

## **CAUTION: CHILDREN AT PLAY**

A radio documentary on the decline of children's free play opportunities in Dublin, Ireland.

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## DECLARATION

I hereby certify that this material, which I now submit for assessment on the programme of study leading to the award of the MA in [insert your programme name here, eg: Journalism & Media Communications], is my own; based on my personal study and/or research, and that I have acknowledged all material and sources used in its preparation. I also certify that I have not copied in part or whole or otherwise plagiarised the work of anyone else, including other students.

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## ABSTRACT

Research in human development indicates that play encompasses an important role in the development and learning of children. It is through play that children discover the world around them and begin to internalise their experiences.

In this increasingly fast-paced world, children are busier than ever before. They are faultlessly caught up in a results-based society, that is more competitive and demanding of them than any generation that went before them. Parents, too, are struggling to strike a balance between keeping up with this frenzy and nurturing the growth of their precious children.

The document lays out the research path of the radio documentary: 'Caution: Children at Play.' It refers to relevant literature and investigates how children play in our modern, increasingly digitised world. The dissertation also outlines the creative and technical process involved in the production of 'Caution: Children at Play'. It presents the researcher's findings that a lack of unstructured play opportunities in childhood has led to a generation of children who have less of a relationship with nature, and are less inclined to be creative.

The documentary and supporting document seek to prove that over-supervise and over-protection is taking away child's free choice and the very thing that makes their behaviour play. The fear exists that this will lead to a lack of essential coping skills when these children reach adulthood.

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Caoimhe Cooke

## CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

‘Where journalism attempts to give answers, art strives to raise questions...what [we] can do better is to construct a self-reflective medium, which ‘coaches’ its viewers to ask relevant questions by themselves, instead of accepting representations as they are proposed.’  
Cramerotti (2009)

The purpose of this dissertation is to investigate how children play in our modern, increasingly digitised world. Through academic and media research, interviews with childcare professionals and families and vox pops, I will create a radio documentary which will attempt to identify just how structured children’s play has become in modern society, and assess what implications these play habits will have for children in the future.

Having worked with children and teenagers since the age of 16, and spent the last 9 years as a primary school teacher, I have long observed that children’s lives are busier today than before. This, as the research in Chapter Two will indicate, has led to a direct decline in children’s opportunities to play freely i.e. without intervention from their parents or guardians. These developments are commonly seen as symptomatic of the highly industrialised world in which we live, with factors like oversaturation of interactive media, lack of ‘safe’ places for children to play, and busy after-school lives being offered as the major contributors.

These changes have occurred quickly and relatively little is known about their impact on children’s play. What research is suggesting, however, is a worrying trend which charts a decrease in unstructured play opportunities, and an increase in mental illness among adolescents, as well as a lack of key social and personal skills relating to empathy and resilience. There are fears that children are losing the sense that they have control over their own lives (Gray, 2014). Many professionals believe that this has contributed to a generation of young people who find it hard to adjust to the responsibility and accountability expected of them at university level, and in the workplace.

The radio documentary format was chosen because I believe that the qualities which characterise children’s play - energy, vitality, creativity - would be best conveyed through this most energetic medium. Radio documentaries allow for space and movement around a

discussion; they provoke and encourage thought in a very different way to a piece of written text. To represent something as precious as children's play in written words alone would be to diminish it, in my opinion.

My research, as can be seen in Chapter Two, has led me to many articles and reports (Irish and International) which deal with specific concerns around the area of children's play. These reports look at factors like the reported decline in childhood mobility; changes in parenting habits and societal perceptions of parenting; and the busy lives children are leading today. While there is some print media on the topic, there were only a few radio and television examples.

The most similar example I could find was a short video made by Early Childhood Ireland, which was designed to showcase the benefits of the proposed primary school teaching programme 'Aistear'. The existence of such a programme (outlined in more detail in Chapter Two), which is based on a Finnish teaching model, is evidence of the need to explore the area of children's play further, using a model that is accessible to, and inclusive of, all members of society.

In Chapter Two of this dissertation I will discuss the research I undertook before creating this product. This research chapter consults academic literature, as well as publications from industry and civil society organisations. It also charts my engagement with relevant media products as part of the study e.g. documentaries, news articles, TED talks etc. I will, firstly, detail my research which investigates the merits of the radio documentary as a journalistic medium; secondly, I will look at theories, articles and media artefacts which analyse and interpret the value of 'free play' to a child's development.

In Chapter Three I will detail the practical decisions I made as I went about constructing and scripting the documentary. I will give a detailed description of the contributors to the piece, outlining how and why they became involved in the project. I will outline the interview process as it progressed and justify the editorial decisions I made during this phase, including the inclusion of vox pops and sound effects.

In Chapter Four, I will reflect critically on the production process. I will also refer to the editing techniques I adopted in the construction of the documentary and discuss the difficulties I encountered in the editing process.

In the final chapter, I will evaluate the documentary 'Caution: Children at Play', and refer to ways I believe it could be developed further. I will also consider potential platforms where the product would be best publicised and circulated.

## EVIDENCE OF RESEARCH:

‘Play is nature’s means of ensuring that young mammals acquire the skills that they need to evolve successfully into adulthood...by definition, ‘play’ is self-controlled and self-directed. It is the self-directed aspect of play that gives it its educative power.’ (Gray, 2014)

Over the course of this chapter, I will map out the research path which guided me to the construction and design of my radio documentary ‘**Caution: Children at Play.**’

I will look firstly at the radio listenership in Ireland to ascertain whether an audience exists for a documentary in this format. I will, then, examine the radio documentary as a communication medium, assessing its worth and applicability to this study. I will explain how radio documentaries allow for inclusive conversation through dialogic communication; how the audio format brings listeners in to the debate by providing a sense of place and context through variations in voice and sound; and how the radio format provides scope for creativity and ingenuity in its treatment of a subject matter.

Secondly, I will review relevant literature and reports on the topic of children’s play, beginning with a review of Jean Piaget and Leo Vygotsky’s theories on play and child development. From here, I will discuss the findings of the recent report ‘Children’s Independent Mobility in Ireland’ conducted in the University of Limerick. This report shows that Irish children rank twelfth out of fifteen countries in terms of mobility, and that a lack of public spaces to play in is encroaching on their personal freedom. Next, I will discuss some of the work being carried out today to address this lack of ‘free play’ in childhood, including ‘hazardous’ play and outdoor play. Finally, I will look at some of the theories which connect the decline in free play with an increase in anxiety disorders and coping skills in adulthood, and report some solutions to this decline, as offered by the research.

### Evidence of Research Part 1: The Radio Documentary

- Radio in Ireland:

Irish radio audiences listen to a significant amount of radio every-day, when compared to their overseas counterparts. The latest JNLR/Ipsos MRBI report into radio listening in Ireland (published 27th April 2017) shows that 82% of all adults listened to the radio every weekday in the 12-month period from April 2016 to March 2017. The statistics showed that more than half (56%) tune into their local or regional station, and 44% listen to a national station. Among the younger, 15 to 34-year market, 76% listen daily.

Gabrielle Cummins, chairperson of the Choose Radio group, which represents radio marketing companies in Ireland, spoke to the Irish Times recently about the 'unique relationship' Irish people have with radio: "We have a dynamic radio sector and some great radio stations. Radio in Ireland is alive and well." (Slattery, 2017)

Ms. Cummins also used the JNLR statistics to argue against the growing trend which suggest media buyers are favouring digital communications, defending radio as a viable communications medium: "The most common approach among media buyers is to focus on digital and online advertising. I would challenge that thinking based on today's JNLR results which proves the strength and reach of radio in Ireland."

With such high listenership comes high responsibility. Gaynor and O'Brien (2012) write that a key objective of radio 'is to work to empower communities, to promote dialogue and debate and to move towards social justice and progressive social change.' It is essential that journalistic communication, across all media, does not patronise its audience by providing them with exactly what they want to hear.

