CHILDREN'S PERSPECTIVES OF SAFETY IN THEIR NEIGHBOURHOOD

by

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Abstract

The main purpose of this study was to explore, understand, and describe children's perspectives of safety in their neighbourhood. Participants included 15 children aged 7 to 9 years, who lived in a neighbourhood in the Lower Mainland of British Columbia characterized by high crime rate and characteristics associated with high vulnerability. The methodology used was symbolic interactionism. Data collection included individual and collective drawing activities and semi-structured group interviews conducted across three group sessions. Field notes and memos were used to document the data analysis process, in addition to peer debriefing sessions. A constant comparison method guided the coding, categorization, and analysis of all data, which were reviewed by a peer audit. Through the social interaction in groups, children co-constructed the meanings of safety, enriching the discussions and expanding the findings. Two interrelated core categories emerged: *protective conditions* that serve to help the children prevent or avoid *risky events*. *Protective conditions* were associated with places and people the children perceived as protective and with *protective actions* taken and *protective accessories* used to prevent harm. *Risky events* included *neighbourhood disorder*, *crime*, *contact with strangers,* and *accidents*. The fear of exposure to such events could result in harm and, consequently, damage children's sense of well-being. The dynamic relationship between the obverse meanings of safety -safe and unsafe- contributed to children's understanding of this concept. It is suggested that the social context where the children live and the social interaction among participants shaped their perspectives of safety. While examples of extreme dangerous situations, descriptions of safety rules taught by adults, and media violence illustrated children's "negative" perspectives of safety, a few participants indicated that supportive relationships promoted sense of security. Implications of these findings for parents, psychologists, and other professionals working with children suggest efforts to (a) understand and recognize the benefits and risks of teaching

children strategies to protect themselves, (b) promote positive and stable relationships within the child's proximal environments (family, school, and neighbourhood), and (c) reduce situations in the neighbourhood associated with disorder as children perceive themselves as unable to maintain their sense of well-being.

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Chapter One: Introduction

Even though research in neuroscience and biological science acknowledges that individual differences and life outcomes have a strong relationship with one's biological characteristics, empirical research also suggests that the social environments, particularly during the first years of life, have long lasting effects on shaping individuals' learning, behaviour, and health (McCain, Mustard, & Shanker, 2007; Shonkoff et al., 2004). Compelling evidence supports that the environmental contexts in which children live influence their development over extended periods of time (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006; Boyle, Georgiades, Racine, & Mustard, 2007). However, what has been less researched is how children perceive and understand these environmental conditions.

Over the years, contextual theories have been used to better understand how factors in children's environments influence their development. These theories focus on the relationship between child and environment, which shifted the emphasis from biological to contextual determinants (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 1998; Coleman, 1988; Jencks & Mayer, 1990; Sampson & Morenoff, 1997). According to Bronfenbrenner's ecological theory of human development (1979), there is a need to examine the multiple contexts of which children and families are a part, and the interactions among these contexts, to understand how environments influence child development. These environments are nested settings that an individual develops over time throughout the course of life. The three important characteristics of the ecological model are that: (a) it is child-centered; (b) it starts with a focus on the child's experiences; and (c) it includes the nature of the relationships between different settings because they influence the experiences that young children have (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 1998).

Based on evidence that environments play an important role in child development, research also shows that although individual and family characteristics have a greater impact on

children's outcomes (Tremblay et al., 2001), other contexts, such as neighbourhood conditions, also affect the development and well-being of children and adolescents (Barnes & Cheng, 2006; Curtis, Dooley, & Phipps, 2004; Schaefer-McDaniel, 2009).

To better understand the dynamics between children and their environments, it is important to investigate how the children *themselves* make sense of these contexts. A small body of research about young people's perceptions of their environment, particularly their neighbourhood, has been conducted. In a comprehensive review of the literature on the effects of neighbourhood residence on child and adolescent outcomes, Leventhal and Brooks-Gunn (2000) stated that most studies on this topic have "focused either on early childhood or late adolescence" (p. 315). More studies that explore early elementary school-aged children's views of different aspects of their neighbourhood are needed in order to draw conclusions on how this environment affects their development. Among the studies that explore young people's perspectives of the environment where they live, safety is an important and persistent theme that emerges (Chawla, 2002; Irwin, 2005; Nicotera, 2008; Schaefer-McDaniel, 2007; Spilsbury, 2002).

The current study was an investigation of elementary school-aged children's meanings and experiences of safety in their neighbourhood. Findings from this study added data to a growing body of literature that explores children's perceptions of their environment. Learning more about children's perspectives of safety will contribute to new directions in research and assist in the development of strategies to improve conditions related to neighbourhood safety, as perceived by children. Increasing children's feelings of safety may positively impact their perspectives about the environment where they live and their life experiences.

Purpose of the Study and Research Questions

Given the limited research in exploring experiences of children in their environment, the purpose of the present study was to explore, understand, and describe neighbourhood safety from the perspective of children. The aim was to investigate the meanings attributed to, and children's experiences of, safety in their neighbourhood, and to answer the research question: What are children's perspectives of safety in their neighbourhood? To help guide the main research question, subsequent questions were examined, including: (a) What does "safety" mean to children in their neighbourhood? (b) What does "lack of safety" mean to children in their neighbourhood? and (c) What are children's experiences of safety in their neighbourhood?

Definitions of Key Terminology

This section provides clarification of the use of terms and definitions found within this thesis.

At-risk or vulnerability. Due to the implementation of the Early Development Instrument (EDI) (Janus & Offord, 2006) in the province of British Columbia (BC), population level data designed to measure the state of child development at Kindergarten entry have been collected over the past 10 years. The EDI is a measure used to assess physical health and well being, social competence, emotional maturity, and language and cognitive development of Kindergarten children. EDI results in BC indicate that a percentage of children who enter elementary school are vulnerable in one or more scales of development. The term "vulnerability" in this context indicates that a child is, on average, more likely to be limited in his or her development than another child who scores above the cut-off. Particularly, to predict child vulnerability rates in each neighbourhood in BC, statistical modeling is used in relation to the local socio-economic conditions measured by the census. The present study was conducted with children who resided in a neighbourhood identified as having at-risk characteristics associated with poor

developmental outcomes. The phrase "at-risk" is used in this thesis to describe a population of children, rather than an individual child. Another word used to represent the population of children who are at potential risk for developmental delays is "vulnerability" (Human Early Learning Partnership [HELP], 2009).

At this time, the database used to help understand child vulnerability consists of EDI data for three entire cohorts (2003, 2006, and 2009) of Kindergarten children in BC (each cohort contains records for approximately 40, 000 children). The database also contains an extensive range of demographics and socio-economic status (SES) indicator variables that are combined at a neighbourhood level. EDI data gathered from the first two cohorts of Kindergarten children (data collected between 2003 and 2006) identified that children who lived in the targeted neighbourhood had rates of vulnerability significantly different from census-based predictions. The neighbourhood in this study demonstrated favorable "off-diagonal" patterns (HELP, 2009) or a "strong tendency toward the lower-vulnerability-than-expected outcome" (Kershaw et al., 2009, p. 400). In other words, children who resided in the targeted neighbourhood were less vulnerable than predicted in one or more scale(s) of development. EDI data gathered in 2008-2009, however, indicated that the targeted neighbourhood had the highest rate of children at-risk for developmental delays among all the neighbourhoods located in the city. It is important to note that while the targeted neighbourhood was selected to better understand these patterns, the children involved in this study are not necessarily reflected in this statistic.

Neighbourhood. The term neighbourhood within this study is described in a strictly geographic sense when referring to the area with boundaries set by HELP in collaboration with the early childhood development coalitions (HELP, 2009). To determine the neighbourhood boundaries across BC that are more meaningful for local citizens than prescribed census tract boundaries, data from the 2001 Canadian census was combined with reports about the "internal

boundaries that reflect lived experiences of social and economic divisions" of residents who live

in each district in BC and who are associated with childhood programs (Kershaw et al., 2009, p.

391). Thus, the 2001 Canadian census data were reformatted to reflect the neighbourhood

boundaries according to HELP guidelines.

Chapter Two: Review of the Literature

Overview

        In this literature review, different factors that have been found to influence child development are explored with the intent of linking neighbourhood characteristics with children's perspectives of safety. The main topics examined were: (a) early child development, (b) environmental effects on child development, (c) neighbourhood safety, (d) residents' perspectives of their environment as they relate to child development, and (d) children's contributions to research.

Child Development

        During the early years, billions of neurons in the brain are stimulated to form pathways that are considered crucial processes for integrating the many functions of the brain (Cynader & Frost, 1999). At birth and for a short period of time after, several areas of the brain are highly plastic or susceptible to change because during this period is the first time that basic neural pathways are built (McCain et al., 2007). The changes that occur during the early development, including the prenatal phase, can significantly impact how the brain will respond to demands and stimuli from the environment, resulting in lifelong effects at the individual's physical and/or mental level (Knudsen, 2004). When studying child development, it is important to understand how biological and social mechanisms promote individual differences in competencies and abilities. While a child's biological characteristics are fundamental for his or her healthy development (e.g., low birth weight children have higher chances for incurring cardiovascular problems, diabetes, and high blood pressure), the environment where the child is reared also influences his or her physical and mental health state (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 1998). Beyond the child's home, other contexts such as neighbourhoods have been shown to affect child development in both a positive and negative way. For example, in a review of the literature

Leventhal and Brooks-Gunn (2000) found that being raised in advantaged neighbourhoods (high SES) has a positive effect on children's school readiness and achievement outcomes. In contrast, the presence of low-income neighbours or low SES neighbours is associated with an increased number of reports of children's and adolescents' externalizing problem behaviours. It has been suggested that when investigating the relationship between risk factors and life outcomes for children, researchers should consider what is known about the influences that the environment have on crucial periods of development in order to understand, prevent, and also remediate the consequences that negative early experiences may have on the developing child.

Environment and Child Development

Based on compelling evidence that factors in the environments surrounding the child have a significant impact on cognitive, socio-emotional, and physical development, contextual theories in developmental psychology have explored the relationship between child and environment, focusing more on contextual determinants rather than biological factors (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006; Jencks & Mayer, 1990). Bronfenbrenner's ecological theory (1979), in which human development is considered in context, is a critical foundational theory. According to this framework, to better understand how environments influence children's and adolescents' developmental outcomes, it is necessary to examine lives in context, including the multiple settings that influence children and their families and the interactions among these settings. To illustrate Bronfenbrenner's theory (1979; 1986), the image of a series of concentric circles is often used as it represents the different layers of relationships present in the environment in relation to the child.

In the innermost circle is the child who is nested within the other layers (environments) that are also nested within each other. Changes or conflicts that occur in one layer of the circle may spread to other layers. The first layer of the circle surrounding the child, called the

microsystem, has the most immediate effect on the child and is comprised of individuals such as parents, teachers, neighbours, and anyone who has a close relationship and spends a significant amount of time with the child. The second layer is the mesosystem, which consists of the connections between the child's immediate settings and surroundings, including the relationships between microsystems (e.g., home, school, neighbourhood, and child-care centre), that promote the child's development. The third layer is the exosystem, which surrounds the mesosystem and consists of the social settings that do not include the child, but can have a significant effect on the child (e.g., the parent's workplace or health services in the community). Finally, the outermost layer contains the microsystem, mesosystem and exosystem, and it is called the macrosystem. The macrosystem consists of factors that influence and at times support the child within the environment (e.g., cultures, norms, and laws). In 1986, Bronfenbrenner proposed the concept of the chronosystem (the area that surrounds the nested circles), which refers to the environmental pattern of events, transitions, or critical periods in the child's development that occur over the child's course of life. For example, as a child gets older, the effects of a divorce on him or her will be different because the older child may react differently to environmental changes.

In 1993, the ecological theory was extended and renamed bioecological theory or the bioecological model of human development (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 1998). According to the bioecological model, both psychological and biological factors influence the development of individual children in particular environments. As a result, the interaction between factors in the child's maturing biology, his or her immediate family/community environment, and the societal environment in which he or she lives promotes and determines the child's development. According to Bronfenbrenner (1990), two environmental conditions are essential for human development: (a) at least one adult must love the child unconditionally; and (b) the child must be

encouraged by adults to join activities with them in and out of the home environment. It is worth noting that in the bioecological model, not only do contexts affect individuals, but also individuals' characteristics influence or often shape the contexts in which they interact. In other words, "adults affect children's behavior, but children's biologically and socially influenced characteristics such as their physical attributes, personalities, and capacities also affect the behavior of adults" (Berk, 2000, p. 27). For example, an attentive and friendly child is likely to be responded with positive and patient reactions from parents, whereas a distractible child is more likely to evoke restriction and punishment. To describe the interactions between the child and other people (e.g., mother, father, teacher, or neighbour) and with individuals or group of individuals who belong to any of the layers, the term bidirectional relationships is used. Further, for such interactions to promote positive development, they must occur on a regular basis over extended periods of time. These enduring forms of interactions in the immediate environment are called proximal processes and are considered the engines of development (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 1998). Overall, Bronfenbrenner's theory implies that to study child development, it is necessary to investigate not only the child and his or her immediate environment, but also the interaction that occurs across the larger environment (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 1998).

An increasing number of researchers have investigated the relationship between factors within environments that influence child development (e.g., family, peers, school, and neighbourhood) (Kohen, Brooks-Gunn, Leventhal, & Hertzman, 2002; Sampson & Raudenbush, 2004). Findings suggest that each of these factors has a variable effect on a child's outcome, with some environmental variables such as individual and family characteristics having a greater impact than others (Trembley et al., 2001). The early relationship between the caregiver and the child provides sensory stimulation that has a direct effect on early brain development,

influencing neural pathways that underlie both emotional (e.g., child's capacity to interact and attend with other people) and intellectual functions (e.g., language and cognitive processes) (Greenspan & Shanker, 2004; Shonkoff et al., 2004). Therefore, traumatic experiences early in life (e.g., caregiver substance abuse, maternal depression, family violence, and physical, verbal, or sexual abuse) and the exposure to circumstances that create persistent fear and chronic anxiety can affect structures in the brain that impact individuals' quality of life over time (Shonkoff et al., 2010; Teicher, 2002).

Not only do biology and genetics play an important role in child development, but the environments and the relationships built within these environments where children grow also influence many aspects of their outcomes (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 1998; Shonkoff et al., 2004). While negative experiences increase the chances of susceptibility to the development of a mental disorder and lack of academic preparedness, positive experiences assist children with the development of self-regulation skills and facilitate their adaptation to the socially defined role of a student and a future citizen (Mash & Barkley, 2003). Looking at the early development and the long-term outcomes of the relationship between child and environment, it is clear that childhood difficulties also result in lifelong consequences that negatively affect both the child and the society (Teicher, 2002; Thomas, 2006).

Neighbourhood and Child Development

Research suggests that children's life outcomes cannot be fully explained by individual and family characteristics. Other contexts, such as neighbourhood conditions, have also proven to contribute to their life outcomes. Neighbourhoods are part of residents' daily lives and children and youth have direct contact with the social and physical aspects of this environment. Particularly in middle childhood and early adolescence, young people have increased mobility and autonomy to explore their neighbourhoods (Nicotera, 2008; Spilsbury, 2005) and their

neighbourhoods become important developmental contexts for their socialization and social-emotional functioning (Farver, Ghosh, & Garcia, 2000).

A number of studies have found connections between children's internalizing/externalizing problems and neighbourhood variables such as living in a disadvantaged community, as measured by low-income or low SES neighbours (Lapointe, Ford, & Zumbo, 2007), exposure to violence (Shonkoff et al., 2010), and perceptions of lower neighbourhood trust and greater danger (Meltzer, Vostanis, Goodman, & Ford, 2007). Moreover, a review of the literature conducted by Tremblay and colleagues (2001) highlights three important findings regarding neighbourhood effects on children. First, school-aged children are most directly affected by neighbourhood effects. Second, neighbourhood effects are more significant for measures of achievement and cognitive abilities than behavioural and mental health. Finally, SES is the neighbourhood variable that appears to have the most direct effects on childhood behavioural outcomes.

