

Melissa & Doug®

Time to Play

A Study on Children's Free Time:
How It Is Spent, Prioritised and Valued

| REPORT ON BRITISH, CANADIAN AND AUSTRALIAN PARENTS



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Table of Contents

Introduction.....	1
Insight 1	2
Insight 2.....	3
Insight 3.....	5
Insight 4	8
Implications.....	10
Survey Methods.....	11

Introduction

Today's parents face perpetual pressure to keep their children engaged and busy with activities, whether music lessons, organised sports or academic enrichment. Driven by a desire to keep their children ahead of the pack, many parents feel the need to structure their children's lives.

But does the focus on structured activities come at the expense of child-led, unstructured and imaginative play? And do parents recognise how child-led play benefits their child's development?

Researchers and experts recognise the benefits of child-led play. Studies link unstructured play to greater independence;¹ social skills;² and the development of problem-solving abilities, cooperation, resilience³ and other qualities that form the foundation for academic success.⁴

To investigate how parents perceive the role and benefits of various activities for their children, global toy company Melissa & Doug partnered with Gallup to conduct a study of parents of children from ages birth to 10 in the United Kingdom, Canada and Australia. These results are based on interviews with 1,000 parents from each country in April 2017, using Survey Sampling International's comprehensive opt-in web panel.

This report is the second in a series of studies on children's play. The first report, released 1 Aug. 2017, centred on the views and experiences of U.S. parents. Broadly speaking, the views of British, Canadian and Australian parents about the role of play in the lives of their children are similar to those of U.S. parents. The few differences that emerged from the two studies are highlighted throughout this report.

¹ Barker, J. E., Semenov, A. D., Michaelson, L., Provan, L. S., Snyder, H. R., & Munakata, Y. (2014). Less-structured time in children's daily lives predicts self-directed executive functioning. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 5.

² Golodner, L. M. (2016). Unstructured free play for kids: The benefits of creative play. *MetroParent for Southeast Michigan*. Retrieved from <http://www.metroparent.com/daily/parenting/parenting-issues-tips/unstructured-free-play-time-for-kids-is-critical/>

³ Ginsburg, K. R., & Jablow, M. M. (2005). *Building resilience in children and teens*. American Academy of Pediatrics.

⁴ Elkind, D. (2007). *The power of play: How spontaneous, imaginative activities lead to happier, healthier children*. Cambridge, MA: Da Capo Press.



INSIGHT 1

Too few parents let boredom work its magic.

- Only about one in five parents surveyed in the U.K., Canada and Australia strongly agree that it's good to let children be bored now and then.
- When their child is bored, the most common first strategy among parents in these three countries is to intervene with potential activities.

Few of the surveyed parents in the U.K., Canada and Australia fully embrace the idea that occasional boredom is beneficial for children. About one in five parents in these countries strongly agree it is good for children to be bored now and then.

When their child is bored, parents in these countries most frequently first respond by intervening. About four in 10 parents in the U.K. (42%), Canada (37%) and Australia (40%) say their first strategy when their child is bored is to talk to them about different activities they might do. Far fewer parents say they let their child confront boredom on their own: 28% in Canada, 27% in Australia and 19% in the U.K.

