

WAYS OF SPENDING LEISURE TIME BY PRESCHOOL CHILDREN – A COMPARATIVE STUDY

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Abstract: *The research aimed to comparatively analyze how preschool children spent their leisure time in 2013 and 2024. A questionnaire survey was the method used in the study. The research included two groups: the group of parents of preschool children investigated in 2013 and the group of parents investigated in 2024. Parks with playground areas for children remain a top option for children's leisure time ($M= 3.69$ in 2024; $M= 3.56$ in 2013). Playrooms and the Children's Club ranked in the last positions. The comparative analysis of leisure-time activities for preschool children showed that, while in 2013 "we go outside and he/she plays with other children" held the first position among leisure time activities ($M=3.49$), in 2024 this activity ranks second ($M=4.18$), with "I play various games with him/her" in first position ($M=4.30$), which in 2013 had been in third position ($M=3.23$). The last two positions remain the same for both investigated years: "we go to museums, tourist attractions" (M 2013 – 1.91; M 2024 - 2.85) and "we play on the computer" (M 2013 – 1.86; M 2024 - 2.02).*

Keywords: *preschoolers, leisure time activities, places for spending leisure time.*

Introduction

Regarding leisure time, R.A. Stebbins (2018) stated that it refers to leisure time as non-work and leisure time as entertainment— a perspective specific to the adult world. If we adapt this definition for preschool children, leisure time would be the time remaining after they return from kindergarten, without taking into account time for routines: sleep, eating, hygiene. If, for the adult world, the entertainment perspective appears for leisure time, for children's leisure time we add, beyond recreation (Dumazedier, 1974; Godbey, 1994), the following aspects: education—learning an active-healthy lifestyle, learning about moral values (Henderson et al., 2007; Shaw & Dawson, 2010), self-development (Zarezadeh, Rastegar, 2023), psychological well-being

(Stark et al., 2025) and, last but not least, cognitive development, learning (Squires, 2025).

Background

Leisure-time activities in preschool childhood, include: various hobbies, sports, toys and games, outdoor play, reading, watching television and other devices, spending time in the city, etc. (McHale, Crouter, Tucker, 2003). A 2024 study highlights that, alongside the traditional childhood of children who stay outdoors, we distinguish “indoor children” and “children from the backseat generation”. These two new types are characterized by a decrease in outdoor play and an increase in adult supervision. Recent decades show that children’s play has shifted from free play and mobility to various organized, adult-led activities, with parents considering it necessary to control children in order to prevent urban risks and ensure protection (Silonsaari, Simula, Brömmelstroet, 2024). Children’s outdoor physical activity has sharply decreased compared to the previous generation and the factors that influence children’s participation in outdoor physical activity depend on: (1). basic demographic characteristics—parents’ education level and family income; (2). family characteristics, parents’ attitudes toward children’s participation, their encouragement and support (Deng, Liu, Long, 2024). Although this may be considered a loss, new activities for children have emerged, both outdoors and indoors (Karsten, 2005).

Parent–child interactions are very important for children’s emotional and behavioral development. Regression analyses showed that parents’ investment in child–parent time was significantly associated with parent–child closeness, even after controlling for a number of factors related to relationship quality (Zabidi, Hastings, Totsika, 2023). The family is one of the important environments for the development of children’s health. In a 2014 study, Berntsson & Ringsberg observed that activities that were significantly positively associated with children’s health in ages 2 to 6 were: play/games, going to the cinema, theatre and sports events, reading books, playing musical instruments/singing, sports activities, watching TV/video/DVDs. Another study, from 2015, presents approximately the same activities carried out by parents together with children during the week: outings in the city (walks, hiking, playing on the playground), reading (often before bedtime) and, for the weekend: computer games, watching television, activities in hobby clubs and groups (Havigerová, Šnoblová, Truhlářová, 2015). Soori (2006) considered that children’s preferred activities were: football (22,3%), cycling (13,2%), watching television (12,3%), and they reported that their preferred places to play are: the street (27,4%), the park/playground (18,3%) and home (17,8%). Urban

