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Children's out-of-home leisure activities: changes during the last decade in Norway

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ABSTRACT

This study, based on two nationally representative samples of children aged 6–12 years and their parents from 2005 and 2013–2014, explores changes in children's play, through changes in participation in three different out-of-home leisure activities during the last decade in Norway as well as the interactions between these activities. The study finds that there has been an increase in the share of children who participate in organized leisure activities; that they start to participate at a younger age; and that the intensity of participation in organized leisure activities has increased. During the same period, there has been a decrease both in the extent of unsupervised play outdoors and in the degree to which children visit friends' houses. A key empirical finding is that there is a strong positive association between participation in organized leisure activities and, respectively, the extent of unsupervised outdoor play and visits to friends.

KEYWORDS

Children's leisure life; childhood; children's play; children's out-of-home activities; children's outdoor play; children's outdoor activities

1. Introduction

The nature of children's play has changed during the last four to five decades in Western countries (Valentine and McKendrick 1997; Karsten 2005; Skar and Krogh 2009; Holloway and Pimlott-Wilson 2014; Woolley and Griffin 2015). Knowledge on how children engage with the outdoor environment, which activities they engage in outside the four walls of their home, and how this changes over time, is significant for several fields of inquiry. Not only does it give insight into what childhood is and how it is perceived in different times and contexts, but such changes in children's leisure activities (outside of the kindergarten or school) and use of public space also informs our understanding of important cultural, technological and contextual changes in society (Frønes 1997). It is also important to know the extent of outdoor play from a health perspective, as it often involves more physical exercise than indoor play. Considering the increase in urbanization across the world, it is important to consider how children move about and use public spaces and to identify the factors that influence their engagement with these spaces. In addition, knowledge on children's participation in out-of-home activities helps in our understanding of social interaction and networks, and of integration and social inequality.

The primary purpose of this paper is to explore changes in the spatiotemporal characteristics of children's play during the last decade in Norway, through changes in children's out-of-home leisure activities. Out-of-home leisure activities are defined as all

kinds of play activities carried out outside school hours that also require physical movement in space. The paper distinguishes between three main out-of-home activities related to play: unsupervised outdoor play, adult-organized play and visits to a friend's house. The secondary purpose is to explore potential interactions between these different kinds of out-of-home activities. The study presented is based on two nationally representative surveys among children aged 6–12 years and their parents in Norway from 2005 and 2013–2014.

As compared to most other European countries, Norway has a relatively cold climate with clear seasonal distinctions. Despite this, there are fewer seasonal variances in leisure and sports activities than one might expect. Winter sports, especially skiing, are popular during the winter season and are important parts of the Norwegian culture. While skiing is often centered around the family (something 'everyone' does during the winter season), it is also the second largest organized sports activity among children, after football (Ingebrigtsen and Aspvik 2010). Organized outdoor activities are most commonly carried out all year round, but the training might take on a different form (e.g. roller skis during the warmer seasons) or be performed indoors (e.g. tennis). Football is also a year-round activity, but the training and matches often take place outdoors, even when the playing surfaces are covered in snow or ice and the temperatures are well below zero degrees Celsius. The large degree of outdoor activities during the winter season might indicate that Norwegian families and children view winter as an opportunity for 'real fun' (Ergler, Kearns, and Witten 2016) rather than as a constraint.

2. Previous research

The empirical research suggests that there have been some major changes in children's play since the 1960s and 1970s. Cross-generational, qualitative studies across Western countries have found that there has been a shift away from self-initiated outdoor play to adult supervised and organized play (Valentine and McKendrick 1997; Karsten 2005; Skar and Krogh 2009) in clubs and settings that are arranged either on a nonprofit or commercial basis. In general, one could say that children's play has become more 'institutionalized' (Holloway and Pimlott-Wilson 2014). This is especially the case when considering that an increasing share of children attend kindergarten. At the same time, their freedom to engage with the outdoor environment has been reduced. Not only do children play less in outdoor public spaces, but evidence from several countries also suggests that children's home range, defined as the distance children travel away from their home in course of their outdoor play, has been reduced (see e.g. Gaster 1991; Skar and Krogh 2009; Woolley and Griffin 2015). Adding to this, children's independent mobility has been reduced: Research from the UK and Germany shows that the percentage of children accompanied to school and leisure activities is increasing, even though the major part of this increase took place before 1990 (Shaw et al. 2013). In addition, studies from across the Western world (Bradshaw 2001; Mackett 2002; Mackett et al. 2005; Fyhri et al. 2011; Kytä et al. 2015) show an increase in the share of children being taken to school by car (with fewer children walking and cycling).