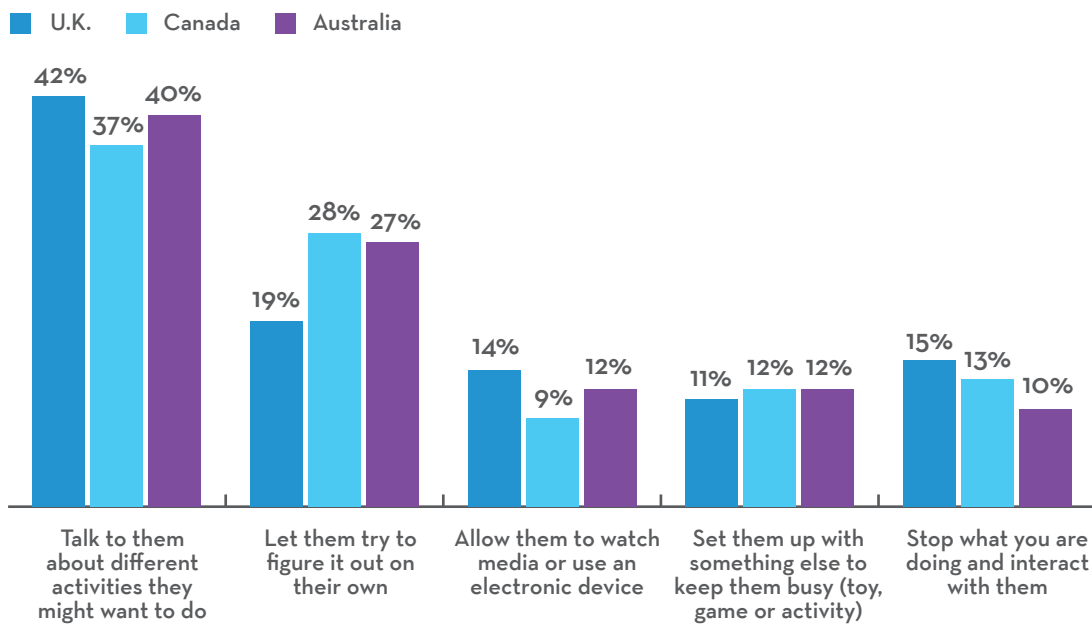


Strongly agree: "It's good to let children be bored now and then."

19% U.K.
22% Canada
23% Australia

FIRST STRATEGY WHEN CHILD IS BORED, BY COUNTRY

Among British, Canadian and Australian parents of children aged 2 to 10



INSIGHT 2

Parents in these countries overlook the benefits of unstructured play.

- Creativity is the only skill that a majority of parents in all of these countries closely associate with unstructured, screen-free play.
- Other key skills, including teamwork, self-confidence and academic skills, are more likely to be identified with structured play or organised sports.
- Fewer parents value creativity than value other skills as important for children to develop by age 10.



Findings From U.S. Report on Child Play

U.S. parents link creativity and problem-solving with screen-free play. However, they mainly associate self-confidence and social skills – the two skills they believe are most critical for children to develop – with structured activities and organised sports.

Parents of children from ages birth to 10 were asked to choose up to three benefits or skills that they associate with different types of activities. Creativity is the only skill that a majority of parents (57%) in the U.K., Canada and Australia associate with unstructured, screen-free play. Fewer parents in these countries – about three in 10 – believe children develop problem-solving, self-confidence and other skills (art, music, athletic, etc.) while engaging in unstructured, screen-free play. Even fewer parents associate this type of play with resilience (17%), academic skills (17%) or discipline (11%).

However, few of these parents consider creativity to be important to children's development. When asked to say which of 12 qualities are most important for children to develop by age 10, 28% include creativity as one of their top three mentions. Similarly, 24% say problem-solving is a critical skill for children to develop by age 10, though experts have shown both creativity and problem-solving to be crucial to children's development.⁵ Parents in these countries, instead, rate self-confidence (63%), social skills (46%) and academic skills (42%) as most critical.

⁵ Keen, R. (2011). The development of problem solving in young children: A critical cognitive skill. *Annual Review of Psychology*, 62, 1–21; Simonton, D. K. (2000). Creativity: Cognitive, personal, developmental, and social aspects. *American Psychologist*, 55(1), 151.

PERCENTAGE WHO SAY THAT EACH SKILL IS ONE OF THE THREE MOST IMPORTANT QUALITIES FOR CHILDREN TO DEVELOP BY AGE 10

Among British, Canadian and Australian parents of children from ages birth to 10

Skills	Total mentions
Self-confidence	63%
Social skills	46%
Academic skills	42%
Creativity	28%
Discipline	24%
Problem-solving	24%
Teamwork	21%
Resilience	16%
Computer skills	14%
Motor skills	11%
Other skills (art, music, athletic, etc.)	8%
Leadership	4%



