

BEYOND ALLOWING CHILDREN TO PLAY: CAREGIVERS' PERCEPTIONS OF THEIR ROLES IN FACILITATING PLAYFUL PARENTING IN NYAMAGANA DISTRICT, TANZANIA

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ABSTRACT

Playful parenting supports children's learning, development and caregiver-child relationships, yet less is known about how caregivers themselves understand their role in facilitating play within everyday social, economic and cultural conditions in Tanzania. This article explored caregivers' perceptions of their roles in facilitating playful parenting among children aged 2–8 years in Nyamagana District, Mwanza Region. A qualitative descriptive design was used in Isamilo and Luchehelele Wards. Caregivers were selected purposively, and data were collected through 14 semi-structured in-depth interviews and two focus group discussions, each involving six caregivers. Data were analyzed thematically, with interpretation informed by Giddens' Structuration Theory and Kleinman's Local Moral World. Four interrelated themes were identified: participation, guidance and protection; creating time, materials and safe opportunities; teaching and nurturing through play; and shared caregiving roles and contextual barriers. Caregivers described involvement as extending beyond physically joining games to include listening, encouraging, supervising, protecting, teaching, improvising materials and creating opportunities for children to explore. However, their involvement was negotiated against livelihood demands, household labor, limited income, restricted play spaces, gender expectations and community beliefs about adults playing with children. The findings show that caregiver involvement in playful parenting is a socially organized and negotiated form of care rather than simply a matter of willingness or knowledge.

Keywords: playful parenting; caregiver roles; early childhood development; qualitative research; Tanzania

1. INTRODUCTION

Playful parenting is an important part of early childhood because it creates opportunities for children to explore, communicate, practice emerging skills, form relationships and make sense of their social world. Within families, these opportunities are influenced not only by whether children have toys or free time, but also by how caregivers respond to children's interests and create space for interaction, conversation, guidance and shared activity. Evidence from low- and middle-income countries links caregiver engagement in play, reading, singing and other forms of stimulation with positive child development outcomes (Cuartas et al., 2023; Jeong et al., 2021).

The developmental value of caregiver-child interaction is well established, but caregivers do not necessarily interpret or enact their roles in the same way. Parenting practices are socially situated: they are shaped by ideas about responsible adulthood, expectations of mothers and fathers, household routines, livelihood demands, available resources and community beliefs about childhood. Qualitative evidence from under-resourced settings shows that caregivers' perceptions of their developmental role are closely shaped by context, support systems and everyday living

conditions (Ayob et al., 2022). Limited adult participation in children's play therefore cannot automatically be treated as indifference or lack of knowledge.

In Tanzania, emerging evidence shows both the importance and the unevenness of caregiver-child stimulation. A study in Zanzibar found that regular play, communication and other stimulating activities were positively associated with child development, while maternal engagement was more frequent than paternal engagement and many households relied on homemade toys and ordinary household objects (Russell et al., 2022). Parenting interventions in mainland Tanzania have also improved caregiver knowledge, early stimulation, father engagement and the quality of caregiver-child interaction (Antelman et al., 2023; Leighton et al., 2023). However, much of this evidence focuses on intervention effects or measurable behaviors rather than caregivers' own interpretations of what their role in facilitating play should be.

This distinction matters because caregiver participation is broader than physically joining every game. An adult may facilitate play by listening to a child, encouraging an interest, telling stories, making a simple toy, supervising from nearby, helping children use a safe space or integrating a playful element into an ordinary household activity. Such forms of participation may be especially important where purchased toys are scarce, adults have heavy workloads, or grandparents and other caregivers are less able to take part in energetic physical play.

Related Tanzanian research on parental engagement in pre-primary education also shows that stakeholders define involvement differently and regard support for children's learning at home and school as an important parental responsibility (Kojo et al., 2025). Yet such framing may miss how caregivers negotiate multiple responsibilities within family life. A caregiver who leaves home to work may reduce time available for playful interaction while simultaneously fulfilling another central caregiving obligation: providing food, school needs and household security. Caregiver involvement in play is therefore best examined within the wider organization of family life rather than as an isolated behavior.

