

Participatory Research Report

THE ROLE OF PLAY IN ENHANCING THE SAFETY OF CHILDREN



Time to Play Project
March, 2024

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Time to Play Project background information

Terre des Hommes Netherlands, with the financial support of Volkswagen Group Works Council through Terre des Hommes Germany, partnered with Action for Children in Conflict (AfCiC) to implement the 24-month (May, 2022 to end April, 2024) "Time to Play Project" project.

Terre des Hommes Netherlands (TdH NL) is an international non-governmental organisation committed to stopping child exploitation. Our mission is to protect children by preventing and stopping child exploitation, and by empowering children to make their voices count. Our vision is that children can flourish in a world free of all forms of exploitation.

AfCiC is a grassroots NGO established in 2003, working in and around Thika Town to rescue, rehabilitate and reintegrate street connected children, ensure access to justice for women and children who experience gender based violence. AfCiC also implements education and economic empowerment programmes while elevating the voices of children to advocate for change on matters concerning them.

The "A time to play" project aimed to contribute towards the creation of a safe environment for children aged five to seven years old to play, learn, experience and express themselves.

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Executive Summary

This participatory research was conducted under the Time to Play project, a child protection initiative led by Terre des Hommes Netherlands (TdH NL) in partnership with Action for Children in Conflict (AfCiC), and supported by the Volkswagen Group Works Council through Terre des Hommes Germany. The project aimed to create safe and inclusive spaces where children aged 5 to 17 could play, learn, and express themselves freely in Thika Municipality, Kiambu County, Kenya.

The study explored how access to play affects children's safety and their risk of exposure to exploitation. Specifically, it sought to understand the extent to which play influences children's physical, emotional, and psychological protection and how intersecting factors such as poverty, gender, caregiving responsibilities, and school access impact this relationship.

Using participatory methods such as focus group workshops, avatar creation, word clouds, and body mapping, the study engaged 60 children (44% girls, 56% boys) across four age groups. Findings revealed that while children deeply value play for its emotional and social benefits, their ability to engage in it is often constrained by structural and contextual barriers. These include household poverty, insecure environments, lack of parental care, and heavy domestic responsibilities.

The research identified multiple forms of child exploitation affecting children in Thika Sub county, including:

- Unpaid Care work, especially among girls;
- Hazardous child labour in quarries, construction, and street-based income activities;
- Child exploitation, including forced begging, theft, and drug trafficking;
- Sexual exploitation and early marriage, sometimes with adult complicity.

Children associated play with safety, happiness, and resilience, but reported that such opportunities were unevenly distributed—

particularly for out-of-school and street-connected children. Structured, mentored play spaces like those introduced by the project were cited as safe, stimulating, and protective.

The study concludes that play is not just recreational but a vital protective right. Realising this right requires addressing systemic barriers and reinforcing child protection structures through coordinated action among families, governments, and civil society actors.

- **For Parents and Caregivers:** Create loving, stable environments that prioritize children's right to play and protect them from labor and abuse. Avoid sending children out after dark and share caregiving responsibilities equitably.
- **For Government:** Invest in safe public play spaces; enforce laws against child labor, early marriage, and exploitation; and ensure all children are enrolled and retained in school.
- **For Civil Society and NGOs:** Promote positive parenting, expand inclusive play opportunities (especially for vulnerable and marginalized children), and continue participatory research to shape interventions that reflect children's voices.

This research reinforces that ensuring children's right to play is foundational to protecting them from harm—and must be prioritised in both policy and practice.



CHAPTER 1

Study overview

1.1 Introduction

This study was undertaken among children living in Thika Municipality, located in Kiambu County, Kenya. This urban location is positioned approximately 40 kilometres northeast of Nairobi and benefits from its strategic location along the A2 highway. The National Census in 2019 indicated that over 270,000 people live in the municipality. The area is home to a mix of factories, including textile, food and agricultural processing, and metal industries.

While Thika Municipality is a rapidly developing community and is home to several schools, colleges and university campuses, it is also home to many children at risk. To serve them and improve the well-being of local children, TdH NL and AfCiC undertook the “A Time to Play” project from May 2022 onwards.

The overall goal of the project was to contribute to the creation of a safe environment for children (aged five to 17) in Kiambu County to play, learn, experience, and express themselves.

The project aimed to achieve the following outcomes:

1. Children enjoy enhanced protection and safety in Kiambu County through participation in play (sports for peace), social skills learning and cultural activities;
2. Children in Kiambu County appreciate cultural diversity and express themselves through arts;
3. County and national governments, community, caregivers and stakeholders show increased commitment in supporting safe play for children.

Using the safe space created by the “A Time to Play” project, this participatory study was undertaken in 2024 to establish whether play has an influence on the safety of children, and to determine if play influences the risk of exposure to exploitation among children. This report outlines the methods used, the findings of the study and makes recommendations for future research and programming.



1.2 Key concepts

The key concepts around which this study was conducted are ‘play’, ‘safety’ and ‘child exploitation’. These concepts are described as they were defined in the context of this study below.

Play

Play is difficult to define, but generally understood to be a voluntary, recreational activity that promotes cognitive, physical, social, and emotional development. Research shows that play is essential to development because it contributes to the cognitive, physical, social, and emotional well-being of children and youth. Play also offers an ideal opportunity for parents to engage fully with their children³.