There are several factors that may have reduced the extent to which children play outdoors and are free to engage in the outdoor environment. It has been suggested that the increase in traffic and urbanization has reduced 'natural' areas for playing in the neighborhoods where children live and hence reduced their opportunities for autonomous outdoor play (see e.g. Gaster 1991; Aitken 1994; Karsten 2005; Little and Wyver 2008).

Others have suggested that parents are increasingly reluctant to leave their children unsupervised in public places (Hillman, Adams, and Whitelegg 1990; Cahill 1990; Valentine and McKendrick 1997), due to fear of traffic accidents, abduction by strangers ('stranger-danger') and fear of violent and unruly teenagers in public spaces (Valentine and McKendrick 1997). Furthermore, and not least, it is likely that the emergence of new technologies, as the Internet and electronic games (e.g. Nintendo DS and Sony PlayStation) encourages children to communicate and play indoors. The increase in indoor play is part of a general trend in recent decades, which has also been explained by changes in the socio-spatial conditions of play both outdoors and indoors (Karsten 2005). Karsten (2005) has pointed out that spending time outdoors was not necessarily a matter of choice of children in previous generations, and that bigger houses and apartments have now given children more freedom indoors.

Women's entry into the labor force in the 1970s is an important driver of the institutionalization of children's play. With both parents at work and no one at home to look after the children, there was a need for a change in the socio-spatial organization of the lives of families. However, during the last decades, there has also been a change in the ideology of 'parenthood'— the idea of 'intensive parenting' has become part of the dominant discourse, encouraging parents to focus their full attention on the needs of their children and to be constantly available to take care of these needs (see e.g. Hays 1996; Shaw 2008). Parents often perceive adult-organized activities as more 'meaningful' and better for the development of creativity in children as compared with playing in the street without any adult supervision (Jensen et al. 2004; Mattson 2002). In addition, leisure time is increasingly viewed as *learning time* during which children can acquire skills and competencies that can develop a child's uniqueness and enhance their competitive position later in life (Griffin 1993; Adler and Adler 1994; Lareau 2002; Jurczyk, Olk, and Zeiher 2004). As many parents become aware of the potential benefits of extracurricular activities, they will encourage their children to take part in such activities (Zinnecker 1995; Zeijl 2001; Lareau 2002; Fawcett, Garton, and Dandy 2009). Lareau (2002) has labeled this phenomenon 'concerted cultivation'. This has resulted in some children having a carefully thought-out and well-planned leisure career (Büchner 1995; Torrance and Du Bois-Reymond 1995) and to what Katz (2008) refers to as the 'overscheduled child'. Small-scale studies have suggested that those parents who stimulate their children to an active leisure life are willing to function as leisure providers and facilitators (Karsten 1995), not only by exempting children from household chores but also by acting as chauffeurs (Zeiher 2001).

In many cases, organized activities take place beyond the immediate neighborhood and participation requires transportation, usually by the parents (Tillberg 2001; Mattson 2002), and most often by car (Hjorthol and Fyhri 2009). Zeiher (2001) has claimed that children's lives can be characterized by 'insularisation', i.e. that their lives are institutionalized through daycare and school, and by transport from island to island of, for example, music or sports arrangements in a landscape made for adults. The same phenomenon has been labeled the 'Glasshouse childhood' (Kytä 2003), where children need the help of parents to become familiar with the environment.

In line with the ideology of intensive parenting, studies have observed a growing attention among parents to create time and space for the family as a whole through transportation and family outings, e.g. gathering the family around children's matches on the weekends or exploring the city together (Van der Burgt and Gustafson 2013; Karsten and Felder 2015). In their case study of one middle-class family's time-space

organization in the inner-city of Uppsala, Sweden, Van der Burgt and Gustafson (2013) found that a family can exercise agency within the spatiotemporal constraints of both outdoor play and institutionalized leisure activities. Karsten and Felder (2015) reached a similar conclusion in their study on family outings in Rotterdam and Amsterdam, in the Netherlands, but showed that families with higher education and income are more able to overcome spatial constraints in the outdoor environment of a city as compared with lower class families. The former were shown to have more knowledge (cultural resources) of the opportunities for family outings offered in the cities. However, research from the UK shows that in poorer neighborhoods, children often have a richer sense of place than children in higher income neighborhoods, a phenomenon labeled ‘paradoxical poverty’ (McKendrick 1997). The children’s richer sense of place in the poorer neighborhoods is explained by their having the opportunity to develop their own competencies in relation to the world around them, even though their environments were hazardous, congested and apparently lacking in the purpose-built facilities that were typical in the more well-off areas.

