# Queer Play, Failure, and Becoming:
# Investigating Queer Young Adults' Memories of Play and Exploring Gender and Sexuality in Child and Youthhood

by

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We acknowledge and respect the lək̓ʷəŋən peoples on whose traditional territory the university stands and the Songhees, Esquimalt and W̱SÁNEĆ peoples whose historical relationships with the land continue to this day.

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## Abstract

This study investigated (1) how and where queer young adults remembered playing and exploring gender and sexuality in their child and youthhoods, and (2) how those memories influenced their identities as queer young adults. Eight young adults from Southern Vancouver Island were recruited to the study using non-probability and purposive sampling. Each participant took part in a narrative interview and was asked to recreate in a sand tray one or more places where they remembered exploring gender and/or sexuality in their childhood or youthhood. Data were analyzed using thematic analysis through a queer phenomenological lens inspired by Sara Ahmed. It was determined that "queer failure," as described by Jack Halberstam, was a critical, formative process that contributed to the reorienting of queer children and youth towards queer futures. The way that queer failure was responded to by significant adults appeared to have enduring impacts on participants' self-esteem and self-regard, with having a supportive caregiver being associated with positive self-regard as a queer adult, and a lack of support associated with long-term poor mental health and lower likelihood of experiencing pride in being queer. Additionally, participants demonstrated how access to the outdoors provided a meaningful locus of self-discovery wherein the limitations and structures of gender were less omnipresent and they felt more external and internal acceptance of their queer identities.

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## Acknowledgements

I owe many thanks:
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## Dedication

For Freyja Makwa

# Chapter 1: Introduction

This study provides a nuanced picture of queer childhood play and identity development, and offers insight into how we can best support the play and exploration of queer children and youth in ways that promote dignity and an enduring sense of positive self-regard and mental wellness. There is a dearth of research on the ways queer children and youth play, and most of the existing research was conducted with the intention of identifying queer children for the purposes of reorienting them into becoming straight and cisgender adults (Sedgwick, 2004). In addition to being deeply prejudiced, these efforts to prevent or eliminate queerness have been proven to be harmful and ineffective (Abate, 2014). I come to this research as a white, cisgender, queer woman who was harmed as a youth by care practices that upheld heteropatriarchal assumptions and expectations of "appropriate" (e.g. hetero- and cisnormative) behaviour and gender expression. I am also as a child and youth professional who has witnessed the continued reproduction of these beliefs and behaviours in families, communities, and institutions, and the harms they do to the young people I have worked with. Because of this, I am interested in the ways adults disciplined or supported queer children and youth and the long-term consequences of those responses.

While this research asks how the queer participants played, the aim is not to find ways of identifying queer children or youth through their play. Rather, I am interested in how queer young adults derive meaning and a sense of identity based on their *memories* of play and exploring gender and sexuality in their child and youthhoods. This research further explores how queer play and exploration was responded to by caregivers, how those responses impacted participants as children and youth, and how they continue to impact them as young adults.

**Organization of Thesis**

The literature review covers the foundational texts that informed the formation of this research. In it I outline and explore the ethical issues in the existing literature on queer childhood. I also discuss Halberstam's (2011) *Queer Art of Failure*, review literature on childhood play more broadly, and discuss how privacy and secrecy develop in childhood. Finally, I discuss the literature on the fallible and political nature of memory as it pertains to qualitative, social justice oriented research.

The methodology chapter provides a thorough overview of my theoretical framework, study design, approach to data analysis, and the study's limitations. First, I introduce Ahmed's (2006) *Queer Phenomenology* as the theoretical framework for this research and discuss how it makes space for the study's purposeful failure at being strictly phenomenological. Following that I describe how I recruited participants and then provide participant demographics and a brief biography of each participant. I then describe the use of narrative interviews and the sand trays in which participants were asked to recreate a place where they explored gender or sexuality as a child or youth. Finally, I describe the data analysis process which was based on Clarke and Braun's (2018) thematic analysis and discuss the validity and limitations of the results.

The results chapter is divided into three sections to reflect the three key themes of the research. The first section is about queer failure and includes subsections on participants' relationships with queer failure (such as pride or shame), and the ways participants disrupted gender expectations through play, clothing, and hair. The second section is about adult relationships and their influence on participants' self-regard as queer adults. There was a association between participants who had at least one significant adult in their life who was supportive of them being queer or playing queerly and the participant describing generally good

mental health and positive self-regard about their queer identity. Inversely, all three participants who lacked an affirming adult also struggled with mental illness, and two expressed either not wanting to be queer or ambivalence about being queer. The third section is about the impacts of indoor and outdoor spaces. Indoor spaces featured less prominently, although bathrooms and mirrors were described as locations of self-discovery. On the other hand, the outdoors was reported by every participant as an important space where they explored gender and sexuality, with several reporting that it was the only place they felt free of the oppressive expectations of gender.

The final chapter provides specific recommendations based on the research and substantiating literature for how we can better support queer children and youth. The recommendations are organized across three key contexts: home, sports, and schools. The recommendations centre around making space for queer failure in ways that support queer identity development, ensuring queer children and youth have access to supportive adults, making sports and schools inclusive for people of all genders and gender expression, and allowing young people access to the outdoors.

# Chapter 2: Literature Review

When I began to explore the question of how queer people played and explored gender and sexuality when they were children and youth, I was met with a fairly small body of research, much of which focused on predicting or preventing queerness in children. I, however, was interested in queer identity formation through memories of play and I did not find this explored at all in the existing literature. My jumping off point when exploring queerness and queer childhood was Halberstam's (2011) book *The Queer Art of Failure*. This was followed by exploring childhood play more broadly, and an inquiry into secrecy and the surveillance of children and youth. Finally, I honed in on my approach to the research question and methods by exploring the possibilities and limitations of memory.

## Queer Childhood Play

While I was able to find one article that discusses the ways gay and lesbian adults' identities can be influenced by memories of childhood generally (Cover, 2011), I was only able to find a small body of contemporary research about the way queer children play(ed). Though their conclusions varied the studies I found largely explored the possibility that transgression of stereotypically gendered play or behaviours in children may be predictive of adult queerness (Friedman & Downey, 2014; Lippa, 2008; Peplau & Huppin, 2008; VanderLaan et al., 2011). This interest among researchers in non-stereotypical gendered behaviour as possible indicators of queerness points to the ongoing influence of early twentieth century western psychoanalysts, such as Freud, who believed that homosexuality and gender transgression in childhood are linked (Burke, 2013; Friedman & Downey, 2014). Other researchers demonstrated an interest in finding a positive correlation between androgen exposure in utero and the likelihood that children would

engage in “gender-atypical” play (Knickmeyer et al., 2005), or in aggressive or rough and tumble play (Burton, 2009). This is notable because, though not all of these studies explicitly indicate an interest in determining the sexual orientation of participants, it otherwise mirrors sentiments expressed in historical “sissy boy” research (Green R. , 1987; Whitam, 1977) which problematically identify femininity and an aversion to violence as causal indicators of later homosexuality in men (Burke, 2013; Sedgwick, 2004).

Sedgwick (2004) notes that the writing of Green’s sissy boy research (though Green disavows this interpretation) is predicated on a “desire for a nongay outcome” (145). Damningly, Green is quoted in a transcript in his own book as telling a boy he subjected to reparative therapy (therapy intended to straighten or “reorient” queer children) (Ahmed, 2006) that the reason the boy’s parents brought him for the treatment was not to prevent him from being a homosexual but because he was purportedly “unhappy” (as cited in Sedgwick, 2004, p. 145). However, Green’s own reflection on the same page states that the boy’s parents were “worried that the cross-gender behaviours portended problems with later sexuality” (as cited in Sedgwick, 2014, p.145). The contemporary research about childhood play that I have reviewed demonstrates that heteronormative legacies that conflate the transgression of stereotypically gendered play in childhood with adult queerness, continues to permeate research. The continued research on cross-gender play as predictors of adult queerness suggest a worrying continuation of Green’s efforts to extinguish queerness. Furthermore, this kind of research is predicated on an essentialist idea that there is a right and a wrong way for children of different genders to play, and suggests a possibility that children’s bodies can be disciplined into “proper” kinds of gendered play.

I suspect that underpinning the ongoing trend of searching for queerness in children is the question of whether queerness is biological or social in origin. This question troubles me because

I see no purpose in it other than as an attempt to find a cure for queerness. In the wake of mounting evidence that reparative therapy[1] is harmful and ineffective in preventing adult queerness (Abate, 2014), guarding against research that supports the contemporary search for a biological or genetic cause (and its potential for yielding a "cure") for queerness has become all the more urgent (Hamer & Copeland, 1994). In this study I was careful to avoid inadvertently replicating this kind of research. Rather than focusing on whether the way my participants played was different than their heterosexual peers, I have concentrated on how their *memories* of childhood play have contributed to how they make sense of their identities as young adults.

### *The Queer Art of Failure*

As we have seen in the literature about "cross-gender" play, adults appear to be preoccupied with policing the purportedly gendered play of children. These concerns are not unique to adults, and research has demonstrated that, before the age of two, many children are able to "gender label" people as male or female, and that the age at which the gender labeling begins coincides with an increase in normatively gendered play (Zosuls, 2009). Akin to Ahmed's (2006) discussion of "straightening" which will be discussed at greater length in the methodology section, Halberstam (2011) argues that to be queer is to fail at the "common sense" (p. 89) of hetero- and cisnormativity. Among other things, this failure could look like the refusal to participate in the normatively gendered play that appears to coincide with the ability to gender label (Zosuls, 2009).

Duggan (2002) argues that certain kinds of queer people have been invited into the fold of normative life. These queers (who are, it seems, not so queer after all) are generally cisgender,

[1] "Reparative therapy" is a euphemism that describes the practice of trying to rid a person of queer desire through means such as psychoanalysis and talk therapy, faith-based shaming and "reorientation" therapy, forced heterosexual sex, and aversion conditioning using electric shocks (Haldeman, 1991).

gay people who are upper or upper middle class, white, and perform particular kinds of (re)productive citizenship (e.g. marriage, having children, buying a home, remaining gainfully employed). Duggan coined the term "homonormativity" to describe this palatable kind of un-queerness. Homonormativity is a way for certain kinds of queers to edge into successful citizenship (winning the bronze medal, one could say), but Halberstam (2011) asks us what complexities, arts, and unique beauty is lost when this partial success is attained. Additionally, as Halberstam points out, in order for someone to win, someone else must fail. If the queer subject is allowed to win (and thus, in a way, fails at queerness), who must be sacrificed? If the queer child is invited into the fold of acceptability, then who is left behind as the other? While this research does not ultimately explore this aspect of queer failure, it does ask how participants succeeded at, and found joy in, queer failure.

While the rhetoric of winners and losers flattens some nuance, what Halberstam (2011) is telling us when it comes to queer children, is that we should not be striving to prevent failure. Indeed, through failure we queers can discover the productive and "disruptive potential of shadow worlds" (Halberstam, 2011, p. 102) from which community and art can flourish. The question for caregivers then becomes: is there a way to accept that the queer child (or the child who behaves queerly) is destined to fail, while also reducing the potential for physical and emotional violence that such failure may produce? How can be we make space for the child who fails? How can we allow children to fail more safely?

***Childhood Play***

An area of interest is the possibility that childhood play itself is queer. Bruhm and Hurley (2004) argue that when it comes to studying children, what seems to appear with the most consistency is children's marked resistance to fitting into academic understandings of childhood

or developmental metrics. Furthermore, they routinely demonstrate "curiosity about bodies and pleasure… [and a] desire to make stories that are not colonizing narratives of heteronormativity" (p. xx). While I did not seek to conduct a study that differentiates queer children from non-queer children, nor am I interested in creating a hierarchy of queerness in play, I remained curious about how the participants thought of their queerness retrospectively and how that influenced their sense of self and identity.

Pretend play in early childhood is especially interesting, with young children able to conjure vibrant, imaginary worlds. The purpose of children's capacity to so readily immerse themselves in pretend and "playfully misrepresent the world" (Sutherland & Friedman, 2013, p. 1660) has been touted as having vital developmental purposes. Suggested purposes have included fostering emotional and social skills and, as research by Sutherland and Friedman (2013) suggests, gaining generic knowledge about the world that allows children to attribute characteristics to categories of objects (e.g. "cats chase mice," rather than "the tabby cat next door chased my pet mouse"). However, in a meta-analysis of research on the developmental importance of pretend play, Lillard, Lerner et al. (2013) conclude that there is not strong evidence that pretend play itself is integral to child development. They further point out that many "non-Anglo" cultures do not place the same importance on the role of pretend play in childhood, and the amount of pretend play reported by mothers is proportionately smaller in regions where pretend play is less valued.

Regardless of whether the biological function of pretend play is vitally important to development or merely a by-product of more basic but essential kinds of mammalian skills-based play (Lillard, Hopkins, et al., 2013), I believe the ways we remember our chilhoods and the meanings we attribute to those memories are worthy of exploration and may provide insight into

queer identity formation. In research conducted by Perry et al. (2004) about the narratives that children produce during play and what those narratives can tell us about their family functioning, the authors conclude that play offers unique access to children's internal meaning systems. In this research, I build off this assertion to argue that *recalling* childhood play also offers participants an avenue along which they can explore their understanding of self and their place in the world.

***The Hidden Worlds of Children***

Rather that attempting to reorient queer children on a path towards the sunshiny promised land of what Butler (1999) calls the "heterosexual matrix", what would it mean to allow queer children to play in the shadows? It is well known that children and youth keep secrets, though the reasons for keeping secrets are diverse and change with age (Last & Aharioni-Etzioni, 1995). While normal, secret keeping is not without import: on the one hand, keeping secrets from parents has been shown to be developmentally advantageous for adolescents (Finkenauer et al., 2002), but in middle childhood, it has been correlated with reduced parental communication overall and being viewed by teachers as less socially competent and more aggressive (Bumpus, 2008). However, it should be noted that this secrecy could be a symptom of other factors that may be impacting a child's perceived social competence and levels of aggression.

Sexuality and sexual expression are common areas of secrecy but there are obvious limitations to the usefulness or appropriateness of maintaining secrets regarding sex, including the risk of sexual abuse going unreported (Ryan G. , 2000). Related to this conversation about childhood secrecy is a discussion of caregiver (over)involvement and its impacts on children. "Overparenting" has come under scrutiny in recent years and is modestly associated with increased anxiety in children (McLeod et al., 2007; Murray et al., 2009) and later "ineffective"

coping skills (Sergin et al., 2013). In this study I was curious about how the participants perceived the level of caregiver scrutiny they experienced and how/if they feel that influenced the way they played.

