![Save the Children]

LET'S PLAY!
SAVE THE CHILDREN AND PLAY:
GUIDANCE NOTE

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The **LEGO** Foundation

CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

"We live a captive life here. We cannot do anything we want to do. We cannot play here, there is no football and there is not enough space for us to play. I want my old life in Myanmar back."

Rohingya Boy, 11–14 years old, Kutupalong Camp, Cox's Bazar, Bangladesh

1 INTRODUCTION

" **Play should be seen as an essential tool to solve obstacles – there are so many. Play helps us learn and lets us have fun, relax and also get to know each other**"

Olivia, 11 years-old, Mexico

The purpose of this guidance note is to provide a framework and guidance for Save the Children's work with play. It focuses primarily on our programmatic work with children, from babies to adolescents[1] and provides content for advocacy work. The final section looks to spark a conversation around play and our organisational culture: the role it might have for staff engagement and development, and to support child and youth participation at the organisational and governance level.

The guidance note provides:

- A definition of play and the characteristics of quality play.
- A conceptual framework consisting of the right to play, learning though play, and resilience through play.
- Rationale and evidence supporting the power of play.
- Signposting for where to go for more resources, examples and guidance on how to integrate play into our work.

Woven throughout are programmatic and technical examples of play within Save the Children's work, including opportunities for integrating play and playful approaches.

This guidance note is for a wide range of Save the Children staff and partners – those working on programmes, advocacy and coordination in all countries and all contexts – sudden onset emergencies, to longer term protracted crises and development and peace contexts.

First and foremost, we hope that this note inspires Save the Children staff when it comes to the power of play. It aims to provide the evidence base as to why play is important; to spotlight existing good practice; and to signpost practical ways for Save the Children staff to consider integrating play into their work where it is felt it could add value and lead to better child learning, development and wellbeing outcomes and realisation of their rights.

WHAT'S IN A WORD?

As we age, the word play itself may feel inappropriate. Many of us think of toys, building bricks and small children when we hear the word play. Whilst we continue to use play throughout this guidance note, it may be that other words/ paraphrases are more appropriate as we think of older children, adolescents and adults, such as hobbies, what you like to do in your free time, to relax etc.

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1   We are flexible with age ranges here – and fully recognise the importance of play for all, from the youngest children, through adolescence and youth, and into adulthood. However, we have mainly focused here on the 0-18 age-range – and will often use the term 'children' for simplicity

KEY TAKE-AWAYS

- There is a lot of play within our work, but this often isn't recognised or celebrated.

- And so…let's talk about play – be proud of and celebrate play, rather than dance around the edges!

- What makes play different from everything else is that it is driven by intrinsic motivation, with a large dose of agency. Whilst many of Save the Children's activities are playful – the majority are very structured and there is a lack of opportunities for children to really decide what and how they want to play (or to learn, to develop). The linked resources throughout this guidance are there for inspiration – but the challenge is to see how they can be made even more playful (thinking about and applying the six characteristics of play – especially child agency). This should be our challenge!

- That said, safety is of the utmost importance – there is most definitely a place for adult facilitation; however, this should respond to the needs of children – and we really do need to know when to take a step back and allow children freedom, choice and voice.

- The biggest barrier to play is often the adults – teachers, parents/ caregivers…Save the Children staff. As adults we have forgotten, or neglected, or don't realise, the power of play. First and foremost, we need to believe in the right to play and that play contributes to learning and resilience. We need to provide the rationale for play – and allow ourselves and our partner staff to explore and play with play.

- Look at the 'So what…?' section for ways in which you could integrate play into your work – whether it's assessing needs, designing a project or a training, carrying out MEAL activities or even thinking through strategic approaches.

WANT TO KNOW MORE?

All the documents in the reference section are super interesting, but for an initial dive into play, we would suggest the following as a good starting point:

- ***Playing through crisis: lessons from COVID-19 on play as a fundamental right of the child.*** The International Journal of Human Rights, DOI:10.1080/13642987.2022.2057962. Casey T & McKendrick JH, 2022.

- ***Pretend Play as Culturally Constructed Activity,*** in Marjorie Taylor (ed.), The Oxford Handbook of the Development of Imagination, Oxford Library of Psychology (2013; online edn, Oxford Academic, 1 Aug. 2013), Gaskins S, 2013. https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780195395761.013.0016.

- ***Learning to cope through play: Playful learning as an approach to support children's coping during times of heightened stress and adversity.*** The LEGO Foundation, DK. Lynneth Solis , Liu CW & Popp JM, 2020.

- ***Learning through play: A review of the evidence (white paper).*** The LEGO Foundation, DK. Zosh JM, Hopkins EJ, Jensen H, Liu C, Neale, D, Hirsh-Pasek K, Solis SL, & Whitebread D, 2017.

- ***Let's Play: Behavioral Edition*** – Save the Children International, 2023.

"Play is the only language children speak. And we must all learn that language."

Rehnuma Akhter, Save the Children Bangladesh

2. WHAT IS PLAY?

BRAIN BREAK!

Close your eyes. Can you remember your favourite childhood game? When and where did you play? Who did you play with – was there a favourite person or people? Did you also enjoy playing by yourself? How did you feel when you were playing? What made play different from other aspects of your life – schools, chores? Do you have chance to play now as an adult? If so – what does that look like and feel like?

Open your eyes. Play is personal, and it can take on many different forms. That said, play is universal, and it is a unifier – it cuts across cultures, tasks, thematic areas – and it is children's way of exploring the world. Children themselves may not play to develop – but child development and play cannot be separated.

Play is universal – a favoured and sought-after activity for children the world over and has been observed in every society and context (Gaskins, 2013; Gosso, 2013). Play is children's spontaneous way of exploring and learning about the world – it centres around intrinsic motivation and often brings joy and/ or escapism. It is the natural, self-driven way children use their curiosity and imagination. Humans are not the only species to play. Many animals are observed to play, not least as it helps them practise valuable skills and form relationships with their peers and families. In the same way, children around the world play as a way to rehearse different roles, ways of communicating and activities they see around them and that they will grow up to do in the future (Gaskins, 2013). Play also has benefits for children's development. Children learn cognitive skills such as concentration, learning, memory, language and attention, fine and gross motor skills, as well as social and emotional skills. Play can be an important way that children in difficult circumstances explore emotions and experiences and communicate feelings and thoughts. Play deprivation, when children are restricted in their access to play, is known to have serious impacts on social, emotional, cognitive, and behavioural development into adulthood. For example, observations in Cox's Bazaar highlighted primary-aged children playing games that usually would have been played by toddlers. Play will look different for different age-groups, and certain types of play, such as playing with objects or pretend play, are associated with developmental milestones. There are also different types of adult-engagement in play, including free play (where children are completely in control, and adults are there to ensure safety) and more structured play with a purpose (where adults may set rules and have a larger role).

For Save the Children, play is a wide range of activities and behaviours that harness children's **intrinsic motivation**, promote their **agency** and **active** participation, are culturally and socially **relevant**, allow for **iteration**, are often **social** and **fun**. Play is a right and contributes to outcomes linked to all three of our breakthroughs: learn, survive, protect.

All children have the right to play, and whilst it is often more obvious for younger children, it is important to recognise that all children, and indeed youth and adults, need time and space to play.

For Save the Children, play is integral to quality programming in children's homes, communities, formal and informal learning spaces, and safe spaces – as well as in other places they may find themselves, such as health centres, distribution centres and clinics.

Children's access to and experience of play differs enormously and play often faces similar barriers to other rights Save the Children strives to protect – barriers associated to gender, age, socio-economic status, disability, perceived value. A 2022 Save the Children staff survey identified a number of different barriers to engagement with play including low prioritisation and understanding of the value of play by parents/ caregiver, decision makers, lack of materials, lack of staff training and/ or experience with play, and lack of safe and appropriate spaces for play.

2.1 THE IMAGE OF THE CHILD

How do we view children? How we think about play also reflects our perceptions of children. Each and every one of us will have a different picture of what a child 'is' in our own heads – and this will be based on our own experiences, as well as cultural and societal influences and expectations. Is a child an empty vessel, and our job as adults is to fill that vessel with knowledge and ideas? Does a child already have intelligence, ambitions, ideas, experiences, relationships, emotions; and our job as adults is to help create an environment where children can explore, develop, and build on these to flourish – to be in charge of their own development? Does it depend on the age of the child? Whether they are a boy or a girl? Whether they come from an educated background, or a home where parents/ caregivers are not able to read or write? Whether they have a physical disability or are neurodivergent? Whether they are in a stable and peaceful environment or in the middle of a crisis?

At Save the Children, our vision is a world in which every child attains the right to survival, protection, development, and participation. Our Ambition for Children 2030 promises to build a better world for and with children where they can thrive; we promise to amplify the voice of children, and to collaborate with children to share knowledge, influence others and build capacity to ensure children's rights are met. Our image of the child is one that is empowered, full of capacity and potential, through the realisation of their rights.

What has play got to do with all this? Play and children are inseparable – children simply cannot help playing. Rudolf Steiner said 'Play is the work of children. When children play, they are experiencing the world with their entire being.' One way to look at play would be to see it as children researching. They are researching the world around them, and through that process they are always learning something. As adults, we sometimes tend to believe that we know children, when in fact, we need to observe and listen to children to know when they are happy, sad, distracted, engaged, frustrated – and that we learn as much from children as they do from us. Championing play is crucial if we want to live up to our vision and ambitions for children.

Source and further reading: Reggio Emilia Approach

"The thing I like the most is to play – the adults should always allow us to play."

