

SPECIAL REPORT

MSPP's Freedman Center Supporting Homeless Families

Implementing Playtime for Homeless Children

The Massachusetts School of Professional Psychology (MSPP) promotes professional development through the integration of rigorous academic instruction with extensive field education.

MSPP is committed to developing programs to educate specialists of many disciplines to meet the evolving mental health needs of society. MSPP's **Freedman Center for Child and Family Development** (Freedman Center) is dedicated to the *prevention of mental health disorders and the promotion of mental health* focusing on children, youth and families.

A year ago, the Directors of the Freedman Center (Margaret Hannah, MEd) and Child and Family Evaluation Services (CAFES) (Christina Harms, JD) met with the Senior Associate for Research and Evaluation (Sonia Suri, PhD) to develop an intervention to better support homeless children and their families. They adapted the Freedman Center's Playtime program to serve homeless and transitional families. In November 2013, with the aid of a Community Health Network Area (CHNA) grant written by Margaret Hannah and her colleagues at Youth Partnership in Boston, and in collaboration with a transitional shelter in Greater Boston¹, a pilot program to serve homeless children and their families² was launched.

Homeless children are all around us in Massachusetts. Tragically, their numbers are on the rise. They live in shelters, short-term hotels, and motels. According to the Massachusetts Coalition for the Homeless, the number of homeless children has more than doubled since 1990. In 2012, fifteen percent of all Massachusetts children were living in poverty; most of these children are homeless (<http://datacenter.kidscount.org/data>). Homeless families, both parents and children, often suffer from toxic stress: stress so overwhelming it causes a physiological response that can adversely affect brain development, damage mental health, social emotional well-being, and family relationships (www.familyhomelessness.org/media/306.pdf). Children from homeless families experience

disparities in education, health care, and socioeconomic resources; *they are often deprived of safe and creative playtime and access to age-appropriate recreational activities*. Children living in transitional shelters are even less likely to have access to programs and services, as their housing situation is considered short-term, and families have access to minimal support as they wait to move to a more permanent housing situation. Given that play is essential for the development of social, emotional, cognitive, and physical well-being of children, the lack of playtime can have substantial implications for mental health, emotional well-being, and learning capabilities of homeless children (American Academy of Pediatrics, January 2012). Research also indicates that a child's early experiences have a powerful impact on their physical and mental health throughout their life (www.cdc.gov/ace/findings.htm). It is imperative that homeless young children and their parents are supported in the development of positive family relationships; these in turn build protective factors to help children cope with stress, improve the parent-child bond, and support healthy social-emotional development.

The Playtime Program offers children from birth to age five the opportunity to learn and practice essential skills related to language, social-emotional development, motor, and sensory skills. Parents learn to nurture growth and development in their children, better communication, and disciplinary skills.



¹The shelter provides transitional housing for 108 homeless families, including 162 children; 118 of whom are age 5 or younger. The temporary residential facility is located in a working class Boston suburb located within the Route 128 ring road.

² The program consisted of two part-time staff: an on-site Playtime coordinator/group leader and a second group leader. The coordinator, a CAFES post-doctoral fellow (Dr. Stephanie Tabashneck), devoted one day per week. The second Playtime group leader was a doctoral student in the Children and Families of Adversity Resilience (CFAR) program, Glavielinys Cruz. In addition, technical support in research, evaluation, and documentation was provided by MSPP's Office of Research (Sonia Suri), who prepared this report with the support from the Directors of Freedman Center and the CAFES program.



Figure 1: Playtime facilitator demonstrates parent-child play for participants.

Parents and young children experiment with new skills, explore their imagination and creativity, and learn about relationships through interactive play³. Each 90-minute Playtime session includes age-appropriate play activities that foster sharing, turn taking, language development, problem solving, decision making, and conflict resolution. As parents and children play together, their relationship is strengthened. Their positive interactions increase in frequency and duration, promoting more secure parent-child relationships and healthy social and emotional child development.

