



# Looking at Play Through the Eyes of Rohingya Children in Cox's Bazar

Authors: Sneha Bolisetty; Jessica Castelyn; Saadman Chowdhury; Sharon Kim; Maung Nyeu; Kathy Trang and Hirokazu Yoshikawa<sup>i</sup>



Credit: BRAC

## Introduction

As part of preparatory research for the Play to Learn (PtL) program, NYU Global TIES for Children (NYU-TIES) and PtL partners developed and implemented a qualitative approach for assessing playful learning in humanitarian settings in Cox's Bazar, Bangladesh, home to over 450,000 children under the age of 18<sup>1</sup>. Despite the extensive consideration of children's play in cultural anthropology, very few studies have examined play from a cultural perspective in refugee or humanitarian contexts. As such, the research was not intended to take a comparative or cross-cultural perspective to play, but instead aims to capture the point of view of young Rohingya children themselves in order to provide context to how they may be "mediating between their world of origin and the host society"<sup>2</sup> through play.

Our data show that Rohingya children demonstrate a tremendous amount of spontaneous and creative activity in their everyday lives, despite the many challenges in the Cox's Bazar camps. This brief provides fresh perspectives into the remarkable resilience and creativity these young children possess. The four key themes that emerge from the data, explored in more detail below, include how Rohingya children 1) learn and play through song and rhyme; 2) self-organize their play in groups with other children of various ages; 3) use space flexibly and fluidly during play and; 4) use their imaginations to create toys and games.

In reviewing these findings, we explore potential ways to harness this creativity to strengthen the capacity of children to cope, develop, and play in this humanitarian setting. In trying to understand these points of view, our hope is that the data collected may also serve to give Rohingya children a voice in shaping the programming and policies that are developed to help them learn and heal.

<sup>i</sup> Authors are listed in alphabetical order.

## Background

Play is a universal childhood activity that is widely recognized as a culturally specific process<sup>3</sup>, though evidence on the benefits of play for cognitive and social development in various cultural settings has only begun to be discerned more recently<sup>4</sup>. Still, relatively little is known about play and playful learning among young children in refugee or humanitarian settings. Moreover, much of play research has also privileged the perspective of dyadic parent-child interactions or of a single child<sup>5</sup>, and not necessarily within a naturalistic environment. And while mothers or other adults are often playmates for young children in Western, Educated, Industrialized, Rich, and Democratic (WEIRD) contexts, this is less true in many other societies<sup>6</sup>. These perspectives have limited our ability to design locally grounded, child-facing programs and policies.

## Methods

Late in 2020, data for this research were collected by enumerators from Innovations for Poverty Action (IPA) based in Bangladesh using an ethnographic observation approach focused on recording children's experiences from their own 'points of view'. Though ethnographic accounts of cross-cultural childhood experiences date back the 1900s, these observations often required extended fieldwork spanning months, if not years. Such timeframes are not an option for implementing organizations and researchers working in humanitarian settings, and so, as an alternative, we instead trained enumerators to conduct 5-minute 'flash' observations. This approach builds upon a long tradition of ethnographic observation within anthropology, but adapts and integrates the rapid research methods or Rapid Ethnographic Assessment (REA) that have become increasingly utilized in the health and development sectors<sup>7</sup>.

Child observation data comes from eight different camps within Cox's Bazar. The sample includes N=61 focal children, aged 2-5 years old, in their everyday lives. 41% of this sample had participated in the Humanitarian Play Lab (HPL) program and 59% had not. Observations took place in conjunction with other ongoing data collection so as to avoid families feeling unduly scrutinized. Enumerators were trained to follow children around within a limited timeframe and to take indepth, moment-to-moment descriptions of children's activities, including those with whom the children engaged. Children engaged with varied individuals during these observations including fathers aged 24-45; mothers aged 20-35; other adults aged 24-52; and non-focal children aged 8 months - 12 years old. HPL participants were identified or verified through our data collection partner, IPA. Other non-HPL participants were found via inquiry with the local majhee, a community leader, or at random with consent from the child's family through convenience sampling. All quotes included in this brief were drawn from the field notes of these enumerators. Field notes were written in English by the enumerators immediately after their visits.

