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Experiences of childhood play among different generations in Estonia

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Play is an important part of child development, learning and the lives of children; however, access to the space and time necessary for play has dramatically changed in recent years. The aim of this study is to examine memories about childhood play from three generations of people in Estonia. Individual interviews were used to retrospectively explore perceptions of play with 98 respondents. The respondents mainly associated play memories with outdoor games that involved joy, fun, and excitement. The findings identified that freedom and a variety of options for play were important for children. The results highlighted the wide repertoire of play across generations and the difference between play for urban and rural children. The findings were compared with earlier studies and considered in light of educational and political changes in Estonian society.

KEYWORDS

playfulness, generation, play, place for play, time for play

Introduction

Childhood and play are inseparable concepts. Global changes have led to a different approach to the concept of childhood. In the new understanding of childhood, children are seen as active and independent social actors, as part of society and its structure and culture. This new perspective considers the need to study childhood based on historical and cultural systems (see [James et al., 1998](#); [Mayall, 2002](#); [Prout and James, 2008](#)). [Cunningham \(2000\)](#) notes that the question of whether childhood today is worse or better than childhood in earlier times itself testifies to a general notion that there is an ideal childhood we should strive for. He answers that, “childhood today is neither better nor worse than before, it is different.” And it is history that can convey the degree of difference ([Cunningham, 2000](#): p. 5–6).

The significance of play in childhood has been emphasized, and it has been pointed out that play is a child’s main activity, during which their personality develops as a whole. Play affords children opportunities to develop physical, social, and cognitive abilities necessary for successful learning at school ([Vygotsky, 1976](#); [Sutton-Smith, 1997](#); [Bodrova and Leong, 2006](#); [Singer, 2013](#)). At the same time, it has been recognized that children today have less time to play, free games have decreased, and the places where it is possible to play are increasingly limited. Therefore, the world of play has changed drastically for children compared to previous generations. [Chudacoff \(2007\)](#) has studied the games of American 6–12-year old children and has highlighted several important play-related conditions that affect childhood play globally and drastically. According to [Chudacoff \(2007\)](#) there are three basic changes involving play place, things, and use of time. Changes to “place” involve a shift from informal, nature-based play spaces to formal playgrounds, organized activities, and home-based play. Play “things” have shifted from homemade and improvised toys to adult-sanctioned educational toys and the direct-to-child marketing of manufactured, electronic, and media-based entertainment options.

In this article, we shed light on the experience of children's play in a historical perspective. Our assumption is that play is a cultural phenomenon conditioned by historical time and space; for example, the growing role of electronic media, marketing, and the commercialization of play is evident.

Already before the occupation and Christianization of Estonia, children's play had an essential role in forming and maintaining the Estonian national identity and preparing children for fulfilling their roles as adults (Andresen, 1997; Ugaste and Mikser, 2015). Estonia first gained independence in 1918, and at this time Estonia experienced extensive advancement in education and cultural life. The foundations for the school system were built: the number of literate people increased dramatically because compulsory education was raised from 3 to 6 years. According to the census of 1922, fully literate people accounted for nearly 90%, plus 5.3% of those who could only read (Ruus, 2004: p. 41). With the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact in 1939, Estonia lost its independence and hundreds of people died in World War II or were deported to Siberia. From 1940 to 1991, more than 50 years, Estonia was occupied by the Soviet Union.

In the late 1980s, great changes began to take place in the Estonian economy, social welfare and educational life. Estonia was freed from the 50-year occupation of the Soviet Union, and the re-independence of the Republic of Estonia was announced on August 20, 1991. After Estonia regained its independence, legal measures were taken to guarantee children's rights to education and play and in that year Estonia ratified the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (Lapse Õiguste Konventsioon, 1991). According to the convention, every child is entitled to rest and free time, which he or she can use for his or her congenial activity and play. This document brought a major change from the previously dominant approach to the child as a passive learner and more frequently children were seen as active subjects with their own rights. The ideas of child-centered education increasingly began to spread in society.

The aim of this study is to contribute with nuanced knowledge about childhood play experiences based on three different generations in Estonia. Based on memories of childhood play across three generations we explore changes and continuities, as memories are described from 1940 to 2000. The results contribute to our knowledge of potential changing experiences of play in space and time and playfulness. During the different decades of the Soviet era, childhood and children's games were not studied because Soviet children had a happy childhood. It was found that the best conditions in the world were created for children to enjoy their childhood, and therefore at that time it was not considered necessary to study children and their activities.

Our purpose in presenting experiences from Estonia is to obtain thick and detailed descriptions about play in space and time during childhood from the perspective of different generations. We also aim to learn from the relevant experiences of previous generations and draw conclusions from them.

At first, we present our theoretical frame and analyze previous studies. Then we will describe our methodological approach and findings. Finally, we will compare and discuss our results with earlier research findings.

