

Evaluation of a Play-Based Recreation Program for Preschoolers:

Municipal Recreation Policy Implications of Strathcona County's Love to Play Program

Prepared by: The Love to Play Community-University Partnership Team.
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What were the objectives of our study?

- (1) Understand if the innovative design of a preschool space and accompanying program (Love to Play) fosters free play amongst children aged 3-5 years
- (2) Explore immediate benefits realized from this innovative design

What is Love to Play?

Love to Play is Strathcona County (SC) Recreation, Parks and Culture (RPC) department's purposeful investment in preschool infrastructure and programming.

The goal is to create a community resource that aims to enhance young children's developmental experiences by focusing on play-based learning.

Why did we do this study?

In the preschool years, free play (also known as unstructured play) builds a strong foundation for lifelong learning and healthy development. Yet, over the last few decades, there has been a substantial decrease in children's free play time. Also, play spaces and play experiences are becoming increasingly more structured, organized and institutionalized.

Early childhood education environments present a strategic opportunity to foster engaging and dynamic free play experiences. As such, we were interested in examining how the Love to Play space and program created a supportive free play environment for preschool children.

How did we do this study?

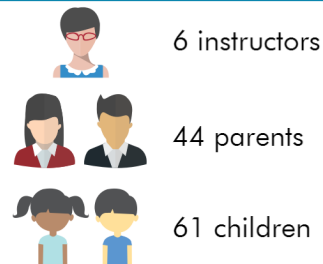
We compared the Love to Play program and space with two other conventional preschool programs and spaces also offered by SC RPC. The study was comprised of 3 parts.

Part 1 Conversations with parents and instructors before and after being involved in the preschool programs

Part 2 Systematic inventory of the preschool spaces

Part 3 Video observations of children in the preschool spaces at multiple times

Who were the participants?



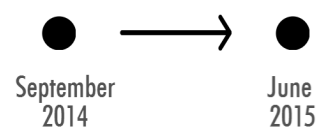
Which preschool programs were involved?

Love to Play Program at Ardrossan Recreation Complex

Preschool Program at Kinsmen Leisure Centre

Preschool Program at Strathcona Olympiette Centre

When did we do this project?



What did we find out?

Part 1

Both parents and instructors felt that children's ability to choose is a central feature of free play.

Parents thought that a variety of equipment and activities that foster free-play should be available to allow children to choose how and when to play.

All instructors had similar ideas about the benefits of free play for children's health and development. However, they had different opinions about how and when free play should take place (specifically around balancing between the structured and unstructured play activities).

Part 2

The overall quality of all three preschool environments was good in terms of promoting cognitive, social, and emotional development.

Part 3

The three preschool sites differed in terms of the level of physical activity, type of physical activity, and initiator of activity (i.e., child- or instructor-initiated activity).

So What?

While in-depth data analysis is underway, the preliminary study findings have already helped clarify our understanding of how free play-based spaces and accompanying programs in institutional settings influence play activities among young children.

We hope our findings will contribute to the enhancement of preschool settings and programming, providing children with more opportunities for free play to encourage healthy development.

Understanding the Community-University Partnership

As part of actively engaging the community partners in research, SC RPC members are being engaged throughout data analysis to ensure the findings are meaningful and relevant to the community in their decision-making.



To better understand this collaborative research project (between SC RPC and the university team), the strengths and limitations of the partnership were explored through an evaluation. To do that, an external consultant conducted one-on-one interviews with 11 members involved in this project. Almost all project members pointed out that the strong community-university partnership in this project was a key component for the successful development of the research activities, especially during data collection.

Research Team

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