It is worth noting that in spite of the small sample size, these data are likely generalizable to the population of young parents in Cox's Bazar. The Rohingya community is not as heterogenous as those that might be found in similar humanitarian contexts. The majority of the population is largely low income and hold low levels of formal education due to policies intentionally implemented by the Myanmar government in Rakhine<sup>8</sup>. Nevertheless, though opportunities for earning an income are limited for the population, those who were employed prior to displacement are much more likely to be employed in Bangladesh, including women<sup>9</sup>.

## Preliminary Findings



### Rohingya children learn and play through song and rhyme

In Rohingya communities, adults and elders may sing and engage in storytelling, which children often pick up through observation. In this study, our enumerators observed that children often hum, sing, and sway as they are absorbed in other activities. This was seen both in individual and group play.



*“He got up and recited rhymes with his friends. He smiled all the way. He supported his back with the wall and sat down with his legs folded. Yasir started clapping and following him everyone started clapping...Yasir and his friends started singing. They all swayed together with the music. After that Yasir and his friends started talking again.”*

*“A few seconds later she started jumping around by herself again. The sound was not audible, but her lip movements suggested that she was still humming some song.”*

Existing literature suggests that music and art can help alleviate some of the effects of trauma in refugee children. Furthermore, music can be used to show resistance to the reality Rohingyas are experiencing, maintain the culture and identity of the Rohingya people, and preserve their distinct cultural heritage for future generations growing up outside their traditional homeland. Therefore, using culturally appropriate songs and music can serve both child developmental goals as well as cultural preservation goals in programming for Rohingya children.



### Rohingya children self-organize their play in groups with other children of various ages

Children often socialize with same-age peers in their classes, but in naturally occurring play in and around their homes, Rohingya children frequently play in mixed age groups. These groups are made up of family members as well as others in the community. In our preliminary findings with early childhood aged children, we see them playing with their siblings and friends who may not be close to them in age, but who nonetheless engage in the same activities.

*“Sahera (3) was wandering here and there with Abbul (3), Ansar (3), Rabeya (9), and Mina (10). Suddenly they all have a break and stopped in one place...Sahera started whispering to Mina something. She started trying to touch her earrings with her tongue but failed. Then she attempted to touch her hair with her tongue again and this time she succeeded which brought a pretty smile on her face.”*

*“Fatema (11) and Samira (4) started to play a game. They would point at each of the characters on a page and tell if it's a 'fua' (boy) or 'maya fua' (girl). They do this for a few minutes. Samira then puts the book inside the bag and takes the bag inside the other room.”*

*“Arif (6) came in with a balloon in her hand and stood at that place where Fatema (4) was sitting. Arif showed the balloon to Tasnim (3.5). Tasnim said to Arif, “Blow it up!” very calmly and Arif started doing so.”*

*“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 5 small plates, one broken fork, one half coconut shell, one bottle cork and a big plastic box. Mahi (age 3) was sitting on the mat in the premises with her other friends. Dina (5) said to everyone, “Done! Let's move.” They all stood up, took different things of the arrangement in their hands. Mahi took a plate full of sands in her hand and stood up. They all walked to the stairs to make their new setup for playing. Absar (4) spread the mat on a stairstep, and others started putting their things on the mat. Mahi also went there and put her plate beside the other plates. Then, she sat beside Didar (2).”*

These preliminary findings suggest that children are learning to communicate and collaborate not just from peers their own age but from children across age groups. Some of the group activity was complex, with multiple objects being used and children participating according to their developmental ability (for example, Dina's orchestration of her group's activity). The prevalence of learning in play from children of other ages may be important for future programming in this context, particularly with regards to creating classrooms or play groups based on learning level across age groups. Integrating older children in teaching models may also be an effective way to adapt programming in child-centered ways.



