

# ACCELERATING FOUNDATIONAL LEARNING THROUGH PLAY

**AN EFFECTIVE APPROACH TO IMPROVING LITERACY,  
NUMERACY, AND SOCIO-EMOTIONAL SKILLS**



# SUMMARY

**This policy brief outlines the case for play as a proven and cost-effective way to achieve foundational learning outcomes, including literacy, numeracy, and socio-emotional development. By bringing together global evidence and results from Right To Play programs, the brief examines how play-based interventions can unlock children's full potential by tapping into their natural curiosity and responding to differentiated learning needs. With the growing global recognition of the right to play, donors, Ministries of Education, and national and local play experts can all take steps to ensure that education systems integrate and invest in play-based learning to achieve our shared education and learning goals.**

Cover photo credit: Luca Imberi for Right To Play

## **Play is how children learn and make sense of the world.**

Play builds critical thinking skills, encourages exploration and experimentation, and provides opportunities for children to interact with, learn from, and better understand themselves and others. Play taps into children's natural curiosity and intrinsic motivation to learn and master skills.

## **Play-based learning is an effective approach to improving quality education and foundational learning.**

Play enhances literacy by engaging children in creative language activities that build vocabulary, strengthen word recognition, and develop early reading and writing skills. It supports numeracy by helping children explore counting, patterns, measurement, and problem-solving in a fun and interactive way. Through play, children build socio-emotional competencies such as recognizing, expressing, and managing emotions while developing skills like cooperation, empathy, and conflict resolution. These skills are essential for building healthy relationships throughout all stages of life.

## **Play-based interventions are considered to be low- or no-cost and can be designed according to the local context. This allows for sustainability and long-term impact, even in resource-limited environment and fragile contexts.**

Investing in high-quality early childhood, lower, and upper primary education that includes play-based learning can be a powerful way to break cycles of poverty and equip future generations with the skills and opportunities they need to contribute to the economic growth and stability of their communities and countries.

## **Despite the growing momentum and well-documented benefits of play-based learning, these approaches remain underfunded and under-utilized.**

There is an urgent need for donors and Ministries of Education to prioritize investments in education and play-based learning, so that all children have access to enriching and transformative learning experiences.

# THE CONTEXT

**Access to safe, inclusive, quality education that leads to meaningful learning outcomes remains a critical global challenge.** At present, more than 250 million children and youth are out of school,<sup>1</sup> faced with barriers such as poverty, gender inequality, and inadequate and inaccessible schools. Children living in countries affected by conflict and climate-related events experience even greater barriers to access and disruptions to their right to an education. In many instances, weak national education systems and inadequate investment from both donors and national governments, including investments in qualified and well-compensated teachers, means that children's academic success, development, and well-being is being undermined. In 2022, 70% of ten-year-old children in lower- and middle-income countries were unable to read and comprehend a simple text. This is known as learning poverty.<sup>2</sup>

**Quality education is one of the most important investments we can make to build a more peaceful, prosperous, and stable world.** With the adoption of the Millennium Development Goals, the world committed to ensuring that all children would have access to universal primary education. While enrolment in developing regions reached 91% in 2015, the quality of education did not keep pace, and children's learning outcomes did not see a commensurate rise. A much-needed commitment to quality education was made with the launch of the Sustainable Development Goals in 2015. Progress has advanced steadily, yet many roadblocks remain. The COVID-19 pandemic resulted in the largest number of children out of school in recorded history, many of whom did not return. We are also facing the largest cohort of children and young people in history who are ready and eager to learn.<sup>3</sup> Taken together, demands for access to quality education remains high.

When surveyed, children and young people themselves consistently say that their number one priority is access to a safe, quality education.<sup>4</sup> Yet, investments in national education systems are not keeping pace, and international assistance more broadly – and global education financing more specifically – are on the decline. In 2025, we are observing a concerning trend away from international assistance with donors citing domestic economic and security



**In 2022, 70% of ten-year-old children in lower- and middle-income countries were unable to read and comprehend a simple text.**

Photo credit: Luca Imberi for Right To Play

challenges as the rationale for those cuts. By reducing investments in quality education across the development-humanitarian-peace continuum, including innovative play-based learning approaches, decision-makers are further compounding the economic and security challenges we so desperately need to solve. Furthermore, we are denying children and young people their right to education and equal opportunities to access the skills and knowledge they need to succeed.

For 25 years, Right To Play has worked to protect, educate, and empower children to rise above adversity through the power of play. Together with parents and caregivers, teachers, coaches, and government officials, we transform the lives of children inside and outside the classroom through play – one of the most fundamental forces in a child's life. Operating across Africa, Asia, the Middle East, and in Indigenous, Inuit, and Métis communities in Canada, Right To Play's unique program model drives change in four core areas: early childhood care and education, quality primary education, gender equality and girls' well-being, and psychosocial support.

Right To Play's play-based learning approach is grounded in evidence of impact and proven as an effective way to deliver quality education and promote foundational learning outcomes, including literacy, numeracy and socio-emotional development. This ensures that children have the skills, knowledge, and opportunities to thrive and to positively contribute to their communities, countries, and the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals.

# PLAY AND PLAY-BASED LEARNING

A growing body of research exists to help play experts understand and design play-based approaches that support children's learning and development. Below is a set of common terms and principles used by Right To Play to guide our program model and inform our Theory of Change.

## Why Play?

**Play is a universal experience.** Across all cultures, people of all ages engage in some form of play. Play is fun and enjoyable, socially interactive, engaging, meaningful, and imaginative.

**Play-based learning harnesses the way children learn naturally.**<sup>5</sup> Play-based learning draws on a wide range of activities that are selected for a specific purpose or learning goal. Play-based learning is a developmentally appropriate and child-centred approach to teaching and considers the role of both children and adults in creating meaningful opportunities to learn and develop in a safe, nurturing, and engaging way.

