

Future Pathways for Playful Parenting

Workshop Brief



Future pathways for Playful Parenting

Parents and caregivers play a pivotal role in their children's development, with their responsive care influencing critical early brain growth. Engaging in quality interactions such as play and reading not only fosters healthy development but also leads to improved learning outcomes that can last throughout a child's life. To harness these benefits on a global scale, in 2019, the LEGO Foundation partnered with UNICEF to advance playful parenting programs, focusing on playful learning as a key driver of children's development.

Through this collaboration, the LEGO Foundation aimed to scale up parenting interventions in countries like Zambia and Serbia while also promoting global advocacy and knowledge sharing. The initiative focused on empowering caregivers to engage in nurturing, playful interactions that enhance early childhood development. With support from ECD networks, namely International Step by Step Association (ISSA) alongside Early Childhood Development Action Network (ECDAN) and the Africa Early Childhood Network (AfECN) this partnership generated lasting impact by advocating for better policies and creating sustainable programs that reach over 100,000 families worldwide.



Carrying the playful parenting agenda forward together

On September 26, 2024, the International Step by Step Association (ISSA) held an engaging thematic workshop titled *Future Pathways for Playful Parenting*. This event brought together 35+ experts, practitioners, and advocates to explore the significant role of playful parenting in fostering child development. Through a series of presentations and interactive discussions, the workshop aimed to unlock the potential of play in parenting while identifying key strategies for future actions. The workshop focused on identifying the future of playful parenting both in practice and policy. It brought forward ideas on enhancing the involvement

of men in parenting, improving support for professionals working with parents, and advancing playful parenting research.

Workshop objectives

- Provide a comprehensive overview of playful parenting.
- Highlight successful pilots and initiatives from various regions.
- Facilitate discussions on future pathways for playful parenting.
- Develop actionable recommendations for enhancing playful parenting in both policy and practice.

During the workshop the playful parenting community engaged in small group discussions diving deeper into several aspects regarding playful parenting to map knowledge gaps, identify pending actions and suggest strategies for practice and policy improvements.

The thematic groups are as following:

- **Implementation Research on Playful Parenting:** Findings and strategies from the Serbian program.
- **Engaging Men in Playful Parenting:** Challenges and strategies to involve fathers more actively.
- **Supporting Professionals in Promoting Playful Parenting:** Techniques for professionals to communicate effectively with parents.



Why Playful Parenting?

Jill Popp, Senior Researcher at the LEGO Foundation, focused on the critical role of play in parenting and child development. She explained how playful interactions between parents and children contribute to various aspects of development, such as emotional regulation,

social skills, and cognitive abilities. Popp emphasized that play is not only essential for children's well-being but also for parents, as it fosters stronger connections, trust, and engagement within families.

Participants were also provided an overview of the LEGO Foundation's initiatives that promote playful parenting across different cultures and communities, highlighting both local and global programs. The initiatives aim to support caregivers in integrating playful activities into their daily routines, recognizing play as a powerful learning tool rather than just entertainment.

“Playful parenting goes beyond fun—it’s an essential strategy for fostering resilient, curious, and empathetic children.” – Jill Popp

Popp also touched on the challenges of integrating playful parenting in different socio-economic contexts and the importance of advocating for policy changes that support play as a foundational aspect of early childhood education and parenting. Her talk highlighted the need to transform societal views on play, positioning it as a serious and impactful component of child development and parental engagement.