### **Rohingya children use space flexibly and fluidly during play**

The space the children are able to occupy has significant potential to make a difference in the kind of play, both what is enacted and with whom. Little is yet known about how surrounding environments of refugee children can affect their choice of activities, physical or otherwise, but a small body of research has begun to emerge<sup>10</sup> on this topic. For example, cramped living conditions have been documented as barriers to active indoor play<sup>11</sup>. Alternately, proximal found spaces<sup>12</sup> – those which are not specifically designed for play – or other informal public and community spaces<sup>13</sup> have been identified as spaces that are possible or have potential for children's play<sup>14</sup>. Our observations remain largely consistent with this extant literature. Though children were most often observed in their homes, we also found that in many instances, the activities of focal children also spanned around, across, and between multiple homes or in public spaces. In particular, children were able to move relatively freely in and out of other homes, particularly those of relatives.<sup>15</sup>

*“She went to the gate of the third house in the opposite direction to where the shops are and there were a lot of kids standing in a small gathering. They were looking at something. In a moment she came back toward the house with her brother. In a few moments, again she was walking holding Aziz's hand and walked toward the gate of the third house beside HC. There were 7 kids looking inside the IOM health center (HC). I went beside the gathering and found they were watching a TV (cartoon channel- JOJO).”*



*“Rakiba was standing in front of the yard holding a black plastic bag in her one hand and one corner of her frock in her other hand. She saw me and stared at me for a while. She ran inside the house. She came back in a few seconds. She along with Saida and Kabir started walking and talking. After walking for a while, they reached a narrow alley. They sat there on a jute bag. They talked with one another for a while. Rakiba tried to open the plastic bag. Saida helped her to open the bag but they failed. Then Kabir whispered something into Rakiba’s ear. Rakiba tore two leaves from the tree next to her. Saida took a leaf from Rakiba’s hand. Rakiba and Saida started to rub the leaves on the ground. They painted the ground in front of them with green color from the leaves.”*

*“Mita was sitting on the bench. She stood up and ran to the door of another house. She found a plastic bag and a plastic spoon there. She sat on the ground and started stirring sand with that spoon. She tried to take some sand inside the plastic bag with that spoon, but she couldn’t hold sand on that spoon as the spoon was too flat and small too. Zaman who was selling clothes came to the house where Mita was sitting previously. Mita threw the plastic bag away and ran to Zaman. She started looking and touching the clothes from Zaman’s basket. Then she sat on a bag of sand just beside the basket. She started handling this and that cloth from the basket. Zaman didn’t seem to be bothered at all by Mita’s activity. He left the place taking the basket up and went to another door. Mita stood up and followed Zaman to that house. Mita picked a small piece of paper up from the ground, and directly put it in her mouth. Moni came out of the house with a packet of pickles from which she was already eating. She offered it to Mita. Mita took the packet from Moni’s hand. Moni got inside the house. Mita spat something out of her mouth. She sucked a bit of pickle from that packet. Then she entered the house with the packet in hand.”*

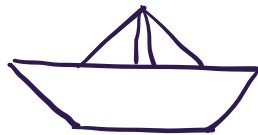
**▲ Rohingya children use their imaginations to create toys and games in a sometimes-hazardous context**

The objects and materials to which the child has access are an integral component of the play spaces or environment. In a resource scarce setting, Rohingya children have adapted their play in ways that engage their imaginations and show a strong propensity for creativity. This can be seen in the ways they are developing their own games and toys with objects readily available to them in the absence of ‘store-bought’ toys and games. In our observations, Rohingya children often use objects they find around them in play settings, including tubing and sand.

