and teenagers. She has served as a health behaviour consultant to a number of organisations, corporations and government health bodies and is co-author of *Grand Theft Childhood*, which provides a balanced look at the effects of video games on children.

Professor Janet Moyles

Early Years Consultant, Academic and author. She is Professor Emeritus at Anglia Ruskin University. Her book Excellence of Play details how play is a successful learning and teaching aid in early education.

Sally Goddard Blythe

She is the author of several books on child development and a consultant in neuro-developmental education. Her books include 'The Genius of Natural Childhood', which describes the importance of physical and imaginative play to children's development.

Robin Balbernie

Robin Balbernie is currently Consultant Child and Adolescent Psychotherapist in Gloucestershire CAMHS. He has a special interest in early interventions, originally arising from his work with adopted children, and is on the Committee of the Association of Infant Mental Health (UK) and is also a member of the Young Minds' Policy and Strategy Advisory Group.

Nigel Mainard

Head of Education at Artis Education. Artis brings a blend of music, drama and movement into classrooms. They aim to harness imaginative thinking and play to aid children's education.



Ribena
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