



Fathers' Perceptions of Play: Evidence from the Rohingya Camps

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Credit: BRAC

Introduction

In 2020 and 2021, NYU Global TIES for Children (NYU-TIES), along with our Play to Learn program partners, BRAC and Innovations for Poverty Action (IPA), set out to better understand how parents perceive play in the Cox's Bazar camp in Bangladesh. This research was conducted as part of NYU-TIES' efforts to prepare for larger scale longitudinal and impact evaluation studies, the validity of which is dependent upon the team's ability to accurately understand and develop data collection tools that capture the socio-cultural context connecting play to parenting, learning, and child socialization. Our research involved interviews with both Rohingya mothers and fathers as well as observations of children at play in the Cox's Bazar camps. Though designed as part of a broader measurement pilot, the combined findings from these multiple data sources captures a shift in fathers' roles in children's development and sheds light on cultural dynamics that expand our conventional notions of play and how caregivers perceive it.

This brief highlights some of the most critical findings supported by multiple data sets, focusing in particular on the role of fathers in supporting playful learning and concluding with reflections on how these findings might be valuable for future program implementation and research.



ⁱ Authors are listed in alphabetical order.

Background

Refugee camps today are being reimagined as spaces where refugees can receive education and psychosocial support to prepare for the future, not just a temporary abode for the forcibly displaced¹. However, children of refugee communities face serious challenges with regards to psychological distress, vulnerability, and trauma². Play may assist in buffering the effects of trauma³ and help with healing by employing the various therapeutic elements of play in these environments⁴. Moreover, the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child⁵ emphasizes prioritizing opportunities for play, recreation, and cultural activity, as play can help children recover from families' experiences of trauma and enhance their learning and well-being.

Fathers play a critical and unique role in providing safety, security, and nurturing care for their children. Fathers' involvement with their children in infancy predicts children's security of attachment at later ages⁶. Studies show that fathers' daily interactions with children positively influence cognitive development⁷ and preschoolers' early literacy⁸ and numeracy⁹ skills, but most research on this topic draws on the experiences and engagement of fathers with their children in the Global North. In the context of forced displacement and trauma, fathers' roles in children's development may be even more important, but literature on refugee fathers' engagement with children in the context of forced displacement is scarce. Research on engaging fathers in children's play for positive early childhood development (ECD) and psychosocial wellbeing is practically non-existent in refugee contexts.

Research related to refugee children and play found that relationship building with adults and stability in play environments were important in alleviating some psychological challenges. ECD research in humanitarian settings reports that play-based parenting interventions have proven effective in supporting caregivers¹⁰. Research on playgroups discusses the importance of support for parents, and how allowing parents and children to have access to each other can alleviate issues of separation anxiety and promote positive prosocial behaviors^{11, 12}. However, studies on fathers are virtually absent in the refugee or displaced context. Our research therefore seeks to better understand Rohingya fathers' perceptions of play in the Cox's Bazar camps.

We are especially keen to find out how fathers engage with the idea of children's play amidst various security and safety concerns among parents of children growing up in the camps.

Methods

The data for this brief was drawn from interviews with a total of 25 Rohingya father-mother dyads from camps 5, 6, 9, 10, 11, and 12 and field notes from observations of child play with 60 Rohingya children aged 2-5 years old from the same camps. The parents, aged between 23 and 48, with one to seven children, of whom at least one child was between 2- and 4-years-old, were interviewed from November 2020-January 2021 using semi-structured interview methods. Some of the themes included were children's daily routines and parents' future aspirations for their children however, data presented here draws primarily from the theme of child play.

Most of the fathers were not employed and less than one-third of the fathers worked as volunteers and in construction sites at the camp. Rohingya men living in the Cox's Bazar camp are primarily in volunteer or self-employed roles, similar to the fathers in the study sample. This sample is representative of the adult male populations in the camp, who are mainly day laborers or partially or completely unemployed.

The semi-structured interviews included fathers with children who participated in Humanitarian Play Labs (HPL)¹³. A series of iterative analyses was conducted at NYU-TIES by a team of multilingual researchers in Rohingya, Bangla, and English refusing transcripts from enumerators in Bangla and audio files from interviews. This was followed by the creation of a codebook developed from a set of themes which emerged from the initial analysis and field memos. Transcripts were further analyzed using Dedoose, a mixed methods research platform, with the finalized set of codes.

