

Play Under Pressure



Surveying Parents
about Children and
the State of Play



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Contents

Introduction Overview, Definitions and Benefits of Play Page 3

Summary Key Findings, Impact and Action Page 6

Section I General Attitudes about Play Page 8

Section II Play and the Family Page 14

Section III Child-Directed Play Page 18

Play Resources Information for Parents Page 23

Appendix Methodology, Demographics and Acknowledgements Page 26

Overview

Too much screen time. Over-scheduled kids. Helicopter parents. A looming creativity crisis. Free-range parenting.

Our society is talking a lot about how our children are growing up – and what we can do to help them succeed in a world that becomes more complex and challenging every day.

One factor often overlooked in these discussions is the crucial role of play in helping children develop the skills they need to thrive. Extensive research shows that play cultivates lifelong competencies, including critical and creative thinking, communication, collaboration, confidence and more.

Despite this evidence, play time is declining. Children growing up today spend an average of eight hours less per week playing than children did in the 1980s. That means the average child is spending 400 hours – 17 full days – less time playing per year than children did just a few decades ago.

Against this backdrop, Minnesota Children’s Museum, a nonprofit organization dedicated to sparking children’s learning through play, commissioned a survey to gather insights about the role of play in Twin Cities families.

The survey asked parents several key questions:

- How do you see play contributing to your child’s development?
- Are children playing enough?
- What factors limit your child’s play time?

The Museum, which is undergoing a major expansion and renovation of its flagship location in downtown St. Paul, is using the survey findings to further develop initiatives to raise awareness about the benefits of play throughout life.

The Museum has launched #PlayMoreMN, a movement to urge parents and our entire community to recognize the value of play – for both children and adults. Minnesota Children’s Museum envisions a future in which kids and adults play more. The Museum sees our community thriving as a happier, healthier and more innovative place through the radiant power of play.

“Play is simple, yet profound.
Rich and deep learning
happens through play.”

*Dr. Megan Gunnar, director of
the Institute of Child Development,
University of Minnesota*

Definitions

Play comes in many forms. Researchers offer a multitude of definitions and describe various types of play. For many people, the definition of play is personal, based on their own experiences as children and parents.

The first portion of this survey sought general impressions about play. The survey did not define play in this section. The intention was to gauge parents' attitudes about play, however they chose to define it.

A separate portion of the survey asked parents about "child-directed play," which was defined for respondents as time children spend playing by themselves or in small groups, doing things they choose to do, with little or no guidance from an adult.

Powerful Play

Minnesota Children's Museum is committed to sparking children's learning through play. The Museum views all play as beneficial, but considers some types of play and certain environments even more powerful than others. The Museum believes "powerful play" pairs play and learning as lifelong partners. It celebrates children as their own agents of learning. It is the kind of play that makes learning stick.

"Play is innate, natural and unstoppable. Play is a necessity."

*Nichole Polifka, Director of Learning and Impact,
Minnesota Children's Museum*

Powerful play shares three aspects:

- **Personal motivation:** A child wants to be there. The activity is enjoyable, relevant, interesting and purposeful. The play stems from a child's own desires and brings satisfaction and/or pleasure.
- **Mind and body engagement:** A child is actively involved both mentally and physically. The play, and the learning, is a whole-body experience.
- **Individual exploration:** A child explores freely without the limitation of being expected to do things the "right" way or a certain way. The process is the focal point, not an end result or outcome.

Benefits of Play

[Excerpted from “The Power of Play: A Research Summary on Play and Learning,” written for Minnesota Children’s Museum by Dr. Rachel E. White]

Researchers in the fields of education and child psychology have amassed significant evidence for the necessity of play in children’s lives.

There is no denying that play is fun, and certainly the joy of play is a big draw for children. However, as children play, they also develop critical cognitive, emotional, social, and physical skills. Play also significantly contributes to proper brain development.

In this way, play is an important end in itself; it is also a means to other ends. The skills children learn through play set the stage for future learning and success from the kindergarten classroom to the workplace.