Even though evidence points to a significant correlation between SES and a wide range of child outcomes, the effects of SES also appear to be moderated by the child's own characteristics, family characteristics, and the availability of external support systems (Bradley & Cornwyn, 2002). Researchers have gathered valuable information on the effects of poor and affluent neighbourhood residence on child well-being. However, it is important to recognize some of the limitations of solely relying on SES data when examining neighbourhood effects on child development. First, while SES variables derived from census data often include some quantification of family income, parental education, and occupational status, its definition usually varies across studies (e.g., Bradley & Cornwyn, 2002; O'Brien Caughy, O'Campo, & Muntaner, 2003). Second, discrepancies between census' and residents' geographical definition of neighbourhood boundaries is often reported (Kershaw et al., 2008). This can be partially

explained due to a variation of residents' perceptions of the neighbourhood social conditions and the present-day lived experiences (Coulton, Korbin, Chan, & Su, 2001). Third, SES data only provide information regarding structural, economic, and housing conditions of neighbourhoods, lacking in the description of neighbourhood social characteristics. Assessing individuals' perspectives of their neighbourhood have been found to be of extreme value when the aim is to enhance the understanding of neighbourhood effects on residents (Schaefer-McDaniel, 2007).

Perceptions of Safety in the Neighbourhood

Surveying residents about their perceptions of their neighbourhood can reveal social processes considered valuable data for the neighbourhood research (Kohen et al., 2002). A number of studies have shown how residents' perceptions of their neighbourhood can mediate the relationship between neighbourhood effects (e.g., SES) and children's outcomes (e.g., Austin, Furr, & Spine, 2002; Bradley & Cornwyn, 2002). For example, family practices and family psychological well-being are influenced to a certain extent by neighbourhood conditions, which are closely related to safety (Austin, Furr, & Spine, 2002; Bowen, Bowen, & Ware, 2002; McDonell, 2007; Miles, 2008). The presence of risks in neighbourhoods such as danger, violence, crime, and illegal or harmful substances, is likely to enhance parental concerns about their child's safety (McDonell, 2007). Perceptions of safety and fear of crime are associated with social and organizational characteristics of a neighbourhood, including physical disorder (e.g., litter, graffiti, signs of vandalism, gangs, and public drunkenness) and attitude toward crime (e.g., incivilities, delinquency, or criminal involvement) (Ross & Jang, 2000). These variables influence parents' behaviours and support with regard to giving their child opportunities for independent mobility (e.g., walking to school), physical activity (e.g., use of local playgrounds), and social interaction (Hume, Salmon, & Ball, 2005; Weir, Etelson, & Brand, 2006). In a study conducted by Curtis, Dooley, and Phipps (2004) using the National Longitudinal Survey of

Children and Youth in Canada data (NLSCY), the associations between child well-being and neighbourhood quality were examined. Parents were interviewed about the occurrence of several problems related to aspects of safety, cohesiveness (e.g., helpfulness of neighbours), and disorder (e.g., garbage or drugs) in targeted neighbourhoods. Information on health and well-being, family SES, and neighbourhood characteristics was gathered in both two-parent and lone-mother families of 11,037 children between the ages of 4 and 11 years. Even after controlling for individual and family characteristics, neighbourhood quality was found to have strong associations with safety and child well-being (Curtis et al., 2004).

Social Networks and Safety

When investigating how residents perceive their neighbourhood, social networks have been found to enhance the social support among residents and, consequently, increase feelings of safety (Pebley & Vaiana, 2002; Sampson, Morenoff, & Gannon-Rowley, 2002). The degree to which families in the community cooperate to maintain safety in their neighbourhood, monitor children's and adolescents' behaviour, and prevent crime have been positively associated with reduced violence in the community (Sampson & Raudenbush, 2001). Such cohesion among neighbours in combination with shared expectations for informal social control of the neighbourhood has been defined as collective efficacy (Sampson, Raudenbush, & Earls, 1997). When there is low collective efficacy and an absence of norms, neighbourhoods are perceived as less safe because of the higher risk of violence and crime. On the other hand, a neighbourhood with stronger social networks can decrease the negative effects produced by safety concerns (Leventhal & Brooks-Gunn, 2000). To test the hypothesis that collective efficacy is associated with reduced violence, Sampson, Raudenbush, & Earls (1997) surveyed 8,782 residents of 343 neighbourhoods in the Chicago, Illinois. Findings reveal that collective efficacy mediated the positive association between neighbourhood structural factors, including concentrated poverty

and residential instability, and rates of violence in the community. While residents who are able to monitor and control behavior in their own neighbourhood perceive lower levels of violence in their neighbourhood, lack of social control in the community leads to disorder and higher levels of violence and criminality. As a result, residents who share a sense of danger and insecurity become afraid to exert social control. Low levels of social support in the neighbourhood attenuated by neighbourhood conditions have shown to influence parenting style. Some empirical studies have found that chaotic neighbourhoods have an effect on more restrictive and controlling parenting strategies to ensure children's safety (e.g., Ceballo & McLoyd, 2002; Letiecq & Koblinsky, 2004).

Indeed, residents' social lives and neighbourhood conditions such as safety and collective efficacy are important factors to describe neighbourhoods as communities rather than physical places (Nicotera, 2002). Most of the studies that investigate residents' perceptions of neighbourhood conditions in relation to child overall development and health rely on adults' perceptions (e.g., Austin et al., 2002; Miles, 2008). Few studies have investigated children's perceptions of their environment. Even though children are often the objects of study in research, their opinions and experiences are not always considered as a means to increase the understanding of their needs.

Children's Contributions to Research

In recent years, techniques involving interviewing residents have been widely used to explore aspects of social and physical disorder in neighbourhoods (Curtis et al., 2004; Kohen et al., 2002). Not many studies have been devoted to investigating children's perceptions of their neighbourhood (Farver et al., 2000; Hume et al., 2005; Min & Lee, 2006; Nicotera, 2008; Polivka, Lovell, & Smith, 1998; Schaefer-McDaniel, 2007; Spilsbury, 2002; Usta & Farver, 2005). According to Nicotera (2008), the vast work examining the effects of neighbourhoods on

children and youth may lead to incomplete assumptions or conclusions because it often ignores the child's perception and experiences in these contexts. Researching children's perspectives of their environment is important when the main goal is to examine the impact of this context on their development (Polivka et al., 1998; Schaefer-McDaniel, 2007). The following paragraphs highlight key studies that contributed to the neighbourhood research on children's perspectives.

Schaefer-McDaniel (2007) conducted a qualitative study that examined early adolescents' perceptions of their neighbourhoods in New York City. Data collection involved individual interviews, neighbourhood walks, and use of maps. Findings indicated that all ten adolescents defined their neighbourhood as a physical place within a few blocks around their homes, and some of them added other characteristics such as this being a familiar space where they had friends and neighbours, and where they participated in fun activities. Consistent with the literature, discrepancy was found when the participants were asked to draw their neighbourhood boundaries. The perceptions of the geographic boundaries significantly varied across the youth. The most common and persistent theme of the discussions around neighbourhood quality (e.g., what participants liked or disliked) was safety, followed by social and physical disorder, respectively. The participants displayed great knowledge about the crimes that occurred in their neighbourhood and were able to locate and discuss particular streets where they had either heard of or seen physical violence firsthand. Overall, the adolescents' perceived lack of neighbourhood safety resulted in a low evaluation of the neighbourhood quality (Schaefer-McDaniel, 2007).

Polivka, Lovell, and Smith (1998) investigated children's perceptions of their neighbourhood. Using a word association format, 379 children between ages 5 and 12 were asked to respond to some questions related to their neighbourhood. While older participants responded to 20 descriptive words (e.g., safe, quiet, dangerous, dirty), younger individuals drew

pictures in response to three words (safe, sad, happy). Content analysis techniques were used to analyze the data, and findings indicated that most participants associated neighbourhood areas with negative descriptive words (e.g., crowded, dangerous, and dirty). Concerns around safety and physical disorder (e.g., dirt and noise) also emerged as major themes. The word safe was associated with home, family, school, and another places. While Kindergarten children listed that their family was safe, a number of youth reported that shelter or children's services was safe. A few youth indicated a violent activity/thing (e.g., fighting) or having guns as safe. Safety was a theme briefly explored in conjunction with other topics related to neighbourhood conditions. The authors suggested that collaborative initiatives aimed at cleaning up the neighbourhood and reducing violence be targeted as areas for intervention and further research (Polivka et al., 1998).

Safety was also a significant topic of discussion that emerged from Irwin, Johnson, Henderson, Dahinten, and Hertzman's (2006) study about how contexts of daily life shaped young children's perspectives of health. Using ethnographic methods, the first author collected data (e.g., observations, semi-structured interviews, parent questionnaires, and informal conversations with the children, parents, and key informants) over a period of one year. Participants included fourteen 6-7 year old children and their parents who lived in a neighbourhood characterized as having mid to high range of neighbourhood factors connected with vulnerability. While the children revealed that physical activity, healthy eating, and freedom from illness were the requirements for physical health, a discrepancy between the children's knowledge about health, their perceptions, and their contextual realities regarding health was found. The children in this study indicated concerns for their physical safety in their schools and neighbourhoods (e.g., fears of being lost or stolen), their lack of free range of play outside, and their very restricted opportunities to play with or get to know their neighbours. It was suggested that these factors may have negatively contributed to the children's connections to place. The

authors emphasized that the children's perspectives were heavily related to their concerns about safety and pointed out the "need to increase our awareness of the important mental health stresses of daily living for children," including the less apparent stresses identified by the children in the research (Irwin, Johnson, Henderson, Dahinten, & Hertzman, 2006, p. 358). One of the recommendations was for professionals to find developmentally appropriate ways of enhancing a child's connection to place as a means to foster positive relationships with a child's environment.

Moreover, through an ethnographic approach, Spilsbury (2002) investigated sixty 7- to 11-year-old children's perspectives of their neighbourhood and help-seeking behaviour in Cleveland, Ohio. These neighbourhoods had different levels of violence/crime. Results indicated that children who resided in neighbourhoods with both low and elevated levels of violence were exposed to acts of violence and reported concerns about victimization. In response to these concerns, the participants described strategies to maintain personal safety while seeking help. Such strategies illustrate the active role that children play in their neighbourhood with regards to "interacting with their local environments, interpreting environmental features and acting accordingly" (p. 101). The author suggested that future work examine the larger social forces shaping the neighbourhoods in which these help-seeking strategies are performed. It is worth noting that this study did not investigate how children perceived safety, but rather what type of help-seeking strategy they would perform when faced with neighbourhood problems.

Finally, Farver, Ghosh, and Garcia (2000) conducted a quantitative study with 223 children between ages 7 and 11 years about their perspectives of neighbourhood violence and safety in relation to their socio-emotional functioning, neighbourhood violent crime rates, and their parents' ratings of safety and violence in the neighbourhood. The participants lived in either low or high violence neighbourhoods in Los Angeles, California. Data were collected through

children's drawings of their neighbourhoods as well as their responses to a neighbourhood safety survey and two rating scales that addressed locus of control and perceived self-competence. Parents completed a short questionnaire about neighbourhood violence and safety. Findings from this study indicated that children who resided in high violence neighbourhoods reported (a) feeling unsafe playing outdoors, (b) being more suspicious of the police, (c) having lower perceived self-competence and external locus of control; and (d) their drawings displayed higher rates of violent content than did children who resided in low violence neighbourhoods. The authors suggested that "exposure to neighbourhood violence may negatively affect children's feelings of well-being, sense of self-control over events in their lives, and opportunities to play safely in their neighbourhoods" (p. 139). It is worth noting that the analysis of the drawings followed the "Child and Violence Neighbourhood Coding Scheme" procedures and that the children responded to questions derived from the "Children's Survey on Safety and Trust" (Farver et al., 2000). In the survey, children were requested to rate their feelings of safety in specific environments based on pre-established definitions of safety and situations associated with safety.

Based on review of the literature, no research to date investigated the meanings that children *themselves* attribute to safety in their neighbourhood. One of the main purposes of the current study was to address this issue and explore children's own understandings of safety in their neighbourhood.

Considerations for researching children's experiences. When researching young people's perspectives, it is essential to have knowledge about theoretical foundations and methodological strategies used to guide empirical studies. The present study was conducted with groups of children aged 7-9 years, an understudied population according to the neighbourhood research (e.g., Austin et al., 2002; Schaefer-McDaniel, 2007) who belong to an age range

conceptualized by some researchers as middle childhood (Zembar & Blume, 2009). Several theoretical viewpoints that address physical, cognitive, affective, and social aspects of development have been used over the years to better understand and explain child development (e.g., Bowlby, 1969/1999; Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Piaget, 1967/1971; Vygotsky, 1978). Based on previous studies conducted with children, the contexts in which the young participants lived, including their family, school, neighbourhood, and culture, played important roles in the development of their knowledge (e.g., Nicotera, 2008; Schaefer-McDaniel, 2007). In particular, researchers suggested that the social contexts where the children were raised influenced their perspectives and enhanced the interpretation of the research findings (e.g., Irwin et al., 2006; Spilsbury, 2002).

Because in middle childhood, home, school, and community are the primary environments in which child development occurs (Zembar & Blume, 2009), the present study was guided by a contextual view of development, focusing on how social interactions shaped the research participants' perspectives of safety (Blumer, 1969; Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 1998). Vygotsky's social development theory (1978) about how knowledge and meaning are socially constructed during childhood is a foundational theory that can also promote a deeper understanding of 7- to 9- year old children's perspectives in this study. According to Vygotsky (1978), children construct meanings through their interactions with other individuals in a social context, and create thought through the use of language. The construction of knowledge occurs socially rather than individually and in two ways: at the social level (between people) and later at individual level (inside the child). First, since birth children are surrounded by people and language. Adults tend to interact with them through language by labelling people and objects. As children mature they learn to speak and engage in social dialogue with other individuals. As the use of language begins to shape children's actions, there is an increase in their self-controlling

behaviour because the "operation that initially represents an external activity is reconstructed and begins to occur internally" (Vygotsky, 1978, p. 57). The internalization of language influences how children think because it mediates their experiences and shapes the way they perceive the world. This is Vygotsky's second assumption about knowledge being constructed socially rather than individually and *inside the child*: language, also considered a cultural tool, is internalized and becomes part of the child's thoughts.

According to Vygotsky's socio-cultural standpoint, biology and environment are interrelated and promote development; however, his theory places greater emphasis on how cultural influences shape cognition. Unlike Piaget, Vygotsky did not propose universal chronological stages of development given his belief that children's learning derive from individual socio-cultural histories and their interactions with contexts. He emphasized that learning and development are interrelated, and learning is heavily influenced by one's social environment and culture (Zembar & Blumer, 2009). Vygotsky's view of how knowledge is socially constructed is important for the current study that explores children's social constructions and reconstructions of the meanings of safety in their neighbourhood.

Furthermore, when conducting an empirical study it is important for researchers to consider different methodological strategies that are adequate for school-aged children. Using drawings in research with children can be an effective strategy to gather data as it may provide a concise representation of the main aspects of the participants' experiences as well as reveal their feelings and emotions about the topic being investigated (Freeman & Mathison, 2009). The drawing activities in the present study served to give children the opportunity to organize, make sense of, and describe their experiences. This methodological strategy used with the age range 7-9 years is considered an effective way to explore children's understandings of the world where they live (Almeida, 2003; Lowenfeld, 1947; Malchiodi, 1998).

To better understand children's visual representations, research in art therapy has explored a relationship between intellectual growth and general stages of artistic development, and theories have also been developed (Malchiodi, 1998). One of the most well-known theories of artistic development in children was developed by Victor Lowenfeld (1947). According to Lowenfeld (1947), children's art expressions are indicators of emerging abilities in different areas such as motor skills, perception, language, symbol formation, sensory awareness, and spatial orientation. This theorist emphasized that there are six main stages of artistic development, which range in age and specific drawing skills. During the schematic stage (age 7-9 years), children are able to represent objects relative to one another rather than only in relation to themselves, and use symbols in their drawings, (e.g., exaggerations in size, emphasis of elements, or omissions in images) to illustrate their experiences. In the 1980s, researchers in the field of children's artistic development suggested that art expressions from children who belonged to Lowenfeld's schematic stage were "very creative and uninhibited, representing the golden age of artistic expression" (as cited in Malchiodi, 1998, p. 88). More recent studies that compared typical developmental characteristics in children's art productions, however, did not fully support Lowenfeld's stages of artistic development (Almeida, 2003; Anderson, 2001, Gantt, 1998). It has been suggested that the field of art therapy still lacks a contemporary reanalysis of typical developmental characteristics in children's drawings (Almeida, 2003). Therefore, when analyzing children's visual productions researchers should acknowledge the context in which the participants live (e.g., time, place, and relationships), as childhood artistic developmental norms have been influenced by socio-cultural and environmental shifts since the 1940s, when Lowenfeld first developed his theory. In the current study, drawings were used to elicit information from the participants and to facilitate the "sense making and representation" of their perspectives and experiences (Freeman & Mathison, 2009, p. 113).

