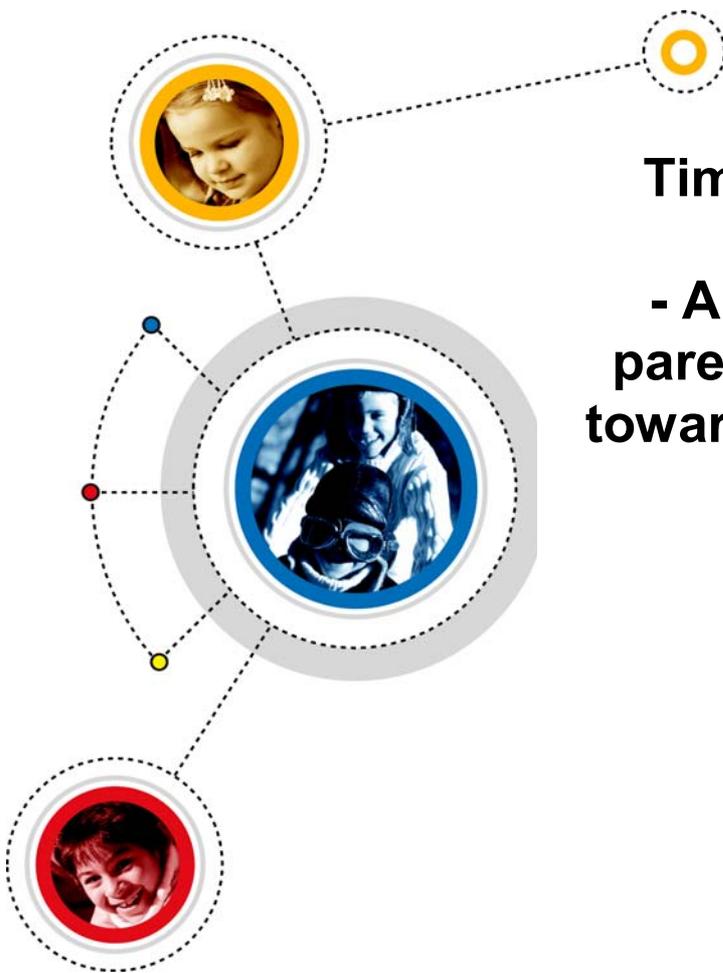


Denmark  
December 2002



## **Time for Playful Learning?**

**- A cross-cultural study of  
parental values and attitudes  
toward children's time for play.**

**LEGO® learning institute**

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## Abstract

Over the past 10-15 years, child development researchers have expressed worries about the fact that an increasing number of parents in the western world tend to over-schedule their children<sup>1</sup>. They claim that contemporary western lifestyle not only results in stress among adults, but also increasingly among children who are deeply affected by the stressful lives of their parents<sup>2</sup>.

A review done by LEGO Learning Institute of newspapers and periodicals shows that there have been extensive debates about the issue in the public press from the mid 1990s and onwards. The fact that the issue has received so much attention in the public press indicates, that many parents of the western world recognize this problem from their own lives.

But what are parent's *actual* attitudes, values and beliefs when it comes to balancing their children's time between scheduled activities and free play? There is great need for empirical studies that can give us more knowledge about that.

On this background, LEGO Learning Institute decided to conduct a major quantitative research study in five countries around the world: France, Germany, Japan, U.K., and the U.S.A. The survey was conducted in the spring of 2002. The purpose of the study was to investigate parents' attitudes, beliefs and values concerning children's use of time. More specifically, parents were asked the following questions:

- What they consider to be healthy activities,
- How they prioritise between scheduled activities and free play,
- What their notions of childhood are,
- Whether they think there is a balance between their own children's engagement in scheduled activities on the one hand and time for free play on the other.

The study shows that there are indeed cultural differences concerning attitudes, values and beliefs about children's time consumption; especially German and Japanese parents distinguish themselves by wanting more time for free play than is presently the case.

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<sup>1</sup> Most notably, perhaps, David Elkind (1988), who has written the book called "The Hurried Child". But a long row of other researchers and child development experts have backed up the notion of the hurried child: for instance Gray J. (1999), Rosenfeld (2001), and Hill, M. (1997).

<sup>2</sup> See, for instance, Zlotnik (2001).

There are also a number of similarities across cultures, however, that are worth noting. The research study indicates that parents feel, they must try to create a balance in their children's activities between free play and scheduled activities. On the one hand they know that time for free play is crucial to children, and they acknowledge that when children are engaged in play they also learn and grow. At the same time, though, parents feel obliged to prepare their children in the best possible way for adult work life. And they seem to think they do so by enrolling their children in scheduled activities.

Thus the findings indicate that, indeed, free play is squeezed in favour of 'goal oriented' and 'real world conforming' activities.

Furthermore, the study raises some interesting research questions. One is that our notion of what is considered to be play is expanding into other spheres; like e.g. the consumption sphere, and that children's interaction with and consumption of technological products is increasingly considered to be play.

