

# Rural Mothers' Perceptions of Play in Children's Learning and Development in Bangladesh

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## Abstract

*The purpose of the study is to explore rural mothers' perceptions of play in children's development and learning in Bangladesh. Because, it was necessary to fulfill the lack in data and research evidences on the issue and to contribute to include play in policies and practices in this regards.*

*Mixed methods have been used in the study and mothers with children of 3-5 years have been purposively selected. The results show that mothers in rural Bangladesh have lacks of clear and specific knowledge about the benefits of play. They prefer academic activities rather than play activities for their children. On the issue of gender differences in play, mothers' educational level makes differences in mothers' perceptions regarding gender orientation in child's play. Parents seldom play with their children and do so only when they are requested by their children. At best, they play supervisory role in their children play.*

**Key words:** Mother's perceptions of play, Play and child development in Bangladesh, Gender in child development

## I. Introduction

During the early years of life, children's opportunities to develop appropriately are influenced by many different factors. These include parents' knowledge, attitudes, and practices; the cultural norms and values of the wider society; the initiatives of the primary caregivers; and the availability of early childhood development (ECD) programs and services. While it is well known that play is a very important element of child development and learning and "creates the zone of proximal development" (Vygotsky, 1933, p. 552), parents' behaviors and beliefs toward play in Bangladesh, and how they are influenced by social and cultural values, have received less scrutiny.

More than 16 million children under 5 years live in Bangladesh (BBS, 2001), which was one of the first countries to ratify the Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989). Through this Convention, and the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (1979), the country is fully committed to improving the status of children and to addressing gender discrimination. But a lack of attention to early childhood development and education and the role of play in it is still evident.

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Play is a joyful activity that occurs naturally for most children and fosters the social life and constructive activity of the child (Elkind, 2003; Piaget, 1980; Sluss, 2005). Many researchers across different disciplines have found that play is a main activity for children in all cultures and that parents have a significant role in facilitating it. As noted in the writing of Lev Semyonovich Vygotsky (1896-1934), playing with an adult or an older child enhances a child's skills and builds the child's self-confidence. (Vygotsky, 1966, 1978, 1990). Urie Bronfenbrenner's (1917-2005) ecological model also provides an important framework for considering play as part of child development and the role of parents and family (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). In Bangladesh, however, there are gaps in the research on this issue and very limited data have been available for development of an ECD education policy from this perspective..

## 2. Objectives

The primary aim of this study is to answer the research question:

1. What are rural mothers' perceptions of play for children's (age 3–5) learning and development in Bangladesh? This main question can be broken down into additional research questions in the Bangladesh context, as listed below.
2. What are the rural mothers' perceptions of gender difference in children's play?
3. Do rural mothers' perceptions of play vary with their level of education?
4. Do rural mothers' perceptions of play differ based on fathers' (husbands') level of education?
5. Do mothers in rural Bangladesh view play differently based on their family income?

## 3. Methodology

Information on mothers' perceptions of play was obtained using both quantitative and qualitative research methods. Mothers with children 3–5 years of age were selected. At this age (children 3–5 years of age), parents begin to see children as “learners” and consider the importance of “formal” learning rather than learning through play.

For the quantitative study, 60 mothers from two rural villages in Gazipur District—Singardighi and Kopatipayara—were purposively selected to participate. The data collection instrument was a structured survey, with a five-point Likert scale, created in collaboration with a team of ECD faculty of BRAC University and other experts working in the country. Eighteen statements regarding play were formulated which covered six development domains: physical, social, cognitive, language and communication, emotional, and creativity. Contents were also evaluated for relevance to life skills, learning and academics, play opportunity, gender, and parents' involvement in children's play. A validation panel of five experts was enlisted to rate the relevance and clarity of each item in the survey.

Because the majority of participants had low or no literacy, data were collected through face-to-face interviews. The surveys were conducted by the researcher and a trained research

assistant who recorded each mother’s responses to the 18 statements during the interview.

Data analysis generated descriptive statistics of mothers’ responses and included frequencies, percentages, and mean scores with range and standard deviation. Bivariate statistics were used to explore the variations in maternal responses by socioeconomic status, educational background, and child’s age since responses may vary according to the age of the child.

