



Evaluation of a Play-Based Recreation Program for Preschoolers: Municipal Recreation Policy Implications of Strathcona County's Love to Play Program

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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INTRODUCTION

Free play (also known as unstructured play) experiences in early childhood have a profound impact on children's lifelong physical, mental, and developmental health.¹ The term 'free play' applies to play that is player-initiated and controlled, voluntary, spontaneous, intrinsically motivated, and child-directed.^{2,3} Play helps children build conceptual foundations for literacy, mathematics, and scientific thinking, as well as social competence and confidence, emotional resilience and self-control, and physical strength and coordination.³

The physical and social environments where play occurs can have a substantial influence on the play activities that children engage in, as well as richness of their play experiences.⁴ However, the physical and social environments of early childhood have changed profoundly in the last 50 years due to urbanization, changing family demographics, and increasing use of technology. These changes have led to a significant decline in children's free play time both in home and educational settings.^{2,5} Play spaces and play experiences are increasingly becoming more structured, organized, and institutionalized,⁶ further limiting opportunities for free play. That is problematic because young **children learn best through free play**.

There is much that can be done to ensure that children's environments foster free play. Physical spaces should offer a variety of activities that support children's choice and agency; allow children to encounter risk and test personal boundaries in a safe environment; and provide opportunities for solitary and social play.^{7,8} A social environment that encourages free play must complement the physical space: children should be able to play freely in an environment that encourages creative, exploratory, active, and social play. Adult supervision, while required for safety and other reasons, should not mean the adults prescribe how or when play should occur; *au contraire*, they are there as a resource to support the children's needs.

Preschools help meet the play needs of children as they are safe, supervised environments that provide group interaction and foster exploration. Therefore, **preschools are a prime target for positive environmental change in children's play behaviours** and, consequently, in their healthy development.



BACKGROUND

The Recreation, Parks and Culture department (RPC) of Strathcona County (SC), Alberta, has recognized the importance of encouraging free play amongst children and invested CAD\$350,000 into the development of **Love to Play: a unique, leading edge, and innovative play-based preschool space and program for children aged 3-5 years**. Love to Play aims to enhance preschool children's developmental experiences by focusing on open-ended, play-based learning in a purposively designed environment. Located in rural Strathcona County, the Love to Play program was a response to local data showing that 21% of children living in rural areas experience difficulty in the developmental areas of communication, general knowledge, and emotional maturity.⁹

The Love to Play program and space was fully operational in September 2014 and this presented a time-sensitive opportunity to evaluate the impact of this community investment in its inaugural year.



PURPOSE

This project was a partnership of SC RPC with researchers at the University of Alberta and MacEwan University. The partnership sought to uncover whether and how the innovative design of the Love to Play preschool space and associated free play-based learning philosophy fostered free play amongst preschool children enrolled in the program. We also explored the benefits of Love to Play compared to two conventional preschool programs of similar size offered by SC RPC.



METHODS

In our 9-month study (September–November 2014 and January–June 2015), **we evaluated Love to Play in comparison to other two preschools using a multi-method approach organized in three parts.** Part 1 involved semi-guided conversations with parents and instructors before and after being involved in each preschool program. Part 2 assessed the physical features of the three preschools to determine the ‘objective’ quality of their environments using a validated, third-party space audit tool. In Part 3, children’s play behaviours were video recorded once per month in each space to capture the nature and array of play behaviours occurring over the program term. Video observations consisted of two 30-minute recordings on the same day: one in the morning while the children were in the preschool room and one in the afternoon while the children were in the play room.

Six instructors shared their thoughts about free play and preschool programming in both pre- and post-interviews. In total, we interviewed **44 parents**, but only 12 of them participated in both pre- and post-interviews. We video-recorded **61 children** over the study period. Preliminary analyses are complete. In-depth analyses of data from all three parts are still on-going.



SELECTED FINDINGS

- Most parents and all instructors defined free play as those activities that children engage in freely, and where children’s choice was considered a central component of play.
- Most parents and some instructors believed children must have the ability to make choices about how, with what, with whom, and when to engage in play.
- All instructors shared the opinion that free play offers health and development benefits for preschoolers. There were differing opinions on how and when free play should be fostered. Instructors noted the need to balance structured and unstructured play activities, while attending to parental preferences for formal, academic-like learning opportunities in the preschool setting.
- The physical space assessments showed that all three preschools offered overall ‘good’ quality environments for children. When analyzing each component of the space audit tool separately, the Love to Play space and one comparison site scored ‘fair’ for the Quiet Activity Areas (e.g., areas designated for reading). However, in the subscale Physical Activity Areas, the Love to Play space scored ‘excellent’ while the two comparison sites scored ‘good’.
- Data from the video recordings showed there were statistical differences between the three preschool sites in terms of ‘level of physical activity’, ‘type of physical activity’, and ‘initiator of activity’ (i.e., child- or instructor-initiated activity). However, no statistical difference was found between the preschool sites for the variety of ‘play activities’.



A WIN-WIN PARTNERSHIP BETWEEN UNIVERSITY AND COMMUNITY

Our team was also interested in evaluating what worked or did not work well in our community-university collaboration, so we commissioned a process evaluation. The external consultant interviewed project team members individually, conducted a thematic analysis, and then formally reported the findings back to all team members.¹⁰

Findings from this process evaluation showed that project members felt that the community-university partnership was genuine and positively impacted all stages of the research process. Overall, it was found that the partners jointly shaped the research questions, producing an applied research project with a high level of scientific rigour that also focused on what was relevant to advance community priorities. Team members’ interpersonal qualities (e.g., dedication in communication) were considered a key facilitator in the partnership.

Our community-university partnership will continue to collaborate closely to support in-depth data analysis and meaningful, ongoing dissemination. This approach will ensure the usefulness and relevance of the project findings to Strathcona County and to those communities interested in similar initiatives.



CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This research contributes to our understanding of the design and program features that facilitate free play and promote healthy development in institutional preschool program settings for young children aged 3-5 years. Our results will set the stage for the (re)development of other preschool spaces in Strathcona County (and provincially), by helping decision-makers understand how free play-based preschool spaces provide nurturing environments for non-parental care and the importance of having free play-based designs in institutional setting environments.

We recommend that academic teams and community organizations work collaboratively as equal members of projects throughout the research activities. For our team, this approach was a win-win partnership that produced meaningful and relevant findings, which are more likely to make difference in the community and contribute to the academic knowledge in this area.

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