

# The need for Inuit parents' perspectives on outdoor risky play

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## Commentary

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### Abstract

Parents' perspectives on their children's outdoor risky play behaviours influence their children's adoption of safety strategies and their children's approach to risky and dangerous situations (Brussoni & Olsen, 2011). Over the past decade, researchers have explored many Canadian mothers' and fathers' perspectives on this topic; however, to date, there has been a lack of research on Indigenous parents' perspectives, particularly those of Inuit parents. This lack of research means that Inuit families are unaccounted for in research used to create and promote safety policies and practices in Canada. The present research commentary is the first to address the urgent need for research on northern Canadian Inuit parents' perspectives on outdoor risky play. Specifically, outdoor risky play is defined, and Inuit children's outdoor play experiences are compared to non-Inuit children's experiences. Further, Inuit children's experiences of injury are discussed to further situate the dire need to work with the most vulnerable population in Canada – Inuit – in child injury prevention research.

### Introduction

There are many definitions of risky play. Some relate to children's experiences while engaging in risky play (e.g. risky play is defined as play that makes children experience fear; Stephenson, 2003), while others relate to children's engagement in play that is beyond their mental and physical skill set (Sawyers, 1994). There is consensus, however, that risky play can be defined in child injury prevention research as “thrilling and exciting play that can include the possibility of physical injury” (Brussoni et al., 2015, p. 6425). Sandseter (2007) posited that risky play can be categorised into play at great heights (e.g. climbing); at great speed (e.g. riding a bike at high speed); with dangerous tools (e.g. using a saw to cut branches); with dangerous elements (e.g. play near cliff sides); where there is a chance that children may get lost or disappear (e.g. playing alone in unknown spaces); and rough-and-tumble activity (e.g. fighting with sticks).

Over the past decade, there has been movement in the field of child injury prevention to include parents' perspectives on children's outdoor risky play behaviours (Brussoni & Olsen, 2011; Brussoni, Creighton, Olsen, & Oliffe, 2013; Brussoni, Olsen, Pike, & Sleet, 2012; Morrongiello, Walpole, & McArthur, 2009; Morrongiello, Widdifield, Munroe, & Zdzieborski, 2014). This is because parents' perspectives on their children's outdoor risky play behaviours can mitigate the harm associated with children's engagement in outdoor risky environments and activities (Morrongiello, Corbett, & Bellissimo, 2008). Further, parents' perspectives on outdoor risky play influence their children's perspectives on risk and danger (Brussoni & Olsen, 2011). Despite the movement within child injury prevention to include parents' perspectives on their children's outdoor risky play behaviours, Inuit parents' perspectives have escaped scholarly attention. This is problematic; health campaigns that use research on parents' perspectives on children's engagement in outdoor risky play behaviours to inform safety marketing strategies and develop child injury prevention campaigns currently do not account for an important subset of Canadian families.

Oliver and Kohen (2012) assessed rates of hospitalisation due to unintentional injury in areas with a high percentage of children of Aboriginal identity. They found that for Inuit children and youth aged 0–19 years old, the age-standardised rate of hospitalisation due to unintentional injury was 83.0 per 10,000 person-years at risk. This is compared to 39.4 per 10,000 person-years at risk for the whole population aged 0–19 in Canada. Importantly, compared to non-Aboriginal children and youth in the same age group, Inuit children and youth experienced more injuries from falls (e.g. falling on ice), land transportation (e.g. crashing motorised vehicles), drowning/suffocation (e.g. trapped in water), cuts/piercings (e.g. from playing with knives), and poisoning. To better understand the causes of Inuit children's injury experiences, it is vital to explore Inuit parents' perspectives of their children's outdoor risky play behaviours. A lack of understanding of Inuit parents' perspectives can hinder the development and implementation of culturally appropriate child injury prevention programmes for Inuit communities.

This commentary is the first to discuss the need to include Inuit parents' perspectives on their children's engagement in outdoor risky play behaviours in child injury prevention research.

Below, outdoor risky play is defined and the positive and negative consequences of children's engagement in outdoor risky play behaviours are discussed. Further, Inuit and non-Inuit children's experiences of outdoor risky play and injury are compared.

### Outdoor risky play

There is currently a significant push from groups like ParticipACTION Canada to encourage children to engage in more outdoor risky play behaviours (ParticipACTION Canada, 2017). For example, the *Position Statement on Active Outdoor Play* (PSAOP) was developed in direct response to children's lack of engagement in outdoor risky play, and it was formulated in collaboration with multiple child health advocacy stakeholders to encourage parents to allow their children to engage in outdoor risky play (Tremblay et al., 2015). In fact, signatories of the PSAOP have argued that their recommendations for an increase in outdoor risky play should be applied to "girls and boys (aged 3–12 years) regardless of ethnicity, race, or family socioeconomic status" (ParticipACTION Canada, 2017, p. 1). The statement challenges parents' refusal to allow children to engage in outdoor risky play by providing evidence for the benefits of engagement in active, independent and risky outdoor play, and provides references for families that promote children's healthy development outdoors. Some of these benefits include facilitating children's social development, providing experiences of stimulating and challenging circumstances that encourage resilience and physical and mental growth, and aiding them in learning how to navigate dangerous situations (Brussoni et al., 2015).

