

# REAL PLAY FAMILIES

## EXECUTIVE REPORT

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**HUMAN POTENTIAL CENTRE**  
AN AUT UNIVERSITY RESEARCH CENTRE

in partnership with Persil





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## Background to Real Play Families

The importance of quality play experiences for children's physical, social, and emotional development is well established. Play provides opportunities for children to be physically active, and enhances motor, social and communicative skills, cognitive abilities, resilience, wellbeing, and creativity.<sup>1-3</sup> Over the last three decades, however, children in the developed world have shifted from mostly unstructured, unsupervised, outdoor play to structured, supervised, and/or indoor activities.<sup>4,5</sup> Modern outdoor public and school playgrounds are typically static structures designed by adults to support a predetermined set of activities that prioritise injury prevention above all else.<sup>6,7</sup> Furthermore, as parental efforts to safeguard their children increase, opportunities for children to engage in risky and unstructured 'real' play diminish.<sup>8</sup> Play spaces created by adults habitually align with their own perspective of children's play preferences, with safety being a key factor. This frequently leads to brightly coloured and highly structured play spaces, whereas it appears that children prefer to play in natural outdoor environments.<sup>9</sup>

**There is a growing concern that our increasingly risk averse society is contributing to a generation of 'bubble-wrapped' children that have limited opportunities to play creatively, instigate physical activity, overcome challenges independently, and learn to manage risks appropriately.** <sup>6,7,10,11</sup>

To gain a better understanding of how kiwi parents view real play, AUT University partnered with Persil NZ to conduct a nationwide survey of play perceptions and practices. The State of Play Survey collected data from over 2,000 NZ parents, and included a wide range of questions about real play engagement, risk tolerance, active transport, independent mobility, and screen time. Our interpretation of real play was largely based on the definition of risky play by Ellen Sandseter.<sup>12,13</sup> In her seminal work, she identifies six main components of risky play that we incorporated into the survey design: (1) play at great heights, (2) play with high speed, (3) play with dangerous tools, (4) play near dangerous elements, (5) rough-and-tumble play, and (6) play where children can 'disappear'. We have also added two additional components to broaden our concept of real play: play with loose objects (e.g., sticks, timber, tyres, tarpaulins) and 'messy' play (e.g., mud, dirt, sand, water, paint). Some of the key findings of the State of Play survey are listed below.

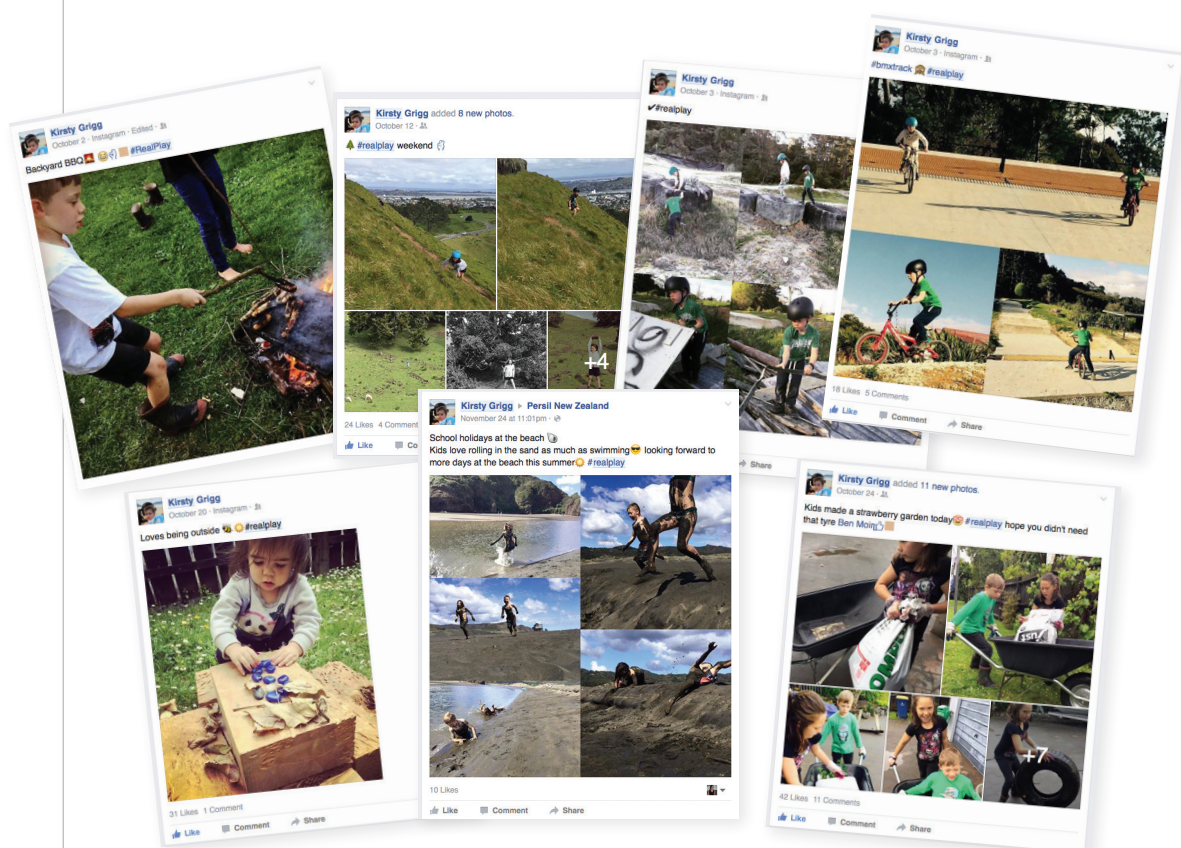
- Most NZ parents recognise the potential developmental benefits of real play, and believe that children need to be exposed to some form of risk to develop their risk management skills.
- However, the majority of children do not often participate in a wide range of real play activities; in fact, a reasonable proportion does not engage in real play at all.
- Only a relatively small proportion of parents regularly allow their children to play outside when it is raining.
- Less than half of kiwi kids aged 8-12 years are allowed to travel alone in their neighbourhood, with only 5% doing so often.
- Key reasons identified by parents for restricting independent roaming are the likelihood of road accidents (73.2%) and of encountering ill-intentioned adults (59.9%).
- Parental tolerance of risk was the number one predictor of whether or not their children engage in real play.