Notes about the Survey Methodology

Minnesota Children’s Museum partnered with InsightDynamo, a consumer insights firm, to survey Twin Cities parents about play. More than 1,000 adults in the Minneapolis-St. Paul metropolitan area completed the survey, which was conducted via an online survey platform. Respondents were recruited from a pool of general consumers and members of Minnesota Children’s Museum.

The Museum and InsightDynamo developed the survey questions with input from the Minnesota Children’s Museum Research Advisory Council, a panel created in partnership with the Institute of Child Development at the University of Minnesota.

Key Findings:

What the Survey Says

Parents know play benefits children...

- Most parents believe play helps children develop essential skills (Ranked No. 1 in reasons children should play) [pg. 13]
- Most parents view child-directed play as crucial to their child's development (93%) [pg. 19]

But families face a variety of pressures...

- Busy schedules, lack of nearby playmates and safety concerns cited as top reasons limiting play time [pg. 17]
- Kids spend too much time with electronic devices (88% agree) [pg. 9]
- Many parents worry children will “fall behind” if they don't take part in adult-led activities (45%) [pg. 16]

And play time often gets crowded out...

- Children don't get enough time to play (70% agree) [pg. 9]
- Parents played more when they were kids (82% agree) [pg. 9]
- Parents want their children to spend more time in child-directed play (76% agree) [pg. 22]

Impact & Action:

What It Means and What We Can Do

More play means more learning

- Play is essential to the healthy cognitive, social, physical and emotional development of children
- When play time declines, there are fewer opportunities for children to engage in activities that help them develop critical lifelong skills

It's time to spread the word

- Play is not “just fun” or “nice to have” – it's essential
- Play is learning
- Child-directed play builds skills that prepare children for success in school and beyond

Families can take action

- Make play time a priority
- Learn more about the benefits of play and what adults can do to enhance the learning that happens through play
- Join the #PlayMoreMN movement – take a stand that says making time and space for play is important for your family and the entire community

Section I: General Attitudes about Play

In the first part of the survey, respondents were asked a series of questions about play in general.

Parents answered questions about the amount of time they perceive children spend playing, whether they themselves had more time to play when they were younger and whether children spend too much time with electronics.

Parents were asked about the amount of free time kids in general have, whether kids spend too much time on electronics, whether kids have less free-time than they did when they were kids. Parents were also asked about the benefits of play, and whether activities are better if organized by adults.

Highlights

Parents strongly agree that children do not get enough time to play these days

Parents rate learning essential skills and having fun as the top benefits of play

Parents strongly agree that children develop important skills when they play on their own

Few parents (1 in 4) believe that children have too much free time

Do you agree or disagree with these statements?

Children these days don't get enough time to play



Compared to children today, I had more time to run around and play



Children should spend more time in activities organized by adults



Children have too much free time



Children spend too much time with computers, tablets, phones and electronic devices



N = 993

Do you agree or disagree with these statements?

The main benefit of play is that children have fun



Children develop important skills when they play on their own



When children get older, they should focus more on school



Children learn most of the skills they need to succeed through lessons and organized activities at school (or pre-school)



Play is most beneficial for children when adults direct the activity



N = 1,107

Which of these activities are valuable to the overall learning and development of children?

Playing on playgrounds

9% don't find it valuable

91% find it valuable

Playing video games or apps on computer/tablet/phone

67% don't find it valuable

33% find it valuable

Tag, hide-and-go-seek or other neighborhood games

11% don't find it valuable

89% find it valuable

Playing board games

12% don't find it valuable

88% find it valuable

Doing flash cards or worksheets

35% don't find it valuable

65% find it valuable

Sport practices and games organized by coaches

21% don't find it valuable

79% find it valuable

Role playing with costumes

14% don't find it valuable

86% find it valuable

N = 1,003

Which of these activities are valuable to the overall learning and development of children?