Playful Parenting programming

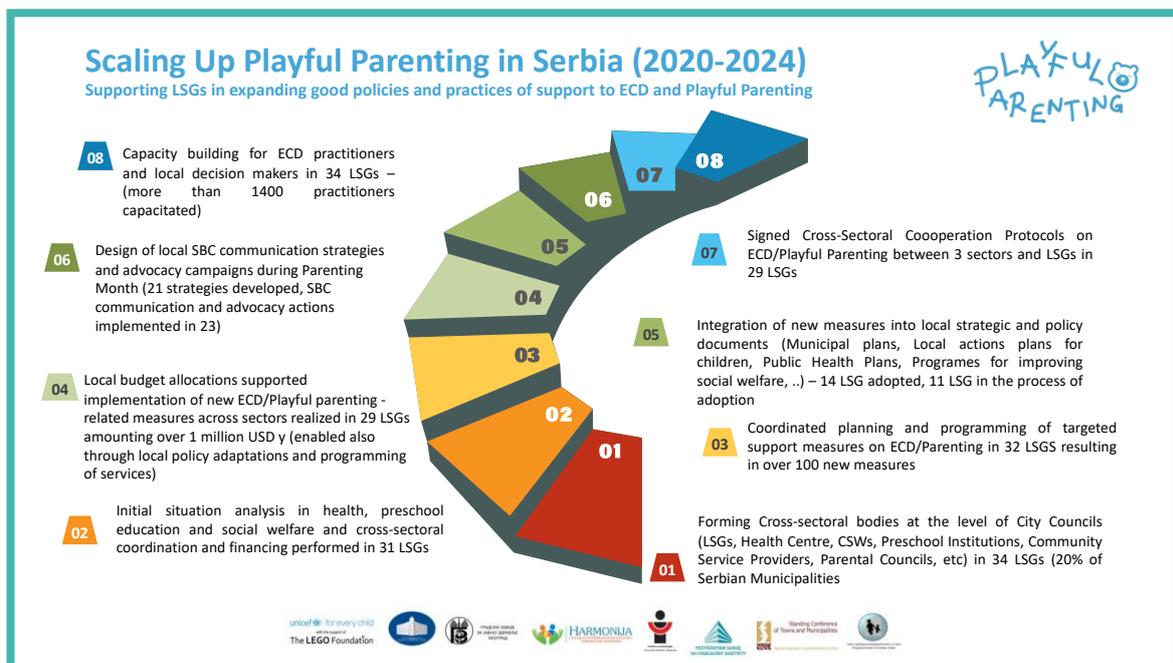
Erinna Dia, Associate Director, UNICEF ECD, provided an insightful overview of UNICEF's efforts to implement and scale playful parenting globally. She emphasized that playful parenting is more than just an activity—it is a core strategy for fostering the holistic development of young children. Dia also highlighted the importance of partnerships, especially with organizations like the LEGO Foundation, and the significant role these collaborations have played in scaling up culturally relevant parenting interventions since 2015.

“UNICEF is committed to playful parenting reflects the need for systemic integration, supporting caregivers with tools and strategies to foster positive child outcomes through play.”
 - Erinna Dia

Dia discussed UNICEF's approach to scaling playful parenting initiatives through partnerships with local governments, civil society, and community organizations. She explained how playful parenting has been integrated into national systems by leveraging existing early childhood services, making these practices more accessible to families. The goal is to provide every caregiver with the tools and resources needed to incorporate play into their parenting, regardless of their circumstances. She also emphasized the importance of local adaptation and sustainability, sharing examples of how playful parenting has been tailored to fit different cultural contexts.

The Playful Parenting program from Serbia: Effective scale-up and adaptation

Sonja Vujin, Project Manager, Standing Conference of Towns and Municipalities, provided an in-depth look at the Serbia Playful Parenting Program, showcasing how playful parenting practices have been scaled from pilot projects to a national initiative level. She began by explaining the origins of the program, which started as localized pilots aimed at encouraging play-based parenting practices within small communities. Their efforts reached 20% of the Serbian region. The COVID-19 pandemic further underscored the need for systematic support for vulnerable families.



The playful parenting framework they introduced allows local decision-makers to rethink policies and improve services, fostering better coordination between policymakers and professionals. "Our collaboration with local stakeholders," she stated, "ensured that the program not only reached more families but also became a part of their daily routine, integrating play into the fabric of their lives." This approach fostered a sense of ownership within communities, which was crucial for the program's sustainability and scalability. Through capacity-building initiatives, mentoring, and supervision training, they have enhanced the skills of over 1,400 professionals and integrated parenting measures into local strategies for long-term sustainability.

Vujin highlighted how the initiative created a platform for collaboration between decision-makers, professionals, and parents, leading to new parenting measures based on community needs assessments. They developed a popular multi-sectoral parenting school in collaboration with the Institute for Public Health and successfully advocated for budget allocations at the local level. Despite covering only a portion of the municipalities, the initiative is committed to expanding its reach and continuing its work to support families across Serbia.

Exploring pathways of playful parenting: Insights from thematic group discussions

Implementation research on Playful Parenting



The discussion began with an introduction to the concept of **implementation research**, which focuses on understanding how programs, policies, or interventions are introduced, applied, and sustained in real-world settings. This approach aims to bridge the gap between program design and practical application, ensuring evidence-based interventions achieve their desired outcomes. The playful parenting implementation research in Serbia, conducted by **FHI 360**, was highlighted as an example. The program started in early 2020 and has since expanded to multiple municipalities, with a goal to evaluate its reach, effectiveness, and sustainability.