Theoretical frame

The concept of play and playfulness

Numerous researchers have made attempts to identify the characteristics of play (Krasnor and Pepler, 1980; Rubin et al., 1983;

Saracho and Spodek, 1998; Johnson et al., 2005; Smith, 2010). First and foremost, play is characterized by a small number of dispositional factors. These are as follows: non-literality, which means that actions in play are not actual or real but fictitious; play motivation comes from the individual and is not externally motivated, thus the play is an intrinsically motivated activity; in play children feel free in the sense that they can stop playing whenever they wish, or they can start a new game when the play gets boring; in play children have a free choice of playmates, play themes and objects of play; play can also be characterized as a flexible activity that is not goal-oriented and play is usually fun and thus enjoyable.

Barnett (1990) has written that research strategies have previously defined play by focusing on the child's behavior and interactions. But she suggested that rather than regarding play as what the child does, a better way is to focus on play as an internal predisposition to be playful. A pioneer in the research of playfulness, Lieberman (1971, 1977) identified playfulness in terms of five personal traits: physical, social and cognitive spontaneity, and the manifest of joy and sense of humor.

The dimension of physical spontaneity reflects the child's activity level and physical coordination; social spontaneity captures his or her ability to move in and out of social play situations fluidly, to share, and to show leadership during peer play; cognitive spontaneity reflects the degree to which imagination and creativity are shown in play by the child inventing games, roles, and characters; manifest joy is demonstrated by the degree of exuberance, joy, enthusiasm, and heightened positive emotions the child exhibits in play; and sense of humor encompasses the teasing, rhyming, humor appreciation, and joke-telling aspects shown during play (Lieberman, 1971, 1977; Barnett, 1990, 1991a,b, 2007).

While play refers to behavioral manifestations, playfulness has been defined as "the predisposition to frame (or reframe) a situation in such a way as to provide oneself (and possibly others) with amusement, humor, and/or entertainment" (Barnett, 2007: p. 955).

Later, Barnett (1991b), based on Lieberman's five dimensions of playfulness, developed The Children's Playfulness Scale. She added personality traits and information about the child (gender, age, birth order, etc). The analysis indicated that certain playfulness dimensions are susceptible to gender, age, and family environment characteristics. According to Barnett, play can be viewed as an integrated part of the child because playfulness shows interrelationships with many other personality characteristics. As such, playfulness is recognized as the essence or spirit of play (Bundy, 1993). Playfulness is considered more than just a behavior or a personality trait, but rather a necessary component for human development and experience.

Despite the fact that play and being playful has an important role in a child's development and learning, researchers from several countries have been concerned about the decrease in children's play in preschool, school and the family (Singer et al., 2006; Elkind, 2008; Hirsh-Pasek et al., 2009; Miller and Almon, 2009; Nicolopoulou, 2010; Lynch, 2015).

At first, teachers frequently described their desire to use play in their classes, but they reported they were unable to for reasons unrelated to their teaching beliefs or knowledge (Miller and Almon, 2009; Nicolopoulou, 2010; Lynch, 2015). The reasons included the disapproval of the school administration, principals, and parents, and policy requirements that prohibited play.

Second, as argued many authors (Pellegrini and Smith, 1998; Singer et al., 2006; McQuade et al., 2019; Sutterby, 2019), children's use of the public space to play and to socialize and their freedom of movement have decreased. This change is related to increased traffic and ensuring the safety and security of children. It results in limited play space, as

parents do not allow children to play without adult supervision and control. The increase in technology in children's daily lives has drastically reduced children's active free play and play opportunities. In addition, such factors as parental fears and worry about children's safety, the structure and supervision in children's lives and increased pressure for academic exposure at a young age have also decreased play.

Third, families are worried about their children's academic skills, learning success, and future coping (Elkind, 2008; Gray, 2011). Therefore, children are sent to various academic clubs and hobby groups.

Previous studies

The memories of childhood play among people of different ages have been studied internationally. For example, memories of 13 respondents who lived in Finland during the Second World War were investigated by Paksuniemi et al. (2015). The children actively participated in household work but the interviewees had time to play regardless of all their duties. There was still time to play and they played whenever possible. The children were creative and if they needed toys, children prepared them by themselves.

An Amsterdam study compared children's use of space–time behavior during the 1950s and early 1960s with that of today (Karsten, 2005). Children's time–space behavior in the 1950s and 1960s can be characterized as “outdoor childhood,” with children playing outside for hours and in large groups. The relation between inside and outside spaces started to change at the beginning of the 1960s, but especially rapidly from the 1970s onwards. Karsten (2005) stated that nowadays playing outside is much more limited in terms of time, space and activity. In addition, the amount of time children spend at home has grown, and activities that used to be done outside have become part of children's indoor culture.