The increase in the chauffeuring of children as well as family outings point to another important trend concerning childhood – that parents and children spend more time together than ever before. Several studies based on time-use data have also confirmed that the time parents spend on childcare has increased in the USA, Britain and Canada since the 1960 (Fisher, McCulloch, and Gershuny 1999; Bianchi 2000; Sandberg and Hofferth 2001) and in Australia since the early 1990s (Craig, Powell, and Smyth 2014). Taken together, the trends outlined above can be perceived as part of the ‘modernity project’ where the emphasis is on developing the individual and cultivating distinctive qualities (Giddens 1991).

However, the opportunity to participate in organized leisure activities that are likely to have a positive effect on subsequent life outcomes are not equally available to all children. Several studies have shown that participation in organized leisure activities vary with social class and ethnic background. Children with an immigrant/minority background and/or in families with lower education/ income are less likely to participate in organized leisure activities as compared with children with a native/majority background and/or higher education/income (In the USA: Lareau 2002, 2003; Putnam 2015; In Norway: Hjorthol and Fyhri 2009; Normann 2011; Friberg 2005; Øia, Grødem, and Krangle 2006; In the Netherlands: Karsten 1998, 2005). Differences in participation between social classes, regardless of ethnicity, have been explained by differences in the financial resources required for participation (membership fees, equipment, trips, etc.) (Lareau 2002; Holloway and Pimlott-Wilson 2014) as well as differences in the cultural logic of parenting, that is, the extent to which parents deliberately foster children’s networks and skills through activities supervised and organized by adults (‘concerted cultivation’) (Lareau 2002). A more recent study from the UK suggests, however, that the parents across the class spectrum share the understanding that such activities are important for children’s future opportunities (Holloway and Pimlott-Wilson 2014), in addition to regarding them as fun, healthy and social in the moment. Ethnic background is often linked to social class, but Karsten (1998) has suggested that different ethnic groups may also have their own culture-specific ways of raising children. Moreover, research has also shown that participation increases with age and that boys, to a larger extent than girls, engage in organized leisure activities (Fyhri and Hjorthol 2006; Karsten 1998). The same pattern has been observed for outdoor play (Fyhri and Hjorthol 2006).

The present study will contribute to the literature in several ways. While the loss in children’s opportunities to engage with the outdoor environment without supervision has

received a great amount of attention among scholars these last decades, a small, but growing body of literature is now focusing on what has replaced this decrease in independent outdoor play and mobility (e.g. Karsten 2005; Van der Burgt and Gustafson 2013; Holloway and Pimlott-Wilson 2014; Karsten and Felder 2015). This study will add to this approach in exploring the extent to which unsupervised outdoor play has been replaced by other kinds of play during the last decade in Norway. Although there are several international studies showing a shift away from unsupervised outdoor activities to more supervised activities, they are small-scale studies, primarily based on qualitative data (oral stories, interviews, observations). They do not give insight into the extent of these changes. Moreover, even though the largest changes in children's play probably occurred prior to the new millennium, this study will explore whether change towards more supervised leisure activities and less unsupervised outdoor activities has continued into the new millennium among children in Norway. Finally, previous research, based on qualitative data, has suggested that children's decreased outdoor play reduces their freedom to expand social networks, particularly relationships within the neighborhood outside of the family circle (Karsten 2005; Spilsbury 2005). The present study seeks to explore this finding further, by exploring the links between participation in organized activities, engagement in unsupervised outdoor play and visits to friends' homes, based on quantitative data.

3. Methods and data

3.1. Data

The data in this paper is based on two surveys of children's activities and travel (named 'survey on children's activities' hereafter) from 2005 and 2013–2014. The samples in these surveys were drawn, respectively, from the Norwegian National Travel Surveys in 2005 (NTS 2005) and 2013–2014 (NTS 2013–2014). The NTS cover personal travel of all types, including short trips taken on a daily basis and longer journeys undertaken less frequently, as well as all modes of transport, including walking and cycling. The NTS is carried out every fourth year among respondents aged 13 years and older and constitutes a representative sample for the entire country (17,514 and 61,348 respondents in 2005 and 2013–2014, respectively, including regional samples). The interviews in the NTS data are conducted every day throughout the year.