Another interesting finding is that there are differing attitudes among parents to girls and parents to boys. Relatively more parents to girls between 9 and 14 years old, for instance, agree to the statement that 'time spent playing is time wasted'.

# Introduction

## About LEGO Learning Institute

The mission of the LEGO Learning Institute is to gather and distribute knowledge about different aspects of children's development; especially those aspects having to do with the relations between play and learning. By gathering and communicating this knowledge to parents, practitioners, policy-makers, and others who care, we hope to increase the collective knowledge and awareness of the life conditions that we offer our children and the close connections between play, learning, and culture.

As part of its ongoing efforts to understand the changing landscapes of childhood and the many relations between play and learning, LEGO Learning Institute regularly conducts research studies into various aspects of children's development, as well as their learning and play activities.

## Background for the Study

The study reported here was conducted in the spring of 2002. It was initiated as a reaction to the rising debate about overscheduled and stressed children, and with the purpose of contributing to our knowledge about parents' notions of childhood, play and learning in a society characterised by time constraints and high demands in terms of developing skills and competencies.

For the past 10-15 years, a long row of child development researchers<sup>3</sup> have pointed to the fact that children in contemporary society tend to be overscheduled, and that an increasing number of children experience stress<sup>4</sup>.

In their attempts to explain why we have this tendency to over-schedule our children, researchers refer to the profound cultural changes that have taken place for the past two-three decades. These cultural changes have had strong impacts on our daily lives; most explicitly, perhaps, regarding our work life, family structures, and consumer activities. But they have also resulted in different notions of what childhood is and ought to be about, and what the relations are between play and learning.

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<sup>3</sup> Elkind 1988, Hill 1997, Longo 1996, Saxon 1991, Schor 1995.

<sup>4</sup> Zlotnik 2001.

David Elkind, who is a professor of child development at Tufts University in Boston, defines play as a social construction<sup>5</sup>. He refers to the fact that when society changes, so too does the societal conception of play. He explains our changing conceptions of play through our cultural transformation from industrial to information society.

Our attitudes, beliefs, and values are deeply rooted in culture - also when it comes to our notions about how children's time ought to be administered in order to give them the best possible base for turning into healthy and skilful grown ups.

One example of how our values and attitudes have changed is the often well meant, but misunderstood, attempt on the part of parents to prepare their children for adult work life. We wrongfully think that the best way to do this is by keeping them occupied with scheduled activities. The backside of the coin, however, is that free play is being squeezed in favour of 'goal oriented' and 'real world conforming' activities. In this connection Elkind writes:

Our traditional conception of play was that of a free, spontaneous, and self-initiated activity that reflected the abundant energy of healthy child development. Today, however, that conception of play has been relegated to the early childhood years. For school age children, play is now identified with learning and with the preparation for adult life.<sup>6</sup>

But there are other explanations as well. Some researchers<sup>7</sup> point out that parents in contemporary western society tend to see and treat their children as status symbols. Rosenfeld refers to a notion called 'hyper-parenting':

The problem is "hyper-parenting", where the parents micro-manage every detail of their children's lives in what becomes a relentless pursuit of perfection. That drives kids to burn out before they even get their high school diplomas. [...]The kids are there to produce accomplishments. They're loved not for who they are but for what they can produce.<sup>8</sup>

Researchers within child psychology point out that there is nothing wrong with supporting and encouraging children. But at the same time they stress that some parents have difficulties distinguishing between their own need to stand out as parents and their children's needs to be stimulated and encouraged. Children's performances are therefore often mis-guidingly used to measure how successful the family is. Zimmerman, for instance, writes:

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<sup>5</sup> Elkind, 1988.

<sup>6</sup> Elkind, unpublished.

<sup>7</sup> e.g. Elkind, unpublished, Rosenfeld, 2001

<sup>8</sup> Rosenfeld, 2001

Not all pushing is over pushing. Nor is it wrong to encourage a precocious talent for music, art or sports. But parents can only exercise the right kind of guidance if they separate their own needs from those of their children.<sup>9</sup>

The reason that researchers object to this tendency for hyper-parenting is that crucial development aspects like self reflection and self evaluation are being sacrificed in favour of mechanical and more tangible skills. Children have a natural urge to grow, to learn, and to enrich themselves, they claim, and competencies like imagination, creativity, and social intelligence arise from being allowed to engage in free play. Rob Heffer writes:

A child who is constantly involved in all types of structured activities may not have the time to engage in important development activities such as self-reflection and self-evaluation.<sup>10</sup>

Rosenfeld supports this notion when he writes:

You feel like you're giving them enormous enrichment but you're really denying them the opportunity to enrich themselves. It's all very paradoxical.<sup>11</sup>

## About the LEGO Time Study

As it can be gathered from above, researchers have significant opinions concerning the state of play in contemporary society. But there is a great need for *empirical* studies of parent's values, beliefs, and attitudes concerning their children's time consumption.