“A time to Play” project is centred around creating opportunities for children to play - to engage in sports, cultural activities and arts. In this study play is understood in the context of the The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC). In Article 31, the UNCRC recognises the right of the child to rest and leisure, to engage in play and recreational activities appropriate to the age of the child, and to participate freely in cultural life and the arts. The UNCRC emphasises that play is essential to the well-being and development of children, and it acknowledges that play should be self-directed and free from undue restrictions, providing opportunities for children to express themselves, develop physically, mentally, and emotionally, and engage with their peers in a meaningful way. This definition underscores the importance of ensuring that all children have access to safe, inclusive, and stimulating environments where they can engage in play and recreational activities.

Safety

Safety in this study is understood in relation to children’s rights outlined in various articles of the UNCRC. These include Articles 19, 32, 34, 36 and 37. Article 19 mandates that States Parties protect children from all forms of physical or mental violence, injury, abuse, neglect, negligent treatment, maltreatment, or exploitation, including sexual abuse, while under the care of parents, legal guardians, or any other caregivers. Article 32 recognises the child’s right to protection from economic exploitation and hazardous work that could interfere with their education or harm their health or development. Article 34 commits States Parties to protecting children from all forms of sexual exploitation and abuse. Article 36 safeguards children against all other forms of exploitation that could harm their welfare. Finally, Article 37 ensures that no child is subjected to torture or other cruel, inhuman, or degrading treatment or punishment. In essence, safety is broadly understood in this study as children’s protection from abuse and exploitation.

Child exploitation

There is poor agreement on the definition of ‘child exploitation’. Legislation and other standards within the United Nations and the international non-governmental organisation community reference child exploitation but do not provide a definition. None of the international or regional standards, including the UNCRC or its Optional Protocols define child exploitation. For this reason, and with the participation of children, TdH NL developed and uses the following definition of child exploitation: ‘Child exploitation is an individual, group or organisation taking advantage of an imbalance of power to get a child to engage in activities that are detrimental to the child’s wellbeing and development, and from which the alleged perpetrator(s) and/or third party(ies) gain some advantage⁴.’

³ American Academy of Paediatrics, (2018).

⁴ TdH-NL (2023)

1.3 Methodology

As part of the “A Time to Play” project, this participatory study was undertaken to establish the role of play in enhancing safety and preventing child exploitation in Thika Municipality.

Objective

To determine the role of play in enhancing the safety of children in the context of the “A time to play” project in Thika Municipality, Kiambu County, Kenya.

Research questions

1. Does play influence safety among children involved in the project?
2. Does involvement in play influence the risk of exposure to exploitation among children?
3. What are the common child exploitation issues in Thika Municipality, Kiambu County?
4. To what extent do children in Thika Municipality, Kiambu County access their rights to play and safety?

Methodology

Sampling

Purposive sampling was used to identify children in four age groups to participate in the study. Children participants in the study were drawn from the project, meaning they needed to be enrolled in the project to participate in the study. To include school-going children, children from eight schools from within the project area were included. To sample out-of-school children, children were sampled from four football teams connected to the project.

Children were aged between five and seventeen years old (mean 11 years old, unimodal age). 44% of the children were girls (n=27), 0% were gender diverse (n=0), and the remaining 56% were boys (n=34). 3% had a disability (n=2). Types of impairments were commonly physical, intellectual, learning and communication impairments. 95% were enrolled in school (n=58) and, for a range of reasons, the remainder 5% were out-of-school.

	5-7 years	8-11 years	12-14 years	15-17 years
Gender Breakdown	6B, 5G	11B,9G	11B,9G	6B,4G
In school	11	18	20	9
Out-of-school	0	2	0	1
Total	11	20	20	10

Table 1: Showing Participatory Research Participants



Data Collection

This study made use of participatory methods with children. A total of six, three-hour participatory 'focus group' workshops were facilitated by an experienced practitioner. Workshops were arranged for children in four different age groups (five to seven years, eight to 11 years, 12 to 14 years, and 15 to 17 years) to allow for some age-appropriate adaptation of activities.

The participatory workshops made use of methods developed and tested by TdH NL5. During the workshops, participatory activities were conducted. These included:

Avatars

The development of a fictional character or "friend" and exploring this "friend's" characteristics and themes related to play and safety. Children were given the option of creating an avatar as individuals, or to do so in groups. They were given time to work on their drawings and when they were done, they were guided by the facilitator to think about characteristics, including gender, age, in or out of school, (dis)ability, living situation. Further, they were asked to reflect on whether their friends had time to play, if not what stops them from playing. They were also asked to reflect on how their friends felt in relation to play, as well as in relation to the "A Time to Play" project.