Preliminary Findings

Overall Fathers' Involvement



Fathers are spending more time with their children



After escaping the genocide in Myanmar in August 2017 and settling in the camps of Cox's Bazar, Bangladesh, Rohingya fathers find themselves in a unique situation where they are either unemployed or intermittently employed. While the lack of formal employment is financially and psychosocially challenging, fathers admitted that they spend more time with their families compared to their time back in Myanmar when they were fully employed. Fathers' roles are therefore changing in Rohingya communities in Cox's Bazar. As fathers spend more time at home, they engage with their families in more profound ways developing closer relationships with their children. Their engagement with children, however, is different than that of mothers. Instead of helping with feeding in the home, for example, most fathers preferred to spend time with children by taking them outside for a stroll in a public place such as a local market or bazaar and/or buying them light snacks or treats. Some fathers accompany their children to the BRAC HPLs.

"... I take him to the shops and buy him snacks."
- Father of boy

"My daughter loves to go outside. Whenever I come home, she would always insist that I take her out for a short walk."
- Father of girl

"When I find him unmanageable, I oftentimes buy him some fried chips."
- Father of boy

In contrast, some of the mothers shared concerns that their children want to play outside and run around rather than stay at home.

"He always goes out to play and I need to keep an eye on him for his safety."
- Mother of boy

"While playing outside, he sometimes picks something from the kitchen and runs away fast. He always wants to stay outside. It is difficult for me to drag him home sometimes."
- Mother of boy

Cultural norms in Rohingya society place the responsibility for all aspects of childcare on mothers but they are often restricted from many parts of public life and it is preferred that women remain within the household¹⁴. Therefore, fathers may play a particularly important role in structuring young children's outdoor play and exploration. This may be related in part to their specific concerns about physical safety and security which we report below.

How Fathers Perceive Play



Play is integral to children's social-emotional well-being

Fathers perceive play as an integral part of children's daily lives without which they tend to get upset. Fathers report that their children play all the time and believe that it helps them to stay active, happy, and calm. When discussing the challenges of parenting, fathers suggested that children get irritated or start crying when they are forcibly brought home and interrupted in ongoing play.

"Every afternoon, my son doesn't want to come back home for lunch or take a nap. I call him, his mother calls him, but he wants to play outside, and this is difficult for us."

- Father of boy

In addition, play-fights seem to cause parents some stress as it leads to them intervening in children's play. All fathers reported that children become cranky and irritable when they are not satisfied with their playtime.

"My son gets angry sometimes when I forbid him to play. He wants to play all the time. If he gets into a play-fight with children, he starts crying."

- Father of boy



Fathers pay attention to children's play

All fathers in our study provided precise answers about the play-items with which their children play. One of the fathers specified that his son loves to play 'Latim' (spinning a top). Another father shared that his son loves to play with any materials found in the surroundings and create different objects using those materials, noting the creativity involved:



"He plays with kites and makes houses with papers and cars with bamboo sticks. Sometimes he makes bullets with rubber and sticks. He often plays football with other kids."

- Father of boy

Fathers also report their children playing with anything shiny or unusual in their immediate surroundings. One of the fathers shared that his daughter enjoys playing with kitchen waste.

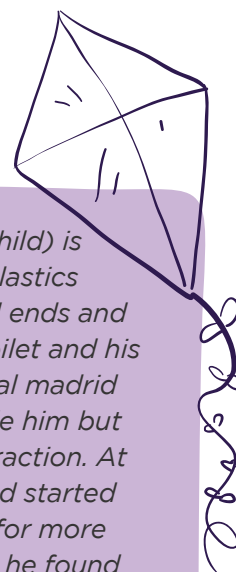
"She plays with the wastage of raw vegetables from the kitchen with her elder sister."