**Play helps children's brains develop.** It helps build their memory, flexibility in thinking, self-control, and helps them manage emotions and behaviour.<sup>6</sup> Through play, children can focus on tasks, handle distractions, and solve problems. It builds critical thinking skills, encourages curiosity, and lets them explore and try new things. When children play, they learn naturally and understand new ideas in ways that make sense to them.<sup>7</sup>

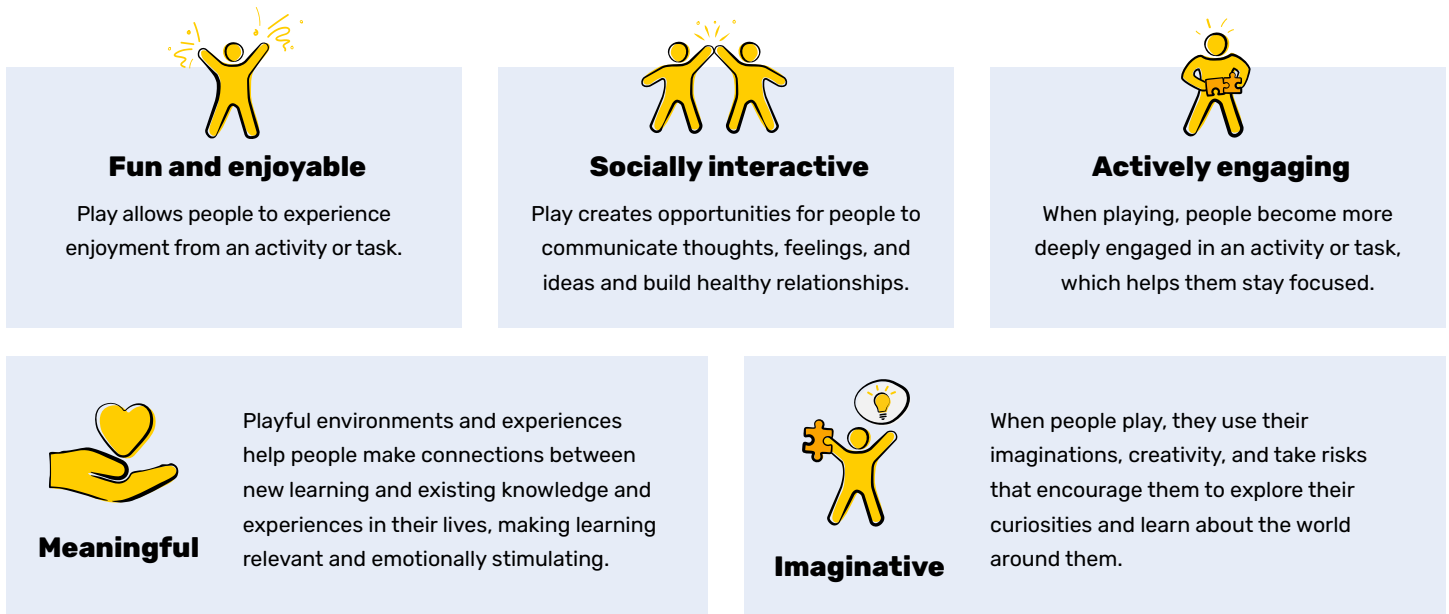
**Play provides opportunities for children to interact with, learn from, and better understand themselves and others.** It helps them build social and emotional skills such as empathy, cooperation, and self-regulation which are crucial for their overall development and well-being.<sup>8</sup> For children affected by conflict and crisis, play can be used to support psychosocial well-being by giving children the tools they need to process stressful and adverse experiences. Learning outcomes are built on a foundation of safety and emotional support facilitated by trusted adults through play. Literacy and numeracy are higher order skills, made possible through the crucial but often ignored foundation of psychosocial well-being. Thus, providing play-based psychosocial support improves both mental health and learning outcomes.<sup>9</sup>

**Children today are playing less – just one in four children now play regularly.**

**Play-based learning can be adapted to diverse learning styles.** Play taps into children's natural curiosity and intrinsic motivation to learn and master skills. Numerous pedagogical approaches align with the principles of play-based learning, including active learning, experiential learning, discovery- and inquiry-based learning, problem-based learning, and project-based learning.<sup>10</sup> These methods put learners at the centre and promote problem-solving, creativity, adaptability, and critical thinking – essential skills for future success. Play is not merely a pastime for young children, but a powerful tool that is relevant and valuable throughout their lives.<sup>11</sup>

**Play-based learning can help address the decline of play at home.** Children today are playing less at home than previous generations. According to UNICEF, one in five children do not engage in play with their caregivers at home.<sup>12</sup> At the same time, just one in four children now play regularly outdoors and in their communities – a sharp decline from their grandparents' generation, where nearly three-quarters did so several times a week.<sup>13</sup> As play diminishes at home, education systems can fill the gap by providing meaningful play-based learning experiences that support children's cognitive, emotional, and social development.

**FIGURE 1: The Characteristics of Play**



For children, play is how they learn and understand the world. It is how they articulate their hopes and dreams, how they learn to communicate with and interact positively with others, how they process difficult emotions and experiences, and how they develop and grow into well-rounded adults.

**The continuum of play is a mechanism to enhance children’s learning, well-being, and development,** from adult-directed games and structured activities, to collaborative and guided play, to child-directed free play.<sup>14</sup> The continuum below shows the range of play types that can make up play-based learning, as well as the extent to which children and adults direct learning and interact with each other in a playful context.

Right To Play values and uses all types of play, however, we are especially interested in collaborative and guided play, as evidence has shown this to have the most positive effects on learning and development outcomes. In collaborative and guided play, adults incorporate learning goals into activities while children maintain some direction over how they engage.<sup>15</sup> When children have the space to make decisions about their play and learning, it creates a sense of agency and builds trust and respect between children and their teachers and caregivers.<sup>16</sup>

**FIGURE 2: The Continuum of Play**



# RIGHT TO PLAY'S APPROACH TO QUALITY EDUCATION AND FOUNDATIONAL LEARNING

Play is essential to foundational learning, particularly for young children.<sup>17</sup> When children learn through hands-on exploration, experimentation, and interaction with their environment, it offers them a natural and engaging way to make sense of the world around them, laying the foundation for literacy, numeracy, and socio-emotional development – otherwise known as foundational learning.

Right To Play's unique program model takes a long-term, gender-responsive, and holistic approach to creating safe and nurturing learning environments that deliver quality education and foundational learning outcomes through the power of play. Our approach to play-based learning engages children across the continuum of play, and is sensitive to age, gender, ability, and culture.



Photo credit: Luca Imberi for Right To Play

We work with teachers, head teachers, school administrators, political decision-makers, parents and caregivers, and children, to ensure that play-based learning is integrated into the entire education system, from policies to teacher training to curriculum.