Figure 1: An avatar created by children in the 5 - 7 year-old group, creating their friend. Created by a child out of school

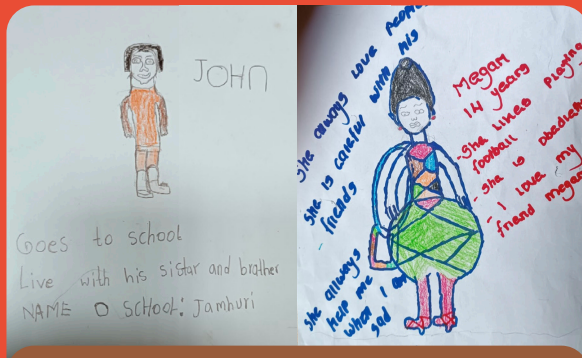


Figure 2: Avatars of friends drawn by children aged 8-11 years

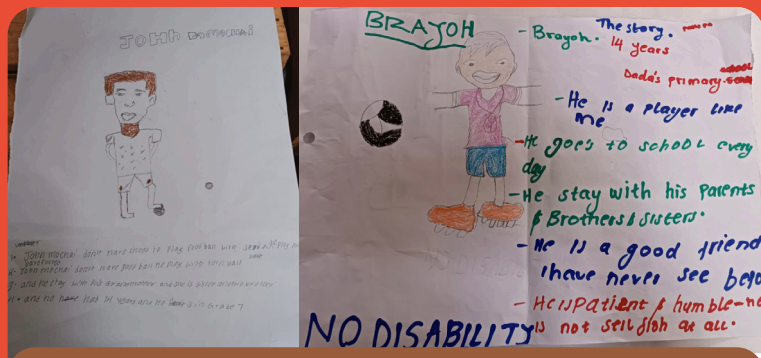


Figure 3: Avatars of friends drawn by children aged 12-14 years

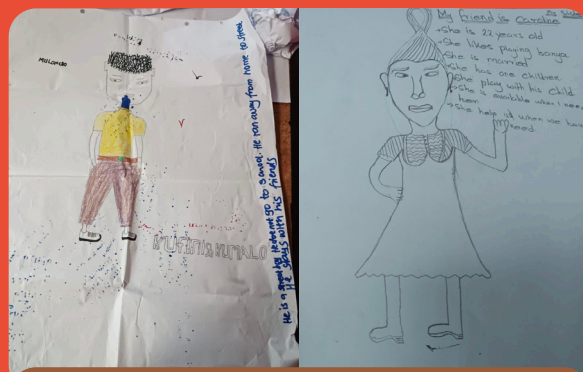


Figure 4: Avatars of friends drawn by children aged 15-17 years

Most friends created by the 15-17 year olds were mainly older siblings that had significant influence on them.

Word cloud

An individual brainstorming activity, followed by group discussion to explore children's understanding of child exploitation and how it manifests in their context. Children were given sticky notes and pens. They were asked to either draw or write what child exploitation meant to them. Once all sticky notes were collected into the word cloud, children had time to share their input. This was followed by a facilitated discussion to explore in more depth what forms of child exploitation and other unsafe situations were familiar to children in their context.

Body mapping

A creative, arts-based activity used in both therapeutic and research settings⁶ involving drawing and writing onto a large outline of a body. The method 'reduces verbal communication barriers, and facilitates the collection of rich data regarding personal experiences'⁷. In this study the activity was facilitated to encourage visual representation of places, things, people and activities that make children feel safe and unsafe in their community. Children were given the opportunity to decide how they would like to work and they chose to work in two gender specific groups (girls and boys). One child from each group volunteered to have their body outline traced on the flipcharts for the mapping exercise. Once the outline was ready, a facilitated discussion started that lasted 20-30 minutes. For each body part traced, children discussed and identified places, things or activities that make them safe or unsafe (places they go or are asked to go - legs, things they do or are made to do or see - hands and eyes, things they hear - ears, things they say or that are said to them - mouth and finally, emotions they feel or are exposed to by others - the heart).

No audio or video recordings of workshops were made. Instead a research assistant sat in on the workshops and transcribed the discussions. In addition photographs were made of the posters, word cloud and body maps created by participants, with permission.

Data Analysis

Text data from the participatory workshop transcripts were coded using ATLAS.ti. Deductive codes included codes for 'play 'safety'; 'children's perspectives'; 'forms of violence against children'; and 'intersectional factors' (for example age, gender, health status, status of family or parental care'; 'school enrolment status'). Inductive codes added included codes for themes that cropped up in the data. Examples include 'time'; 'food'; 'begging'; 'stealing' and 'friends', 'love' and 'belonging'. Within each research question data was tagged with thematic codes, organised and summarised.

Validation

Findings from the assessment were validated with 20 children out of the 60 who participated in the assessment. A summary of the findings was shared with the children. Five key findings were summarised on flip-charts and shared with children. Under each key finding, specific questions were asked for children to confirm if they recognise these findings, check whether something had been left out and/or make additions to the findings. At the same time, the conclusion and recommendations were also validated using the same approach. Feedback from the children confirmed the findings as their answers were in line with the initial input they had provided during the assessment. Caregivers and other adults (key actors) did not participate in the study as respondents, however, the findings were also validated with 35 (19 male, 16 female) stakeholders who comprised teachers, parents, business owners, Sub County Children's Officer, Counsellors and community volunteers. They acknowledged that the findings are a true reflection of what they observe in their community.

Ethical considerations and child safeguarding

The study was conducted with ethical clearance and a research

permit from the Kenyan National Commission for Science, Technology and Innovation and in compliance with the internal TdH NL Safeguarding Policy (2023).

This study included research activities with children, and therefore required considerable attention to ethical practice and child safeguarding. TdH NL is committed to both the comprehensive safeguarding of children and highest ethical standards of research. Being a child protection organisation, policy, procedures and reporting mechanisms ensure that TdH NL activities adhere to the principles of 'do no harm' and 'best interests of the child'. All participants were treated with the utmost respect and dignity as data collection activities were facilitated by trained staff, experienced in child participation.

