

WHAT TO DO? MOTHERS' ACCOUNTS OF THEIR CHILDREN'S DISCRETIONARY  
TIME-USE

by

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BA, University of British Columbia, 2005

A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements for the Degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

in the School and Child and Youth Care

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Supervisory Committee

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## Abstract

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It is suggested in both academic literature and popular media that many children's opportunities for play, particularly in North America and during middle childhood are decreasing and that the consequences include negative impacts on social, emotional and physical well being. One of the explanations for the decline in play, particularly amongst middle and high socio-economic-status families is an increased participation in structured extracurricular programming. This qualitative study explores parental accounts in order to understand some of the underlying ideas that shape their decision-making. Semi-structured individual interviews conducted using questions generated from a background literature review are implemented with five mothers, four of whom are spoken with twice. A thematic analysis approach is used to analyze the data. Integrating further literature, the ensuing discussion focuses on how a culture of fear may be contributing to an uncontrollable busyness of both parents' and children's lives. Protection, prevention and preparation are identified as specific motivations for structured program involvement that stem from a culture of fear. Particular focus is given to ideas behind the preparation mentality. The importance of early exposure, the intensity of extracurricular involvement, lost investment, wasted time, and the relationship these ideas have with discourses of intensive mothering are all explored. This study contributes new information to the existing dialogue about changes in children's time-use, and provides insight into avenues for further qualitative research in the field.

*Keywords:* parents, school-age, discretionary time-use, qualitative, thematic analysis

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## Acknowledgements

Thank you to everybody who offered me support throughout the undertaking of my thesis. The role of family, friends and acquaintances is not to be overlooked in my success. Those who gave their time to edit along the way are owed an extra special thank you.

I would like to thank my peers in the MA Child and Youth Care program; the dialogues we shared were influential to my development as a student and the completion of this work.

To the participants who gave their time and answered my many, many questions, I am extremely grateful. Letting a stranger into your home and life is rarely done in our society, and I benefitted immensely from your willingness to do so. I hope you took something away from the experience too.

Thank you to my supervisors, Marie Hoskins and Doug Magnuson, for your continued help over the last three years. You have both guided and challenged me to produce something I am proud of. I am particularly grateful that during the first term of my studies you assisted me with writing a funding proposal for this research, even before you had worked with me as your student.

An extra special mention of thanks goes to my partner, Jesse, for his unwavering support of my academic pursuits. During the final year of my research, you took extra responsibility with the care of our son, allowing me to focus without worry on my writing.

And finally, thank you to my son Aiden, for providing the most wonderful of distractions. You helped me keep things in perspective and brought a smile to my face when most needed.

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## **Chapter One: Introduction**

### **Background Context**

Since around the turn of the century, there has been a proliferation of media reports (Gilbert, 1999; Noonan, 2001; Quindlen, 2002; Richardson, 2013), popular books (Elkind, 2007; Honoré, 2008; Louv, 2006; Rosenfeld & Wise, 2000), documentaries (Bartlett & LeRose, 2010; Raworth, 2011), and organizations (Alliance for Childhood; Campaign for a Commercial-Free Childhood; Children and Nature Network) espousing concerns about hyper-parenting, over-scheduling, and a suggested decline in opportunity for children's play. For children and youth, play is often considered to be vital for healthy development; a child's right and important in and of itself (Baggerly, 2004; Berk, 2005; Ginsburg, 2007; Hirsh-Pasek & Golinkoff, 2003; UNCRC, Article 31). Particularly in North American society, active play opportunities are reportedly decreasing (Hofferth, 2009; Juster, Ono, & Stafford, 2004; Linn, 2008). Several explanations for the decrease in play among children have been offered, including a loss of children's outdoor-spaces, a climate of parental fear, increased presence of technology, and increased participation in programmed activities (Veitch, Bagley, Ball & Salmon 2006; Veitch, Ball & Salmon, 2007).

To substantiate claims, much of the popular literature on this topic relies on anecdotal information gathered through authors' personal and professional experiences, observations, and informal conversations with parents. I believe the frequency of arguments founded upon such anecdotal experiences speaks to a need for more qualitative research that gives voice to such accounts. As a practitioner working with families in a variety of extracurricular contexts, I have had many informal conversations with staff, children and parents around discretionary time-use, and in particular the choice to enrol children in structured activities. This further backs my belief that such accounts are indeed immensely valuable and can point to certain cultural discourses



that shape how childhood is viewed. In particular, I think that examining the descriptions and explanations contained within parental accounts, provides a means of illuminating factors that underlie time-use choices for children. When considered in conjunction with the existing literature on the topic this offers a useful tool for expanding the dialogue on over-scheduling and the decline of play.

Alongside the stream of popular literature that has projected hyper-parenting, over-scheduling, and the decline in opportunity for children's play into the media spotlight; a growing body of academic research is also emerging. Given my beliefs about the value of parents' accounts, I am particularly interested in academic literature exploring their reports about children's discretionary time-use. Some qualitative studies have examined parents with children in the early years (ages three to six) (Bodrova, 2008; Ranz-Smith, 2007; Romagnoli & Wall, 2012; Wall, 2010; Youngquist, 2004) or during the pre-teen or adolescent period (Shaw & Dawson, 2001). A number of studies have also looked at the middle childhood period (Dunn, Kinney & Hofferth, 2003; Kremer - Sadlik, Izquierdo & Fatigante, 2010; O'Brien & Smith, 2002; Veitch et al., 2006; Witten et al., 2013). Structured extracurricular programming is particularly prevalent during middle childhood (ages 6-12 years), and for those children from middle- and high-socioeconomic status families (Mahoney, Vandell, Simpkins & Zarrett, 2009). This study builds on these statistics by conducting research that examines what the accounts of a selection of full-time stay-at-home parents with school-age children can add to the dialogue.

### **Researcher Motivation**

Researchers are involved in shaping all stages of inquiry (Clark, 1998; Ryan, 2006), making their motivations are a crucial component of any research enterprise (Kirby et. al, 2008; Padgett, 2006; Ryan, 2006).

I am a dedicated child and youth care professional with over ten years of experience in children's recreation and extracurricular programming in North America. Rich personal childhood experiences influence the way I engage with children and the way I view childhood. I continuously see how an upbringing of imaginative play-based experiences has shaped me into an independent, unique, creative, and happy adult. During middle childhood, I participated in limited structured programming and had extensive opportunities for imaginative free-play. I appreciate that my experience was at least partially facilitated by my family's middle socio-economic-status, the presence of a full-time stay-at-home caregiver, and our semi-rural environment. I acknowledge this is not the childhood context for all. I feel it also relevant to note that throughout the duration of my research, I became a parent, thus changing my position in relation to the group I was consulting with. As discussed in my literature review, I am aware that my research is situated in the context of a social movement around children's access to free-play opportunities. I believe that through research that emphasizes meaning and the creation of new knowledge, movements towards social justice and change can be supported (Henderson, 2011; Ryan, 2006).

### **Overview of Study**

This study utilizes five full-time stay-at-home mothers' accounts of the choices they make regarding their children's time-use. Individual semi-structured interviews are used to gather data that is then examined through thematic analysis. The descriptions and explanations contained within the conversations are used as a platform for illuminating ways of thinking that may be of influence.

My paper begins with a literature review that is broken into two distinct sections. Part one offers a detailed examination of background literature by exploring work on children's time-

use, the suggested decline of play, extracurricular program involvement and over-scheduling.

Through looking at work that has focussed on parents' accounts of their children's discretionary time-use, part two positions this study in location to existing research with a similar focus. In the next chapter, I describe and justify my methodology, which includes my research design, sampling, recruitment, data collection and analysis. I also speak to the study limitations, ethical considerations, reliability and validity. In the final chapter, I present an analysis and discussion of the data collected. Drawing on both illustrative quotes from my interviews and relevant information from the existing literature, I offer a discussion of how a culture of fear and uncontrollable busyness are prominent themes in the data collected. In closing, recommendations for future research are presented.

## Chapter Two: Literature Review

### Introduction

Before commencing my research, I examined literature in a variety of areas that related to my topic. This initial step helped to give context to my study, aided me in formulating the questions I asked during my data collection, and provided the foundation upon which my data analysis and discussion were built. Although my literature review started prior to beginning my interviews, it was an on-going process that evolved alongside my data collection. As I constructed new ideas and themes, it was necessary to re-consider the existing literature and also to explore areas I had not previously considered.

The sources discussed represent a selection of those most relevant to my research area and are by no means an exhaustive list of all related literature. In particular, Canadian statistics on children's time-use patterns, as well as research regarding extracurricular program participation and the suggested loss of play in Canada, are not readily available. Most of the information presented in this section was drawn from the United States, the United Kingdom, and Australia: where the majority of research on these topics has taken place (Hofferth, 2009; Hofferth & Sandberg, 2001; Juster, Ono & Stafford, 2004; Mahoney, Harris & Eccles, 2006). While countries such as Canada and the United States are often aggregated into the category of Euro-Western nations, and on a global perspective presumed to share similar dominant parenting and educational attitudes, this is not necessarily the case. Rather, the current lack of Canadian research around children's discretionary time-use and extracurricular activity participation makes it unclear how much of the available information may be relevant in Canada. Ideally, more research in the Canadian context needs to be conducted..

This chapter is broken into two sections. Part one gives important background context to this study by offering a detailed examination of the general discourse on children's time-use,

how it has evolved into a suggested decline of play, and how this relates to extracurricular program involvement and over-scheduling. In this section, I also take the opportunity to briefly discuss the complexity of defining play, and the challenges this presents for the discussion of a loss of play. Part two looks in more depth at existing research that has focussed on parents' accounts of children's discretionary time. This primarily includes studies of parents' reports of activity involvement and children's play, but also touches on select children's and teachers' accounts. From here, I provide a rationale for the particular focus I adopted by locating my research within the body of literature it most closely relates to.

### **Part 1: Background**

This section explores the foundation of ideas upon which my study is built, and provides an understanding of the climate in which my research is conducted.

**Children's time-use.** One of the most striking time-use changes for children over the past 200 years is that of time spent in labour activities (Larson, 2001). With increased urbanization and a move away from agrarian economies, most North American children have experienced a dramatically decreased involvement in household chores and unpaid labour. This transition has made way for increased time in schooling, as well as a rise in what is often considered discretionary time. Children's time-use has been a topic of public debate since as early as the 1920's, when studies on children's time-use began emerging (Larson & Verma, 1999). One of the biggest bodies of academic research has been in the field of education; however, time outside the classroom has also been considered.

Hofferth and Sandberg (2001) found that an average of 30% of children's time was shown to fall into the category of discretionary time (time outside of sleeping, schooling, eating, and personal care), and that structured activities took up 18% of this free time, with 29% for

playing<sup>1</sup> and 24% television viewing. The remaining 29% is comprised of educational activities, reading, studying, art, household work, and conversations. They found that between 1981 and 1997, the number of hours per week that children ages 3-12 spent in sports, art activities and youth groups jumped from 5.5 to 7 hours. In 1997, these activities accounted for 13.8% of children's free time, compared with 9.5% in 1981. These percentages were found to be even higher for the 9-12 age group (Dunn, Kinney & Hofferth, 2003, p. 1360). A different study suggests that screen time for 8 to 18 year-olds in 1999 was measured at 7.5 hours/day, or close to 33% of daily time (Roberts, 1999). With the presence of even more technology, it is reasonable to assume this percentage is even higher today.

A frequently cited study by Juster, Ono and Stafford (2004), based on a nationally representative sample of data collected from children ages 6 to 12 during the 1997 and 2003 waves of the Panel Study on Income Dynamics Child Development Supplement, broke children's discretionary time into the following categories: visiting/socializing, sports, outdoor activities, hobbies, art activities, television, other passive leisure, playing, reading, being read to, and computer activities. They found that over this period there was an increase in video game use and television viewing, with a related decline in sleep, sports and outdoor activities. The study's results are somewhat inconclusive for the category of playing, which is not clearly defined. Certain age groups showed slight increases in time dedicated to play, while for other age groups the findings undoubtedly demonstrated a decline.

Another important change relating to children's time-use over the past few decades is the increase of mothers in the workforce. According to Human Resources and Skills Development

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<sup>1</sup>Playing was given a broad definition and included cards, board games, make-believe games, playing with toys, unspecified indoor and outdoor activities, as well as computer games and surfing the Internet.

Canada, in 2009, 78.5% of women parenting children 6-15 years of age were involved in the labour force, compared to 69.8% in 1996, and only 46.4% in 1976. Such a high percentage of dual-income families have unquestionably increased the number of school-age children that are in childcare outside the school day. For some children, after-school care may be informal, for example with friends and family; while for others, care takes the form of a regular structured out-of-school program or a variety of extracurricular activity options. For many, it is a combination of these arrangements. Mahoney, Harris, and Eccles (2006) report that American youth ages 5 to 18 report spending an average of 5 hours per week in organized activities, however that does not include those in formal out-of-school-care programs which would likely make the numbers much higher. Carver and Iruka (2006) report that 23% of children in grades one to five, who are not looked after by their parents after school spend 7.7 hours of time in after-school programs per week. This does not include additional extracurricular programs that take place in the evenings or on the weekends.

A study that corroborates many of the findings noted above is titled “It All Used to be Better? Different Generations on Continuity and Change in Urban Children’s Daily Use of Space” (Karsten, 2005). Although focussing on changes in use of space, the article’s discussion relates directly to conversations about changes in children’s time-use and play. Using data generated from a combination of statistical and archival research, oral histories, and observations, this mixed methods study investigated changes in children’s use of space in Amsterdam between the 1950’s and 2005. A dramatic alteration in the relationships children have with indoor and outdoor space, as well as their freedom of movement was noted. The study found that historically, *playing* always referred to *playing outside*, with weather seemingly being non-influential. Oral histories recounted large groups of children of all backgrounds and ages

gathering daily in the street. As organized extracurricular activities were a rarity for most children, more time was available to spend in the street. Children did not spend time indoors as the home was viewed as an adult space, and one that was too small for children to play in. The research also suggested greater outdoor time was associated with poverty, and a lack of television in homes. The present day increase in indoor time was further related to the rise in consumer goods and presence of disposable incomes that allow families to purchase luxury items for children. This includes the purchasing of participation in leisure activities. Karsten's analysis suggests that while all children of the past could be grouped into the category of outdoor children, modern day kids can be categorized into indoor, outdoor or backseat children. The last refers to a generation of children who spend most of their time in the backseat of a car shuttling from one activity to another.

An interesting point made by Karsten (2005) is that while children's use of space has dramatically changed, this does not necessarily warrant the suggestion that childhood used to be better. Historically, many of the trends observed were related to poverty, and rather than demonstrating children's choice to play outside, behaviours were a reflection of having few other options. The plethora of opportunities available to children today perhaps demonstrates greater societal affluence that affords many parents and children the chance to have more control over their time-use. The author concludes that one change that should be noted is that of children's role in taking charge of their environment. Previously, it seemed that children were in charge of the street, and controlled whom they played with, where and when. Today that autonomy has very much been removed from the child, depriving them of diverse real-life intercultural, mixed gender, multi-age interactions. That has potentially worrying consequences for developing an independent generation of tolerant, open-minded adults.



The loss of autonomy and diversity in children's play are some of the concerns that have contributed to larger movements around the decline of play and loss of childhood. Before discussing research around the loss of play in more detail, it is appropriate to take a brief digression to consider the concept of play itself.

**Definitions of Play.** When talking about children's discretionary time-use, play is a commonly mentioned category. In studies that tout the benefits or drawbacks of play, attention must be given to how play is defined and measured. In research that considers the time children spend playing, the activities that are grouped under the term "play" should be noted. When statements are made about a decrease or loss of play, one must also seek explanations for what elements of play are being referenced. In most instances, failure to consider the complexity of play would be misguided and could result in confusion around the findings and their implications.

It is extremely challenging to find a definition of play that encompasses all of its many facets (Hendricks, 2008). It is however possible to categorize play by certain pragmatic attributes; though it is inevitable that classifications will intersect, blurring boundaries and challenging definitions. Distinctions are often made about where it takes place, such as indoor play, playground play, and nature or wilderness play. Play can also be categorized by whom it is with, such as individual or group play. It is also commonly classified by whether it is child-led, or adult-facilitated. The types of behaviours that take place are also often used to distinguish play forms, for example imaginative or make-believe play, and physical or active play.

Child-led play is often referred to as free play, because children are able to independently make decisions about the form their play takes. A common criterion for this type of play is that, in the moment, it does not serve any predetermined purpose (Pellegrini & Smith, 1998). A

study by Beisser (2013) on children's attitudes towards play suggested that from the perspectives of the children studied, play must be enjoyable, should often involve friends, and have a large component of freedom and autonomy around how it evolves. Often, play found in extracurricular and organized activities is exactly the opposite. Boundaries are typically established and overseen by adults and play's utility is increasingly subjected to outcome driven assessment that focuses on the importance of academic achievement (Beach, 2003, p. 186 in Beisser, Gillespie & Thacker, 2012, p. 27). The utility of play is also capitalized upon in certain counselling situations, where play therapists utilize play as a means to reach desired outcomes, and facilitate children to open up about issues they are struggling with. Play is suggested to be a way for children to communicate and work through new experiences (Guerney, 2001), and in the case of traumatic or challenging life events, play can provide a vehicle for children to express their emotions and feelings.

Interest in active play is another example of how the utility of play can be central. Active play has been the focus of attention in discussions about childhood obesity (Anderson, Economos & Must, 2008; Brockman, Jago & Fox, 2010). Many statistics on children's time-use, particularly those relating to the decrease in outdoor/active play and increase in use of technology, have been related to frightening global increases in obesity and type 2 diabetes (Janssen et al., 2005). In countries with worryingly high childhood obesity levels, such as the United States, Australia and the United Kingdom, this has resulted in a number of studies that focus on the benefits of active free-play, particularly in outdoor environments (Burdette & Whitaker, 2005; Farley, Meriwether, Baker, Rice & Webber, 2008; Handy, Cao & Mokhtarian, 2008).

For some people, rather than thinking of play and its utility, independence, spontaneity, purposelessness, and flow are key aspects of play. Hendricks (2008) articulates:

It is probably fair to say that most theories of human play associate play with the freedom of human beings to express themselves openly and to render creatively the conditions of their lives. In that sense, play is often considered to be a respite from the necessities of life, a stretch in time when the normal affairs of the world are suspended. Compared to those moments when people are virtually prisoners of their daily routines, people at play are said to have broken free to conjure new possibilities of being and, even more importantly, to test the implications of those possibilities in protected forms of behaviour. To play is to create and then to inhabit a distinctive world of one's own making. (p. 159)

Whether play is child-led or adult-facilitated, and the degree to which play is structured are factors given particular attention in considering imaginative play. Sutton-Smith (2008), a leading scholar on play, says that for children, ideal play “allows them to overcome the stuffy and bossy adult world they encounter” (p. 94). He believes one of the common threads in most forms of play is that “the world is a more exciting place in which to live for a player or spectator, at least for a time” (2008, p. 95). Play in its wide variety of forms and guises makes life worth living and is more than just a tool for conformity (Lester & Russell, 2008). Hendricks (2008) suggests that for Huzinga, an early writer on the topic of play, “play's ultimate driving force was the sense of satisfaction, excitement, and even ‘fun’ it provided.” (p. 167).

When thinking of activities children do simply for enjoyment, electronic video games may come to mind. Yet, when considering children's time-use, it is common to see technology positioned in opposition to play. Whether this should be the case is cause for debate. A study of play in virtual worlds demonstrated that for many children there were similarities between online

and offline play (Marsh, 2010). Fantasy play, socio-dramatic play, ritualized play, playing of games with rules, and virtual 'rough and tumble' play was all found to exist in online worlds. While there are undoubtedly certain differences between virtual and real play, Marsh argues that it is "futile to separate children's engagement in 'real' and virtual environments in this way; instead, we should view their experiences along a continuum in which children's online and offline experiences merge" (p. 25). The study noted that virtual worlds targeted at younger children typically did not offer as much creativity as those for older audiences, and that given play's close relationship with creativity, particularly in the younger years, this may be cause for concern.

The role and understanding of play also varies across cultures, societies, contexts and individual families (Rea & Waite, 2009; Singh & Gupta, 2011). Play is a multi-faceted concept that can be many things at the same time. It may not always be viewed positively and may carry negative or loaded memories for certain people or groups. For example, children could have been physically or emotionally hurt as a result of neglect that led to excessive amounts of unsupervised free time.

Exploring definitions of play and the contradictions they present in more detail is not the focus of this review; however given the diversity of play forms and the multiple interpretations of what constitutes play, it was important to consider play within understandings of children's time-use. In light of the numerous understandings of play, the suggestion that childhood has suffered a loss of play is complicated. Most typically, those who support the idea that childhood play has suffered a decline are typically referring to independent, child-led, active, free play.

**The Decline of Play.** The idea that childhood play has declined, while currently popular, has been around since before the most recent boom of attention on the topic. In 1981, child

psychologist David Elkind wrote a book titled *The Hurried Child: Growing Up Too Fast Too Soon*, which argued that youth are hurried into being too ‘adultlike’ at an unnecessarily young age. It was put forward that parents, schools, the workplace, media, and society in general were all contributing factors to children losing the experience of childhood. At the time, Elkind’s popular book led to a flurry of concern around the need to re-examine childhood (Meyrowitz, 1981; Postman, 1982; Suransky, 1982); however, it also drew criticism from scholars who claimed that the large-scale destruction of childhood espoused in the book was not adequately supported by legitimate evidence.