public places and their environmental characteristics influence children's physical activity, with urban design recommendations being made depending on their age and gender (Scheller, et al., 2024). Parents take into account: the safety offered by the environment, the abundance of natural materials (Gao, Zhu, Cheng, 2024), temporal aspects (day of the week or weekend day), mode of transport (Ng, Kim, Koh, 2025), accessibility (Mullenbach et al., 2022), the social safety of the neighborhood environment (Son & Kim, 2024), parents' attitudes toward risk and injury (Jerebine et al., 2023), the child's age (relatively low levels of physical activity are observed before age 1, a peak in the early years of childhood, and a subsequent decline—MacDonald & Parke, 1986). In addition, children's physical activity also depends on: parents' age, education level, exercise habits, or number of siblings (Cheng, Wang, Hsia-Ling, 2025). Thus, children who had an older parent, with high-school/university education, a monthly household income above 2,200 US dollars, living in rural areas, and having siblings at home recorded better performance in terms of physical activity. Rodríguez-Rodríguez et al. (2025) also observe the existence of a correlation between parents' physical activity levels and those of children. Moore et al. (1991) further analyzed mothers versus fathers' physical activity, finding: children of active mothers had a 2,0 times higher probability of being active than children of inactive mothers (95% confidence interval = 0,9, 4,5) and the relative odds ratio of being active for children of active fathers was 3,5 (95% confidence interval = 1,5, 8,3). When both parents were active, children had a 5,8 times higher probability of being active (95% confidence interval = 1,9, 17,4) than children with two inactive parents (Santos et al., 2025). During exploratory activities in various outdoor natural environments, children's interest develops; they accumulate direct experiences, are receptive to acquiring factual information, and reflect on the knowledge they apply (Skalstad & Munkebye, 2022). Physical activity combined with other interventions has a significant effect both on body mass index and on anxiety symptoms (Chen et al., 2024; Wu et al., 2025).

The proportion of moderate-to-vigorous physical activity during free outdoor play was significantly higher than that during free indoor play. On the other hand, there was no significant difference between the proportion of movement physical activity performed during free play outdoors and the proportion within sport activities. After adjustment by sex, age, height and body weight, there were no significant differences in the proportion of movement physical activity within sport lessons. In conclusion, children achieved nearly 30~40% of movement physical activity during free play outdoors or in sport (Tanaka et al., 2019).

Watchman & Spencer-Cavaliere (2017) conducted a study examining parents' perspectives on free play and sport as activities practiced by children. Both free play and sport were considered important; however, the experiences gained in children's sport were considered to be of greater value for children's overall development and, therefore, were prioritized. Researchers found the complex nature of raising children and the pressures exerted by different levels of influence on the decisions they make regarding children's well-being, in the contexts of free play and sport.

Access to playful outdoor experiences is very important for children's physical, social, cognitive, and emotional development. Outdoors, the following are available: open/grass areas, fixed equipment, or sandy spaces and playgrounds (with gardens, rocks, trees and water—Wishart et al., 2019), and open/grass areas and paved areas were locations in which children spend their leisure time (73%-100%), and for indoor activities, books and games are frequently used (Clevenger, Pfeiffer, 2021).

Children's physical activity and play are essential for healthy development, and parks/playgrounds are important public spaces that provide opportunities for physical activity/play. In 2022, Anderson & Whaley evaluated changes in children's attendance at parks/playgrounds, with an increase in attendance being recorded in 2011–2017 compared to 2008. Veitch et al. (2021), following a conducted study, offered three variants of parks desired by children: parks that look like a large adventure playground with a giant slide and interactive areas for visiting the park; parks that resemble an obstacle course and have a giant slide for physical activities; or parks that feature interactive areas and an obstacle course for social interaction. Swings, playground areas and play structures were associated with a greater number of children engaged in physical activities (Barenie et al., 2024). However, playgrounds in urban parks may also present risks of exposure to microplastics, through inhalation or ingestion, via hand-to-mouth transfer (Koutnik et al., 2023). Swimming pools are another option loved by children for spending leisure time, but parents are concerned about children's safety. Three parental beliefs were identified regarding pool safety: behavioral beliefs about learning swimming skills and preventing drowning/injury; normative beliefs about family members' approval; and control beliefs about time spent (Hamilton, Keech, Peden, 2025).