For the qualitative study, eight mothers from each village participated in focus group discussions (FGD) after they completed the quantitative survey. An equal number of mothers with less than primary education and primary education and above were included, and assigned into FGD-A and FGD-B, respectively. Focus group discussions were held with mothers in a location of their choice. Each session was audio-taped with the permission of the respondents. A trained research assistant moderated all FGD sessions on the basis of study objectives and research questions that were shared by the principal researcher, who took notes and organized and monitored the sessions. Each session lasted approximately 40 minutes.

The discussions were recorded and carefully transcribed and compared for accuracy and validity.. Transcriptions were made in Bangla and translated into English. The focus group facilitator resolved any content discrepancies. Using content analysis, major themes were identified, coded, and categorized; excerpts from the transcripts were chosen to illustrate the summary statements, which were also used to validate the findings.

### 4. Findings

Based on the objectives and research questions of this study, we found significant findings from the survey and focus group discussions that are presented separately below:

#### 4.1. Survey

Table 1 summarizes results from the survey of mothers’ perceptions of play for children’s learning and development in Bangladesh. As evident in the table, mothers’ attitudes toward play and its role in early childhood development were very positive. Only some of the key findings are presented below.

**Table 1. Quantitative Findings: Mothers’ responses to statements on play and children’s development, by percentage**

	<b>Strongly disagree</b>	<b>Disagree</b>	<b>Undecided/ neutral</b>	<b>Agree</b>	<b>Strongly agree</b>
“Through play, children learn to live with other people as a social being.”	–	–	1.7%	3.3%	95.0%
“Play is detrimental to increasing children’s knowledge.”	71.7%	8.3%	10.0%	3.3%	6.7%

“Play encourages children’s creativity.”	–	–	1.7%	10.0%	88.3%
“Play does not help children’s physical development.”	70.0%	10.0%	–	3.3%	16.3%
“Through play, children learn to express their emotions appropriately.”	6.7%	–	3.3%	5.0%	85.0%
“Children’s development of language skills is hampered when they play.”	86.7%	5.0%	1.7%	–	6.7%
“Play helps children in learning math skills.”	1.7%	–	–	10.0%	88.3%
“Through play, children learn logical thinking.”	–	–	5.0%	6.7%	88.3%
“Through play, children are encouraged to solve problems on their own.”	3.3%	–	–	11.7%	85.0%
“Through play, children learn to follow rules and instructions.”	–	–	–	6.7%	93.3%
“Play is detrimental to children’s learning.”	75.0%	6.7%	1.7%	11.7%	5.0%
“Children learn to accept a victory or defeat in play.”	–	–	–	1.7%	98.3%
“For boys and girls, play should be different.”	58.3%	6.7%	1.7%	6.7%	26.7%
“For boys and girls, play materials should be different.”	38.3%	1.7%	–	6.7%	53.3%
“Children do not need to have play opportunities at home.”	90.0%	3.3%	–	–	6.7%
“There is no need to have an outdoor playing field (playground) for children.”	83.3%	5.0%	–	5.0%	6.7%
“Parents should play with their children.”	3.3%	–	–	6.7%	90.0%
“Play should be a regular routine as a class subject in preprimary education.”	6.7%	–	–	3.3%	90.0%

#### **4.1.1. Mothers' level of education**

When the mean score was compared between mothers with different levels of education, no significant difference was found except for the following three statements. Mothers with lower levels of education were more likely to agree with the statement, "Through play, children learn to follow rules and instructions." Mothers in the lower education group were also more likely to agree that "children do not need play opportunities at home." However, mothers with higher education were more likely to agree with the statement, "Parents should play with their children."

#### **4.1.2. Fathers' level of education**

Mean score comparisons were made between the level of fathers' education and respondents' agreement with the 18 survey statements in the quantitative study. No significant differences were found.

#### **4.1.3. Family income**

An analysis of variance, or ANOVA test, was carried out to determine the influence of income on maternal perceptions of play. No significant differences were found between participants' responses when analyzed by their family income.

### **4.2. Focus Group**

For fulfilling the objective of the study and obtaining in-depth data in qualitative study, two groups of mothers of different types were recruited purposively (N= (8+8)16). Some of the key findings and comparisons of the two focus groups—mothers with less than primary education (FGD-A) and mothers with primary education and above (FGD-B)—are presented below.

