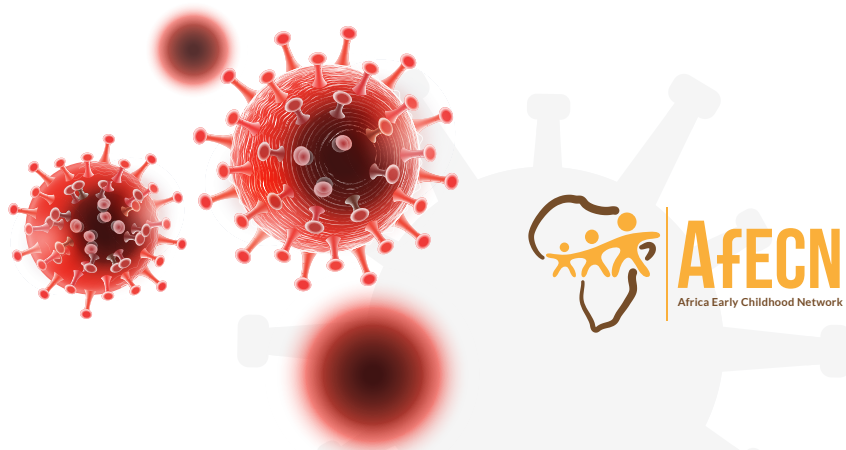


Building Back Better



The right to play: Joyful child's play is serious learning



Governments around the world should pay attention to play. By doing so, they get to do the proverbial 'killing of two birds with one stone'. Play is the right of the child, supported by both the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child and the international Convention on the Rights of the Child. It's also a pathway to boosting children's development, promoting lifelong learning and strengthening education systems because of its impact on the quality of ECD provision.'

Play is not new, all children do it, we know this because once we were also young and probably spent hours alone and with friends, playing. Maria Montessori, physician and advocate for child-centred learning in the early nineteen-hundreds, named it the work of the child. More recently, this thinking has been expanded by researchers like Baylin and Hughes (2016) who have demonstrated how play promotes brain development, particularly in the "crucial prefrontal cortex or 'upstairs brain,' which is the home of executive functioning, healthy social skills, impulse control, creativity and joy".

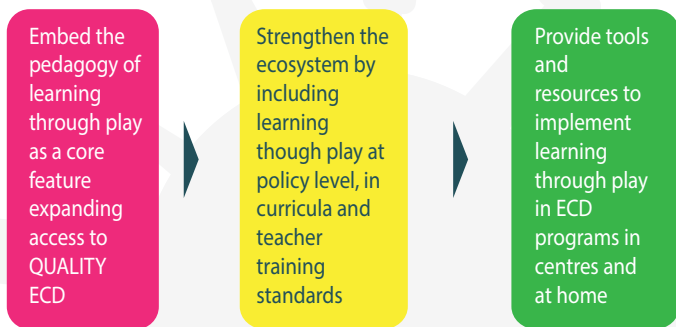
Play is the means through which children learn to solve problems, develop hypotheses about how the world works, build friendships and empathy, learn to self-regulate, collaborate and resolve conflict. It is the basis on which those skills which will carry children into the 21st century, resilient and able to manage a fast-changing world, are constructed. It is a key feature of ECD quality and as such, should be a priority for governments.

***Play is universal and the right of every child**, upheld in various international, regional and country level treaties that support the rights and wellbeing of young children. The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, (Article 31) states that every child has the right to play. Likewise, the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child (Article 12) upholds children's right to engage in play appropriate to their age. The African union (AU) has also identified early learning as a key pillar to achieve its Vision 2063.*

GOVERNMENTS MUST PROMOTE THE PEDAGOGY OF PLAY AS A FUNDAMENTAL FEATURE OF EARLY CHILDHOOD CARE AND EDUCATION QUALITY.

Many governments have expanded early learning services by adding a year onto existing primary schools' infrastructure. While this provides a good solution for quick service expansion, it also comes with the risk of the schoolification of ECD. Schoolification is a global trend which happens when adults emphasise the formal skills associated with readiness for primary schooling, forgetting that in the early years, children have an inbuilt need and capacity to learn that is largely driven through play.

Schoolified environments often adopt higher teacher-child ratios, are more focused on academic learning and give less time to child-centred, play-based pedagogy. Evidence tells us that learning success in pre-primary settings is driven by age-appropriate pedagogies. By systematising play as a core feature of quality in early learning, they can boost child development and human capital formation. Embedding it at policy and curricula level will ensure it is firmly rooted in teacher practices and so integrated into early learning environments.