Boy, 3 ½ years old, Za'atari Refugee Camp in Jordan

Credit: Save the Children Uganda

2.2 AGE AND PLAY

PLAYING FOR BABIES

- Babies especially like games such as peek-a-boo, singing, objects to grab, objects that make sounds
- Even newborn babies like to play. Stick your tongue out at a newborn and see what happens!
- Babies will start to use their whole body (starting to crawl and roll around) to learn about themselves, other people, and the world around them
- Play = parent/ caregiver and baby bonding – a baby's favourite thing to play with is their caregiver!

PLAYING FOR TODDLERS

- From one year – language development
- Continue to use all their senses to explore their world
- Very curious
- Start to build simple things and use objects in make-believe play
- Mobile – balancing, climbing, hiding – important not to interfere unless in danger
- Play = individual, with adults, but also starting to socialise with peers

PLAYING FOR THREE- TO FIVE-YEAR-OLDS

- Increase in playing with peers – less dependent on caregivers
- Enjoy making more complex things – as well as taking them apart again – this is all part of the fun
- More complex linguistic skills = more complex symbolic games, fantasy games and dramatic play
- All helps with coordination and cognitive development, as well as empathy and emotional awareness

PLAYING FOR FIVE- TO EIGHT-YEAR-OLDS

- Skilfulness in sports, music, art, theatre and dance
- More independent and able to problem solve
- Can engage in more complex and interactive construction projects with peers
- Play = more imaginative and potentially more physical (e.g., rough and tumble)

PLAYING FROM EIGHT TO 12 YEARS OLD

- Continued creativity – e.g., making up songs and dance, building and making things.
- Growing sense of logic: play may be more organized and orderly - may prefer sports and games with rules.
- Social acceptance is very importance: hanging out with friends = play

PLAYING FOR ADOLESCENTS

- Also need play and to have fun
- Friendship groups are often the most important part of life
- Play = hanging out with friends – without being told what to do
- Play = also sports, expressive arts, computer games, board games and cards
- Play = online. Helps to feel connected. Open discussions really important (addictive nature to gaming/ social media, digital safety)

PLAY FOR ADULTS

- Play doesn't end with adulthood
- Same holistic benefits continue – connecting with others, enjoyment in the process as well as the outcome, deciding how we want to spend free-time
- Without play, emotional and physical wellbeing decline, as stress and boredom levels rise

Sources and further reading:

Children's Development and wellbeing: https://resourcecentre.savethechildren.net/document/childrens-development-and-wellbeing-e-learning/
Playful Childhoods: https://www.playfulchildhoods.wales/how-children-play-at-different-ages
Heather R Hayes: https://www.heatherhayes.com/the-importance-of-play-for-adolescents/
The Adolescent Brain: https://www.unicef-irc.org/adolescent-brain

2.3 PLAY AND CULTURE

Play is universal, however, like every human activity, it is shaped and impacted by cultural contexts (Gosso and Carvalho, 2013). It can be valued as important for holistic child development by adults and where adults can engage in playing with children; it can be seen as something spontaneous that only children do, with no role for adults; it can be seen as something just for children, but is seen as not being important and therefore limited due to other priorities – or a combination of all of the above (Gaskins et al, 2007). Culture impacts the nature, frequency and duration of play through the availability of time and space, how children are viewed within their societies, objects and playmates, traditional and/ or indigenous games and stories, and adult role-models and their views on the importance of play (Gaskins, 2013; Gosso and Carvalho, 2013).

As an example, findings from a 2023 qualitative girls' play, power and gender analysis undertaken in Vietnam by Save the Children indicated that children in rural areas had much more freedom when it came to playing and played most often outside. Children living in the city were more likely to attend organised activities or play inside due to a lack of play space outside and safety concerns. However, for both groups of children, play time was limited due to a prioritisation of academic studies, or conditional and used as a reward for good grades. Culture also impacts gendered experiences of play. Other global examples include mothers in a Guatemalan Mayan community seeing play as perfunctory to child development; in Papua New Guinea, people generally believe that children learn through work rather than play, and in many farming or foraging societies, children learn development and survival skills through a mixture of work and play. For example, a study of Baka foragers in the Republic of Cameroon recorded 85 different types of play by young children, including hunting (making

a trap), gathering (insect collecting), fishing (with baskets), playing house (play cooking with inedible materials) and creating clothes (making eyeglasses out of vines) (Roopnarine, 2018).

Equally, anecdotal evidence from northern Uganda indicates that due to 'modernisation', the value of traditional games, songs and dance has decreased significantly in recent years. As a result of his involvement in the Championing Play project, one Senior District Education Advisor described how he had started playing traditional jumping games with his children and their friends, knowing that the activity was helping them with their physical, social and cognitive development. He spoke of this understanding resulting in a renewed pride in identity and culture, and a way for adults to participate in their children's development.

Finally, in her chapter on pretend play as a culturally constructed activity, Gaskins highlights the fact that ethnographic research indicates that pretend play is a widespread, perhaps universal, part of children's play. However, quantity, quality and type of pretend play may differ significantly. Interpretive play (where children play based on experience and real-world situations) seems to appear everywhere. In this type of pretend play, children practise things, often in friendship groups, that they experience or see others doing – playing school, going to the market, playing at families. This allows them to make sense of the world without serious consequences and is a way of preparing them for the future. Inventive play (based on imagination) is much more limited to European-American cultures – and therefore the minority of children (Gaskins, 2013). This is not to say that we need to 'fix' this, but it is important to be aware of the highly complex and socially constructed nature of play.

"This [Learning through Play] approach has embraced the traditional culture of singing, storytelling, dancing, jumping – in the past this was all very important but somehow through 'modernisation', their value was lost. There has been a kind of renaissance – and parents, children and teachers are proud, excited and engaged."

Senior Education Officer, Moroto District Education Office, Uganda

2.4 GENDER AND PLAY

The gendered differences highlighted in the 2022 Save the Children staff survey were stark, with staff reporting major differences in the amount of time and the ways boys and girls play. Girls generally have less time to play. As they get older, they often take on more and more household chores and caring responsibilities, which limit them to the domestic realm, and often isolate them from peers. Fear of insecurity and violence means that parents/ caregivers restrict girls' movement, not letting them outside, or to explore and play freely. Parents/ caregivers tend to allow boys more freedom and to take more risks, whilst they will protect girls from being exposed to violence.

Outside of the home, girls tend to have less access to ECCD and school in general, curtailing their opportunities to play in other places. Beliefs were prevalent around the fact that boys 'need' more play, and especially physical, outside play, whereas girls are believed to prefer quiet and alone time and do not require as much social interaction as boys. Girls are perceived to be reserved, whilst boys are more relaxed and carefree. Whether or not these gender differences are nature or nurture, key is for Save the Children to promote safe access to and joyful experience of play for all children, and to encourage children's own likes and dislikes to be addressed, rather than allowing gender stereotypes to prevail. Play – the topic, material and surroundings – should not be stereotyped. Ensuring girls have access to safe, quality play at home and outside is as essential for their development as it is for boys and needs to be a priority moving forward.

The connection between play and development is evident from a very young age, i.e., girls playing with dolls will encourage communication and personal social skills, while boys playing with building blocks will develop cognitive and problem-solving skills, which then sets up the basis for more stereotyped 'work' later in life. Girls may well be very interested in playing football or playing with technology such as robots or computer apps and games. Boys may enjoy playing with dolls or baking pretend cakes. However, they are not always exposed to or included in such activities due to our own staff and/ or community biases and perceptions.

Example questions to ask to explore this further in your own context:

- Are there stereotypical boys' and girls' games and toys?
- Are there stereotypical boys' and girls' play needs/ behaviours/ traits (i.e., boys are more physical)?
- How do girls/boys like to spend their free time if they are able to decide? Do they have enough time to do these kinds of activities? If not, why not?
- Are there any restrictions on girls' and/ or boys' movements (for safety, for honour)?
- Do boys and girls have the same amount of spare time?
- Do mothers and fathers both play with their children? Or are there differences? Why?
- Play is a form of self-expression and gendered approaches to play can be particularly challenging for children and youth with diverse gender identities. Is this something discussed in your context?

Sources and further reading: Save the Children Staff Survey (2022)

Girls, Play and Power - Rapid Gender Analysis (2023)

2.5 DISABILITY AND PLAY

All children have the right to enjoy play. Children with disabilities, like all children, can learn and develop through play. Play does not look the same for all children, and we should work to ensure that all children can play in the ways that they enjoy.

A child with a disability may have difficulty playing for a variety of reasons:

- Caregivers and other play facilitators may **not believe** that the child can play.
- A **lack of specific competencies & adaptation skills** within play facilitators *(i.e., caregivers, professionals, volunteers).*
- **Environments** *(i.e., play spaces, ECCD Centres)* and **contexts** *(i.e., household, community)* are **neither accessible nor inclusive**.
- **Toys** and other **manipulatives** are **not accessible and usable.**
- A **lack of interest** in the **available toys or activities.**
- **Stigma** associated with disability and the fact that children with disabilities may be kept isolated from peers. Consequently, this impacts on a child's experience of play, especially the social dimension.

Five Guiding Principles for Disability Inclusive Play

1. **All children can learn and have a right to care and development** (UN CRPD Article 30 (d)) – Children with disabilities have exactly the same right to play as their peers. This means that we have to constantly ask ourselves if we are supporting every child with his or her development. We often have to make changes to activities and games in order to adapt to the needs of the child and reduce their barriers to participation. It is adapting the environment to the needs of the child that leads to inclusion. We should also look for and promote opportunities for social interaction, especially as children with disabilities may be isolated from their peers.

2. **Accentuate a sensory component and/or add a sensory dimension** – Does the toy/object respond with **lights, sounds, or movements**? Does it have a **scent** (such as paints or playdough)? Is there a **texture**? Are there **contrasting colours**? For children with low vision can they **feel** the toy, object, cloth, etc.? Follow the child's interests and add sensory components that the child enjoys and stop if the child is not enjoying it to avoid sensory overload.

