

## *Caregiver perceptions of the value of play for early childhood development: Lessons from a needs assessment conducted in three low-income areas in Johannesburg*

### **Summary**

It is widely accepted that play (beginning in early childhood) is essential for the social, emotional, cognitive and physical wellbeing of children. However, play is given very little attention and recognition in early childhood development (ECD) policies and practice. In cognisance of this neglect, the Play Every Day Project (a partnership between the Sesame Workshop and the LEGO Foundation) is currently being implemented in India, Mexico and South Africa to unlock the potential of children through play. This project is aimed at helping children become creative, lifelong learners by unlocking the power of play to create transformative, hands-on learning experiences. In order to inform the development and implementation of the project in South Africa, the Research

Use and Impact Assessment Unit (RIA) of the Human Sciences Research Council (HSRC) was contracted to conduct a needs assessment in 2016. This policy brief is based on this assessment and focuses on gaining an understanding of caregivers' perceptions about the significance of play for their children's development, as well as the factors that constrain their capacities to engage their children in developmentally meaningful play activities. Caregivers expressed both positive attitudes (including the view that children learn problem solving and self-regulation through play) and negative attitudes (including the view that adults do not need to play with children because children can play on their own). They further believed that the main reason why some parents do not have positive conceptions of play is because of ignorance and lack of education or

because they do not have time. Based on this, this brief includes policy recommendations aimed at informing the inclusion of play as a substantive component of the curriculum at both ECD and basic education level, given its value in enhancing children's learning experiences.

## Introduction

Play has long been recognised as essential for the cognitive, physical, social and emotional well-being of children (Milteer, Ginsburg & Mulligan 2012). As early as 1826, German educator Friedrich Froebel (one of the pioneers of early childhood educational reform) remarked that "...play is the purest, most spiritual activity of man... It gives joy, freedom, contentment, inner and outer rest, peace with the world. Play is the highest phase of child development..." (as cited in Lin 2009: 1). For these reasons, children's right to play, recreation, leisure, art and cultural activities is set out in Article 31 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC), as well as Article 12 of the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child (ACRWC) (Talbot & Thornton 2009). In South Africa, Chapter 26 of the Children Act 28 of 2005 explicitly highlights the significance of play. In addition, the National Plan of Action (NPA) 2012–2017 on Play, Sports and Leisure of the former Department of Women, Children and People with Disabilities, in conjunction with the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), was aimed at encouraging and resourcing play activities for children and adolescents through the national school curriculum (Republic of South Africa 2012).

Despite its demonstrated value, not all parents view play positively, nor do they actively engage in play with their children (Lin & Yawkey 2013). In addition, various factors serve as barriers to the ability of poor parents in particular to fully exploit the development potential that play holds for their children. It is

widely accepted that poverty and its multiple associated risk factors seriously impact children's life chances. According to Mathers et al. (2014), growing up poor typically means access to poor housing, higher crime and violence rates, poorer quality childcare, and restricted schooling and outdoor play facilities. Furthermore, research has shown that the stress associated with a life of poverty can reduce parental responsiveness and warmth, and increase inconsistency in routines and disciplinary practices (Bornstein & Bradley 2003). Poverty, therefore, negatively impacts relationships and learning experiences at home, including play activities, which are known to be linked to positive child development outcomes. Yet Mathers *et al.* (2014) remind us that poverty does not necessarily equate to poor parenting and that parental practices have significant power to protect children from the negative effects of a life of poverty.

This policy brief draws on a needs assessment that the Research Use and Impact Assessment Unit (RIA) at the Human Sciences Research Council (HSRC) was contracted to conduct in 2016 in order to inform the development and implementation of the Play Every Day Project in South Africa. It focuses on caregiver attitudes towards play and their perceptions of the significance of play in ECD, as well as the factors that constrain their capacities to engage their children in developmentally meaningful play activities. Based on this, it sets out policy recommendations for the inclusion of play as a substantive component of the curriculum at both ECD and basic education level in order to enhance children's learning experiences and yield positive learning outcomes.