I suspected that over the course of the research I would hear stories not only of how participants were surveilled and disciplined to ensure gendered expectations of play were maintained, but also that participants would report having self-surveilled. Self-surveillance and self-policing have been described by Davies (2020) in regards to femme, gay adolescents: he notes that the "glorification of hegemonic masculinities in gay communities" (p. 112) has resulted in gay adolescents and young men "defeminizing" themselves in order to fit in and be considered desirable. Foucault (1979) theorizes how this kind of self-reinforcing power operates through his discussion of the Panopticon. The Panopticon is a type of circular penitentiary building designed by Jeremy Bentham which is laid out so that all inmates can be observed by a single overseer without the inmates being able to see if the overseer is watching over them at any given time. Foucault writes that the function of the Panopticon is "to induce in the inmate a state of conscious and permanent visibility that assures the automatic functioning of power… the inmates should be caught up in a power situation of which they are themselves the bearers" (p. 201). Foucault posits that, like the prisoners in the panopticon, citizens have been disciplined so effectively by each other that they will self-surveil and maintain normative behaviours even in the absence of an onlooker. Gendered play is an example of a social expectation that is heavily regulated, disciplined, and surveilled by parents, teachers, doctors, and other children, and I was curious whether self-surveillance would be reported by participants.

**The Limitations and Possibilities of Memory**

To ask an adult to describe experiences from their childhood requires not only the recollection itself, but also the synthesizing of bodily sensations that compose that memory followed by a "leap to words" (Culbertson, 1995, p. 169) that is required to narrate the experience. Culbertson (1995) points out that this can be especially difficult when the person is recalling a traumatic experience, because many people will avoid "reliving the victimization countless times" (p. 169) by attempting to suppress the memory. This attempt to suppress is not an entirely internally motivated affair, but also a cultural one that has even extended as far as the prescribing of the beta-blocker, propranolol. Propranolol has the ability to dampen the vividness of traumatic memories or experiences of sexualized violence, offering survivors what is at once a potentially humane therapeutic response to a painful experience, and also a deeply troubling pharmacological muting of memories that could otherwise be drawn upon to mobilize social healing or justice (Cadwallader, 2016).

While memory is obviously of paramount importance in this research, when drawing on memory it is important to considering the implications of situations where memory is absent. A compelling example of how the absence of memory impacts meaning making is provided by the history of socopolamine-morphine anaesthesia's use (commonly known as "twilight sleep") during childbirth throughout the early and mid 1900s. Epstein (2010), who has described the curious birth of twilight sleep drugs in the United States, explains that the drug was not made immediately available in the US but, understanding it as a way for pregnant people to have painless births, American women took on its adoption as a feminist issue. Feminist activists rallied and performed speaking circuits, placing pressure on the medical community to approve the drug. Doctors opposing its use came forward to inform the public that socopolamine-

morphine did not actually make childbirth painless; rather, it caused the birthing person to forget that the pain had occurred. Restraints were even used to prevent people in twilight sleep from hurting themselves or others during the painful and disorienting experience of giving birth without control of their bodies. Despite the revelation that twilight sleep did not actually make childbirth painless, leading activists in the pursuit of twilight sleep argued that, if they did not remember the pain then, for all intents and purposes, the pain did not happen. What Epstein (2010) is demonstrating is that there is historical precedent for a subjugated population asserting that the act of forgetting is meaningful and helpful, which we see mirrored in Cadwallader's (2016) discussion of propranolol being used to dampen memories of sexualized trauma.

**Conclusion**

I designed this study in part because of a gap in the literature regarding queer childhood play, and particularly because the nature of much of the existing literature was harmful. When preparing to conduct the research I drew heavily on Halberstam's (2011) *Queer Art of Failure* as a starting point from which to consider childhood play, secret keeping and the surveillance of children and youth. Of key importance to the construction of the study and to data analysis was a nuanced approach to memory, the theoretical foundation of which was conducted in the literature review.

# Chapter 3: Methodology

For this research I recruited eight participants with whom I conducted narrative and arts-based interviews using sand trays. The interviews were constructed to draw out memories of play in child and youthhood and the resulting recorded narratives and completed sand trays were the sites of analysis. There were two overarching research questions that I kept at the fore when conducting the data analysis: (1) how and where queer young adults remembered playing and exploring gender and sexuality in their child and youthhoods, and (2) how those memories influenced their adult identities as queer young adults.

This chapter provides a discussion of my theoretical framework; a description of the data collection process, including recruitment, sampling, participant demographics, and participant biographies; descriptions of my methods of inquiry, which were narrative interview and sand trays; provides a description of the thematic analysis I conducted as the data analysis; and discuss the study's trustworthiness and limitations.

## Theoretical Framework

My theoretical framework was based on Ahmed's (2006) theory of Queer Phenomenology. Phenomenology is the study of essence, both in a style reminiscent of Aristotle's "pure forms" (Ryan E. E., 1973), but also in a way that re-enlivens essence (Merleau-Ponty, 1996). As a philosophy, phenomenology posits that the world exists before we begin to reflect upon it, as opposed to the Elizabeth St. Pierre's (as cited in Glesne, 2011) argument that "words do not simply point towards pre-existing things and ideas but rather help to construct them" (2011, p. 13). Rasmussen (2015) argues that phenomenology pays close attention to the background and to the past, and that it allows us to "explore how bodies are shaped by histories

which they perform in their comportment, their posture and their gestures" (Ahmed, 2006, as cited in Rasmussen, 2015). This is one way in which phenomenology is particularly fitting for this research, as I was asking participants to draw on memory. Phenomenology is largely attributed to Husserl and Heidegger, but it is not a static philosophy or methodology, and it has been picked up and reinterpreted by Hegel, Kierkegaard, Marx, Mietzse, Freud, and as I will be most significantly drawing on, Ahmed (Ahmed, 2006; Merleau-Ponty, 1996).

In a way that is poetically in line with Halberstam's (2011) *Queer Art of Failure* (another work that I drew on heavily in my analysis of the research), queer phenomenology fails at being strictly phenomenological. Rather than taking this as a fault, Ahmed (2006) posits that "queer phenomenology might rather enjoy this failure to be proper" (p. 2). To justify choosing phenomenology as her framing methodology, she explains that it is because phenomenology is deeply concerned with "orientations" in that it is always oriented to gaze upon an embodied subject who is, in turn, oriented towards particular objects and experiences. The reason queer phenomenology may enjoy its failure at being "properly" phenomenological lies in one of its key premises: that queer subjects necessarily fail at the project of orienting themselves "properly." Ahmed's (2006) writing on queer phenomenology describes the impact of orientations, both in how we orient ourselves in space, and in terms of sexual orientation. She describes heterosexuality not as a "natural" state, but as an orientation, and that "to become straight means that we not only have to turn towards the objects that are given to us by a heterosexual culture, but also that we must 'turn away' from objects" (p. 21) that would lead us astray. Ahmed's theorizing of heterosexual culture operating in ways that attempt to orient bodies in particular ways is bolstered by how it mirrors language that is used in the world of reparative therapy. Most notably, Colin Clark, a pastor and prominent proponent of reparative therapy, who developed

what he called “reorientation counseling” in conjunction with the Seventh Day Adventist Church (Haldeman, 1991).

Ahmed (2006) argues that a body’s orientation directs us along certain lines or life courses and that for “a life to count as a good life…it must take on the direction promised as a social good” (p. 21) wherein certain normative behaviours, such as sublimation into the heterosexual matrix, are enacted. A queer life, however, fails to orient itself along these lines (Ahmed, 2006; Halberstam, 2011). Following from Ahmed’s understanding of phenomenology, I assert that as queer adults who grew up and played in a heteronormative and cisnormative world, our failures (and that is not to say we ever could have succeeded) to orient ourselves “properly” has come to bear on the ways we understand our selves, pasts, and futures. Queer phenomenology allows for a nuanced examination of the participants’ memories of childhood and their understanding of the adults they have become.

## Data Collection

For this study I recruited eight participants between the ages of 19-35 who self-identified as a gender or sexual minorities and were willing to discuss their childhood and youthhoods with attention to play and sexual exploration. Participants were asked to participate in an initial 1-2 hour interview; consent to having their sand trays and narratives shared (though they would remain anonymous); and be open to being contacted regarding the project as it developed. Prior to commencing data collection, the study was reviewed and approved by the University of Victoria’s Human Research Ethics Board.

### *Recruitment and Sampling*

I recruited participants through non-probability sampling by posting recruitment posters on my personal social media pages (Lune & Berg, 2017), as well as purposive sampling by

contacting queer-oriented community organizations in the target locations and asking them to share the recruitment materials on their websites, in their offices, and through their e-mail lists (Lune & Berg, 2017). The target locations were initially set to be both Vancouver and Vancouver Island; however, I was able to garner enough diverse interest in Victoria alone that I was able to conduct all the interviews in Victoria, where I am located.

***Participant Demographics***

In my selection process I sought to represent a diversity of gender and sexual identities, ages, socioeconomic, and ethnic backgrounds. I conducted a pre-interview questionnaire in the recruitment process, during which I requested demographic information form participants. The age range of participants interviewed was 21-34. The gender identity demographics are not tidy, with all but one participant using multiple descriptors to describe their gender identities. The majority of participants described their gender identities as outside of the binary (descriptors included nonbinary, gendequeer, gender fluid, and pangender), two identified as having a transmasculine gender expressions alongside a gender identity outside the binary, one participant identified as transfeminine and nonbinary, one participant identified as a cis woman, and one participant was a trans woman who also identified with gender fluidity. Sexual orientations of participants were similarly multifaceted, the majority using multiple identifiers: these included four who identified in part or in full as queer, two in part or in full as demisexual, one was unspecified, two used lesbian as one of their sexual identities, one used pansexual and poly in addition to queer, and on used dyke in addition to lesbian. When asked to describe their ethnicity, five participants identified as white or European, one as Jewish, and two as biracial (South Asian/European, and Southeast Asian/European). Six participants were raised in North America, one in Southeast Asia and North America, and one in Western and Southeastern

Europe. Half had religious and half had non-religious upbringings. Five participants described being raised simultaneously by a mother and father, one by parents and grandparents at different intervals, one by her father as well as multiple families in her community, and one by a combination of their mother, adoptive father, independently, and in shelters.

***Participant Biographies***

I have provided some basic demographic information about each participant below, as identified at the time of the interview.

*Alex* was 30 years old and used they/them pronouns. They described their gender as nonbinary and trans-masculine and their sexual orientation as queer, kinky, and polyamorous. Alex is an only child and spent their first years of life with their parents in Eastern Europe, then from two to six they were raised by their grandparents as an asylum seeker in Western Europe. They went to live with their parents once their parents were granted asylum when Alex was seven years old. Alex initially came out as a lesbian when they were only seven years old and their mother was not supportive at all, but their father was affirming and open then and continues to be as their gender and sexual orientation have evolved.

*Basil* was 34 and used they/them pronouns. They identified their gender as nonbinary and genderqueer and their sexual orientation as demisexual. They defined demisexuality as a sexual orientation where deep emotional connection is a necessary precursor to sexual attraction and more important than the gender of their other person. Basil described themselves as a white Canadian who grew up in a large Canadian city. They grew up in poverty, were raised primarily by their mother and for a couple years with an adoptive father in their early teens. In their mid-teens they lived again with their mother, step father, and half-brother. They were kicked out of their home when they were 16 years old and lived in shelters, with friends, and independently.

Basil was assigned female at birth and their family was wholly unsupportive when they first came out as being attracted to women and continued to be then they came out as trans.

*Denver* was 31 and used both he/him and they/them pronouns. He described his gender identity as transmasculine and nonbinary and both his gender and sexual orientation as queer. Denver identified his ethnicity as Wester European and was raised in rural Canada. He was raised in a middle class family by his mother and father and has an older sister. His family has been very supportive of his sexual orientation and gender identity. He first came out as a lesbian in his late teens and as trans in his early 20s. Denver was the only participant with a child.

*Galen* was 25 years old and used she/her pronouns. She described her sexual orientation as driven by people more that genitals and used multiple words to identify it, including: queer, bisexual, and pansexual. She described her gender identity as a transgender woman, and gender fluid. She identified as biracial (South Asian and European) and was raised in rural Canada in a middle class family composed of her mother and father and one sister. Her coming out process to her family was fairly well received and has overall produced more closeness and candidness from her father.

*Helena* was 28 years old and used she/her or they/them pronouns. She described her gender and sexual orientation as queer and exclusively attracted to women, particularly androgynous ones. Helena was raised in and continues to live in poverty. She is white and grew up in a midsized city in the United States where she was raised primarily by her father, though she spent more than half the time living with friends. Their mother was largely absent because she struggled with addiction. Helena was homeschooled until grade nine. They had two siblings but did not live with them for most of their childhood. She was not out to her father until adulthood but her father is quietly supportive of her sexual orientation, though she did not feel she had

support from any adults growing up as a queer or gender defiant child. They were assigned female at birth and have not told any family about sometimes using they/them pronouns.

*Izz* was 27 years old and used they/them pronouns. They described their gender identity as nonbinary and transfeminine and their sexual orientation as pansexual. Izz is biracial (Southeast Asian and European) and was raised in urban centres in both Canada and Southeast Asia. They were raised by their parents and have four older siblings. Despite their parents' religious backgrounds, they were quite affirming when Izz initially came out as a trans woman and have continued to be supportive as their understanding of their gender identity has evolved.

*Kae* was 25 years old and used she/her pronouns. She described herself as a cisgender but elaborated, saying she was "non-stereotypical in [her] femaleness" and has embraces "gender chill" to describe her fluidity and non-normative expression of gender. She identified as demisexual, which she defined as requiring a deep emotional connection before she experiences sexual desire, and as bisexual which she defined as being attracted to her own gender and all others. Kae described herself as first generation European and Jewish on her father's side and Canadian on her mother's side. She and one sibling were raised by both of her parents in an upper middle class family in a midsized Canadian city. She has ongoing mental health struggles and her relationship with her mother is tense following her coming out when she was 20 years old. Her father died when she was 20 and she is still grieving his loss.

*Morgan* was 21years old and used she/her pronouns. She described herself as a gender-fluid woman who mostly identified herself as cisgender in everyday live out of convenience though she felt gender-fluid better described her experience of gender. She described her sexual orientation as a lesbian or dyke but was clear that, for her, those identities are not predicated on being a woman. Morgan identified as white and was raised in Canada in a combination of rural

and urban settings. She was an only child, raised primarily by her mother in her early years and by both of her parents when they reunited in her later childhood. When she came out initially as a teenager her mother was tentative in her support but has since become fully supportive.

## Methods of Inquiry

I employed two primary methods of inquiry: narrative interviews and sand trays. The first half of the interview was narrative based and we transitioned into the sand tray component in the second half.

### *Narrative Interview*

The interviews were semi structured, using some guiding questions. The questions are listed in Appendix A. Not all of the questions were used in every interview, but they were used as generative starting points. The narrative interview served as a key component of setting up the context in which the sand-tray portion of the interview was conducted (Leavy, 2009). I used a semi-structured format to make space for the discernment of the symbolic associations the participants have towards their childhood play and towards the act of remembering that play (Lune & Berg, 2017). As a researcher, I am also interested in more than the participants' individual meaning systems. I come from an epistemological standpoint that rejects the possibility that a person could have an insular meaning system at all. As such, I went into this research curious about the meaning making that the participants and I would be constructing together (Coleman, 2008; Madigan, 2011; Mucina, 2011), and the journey of learning and change that takes place in a narrative encounter (Pinnegar & Daynes, 2012).

