

PLAY AS A SOCIAL DETERMINANT OF HEALTH: A Reflexive Toolkit for Practitioners Promoting Play



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Introduction

“All citizens have a right to participate in the production of space, and for children, moments of playing are an exercise in actualizing their rights to participate and be well”
 - (Lester & Russell, 2014, p. 303)

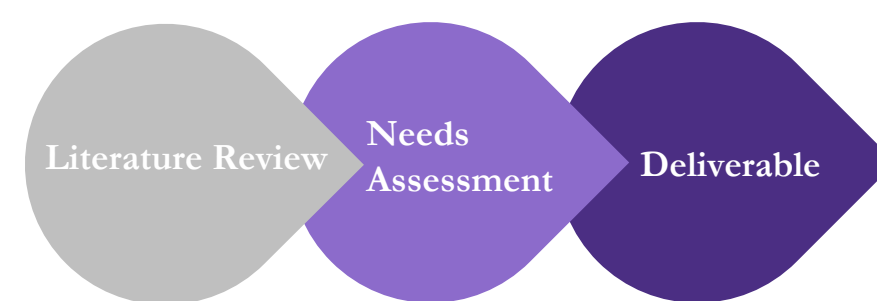
Play is the primary occupation of children, a universal human right, per the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, and a significant social determinant of health and well-being.

Disabled children are disproportionately and persistently impacted by play disparities, with gaps in play quantity/quality often widening throughout childhood.

However, there is a lack of consensus among rehabilitation professionals regarding what constitutes play and their role in promoting it.

Project Purpose & Process

To understand the role of play in children’s development and to support the role of early intervention practitioners in promoting conditions that facilitate play.



Literature Findings

The need for:

- ❖ Ongoing discourse and critical analysis of existing play frameworks & theories to foster inclusive and culturally relevant understandings of play.
- ❖ Reflexive, responsive adults to support and scaffold play.

- ❖ Skilled professionals capable of supporting child-led play, as an ‘end in itself’ (i.e. not as a tool to motivate or achieve extrinsic adult-generated goals/outcomes).
- ❖ Thoughtful consideration of family dynamics, societal values, and political factors impacting children’s play.
- ❖ The importance of safe, inclusive, accessible play environments.

Practitioner Survey

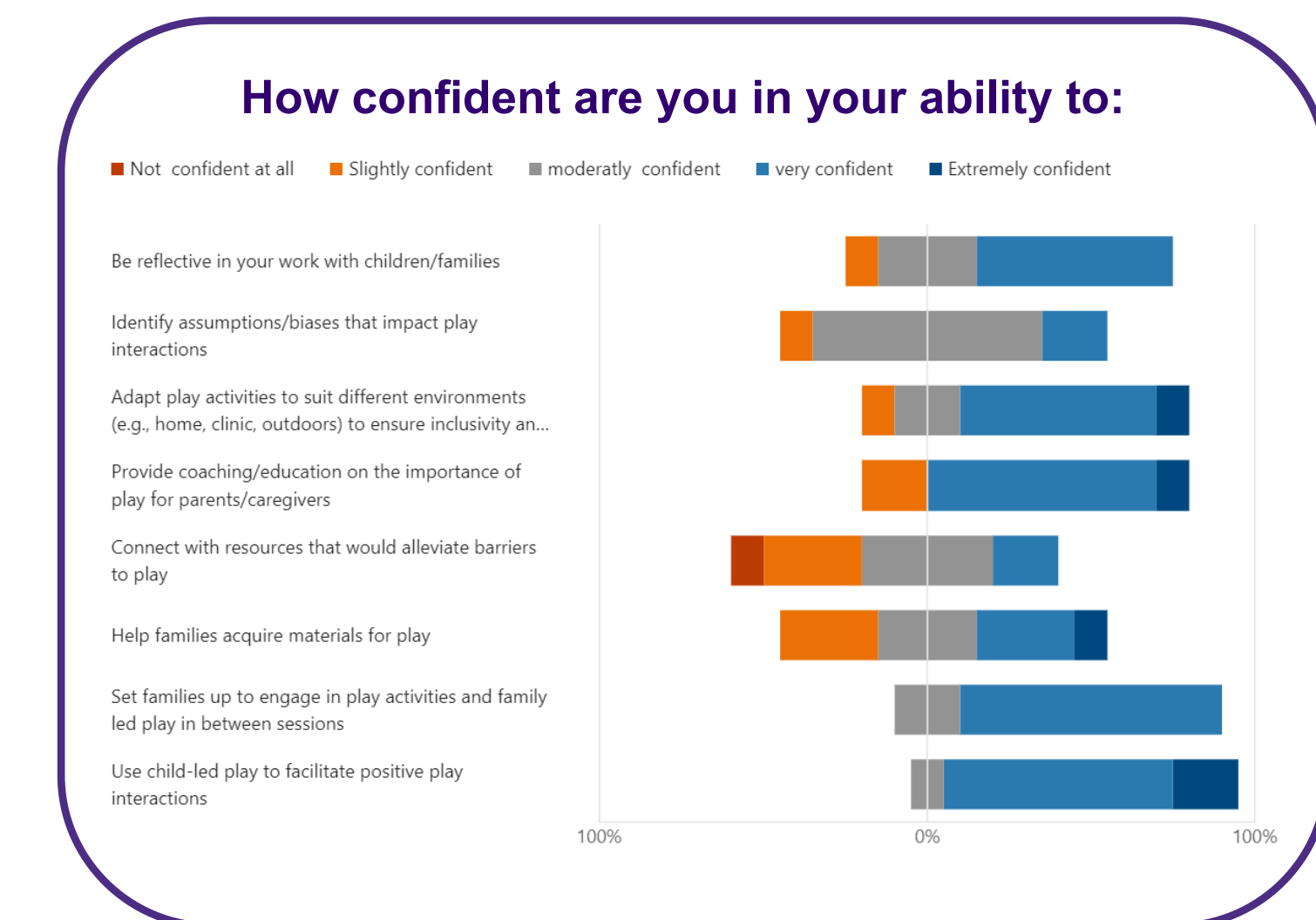
The survey aimed to explore play promotion and reflexivity among early intervention practitioners.