The play memories of 135 adults who grew up in 21 countries was examined by Nicholson et al. (2016). Two themes were the most prevalent in adults' memories of their childhood play: play as a relational experience and play in an outdoor environment. Researchers pointed out that outdoor play often involved making up pretend games and taking risks. They emphasized that children's play opportunities have changed – there has been a reduction in children's opportunities to play including less access to outdoor play and an increase in technology in children's daily lives.

One study was conducted with 13 Canadian young adults (Holt et al., 2015). The respondents recalled from their childhood experiences some of the familiar concerns that restricted play in modern society (i.e., parental restrictions and safety concerns). Despite parental worries, the respondents were able to play independently, a sense of community and safety in numbers facilitated their involvement in active free play. The young adults thought the sense of community had since become eroded from modern society.

Kalliala (2002) investigated 23 six-year old children who grew up in Helsinki and the parents and staff of the day care centers were interviewed to provide (Supplementary Material). The results show that the dependency of play on time and culture may be traced from the micro level of children's play culture to the macro level of profound societal changes and, in particular, the changing roles of children and adults. She also found uncertain child-rearing practices and at the same time children partly being left alone to construct not only their own play culture but their own childhood. She stated that the framework for play can be seen as based on clear boundaries generated by certain

child-rearing practices in the 50s, and as based on floating boundaries due to the uncertain child-rearing practices in the 90s. Kalliala used the metaphor “out of the garden” which means a concrete movement away from domestic yards to “institutional playgrounds” in daycare centers.

Another study interviewed 111 Swedish pre-school teachers and students to compare younger and older respondents' memories of play (Sandberg and Vuorinen, 2008). The youngest participant was aged 22 and the oldest was 63. The older respondents included mainly individual play and play with toys and natural materials in their favorite play memory, while the younger respondents mostly referred to social play including other children. In their memories of their school years, outdoor play dominated both groups' descriptions of their strongest play memory. When comparing their own play experiences, almost all respondents, both younger and older, described children's play today as being deficient in some respect. Therefore, they perceived deficiencies in the imaginative and creative abilities of children, as well as in children's ability to initiate and start play.

In sum, we can conclude that the games of people of different ages have been studied, but play and playfulness from the perspective of different generations have not been investigated more thoroughly.

Materials and methods

In this section of the article, I will describe the focus of the interviews and the selection of respondents and methods, as well as the analysis process. The aim of this study is to examine the childhood play memories of three generations of people in Estonia.

The study seeks to shed light on the following questions:

- How do people of different ages describe their experiences of the play space and time, and playfulness?
- Which dimensions of playfulness and how they are present in the experiences of the interviewees?

Sample and method

Through qualitative interviews it was possible to get to know the interviewees' personal thoughts and thoroughly describe their meanings and subjective experiences (Kvale, 2005; Flick, 2006). I chose a qualitative retrospective interview for several reasons. This method makes it possible to collect data about events of past times, and understand changes and to include a time dimension to the data (De Vaus, 2011). The main reason advanced for collecting retrospective information is that it provides a quick and efficient way of obtaining measures of changes. Furthermore, where data about past patterns simply were not collected at the time there is little alternative to using retrospective data to explore the past events. This design is best suited to the construction of sequences of significant events and in that respect can provide valuable insights into the sequence of events in individual lives or into historical changes. The retrospective approach has been used in several different scientific works (e.g., Hollingworth and Miller, 1996; Côté et al., 2005; Selwyn, 2013). These authors emphasized the advantage of a retrospective study and confirm the success and possibilities of such an approach.

One teacher with a master's degree and one doctoral student conducted the interviews with me. I explained the purpose of the interviews beforehand and the procedure of the study and trained them thoroughly on how to conduct the interviews. At first, three pilot

interviews were carried out to confirm the suitability of the interview questions. Some of the interview questions were specified and corrected. The interview was constructed on a topic-by-topic basis. Respondents were asked to reflect on their experiences of playing in their childhood.

The detailed questions are:

- Where was your childhood home, what about your siblings, your playmates?
- What games did you play at home, in preschool, at school?
- What games did you play inside, outside?
- What were the toys like, what was your favorite play and toys?
- What were the themes and content of the games?
- What were the players' relationships like?

During the interview, the interviewees were asked to specify their thoughts by asking them, for example, "Would you explain that more" or "Give me an example" or.

"Could you please describe some games in more detail?"

This study included 98 Estonian women and men of different ages. Our respondents can be divided by age as follows: 32 were aged 70–80 and this generation experienced childhood during the war and the post-war period (born 1940–1960); 34 were aged 50–60 and were children when economic and social changes were taking place in Estonian society (born 1960–1980); finally, 32 respondents were aged 20–30 (born 1990–2000) and their childhood was influenced by extensive national and international events and very rapid technological developments. A total of 52% of women and 48% of men participated in the study, and of the participants 63% had a secondary vocational or secondary education, 31% had higher education and 6% had primary or basic education.