Government can achieve more by partnering with national and international innovators in the early childhood sector.

A study undertaken in 2019 by the Centre for Universal Education at the Brookings Institute, found that of the 1 912 playful learning innovations in their catalogue, only 15% were implemented by government while 1 122 (59%) were the work of the NGO sector. The study also notes the importance of being open to new ways of doing things. The World Bank has responded to the COVID-19 crisis by increasing support to government led initiatives to mitigate the impact of school closures on learning, this included prioritising early learning. A number of governments were able to pivot their work to support playful learning at home and in the community. In Kenya, the Emerge Reading Program also the RISE Interactive Radio Instruction Program managed by the Ministry of Education in Zanzibar as well as the Sesame Workshop programs in 15 countries and Ubongo TV in East Africa.

Having started this blog with a proverb, let's end with the well-known one from Africa, "if you want to go fast, go alone, if you want to go far, go together." We have a long and important road ahead. Even as governments with all the load that must be carried, as Jean François Basse, Regional Adviser, Child Protection at UNICEF ESARO at a recent AfECN webinar on the right to play reminded us, "we do not need to achieve these results alone. Through our partnerships with UN agencies, civil society, and the private sector", much can be achieved.

A 5-Step Call to Action

As duty bearers for the scaling up of early childhood care and education services of quality, government leaders should take decisive and bold steps to support and stimulate the take-up of play-based pedagogies by:

Advocating for child-centred, play-based pedagogy as key to quality provision and a critical feature of the expansion of ECD services.

Activating government ministers and leaders to be champions for children's learning through play. Advocates in high places can play a critical role by raising visibility and putting pressure on other parts of the system to adopt approaches and strategies that support learning through play.

Promoting the inclusion of the pedagogy of play in sector specific policies and directives ensuring that the right of every child to play and to learning through play is systemically embedded and that local laws supporting play are enforced.

Increasing and improving domestic and international investments (at least 1% of GDP) to enable the expansion of early childhood services of quality which includes resources for play-based teaching and learning.

Developing public awareness and stimulating demand by working with existing programs and services to facilitate the adoption of play-based approaches through interaction in the home, in ECD programs, within teacher training institutions and at community level.

GREAT THINGS ARE HAPPENING, HERE ARE SOME TO LEARN FROM

(i) **Child-Friendly Cities Initiative - CFCI (UNICEF-led)** - By 2050 almost 70% of the World's children will live in urban areas, many in slums. This project focuses on supporting municipalities to realise the rights of children at the local level bringing together numerous stakeholders around a common agenda to make cities friendlier for children which includes space to play, develop and learn. Available @ <https://childfriendlycities.org/what-is-the-child-friendly-cities-initiative>.

(ii) **Ubongo** leverages the power of entertainment, the reach of mass media, and the connectivity of mobile devices, to deliver effective, localized learning to African families at low. It reaches 40 countries and 6.5 million households with fun, localised and multi-platform educational programs. Their program content focuses on improving school readiness and promoting social and behavioural change for children, caregivers and educators. Find out more @ <https://www.ubongo.org>

(iii) **WASH UP!** A partnership between Sesame Workshop and World Vision reaches children across Africa with easy-to-share lessons about safe water, sanitation, and hygiene habits, led by furry Sesame friends who model handwashing and healthy latrine use as part of their everyday routine. Run in Zambia, South Africa, Nigeria, Zimbabwe, Niger, Mali. Find out more @ <https://www.sesameworkshop.org/what-we-do/health-and-hygiene>

SOME THOUGHT LEADERSHIP RESOURCES TO EXPLORE

(i) **The LEGO Foundation: What we mean by learning through play.** This leaflet provides a view of play as an important vehicle for children's learning and about how playful experiences support children in developing the skills to serve them, their communities and society through a lifetime. Available @ https://www.legofoundation.com/media/1062/learningthroughplay_leaflet_june2017.pdf

(ii) **The LEGO Foundation: Learning through play a review of the evidence.** This white paper summarises current evidence on the role and importance of children's learning through play. Available @ https://www.legofoundation.com/media/1063/learning-through-play_web.pdf

(iii) **UNICEF: Learning Through Play.** This brief will help pre-primary stakeholders advocate for making play-based or playful learning a central aspect of expanding and strengthening the pre-primary sub-sector. Available @ <https://www.unicef.org/sites/default/files/2018-12/UNICEF-Go-Foundation-Learning-through-Play.pdf>

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