



# Australian families: **How we play**

## Poll report

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## Report highlights

- Most parents (94%) recognise play is important for a child's health, including physical wellbeing and brain development.
- Less than half (45%) of Australian children play outdoors most days, and 80% of parents would like their children to spend more time outdoors.
- Time, safety concerns and weather stop Australian children playing outdoors.
- A third of parents (32%) say it is not good for play to involve risk.
- Almost two in three parents (61%) often find playing with their child hard or boring, and most parents (58%) are keen to learn more about how to play with their child.

## What is play?

Play can be described as a behaviour that is freely chosen, spontaneous and voluntary. Children engage in play simply for the satisfaction the behaviour itself brings. Research shows that play is critical to children’s health, wellbeing, development and learning.<sup>1-3</sup> Play enhances learning at all ages and is a powerful force in family connectedness. It is a way for all people to express their imagination, curiosity and creativity. Through play children communicate, learn to understand each other and make sense of the world.



However, one-fifth of parents (19%) believe play is fun but not essential, with one in eight parents (12%) believing play is mostly a waste of time. One in seven (15%) believe only young children need to play, and that teenagers don’t need to play (13%). About one fifth of parents (18%) think that babies don’t know how to play. These findings suggest a gap in understanding the importance of play at every stage of development throughout childhood and adolescence.

Almost all parents (90%) believe that children need a variety of different types of play and three-quarters (76%) recognise that it is good for children to be bored sometimes. Two thirds (65%) of parents believe play was better when they were growing up than it is for children today. The vast majority of parents recognise the benefits of time outdoors, with 89% saying it is essential for kids to play in nature.

## How and where do Australian children and young people play?

Play experiences are changing for children in an increasingly urbanised, organised and technology based society, with much less access to play in nature and unsupervised free play. Over the past two to three years, the COVID-19 pandemic further altered play experiences for children and young people in Australia.

### Outdoor play

Less than half (45%) of all children played outdoors either at home (31%) and/or away from home (33%) in the street, nature or playground most days of the week. Outdoor play was more common among toddlers and

## What do parents know about the benefits of play for children and young people?

Most Australian parents recognise the benefits of play for children, with 94% of those surveyed recognising that play is important for a child’s physical wellbeing and brain development and 95% noting that it is important for social and emotional wellbeing and mental health. Almost all parents (94%) recognise play as a type of learning.

## Where Australian children play most days of the week\*

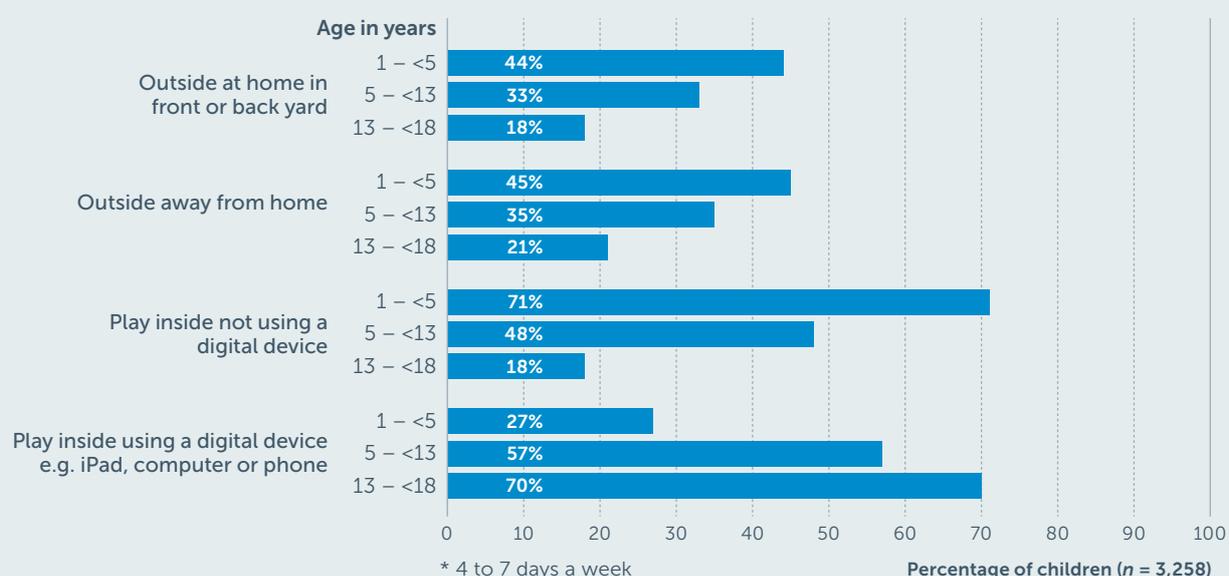


Figure 1.

preschoolers (at home 44%, away from home 45%) than primary school-aged children (at home 33%, away from home 35%) and teenagers (at home 18%, away from home 21%). Thirty-six per cent of male children played outside away from home most days compared to 30% of female children and 34% of males playing outside at home compared to 27% of females.

