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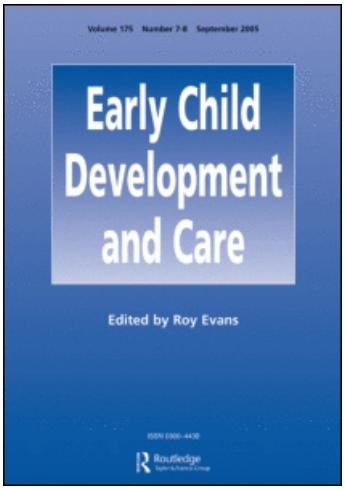

Early Child Development and Care
Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:
http://www.informaworld.com/smpp/title~content=t713640830

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To cite this Article MacDougall, Colin , Schiller, Wendy andDarbyshire, Philip(2009) 'What are our boundaries and where can we play? Perspectives from eight- to ten-year-old Australian metropolitan and rural children', Early Child Development and Care, 179: 2, 189 — 204
To link to this Article: DOI: 10.1080/03004430802667021
URL: http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/03004430802667021

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Early Child Development and Care
Vol. 179, No. 2, February 2009, 189–204

Routledge
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What are our boundaries and where can we play? Perspectives from eight- to ten-year-old Australian metropolitan and rural children

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(*Received 23 June 2008; final version received 5 December 2008*)

This study took place in an inner metropolitan Adelaide school and a rural school on Kangaroo Island off the South Australian coast. We compare 33 eight- to 10-year-old children's accounts of what the area is like for them. What are the rules and boundaries and who sets them? Metropolitan children were found to have tighter boundaries and required adult supervision to use facilities that rural children could use unsupervised. Rural children negotiated freedom of movement by considering broad principles about safety. Findings increase our understanding of how children perceive movement within their communities, and suggest policies and environmental changes to increase freedom of movement. Study findings raise concerns about the way the environment is designed for social planning, and the importance of children's engagement and interaction with the natural environment.

Keywords: sociology of childhood; play; rules and boundaries

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Introduction and plan of paper

Our approach to research draws on the sociology of childhood (James, Jenks, & Prout, 1998; Morrow, 2003), which emphasises that children are active social agents who shape the structures and processes around them and that children's social relationships and cultures are worthy of study in their own right (Lansdown, 2004; Mayall, 2000; Morrow, 2003).

A study with 204 four- to 12-year-old children in South Australia (see MacDougall, Schiller, & Darbyshire, 2004) concluded that children did all they could to ensure that play was child-centred, spontaneous, continually adjusted to avoid boredom and increase access to give all children the chance to have fun. Children wanted to make democratic decisions about what to play at school, home, friend's houses and in the community (MacDougall et al., 2004).

The research in this paper explores children's perspectives about places, spaces and communities in which children live which impact on their experiences of, and engagement in, play and physical activity (Karsten, 2005; Karsten & van Vliet, 2006; Tandy, 1999). Children can only make democratic, spontaneous decisions which

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ISSN 0300-4430 print/ISSN 1476-8275 online
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DOI: 10.1080/03004430802667021
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involve them in moving around their communities with adult supervision at a distance, if the social norms and significant adults in their lives allow this (Karsten & van Vliet, 2006; Louv, 2005). Our research elicited children's perspectives on where they live, their boundaries and rules about moving through their communities.

We need children's perspectives because, in developed countries, successive policy and practice actions have produced a discourse of taking the risk out of childhood and restricting children's boundaries: all in the name of keeping them safe and reducing risk (Evans, 2000; Gill, 2007; Louv, 2005). Introducing a study exploring children's perceptions and experiences of safety and risk in one highly contested area in Belfast, Northern Ireland, Madeleine Leonard wrote:

> Once innocent spaces of childhood such as streets, parks and other public places have become redefined as areas where children are in potential danger from other children or from some of the adults usually defined as their protectors. … While the empirical evidence to demonstrate the frequency of the public and private risks confronting children falls far short of the moral panic surrounding notions and of risk and safety, the upshot has been to locate contemporary childhood in increasingly risky environments. (2007, p. 432)

As researchers, we believe that we must contribute evidence that takes into account those social, cultural, experiential and temporal contexts that shape children's patterns of leisure and activity (Haughton McNeill, Kreuter, & Subramanian, 2006; Wright, Macdonald, & Groom, 2003). As part of a larger study on places, spaces and play, children considered the following:

- What the area is like for a child growing up here?
- Rules and boundaries: what they are and who set them?

