

Wild Child Outdoor Playgroup Evaluation

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BACKGROUND

ChildReach is a collective of early years professionals focused on achieving positive outcomes for children and families based in London, Ontario founded in 1975. ChildReach values children as individuals, that are active and competent contributors with their own interests and perspectives. Children need environments and experiences to explore ideas, investigate their theories, and interact with others in play. A diverse range of programming has been developed by the organization to recognize the connection between emotional well-being and socio-cognitive development. ChildReach offers drop-in EarlyON playgroups, fun child-parent educational activities, parenting workshops, one-on-one and group-based parental support, and helpful information about community resources and family services.

Wild Child is a free, nature-based program for families with children of all ages delivered by ChildReach. Each week, children and parents' head into the woods to enjoy free play in a natural setting. Wild Child program leaders demystify the risks of outdoor free play and increase parents' confidence in providing child-led, inquiry-based opportunities for their children. Wild Child is based on an informal and unstructured approach where the experience is child-led. The Wild Child principles are to climb trees, get muddy, find bugs, eat plants, dig holes, skin knees, be tired, and be happy.

Wild Child has been offered as an outdoor playgroup for children and parents since September 2015 by ChildReach. The program has been supported by the Lawson Foundation, Healthy Kids Community Challenge, Ontario's Healthy Kids Strategy, and the Ontario Sport and Recreation Community Fund. The program prior to the COVID-19 pandemic operated four sessions each week across three different locations in London. During the COVID-19 pandemic situation, the Wild Child program has been altered to provide digital and self-serve programming via a Facebook page and Instagram account. Recently, staff have resumed delivery of in-person Wild Child programming.

ChildReach retained the Human Environments Analysis Lab (HEAL) at Western University to perform an evaluation of the perceived impacts and effectiveness of the Wild Child Outdoor Playgroup program during the COVID-19 pandemic situation. The program was previously evaluated by Kovacs Group in February 2017.

The HEAL at Western University is state-of-the-art, multi-disciplinary research and training environment based at Western University which specializes in the production, evaluation, synthesis, dissemination and mobilization of evidence to support effective policies, programs and professional practice aimed at creating healthy and vibrant communities. HEAL faculty and students come from various academic disciplines, including geography, sociology, urban planning, engineering, landscape architecture, health sciences, epidemiology & biostatistics, neurosciences, paediatrics, and food and nutritional sciences. We specialize in community-based research and strive to build authentic and mutually-beneficial partnerships with local community organizations, especially non-profits and charities.

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The following evaluation provides an overview of the peer-reviewed evidence that supports outdoor educational programming for childhood development, a summary of the digital engagement via Facebook and Instagram with Wild Child Outdoor Playgroup programming over the course of the COVID-19 pandemic, and results from a survey of Londoners about outdoor educational programming for children. This triangulated set of evaluation measures provides a set of implications and recommendations for future Wild Child program offerings.

EVIDENCE REVIEW

Childhood outdoor educational programming provides unique opportunities for experiential learning, skills development, improving child-parent relationships, and increasing socialization among all ages. A recent evidence synthesis of interventions to promote physical activity and social connectedness in outdoor spaces among children and youth found nature-based risky play programming to be among the most effective types of interventions.¹ Risky play is defined as activities and types of play children would think as thrilling and exciting, where the possibility of physical injury may exist, but they are in an environment where they can recognize and evaluate challenges based on their own abilities. Risky play allows children to develop their critical thinking and decision-making skills, as well as build confidence, competence, and independence among children and parents about risky play. This form of programming has a strong track record for improving children's health and wellbeing across the lifecourse.