3. **Modify the activity for the child's level** – Play activities, like other activities, should be picked so that they 'fit' a child's level of development. They should be hard enough to be interesting but easy enough to be done well. Modifications could include reducing the number of steps in a game, breaking down the main activity into smaller parts, making objects easier to manipulate, ensuring a toy and/or game can be played from different positions (e.g., from a wheelchair, lying on a side if a baby is unable to sit up etc.).

4. **Build on children's interests** – Recognise the interests of the child, follow their lead while they are engaged in everyday activities to encourage more play and exploration with the environment and others. This should involve asking a child his/ her own preferences – what does he/ she want to do, what materials would he/ she like to use, where does he/she like to play etc.

5. **Partner with and support caregivers of children with disabilities** – This final principle recognizes that caregivers themselves may have additional mental health and psychosocial support (MHPSS) needs. One idea is to form or strengthen caregiver support groups, specifically for caregivers of children with disabilities. These empathic, welcoming groups allow caregivers to share and validate their feelings.

Source and further reading: Inclusive Play Forum

3 SAVE THE CHILDREN AND PLAY: A CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

Figure 1: Save the Children's Conceptual Framework for Play

Play is a right and contributes to outcomes linked to all three of Save the Children's breakthroughs: learn, survive, protect. To this end, we can explore Play from three different angles[2]:

● **The right to Play** – as leisure and play are a right for all children, Save the Children has a duty to ensure that all children can play without a specific purpose and just for fun, at times of crisis, as well as through more stable times. This will often take the form of free and self-guided play and will usually not have an explicit purpose, but in itself has developmental benefits for the children/ adults playing.

● **Learning through Play** – evidence points to the fact that children develop holistic learning outcomes through play. Utilising playful activities and pedagogies has an important role in nurturing and responsive caregiving, and effective and engaging learner-centred teaching.

● **Resilience through Play** – through play, children can explore and understand emotions and experiences, put them into context, and communicate feelings and thoughts. This is especially powerful at times of adversity and play is an important tool in MHPSS work for example. Play supports key areas of resilience such as cognitive and social skills both of which are at risk of being hampered for children living in adversity.

2 Note we go into these three angles in greater detail and provide supporting evidence in the Why is Play Important for Children section.

We hope these three dimensions help staff to reflect on, integrate, and operationalise play in different projects and programming; however, in practice including play in programmes will likely have multiple and intersecting outcomes that contribute to learning, resilience and rights.

- In HEART[3], for example, play and playful approaches to expressive arts are used as the modality to provide MHPSS. Here, it is the process that is the focus, and which supports children to explore and process their emotions in a safe and supportive environment. At the same time, this playful approach is supporting skill development – social, creative, physical, emotional, and cognitive – however, this is very much a secondary benefit and children are not judged on their creative abilities.

- Literacy Boost's *Community Action* component is aimed at increasing children's early grade literacy outcomes and employs playful approaches and activities for local community members to use to promote learning outside of the formal education space. There is a focus on fun, creativity, and exploration – but also volunteerism and social networks which help to provide an enabling environment for resilience.

- The right to play often manifests in safe spaces and in education programming by way of recreational activities which have the objective of allowing children access to leisure time and to play for play's sake, rather than any specific development outcome. However, children will be learning and developing, whether that's physically through stacking blocks on top of each other, creatively through role-play, or building their literacy and language skills through singing or play-acting. In short, play is key for Save the Children to achieve its **Learn, Protect and Survive** breakthroughs.

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3   Save the Children's Healing and Education through the Arts (HEART) programne is an arts-based approach to providing psychosocial support for children, youth, and adults around the world.

"Play is the 'main job' of children. They play because it is fun.
They can use their senses. They are curious. They can be creative and imaginative. They make friends with other children."

Save the Children Staff Member, 2022

Credit: Save the Children Lebanon

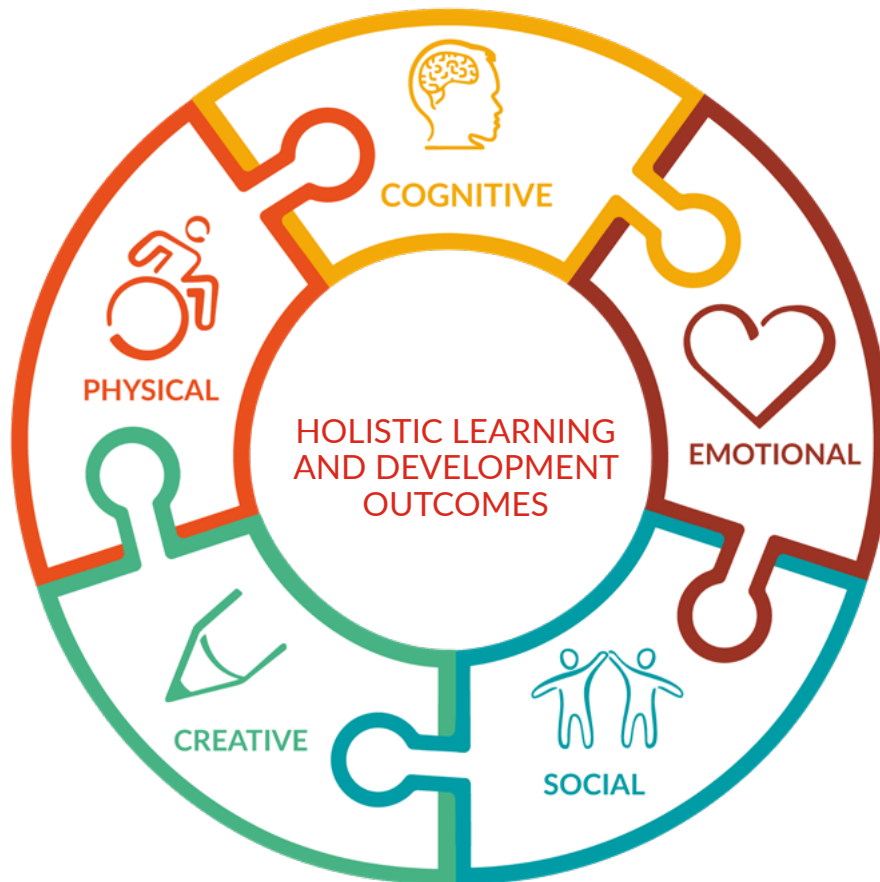# 4 THE POWER OF PLAY: WHY PLAY IS IMPORTANT FOR CHILDREN

Figure 2: Holistic Learning and Development Outcomes

Save the Children strives to support holistic learning and wellbeing outcomes for all children. This goes beyond academic and knowledge gains – and includes social, emotional, physical and creative outcomes – a breadth of skills. Recent evidence points to taking a holistic and playful approach to child learning and resilience having a multitude of benefits, including increasing academic achievement; overcoming adversity; combatting negative societal challenges related to health, behavioural issues and unhealthy relationships; and economic benefits through increased holistic skills and their impact on active citizenship, productivity, employability, reduced health and criminal justice costs (LEGO et al, 2023). Save the Children's Quality Learning Framework recognises the importance play in achieving these outcomes.

"Imagination is more important than knowledge. For knowledge is limited to all we now know and understand, while imagination embraces the entire world, and all there ever will be to know and understand."

Albert Einstein

4.1 THE RIGHT TO PLAY

All children have a **right to play**. The United Nations Conventions on the Rights of the Child (article 31, and further elaborated by the UNCRC Committee on the Rights of the Child in their General Comment no. 17) and the Rights of Persons with Disability (article 30) enshrine play as a right. Play is the way children interact with the world, including how they explore their surroundings, learn, and socialise (Zosh et al, 2017; LEGO Foundation et al, 2018; King-Sheard & Manello, 2017) Play is of fundamental importance to the child, children and childhood – it is a vital dimension of childhood (Casey & McKendrick, 2022).

Taking a rights-based approach to play may cause a number of tensions. **Firstly, there is a growing tendency to instrumentalise rights** – e.g., girls' education is important because it will lead to greater economic participation and contribution in the future; play is important because it will lead to improved learning outcomes – whereas General Comment 17 specifically states that play should be without purpose and non-productive: playing for playing's sake.

Secondly, whilst adults can and should contribute to the creation of a play-conducive environment, and that there is often a need for adults to facilitate safe and inclusive play, **child agency is at the heart of play, and motivation should be intrinsic**. Whilst we often speak of children's choice, voice and power, the reality of providing the time and space for freedom and child-directed activity is challenging. This is especially true in a learning environment: as an organisation, whilst we do not promote rote/passive learning, we are far more comfortable with adult-directed learning. Play enables children to make their own choices and to take the lead – and adults can support that; we need to be deliberate and always consider opportunities for play and playful approaches.

> 'Much debate has taken place over the years about the precise role of play in children's development. It has frequently been suggested that through playing children are practising skills for adult life. It is now becoming more widely accepted that play is a behaviour that exists for its own sake and has a fundamental developmental role. From the early stages of brain development and bonding with parents, to the independence and autonomy of the teenage years, play makes its contribution. As they grow, play offers children the opportunity to develop and hone a range of physical, emotional and social skills, helping them make sense of and relate to an increasingly complex physical and social world.' The Power of Play, Play Scotland

Thirdly, and perhaps more implicit, is the fact that **play is often not seen as being important by caregivers, educators, Save the Children staff, or government officials.** In the hierarchy of needs, it is perhaps fair to say that it is deemed to come far below food, shelter, health and education.

When we think of what childhood means and what its value is, things can get complicated. For Save the Children, childhood has a value in itself – and needs to be protected. However, childhood looks and feels different the world over, with different perceptions on what is a 'happy and valuable' childhood – be that prioritising formal, academic education over longer, less structured ECCD; or children working and assuming caring duties from a young age. Despite these differing perceptions, children themselves prioritise play. In Save the Children's *Protect A Generation* report, which surveyed more than 8,000 children across 37 countries at the height of the Covid-19 pandemic, one of the biggest causes of feelings of sadness and hopelessness was isolation from friends and not being able to play. As the world's biggest child rights organisation, Save the Children needs to promote and fight for the right to play, as a foundational pillar of a fulfilling childhood, alongside all other child rights.