## Contemporary theories of play

A number of theories seek to explain the role of play during various life

stages and with regards to different aspects of child development. Most notable is perhaps Freud's *psychoanalytic theory* of play, which essentially sees the function of play as that of helping the child cope with negative feelings emanating from unpleasant or traumatic events (Freud 1961). However, Erikson's (1950) *psychosocial theory* highlights the role of play in reflecting children's psychosocial development. Cognitive theorists such as Piaget (1962) assert that children engage in certain types of play that match their current cognitive developmental level (Saracho & Spodek 1995), and in the process practice and master newly acquired skills needed for human life (Johnson, Christie & Yawkey 1999). In stressing the influence of socio-culture on children's development, Vygotsky (1978) proposed the concept of a *zone of proximal development*, which is the intermediate space between *actual development* and *potential development*. Play is seen as promoting childhood development by acting as a scaffold within the child's zone of proximal development, thus helping them to attain higher levels of functioning (Vygotsky 1978).

## The role of culture and the impact of parental perceptions of and attitudes towards play

Research suggests that cultural and ethnic backgrounds impact the value that parents attach to play for childhood development (Lin & Yawkey 2013). Thus, in line with Western individualism, parents in the United States tend to believe in the ability and independence of children and are therefore inclined to provide them with the freedom to demonstrate their inherent characteristics as well as natural ability (Rudy, Grusec & Wolfe 1999). In contrast, people from Eastern countries such as China rather emphasise the importance of academic achievement and regard play as a waste of time (Chao 1994). Furthermore, Rubin, Fein

and Vandenberg (1983) observe that parents' perceptions of and attitudes towards play impact maternal play behaviours and the social environments they choose to establish for their children. Thus Farver and Wimbari (1995) determined that Indonesian mothers who viewed play as valuable in keeping children happy, occupied and easy-going engaged in a higher proportion of cooperative social pretend play compared to mothers who believed that play is not significant in developing intelligence and social skills. What all this demonstrates is that parents from different cultures have diverse perceptions of how children grow and learn, and these perceptions inform their attitudes towards play.

## The Play Every Day Project

The Play Every Day Project, a partnership between the Sesame Workshop and the LEGO Foundation, is currently being implemented in India, Mexico and South Africa. The project is aimed at helping children from poor backgrounds become creative, lifelong

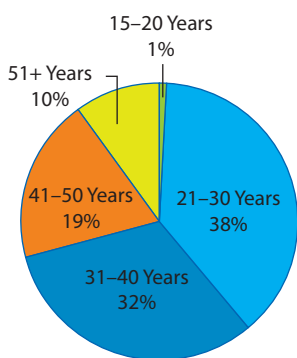
learners by unlocking the power of play to create transformative, hands-on learning experiences. The project is underpinned by the belief that it is essential for all children to grow up in environments that nurture their natural curiosity to learn through engaging and meaningful interactions with caring adults. The project ultimately aims to increase parents' awareness about the importance of guided play for children's development, and to build parents' capacity for engaging in play.

In order to inform the development and implementation of the project, needs assessments were conducted in each of the implementing countries, with RIA conducting the needs assessment in South Africa in August 2016. This was done at three ECD service providers in Diepsloot, Protea South and Meadowlands (three historically disadvantaged areas in Johannesburg). Amongst others, the objective was to assess parents' understanding of the value of play and examine the barriers to play that they encounter in their daily lives. In Diepsloot, 48 participants were

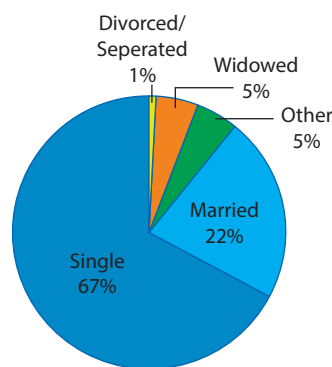
accessed through Afrika Tikkun (an NGO that provides education, health and social services to children and youth, and their families, through centres of excellence in South African townships). In the remaining two geographical areas (Meadowlands – 23; Protea South – 14), participants were recruited through Cotlands, which is a non-profit ECD organisation. Both organisations gave formal permission for the needs assessment to be conducted, while ethical clearance was provided by IRB Solutions, an external reputable ethics review organisation.

