Play as the invisible casualty of COVID-19 :

The perspectives of eight Maltese parents on the impact of the

Coronavirus pandemic on children's play.

Enrica Caruana

June 2023

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Abstract

Play is important for all children as it not only has a big impact on their development, but is also rehabilitative and therapeutic when children are faced with situations of crisis. Taking a socio-cultural stance, this study explores how Maltese children's play was affected by the COVID-19 pandemic. Adopting a qualitative approach I sought the perspectives of eight parents whose children were all between the ages of three and eight during the time of the study. Data was collected through eight semi-structured interviews. Auto-photography and photo elicitation of children's play experiences at home and outside prior, during and post-pandemic were also used. Adopting a narrative analysis approach, findings show that children's play was greatly affected due to the pandemic, in particular their outdoor play which was, in many cases, limited during this time. This resulted, however, in children being able to develop their indoor play further, even using play to understand all the change going on in the world around them. Screen time, also was affected with an increase resulting in 100% of the children within my study. Screen time was also used however, as a means of socialisation with family and friends with children coming up with innovative ways to play through the screens. This study also sheds light on struggles that families and young children faced during the pandemic leading to suggested recommendations to parents, schools and policy-makers in order to create awareness and suggest ways to counteract any negative consequences on children.

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Keywords: play, COVID-19, benefits of play, children, social interaction

Dedication

To my husband

without your support and encouragement this would not have been possible.

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List of Abbreviations

COVID-19   Corona Virus Disease

CRC   Committee on the Rights of the Child

CSEP   The Canadian Society for Exercise Physiology

FREC   Faculty Research Ethics Committee

IPA   International Play Association

MFWS   Malta Foundation for the Wellbeing of Society

UN   United Nations

UNCRC   United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child

UNICEF   United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund

VoIP   Voice-over Internet Protocol

This dissertation follows the APA 7th edition referencing style.

Chapter 1

Introduction of the study

1.1 Introduction

This qualitative research study aims to explore how children's play was affected by the COVID-19 pandemic. This is done from the perspective of eight parents. The proposal for this study emerged when some COVID-19 restrictions were still in place. At the time, it was imperative that research be held to discover how the pandemic featured within children's play, and how it impacted their play experiences and their development.

In this chapter I begin by briefly discussing play and play in the Maltese context. Subsequently, I discuss children's right to play and children's play in situations of crisis. This is followed by a description of the aims of the study, the theoretical framework that underpins this study, the background of the study as well as the significance of the study.

1.2 What is Play?

Play is difficult to define as it is a complex and ambiguous concept (Eberle, 2014; Howard & McInnes, 2013; Moyles, 1989). It is subjective as it can be interpreted differently by different people from diverse cultures, religions and socio-economic backgrounds (Howard, 2002), depending on one's beliefs and experiences. What play means to one person does not necessarily reflect the meaning of play for another. Moreover, adults and children can have a different understanding of play (Turnbull & Jenvey, 2006).

Different theorists provided different definitions of play including: play as being children's work (Montessori, 1964); as a learning mechanism (Uren & Stagnitti, 2009; Vygotsky, 1978); as an exploratory behaviour (Piaget, 1951) or as a free expression (Froebel, 1887; Albon, 2001); however, all agree that play is essential for children's development

(Cook & Lieberman, 2017; Keefer, 2012; MacFarlane, 2020; McNeil Sallman, 2007; Wei et al., 2015).

Play and its importance for children's learning, development and mental health have been debated by philosophers, academics, and researchers for centuries (Ginsburg, 2007). Children are growing up in an increasingly fast-paced world where they have less time and space to play than in previous generations, making play all the more important (Ebbeck & Waniganayake, 2010; Isenberg & Quisenberry, 2002).

1.3 Children's right to play

Play is considered so important for children's holistic development that it has been recognised by the United Nations as a right of every child (United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child [UNCRC], 1989). Article 31(1) declares that state parties must "recognise 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". Moreover, Article 31(2) of the same Convention affirms that "state parties shall respect and promote the right of the child to participate fully in cultural and artistic life and shall encourage the provision of appropriate and equal opportunities for cultural, artistic, recreational and leisure activity." These articles are drafted in very broad terms and do not provide a definition for 'play' or 'recreational activity', which may lead to different interpretations.

The UN Committee on the Rights of the Child (CRC) (2013) states that Article 31 of the UNCRC (1989) enriches children's lives as it promotes play, which is crucial for the quality of childhood, promotes resilience, and supports the child's right to optimum development.

However, even though there seems to be a consensus about the need and benefits of play for children (Bruner, 1983; Piaget, 1951; Vygotsky, 1978), yet, children seem to be more deprived of freedom and play than ever before due to various factors including increased urbanisation, more structured spaces, institutionalisation of childhood, and the rise of computer and video games amongst others (Gray, 2018; Singer et al., 2009). This decrease in play was further heightened during the COVID-19 pandemic when children were many times confined to playing indoors. At the time, play advocates implored governments to address this deprivation to minimise negative developmental impacts on children (Gill & Miller, 2020; Okechukwu, 2021).

The importance and right to play are further safeguarded by the International Play Association (IPA), an international non-governmental organisation which advocates in favour of play, and aims to preserve, protect and promote children's right to play. In its *Declaration on the Importance of Play*, the IPA (2014) stresses the pivotal role of play within a child's life by claiming that play is a process rather than an activity. The IPA (2014, p. 1) also holds that play is a "fundamental part of life; it is a biological social, cognitive necessity for individual children, but also has benefits for society and the human species." The IPA (2014) also highlights the negative effects of play deprivation of play on the children's development, often resulting in symptoms such as loss of brain activity as well as depression.

It is therefore imperative that play is safeguarded and protected in order to enable all children to play freely as this will not only aid a child's development but it will also help children overcome difficult situations they might find themselves in. This is especially significant in today's reality where the effects of play derivation during the pandemic on children may not be as yet known.

1.3.1 Children's rights to play: The Maltese context

Malta became a signatory on the rights of the child in 1990 (Office of the Commissioner for Children, 2015). This saw the establishing of the office of the Commissioner for Children in 2003 to promote children's welfare and to monitor and enforce compliance with the UNCRC in Malta (The Commissioner for Children Act, 2003. Cap.462, Act VII, Article 2 and 17). One of the functions of the office of the Commissioner for Children is "to promote the highest standards of leisure, play and recreational facilities for children" (The Commissioner for Children Act, 2003. p.3, Article 9(j)).

The Children's Rights to Play document (Sollars, 2006), commissioned by the Office of Commissioner for Children, found that children were not provided with enough opportunity for physical movement in schools due to various reasons such as inadequate indoor play areas, more importance placed on academic achievement, and not enough time allocated to play. Findings from the study also show that as children grew older, they were more likely to spend time in sedentary behaviour through screen time.

Officially introduced in 2014, The Malta Foundation for the Wellbeing of Society (MFWS), published a document, "Fil-Beraħ" (Satariano et al., 2021), which aimed at evaluating the state of outdoor play in Malta. It was noted that children's outdoor play is on the decrease, due to globalisation, urbanisation and technology, amongst others. The National Children's Policy (Ministry for Family, Children's rights and Social Solidarity, 2017) also indicates that children's indoor play is being affected due to parents' busy schedules and children's extra-curricular activities resulting in a more sedentary lifestyle. It further states that all children should have access to play and play spaces, and should moreover be included in the decision process when setting up play spaces.

1.3.2 Children's play during COVID-19 and situations of crisis in Malta

COVID-19 started with a pneumonia outbreak in Wuhan, China in December 2019. Followingly, it spread to other countries very quickly prompting and urging countries to enforce nationwide lockdowns (WHO, 2020). This resulted in school closures in 107 countries worldwide in March 2020, which affected over 800 million children and adolescents (Viner et al., 2020). Malta was one of the 107 counties to close down its schools. In fact, through Legal Notice 41 of 2020 published on the 12th March 2020, the Superintendent of Public Health ordered the closure of, amongst others, childcare centres, kindergarten centres and schools between the 13th March and end of June 2020 (Times of Malta, 2020). In March-April 2021 a second school lockdown of 15 days was experienced. Legal Notice 112 of 2020 further imposed social distancing, limiting the number of persons in public places: playgrounds and any extracurricular activities such as sports events, music lessons, dance studios, children's parties, play areas etc. where groups of children would usually play, were ordered to close down, limiting children's play and interaction with others.

Children suddenly lost access to not only friends but also to other adults who played a significant role in their lives such as teachers and coaches (Sacks & Jones, 2020). However, there was also the positive side of the pandemic, where parents could spend more time with their children and experience activities with them such as cooking, crafts and play activities, which also helped build family bonds (Deguara, et al., 2022).

Crisis situations such as the pandemic highly influence and change children's access to play (Graber et al., 2020). Since play helps give children stability, normality and enjoyment in situation of crisis, (IPA, 2017) play should not be limited but, on the contrary, should be

encouraged during a pandemic. Play may even act as a means to rehabilitate and help children cope with stress and anxiety which are tied to such situations (Chatterjee, 2018). The implementation of Legal Notice 112 of 2020, where places for play such as playgrounds were closed to the public, restricted and forbade outdoor play thus limiting children's social interaction and impacting their play experiences.

1.4 Aims of the Study

Bearing in mind the importance that play has on children's development, the aim of this study is to explore how children's play in Malta was affected by the measures implemented during the COVID-19 pandemic. I investigate the perspectives of eight parents of their children's play and how this was affected by the pandemic. Moreover, I aim to explore any changes parents noticed in the children's play as well as in their development.

The main research question of the study is:

What are the perspectives of parents on children's play during the COVID-19 pandemic?

The following subsidiary questions are investigated to aid in answering the main question:

1. How did the COVID-19 pandemic impact children's play?

2. How did the COVID-19 pandemic feature within children's play?

3. How did the change in, or lack of, play during the COVID-19 pandemic impact children's development?

1.5 Theoretical Framework

This study is grounded in Vygotsky's (1978) sociocultural theory that holds that

children learn through interacting with others and with their environment. Children benefit

from interacting, collaborating and negotiating with others in a meaningful way (Scot, 2022).