Furthermore, Kovach and Rosenstiel (2014) argue that journalists must serve as an independent monitor of power by avoiding 'the faux watchdogism' which panders to audiences rather than doing a public service. This is something to bear in mind with this subject matter - as a teacher myself I must avoid the temptation to indulge in my own biases and opinion on the subject of children's play but, instead, must use the medium creatively as a mode of representation which allows the story of play to develop organically, while giving a voice to as many parties as possible.

There is a delicate balance to be struck here, however. The very reason I have decided to carry out this investigation is because of my own professional experience of working with children. It has been my observations, conversations, and personal research that has led me to this study, where I see a critical need for a comprehensive analysis of the way children are playing today. While I will strive for balance in my treatment and communication of the information I receive, I cannot ignore the fact that I am, as a primary school teacher, coming to the documentary with my own biases and beliefs. This, according to the literature, is not necessarily a negative thing. Kovach and Rosenstiel (2014) write that that being impartial or neutral in a news item 'is not a core principal'; and, more pertinently, warn against 'phony evenhandedness' in journalism, which is usually transparent and clumsy in its execution.

It seems, therefore, that the answer to finding a balance perspective or the neutral point of view on a topic, is to gather as much information from as many sources as possible. As Cramerotti (2009) puts it: 'The more documents we have, the more reliable the account; a neutral point of view is assessed when it is shared by a large enough number of people.'

As the journalist devising this documentary, my voice and opinion are secondary; it is the many voices of the public that matter. The more the merrier, it seems.

- The Documentary as a Communicative Tool

The documentary approach adopted for this dissertation was chosen because I saw a need for an in-depth discussion around the area of children's play – one which comes from real voices of actual people living in Ireland.

Kovach and Rosenstiel (2014) make the point that journalistic engagement with a news story has changed over time. In order to adapt to this, they argue, journalists must seek to understand a 'deeper reality' where news media must 'adapt to fit the behaviour and curiosity of the community that new technology has created.'

Irish national broadcaster RTE, in its response to the Green Paper on Broadcasting (1995), commented that 'it is the approach to news and current affairs that confirms the public service character of a broadcasting organisation.' The radio format, I believe, is suited to this style of investigation because it provides scope for creativity and ingenuity in the treatment of the

subject matter, and is accessible to the general public through its employment of a range of voices, opinions and soundscapes.

Bakhtin and Voloshinov, cited in Kelly and O'Connor, favour dialogue as a communication method as it is oriented to the 'other' voice in society, and therefore challenges traditional 'monologic' discourse, 'which attempts to normalise and dominate'. Conversation, they write, accepts that words adapt and change according to the relationship between the speaker and addressee, and to the particular socio-cultural context of the interaction (1997). It is only through open, inclusive conversation around the area of children's free play that we can attempt to understand what changes have occurred, and how this affects the daily lives of Ireland's young generation.

- Radio as a Sensory Playground:

Kaye Mortley, cited by Madsen (2010), describes a radio documentary as 'a type of radio where the real glides towards something else... where the aim is less to instruct or inform, and is more about creating a universe woven from real sounds.' This statement is particularly meaningful in the context of this documentary, where I will attempt to provoke the audiences' imagination through real voices, clips and sound effects.

It is my hope that this documentary will capture the truth at the heart of children's play, as well as conjuring the sounds, smells, tastes and scrapes of childhood for the listener. The potential for playfulness and creativity afforded by the documentary format makes it a perfect marriage of medium and message. By creating space for the sounds of life the microphone captures the characters and the textures of life, as well as revealing the silences and absences that might also speak to the listener.

Helmut Kopetsky (cited in Crook, 2009) acknowledges the value of adopting a personally resonant medium as a journalist: 'Make your point in a distinctive, unmistakable personal manner, in your special tone, including a certain amount of good humour.'

## **EVIDENCE OF RESEARCH PART 2: PLAY THEORIES**

'When you teach a child something, you take away forever his chance of discovering it for himself.' (Piaget, 1951)

- Historical Perspectives on Play in Childhood

Leading Russian psychologist and theorist Lev Vygotsky believed that the effect of play on a child's development is 'enormous'. Vygotsky (1933) argued that it is through play that children make sense of the world: 'in play a new relationship is created between the semantic and the visible – that is, between situations in thought and real situations.'

Vygotsky applied his theory of the "zone of proximal development" to his study of children's play – this 'zone' refers the discrepancy between the problems a child can solve independently and those with which he/she require assistance to solve. With each newly acquired skill, Vygotsky argued, the child moves move into a new zone of development and problem solving. This process of assistance is called "scaffolding" which helps bridge the gap between a child's current level of problem-solving and his potential for more complex problem solving.

Swiss clinical psychologist Jean Piaget believed that imaginative play is essential to the cognitive development of a child. He believed that play was about discovery. He was the first theorist to recognise the qualitative differences between child and adult intellectual abilities. (Sutherland, 1992)

In his seminal work 'The Psychology of the Child' (1951), Piaget wrote that children's experiences shape how they comprehend the world around them, with each experience carrying them to a new stage of development. It is through this cognitive progression (until the age of eleven) that a child's belief and value systems are formed: 'The child often sees only what he already knows. He projects the whole of his verbal thought into things. He sees mountains as built by men, rivers as dug out with spades, the sun and moon as following us on our walks.' (Piaget, 1951)

Piaget's theory on the 'Formal Operations' stage of development is also relevant to this study. This stage, which occurs from age 11 /12 though to adulthood, is characterised by abstract and logical thinking, complex verbal and problem-solving abilities as well as hypothesis formation. Piaget called this 'hypothetico-deductive' whereby the adolescent is able to conceive an idea and use deductive powers to draw conclusions (Sutherland, 1992). This is the state

where a child begins to apply what they have learned in childhood and make decisions based on a pattern of thought which 'is no longer limited to reality or personal experience'.

What is most significant about Piaget's theories, in the context of this study, is that each stage of cognitive development happens in 'an invariant sequence' (Piaget, 1969). The question that arises from this research is whether a child, who has had limited access to unstructured play, can reach a critical stage of independent thought and self-sufficiency. Are children, because they have been raised in a risk-averse culture, equipped to navigate the minor and major upsets that arise in adulthood?

- Opinions and studies on the Effects of Adult-organised Play on Children

Goldstein (2012) writes that Imaginative play offers a child a multitude of rewards. As well as developing their creativity and sense of initiative, children explore diverse emotions and learn how to socialise and relate to their peers in different ways. Through pretences and games, children have a chance to express themselves through arguing, negotiating and interacting when they take up the roles that they like during playtime. In essence, pretence gives children the platform through which they can learn how to plan, negotiate and solve problems. Playing away from adult supervision is equally important, according to Gleave and Cole-Hamilton (2012), 'allowing children to acquire independent mobility, explore the world on their own terms and create their own identities.'

The results of a study carried out in Norway, investigating children's perceptions of play through focus groups with children, found that although children can enjoy organised activities, they tend not to view these occupations as 'leisure time' or 'free time'. (Sandseter, 2011) What was clear from the data collected, in fact, was that the children's definition of play and leisure time was relatively ambiguous: 'There was a consensus that leisure time is associated with playing, freedom and the ability to do as they wish under their own direction, rather than an activity that is compulsory or under adult control.'

Lester and Russell (2010) argue that adults should be aware of the importance of play and take action to promote and protect the conditions that support it. The guiding principle is that any intervention to promote play must acknowledge its characteristics, and allow sufficient flexibility, unpredictability and security for children to play freely. 'We can prioritise children's

time to play freely. If we over-supervise or over-protect we take away the child's free choice and the very thing that makes their behaviour play.'

This type of thinking is in line with Vygotsky's theory of 'scaffolding' learning for children. Rather than revert to a model where children are unsupervised for large portions of the day, adults must aim to strike a 'happy medium' which allows for uninterrupted sessions of free play but also has a place for adult guidance. This is often referred to as 'child-led' play, which sees the adult as a facilitator to the child's exploration.