Lynott and Logue (1993) claimed that the arguments made by Elkind and his supporters took a limited historical perspective of childhood and did not adequately identify whom exactly the hurried children were. They asserted that taking a more in-depth look at childhood over the past centuries showed that many stressors and concerns have been eliminated and contributed to an increased quality of childhood. Dramatically improved health care and economic standards of living are just two factors they believe Elkind overlooked. They also pointed out that for many children, the idealized and romanticized childhood lamented, typically comprised of free, uninhibited play in large open spaces, had never been a reality and therefore could not have been lost.

In contemporary western societies, the discussion typically supposes an idyllic childhood that is a happy time, free from adult responsibilities. Children’s ‘work’ primarily consists of school and their leisure time falls outside of that. There is also a preoccupation with the perceived loss of play in less economically industrialized areas of the world, where for example children who live in war-torn areas, extreme poverty, or are involved in child labour, are seen as deprived of valuable play opportunities. It is often believed that a child’s right is to meet the

contemporary western understanding of childhood (Valentine & McKendrick, 1997), with play viewed as a child's right. International organizations seeking to help impoverished children, such as Right to Play ([www.righttoplay.com](http://www.righttoplay.com)) utilize play as a therapeutic tool and export it as an aid strategy. While centring on a discussion of loss of play, the context is quite different. As the locale for my research is Canada, I acknowledge that certain understandings may be the dominant school of thought; however it is important to keep its potential fluidity in mind.

Even though there was opposition at the time of the first publication of *The Hurried Child*, in 2006, a twenty-fifth-anniversary edition was re-printed. This suggests that many of the concerns Elkind pointed out a quarter of a century earlier are still perceived as a risk today. In particular, the most recent edition included updated information about the ways in which electronic media and technology have contributed to what he describes as a "reinvention of childhood" (2006, p. ii). In addition to republishing *The Hurried Child*, in 2007 Elkind published a similar book, titled "The Power of Play: Learning What Comes Naturally". It was based on the central thesis that unstructured, spontaneous play is crucial for healthy child development, but that in the increasingly competitive global economy it is proving challenging. The discussion is broken into three distinct sections. He first talks about the changing world of play, including the influence of parental angst, the media, technology, and the consumer market. From here, he turns his attention to the role of play in development, including individual and collective benefits and what he identifies as commonly held misconceptions about how children learn. The final section looks at the power of play in both the school and home. An important difference between this book and *The Hurried Child* is that play is propelled into the spotlight, and presented as a potential solution to childhood challenges. He presents large-scale societal issues, such as the pressure for children to perform academically, and connects them to

individual level applications, such as the presence and role of intelligence enhancing baby toys. Elkind then aims to offer parents and educators practical opportunities to understand how they can take action against what he sees as a daunting systemic concern.

Elkind (2007) also focuses the debate on the over programming of children. He situates his discussion of this issue in his section on outcomes of parental angst, alongside hyper-parenting and over-parenting. He employs a certain shock value when he anecdotally mentions several physical manifestations of over programming that he has observed in his practice, including stomach-aches, headaches, hair pulling, and self scratching, even to the point of bleeding (p. 83). In particular, he talks about climates of parental peer pressure, which he feels can explain why parents may go against their internal beliefs about what is best for children. As a professor emeritus of psychology, Elkind is no longer conducting formal academic research; however, he is well known in his field, and has continued to advocate for the importance of play through the publication of numerous popular books, magazine articles, and appearances on television.

Elkind's publications (2006, 2007) coincided with the first time publication of another popular book that also espoused a nostalgic view towards childhood's past, this time in relation to children's connection with nature. Richard Louv's (2006) "Last Child in the Woods: Saving our Children from Nature-Deficit Disorder" became a key part of the rapidly growing trend in much of Europe and North America, referred to as the child nature movement. Proponents argue that children are deprived of time in natural environments, something they previously had an abundance of (Charles, 2009; Gray; 2008; Louv, 2008; Skår & Krogh, 2009). Rapid urban development, decreased access to natural environments, increased participation in structured programming, a growing focus on academic outcomes in school, and a rise in time spent

engaging with technology are all proposed as influences. Supporters claim that a lack of time playing in nature has worrisome developmental outcomes for children (Charles, 2009; Gray; 2008; Louv, 2008; Skår & Krogh, 2009), and that strategic efforts must be made to overcome the many barriers. Skår and Krogh (2009) point out that traditional views suggest, “a happy childhood is necessarily associated with a ‘good’ outdoor life, self-governed play and the chance to wander freely in forests and nearby neighborhoods” (p. 340). Borge (2003) points out that “outdoor play characterizes the image many parents have of a happy, healthy childhood” (p. 605). This foundational image is widespread across the movement, but remains a relatively unexamined assumption. Recently, the child-nature movement has begun to draw criticism over the idealization of one perfect childhood. Melhuus (2012) problematizes the perspective by questioning whether nature kindergarten is a way of holding onto values of childhood as pure and free, when in today’s era this may not be the case.

There have also been a number of other articles written in the last decade about the loss or changing nature of play in children’s lives (Cole-Hamilton, Harrop & Street, 2002; Frost 2012; Ginsburg, 2007; Russell, 2008). A frequently cited piece is Ginsburg’s (2007) article titled, “The Importance of Play in Promoting Healthy Child Development and Maintaining Strong Parent-Child Bond”. It was published in the popular medical journal *Pediatrics*. In a culture where medical practitioners’ opinions are often given authority, with their knowledge considered superior, it is suggestive of the play movement’s widespread support that an article on the benefit of free-play could be published in such a prominent medical journal. This positional piece does not bring any new information to the discussion, but rather reiterates previous opinions, studies and findings. The report begins with a discussion of some of the benefits of play, next it describes the current climate of decreased opportunities and some of the



explanations, and finally it suggests some possible solutions that can be offered to counter the worrying trends related to a decrease in play. The last section specifically addresses the role of the physician in helping to combat this issue, offering a list of twenty-two suggestions. In response to the concern that parents might actually be doing too much by placing children into organized activities and enrichment activities from a young age, Ginsburg suggests:

Pediatricians can discuss that, although very well intentioned, arranging the finest opportunities for their children may not be parents' best opportunity for influence and that shuttling their children between numerous activities may not be the best quality time. Children will be poised for success, basking in the knowledge that their parents absolutely and unconditionally love them. This love and attention is best demonstrated when parents serve as role models and family members make time to cherish one another: time to be together, to listen, and to talk, nothing more and nothing less. Pediatricians can remind parents that the most valuable and useful character traits that will prepare their children for success arise not from extracurricular or academic commitments but from a firm grounding in parental love, role modelling, and guidance. (p. 187)

This is a controversial suggestion as it implies that love, role modelling, and guidance are separate to extracurricular and academic commitments, and best demonstrated in one specific way. Yet it is my opinion that often, amongst other things, love and guidance influence parents to enrol their children in structured programming.

Following suit and perpetuating scholarly discussion of play is a slightly more recent article by Frost (2012), written for the newly established *International Journal of Play*. His summary titled "The Changing Culture of Play" offers a well rounded analysis of the current state of play, including a detailed description of what brought us here today, as well

as a summary of current initiatives and where they might be taking us. The content of the article is vast, offering international perspectives towards education, grass roots action, scholarly research and a variety of other aspects considered central to the understanding of the culture of play. Frost makes the important point that while there has been a tendency to want to generalize play across all cultures and societies, “a single pattern of change is not universal across all countries and cultures” (p. 119). He points out that some generalizations such as the parental belief that television is taking away from time for play hold true across many countries (Argentina, Brazil, China, France, India, Indonesia, Ireland, Morocco, Pakistan, Portugal, South Africa, Thailand, Turkey, the United Kingdom, the United States, and Vietnam). He also summarizes the transformation of play, including a discussion of the role of adult anxiety, high stakes testing, cyber play and poverty. The article is an extremely useful resource for sourcing contemporary and historical literature relating to play.

One of the most interesting and useful aspects of the article is its detailed summary of the history of play. Starting in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century in the United States, when extreme poverty was seen as a hindrance to children’s play, the author then tours through the changing culture of play after World War II. Frost (2012) identifies the 1980’s as a period when linkages between amounts of free play, diet, television viewing and obesity began being documented. Also of note during this period was a drastic reformation of the family unit and post WWII boom in consumption, including children’s toys and activities. Since this time, such topics have been the continuous subject of debates in both popular literature and academic discourse. He states that:

a play movement of unprecedented range and energy is alive and spreading around the

world – far exceeding the impact of play initiatives during the child saving movement of a century ago. (p. 127)

Another aspect Frost touches on is that of adult interaction with children during playtime. He emphasizes the extremes that can be found across the globe. On one end of the spectrum are organized soccer games for 2 year-olds, run by intense parent-coaches who often push their children into activities without consideration for the outcomes, while on the other end are specially trained playworkers who pride themselves in facilitating child-led play through minimal direct involvement. To some however, both of the previous examples would be on the same end of the spectrum because play is still facilitated by adults, and not exclusively under the children's control. Valentine and McKendrick (1997) argue that “the perception that children are spending too much time indoors is misleading; rather they are spending more time under adult supervision, either while playing independently outdoors in the garden, or at institutionally-based play activities” (p. 231).

While not always specifically discussing the decline or loss of play, scholarship on play in general has also burgeoned within the past decade in the United Kingdom (Cole-Hamilton, Harrop & Street, 2002; O'Brien & Smith, 2002; Russell & Lester, 2008; Russell, 2012). Interestingly, in more recent documents, the intrinsic value of play, in and of itself, has begun to be mentioned. In 2002, the New Policy Institute published a systematic review of literature relating to the value of children's play and play provision (Cole-Hamilton et al., 2002). The primary aim of this review was to establish how play and play initiatives could be used to support larger government objectives and policies. This extensive report included information collected from and in consultation with government departments, university faculties, urban planning initiatives, children's service providers,

non-profit organization, recreation and leisure services and many other areas connected to the field of play. Over 100 sources have been consulted, in addition to case-study examples from a number of initiatives that were in place at the time of the review. The report focused primarily on the role of school-age children because they are an underrepresented age group in literature on play and there is increasing concern surrounding schooling and its over emphasis on achievement and success. “As society becomes more complex and competitive there is concern that spontaneous play is being replaced with structured activities both at home and within school” (Cole-Hamilton et al., 2002, p. 1).

In 2008, a follow up to the 2002 report was published for Play England by the National Children’s Bureau (Russell, 2008). It examined what new literature had come into circulation in the six years since the previous review. The report draws on international literature from predominantly ‘Western’ countries including the United Kingdom (UK), northern Europe, North America, Australia and New Zealand; however, the demographic and policy data pertain specifically to the UK. The report contains chapters on approaches to policy-making and the construction of childhood and children, literature on the benefits of children’s play, literature on play patterns, and provisions for play and working with children at play.

The report’s most important message about the role of play is articulated clearly. “Important functions of play are incidental in the child’s own experience, which has little, if any, cognizance of ‘outcomes’. Play is evidently simply how children enjoy being alive in the world now” (Russell, 2008, p. 4). With this in mind, the report goes on to say that:

There is a need to gather the evidence on what works best in providing for play for its own sake towards a recognition that the benefits of play accrue from its characteristics of unpredictability, spontaneity, goallessness and personal control,

rather than directly from its content. (Russell, 2008, p. 4)

Under this suggestion lies an unquestioned support for the idea that childhood play has declined. This research objective however is far more easily articulated than achieved. This is partly due to what is identified as a “tension field” which exists between theory and research evidence, provision for play, and social policy. While there is an overall resonance between academic research surrounding the benefits of play and the overarching aims of current policy in place, this does not translate into practice because of the “instrumental understanding of play and the nature of childhood” (Russell, 2008, p. 35).

Finally, it is interesting to note that children themselves have spoken out about the need for play. While they may not be able to understand changes that have taken place in time-spans greater than their ages, their input should not be overlooked. Results of a study conducted by Beisser (2013) on the concept of play through the eyes of gifted fifth- and sixth-grade students reported that the children expressed that time should be allowed for self-directed play afterschool with a limitation on scheduled activities. It is now to extracurricular program participation and the debate about over-scheduling that we turn our attention.

**Extracurricular program participation and over-scheduling.** Consideration of studies about extracurricular program participation is also paramount to the dialogue about a decline in play. A decrease in opportunity for play is often juxtaposed against an increase in scheduled activity involvement. A wealth of research seeks to link certain outcomes to time-use and behaviour patterns. Most typically studies have tried to correlate extracurricular program involvement with academic outcomes (e.g. linguistic ability, mathematical competence, academic adjustment). This perspective towards childhood may be perpetuated by industrialized society’s continued focus on economic productivity. Consequently, debates over how to most

efficiently utilize children's time and control for certain desired outcomes during adulthood are growing.

In studies of the links between extracurricular program participation and developmental outcomes, researchers have historically favoured studies of a quantitative nature (Eccles & Templeton, 2002). Commonly, researchers have focused on both the intensity and duration of extracurricular participation (Fredricks, 2012). The categories of sports, arts, civics and academics have been used in a number of studies to distinguish between types of extracurricular participation (Barber, Stone, Hunt, & Eccles, 2005; Jacobs, Vernon, & Eccles, 2005; Luthar, Shoum & Brown, 2006; Pedersen & Seidman, 2005). It is the adolescent period of childhood that has been the subject of most focus in the majority of studies on extracurricular program participation (Bartko & Eccles, 2003; Fredricks & Eccles, 2006; Luthar, Shoum, & Brown, 2006; Mahoney, Harris, & Eccles, 2006; Pedersen & Seidman, 2005). In particular, many of them have focused on low-income or otherwise disadvantaged youth (Mahoney, Lord & Caryll, 2005; Halpern, 2000; Pedersen & Seidman, 2005; Posner & Vandell, 1999) and speak to the benefits of extracurricular program participation for at-risk groups.

As the media commonly claims that over-scheduling is a concern that parents should be wary of (Belluck, 2000; Gilbert, 1999; Kantrowitz, 2000; Noonan, 2001; Quindlen, 2002; Richardson, 2013), academic research has been called to consider the potential harm that too much, or too intense, participation in specific contexts may be placing on children and families. Several studies have been executed to test the over-scheduling hypothesis (Fredricks, 2012; Luthar, Shoum, & Brown, 2006; McHale, Crouter & Tucker, 2001), which is suggested to be a particular concern of the affluent middle and upper-classes. In their research on extracurricular program participation, Luthar, Shoum & Brown

(2006) challenged the popularly held assumption that extracurricular over-programming may be a root cause of emotional distress (e.g. anxiety and depression), substance abuse and poor academic achievement. In particular, they investigated whether demonstrated adjustment problems in youth can be more strongly connected to high extracurricular participation or to aspects of perceived parental pressures and expectations. The results of the study suggested that the assumption, that a positive correlation exists between over-scheduling and emotional distress in youngsters, should not be taken as a scientific fact. Without discarding this finding completely, it is important to keep in mind that the data collected was a one-time sample and did not offer an ongoing assessment. Additionally, the cross-sectional data collection format prevents drawing conclusions that relate to causality, and since the data collected was for grade eight students only, it cannot and should not be used to draw conclusions on older or younger youth.

In 2006, Mahoney, Harris and Eccles published an article in the journal *Social Policy Report* titled “Organized Activity Participation, Positive Youth Development, and the Over-Scheduling Hypothesis”. In the report they review many sources that relate to children’s time-use, as well as those that look at indicators of development in relation to time-use. They evaluate data gathered from a nationally representative sample of American 5-18 year-olds, as well as discussing regional, historical and limited sample size studies. The report offers a comprehensive summary of many of the articles that pertain to time-use and extracurricular program participation, and leads the authors to refute the over-scheduling hypothesis in three ways. Firstly, Mahoney et al. claim, “although there are many reasons that underlie youth participation in organized activities, the most common motivations are intrinsic” (p. 6). This is contrary to popular parenting books and media reports, which cast concern about over-

scheduling and its relationship with extrinsic motivations for activity participation. Secondly, they claim that organized activities do not typically dominate discretionary time-use: and a far greater percentage of children do not participate in any organized activities than those that fall into the bracket of over-scheduled (20+ hours per week of organized activities). Finally, they conclude that from a developmental perspective, participation in extracurricular activities should be recommended, as “the bulk of research on organized activities has shown positive consequences of participation for academic, educational, social, civic, and physical development” (p. 3).

Importantly, Mahoney et al. (2006) also draw attention to limitations in existing studies and highlight areas needing further research. This includes a need:

to know much more about the relation between the participants’ and their parents’ motivations, goals, values, and expectations and the choices children/adolescents make about their discretionary time in general, and the amount of time they devote to various types of organized activities, more specifically. (p. 16)

There are undoubtedly populations for which extracurricular programs can provide extremely beneficial opportunities; indeed as Mahoney et al. (2006) claim, some benefit can be derived from program participation for almost all children and youth. Still, relatively little is known about what elements of extracurricular programs may explain the beneficial observed outcomes (Eccles & Templeton, 2002).

One of few studies to do so is by Pierce, Bolt and Vandell (2010), which looked at specific features of after-school program quality and its effect on functioning during middle childhood. Both non-profit and school based programs participated in the study. Children had to be enrolled in after-school programs at least four days of the week. Program quality measures



were broken down into three distinct areas: positive staff-child relations, available activities, and programming flexibility. The development outcomes measured were reading and math grades, work habits, and social skills with peers. Data was collected twice in each school year, both through observations and consultations with teachers and parents. Findings showed that diversity and developmental appropriateness of activities were associated with children's work habits and math grades. Positive staff-child relations were associated with reading and math grades, and with boys' social skills with peers in the classroom. The article assumed that out-of-school time should be used to strengthen academic measures of success and narrow existing achievement gaps. Programming flexibility, which is the measure most closely connected with free-play and time-use, was found not to be associated with any of the evaluated outcomes.

A particularly interesting finding from the Luthar et al. (2006) study was that a greater positive correlation existed between maladjustment and children's perceived view of parental expectations of extracurricular involvement than between maladjustment and the sheer number of extracurricular hours. Clearly, parental expectations and behaviours are a crucial aspect that affects children's experiences. Many pieces of work that allude to large-scale societal trends that have influenced children's play and time-use draw attention to the role of both parents and childcare professionals in making change. In the words of Fisher et al. (2008) "both parents and childcare professionals share important roles in influencing children's play and learning environments"(p. 306). In particular they must work together to "advocate for educational settings that promote optimal academic, cognitive, physical, social, and emotional development for children and youth" (Ginsburg, 2007, p. 188). The need to look more closely at parental accounts of choices around their children's extracurricular activity is evident.

## **Part 2: Parental accounts of time-use**

The previously discussed literature provides important background information, however much of it represents the opinions and findings of childcare professionals and academic scholars working within related disciplines. As my research focuses on parents' accounts of time-use, this section of the literature review examines previous studies that have looked at parents' explanations for time-use, most specifically in relation to the decline in play and extracurricular activity involvement. Given parents' pivotal role in making decisions about children's activities, it is vital that the dialogue on children's time-use gives voice to their opinions.

Particularly within the field of sociology, scholars have looked in depth at the value of accounts and what they can contribute to understanding of events and actions (Cardwell, 2014; Orbuch, 1997; Scott & Lyman, 1968). It has been suggested that there are two types of accounts, excuses and justifications (Scott and Lyman 1968, paraphrasing Austin, 1961). Justifications are considered to be accounts in which the responsibility is accepted for the actions in question, where as excuses are socially approved vocabularies for mitigating or relieving responsibility when conduct is questioned. Accounts of both kind are "useful for gaining insight into the human experience and arriving at meanings of culturally embedded normative explanations" (Orbuch, 1997, p. 455).

A small, but nonetheless important study from the United Kingdom on play considers the accounts of parents in relation to the suggested decline of free-play. O'Brien and Smith's (2002) qualitative study of six white parents of British 6 year-olds explores questions relating to the way their children play, their reasons for facilitating certain play, changing patterns of play, and perceived risks associated with play. Using grounded theory to organize and analyze the results, four major categories were identified including fear of an uncertain world, trying to keep control, memories of a freer past and trying to compensate respectively. Particularly important was the

climate of parental fear. Since some parents are fearful of unknowns and do not allow children to play unsupervised, there was thought to be a decrease in opportunities to play with other children and participate in outdoor activities. To combat this, adult organization is used to facilitate children playing together, most commonly in indoor spaces. All parents specifically identified participation in supervised programmed activities as an explanation for decrease in free-play, one that was nested in the fear of an uncertain world. These parents' thinking was that if children are doing something constructive then they are not likely to get abducted. This notion of constructive use of time has links to both fear and the instrumental view of childhood previously mentioned by Russell (2012).