*“Zannat took an empty plate and put some sand and some leaves on it. Kolima said to Zannat, ‘Don’t give me so much broth.’”*



*“Mohammad looked at the pieces of plastic with shredded ends and got up to look for more plastic on the ground. While roaming around, he found some and came beside the blue drum for shade from the sun. He took the collected pieces of shredded plastic and joined them together like the long tail of a kite. He got up and started running with it with a beaming smile as a sign of success.”*



*“Mostafa used a large piece of plastic and a rope to build a boat to use in the canal.”*

*“She 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 brings the feathers together and holds them in one place from the stem. She takes the stick and places the bundle of feathers on one end. She then separates a string from the 'broom' and tears it off. 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.”*

Literature on early childhood development and pretend play notes that high quality pretend play may link to higher level cognition, social and linguistic competence, and abstract thought<sup>16</sup>. Our preliminary findings suggest that children are creative in the use of their imaginations and show resourcefulness in finding and making tools to create toys and games. In some cases, these toys mirror everyday household objects (such as the broom in the quote above). This use of imagination, creativity, and resourcefulness in the context of community and household routines may be considered in the development and adaptation of future programs, interventions, and policies created for these young children.

Examples also show that children are using objects such as bicycle spokes, or repurposing discarded items in their play. Some of which present potential significant health and safety concerns.

*“Abbul was sitting on the concrete steps holding in his hand a piece of bicycle wheel spoke bent in a 60-degree angle. He had 4 rubber bands spiraled one after the other and a matchstick that he was using to remove gunpowder and pour into the end of the spoke.”*

Highlighting and promoting the use of spaces such as BRAC’s Humanitarian Play Labs to caregivers as physically and emotionally safe spaces for children to play, learn, and heal, as recommended in our Fathers’ Perceptions of Play research brief, may alleviate some of these risks.



## Conclusion

The child POV data from Cox's Bazar serves to deepen collective knowledge on the ubiquity and importance of play and pretend play. It builds upon the extensive scholarship of sociocultural approaches to children's play in non-western contexts in both anthropology and, to a lesser extent, psychology<sup>17</sup> around themes such as extended family networks and mixed-age play interactions. The emergence of multi-age play groups is consistent with existing cross-cultural literature in human development<sup>18</sup> but in contrast to western literature where mothers or other adults act as playmates for young children<sup>19</sup>.

Nevertheless, the data also underscore the need to further examine how the Rohingyas' unique context, including 'play resources' (e.g. objects, space)<sup>20</sup> and socio-cultural ways of interacting within the community, can affect play engagement<sup>21</sup>. The frequent use of found spaces – those spaces between and around housing not designed specifically for play<sup>22</sup>– as a setting for Rohingya children's play activities is a unique factor contributing to their play environment not often seen in western literature. For example, previous studies of refugee children have shown the absence of dedicated safe spaces for play to be a barrier for more physical activity or 'active play'<sup>23</sup>. Additionally, play in the context of physical hazard is one that is not often found in extant literature and is a contribution that could help us to better understand play for children in Cox's Bazar as well as other humanitarian and low-resource settings.

Lastly, Rohingya children's creativity with everyday objects reflects a specificity to their environment and the types of materials available to them. Various forms of object-use emerged, namely exploration, construction, play, tool use, and tool making<sup>24</sup>. Some uses appear to reflect cultural experiences of children (e.g. imitating a parent or caregiver) while other uses reflect the development of their own new ways of using an object (e.g. creating their own tools). In either case, play appears to have created a space where both existing and new knowledge can potentially merge and emerge<sup>25</sup>.

The young Rohingya children in Cox's Bazar camps have endured immense trauma, and yet they also demonstrate remarkable resourcefulness and resilience. Play has the potential to play a significant contributing role in these positive outcomes<sup>26</sup>. This research provides a small foundation towards better understanding how children in these contexts perceive play. As a medium through which we can glean critical insights on children's understanding of their sociocultural contexts<sup>27</sup>, our ability to observe play in these Rohingya communities is invaluable.

Preliminary findings demonstrate that policy- and program-relevant insights into playful learning can be gleaned from a simple and rapid child point-of-view approach. While we share our findings in this area, we acknowledge that to truly see play through the eyes of children, greater time and investments in this area are needed in order to develop studies where the voices of these young children are heard, not through conversations with or observations of adults, but through their own words and thoughts.

This research is not meant to provide a full perspective into the lives of children, but allows researchers to feasibly use a simple, rapid, and cost-effective point of view approach with implications for building future programs, policies, and interventions designed and adapted for children in humanitarian contexts.