Parents who were interviewed in the NTS 2005 and 2013–2014 with children in the age group 6–12 years, were invited to take part in the survey about children's activities. Quantitative data are rare in the field of children's geographies (Holt 2006), but they can represent an important addition to the field by providing claims about law-like regularities about children's behavior. The questionnaire was filled out by parents together with their children.

The two surveys on children's activities were carried out by mail in 2005 and by a web-based interface in 2013–2014. As both surveys on children's activities required written responses, it is expected that the responses will not vary systematically due to differences in format. In both years, the respondents (parents) were asked to answer the questionnaire in cooperation with their child. If they had more than one child in the age group 6–12 years, they were asked to answer for the one with the latest birthday. The questionnaire included questions about gender, age, housing situation, conditions for outdoor activities, the trip to school in relation to traffic, extent of outdoor play and

organized leisure activities as well as interaction with friends and travel to and from these activities

3.1.1. Samples in 2005 and 2013–2014

Table 1 shows the process of selection and response rate for the survey on children’s activities in, respectively, 2005 and 2013–2014.

The response rate is a little lower in 2013–2014 than in 2005, which is probably due to an increased likelihood of incomplete/wrong e-mail addresses as compared with post addresses, as well as a general decrease in response to surveys.

In 2005, an additional survey was carried out (with a sample from the whole country), using the same questionnaire, to secure a good basis for the analyses. A sample of 1000 people with children aged 6–12 years was drawn from an MMI panel (people who agreed to respond to surveys). MMI, now Ipsos MMI, is a Norwegian polling institute. The panel was composed so as to be approximately representative of the national population above the age of 18 years. This was also carried out as a postal survey. The response rate for this survey was 60%. The data from the two surveys on children’s activities in 2005 were merged.

Table 2 shows the distribution of central background variables for the respondents with children in the age groups 6–12 years in the NTS surveys (2005 and 2013–2014) and in the surveys on children’s activities (2005 and 2013–2014). The samples of the two surveys in 2005 are presented separately in Table 2.

Table 1. Selection and response rate for the survey in 2005 and in 2013–2014 (n and %).

	Number	Percentage of NTS	Response
Sample 2005			
A. Number of respondents in NTS 2005	17514		
B. Number of respondents with children in age group 6–12	4433	25 (of A)	
C. Number of parents positive to participate in the survey	2067		46 (of B)
D. Number of respondents after a reminder	1282		62 (of C)
			29 (of B)
Sample 2013–2014			
A. Number of respondents in NTS 2013–2014	61348	100	
B. Number with children in the age group 6–12 years	7875	13 (of A)	
C. Number of respondent positive to participate in the survey	4480		57 (of B)
D. Number of respondents after a reminder after	1463		33 (of C)
			19 (of B)

Table 2. Respondents in NTS 2005 and 2013–2014 and in the surveys on children’s activities 2005 (two samples) and 2013–2014 by gender, age, place of living, and education (%).

Variables/Samples	NTS 2005, have children	Survey on children’s activities	Survey on children’s activities	NTS 2013– 2014, have	Survey on children’s activities 2013–
Gender					
Man	49	44	48	49	43
Woman	51	56	52	51	57
Age					
18–34 years	24	20	18	10	8
35–44 years	40	60	60	59	60
45–54 years	20	19	20	28	29
55–66 years	13	1	2	3	2
67+	3	0	0	0	0
Place of living					
Oslo, Bergen, Trondheim, Stavanger	19	15	16	17	19
Surrounding municipalities to O/ B/T/S	18	20	16	23	23
Nest six cities	11	13	11	18	17
Smaller cities	20	21	21	30	29
Rest of the country	32	31	36	12	12
Education					
Elementary school	10	7	9	3	1
High school	44	42	41	26	19
University, lower grade	25	29	50 ^a	40	43
University, higher grade	21	23		31	36
Number	4433	1282	588	7875	1463
Weighted number		1212			1505

^aIncludes higher and lower university grade.

Note: Source of recruitment of respondents in parenthesis.