It is clear that parents are generally supportive of a return to real play in kiwi kids, but the social pressure to maintain the overprotective status quo is difficult to overcome. We believe that the time is right to show families it is still possible to provide children with real play opportunities, even in today's hectic lifestyle. We strongly believe that we need more children visibly engaging in real play within communities to create a level of social acceptance and trigger widespread societal change.

To this end, AUT and Persil have embarked on another collaborative project – Real Play Families – this time working closely with three typical kiwi families in a social experiment encouraging them to adopt the real play philosophy in their lives. Over a 4-week period (including two weeks of school holidays), we asked families to describe the barriers they faced, the actions they took, and the positive (or negative) outcomes they noticed. They were regularly filmed and their adventures made public on the Persil website, in Woman's Day articles, and on the Persil NZ Facebook page. We also collected qualitative data using focus groups, interviews, and social media analysis to present a comprehensive picture of the experiences of each family.

We hope that this summary report will help other parents to see how they might be able to enhance play opportunities for their children. If we can encourage enough kiwi parents to modify their thinking around play, risk, and the outdoors, we may be able to realise a paradigm shift that will lead to happier families, well-rounded children, and more connected communities. The information gathered from Real Play Families may also be useful for local agencies in the design of recreational equipment and development of play spaces that promote real play. Furthermore, the outcomes of this project will be used to develop resources to support children and families to choose activities that are less sedentary and encourage more unstructured real play behaviour.



## Designing the Real Play Families experiment

### Recruitment of the Real Play Families

The first step in this project was the identification and recruitment of three typical kiwi families. A recruitment advertisement sent out to four Auckland primary schools resulted in responses from eight families, all expressing a keen interest in participating in the project. It was important for the timing and delivery of the experiment that children were able to spend some time at home in the school holidays, and that they did not attend school holiday programmes more than 1-2 days a week. The three families selected all had 'stay-at-home' mums and coincidentally all resided in the Waitakere region of Auckland. Full descriptions of the families can be found later in the report.

### Focus groups

Focus groups were held with the Real Play Families both before and after the social experiment. Parent and children focus groups were conducted separately to give parents a chance to speak without being interrupted and to allow children to speak freely about their parents. Two 30-minute focus group interviews were held with the nine children from ages 5-11 years old, one before the experiment and one after. Parent focus groups were conducted concurrently (but separately) with the children's groups, with all five parents from the participating families contributing to both groups. The initial, pre-experiment focus group was around 30 minutes. The second, post-experiment group was considerably lengthier, lasting around 60 minutes in total. In the first focus groups we were interested in exploring parents' and children's initial feelings about real play and risk, and the perceived pressures they faced when it came to what is or isn't allowed.





## Parent workshop and the #RealPlay Challenge

The first stage of the intervention involved conducting a workshop for parents that explained the definition of real play, the benefits for children (and parents), and provided a demonstration of the types of activities they might engage in over the experimental period. Parents were also shown a trailer for 'The Land' documentary, which provided another example of just how far others are taking the real play concept.



**The advice parents were given was based on five major points.**

1. Provide permission
  - a. Make the decision to make real play a family priority
  - b. Balance the risks of play with the potential benefits
  - c. Lead by example
2. Develop a plan
  - a. Make a list of all the ways in which your children can be involved in real play
  - b. Plan out each week (with contingencies)
3. Get the right gear
  - a. Check you have rain gear and gumboots for everyone
  - b. Think about places you could ask for loose parts from (building sites, trade shops etc)
4. Do it!
  - a. Think outside the square
  - b. Be prepared to change your plans
  - c. Don't worry about other parents
5. Communicate
  - a. Make sure your friends and family know what you are doing

At the end of the workshop, the parents were presented with the main focus of the experiment: the #RealPlay Challenge. Each of the Real Play Families was tasked with posting at least 10 pictures or videos on social media (i.e., Facebook, Twitter) of their children engaging in different real play activities, with each post occurring on a different day. Parents were asked to use the hashtag #RealPlay wherever possible to encourage the trend among their friends and followers. Each family was given an iPod Touch to allow them to easily take and post photos and videos. While we recognise the irony of using screen-based media to promote essentially outdoor activities, it is clear that social media has become a driving force for social change in the Western world; the purpose of the #RealPlay Challenge was to harness this tool to spread the word and encourage others to accept real play as essential for raising a well-balanced child.

## Children's workshop

While the parents were participating in their workshop, the children were taken into an area of bush by a team of AUT staff, students, and an outdoor education instructor from the Birkenhead Leisure Centre. Once there they were encouraged to creatively engage with the natural environment; however, very little structured instruction was given. Areas utilised included intense bush, steep bush tracks, a shallow muddy stream with sheer banks on either side, and open scrubby areas. Interestingly, children were initially hesitant to start playing. Typically children waited for instruction or permission to engage with the environment and commence playing. Under the guidance of the instructors, however, the children gradually began to interact with each other and elements available to them (e.g., branches, fallen trees, mud). Appropriate loose parts (e.g., rope, wooden poles) were introduced to allow the children to experiment and expand their activities they engaged in. As the afternoon progressed, children began to initiate activities, including climbing banks around the stream, climbing trees, and building huts.

