

## Introduction to Play, Recreation, Health and Wellbeing in Geographies of Children and Young People

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The volume on Play, Recreation, Health and Well Being, from the Geographies of Children and Young People series, consists of two interlinked sections, each focusing on a broad topic which has been of central importance in the development of geographical research with children and young people. Section 1 focuses on children and young people's **play and recreation**, while section 2 focuses on children and young people's **health and wellbeing**. Each section includes a rich variety of conceptual and empirical work by researchers working in diverse geographical contexts, and within diverse methodological and conceptual traditions. Both these sets of topics are important concerns for researchers working in the subdiscipline of Children's Geographies. Whilst there has been some work to extend play to adults (e.g. Edensor et al 2012, Woodyer 2012) Children's Geographies remains the subdisciplinary area within which the majority of work on play has taken place. Work on health and wellbeing is not similarly concentrated within Children's Geographies. However, these concepts are key concerns for geographers working with children and young people in diverse contexts and, at a more fundamental level, as Bourdillon (2014 497) has recently suggested, "most academics who undertake childhood studies do so because they are concerned about the well-being of children". Both play and recreation and health and wellbeing are also enshrined as rights in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (United Nations 1989, see Skelton, 2007) and are often both taken for granted as socio-political goods. When articulated together (as well as separately) play and recreation and health and wellbeing are often normatively discussed in both popular and academic discourses, with developmental-medical discourses dominating in articulation with moral panics about children, young people and families. This means that play and recreation are often framed as solutions to concerns about health and wellbeing rather than as intrinsic rights. For example, active play is often called for as a solution to concerns about obesity (Hemming 2007). Some of the chapters in the volume on Play, Recreation, Health and Well Being touch on these instrumental approaches to play and wellbeing but all attempt to move, in different ways, beyond such normative ways of thinking about play and recreation and health and wellbeing. Reflecting broader work in Children's Geographies, the contributions to the volume on Play, Recreation, Health and Well Being do important work in critically and conceptually reflecting on both sets of ideas (play and recreation and health and wellbeing), making clear the complex spatialities involved and challenging any simple instrumental approaches. The chapters in the volume on Play, Recreation, Health and Well Being explore, through a wide range of foci and case studies, what play and recreation and health and wellbeing mean in the context of the lived experiences of children and young people's lives. The diversity of conceptual positions, methodological approaches and geographical-historical contexts present in even this limited cross-section is remarkable, and should caution against universalising and normalising ways of thinking about play and recreation and health and wellbeing. Key concerns of the volume on Play, Recreation, Health and Well Being's two sections are as follows.

### ***Section 1 – Geographies of children and young people's play and recreation***

The first section of the volume on Play, Recreation, Health and Well Being showcases an international range of leading edge geographical research focusing on children and young people's play and recreation in diverse contexts. Play and recreation have been major, longstanding foci for geographers working with children and young people, and this section offers something of a cross-section of the rich diversity of topics, issues, intellectual challenges and methodological approaches present within this very large body of research. Three key themes, which recur widely in geographical scholarship about play and recreation, are prominent in the chapters collected here.

First, many of the chapters are particularly concerned with the critical theorisation of play-itself and recreation-itself. Notions of 'play' and 'recreation' are widely deployed and taken-for-granted in popular and academic discussions about children and young people but, on reflection, the meanings and usefulness of these terms are unclear and contested. As a classic text by the psychologist and play theorist Brian Sutton-Smith (1997 1-3) argues,

"we all play occasionally, and we all know what playing feels like. But when it comes to making theoretical statements about what play is, we fall into silliness. There is little agreement among us, and much ambiguity... Obviously, the word play stands for a category of very diverse happenings"

Indeed, as the sociologist Thomas Henricks (2008 157) argues, terms like play and recreation can be used to denote happenings as vastly and peculiarly diverse as,

“throwing snow balls with a group of friends. Building a sandcastle. Playing a kissing game at a middle school party. Saying a tongue twister faster and faster. Finger painting. Taking a swing at a moving ball. ‘Strutting your stuff’ on a dance floor. Telling a joke. Pulling a prank. Dressing up in crazy clothes. Wagering at a casino or racetrack. Making your doll do whatever you want. Surfing. Fantasizing about someone romantically. Doing a crossword puzzle. Holding your breath longer than you have before. Teasing your younger brother. ‘Bluffing’ in a game of poker. Collecting ceramic frogs. Making the biggest splash possible at a public pool”

