

Researchers: Karen Brown and Anita Noiesen, Grand Avenue State School Outside School Hours

PHYSICAL ACTIVITY, OUTDOOR EXPERIENCES AND SCREENTIME IN OSHC

Background

Grand Avenue OSHC is a large service catering for up to 225 children. We are keenly aware that there are children in our care who spend the majority of their discretionary leisure time with us. We wanted to know that our program, and our Centre, ensured that children in our care do not miss out on the valuable social, emotional and physical benefits of quality outdoor experiences... experiences that “value-add” to their lives and that drive children to want to be outdoors.

We held some preconceived ideas which influenced our thinking and we wanted to ensure our program genuinely meets the needs of children rather than a program focused on what children in attendance wanted.

We wondered if a quality outdoor play space was easier to facilitate in a natural setting rather than a manufactured environment. We were also considering how we might counter the reduction in organised school sports and the amount of “recreational” time children now get in their school day.

Initially, we thought we were making a case for an impressive budget increase to take these children out and about in new and wonderful ways. While we already have amazing activities and a strong focus on being outdoors, our intention was to build on this and provide something new and different.

There were a number of reasons why we focussed on outdoor activities but predominantly it was because the children are in our care for so much of their “leisure time” and because we thought, as a service, that we might be able to offer access to a broader range of activities during the term time, not just Vacation Care. (For example weekly walks/bike rides, orienteering, senior club activities, specialist sports coaching etc)

We also wanted to increase our educator’s understanding of their role and the fact that outings and excursions are not just a fun part of their job, but a vital part of childhood and integral to learning.

Research Questions

Resultant of our observations, we set out to explore the following research question:

Is there an increasing responsibility for OSHC to provide quality outdoor experiences?

However, we note that as our research evolved, what we thought we were investigating initially took a slight detour resulting in a related but different set of findings.

Research Method and Data Collection

Our research began with accessing current data on physical activity trends throughout Australia. It also involved surveys, training and extensive observations.

Active Healthy Kids Australia is a collaboration of physical activity researchers from nine universities across Australia. Since 2014 they have released a number of ‘Report Cards’ on physical activity for children and young people. This was our first source of information.

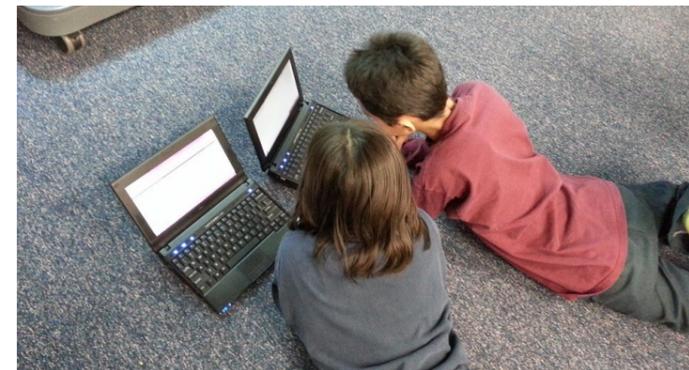
We reviewed several reports and found some interesting ideas which informed our reflection and subsequent actions. We reflected on organised sport, learning that this was not the solution to sedentary behaviour and physical activity promotion. Even for children who are involved in organised sport, it typically only runs for a fraction of the year and at best provides for two training sessions and one game session per week—which is not enough!

Physical Literacy was another area of interest which encompasses the physical, cognitive, emotional and social capabilities an individual needs to be physically active for life. Just like academic literacy, physical literacy is not something that a child acquires or develops at just one age or milestone. Rather, physical literacy requires ongoing acquisition and development across all stages of childhood, with significant others all playing an integral role. Again, we felt there were shortcomings in our children’s physical literacy and that children did not have all the tools to be physically active for life.

We also learned that changes to primary school recess had an effect on children’s physical activity. Reductions in lunch hour play time and afternoon recess is a concern along with the significant increase to the NO running, jumping, tackling, climbing or ball games rules being imposed on play time.