The study was conducted between 2017 and 2020. The respondents were invited from our personal networks using snowball sampling in our selection. The criteria for participating were age, having volunteered and having an interest in sharing childhood memories. The respondents were informed about the purpose of the study, its design, confidentiality, and their right to withdraw. The people were interviewed in a separate room where it was possible to speak quietly and confidentially. The average duration of the interviews was 20 min.

The author of this article has studied children's play in different contexts (preschool, home) for many years. The researcher has also published play based articles in international journals and has taken part in several international play conferences and SIG groups.

Data analysis

Due to our extensive qualitative data, it was appropriate to use thematic analysis to identify and report patterns (Ryan and Bernard, 2003; Braun and Clarke, 2006; Vaismoradi et al., 2013). We followed six steps guided by Braun and Clarke (2006). At first all interviews were transcribed, and the data was read and re-read repeatedly. Then we searched for interesting features in the data, generated initial codes and collated the data relevant to each code. The third step was the mapping of the codes as themes and sorting the codes into potential themes and sub-themes. In the next step we defined and named several themes and checked how all the themes matched the research questions and each other. After this, the specifics of each theme were critically refined and clear labels for each theme, which reflected the content of the theme were generated. The last step was to link the analysis to the research questions producing a description of the analysis.

In addition to the place and time of play, we also analyzed the playful aspect of play in the interviews. I started here from the five dimensions of playfulness mentioned above (Lieberman, 1971, 1977; Barnett, 1990, 1991a,b). In the dimension of physical spontaneity, we explained whether the child is psychologically active in the play, or the child moves differently in the game; for example, climbs, jumps, runs away from other players, etc. In terms of social spontaneity, we investigated whether the child has playmates, whether he/she starts games himself and shares toys with others. With cognitive spontaneity, we observed whether the player uses objects in the game in an unusual way, whether he takes different roles in the games and changes the content of the game. Regarding the manifest joy dimension, we described whether the child enjoys the game and shows satisfaction and enthusiasm in the game. Finally, in the perception of humor dimension, we explained whether the children joke, laugh, and tell funny stories to others in games.

The analysis work was conducted manually with a focus on substance and complexity in order to develop coherent and thick descriptions for the study. To satisfy confidentiality, the respondents' names were removed from the interviews and pseudonyms were given to all respondents to protect their anonymity. To increase the trustworthiness of the study, the respondents had an opportunity to read their transcribed interviews (Creswell, 2007). The presentation of the results consists of authentic phrases from the interviews, which show the expression of the perceptions of the respondents.

Results

The experience of the place and time of play among different generations

Oldest generation

The oldest generation in this study grew up during the war and in the post-war years and the participants characterize their childhood as a very hard time when parents were deported, and fathers were often at war or in prison. There was hunger and families had few material goods, such as clothes as well as food. Parents with children moved to the countryside because it was easier to get food.

Despite the hard times their memories of play are mostly happy and positive, and therefore it contributed to their memories of childhood as having time to play and the freedom to go almost anywhere. The respondents elaborated that they had to start helping their parents at home when they were very young; for example, looking after smaller brothers and sisters, making hay, or taking care of domestic animals, weeding vegetable gardens, picking potatoes or picking berries. When the housework had been done, the children were allowed to play on their own. They found time to play in addition to doing work. For Estonians it seemed that work and play mostly went hand in hand. The participants spent a lot of their time playing outdoors, especially in summer. They played in nature, in the forest, in the fields and pastures.

Games were developed somehow spontaneously and imperceptibly between the forest and the fields.

Enn recalls: *Because when there was a forest and trees, you had to climb trees or build huts from branches. It was good that there were sand hills, then holes were dug, sand towers were built as well as castles and fortresses.*

The games were related to home and included animals (cows, sheep, pigs, calves, and horses) because animals were important to the players,

because it was part of their lives. Cows were taken to the pasture, they were milked, pigs were fed, and horses were harnessed to carts. The topics of the parents' farm work were also used in play because the parents' work and activities were visible and close at all times. We can say that the games of the oldest generation were family and farm oriented.

Outdoors they also played hopscotch, dodgeball, rear pair out, blind man's bluff, and ball games: *Then there was hide-and-peek outdoors, for there were barns and bushes and hedges where it was good to hide*, explains Mati.

Lembit adds: *When Tarzan came, we all hung in the trees, we took strings along.*

In winter, the main activity was skiing or sledding because there was a lot of snow in their childhood. The snowdrifts were high and the weather was very cold.