The data were collected by means of a demographic questionnaire as well as an interview protocol (see the pie charts below for the caregiver demographics). Of the 85 caregivers, only two were fathers. Almost half of the interviews were conducted in English (44%). The others were conducted in Zulu (16%), Sepedi (6%), with the rest (34%) code switching between English and either Sepedi or Zulu. The interview data were subjected to both qualitative and quantitative analyses. SPSS was used

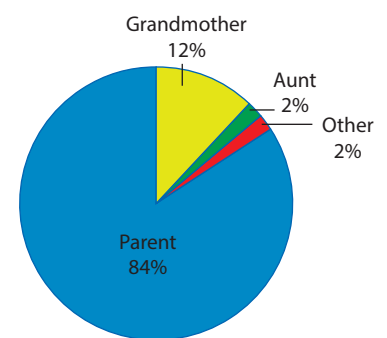
**Figure 1:** Caregiver age



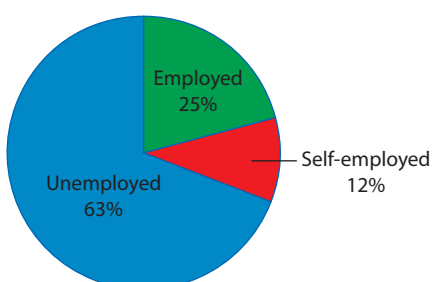
**Figure 2:** Marital status



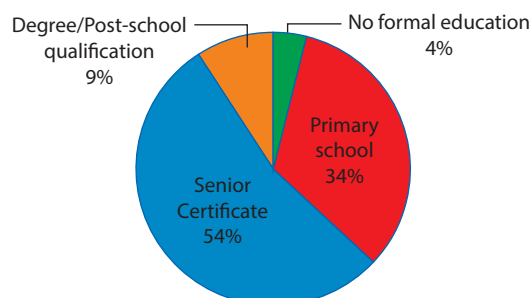
**Figure 3:** Relationship to child



**Figure 4:** Employment status



**Figure 5:** Education level



to generate descriptive statistics in the form of frequencies and percentages for close-ended and Likert scale questions. Open-ended questions were subjected to thematic analysis.

## Main findings

The study showed that parents value and understand the importance of play for their children, with 83% holding this view. For many parents, the importance of play derives from the learning that takes place when children engage in it. Some of the advantages of play that were recurrent in the data from parents were:

- *It signals the health state of the child, refreshes the mind and helps the child to learn.*
- *Children learn a lot by playing.*
- *When they play, they learn to speak other languages.*
- *When they play, their minds become fresh.*

Although parents appreciate play for the learning potential it has, they distinguish this from and view it as less important than more formal kinds of education. Thus most parents (87%) regard studying as more important for the child than play. The following quotations from parents' data illustrate this point.

- *School work is more important than playing.*
- *Studying is more important than play.*
- *Play is more important than doing chores.*
- *Books are more important than playing.*
- *I think studying is more important than playing.*

When asked what they thought children learn when they play, the majority of the parents responded that children either learn to relate with others (46%) or they learn language and communication skills (39%) when they play.

- *She learns to be friendly with others, and she learns other languages.*

- *He learns to interact and he learns to speak in other languages (e.g. learned Sotho from friends).*
- *He learns to speak many languages.*
- *I think they learn how to behave with other people.*

In response to what they thought children learn when they play with them, 53% of the parents responded that children only learn literacy and numeracy, while 36% felt that the children learned only language and communication skills when their parents play with them. The remaining 11% believed that children learn literacy, numeracy and language when their parents play with them.

- *He learns letters, associations with names, colours.*
- *I teach her how to talk to people.*
- *I teach good language and not to insult and use bad language.*
- *He learns how to read and write.*
- *We count together and she learns numbers.*

When asked what they thought children learn when they play with their peers, 72% of the parents responded that children learn language skills and interpersonal relationships when they play with peers.

