

Parents' Metaphors About Outdoor Play*

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Abstract

The aim of this study is to examine the parents' perceptions about outdoor play through metaphors. The study is conducted with 107 parents, 96 mothers and 11 fathers, with children between 0-72 months. The data has been collected via an online questionnaire. Parents completed the prompt "Playing outside is like... Because ..." to indicate their conceptualization of outdoor play. In addition, interviews were conducted to obtain more in-depth data about parent's views about outdoor play. Content analysis technique is used in the evaluation of the data obtained in the research and eight conceptual categories were identified. The metaphors developed about outdoor play are, in order of frequency, freedom, healing, need, fun, instruction, happiness, peace, and exploration. As a result, it has been found that parents of preschoolers have positive perceptions towards outdoor play. Also, parents are aware of the benefit of outdoor play for the child, perceive it positively, but limit their children's outdoor play opportunities, or try to structure it especially because of their concerns about security and health. Thus, it will be possible for children to benefit from outdoor play at the maximum level by eliminating the difficulties faced by parents and increasing their awareness about outdoor play.

Keywords: Early Childhood; Play; Outdoor Play; Parents; Metaphor.

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INTRODUCTION

Being outdoors is an interactive learning and play environment, in which children discover the world directly, experience gross motor movements, and contact with natural elements. Outdoor provides an environment for interactive learning and play, in which children discover the world directly, experience gross motor movements, and are in contact with natural elements (Maynard & Waters, 2007; Rivkin, 1995). Outdoor play is necessary for healthy growth and development of children. In general, children enjoy playing outside because the outdoor environment enables them to perform gross motor movements such as running, climbing, and jumping that are difficult to perform in indoor environments. Outdoor play allows children to master a number of skills (Stephenson, 2002). Although it is obvious that outdoor play is beneficial for children's well-being and development, research shows that outdoor play has been decreasing recently (Tremblay et al., 2015). Many factors such as changes in lifestyle, urbanization, use of technology, and children's safety are effectful in this decline.

Benefits of outdoor play

Outdoor play is a natural and critical part of a child's healthy development, and it has been demonstrated by many studies that outdoor play has positive contributions to children development (Bento & Dias, 2017; Clements, 2004; Erdem, 2003; Gray et al., 2015; Hinkley et al., 2018; McArdle et al., 2013; Price, 2019; Prince et al., 2013; Spencer & Woolley, 2000; Wells & Evans, 2003). Outdoors enable children to move freely, experience risky movements, make noisy voices, interact with friends, and contact with natural elements. Since outdoor play enables children with unstructured, interactive, different opportunities which are unforeseeable and risky, it helps children to have rich opportunities for learning, problem-solving and social interaction (Greenfield, 2004). While outdoors children move more, sit less, and play for longer.

The outdoors is also an open and free environment where children are exposed to fresh air, sunlight, nature and living things, which has positive benefits in terms of children's health and well-being. Throughout outdoor play, children not only become learners but also they act like teachers so that they can convey their experiences and knowledge with peers (Bilton, 2010; Dymont & Bell, 2008; Gray et al., 2015; Sandseter, 2009). Hinkley et al. (2018) stated that children who play outdoors less than their peers have lower social competencies, so it may be said that social emotional skills develop much more outside than inside. Outdoor play prepares children for adult life by improving their skills like social competence, cooperation, interpersonal skills, problem-solving, creative thinking and risk-taking which are necessary for adult life. In the light of all these, it may be concluded that outdoor play facilitates interaction with peers, thus providing more opportunities to support socialization and development of social skills like empathy and understanding of other people's feelings (Dowdell et al., 2011; Kahn & Weiss, 2017; Moore & Wong, 1997; Rivkin, 1995, 2000).

