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Sereverien Ngarukiye

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Final Project Faculty Approval Form

Master's Candidate: **Sereverien Ngarukiye**

Capstone Title: **Unlocking Children's Potential Through Play: Improving Early Childhood Experiences in Nyarufunzo Village**

Presented in the MDP Community Forum on: **May 13, 2024**

I approve this capstone as partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Master of Development Practice.



Advisor Signature

Name: Nina Miller, PhD

Date: August 15, 2024



Faculty Reader Signature

Name: **Catalina Rincon, MAT: Early Childhood Education**

Date: Aug 15, 2024



Program Director

Name: Nina Miller, PhD

Date: August 15, 2024

Unlocking Children's Potential Through Play: Improving Early Childhood Experiences in Nyarufunzo Village

Sereverien Ngarukiye

Master of Development Practice (MDP)

Capstone Project

Regis University, US. Denver Colorado

Date: August 2024

Table of Contents

List of Acronyms	2
Personal Statement	3
Executive Summary	5
Literature Review	6
Introduction to Community and Context	15
Stakeholder Analysis & Strategy	18
Needs Assessment	26
Theory of Change	34
Program Description	37
Evaluation	45
Implementation	49
Reference List	53

List of Acronyms

ECD: Early Childhood Development

ESSP: Education Sector Strategic Plan

MIGEPROF: Ministry of Gender and Family Promotion

NCC: National Commission for Children

NCDA: National Child Development Agency

NESA: National Examination and School Inspection Authority

REB: Rwanda Education Board

RGB: Rwanda Governance Board

TMR: Twigire Mumikino Rwanda/Learning Through Play

ToC: Theory of Change

Unlocking Children's Potential Through Playful Parenting and Play-Based Learning

Personal Statement

The warmth of my three-year-old daughter's laughter echoes the memories of my own childhood in a bustling village. But mine was a story marked by loss – losing my father when I was just 3, my mother when I was 12 and being raised by the family of my elder brother. Despite challenges, laughter and play remain vital threads, woven into the fabric of my survival. Today, as a working parent pursuing a Master of Development Practice, I'm drawn to this "playful parenting" capstone project with a profound intensity.

My experiences shape my identity and fuel my passion for this project. Growing up in a village exposed me to the power of parental support, where play transcended mere amusement, becoming a tool for resilience and connection. However, the play I am talking about here is with fellow young ones in the village. Parenting through play is a child's right, yet it is a luxury for many children. If parents are supportive enough, they will ensure that their children attend school. Losing my mother and father instilled in me a fierce desire to create a nurturing environment for my own daughter, Neria, and to heavily invest in intentional parenting. Witnessing the struggles of single parents, young parents, and especially those from underserved communities, reminds me of the sacrifices my brother made for me.

My journey through the Master in Development Practice has fueled my belief in the transformative power of education and access to resources. The MDP program exposed me to global resources, knowledge, and tools that I can easily adapt to fit the local context. This project aligns perfectly with that belief. By exploring the intricacies of playful parenting, particularly in peri-urban contexts like Nyarufunzo village, I strive to bridge the gap between theory and practice. This isn't

just about academic inquiry; it's about translating knowledge into impactful tools for parents like myself.

Imagine workshops filled with laughter, where parents from diverse backgrounds learn and practice playful strategies to nurture their children's development. Imagine families filled with laughter, where parents and caregivers can easily connect to each other and with children through play. Imagine families filled with joy, where everyone (adults and young ones) is a life-long learner and is curious about discovering the world around them through play. But most of all, imagine communities where parenting and play become more intentional. Picture online resources offering accessible guidance and community support. This is the difference I hope to make as an outcome from this capstone project.

This project is deeply personal – a chance to heal, connect, learn, and offer hope. As a son who found solace in play despite hardship, and as a father determined to create a joyful childhood for my daughter, I yearn to empower others. Through this project, I aim to contribute to a world where playful parenting fosters not just laughter, but resilience, connection, and ultimately, a brighter future for generations to come. This isn't just a capstone project; it's a personal mission, a journey fueled by memories, experiences, and the unwavering belief in the power of play to unlock a child's potential and heal a parent's heart. The echoes of my daughter's laughter are a reminder of the difference we can make, one playful moment at a time.

Executive Summary

From the study conducted in February 2024, 80 parents with children under the age of 6 participated in the research. 68 parents (38 women and 30 men) who participated in the survey live in Kigali city and have a bachelor's degree or beyond. Other 12 parents, 4 men and 7 women, who participated in both focus group discussions and in a survey are parents who live in Nyarufunzo village and have a high school degree or below. This last group of parents has similarities to my village where I was born from where the majority of parents have finished primary school or have never attended school. Limited access to support and playtime were examples of challenges raised from the study. Over 75% of parents surveyed lack access to forums or professional networks for learning or sharing best practices on play-based learning and playful parenting. 50% of parents reported spending less than 30 minutes a day playing with their children, while the remaining 50% engaged in no playtime at all. Hence, this lack of parental engagement in play-based learning, at home and school, limits children's potential in developing numeracy, literacy, and life skills. 'As a solution, I propose a play-based learning and playful parenting program. This program would equip caregivers with the knowledge and skills to engage in playful interactions with their children and assist Early Childhood Development center facilitators in integrating play-based learning activities into their curriculum. By promoting play and fostering positive parent-child interactions, this program aims to create a foundation for optimal learning and development, leading to improved educational outcomes for young children in Nyarufunzo village.

Literature Review

IMAGINE this – you and your child laughing together, sharing moments of pure happiness and laughter. That is the power of playful parenting!

“Children’s brains are built, moment by moment, as they interact with their environments. In the first few years of life, more than one million neural connections are formed each second – a pace never repeated again. The quality of a child’s early experiences makes a critical difference as their brains develop, providing either strong or weak foundations for learning, health and behavior throughout life” UNICEF, (2024).

“Early childhood experiences from birth to age 8 affect the development of the brain’s architecture, which provides the foundation for all future learning, behavior and health. A strong foundation helps children develop the skills they need to become well-functioning adults” (NC Department of Health and Human Services, n.d.).

This literature review focuses on the context of Rwanda, in East Africa. Rwanda is a country situated in Central Africa, bordered to the North by Uganda, to the East by Tanzania, to the South by Burundi and to the West by the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC). Rwanda’s total area is Km² 26,338, with a population density estimated to be 445 people per km². According to a 2022 report by the National Institute of Statistics of Rwanda (NISR, 2022), there are 13.2 million of the population. The GDP per capita was \$787 in 2022 (GoR, 2023).

The education system in Rwanda operates in a structure of 6-3-3-4, respectively Primary, Junior Secondary School (Ordinary Level), Senior Secondary School (Advanced Level), and University Bachelor’s Degree. There are 2 official languages of instruction throughout the Rwandan educational system: Kinyarwanda in primary school (P1-P3) and English from P4 through

University. French and Swahili are taught as an elective or a supplemental subject in public primary and secondary schools. In terms of governance, there is the Ministry of Education which manages Basic Education (pre-primary, primary, and secondary education), Technical and Vocational Training, and Higher Learning Institutions.

Rwanda's approach to Early Childhood Development (ECD) is an integrated framework that links 5 pillars namely education; health; nutrition; WASH; and child/social protection. Only 1% of 3 years old children and under have access to Early Childhood Development (ECD) services (UNICEF Rwanda, 2023). Just 20.8% (13.3% in 2014 and 6.1% in 2010) of children between ages 3 and 6 have opportunities to attend pre-school programmes, day care, or other early learning facilities in 2018 (National Early Childhood Development Program Strategic Plan, 2018-2024). 98% of children in Rwanda are enrolled in primary school where only 71% of them complete their primary education (UNICEF, 2023). It is obvious that the gap between children who enroll and finish primary education is still large. In terms of performance, a research by Save the Children in 2014 found that only 32% of Primary 6 students had attained minimum levels of reading fluency and with 40% of Primary 4 students unable to correctly answer questions about simple texts when it comes to reading comprehension. In 2022, the percentage of pupils responding correctly to at least one reading comprehension question was 74% in 2022 (USAID, 2023).

All of these challenges make approximately a third of young children not reaching their full potential in Rwanda due to limited availability of qualified caregivers, limited physical infrastructure, and insufficient financial resources (UNICEF, 2018).

In 2011, the government of Rwanda launched the National ECD Policy which provided a framework to ensure a holistic and integrated approach to the development of young children across Education, Health, Nutrition, Water and Sanitation, Child and Social Protection to ensure that young children grow in an environment with empowered and supportive families (MININFRA, 2013). The Ministry for Gender and Family (MIGEPROF) was given a mandate of coordinating the implementation of the ECD policy, and the primary responsibility was to harness positive family values and child protection (Early Childhood Development Policy, 2016).