LEGO Learning Institute initiated such an empirical research study in the spring of 2002.

The objective of the study was to investigate parents' conceptions of play and its significance in terms of children's development. The data findings give an indication of how childhood and play is understood by parents. They indicate how parents perceive scheduled time compared to free time, and how they prioritise between the two. The questions cover four major areas:

- 1) Beliefs as to which activities are most beneficial for children.
- 2) Values and beliefs concerning what childhood is about.
- 3) Attitudes and beliefs about what is considered time well spent for children.
- 4) Attitudes and beliefs about what is considered to be play.

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<sup>9</sup> Zimmerman, 1989.

<sup>10</sup> Heffer, 2002.

<sup>11</sup> Rosenfeld, 2001.

The research study was based on the assumption that many parents regard free time as wasted time, and prefer them to engage in scheduled and goal-oriented activities. In the conclusion it will be considered whether the research findings confirm these assumptions.

## Method

The research has been carried out in collaboration with the international independent research institute Millward Brown, who are world class players within research also among families and children.

Edith Ackermann, professor at Massachusetts Institute of Technology, David Elkind, professor at Tufts University, and Hans-Henrik Knoop, professor at DPU, The Danish University of Education, have all kindly offered their expertise and advice regarding the design of the research study. Thank you very much for that.

The survey was carried out in the spring of 2002 as telephone interviews. Approximately 3000 parents to children between the ages of 0-12 were asked about their attitudes toward their children's time consumption. The parents were picked randomly from the target populations. In picking the sample size, the following parameters have been thoroughly considered and weighed against each other: Statistical precision, credibility, and accepted practice<sup>12</sup>.

The five countries chosen for the survey were USA, UK, France, Germany and Japan. The reason for choosing these five countries was to get as wide a picture as possible of parents in post-industrial societies; not least in recognition of the fact that there might be significant cross-cultural differences.

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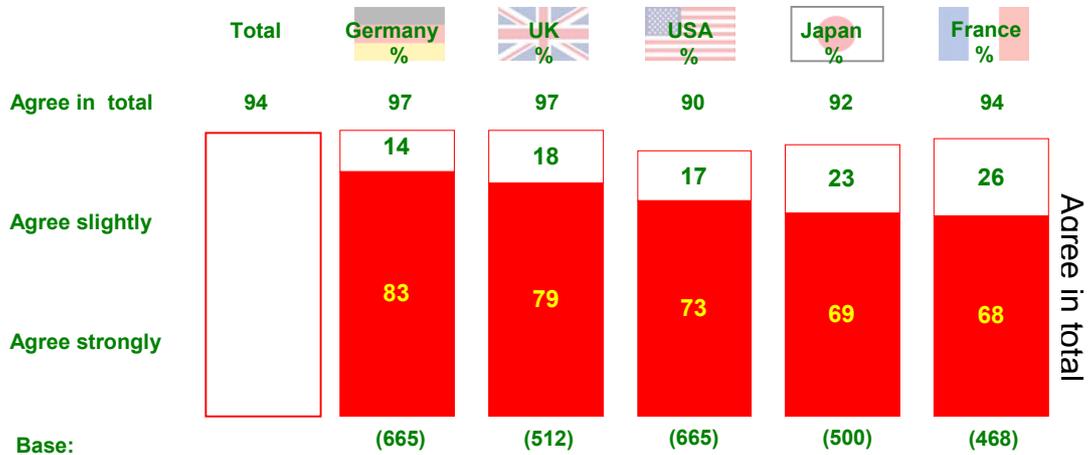
<sup>12</sup> According to Lehman (1989), these are three key parameters to be used in choosing a sample size.

# Results

## Attitudes toward play and free time

Parents of today do seem to acknowledge the value of play. As it appears from figure 1, a large majority (94%) of all parents asked either agree strongly or slightly with the notion that time spent playing is also time spent learning. This finding clearly indicates that if play is undervalued in contemporary society, it is not due to the fact that parents disregard or are unaware that play and learning are closely connected.

Figure 1: "Time spent playing is also time learning"