As Frost et al. (2007) point out, 'Children must be exposed to managed levels of hazards, learn to identify hazards, evaluate hazards, and cope with or master hazards.' Children are best raised, they assert, by learning to manage hazards, challenges and risks from an early age, under the watchful eyes and helpful hands of adults.

- Children's Independent Mobility in Ireland:

A report released in 2015 by the University of Limerick attempted to gauge children's and parents' perceptions of safety and mobility in their local area. (O'Keeffe and O'Beirne, 2015). The study was conducted with children and parents from twenty-five schools across the island of Ireland, and compared to 15 other countries worldwide.

The data that emerged showed that Ireland was twelfth among the sixteen locations in terms of childhood mobility. Finland emerged as the country with the highest levels of Children's Independent Mobility. The study showed that over three-quarters of Irish primary school children were accompanied by an adult while travelling to school, and that nearly one quarter of Irish primary school children (23%) admitted to being worried about strangers when they are outside on their own.

Parents' responses revealed concerns about anti-social behaviour and possible intimidation in their locality. The report also revealed that children have been excluded from some public spaces through formal restrictions being put in place, and their preferred activities being curtailed. The removal of skateboarding ramps, and planning restrictions on tree houses are

given as examples of the encroachment being made on children's autonomy and freedom. (O'Keeffe and O'Beirne, 2015)

- Benefits of Outdoor Play

Research in Scotland (Wayman, 2013) has shown that the benefits of outdoor exploration include better motivation and concentration; improved language, communication and social skills; and new confidence and self-esteem.

A new outdoor schooling programme, dubbed as 'forest schools', is currently being piloted in Ireland. Michelle Nolan, a leader from Dublin, commented that the ultimate aim of these schools is to "let children be children and let them play naturally... when you get outside, you should scream at the top of your lungs, climb up that hill, get into that tree and see how far you can go, swing on that rope". Lack of woodlands in urbanised areas and restricted interpretations of education are the biggest road blocks for children's free play in Ireland, Nolan believes. (Wayman, 2013)

- New Primary School Programme: Aistear

New proposals, drafted by the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA), highlight further the need for change in not only our approach to children's play, but also the value we place upon it. A key proposal of these changes involves the extension of the preschool curriculum – Aistear – into the early years of the primary school curriculum. This would form the basis for a child-led play approach to learning which, it is envisaged, would continue up through primary school, with traditional subjects not being officially taken up until Third Class. Writing in the Irish Times recently, Carl O'Brien (2017) reports that these reforms are based loosely on some of the features of top-performing education systems in countries such as Finland, and that experts feel that the current system is too structured and may impede learning. The programme is being piloted in more than 15 schools across the country and allows for playfulness and innovation not only from the children, but from the teachers involved as well. Kernan (2007), in her research on the Aistear programme, writes that 'children need to feel safe and secure when they play. However, it is important that adults balance children's need for safety with the recognition that risk-taking and challenge are developmental necessities and are important for children's well-being.'

- Possible Implications for the Future?

American psychologist, Dr. Peter Gray, in a 2014 Ted Talk about the decline of children's play, states that over the last 50 – 60 years, society has been gradually taking away the gift of play from children. He attributes this to the spread of a 'schoolish view of child development' which implicitly suggests that children learn best when they are instructed by adults. The increase of fear and perceived dangers has taken away 'the appeal of the outdoors', he maintains, which has had a self-generative effect: 'less children out there mean less children will be out there.'

Gray points to statistics which show a rise in narcissism in young people since 1955, and a decline in empathy. He also notes a gradual decline in creative thinking. He links this to the decline in play, and refers to a growing sense among young people that they have less control over their own lives, believing, more commonly, that 'their lives are controlled by fate, by circumstance, by other people's decisions.'

Former Stanford University Dean of Freshmen Julie Lythcott-Haims argues that many students today are "failure deprived" when they arrive at college, and that parenting — or rather, 'over-parenting' — plays a key role in this. Lythcott-Haims argues that due to a 'failure-deprived childhood' students don't have the 'where-with-all to cope' with the everyday ups and downs of student life: 'Over-help [sic] has meant that they haven't worked out how to get from A to B to C on their own. If they don't do the planning and thinking themselves, they may get to the destination but they don't know how they got there.'

O'Keeffe and O'Beirne (2015), reflecting on their findings that Irish children are less likely to play on the streets than previous generations, assert that the marginalisation of youths in this way is further polarising them from society. The pair cite Hörschelmann and Van Blerk, reporting that 'the creation of 'youth only' spaces ensures that identity formation can take place away from adults, but at the same time make adults fearful of youth on the streets and their potential to engage in criminal behaviour" (2012p. 105).

This solution is echoed by Gray (2014) when he urges parents to 'stand up against the clamour for extra schooling' and help children 'reclaim the street'. He recommends that adults get to

know their neighbours, open up halls and spaces for free play and hire supervisors for local parks so that parents can trust that their children are safe without hovering above them.

# CHAPTER THREE: CONSTRUCTING AND DESIGNING THE DOCUMENTARY

‘To make a good radio feature you need passion, commitment, skill from the programme and the desire to communicate.’ (Crook, 1999)

## PART ONE: PRE-PRODUCTION

### The Interview Process:

Steiner Kvale (1996) writes that ‘The person of the researcher is critical for the quality of the scientific knowledge and for the soundness of ethical decisions. By interviewing, the researcher him-or herself is the main instrument for obtaining knowledge.’

The question of whether there has been a decline in children’s free play over the last number of years is one which requires not only specialist analysis, but merits equal input from citizens across all sectors of the community. In order to obtain as much knowledge as possible for this documentary, I conducted four interviews with relevant professionals, two interviews with families, and went on many trips to local play spaces to obtain voices from ‘ordinary’ citizens, or ‘vox pops’.

These interview methods are laid out in more detail below:

- **The Formal Interviews:**

At our first meeting, my technical supervisor, Ronan Kelly, emphasised the story-telling purpose of documentaries and the need for a definite ‘arc’. Though I did not doubt the value of an investigative documentary into children’s play, I knew that a flat delivery of opinion after opinion would not hold the audience’s attention, and therefore would be a pointless pursuit as a piece of journalism. As Chantler and Harris (1997) put it: ‘the producer must know whether [a radio documentary] will have a definite conclusion to reach or whether it is a series of individual pictures in sound put together because they are more effective in a single frame.’

I thought about this for a long time and started to look for points of conflict or change within the emerging story of 'Caution: Children at Play'. Thankfully, the more audio I gathered, the clearer this 'story arc' became. While consensus holds that free play in childhood *is* in decline, there did emerge some conflicting interpretations of childhood behaviours and trends, which naturally carried the narrative of the piece.

As the research indicates, the factors that affect a child's ability to play are many and far-reaching. In order to encourage critical discussion around the question of whether children's play has become overly structured, it was important to me to make sure that the contributors were from various professional disciplines, and/or represented different personal standpoints.

Below, I have provided detailed descriptions of the professional interviewees, who are listed in order of contact made: Emily Hourican, Ciara Hinksman, Tom Conaty and Dr. John Sharry. A sample of the questions I asked can be found in Appendix C.

### **Emily Hourican**

***"We've had the whole crazy, endless bolstering of self-esteem. Telling children 'you're wonderful, you're amazing, you're brilliant. That's not a very good thing, Being 'blanket' about praise makes them anxious, afraid of failing, and of not getting that praise."***

Emily Hourican is a journalist, editor and author based in Dublin. She writes on a broad range of topics, many of which centre on themes of motherhood and family. Her first book 'How to Really be a Mother' deals candidly with many issues of motherhood, including societal judgement and expectations.