Playing with dolls, action figures, cars or trains

11% don't find it valuable

89% find it valuable

Music lessons and practice

14% don't find it valuable

86% find it valuable

Art projects

9% don't find it valuable

91% find it valuable

Watching a movie or watching television

77% don't find it valuable

23% find it valuable

Taking tests

56% don't find it valuable

44% find it valuable

Making up games and stories

5% don't find it valuable

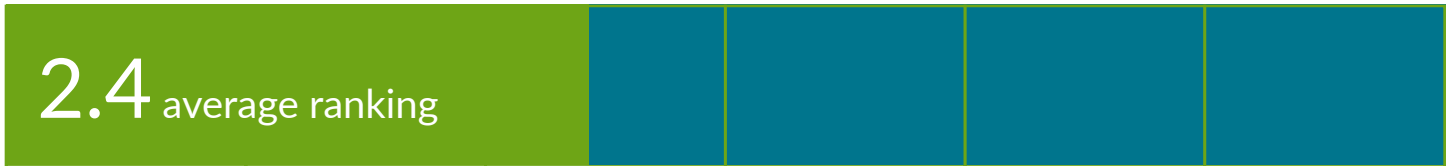
95% find it valuable

N = 1,003

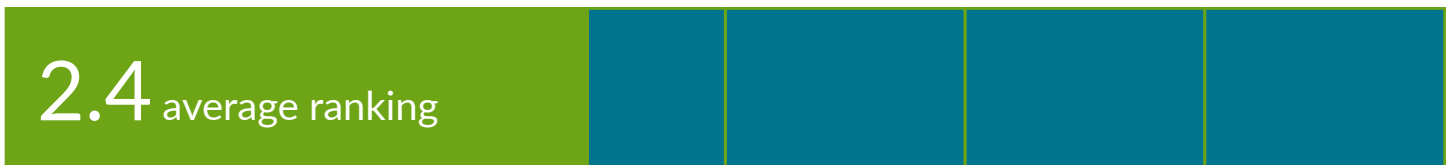
Among these possible reasons that children may spend time playing, rank the following in order of much importance you give them.

1 = most important; 6 = least important

Learn essential skills



Have fun



Make friends



Build strong muscles and bones



Burn off energy



Give parents a rest



N = 992

Section II: Play and the Family

In the next part of the survey, respondents were asked a series of questions about their own families.

Parents answered questions about how their children spend their time, factors that limit play time and pressures related to homework and success in school.

Highlights

Nearly 2 out of 3 parents say they feel pressure to make sure their child is prepared to excel in school

As children get older, the percentage of parents who wish their children had more time to play increases

Worries about children “falling behind” if they don’t take part in organized activities grows as children get older

Parents cite busy family schedules, lack of nearby playmates and concerns about safety when children are outside as the top factors limiting play time

Do you agree or disagree with the following statements?

My child has too much free time

80% disagree

20% agree

My child has too much homework

79% disagree

21% agree

School, pre-school or daycare is where my child learns most of the skills or abilities he or she needs to succeed

58% disagree

42% agree

I feel pressured to make sure my child is prepared to excel in reading, math and science

38% disagree

62% agree

I feel my child spends too much time with computers/tablets/phones or other electronic devices

54% disagree

46% agree

I wish I could find more time for my child to play

54% disagree

46% agree

I worry that my child will fall behind if they don't take part in organized activities outside of school

58% disagree

42% agree

N = 971

Do you agree or disagree with the following statements?