Vygotsky (1978), considered development as a socially mediated process through which

children acquire their beliefs, learn values and problem-solving skills through dialogues with

more knowledgeable persons. Through this dialogue children are able to interact with more

knowledgeable others, creating a Zone of Proximal Development (Figure 1), that is, the

space between what a child can do on their own and what the child can do with guidance

and support.
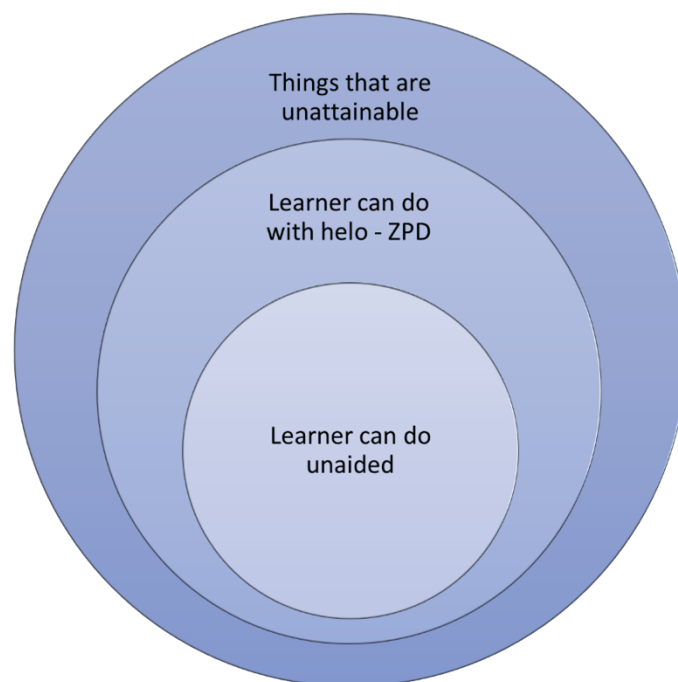
Figure 1: Zone of Proximal Development

Vygotsky (1978), believed that when children play, they perform beyond their average

age: play is a tool that helps promote cognitive growth in children, similarly leading children

to perform within their Zone of Proximal Development through interaction with more

knowledgeable others. This is supported by several other scholars (Eidsvåg & Rosell, 2021; Howard & King, 2015; McInnes et al., 2011) who also noted that play motivates children, resulting in more engagement and attention as well as higher performance in the activity, allowing learning to take place.

Given that children's play and social interaction with others were affected during the pandemic, this would suggest that children's ability to develop cognitively and work in their Zone of Proximal Development could have been affected. Vygotsky's socio-cultural theory guided this study as throughout the pandemic children's ability to socialise outside of the home was greatly affected. The lack of play and interaction that children experienced may have ultimately affected their ability to work within their Zone of Proximal Development, leading to a deficiency in skills such as social skills, language skills and thinking skills amongst others.

1.6 Background of the study

One major influence that motivated me to look deeper into children's play and how it was affected by the COVID-19 pandemic were my own children who were still very young at the time. Even if I made a conscious effort to create varied play experiences, their play inevitably changed, was limited, and to a certain extent repetitive. I was able to witness first-hand the struggles they faced when life slowly returned to normal. When starting the MTL at the University of Malta and studying play and its importance for young children, I recalled the struggles my own children were facing and was intrigued to investigate whether these struggles were experienced by other children of a similar age. I also sought to uncover the implications of such struggles would be for Maltese children as although I was aware that

some studies in this regard were being carried out internationally, I was not able to find any other study that focused directly on the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on children's play.

1.7 Significance of the study

Findings from studies about how the pandemic has influenced children's play are limited and still emerging to this day. Studies by Barron and Emmet (2020b), Egan et al. (2020), and Di Yanni et al. (2021) concluded that most children's play activities have been impacted by the virus.   Barron and Emmet (2020b) investigated the impact of the pandemic on children's play spaces and friendship in Dublin City Council area, while Egan et al. (2020) investigated the change in the type of play children engaged in and how the pandemic was reflected in children's pretend play.   A study by O'Keeffe and McNally (2021) also investigated the effect of the pandemic on play, albeit from a teacher's perspective. However, to my knowledge, no similar studies have been conducted locally yet. This study also differs from international studies as due to our close family ties, and the small size of Malta, the void of social contact may have affected Maltese children more than it would have affected children living in much larger countries who may be accustomed to living far away from their relatives.   The aim of this study is, therefore, to fill this lacuna and investigate how the COVID-19 pandemic impacted children's play from a parental perspective within the local Maltese context.

1.8 Conclusion

I began this chapter by introducing my study and providing an overview about play and play in the Maltese context. Discussing the right for children to play as well as the impact of

the COVID-19 pandemic on children's play provided a context to the study. Subsequently, I discussed the aim and the underpinning theoretical framework of the study. Finally, I discussed the background of this study and its significance. In Chapter two I present a review of literature about play, its importance in children's lives, its use in situations of crisis, and the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on children's play.

Chapter 2

Literature Review

2.1 Introduction

This chapter focuses on the review of literature related to play. It aims to give a general overview of play, what it is, why is it important and how it is affected by situations of crisis. The first part of the chapter focuses on the definition of play including the diverse types of play. This will be followed by a discussion on the importance of play and the consequences of play deprivation for children's development from a children's rights perspective. Subsequently, the focus will move on to play and how it is used in situations of crisis, specifically focusing on the COVID-19 pandemic and the restrictions it brought on play for children. This chapter concludes with an analysis of how adults could support children's play in such situations.

2.2 Defining play

Play is a self-controlled, natural, spontaneous activity; "the free expression of what is in a child's soul" (Froebel, 1887. p.55), reflecting a "happy display of known action" (Piaget, 1962, p. 93) which is done purely for fun and the satisfaction that it gives (Hughes, 2012). This sense of freedom is also reflected by the Scottish Government's (2013, p.1) document which considers play as a, "freely chosen, personally directed and intrinsically motivated" without a particular objective (Wiltz and Fein, 2006), or rewards. Such a definition of play is also echoed by Smith (2013) when he described it as:

> "a spontaneous, voluntary, pleasurable and flexible activity involving a combination of body, object, symbol use and relationships. In contrast to games, play behaviour is more disorganised, and is typically done for its own sake (i.e., the process is more important than any goals or end points)" (p. 5).

Intrinsic and autotelic play is an experience enjoyed for its own sake which reflects Sutton-Smith's (2008, p.122) definition of play as, "a pleasure for its own sake, but its genetic gift is perhaps the sense that life, temporarily at least, is worth living", a view also supported by others (Frost, 2010; 2012; Hughes, 2012; Rubin et al., 1983). Wiltz and Fein (2006) note that while such spontaneous, unstructured free play happens within the home or outdoors, frequently it does not happen in schools. This is because at school children are usually confined to specific areas with limited time to play. While Albon, (2001) also embraces a view of play as, "a free-ranging voluntary activity that occurs with certain time and place limits" (p.357), he also sees the contrasting need for play to have rules, a position also taken by Huizinga (1949) and Vygotsky (1966). The latter claims that rules are important as while the child engages in play, the child follows rules that may not have been formulated beforehand but may stem out of the imaginary situation.

Froebel (1887) on the other hand considered play as a vehicle for children to be curious, inquire, explore, and investigate; a disposition that promotes learning and the development of cognitive, creative, physical and emotional skills (Uren & Stagnitti, 2009; Wood, 2007). Correspondingly, a position also adopted by Lester and Russell (2008) and Vygotsky (1978). Also recognising play as learning, Piaget (1951) believed that play evolves as the child develops both physically as well as cognitively. However, when play is related to learning, and especially in a school contexts, it tends to be teacher-led and teacher-structured with limited materials and controlled by the adult. This view of play as learning was also emphasised by Montessori (1964) who considered it to be "the child's work" (p. 180); an experience which might not always be memorable or enjoyable for children.

2.2.1 Types of play

Hughes (2012) proposed a typology of play that included 16 different types of play, thus enabling adults working with young children to distinguish between the different play types; albeit, acknowledging that it was not an exhaustive list. Hughes (2012) play types were later organised into four groups by McKie and Casey (2017) to group similar play types together to aide identification of diverse play experiences. (Table 2.1).

Hughes Play types as grouped by McKie and Casey (2017)		
Type of play	Examples of play	Benefits of play
Group 1		
Creative play	Music, dance, painting, art and craft, pottery	Development of creative thinking, fine motor skills, hand-eye coordination and encourages experimentation, express themselves, develop their thoughts and relax (Almon, 2004; Anderson-McNamee and Bailey, 2010; Nelson et al., 2006)
Exploratory play	Exploring and investigating the environment or objects	Development of problem-solving, thinking, assessing risks, creativity and self-regulation, development of the senses
Mastery play	Growing things, demolition and construction, building of moats, digging holes	Development of motor skills, reasoning, problem solving, as well as develop respect for the environment.
Object play	Objects may include sticks, puzzles, stones, household items	Development of fine motor skills, reasoning, thinking, creativity, problem-solving skills and find answers about the world around them (Bjorklund & Gardiner, 2011) by manipulating toys.

		This is the basis for acquiring abstract maths concepts.
Group 2		
Communication play	Singing, talking, hand gestures and body language	Development of language, social skills and acquisition of vocabulary (Berkley & Mahoney, 2010; Hughes, 2012).
Dramatic play (individual make-believe)	Pretending to be a doctor treating soft toys, dressing up in parent's clothes, pretending to be the mother or father of a doll	Development of self-expression, creativity, acquire life skills, language development, make-believe with objects and situations that a child enacts on their own (Berkley & Mahoney, 2010)
Socio-dramatic play (make-believe with others)	Children recreate scenes from their lives when playing with friends	Development of self-expression, creativity, acquire life skills, conflict resolution, communication skills through the engagement with others (Berkley & Mahoney, 2010).
Roleplay	Pretending to drive, to be a celebrity by imitating voice and actions	Development of observational skills, language, communication, group work
Social play	Board games, locomotor games, conversations done with peers or adults.	Development of social skills, language, emotional intelligence and communication skills
Group 3		
Rough and tumble play	Wrestling, pushing, kicking, tumbling, pulling, contact games	Development of social skills, relationships, physical development, enable children to learn about their bodies and their limits (McKie and Casey, 2017)
Locomotor play	Climbing, swinging, skipping, chasing	Development of endurance and muscle strength, coordination, communication skills, social skills as well as promotes

		emotional as well as mental well-being.
Group 4		
Deep play	Riding a bicycle, climbing trees	Development of concentration, focus, risk assessment, survival skills
Fantasy play	Creating fantasy characters and scenarios.	Development of language and vocabulary, creativity, social skills, create worlds that may be easier to handle than the real world (Ary-De Rozza & Payne-Jones, 2004)
Imaginative play	Pretending to cook, clean, washing a toy baby	Development of language and vocabulary, creativity, social skills, collaboration and negotiation skills
Recapitulation play	Creating caves, playing war, growing things, creating weapons	Development of language, vocabulary, social skills, problem solving, physical development, creativity as well as develop an understanding of human nature and society.
Symbolic play	Using symbols to represent something different eg. hearts representing love and cushions to represent rocks	Development of language, communication, creativity, abstract thought

Table 2.1: Hughes play types as grouped by McKie & Casey

McKie and Casey (2017) categorised creative play, exploratory play, mastery play and object play under Group 1 (Table 2.1). These types of play provide children with the opportunity to learn "about the physical world" (McKie & Casey, 2017 p.2). Creative play allows children to express themselves through different ways such as music, dance and painting (Almon, 2004; Anderson-McNamee & Bailey, 2010; Nelson et al., 2006); exploratory play which includes experimentation helps children develop their curiosity and

inquiry skills (Chirombe, 2018; Nazir, 2019); mastery play which includes construction helps children learn new concepts and skills by controlling and modifying or manipulating their surroundings (Piaget, 1973; Sanderson, 2015) and object play helps children with finding answers to their questions (Bjorklund & Gardiner, 2011) .