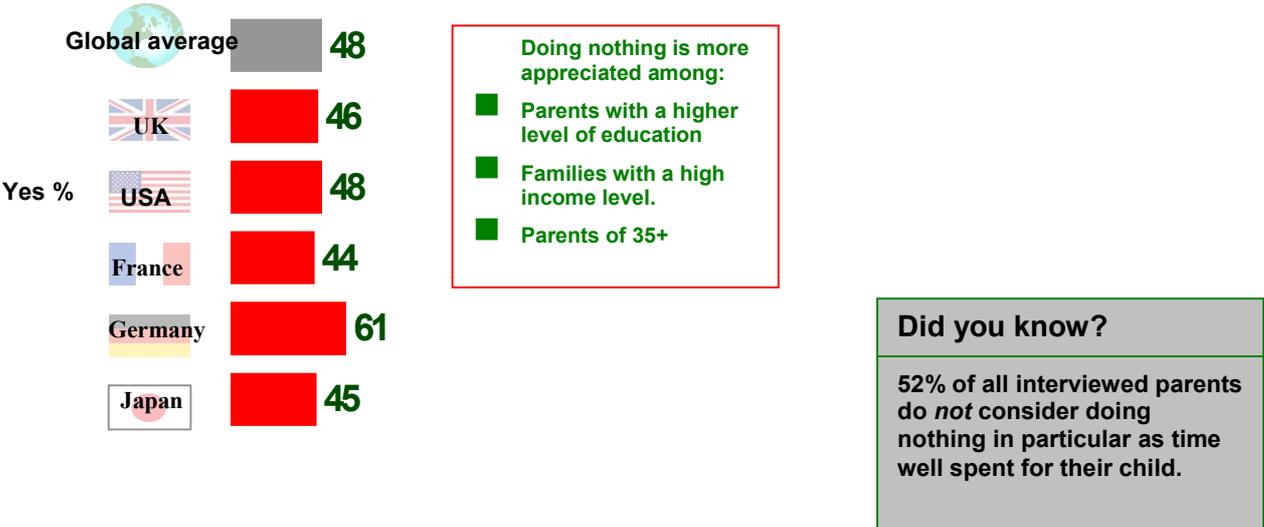


Only 15,8% of all parents asked feel that children's free time is often wasted. Parents' answers to this question vary greatly across countries, however. In Japan only 5% agree that children's free time is often wasted time, while in the UK 32% agree to that same statement. This indicates some significant cross-cultural

differences when it comes to values concerning children’s free play. Furthermore, the findings indicate that parents to children between 9 and 12 years of age are relatively more inclined to feel that children’s free time is wasted time.

Parents are almost evenly divided on the question of whether doing nothing in particular is time well spent for their child. 48% of parents agree that spending time doing nothing in particular is time well spent for their child. In turn this means that 52% of all interviewed parents do *not* consider doing nothing in particular as time well spent. Doing nothing in particular is relatively more appreciated among parents with a high level of education, a high-income level, and among parents of 35+. What is more, parents in Germany score significantly higher on this question; 61% agree that spending time doing nothing in particular is time well spent. This indicates that parents in Germany might have a slightly more positive attitude toward free play compared to parents in the other countries.

Figure 2: “Spending time not doing anything in particular is time well spent for my child”



Thus, while parents acknowledge that play and learning are intimately connected, the findings do indicate that a significant group of parents tend to prefer play activities with a goal or a purpose.

**Are conceptions of what is play expanding?**

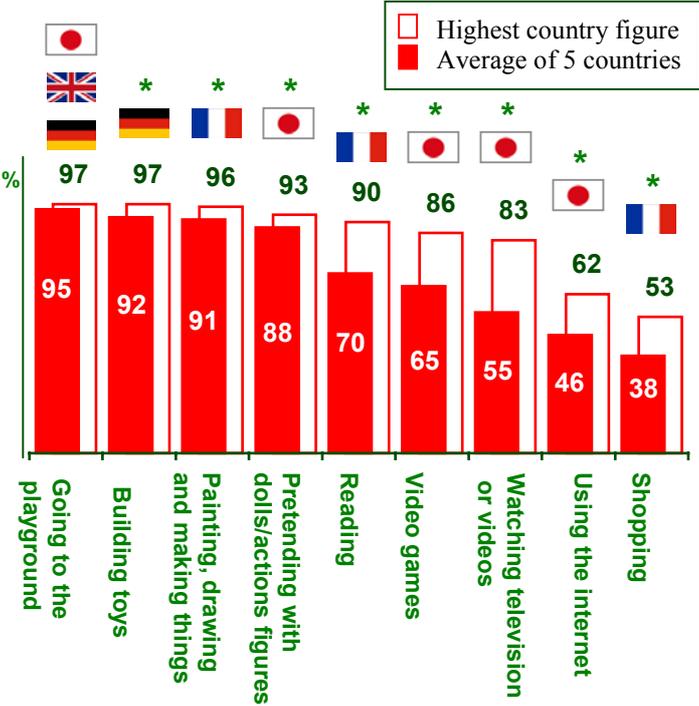
The parents in the survey have a remarkably broad definition of play. As it appears from figure 3, 65% of the interviewed parents define video games as a play activity,

55% consider watching television or videos to be play, 46% consider using the internet to be play, and finally 38% define shopping as a play activity.

Japanese parents, in particular, seem to have a significantly different notion of the concept of play; 86% define video games as a play activity, 83% consider watching television or video films to be a play activity, 62% perceive using the internet as being a play activity.

When it comes to shopping, French parents seem to stick out from parents in other countries; 53% of the French parents define shopping as play.

Figure 3: Which of these activities would you consider to be play?