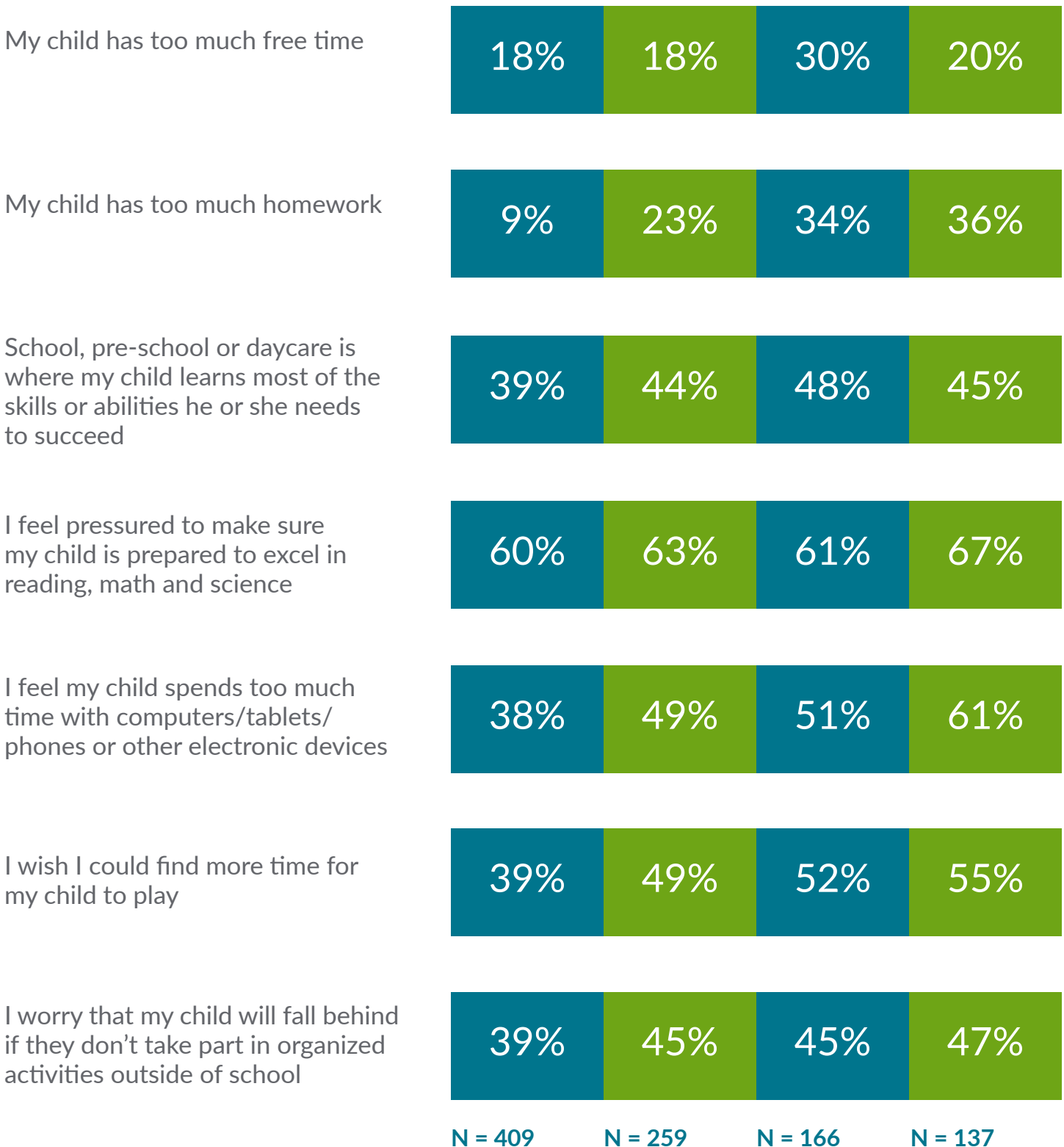
% agree: parents with children...