INSIGHT 3

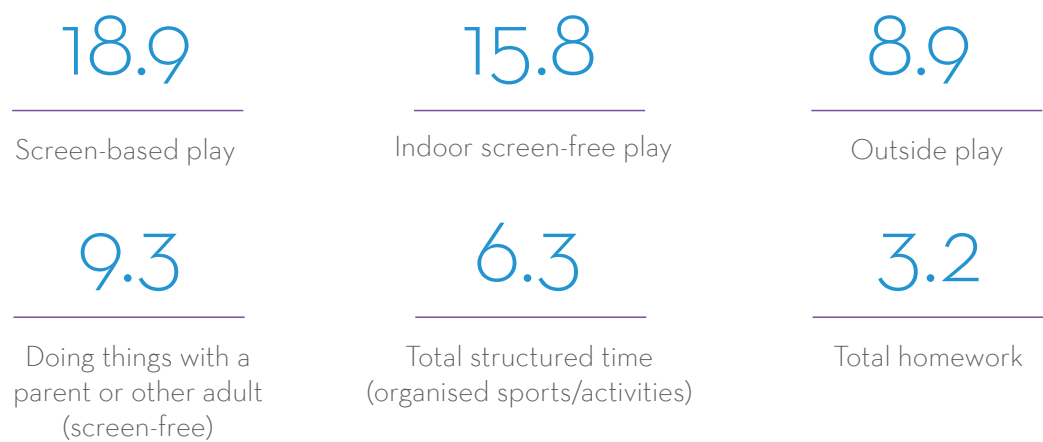
When children are indoors, screen-based play edges out child-led play.

- British, Canadian and Australian parents surveyed say their children average nearly 19 hours a week on screen-based play versus 16 hours on indoor screen-free play.
- According to parents, children would most like to spend their free time watching media or playing on electronics – parents’ least-preferred activities for their children.

Parents in the U.K., Canada and Australia say their children get a fair amount of outdoor play – averaging about nine hours per week. But when inside, children spend more hours interacting with screens (media, electronic devices) than engaging in unstructured, child-led play. On average, children spend about 19 hours on screen-based play and 16 hours on indoor screen-free play. This skew towards screen time is particularly notable in the U.K., where parents report that children spend an average of 21 hours per week on screens versus 15 hours engaging in indoor screen-free play by themselves or with others.

CHILDREN'S AVERAGE FREE-TIME HOURS PER WEEK, BY ACTIVITY TYPE

Among British, Canadian and Australian parents of children aged 2 to 10



According to parents in all three countries, the main reason their child doesn't get more indoor screen-free play is the child's preference for screen-based play. Nearly half of parents in each of these three countries cite this as the top barrier to more screen-free play.

BARRIERS TO INDOOR SCREEN-FREE PLAY

Among British, Canadian and Australian parents of children aged 2 to 10

Barrier	Overall	U.K.	Canada	Australia
Child prefers screen time	48%	46%	49%	48%
Child needs guidance	28%	20%	33%	31%
Child prefers outside play	22%	25%	21%	22%
Child needs supervision	20%	19%	20%	21%
Schedule too busy	15%	20%	10%	14%
Not enough space inside	11%	12%	13%	10%

On average, parents in these three countries report that their children would most like to fill their free time watching media (48%) and using electronic devices (44%), followed by playing outside (42%). This differs from the U.S., where parents perceive that playing outdoors is their child's top choice for free time.

The activities that children are least likely to want to do in their free time, according to their parents, are structured activities (9%), organised sports (12%) and academic activities (16%).

When asked whether they would like their child to spend more, the same or less time on various activities, parents in these countries – like those in the U.S. – most prefer that their child spend more time playing outside (42%) or doing something with an adult (41%). About three in 10 parents want their child to spend more time on screen-free indoor play with others (32%) or by themselves (29%), while a third or more want their child to spend more time on structured activities (33%) and organised sports (34%).

