

Play participation of displaced youth: exploring influencing factors in a refugee reception center in Cyprus

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Introduction

- Over **48.8 million** children worldwide are displaced (UNICEF, n.d.).
- Play is the **central occupation** of childhood (AOTA, 2020; Hollenbeck, 2024; Parnham, 2008).
- Play is essential for **neurological, physiological & psycho-social** development (Fumbiro Akiriza, 2025; Mazzeo & Bendixen, 2023; Ray-Kaeser & Lynch, 2022; Yogman et al., 2018; Zhou et al., 2022)
- Play is a **leading activity** across **cultural communities** (Fleer, 2009).
- **Playfulness & play access** for refugee & asylum-seeking children is often disrupted due to **personal & contextual factors, & cultural & socio-political** influences. (Abdeta, et al., 2025; Casey & McKendrick, 2023; Siddiqui et al., 2019).
- **Intrinsic factors** impact the ability for the youth to internally access play. These include trauma response, mental illness, delays in development, & other functional challenges (Bernhardt et al, 2023; Cruz et al., 2022; Dangmann et al., 2022; Felitti, 1998; Nabsny & Juengst, 2023; Song et al., 2018).
- **Extrinsic factors** impact a child's access to play participation. These include access issues to play education, formal programming, clean & safe food & water, safe play spaces, play equipment, tools for play, & parent priorities (Chen et al., 2021; Chen, S., & Knöll, M., 2022; Weir et al, 2023).
- Using the **PEO model** (person, environment, occupation) informs a systems-level approach to assess complexities facing this population (Law et al., 1996; Menard, 2023).

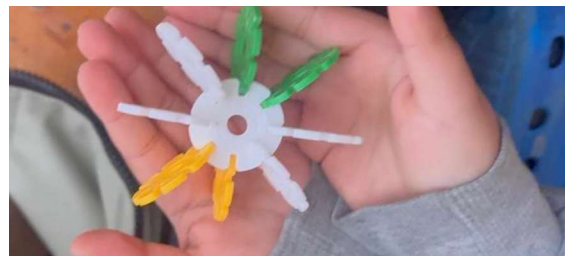
The interplay of intrinsic and extrinsic factors on play engagement likely impairs healthy development and functional performance in millions of vulnerable youth worldwide. Examining these factors in-depth could help identify potential solutions and underscore need.



Regional displacement map (modified Google Earth image)

Objective

This study aimed to explore the complex dynamics of **intrinsic & extrinsic factors** that influence **play engagement** among **displaced youth** residing in a **refugee reception center** in Cyprus.



European University Cyprus



A collaboration of;

Bridging Occupational Gaps &

Come To Play, Treeline Perspectives, LLC

Methods

Mixed-methods study

Conducted Fall 2025
Refugee Reception Center (i.e., "refugee camp")

Design Goals

With integrity to trauma-informed practice and outgroup bias, obtain an in-depth picture of play engagement and factors that support or hinder access through the lens of;

1. **parental perception,**
2. **child self-assessment, &**
3. **clinical observation of play in the lived-environment**

Design Values

Maintain;

- **Congruence** with occupational focus (Limited occupationally specific data for this population).
- **Intersectionality** of person & their environment (Understanding child within the context of displacement is critical in examining life within refugee camps/communities).
- **Cultural awareness,** sensitivity & **curiosity** (Researchers must seek to listen, hear & understand through a lens of curiosity & recognize that they can never fully understand).
- **Reflective practice** of personal biases (Researchers must be self-examining in personal bias & its impact on perception of information).
- **Trauma-informed & ethical process** (exposure to harm is pervasive in this community & requires strategies informed by impact of trauma on individual, family and community).

Design Highlights

Who;

- Families residing in accommodation center for refugees & asylum-seekers,
- Youth ages 4-15,
- Snowball sampling.

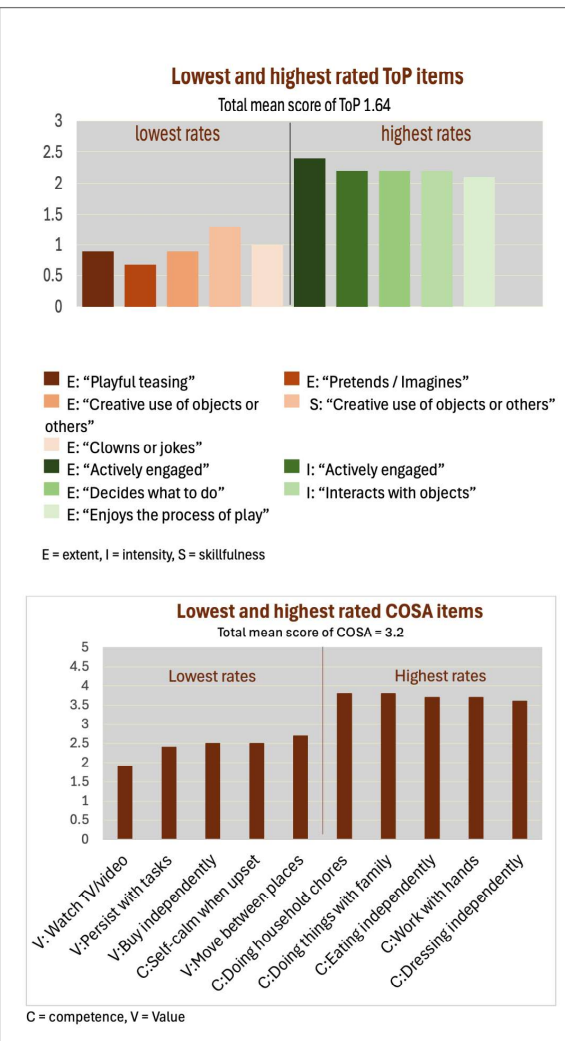
Assessment Plan;