Geographers working with children and young people have contributed significantly to conceptual reflection upon the diverse spatial phenomena which are habitually labelled as ‘play’ or ‘recreation’. Geographical scholarship in this context has taken a wide range of forms, variously inspired by wider theoretical and critical work in social and cultural geography (see Aitken 2000, 2001, Gagen 2000, Thomson and Philo 2004, Harker 2005, Rautio 2013, Woodyer 2012, 2013), participatory playwork (see Lester and Russell 2010, Russell 2012), and/or sociological and ethnographic research (see James 1998, Corsaro 2014). A number of vivid, distinctive, sustained conceptual discussions of play are included in the volume on Play, Recreation, Health and Well Being. For example in the chapter “Ludic Geographies”, Woodyer et al critique the limited attention to spatiality in play research outside academic Geography, and call for geographers to do more to challenge prevailing media and academic portrayals of play which are frequently aspatial, uncritically nostalgic, and problematically wedded to developmental understandings of childhood and youth. These critiques challenge geographers to develop innovative, creative and playful – or ‘ludic’ – ways of thinking, writing and researching about play and recreation. Rautio and Jokinen’s chapter, “Children’s Relations to the More-Than-Human World Beyond Developmental Views”, develops a parallel critique of normative developmental and representational understandings of play. They call for geographers to notice the considerable social-material-spatial complexities of play and recreation, via an evocative case study of events of children’s play with/in snow. Denise Goerisch’s chapter, “Playful Enterprises”, makes two further important conceptual contributions, via a case study of young people’s involvement in youth organisations such as Girl Scouts, calling for consideration of the historical construction of youthful play and recreation, and also how children and young people themselves conceptualise play and recreation. Meanwhile, writing from a quite different conceptual tradition, Oliver et al’s chapter, “Children’s Geographies for Activity and Play: An Overview of Measurement Approaches”, evaluates some commonly-used empirical approaches to conceptualising and auditing relationships between environmental features and children and young people’s mobilities, play and recreation behaviours.

Second, several chapters in this section are focused upon spaces which are explicitly designed and/or habitually designated for play and recreation. A number of chapters summarise, and seek to extend, large established bodies of research about designated play-spaces like playgrounds (McKendrick 1999, Gagen 2000, Thomson 2005, Ferré 2006, Hendricks 2011), early childhood settings (Russell 2010, Dymont and O’Connell 2013), school grounds (Tranter and Malone 2004), youthwork settings (Russell 2013) and natural or adventure play environments (Lester and Maudsley 2007). For example, Aziz and Said’s chapter, “Outdoor Environments as Children’s Play Spaces: Playground Affordances”, provides an introduction to research about the properties, qualities and play ‘affordances’ of formal playground provision vis-à-vis informal ‘play grounds’ where children and young people make their own play opportunities. Sruthi Atmakur’s chapter, “Children’s Play in Urban Areas”, also provides a review of evidence comparing ‘traditional’ designed urban playgrounds with alternative, informal ‘looser’, ‘manipulable’ play opportunities in built environments. Johansson and Hultgren’s chapter, “Children and Young People’s Participation in Cultural Activities”, shifts the spotlight to designated play-spaces in institutional settings for preschool children. Through a discussion of theoretical literature and ethnographic research, the authors consider the ways in which spaces of care, learning and ‘carnival-esque’ playfulness are constituted. Tracy Hayes’s chapter, “Playful Approaches to Outdoor Learning: Boggarts, Bears, and Bunny Rabbits”, is located within a tradition of research and practice in spaces of youthwork and outdoor learning. Hayes provides both a contextual overview of playful practices in these settings and an affecting argument for the use of playful, creative methods in academic practices (look out for pesky boggarts!) Verstrate and Karsten’s chapter, “Play and Recreation in Urban Spaces”, directs attention to another form of designated play-space: the landscaped natural play environment. Through a case study of nature playgrounds in the Netherlands, the authors highlight how play-spaces are constituted and shaped by social-historical contexts, demographic change, and contemporary norms and childhood, youth and risk.

