

A STUDY ON KNOWLEDGE, ATTITUDES AND PRACTICES OF PARENTS/PRIMARY CAREGIVERS WITH CHILDREN FROM BIRTH TO SIX YEARS OLD REGARDING THE IMPORTANCE OF PLAY IN EARLY LEARNING: EXECUTIVE SUMMARY



impact

consulting

maximising positive
social impact



basic education

Department:
Basic Education
REPUBLIC OF SOUTH AFRICA



basic education

Department:
Basic Education
REPUBLIC OF SOUTH AFRICA

Written by:

**Jerushah Rangasami, Gill
Naeser, Linda Biersteker**

Statistician:

Nelius Boshoff

Fieldwork team:

**Gabrielle Jonker, Gill
Naeser, Linda Arnott,
Lindiwe Farlane, Lindy
Dlamini, Matipa Ndoro,
Paddy Nhlapo and Patsy
Pillay**

Support from:

**Deborah Pavlou, Simon
Sender and Bridget Savage**

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This report would not have been possible without the assistance of the following ECD service providers and community organisations:

Centre for Early Childhood Development
Centre for Social Development (Rhodes University)
Custoda Trust
Do More Foundation
Hope Worldwide SA
Khanimamba Training and Resource Centre
Lulamaphiko
Masiphumele Neighbourhood Watch
Midlands Community College
New Beginnings ECD
Ntataise
Overberg ECO Rangers
Realeboga-Bakubung Training and Development Agency
Sikhula Sonke Early Childhood Development
Ubunye Foundation

We would like to give heartfelt thanks to the service provider staff and other key informants at a local and national level, for their time, hospitality and valued input. Finally, and most importantly, we thank the parents for opening up their hearts and thoughts to us and sharing their invaluable insights.



Report produced by Impact Consulting (www.impactconsulting.co.za)

All rights reserved. No part of this report may be reprinted or reproduced or utilised in any form or by any electronic, mechanical, or other means, including photocopying and recording, or in any information storage or retrieval system, without permission in writing from UNICEF and Impact Consulting.

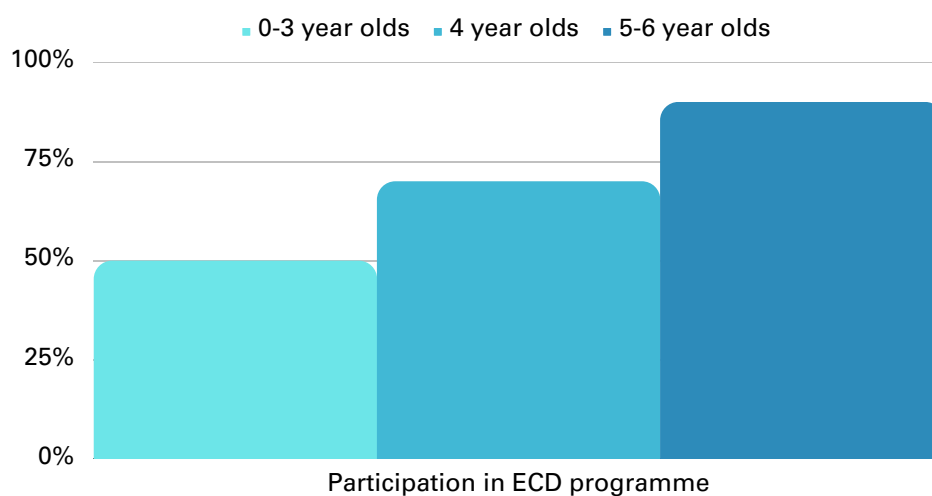
A STUDY ON KNOWLEDGE, ATTITUDES AND PRACTICE OF PARENTS/PRIMARY CAREGIVERS WITH CHILDREN FROM BIRTH TO SIX YEARS OLD REGARDING THE IMPORTANCE OF PLAY IN EARLY LEARNING

A report by Impact Consulting presented to UNICEF South Africa and the Department of Basic Education.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

South African ECD policies and curriculum highlight play to promote early learning. These also emphasise the role of parents in supporting the development of their young children, which is essential as the home learning environment accounts for a large proportion of child educational performance, whether or not they attend an ECD programme. In 2020, more than 50% of children from birth to four years old stayed at home with parents or guardians. Approximately 30% of birth to three year olds, 70% of four year olds and more than 90% of five to six year olds participated in an early learning programme (including Grade R).