Future programs, policies, and interventions designed and adapted for these children can leverage these insights to advance child-centered approaches that are locally and culturally grounded.

Knowing how children play and with whom they play can help practitioners meet children where they are for the greatest possible impact. A greater understanding in this area will also inform culturally-grounded and adapted policies created for Rohingya children in Cox's Bazar.

## References

- 1 [https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/2021\\_jrp\\_with\\_annexes.pdf](https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/2021_jrp_with_annexes.pdf)
- 2 Knörr, J. (Ed.). (2005). *Childhood and migration: From experience to agency*. London: Transaction.
- 3 Gaskins, S. (2013). Pretend play as culturally constructed activity. *The Oxford handbook of the development of imagination*, 224-247.  
Gaskins, S. (2015). Yucatec Mayan children's play. *International perspectives on children's play*, 11-22.  
Goncu, A., Tuermer, U., Jain, J., & Johnson, D. (1999). Children's play as cultural activity. In A. Goncu (Ed.), *Children's engagement in the world: Sociocultural perspectives* (pp. 148-170). Cambridge University Press.  
Kirova, A. (2010). Children's representations of cultural scripts in play: Facilitating transition from home to preschool in an intercultural early learning program for refugee children. *Diaspora, Indigenous, and Minority Education*, 4(2), 74-91.  
Rogoff, B. (2003). *The cultural nature of human development*. Oxford university press.
- 4 Roopnarine, J. L., Patte, M. M., Johnson, & J. E. David Kushner, eds. 2015. *International Perspectives on Children's Play*.  
Roopnarine, J. L. (2015). Play as culturally situated: Diverse perspectives on its meaning and significance. *International perspectives on children's play*, 1-7.
- 5 Yoshikawa, H., Ramachandran, A., Kim, S., Trang, K., Aber, J.L., Jukes, M., & Wuermli, A. (2021). *A Conceptual Framework for Assessing Social Interactions that Support Playful Learning in Home, School and Community Activity Settings*.
- 6 Rogoff, B., Morelli, G. A., & Chavajay, P. (2010). Children's integration in communities and segregation from people of differing ages. *Perspectives on Psychological Science*, 5(4), 431-440.
- 7 Sangaramoorthy, T., & Kroeger, K. A. (2020). *Rapid ethnographic assessments: A practical approach and toolkit for collaborative community research*. Routledge.
- 8 Garcia, S., & Olson, C. (2008). *Rohingya: Burma's Forgotten Minority*. field report, Refugees International, Washington, DC, 19.
- 9 [https://www.poverty-action.org/sites/default/files/publications/Rohingya%20History%20Fact%20Sheet\\_2020.04.30.pdf](https://www.poverty-action.org/sites/default/files/publications/Rohingya%20History%20Fact%20Sheet_2020.04.30.pdf)
- 10 Chen, S., Carver, A., Sugiyama, T., & Knöll, M. (2021). Built-environment attributes associated with refugee children's physical activity: a narrative review and research agenda. *Conflict and health*, 15(1), 1-10.  
El Gemayel, S. M. (2020). *Childhood and play 'in-between': Young Iraqi and Syrian child refugees' play following armed conflict and forced displacement to the northern suburbs of Beirut, Lebanon* (Doctoral dissertation, UCL (University College London)).