We sought information on barriers to outside play and three of these were identified as space, time and safety. As we reflected on this, it was identified that we have the space (or so our tape measures tell us), we certainly have the time and we have the awesome relationships with our families as well as procedures in place to reassure parents of the safety.

The fourth perceived barrier to outdoor play is Technology and this is where our research took an interesting and informative detour.



Theoretical Framework

We reflected on children’s rights and in particular the ideas promoted by Play Australia which include: *Play is essential to the health, development and well-being of children; There is a need to raise awareness of the importance and essential role of play; Play is essential for all ages and intergenerational play is important; Time and access to unstructured play must be a priority; Unstructured play outdoors is essential to health and well-being; Independent mobility is essential as a child grows; Risk and challenge through play are important experiences; Access to nature must be provided for all children; Embracing young people in public spaces is an important part of valuing them; and We must plan cities with children and young people in mind.*

The right to play and informal recreation, for all children and young people up to 18 years of age is contained in Article 31 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child which also includes a number of related, but distinct, rights: rest, recreation, leisure, play, participation in cultural life and the arts.

Findings

Current research blames children’s screen time for weight gain, laziness, sleep deprivation, childhood hyperactivity, weakened communication and social skills, sensory deprivation and links to ADHD.

Longer screen time gives little to no room for communication and social skills. Children sitting on the couch for two or more hours on devices are experiencing “viewer passivity” which is the direct implantation of ideas into the brain without active participation. This takes place when the young mind is subjected to an ongoing stream of images which unknowingly inhibits their natural capability to communicate and socialize and becomes a default mode.

According to Dr Amit Sood, as quoted by the Mindd Foundation (2019) ‘the more time spent in default mode, the more risk there is of dementia, attention deficit, anxiety, and depression.’

The evidence suggests that the majority of Australian children across all age groups are exceeding the current national recommended guidelines for screen time. We reviewed this alongside health guidelines and felt despair for the children in our care.

We wanted to know how this was effecting children in our care so we started having focussed chats with the children. We asked about their weekend activities, what sports they liked, what sports they played etc. Many children spoke of their involvement in team or individual sports as well as scouts etc. All children spoke of screen time as part of their weekend. Gaming and social media were mentioned by all children even more so than watching television.

Screen time disconnect was the one point that resonated with us. We struggled with the lack of face-to-face interactions. We asked ourselves, if devices are the new “relaxation time” then who is talking to the kids. (Parents are increasingly involved with their devices for their work, social and relaxation time at home. We had parents who mentioned this in interviews when discussing their children’s screen time.)

Conclusion

As we progressed through our project, we landed in a totally unexpected place. Instead of providing more outdoor activities and a crazy budget increase, we’ve come to the realisation our families need more from us (as an OSHC service) than offering those activities. We have realised that as an OSHC Educator we need to tell our management groups and our families how invested we are personally as well as professionally, in the lives of “our” kids. The focus is often on compliance and A&R when we feel the focus should be on celebrating the personal interactions that work to benefit the children.

Moving forward: our program is growing children not just looking after them... It is a changing world and people’s lives are getting busier.

We have changed our roster to allow for more small group interactions. We are not grouping children by age/development as we feel that mixed age play has far too many benefits to ever be compromised. We have reflected on engagement vs supervision and question whether current ratios in Queensland are adequate for meaningful engagement and strong relationships between educators and children.

Recommendations and Future Directions

We would like to increase opportunities for parent learning though:

- Developing a parent library
- Dinner nights and social activities to allow parents to form friendship groups outside their children’s friends
- Community involvement – Screenagers: showing movie in the community
- Adding the Play Charter, Family Online Agreements and mobile phone contract, to the enrolment pack
- Overnight Senior Camp

We intentionally have limited access to screens at OSHC – we believe there is ample time at home for leisure screen time. We do still offer coding and tech time for homework and educational purposes. We have consulted with the children to see if they agree with our trial of no leisure time on screens at OSHC, and although there are some who would still like access, they understand the reasoning behind no access at OSHC.

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Citation

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