### *Sand Trays as Playful Inquiry*

I invited participants to recreate locations where they remembered exploring gender or sexuality as children or youth in a sand tray as an elicitation tool through which memories of

childhood play could be recalled. I used sand trays as a way of helping to provoke memory and story, and as a way of facilitating the "leap to words" (Culbertson, 1995, p. 169) that can be challenging in the act of recollection. Bigelow and Poremba (2014) suggested that visual and tactile memories are processed differently than auditory memories, that we have an easier time recalling tactile and visual experiences, and that those memories decay more slowly than auditory memories. As such, I felt that a playful, visual and tactile tool like the sand tray would provide a fruitful method for deepening and expanding the exploration of participants' memories of childhood. Another way that the use of sand trays as a research method is especially germane to this research because of its noted ability to illicit childhood memories (Labovitz Boik & Goodwin, 2000). Labivitz Boik and Goodwin (2000) posit that this is because children often played in sand and dirt. While they do not unpack this connection, I believe it is reasonable to assert that being given the unique opportunity to interact with a medium often relegated to childhood (sand) may awaken and facilitate the communication of memories that can be difficult to conjure and express through language alone (Culbertson, 1995).

Materials I brought to the interviews included: a two foot by three foot sand tray, various sizes of cardboard rectangles, paper, small stones, basic figures made from clothespins, models of trees, patterned paper, plasticine, markers, pencil crayons, pencils, pens, pastels, and scissors. I had initially intended to only use more traditional art materials for the arts based activity, but I worried that perfectionism or a sense of "not being artistic" might interfere with the production of imagery for some participants. Instead, I chose to use of the sand tray as the primary medium within which other more traditional art forms could be integrated (e.g. clay figures or drawings of objects) if the participant desired. Unlike more traditional approaches like painting or drawing, I believed that a sand tray would be less anxiety producing and unlikely to provoke

participants to feel that they must produce an aesthetically pleasing or accurate work. By offering an alternative medium that likely did not appear in their childhood art education, I hope that participants felt more able to be immersed and spontaneous in their engagement with the materials. An additional benefit that I anticipated with the use of a sand tray is the medium's inherent instability. I felt that the slippery and untameable nature both of memory and of the sand itself could be productive. By using a medium that resists fixity, my hope was that participants would be able to revisit memory in a way that was as dynamic and mutable as the sand itself.

The therapeutic practice of "Worldplay" was developed by British pediatrician Margaret Lowenfeld in 1929 (Labovitz Boik & Goodwin, 2000). In Worldplay, Lowenfeld would provide children with a sand tray and small items that could be placed in it such as pieces of wood, plasticine, paper, and small figures and toy animals. Unlike many of the Jungian psychoanalysts that were using sand trays, Lowenfeld was not interested in analyzing the work the children used and felt that the goal of Worldplay was to "have the created world confront its maker" (De Domenico, 1988, as cited in Labovitz Boik, 2000). In choosing the use of stand trays and evoking certain aspects of Worldplay (specifically through my choice of materials and the accompanying invitation to recreate spaces and places), I was drawing on this idea of inviting the participant to recreate remembered playscapes that they could then be confronted by. In so doing, the participants were offered a visual way of navigating memories.

**Ethical Considerations**

In addition to the challenge of making the leap from embodied to narrated memory, Culberston (1995) notes that the probability of a person doubting the verbalized story they are offering is high because the story may have survived in non-narrative forms in the body for a very long time, and applying words to bodily sensations may feel like an attempt to tell the

untellable, and seem to fall short of representing "truth". With that in mind, I foresaw potential challenges arising when I would ask participants to recall experiences that may have been unpleasant or traumatic. I employed the use of sand strays as a method of inquiry in part as a way of circumventing the barriers that can be presented by the task of making the leap to words. The sand trays were also used to facilitate drawing on the power of place to conjure memory. Trigg (2009) posits that trauma is intimately bound up in "ruins", or the places where trauma occurred. I did not attempt to push participants to relive trauma, but I did offer the recreation of locations of play in a sand tray as one way of recalling memories of exploring gender and sexuality, some of which were traumatic.

Given the importance that the act of forgetting painful or traumatic experiences clearly holds for subjugated populations, to request that my participant recall experiences of trauma is ethically complex. Going into this research I was drawing on Cadwallader's (2016) important point that for subjugated populations (in her example, survivors of sexualized violence) to actively or passively forget an experience of trauma inhibits possibilities for social justice and healing at both personal and community levels. Having said that, I do not believe that it is ethical for me as a researcher to privately use this as justification for asking my participants to engage in research intended to explore experiences of trauma, especially because I deliberately used visual-tactile methods to circumvent the challenges of accessing memory verbally. As such, in the process of disclosing potential risks to my participants before interviews begin, I was clear that my asking them to explore and describe potential traumas may be harmful for them personally and that, though my goal of eliciting recollection is intended to serve a social good, if they feel the risk to themselves did not justify any good I may see as a reasonable possibility (or for any other reason at all), they were in no way obligated to participate in the research. On the other

hand, I also informed them that the experience of participating in the interview and seeing their experiences and sand tray images shared in meaningful ways could be therapeutic and feel meaningful (Nelson et al., 2013).

## Data Analysis

After interviews were completed, I and two transcriptionists transcribed the recordings in a broad style that preserved the full body of the dialogue, including pauses, repetitions, false starts, and slang (Henderson, 2012). Following this, I began a thematic analysis of the data.

### *Thematic Analysis*

Data were analyzed using thematic analysis inspired by the work of Clarke and Braun (2018). The goal of the data analysis was to develop fully realized themes that appeared through all or several of the interviews. Clarke and Braun write that "Each theme has an 'essence' or core concept that underpins and unites the observations" (p. 108). In this way, thematic analysis is an ideal data analysis method for a phenomenological study, in that they are both interested in essence. It should be noted that these themes or essences are not absolute, but are my "active creations" (Clark & Braun, 2018, p. 108) born from the co-constructive act of a narrative interview.

I drew on Braun and Clarke's (2006) recommendations for thematic analysis in psychology and was guided by the following steps:

1. *Reviewing the Dataset:* I read the interview transcripts and looked at the photographs of the sand trays one by one. I wrote brief, initial observations to begin organizing thoughts and general impressions.
2. *Generating Initial Codes:* I reread each transcript and wrote codes in the margins and in MindNode (a brainstorming and data organizing program). The codes from the

interviews were then clustered into larger thematic areas within MindNode (Appendix B, C, D, E, F, G). Quotes relevant to the codes were collated in a separate document for later retrieval.

3. *Establishing Themes:* Once all interviews had been coded and categorized in MindNode, individual categories were analyzed to see which ones spanned the dataset. This phase involved the reviewing, reorganizing, joining, and separating of categories in MindNode. Once this was complete, the remaining categories served as the preliminary major themes.
4. *Thematic Review:* I reread the interviews and checked to ensure the identified themes were supported by the data. I edited themes as necessary and added missed quotes to the collated list of quotes.
5. *Organize Results and Begin Writing:* Using the established themes, I wrote an outline of the results and discussion chapter with the themes and subthemes. I begin analysis by writing a brief introduction to each theme and presented data by placing quotes in conversation with each other and the theoretical literature.

**Trustworthiness and Limitations**

Producing trustworthy, qualitative data requires a transparent research process that is "logical, traceable, and clearly documented" (Nowell et al., 2022, p.3). I believe this research meets that benchmark but, as with any research, it still has some limitations.

Priming may have been a limitation with the use of sand trays. As is discussed in the discussion and results chapter, all the participants created scenes in their sand trays that were in whole or in part depicting the outdoors. I have given a fair bit of meaning to this, and believe that there is importance in the consistent identification of the outdoors as a place where gender and

sexuality can be explored. However, it is worth considering that the sand itself being a natural material, could have primed participants to think of outdoor spaces.

Memory is both a limitation and a feature of this research. Because these interviews relied on the act of remembering, it is important to consider that there may be differences between what participants recall experiencing and what actually occurred. This means that, rather than trying to illuminate the material realities of children past or present, I have oriented myself towards considering how the narratives constructed from my participants' memories come to bear on their understanding of themselves as queer adults. Indeed, I question the premise that any event has an essence that can be recalled (yet another queer failing in my use of phenomenology), and am compelled instead by how we make meaning of our memories.

A final limitation is sampling. While I intended to represent a diverse set of identities, despite initial interview suggesting more of the participants had binary gender identities, only one had a strictly binary gender identity as a cisgender woman. I also did not have any participants who identified as gay men, and 75% of the participants identified as white or European. Another sampling limitation is that all of the participants lived in one specific geographic region (Southern Vancouver Island) at the time of the interview. This means that, while the diversity of the participants' upbringings throughout Canada, the United States, and Southeast Asia provides trustworthiness in terms of our ability to apply the findings to a boarder North American context (and perhaps beyond), the concentrated geographic sampling should remain a consideration.

**Conclusion**

The study's primary theoretical framework is queer phenomenology (Ahmed, 2006) which allows for a nuanced reading of the participants' narratives and sand trays in ways that

acknowledge the social construction of the expected orientation we have been raised with, and also the material realities of these expectations and their impact on participants' identities and selves. I used narrative interview and sand trays as methods of inquiry and analyzed the data using thematic analysis to construct the overarching themes I discuss in the results. The limitations of the study are double sided and relate to both the benefits and drawbacks of qualitative research. Other limitations included possible issues with priming, and a lack of diversity in the sample of participants.

# Chapter 4: Results and Discussion

This study explores queer young adults' memories of how and where they played and explored gender and sexuality during their child and youthhoods, and how participants make sense of their adult identities based on these experiences. I will present three key themes developed using data from participant interviews and sand trays, and expand upon them by drawing on Ahmed's (2006) *Queer Phenomenology* and Halberstam's (2011) *Queer Art of Failure*. The key themes that I generated through thematic analysis are: (1) queer failure and the development of queer identity, (2) adult relationships and their influence on play, self-esteem, and mental Health, and (3) the impact of indoor and outdoor spaces on queer children and youth's exploration of gender.

## Queer Failure and the Development of Queer Identity

In this section I will be drawing on interview data to show how I came to develop the first theme that queer failure was an important, and possibly critical, part of participants' queer identity development. Participants in this study described playing with gender and gender transgression and that play and transgression felt important and meaningful to them as queer young adults. What Halberstam (2011) might call participants' "queer failure" in their child and youthhoods, as experienced both in the ways they played and in the more mundane, but arguably more pressing, trappings of daily life (like clothing and haircuts) was an integral part of understanding themselves as queer subjects. More succinctly, queer failure was part of queer becoming.

Using Ahmed's (2006) Queer Phenomenology, I argue that the participants failed to orient themselves "properly" in their genders and sexualities, but in their attempts to conform,

they further failed to be the queer selves they would later identify with. Despite (and perhaps because of) this failure, they arrived at the queer adult selves that brought them to the interviews. So many queers do not survive this failure – indeed our rates of murder, suicide, and early death have historically and continue to far surpass our cisgender and heterosexual peers (Dinno, 2017; Cochran et al., 2016; Haas & Lane, 2015; Wise, 2021). However, many of us have survived and we will continue to fail, but it is my hope that our failures will become increasingly supported by the world around us, celebrated amongst ourselves, and recognized as transgressive acts of resistance in ways that make our lives richer, brighter, and more liveable.

***Shame and Pride in Queer Failure***

Denver told me about his relationship to shame and pride when it came to queer failure, and gender failure more specifically. When discussing how others perceived him as he played with and explored stereotypically masculine types of play and gender, Denver reflected that as a child he internalized the message that if a *person "made a 'mistake' about [my gender]…it meant [I was] doing being a person wrong…people should be able to know 'what you are'."* When I asked him where he got that message, he attributed it to negative or comedic pop culture representations of any kind of gender bending, shaming from peers, and a frustration that, despite the message he received from their parents that *"you can do anything and be a girl"* people still assumed he was a boy when he dressed or behaved in masculine ways.

In response to the idea that Denver himself was "wrong", I think Adelaide's (2021) advice to artists provides a useful reframing for young queer people encountering queer failure. She writes that it is important to be "pushing beyond the idea of failure as meaning something that *does not work*…towards one that welcomes the act of failure as a creative force in and of itself" (p. 162). I think "creative force" here can be seen as not only the act of creating art, but

the act of creating self. In these moments that felt like a failure of self, Denver was actually failing at gender in a way that *produced* self. This is evidenced by the fact that this memory was one that Denver identified as part of his journey in understanding himself as a trans and queer adult, and by his statement that as an adult *"I do feel pride about being trans and queer, and [now] I like it when people know that about me."* In this way, we can see that gender failure was uncomfortable but also productive, and transformed over time into a point of pride rather than one of shame. To be clear, I do not think that shame was a necessary part of this becoming – just as a writer does not need to be ashamed of a draft for it to be a useful – and my hope is that in the future we can make space for queer young people to fail in ways that are productive without feeling shameful.

Queer failure and gender failure can also inhabit a space where pride, anxiety, and excitement intermingle. Galen, who now identifies as a queer trans woman, first came out as a gay man in high school. She recalls that, even before she came out as gay she always felt *"different from a lot of the straight guys"* and she enjoyed that feeling. She told me

> *I felt like an outsider…othered in many different ways…I think I enjoyed that kind of outsider status where I, like, kind of was a rebel but didn't want to break the rules because I was so anxious about breaking rules…but it was nice feeling like I was different.*

I am intrigued by the play between anxiety and excitement that showed up for Galen by being different or a "rebel". Failure is not a comfortable feeling but, just as feelings of anxiety and excitement have similar physiological effects (Brooks, 2014), the disruptive feelings that accompany failure can be useful in the production of both a queer self and a world that is kinder to those who fail. As described by Halberstam (2011), "there is something powerful in being

wrong, in losing, in failing, and that all our failures combined might just be enough, if we practice them well, to bring down the winner" (pp. 120-121).

So, what happens when a queer person embraces failure? Alex described the difficulties but also the pride they felt in pursuing a medical transition:

> *My husband… always made the explicit point 'I'll never stop loving you, but I cannot guarantee you that I actually will still find you sexually attractive [if you medically transition]'… So I, I held back and I considered, reconsidered…and then the gender dysphoria just went up and down and up and down. [In the end I went] through with it…and in BC I'm actually the first nonbinary person to get any medical transitioning. So, I'm the precedent case. I'm actually – let's call it for what it is – I'm proud of that.*

Ahmed (2006) writes that, according to the logics of heterosexual culture "For a life to count as a good life…it must return the debt of its life by taking on the direction promised as a social good…[by] reaching certain points along a life course" (p. 21) such as heterosexual marriage. She goes on to posit that "A queer life might be one that fails to make such gestures of return" (p. 21). While Alex appeared to have reached some of those "points", such as marrying a man when they were still presenting as a woman, they queered that marriage by later coming out as nonbinary, socially and medically transitioning[2], and pursuing polyamorous relationships. In this way, Alex failed to make the "gestures of return" to, or maintenance of, the heterosexual life that Ahmed speaks of. What Alex demonstrated in the interview, however, is that they have found a different "good life" that is defined by a pride in their queer relationships and the unique ways they occupy and queer gender. It was with a smile that they said *"my husband and my girlfriend,"* and they described themselves, while laughing, as *"flamboyant and effeminate, but*

[2] Transitioning does not require any medical interventions, but it did for Alex.

*not feminine."* This pride in their romantic and sexual relationships and their unique gender expression demonstrates how queer failure and a refusal to make any "gestures of return" (Ahmed, 2006, p. 21) to the promised "good life" can, itself, be joyous.