- 11 Allport T, Mace J, Farah F, Yusuf F, Mandjoubi L, Redwood S. "Like a life in a cage": understanding child play and social interaction in Somali refugee families in the UK. *Health Place*. 2019;56:191-201. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.healthplace.2019.01.019>.  
Arcan C, Culhane-Pera KA, Pergament S, Rosas-Lee M, Xiong MB. Somali, Latino and Hmong parents' perceptions and approaches about raising healthy-weight children: a community-based participatory research study. *Public Health Nutr*. 2018;21(6):1079-93. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S1368980017001719>.  
El Gemayel, S. M. (2020). Childhood and play 'in-between': Young Iraqi and Syrian child refugees' play following armed conflict and forced displacement to the northern suburbs of Beirut, Lebanon (Doctoral dissertation, UCL (University College London)).
- 12 Woolley, H. (2021). Beyond the Fence: Constructed and Found spaces for children's outdoor play in natural and human-induced disaster contexts—Lessons from north-east Japan, and Za'atari refugee camp in Jordan. *International journal of disaster risk reduction*, 56, 102155.
- 13 El Gemayel, S. M. (2020). Childhood and play 'in-between': Young Iraqi and Syrian child refugees' play following armed conflict and forced displacement to the northern suburbs of Beirut, Lebanon (Doctoral dissertation, UCL (University College London)).
- 14 Veronese, G., Sousa, C., Cavazzoni, F., & Shoman, H. (2020). Spatial agency as a source of resistance and resilience among Palestinian children living in Dheisheh refugee camp, Palestine. *Health & Place*, 62, 102304.
- 15 See Gibson (1979) on environment and theory of affordances
- 16 The definition of 'home' was inclusive of the homes of relatives according to a study of refugee children in Palestine (Veronese et al., 2020).
- 17 Whitebread, D., & O'Sullivan, L. (2012). Preschool children's social pretend play: Supporting the development of metacommunication, metacognition and self-regulation. *International Journal of Play*, 1(2), 197-213.
- 18 For reviews see:  
Gaskins, S., Haight, W., & Lancy, D. F. (2007). The cultural construction of play. *Play and development: Evolutionary, sociocultural, and functional perspectives*, 179-202.  
Goncu, A., & Gaskins, S. (Eds.). (2007). *Play and development: Evolutionary, sociocultural, and functional perspectives*. Psychology Press.  
James, A. (1998). Play in childhood: an anthropological perspective. *Child Psychology and Psychiatry Review*, 3(3), 104-109.  
Schwartzman, H. (Ed.). (2012). *Transformations: The anthropology of children's play*. Springer.  
Sawyer, R. K. (2002). The new anthropology of children, play, and games. *Reviews in Anthropology*, 31(2), 147-164.
- 19 See Rogoff (2003), The cultural nature of human development for review
- 20 Hewlett, B. S. (1993). *Intimate fathers: The nature and context of Aka Pygmy paternal infant care*. University of Michigan Press.
- 21 Morelli, G., Rogoff, B., & Angelillo, C. (2003). Cultural variation in young children's access to work or involvement in specialized child-focused activities. *International Journal of Behavioral Development*, 27, 264-274.
- 22 Nicolopoulou, A. (2019). Pretend and social pretend play: Complexities, continuities, and controversies of a research field. *The Cambridge handbook of play: Developmental and disciplinary perspectives*, 183-199.
- 23 Fler, M. (2009). A cultural-historical perspective on play: Play as a leading activity across cultural communities. In *Play and learning in early childhood settings* (pp. 1-17). Springer, Dordrecht.  
Woolley, H. (2021). Beyond the Fence: Constructed and Found spaces for children's outdoor play in natural and human-induced disaster contexts—Lessons from north-east Japan, and Za'atari refugee camp in Jordan. *International journal of disaster risk reduction*, 56, 102155.

- 26 Pellegrini, A. D. (2013). Object use in childhood: Development and possible functions. *Behaviour*, 150(8), 813-843.
- 27 Kirova, A. (2010). Children's representations of cultural scripts in play: Facilitating transition from home to preschool in an intercultural early learning program for refugee children. *Diaspora, Indigenous, and Minority Education*, 4(2), 74-91.
- 28 Cohen, E. (2019). Political violence (war and terrorism) and children's play. *The Cambridge handbook of play: Developmental and disciplinary perspectives*, 183-199.
- 29 Kirova, A. (2010). Children's representations of cultural scripts in play: Facilitating transition from home to preschool in an intercultural early learning program for refugee children. *Diaspora, Indigenous, and Minority Education*, 4(2), 74-91.





**NYU Global TIES for Children**

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](mailto:global.ties@nyu.edu)