Play activities classified under the second group include communication play, dramatic and socio-dramatic, role play and social play, which frequently intertwine and are in interplay with each other. A common theme throughout Group 2 is the development of communication skills and the acquisition of vocabulary (Berkley & Mahoney, 2010; Hughes, 2012). Although dramatic play and sociodramatic play are similar in nature, the former includes make-believe with objects and situations that a child enacts on their own, whereas the latter includes engaging with others; hence, frequently with the addition of verbal communication (Berkley & Mahoney, 2010).

The play types suggested by McKie and Casey (2017), in Group 3 include locomotor and rough-and-tumble play, which enable children to learn about their bodies and their limits (McKie & Casey, 2017). While locomotor play involves movement of the body such as throwing a ball (Palmer et al., 2020), rough-and-tumble play involves play fighting (Pellis & Pellis, 2007), such as grappling, wrestling, tumbling and kicking (Pellegrini & Smith, 1998).

Group 4 includes deep play, fantasy play, imaginative play, recapitulative play, and symbolic play which provide children with the opportunity to learn "about what it is to be human" (McKie & Casey, 2017. p.2). These types of play experience allow children to confront their fears and improve their focus and concentration (McKie & Casey, 2017). These types of play allow children to pretend they are someone else or in a different setting or time (Capurso & Ragni, 2016; Jankowska & Omelańczuk, 2018; Russ, 2014), allowing

children to create worlds that may be easier to handle than the real world (Ary-De Rozza & Payne-Jones, 2004) . These types of play also allow children the possibility to build caves and fires, discovering history and ancestry in the process (Rathnakumar, 2020).

It can be noted that when children are at play they frequently engage in multiple types of play simultaneously (Jarusriboonchai et al., 2019). For instance, if children are role playing pirates they are engaging in fantasy and dramatic play while frequently also involving themselves in social and communication play and possibly in rough and tumble play all at the same time.

Digital Play

Digital play, which can be considered as a type of "futuristic" play that is dominating children's play experiences in the current digital age, is not included as part of Hughes' (2012) typology, possibly because computer use by children for play was still a new concept at the time (Marsh et al., 2016). Digital play involves the use various technologies, including televisions, computers, laptops and touch screen, electronic toys, music players, mobile telephones, digital cameras, DVDs and console games (Marsh, 2016; Nevski & Siibak, 2016; Stephen & Plowman, 2014).

Edwards (2011) and Stephen and Plowman (2014) suggest that digital play should be acknowledged in our contemporary digital culture as it enhances children's creative development, social participation and frequently leads to future employability and economic effectiveness (Stephen and Plowman, 2014). Contrastingly, several scholars (see for e.g. Budak & Işıkoğlu, 2022; Kowalski et al., 2012; Lissak, 2018; Reid Chassiakos et al.,

2016) highlight the dangers of children using excessive digital media and addiction, obesity, cyber bullying, and psychological resilience in children.

During the pandemic there was a significant increase in the use of digital technologies which were often used extensively as a means of entertainment and socialisation (Ozturk Eyimaya & Yalçin Irmak, 2020; Pandya & Lodha, 2021; Sultana et al., 2021; Tulchin-Francis et al., 2021; Wiederhold, 2020). Even if the use of screen time became a needed means for children to learn and communicate with others some parents harboured guilt feelings for allowing their children to have increased digital exposure during the pandemic (Findley et al., 2002).

2.3 Adults' views, attitudes and definitions of play

Adults' views, attitudes and definitions of play vary significantly. While some adults have a positive view of play and see it as a learning activity and a tool which supports children's development (Ivrendi et al., 2019; Lacey et al., 2022; Moon-Seo, et al., 2023; Shah et al., 2019), others may consider it negatively - a waste of time (Elkind, 2008; Hughes, 2003) and a potentially dangerous activity (Moon-Seo, et al., 2023; Yalçın & Erden 2021).

Although parents generally do appreciate play (Adonis & Sobane, 2018; Babuc, 2015), the type of play that parents experience with their children may vary. While Babuc (2015) found that generally parents opted for artistic forms of play such as painting or playdough to do with their children, Gulen and Baris (2022) found that the vast majority of parents opted to engage in more physical games such as football and hide-and-seek with their children. Contrastingly, Fidan's (2021) study which was held during the pandemic shows

that parents opted to play video games with their children in order to socialise and bond with them.

This conflict of parent's views on play may be the result of cultural differences. In their study, Ivrendi et al., (2019) found that Turkish and Norwegian parents appreciated play and considered it a vehicle for learning; however, learning was not their main focus but a welcome secondary outcome of the activity. Contrastingly, in their study of Euro-American and Asian cultures, Parmar et al. (2004), found that while Euro-American parents appreciated play as it enhances children's social, emotional, physical as well as cognitive development, Asian parents did not value it in this way. Contrastingly, they believe that early academics help children develop their cognitive abilities. This finding was supported by Moon-Seo et al.'s (2023) study where Asian parents claimed that educational learning and development takes priority over fun.

2.3.1 The effect of play deprivation on children and child development

Humans have an innate need to play (Brown, 2014; Karpatschof, 2013). Play is a fundamental need of childhood and a lack of it can negatively affect growth and development, which can lead to children being "very socially disturbed" (Brown & Webb, 2005, p. 145).

Hughes (2012), argued in favour of children engaging in different types of play (refer to suggested typology of play Table 2.1) for children to achieve and maintain a healthy wellbeing. Consequently, a deficit of play might result in lifelong damage to the child Including a shortage of sensory interaction or even a disturbed or unreliable interaction with the world (Hughes, 2012). Lack of play may also result in children suffering socially and

emotionally which might result in the inability to have any sort of meaningful social interaction (Brown & Webb, 2005; Gill & Miller, 2020; IPA, 2014; Pellis & Pellis, 2010). Play deprivation could also be manifested through symptoms of depression (Gill & Miller, 2020; IPA, 2014) with Brown (2014) specifying that adult chronic depression was linked to the long-term outcome of play deprivation in childhood.

It is interesting to note that even before the COVID-19 pandemic, the American Academy of Paediatrics was aware of the decrease in children's play and aware of its great benefits to children's development urged paediatricians to prescribe play as an antidote against consequences brought on by changes within a child's environment (Yogman et al., 2018). This is also reflected in Thibodeau-Nielsen Palermo et al., (2021) who highlight the importance of play for children's well-being during the COVID-19 pandemic.

2.4 The importance of play

When looking at the history of play, Plato (427-347, B.C.) as well as Aristotle (384-322, B. C.) both recognised the importance of play and its role in children's overall development (Whitebread, 2012). More recently, other scholars (see for example Ginsburg, 2007; Howard & McInnes, 2013) likewise consider play as essential for children's development as it contributes to their physical, cognitive, intellectual, and social and emotional skills, with Howard and McInnes (2013) explicitly tying play and its benefits to the different stages of children's physical development. Interacting with others through play also abets the development of their social and communication skills. I now discuss with more depth how play is beneficial to all areas of development for children.

2.4.1 A developmental stance to play

Table 2.2 captures how different theorists perceived play from a developmental stance. Piaget (1973) and Vygotsky (1978) tie play and its benefits to specific ages of children's development. Piaget (1973) notes that from 0-2 (sensorimotor) children experience and learn about the world through their senses (as cited in Kalina & Powell, 2009). Through the discovery of sounds, textures, colours, taste, amongst others, sensory play challenges children to also develop their cognitive and intellectual skills. From the ages of 2-7 (preoperational) children tend to be egocentric and use language as well as symbols (as cited in Lowenthal, 1975). For this reason symbolic play would aid children's literacy during this stage. From 7-12 children then enter the concrete operational stage where children are able to converse and comprehend cause and effect (as cited in Ghazi & Ullah, 2015). The final stage (12+) is the formal operational stage where children are able demonstrate abstract thinking, logic and compassion (as cited in Bakirici et al., 2011).

Piaget's (1973) stages of Cognitive Development	Vygotsky's (1978) Sociocultural Theory of Cognitive Development	Bruner's (1983) Theory of Cognitive Development	Essame's (2020) Developmental Play Pyramid
- Children's intelligence advances and changes as they grow. - Development occurs in specific stages. - Children need to build a mental idea of their surroundings.	- Human Development as a social process which is acquired through dialogue with more knowledgeable others - Society influences cognitive development	- Believed that Development is a continuous process rather than stages. - Language is a cause of learning not a consequence - Believed in the role of a more knowledgeable other	- Belief that children need varied kinds of play to grow - Play supports the development of the whole child. - Play is the major tool that leads to children's development
0-2 years Sensorimotor - coordination of senses with motor responses. - explore surroundings and learn by doing: sucking, touching, looking.	**0-3 years Pre-Intellectual Social Speech** - The child does not construct thoughts through language - Speech is used only for social change.	**Enactive Representation** - During infancy we learn through Enactive representation which is learnt through hands-on experiences. - Children learn through real-world experiences.	**Stage 1 Sensory Body Stage & Attachment Safety Play** - Make sense of their world through senses. - Children are learning balance, coordination, distance, objects. - Affected by children's relationships through being loved, held and communicated with.
2-7 years Preoperational - use of language and symbols. - Children tend to be egocentric - Symbolic will aide children with literacy and numeracy skills	**3-7 years Egocentric Speech** - Language is used to help control behaviour - Children are able to verbalise their thoughts while playing	**Iconic Representation** - At this stage children are able to link what they know and their experiences to iconic pictures.	**Stage 2 Creative Explorative Play** - Start to explore through body awareness and - Play and discover by crawling, shaking a rattle

			- etc. leading to cause and effect. - Cause and effect, hide-and-seek and self-control are evident in this stage.
7-12 years Concrete Operational - demonstrate conversation, ordering, and understanding of cause-and-effect. - more advanced play such as games with rules aide development	**7+ years Inner Speech** - Silently done to develop thoughts - Used publicly to communicate with others	**Symbolic Representation** - The pictures or images we used in Stage 2 are translated into abstract language. An example of this is mathematical symbols.	**Stage 3 Meaning making play** - Foundations of language as children understand symbols and build hypothesis about the world. - Children often play games or watch films repeatedly for sequence and patterns to be understood.
12+ Formal Operational - demonstrate abstract thinking, deductive reasoning, logic, comparison, classification - children are aided through experimenting and making. - Constructive games aid children as it is half way between play and work**.**			**Stage 4 Higher Play** - Children have imagination and can use this in their play. - Play is more social, symbolic, and children have roles and rules. - Children are social learners at this stage.