Children who engaged in nature-based risky play during kindergarten programming were observed to participate in numerous styles of play activities. This included functional play (such as running, jumping, and climbing), construction play (building with loose parts such as sticks and rocks), and symbol play (playing make-believe such as house or pirates).² In a pre and post observation of this environment, it was found that those who played in this natural landscape had significantly improved balance and coordination abilities.² Risky play has also been associated with a higher energy expenditure through physical activity.³ As risky play is child-initiated, it may serve as a motivator for active habits through development as children discover activities they enjoy doing and continue to pursue them.³

Numerous research studies have found that play spaces modified to have more natural components promoted movement of play across the entire playscape and children were less likely to limit their play to one specific area.^{4,5} This has been found to increase collaboration between children as well as provide more opportunities for adult and child interactions during playtime.⁴ Researchers have also observed that children in these diverse playscapes increase their play interactions with different genders and age groups⁶ and that these relationships strengthen as they learn to master challenges together.³ Because of the variety of choice in play elements among nature, children also have the opportunity to play independently and thrive in the environments of their choice.^{4,6}

In a school that repurposed their playground area to have more nature-based elements, teachers reported that children had an improvement in mood after outdoor play, their concentration and attainment levels were increased after play, and there was an improved quality in social interactions between peers and teachers.⁶ Other research has also

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indicated that children’s engagement and concentration in their activities is positively associated with risky play, as children learn to assess the risk and develop strategies to understand their own abilities.³ This level of autonomy when playing has been positively associated with well-being in children.³

A study comparing a natural playground to a manufactured playground found that the natural playground increased dramatic play among children, especially with exposure to loose elements that could be used for construction play and imagination.⁷

Dramatic play requires cognitive strategies to develop and sustain make-believe scenarios, which helps promote communication, planning, and problem

solving. It was also found that children who went to preschools with nature playgrounds engaged in more exploration and discovery of nature that fostered learning stimulation and curiosity.⁸ Other research exploring nature-based programs found increases in creative thinking among preschool-aged children as they increased their number of approaches, originality, and imagination when carrying out kinesthetic tasks, all of which are significant skills when developing problem-solving approaches.⁹

“The ability to learn through play. To experiment with objects and push themselves physically. I think they surprise themselves with how strong or brave they actually are, because they’re in situations where they are individually drawn to a challenge and must overcome barriers, that have reactions/consequences in the way they approach the challenge. It helps them feel more emotionally balanced, to be out in the fresh air and experience nature in its raw form.” – Outsider, 33

Existing and developing research in nature-based risky play is showing positive outcomes for young children in numerous areas of development that can develop into long-term healthy habits. Natural areas provide vast opportunities for play, which increase children’s physical activity levels, improve social and cognitive skills, and provide applied learning opportunities. Childhood well-being is a significant outcome for nature-based play; this self-directed play provides children with the opportunity to play autonomously, master personal challenges, and collaborate with others as they explore nature together.

SOCIAL MEDIA INTERACTIONS

Wild Child Outdoor Playgroup has a social media presence on Facebook and Instagram, with 3024 unique users liking the Facebook page and 937 unique users following the Instagram account, as of February 2022. The vast majority of users that engage with Wild Child on social media identify as women, with most on Facebook aged 35-44 years old, and most on Instagram aged 25-34 years old (Table 1). A greater proportion of men engage with Wild Child on Instagram than Facebook.

Most users are from the Middlesex-London region. The Facebook page has a small following of users from the United States (~12% of all users), while Instagram is predominantly followed by Canadians. The Facebook page attracted 352 new users (14% increase), while the Instagram account attracted 208 new users (32% increase) from March 2020 to February 2022. During the same time period, the Facebook page was visited 6243 times, while the Instagram account was visited 1988 times. On average, posts on the Facebook

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page reached 311 unique users per post, while posts on the Instagram account reached 48 unique users per post.

Table 1. Summary of user gender and age groups by social media platform

Age Group	FACEBOOK				Age Group	INSTAGRAM			
	# Users		% All Users			# Users		% All Users	
	Women	Men	Women	Men		Women	Men	Women	Men
18-24	70	15	2.3%	0.5%	18-24	22	3	2.4%	0.3%
25-34	711	52	23.5%	1.7%	25-34	376	18	40.2%	1.9%
35-44	1542	76	51.0%	2.5%	35-44	292	39	31.2%	4.2%
45-54	332	24	11.3%	0.8%	45-54	100	16	10.7%	1.7%
55-64	85	12	2.8%	0.4%	55-64	47	6	5.0%	0.7%
65+	96	9	2.9%	0.3%	65+	13	5	1.2%	0.5%
Total	2836	188	93.8%	6.2%	Total	850	87	90.7%	9.3%