Instead of one-off teacher training, Right To Play provides ongoing support through continuous professional development opportunities (e.g., coaching and mentoring) and communities of practice, ensuring sustainability and impact. We work with teachers and community leaders to leverage culturally significant, familiar, and indigenous games, ensuring relevance and responsiveness at the local level. Our model is also cost-effective, as it utilizes resources available in and around schools and communities and adds-value by leveraging existing curriculum and teacher training networks. This is especially valuable in resource-limited or crisis-affected settings.



Photo credit: Luca Imberi for Right To Play

## Literacy and Play-Based Learning

Establishing early literacy skills lays the foundation for future academic success. Play-based learning helps children develop literacy skills by engaging them in creative and meaningful language activities. Role-playing, storytelling, and interactive dialogue between learners and their peers and teachers introduce new vocabulary and sentence structures, building essential language skills. Rhymes, games, and songs enhance phonemic awareness and provide the building blocks for reading. Children develop early reading and writing skills by first pretending to read, then recognizing words, and finally writing letters and composing simple stories. When trained to effectively use play-based learning in the classroom, teachers can increase opportunities for children to practice phonemic and literacy skills and improve reading fluency.



Photo credit: Luca Imberi for Right To Play

### Partners in Play Project (P3), 2019-2024

P3 was a five-year project implemented by Right To Play in Ghana, with support from the LEGO Foundation. The project incorporated play-based learning approaches into curriculum and teaching in Ghana in partnership with the Ministry of Education and its agencies, NGO partners, and community-based organizations. **Learners in direct intervention schools spent 60% more class time reading at the end of the program compared to baseline.** This was also significant compared with control schools, which saw a decrease in the percentage of time spent reading.<sup>18</sup>

### Gender-Responsive Education and Transformation (GREAT), 2018-2023

The GREAT project was a five-year project implemented by Right To Play in Mozambique, Rwanda, and Ghana, funded by the Government of Canada, through Global Affairs Canada. The project improved learning outcomes for primary school students.

- ▶ In Ghana, Right To Play trained and mentored more than 16,000 teachers to develop their skills and confidence in using play-based approaches. Students in GREAT-supported schools nearly quadrupled their reading fluency from 18 to 69 words per minute by the end of the project,<sup>19</sup> which was significantly more than the national average fluency rate of six to 32 words per minute;<sup>20</sup>
- ▶ In Mozambique, Right To Play worked to close the literacy gap between girls and boys. At the beginning of the project boys did better than girls in almost all literacy activities: 35% of boys were considered readers compared to only 16% of girls. However, by mid-project, that gap had been closed, with 40% of girls and 43% of boys qualifying as readers.



Photo credit: George Kumi Koranteng Danso for Right To Play



Photo credit: Julius Mahela for Right To Play

## Enhancing Quality & Inclusive Education (EQIE), 2020-2024

The EQIE Project was a four-year project implemented by Right To Play in Lebanon, the Palestinian Territories, Ethiopia, Tanzania, and Mozambique, with support from the Norwegian Agency for Development Cooperation (NORAD).

The project improved children’s reading in Tanzania by using child-centred, play-based, and active learning techniques. Right To Play worked with education staff, teachers, and parents to increase opportunities to read at school and in the home. Reading skills among young learners improved dramatically. By mid-line, the number of grade four children who could read to comprehension had risen to 98% in EQIE-supported schools, compared to 53% in non-supported schools.<sup>21</sup>

### TIME TO PLAY!

#### Sound Ball Game

*For a large class, break learners into smaller groups*

#### Materials

Ball or paper ball, marker

#### Objective

To help learners relate a letter name to its sound

#### How to Play

- 1 Write letters on the surface of the ball
- 2 In a circle, learners take turns passing the ball across the circle to each other
- 3 When a learner receives the ball, they say the letter, the sound, and three words that have that sound at the beginning/middle/end (e.g.: A = apple, cat, umbrella)
- 4 The game ends after all learners have taken their turn



## Closing the learning poverty gap through play

Learning poverty is defined as the inability to read and comprehend a simple text by age 10. Learning poverty is a significant global challenge that is exacerbated by social and economic disparities, limited resources, and rote teaching methods that fail to engage diverse learners.<sup>22</sup> In 2022, 70% of ten-year-old children in lower- and middle-income countries experienced learning poverty.<sup>23</sup>

Play-based approaches help close this gap by creating child-centred opportunities for learning that are engaging and inclusive, even in contexts where resources are limited.<sup>24</sup>

Through the GREAT project, we trained facilitators to curb learning loss resulting from school closures during the COVID-19 pandemic. Right To Play-trained teachers created fun and inclusive environments where students could learn without fear of ridicule. They incorporated interactive games that combine verbal practice with physical movement into lessons to engage students in the learning process, helping them to better absorb and remember lessons. This is a sharp contrast to traditional, rote styles of teaching that rely on repetition and memorization, and often use ridicule and punitive discipline when learners make mistakes.<sup>25</sup>

Photo credit: Luca Imberi for Right To Play

# Numeracy and Play-Based Learning

Play-based learning introduces children to basic mathematical concepts in a fun and interactive way. Through play, children practice counting, sorting, and grouping objects, helping them to develop a foundational understanding of numbers and data. Games and puzzles that involve measurement, pattern recognition, and problem-solving encourage critical thinking and build essential mathematical reasoning skills. Play-based learning that involves construction, exploration, or movement can also enhance children’s spatial awareness, an important aspect of numeracy.

## Enhancing Quality Early Childhood Education (ECE), 2022-2024

The ECE project was a two-year project implemented by Right To Play in Ghana with support from the ELMA Foundation and the LEGO Foundation. The project improved early literacy, numeracy, and socio-emotional skills among children ages three to five years old.