The results of a study conducted by Gracia (2015) show that parents' social position has significant positive effects on parent–child cultural activities and negative effects on watching TV programs. Including high-quality theatre arts programs in children's early education can

provide them with a fun and engaging experience, while also offering support: in getting to know oneself and getting to know the world (Steinhardt, 1994), coping with illness, hospitalization, pain (Tilbrook et al., 2016), and developing resilience (Stange et al., 2025). In closing, we discuss parents' reading behavior. Regarding this, Wollscheid (2014) found: the reading behavior of both parents has a stronger impact on daughters' reading behavior. At the same time, the results support the gender-stereotype hypothesis, indicating that fathers have a stronger impact on sons' reading behavior and that mothers have a stronger impact on daughters' reading behavior. In addition, mothers' reading behavior seems to have a stronger impact on the reading socialization of younger children, while fathers' reading behavior seems to be of greater importance for the reading socialization of older children.

Methodology

The primary objective of the research was to comparatively analyze how preschool children spend their leisure time in both years 2013 and 2024. Two objectives were delineated: (1) the comparative analysis of places for spending leisure time by preschoolers, and (2) the comparative analysis of leisure-time activities for preschool children. A questionnaire survey was the method used in the research. The research instrument was a questionnaire, developed and validated for this study (Cronbach's Alpha coefficient = .893, indicating high internal consistency of the instrument). The questionnaire included four dimensions: information about the child's life, information about ways of spending leisure time, information about the child's leisure time, and identification data. Items included dichotomous-choice items, multiple-choice items, and Likert-scale items.

The research comprised two large groups: the group of parents of preschool children investigated in 2013 and the group of parents investigated in 2024. The 2013 participant group included 162 parents of preschool children. Of these, 79.6% (129 participants) were female and 20.4% (33 participants) were male. The mean age of the group was 35.07 years. In terms of age categories, most participants were aged 31–40 years (123 participants; 75.9%), followed by 20 participants (12.3%) aged 21–30 years, 18 participants (11.1%) aged 41–50 years, and 1 participant (0.6%) aged over 50 years. Regarding marital status, 148 parents (91.4%) reported being married; 7 parents were unmarried (4.3%), 5 parents (3.1%) were divorced, and 2 parents (1.2%) were widowed. Most parents (58%) had one child, 38.3% had two children, 3.1% had three children, and only 0.6% had more than three children.

The children of the investigated parents were female (88; 54.3%) and male (74; 45.7%).

Most children (58% - 94 participants) had birth order 1, 38.3% (62 participants) had birth order 2, 3.1% (5 participants) had birth order 3, and only 0.6% (1 participant) had birth order 4. For most parents (77.16%—125 participants), children attended a kindergarten with extended schedule (8 hours), while the remaining children (22.84%—37 participants) attended a kindergarten with short schedule (4 hours). Regarding income, 59 parents (36.4%) stated that the family's monthly income was approximately 400 Euro, followed by 42 parents (25.9%) who reported income above 400 Euro, 31 parents (19.1%) who reported an income of 350 Euro, and 4.9% (8 participants) who reported 300 Euro, with the remaining 6 parents (3.7%) reporting an income of 250 Euro.

The 2024 participant group included 130 participants, parents of preschool children. The parents were 91.5% (119 participants) female and 8.5% (11 participants) male. The mean age of the group was 35.87 years. In terms of age categories, most participants were aged 31–40 years (85 participants; 65.4%), followed by 24 participants (18.5%) aged 41–50 years, 20 participants (15.4%) aged 21–30 years, and 1 participant (0.8%) aged over 50 years. Most investigated participants were married—90.8% (118 participants), while 6.9% (9 participants) were cohabiting and 2.3% (3 participants) were divorced. Most parents (46.9%—61 participants) reported having one child, 42.3% (55 participants) had two children, 9.2% (12 participants) had three children, and only 1.5% (2 participants) had more than three children. The children of the investigated parents were female (79; 60.8%) and male (51; 39.2%). Most children (58.5%—76 participants) had birth order 1, 36.2% (47 participants) had birth order 2, 3.8% (5 participants) had birth order 3, and only 1.5% (2 participants) had birth order 4. For most parents (78.5%—102 participants), children attended a kindergarten with extended schedule (8 hours), while the remaining children (21.5%—28 participants) attended a kindergarten with short schedule (4 hours). Regarding family monthly income, most families—52 (40%)—reported an income above 1600 Euro; 17 families (13.1%) reported income between 800–1000 Euro; 16 families (12.3%) reported income between 1000–1200 Euro, and between 1400–1600 Euro; 12 families (9.2%) reported income between 1200–71400 Euro; 11 families (8.5%) reported income between 600–800 Euro; and 4 families (3.1%) reported income below 600 Euro. In addition, 2 participants (1.5%) refused to answer this item. Data were collected in the period April–May 2013, and 2024.

