From carefree to controlled
Influences on the leisure of Australian children since the 1950s

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Statement of Originality

The thesis contains no material which has been accepted for the award of any other degree or diploma in any university or other tertiary institution and, to the best of my knowledge and belief, contains no material previously published or written by another person, except where due reference has been made in the text. I give consent to this copy of my thesis, when deposited in the University Library, being made available for loan and photocopying subject to the provisions of the Copyright Act 1968.

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Postcard from the 1970s/80s

“All the kids would go and meet down the park and play cricket”

“The boys played football, the girls played netball”

Generation Y: “Two things in summer and one in winter”

A postcard from the 1980s/1990s

“He’s more of a computer person”

“They were allowed to do one sporting and one cultural thing”

Generation Z: “Ballet twice a week and basketball Tuesday nights”

A postcard from the early 21st century

Home based play and leisure activities

“My first child was in swimming from seven months old”

Conclusion

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Technological advances

Baby Boomers: “I used to ride my bike to tennis”

Generations X and Y: “It wouldn’t happen if we couldn’t transport them”

Generation Z: “I just leave work and I’m in the car for two hours”

Intergenerational comparison

Leisure activities for rural and regional children

Baby Boomers: “We were rural country […] transport was a major issue”

Generations X and Y: “Occasionally it was 800kms a week”

Generation Z: “And we drive as far as Rural Town […] four hours away from here”

Intergenerational comparison

Educational and religious institutions

Baby Boomers: “I played sport, but it was with the school”

Generations X and Y: “Netball would have started at school”

Generation Z

Intergenerational comparison

Friends and peers

Baby Boomer children: “Oh, all my mates were playing”

Generations X and Y: “All their friends played sport”

Generation Z

Conclusion
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Synopsis

Childhood participation in organised leisure activities has increased over the past six decades. Parents in the first part of the 21st century are inundated with often contradictory messages from government, experts and media organisations regarding the leisure activities of children. They are told simultaneously that organised leisure activities are beneficial for children in terms of development and socialisation, whilst at the same time warned against the harm that the over-scheduling of children’s activities may bring. In order to understand why children take part in organised leisure activities this research examined the influences on the organised leisure of Australian children.

This research explored the influences on the leisure of children from four different generations - Baby Boomers, Generation X, Generation Y and Generation Z. An interpretive, broadly feminist approach investigated influences on participation in organised leisure activities of children since the 1950s. The multi method research was primarily qualitative in nature and comprised three elements: focus group interviews with 55 participants from both urban and rural areas in Queensland and New South Wales, semi-structured telephone interviews with 87 ‘young’ participants from the eastern Australian states and semi-structured telephone interviews with 80 ‘mid’ participants from eastern Australian states. All participants completed a short demographic style survey.

Findings indicated that whilst similar influences were in effect across the generations, the way in which these influences manifested differed vastly. Influences were varied and included factors such as rapid and vast technological change, especially in the area of transport, a child’s locality in an urban or rural environment, along with the influence provided by educational and religious institutions, and friends and peers. Parents from all generations were an important influence on organised leisure activities. This influence varied across generations and migrated from a ‘gatekeeper’ role played by parents of Baby Boomers to the coercive role provided by the parents of Generation Z. In the late modern era, parental reactions to risk were found to be an influence on the organised leisure of Generation Z children. This influence included parents guarding against future risk, their reactions to current risk and the consequences of risk. Findings indicated that the leisure activities of children had largely shifted from being autonomous, child lead, and carefree
during the childhood of Baby Boomer children to being tightly controlled, adult organised
and supervised in the childhood of Generation Z children.