Inside they played (singing) games in the round and dance games as well as a lot of board games. For example, Travel around the World, Dominoes, and Checkers. Because of the poor time there were few toys, these were made either from natural items; for example, water, mud, clay, and snow. On the other hand, a lot of animal toys were made from wood, pinecones, moss, twigs, and acorns. They also designed dresses for paper dolls and the dolls were sewn by mothers or the older children did it themselves. The children had no difficulty in finding playmates because there were their siblings as playmates. There were also children in the neighborhood to play with.

Middle generation

All the respondents of the middle generation claimed that they loved playing outside. But there were different play options for town children and country children. Country children had time and space to play outdoors because they lived either in a detached house or an apartment where the children were allowed to play around the house and the parents were able to see them. In the countryside, everyone knew each other, and the children also knew the boundaries of where they could play.

The time that town children (known as stone-house children) had for play depended on their parents; they had time to play after preschool and school. In summer and at weekends they could go to the country to visit their grandparents or relatives, or they went to a summer house and thus experienced more freedom to play spontaneously and outdoors. In the town, children played between tall buildings (if it wasn't dangerous) and there were children's playgrounds for smaller children with sandboxes, slides, and ladders. For bigger children there were sports grounds for ball games, either for basketball, volleyball, or football. Sometimes there were also facilities for long-jump or high-jump. But the town children explained that they tried to play outside whenever possible. They waited for the end of lessons at school so that they could go home to eat and then outside to play.

The participants described how their parents were worried about their children's development, learning and school readiness. Therefore, they sent their children to different adult-led activities or preschool classes (or sport and music clubs). This, as well as the traffic in the streets, the parents' concern for their safety and their growing fear of crime and violence limited outdoor play opportunities for many Estonian town children. If the parents had time after their work, they took their children to play in the park or in a playground.

Outdoors they also engaged in the traditional games previous generations had played. Cabins from twigs and branches, and sandcastles

were built and ships were floated. The example of popular play and games for respondents included such traditional games as hide-and-peek, rotten-egg, ball games, tag games, hopscotch, playing ball, skipping rope, and playing with hula-hoops.

Lauri commented on play in nature as follows: *In the yard, in the sandpit, we made cakes from the sand and tree leaves were money. The cakes were bought for that money. Cabins were built so there was a cabin village. The walls were made from a green hazel and it had a wooden ceiling. We decorated the walls with green leaves. There were also two-room cabins. The boys built cabins in the trees, the girls remained on the ground. Pots were brought from home and the girls cooked while the boys worked hard in the forest – selecting branches, twigs and stones for the cabins.*

The respondents remember that they enjoyed traditional role-play games indoors (e.g., home, shop, school, and hospital). They explained that they played home with dolls and without dolls. There were not many dolls, they were mostly made from plastic and often without clothes. German dolls were especially valued as they had beautiful long hair, large eyes, spoke, and walked. Toys were also obtained through the 'acquaintances' in shops.

At that time the mass media started to develop and more activities might have moved indoors. It was indicated by the respondents that some of their play themes were inspired from TV and books. Estonian boys obtained their game themes from films or serials on TV.

Toomas explained: *We played according to films we saw on TV and stories we heard (books). For example, war with different actors and self-made weapons, sticks, bows, and wooden guns. We made bows and guns ourselves from twigs but we also made willow whistles, which we used for making music.*

Most of the participants of the middle generation said that they had been to kindergarten. However, their memory from that time is blurred and seldom mentioned in the interviews. It was pointed out that they played with cars inside, built houses or fed dolls. Outdoor games in kindergarten were remembered more because there was a lot of freedom, and not so many activities were organized by the adults.

Youngest generation

In the 90s, extensive economic and social changes took place in Estonian society. Computers and telephone games appeared in homes and this generation talked about a tremendous upswing in media and digital development and organized adult-led activities. The youngest respondents described more indoor play than the previous generations.

Changes in society contributed to the emergence of new themes in play and means of play in children's games. They imitated what they saw on Finnish TV, commercials, comics and cartoons (Biker Mice, Batman, caps in crisp packages, also spinners, modern car models, snowboards, etc).

Lego toys and Lego sets played an important part for many boys and girls and were among the children's favorite toys.

Kalle stated: *... to my mind the most awesome toy that ever existed was Lego. I could endlessly play with Lego and each day was totally different from the previous one, so that no game or thing that you built was the same as the one you had built the previous day. ... But I think that Lego was one of the last things that was like a toy even when I went to school, I still played with Lego.*

Finnish TV provided ideas about playing superheroes most of all in northern Estonia. But the really popular toy was Barbie and they also appreciated its accessories (clothes, jewellery, dishes, furniture, etc).