### Digital play

The most common type of play was play with digital devices, with 54% of children playing inside on a digital device or screen most days (see figure 1 on the previous page). Digital play was most common among teenage children (70% playing on devices most days), followed by primary school-aged children (57%) and toddlers and preschoolers (27%).

### Free play

Free play is when a child decides what and how to play without an adult telling them what to do or how to do it. Half of children (52%) engaged in free play most days of the week. There was a small difference in free play across age groups (teenagers 60%, primary school-aged children 52%, toddlers and preschoolers 47%). More than half of parents (56%) said their child needed to spend more time in free and unstructured play. Of concern, almost one in four parents (22%) mistakenly believe that play always needs to be organised by an adult.

### Play partners

Parents reported on who their child most commonly played with outside of school hours. The most common play partner for children was a sibling, with three in four

(72%) children playing most commonly with their siblings (see figure 2). Of note, this was less common among teenagers (56%) compared with primary school-aged children (79%) and toddlers and preschoolers (74%).

Half of children (49%) most frequently played by themselves, and this was similar among all age groups – toddlers and preschoolers (48%), and primary school-aged children (49%) and teenagers (50%). Forty-four per cent of children played with a parent most often, with this decreasing markedly with increasing child age (toddlers and preschoolers 63%, primary school-aged children 48%, teenagers 24%). A third of parents (33%) felt their child did not spend enough time playing by themselves and just under half (42%) believed their child should spend more time playing with family members.

Across all age groups, a third of children (34%) had a friend as their most common face-to-face play partner outside of school hours. This was most common among teenagers (47%), primary school-aged children (36%), and less common among toddlers and preschoolers (13%).

Pets were identified as the most common play partner for 16% of children and were most common among teenagers (20%).

More than one in ten children (15%) played with their grandparents most frequently, although this was much more common among younger children than older children (28% of toddlers and preschoolers, 15% of primary school-aged children and 5% of teenagers).