There are some more women in the surveys on children’s activities than in the NTS surveys, both in 2005 and 2013–2014. In 2005, there is also a stronger concentration in age in the survey on children’s activities, which can be related to some of the respondents in NTS potentially being older siblings and not parents of the children in the age group 6–12 years. The distribution of the other variables is rather similar. In general, the deviations between the NTS surveys and the surveys on children’s activities (recruited from NTS) both in 2005 and in 2013–2014 are so small that there is no need for weighting of the data, more than what has to be done (by geography) due to the additional regional samples in the NTS 2005 and 2013–2014. The additional survey from 2005 (MMI) was not weighted as this is expected to be representative. Based on the above reflections, we perceive that the surveys from 2005 (including the additional survey) and 2013–2014 are representative for the total population (6–12 years) and that the results are generalizable and comparable over time. Control tests show that there are no seasonal variations in response rate between the two surveys.

3.2. Indicators of out-of-home activity participation

The focus of this study is on three different types of out-of-home activities: (1) Organized leisure activities, (2) Unsupervised outdoor play, and (3) Visits to friends’ residences.

Organized leisure activities comprise activities after school hours organized and supervised by adults on a nonprofit or commercial basis.

When it comes to the *organized leisure activities*, the respondents were first asked if they participate in any of the following activities ('Do you participate in any of the following activities?'):

- Choir, band, music (in this study labeled 'music activities'),
- Sports, athletics, training (in this study labeled 'sports activities'),
- Youth center,
- Other organizations or clubs.

The set of organized activities covered in this study was meant to capture the most common types of organized leisure activities among children in Norway. The respondents could tick off a box for each activity they participate in. Those who did not tick off the box for a specific activity are considered in the analysis as nonparticipants in that activity.

Those who ticked the box for a specific activity got several follow-up questions, e.g. 'Can you report how many times you participate in this activity? Report number of times during a week'. Here, the respondents could fill in the number of times they participated in a given activity in the course of a week.

In order to measure the *general* degree of participation in organized leisure activities during a week and also to calculate the percentage of children that participated, and did not participate, in any activities during a week, the responses to number of times respondents participated in any of the four activities during a week were arranged into a scale. This scale was then transformed into a categorical variable with five categories: 'Never', 'Once a week', '2 times a week', '3 times a week' and '4 or more times a week'. This procedure was done for both the 2005 and the 2013–2014 datasets.

The extent to which children engaged in *unsupervised outdoor play* was measured by the question 'How often do you play/stay outdoors after school/daycare facilities without the presence of adults?', while the extent of *visits to friends* was measured by the question 'How often do you visit friends after school?'

4. Results

In the following section, I outline the results from the analyses of how children's out-of-home activities have changed during the last decade. In addition, this section will also report the results of potential interactions between participation in organized leisure activities, unsupervised outdoor play and visits to friends.

4.1. Changes in the share who are taking part in organized leisure activities

The general degree of participation in organized activities during a week (Once or more) has increased from 88% in 2005 to 92% in 2013–2014. The observed change is significant. Further analyses indicate that there has only been an increase in participation in sports activities (see [Figure 1](#)). Participation in different kinds of organized music activities, and in other organizations, has remained more or less stable, while visits to youth centers have decreased during the same period.

Together, these results suggest that it is the increase in sports activities that accounts for the overall change in participation in organized leisure activities among children.

Moreover, further analysis suggests that the observed change in overall participation in organized activities can primarily be explained by increased participation among the youngest children. While there has been a significant increase in participation among children age 6–7 years from 2005 to 2013–2014 (from 76% to 91%), the shares participating in organized activities among older children have remained stable in the same period.

There is no significant difference between girls and boys in participation in organized leisure activities in 2013–2014, except when it comes to music activities, where we see that a significantly ($p < .001$, two-sided test) larger share of girls participated as compared with boys (27% and 17%, respectively). No gender difference in participation in different types of organized leisure activities was found in 2005 either, except for participation in music activities (30% of girls and 17% of boys).