The study setting

One school is in inner western metropolitan Adelaide, the capital of South Australia, an area with a mixture of government and private houses and some industry. Like many areas close to Australian cities, there are changes in demographics as older houses are replaced by houses with smaller gardens, thereby increasing the density of suburban living. The rural school is on Kangaroo Island, which is off the South Australian coast and accessible by ferry or air. It is well-known as an ecotourism destination and is sparsely populated with two main settlements and many farms of varying sizes.

Recruitment of participants

Information letters for parents/guardians, information sheets for children, and consent forms, were sent directly to parents/guardians by each school. Parents/guardians were asked to consent to the participation of their child, and provision was made on the consent forms for children to give their assent. Participants were advised that participation was entirely voluntary and they could withdraw at any time. The Chief Investigators, who are all authors of this paper, briefed teachers and leaders in each school at staff meetings.

Table 1 shows that in the two schools (one urban, one rural island) 33 children completed focus groups and graphics and 27 completed photovoice (see the next

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Table 1. The sample of eight- to ten-year olds.

	Children in focus groups and graphics			Children completing photovoice		
	Boys	Girls	Total	Boys	Girls	Total
Metropolitan	7	6	13	6	6	12
% of class	35% of boys	58% of girls	41% of class	30% of boys	50% of girls	38% of class
Rural	8	12	20	7	8	15
% of class	73% of boys	86% of girls	80% of class	64% of boys	57% of girls	60% of class

section for descriptions of the methods). We used data from classes of eight- to ten-year olds after preliminary, year by year analysis of data from children aged three to 15 years in a broader study in these schools. The analysis showed that eight- to 10-year olds were distinctive in that they were starting to respond in detail about boundaries and rules, suggesting that this was a transition between the smaller boundaries and stricter rules for three- to seven-year olds; and the increasing freedom of children 11 years and over. We selected schools in two contrasting areas so we could incorporate into our analysis the contribution of geographical and social context.

Table 1 shows that in focus groups we spoke to between 35% and 86% of the children in each class, and that only a few children did not go on to complete the photovoice method. A higher proportion of rural children volunteered to participate than metropolitan children in this age group.

Data collection

Three methods of data collection were used with the children: focus group interviews, drawing/mapping and photovoice, to provide a rich, multifaceted perspective of children's experiences (see Darbyshire, Schiller, & MacDougall, 2005 for more information about mixed qualitative methods).

Focus groups

The focus groups were semi-structured and conducted by the authors. In each focus group, one of the researchers took written notes. The focus groups broadly followed an interview schedule, and this paper focuses on responses to the following questions/prompts:

- I don't live and go to school here so can you tell me what it is like for you growing up here? What is good? What is not so good?
- Where can you go by yourself? When do you have to get permission to go somewhere? Who from?

Visual data collection: mapping and photovoice

Towards the end of each focus group, the children were invited to draw graphics of the places, spaces and activities that they had been discussing. Each child was provided with a disposable film camera, containing film for 24 images, and asked to

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take photographs showing where they played, who they played with and what they played, that is, what they believed depicted something of their worlds of physical activity (with adult help as necessary). The cameras did not have a flash to take clear photographs inside, so we suggested to the children that they take photographs outside. Children were asked to return their cameras to the school after two to three weeks. The photos were then developed.

