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# INTERVENTION RESEARCH ON CHILDREN'S FREE PLAY: PARENTS' PERSPECTIVES

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REPORT SUBMITTED TO PLAYRIGHT CHILDREN'S PLAY ASSOCIATION



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SEPTEMBER 29, 2021

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## **Executive Summary**

This study was undertaken in Hong Kong, in which the influence of the COVID-19 pandemic on people from all walks of life was evident. Various preventive measures were enforced, including the closure of many outdoor playgrounds and suspension of face-to-face contact in schools. These preventive measures impacted children because of the restrictions on their use of public facilities for leisure activities.

Playright has always promoted free play in Hong Kong and had considerable concerns about the impact of the pandemic on children's play. In this regard, Playright developed a free play protocol that was implemented either in self-organized programmes or in partnership with some kindergartens. Against this backdrop, this study examined the evidence-based outcomes of the protocol.

### **Research Objectives**

The study aimed to examine parents' perceptions of free play, parents' engagement with their child in free play, and the possible influences of free play on parents' mental health and parent-child relationships. Specifically, this study aimed to address research areas, including 1) parents' perceptions of free play; 2) parents' engagement in free play with their children; 3) barriers and difficulties faced by parents in engaging in free play with their children; 4) the outcomes of free play, specifically on parent-child relationships and parents' mental health.

## **Methodology**

Part A of the study investigated the effectiveness of the PLAYBAG intervention protocol<sup>1</sup> in three kindergartens. Target participants were parents who participated in the PLAYBAG programme in these three kindergartens. A mixed-methods approach was adopted to collect quantitative pre- and post-intervention data by questionnaires capturing parents' perceptions of free play, their engagement with their children in free play, their mental health and their relationship with their children. Parents participated in focus group interviews to inform understanding of their engagement in free play with their children. Thematic analysis was employed to analyze the data from the focus group interviews.

Part B comprised a cross-sectional and quantitative investigation of parents' perceptions of free play, their participation in free play with their children and their relationships with their children. Target respondents were parents involved in the 'Playright Home Play Box' and 'Medical Play Experiential Box' activities organized by Playright between April 2020 and May 2021.

## **Findings**

Part A confirmed the evidence-based effectiveness of the PLAYBAG intervention protocol

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<sup>1</sup> Contents of PLAYBAG intervention protocol include: 1) Parents session which introduce project background, values of free play and how to make use of the provided resources (Play Bag and Play Diary) to engage children in free play; 2) Offering each child a Play Bag which contains unstructured play materials for parents and children to enjoy free play at home and school; 3) Providing a Play Diary for parents to record their reflection and observation when they engage with their children in free play; 4) Teachers trainings which educate teachers' knowledge and skills to engage their students in free play in schools and to provide necessary support to parents in this protocol.

in terms of enhancing parents' perceptions of free play, fostering positive parent-child relationships, and promoting parents' mental health. In addition, more than 80% of parents agreed that their child spent more time on PLAYBAG and other free play activities at home and that they had increased confidence engaging in free play activities with their child.

Regarding the intersection of parents' perceptions of play and socio-demographic background, Part B found that mothers were more inclined to endorse play freedom than fathers. Fathers embraced play safety more than mothers. Compared to parents with a tertiary or university education, parents with senior high school or below education were more inclined to endorse parental rules, play safety, gender stereotyping, and the importance of structured play and were less inclined to support imaginative play. In terms of play freedom, no significant difference was evident between parents with different levels of education. Parents in full-time employment were less inclined to support parental rules in play. Compared with parents of primary school-aged children, parents of children in kindergarten were less focused on parental rules when engaging in free play with their children. Regarding living space, parents living in confined accommodation were much concerned about safety problems when engaging in free play with their children.

This study also examined the intersection of parents' perceptions of play and parent-child relationships. Closer parent-child interaction and more positive parent-child relationships as a whole were evident among parents who endorsed play freedom and imaginative play. More conflict in parent-child relationships was observed when parents emphasized play safety and gender stereotyping in children's play. Investigation of the relationship between parental

perceptions of play and the average time spent in free play revealed that parents who endorsed play freedom, imaginative play and children's choices allowed their children to spend more time on free play.

This study found that children spent more time in free play with their mother than their father. It identified parents' long working hours, children's rest schedules, and limited indoor space as the three most important barriers impacting parents' engagement in free play with their children. Parents considered female children's rest schedules the most influential factor affecting free play. Parents of primary school-age children considered the amount of homework as the most influential factor in free play. Parents who emphasized play safety were more likely to consider limited indoor space and difficulty balancing responsibilities as factors influencing their engagement in free play with their children. Moreover, parents who embraced play safety were more inclined to impose rules and regulations on their children in free play. This posed a dilemma for parents in balancing the roles of discipline enforcer and playmate.

The focus group interviews provided a fruitful insight into understanding parents' participation in free play with their children. Four essential elements were identified that facilitated meaningful interaction between parents and children in free play: 1) an egalitarian and non-judgmental attitude, 2) the quality of encounters with children in free play, 3) discoveries about their children, and 4) sustaining new meanings of their children's identity.

## **Recommendations**

The results of this study generated the following recommendations:

1. Enhancement of the PLAYBAG intervention protocol to address the specific needs of parents from different socio-economic backgrounds. For instance, parents' sessions for fathers, parents with full time employment, parents with children from different age groups etc. Contents of parents' sessions could provide more solutions to tackle the dilemmas faced by parents when engaging in free play with their children. More scenarios regarding possible ways to use the unstructured play materials in free play could be added in the parents' sessions.
2. Parental education on free play should be widely implemented in kindergartens and schools through collaboration among different stakeholders in the community, echoing a recent proposal "Curriculum Framework on Parent Education (Kindergarten)" published by the Education Bureau. Parental education on children's free play might include, principles and benefits of free play, effective ways to engage children in free play, creating quality free play time in families, co-parenting perspective of engaging fathers and mothers in free play.
3. Promotion of free play to the general public, in particular to generate understanding of the importance of free play, positive outcomes regarding enhancement of mental health and parent-child relationships, should be emphasized in community education programmes. The pandemic seriously affected parents' and children's mental health and well-being, and free play in the home and school environment helped relieve stress and anxiety and enhance family bonding.
4. The barriers to children's engagement in free play should be removed. Home-school

collaboration needs to be strengthened to enhance parents' and children's creativity, participation, and collaboration in free play activities. Teachers' training regarding free play implementation in school settings are recommended. Policies to streamline the amount of homework given to children and the development of a child-friendly free play school environment are advocated.

5. Creating an innovative child-friendly free play environment should be promoted through collaboration between different stakeholders in the community. Apart from improving the designated playgrounds provided by Housing Authority and Leisure and Cultural Services Department, different community stakeholders could work together to create various doorstep, indoor or outdoor play space for children and their parents to have free play in safe environment.
6. Last but not least, consideration should be given to empowering children's voices to co-create a free play environment. Different models or tools for children's participation should be adopted to fit various needs of children. Moreover, trainings are also required for the adults to listen, collect and respect children's voices in regard to those child-related issues.