***Divergent and Disruptive Gender Expressions and Play***

Sexual orientation is an important part of queer failure, but the participants demonstrated in several ways how diverged sexual orientations are inexorably linked with, and perhaps predicated upon, gender expressions that diverge and disrupt cisgender normativity. I will first describe how Morgan and Galen demonstrate the enmeshment of gender and sexual orientation, and then share some of the ways participants expressed their divergent and disruptive gender expressions through play.

During the interview, Morgan described how she feels comfortable enough being identified by others as a woman that she did not feel she could claim a trans identity, but she identified with many aspects of a trans experience of gender. Indeed, she believed that if being trans had the same amount of visibility to her as a young person as it does now that she likely would have identified as nonbinary. In the absence of that exposure and understanding, she carved out space for herself within the bounds of queerness she had been exposed to by identifying as a lesbian:

> *I would never be a woman if I couldn't be a lesbian. To me, if like for some reason we were in a world in which, like, I couldn't identify as a lesbian but I could identify as nonbinary, I would 100% identify as nonbinary before I identify as a woman. But I think lesbian identity gives me, like, a space in womanhood in which I actually feel like comfortable identifying with that term.*

What I see Morgan expressing here is that she felt more aligned with the identity of lesbian than of any particular gender identity. As a child she felt tension from others because of the ways she was "doing gender" wrong, but once she started to identify as a lesbian as a teenager she felt more in alignment with her assigned gender. While on its face this could appear to collapse gender and sexual orientation, Morgan's experience serves to burst open these categories, and demonstrate how the borders between gender and sexual orientation are porous: for Morgan, to be a lesbian is not to be a woman who loves women, but a particular kind of gendered subject that can be outside of conventional ideas of womanness. This calls to mind the significant and important history and ongoing presence of butches whose gender identities and sexual orientations are tied up in and inform each other, allowing butchness to occupy both spaces of gender and sexual orientation (Hiestand & Levitt, 2005).

Galen also demonstrated how sexual and gender identity are enmeshed, though the way she experienced this enmeshment was very different than Morgan:

> *I was always attracted to straight men, growing up… Starting out coming out as gay, I was really attracted to more masculine men – or just men who performed straightness – because, I guess, the idea of being with a straight man would validate my gender. I don't think I thought of it in those terms but looking back that makes a lot of sense that dating a straight man would validate a gender I had not yet perceived in myself.*

What Galen was identifying was that, despite not fully knowing yet that she was a woman, the idea of being with a straight man validated her gender in a way that dating a gay man would not. This reflection from Galen not only demonstrated the enmeshment of gender and sexual orientation, but is another example of the productive power of queer failure. Keeping in mind her own assessment of the reason behind her crushes on straight men, I interpret Galen's crushes as

her way of grappling with and trying to mitigate queer failure: if she could date a straight man, then she would be that much closer to "succeeding" at being a woman in a normative way through her proximity to heterosexuality in the form of a straight partner and a straight relationship.

Keeping in mind the reciprocal relationship between gender and sexual orientation demonstrated by Galen and Morgan, I can explore the ways several participants disrupted gender in their play. Every one of the participants who were assigned female at birth recalled disrupting gendered expectations of play by engaging in one or both of rough and tumble play or in fantasy play where they would pretend to be boy characters. When asked to use the sand tray to recreate a place where they explored gender or sexuality as a child, Basil recreated their childhood yard (Figure 1), including a truck, a ball, army men, an old rusted swing set, and the shed whose roof Basil would climb on and pretend to do repairs with their play tool kit. They told me as they created: *"I was total tomboy – like running, jumping, scratching, climbing, fighting. You know, all nine yards, was everything I loved. I loved tools, I loved trucks. Um, it was great. Sports, running, so fun".* Morgan, who also referred to herself as tomboyish, recalled playing with friends who were all boys and she told me they would roughhouse and *"we would play out in the yard [with] nerf guns a lot."* Similarly, Kae recalled summers at the beach *"playing games with water guns"* and fantasy games with friends *"pretending to be Jedis or knights."* Alex also loved what they described as:

**Figure 1**

*Basil's sand tray of their yard*

> *exploration and rough and tumble play. So, I was out basically the entire day. Um, on my bike primarily…just finding places …[like]a new little park, and if there's a pond find a stick, poke it for frogs. Sorry about that these days, but back then as a kid it was the best thing ever…I [also] pestered my grandfather into buying me a plastic sword when I was a kid…I had the total knights of the roundtable phase - [I] wanted to be a knight.*

Like Kae and Alex, Helena also engaged in fantasy play with friends where they would all pretend play a boy character. Helena and her friends would play *"a schoolhouse scenario and I always played this like rough and tumble boy character named Michael"* (Figure 2). Denver also recalled playing games with their friends where they would get to demonstrate masculinity and ruggedness by exerting physical strength, and in fantasy play where *"if I was playing house with my friends, I was 'Dad'."* I think it is telling that every one of the participants who were assigned female at birth remembered so clearly disrupted gendered expectations in their play. What these testimonies demonstrate is that gender disruption by way of interests and activities that are associated with the "opposite" gender is an important way many queer children play queerly, and the recalling of that play may be an important part of queer identity development.

**Figure 2**

*Helena's sand tray of her schoolhouse fantasy game*

Unlike the participants above, Izz, who was assigned male at birth, enjoyed playing with toys marketed to boys and engaged in gender "appropriate" play:

> *I used to…be interested in what a lot of people would consider traditionally masculine interests, such as cars and stuff like that… Working on vehicles and stuff like that, I think was a pretty formative part of myself and how I tend to … y'know put on, uh, as my friend likes to call it, the "man suit"*

This demonstrates how Izz engaged in gendered play both in ways that felt fine at the time, but in retrospect, perhaps was also a way of trying to *"'self-medicate' by hyper-masculinizing myself and my activities"*. They wondered if this self-reorienting might have obfuscated their femininity and hidden potentially *"genuine"* feminine interests. Izz asking whether societal gender expectations disrupted what might have otherwise been their primary interests. They posited that cultural misogyny might have deterred and reoriented them further from more feminine interests they otherwise might have explored:

> *I went to high school in like the early two-thousands…So I mean not the fifties [but] there's still a lot of misogyny right? And I [wonder], would I still be interested in [masculine toys] if I - uh - wasn't raised as a boy?*

It is tempting here to engage with Izz's question and ask what produces gendered interests. However, ultimately, the etiology of gendered interests is not what I am exploring in this research. Rather, I am seeking to understand how we *remember* these interests, how those memories inform queer adult identity, and how the way this play was supported or resisted (internally and externally) influences queer adults' sense of self and self-regard. Memory is not, of course, infallible or neutral and what participants remember about their childhood play is important not as a precise account of what it looks like for a queer child to play, but an account

of what it means to be a queer adult remembering and queering their childhood. As the feminists who fought for the right to forget childbirth through access to "twilight-sleep" (Esptein, 2010) demonstrated, what we (do not) remember is an important part of how we understand our own experiences of suffering, joy, and significant rites of passage. What the participants here have demonstrated is that they remember childhoods where they found space to disrupt the gendered expectations of them. It follows, then, that if we are to create more space for queer children, it is important to allow them to transgress gender norms and expectations because their queer adult identity may have strong ties to those memories of exploration. Through the research, I have also come to see that children who remember being caringly supported in failing queerly may fare better as adults in terms of their relationship to their queer identity and in their mental health. In the section on relationships and supportive/unsupportive adults I delve further into this question and discuss how participants' testimony points towards the conclusion that supportive adults are an important part of positive self-regard and good mental health later in life.

***Clothing, Hair, and Dress-Up***

All but one participant shared how hair and/or clothing were important ways of exploring gender as a child or expressing gender and/or queerness as an adult. Even Morgan, who was the only participant who did not identify exploring gender through clothing and haircuts as an explicit part of her gender exploration, described herself as a "tomboy". Despite not identifying her more masculine presentation in clothing as a form of exploration it did result in gender policing by her peers: she *"was accused of being like a lesbian a lot"* in elementary and middle school because of the way she dressed. In this way, even though she did not identify her appearance as part of her gender or sexual exploration, peers still conflated her gender expression as indicative of her sexual orientation. Interestingly, Morgan felt that her thinking of

herself as a *"tomboy,"* and the association of tomboyishness with being a lesbian by her peers, delayed her coming out as a lesbian because she did not want to be a stereotype: *"[I thought] 'Well I'm a tomboy, so I can't be a lesbian because that's a stereotype.'"*

All the other participants explicitly remember exploring gender and/or sexuality through clothing and hair. Galen remembered exploring gender through fantasy games, with dress-up as a particularly important locus of gender exploration:

> *It was through gender play [like dress up] that I learned that some things are okay for my assigned gender at birth and some are not… [but access to dress up] was so good for my gender. Like, I think if I was a cisgender man I don't think it like made me trans, but it gave me room to explore that…I think it was so wonderful to have an opportunity, in addition to all the outdoor and imaginative play I was doing, to have that interior, um, imaginative play that was just around [my] body and clothing.*

Access to feminine clothing was partially facilitated by Galen having a sister with whom she could play dress-up and get to try on *"girl"* clothes and makeup and explore femininity. The way Galen recalled playing dress-up as a child showed gendered interests and identity development in a way that was easily legible to others and allowed her, through the somewhat safer avenue of play, to orient herself towards her felt gender. Of course, gender transgressive play is not free of risk and, as several participants described, playing outside of expected gender roles can result in violence and bullying by peers and adults alike. However, I think the world of play cracks open a space of permissiveness that may not otherwise be available to queer children and youth. For example, I think it would be far more difficult and riskier for Galen to have gone to school in the stereotypical girls' clothing that better reflected her gender than it was to play dress-up at home

with her sister. In this way, and as Galen attested, dress up was an important space of exploration and positively impacted her gender development.

Dress-up was also an important part of Helena's childhood play. She remembered playing a rough-and-tumble boy character named Michael:

> *Michael, I mean basically he was Helena. Like, [laughs] I mean I don't know why I felt like this was so different from my own person. Like we had like similar things where we were both like, you know, seen as rulebreakers, or… we both like would play a leader role…it's basically me. It's just that he got to wear pants! [But] I did wear pants already! It's not that my – I didn't grow up in a family where there was like strict, like you know, "you have to wear a dress." Um, so I don't know why…I felt the need to like take on a, like, boy character in order for me to have fun.*

I find it interesting that, despite already being a lot like Michael in her daily life, Helena felt the need to play a make-believe version of herself where the only real difference was that the character was a boy. I wonder if in some ways the fantasy was less about how Michael dressed and behaved, and more about the feeling of inhabiting a character who was not simply *allowed* to act and dress this way but was *expected* to and might even be celebrated as a boyishly rebellious character like that of Huckleberry Finn, whom Helena likened Michael to. In this way, like Galen, Helena found a space of relative safety through dress-up and make believe in which she could explore gender with greater permissiveness than she experienced in her daily life.

Dress-up was not a type of play afforded to all the participants. Basil, who was raised in a poor family, shared how poverty limited the ways they could explore gender as a child. This came up both in relation to clothing and to availability of toys and dress-up: there was simply not

enough money to buy extra toys or clothing outside the "gender appropriate" ones they had been gifted or their mother bought for them.

Denver brought a handful of childhood photographs of themself to the interview. In several they are dressed in more feminine outfits and looked palpably uncomfortable. In one photo where they are dressed for a basketball game they, tellingly, said to me *"here I am, looking like myself"*. This moment of self-reflection demonstrates how playing sports (and the often less feminine clothing that goes along with it) can allow trans masculine children and youth a publicly visible and celebrated forum in which to express their gender in affirming ways. This freedom does not come without negative scrutiny, and Denver described several instances of bullying and gender policing that they encountered while playing sports, but their beaming smile showed just how important those opportunities to look like themselves were.

For Kae, exploring her sexuality and gender expression did not occur until a little later than it did for the other participants. She speculated that having a school uniform provided a bit of reprieve from having to parse gender expression in high school, but once she entered university in a fine arts program, she began to notice a *"queer dress code"* that she liked and wanted to emulate. She did and continues to experience conflict with her mother over her clothing choices. Her lack of feminine presentation made her feel like on some level she was failing at being a woman, particularly after puberty when she developed breasts, whereas when she was a kid, *"my tomboyishness was kind of like a cute quality about me."*

Puberty was also a demarcation line for Basil, after which gender expression expectations intensified, particularly from their mother. When they started to develop breasts, Basil recalled their mother trying to get them to wear training bras and later taking them to a bra fitting that resulted in them being mortified to be forced into a satin and lace bra. They found this coming-

of-age ritual that many mothers do with their children who they think are daughters to run counter to the gender they had expressed their whole life leading up to that point*: "I've never owned a lace anything in my life! I tried to pull the little bows off of my underwear, because why does my underwear have a tiny pointless bow on it?!"* Not only was the fitting deeply uncomfortable for Basil, they also felt that puberty was occluding the way they had always expressed their gender to their mother and to the world. For Basil, as with Kae, puberty proved itself to be a turning point during which Basil was expected to reorient themselves towards "proper" gender expression, and away from the tomboyishness they had found to be more permitted as a child.

Clothing was not the only way Denver and other participants explored gender: hair was also a significant site of exploration. Denver shared a turning point in his childhood and gender expression brought about through a haircut:

> *[in kindergarten] I got my first mushroom cut. That was when I actually started to come out of my shell…[The mushroom cut] changed everything!...interestingly, there have been multiple checkpoints throughout my life where a short haircut has helped me just come into myself.*

Denver showed me another photo from one of his dance performances (that was, funnily enough, being done to queer drag icon Ru Paul's song "Supermodel"). He explained that his hair was expected to be pulled back in a ponytail but, because he had the mushroom cut at that point, he had to slick his hair back with gel to make it look like a ponytail. This attempt to temporarily, and only somewhat effectively, glue into place his defiant hair so as to make him look identical to the girls in his dance class strikes me as an apropos allegory for the many ways society

forcefully and ineffectually tries to reorient children and youth failing at orienting themselves "properly".

Like Denver's experience of their mushroom cut being transformative, Alex also spoke to the way changes in clothing and hair marked transitions in their life and gender expression. They recalled that as soon as they were living with their parents and away from the constant surveillance of their more conservative grandparents *"I cut my hair short and start wearing pants."* This was not long after they had come out as a lesbian and they remembered it as an important point in their gender journey. Helena also had a relationship with her hair that did not align with what was expected of her by adults or by gendered expectations of girls and people assigned female at birth. She described herself as a *"wild"* child who *"hated to wear shoes"* and would *"literally like run away and climb up a tree and not come down*" to avoid having her hair brushed. She offered these stories as ways of demonstrating how she refused to be the *"gentle"* or *"sweet"* child expected of girls.

Izz also explored gender through hair, though for them it was facial hair. They shared that an important moment in their exploration of gender occurred in a men's dormitory bathroom while they were getting ready early one morning*: "I very vividly remember like, shaving [my face] one time…and just thinking… 'this is not who I want to be.'"* Izz elaborated that, although they enjoyed the meditative experience of shaving, they realized that the act of having to shave off facial hair was not reflective of how they wanted to relate to their body.