The families at this site were initially reluctant to take part in Playtime activities, and relied on the facilitators to engage the children in play. At first, mothers did not participate in the Playtime activities, but spent that time texting or playing on their cell phones. After a few weeks, the facilitators started encouraging the children to involve their mothers in pretend play. Serving as role models for the parents, they demonstrated how parents could play with their children.

Four months into the program, parents/caregivers were asked to rate the program on a 5-point scale ranging from *very poor* to *great*. More than 3 out of 4 parents (75.6%), rated the Playtime program as *great*, and another 20% told us that the program was *good*. Most parents were able to list their child's favorite activity (many listed multiple activities their kids enjoyed) by the time we did the program assessment in March. Almost all parents asked for the Playtime Program to be expanded beyond the first 20 weeks. Based on the parents' enthusiastic responses, our funders agreed to extend the program for another 10 weeks. As we learn to better engage with this special population, we are learning to adapt the program and the curriculum to better meet their needs.

Parents learned a wide variety of fundamentals from participating in Playtime activities. Their responses are listed in figure 3 below. Most parents (31 out of 40) reported

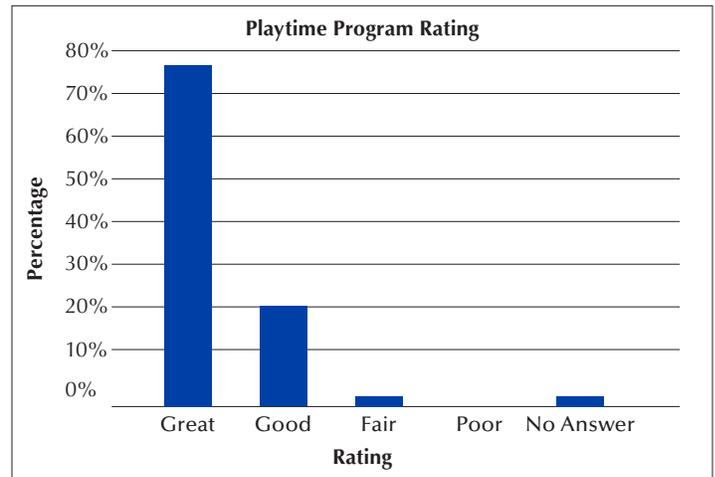


Figure 2: Participating Parents rate the Playtime Program (n=45)

that they had learned the importance of play for and with their children, and of active versus passive parent-child interaction, as a result of participating in the group. They also learned the value of group play—it helped children learn to interact with other children and adults, and to share.

Most parents were pleasantly surprised by their positive interactions with other families at Playtime. When asked, “What have you learned from participating in Playtime?” caregivers reported an increased understanding of developmental milestones, and the importance of play in child development. They also listed that children enjoy playing together, and the caregivers enjoyed participating in the children’s activities. See figure 4 for additional details.

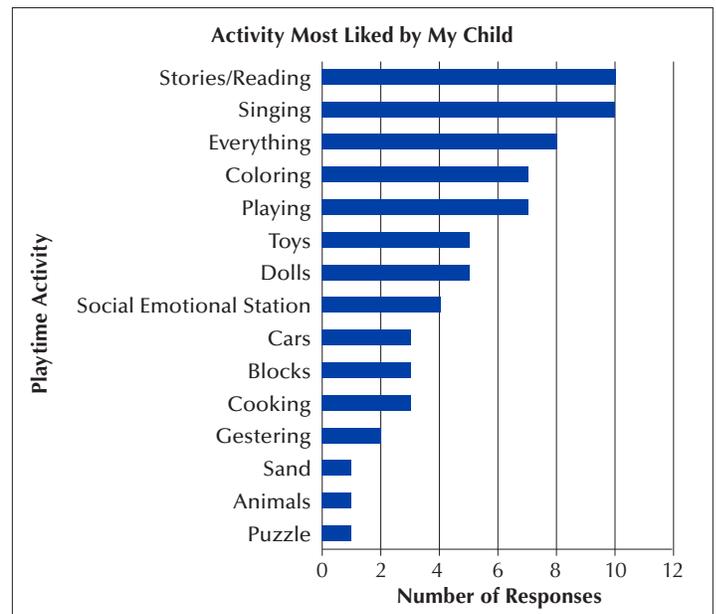


Figure 3: Activity Most Liked by My Child (n=45)

³At this transitional shelter site, because of other programs already available to children 5 and under, it was negotiated that we host the Playtime group for children 2.5 to 5 years of age.

