“For all of human history and of human pre-history, children in their formative years have been going outside and spending much of their time either playing or working in nature. In the matter of two or three decades we are seeing the possible virtual disappearance of that kind of activity in kids.”

Richard Louv,
Last Child in the Woods
Background

- Over 2000 adults in the UK shared their experiences of play in 1987 (or when they grew up if they were under 30 years old) and 2017. Almost 1000 adults responded from Scotland.

- The four national play organisations in the UK invited Professor John McKendrick of Glasgow Caledonian University to administer an online survey on their behalf.

- The research was coincided with 30 years of Playday in the UK.

- The research provides a unique insight into how play has changed through time from the perspective of those who have lived through these changes.

- This paper reports findings from Scotland only. Every statistic refers specifically to Scotland.
The demise of outdoor play

• 68% of those who were adults in 1987 perceived that children spent “far more of their play time outdoors than indoors”. In sharp contrast, 69% of adults without children in 2017 perceived that today’s children spent “far more of their play time indoors than outdoors”. Children’s retreat from the wider neighbourhood.

• 42% of those who were children in 1987 recalled that they spent most of their outdoor play time “all over the neighbourhood”. In contrast, 16% of parents in 2017 reported that their children spent most of their outdoor play time “all over the neighbourhood”.

• Similarly, 23% of those who were children in 1987 recalled that they spent most of their outdoor play time in the garden/yard. In contrast, 45% of parents in 2017 reported that their children spent most of their outdoor play time in the garden/yard.

The rise of screen-based play

• 51% of those who were children in 1987 recalled that they spent either “none” or “hardly any” of their play time spent in passive screen-based play. In contrast, 14% of parents in 2017 reported that their children spent either “none” or “hardly any” of their play time spent in passive screen-based play.

At the other end of the scale, only 4% of those who were children in 1987 recalled that they spent either “a lot” or “most” of their play time spent in passive screen-based play. In contrast, 30% of parents in 2017 reported that their children spent either “a lot” or “most” of their play time spent in passive screen-based play.

• 90% of those who were children in 1987 recalled that they spent either “none” or “hardly any” of their play time spent in active screen-based play. In contrast, 38% of parents in 2017 reported that their children spent either “none” or “hardly any” of their play time spent in active screen-based play.

At the other end of the scale, only 1% of those who were children in 1987 recalled that they spent either “a lot” or “most” of their play time spent in active screen-based play. In contrast, 27% of parents in 2017 reported that their children spent either “a lot” or “most” of their play time spent in passive screen-based play.
Less play with friends

- 59% of those who were children in 1987 recalled that most of their play was with friends. In contrast, 39% of parents in 2017 reported that most of their child's play was with friends.

- Similarly, only 2% of those who were children in 1987 recalled that most of their play was with parents/carers. In contrast, 21% of parents in 2017 reported that most of their child's play was with parents/carers.

More formal play spaces, fewer informal play spaces

Not everything has changed

- 37% of those who were children in 1987 recalled that they had access to school grounds for play outside school hours. Interestingly, 32% of parents in 2017 reported that their child had access to school grounds outside school hours for play – much higher than was reported by respondents from Wales, England and Northern Ireland (10% reporting access elsewhere in the UK).

But some things have changed

- 74% of those who were children in 1987 recalled that they had access to quiet roads for play. In contrast, 41% of parents in 2017 reported that their child had access to quiet roads for play.

- Similarly, 68% of those who were children in 1987 recalled that they had access to lots of open spaces across their neighbourhood for play. In contrast, 52% of parents in 2017 reported that their child had access to lots of open spaces across their neighbourhood for play.

Some improvements have been made

- Only 35% of those who were children in 1987 recalled that they had access to a large equipped playground in their neighbourhood, whereas 50% of parents in 2017 reported that their child had access a large equipped playground in their neighbourhood.
Less playtime throughout the year

• 11% of those who were children in 1987 recalled that they had less than one hour of play time on a school day in winter. In contrast, 23% of parents in 2017 reported that their child had less than one hour of play time on a school day in winter.

• 9% of those who were children in 1987 recalled that they had less than two hours of play time on a school day in summer. In contrast, 19% of parents in 2017 reported that their child had less than two hours of play time on a school day in summer.

• 73% of those who were children in 1987 recalled that they had five or more hours of play time per day at weekends. In contrast, 51% of parents in 2017 reported that their child had five or more hours of play time at weekends.

• 81% of those who were children in 1987 recalled that they had five or more hours of play time per day on school holidays. In contrast, 62% of parents in 2017 reported that their child had five or more hours of play time on school holidays.

Playgrounds becoming more dangerous

• Only 3% of those who were adults in 1987 perceived that playgrounds were “very” or “quite” dangerous. In sharp contrast, 33% of adults without children in 2017 perceived that playgrounds were “very” or “quite” dangerous.

More restricted play

• 19% of those who were children in 1987 recalled that they did not want to play outside in bad weather. In contrast, 39% of parents in 2017 reported that their child did not want to play outside in bad weather.

• 18% of those who were children in 1987 recalled that “having nobody to play with” restricted their play in 1987. In contrast, 43% of parents in 2017 reported that their child not having anybody to play with restricted their child’s play today.

• 16% of those who were children in 1987 recalled that traffic restricted their play. In contrast, 46% of parents in 2017 reported that traffic restricted their child’s play today.
Growing dissatisfaction with children’s play

- 89% of those who were children in 1987 recalled that they were either “very” or “quite” satisfied with their play opportunities in 1987. In contrast, ‘only’ 64% of parents in 2017 reported that they were satisfied with their child’s play opportunities today; 23% of today’s parents were either “quite dissatisfied” or “very dissatisfied”.

Mixed opinions on the future of play

- 50% of respondents perceived that play would get “better” or “much better” in the future, whereas 28% perceived that play would get “worse” or “much worse” (11% expected no change and a further 11% did not know).

Triggers to improve community play

- 53% of respondents perceived that play in their community would get better if there were more places to play.
- 50% perceived that play in their community would get better if it was easier to get access to play places and spaces.
- 42% perceived that play in their community would get better if traffic was slowed down.
- 43% perceived that play in their community would get better if adults were more tolerant of play.

Adverse impact of austerity/cuts

- 43% of respondents perceived that austerity/cuts has had a negative impact on youth clubs.
- 44% perceived that austerity/cuts has had a negative impact on play areas in parks.
- 38% perceived that austerity/cuts has had a negative impact on after school clubs.
- 36% perceived that austerity/cuts has had a negative impact on adventure playgrounds.
- 38% perceived that austerity/cuts has had a negative impact on play facilities in schools.

For more information about the survey, please contact Professor John McKendrick by email at jmke@gcu.ac.uk