SURVEY INSIGHTS

A survey was distributed on ChildReach, Wild Child, and HEAL social media channels, rendering an acceptable set of responses (n=51). The survey consisted of questions about engagement with Wild Child programming, outdoor play experiences, demographics, and perceptions of parent and child wellbeing. The majority of respondents identified as women (n=44), with few men (n=7). These respondents reported having most often two children (n=32), followed by one child (n=14), and then those with 3 or more children (n=7). There was an even gender distribution of boys and girls between these children, with a median age of six years old among this group. Most (96%) responding parents have access to a vehicle, while only some (43%) report caring for a pet that requires outdoor exercise. The majority (84%) report coping or living comfortably on their income, being employed (76%), and being married (82%). More than half (54%) of respondents have completed a university degree.

The survey identified four types of respondents: Regulars, Newcomers, Leavers, and Outsiders. Regulars (n=21) are families that previously participated in Wild Child programming and continued to do so over the pandemic. Newcomers (n=9) are families that

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began participating in Wild Child programming during the pandemic. Leavers (n=6) are families that previously participated in Wild Child programming but did not continue their participation over the pandemic. Outsiders (n=15) are families that have not participated in any Wild Child programming.

“It has introduced us to new forested areas in the city. It has helped make parents friends with similar interests. It has provided us with the confidence to let our children test out challenging things/activities that we might have been more cautious about (ie. climbing trees, jumping off logs, breaking ice in ponds.) prior to participating in Wild Child - this has only help grow my children's confidence in outdoor activities and nature.” – Regular, 42

There were identifiable differences in the frequency of visits to outdoor spaces, unrelated to Wild Child programming, between these four groups (Figure 1). Respondents were asked “How often do you and/or your child participate in outdoor activity, other than Wild Child programming, in the following kinds of spaces?” in the survey. Regulars and Newcomers reported visiting natural spaces more often than Leavers and Outsiders, while inversely, Leavers and Outsiders reported visiting more structured play environments.



Figure 1. Visitation patterns to play spaces by respondent type

Barriers to participation in outdoor activities were similar between the four groups (Figure 2). The largest barriers to participation were not having time to take children to outdoor areas, the weather not being right for outdoor activity, lack of public information on where to find outdoor areas, lack of transportation to outdoor areas, and being afraid of crime and/or harm from other people in outdoor areas.

