"All work, no play...?" A critical examination of the emerging public health discourse on children's play

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Children’s Play:

- pleasurable, unstructured, creative, process-oriented, no target outcome, few formal rules.
  - ‘simply makes children happier’ (Sutton-Smith, 2001)

- Considered critical for childhood - yet mounting concerns over declines in play.

- Recently, discussions of play begun to enter public health

- The ‘declines in play’ linked to ‘looming children’s obesity epidemic’
Growing concerns about children’s obesity have led to:

- “Active play” promoted to increase children’s physical activity.

What is resulting:

- Play becomes a way to decrease children’s obesity; as a means to a health end.

Public health discourse around play emerging:

Play for health
Promoting play *for* children’s physical health may be beneficial, but also raises some concerns.

If playing becomes predominantly a *means* to a physical health *end* (i.e., mainly to decrease obesity), are there potential losses for children’s play?

What happens to play that is simply…

“pleasurable, unstructured, creative, process-oriented, no target outcome, with few formal rules”?
To critically examine the emerging public health discourse around children’s play.

Identify: assumptions, familiar notions, ways of thinking that this discourse is based on.

This will help us understand how this emerging discourse may be shaping children’s play.
Michel Foucault (1979) – Governmentality and Biopower

- Forms of social regulation of the population developed 18th/19th C Europe, through technologies of power (i.e., surveys, statistical measurement, medical analysis)

- Accumulated knowledge produced norms of desirable behaviour against which population is measured.

- Useful to examine how normative forms of children’s play are constructed in public health.
Carol Bacchi (2009) – Discourse Analysis

- Challenges view that governments simply respond to problems existing “out there in the world”.
- Draws attention to how problems are “given shape” - affects what can be said/done.
- Useful to critically question the emerging discourse and examine any underlying assumptions.
Method
- Search of 10 public health organisations
  - Gov’t, Non-Gov’t, Health Research
  - Workbooks, reports, surveillance data, media releases
- Narrowed to 6 organisations
  - Addressing children and youth; health, physical activity and play.

Analysis
- Codes to examine documents in detail; Bacchi’s question-posing approach.
Identifying the problem?

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“Obesity is now such a serious public health concern that obesity is ‘the new tobacco’” (Health Canada)
Identifying the “Cause”? 

“Child physical inactivity …is a larger public health concern than previously believed” (Canadian Fitness & Lifestyle Research Institutes, CFLRI)
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“An alarming modern-day trend has emerged - Canadian kids are coming home from school and are parking their bodies” (ParticipACTION)
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“Children who grew up a generation or two ago spent this time in active play, running, biking, and playing (usually outside) with their friends …this is not the case today; Canadian children have adopted a modern lifestyle that includes spending a great deal of after-school time sitting idle indoors” (Active Healthy Kids Canada).
Identifying the “solution”?

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“Becoming physically active does not have to be difficult. Children simply have to be encouraged …to move more in all aspects of their day” (Active Healthy Kids Canada)
Evident solution?

- Active play can benefit children while they’re having fun!
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Questioning the “solution”.
What assumptions underlie (and shape) the solution of “Active healthy play”?
What effects might this have on children’s play?
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“Active play is an excellent means for children to accumulate daily physical activity…” (Active Healthy Kids Canada)
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Play is valued if it contributes to “optimal growth and development”. Play requires a productive purpose, as a means to achieve better health.
Findings: Utilitarian values (b)

“Active Healthy Play” critical for country’s social and economic growth:

“Physical activity builds strong, smart kids. Strong, smart kids are the foundation of a strong, smart society that we need in tough times and will lead us to better times.” (Active Healthy Kids Canada)
“Active Healthy Play” critical for social and economic growth; healthcare costs “spiraling upwards”:

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- Critical to: “build the foundation for a healthier, more active population by supporting and encouraging families, at all levels, to get their kids moving”
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Playing becomes ‘serious’ with a utilitarian role for children’s health and Canadian society.
What about ‘just’ play?

Original questions:

1. If playing is predominantly a *means* to a health *end* (i.e., decrease obesity), are there potential losses for children’s play?

2. What about play that is as defined, “pleasurable, unstructured, creative, process-oriented, no target outcome, with few formal rules”? 
What about ‘just’ play?

Unintended Consequences?

- Norm developing for **appropriate** and **desirable** leisure activities for children.
  - Play that is *not explicitly useful* - freer, unproductive – is devalued and less desired
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1. Norm developing for appropriate and desirable leisure activities for children.
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2. Dominance of play promoted as health-focused activity may have unintended effects on children’s play.
   - Less inclined to play when play promoted to BE active.
   - Playing *for fun* different than playing *for health*.
Critical to question a discourse promoting **play** as a **health practice** to counter a problem, like obesity.

- “Play is the missing link in anti-obesity campaign.” *(Alliance for Childhood, 2010)*

Need to reflect on the **role of public health** in promoting children’s play:
- attaching values of productivity and utilitarianism to play;
- governing children to become productive citizens **over** the promotion of pleasure and diverse forms of playing.
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10 Organisations

**Government:**
- Public Healthy Agency of Canada
- *Our Health, Our Future (site of PHAC)*
- Health Canada
- INSPQ

**Research Institutes:**
- Canadian Society for Exercise Physiology
- Canadian Fitness and Lifestyle Research Institute
- *Canadian Institute for Health Information*

**Government funded - Dissemination**
- ParticipACTION

**Non-Gov’t, linked to other**
- Active Healthy Kids Canada
- CPHA
Example:
Active Healthy Kids Canada, 2012 Report Card

IS ACTIVE PLAY EXTINCT?

2012
Active Healthy Kids Canada
Report Card on Physical Activity for Children and Youth