

Play and Learn Groups: A Bridge Between Schools & Families

Context

Early Learning Multnomah (ELM) began offering Play and Learn groups at their eight Prental-3rd Grade (P-3) focus schools¹ in 2016. To learn more about the school-based Play and Learn groups, researchers from Portland State University conducted interviews with all eight (8) of the P-3 Coordinators, two (2) ELM staff, and three (3) SUN School staff/managers who worked with the P-3 Coordinators. Research questions were designed to better understand Play and Learn as a strategy for P-3 engagement, including goals and benefits, effective outreach methods, and key elements of successful implementation. What follows is a summary of the main themes that surfaced across interviews and also individual experiences which vary from site to site and person to person.



**EARLY LEARNING
MULTNOMAH**

Why Play and Learn as a P-3 Strategy?

When asked why Play and Learn groups were chosen as one of the primary family engagement strategies across the P-3 schools, ELM staff reported that the Early Learning Hub was looking for a way to **link young children and families to the school** and provide an **opportunity for parents² to connect** with other parents. ELM staff drew from experience and conversations with community stakeholders to brainstorm programs that they thought would meet these desired goals, and Play and Learn groups were the best fit.

“We wanted to find something that was parent centered and that built skills that supported kids as they’re entering school. Because of our experience with Parents as Teachers, we were familiar with socialization groups and parent child groups. That’s something that we know about and we have seen work. We wanted to honor families as the first teachers and provide them opportunities for them to learn in a safe, comfortable, and honoring environment.” [ELM staff]

Play and Learn Groups: Cross-Location Similarities & Differences

While there was some variation from site to site, Play and Learn groups were “**all based on the same vision** and goal of serving parent and families of children [ages] 0-5” [ELM Staff]. All of the programs had **similar activities** geared towards early learning, social emotional development, motor-skill development, and light touch parent education about how the activities supported their child’s development including: play time, snack time, a planned group activity, story time, and singing. The space provided at the school varied from site to site, with some groups taking place in a cafeteria while others were in classrooms. All sites had materials appropriate for early learning (e.g. toys, books, carpet for circle time).

P-3 Coordinators used a family-directed approach to planning group activities by **soliciting advice from parents**, and **responding to parenting concerns and questions**. They also worked with other Coordinators to spark creativity and share programming resources (e.g. puppet show, OMSI). Some Coordinators selected specific themes (e.g. seasons or animals), while others were more flexible in their approach. The Coordinators often provided **multiple activities to appeal to different age groups** of children in attendance. All sites had some flexibility in

¹ The ELM P3 focus schools are Kelly (PPS), Lincoln Park (DDSD), Wood (Centennial), Rigler (PPS), Sacramento (Parkrose), Salish Ponds (Reynolds), Wilks (Reynolds), and Ventura Park (DDSD).

² The term “parent(s)” is used throughout this document, but this also includes other family or non-traditional caregivers.

their programming to be responsive to parent requests and attendance patterns. The most notable differences between P-3 groups were intentional, revolving around **providing culturally specific programming.**

“Outreach to families will be different depending on the community and demographics of the school and what’s a priority for the school. Schools have different visions. At [P3 focus school], it’s Russian immersion. Some [sites] have had to be extremely flexible and offer 2 groups at different times. They cater strategies specific to each school.” [ELM Staff]

Play and Learn Outreach

Successful Strategies

Interviewees reported a number of traditional outreach methods. These activities included outreach through the school, like sending flyers home with students and calling the families of younger students and asking if there were non-school aged children in the home. Broader community outreach efforts included things like posting flyers in the community (e.g. library, community centers, apartment complexes) and doing outreach through partner agencies.

However, when asked to specify **the most effective outreach methods**, P-3 Coordinators and ELM staff described the need for different techniques. The most common responses involved **relationship-based outreach** and **culturally- and linguistically-specific** efforts.

Relationship-Based Outreach

P-3 Coordinators, SUN, and ELM staff reported the importance of building personal relationships at the **Coordinator-to-family** and **family-to-family** levels.

Coordinator-Family: Coordinators infused their outreach efforts with a personal touch by striking up conversations with families with young children at school events (e.g. kindergarten registration, open houses) as an initial way to build relationships and trust. Once families expressed an interest in or attended a Play and Learn group, Coordinators continued to keep communication open by personally calling and talking to families.