Table 2.2: Theories of play

Like Piaget (1973), Vygotsky (1978) also linked play to ages, however, he considered it as a social process rather than simply advancing as children grow. According to Vygotsky (1978), from the ages of 0-3 (pre intellectual social speech) children are not able to construct thoughts through language but simply use speech for social exchange (as cited in Klint, 2018). From 3-7 years (egocentric speech), children are able to verbalise their thoughts and language is used to help control behaviour (as cited in Gillen, 2000). In the final stage which starts at age 7 (inner speech) children can speak publicly to communicate as well as use language to develop inner thoughts (as cited in Cohen, 1995).

Contrary to Piaget (1973) and Vygotsky, Bruner (1983) and Essame (2020) link play and its benefits to the different stages rather than specific ages of children's development. Buner's (1983) Theory of Cognitive Development holds that development is a continuous process and is divided into enactive, iconic and symbolic representations. During infancy, children learn through enactive representations and real-world experiences (Garrett, 1997). They then move onto iconic representations as they become able to link their experiences to pictures (Mcleod, 2023). Finally, during symbolic representation, iconic representations are translated into abstract language (Mcleod, 2023).

Lastly, in Essame's Development Play Pyramid (2020) she lists four stages that a child goes through as they play and develop. In the first stage, she reflects Piaget's Sensorimotor stage in that children make sense of their world through their senses, adding that at this stage, children are also affected by relationships with others. During the second stage (creative and exploratory play), children explore the world around them allowing them to experience cause and effect through activities such as shaking a rattle or throwing toys on the floor. Stage three is referred to as meaning-making play. This is the time where children begin to comprehend symbols and begin to build hypothesis about the world. In her final

stage of higher play, children develop their imagination and are social learners, thus

reflecting Vygotsky's (1978) sociocultural theory.

The development of physical skills through play

Play enhances the development of physical gross motor and fine motor skills (Howard,

2017), encouraging "co-ordination and visuo-spatial ability" (Howard, 2017. p.15). Children

who move around and do physical activity are more likely to be physically healthy. As

indicated in Table 2.2, Piaget (1973) emphasised sensorimotor development, more

specifically the sensorimotor stage where children explore the world through their bodies

and senses, aiding the motor and intellectual development. According to Piaget (1973 as

cited in Huitt & Hummel, 2003) the development of children's motor skills facilitates and

supports the development of intellectual abilities. Reflecting Piaget's sensory motor stage

(1973), Essame (2020) argues that at this level, it is essential for all children to work through

their body. This importance on physicality according to Van der Kolk (2015) is also linked to

the social as well as emotional wellbeing of children.

Since play, especially outdoor play, involves physical activity this helps children be in a

good state of mind (Joshi & Stone, 2021), in leading healthier lives, while preventing more

serious health risks in the future (Frost, 2010). It also helps children lose excess weight

(Stone & Faulkner, 2014).

The development of social and emotional skills

Jarvis et al., (2014), argue that children's ability to develop into well-regulated adults

originates from social interaction in childhood which is done naturally through play. Play

allows children the opportunity to learn about themselves and others, thus leading to the development of emotional skills such as trust, empathy, acceptance, conflict resolution and negotiation skills (Andrade, 2019; Griswold, 2018; Howard, 2017; Isenberg & Quisenberry, 2002; Lee, 2022; Welding, 2022).

This social benefit of play was also highlighted by both Bruner (1966) and Vygotsky (1978) who stated that social interaction with others during play is an important tool for children's development. Bruner viewed play as a way for children to learn language when they talk about their symbolic representation such as images or structures. Vygotsky (1978), on the other hand, believed that when conversing with more knowledgeable others during play, this enhances children's development. The importance of social play is also captured in Essame's (2020) Developmental Play Pyramid. Categorising attachment play and the child's need to communicate with and be loved by adults close to them during play, is at the basis of the pyramid, providing a clear indication of the importance of socialisation for the further development, learning and well-being of children (Essame, 2020).

In addition, play is essential for children to learn self-regulation which encompasses their ability to control their impulses and emotions, behave responsibly, develop self-reliance as well as self-guidance in their own thoughts (Berk, 2018; Healey et al., 2022). As Howard and King (2015) and Eidsvåg and Rosell (2021) suggest, play provides children with the ability to set their own boundaries and to completely regulate and control their play. This ultimately leads to the development of the child's self-esteem.

The development of cognitive and intellectual skills

Play experiences change the neural structures and function of the brain (Wheeler, 2022). Children who play are more intelligent (Calvin, 2004): they are more able to predict what is coming, to problem solve, to be more logical and able to adapt to new situations. Play also enhances imagination and creativity and facilitates the understanding of concepts as well as advances the development of abstract thinking and making associations (Ginsburg, 2007). Moreover, play has the ability to "foster 21st century skills and to guide students toward individualised development and learning goals" (NYS Early Childhood Advisory Council, n.d., p. 2), allowing children the possibility to learn about the physical world and how it works. This view is supported by Vygotsky (1978) who stated that play is perhaps the most important activity that a child may participate in as it allows the child to work at a higher mental level . Differing from Vygotsky (1978), Piaget (1962) emphasised that rather than developing learning, play consolidates learning, allowing for new learning to take place. Consequently, the way that an activity is presented to a child is more important than the activity itself. Thus, if an activity is presented as play, then children can achieve at a higher developmental level. This is because play does not put children under stress; it has no consequences or right or wrong answer, resulting in children wanting to attempt something even at the risk of failure.

2.5 Creating the right environment for play

The importance of creating the right environment for play is paramount for children's development (Durualp & Aral, 2013; Hylton, 2007; Lynch & Hayes, 2015). Play spaces designed and influenced by adults within the "institutionalised triangle" (Rasmussen, 2004,

p. 157) of the home, school and play areas in the community encompass many restrictions for children's play. Rather than "places for children" (Ramussen, 2004, p.157) organised by adults, Ramussen (2004) advocated for providing children with the possibility of creating their own "children's places" (Ramussen, 2004. p. 157), for play. Raje and Ojha (2022) take this a step further by stating that play spaces should be separated into children and adult areas. This would allow parents to keep visibility of their child but not control their play experiences. Ultimately, adults need to be more understanding and tolerant of the children's wants and needs in their own play spaces.

Research in this area (for example, Acer et al., 2016; Jansson, 2015; Nykiforuk et al., 2019) has shown that the more children are free to choose their play by having an array of accessible materials and opportunities, the more they are creatively stimulated and play is enhanced.

2.5.1 The home as a space for children to play

Play within the home was the main play environment children were exposed to during the pandemic. At school children's play is often adult-led and adult-structured and with limited access to material. It is confined by time and space, is predictable and repetitive; allowing children to frame a game with a theme and rules. Contrastingly, it is unpredictable play, which is frequently permissible at home, allowing children to bring forward their own ideas, creativity and individual experiences into their play, taking them in "unpredictable directions, both physically and mentally" (Hansen Sandseter et al., 2022. para. 5). To allow for unpredictability, adults should listen to children and their interests, provide them with the space to work alone, while guiding them as necessary while also turning the play

experience into a bonding one (Hansen Sandseter et al., 2022). The limitation of a predictable environment makes the freer home space even more important for children's play (Capuozzo et al., 2019; Wiltz & Fein,2006).

Spaces within the home are frequently shaped by children's desire and need to play. Oftentimes, parents try to maintain boundaries between "play-space and space-free-from-play" (Stevenson & Prout, 2013, p. 136). Back in the 19th century, children had a specific play space within the home, often referred to as the 'nursery', a designated play area with all the children's toys and other paraphernalia contained within this one room. This was obviously not the case for poor children who spent most of their childhood working or running the streets (Humphries, 2013). However, by the 20th century the concept of children's developmental growth and intrinsic need for stimulation began to emerge. Houses also became smaller with less space and by the mid-twentieth century the children's main play area seemed to have shifted to the home's main living space (Birdwell-Pheasant & Lawrence-Zuniga, 1999).

Although access to playful resources in the home may differ greatly, all play types (Hughes, 2012), encourage children's development (Egan, 2021). The importance within indoor play is to offer children quality play through providing equipment and toys that promote development which also frequently occurs within free play within the home (Fees et al. 2015). Playdates within the home can also help children socially interact with others (Barron et al., 2012). Although the outdoor environment is considered as highly beneficial for both physical and cognitive development of children, not all families are able to provide an outdoor play area such as a garden or roof where children may play at home (Armstrong et al., 2019; Lambert et al., 2019).

Opel et al., (2008), argue in favour of play, which can only be encouraged by parents at home by providing a safe space. While this is important, it is likewise crucial for children to experience an element of risk, thus, helping children become independent, risk-takers (Hancock & Gillen 2007).

2.5.2 Toys, resources and materials children play with at home

The resources, materials and toys children use to play with can be varied. In our highly commercial society, the task of choosing toys for children can be somewhat overwhelming with many placing emphasis on the educational value of toys rather than the process of the play experience (Howard, 2017). While the educational value of toys is based upon the intellectual development that may occur while interacting with the toy (Goldstein, 1994; Ogata, 2004; Rachmawati et al., 2021) on the other hand, real play or value play have many more developmental accomplishments that may be achieved (Healey et al., 2019; Yazgin, 2021). For example, toys such as rattles help children develop important visual, auditory and motor skills, while others may help stimulate speech and develop analytical, comparison and generalisation skills through their use (Kurbanova, 2022). Toys, such as blocks, cars and dolls are usually the first that come to mind when considering play providing children with more structured games, such as board games which are also important, as they enable children to collaborate with friends and family, follow rules and compete with others (Petter, 2017).

Although the concept of play has not really changed, toys have changed drastically over the last century (Fisher et al., 2008). Table 2.3 below lists traditional and modern toys according to Healey et al., (2019).

Traditional Toys	Modern Toys
Symbolic/Pretend toys – dolls, cars, figures, tea sets etc	Digital Toys – laptops, tablets, phones, electronic games
Fine motor or Manipulative – blocks, puzzles etc.	Toys that substitute interaction with humans-toys that read stories
Creative/Inventive – painting, colouring, sculpting etc.	Sensory stimulating toys - usually traditional toys with added elements such as light and sound, usually do not require any input by the child apart from pushing a button
Language/Social - card games, board games etc.	
Gross Motor/Physical – tricycles, push and pull toys etc.	