- Father of girl

Our ethnographic observationsⁱⁱ of children also showed creativity in playing with everyday materials in and around households that support the data on fathers' perceptions of play:

When Rina (2-year-old girl child) was first spotted from afar, she was being taken inside her home by her grandmother (Shanu). In one hand she is holding what looks like an empty bottle of a fruit drink. The other hand is being held and lifted a bit higher by Shanu (52 year old). She is murmuring something as she's walking in to which Shanu doesn't respond. Rina walks into the other room inside. Her father was sitting on the ground and having lunch. She goes up to her father and stands in front of him. She starts shaking the bottle side to side in her hand holding it close to her father's face. The bottle makes a sound which is similar to the sound nuts, or some sort of grains would make against plastic when shook. Seeing this, her father says something to her in a soothing child-like tone in a higher-than-normal pitched voice.

Yasir (4-year-old boy child) is looking at the waste plastics (polythene) with shredded ends and was sitting in front of the toilet and his father, wearing a white real madrid jersey, was standing beside him but they did not have any interaction. At one point, Yasir got up and started roaming around looking for more plastics in the ground and he found some came back beside the blue drum where there was a shade from sun. As he had few shredded plastics, he joined them together like the long tail of a kite. And he started to run, and his face was smiley as a sign of success. He was running and flying the long tail behind him.



Fathers identify imagination and pretend-play among children

Some of the fathers mentioned that their children like 'pretend-play' - sometimes called symbolic play, imaginative play, dramatic play, or make-believe. Almost all Rohingya fathers in our study sample reported their children engage in pretend play - acting like a character from a story or someone from a specific profession that the child fancies. Fathers seem to encourage children to engage in these kinds of play such as playing 'ghor ghor' (an imaginative household) where children act like their own parents. Fathers explain that children may act like a cook and make food, or a police officer and chase other children, or a mason and make houses with mud.

"He runs around with the other kids and plays with whatever he can get, even with polythene (plastic) bags. He pretends to act like us (his parents) and play ghor ghor. Sometimes, he acts like a police officer and chases other kids."
- Father of boy

"I saw my daughter playing 'ghor ghor' and she would make cakes with mud. And then she will pretend to feed her younger sister."
- Father of girl

ⁱⁱ The names used in this brief has been anonymized.

Similarly, our ethnographic observations of children demonstrated multiple instances of pretend play:

Koli (3-year-old girl child) picks up a few bird feathers lying around and brings them inside the house. She sits down with the green broom, the stick and the feathers laid out in front of her... She wraps the string around the feathers holding the stick in the middle. Her eyes are fixed on her fingers trying to tie up the string. Her mouth has a small gape. She is unable to tie the feathers together. She unwraps the string and takes some of the feathers out. Then she wraps the string again and tries to tie the feathers together. She utters a high pitched "hmmm" sound. She is finally able to tie them together. She gets up and goes towards the door and utters a loud "Aaaaaooo" sound as if to rejoice her success. She goes up to the stairs and starts dusting the stairs.

Mina (3-year-old girl child) along with her other friends were sitting on the mat and playing with the cooking set. Jahanara (7-year-old girl child) seemed to be the chef and so, she's pretending to cook some food for others...Mina started itching her left underarm with her right hand. Rahim (3-year-old boy child) again tickled her with his finger through the rip of the top. This time, she stood up on her knees without saying anything. Asif (7-year-old boy child) punched softly on the left side of her chest and said, "Sit!". Mina was still staring at what Jahanara was doing with the spoon and the pan on the stove. Suddenly Asif picked a small stick up and threw it out of their playing zone. Shahed (4-year-old boy child) was cleaning up a plate. Mina stood up and started wandering around. Asif asked Rahim to stand up and leave. As soon as Rahim stood up and moved away, Asif picked the mat up from the ground and hung it with a knob stick so that it can be used as a curtain.



Fathers notice who children play with

Rohingya parents tend to ensure their children play within their own neighborhoods (blocks – the smallest unit of neighborhood in the Cox's Bazar camps). Most fathers in this study reported that their children usually play with their siblings. Furthermore, children were reported to play with their cousins who live close by as well as with other young children in the neighborhood. A majority of the fathers mentioned that their children love to play by running, jumping, and clapping with other children of similar ages and those slightly older than them. Sometimes parents play with their children at home.