“1-1 talking to them and letting them know about the program and connecting with them during the school events, that’s kind of the most successful

outreach. Connecting with them in person.” [P-3 Coordinator]

Family-Family: Several interviewees reported that families themselves played an active role in outreach by inviting their friends or family members with young children. This was especially effective when trying to connect with communities that schools have historically not reached (e.g., culturally or linguistically diverse families). In these instances, strong personal relationships and trusted accounts were necessary to attract families to group.

“Definitely word of mouth. I tell them to bring their friends and friends’ kids. Once they start making friends in the group, once they know they don’t have to come to the school to be part of the program, they know they can invite others.” [P-3 Coordinator]

While the family-to-family outreach happened organically in some Play and Learn groups, in others this link was more intentional:

“I used an incentive-based outreach method. I gave the families \$25 gift cards if they brought an additional family to the groups. I had one mother bring me 4 families, 3 of which were her siblings who had their own children. Those initial families were able to do the outreach for me and provide our class with people that came from their communities. Being able to have families reach out to others using personal accounts to inform others of the benefits was huge!” [P-3 Coordinator]



Play and Learn Participant on a Field Trip

Culturally & Linguistically Specific Outreach

P-3 Coordinators and SUN representatives reported that having culturally specific, responsive, and inclusive Play and Learn groups was, in and of itself, a strategy for encouraging participation and sustained engagement. To do this, Coordinators provided **culturally relevant content**, cultivated **critical partnerships**, and fostered the **value of multicultural spaces**. As a result, families encouraged their peers from the same cultural background to join the group. In one group, the strategy was so effective at bringing more families to group because it was tailored to their cultural values and linguistic needs that a waitlist was created.

Culturally Relevant Content: Providing culturally relevant and appropriate content during Play and Learn was also seen as essential to maintaining engagement.

“For example, for Latino families we have planned a Play and Learn to celebrate El Día de los Niños (Day of the Child) as this is important in Latino culture. When planning activities, we try to be culturally responsive making sure songs are sung in Spanish, and books are in Spanish. The same goes for Slavic Play and Learn. Most families are Orthodox and music is not played as families only sing music related to their religion. Activities are altered to respect their culture.” [P-3 Coordinator]

Critical Partnerships: Prioritizing relationship building with partner organizations supported sustained participation by different cultural groups.

“Working with community leaders specific to those cultures, taking the time, making the investment. [Knowing] who these people are. Which organization might be key? Spending the time building the relationship.” [SUN Staff]

Value of Multicultural Spaces: Play and Learn groups helped respond to parents’ desire for multicultural spaces. Interviewees reported that parents sought environments that encourage bilingualism and that reflect the diversity of the communities that they live in.

“When we were having 3 languages being spoken, there was a lot of emphasis on how we were all learning 3 languages and the importance of having

[people from] those cultures talking, eating and playing together.” [P-3 Coordinator]

“Parents want their kids to learn both languages. Typically, they’ll take their baby somewhere and people will only speak English to them. This is the ability to have it catered to the school community.” [ELM Staff]



Play and Learn Participants Getting Ready for Crafts

Outreach Challenges

Cultural and Linguistic Barriers

Although also a strength, outreach to culturally specific communities or families who speak languages other than English did pose some challenges. Specifically, some Coordinators noted that school staff did not represent the cultural and linguistic diversity of the school. However, Coordinators acted as a liaison between the school and non-English speaking populations when they were bi/multi-lingual.

*“[A] lack of bilingual staff from communities of color. We have limited resources to get the staff who speak the families’ languages. For some communities, they don’t trust people – even when they understand English – but **they don’t trust people who don’t speak their language, who don’t come from their own community.**” [P-3 Coordinator]*

Some Coordinators noted that creating culturally specific or inclusive spaces without making other communities feel excluded was also a challenge.

Other Challenges

Several Play and Learn groups were composed of children and parents that did not live in the school or district catchment area. Other challenges may have impacted engagement by families living in the school neighborhood. Some Coordinators reported that **traditional outreach** methods (e.g. flyers, door to door) were ineffective. Another commented that **“staff support”** from the school or other partner programs would also be helpful in their efforts to advertise groups. Hosting the Play and Learn groups at the school also added **a transportation challenge** for some families, although some Coordinators alleviated this challenge for some families by changing the location of the group. One Coordinator reported that even when there were multiple Play and Learn times offered, turnout could remain low. She reported that **Play and Learn times conflicted with other family priorities** and that strong initial interest would not necessarily materialize into ongoing attendance. Finally, some mentioned that the name “Play and Learn” might be a deterrent as parents may not take the group seriously.