## Parent introduction to children's activities

Following their workshop, parents re-joined their children and were introduced to the types of real play activities that they had engaged in over the period of the workshop.

Parents were encouraged to observe for a period of time to allow children to continue their play un-interrupted, and to note the children's behaviour and chosen activities. Subsequently parents were asked to join their children and to talk to them about what they were doing, why they had chosen these activities, and how they could adapt this way of playing into their home environment.

Throughout the afternoon, the Persil media team filmed all elements of the workshop and play activities. Camera personnel were careful to not influence children's activities, allowing children to engage in play in a manner that was unimpeded by attending adults.





## Getting to know the Real Play Families

### The Harris/Stenersen family



The Harris/Stenersen family are a large and blended family. Meg and Martin have six very special and active children between them: Nate (11), Ava (8), Kyra (11), Holly (9), Oliver (2) and Alex (6 months). Meg is a very busy Mum, whose motivation to be involved in the Real Play Family intervention stemmed from her desire to allow all her family to be active. However, with six children ranging in age from 6 months to 11 years, this was becoming more and more difficult. Furthermore, with two of the six children under five, the older children spend a lot of time at home. Meg and Martin were interested in learning more about supporting their older children to play independently and safely, outdoors around the family home. A major obstacle for Meg was getting out and about with the older children while also looking after the baby, Alex. The Real Play Family intervention allowed her to let go and encourage the children to create and explore both at home and in the local environment.





## The Moir family



The Moir family is another busy and very close family who already enjoyed time outdoors together. Kirsty, Ben and their four children – Chloe (16), Emily (7), Lennox (5), and Camille (15 months) – have a busy and active lifestyle. Chloe is in high school and a member of the Service Academy. Emily and Lennox play netball and rugby league, respectively. Ben and Kirsty both coach and manage sports teams and are involved in their own sporting pursuits. Camille enjoys following and learning from her older siblings. Kirsty wanted to learn more about letting her children make their own decisions around their play activities, while still knowing they were safe. Emily and Lennox attend Swanson Primary, a school committed to allowing pupils play in a manner that promotes a level of risk and independence. The Moir family was keen to incorporate these concepts into their family activities.





## The Lealiiee family



The Lealiiee family is made up of Mum (Hannah) and three lovely children Jennayah (8), Derrion (5), and Elizapeta (2). Hannah's motivation for participating in the intervention was to help her discover activities that were appropriate for her three active children, who all had very different interests. Jennayah loves art and craft, while Derrion always likes to be active and on the move. Elizapeta just wants to keep up with her older siblings and provides an added dimension to the way this family plays! Hannah had two major obstacles in engaging in real play: allowing her kids to go outside to get dirty and allowing them to have fun playing outdoors without her supervision. Hannah admitted that she was a hyper-parent who bubble wrapped her children.



## Real Play Families discuss what play means to them

### Parent's initial perspectives about real play

A short 30-minute focus group interview was held with the five parents involved in Real Play Families. We were interested in exploring parents' initial feelings about real play right at the onset of this project, and in hearing about some of the challenges they faced in encouraging their families to be more physically active. Research to date has tended to focus on the influence of the built environment on physical activity, but for these parents it was more about the loss of a neighbourhood where people looked out for each other which had greater influence. There was a perception that today it is not safe to roam and play.

#### We have lost our sense of community

All parents expressed how much more freedom to be outdoors and play they had when they were kids:

- *"For me yes [more free play], more than I give my kids now. Like a lot lot more."*
- *"My childhood was lots of rough and tumble games when I was a kid and playing cricket out in the front yard with a tennis ball, playing bull-rush."*
- *"We were all out playing."*

They were also allowed to roam further:

- *"It was like a different time as well because I can remember being free to just yell up to mum and dad I'm just going to such and such's place over the road and we'd just go."*
- *"We would go to the park, it was a long way away. So there was no way mum could hear or see what we were doing, we had complete freedom."*

When the interviewer asked: Would you let your children have that freedom?

- *"No, no, not at all."*
- *"Definitely not."*

A key reason for not allowing their children the same freedom they had experienced in their own childhood was closely related to this lost sense of community. Parents felt it was safer when they were kids, no matter if you lived in the city or the country; if you wandered up the street, everybody knew everybody else and people looked out for each other:

- *"I knew all the kids in the neighbourhood you know, your sort of muck around and hang out and look out for each other."*

It was apparent that it wasn't just the kids that knew each other, it was the adults as well. There was a perception that it was safer back then, people knew each other and looked out for each other:

- *"How many of us are friends with our neighbours? I used to walk to school as a kid and it was quite a walk, and I had to cross a few roads and one of them was a busy one, but along the way there was about twenty different houses."*
- *"My mum knew if I ever got in trouble there were all these people along the way that would either see me or I could go to or anything and I was fine. I mean now we live on a busy street as well [...] but I wouldn't let my kids ride their bike on the footpath on our road."*



The suggestion by parents of the understanding and value of community, while not unexpected, was interesting to us. It was very apparent that the parents have a perception that our neighbourhoods are no longer a safe place for children to roam and play freely.