Ages 3-4

Ages 5-6

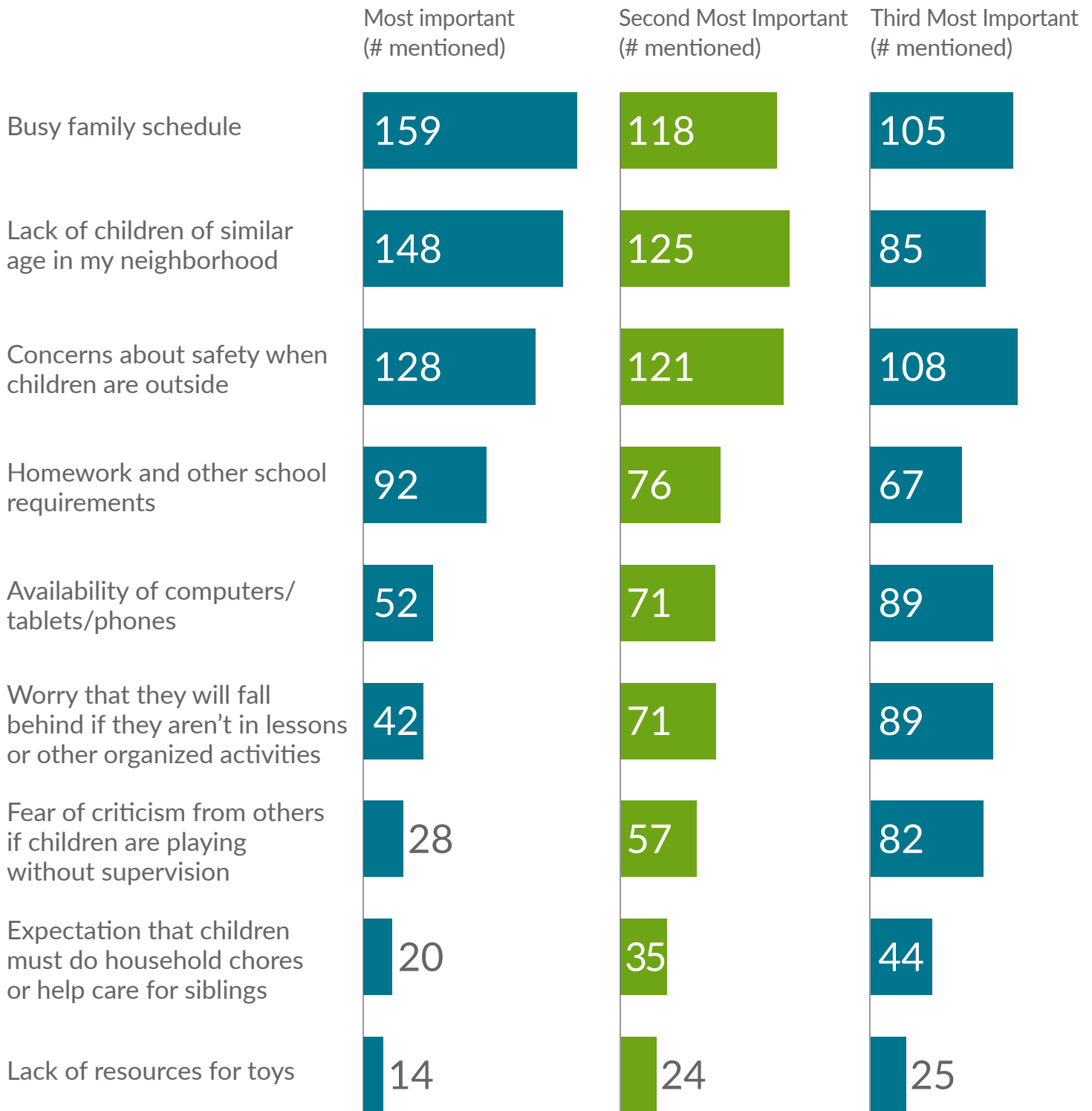
Ages 7-8

Ages 9-10



Which of the following most affect the amount of time your child can engage in play?

Please pick the top 3



N = 919

Section III: Child-Directed Play

The survey asked respondents to think about child-directed play, which was defined as time children spend playing by themselves or in small groups, doing things they choose to do, with little or no guidance from an adult.

The survey informed parents not to include video games, phone and computer time, movies and TV, sports practices, music lessons and other organized activities led by adults in the definition of child-directed play.

