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# Motivations and challenges for grandparent–grandchild outdoor play in early childhood: Perception of Canadian grandparents

Mathilde Duflos<sup>1,2</sup>  | Juliana Lane<sup>1</sup> | Mariana Brussoni<sup>1,2,3,4,5</sup> 

<sup>1</sup>Department of Pediatrics, University of British Columbia, Vancouver, BC, Canada

<sup>2</sup>British Columbia Children's Hospital Research Institute, Vancouver, BC, Canada

<sup>3</sup>School of Population and Public Health, University of British Columbia, Vancouver, BC, Canada

<sup>4</sup>Human Early Learning Partnership, University of British Columbia, Vancouver, BC, Canada

<sup>5</sup>British Columbia Injury Research and Prevention Unit, British Columbia Children's Hospital Research Institute, Vancouver, BC, Canada

## Correspondence

Mariana Brussoni, BC Children's Hospital, F511 – 4480 Oak Street, Vancouver, BC V6H 3V4, Canada.

Email: [mbrussoni@bcchr.ubc.ca](mailto:mbrussoni@bcchr.ubc.ca)

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## Abstract

**Objective:** We investigated grandparents' motivations and challenges for grandparent–grandchild outdoor play with their 3- to 5-year-old grandchildren.

**Background:** Outdoor play benefits children's and older persons' mental and physical health. Thus, inter-generational outdoor play could benefit both grandparents and their younger grandchildren.

**Method:** Semistructured interviews were conducted with 14 grandparents (seven grandmothers and seven grandfathers) from British Columbia, Canada, who lived in the same province as their grandchildren and who were fluent in English. Grandparents were recruited using a convenience, purposive sampling method with social media advertisements, posters in community centers, and word of mouth.

**Results:** Using a thematic analysis, we identified six themes: (a) improving grandparents' and grandchildren's health, (b) supporting children's needs, (c) feeling positive emotions, (d) supporting family closeness, (e) aspiring to go outdoors together, and, (f) maintaining the relationship despite the COVID-19 pandemic.

**Conclusion:** Our study emphasizes the importance of outdoor play for grandparents, especially as they develop their relationship with their young grandchildren. Outdoor play provides a unique opportunity for a health-boosting activity that also strengthens the relationship and family bonds, and supports grandchildren's developmental needs.

**Implications:** Our research can contribute to promoting outdoor play across the life span, and more specifically the

**Author note:** We thank the participating grandparents for their generosity with their time.

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benefits of outdoor play during early childhood and older adulthood.

#### KEYWORDS

climate change, early years, grandparenting, intergenerational relationships, well-being

During the past decades, researchers have highlighted the benefits of outdoor play in the physical and psychological development of children (Dodd et al., 2022), as well in older persons' physical and mental health (Thompson Coon et al., 2011). In this article, outdoor play is defined as "a form of play that takes place outdoors," with the outdoors referring to "any open-air, wild, natural, or human-made space" (Lee et al., 2022). Although there has been increased attention on parenting related to outdoor play (Oliver et al., 2022), research has not yet examined the shared experience of outdoor play between children and older members of their family: their grandparents. One third of Canadian grandparents see their grandchildren at least once per week, and they play an important role in providing childcare for their grandchildren (Battams, 2019), thus, many grandparents are likely to play a key role in their grandchildren's daily lives, including when playing outdoors. This study aimed to investigate the perspective of Canadian grandparents on outdoor play with their preschool-aged grandchildren.

As life expectancy increases, family size decreases, and maternal employment increases, today's grandparents have more opportunities to spend time with their grandchildren than in the past (Dunifon et al., 2018). Multigenerational households are the fastest growing household type in Canada, with 9% of children aged 14 years or younger living with grandparents (Battams, 2022). This is projected to increase as the population ages: 19% of Canadians are 65 years or older, and that number is expected to rise to 23% by 2031 (Battams, 2022). Expanding our understanding of these meaningful family relationships during early childhood, which is considered as the most critical period of development over the life span, can deepen our comprehension of grandparents' roles in early childhood development and how they influence grandparents' own well-being.