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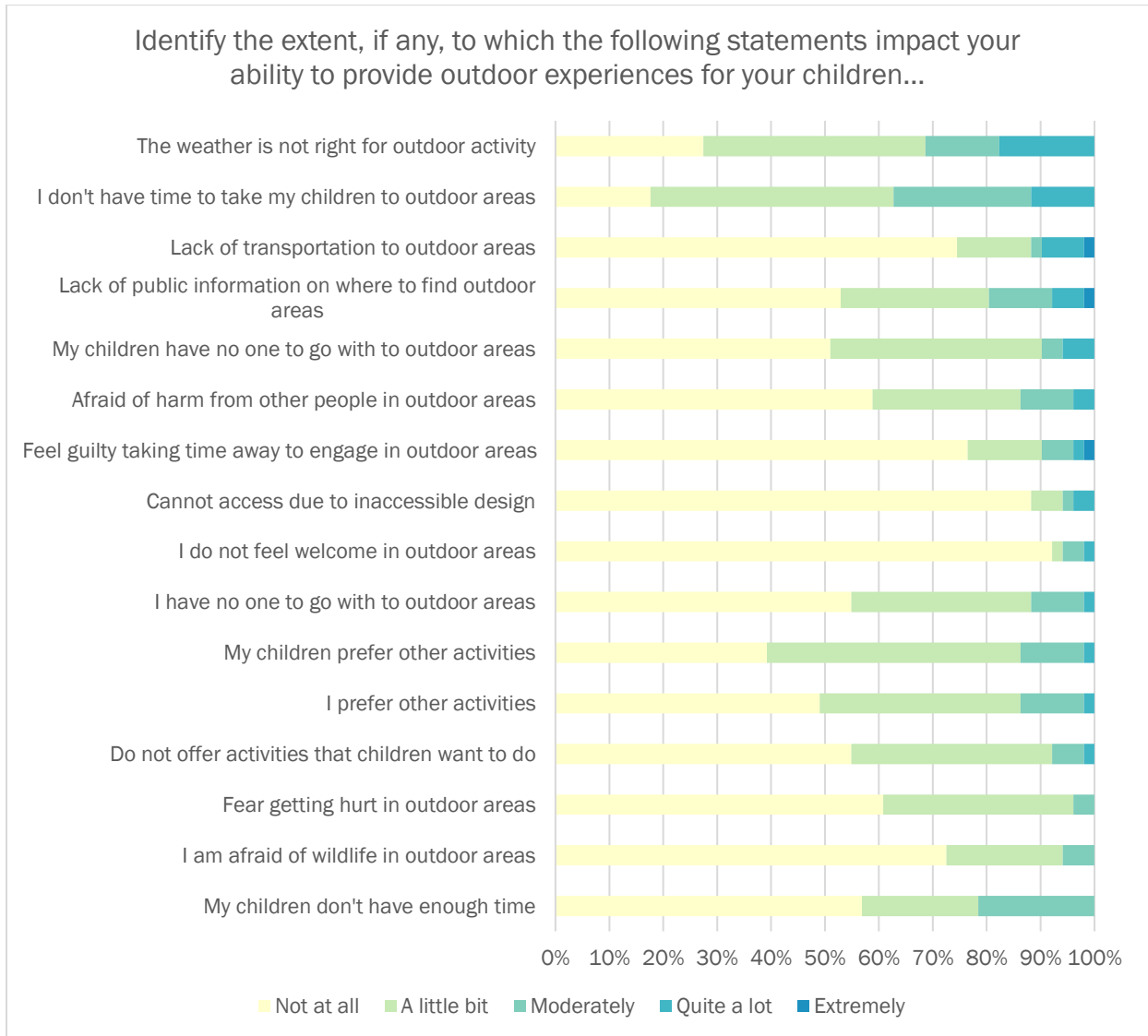


Figure 2. Barriers to participation in outdoor activity

Responses from parents to the survey reveal Wild Child programming, compared to outdoor activity, improves wellbeing and community connectedness among parents (Figure 3) and their children (Figure 4) from the view of their parents. Respondents were asked “As a parent, how do you feel Wild Child programming/outdoor play has impacted your own/your child’s wellbeing, in comparison to all other aspects of your life?” in the survey.



