

Why parental pressures are taking the fun out of children's play

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Modern day parenting pressures and expectations are leading to the death knell for children enjoying spontaneous play, according to a new study from the University of Essex.

While [parents](#) have always felt some responsibility for their children's development, the heightened intensity of parenting in recent years now means parents are expected to spend more time exhaustively watching, noticing and responding to their children's desires and behaviors.

This, the research suggests, is leaving less time for children to play independently where they learn for themselves the risks and dangers of outdoor play.

According to the study, published in the journal *Sociology of Health & Illness*, parents are worried this lack of spontaneous play means their children are not as developed and well-rounded as they could be, coupled with the fact children's play is increasingly more sedentary due to technology.

"Until around the 1990s, parents were not expected to endlessly entertain and monitor their children in the same way they are today, so children had greater freedom to play independently," explained the study's author Dr. John Day. "But since those children have become parents themselves, society has changed so there is a heightened feeling of responsibility for their children's development."

"One aspect of the problem is increased fears around stranger danger and more traffic on the roads which means opportunities for children to be physically active through spontaneous play have become limited."

So, today's youngsters are spending less time playing together away from adult care and more time under parental supervision and participating in structured health-focused physical activity settings such as holiday clubs.

Explained Dr. Day: "Parents are encouraged to spend more time with their children while simultaneously judged on how independent their children are. But most of the learning about independence takes place

when children take risks of their own choosing and these opportunities are becoming lost in childhood."

This generational shift was noticed by Dr. Day, from Essex's School of Health and Social Care, when conducting in-depth interviews with 28 UK residents born between 1950 and 1994 about their physical activity history and how family members influenced these experiences.

The research found that the rise in structured [physical activity](#) for children happened at the same time as, and possibly caused, a decline in children playing spontaneously.

Growing concerns around [child health](#) meant many parents born after the late 1960s, who started parenting in the early 1990s, felt as though they should intervene to make sure their children were active, which restricted the possibility for more spontaneous forms of play.

"Society today positions parents as the sole engineers in their children's development which represents an unrealistic burden that brings with it unjust pressure and expectation," added Dr. Day.

To help address this trend, Dr. Day says there needs to be a culture shift where health policy makers ensure children are encouraged to learn about the risks of physically active play, independent of adult supervision.

"Parenting is no longer simply an aspect of who someone is but a role one is expected to extensively perform. Parents and their children are trapped together in this scenario and so we need policymakers to recognize this and work with parents and [children](#) to change this for future generations," he said.

More information: John Day, The intensification of parenting and

generational fracturing of spontaneous physical activity from childhood play in the United Kingdom, *Sociology of Health & Illness* (2023). [DOI: 10.1111/1467-9566.13701](https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-9566.13701)

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