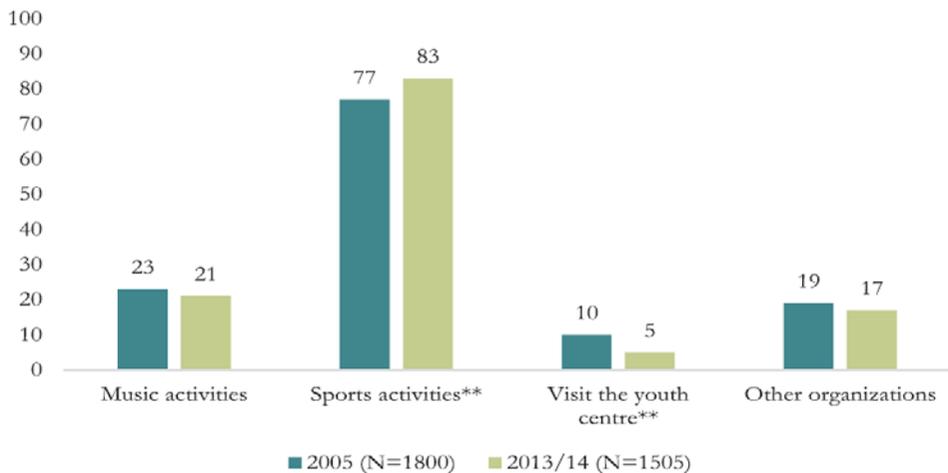


Figure 1. Share of respondents that participate in the four types of organized activities measured in 2005 and in 2013–2014 (%).

** $p < .001$ (two-sided test).

4.2. Changes in the intensity of participation in organized leisure activities

Among those who responded that they *do* participate in at least one activity, they reported more frequent participation in organized activities in 2013–2014 than in 2005 (from 2.4 activities per week per child in 2005 to 2.5 in 2013–2014), but the increase is small and not significant. When we look at the different types of organized activities, there is a small but still significant increase in the extent of participation in sports activities in the same period (see Table 3).

At the same time, there is a small, but significant decrease in the extent of participation in ‘other organizations’ during a week. The extent of participation per week has neither changed for music activities nor for visits to youth centers.

However, further analysis of the extent of participation in organized activities, in general, suggests that there is a significant increase in the intensity of participation among those who are 10–12 years old, but not in the other age groups, which explains the overall increase in the intensity among children (6–12 years) (see Figure 2).

While 53% of the children aged 10–12 years took part in organized leisure activities three or more times per week in 2005, this share increased to 66% in 2013–2014.

4.3. Changes in unsupervised outdoor play

Since 2005, there has been a significant decrease in the share of children who play outdoors every day without the presence of adults (see Table 4).

As shown in Table 4, the decrease in unsupervised outdoor play is independent of age and more or less independent of gender as well. Only for girls aged 6–7 years, was there no significant change in

Table 3. Intensity of participation (mean of times/participation during a week) among children (6–12 years) in 2005 and in 2013–2014, and change in mean during the same period.

	2005 (N = 1800)				2013–2014 (N = 1505)		
	Number (N)	Mean	St. deviation	Number (N)	Mean	St. deviation	Change in mean
Music activities	417	1.3	0.533	321	1.3	0.551	–
Sports activities	1393	1.9	1.934	1247	2.1	1.163	0.2**
Youth center	174	1.1	0.351	68	1.1	0.754	–
Other organizations	341	1.2	0.533	257	1.1	0.456	–0.1*

* $p < .001$; ** $p < .05$ (t -test).

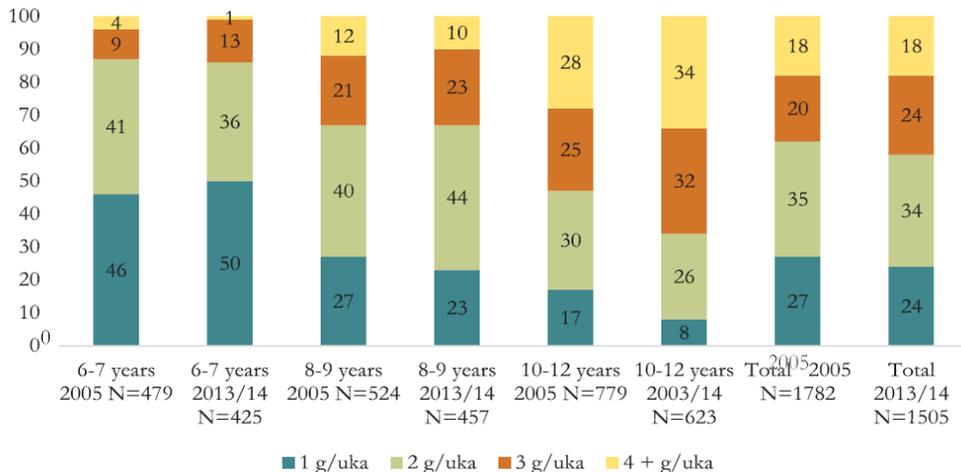


Figure 2. Share of children in different age groups and in general (total) that participate one time, two times, three times, four times or more per week in 2005 and in 2013–2014 (%).

the extent of outdoor play without the presence of adults from 2005 to 2013–2014. Boys and older children are more likely to play outdoors without adult supervision as compared respectively with girls and younger children both in 2005 and in 2013–2014.