4.2 LEARNING THROUGH PLAY

Babies play from the moment they are born. The internal impulse of exploration and development is innate in children, although they require a stimulating environment, where they can act, communicate, and play.

Children learn in many different ways, and from lots of different experiences and tasks. This includes from work, quietly studying, memorising, listening, observing parents, other adults and their friends. Therefore, whilst play is not the only way children learn, it is evident that play can support children's **holistic development** – and should not be seen in opposition to 'serious' work or learning. Children use social, emotional, cognitive, creative, and physical skills when they play (Parker & Thomsen, 2019). Over time, the use of play can enable children to explore their environment, adapt to their surroundings, and engage with others (Zosh et al, 2017). It is also a key platform for inclusive learning approaches, with the different characteristics of play allowing for children with different abilities and needs to participate in ways that are meaningful and accessible. Using play encourages children to explore and develop

their own agency and intrinsic motivation. Finally, whilst clearly there is a place for a variety of teaching and learning pedagogies, there are some skills for which play is key. For example, imaginative play gives children the freedom to practise creativity, problem solving and risk taking without adverse consequences (Bayley, 2023; Gaskins, 2013). All of the aforementioned skills are essential for the here and now, as well as learning how to learn with the goal of **helping prepare children for the future.**

Learning through play can **improve academic learning outcomes**, including literacy and numeracy while simultaneously cultivating **social and emotional skills** (Parker & Thomsen, 2019). Children gain essential cognitive competencies, skills, and knowledge (including executive functioning[4], critical thinking, and problem solving) through play (LEGO & UNICEF, 2018). Teachers and facilitators can also utilise play to teach specific content, connect content and skills, and as a classroom management tool (Zosh et al, 2017). It is therefore important to ensure that teaching staff can link learning through play activities to learning and development objectives and outcomes.

Note that the term 'Learning through Play' is largely inter-changeable with other terms such as child-centred pedagogy and active teaching and learning approaches which also focus on making learning active, relevant, social, iterative and fun – although with the potential to include more around child agency (if appropriate, wanted, needed).

"Education either functions as an instrument which is used to facilitate the integration of the younger generation into the logic of the present system and bring about conformity or it becomes the practice of freedom, the means by which men and women deal critically and creatively with reality and discover how to participate in the transformation of their world."

Paolo Freire

SOCIAL AND EMOTIONAL LEARNING (SEL)

SEL is the facilitated process through which children acquire and effectively apply the knowledge, attitudes, and skills necessary to understand and manage emotions, set and achieve positive goals, feel and show empathy for others, establish and maintain positive relationships, make responsible decisions, and process and retain information (SC SEL Guidance). Play is an effective tool to support children in developing these skills as it creates space for collaboration, problem solving and compromise.

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4   Find out more about executive functioning skills here and here

BEYOND SCHOOL

Learning through play is a powerful tool within education spaces; however, as a pedagogy, it is widely found in other spaces. The home is a key one – with parents and caregivers encouraging and playing with their children to help stimulate development and happiness. Learning through Play is also frequently used to help children learn about health and safety. For example, hand wash-ing campaigns employed playful approaches such as songs, rhymes and cartoons in Haiti and post-earthquake Syria to help combat cholera and other waterborne diseases. As part of disaster risk reduction programming, children have 'built' their environment, in-cluding all the risks they face, as a way to stimulate discussion and learning on ways to mitigate them.

WORK VERSUS PLAY

As is the tendency to create dichotomies, there is often a stand-off between work and play. Work is work, and play is play (just as learning is learning and play is play). We know that work is a predominant feature in many children's lives the world over, but especially in low and middle-income contexts. Children take on many unpaid tasks, from fetching water and firewood, to caring for siblings or older relatives, to working in the family fields. They may also take on paid work, including market trading and domestic work jobs. These are often essential for family survival. This prevalence of work does not mean that children are not playing or learning – with children finding opportunities to make work playful, as well as discovering, practising and mastering skills through work that they may otherwise develop through play. Work can also create opportunities for play, such as cattle herding in Ethiopia, which brings together children from different households and expands social networks and play without adult supervision. Suzanne Gaskins' research in Mexico showed children as young as two or three combining play with basic chores such as fetching and sorting, which also enabled them to participate in family activity.

Clearly work provides plenty of opportunities for children to learn. However, Gaskins argues that play provides children with unparalleled freedom to imagine, explore, create, take risks and fail, not least because of the fewer constraints and real-world consequences. This is different to work, where there are often consequences if things go wrong.

Source: All Work and No Play? Busting the Binary in Majority World Settings
Dr Stephen Bayley

Credit: Mustafa Saeed/Save the Children

Integrating play into learning – especially formal, academic learning from primary level upwards – can be challenging. Prevailing perceptions view school as serious business, whereas play is just for fun, a means to occupy children when they are bored. For many of the parents/ caregivers with whom we work, education is seen as the one-shot they have for their children to escape poverty, succeed and be happy – and play and frivolity are perceived as distractions. For teachers, the curricula they have to deliver is often highly theoretical, and there is pressure to complete schemes of work and get children through the exams. Classrooms are overcrowded, and there is a lack of teaching and learning resources and teachers do not have sufficient time or resources to apply a playful, child-centred pedagogical approach. Furthermore, for both parents and teachers, playing with children disrupts cultural-societal norms which often require serious, dignified adult behaviour versus playful relationships. We need to acknowledge and respect these barriers and help parents/ caregivers and teachers with evidence on, and tools, time, and space to experience the benefits of learning through play.

Save the Children's Quality Learning Framework (2022) highlights the importance of playful, child-centred pedagogies as a core component of quality learning.

BRAIN BREAK!

There are lots of examples of Save the Children projects that apply learning through play. In Jordan's Championing Play project, girls aged 10-12 years from urban host communities took short courses in STEM (science, technology, engineering and mathematics) and learnt to build robots to perform tasks and apps based on things they were studying school. The courses were very playful, with girls encouraged to collaborate, to come up with their own project ideas, and to try, try, and try again. Girls reported stronger friendships and greater interest and confidence in school, and parents reported an acknowledgement of talents they didn't know their daughters had, as well as a recognition of play being a powerful tool for learning.

Can you think of any examples of projects that have purposefully included learning through play. What reactions did you get from children? Teachers? Parents? Did any-thing surprise you?

"In crisis settings, children play to forget, at least temporarily, the difficult circumstances they are in, to temporarily feel safe. This is a major reason why they play. It is about 'survive' and 'be protected' as much as it is about 'learning'.

Save the Children staff member

4.3 RESILIENCE THROUGH PLAY

Play contributes to wellbeing by providing opportunities for children to process, recover from, and cope with adverse experiences (including abuse, violence, poverty, illness, the impact of disasters, and conflict) and regain a sense of normalcy (Lynneth Solis et al, 2020). Play helps to develop positive relationships, including bonds with parents/ caregivers, and builds self-confidence and trust in others. Mental health and wellbeing are foundational to all humanitarian and development goals – children cannot survive and thrive, learn and be protected unless they (and their caregivers) enjoy a reasonable level of personal and interpersonal wellbeing. Without addressing the psychosocial needs of the children and communities with whom we work, we risk them not being able to fully reap the benefits of all our other interventions. Trusted adults can use play in a variety of settings including school, home, therapeutic, and healthcare settings.[5] They can support structured play and/ or provide opportunities for free play. Save the Children often works with partners to provide children with safe, protected spaces where they can play to **learn the social and emotional skills[6] to cope with current and**

future stress and challenges (Lynneth Solis et al, 2020). This includes the ability for children to express their emotions, self-regulate, process change, interact with others and develop positive relationships, take others' perspectives, and practise empathy (Lynneth Solis et al, 2020).

Play helps to **create and strengthen positive relationships between peers and with trusted adults, including parents/caregivers**. Playful interactions between children allow them to understand and negotiate similarities and differences in likes, dislikes, and opinions. When playing, children find different ways to communicate, negotiate, lead and compromise – all the time building relationships. Parents/ caregivers play an important role in supporting children to develop resilience and coping skills. From an early age, playful interactions between parents/ caregivers and children help children to learn self-regulatory skills, alongside communication and decision-making skills – and this continues throughout childhood (Lynneth Solis et al, 2020). For example, in Niger, a qualitative study of combined Ready to Learn (ECCD -level) and Literacy Boost (Basic Education-level) workshop approach found that the biggest and most immediate improvement was in how parents perceived their relationship with children - essentially they felt much closer and testified to a warmer relationship with their children.

There seem to be fewer tensions in using play for healing/ wellbeing than the *Right to Play* and *Play for Learning and Development*, and mental health and wellbeing are increasingly spoken about and recognised as being critical to a child's healthy development and flourishing, alongside physical health. Play is a core feature of Save the Children's protection programming, especially HEART (Healing through Education and the Arts), Safe Families and in many of the safe spaces we establish, all of which demonstrate how play can be used sensitively and powerfully, alongside other SEL and mental health and psychosocial support interventions, to help children cope with difficult experiences.

BRAIN BREAK!

HEART is a non-clinical intervention that emotionally supports children, and helps them to process and work to understand their stress and emotions through the expressive arts. The design of the approach is intentionally well-structured and predictable, and builds a socially and emotionally supportive network of peers and trusted adults. HEART's use of expressive arts is especially powerful for younger children (4-6 years), who may not be able to verbalise how they are feeling, and therefore for whom traditional, talk-based therapeutic support is less effective (Kaimal, Hommel et al, 2022). With the focus on the process rather than the end result, and the mantra that 'all art is good art', young children build confidence in a space where they will not be judged as inadequate or wrong.