In considering attitudes towards play, it is interesting that a difference in perspectives towards unstructured or free-play has been noted between parents and childcare professionals. In particular parents usually attribute less value to unstructured and self-initiated activity. In 2008, Fisher et al. studied the perceptions of both mothers and child development professionals towards the relationship between play and learning. They found a considerable difference in the beliefs of the two groups: child development professionals typically rated greater learning to be associated with unstructured play, while mothers on the whole ascribed more learning to structured activities. This difference between groups is important because “where an imbalance in structured and unstructured activities may be readily apparent to child development professionals, parents may see their child engaging in consistent or increasing levels of playtime” (p. 314). This finding has implications for parents' decisions around time-use outside of school contexts. Do parents perceive structured activities such as organized sports and arts to have the same benefits as unstructured active and artistic play opportunities? The authors suggest that societal trends which place an “emphasis on academic preparation over unstructured play may

represent an emerging parental belief of play's reduced effectiveness for early academic learning” (p. 306). This suggested societal focus on academic success may also relate to parental perspectives on free time versus extracurricular activities, with parents making decisions based upon their beliefs about the benefits, or lack of, provided through unstructured time.

It was also notable that for the mothers in the study, the amount of academic value given to their children’s activities varied according to their conceptualization of play. Through cluster analysis, the results showed that one group of mothers viewed both structured and unstructured activities as play, another group viewed only unstructured activities as play, and a third group were somewhat less clear as to what exactly constituted play. This finding demonstrates the importance of interactions between parental beliefs about play and decisions made about children’s activities.

An examination of parents’ understandings of why school-age children in suburban Auckland are less likely to walk to school and play unsupervised outdoors than historically was conducted by Witten et al. (2013). A total of 68 parents were spoken with in focus groups ranging in size from four to eight. Groups began by discussing their own childhood play, active travel and neighbourhood experiences, before turning attention to their thoughts on their children’s experiences. Some of the key ideas parents brought forward to explain the changes in children’s time-use included changes in technology, traffic, social interaction and neighbourhood environments. Another one of the themes identified was “a competitive world” (p. 222) and the importance of preparing children to thrive in it.

While play was seen as learning and an important aspect of childhood for many parents, there was a secondary discourse that considered ‘play’ to be a distraction from the business of acquiring skills that would equip children to compete for jobs in the future.

(p. 222)

In an attempt to synthesize understanding across disciplines, Lee et al. (2015) systematically reviewed 46 qualitative studies examining determinants of children's independent active free play. While the study's participants were not exclusively parents, and included children, teachers and a few other community members, the authors estimate that over 1000 parents participated in the studies reviewed. Their search criteria excluded any work that focused on adult-directed activities, which includes most structured extracurricular programs. Regardless, a few important findings are worth noting.

Parents with children 5-11 years old were most commonly sampled, highlighting a research focus on the middle childhood or school-age population. Close to half of the studies recruited parents based on neighbourhood indicators of socioeconomic status, suggesting as Holloway & Pimlott-Wilson (2014) point out, that social class is perceived to be of particular importance in time-use choices. Parental concerns about children's safety were the most consistently and widely reported barrier to independent active free play, with a decrease in sense of community and reduction of children in the neighbourhood also commonly identified. These are all factors that contribute to children's increased enrollment in supervised activities. Given dialogue about intensive mothering and the concerted cultivation of children through strategic activity involvement, it is also worth noting that eight studies supported the idea the perception that "allowing children to roam free was a feature of poor parenting" (Lee et al., 2015, p. 6).

Using Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological systems model as a theoretical framework for understanding, Veitch, Bagley, Ball and Salmon (2006) conducted a qualitative study to investigate where children play and why, through an exploration of parents' perceptions of influences on their child's active free-play. Seventy-eight parents from 5 different primary

schools in metropolitan and outer-urban Melbourne, Australia, participated in 30-45 minute interviews. Parents were from a mixture of low, middle and high socio-economic status (SES) areas, and had only to meet the requirement of having at minimum one child in primary school years one through six. Questions were open ended, and addressed perceptions relating to individual, social and physical environmental influences. Data was coded, and six common themes were identified and discussed: safety, child's level of independence, child's attitudes to active free-play, social factors, facilities at parks and playgrounds, and environment and urban design factors.

The primary barriers to independent outdoor play were identified as being parental fears and child independence. Fifty-eight percent of parents raised safety concerns in relation to active-free play. These factors are important in the context of extracurricular programming as it is an environment in which such barriers can be potentially alleviated, with staff supervision part of the package. Also discussed was the importance of physical spaces in which children were able to play. Increasing urbanization and dangerous streets were factors of concern for many parents. As pointed out by the authors, this has important implications for street design. It also has important ramifications for extracurricular service providers, who should strive to locate themselves in spaces where active free-play can be safely conducted. Many participants also raised concern around playground equipment not being age appropriate. This too has important implications for extracurricular program environments as it suggests that the physical spaces available both indoors and outdoors may bear strong influence on children's opportunities for free play.

Singh & Gupta (2011) examined parental perceptions towards play in a traditionally non-Western society through a variety of qualitative methods. The majority of other studies similar

to this have come from the United States or Australia, so to consider work done in India is unique. The method of the study was 3-4 in home observations and interviews with 28 families belonging to one of two SES groups living in two different urban areas in India. Those in the high SES group were parents with professional careers or high-ranking positions with consistent post secondary education, while those in the low SES group were often labour workers and had minimal post secondary education.

Little differences in findings were noted across the two groups. In general both sets felt that academic pressure and strong presence of technology were responsible for depriving children of play. Furthermore, parents themselves felt that they ought to restrict play to keep up with school demands and academic pressure. Twenty-three of the twenty-eight participants felt play was an activity that brings happiness, enjoyment and entertainment to children. Twenty-three also mentioned that freedom to play was often regulated by strict allocation of free-play. The feeling was that self-chosen play should not be an endless activity. Most parents also spoke to an increase in the presence of play objects (toys, purpose built play structures, books) in current times, and in particular that the older a child becomes, the more important this was.

An interesting difference across the groups was their perceptions towards supervision. High SES participants felt that supervising free-play was a specific activity that they had to make time for, while lower SES participants, particularly mothers, noted that supervision took place concurrently with their household and community work, and that it was not a solo or singular activity. The authors note “excessive supervision, monitoring and control can obstruct thinking minds and the paths to autonomy” and that “domestication is accentuated by an increasing control and supervision of play by cultural agencies such as playground supervision, sports

organizations and other recreational organizations” (Goldstein, 1994, paraphrased in Singh & Gupta, 2012, p. 244).

The control over targeted outcomes afforded by participation in organized activities is one of the reasons parents attribute to their children’s increased involvement. Dunn, Kinney and Hofferth (2003) found American parents’ perceptions of children’s after school activities are linked to the hopes, aspirations and qualities they wish to instil in their children. They interviewed 23 middle-class families (at least one parent and child were spoken to from each family) to examine the role of after-school activities in transmitting parental values to children. The specific skill of teamwork has been shown to hold particular importance for parents and often mentioned in relation to what is gained from extracurricular activity participation, particularly sports. They also found that after-school activities were seen specifically as opportunities for children to learn discipline and responsibility. When activities were ‘not fun’ for children and they did not always want to attend, parents felt they had the opportunity to teach children about following through on commitments and not letting others down. The authors also found that “a few parents also seemed to use the plethora of after-school activities available in and around the community to discern what types of things their children were good at or to reinforce and expand emergent abilities” (p. 1383).

While organized afterschool activities were generally viewed in a positive light, some parents expressed a desire for their children to have more unplanned time with friends or to engage in free play. Parents who communicated such wishes included those who had their children in many programs and those who had their children in few or no organized activities. One of the barriers mentioned was that other children had little free time, or their child themselves did not have the time. Safety concerns surrounding allowing children to venture out



alone and geographical proximity to friends were also stated as barriers to increased playtime with friends. Many “parents voiced concern that they did not want their children to ‘just sit around’ or to spend a great deal of time watching television or playing video games” (Dunn et al., 2003, p. 1384), and as prevention, seemed to want or expect their children to be involved in organized activities.

Kremer - Sadlik, Izquierdo and Fatigante (2010) conducted a comparative study of Italian and American parents explanations for their children’s extracurricular program involvement. Families included in the study were from either Rome or Los Angeles (L.A.), and consisted of two parent units with two to three children between 8 and 10 years of age. Information was gathered through the completion of time-use calendars, as well as a number of semi-structured interviews. At the time the research was carried out, the authors claimed that “few studies [had] explored parents’ accounts about reasons for which they engage their children in a multitude of activities and meanings that parents attach to such activities” (p. 36) and that no studies had looked cross-culturally.

Similarities in the type and frequency of activity involvement were found across both groups of parents, with sporting activities taking the most dominant role. Another commonality was that “parents in both locales consistently described activities as arenas where children can learn to master social and cognitive skills, as well as better their psychological well-being” (p. 40). One of the primary differences the study found was in parent’s attitudes towards busy schedules. While several of the American parents commented on the challenge of time crunched schedules, it was in reference to the value they placed on such activities. Contrastingly, the Italian cohort expressed concerns about possible negative side effects of busy schedules. The authors suggest that this might be to do with greater media attention given to the dangers of over-

scheduling in Italy, and a focus in American popular culture on the benefits of extracurricular program involvement. They state:

The negative evaluation of the heightened busyness of children and the pressure put on them to excel, as seen clearly in the Roman parents' discourse, is only at times discussed in U.S. popular literature and newspapers. Yet, at the core of academic literature on contemporary U.S. childhood is the idea that the perception of childhood has changed: instead of parents protecting children from life's dangers, parents are preparing them to deal with adult life (Kremer-Sadlik et al., 2010, p. 49)

However, my background review of literature suggests that in the United States there is a considerable amount of media focus on concerns of over-scheduling and the importance of unstructured play.

Another difference of note in the study was in the level of parental involvement in the activities. The American parents generally demonstrated greater activity involvement, such as coaching or volunteering. The Roman parents involvement was considerably less intense. The authors point out that it may be a product of the fact that all the Italian organizations offering extracurricular programs are provided by private institutions and therefore do not need parental involvement to exist. On top of this however, the authors note that this could be due to a stronger US culture of parental involvement and responsibility for pushing children to excel or perform at their best. In general the importance and value placed on competition was higher amongst the American group and the "L.A. parents seem to emphasize, instead, the need for children to feel committed and to orient their efforts towards accomplished and successful performance" (p. 51). At the end of the article, the authors suggest that it would be informative to add children's perspectives from these respective locales into the discussion. They feel this

would add greater depth to their understanding of “how local perspectives on childhood and children’s worlds may influence the daily life of children and families” (p. 51).

Another comparative qualitative study was done by Bennett et al. (2012) who investigated the difference in activity participation for working- and middle-class families. Their research responded to disagreements over the explanations for the well-known class gap in activity participation. They interviewed 51 parents from two schools in the United States, exploring both the cultural and structural factors that may be contributing to differences in extracurricular involvement. Findings showed that parents from both groups generally have very similar explanations and motivations for their children’s activity involvement, even though their behaviours around participation differ. The only difference they highlighted was that those in the working-class placed more focus on activity participation for safety purposes, while the middle-class parents were more actively customizing their children’s involvement. Rather than supporting claims that difference in activity involvement can be attributed to cultural parenting logics (belief systems) that differ between classes, the authors believe that the importance of structural factors is paramount. Specifically, they point to financial resources and a difference in institutional offerings in neighbourhoods as key explanations for differences in participation. Their discussion also explores how schools are to some extent an equalizing institution (by providing extracurricular programs to working class neighbourhoods), yet simultaneously restricting opportunities by the selection of activities provided.

These ideas are further explored by Holloway & Pimlott-Wilson (2014) who trace patterns and changes in children’s time-use through an analysis of data collected from survey-questionnaires completed by 321 working- and middle-class parents in the English Midlands. They find that the “institutionalization of childhood, albeit inflected with class differences, is

valued by parents” from both classes (p. 624), with widespread acceptance of the importance in activity participation for personal development and skill acquisition. Similar to Bennett et al. (2012), the authors draw attention to the role of financial circumstances, neighbourhood locales and educational establishments in shaping apparent disparity between classes. They believe that failure to acknowledge this “leaves the door open to cultural explanations of different parents’ choices that obscure the importance of wealth and poverty in their decision-making processes” (P. 625). In closing, Holloway & Pimlott-Wilson make the suggestion that while understandings of children’s geographies has recently tended towards using data collected from children, “if we want to fully understand children’s lives we need to explore parents’ views, capacities, and constraints as they are (often) key social actors in children’s lives” (p. 625).

While not specifically looking at parents’ accounts, Shannon’s (2006) study on adolescents’ perceptions of parents’ messages about the role of extracurricular and unstructured leisure activities found that “parents are one of the most significant socialization agents responsible for the leisure interests and values that their children develop” (p. 398). The idea that “leisure is a means to various ends, and can benefit individuals personally” (p. 398) is one that many adolescents absorb from their parents. Most of the teens felt that in the eyes of their parents, unstructured leisure was not seen to produce as many positive outcomes as structured extracurricular activities. They reported that from their parents’ perspectives, activities such as hanging out with friends or skateboarding were not deemed worthwhile. Shannon points out that these beliefs may relate to research evidence that suggest participation in unstructured activity “does not produce the *same degree* [emphasis original] of positive development outcomes as structured activities” (p. 402). Also, she points out that “the developmental opportunities associated with participation in unstructured leisure activities and experiences may not be

understood as well or promoted to the same extent as organized leisure opportunities” (p. 415). The study also found that “simple enjoyment and having fun were not identified as primary purposes for encouraging adolescents' participation in extracurricular activities (p. 414). This is particularly informative to the discussion of the instrumental value of time and activity choice. It also demonstrates an attitude that does not value pleasure and happiness in the moment, but rather perpetuates the belief that time well spent must afford benefits at a later point in life.

Wall’s (2010) qualitative study of fourteen mothers of five year-olds in Ontario, Canada, provides valuable “insights into some of the ways in which the cultural understandings and social expectations associated with intensive mothering and early years brain development can affect families, and an in-depth and nuanced understanding of the processes through which this occurs” (p. 262). It also serves as an example of the rich nature of data collected from such an approach to inquiry. Mothers in the sample were found to be under extreme time stress, but were nonetheless “preoccupied with careful management of time in order to create pockets of unrushed, non-stressed, enjoyable time with children” (p. 262), not only for the pleasure it provided, but as it was part of what constituted *good intensive mothering*. “The brain development discourse had always been in the background during their child-rearing years and was part of their taken-for-granted understanding of good parenting” (p. 256).

The brain development discourse is suggested as a recent addition to an already shifting approach to parenting. Quirke (2006) undertook an extensive examination of more than 500 parenting magazines and articles printed since 1959. She noted a dramatic shift in parenting from a foundation of ‘fun’ to parenting based on education and cognitive development. In particular she commented, “parents are encouraged to foster their children’s cognitive development through everyday interactions and exposure to enriching activities and

environments” (p. 403). Hays (1996) terms this approach to parenting the “ideology of intensive mothering”, and believes that its roots lie with Post-World-War II developmental psychology. Hays understanding of intensive mothering involved a focus placed solely on the child, including not just the physical, but their emotional, psychological and cognitive needs too. With a dominant social expectation that intensive mothering is the best approach to parenting, mothers began to be “seen as the conduits through which children’s potential could be maximized” (Romagnoli and Wall, 2012, p. 275).

Several of the studies discussed in this section make reference to the “concerted cultivation” approach to parenting, put forward by Laureau (2003). In her book titled *Unequal Childhoods: Class, Race, and Family Life*, she identifies a “cultural logic of middle-class parent[s]” that sees mothers responsible for enrolling children in skill building, age-specific extracurricular activities, regardless of the labour and financial costs to the parents. Through data collected from interviews with 57 mothers and 14 fathers in London, England, Vincent and Ball (2007) note a similar middle class parenting enthusiasm for involving their young children in enrichment activities. They suggest that such time-use choices are a result of parental anxiety and responsibility for the reproduction of middle-class standing. This idea is also supported by Shore (2003) who specifically equates activity participation with the consumption of consumer goods that help to maintain social status.

### **Summary**

This first part of this literature review highlights a considerable amount of controversy in the discourse around changes in childhood, the decline of play, over-scheduling, and children’s time-use. For almost every claim, one can find critics who disagree. While some studies suggest that children have less free time than in the past, others suggest that for many children an

abundance of leisure time is now present. Given the complex ways in which play is defined, it is not an easily measured phenomena and it is questionable whether opportunity to play has itself decreased. It is however reasonable to conclude that the ways and environments in which children play have evolved. One of the most notable changes, and one that is rarely debated, is the increased time children spend in structured program environments. This rise is in part related to increased urbanization and greater childcare needs of dual-earning families. However, other factors also play an important role in parents' decisions to enrol children in structured activities. As I highlight in the second part of this chapter, research on parental perspectives demonstrate that increased activity involvement may be connected to an instrumental perspective of time-use. A cultural parenting logic that focuses on intensive mothering and the transfer of class advantage are two further theories that have been discussed by authors examining parental accounts of their children's time-use.

The studies examined in the second section serve to highlight the breadth and depth of information that can be gathered from looking closely at parents' accounts of their children's time-use. Each study provides a different context of data collection and contributes new information to the discussion. Some of the research discussed looked at the reports of parents with children in the early or adolescent period, while others were focused on middle-childhood. The research was also from a variety of different countries, and focused specifically on extracurricular programs or more generally on play and time-use. By examining the accounts of a small group of full-time stay-at-home parents of school-age children, I plan to build on the conversation and bring a new perspective into the discussion of children's time-use.

## Chapter Three: Methodology

### Introduction

My research adopts what could be considered a descriptive qualitative approach as it draws from a variety of qualitative methods and “is not guided by an explicit or established set of philosophic assumptions in the form of one of the known qualitative methodologies” (Caelli, Ray & Mill, 2008, p. 2). Henderson (2011) argues for a need to use qualitative research to better represent leisure related *lived* experiences (p. 342, emphasis in original). In particular, to better understand the justifications and motivations that underlie certain recreational time-use choices for children, I think research should explore the reports of adults involved in making the leisure-related decisions for them. Semi-structured interviews and Thematic Analysis (TA) are a particularly useful approach in the study of human behaviour (Henderson, 2011) and are often used to explore subjective phenomena such as meaning and experience (Clark, 1998). Adopting this type of qualitative approach facilitated the generation and analysis of parents’ accounts of the choices they make about children’s discretionary time-use.

Accounts comprise of individuals’ descriptions of events, perspectives on ideas, and recollections of experiences. They often include retrospective explanations of reason and motive for particular actions or choices (Cardwell, 2014; Orbuch, 1997), and can provide both subtle and direct insights into topics under discussion. By collecting parents’ accounts, I plan to “depict and understand the ways in which [they] make sense of their actions and to gain insights into cultural beliefs” (Cardwell, 2014, p. 9) that influence parents to make particular time-use choices for children. Research that exemplifies these ideas, and which informed my study, include Veitch et al.’s (2006) examination of parents’ perceptions of influences on children’s active free-play, Wall’s (2010) examination of mothers’ experiences with intensive parenting discourses,



and Dunn, Kinney and Hofferth's (2003) study of parental ideologies and children's after-school activities.

As "many *correct* techniques can be applied to collecting and analyzing data" (Henderson, 2011, p. 343, emphasis in original), it is crucial that time is taken to ensure the methodology or combination of methods utilized for a given study are justified. With the aim of ensuring that validity and rigor are not called into question I have paid close attention to the articulation of the rationale behind my choices. In the following sections I provide theoretical justification for my methods of sampling, data collection and analysis. I also draw attention to ethical considerations, validity, reliability and research limitations.

### **Sampling Strategy**

Patton (2002) suggests there is no ideal sample size for qualitative research, as long as it is large enough to be credible given the purpose of research and small enough to permit suitable depth and quality of information. Marshall (1996) claims that in qualitative research an appropriate sample size is one that adequately answers the research question. As this cannot be known at the beginning of the research journey, particularly one that is following an emergent approach, it was crucial to have a "flexible research design and an iterative, cyclical approach to sampling, data collection, analysis and interpretation" (Marshall, 1996, p.523).

My initial approach to sampling was fairly traditional, and could be considered a mixture between convenience sampling and judgment (or purposeful) sampling (Marshall, 1996). I used an element of convenience sampling by using easily accessible subjects who volunteered to participate; however by specifically aiming my early recruitment towards full-time stay-at-home parents of school-age children, I was slightly more purposefully targeting those whose explanations for time-use choices might share certain characteristics in common. Specifically, I

hypothesized this particular sub-section of parents were not placing their children in structured programming solely to meet childcare needs, and had the option of providing their children with a variety of time-use options. Also important with this sub-section of parents was the belief that they typically do not have large economic barriers preventing them from enrolling their children in structured programming should they choose. By meeting these criteria, I hoped to more directly extrapolate other ideas from the parents' accounts.

I sent an email (Appendix B) with a recruitment poster attached (Appendix C) to a network of my personal contacts. These personal contacts were those of close friends or acquaintances who had previously given me permission to contact them. In the case of referrals, I asked for my personal contacts to pass along information to their networks, and have individuals contact me only if interested. I did not directly contact anybody I did not personally know, who had not expressed an interest in participation and being contacted. The same information (email and poster) was also sent to the University of Victoria Child and Youth Care Listserv<sup>1</sup>. Poster advertisements were also placed at local Vancouver community centres and other locales that provide middle childhood extracurricular program options. Finally, the same information was also shared through a personal status update on my Facebook account. Those viewing or sharing the information were doing so freely, and could contact me only if interested.