Parent Voices about the lessons learned through Playtime ⁴
"Children like playing with each other" (4 Parents)
"Children enjoyed group" (3 caregivers)
"Good to be active with my child" (3 parents)
"Children like to play pretend" (2 parents)
"Different children react differently to similar stimuli" (2 parents)
"We learned a lot from participating in Playtime" (2 parents)
"Children like to share together" (2 parents)
"The children like the four stations (social-emotional, language, sensory, motor)" (2 parents)
"It was a great group" (2 parents)
"It is Important that the kids learn to read" (2 parents)
"Singing is important" (2 parents)
"Group brought fun to the kids" (1 parent)
"Once one child, in the groups, interacts with an adult they all want to as well" (1 parent)
"I learned how much fun participating in a organized children's group is" (1 parent)
"Children seem to be engaged even when activity was in a language they don't speak" (1 parent)
"Group play important for both parents and children" (1 parent)

Figure 4: Parents' responses to: "What have you learned from participating in playtime?" (n=31)

We are making a difference...

The Vignettes below illustrate the day to day impact of playtime on the participants are witnessed by our two co-facilitators.

Universal Language of Play

Parents who live in poverty and are unemployed and/or homeless often consider playing with their children to be a luxury they cannot afford. They may come from families where they never learned to play and enjoy themselves, or they may not have a safe place to play with their children. The Playtime Program offers at-risk families a safe place to play and explore together.

"Jasmine and her mother joined us during one of our early playtime sessions. Jasmine attempted to play with other children, but her mother consistently chose to stay on the sidelines, sometimes watching her interact with the facilitators and other children. Towards the end of one such group, Jasmine got more involved with playing as she discovered the pleasure

in stacking blocks to create giant structures. Encouraged by Jasmine's assimilation, I encouraged her mother to join us, but she shook her head shyly. I then went and sat next to her and continued to communicate with her (even though I was not sure if she could understand me). I told her how talented her daughter was and that she wanted her mommy to play with her. I pointed over to Jasmine and told her to join Jasmine in her play. She got up and went to help Jasmine build a taller structure. Jasmine had been playing quietly until then, but became more animated as she laughingly handed the blocks to her mother. Her mother responded to her enthusiasm by smiling broadly and joking with her daughter as their play continued – it was a beautiful sight." –Program Coordinator

Parent-Child Interaction

Parents who are involved with their children's play tend to bond with their children and are less likely to neglect or maltreat them. At Playtime we encourage parents and children to connect together through guided play activities.

"I asked John to cook a meal for his mother, and told him (in a voice loud enough for his mother to hear) that she (his mother) would be really excited about the meal he had cooked for her. John walked over to his mother with the pretend dinner he had cooked for her, and she began pretend eating with him, marveling at everything that he had "cooked" for her. Soon they were joined in this role play by another mother and her son. Now many of the mother-child dyads regularly interact with each other during playtime." –Playtime Group Leader



Social Connections

Social Isolation often contributes to child maltreatment and abuse. Helping parents build and sustain (appropriate) social supports can help mitigate child maltreatment and neglect. Our Playtime staff encourages families to connect with each other.