### Electronic devices as babysitters

Another key theme to emerge was the strong influence that technology has on people's lives. There was a feeling that life was more relaxed at home in their own childhood. Parents today appear to be much busier with added pressure on both parents to work and continue their careers. The use of computers, TV or other electronic devices is perceived to almost be a "babysitter":

- *"It's giving the parent a bit of rest sometimes. They can just run riot otherwise. A long day at work or a busy day at home even with a toddler, and then the kids come home and it's like what are we going to do, are we going to go out and go for a play or am I going to give the kids the iPad so I can have five minutes to get dinner on in peace."*
- *"It's taking the child minding job off the parents whilst the parents can be doing stuff that needs to be done."*

While parents had developed strategies to limit time spent using technology/devices, all acknowledged just how hard it can be to manage and agree on appropriate time allowed on devices. All understood the downside of not limiting time allowed on devices; however, it was apparent that when they were busy they did what they had to do to get by:

- *"You know like five minutes turns into half an hour turns in an hour, and all of a sudden the kids been on it for an hour and you said five minutes."*
- *"I'm not really sure why I've been letting them watch lots of stuff, and they're so cranky all of the time, behaviourally."*

### What would you like to do differently as a parent to encourage more real play?

Parents found this question difficult to answer. All parents wanted their children to be more active and know the benefits of giving them more freedom. Responses to this question will resonate with many parents:

- *"I suppose give them a bit more freedom, to roam a bit more, that would be the ultimate but whether you would let them go and go down the road and stuff like that."*
- *"[Just to trust them] secretly you know they'll be fine. My thing is; will a car back out of drive way and knock them over. But things like that, especially you know 5 o'clock when it's really, really busy but they want to shoot down the road, to be able to go - okay watch for cars, see you in ten minutes."*
- *"Get outdoors, right now we are always indoors no matter what, sun, rain, shine, we are always indoors."*
- *"To lead by example, because my kids see me, sitting and watching TV or sitting on my laptop, they don't see me outside playing so they don't think to do it."*
- *"Go for it!"*

Parents discussed a wide range of issues relating to their perception of and decisions around allowing their children to engage in real play. However, the dominant themes that consistently emerged related to a sense that New Zealand society has changed and we have lost that sense of community. Furthermore that the use of technology – something all modern-day parents can probably relate to – has impacted both our children’s play behaviours and the way we interact with our children.

### Children’s initial perspectives about real play

Two short 30-minute focus group interviews were held with the nine children from ages 5-11 years old (Kyra, Holly, Nate, Ava, Oliver, Jennaya/Champa, Darien, Lennox and Emily) involved in Real Play Families. We were interested in exploring these children’s initial feelings and experiences with play at the onset of the project and again at the end of the project.

The children talked about their experience of play, the sort of things they did, the places they played and decision making with regard to how they played. The dominant themes that consistently emerged related to socialising with their peers, having fun and having to be safe.

#### What is play?

Findings from previous studies indicate that children are motivated to play, and be active because it is fun, and that they enjoy playing with their friends. As children grow older they also recognise the health benefits of being active. Children from the Real Play Families however, were still predominantly focussed on the ‘fun’ and ‘friends’ aspects of play. When asked what they enjoyed about playing, children said play was about having fun:

- ***“Well, it is like where you have fun with other people.”***
- ***“About having fun.”***
- ***“Play league and play football.”***

#### Play experiences

Interestingly, the children appeared to relate play to both being physically active and outdoors. When asked the types of activities they engage in when playing, there was little discussion around indoor and or more sedentary games. Predominantly activities mentioned were physical and traditionally engaged in outdoors:

- ***“I run around and play and do all sorts of stuff.”***
- ***“I just get my brother and my sister and we just start to play whatever we want to play.”***
- ***“I play in the backyard, in the playground and I play on the field.”***
- ***“Out west, we play hide and seek but we don’t play the ball stuff.”***
- ***“We usually play hide and seek inside.”***
- ***“Spinning round and round on the tyre swing.”***

It became apparent that children value both a safe supportive physical and emotional environment. When asked what they were worried about when they played, children indicated they were concerned about injuring or hurting themselves:

- ***“Like falling and hurting ourselves.”***
- ***“Injuries.”***
- ***“I was climbing a tree and then the branch started to break and then it broke and I fell.”***

Children appear to feel safer when playing with siblings and friends. When asked if they had done anything scary when they have been playing, responses indicated that they children often feel uncomfortable playing with people they are unfamiliar with. Furthermore, being with friends and siblings can contribute to a feeling of security in some children:

- ***“Just when me and my brother, when we play with different peoples.”***
- ***“I just go with my brother to make him happy.”***

While children indicate injury as a key concern when playing, parental concerns are underpinned by the sense of a less supportive community than they enjoyed in their own childhood. Children had a clear understanding of both what they were allowed, and not allowed to do in the play space. Interestingly, activities that children knew were not permitted outnumbered those they were allowed to do. When asked what they are allowed to do and not allowed to do, responses reflected concerns common to both children and their parents.

ALLOWED TO DO	NOT ALLOWED TO DO
Play hide and seek and tag	No cheating
We can jump off a tree house and on to a tramp	Not allowed to go out
	Not allowed to go anywhere else unless our parents know where we are
	Jump out of the window
	Jump out of a high window said Mummy and Daddy

Children’s perceptions around why they were not allowed to engage in certain activities, not surprisingly included an element of parent’s concern for their safety. When asked why they were not allowed to do some of the things above, they responded with:

- ***“Adults don’t want us to do that, because they want us to be safe.”***
- ***“So we don’t get hurt.”***
- ***“Parents watching over you.”***



In addition, children expressed that they thought that their parents would have been told the same things by their parents too:

- ***“Mum just told me this story back when she was a teenager. They were all nice to each other.”***

Finally, when asked if parents would have played the same type of things that they did, they said:

- ***“No, because we have got technology – computers, tablets and ipads and...”***

#### Favourite play experiences

In contrast to responses around what children recognise as play experiences, when questioned about their favourite play activities, children were more likely to recognise indoor and sedentary games. There were a variety of indoor and outdoor favourite activities discussed:

- ***“Dress ups.”***
- ***“Rock climbing.”***
- ***“Playing with dinosaurs.”***
- ***“Duck, duck, goose” (a chasing game).***
- ***“Staying inside and make craft and stuff.”***
- ***“Tag.”***

Previous focus group discussion had indicated that most of the children prefer to play with others. This social aspect of playing with family and friends was not unexpected.

