

# PLAYING OUTSIDE: REFLECTION ON THE PERCEPTIONS OF FAMILIES IN A DAYCARE CENTRE

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## Abstract

Nowadays, interest in playing outside and getting in touch with nature seems to have gained prominence in society and particularly among professionals and researchers. We know that play plays a fundamental and crucial role in a child's global and integral development, as they learn best through autonomous play, and their lives are enriched by the fact that it is a pleasurable, imaginative, spontaneous and creative activity. We seem to be recovering old habits and routines that we've lost. New generations are faced with several variables that condition children's access to different opportunities for exploring space. Issues such as safety, the balance between risk and danger, adult control and supervision are all aspects that parents consider. This paper describes partial data collected among families of 36 children (nursery to two-year-old) involved in the study. It describes partial data from a wider study by the Observatory for the Future of Early Childhood Education in Portugal (OFEI): "Outdoor learning opportunities: changing practices in urban daycare centres". It reflects on parent's perspectives about using outdoors in children's lives as well as in parents' lives when they were children. We noticed changes between parents' and children's generations in terms of access to the outdoors as well as significant differences in play between parents and children.

Keywords: Play outside, families, development, early childhood education.

## 1 INTRODUCTION

In urban contexts, due to parent's professional demands, time tends to be limited. In their busy lives, families must juggle work, daily chores or other responsibilities and still fit in quality time with their children. We know from experience that during childhood of previous generations, much of the time was spent outdoors with friends, taking risks. Over time, children seem to have lost contact with nature and the outdoors. For their parents, playing in the street was a regular occurrence. Adult supervision was less valued and possibly even less necessary. A childhood enriched with meaningful references promotes the recording of memories that remain etched in the minds of today's adults. Our perception is clear: we need to slow down so that childhood can be a time of exploration, curiosity, and inspiration, because today's children need us to let them be children and experience everything that comes with childhood [1]. The way society is organized, absorbed by the digital world, influences the way we make choices [2]. More sedentary lives confine today's adults and children to their homes, always connected to the world in a virtual way, cancelling out the various possibilities of access to movement and risk [3]. This scenario means that children don't have the freedom of movement, skinned knees and meaningful learning that are fundamental to a child's harmonious development. In this way, contact with nature from an early age is urgent, as it provides children with an ideal environment for developing motor and sensory maps that lead to efficient spatial perception. Neto [3] emphasises the idea that today's adults were freer as children and that today's children, before the pandemic, would have been locked inside four walls a long time ago. Today, children and young people interact in a different way, using more and more technological resources. It is necessary to create time and space for play in the street, in the neighbourhood, at school and in the city, but also at home, and to democratise play without formatting or a timetable [3].

Extensive research has been carried out to study the potential of urban daycare centres in creating learning opportunities in contact with natural elements outdoors [4]. It was developed using a methodological design with qualitative and quantitative approaches. The intervention implemented in an institution in Matosinhos, Portugal, arises from the need to make up for the lack of outdoor space and to give children some contact with nature. This paper describes partial data collected among families of 36 children (nursery to two-year-old) involved in the study. When collecting information from families,

we opted for a simplified questionnaire, using mostly closed questions and images that would allow us to record their perspectives more objectively. This option was related to the fact that we felt we could gather and process data that would have a real impact on the practices to be implemented more quickly and objectively.

## 2 METHODOLOGY

The process described in this paper is part of a wider project by the Observatory for the Future of Early Childhood Education (OFEI) - "Outdoor learning opportunities: changing practices in urban daycare centre". Supported by a mixed methodology, but with a more prominent qualitative insight, especially regarding the intervention period [5]. It aims to understand and implement practices to reduce the constraints on access to the outdoors for a group of children in a daycare centre. The research proposal thus arises from a praxeological understanding in the context of a group of children aged 1 and 2 in a daycare centre in Matosinhos, Portugal.

The data presented in this paper relates to the project's diagnostic period, which included the application of a questionnaire survey to understand parents' perspectives on the use of the outdoors as a play possibility. The instrument was applied to the parents of all the nursery classrooms in an institution: 36 families.

The following dimensions were defined:

- Characterisation of the respondents;
- Playgrounds of the respondents (parents);
- Opportunities to play outside in family context;
- Habits of frequenting the outdoors as a place to connect with nature;
- Constraints and fears about children's use of outdoor spaces;
- Well-being when using outdoor spaces;
- Perceptions about learning.

Data from 26 respondents was validated, corresponding to 72% of the daycare centre's parents. Most of the questionnaires were filled in by mothers (8%), an aspect that is related to the fact that this is the adult who most often takes the child to the institution or picks them up at the end of the day. The majority of respondents (54%) had up to a 12th grade degree, 31% a bachelor's degree and 12% a Master's degree. With an average age of 35,73% are between 30 and 40 years old.

Ethical concerns were considered, namely the informed consent and anonymity of the respondents.

## 3 RESULTS

### 3.1 Play areas

When asked about the three places they played in their childhood, parents made 64 entries. They emphasised indoor areas, outdoor areas, and other different contexts. We realised that the usual places to play were outside. Of all the records, 41 refer to outdoor contexts such as parks, fields, beaches, or gardens and of the 26 respondents, only one refers to indoor spaces as the only places to play up to the age of 3. As far as specific play contexts are concerned, the "house" emerges as the most important space (69%), but outdoor spaces, although diverse, are more prominent: park/garden/square (62 %), street (35%), threshing floor/field (15 %), backyard (12%), beach (%) and patio (8%).

