

Learning About Play & Learn Groups Through Participant Perspectives

Early Learning Multnomah (ELM) started offering Play and Learn groups at their eight Prental-3rd grade (P-3) focus schools¹ in 2016. To learn more about families' experiences in the school-based Play and Learn groups, researchers from Portland State University (PSU) conducted four focus groups with participating families. Focus groups included a culturally- specifically Play and Learn group for Russian and Ukrainian parents (n=9) and three Play and Learn groups that included parents who spoke Spanish (n=6) and English (n=10). Focus groups ranged in size from 3 to 9 participating family members. Parents had from 1-11 children; a number of families in the Russian/Ukrainian group had four or more children. Children ranged in age from newborns to school age, although all participants had at least one child under the age of 5.

Focus group questions were designed to better understand the reasons families participate in the Play and Learn groups, the benefits to children and their parents, and to identify areas for improvement. In developing research questions and selecting sites for focus groups, PSU included questions related to culturally relevant content and selected two sites where the Play and Learn groups were facilitated in languages other than English. Researchers reviewed the data to identify key aspects of the groups that were of particular importance to the Spanish-, Russian-, and Ukrainian-speaking participants since a key goal of the groups is to connect culturally and linguistically diverse families with elementary schools.



How Were Families Identified & Invited to the Play and Learn Group?

Families learned about the groups in several different ways, including:

- Flyers in community locations (libraries)
- Outreach/communication from community partners (librarians, SUN programs, other school staff)
- Word of mouth (from other parents)
- Flyers from the host schools (for those with older, school-age children)

Families most often spoke about joining the Play and Learn groups because of the benefit to their children, with a number explicitly talking about it as an opportunity to help their child be “more ready for kindergarten.” Families seemed to think about school

readiness quite broadly and described their hope that children would learn pre-academic skills, social skills, and also get familiar with the school setting. Parents also talked about their hope to connect with other parents and have structured, free, fun activities to do with their children. One parent explicitly mentioned not being eligible for Early Head Start or Head Start, commenting that:

“We can’t meet their criteria, so these groups are nice so your kids can still participate in it and enjoy the program and get some learning.”

All participants had attended more than one Play and Learn meeting, with many attending regularly since the start of the year.

¹ The ELM P-3 focus schools are Kelly (PPS), Lincoln Park (DDSD), Wood (Centennial), Rigler (PPS), Sacramento (Parkrose), Salish Ponds (Reynolds), Wilks (Reynolds), and Ventura Park (DDSD).

Benefits of Continued Attendance

In explaining why they continue to participate, parents described different aspects of the groups as important for them and their child. These included:

Benefits for Children

- *Opportunities to experience a variety of materials and structured play activities* that families were not able to provide. Having access to materials such as coloring books, finger paints, toys, puzzles, books and other resources was mentioned numerous times in each group as a key positive aspect of the Play and Learn groups. Several participants also discussed having access to activities in the community through the Play and Learn groups that they would not have access to otherwise, including OMSI and the Oregon Zoo. These activities expanded their child's learning into new, fun settings.
- *Building a positive association with school.*
"I really like that my daughter thinks this is school and is excited and uses the words, 'I would love to go to school.' To have that association this early that school is a really fun, cool place to go, it makes you want to keep up with it."
- *Building self-regulation skills that are critical to school readiness and success.*
"He's so energetic, and it's hard to get him to sit down. He's still learning to focus, and it helps that this gives him an opportunity to practice how to focus. They're doing energetic stuff, but they're also learning to focus."
"He's just at the age when he's not sticking glue sticks in his mouth; he's actually doing the projects. It gives him the ability to focus, and now he's focusing more. It will be great for when he gets into school, and he's able to listen and follow directions."
- *Increasing confidence and social skills.* Several parents noted that the groups helped their child to "not be afraid" of school and/or feel more comfortable around other children.

"My little one, the first [group meeting] she was really shy and wouldn't do anything. This time was the first time she would go to the playground without me. She has learned a lot."

- *Providing healthy food and snacks for children at the groups.*

Benefits for Parents/Caregivers

- *A supportive and nonjudgmental setting.* Another aspect of the group that appeared to be important to parents was the opportunity to be in a setting where they did not have to worry about their child's behavior being seen as unruly or disruptive and in which they wouldn't be judged:

"It's nice to interact with parents because we get to talk and compare notes and that's important. You can go a little stir crazy when it's just you and your kid all the time."

"Being somewhere where kids just get to be kids. It's not like being at a coffee shop where you have to worry about being kicked out."

"It's the re-iteration that you're doing ok. It's affirmation that you are ok and this is normal...Being exhausted is normal."

- *Building support for learning at home.* One of the key intended outcomes of the Play and Learn groups is to increase parents' confidence and skills in supporting children's learning at home. When asked whether there were things that parents brought into their home routines from the group, the primary responses described the interactive parent-child activities that they learned in the groups. Receiving take-home materials was also seen as key to parents engaging in the activities beyond the end of the group session. For example, parents told us:

"I am reading and singing to her more. I'm learning a lot in the group about how I can play with my daughter."