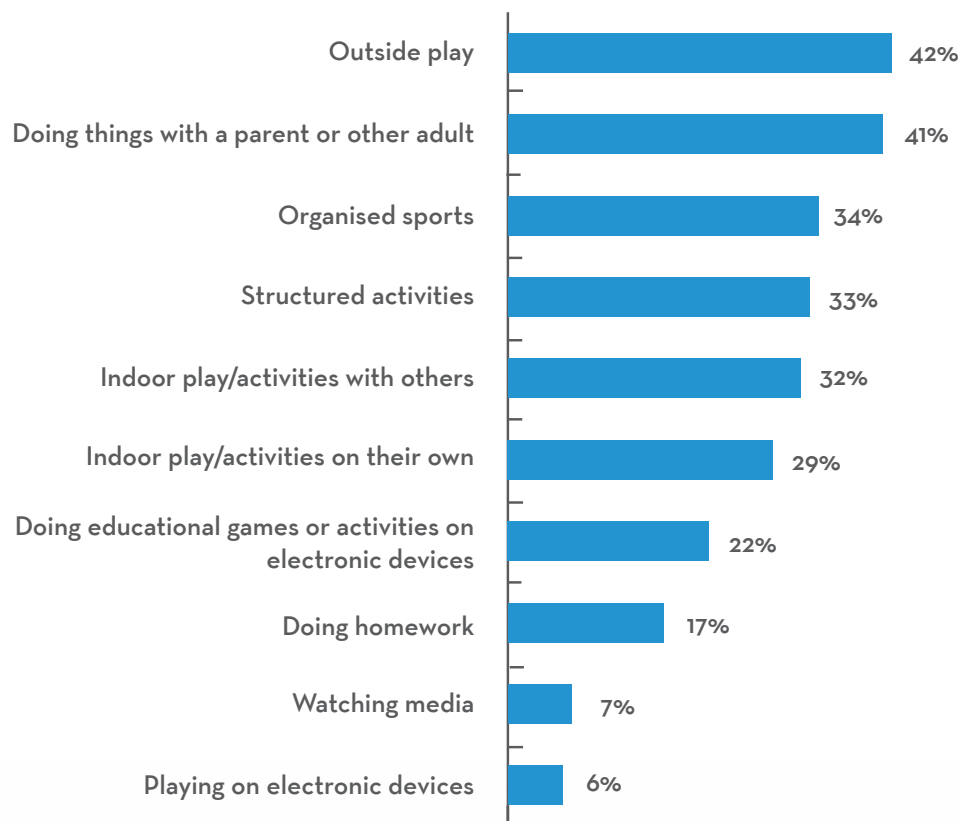
Parents in all three countries are largely in agreement about the activities they would like their children to spend more time doing, though U.K. parents are considerably less likely than parents in Canada or Australia are to wish their child would spend more time on outside play or indoor screen-free play by themselves.



PARENTS' PREFERENCES FOR TIME THEIR CHILD SPENDS ON ACTIVITIES

Among British, Canadian and Australian parents of children aged 2 to 10

■ % Parents who want child to spend more time on that activity



INSIGHT 4

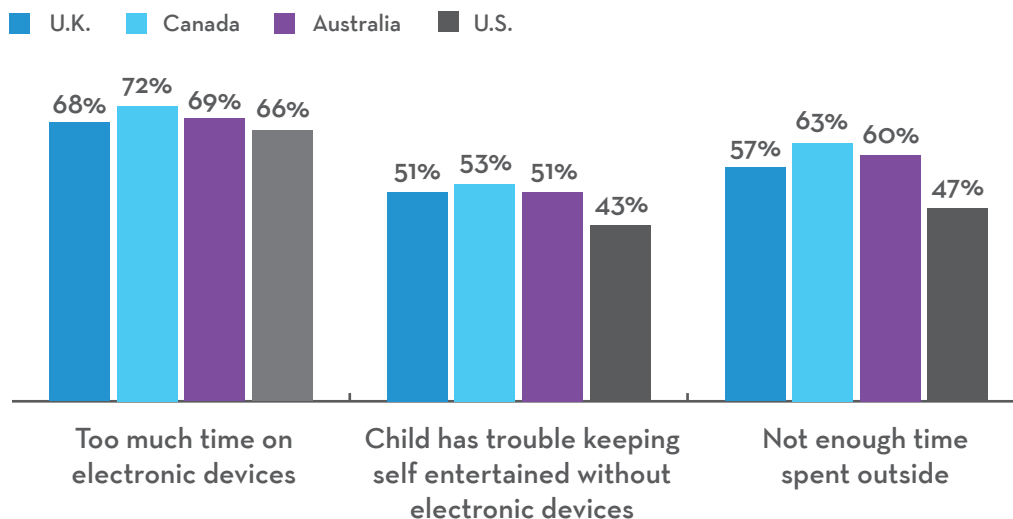
Most parents harbour concerns related to screen time.