Within several weeks of implementing my recruitment procedure, I had heard from seven individuals. Upon follow up, five were secured for interview. At this point I was still unsure whether such a small number of participants would generate enough information for analysis. I remained open to the possibility that I would have to return to my sampling and recruitment, extending my data collection in search of greater breadth or depth.

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<sup>1</sup> The Listserv is a mailing list that includes past and present graduate students in Child and Youth Care at the University of Victoria.

## **Participant Profiles**

Although I was not exclusively recruiting mothers, no stay-at-home fathers volunteered to participate. Two of the participants lived in the Westside of Vancouver and the other three lived in different areas of the Lower Mainland. None of the participants were friends or acquaintances. Of the five participants, I had met three of them before, in a very brief context. I had not previously spoken with any of them about the topic. Each of the participants reached out to me via email expressing an interest in participating after having had my recruitment email forwarded to them.

All of the mothers were living and parenting in partnership with their children's fathers, who worked full-time. This is relevant because time-use decisions are undoubtedly affected by custody arrangements for families who are not a single-family unit. For those families I spoke with, the mothers made all of the time-use decisions, occasionally consulting with their partners for input. All of the parents I spoke with had two children. This point is important as the number of children's lives being juggled undoubtedly affects discretionary time-use decisions. Four of the participants I spoke with had two daughters, and one had both a daughter and a son. Kathryn<sup>2</sup> lived in the Westside of Vancouver, and had Emma, age 7, and Rose, almost 9 years. Samantha had Jemma, age 8, and Sarah, age 11, and they lived in Port Moody. Jennifer, from West Vancouver, had Rachel, age 7, and Susan, age 5. Denise had a 12 year-old daughter, Jenny, and 8 year-old Ella. They lived in North Vancouver. Sandra lived in the Westside of Vancouver, with her 8 year-old son, Oliver, and his younger sister Maya, who was 5 years old.

## **Data Collection**

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<sup>2</sup> All names have been changed to protect anonymity

My data collection, or inquiry, involved individual, semi-structured, in-person interviews, conducted in the home of each participant. Each participant was interviewed twice, except for one, who was only able to talk with me once. An individual rather than group interview approach was selected for this study, as the possibility exists for greater confidentiality and trust (Kirby et al., 2006; Van den Hoonaard, 2012). For example, as peer pressure from other parents may influence parents' accounts, a group dynamic comprised of multiple peers might restrict open dialogue. The site of the interviews was suitably private and comfortable to allow for a relaxed interview dynamic (Van den Hoonaard, 2012) as well as for high quality digital recording to take place. I also took observation notes to reflect on important visual information that would have gone undetected on audio recordings. Employing a loose, semi-structured question template (Appendix A) ensured that the interview covered the general topic areas of interest, but was flexible to evolve as suitable (Kirby et al., 2006; Padgett, 2008; Van den Hoonaard, 2012). Semi-structured interviews are often considered to be in-depth interviews, preferred in qualitative research due to the rich nature of data generated (Ritchie & Lewis 2003; Van den Hoonaard, 2012). One main advantage of an in-depth rather than structured interview format is that there are no set rules so the researcher can adapt or alter questioning to ensure collecting a greater quality and quantity of suitable data (Kvale, 1996; Kvale & Brinkmann 2009; Van den Hoonaard, 2012). Prompts can be used when necessary to encourage more detailed responses (Veitch et al., 2006) and to explore interesting ideas or concepts that arise (Kirby et al., 2006). I tried to avoid asking leading questions and interrupting participants, instead ensuring I was actively listening to responses and allowing the information offered to be as unaffected by my input as possible. Each interview was approximately sixty minutes long and was recorded

digitally. At the end of the interviews, participants were offered the chance to have their transcripts returned to them for editing.

After transcribing the interviews verbatim, I read and re-read the material, sitting with the data for a period of time before formulating loose themes. Looking at both *what* the participants said and *how* they said it was important to my analysis. Sometimes a tone of voice or the use of humour provided insight. I also paid attention to any contradictions as this shed light on areas being navigated with uncertainty. While the individual responses are not representative of any particular group of parents, the accounts I collected highlight ways of thinking that inform my understanding of the topic. The conversations I had provided information to support some of the claims I had found in the existing literature and they also drew my attention to possible discrepancies with current research. Perhaps most valuable for me, my conversations brought to life the experiences of parenting and the challenges involved in making decisions about time-use.

As previously mentioned, when commencing my research journey, I was interested in finding out what parents' accounts of their children's discretionary time-use could contribute to the existing dialogue on over-scheduling and a decline in play. In particular I was interested in the experiences of parents who did not have childcare needs and economic barriers as principle concerns. With such a broad focus, my initial data collection and analysis raised a number of issues and implicated a huge associated body of literature. I loosely structured my initial findings into several themes: the critical window, all or nothing, prioritizing sports, busyness, outdoor play and childhoods past, what's school all about, and technology. For the mothers I spoke with, extracurricular program participation seemed to form the backbone around which all other time-use decisions were made. Within the categories I had developed, I noticed that a number of the themes were specifically related to activity participation (the critical window, all

or nothing, prioritizing sports, busyness). I also found that the other themes were discussed in relation to activities (technology use, school, outdoor play and childhoods past). Conversations about time-use, both formal and informal, always came back to structured program involvement, the way time-use balance (though different for each family) is maintained around it, and the changes in activity participation that have taken place over the last few decades.

The ideas and ways of thinking I encountered from these five accounts gave me insight I had not expected. This led me to make the decision not to continue interviewing more parents, and rather return to the same participants for a second series of more focussed interviews. I had developed a good rapport with the mothers I had already spoken with, and felt that by returning to talk in greater depth with them I could better explore the ideas I was working with. I refined my research question to focus more specifically on these parents' accounts of their decisions around whether to enrol children in scheduled organized activities, the intensity and frequency of participation, and the striking of a balance with free time. In particular, I wanted to consider this their experiences against the background of multiple and often contradictory messages about the best use of school-age children's discretionary time. I also wanted to delve deeper into the concept of uncontrollable busyness. The intensity of extracurricular program participation is especially fascinating to me. It often seems that parents (and not just those I spoke with) do not want to be as busy as they are and wish their children had less chaotic schedules. I wanted to better understand this contradiction.

A year after our first conversation, I spoke again with four of the mothers. One participant, Sandra, was unable to speak with me again due to personal circumstances. During the second interviews, we briefly talked about time-use changes that had taken place for them since we last spoke, and then focused our conversations specifically on the structured activities

they were involved with and the busyness that engulfed their lives. A list of the questions I used to guide my follow up interviews can be found in Appendix E.

### **Data Analysis**

Strengths of TA include its relative ease of use for the novice researcher, its generation of unanticipated insights, and its flexible application (Braun & Clark; Padgett, 2008). Thematic analysis involves extensive examination, organization, and coding of a data set to generate themes that are then used for discussion and description (Aronson, 1994). The TA process can be broken into six stages (Braun and Clark, 2006): 1) Familiarization of data; 2) Generating initial codes and patterns; 3) Grouping codes and searching for themes; 4) Returning to data and reviewing themes; 5) Formalizing understanding of themes through defining and naming; and 6) Producing a final report. While TA is frequently focused on common findings in data, it is equally important to make note of outlying or anomalous data findings as they may inform analysis in diverse and insightful ways (Kirby et al., 2006). For example, a theme might come to fruition from a particular concept or idea that triggered emotional responses from participants, was met by silence or confusion, or elicited a variety of other notable findings. The number of thematic categories, subthemes, or codes is influenced by the size of a data set, the length of time devoted to analysis, and the researcher's experience and familiarity with the topic.

I continued the first three stages of the process until I reached a process of saturation and I was no longer finding new themes or codes (Kirby, Greaves & Reid, 2008; Padgett, 2006). In particular I sought examples within the data that provided explanations and justifications for particular time-use choices. This involved isolating instances when my participants provided a conscious depth to their descriptions and explanations, or when repetition of certain ideas offered insight into common assumptions of beliefs. In the first phase of my research this resulted in

seven groupings. Moving onto the fourth phase, I expanded my ideas through the collection of further information. This included a second round of interviews as well as a return to existing literature. As I sat with this new data, re-considering the themes I had generated, a new system of conceptual understanding evolved. The new arrangement coherently offered me a way to organize most of my findings in a unified manner. The fifth stage had been achieved. With the goal of presenting findings in a straightforward manner, I paid close attention to ensure that I remained reflexive and avoided dogmatic or authoritarian tones (Ryan, 2006).

### **Ethical Considerations**

All research was conducted in accordance with the University of Victoria Human Research Ethics Board stipulations. Approval was sought prior to commencing any data collection, and again when an extension to data collection was necessary. This included consideration of consent, confidentiality, risk and inconvenience.

Participants were made aware that in order to respect confidentiality, all identifying data was stored in a safe location (password protected folder on my password protected laptop) that was only accessible by myself. In all formal written documentation that resulted from the study, participants' identities were made anonymous. Both hard and digital copies of data will be destroyed upon completion of this project.

Potential risks of participation were communicated to all participants. The primary risk being that some of the questions inquired about concerns parents may have related to their children's time-use and activities, and could have potentially lead to feelings of distress or discomfort for the participant during the interview. The questions I perceived to be more sensitive were asked later in the interview, once a safe and supportive interview environment and rapport had been established. I prefaced such questions with phrases such as "if you feel



comfortable to answer...” or “this can be a sensitive question, so feel free to take your time answering...”. This was to remind participants that at any time they could choose not to answer any question they were unsure or uncomfortable with. Although none of the participants I consulted exhibited any kind of distress, I was prepared to give them the opportunity to take a break, move onto the next question, or terminate the interview entirely, should it have been their choice.

To participate, participants were asked to give up an hour or two of their time. In the case that they needed to make childcare arrangements during the time of meeting, they were offered a childcare stipend. All participants were also offered a gesture of appreciation, in the form of a \$20 gift certificate. Given the small monetary value of the gift, and the economic bracket from which the participants all came, the gesture of appreciation did not act as an incentive for participation. In the case that a participant had chosen to withdraw from the study, any compensation, including the childcare stipend, or gesture of appreciation gift, would have been honored.

All of the above information was communicated to participants throughout the process. As consent is not a form, but rather an on-going process, I made sure to build in opportunities for consent along the way. Prior to meeting with a participant, they were emailed a consent form (Appendix D) to review. At the time of their interview, after I reviewed the document with them, participants were asked to sign it, agree to the terms of the study and the digital recording of the interview. I took time to ensure that they realized participation was entirely voluntary and that they were free to decline answering any of the questions. At the end of the interview, all participants were offered the opportunity to review their transcript and edit any responses. Although all participants declined, building in the opportunity for such review is in accordance

with the idea of on-going consent. It also provided a way of being ethically accountable to the participants, ensuring they have the opportunity to validate the researcher's interpretation of the conversations held.

### **Reliability and Validity**

Kvale (1995) highlights that there is not solely one means of achieving validity within qualitative research. In the context of this study it is important to draw attention to two approaches. The first is pragmatic validity; that is, that “validation is verification in the literal sense – ‘to make true’ ” (Kvale, 1995, p. 32). I subscribe to the pragmatic belief “that an ideology or approach is true if it *works* (i.e., if it can advance scientific knowledge in a field or provide practical benefits and/or solutions to problems)” (Henderson, 2011, p. 342, emphasis in original). The second is the notion of validity through the “quality of the craftsmanship in research” (Kvale, 1995, p. 26). Validity is not a final product to be sought, but results from verification that “is built into the research process with continual checks of the credibility, plausibility, and trustworthiness of the findings” (Kvale, 1995, p. 27).

Throughout this chapter I have discussed ways in which I have attempted to be accountable to the validity of my research. During data collection I implemented interviewer strategies that facilitated open communication and avoided influencing responses as best as possible. A verbatim transcription followed by rigorous reading and re-reading of my data, was done to ensure that unique themes were generated from the data set, rather than just a rehashing of research questions. In the subsequent chapter I do not speak of “emerging from the data” as this implies the passive involvement of the researcher. I was actively involved in generating both the data, and the themes (Braun & Clark, 2006; Taylor & Ussher, 2001).

Acknowledging the limitations of a study is perhaps the most integral way to seek validity. All research has limitations. These limitations are related to the methods used for sampling, data collection, and analysis. Any given methodological approach may fall under scrutiny, unless such limitations are communicated alongside any findings. Appreciating that the data gathered is valid within a unique context is vital to its ability to be considered true.

With this study, the group of participants interviewed represents a small sample size of a specific sub-set of parents. My research was exploring ideas generated from parents' accounts, and it should be noted that the participant responses are by no means representative of any particular group of parents. It is possible that a self-selection bias may exist for participants who elect to participate because they have an interest in the topic. "Fixing meaning(s) is not a neutral act, and that the questions raised reflect particular interests" (Henderson, 2011, p. 343). My findings are based on a selective set of answers to a limited number of questions asked during two specifically located and time-restrained interviews. Interview answers may have been grounded in participant's perceptions of me, the researcher, as perhaps somebody younger, without school-age children. Furthermore, individual, social, and historical contexts serve as scaffolding for the questions posed and the answers provided (Ryan, 2006) and therefore my findings cannot be generalized to apply to any group other than the individuals studied (Kirby et al., 2006). It would be challenging to replicate identical results, as dynamics of conversation and analysis experience would certainly differ. I acknowledge that while my research might reach valuable conclusions, it is partial and revisable and unique to the product of interactions between researcher and participant (Ryan, 2006).

While the interview data itself was a co-creation of meaning between researcher and participant, the themes extrapolated from the transcripts were generated without consultation

with the interviewees. To remain accountable for data and findings, a number of possible options exist. Examples include the presence of a second interviewer or coder and the implementation of member checking. I sought accountability for my analysis by discussing the themes I constructed with participants during my second round of interviews. This gave them the opportunity to comment on earlier statements, and ensure I was accurately representing their ideas.

### **Summary**

Conducting research that is reliable, accountable, ethically sound, and congruent with the questions it seeks to answer is by no means a small feat. I have addressed some of these challenges through a theoretical exploration of my approach to sampling, data collection and analysis, ethical concerns, and limitations. By having followed and communicated the steps outlined, I hope to have justified my methods for research that explores parents' accounts of the choices they make about their school-age children's discretionary time-use.

## Chapter Four: Analysis and Discussion

### Introduction

The following chapter is broken into two parts: Busyness and A Culture of Fear. In the first section, I discuss how the information gathered from my interviews assisted me in conceptualizing busyness through the visualization of a matrix. In particular, my understanding looks at how different layers of the grid each adds complexity, tightness to the schedule, and generally contributes to the feeling of inevitable busyness that engulfed the families I spoke with. In particular, I examine why frantic lifestyles seem unavoidable and beyond the control of the individual. As structured activity participation is one of the primary factors adding to busy lifestyles, in the second section I touch on some of the influences drawing the mothers I spoke with to enrol their children in organized programs. In particular, I examine how a culture of fear appears to impact time-use decisions. I break down fear based parenting decisions to what I see as their root motivations: protection, prevention, and preparation. I then briefly discuss collected examples of protection and prevention; however, my focus lies with the preparation approach, which made itself most visible in the data I collected.

### Part 1: Uncontrollable Busyness

**A complicated matrix.** The descriptions some of the mothers gave me of their typical schedules were incredibly informative. They allowed me to understand the precision with which their lives were organized. Kathryn said that free time was a novel concept for her children and described their lives as “go, go, go”. She proudly explained the coordination of her children’s lives to be “a very complicated matrix”. Almost without taking a breath, she, gave me the following run-down of her Monday and Tuesday afternoons:

Yeah, it’s complicated, because I want Emma to have as many opportunities as Rose, and there’s conflict, like Monday for example, I couldn’t do it without my mum. So I have a

lot of help from my mum. I'll drive, from here, the half a block to school, so I can park my car facing the right way, I'll rush them into the car, we'll drive over to my mum's, which is in Kitsilano, I'll drop Emma off at my mum's, because Emma has dance that starts at 4, at Kitsilano Community Centre (KCC), and Rose has gymnastics at starts at 4 at Hillcrest Park so then my mum takes Emma to dance, and I take Rose to gym and then my mum will pick Emma up from dance and give her dinner. Then Tuesday is the same. Emma has skating that starts at 3:30 at KCC and Rose has gym that starts at 4, so my mum will meet me at the ice rink at 3:30. I'll again drive to the school, park facing east, drive to KCC, get Emma's skates on, my mum comes from her ballroom dancing...so she'll come and meet me at the rink, and take-over, stay with Emma, and I'll take Rose to gym, and then she'll take Emma to her place, give her a snacks, and then take her to Sparks for 5:15.

She relied on her mother at least three days of the week to make the logistics of her daughters' schedules work, and even with that help, she still had to plan the schedule down to the minute. To feel that the direction in which you park your car has an impact on the flow of your day suggests a tensely programmed schedule. Kathryn wished her oldest daughter could also take part in swimming and music, but said she didn't have even the spare 10 minutes each day necessary to practice an instrument, let alone commit to a swim club. When she described leaving town for the weekend, she said she had to leave her husband a "manifesto" containing almost minute by minute information on where to be at what time and with what snacks and equipment.

When asked about the biggest challenge she faced regarding her children's time, Kathryn in an extremely matter-of-fact manner said "food and sleep". In particular, she found it difficult

to ensure that a nutritious meal was consumed on the evenings when her 8 year-old participated in gymnastics until 8pm. As the program her daughter was in started at 4pm, she did not have time for a proper dinner, and had to find quick and easy snacks that would still provide enough nutrition. At night, the struggle was then “getting her to unwind and get to sleep”. She said this was the case at least three night of the week.

Another participant, Samantha, was going though her week and said, “Monday...umm...is now the busy night I guess”. She then followed this up with “Wednesday night...that’s kind of our busy night”. She also felt their weekends were busy. At one point in our conversation, she pointed over to the hallway drawing my attention to her children’s after-school bags, which were already pre-packed with all the necessary equipment and snacks for their afternoon and evening activities.

The complicated logistics of successfully scheduling children’s time seemed to result in the parents being controlled by their calendars. In my conversation with Jennifer, I noticed she kept glancing over at the wall every time she was talking about activities. When I looked over to see what she was glancing at, she said “sorry I keep looking at the calendar”, which was pinned on the wall in the kitchen. She then laughed and went on to talk about the challenges of accommodating social engagements, scheduling different seasons of activities, and trying to fit everything in. When probed in more details about how she organized her time Jennifer explained:

We [herself and other mothers] talk about it a lot. We are always communicating. ‘Hey! There’s gymnastics, ‘are we doing it again with the girls?’ or you know, it’s registration; it’s quite stressful for these places too. 10 in the morning you’re on the computer and you’re stressing out because you want your child, your child wants to do this, wants to do

it with your friend, so you always have to be on top of it, and if you're not at 10am in the morning registering your child, you're not going to get the times you want or anything like that, or you child's not going to get into some programs. It's quite challenging yes, and you just have to be really really organized and on top of it.

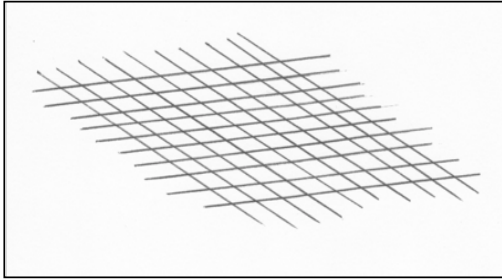
Denise, who wasn't very organized and didn't previously live by the calendar, was pressured by her daughter to become more organized so as to be able to coordinate her time more successfully. She said:

I found it a bit of struggle, because I'm not very organized, like I never think ahead about how they are going to use their time, we tend to just do things spontaneously, but it became really difficult, because lots of kids had activities, because if you weren't organized, you didn't know when their activities were, then I would turn up and see, oh and so and so come today to our house, oh no, no, no, they've got this and they've got that. So that yeah you have to be organized. ... This is the first year that I've actually gone out and bought a calendar, where I write things down, so that I know who is going where.

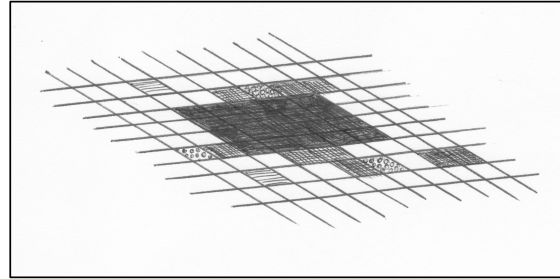
These quotes illustrate that organization and scheduling are key factors influencing time-use decision-making, and affecting the busyness of lives.