Table 2.3: Traditional vs. Modern Toys (adapted from Healey et al., 2019)

Healey et al., (2019) provide a list of benefits and harmful effects that toys may have on child development as well as discuss the replacement of traditional toys with more digital, media-based ones which do not show the same amount of benefits for children's development. They suggest that traditional high-quality toys are usually simple in design, versatile, durable and encourage cooperative play, language development, creativity as well as problem solving skills by encouraging children to solve a problem or interact with a friend or adult through play. While traditional toys such as symbolic pretend toys, manipulative toys, creative toys, language toys and gross motor/physical toys facilitate interaction, growth of imagination and physical development through the use of blocks, painting and bicycles (Healey et al., 2019), modern/technological toys such as toys that use lights and music, laptops and electronic games are also considered as important for children's development while they also enhance children's electronic skills which are essential in our digital world (Levin & Rosenquest, 2001; Ukala, 2019). Contrastingly, Levin and Rosenquest,

(2001) also argue that although modern toys are marketed as being the ideal toy for children's learning and growth, these toys often limit children by substituting children's creativity, active play and interaction for attractive sounds and lights. Other evidence (Klin et al., 2003; Semiz, 2022; Sosa, 2016) shows that the use of such digital toys may reduce or even substitute any form of interaction with others while requiring little or no interference by the child, which can manifest in reduced language acquisition.

Unfortunately, today there is a misconception that good toys should be expensive and need to have many functions. This, however, is not the case. Simple real-world household objects such as pots and pans can have a much more beneficial effect on children than expensive electronic toys (Healey et al, 2019).

2.5.3 Outdoor play

Playing outside is a natural way for children to engage in physical activity. It is good for children's health, development and well-being. Exposure to nature including sunlight and fresh air contribute to the children's physical development as well as help build their immune systems (Bilton, 2010; Clements, 2004; Dyment & Bell, 2008). Playing outdoors is exciting for children as it offers direct contact with an open space and nature, thus, providing a space for children to be more boisterous and messy (Back et al., 2016; Maynard & Waters, 2007; White & Stoecklin, 1998) with constantly-changing stimuli that are very difficult to replicate indoors (Stephenson, 2002).

Outdoor play decreased significantly during the COVID-19 pandemic due to the worldwide restrictions set in place, and has not, as yet, returned to pre-COVID-19 levels (Salway et al., 2022). While restrictions on outdoor play were experienced in countries such

as Canada (Moore et al., 2020), the UK (Salway et al., 2022) and Malta (Cefai et al., 2021), however, other countries such as the US (Tulchin-Francis et al., 2021), Germany (Schmidt et al., 2020) and Belgium (Constandt et al., 2020) experienced an increase. This was because some countries did not impose strict measures but a light lockdown which still encouraged individuals to exercise within and outside of their homes (Constandt et al, 2020).

2.6 Play and its use in situations of crisis

Situations of crisis, such as a pandemic and the restrictions that come with it, change and limit children's access to play (Graber et al., 2020). As a result, children experience increased stress, weakened development, and feelings of "lack of control and loss of trust" (IPA, 2017. p.4) which multiply if children are not given the opportunity to play (IPA, 2017). In such crisis situations, play has a significant rehabilitative as well as a therapeutic role to help children process, understand and overcome trauma, share their concerns, changes, and insecurities they experience, cope with stress, anxiety, and helps restore in them a sense of stability, normality and enjoyment (Boyd Webb, 2007; Chatterjee, 2018; IPA, 2017; Schaefer, 2011). For example, children in zones of war will play war as they have to process the situation they were placed in.

It is the role of adults, in such situations, to aid children by creating play opportunities for them, facilitating their play through sourcing resources, protecting their space and time to play freely and supporting them in developing their own play. The IPA (2017) also calls on policymakers to value the importance that play has for children in situations of crisis and promotes the adopting of a play policy, to ensure that staff are well trained in procedures to support traumatised children. Such a position safeguards play and ensures that it is not

impacted negatively by other priorities. It also guarantees that it is included in the initial planning stages of crisis management.

2.6.1 Play during COVID-19.

Due to the lockdown that was aimed to control the pandemic, children were deprived of play at a time where play should have been used to protect them from the negative impacts of the pandemic such as their physical and mental health (Nieto et al., 2021). As argued above, sustained play deprivation has major consequences for human competency (Brown, 2014). It is therefore imperative to understand how play changed and what the impact of this change was on children.

When the COVID-19 pandemic hit, many governments worldwide (such as Malta, Canada, Italy, China, France) demanded of people to physically distance themselves and closed playgrounds as well as indoor play areas to help restrict the spread of the pandemic (Constandt et al., 2020; Eyler et al., 2021; Perez et al., 2021; Times of Malta, 2020). Countries, such as China (Chen et al., 2020; Xiang et al., 2020), Canada (Hemphill et al., 2020), and Spain (López-Bueno et al., 2020) placed significant restrictions on outdoor movement resulting in significant decline in physical activity, and an automatic decrease in outdoor play (Moore et al., 2020). A decrease in children's outdoor play was also reported in the UK; even more worrying is that findings show that play has not as yet returned to pre-pandemic levels even though restrictions have been lifted (Salway et al., 2022).

Other governments took a different approach. Studies in Germany (Schmidt et al., 2020) as well as Belgium (Constandt et al., 2020) did not note a significant difference in outdoor play for children. Belgium only had mild restrictions in place (Schmidt et al.,

2020) which resulted in an increase or equal amount of outdoor activity for parents and their children when compared to prior pandemic times (Constandt et al., 2020). The Scottish Government (as cited by Case & McKendrick, 2022) not only maintained outdoor play activities but even increased it. Medrano et al., (2021) noted that a family's social wellbeing may also have had an influence in the amount of physical activity and outdoor play a child may have been exposed to: a deterioration in lifestyle and outdoor play was noted particularly in children coming from vulnerable families.

Conversely, as people were required to stay indoors to limit the spread of the virus (WHO, 2019), the use of digital technologies increased when compared to pre-COVID times (Barron et al., 2021; Moore et al., 2020). During the pandemic in many countries, including Canada (Moore et al., 2020), Germany (Lemenager et al., 2021), Italy (Scarpellini et al., 2021), Portugal (Ribeiro et al, 2021), UK (Allen & Velija, 2023), and Malta (Deguara et al., 2022) teaching and learning shifted to online modes, drastically increasing the use of screen time. Tulchin-Francis et al., (2021) also claimed that during the pandemic children used technology as a form of socialisation thus increasing the use of screen time considerably.

Indoor play during the pandemic may have been regressive given that children were always near parents thus allowing the children to have less freedom as well as autonomy in their play (Kasey & McKendrick, 2022). When studying the type of play that children were exposed to during the pandemic, some organisations took it upon themselves to support families by creating campaigns and resources for families to be able to generate play ideas for children such as messy, free, object, imaginative, digital and outdoor (Play Scotland, 2020); albeit such suggestions although included some ideas for the outdoors, focused mainly on indoor play ideas.

On the 23rd of March 2022 an online exhibition was also launched featuring play experiences that children were exposed to during the pandemic (Play observatory, 2022). The main types of play most favoured by children when confined to the pandemic restrictions included: construction play where children created spaces within their home such as building tents; creative play by creating artwork through drawing, painting and creative use of any materials available; small world play where children used their toys to create mini worlds; imaginary play which was important as through this type of play children were able to escape their reality; and digital play which featured strongly through the use of digital devices which were also used to connect with friends and family.

2.6.2 The effect of lack of play during COVID-19 restrictions

In its policy brief, the UN Sustainable Development Group (2020) clearly stated that although children were not the face of the pandemic, as health-wise they were not the ones who were at risk, they could still be the biggest victims of the pandemic. This is because, as argued above, since children had to endure mitigating factors implemented to contain the spread of the virus, including lack of outdoor play and social interactions with others, the pandemic is likely to have had an effect on their development and well-being. The social isolation that children experienced during the lock down due to the closure of schools, playgrounds and other public areas, not only brought drastic changes to their lifestyles to which they had to adapt, but also affected their learning, their physical development and social skills (Charney et al., 2021; Donnelly & Patrinos, 2021; Wang et al., (2002)

Similar to children worldwide, schools and playgrounds in Malta were closed (Times of Malta, 2020). This resulted in Maltese children experiencing negative effects due to the

restriction measurements of the pandemic. In their report, where they studied the resilience of Maltese children during the pandemic, Cefai et al. (2021) found that children needed to be provided with adequate space to play, exercise, and be creative. Findings from a local study by Deguara et al., (2022) also stated that 37.1% of parents felt that their children's happiness was negatively affected and they did not adjust well to the changes of the pandemic restriction measures.

2.7 Conclusion

This chapter provided an overview of play, its numerous definitions as well as the various types of play and benefits. It highlighted the effects of play deprivation on children. The discussion underlined that play is such a universally important right that it has been included in the UNCRC (1989). The chapter focussed on the need to create the right environment for play, including outdoor play, toys and resources that may be used and the effect that free play and structured play can have on children. Finally, the discussion analysed the importance of play in situations of crisis, specifically the restrictions on children's play during the COVID-19 pandemic and the effect that the lack of play has on children in such austere situations. It was argued that although play is a central element of a child's development it is not always given the importance it deserves. Many times other contributing factors – such as the priorities of adults and, in the case of the pandemic, of the nation, impose severe restrictions on children's ability to play freely.

Chapter 3

Methodology

3.1 Introduction

This chapter provides an overview of the methodology used within the study. I begin this chapter by listing my research questions which guide my study. This is followed by an overview of my epistemological and ontological positions. I then discuss my rationale for adopting a qualitative, phenomenological approach through a narrative inquiry. I proceed by focusig my discussion on describing the recruitment of participants and the data collection process including the way the interviews were conducted and how I used photo-elicitation to support the conversations with the parents. I will then move to provide an account of the ethical considerations that needed to be considered. In conclusion I discuss how, using an image-based approach, I used visual analysis to analyse the data.

3.2 Research Questions

A research question is a focused, challenging question that addresses a problem that the researcher would like to answer through the interpretations and analysis of data (Lipowski, 2008). Frankel and Devers (2000) state that the research question determines the relevance as well as the validity of a study. Moreover, they also state that a good research question will bring clarity that is the crucial key for quality research. According to Agee (2009), there is much more to a research question than simply fulfilling its function of being a starting point for research. Research questions shape and direct a study, they are also crucial in defining the limits of a study, create a focus and define the empirical and ethical issues of a study (Clough & Nutbrown, 2012).

My research questions were carefully designed to help analyse children's play and how this has been affected by the COVID-19 pandemic. The overarching main research question of this study is:

What are the perspectives of parents on children's play during the COVID-19 pandemic?