In 2018, the Government of Rwanda included pre-primary education in the Education Sector Strategic Plan (ESSP) of 2018/2019-2023/2024 with the goal to increase pre-primary access from 17.5% in 2016 to 45% in 2024. The Education Sector Strategic Plan included outcomes such as; increase in number of pre-primary centers, increase in number of pre-primary schools that have qualified and salaried staff, and provide community and parental education programs for early learning (ESSP, 2018/2019-2023/2024).

In 2020, the National Child Development Agency (NCDA) was established by merging the former National Commission for Children (NCC) and the National Early Childhood Development Program (NECDP) with the mission to foster development of a child, the promotion and the protection of his or her rights. In the NCAA's mandate comes parenting education and school readiness and transition with a holistic parenting education curriculum for parents and their children (from birth to 3 years and 3 to 6 years. Parenting education, and school readiness and transition is under the NCAA's mandate. The government recognizes the need for a holistic parenting education programme that helps parents learn about positive parenting and how to

develop emergent literacy, stimulation, and socialization skills. The school readiness and transition shall encompass additional six major dimensions including; children's physical well-being and motor development, social and emotional development, cognitive/language development, self-help skills and general knowledge. According to NCDA (n.d.), parents or homes are supposed to be supportive by creating environments that respond proactively to children's learning needs, including promoting early literacy at home and stimulating children to acquire higher cognition abilities through provision of requisite age-appropriate play and learning materials administered right from parenting sessions. This helps children to be ready to start primary school at the age of 5 and 6.

Almost 80% of children between 3-6 years old did not attend preschool, and even if they enroll in primary school, there was a repetition rate of 20.5% in 2018 (NECDP Strategic Plan, 2018-2024). The UNESCO defines repetition rate as a proportion of pupils from a cohort enrolled in a given grade at a given school year who study in the same grade in the following school year. This is in addition to the low number of qualified teachers and lack of better incentives. While there is also a lack of awareness about ECD services among multiple stakeholders including families, the services are unsustainable due to limitation of financial resources and this is more problematic in rural areas (NECDP Strategic Plan, 2018-2024).

According to Rwanda Parliament (2023), the children's dropout rate in primary school was 9.5% in 2020/2021 from 7.8% in 2019. "Some of the reasons for this rise in dropout rates include but are not limited to family conflicts, poverty, and a poor mindset given primary and secondary education is subsidized" the report said. Repetition rates for children were the highest in Primary

1 (24.5% in 2017), and this is associated with low level of school readiness in terms of literacy, numeracy, and socio-emotional development (Laterite Rwanda, 2019). The report by Laterite highlights the connection between low levels of parental education to children's low performance and high repetition rates in school (Laterite Rwanda, 2019). This report highlights the delay in starting school as a contributing factor to school-drop-out rates. Delayed start to education explains ~95% of out-of-school cases for children between the ages of 7-9 (Laterite Rwanda, 2019). All of these show the importance of starting education at a younger age and ensuring the best experiences for the young ones who are entering school.

In 2023 alone, nearly 800,000 children – 38 per cent – under the age of 5 were stunted, preventing them from reaching their full potential in cognitive, motor, language and socio-emotional skills (UNICEF Rwanda, 2023). According to the National Early Childhood Development Policy in Rwanda (2021), 48.8% of the population live below the poverty line and although many children now survive, they still face multiple risks that prevent them from developing their full physical, sensory-motor, cognitive-language, and social-emotional potential with long term detrimental implications for human capital formation. The World Bank defines human capital as a set of knowledge, skills, and health that people invest in and accumulate throughout their lives, enabling them to realize their potential as productive members of society. This speaks to economic value or return on investing in quality education at a young age. Research shows that early learning initiatives have provided total benefits to society, including reduced crime, lower anti-poverty transfers, and educational savings of up to \$8.60 over a child's lifetime for every \$1 spent and long-term analyses suggest that early childhood education can increase earnings in adulthood by

1.3 to 3.5 percent (The Executive Office of the President of the United States, 2014). This shows the need to invest in early childhood education programs.

Deficit in Early Childhood Education is not only a responsibility for the government of Rwanda but also for parents. There are parents who are not actively engaged in their children's learning at home as a way to prepare their children for school. Only 1 in 5 parents in Rwanda are engaged in activities that support early learning at home, such as reading or playing games with their child, and men are particularly disengaged with early learning and nurturing activities at home (UNICEF Rwanda, 2023). UNICEF also points out that more than half of children under age 2 are victims of violent discipline, and more than half of young children are left home alone during the day or in the care of an older sibling. In their research, authors Ming-Te and Salama (2014) argue that low-income parents tend to be less involved in their children's education despite holding equally high aspirations for their children in school and in life. Authors added that parents lack confidence, competencies, time and resources to facilitate play and children's education. Rural children, children from poorer quintiles, and children whose mothers have had less education are much less likely to attend any organized programme or facility.” UNICEF, 2018).

In schools, emerging evidence suggests that play-based learning approaches can transform the educational experiences of children in primary grades and strengthen learning motivation and outcomes. In collaboration with the LEGO Foundation, the Ministry of Education has been working with five partners (UNICEF, VSO, VVOB, Right to Play and Purpose) to support play-based learning pedagogical approaches and practices as a key driver for improving learning outcomes for children. In June, 2023, the Ministry of Education in Rwanda launched a call for proposal for a development of a Learning through Play Strategy for Rwandan basic Education

(UNICEF, 2023). The strategy will guide the institutionalization of learning through play as a key pedagogical approach for delivering the competence-based curriculum for basic education where teachers shift from traditional methods of instructions to participatory and interactive methods that allow active involvement by learners in groups and as individuals. Through VVOB's IT's PLAY (Improving Teaching Skills on Playful Learning for Africa's Youngest (IT'S PLAY) project, they started implementation in two districts, Muhanga and Gicumbi, starting in 2021 and expanded to Rwamagana and Karongi in 2023 (VVOB, 2023). The project focuses on strengthening teachers and school leaders' skills to facilitate Learning through Play for emergent numeracy. Twigire Mumikino Rwanda (TMR), or 'Let's Learn Through Play', is another project by VSO that is running in 30 districts in Rwanda from 2021 to 2025 to support children between 3-6 years old. However, another research shows that children of parents who treat play as valuable are more likely to have higher cognitive abilities, better social skills, and show greater independence (Lin & Yawkey, 2014; Parker et al., 1999). So play should not be something that merely happens at school. "Through play, parents can gain valuable insights into their child's preferences, interests, and developmental milestones. So when parents actively participate in play-based activities, they send a powerful message that learning is enjoyable and worth investing time in." _ (All Hallows School, 2024).

Play has a lot of benefits for children and helps children in many different forms of life. It helps children to develop intellectually, socially, emotionally, and physically (Leah, 2018). Children who regularly play outdoors tend to be fitter and leaner, develop stronger immune systems, play more creatively, have more active imaginations, report lower stress levels, and demonstrate greater respect for themselves and others (Fjørtoft 2004; Burdette & Whitaker 2005). When young

children have access to play spaces designed with intentionality they can increase their physical activity (Bower et al. 2008; Brown et al. 2009). Exercise play may also contribute to children's emotion knowledge by increasing their awareness of the physiological origins of emotions as children observe the links between their own elevated heart rate and excitement levels (Smith, 2010). Intentionality is a key word here, and speaks to why children should play, how they should play, where to play and with whom to play. Lev Vygotsky also adds that when children play, they behave beyond their average age, above their daily behavior, and taller than themselves and that play should focus on the process rather than outcomes (Pamela, 2012).

Research finds that playful learning fosters the transferable skills – collaboration, communication, content, critical thinking, creative innovation, and confidence (termed the 6Cs by Golinkoff & Hirsh-Pasek, 2016) – that researchers, educators, and employers say are crucial for success in the 21st century (Golinkoff & Hirsh-Pasek, 2016; Hirsh-Pasek et al., 2020; Darling-Hammond et al., 2020).

Play is not only beneficial to children but also to parents. “Science has shown that when parents play with their child, the hormone, oxytocin, is released. Oxytocin is associated with trust and relationship building. Another benefit of oxytocin is that it counteracts the effects of stress, reducing blood pressure, anxiety, and fear” (Utah State University, n.d.). Play naturally promotes positive parent–child interaction and helps build a strong parent–child bond (Milteer et al., 2012). Parents around the world report that playing with their child makes them feel more energized, creative and relaxed, as well as closer to their child (LEGO, 2018). It is no surprise that parent–child play can lead to reductions in parent stress (Cates et al., 2016; Weisleder et al., 2019). Therefore, play seems to be a win-win for both a parent and their children.