Workshops were held within a month where the children's photos were returned to them and they were asked to select four photographs and arrange them on an A4 worksheet page using the following prompts:

- This is my favourite photo because …
- My favourite place to do activities is … because …
- This photo makes me feel … because …
- What I like doing best is … because …

During the workshops, the children discussed both their maps and their worksheets with their peers and the researchers. Notes were taken during the workshops, and the researchers assisted with the children's explanations and annotations of the graphics, as requested.

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What children told us about where they live?

Focus groups

We coded the responses to the question about what is good about living in their area into themes, and Table 2 compares what the eight- to 10-year-old island and metropolitan children told us. It is apparent that the rural children appreciated the natural environment, and compared it to their conception of city life. Opportunities for play in the city revolve around gardens, parks and playgrounds and organised activities, in contrast with the rural children who played in large open spaces and gave evidence of their appreciation of this natural world and the freedom to explore that it offered (Louv, 2005).

Table 3 shows that rural children predominantly mentioned dangers from animals and water when asked about what is not good about living in the area. When prompted, they spoke about distance and traffic problems arising from speed and poor roads. Metropolitan children were more likely to refer to factories, safety and danger: all relating to the built, rather than the natural environment.

Graphics

Metropolitan children most frequently drew maps with considerable detail about the streets and houses near their house or school. They then annotated particular houses or features as places that they went to frequently, or which had meaning for them. The area that they mapped was quite small, and there was considerable detail about the built environment.

Figure 1 is typical of metropolitan graphics, showing fine details about a small geographical area. In this graphic, the child drew a map with school, home, playground and friends' houses. The child was accompanied by a parent outside the house, and pets were important. The 'bad people's house' is highlighted, showing how boundaries are constructed.

Table 2. What children say is good about living in their area.

	Rural island	Metropolitan
Natural environment	Tropical paradise Lovely to have trees No pollution Fresh air Not noisy Have birds Sea seals and animals Go to Seal Bay and see the paradise of it National parks with wildlife	The creek is very important
Built environment	Not a big city Little groups of cities No traffic lights	Many live in (a suburb) Camden Park
Opportunities for play	Lots of kids have horses Heaps of space to ride around on a bike Lots of farms with room to play	Playgrounds are very important Lots of playgrounds In (suburb) Morphetville there are wetlands and I can watch horses Lives four houses from school and there are two parks – one at the back of the house
People	Nice people Not much drugs	Lives close to grandparents

Table 3. What children say is not so good about living in their area.

	Rural island	Metropolitan
Natural environment	Snakes Kangaroo drowned dog in the dam and pulled its eyeballs out Sharks Wild koalas are dangerous Kangaroos	
Built environment		Factories
Opportunities for play		Not enough parks
People	Big kids look mean	Not safe
Prompt: what is dangerous that is not to do with animals? (Rural Island group only)	Everything is too far away Dirt roads are bumpy Road crashes Too much rain and roads get bogged Potholes [in roads]	

These particular island children's graphics depicted discrete places or activities with annotations showing that these activities and places were geographically distant from each other. In contrast to their descriptions in focus groups, rural children did not draw the natural environment in great detail. In Figure 2, for example, the graphic shows the child's activity in different areas of Kangaroo Island: each a considerable distance from the other. The graphic shows both organised sport and swimming in a river, as part of the natural environment. The depiction of teeth brushing reflects a

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Figure 1. Ten-year-old metropolitan child's map of the immediate area.