In collaboration with the Ministry of Education and its agencies, Sabre Education, and Innovations for Poverty Action (IPA), the project trained teacher college tutors, teachers, and ECE coordinators on play-based learning approaches and developed contextually relevant play-based content for professional development opportunities at the school and district level. Between the beginning and end of the project, average scores on tests assessing children’s numeracy skills rose from 44% to 81%. Students demonstrated improved performance on number and shape identification, one-to-one correspondence, and spatial reasoning, skills that prepare them for subjects like geometry and more complex mathematical problem-solving later in life.<sup>26</sup>

At the end of the project, the number of children who demonstrated skills like emotional awareness, empathy, and conflict resolution had almost doubled, rising from 42% at baseline to 82% at endline.<sup>27</sup>



Photo credit: Isaac Gyamfi A for Right To Play

## TIME TO PLAY!

### Data Count

*This game can be played in the classroom or at home*

### Materials

Paper, pencils/pens, found materials (e.g.: books, sticks, bottle tops)

### Objective

To help learners collect and organize information

### How to Play

- 1 Place the found materials around the room
- 2 Ask learners to find groups of objects
- 3 Organize learners into small groups to put their objects together and cluster them according to type
- 4 Ask the group draw a T-table, (e.g., object in the left column, quantity in the right column) to group, label, and document quantities of each object

## Socio-Emotional Development and Play-Based Learning

Play-based learning is vital for helping children to develop socio-emotional skills. Through play, children learn to recognize, name, and express their feelings and manage negative emotions like anger and frustration. Collaborative play encourages the development of key social skills like cooperation, negotiation, empathy, and conflict resolution, which are essential for building healthy relationships throughout all stages of life and can contribute to greater social cohesion. Play also boosts self-esteem and confidence by allowing children to explore new ideas, take calculated risks, and succeed in conquering challenges and mastering new skills.

### Positive Child and Youth Development Project, 2015-2018

The Positive Child and Youth Development Project was a three-year program implemented by Right To Play in Pakistan, with the support of the United Kingdom's Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO) under the What Works 1 program.

This play-based program used games to teach boys and girls to resolve conflict, develop positive relationships, strengthen communication skills, and treat others with respect, regardless of gender. A randomized control trial found that violence against girls decreased by 59% in Right To Play-supported schools and only 21% in non-supported schools, and violence against boys decreased by 33% in Right To Play-supported schools and 28% in non-supported schools.<sup>28</sup>



Photo credit: Num Films for Right To Play



Photo credit: Palm Media for Right To Play

### Toward Gender-Responsive and Empowering Education for Refugee Girls and Boys in the West Bank and Gaza (TOGETHER), 2019-2024

TOGETHER was a five-year project implemented by Right To Play in the West Bank and Gaza and funded by the Government of Canada, through Global Affairs Canada. The project trained teachers and school counsellors to provide, safe, supportive, and gender-responsive education for girls and boys in Grades 1-9. Midway through the project, the number of children in Gaza who demonstrated socio-emotional competencies more than doubled, and 61% more children experienced feelings of social connectedness at the end of the project, compared to 31% of children at baseline.<sup>29</sup>



Photo credit: Flash Studios for Right To Play

**“I can say that our children are more creative now. They have the freedom to express themselves. Leadership skills are also developing among the learners because they’re now sitting in groups and every group has a leader. When they discuss anything, they are supposed to elect somebody to do the presentation. So, leadership is also being developed among them. So not only academic skills, but also non-academic skills.”**

Teacher, Ghana

## **Gender-Responsive Education and Transformation (GREAT), 2018-2023**

The GREAT project helped children improve their learning outcomes and socio-emotional skills. In Ghana, learners’ leadership skills more than doubled, with 93% of learners showing leadership aptitude at the end of the project. Additionally, 99% of learners reported having high self-esteem at the end of the project compared to only 53% at baseline.

### **Let’s Not Forget About Socio-Emotional Learning**

Since the adoption of the Millenium Development Goals in 2000 and the Sustainable Development Goals in 2015, education systems have sought to improve children’s access to quality education. An increased focus on learning outcomes led to the prioritization of delivering and measuring improvements in literacy and numeracy above all else. This priority intensified after the COVID-19 pandemic, when policies focused on combating the learning loss resulting from school closures and learning disruptions.

While literacy and numeracy are critically important, it is imperative that socio-emotional learning is not sidelined in these efforts. Achieving foundational learning outcomes necessitates a balanced approach that equally prioritizes literacy, numeracy, and socio-emotional learning, so that children can develop a wide range of skills needed to navigate interpersonal relationships in their families, communities, workplaces, and the world. Importantly, socio-emotional skills development is shown to reinforce academic outcomes.<sup>39</sup> Play can serve as an effective tool to enhance all three dimensions, supporting learning and well-being for all children.

## A CASE FOR PLAY IN UPPER PRIMARY: THE PLUG IN PLAY PROJECT (PIP) IN RWANDA, 2021-2024

While often associated with early childhood and lower primary education, play-based learning offers significant benefits to learners in upper primary education as well. At this stage in their development, children are beginning to apply logic, explore abstract thinking, and develop self-regulation skills. Engaging in pedagogical approaches like experiential learning, guided discovery, inquiry-based learning, and project-based learning allows children to simulate real-world challenges, fostering critical thinking and teamwork.<sup>31</sup>

Implemented by Right To Play, with support from the LEGO Foundation, Plug in Play was a three-year pilot project in Rwanda that improved the quality of education for boys and girls aged 10 to 12. Delivered in collaboration with the Ministry of Education and its agencies, the University of Rwanda – College of Education, and local EdTech partners, Plug in Play used an innovative approach to learning through play with technology (LtPT) to deliver Rwanda’s competency-based curriculum to learners. LtPT includes a focus on fields such as making, tinkering, coding, and robotics. The hands-on, play-based approach developed students’ creativity, innovation, collaboration, problem-solving, and practical 21st-Century skills.

**“Before, it was very theoretical, which would bore the children. But currently, it is more practical and playful. Learning by doing is very important as it helps students to acquire knowledge smoothly and eases the work for teachers.”**

Teacher, Rwanda



Photo credit: Round Designs for Right To Play

The project showed promising improvements in student’s learning outcomes and teachers’ ability and confidence to deliver engaging and practical Science, Engineering, and Technology (SET) lesson plans through play. Teachers who received support from Right To Play were better able to shift away from theory-based approaches to more effective learner-centered and participatory methods.