Summary

Environments have been shown to have a significant effect on child development. Investigating how young people perceive these contexts seems to be an essential condition to better understand the dynamics between children and their environments. Based on the previous discussion, there is a need for researchers to incorporate in their studies young people's voices and perceptions of their surroundings as a means to explore neighbourhood influences on children's and youth's well-being (Schaefer-McDaniel, 2007). Children's participation can make a unique contribution to research and provide valuable information for the development of strategies aiming to minimize negative environmental effects on child development (Hume et al., 2005; Nicotera, 2002; Polivka et al., 1998; Spilsbury, 2002). Because relying on structural measures such as SES data or surveying adults' perceptions may not provide a full understanding of how neighbourhood conditions impact child development, researching children's perspectives of their environment can add significant empirical information to the current body of research. Particularly, examining the meanings that children *themselves* attribute to safety in their neighbourhood is a topic that has not been fully investigated yet.

Chapter Three: Methods

Overview

In this chapter, the setting where the present study was conducted and the participants' characteristics are described. The rationale for the theory and method is explained, the purpose of the study is outlined, and the main research questions are highlighted. In addition, procedures used for data collection and the strategies incorporated in data analysis are presented as well as the specific strategies used by the investigator to support the research findings and to address the trustworthiness of the study.

Setting

The present study was conducted with children aged 7 to 9 years, living in a neighbourhood in the city of Surrey, which is located in the Lower Mainland of BC. Surrey is characterized by a wide cultural diversity of ethnicity, social class, school systems, employment, etc (British Columbia Statistics, 2008). Over the last 20 years, Surrey has had a rapid growth through in-migration from different parts of Canada and especially through immigration from different parts of the world (most notably Asia and South Asia) (British Columbia Statistics, 2008). Surrey is ranked as one of the largest cities in Canada and considered one of the most dangerous cities in the province of BC (Maclean's National Crime Rankings, 2009; Surrey Royal Canadian Mounted Police [RCMP], 2010). According to the Surrey Royal Canadian Mounted Police (2010), at the beginning of 2010 the targeted neighbourhood where this study was conducted was ranked as having the highest crime rate among all the neighbourhoods comprised in the city. This neighbourhood is an area undergoing major development, which has resulted in a decrease in the population under five years of age, but has one of the highest single parent household and low employment rates (British Columbia Statistics, 2008). EDI data gathered in 2008-2009 indicated that the targeted neighbourhood had the highest rate of children at-risk for school readiness among all the neighbourhoods located in Surrey. A total of 56.6 percent of

children entering Kindergarten were represented as vulnerable on one or more scale (s) of the EDI (32.1% of children were vulnerable on Physical Health and Well-being; 32.1% of children were vulnerable on Social Competence; 28.3% of children were vulnerable on Emotional Maturity; 20.8% of children were vulnerable on Language and Cognitive Development; and 20.8% of children were vulnerable on Communication Skills and General Knowledge). It is important to note that no research was found linking the rate of child vulnerability (EDI data) with crime rate. However, it is possible to note that rates of child vulnerability and crime have at least one thing in common: children who live in low SES neighbourhoods tend to be exposed to higher rates of crime as well as be considered at a higher risk for school readiness. When all of this information was considered, Surrey characterized by a high urban population density, and the neighbourhood with the highest crime rate in the city and also as having a complex high range of factors related to vulnerability for children's health, this setting became of interest for the present study (HELP, 2009).

Participants

Two after-school programs within the targeted neighbourhood agreed to assist with recruitment and offered space to conduct the interview sessions. Participants in this study were 15 elementary school-aged children between 7 and 9 years, recruited on a volunteer basis through poster advertisements placed in after-school programs (see Appendix A), followed by letters sent home inviting parents to consent to their child's participation in the study (see Appendix B). All recruitment procedures were approved. A certificate was issued by the Behavioural Research Ethics Board (BREB) at the University of British Columbia (UBC). Procedures were in compliance with Tri-council Polices for research at Canadian universities (see Appendix C). The investigator visited these after-school programs several times before obtaining consent from parents. Repeated contact with the staff prior to recruitment and data

collection increased not only the rapport, but also the investigator's familiarity with the population served by these programs and the surroundings of this neighbourhood. After-school program A was located in a residential complex beside a ravine, and 5 children from this program participated in the sessions. After-school program B was located beside a Catholic church and 10 children from this program participated in the study. Overall, participants in this study attended 7 different schools located within or nearby the neighbourhood.

Characteristics of participants. There were more volunteers for the study than were selected for participation. An initial screening process ensured that participants included in the study were children between 7 and 9 years of age, who could communicate effectively in English and lived in the targeted neighbourhood. Parents who agreed for their child to participate in the study were first asked questions about their child's age and English skills and the postal code of their homes (to confirm that they lived in the targeted neighbourhood) (see Appendix D). After consent was obtained, parents responded to a brief questionnaire about family demographics, configuration, and their use of neighbourhood facilities and views of neighbourhood safety (see Appendix E). A total of 15 participants took part in this study, 9 boys and 6 girls. The participants were familiar with one another. To protect their anonymity, pseudonyms were assigned to participants and the after-school programs (after-school programs A and B). The following paragraphs provide an overview of the information gathered about the participants and their parents' views of neighbourhood safety.

After-school program A had a total of 5 participants whose family composition ranged from one- to three-child family. Four out of the 5 participants spoke English as a first language. Most of the children did not participate in extra-curricular activities in their neighbourhood and most of the parents reported walking with their children around the area. Three families lived in the targeted neighbourhood for less than 5 years. Four out of the 5 parents reported they did not

trust their neighbours to watch after their children and also believed that the neighbourhood was

not safe for children.

After-school program B had a total of 10 participants whose family composition ranged

from one- to three-child family. Nine out of the 10 participants spoke English as a first language.

Most of the children did participate in extra-curricular activities in their neighbourhood and all

the parents reported they walked with their children around the area. Seven families lived in the

targeted neighbourhood for less than 5 years. Four out of the 10 parents reported they did not

trust their neighbours to watch after their children. Eight parents indicated they believed that

their neighbourhood was safe for children.

Symbolic Interactionism

The methodology used in this study was symbolic interactionism. The first and

fundamental assumption of symbolic interactionism is that humans live in a world of meanings

and that they respond to events and objects according to the meanings that they have attributed to

them (Lauer & Handel, 1977). The meanings of such events or objects derive from social

interaction, in which "the reality is negotiated between people, always changing, and constantly

evolving" (Richards & Morse, 2007, p. 59). Because meanings are not considered inflexible and

static, a continuous interpretative process occurs. Throughout this process, existing meanings are

used to interpret events or objects and these are simultaneously used to assess the adequacy of

those meanings. Whenever existing meanings are inadequate or inappropriate to explain and

respond to events or objects, new meanings that will be more useful are sought (Charon, 1979).

Symbolic interactionism derived from the teachings of G. H. Mead, but the term was

coined by Herbert Blumer (1969). Blumer highlighted three fundamental premises: (a) that

human beings act toward things based on the meanings that these things have for them; (b) that

the meaning of such things derive from, or arise out of, the social interaction that an individual

has with others and the society; and (c) that these meanings are handled in and modified through an interpretative process used by the individual in dealing with the things that he or she encounters.

In symbolic interactionism research, participants are seen as social actors who come into the experimental situation (e.g., a group session) with their own definition of the object of study (e.g., safety in the neighbourhood), and who interpret and assign meanings throughout the interaction process with other participants in the experiment (Blumer, 1977). Symbols and signification are the manifestations of meaning making through lived experience, much of which is implicit. The intent of the current study was to carefully explore and describe the experiences and subjective meaning of safety in the neighbourhood constructed by the children who participated in this research.

Data Collection

In this study, data were collected across 3 sessions that involved individual and group drawings, group interviews, and observations derived from field notes and memos. Most of the groups were comprised of 5 children and there was a total of 11 sessions. The drawings were used to guide the group discussions. Understanding children's drawings in context and using art as a process to help participants externalize thoughts and experiences enhanced the body of data gathered. The aim of having group sessions was not to attempt to find a common definition of neighbourhood safety, but rather to embrace the ambiguity of the diverse meanings and try to understand how they can simultaneously exist. To ensure that enough data were available to develop a full and rich description of the phenomenon, the investigator stopped collecting data when the stage of saturation was reached (Morse & Field, 1995). Therefore, data collection ended when categories were rich and thick and replicated by the participants.

Training. The data collection sessions were conducted by the investigator with the assistance of one or two members of the research lab where the investigator worked. Each lab member received prior training on conducting group interviews and drawing activities with children. Training was provided across two sessions by the investigator, who is the principal researcher of this study.

Session one. The purpose of the initial one-hour interview session was to establish rapport with the children and to prompt them to describe their neighbourhood and to share their personal experiences in their neighbourhood. During the initial session, the research project was explained to the children, who provided written assent (see Appendix F). During the first session, a rapport building activity was conducted where participants were shown pictures of their neighbourhood (e.g., houses, convenient store, park, library, and sky train station) and asked questions about these pictures. Following the discussion, as a group, children were instructed to create their neighbourhood using these pictures. Paper and felt pens were provided to them to draw other things that were not captured in the pictures. A blind-folded activity was then introduced, where a volunteer from the group was asked to guess the picture that the rest of the group was trying to describe through hints. All children took turns being blind-folded. At the end of the session, each participant was provided with a sheet of paper and felt pens and asked to draw his or her neighbourhood. Once the drawings were finished, each participant was asked to describe his or her drawing and both the investigator and the other participants followed up with questions to understand the child's description of the neighbourhood. Snacks and a small thank-you gift were given to each group member, who was informed when the following session would occur.

Session two. The second interview session took place two weeks after the initial session. The aim of this session was to investigate children's perspectives of safety in their

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neighbourhood. First, a sheet of paper and felt pens were provided and each participant was asked to draw a safe situation in the neighbourhood and then either describe or tell a story about the drawing. Because some of the children reported to not understand the meaning of the word "situation," the investigator provided further prompts such as "You can draw what ever you want related to safety in your neighbourhood," "What is safe? I want you to draw safety in your neighbourhood... what it means to you," or "What makes you feel safe in your neighbourhood?" The group was prompted to ask questions about their peer's drawings. Following the group discussion, a similar activity was conducted, but this time, the children were asked to draw and then describe an unsafe situation in their neighbourhood. At the end of the session, snacks and a small thank-you gift were provided and the children were informed when the next session would take place.

Session three. The third and last session occurred two weeks after the second session. A collective drawing activity was introduced and one large sheet of paper and drawing supplies were provided. Initially, the group of 5 children was asked to draw their experience of safety in their neighbourhood as a group based on the prompt: "Pretend I am a new kid in the neighbourhood. Tell me through your drawing, the good and bad things I should know about this as a place to live." This strategy was not effective with the whole group because the participants were unable to collaborate with one another and, consequently, some group members became upset and refused to join the activity. The group of 5 was then divided into two smaller groups according to their own preference for group members. Each group received another sheet of paper and was asked to perform the task. The division of group members into smaller groups was necessary for the participants from both after-school programs. Following the drawing activity, the children were given the opportunity to describe, clarify and/or elaborate upon their drawings and statements made by the group. At the end of the session, the children received snacks and a

small thank-you gift. They were also informed that perhaps a fourth session would take place after the December break. At the time of the third session, the investigator did not know whether this would be the last session because until that point the data were not fully analyzed to confirm that the stage of saturation was reached (Morse & Field, 1995).

Transcriptions. The sessions were video and audio recorded and transcribed verbatim to ensure accuracy of the conversations in data gathering. Four members of the research lab who assisted with data collection transcribed the sessions following a sample created by the investigator to help ensure consistency with the transcription format. The investigator reviewed the videos after transcriptions were concluded to certify that the information was accurate.

Memos and field notes. Field notes and memos were used to supplement other ways of gathering of information (Richards & Morse, 2007). Given the complexity of transcribing a session where more than two participants were involved in talking as well as managing the challenging behaviours presented by them, field notes included observations of interactions among the children and verbatim statements provided by individual participants. Memos were used to record the impressions that the investigator gathered, including any thoughts, feelings, interpretations, and ideas that emerged from the sessions (Richards & Morse, 2007). Also, memoing was used as a technique to record the relationship among themes that emerged from the data (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Both field notes and memos were recorded during and/or after each session.

Peer debriefing. In addition to field notes and memos, the investigator and other lab members engaged in peer debriefing, a process where thoughts, ideas, themes, and other topics that emerged from the data collection session were shared and discussed (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The discussions served to guide the investigator in: (a) refining and modifying previously developed follow-up interview questions to explore important issues that emerged after

analyzing the transcripts and drawings; and (b) developing different strategies to engage the children. Modified follow-up questions and strategies to facilitate children engagement were then introduced in the later sessions. When a more in-depth analysis of the data was performed, other peer debriefing sessions occurred to discuss the findings and exchange thoughts. Finally, a peer auditor who was a member of the research lab and familiar with the topic and the qualitative methodology carefully reviewed the original transcripts, drawings, and the data analysis. The peer auditor provided detailed feedback to the investigator as well as asked pertinent questions about the research which were further addressed in this thesis.

Data Analysis

Based on symbolic interactionism, reality is constantly being negotiated among participants and changes, leading the investigator to engage in continuous inquiry of events, throughout the process of data collection and data analysis (Richards & Morse, 2007). Data were transcribed and partially analyzed following each session. Data were analyzed line by line and codes were written in the margin of the transcripts following the constant comparison method. The ATLAS.ti qualitative analysis software (Muhr & Friese, 2004) was also used to assist organizing the data analysis.

Constant comparison method. During the data analysis process, systematic comparisons occurred as a means to understand and interpret the social phenomenon of neighbourhood safety. Constant comparison method, which derives from grounded theory (Strauss & Corbin, 1998), was used to guide the analysis of the data and hypotheses emerged as data were collected and analyzed.

Constant comparison method involves comparing and contrasting texts throughout the analysis process by: "forming categories, establishing the boundaries of the categories, assigning the segments to categories, summarizing the content of each category, finding negative evidence,

etc" (Tesch, 1990, p. 96). Constant comparative analysis allows the researcher to inductively develop a theory, or in the case of this study, to better understand the phenomenon of children's perspectives of safety in their neighbourhood. This was an ongoing process where systematic comparison between each text assigned to a category (new material) and each of those already assigned to that category (old material) were used to promote a better understanding of the properties of the category. Categories were established based on the similarity of idea or unit provided by the children's responses to prompts. Overall, the initial analysis generated a number of results that assisted in understanding young participants' perceptions of safety in their neighbourhood.

Data coding. Coding as a process can be described as a "series of evolving sequences of action/interaction that occur over time and space, changing or sometimes remaining the same in response to the situation or context" (Strauss & Corbin, 1998, p. 165). In this study, coding occurred at three levels: (a) open coding- the process of breaking down, comparing, conceptualizing, and categorizing data; (b) axial coding - designed to systematically develop and connect categories; and (c) selective coding - the process of selecting the central category, systematically establishing relationships between the central category and other categories, validating those relationships, and filling in categories that need further development and refinement (Strauss & Corbin, 1998).

Open coding. Open coding was the first level of coding. The goal of open coding was to break down the data into facts or concepts that are conceptually similar or related in meaning to the participants' words. As the sessions were transcribed, similar statements provided by the participants were coded and grouped into categories. These categories generated a list of main themes. Examining the data for differences and similarities promoted a more in-depth discrimination and differentiation among the categories. While two categories illustrated

children's definition of neighbourhood, physical space and relationships, 11 categories of concepts were generated from participants' descriptions of safe and unsafe situations. For example, while some children described feeling safe at specific places such as their home or neighbour's house, others illustrated safe situations as wearing a helmet or a seat belt. Memos assisted in determining which category each of the drawing descriptions or reports best fit.