I initially contacted Emily as I was intrigued by an article she had written for the Journal.ie entitled: 'Think playdates are all fun and games? Think again.' (2015) The piece dealt with the realities of regulated social interaction from a parent's perspective, and was a direct and honest analysis of the new custom. The points raised, which included references to inter-parental judgement and a growing sense of entitlement among children, were highly related to the questions at the heart of my documentary, I felt.

Initial contact (Appendix D) was made through an email address I found on Emily's homepage, and from there a follow-up phone call was scheduled to arrange the interview. Emily was

enthusiastic and supportive of the project from the get-go, and had very strong opinions on the topic, particularly concerned by the lack of resilience she observes in children today.

Emily was the first person I interviewed for the documentary. The interview took place at 12pm on the 8<sup>th</sup> June in Stillorgan Park Hotel. I had called ahead a couple of days before, explained about the project and inquired as to whether they could accommodate me with a quiet room to record in. They kindly complied and allowed me to use a wing in the business centre of the hotel to conduct the interview. The furnishings were less cushioned here (which I knew could affect the sound quality of the audio), but it was much quieter and removed from the distractions of the main hotel and, therefore, the best option.

I had brought some blankets to minimise any echo-feedback, but, on completion, still found that audio was tinny in parts. This would be my first major lesson of the production process: never compromise in the pursuit of quality audio.

Technical imperfections aside, this was a very rewarding and enjoyable interaction. I was lucky to have someone as media savvy as Emily as my first interviewee. She was respectful of the interview process - giving due thought and consideration to my questions, and offering valuable asides as they naturally occurred to her. Emily's contributions on parental accountability and how play prepares children for adulthood were particularly valuable. She was critical of 'blanket praise' being doled out to children, maintaining that this does nothing for a child's self-esteem, and leaves them constantly seeking approval. She spoke of a lack of 'resourcefulness and grit' among today's young people, and believed that the constant 'hovering and the praising' from parents has led to a tendency among young people to expect too much in terms of input from their bosses as they progress into adulthood. 'Confidence is built stone by stone. Doing too much for people holds them back, because then they don't do things for themselves, and they don't learn that they can do things for themselves.'

### Ciara Hinksman

***'People heal through play. They might be climbing a tree, holding the tree with their arms, and that's very grounding. They might build a shelter, and there's something really powerful in***

***knowing that you can create your own safe place to be in. It's total play but big things are happening.'***

Much like Emily Hourican, I came across Ciara's name in article for the Irish Times entitled 'Why Children Need to go into the Woods Today' and made contact via email. Ciara founded the forest school 'Earth Force Education' in 2009. She delivers workshops to both primary and secondary school students, as well as running outdoor adult workshops. Ciara also coordinated the first internationally recognised 'Forest School Leadership Trainings' in Ireland in September 2013.

I arranged to meet her at Castleruddery Organic Farm, Wicklow, where she carries out her work. This was an ideal setting for the interview, I felt, as the outdoor soundscape complemented the subject matter perfectly, allowing the recorder to pick up the sounds of the wildlife, the rustle of the trees, ground crackling underfoot etc

It was a damp Sunday in June and as the interview progressed, the rain grew heavier and the wind gathered momentum, so we took shelter in a yurt within the forest. This changed the quality of the audio, and the rain drumming on the cloth above us meant that the volume of the dialogue was overpowered at times. Ciara had also two dogs who came along for the walk and so some of our conversations were interrupted by their barking!

The interview, nonetheless, was very fruitful. Ciara is a passionate advocate for exploratory play among children, and is very knowledgeable in her field. She spoke about the healing powers of free play – how nature can ground a person and bring them back in touch with how they are feeling. She referred to John *Bowlby's* evolutionary *theory of attachment* and Leo Vygotsky's concept of scaffolding learning for children. Ciara described incidences where she had witnessed anxious children become more relaxed in the course of their free play - taking risks and, eventually, building self-esteem. She warned of the dangers of risk-averse parenting styles and a 'risk-assessment' culture in general.

I left the interview with Ciara feeling uplifted and encouraged. I felt like she was contributing to the documentary not as a courtesy to an MA student, but because she believed passionately in the matter at hand. This was a humbling realisation, and served to reinforce the purpose behind

the project i.e. to create dialogue around the area of children's free play in order to bring about social justice and solidarity.

**Tom Conaty:**

***'If we start in childhood then we are creating or, at least, setting the conditions for children to be free, expressive and creative. Not matter what comes in the door, if you're creative then you can do something with it. It's not some big ogre.'***

Tom Conaty is a poet, teacher and principal with over 30 years' experience in the field of education. He has founded three non-denominational primary schools, and is currently a teaching-principal in Zion School, Rathgar.

I met Tom in May at an anti-bullying course in Blackrock Education Centre, where he shared his experiences on the benefits of child-led learning. Tom also mentioned that he had employed a psychologist to spend a term in the school this year, who delivered seminars and workshops to parents, teachers and the children, on areas like boosting self-esteem and unlocking 'the true self'.

This approach to education was not something I'd ever heard of before - certainly not in Ireland, at least. I was keen to find out more about Tom's methodologies and spoke to him about documentary I was working on. Tom had lots to say on the matter of declination in children's play.

I met Tom at his home in Dublin on 14<sup>th</sup> June 2017. He spoke passionately about embracing playfulness in education, stressing that play and creativity were intertwined. He expressed concern over an 'absence of location' today, where he believes that a lack of exploration of their locality has led to a loss of a sense of identity among children. Indeed, a lot of the points Tom raised were supportive of outdoor exploration, and echoed what Ciara Hinksman had said. Tom stressed that, in his work, his primary focus is to help children become their 'true self. This, he maintained, can only be achieved through play.

**Dr. John Sharry**

***'The most connected times - when parents understand their children, and when children understand their parents - are times at play. Play is the main mediator for creating good parent-child relationships.'***

Social worker, child and family psychotherapist, and founder of Parents Plus charity, Dr. John Sharry, was my final professional interviewee for the documentary. He is a cousin-once-removed of mine and seemed like an ideal candidate for the piece, with 27 years of experience working with families. John is also an active participant in print and broadcast media, speaking on a wide range of familial matters.

I called John and asked him would he be available to participate. We met on 15<sup>th</sup> July in the Parents Plus offices, Dublin 7. John offered sound, comprehensive responses to my questions and adopted a non-alarmist approach in his answering.

Much like Tom Conaty, he equated children's play with unlocking passion, and spoke about the importance of allowing 'the child to lead the play'. John referred to the centrality of play to his practice in dealing with attachment issues, behavioural concerns and self-esteem.

In response to a question on whether children's play should be 'scaffolded', as Vygotsky's theorised, John maintained that a mixture of structured and unstructured play is best. He explained how even total free play is scaffolded by adults to a degree by simply turning off the television or having a ball in the back-garden. He stressed, however, the importance of allowing a child to feel bored so that they can 'decide to become playful.'

John spoke on the topic of play dates, believing that they were 'not bad' and that they are just part of the way we play now. His one caveat, however, was that they should be arranged on a one-to-one basis. Any more than that, John said, does not support friendship.

This perspective, i.e. that a play date's sole function is to support friendship, really stuck with me. It is not a thinking pattern I have observed too often in the parents I meet in school, despite the fact that it seems like an obvious statement. It is contrasted by Emily Hourican's point that play dates are often used as a mode of convenience for busy parents.

The confusion that exists over something as primal and basic as children's play is, I feel, where the story lies in this documentary. Somehow the dominant culture has led to active play being side-lined, with children being managed and 'pencilled in' for experiences by adults. It also echoes the point made by Peter Gray in Chapter Two, that we need to stop adopting a 'schoolish approach' to children's play. I hope, through the interviews described above, family interviews and vox pops, to convey this point through the radio documentary.

- **Vox Pops:**

'The purpose of vox pops is to stimulate public debate and to influence decision-makers.'  
(Ingrahm, 2008)

As advised by my supervisors, I carried out some 'test runs' in a local park at the beginning of May. I came across a group of children aged 10 and 11 and spoke to their parents about the project, to gain permission to talk with the children. The children themselves were quite receptive to the chat, and their responses were interesting. Initially, they said that they get lots of time to play outside. When I rephrased the questions, however, and asked them not to count 'screen time' and time spent playing organised sports, they changed their answer, with only one child saying he had played 'at nothing' in the past 7 days.