\* Significant difference compared to average 99% minimum

**Technology is an integrated part of children’s play rituals**

Most notable is perhaps the fact that a fairly large amount of parents in the five countries see children’s interactions with technological products as play. This stems very well with the fact that a rapidly increasing proportion of kids toys today

are digital<sup>13</sup>; in other words, our cultural values and notions of play have change accordingly with technological development. As e.g. Jessen<sup>14</sup> points out, computer games and other interactive toys are no longer sub cultural phenomena reserved for the minority. Technology is today a natural and integrated part of children’s play activities and interactions with each other; not just when it comes to adolescents, but also when it comes to pre-schoolers of 3+.

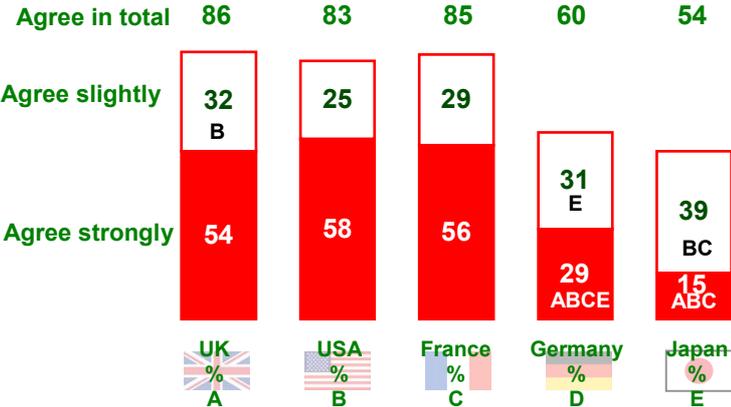
**Consumption activities as play?**

Another interesting indication in the data findings is that a fairly large amount of parents view consumption activities as play. As mentioned, 53% of French parents, and 38% of all parents asked, characterise shopping as play. This can be viewed as an indicator of the vast cultural changes that we have witnessed in terms of consumption. A vast number of sociologists, anthropologists, and consumption theory researchers<sup>15</sup> emphasise that one visible sign of late modern consumer society is that the area of consumption is merged with other activities traditionally belonging to other realms. One example of this is, that consumption arenas are often turned into or merged with play-like, experience oriented family activities.

**Attitudes toward scheduled activities**

As mentioned, parents in the five countries broadly acknowledge the fact that time spent playing is also time spent learning. Simultaneously, though, a significant proportion of parents (an average of 73,6%) think that school-time needs to be supplemented with other planned activities to complete a child’s education.

Figure 4: “School-time needs to be supplemented with other planned activities to complete a child’s education”



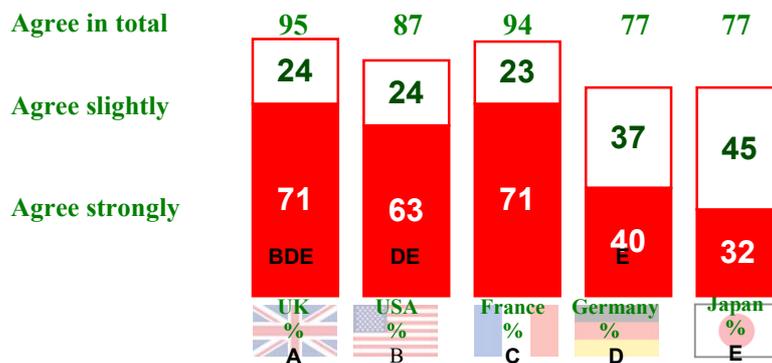
<sup>13</sup> In 1999, more than one fourth of all toys for kids were digital (Rørth 1999).

<sup>14</sup> Jessen, 1999

<sup>15</sup> E.g. Featherstone, 1991, Firat & Venkatesh 1996, Gabriel & Lang 1995.

Additionally, a majority of 86% thinks that children need to participate in organised activities out of home to develop social skills. This appears from figure 4 and 5.

Figure 5: “Children need to participate in organised activities out of the home to develop social skills



NB! A letter in a column indicates significant differences compared to the specific column e.g. 71% of parents in the UK (column A) agree slightly on the above statement, which is significantly higher than parents in the USA (column B), Germany (column D) and Japan (column E)

**Did you know?**

Parents are keen that children participate in organised activities out of home to develop social skills

The figures also show that this attitude is particularly salient among parents from the UK, USA, and France. A significantly smaller proportion of parents in Germany and Japan agree to these two statements.

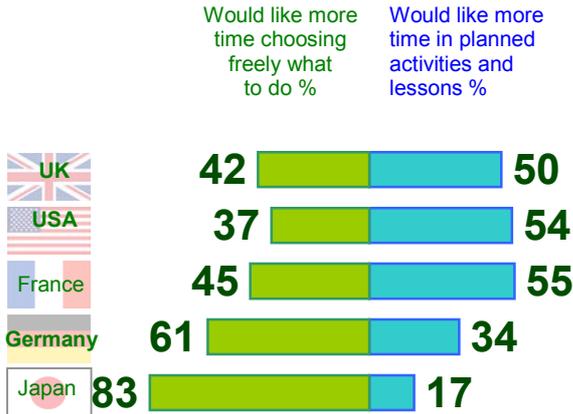
## Balancing between scheduled activities and free play

Some of the findings seem to indicate that parents in the UK, U.S.A. and France prefer to keep their children busy ‘learning’ even if this is at the expense of free time for playing.