Gender and generation also shape caregiving opportunities. Mothers may have frequent day-to-day contact with young children while carrying substantial domestic and livelihood workloads. Fathers may be strongly associated with financial provision, authority and discipline, but may also listen, supervise, encourage and join children's activities. Grandparents may contribute through stories, language, cultural knowledge and supervision even when age limits physical participation. These differences suggest that shared caregiving does not require identical contributions; family members may facilitate playful parenting through complementary roles.

This article addresses the limited attention given to caregivers as reflective social actors who interpret, negotiate and sometimes reshape the meaning of responsible parenting. It draws on a broader qualitative study of caregivers' perspectives on playful parenting in Nyamagana District but is deliberately limited to the third study objective: to investigate caregivers' perceptions of their roles in facilitating playful parenting. The article asks: How do caregivers perceive their roles in facilitating playful parenting among children aged 2–8 years in Nyamagana District?

2. THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVE

The analysis is informed by Giddens' Structuration Theory (1984) and Kleinman's concept of the Local Moral World (1999). Structuration Theory rejects a simple opposition between individual choice and social structure. Individuals act as knowledgeable agents, but their actions are enabled and constrained by recurring social rules, resources and expectations. Applied to parenting, the

theory directs attention to how caregivers make choices within conditions shaped by gender norms, economic demands, household organization, community expectations and available material resources.

Kleinman's Local Moral World complements this perspective by focusing on what people consider to be at stake in everyday life. Caregivers may simultaneously value play, education, discipline, safety, food provision and economic survival. Decisions about how to spend time are therefore not always choices between a 'good' and a 'bad' practice; they may be choices between competing responsibilities that each carry moral significance. This lens is especially useful for interpreting situations in which caregivers recognise the value of play but cannot participate as regularly as they would like.

Together, these perspectives allow playful parenting to be analysed as a socially produced and morally negotiated practice. They also help avoid explanations that locate responsibility entirely within individual caregiver motivation. Caregivers exercise agency by adapting routines, improvising materials and redefining mothering, fathering or grandparenting, but this agency operates within social and economic conditions that can expand or restrict what is possible.

3. EMPIRICAL REVIEW

Empirical research consistently shows that caregiver engagement contributes to children's development, but much of the evidence has concentrated on intervention effectiveness and developmental outcomes. In a global systematic review and meta-analysis, Jeong et al. (2021) found that parenting interventions improved parenting practices, parent-child interactions and children's cognitive, language, motor and socio-emotional development. Similarly, Cuartas et al. (2023), using longitudinal data from five low- and middle-income countries, found that family stimulation through activities such as play, reading and singing predicted improvements across several developmental domains. These studies demonstrate the value of caregiver engagement, while also pointing to the need for more context-sensitive evidence on how such engagement is understood and practised.

Tanzanian studies provide further evidence that caregiver practices can change when supportive conditions are created. Leighton et al. (2023) reported that a group-based parenting intervention in rural Tanzania improved children's development and changed the type and frequency of caregiver-child interactions among both mothers and fathers. Antelman et al. (2023) similarly found that the Malezi programme improved caregiver knowledge, early stimulation, responsive care and father engagement. Ferla et al. (2023) observed improvements in community health workers' nurturing-care counselling performance following the introduction of early childhood development videos, supervision and mentorship, alongside reported increases in father engagement. These intervention studies are important, but they tell us more about programme effects than about caregivers' own interpretations of what responsible involvement in play means.

Observational and qualitative evidence also shows that caregiving roles are strongly contextual. In Zanzibar, Russell et al. (2022) found that stimulating activities were associated with better developmental outcomes, but patterns of participation differed by caregiver gender and household resources. In South Africa, Ayob et al. (2022) found that caregivers' understandings of their developmental role were shaped by the social environment, economic conditions, support structures and access to information. Such findings suggest that willingness to engage with children cannot be separated from the conditions under which caregiving takes place.