Neuroscience explains that playful experiences enhance learning, including executive functioning skills. Play also promotes social interaction with caregivers and peers which develops language, cooperation and social learning in young children, and helps them to practise self-regulation. Parental wellbeing and mental health, and hence responsive caregiving, is enhanced through playful interactions with young children.



IMPACT OF HOME ENVIRONMENTS ON PLAY AND LEARNING

The influence of children's home environments and parenting practices are well established. Parent and child interactions in the first few years are especially important for early language, cognitive, and socio-emotional development and early grade school performance. Parents' time spent playing with young children is limited: local studies indicate significant proportions of parents never engage in reading or telling stories or singing to their children], drawing and colouring, counting, or playing with blocks or puzzles. This indicates a clear need to change prevailing parenting practices so as to support early learning.

OVERVIEW OF THE STUDY

This national study was commissioned to determine the current parent knowledge, attitudes and practices about play in early learning for children from birth to six years old to inform an evidence-based approach to supporting the implementation of early learning programmes in South Africa.

A mixed methods design was utilised, which included:

- a rapid literature review
- mapping of current parenting programmes
- reflective participatory workshops
- quantitative and qualitative data collection and analysis during site visits in nine provinces
 - focus group discussions and interviews
 - a parent survey administered by trained local fieldworkers
- participatory design and analysis sessions with the study steering committee for the study

A total of 1429 participants were involved in the study:

- **Total parent surveys: 1088 (a nationally representative sample)**
- **Total focus group participants (parents, local leaders): 310**
- **Total key informant interviews (national and provincial ECD and parenting programme providers): 31**

 **1088**

Total surveys

 **311**

Total focus group participants

 **31**

Total key informant interviews

PARENT KNOWLEDGE, ATTITUDES AND PRACTICES ABOUT PLAY IN EARLY LEARNING

Knowledge

Study findings substantiate that the importance of play is not widely understood. Parents viewed their responsibilities largely in relation to the child's needs for health, nutrition, protection, self-care and socialisation. They understood that play helped the child bond with the parent, and that a range of adults and other children should play with young children. Parents gave examples of playful interactions during care routines. Singing, drawing and playing games were seen as avenues for learning. Respondents noted the role of culture and traditional games in teaching "identity and respect".

'Learning through play' was understood mostly in relation learning socialisation skills. Attending 'creche' was seen as the avenue for educational learning. Many parents believed that children learn through technology, especially watching television (cartoons) and playing on cellphones.

The link between learning and play in other developmental domains was not well understood, especially not how play influences learning of emergent mathematics and early literacy. Understandings that children play for leisure on their own or with other children were prevalent; however, only two thirds of parents knew that young children could be learning when playing on their own.

Attitudes

Parents' values and goals for child development influence child behaviours and have implications for programmes aiming to promote particular parenting practices. In this study, responses to the attitude scale were overwhelmingly positive. 92% agreed that it was important to play with your child, that it promoted bonding (97%), that they looked forward to it (89%), that it was fun (96%), that adults should play with children (89%) and that it was not only a woman's role to play with the child (90%). Only 20% believed that boys and girls should play different games. More than three quarters (78%) of parents believed in letting children have some choice in what was played. Some parents indicated that children should be doing chores rather than playing; 84% agreed that including children in household tasks could be seen as play. These attitudes provide a useful basis for promoting play though efforts are needed to build a better understanding of the importance of play for learning.

SINGING,
DRAWING
AND
PLAYING
GAMES WERE
SEEN AS
AVENUES
FOR
LEARNING

POSITIVE
PARENT
ATTITUDES
ARE NEEDED
TO BETTER
UNDERSTAND
THE
IMPORTANCE
OF PLAY FOR
LEARNING.

BOUGHT TOYS
WERE
AVAILABLE IN
68% OF
HOUSEHOLDS.
43% OF
HOUSEHOLDS
HAVE NO
BOOKS. LESS
THAN 20% OF
HOUSEHOLDS
HAVE PUZZLES/
CONSTRUCTION
TOYS

71% OF
CHILDREN
REGULARLY
WATCH TV OR
VIDEOS ON A
PHONE OR
DEVICE

52% of parents believed in learning through instruction and it was commonly believed that learning takes place at school/creche, not at home. A concern was that children from birth to two years old were considered too young for books and play. Attitudes to technology varied, though there was some general awareness of potential damage from unregulated exposure to media. Respondents felt that screen time should be limited for the children from birth to two years old as it prevented socialisation.