Teachers were also better able to develop lesson plans that encouraged exploration and interaction among peers, which allowed students to grasp SET concepts more easily and increase their enthusiasm for learning. Bringing LtPT into the classroom also helped to create more positive and engaging learning environments, increased teachers’ ability to teach science, engineering, and technology concepts, and improved their motivation and well-being.<sup>32</sup>

## Safe and Positive Learning Environments and Play-Based Learning

Positive learning environments are characterized by a sense of connectedness and belonging, enjoyment and enthusiasm, and mutual respect among learners and between teachers and learners.<sup>33</sup> Play-based learning naturally supports the creation of such environments by engaging children in interactive and enjoyable activities in a respectful and supportive manner. Teachers trained in play-based approaches are also less likely to use corporal punishment and punitive classroom management techniques. Right To Play-supported teachers are guided to better understand the negative impacts of these techniques on children's well-being, as well as given new tools to connect and redirect children without the use of violence.

Through play, learners can express themselves, collaborate with peers, and develop positive relationships with teachers, all while developing essential skills in a nurturing environment. Because play-based learning is adaptable, it fosters inclusivity, accommodates diverse learning needs, and allows for differentiated learning paths, ultimately boosting individual engagement and participation,<sup>34</sup> as well as reducing classroom conflicts and disruptive behaviours.<sup>35</sup>

For example, in Tanzania, Right To Play trained teachers on how to use play-based classroom management techniques. Before the project started, corporal punishment was a common practice in partner schools. By the end of the project, 88% of teachers were using alternative forms of positive discipline and 77% using inclusive classroom practices that enhanced relationships between learners. Ninety per cent of teachers also integrated play-based and interactive learning strategies into their lessons including drawing, creative play, structured games, interactive songs, storytelling, and role-play to bolster literacy, numeracy, and socio-emotional learning.

In Ghana, Mozambique, and Rwanda, 81% of teachers said they had increased skills and confidence to apply play-based learning methodologies, a six-fold increase from baseline. These methodologies promoted safe, active, and participatory learning envi-



**By the end of the project, 88% of teachers were using alternative forms of positive discipline and 77% were using inclusive classroom practices that enhanced relationships between learners.**

Photo credit: Num Films for Right To Play

ronments, contributing to better learning outcomes. The percentage of girls and boys who perceived their learning environment as supportive rose to 82% from 66% at baseline. Teachers noted that positive discipline improved the school environment, and reports from children indicated a reduction in corporal punishment, with Mozambique classrooms showing no instances of such punishment.

In Gaza, 62% of teachers focused on increasing the meaningful participation of girls in their lessons, compared to 20% at the project's start.

**“Previously, when a learner answered a question wrongly, I either shouted at the child or made the class hoot at them but I have learned that such responses were not good. I have also stopped corporal punishment because it can scare children from learning.”**

Teacher, Ghana

## Positive Learning Environments in Crisis-Affected Communities

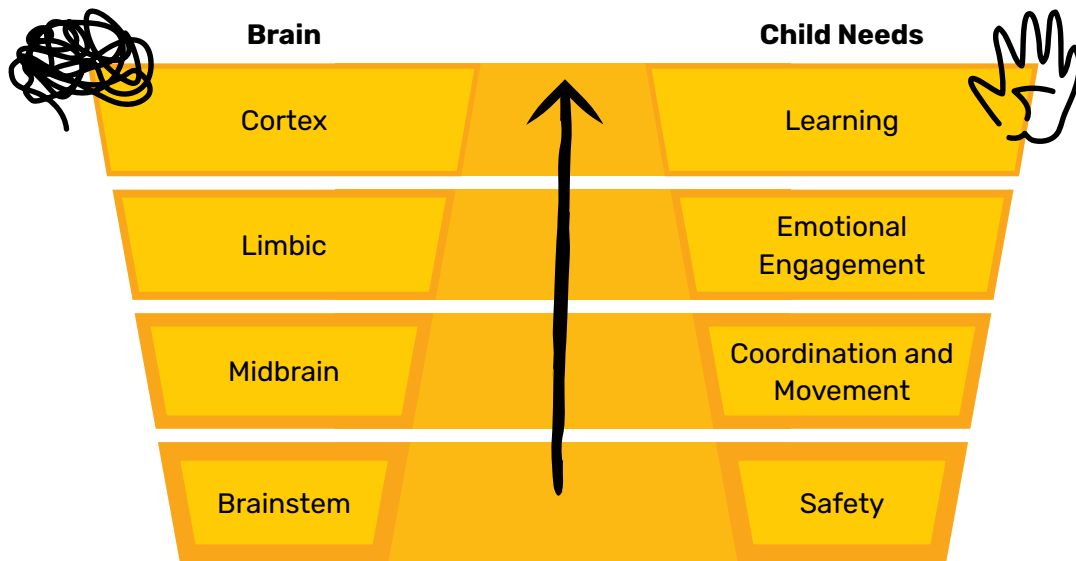
For children impacted by conflict, climate-induced disasters, and other adverse experiences (e.g., witnessing or experiencing violence, poverty, and discrimination), a positive learning environment is crucial for brain development.

When a child experiences an adverse event, their brain shifts into survival mode, limiting access to higher order functions like emotional regulation and learning. By providing consistent and predictable relationships with trusted adults in safe and nurturing learning environments, educators can help children move out of survival mode, enabling them to access the brain's cortex, or their learning brain, to promote emotional stability, resilience, and effective learning.<sup>36</sup>



Photo credit: Ich Ohg for Right To Play

**FIGURE 3: Brain development and child needs**



Adapted from: McCaleb, M & Milaere-Wallis, N. (2005) Relationship-shaping: Teacher consistency and implications for brain development. *The First Years/Ngā Tau Tuatahu: New Zealand Infant and Toddler Education* 7(2), 21-25

**“Playing is a way for children to process their trauma, because they learn to express their feelings in their own way. Play is a language that every child speaks.”**

Racha Nasreddine, Country Director - Right To Play Lebanon

# PLAY-BASED LEARNING: A LOW-COST INTERVENTION TO STRENGTHEN EDUCATION SYSTEMS

## Increased Return on Investment and Learning

Investing in global education – especially in the early years – is one of the most effective strategies to break cycles of poverty and ensure that future generations have the skills and opportunities they need to contribute to the economic growth and stability of their communities and countries. Studies have shown that every dollar invested in early childhood education can yield an economic return of 7% to 10% per year throughout an individual's life based on increased school and career achievement.<sup>37</sup> Universal access to early childhood education can help children develop the foundational skills they need to succeed in school and beyond.<sup>38</sup>

**“Play-based learning is listed as a very low-cost intervention that typically increases learning by the equivalent of four extra months in school each year.”**