Research on parental engagement in Tanzanian pre-primary education likewise shows variation in how adults define their responsibilities and how engagement is enacted in everyday practice (Kojo et al., 2025). However, there remains limited qualitative evidence focused specifically on how caregivers in Tanzanian family and community settings perceive their role in facilitating play, particularly across different gender, generational and livelihood positions. The present study addresses this gap by examining caregivers' own accounts of participation, guidance, protection, teaching, provision and the constraints that shape these roles in Nyamagana District.

4. METHODS

4.1 Study design and setting

The study employed a qualitative descriptive design in Nyamagana District, Mwanza Region, Tanzania. This design was appropriate because the study sought a clear, contextually grounded account of caregivers' meanings, interpretations and experiences without attempting to generate a formal theory (Bradshaw et al., 2017; Colorafi & Evans, 2016; Sandelowski, 2000).

Data collection took place in Isamilo and Luchebele Wards. Isamilo represented a more urban setting, while Luchebele provided experiences from a more rural setting within the district. Selecting the two wards enabled the study to capture variation in livelihood patterns, family circumstances, access to space and other social conditions that could influence caregiver involvement in children's play.

4.2 Participants and sampling

The target population consisted of caregivers actively involved in the care and upbringing of children aged 2–8 years. Caregivers included parents, grandparents and other adults with primary responsibility for children's daily care and development. Purposive sampling was used to select participants with direct caregiving experience and the capacity to provide detailed information about playful parenting (Patton, 2015).

Fourteen caregivers participated in individual interviews. Among the interview participants, nine were women and five were men; eight were from Luchebele and six from Isamilo. Participants varied in age, marital status, educational background, livelihood activity and caregiving relationship. In addition, two focus group discussions were conducted, one in each ward, with six caregivers in each group. Data collection continued until the researcher judged that subsequent interviews were repeating information and no substantially new perspectives relevant to the study objectives were emerging.

4.3 Data collection

Semi-structured in-depth interviews were the main data collection method. The interview guide used open-ended questions to explore caregivers' understanding of play, the benefits they associated with playful parenting and the roles they believed caregivers should perform. For the present article, analysis centred on questions about caregiver responsibilities in children's play, personal participation, activities undertaken together, constraints to involvement, forms of support needed and the influence of work schedules, financial circumstances, the home environment, culture and community expectations.

Two focus group discussions complemented the interviews by allowing participants to respond to one another, give examples, express agreement or disagreement and elaborate shared social expectations. This was particularly useful for examining gender roles, intergenerational caregiving,

community beliefs and the acceptability of adults participating in children's play. Interviews and discussions were conducted with participants' consent, audio-recorded, transcribed and translated from Kiswahili into English for reporting.

4.4 Data Analysis

Data were analyzed thematically. Analysis began with repeated reading of transcripts and field notes, followed by initial coding of meaningful segments related to caregiver involvement, supervision, protection, time, materials, teaching, family roles and barriers. Related codes were grouped into categories and refined into broader themes. Themes were reviewed against the data and interpreted in relation to the article's objective and theoretical framework. Direct participant quotations were retained to keep caregivers' voices visible in the analysis (Nowell et al., 2017).

The analysis for this article concentrates only on the four themes generated under the third objective of the broader study: (1) participation, guidance and protection; (2) creating time, materials and safe opportunities; (3) teaching and nurturing through play; and (4) shared caregiving roles and contextual barriers.

4.5 Trustworthiness and Ethics

Trustworthiness was addressed through credibility, dependability, confirmability and transferability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Individual interviews and focus groups provided complementary data sources, while probing and follow-up questions were used to clarify participants' meanings. Audio recording, transcription and systematic documentation of coding supported dependability. Interpretations were grounded in participant accounts, with direct quotations used to demonstrate the relationship between the data and the reported themes.

Ethical clearance was obtained from St. Augustine University of Tanzania, followed by administrative permission from the Nyamagana District Executive Director's Office and the relevant ward authorities. Participants received information about the purpose and procedures of the study, voluntary participation, the right to decline questions or withdraw, confidentiality and audio recording. Informed consent was obtained before data collection. Identifying information was excluded from transcripts and reporting, and participant codes were used in quotations.