Axial coding. In the coding process, axial coding was used to systematically connect categories to subcategories according to their properties and dimensions (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Through the process, 11 categories representing the perspectives of most of the participants were linked and grouped into 8 conditions. The term "condition" was selected to represent "sets of events or happenings that create the situations, issues, and problems pertaining to a phenomenon and, to a certain extent, explain why and how persons or groups respond in certain ways" (Strauss & Corbin, 1998, p. 130). According to Strauss and Corbin (1998), conditions may arise out of place, rules, beliefs, social words, and other things, and participants "might not know all of the reasons why they do things, although they might give researchers some rationales for their behaviour" (p.131). The relationship between conditions was developed and then the core categories were organized.

Selective coding. Selective coding was the last phase in the coding process. The goal was to integrate and refine the categories, by selecting the category, systematically establishing relationships between the major category and other categories, validating those relationships, and filling in categories that needed further development and refinement (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Two core categories emerged as a result of children's reports of their views of safe and unsafe situations in their neighbourhood. These two categories were interconnected and together plausibly explained children's perspectives of safety in their neighbourhood. *Protective conditions* became the centre of the four conditions related to safety as it was similarly described

as a means to avoid unsafe situations. *Risky events* formed the core category that represented unsafe situations that were likely to damage children's sense of well-being.

Analysis of visual data. Similar to the analysis of the group discussions, the analysis of the drawings created by the participants was an ongoing process. Different strategies were used to address concerns with misinterpretation of the drawings: (a) the investigator was present during all drawing activities; (b) the investigator asked the children to explain or describe their drawings and to answer follow-up questions based on literal reading (physical features of the image) and iconic reading (investigating how the image related to bigger ideas, values, and constructions) of the drawings; (c) all drawing descriptions and comments were transcribed and attached to the back of each drawing; and (d) field notes, memos, and peer debriefing strategies were also used to enhance the understanding of the participants' drawings.

Strategies for Enhancing Validity of Interpretations

Triangulation is a method to improve the validity of the research findings through the use of multiple methods, multiple sources of data, and multiple researchers (Mathison, 1988). To provide a "rich and complex picture" of the social phenomenon investigated in this study-children's perspectives of safety in their neighbourhood - multiple methods and data sources, including drawings, group discussions, field notes, and memos were used (Mathison, 1988, p. 15). The drawings served as a primary strategy to elicit information from the young participants, who had more time to elaborate on the topic of discussion, share with one another their experiences of safety while drawing, and to represent the key elements related to their perspectives of safety in their neighbourhood. The literature suggests that when using children's images in research, their drawings should be interpreted in combination with their own comments about the meaning of their work (Freeman & Mathison, 2009). Following the drawing activity, to enhance the interpretation of their perspectives instead of solely relying on the

features presented in the drawings, children were asked to share their drawings with the group.

Each child described what he/she drew and how it was related to his/her feelings of safety. Other

children were also prompted to ask questions about their peer's experiences or specific drawing

features. In addition, observations of the interactions among the participants, their reactions to

the task demands, and the content of their statements were recorded and assisted with the

interpretation of their perspectives. Memos served to document the investigator's own

impressions about the group sessions and personal bias in an attempt to control distortions during

the analysis (Elliot & Lazenbatt, 2005). Constant comparison analysis was on ongoing process

that assisted the investigator in better understanding the phenomenon being studied. The

involvement of other researchers in collecting data was important because their own thoughts

and feelings about the group sessions were also discussed and helped in the development of

follow-up interview questions and strategies to keep the participants engaged during the group

sessions. Further, feedback during the data collection and data analysis process was provided by

the supervisory committee, the members of the research lab, other students who were part of

university department (peer debriefing), and by the peer auditor.

      To gain a better understanding of the context in which the children who participated in

this study lived, the investigator had prolonged contact with the staff at the setting, the

participants, and their parents (Morse & Field, 1995). Repeated visits to the after-school

programs prior to the initial data collection sessions allowed the investigator to become more

familiar with the setting, the staff, and the participants' parents. Direct contact with the

participants occurred over five opportunities (before the initial session, during the three data

collection sessions, and at a later time when the children were provided with a final prize for

their participation).

It is important to acknowledge that the interpretations of this study are partially influenced by the investigator's perspectives, personal experiences, and understanding of how other studies support the results. To reduce the emphasis of the investigator's personal interpretations, some of the original drawings as well as direct quotes provided by the children were used to describe the categories. To demonstrate the relationship between the data and the claims of this research (Freeman et al., 2007), the original content presented in the findings, the contextual characteristics of the neighbourhood (e.g., demographics, crime rate, and the rate of vulnerable children in the neighbourhood), and the profile of each group of participants (e.g., age range, family demographics, configuration, and parental use of neighbourhood facilities as well as their view of neighbourhood safety) were considered. In addition, through a review of the literature, other research studies and theories that partially or fully support the findings were acknowledged. Finally, at the end of the Discussion chapter, the limitations and strengths of this study are addressed to recognize the challenges and drawbacks as well as the valuable contributions of this study to the literature.

Summary

The primary purpose of this study was to investigate 7 to 9 year old children's perspectives of safety in their neighbourhood. Participants were 15 children, who attended two after-school programs and lived within the targeted neighbourhood located in Surrey, BC. Data were collected through individual and group drawings, group interviews, field notes, and memos across a 2-month period. The methodology used was symbolic interactionism, and emphasis was placed on how children actively constructed and described their experiences of safety in their neighbourhood through social interaction. A constant comparison method was employed to analyze the data. Data analysis included three levels of coding (open coding, axial coding, and selective coding). As data were gathered, coding procedures were used to organize, reduce, and

interpret the data. To address the validity of the study, different strategies were employed,

including the use of multiple methods, multiple sources of data, and overviews of multiple

researchers.

Chapter Four: Findings

Overview

The purpose of this chapter is to provide a descriptive, but comprehensive examination of the meanings attributed to safety and the core categories that comprise children's perspectives of safety in their neighbourhood. Emphasis was placed on how children actively co-constructed the meanings of safety through their social interaction in groups. Please note that a critical discussion of the findings of this study is provided in the Discussion chapter.

In the first group session, children were asked to draw and describe their neighbourhood. Overall, drawings illustrated two contexts: social (e.g., having family, friends, and neighbours) and physical (e.g., their home, neighbour's house, friend's house, school, road, stop sign, mail box, and trees). The vast majority of participants (10 out of 15) referred to their neighbourhood solely as their home. As a result, one could expect that their understandings of safety in their neighbourhood would be strictly related to situations that occur in their homes. This was not the case of the results. Other environments such as school, streets, and parks were also scenarios of their descriptions of safe and unsafe situations.

In the second group session, children were asked to draw a safe and an unsafe situation in their neighbourhood and describe their drawings to the group. Participants' drawings and verbal descriptions were used to illustrate their understanding and experiences about the topic. The interaction among group members enabled the co-construction of the meanings of safety as children were given the chance to reflect about their peers' drawings and comments, complement one another's talk, and at times incorporate such ideas into their own descriptions of safety. Such collective construction of meaning was noted throughout the three sessions especially when the children engaged in discussions about their peers' drawings and comments, and in some cases,

produced extremely similar drawings. It is suggested that the act of drawing and talking about it in a group contributed to their perspectives of safety in this study.

In the third session, similar ideas regarding safety were expressed by the children, who were given the opportunity to work in small groups to produce a collective drawing. Figure 1 describes the interactive and dynamic relationship between the two core categories that emerged from the data: *protective conditions* and *risky events.*

Figure 1. Children's Perspectives of Safety in their Neighbourhood
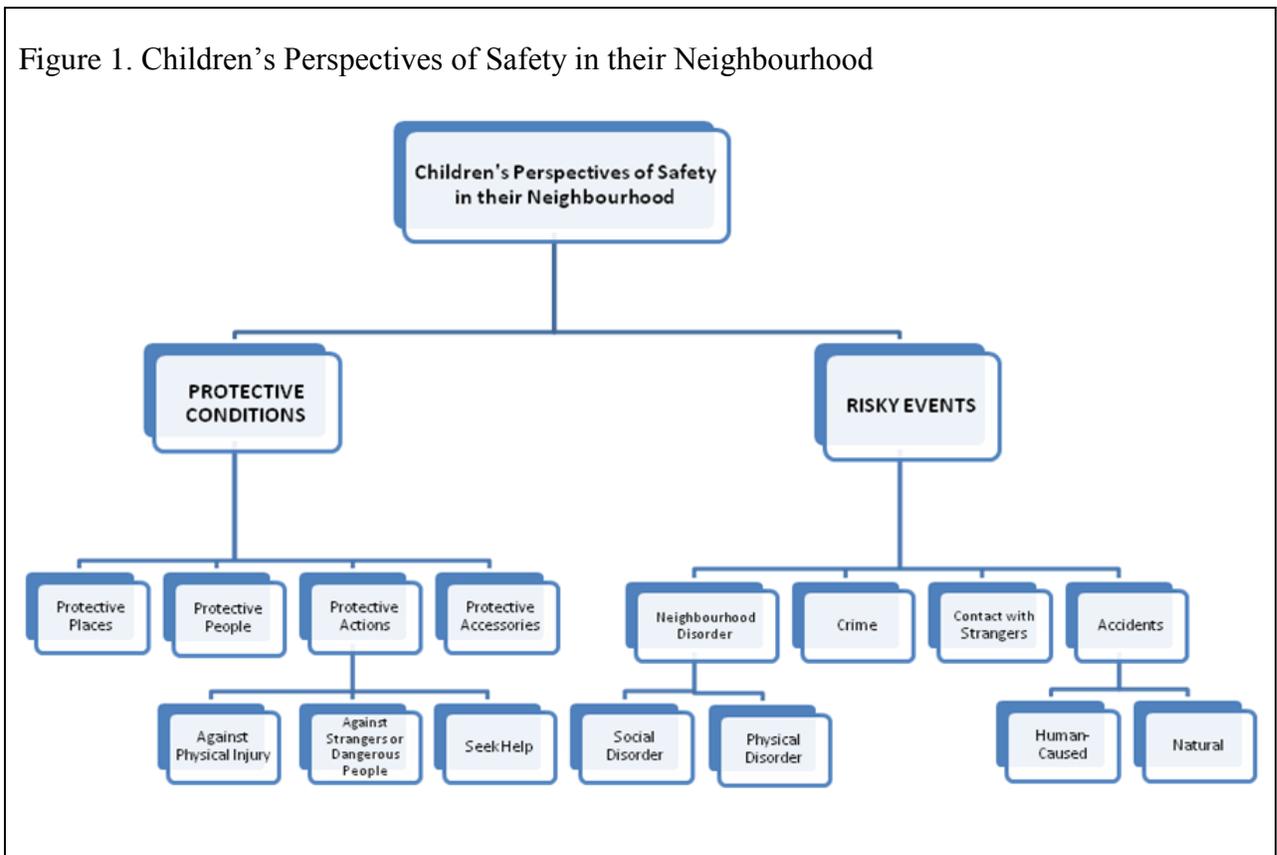
Protective Conditions

Safety was mostly associated with specific conditions perceived by children as a means to prevent or avoid unsafe situations. Unsafe situations were described as dangerous, violent, or harmful situations or events. Four main *protective conditions*, including *protective places, protective people, protective actions,* and *protective accessories*, were perceived as safety. The following paragraphs provide a description of the specific *protective conditions* associated with the topic of this study.

Protective places. This condition was described by some children as physical places such as their home and friends' or neighbour's houses where they felt protected. A direct description of the places rather than who would be at these places was emphasized. For example, a participant described his drawing by indicating where he felt safe, "This is my house (…) no one can get in. My house and my room are safe." During the group interaction, similar comments were made regarding the places where the children felt safe. All these physical spaces were familiar to them. Even though some children did not elaborate on the specific reasons for feeling protected in these places, it appears that *protective places* were related to safety due to the familiar and perhaps affective aspect of it.

Protective people. Participants associated feelings of safety with a relational component exemplified as being with parents, friends, or neighbours. Similar to *protective places*, children indicated that having contact with individuals with whom they were familiar and trusted made them feel protected. The children reported a number of different experiences of safety when accompanied by familiar people, especially by their parents. For example, when prompted to draw a safe situation in the neighbourhood, a participant immediately asked, "Like being with your parents?" Figure 2 illustrates this child's drawing.

Figure 2. Drawing of a Safe Situation

"I drew myself and my mom (…) walking (…), not running because you will trip."

The child stated that he felt safe in this situation "because you are with your mom." Another group member expressed a similar idea regarding safety as he drew himself with his dad and explained his drawing, "This is my daddy and I am holding his hand." When inquired about what was safe in the situation, he also indicated the same limited idea as the previous child ("stay with my daddy"). As it can be noticed, both children attributed a relational meaning to safety and, despite prompts, were unable to provide further explanations.

The support of significant others such as being with familiar adults other than their parents, was also described as safe. For example, a participant reported:

I got a neighbour named Mary and when my dad leaves, while I am going to go to

sleep, Mary's mom comes and knocks on the door and then dad asks her to watch me

while I am asleep so no one breaks into my house and tries stealing me while I am

asleep.

Only a few children associated safety with being with *protective people.* Nonetheless,

throughout the interaction among participants, it was observed that some other participants

reported stories of seeking help from different sources in case of emergency (e.g., going to a

neighbour to seek help). Such examples may also be identified as *protective actions.* To

illustrate this condition, a participant explained her drawing (Figure 3).

Figure 3. Drawing of a Safe Situation

"If your mom falls down and starts bleeding in the bathroom and your dad is not there, then you go to a neighbour."

When asked why that situation was safe, the child replied, "because she is, I am running to Katie's house which I know … and she knows my mom so they will go really fast." It can be noted that the words "code green" were written on the top of the drawing. The children as a group explained to the investigator the meaning of such code. According to them, a safety code identified as a "code red" drill was taught to them at school. A "code green" announcement after fire or earthquake drills indicated that the building was clear and safe for children to return to their classrooms.

After all the drawings were described and discussed with the group, the investigator asked if the children wanted to share more information about safety. Some participants promptly replied that they had neighbours and friends (e.g., "I have four neighbours" and another complemented, "John's and Kelly's house … they are my friends") and it was observed that the social interaction among the children promoted a co-construction of the meanings of safety associated with supportive relationships. The children tended to identify their experiences with one another and complement each others' talk.

Protective actions. Another condition associated with safety in the neighbourhood was a variety of actions (strategies) that could be employed to reduce or avoid the likelihood of unsafe situations arising in the first place (*risky events*). Children expressed their knowledge about specific actions to prevent physical injury, to reduce the risk of harm caused by strangers or "bad guys," and to help them in case of an emergency. This was the condition most discussed among the children, who had a number of examples to share with the investigator. The group format stimulated the discussion and enriched the data as many participants had comments about their peer's experiences and appeared excited to share their knowledge about these actions. In fact, it was necessary for them to take turns when sharing their thoughts because they were eager to speak and tended to talk at the same time. *Protective actions* is framed according to the following categories: (a) *protective actions against physical injury*, (b) *protective actions against strangers or dangerous people*, and (c) *protective actions to seek help*.

Protective actions against physical injury. This category was described as preventative actions taught to participants as a means to prevent physical injury. The following direct quotes are provided to better illustrate the children's knowledge about such actions: "not running because you will trip"; "no pushing because you can really hurt somebody"; "no walking on a road if you not allow to"; and "checking both sides before crossing street." One group of

children who belonged to the same after-school program emphasized a safety alarm system ("code red") taught at school to decrease the chances of harm in case of potentially dangerous situations. They described "code red" as preventative actions to perform in case there was an earthquake or a "stranger" was present in the building. Before drawing a safe situation, the children reported to have recently rehearsed such actions at school. They also provided further explanation regarding the safety alarm system, "we pretend that someone bad was in the school and everyone goes under the table," "it is called code red ... Code red is like when someone is walking around the hall and they are… they are bad," "they are not supposed to be there." Most members of this group wrote at the top of their drawings "code green," indicating that to a certain extent the group experience influenced what they drew. While a girl's drawing of safety illustrated the performance of such action (going under the table) when there was an earthquake (Figure 4), another child drew himself staying under the desk when it was code red (Figure 5). Both drawing were strikingly similar suggesting that the social interaction among the participants from the same group promoted a similar construction of the meaning of safety. Nonetheless, while the first children indicated a protective action against physical injury, the second reported the same protective action but against strangers.