Crook (1999) writes that the development of small, portable recorders which offer dependable digital quality has 'shifted and transformed the relationship between broadcasters and listeners.' The portable nature of the Sony device that I used allowed me to access areas and environments discreetly, allowing the participants to feel more comfortable with the interview format.

Throughout the vox-pop stage of the process, I learned to refine my questions. Open-ended invitations to speak were far more fruitful than closed questions, which tended to elicit one-word responses. For example, 'Can you tell me about all the ways you like to play?' was preferable to 'Do you play on the streets at home?'. I also had to avoid the temptation to chime into the discussions myself, bearing in mind that Chanteler and Harris' maxim that 'other people's words are often more effective than your own, and that there are many sounds other than your own.' (1997)

In his article 'Beyond Vox Pop', Bosch (2014) makes a very interesting point about the use of ordinary citizens, or the 'nonelite', in journalism: "Ordinary' people rarely appear in the form of exemplars, especially regarding political issues.' Bosch notes that the exceptions to this usually occur when a journalist wants to enhance a news story by adding drama and conflict to it, or when an individual has a close connection to the issue.

This observation was highly perceptive, in my opinion, and carries ethical implications for the journalist. I kept it in mind as I approached groups in various fields and play areas around Dublin, and reminded myself of the 'public service' objective of this documentary. As a result, I endeavoured to 'blindly' approach people at play, and avoid the temptation to typecast and screen the contributors.

This approach (though requiring a few attempts to get right) was far more rewarding. It was the surprising admissions from unexpected places that delighted me most on these trips, and ultimately added the most colour and texture to the finished product.

- **Identification of potential challenges and possible ethical implications**

'If you want to be a competent professional interviewer, talent, skill and experience are essential but they are not enough – you must know and understand the law as it applies to journalists.' (Hicks cited in Adams, 2001)

#### Ethical Considerations When Interviewing:

The Griffith College Research Ethics Policy stresses that 'consent is a fundamental research principle' (GCD, 2017) and demands that practitioners provide each participant with a consent form that is explicit and easy to understand.

The GCD Research Policy also refers to the responsibility of the practitioner to ensure that all participants are comfortable with the interview process and made aware that they can cease to participate at any point during the production process. As my work involved an appeal to families through the school I work in, I sought permission from the Board of Management of St. Brigid's BNS, Foxrock.

This letter can be found in Appendix A, and a sample of the consent forms used can be found in Appendix B.

### Working with Children:

According to the Griffith College Research Ethics Policy, children are a 'vulnerable' group in society. The following criteria were observed and employed during all interactions with children:

- ❖ minimising risk of harm
- ❖ informed consent and assent
- ❖ confidentiality and anonymity.
- ❖ a child-centred, inclusive approach to research.

(UNICEF publication Ethical Research Involving Children)

As my work included interviews and vox pops from children, I was required to seek permission from each child's parent via an Interview Consent Form (Appendix B) prior to the interviews.

Boyd, Steward and Alexander (2008) state that 'interviewing children...demands that the journalist doesn't go into areas that may be beyond the child's understanding.' As I have been working with children in some capacity for over 16 years, I have developed good communication skills which will allow me to ensure that the children involved with the project remain comfortable throughout the process, and take enjoyment from it.

While it is the aim of this media piece to shed light on an issue of potential societal concern (i.e. the decline in unstructured play opportunities), I am determined not to coax or 'lead' participants into giving sensational or exaggerated opinions. Vulnerable participants, like children, must be particularly safeguarded against this exploitation, and I will bear this in mind as I go about interviewing them.

## **PART TWO: THE EDITING PROCESS**

'Think of a news story as a diamond. A diamond has many facets, and whichever way you hold it, it is impossible to look at them all at once.' (Boyd, Steward and Alexander, 2008)

The editing process was, at first, very daunting. I had gathered so much content - professional interviews, family interviews, vox pops, media clips and sound effects – that I didn't really know where to start. In conjunction with my laptop notes, I had been scribbling ideas in my notebook as they occurred to me and felt a bit overwhelmed when I finally sat down in July to assess what I had. I referred frequently Chantler and Harris (1997) who, among their many words of wisdom, recommend ruthlessness in the editing process; the use of shorter rather than longer pieces of audio, and forcing the listener to listen by going out 'with a bang'.

This guided me as I went about setting up a sorting process (Appendix E) which entailed chopping up the audio pieces, firstly by speaker and secondly by theme, and keeping strict notes outlining who said what, and when. Laborious though this was, it turned out to be the most valuable piece of work I would do in the editing process, acting as a guide when I got lost in the sea of other people's words. Listening and re-listening to the interviews allowed me to identify sub-themes as they emerged in the conversations (Play and Technology, Play and Creativity) and I began to categorise these accordingly (Appendix F). This method had the added benefit of allowing me to spot crossovers and contradictions within the opinions of the various contributors. The narrative arc, thus, emerged naturally, and is laid in the table below. I will detail this development further in

As well as maintaining a narrative arc, I was keen to impress a personal, even playful, feeling upon the listener, bearing in mind the topic at the heart of the documentary. I also wanted to create a sense of pace and dynamism by varying voice, soundscape and context of the audio clips. Kaye Mortley (cited in Madsen, 2010), on speaking about documentary work, said: 'what matters is that there is an author, and the author's way of engaging with the subject. For behind all 'documentaire de creation' there must be an author...conjuring worlds of richness and subtlety.'

- **Decision to Include Sound Effects:**

Throughout the project, I had been listening to radio documentaries on RTE 'Doc on One' series, as well as the BBC online database. Though I could not find radio examples that were similar to my own developing documentary, I was keen to familiarise myself with the pace and format of these approved media products – did they underline their interviews with a 'bed' of music? Did they pepper their story with sound effects? If so, how many? Two documentaries whose style I

particularly liked were 'Keeping the Door Open' by Leanne O'Donnell (2014) and 'We Decide Who Lives or Dies' by Ronan Kelly (2016), both on the Doc on One database. I began to take notes as I listened to these products and found that no two documentaries followed the same pattern. The only question to be asked, it seemed, was 'Will this help the listener understand the story better?'

This decision informed editorial choices I made, including the decision to use music as a link to some audio pieces; choosing to include sounds of children playing and laughing; the inclusion of a poem written by a parent; and the inclusion of a recent radio feature on RTE. All inclusions of this sort were added to enhance and support the story that was already emerging for the listener. Some tough calls were made, and several cherished but ill-fitting snippets landed on the edit room floor. These mainly included sound effects and audio extracts which, as was wisely suggested by GCD technical advisor Pat Proctor, were in danger of leaving the piece appearing as an 'over-decorated Christmas Tree.'

- **The Emerging Narrative Arc:**

As the discussion opened up, it became clear that the risk-averse parenting style, which contributed largely to the 'play-date' phenomena, was a symptom of a wider societal shift towards results-targeted parenting and educational styles. As the interview process wore on, I learned to listen more and talk less. Instead of coercing the interviewees into answering the question: 'Are children getting enough time to play freely?', I learned to let them talk about the issue as they perceived it. Whatever advice or opinion they espoused, the contributors to the documentary all shared a common conviction that childhood is precious, and must be protected. As the research had predicted, exacerbators like technology, safety concerns and an increase in adult organised activities emerged in the interviews. I will continue to discuss this in Chapter Four.

## CHAPTER FOUR: DISCUSSION:

In this chapter, I will look back at the progression of 'Caution: Children At Play', and critically comment on the creative and production process.