5. FINDINGS

Caregivers consistently described themselves as active actors in making play possible, although the form and intensity of participation varied. Their accounts moved beyond a narrow idea of play as an activity children undertake independently. Caregiver involvement included direct participation, supervision, protection, emotional availability, teaching, the creation of opportunities and the mobilization of family resources. At the same time, these roles were negotiated within economic, gendered and cultural conditions that sometimes-limited involvement. Four interrelated themes are presented below.

5.1 Participation, guidance and protection

Participation, guidance and protection were closely connected in caregivers' descriptions of their responsibilities. Thirteen of the fourteen interview participants referred to supervision or guidance as a caregiver responsibility, while eight reported personally joining children in activities such as football, running, singing, storytelling, hide-and-seek, ball play or informal conversation. Direct participation gave caregivers an opportunity to observe children more closely, while supervision was viewed as necessary for keeping play appropriate to the child's age and environment.

A 40-year-old father and farmer from Luchebele emphasized the protective dimension of caregiver involvement:

The caregiver's role is to supervise children during play. Play can involve risks, particularly when children are given complete freedom without attention to the environment. The caregiver should therefore know the type of game, the place where it is being played, and whether the area is safe for running and movement. (IDI-R1, Male, 40 years, Luchebele)

Caregivers did not equate participation only with physical involvement. Listening, encouragement and emotional availability were also understood as meaningful forms of participation. A 47-year-old father from Isamilo described his role in relational terms:

My first role is to support my children. When a child comes happily and tells me about play, I listen and encourage the child to keep trying. Another form of support is to play with them and build a friendship so the child knows the father is also a friend. (IDI-R14, Male, 47 years, Isamilo)

Focus group participants similarly linked involvement with confidence, relationship-building and developmental judgement. One father explained that adults should encourage, provide safe materials, supervise and sometimes join the game, while also understanding what forms of play were appropriate for the child's age. Across accounts, therefore, caregiver participation was both relational and practical. Caregivers sought to balance protection with space for exploration: too little supervision could expose young children to risk, while excessive restriction could reduce independence, peer interaction and learning opportunities.

5.2 Creating time, materials and safe opportunities

Caregivers recognised that facilitating play required time, materials and an environment in which children could participate safely. This was also the theme in which the difference between what caregivers valued and what they could regularly practice became most visible. Nine interview participants specifically described work, household duties or livelihood pressures as reducing time for interaction. Materials and suitable play spaces were also recurring concerns, although caregivers frequently described improvising with ordinary objects and locally available resources.

A widowed grandfather in Luchebele described the conflict between a child's expectation of interaction and the caregiver's responsibility to secure household income:

Sometimes the caregiver returns from work during the day but still needs to go back to the farm or the lake later. The child sees the caregiver at home and expects time for play, while the caregiver must continue working to meet the family's needs. This creates a conflict between caregiving time and income-generating responsibilities, especially because the work schedule is unpredictable and there is no fixed time. (IDI-R4, Male, 43 years, Luchebele)

This account illustrates that absence from play was not necessarily a rejection of playful parenting. Rather, caregivers could face competing obligations that each represented responsible caregiving. The focus group data reinforced the way multiple constraints could accumulate:

Work takes time away, low-income limits choices, and beliefs tell the parent that play is not important. When all three are present, the child is left to play alone. (FGD-L05, Male, 48 years, Luchebele)

The constraints differed somewhat by context. Luchebele participants frequently referred to farming, fishing and market schedules, whereas Isamilo participants more often discussed business demands, food costs and limited space. Across both wards, however, caregivers described practical adaptations: short interactions after work, conversations during household tasks, storytelling on rest days and the use of simple household or locally available materials. These adaptations demonstrated caregiver agency but did not remove the structural pressures associated with long working hours, unstable income and restricted environments.

5.3 Teaching and nurturing through play

Caregivers also perceived themselves as teachers and nurturers. Eight interview participants described teaching through everyday activities, and eight explicitly referred to identifying or nurturing children's talents or interests. Playful parenting was therefore often integrated into ordinary family life rather than treated as a separate programme or scheduled session.