Play is an important component of grandparent–grandchild interactions during childhood, as grandparents' role toward their younger grandchildren revolves around being a playmate and providing childcare (Dunifon et al., 2018). Play is seen as a privileged time of undivided attention between the child and the grandparent, which is conducive to better intergenerational communication (Agate et al., 2018). Despite the extended amount of time grandparents spend with their young grandchildren, little is known about the importance of play, particularly outdoor play, in the grandparent–grandchild relationship and about how this shared time shapes their intergenerational relationship. Therefore, research on play as an intergenerational activity might help us to better understand a key element of the grandparent–grandchild relationship.

Outdoor play is a neglected area of study in the context of the grandparent–grandchild relationship. Even though outdoor play has been shown to have many benefits for both children and older adults, it has greater barriers to participation than indoor play (Oliver et al., 2022). Outdoor play is associated with benefits to children's health and well-being as well as with their cognitive, emotional, physiological, and social development (Milteer et al., 2012) and with decreasing anxiety (Dodd et al., 2022). Outdoor play is also considered a way to increase physical activity and reduce sedentary behaviors in children (Gray et al., 2015). However, poor weather, poor access to play facilities, and fear of injury can be barriers to outdoor play (Oliver et al., 2022).

Among older people, sedentary behaviors and physical inactivity are linked to higher mortality (Gremeaux et al., 2012). Further, outdoor activities are associated with increased energy, engagement, feeling of revitalization, and the elicitation of more positive emotions compared to

indoor physical activities (Thompson Coon et al., 2011). Some elders could experience difficulties while playing outdoors, such as the risk of falling, injury, or fatigue, however, research has shown that the benefits of physical activity outweigh the risks in supporting healthy aging (Thomas et al., 2019). In Canada, 27% of grandparents specifically reported that spending time with their grandchildren kept them physically active (Reid, 2013). Despite a dearth of research on outdoor play during adulthood, especially during later life, we would anticipate that older people would experience benefits from outdoor play. Indeed, older adults recognized the benefits of play throughout the life span as play helped them to remain physically and mentally active while experiencing positive emotions (Burr et al., 2019). Therefore, supporting opportunities for children and their grandparents to share outdoor play could benefit both generations.

## Rationale

The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child expressed concern for the decline in children's play. It established that "every child should be able to enjoy these rights regardless of where he or she lives, his or her cultural background or his or her parental status" (United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child, 2013, p. 4) and that play is an important component of children's health, well-being, and development. It also reported that play involving adults helps to develop respect and communication between generations. Research highlights that when children and elders had more opportunities to interact with each other, their feeling of closeness increased, they shared more positive emotions, and they discovered and shared more common interests (Morita & Kobayashi, 2013). Thus, fostering intergenerational play could benefit families, children, and elders. We sought to investigate outdoor play between grandparents and grandchildren in order to illuminate this important aspect of the intergenerational relationship and to provide evidence that may help support it.

The aim of this study was to explore and identify grandparents' perspectives on motivations and challenges related to grandparent–grandchild outdoor play during early childhood in Canada. We interviewed grandparents about their outdoor play experiences with their 3- to 5-year-old grandchildren.

## MATERIAL AND METHODS

### Design

This paper is based on a cross-sectional qualitative analysis of semistructured interviews with grandparents of children between 3 and 5 years old. Grandparents discussed their interactions with their grandchildren during outdoor play, facilitators and motivations, as well as challenges faced related to playing outdoor.

### Participants

Participants were recruited by social media advertisements, posters in community centers, and by word of mouth. Eligible participants (a) had at least one grandchild between 3 and 5 years old whom they saw at least once a month, (b) did not reside with the grandchild, and (c) resided in British Columbia (all participants and their grandchild resided in the Metro Vancouver area or on Vancouver Island), Canada. Interested participants initiated contact with the research team, after which we explained the study in more detail and scheduled the interview. Participants' demographic characteristics are detailed in Table 1.