Many parents seem to think that their child benefits the most from engaging in goal/reward-oriented activities as opposed to natural, free flowing, exploratory activities. As it appears from figure 6, when asked which types of activities they would encourage their child to engage in, half of the parents in the UK, U.S.A., and France would encourage their child to spend more time in planned activities and lessons. The answers from parents in Germany and Japan, however, are significantly different. In Japan 83% of all parents would encourage their child to spend more time choosing freely what to do, and 61% of the German parents would encourage their child to spend more time choosing freely what to do. Two factors can be explanatory in terms of these country specific differences: One possible interpretation could be that parents in Germany and Japan are more in

favour of free play. Another interpretation could be that children of Japan and Germany now spend so much time in scheduled activities and lessons that their parents feel it is becoming too much.

Figure 7: Would you personally encourage your child to spend more time in planned activities and lessons, or spend more time choosing freely what he/she wanted to do?



**Did you know?**

Around half of all parents find their child is over-scheduled.

### Is time for free play squeezed?

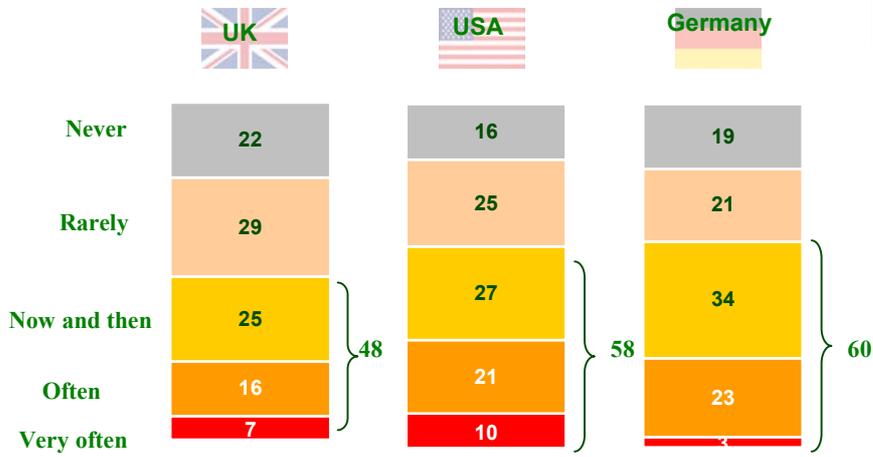
As it appears from figure 8, almost two thirds of all parents in USA and Germany find that their child is over-scheduled now and then, often, or very often. In UK, 48% of all parents characterise their children as over-scheduled<sup>16</sup>. As indicated in figure 9, however, this worry differs according to the children’s age and gender. In Germany, for instance, 26% of all parents report that their children are over-scheduled often or very often. That percentage *increases to 35%* when it comes to parents to girls of 9-11 years of age. And it *increases further to 43%* for parents to girls of 12-14 years of age. The increase is not quite as dramatic when it comes to boys. 33% of parents to boys 9-11 years of age report that their child is over-scheduled often or very often. For boys 12-14 years of age, that same number is 34%. Thus, according to parents, over-scheduling increases proportionately with children’s age.

<sup>16</sup> This figure stems from another survey conducted by LEGO Brand Tracking. The answers have only been collected from parents in Germany, UK, and USA.

**Did you know?**

There is more worry about over-scheduling for those with children of 9+; especially concerning parents to girls.

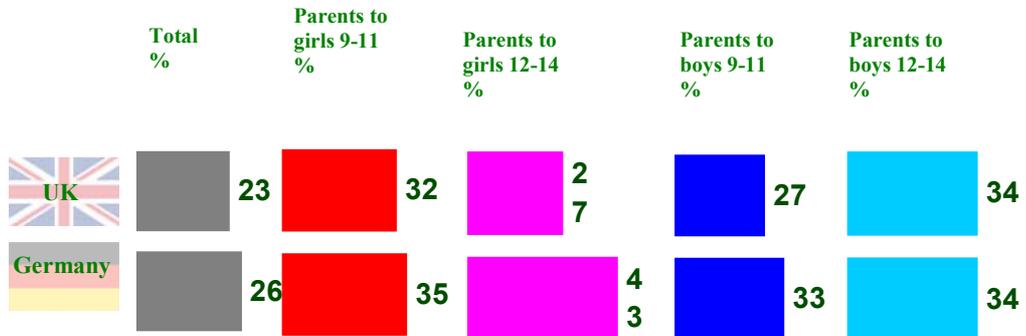
Figure 8: How often do you think your child's time is being too scheduled?\*



\*Source: LEGO Brand Tracking

Figure 9: How often do you think your child's time is being too scheduled?\*

**Very Often/  
Often**



Whether parents think that children have less time to play than they did varies greatly across countries. In France, only 27% agree to this notion, while 75% of the Japanese parents claim that their children have less time to play than they did. This gives evidence to the very different cultural historical backgrounds of France on the one side and Japan on the other.