One father described using routine livelihood and household activities as opportunities for guided learning:

I teach children to sweep, make simple brooms for the compound, milk livestock, and care for animals. These activities can also have a playful element, even though they are connected with practical work. The caregiver, therefore, needs to be creative, consider what is suitable for the child, observe the kind of activity the child needs, and provide guidance according to the child's interests and abilities. (IDI-R1, Male, 40 years, Luchebele)

A mother in Luchebele similarly described allowing her child to participate in ordinary household work because observation and imitation created opportunities for learning:

When I am washing utensils or doing other work, the child comes and participates. I allow the child to join because, through that participation, the child is learning. (IDI-R5, Female, 32 years, Luchebele)

Intergenerational differences broadened the meaning of participation further. A grandmother explained that older caregivers could contribute through stories, songs, language, guidance and cultural experience even when they lacked the strength for energetic games:

Grandparents may not have the strength for running, but we carry stories, songs, language, and experience. We can sit with children, tell them about earlier times, teach respectful behaviour through stories, and supervise simple play. (FGD, Female, 56 years, Luchebele)

Taken together, these accounts show playful interaction as a form of socialization through which children observe, imitate, practice, ask questions and receive feedback. Caregivers transmitted practical skills, language, values and cultural knowledge while also observing children's interests. Importantly, participants' accounts distinguished age-appropriate and enjoyable participation from imposing excessive work on children. Everyday tasks became playful learning opportunities when participation was safe, voluntary, guided and suited to the child.

5.4 Shared caregiving roles and contextual barriers

Caregivers located playful parenting within a wider family and community system. All fourteen interview participants identified at least one constraint to involvement, although the type and intensity of constraints varied. Responsibility was distributed among mothers, fathers, grandparents

and other family members, while community norms influenced what forms of adult participation were considered acceptable.

One father and football coach in Isamilo described community judgement as a direct barrier:

The challenge often comes from the community. In a setting where adults playing with children is unfamiliar, people may see the caregiver as wasting time or having nothing serious to do. For such interaction to become accepted, community-wide education is needed so that an adult sitting, playing, or exercising with children is understood as a normal caregiving practice. (IDI-R12, Male, 34 years, Isamilo)

A second father in the Isamilo focus group expressed the same tension more briefly:

People generally accept children playing with other children, especially football. Less accepted is adults joining children. Some people still see that as lowering oneself. (FGD, Male, 34 years, Isamilo)

Gendered and intergenerational expectations were especially visible in the group discussions. Mothers were described as having frequent contact with young children through feeding, bathing, household work and supervision, yet this proximity also came with heavy domestic and livelihood workloads. Fathers were often associated with financial provision and correction, but participants also described listening, joining activities, encouragement and approachability as legitimate parts of fatherhood. Grandparents contributed through supervision, storytelling, songs, language, practical knowledge and cultural experience.

Culture operated as both a constraint and a resource. Community beliefs could make adult participation appear inappropriate, but stories, songs, riddles, dance, local games and practical demonstrations were familiar resources that supported interaction. The findings therefore suggest that shared caregiving should not be interpreted as identical caregiving. Family members occupied different social positions and had different capacities, but those contributions could be complementary.

The barriers were also interconnected rather than isolated. Economic pressure reduced time; limited income narrowed material choices; unsafe spaces encouraged tighter restriction; gender expectations influenced whose time was assumed to be available; and community beliefs could reduce the legitimacy of adults playing openly with children. At the same time, local knowledge and everyday materials created opportunities for caregivers to adapt. Caregiver agency therefore operated within social conditions that could simultaneously enable and constrain playful parenting.

6. DISCUSSION

This article examined how caregivers perceived their roles in facilitating playful parenting. The central finding is that caregivers did not understand their role as simply permitting children to play. They described an active but negotiated responsibility that combined participation, emotional availability, guidance, protection, teaching, provision, improvisation and the creation of opportunities. At the same time, these roles were shaped by livelihood conditions, gender expectations, community beliefs, material resources and the organisation of family life. The findings therefore position playful parenting at the intersection of caregiver agency and social structure.