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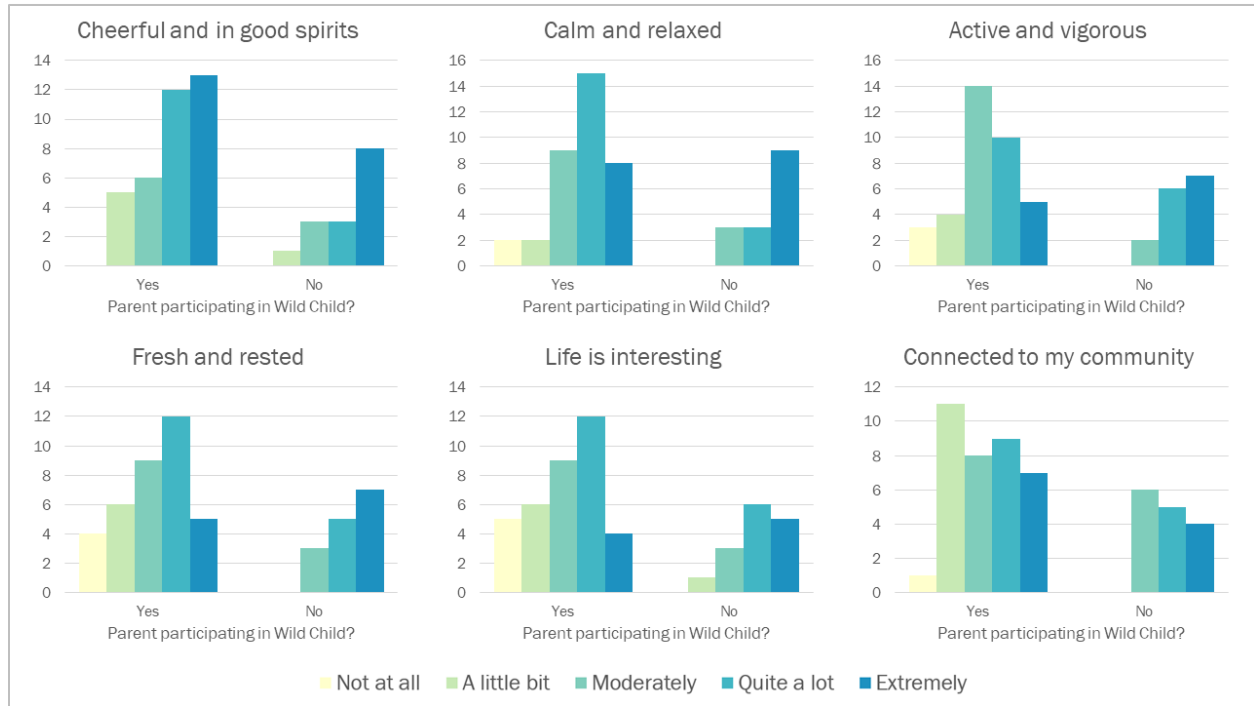


