

Active play for young children: Are there cultural sensitivities?

Active play in children under the age of five years is seen in Australia as an integral part of development and the programming in early childhood services. However, children's lifestyles have become increasingly sedentary. Australian children are watching an average of two and half hours of television each day (Salmon, Telford & Crawford, 2002), while more children are being driven instead of walking: in 2003 only 25 per cent of children in Melbourne walked to primary school—68 per cent went in 'mum's taxi' (Mees, 2000). These, among other factors, have led to the major issue of overweight children.

To families from culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) backgrounds, active play may not be a priority. Initial priorities for many newly arrived CALD families to Australia are to understand the culture of the country, learn English and access basic human rights such as accommodation, affordable and nutritious food, and employment. Therefore the physical development of children may subsequently be affected by these competing priorities.

Depending on their country of origin, many newly arrived families may not have been able to access early childhood services. Consequently their children may have been able to play freely outdoors until they started school. Alternatively, those children from war-torn countries may have had restricted access to outdoor play—they may also have been in refugee camps or detention centres in Australia for many years. Whereas, in many families who have lived here longer, there may have been the development of an understanding of, and the ability to access, the range of early childhood services that encourage and promote active play.

Some of the key issues for CALD families may include:

Safety

Since September 11, 2001 there has been an increasing rise in racism and fear of terrorism. Accordingly, the perceived and real safety issues for Muslim women and children has in some cases severely restricted their access to public places, such as playgrounds and parks. Many families who live in the public housing estates fear using the playgrounds because of safety concerns and bullying (Darebin City Council, 2003).

Cultural and religious issues

Girls and boys in some cultural and religious groups are raised quite differently. Girls, from a young age, are discouraged from socialising with boys, therefore limiting the type of physical outdoor activities in which they can participate. In some patriarchal societies, including traditional Muslim and tribal cultures, young girls stay close to their mothers, learning the female roles of housekeeping and care. In certain more traditional Muslim communities, music, singing and dancing—even for preschool-aged children—is prohibited, which has implications for early childhood programs.

Grandparent care

The increase in the number of women in the workforce has led to a growing reliance on grandparents to care for and raise their grandchildren. According to the Australian Bureau of

Statistics, in 2003 nearly a quarter of children under the age of four are cared for by grandparents (cited by Goodfellow, 2003).

In a research study of 40 CALD grandmothers who cared for their preschool-aged grandchildren, many expressed difficulty in caring, particularly in taking their charges out of the house and to a park or playground. They were afraid that the children might hurt themselves or run away, and that they would not be able to catch them, so they preferred to keep them inside the home and, mainly, in front of a television (Drysdale & Yaman, 2000).

Family structure and size

Many refugee single mothers who come to Australia under the Women at Risk category may have up to nine or more children. This imposes severe limits on movement around the community due to perhaps not having access to cars and the logistics and cost of using public transport.

Health issues

Some young Muslim children who are not accessing the outdoor environment or are well covered are getting less sun exposure, therefore not gaining enough Vitamin D in their systems and are consequently now developing Ricketts (Nowson & Margerison 2001).

Family income

The new refugees and migrants to Australia take time to establish themselves. Their access to an income is limited and Centrelink pensions may be their only form of income—therefore the purchasing of toys, bikes and games would not necessarily be a priority.

[breakout]

Promoting good early childhood practice

- Building relationships with parents: building the relationship and trust with families is important when it comes to discussing more sensitive issues. Active play may be a sensitive issue for some traditional cultural groups.
- Explaining the benefits of active play to families: some families may not know why active play is important to children's development; to their development of self-confidence, movement skills, social skills and to their expression of feelings and emotions. This can be overcome by providing information to parents that is translated, or provide access to bilingual staff who are able to interpret information for families. It is also important that children are dressed comfortably for active play.
- Culturally sensitive ways of providing active play: it may be appropriate to have a discussion with families who do not encourage active play for girls, to work out what may be acceptable within the children's service environment. It may be a game of musical chairs, ball games, 'Simon Says' or 'Follow the Leader' that could incorporate some physical movements.
- Incorporating more active play within the program: as children are now spending many hours of the day in some form of children's service, the importance of providing both structured and unstructured active play is increased. Ensure activities are provided that children of all abilities are able to participate in successfully, but can still be challenged.

[/breakout]

In research for this article, three women from different cultural groups were asked for their thoughts on the cultural sensitivities of active play for children within their own communities.

Chinese families

Barriers to active play:

- Language
- Transport issues
- Lack of knowledge about the local services
- Motivation.

Parents see it is important to take their children outdoors therefore they are starting to use playgrounds and parks and enrolling in children's services.

Comment:

“Children are more independent and have more free play in Australia.”

Christy Guo, Chinese Cultural Consultant from Victorian Cooperative on Children's Services for Ethnic Groups (VICSEG).

Somali families

In Somalia:

- Not many toys were available so active play came from play around the neighbourhood
- All neighbours were 'Aunties' and would watch out for the small children.

In Australia:

- Children are encouraged to stay indoors and watch television or play with toys
- Many single mothers with large families find it too difficult to take them outside or they are too busy
- Families in public housing fear the drug users and needles in the playgrounds.

Malyun Ahmed, Social Worker, Migrant Resource Centre, Preston.

Iraqi families

In Iraq:

- Children played outside watched over by other adults in the street
- Following the war, children are kept inside because of the danger.

In Australia:

- Indoor games and television are preferred
- Families tend to buy toys that are indoor focused
- Mothers only take their children to the park if there is a group of women going.

Safa Al-Kafaf, Iraqi Playgroup Leader (VICSEG)

|

Creina Porter

State coordinator of Early Childhood Services for the *Kids go for your life* program, sponsored by Diabetes Australia (Victoria) and The Cancer Council of Victoria.

Gabrielle Fakhri

Program Consultant for the Victorian Cooperative on Children's Services for Ethnic Groups.

References

Darebin City Council. (2003). *Cramer St neighbourhood project: Working living and caring together*. Melbourne: Darebin City Council.

Drysdale, P., & Yarman, N. (2000). *It's a long day on your own: Exploring and addressing the health impacts of grandmothering in culturally and linguistically diverse communities*. Melbourne: Women's Health in the North & VICSEG.

Goodfellow, J. (2003). Grandparents as regular child care providers: Unrecognised, under-valued and under-resourced. *Australian Journal of Early Childhood*, 28(3), 7–17.

Mees, P. (2000). *A very public solution: Transport in the dispersed city*. Sydney: Macquarie University.

Nowson, C., & Margerison, C. (2001). *Vitamin D status of Australians: Impacts of changes to mandatory fortification of margarine with vitamin D*. Victoria: Deakin University. Also available: www.foodstandards.gov.au/_srcfiles/FINAL_Report_Deakin_uni.pdf

Salmon, J., Telford, A., & Crawford, D. (2002). Assessment of physical activity among primary school aged children: the children's leisure activities study (CLASS), *Australian Epidemiologist*, 9 (2). 10–14.

The strategies document from the national consultations on eliminating prejudice against Arab and Muslim Australians is available:

www.hreoc.gov.au/racial_discrimination/isma/strategies/index.html