- Child Occupational Self-Assessment (**COSA**) (allowed for child self-reporting on occupations & informed overall areas of function and difficulty) (Seeley & Parnes, 2006).
- Test of Playfulness Scale (**TOPS**) (provided observations of free play behaviors, skills, intensity & engagement to assess intrinsic factors) (Bundy et al, 2001).
- Structured **observations of free play** (examined intrinsic factors related to play performance, skills and engagement).
- In-depth **parent interviews** (with translator as needed) (examined cultural values, parental insights of personal/temporal relationship to play & intrinsic/extrinsic factors of their children's play behavior & interest).

Demographics

- **100%** refugee or asylum-seeking in **Cyprus**
- **59** child participants
- Representing **24** families.
- Ages **4-15** yrs, mean age **10.1** yrs
- Identifying from **7** ethnicities
- Displaced from **6** countries
- **90%** reporting exposure to violence, threats to life or persecution in child's lifetime
- Length of time since arrival at camp averaging **16** months

Quantitative Results



Qualitative Results

Play participation emerges from the dynamic **interaction** between **child capacities** and unique **contextual conditions** as outlined below.

Intrinsic factors

Supports Play

- Innate Motivation
- Sense of Volition
- Developmental Milestones
- Relational skills
- Social-Emotional skills
- Self-Confidence
- Developed identity

Hinders Play

- Dysregulation
- Trauma-responses
- Developmental Delays
 - Psychological
 - Neurological
 - Physiological
- Reduced Social Skills
- Self-Identity lacking
- Poor Interactional Skills

Extrinsic factors

Supports Play

- Adult relationship
- Peer relationship
- Social structures
- NGO programming
- Natural & built play milieus

Hinders Play

- Contextual stress
- Trauma exposure
- Lack of play structures
- Social/ interactional/ material deprivation
- Disruption due to conflict, displacement & resettlement
- Parental capacity
- Safety risks
- Disrupted routines
- Play mediation patterns

*Data sources:
Child Observation
Form & Parent
Questionnaire*



environmental constraints limited sustained & skillful play participation. Indicators of trauma-response in children's behaviors' greatly impacted their ability to attend, access & engage in play. Built environment & safe spaces for play were generally lacking in proximity.

Challenges faced;

- **Language, culture, & translation** barriers reduced overall transfer of concepts.
- **Age & development factors** decreased ability to complete COSA assessment from all participants.
- **Impact of trauma & displacement** on feelings of safety & trust may have reduced information sharing.
- **Transient realities** of asylum-seekers contributed to attrition due to change in status or deportation.
- **Western cultural basis** for TOPS & COSA created challenges for understanding & contributed to issues of relevance & inclusivity.
- **Play specific milieus** lacking in proximity to camp decreased ease of observation & overall access.

Implications for Practice;

Health professionals can champion this by:

- **Integrating** intrinsic & extrinsic factors of play access & deprivation in promoting children's rights.
- **Assessing** each displaced child for play engagement and performance to provide early intervention & catch potential developmental concerns.
- **Advocating** with stakeholders for universal play access & safe spaces as human right.
- **Ensuring** culturally responsive & trauma-informed practices are utilized in play programming.
- **Engaging** parents in play to encourage greater transference & to better understand obstacles.

Discussion

Overall, children demonstrated innate capacity & intact degrees of motivation for play, while engagement was inconsistent, highly individual & context dependent. Observational (TOPS) & self-report (COSA) data aligned with qualitative themes, indicating that trauma-related, regulatory, &

Conclusion

Intrinsic and extrinsic barriers experienced by displaced families **limited children's play** engagement and reinforced **population health inequities** in this vulnerable population.

While most **parents highly valued play** for their children, they voiced concern about lack of play access and engagement due to **temporal, financial, emotional, and contextual** factors.

Similarly, most **children** had an **innate curiosity** about play, but demonstrated **challenges across developmental domains**, including language, motor planning, sensory integration/processing, emotional regulation, psycho-social competency and **feelings of safety and future insecurity**.

Future research should investigate how **enhanced access** to play and skill development, together with **stronger institutional support** and more **positive public perceptions** of play, shape the occupational wellness of children, families, and their communities.

Additional Resources

Bridging Occupational Gaps website:
<https://bridgingotgaps.euc.ac.cy/en/home/>

References available at:

<https://bit.ly/4r9G6md> -
Play in a refugee camp

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