"I know what to do with my children at home. [Because of the group] I have ideas, some crafts,

teach them how to cut with scissors. We had a game where we had string and colored cheerios so they had to do a necklace and bracelets, and this was an activity I brought home.”

“It’s really nice to bring activities for home as well, for them to continue learning at home after the group meetings.”

- *Increased connections to the school.* Another key intended outcome of these groups is to build connections between families and elementary schools while children are still young. In addition to the benefits of children familiarizing themselves with the setting and associating schools with fun activities described above, parents also saw having the groups at the school as increasing their opportunity for being invited to family-friendly events.

“If you don’t have older kids, you’d never know about [activities at the school]. But [Coordinator] makes sure we’re all invited. I’d say, ‘I have this person coming...?’ and she’d say, ‘Bring ‘em!’”



Coordinator Characteristics and Approach

Play and Learn participants also spoke in length about the importance of a friendly environment that was welcoming to both their child and their whole family, including older children. Having the right person to lead and coordinate the groups was essential. A number of parents described the P-3 Coordinators and their style and characteristics as a key to their ongoing participation. Parents specifically mentioned things such

as having an outgoing personality, friendliness, enthusiasm, ability to connect with children and adults, and knowledge of a wide range of activities that could help children build school readiness skills. In addition, while parents did not use the term “family-driven” it was clear that the Coordinator’s ability to listen and respond to families’ specific needs and concerns was one reason they continued to attend.

“I told her about [child] running into the street, and we had a safety class. We did ‘red light/green light’.”

“She takes all of our advice. If I would say, ‘[Coordinator], I would like my daughter to do this,’ then the next class she going to say ‘Oh, I brought this so [child] can do this!’”

“She’s always asking, ‘What do you want?’ And then figuring out how to do that to help you.”

Cultural and Linguistic Supports

Translation and interpretation, notably, were not seen as a challenge, and in fact, for those families speaking languages other than English, many specifically thought exposure to English was a benefit for themselves and their children. Similarly, some of the English-speaking parents noted they appreciated exposure to Spanish. *“Tuesdays she’s there with the Spanish [group]; I don’t know a lick, but I’m listening. I tell [Coordinator] that my daughter likes the “Elefante” song; they still do a lot of singing and dancing and that’s what we’re here for.”* In addition to being exposed to new languages, families noted their appreciation for learning about other cultures by talking with parents from different ethnic backgrounds and exposing their children to children and families that are different from their own.

In one largely Spanish-speaking group, families suggested that they wished more time had been spent on helping children with letters, numbers, and other pre-academic skills. Interestingly, the focus on learning these skills was also clearly a key component of the Slavic Russian/Ukrainian group and seen as a major benefit. It may be that the importance of this aspect of the groups for these families was attributable to the parents’ desire

for the groups to help their children learn these skills in English. This idea was articulated by one Russian-speaking mother (in this group a key theme was that children were learning pre-academic skills): *“My kids know those things [letters, numbers, colors] in Russian, but not in English, which helps in Kindergarten. They know everything in Russian, but they need to know in English.”*

Parents participating in the Slavic group also expressed their appreciation for materials provided in Russian (e.g., books to take home). Materials in their first language make it easier for parents to continue learning skills discussed at the Play and Learn group at home as well as advance their children’s learning in Russian.

“Well my understanding is, they help us not teach only English, but Russian too, and it’s going to help kids with their education.”

In addition, for the Slavic group, support from the leader in translating information (e.g., letters received at home) as well as occasional interpretation (“When her child was sick she had no car, so [bi-lingual staff member] went with her to the emergency room to translate.”). This clearly suggests Play and Learn staff going above and beyond to help these families navigate English language hurdles.



Suggestions for Improvement

Overall, parents were quite enthusiastic in their praise for the opportunities provided through the Play and Learn groups and offered only a few suggestions for improvement.

- *Offer more sessions.* The most frequent suggestion was to increase the frequency of Play and Learn groups, and a number of participants expressed an

interest in attending groups more than once per week. One group (the Russian/Ukrainian group) was at capacity, with 32 families and over 50 children participating over the year. Parents noted, “there are a lot of people who want to participate but can’t.”

- *Offer sessions on weekends or other times* for working parents and/or sessions specifically for fathers.

“I think my boyfriend would love to come to these kinds of things. They [dads] miss out on a lot of this.”

“Schedule on weekends so dads can attend.”

- *Keep the flexible attendance policy.*

“It’s nice that you don’t have to come every week because it’s not building on one week after another. If you don’t make it, you don’t feel like you’re throwing away money because it’s free. Now, we’ve been coming here for so long there’s comradery where people can say ‘we missed you last week.’”

- *Provide transportation.* Transportation to the groups was a problem for some (especially families with a large number of children) and several wished for bus or other group transportation to the groups and field trips.
- *Developmentally appropriate activities for all children 0-5 years old.* The Play and Learn groups served families of young children from 0 to 5 years, and in some cases, school-aged children attend the groups as well. Parents participating in Play and Learn groups acknowledged that it is difficult to provide activities for all children in this age range; however, some parents expressed a desire for more developmentally appropriate games, activities, and materials, particularly for their very young children (0 to 3 years old).