**TABLE 1** Sample characteristics of grandparents in the sample ( $n = 14$ )

Variable	<i>n</i>   <i>M</i> ( <i>SD</i> )
Lineage	
Maternal grandmother	5
Maternal grandfather	5
Paternal grandmother	2
Paternal grandfather	2
Age (years)	
51–60	3
61–70	8
71–80	3
Number of children <i>M</i> ( <i>SD</i> )	2.71 (1.07)
Number of grandchildren <i>M</i> ( <i>SD</i> )	3.36 (2.10)
Geographic distance from the grandchild	
Same neighborhood	3
Same city/town	9
Same province	2
Frequency of outdoor play (per month)	5.15 (3.08)
Country of origin	
Canada	8
Elsewhere	6
Language most often spoken at home	
English	14
Language most often spoken with the grandchild	
English	11
English and another language	3

## Data collection

Ethics approval was obtained from the University of British Columbia/Children's and Women's Health Centre of British Columbia Research Ethics Board (H21-01321). Fourteen interviews were conducted with grandparents between November 2021 and March 2022. Two interviews were conducted in person, one of them due to unsuccessful attempts to conduct it online. Twelve interviews were conducted via Zoom. All the interviews were conducted in English by the first author and lasted between 18 minutes and 50 minutes ( $M = 37.33$ ;  $SD = 9.27$ ). Each participant was offered a \$50 honorarium to acknowledge their participation. The interviews were recorded using a digital recorder or the audio recording function of Zoom and were transcribed for analysis. Names and identifying features were removed from the written transcriptions to protect participants' anonymity.

## Measures

The qualitative semistructured interviews focused on grandparents' experience of outdoor play with their 3- to 5-year-old grandchildren; grandparents with more than one grandchild in this age group focused on the grandchild they met most often. Grandparents were asked questions

about motivations (i.e., What are your motivations to play outdoors with your grandchild? What are your grandchild's motivations to play outdoors with you?) and challenges (i.e., Do you face any challenges when you want to play outdoors with your grandchild or when your grandchild wants to play outdoors with you?) to play outdoors with their grandchildren. Prior to the interview, participants completed a demographic questionnaire.

## Data analysis

We conducted a thematic analysis of the interviews to identify nuanced themes that would emerge from grandparents' interviews on their experience of outdoor play with their grandchildren. Interviews were transcribed by one of the researchers and checked for accuracy by another researcher. Data analysis began with the first interview, and resulted in some adjustments to the interview guide in subsequent interviews (e.g., additional probes about grandparents' and grandchildren's challenges to playing outdoors). We considered data saturation to be reached after 14 interviews. Data saturation is considered to be reached when no new themes emerge during new interviews. In this study, the initial analysis sample was set at 10 interviews. The final four interviews were used to triangulate and substantiate themes that were identified in prior interviews (e.g., naming themes, merging two themes into one, having more precise quotes).

Data analysis was carried out in the six stages proposed by Braun et al. (2019). First, we read transcripts repeatedly and discussed emerging topics. Second, in an inductive process, we extracted initial codes based on the interviews' content. Third, we adopted an inductive approach to identify potential themes emerging from the codes identified during the previous stage. Fourth, we discussed themes identified during the third stage in terms of their relevance regarding the research questions and the coded extracts. Fifth, we independently verified that the themes matched the identified extracts and named these themes. We (MD and JL) independently extracted text segments related to each code and verified that the identified themes were consistent with text segments that were extracted. At this stage, we also assessed the intercoder reliability based on a subset of five interviews, which was determined by dividing the number of agreements by the total number of agreements and disagreements for each code (Miles & Huberman, 1984). The intercoder reliability was greater than .86 for each theme, indicating a "relatively high degree of reliability" (Hodson, 1999, p. 51). Sixth, we prepared a report of the analysis to outline motivations and challenges of grandparent–grandchild outdoor play as identified by participants.

## RESULTS

Six themes giving a comprehensive overview of motivations and challenges to grandparent–grandchild outdoor play were identified: (a) improving grandparents' and grandchildren's health, (b) supporting children's needs, (c) feeling positive emotions, (d) supporting family closeness, (e) aspiring to go outdoors together, and (f) maintaining the relationship despite the COVID-19 pandemic. Each theme is described below.