- Majorities of parents surveyed in the U.K., Canada and Australia worry that their child spends too much time on devices, can't occupy themselves without a device and doesn't spend enough time outside.
- In these countries, parents of older children are particularly worried about their child's screen-based activities and their academic, social and emotional development.
- Parents of children who spend three or more hours per day engaged in screen-based play also express more concern about their child's development.

More than two-thirds of parents in the U.K. (68%), Canada (72%) and Australia (69%) say they are worried that their child spends too much time on electronic devices – about on par with parents in the U.S. (66%). Relatedly, slim majorities of parents in these three countries are also concerned that their child has trouble keeping themselves entertained without electronic devices, somewhat higher than the 43% of U.S. parents who say the same. Compared with parents in the U.S., parents in the U.K. (57%), Canada (63%) and Australia (60%) are substantially more worried that their child does not spend enough time outside.

PERCENTAGE “WORRIED A LOT/LITTLE,” BY COUNTRY

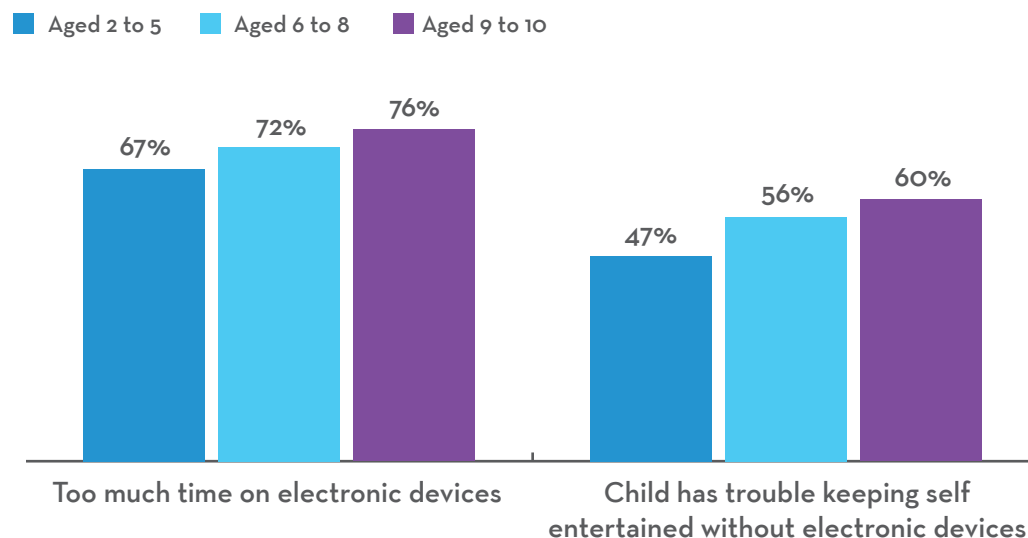
Among British, Canadian, Australian and U.S. parents of children aged 2 to 10



These concerns about screen time are particularly high in reference to older children. More than three-fourths of parents of children aged 9 to 10 across the three countries are concerned that their child spends too much time on electronic devices, compared with 67% of parents of children aged 2 to 5. Moreover, while less than half of parents of children aged 2 to 5 (47%) are concerned that their child has trouble keeping themselves entertained without electronic devices, 60% of parents of children aged 9 to 10 have this concern.