As I listened to these mothers' accounts, I found myself conceptualizing free time on a matrix. The blank matrix (figure 1.) represents a child's time. First, their regular school hours are blocked in the centre and then structured activities are added outside the school hours (figure 2.). I opened most interviews by asking parents to tell me their children's ages, and to describe what a typical week looked like for each child outside of school hours. I was careful not to specifically mention structured or organized activities in this opening question, indicating that I

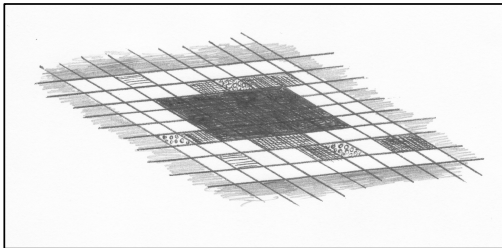




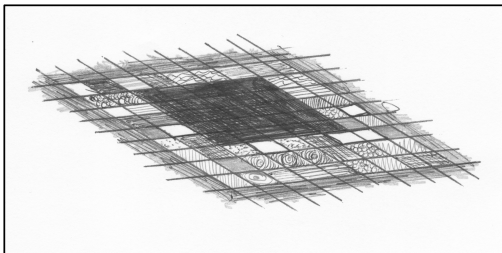
*Figure 1. Blank time matrix.*



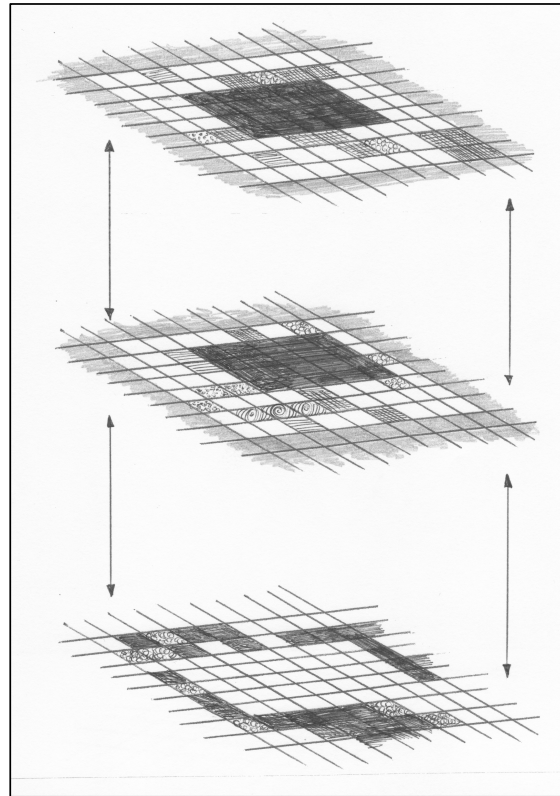
*Figure 2. Time matrix with school in the centre and activities surrounding*



*Figure 3. Time matrix with school and activities filled in plus sleep around the periphery*



*Figure 5. Time matrix with very limited blank spaces that represents free time*



*Figure 4. Matrices trying to aligning with one another adds to the complexity*

was interested in any discretionary time activities. However, my participants for the most part quickly listed the different structured activities that took place on each day. This suggested that they placed a certain time-use priority upon organized activities that are regularly scheduled. It also led me to conceptualize these activities as a first layer of the grid. When I did ask specific

questions about structured program involvement, I did not separate activities into categories such as sports, arts, and enrichment; however the responses parents gave demonstrated that the mothers used such activity groupings to conceptualize and organize their children's time. To represent different categories within structured activities that parents use to break down their children's time I used different hatching (for example, checked, striped, spotted, light, dark) in figures 2, 3, 4 and 5. The need to create a balance of scheduled activities adds complexity to the picture, and is something the mothers I spoke with took upon themselves as an important responsibility. Within the structured activities, my participants placed importance on the role of sports involvement, which was always the first activity they discussed. This may simply be reflective of the specific individuals I spoke with, or it may be indicative of a larger time-use hierarchy or parenting obligation, as I discuss in the later section titled "Prevention – The Worry About Doing Nothing".

After activities, some time is then filled in for sleeping on the edges (figure 3.). I placed sleep after activities, because several of the mothers I spoke with told me about how their children's programs were at such times that they eroded into their typical sleep routine and resulted in the children being kept up past their bedtime, or being awakened early in the morning, before their natural waking.

Interestingly, on several occasions a parent later added into our conversation an activity that their child participated in which they had forgotten to mention during their introductory list. "Oh, and we also do piano". These were often school-based activities which took place before, during, or immediately after the school day, or music and tutoring. "Oh yes, I forgot on Wednesday there is also choir before school". This type of comment added to the sense of jam-packed busyness that I understood to engulf the mothers. In telling me about their busy

schedules, there was so much going on that it could barely be recollected in one conversation. Though some matrices had seemed reasonably empty, as I was conceptualizing them they were filling in by the minute. The matrix in figure 5. highlights how intensely packed a grid can become, with very few blank squares of free time. This would include eating, chores, homework, play, travel time, family reading, etc. One mother told me about having to feed snacks and even dinner in the car on the way to activities, while another made mention of the need to fit homework in before the evening activity routine commenced.

If there are two or more children in a family, they will likely each have their own unique matrix, especially if they are at different schools (which was the case for three of the families I spoke with) and participate in different activities. These matrices layer on top of one another and the picture becomes more complex (figure 4.) A parent's matrix is a fusion of their children's, resulting in a schedule that is more chaotic than for the individual child. If children are at different schools, those blocks may not align. Activities may be at different times, and matrices might also include personal activities, work, and commitments. For children at this age, their matrix is also typically a fusion of their siblings. All of the mothers I spoke with had on at least some occasions brought one child along to a siblings activity, even if that child was not participating themselves. This is one of the reasons that even though a child may not have a jam-packed activity schedule, their free time is still limited and structured by the schedules of others.

In addition to the individual family matrices, parents are continually working to ensure that their grid aligns with that of organizations offering extracurricular programs. This is visualized as the bottom layer in figure 4. Although figure 4. depicts only three matrices layering on top of each other, the reality is that there is an indefinite numbers trying to align. As I discuss in detail in part two, organizations seem to be continuously expanding their offerings

and complicating their grid (filling in more and more squares). The timing of their programming is typically outside the school hours, but includes afternoon, evening and weekends.

Furthermore, many schools provide extracurricular activities that are added on as an extension to the school day, resulting in the solid black school squares gradually creeping outwards. As the school day and structured out-of-school activities usually do not have much flexibility, when something new is added into the mix, it is typically free time, mealtime, family time, and sometimes even sleep that are compromised.

On top of aligning with program offering organizations, parents also try to find common free time between their schedule and other families' schedules. The responsibility to organize playdates (a date and time set by parents for children to play together, usually at one of the children's homes) seemingly lies with parents, because busy schedules, increased urbanization, and fear about independent outdoor play, means spontaneous social interactions are increasingly rare for children today.

The mothers I spoke with were continuously occupied with maximizing efficiency and coordinating with the matrices of other families. Children's love for playdates was unanimous amongst my sample. So was the challenge of coordinating them with other families. The following comments relate to playdates and scheduling challenges:

They ask for play dates **all** the time...if I give them too many activities throughout the week, you know, they won't have time for play dates, which is what they really like.

(Jennifer)

Jemma really likes to have friends over too, but it's harder because all the kids her age seem to be really busy. (Samantha)

It's harder because a lot of their friends do loads of activities...so there's precious wee moments, like an hour here and an hour there, that they go on and hang out and play.

(Denise)

Ella does play a couple of times a week, but I mean we know the days it happens because it fits in with what she's doing and what her friends are doing, and there's little room, well I mean there's 3 days a week where they can just play spontaneously, if whatever child she asks hasn't got something else. But otherwise, you need to be, you've got your calendar...it's sometimes hard in the summer as well because a lot of kids are in programs, and doing various things. (Denise)

This playdate that Rose had with her friend from gymnastics, I arranged two weeks ago.

It's crazy. (Kathryn)

Usually it's planned. Yeah usually it's planned. There are some parents who are like, ok I'm taking your child today. Sometimes with their schedules it's hard, you know on day when he has something going on at 4, like an activity, it doesn't work, you know, but usually we plan it. That way, I'm a planner. So I like to know what's happening in two days. (Sandra)

As arranging playdates presented challenges for the parents I spoke with, organized activities were used as a substitute. It was sometimes seen as easier to enrol children in the same class, than find time that was mutually free.

They loved it and they had fun, but I think they had fun because their friends were there, not because they really enjoyed ballet. So I guess that would be the pressure of just doing it because our friends were doing it (Jennifer)

They love it. You know what they enjoy, they love being with their friends. I think that's a bonus for them. You know. And they love to see their friends. So it's great. We all the parents, coordinate all the camps (Sandra)

I believe that with play dates they learn how to interact with the other kids. And having that socialization. We do a lot and we love it. (Sandra)

It would seem that sufficient social interaction is one of many inputs that parents feel the need to take responsibility for to ensure optimal childhood development. This almost formulaic approach to programming your child's life with suitable activities is discussed in more detail in the second section of this discussion.

**Inevitability.** When I first spoke with the mothers, I was pregnant, and not yet a parent myself. A year later, when I conducted my follow up interviews, I had a 10-month old son. It was fascinating to see how this altered our conversations. The participants talked to me as a mother, often directly addressing the inevitability of the journey I was about to embark on. When talking about the challenge of time-use options, and deciding what to do with her children's time, Kathryn said, "you know in a couple of years you're going to be having to think where you are going to send your son to pre-school". She was implying that the decisions and choices about time-use are inevitable, and that busyness follows whether you want it or not. She also said to me later in the conversation:

And all of a sudden ... and you will find this as they get older, if not by the end of the school year, by the end of the summer, you know what your fall schedule looks like. Jennifer talked to me about how the reality of busyness is not something you can understand until you are immersed in it. She alluded to this inevitability being something I would soon

know more about. I was fascinated to learn that this aspect of parenting is something that often feels out of the control of parents.

Denise and Samantha were both quite against busyness. Samantha said, “I hate that they have scheduled activities all the time”, while Denise said, “if they don’t ask to do things, then I don’t organize things for them, because I’m quite happy not to be doing things”. These two mothers who intentionally fought against busyness still spoke of being victims of external pressures that resulted in lifestyles that were more hectic than they would have preferred.

Although my participants felt, for the most part, to be in control of their schedules, there was still an element of surprise at just how busy their lives had become:

I never thought we’d be such a programmed family (reflectively). That life would be a little bit more unstructured, but it just didn’t work out that way. You can’t have it all. You can’t have exposure to all these things without the juggling and mass scheduling. (Kathryn)

I didn’t think we’d be rushing from school every day. Last year was almost every day that we were getting into the car to go somewhere. (Kathryn)

I always said I’ll never be, I’m not going to be that parents whose kids are busy all the time, and now I feel like I’ve turned into that parent. (Samantha)

I hear that it gets busier when kids get older. I don’t know, I thought it was already busy, but I hear there are other things. (Jennifer)

My understanding is that the feeling of inevitable busyness comes from the tendency of the grid to fill itself up. It is like a scale that continuously tips towards too heavy. Although the number of extracurricular activities varied between the families, each tried to make decisions based on finding a functional balance for their lives. Once a working balance was obtained, over

time, schedules had a tendency to move towards the ‘too busy’ side of the scale, eventually calling for a drastic decision to be made about dropping an activity or re-claiming some un-programmed downtime. Once balance was re-claimed, it seemed that the cycle would slowly repeat. Denise said you had to make an intentional and conscious effort to say when enough is enough because “there is always another email asking if Jenny and Ella want to do this or that and it sounds so wonderful and good fun”. Jennifer said that “there is always something we could be doing” when talking about their free time. She also told me that:

your kids hear all these other kids, what activities they are taking, so they are all like ‘I want to do that, and I want to do that’ and they want to do everything all the time.

When your schedule was organized with enough free time in it to accommodate what your children were asking for, she felt it was sometimes hard not to just add another thing in, thus tipping the scale towards busy. It was as if the idea of saying no to your children was more difficult when you couldn’t use time-logistics as an explanation for why they could not do something.

Utilizing persuasive anecdotal evidence, Rosenfeld & Wise (2000) argue that many parents no longer accept that a well-lived childhood must include rest, relaxation, reflection and free time. Rather:

as our society has become postmodern and even more insufferably materialistic, we have also bought into the consumerist view that the next generation is entitled to have, if not all, at least almost everything they want. And not just materially. What our kids deserve is happiness, nothing less, 24-7. (p. 204)

Life that lacks pizzazz and excitement is quickly perceived as boring and dissatisfying, and not surprisingly, “kids are unable to find some low-tech way to entertain themselves for more than a



few minutes without complaining to us that they have nothing to do” (Rosenfeld & Wise, 2000, p. 215). Thus activity involvement breeds the desire for more activity involvement, and is a method of preventing the boredom.

Denise thought that busyness and successful management of a complex schedule was also something many people were proud of. While she tried not to have her kids be too busy, she felt that other parents got something out of saying they successfully managed having their children be involved in many activities all the time. She said being busy and managing to coordinate the logistics of many activities was “like a badge of honour”. I subtly detected this kind of pride from several of my other participants. Jennifer, when talking about music lessons which she planned to enrol her daughter in the following year, said, “I don’t know how I’m going to fit it in, but I’m going to have to make it work” (Jennifer). Her tone of voice suggested that she would proudly rise to the challenge of fitting another activity into their already complicated schedule. Samantha joked about how she had to be in three places at the same time, but somehow made it work. She had strategies to make it work, such as leaving her activity early, car-pooling with other parents, and dropping children off slightly early or late for a program. This supports Shore’s (2003) idea that “parents’ laments about children’s increased busyness may be, at least partially, insincere concerns; [as] this “busyness,” although stressful at times, is in fact a preferred state of being” (Shore, 2003, paraphrased in Kremer-Sadlik et al., 2010, p. 31).

Denise continuously referred to herself as lazy, almost suggesting that was why her daughters didn’t partake in as many activities as other children. But she also felt it was part of her personality, and she just liked to have a slower paced lifestyle. Although she didn’t agree, she thought, “there’s that feeling that, if you’re not in fulltime employment and you’re not doing

something with every minute of your spare time, then you're wasting you time". She said, "it's part of the big narrative that we have to be doing something all the time. You can't just, be, ... because it's a waste of time". She also told me about how she felt there was a middle-class mentality that if you could afford to enrol your children in activities, then it was your obligation as a good parent to do so. In part two of this chapter, I offer a more in depth discussion about the idea that parents are responsible and obliged to ensure that time is not wasted and available resources are utilized. First however, the analysis explores how my participants' memories of the past contributed to my understanding of a busyness that is inevitable.

**The way it was.** Several of my discussions naturally tended towards children always being told what to do and not knowing what to do with free time. In particular, several parents made reference to the fact that during their own childhoods they had more free time and were given more autonomy and independence. While the adults I spoke with seemed to hold powerful recollections of their own childhood experiences, it seemed that their memories did not drastically affect the decisions they made about their children's time-use. Rather it was accepted that times have changed and childhood can't be the way it was, particularly when deciding between structured or unstructured time. This was an important aspect of my conversations that contributed to my understanding of a busyness that seemed uncontrollable. In the opinion of Samantha, times have changed as "when I was 8 I used to get on my bike for hours and come home at dinner time". Jennifer said that:

Where I grew up, it was you know, let the kids run around outside the house, not really watching them, it was just a different mentality.

Some comments Kathryn made were:

Where we lived there was only houses on one side of the street, and undeveloped land on the other and we would just go play in the bush for hours. There were freedoms our kids don't have.

I do look at my kids and I think they are always being told what to do, whether it's by me, by a teacher, by a coach, they're always being guided in what to do. ...It would be nice to find a little more balance of them not always being bugged at, but it is what it is.

Kathryn said she'd been busy as a child and participated in lots of structured scheduled activities, "but there was a lot more freedom too, I rode my own bike to the pool". As these mothers talked about a difference of mentality and freedoms that no longer exist, I saw not just a sense of autonomy that has been taken away from the children, but also the parents. These mothers communicated to me that they would struggle to give their children greater freedom and autonomy because they feel the pressure of a parenting mentality that prioritizes safety, protection, and control of risk. Kathryn's statement that 'it is what it is' communicated her acceptance of this mentality.

## **Part 2: A Culture of Fear**

One of the societal trends suggested to have influenced parenting over recent years is a culture of fear (Franklin & Comby, 2009; Guldborg, 2009; Valentine, 2004). In recent decades, the media has played a large role in publicizing rare occurrences such as kidnappings, child murders, and school massacres. Heightened awareness of such incidents, however uncommon, has created a widespread panic amongst parents about the presence of risk to their children. With additional media focus on injuries occurring from risky activities, such as unsupervised play in both urban and rural environments, Euro-Western society has seen a shift towards the intense mitigation of risk from children's lives. This trend is made even stronger when it is

framed in a culture of litigation that seeks to find somebody or something negligent for all misfortunes, however genuinely accidental. Furthermore, the explosion of available information in today's digital era means that parents are exposed to an abundance of opinions and advice, and faced with the challenging task of making their own decisions amidst the chaos. "Parents are bombarded with conflicting advice from 'experts' and battle to walk the line between allowing their children to be 'free range' and wrapping them in cotton wool." (Franklin & Cromby, 2009, p. 161). Romagnoli and Wall (2012) suggest:

Evident over the last two decades, and contributing to an expansion of parenting expectations, are the increasing number of risks that children are perceived as needing protection from, and an increasing focus on parents as risk factors in children's lives. (p. 274)

In fact parents themselves are framed as being risk factors if and when they don't make the 'best' decisions for their children's development.

Fear-based parenting decisions appear to be made with three principal goals in mind: protection, prevention, and preparation. Making decisions based on protecting children from both real and imagined danger such as wildlife, traffic, murderers, and kidnappers is the norm for most in the middle class. So is preparation for life as adults in a competitive and cutthroat society where university attendance is the standard level of educational achievement. This 'Triple-P' mentality is one influence that undoubtedly affects the decisions parents make about their children's time-use, and was clearly illustrated by several of the mothers I spoke with. The influence of a protection mentality was openly acknowledged, and even joked about by some of my interviewees, suggesting an awareness that behaviour was grounded in an alarmist parenting culture that they realized was not necessarily rational. Strangers, traffic, and wildlife were

specifically mentioned as things to protect children from and reasons for not allowing children to play independently outside or walk to school alone. In contrast, prevention and preparation decisions were not demonstrated to have an acknowledged rooting in a climate of fear, instead being taken far more for granted as correct or good parenting. Examples of prevention mentality time-use decisions include limiting screen time and ensuring suitable physical activity. Preparation underlies the decision to enrol children in skill building activities and organizing time around academically enriching extracurricular programs. Protection, prevention, and preparation all provide motivation for increased enrolment in structured extracurricular programs.

**Protection – traffic, strangers and the unknown.** Not surprisingly, several of the mothers I spoke with were aware that decisions they made were influenced by the desire to protect their children. In discussing why her children were not allowed to walk to school, or even to the swimming pool only two blocks away, Kathryn said:

Because things do happen, and even in our neighbourhood, not in the last year or so, it was a couple of years ago, but we've had reports of suspicious behaviour...people approaching kids.

She then reflected back on her childhood:

I'll have to ask my mum how old I was when I walked to school by myself. It might have been an extra half block away...you had to cross a busy street. I was pretty young I think. We walked with friends. That was a long time ago, in a really small town, without emails of sightings of weird people and white panel vans.

Her last comment is interesting as it demonstrates she is aware that the perception of risk has increased. In our second interview she made another informative comment. She was telling me

about how since we last spoke she had made the decision to allow her 10 year old daughter to walk one block from her school to the community centre, to meet her there for a program. They had done a test walk together, talking about strangers, and implementing a family password. When she told her husband, he had said, “you know I wouldn’t blame you if something happened”. She then said “and I just thought...what [deep breathing]...what does that mean exactly?” As she was talking, I could see anxiety and guilt regarding whether she had made the right decision and was providing her children with a suitable level of protection. Although her husband said he wouldn’t blame her, this only reinforced her feelings of responsibility.

Sandra also demonstrated an awareness of protection as a motivating influence. She had the following to say:

I think that parents are really paranoid nowadays with just keeping their kids safe.... some parents don’t like their kids being driven by anybody else, some kids don’t, sometimes what happens too is that the kids are fine, but the parents aren’t...I think parents are so umm...protective over their kids nowadays.

Samantha told me of a parent she knew very well who went to everything her children participated in, and how time consuming it was. She also talked about parental monitoring when it came to outdoor play:

I think we’re an anomaly, and I don’t think a lot of parents would let their kids play out there [in the forest], I think a lot of parents are over protective. There was one girl who lived on the street that was not allowed back there without walkie-talkies with the parents, which I totally understand, but I don’t know, gosh, when I was 8 I used to get on my bike for hours and come home at dinnertime. Times have changed.

A number of studies have demonstrated fear to be an influence that motivates parents to

make certain time-use decisions for their children (O'Brien and Smith, 2002; Veitch et al., 2006). Veitch et al. (2006) interviewed seventy-eight parents from five different primary schools in metropolitan and outer-urban Melbourne, Australia, and found that the primary barriers to independent outdoor play were parental fears and child independence. Fifty-eight percent of parents raised safety concerns in relation to active free-play. Also discussed was the importance of physical spaces in which children were able to play. Increasing urbanization and dangerous streets were also a concern for many of the parents.