Participation by children in the study was voluntary. Written consent and assent was obtained from the parents/caregivers and the children respectively before the children participated. Children who assented were reminded that they were at liberty to opt-out of the data collection if they wished. None of the children opted out of the research. AfCiC safeguarding focal point was present during the research and a reminder made at the beginning of each three hour session with children in the three age categories about who to talk to if they felt unsafe, disturbed by the content or if they just needed a break (time out) from the session. A safeguarding risk assessment had been done prior to the actual data collection. The signed consent forms were scanned and stored digitally in a restricted-access folder.

Confidentiality and the rights to privacy of the participants and the data obtained were respected, in compliance with TdH NL Privacy Policy (2022) and the European Union General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR).

⁶ Lys C, Gesink D, Strike C, Larkin J. (2018).

⁷ Ibid. p 1185



Limitations

The scope of the study was limited to collecting data from children, but not other stakeholder groups. Additionally all data were qualitative, from the participatory workshops. There were no adult respondents and therefore no separate data set for comparison or triangulation.

The second limitation relates to the complexity in discussing child exploitation with children aged five to seven years old. Comprehension of child exploitation for this age group was challenging and so the word cloud exercise to define child exploitation was not utilised with this age group.



CHAPTER 2

Findings

This chapter is structured around the three research questions. The first section children's descriptions of play and how it is experienced by children in their community. The type of play they engage in, who they play with and the environments in which they play are described. The second focuses on understanding context-specific barriers to play as described by children. These findings centre around the intersecting factors related to childrens' identities that affect children's rights in this municipality. Finally, the specific barrier of child exploitation is explored in the third section. The extent to which children described work, or child exploitation, affecting children in their community is outlined. Specifically unpaid care work, child labour, criminal exploitation (linked to illegal substances) and sexual exploitation of children are identified as affecting children living in Thika.

Play as described by children in Thika Municipality

To understand contexts where play occurs, most mention of play was located in the community (see table below), followed by play related to the project, at home and at school. That said, the younger children (under seven) did not seem to play in the community and felt children their age should be in school, daycare or at home. The least frequently mentioned environment for play was online.

Children shared examples of play, which were almost exclusively informal and did not include or involve adults, like parents. Exceptions were 'being at home' with parents, 'visiting their grandparents' and other relatives as well as 'going to church or mosque'. Other than this and 'going to the mall (Ananas)' and supermarkets, children were mostly left to their own devices to play with siblings or friends.

They mentioned activities like 'playing with dolls' and action figures like 'Spiderman', 'playing with friends' and games like 'jumping rope' and 'marbles'. Several sports were mentioned, including 'football', 'running', 'boxing', 'riding bikes', and 'swimming in the river'. One group of 15 to 17 year olds spoke of making games out of 'jumping over open drains' in the community near home. Two groups spoke of 'climbing trees', sometimes to 'get fruits'. Older children referred to going to parties and 'discos' or 'walking into town', meaning going into central Nairobi. While play online or in digital environments were less frequently mentioned, these forms of play included 'Playstation', 'watching Indian movies' and 'Akili Kids'. Children also referred to watching videos on phones, TV or 'USB drives from video shops'.

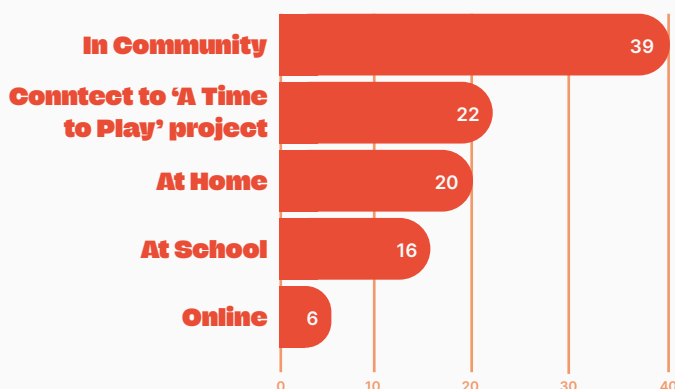


Table 2: Where did children talk about play taking place? A count of mentions related to play environment

It was clear from the data that the 'A Time to Play' project had provided opportunities for meaningful, engaging and constructive play for children. Whereas play at home, school and in the community was relatively simple and unsupervised, children were excited by the variety and mentorship offered.

With regard to sports, football was enjoyed by both boys and girls. Girls mentioned they 'loved playing football' with their friends after school and during play times in the context of the project. The children appreciated having equipment (like football 'uniforms' and 'balls'), a designated space to play football and 'coaching'. Children mentioned that before the interventions, they 'played with handmade balls on the train tracks':

"Before...we just watched, but now we get the opportunity to play. We just used to play with a ball made of paper and did not have coaches. But now we have coaches and we have access to balls. We have skipping ropes- before they weren't there"

-Child, 15 to 17 age group



In addition, it was evident that the Art Hub provided opportunities for creativity that were novel and new for children. It was clear that access to art supplies and this type of activity was new and exciting:

"I never used to play and draw before the art hub but now I am able to draw"

-Child, five to seven age group

Children enjoyed the opportunity to draw, paint and socialise with their peers. Some of the children feel that they can now draw as a result of engaging at the Art Hub. They also valued spending time with their peers as they described how this makes them 'happy', 'healthy' and 'strong'. Children in the 12 to 14 year old group said that since participating in the project they were no longer 'lonely' or 'bored'.