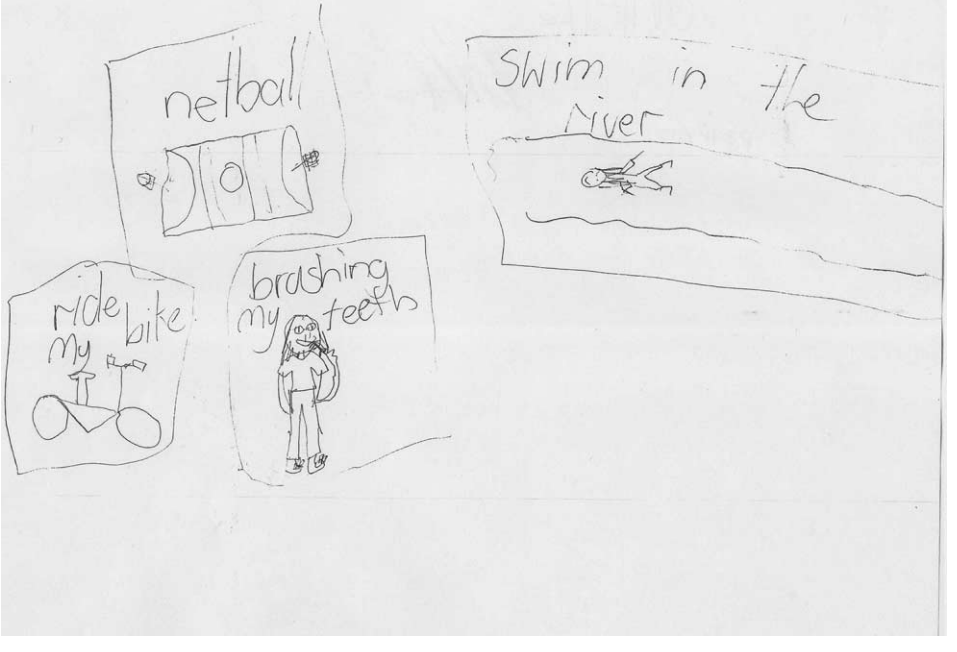

Figure 2. Rural child's map of activities in the area.

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number of unusual, or often humorous, depictions of physical activity in both graphics and photovoice.

Photovoice

The photographs taken by rural children complemented their glowing descriptions of their natural environment by showing large open spaces, rivers, the ocean, and playing and riding bicycles in large open spaces with few adults or built features. Figure 3 shows two of the four photographs from one boy: one an action photo of surfing and the other riding a small motorbike. The motorbike has a device limiting its speed and the boy is working with his parent on the farm – while also having fun. In his fourth photograph (not shown here) he again is on his motorbike and his annotation in response to the photo is 'What I like doing best is motorbike riding'. His response to the prompt of 'why?' was 'I can help my dad chase sheep and help him with his work'.

Figure 4 shows two photographs of a rural island girl with her dog and her horse. While metropolitan children also drew or photographed dogs and horses, they were invariably in smaller, fenced areas or in streets. Rural photographs showed larger spaces and fewer fences and boundaries, and children's pets were working dogs (e.g. dogs to herd sheep).

Metropolitan photographs, like the graphics, showed a much smaller geographical area and range of activities. There were many photographs of parks and playgrounds, and children doing activities in and around their houses. This included front and back gardens, driveways and garages or carports. Although these spaces were often quite small, they contained a lot of play equipment. These contrasted with the rural children who rode bicycles and played on equipment in gardens and paddocks which usually looked like large, natural open spaces. Nevertheless, metropolitan children told us how much they enjoyed playing in their gardens and that, in their eyes, playgrounds and parks were big. In Figure 5, for example, this metropolitan boy 'always plays in his backyard' and his favourite place is 'the park near my house because it is big and has lots of activities'. The photo of his bike in the backyard makes him feel 'happy and fit' and the fourth photo is of a park where he 'likes playing sport here' because 'it is so big'.

Two of the metropolitan children's photographs were of gardening. These were in the section of the photographic worksheet which called for a photograph which '*makes me feel* …' It may be that the metropolitan children were using gardening as a way of connecting with the environment. One child indicated that gardening was what she was best at, because she was 'really good at growing veggies (vegetables) for the family to eat'.

What children told us about their boundaries

The most specific information we have about boundaries comes from direct questions we asked during focus groups. Graphics and photovoice, while they do not specifically address boundaries, support the focus group discussions because, as discussed above, metropolitan children drew and photographed a much more restricted area and range of movement than rural children. Therefore this section reports results from focus groups.