Outdoor play also contributes to the cognitive development of children and through these plays children have the opportunity to develop perceptual competences such as depth, shape, size and movement perception. It is also known that children's outdoor play experiences in the first years are linked to their later academic performance (Rakison, 2005; Singer & Singer, 2000). The greater freedom of movement and exploration provided by the outdoor environment also encourages the use and development of gross motor skills. Beside development of gross motor skills, studies have indicated that outdoor play is associated with higher vitamin D levels, better attention span, and better self-regulation. Finally, numerous studies have revealed that spending time outdoors reduces stress, mental fatigue, ADHD symptoms, anxiety, and risk of obesity (Burdette & Whitaker, 2005; Green et al., 2012; Kaplan & Kaplan, 1989; Kimbro et al., 2011; Özdemir & Yılmaz, 2008; Taylor & Kuo, 2009; Wells & Evans, 2003).

Parents perspectives about outdoor play

In a world where urbanisation increases, children spend most of their time in closed areas away from nature. It is seen that parents adapt to the conditions brought by this urbanisation and their children play less outdoors. A study showed that about half of children are not taken to play every day, and when they do, they usually go with their mother (Tandon et al., 2011). Such a decline is related to families' lifestyles and attitude towards the outdoor environment. One of the reasons for this decline is security concerns. It is known that the perception of risk significantly affects the level of parents allowing their children to play outside. A growing culture of fear about possible accidents affects parents' attitude towards outdoor play, so today children are kept indoors, engaged in structured activities, and controlled by adults.

According to the research of Lester and Russell (2008), although parents are aware of the positive effects of playing outdoors, their desire to protect their children outweighs, thus limiting their children's unsupervised play and limiting children's access to the outdoors. In addition to security concerns, the belief that children are more vulnerable and in need of protection, academically oriented lifestyles and playgrounds that do not respond to children's interests and needs are also factors that cause children to play less in the outdoors. Furthermore, technological developments and the difficulties of managing work and family life have led families and children to spend more time indoors, using screens as entertainment have brought sedentary lifestyles and created a barrier in front of outdoor play. It can be said that environmental changes and restrictions on children's activities as a result of parents' concerns have changed the nature of children's play and reduced the relationship between the child and the outdoor environment, pushing children into closed environments (Aarts et al., 2010; Brussoni et al., 2012; Cevher-Kalburan, 2014; Dwyer et al., 2007; Kernan & Devine, 2010; Little, 2015; Rivkin, 2000; Veitch et al., 2006; Waters & Rekers, 2019).

However, the unique characteristics and stimuli of the outdoor environment offer different play opportunities that are difficult to implement indoors. Providing an environment that meets the basic needs of children, where they can socialize with a sense of trust and belonging and have a chance to make discoveries is very important for the development of children (Casey, 2007; DeBord et al., 2005; Stephenson, 2002). As can be seen, the perceptions and attitudes of families greatly shape the child's life. As Bandura's social learning theory (1974) suggests, children's behaviour is shaped by their environment (Ernst, 2018). To conclude, outdoor play is one of the most important parts of a child's life, and families play a crucial role in providing children with appropriate play environments and ample time to play. It is a fact that the experience and freedom offered to children is influenced by the parents' perceptions about outdoor play. Metaphors are a powerful research tool that can be used to reveal personal perceptions, show the way individuals perceive the world and themselves, and explain abstract concepts. When the literature is examined, the results obtained from this research will contribute to the literature, since there is a limited study in which parents' perceptions of outdoor play are examined through metaphors. Therefore, the purpose of this study is to examine the parents' perceptions about outdoor play through metaphors. In line with this main purpose, interviews were conducted with parents to deepen the understanding of parents' perceptions about outdoor play. Thus, answers to the following questions were sought:

1. What are parents' metaphors about outdoor play?
2. What are the views of parents about the benefits of outdoor play to the child?
3. What are the challenges parents face during outdoor play time?

METHODS

Research Design

In this study, a phenomenology model, which is one of the qualitative research models, was used. Phenomenology is a research design that aims to understand people's inner world and their

consciousness structures (Mayring, 2014). In this research, it is investigated how parents perceive, explain, remember, and interpret “outdoor play” and what kind of language they use to convey this phenomenon. To interpret and understand the perception of parents about outdoor play the metaphor technique was used. Basically, metaphor which is mostly used to symbolize our mental and intellectual cognition system is the explanation of a concept, phenomenon, or event by analogy with another concept, phenomenon, or event (Oxford et al., 1998; Schmicking & Gallagher, 2010).