There are different criteria to look at to be able to tell if an activity can be described as play. Leah Shafer (2018), who leads communications strategy at diversitydatakids.org and the Institute for Child, Youth and Family Policy at the Heller School for Social Policy and Management at Brandeis University, argues that an activity is described as a play if it meets three criteria, **choice**, **wonder**, and **delight**. Children should be able to set their own goals, develop and share ideas, make rules, negotiate challenges and decide how long to play. They should also be able to explore, create, pretend, imagine, and learn from trials and errors which show a sense of wonder. The author also adds that children should also be happy: smiling, laughing, being silly, or generally feeling cozy and at ease. Another author, John Dewey, an American philosopher and psychologist, also said that ‘play’ should involve activities that are **enjoyable**, performed at their **own sake**, and with **no end result in mind**, that action/activity itself is learning (Pamela, 2012). He added that a child does not get hold of an idea until he has done it; he acts the idea out before he takes it in. The author also quoted Sandra Smidt who said that “all play is purposeful for the child, in that children follow their own ideas and their own interests in their own way for their own reasons.” All authors agree that a playful environment should let children make decisions, explore, learn, and play on their own which in return brings pleasure to them. However, some parents find rough play as one of the negative consequences of play as it could lead to injuries, but they agree that it could be an advantage for children by offering a lifetime lesson (Rogers State University USA, 2022). So it is important for parents to give a space for children to play independently while at the same time ensuring their safety as they play. High Scope Education Research, Waldorf Education, Reggio Emilia, and LEGO foundations are all known for their play-based approach in supporting children's learning process.

“Parenting through play can be super fun and support your child’s holistic development. When your child is engaged in play, their curiosity is sparked, and their creativity grows. Through play-based activities at home like building blocks, pretend play, and solving puzzles together, your child develops critical thinking skills, language skill, and a love for learning that lasts a lifetime” (UNICEF, 2024).

Introduction to Community and Context

Rwanda, a nation rising from the ashes of its tragic past, presents a unique and evolving landscape of parenthood. This section delves into the heart of the Nyarufunzo village, a peri-urban area Kigali city, to understand the playful parenting practices, challenges, and aspirations. Nyarufunzo is one of the cells of Mageragere Sector in Nyarugenge District of Kigali City. By weaving together government data, NGO reports, sociological studies, and firsthand observations, I paint a detailed picture of the social, cultural, economic, and historical factors shaping the lives of parents and children in this vibrant community. Nyarufunzo village reflects Rwanda’s diverse and larger community of Rwandans. Traditional Rwandan society emphasized strong family structures, with elders playing a significant role in raising their children. However, rapid urbanization and changing social norms have challenged these traditional practices. Parents are navigating a complex blend of cultural values, modern influences, and limited resources.

The latest study done by the Positive Discipline programme reveals that 56 per cent of teachers in Rwanda practiced physical punishment through either slapping (at 66 per cent) or hitting with objects (68 per cent) _The New Times (2015). “Children’s rights should be respected. It is the responsibility of both parents and teachers to use positive discipline approaches when children

do wrong so that they feel free and comfortable to express their feelings about such a fault,” Claudine Uwera Kanyamanza, the executive secretary of the National Children Commission (NCC) said. In Rwanda, schools that advocate for corporal punishment experience increased aggressive and destructive behavior, vandalism, inadequate learning achievement, weak attention span, increased drop-out rate, school avoidance and phobia, low self esteem, anxiety and retaliation against teachers, (Ogando et al., 2015). On the parents’ side, Pontalti (2013) reported that on average, 48% of Rwandan children received physical punishment in schools, while 58% of boys and 66% girls had been kicked and punched by adults in homes, threatened by parents and slapped. These punishments can be reduced or eliminated if parents and teachers are aware of the negative impacts of corporal punishments to children towards their success at school and in life.

The economy in Nyarufunzo village primarily relies on casual work and heavy duties. While poverty rates have decreased nationally, many families in Nyarufunzo village still struggle to meet their basic needs. This economic hardship often translates into limited access to quality education, healthcare, and essential resources for children. The pressure to contribute to household income can also place additional burdens on children, potentially hindering their development and educational opportunities. Stunted growth in children is an example of an issue associated with poverty.

The 1994 genocide against the Tutsi left deep scars on Rwandan society, impacting parenting practices in profound ways. Many parents lost loved ones, experienced trauma, and face ongoing challenges related to mental health and social cohesion. A counselor noted that many children who have experienced the Genocide against the Tutsi tragedy are not mentally stable because growing up as an orphan itself is miserable, since in most cases you grow up lacking proper

parental guidance (Donah, 2019). Addressing these historical wounds and fostering a supportive environment for healing is crucial for creating a nurturing environment for future generations.

Engaging in conversations with local parents in Nyarufunzo Village, several key themes emerge. First, parents have a strong desire for positive parenting; parents express a deep love for their children and a genuine desire to raise them well. However, they often lack access to knowledge and resources on effective parenting strategies and managing their children's discipline. There is limited access to professional guidance on child development and parenting skills. Even if they have access to meet professionals, it is that training that comes once in a year or 2 years. Second, parents also face the clash between traditional practices and modern, which create confusion and challenges for parents when exercising their parenting role and responsibility. For instance, parents are likely to share smartphones with their kids to watch YouTube videos or play other games, but this practice is not intentional and parents may not necessarily know what it is to show to kids. "A phone keeps a child busy, and you can at least be able to relax or be able to do some housework", one parent mentioned during a focus group discussion. Last but not least, parents' struggle to meet basic needs can lead to neglect, harsh discipline, and child labor, impacting children's physical and emotional well-being. This is no different from a village where I grew up, for every mistake you make as a kid, a stick and insults are waiting for you.

Understanding the Nyarufunzo village through the lens of parenting reveals a complex interplay of social, cultural, economic, and historical factors. While challenges exist, the community's inherent strengths, such as strong family values and a desire for helping children thrive, offer a great starting point for playful parenting interventions. At least someone willing to support these parents would not be starting from scratch, at least the thirst to raise their children well. By addressing the specific needs and aspirations of parents from Nyarufunzo village, we can

empower them to raise healthy, resilient, and thriving children, contributing to a brighter future for the entire community and the country at large.

Through this comprehensive understanding of Nyarufunzo village, which is similar to many other peri-urban and rural communities I aim to serve, I can identify key needs for our playful parenting program. First, raising awareness by educating parents on the benefits of play in early childhood development and promoting playful parenting practices. Second, building capacity by providing parents with practical tools and strategies to integrate playful activities into their daily routines, even with limited resources and using locally available materials. Third, addressing cultural considerations by ensuring the parents program respects and is built upon existing cultural values while introducing new concepts like playful parenting. Last but not least, fostering community support where parents can learn from each other and be able to share best practices and experiences.

Stakeholder Analysis & Strategy

Playful Parenting Program (3Ps) in Nyarufunzo Village

A successful playful parenting program in Rwanda requires careful consideration of various stakeholders and their potential roles, interests, and influence. This analysis focuses on parents with children under six, the primary beneficiaries of the program.

Parents Persona:

- A mother, father, or a caregiver responsible for a child (children) of 6 years old or below.
- Education: Parents with either no formal, primary or secondary education
- Parents who do not believe in playful parenting or are not sure about how to use play in their parenting style.



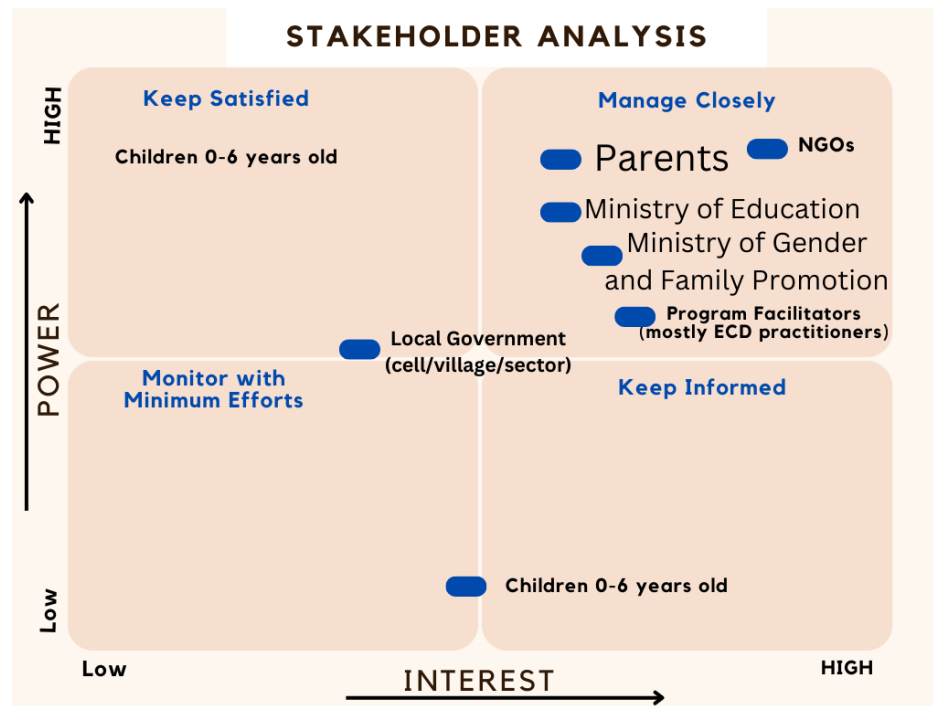
Stakeholder Group	Relationship to Project	Incentives, Motivations, Risks	How to Engage
Parents of Children between 0-6 years (direct beneficiaries)	<u>Direct and Primary Beneficiaries:</u> -Bring their children to the playing center (one in a village) -Participate in bi-weekly meetings (6 months program) to learn and share best practices and experiences _around playful parenting. -Participate in the design and monitoring of the project's impact to children and parents, plus sharing feedback on activities.	-Transformative learning experiences (action-based/play-based)/Active participation and engaging activities (prioritizing parents' voices) -Fun activities with their kids or fellow parents -"You can do it" attitude. Risks/Threats: -Unqualified staff to translate curriculum	-Co-design, problem-solve together, build a relationship, space to freely share ideas and contributions. -Advocate for the program within their communities and encourage other parents to participate. Parents' peer visits and feedback exchange.