Participants made it clear that clothing and hair were an important locus of self-expression and self-discovery. Because these forms of self-expression are often regulated by parents and caregivers (or, in the case of Izz, institutions that had requirements around head and

body hair), it follows that the support of significant adults could make meaningful impacts on the lives of queer children and youth.

**Adult Relationships and their Influence on Play, Self-Esteem, and Mental Health**

In this section I will discuss the impact of significant adult relationships on participants when they were children and youth. Three areas related to adult relationships appeared to be particularly salient in the research: (a) the results of sexualizing youth assigned female at birth (b) the harmful impacts of lacking a supportive adult, and (c) the benefits of having a significant, supportive adult.

***The Sexualization of Participants Assigned Female at Birth***

Five of the participants who were assigned female at birth identified puberty as a turning point after which their ability to play and interact with the world became more limited. Prior to puberty, Denver recalled playing basketball with their dad as a child and *"not wearing a shirt because at that time my body wasn't sexualized and developed in certain ways."* In these moments of play, they were able to literally embody gender in ways that felt good and, in retrospect, were very meaningful. Similarly, Basil didn't realize until being told off by an adult for baring their chest that "girls" were expected to stay covered.

Both Basil and Alex saw their world get smaller because of being assigned female at birth, particularly when they began to go through puberty. For Alex, their grandparents and parents were concerned about their safety because they were thought to be at risk of assault by men and boys. They recalled a particular incident:

> *I wanted to go over to my, ah, best friend's place. He had an older brother though, and my grandfather who I was – or my grandparents – who I was living at the time with,*

*basically threw a tantrum. That as a girl, I'm not allowed to go, I'll definitely be raped. And it was really the first time when it was "Wait, what? I'm a girl?"*

This limiting of movement and access to the outdoors in particular was upsetting for Alex: their grandparents also worried about Alex being sexually assaulted if they went too far outdoors as they entered puberty. This will be discussed further in the section about the outdoors.

For Basil, their friendships and where they were allowed to go were both brought under greater scrutiny and restriction after they began to go through puberty. This caused tension with them and their mother, as well as being very frustrating for them by curtailing their important friendships with boys. What is important here is that Basil's mother was not worried that they were dating a boy, she was worried about them behaving in non-normative ways: *"if the concern was that I was involved with [my guy friend], like that would have been one thing. But that wasn't the concern. The concern was literally that I was hanging out with [a boy] playing video games and watching anime."* For Basil's mother, their failure at performing gender and femininity was so upsetting that they were forced to leave home: a disagreement that Basil found very confusing about them spending time with this boy and a late night movie ultimately precipitated them getting kicked out of their home by their mother.

Kae experienced puberty a turning point in which she went from feeling somewhat free of gender to gender being *"aggressively"* present, *"almost overnight"*. Having breasts was physically uncomfortable for her and that, in addition to the sexualization and segregation of women's sports in and out of school, lead to her stop playing sports and pivoted to art instead: *"sports culture for girls [at my school] was so…incredibly ultra-femme. Like all of the girls had y'know the perfect ponytail, they were athletic. All of the weird kids were the ones who did art."*

What these examples show us is how the sexualization of children and youth assigned female at birth unfairly limits their play, friendships, and access to space. This naturally brings us to a deeper discussion of the importance of particular kinds of adult relationships and how caregivers can better serve the needs of children of all genders.

***Lacking Supportive Adults and Caregivers***

Three of the participants, Basil, Helena, and Kae, had either wholly negative or not particularly affirming expediencies coming out, and/or lacked an adult who was supportive of their queerness or divergent gender expressions as a young person. Of importance here is that all three demonstrated or described experiencing significant mental illness, and two of them expressed dislike of or mixed feeling about being queer. This was a stark contrast to the generally good mental health and positive self-regard and positive relationship with being queer that the other participants demonstrated and that will be described in the next section.

Helena reported experiencing depression since she was seven years old, but most intensely as a teenager. She attributed this to a few things, including feeling different and unaccepted as herself, and feeling like she was "*hanging on the walls of other people's worlds"* without a world of her own. She remembers feeling isolated from everyone – adults and peers – in her youth and she also feels she lacked a parental bond in her youth. She now reflects on having a solid bond with her father who she feels has accepted her in all ways but that he did not offer her everything she needed growing up. In a poignant moment, Helena shared that her wife had speculated that, had Helena been born in different circumstances that she could have been *"super gay, super queer"*. When I asked that that would have looked like she shared that if her childhood had been different she could have been

> *really like proud of who I was; and really like, um, open to exploring like things I was interested in; and, um, um, open to like expressing myself and connecting with other people; and like I just think that I would have been a lot less messed up about it.*

Instead of an adulthood where Helena felt like she was able to be joyously "super queer", Helena seemed to have resigned herself to her life. Her love of and devotion to her wife was apparent, but her self-regard as a queer person seemed like a plodding acceptance more than a celebration. This extended to her feeling of being gender fluid:

> *If I were to like physically or socially transition any part of me now to look…I don't know, more feminine, more masculine, or more or less whatever, I think I would – now – I'm sort of like quote unquote "too late." I know it's not. But like for me it feels too late for that to make a difference. Because now I feel like that, um, sense of not being in the correct body has been assigned to my entire body, and so if I were to, um, I don't know…Um, look more masculine, I would just look more masculine and still have the same problems with my body as I do right in this moment.*

Basil, similarly, expressed dissatisfaction with their body and being queer. During the interview they referred to a point in time when it became harder to function in the world. When I asked them when things got harder for them to function as a young adult they replied: *"When I like, when I really started to come to grips with the fact that I was trans. I still don't want to be trans."* They went on to share that what they wish is that being their assigned gender had worked because *"If being a girl had worked I would still be me, I would just be a function-able me."*

I think it is telling that one of Basil's recommendations for how we can improve the lives of queer children and youth is to ensure queer children *"hear that they are loved*." It was clear

by the way Basil described their child and youthhood that they did not receive that message, and culminated to them being kicked out by their mother when they were sixteen.

The closest Basil came to describing a significant adult who was supportive of their gender identity was recalling their grandfather giving them a toy toolkit when they were very young. Unfortunately, he died when Basil was only six years old. Basil described a significant dissolution in the family functioning after his death, so I asked them how they thought things might have been different had their grandfather lived longer. They told me that they though his grandfather would have prevented his mother from making bad choices about the men she married, and *"had he still been around when I was 16 and, and, you know, [my mom] tried to throw me out, I don't think that would have happened."* I think it is demonstrative of how deeply the lack of an affirming adult impacted Basil that they imagined that support for themselves in the form of their deceased grandfather.

Kae described a complicated relationship with her mother who, despite (or perhaps because of) being an advocate for gay men with AIDS, viewed being gay as very hard so she was not accepting of her children being queer. Clothing was an early red flag in Kae's mother's lack of support for non-normative gender or sexual identity or expression. Kae reported that *"I think clothing has probably been the biggest point of contention between my mom and I,"* and that, while her tomboyishness had been okay with her mother when she was younger, after puberty it began to cause issues between them. She recalled that her mother had told her that *"dressing not traditionally feminine is going to cause me not to succeed."* When Kae eventually came out as bisexual when she was 21, it did not go well. In time, Kae's mother came around but Kae recalled early introductions between her mom and girlfriend as being very awkward.

Kae's father died before she came out and she was not sure how he would have reacted to her coming out but postulated that, as a psychiatrist and a generally open person, he would have been supportive. Kae cried during the interview when talking about her father. She reflected that she was between jobs, which was a source of conflict with her mother, and she told me *"I've been having my own mental health uh struggles recently [but my dad] definitely would have helped me be able to also explain this stuff to my mom."*. Like Basil, a dead paternal figure had become a defender and someone who she believed would have championed her and helped her in her relationships with her mother. I think this second example of a desire to create support where it was absent similarly speaks to how crucial a supportive adult is to the emotional wellbeing of young queer people.

These stories point towards the possibility that the impacts of a supportive adults are enduring, lasting at least into young adulthood. One way of ensuring most young queer people encounter queer affirming adults could be the inclusion of gender and sexual minorities as an employment equity group. This way, queer adults could be specifically sought out in education and care settings.

***Impacts of Supportive Adults and Caregivers***

In contrast to Basil, Helena, and Kae, those participants (Galen, Morgan, Denver, Alex, and Izz) who recalled feeling affirmed in childhood and/or during their coming out appear to have become self-affirming as adults and were more likely to have expressed satisfaction or pride in their queer identities as adults.

Galen, who enjoyed dress-up as a child, recalled an important moment where her gender was affirmed by an adult in her play:

> *My parents were having a dinner party with some family friends and I got dressed up in a big, red dress with heels and this brown curly wig – a long haired wig – and, um, I came downstairs while they were eating and one of our family friends said "who's the little princess?*

Galen recalled that initial moment of believing she had "tricked" an adult into believing she was a girl (this was not a malicious tricking. It was more so succeeding in embodying being a girl in a convincing way), and was also the moment she identified as when she really began to understand that gender existed. Through dress-up and interaction with an adult who was permissive of expansive gendered play she was able to see that gender existed, transgress it in a way that was playful and ultimately safe, and in so doing begin a journey of seeing herself as a person who can fail at, succeed in, play with, and find herself in gender. I think it is also important to note that this happened in front of Galen's parents, indicating that they were permissive of this kind of play and not interested in "correcting" the family friend. Beyond childhood play, Galen had other positive responses to being queer as she grew up. She came out first to a homeroom teacher in high school who was affirming and who Galen later found out was queer herself. Later, her parents were both fairly supportive when she came out to them, too, and she thinks that it may have even improved her relationship with her father.

Like Galens' family, Morgan's mother was generally supportive of her expressing and exploring gender through clothing, though for Morgan it was masculinity. Morgan described herself as being *"tomboyish"* and recalled that her mother encouraged her enjoyment of the outdoors and sports. Occasionally her mother did suggest that Morgan try to be more feminine:

> *She had very similar childhood experiences to me…Like she was very, very tomboyish for quite a while. And, um, I think like had very, also had very bad experiences about it. I*

> *think one time she told me she got not badly beaten up, but kind of beaten up, um, by some boys who she'd been friends with. And I think like a lot of times when she would push me to be more feminine, like I think it was like coming from a place of like "Don't get hurt."*

Despite this, Morgan felt generally supported in her gender expression as a young person. When she came out as bisexual at 15 years old and later as lesbian at 16/17, Her parents were largely supportive, particularly her father.

Alex aware particularly early in realizing that they were queer. They came out as a lesbian at the age of seven, and came out as genderqueer in their early adulthood. Unique to Alex was having a parent who was not only accepting of their coming out as a lesbian, but their computer tech father went to the extent of educating and supporting them in the best way he knew how:

> *He finds me computer games about sexuality. So, I played all those kind of weird old sex ed games…They're super awesome…[My dad was] very much on "Okay, let's support the kid…Whatever makes you happy. I don't care, you're my kid."*

Alex's childhood caregivers were not all affirming, and they report more complicated relationships with both their grandmother and mother, both of whom had more gendered expectations of Alex. It is probable that, because of such a wholly affirming response from their father at a very young age, despite some other challenges Alex demonstrated very positive self-regard and feelings of satisfaction, pride and joyous defiance regarding their gender and sexuality.

Two of the participants, Denver and Izz, told stories of having supportive teachers. In high school, Denver had an openly lesbian teacher and remembered there also being another

lesbian teacher at the school. He referred to them as *"guardian angels having my back."* Importantly, when I asked what made them guardian angels, he did not recall them going out of their way to do anything in particular. However, harkening back to his discomfort when people would publicly correct someone who made a "mistake" about Denver's gender, they recounted a moment with one of the lesbian teachers where the opposite occurred. One of the teachers nearly referred to Denver as a boy when talking to someone else when he was in the room, but Denver recalled:

> *when I turned around and she saw it was me…[she] didn't make a joke of it and she didn't tell me… "oh my gosh, I thought you were a boy but here you were a girl all along." I think she had that thought and filtered it, and I remember that moment feeling grateful that she didn't tell me what the mistake she was about to make was. Yeah, that felt really good. And regardless of how I understood my gender at the time I felt very seen in that moment.*

Like Denver, Izz also found safety in a teacher. Izz considered the first few years after high school, when they were in an institutional work training program, to be part of their youthhood. The program was highly regimented and gendered and they were struggling with some of the gendered expectations of them. While they were there, they experienced support from a teacher who went to bat for them:

> *One my instructors, uh... I let her know [I was trans], and I was like, "This is what I'm going through" and she ... did her best to protect me from other instructors and basically told other instructors not to fuck with me. Um - I still talk to her every now and then uh - I also have her on social media… Um so... really cool!...I feel like she respected me.*

In addition to Denver and Izz having supportive teachers, they both had affirming parents when they came out as queer. I suspect that this wraparound support significantly influenced both of them having pride in their queer identities. This is demonstrated not only by their general positive self-regard, but also in the way they have passed on this support as adults. Both Denver and Izz have gone on to do professional work in creating safer spaces for queer youth, and improving queer competency in educational and workplace settings.

The participants above demonstrated generally positive feelings about being queer, and none shared that they suffered significantly from mental illness. This bolsters existing research that supports exactly that: the results of the 2019 Canada-wide Trans and Non-Binary Youth Health Survey reported that "Youth with supportive families and safe schools were much less likely to report suicidal thoughts," and "those with supportive families, safe schools, and/or a legal name change were less likely to report severe emotional distress" (Taylor et al., 2020, p. 3). Colvin, Egan, and Coulter (2019) report that gender and sexual minority youth with a supportive school environment were more likely to have positive mental health outcomes, and Snapp et al. (2015) found that lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender youth who experienced family acceptance had higher levels of self-esteem and were more likely to report being "proud to be a part of the LGBT community" (p. 424).

**Impact of Indoor and Outdoor Spaces on Gender Exploration**

In this section I will share some of the places and spaces where the participants recalled playing and exploring gender and sexual orientation as children and youth. I will be paying particular attention to the significant finding that the outdoors played a crucial part in queer identity development for all of the participants. I am basing this assertion on the observation that during the portion of the interview where I invited participants to recreate a place where they

played or explored gender or sexuality during their child or youthhoods in a sand tray, all of them created a space that was partially or fully outdoors. When the last participant in the study, Galen, also created an outdoor space, I asked for her interpretation of why the outdoors might have featured so consistently as a place of exploring gender and sexuality for the other queer participants. Her interpretation was succinct: *"nature accepted us when interior worlds didn't"*. It is important to preface this section by restating that all but one participant grew up, at least in part, in so-called Canada or the United States. Additionally, none of the participants are Indigenous. As such, the participants' relationship with the land is one made possible through the ongoing project of colonization.

***The Restrictions and Possibilities of the Indoors***

There being fewer examples of indoor spaces among participants when prompted to recreate places where they explored gender and sexual orientation makes sense to me. While the outdoors is far from free of the reach of politics and regulation, it is perhaps less regulated by the structures and systems of the built environment. The indoors is often a space of greater surveillance than the outdoors and one with fewer gender-based laws and regulations. Take, for the example, bathrooms which are often the locus of contested school policies (Farley & Leonardi, 2021), gender policing in schools (Davies et al., 2017), and legislation through so-called "bathroom bills" that harm trans people by restricting who may use which bathroom based on their assigned sex (Murib, 2020).