Rural children, most of whom lived on farms, said that they can go anywhere as long as they can negotiate with their parents about safety in relation to risks and

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Figure 3. Photographs of a rural island child's activities.

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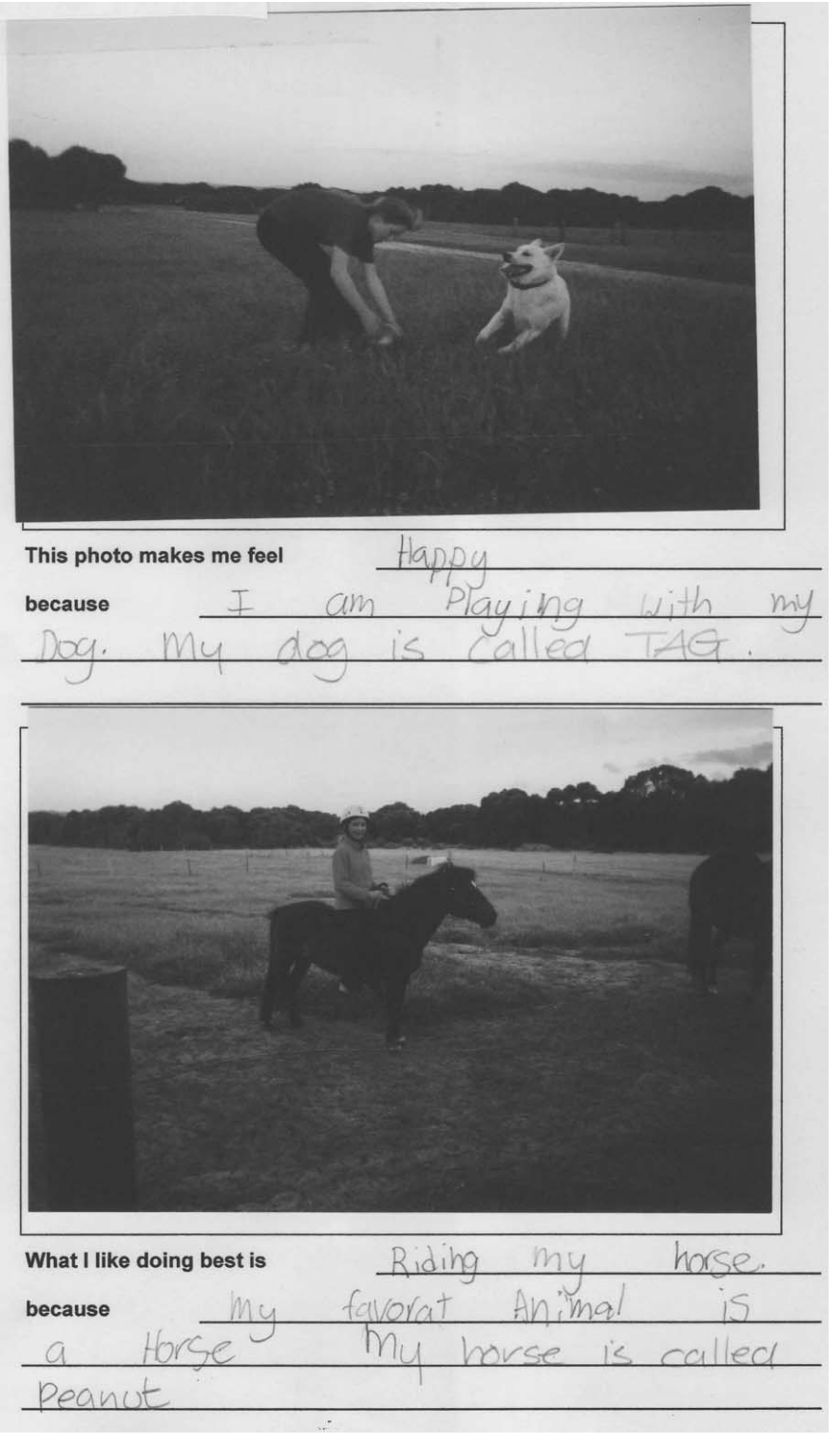

Figure 4. Rural island child's photographs of activities.