“They hear the play part but not the learn part. They think they don’t have to come to school to play.” [P-3 Coordinator]

Play and Learn Benefits

P-3 Coordinators were asked to identify the benefits of the Play and Learn groups for children, parents, and the school. The benefits illustrate how Play and Learn offers an **entry point for more comprehensive P-3 work** by promoting early childhood development, developing connections between parents and between parents and the school, and aligning school systems.

Parent Benefits

When asked about the goals and benefits of the Play and Learn group, the most common responses involved parents and family engagement. This included building **parent-parent relationships, parent-school relationships,** increasing **parent-child interactions,** constructing a building block in **creating parent advocates,** and having another opportunity to **respond to parent needs.**

- **Building Parent-Parent Relationships:**

“Coming to the group is the opportunity for them to promote their social network, and share with other parents.” [P-3 Coordinator]

- **Building Parent-School Relationships:** The Play and Learn groups offer low-pressure and pleasurable early connections for the parents to the school.

“It’s about parents getting in to the school without telling them anything. It’s about just being part of the school community.” [ELM Staff]

- **Increasing Parent-Child Engagement:** Play and Learn groups and take-home activities were geared towards increasing parental engagement with their children through stimulating play. Providing exposure to activities that were inexpensive, easy to replicate, and increased parent-child engagement was a goal of the groups.

“They get the idea of how to play with their kids through fun and supportive educational activities. They don’t just sit there – they interact with their kids, and they will find out where their kids are behind and then can encourage and provide more support at home. They interact with their kids through learning and playing. They learn ways to support their kids to learn better at home, and to get them ready for school.” [P-3 Coordinator]

- **Parents as Advocates:** One interviewee also mentioned the Play and Learn group as the first step to supporting parent empowerment and creating parent advocates.

“I would hope that the families who are involved feel empowered to advocate, and that means something. That’s kind of the route. I think sometimes if there are families that believe in this and are feeling empowered to bring this as a point of advocacy to the School District and state, they could really make a difference that way.” [SUN Staff]

- **Meeting Parent Needs:** Another theme across the interviews was the importance of allowing parents to inform group activity and content and to ensure content responded to parent needs and requests. Specifically, P-3 Coordinators and ELM staff discussed

being sensitive to the variety of stressors parents may experience and tending to those needs.

“This may be a family that is new to the school community or a mom that has experienced trauma. They don’t want to hear about if their kid is crawling appropriately. Even though we’re working on those things, we’re not saying that. We’re just saying here’s our activity of the day. It’s not something you pass or fail. It’s just ‘come and hang out with us.’” [ELM staff]

Providing nutritious food at the groups is another example of meeting parent’s needs.

“Having a space where the kids have a guaranteed nutritious meal was also crucial.” [P-3 Coordinator]



Play and Learn Families

Child Benefits

The primary child-level benefits of the Play and Learn group revolved around kindergarten readiness. Kindergarten readiness included a broad range of themes including **early learning**, developing **social emotional** skills, having opportunities for **child-child interactions**, and getting **comfortable with a school setting**.

“This is a good place for them to interact with other kids in a fun and informal setting. They gain valuable kinder readiness skills, and can establish social/emotional [skills] in a learning environment. And also promote early learning skills, and develop cognitive self-regulation and literacy skills.” [P-3 Coordinator]

School Benefits

When asked about school-level goals of the Play and Learn group, responses centered around **expanding the school community** and **supporting school initiatives**.

- **Expands School Community:**

“It makes the school community bigger because we’re bringing people in to the school who aren’t in the school yet. It makes them familiar to the space. It’s an opportunity to build trust.” [P-3 Coordinator]

- **Supports School Initiatives:**

“That’s the place [Play and Learn Groups?] where we support EKT connection, early registration. We also introduce new programs from the school, and a liaison to transfer school resources to the families.” [P-3 Coordinator]

*“[It’s a] transitioning space for parents and babies and kids 0-5 in a space where parents are making connections with kids and huge space for FE [Family Engagement] so that parents come in, feel welcome, know where to go, know how to navigate that system, and feel comfortable to be leaders in their school communities and share in their student’s learning. That **supports all the initiatives that are going on in the schools right now**. Like we have an attendance initiative, and it supports that.”* [ELM Staff]

Other school-level benefits included a **shift in K-12 staff perspectives** incorporating early learning and earlier intervention, and a **more holistic view of kinder readiness**.

“Principal mindset shifting. I love having them in community, but having them in the [school] building changes how we think about families and our kids.” [P-3 Coordinator]

“Being able to more smoothly transition those kids into the kinder classroom. Kids are all about pattern and structure. If they’ve already been coming to the school for two years, kinder is an easy transition. They’ll have the self-regulation, and not have too many blowups. They’ll be familiar with the setting.” [P-3 Coordinator]

P-3 and Systems Alignment

When asked how Play and Learn groups lead to more P-3 work in the school, respondents said that Play and Learn groups are integral to the P-3 goal of creating systems alignment.