#### **4.2.1. Defining value of play for children 3–5 years old**

Participants in both focus groups responded similarly to the questions, "What do your children do throughout the day? Among those activities, which are play or games and which are not—and why?" The mothers said that children in this age group play all the time, with joy, pausing only when called for specific tasks such as eating, drinking, and bathing. Activities they defined as play include playing with dolls or toys; games such as football, cricket, and running competitively; rough-and-tumble play; cooking; collecting leaves from a banana tree; making things with mud and throwing things into a pond; dancing and wearing a sari; riding a bicycle; pretend shop-keeping with roles as a seller or a buyer; and digging in the mud like a farmer. They differentiated these activities from "risky" activities such as swimming or climbing trees, which they mentioned as "harmful play," "unhealthy play," or "naughty work."

#### **4.2.2. Benefits of play**

Focus group participants were asked to discuss the positive and negative benefits of play for 3- to 5-year-old children. Both groups agreed that play increases knowledge, supports language and math skills, and increases psychological well-being. They regarded physical play as activities that keep children's bodies healthy, enhancing children's weight and

physical strength. Some mothers, especially those in FGD-B, mentioned that children who are physically active become agile in all other activities, including academics. Regarding the negative aspects of play, the mothers' opinion in both groups was very clear: they felt that there is no disadvantage to play unless children participate in hazardous games.

#### 4.2.3. Gender differences in children's play

Participants in both focus groups felt that boys and girls play differently. But there were some variations in the activities they identified as interesting to girls or boys, as shown in table 2.

**Table 2. Gender differences in play, as identified**  
by mothers during focus group discussions (FGD)  
(X = activities identified by FGD; O = not mentioned by FGD)

Interesting for girls	Mothers with less than primary education (FGD-A)	Mothers with primary education and above (FGD-B)
Cooking	X	X
Playing with dolls	X	X
Using utensils	X	X
Dancing	O	X
Wearing women's dresses	O	X
<b>Interesting for boys</b>		
Playing ball	X	X
Playing flute	X	O
Cycling	X	O
Cricket	X	X
Running	O	X
Carom (indoor board game)	O	X

Regarding whether girls and boys should play together, the mothers in FGD-A said that boys like to play outside the home, in a playground or open space, and that girls like to play at home, in the courtyard or under the trees. Some mothers remarked that their girls were forbidden to go outside alone. They did not have any problem with boys and girls playing together when they were under age 5 but felt that it was inappropriate for older children. Mothers in FGD-B were more likely to understand the benefits of letting children choose activities, play materials, and playmates regardless of gender. And they were of the opinion that if given the opportunity boys and girls enjoy playing together and learn from each other.

#### 4.2.4. Emphasis on play or academics

The basic opinion mothers expressed during the focus group discussions is that preschool-age children do learn through play and that it is the dominant activity compared to more formal academic learning. Their preference, however, would be an emphasis on more formal learning, indicated through such statements as, "Academic activities for children are

very good. If they engage in play less and more in academic activities, that would be best for children.” With one exception, they felt that there is no need to have play materials in the classroom and that play should be an outdoor break from academics rather than incorporated into classroom activities. Only one respondent said that play opportunities should be part of school curricula for 3- to 5-year-old children, because academic learning can happen through play.

#### **4.2.5 Play opportunities at home and beyond**

Mothers in both focus groups had similar concerns about safety for children in this age group and expressed a preference for play at home/indoors. Slight differences were found between the groups, with mothers who had less than primary education preferring a specific space, such as a small cottage where four or five children could gather, arranged for calm, quiet, and safe play. Mothers with primary education and above felt that children could play at any place in the home, such as the balcony, open space in front of the house, or underneath a tree.

Both focus groups thought that outdoor playing areas should be safe and formally structured, providing natural light, fresh air, and a chance for their children to enjoy open space and refresh their mental state. FGD-B mothers, however, said that due to the social system in their village, mothers cannot go outside and that is why children do not get their mothers’ participation in or support for outdoor play. FGD-A emphasized that there is a real need for spaces that are close to home and specifically modified for children’s play. Existing outdoor play spaces, they said, are too small, informally developed, and not well organized.