Consent was obtained before administering the instruments; participants were informed about the purpose of the research, the method and the research instrument, the associated risks, and their rights as research participants. Participants were assured of data confidentiality. On average, completing the questionnaire took 15–20 minutes for each participant.

Results

The first objective was to compare places where preschoolers spend leisure time with their parents. As shown in Table no.1, parks with designated play areas remained the highest-rated option in both years (M=3.69 in 2024; M=3.56 in 2013) (Soori, 2006, Anderson & Whaley, 2022). For the second position, we note a slight reversal: in 2024, parks occupy this position (M=3.55) (Soori, 2006), whereas in 2013, children's playgrounds held the second position (M=3.25) (Anderson & Whaley, 2022). We mentioned that the positions are reversed: children's playgrounds, which in 2024 are in third place (M=2.90), while parks were in third position (M=3) in 2013. Puppet theatres / venues where performances for children take place (Berntsson & Ringsberg, 2014) move up one position: if in 2013 they occupied fifth position (M=2.04), in 2024 we find them in fourth position (M=2.55). Places where artistic activities can be practiced (music, dance, visual arts activities, creative activities) also move from seventh position in 2013 (M=1.65) to fifth position (M=2.53) (Berntsson & Ringsberg, 2014). Cinemas / places where films are shown also advance, moving from eleventh position in 2013 (M=1.28) to ninth position in 2024 (M=2.11) (Berntsson & Ringsberg, 2014).

No.	Ways of spending leisure time	M	SD	M	SD
		2024	2024	2013	2013
1	Parks with designated play areas for children	3.69	.703	3.56	.892
2	Parks	3.55	1.086	3	1.351
3	Children's playgrounds	2.90	.939	3.25	.980
4	Puppet theatres / venues where performances for children take place	2.55	.941	2.04	1.100
5	Places where artistic activities can be practiced (music, dance, visual arts activities, creative activities)	2.53	1.101	1.65	1.112
6	Swimming pools / swimming basins	2.40	1.008	2.04	1.179
7	Venues for celebrating children's birthdays	2.39	.992	2.22	1.146
8	Ice rinks	2.12	.978	1.67	1.085
9	Cinemas / venues where films are shown	2.11	.819	1.28	.798
10	Sports clubs	2.00	1.042	1.32	.969

No.	Ways of spending leisure time	M 2024	SD 2024	M 2013	SD 2013
11	Gyms / places where sports activities can be practiced	1.93	.974	1.52	1.065
12	Children's libraries	1.85	.944	1.25	.827
13	Playrooms	1.70	.912	1.09	.754
14	Children's Club	1.68	.872	1.45	.985

Table no. 1. Comparative values of the means for 2013 and 2024

Compared with 2013, several locations declined in mean in 2024:

- swimming pools/basins fell from 5th in 2013 ($M = 2.04$) to 6th in 2024 ($M = 2.40$) (Hamilton, Keech, & Peden, 2025).
- venues for children's birthday celebrations fell from 4th ($M = 2.22$) to 7th ($M = 2.39$).
- ice rinks fell from 6th ($M = 1.67$) to 8th ($M = 2.12$).
- gyms/venues for organised sports activities fell from 8th ($M = 1.52$) to 11th ($M = 1.93$).
- children's clubs fell from 9th ($M = 1.45$) to 14th ($M = 1.68$).

By contrast, mean stability was observed for sports clubs (10th; $M = 1.32$ in 2013 and $M = 2.00$ in 2024) and libraries (12th; $M = 1.25$ in 2013 and $M = 1.85$ in 2024). Compared with 2013, several locations declined in mean 2024 despite higher mean for these options. Next, Pearson correlation coefficients were examined, with statistical significance set at $p < .01$ (see Table no. 2).