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Name _____ Class Mr SKUSE

This is my favourite photo because I always play in it
This is my back yard

My favourite place to do activities is The park near my house
because It is big and has lots of activities
like swings.

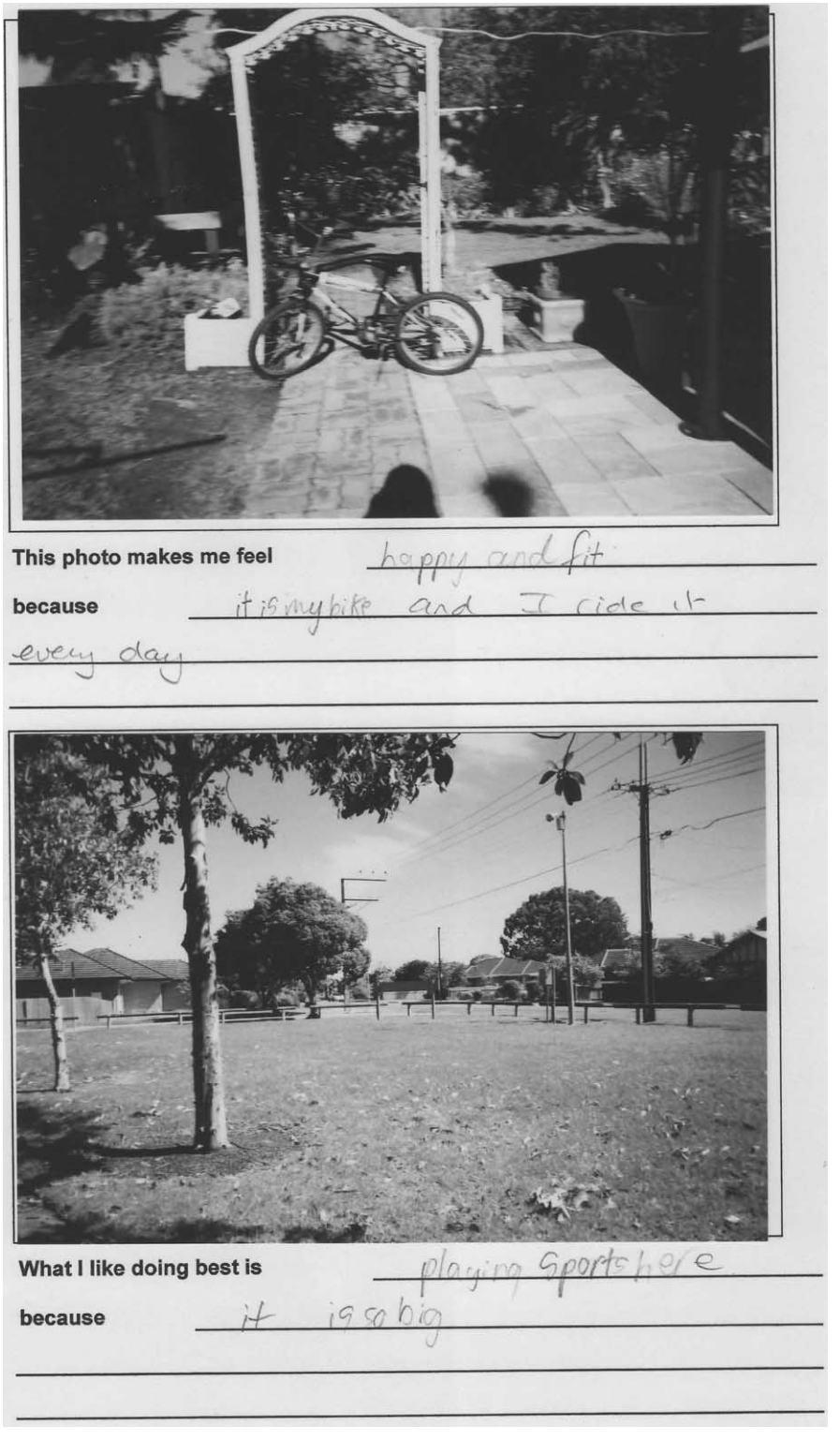

Figure 5. Metropolitan child's selected photos.