Figure 3. Parental wellbeing measures by participation in Wild Child programming

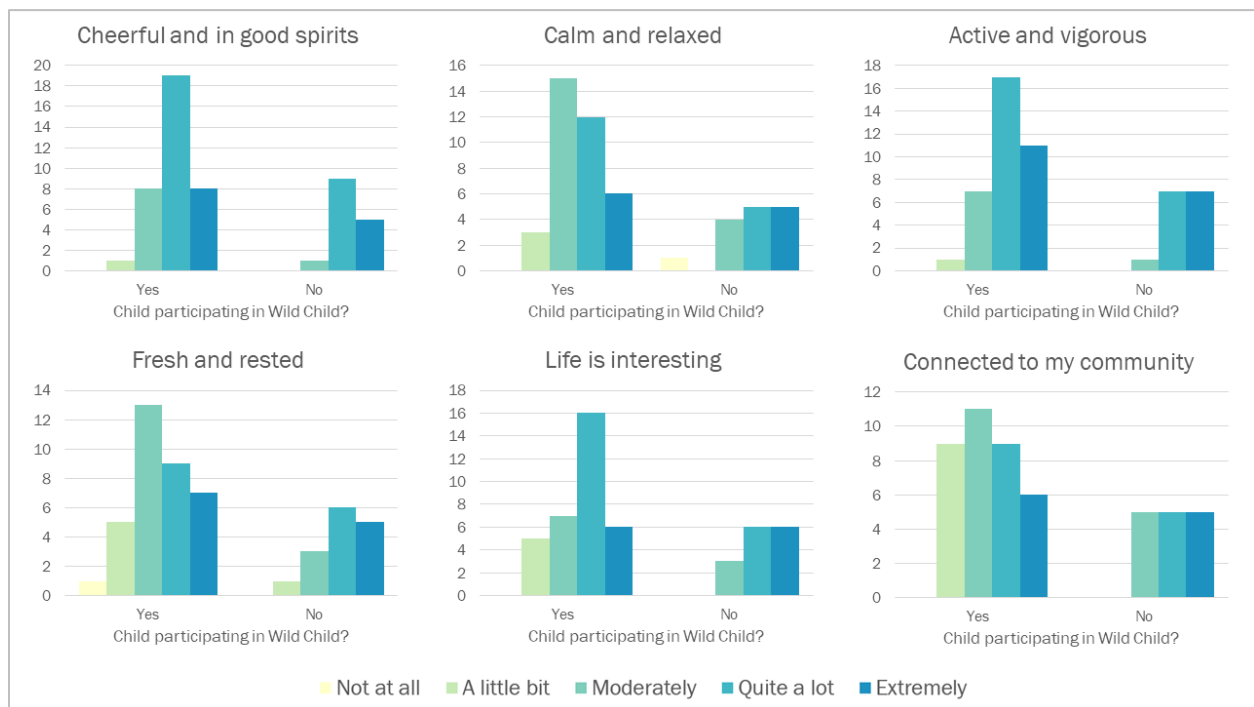


Figure 4. Child wellbeing measures by participation in Wild Child programming

IMPLICATIONS

The Wild Child Outdoor Playgroup is a highly successful child-led parent-supported educational program that should expand to serve more families in the Middlesex-London region. Outdoor playgroups are recognized globally as effective programming to increase child engagement with nature and build strong child-parent relationships. Literature indicates that nature-based risky play is beneficial for children’s physical, social, and cognitive development.

Over the course of the COVID-19 pandemic, the Wild Child Outdoor Playgroup social media presence grew considerably, with a high uptake of digital self-serve programming. As the Playgroup could not gather in-person due to safety restrictions, this strong social media presence and interaction by parents indicate that the Wild Child Outdoor Playgroup continued to provide an effective program for families to enjoy and engage with nature at their own pace. This programming provided a vital route for families to continue to access outdoor programming in a safe manner, counteracting the mental health and isolation impacts of pandemic-related control measures.

“I was so glad for this program during covid! The stone finding activities got us through the 2020-2021 winter lock downs. And then the in person programs had a major positive impact on my mental health. Being able to meet with other parents and staff in a safe outdoor setting was essential to my well-being, and so then of course essential to my children's wellbeing. I'm not sure what we would have done without this program. The lock downs would have certainly been more challenging, if not impossible to get through.” – Regular, 37

Regular and Newcomer Wild Child program participants tend to visit more natural spaces more frequently for outdoor play than those who were Leavers or Outsiders of the Wild Child program. Those that did participate in Wild Child report that both parent and child wellbeing was positively impacted by the outdoor programming. Wild Child programming follows established evidence from around the world, improving physical activity levels, social connectedness, and overall wellbeing among children and parents.

“I think my attitude towards outdoor play has changed over the years. I'm less neurotic about getting messy and actually encourage it now a days. I think this is due in part to the general state of outdoor playgroups like Wild Child and the attitudes of the instructors and participants themselves. I'm also a more prepared parent, knowing that they will get messy and dress them up appropriately. This has allowed me to relax and just enjoy nature.” – Leaver, 35

It is important to recognize that parents of all groups reported weather, insufficient time, transportation, and lack of information about outdoor areas as leading barriers for accessing nature-based play. These barriers align with existing evidence about outdoor play and is addressed specifically through Wild Child programming by educating parents about how to dress for the weather, make time for outdoor activity, and reach outdoor play opportunities within their local environments. Addressing these barriers among a broader group of London families could be an ideal direction for Wild Child program leaders to continue the development of the Wild Child Outdoor Play programming model.

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Wild Child's program elements align with programs in the literature that have seen positive outcomes; this review highlights that participation in outdoor play can contribute to improved children's health and well-being across the lifecourse. Wild Child enables children, inclusive of different ages, genders, and ethno-cultural backgrounds, to collaborate through nature-based play. Furthermore, through exposure to risky play in natural environments, children at Wild Child learn to assess risk, collaborate with others, improve creative thinking, and develop strategies to understand their own abilities. Continued support of the Wild Child Outdoor Playgroup is essential to supporting London families, addressing barriers to engaging in outdoor play experiences, building stronger parent-child relationships, improving parent-child wellbeing, and inspiring life-long interest in nature. Expansion of this evidence-based program through additional staff and communications support would have an outsized impact on parent-child relationships and wellbeing in the Middlesex-London region.



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