PERCENTAGE “WORRIED A LOT/LITTLE,” BY CHILD AGE

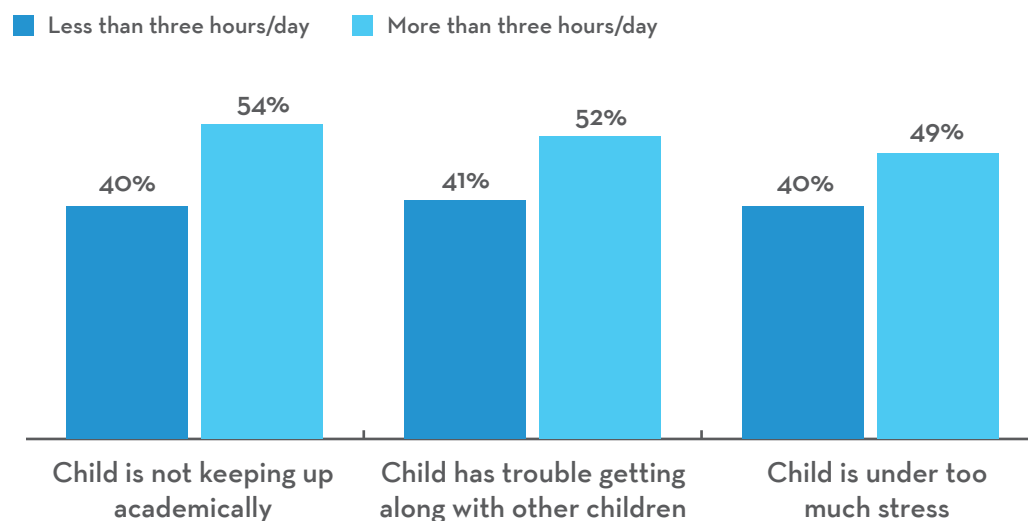
Among British, Canadian and Australian parents of children aged 2 to 10



Parents who report that their child engages in three or more hours of screen-based play per day – about 24% of children – also express greater concern about their child's development in key areas. About half of parents whose child spends three or more hours per day on screens say they are worried a little or a lot that the child is not keeping up academically (54%), has trouble getting along with other children (52%) and is under too much stress (49%). By comparison, only about four in 10 parents whose child spends less than three hours per day engaged in screen-based play have these concerns.

PERCENTAGE “WORRIED A LOT/LITTLE,” BY SCREEN TIME

Among British, Canadian and Australian parents of children aged 2 to 10



Implications

This report on parents in the U.K., Canada and Australia set out to answer two key questions: Are children in these countries engaging in unstructured, child-led play? And do parents recognise how child-led play benefits their child's development?

According to parents' reports, children spend more time engaged in screen-based play than in unstructured, child-led play when indoors. Also according to their parents, given the choice, children gravitate towards media and electronics to fill their free time, in addition to outside play, while unstructured, child-led indoor play ranks lower.

Many parents may not recognise the positive effects that unstructured, child-led play can have on their children's development, despite the scientific research linking this type of play to the development of problem-solving skills, social cooperation, resiliency and creativity.

How might these perceptions about children's play fit into a broader discussion about raising children in the 21st century? Tony Wagner, researcher and author of *Creating Innovators: The Making of Young People Who Will Change the World*, notes, "It is [the] combination of play, passion and purpose that best develops the discipline and perseverance required to be a successful innovator."⁶ Taken with the findings in this study, this raises another key question: If creativity promotes innovation – a crucial skill for the information economy of the 21st century – how do parents, schools and society cultivate creativity in children?

⁶ Wagner, T. (2012). Graduating all students innovation ready. *Tony Wagner: Transforming Education*. Retrieved from <http://www.tonywagner.com/tonys-latest-ed-week-commentary-graduating-all-students-innovation-ready-now-available/>



Survey Methods

These results are based on interviews with 1,000 adults aged 18 and older in each of three countries – the United Kingdom, Canada and Australia – who have one or more children from ages birth to 10. Interviews were conducted April 21-26, 2017, using Survey Sampling International's comprehensive opt-in web panel in each country. Survey invitations were sent to panel participants who reported they had a child in the designated age range.

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