Data Collection

The participants of this research were the parents who have children between 0-72 months. In the beginning of the study, there were a total of 121 parents, but during the data analysis process 14 participants were eliminated from the study and the research was conducted with 107 parents, 96 mothers and 11 fathers. The working group was determined in line with the limitations of the pandemic period. Thus, the data has been collected via an online questionnaire (Google form). Data was collected through asking parents to complete the prompt “Playing outside is like..... Because ” by focusing on only one metaphor to indicate their conceptualization of outdoor play. Furthermore, semi-structured interviews were conducted with a total of 19 parents, 14 of which were mothers and 5 were fathers. During these interviews, parents were asked about the benefits of outdoor play to the child and the difficulties they faced during outdoor play time, which enabled researchers to support the data obtained from the metaphor analysis and to examine parents' views in a more detailed way.

Data Analysis

Content analysis technique was used to evaluate the data obtained in the study. Content analysis method is used to analyse written, verbal, or visual data (Bengtsson, 2016; Mayring, 2014). When using content analysis, the aim is to build a model to describe the phenomenon in a conceptual form by distilling words into fewer content-related categories (Elo & Kyngäs, 2008). The analysis of the metaphors in this study included the following stages: (1) naming/labelling stage, (2) sorting (clarification and elimination) stage, (3) deciding the unit of analysis, (4) sample metaphor compilation and categorization stage, (5) establishing the inter-rater reliability rate. Firstly, the metaphors formed by the parents about the concept of “playing outside” were named by two researchers and then invalid data were removed. 14 papers eliminated from the study. In the next step, metaphors with similar characteristics were categorised independently by the two researchers. As a result of this procedure, eight conceptual categories were identified. Interviews are analysed by content analysis methods, too. Lastly, to establish the inter-rater reliability rate, Miles and Huberman's (1994) reliability formula was used and the agreement percentage between the researchers was calculated as .92 (i.e., $\text{Reliability} = \frac{\text{Agreement}}{\text{Agreement} + \text{Disagreement}} \times 100$), which means the level of agreement between the researchers was 92%.

RESULTS

The results of the research were presented under two subheadings to make a better understanding for the reader.

Results regarding parents' metaphors about outdoor play

Altogether participants produced 107 valid metaphors about the concept of outdoor play. At the end of the study, metaphors developed about outdoor play were collected in 8 categories according to their similar aspects. The categories and example metaphors for each category are shown in Table 1. Among all categories, parents developed the most metaphors in the freedom category and the least in the exploration category.

Table 1 The distribution of metaphors by categories

Categories (n=8)	f	%	Metaphors
freedom	41	38,7	being a bird, kite, breath, escape, infinity, flying in the sky
healing	24	22,6	medicine, cure, vitamin, sport
need	14	13,2	water, breathing, oxygen
fun	7	6,6	amusement park, rainbow
instructive	6	5,7	school, brain developer, skeleton key
happiness	6	5,7	dream, sea
peace	5	4,7	therapy
exploration	3	2,8	discovery, invention, gift, surprise

Main conceptual categories

The eight conceptual categories that were developed out of the 107 metaphors include the following:

Category 1: First and most developed category is “freedom”. Exemplary metaphorical expressions of this category are stated below.

- *Outdoor play is like flying in the sky because we feel as free as birds. (P95)*
- *It is the breathing space of the child because it is the place where he is intertwined with nature and is free, where he can run and release his energy. (P29)*
- *Outdoor play is like a bird released from a cage because in these days when we are immersed in technological tools, every step we take outside liberates us even more. (P48)*

Category 2: Example metaphorical expression for “Healing” category

- *Outdoor play is like a vegetable meal because it is beneficial for you. (P103)*
- *Outdoor play is like breathing because a deep and beautiful breath taken outdoors refreshes our body. (P88)*
- *Outdoor play is like a medication because it is not only good for both the soul and the body but also it creates unique subconscious learning opportunities. (P28)*