Children undeniably valued play, and recognised mainly the emotional and social benefits. They also recognised their rights to play, as illustrated by this quote:

"I don't feel happy seeing other children playing when I am locked up in the house. Other children are also not happy seeing their friends playing outside, and they are locked in their homes".

That said, it was evident that children, especially in the absence of spaces provided by school or 'A Time to Play', did not have access to play 'free of undue restrictions' (UNCRC, 1989). Nor did children have guaranteed access to safe, inclusive, and stimulating environments where they could engage in play and recreational activities. Lack of stimulation was evident, for example, children in the 8 to 11 age group said that they 'loved going to school' because school holidays were 'boring'. Instead of enjoying childhoods filled with play that facilitated their physical, cognitive, emotional and social development, children encountered a range of barriers to play. For some children, their basic needs were not met and play was mediated by intersectional factors including how old they were, how they were cared for by their families and the extent to which poverty limited their options.

Barriers to play

The majority (96%) of children participating in the workshops confirmed that they did have time to play, but time was not the key barrier to play in most instances. Children mentioned that they were restricted from playing due to various factors, including the weather, family obligations and individual safety risks. These restrictions varied by age and gender.

The younger children, under the age of seven, experienced the least restriction on their time for play. Their main barriers to play were weather conditions and physical safety. They said that generally parents did not allow them to play outside in the rain or when it was cold outside because of the belief that they might get sick. In addition, themes of insecurity emerged. The fear of kidnapping was said to prevent younger children from being allowed to play outside. This same fear was shared by parents. Community violence including stabbings and murder were mentioned, with some places in the community being known to be dangerous (for example 'railway crossings'). As a result young children mostly played at home, daycare or school.

Almost all of the "friends" (avatars) created by children in the workshops were said to be enrolled in school. Only one avatar was said to have 'dropped out of school'. The children who created this "friend" said that this was because they 'got involved in drugs'. While school was one of the key environments where children could spend time with friends and play, it was also associated with insecurity and, at times, violence. Children in one of the 12 to 14 year old groups said that 'walking long distances to go to school because you live far' took up their time for play and made them vulnerable. It was also a place where they experienced corporal punishment, like 'being hit on the legs' by teachers as punishment- a form of physical abuse.

Physical abuse, both at home and in the community, was mentioned multiple times by children in all four age brackets. Being 'beaten' by parents, seeing other children being beaten or 'locked up' were commonly experienced forms of violence at home. Additionally, exposure to violent behaviour, like 'seeing people fighting', including domestic violence was described as making children feel unsafe. In addition, children talked about aggression or violent behaviour by children (towards peers and adults). Examples of this included children 'showing people the middle finger', 'fighting', and 'throwing stones'.

Expanding on the theme of insecurity, a temporal dimension came to light, restricting the time when children could be safe and play freely. Children of all age groups were in agreement that

it was not safe to be 'out' and playing 'on the streets' at night or 'after dark'. They even feared being sent to the shop by parents if it was after dark. They listed the many dangers that they might encounter, including serious interpersonal violence and crime. Examples of these ranged from 'being kidnapped' to 'being raped if you use "machuom" (shortcuts)' on the way home, as described by 12 to 14 year old children. Similarly, slightly older children in the 15 to 17 year old age group, described what could happen, saying it was unsafe "going to birthdays and parties then coming home late [because] you can get pregnant or get into a fight" or be 'beaten by a thief'.

It was unclear the extent to which children themselves restricted when and where they could play, rather than their parents enforcing boundaries. The protective influence of parents sometimes limited children's freedom to play and spend time in the community environment.

The impact of parental and family care on children clearly emerged as a dominant theme. From the avatars, children demonstrated different intersectional factors impacting on children's right to play, safety and protection from child exploitation. One example is the "friend" from figure 4 above, Muloncho "Kufinish kumalo". Muloncho lives in the streets. He ran away from home (living without parental care) to stay with his friends in the streets, and does not go to school. Without parental care, Muloncho and his friends do not get time to play (they have to fend for themselves), and are exposed to drugs and other vices as the avatar story shows.

The table below illustrates the relative size of the code groups for various intersectional factors, showing that parental care was most often referenced by children in the focus group workshops. Children in all age groups said that their avatar characters lived with parents, and many with siblings and grandparents too. This was mostly described as a protective factor that made children feel safe, for example, children in one of the five to seven year old focus groups said that 'being near their parents' protected them. Of one of the avatars, a boy said:

"Seeing their cucu (grandmother), guka (grandfather) and parents make them happy and feel good inside"

-Child, 5-7 year old group

However, lack of parental care also emerged, along with some themes related to child abuse, neglect and exploitation. This, in combination with poverty (or low socio-economic status) and gender influenced how and if children had time to play. It was clear children in this community could not take it for granted that their basic needs could be met by those caring for them. Several groups of children explained how some parents needed help from children to bring in an income or contribute to the household by doing unpaid care work to allow the parents to earn a living. The way children contributed was relatively different for boys and girls.