- **Changes in Direction:**

I submitted my dissertation proposal on March 1<sup>st</sup>, 2017. This pitch aimed to investigate the efficacy of 'play-dates' as a means of meaningful social interaction between children, aged 7-12. It laid out my intentions to discern, through interviews, vox pops and questionnaires, the positive and negative effects of organised play on children and contained a list of potential interviewees that would suit the topics to be addressed.

During the four months between the thesis proposal submission and final thesis submission, the design and structural element of the documentary took its own direction, deviating somewhat from my original proposal. I decided against questionnaires quite early in the process, despite having received permission to conduct them from the Board of Management of St Brigid's BNS. Recording children and their family's voices would provide clearer context and explanation from their point of view, which was a more suitable way of gathering true information for this type of investigation, in my opinion.

Unfortunately, I was forced to make another change when one of my primary sources, Dr. David Carey, became unavailable due to unavoidable personal circumstances. I approached, instead, Dr. John Sharry who agreed to participate as the psychoanalytic voice for the piece. John's passion and commitment to improving the lives of parents and children through his work, coupled with his prolific media presence, made him the ideal candidate to provide the professional psychological opinion to 'Caution: Children At Play'.

The final and most significant difference between the proposal in March and the finished product in August was the decision not to focus on 'play-dates' alone. As discussed in the previous two chapters, the information I gathered in the research and interview stages impelled me to delve further into the question of *why* parents are micro-managing children's play opportunities. To have focused on the play-date culture alone, as I originally had proposed to

do, would have been to miss the point completely. Play dates, symptomatic as they may be of a risk-averse culture, are not necessarily a 'bad' construct. Conversations with Dr. John Sharry, Emily Hourican, and the numerous parents and children I spoke to, all reinforced this point. When 'set up for success', as Dr. Sharry put it, play dates are an effective way of scaffolding a child's social development, and support friendships between children.

I chose, instead, to address the subject on a broader canvas. This meant referring to the perceived main contributors in the decline of free play (technology and growing fears amongst adults for children's safety), and the perceived main solutions to this decline (nurturing creativity and nurturing a relationship with the outdoors.) This new focus only developed as I gained more experience with the interviews process, which I have outlined in detail below.

- **Interviews and Vox-Pops**

When I think back to my first interview with Emily Hourican, I see how much I was seeking to make her agree with me – to confirm that yes, we have a problem with children's play. This is something I learned to do less and less as the interview process moved along. The purpose of a documentary is to let the participants tell their story and allow the narrative to form naturally. Eventually, with practice, I learned to allow the conversation to flow. The interviews immediately felt more natural, and I began to spot connections and overlaps between the contributors. The quality of the interviews therefore improved and made for a more personal, yet comprehensive documentary on the decline in children's free play opportunities.

Approaching people for 'vox pops' was another learning curve I learned to navigate through this process. Again, time and practice proved to be the only solution to this. I learned not to lead with my voice recorder, as this seemed to intimidate some people. I was clear about my purpose in talking to the contributors, but learned to be careful with my phrasing in introducing myself, and posing questions. Confidence, a smile, and a steady hand were the magic ingredients in these situations, I learned.

- **The Editing Process and Omissions:**

The editing process was quite enjoyable, though lengthy. I revised my note-taking system several times before finding the method that worked best for me (Appendix E). This was

definitely the most time-consuming part of the process. This labour, however, proved beneficial when it came to compiling the documentary in the Cool Edit software.

As the project unfolded, various potential avenues of discussion became visible. Naturally, not all could be included in the final product. One topic that I deemed to be less suitable was the well documented, and widely reported, connection between changes in play and growing obesity levels among adolescents. The decision to cut this narrative from the piece was not an easy one but, eventually, I felt that such a serious topic deserved comprehensive, multi-layered analysis, and that 'Caution: Children at Play' was not an appropriate forum for this discussion. I also felt that the topic of obesity is well covered by the media today, whereas unstructured play is not. I did not want to wear out the listener by over-stuffing the piece, and so decided to focus on factors already outline i.e. the increasing dependence on technology and decreasing opportunities for creativity for children today.

I also decided to omit the voices of adults describing how they had played as children. As personal as these anecdotes were, their value to the overall narrative of 'Caution: Children at Play' - suffice for a short reference to provide context for the listener – was relatively little.

## CHAPTER 5 CONCLUSION

In the documentary 'Caution: Children at Play', and in this supporting document, I have attempted to demonstrate how an increasing lack of unstructured play opportunities for children in Ireland is contributing to a generation of young people who are less equipped to deal with the cut-and-thrust of everyday life than their predecessors.

As the documentary exposes, children are busier now than ever before. They are faultlessly caught up in a world which is increasingly more competitive, fast-paced and demanding of them. Parents, too, are struggling to strike a balance between keeping up with this frenzy and nurturing the growth of their precious children. The implications of this, as evidenced by the piece, is that children have less of a relationship with nature, and are less inclined to be creative. They are missing out on the scrapes, trips and triumphs (figuratively and literally) of childhood, leading to a lack of essential coping skills when they reach adulthood.

The solution, as offered by the experts in the documentary, is to scaffold children's exploration by allowing them the freedom to explore and play without supervision, in an environment which is known to be safe by the parent. Not walking them into danger, but allowing them to experience minor feelings of anxiety or fear, so that they learn to overcome these by themselves. We need to trust their ability to judge a situation, and allow them sufficient time and space to comfortably engage in play.

If I could spend more time with this investigation, I would extend the study further afield. All interviews for 'Caution: Children at Play' were based on children who live and play in Dublin. I regret that I did not have the time or resources to extend the study into rural Ireland, where I believe the comparisons between rural and city/suburban children's play would be fascinating to draw.

Considering the generality of the subject matter, I believe the finished product 'Caution: Children at Play' would be suitable for inclusion on mainstream and community radio stations, including the Doc on One series on RTE Radio 1 and the Newstalk documentary programme scheduling. The primary target audience of the piece is, however, mothers and professionals

who work with children. With the NCCA proposals to launch the child-led 'Aistear' programme in primary schools next year, I believe that the completion of 'Caution: Children at Play' is quite timely. I hope it will go some way in supporting the need for a full state review into the decline in children's free play opportunities.

## APPENDIX A:

24<sup>th</sup> May 2017

Dear Parents,

I am currently carrying out some research for a postgraduate MA study with Griffith College, Dublin. The focus of this study is an investigation into the area of children's play. I will be using a variety of data gathering methods in the process which will culminate in a **radio documentary** on the topic, as well as a written dissertation. I am hoping to find a family who would volunteer to take part in the study, which I have outlined below:

The main focus of the research is a study of **how children's play has changed over time**. Having worked with children and teenagers since the age of 16, and having spent 9 years teaching here in St. Brigid's, I have noticed a lot of changes in the way in which children play. These changes are commonly seen as symptomatic of the highly industrialised world in which we live, with factors like oversaturation of interactive media, lack of 'safe' places for children to play and busy after-school lives offered as the major contributors. These developments have occurred quickly, and we know relatively little about their impact on children's play.

I am hoping to accompany one or two families (children, parent(s) and maybe even a grandparent) on a trip to a local playground (eg Cabinteely Park) Through the course of the trip, I will record the participants' responses to questions about play, as well as encouraging them to offer their own opinions on the topic – all the time adhering to Griffith College's Principles of Research Ethics. This audio will be included in the final documentary, with contributors having the choice of anonymity. Along with the voices of families, the documentary will feature the voice of experienced professionals including a child psychologist, and an author and journalist whose work centres on the theme of motherhood.

If you think you would like to participate, or obtain further details on the study, please fill in the form below and I will contact you directly.

Many thanks for taking the time to read this letter,

Best wishes

Caoimhe Cooke

---

I am interested in taking part in the radio documentary on children's play.

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Child's name: \_\_\_\_\_

Contact no: \_\_\_\_\_

**APPENDIX B:**

Interview consent form

I, \_\_\_\_\_, enter into this agreement with Caoimhe Cooke, hereby known as the Producer.