### **Improving grandparents' and grandchildren's health: "That is my important assignment to keep healthy"**

Most grandparents reported motivations and challenges related to their own and their grandchildren's health by identifying health and aging as a challenge and a motivation, and

avoiding sedentary behaviors as a motivation for grandparent–grandchild outdoor play. Health and aging was mentioned by most participants who felt that their health and their experience of aging might sometimes be a barrier to outdoor play because they might not be physically capable to be involved in their grandchildren’s play, as expressed by Grandmothers 6 and 7:

Well, I’m older, I’m not as flexible (laughs), I can’t run as fast. (Grandmother 6)

Because the five-year-old boys kind of want to rustle with Grandma and I say “Grandma is delicate, and you walk and talk with Grandma and you make crafts with Grandma and read” (laughs). So, because otherwise they’d be rough-and-tumble, the boys especially. (Grandmother 7)

Conversely, some participants felt that playing outdoors helped them to maintain good health and that the joy of grandparent–grandchild outdoor play was a motivation to stay in shape:

It’s a privilege to be able to spend time with your grandchildren. And another important thing I find all day is health. When I have good health I can do so many things with her but what happens if I am not in good health? A lot of things would be kind of on a bounce. So for me, my thing for myself is to take care of myself, so I can take care of my grandchildren. So that’s so much joy in doing that, that is my important assignment to keep healthy, have healthy living, and then with her it reinforces the healthy living as well. (Grandfather 8)

Grandparents were also motivated to play outdoors with their grandchildren as they saw it as a good way to avoid sedentary behaviors, such as screen time, both for themselves (“It gives me time to exercise and all of that things and not on the couch going through the cellphone,” Grandfather 8) and for their grandchildren (“to us it was important for the kids to be outside in the fresh air and to get out of the house, and to get away from the TV or the videos,” Grandmother 6).

### **Supporting children’s needs: “Whenever times we got ready to go but she’s not ready to go, so it can be a challenge”**

Grandparents identified their grandchild’s self-determination as a challenge and regulating their grandchild’s energy and facilitating their grandchild’s socialization as motivations for grandparent–grandchild outdoor play. Some grandparents expressed that their grandchild’s self-determination posed a challenge when trying to initiate outdoor play as grandchildren may have competing desires. For instance, it was often difficult to motivate grandchildren to play outdoors when they were already engaged with an indoor activity: “If they’re playing happily with toys, it’s not necessarily easy to say, ‘okay let’s go outside then and go to the park, go to a playground’” (Grandfather 2). Grandparents also had trouble bringing their grandchild back home when the child was engaged in outdoor play: “When she plays in the playground, coming back, ok, because you know, whenever times we got ready to go but she’s not ready to go, so it can be a challenge” (Grandfather 8). Therefore, having to motivate the child to interrupt an activity to participate in a new one, or having to negotiate returning home could be considered challenging because making the child follow grandparents’ requests may interrupt a joyful moment and compete with the grandchild’s self-determination.

Grandparents were also motivated to play outdoors with their grandchildren as they considered it helpful in regulating their grandchild's energy levels. Grandparents described their lack of energy compared to their grandchildren's as a difficulty when it came to taking care of young grandchildren; therefore, they used outdoor play as a means to manage the discrepancy between their energy levels. Some grandparents found outdoor play to be a good compromise between their needs and the needs of their grandchildren in terms of energy: "It's important to play with them in general. But outside it's double-edged sword, it keeps me awake, it's cold, and fresh air and it makes them more tired when it comes down to have their nap" (Grandfather 11) and "I think there is an interesting thing that happens when you play with them is beautiful and natural. You know, they get tired, I get tired. And sometimes, we would just take a break just to sit together" (Grandfather 14). Several grandparents thought that the main advantage of outdoor play was that it improved their grandchildren's napping, making their caregiving time less exhausting.