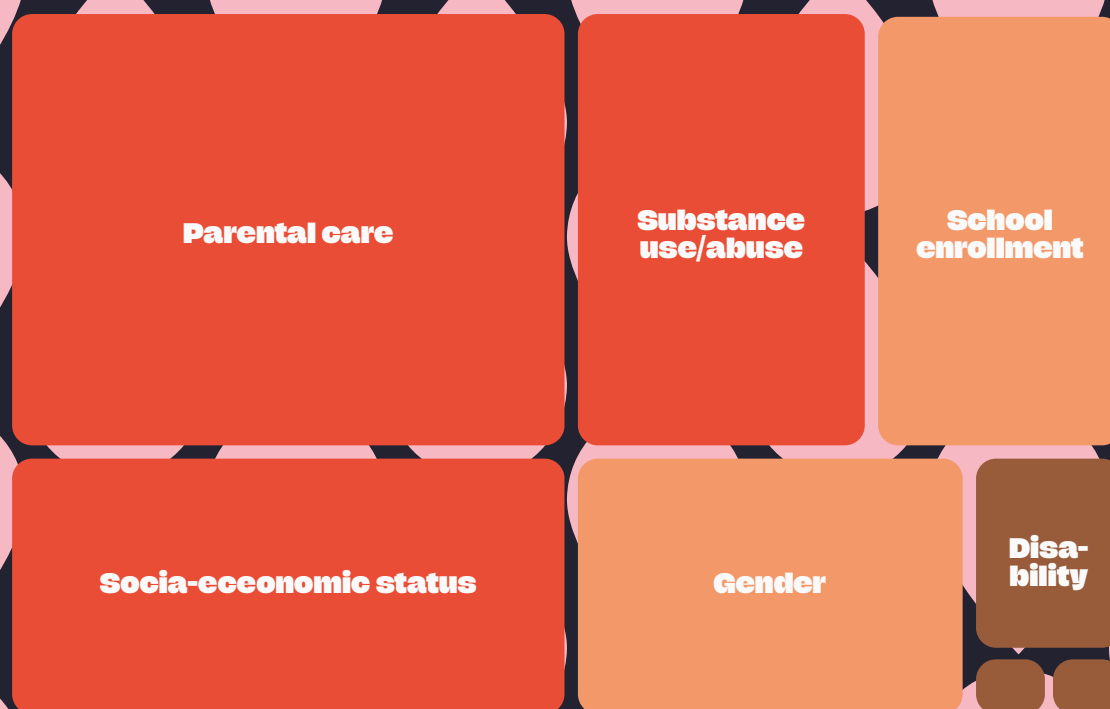


Table 3: Treemap showing relative size of intersectional factor code groups

Children in the older age brackets, between eight and 17 years old, faced more restrictions on their time and barriers to playing, as the majority cited family obligations such as 'household chores' or working outside the home to supplement household income as hindrances to their play time. Boys category reported that their avatar characters did a variety of things in their spare time which took time away from play. The activities of 'collecting scrap metal', 'begging for money on the streets' or 'use and sell of drugs after school'.

As illustrated in the quotes above, substance use and abuse were mentioned extensively in the study. This theme emerged spontaneously from the data, and was very prominent, as illustrated in the treemap above. Children in every age group raised the issue of drugs and alcohol, but one of the 12 to 14 year old groups raised it repeatedly. Substances reportedly used locally, including by children, were stimulants like tobacco (snuff, 'mbaki' and 'kuber') and chewing khat; bhang; sniffing glue; and alcohol ('karofo' or local brew). In addition a hard drug that was mentioned multiple times was "ka-white". Children explained that it was a strong medication used for treating mental health conditions but found its way to the streets and into the hands of children. Substance use and abuse was clearly associated with vulnerability and lack of security, and children in several groups associated it with negative outcomes including 'dropping out of school' and various forms of child exploitation (as will be expanded upon in forthcoming sections).

Overall, the impact of poverty and economic hardship at household level on play emerged from the data as a large theme. Socio-economic status was the third most commonly mentioned intersectional factor raised by children in the workshops. Both boys and girls also mentioned that children sometimes 'sleep hungry'.

Food was mentioned by children in all age groups. Children highly valued 'having enough to eat' and some linked having food to feeling safe. Being 'denied food' was connected to 'being abused' by parents, but it was also understood that sometimes, 'parents

have no money to buy food'. Children in one of the eight to 11 year old workshops spoke of having to 'go to strangers' houses to eat'. Slightly older children described needing to 'eat other people's food' which made them feel unsafe. Finally, children in the next age group (15 to 17 years) spoke of doing work like 'fetching water' for others in order to get food.

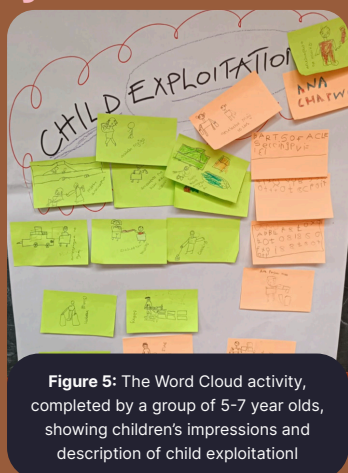
These impressions are emblematic of the fact that for some children their families were unable to meet their basic needs, and that survival was prioritised over play. Some of the avatar stories made up by the children included that parents were not able to buy 'clothes or shoes'. Alternatively, some avatars had caregivers who were unable to care for them because they were 'sick'. In addition, some told of children whose parents had passed away. This was said to be a reason that children might be living 'on the street' and especially vulnerable.