That the decisions parents make about their children's time-use are motivated by a desire to protect their children from risk is widely known. For this reason I have chosen not to provide further examples from my data. However, in exploring influences that affect extracurricular program involvement, fear and protection are important to keep in mind. A variety of studies have aimed to specifically highlight dangers for unsupervised children (Pettit, Bates, Dodge, & Meece, 1999; Richardson, Radziszewska, Dent, & Flay 1993; Vandell & Shumow, 1999) and "called attention to organized activities as a means to provide safety and supervision for children with working parents (Mahoney et al, 2006, p. 3). Organized activities provide environments that alleviate fear, with staff supervision and safe purpose-built spaces part of the package. Protection is undeniably a motivating factor for involvement in structured programs.

**Prevention – the worry about doing nothing.** For many of the mothers I spoke with, structured program involvement was used as a preventative measure that buffered against the supposed negative outcomes associated with doing nothing or having too much downtime. Several of them mentioned challenges or concerns with giving their children free time.

Sometimes when we have nothing my kids don't know what to do with themselves, it takes them a while to get into the mode of entertaining themselves. (Kathryn)

She [Sarah] finds it hard to work out what to do when she doesn't have a screen or scheduled or...whatever. (Samantha)

You are constantly being told what to do, or it's screens and stuff, where it's constantly changing. I totally agree with that. They don't know what to do with themselves when they're not doing something scheduled. (Samantha)

I keep them occupied in camps, because if they are home, there is really nothing, I feel like there's nothing to do. (Sandra)

Basically if they spend time outside that means I have to go outside. (Sandra)

I think that parents don't want their kids to sit around. And it's sitting around means playing outside, they don't really want them, I don't think they really care for that. I think that instead they want them to be in some kind of activity. (Sandra)

Above and beyond general concerns with doing nothing, excessive technology use, inactivity and obesity, and delinquency during adolescence were three specific examples I found of behaviours that the parents hoped to avoid or prevent.

Even before I specifically asked any questions about technology, I noted that the decision to enrol children in organized activities appeared to be linked to the desire to avoid excessive technology-use. The mothers made comments about their dislike of when their children had free time their go-to of choice was usually technology. Kathryn stated that given a choice of what to do, her daughter would rather watch television, therefore she wasn't given an option, and was enrolled in activities that her mother felt were more beneficial. Samantha expressed a similar sentiment about her daughter, stating "sometimes I wish she was a bit busier so she wasn't doing the screens and stuff". As a result, it seemed that most of the parents had rules about technology use. These included no screens before school, no screens during the week, no technology use in



the bedroom, and time duration limits for approved periods of use. I think it is likely that the rules around technology use are connected to many years of popular media coverage about the detriments of excessive screen time and technology use. Technology has often been portrayed as a bad guy, with too much screen time linked with obesity, behaviour disorders and other negative outcomes. The concern that too much technology use might have negative developmental outcomes is definitely related to a prevention mentality.

One of the reasons that structured involvement in sports seemed to have a high priority for the parents I spoke with was the connection with the suggested need to ensure sufficient exercise and prevent obesity. Samantha's original explanation for enrolling her daughter in gymnastics was "always for her to get some exercise" while Jennifer stated that "they are exercising, that makes me happy". Denise spoke about one of the benefits of one particular activity as "fun and exercise". She also went on to articulate in more detail the responsibility parents feel for ensuring their children exercise adequately.

also the other thing about their activities, is, well it's a catch 22, because parents don't let their children run out in the streets anymore, and then **they feel like they have to get in that other period of exercise**, and they're always **recommended an hour of a physical activity a day**, so that's when the activities come in. To get them doing something, where they are running around, or expending some energy.

Witten et al. (2013) noted that involvement in sports clubs was "sought by parents to increase their children's physical activity in lieu of informal play" (p. 225). A study by Wheeler and Green (2014) that explored parenting practices and middle-class parents' perceptions specifically in regards to children's sports participation found that:

the parents in question saw sporting involvement as a benchmark of 'good' parenting. It

was seen to promote social, psychological and physical benefits, in addition to being enjoyed by the children. Promoting and supporting their children's sporting participation was "endowing them with social and cultural capital that they perceived would afford their children advantages both in the short- and longterm (p. 279)

Given health concerns relating to rising childhood obesity rates globally, it is perhaps not surprising to find a perceived correlation between good parenting and childhood exercise. What is particularly interesting is that exercise is perceived to be something that must come from structured activities. Research has in fact suggested that free and spontaneous play may be a more effective means of burning calories and keeping physically active (Bailey et al., 1995), yet it would seem that this type of time-use is not generally seen as the top obesity preventing choice.

A third example of prevention that presented itself was the idea that keeping busy could help avoid trouble during adolescence. Kathryn, who had one of her daughters in competitive gymnastics, specifically said to me that she did not have Olympic aspirations for her child. Rather, by enrolling her children in sports at a young age, she hoped they would find something that "makes them feel good about themselves, particularly to carry them through those yucky teenage years". She continued to explain that she felt participation in sport would provide them with a "sense of confidence and self esteem and a love for sport, to give them a goal, and something to do when they are teenager, rather than going to the mall". The idea of enrolling children in sport at a young age, to buffer against delinquency in adolescence is fascinating, and leaves me wondering where our fears about teenage years emerge from.

From the examples presented, I understand extracurricular program involvement can be seen a preventative solution, and decisions to enrol children in organized activities might be

influenced by such thinking. While both the protection and prevention mentality are not expanded on in more detail in this discussion, they form a foundation upon which the dialogue on preparation is built.

**Preparation - the critical window.** For all of the mothers I spoke with, structured program involvement was seen as an integral part of successful preparation for life. One factor that came across as influential for time-use decisions for several of the parents I spoke with was the idea that there exists a critical window of time, during which the exposure to certain activities is most beneficial. Kathryn articulated that:

my philosophy on activities is that I wanted to **expose them** to as many things as I could **while they were young.**

She went on to communicate that her exposure philosophy was because as her daughters, currently aged 7 and 9 became older, school was going to become more of a commitment outside the classroom hours, and therefore they were going to have to make more choices about their discretionary time. While not for exactly the same reasons, Jennifer made the following statements about the importance of early activity involvement:

You just **don't want your kid to be left behind**, and you want to see what is the thing that they gravitate towards.

When you get older, and all your friends have been playing soccer since, you know...**it's harder to learn and catch up.** So I just think that the smaller the kids are, the better it is for them to learn different things. They learn quicker.

For Jennifer, there was a perceived period of time in middle childhood during which learning through scheduled activities became a priority. She spoke of how her focus on learning from activities had heightened since the early years when she was less concerned about program

content. Later in the interview she stated that her seven year-old daughter was “coming of age that she should be introduced to it [music]” further supporting the idea that there is some kind of optimum age for exposure to certain activities. When I followed up with her a year later, she told me about her concerns that even at 7 or 8 she was starting too late. She said “I do worry a little bit, I mean she’s 8, and they say music should start, the littler they are the better they will pick up on the sounds”. She told me that she spoke with other mothers of younger children who were enrolling them in music programs, and this caused her to feel some anxiety. She had chosen not to put her daughters in music until they expressed an interest, which wasn’t until recently, but she said almost a little regretfully that she hadn’t been able to immediately capitalize upon her daughter’s interest as it had taken a while to find a teacher and organize lessons.

Sandra also conveyed to me that she took for granted the knowledge that during the first 8 years of life it’s easier for children to catch on right away. Time and time again throughout the interview she expressed concerns about the apparent expiration of opportunity:

I don’t want him **to miss that opportunity** and these are the years where they learn so fast...well I think everybody is trying to keep up. Everybody is trying to. Well my kids are in this, my kids in that, just trying to keep up. You don’t want your kid to **lose that opportunity**... I believe **there’s a certain window**, and umm...if they don’t, if they don’t learn it now, it’s **going to be harder for them as they get a lot older**.

Although many of the parents articulated a belief that they had choice and control around their children’s time-use, they seemed to take for granted the importance of early exposure. The certainty with which they talked about a critical window of time suggests they are operating within a system of thinking that they perhaps do not believe can be challenged.

Illustrated by the previous quotes, the ‘critical window’ mentality and the importance of capitalizing on early involvement can be broken down into more specific aspects. This includes: a) the belief that children are naturally better at learning things when they were younger; b) the idea that children could miss out on opportunities if they do not try lots of things at a young age; c) the concern that other children would ‘get ahead’ and have a competitive advantage, d) the idea that at a young age you can and should tap into children’s natural skills, and see what they ‘gravitate’ towards, and e) the idea that to learn things children must be in programs.

While activity participation for lower social classes is associated with shielding children from harm, Bennett, Lutz & Jayaram (2012) point out that an emphasis on structured activity participation among the middle class can be understood by considering shifts in parenting practice regarding children’s play and the shift towards “a parenting logic that helps transfer class advantage” to children. This is what Lareau (2003) terms “concerted cultivation”, or the intentional preparation of children for recreating middleclass standing. Paraphrasing another author, Olfman (2002) eloquently states:

we create work for our children in the form of skills development, whether it be dance classes or foreign language study, or we provide them with endless entertainments. This creates a culture of egocentrism in which children are groomed to be the best at several activities to further their own sense of worth, but that have no immediate bearing on the welfare of society. (Olfman, 2002, p. 56 paraphrasing Damon, 1995)

Some of these ideas have been suggested to be relatively recent beliefs that stem from advances in developmental psychology that seek to understand the architecture of the brain (Wall, 2010). Starting in the ‘90s, parenting advice was influenced by what has been termed ‘new brain research’ (Romagnoli and Wall, 2012). Wall articulates that the “brain development

advice itself borrows from the language and authority of neuroscience to frame children's brains as technologically complex machines that need the correct inputs in order to attain maximum efficiency at a later time” (Wall, 2012 p. 254). This thinking is exemplary of the preparation aspect of fear-based parenting, and has been translated into parenting advice that leaves little room to be questioned, casting parents and caregivers “as the engineers and programmers charged with the task of making the correct inputs, and the potential consequences of neglecting to give children what they need in this regard are portrayed as dire” (p. 254). Wall (2004) also believes that such thinking is linked with tenets of neo-liberalism, and angst about the need to equip children with skills to cope as individuals in a swiftly changing world.

Wall’s (2010) qualitative study of 14 mothers of children age five and younger demonstrated that “the brain development discourse had always been in the background during their child-rearing years and was part of their taken-for-granted understanding of good parenting” (p. 256). Wall suggests that much of the focus is on the early years; however, my conversations suggest there is spillover into the middle childhood years.

In follow up interviews, I asked some of the mothers what they thought about the critical window, and few of them were aware of such thinking. Only Denise demonstrated that such knowledge should not necessarily be assumed as true. She made the following rather astute comment about her awareness of such knowledge constructions:

I think it’s this sort of, very recent, idea that your children have to be involved in activities, they have to be exposed. In some ways I think it’s a great thing, because they do get exposed to all sorts of things, because they do get to do things they’ve always wanted to do, and lots of parents can’t always do that on their own

While not equating thinking specifically to the ‘new brain research’ discourse, she perceived that

sporting competition was compelling organizations to promote the belief that children must start activities at a young age if they want to excel:

all these sort of sporting organizations want to have this huge, much bigger, net to choose them, so it's starting younger and younger, and they are putting out this whole idea, this philosophy that you have to start them really young, because **if they're not doing it before they're five they're not going to be the best.** But I mean, yeah, how true is that?

When I asked a senior coach for a competitive Vancouver youth soccer club what he thought about the suggestion that competitive (and recreational) sporting organizations are demanding kids to do more and more organized programs at a younger and younger age, he had the following to say:

the reason for more organized soccer programs is that kids do not get enough free-play, They don't play enough. Society seems as though we're **scared to allow our kids to organize their own games**, and families need their kids to do something and if its organized and supervised then great (A. Dunn, personal communication, December 22, 2014)

He went on to elaborate that he felt time spent playing independently used to be when children learned the basics of many sports themselves, but that since this was no longer happening, organizations offered programs to younger and younger children so the fundamentals could be mastered at young ages. In order to be competitive at the highest level, he felt that age 11 or 12 (when they typically had children full-time in their program) was too late to learn the basics. For this reason, their soccer club offered camps for elementary age children. While this is only the opinion of one coach from one club, it is not unreasonable to suppose that other organizations support a critical window mentality as well.

In our second interview, Denise commented that organized play activities (such as gymnastics and dance) were being “sold as an extension to education”. She said that she’d seen leaflets for one gymnastics organization that clearly laid out the “step by step benefits to your brain when you’re dancing”...including “dance will help you with your mathematics”. In disbelief she said:

I couldn’t believe how scientific they’d made it sound on the leaflet...it was some study they’d done and it was put in this very scientific way, that related it [gymnastics] to your cognition and neurological well-being

This demonstrates that ‘new brain research’ has not focussed solely on the early years, and is being used directly to market participation in programs during middle-childhood. While Denise was sceptical of the information, she felt it was likely that this type of study sways many people. Sandra made a related comment about the worry of wasting time.

Because it’s [time outside] wasted...because I think that to keep up, you know, to keep up with everything, if it’s academic, if it’s sports, they want them to be reading instead, right? Instead of that play time outside. This is my thought. This is the overall thinking of the parents. I see at school and talking to parents, they don’t’ really... I don’t know if they really care for that [time outside].

With the responsibility for preparing children to be successful placed on parents, there seems to be little interest in leaving things up to the unknown. While many skills were previously learned through unstructured or free-play opportunities, there is currently a focus on the importance of structured activities for learning certain skills:



My mum sometimes says...they'll learn to ride a bike, why do you have them in a bike camp...I didn't you know...I just kind of taught you myself. I don't know how I learned to ride a bike, but I did (Jennifer)

You're a great swimmer because you took lessons (Sandra)

I feel like parents now, what I get are, very, like...worried in a sense, or not worried, or they just want their kids to learn everything, like skating and swimming, and it's just something you do. Get your kids into these after school activities. (Jennifer)

There was far greater mention of things learned from structured activities than those from unstructured free time. Several parents mentioned that the programs their children were involved in taught them things they would be otherwise unable to learn independently. Activity participation was providing something that gave their children an opportunity to increase their portfolio of skills and prepare for later life.

One seemingly important aspect of the decision to involve children in sporting activities was the value of being part of a team. All of the participants mentioned the importance of having their children be involved in a team sport:

Well for Sarah, soccer was a big thing as it was a team sport. She's not...she's a real...bit of a...leader/loner...like she'll work independently, and she's not great at being accepting of everybody on a team. So that's been really good for her. (Samantha)

I believe a team sport is really good for them. (Jennifer)

The one things that [my husband] and I agree is that we wanted them to play football, because we wanted them to be part of a team, and you know, follow and be part of that for years and years. (Denise)

I just hope that with Oliver, in soccer, just having a team sport you know, just umm...not so much being a good soccer player, but a team sport. You know, having to work hard, making sure that he works with his teammates. (Sandra)

While such statements do not give me permission to draw conclusions about the importance of team involvement for all parents, they raise interesting questions about what aspects of team involvement might be viewed as most valuable, and why sports are a preferred means of teaching such values or skills to children. Would previous spontaneous interactions with other neighbourhood children have provided the same opportunity for team skills? It is possible that underlying team involvement is a focus on individual skill acquisition. Rather than viewing things from a collectivist perspective, which might concentrate on the benefits afforded to society as a whole, team involvement is often seen to give the individual the skills to function more successfully as an independent individual. This is an exemplar of Bennett, Lutz and Jayaram's (2012) suggestion that an emphasis on structured activity participation among the middle class can be understood by considering shifts in parenting practice regarding children's play, and the shift towards "a parenting logic that helps transfer class advantage" to children. They go on to suggest more specifically that, "families have come to understand (at least somewhat) the relationship between activity participation and educational (and occupational) opportunities" (p. 151).

The idea that children need to be competitive in order to be successful is one that is explored in the film *Race to Nowhere* (Abeles & Congdon, 2010). The documentary's principal argument is about the negative impact of the excessive pressure placed on students by schools, which results from a culture of achievement that supports memorization and standardized testing. Long school days, coupled with large volumes of homework, and the expectation that children

participate in a number of extracurricular pursuits are hypothesized as causing depression, anxiety, drug-use, addiction, and in some-cases even suicide. It is suggested that a focus on success at a young age has emerged as a result of the “system that the elite colleges and universities developed to evaluate the best and the brightest” (Stevens, 2007, p. 247, in Bennett, Lutz & Jayaram, 2012).

When I asked Kathryn about her thoughts on living in a competitive society where you need to equip your children with skills to succeed she said:

Yes we do. Yes we do. ... It is a very competitive society and there are people who will send their kids for extra math tutoring just to get ahead. Everyone is worried their kid won't get into university. ... It's a hard world. Anybody could go to university when I graduated from high school. You just decided which university you were going to go to. Were you going to go to SFU or UBC? Were you going to start at Langara or were you going to go to UVIC? You just went. Assuming you graduated with relatively okay marks, you just went; but now, it's a different world. In those days, you got a degree and it actually meant something, like an undergraduate degree was worth something, but not so much anymore. It's much harder. It's a harder world to navigate.

Denise added to this topic by articulating that she thought, “we live in this competitive society where everybody is expected to go to university” and when you fill out your application “you have to say all of these things you did when you were younger”. She felt that this was typically a perspective of middle class parents, and even though she was wary of it, she often caught herself being engulfed by the mentality. She told me that she has caught herself saying to other parents such statements as “**when** the girls go to university” rather than “**if** the girls go to university”. She also said that a “when” rather than “if” mentality towards university is something that many

parents communicate to their children. It would be interesting to explore whether such assumptions about future academic achievement are subtly influencing what school-age children are expressing an interest in doing with their discretionary time.

Some technology time-use decisions also appeared to be demonstrative of a preparation mentality with a foundation of worry about a child being left behind. While on the one hand it seemed that the mothers were wary of intensive engagement with digital devices (as discussed in the prevention section), on the flip side a desire to ensure children didn't fall behind in their technological abilities was expressed. This supports findings by Witten et al. (2013) who found that although parents were wary of excessive technology use, they felt competency with technology was "crucial to their children's future employment prospects" (p. 223).

In particular a few of the parents I spoke with made comments about the inevitability of technology and its role in children's life:

Do I think kids are too addicted to technology, absolutely, but technology is their world. If they are not up on technology **they will get left behind**. That is their reality. It wasn't ours. (Kathryn)

It is our present. If they are not technologically savvy, that's **going to do them a disservice as an adult**. When they are out there in the job world, job market, if you don't know how to navigate a computer. (Kathryn)

Oh it just **seems to be the future**. Like that's how kids, that's how they're using smart boards and what not at school and computers, so they need to know, I suppose I kind of feel like it's a bit like, **to not allow them to use it, is maybe the equivalent of not allowing them to use a ball point pen**, when they were invented. That's the way things are going. (Denise)

It's frustrating and it's hard because I don't know what the answers are for technology.  
(Samantha)

Several parents also expressed concern that as their children got older, and technology was more integrated in their lives, decisions about technology time-use were only going to become more challenging. There was uncertainty and conflict as participants wanted to prevent their children from falling victim to the supposed harms of too much technology, while at the same time ensuring they are technologically prepared to excel in today's digital era.

**Preparation – 10,000 hours.** A particular aspect of the 'critical window' worth discussing is the belief that for children to be successful, and perhaps achieve high level or competitive activity involvement, they must participate in intensive programs at a young age. In providing rationale for activity involvement, Kathryn said:

At this point, I just want them doing whatever it is that they are doing. Even if it is not super productive, if it's not a super productive swim program, at least they are in the water. It's kind of just building up the 10,000 hours, or whatever. Not that I expect them to do 10,000 hours (laugh), but just you know, it's either time in the water, on the ice, in the snow.

Although on the surface this statement suggests she doesn't have a particularly strong agenda for putting her children in programs, her reference to "the 10,000 hours, or whatever" suggests a target for exposure that she is working towards. She is referencing "the 10,000 hour rule", which was proposed by Malcolm Gladwell (2008) in his book *Outliers: The Story of Success*, and suggests that this is the number of hours of practice required to achieve mastery of a skill. By pulling me into the conversation, and using the expression "you know", she alluded to knowledge that she sees as commonly known, and perhaps taken as fact. Interestingly,

Samantha also made reference to the same idea. When talking about reasons children are in so many activities, she said “and I know there’s the whole practice thing, you know Malcolm Gladwell’s 10,000 hours or whatever”. Her comment suggests that preparation ideas such as this one have filtered into the parenting sphere and are influencing decisions.

Coincidentally, three of the five mothers I talked to in my early interviews had experience with the choice to involve their daughters in competitive sports, specifically gymnastics. One child had been in the competitive stream since age three, one child had very recently entered a competitive training program at age eight, and another had been offered the chance to join the competitive program at age six, but decided against it. It is interesting to see how several of the mothers viewed the element of choice and decision-making. Kathryn, whose now 9 year-old daughter had been in the program since a young age said the following:

That’s not...well it is our decision as in we could say no, but **it wasn’t our decision** to put her into that. You have to get in...it just evolves from there. And every year they decide whether they invite you back into that program or not.

After being asked how they ended up deciding to take a competitive route with one sport, she began to say that it wasn’t her decision, then retracted, acknowledging they could have said no, and then reinforced her belief that it was not a choice they had consciously made. Rather, she felt it was a decision that had been made for them by the organization and her daughter’s natural talents.