"Soon after we started our playtime group, Jamar, a 4-year old, walked into the room with his mother close behind him. Jamar's mother had him on a kid leash and was trying to cajole

⁴The comments listed in the table below were made in three different languages (English, Spanish and Haitian Creole). The responses were translated into English by MSPP students who work at the Freedman Center.

him into leaving the room. Jamar refused and started crying; exasperated, his mother gave up her attempts to drag him out of the room and settled down warily to watch the activities unfolding in front of her. A few minutes after that, another Haitian mother struck up a conversation with her in Haitian Creole. We later discovered that Jamar and his mother spend all their time cloistered in their room, isolated from other families at the shelter. We hope that this interaction was one of many that will help create a social network for Jamar and his mother. This was the first of many groups that Jamar and his mother attended.” –*Program Coordinator*

Using Playtime to Reaffirm Family Bonds and Care Giver Confidence

Immigrant and Refugee teenagers and young adults often feel very inadequate, and start questioning their self-worth, especially if they are not fluent in English. This situation can lead to increased tensions within the family. In this case, providing the family with materials in Arabic supported Sadam in his attempts to interact and connect with his younger brother (Tahir) during Playtime. Even though he was not fluent in English, he was able to help his brother learn the Arabic alphabet. It also sent Sadam a message that his language and his culture were valued in our society.

“Sadam, a 17-year old from East Africa, brought his little brother Tahir to Playtime for a second time today. Sadam and his seven siblings live at the shelter with their parents. The first time Sadam joined us, he indicated that his family spoke Arabic and very little English. To make the family feel welcome, we purchased a number of playtime materials in Arabic, including an alphabet puzzle. When Sadam saw the puzzle his eyes lit up, and he sat Tahir down and enthusiastically explained the Arabic alphabet to him. Tahir was having fun with the puzzle pieces, and Sadam appeared to have grown more self-assured and accomplished as he taught his brother the basics about their native language.” –*Playtime Group Leader*

Results

We hope to use these groups⁵ to educate parents, enhance resilience, and promote child and family social-emotional development and well-being. Preliminary evaluation data based on parent self-reports and facilitator observations suggest that participation in Playtime helped to:

- Highlight the importance of play for child development;
- Improve parental understanding of developmental milestones;
- Increase parental engagement in specific parent-child activities;
- Enhance parenting skills; and
- Teach children important social skills.

Lessons Learned

Need to Collaborate with Local Stakeholders: In order to bring Playtime to this group of children we had to negotiate our entry and ongoing presence at the transitional shelter. In this case, it meant that we were to become part of a loose network of wrap-around children’s service providers at the site. It took several meetings to establish and reinforce protocols and processes to ensure and sustain a collaborative partnership with other stakeholders (Early Intervention and Head Start). As a result of these negotiations, it was determined that MSPP’s Playtime would host a weekly play group for children between the ages of 2.5 to 5 years, because Early Intervention and Head Start already offer play groups for children from zero to 2.5 years old. This ensured that we were supporting and expanding the work done by other service providers, instead of competing with them for potential clients.

Linguistic Accommodation: MSPP’s sensitivity to diversity was critically important as we put together these groups to serve a diverse population (cultural, linguistic, socio-economic, and familial) of parents and children. At the outset of the program, we were aware that many of the families who attended Playtime were not native English speakers, and so Playtime activities were planned for a bilingual audience; both our group leaders were fluent in English and Spanish. Despite our accommodation, we had several families that were not fluent in either English or Spanish; several families in attendance were Haitian, Asian, Portuguese, and one family was from East Africa. Many of the caregivers from these backgrounds were not comfortable with spoken or written English. In order to accommodate our diverse clientele, our facilitators have started using more hand gestures and eye contact to help engage caregivers in Playtime activities. Since they managed to engage many of these families for more than six months, this approach seems to be working for now. We are also in the process of buying early education materials in several languages to support families, and celebrate their diversity.

This has been a promising first year. We look forward to building upon this strong beginning, to learn from this experience as we refine our future approach. In addition to strengthening the program, we intend to undertake both process and outcome evaluation activities to better assess which activities work best for which participants, and under what circumstances.



including the MSPP INTERFACE® Referral Service at the Massachusetts School of Professional Psychology

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⁵Offered over a three-year period – 30 weekly sessions each year.