		(English to Kinyarwanda) -The program may get expensive -Parents may be reluctant to send children to the ECD centers alone or attend bi-weekly meetings. -Cultural practices that may not prioritize play. -Lack of confidence or motivation to adopt new playful parenting approaches.	-Provide valuable feedback for program improvement and adaptation.
Children 0-6 years old (indirect beneficiaries)	<u>Ultimate Beneficiaries:</u> -Use toys and play games at a play center in the village. -Participate in playful activities at home or at a play center in the village.	-Experience positive upbringing of playful parenting on their development. Risks: -Lack of a safe environment to play or someone to talk to when they have a challenge. -Poor implementation of children and safeguarding policy.	-Engage in playful events at home with parents and at school with their teachers.
Program Facilitators	-Engage parents and children in playful	-Community support (sense of importance)!	-Co-design, problem-solve together, provide

<p>(mostly ECD practitioners)</p>	<p>activities.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Conduct workshops with parents on playful parenting. -Lead and monitor activities (plays and programs) at the play center and conduct impact assessment. 	<p>Risks/Threats:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Burden of additional responsibilities to train parents and adapt curriculum. -Require lots of training and cost implications -Dynamics and conflicts between teachers and parents regarding authority over children. -They may need to have special certifications, which can make it hard to find them. 	<p>ownership (as long as they leverage human-centered design)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Take facilitator's role in workshops with parents and playful activities -Participate in the design, implementation, and evaluation of the playful parenting program. -Participate in bi-weekly professional development training.
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<p>The Ministry of Gender and Family Promotion (MIGEPROF) and the Ministry of Education (MINEDUC).</p>	<p><u>Secondary Stakeholders:</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Policy-makers nationally/country coordination of ECD programs. -Provide requirements and set standards -Approve Playful Parenting Program and its components. -Overseeing EDCs, curriculum, resources, 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Benefits from research of a test-model/parental engagement. -A model-program that is scalable nationally. -Increase in access in ECD programs/low rates of school dropouts and repetitions. <p>Risks/Threats:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Monitoring and evaluating the program may feel as an additional task for them. -May require special certifications for facilitators in the Playful Parenting Program. -May require special types of infrastructure that meets children's safety standards. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Provide overall advising and support -Share resources regarding play-based education and children's holistic support. -Connect us with other partners in ECDs. -Keep informed and updated -Build and maintain good relationships. -Following policies and fulfilling their mandate
<p>NGOs -LEGO/Right to Play/VSO/Kina Rwanda/Igikuriro/UNICEF, Save the Children</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Provide expertise, experience, and research in children's play and playful parenting. -Borrow games, plays, and resources (training, etc.) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Interests in making a larger impact. -Co-researching and designing, and training where necessary. -Provide funding (i.e. LEGO) to play centers. <p>Risks:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> -New tasks due to an additional program to 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Provide feedback and in-puts when designing programs and activities -Provides advocacy efforts through ECDs, schools, and parents programs.

		visit and check on how activities are running.	
Local Government (Village/Cell/Sector Leaders)	-Mobilizing the community regarding the Playful Parenting Program in the villages/influencing community acceptance and participation.	-Recognition on their efforts to support the Playful Parenting Program. -Helping in sensitizing fathers in attending playful events. Risks: -Additional tasks to assess and monitor the quality, plus review of reporting from the new established program.	-Keep informed and updated -Advocacy to upper levels (sector, district level, and beyond). -Help in mobilizing the community and providing program logistics/facilities.
Donors/Funders	-Provide funding and resources to the Playful Parenting Program -Advocacy, advice, research	-Scaling impact _increased access! -Community ownership (by parents and teachers through communities of practice. -Interests in improved children's performance -Low-cost/resource programs Risks/Threats: -Wanting to control/influence or direct the programming/vision of the organization.	-Provide funding and resources to the program



From the graph, there are different stakeholders with different levels of power and interest. Parents, the Ministry of Education, Ministry of Gender and Family Promotion, and Program Facilitators are the main stakeholders to manage closely since they have high interests and power in the work we will be doing for parents and their children. The local government (Cell/Village/Sector) are also important stakeholders to keep informed since they have fair interests and power into our programming. For children, they need to be satisfied with their learning outcomes and love towards learning. Children are psychologically safe to play with and seek support from teachers and parents.

Needs Assessment

In an effort to explore the current landscape for playful parenting in the peri-urban area in Rwanda, this needs assessment employed a mixed-methods approach. A quantitative survey was administered to 68 participants, providing a broad overview of attitudes and practices in Rwanda for the educated parents. To delve deeper into the lived experiences of parents, a focus group discussion and a survey were conducted with 12 parents from Nyarufunzo village, a peri-urban area, which represents a village that I grew up in. This combined approach aimed to gain a comprehensive understanding of how parents in Rwanda experience raising children under the age of 6 years, and how play fits into their lives. The research aimed at finding where parents get support in their journey to raise their children, play-based experience with their children, and resources that are available to them.

Method:

In order to get the context of parents who are educated, a survey was randomly released into a WhatsApp group and 68 people in Kigali completed it. One main criteria to choose the platform was that at least these people have a bachelor's degree or beyond. My assumption was that “educated parents set the standards for effective playful parenting and play-based learning”, and this can be as a baseline for my research. I thought the educated people can be model parents in terms of playful parenting and play-based learning. From the same group, 62% of the parents did not have a regular or consistent play-time with their children. This also shows the need for these parents to prioritize play with their children in a more consistent way. 75% of these parents did not belong to any professional group that shares best practices on playful parenting. The majority of them get parenting tips from the internet, their friends, and relatives. This these findings, I therefore proceeded to conduct a survey and focus group discussions with parents in Nyarufunzo Village, which represents

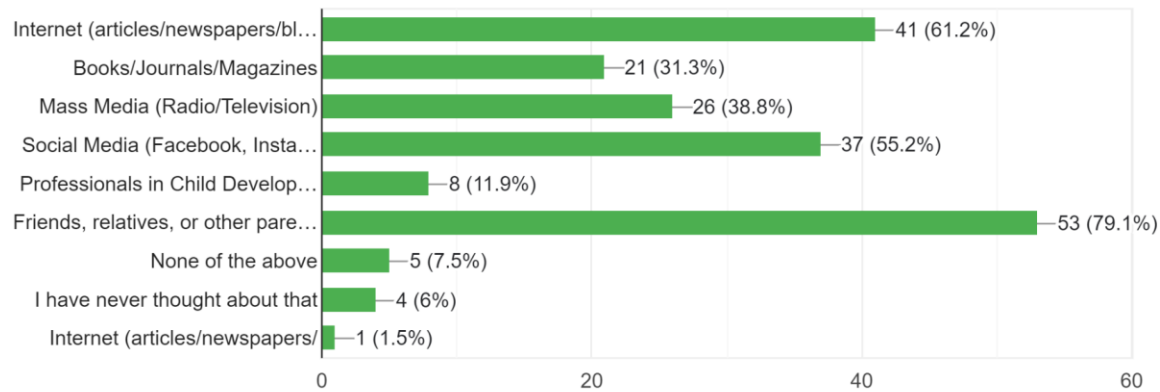
my native village. The village has a mix of parents with diverse education backgrounds. In addition, I conducted an interview and a focus group discussion with 12 parents from Nyarufunzo village. Of 12 parents, 5 of them had secondary education, 5 with primary education and 2 with no formal education at all. Four men and 7 women were able to voluntarily participate in the discussion and had given their verbal consent. All parents who participated in this research had children, or a child, below 6 years old.

