



# The new frontier: A social ecological exploration of parents' supporting physically active play with young children in the home

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## INTRODUCTION

*A burgeoning number of children are now being affected by the problem of obesity and inactivity. Forging a new path in terms of getting 'inside' the problem, this research was motivated by the desire to understand the subtleties and nuances of parents' 'lived experiences' (a naturalistic model).*

This study aims to provide a rare window into a sample of parents' understandings and choices in providing physical activity, experiences and environments whilst also contributing to the limited body of knowledge of the contextual influences that impact on these areas. With these intentions in mind the research focuses on three main goals.

❖ **Goal 1 - Contribute to understanding the types of physical activity experiences, opportunities and environments that are being supported within the home with children four years and under.**

❖ **Goal 2 – Engage specifically on dialogues and conversations with parents with the aim of drilling down further into understanding the phenomenon of the micro-environment (the family home).** This discourse focused on parents' beliefs, choices, knowledge and understandings of physical activity experiences and whether they consider that the outcomes of these experiences contribute to a range of health outcomes and areas of development including physical development, cognitive development and social development (in particular bonding).

❖ **Goal 3 - Investigate the barriers and enablers identified by parents in providing movement experiences for children.** There is also a growing body of research that confirms the critical role that parents have in influencing not only dietary practices but also the attitudes to and the amounts of activity that young children engage in (Hills, et al., 2007; Krebs & Johnson, 2000; Lindsay, et al., 2006; Spurrier, et al., 2008; Whitaker, et al., 1997).

## METHODOLOGY

*Adopting a case study method, this study explored the contextual influences impacting on parents' understandings of and their practices for supporting physical activity and active play behaviours with children in the home. The study developed a multi-dimensional model that extended on the social ecological model to help make sense of social practices, beliefs and values often beyond the immediate micro-context to the family home.*

## Conclusion

*Investigating the complex and interrelated factors that influence paediatric inactivity and the contextual influences impacting on parents' understandings and practices is like venturing into unknown territory or exploring a 'new frontier' as it a key into understanding a significant part understanding the complex puzzle pertaining to paediatric inactivity.*



## Significant grants and associated

**2008 – \$150,000 - Alice Brown** (part of team with Chief Researcher Robert Eley). Investigating the stakeholders, opportunities and key entry points for increasing physical activity participation in rural communities in Queensland (HPQ 00.01/19)

**2007 - \$16,500 – Chief Researcher – Alice Brown**, (Principal Investigator Malcolm Lewis from Queensland Health). South Burnett - Early movement and stimulation project. Funding Body: Graham House (Research Consultancy)

### Reports

**Brown, A.** (2009). South Burnett Early Movement and Stimulation Project. Toowoomba: University of Southern Queensland.

### Books

**Landy, J., & Brown, A.** (2008). *Kids with more zip: A wellness resource for educators and parents to develop active children ages 3-12*. Perth, WA: Family Health Publications.

### Chapters in edited books

**Brown, A.** (2008). Towards a new frontier in understanding the contextual influences on paediatric inactivity. In R. Henderson & P. A. Danaher (Eds.), *Troubling terrains: Tactics for traversing and transforming contemporary educational research* (pp. 149-168). Teneriffe, Qld: Post Pressed.

### Resources

**Brown, A.** (2009). *Connecting with Kids Cards*. Resource developed to support active play and bonding opportunities with parents, primary carers and support staff, USQ.

**Brown, A.** (2007). *Infant Massage and Nappy Aerobics DVD*. USQ.

### Conference Paper/Presentation

**Brown, A., & Williams, J.** (July 5, 2008). Freedom to move. Freedom to play. Freedom to learn. *Paper presented at the Birth to Three Matters Conference*, Griffith University, Brisbane, Qld.

**Brown, A.** (Issue 61, 2008). Parents – The key to a child's long term health and wellbeing. *First Steps: Official magazine of Toddler Kindy GympaROO and Toddler KindyROO*, 7-8.

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## INTRODUCTION

The key aim of the 'South Burnett – Early Stimulation and Movement project' was to pioneer partnerships with families and local support networks in the SB region and develop an understanding of their contexts. This project was underpinned by a strength-based paradigm that acknowledged the significant contribution families and key agencies in contact with families have in disseminating information and supporting experiences with bonding and attachments as well as routines that stimulate early brain development using physical activity strategies. This study invited key agencies (early childhood services, playgroups, schools, community health agencies, support networks and other organisations that support families and protect children) and parents of young children to share their stories and experiences. The aim of documenting and analysing this information being to develop a deeper appreciation of the region's contextual issues, particularly in terms of supporting strong attachment relationships and the health and well-being of young children.

Further to this, the research aimed at gaining a better understanding of the constraints on and enablers of these stakeholders in supporting early movement and bonding opportunities 'connecting' with young children and produce knowledge and action that would be valued by these groups. After consultation with key stakeholders on how they acquired and used information (in particular in relation to bonding, attachment and active play) and their preferred avenues for information dissemination, the final stage of this project was to report back to stakeholders insights from the study and share a contextualised resource that emerged from and was developed for stakeholders titled the 'Connecting with Kids Cards'.

## METHODOLOGY

**Case study was used for this research** as it best afforded a 'real life' glimpse and contextual understanding of what was happening in relation to attachment, bonding and active play in the South Burnett community (Yin, 2003). This was important in this study as these particular stakeholders were identified as being at the heart of influencing and supporting the values, beliefs and attitudes of families and children (Baranowski, Cullen, Nicklas, Thompson, & Baranowski, 2003; Müller, Danielzi, & Pust, 2005).

**Participants in this study included:** playgroup mothers, community development workers, centre care workers, community support services and parents and were recruited primarily from contacts and referrals with key agencies in the South Burnett community. Data collection primarily involved semi-structured interviews assisted by audio recording. **These interviews examined the following topics with participants:**

- ❖ perspectives and context;
- ❖ constraints on and enablers of supporting movement experiences with very young children (birth to 5);
- ❖ views and experiences with quality attachment and bonding and how early movement routines can support this (commonly referred to as 'connecting' with children);
- ❖ perceptions and feedback on how stakeholders acquired and used information and their preferred avenues for information dissemination.

## Conclusion

**Cascading connections: building strong and effective partnerships**

After final meetings and consultation with key stakeholders a range of ideas were put forward as to how the community and stakeholders would benefit from ongoing support, collaboration and information from research and community health representatives. A key priority was the need to build community capacity to promote secure attachments and active play opportunities whilst addressing child outcomes. It was also raised that the 'Connecting with Kids Cards' could offer a tool for supporting parent's knowledge of child development, parental relationships and active play as a form of protective factor. Researchers and community health could support service providers and early intervention specialists with the ideas in the cards, disseminate practical parenting strategies to parents of young children in these disadvantaged communities with high rates of child abuse and other poor child outcomes.

**There is strong evidence that healthy attachments & bonding improve child outcomes.** Interventions based on one on one or group methods have been proven to modify these outcomes. Missing in a public health model of prevention, are complimentary, brief & cheap, universal interventions can improve attachment, bonding & associated processes (brain development, self regulation, parenting sensitivity, safety). Cascading connections would aim to use action research methods to explore how to translate this research into practice and to reorient services and build parenting skills in contextualised settings.



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