In Mexico, HEART has been practised since 2015 in preschools located in some of districts in Mexico City most impacted by community-based violence and poverty, as well as in community centres and safe spaces serving migrant children living in temporary accommodation on the US-Mexico border, and children impacted by natural disasters. A 2019 evaluation found significant positive impact with teachers and caregivers reporting improved children's emotional regulation and expression, including the ability to calm down and follow instructions. Improved social cohesion amongst children was also highlighted. Teachers reported changes in their own lives, including some of the HEART techniques at home, as well as being better able to relate to their children's emotions. Parents reported that they were better equipped to emotionally support their children, feeling closer bonds with them, as well as using some of the calming techniques to regulate their own stress and emotions.

How do you de-stress or calm yourself down? Do you 'play' – lose yourself in an activity or a favourite past-time? If you have or work with children, have you noticed if they are able to regulate their emotions? Does play ever have a role in that?

5 SIX CHARACTERISTICS OF QUALITY PLAY
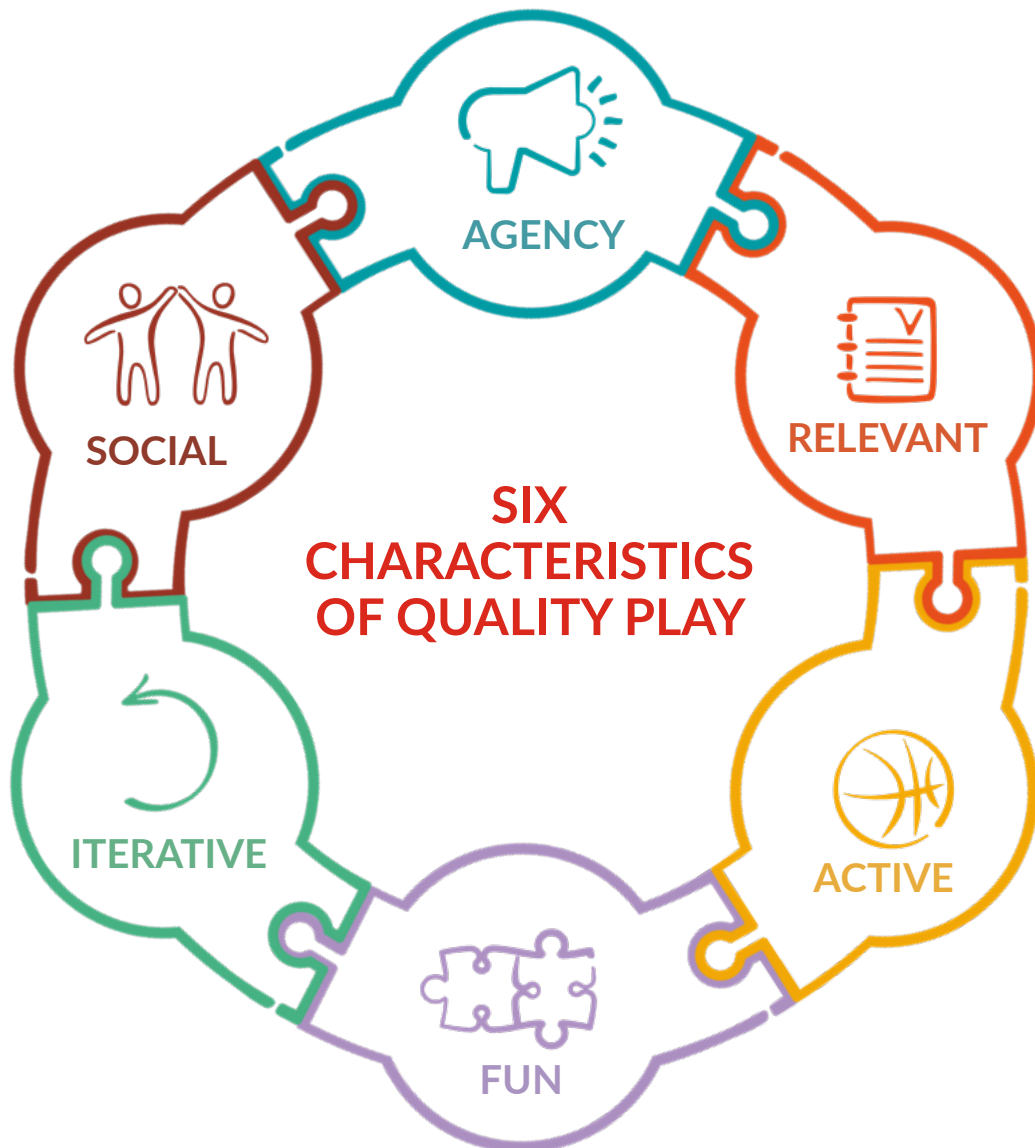
Figure 3: *Save the Children's Six Characteristics of Quality Play*

These characteristics support children's holistic development, lifelong learning, and social and emotional wellbeing. They build on the LEGO Foundation's five characteristics of playful learning[7], but use Save the Children's language and concepts and came out of a review of our technical and common approaches[8]. We have added a sixth dimension – agency. If we think of agency as being the ability to make choices and decisions to influence events and to have an impact on one's world, then this is at the heart of Save the Children's work, and play can be an ideal vehicle to provide space for children to try out different levels of agency safely. Not all characteristics will be present at the same time or to the same extent in every play activity; however, over time, they should be thought about and/ or experienced.

7   Joyful, actively engaging, iterative, meaningful, socially interactive: https://learningthroughplay.com/how-we-play/five-ways-to-spot-playful-learning
8   This review has not been published – please reach out to Amy Parker (ampa@redbarnet.dk) for further details

AGENCY

Children have the right to some form of choice and/or control over their experiences. Babies and toddlers do this naturally, and programmes, like Building Brains, can cultivate a caregiver's ability and confidence to follow a baby's lead as they play together, respecting children's agency. Agency is particularly important during times of crisis when loss of control is significant, and play is an opportunity to regain some normalcy and control. Moreover, by affording children agency, we are supporting them to explore and develop intrinsic motivation, which is key for lifelong learning, development, and resilience. Not all play offers complete agency – but there are often opportunities for children to have some sort of choice. Agency can be as simple as a father allowing his young baby to choose which blocks to play with, or children in a numeracy boost session deciding which game to start with; or it could be more structural in nature, such as deciding how to 'tell a story' – through drama, pictures, writing, poetry, alone or in a group; free-play sessions built into the ECCD curriculum and timetable, or learners designing a space for play in a temporary classroom.

Exemplar Resources:
- Ready to Learn/ Emergent Literacy and Math 2.0: Activity Cards; EL 43 "How to Play Pretend"
- Safe Schools: Safe Schools Children's Activities: Living Well Together; OL8: Story boxes (source: LB strategy 9)
- Safe Back to School: Catch-up Clubs Activity Guide; ST9: Touch the text (contact the Catch-up Club team to access the resources)
- HEART at Home: Guidance for Parents/ Caregivers
- Literacy Boost Toolkit: Reading Club Curriculum
- Numeracy Boost: Maths Clubs
- Girls Decide: Life skills to protect and empower girls affected by migration and displacement – the Curriculum
- UNICEF's Adolescent Kit – resources for expression and innovation
- Blog: Let's Play

RELEVANT

Relevance is key to any play-based activity. It is important to observe how and what children of different age groups play, their preferred activities and how they engage with other children and with adults. There are different elements of relevance: culture, traditions, norms, safety and age of the children/ adolescents involved are key aspects. It is critical to ensure play activities, references, and materials are relevant and connected to children's lives. Children's meaningful participation in experiences leads to deeper learning. This is also a way for parents/ caregivers and the community at-large to engage in children's learning and development – as well as celebrating positive cultural traditions and identities through storytelling, games, songs and other expressive arts. Locally available materials can be used to develop age-appropriate learning and play materials.

Exemplar Resources:

These resources either model activities that have been adapted to different contexts, or include guidance on considerations around adaptations or to encourage local games/ resources/ activities.

- Safe Schools Children's Activities: Living Well Together
- Ready to Learn/ Emergent Literacy and Math 2.0: Activity Cards
- Building Brains Common Approach (including how to talk to parents about local practices)
- Ready to Learn/ Emergent Literacy and Math 2.0
- HEART (contact the HEART team to learn more)

ACTIVE

An active child shows initiative, is alert and engaged in the activity. Active participation can be supported by ensuring the relevance of activities and material, allowing time and space for children to explore their agency and imagination. Sometimes it requires facilitation to ensure that all children are included, and some children may need extra support to participate – which requires thoughtful fun, safe and inclusive facilitation and planning. Play activities are hands-on experiences that provide children with the opportunity to fully engage and learn-by-doing independently, with each other, and/or with trusted adults. This promotes recognition of their environment, creative thinking, problem-solving, increases attention, and physical health. For example, children may build their own villages/ cities using locally available materials to explore what an ideal community would look like for them; or through designing and carrying out interviews with local leaders, children can find out more about how the local governance system works and prioritises actions.