Responses depended on the type of games children were engaging in, and not surprisingly children referred to friends and siblings as preferred playmates. When asked who the children play with responses included:

- ***“Playing with brothers and sisters.”***
- ***“More than 2.”***
- ***“Friends people, you need a tagger.”***

The initial focus group highlighted some key but not unexpected insights into the children’s perceptions, barriers, and motivators of play. These included the importance of playing with friends and concerns around being hurt or injured. It appears that children recognise play as physical and predominantly based outdoors.

## Real Play Families undertake the #RealPlay Challenge

### The Harris family have their best holidays ever

Meg, Martin, and the children took on the #RealPlay Challenge right from Day 1. They used the Real Play Families experiment as a motivator to make the most out of the holidays and plan active, outdoor adventures almost every day. Here are the types of activities that the family engaged in over the intervention period:

- We went to a playground that has a huge bush area behind it. There weren't paths through so the kids took turns at guiding us through the bush. We went through shrubs, over fallen trees, under old fences and hopped across stones.
- We went to the local refuse centre and tyre shop and got a bunch of tyres and wood and let the kids build their own fun in the backyard. We had a playground, obstacle course, tyre worm, circus and water slide created among many other things and best of all it was all free.
- We did messy experiments at home. I let go of control and let the kids do everything by themselves.
- We went to Whatipu and the kids explored the caves, walked through waterways and played in mud.



- *"We had a lot less screen time and we got outside at home a lot more."*
- *"We dug in the garden and generally made a mess."*
- *"The kids say it was the best holiday they ever had."*



Meg noticed that over the intervention the family spent a lot less time on screen and devices. The children have assured their parents that the last school holidays were the best they have ever had!



### The Moir family explore their neighbourhood

The Moir family also took the #RealPlay challenge head on. They spent a greater amount of time outdoors and gave their children more freedom to play independently and resolve conflicts themselves – they even noticed how the children’s behaviour improved! Here are examples of the types of activities that the Moir family engaged in over the Real Play intervention period:

- A favourite activity for the kids was creating the secret garden. They loved making this! Using an old plastic tablecloth for shade, they hid away in the garden making their Secret Garden. They used old toy animals, dug and made tracks through the dirt. They found stones, sticks and leaves to decorate their garden. The next day they packed it all up and moved it to the tree hut! This was an activity that used their imagination, got them dirty and used independent exploration.
- I took them to a BMX track where they took risks, they got dirty, they fell, they climbed, they rode out of our sight they played with all the junk.
- They rode to the shops bought lollies by themselves for the first time.
- We walked/scootered to Swanson Oaks Track in Swanson – I let kids run ahead up the track and down the bank to play by the stream.
- ‘Loved’ the beach, climbing through the bush and down the bank to the water. Other kids watched and soon Lennox and Emily had a couple of new friends.
- When we were playing on the flying fox at Waikowai Park, when there were no parents there to help the smaller kids on, the older kids did it on their own. When parents arrived I actually think the kids weren’t as social and all became a bit shy, a shame parents had to intervene at all.



- *"We spent \$0 on holiday entertainment no movies and most of the time took packed lunch."*
- *"If you find yourself interfering walk away and come back in five minutes to see what they've done, its quite surprising how little they need our help."*
- *"Happier to go on normal outings because rules were relaxed."*
- *"When there were no parents there to help the smaller kids on, the older kids did it, when parents arrived I actually think the kids weren't as social with each other."*
- *"Normally I wouldn't let them roam off through the flax where I couldn't see them, they loved this and were excited to tell their Dad when he got home."*

Throughout the intervention, Kirsty and Ben found that the less hands on they were the more independent the children became. The children are initiating their own play ideas and inventing some fantastic activities around the home and local environment. They noticed that the children were quite capable of managing their own interactions, including resolving conflicts. This meant Kirsty could spend less time overseeing the kids and more time getting her own jobs done!

## The Lealiie family enjoy getting dirty

Before Real Play Families, Hannah said she was constantly watching out for her children, making sure they didn't get their clothes dirty or do anything too dangerous. The main change she noticed during the experiment was her outlook on parenting: now she has taught herself to allow her children the freedom to play in the dirt and mud, and to learn from their own mistakes. She has had lots of support from her friends and families, but she was also challenged by others in her community about her new parenting style.



Thankfully, she had the confidence to keep going and she knows that her children are better for it. Here are some examples of what Hannah and her kids got up to:

- We went to Moire Park and climbed trees.
- Bush walking along the Manutewhau Stream.
- Lots and lots of unsupervised park play.
- Home baking, playing with just flour and water, building and painting.
- Mission bay beach, west wave pools.
- Frolicking in the freshly cut lawn.
- Playing in stream water.





- *“For the first time I allowed Derrion into main pool and not having me in the pool with him.”*
- *“I have had argument with people because I have allowed my kids free real play.”*
- *“People think it is dangerous for my kids when they get wet or cold.”*
- *“I am so passionate about real play now.”*

While Hannah has encountered hostility from some people, she is determined to continue letting her children play independently, embracing the ‘Real Play’ concept. Hannah now allows her children to make their own choices on how or what they would like to play by allowing them the choice of what they would like to do for fun. It saves arguments from all sides and it allows the children to be creative and to use their imagination. Recently Hannah received some negative comments from those observing her children playing in the local park, suggesting that perhaps Hannah was negligent in her mothering skills. Allowing her children to get dirty and wet, to climb trees, run, and interact freely with the environment created a perception from onlookers that the children would very likely get sick or injured. Interestingly one onlooker threatened to call Child Youth and Family Service (CYFS)! Hannah used this as an opportunity to explain the theory behind Real Play and has not allowed this to deter her resolve to continue allowing her children to play this way. While her children’s safety is still her number one priority, Hannah believes that by allowing them to have fun on their own, they are learning how to manage their own risk and are becoming strong and independent children.