Finally, grandparents who pointed out the importance of facilitating their grandchild's socialization shared how they wanted to provide their grandchild with opportunities to develop their social skills, and outdoor spaces like playgrounds were seen as particularly convenient to do so:

Once, you know, the Covid restrictions eased and we could take [our grandson] to a playground, it was great fun seeing him interact with other children. I mean, he, basically, from when he could walk and talk it was the pandemic and he had no interaction with other kids, but he'd go up to a little girl or a little boy and stick his hand out and say, you know like "play" kind of things "friends" he calls—everybody was "friends." (Grandmother 6)

### **Feeling positive emotions: "It gives you a license to be silly when you're with the kids"**

Most grandparents reported sharing positive emotions and creating good memories, feeling younger, and a sense of freedom as motivations for grandparent–grandchild outdoor play. Grandparents emphasized how outdoor play enables them to share positive emotions like happiness, love, and fun with their grandchildren: "I know it's good for her. And it's fun. And we have lots of fun together, cause we collect things—we collect leaves and things and then we make pictures and stuff with them like that. We have fun!" (Grandmother 1) and "Well we feel joy, we feel love, we feel very connected to all the environment. We do feel things and touch and smell. It's reciprocal. We both feel that. I can tell by her face and the way she is" (Grandfather 10). Grandparents also wanted to create good memories for the future as they considered it an opportunity to build lasting intergenerational bonds and to assure their grandchildren that they can rely on them throughout their lives: "I like to allow for their interaction so she can recall when she grows up, you know, the time with grandpa and grandma. That's why I want to have the legacy" (Grandfather 8). Likewise, Grandfather 13 said,

I think that's important to, for the connections, so that they grow up knowing that there is somebody else that loves them and they can, hopefully as they get older, they can trust him and talk to, when they need someone to talk to.

Some grandparents shared that they felt younger when playing outdoors with their grandchildren, and that it allowed them to be whoever they wanted to be, paying less attention to social expectations:

And you will do things with them that you wouldn't do on your own. Like, you know, splashing through a puddle or picking the leaves or throwing the leaves at each other, or burying them in the sand, or whatever the things are that is ok for children to do. But not, you know as a grown up you're not supposed to do that anymore. (Grandmother 6)

Finally, grandparents were motivated to play outdoors with their grandchildren because it provided both a sense of freedom. Children had more room to play and could be more adventurous than at home, which was also less stressful for grandparents:

In all cases there is amazing emotions. You're just so happy to see them playing, I think outdoor just the emotions, maybe there is just extra freedom to all of it. So I can feel freedom, kind of. Which goes along with being outdoors I think. [...] I think it's just getting outside it's just something different than inside, you feel freer probably, right? You feel like you can run and you can you know kick the ball further and do sort of more that kind of playing as opposed to indoors, you have to be a little careful and you know just break a thing. (Grandmother 9)

### **Supporting family closeness: "It's like, I get to relive this in a certain way, through my granddaughter"**

Grandparents reported motivations associated with their desire to support their family closeness by identifying that providing childcare to support parents and a second chance of experiencing parenting. Grandparents found that providing childcare for their adult children was a good way to support them by being an alternative to costly childcare and by giving them some free time. Spending time caring for their grandchildren created more opportunities for outdoor play:

Up until last September, we child-minded all our grandchildren, I mean one at a time because they're spread over. We try once or twice a week, so we spend time with our grandchildren once a week just to help the parents, you know because day care is so expensive. (Grandfather 10)

Most grandmothers felt like playing outdoors with their grandchildren reminded them of memories of play with their own children, giving them a second chance to experience parenting, like this grandfather, who is finding a new way to connect with his daughter through his granddaughter:

I have one daughter, I have five sons, one daughter. My daughter is in the middle. And my daughter physically is very similar to my granddaughter, very small, very flexible, even the meltdowns. So for me it's like a déjà-vu [...] it's somehow even a connection to my daughter. It's like, I get to relive this in a certain way, through my granddaughter. And I always wanted another daughter but I never got one. (Grandfather 14)