Maret explained: *Barbie and Ken and what I wanted to have was Barbie's house! Gees how I wanted to have that! All the Christmases, birthdays I wished for Barbies.*

Tiina remembered: *A relative brought the first Barbie from a foreign country. Then it was such a Barbie with a dressing gown, two different combs, and two pairs of footwear. And then there were some kinds of shampoos, so that it could be washed as well. We sewed clothes for them with my sister from all kinds of old pieces of fabric. We were quite big (schoolchildren) when we still played with Barbie dolls.*

Despite the fact that there was a lot of talk about indoor games, all the respondents highlighted that outdoor play was the best and their favorite. The youngest generation valued outdoor play and they enjoyed playing outdoors. It seems that the children of that generation, compared to the previous generations, were even more dependent on their parents. Preschool children and elementary school pupils were often not allowed to play outside unless the parents knew who they were playing with and where they were playing.

The parents of this generation wanted their children to be protected, and therefore they sent the children to attend hobby groups (music, dance, and song) and sports clubs more and more. At the same time, parents also wanted their children to participate in academic activities and learning support circles.

Although digital technology tools quickly came into children's lives, relatively little was reported about them in the interviews. The reason for this could be that the parents did not have the opportunity to provide the means or they did not want them do that.

Several of the participants admitted that in retrospect they were happy that there were no computers in their childhood and that they could play traditional games indoors and play a lot outdoors.

Maret illustrated this idea: *I am very happy with my play world. I am glad that my childhood did not pass with electronic toys, but I spent a lot of time outdoors and played with my brothers and friends.*

For Estonians, life in kindergarten, preschool and school seems to dominate their childhood, but they do not remember much about their play there or did not tell us about it directly.

Dimensions of playfulness in the respondents' memories

Psychological spontaneity

All the respondents connected playing primarily with movement, physical activity and various motor activities, especially in the open air.

Anu mentioned: *My favorite games were games where you could be physically active. These games helped lay the foundation for enjoying physical activity and taught rules and discipline. As a child I ran around and made up all kinds of games.*

It was emphasized that being outside, you could get to know nature by running around, you could learn more and you could learn to care for it more. The children liked different ball games (basketball, volleyball, baseball, etc). These ball games were played according to their own rules and the equipment was different (often with self-made means).

A particularly favorite game was hide-and-seek with several variations. They hid everywhere, either behind trees or bushes, sheds or fences. They also enjoyed playing various other chasing games and favorite games included: the rotten-egg ball game, tag games, hopscotch, rear pair out, blind man's bluff, etc. In winter, it was really exciting to ski, skate and sled because it seemed to the older generation that winters were snowier and colder then.

Social spontaneity

The respondents remembered that particular games were played together with other children in a large group. It was not difficult for the older and middle generation to find companions because the families were large, siblings were playmates and there were mostly families with many children in the neighborhood. Therefore, the playmates lived nearby, which enabled getting together and starting to play. Everyone played regardless of age; 4-year-olds and 13-year-olds played together because there were children of that age in the neighborhood. Older children often taught younger ones.

Maie stated: *Since I had several older sisters, I also learned to play a lot of games from them, and that's how we learned a lot of things together. Or one kid learned from another player. Or they invented games together.*

Many children participated in indoor games, but the games of the younger generation were mostly solo games.

The interviewees did not recall any major conflicts, misunderstandings or rivalry between children.

Sven told: *Sometimes you had to show your skills in the games, and you wanted to be better than others, for example take a leading role in the play or you definitely wanted to win.*

But the respondents found unanimously that if there were problems, then the players resolved conflicts quickly and calmly. It was nice to play with best friends the games that they liked and were most interested in. As one interviewee from the middle generation put it: "These were my people."

Cognitive spontaneity

The interviewees repeatedly pointed out the cognitive aspect of playfulness. The use of unusual objects was emphasized by all the generations, especially in outdoor games. Materials from nature (for example a hut was built from tree branches, cones were animals, cakes were made from the sand, tree leaves were money, etc).

Mihkel elaborated: *I made wooden toys and board games myself. Somehow my meaning and thoughts got in there.*

Creativity was brought out several times because the games mostly imitated what the adults did with several tools and the children used their own age-appropriate fantasy and imagination in their play.

The games were changed according to the players' wishes so that it would suit everyone. The interviewees said that the game was usually supposed to be played that way, but they talked and agreed to play differently, changing the rules of the game or they played it using other means. The game themes came from their own head, what players or playmates experienced in their surrounding life, what was seen on TV or what was read aloud or read themselves.

Anne illustrated this: *We played a shop game outdoors so that one was the shop assistant and the others were standing in the queue and were buying. Queues were long like they were in real life at that time.*

Indeed, it was evident in several stories that queues were typical of many games (doctor, hairdresser, traffic game, etc). It was emphasized that many skills were learned and knowledge gained because wisdom and speed were important in the games.