The first theme shows that participation, guidance and protection were not competing roles in caregivers' accounts; they were interdependent. Caregivers could join an activity, observe a child,

listen, encourage and protect within the same interaction. This aligns with evidence that responsive parenting interventions improve parent-child interaction (Jeong et al., 2021) and with Tanzanian evidence that parenting programmes can change the frequency and quality of caregiver-child engagement among both mothers and fathers (Leighton et al., 2023). The Nyamagana findings extend this literature by showing that caregivers themselves define participation broadly: emotional presence, attentive listening and supervision may constitute meaningful involvement even when adults do not physically join every game.

This broader interpretation has practical importance. A narrow model of playful parenting that assumes adults must frequently sit on the floor, run or play with specialised toys may be difficult to sustain across diverse households. Caregivers in this study described forms of involvement that could fit different ages, abilities and workloads. Such flexibility is especially relevant for grandparents, caregivers with physically demanding work and households where daily routines leave little uninterrupted leisure time.

The second theme highlights the difference between valuing a practice and being able to enact it. Caregivers recognised a responsibility to make time for children, yet work schedules, domestic labour and income insecurity reduced availability. This is consistent with qualitative evidence that caregiving practices are shaped by socio-economic conditions, support systems and the wider environment (Ayob et al., 2022). It also complements Tanzanian intervention evidence showing that supportive information and community-based platforms can improve early stimulation and responsive caregiving (Antelman et al., 2023). However, the present findings add that information alone cannot remove long working hours, unpredictable livelihoods, unsafe environments or material scarcity.

Structuration Theory is particularly useful for interpreting this tension. Caregivers exercised agency by improvising materials, using brief moments after work, incorporating conversation into daily tasks and adapting available spaces. Yet these actions took place within structures that shaped the range of possible choices. A caregiver may value playful interaction and still return to the farm, lake, market or business because household survival depends on that work. Agency was therefore real, but bounded.

Kleinman's Local Moral World further shows why this should not be interpreted simply as failure to prioritise children. Time spent earning income may compete with time spent playing, but both can be understood as expressions of responsible caregiving. Food, school expenses, protection, discipline, future opportunity and emotional connection can all be morally important. The caregiver's everyday challenge is often to negotiate between these goods rather than choose between care and neglect. This interpretation shifts analysis away from blaming individual caregivers and toward understanding the social organisation of caregiving responsibilities.

The third theme demonstrates that caregivers considered teaching and nurturing to be integral to play. Participants described children learning through observation, imitation, storytelling, household participation and practical demonstration. This resonates with Tanzanian evidence that videos, supervision and mentorship can strengthen community health workers' counselling on nurturing care, including caregiver-child interaction (Ferla et al., 2023). It also broadens research on parental engagement in Tanzanian pre-primary education, where stakeholders often define engagement through support for children's learning and schooling (Kojo et al., 2025). In Nyamagana, caregivers described themselves not only as providers but also as everyday educators who transmit knowledge, behaviour and practical competence through ordinary family activities.

The finding is sociologically significant because it shows how cultural knowledge is reproduced through ordinary interaction. Stories, songs, language, practical skills and expectations of respectful behaviour are passed between generations, but they are not transmitted mechanically. Caregivers select, adapt and reinterpret them according to children's age, interests and present circumstances. In Giddens' terms, these everyday practices reproduce social patterns while also creating opportunities for change.

The fourth theme highlights the gendered and intergenerational organisation of playful parenting. Mothers, fathers and grandparents were positioned differently in relation to young children. Mothers often had more routine contact but also heavier domestic burdens; fathers were more strongly associated with financial provision and authority; and grandparents contributed experience and cultural knowledge while sometimes facing physical limitations. These patterns are consistent with Zanzibar evidence showing substantially more frequent maternal than paternal engagement in stimulating activities (Russell et al., 2022), while Tanzanian intervention research also shows that father engagement can increase when programmes explicitly include men (Antelman et al., 2023). The present study therefore shows both the persistence of gendered expectations and the possibility of more flexible caregiving roles.