During this section of the survey, respondents were asked their opinion of one of their own children. The survey randomly assigned the respondent one of their children by age to consider when answering questions in this section.

Highlights

Parents view child-directed play as very important in helping their child develop skills such as problem solving, creative thinking and confidence

More than 9 in 10 parents believe that child-directed play is important to the development of their child

Three out of 4 parents express a desire to find more time for their child to engage in child-directed play

Child-directed play is important to the overall learning and development of my child.

All respondents

93% agree

N = 938

Ages 3-4

94% agree

N = 385

Ages 5-6

94% agree

N = 256

Ages 7-8

94% agree

N = 162

Ages 9-10

87% agree

N = 135

Using a scale from 1 to 10, how important do you consider child-directed play in helping children develop the following skills and abilities?

1: Less important

10: More important

Solve problems



Move with coordination, strength and endurance



Think creatively



Communicate effectively



Be resilient



Generate new ideas



Work well on a team



Be confident



N = 919

Using a scale from 1 to 10, how helpful are each of the following approaches in helping your child grow into a confident and creative person?

1: Less important

10: More important

Encourage activities that challenge my child



Limit risk-taking and minimize failure



Provide my child with easy tasks so my child can experience success



Avoid activities that frustrate my child



Offer suggestions when they don't know the answer



Provide frequent praise of my child's work



Tell my child the correct way to do things



Praise my child's efforts, even if the answer is wrong or the task isn't finished



Show my child how to get the right answer or complete a task correctly



Allow my child to figure things out on their own



Work together with my child to take on challenges and generate possible solutions



N = 978

Do you agree with this statement? “I wish my child could spend more time engaged in child-directed play.”

All parents



Parents of children ages 3-4



Parents of children ages 5-6



Parents of children ages 7-8



Parents of children ages 9-10



Play Resources: Information for Parents

Powers of Play: The 7Cs

Minnesota Children’s Museum recognizes seven skills children need to thrive, now and throughout their lives.

These powers of play, which the Museum calls the 7Cs, are crucial to the growth and development of children. They give children the tools they need to interact positively with others, manage their emotions and make sense of the world around them. The powers of play make for healthy minds and bodies.

“Through play, children learn to regulate their behavior, lay the foundations for later learning in science and mathematics, figure out the complex negotiations of social relationships, build a repertoire of creative problem solving skills, and so much more.”

Dr. Rachel E. White, The Power of Play

The Museum creates experiences designed to cultivate the powers of play. The Museum purposely tries to draw out these skills in our visitors, young and old. The goal in any exhibit or program is to nourish the development and build the capacity of one or more of the seven powers of play.

Confidence	To genuinely believe in own abilities to experience success and satisfaction in not only what one can do, but also what one is willing to try.
Creative Thinking	To consider and experiment with alternatives freely and without fear in any situation.
Critical Thinking	To discern knowledge, information and interests in order to solve a problem, prove a point or decide what to believe.
(Self)-Control	To interface with and within a bustling society with the ability to manage one’s own attention, emotions and behaviors.
Collaboration	To engage with others positively and productively in pursuit of a common goal.
Communication	To take language and literacy (the tools of communication) and use them to exchange information with power and precision.
Coordination	To recognize, use and appreciate the physical marvels of the human body.

Supporting Playful Learning: The PlayLENS

Children grow in amazing ways when we keep play at the center of their lives. When adults give children the time and space to take charge of their own learning, they embark on a path of lifetime achievement.

To help adults enhance the learning that happens through play, the Museum offers the PlayLENS, which stands for “Let go, Empower, Notice, Support.” The PlayLENS is both a framework and a call to action for adults to support children’s learning through play.

LET GO...

- ... of the urge to give children the “right” answers
- ... of the desire to avoid mistakes. Embrace failure and let children grow.

EMPOWER

- Encourage children to think for themselves. Ask “What do you think?”
- Guide children without taking over

NOTICE

- Focus on the process, not the end result
- Slow down. Observe with intention.