Nevertheless, it appears from figure 11 that a majority of parents think their child has the right balance in terms of time to freely choose and time in planned activities. Again the greatest concern is among Japanese parents, where 30% claim that the child does not have enough free time.

Figure 10: "Children today have less time for play than you had when you were a child"

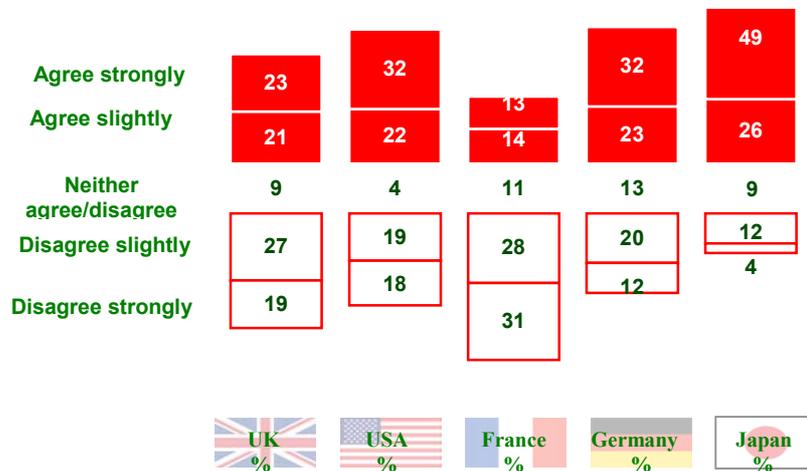
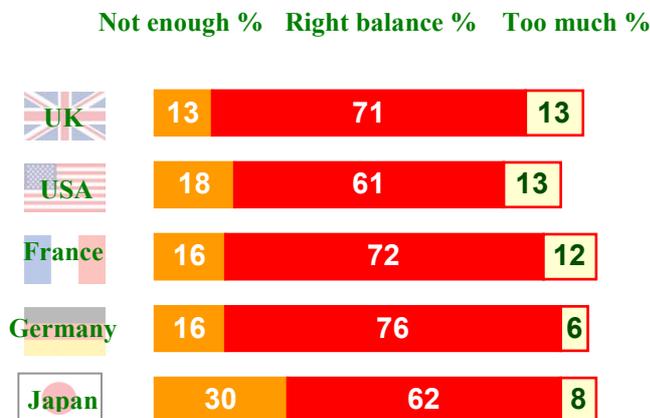


Figure 11: Does your child have:

- Too much free time where they choose what to do
- About the right balance of free time and planned activities, or
- Not enough free time where they choose what to do

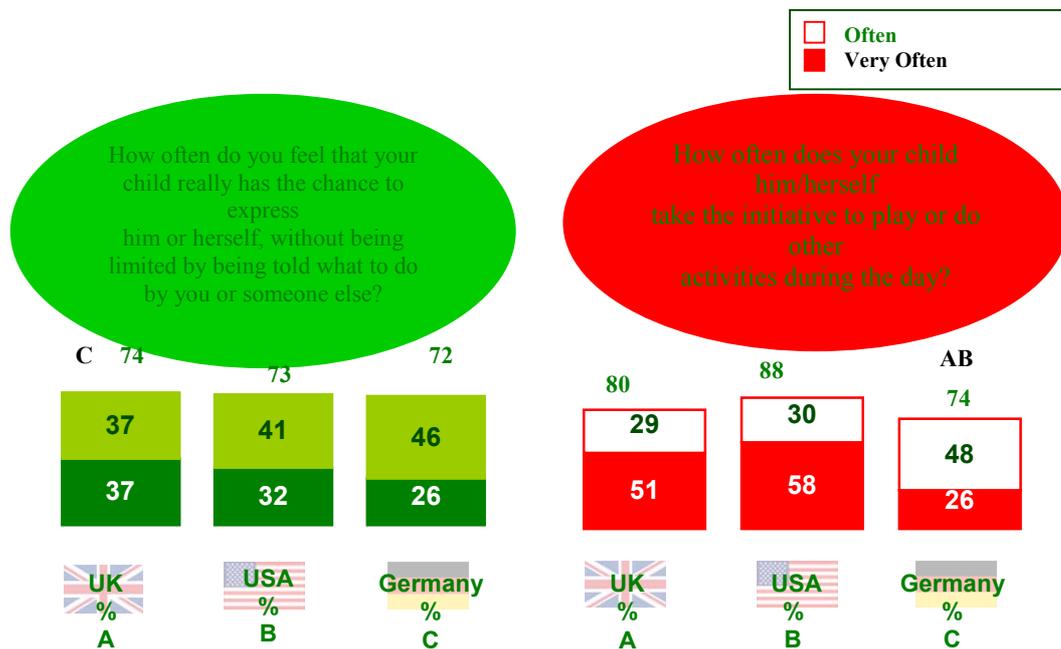


**Did you know?**

Two thirds of parents think their child has the right balance of time to freely choose and time in planned activities.