I have been informed and understand that the Producer is producing a radio documentary for academic purposes that may be aired on public and/or commercial radio and other formats.

I hereby grant the Producer the right to use any of said recordings in their productions, whether recorded on or transferred to videotape, film, slides, photographs, audiotapes, print, digital/electronic media or any other media in perpetuity.

This includes, without limitation, the right to edit, mix or duplicate, and to use or reuse said recordings in whole or in part, as they may desire.

I also grant the right to broadcast, exhibit, publish, archive, market and distribute any of said recordings, either alone or as part of its finished productions.

Taking part in this research is voluntary and there will be no consequences for withdrawing.

If you have any questions about this research, please contact:

Caoimhe Cooke, caoimhe.cooke@gmail.com or

Ronan Kelly (Dissertation supervisor), ronan.kelly@griffith.ie

*This project has been approved by the Faculty Research Ethics Committee.*

-----  
I have read the foregoing and fully understand and consent to the terms and stipulations contained therein.

Participant Signature \_\_\_\_\_

PRINTED NAME \_\_\_\_\_

DATE \_\_\_\_\_

Researcher Signature \_\_\_\_\_

## **APPENDIX C:**

### Interview Questions

#### **Emily Hourican:**

1. How old are your children?
2. What have you noticed about the way they play?
3. In your opinion, has the play date situation become exacerbated over time?
4. What do you see as the reasons for this shift?
5. Are children dependent on their parents to sustain and keep friendships going?
6. Did your parents know the parents of the children you played with?
7. With developments like the internet, the world can seem like a scarier place simply because we know more about what is going on in the world. Do you see this as having had an effect?
8. Do you think children get to play with the children they want to these days?
9. Do you think parents feel pressure to be the popular play date mum in order for their children to have a fighting chance of friendships?
10. Is there a pressure to meet people with children of a similar age to your own?

#### **Tom Conaty:**

1. Do you remember how you played as a child?
2. Are children playing the same way – inviting people to play?
3. Do adults give children enough credit these days?
4. What concerns do parent have about the way their children are playing?
5. A report in UL on Childhood Mobility shows that children are playing less and less on the streets – is this something you've seen evidence of?

#### **Questions for John Sharry:**

1. Do you believe children are born with an instinct to play?
2. What is happening within a child when they are at play?
3. What happens when a child's opportunities to play are overly structured?
4. Do adults trust children's capabilities less these days?
5. Is there a belief that children learn best when instructed or led by an adult?

6. Can you explain what it means to 'scaffold' a child's learning?

**Ciara Hinksman:**

1. Would you agree that play is a natural instinct in children?
2. Can you remember some of the ways you played as a child?
3. There has been lots of research suggesting that risk-averse parenting styles have led to a generation of children who have difficulties making decisions and developing coping skills - how can nature courses like yours help to reverse/address this?
4. Why did you see a need for a place like Earth Force education?
5. Can you describe some of the work done at Earth Force Education?
6. What advantages does free play in nature have for children?
7. What feedback have you received from children/educators/parents since beginning your work in this area?

## APPENDIX D

### Sample Email Correspondence:

Hi Emily,

My name is Caoimhe Cooke - I am a final year MA student of Media and Journalism at Griffith College, Dublin.

I have just received approval for my Dissertation study which will be a **radio documentary** on children's play - more specifically a look at **how play has changed over the years** (looking at new phenomena like the play date culture, for example).

I study at night, and work as a Primary School teacher during the day. The changes in the way children play, or don't play, is an area I have increasing interest in, and fears for. As far as I can see, the 'play date' culture seems to be growing and there seems to be a divide among parents, teachers and children about whose interests are served best by them. Lack of 'risky play' opportunities in early childhood has been linked to anxiety disorders in adults, and many professionals believe that this has contributed to the generation of 'millennials' who find it hard to adjust to the responsibility and accountability expected at university level, or the workplace. Without driving the narrative too much, I aim to investigate whether play has become overly structured and to measure what impact, if any, this has on primary school-aged children.

I have been reading a lot of your articles and posts online, and would love to have you as a contributor to the piece if you're interested?

Along with the voices of children on the doc, I have arranged to interview child psychologist Dr. David Carey. I think a voice like yours would be a wonderful addition to the study, bringing the conversation from the theoretical to the practical here and now - how do you feel, as a parent, about the way play has changed? Does it give you any cause for concern for your children's future?

The interview would not take longer than an hour and would be a general discussion about how you perceive modern children's play - is it changing, and how?

The documentary will be go on GCD's online repository, and I aim to circulate it among independent news outlets upon it's completion.

Hi ya, sounds like a very interesting idea! This is a v busy week for me - would you ring me next week, after Monday, and we can chat then?

I'm on 08x xxxxxxxx, Thanks a mil

---

***Anna Bale – UCD Folklore Clection***

Hi Caoimhe,

Thanks for your email and, yes, we can certainly help with your very interesting radio documentary. I work at the latter end of the week so if you'd like to visit some Thursday or Friday that would be fine but I'm afraid we will be **closed to the public next week 'til the 16th** due to building work being done. Are you working to a tight schedule? You can ring me at the number below if you'd like to come in today or tomorrow. In the meantime I can send you some of the very short excerpts I used for the Cruinniú na Cásca talk.

All the best, Anna

--

Anna Bale

National Folklore Collection UCD, Sound/Video Archive

Senior Technical Officer & Research Fellow

F013 John Henry Newman Building, University College Dublin, D4

Hi Anna,

Thank you for getting back to me. I'm delighted that you're willing to help out!

That time frame actually suits me as I have interviews lined up over the next two weeks so I will have a better idea of the shape of the piece by then. How is Thursday 22nd? I could be there anytime from 3pm onwards?

I'd love to listen to any excerpts you send on. Thank you!

Best wishes,

Hi Caoimhe, That's fine - see you on 22nd, c. 3pm. We're located at the back door (Ground floor) of the Newman Building - call me if you need help finding us, All the best,

APPENDIX E

Ciara Interview Breakdown

Transcription	Time	Notes
Forest school definition... Learning edge...nettle.... School types	0 – 4, 43	
Wolf call .... Hawthorn tree...three agreements...safe and happy...careful with stick...inviting each other to play...developing self trust...edgery...using a tool...I'm not allowed to do that in real life...rain		
Learning edge ... we don't want them to go into panic mode...small group ... tinder ...relationship to fire...if you can't get it, learn to restart ... oh no I'm failing... reframing relationships...hold them in the space...scaffolding learning....skills develop..remember the first week...it's in their body...	4, 43	
<b>Played as a child?</b> Always outside...parents had no idea what we were doing...child-led play ... witnessing what they're doing while they're doing risky things...because if we don't let them take risks they have no idea hope cope (9 mins 5s)...accidents can happen .... Find that because they're in the woods their senses are open, using awareness...alive and awake... my childhood was wild and free (9,19 seconds) because I have relationship with the woodlands, I understand how important that is ...never know what's coming with nature (11 mins 03) have to be prepared...cause and effect	8 mins – 11 mins 10 s	
<b>Witnessed children exclaiming that they can't do something?</b> Yes...girl with hill, too steep (12 mins)...show her how ... so she came down a bit... processing it...this isn't my world...my mum opens windows...so able when she came back ...did its magic ... dynamic play areas	11 - 15	Nice anecdote
<b>Resistance from parents?</b> Birthday party ... used a saw .. usually get the kids to carry the equipment...handed a bow saw to this child (15, 58) ..mother looked so upset and said take it off him...parents should come and experience it for themselves...really see what's happening...kids whittling a stick with a potato peeler...I've seen a mom sitting and whittling a stick...every adult thrives when they're given a chance to drop into time outside...appetite?	15 mins 36s - 18	
<b>Demand for this?</b> Training courses ... inaugural conference...	18 - 19	Probably not relevant
Sweet spot of learning...a lot of dialogue and experimentation ....could be part of school, like in UK...	19 mins 47	
<b>Are children hungry for play when they come to you?</b> New every day, all this energy...by 3 <sup>rd</sup> of 4 <sup>th</sup> week getting chilled and can sit...one school used to fight a lot...gender divided...games and things that are helping them to mingle...first few weeks a bit crazy...forest pulls that out of them, they become caretakers and stewards... allow them to love the land before we ask them to	21 mins – 24 min 40	