The following three subsidiary research questions are explored to help answer the main research question:

1. How did the COVID-19 pandemic impact children's play?

2. How did the COVID-19 pandemic feature within children's play?

3. How did the change in or lack of play during the COVID-19 pandemic impact children's development?

3.3 My epistemological position

Crotty (1998, p.3) defined epistemology as "the theory of knowledge embedded in the theoretical perspective and thereby in the methodology". It is a way by which we understand the world and make sense of it. This term is further defined by Mukherji and Albon (2010, p.9) as a "branch of philosophy that looks at what knowledge is (its nature), the source of knowledge and the validity of knowledge". When performing a research study, it is important to understand that research itself is rooted in the researcher's philosophical beliefs with regards to concepts, values, as well as the nature of knowledge; defined by Clough and Nutbrown (2012) as the study of knowing. Thus, an epistemological position informs the choice of the study, its purpose, and goals (Snape & Spence, 2003). My epistemological position affected how I uncovered knowledge as well as made decisions related to this research.

Crotty (1998) distinguished three epistemological positions, namely: objectivism,

subjectivism and constructionism. Within an objective epistemological position, meaningful

realities occur separate from the control of consciousness (Crotty, 1998), where every

object has an inherent meaning; it is through research that our knowledge becomes more

objective in our understanding (Feast & Melles, 2010).

Contrastingly, a subjectivist epistemological approach considers meaning as being

taken from anything but the object it is attributed to. Thus, the object does not contribute

to the meaning that is given to the object by the subject (Crotty, 1998). Therefore, our mind

would enact meaning without the need for object perception which is seen in objectivism

(Feast & Melles, 2010). Adopting a subjectivist epistemological position implies that the

researcher makes "meaning of their data through their own thinking and cognitive process

of data information by their interactions with participants" (Kivunja & Kuyini, 2017, p.33). In

essence, according to Feast and Melles, (2010) an epistemological view considers that what

is perceived is real and that there is no absolute truth that is independent of one's own

perception.

Finally, a constructionist epistemology, which is what this study is based on, focuses

on the meaning that is found in human engagement within the world (Al-Ababneh, 2020).

For a constructionist epistemology, meaning and knowledge are brought about through

lived experiences and our interactions with the world (Feast & Melles, 2010). A

constructionist standpoint acknowledges that different people create and make meaning in

different ways (Feast & Melles, 2010). Likewise, Ültanir, (2012) acknowledges that different

people interact, interpret and make meaning differently. In constructionism, knowledge is

created rather than discovered (Hacking, 1990). Following a constructionist epistemological

stance, I am not in search of the absolute truth but rather, will seek meaning about children's play and how it has been affected by the COVID-19 pandemic by interviewing their parents, who are often involved or overlooking their children's play. Through my interactions with the parents, mainly the mothers of these children, and together with them, I was able to construct meaning of what play means to them and their children and how this has been affected by the pandemic.

Lupia and Elman (2014) claim that an epistemological position demands transparency on the researcher's part. I tried to achieve this by making sure to explain the research design, the data collection, and the findings as well as the reporting of the study to the participants. Throughout the interviews, I attempted to develop a relationship with the participants by making them feel comfortable in my presence. I tried to achieve this by engaging them in conversation before the commencement of the interview. This was also aided by the fact that many of the participants were acquaintances which contributed to their comfort and ability to open up during the interviews. Moreover, during my conversation with them I made sure that the understanding that was developing, and therefore the new knowledge that was emerging, was shared and constructed in tandem with them. All this led to the participants feeling more at ease and talking more comfortably about their experiences and perspectives in depth.

3.4 Ontological position

Jacquette (2002, p.12) defines philosophical ontology "as the question of the meaning of the words 'exist' or 'being', or of what it means for something to exist". Ontology is therefore based on the study of how something exists and what exists. Research starts from

a question and researchers need to decide and take a stand as to their view about how things work and how things are in the world around them. Thus, ontology is concerned with the social world and what can be known about the social world (Snape & Spencer, 2003). Conversely, Scotland (2012) perceives an ontological position as an assumption that determines what is true.

Clough & Nutbrown (2012) claim that an ontological position is characterised by two polar positions, namely qualitative or quantitative, which may also be referred to as interpretive or positivist. A positivist approach adopts an objective view to knowledge and reality where knowledge is viewed as tangible (Aliyu et al., 2015; Scotland, 2012). Adopting a quantitative methodology, positivists seek out constants thus allowing their hypothesis to form through the collection of numerical data which, in turn, gives them the ability to test their hypothesis (Mukherji & Albon, 2010).

Interpretivism, on the other hand, is an approach where meaning is constructed, interpreted and experienced by people in their real-world in interaction with each other and within their larger social contexts. This frequently results in situated data that is shaped by human interaction and their social construction of reality. Thus, reality is subjective and is experienced and interpreted differently by different people (Aliyu et al., 2015). Therefore, through an interpretive approach, researchers base their focus on spoken words and interaction with people rather than on numbers and statistics (Mukherji & Albon, 2010). Hence an interpretivist approach, which is largely used in qualitative research, allows the researcher to gain a deep and detailed insight into a contextualised situation or issue. Data is frequently collected through observations, interviews and focus groups which are frequently audio and/or video recorded (Silverman, 2006).

Within this study, I adopted an interpretivist approach. I gathered knowledge as well as information about the parents' views, experiences, perspectives and interpretations of how the pandemic affected their children's play through audio-recorded, semi-structured interviews. Moreover, I made use of photo elicitation which helped parents describe their children's play, support their arguments, and draw upon any changes which were evident of their children playing before and during the pandemic.

3.5 Research design: Adopting a qualitative methodology

Clough and Nutbrown (2012, p.20) define a qualitative research design as "an interpretive approach to data, [which] studies 'things' within their context and considers the subjective meanings that people bring to their situation". Qualitative research enables the researcher to delve deeper into people's experiences to get more information about people's emotions, concerns, opinions and beliefs that would not be possible through a quantitative methodology. Thus, adopting an interpretivist view which focuses around the "authenticity of human experience" (Silverman, 2010, p. 6), this study assumes a qualitative research design grounding on the notion that individuals construct their own, subjective meanings through their interactions with the world (Merriam & Grenier, 2019). Such methods enable the researcher to generate rich, descriptive information in order to make sense of and understand the participants' viewpoint. By using narrative inquiry to discover the data, I was not only able to extract rich data but also lengthy descriptions of the children's play experiences during the pandemic.

3.5.1 Phenomenological theoretical perspective

In line with a qualitative research methodology, a phenomenological approach attempts to comprehend a particular phenomenon that people would have gone through (Wilding & Whiteford, 2005); examining their subjective, daily experiences while exploring what the experience was like (Robson, 2002). It also seeks to set aside any convictions about people's sentiments and responses to particular situations (Baker, 2019). The use of a phenomenological approach generally results in obtaining deep, lengthy, and descriptive information which are gained through qualitative methods. Although interviews are the preferred means to gather phenomenological data, it may also be collected through open-ended questions, diary recordings, observations and discussions (Lester, 1999; McLeod, 2017;). A limitation to using such an approach, however, is that it represents the reality of an individual's personal experiences rather than the general population who might have experienced the same phenomenon in a different way (Husserl, 1983).

I opted to use a phenomenological framework for my study as I sought to uncover children's lived play experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic. In line with Creswell (2007), this allowed me to collect data from participating parents who have seen the change in their children's play, resulting in the acquisition of detailed information brought about through in-depth interview techniques. As the researcher, I also put my assumptions about play aside so as not to affect my participants narratives and acted as a guide to assist them in communicating their children's lived experiences through prompts and questions.

3.5.2 Narrative Inquiry

Webster and Mertova (2007) describe narrative inquiry as being, "set in human stories of experience. It provides researchers with a rich framework through which they can investigate the ways humans experience the world depicted through their stories" (p. 1), facilitating the uncovering of people's true lived experiences (Smithers, 2016). Through their responses, participants may reflect on past experiences while also helping the researcher make meaning out of their current lived experience (Ketelle, 2010) while leading readers to reflect on their own practices and views (Ford, 2020). Contrastingly, Nelson (2011) argues about the limitations of narrative inquiry stating that data may include too much detail and not enough insight and meaning.

Using a qualitative research methodology, narrative inquiry helped me get a deeper view of the lived experiences of the parents in relation of their children's play during the COVID-19 pandemic. The use of semi-structured interviews, supported by photo elicitation (Ketelle, 2010) provided the participants with the opportunity to tell their whole story rather than be limited to particular instances of their lived experiences. It also enabled me to explore and analyse my participant's experiences more deeply than other methodologies, which is why it suited within my epistemological stance.

3.6 The research context

Initially I thought to conduct interviews with children, as they would provide first-hand experience of their play during the pandemic. However, given that during the data collection process there were still some restrictions in place and times were still uncertain, it was suggested by the Faculty Board of the Faculty of Education, that we refrain from

conducting interviews with children. Therefore, I opted to hold interviews with their

parents, as the closest adults to children.

The preferred method of selecting participants was 'convenience sampling' which is

popular in qualitative research. Through this method, the researcher on the one hand

announces the study to potential participants. The potential participants, who are

conveniently selected due to their availability of time, willingness to participate, close

location and easily accessible, on the other hand, are able to choose whether to participate

in the study or not (Lopez & Whitehead, 2013; Stratton, 2021). In convenience sampling,

given the uncertainty during the COVID-19 period, having known the participants as

acquaintances increased my chances of them being willing to participate in the study. This

may also have helped to ease the participants' worries and opting for face-to-face

interviews rather than virtual ones. Ultimately, three of my eight participants agreed for a

face-to-face interview, while the other five opted for a virtual interview through Zoom[©].

3.6.1 Research participants

The parents

The interviews were held with eight parents - all mothers who all had one or more

children aged between 3-8 years. Although a request for participation was made to either

parents, however, only mothers accepted to participate. Table 3.1 provides background

information about the mothers including their ages, occupation, qualification and the type

of dwelling they resided in. All families may be considered as middle-class, however, three

mothers may be considered as coming from a working-class background.   Some participants

also had other children who were older and/or younger than the children of the study.

These children were at times also mentioned.

Parent Pseudonym	Age	Occupation	Qualification	No. of Children	Dwelling Type	Permission for photos
Paula	40s	Lawyer	BA LLD	1	Apartment	No
Anna	40s	Fitness and Wellness Instructor	Masters in Business Administration	1	House	Yes
Laura	30s	Studying for Masters in Education	BSc Physiotherapy	2	Bungalow	Yes
Rachel	30s	Studying for Masters in Education	BA Accountancy	2	Apartment	Yes
Emma	40s	Early Years Educator	Diploma in Childcare Management	1	House	No
Gaby	30s	Mid-Wife	BSc Midwifery	4	Apartment	Yes
Emily	30s	Stay-at-home mum	BA Psychology	2	Maisonette	Yes
Jessica	40s	Air-Freight Clerk	O'levels	2	Apartment	Yes

Table 3.1: Mother's information and permissions

The children

While the children were not active participants in the study, the whole conversation

revolved around them. The children were all aged between 3 – 8 years old, lived in different

towns and villages, and attended different schools from the sectors, namely, independent,

church and government schools. Table 3.2 provides background information about the

children, including their age, school and year attended, pseudonym and age of sibling and a

short description of each child as described by their mother.