Category 3: Example metaphorical expressions for the “Need” category

- *Outdoor play is like water because if you drink as much liquid as you want, nothing can replace water. No matter how much the child plays at home, he can't enjoy it as much as playing outdoors. (P62)*
- *Outdoor play is like breathing because we cannot live without breathing and playing. (P81)*
- *Outdoor play is like food and water because it is a basic need. (P34)*

Category 4: Example metaphorical expressions for the “Fun” category

- *Outdoor play is like watching the sky because daydreaming is the funniest game. (P79)*
- *Outdoor play is like an amusement park because it's so diverse. (P54)*
- *Outdoor play is like gliding over a rainbow because I can't think of an activity as enjoyable and instructive as playing in nature in the fresh air. (P23)*

Category 5: Example metaphorical expressions for the “Instruction” category

- *Outdoor play is like a school because there is so much to learn. (P52)*
- *Outdoor play is like a skeleton key because it serves the development of the child in many areas and opens the doors of growth for each development area. I think nature is the best teacher. (P78)*
- *Outdoor play is like a brain developer because oxygen and nature are beneficial for the human brain. (P49)*

Category 6: Example metaphorical expressions for the “Happiness” category

- *Outdoor play is like a dream because my son is so happy when he's playing outdoors, as if he's not in this world. (P5)*
- *Outdoor play is like swimming in the sea, you relax, you'll be happier. (P12)*
- *Outdoor play is like a star because the shining of the star makes you happy. (P109)*

Category 7: Example metaphorical expressions for the “Peace” category

- *Outdoor play is like meditation because it helps the child find inner peace and clear his mind. (P15)*
- *Outdoor play is like meditation because while the child is playing freely, they also relax, get fresh air and rest. (P50)*
- *Outdoor play is like therapy because it helps to clear your mind. (P30)*

Category 8: Example metaphorical expressions for the “Exploration” category

- *Outdoor play is like invention because there is always so much to discover. (P40)*
- *Outdoor play is like exploration because while you're out, you can discover and play with so many different things. (P66)*
- *Outdoor play is like a gift because it happens surprisingly. (P36)*

Results regarding parents’ interviews about outdoor play

Among the parents participating in the study, 19 of them volunteered to be interviewed. Semi-structured interview form consists of questions about the benefits of outdoor play and the difficulties they faced during outdoor play time. Considering the views of the parents about the benefits of outdoor play, it was seen that they regard outdoor play as a tool for socialisation, discovery, and healthy lives. Moreover, they believe that outdoor play is beneficial for all developmental areas.

Example statements:

- *Outdoor, which is a more natural environment as opposed to indoor areas, creates an opportunity for my child to socialize with his peers and to explore the world first-hand (P34)*
- *I think that the outdoors provides much of the contribution that the child needs in all areas of development, in accordance with the natural developmental speed of the child. Thus, outdoor play ,especially played in nature, will contribute to motor, cognitive, language, and social emotional development of children (P64)*
- *My child moves more freely when outdoors, so he feels more free, which makes him happier (P 75)*

When the difficulties faced by the parents during the outdoor play time are examined, it is seen that the risk of getting sick, safety problems, possibility of accidental injuries, unhygienic play areas, lack of appropriate space for outdoor play, and negative attitudes of other children and parents are the main difficulties parents encounter.

Example Statements

- *Children unintentionally harm each other. Self-harming with uncontrolled movements can occur (P34)*
- *The risk of getting sick increases in winter. My child sweats with excessive movement and takes off her/his coat. (P64)*
- *My child doesn't want to go back home. (P75)*
- *Insecurity of the playground, when my child runs, she/he enters the streets or areas that may be dangerous. (P12)*
- *We're having a hard time finding a suitable playground. Places that are either too structured, too crowded or lack green areas (P25)*
- *Negative behaviour of other children and families (P36)*
- *Allergic reactions may occur. P62)*

CONCLUSION AND DISCUSSION

As a result of the research examining the metaphors produced by parents with 0-72 months old children regarding the concept of outdoor play, it was seen that parents produced metaphors in the categories of freedom, healing, need, entertainment, instruction, peace, and exploration. In addition, as a result of the interviews, the parents stated that outdoor play contributed to the development, socialization and health of the children. Considering the difficulties faced by the parents, it was seen that parents concerned about the risk of getting sick and accidental injuries, safety problems, reaching the outdoor play area and the negative behaviors of other parents and children. As a result, although the parents mentioned about the difficulties they faced, it was seen that they have positive perceptions toward outdoor play.