SUPPORT

- Give children time, permission and freedom to explore based on their own interests
- Pose challenges and ask open-ended questions

A Movement to Embrace the Power of Play

Minnesota Children’s Museum envisions a future in which kids and adults play more. The Museum sees our community thriving as a happier, healthier and more innovative place through the radiant power of play.

The Museum has launched #PlayMoreMN, a movement to urge parents to recognize the value of play – for their children and themselves – and to learn how they can enhance the learning that happens through play.

The Museum is in favor of giving kids more time and space to explore, experiment, do their own thing and make a mess. Play is a big deal. Through play, children learn the key skills they’ll need to succeed in life, including critical thinking, communication, creativity, coordination and more.

What’s unfortunate is that the time kids spend playing is on the decline – down an average of eight hours per week since the 1980s. That means children growing up today are spending less time doing the very things that will make their lives happier, more fulfilling and more rewarding – now and into the future.

Video Series: Successful People Play

Hear from interesting, notable and creative people as they share their stories of how they roamed, imagined and explored as kid – and how maintaining a playful mindset fuels their success and happiness to this day. Videos available at mcm.org/successful-people-play/

Research Summary

“The Power of Play: A Research Summary on Play and Learning” – Written for Minnesota Children’s Museum by Dr. Rachel E. White is a compilation of published research on the major types of play for young children and related learning benefits. The report is available for download at mcm.org/museum-professionals/explore-our-research/

Additional Information

Visit mcm.org/playmoremn for more information about the benefits of play and what parents and other caregivers to support playful learning.

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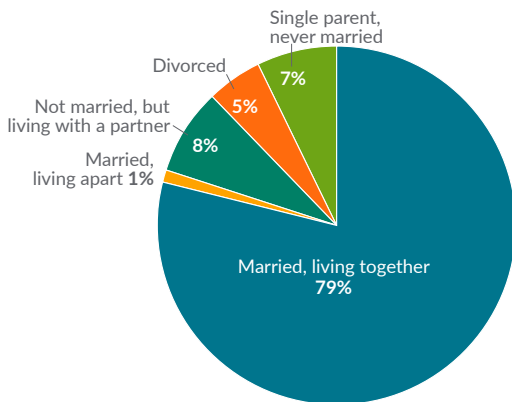
Appendix: Methodology, Demographics and Acknowledgements

Methodology Details

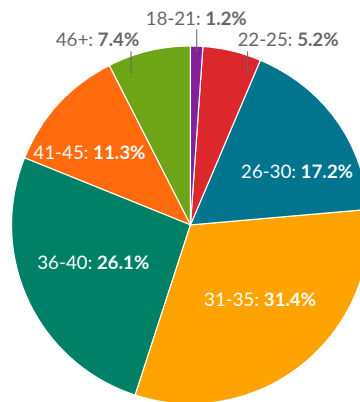
InsightDynamo designed and implemented an online survey among general consumers and members of Minnesota Children’s Museum. The study was conducted via InsightDynamo’s online survey platform powered by Qualtrics. InsightDynamo sourced qualified sample for general consumers in the greater Minneapolis/St. Paul demographic area. Consumers were screened for age (18+ years old) and the presence of children ages 3-10 for whom respondent was a caregiver. Minnesota Children’s Museum invited members to complete the survey as well. The survey was conducted in July 2015. A total of 1,017 surveys were completed.