#### **4.2.6 Parents’ Role in Children’s Play**

When mothers were asked, “What do you think about parents’ role in children’s play?” FGD-A and B mothers answered similarly that there is a need of parents’ playing with their children. They should allocate a good amount of their time for playing with children. According to them, these little kids can not spend time alone. Again, if parents play with their children they would be protected from risks and safety concerns. Children also are happy if parents play with them. Consequently they become attentive to and develop a bonding with the mother. That’s also the time when children listen and obey, and follow the parents’ instructions. Mothers said that sometimes they had to join in play when their children insisted that they do, , generally due to lack of play partners. Some mothers felt happy and proud to find time for play with their children. . Their positive opinion was--- “Through involvement in play with children parents-child relation becomes stronger”

Mothers engage and support in their child’s play at home (in indoor play). Generally, fathers engaged less in children’s play. Mothers mentioned as the cause the fact that fathers stayed outside of the home most of the time and returned at night when young children went to bed. In some cases, even if fathers had the time they did not value play as important. Some mothers agreed that fathers were supposed to be busy with family matters other than childcare affairs.

## 5. Discussion

The findings of the study were obtained using both quantitative and qualitative research methods. The focus group discussions (FGDs) complemented information obtained from the quantitative survey and provided deeper insight into the participants' rationalization and disagreement regarding play in early childhood.

### 5.1. Benefits of play

Quantitative findings show that a relatively important percentage of respondents were not aware about the benefit of play in development of children. Qualitative study findings in this theme also reveal that they perceived physical play as physical exercise for the children. Besides this, they did not show a deeper knowledge on how children's development as a whole benefited from play. One mother, however, observed that children engaging in physical activity became agile in other areas including academic skills.

The quantitative study findings show that mothers have knowledge about some of the benefits of play; however, qualitative information revealed that a larger number of mothers had a positive attitude towards play but they lacked clear and specific knowledge about the benefits of play for children's physical development. They were not ware, for example, of the link between healthy bodies and healthy brain development or of as the curative strategy against the obesity epidemic (Ginsburg and the Committee on Communications and the Committee on Psychosocial Aspects of Child and Family Health, 2007).

Some of the mothers have a wrong perception about play and children's cognitive development. Survey showed that about 20% of respondents' have lack of awareness on the benefits of play for children's cognitive development. Qualitative study findings also revealed a lack in this respect. Although some of the respondents mentioned that play helped learning and gain in knowledge, discussion showed lack of clear understanding about the matter such as children's mastery of their surrounding, development of confidence, and achieving competencies for facing future challenges, as supported by research literature (Tsao, 2002).

### 5.2. Emphasis on Play and Academics

Literature shows that the conflict in perception between children's academic learning and play opportunity at preschool classroom and beyond exist around the world and emphasis is wrongly given to academics rather than play. (Sluss, 2004). In the quantitative study two items were used to find the mothers perception on this issue. The e first item was the statement, "play is detrimental to children's learning," to which 16% of the mothers agreed.

In qualitative study, however, mothers perceived that 'play/game is not detrimental to the learning/academics'. Mothers' opinion was that children have the right to play along with academic activities. They need to have time for play the same way as for academic activities, in the mothers' view... But when a choice of emphasis was required, mothers preferred academic activities over play..



The second statement on this issue in the survey was “Play should be in regular class routine as a subject in preprimary education.” Ninety percent of the mothers strongly agreed. But, discussion in the qualitative study seemed to negate this view. . Mothers did not think that there was a need to play with dolls, balls, toys, and other play-materials in classroom like other academic or leaning activities. They seem to prefer keeping play out of classroom. . Among 18 FGD participants , only one responded boldly that there was need to have play as routine activity for 3 to 5+ children in their school’s regular curriculum. The majority view was reflected in the remark: “If our children engage in academic activities that makes us happy. Engaging in play makes us less happy. Academic activities for children are very good. If they engage less in play and more in academic activities it would be the best for children.”

### **5.3. Gender Differences in Children’s Play**

Frost (2005) noted that “One source of gender segregation is culture. ...family and parenting are a factor in gender difference in play” (p-110).

