Childhood pastimes are increasingly moving indoors

By Dennis Cauchon, USA TODAY

BELLBROOK, Ohio — Being a kid isn't what it used to be.

Many among today's generation of children would rather play video games or surf the Internet than hang out outside.

Dakota Howell, 9, went fishing in this town of 7,000 the other day with his mom, dad and little brother. "It's fun," he says, happily reeling in sunfish from Spring Lake during a fishing derby sponsored by Wal-Mart.

But, to be honest, he'd rather be doing something else: playing video games. "That was my first choice," he confides. "But mom says they rot your brain."

Misty Pollock, his mother, smiles. "When I was a kid, we wanted to be outdoors," she says. "Today, you have to push kids outside."

The fundamental nature of American childhood has changed in a single generation. The unstructured outdoor childhood — days of pick-up baseball games, treehouses and "be home for dinner" — has all but vanished.

Today, childhood is spent mostly indoors, watching television, playing video games and working the Internet. When children do go outside, it tends to be for scheduled events — soccer camp or a fishing derby — held under the watch of adults. In a typical week, 27% of kids ages 9 to 13 play organized baseball, but only 6% play on their own, a survey by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention found.
The shift to an indoor childhood has accelerated in the past decade, with huge declines in spontaneous outdoor activities such as bike riding, swimming and touch football, according to separate studies by the National Sporting Goods Association, a trade group, and American Sports Data, a research firm. Bike riding alone is down 31% since 1995.

A child is six times more likely to play a video game on a typical day than to ride a bike, according to surveys by the Kaiser Family Foundation and the CDC. Dakota Howell says his favorite video game — *Tony Hawk’s Pro Skater*— is more fun than actual skateboarding.

The change can be seen in children's bodies. In the 1960s, 4% of kids were obese. Today, 16% are overweight, according to the CDC. It can be seen in their brains. Studies indicate that children who spend lots of time outdoors have longer attention spans than kids who watch lots of television and play video games, says Frances Kuo, director of the Human-Environment Research Laboratory at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign.

"New research indicates that our intuition is right: Kids are spending way too much time with media and not enough time outside," Kuo says.

The lure of television and video games isn't the only thing keeping kids indoors. Parents are more afraid of letting kids roam in a world of heavy traffic and reports of pedophiles and missing children. A 41% decline in the birth rate since 1960 means smaller packs of kids roam neighborhoods. Air-conditioning means kids don't need the local pool or swimming hole to cool off.

"Boundaries for kids used to be measured by blocks or miles. Now, the boundary for most kids is the front yard. A lot of kids are under house arrest," says Richard Louv, author of *Last Child in the Woods*, a book about how children have lost touch with nature.

He says many parents fear the outdoors, whether it's letting a kid climb a tree or hike alone in the woods. "Parents think their kids are safer in front of the Xbox in the next room."

**Home alone**

Consider Jared Timmons and Cole Hillsamer, a pair of athletic 11-year-old friends from Beaver Creek, Ohio. The boys live in neighborhoods separated by a busy street neither is allowed to cross in their 38,000-resident town outside of Dayton.

During the school year, both boys got home about 2 p.m. and spent a couple hours alone. Cole flopped on his bed, watched MTV or the *Dukes of Hazzard*. Jared sat 2 miles away instant messaging friends and sometimes stepping outside to shoot baskets by himself.

The buddies were outdoors together at this month's fishing derby. Cole's mother, Janet Begley, drove them to the event and sat in a beach chair behind the boys reading *Hidden Prey*, a murder mystery.

She says she would never let her son play in the woods without an adult. She won't even let him go alone to the park down the street. "Parks are where pedophiles go," she says.

The mother pauses for a moment to recall her tomboy childhood. She rode her bike all over town. She played outdoors freely — climbing trees, playing tag and kick the can. "Life for kids isn't what it used to be," she says.

Annabel North, 9, a bubbly Catholic school student, is fishing a few feet away. Last night, she had a sleepover at a friend's house and had a grand time trying to make grape jelly from juice and milk. She stayed up whispering until midnight discussing whether the Loch Ness monster is real.

But much of her time, she says, is spent by herself. "When I'm happy, I go outdoors. When I'm sad, I watch TV," she says.
Some days, Annabel says, she watches television from the moment she wakes up until the moment she goes to bed.

Is that boring? "No, it's not boring at all!" she exclaims, surprised by the silly question. "It's great. I don't miss anything."

**Multimedia lives of children**

In the 1960s, television broadcast 27 hours of children's programming a week, much of it shown simultaneously on Saturday morning. Today, there are 14 television networks aimed at children, and the most popular show with children, *American Idol*, isn't on any of them.

Children ages 8 to 10 spend an average of 6 hours a day watching television, playing video games and using computers, according to the Kaiser study. And that's during the school year. No study has been done on vacation habits, but TV ratings show kids watch more during the summer.

Childhood's outdoor pastimes are declining fast and the rate has accelerated in the past decade, especially the past five years, according to the National Sporting Goods Association (NSGA) annual survey of physical activity.

Since 1995, the portion of children ages 7 to 11 who swim, fish or play touch football has declined by about a third. Canoeing and water skiing are down by similar amounts.

The relationship between kids and their bikes is especially telling.

In 1995, 68% of children ages 7 to 11 rode a bike at least six times a year. Last year, only 47% did.