The research methodology employed multiple data collection techniques, such as interviews, focus group discussions, observations, and child assessments, to capture a wide range of insights from stakeholders, professionals, and families. One of the key points discussed was how implementation research informs decision-making for scaling up successful interventions and ensures they are adaptable to different geographic regions and family needs. Participants also reflected on the use of **existing systems**, such as partner nurses and preschool teachers, to implement the program, which has proven to be a strength in ensuring sustainability.

The key findings from the review of early childhood development (ECD) in Serbia highlight both strengths and challenges. Strengths include a strong national policy framework

supporting ECD, enhanced by ongoing capacity building and intersectoral cooperation, which have been crucial in implementing playful parenting programs. Additionally, horizontal knowledge exchange among professionals has improved service quality and bolstered intersectoral collaboration, while advocacy efforts have significantly increased local support for family-focused interventions. However, a challenge that was highlighted is a notable shortage of trained professionals such as nurses, pediatricians, and social workers, especially in smaller municipalities. Furthermore, rigid legal and regulatory frameworks impede the adoption of innovative approaches like playful parenting. Prevailing social norms that define parenting roles, particularly the perception of fathers as primarily disciplinarians or providers, also pose barriers to program success.

This breakout session concluded with a reflection on the complexity of conducting **implementation research** in real-world settings and the importance of continuous learning and adaptation to ensure program effectiveness and sustainability.

Knowledge Gaps

- One of the key challenges raised was the difficulty in **measuring the real-world impact** of playful parenting interventions. Gathering consistent data from families and assessing long-term effects remain complex tasks.
- **Engaging families**, particularly in **marginalized** communities, has proven difficult. Parents often lack awareness of what kind of support they need and are not always receptive to new interventions.
- Ensuring that **implementation research continuously informs** the program's development and adjusts strategies based on findings is crucial. This includes addressing the differences in family engagement across municipalities.

Pending actions

- Continuous **validation** of approaches is necessary to ensure that playful parenting programs are on the right track and adaptive to community needs.
- Monitoring and evaluation need to evolve, involving **community research practices** to ensure local relevance and engagement. This could include feedback from families and local leaders.
- Progress must be accompanied by **evidence generation**, including getting local leaders and policymakers on board to support playful parenting initiatives.

Solutions and future pathways

- **Leverage existing workforce**: The existing network of professionals, such as partner nurses and preschool teachers, has proven to be an effective means of delivering the playful parenting program. Building on this workforce ensures broader reach and long-term sustainability.
- **Incorporate new learnings** into the implementation of programs as soon as needs arise. This agile approach allows programs to remain relevant and effective.

- **Contextual adaptation:** Research highlighted the importance of adapting programs to different contexts. For example, considering regional differences and cultural norms around parenting can make interventions more effective.
- **Targeted vs. Universal Approach:** Discussions touched on whether playful parenting programs should adopt a targeted approach, focusing on families that need more support, or remain universal. This remains a critical issue, especially in smaller and under-resourced municipalities.
- **Local partnerships** are crucial for successful scaling. Getting local leaders involved in advocacy and funding playful parenting programs is essential.

"We're seeing improvements, but real change takes time, especially when working within existing systems. It's about patience and persistence to ensure that these programs become fully integrated and sustainable." — Ksenija Krstic

Engaging men in Playful Parenting

The discussion began by reflecting on previous conversations related to programmatic approaches, such as advocacy, funding, lobbying, and capacity building, which were recognized as strategies that are needed by the playful parenting community to achieve common goals.



The group first focused on the following question: "What does engaging men mean?" leading to a focus on men's involvement, particularly in fatherhood and playful parenting. The definition of father-child play was explored, prompting reflections on its benefits and challenges. The need for a deeper understanding of fatherhood and strategies to promote fatherhood engagement in playful parenting was discussed, and future innovations were brainstormed.

In the breakout session, a synergy of ideas was encouraged, with participants highlighting research showing that fathers engage differently with their children compared to mothers. Father-child play was described as more physical and unpredictable, often involving rough-and-tumble activities, which peak around the age of three. Additionally, it was noted that fathers engage in creative and toy-based play, though these interactions may differ from mother-child play.

Knowledge gaps

- There is a need to understand more about fatherhood engagement, particularly in playful parenting. There is still a gap in knowledge about **how fathers can be better engaged** in early childhood care and play.
- **Father dropping out** from programs is a significant issue. Cultural differences and varying family structures make it difficult to engage fathers, especially in non-nuclear or separated families.
- Scenarios like migrant workers being absent from their families (e.g., in South Africa) pose additional challenges. There is a lack of understanding about the **realities that fathers on the margins face**, such as those who are incarcerated or working abroad.
- While it is known that father-child play is generally more physical and unpredictable, the differences between **mother-child and father-child play**, especially with respect to emotional bonding and cognitive development, **require further research**.