Results:

Majority of random participants who completed the survey were women (38/68) and only 29/68 men. Whether this gender difference demonstrates how women are more interested in parenting topics remains something to learn more. Of 68 parents, 47 and 19 of them had a bachelor's degree and a master's degree respectively. 43 parents lived in Kigali, which is the capital city of Rwanda. During the survey, 75% (50) of parents mentioned that they don't belong to any parents' forum or a professional network that discusses and shares best practices on parenting topics. 79% (53) of the parents mentioned that they get parenting support and advice from their friends, parents, or relatives. Only 11% percent of parents mentioned that they get support from professionals in child development.

Where do you often get parenting tips/advice or support?

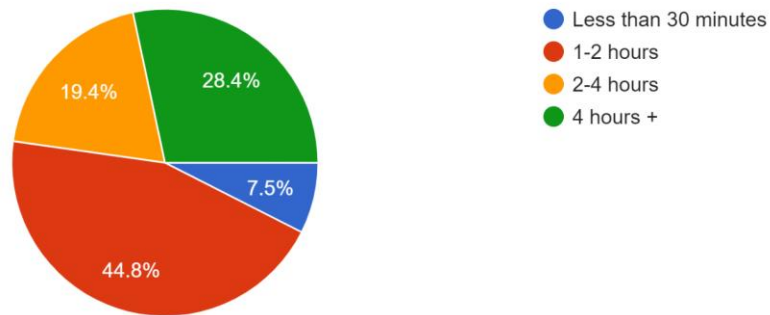
67 responses



In general, parents spare some time to play with their children. For instance, 44.8% of parents had taken 1-2 hours of play with their children in the previous week. Regarding whether these parents had consistent or regular play-time, only 38.5% mentioned that they play with their children on a regular basis. Of 12 parents, half of them their children were attending ECDs in nursery 3 whereby the remaining half their children were in either nursery 1 or 2.

How much time in total did you spend playing with your child throughout this past week?

67 responses



Nyarufunzo Village, Results from the Survey

From Nyarufunzo village, 12 parents (5 men and 7 women) completed the survey and they also participated in a focus group discussion. 5 parents had completed secondary education, 5 had completed primary education, and 2 of them didn't have any schooling. Of the 12 parents none of them either belonged to a parents forum or program that discusses and shares best practices about parenting topics, nor has attained university. 100% of parents mentioned that they set aside time to discuss with their partners or spouses about raising their children but they don't do it regularly. In regards to the amount of time parents had taken in the previous week to play with their children, 50% of parents had taken less than 30 minutes to play with their children while another 50% of parents didn't take any time at all.

The following data summarize the level of priority parents give to different tasks related to play.

<p>Engaging my child in structured play with me or my partner at home or outside.</p> <table><tr><th></th><th>Frequency</th><th>Percentage</th></tr><tr><td>5-High Priority</td><td>1</td><td>8%</td></tr><tr><td>4</td><td>3</td><td>25%</td></tr><tr><td>3</td><td>5</td><td>42%</td></tr><tr><td>2</td><td>2</td><td>17%</td></tr><tr><td>1-No Priority</td><td>1</td><td>8%</td></tr><tr><td>Total</td><td>12</td><td>100%</td></tr></table>		Frequency	Percentage	5-High Priority	1	8%	4	3	25%	3	5	42%	2	2	17%	1-No Priority	1	8%	Total	12	100%	<p>Encouraging my child to play with relatives of the same age (siblings, cousins, etc.).</p> <table><tr><th></th><th>Frequency</th><th>Percentage</th></tr><tr><td>5-High Priority</td><td>4</td><td>33%</td></tr><tr><td>4</td><td>3</td><td>25%</td></tr><tr><td>3</td><td>1</td><td>8%</td></tr><tr><td>2</td><td>4</td><td>33%</td></tr><tr><td>1-No Priority</td><td></td><td>0%</td></tr><tr><td>Total</td><td>12</td><td>100%</td></tr></table>		Frequency	Percentage	5-High Priority	4	33%	4	3	25%	3	1	8%	2	4	33%	1-No Priority		0%	Total	12	100%
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<p>Helping my child to develop and build friendship through play with other kids outside home.</p> <table><tr><th></th><th>Frequency</th><th>Percentage</th></tr><tr><td>5-High Priority</td><td>2</td><td>18%</td></tr><tr><td>4</td><td>1</td><td>9%</td></tr><tr><td>3</td><td>3</td><td>27%</td></tr></table>		Frequency	Percentage	5-High Priority	2	18%	4	1	9%	3	3	27%	<p>Finding toys and games for my child to play at home.</p> <table><tr><th></th><th>Frequency</th><th>Percentage</th></tr><tr><td>5-High Priority</td><td>8</td><td>67%</td></tr><tr><td>4</td><td>1</td><td>8%</td></tr><tr><td>3</td><td>2</td><td>17%</td></tr><tr><td>2</td><td>1</td><td>8%</td></tr></table>		Frequency	Percentage	5-High Priority	8	67%	4	1	8%	3	2	17%	2	1	8%															
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<div>Using play to help my child learn (literacy, numeracy, culture, etc.)</div> <div> <div>Frequency</div> <div>Percentage</div> </div> <div> <div>5-High Priority</div> <div>8</div> <div>67%</div> </div> <div> <div>4</div> <div>1</div> <div>8%</div> </div> <div> <div>3</div> <div>1</div> <div>8%</div> </div> <div> <div>2</div> <div>1</div> <div>8%</div> </div> <div> <div>1-No Priority</div> <div>1</div> <div>8%</div> </div> <div> <div>Total</div> <div>12</div> <div>100%</div> </div>	<div>Attending my child's games or fun activities in which they are participating.</div> <div> <div>Frequency</div> <div>Percentage</div> </div> <div> <div>5-High Priority</div> <div>4</div> <div>33%</div> </div> <div> <div>4</div> <div>1</div> <div>8%</div> </div> <div> <div>3</div> <div>2</div> <div>17%</div> </div> <div> <div>2</div> <div>3</div> <div>25%</div> </div> <div> <div>1-No Priority</div> <div>2</div> <div>17%</div> </div> <div> <div>Total</div> <div>12</div> <div>100%</div> </div>
<div>Providing my child with freedom to play independently, self-select their play activities and partners.</div> <div> <div>Frequency</div> <div>Percentage</div> </div> <div> <div>5-High Priority</div> <div>6</div> <div>50%</div> </div> <div> <div>4</div> <div>2</div> <div>17%</div> </div>	<div>Taking my child out for play-based experiences and activities (recreation centers, ...).</div> <div> <div>Frequency</div> <div>Percentage</div> </div> <div> <div>5-High Priority</div> <div></div> <div>0%</div> </div> <div> <div>4</div> <div></div> <div>0%</div> </div> <div> <div>3</div> <div>1</div> <div>10%</div> </div>

30%			20%		
2	1	8%	1-No Priority	9	90%
1-No Priority	3	25%	Total	10	100%
Total	12	100%			
<hr/>			<hr/>		
Helping my child learn through play on technology (TV, phone, etc.)					
<hr/>					
Frequency			Percentage		
<hr/>					
5-High					
Priority	10	83%			
4		0%			
3	2	17%			
2		0%			
1-No Priority		0%			
Total	12	100%			
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Nyarufunzo Village, Results from the Focus Group Discussions

Parents overwhelmingly emphasize the importance of playful parenting, acknowledging its significant role in fostering strong parent-child bonds. During focus group discussions, parents enthusiastically shared their experiences and perspectives. A recurring theme was the increased openness and trust nurtured through playful interactions. Parents highlighted how play creates a safe space for children to express themselves freely, leading to deeper emotional connections. Furthermore, parents recognized the positive impact of play on children's well-being. Phrases like "play increases their hope" and "they become happy" echoed throughout the discussions, underscoring the emotional benefits of playful parenting. One parent eloquently summarized the collective sentiment: "Play makes children expand their thinking and they become happy." This statement encapsulates the power of play in stimulating intellectual growth and fostering joy, simultaneously strengthening the parent-child bond.

When asked about their roles during play, parents overwhelmingly emphasized ensuring their children's safety as the top priority. This sentiment was echoed by various parents, like one who stated, "You have to make sure your child doesn't destroy something and nothing can cause an accident or harm." This highlights the parents' instinctive need to create a safe environment for their children to explore the world through play. Children's safety will be part of the proposed ECD program. Beyond safeguarding, parents also acknowledged their role in helping children understand the meaning behind their play. They expressed a desire to guide their children, as another parent mentioned, "you have to help your child understand what they are playing." However, a gap emerged regarding the specific types of explanations they provided. Many parents were unsure about the level of detail to offer, whether it be explaining the importance of the game, the rules of play, or the deeper symbolic meaning behind their child's actions. This suggests a potential need for additional support or resources to equip parents with various approaches to fostering understanding

during play. When it comes to play-based learning, parents have to know the types of skills children develop through play before they get to know how they can be involved in play.