- *She learns to interact; he learns language. (Learned Sotho from friends.)*
- *He learns to be involved with others.*
- *He learns how to treat others well.*
- *He becomes strong and to stand up for himself because he plays with bigger boys.*

In addition to the above, the parents were asked a number of Likert-scale questions to shed further light on their attitudes towards play. As shown in Table 1 on the following page, most of the parents strongly agreed that they enjoy playing with their child; that their child learns language when they play; and that play helps them bond with their child. There was less agreement on whether there are more important

things than play. Also, many parents noted that they did not have enough toys and resources for play. Another interesting finding is that some parents think that adults should not interfere with children while they play.

The caregivers were also asked questions aimed at gauging what they perceived to be the main reasons why parents do not play with their children. The overwhelming majority (87%) believed that the main reason why parents generally do not play with their children is because they are either tired or they have no time. They attributed both of these to the fact that working takes up much of parents' time, thus leaving them with little time or energy for their children. Others (13%) believed ignorance and lack of education to be a main stumbling block.

- *There is not enough time because they are coming from work,*
- *They are busy because they are working,*
- *Sometimes they come home tired after work, but a parent should make time for their kids,*
- *They say they don't have time because they work,*
- *Some of them are uneducated and ignorant.*

## Recommendations

Given the demonstrated value of play as perceived by parents and caregivers, and as evidenced in the literature, it is important that play is incorporated in the learning activities of children. In particular, efforts should be made to ensure that in ECD centres, children are exposed to guided play targeted at stimulating specific learning outcomes. It is therefore recommended that:

1. Most children spend some of their time at ECD centres under the guidance of caregivers. Therefore, as part of their training, caregivers should be exposed to specialised training on a) the value of play as a

learning instrument; b) how to use play as a stimulant of learning. This will equip them with the requisite tools to unlock the potential capabilities of children.

2. All the ECD centres that were used as sites for this study did not have the necessary facilities to use as children's play facilities. It is recommended that standard play facilities should be made a requirement for the registration of an ECD centre and that the Department of Social Development (DSD) monitor the availability of such facilities in ECD centres periodically.
3. There did not seem to be any uniformity in the curriculum or the activities in the different ECD centres that were chosen as study sites. It is recommended that the curriculum be standardised and that play be included as a substantive

component. In particular, caregivers should be assisted to have planned, guided play activities with a learning purpose.

4. Parents and caregivers at home play a big role in the development of the child. It is therefore recommended that workshops be held for parents to make them aware of the value of play as a learning activity, the importance of improvising with available materials to create toys and the value of playing with one's child.

It is envisaged that with the proper training of caregivers and parents, and the provision of playing spaces and facilities for children, the learning experiences and outcomes will be realised. The collaboration of the DSD and the Department of Basic Education on issues surrounding the value of play in childhood development will also yield

positive outcomes since ECD centres are essentially a preparatory phase for basic education.

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**Table 1:** Parental attitudes towards play

	strongly agree	somewhat agree	neutral	somewhat disagree	strongly disagree
Children learn language when they play.	94%	6%	–	–	–
Children learn imagination and creativity when they play.	94%	6%	–	–	–
Playing together helps me bond with my child.	94%	2%	–	1%	2%
I enjoy playing with my child.	93%	7%	–	–	–
Children learn social skills when they play.	89%	11%	–	–	–
Children learn important skills when adults guide them in play.	83%	9%	4%	–	4%
Children learn problem solving when they play.	82%	8%	3%	1%	6%
Children learn self-regulation when they play.	80%	8%	4%	–	8%
Adults should play with young children often.	79%	13%	–	5%	4%
Studying is more important than playing.	74%	11%	2%	2%	11%
Playing keeps children busy and out of the way.	74%	8%	2%	1%	14%
I ask my child lots of questions when I play with him/her.	70%	13%	5%	6%	6%
Children should play with other children – learn important skills when adults don't interfere.	54%	12%	4%	1%	30%
There are more important things for the child to do than play.	38%	12%	4%	6%	40%
My child has enough toys and objects to play with.	29.8%	21%	4.8%	4%	40%
Adults don't need to play with children – they can play on their own.	19%	6%	5%	6%	64%
Playing feels like a waste of time for my child.	5%	1%	–	4%	90%
I don't have time to play with my child.	5%	–	4%	8%	83%
I don't really know how to play with my child.	3%	1%	1%	7%	88%

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