Respondent Demographics

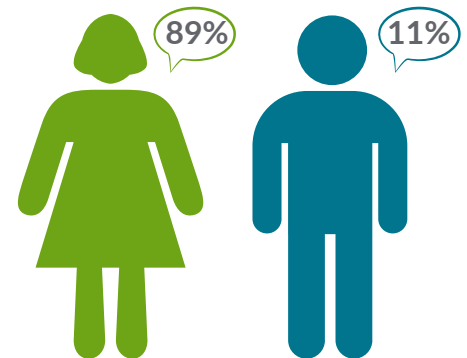
Marital Status



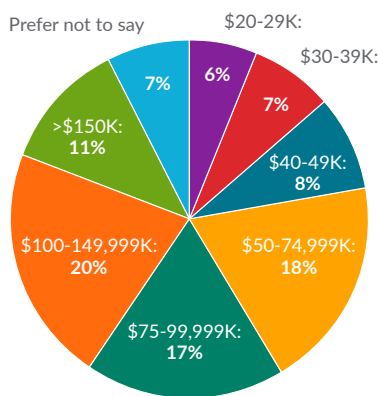
Age



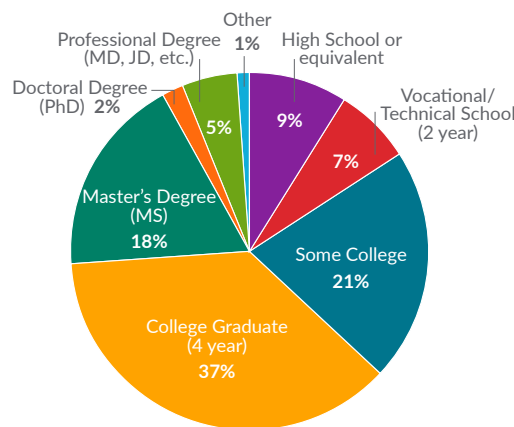
Gender



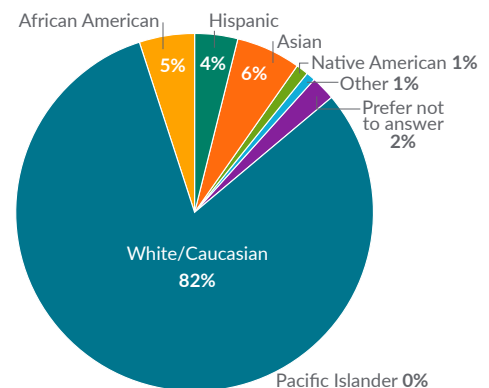
Income



Education



Ethnicity



About Minnesota Children’s Museum

Minnesota Children’s Museum is dedicated to sparking children’s learning through play. Our vision: “Kids play more. Adults do, too. We thrive as a happier, healthier and more innovative community through the radiant power of play.” The Museum, which first opened in 1981 and moved to downtown St. Paul in 1995, serves more than 460,000 visitors each year at its locations St. Paul, Rochester and Mall of America, and reaches thousands more across the state through Smart Play Spots, Storyland exhibits and other programs. The Museum is consistently rated as one of the top children’s museums in the country by national media outlets such as Forbes and Parents and was named as a finalist for an Institute of Museum and Library Services Medal of Service, the nation’s highest honor conferred on museums and libraries.

Online: mcm.org

About InsightDynamo

Too often, research companies simply deliver data without clarity or meaning, which can lead to confusion and misinterpretation, and ultimately fails to solve a business problem. Our belief is that providing information is not enough—you need to be able to turn information into insights, and explain what those insights mean. And with 30 years of combined experience in this field, we are able to do just that. We founded InsightDynamo as a high-touch, full-service and flexible insights consulting firm that delivers custom programs, tailored to you—your industry, your culture, your one-of-a-kind challenges. Think of us as an extension of the companies we serve, with an overriding goal of using our expertise to provide actionable insights that will make a real and pronounced difference to you and your strategic goals. Online: insightdynamo.com

Acknowledgements

Minnesota Children’s Museum thanks the partners that helped develop, conduct and analyze this survey. Michael Brousseau, partner and CEO of InsightDynamo, provided valuable expertise and offered extensive pro bono services. Members of the Museum’s Research Advisory Council gave important input on the content and wording of the survey questions. Dr. Megan Gunnar, director of the Institute of Child Development at the University of Minnesota and chair of the Research Advisory Council, helped the Museum analyze results and provided context for the findings.