Parents enthusiastically embraced the idea of utilizing readily available materials for play, highlighting the importance of resourcefulness and fostering creativity in their children. Common household items like rope, plastic cups, balls, and beans were identified as valuable tools for learning through play. Parents even shared examples, like using beans for counting activities, demonstrating how everyday items can transform into educational aids. This approach not only promotes affordable play but also encourages parental involvement. Interestingly, while acknowledging financial limitations on buying toys, some parents still held beliefs about gender-specific play tools. However, by incorporating readily available materials, parents can actively participate in their child's learning journey, fostering closer bonds during playtime, regardless of perceived gender limitations.

From the data and observations, parents need a platform where they learn and become aware of playful parenting, also a place where they can ask questions about challenges they face in their parenting journey. Even those who have an idea of playing with their children, they miss the point of types of competencies developed through play.

Theory of Change

The theory of change for the play-based learning and playful parenting in Nyarufunzo Village is based on the premise that play will unlock children's potential hence becoming resilient, agile, life-long learners and responsible citizens.

This program empowers both parents and Early Childhood Development (ECD) facilitators to unlock the magic of play in their interactions with young children. We recognize that play is not just

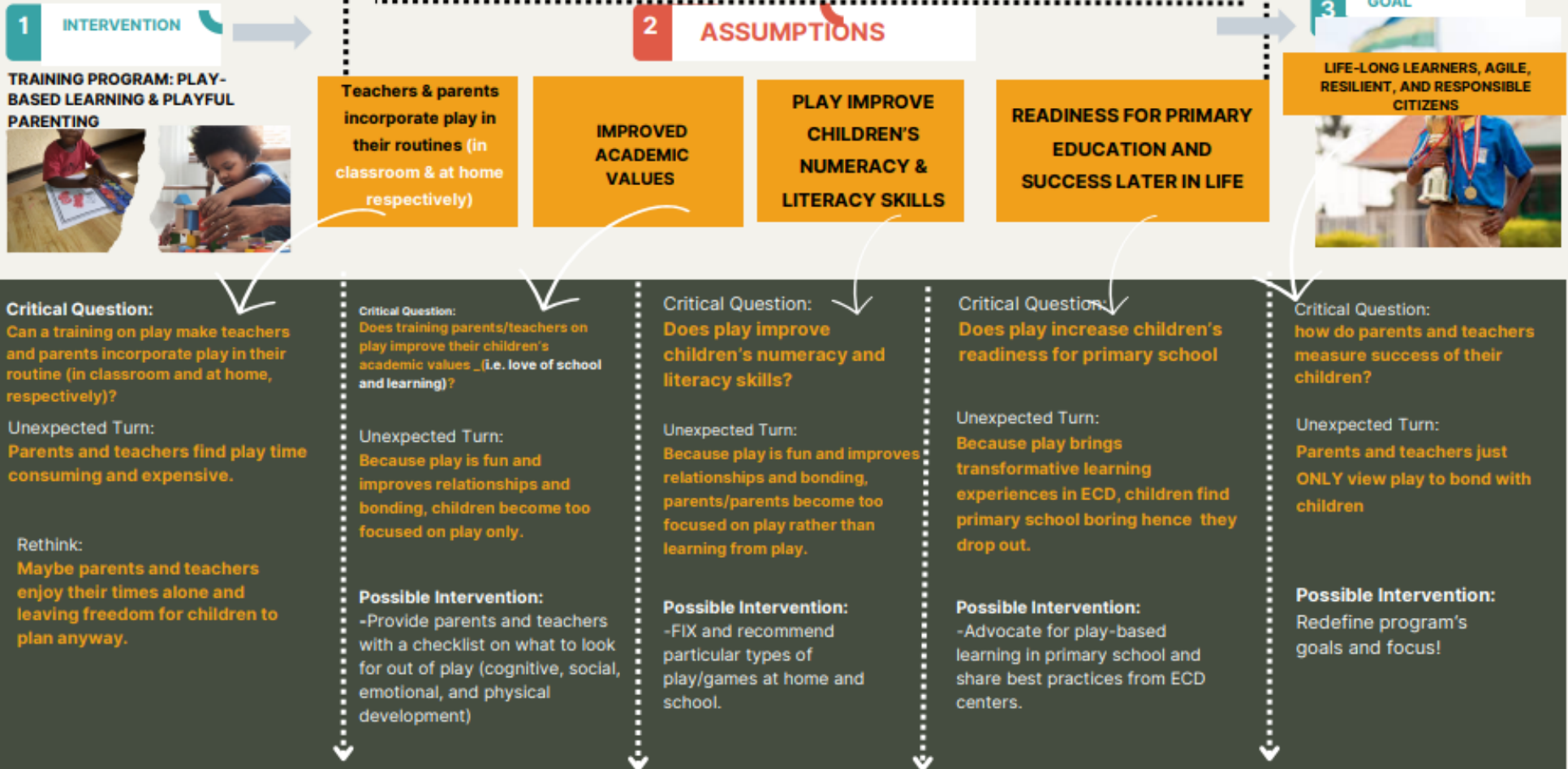
fun - it's essential for a child's healthy development. Our program equips parents and ECD facilitators with the resources, skills, and support needed to seamlessly integrate play into daily routines and nurture a love of learning through play.

For ECD facilitators, our program will deepen their understanding of play's role in fostering children's cognitive, social, emotional, and physical development. ECD facilitators will participate in to the program's six months professional development workshops with topics such as; using play to build numeracy and literacy skills, choosing age appropriate games and toys that stimulate learning, creating a safe and stimulating play space within classrooms and at school, measuring success of play-based learning, etc. The professional development workshops will also be a space for ECD facilitators to reflect, share best practices, and troubleshoot challenges related to play-based learning.

For parents and caregivers, our program will also deepen their understanding of play's role in fostering children's social, cognitive, emotional, and physical development. Parents will participate in bi-weekly Sunday sessions that cover topics such as; discovering the incredible benefits of play for their children's development, choosing age-appropriate games and activities for their children, creating safe and stimulating spaces at home, etc. Parents will receive support from ECD facilitators who spend more time with kids at school. Both parents and ECD facilitators will share their observations regarding children's development and growth.

In a few words, this program recognizes the critical roles that both parents and ECD facilitators play in a child's life. Through our workshops, we aim to create a collaborative learning environment where parents and educators can exchange ideas, build a shared understanding of the importance of play, and work together to nurture the well-being and love of learning in young children.

Theory of Change (ToC): Playful Parenting and Play-Based Learning Program



Program Description

Goals and Objectives of the Play-Based Learning (PBL) and Playful Parenting Program (PPP)

The following is ONE main goal and its 3 main objectives address both the need for increased implementation of play-based learning in Early Children Development programs and the encouragement of playful parenting practices at home, creating a comprehensive approach to enhancing the learning experiences of young children of six years old and below.

While co-creation with parents, caregivers, and ECD facilitators is crucial, the organization will also seek additional support from stakeholders invested in early childhood development. To ensure program and product quality, we'll establish a dedicated non-government organization registered with the Rwanda Development Board (RDB) and Rwanda Governance Board (RGB) by the end of 2024. This organization will spearhead the development and coordination of our playful parenting and play-based learning product aimed at parents and caregivers of 6-year-olds, while fostering strong partnerships with ECD centers.

Initially, the organization will consist of 2 co-founders, a Program Manager, and a Finance and Logistics Manager who bring different skill sets to the organization. First of all, I will co-found the organization with my colleague, Jeanne Mukangenzi, who graduated with a Master's of Education with focus on Child Study and Early Education from the University of Massachusetts Amherst under the Fulbright Scholarship. Jeanne brings a lot of experience as a teacher in secondary to tertiary education in Rwanda. Her current academic background in education both in Rwanda and in the U.S. is an added value to the team and the programs we intend to launch.

As a co-founder, I also bring more than 7 years in teaching in Rwanda and humanitarian contexts, plus supporting TVET graduates with soft and job readiness skills they need to secure and thrive in their employment. In addition to that, I also bring extensive experience as a learning experiences designer for both secondary and tertiary education in Rwanda and Ethiopia. All of these experiences are also useful assets to the programs within the co-found organization.

At the start, we will also hire a Program Manager who will be responsible to lead the program and coordinate training. The program manager will be able to lead different community outreach and conduct learning sessions with our end-users (parents and facilitators at ECD centers). The program managers will bring project management, partnerships, and experience in the education sector in Rwanda.

Finally, we will hire a Finance and Logistics Manager who will be in charge of coordinating logistics and operations of the organization in its foundation. The Finance and Logistics Manager will bring budgeting, transactions recording, procurement, and reporting skills all of which will be useful at the early stage of the organization.

Goal: __ to improve learning experiences of 200 young children (6 years old and below) through play-based learning and playful parenting by 20 well-equipped facilitators and 150 caregivers, including parents within 2 years. Both facilitators and caregivers or parents are all from the same community. Parents or caregivers with a child at the ECD center will be invited to participate in the program, but this is definitely optional for parents and caregivers.