*“Just having a Coordinator in the building has and will probably continue to create more communication between the K-1-2-3 grade teachers around **following kids through different grades and making connections between younger preschool age children and their older siblings.** Just starting that conversation has been really important to making that continuum happen.” [SUN Staff]*

“[The Play and Learn groups] lend an opportunity to bridge early learning and K12. You can make it what you want. You can start to align curriculum and/or follow the kid through that process and it informs your delivery of services.” [ELM staff]

Essential Elements for a Successful Play and Learn

After a year of experience, the P-3 Coordinators, SUN staff, and ELM staff were able to provide the following insights for creating successful Play and Learn groups in P-3 focus schools.

Relationship Building and Buy-in

Building relationships with families and community partners to create authentic collaboration and building buy-in was key to Play and Learn success.

“What about the expectations and the need of the families or the organizations you’re partner[ing] with? What do they want and how do we work together in a true collaboration. Building the relationship and being able to listen and dynamically create or adjust programming so that it is responsive while still promoting learning and aligning with contractual obligations.” [P-3 Coordinator]

*“Before you get in to goals and visions for K12 experiences, make an effort to hear from parents. **To put a lot of effort in building relationships and***

***learning from parents in the community and finding multiple ways to do that.** It sounds really simple, but there’s a strategy to building relationships. If you do that, you’ll have a well-connected community and you’ll be able to support families and have children and families can really thrive.” [ELM staff]*

This included **cultivating critical partnerships** inside and outside of the P-3 system.

“More communication than you think is possibly necessary is good. One thing that we’re doing really well is thinking about the population that we’re serving and who is doing that work.” [ELM staff]

*“Having time to really **plan with partners** is key. Thinking about commitment from multi-levels of folks is really important.” [ELM staff]*

Start Small and Stay Flexible

Two other themes that surfaced when asked for advice were **starting small** and **remaining flexible**. Starting small and maintaining flexibility helped the Coordinators respond to parent requests and tailor content to the communities that were coming to the groups. There was also an element of unknown with each session, as the ages of the children and participants changed from week to week.

“Start small. The first few, there could just be 3 people that came, and giving it time. The three eventually grew to 13 or 8 consistently, and then at that point there’s also word of mouth. Being able to deliver on a promise. Being able to listen to hear what your participants needs are.” [P-3 Coordinator]

“I keep it pretty flexible. If they’re having fun doing one thing, I don’t interrupt. That’s a huge part of it, just getting lost in what you’re doing and have a good time.” [P-3 Coordinator]

Provide Take-Away Materials

Providing take-away materials to help parents understand the value of early learning and to give parents what they need to repeat activities at home was seen as a major draw for families and aided in the success of the Play and Learn groups.

“Being able to provide the kids with take-homes was huge! For example, the books I read aloud the child received a copy of their own. Which then gave the parents the tools to be able to continue this learning at home. Being able to give the children art supplies and small toys helped the children have buy-in with the class.” [P-3 Coordinator]

Summary

Play and Learn groups offered within the 8 P-3 focus school catchment areas had some key successes in their first year of implementation, including:

- Outreach and engagement of culturally and linguistically diverse families;
- Relationship building between families with very young children;
- Relationship building between families with very young children and elementary schools;
- Setting early foundations for the alignment of early childhood and K-5 education.

While attendance and engagement was strong in some groups, it was variable in others. In order to promote strong engagement throughout the school year, P-3 Coordinators found that personal connections with and between parents was critical. Tailoring Play and Learn

groups to parents’ needs and requests as well as hosting culturally-specific groups also fostered sustained participation. In other groups, facilitating multi-cultural sharing was an important aspect of group that kept parents coming back.

As with all program implementation, several challenges surfaced in the first year of Play and Learn group including:

- Outreach to culturally and linguistically diverse families;
- Competing family priorities;
- Transportation;
- Support from school staff.

By the end of the school year, P-3 Coordinators began addressing these challenges in a variety of ways. However, additional support from staff that represent the full diversity of schools (i.e., more linguistically and culturally diverse staff) would enable Coordinators to reach out to more families within school catchment areas. Finally, more support from current school staff to advertise the Play and Learn groups and connect with participating Play and Learn families before their children enter kindergarten would ensure greater success and more alignment and integration in the second year of implementation.