save it... underpinning thrust in life...coming here themselves...human beings are predisposed to care about the world in which they live in...		
<b>Anecdote:</b> child who was a 'school refuser' ...up a tree leading a game...enabling himself to have fun...		
<b>Fun is happy biproduct?</b> People heal through play (26, 03) re-forge broken relationships... connective...games where we have stand beside each other...climbing a tree...very grounding...big stuff is happening while they're playing... there is real power in knowing that you can create your own safe place to be in ... how was that for you (dogs fighting her)		Dog fighting...contemplating leaving it out but could it be appropriate? Primal playing.
<b>Your background?</b> Didn't know what I wanted...fell in love with art...art therapy...speaking my language...where are our elders... nature is the medium, here's loads of indigenous tools, took this as my way forward...built a shelter...really went for it... Earth Force Education was born...forest school looking at whole child ... although it feels like the ids are having free-play (34 mins)	29 mins 30	*Suspect this is irrelevant to subject matter
<b>Neuroscience behind play - can you elaborate?</b> Two learning theories...Balby and attachment theory... children are not trying to do anything more than turn up as well as they can...neuropathways form around skills and abilities...wish we had them for longer .... (36 mins ) These kids were coming to school class just to come... Fully engaged...	34 mins 40 s	
<b>What are the 'enemies'?</b> A lot of things creating a distraction...don't have to engage...emotionally challenging as they get older...some baseline or connection with the woodlands would be great...schools give this in blocks...it's all areas of the curriculum	37 mins 06 – 38 mins, 50	
<b>Can it breakdown cliques?</b> Yes...first week girls went one way and boys went another...by last session all mixed in together...worked together to pull it up...kept encouraging them...	39 mins	
<b>Future?</b> Trainers...	42	
<b>Like to add?</b> Barriers...we need an 'aware culture'...incredibly risk assessed...guardian tree (46 mins 40)...trees are sacred	44	Trails off towards end
Something happening with our relationship to nature...takes in our feeling ... act out a bit...time out with trees.. mud trees ...dream catchers...	47 50	
Ciara shows me plants like plantain, dandelion head. We make dream catchers. She shows me how to cut the willow tea for cleaning cathar. I struggle with the cutting tool and she tells me to have a go again. It's soothing. It breaks in my hand. She tells me to 'whisper it into shape.' It works! It's the opposite to how I do everything – pushing, pulling, twisting It's all about taking a breath. Taking time I feel great, I leave feeling very happy and content.)	50 mins 40	

## **APPENDIX F:**

### **Script - Narration and Intro**

Eminent child psychologist Jean Piaget wrote that children require long, uninterrupted periods of play and exploration.

Having worked with children and teenagers since the age of 16, and spent the last 9 years as a primary school teacher, I have noticed a lot of changes in the way in which children play.

These changes have occurred quickly and we know relatively little about their impact on children. What research is suggesting, however, is a worrying trend which charts a decrease in 'free-play' and an increase in mental illness among adolescents.

There are fears that young people are losing the sense that they have control over their own lives. Many professionals believe that this has contributed to a generation of young people who find it hard to adjust to the responsibility and accountability expected of them at university level, and in the workplace.

Through conversations with professionals, families and children, this documentary will attempt to identify how children are playing today, and assess what implications these play patterns may have for them in the future.

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Dr. John Sharry is a Social worker, a child and family psychotherapist, and the founder of Parents Plus charity

Tom Conaty is a poet, teacher and principal with over 30 years' experience in the field of education, and is currently the principal of the The Zion Parish School in Rathgar.

Ciara Hinksman, delivers outdoor workshops to children and adults across Ireland. In 2009, she founded the forest school programme 'Earth Force Education'. We met in Castleruddery Organic Farm, Wicklow, where she carries out her work.

A report released in 2015 into Children's Independent Mobility in Ireland

attempted to gauge children's and parents' perceptions of safety and mobility in their local area.

The study was conducted with children and parents from twenty-five schools across the island of Ireland, and compared to 15 other countries worldwide.

This study distinguishes itself from many other reports on children's lives because it actively involved children, and it gave effect to their voices.

The data that emerged showed that Ireland was twelfth among the sixteen locations in terms of childhood mobility.

Finland emerged as the country with the highest levels.

The study showed that over three-quarters of Irish primary school children were accompanied by an adult while travelling to school, and that nearly one quarter of Irish children (23%) admitted to being worried about strangers when they are outside on their own.

Parents' responses revealed concerns about anti-social behaviour and possible intimidation in their locality. The report also revealed that children have been excluded from some public spaces through formal restrictions being put in place, and their preferred activities being curtailed. The removal of skateboarding ramps, and planning restrictions on tree houses are given as examples of the encroachment being made on children's autonomy and freedom.

Sample Ethical Participation form:

**APPENDIX G:**

	Audio Clip	Description of Audio
1.	Montage- Children's Voices	Defining play in their own words Ciara people heal through play, emotionally satisfying
2.	Intro	My voice
3.	<b>Dr. John Sharry</b>	Play is crucial part of a child's development part of relaxing the family ... learn best when exploring...most connected times between parents and children...
4.	Montage – Adult voices	Noel, Shazhad, Ciara remembering how they played Max remembering how his dad played
5.	Narration	But play is changing.
6.	<b>Dr. John Sharry</b>	Adults over structuring, cossetting children.
7.	<b>Max</b>	Climbing tree
8.	<b>Emily Hourican/Narration</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Having kids is not easy, and you're really prey to the media.</li> </ul> <p align="center"><b>Narrate...</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Less separation between adults and children, children more used to parental supervision... 40 seconds</li> <li>- Our children's future will be distinctly tricky, We're all thinking ahead, will they get a certificate?</li> </ul>
9.	Vox Pop	Children listing activities
10.	<b>Emily Hourican</b>	Parental judgment and guilt Frieda my mum was working, we had a freer time
11.	Montage	Parents in the park 'children are children for far too long now' /Children on safety – playing well, stranger danger
12.	<b>Dr. John Sharry</b>	Purpose of play dates to promote friendship. One to one.
13.	<b>Emily Hourican</b>	
14.	Vox Pop	Teenager's descriptions of playdates

15.	<b>Dr. John Sharry</b>	Technology
16.	RTE bulletin	Technology and play
17.	<b>Tom Conaty</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- We are educating children for a jobs world</li> <li>- There is an absence of location that children are deprived ...technology take experience of the world 32 sec</li> <li>- Every Individual has a right their mark organically</li> </ul> <p>If we start off with childhood first of all, playful Technology; development of 'self'; creativity and art; nature Cannot talk about play unless the adults are playful, deadly serious while playing</p>
18.	Narration	Report on mobility
19.	<b>Ciara Hinksman</b>	<p>We might play games where they have their shoulders touching... 36 seconds</p> <p>A couple of years ago... (anecdote) 1 min 53</p> <p>...Narration...</p> <p>What we're doing here is holding space...risk thing that are risk assessed 57 sec</p> <p>Children create neuropathways...not hardwired later in life 17 sec</p> <p>Outdoor play; self esteem; building shelter; grounding</p>
20.	<b>The Kelly Family</b>	<p>Emily: Confidence built stone by stone</p> <p>Max story of getting bay leaves – 18 seconds</p>
21.	<b>Dr. John Sharry and Tom</b>	<p>Scaffolding learning, leading the way</p> <p>Ciara 'we don't want them to go into panic mode'</p>
22.	<b>Tom Conaty</b>	<p>Poem</p> <p>Play and playfulness; the centre cannot hold without play;</p>

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