Parents from UK, U.S.A. and Germany also generally report that their children have the chance to express themselves without being told what to do. Likewise a majority of parents claim (UK: 80%, U.S.A.: 88%, and Germany 74%) that the child either often or very often takes the initiative to play or do other activities during the day.

Figure 12: Do children have the chance to express themselves freely, and do they take the initiative to play themselves?



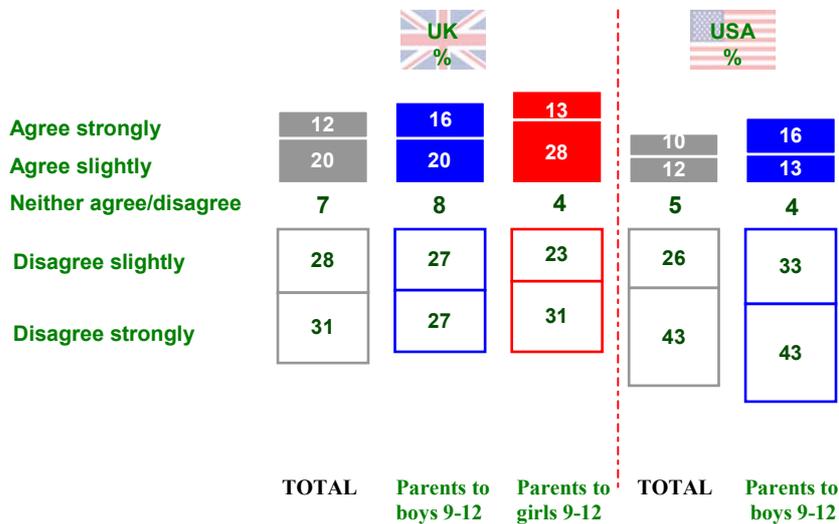
## Gender Differences?

As it has already been noted, the findings do indeed indicate that there are differing attitudes among parents to girls and parents to boys when it comes to values concerning what is considered time well spent.

As illustrated in figure 9, a relatively larger proportion of parents to girls of 9+ report of frequent over-scheduling.

As can be seen from figure 12, parents to girls between 9 and 14 years of age, are relatively more inclined to consider children's free time as wasted time.

Figure 12: “Children’s free time is often wasted time”



One possible interpretation of this is that boys are allowed to be boys for a longer time, whereas girls are expected to become ‘productive’ (do house chores etc.) when they reach a certain age. Another possible interpretation is that girls’ play behaviours change earlier than boys, and that parents tend to perceive this newly acquired behaviour characteristic of adolescents as a waste of time.

## Conclusion

The purpose of conducting this research study was to take the temperature of 'the state of play'. Important questions in this connection were:

- ◆ How do parents value free play?
- ◆ What do parents consider as play?
- ◆ What do parents consider time well spent for their child?
- ◆ Do parents value scheduled activities and lessons more than free play?
- ◆ Do parents think of their own children as overscheduled?

One of the assumptions prior to conducting this study was that many parents regard free time as wasted time, and prefer their children to engage in scheduled and goal-oriented activities. An overall analysis of the findings does point to the fact that many parents really do seem to prefer scheduled and goal-oriented activities as opposed to free play activities. Not because they disregard the fact that free, unrestricted play holds many learning experiences for children. But because they are convinced that children need to participate in scheduled activities and lessons after school in order to be properly prepared for adult life.

Only a minority of parents regard free time as wasted time. There are significant cross-cultural differences though. In Japan only 5% agree that children's free time is often wasted time, while in the UK 32% agree. Furthermore, the findings indicate that parents to children between 9 and 12 years of age are relatively more inclined to feel that children's free time is wasted time.

The findings indicate that parents to girls of 9-14 have different notions about play and time than parents to boys. Relatively more parents to girls 9-14 characterise their children as over-scheduled often or very often. In addition some of the findings indicate that relatively more parents to girls of 9+ think that free time is often wasted.

Last but not least the findings indicate that parents' definitions of play are expanding. A remarkably large proportion of parents regard children's interactions with technological products of various kinds (e.g. surfing on the internet, computer games, television, videos) as play.

What's more, 38% of all parents asked consider shopping to be a play activity. Particularly French parents (53%) see shopping as a play activity.

Thus, the vast changes in our life conditions that we have witnessed during the past decade (e.g. the technological development and the increasing focus on consumption) not only affects children's play behaviour. They also affect our definitions of play in general.

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