"My son usually plays with her younger brother. Sometimes, he plays with some children who live nearby, especially one child named Abbas."

- Father of boy

"He plays mostly with his younger brother. Sometimes he plays with his mother and me."

- Father of boy

In our ethnographic observations, we frequently observed mixed-age play groups spontaneously forming. Older children often played leadership or monitoring roles, orchestrating the play with and for younger children:

The premises: in a house where a mat was spread on the ground. There's a setup of kitchen toys on the mat which includes five small plates, one broken fork, one half coconut shell, one bottle cork and a big plastic box. Moni (three-year-old girl child) was sitting on the mat in the premises with her other friends. Jannat (five-year-old girl child) said to everyone, "Done! Let's move." They all stood up, took different things of the arrangement in their hands. Moni took a plate full of sand in her hand and stood up. They all walked to the stairs to make their new setup for playing. Ansar (4-year-old boy child) spread the mat on a stairstep, and others started putting their things on the mat. Moni also went there and put her plate beside the other plates. Then, she sat beside Darul (2-year-old boy child).

Minara (three-year-old girl child) was hanging herself from a bamboo pole grabbing it with both of her hands at the middle part of the pole and legs at the lower part of it. Reshma (six-year-old girl child) came there and called Minara loudly saying, 'Hey!' Minara left the pole and stood on the ground. Reshma caressed Minara's hair. Minara sat on the concrete block while Reshma sat on the chair. They started whispering to one another. Suddenly, Minara put her index finger in her mouth. Ambia (seven-year-old girl child) was passing by the pharmacy at that time, and she beckoned to them. As soon as Reshma watched Ambia, she stood up from the chair and ran to join her without saying anything to Minara. Minara also stood up and got inside the house through the pharmacy.

Similar patterns of relationships in mixed-aged peer groups have been observed frequently in the anthropological literature on culture and human development^{15 16}- thus expanding our notions of play beyond adult-child dyads that are often the focus of research and observation in the context of forced displacement.



Father's view HPLs as a place for children to play and learn but refer to it less as a space for healing

According to 22 of the 25 interviewed fathers who had children enrolled at the HPL, play is an important activity at the BRAC HPL. Of these fathers, most admitted being less involved in the HPLs compared to the mothers of the children. Fathers perceived that the main goal of BRAC HPL, commonly labeled as '*kela khanas*', is to provide spaces for children to play with other children. Fathers mentioned that they heard about BRAC's HPL program from female associates at the HPLs or other parents whose children were enrolled in HPL. Most of the fathers were familiar with the main activities at BRAC HPLs and explained these activities as basic learning (reading, writing, counting, learning Burmese/Arabic), eating biscuits, and playing games or singing songs.

"My son learns to draw flowers with the color pencils he received from HPL. He also loves to eat the biscuits given to him from HPL. Previously, he couldn't hold a pen but now he can write and draw. He plays all the time. He also recites the poems which he learnt at HPL at home now."

- Father of boy

"I saw her sometimes studying, sometimes playing, and sometimes clapping in different ways."

- Father of boy

"She loves to go to BRAC HPL because she can play. She is also learning Burmese alphabets, and a few poems with other kids."

- Father of girl

Preliminary findings show that most fathers acknowledge play as an important activity for their children. They felt the same way for both structured play - for example, at 'kela khanas' - and for unstructured play - where children are casually and spontaneously playing in and around homes.

While there is an understanding among fathers of the importance of play and learning, there may be a gap in connecting play and learning to the development of socio-emotional skills and healing in designated spaces such as HPLs.



Fathers are concerned about the physical safety and security of their children at play

Rohingya fathers and mothers share similar levels of concern about the safety of their children, but they focused on different aspects of it. Fathers worried more about physical safety and security, while mothers spoke about their concerns about everyday health and hygiene.

Fear of kidnapers

One prominent fear was fear of kidnapers. In 2019, UNHCR and its partners reported about 170 cases of missing persons, abductions, and kidnappings in the Cox's Bazar settlements¹⁷. During the interviews, fathers expressed serious concerns over people from different local and international organizations visiting the camp on a regular basis. Fathers are often worried about their children being kidnapped or getting lost in the middle of a crowd of strangers, especially when they play outside of the house. The fathers of girl children especially reported their concerns over losing their daughters to kidnapers or in a crowd.