Figure 4. Drawing of a Safe Situation
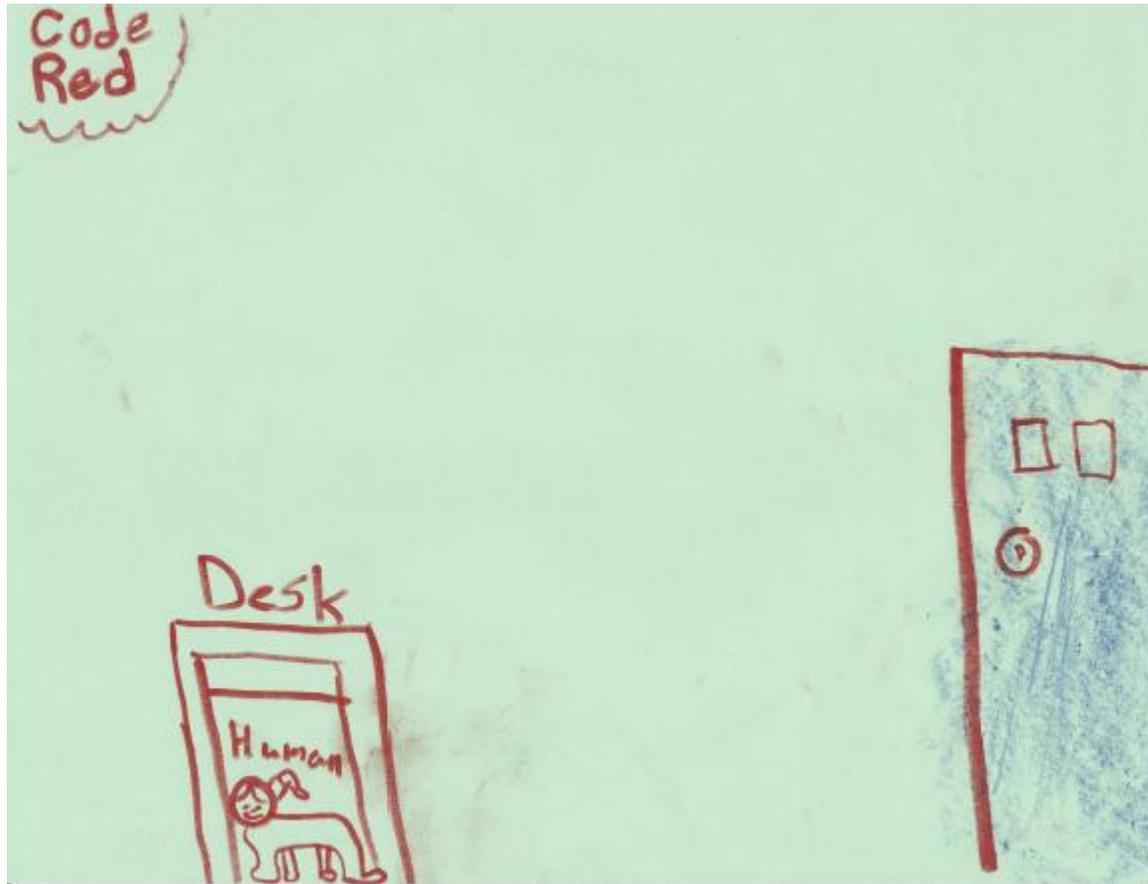
"This is a person and if there is an earthquake, she is under her desk, she has nothing to worry about if glass hits her desk it won't hurt her."

Figure 5. Drawing of a Safe Situation
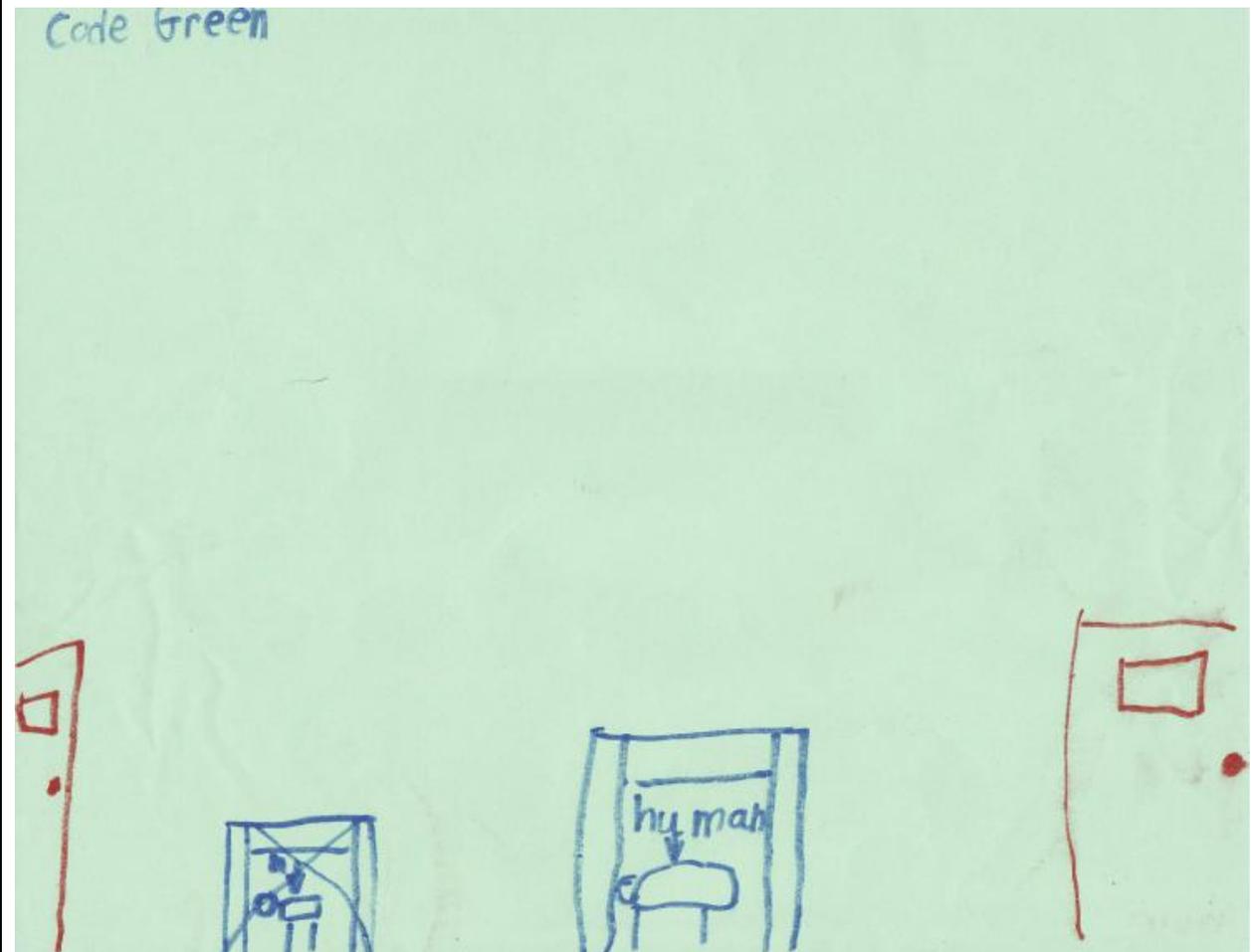
"Me under a desk when it's code red (protecting myself) from the person coming in."

Protective actions against strangers or dangerous people. Similarly with performing

protective actions to avoid physical injury, the children indicated that avoiding strangers or

dangerous people represented a safe situation. These people were at times identified as "bad

guys" or "hobos." For example, a child commented, "never take candy from a stranger because

the candy can be poisonous" and another child complemented, "don't go walking to a stranger's

house, they could be bad." When asked to draw a safe situation, somebody stated, "people can

get hurt if you don't lock your door" and other children engaged in a discussion about what to do

if a stranger tried to contact them (e.g., "if someone calls you and you have no clue who it is then… um… you say nobody is here and hang up and goodbye" and "if a person is knocking you should walk away").

Furthermore, *protective actions* against direct contact with homeless people, referred as "hobos," were emphasized by several children who belonged to the same after-school program. The children tended to use the word "hobo" quite often with a negative connotation. They reported a number of experiences related to avoiding contact with homeless people and seemed to fear such individuals. For example, a child wrote on his paper "no talking to hobos" instead of drawing a safe situation. He drew lines around this sentence that looked like a gun. When asked about his perspective of safety, this boy said, "don't talk to a hobo because… um… it might attack you and steal all your stuff." Figure 6 illustrates this boy's drawing.

Figure 6. Drawing of a Safe Situation
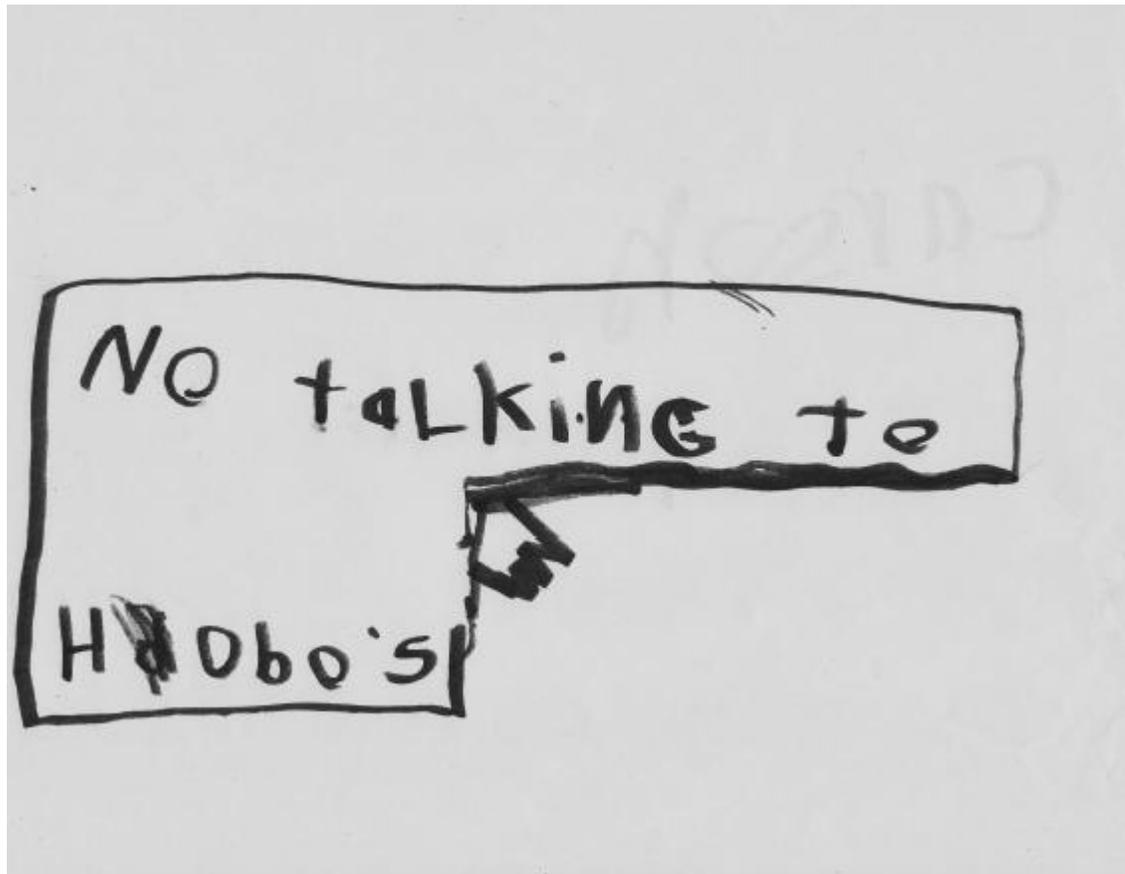
"no talking to hobos"

Avoiding unfamiliar people was a common and pertinent theme discussed among the children pointing to concerns about potential victimization. These findings also revealed children's knowledge about the concept of "stranger danger," which will be discussed in the Discussion chapter.

Protective actions to seek help. As part of *protective actions*, a few children described safe situations as seeking help in case of emergency. Some examples such as "run to my neighbour's house and get their phone" or "phone 911 when you need help" illustrate children's knowledge about the action to take when exposed to *risky events* involving harm or danger. It

can be noticed that not only neighbours, but also the police were associated with safety, suggesting that seeking support in the community was safe.

   Protective accessories. The last condition associated with safety was related to the use of devices for preventing physical injury in the case of accidents or crime. Children reported that wearing a helmet or seat belt ("wearing seat belt when my father is driving the car,") having cars with airbags ("airbags help people sometimes,") and using a fire hydrant ("if there is a fire then punch the glass with the fire hydrant and then go ppppppppeeeeee") could avoid serious physical injuries. Likewise, having window stoppers and fences were considered safe because these devices protected children against risky situations ("no one can get through so I am safe" and "the safe thing about school is that they have fences so that little kids don't run out of school"). Once more, it is interesting to note that the interaction among participants generated similar drawings and themes. For example, two children from the same group drew a similar picture regarding the use of a helmet to be safe. Figures 7 and 8 illustrate these drawings.

Figure 7. Drawing of a Safe Situation

"This is me and I am wearing a blue helmet. And this is Sonia and she forgot to put on her helmet. And I was about to go down the hill and Sonia fell and then she hurt her head."

When asked why that was a safe situation, the girl replied:

Because I am wearing a helmet ... and if Sonia ran over me, then I get hurt. My head will get hurt. But if Sonia ran over me again and I was wearing a helmet, then I will be safe and I wouldn't.

Figure 8. Drawing of a Safe Situation

"I have a helmet on and I am standing on a bike."

Overall, the three groups of children provided a range of examples related to protective devices used to ensure safety.

Risky Events

Children drew and described unsafe situations as potentially dangerous, violent, or harmful events or happenings (conditions) that they could be exposed to in their neighbourhood. These situations were identified as *risky events* and included *neighbourhood disorder, crime, contact with strangers,* and *accidents.* These conditions were perceived as unsafe situations because there was a probability of children becoming a victim of violence or that their sense of

well-being being compromised. Participants were asked to draw an unsafe situation in their neighbourhood and, to a certain extent, these situations were indirectly associated with the *protective conditions* described as safe situations. In other words, while describing *protective conditions* most children indicated what they could do to avoid or prevent harm derived from *risky events*, when asked to draw an unsafe situation the vast majority drew the possible *risky events* that could result in harm. Given the violent content of the children's reports, throughout the sessions they were inquired about where their ideas of *risky events* came from (e.g., were part of their direct experience or based on their exposure to the media). Some comments revealed that the children acknowledged the media influence, whereas others indicated that unsafe situations were part of their immediate experience in their neighbourhood.

Neighbourhood disorder. Children identified a range of social (e.g., hostile behaviour or drunkenness) and physical attributes (e.g., presence of garbage, building conditions, or signs of vandalism) as present in their neighbourhood and perceived as unsafe.

Social disorder. Social incivilities such as public drunkenness (e.g., persons drunk or visibly intoxicated) and persons fighting or behaving in a hostile or threatening manner were identified as *social disorder*. Some children reported that seeing people intoxicated or fighting was part of their immediate experience in the neighbourhood (e.g., "lots of drunk people and the police have to check on them. I have seen it lots of times in my neighbourhood," "there is lots of fights in our neighbourhood and... (it is not safe) being drunk driving"). Figure 9 illustrates a participant's drawing of a fight between two homeless people.

Figure 9. Drawing of an Unsafe Situation

"This is a hobo throwing a hobo at a tree."

When questioned about why that situation was unsafe, this boy replied, "because it is very inappropriate because the other person might get hurt." Given a number of comments across groups regarding homeless people, the investigator also asked the children if these people were present in their neighbourhood. They confirmed seeing people living on the streets and shared other stories such as "I saw a hobo in our backyard … I told my dad and then he was like get out of our backyard." At times homeless people were identified as "bad guys." For example, one child told a story about seeing some people in action trying to "knock down" a house:

We saw lots of bad guys over there. They were like climbing on the walls over here,

ripping the papers off, and trying to break it over here. But there is still people living

inside there.