Overall, growing up in households with low socio-economic status negatively impacted on the ability of parents to provide for the basic needs of children, let alone prioritise their holistic development. This, along with the danger of violence and insecurity, constrained the enjoyment of children to play. In addition, in some cases, this also meant that children were at risk of various forms of child exploitation, as will be described in the following section.



More work, less play

It was argued in the previous section that poverty was a leading barrier to the enjoyment of the right to play for children. Even though children indicated that a majority of the avatar characters they developed did get time to play, some did not play as a result of potential or actual child exploitation. Children described having to 'work' to supplement family income. Some said their avatar characters worked without pay or parents getting paid for work done by children. Four themes emerged clearly: unpaid care and household work, child labour (including worst forms of child labour), criminal exploitation and sexual exploitation.



Unpaid care work

Unpaid care work and time spent doing 'a lot' of 'household chores' was mentioned especially frequently in children over the age of eight. The types of activities described included 'doing dishes', 'washing clothes' by hand, 'cleaning the house', 'cooking', 'building chicken coops and rabbit houses'.

The work of 'fetching water' was prominent, involving carrying heavy buckets or jerrycans from a distant tap to households without direct water supply. Some children from two separate workshops described how neighbours would manipulate children into fetching and carrying water for them, without payment:

"They lie to you that they will pay you but after you fetch water they just say, 'Thank you'" -Child, 15 to 17 year old age group

When telling the stories of the fictional avatar characters that they had developed, girls explained how some were 'locked' in their houses to help take care of their siblings, as evidenced by this quotation:

"[My friend says:] my parents lock me up in the house and they go to the market to sell things" -Child, 5-7 year old age group

There was also mention of children being left to take care of younger siblings. Of one avatar character, children in an eight to 11 year old group described:

"[Our] friends don't play as they have many chores at home, [like] bathing babies and [younger] children, so they do not get time to play. [They] go to school every day with no time after school due to many chores" -Child, eight to 11 year old age group.

It was clear that household and care work limited children's time to play, but the extent to which this met the criteria for child labour was not established by this study. Certainly families and sometimes neighbours took advantage of their relative

power over children to engage their help, but it was not always clear the extent to which this was harmful to their well-being or development. It was however noted that children in one workshop said that some children were, ***"given a lot of work even making them miss school"*** -Child, 15 to 17 year old age group.

Child labour

It was evident that some children in Thika Municipality were being exploited in child labour. Child labour is defined as "work that deprives children of their childhood, their potential and their dignity, and that is harmful to physical and mental development"⁸ Children were aware of what 'age-inappropriate' work was. They described a variety of jobs done by children, like:

"Digging other peoples shambas (farm plots) without pay or the money is given to the parents" -Child, 8 - 11 year old workshop.

"Collecting scrap metal and nails for sale" -Child, eight to 11 year old workshop.

They also gave very vivid descriptions of children doing hazardous work like:

"Carrying heavy loads at construction sites" -Child, eight to 11 year old workshop.

"Being asked to carry a twenty litre bucket of ballast on the head at the quarry" -Child, 15 to 17 year old workshop.

"Children being asked to go look for jobs at the quarry and then give the parents the money" -Child, 12 to 14 year old workshop.

Jobs like these, involving children carrying heavy loads and work in dangerous or dusty environments, are considered to be worst forms of child labour⁹.

Criminal exploitation

Based on stories developed and told by children in the focus group workshops, there were a number of ways in which children in Thika might find themselves 'taken advantage' of to engage in risky or illegal acts 'detrimental' to their wellbeing or safety¹⁰.

The first was being 'sent out to beg' in Thika town. This may not have been criminal, but 'highly organised...forced begging' is a recognised problem in Kenya and a way in which some criminal gangs have 'handlers' use children to make money¹¹. Forced begging is associated with the trafficking of children and people with disabilities in Kenya, and as children mentioned 'helping blind persons to beg in the streets', it is possible that children from Thika may be targeted by traffickers.¹²

Second, children being forced or coerced to 'steal' was mentioned. Stealing 'money', 'farm produce' and 'food' were discussed. One scenario described by a child revealed far-reaching impact of poverty and deprivation on families and children:

"Maybe a parent forces the child to steal chicken then they sell it, when the police arrest the child, the mother blames the child" -Child, 15 to 17 year old workshop.



⁸ ILO, n.d

⁹ ILO, 1990

¹⁰ TdH NL, 2023

¹¹ HAART (2023)

¹² ibid.

Finally, the theme of substance use and abuse was introduced above as a tangible risk to children's rights. Some children in the municipality, especially those out of school, mentioned that they had been asked to sell drugs. Others spoke of children 'selling traditional brew (beer)'. This notably affected children:

"Some neighbours ask you to start selling alcohol and bhang"
-Child, 15 to 17 year old workshop.

"He sells the drug ka-white and Kianjau. He keeps the drugs inside a cap. When the police come, he runs away and leaves the cap and the police do not know so they leave the cap"
-Child, 15 to 17 year old workshop.

Child exploitation in drug trafficking in East Africa involves using vulnerable children to transport and sell drugs, often under coercive and manipulative conditions. In some cases, it was explained that children were paid not with cash, but with the ka-white drug or they were not paid at all, indicating the forced nature of this act:

"Children don't get time to go and play. They are made to...sell Marijuana without pay" -Child, 12 to 14 year old workshop.

Sexual exploitation

Whilst the understanding of sexual exploitation is limited (especially among younger children), it was evident from the examples given, that children in and around Thika municipality were aware of it happening.

In addition to describing how children were 'enticed', they could identify specific spaces where commercial sexual exploitation of children occurs. Child sexual exploitation occurs when people take advantage of power imbalances and use the power they have over children, by virtue of the intersection of their age, gender, and other identity factors, to sexually abuse them in exchange for cash or kind for the child or third party'. Children spoke of children being in 'prostitution' and that some children had to 'sell their body' in exchange for money. That said, it



was also mentioned that "girls are sometimes enticed [into having sex] with sweets" (Child, 12 to 14 year old workshop). For example, Kenyatta Road (In Thika town) was specifically mentioned as a place where this happens.

Child, early and forced marriage (CEFM) refers to the harmful traditional practice of formally or informally marrying children under 18 with another child or an adult¹⁴, often without their full and free consent. CEFM denies children, particularly girls, their fundamental human rights and perpetuates cycles of poverty, gender inequality and social injustice¹⁵. CEFM is child exploitation in circumstances where imbalances of power are taken advantage of and perpetuated and some parties (like families and/or the 'spouse') gain or are promised payment (like a dowry or bride-dowry) or some other (economic or social) advantage¹⁶. Children in the older age groups spoke of parents who encouraged their daughters to exchange sex for money, and then they got 'married off' when they 'got pregnant...at a young age'. Children described how children as young as 12 were sexually exploited and married:

"Some girls, their mothers and guardians support and want them to participate in sexual behaviour. Some of them are married off before they do their KEPSEA (Kenya Primary School Education Assessment) exam. The parents support the person marrying the girls, even those in Grade 5" -Child, 15 to 17-year-old workshop.



¹⁴ UNICEF, 2023a.

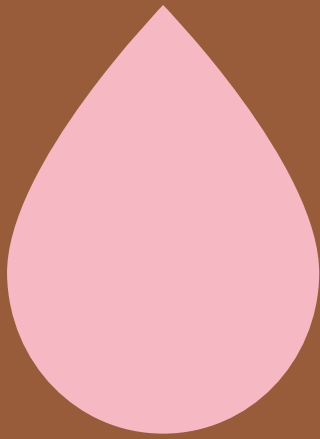
¹⁵ Campbell et al., 2020; UNGA, 2022; IPU & WHO, 2016.

¹⁶ Looksp TdH NL, 2023a.



CHAPTER 3

Learnings



This study set out to better understand the relationship between children's enjoyment of their rights to play, and their safety (specifically protection from child exploitation) in the urban municipality of Thika, near Nairobi, Kenya. This chapter summarises the learning outcomes of the study and lists recommendations for a range of stakeholders for future action.

Key findings

Children participating in the study described how and where they typically play. The majority of play was unstructured and unsupervised play, out in the community, at home or at school. In contrast, structured play with coaching, and creative play involving art, was described in relation to the 'A Time for Play' project. This was exciting and appreciated by children.

- Play was associated with **feeling happy and safe**.
- While it was generally safe to play at home, at the project and in school, **high levels of insecurity** were associated with the community- especially at night and in some 'dangerous places'.
- Children **highly valued play**, yet they **faced barriers and constraints to play**.
- Some children were safer and more free to play, while others, specifically **out-of-school and street-connected children were less safe**.

Exploring context-specific barriers to play as described by children, prominent themes emerging were the effects of low social-economic status on parental or family care. The **basic needs of children, like having enough food to eat, were sometimes not met**. Further children shouldered a heavy burden of care, taking on high loads of unpaid care and domestic work.

Children were typically expected to take on gendered roles within the family around the age they started school. It was evident among the age groups of children older than eight, that work, and for some child exploitation, affecting children in their community:

- Most children were expected to take on a heavy burden of **unpaid care and domestic work**, which took time from play and, in some cases, affected school attendance.
- Child labour, in agriculture and mining quarries were evidently affecting local children. The examples shared by children were mostly types of **hazardous work**, thus qualifying as **worst forms of child labour**.
- Criminal exploitation, linked to crime, begging and strongly linked to **selling and trafficking substances like alcohol and drugs** was described by children.
- Both **commercial sexual exploitation of children** and **child, early and forced marriage** were identified as affecting children living in Thika.

Recommendations

Parents

- Ensure loving, warm home and family environments and prioritise children's wellbeing
- Support and encourage various forms of play
Ensure children's safety, especially when commuting and avoid sending children out in the dark while unaccompanied
- Ensure that children's wellbeing and school attendance is never compromised by their responsibilities within the household
- Protect children from exploitation

Government

- Establishing Safe Play spaces for children
- Enact policy that supports sustainable livelihoods for families
- Ensure school access and enrollment for all children
- Step up community safety and prevent child exploitation
- Clamp down and prosecute child labour, sexual exploitation of children and CEFM
- Take action on drug trafficking

Civil society

- Support school enrollment, family preservation and family resilience to poverty and economic shocks.
- Raise awareness among parents and duty-bearers about children's rights, the importance of play and safety for children.
- Support positive parenting interventions to equip parents with positive parenting skills since parental care, love and familial ties are critical protective factors.
- Promote play opportunities for children, especially those that would ordinarily not have access to these opportunities.
- Invest in research to further explore structural and cultural barriers to play among older children (8-17 years) to inform future interventions.



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