As it can be seen in the findings, children don't want to go back home when they are outdoors. In fact, this situation is not a surprise because play is in the "nature" of children (IPA, 2014). As The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child stated play as a fundamental child right (UNICEF, 1989). Hence, allowing children to play as they want and as much as they want is important in terms of respecting the child's right to play. Since perceptions of families have a strong effect on the child's right to play, outdoor play also can be affected by this perception. Thus, it is

important to examine the parents' views about outdoor play because they are the ones who provide opportunities in the outdoor environment (Ívrendi et al., 2019). However, to get the benefit of outdoor play, the child should have as much and easy access to outdoor play as possible. This can be achieved if families have a positive perception of outdoor play. Similarly, Goodyear-Smith and Laidlaw (1999) emphasized in their research that families who want their children to be psychologically resilient, strong in problem-solving skills, have high risk-taking skills, and physically competent should have positive perceptions about outdoor play.

When the studies on outdoor play with parents are examined, it is seen that parents generally have positive perceptions about outdoor play, but when they come to the part of making the child benefit from outdoor play, they display a more controlled attitude towards outdoor play. Namely, it is possible to say that they believe that outdoor play is beneficial and necessary, but they are concerned about some environmental reasons at the point of creating an opportunity for this. As Little (2015) states, parents' fears and anxieties are effective on children's outdoor play experiences. It has been found that due to these fears, children spend more time in their own homes or in their friends' homes, during which time they are mostly directed to activities that are structured and controlled by their parents.

Cultural differences also have an impact on parents' attitude toward outdoor play. Yalçın (2015) found that when asked Finnish parents about the significance of outdoor play, they highlighted the importance of health, freedom of movement, creativity, and physical development. In the same study, it was found that Turkish parents also have a positive attitude toward outdoor play, but they emphasized the benefits of socialization, health, and getting to know nature. Similarly, in Scandinavian culture, children's outdoor play activities are highly valued and considered a part of education, while in the United States, England and Turkey outdoor play is regarded as free time activity (Allin et al., 2014; McBride, 2012; Prince et al., 2013).

When the literature is examined, it has been found that the income status of the family influences the children's use of outdoor play. When the direction of this effect is examined, Wijtzes et al. (2014) stated that there is a negative relationship between outdoor play and income level because families with high incomes provide their children with more structured games. On the other hand, according to Delisle Nyström et al. (2019) study, there is a positive relationship between outdoor play and income level because families with low incomes have less access to the safe and child-friendly playgrounds due to the conditions of the region they live in, their distrust towards the environment and neighbourhood, and the traffic density, so they prefer outdoor play less.

In this study, the perceptions of parents about outdoor play were examined through metaphors, and as a result of data analysis, it is concluded that families have positive perceptions about outdoor play. They associate outdoor play with freedom, healing, need, fun, instruction, happiness, peace, and exploration. As a result of the interviews conducted with parents, it is seen that they regard outdoor play as a beneficial activity for children while emphasising that they experience some difficulties such as safety, health and reaching the appropriate outdoor area.

When the results are examined together with the literature, it is seen that the parents are aware of the benefit of outdoor play for the child, perceive it positively, but limit their children's outdoor play opportunities, or try to structure it especially because of their concerns about especially security and health issues. Outdoor play provides children with a rich learning environment and the opportunity to gain many skills, but how much children can benefit from this opportunity is shaped by the perceptions and attitudes of the parents. Therefore, child-friendly, and accessible environments should be created to eliminate the safety concerns of parents. Furthermore, parents should be informed about what they can do for children to spend quality time in these places. Comparison of the relationship between parents' perceptions about outdoor play and children's use of outdoor play can be a suggestion for further research.

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