Mother's Pseudonym	Child's Pseudonym	Age	School	Year at School	Pseudonym and Age of Siblings
Paula	Petra	5 years	Church	1	N/A
Petra is bubbly, very sharp and attentive, pays attention to detail. She tends to get moody. She does very well academically and loves learning. She plays and interacts well with other children and she is very kind-hearted. She is also very helpful with her peers.					
Anna	Andrew	4 years	Government	KG1	N/A
Andrew is a very energetic and strong-willed boy. His behaviour is at times challenging. He likes to be active but he also enjoys playing quietly on his own.					
Laura	Lena	8 years	Church	4	Luana (10 years)
Lena is described as a very anxious girl, especially with school-related tasks. She is a perfectionist so school makes her very nervous. She is considered as a very happy child.					
Rachel	Ruby	4 years	Private	KG2	Ron (2 years)
Ruby is a very lively, outgoing and bubbly little girl. She likes to think of new things to do. She is a leader. Being so young she relies on her mother to help her to come up with ideas, then when she has an idea of what to do, she is very independent.					
Emma	Emmanuel	8 years	Private	4	N/A
Emmanuel is an energetic and confident boy, very social and creative. He is also a very decisive child and is not afraid to speak up if he notes someone doing something wrong. He prefers to be active rather than sit down and watch TV or play video games. He loves animals and is very knowledgeable about them. When he has screen time, this time is usually spent researching information about animals.					
Gaby	Gina	6 years	Church	2	Gail (10 years) Gary (9 years) Georgia (2 years)
Gina is a very playful child who enjoys playing with her siblings. She is very talkative and relatively quiet though. She tends to be more social when her siblings are around. She seems to be having some challenges at school and the mother is questioning whether Gina has dyslexia like her two older siblings.					
Emily	Erik	5 years	Government	1	Ethan (8 years) (below)
Erik is an outgoing and assertive boy. He is also described as an active child and is not afraid to take risks. Erik is also very free spirited, asks very deep questions and thinks outside the box. He enjoys sports and playing outdoors.					
Emily	Ethan	8 years	Government	3	Erik (5 years) (above)
Ethan is very caring, sensitive and shy. He likes jokes and playing pranks on people. Ethan is also into superheroes and technology; however, he is also very sportive and creative.					
Jessica	Joy	7 years	Church	2	Joshua (19 years)
Joy is happy, bubbly, outgoing, and an extrovert, who also tends to get nervous and angry very quickly. Joy needs to be kept busy and is very independent. She also has no sense of fear or danger.					

Table 3.2: Children's information and description

3.7 Data collection process

Data collection is defined as a methodical collection of information from sources such as "interviews, focus groups, observation, existing records and electronic devices" (Rimando et al., 2015, p.4). The aim of data collection is to acquire information or capture data about the phenomenon being studied (Ayres, 2007). It is the most important part of any study: "No data – no project" (Robson, 2002 p.385).

3.7.1 Semi-structured interviews

Interviews are greatly used to acquire information about interviewees and extract information that holds value to a study. Their purpose is to provide in-depth information that is extracted from the interviewee's experiences (DiCicco-Bloom & Crabtree, 2006; Shackleton et al., 2021). This is done through questions that help the researcher understand people's behaviour, feelings, thoughts and beliefs (Stuckey, 2013). I therefore opted to interview participants within my study as interviews permitted me to investigate parent's views of their children's play and how it changed during the COVID-19 pandemic. Interviews include defining a research problem, deciding on the number of participants, following an interview protocol, recording and transcribing (Silverman,2010).

There are four main types of interviews that may be used in a study namely: structured interviews which happen without probing or improvisation; semi-structured interviews which require a rapport with the interviewee and also includes some probing; open-ended or unstructured interviews which are flexible in nature and also require rapport with the interviewee; and focus groups which require a lot of flexibility, as well as the

interviewer's ability to facilitate a discussion while also taking a back seat in order to allow group dynamics to develop (Silverman, 2006; Tang, 2022; Winwood, 2019).

I opted for semi-structured interviews, as it enabled me to assist my participants in giving a more in-depth narrative about their experiences. It also helped ease the participants' concerns knowing that I was there to assist them through the process of the interview questioning. In certain cases the sequence of questions was also changed as participants would inadvertently mention something related to another question which would lead me to ask that question there and then in order to continue with the flow of the interview. At times, the question was either re-worded or asked once again at a later stage as necessary.

3.7.2 Compiling the questions for the semi-structured interviews

Prior to compiling the interview questions, I researched the topic of my study and referred to academic papers that were being published regarding the COVID-19 pandemic and how it has affected children. This research helped me create a series of related closed and open-ended questions (Appendices 1.1 and 1.2) which were accompanied by Why? and How? questions (Adams, 2014) that helped me gain more insight.

I opted to hold semi-structured interviews, as they included a combination of predetermined closed questions as well as open-ended ones where participants may answer freely and in depth (Mukherji & Albon, 2010). This allowed me to tweak questions according to how interviews were progressing and how frank the participants were regarding their experiences. The questions themselves, were prepared in both the English and Maltese language to suit the preferences of the parent.

The final stage of the interviews involved photo elicitation that aided the interviewees recall certain instances of play before and during the pandemic which helped participants reflect on changes and elicited deeper descriptions and emotions from them.

3.7.3 Conducting the interviews

At the time of the data collection process, that is in June 2022, the COVID-19 pandemic was still present, albeit it was getting weaker and people were socialising more. Out of respect towards my participants, I provided them with the option to hold the interview either face-to-face or online; three participants opted for face-to-face interviews while five had their interviews online.

The interviews were held during July and August 2022. The duration of the interviews varied between 42 minutes and 102 minutes based on the participant's ability to develop arguments and discuss them in depth. All participants gave me consent to record the conversations. Table 3.3 illustrates information about the date and duration of the interviews as well as the mode used.

The face-to-face interviews

Opdenakker (2006) describes face-to-face interviews as, "synchronous communication of time and place" (p. 3). When the interviewee is the subject of the interview, then the data collected is significant.

Face-to-face interviews tend to be the preferred mode of interviewing as they allow the interviewer to pick up on verbal and non-verbal cues of the interviewee such as facial expressions and body language (Opdenakker, 2006; Saarijärvi & Bratt,2021) that provide

more information than what is being verbally given (Berg, 2001) and allow the researcher to understand whether the participant had more to say and hence probe further on a particular issue. On the other hand, however, face-to face interviews may be problematic as they are time-consuming, and involve commuting to the meeting place to meet the interviewees (Bampton & Cowton, 2002).

For this study, four participants had opted for face-to-face interviews; however, one mother tested positive to the COVID-19 virus in the morning of the interview so we had to hold it remotely. The individual, face-to-face interviews with Paula, Anna and Rachel were held in various locations including at the University of Malta, chosen by the participants. I kept the interviews like a conversation rather than a formal question-and-answer type of interview, to help the participants feel at ease, and may lead to the interviewee divulging valuable and unexpected information (Raworth et al., 2012). The interviews were all recorded on a hand-held recorder. My mobile phone was also used as a back-up recorder to ensure data was not lost in the case of any device malfunctioning. All interviews were also held in English.

Pseudonym of mother participant	Name of Child/ren	Date of interview	Mode of interview	Location of interview	Duration of interview
Anna	Andrew	31.07.22	Face to face	Anna's home	102 min
Laura	Lena	01.08.22	Remote: Zoom	Home	85 min
Rachel	Ruby	02.08.2022	Face-to-face	University of Malta	55 min
		10.08.022			26 min
Emily	Erik & Ethan	03.08.22	Remote: Zoom	Home	84 min
Emma	Emmanuel	04.08.22	Remote: Zoom	Car	46 min
Paula	Petra	08.08.22	Face to face	Paula's home	42 min
Jessica	Joy	12.08.22	Remote: Zoom	Home	68 min
Gaby	Gina	13.08.22	Remote: Zoom	Home	60 min

Table 3.3: Mode of Interview

The remote interviews

The advancement of technology has made it possible for interviews to be held remotely through video-conferencing rather than limited to traditional forms of face-to-face data collection (Irani, 2019). Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, remote interviews were necessary during this period due to social distance restrictions (Lobe et al., 2020). The use of remote interviews also makes it a convenient alternative as participants may be interviewed from any location (Deakin & Wakefield, 2014) and is more cost effective (Chapman, 1999). Developing rapport online is also significantly different from developing face-to-face relationships. Referring to two studies they conducted, Deakin and Wakefield (2014) found that although there are differences between holding interviews face-to-face and remotely, when adopting the latter methodology, this did not affect the conversation quality. Moreover, they noted that building rapport online is only a hindrance when the person being interviewed is rather reserved. In my study, given that the participants were already acquaintances of mine, I did not find it problematic to build good rapport.

Holding interviews remotely however, can be limiting and problematic: poor internet connection, disruption by other people in the home or location, and lack of eye-contact and visual cues which may result in interactions becoming more formal (Sedgwick & Spiers, 2009; Weller, 2017). I experienced disruptions caused by poor internet connection in Emma's interview. She was taking the interview from her car using mobile data, which was unstable. At times the screen froze for a few seconds, and words were lost; thus Emma had to repeat the last sentence; at other times, I had to repeat the question which would stop the flow of the conversation. Towards the end of the call, she was also running out of bandwidth resulting in the interview having to be cut short. Disturbances by family members were also experienced in Emily and Gaby's interviews where their children would enter the room resulting in the participants losing concentration.

Five participants (Laura, Emma, Gaby, Emily and Jessica) opted to hold the interview remotely; four from the home and Emma from her car. All remote interviews were held through the Zoom[©] platform. I asked the participants whether they were familiar with the Zoom[©] platform or whether they had any other preferred Voice-over Internet Protocol (VoIP). All participants were familiar with Zoom[©] as all had previously used the platform for work or to contact family and friends during the pandemic. All participants also agreed to have their cameras on during the interview and to have the interview recorded via the Zoom[©] recording feature. The camera allowed me to have more connection with the participants and allowed me to read their facial cues throughout the interview. Zoom's[©], recording feature, allowed me to download the recording which facilitated transcriptions as when reviewing the videos, I was able to recall the facial expressions and body language which was not possible with the audio recording used in the face-to-face interviews. Although I used the Zoom Recording function, I also recorded the conversation on a

handheld recorder to have a back-up recording should any one malfunction. All interviews were also held in English as it was the preferred language for most participants with two participants, Jessica and Gaby leaving the option to me.

3.7.4 Organising the interviews

All the participants in this study were acquaintances of mine who have children aged between 3 and 8 years old.   After getting ethical clearance from FREC (Faculty Research Ethics Committee), I appointed a critical friend, to help with recruiting the participants.