"My short-term worry is if my child gets lost - she is still very young."

- Father of girl

"I am more worried about my children here because this area is overcrowded, and children easily get lost in the crowd."

- Father of girl

"...they play on the streets- there is always a chance of being kidnapped."

- Father of girl

"I worry for her going out of the home because anything can happen- a road accident might happen, or she can get kidnapped."

- Father of girl

Fear of road and other accidents

Road accidents are another reason for injury among children living in the camps. As the aid workers, development professionals, and volunteers start coming into the camps every morning,

some areas in the camps get very busy and unsafe for children at play. Fathers are worried about their children's safety due to frequent road accidents in the camps. Fathers express their concerns that children are prone to get hit by cars and auto-rickshaws or even the 'tuk-tuks' (local vehicles) when they play on the roads. There are a great number of road accidents reported to the local police stations every week in the various camps where we interviewed the fathers.

*"Because children always play on the roads, and I fear that any accident can happen at any time."
- Father of girl*

*"I worry if my children get hurt by slipping off."
- Father of boy*

Fathers expressed concerns about their children's physical safety and security when they play outside of the house surrounded by poorly constructed roads and passages. As a result, fathers often worry about their young children getting hurt by slipping off the steep and narrow passages between houses in the camp. Almost all the fathers expressed serious reservations about their children walking down these narrow pathways inside the camp.

Adding to these major worries, most fathers expressed their helplessness in protecting their children from injury and accidents due to extreme poverty and lack of stable livelihoods in the camp. Similar to mothers, fathers worry about their financial insufficiency and inability to meet the needs of their families and children. One of the fathers pointed out that during winter they do not have access to adequate blankets and warm clothes, which causes their children to fall sick easily during the cold months in the hilly areas.

Fear of physical harm during play-fighting

Some fathers reported fear of their children being hurt during 'play-fighting'. Most children engage in play fights during their childhood. However, some fathers reported frequent play-fights that led to other parents getting involved, which they view as a threat to their children's safety. Additionally, in the absence of a sufficient number of safe spaces for play, some fathers observed that their children often get into fights, not related to play, with other children over trivial matters.

*".....My son gets into a quarrel often and fights with other children. One time he bruised his arms. And then we had to interfere— otherwise my son would have gotten hurt."
- Father of boy*

*"I worry about my children the most. When I go to work, I am always worried about their safety and well-being if they are getting involved in any fights with other children or if they are studying properly or not."
- Father of boy*

While fathers seem to worry most about the physical safety and security of their children, mothers tend to worry about a healthy diet and proper healthcare for their children. When children play outside, mothers' concerns around cleanliness are exacerbated by their complaints about acute scarcity of clean water, poorly managed sanitation systems, and chronic illness among their children. According to them, camps are an unfriendly environment to raise children in due to the prevalence of poor hygiene and bad sanitation. Mothers believe that BRAC HPLs allow children to have access to a healthy environment, because children at HPLs keep their hands clean, want to take showers regularly, and wear clean clothes.

Conclusion

We conducted the first study combining fathers' perceptions of play using in-depth semi-structured interviews with ethnographic observations of children's actual play episodes to understand the cultural contexts of learning through play in ECD among Rohingya households in Cox's Bazar.

Our findings of fathers' perceptions of play from interviews, coupled with participants' and our own observations through ethnographic field notes, show a rich context for play that broadens our understanding of it beyond the typical sole-child-oriented, dyadic adult-child, or classroom-based teacher-guided play that is often the focus of the Western literature on child play.

Our findings expand our notions of play in both unstructured home and community contexts in the Cox's Bazar camps, as well as the more structured contexts of BRAC's HPL program.

In summary,

1) Play in and around homes occurs spontaneously, often in mixed-age peer groups. This broadens potential future models of ECD interventions to build on these naturally occurring, culturally-based peer interactions.