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dangers, most of which related to the natural environment (see Table 3). Because of distance and transport problems, most rural children moved between geographically disparate locations either by cars driven by family or friends, or by using school buses. In relation to the many sports rural children played, they were not in school teams but involved in clubs in the various towns and districts. They told us that they travelled between sports using different school buses to get to sport, training and friends' houses. So apart from those occasions, when rural children took buses or were transported by parents and friends, there were few places that were out of bounds.

Metropolitan children, on the other hand, have a very restricted range of movement that was determined by parental concerns about traffic and danger from people. They said they could:

- Go to two friends' houses by one path
- Ride bike between quiet streets but not in the busy street
- Go to local shops
- Walk around block to a little playground
- Ride a bike to shop and a quiet street

Table 4 shows that rural children perceived few places they could not go. Again, those places were predominantly characterised by danger from animals or the natural environment. Metropolitan children had far more restricted boundaries, determined by

Table 4. Where children cannot go in their area.

	Rural island	Metropolitan
	Most said there were no places	Most said there were many places
Natural environment	Cliffs Remarkable rocks with the sea around it Holes in the ground near the walk in Seal Bay (a tourist destination by the sea with seals) Rips when swimming Dams and creeks Wild pigs Electric fences Snakes in long grass Snakes in ditches Snakes in paddocks Feral cats Swooping birds Fires in dry grass	Drain in the golf course
Built environment	No relevant comments	Outside gate Near the local shops The balcony of the house Round the block Near a path Where there are scorpions' hives and cobwebs in the cubby house
People	Don't go in anyone's car that you don't know	Where no one can see us

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fears about traffic and people. Both groups indicated awareness of 'stranger danger' however (see Table 4).

When asked who sets rules and boundaries, metropolitan children replied that it was their parents, and that they accepted these decisions. For rural children it was not as simple as setting a rule or a boundary, rather, it was a process of learning to appreciate the opportunities and dangers inherent in the environment, and making sensible decisions to maximise their range of movement while minimising risk. It appeared that it was much more responsibility placed on children. However, it is important to note that the potentially high risk travel between places was undertaken by car travel or school buses.

What do these findings suggest for research, policy and practice?

An ecological framework for physical activity comprises three factors that link human agency with structure and environment: locating in space, moving through space and relating to people in space (MacDougall, 2007).

Locating in space refers to the way experiences of the settings where people live, work, shop, play, including the facilities and services they use. Children in this study located themselves not only in the immediate vicinity of their home (in a geographically defined community) but also away from their home; including in communities of interest. Rural children had larger boundaries around their houses, but needed adults to transport them between locations and communities of interest such as school and sport. Metropolitan children had smaller boundaries, and often needed adult supervision to use facilities that rural children could use unsupervised.

Moving through space refers to the way people move around either their immediate environment or geographic community and between locations or communities of interest. In this study, there are marked differences in how children moved through metropolitan and rural spaces. Rural children negotiated movement by considering broad principles about safety. These related to potential hazards for animals and the elements in the natural environment (encountering snakes in the fields, and taking care when swimming alone, or riding safely on a dirt track away from the farmhouse). For metropolitan children, movement was restricted by concerns about traffic safety and danger from people.

Relating to people in space refers to the way people relate to each other in their immediate environment, in families and social networks, in locations and as they move between locations. Children on the island had more responsibility for determining boundaries near their homes, but depended heavily on adults, friends and school buses for travel between disparate locations. In the metropolitan area, boundaries were determined by fears about relationships with potentially dangerous people.