It was particularly informative to talk with Samantha, whose 8 year-old daughter, Sarah, had recently entered the program (only two weeks prior to our first interview). She felt that the decision to enrol in the competitive program was presented by the organization as if “it wasn’t

really an option that we wouldn't do it". Although she saw it differently and ultimately felt the decision rest in their power as parents:

Two weeks ago she [Sarah] got asked to join the competitive team of gymnastics, so **it went up from an hour and half a week to 15 hours a week**. So I spent a lot of nights actually stressing about it, going back and forth, considering everything I've always said. We're kind of doing a month trial to see how it works. We're just starting our second week. It's all new!

Her statement "everything I've always said" refers to an earlier articulated philosophy that her children would do no more than two activities at any one time. Typically this meant activities no more than twice a week. For Samantha, going against her previous values was not something that was easy to do, but in light of her daughter's strong desire to pursue the competitive option, she had agreed to trial the opportunity. Samantha expressed several statements that demonstrate aspects of the thought processes that played into her decision-making.

Now with this gymnastics, your brain get's going, and it's like...**is she going to get a scholarship or bursary**, I mean it's ridiculous, I hate that that goes through your mind. That's not why we are doing this, I don't really know why we are.

It scares me too, she's eight and doing 15 hours, **what it is going to be when she's ten?** Twenty hours? And I'm pulling her out of school on Wednesday afternoons. So it's just...it was a big decision.

There's a girl who is 11 and she's there 24 hours a week, and she's out of school 4 afternoons a week. **And in my mind I'm like...I don't want to do that**. But at the same time, if she came to me when she was 11 or 12 and said I don't want to do it anymore, I'd think...really? **We've spent all this money and time**.

Parents seem to want better opportunities for their kids, and that's why I think kids are overscheduled too, you know **if they're told that they're good**...I mean I guess that happened with gymnastics, you get told they are at this level, like with hockey, and you want them to be better.

The first quote demonstrated what Samantha saw as an almost uncontrollable thought process that projects one into your child's future and has you imagining grandiose achievements, even though the reality is that very few make it to the highest level. Carl Honore's (2008) book *Under Pressure: Rescuing Childhood from the Culture of Hyper- Parenting* opens by touching on a similar idea, suggesting that parents have a tendency to hear about their child's natural ability, and jump very quickly to try and harness or fine tune the aptitude, often to the detriment of removing the child's enjoyment of the activity.

The same idea is raised in the fourth quote, when Samantha makes reference to the power of being told that your child is good. While the projection of great things to come was one aspect that impacted this participant's choice, she also demonstrated anxiety around her belief that this was just the beginning of a seemingly uncontrollable growth in time commitment that would unfold over the following years. Rhetorically asking, "*what is it going to be when she's ten*" showed an almost comical disbelief about just how much time competitive pursuits can consume. Kathryn, whose daughter had been in a competitive program for many years, expressed a similar awareness of the escalation in time commitment, but seemed more accepting that it was a natural course of progression. "Rose does 12 hours/week, so she's there 3 nights, for 4 hours, and probably at some point she'll bump up to 16 hours/week this year. So it'll be 4 days at 4 hours".



Denise, who had experience with the choice to participate in a competitive stream, but declined, was also very aware of both the increasing time demands and pressure placed on her to tap into her daughter's natural talents. She made several informative comments:

So we eventually when she was about 6, took her to gymnastics to try it, and she really liked it, but within a couple of weeks of being there, they were like...oh **you know, she's really good**, would you put her into the pre-professional and I just felt that's not what I wanted for her. I didn't want her in **something that she's going to every day**...and that that's ...because it went from, she's going there to an hour, to well it would be three times a week for two hours, and then **each year it goes up and up**.

I could see how it could happen. Like with the gymnastics thing, I can see how parents, because I can see them there, and they are so into it, and you know, and I can see how that can happen when somebody tells you you're child is quite good at something, that you can easily be sucked into doing more and more and more, and encouraging them to do more regardless of if they want to do it or not.

It's almost like there's this drive that **everybody has to be the best at everything** right now. You can't just do things by half measures. I don't know...there may be really positive outcomes for some kids, when they are really talented at something.

We're living in this society where everybody is just **competing, competing, competing all the time**, and I just think that sometimes we have to accept that we can't all be brain surgeons or the best at everything.

Ultimately, the reason they had decided against the competitive program was that their daughter had not been whole-heartedly committed to the idea. Had her wishes been otherwise, Denise felt the decision would have been much more difficult.

So Tom [Denise's husband] and I discussed that and we didn't think that was a good thing for her. And then as a sort of second aside, we decided to ask her what she thought, and I think she realized that she didn't want to do that either. So when we asked her if she wanted to do more, she said, no, she kind of just wanted to go for the one hour, and umm...and only do it once a week, and then get to do whatever else she wanted. So I was kind of pleased with that, because I struggled with that, because **had she said yes I love it, and I really want to do it, I don't know what I would have done.**

While most of the conversations I had with parents were around competitive gymnastics, a few participants also made reference to other sports in which they felt this 'all or nothing' approach was present. Kathryn mentioned that her daughter would love to be part of a swim club, but because "she didn't have time to train 3 nights a week" she wasn't able to partake. To be in a swim group that met her level and needs was not possible unless she could commit fully to the competitive program. Denise had a very similar experience with swimming:

Jenny wanted to swim, she really loves swimming, but she didn't want to just keep doing the swimming lessons, she wanted to be in a team. But not so much for the competition, I don't know why it was, I think she wanted to learn how to swim really well. So we tried, I tried to sign her up for swimming lessons, and she had to swim five days a week at 6am in the morning, to be part of this team. I said to the guy, like, that's a bit extreme. Is there nothing that she can do, can she come you know once or twice. 'No...well no, you know. **If we really want them to be the best, this is what they need to do.**' What if you don't really want them to be the best, and she wants to be part of a team, and she doesn't care if she's the best and she just wants to do it? But **there was nothing in between.** It was that, or it was swimming lessons.

Dance programs also seemed to provide an opportunity for increasing intensity of involvement. It was described as a “snowball effect” that sees involvement become “more and more and more” (Denise). From her experience she described a sense of guilt associated with not allowing their children to increase involvement to high levels of intensity. Denise said that one had to be wary that you are not:

sucked into doing more and more and more, and feeling that when they are not doing more, that somehow you are neglecting, or holding them back somehow from being really good at something.

Specifically, Denise had felt pressured by the instructor to have her daughter sit examinations within the program, even though it wasn't a mandatory component. Her daughter, Jenny, had said she didn't want to do them, which the parent knew, but when communicating this to the instructor, there was discussion about the challenges she would face if she changed her mind down the line and was behind other children. Both the idea of intensive involvement and the critical window theory support the idea that you are depriving children of future opportunities if they are not doing enough at a young age.

**Preparation – lost investment and wasted time.** The idea that children might change their minds about interest and involvement was a concern when it came to pulling children out of an activity they had already invested a lot into. The importance of not wasting both time and money seems to be paramount. In a quote from the previous section, Samantha expressed concern that in the future her daughter would change her mind about involvement in gymnastics. She said she might feel as if the whole experience had been a waste of time and money. This suggests that activity participation has a more long-term purpose than enjoyment in and of the

moment. Later in the interview, Samantha returned to this idea, with a story of a child in the neighbourhood, whom she felt was victim of this thinking:

I know there's one particular kid on this street, I don't think he wants to play hockey at all, I think he wants to play soccer, but his parents have spent so much money and he's in one of the bigger winter clubs, and not just playing for [the city]. In a private club and money, I don't know if they would say to him that he could quit if he came to them.

Denise communicated similar worries:

they've invested so so much time in it, and then you turn out you're not the best at it, and what kind of impact does that have?

With respect to gymnastics, which both her 5 and 7 year-old daughters took part in,

Jennifer said:

I don't really know if they are learning much. Or I don't see much of a value...I don't know if there's any value, and I'm not sure what they're getting out of it.

This statement supports the idea that fun or enjoyment is on its own not enough to give an extracurricular activity value, but rather there ought to be some kind of educational component involved. Some parents are continuously evaluating the choices they have made based on whether they are providing their children with valuable opportunities, or wasting their time.

One particular type of time-use that is often not seen as valuable is independent outdoor play. This type of play was an activity that would seemingly take place when a rare block of free time was present, such as immediately after school or on the weekend if neighbourhood friends happened to have a similar free time window. Interestingly, none of the parents talked as evocatively about their children's experiences in scheduled indoor activities, as they did about their outdoor free-play. Yet, when it came to scheduling, very little time was allocated for such

time-use. When I asked Denise why she thought this was, she said that climbing trees and playing in the forest were not skills that could be written on a resume and therefore people don't care about it. She said, "it's more about saying 'oh, I did dance for 13 years' or 'I reached this level' ". Though their children might seemingly be having more fun, if there is no tangible benefit, this type of time-use is not viewed as constructive. This supports the belief that to make free-play a priority, it needs to be presented using the language of long-term benefits and outcomes, as in-the-moment enjoyment is rarely a priority, but rather a side benefit.

There is in fact beginning to be a trend towards using new brain research to argue for the benefits of free-time. Supporters of unstructured and independent play have been forced to make arguments for their case within the dominant paradigm of correct inputs for maximum efficiency, or incorrect inputs for decreased efficiency. An article recently published in *Frontiers in Psychology* is touted as one of the first studies to scientifically address the question of how an increase in structured and scheduled activities may affect brain development in children. Barker et al. (2014) gathered information from seventy parents about their 6-7 year-olds' schedules (daily, annual and typical) and categorized time-use into structured and less structured; then using an established verbal fluency task, they measured children's self-directed executive functioning (for example, independent goal setting and actualization of these goals). They found that children who spend less time in structured activities had better self-directed executive functioning, and that those with more structured activities had poorer scores. Their results held true even when time-use that was questionably structured was removed from analysis. Still, given the limited sample size, and singular method of measuring executive functioning, results should not be sensationalized. The study raises a number of interesting questions for future exploration and undoubtedly paves the way for future work examining the possible benefits of

unstructured time. If there are valuable skills that are not learned through extracurricular programs, and rather afforded by unstructured time, as supporters of the loss of play movement argue, then such information seemingly has to shape itself into ‘new brain research’ and be transmitted to parents, educators and society in general. If more studies continue to seek such evidence, it will add to the complexity of *scientifically proven* mixed messages that parents must navigate around the ‘best’ use of children’s time.

**Preparation – mixed messages and responsibility.** Both the existing literature and the conversations I had with my participants demonstrate that there are contradictory messages directed at parents about time-use. For example, children need to learn how to use technology but too much technology use may be damaging; participation in extracurricular programs provide opportunities for positive developmental outcomes yet too much over-scheduling may result in negative outcomes; children’s happiness is important yet there are certain things they should or could be learning that will be of benefit in the future; children should be kept safe from the many risks of today’s dangerous society, but independence and autonomy are important to healthy development.

When a focus on childhood as the time to prepare children to be successful as adults interacts with ‘new brain research’ that provides supposedly concrete information as to the ideal time to teach certain skills, a complicated template for ideal parenting emerges. Anxiety about not being a good parent and providing children with suitable opportunities abound. It is exacerbated by competing discourses of what it means to be a ‘good parent’ that bombard parents with contradictory messages. An overload of mixed messages was undoubtedly influencing the mothers I spoke with. When Kathryn described her family as “the poster family for over-programmed”, she used a tone of voice that acknowledged she felt that she was looked

upon with disdain by many other parents. In her self-identification of having an over-programmed lifestyle, I was very interested to note subtle comments she made that spoke to her understanding of what it meant to make good time-use decisions. When asked if her life was too busy, her response was generally that they had the balance right for their family; however, she still made reference to the external pressures she felt to fit into a certain behaviour pattern:

Well yeah, that's the funny thing. So I scaled all this gymnastics back, **and I was very proud of myself**, I scaled everything down. And we had all this time [laughter]... and all this pent up energy...so we added one more day. And all of a sudden she's busy one more day, so all of a sudden she's busy seven days a week, and I'm like... 'oh **I was so good for like a minute there**'.

After hearing her responses, I specifically asked what made her think that she'd been 'good' and should be 'proud' of the decisions she'd made to cut back activity involvement. She replied with:

We have scaled back. The amount [hours] of activities she [Rose] does is still less than she was doing with just gymnastics last year. So we can come home and we have time to unpack backpacks, get homework done. We have one night a week when we can actually sit down for a family dinner. We are all here! So we can introduce some other things that we're missing. There were definitely some elements that were missing in our family dynamic.

I followed up by asking if those were the elements that suggested balance and good decision-making. Her response was:

I'm not barking at them all the time saying "let's go, let's go, let's go", because it all lands on the mum or the parent that's doing the driving. So last year we had to get out of

school, get in the car. So my rotator cuff was sore from feeding snacks this way [she gestures the repetitive stuffing of food behind her in a car as you drive] every day...park a certain direction because everything was scheduled so tightly. So even now that the kids are at two different schools it's not so tight.

When I pushed her for more information about where her understanding of what elements made up a good balance, she seemed somewhat unsure of how to answer. The closest she came to offering an answer was when she later said:

Oh we knew those needed to be fit in. There's lots of research that shows family dinners are vital for family dynamic, but we just didn't have the time. Between their activities, and my husband's work and his own activities, we were just...from 3pm we were all just ships in the night. We just decided our family needed to focus more on this.

When I specifically asked her about her thoughts on children being over scheduled she said the following:

You know it's a double-edged sword. I mean are kids over-programmed?

Yes...absolutely. And sometimes when we have nothing my kids don't know what to do with themselves, it takes them a while to get into the mode of entertaining themselves; however when in the summer, when we go away somewhere, like we go camping every summer, they are fine. There's no technology there's no schedule, and they are fine filling their day. They are not standing around saying "I don't know what to do". They can definitely find ways to entertain themselves. Yes I have heard that when you over-program your kids, sometimes they lose that ability to entertain themselves and to be creative thinkers, but I'm not sure I agree. Sometimes I worry about it a little bit.



I do look at my kids and I think they are always being told what to do, whether it's by me, by a teacher, by a coach, they're always being guided in what to do. So it would be nice to find a little more balance of them not always being bugged at, but it is what it is for now. They seem to be okay. I don't see them pulling the wings of any bugs yet, so I think we're all good. Nobody has kicked the dogs yet [laughing].

These statements suggests that Kathryn's concerns about over-scheduling are related to the idea that children aren't learning how to make independent decisions and entertain themselves and that busy schedules might be impacting the physical and mental health of children. Her last sentences allude towards violent or socially maladjusted behaviours, which she indicates would be benchmarks that suggest she might have made wrong decisions about time-use as a parent. These ideas may well be filtering down to her through the media, which continuously offers contradictory messages.

A recent example of media coverage on children's time-use was an article on the popular *Huffington Post* website. A blog titled "Overscheduling Your Kids Isn't the Fast-Track to Success it Once Was", was followed by a mini-quiz titled "Signs that your Child is too Busy" (Kang, 2014). Both the article and quiz were pushing the over-scheduling hypothesis and challenging parents to consider the decisions they make about their children's time-use. The article, by psychiatrist and author Dr. Shimi Kang, talks about the emotional wellbeing that children derive from less structured activities and more time for free-play. She begins by discussing how as a parent she often felt she was going against her instincts and signing her children up to participate in more activities than she felt was good for them. Her response to well-meaning family and friends who commented on her hectic schedule was "I know it doesn't feel right, but everybody else is doing it" (Kang, 2014). She then talks about some of her

experiences as a psychologist dealing with anxious and stressed children, and how these led her to re-evaluate what her own children were doing. The interactive slideshow quiz at the end of the article is simplistic, and goes through ten indicators that suggest you might need to rethink your children's discretionary time, including: family meals being a thing of the past, children not having time to play with friends, the car being a fourth family member, your child never doing anything, and the presence of anxiety or moodiness.

Recent media attention on the topic has also been on account of the American organization, Alliance for Childhood, who in 2014 launched a national social action campaign called 'Ban Busy: Time to Thrive'. The campaign challenges parents, educators, students and communities to "reclaim downtime" (Race to Nowhere Website, 2014) and make time for play, creative exploration and family, addressing concerns that children's health and happiness are being affected by over-scheduling. The Race to Nowhere Ban Busy webpage states that both research, and "gut instinct" support such beliefs. By asking participants to post photos of their downtime activities, with the #BanBusy, the organization hopes to draw attention to the types of pastimes that are often missed out on when busyness gets the better of you. The campaign was launched alongside a nationwide re-screening of the documentary, *Race to Nowhere: The Dark Side of America's Achievement Culture*. The film looks at how society has put pressure on the importance of preparing children for success, and some of the impacts this is having on children. They suggest that the focus on success is akin to a silent epidemic in schools that leads to children who are stressed, depressed, anxious, and burned-out. Since its filming in 2010, the documentary has been shown in more than 7,000 schools, universities, and other community locations, and is a centrepiece of grassroots movements aiming to transform education and reclaim childhood.

Later in our conversations, Kathryn, in response to a question about when she foresaw her children walking to school on their own, jokingly said “thirty would be okay”. She then said, “whirr whirr whirr...helicopter blades” and laughed. Her reference was to the commonly used expression of helicopter parenting: somebody who hovers close to his or her children like a helicopter above the ground. The term typically has somewhat negative connotations, and is something parents would not like to be labelled, as it insinuates being over protective and not giving your child enough freedom. This mother’s allusion towards not becoming a helicopter parent points out yet another subtle parenting discourse that plays into her decision-making. While joking, she demonstrates a need to be protective, but not too protective.

Several other commonly referenced parenting styles come to mind. In popular literature and social media forums, the parenting philosophy of “tiger mothering” is often contrasted against the “free-range” parenting approach when it comes to making decisions about children’s time-use. Supporters of both philosophies are always armed with anecdotal evidence to support their arguments, and the occasional loosely related scientific study.

Tiger mothering refers to a parenting approach that involves hyper-disciplining and a laser-like focus on achievement and performance. The term became popular in 2011, when Amy Chua published a book on her parenting approach titled *Battle Hymn of the Tiger Mother*. Thinking such as the critical window and 10,000 hours would be exemplary in this school of thought. The term free-range parenting was propelled into regular use after Lenore Skenazy (2009) wrote, *Free Range Kids: Giving Our Children the Freedom We Had without Going Nuts with Worry*. The philosophy argues for children to be given freedom from structure and independence from overly involved parents. The free-range parenting approach has also been associated with Carl Honoré, who has written extensively on the topic of slowness, and the need

to challenge the cult of speed that engulfs daily lives. One of his most recent books, *Under Pressure: Rescuing Our Children from the Culture of Hyper-Parenting* (2008) specifically targets parents. In his quest to curb busyness and slow the frantic pace of modern family life, Carl Honoré recently had a TV casting call on his website seeking busy families from Sydney, Australia interested in participating in a documentary about the frantic pace of modern family life. The show plans to follow three families over a two-month period, during which Honoré claims he will “unplug[s] the kids and parents...tear[s] up their jam-packed schedules...serve[s] up a recipe for making family life a journey or an adventure rather than a rat race” (Honore, 2014). Assuming the program airs, it will undoubtedly further propel the topic into the media spotlight, placing even greater demand on a need for sound research into some of the theories he proposes.

Towards the end of our interview I asked Kathryn specifically where she thought messages about parenting come from. Her response was:

The TV, newspapers. I'd pick up [messages] when you're glancing though them at Starbucks. The internet...well you can be bombarded with it if you want to be open to it and if you seek it out. It's almost endless and overwhelming.

You get these headlines, like if you subscribe to an email magazine, so they come in headlines, “FAMILY DINNER”.

Although none of the other mothers I spoke with identified directly that their understandings about time-use came from affiliation with a particular parenting approach, popular literature, television or media, perhaps such an understanding is too subtle to be able to recognize. Our conversations nonetheless revealed that they were still influenced by popular discourses on good

parenting. Looking closely at the language that Jennifer uses to talk about her children's time-use, there is a sense of obligation and responsibility for making the right decisions:

well there is **always something we could** be doing. I **should probably continue** with swimming, we did so well, you know, that one is always the hard one, because they are doing so well and catching up and then I take a huge break because I need to do these other activities, and then...so yeah, **there's always something**...like I haven't done any violin. My oldest one wants to do music and I have not introduced music yet. So that's something that I am planning to fit in down the line, yes

While the very first statement seems straightforward, it is rather telling that the 'something' she refers to are programmed activities. She talks about how she "should probably continue with swimming", suggesting that by deciding not to continue, she's deviating from what might actually be best. By explaining that it's hard to take a break, she conveyed the sense of responsibility she felt for all of the potential missed opportunities. Then she went on to talk about music lessons that her daughter wanted to be involved in, which she hadn't yet had the time to make happen. She carried a strong sense of responsibility for organizing it in a timely manner.

All of the quotes throughout this section, and indeed those earlier in this chapter are exemplars of the idea that "not engaging in intensive mothering would result in guilt, self-blame, and adverse judgments from other middle-class mothers" (Romagnoli & Wall, 2012, p. 286). A statement Kathryn made when I asked her about contradictory time-use messages demonstrates this excellently, and provides a suitable place to end this chapters discussion:

If you could figure that out Anna, many of us would be very, very happy. Because you are guessing, **you think you are doing the right thing, but you don't really know.** I

mean are you doing the right thing by having them experience lots of activities, and be busy all the time, or do they need more downtime. It's hard to know, so you just do what you think you should do.