1. Objective #1: Increase the Use of Play-Based Learning in 5 Early Childhood Development (ECD) Centers.

- a. **Objective 1.1:** Collaborate with 5 ECDs centers facilities to create stimulating and age-appropriate learning environments that encourage exploration, discovery, and imaginative play by December 2025. This involves renovating classrooms and compound space, arranging furniture in classrooms, and creating designated areas for specific activities (building, workshop area, reading, dramatic play, sports area,), and incorporating natural elements such as gardens. The space will be designed in a way it conforms to real-life careers such as farming, construction, gardening, medicines, trading, etc.
 - b. **Objective 1.2:** By December 2025, we will have provided resources and support to 5 ECDs centers to integrate play-based learning activities into their competency-based curriculum. Among resources we will provide include but not limited to revised curriculum that incorporates games in it and physical games that encourage language acquisition, fine and gross motor development, imaginative play, etc. The organization will support in creating a play-based learning guide (booklet) for facilitators with a clear alignment on the CBC and types of skills children are supposed to learn, plus assessments to measure learning and progress.
2. **Objective #2: Promote Playful Parenting Practices _that leverage the use of locally available resources.**
 - a. **Objective 2.1:** By December 2026, we will have organized workshops and informational sessions for 150 parents and caregivers to understand the importance of playful parenting and its impact on children's development. These are bi-weekly Sunday workshops with parents and caregivers for 6 months (2

hours per session). The workshops will be led by our staff members and facilitators at ECD centers.

- b. **Objective 2.2:** By December 2026, we will have developed and shared educational materials that provide practical tips and activities for 150 parents and caregivers to engage in playful interactions with their children. These are guides and booklets for facilitators and parents to use during bi-weekly Sunday workshops. The guide will include sample games and playful activities for parents/caregivers and children aged below 6 years old.
 - c. **Objective 2.3:** By December 2026, we will have created and facilitated parents support groups through WhatsApp platform where parents can share experiences, ask questions, and connect with other parents who are interested in playful parenting. The Whatsapp group will be monitored by ECD facilitators and parents' themselves. Our staff will support in creating guidelines for effective use of the Whatsapp group to maximize learning and sharing of best practices.
 - d. **Objective 2.4:** By December 2026, we will have created a child-friendly environment that supports play and learning. We will also produce toys using locally available materials at the lowest cost, making them accessible to all families and ECD centers in Kigali.
3. **Objective #3: Build a scalable and community-led model that fosters partnerships and initiatives.**
- a. **Objective 3.1:** By December 2025, we will have built a scalable and community-led model that fosters collaboration between parents, facilitators at ECD centers, community-health workers, and others to share best practices and resources in support of children's learning and development through play. During bi-weekly

Sunday workshops, we shall be inviting guest speakers to talk to parents on other aspects of children's holistic support, including nutrition and spiritual guidance.

- b. **Objective 3.2:** By June 2027, we will have conducted at least 3 sessions with policy makers (Ministry of Gender and Family Promotion & Rwanda Education Board) and initiatives (LEGO foundation in Rwanda, UNICEF, etc.) that promote the importance of play in early childhood education and family life. In the sessions, we will be advocating for more children to join our program, and showcasing how children and parents in our program have improved.

Organization will advocate for more access to ECD services, play-based learning, and support in getting resources (toys and games). It will be a good space for us to share important learning on solutions implemented.

- c. **Objective 3.3:** By June 2027, we will have conducted research and collected data to measure the impact of play-based learning and playful parenting on children's cognitive, social, emotional development, and performance in ECD centers. We will achieve this by ensuring action research by parents, caregivers, and facilitators at the ECD centers. Again, every participant in our program should be able to track and measure growth and progress in implementing play-based learning and playful parenting.

Activities, Users, and Partners

The programs primarily focus on three key activities: designing learning experiences, collecting resources and materials for play-based learning and playful parenting, and delivering learning experiences with facilitators and caregivers/parents.

Activity #1: Developing effective learning experiences for our diverse end-users in Nyarufunzo village, where the program will start, is the first activity and requires a user-centered approach.

This involves:

- **Discovery Activities:** To ensure the program meets their actual needs, we conduct extensive "discovery activities" to understand their:
 - **Challenges and aspirations (pains and gains):** What difficulties do they face?
What competencies or skills do they need to develop?
 - **Existing resources:** What resources and materials do they currently have access to?
 - **Time constraints:** How much time can they realistically dedicate to learning activities?
- **Co-designing with end-users (caregivers and facilitators at ECD centers):**

Recognizing the unique needs of each user group, we involve them in the design process through collaborative efforts. This ensures the program addresses their specific wants and interests ("what they want to see and do; how do they want to feel during or after the program"). The co-design process ends with an actual testing of the learning experiences by a small sample of our end-users. The success of ECD programs hinges on ECD facilitators, who foster a unique environment where parents of children attending the same program can connect. This shared experience creates a strong foundation for collaboration, as both facilitators and parents have a vested interest in their children's development, both at school and at home. EDC facilitators' motivation is from working collaboratively with parents whose kids attend play-based learning programs at ECD centers.

- **Partner Consultation:** We leverage the expertise of existing Early Childhood Education partners in Rwanda to inform and refine our learning experience design. Those partners include but not limited to [Gikuriro Kuri Bose](#) (Growth for All) Program by Caritas, [Kina Rwanda](#), [Right to Play Rwanda](#), [Twigire mu Mikino \(Learn through Play\) program by VSO](#), [Save the Children Rwanda](#), [UNICEF Rwanda](#), [MIGEPROF](#), [MINEDUC](#), National Early Childhood Development Program (NECDP), and among others.

Activity #2: The program's second phase focuses on collecting resources and materials to support both play-based learning and playful parenting. These resources encompass tangible materials like training supplies (printers, flip charts, pens, paper) and intangible resources like guides for caregivers, facilitators, and trainers. This stage involves a thorough identification process to determine all necessary resources, followed by budgeting and securing funding to ensure their availability and delivery to the designated training venues, primarily Early Childhood Development (ECD) centers for this program. The main partners for these activities include but are not limited to local leaders, facilitators, suppliers/vendors, and donors.

Activity #3: The program's core activity involves **delivering learning experiences** to facilitators and caregivers/parents.

- **Facilitators** at ECD centers will participate in a **6-month professional development program**, receiving **weekly 2-hour sessions** on designing and leading play-based learning experiences to children at school.
- **Caregivers/parents** will attend **bi-weekly 2-hour sessions on Sundays for 6 months**. Some sessions might require them to attend with their children for play activities at the center.

Initially, **program staff will train the first group of 5 ECD center facilitators and co-lead the first round of parent events** with program staff. However, the program aims to **empower these facilitators to train and support their peers** in future rounds, both at their own centers and at other ECD centers. This **empowerment strategy** leverages their **lived experiences** to **maximize program impact and ensure sustainability**.

Sustainability

Community Sustainability _Developing Change Agents: To ensure the program's long-term sustainability and impact within the community, we prioritize empowering participants to become knowledge producers and change agents. Upon program completion, parents/caregivers will be empowered and equipped with the necessary tools and resources to support their peers by sharing knowledge and best practices related to playful parenting. ECD center facilitators will receive comprehensive training, equipping them to mentor and train future program participants, effectively replicating the program's benefits within their own communities and beyond. They should be able to speak from their own experience while supporting their new peers.

Organizational Sustainability Availing accessible resources with key best practices and philosophy towards play-based learning and playful parenting, plus a platform to keep in touch. We will **create and share readily accessible resources** on key best practices and philosophies related to play-based learning and playful parenting. These resources will serve as ongoing references for our program participants, including ECD center facilitators and caregivers/parents. In addition, we will establish a dedicated **WhatsApp platform** where participants can conveniently access resources, ask questions, and share best practices with each other. This platform will foster a collaborative learning environment, encouraging ongoing engagement and knowledge exchange beyond the program's duration.

Financial Sustainability Encouraging the use of readily available resources found within the community, reducing dependence on external materials. **Engaging end-users** by inviting them to contribute their time, expertise, or financial support as they are able. **Securing funds from donors** through fundraising events to cover core program activities like training logistics and printed resources (i.e. guides for facilitator and caregivers/parents). This approach promotes resourcefulness, shared responsibility, and long-term program viability.

Evaluation

Promoting a Culture of Evaluation and Growth: The program actively fosters a culture of collaborative learning, reflection, and feedback. This aligns with the program's Theory of Change, aiming to empower end-users (ECD facilitators and caregivers) to become self-directed in measuring their progress and success. We will achieve this by setting evaluation metrics to assess behavior changes among facilitators and caregivers, focusing on types of behaviors observed and participant attendance in relevant events. We will also create empowerment tools like checklists for play-based learning activities within the competency-based curriculum and checklists for playful parenting practices. These tools will equip participants to track their own growth and effectiveness, plus growth of children either at home or at school.