We'd like to highlight the "street" as a privileged playground mentioned by 35% of respondents, which is now a less common context, especially in urban areas such as the one where the institution is located. In the "Other" category we group together places that, even outside, are probably associated with specific and less usual moments, such as: "Sports field", "Campsite" or "Under the rain".

When parents were asked about their children, 88% of respondents said that they play outside, mostly "at weekends" (46,2%) or "a few times a week" (34,6%). These figures seem to show that parents promote access to the outdoors mainly at weekends and that children depend on the school for this opportunity on weekdays.

When respondents were asked about their children's favourite places to play, there was a significant incidence outdoors. Of the 57 records, "Parks, gardens and squares" were mentioned by all the respondents. Gardens and urban parks, environments built by adults, are often an opportunity for children to spend time outdoors. However, "children continue to be largely absent from studies on public policies, particularly issues related to mobility, urban regeneration and housing [6].

Compared to the reality presented by parents about their own childhood, we can see several differences. We'd like to highlight three categories in which difference seems most significant.

Table 1 - Local differences in parent-child play [4].

Space	Parents	Children
Street	35%	8%
Home	69%	15%
Park/Garden/Square	62%	100%

With the change in generation, "street" has ceased to be a favoured space for parents and children to play and, at the same time, the use of "parks, gardens and squares" seems to have increased. At the same time, the use of the "Home" space seems to have decreased from parents to children as a place to play.

### 3.2 Perception of children's activity contexts

Parents' perception of the activity space and how they relate it to learning, among other dimensions, made it possible to understand which spaces are most valued and associated with positive opportunities for children. Using a set of predefined dimensions, respondents were asked to relate them to images of children in activity.



Figure 1 - Dimension valued by parents according to images.

Perceptions about images of children reveal some of parents' convictions. For example, images of children playing outside, in the mud, in the rain or in the sand were associated first and foremost with "Fun and freedom" dimension, possibly relating more to the idea of leisure and the child's agency. On

the other hand, "Learning" was associated with images of children indoors with resources provided by the adult, sitting at a table working in arts or interacting with a sensory board.

### 3.3 Safety and well-being/satisfaction

Regarding respondent's feeling about safety, the majority answered "I feel safe both indoors and outdoors" (54%), which seems to reveal, at first glance, a positive perspective on the use of the outdoors as a regular space for children. However, we realise that there is a very significant percentage of 46% who struggle with safety issues regarding the outside space as a place to play. When asked about aspects of adult supervision, 96% of respondents said that playing outside required more supervision. They noted concrete aspects related to nature, because

*"(...) nature itself is very uneven and there are dangers"; with the possibility of getting hurt: "You can get hurt, you can put dangerous things in your mouth"; with dangers in general terms, i.e. "because of cars, motorbikes, strange people, etc".*

When parents were asked about children's play and contact with nature, respondents recorded opinions that reveal, from their perspective, the importance of the outdoors for children's development and learning. Specifically, we have systematised some ideas supported by excerpts from the respondents' records:

*"Playing outdoors allows children to explore, give free rein to their creativity and connect with nature."*

*"Playing outdoors reduces the amount of time that many of us are using or in contact with the TV, etc. It promotes socialising among peers."*

*"It boosts the immune system and increases the enjoyment of outdoor activities, developing a sense of well-being."*

*"It's very important for children to play outside, to get in touch with nature, to feel new textures, to experience new realities, to develop greater autonomy when they encounter a different reality from what they're used to."*

Overall, parents and carers had very positive ideas about the importance of contact with natural materials and contexts in children's development.

## 4 CONCLUSIONS

In the first three years of life, children learn by using their bodies to explore the world around them, and for this reason they are referred to as active learners. Children explore the world through actions such as: observing, listening, touching, reaching, grasping, bringing to the mouth, releasing, moving the body, smelling, tasting, or making things happen by manipulating objects [7].

Data emphasises changes between parents' and children's generations in terms of access to the outdoors. Outdoor spaces have changed and so have the opportunities for access. Parents as children used more informal and natural outdoor contexts, such as backyards or the street, while their own children used more formatted outdoor spaces, such as gardens or urban parks.

We realised that, according to parents, more formal spaces, such as indoor areas with tables and chairs, may be more associated with "Learning". Informal contexts in which children play in the mud or rain are always associated with "Fun" and "Well-being". This perception is particularly important for parents and early childhood education professionals: the idea that learning takes place in informal contexts is not always assumed and should be generalised.

It is also worth noting the importance respondents attached to access to the outdoors as a driver of balance in the use of technology. This aspect was partially evidenced in the attribution of the characteristic "Danger" by some respondents to the image of the child using a tablet. Other aspects mentioned: relationship between contact with nature and the promotion of health and well-being; access to nature as an engine for learning and development; link between the outdoors and children's freedom of choice.

We understand that this data collection process had several outcomes:

On one hand, it allowed us to get to know families better to plan more personalised interventions geared towards children's real needs. On the other hand, it allowed parents to reflect on the importance of access to less formal, less modelled, and adult-organised contexts for children's learning, well-being, and health. It prepared families for the introduction of a new piece of equipment in the room that would

cause a change in the children's clothing. Finally, it also encouraged parents to take part in the project itself by bringing materials to use in the mud kitchen.

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