Third, many chapters in this section are centrally concerned with the everyday playful and recreational practices and mobilities of children and young people. The ways in which children and young people’s everyday play and recreation intersect with – and often disrupt, subvert and clash with – conventional, normative uses of public spaces has been a major concern of much geographical research (Valentine 1996a, 1996b, Matthews et al 2000, Punch 2000). The contested and ambiguous presence of children and young people (as feared-for ‘angels’ or feared-about ‘devils’, in Valentine’s (1996a) classic formulation) in highly-regulated adultist public spaces is a recurring motif in many chapters collected here. However, the sheer diversity of contexts, politics and playful practices present in this section should

preclude any sense of childhood and youth as universal experiences. Case studies range across geographies of children and young people's everyday practices of hanging out in Finnish shopping malls (Pyry and Tani's chapter, "Young People's Play with Urban Public Space: Geographies of Hanging Out"), improvised play in New Zealand backyards (Kearns et al), adventure sports in Finnish parking lots (Harinen et al's chapter "Alternative Sports in Finland"), and walking in the English countryside (Leyshon's chapter "Rural Youth Identity Formation: Stories of Movement and Memories of Place"). In addition, Emilia Licitra's chapter "Play and Learning in Benin" discusses the importance of ethnographic and anthropological research for geographical research, presenting a case study of children's everyday play experiences in northern Benin. When juxtaposed, the diversity of practices, politics and experiences of children and young people in these different contexts is marked. Michelle Pyer's chapter "Young Wheelchair Users' Play and Recreation", provides an overview of the everyday physical and social barriers encountered by young wheelchair user's everyday provides further evidence of the diverse, often profoundly inequitable, geographies of children and young people's play and recreation practices. The ways in which children and young people's play and recreational practices are changing in many contexts because of changing technologies, transport habits, and social-cultural norms has been another major concern for many geographers (Karsten 2005, Mackett et al 2007). The chapter by Paul Tranter on "Children's Play in their Local Neighbourhoods: Rediscovering the Value of Residential Streets", the chapter by Moushumi Chaudhury et al on "Public Open Spaces, Children's Independent Mobility", and the chapter by Robin Kearns et al on "Variegated Nature of Play for Auckland Children: Banal Landscapes and the Promotion of Wellbeing", provide evidence reviews relating to children and young people's declining independent mobility in the minority world over the last century. These chapters also summarise a range of emerging evidence about health, wellbeing, community and social-cultural impacts of shifts towards automobility and heightened regulation of children's play and recreational mobilities. Finally, many social scientists have explored children and young people's playful and recreational engagements with popular, media and consumer cultures within this context (Buckingham 2007, 2011, Horton 2010, 2012, 2014). Two examples of new scholarship from this interdisciplinary context are included in the volume on Play, Recreation, Health and Well Being. Allen and Mendick's chapter, "Popular Culture, Identity 'Play', and Mobilities: Young People and Celebrity", explores the significance of popular cultural media celebrities within many young people's lives, noting that popular cultural media constitute a resource for young people's 'identity play'. The chapter by Crowe and Watts, "Revisiting Goliath: The Geography of Trolls, Grief Tourists, and Playing with Digital Transgression", highlights the complex, and sometimes hauntingly dark, spaces afforded by new online and digital media, with a particularly focus on young people's 'transgressive', but often playful and creative, practices of 'trolling' and 'grief tourism'. Both of these chapters call for geographers to engage in more careful, subtle, detailed (and indeed *playful*) research in relation to children and young people's everyday recreational and playful practices.

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### **Section 2 – Geographies of children and young people's health and wellbeing**

The second section of the volume on Play, Recreation, Health and Well Being collates a range of geographical research focusing on children and young people's health and wellbeing. At the same time that geographical work on children and young people was developing in the 1990s and early 2000s (Matthews and Limb 1999) significant changes were also taking place in medical geography seeing a shift towards new geographies of health and wellbeing (Kearns and Moon 2002; Hall 2000; Parr 2002 2003 2004). This brought a broader understanding of wellbeing into geography and whilst wellbeing remains a complex and contested term (Atkinson and Joyce, 2011) it has enabled a focus on a broader spectrum of lived experience and of spaces and encounters beyond a focus on the causes and incidence of ill-health. Wellbeing thus, as Atkinson et al (2012 3) explain is fundamentally geographical:

"Wellbeing, however defined, can have no form, expression or enhancement without consideration of place. The processes of well-being or becoming, whether of enjoying a balance of positive over negative affects, of fulfilling potential and expressing autonomy or of mobilizing a range of material, social and psychological resources, are essentially and necessarily emergent in place."