The indoors and bathrooms are not only a place of oppression, however. Bathrooms and the mirrors therein showed up as important places of gender discovery and realization for both Denver and Izz. Denver remembers after getting a short haircut, "*looking into the mirror and finally having a sense of familiarity like, 'Oh! I've been looking for you!'"* Izz also had a

**Figure 3**

*Izz's sand tray of the bathroom where they would shave*

moment of self-recognition in a bathroom mirror (figure 3), as was shared in the earlier section "Hair, Clothing, and Dress-Up". Theirs was the opposite of Denver's who finally recognized himself in the mirror: while shaving early one morning, Izz realized that the act of shaving felt incongruous with their gender.

The highly gendered nature of the indoors brought Morgan both self-discovery and anguish. On the one hand, she experienced the indoors as a highly gendered space where she was able to explore masculinity. In her sand tray, she recreated a friend's basement and back yard where she played from approximately ages seven to 13 (figure 4). She described her friend's basement and treehouse as places where she got to participate in and explore gender by engaging in more stereotypically masculine games like nerf guns and combat-based video games.

**Figure 4**

*Morgan's sand tray of the basement and yard where she would play*

On the other hand, she recalled that when attending summer camp as a child, it was

> *awful because of course you like get spread off into gender separated cabins. And I spent like the entirety of summer camp just like in this like very vivid daydream in which I was a boy and I was in the boy's cabin.*

In this way, the gendered segregation of the indoors contributed to the feelings of loss that Morgan expressed about being denied a "boyhood" that she sometimes deeply desired

***Gender Freedom and Gender Scrutiny in the Outdoors***

Galen thought of herself as a very imaginative child and feels that being raised in a rural area where she got to play outside in nature helped facilitate this. Nature was more than a space for imagination though. For Galen, swimming in a pond nearby was a liberating and important part of her childhood:

> *we would go to the pond to swim…I loved it and I still love it so much…I just found it a really liberating feeling, um, and I didn't feel the need to cover my chest or anything. I was okay just wearing bottoms. Yeah, and I just like delighted in being able to go under water and look up at the sky from under water and it's like, it looks kind of round…it just looks like an impressionist painting. It's beautiful.*

The lens of the water provided Galen with a new way to view the world. This reminded me of Ahmed's (2006) discussion of queer disorientation: "when one thing is 'out of line,' then it is not just that thing that appears oblique but the world itself might appear on a slant, which disorientates the picture and even unseats the body" (p. 67). This state of disorientation in the water provided a place in which Galen's gender and her body were allowed to exist outside of the dominant axes of gender that attempt to reorient queer subjects.

Over and over again, participants articulated the freedom from gender that they felt outdoors. Helena fondly recalled the way camping altered gender expectations:

> *I definitely spent a lot of time outdoors and I, I love it…I spent a lot of time like camping and stuff like that. And I felt a little bit less like…A little bit less, um, ah, expected to*

*perform certain, I don't know, quote unquote "feminine" things or ways. Because it was: everyone was camping, we were all camping people now.*

For Basil, the outdoors was a place they could play unimpeded with the kinds of traditionally "boy toys" they were drawn to, such as army men, trucks, and tools. The outdoors also offered a place where they could be outside of gendered expectations and use their body more freely for *"running, jumping, scratching, climbing, fighting. You know, all nine yards."*

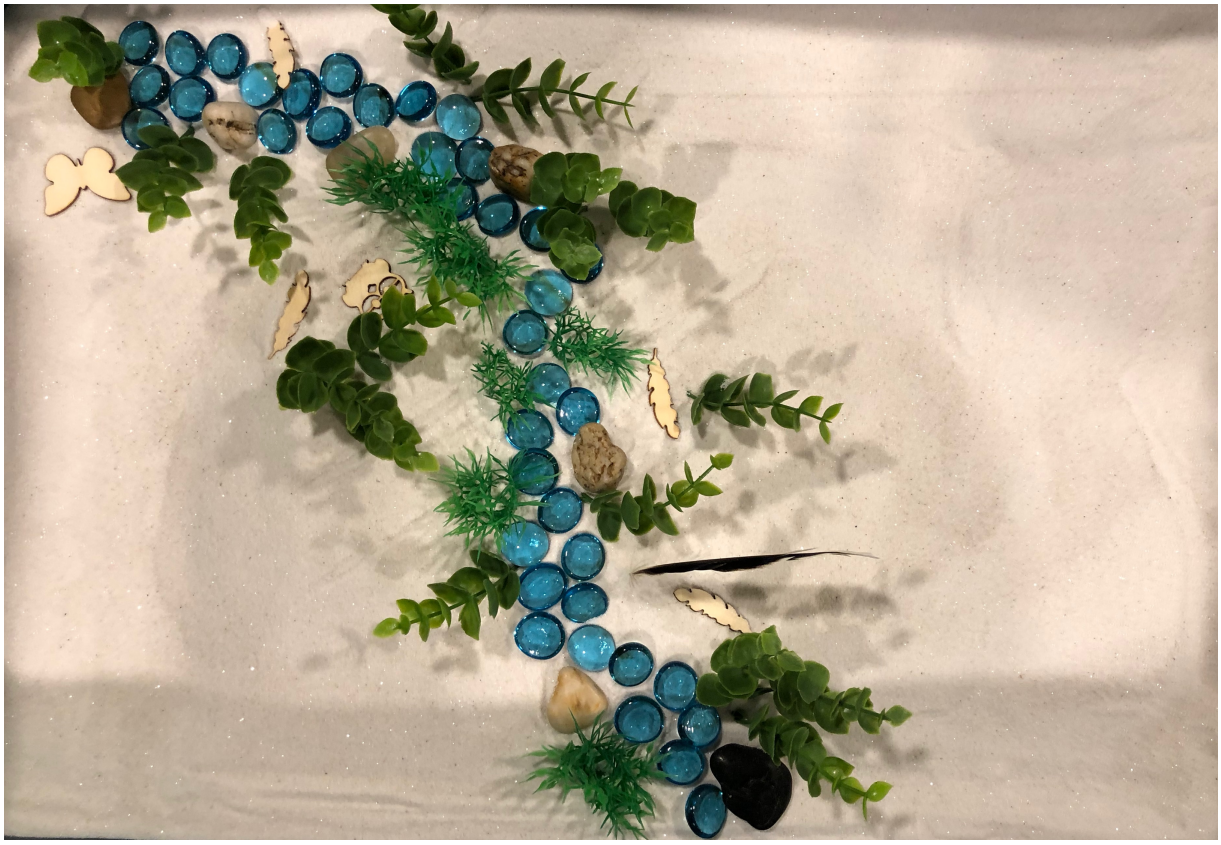
Morgan told me that the outdoors, and the woods specifically, was *"the place where I was…allowed to sort of be very genderless."* But the outdoors was not always a place where she could be free of gender. Morgan joined a baseball team with some of her friends and, while the team was co-ed, she was the only girl. She remembered a humiliating incident at the end of a season when the coach was handing out awards. The coach gave each player an award, and everyone got one (things like "MVP" and "most improved"), but when he got to Morgan, despite her being a decent player, he just said *"Morgan had great hair."* This incident points to an important consideration when it comes to talking about the outdoors being a place where queer children and youth can explore their identities: the same oppressive gendered borders of the built environment can also be enacted outdoors, particularly through structured activities like sports. This was further articulated by Izz who recreated a lake where they would row and described it as *"a very gendered sport"*. But, unlike Morgan, Izz had a very supportive coach who demonstrated a softness that they did not often see in men.

Despite the sometimes harmful gendering that can happen in outdoor sports, participants demonstrated that when the outdoors was not being segregated by gender, its possibilities for self-discovery and self-acceptance were abundant. Kae had experiences of the outdoors that allowed her get outside of the limits of what was otherwise expected of her as someone assigned

female at birth. Kae had one brother and three boy cousins and she remembered feeling and being treated like *"one of the boys."* Together by the lake they would be *"building sandcastles, jumping off the dock, swimming around, playing games with water guns…[and] running around in our swimsuits."* In her sand tray, Kae recreated a bay where she was taken as a kid. She remembered playing on rocks, and enjoying climbing while parents drank coffees and minded their own business. People would dig into the hillside and bring in swings. She described it as a *"a constant shifting playground of a beach"*.

**Figure 5**

*Alex's Sand Tray of the creek in the forest near their grandparents' home*



Alex was emphatic about the importance of the outdoors as being a place away from assumptions about binary gender, and away from the prying eyes of adults. When I asked them why they recreated the woods in their sand tray (Figure 5) they said:

> *because it's away from humanity. It's away from this society that I need to fit in one way or another. It's, ah, I can be on my own, I can be whatever I want to be, whatever I feel I am. Rather than how others perceive me. Um, later when the gender dysphoria [showed up], it always was more [from] how other people put me into a specific category than an inherent issue with myself. It's…the social construction of gender is what gets me.*

Understandably, being told as they got older that they could not be out alone, go too far away, or be out late because their family thought they were a girl, was deeply upsetting when it was this very freedom and access to nature and the outdoors that allowed them to escape the confines of "girl". While no participants stated that the indoors were less desirable because they were a site of greater surveillance, both Kae and Alex brought up the reduced surveillance of adults in the outdoors as appealing. I think the ubiquity of an interest in outdoor spaces and the conspicuous absence of stories that involve adult observation in these spaces further suggests that there was a feeling or actuality that there was less scrutiny outdoors and I suspect that may have contributed to a greater feeling of freedom to explore gender and sexuality.

Denver told me that that being in nature was *"the only time that I felt I was free of expectations."* and he felt that nature provided a *"different language"* through which his gender could become legible, and that it was the only place he could be *"truly free"* of the social and cultural noise that got between him and feeling self-actualized in his gender. Denver was the most explicit in describing how the outdoors was not only a place that allowed for exploration of gender, but was pivotal in them realizing they were trans:

> *I remember writing a story about how the only time that I felt I was free of expectations was when I was in nature. And like hiking and no one around. I've re-found it a few times and reread through it and gone, "yeah! Denver, this is you saying that you're trans," you*

*know? Just in different language but being in nature and around the mountains was the only time I felt truly free from it all.*

When the constructed world around you (institutions, classrooms, bedrooms, bathrooms, closets) is built in ways that are hetero and cisnormative and deny or resist your existence, I can see how the outdoors, with the permissive wisdom of the natural world, would be a space that becomes an important locus of self-actualization.

**Conclusion**

In this study, the participants' interviews and sand trays clearly illustrated how gender failure, adult relationships, and both the indoors and outdoors were important factors in queer identity development. Participants demonstrated how queer failure's eventual success is a queer kind of success. Queer children who go on to be queer adults do not eventually succeed in a culturally appropriate or normative ways, insofar as our failures do not eventually bring us into alignment with the promised "good life" (Ahmed, Queer phenomenology: Orientations, objects, others, 2006, p. 21) of being cisgender or heterosexual. Adult support to that failure was shown to be impactful on participants' mental health and the development of positive self-regard as queer adults. Furthermore, access to non-gender segregated outdoor spaces was shown to be important to queer self-discovery and self-acceptance.

# Chapter 5: Implications and Conclusion

This study investigated (1) how and where queer young adults remembered playing and exploring gender and sexuality in their child and youthhoods, and (2) how those memories influenced their identities as queer young adults. To answer these questions, I recruited eight young adult participants with whom I conducted narrative interviews and had them recreate in sand trays places where they explored gender and sexuality in their childhood and youthhoods. The data were then analyzed using thematic analysis to generate the following three key findings:

a) Queer failure was a critical, formative process that contributed to the reorienting of queer children and youth towards queer futures.
b) The way queer failure was responded to by significant adults had enduring impacts on participants' self-esteem and self-regard.
c) Access to the outdoors provided a meaningful locus of self-discovery wherein the limitations and structures of gender were less omnipresent.

In this chapter I will discuss the implications of these findings, and provide specific recommendations for how we can better support queer children and youth based on participants' testimonies. I have organized the recommendations around the central idea of making space for queer failure in three key areas: in the home, in organized sports, and in schools.

## Making Space for Queer Failure

The participants in this study demonstrated that queer childhood failures at hetero- and cisnormative gender and sexual expression are not simply failures, they are the work of becoming a queer adult. Queer failures were formative steps that oriented participants towards a

queer life and all the pains and joys that entails. This demonstrates how the existence of gender is not inherently harmful, but the policing of its borders by adults and systems resulted in ongoing distress for participants. However, when queer failure was caringly supported, it appears to have resulted in the participants later expressing a sense of pride and comfort in their queer identities as adults. This leaves us with an important question: how do we make space for queer play and failure in ways that are supportive and caring?

### *At Home*

Denver and Alex were emphatic that it is important that we not only accept non-normative gender interests in children but that we celebrate and encourage them to compensate for the ongoing projects of hetero- and cissexism. The participants in this study demonstrated how making sure children and youth have queer affirming adults in their lives has the potential to reduce not only anguish in the child and teen years, but possibly also mental illness and poor self-regard in adulthood. The home is a critical space where this kind of support can be demonstrated. There is existing evidence that the presence of a single affirming adult significantly improves the mental wellbeing of trans and nonbinary youth (Veale et al., 2015), and the results of this study and others (Fuller, 2018) point towards the possibility that these impacts apply to many queer identities and are enduring, extending at least into young adulthood. Furthermore, the literature supports allowing queer, trans, and gender expansive children to socially transition (Ehrensaft et al., 2018), and trans and nonbinary youth to access gender affirming hormones (Clark & Virani, 2021; Green et al., 2022; Riggs et al., 2020). This is born out in the data from this study by participants describing the importance of being allowed to explore gender identity and presentation, including through dress-up, toys, clothing and hair. This includes all body hair, and applies equally to haircuts as well as to the power of allowing

older youth to access gender affirming hormones or puberty blockers that can aid in the development or prevention of facial and body hair (Ashely, 2019). I think it is no accident that Denver and Basil both told me that it is important for queer children and youth to hear that they are loved: if we can build up all children with a foundation of knowing they are loved and knowing that their interests and ways of moving through the world are worthy of celebration, then we are equipping them to fail with confidence.

Participants identified the following as helpful actions caregivers can take to better support queer children and youth:

a) Morgan, Alex, Kae, Izz, and Denver all encouraged caregivers to verbalize and demonstrate that they are always happy to talk about any topic that is important to the child.
b) Izz, Basil, and Denver said that engaging children and youth in discussions about queer people, and caregivers making it explicit that they are affirming of trans, nonbinary, and queer identities would be helpful to queer children and youth.
c) Access to queer books, TV, and film media was identified by Denver, Izz, Helena, Kae, Alex, and Morgan as important to queer children and youth. This is supported by existing research (McInroy & Craig, 2017) and suggests that making sure children and youth have easy access to queer media is important. Caregivers and their children watching television and film with queer characters was also and identified by Denver as useful for starting conversations about queer people and demonstrating affirming attitudes from caregivers.
d) Galen, Morgan, Alex, and Kae felt that showing interest in and approval of children and youths' diverse interests was important. Kae and Morgan also felt it was important to

affirm to children that, though it can be challenging to be different, it is still worthwhile to be yourself and express your interests.

e) Denver, Alex, Helena, Basil, Kae, Galen and Izz all shared how appearance, including clothing and hair, was an important part of their gender exploration. This demonstrates that it is important for caregivers to allow young people to play with, style and/or cut their hair in the ways they want to, and to provide access to a variety of clothing for both dress-up and regular wear.

f) Alex and Basil demonstrated how assumptions around the vulnerability of girls and young women can cause youth assigned female at birth to have their worlds made smaller and more restricted than their peers who are thought to be boys. Given the impact participants said access to the outdoors had on their ability to navigate and explore gender, in addition to the existing literature on the myriad physical, mental, and social benefits that unstructured outdoor play has for all children (Frampton et al., 2014), it is important that caregivers offer children and youth of all genders access to unstructured, expansive, outdoor space and time.