4.4. Changes in the extent of visits to friends' homes

The extent to which children visit their friends also decreased from 2005 to 2013–2014 (see Table 5).

In 2005, 44% of the respondents reported that they visited their friends' homes four times a week or more often. This share decreased to 24% in 2013–2014. This decrease is more or less independent of age and gender.

There are no gender differences when it comes to the extent to which children visited their friends' homes, neither in 2005 nor in 2013–2014. However, older children are somewhat more likely to visit their friends' homes more often than the younger children, as shown in [Table 5](#).

4.5. Interaction between participation in organized leisure activities, engagement in unsupervised outdoor play and visits to friends' homes

In this section, I will explore the associations between participation in organized activities and, respectively, engagement in unsupervised outdoor play and visits to friends' homes.

Table 4. Share of children who play outdoors every day without adult supervision by gender, age and in total in 2005 and 2013–2014 (%).

	Girls	Girls 2013-14	Boys	Boys 2013-14	Total 2005	Total 2013-14
6-7 years	33	31	47	31**	41	31**
N	207	185	260	239	467	424
8-9 years	49	34**	59	48**	54	42**
N	262	197	259	259	521	456
10-12 years	53	34**	60	49**	57	42**
N	367	296	393	326	760	622
Total 6-12 years	47	33**	56	43**	51	39**
N	836	678	912	824	1748	1502

** $p < .001$ (two-sided test).
N: Number of respondents.

Table 5. Share of children who visits friends four times or more during a week without by gender, age and in total in 2005 and 2013-14 (%).

	Girls	Girls 2013-	Boys	Boys 2013-2014	Total 2005	Total 2013-2014
6-7 years	32	22*	42	17**	37	19**
N	205	186	260	240	465	426
8-9 years	44	30**	47	22**	46	26**
N	262	198	260	259	522	457
10-12 years	47	24**	47	29**	47	27**
N	371	295	391	327	762	622
Total 6-12 years	42	25**	46	23**	44	24**
N	838	278	911	328	1749	606

** $p < .001$; * $p < .05$ (two-sided test).
N: Number of respondents.

As for those who participated in organized activities, the more they took part in organized activities, the more they also played outdoors without adult supervision (see [Table 6](#)). The association is significant.

This result indicates that organized activities do not take time away from unsupervised play outdoors. One explanation for this might be that through organized activities, children expand their social network and hence have more children to play with during their unsupervised outdoor play. Another explanation might be that children spend time together outdoors before or after participating in the organized activities

(e.g. they might walk, cycle or use public transport together to and from an organized activity). A third explanation might be that because sports can often be carried out outdoors, children who participate in organized sport activities also engage in informal or unorganized sports activities with friends, after school hours, for the purposes of having fun or improving their skills.

However, **Table 6** also shows that those who never participate in organized activities also play outdoors more (4 times or more during a week) as compared with those who participate in an activity just one a week. One explanation for why those who participate in organized activities only once a week play/spend time outdoors to a lesser degree than those who never participate in organized activities, might be that they have a smaller network of friends to play with and/or that they have other preferences than outdoor play.

Table 6 also shows that there is a clear and significant association between degree of organized activities and visits to friends during a week: the more children participate in organized activities, the more they visit friends' homes during a week.

Table 6. Degree of engagement in unsupervised outdoor play and extent of visits to friends by degree of participation in organized activities during a week in 2013-2014 (%; N= 1506***).

	Participation in organized activities				
	Never	1/week	2/week	3/week	4+/week
Unsupervised outdoor play					
Every day	32	24	43	41	51
4-6 times/week	36	25	30	30	25
2-3 times/week	19	36	19	23	20
1 time/week	13	15	8	6	4
Total	100	100	100	100	100
N	123	339	470	329	244
Visit to friends					
Every day	4	2	3	5	1
4-6 times/week	19	18	23	21	24
2-3 times/week	23	27	40	51	53
1 time/week	54	53	34	23	22
Total	100	100	100	100	100
N	124	338	470	329	244

** $p < .001$ (Chi-square)

This is contrary to what was expected and indicates that that participation in organized activities does not happen at the expense of time spent with friends. One hypothesis is that organized activities generate a greater social network, which again leads to more time spent on unsupervised play and visits to friends. However, whether it is the organized activities that generate more social life or whether it is the more socially inclined children that are more likely to be involved in organized activities cannot be explored in this study.