Exemplar Resources:

- Safe Families: Children's Group Sessions for 6-9 Year Olds
- HEART at Home: Guidance for Parents/ Caregivers
- Safe Schools Children's Activities: Living Well Together
- Girls Decide: Life skills to protect and empower girls affected by migration and displacement – Programme Guidance
- Numeracy Boost 2.0 activities – response cards, turn and talk: Importance of Discussion (interwoven and on slide 11); Formative vs Summative (slide 20)

FUN
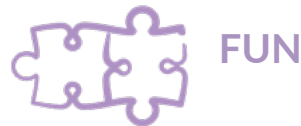
Fun: Laughter and fun have a series of benefits that support learning, development, and resilience. Laughter eases anxiety and fear, reduces stress, and increases confidence levels. An enjoyable activity is more likely to give children a sense of mastery and builds intrinsic motivation, which in turn is stored in the long-term brain. Having fun also strengthens relationships, increases teamwork, and helps to diffuse conflict[9]. Enjoyment is strongly linked to children having the ability to choose how or what they do, and with whom – and their intrinsic motivations (linked to agency and active above). It is hard to have fun when you are told what to do, whether you like it or not! It is important to note that 'fun' is subjective and is not necessarily 'laugh out loud' – creativity, openness, and variety are often the key. For example, drama and group work may be enjoyable for some children, whereas others may enjoy simply creating a story on their own. Or young children may enjoy 'serve and return' activities with an adult, for example peek-a-boo.

Exemplar Resources:

- Safe Back to School Initiative: Catch-up Clubs Activity Guide
- HEART at Home: Guidance for Parents/ Caregivers
- Safe Schools Children's Activities: Living Well Together
- Fun, Safe, Inclusive - a half-day training on facilitation

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9   Fun, Safe, Inclusive: A half-day training module on facilitation skills. Save the Children. 2015. Available here

ITERATIVE

Through play, children have opportunities to learn, practise, apply, and connect knowledge and skills more than once, and in more than one way. They are encouraged to try, fail, and try again – the process is as important as the end result; making mistakes and figuring out different ways to approach things is all part of the learning and development process. This is often how we learn things outside of the classroom – catching a ball, cooking a meal – and can be transferred into other spaces and times, such as parenting and ECCD (e.g., a child uses trial and error to grip and place objects of varying sizes into their respective pegs on a board) and learning centres (e.g., encouraging exploration of wrong answers rather than disciplining).

Exemplar Resources:

- Literacy Boost Toolkit: Reading Club Curriculum
- Safe Families: Children's Group Sessions for 6-9 Year Olds
- Ready to Learn/ Emergent Literacy and Math 2.0: Activity Cards
- Building Brains Common Approach
- Numeracy Boost activities (e.g., Exploring Manipulatives, Teacher Training Guide, Module B games and activities)

"I wish I could play often with my friends, especially the girls. Playing something in a group or a fun rivalry game against the boys, can help us to know each other."

Hani, 13 years-old, Indonesia

SOCIAL

Play doesn't *have* to be social, but it often is. Playing with others, sharing roleplay, imagination and creating bonds has value in itself for the sheer joy and contentment that it provides. Play experiences, including individual and group play, provide children with opportunities to develop social skills and positive relationships with peers and trusted adults, including those at home, in safe spaces and learning environments. These activities provide children opportunities to learn and practise communication, collaboration, and negotiation skills. Children also "learn to manage their emotions and behaviours through social interactions." (Lynneth Solis et al, 2020) A variety of social experiences is important – with adults, with peers, with both, large group, small group, in pairs. All these experiences have value.

Exemplar Resources:

- Literacy Boost Toolkit: Reading Club Curriculum
- Safe Families: Children's Group Sessions for 6-9 Year Olds
- Safe Back to School Initiative: Catch-up Clubs Activity Guide

BRAIN BREAK!

Think of different times when you used to play as a child. Can you remember laughing so much you got tummy ache? Can you remember feeling a bit anxious that you were going to lose? Can you remember getting bored? Can you remember getting frustrated that you couldn't do something?

Whilst fun is often a part of playing – we can experience confusing or negative emotions too.

As mentioned, it is important to note that not all these characteristics of quality play are, or need to be, present at all times. When using play as an approach to help children process difficult experiences for example, a child may become upset or anxious as they play; or a sick child in hospital may play as a form of escapism and not necessarily show any outward signs of joy; however, the ultimate experience should be a positive one, as the child has been able to choose how he/ she explores those experiences in an active way that is meaningful to him/ herself. Similarly, individual play is extremely important, and therefore, not all play will be social. Play is also a way for children to escape and surpass their everyday lives and live in their imagination – therefore it is not always relevant and rooted in their lived experience. Finally, as with all things, children have different likes and dislikes, and for example, what is fun for one child, may not be fun for another. Therefore, when thinking about quality play, it is important to listen to children, facilitate access to personal preferences by finding ways to offer a range of play options and encourage them to try out new things or things they are less confident with.

Credit: Farjana Sultana / Save the Children

This photo shows a boy practising his letters, it looks like he is working hard on an academic learning activity. However, when the teacher asked, "what are you doing?" he replied "playing". This took place during time where children were allowed to play freely, and this is what he had decided to do – acting on intrinsic motivation, exercising agency and finding enjoyment out of it. (ref – Early Learning Center, Bangkok)

ADULT ENGAGEMENT AND TYPES OF PLAY

GUIDED PLAY
Child-led, adult supported

DIRECT INSTRUCTION
Adult-led, controlled — not 'play', but can be playful

FREE PLAY
Child-led

GAMES
Adult designed, rules

There are many different forms of play and adult-child interaction during play. The LEGO Foundation's Playful Learning Continuum outlines a spectrum of kinds of play and child-adult interaction that includes free play, guided play, games, sport, and playful direct instruction. Play also takes on many different forms – object play, pretend play, role-play, creative play, sports, rough and tumble play, fantasy play, quiet play and so forth (source: Play Scotland). The continuum could be seen as being like a dance floor, where depending on child engagement, as an adult, you decide where and how to move, towards more freedom or more structure. Adult engagement in free play will be more along the lines of observation and learning from children's play without disruption; children still have a role in direct instruction through asking questions, challenging, giving ideas and expressing their interests. You can categorize a specific or whole play activity within the continuum, but as adults, we should be reflecting how to adapt to children's signs of agency, fun and engagement.

The majority of Save the Children's work with play is with guided play, games and direct instruction. This is due to many reasons – quality assurance, scaffolded support for staff, the need to deliver a certain curriculum in a short amount of available time. However, free play is essential for children and adolescents to take the lead, make decisions and truly explore their motivations, strengths and learn to respond to their personal challenges. Remember – when children play, they will always be learning something, just maybe not what we as adults set as a target. We would like to challenge staff and projects to look for opportunities to include time and space for free play – and document its impact.

"I now realize that play is important, I stopped playing when I got married at 15. I now play with my children and I find myself much more happy and a more patient mother."

9 Year Old Girl's Mother, Host Community In Jordan

6 HELPING PLAY HAPPEN: CONSIDERATIONS FOR ENABLING PLAY

Improved holistic learning and wellbeing outcomes for children

Improved quality of play for children's holistic learning and wellbeing

Delivering Play – Supply
- Safe spaces for play
- Play materials
- Dedicated time
- Quality content, curriculum, resources
- Skilled workforce (Save the Children staff, facilitators, teachers, other practitioners e.g., health and child protection workers)
- Access to peers/friends to play with

Uptake of Play – Demand
- Caregiver engagement with play at home (understanding the value, ability to play/provide opportunities for play at home)
- Caregiver support to provision of play outside of home (in centres, schools – interest/engagement with providers)
- Caregivers hold providers/leaders to account for the quality provision of play opportunities

Enabling Environment
- Political will, investment, leadership on integration and importance of play
- Social and cultural norms are taken into consideration regarding play – and where needed, are nudged to become more accepting/ understanding of play
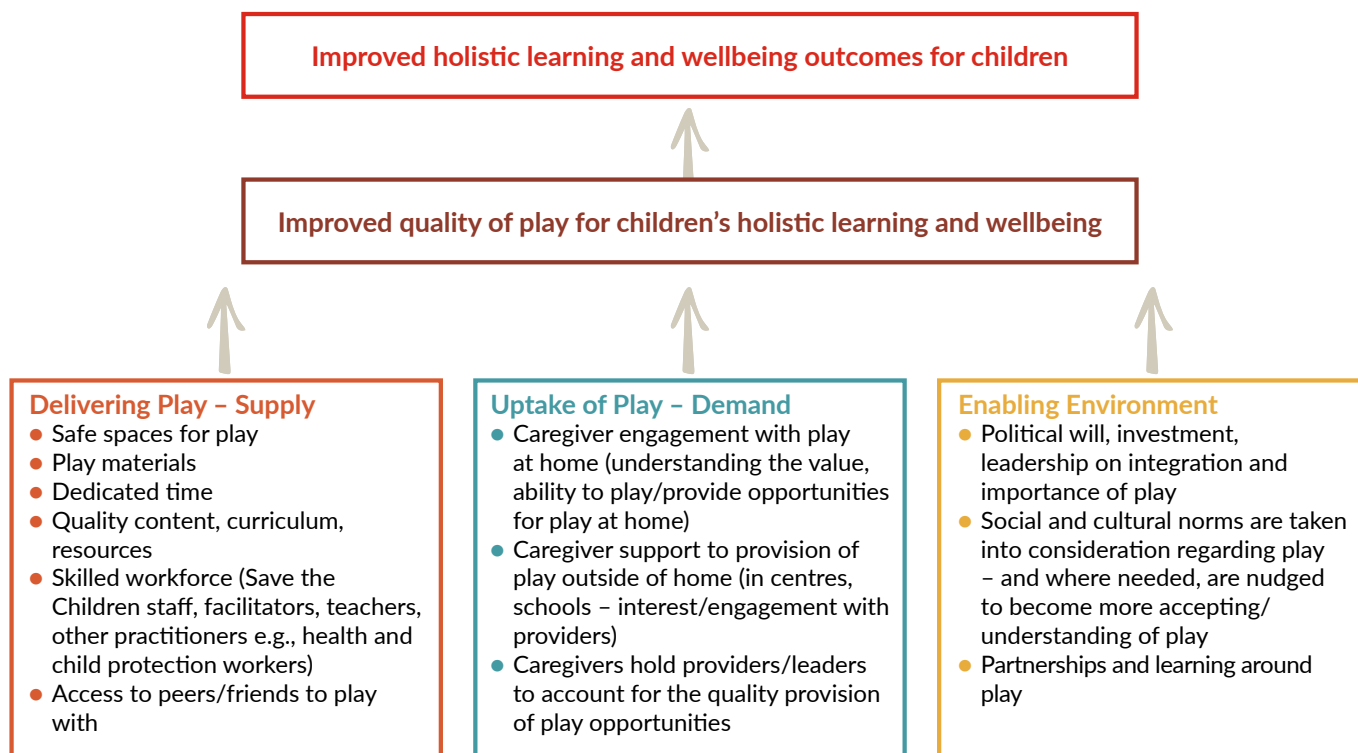- Partnerships and learning around play

Figure 4: Example Theory of Change for Play

There are many barriers to play as we have mentioned – some of them are around a lack of space, time and resources, others are around the lack of value or understanding of the crucial role play has in child development. As already mentioned, play is often seen as frivolous and disconnected from learning and wellbeing. The considerations below are components of the ecosystem around the child that create an enabling environment for play.

