

ACCELERATING FOUNDATIONAL LEARNING THROUGH PLAY

An Effective Approach to Improving Literacy, Numeracy, and Socio-Emotional Skills



Access to safe, inclusive, and quality education remains a critical challenge globally. In 2022, 70% of ten-year-old children in lower- and middle-income countries experienced learning poverty – the inability to read and comprehend a simple text. More than 250 million children and youth are out of school, faced with barriers such as poverty, gender inequality, and inaccessible schools, particularly in conflict- and climate-affected communities. Weak national education systems and insufficient investment, particularly in teaching training and continuous professional development, further undermine children’s academic success, development, and well-being.

Play-based learning is an effective approach to improving quality education and can accelerate children’s literacy, numeracy, and socio-emotional development – otherwise known as foundational learning. Investing in play-based learning, especially in early childhood, lower, and upper primary education, can be a powerful way to equip current and future generations with the skills and opportunities they need to thrive and contribute to the economic growth and stability of their communities and countries.

What Is Play-Based Learning?

Play is a universal experience. For children, it provides a natural and powerful way to learn, grow, and understand the world around them. When children learn through hands-on exploration, experimentation, and interaction with their peers, teachers, and environment, they tap into their natural curiosity and intrinsic motivation to learn and master new skills. Research shows that play builds critical cognitive, emotional, and social skills – from self-regulation and problem-solving to empathy and cooperation. Play also supports psychosocial well-being, especially for children affected by crisis.

According to the Education Endowment Fund, play-based learning is a low-cost intervention that typically increases learning by the equivalent of four extra



Photo credit: Luca Imberi for Right To Play

months in school each year. Achieving foundational learning outcomes requires a balanced approach that equally prioritizes literacy, numeracy, and socio-emotional development, so that children can acquire a wide range of skills needed to navigate interpersonal relationships in their families, communities, workplaces, and the world. Play can serve as an effective tool to enhance all three dimensions, supporting learning and well-being for all children.

QUICK FACTS

- ▶ 90% of a child's brain growth occurs by age five.
- ▶ Every \$1 invested in early childhood education can yield an economic return of 7% to 10% per year throughout an individual's life.
- ▶ Play-based learning is a low-cost intervention that is accessible in all settings, even resource-limited and crisis-affected communities.
- ▶ Play-based early childhood education can increase learning by an equivalent of four additional months in school each year.

The Power of Play: Evidence from Right To Play programs

Children in Right To Play-supported projects improved their **literacy skills** by building vocabulary, phonemic awareness, and early reading and writing skills through activities like role-playing, storytelling, and rhymes.

- ▶ In Tanzania, the number of grade four children who could read to comprehension rose to 98% compared to 53% in non-supported schools;
- ▶ In Mozambique, gains were made to close the literacy gap – especially for girls – with 40% of girls qualifying as readers at project midline, compared to only 16% at baseline.

Children improved their **numeracy skills** through counting, sorting, pattern recognition, spatial awareness, and critical thinking in a fun and interactive way.

- ▶ In Ghana, children improved their early numeracy skills from 44% at baseline to 81% at endline.

Right To Play nurtured children's **socio-emotional learning** by implementing play-based activities that helped children name and manage emotions, build social skills like collaboration and problem solving, and boost self-esteem and confidence.

- ▶ In Palestinian Territories, children 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;
- ▶ In Pakistan, play-based interventions taught boys and girls to treat each other with respect, regardless of gender. A randomized control trial found that violence against girls decreased by 59% in Right To Play-supported schools.

Play: The Path to Quality Education and Learning for All

Despite strong evidence of its benefits, play-based learning remains underfunded and under-utilized. Key barriers to implementation include policy gaps, curriculum constraints, inadequate teacher training, and lack of parental engagement. To meet global education goals and help all children thrive, donors and Ministries of Education must mainstream play-based learning into their policies and budgets.

Right To Play International proposes the following recommendations for consideration:

- ▶ Embed play-based learning into national curricula, teacher training, and education budgets.
- ▶ Require projects and programs to include strategies for integrating play-based learning to boost literacy, numeracy, and social-emotional skills.
- ▶ Train and support teaching staff and school administrators to enhance their capacity to deliver play-based learning.
- ▶ Appoint "play specialists" and "play champions" across Departments and Ministries of Education to provide technical leadership and advocate for play-based learning across policies and programs.
- ▶ Invest in school- and community-based awareness raising campaigns to build knowledge and support for the power of play.
- ▶ Invest in long-term research, pilots, and data collection to strengthen the evidence base and demonstrate the positive impact of play-based learning.
- ▶ Recognize the International Day of Play annually through events, public statements, and/or political and financial support to play-based learning.

ABOUT RIGHT TO PLAY

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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