The chapters explore health and wellbeing in these broad terms across a range of different macro- and micro-geographies. In particular, there are three key themes which run throughout the chapters in this section of the volume on Play, Recreation, Health and Well Being which illustrate some of the parallels between Children's Geographies and new geographies of health and wellbeing.

First, several of the papers argue for recognition of children as knowledgeable actors in relation to health and wellbeing. The recognition of children and young people as agents has been a core tenet of Children's Geographies (Holloway and Valentine 2000). This sees parallels in the development of new geographies of health and wellbeing in

the decentring of medical knowledge and a shift to instead take seriously the embodied knowledges and lived experiences of people beyond those claiming medical authority (Parr, 2004). However, as Colls and Evans (2008) and Evans, Colls and Hörschelmann (2011) illustrate in relation to children's healthy eating initiatives, much (public) health policy and research fails to recognise agency in intersubjective and intercorporeal relations, remaining informed by individualistic models of responsibility which either continue to exclude children and young people as active in health decision making or place blame on children, holding them accountable for 'irresponsible' behaviours in the same ways as adults (Ruddick, 2006). Several of the chapters challenge this and offer more positive accounts of children's agency in relation to health and wellbeing. For example, Hampshire's chapter, "Children and Medicines", questions the idea that medicines should be 'kept out of the reach of children', using this phrase often found on medicine bottles as evidence of the dominant assumption that children are vulnerable and in need of protection (Holloway and Valentine 2000) and that children and young people are merely passive recipients of medicines and health care. The chapter argues that children and young people often are active in taking responsibility for their own medicine, yet policy and legal regulations neither recognise, nor support them to do so effectively and safely. As such, the chapter calls for further engagement with children and young people as 'therapeutic citizens', actively involved in their own health care. Gallagher et al do this in their chapter, "Geography of Adolescent Anaphylaxis", in which they argue that anaphylaxis is a disruptive force which confounds expectations about risk and safety in particular spaces, drawing attention to the challenges of mobility for young people with anaphylaxis. Moreover, they discuss the management of risk and responsibility in relation to anaphylaxis as a form of biopower in the lives of young people. The chapter by Wilkinson, "Young People's Drinking Geographies", similarly moves beyond any simplistic framing of responsibility and risk, this time in relation to drinking behaviours. Instead, this chapter discusses the multiple ways in which young people care for their own and others' wellbeing whilst drinking alcohol. Moreover, Wilkinson's chapter moves understandings of children and young people's agency further by considering the relations between human and non-human actors through the lens of actor-network-theory. This does important work to challenge any individualistic notion of agency by instead considering the ways in which the material and more-than-representational elements of drinking spaces may shape young people's alcohol consumption experiences and the performativity of drinking and drunkenness in non-deterministic ways.

Secondly, and related to framings of responsibility and agency discussed above, a common theme amongst the chapters in this section is a move to challenge dominant policy and media representations of children and young people in relation to health. Questioning the ways in which particular social groups are labelled as more or less 'healthy' or 'risky' is a core feature of critical health geographies (Parr 2004, McPhail 2009, Rawlins 2009) and recent work in Children's Geographies has particularly highlighted the ways in which children and young people are targeted in pre-emptive health policies as a result of the framing of children as future adults (Evans 2010, Evans and Colls 2009, Evans Colls and Hörschelmann 2011). The majority of the chapters in the volume on Play, Recreation, Health and Well Being extend these debates in some way, drawing attention to the intersectional politics through which children and young people are framed as vulnerable or risky in relation to health and wellbeing. For example, Pike and Kelly's chapter, "Beyond Jamie's School Dinners: The Moral Geographies of Young People and Food", explores the battlegrounds of school dining rooms in relation to concerns about children and young people and food. They particularly focus on media framings of school food and children's health in the UK in relation to Jamie Oliver's 'School Dinners', subsequent programming and associated media coverage. Drawing theoretically on Stuart Hall and Michel Foucault, they particularly question the classed discourses that inform ideas about good/bad and responsible/irresponsible eating and who should/could be an actor in media programmes that overwhelmingly target children from poor/disadvantaged families. In doing so, the chapter raises important wider questions about the framing of responsibility for health/wellbeing in the context of wider classed politics. Coleman et al's chapter, "Mediating Young People's Knowledge: Framing School-Based Sexuality Education in New Zealand and Canada", similarly explores the framing of children and young people as 'at risk' this time in relation to sex education in New Zealand and Canada. Like Pike and Kelly, this chapter also draws attention to the space of the school as a space of intervention in health campaigns. Through analysis of print media they demonstrate that the voices of young people are silenced through a politics of intervention which frames young people both as risky and as vulnerable and in need of adult control. Moving beyond the school, Qian Hui Tan's chapter, "Governing Futures and Saving Young Lives: Wilful smoking temporalities and subjectivities", on young people and smoking in Singapore similarly demonstrates the ways in which young people's agency in relation to public health concerns is seen as problematic – framed as risk. This chapter uses Sara Ahmed's work on Wilfulness to challenge the ways in which young people who choose to smoke are framed as Wilful and in need of protection from themselves. All of these chapters raise important questions that also relate to the previous theme in terms of the recognition or problematisation of children and young people's agency in relation to health and wellbeing and children and young people's rights in the face of interventions which aim to protect the health of future adults.

The third theme that runs through the chapters is one of space. Two sub-themes are evident in the ways in which chapters in the volume on Play, Recreation, Health and Well Being approach space: a focus on everyday spaces and lived experiences, and a focus on institutional and clinical spaces. In the first of these, papers follow from the shift from medical to health geography which saw attention shift from larger scale epidemiological studies, to the everyday, experiential and embodied spaces of health and wellbeing (Kearns and Moon 2002; Hall 2000; Parr 2002 2003 2004). Children's Geographies has similarly drawn attention to the lived realities of small scale and micro-geographies (Ansell 2009; Holloway and Valentine 2000) with particular attention to the spaces of the school, home, street and play spaces. Here, many of the chapters explore the relationship between home and public space in terms of children and young people's relative safety or risk. This is key to many of the chapters already discussed above for example Gallagher's chapter on anaphylaxis which demonstrates the ways in which 'risk' and 'responsibility' inform young people's mobilities. The chapter which perhaps most clearly complicates any simplistic division between safety and risk in relation to home/public space is Alexander's chapter, "Children's Corporeal Agency and Use of Space in Situations of Domestic Violence". A theme of agency runs strongly through this chapter alongside one of space as the chapter considers the agency of children who are survivors of domestic violence, complicating any simple division between home and public space in terms of understandings of risk and foregrounding children's resilience and agency in finding spaces of comfort in violent contexts. This moves debates beyond a simple framing of children as 'victims' which means that the voices of child survivors of domestic abuse are often unheard, to allow children to inform more nuanced and complex understandings of the lived experiences of domestic abuse. Far from passive victims, the chapter illustrates the multiple ways in which children resist, cope and survive during and in the aftermath of domestic abuse. This more nuanced research which centres children as agents has clear implications for practice in supporting child survivors of domestic violence. Complicating the perception of home as a safe space in contrast to risky public space is also key to Jayne and Valentine's chapter, "Alcohol Consumption and Geographies of Childhood and Family Life", which considers the ways in which parents and carers emphasise home as a 'safe' space to introduce children and young people to alcohol. As the authors argue, this over-simplifies understandings of health in relation to drinking and means there are missed opportunities to teach children about a range of drinking spaces/places and relations. As mentioned above Wilkinson's chapter also on young people's drinking geographies extends this, exploring the ways in which spaces beyond the home are important for young people's alcohol consumption.

