

PLAY FOR EARLY CHILDHOOD DEVELOPMENT

Dr Cyril Adonis and Dr Konosoang Sobane reflect on the importance of play in contributing to development of children.



Child playing in park.
Credit: HSRC Communication and Stakeholder Relations

Play is an innate childhood instinct that is not only enjoyable, but also essential to the social, emotional, cognitive, and physical wellbeing of children. Internationally, 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 (CRC), as well as Article 12 of the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child (ACRWC). In South Africa, Chapter 2 of the Children’s Act (2005) highlights the significance of play. In addition to this, the National Plan of Action (NPA) 2012-2017 on Play, Sports and Leisure aims to encourage and resource play activities for children and adolescents through the national school curriculum. Despite this commitment, play does not appear to be integrated in the formal school curriculum in South Africa.

The Play Every Day Project

To address these shortcomings, Sesame Workshop with funding from the LEGO Foundation, developed *The Play Every Day Project*, which was implemented in India, Mexico, and South Africa. The project aimed at helping children become creative, lifelong learners by unlocking the power of play to create transformative hands-on learning experiences. Furthermore, the project aimed to increase parents’ awareness about the importance of guided play for

children's development, and build parents' capacity for engaging in play. In order to inform the development of the project, needs assessments were conducted in each of the implementing countries. During the second half of 2016, a team from the HSRC's Research and Impact Assessment Unit (RIA) was contracted to conduct the South African needs assessment.

The needs assessment was aimed at:

- learning more about families' access to materials and media, which can support play;
- understanding the role of play in children's lives;
- assessing parents' understanding of the value of play;
- examining barriers to play.

Workshops were conducted at three early childhood development (ECD) centres in Diepsloot, Protea South, and Meadowlands. The study targeted children aged between three and six years who attended the ECD centres, as well as their parents. In total, 85 parent-child pairs participated in the study. Data was collected through a demographic questionnaire, as well as a parental and a child interview protocol.

Results

A significant proportion of parents confirmed that they have children's books (53%), and art and craft materials (60%) at home. The majority (70%) did not have toys or other learning materials. The most widely owned media device was a TV with over 80%, and the least owned was a tablet with a little over 20%. Smartphone and TV usage were the highest for both parents, and children. Parents also valued the role of play in providing the foundation for the realisation of the dreams they have for their children. In addition, they distinguished

between learning through play and formal education. They believed that the main reason why some parents do not hold positive conceptions of play is because of ignorance, lack of education, or because they do not have time. Parents further had positive attitudes towards play, including that adults should play with children often; and that children learn problem-solving and self-regulation through play. Negative attitudes include the view that adults don't need to play with children because children can play on their own; and that play keeps children busy and out of the way.

Because of limited physical living spaces, children tend to play outside rather than inside. As a result, they risk being knocked over by cars. The children's explication of the indoor and outdoor play routines were similar to that of their parents. There were clear child gender differences in terms of toy and game preferences. While 75% of the children have siblings, most of them preferred friends as play partners. Most of them (76%) also listed their mother as the likely parental play partner. In addition to this, many of the children seemed to lack imagination when it came to what they could do with some of the play objects they were presented with.

Implications for programming

The needs assessment findings highlighted the fact that parents need to be educated on the importance of play, and how to exploit objects around them for the benefit of their children's development. Parents would also benefit from training aimed at helping them engage their children in pretend play, particularly as it relates to their future professional interests. Given the high TV, DVD, and smartphone ownership, these devices would be the most ideal avenues through which video content could be consumed.

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The programme should aim to counter the misconceptions that parents have around play and the implications it has for early childhood development, while also reinforcing the positive attitudes that parents have. It should emphasize the importance of quality rather than the quantity of the play interaction; and it should focus on promoting play activities that are not physically demanding in order to bridge barriers attributed to lack of time, exhaustion, and ignorance. In addition, the programme should make provision for safe outdoor play and focus on the development of group play activities, as well as activities that can be pursued individually.

Conclusion

Informed by the results and recommendations of the needs assessment study, the Play Every Day Project was developed through a series of play workshops. The project piloted two play workshops in Orange Farm in November 2016. On the basis of the evaluation of these workshops and the needs assessment, Sesame Workshop developed a series of play workshops. These were to be implemented in three phases, i.e. the Prototype, Alpha, and Beta phases, during the course of 2017 in preparation for scale-up to reach 2000-2,500 families during its lifetime.

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