Practices

In common with many African contexts, play was largely polyadic (children playing with other children) especially in rural areas, and physical care and socialisation were parental priorities in the early years. This indicates that not enough adult/child play was taking place. Not having time to play with the child was a reported constraint for nearly a third of parents, more so for three to six year olds. However, only 7% of parents said that neither they nor any household member played with the child at all, 35% indicated someone had played only once or twice, and 59% reported that a young child had been played with “many times”. Siblings and mothers most often engaged in play.

Children play with other children in mixed age groups. Different kinds of play included exploratory play by younger children, some ‘educational’ play materials, active physical play, fantasy play with dolls and wire cars and numerous games with rules.

Bought toys were available in 68% of households. Singing and physical play between adults and children was most common (close to two thirds). There was significantly less engagement on early literacy and numeracy development. Less than a third told stories or read books. 43% of households have no books. Less than 20% reported puzzles or construction toys.

While 25% of children had access to electronic devices and only 20% listened to children’s radio, 71% watched TV or videos on a phone regularly. This presents an opportunity for educational programming, but a concern for exposure to inappropriate content, and limited active and mediated play and reading of stories.

Playing indoors for safety reasons was emphasised. Outdoor play needed to be supervised. Indoor play lent itself to technology or TV watching, which was prevalent in all areas. This was found to have eroded active, exploratory play.

CONTEXTUAL ENABLERS AND BARRIERS FOR PARENT MEDIATED PLAY IN EARLY LEARNING

Focus group discussions with parents and service providers highlighted some pointers for interventions to promote learning through play, but others highlighted broader support that parents need so that they can engage confidently and responsively with their children, and highlighted the resources needed to enable this.

Several factors were surfaced which provide a good foundation for developing a culture of playful learning for the future, including positive parent attitudes with regards to playing with children, and availability of certain play materials. In intergenerational and larger households, there were multiple carers including siblings who played with children. Access to media and television was extensive, and, judiciously used, is an opportunity for advancing learning through play.

However, findings indicate serious challenges to learning through play from the broader environment. Lack of social cohesion and safe spaces for young children to play severely restricts play opportunities. Most children (76%) play inside. Only half played outside and 38% at neighbours. Only 16% accessed an ECD programme. Indoor play involves more sedentary screen-based activities. A lack of puzzles, conceptual games, drawing materials and books is a challenge. Time-poor parents are often isolated and lack confidence in their parenting. A significantly higher percentage (one third) of parents over 40 years old reported being too busy to play, though they were still more likely to spend time playing with their children than younger parents (under 25 years old).

Programmes for parents: what works

Well designed, parenting programmes have been shown to positively change parenting behaviours. A database of 100 parenting programmes was developed through this study, and in-depth information collected on 37 programmes who offer content on play in early learning. Offerings included book sharing, home visiting, toy libraries, workshops and mobile ECD services. Some have an age focus or target groups such as fathers, young parents or parents of children with special needs. Most were offered face to face, though there are some Parenting Apps. Providers reported that supporting parents and sharing practical activities to do with children enhances parents' confidence to engage in play with their children. Implementation is sustained when adults and children attend programmes together. Peer group support for parents was shown to be valuable, and parent stress levels reduced when parents played with their children.

WHAT IS NEEDED TO ENABLE PARENTS TO PROVIDE LEARNING THROUGH PLAY EXPERIENCES FOR THEIR CHILDREN?

Parenting behaviour change would be supported by:

- Promotion of learning through play through local champions and communication campaigns at all points where parents of young children gather, and in the media
- Provision of accessible book and toy libraries
- Creation of safe play spaces in communities
- Encouraging safe and appropriate play in the home
- Psychosocial support for parents.

While some structural and systemic changes are needed through multi-stakeholder solutions, there are good foundations in place for improving parents KAPs for play-based learning. This is very encouraging for the young children of South Africa.

**To read the full report, visit
www.unicef.org/southafrica**