We found that children spend much of their outdoor time playing in peer groups, most often with children of a variety of ages. The opportunities for learning from peers are important generally in child development, but the particular salience and importance of mixed-age peer groups has been noted in the literature on culture and child development in different cultural contexts such as Cameroon¹⁸, Morocco¹⁹, and Mayan cultures²⁰. Play-based interventions could leverage these naturally occurring peer groups, in which younger children are learning from older children, and older children are learning about different forms of socialization, cooperation, and leadership as they interact with younger children.

2) Play outdoors raises concerns for parents, in different ways for fathers and mothers – this raises opportunities to consider collective monitoring and social capital of parents as a focus of future ECD models.

Fathers were concerned about their young children's safety, with prominent fears of kidnapping and road accidents. Based on these findings, there is an opportunity to further strengthen efforts to protect children when playing outdoors that bolster naturally occurring peer groups, but also opportunities for adults to monitor. This may serve to enhance social cohesion among adults in the camps, as there may be opportunities to organize around the collective task of raising young children, including both fostering learning through play and keeping them safe and secure. Such an emphasis on social cohesion is characteristic of recent community-parent group-based interventions in ECD in countries affected by conflict, such as the Mama Yeleen community mothers' program in Mali²¹.

3) Building and broadening fathers' awareness of the HPL *kela khanas* may be productive.

As the fathers were particularly concerned about the safety and security of their children, framing '*kela khanas*' as safe physical and emotional spaces where children learn and play may also be helpful to increase fathers' support for HPLs. Fathers perceived HPL programs as places where children play and learn, but these perceptions could be broadened further as they were still largely perceived as spaces relevant more to mothers than to fathers, and mothers are more frequently observed to bring their children to the HPL setting than fathers. To enhance fathers' participation at HPLs, father volunteers could be recruited to educate other fathers about the connections between

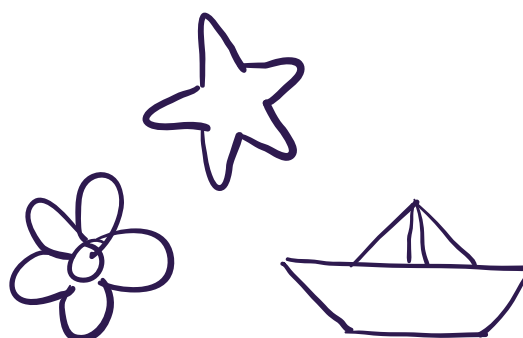
play (*kela*) and learning (*shikhon*) and how '*kela khanas*' facilitate both learning and healing processes for children growing up in crowded camps without access to adequate educational resources and nutrition.

In conclusion, this brief summarizes some critical findings, employing multiple data sets, on fathers' perceptions of play with a focus on the role of fathers in supporting playful learning in the Cox's Bazar camps in Bangladesh. The findings – highlighting insights on children's play and security concerns shared by fathers due to forced displacement – are valuable in informing the design and implementation of play and playful learning for socio-emotional development among Rohingya children and psychosocial support for parenting in the camps as well as in the broader context of forced displacement. Moreover, the research underscores the gradual shift that naturally takes place in fathers' roles and engagement in child development in these contexts and seeks to leverage the information to improve ECD services and outcomes for children in similar environments.

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NYU Global TIES for Children is an international research center which works towards a world where all children have equitable access at scale to opportunities that allow them to thrive, in an ecosystem where caregivers and teachers have the resources they need to support them. Our mission is to support this vision by contributing to a robust and culturally-grounded science for program and policy action that promotes children's holistic learning and development in Low-and-Middle-Income Countries and Conflict Affected Contexts.



Play to Learn

Play to Learn is an innovative program from the LEGO Foundation, Sesame Workshop, BRAC, the International Rescue Committee, and NYU Global TIES for Children that harnesses the power of play to deliver critical early learning opportunities to children and caregivers affected by conflict and crisis. Play to Learn is reaching families affected by the Rohingya and Syrian refugee crises through educational media and direct services in homes, play spaces, health centers, and more to provide the essential building blocks of play-based learning and nurturing care. Ultimately, Play to Learn aims to establish play-based early childhood development as an essential component of humanitarian response for all children and caregivers affected by crisis.



To learn more about our Play to Learn research contact global.ties@nyu.edu