"We realized that reaching out to fathers is one issue but sustaining them can be challenging. Fathers tend to drop out of programs. This is something that's a challenge and a knowledge gap." - Ayça Alaylı

Pending actions

- **Promote more research on fatherhood.** There is a clear need for more research on how fathers can be engaged in early childhood development and play. Future studies should explore both the short-term and long-term benefits of father-child play.
- **Communicate evidence** on the benefits of father engagement in play, beginning from early years.
- **Develop tailored programs** that consider various family structures, such as single fathers, same-sex families, and migrant workers.
- Promote **paternity leave policies** and address biases in services that often exclude fathers.
- Employ **technological solutions** to support fathers who are physically distant, helping them stay engaged with their children's upbringing.
- Advocate for changes in **working conditions** that allow fathers more flexibility to be involved in their children's lives.
- **Involve more stakeholders** in promoting fatherhood and engaging men in responsive and playful caregiving.

Solutions and future pathways

- Reaching fathers in environments where they feel comfortable, such as **father-specific groups** (e.g., toy-making sessions or birth preparation classes).
- Fathers may be drawn to programs because they want to **spend time with their children** rather than simply to engage with other fathers. Tailoring programs to these motivations could increase participation.
- **One-on-one services** such as "walk and talk" sessions can be more effective in addressing father-specific needs and mental health concerns.
- Introducing **education-focused initiatives** rather than interventions could encourage more fathers to take on caregiving roles.

Supporting professionals in promoting Playful Parenting

The session highlighted the training program in Serbia designed to improve communication between preschool teachers and parents, particularly when addressing sensitive issues such as developmental disabilities or family-related challenges. The program focused on active listening, teamwork, and communication skills. The training



addressed common issues such as parental distrust, lack of cooperation, overprotectiveness, and unrealistic expectations, which were particularly pronounced when dealing with vulnerable groups. Teachers were encouraged to share their challenges, work collaboratively, and use real-life case studies to enhance their ability to handle difficult conversations with parents.

"From my perspective, children go to kindergarten, then they go to speech therapy, then they go to motor skills exercises, then to the playroom. We need to address this, not to judge parents, but to work together with them." - Milos Zorica

A key focus of the training was promoting parental involvement in playful parenting, emphasizing the need for teachers to build trust and communicate the importance of play for child development. Teachers observed that millennial parents, often over-reliant on technology, faced challenges in supporting their child's development, particularly in motor skills and communication. Societal pressures and busy schedules further complicated parent engagement, leaving many parents to delegate responsibilities to professionals. The session underscored the importance of parents and teachers aligning their efforts to foster children's growth, despite these modern challenges.

The discussion also addressed the impact of digitalization on child development, noting the detrimental effects of early screen exposure on cognitive and motor skills. Teachers expressed concern over parents placing too much trust in external systems for developmental tasks, such as speech therapy and motor skills training, leading to disengagement from their own role in their child's growth. Participants from the European Parents Association emphasized the importance of strong, continuous communication between parents and teachers, advocating for more parental education on child development and the creation of collaborative platforms for improving parent-teacher interactions and trust-building.

Knowledge gaps

- Communication with parents needs to be approached holistically. There is a **discrepancy** in how professionals and families understand key concepts.
- Many parents are **unaware of the developmental stages** of their children, particularly in terms of motor skills, communication, and the negative impact of excessive screen time.
- The **over-reliance on digital tools** has led to decreased attention spans in both children and parents. This issue needs to be addressed in a world where technology dominates communication.
- Parents tend to over-rely on **external professionals** for their child's development, instead of taking an active role at home.
- The importance of co-regulation and the child's need to experience positive stress was not fully understood by many parents, leading to overprotection or unrealistic expectations.

Pending actions

- Focus on **capacity-building** for professionals to support parents more effectively. Training needs to be tailored to the specific demands professionals face in their daily interactions with families.
- Establish better mechanisms for **listening to parents' needs** and strengthening communication channels.
- Develop **monitoring systems** that regularly evaluate the effectiveness of these capacity-building efforts.
- Establish more opportunities for parents and teachers to communicate and work together, such as workshops, team meetings, and parent-teacher sessions focused on specific child development issues.
- Increase efforts to inform parents about the cognitive and physical impacts of early and excessive screen exposure on children and promote alternatives like outdoor play and hands-on activities.