To find the answer to the research question 2, both quantitative and qualitative enquiry was conducted. Both revealed that gender issue in children’s play is a debatable and confusing subject to the mothers. For instance, to the the statement, For boys and girls play should be different,” about 58% of the respondents strongly disagreed and 26% of respondents strongly agreed. To another statement, “For boys and girls play-materials should be different,” about 60% of the respondents agreed. In FGD-A some mothers said they kept their girl’s at home, within their sight, and gave them kitchen utensils and dolls to play with, out of sfety concerns., Children’s play has been dictated and influenced, it appears, by mothers’ own gender stereotypical attitude., When sufficient numbers of children gathered from neighboring families, mothers instructed their children to form boys’ group and girls’ group for playing together in gender oriented groups.

FGD-B mothers appear less stereotypical about dictating play behavior according to gender identity. They were more open to the opportunity for children to play together regardless of being boys or girls. Some mothers described their thinking in this way that “girl may wish to play with ball; boys may wish to play with doll. If we differentiate play material for girls and boys, that could be a form of deprivation for them.” FGD-B mothers agreed that there should be the scope to choose the play partners and play materials. As a mother put it, “If boys and girls get opportunity to play together, children have fun and pleasure and enjoy a lot, and they learn from each other.”

Research literature on this issue indicates parents’ role. It has been pointed out that “Parents can foster play that is gender-neutral. Parents can treat their children’s play in an equitable manner. Equal time should be spent with children of either gender or equal emphasis placed on toys and activities. Fathers and mothers should include girls in traditional male games and engage their sons in cooking and other activities in the home once thought to be females territory” (Frost, Sue & Raifel, 2005, p-152).

#### 5.4. Parents' Role in Children's Play

. In both quantitative survey and FGDs mothers recognized the role of parents and supported parents' joining in children's play. But as a mother said, , in most of the case, their participation is the result of fulfilling their children's need and demand rather than mothers' awareness and realization of importance of play for their children's development and learning.

Frost, Sue & Raifel (2005) added from different research study results that "adult involvement is most effective when the adult becomes a co-player or provides suggestions and materials to enrich play. Adults are least effective when they are uninvolved or merely observe play. At the other extreme, they are equally ineffective when they become instructors or directors of play" (p. 152).

Our study revealed that generally fathers engaged less in children's play. The literature shows that fathers' involvement in children's play is very important. Frost, Sue & Raifel (2005) noted that "mothers and fathers play differently with infants and toddlers. ...When parents play with toddlers, differences in play activities persist (p-115)." Mothers help their toddlers play one way, and fathers in other ways. Some research show that toddlers are relatively more responsive to fathers than to their mothers (Frost, Sue & Raifel, 2005). Though mothers expressed positive attitudes towards facilitating and supervising children's play, they often were limited by availability of time; fathers were generally even less involved in children's play..

### 6. Conclusion

The results of the survey show that mothers in rural Bangladesh know about some of the benefits of play for children. But the more in-depth analysis of focus group data revealed that although mothers generally have a positive attitude toward play, they lack clear and specific knowledge about the benefits of play—including for motor development, psychological well-being, and development of life skills.

Regarding relative emphasis on play or academics, mothers preferred academic activities. However, they also recognized that 3 to 5 year-old children are not fully ready for academic activities, and for this reason, both play and academic activities are needed.

On the issue of gender differences in play, the focus group discussions generated some ambivalent results. Perceptions among mothers who were illiterate or had less than primary education (FGD-A) were that children's play should be determined and influenced by mothers, and preferably, girls should play with other girls, boys with other boys. But those who had primary education or above (FGD-B) stated that mothers should not restrict girls and boys to playing in separate groups. Rather, mothers should give them the opportunity to play together.

Regarding their role in children's play, results of both the survey and focus groups found that mothers have positive perceptions. Focus group discussions, however, revealed that

mothers' participation in play is limited because they are busy with chores. They seldom engage in play with their child and do so only for a very short time and in response to their child's request. The participants in this study perceive their role as supervising and protecting their children while they are playing. That's why mothers keep their children nearby when they are working. Although they sometimes support activities by giving children play material, buying toys, etc., mothers did not mention that they were involved in their children's play on their own initiative.

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