Space is also important in the volume on Play, Recreation, Health and Well Being through a focus on institutional spaces. As noted above, both Pike and Kelly's and Coleman et al's chapters draw attention to the school as a site of intervention in health campaigns and school space is central to much work in Children's Geographies. Other chapters in this collection extend the range of institutional geographies (Philo and Parr 2000) beyond the school. For example, Callaghan et al's chapter, "Mental Health of Looked After Children: Spaces, Places, and Bodies that Move", adds an important geographical perspective on space in children's everyday lives to a literature dominated by psychotherapeutic approaches. In particular, they raise the importance of spaces of 'home and belonging' for looked after children whose lives are often mobile. Crafter et al's chapter, "Children's spaces of mental health: The built environment as places of meaning", similarly explore institutional spaces but in this case in relation to the built environment and spaces of outpatient Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS). In particular they explore how meanings associated with what it means to be a 'child' are reflected in the built environment often opposing ideas of the 'normal' child with the 'dangerous' child service user. In the chapter "Locking Up Children and Young People: Secure Care in Scotland" Schliehe explores space in a more extreme setting. This chapter offers a nuanced and important reflection on the spatial articulation of care and control in institutions often considered the last resort for young people deemed to present a risk to themselves and others. In the context of the clinical space of fertility clinics, McPhail and Hunynh's chapter, "Geographies of Maternal Obesity, Eugenics, and the Clinical Space", explores the ways in which risk to future/unborn children plays a part in discussions of maternal obesity. Here, future children's wellbeing is evoked prior to conception in a preemptive politics which the authors suggest constitutes a form of eugenics, limiting the reproductive choices of mothers labelled as obese. Ward's chapter, "Alternative Childhood Obesity Treatment in Age of Obesity Panic", offers a more hopeful clinical context surrounding fat wellbeing, describing an alternative obesity treatment program which challenges some of the dominant stigmatization of fat bodies.

Whilst these chapters pay attention to the micro-geographies of these everyday and institutional spaces in relation to health and wellbeing, it is important to note that they also do more than just pay attention to the micro-scale (Ansell 2009) and many of the chapters demonstrate how these microgeographies articulate with geographies at larger scales. For example, Tan Qian Hui's discussion of young people's wilful smoking subjectivities is situated through discussion of the framing of young people as "polluting presences in a supposedly clean-and-green Singapore", whilst Pike and Kelly's discussion of class in relation to media representations of school food are situated within the discourses surrounding austerity politics in contemporary Britain. The different clinical encounters surrounding fat bodies in chapters by McPhail and Hunynh and Ward are also situated within a wider 'war on obesity'. Almost all of

the chapters (particularly those on institutional spaces) also discuss children and young people's lives in relation to national and international health policy. Thus the chapters in the volume on Play, Recreation, Health and Well Being illustrate that, as Ansell (2009 204) argues:

"Policies are made and events take place beyond children's perceptions that they cannot comment on, yet profoundly shape their lives. The political spaces from which children are physically absent are as important as those in which they are present".

At the outset of this editorial, we noted that Health and Wellbeing are enshrined in the UNCRC. As Skelton (2007) explains, this convention is framed around three Ps: Provision, Protection and Participation. Looking across the three themes outlined above in relation to this section of the volume on Play, Recreation, Health and Well Being, what is evident is that the relationship between these three is often tense in the context of health and wellbeing. Whilst many spaces, policies and interventions are framed around providing care *for* children and protecting children, this often articulates in difficult ways with children's participation as a framing of children and young people as 'at risk' may negate or make problematic any recognition of their agency. This is not to say that children and young people do not need care and protection (Skelton 2007), but as the chapters in the volume on Play, Recreation, Health and Well Being illustrate, Children's Geographers are doing important work to complicate this and offer more nuanced understandings of the articulation of agency, responsibility and risk across different geographies.

#### **Key questions**

As you read the chapters in the volume on Play, Recreation, Health and Well Being, we invite you to consider the following questions.

- How are the concepts of play, recreation, health and wellbeing important to topics you are researching or studying?
- Which aspects of play, recreation, health and wellbeing are distinctive to children and young people? How do children and young people's geographies of play, recreation, health and wellbeing vary over space and time?
- What aspects of play, recreation, health and wellbeing are important areas for future research? Are any aspects of these topics *not* covered in the volume on Play, Recreation, Health and Well Being?
- A wide range of theories and methods feature in the volume on Play, Recreation, Health and Well Being: which of them do you find most useful in thinking about play, recreation, health and wellbeing?

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