Physical disorder. Participants also associated unsafe situations with physical incivility

(e.g., litter, deteriorating buildings, and signs of vandalism). Children reported seeing garbage on

the streets and in the park (e.g., finding cigarettes or glass on the ground) and associated it with

harm (e.g., "smoking is bad for you" and "I went in the fountain and there was glass in it. I took

off my shoes and I stepped in a piece of glass and it got stuck in my foot"). Signs of vandalism

were also related to *risky events*. For example, a girl indicated:

Because we live in Surrey and... um... every time we like leave our back gate open for

someone to come visit us, someone always comes in. Like last summer this guy came

in with a knife and popped all of our bouncy balls.

Furthermore, a group of children who attended a specific school in the neighbourhood

reported seeing bullet holes in the playground of their school. This was a fact confirmed by a

report released by the Surrey RCMP. According to the report, as a precaution, the elementary

school followed the code red lockdown (Canadian Press, 2009). It is interesting to note that even

though the children from the group that made comments about bullet holes in their school were

familiar with the code red system, this procedure did not come up during their groups

discussions, as opposed to another group that included such codes in their drawings and

explanations about safety.

Crime. Actions that violate the law and that are perceived as injurious to the general

population were described as a condition derived from *risky events*. Such actions included "being

taken," "being robbed," "break- in," "stealing," and "killing," and were consistently reported

across the groups. For example, two children from different groups drew themselves being kidnapped. Figure 10 illustrates one of these examples.

Figure 10. Drawing of an Unsafe Situation

"That is me and a guy that looks a clown saying "Want some candy kid?" ... And this is the guy that said come into my van and see my puppy ... He is going to take me."

Other children associated unsafe situations with break-ins (e.g., "somebody is trying to break into our house … somebody was trying to break the door and come in") and being robbed (e.g., "there are lots of strangers in Surrey and they try to take your stuff"). Based on their peers' drawings and comments, some children who did not draw a criminal situation also shared their own stories about crime. For example, a child reported being victimized by a criminal offence, "I

was at the store and there was this guy who was going to shoot people. But I stand still and he robbed everybody's money."

Moreover, "killing" was often used to represent *crime* in the neighbourhood. The example below (Figure 11) describes a criminal situation from the victim's perspective who considered the offender a stranger.

Figure 11. Drawing of an Unsafe Situation

"This is a bad guy trying to kill this lady name Ana. And the guy trying to kill her is named

Ronald. And he is wearing some clothes and a sword in his hand and he is saying, "give me your

money or else otherwise I will kill you." If she doesn't, he will throw the knife at her. And then

she said, 'No stranger."

Other descriptions of crime provided by participants from one of the after-school

programs also involved religious themes (e.g., "she is a devil that's why I don't know her ... she

killed me"). As previously indicated in the Methods chapter, one of the after-school programs

was located by a church and the contact with such environment may have influenced their

statements and the drawings' content regarding religion ("God protects you," "I didn't want him

to go to heaven so he went to hell," and "angels are dead").

Lastly, the investigator asked follow-up questions regarding the sources for comments about crime that did not seem realistic. For example, a boy who described a violent self-defence strategy against crime ("somebody is trying to shoot me at my house and I (use) a hammer to start bonking him in the head. I was scared") also acknowledged that this was not a real situation and reported to have heard about criminal acts on TV. During the discussion, other children also indicated media influence in their descriptions of safety. It was observed that the group format not only promoted the social interaction among participants, but also influenced their symbolic representation of lack of safety. This was seen when the children engaged in discussions about their peers' experiences with crime and provided similar ideas regarding the topic. At the same time, some children tended to "copy" specific features of each others' drawings.

Contact with strangers. Participants also described *risky events* as having contact with unfamiliar people. Even though the harmful consequences of such events were not described, children tended to perceive the contact with adults with unknown identity as unsafe. They either reported to be uncertain about what could happen in the case of such direct contact or did not expand on the consequences of having *contact with strangers*. For example, while a child expressed not to feel safe around her house because of the presence of strangers ("There's nothing safe around my house because there are lots of strangers"), another considered his direct contact with a stranger an unsafe experience ("Me and my cousin went into the woods and there was this guy there so we had to run back to my house and it was scary so never run into the woods"). Contact with strangers was a persistent theme that emerged across the group discussions. Figure 12 illustrates this condition.

Figure 12. Drawing of an Unsafe Situation

"This is someone saying hello to a stranger."

When asked why this situation was unsafe this boy said, "because you don't know if a stranger is bad." It is worth noting that another child asked this boy why he did not put "violence" in his drawing and this boy replied that he did not know. When the investigator inquired why that child asked the question about violence, he indicated the influence of media in his comment and replied, "because he plays video games." Additional descriptions of unsafe situations included, "going to someone's house that you don't know" and "telling your address to someone you don't know." While in the descriptions of safety, some children revealed that avoiding contact with strangers was safe, in their perspectives of lack of safety, having such

contact with unfamiliar people was considered unsafe. Children's notion of "stranger danger" is once more observed in this condition.

Accidents*.* Finally, the last condition described by participants as unsafe was associated with accidents either caused by humans or nature. According to the children, exposure to such accidents increased the likelihood of being harmed.

Human-caused accidents. Accidents caused by humans were described as *risky events*. Some examples included, forest fire caused by cigarettes, car crash due to drunk driving, bike crash, unexpected accidents that involved individuals such as falling downstairs or falling from the top of a giant tree, and having a weapon (gun or knife) and hurting someone by accident. Figure 13 illustrates a child's experience of a *human-caused accident*.

Figure 13. Drawing of an Unsafe Situation

"I saw fire outside of someone's house."

It is worth noting that only one child identified an unsafe situation as hurting one's self and committing suicide. Although this type of action is caused by humans, it cannot be considered an accident because of the purposeful intention of harm attached to it.

Natural accidents. The effects of natural hazards such as earthquakes, floods, and snow storms that damaged the environment and possibly resulted in physical harm were associated with unsafe situations. As previously discussed, in their descriptions of safe situations, some children expressed that taking *protective actions* would reduce the chances of being physically hurt in case of a natural accident (e.g., earthquake). Comments such as "...earthquakes are not

safety" and descriptions of a car crash due to a snow storm are some of the examples of *natural accidents*. Figure 14 illustrates another type of *natural accident.*

Figure 14. Drawing of an Unsafe Situation

"It's raining and it's flooding. (It is unsafe) because it will go higher ...then you ... and then you can't breathe."

While the city where the children lived has had occasional snow storms during the winter, no history of recent earthquakes and floods was reported over years. It is important to highlight, however, that the children have been exposed to preventative actions against earthquakes at school, which seems to have played a role in their understandings about safety.

Summary

In this chapter, the findings of the study, specifically the symbolic meanings that children attributed to safety, were presented. The group format not only promoted the social interaction among participants, but also influenced their symbolic representation of safety. The participants engaged in discussions about their peers' experiences, complemented each other's talk, and provided similar ideas. A number of drawings were strikingly similar, suggesting that the social interaction in groups also influenced their visual productions. *Protective conditions* were considered part of children's co-construction of safety in their neighbourhood. Four main conditions were described as safe situations (*protective places, protective people, protective actions,* and *protective accessories)* that served to help the children prevent or avoid *risky events*. *Risky events* were perceived as unsafe situations that could result in harm. *Risky events* were associated with *neighbourhood disorder, crime, contact with strangers,* and *accidents*. The present chapter presented the components of the symbolic meaning and the relationships between the core categories and conditions described by children as safety and lack of safety in their neighbourhood.

<center>**Chapter Five: Discussion**</center>

Overview

In this chapter, significant findings will be discussed in relation to reviewed literature. The implications of the findings for parents, psychologists, and other professionals working with children as well as the limitations and strengths of the present study will be addressed. The chapter will conclude with a discussion of future directions for research in this area.

Discussion of the Present Study in Relation to Previous Literature

Obverse meanings of safety. This study aimed to broaden the understanding of children's perspectives of safety in their neighbourhood. To guide the main research question, an attempt to explore the meanings and experiences of safety was made. Most of the children revealed an understanding of safety as a dynamic relationship between its obverse meanings: safe and unsafe situations. Safety and lack of safety in the neighbourhood were identified according to two core categories: *protective conditions* and *risky events*, respectively. Each of the four *protective conditions* (*protective places, protective people, protective actions,* and *protective accessories*) were related, to a certain extent, to the conditions derived from *risky events* (*neighbourhood disorder, crime, contact with strangers,* and *accidents*). Through the social interactions within the groups, the children were given the opportunity to share their thoughts and co-construct the meanings of safety. A number of comments and drawings demonstrated that the interaction among participants enriched the descriptions of the relationship between safe and unsafe situations. Such relationship is illustrated in the following examples. When children reported that seeing homeless people on the streets was an unsafe situation (*social disorder*), a safe situation was described as avoiding direct contact with "hobos" (*protective action*). Following the same rationale, while earthquakes were associated with unsafe situations (*natural accidents*), taking a *protective action* such as "going under a desk in case of an earthquake" to decrease the chances of being harmed was perceived as a safe situation. Children indicated that

not wearing *protective accessories* (e.g., helmet or seat-belt) was unsafe, whereas they described that wearing such devices was safe. Similar examples of the two sides of the meaning of safety were articulated across groups and by different children, allowing the investigator to observe a co-construction of the meanings of safety.

While the main research question of this study was to investigate children's perspectives of safety, one could argue that only asking the participants to draw a safe situation would be sufficient to better understand their perspectives. However, given the emphasis on the "negative" descriptions of safety, exploring the meanings that the participants attributed to lack of safety certainly enhanced the findings as most of the children perceived safety as a means to avoid or prevent events later described as unsafe situations. Throughout the data collection process, the investigator observed several signs of social (e.g., a number of homeless people, intoxicated people taking drugs on the street, and police cars) and physical (e.g., deteriorating buildings, high amount of garbage, abandoned clothes, furniture, and supermarket carts, and broken glass) disorder in the neighbourhood. It is suggested that the "negative" focus on safety was possibly influenced by challenging physical and social aspects of this context (a high crime rate and high range of factors associated with vulnerability). Bronfenbrenner's ecological theory (1979) supports the notion that to better understand child development it is necessary to consider the contexts where children live, including the multiple settings that influence children and their families and the interactions among these settings. According to this framework, not only the children's home environment affects their development, but also other environments that are part of their lives, including neighbourhoods (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 1998). The neighbourhood literature emphasizes that the challenging aspects of a neighbourhood (e.g., low SES, exposure to violence, and perceiving lower neighbourhood trust and greater danger) have various negative effects on children's health and perspectives (Leventhal &

Brooks-Gunn, 2000; Nicotera, 2008; Schaefer-McDaniel, 2007). Findings from the current study support previous research which suggests that exposure to neighbourhood disorder has a negative effect on children's feelings of safety (Farver et al., 2000; Irwin et al., 2006; Nicotera, 2008; Schaefer-McDaniel, 2007).

Previous researchers have investigated the impact that lack of perceived safety has on residents' perceptions of neighbourhood quality and the behaviours associated with family practices and child well-being (e.g., Austin et al., 2002; McDonell, 2007; Curtis et al., 2004). Few studies have directly examined children's perspectives of safety in their neighbourhood (Farver et al., 2000; Hume et al., 2005; Min & Lee, 2006; Nicotera, 2008; Polivka et al., 1998; Schaefer-McDaniel, 2007; Spilsbury, 2002; Usta & Farver, 2005). Review of the literature regarding residents' perceptions of neighbourhood safety stresses that this concept is often associated with neighbourhood satisfaction in terms of perceived crime, neighbourhood incivilities, lack of trust, and limits on personal freedom (Austin et al., 2002; Ross & Jang, 2000). Such "negative" conceptualization of the term safety is often used by researchers to define and to measure residents' perspectives of neighbourhood safety. Among the few studies that directly explored children's perspectives of safety (e.g., Farver et al., 2000; Spilsbury, 2002; Usta & Farver, 2005), the term "safety" was found to be already pre-defined by the researchers. Similarly with the literature, most of the children in this study used examples related to "lack of perceived safety" to explain safe situations. No research to date explored the meanings that children *themselves* attributed to safety in their neighbourhood and this is a unique contribution of the current study to the literature.

Examples of extreme danger. Through children's drawings and verbal responses, examples of extreme perceived risks associated with safety were observed. Safety was partially described as *protective actions* performed to avoid (a) violent *crimes*, (b) *contact with strangers*

or dangerous people, and (c) *natural accidents.* When interpreting the possible reasons for children associating extreme danger with safety, it is important to consider how the contexts in which the children live affect their perspectives. While one cannot assume the degree to which children's perspectives of safety were significantly influenced by the characteristics of their neighbourhood, it is important to acknowledge that their examples of extreme danger could possibly be related to (a) their own experiences with neighbourhood disorder (e.g., seeing drunk and homeless people on the street and having witnessed crime), (b) their parents and school teaching about safety rules, (c) the influence of other group members' ideas in their own perspectives, and (c) the influence of the media.

First, violent imagery was striking and prominent in the drawings of unsafe situations and illustrated (a) violent scenes that involved blood and death (8 drawings) and (b) kidnappings (2 drawings). Although the targeted neighbourhood is characterized by a high rate of criminal offences, most of the children reported to not have had direct contact with violent acts. It is worth noting that an indirect encounter with a violent crime in the neighbourhood was experienced by the investigator during data collection. A murder occurred near the playground of the after-school program A on the day that the investigator was visiting the site. The high incidence of drawings and descriptions related to crime may be partially supported by the negative aspects of the neighbourhood. This is consistent with empirical research that points to a negative correlation between perceptions of safety and fear of crime and social and physical characteristics of a neighbourhood, including neighbourhood disorder (e.g., litter, signs of vandalism, gangs, and public drunkenness) and attitude toward crime (e.g., incivilities, delinquency, or criminal involvement) (e.g., Meltzer et al., 2007; Ross & Jang, 2000).

A prominent example of extreme danger discussed among the children was associated with *contact with strangers*. Children spoke about their fears of being stolen or hurt by a stranger

in both descriptions of safe and unsafe situations. Such idea illustrates the widespread usage of the concept "stranger danger," which refers to general warnings about possible threats or danger caused by strangers. "Stranger danger" has been widely taught by families and schools as well as emphasized in the media and in the empirical literature. The children in this study revealed a variety of strategies to protect themselves from strangers. Such examples were found in a number of websites regarding tips for parents to teach their children to be safe against "stranger danger" (e.g., Canada Safety Council), child's books and songs (e.g., Irene, 1985; Smudge Fundaes, 2003) and research studies (e.g., Irwin et al., 2006; Zamora, 2010). Children's concerns with threats presented by unfamiliar adults echoed the influence that their social environment (family and school teaching) had on their perspectives.

Another type of extreme danger associated with safety was illustrated by children's reports of *natural accidents* (e.g., earthquakes, floods, and snow storms). While the area where the targeted neighbourhood is located has no history of major natural disasters such as earthquakes or floods, there is a possibility of children having witnessed snow storms. Even though descriptions of *natural accidents* are not fully supported by children's direct contact with such catastrophes, it is suggested that their general knowledge about these *risky events* may have played a role in their understandings of safety. Once more, such knowledge derived from the social context in which they live. For example, children reported to have learned safety rules (*protective actions*) about earthquakes at school.

Learning rules. As previously indicated, children's perspectives of safety also reflected family and school teaching. These safety rules were described as strategies taught by adults to prevent harm. Some examples included performing *protective actions* to avoid injuries caused by *accidents* as well as following advice to avoid the consequences of lack of awareness about the environment (e.g., crossing the street without looking both sides or talking to strangers). Their

knowledge about these rules originated in the social-cultural context in which the participants live. It is suggested that the children constructed the meanings of safety through their interaction with other individuals present in their lives and, during the research process, were influenced by the other children who were part of the research group. The assumption that the roots of the children's understandings of safety derived from their social environment goes in line with Vygotsky's belief that socio-cultural contexts contribute to the development of knowledge (Vygotsky, 1978). For example, recent teaching provided by the school curricula (e.g., "code red" lockdown) influenced children's co-construction of safety. Such findings are also consistent with Irwin et al.'s findings (2006) regarding how contexts of daily life influence children's perspectives of health. The authors reported that the school curricula (e.g., "caring for self" as part of an anti-bullying programme) and family teaching (e.g., stranger danger) were part of children's perspectives and understandings of health in their study.