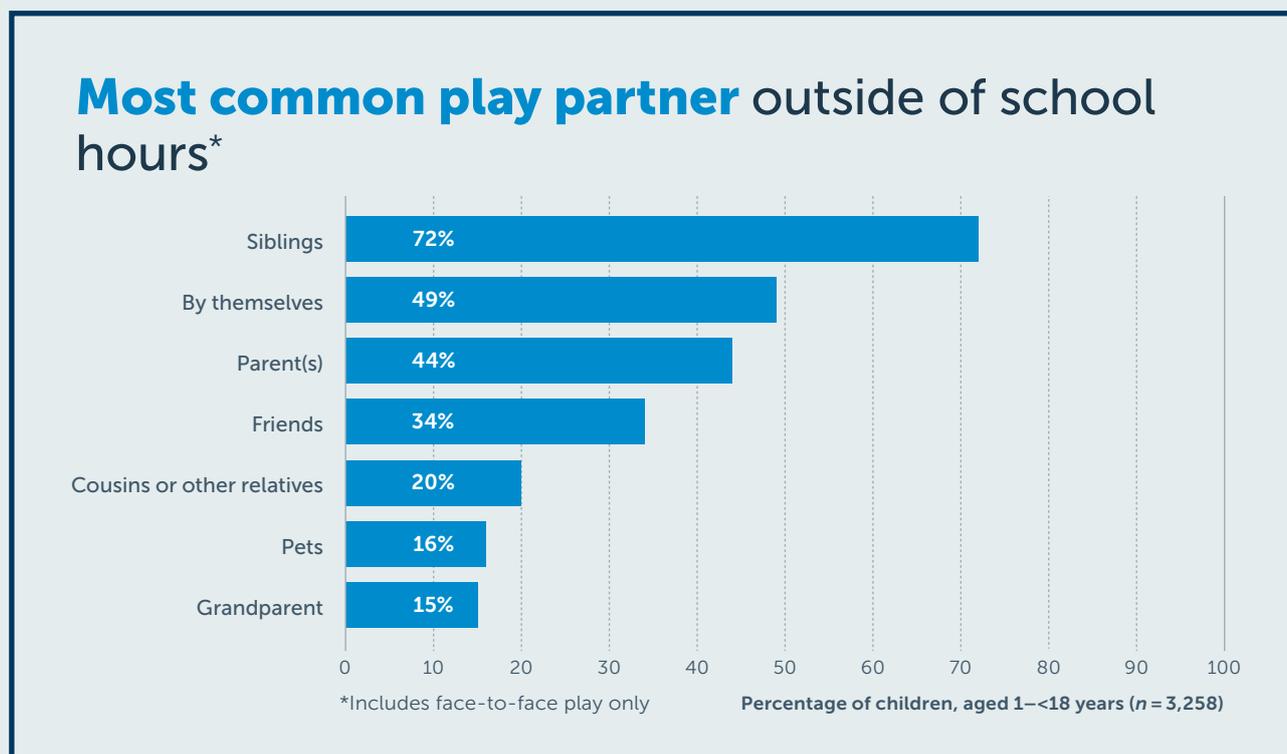


Figure 2.

## What are the barriers to children and young people playing more?

Parents identified several barriers to their child playing more.

### Time

Many parents said time was a barrier to their children playing more, with a third (35%) saying it is hard to schedule in time for their child to play and over half (57%) saying children needed more play time and less homework. Eighty-six per cent of parents said it is hard for them to find time to play with their children.

### Supervision and risky play

Play inherently involves some risk and it is through managing risk that children learn and develop. People have different levels of comfort with risk and perceived need for supervision and management of children's play. A third (32%) of parents do not think it is good for play to involve risk.

The perceived need for adult supervision in all play was a barrier to their child's play for some parents with 38% of parents saying play always needs to be supervised by an adult and more than a quarter (27%) of believing an adult should always step in to sort out the problem if children disagree when playing.

### Cost

Children do not always need toys or equipment to play – they can play with inexpensive and everyday items or without anything at all. A third (36%) of parents believe that play is better with toys, and said the toys or equipment that their child needs to play are expensive (38%).

### Skills, knowledge and interest

Although most parents (91%) say they enjoy playing with their child, one-third (36%) say they sometimes don't know how to play with their child and one-half are not confident that they could help their child to play (50%). Almost two-thirds (61%) of parents say they often find playing with their child hard or boring, and almost one-third (36%) prefer not to play with their child. Over half (58%) of parents would like to learn more about how to play with their children.

### Barriers to playing outside

Playing outside has many benefits for a child's physical and mental health and development.<sup>1</sup> Four in five parents (80%) said they would like their child to spend more time playing outside and 62% reported that their child would rather play outdoors than indoors if they had a choice (65% of boys compared to 60% of girls). Despite these intentions, parents note several barriers to outdoor play including a need for supervision, safety concerns and the weather. Among teenagers, a lack of