Metropolitan children had less influence in negotiating boundaries, but accepted the rules from their parents. For these children, their negotiations about places to play were conducted principally in house gardens, parks and playgrounds. The island children demonstrated greater agency by working from their knowledge of the dangers of the natural environment to determine specifically where it was, and was not safe, to play. Our findings resonate with the sociology of childhood's argument that children are, and must be seen as, active in the construction and determination of their own social lives, the lives of those around them, and of the societies in which they live (Morrow, 2003).

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In our practice and our discussions with human service agencies, we frequently hear about the problems of children's shrinking metropolitan boundaries, as gardens get smaller and smaller as a result of increasing housing density in inner metropolitan areas. We also hear frequently about the problem of parks and playgrounds becoming less attractive for children as measures are taken to reduce risk of injury. While these forces are undoubtedly at work, children in the metropolitan school clearly told us how much they appreciated the playgrounds and parks in their area. They drew and photographed their back gardens, front gardens and driveways as sites of many and varied play and social activities (including a pyjama party on the backyard trampoline!) They did not tell us their house and garden was too small, or that the local playgrounds were boring. In fact, many captions on their photographs stated how big they perceived the parks and playgrounds to be. While, as adults, we may compare the spaces in which children play with those of another era, or in another place, we must not assume that children share our critical views. This does not mean that we cannot improve opportunities for children to play, merely that if we are going to take children's views seriously, we must not override them with our own discourse and generalisations (Evans, 2000), as these may not be relevant to children's perspectives today.

Our research also suggests a role for negotiation between children and adults in relation to rules and boundaries. In the metropolitan school, we discussed the children's accounts of their boundaries with a focus group of parents. One parent said they would like to see their eight-year-old child have more freedom of movement (when accompanied by older siblings), but had been criticised by other parents for doing so. Other parents agreed that they felt that supervising their children very closely was part of being a good parent, and wondered how to negotiate appropriately about rules and boundaries. There may be merit in parents conducting these negotiations with their children in a spirit of cooperation because, as the children told us, they understood the reasons for adult boundaries.

Further research could explore in more detail how children move around the communities, and what policies and environmental and cultural changes could increase freedom of movement in the various contexts in which children live. This would integrate health, education and recreation sectors which often are involved in research about physical activity. In both the rural and metropolitan areas, an immediate problem which needs to be rectified is the way in which environment is designed for motor cars and therefore does not provide safe environments for children's movement and in which to play.

We went into the study seeking contextual information from children and found how very much these perspectives differed between rural and metropolitan children. All this suggests how important it is to take context into account in research, which in turn suggests a role for participatory action research, leading to community development. Participatory action research 'seeks to understand and improve the world by changing it' (Baum, MacDougall, & Smith, 2006, p. 854). At its heart is collective, self-reflective inquiry that researchers and participants undertake, so they can understand and improve upon their practices. The reflective process is directly linked to action, influenced by understanding of history, culture and local context and embedded in social relationships. The process should be empowering and lead to people having increased control over their lives.

Community development would bring children, significant adults in their lives and relevant policy and practice sectors to create environments and structures that

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maximise opportunities for physical activity and social interaction (Baum, 2008) to make it easier for children to exercise agency in decisions about play and moving through their communities. With such differences between metropolitan and rural children, and between rural children in different areas, quite clearly standard interventions programmes informed by generalising from research findings from very different contexts will not be effective.

In conclusion, we look forward to the day when Australian children can meet, in a forum endorsed and funded by leaders in government and civil society, and discuss how the natural and built environments can be preserved, enhanced and support the aspirations of young people. We hope the children and young people would then be able to say:

> Young people have a fundamental role to play in the formulation of policy on health and environment, in related decision-making processes, and in the building of a healthier and more sustainable world. We are already making real and positive change in our local communities, countries and internationally. (World Health Organization, 2004, p. 3)

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