PHYSICAL SPACE:

The environment in which play occurs allows for children to engage fully and safely depending on the activities available (Parker & Thomsen, 2019). Play does not require specialised, highly equipped space, but we can be intentional in the way we plan space for play. For example, setting up different activity corners to encourage children to explore, laying out art materials around the side of a room, with plenty of shared space in the centre for children to be able to paint and draw freely. We can also offer children opportunities to make decisions on how to position themselves within spaces so that they can make decisions on how to meet their own needs. For example, offering a quiet mat in an ECCD centre for children to go to if they are feeling tired, or allowing children to work in different available spaces during applied learning/ project work.

Exemplar resources:
- HEART: A Manual for Launching HEART and Training Facilitators (contact HEART team to learn more)
- Ready to Learn/ Early Literacy and Math Training Manual
- Child Friendly Spaces in Emergencies: A Handbook for Save the Children Staff

PHYSICAL MATERIALS

One of the biggest barriers to play cited by staff, parents/ caregivers and teachers is a lack of resources. Play does not require expensive toys (and remember that imagination and pretend play[10] are extremely powerful – we also encourage adult/child interactions even in absence of toys. For example, singing, clapping, peek-a-boo etc. This may have even more value to adult-child relationships and engagement.). Of course, children enjoy and thrive off a variety of different playthings; however, whilst these can be shop-bought, they can also be made from local materials, such as dried beans in an empty plastic bottle, or a hand-sewn doll – and pots and a wooden spoon make a great drum set! There need to be considerations around culturally relevant and developmentally appropriate materials, as well as safety. This is also a great opportunity to nudge gender norms, ensuring that girls and boys are encouraged to play with a variety of toys, not just dolls for girls and footballs for boys.

Exemplar resources:
- Ready to Learn/ Emergent Literacy and Math 2.0
- Literacy Boost Toolkit Community Action: A Guide for Volunteers
- Magic Bags

DESIGNING AN INVITATION TO PLAY

(reference: Early Learning Center, Bangkok)

Can we think about intentionally organising space and any materials, so they invite children to play? Spaces that give children autonomy to explore and follow their own curiosities and interests? When we are thinking about space for play, we can consider the following questions:

- What is there available that would be interesting for children to explore? Think of different textures, colours, shapes and objects from everyday life (kitchen, garden, etc)?
- Does the space and set-up invite investigation?
- Does the space and set-up invite dialogue?
- Does the space and set-up challenge the children's thinking?
- Does it invite collaboration?
- What might be missing?

Credit: Sara Dang/Save the Children

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10   Note that pretend play is most common from 2 ½ years of age

TIME

Just as important as space and resources, lack of time is often cited as a reason not to play. This may be at the household level, and directly affect children as their time is taken up by school and/ or work/ chores/ caring responsibilities. It may be that parents/ caregivers do not have the time to play with their children, resulting in a lack of those all-important parent/ caregiver-child playful interactions. Part of a solution for these cases is to use daily routine activities and caregiving moments such as bath time, walking to market, cleaning time etc. to play and interact with children. When it comes to education, play is often seen as an additional task in an already crammed teaching load and becomes even less relevant as children transition from pre-school to primary and secondary education. Supporting teachers to give children choices on which activities to do, how to do them, as well as provide them opportunities to take the lead could be a good place to start.

BRAIN BREAK!

A number of Championing Play projects provided play kits to help teach and inspire parents/ caregivers to play with their children. In Bhutan, there was a dearth of toys at home and parents reported not being able to play with their children due to this. A two-pronged approach was used to address this:

- Discovery bags were distributed to health centres, where parents attended Building Brains parenting sessions. These were used during the parenting sessions, and made available to parents as they waited for check-ups with their children.

- A series of instructional videos were made to demonstrate how to make five different toys out of readily available local resources. These were broadcast in different major and local languages and on multiple media platforms (national and local TV, Facebook, You Tube, on the programme app).

In Bangladesh, the Championing Play project built on a COVID-19 pilot programme that involved distributing and training parents on magic bags. These bags contained high quality, age-appropriate toys. Parents also attended a series of parenting sessions focused on learning and resilience through play. The bags were regularly used during these sessions, and time was also taken for parents to replicate some of the toys using fabric remnants, banana leaves and other local resources. Feedback from parents included feeling they had the tools and understanding to play with their children now and to know how to interact meaningfully. They also reported a sense of personal wellbeing in terms of greater bonds with their children and joy at seeing their children so happy.

What did you used to play with as a child? Did you always rely on toys? Or did imagination play a big role in your playtime?

PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT FOR FACILITATORS, TEACHERS, CHILD PROTECTION WORKERS, HEALTH WORKERS, SAVE THE CHILDREN STAFF:

As mentioned in the *Learning through Play* section, many adults are either not convinced of the value of play, or do not see it as something they should be engaging in. This often revolves around adult mindsets and how we view children – as empty vessels to fill with knowledge, or as partners who at different times need support and guidance, but who come with their own experience, knowledge and skills. The **rationale for play**, as well as time, space and ongoing support for practising play must be intentionally included in any continuous professional development course. This would include training on child development, impact of adversity and how play supports children's development. As an example, in education programming, time is often dedicated to train teachers or trainers

on pedagogy – explicitly talking about play and incorporating and modelling it in pedagogical training sessions would be a great opportunity to encourage learning through play in practice.

Exemplar resources:
- Ready to Learn/ Early Literacy and Math Training Manual
- Building Brains Common Approach
- HEART: A Manual for Launching HEART and Training Facilitators (contact HEART team to learn more)
- E-training courses: Learning Through Play in EiE and Coping with Changes: Social-Emotional Learning Through Play
- Fun, Safe, Inclusive - Facilitation Training Manual

ENGAGING PARENTS/CAREGIVERS

As the biggest supporters of children's learning, development and protection, organisations should engage parents/caregivers as active partners in the role of play at home and in programmes to support positive parenting and children's holistic development (LEGO & UNICEF, 2018; Parker & Thomsen, 2019; Lynneth Solis et al, 2020; Mendenhall et al, 2021; Durrant, 2016)[11]. They hold the power to block or facilitate children's access to play both at home and in school, and need to be respected partners if progress towards greater play is to be made. As with teachers and other professional stakeholders, their own mindset often limits child capabilities and how much agency and choice they allow children when it comes to play.

Further, it is important to take into consideration traditional gender norms here as well. Caregiving is viewed as the woman's role in many contexts, and this is compounded by a tendency of peer pressure amongst male caregivers. It is not seen as 'manly' to be playing with your children.

Exemplar resources
- Emergent Literacy and Math at Home
- Building Brains Common Approach
- Literacy Boost Toolkit Community Action: A Guide for Volunteers/ Volunteer Flipbook
- IRC's SAFE: Supporting Adolescents and their Families in Emergencies
- Math Power! An IVR pilot in Rwanda in partnership with Viamo and mEducation Alliance to nudge families to play more maths games at home
- Let's Play: Behavioural Edition (A playbook informed by behavioural insights to promote the uptake of play among caregivers)

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11   There are cultural considerations, however, with this. As Gaskins states in her 2013 work, in many cultures, adults do not see an important role for themselves regarding playing with their children. In some, it is viewed as inappropriate. Therefore, this work needs to be sensitive and should be undertaken in partnership with parents and caregivers, rather than enforced.

BRAIN BREAK!

Many Championing Play projects worked closely with parents/ caregivers to encourage and celebrate play. In Uganda, the country team held a Play Day for staff and their children – with adults making pledges about play in the future. In Bangladesh, Child Fairs were held to demonstrate different ways of playing with children – including games, story-telling and toy-making. In Sierra Leone, the project worked with adolescent parents as part of a stopping gender-based violence programme. Here the Building Brains parenting sessions were adapted to have a greater focus on play. In Lebanon, play kits were distributed to children in learning retention centres and parents attended sessions with their children to learn more about the toys – and reported being inspired to make more such toys at home.

Are you a parent? Or an auntie or uncle? Or a grandparent? Or an older sibling or cousin? Do you enjoy playing with children in your family or care? How does it make you feel? What's your favourite game to play?

Credit: Save the Children Uganda

POLICY AND SYSTEMS

Many education systems prioritise academic outcomes and traditional, content-acquisition heavy curricula which favours memorisation and teacher-centric pedagogy. There is no space for play, and non-academic learning outcomes are squeezed out. The value of a breadth of skills and wellbeing outcomes, and the crucial role play has in building these, should be part of any partnership work with systems-level partners. Emergencies can often provide windows of opportunity to make these system-level changes, as the disruption to formal schooling can mean that timetables are more flexible and play can be prioritized.

BRAIN BREAK!