However, three grandfathers and a grandmother, who used to be single parents, shared their regrets for not playing enough with their own children during their childhood, due to the job demands. Therefore, playing outdoors with their grandchildren was seen as a second chance to experience parenting, and eventually of correcting mistakes that they felt they made with their own children, as they now had more time to be involved with their grandchildren:

I was a single parent for many years, so I didn't have as much time to play with my kids. I was exhausted. So to have this time where there's no constraints, you know, like nothing in the back of my mind, like I've got to get lunches ready or you know, get all this stuff done. I've got the time to dedicate to them and I know how important it is for them and for us. [...] But it's been easier, like I said I worked long hours, I had a long commute and everything, I didn't do as much with my own children, I mean I did, but not as much. But I want to carry that through with the kids, because nature is so important. (Grandmother 3)

Well, I was really busy when I was young and raising my family I think. Probably looking back, I wish I played more with them. Maybe that's why I'm so involved with my grandchildren (laughs). (Grandfather 12)

### **Aspiring to go outdoors together: “Climate change, weird weather, is the one thing that's restricting us from being outside more”**

All the grandparents reported motivations and challenges related to their aspiration to go outdoors with their grandchildren by describing accessibility to outdoor space and experiencing nature together as motivations, and climate change as a challenge for grandparent–grandchild outdoor play. Most grandparents reported that accessibility to outdoor space was a motivation and a facilitator for grandparent–grandchild outdoor play. Particularly, they felt that living in British Columbia, with an abundance of natural spaces and with the mild weather, facilitated access to outdoor space and nature:

I'm lucky to live in a place where, you know, we live close to the beach, close to the forest, and so it's very easy [...] I just had lots of access to go outside with her. (Grandmother 1)

Back in those days even with limited funds, you know, because, you know, the outdoors, nature, it's free, it's literally free of charge. Maybe a little bit of gas you know, or maybe taking the public transit even, you know, so it's yeah and the fresh air. (Grandmother 5)

Another motivation, facilitated by the accessibility to outdoor space, was grandparents' desire to experience nature with their grandchildren. They saw outdoor space, and nature more specifically, as a positive environment for themselves and for the next generations, and that experiencing nature together might benefit both of them:

I love being outside with her and seeing how she is experiences nature. It's really, you know, just renewed or deepened my appreciation in nature too. (Grandmother 1)

And so when I take her outside and let her evolve in a different world, or to do things maybe she can't do at home, that's what encourages me. It's to see her change, become more independent, more comfortable being outside, being with nature. (Grandfather 14)

Grandparents shared that weather was usually not a serious challenge to playing outdoors with their grandchildren; however, they recognized that climate change–related challenges (including extreme heat, wildfire, and flooding) as experienced in British Columbia in recent years was a new challenge that could limit the possibilities to play outdoors. Climate change was also deleterious to the quality of the grandparent–grandchild relationship, as staying indoors was considered by many grandparents as potentially more stressful than interacting outdoors:

The only thing that was really hard this summer, when it was smoky and hot and we were supposed to not be outside for too long. He wanted to be outside and that was really hard. And we had our other grandchildren here at the same time staying here. But fortunately my house is air-conditioned a little bit, but it's very hard having eleven people inside. And the kids want to go outside and play and we tell them no. So I mean, climate change, weird weather, is the one thing that's restricting us from being outside more. (Grandmother 6)

### **Maintaining the relationship despite the COVID-19 pandemic: “I want to imprint her childhood memories beyond the pandemic”**

Some grandparents considered the COVID-19 pandemic as a motivator for grandparent–grandchild outdoor play. As these grandparents noted that the COVID-19 pandemic encompassed their grandchild's infancy and toddlerhood, they felt the urge to provide positive experiences and memories to their grandchildren:

And especially these days with the pandemic, like I want her to, how do you say it, imprint more positive memories rather than thinking about the pandemic as masks or washing hands and sanitizing, and social distancing. There's more to it, so I want to imprint her childhood memories beyond the pandemic. (Grandmother 5)

Additionally, playing outdoors became a safe way to bond with their grandchild while respecting health policies implemented during the pandemic that limited indoor socialization:

Initially we weren't sure like what to do, you know, about whether or not we should even be seeing them because my husband and I are older. We're both retired. We also help look after my mother who's now 90. And if we get exposed to Covid through the grandchildren then we're bringing it to her as well. So yeah, outdoors became even more important than indoors. (Grandmother 6)

## **DISCUSSION**

This qualitative study is the first, to our knowledge, to explore motivations and challenges to grandparent–grandchild outdoor play. Overall, these Canadian grandparents identified more motivations than challenges to grandparent–grandchild outdoor play. Their motivations might help other grandparents to be more involved in outdoor play, and recognizing and addressing their challenges may facilitate accessibility to outdoor play for other families.

Participants in our study revealed ambivalent attitudes about health and outdoor play as they considered health and aging as both a challenge and a motivation. Although most

grandparents acknowledged the constraints of their bodies when playing outdoor with their grandchildren, they also recognized that this supported being physically active and maintaining a healthy lifestyle. Physical activity benefits older people's cognitive functions and increases their longevity (Gremeaux et al., 2012); thus, promoting outdoor play with grandchildren may represent a fruitful path in motivating older adults to be physically active. Grandparents in our sample further identified that outdoor play could limit sedentary behaviors, such as screen time, especially for their grandchildren. This is consistent with a previous study indicating that encouraging parents to support their children's outdoor play by being involved in outdoor activities as a family significantly reduced children's screen time (Davison et al., 2011). Our study suggests that future programs could include grandparents in interventions to foster outdoor play.

Participants were also motivated to play outdoor with their grandchildren so they could channel their grandchildren's energy and reduce the demands on their own energy and resources required for childcare. Previous research specifically pointed out the physical cost of high energy activities for older people (Kirsnan et al., 2023), therefore when playing outdoors, grandparents can participate in their grandchildren's play in ways that are less physically demanding to preserve their own energy level while continuing to play. Another motivation was to foster their grandchildren's socialization with peers, providing opportunities to learn how to compromise, share, regulate their emotions, and to develop their theory of mind in the context of egalitarian relationships.

Participants motivations for grandparent–grandchild outdoor play were enhanced by the positive emotions they experienced with their grandchildren during this activity. Adopting a life course perspective, grandparents' and grandchildren's relationship and closeness might benefit from intergenerational outdoor play during early childhood as sharing similar emotions and building positive memories together may help to preserve the relationship even if physical decline eventually prevents grandparents from participating in such activities in the future. Outdoor play helps grandparents learn how to see the world through their grandchildren's eyes, and to experience sensations of freedom for themselves and for their grandchildren that might not be available in more structured activities. Children exercise their freedom through outdoor play (Flannigan & Dietze, 2018), and we would expect that it would support older persons to feel a similar sense of freedom when playing outdoor with their grandchildren. Indeed, that is what participants in this research reported. Although aging is often associated with decreased physical activity (Gremeaux et al., 2012), fostering outdoor activities, such as play with grandchildren, could support healthy aging.

Grandparents in our sample saw outdoor play as a means to enhance their family's closeness. By providing childcare to their grandchildren they supported their own children, and when they played outdoors with their grandchildren they felt like they were experiencing parenting again. It was an opportunity for grandparents to reflect on their own parenting and to give their grandchildren the time and attention that they sometimes were not able to provide their children. Indirectly, grandparent–grandchild outdoor play seems to help grandparents to reflect on their family relationships while strengthening intergenerational bonds across the life span. Playtime has already been shown to develop parent–child closeness (Milteer et al., 2012), thus including grandparents in play could benefit all generations by increasing their family closeness.

Enjoying the outdoors and nature provided an additional motivation for outdoor play. Proximity and access to outdoor spaces and nature was a key factor in promoting grandparent–grandchild outdoor play, which emphasizes the necessity of preserving outdoor spaces accessible to all, especially in neighborhoods where residents are less likely to have their own backyard. Additionally, grandparents stressed the benefits that nature provided for their own and their grandchild's well-being.