It is important to distinguish between risky and dangerous play. According to ParticipACTION Canada (2015), risky play can be thrilling and exciting play whereby children can recognise challenges and evaluate whether or not they can overcome them. Conversely, dangerous play is inherently linked to significant possibility of injury when children are not able to overcome obstacles (e.g. play in which young children are alone and unsupervised and could go missing). While there are indeed a multitude of benefits associated with children's engagement in outdoor risky play, the potentially negative consequences of this engagement need to be addressed. Although engagement in outdoor risky play may be beneficial for children in safe neighbourhoods (e.g. where there is plentiful access to health resources such as hospitals and clinics), encouragement could be problematic for some children. Examples of children who may not benefit from encouragement in outdoor risky play include children growing up on farms (e.g. they may experience more tool, animal and machinery-related injuries) (Rivara, 1997); children in poor neighbourhoods (e.g. with poor access to health resources when in need of medical attention) (Leventhal & Brooks-Gunn, 2000); and children residing in at-risk environments (e.g. they are in continual contact with dangerous or potentially hazardous objects/circumstances) (Satterthwaite, 1996, p. 54). It is thus important to consider children who may be negatively affected by encouragement to engage in outdoor risky play, such as Inuit in northern Canada.

### Inuit in northern Canada

Inuit have lived in their homeland (now referred to as Canada by settlers) since time immemorial. Currently, the majority of Inuit live in 53 communities across Inuit Nunangat in the Canadian Arctic (Inuit Tapiriit Kanatami, 2018). Inuit Nunangat consists of four regions: the Inuvialuit Settlement Region, Nunavut, Nunavik and Nunatsiavut (Inuit Tapiriit Kanatami, 2018). Although each of these

regions is home to various communities with different traditions and knowledge, Inuit values of respect, caring, connection to the land, storytelling, cooperation, and learning from elders remain central to the Inuit way of life (Inuit Tapiriit Kanatami, 2018). Indeed, Inuit have rich histories of resilience and tradition in the face of oppression and subjugation due to colonialism and racism.

At the hands of Europeans and Euro-Canadians, Inuit were continually pressured to abandon their culture, move to different settlements constructed by settlers, and stop traditional activities (e.g. hunting) (Karetak, Tester, & Tagalik, 2017, p. 3). Inuit children were forced from their homes into residential schools, where attempts were made to strip them of their culture, and they were mentally, physically and sexually abused (Douglas, 2013, p. 83). Despite the horrors faced through colonial, racist policies and practices, Inuit have demonstrated incredible resilience.

There are important differences in child rearing practices between non-Inuit and Inuit. Non-Inuit children in Canada are raised in a society where there are negative consequences and punishments associated with their failure to abide by rules and governing laws (Karetak et al., 2017, p. 9). Conversely, Inuit children are disciplined under the *maligarjuat* (i.e. Inuit laws) (Karetak et al., 2017, p. 9). The *maligarjuat* prohibit Inuit parents from policing and punishing Inuit children, and failure to adhere to the *maligarjuat* can result in Inuit parents being ostracised by their community (Karetak et al., 2017, p. 46). This results in Inuit children engaging more freely in play practices that non-Inuit may consider risky or dangerous, such as children playing freely while unsupervised (Karetak et al., 2017, p. 88). Inuit children are taught by the community and not just by their parents. Thus, it is considered the community's role to raise the child, and elders are an important influence in children's lives and teachings (Karetak et al., 2017, p. 92).

Inuit children are expected to learn *Inuit qaujimagatatuqangit* (IQ) (i.e. wisdom that is gained through life experiences contextualised within the Inuit community) while they engage in outdoor risky play behaviours (Karetak et al., 2017, p. 123). An understanding of the interconnections between people and nature and an appreciation for the land and what it provides are central to IQ (Karetak et al., 2017, p. 123). Thus, on the land, Inuit children are taught the value of animals, lakes, forests, traditions, harmony, responsible environmental management and Arctic survival (Karetak et al., 2017, p. 84). Inuit children embody Inuit identity by learning hunting, building, Inuit traditional activities and cultural values (Karetak et al., 2017, p. 89).