## Following up with the Real Play Families

### Parent perspectives about Real Play Families

A follow-up focus group was held with the parents at the end of the Real Play Families project. When we had previously interviewed these parents at the onset of the project, the main themes to emerge related to a **sense of lost community** and how that impacted upon their willingness to allow their children freedom to play outside; **the impact of technology** on family life and physical activity in general - “the iPad as a babysitter”; and at the end of that focus group, the parents had all also expressed a strong desire to be more relaxed, to allow their children more freedom, to be **role models** and for one “to lead by example, because my kids see me sitting and watching TV or sitting on my laptop, they don’t see me outside playing so they don’t think to do it.”

The aim of the follow-up focus group was to explore their subsequent thinking in relation to these earlier themes, then to discuss the impact of participating in the project, and finally to follow up on their stated desire to lead by example and “get out there” themselves. However, from our perspective there was a clear shift in the way the parents talked about issues now as opposed to the way they spoke at the start of the project. In the first focus group, the main themes to emerge seemed to relate to factors perceived to be outside of their control, which prohibited them from being more active and adventurous. Significantly, the group now acknowledged that they had the ability to bring about change themselves and subsequently new themes now emerged that related to:

1. **A sense of empowerment;**
2. **Being more relaxed parents and the associated benefits;**
3. **Maintaining these lifestyle changes.**

#### A sense of empowerment

The group still agreed that as a society we have lost a sense of a safe, supportive community environment, but the discussion in the first focus group meeting had encouraged some to reflect and look inwards at how they themselves could actively contribute to rebuilding that community-feel in their own neighbourhoods:

- ***“I suppose it comes down to changing and that really comes down to me to an extent, you know thinking about that, if we have this perceived loss of that community then the onus is on us to go out and create it.”***
- ***“And get it back, so yeah, I was thinking about that after the initial interview. I guess I am partly to blame for that at the end of the day.”***

The language used now was very different to the way they spoke in the first focus group. The way that some of these parents now talked seemed to reflect a desire to initiate change and we felt that this indicated a feeling of empowerment on their part - that they were actually able to do something themselves to bring about change:

- ***“But I think the kids, because I let them go and play on the street now, I think that will initiate some more of a community, I am sure people will see - oh there are kids out playing on the street, maybe we should let our kids go out on the street - that might start something.”***





### The benefits of relaxed parenting

Taking part in this project had prompted the parents to come out of their comfort zone, take risks in their parenting by allowing their kids to try things they would normally have forbidden. The benefits of this for the children were immediately apparent to see:

- *“Seeing [my son’s] confidence has been amazing because there has been so many times that I cringed and wanted to do something but stopped myself, like when I see him climbing up a tree, that’s like this, he’s little and I’m just like - no just let him - so his confidence in his abilities is just blooming.”*

One advantage of the timing of this project was that it coincided with the school holidays and the families were able to maximise their time together. The benefits of being more relaxed in their parenting were not only that the children’s confidence increased, they were developing broader social skills, for many parents and children their relationships improved and for many it was the best holiday they had ever had, and the cheapest!

- *“I feel like I have bonded with my kids again.”*
- *“For starters the kids mentioned more than once that it was the best holidays they have ever had, Which made me think about the previous ones where I have been - oh we don’t have enough money to go out and do anything so we will just stay home. I did not even think about what we could do free, which was one of our focuses which was how much fun we could have without really spending any money....and the discussions with my children that yeah... I thought I knew my kids really well but when we go out walking and they talk about why are we going this way and why are we going to do this and where are we going next and yeah I found out how great a leader my son is and... it was just really cool.”*
- *“I have become not so stressed anymore, and not so uptight, like you know now I can just sit back and [as long as] I can see them and if I don’t see them I’ll just call out and I can hear their voices or something. It is not so bubble wrapped anymore, and I love that cause now I can just sit back and relax and they are doing whatever. Where that.. you know.. my daughter was calling me from this bird-cage thingy and I was like ohhhhhhh I was like.. I will look somewhere else, but she was fine and that’s the thing, now they are so much happier for getting out there and getting to play whatever they want without having to ask the permission - can I go outside? Can I do this? Can I do that? Now it’s just, once we have gone to the park, they are just gone, they have just left us. So yeah it’s been really good, it’s been great holidays, it’s been my best school holidays so far with my kids, it’s been fun, you know I’ve loved it...every single day.”*

One of the challenges of being a modern-day parent is living up to society’s expectations of what it is to be a ‘good parent’. There are social norms that influence how we parent and what we allow our children to do. The parents in this project were really brave, not only in being more relaxed in their parenting style and allowing their children to take risks, to roam further, but also by taking a stance in allowing their kids to have some freedom:

- *“We went to the scooter park, and instead of how I would usually walk around the track and just follow them especially the younger boy, I stayed in the middle and he just rode his bike around and I just watched and that was hard, but then my older boy he is like “I’m going off - I will see you later” I was like... ok and he went off into the bush. I had no idea where he was but you know he came back 20 minutes later all excited about all that he had found like he had found some other boys that had taken him in and they were gathering some supplies and putting them into this like cache that they had made, and they had done all of this and all of this experience that he wouldn’t have had before.. because I would have to have him near me or at least within range of sight.”*



It has been suggested that we have become a 'risk averse' society, with concerns being expressed by academics and others that if our kids aren't able to take risks when they are young, they will start taking them when they are older, with potentially serious consequences. Allowing your children to engage in 'real play' is not without risk:

- *"We had an injury on one of the days we went out, we went to North Head and we were sliding down the hills and my daughter hit a bump, came off, went rolling and hit her head on the path on the bottom and so I was like really worried you know about a head injury kind of thing, but umm she was fine but now I know next time to check that there are no paths around before I decide to slide down. But if I had just told her – "just make sure the path is safe before going" - I don't really know if she would have taken that in. But now she really knows and she isn't going to do it again - so yeah."*
- *"And that's what we were saying first day, you know it's learning experiences about assessing risks."*

The parents talked about how much happier their kids were in general. There was less focus on technology and more desire just to engage in 'real play':

- *"I am finding things easier and they are finding it easy to play with each other now. Before they didn't and they didn't do rough play cause sometimes one person would think rough play was actually a fight. So – haha - it ended up being a fight.. but now all three of them.. like my daughter has a bit of a bruise up here but that's because she got elbowed and normally I'm like – Don't do that! - but I just let them carry on and was laughing, you know they are enjoying each other much, much more than before and I love that and they do to."*
- *"I think they play reasonably well together, I think they spend a bit more time now doing that, one thing I think that has come out of it is we that we hear the words 'bored' a lot less. Because they realise they can actually find something to do without having to switch something on."*
- *"I got them to wash my car and they ... heard one of them saying that they got themselves chairs and climbed up and do it. I didn't do any of that, they did it themselves, Someone needed some help and they helped. I couldn't believe they were the same kids, they were being so nice to each other. So that's good. Big change yeah."*

### Maintaining these lifestyle changes

This was a relatively short-term project which coincided with the school holiday period which the families acknowledged. However, they had all experienced positive changes and seen significant benefits. Being part of a group with a common purpose had been a motivator for these families. They had engaged in workshops and seen videos about real play and been set challenges during the project. We were interested in finding out what would help them continue to encourage their kids to engage in 'real play' type activities in the long term. Facebook was seen as an ideal way to exchange ideas with other parents:

- *"Yeah so we were able to bounce ideas off each other and encourage each other and stuff so..."*
- *"It is always good to see that you are not alone."*

Some of the parents had also faced criticism from other parents or neighbours about letting their kids play outside and get dirty:

- *“I think also it’s not just having the space for the kids to play, but it’s making other parents understand that it’s ok, that it is safe. It’s almost like we have forgotten how we used to play. You know and it’s kind of a shame we don’t have an individual film reel for each of us or a video like those kids playing of us as kids and then us as an adult going well...you know... I got a couple of scars but I survived it. I’m a pretty well balanced member of society so my kids are doing this too and having the parents learn that this is what we used to do and it’s ok to do that again now, I think that’s a big challenge”.*

It is a big challenge but these parents are clearly committed to taking it on:

- *“I can remember once when we went to Moir Park and as we were getting out of the car they turned the sprinklers on in the field and my daughter goes - can I go run through the sprinklers? - And I went automatically to say no then I was like - yes.. and her face was like really??..off she went and yeah she was just so happy and had so much fun and it was something I would never have done before so I think the knowledge I have gotten from this means my attitude is going to change. So I don’t know how huge a change it’s going to be during the week day in day out. But there is definitely going to be... I’m more relaxed about letting them go off and do things and yeah I think there is going to be more opportunity for them from now on, I mean I have become quite passionate about it since doing this so I’m kind of an advocate now. Hahaha.”*
- *“I just want to maintain this too, cause I love the way it’s going, I am less stressed and the kids are much more happier. You know and I don’t want to have to go back to the way it was before. I’m quite passionate about this so I just want to keep it going, you know. It’s really great for all of us, every single one of us.”*

The experiences these families have shared show that through even small modifications to our approaches to parenting, allowing our kids to engage more in ‘real play’ can have significant social benefits. From our perspective, it has been a privilege to read and hear about these families’ powerful and often moving stories and it has inspired us to follow their lead with our own families.





## Children recall their experiences with real play

The Real Play children were encouraged to share their play experiences over the 4-week experiment in a follow-up focus group. They recalled a variety of different creative play experiences, such as imaginary games, playing with different equipment, playing with paint and mud, playing in different environments, and taking a few risks, often unsupervised. Children expressed that they were able to play more independently (even getting dirty). Furthermore it was apparent to the researchers that children had become more confident in both their play behaviours and in their communication. Children were able to share what they had learnt more effectively as a result of this.

### Play experiences

When children were asked whether there was anything new or different to how they played since the start of Real Play Families, a range of both indoor, outdoor, sedentary, and more active types of play were mentioned. Interestingly, activities included the use of tools and an element of risk had appeared in choice of activities. Using the outdoors also featured predominantly in the discussion. When asked whether they had been playing in a different way since our first meeting they said:

- *“Playing with tools and painting.”*
- *“[using a] Hammer and nails.”*
- *‘The not walking on the ground game – “We put wood on the tramp and just walked up it and I fell on my bum, and we put water on there and we slipped over [laughter].”*
- *“We were playing with the spade and then we threw them at each other.”*
- *“Arts and crafts outside.”*
- *“We went bashing in the woods, close to home. We walked there. We made a lake with water and rocks.”*
- *“We went on the ferry.”*
- *“Playing with cousins at the beach.”*
- *“At school, we walk around, we climb trees. We have a no-rules playground.”*
- *“We walked to the park.”*
- *‘I climbed to the top of a really tall tree.’*

When asked whether the children were still playing with electronic devices and sitting on the couch they responded:

- *“Mmm a little bit. Less. Because it’s been sunny and I wanted to get outside.”*



## Playing with others

It is apparent that for children, play constitutes having fun with their friends. As in the initial focus groups, children expressed that they enjoy playing with their family members and friends:

- ***“My friend/s.”***
- ***“My cousins.”***
- ***“I would like to play with Mum and Dad but they are usually really busy with the baby.”***

Throughout the focus group it became clear that the children’s play had included an element of risk over the intervention period. It also appeared from the children’s comments that parents had become more relaxed and less involved in the types of activities children engaged in. The children were eager to share information on both risky games and risks they had taken:

- ***“We went into the water [at the beach with cousins]. They pushed me into the water. Mum was just sitting down in the tent.”***
- ***“We sometimes take the no-rules when we go home.” When asked if Mum and Dad let you, she responded: “Umm only occasionally, not all the time.”***
- ***“We lit the fire. We put sticks in it and I tried to rub 2 sticks together.”***

Furthermore, children seemed to recognise the change in their parent’s attitude to their play activities. When asked if the children were allowed to do stuff or play by themselves now, all but one said yes:

- ***“I got to do a flip in the water, by myself. In the pool by myself. But I am not allowed past the line.”***
- ***“My mum gives me a phone and she calls me, just to see how I am, cos she used to always comes out just to see how I am and kinda guards me. But ever since we started the research she would just call.”***

While the concept of ‘getting dirty’ did not feature in the initial focus group, it had become apparent that for some parents, the thought of the children getting dirty was a barrier to allowing them to play freely outdoors. When children were asked about getting dirty while playing, they did not appear to be concerned, and believe their parents were not worried about getting dirty either. The only barrier to being dirty was the need to sit on the lino at school if clothes had become dirty during interval and lunchtime at school:

- ***“Not at school otherwise you have to sit on the lino at school.”***
- ***“Mum is fine about that.”***
- ***“Yeah its ok when we get dirty.”***
- ***“On the weekend we go really muddy. I smashed my head in the mud at the park.”***

## Learning from playing

Learning expressed by children over the experiment was predominantly around the benefits of unrestricted play. It was evident that they had enjoyed more independence in their play and recreation, and that their parents had both relaxed the rules and their own involvement

in children's activities. When asked what they have learnt over the last four weeks, children's responses included a range of interesting concepts, including getting dirty, exploring fun places and games to play, and an understanding of the types of play that are best for children:

- *"No limits for playing."*
- *"You can play anywhere you want and no one can boss you around when you are playing your own game."*
- *"That I actually like playing in the mud. When I started jumping into the mud I stated to like it because I found it was actually really fun."*
- *"Feeling nice, because we don't have to stay inside and I go outside. I don't have to like, say make sure you have to do this, you can't get things wet, like you can't get dirty."*
- *"We made a trap with the sticks when we were going in the bush walk with my sister."*
- *"I like to clean everything when I am sad. It cheers me up."*
- *'Play is fun.'*
- *"Like cos after I do all of my work I go outside and she [Mum] comes to have a look and encourages me to do more."*
- *"I saw how a sausage gets cooked. We put it on a tray... and we put it on top of a tray and we got them off and we got the sausages off the fire..."*
- *"It's ok to get muddy and stuff."*

It was clear from the tone of the responses in the focus group that the children had very much enjoyed their increased freedom and outdoor adventures. As expected, children are naturally drawn to real play, and if given the opportunity will jump in with both feet. We were excited to hear all the fun experiences the children had during the last four weeks, and noted that all the children were eager for the real play approach to continue beyond the experiment.





## Real Play Families: What did we learn?

It is now well established that the types of activities involved in real play are essential for balanced and healthy kids. We also know that real play is no longer as common as it used to be, replaced by structured, over-supervised, risk-free activities or electronic devices. Real Play Families was developed to gain insight into the barriers and motivators for real play in kiwi families, and to observe the challenges they faced as they tried to increase real play in their children's lives.

Initially parents highlighted that a 'lost sense of community' has created concerns around the safety of letting children roam in the neighbourhood. Furthermore, as a result of busy lifestyles, devices such as tablets and television have been elevated to 'babysitting' status. It was apparent at the outset that families understood the importance of real play. Clearly, however, they were unsure of both the parameters and balance between allowing children to play independently and the perceived risks involved in this form of play.

Real Play Families provided the parents with expert advice and motivation to undertake a movement towards real play. At the start of the experiment, we were unsure if the changes would be successful given the social and practical pressures faced by today's parents. What we observed well exceeded our expectations. All three families, including all five parents, fully committed to the philosophies of real play and were prolific in sharing their experiences with us. As we followed their adventures on social media, we were inspired at the passion and confidence shown by the families. We noted multiple comments from friends and followers, some of which were replicating the challenge in their own families.

Perhaps the most rewarding part of Real Play Families for us was the discussion in the follow-up focus groups. Hearing first hand the impact the changes have had on family fun and togetherness was extremely moving. It also reinforced the importance of continuing to promote real play in all kiwi families. Interestingly, parents reported that when they were less involved in activities, children both supported each other and were more likely to engage and include other children in their games. Notable observations of parents during Real Play Families included:

- ***Real play doesn't cost a lot.***
- ***Real play means allowing your kids to 'just play'.***
- ***Getting dirty is okay.***
- ***Real play means a 'hands off' approach to letting kids play.***
- ***Activities that were previously 'boring' became fun when the rules were relaxed or removed.***

Our key learning from Real Play Families is that real play can be a part of kiwi kids lives, even in today's fast-paced and technologically-driven lifestyle. Not only that, the benefits of enhancing real play for children's development and family cohesion are clear. Real Play Families has shown that engaging in real play is not only possible, but that it should once again be a cornerstone of family life in NZ. We hope that the findings in this report resonate as much with the reader as they have with us.

**As a nation, we need to reconsider how we are raising our children. A return to real play is essential if we are to allow all kiwi kids reach their full potential.**

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A photograph of two children playing in a sandpit. One child, wearing a white and red vest over a blue long-sleeved shirt and blue pants, is crouching on the left side of the frame, digging in the sand. The other child, wearing a blue and black plaid shirt and blue jeans, is crouching on the right side, also digging. The sand is dark and appears to be a mix of sand and small stones. In the background, there are some dry, tangled branches and some green foliage.

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