Education Endowment Foundation, Early Years Toolkit

Emerging evidence on the cost-effectiveness of play-based learning largely comes from the early childhood education sector, where play is a key component of nearly all curricula. Play-based learning, a key approach in early childhood education, is particularly effective in promoting foundational skills and closing achievement gaps in children from different socio-economic backgrounds.<sup>39</sup>

The Education Endowment Foundation, which ranks early childhood interventions by cost and impact, also identifies play-based learning as a very low-cost intervention that typically increases learning by the equivalent of four extra months in school each year.<sup>40</sup> Investing in play-based learning is a low-cost strategy offering significant returns for both learners and



Photo credit: Flash Studios for Right To Play

education systems. Good quality education, including play-based learning approaches, can also reduce costs in the long-run, such as re-enrolment costs, catch-up classes, and remedial education.<sup>41</sup>

A two-year study revealed that play-based learning significantly enhanced cognitive, language, physical, and socio-emotional development. Children who participated in the project being studied outperformed those who primarily remained at home in the first year and attended government-run preschool in the second year. The children supported by the project show dramatic improvements across all measures. Additionally, the study found that the project enhanced parents' knowledge, attitudes, and practices regarding early childhood development, with parents supported by the project showing greater improvement than those remaining at home and attending government preschool.<sup>42</sup>

## Versatile, Adaptable, and Locally-Sourced Materials

Play-based learning is accessible in all settings, even resource-limited environments. Educators can leverage low-cost or locally-sourced materials available in and around the school community, such as found objects or clay, sticks, bottle tops, cartons, straws, glue, pencils, scissors, paper, and more so that children can draw, write letters and numbers, and unlock their creativity and skill development. Connecting lessons to real-life experiences and visual cues further enhances relevance of lessons and engagement of learners. In some cases, play-based learning requires no materials at all, simply using learners' imaginations, songs, rhymes, or verbal cues, which all enhance language, memory, and motor skills.

## Boosting Attendance and Retention

When learners are safe and feel a sense of agency, belonging, and purpose, they are more motivated to learn. Play-based approaches create such environments by nurturing and engaging learners so that they feel valued and supported, thereby fostering positive attitudes and increasing their motivation to learn.<sup>43</sup> Play helps build children's confidence, independence, and pride in their accomplishments. It empowers children by giving them control, choice, and an active role in their learning.<sup>44</sup> In contrast, highly structured, teacher-centred, and rote styles of teaching (e.g., "chalk and talk") are associated with negative outcomes, such as low motivation and self-confidence, inability to think critically, and increased anxiety, which can hinder long-term engagement and retention in school.<sup>45</sup>

Play-based learning is also beneficial to attendance rates, as learners enrolled in schools that use play-based approaches are more likely to attend and stay in school compared to learners from schools that rely on rote learning. A longitudinal mixed-method study spanning Ethiopia, India, Peru, and Vietnam found a direct relationship between disengagement and poor learning outcomes, and eventual dropout.<sup>46</sup> In Right To Play's GREAT project in Ghana, Mozambique, and

Rwanda, attendance rates improved from 87% at baseline to 93% at endline, with consistent improvements for both boys and girls. Learners in GREAT schools were also ten times more likely to be still enrolled in school by the end of the project compared to those in non-supported control schools.<sup>47</sup>

**“They didn’t enjoy coming to school before. They wanted to stay at home and play. But now they understand that when I even come to school, I will play. And the play in school is even making them learn. Absenteeism is not a problem anymore.”**

Teacher, Ghana



Photo credit: Mehrdar Art and Production for Right To Play

## **The Impact of Play-Based Learning on Teacher Engagement, Well-Being, and Retention**

Teachers face a multitude of challenges, including overwhelming workloads, large class sizes, limited resources, low or inconsistent wages, and the pressure of high-stakes testing, all of which can lead to burnout and decreased job satisfaction. Play-based learning fosters a dynamic and engaging classroom environment, which not only benefits students but also rejuvenates teachers by making their work more rewarding and enjoyable. Teachers who feel supported in their professional growth and who are equipped with effective teaching strategies are more likely to remain in the profession.

Additionally, play-based approaches often lead to less disruptive classrooms, as children are more focused, engaged, and motivated when learning through play. By reducing behavioural challenges in the classroom, teachers can invest more time and energy in meaningful instruction, further enhancing their job satisfaction and overall well-being.



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**“I enjoy using play-based learning approaches because it facilitates the delivery of my course content to the students in a more effective manner. It reduces the amount of time I need to spend explaining concepts to them. Moreover, witnessing the active participation of students in the course is highly motivating for me as a teacher. It is energizing to see them fully engaged and enthusiastic about the learning process.”**

Teacher, Rwanda

The effective use of play-based learning starts with teachers. In some cases, play is often perceived as a reward for learners when the real work is done. Pre- and in-service teacher training and continuous professional development is essential to delivering play-based learning effectively in the classroom, transforming both perceptions of play and teaching practices.

**“For me, collaboration among teachers is one of the things that has worked well. When a teacher has a challenge, they come to me and we seek a colleague who can help. With this understanding, there is no competition among them. It’s all about the children and not any one individual.”**

Head Teacher, Ghana

To fully support the use of play-based teaching and learning, strong school leadership is crucial. School administrators who are trained in play-based learning can ensure that teachers receive the support, resources, and peer-to-peer collaboration needed to integrate these approaches effectively. In Ghana, the active involvement of school leadership, coupled with comprehensive teacher professional development, fostered environments where play-based learning could be most effective. Teachers who continuously develop their skills and have agency in their teaching practice were better positioned to innovate and adapt to diverse classroom contexts, resulting in higher student learning outcomes.

## A CASE FOR PLAY: RIGHT TO PLAY'S PARTNERSHIP WITH THE MINISTRY OF EDUCATION IN GHANA

The Partners in Play Project (P3) enhanced the quality of education for girls and boys aged four to 12 in Ghana from 2019–2024, in collaboration with the Ministry of Education and its agencies, NGO partners, and community-based organizations. The program incorporated play-based learning approaches into school curriculum and teaching practices, building on evidence that shows that play can enrich children's educational experience and help them develop a life-long love of learning.