### Inuit children's experiences of injury

The Inuit population of Canada is young, with 56% of Inuit in Inuit communities being below the age of 25 (Pike, 2011). Pike (2011) stated that, "Since injury is the leading cause of death among children, [and] youth and young adults and young people make up such a large proportion of the Inuit population, injury prevention needs to become an important focus for Inuit communities" (p. 6). According to Pike (2011), injuries can be unintentional (i.e. where people are hurt by accident, such as injuries experienced by falling down) or intentional (i.e. where people are hurt intentionally, such as injuries sustained by attempting to commit suicide). Injury rates for Inuit children may be exacerbated by the fact that children in remote communities do not seek or are unable to seek medical care at the same rate as children in urban communities who have greater access to proximal medical centres (Banerji, 2012). Further, Inuit Tapiriit Kanatami (2007) reported that in general, injuries experienced in Canada's Arctic by Inuit are more likely to be left

undiagnosed than injuries sustained anywhere else in Canada. Importantly, Inuit children's experiences of injury increase these children's rates of mortality (Pike, 2011).

Inuit children are often unsupervised when engaging in outdoor risky play behaviours, as parents believe that children need to learn by engaging with their environment independently to understand how nature operates in relation to the human form (Karetak et al., 2017, p. 69). In comparison to non-Inuit children in southern Canada, Inuit children in Canada engage in more play behaviours around potentially dangerous elements (e.g. water and ice) that involve potentially dangerous tools (e.g. knives and harpoons) and animals (e.g. hunting caribou and whales) (Greenwood, Leeuw, Lindsay, & Reading, 2015, p. 64; Karetak et al., 2017, p. 150). According to Tigullaraq (2008), Inuit children learn by playing games that promote independence and physical and mental growth, and help children practise surviving Arctic conditions. Tigullaraq (2008) discussed the cultural influences on Canadian Inuit children's play practices. He argued that it is necessary for Inuit children to learn "snow" skills (e.g. sliding, harpoon throwing, knife handling, and hunting) during outdoor play in order to increase their Arctic survival skills. Inuit children also participate in traditional play behaviours, such as sea ice-pan hopping (i.e. jumping from one ice chunk to another as the chunks float on the water), fishing and hunting (Karetak et al., 2017, p. 152).

Inuit play practices thus differ greatly from what non-Inuit children in Canada practise. Non-Inuit children in Canada are commonly found engaging in organised sports (Brussoni et al., 2012), playing in playgrounds (Veitch, Bagley, Ball, & Salmon, 2006), and engaging in supervised and structured outdoor play (ParticipACTION Canada, 2017). Inuit children, by contrast, are often unsupervised during outdoor risky play behaviours (Karetak et al., 2017, p. 152). Thus, outdoor play practices for Inuit children are significantly different than outdoor play for non-Inuit children in Canada in terms of content and environment.

## Discussion

Messner (2009, p. 172) stated that over the past 60 years, the structure of North American children's engagement in outdoor play has changed from being unstructured, independent, adult-free and nature-based, to being structured, dependent on adult supervision and organisation, and structure-based (e.g. playgrounds and organised sports) (Messner, 2009, p. 175). The increased engagement in supervised and structured play for children is largely due to social processes involving changes in family dynamics (e.g. more men engaging in household duties) and societal pressures that make parents feel obliged to keep their children safe (Messner, 2009, p. 172). Indeed, in North America, many children grow up in "a rising culture of fear" (Messner, 2009, p. 11), in which their outdoor play is restricted due to parents' fear that their children will be kidnapped or harmed through physical injury. In this rising culture of fear, it is crucial to explore parents' perspectives on their children's outdoor risky play behaviours, to determine what constitutes outdoor risky play, what limits and restrictions are placed on children when they engage in outdoor risky play, and how parents mitigate children's experiences of injury (Brussoni & Olsen, 2011). While there has been traction in the field of child injury prevention to explore traditional (i.e. heterosexual, partnered, primary caregiving mothers and secondary caregiving fathers) parents' perspectives on this topic, research has focused on southern (i.e. residing below the Arctic Circle) and non-Inuit mothers' and fathers' perspectives. Pan-Canadian calls for an

increase in children's participation in outdoor risky play may have limited applicability in a northern context, and messages concerning parents being more open to enabling their children's exposure to outdoor risky play may similarly miss the mark.

This commentary provides a cogent argument for the need to include Inuit parents' perspectives on their children's outdoor risky play behaviours in child injury prevention research. Importantly, exploring Inuit parents' perspectives on this topic would provide insights into how researchers can co-create culturally relevant child injury prevention resources with Inuit families in Canada. Further, Inuit parents' identification of risk and danger are important to consider in relation to Inuit children's injury prevention practices. Inuit children and youth in Canada are the most at risk of experiencing injuries, and injuries are the leading cause of death for children and youth in Canada (Pike, 2011). While child injury prevention research that explores parents' perspectives on children's outdoor risky play behaviours on southern and non-Inuit families continues, it is unjustifiable to exclude Inuit parents' perspectives. Research that is done with the purpose of helping the Canadian population must help those most vulnerable to experiencing negative health outcomes. It is thus essential to include the most vulnerable population in Canada, Inuit, in conversations and research on parents' perspectives on their children's outdoor risky play behaviours.

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