## Parent concerns that often stop children from playing outside

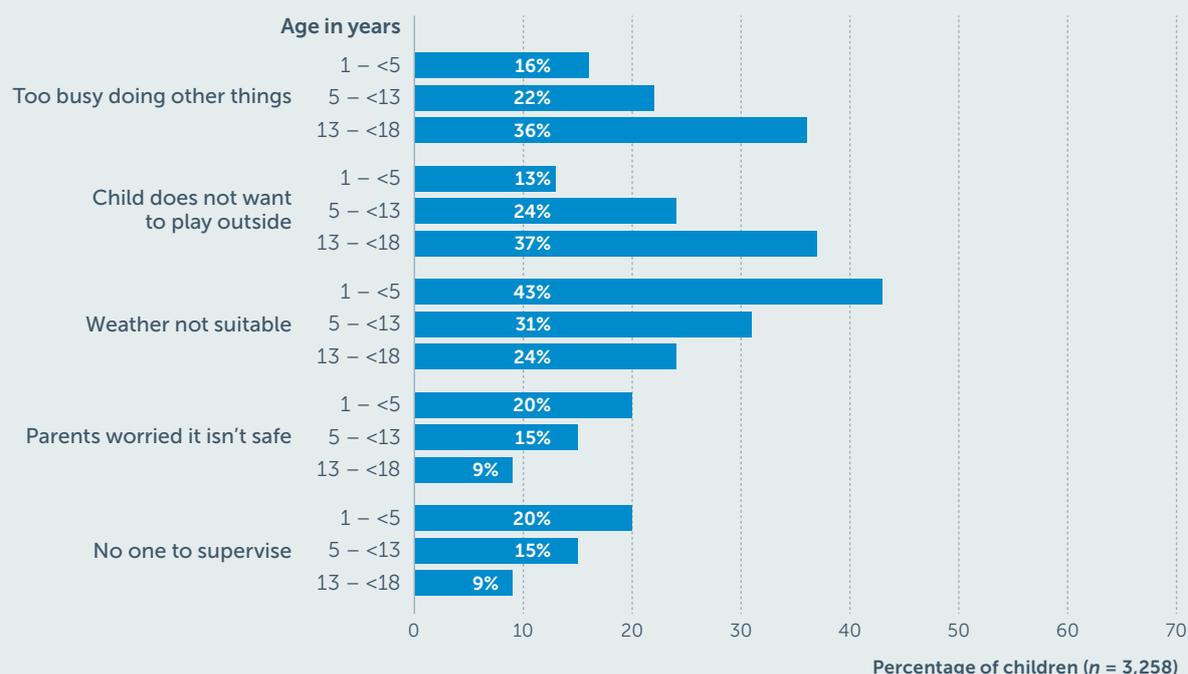


Figure 3.

motivation and time were often the barriers, with over a third not wanting to play outside (37%) or being busy doing other things (36%). For younger children, parent concern about the weather being unsuitable was the reason that most often prevented them from playing outside (43% of toddlers and preschoolers; 31% of primary school-aged children) (see *figure 3* on the previous page).

### Which parent groups have the biggest knowledge gaps about play?

Parents living in metropolitan areas and male parents had lower levels of knowledge and different attitudes about play and were more likely to report barriers to their child playing compared to parents living in regional or remote areas and female parents.

Parents in regional areas were less likely than those in metropolitan areas to report that play should always be supervised (28% vs 41%) or organised (10% vs 24%) by an adult. More parents in metropolitan areas (38%) found it hard to schedule in time for their children to play compared to those in regional areas (25%). Parents in metropolitan areas were more likely than those in regional areas to think play was a waste of time (14% vs 2%) or to prefer not to play with their child (28% vs 37%).

Male parents were more likely than female parents to find play with their child boring or hard (68% vs 58%). Slightly more male than female parents viewed play as fun but not essential (22% vs 17%) and to believe play is better with toys (42% vs 32%).

### Implications

Play is critical to a child's learning and development. Play is the strongest learning mode throughout early childhood, enhances learning at all ages, and is a powerful force in family and social cohesion. It supports children's physical, cognitive and social development, teaching them to develop and use language effectively, and solve problems collaboratively and independently.<sup>2</sup> Play satisfies a basic human need to express imagination, curiosity and creativity.<sup>3</sup> This study shows that most parents recognise the importance of play for a child's physical and mental health and wellbeing, including the essential benefits of play in nature. Despite this, there are many barriers to more time spent playing for Australian children. In particular, things that stop children from playing outdoors include time, weather and safety concerns.

Play is equally important at every stage of the life course and these findings highlight how play changes as children grow and develop. Parents report that their teenage children more commonly play with friends, pets, digital devices and away from home, whereas younger children play with siblings and other relatives, and most commonly at home.

**Most parents recognise play is important for a child's health, including physical wellbeing and brain development**



Navigating risk is an important aspect of play and one of the ways that children learn and develop. Many Australian parents are averse to risky play and believe play always needs to be organised and supervised by an adult. These beliefs are more common among parents living in metropolitan areas than those in regional and remote areas. Playing with children can be challenging for some parents, with male parents being more likely to report finding it hard or boring to play with their children than female parents and more likely to view play as fun but not essential.

This study reveals knowledge gaps among Australian parents about how to best support children of varying ages and stages in their play endeavours while balancing time constraints, risk, safety and supervision. There is a desire among parents to learn more about how to play with their children. Investment should be made in strategies and efforts to reach parents of children of all ages with up-to-date evidence-based information on the wide-ranging benefits of play, as well as practical advice and support to help parents enable play for their children.

## Data source and methods



This report presents findings from a nationally representative household survey conducted exclusively by the Online Research Unit for The Royal Children's Hospital, Melbourne. In an online survey, Australian parents were asked about their experience, knowledge, and beliefs about play in children and young people. The survey was administered from 19 September to 4 October 2022, to a randomly selected, stratified nationally representative sample of adults aged 18 and older ( $n = 2,036$ ). All respondents were parents or caregivers to at least one child aged less than 18 years and provided data on each of their children. A nationally representative sample of 2,036 parents yielded data on a total of 3,351 children including 3,258 children aged between one year and less than 18 years. The sample was subsequently weighted to reflect the distribution of the Australian population using figures from the Australian Bureau of Statistics. Among Online Research Unit panel members contacted to participate the completion rate was 86%.

## References



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For a full list of references please visit [www.rchpoll.org.au](http://www.rchpoll.org.au)

## Suggested citation



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