### **Summary**

The conversations that took place served to highlight several ways of thinking that may be affecting school-age children's discretionary time-use. The stories of overwhelming and uncontrollable busyness, due in large part to the weight given to children's structured activity participation, led me to conceptualize time-use as a matrix: one that is continuously being filled in by more and more structured and scheduled activities. Each individual child's schedule, the parents' schedule, and those of other families all influence the matrix. Further adding complexity and intensity to the grid are the matrices of schools and other community organizations that families are continuously trying to arrange their matrix to align with. Busyness has a tendency to engulf, even when an effort is made to fight against it.

In a quest to understand factors contributing to the inevitability of busyness, I explored in more depth some of the larger discourses that crept into my participants' accounts and were influencing their decisions to enrol children in structured programs. Notably, I found that a culture of fear and the ideology of intensive mothering were affecting their decisions. Breaking the discussion into protection, prevention and preparation, provided a means to a more detailed understanding of these discourses.

### **Recommendations for Future Research**

Each of the discussed themes draws attention to a departure point that future research could build on. A focus on the ideas or questions discussed within any one of the protection, prevention or preparation sections would offer means to deeper understanding. Throughout

chapter four, I have proposed specific questions and drawn attention to ideas that my findings have supported. Further research should strive to answer, extend or challenge these.

One way to build on the conversation about inevitable busyness would be to diversify the participants consulted. For example, consulting with mothers who are working full-time might provide new insight into the discussion of uncontrollable busyness. Even though the small sample of full-time, middle-class, stay-at-home parents consulted in this study does not permit drawing conclusions that can be generalized across this category of parents, it would nonetheless be informative to speak with those who fall outside such criteria and see what their explanations contribute. I would anticipate that by talking with those who have additional time commitments, a greater understanding of the complicated matrix and inevitability of busyness might emerge. Contrastingly, it might appear that accounts of mothers who don't work, or have a more flexible schedule are influenced more by discourses of intensive mothering, feel greater obligation to maximize the productivity of their children's time. A contrasting angle would be to examine the accounts of those parents who are making decisions not to enrol their children in intensive extracurricular programs. What is the parenting experience like for parents who have intentionally chosen to fight against a complicated matrix of inevitable busyness, and how does their input expand understanding? These are just some of the questions that could be addressed through qualitative studies with this particular sub-set of parents.

If future research wished to expand dialogue about intensive mothering and school-age children's discretionary time-use, talking with young and/or low-income mothers would also be helpful. Romagnoli and Wall (2012) adopted a similar approach with their study of how intensive mothering discourses affect young, low-income mothers with children in their early years. They demonstrated that while social expectations of good mothering influenced certain

behaviours for these mothers, there is more likelihood that mothers from this group might challenge the commonly held belief that intensive mothering is the best approach to parenting.

Their study was helpful in supporting previous findings that:

Middle-class mothers were much more likely than working-class mothers to engage in intensive mothering of infants. Intensive parenting was highly demanding of time, energy and money and was only possible for those with both the material and personal resources that accompany middle-class advantage. (Romagnoli and Wall, 2012, p. 276)

Taking a similar approach, but with mothers parenting school-age children might serve to confirm or refute these findings. Speaking with fathers might also provide valuable new insight. Much that is written about intensive parenting suggests that responsibility lies with mothers. How fathers are interacting with the discourse, particularly as ideas relate to their children's activity participation, would be a new avenue to investigate.

Extending the conversation to include children's accounts could also be insightful. Research on children often does not give voice to their opinions, yet work on this topic always claims to have their best interests at heart. Particularly by middle-childhood, children are often involved in making decisions about their time-use. Four of the mothers I spoke with said that their children had a say regarding the activities in which they participated. They shared with me that it was hard to get children out the door to a program they were not interested in attending. When I spoke with Kathryn for the second time she told me that given the rigorous hours of a new school, they had wanted to make sleep a priority, and had therefore taken their oldest daughter out of competitive gymnastics. This had provided a surplus of free time, and her daughter had complained about feeling unfit and wanting to do more. This resulted in finding additional activities to fill the void, and all of a sudden she had activities 7 days a week.



Contrastingly, one of the principal tenets of the over-scheduling hypothesis is that parents make most time-use decisions based on extrinsic motivations for participation (Barker et al., 2014), such as skill acquisition for later life. This opposes intrinsic motivations that have children's enjoyment as the primary focus, and additional benefits as secondary. Taking the time to talk with children about their motivations for program involvement, and other time-use decisions, would provide an important contribution to the controversial dialogue on over-scheduling.

Given the role that schools and community organizations play in the scheduling of children's lives, it would be interesting to invite them to participate in the dialogue. This would involve talking with those who work in schools and community organizations. A key finding from this study was the role played by schools and community organizations in promoting ever increasing and intensive program involvement. I heard several accounts of busy lives being partially attributed to school-based activities that were scheduled immediately before or after the school day. Some mothers also spoke of organizations with a 'more, more, more' approach, that had children doing 'all or nothing' when it came to activity participation. A few mothers suggested that profit may be driving increased program involvement; however many of the groups offering extracurricular programs to children are non-profit. There was also mention of organizations communicating evidence of the proven benefits that involvement provided. To build upon parents' perceptions and hypotheses about motivations for what is offered, it would be enlightening for future research to explore what is driving organizations offering extracurricular programs for children to increase their portfolios of activities. How are different categories of institutes influenced by and/or influencing 'new brain research' and discourses on risk, fear, and intensive parenting?

At the end of the section "Preparation – Lost Investment and Wasted Time" I briefly

touched on how supporters of unstructured active free play are using ‘new brain research’ to validate their beliefs. Are discourses on fear and ‘new brain research’ successfully being used to frame free, unstructured play as the ‘best’ time-use choices for optimal developmental outcomes, as emerging research would suggest? Is popular understanding of what is considered enriching activities and environments evolving? Or, are other ways of thinking, such as a focus on the importance of enjoyment in the moment, more prominent motivations? Does the loss of play movement strengthen or challenge intensive parenting ideas? Examining more closely how the messages about over-scheduling and the importance of free play are interacting with this idea would provide helpful information that builds understanding. Two examples of how this could be done are through a discourse analysis of popular literature on unstructured play or by means of interviews with leading advocates in the field.

The suggestions for future research presented are by no means exhaustive; rather they highlight some of the possible avenues for continued exploration. While I have provided examples for future samples, data collection strategies, and analysis methods, what are more important are the questions I have raised. As the topic under scrutiny is complex, any one thread could be answered and extended in a variety of ways. Given the undeniable changes in children’s time-use, and the on-going controversy about what is best for the child, I believe it is vital that academic research continues to be part of this conversation by offering new insights into the multiple discourses that shape childhood.

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## **Appendix A – Initial Guiding Questions**

### ***General Time Use***

What does a week typically look like for your children outside of the school hours? What about weekends/school holidays?

What is their favourite thing to do with their time? Least favourite?

What is your favourite thing for them to do with their time? Least favourite?

Are there any types of activities that you do not like your child to participate in?

What types of activities do you think of as a positive use of their time? Negative use? What does good quality use of time look like to you? Why?

Do you consider the use of time outside school to be balanced?

What role does “family time” play in your household?

What do meal times look like in your household?

What challenges do you face in organizing your children’s time?

What role do the opinions of others play in your decision-making? Who or what do you consult?

Do you talk to your partner? What do you talk about? Do you talk to friends about time-use, activities, etc.?

Is there anything you think your child does not have enough time to do?

In a perfect world, where money and time were not factors, would you change your child’s use of discretionary time?

Is there anything your child spends too much time doing?

Have you ever been concerned about your child’s time-use?

What, if anything worries you most about your children’s time-use?

How do you feel your child’s use of time is different than your own childhood?

Is the way your children use their time what you expected it would be like?

### ***Organized Extracurricular Programs***

What type of extracurricular programs does your child participate in during the school year?

What type of extracurricular programs does your child participate in during school vacations?

What type of extracurricular programs does your child participate on the weekends?

How do you decide which organized programs your child will participate in?

When deciding between programs, what do you consider?

Are there any types of organized activities that you would like your child to participate in that they are unable to do so?

Do you feel any pressure to have your child participate in things you do not want them to?

What do you see as the benefits of any of these programs?

What concerns do you have about any of these programs?

What do you think about concerns that children may be over-scheduled?

### ***Free Time***

What does your child typically like to do during their free/unstructured time?

How does free or unstructured play feature in your children's discretionary time?

What do you see as the benefit of free time?

What concerns do you have about free time?

Has your child ever told you they are bored?

How do you typically respond to your child's boredom?

What kinds of approaches have you taken when your child has complained of having nothing to do?

### ***Technology***

What types of technology does your child use during their free time?

How much time does your child spend using technology?

What benefits do you see from technology use?

Do you have any concerns about technology use?

What do you think about concerns that children spend too much time using technology?

### ***Time Outdoors/In Nature***

How much time does your child spend outside?

In what capacities does your child spend time outside?

What benefits do you see from outside time?

Do you have any concerns about outside time?

What do you think about concerns that children do not spend enough time outdoors in nature?

***Concluding***

Is there anything else you can think of about your children's time use, and your decision-making, that you want to add?

## Appendix B – Recruitment Email Scripts

**Subject:** Masters Thesis – Seeking Stay-at-home Parent Caregivers for Research Study

**Attachment:** PDF Recruitment Poster (see Appendix 2)

**To:** Personal contacts, emailed through BCC to protect confidentiality

**Message Content:**

To {insert name},

As I may have mentioned to you in conversation, I am in the process of conducting my research for my Masters Thesis. The title of my study is, '**What to do? Mothers' accounts of their children's discretionary time-use.**'

For the study, I am seeking, stay-at-home parent caregivers of children ages 6-12, living in BC, who are interested in talking to me about their experiences and perspectives as a parent towards their children's extracurricular or discretionary time-use. Attached to this email is a PDF poster that provides some additional information about the study.

I hope that you might be able to reach out to your network of personal contacts and share the attached information with anybody who you believe might be interested in participation. However, please be aware that you are under no obligation to do so. Similarly, any individual that you do share the information with should feel under no obligation to respond.

Thank you in advance for any help you may be able to offer.

Sincerely,

Anna Verspoor

**Subject:** Masters Thesis - Seeking Stay-at-home Parent Caregivers for Research Study

**Attachment:** PDF Recruitment Poster (see Appendix 2)

**To:** UVIC CYC Listserv

**Message Content:**

My name is Anna Verspoor, and I am in the process of conducting my research for my Masters Thesis in the Department of Child and Youth Care at the University of Victoria. The title of my study is, '**What to do? Mothers' accounts of their children's discretionary time-use.**'

For the study, I am seeking, BC resident, stay-at-home parent caregivers of children ages 6-12, who are interested in talking to me about their experience and decision-making regarding their children's extracurricular time-use. Attached to this email is a PDF poster that provides some additional information about the study.

If you are interested in participating, please contact me at the below email or phone. If you know of anybody who you believe might be interested in participation, please feel free to share the attached information.

Thank you in advance for any help you may be able to offer.

Sincerely,

Anna Verspoor

## Appendix C – Recruitment Poster

Are you a full-time stay-at-home primary caregiver for  
at least one child aged 6-12 years?

Do you make the decisions about your child's  
extracurricular time-use?

You are invited to participate in a research study conducted by a graduate student in the School of Child and Youth Care at the University of Victoria that is taking place in Vancouver, BC

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***'What to do? Mothers' accounts of their children's discretionary time-use.'***

The purpose of this study is to explore parental accounts of the decisions they make about children's discretionary time-use during middle childhood (ages six to twelve). What parents think about and how they make choices regarding free time, extracurricular activities, outdoor play, and technology are particular areas of interest. Such perspectives are of importance in light of concerns around over-scheduling and the suggestion that increased participation in programming, and time spent utilizing technology are contributing factors that relate to the popular belief that children's opportunity for free-play is decreasing.

To participate in this study, we are looking for parents who:

- Are a full-time stay at home care-giver for at least one child, between 6 and 12 years
- Are the primary decision maker regarding their children's extracurricular time-use
- Live in BC

Participation in this study is completely voluntary and involves a one to 60-90 minute interview at a time and location of convenience to you. Interviews will take place between October 29<sup>th</sup> and November 30<sup>th</sup>, 2013. Participant's anonymity and confidentiality will be strictly protected.

If you are interested in participating in this study, please contact Anna Verspoor

## Appendix D – Consent Form

**Participant Consent Form**

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You are invited to participate in a study entitled, “*What to do? Mothers’ accounts of their children’s time-use*”, that is being conducted by Anna Verspoor, who is a graduate student in the School of Child and Youth Care within department of Human and Social Development at the University of Victoria. You may contact her if you have any further questions.

As a graduate student, I am required to conduct research as part of the requirements for a Masters degree in Child and Youth Care. It is being conducted under the supervision of Dr. Marie Hoskins and Dr. Doug Magnuson. You may contact my supervisors at --- or --- should you have any concerns.

**Purpose and Objectives**

The purpose of this study is to explore parental perspectives and decision-making about children’s discretionary time-use during middle childhood (ages six to twelve). What parents think about and how they make choices regarding free time, extracurricular activities, outdoor play, and technology are particular areas of interest. Little is known about how or why parents make certain decisions regarding their children’s time use. Increasing knowledge around perspectives that influence decision-making, may aid a diversity of service personnel, including family counsellors, recreation program managers, and front-line staff, to better meet the needs of families. In light of children’s increased participation in organized programming opportunities, findings may specifically aid community capacity-building initiatives that seek to enhance program design, delivery and evaluation.

**What’s Involved?**

BC resident, full-time, stay-at-home care-giving parents of at least one child aged six to twelve years of age for whom they consider themselves the primary decision-maker regarding discretionary time activities are invited to participate in this study. If you agree to participate in the research, your participation will include an in-person interview of approximately 60-90 minutes in length, at a time and location that is convenient to you. The interview will be audio recorded, and myself, the primary researcher, will make a transcription. In addition, brief observational notes may be taken during the interview, documenting your verbal and non-verbal responses to different questions. For example, I may note facial expressions or emotions such as surprise, amusement, or frustration that appear in response to a certain question or topic. I may also take note of certain language or terminology that you are using, so as to remind myself to re-phrase or use familiar language for future questions.

**Inconvenience**

Participation in this study may cause some inconvenience to you due to the time commitment of participating in the research interview. Participation may also pose an inconvenience around childcare. If formal childcare is required for you to participate in the study, compensation for two hours of childcare will be provided to you by the researcher, to a maximum of \$20. Should you choose to withdraw from the study at any time, this reimbursement will stand.

**Risk**

There are minimal anticipated risks to you by participating in this research. The only foreseen risk is

that some of the questions inquire about concerns parents may have relating to their children's time use and activities, and could potentially lead to feelings of distress or discomfort for you during the interview. In the event that you exhibit distress or discomfort during the interview, you will be given the opportunity to take a break, move onto the next question, or terminate the interview entirely. If you are interested, you will also be offered information regarding possible sources of further support for your distress.

### **Benefits**

The potential benefits of participation in this research are an opportunity to provide valuable insight into an area that little is known about, and to contribute to knowledge around children's discretionary time during middle childhood.

### **Compensation**

As a small gesture of appreciation, and to compensate you for any inconvenience related to your participation, you will be offered a small gift, in the form of a bookstore gift certificate to the value of \$20. If you agree to participate in the research, this compensation must not be coercive. As it is unethical to provide undue compensation or inducements to research participants, if you would not participate were the compensation not offered, you should decline. Should you choose to withdraw from the study at any time, this gesture of appreciation will stand.

### **Voluntary Participation**

Participation in this study is entirely voluntary. Once agreeing to participate, you may withdraw at any point in time without any consequence or explanation, including after having given consent or participated in the interview. You are also free to skip or pass on any question you do not wish to answer. If you do withdraw from the study, any data collected will only be used with your full permission, and will otherwise be destroyed.

### **On-going Consent**

Consent is not a form, but rather an on-going process. Formal written consent will be obtained in writing before commencing the interview. At the end of the interview, to ensure your continued consent to participate in this study the researcher will review the consent form, checking through verbal confirmation that your consent still stands. Transcripts will not be sent to you for review, unless you specifically request so. You will be offered this choice at the end of your interview. If you do request to see a copy of the transcript, you will be emailed (or mailed a hard copy) within three months of the interview. You will have one week to look over the transcript and make any changes or modifications you choose. The researcher will ask for your written (email) or verbal (phone) consent after that one-week period. If there is no response from you, it will be assumed that your on-going consent has been given. If you choose not to review your transcript but wish to withdraw a particular response, or your full consent at any point after the time of interview but prior to thesis completion, you may contact the researcher to do so.

### **Anonymity and Confidentiality**

In terms of protecting your anonymity, your contact information will be kept in a locked and password protected computer file. It will not be shared with anyone other than the primary researcher. I will only require your first name, and a contact telephone number or email. Data in the form of interview transcripts, and in the writing of the thesis, will be assigned a code name, to protect your identity. The location of the interview will not be identified in the data or writing of the thesis. You should be aware that while all efforts to protect confidentiality will be made, due to the participant selection process, there is a small chance that you may be identifiable, by information given in your responses, by somebody who was aware of your referral to the study.

### **Dissemination of Results**

The results of this study will be shared with others in the form of a graduate thesis. This thesis will



be made publicly available on the University of Victoria D-Space, an online archive for the work of faculty, students and staff that includes articles, conference reports, videos, thesis and dissertations. It is also possible that results of this study will be presented at research conferences or scholarly meetings, or will be published or shared within other media.

**Disposal of Data**

Once the thesis is complete all data from this study will be disposed of. Any hard copies of transcripts or observation notes will be shredded, and all electronic data will be erased. Upon the completion of the thesis all consent forms will be shredded and disposed of.

**Contacts**

Should you wish to verify the ethical approval of this study, or raise any concerns you have, you may do so by contacting the Human Research Ethics Office at the University of Victoria at 250-472-4545 or [ethics@uvic.ca](mailto:ethics@uvic.ca).

Your signature below indicates that you understand the above conditions of participation in this study, and that the researcher has answered any questions or concerns you may hold.

---

(Name of Participant)

(Signature)

(Date)

***A copy of this consent will be left with you, and a copy will be taken by the researcher.***

## Appendix E – Follow-Up Guiding Questions

Thank you so much for agreeing to talk with me again. For reference on the recording, could you just please remind me how old your children are now? And before I get into some of my specific questions, I wanted to ask:

- Has anything important happened or changed in your life since we last spoke? In particular changes that might affect your children's time-use and how you make decisions about it?

Having spoken with yourself and several other mothers, as well as looked more closely at findings in the literature, there are a number of areas I'm interesting in looking at in more depth. In particular I have found multiple discourses, and even contradictions, around the best use of children's time. I'm particularly interested in hearing about how these various ideas impact the decision you make.

- Do you feel there are contradictory messages about what it means to be a good parent when it comes to making decisions about your children's time use? Where do these messages come from? How do you know which messages to listen to? Freedom vs. too much freedom. Risk without too much risk. Activity without too much activity? Downtime without too little stimulation.
- What does it mean to you to make 'good decisions' about your children's time use? Where does your information come from? Do you worry about making or having made the wrong decisions?
- It often seems that decisions made by parents are based on long-term benefits of a particular time-use, rather than short-term or immediate satisfaction. How do you navigate the relationship between immediate and future outcomes?
- Several comments made by parents suggest that there are certain windows of childhood during which it is best to expose children to certain activities. What do you think about this idea? Where has this kind of thinking come from?
- Through the responses I heard, I sensed a difference between down-time and free time. Do you see a difference between the two? Can you explain or elaborate how you think of or construct these two different time-uses?
- Are you concerned about equipping your child with the skills to 'get ahead' and be competitive in the world? Do you feel this is something other parents are focused on? Systems of entry into higher education are said to perpetuate this, do you agree?
- It seems that some kind of hierarchy is placed on different activities, with for example, sports taking more priority than music. Is this your experience, and why might this be? Which activities are most important to you?

- In general it seems that parents and children are busier than they would like, or certainly busier than they imagined they would be. Can you talk to me more about this? Do you agree? Is busyness something that you feel swept up by?
- I sensed a conflict between anticipated expectations about what lives would look like, and the reality of busy schedules. Where do you think your expectations came from? Why is it a struggle to have a lifestyle that meets expectations?
- It seems that family identities can be built around the activities that you participate in (e.g. we're a skiing family, we're a soccer family, we're an outdoor family)? What do you feel about your family identity? Are there things you try not to identify with?
- When you think about potential negative impacts of over-scheduling, what comes to mind? Is the loss of independence more concerning than the suggestions of mental and physical health damages?
- What are your thoughts about watching children in their activities? Have you felt pressure to watch? What do you see as benefits or drawbacks for either party?
- How much do you talk with your parents about what your children are doing? Have they ever expressed concern or disagreement with the choices you've made about your children's time-use? How do you navigate these conversations?
- Have you been exposed to much popular literature on children's time-use. For example, Richard Louv – Nature Deficit Disorder, The Hurried Child, The Power of Play?
- Do you think childhoods past, with supposed freedoms, have been romanticized? Why might this be? Does it impact the decisions you make?