Marko recalled: *Ball games developed, for example, physical abilities and reaction times, while playing Ukauka I learned to calculate and count.*

The respondents noted that playing board games before school helped counting and knowing numbers, and therefore in primary classes at school this was much easier. The interviewees said that they invented the games themselves, changed the play according to the players' wishes and played one and the same game for weeks.

For example, every summer the children were sea captains because they had a pond in the yard (it was shallow and not dangerous) and there was a raft on the pond. The players sailed on the sea and discovered new lands. Every winter they were figure skaters and sledded and skied a lot.

Manifest joy

When talking about the play world in childhood, it was clear that the experience of childhood was wonderful. It had freedom, nature, the sun, grandparents, and mother and father. Playing was described as interesting, fun and a varied activity.

Helle elaborates as follows: *The content of the games was to create a happy mood in order to feel better and have a good time.*

The children played these games because they were cool, they preferred these games themselves and wanted to play and no children were banned. The games that they liked at that moment depended on the players' mood and the playmates. Some days they liked running and hide-and-seek games more, while other days they preferred calmer and more creative activities. The respondents said that the content of the games was fun. The main thing was to get outside and to breathe fresh air and have fun and they never got bored.

Annabel felt that ... *the games came on flying, there were millions of them and they lasted exactly as long as they were supposed to. Everything that came to mind was played.*

Sometimes toys also caused joy and surprises. For example, inside the surprise eggs there were these small, cute things, children really liked them, and they made homes for them.

There was never a dull moment because each new day was different from the previous one and ideas came while playing. Games were full of adventure and freedom; it was nice to be someone else. The difference between urban and rural children's games was also highlighted, because in the country there were many different ways of doing things and everything was available at hand. More specific games were developed in the city because there were several restrictions and rules that had to be taken into account.

Sense of humor

Sense of humor as a dimension of playfulness was brought up the least. Sometimes it was hard to see the difference between the dimensions manifest playful joy and sense of humor. Above all, joking and laughter in particular came to the fore in these interviews and some funny stories were related. It was funny when children invented a role.

Inge clarified her play: *The role of the Strongman Jõnnu (Jõumees, Jõnnu) was funny to everyone. The girl was wearing a big jacket with a leotard underneath. She was very thin, her thin legs stuck out from under the big jacket. Other children asked, are you a strongman, girl? Well, are you a strongman Jõnnu? It seemed funny to everyone ...*

The informants also confirmed that everything was so simple and funny in childhood. It was cheerful when they played the hawk game in a dark haystack, there was a hawk there, but it was already dark and you could not really see where to step. She remembered the moment when she could not run anymore and a friend was a hawk. Both laughed madly, their stomachs twisted because they just could not take it. It seemed most important to get out of the way and then she could not see and fell headfirst into the hay bales.

Silvi said: *the girls played a concert by putting large blankets around their body as skirts and made up songs that were heard on the*

radio. Bread rolls were put inside the shoes to make the shoes have real heels and to make them higher. It was exceptionally funny and had laughs throughout.

Discussion and conclusion

The aim of this study was to explore and describe the childhood experience of play through three different generations in Estonia.

Space and time for play

There is a lot in common in the memories of three different generations. The memories of the generations are characterized by an understanding of the Soviet era. There was no feeling of nostalgia for the Soviet era or an overly critical or pessimistic view of one's childhood. It was noted that this was the time, and this was my childhood, and these were my games.

The memories were primarily related to the experience of outdoor games and the variety of play places. The respondents said how places for play included forests, the edge of a water body, sand dunes and backyards. For all the interviewees, outdoor games were related to nature, freedom and movement. Children saw opportunities for playing everywhere and everything that came to mind was played. These findings are in line with other studies (Karsten, 2005; Holt et al., 2015; Nicholson et al., 2016). For example, Karsten (2005) comparison of children's use of space and time in Amsterdam in the 1950s and early 1960s with that of today highlighted that the 1950s and 1960s was characterized as "outdoor childhood," with children playing outside for hours and in large groups. The amount of time that urban children spend playing outdoors has declined considerably. Karsten (2005) concluded that playing outside is much more limited nowadays in terms of time, space, and activity.

We can say that while the older generations had to participate in domestic household work during difficult times they still found time and were allowed to play. Current findings are consistent with a Finnish study (Paksuniemi et al., 2015), which confirmed that children during war time still had to play and they played whenever possible.

Our study indicated that options for outdoor play changed in the memories of the middle generation; there were differences in the games of rural and urban children. The opportunities for play among country children were the same as in the previous generation but the environment for city children had changed. Town children (stone-house children) played between the new buildings if the parents allowed them and the place was not dangerous. The games of the middle generation became more indoor and also more individual. The importance of parents in choosing the place and time for children's play also increased.