***In Sports***

While Izz and Denver both found freedom and validation through sports, that was not true at all times, nor for all participants. Sexist coaches, gender segregation, and bullying impacted participants in ways that made sports unsafe places to be young and queer. Sports being unsafe to queer people is a documented phenomenon (Clark & Kosciw, 2022) and Denver, Morgan, and Kae all exemplified this. While Denver loved sports and they were an important part of his child and youthhood and gender expression, they were also a locus of gender scrutiny and bullying. Morgan's experience of sports was significantly negatively impacted by a sexist

coach who made her feel like an outsider on a co-ed team where she was the only girl, and also in instances when she was segregated from playing with her friends because of her sex. Kae had enjoyed spots as a child, but after puberty her relationship to sports changed, in part because of the kind of femininity she felt was expected of her within the context of gender segregated sports. The desegregation of sports has been shown to reduce men's stereotypes about women (Anderson, 2008), increase women's pride and self confidence (Cohen et al., 2014), and could have potentially mitigated some of the factors that drove Kae away from sports.

Denver and Izz's stories of largely experiencing support and feeling affirmed through sports demonstrates the importance of sports for may queer children and youth. This drives home the point that challenging deeply held and self-perpetuating sexist, cissexist, and homophobic beliefs among players and coaches alike (Fink, 2016; Keats, 2016), and keeping sports inclusive and safe for young queer people, has the potential to appreciably improve experiences of gender affirmation through play.

The following are some ways we can keep sports inclusive and safer for queer children and youth:

a) Morgan and Kae recommended we avoid segregating sports by gender, particularly in younger age groups.
b) If teams are segregated, existing research demonstrates the importance of always allowing children and youth to play on the team they feel most comfortable with, regardless of sex, gender, or gender expression (Acklin, 2017).
c) Morgan and Kae's experiences remind us to treat all players equally, regardless of sex, gender, or gender expression

d) Ensure sexism and cissexism among players and coaches are addressed and mitigated. Challenging prejudice among players may be best performed by coaches who, in turn, may benefit from education on how they can challenge their own internalized beliefs about gender. For school coaches, this could include the same kinds of training that, as is described in the next section, I recommend teachers in schools should receive. Outside of schools, coach training becomes less centrally regulated and more challenging. I suggest professional sports associations take it upon themselves to require training for their coaches on sexism, cissexism, inclusion of queer players, and how to challenge discriminatory behaviours among players.

***In Schools***

The classroom can be a place of intense gender scrutiny and segregation by peers and educators alike (Payne & Smith, 2013). However, because of our ability to implement structural, regulatory, and curriculum changes, schools and classrooms are also rich with possibility for creating meaningful changes that could better support queer children and youth.

Recalling Basil's reflection on the way poverty limited their access to gender diverse toys and dress-up, we can see how the classroom can function importantly as an equalizing space where we can ensure children of diverse socioeconomic backgrounds can access gender diverse play. Because of the greater scrutiny children face in a setting like preschool versus the home, it is also important that caregivers and educators go beyond merely tolerating gender transgressive play to actively inviting it. As Alex, Morgan, and Denver all point out, it is important to go beyond mere tolerance to get ahead of both gender policing by peers and the self-surveillance "that assures the automatic functioning of power" (Foucault, 1979, p. 201) and maintenance of normative gendered behaviours.

One way of encouraging the disruption of hetero- and cisnormativity in the classroom is through hiring queer teachers. This was born out in this study, with several participants identifying having queer teachers as important. Helena reflected on how gendered systems, like the school system in her high school years, and her lack of a close parental or adult bond as significantly contributing to her experience of depression. Stemming from this, she identified the presence of queer adults, including teachers, in children's lives as being a recommendation for improving the experiences of young queer people. Galen also identified a need for queer teachers and other significant adults who are available to youth as role models, recalling her own experience of the first adult she came out to being a queer homeroom teacher. Denver sensed support from two lesbian teachers though that support was demonstrated subtly; meanwhile, Kae was not overtly aware of having queer teachers at the time, but knows now that a few were and looking back she thought that those teachers were looking out for and encouraging the queer kids. What I think is important to note here is that, even in the absence of teachers being openly queer or overtly supportive, simply knowing that there are or were queer teachers when they were growing up remains meaningful for some queer young adults.

Given the results of this study indicating the impact a supportive adult has on queer children and youths' positive or negative self-regard and mental illness, in addition to research that cites family support and safe schools as important to trans and nonbinary youth mental health (Taylor et al., 2020) it is clear that ensuring there are supportive adults in queer young people's lives is important. While broad cultural shifts towards destigmatizing and celebrating queer identity are happening in some circles, we ultimately cannot control the attitudes of caregivers. What we do potentially have control over is whether the majority of children and youth will encounter supportive adults through the school system and other systems that interact

with children. An effective way of ensuring this could be by making gender and sexual minorities an employment equity group. This would allow schools and other employers to deliberately hire queer teachers and caregivers, thus ensuring the majority of queer children and youth would have access to safe, queer adults.

I have identified the following recommendations for ways that schools and educators can better support queer children and youth, based on participant recommendations as well as my interpretations of their testimonies and sand trays:

a) Drawing on the rationale described above, advocate for the inclusion of gender and sexual minorities as an employment equity group and deliberately hire queer teachers.
b) Kae, Galen, Basil, Alex, Denver, and Izz felt it was important to make sure classroom environments and curricula encourage and celebrate gender diverse play.
c) Morgan advised avoiding gendered language (rather than saying “boys and girls,” use alternatives like “children” “class,” or “everyone”).
d) Denver and Galen recommended gently challenging children and youth’s assumptions when they are enforcing cis- and heteronormativity, or policing gender. Denver recommended centering love and kindness with younger children when addressing these issues, and Galen reminds educators to engage those kids who are policing gender in ways that are supportive because they could be struggling with internalized transphobia or homophobia.
e) Alex, Denver, Galen, and Basil recommended supporting educators in receiving education that allows them to address their own assumptions about gender and sexuality. This is supported by research that indicated that teacher’s beliefs about gender influence their instructional practices (Stevens & Martell, 2016).

f) Based on the repeated emphasis all participants placed on the importance of the outdoors on their ability to explore gender and sexuality, I propose that it would be beneficial to ensure students have access to unstructured outdoor time. This adds dimension to existing research that supports the social and pedagogical importance of unstructured, outdoor, play for all children (Waite et al., 2013).

g) Alex, Izz, and Helena all spoke to the importance of queer media and Alex was explicit about how meaningful it would be to have age-appropriate queer books and other media in classrooms.

**Conclusion**

In response to a dearth of literature about queer childhood play, this study provided a look into how and where some queer young adults remember playing and exploring gender and sexuality in their child and youthoods. Because of the generous testimony of participants, we now have insight about how memories of queer play shapes queer young adult identity development and how we can best support young queer people in growing into young adults who have a sense of pride in their identities, loving relationships with significant caregivers, and rich memories of childhoods in which they had space to queerly explore and grow with care.

In a world often set on reorienting queer children and youth towards the promised "good life" (Ahmed, 2006, p. 21) of cisgender heterosexuality, this study demonstrates how those attempts to steer queer young people away from queer play can negatively impact them both in the moment and have long reaching effects on their mental health and self-esteem as queer young adults. The participants demonstrated how playing queerly through such means as gender transgressive dress-up, fantasy play, and toys were all important parts of the etiology of their queer adult becoming. Participants also shared how access to certain spaces, in particular

unregulated outdoor ones, offered possibilities for escaping the confines of the built environment and all the gendered expectations it carries. Several participants spoke to how understood they felt by the outdoors, and how it allowed them to escape the limitations of gender in ways that were not otherwise available to them. Finally, and I think most critically, was the finding that what seemed to have the most enduring impacts on self-esteem, mental health, and positive or negative self-regard as a queer young adult was related to whether participants had a significant, supportive caregiver in their life who was affirming of their queer failures, explorations, play, and identity. From these findings, the participants have offered us insight into how we can provide the most helpful and meaningful support to queer children and youth as they journey through queer play, failure, and becoming.

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# Appendices

## Appendix A

Example Questions for Participants (as submitted to HREB)

Notes: (1) participants will be invited to bring any objects or image from their child and youthhoods that they feel are significant to the ways that they played or explored gender and sexuality. (2) The below **questions will serve as a guide** but the interview will be semi-structured and open to conversation and questions that arise based on the participants' responses.

*Establishing Identity*

1) How would you describe your gender identity and sexual orientation?

2) At what age did you begin to have sense of your queer[3] identity (minority gender and/or sexual identity)?

3) Were there any particular moments that you recall that made you contemplate that you might be queer?

4) At what age did you "come out" (disclose to others) as queer? How did you come out and to whom? Was the coming out voluntary or were you "outed" or come out under duress?
   a. *If there is a discrepancy between when the participant realized they were or might be queer and when they came out, my follow up question would be:* what do you think led to there being a gap between when you realized you were queer and you coming out?

*Exploration of Gender and Sexuality in Child and Youthhood*

1) Did you engage in any exploration of gender or gender expression as a child or youth?
   a. *If yes:* In what ways (activities, behaviours, with whom, with what)?
   b. *If yes:* How did you feel about that exploration at the time? How do you feel about it now?
   c. *If yes:* Were you ever ashamed of or uncomfortable with the way you explored gender as a child or youth?
      i. *If yes:* who or what do you think contributed to you feeling that shame?
      ii. *If no:* what do you think prevented you from feeling shame or discomfort?
   d. *If no:* did you wish you could have explored gender as a child or youth?
      i. *If yes:* why didn't you explore gender at that time?
      ii. *If no:* why are you happy to have not explored gender at that time?

2) At what age did you first become aware of yourself as a sexual being?
   a. How did this awareness occur?

[3] The participant's specific word(s) for describing their gender and/or sexual minority identity will be used throughout. *Queer* is being used as a stand-in for the purpose of these questions.

3) Did you feel that you engaged in any sexual exploration as a child or youth?
    a. *If yes:* In what ways?
    b. *If yes:* How did you feel about that exploration at the time? How do you feel about it now?
    c. *If yes:* Were you ever ashamed of or uncomfortable with the way you explored sex or sexuality as a child or youth?
        i. *If yes:* who or what do you think contributed to you feeling that shame?
        ii. *If no:* what do you think prevented you from feeling shame or discomfort?
    d. *If no:* did you wish you could have explored sex or sexuality as a child or youth?
        i. *If yes:* why didn't you explore sex or sexuality at that time?
        ii. *If no:* why are you happy to have not explored sex or sexuality at that time?

**Arts-Based/Sand Tray Activity to Expand on Above Questions**

4) Can you please describe the items from your child or youthhood that you brought with you today?
    a. Why did you choose these objects?
    b. How did you use these objects or what do they represent?

5) Where did you explore gender or sexuality when you were a child or youth?

6) I want to invite you to use the art materials provided here to recreate one of the places you just described. You are also welcome to integrate the items you brought into the
    *Available art materials would include a sand tray as well as some combination of cardboard, plain and patterned papers, plasticine, pencil crayons, and markers. Conversation would occur during and after art creation.*
    a. Can you describe this place to me?
    b. Why did you choose this place over all the other places you could have chosen to create today?
    c. Who (if anyone) occupied this space with you?
    d. In what ways did you play or explore in this space?
    e. What feeling(s) does this space conjure for you now?
    f. Other than this conversation now, do you ever think about this space?
    g. Can you show me (by creating a figure, pointing, or verbally describing) how you used this space as a child or youth?
    h. Who (if anyone) oversaw your play or exploration of gender and sexuality in this space?

7) Beyond what we have discussed so far, what kinds of play or exploration of gender and sexuality did you engage in as a child or youth?
    a. With whom did you play?
    b. Who oversaw your play?
    c. Do you think your play was in any way "queer"?

*Possible Closing Questions*

8) Did you ever feel that the way you played or explored gender or sexuality was different than other children or youth?

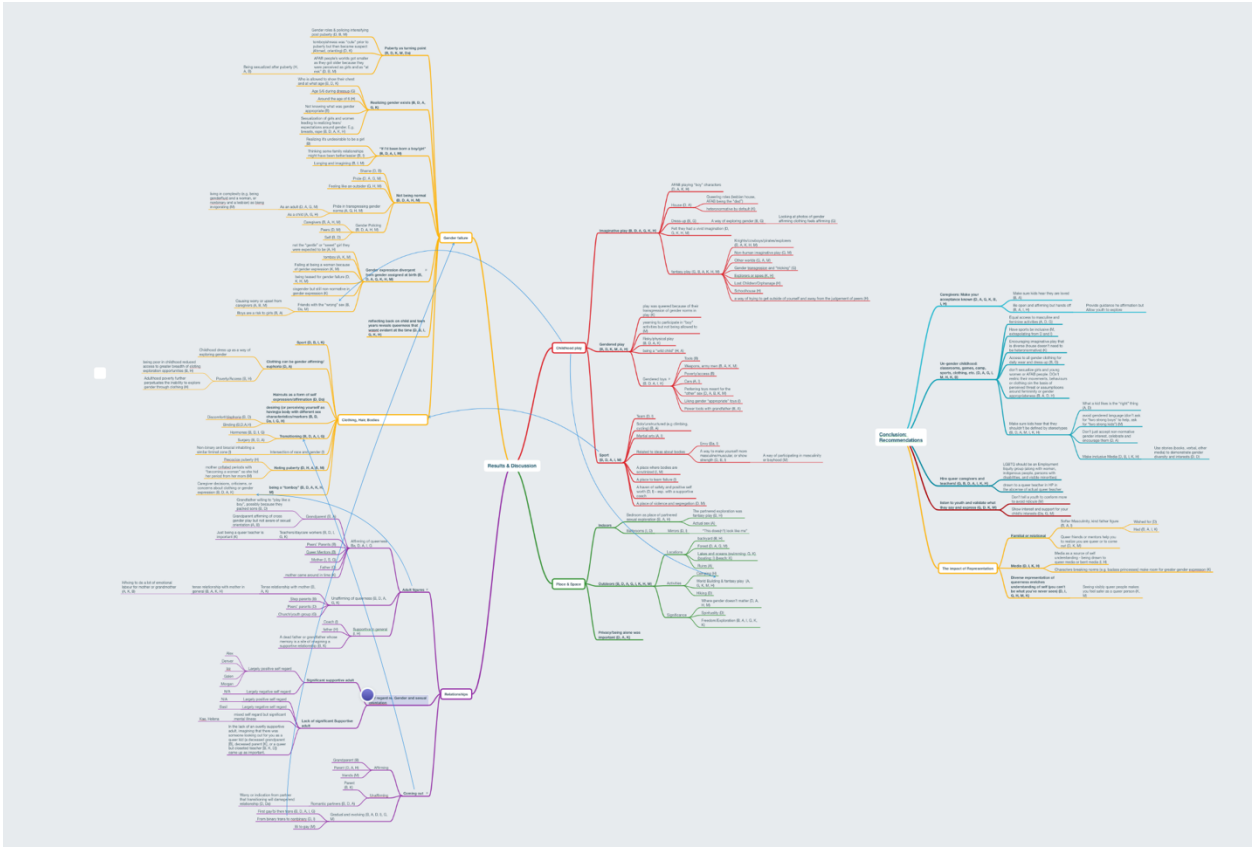
   a. *If yes:* is the fact that you feel it was different important to you?
   b. *If yes:* do you think that difference has carried on into adulthood?