Some fathers in the study described listening, playing, encouraging and supervising as meaningful parts of fatherhood. This is important from a structuration perspective because repeated everyday practices can widen the socially accepted meaning of a role. A father who becomes emotionally available or joins a child's activity may be drawing on existing expectations of care while also reshaping them. Similarly, a grandmother who uses storytelling as playful engagement demonstrates that participation need not be defined through physical intensity.

Community attitudes were another structural influence. Participants reported that adults who openly played with children could be seen as wasting time, behaving immaturely or lowering themselves. Yet the same cultural environment also contained stories, songs, riddles, games and practical forms of interaction that supported playful engagement. Culture should therefore not be presented as a single barrier. It provided both restrictive expectations and enabling resources.

Overall, the findings suggest that interventions should avoid treating caregiver knowledge as the only problem to solve. Caregivers may already value interaction with children but need approaches that fit real schedules, use affordable materials and legitimise different forms of adult participation. The empirical literature reviewed above shows that programmes can improve caregiver practices, while the Nyamagana findings clarify why sustained involvement also depends on livelihood conditions, family roles and community norms.

7. RECOMMENDATIONS

Parenting education should frame playful parenting as a flexible set of interactions rather than an activity that requires expensive toys, large amounts of free time or constant physical participation. Storytelling, conversation, singing, imitation, simple games and age-appropriate participation in everyday routines can make playful interaction more realistic in resource-constrained households.

Parenting programmes should recognise time poverty and livelihood insecurity as conditions that shape caregiving. Messages that simply tell caregivers to spend more time playing may have limited effect when adults are balancing unstable work, food provision and household duties. Practical guidance should therefore emphasise short, meaningful interactions that can be integrated into existing routines.

Fathers and grandparents should be explicitly included in playful parenting initiatives. Father engagement can be framed around listening, encouragement, supervision and companionship in addition to material provision, while grandparent involvement can draw on stories, language, cultural knowledge and calm supervision.

Community sensitisation should address beliefs that adult participation in children's play is inappropriate or unserious. Culturally familiar forms of interaction, including stories, songs, riddles, local games and practical demonstrations, can provide credible entry points for expanding the social legitimacy of playful parenting.

8. STUDY LIMITATIONS

The findings should be interpreted within the context of a qualitative study conducted in two wards of Nyamagana District. They are not intended for statistical generalisation to all caregivers in Tanzania. The value of the study lies instead in providing an in-depth, contextually grounded account of how caregivers interpret and negotiate their roles.

The study relied primarily on self-reported experiences. Participants may have described practices they considered socially acceptable, although probing, follow-up questions and comparison between interview and focus group accounts helped identify convergent and contrasting perspectives. Scheduling focus groups was also affected by participants' work, household and childcare responsibilities, which may have limited the inclusion of some viewpoints.

9. CONCLUSION

Caregivers in Nyamagana District perceived playful parenting as an active responsibility that extended beyond simply allowing children to play. Their roles included participation, listening, supervision, protection, encouragement, teaching, nurturing, providing or improvising materials and creating safe opportunities for children to explore. Participation could take many forms, meaning that meaningful involvement did not depend on a caregiver's ability to join every physical game.

At the same time, playful parenting was negotiated within the realities of everyday family life. Work demands, limited income, household duties, unsafe or restricted spaces, gender expectations and community attitudes influenced the time and legitimacy available for caregiver involvement. Mothers, fathers and grandparents occupied different positions within this caregiving system, but their contributions could be complementary rather than identical.

Taken together, the findings show that caregiver involvement in play is not adequately understood as an individual behaviour or a simple measure of motivation. It is a socially organised and morally negotiated form of care in which caregivers balance children's needs with livelihood demands, family responsibilities, gender expectations and community norms. This perspective helps explain both the diverse forms of caregiver participation observed in Nyamagana and the constraints that shape whether such participation can be sustained.

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