The COVID-19 pandemic brought public health measures encouraging physical distancing, particularly for older adults, limiting usual intergenerational interactions. Playing outdoors,

where viral transmission was lower, provided a means to comply with health policy while still enjoying each other's company. Thus, families may be more receptive than previously to the benefits of outdoor play. However, they might need guidance to ensure that all generations can make the most of outdoor play based on each one's physical capacities and level of energy, for instance.

The motivations evoked above are combined with some challenges. Along with grandparents' concerns around aging, other challenges were identified. Specifically, climate change-related challenges, such as extreme weather conditions, sometimes meant that outdoor play was not possible. Beyond that, grandparents reported that having to stay inside because of the weather was potentially deleterious to their relationships with their grandchildren. For instance, during extreme heat periods, grandparents felt more exhausted and managing grandchildren stuck indoors could diminish the joys of grandparenting. To our knowledge, this is the first paper to underline this relationship between climate change and the quality of family relationships. In the light of global warming, further research should investigate the links between climate change and interpersonal relationships to better understand how relationships may be affected by climate change.

## Implications

In light of our findings and the benefits of outdoor play for children's and older persons' physical and psychological well-being (Dodd et al., 2022; Thompson Coon et al., 2011), several recommendations are proposed to facilitate grandparent–grandchild outdoor play. The first is to increase grandparents' knowledge about the benefits of outdoor play for children and for themselves, with regard to physical and mental health as well as the relational benefits. For grandparents who are worried about their health and physical ability to play outdoors with their younger grandchildren, health practitioners can share positive aspects, such as that managing grandchildren's emotions and energy can be easier outdoors than indoors, and also provide supports for encouraging outdoor play (e.g., a list of accessible outdoor spaces for grandparents, sharing ideas for outdoor activities that fit with grandparents' physical abilities). Second, grandparents can provide peer support to other grandparents to increase outdoor play, sharing the benefits they perceive for themselves and strategies that have worked for them in getting out more with their grandchildren. Third, ensuring easy access to diverse outdoor spaces for play should be supported by local municipalities, particularly for more densely populated neighborhoods where dwellings do not have their own outdoor space. Finally, this study highlights the importance of including grandparents when considering 3- to 5-year-old children's developmental needs. It could be of use to health professionals and psychologists helping families support children's social emotional learning, physical literacy, and other key skills by encouraging outdoor play with grandparents as one aspect of this support.

## Limitations and future research

Several limitations should be acknowledged when interpreting these results. First, this study focuses on grandparents' perceptions. Including grandchildren's voices could extend our understanding of grandparent–grandchild outdoor play. Moreover, parents and extended family could also be included in future studies as other members of the family play a determinant role in grandparent–grandchild relationships; for example, parents acting as gatekeepers (Tan et al., 2010). Second, the generalization of these results may be limited by the unique geographical area in which the participants lived, particularly in terms of weather and access to nature as the southern part of British Columbia has mild weather and abundant outdoor spaces.

Future research should investigate grandparents and grandchildren in other cultural and geographic contexts, and using diverse methodology, particularly child-friendly research methods to be able to reflect their perspectives, such as potentially filming grandparent–grandchild outdoor play to provide novel insights. Future studies could also investigate the evolution of outdoor play between grandparents and grandchildren as both parties age, especially this because activity may vary not only according to grandparents’ and grandchildren’s physical skills but also to fulfill different developmental needs at different stages of life.

## Conclusion

Our findings emphasize the importance of outdoor play for grandparents, especially as they develop their relationship with their young grandchildren. We expect that our results will motivate consideration for outdoor play as a beneficial activity across the life span. Outdoor play could reinforce mutually positive feelings between generations and provide a fun activity that supports healthy child development and healthy aging. Following the COVID-19 pandemic, families appear to be particularly receptive to new suggestions for intergenerational activities protecting and promoting everyone’s health. Therefore, the current period is ideal to communicate the importance of intergenerational outdoor play.

## ORCID

Mathilde Duflos  <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-9532-1859>

Mariana Brussoni  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-1495-816X>

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