Correlation elements	2013	2024
Parks and cinemas	.374**	-
Parks and gyms / places where sports activities can be practiced	.320**	-
Parks and parks with designated play areas for children	.439**	.412**
Cinemas and theatres	.439**	.446**
Cinemas and swimming pools / basins	-	.400**
Cinemas and gyms / places where sports activities can be practiced	.400**	-
Cinemas and ice rinks	.378**	-
Cinemas and artistic activities	.489**	-
Cinemas and libraries	.488*	-
Cinemas and playrooms	.339**	-
Cinemas and venues for celebrating children's birthdays	.348**	-
Theatres and gyms / places where sports activities can be practiced	.304**	-
Theatres and artistic activities	.404**	-
Theatres and libraries	.350**	-

Correlation elements	2013	2024
Theatres and venues for celebrating children's birthdays	.352**	-
Swimming pools / basins and gyms / places where sports activities can be practiced	.317**	.403**
Swimming pools / basins and playrooms	.374**	-
Swimming pools / basins and ice rinks		.410**
Gyms / places where sports activities can be practiced and ice rinks	.366**	-
Gyms / places where sports activities can be practiced and libraries	.458**	-

**** Pearson correlations were computed ($\alpha = .01$).**

Table no. 2. Comparative values of Pearson correlations

As shown in Table no. 2:

- only positive correlation values were recorded, and these values are only moderate.
- in both investigated years, correlations were recorded between: parks and parks with designated areas for children; cinemas and theatres; swimming pools / basins and gyms / places where sports activities can be practiced.
- parents who go with their children to parks also go to cinemas, to gyms / places where sports activities can be practiced, and to parks with designated play areas for children.
- parents who attend cinemas together with their children also go to other cultural activities (theatre, artistic activities, libraries, toy libraries) or sports activities (swimming pools / basins, gyms, ice rinks) or venues for celebrating children's birthdays.
- parents who go to theatre together with their children also go to various artistic activities, attend cinemas together with their children, also go to other cultural activities, to libraries, or venues for celebrating children's birthdays.
- parents who go to swimming pools / basins also go with their children to: gyms / places where sports activities can be practiced, to toy libraries, and to ice rinks; they also take their children to ice rinks or to libraries.

We continue with the second objective of the research: the comparative analysis of leisure-time activities for preschool children (see Table no. 3).

No.	Parent-child activities	Mean 2024	Std. dev. 2024	Mean 2013	Std. dev. 2013
1	I play various games with him/her	4.30	.920	3.23	1.259
2	We go outside and he/she plays with other children	4.18	.952	3.49	1.393
3	We go for walks, go out into nature	4.11	.990	3.45	1.410
4	I read to him/her: stories, poems, various writings for children	4.03	1.056	3.12	1.446
5	We watch various TV programs	3.15	1.264	2.64	1.685
6	We go to theatre performances, children's opera, other cultural-artistic events	3.08	1.227	2.02	2.169
7	We go to various sports activities	3.05	1.394	2.12	2.151
8	We go to museums, tourist attractions	2.85	1.164	1.91	2.216
9	We play on the computer	2.02	1.204	1.86	1.816

Table no. 3. Comparative values of the means for parent-child activities, 2013 and 2024

The top three positions involved the same activities in both years, although their order changed. In 2013, “We go outside and he/she plays with other children” ranked first ($M = 3.49$), whereas in 2024 it ranked second ($M = 4.18$), with “I play various games with him/her” ranking first ($M = 4.30$); in 2013, this activity ranked third ($M = 3.23$) (Berntsson & Ringsberg, 2014; Havigerová, Šnoblová, Truhlářová, 2015). “We go for walks, go out into nature” ranked second in 2013 ($M = 3.45$) and third in 2024 ($M = 4.11$) (Clevenger, Pfeiffer, 2021). The last two positions remained unchanged in both years: “We go to museums, tourist attractions” ($M = 1.91$ in 2013; $M = 2.85$ in 2024) (Berntsson & Ringsberg, 2014) and “We play on the computer” ($M = 1.86$ in 2013; $M = 2.02$ in 2024).

Conclusions

With regard to the ranks assigned to places where children spend their leisure time, increases were recorded from 2013 and 2024 for the following: parks; puppet theatres/venues where children's performances take place; places where artistic activities can be practiced (music, dance, visual arts, creative activities); cinemas/venues where films are screened. If we have discussed increases, we will also highlight decreases in ranks from 2013 to 2024 for: swimming pools; venues for children's birthday parties; ice rinks; sports halls/venues where sports activities can be practiced; the Children's Club; and children's playgrounds. The following leisure-time locations remained in the same position: parks with designated

play areas for children, sports clubs, children's libraries, and toy libraries.

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