The younger generation's memories of the time and place for play are quite different. They value play in general and especially outdoor games. The younger generation admitted that they enjoyed playing in the countryside either at the weekends or during the summer holidays. They talked about different indoor games (board games, construction and role-play games). At the same time, computer games were just coming into their play world but the meaning of these games did not emerge in the interviews. The very large role of parents in creating the children's play world was also evident. It was characteristic for children

of the younger generation to attend various hobby groups, organized activities, or academic study groups in addition to kindergarten or school. These findings also appear in earlier research wherein some respondents thought that modern parents are more likely to put their children into organized activities (e.g., sport programs) rather than letting them play outdoors (Gray, 2011; Holt et al., 2015; McQuade et al., 2019).

The results in this Estonian study can also be interpreted in light of the rapid changes in society and the uncertainty of the parents, which means that the old educational principles did not apply and new ones had not yet been developed (Hämäläinen et al., 1994). The profound changes in society made parents fear for their children's academic success and also for their children's future. Kalliala (2002) study of preschool children highlights the uncertainty surrounding child-rearing practices and at the same time children were partly left alone to construct not only their own play culture but also their own childhood.

According to our findings it was increasingly difficult for the children of the middle and younger generation to find time to play, especially in the city. The findings demonstrated that Estonian children played more and more alone. A Swedish (2008) study identified that the older respondents included mainly individual play and play with toys, while the younger respondents mostly referred to social play including other children. Our findings revealed the opposite result that the older generation and also part of the middle generation played much more in large groups. The games of the younger generation are characterized by playing mainly alone.

Dimensions of playfulness

The positive and bright nature of the memories of all the interviewees was amazing. Even a child that was deported to Siberia with his family during the war, happily remembered his childhood and games. The interviewees explained that the time was just like that and that is why their childhood games were a certain way. The respondents were not sharply critical of the Soviet era or the opportunities for playing during that time.

Two dimensions of playfulness stood out: physical spontaneity and cognitive spontaneity. These dimensions also overlapped with the opinions of our interviewees about the space and time for play. Freedom, movement, different physical activities – these were the most common and typical thoughts when describing the physical spontaneity of playfulness.

On the other hand, a cognitive spontaneity of playfulness was revealed which consisted of initiating or inviting players to play. The creating and inventing of games by players and the modification of games according to the wishes of the players clearly stood out. Creativity in making toys was also emphasized by the respondents. One man from the middle generation noted that poverty gave birth to creativity because you had to make toys yourself with your hands and head.

The social spontaneity of the playfulness was also described, and they were happy that they could play in a large group of children. That they communicated well and that relations were mostly friendly was also emphasized. Many of the childhood playmates have remained lifelong friends. Bullying and violence were not remembered in the games.

Two of the dimensions of playfulness – Manifest joy and Sense of humor – were mentioned less by the interviewees. It can be argued that these dimensions overlapped to a certain extent, but sometimes they were difficult to distinguish. These dimensions were characterized by the words “enjoyment,” “funny stories,” “laughing and joking,” and “cheerfulness.”

Therefore, we can confirm that all dimensions of playfulness were present in the interviews conducted.

In conclusion, it is necessary to get to know the childhood and play memories of people of different ages in order to be able to create a better childhood and play world for children based on the experiences of older generations. From the participants stories about the past we can learn that the children's play is a multi-layered and complex activity in which the place, time and means of play are very important. The results of the study could be known and shared with city planners, designers, health workers, pediatricians and politicians. The experience gained from the research can be used in the initial and in-service training of teachers, as well as in the preparation of preschool and school curricula. Our results suggest this would be valuable information for parents, educators, youth workers, and for those who deal with children and young people.

We used the interview method in this study, which allows us to better learn and perceive the voice, ideas and opinions of the respondents. We definitely agree with Sandberg and Vuorinen (2008) standpoint that retrospective interviews have some methodological problems and limitations, since people have a tendency to remember the past through a filter which is highly influenced by the present. Furthermore, the most obvious problem is that of faulty memory and people may simply misremember the events or they remember situations selectively (De Vaus, 2011). Also, people have a tendency to embellish the past, especially from an emotional perspective, so that the feelings of the respondents might have become more positive with the passing of time. However, the aim here was not to describe how things actually were but to obtain the subjective memories about childhood play from different generations. In the future, for example, data could be collected by carrying out observations with children or, for example, by using the respondents' own childhood photos to stimulate memories.

Data availability statement

The raw data supporting the conclusions of this article will be made available by the authors, without undue reservation.

Ethics statement

Ethical review and approval was not required for the study on human participants in accordance with the local legislation and institutional requirements. Written informed consent for participation was not required for this study in accordance with the national legislation and the institutional requirements.

Author contributions

The author confirms being the sole contributor of this work and has approved it for publication.

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The author declares that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

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