The social interaction among the participants also enhanced the number of stories and strategies reported. A pattern of similar comments and wordings used by the children were observed within the groups. While one of the groups emphasized the "code red" lockdown, the second group tended to use the word "hobo," and the third group used the term "bad guys" to describe their experiences. It is suggested that these speech patterns represent the shared knowledge that the children had of terms socially constructed in the context where they live (Blumer, 1969; Vygotsky, 1978). Results from the current study expand on previous research about how contexts influence children's perspectives and also support the role that family and school plays in the development of children's knowledge.

Media influence. The influence of the media has been widely researched and shown to affect children's attitudes and behaviours (Browne & Hamilton-Giachritsis, 2005; American Academy of Pediatrics, 2009). In the present study, some children acknowledged media

influences in their perspectives of safety. For the most part, participants' drawings and descriptions of lack of safety were illustrated as *risky events* associated with *crime*, *accidents*, *contact with strangers*, and *neighbourhood disorder*. Even though one cannot assume the extent to which children's perspectives of safety were significantly influenced by the media, the investigator inquired about the sources of information for their descriptions of *risky events* (e.g., being part of their immediate experience or based on their exposure to the media). Some comments revealed that children partially recognized the media influence (e.g., television, films, and video games violence) in their perspectives of safety. In the literature, the extent of the effects of media violence on children and young people's perspectives and behaviours is an ongoing debate. In a comprehensive evaluation of published work of five meta-analytic reviews, Browne and Hamilton-Giachritsis (2005) reported "consistent evidence that violent imagery in television, film, and video and computer games has substantial short-term effects on arousal, thoughts, and emotions, increasing the likelihood of aggressive or fearful behaviour in younger children, especially in boys" (p. 702). The researchers also stressed that the evidence is inconsistent when considering older children and teenagers and long-term outcomes for all ages. Although it is not possible to determine a causal relationship between the influences of media on children's perceived lack of safety, evidence supports the negative effects of media violence on aggression-related feelings, thoughts, and attitudes of children and adolescents (e.g., Council on Communications and Media, 2009; Kirsh, 2006). Moreover, the consequences of the fear created by media in children may have severe and long-lasting effects on their social-emotional outcome (Wilson, 2008). In the present study, it is suggested that the media may have contributed to specific aspects of some of the children's perspectives of *risky events*.

Social bonds. Although the vast majority of participants attributed a "negative" connotation to safety, a few children reported a "positive" perspective of this concept, as they

associated safety with supportive parent-child and friend/neighbour-child relationships (*protective people*). A vast amount of research has investigated the influences of social networks on children's outcomes and suggests that social environments can serve as both risk and protective factors, contributing to children's life outcomes (e.g., Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006; McCain et al., 2007). Based on the findings of the present study, the quality of the relationships between the children and their parents, peers, teachers, and neighbours had a positive effect on their sense of safety. These findings support previous research that highlights that having secure and stable relationships within and outside the family positively affect children's development, including their sense of security (Shonkoff et al., 2004). It is also interesting to note that a sense of trust among neighbours was reported by the children, particularly when seeking help in case of emergence. Findings from Spilsbury's study (2002) also indicate that the children in his study described strategies for obtaining assistance from their social networks (help-seeking behaviour) when faced with *risky events*. As research shows, a neighbourhood with stronger social networks can decrease the negative effects produced by safety concerns (Leventhal & Brooks-Gunn, 2000). This is an important argument that was supported by the children in the current study, who also associated safety with positive social support.

Implications for Parents, Psychologists, and Other Professionals Working with Children

Because this study focused on children's perspectives of safety in their neighbourhood, important implications for parents, psychologists, and other professionals working with children are suggested. One of the significant findings was that children associated safety with a number of preventative strategies taught by adults to avoid harm. It is known that families and educational institutions invest a significant amount of time teaching children how to react when faced with hazardous situations. Although teaching safety rules may increase children's repertoire and awareness, it is also important to recognize the side effects of exposing, and at

times, overwhelming children with potential solutions to fearful and dangerous situations. A number of children in this study reported techniques learned (*protective actions)* to avoid extreme risky situations (e.g., earthquakes and kidnappings). Despite the benefits of teaching children how to react to certain violent and harmful *risky events*, a by-product of it can also be an increase in feelings of fear and anxiety, which may vary from child to child. Empirical evidence indicates that threatening circumstances in a child's environment can elicit such negative feelings in children (Shonkoff et al., 2010). According to a recent document released by the National Scientific Council on the Developing Child (Shonkoff et al., 2010), exposure to persistent fear and anxiety has a significant negative effect on children's learning and development. Even though children are able to perceive fear in their environment, especially if they have been taught about the types of situations at high risk of danger, "unlike adults, they do not have the cognitive or physical capacities to regulate their psychological response, reduce the threat, or remove themselves from the threatening situation" (Shonkoff et al., 2010, p. 6).

Teaching children about strangers and how to proceed in specific situations has been enforced by different sources. However, the exaggeration of potential danger in the form of strangers has also been criticized (Canada Safety Council, 2009). While young children may have difficulty identifying dangerous versus non-dangerous situations involving strangers, people who cause harm to children are not always strangers to them. Evidence shows that most people who carry out kidnappings are found to be someone that the child knows. In a report provided by the Canada Safety Council (2009), out of 60,582 missing children in Canada in 2007, less than one percent (only 56 cases) involved abductions; and in the majority of cases the kidnapper was a person known to the family. Some suggestions provided by researchers point to initiatives to increase the sense of collective efficacy among neighbours as a means to reduce children's responsibility for safety as well as enhance the formal support (e.g., community

policing) provided to residents who initiate self-help strategies (Irwin, 2005; Sampson et al.,

1997). Moreover, efforts to clarify children's understanding about the message "stranger danger"

should be reinforced. The Canada Safety Council (2009) provided a number of strategies for

teaching children about strangers and how to act in certain situations. According to this report,

one of the most important lessons to help children identify the appropriate responses when they

face risk would be to practice the "what if" scenarios. This means that children would learn how

to identify people that are safe to approach as well as would be encouraged to role play the

proper reactions in certain occasions. As a result, these practices may "give them confidence to

react in real-life situations" (Canada Safety Council, 2009, p. 1). Overall, findings from the

current study indicate that teaching children how to be safe has its advantages (widen their

repertoire on how to respond to danger) and disadvantages (may create unnecessary fear and

anxiety that children will become victims). Thus, it is important for parents and educators to

acknowledge the benefits and risks of teaching children to protect themselves, keeping in mind

that such protective strategies should be age-appropriate and should not overwhelm them with

fear and anxiety.

Consistent with the literature that correlates neighbourhood disorder with crime (e.g.,

Austin et al., 2002), the context where the children in this study lived played a significant role in

their perspectives of safety. Participants reported to fear crime and to have had direct contact

with neighbourhood disorder, suggesting that such negative experiences contributed to their

"negative" perceptions of safety (e.g., what to do to avoid *risky events*). It is suggested that

children's perceptions of the external sources of danger, concerns about safety, and awareness of

strategies to avoid or prevent risky situations served as defense mechanisms for them to deal

with the reality where they lived. Based on that, ongoing initiatives to lower the levels of

neighbourhood disorder (e.g., homeless people, deteriorating buildings, and garbage) are strongly recommended.

Finally, results from the current study revealed that the quality of the relationships between the children and their parents, peers, and neighbours had a positive effect on their sense of safety. The fact that some children's perspectives of safety were positively associated with their interactions with supportive people should be considered, especially because most of the children in this study indicated a "negative" understanding of safety in their neighbourhood (e.g., what to do to reduce or avoid harm). While it is not possible to determine the extent to which children have opportunities to expand their social networks in their neighbourhood, research shows that high rates of violence and crime affect parents' practices (e.g., McDonell, 2007; Miles, 2008) and reduce children's exposure to social interactions (Burdette & Whitaker, 2005; Hume et al., 2005). Efforts to promote not only secure and stable relationships between the child and his or her family, but also connections between the child and other individuals outside of the family are suggested. For example, for parents who work long hours, nurturing after-school programs may be positive environments to promote children's socialization. In the neighbourhood, common child-friendly places free of physical and social disorder can also serve as environments for children and parents to socialize and strengthen their social networks.

Limitations of the Present Study

This study's significance is that it provides insight into children's perceptions of safety in their neighbourhood. While a number of strengths emphasize the quality of this research, the study is also limited in many ways. First, contextual characteristics should be taken into account when interpreting the results because this study is based on the perspectives of 15 children from a limited geographical area within the Lower Mainland of BC, who resided in a neighbourhood characterized by a high rate of crime and characteristics associated with vulnerability.

Second, although collecting data through group discussions provided valuable information to this research, the investigator faced significant challenges with working directly in groups composed by young children. Despite implementing different strategies to engage the children as well as emphasizing ground rules, participants had significant difficulty in: (a) waiting for one's turn before speaking, which resulted in challenges with transcription and with behaviour management; (b) interacting in a respectful manner with one another (e.g., disrespectful comments about others' drawings or ideas); and (c) paying attention to the activity for the duration of the session. As a result, at times the investigator and the other research assistants were unable to conduct more in-depth explorations of the children's drawings and descriptions because disruptive behaviours interrupted the follow-up questions. Consequently, more detailed information may have been lost due to children's challenging behaviours.

Third, at the third session a group drawing activity was conducted with the intent of mixing individual and collective ideas in the process of making meaning of children's perspectives of safety in their neighbourhood. The idea was that the children would work together "to negotiate the meaning-making process itself" (Freeman & Mathison, 2009, p. 118). This activity, however, was a significant challenge for this age group as they were unable to work in a larger group during the drawing activity. To illustrate their behaviour, while some participants scribbled over each others' drawings, others did not let group members draw what they wanted. As a result, some children became upset and cried and, consequently, refused to join the activity. Given such circumstances, the investigator decided to divide the group of 5 into 2 groups and asked these smaller groups to draw again. This time, most of the children drew their own drawings on different sides of the paper, not integrating the drawing as a whole. When examining the literature, varying advice is provided regarding ideal group sizes when working with children. While Morgan, Gibbs, Maxwell, and Britten (2002) suggest that groups of 4 - 5

participants aged 7 - 8 years is ideal for group discussions, Malchiodi (1998) indicates that only around the age of 9 years old, do children start to develop the "ability to work within groups" (p. 91).

Moreover, based on the background questionnaire completed by the parents, while 4 out of the 5 parents from the after-school program A did not consider their neighbourhood a safe place for children to live, 8 out of the 10 parents from the after-school program B perceived the neighbourhood as a safe place for children. Although these after-school programs are physically one kilometre apart, given the high rate of crime, one would expect that similar reports of lack of perceived neighbourhood safety would be indicated. This was not the case. The investigator did not follow-up with more descriptive questions about parents' reports of perceived safety because this was not the main purpose of the study. Nonetheless, understanding parents' opinions about the quality of their neighbourhood could provide valuable insights and enhance the interpretation of the results.

Finally, it is also important to acknowledge that the interpretations of this study are partially influenced by the investigator's perspectives, experiences, and understanding of other studies in relation to the data. Despite implementing different strategies to improve the validity of the research results (e.g., use of multiple methods, sources of data, and researchers) (Mathison, 1988), the investigator did not present the final findings to the participants. Instead, to demonstrate that the findings represented the perspectives of the children, (a) multiple techniques to collect data were used, (b) constant comparison analysis (e.g., comparing and contrasting similar themes that emerged from a total of eleven sessions conducted with three different groups) was conducted, (c) checking with other researchers about the codes, categories, and development of the main categories occurred on a regular basis, (d) the investigator's personal

thoughts and feelings that may have influenced the study were documented, and (d) a peer audit reviewed all the data and provided feedback.

Strengths of the Present Study

A number of strengths also contributed to the quality of this study. Despite the sample being limited to specific contextual characteristics, the children presented a wide variety of experiences and meanings of safety, which adds strength to the study. Variety among participants' experiences were found as (a) the participants attended seven different schools located within and outside of the neighbourhood boundaries, and (b) according to a background questionnaire responded by parents prior to data collection, family demographics, configuration, use of neighbourhood facilities, and views of neighbourhood safety were not completely homogenous.

The purpose of this study was to give children the opportunity to describe their perspectives of safety and construct the meaning of safety in their neighbourhood through social interactions. Despite the challenges of using a group session format with young children, this was also a strength of this study because children were given the opportunity to collectively construct and reconstruct the meanings of safety in their neighbourhood. According to the methodology of this study, participants were seen as social actors who came into the group with their own definition of the topic of this study, and who assigned and re-assigned meanings to safety throughout the interaction process with other children in the group sessions. In fact, the children were able to share their personal experiences and understandings of safety and also complement their peers' descriptions of safety in their neighbourhood. Children provided valuable insights about their perspectives of safety through individual and group drawing activities as well as group discussions.

Another strength of this research is that the strategies implemented to enhance the validity of the interpretations are adequate. First, to provide a rich picture of children's perspectives of safety in their neighbourhood, multiple methods and sources of data, including drawings, group discussions, field notes, and memos were used. Second, to demonstrate the relationship between the data and the claims of this research (Freeman et al., 2007), the content presented in the findings (including direct quotes and original drawings), the general information about the profile of each group of participants, and a description of the general characteristics of the targeted neighbourhood were provided. Review of the literature also assisted with the interpretation of the findings. Finally, to decrease the chances of the findings from this study being biased by the investigator's perspectives, and rather represent the children's perspectives and experiences, prolonged contact with the participants occurred and a detailed description of the study's methods and procedures were included. In addition, a peer auditor reviewed the raw data and the data analysis and themes were also discussed with other researchers (peer debriefing).

Moreover, the investigator conducted all the interview sessions with the assistance of a few members of the research lab who received previous training. Consistency of the interview style was obtained as a single researcher was facilitating all the group sessions. In addition, short intervals of a two-week period between the data collection sessions increased the likelihood that rapport between the children and the researchers was maintained and that their previous experiences in the former session were recent enough for them to remember and connect with the topic to be explored in the following session. This can be considered an asset of this study.

Not many studies have addressed children's perspective of their environment. From those which do, only a few have incorporated the perceptions of children between 7 and 9 years old about safety in their neighbourhood (e.g., Farver et al., 2000; Usta & Farver, 2005). Therefore,

this age group and this topic are understudied in the neighbourhood research. The present study brings to the forefront research regarding neighbourhood influences in child development with respect to the experiences and understandings of children about safety in their neighbourhood. The fact that children *themselves* had the opportunity to construct the meanings of safety through social interaction has not been previously addressed in the existing literature. This is an important addition to the neighbourhood research field and is a powerful strength of this study.

Recommendations for Future Research

Findings from this study suggest some possibilities for future research. As the present study is among the few that have investigated young people's perspectives of safety in their neighbourhood, future studies may consider this as a pilot to build upon for further research into neighbourhood safety in Canada. It would be interesting to apply the same study design with children from different backgrounds (e.g., high SES, low crime rate neighbourhoods, or from different cultural backgrounds) and compare the meanings that children from diverse backgrounds attribute to neighbourhood safety.

Secondly, researchers may consider examining the meanings that adults attribute to safety in neighbourhoods with high crime rate, as it is known that adults' perspectives not only affect family's practices but also may significantly differ from children's perspectives of their environment (Tomanović & Petrovic, 2010). Such information may be valuable in identifying the differences in perceptions of those involved. Recognizing the different perspectives between children and adults may promote the base for studies that investigate bridging gaps between children's and adults' perspectives of safety and, consequently, to develop effective strategies to address this issue.

Finally, one of the main findings of this study is that children associated safety with preventative actions generally taught by adults to avoid harm. Some of these strategies were

illustrated as extreme dangerous situations (e.g., earthquake and kidnappings). While it was not possible to determine the roots of such statements, it is suggested that family and school teaching, children's direct contact with neighbourhood disorder and crime, and media exposure to violence may put them at risk for developing fear and anxiety. Future research aimed at examining research-based strategies to teach children to be safe without scaring or overwhelming them with examples of threats or violence is recommended. Furthermore, teaching them to make good choices about what to watch on television and restrict their access to violent films and video games is suggested.