The following definitions of ‘reflective practice’ and ‘play promotion’ were provided:

- ‘Promoting play’ involves creating environments, providing opportunities, and offering support that encourages and facilitates children’s natural inclination to play.
- Being “reflective” means engaging in a thoughtful process of introspection and examination of one’s own thoughts, actions, experiences, and emotions in relation to others.

Survey participants included 10 early intervention providers (occupational therapists, physical therapists, speech-language pathologists & educators), with practice experience ranging from 1 to 10+ years.

The majority of respondents reported ‘**moderate-to-extensive**’ experience using reflective practice techniques, while others reported having ‘**some-to-limited**’ experience.



Findings

Practitioner Confidence Level ...

Slightly confident-to-not confident	Moderately confident
Connecting families with relevant play resources and materials.	Being Reflective & identifying personal biases/assumptions impacting play interactions.
Moderately-to-extremely confident	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Facilitating child-led play • Supporting families in selecting play activities between sessions • Coaching & parent education on play 	

“Supporting parents that have little history of play in their past.”

“Cultural ways of playing.”

“How to encourage playfulness/engagement ...when the child is very different from their parents in preferences and/or personality.”

We asked practitioners: “What additional information would you need to effectively promote play with families?”

Play Promotion Toolkit



The ‘**Introduction**’ pages offer a foundational overview of play and detail the purpose and application of reflective and reflexive practices in play promotion.

Resource pages offer practitioners a curated selection of articles/evidence, community resources, frameworks, and educational material.

Reflexive Prompts designed to promote practitioner self-awareness, empathy, and enhanced insights into the conditions impacting children’s play.

“... the presence or absence of playfulness acts as a focal point for beginning to pay close attention to the conditions of childhood, and by inference adulthood, in the everyday spaces and practices that constitute young children’s daily lives”
 - (Lester & Russell, 2014, p. 299)

Our vision for the role of OT in play promotion



- ❖ The promotion of occupational justice and rights, as it pertains to play in the lives of children, families, and communities.
- ❖ Engagement in the global interdisciplinary conversations, discourse and actions related to the rights and well-being of children.
- ❖ Improved research methodologies inclusive of the perspectives of children, families, and disabled and marginalized voices.
- ❖ Ongoing collaboration with community partners and policymakers to implement and advocate for sustainable play initiatives that address systemic barriers and ensure equitable play opportunities for all children.