9) Was there anyone or anything in your life as a child or youth who you felt was supportive of your queer identity? If so, how did they/it support you?

10) Do you think that your current understanding of yourself as queer was influenced by your play or exploration of sexuality and gender in your child or youthood?

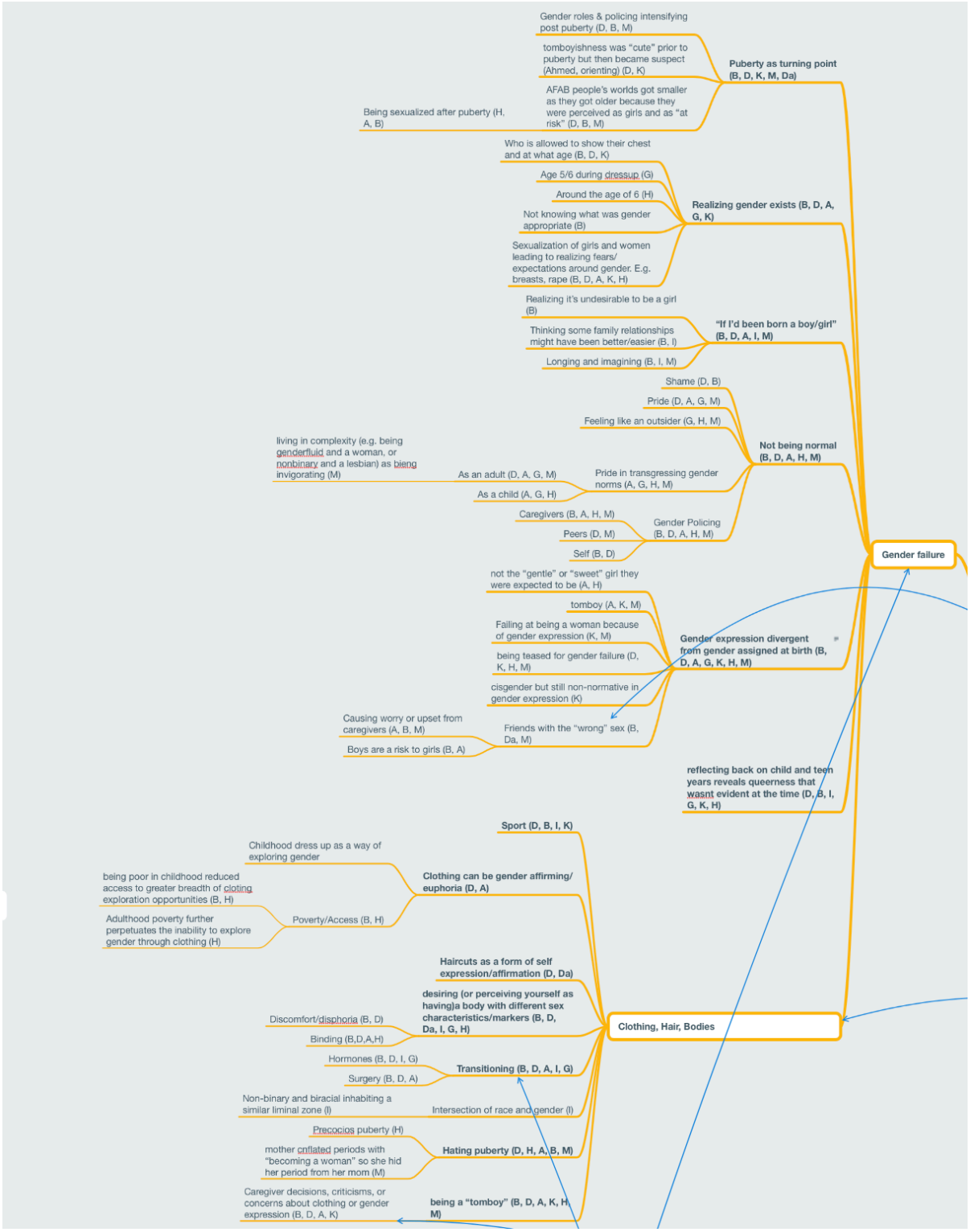
## Appendix B

*Complete MindNode mind map*



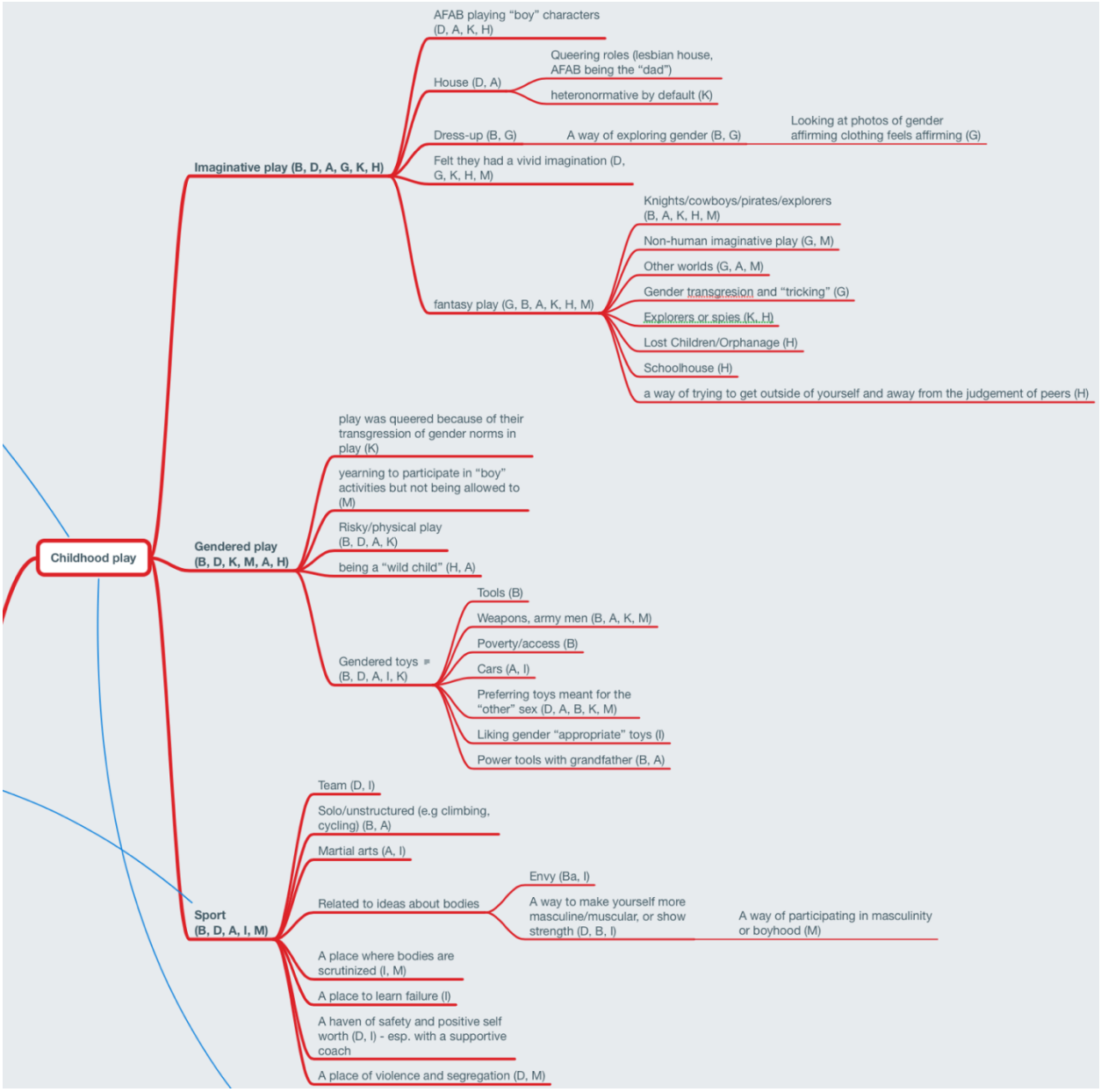
## Appendix C

*Gender failure data in MindNode*



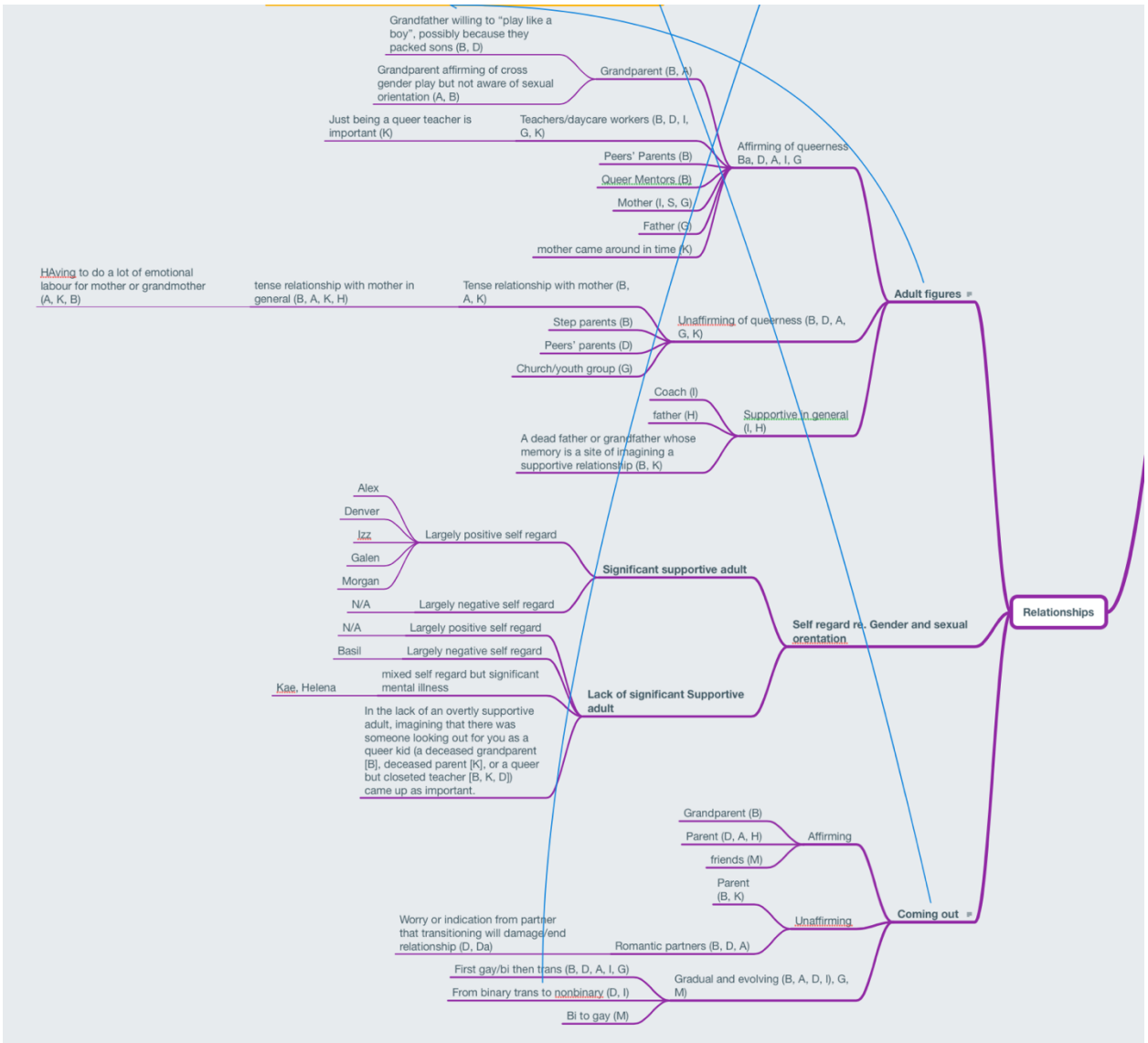
## Appendix D

*Childhood play data in MindNode*



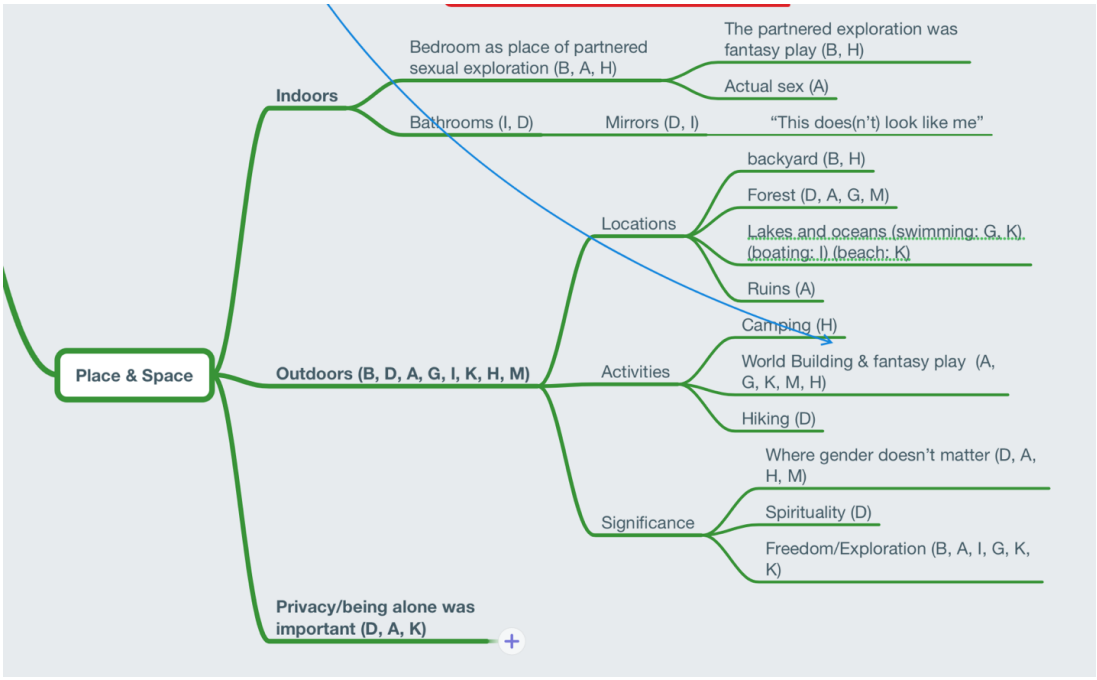
## Appendix E

*Relationships data in MindNode*



## Appendix F

*Place & spaces data in MindNode*



## Appendix G

*Recommendation data in MindNode*