The Ministry of Education in Ghana is implementing significant education reforms to transform teaching and learning. This is in response to persistent gaps in access to quality education in the country. As a partner in this work, Right To Play brought technical expertise to incorporate play-based learning into curriculum and teaching practice, in part developed through the Gender Responsive Education and Transformation (GREAT) project. GREAT trained more than 4,000 teachers from 2018–2023, including through online teacher support during the COVID-19 lockdowns. P3 worked the same GREAT-supported regions by aligning its strategies with the government's Ghana Accountability for Learning Outcomes Project (GALOP).

Right To Play supported more than 16,000 teachers through the P3 project with training and mentoring to develop their skills and confidence in using play-based approaches. The end results showed increased student enrollment and motivation to learn, more positive student-teacher relationships, and improvements in foundational literacy.



Photo credit: Luca Imberi for Right To Play

### REACH

**208** schools across seven districts in Greater Accra, Northern, and the Volta Region

**1,851** GALOP (Ghana Accountability for Learning Outcomes Project) schools

**614,306** children (Direct: 36,123. Indirect: 28,095. GALOP: 550,088)

## A CASE FOR PLAY: RIGHT TO PLAY'S PARTNERSHIP WITH THE MINISTRY OF EDUCATION IN GHANA



Photo credit: Round Designs for Right To Play

### KEY RESULTS

#### Literacy

There is strong evidence linking play-based learning approaches with improved learning outcomes, including literacy.<sup>48</sup> In the GREAT project, students supported by the project saw an improvement in their reading fluency in English from a baseline of 18 to 69 words per minute. Children enrolled in schools not supported by the project saw only minor improvements in their reading fluency from a baseline of 20 to 34 words per minute.<sup>49</sup> After one year of implementation in the P3 project, the percentage of Grade 2 students who could not identify a single word dropped by 20%.<sup>50</sup>

#### Socio-Emotional Development

Play-based learning fosters critical socio-emotional development, such as pro-social behaviour, resilience, confidence, leadership, and creativity. Right To Play found small but statistically significant improvements in these skills among students in GREAT-supported schools compared to children in schools outside the GREAT project.<sup>51</sup> Right To Play's evaluation of the P3 project found that increasing opportunities for students' engagement and participation through play boosts their creativity, problem-solving, and other socio-emotional skills development.<sup>52</sup>

#### Positive Learning Environments

By using games and other play activities in classrooms and outdoor spaces, teachers were better able to create positive learning environments and implement non-punitive discipline techniques, building trust with their learners and enabling quality and active lesson delivery.<sup>53</sup>

95% of learners in GREAT-supported schools perceived their learning environment to be positive and stimulating, from a baseline figure of 68%. Similarly, 20% more students reported feeling positive about their learning environments in GREAT-supported schools as compared to in a control school, especially for girls.<sup>54</sup>

This is also reflected in students' attendance, with children in schools that use play-based approaches more likely to attend and stay in school when compared to learners from schools that rely on rote learning. Students in the schools supported by the GREAT project were ten times more likely to stay enrolled in school compared to those in the control schools.

# THE PATH TO QUALITY EDUCATION AND LEARNING FOR ALL

## Sustaining and Scaling Play-Based Learning

Sustaining and scaling play-based learning beyond individual projects requires that it is embedded and aligned with global and national education policies, teacher training programs, and community-level engagement efforts. While perceptions are changing, a study across 24 countries found that the implementation of play-based learning remains limited. Key challenges include policies, pressure around curriculum delivery, inadequate teacher training, and parental preference for worksheets, drills, and homework.<sup>55</sup> In addition, the perception of play as a non-learning activity, often seen as a reward for completing “real” work, undermines its recognition as educational tool, limiting its use in the classroom.<sup>56</sup>

Embedding play-based learning into educational standards and curricular goals helps integrate these methods into school systems, ensuring their longevity. Similarly, embedding play into pre- and in-service teacher training and continuous professional development further legitimizes the approach, leverages existing teaching networks and infrastructure, and equips teachers with the necessary skills and confidence to implement and advocate for play-based learning methods effectively. Community involvement is crucial in building support and understanding of play-based learning’s benefits among parents and community leaders, and fostering a shared sense of ownership and responsibility. These factors collectively enhance buy-in and ownership at the national, district, school, and community levels, ensuring sustainability and allowing play-based approaches to come to scale.



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# RECOMMENDATIONS

## Increasing Political and Financial Support for Play-Based Learning

In 2024, the United Nations General Assembly adopted a resolution establishing June 11 as an annual International Day of Play, with more than 140 countries in favour. The resolution provided a unifying moment at the global, national, and local levels to remind policymakers, teachers, parents, and other decision-makers of the importance of prioritizing the time and space for children to play and all the benefits that come with it.

Despite the growing momentum and well-documented benefits of play-based learning, these approaches remain underfunded and under-utilized. Across the globe, donors and national Ministries of Education are cutting back funding, leaving systems ill-equipped to meet the needs of their learners with good quality education. Currently, only 3% of international assistance to education is directed towards early childhood education, which includes play-based learning initiatives.<sup>57</sup> This is starkly inadequate when considering that 90% of a child's brain grows by age five, a critical period where play-based learning is most beneficial.<sup>58</sup> Furthermore, in many low-income countries, less than 1% of the national education budget is allocated to early childhood education, leaving these essential programs severely limited in scope and effectiveness.<sup>59</sup>

This lack of funding extends beyond early childhood, as play-based learning in both lower and upper primary education also receives insufficient attention and resources. The portion of international assistance spent on education dropped from 9.3% in 2019 to 7.6% in 2022 as donors shifted focus to conflicts, energy, and healthcare during the COVID-19 pandemic.<sup>60</sup> In 2025, we are observing further movement away from international assistance with donors citing national economic and security challenges as the rationale for those cuts. Furthermore, investments in education in emergencies as part of humanitarian response efforts lack urgency and prioritization as they are not considered life-saving.<sup>61</sup>

There is an urgent need for both donors and Ministries of Education to prioritize investments in education and play-based learning, ensuring that all children have access to these enriching and transformative learning experiences and can reach their full potential. With increased financial and political support, play can become a cornerstone of education systems worldwide, benefiting children for years to come.