Conclusion

The present study represents an attempt to explore, understand, and describe safety in the neighbourhood from children's standpoint. Children between 7 and 9 years of age residing in a neighbourhood characterized by high rate of crime and characteristics associated with vulnerability were selected to participate in the study. Based on symbolic interactionism, participants came into the group sessions with their own definition of safety, and through the social interaction with other participants, constructed and reconstructed the meanings of safety. Data analysis resulted into two core interrelated categories, *protective conditions* and *risky events*. While *protective conditions* mostly referred to specific strategies that children could employ to avoid *risky events* and/or to decrease the probability of being harmed, *risky events* were perceived as dangerous, violent or harmful situations that children would be at risk for harm.

In order to understand children's co-constructions of the meanings of safety in their neighbourhood it is essential to consider how the contexts where they live influenced their perspectives. The main findings of this study suggest that the dynamic relationship between the obverse meanings of safety -safe and unsafe- contributed to children's understanding of this concept. Most children revealed a "negative" perspective of safety in their neighbourhood

possibly due to the challenging characteristics of this context. While examples of extreme dangerous situations, descriptions of safety rules taught by adults, and media violence illustrated their "negative" perspectives of safety, a few participants indicated that supportive relationships promoted their sense of security and well-being. It is suggested that the contexts where they live and the social interaction among participants during the group discussions played a significant role in their perspectives.

The current study expands previous work in the area of neighbourhoods' impact on children' perspectives and provides a research-based framework for enhancing the understanding of the experiences and meanings that school-aged children attribute to safety in their neighbourhood.

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Appendix A: Poster Advertisement

THE UNIVERSITY OF BRITISH COLUMBIA

Department of Educational & Counselling
Psychology, & Special Education

SPACES Project
Children's Perspectives of Safety in their Neighbourhood
Letter of Invitation and Recruitment

Dear Parent/Guardian,

We are writing to invite your child to take part in a research study that we are conducting in Surrey. You are receiving this letter because your child is taking part in a community program in the [Targeted Neighbourhood] community and is between seven and nine years old.

The purpose of this study is to learn more about how children perceive safety in the [Targeted Neighbourhood]. Your willingness to let your child to take part in this study is very important. Findings from this study may enhance our understanding of the effects that neighbourhood characteristics, particularly safety, have on child development and well-being.

Your child's taking part is voluntary and will not affect any services he/she may receive in the [Targeted Neighbourhood] community.

He/ she will be free to stop at any point, or not to take part at all without any consequences, even after you sign the consent form.

Taking part in this study means that your child would take part in three to four 1-1.5 hour sessions that involve group discussions and drawing activities. Your child will be asked questions about places or things that he/she likes and dislikes about the [Targeted Neighbourhood], and aspects or conditions in the neighbourhood that make he/she feel safe or unsafe.

The group discussions with your child will be audio and video-recorded, so we are able to accurately remember what is said. The audio and video discussions will not be used beyond this research study.

As compensation for your child's time and any transportation expense, each child who takes part will receive school supplies as a thank-you gift for each session and a $10 gift certificate from a local book store (e.g., Chapters) at the last session.

It is very important to us that your family's right to privacy is respected. Therefore, all information collected as part of this research study will be kept confidential. No individual information will be reported and no child will be identified by name in any reports about the

completed study.

We would be delighted if you would allow your child to participate. If you are interested in your child taking part or would like to learn more about the study and what is involved, you may contact us by phoning the research project office at XXXX. You can also call one of the project leaders at the phone numbers listed below. You may also sign the consent form that is attached to this letter and returning it to the daycare staff.

After you contact us to learn more about the study, you will be asked if you wish that your child to take part. If you do wish that he/she take part, our research team will find a time that works for all to conduct the group discussions and drawing activities with your child and other participants.

If you do decide that your child take part in this study, and if you have any concerns about your child's rights or treatment as a research participant, you may contact the Research Subject Information Line in the UBC Office of Research Services at the University of British Columbia, at XXXXX.

Sincerely,

_____   _____

Laurie Ford, PhD   Juliana Negreiros,
Associate Professor   MA School Psychology Student
Principal Investigator   Co-Investigator
Department of   Department of
Educational & Counselling Psychology and   Educational & Counselling Psychology and
Special Education   Special Education
XXXXXXXX   XXXXXXXX

The University of British Columbia
Office of Research Services
Behavioural Research Ethics Board
Suite 102, 6190 Agronomy Road,
Vancouver, B.C. V6T 1Z3

CERTIFICATE OF APPROVAL - MINIMAL RISK AMENDMENT

PRINCIPAL INVESTIGATOR:	DEPARTMENT:	UBC BREB NUMBER:
Laurie Ford	UBC/Education/Educational & Counselling Psychology, and Special Education	H09-01387

INSTITUTION(S) WHERE RESEARCH WILL BE CARRIED OUT:	
Institution	**Site**
UBC	Vancouver (excludes UBC Hospital)

Other locations where the research will be conducted:

This project will be conducted in two neighbourhoods in Surrey, BC. We will work with members of the community including our research partners with the Early Childhood Roundtable (a group of key stakeholders working on issues relevant to young children and families in Surrey). We have met with members of the local community and they have suggested several spaces where we can work with children based on their convenience. There are several public family support centres and community centres that have rooms for projects. Our ideal setting will be a quiet location mutually agreed upon by investigators, our community partners, and the children in our study (e.g., a room in the community centre). We would like to include a member of the staff of the location where we gather data to be part of our safety protocol. We appreciate the board raising the issue of confidentiality. While we anticipate that the staff will be on site, we do not anticipate that they will be in the room while we collect data. However, if the set up is such that a staff member is in the room, we will review the information with the staff that this is a research study and explain the role of confidentiality in much the same way as we do with the transcriptionist. If, as we finalize our room locations, we discover that indeed staff will be in the room, we will create a form similar to that used with our transcriptionist and submit this form as an amendment to our BREB application to have on file. If not needed, we will proceed as planned. All sessions must occur during hours the centre is typically open to the public. The members of the research team will check in with Dr. Ford at the beginning of each session via cell phone and check out (call) again at the end of the group interview session via telephone (if she is not attending). If the call has not been placed within 30 minutes of the expected completion time of the session, a call will be made to follow up with the co-investigator or the other researcher who will be in the sessions taking field notes. If they are not reached by phone, a call will be made to the community centre and follow up will occur as needed.

CO-INVESTIGATOR(S):
N/A

SPONSORING AGENCIES:
N/A

PROJECT TITLE:
Children's Perspectives of Safety in their Neighbourhood

Expiry Date - Approval of an amendment does not change the expiry date on the current UBC BREB approval of this study. An application for renewal is required on or before: July 23, 2010

AMENDMENT(S):		AMENDMENT APPROVAL DATE: **November 24, 2009**	
Document Name		**Version**	**Date**
Consent Forms:			
Child Safety Consent Nov 19 Revised		4	November 19, 2009
Assent Forms:			
Child Safety assent Nov 19 Revised		4	November 19, 2009
Letter of Initial Contact:			
Child Safety Invitation Revised		2	November 8, 2009

The amendment(s) and the document(s) listed above have been reviewed and the procedures were found to be acceptable on ethical grounds for research involving human subjects.

Approval is issued on behalf of the Behavioural Research Ethics Board
and signed electronically by one of the following:

THE UNIVERSITY OF BRITISH COLUMBIA

Department of Educational & Counselling
Psychology, & Special Education

SPACES Project
Children's Perspectives of Safety in their Neighbourhood
Parent Consent Form

Principal Investigator: Laurie Ford, PhD

Student Co-Investigator: Juliana Negreiros

Project Office:
Dear Parent/Guardian,

Please read the following form carefully. Sign one copy and return. Keep the other for your records. This is a request for your child to take part in the study that we are doing.

Purpose:
The purpose of this study is to describe children's perceptions of safety in their neighbourhood.

Research Study Participation:
1. Taking part in the study means that you allow us to conduct a group discussions and drawing activities with your child. We will do these activities while he/she is at the community location. The persons conducting the activities are trained in working with children. They will not conduct the group discussion unless your child is comfortable.

2. Participating in this study means that your child would take part in three to four 1-1.5 hour activities that involve group discussion and drawing exercises. The group discussion will be audio and video-recorded. Only members of our research team will listen to the audio or view the video recordings. Your child will be asked questions about places or things that he/she likes and dislikes about the [Targeted Neighbourhood] community, and aspects or conditions in the neighbourhood that make he/she feel safe or unsafe. Your child will also be asked to do drawings about the [Targeted Neighbourhood] community and things that they like and dislike and things that make them feel safe or unsafe in their neighbourhood.

3. There are no risks if your child takes part. However, if any of the questions make he/she feel uncomfortable, the facilitator may skip those questions. You are welcome to contact us with any questions. While we do not think there will be questions that make them feel uncomfortable, we will provide you with a list of support locations in your local community if you would like additional support for on discussions about feelings with your child at the first session.

4. If you agree for your child to take part in the study, we will ask you to answer a few

questions about your child's ability to communicate in English and the name and postal code of the neighbourhood where you live in order to guarantee that your child meets the criteria for this study. If you agree to let us do this, please complete these questions at the end of this consent.

5. Your child's participation is voluntary and will not affect any services he/she may receive from the [Targeted Neighbourhood] community. He/ she will be free to stop at any point, or not to take part at all without any consequences, even after you sign the consent form or they sign their assent form.

6. You will receive a brief summary about the results of this study. We will let you know if there are any major concerns and who you can contact to get additional support if you desire. We are not aware of any risks if your child takes part in our study.

7. The information you give us is confidential. No individual information will be reported and no parent or child will be identified by name in any reports about the study. The information collected will be stored in a locked filing cabinet. The only people who will have access to the information you give us are the researchers working on this project.

8. Because all of our activities with the children will be done in small groups we cannot promise that the children will not share things discussed in the group outside of the group. However, we will talk with the students about the importance of not sharing outside of our group discussions since this is a special research project. The topics we will discuss are not extremely sensitive.

9. As a thank-you for your child's time and any transportation expense, each child who participates in each session will receive school supplies as a thank-you gift, and a $10 gift certificate for a local bookstore (e.g., Chapters) at the last session.

10. If you do decide that your child take part in this study, and if you have any concerns about your child's rights or treatment taking part in our research, you may contact the Research Subject Information Line in the UBC Office of Research Services at the University of British Columbia, at XXXXXXX.

If you have any questions or concerns regarding this project you may contact any of the researchers at numbers above or by email at: XXXXXX.

SPACES Project
Children's Perspectives of Safety in their Neighbourhood
Parent Consent Form

I. Consent for my Child to Participate in this Research Project

Please check one of the following:

_____Yes, I agree that my child may take part in this project.

_____ No, I do not wish for my child to take part in this project.

Parent's/Guardian's signature (please sign):

_____

Parent's/Guardian's name (please print your name):

_____

Date:

_____

Child's Name:

_____

Child's Birth Date:

_____

Child's ability to express his or herself in English:

_____

Your Postal Code:

_____

Your Phone Number (in case we have any additional
questions or need to contact you while we are conducting
the study)

_____

General Family Questions

1) Who lives in your home (e.g., mother, child)?

2) Does your child have any siblings? _____ Yes _____ No

   4a) If yes, how many?

   4b) If yes, what are their ages? (Please indicate any siblings who do not live at home)

   _____

   _____

5) What is the primary language you speak at home? _____

   5a) Are there any other languages spoken in the home? _____Yes _____ No

   5b) If yes, please specify:

_____

   a) *Child Experiences*

1) What is the name of your child's school? _____

2) Does your child participate in any activity outside your home (e.g., sports, swimming

    lessons, programs offered by the community center)?

    _____

    _____

   b) *Neighbourhood Questions*

1) Have you always lived in this home? _____Yes _____ No

   1a) If no, how long have you lived in this home? _____

   1b) If no, how long did you live in your previous home_____

   1c) Was your previous home located in your current neighbourhood? ____ Yes ____ No

2) Do you take walks in your neighbourhood with your child? _____ Yes _____ No

2a) If yes, where do you walk? (e.g., around the neighbourhood, to the store, to the park, school, library, neighbourhood garden, etc.)

_____

3) Do you trust on adults in this neighbourhood to watch out that children are safe and don't get into trouble? _____ Yes _____ No

4) Do neighbours look out for children in your neighbourhood?

Most of the time_____ Sometimes_____ Never_____

5) Do you believe you live in a safe neighbourhood for children? _____ Yes _____ No

5a) If no, please explain (e.g., crime, gangs, garbage)

_____

_____

Appendix F: Child Assent Form

T H E U N I V E R S I T Y O F B R I T I S H C O L U M B I A

Department of Educational & Counselling
Psychology, & Special Education

SPACES Project
Children's Perspectives of Safety in their Neighbourhood
CHILD ASSENT FORM

Principal Investigator: Laurie Ford, PhD,

Student Co-Investigator: Juliana Negreiros,

Project Office:

NOTE: THIS WILL BE REVIEWED VERBALLY WITH ALL CHILD PARTICIPANTS

If needed, additional clarification will be provided. We will also have a group discussion at the first session about what it means to be part of a research project.

The Project:

- I understand that Juliana Negreiros is doing a project for school about children's views of safety.

- She will ask me questions about places or things that I like and dislike about the [Targeted Neighbourhood] community, and also what things make me feel safe or unsafe in my neighbourhood.

- She may ask me to draw things such as a map of [Targeted Neighbourhood] or a self-portrait.

- There are lots of things that people who work with children, like teachers, psychologists, and others, would like to know about how children see safety where they live and how this affects their lives.

- By talking to Juliana, I might be able to help other children because this project will be reported to people like community staff, teachers, psychologists, and other people working with children.

What will happen in the project?

- My mom/dad has said that it is OK for me to take part of Juliana's project.

- If I agree to take part, Juliana and the other people working with her will talk to me and other children of similar ages three to four times over the next months for about 1-1.5 hour. We will also do some drawings by ourselves and in groups.

- It will be up to me and other children in the group how long we will talk each time. I do not have to talk if I do not want to. I do not have to do any drawings if I do not want to.

- Juliana will ask me about places and things that I think are safe in my neighbourhood.

- Our talks will be about my views of safety in [Targeted Neighbourhood] and will be audio and video-recorded each time so that Juliana can remember exactly what I said. The only people who will be able to listen to the audio and see the video are members of our research team.

- I know that I can ask Juliana any questions I like during our talks. I also know that I can play or draw if I like. If I decide at any time during our talks that I don't want to answer questions or I want to stop talking that is OK.

- If I decide I don't want to help with Juliana's project anymore that's OK too. I just need to tell Juliana that because it is important that I want to participate in the activities each time we meet.

- Juliana will talk with us about the importance of keeping the things we talk about in our group just between the people in the group. We will try to keep things in our group discussions just with the group. I understand that Juliana cannot promise that people will not talk out things outside the group, but we will all try our best.

My name will not be used:
- I know that I will pick a secret name so that anyone reading Juliana's project will not know that I spoke to Juliana.

- I also know that Juliana will be talking to other kids and that when she talks about her project no one will know which kid she is talking about.

- Juliana will put code numbering on the recording, and the people working on the project at UBC are the only people who will know the codes.

- The recordings and computer printouts will be kept in a locked filing cabinet at Juliana's school at UBC.

- I know that the only people who can hear the recordings, view the video or read the computer print out of my conversations with Juliana will be three teachers who are working with Juliana on her project and the other members of Juliana's team at UBC.

Who to call:
- If I have any questions about Juliana's project, I can call Juliana Negreiros at XXXXXX or her University teacher, Dr. Laurie Ford at XXXXXX. If I have any questions about Juliana's project, I can also talk to my parent s and ask them to call Juliana or her University teacher.

- If my parents have questions, they can call Juliana or her University teacher too.

Child Assent

I understand that I am taking part in Juliana's project because I want to.

I know that I can change my mind about being part of her project at any time without getting into trouble. I can stop at any time.

My printed or written name shows that I agree with my mom/dad's decision to allow me to be a part of Juliana's project.

_____
Signature of child-participant   Date

_____
Print Name