5. Discussion and conclusions

This study of a random sample of Norwegian children in the age group 6-12 years in 2005 and 2013- 2014 suggests that there have been some major changes in children's play during the last decade. The study finds that there has been an increase in the share of children who participate in organized leisure activities, primarily in sports activities, that they start to participate in organized leisure activities at an earlier age than before, and that the intensity of participation in organized leisure activities has increased during the last decade. Moreover, the study finds that during the same period, there has been a

decrease both in the extent of children who play/spend time outdoors without the supervision of adults during a week and in the degree to which children visit friends during a week. One draw-back with this study is that it does not contain any information on the extent of children's play indoors, in their own houses, which would have allowed for the exploration of associations between indoor and out-of-home activities. Nevertheless, the findings clearly suggest that a replacement has taken place in children's play during the last decade in Norway. However, the study also finds that higher participation in organized leisure activities is positively associated with a greater extent of unsupervised outdoor play and visits to friend's homes. This indicates that organized activities do not happen at the expense of other out-of-home activities. Rather, the findings indicate that engaging in organized leisure activities may function as a basis for creating networks of friends, although the directions of correlations are not known. It is likely that children expand their social network through organized leisure activities, and that this affects other spaces of play, e.g. children that play on the same football team might want to also practice together outside of the supervised football training hours. Similarly, it is easier to arrange (spontaneous) visits to each other's homes when you have already met for football training. Perhaps decreased outdoor play reduces children's freedom to expand social networks, as suggested by Karsten (2005) and Spilsbury (2005), but this study suggests that that would only be the case if a child does not attend any organized leisure activities.

Much attention has been given to what is lost in children's play, especially in terms of reduced outdoor play. This study adds to the current debate on what is gained through changes in children's play (e.g. Karsten 2005; Holloway and Pimlott-Wilson 2014). Whether increased participation in organized adult-supervised activities, even from a younger age than before, is a 'gain' or not, can be discussed. Looking further, there are two major concerns related to children's increased participation in organized leisure activities. One concern relates to the consequences in terms of social exclusion, social inequality and integration for those who do not participate in organized activities for different reasons. This study suggests that organized leisure activities might be an important social arena where friendships are made and sustained. With increased participation in organized leisure activities, children who do not participate are at risk of being even more alone on the streets and in their homes. Many of the leisure activities discussed in this paper are expected to have a range of positive effects (e.g. friendship, health, social network), and positively impact a child's life chances. That some groups are systematically prevented by social class and/or cultural background from participating in such activities contradicts to the political goals common in many Western societies that all people (and children) are entitled to have equal opportunities. In Norway, this has received increased recognition by the Government, which last year introduced a new policy that should secure every child at least one hour per week in an organized leisure activity. Moreover, it is likely that organized leisure activities, as an arena for experience and social cohesion that cut across different ethnic groups, is of major importance for integration. Prior research has identified poverty as a major mechanism for preventing children from participating in organized leisure activities. However, even though Holloway and Pimlott-Wilson (2014) demonstrate in their study that parents place the same value on organized leisure activities ('enrichment activities') across the class spectrum, there is still a need for more knowledge on the importance of parental choice and culture-specific child raising logics in children's nonparticipation.

The other concern related to the increased participation in organized leisure activities pertains to its potential consequences for 'childhood'. There is a rising concern among

scholars of what is called the ‘professionalization of play’ that children’s spontaneous and self-driven play is overrun by leisure activities organized and run by adults, which disproportionately emphasizes learning and academic success (Miller and Almon 2009; Nicolopoulou 2010). There is little knowledge of the long-term consequences of the professionalization of play. At present, there is an ongoing debate in the Norwegian media on the tendency in society to evaluate young people on how they perform in school and other activities rather than on who they are. This preoccupies children with attaining the highest scores and being the ‘best’ (labeled the ‘performing generation’ in Norway). Several studies have shown that there has been an increase in depressive symptoms among young people (aged 14–16) in Norway (Øia 2012), as well as in several other Nordic countries (Augustsson and Hagquist 2011). There is no clear evidence linking the professionalization of play and the increase in depressive symptoms, but the concurrence of these trends call for further explorations of a potential association between them.

There is a need for more knowledge on the short-term and long-term effects of participation in organized leisure activities, not only for individual well-being but also for questions of social inequality and integration.

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