

Do children need more time with their parents, or less?

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'Quality time', far from being the time that children spend with their parents, may actually be the time that they spend 'away' from them.

Posing a question in 2005 Paul Martin said, "We all say we want children to be happy, but it is a notoriously elusive aspect of human existence. How can parents help children to maximise their chances of being happy people?"¹ Publication of the recent research report by unicef into children's well-being has brought this issue back into the public eye with a bang and seems to offer us a possible answer.²

It was picked up and reported by a broad spectrum of the UK media which seems to have universally concluded that the report is saying Britain's children are unhappy compared to the rest of the world because British parents give their children materialistic things rather than their time.

The BBC for example reported this as, 'Our Children Need Time Not Stuff',³ The Huffington Post as 'Children want time not toys',⁴ and The Guardian as, 'How to make children happy? Reduce social inequality'.⁵ Despite the comment on social inequality the latter said, "British parents are tired, over-worked and stressed to a point where they find it difficult to find the time and energy for what children value most – shared family time, outings and interests."



The right-wing press was generally in agreement. The Daily Mail went with 'For society's sake, spend time, not money, on your children'⁶ and the Daily Telegraph succinctly lead with, 'Cycle of 'compulsive consumerism' leaves British family life in crisis, unicef study finds'... summarising this by saying, "British parents are trapping their children in a cycle of 'compulsive consumerism' by showering them with toys and designer labels instead of spending quality time with them, a UN report has found."⁷

'Quality time' – now there's an interesting phrase we shall return to.

Seems fair enough then. But aside from the risk of placing yet more guilt on the shoulders of British parents there is a down side to the conclusion that what children need is to spend more time with their parents. On first reading this idea seems to make perfect sense and it chime's well with the PlayReport produced by IKEA in 2010. The IKEA report, which calls itself the world's largest study on play, involved something like 11,000 interviews in 25 countries with 8,000 parents and 3,000 children. It found that 45% of those parents felt that they did not have enough time to play with their own children; and 73% of children are reported to feel it was more fun to play with their parents than watch TV. Or at least that's what the film displaying the results of the survey says: what the written results actually say is that children reported nine to one that they preferred playing with *their friends* and their parents rather than watch TV (my italics).⁸ That's not quite the same thing.

The unicef report, in the first paragraph in a section headed 'Children's Views' says,

"What constitutes a 'good day' for children was very simple: time with those they love (friends, family and even pets); creative or sporting activities; being outdoors and having fun. These were spontaneously mentioned by almost every child we interviewed in all three countries. Across the three nations [Sweden, Spain and the UK] there was a distinct lack of material possessions in children's descriptions of a good day; it was people, and not things that made them happy." (Page 24)

The British press, with the possible exception of the Guardian, has gone firmly down the 'more time with parents' route as the principle cause of children's unhappiness which, admittedly, the report does place a focus on. A view which may have been strengthened by the point in the report that by the time children in the UK have entered secondary school their engagement in 'active and creative pursuits' had decline when compared to other countries. But the importance of 'friends' and the 'outdoors' seems to have generally missed comment.

Ask any parent to describe their own long standing memories of childhood and it is unlikely that adults will figure very highly, either parent or professional, but those memories in all likelihood will include friends. A word that might also come up time and time again would be 'freedom'. In fact it is often the loss of this that parents latch on to when asked to describe the difference between their childhood and that of their own children. Increasing the time spent with parents is unlikely to result in more of that.

Whether you call it independence, self-reliance, play or whatever children spending time in the company of friends and away from their parents and other adults in general is clearly important. The research leading to the publication of the 2004 'National Review of Children's Play' (UK) for example concluded that what children and young people said they wanted more than anything else was to spend more time outside and with their friends.⁹ Biologically, if independence were not developmentally important then children from around the age of seven or eight would not crave it to the extent they do or spend as much effort getting it to anything like the degree they universally do.¹⁰

Frank Furedi says, "Some of the most character-forming childhood experiences occur in peer-group situations, free from adult supervision"¹¹ with the clear implication that these experiences must take place away from the gaze of adults or they possibly would not take place at all. Peter K Smith agrees noting that, "Play is generally fun; but not all play is fun, and not all play is approved of by parents."¹² Even worse is the finding that when adults do engage with their young the result is often a further restriction in playing. Evidence from anthropology and zoology shows that adult humans and other animals often engage in play in order to use it as a distraction, as a way of getting children out of an adults way, and for keeping them occupied.¹³

Gill Valentine takes this further arguing that there is the added pressure on parents to keep their children closer to home and therefore "...have more control over where they are and hence control over their safety."¹⁴ But this degree of control goes beyond mere safety to active restrictions over what can and cannot be done – in the name of safety. Valentine puts this by saying, "... play is becoming more home centred (and therefore supervised by adults), children are being compensated for the decline in their independent mobility and therefore their independent activity by the substitution of adult-controlled institutional activities."

It is, as Paul Martin quoted at the start says, important to parents that our children are happy in their childhood and subsequently become happier adults, and we do have an important part in this. He starts his article by stating that peoples personal relationships are top of the list of requirements for happy children noting the important role of both parents and schools in fostering that; but ends by reminding us that, "... probably the most effective mechanism by which children develop their social and emotional competence does not require schools, teachers or parents. It is called play and it is a remarkable thing."

The Opie's (Iona and Peter Opie, the great collectors of children's play and childlore) say in the introduction to 'Children's Games in Street and Playground that, "... however much children may need looking after they are also people going about their own business within their own society, and are fully capable of occupying themselves under the jurisdiction of their own code."¹⁵ This is something which we adults must not lose sight of because, in short, children will do what they need to do if given the time and space in order to be able to do it.

This is not to say that children do not wish to spend time with their parents or enjoy the experience when they do; nor is it to say that there is no important place for parents in fostering happier children. But what it is to say is that 'quality time', far from being the time that children spend with their parents, may actually be the time that they spend 'away' from them. Quality is in those important things children can do when they are not being stopped from doing so by a guilt ridden parent.

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- ⁷ 'Cycle of 'compulsive consumerism' leaves British family life in crisis, Unicef study finds' (14th September 2011). *The Daily Telegraph* [online] <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/politics/8760558/Cycle-of-compulsive-consumerism-leaves-British-family-life-in-crisis-Unicef-study-finds.html> [accessed 22 September 2011].
- ⁸ There are a number of places that the short film can be found online by making a search for PlayReport+IKEA, but the written report and the PlayReport Facebook page seem to have been taken off-line recently.
- ⁹ DCMS (2004) *Getting Serious About Play: A review of children's play*. London: HMSO.
- ¹⁰ See for example Chapter 8, 'In the company of children', in Judith Rich Harris (1998) *The Nurture Assumption*. London: Bloomsbury.
- ¹¹ Frank Furedi (1997, this ed. 1998) *Culture of Fear: Risk taking and the morality of low expectations*. London: Cassell (p.117).
- ¹² Peter K Smith (2010) *Children and Play*. Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell. (p.196).
- ¹³ Ibid (p.195/196).
- ¹⁴ Gill Valentine (2004) *Public Space and the Culture of Childhood*. Aldershot: Ashgate. (p.69/70).
- ¹⁵ Iona and Peter Opie (1969) *Children's Games in Street and Playground*. Oxford: OUP. (p.v).