Breadth of Skills is a four-year LEGO Foundation-funded project implemented in Colombia, India, Kenya, South Africa and South Korea aimed at increasing political will and commitment towards and understanding of and demand for children's holistic skills development – recognising that a learning through play approach is a key contributor to holistic skills development. Each country is advocating with different stakeholders to make policy and practise change. Examples of progress to-date include the Colombia Senate approving the Holistic Skills Development Bill and the creation of an educational curriculum for holistic skills development; in India, the Karnataka State Curriculum Framework includes 21st century skills for the first time, and the team is engaging in similar discussions in Rajasthan and Jharkhand.

What do you think are the key blockers for play at the systems level? What do you think is needed to initiate change?

*Credit: Nadeem Abdelsamd/ Save the Children*

7 BEYOND PROGRAMMING: TO PLAY OR NOT TO PLAY?

A key question we may want to consider is whether play has a role within Save the Children's organisational culture. This could be for two key reasons:

Firstly, the characteristics of quality play (agency, relevant, active, fun, iterative, social) are also relevant to our ways of working and ensuring Save the Children is an accessible and engaging place to work. The holistic outcomes play results in are crucial staff skills and competences. Our values embrace collaboration and creativity and speak to thriving on diversity and being open to change and new ideas. Play can unlock potentials in staff and volunteers to innovate, be more open and be creative. Further, playful working environments may contribute to motivation and wellbeing in the workplace. This of course needs to be aligned with good management and safe and inclusive workplaces. Making people play if they are unhappy with the working conditions, salary, advancement opportunities, contracts etc. would be counterproductive, so it goes hand in hand with strong values.

Secondly, if we want to raise child and youth participation beyond the programming level and into leadership, decision-making and governance fora within the organisation, then we need to look at our ways of working. Applying playful approaches (and working with children and youth to develop new ways of working) could be key to that.
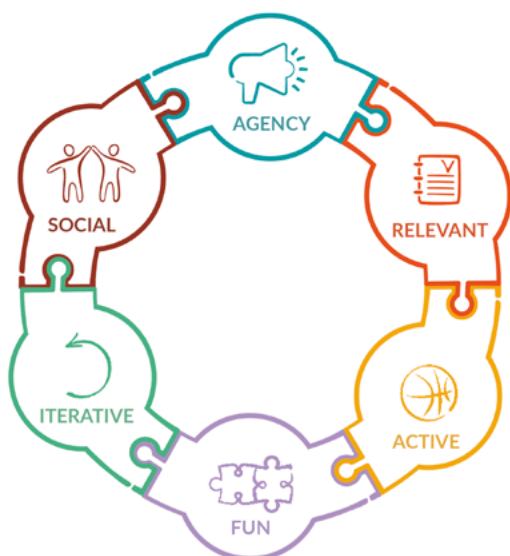
CHARACTERISTICS OF PLAY (PLAYFUL WAYS OF WORKING?)
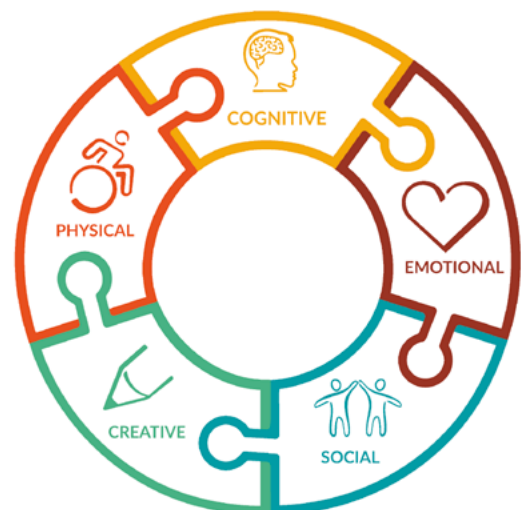
HOLISTIC LEARNING AND DEVELOPMENT OUTCOMES (STAFF SKILLS?)

There are of course barriers to this: the time it takes to create playful ways of working and presenting, professionalism, appropriateness. That said, there are lots of examples of playful approaches being used: polls, Mentimeter, quizzes, games, and platforms such as Mural during webinars and team meetings; allocating specific time for team meetings to be about anything but work, etc. However, it is something worth thinking about and considering where there might be even more opportunities to inject a bit of play.

Figure 5: Playful representation of humanitarian work - part of a staff development workshop

BRAIN BREAK!

In 2009, Save the Children Mexico launched its Framework for a Dignified, Fulfilling and Democratic Life. This framework guides the organisation's actions when working directly with children, building alliances with key actors (families, schools, governments) as well as internally, in the work between different areas within the organization. One focus of the framework is a child's right to play, and the fact that play is inherently natural to all children. The accompanying eight-module online training has been developed to be interactive and playful, providing staff with access to readings, videos and infographics. Alongside these resources are tasks – both mandatory and additional activities for deeper exploration. These are interspersed with 'thinking pauses' where participants are invited to reflect on wider experience – but no written input is required. Each module leads to a group session in which participants have the chance to deepen their understanding by sharing with colleagues. These sessions are facilitated to enhance presence and rooting to the here and now and include activities that help people identify the relationships between what they have learnt and their role in the organisation.

Are there already examples of playful ways of working in your teams? What are the pros of being more playful? Why? What are the cons? What is stopping us? Are there easy wins (renaming 'presentations' as 'play-backs'?!)?

8 SO WHAT...?

Hopefully you're feeling inspired by now. But what could this mean to your work? As mentioned throughout, there is a lot of playful work going on within Save the Children work already – and especially in our activities with children. However, here are a few ideas for how we might bring play more deliberately into our work if we feel it will increase impact for children and young people:

• **Make play more explicit in our programming:** Often play is used as a means to an end in our programming work. When you are implementing a programme on any topic, consider how play can be used when training staff, partners and community members, talk about the value of play, how play is viewed in their context, and how it can be used to support children develop healthily and learn.

• **Apply the six characteristics of quality play to adult facilitation/ training:** Most of our adult facilitation techniques are playful. When you are designing or adapting a training module, not only could you add a session about play and its value, you could also think about helping to join the dots between the facilitation approaches used and how they model quality play. For example, add a time for reflection during training activities for participants to think about how they felt during the different sessions; which characteristics were used; what they thought about the facilitation methods; what worked well for them (and what didn't); and which ones they would like to try and why in their own work.

• **Monitor, evaluate and document the process as well as the outcome:** Play is about the process rather than the outcome/ product (although it does of course contribute to holistic outcomes 😊). Rather than (just) focusing on the output/ outcome, when you design your MEAL plan, can you (also) monitor and document the process and experience that children go through during (and where possible after) a playful intervention – distribution and use of recreational kits, sports activities, community literacy boost sessions – and map against the six characteristics of play and holistic outcomes? To what extent did children find the toys/activities fun? Did they have any choice over how they used them, or within the activities? Were other people interested in playing with them – siblings, friends, parents? Why/ why not? Did the activities help them with learning maths/ express their emotions/ make them feel more confident?

• **Create time and space for free/ unstructured/semi-structured play:** A lot of playful activities within our work are structured and adult-led, e.g., games with rules and very specific outcomes, chosen and led by the adult facilitator. When you are designing a project that includes child groups and/or clubs, as they get more established a few months in, is it possible to weave in more child-led activities/time, and therefore increase child agency? For example, setting up an ongoing project that has to be loosely related to the overarching topic, but where the children get to choose what they focus on, how they work and how they present that work – and related to the above point, monitor and document the process as well as the end product.

- **Hand over the reins to children:** A lot of child sessions begin with a game or activity, however, this is most often chosen and led by the facilitator. Like the above point, when you are designing a project, as the groups become established, can child participants be asked to volunteer to choose a game to do at the start of the next session? Can they build a 'play catalogue' that increases and broadens the activities in the facilitator's guide and that can be used as a resource for other groups? This is also a way to bring in local games and activities, and can be a positive method to platform cultural traditions and identity. And then when you are monitoring and technically supporting projects, can you evaluate what is facilitators and children's experience of this was?

- **Invite parents/ caregivers/ adult community members:** As mentioned, play is often not valued as being important by adults. In your project design, are there opportunities to invite parents to open day events where children showcase what they have achieved and where adults could experience some of the activities?

- **Integrate play into broader interventions:** When undertaking needs assessments, is there a possibility to assess how play might be catered for at things like food distribution centres, clinics, during community meetings etc.? Is there demand for spaces to be set up for different age groups? For the youngest, but also for older children as they are waiting – reading mats, play corners, simple art supplies etc.?

- **Whilst play may not be 'life-saving', it can make the world a less scary place for children:** In the Play in Hospitals example, we spoke about the fact that children often become their disease when they are very poorly. And this can be the case in any emergency – they become a mouth to feed, a life to save. As part of programme and/ or technical strategies, can we build in playful communication skills for our emergency response staff, local medical staff, social workers? Can we still create time for children to play in every response, even at the height of a crisis – knowing that this may just make life a little bit less scary?

Credit: Save the Children Bangladesh

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1

Do you play at work?

Have you seen play being used in our programming?

2

Why do you think play is powerful?

3

How do you define play?

8

7

What do you like to play today?

What was your favourite thing to play when you were young?

6

4

How can we celebrate play more?

Can you make time to play?

5

Directions: Cut out the square and fold it in half so it forms a triangle, then half again, then unfold. You should now have two creases that form a cross. Now fold the corners into the centre of the square to create a smaller square, using the creases as your guide. Flip the square over, and fold the corners into the centre again, once again making a smaller square. Fold and unfold the square in half both ways. Slot your finger and thumb under the flaps created - you are now ready to play a game about play!

How to play: Ask a friend or colleague to choose one of the numbers on the top of the game. Spell out the number, opening and shutting the game as each letter is called out. Next ask them to choose a number. Count out the number, then ask them to pick a final number. Open the flap of the number they picked. Read out the question inside and take turns answer it.

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