Photo credit: Right To Play

**“Acknowledging that play and recreation are essential to the health and well-being of children and promote the development of creativity, imagination, self-confidence, self-efficacy and sense of responsibility, as well as physical, social, cognitive, communication and emotional strength and skills, [we] proclaim 11 June as the International Day of Play, to be observed annually.”**

United Nations General Assembly

Right To Play International is proposing the following recommendations:

**1 Donors should increase political support and financial investments to international development and humanitarian assistance more broadly, and global quality education more specifically. Donors should also commit to mainstreaming play-based learning to achieve foundational learning outcomes, defined as literacy, numeracy, and socio-emotional development. This includes:**

- ▶ Working in partnership with multilateral institutions and national governments to reform education sector plans and embed play-based learning into national education curriculum, teacher training, and budgets, with a focus on play-based early childhood, lower, and upper primary education;
- ▶ Requiring partners to describe how projects and programs will integrate play-based learning to accelerate literacy, numeracy, and socio-emotional development into early childhood, lower, and upper primary education funding proposals;
- ▶ Committing to recognize the International Day of Play annually through events, public statements, and/or political and financial support to play-based learning.

**2 Ministries of Education should increase funding for programs that explicitly support the sustainable and effective delivery of play-based learning across the national education system. This includes:**

- ▶ Hiring “play specialists” within relevant Departments of Education to ensure that governments increase their level of technical expertise and support for play-based learning in policy and program development and implementation;
- ▶ Designating “play champions” within Ministries of Education to act as a liaison with local and national play experts and raise the profile of play-based learning at the global, regional, national, district, and school level;
- ▶ Investing in the training of teaching staff, school administrators, and those involved in the care

and support of learners in school to enhance their capacity to deliver play-based learning;

- ▶ Establishing play-based learning communities of practice to encourage peer-to-peer knowledge sharing and skill-building so that teachers can increase their confidence and effectiveness in bringing play into the classroom;
- ▶ Embedding play-based learning into national pre-service and in-service teacher training and continuous professional development opportunities;
- ▶ Supporting policies and programs that promote play-based learning and playful parenting to support foundational learning in school and in the home.

**3 Ministries of Education should invest in locally relevant, equitable, and inclusive play-based learning programming. This includes:**

- ▶ Financing the design and delivery of play-based learning that promotes equity and inclusion, with specific consideration to the needs of the most marginalized members of the community. This includes very young children and their caregivers, girls, refugees, internally displaced and host community children, LGBTQI+ children, and those living with disabilities;
- ▶ Partnering with national and local play experts to develop clear guidelines for the design and delivery of play-based learning interventions at the district and school level and ensuring adequate training for all stakeholders responsible for their implementation;
- ▶ Committing to recognize the International Day of Play annually through events, public statements, and/or political and financial support to play-based learning; awareness raising campaigns to address the stigma and discrimination associated with mental health and psychosocial well-being;
- ▶ Investing in school- and community-based awareness raising campaigns to increase acceptance of play as a valid and effective way to achieve learning outcomes and child development and well-being;

- ▶ Investing in programs and curriculum that promote the continuum of play, including adult-directed, guided and collaborative, and free play, to maximize the benefits of play-based learning;
- ▶ Fostering cross-sector partnerships that bring together global, national, local, and private sector actors, as well as parents, teachers, and children themselves to ensure locally owned, well-resourced, and sustainable program outcomes.

#### **4 Donors, Ministries of Education, and academic and research institutes should increase the level of long-term investments to collect data and generate evidence and the effectiveness of play-based learning.**

**This includes:**

- ▶ Using evidence to better design, target, and measure the delivery of play-based psychosocial support and socio-emotional learning interventions;
- ▶ Committing to multi-year investments that allow for innovation, iteration, and longitudinal research;
- ▶ Investing and launching pilot programs as a means to test and improve play-based learning approaches in diverse educational settings, including humanitarian and crisis contexts.



Photo credit: Luca Imberi for Right To Play

**In summary, play is a proven and effective way to achieve foundational learning outcomes, including literacy, numeracy, and socio-emotional development. These interventions can unlock children’s full potential by tapping into their natural curiosity and differentiated learning needs. They are also low-cost and can be designed according to the local context, which allows for sustainability and long-term impact. With the growing global recognition of the right to play, donors, Ministries of Education, national and local play experts can all take steps to ensure that education systems integrate and invest in play-based learning to achieve our shared education and learning goals.**

# ENDNOTES

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- 2 World Bank et al., 2022.
- 3 UNICEF Data, 2024.
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- 5 Baker et al., 2021.
- 6 Yogman et al., 2018.
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- 11 Gray, 2013; Le Courtois et al., 2024; Pellegrini, 2009; Zosh et al., 2017.
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- 15 Weisberg et al., 2013.
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- 17 Kemple et al., 2015.
- 18 RTI International, 2024.
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- 20 Ghana Education Service et al., 2016.
- 21 ImpactLoop & Inno-Change International Consultants, 2024.
- 22 World Bank, 2019; UNESCO, 2020.
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- 24 Zosh et al., 2017.
- 25 Navarette et al., 2023.
- 26 Right To Play, n. d.-c. 2024.
- 27 Right To Play, n. d.-c. 2024.
- 28 Karmaliani et al., 2020.
- 29 Proteknôn et al., 2023.
- 30 Glow Consultants & Right To Play, 2021.
- 31 Parker & Thomsen, 2019.
- 32 National Foundation for Educational Research, 2023; Right To Play, n.d.-d. 2024.
- 33 Khalfaoui et al., 2021.
- 34 Pyle & Danniels, 2017.
- 35 Khalfaoui et al., 2021; Stanton-Chapman, 2014.
- 36 Gaskill & Perry, 2014; Right To Play, 2023.
- 37 Government of Ontario, 2017; Heckman, 2012.
- 38 UNICEF et al., 2022.
- 39 BRAC, 2021; Dowd & Thomsen, 2021.
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- 41 Heckman, 2012.
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- 51 Navarette et al., 2023.
- 52 Cynosure Evaluation Limited, 2024; RTI, 2023.
- 53 Akyeampong et al., 2023.
- 54 Navarette et al., 2023.
- 55 Bubikova-Moan et al., 2019.
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*Right To Play is a global organization that protects, educates, and empowers children to rise above adversity using the power of play. We reach millions of children each year in some of the most difficult places on earth, helping them to stay in school and learn, overcome prejudice, heal from trauma, and develop the skills they need to thrive. We do this by harnessing play, one of the most fundamental forces in a child's life, to teach children the critical skills they need to dismantle barriers and embrace opportunities, in learning and in life.*

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