The sales of children's bikes fell from 12.4 million in 2000 to 9.8 million in 2004, a 21% decline, according to *Bicycle Industry and Retailer News*, an industry magazine.

"Bikes used to be empowering for children," says Marc Sani, publisher of the magazine. "My parents didn't care where I went as long as I was home for supper. Now, parents are afraid to let kids out of their sight."

Many kids have substituted skateboards and scooters to get around. But skateboards and scooters travel short distances and their use peaked in 2001 and 2002 respectively, according to the NSGA survey.

Children today tend to get outdoor exercise by appointment.

Soccer participation has been unchanged in the past decade — about 28% of kids age 7 to 11 play the sport. Soccer leagues and soccer camps are in full bloom this summer, although non-organized soccer games are uncommon.

Organized outdoor activities have kept kids moving. They are declining but much more slowly that unstructured outdoor play.

Little League participation has fallen to 2.1 million children, down 14% from its peak in 1997. But overall baseball playing — pick-up games, catch, pickle — has declined nearly twice as fast, the NSGA surveys show.

"As a kid, I'd throw my glove on a bike and pedal 2 or 3 miles to the ball field for a pick-up game," says Little League spokesman Chris Downs, 33, in Williamsport, Pa. "That doesn't appeal to kids as much today. They have many other choices — and not just video games."

In generations past, children's play tended to be open-ended, following whatever game or adventure a child's imagination could generate. Children and parents now prefer structured entertainment, whether it's a video game or a day at the pool.

Spring Valley Pool in Granville, Ohio, closed this year after 70 years. "Kids expect entertainment at a pool, not just pleasure or friendship," says Chip Gordon, whose family owned the pool. "Our 12-foot high dive couldn't compete with the jazzy stuff kids expect."
Kids specialize

Mike Morris, 20, a pole-vaulter at DePauw University in Greencastle, Ind., says the introduction of Nintendo 64 in 1996 was a seminal event in his generation’s childhood. It introduced 3-D graphics, the joystick and the ability to play "shoot 'em up" games that allowed competing against friends. Almost overnight, play in his neighborhood shifted from outdoors to indoors. Some kids never really came back out, he says. Even those who did had their habits changed.

Morris often works out three hours a day at the gym, then returns to his dorm to play the Halo combat game against 20 fellow students sitting in their own dorm rooms nearby.

"My college memories are more likely to be a great move I put on to kill someone in Halo than a great move in pick-up basketball," he says. "It's kind of sad in a way."

Tracey Martin, 40, head of parks and recreation in Greenville, Ohio, says his athletic 14-year-old son spends a typical summer week playing basketball all day at basketball camp and playing soccer at night. But when his son is home, the boy spends his free time using computer chat rooms and playing cards over the Internet. "The funny thing is, I never see him play cards with his friends," his father says.

Many parents express dismay over the lives their children lead, but they aren't sure what to do.

Darrell Mueller, 54, runs the parks and recreation programs in North Platte, Neb. His childhood was spent outdoors playing ball, riding his bike and building forts. Even today, he hates being inside.

His children are the opposite. They prefer being driven to school, which is just two houses away.

His 11-year-old daughter, Ivy, spends hours instant messaging her friend across the street. He asks why she doesn't just go over and play with her friend. "This is more fun," his daughter explains.

Mueller's 16-year-old son, Taylor, spends nearly every waking hour in his room, playing the Warcraft fantasy game on the Internet with people from around the world.

"I call him the caveman because he never leaves his room," Mueller says. "He comes out now and then for dinner, but he can't eat with us. He has to get back to his game."

His son recently burst out of his room excited. His guild, or team, had earned a top ranking in Warcraft. The father didn't know what to say: Should he congratulate his son on his success or worry about what it meant?

Mueller pulls his son out of his room three times a week — twice for a summer basketball league and on Sunday to mow the grass at the boy's grandfather's house. "In my day, we tried to get out of the house any way we could," Mueller says. "Now, you can't get kids outdoors."

In Bellbrook, the fishing derby ends at noon.

Dakota Howell and his brother John, 7, are ready to head home from Spring Lake. Dakota declares he wants to be an archaeologist because he loves getting his fingers dirty. John, carrying fishing rods, looks like a child in a Norman Rockwell painting. He has a big smile on his face.

"Now," he says, "we're going home to play video games."
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Children's Pastimes Today and Yesterday

Children spend their pastime indoors entertained by electronic gadgets, video games, computers, and television today. It was only a few decades ago when children spent their pastime outside in the fresh air playing, building forts, and being active. With the advancement of technology, the way children spend their pastime today is much different from yesterday. Today children spend their pastime watching TV, playing on Gameboy, Playstation, listening to their Ipods, and surfing the World Wide Web. Children are not as active as they once were and because of Only-child families are becoming the new traditional family, for a number of reasons, says social psychologist and author Susan Newman, Ph.D. In her 2011 book, The Case for the Only Child, she writes that many women are having children later in life, and that more and more families are concerned about the cost of raising children. With these demographic and economic trends dovetailing with research that indicates only children aren’t disadvantaged at all and may have an edge in certain areas it’s not hard to understand why single-child families are growing at a faster rate than families.

Five childhood activities to get you moving. Maybe a little after my childhood years but heading out with friends to go dancing was one of my favourite activities (and so much cheaper and more enjoyable than a gym membership). Then work, kids, and home life got in the way and a night at the club wasn’t a priority anymore. If I’m completely honest, I think I would feel too old to visit some of the local dance spots now.