

Families' experiences of a universal play-based early childhood program in Nova Scotia: Implications for policy and practice ^[1]

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AVAILABILITY

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Excerpted from abstract

This study examined families' experiences of a publicly funded, play-based early learning program for children in the year before school entry. An online survey was conducted with parents and/or guardians (n = 291) to learn about their child's outcomes in the program, their perception of play-based learning, attitudes toward the program, and how the program supported their family. Socio-demographic information was also collected (income, education). A concurrent triangulation mixed methods design was used in the analysis of quantitative and qualitative survey questions through descriptive and inferential statistics, followed by content analysis of open-ended responses. The majority of parents felt their child was supported by the program and would transition more easily to the first year of school as a result of participating. The results also indicate the importance of connection to school community and good communication with a child's educators as predictors for positive attitudes toward play-based learning. Overall, the study reinforces the importance of publicly funded quality early childhood education and ensuring that parents value the play-based philosophy of these programs.

Internationally, and particularly in Canada, recent public investment and policy initiatives have been aimed at increasing access to early years programming through quality early childhood education systems (Bennett, 2008). A play-based approach can be an effective method for enhancing both academic and socioemotional outcomes for young children in early learning programs (Weisberg et al., 2013), but previous research indicates that some parents are concerned that play may not adequately prepare children for school (Baker, 2014; Kane, 2016; Yahya, 2016). While some evidence suggests that parental perceptions of play can be influenced by socioeconomic factors (Lin & Dunnett, 2018; LaForett & Mendez, 2017) and the connectedness of families to schools (Breathnach et al., 2016; McLean et al., 2017), further research is needed. The purpose of this study was to explore families' perceptions of play through their experiences with a publicly funded, play-based early learning program for children in the year before school entry.

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