Solutions and future pathways

- **Delivering support** based on the specific demands of professionals and the needs of the families they serve.
- Enhancing professionals' **communication and listening skills** to ensure that interactions with families are constructive and focused on the parents' needs.
- Encouraging **curiosity** in professionals, helping them ask the right questions to understand the challenges parents face.
- Establishing a **"two-way street"** in communication, ensuring parents and teachers collaborate and share responsibilities in the child's education and development.
- Teachers can act as role models for parents, demonstrating positive interaction methods, active listening, and the benefits of playful parenting.
- Focus on the whole family, not just the child or vulnerable groups, ensuring that parents are actively involved in the solution, not just relying on the educational system or teachers.



Future pathways of Playful Parenting

In the last session of the workshop, the playful parenting community discussed and consolidated the insights from the thematic group discussions. The discussions addressed crosscutting challenges and barriers and the future steps that the community of playful parenting can take:

- **Challenge:** Assessing effectiveness and sustainability of current father engagement approaches in parenting.
- **Barriers:** Cultural, social, and structural obstacles hinder father involvement.
- **Concerns:** Reliance on digital solutions may affect quality of engagement with children and parents.
- **Solution:** Continuously validate approaches with evidence-based monitoring and adapt to diverse family needs.
- **Advocacy:** Prioritize inclusive policies like paternity leave and better working conditions for fathers.
- **Strengthening Support:** Enhance teacher and parent capacity to foster playful parenting and supportive environments.

The community agreed on the following cross-cutting future pathways for playful parenting:

- **Systemic Integration:** Embedding playful parenting into **government systems**, as seen in Serbia, ensures long-term sustainability. Future pathways should focus on partnerships between local governments, communities, and non-governmental organizations to keep programs running and funded.
- **Advocacy for Policy Change:** There is a need for continuous advocacy to push for policies that support fathers' involvement in playful parenting and ensure mental health services are available to both parents and children.
- **Flexibility in Program Design:** Programs should be flexible enough to evolve as new learnings emerge. Tailoring interventions to the specific cultural and socioeconomic contexts of each region is essential for scaling playful parenting initiatives successfully.
- **Cross-sectoral Collaboration:** Playful parenting should not be siloed in early childhood education but integrated across **health, education, and social welfare sectors**.

Collaborative approaches help address the diverse needs of families and children, ensuring no one is left behind.

The power of networks in the future of playful parenting

ISSA, as an early childhood network, is dedicated to contributing to the efforts focused on strengthening the regional and global landscape of early childhood development. ISSA has been leveraging its network mechanisms to increase the impact and reach of playful parenting interventions. The power of networks lies in their ability to bring diverse stakeholders together. Networks like ISSA provide a platform for sharing knowledge, best practices, and resources that amplify the impact of playful parenting programs. These mechanisms also included dissemination through online events such as workshops and webinars, communication materials such as newsletters, articles, blogs and videos, and social media channels to improve access, dissemination and uptake of information related to playful parenting. Throughout the lifetime of the initiative, ISSA provided a platform for information sharing, facilitated knowledge exchange, and learning in terms of playful parenting.

"Something we need to celebrate is the power of the networks. ISSA and other networks involved have done a tremendous job, and that convening and creating a platform is something we need to embrace going forward." - Boniface Kakhobwe

Networks, such as ISSA, UNICEF, and LEGO Foundation, serve as **catalysts for collaboration, innovation, and policy influence** in playful parenting programs. They play a crucial role in promoting playful parenting by fostering collaboration across different sectors and enabling systemic change. They connect health, education, and social welfare, ensuring that playful parenting is supported through a holistic approach. By embedding programs within existing government frameworks, networks ensure long-term sustainability and access to necessary funding. Through strong partnerships, they also help scale initiatives and influence policy environments, creating solid foundations for children's development. Additionally, networks facilitate the sharing of knowledge and resources, allowing organizations to quickly adapt to emerging needs and incorporate best practices from different regions. They provide the flexibility to address diverse challenges in various cultural and social contexts, ensuring inclusive and relevant solutions for all families. Finally, through advocacy, networks amplify their reach and influence, driving global change and supporting early childhood development on a large scale. These collaborative efforts make networks essential for sustaining and advancing playful parenting initiatives.

Additional Playful Parenting resources

For additional resources and articles developed by ISSA under the Playful Parenting initiative, visit

<https://www.issa.nl/issa/initiative/content/scaling-playful-parenting>

or scan:

