



A Home-Based Free Play Journey of Parents and Children in Hong Kong: A Narrative Inquiry Approach

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Abstract

This study aimed to explore the process of co-creating free play experiences between parents and children in the context of the "PLAYBAG" project (a home-based free play intervention protocol) in Hong Kong. The study utilized the narrative inquiry approach and collected qualitative data from 24 parents who participated in the focus group interviews. This study has made significant contributions to social work practice in three ways. Firstly, it identified four core elements for parental education in kindergartens: relating rapport, capturing moments, co-creating new experiences, and re-authoring identity. These elements enhance parental education on home-based children's free play. Secondly, promoting free play in community education programs is crucial, emphasizing its benefits for mental health and parent-child relationships. Lastly, social workers can collaborate with designers to create suitable materials for home-based free play. Overall, this study provides practical strategies to enhance social work practice and benefit children and families.

Keywords: Free Play; Narrative Inquiry; Identity; Attachment; Emotion Regulation

Introduction

Children's free play refers to their engagement in unstructured, spontaneous, and voluntary play activities. These activities are driven by the children's own will and choices, without the imposition of specific rules or adult interference [1, 2]. Free play stands in contrast to structured play, which often involves rules and objectives imposed by adults. In free play, children are able to explore their own interests, make choices, and take risks. This type of play fosters independent thinking and creative expression, distinguishing it from more structured forms of play [3, 4, 5]. It is characterized by features such as self-selected activities, active engagement, flexibility, and the opportunity for self-regulation. Free play also involves the use of imagination, improvisation, and experimentation [6,7].

The positive impact of free play on children's cognitive, social and

emotional development have been documented in various studies [3-5]. Nevertheless, the effect of children's free play on parent-child relationships and attachment was relatively less documented in related research in Hong Kong [8]. This study aimed to explore the outcomes of "PLAYBAG" protocol (a home-based free play intervention) in Hong Kong, particularly the effects on parent-child relationships.

Literature Review

Free Play and Child Development

Research has documented the influence of free play on children's cognitive development. These studies consistently demonstrate positive associations between free play and cognitive skills. Sim and Xu [9] found that free play supports the development of higher-order cognitive processes. Free play contributes to the development of various cognitive skills, including problem-solving, creativity, and executive functions. It allows children to apply critical thinking skills, experiment with different solutions, and develop strategies in problem solving [10]. Research shows that free play also nurtures creativity by promoting imaginative thinking, divergent thought, and originality [11, 12]. Furthermore, executive functions such as self-regulation and working memory are enhanced through free play experiences [13]. Promoting children to have more freedom to make choices in unstructured play activities was found to improve their self-regulation and decision-making abilities, consequently leading to better school achievement [13].

In recent years, researchers have focused on understanding the influence of free play on children's social-emotional skills and mental health outcomes. The development of children's emotional self-regulation, empathy, and compassion for others has been found to be associated with free play, which also facilitates the establishment of secure attachments [14]. Free play has been positively associated with emotion recognition, which helps generate self-capacity to handle stressful social situations. As a result, free play can promote

children's social skills in the formation and maintenance of friendships, which are crucial for healthy social and emotional development [15, 16].

Free Play and Children's Mental Wellbeing

Research has shown that free play has a positive influence on children's mental well-being. A decline in children's opportunities for free play over the past half-century has been associated with an increase in children's mental health problems, such as depression, anxiety, and suicide [17]. Free play provides children with opportunities to explore and express their emotions, leading to positive emotional experiences and overall satisfaction. Studies indicate that free play can effectively reduce anxiety, promote emotional flexibility and calmness [18], aid in the development of emotional self-regulation and expression [16], as well as foster secure emotional attachments to help children cope with anxiety and stress [14,19-21]. Unstructured play has also been found effective in promoting students' happiness and playfulness, which can contribute to their mental health and well-being during times of crisis and transition [8, 22].

In addition, free play plays a significant role in building resilience in children, allowing them to cope with adverse circumstances and bounce back from challenges. Engaging in spontaneous free play helps children develop flexibility and resilience in their emotional and social responses, enabling them to adapt to various situations. Free play provides a simulated and immediate reality that allows children to explore the social and emotional world from a unique perspective. It encourages them to embrace unpredictability and uncertainty in real-life situations, explore different scenarios and roles, and develop a sense of self-efficacy and confidence in facing challenges [20].

Free Play, Parenting and Parent-child Relationship

Research suggests that free play can have a significant impact on the formation of secure attachments between parents and children. The quality of parent-child interaction during free play can contribute to the enjoyment of playing and further reinforce their bond. In fact, greater involvement in free play and higher parental sensitivity, which refers to the ability to engage in positive interactions with children, are expected to foster secure attachment [23].

Additionally, studies have found that children are more likely to engage with their parents in a positive manner during free play compared to structured tasks. Active participation by parents in free play contributes to the development of mutually positive and supportive interactions. During free play, parents also demonstrate higher levels of cognitive scaffolding, engage in fewer negative parenting behaviors, and use more interactive language when compared to structured tasks [6].

Furthermore, research has indicated that free play facilitates communication between parents and children, allowing children to learn both verbal and nonverbal cues. Both mothers and children were found to produce more utterances and words during free play. Additionally, the occurrence of mind-mindedness comments (comments that reflect an understanding of the child's psychological perspective) was more frequent during free play [24]. This type of interaction is associated with lower parenting stress and hostility [25].

Research suggests that parents who encourage free play tend to adopt more positive and child-centered parenting styles. These parenting styles are characterized by greater sensitivity and responsiveness to their children, a higher use of positive reinforcement, and the display of warmth towards their children. In turn, these parenting behaviors are significantly linked to the development of positive behaviors in children. On the other hand, negative parental behaviors have been found to have a stronger association with children's problematic behaviors [10]. Furthermore, the level of maternal respect for a

child's autonomy and the mother's ability to regulate strategies for her child's behavior have been found to be significantly related to the children's compliance with authority figures [26].

Research Question

Many of the research studies concerning free play have often focused on child development. However, there was a relatively limited amount of research examining the effect of free play on the parent-child relationship, particularly in Hong Kong. For the studies that examined parent-child interaction, many of them relied on self-reported measurement scales [1, 23, 25, 26] and observation or video-taped sessions that were then coded and rated by researchers [23-25, 27]. However, none of these studies have explored the parents' narrative of their free play experiences with their children.

To address this research gap, our study adopted a narrative inquiry approach [28-30] to collect qualitative data from the parents who participated in an intervention project called "PLAYBAG" protocol. This intervention project focused on home-based free play and was organized by a non-governmental organization (Playright Children's Play Association) in Hong Kong. Specifically, our study aimed to explore the process through which parents and their children co-create free play experiences within the "PLAYBAG" project.

Methodology

Human subject research ethics approval was granted from the first author's University. Invitations to participate in this study were sent to seven kindergartens served for the low-income families in Hong Kong. Low-income families were selected in this study because most of these families lived in small premises and could not financially afford their children to engage in social and recreational activities. Considering this, this PLAYBAG intervention would be beneficial to them. Three kindergartens replied to participate in this study. Briefing sessions were conducted for the parents, and 135 families agreed to participate in this project. A PLAYBAG was given to each family, which included the following items, 1) A play diary introducing for parents with tips and examples of using play materials in the PLAYBAG; 2) A diary for parents to record their observations, feelings and insights when playing with their children; 3) A diary for children to record their feelings when engaging in free play; 4) Unstructured play materials or toys which could promote imagination & social play (pop-tube, little creatures, building blocks etc.) and exploratory & creative play (magnetic bar, flashlight, hourglass, plastic crystal ball and bell etc.).

The PLAYBAG Intervention protocol was administered to parents and children in these three kindergartens for six months starting from February 2021. Contents of PLAYBAG intervention protocol include: 1) Parents sessions which introduced importance of free play, tips and skills of using PLAYBAG which contains unstructured play materials for parents and children to enjoy free play at home and school; 3) Providing a Play Diary for parents and children to record their observation and feelings when they engaged with each other in free play; 4) Teachers trainings which educated teachers' competencies of providing necessary support to parents in this protocol.

Narrative inquiry was adopted to be the research methodology and focused on three major dimension serving for the conceptual framework of analysis: temporality, sociality, and spatiality [28-30]. First, temporality dimension captures events under study in temporal transition. This dimension explores the connection of people, places and events from the past, the present and the future [28,29]. Second, sociality dimension explores the personal conditions, including feelings, perceptions, hopes, desires, and moral disposition of the participants. This dimension also examines social conditions of which participants' experiences and events are understood in the context of culture, social systems and language [28,29]. Third, spatiality

dimension is about the physical and relational process in which the events and inquiry take place. This dimension also focuses on experience is narratively constructed and narratively lived in the research process. The researcher and participants collaboratively work together to construct meaning of the phenomena as experienced by the participant and researcher [30].

Prior to the research, the researchers explained to research participants (parents) regarding the purposes of the study, confidentiality issues, and participants' rights to withdraw from the study. Participants who agreed to participate in this study were required to sign written consent. Four focus groups with parents were conducted one month after completion of the PLAYBAG intervention, to gather their in-depth experiences of free play with their children using the PLAYBAG. When conducting narrative inquiry in focus group, the researcher facilitated the participants to share their stories (lived experiences) of engaging in free play with their child(ren) and constructed their stories in a way to create a coherent and temporal narrative experiences [28,29]. This methodology also encouraged the participants and the researchers themselves in the process of listening to, constructing, and reconstructing the stories that they heard in the focus group. Therefore, researchers encouraged the participants to participate in giving comments and feedback to each story in a constructive and respectful atmosphere [28,29].

The interview guide was designed with reference to the literature review and addressed the research questions. Some of the narrative inquiry questions in the interview guide were as follows:

1. What were your lived experiences of engaging in free play with your child(ren) before and after joining this PLAYBAG programme? (Temporality)
2. What were your children's feelings and your feelings about the experiences of engaging in free play with your child(ren)? What did these experiences mean to you? (Sociality)
3. What was the environment during the experiences of engaging in free play with your children? How did the environment impact the experiences? (Spatiality)

Focus group interviews were audio recorded, and contents were transcribed. Transcripts of these interviews were made available to the participants for discussions in the narrative analysis process. The participants then interpreted their transcripts, and collaboratively constructed their experiences in free play with the researcher. Based on Clandinin [29], four stages of data analysis were involved in narrative inquiry in this study: (1) preparing the data; (2) identifying themes of data and further categorization of themes into categories which are constructed and named in the process; (3) organizing data is a chronological procedure in which associations of themes and categories with hierarchies and orders are developed and evaluated (4) interpretation of data is about aggregating data into meaningful groupings as interpretation or from implicit understanding.

Results

Twenty-four parents agreed to participate in the focus groups interviews. They were all female with the mean age 29 ($SD=2.55$). 41% of them have one child, 39% having two children and the rest of them having three children. 51% were home makers, and the rest of them engaged in part-time or full-time jobs. The responsible staff of the PLAYBAG project have already made considerable efforts to recruit fathers for this study, but unfortunately, their attempts have been unsuccessful. This is primarily due to the fact that most of the fathers are required to work for the entire day.

Relating Rapport

During focus group discussions, parents expressed the importance of an egalitarian and non-judgmental attitude during free play with their children when utilizing PLAYBAG at home. 22 parents in the focus interviews expressed that they changed in the ways of relating with children in play after joining the PLAYBAG project. They

believed that maintaining such an attitude was essential for fostering an enjoyable free play experience, and building rapport and bonding with their children. They viewed free play as an opportunity to bridge the power gap between parents and children, with parents consciously relinquishing their own authority to teach their children how to play. The more parents respected their children's freedom and allowed them to play as they wished, the more balanced the power dynamics became between parent and child. This approach facilitated the development of a trusting and respectful parent-child relationship. Witnessing this transformation further emphasized the significance of fostering an environment that supports and encourages one's child in independent and imaginative play. The following excerpts from the focus group discussions highlight several parents' perspectives:

Previously, I used to take on a more dominant role in teaching my son how to play. I always instructed him how to play. Rules and regulations were often set by me. I wanted him to play safely, and not to damage the furniture in such a small living space. He usually lost his interest to play quickly. However, my perception changed after learning how to use PLAYBAG. I realized that my son had the ability to explore various ways of play. When I stopped exerting control over his play and refrained from passing judgment on his actions, he gained more freedom to discover his unique ways of utilizing the different loose parts in the PLAYBAG to create his own play scenarios. (P1)

The dimension of temporality helped to explain the connection of people, place and event from the past to the present. Before participating in the PLAYBAG project (time), P1 adopted a more dominating role (event) when engaging her son (people) in play time because she worried about her son would hurt himself and others in their small home (place). After joining the PLAYBAG, she stopped giving him too much control but allowing him to have more freedom in the ways he played, she discovered that her son could be very creative at playing.

Another parent, P4 changed her perception towards parental role and gradually her personality became more flexibility and outgoing.

My parents used to adopt an authority figure to discipline me and so I used to be like a teacher teaching my son how to play. My parenting style should be strong enough to discipline my son. If he did not follow my instructions, I was inclined to change his behavior and guide him on the proper ways to play. This was also expected in our culture emphasizing the virtue of respecting seniority and precedence. But, after using PLAYBAG in our free time, I was surprised to discover that he had his own ways of innovative thinking. Sometimes, I let him be the teacher to teach me how to play instead, it sounds interesting. I became more joyful and open to accept my son's creative ideas (P4)

The dimension of sociality helped to realize P4's free play engagement with her son in the context of culture and social systems. First, the parenting style in her family-of-origin (family system) influenced her to adopt a similar parenting style. Secondly, cultural values of expecting the children to learn respecting seniority and precedence also influenced P4's values of parenting (cultural values). After joining the PLAYBAG project, she changed in perception to her parenting roles, adopting a more egalitarian attitude, and even encouraged her son to be a 'teacher role' to teach P4 how to play.

In the past, I held the belief that my daughter lacked the ability to engage in play independently and therefore needed my guidance to partake in play activities. However, upon introducing PLAYBAG into our playtime routine, I was astonished to witness the vast array of play possibilities she effortlessly uncovered using the diverse loose parts provided by the PLAYBAG. It became evident to me that by granting her the respect and freedom to explore and play according to her own innate instincts, she not only became remarkably resourceful but also displayed an exceptional level of creativity. My daughter

liked to turn on the flashlight and switch off all the lights in our small living room. I couldn't imagine it before our room became a small theater. Together we used our fingers to make different shadows on the wall, which looked like different kinds of animals. This small theater became our stage of performance which was created by us. (P18)

The dimension of place encompasses both the physical and relational aspects of the playful process co-created by P18 and her daughter. Upon engaging in the PLAYBAG experience, P18 started adopting a more playful approach to interact with her daughter during free play. Together, they transformed their modest living room (physical place) into a charming little theater, providing a physical space that facilitated imagination and creativity. Additionally, they collaboratively explored different ways to play with a flashlight (relational process), emphasizing the importance of the relational process in their playful interactions. By actively engaging in this co-creation, P18 and her daughter found joy and fulfillment through their shared experiences.

Capturing Moments

Creating an environment that nurtures children's exploration in free play is crucial for fostering meaningful engagement between parents and their children. This goes beyond simply offering ample physical space; it involves providing appropriate resources and ensuring a supportive family dynamic. These resources include allocating sufficient time for free play, supplying materials that stimulate creativity and imagination, and building a strong bond within the family unit. Capturing the favorable moments to engage children in free play is also key. The insights gained from 18 parents from focus group discussions further highlight the significance of these factors in cultivating an optimal environment for fostering parent-child engagement in free play. The following excerpts from the focus group discussions highlight several parents' perspectives:

I was delighted when my son actively requested more time to engage with the PLAYBAG for play. It filled me with joy to see his inventiveness and motivation as he explored the various loose parts within the bag. Giving him the freedom to mix in his other toys with the contents of the PLAYBAG allowed for even more creative possibilities. What truly warmed my heart was witnessing him reconnect with older toys that had been neglected, such as LEGO sets that he hadn't played with in years. It was a beautiful reminder of the power of free play in reigniting his interest and imagination, and I couldn't help but appreciate the value of such experiences. (P20)

Temporality dimension helps to identify the change of play behavior of P20's son that is associated with P20's initiative in capturing the right moment to sustain son's interest in free play. By giving son more initiative in mixing the old Lego with the play materials in the bag, P20 could capture favorable moments to light up son's new idea of using the old Lego again. Her son had already put aside these old Lego for many years, and now he discovered a new way to use these old toys.

The temporality dimension plays a crucial role in highlighting the shifts in P20's son's play behavior across the time, which can be directly linked to P20's proactive approach in recognizing and seizing the right moments to sustain his interest in free play. By granting her son greater agency in integrating the old Lego pieces with the other materials in the PLAYBAG, P20 was able to identify and capitalize on these favorable moments, reigniting her son's imagination and prompting him to rediscover the potential of these long-neglected toys.

It is noteworthy that her son had disregarded these old Lego sets for a significant period of time. P20 demonstrated a proactive and insightful approach to fostering her son's play experiences. Her ability to capture the opportune moments not only reignited her son's interest but also contributed to his development by encouraging him to explore and repurpose toys in an entirely new and exciting way.

Another parent P21 shared an episode she engaged with her daughter, as shown in the excerpts below:

Inside the PLAYBAG, there was a flashlight accompanied by various toy animals. I observed my daughter engrossed in using the flashlight to cast shadows of the toy animals onto the wall. She explored the different effects and sizes of the shadows created. Recognizing her enthusiasm, I decided to rearrange the furniture to create a more favorable space for her shadow play. We discovered that the shadows appeared clearer and more defined when the room was dimly lit. I suggested closing the curtains and turning off the lights, or even engaging in this activity together during nighttime. The most touching moment came when my daughter expressed her desire to spend more time playing with me. These were precious and unforgettable moments that I had not experienced before. (P21)

The social dimension explores changes in individual aspects such as emotions, perspectives, aspirations, and desires of P21 and her daughter. They captured the favorable moments of free play by utilizing the nighttime and creating a more conducive space, allowing P21 and her daughter to enjoy their playtime together. These precious moments intensified their aspiration and desire to spend more time together, fostering a deeper exchange of feelings and emotions.

Cocreating New Experiences

Engaging in PLAYBAG allowed parents and their children to become partners, co-creating playful experiences and offering positive reinforcement to one another. Positive attitudes, such as appreciation and encouragement, exchanging ideas constructively played a crucial role in strengthening both parties' motivation to make discoveries during free play. Parents uncover their children's potential, abilities, and personalities, fostering a deeper understanding of their children and enhancing connection and bonding within the family. This was exemplified by excerpts from the focus group discussions:

My son developed a keen interest in playing with magnets. He would experiment with different objects to see which ones were attracted to it. Through this exploration, he gained a deep understanding of the magnetic properties of various materials. Interestingly, before using the PLAYBAG, he wasn't particularly inclined towards curiosity and exploration. However, I noticed a significant change in him after engaging with the PLAYBAG. I discovered that he had a natural talent for discovering and exploring new things, and I couldn't have been more thrilled to join him in his imaginative play. We would often pretend to be at an airport, with him taking on the role of an airport security guard, and I played the part of a flight traveler. He sat on the bed as if he was sitting at the check-in counter in the airport. During our play, he would use the magnet to inspect my pretend luggage for any prohibited items. (P23)

The narrative from P23 demonstrates the shifts in her son's intentions and actions towards exploration following their engagement in free play. This transformation was associated with the co-creation process that took place between P23 and her son during their playful interactions. P23 actively participated in the pretend play, which in turn heightened her son's enthusiasm for assuming the role of a security guard. Their collaborative involvement in the playful process strengthened their bond and contributed to the positive changes observed in the son's approach to exploration. Based on her narrative, the bed was identified as the place where the co-creation process took place.

Another parent, P8 shared her experience as follows:

My children thoroughly enjoyed playing with plastic tubes, connecting them together to create a long tube with varying lengths and sizes. They would then take marbles and drop them into one end of the tube, timing how long it took for the marbles to come out the other end. I added an additional challenge for them: let's see if we could catch the marbles instead of letting

them roll out freely. This activity unveiled a hidden potential in my children - their willingness to explore and try new things during free play. Interestingly, this aspect of their personalities was often overlooked or not acknowledged by my relatives. Instead, my relatives would often label my children as shy and passive, which would sometimes make my children feel unhappy. (P8)

The narration from P8 indicates the sociality dimension, which describes the changes in the personality of P8's children during free play. P8 actively participated in the co-creation process by exchanging new ideas for playing marbles with her children. Interestingly, her relatives' comments on her children initially obscured P8's own perception of their abilities. However, she eventually discovered that her children had untapped potential in the realm of free play.

Reauthoring Identity

Parental discovery of their child's abilities of which they were previously unaware enabled them to facilitate the development of their child's potential that was very important not only to help the child maintain their motivation to try out free play in their daily activities but also foster the healthy development of child's self-identity. Health and positive self-identity could be co-constructed in free play through mutual exchanges between parents and children, which refers to the process of re-authoring. Re-authoring involves reflecting on and revisiting the events, experiences, and interpretations that make up one's narrative, with the goal of transforming or reframing them in a new light. Through re-authoring, individuals can reinterpret their past and present selves, constructing a more empowering or meaningful narrative that aligns with their desired identity or goals. This process often involves exploring alternative perspectives and actively engaging in dialogue or reflection to reconstruct the narrative in a way that serves a particular purpose or understanding. Re-authoring is an on-going process which usually takes a relatively longer time. As such, 14 parents in the focus interviews revealed relevant information that could reflect the process of re-authoring, as revealed by two of the following focus group discussion excerpts:

My daughter liked to use a plastic tube to chat with me at nighttime. Specifically, before we went to sleep, she would softly whisper into one end of the tube and ask me to guess what she was saying. It was adorable to hear her say "I love you, Mom" through the plastic tube. Over time, that plastic tube became our special way to share our secrets and have heart-to-heart conversations. Through this, I gradually discovered that my daughter was a caring child who could express her love and compassion towards others. I loved her not only because she was my daughter, but also because of these caring qualities that I deeply admired. So, I talked to her in our private talk: 'you are a caring child'. I used to have negative thoughts about my parenting abilities, as I always felt I wasn't good enough. However, I was deeply moved by the fact that my daughter saw me as a good mom now (P12).

The sociality and temporality dimensions are key in analyzing P12's narrative about her changing self-identity and perception of her daughter's identity over time. During their intimate moments of free play, P12 and her daughter built a strong emotional connection and attachment. P12 observed her daughter as a nurturing and caring child, which in turn reinforced her perception of herself as a capable and good mother. This process of narrative exchange, particularly during their free play sessions using a plastic tube as a space for private conversation, solidified and reaffirmed their newfound positive identities.

My son loved playing with building blocks and the little plastic creatures. It was delightful to watch him create a garden for the creatures to live in. However, there were times when he would accidentally knock down all the building blocks. In the past, I used to scold him for not taking care of his toys. But recently, I discovered that he had a deeper intention behind his actions. He was trying to convey the importance of protecting creatures on

the earth through his imaginative play. It struck me that my son was not just playing but crafting a storyline. He was a smart writer instead. Moreover, he included me in his narrative by assigning me the role of a safety guard in the garden. He explained that I played the role of protector all along in his daily life to ensure he wasn't harmed (P17).

The narrative from P17 indicated that the re-authoring process occurred during P17's interaction with her son in the dramatic activity. During this exchange, she gained a new perspective on her son's abilities as a talented writer. This experience not only allowed her to view her son with new identity, but also view herself as a protector which was co-created and incorporated within the story crafted by her son.

Discussion

This study filled the research gap explored the process through which parents and their children co-create free play experiences after participating in the "PLAYBAG" project. The narrative inquiry approach in this study provided valuable insights into the dynamics, impacts, and meanings associated with the parents' and children's experiences in free play. This study found that the journey of parents and children engagement in free play encompassed several inter-related aspects that contribute to the overall experience. These aspects include, 1) relating rapport; 2) capturing moments; 3) co-creating new experiences, and 4) re-authoring identity.

This study found that relating rapport in free play is very important to foster a positive and harmonious connection between parents and their children. While echoing with the findings from several research [6, 10, 23], this study further found that parents' awareness of adopting an egalitarian and non-judgmental attitude is influential to build a sense of mutual understanding, respect, and trust that creates a foundation for effective communication and collaboration during free play. Relating rapport also entails being nonjudgmental and supportive, allowing for open expression and the sharing of ideas during play. They can engage in play more effectively, making it an enjoyable and enriching experience for both parties. By fostering relating rapport in free play, parents can create an atmosphere where children feel valued, understood, and validated. This, in turn, promotes a sense of security and encourages children to explore, experiment, and take risks during play.

Establishing an egalitarian and non-judgmental attitude in relating rapport with children is challenging to parents in Hong Kong. Chan et al. [31] found that psychological control parenting was a prominent style that many mothers adopted in Hong Kong. This type of parenting involves attempts to exert control over the psychological and emotional development of the child, encroaching upon areas such as their thought processes, self-expression, emotions, and attachment to parents. Psychological control is rooted in manipulation and exploitation of the parent-child bond, such as love withdrawal and guilt induction, excessive expression of disappointment and shame, exhibiting possessiveness and overprotectiveness on children.

In this context, the present study found that the PLAYBAG intervention protocol could be useful in promoting parents' awareness and encouraging them to adopt an egalitarian and non-judgmental approach when building rapport with their children during free play. In other words, the intervention through free play could be seen as a way to reduce parents' inclination towards the psychological control parenting style, which was found to be prevalent in Hong Kong according to Chan et al. [31].

The present study identified that capturing moments was another element which could facilitate playful and meaningful free play experience. Engaging in free play provides numerous opportunities for parents and children to capture special moments and create lasting memories. This aspect involves recognizing and appreciating the small, playful and meaningful moments that occur during play, such as shared experiences and moments of discovery. The present

study found that parents could take an active role in capturing these moments by seizing favorable time, space and resources for co-creating the playful process. Furthermore, parental playfulness was found in the present study, to play a crucial role to promote parents' sensitivity to capture playful moments. Parental playfulness is demonstrated when parents adapt a flexible, humorous, playful and creative approach when handle various situations and interactions with their child, in particular changing the tone of harsh situations and transforming them into enjoyable experiences [32].

The present study supported the findings of Shorer et al. [33], who suggested an association between parental playfulness and children's emotion regulation. When parents engaged in playful behavior, they could collaboratively generate new playful ideas with their children, fostering constructive and enjoyable moments for both parties. This not only enhanced their ability to navigate challenging situations with their child more effectively but also contributed to the child's emotional well-being. These positive outcomes were attributed to the increased emotional awareness of the parent and the establishment of a strong parent-child bond.

Co-creating new experiences was identified in the present study, to be the third element that could foster parent-child engagement in free play. Free play provides a wonderful opportunity for parents and children to collaborate and create new experiences together. This aspect involves the exploration of possibilities, the experimentation with various roles or scenarios, and the indulgence in free play. A parent goes beyond simply being a passive observer or facilitator of the child's play, and instead, becomes a collaborative journey of exploration and discovery. By actively engaging in play, parents can take on roles suggested by their children or introduce fresh ideas that enrich the overall play experience.

The act of co-creating new experiences not only nurtures collaboration, but also fosters creativity and facilitates mutual learning between parents and children. Parents can play a pivotal role in co-creating new experiences by actively participating in play alongside their children. Parents and children can bring new ideas into the play, introducing creativity and variety. This could involve suggesting new scenarios or themes for the play, presenting different props or toys that can spark the child's imagination, or proposing imaginative variations to the ongoing free play process. So, the present study affirmed the findings of Davenport et al [10], which supported free play allowed parents to foster a sense of shared exploration and encourage children to think outside the box, broadening their horizons and stretching their imaginative capabilities.

The present study identified the fourth component 're-authoring identity' in free play journey. It refers to the process of both parents and children having the opportunity to explore and redefine their identities through play. During free play, parents and children can engage in a variety of roles and activities, which allows them to redefine and expand their identity. They can try on new roles, experiment with different ways of thinking, and develop new capabilities. In this process of re-authoring identity, both parents and children are encouraged to express themselves freely, without fear of judgment or limitations. By engaging in free play, parents and children expand existing narratives or perceptions about themselves and each other. This provides a unique opportunity to examine and transform their own identities. Through mutual exchange of emotional bonding, they can explore different aspects of themselves as caregivers, playmates, and lovely children, lovely parents etc. In particular for parents, this exploration may involve adopting new roles, trying out different parenting styles, and discovering hidden strengths in parental roles. Overall, re-authoring identity in free play allows for personal growth and transformation for both parents' and children's identities. It provides a safe space to explore new roles, perspectives, and capabilities, leading to a more enriched and fulfilled sense of self.

This study contributed to the impact evaluation of using free play

intervention on enhancing parent-child communication and bonding, promoting positive roles and identity in parent-child relationship. This study has made significant contributions to social work practice in three ways. Firstly, it has identified four core elements that can be incorporated into parental education in kindergartens. These elements are relating rapport, capturing moments, co-creating new experiences, and re-authoring identity. By incorporating these elements, parental education on home-based children's free play can be enhanced. This may involve teaching principles and benefits of home-based free play, effective ways to engage children in free play, creating quality free play time within families, and promoting a co-parenting perspective that encourages both fathers and mothers to engage in free play with their children.

Secondly, it is crucial to promote free play to the public and emphasize its importance in community education programs. These programs should focus on generating understanding of the benefits of free play, such as positive outcomes in terms of mental health and parent-child relationships. By highlighting these aspects, the public can become more aware of the significance of free play and its positive impact on various aspects of life. Thirdly, social workers could cooperate with designers to design various loose materials or toys that are suitable in home-based free play. Overall, this study suggests practical strategies for incorporating the identified core elements into parental education and emphasizing the importance of free play in community education programs. By implementing these suggestions, social work practice can be enhanced, leading to positive outcomes for both children and families.

Limitations

This study focused exclusively on the perspectives of parents regarding their experiences of free play with their children. While parents' viewpoints are valuable, it is important to also consider the perspectives of the children themselves. The interpretation of the results should take into account that only parents participated in this study. Additionally, the absence of fathers' perspectives limits the interpretation to solely the female perspective. It is essential to understand that free play is relevant across various demographic and socio-cultural backgrounds, but this study's generalizability is restricted to the parents who participated in the project and shared their stories in the focus groups. Lastly, it is crucial to acknowledge that the study respondents' accounts were based on their retrospective recall, which may have been influenced by memory loss, reluctance to recall information, and the passage of time.

Conclusion

This study adopted a narrative inquiry approach to explore the process of co-creating free play experiences between parents and children after participating in the "PLAYBAG" project. The findings highlighted four key aspects: relating rapport, capturing moments, co-creating new experiences, and re-authoring identity, which are crucial in facilitating meaningful and enjoyable free play.

Establishing a relating rapport was found to be important in fostering a positive connection between parents and children during free play. By adopting an egalitarian and non-judgmental attitude, parents can build mutual understanding, respect, and trust. Creating an atmosphere where children feel valued and validated encourages them to explore, experiment, and take risks.

Capturing moments during free play was identified as another essential element. Recognizing and appreciating small, playful, and meaningful moments helps create lasting memories and strengthens the parent-child bond. Parental playfulness is crucial in capturing these moments, as it allows parents to approach potentially challenging situations with flexibility, humor, and creativity.

The study emphasized the positive outcomes of co-creating new experiences through active engagement in play. Collaborative generation of ideas enhances collaboration, creativity, and mutual learning between parents and children. Parents play a pivotal role

in introducing new ideas, suggesting new scenarios and meanwhile be sensitive to children's constructive ideas in play. Additionally, the study identified the process of re-authoring identity during the free play journey. Both parents and children have the opportunity to explore and redefine their identities through play. Engaging in various roles and activities allows them to expand existing narratives, freely express themselves, and transform their own identities.

The PLAYBAG project has made a significant contribution to the understanding and promotion of meaningful free play experiences between parents and children. This project has offered practical strategies for parents to create enjoyable and enriching free play experiences with their children.

Compliance with Ethical Standards

The authors have no relevant financial interest or affiliations with any commercial interests related to the subjects discussed within this article.

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Informed consent has been sought from the research participants before collection of data.

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