Evaluation Plan

Outcomes/Objectives	Indicators	Methodology	Frequency	People in Charge
Goal _ to improve learning experiences of 200 young children (6 years old and below) through play-based learning and playful parenting by 20 well-equipped facilitators and 150 caregivers, including parents within 2 years.				
Objective #1: Increase the Use of Play-Based Learning in 5 Early Childhood Development (ECD) centers.				
Objective 1.1: Collaborate with 5 ECDs centers facilities to create stimulating and age-appropriate learning environments that encourage exploration, discovery, and imaginative play by December 2025.	(1) Number of playing facilities at ECD centers. (2) Number of children who benefit from the available facilities at ECD centers. (3) Children’s attitude towards school -did the children’s attitude and love towards school improve? (4) Children’s performance in literacy and number skills.	Surveys	Quarterly	Program Staff
Objective 1.2: By December 2025, we will have provided resources and support to 5 ECDs centers to integrate play-based learning activities into their competency-based curriculum	(1) Number of ECD centers that have integrated play into their classrooms. (2) Average percentage of play-based activities vs. non play-based activities in the classroom.	Observation and survey data	Quarterly	Program Staff
Objective #2: Promote Playful Parenting Practices _that leverage the use of locally available resources.				

Objective 2.1: By December 2026, we will have organized workshops and informational sessions for 150 parents and caregivers to understand the importance of playful parenting and its impact on children's development.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> (1) Average attendance rate of caregivers in professional development sessions at ECD center. (2) Average attendance rate of parents in bi-weekly sunday workshops at the ECD center. 	Program Data (observations/data collection)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> (1) Weekly (2) Bi-weekly 	Program Staff/ToT
Objective 2.2: By December 2026, we will have developed and shared educational materials that provide practical tips and activities for 150 parents and caregivers to engage in playful interactions with their children.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> (1) Number of facilitators and caregivers who used the provided guides. (2) Number of caregivers who used the provided guides. (3) Parents provide constructive feedback and suggestions to improve the program. 	Surveys/interviews	(1) Quarterly	Program Staff/ToT
Objective 2.3: By December 2026, we will have created and facilitated parents support groups through WhatsApp platform where parents can share experiences, ask questions, and connect with other parents who are interested in playful parenting.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> (1) Number of WhatsApp groups created (2) Average number of participants who shared best practices and resources, or asked questions on WhatsApp groups. (3) % of parents who reported improvement in their parenting styles (4) Gender equity and participation -how many fathers are taking the lead in playful parenting or play-based learning? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> (1) Observations (2) Surveys (3) Observations 	Quarterly	Program Staff
Objective #3: Build a scalable and community-led model that fosters partnerships and initiatives.				
Objective 3.1: By December 2025, we will have built a <u>scalable</u> and <u>community-led</u> model that fosters collaboration	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> (1) Number of meetings and events that bring together different stakeholders. (2) Number and types of resources shared by 	Program data	Quarterly	Program Staff

between parents, educators, healthcare professionals, and community organizations to share best practices and resources in support of children's learning and development through play.	<p>different stakeholders.</p> <p>(3) Parents - ECD facilitators relationship and frequency of communication and interactions</p> <p>(4) Are parents actively involved, observing their children, and interacting with them during play? Parents attitudes towards play</p>			
Objective 3.2: By June 2027, we will have conducted at least 3 learning sessions with policy makers and initiatives that promote the importance of play in early childhood education and family life.	<p>(1) Number of learning sessions with policy makers and other initiatives that support ECDs.</p> <p>(2) Average attendance during learning sessions.</p>	Program data	By session	Program Staff
Objective 3.3: By June 2027, we will have conducted research and collected data to measure the impact of play-based learning and playful parenting on children's cognitive, social, emotional development, and performance in ECD centers.	<p>(1) % of children who stayed in school</p> <p>(2) % of parents who reported improvement in their parenting styles because of play.</p> <p>(3) % of children who improved their performance.</p> <p>(4) % of ECD center facilitators who benefited from the program.</p> <p>(5) Observations on engagement _do children actively participate, explore, and express themselves through play?</p> <p>(6) Observations on emotional climate -Does the program feel positive, supportive, and encouraging for both children and parents?</p>	<p>Surveys</p> <p>Observations</p>	<p>Quarterly</p> <p>Weekly</p>	Program Staff

Implementation

Timeline

Activities	Year 1 (2025)												Year 2 (2026)											
	Q1			Q2			Q3			Q4			Q1			Q2			Q3			Q4		
	M1	M2	M3	M4	M5	M6	M7	M8	M9	M10	M11	M12	M13	M14	M15	M16	M17	M18	M19	M20	M21	M22	M23	M24
Recruitment _Program Manager and Designer																								
Program Strategy and Concept Note _design and review																								
NGO/Program Registration at RDB/RBG																								
Baseline Evaluation																								
Fundraising events																								
Designing facilitator guides and training materials.																								
Testing with facilitators and caregivers _iteration																								
Recruiting a finance and logistics officer																								
Identifying and recruiting parents and ECD center facilitators -1st cohort																								
Printing guides and training materials																								
Program Launch _1st Cohort																								
Program Launch _2st Cohort																								
Program Evaluation																								
Follow-Up Program _1st Cohort																								

Capacity:

For the play-based learning and playful parenting program to be successful, we will establish a strong staff team and infrastructure.

- **Staffing:**
 - **Co-Founders:** setting the organizational vision, setting learning agenda, supporting in reflecting and measuring success of the programs. Setting learning questions and assumptions for experiments and pilot programs. As a founder, I will also have to carry out the following responsibilities, which we will later on hire specific staffing for.
 - **Program Manager:** Leading program development, implementation, monitoring, and evaluation. Requires experience in program management, early childhood education, and community engagement.
 - **Learning Experiences Designer:** Creating culturally relevant and age-appropriate learning materials for parents, caregivers, and facilitators. Requires expertise in child development, learning experiences development, and appropriate communication styles for different audiences. Can also lead training sessions and workshops for ECD center facilitators, parents, and caregivers.
 - **Finance and Operations Officer:** leading and managing fund activities. Leading internal audits and participating in budgeting and procurement processes, contacting vendors and suppliers. Transporting materials to the venues.
- **Infrastructure:**
 - **Training Venue _ECD center:** in this particular case of our program, we shall use ECD spaces since they are accessible to both parents and children.
 - **Equipment:** Projector, screen, flip chart, markers, and other basic materials needed for conducting training sessions.

- **Technology:** Each staff will need a computer and internet access for resource development, communication, and data management. They will use their own smartphones to ensure they can coordinate with parents who also use WhatsApp to communicate, etc
- **Transportation:** Program Staff will need transportation to reach the ECD centers and when doing pre-planning activities, that includes interviewing caregivers from their homes.
- **Materials:** Printed resources such as training manuals, activity guides, and parent/caregiver handbooks.

Funding

The following budget is for the 2 years' program that will cater for 4 cohorts of 20 ECD center facilitators at 5 ECD centers, 150 caregivers/parents to impact more than 200 children. After the first cohort, we will have learned much about the cost of operations and will be able to write a proof of concept to take to funders. Most of the funds to run the program will come from donors who have interests in ECD programs such as the UNICEF, LEGO Foundation, USAID, Save the Children, and government entities such as Ministry of Education, MIGEPROF, Rwanda Education Board (REB), National Examination and School Inspection Authority (NESA). For the sustainability of the program, there will also be contributions from the community (parents, local government, ECD facilitators, local funders, etc.).

2 Year Budget					
Item	Qt	U.P. (USD)	Total (USD)	Source	Comment
Salaries					
Program Manager	24	1,500	\$ 36,000	Grants	Hired in the first year to serve for 2 years
Learning Experiences Designer	24	1,300	\$ 31,200	Grants	
Finance and Operations Officer	18	700	\$ 12,600	Grants	
5 ECD Center Facilitators	24	300	\$ 7,200	Grants	
Program Operations					
Games/toys	4	1,500	\$ 6,000	Grants	4 cohorts within 2 years
Computers/maint	4	700	\$ 2,800	Grants	
Training materials	4	100	\$ 400	Community Contribution	
Transportion (staff/materials)	24	400	\$ 9,600	Grants	
Internet Bundles	24	60	\$ 1,440	Grants	
Smartphones	4	180	\$ 720	Grants	
Workshops and Training					
Training space	4	600	\$ 2,400	Community Contribution (ECD centers, local gov. contribution)	
Participants facilitation	4	10000	\$ 40,000	Fundrasing & community contributions	
Snacks/Meals	24	500	\$ 12,000	Community Contribution	
Monitoring and Evaluation					
Enumerators, software, printings, transport, etc.	8	400	\$ 3,200	Grants	
Total			\$ 165,560		

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