

Introduction

Children’s cognitive, physical, and social-emotional wellbeing is best supported when they interact with an educator who understands that children thrive and learn through play. When parents and educators at early learning centers share this goal and allow children to express themselves through play, it may improve parent-child interactions while creating trusting relationships, so they can develop a stable attachment to people in their lives (Okimoto et.al, 1999; Johnson & Dinger, 2012).

In this action research project, the investigators partnered with a new early learning center to learn about their use of play-based practices by conducting focus groups with parents and staff. This study focused on current levels of communication between educators and parents, the use of toys in the classroom, and how the early learning center’s philosophy aligns with their practices in the classrooms. Researchers led focus groups with the parents of the children as well as with staff at the center.

Research Questions Investigated:

- Use of materials and equipment in the classroom
- Meeting the needs of children
- Communication and relationships with parents and families

Demographics

- ❖ Parents and teachers of children ages 3-5 years old
- ❖ Gender of parents and teachers
 - ❖ Female-100%
- ❖ Parents vs. Teachers
 - ❖ 5 parents and 4 teachers



Results

Parent Themes

Theme	Subtheme	Example statement (not verbatim)
Communication	Parent-teacher interactions	"I feel there is a lack communication because my child's lead teacher has already left for the day"
	Knowledge on daily/weekly activities	"I would like a weekly letter to know what activities are going on in the classroom so I can expand on it at home"
	Newsletters	"It would be nice to know the overarching theme and more heads up on special activities or events"
	Contacting administrators	"I don't get responses from my questions right away it may take a few weeks to get a response."
	Staffing updates	"I would like more communication about which staff is going to be in the classroom"
Equipment and Materials	Sensory items	"It would be cool to have different sensory experiences outside because they lack grass"
	Child/child collaboration	"The toys my child plays with allows for collaboration between the kids"
Outdoor Space	Size	"The space is not big enough; they have to take turn using the space"
	Safety	"I am a fan of risk but need to set kids up for risks that will end safely not in injury"
	Large/fine motor skills	"Likes things to climb on and thing to work on fine motor like bikes."

Teacher Themes

Theme	Subtheme	Example Statement
Communication	Kinderlime app	"It's a nice app with messaging, mood updates, or just fun updates throughout the day."
	In person communication	"Face to face [communication] is better when interacting with parents since you get to know them."
	Staffing consistency	"Sometimes we don't know what room we will be in until we arrive to work either in the morning or afternoon. It would be nice to know where I would be in advance"
Equipment and Materials	Sensory toys	"We also have a table of beans, shredded paper, q-tips, cotton balls, a sand table, magnetic tiles, and building blocks."
	Real life items	"Some kids like things like gloves, wipes, fake cleaning supplies. They're mostly things used at home"
	Dramatic play	"The kids love to play house. We also have a fake sandwich shop where they can dress up in aprons and pretend to 'take orders."
Outdoor space	Safety	"We would like to get the kids outside more, but we find construction nails and cigarettes. There's also really uneven and broken up ground on the sidewalk."
	Walks	"We love to take the kids to the nearby park when the weather is nice."
	Gross/fine motor development	"We would like to see our outside play area become a place where the kids can run and jump and climb."
	Music wall	"It would be fun for the kids if we made an 'instrument wall' where the kids could play and make as much noise and music as they want."

Data Collection Methods

The research team conducted two focus groups with parents and preschool teachers at a new early learning center. Data was collected through Qualtrics, an online survey.

Examples of Open-ended questions:

- How do you initiate communication with teachers/parents? Do you think this is an efficient method?
- What kind of class materials are used in the classroom? How are they helpful for learning?
- What do you like about the current outdoor play setting? What do you not like, and what would you suggest for improvements/changes?

Discussion & Recommendations

While there is no single definition of quality in childcare, there are some critical elements of childcare identified by participants. Both teachers and parents believed that it is imperative to meet the developmental needs of the children through the utilization of materials and space at the center. Both groups applauded the center's use of community engagement and play equipment to encourage positive development that prepares them for elementary school. Additionally, teacher and parent focus groups also identified communication as a key aspect that was lacking. Most parents desired more communication with teachers related to their child’s day and the types of activities in the classroom. Teachers identified schedules as a possible interference with parent-teacher communication. Both groups identified a need for improvement when communicating with administrators. In all, while teachers and parents believe there are several components that need improvement, both groups enjoy being a part of the center.

Researcher Recommendations:

- Lead teachers send out a weekly parent email with a schedule detailing activities and field trips
- Weekly teacher meetings with the lead teachers of all preschool teachers and directors
- Increase outdoor sensory, play, and learning experiences by adding equipment (I.e. Water tables, bikes, and musical wall on fences)

References

- Johnson, J. A. & Dinger, D. (2012). Let them play: An early learning (un)curriculum. St. Paul: Red Leaf Press
Okimoto, A. M., Bundy, A., & Hanzlik, J. (2000). Playfulness in children with and without disability: Measurement and intervention. *American Journal of Occupational Therapy*, 54(1), 73-82.