Since the critical friend has three daughters in my daughter's school, she was willing to post information about my study on the private chats of her three daughter's classes and asked any interested parents to get in touch with me directly. Initially four participants showed interest in my study and got in touch via Messenger. However, prior to the data collection process, one participant opted out as she was going abroad for an extended period and would not have been able to make the online interviews within the stipulated timeframe. Once the remaining three participants (Paula, Gaby and Jessica) confirmed their interest in participating in the study I got in touch once again through Facebook messenger where participants provided their e-mail addresses.

Aware that some of my participants who are following a Masters in Education, namely Laura, Rachel and Emily (who has since dropped out of the course) have young children of their own, I asked the critical friend to contact them via a private Facebook Messenger group, explaining the study, and inviting those interested to participate to get in touch through a private message to her. All three were very eager to participate and assist with my study.

The critical friend then approached the final two participants who were acquaintances of mine: Anna, a friend of my cousin and Emma, the owner of a day-care centre which both my children used to attend. These two participants were also contacted by the critical friend via Facebook Messenger, and were invited to participate in the study. Table 3.4 summarises the recruitment process.

Pseudonym of parent	Relationship	Mode of recruitment
Paula	Our daughters went to the same school	Contacted via parents' private chat
Gaby		
Jessica		
Laura	Followed the same MTL in Teach and Learning Course	Contacted via private Facebook Messenger group
Rachel		
Emily		
Anna	A friend of a cousin	Contacted via Facebook Messenger
Emma	Owner of the childcare setting my children used to attend	

Table 3.4: Mode of Recruitment

Once the participants communicated their interest, an information letter (Appendix 2.1 and 3.1) and consent form in both Maltese and English (Appendix 2.2 and 3.2) were sent to them via email.

Together with these documents, I also sent an information letter and assent form for the children (Appendices 4.1, 4.2, 5.1 and 5.2). The information letters and assent forms were explained to them by their parents. Through the assent form, the children were given the opportunity to accept or decline having their photos published within the dissertation.

This is because I believe that children should be given the opportunity to give their assent in matters that involve them (Clark, 2011; Grover, 2004; Qvortrup, 2015; Thorne, 2002).

The five mothers (Laura, Emma, Gaby, Emily and Jessica) who agreed to conduct the interview remotely sent their signed consent forms as well as the children's assent forms through email. I subsequently contacted them through Facebook Messenger to identify a convenient time for them to hold interview. On the day before the interview, I sent them another message where I reminded them of the time of the interview and sent them the Zoom© link.

The three participants (Paula, Anna and Rachel) who opted to have a face-to-face interview brought the signed consent forms and children's assent forms with them on the day of the interview. I also contacted these mothers via Facebook Messenger to identify a convenient time and place to hold the interviews. The day prior to the interview I sent these parents a message via Facebook Messenger to confirm the interview.

The six participants (Anna, Laura, Rachel, Gaby, Emily and Jessica) who agreed to participate in the photo-elicitation conversation were also reminded to send the images to me prior to the interview.

3.8 Image-based research

Imaged-based research is the process of using images in research, which are a rich source of information to represent and understand our social world (Mathison, 2012). Images can be used for content analysis by allowing participants to generate their own images; for grounded theory by studying photographs and filming; and through narratives that use personal photographs during interviews then analysing the produced narrative

(Silverman, 2010). The latter narrative-based research using personal photographs (photo elicitation) is the process used in this study, as in line with Banks (2007), I considered images to be an important source of information as they may reveal more insights into the children's play experiences, help parents recall specific episodes, evoke narratives, facilitate the elicitation of feelings, and offer a different route to gain information and knowledge that cannot otherwise be achieved through verbal communication (Glaw et al., 2017; Pink et al., 2004). Prior to this, however, I asked parents to ask their children to give their assent form as if they agreed to have their photos used in the study.

Although some might argue that like any other information, images may be questionably used to mislead, lie, critique and hurt, when used correctly will give invaluable insight and visual representation into an instance of person's life and adding a visual to a narrative (Mathison, 2012).

3.8.1 Photo elicitation and visual analysis in narrative based research

Photo elicitation is the use of "photographs to invoke comments, memory and discussion in the course of a semi-structured interview" (Banks, 2007, p.65). Photographs tell stories and they portray an image which allows for elaboration as to what was happening at that very moment; thus are a very good data source for narrative-based research (Andrews et al., 2008).

Qualitative interviews allow the researcher to gather data and information from the interviewees and clearly bring out their views and perspectives (Boulton et al., 1994). One of the limitations of interviews identified by Silverman (2010) is that researchers should be aware of the extent to which they enforce their own agenda on the interviewees. One way

to limit this is to use photographs, such as through photo elicitation, as a point of discussion. A limitation of this method is that it is a rather passive process as the researcher has very little to no control over what photos the participants are going to choose to be used in the study (Banks, 2007).

Prior to each interview, I asked each mother whose child agreed to have their photographs used, to send 2-3 photographs of their children at play before the pandemic and during the pandemic. Some participants sent much more photos than requested. In these cases, I kept all the photos and during the last phase of the interviews where photo elicitation was used, I asked participants to choose which photos they wanted to discuss. In cases where participants were not sure of which photos to choose, I aided them by asking them to describe and expand on a particular photo that caught my interest. The images provided a visual representation (Hile & Santos, 2022) and supported the parents in their narratives (Erikson, 2018) of the children's play activities prior and during the pandemic.

3.9 Ethical considerations

Ethical considerations ensure truthfulness in reporting data, confidentiality and privacy, and warrant that the findings of a study are portrayed truthfully by the researcher (Hasan et al., 2021). It is essential that ethical considerations need to be taken throughout the entire research process (Banks, 2007) as it is not only the interview itself that may affect the interviewee if not handled correctly, but the interpretation and analysis of the narratives may also impact the interviewee if not done ethically (Elliott, 2005). Confidentiality and anonymity are also a key ethical issue (Elliott, 2005) in order to safeguard the parents' and children's privacy.

3.9.1 The ethical process

I began the ethical process by gaining approval from the Faculty Research Ethics Committee (FREC), which was granted on 19th May 2022. Following approval, and once the participants have communicated their interest to participate, an information sheet in both Maltese and English (Appendix 2.1 and 3.1) was forwarded to each participant. This included detailed information about the study, including its aims as well as procedures that will be taken in order to safeguard their anonymity and confidentiality. A consent form (Appendix 2.2 and 3.2) was also sent for the parents to sign and endorse their consent. I was able to ensure participant anonymity by using pseudonyms, covering the children's faces in the photographs and asked parents not to choose photographs that could have any distinguishing features such as uniforms or nametags.

On the day of the interview, I asked all participants whether they had any queries or questions that required clarification in relation to the interview or the study in general. I also requested verbal permission prior to recording the session and noted that the recording will be used solely for transcribing purposes. I also assured all participants that all data collected will be stored in a password-protected file on my computer and anything said within the interviews will remain confidential.

3.10 Data analysis

Data analysis is a process by which data is organised to discover required information (Islam, 2020; Taherdoost, 2022) which in turn may also be used to answer a research question (Ashirwadam, 2014). This data, in qualitative research, may take the form of pictures, words or even sounds. The main methods as described by Shackleton et al., (2021)

to analyse data within qualitative studies are, discourse analysis, critical discourse analysis, thematic analysis, narrative analysis, critical narrative inquiry and interpretative phenomenological analysis.

I opted to use thematic analysis as it enabled me to discover themes and patterns within my data while also identifying the frequency that any particular theme emerged during my study (Alhojailan & Ibrahim, 2012; Shackleton et al., 2021). According to Braun and Clark (2006) thematic analysis, "offers an accessible and theoretically flexible approach to analysing qualitative data" (p. 77), however, Nowell et al., (2017) also argue that when compared to other research methods such as grounded theory it lacks "substantial literature" that may lead to a deficiency of "rigorous analysis".

On completion of all 8 interviews, which were all held in English, I transcribed the recordings which was aided by the automatic audio transcription software Descript[©]. Once I was satisfied that the transcriptions were correct and I was familiar with each transcription, I commenced the data analysis process through the online qualitative coding software 'Taguette[©]. Taguette[©] enabled me to highlight and tag/label key words, consistencies, patterns or phrases within the transcriptions that surfaced from the responses of the eight participants. The resulted tags were subsequently merged and grouped into sub-themes which ultimately formed the key themes of the study.

3.11 Conclusion

Throughout this chapter I sought to justify the design and methodology of my study and why a qualitative method best suited the nature of my study. An overview of my participants as well as information regarding the recruitment of participants as well as

ethical procedures are also given. In the following chapter I shall discuss the findings and

identified themes within the interpreted narratives presented.

Chapter 4

Presentation of Data

4.1 Introduction

In this Chapter I present abridged narratives of select points that emerged during the eight interviews as an introduction to my participants and their narratives, and for easy reference for the following chapter. The decision to present an abridged form of the narratives was taken due to the word limitation. The narratives are presented from the voice of the parents.

4.2 Description of the phenomenon

The study was conducted towards the end of pandemic that brought about lockdowns which inevitably changed children's access to play during the pandemic. Although some restrictions were still in place such as the use of the masks, people had started to socialise. Considering the length of time that children were confined to their homes and with social distancing restrictions, the children in the study who were still very young were not allowed to meet other children (except for siblings) to play for months.

4.3 Narratives

4.3.1 Gaby narrative

Participant child: Gina – 6 years old.

Siblings: Georgia – 2 years old; Gary - 9 years old; Gail – 10 years old.

I am a 37-year-old mother of four children, three girls and a boy, all of whom attend a church school. By profession, I am a midwife. I live in a small apartment with my children and my husband.

Due to the limited space in our apartment, my children play a lot together, but they also fight a lot. I read a lot about parenting techniques as what works with one child does not work with another. Although I have become a lot less tolerant with 4 children, I try to be as emotionally available to them as possible.

I think everything is play for children. Although they learn while playing, I do not plan for their play to be a learning experience. It is something useful to occupy their time. It also helps me elicit information about their doubts without them realising it. Before the onset of the pandemic, we used to take the children to play outdoors for at least 8 hours a week but that completely stopped during the pandemic; it is only recently that we started taking them out again. When at home they are allowed to play all over the house; however, during the pandemic, their indoor play got a lot rougher and I allowed them to make more mess than I would normally allow them to. Even as a family we were more motivated to play together, and the children became more involved in cooking at home.

Screen time increased during the pandemic. It became a good babysitter and a means to play with other children virtually where they engaged in a lot of role-play. While, before the pandemic I used to control the amount of time they spent on their screens, this was not always possible during the pandemic. I also noticed that all my children have experienced character or mood changes in the past year, but I cannot be sure whether it is due to them growing up or because of the pandemic.

4.3.2 Emily narrative

Participant children: Erik – 5 years old; Ethan - 8 years old.

No siblings.

I am a 34-year-old mother of two boys. I live in a maisonette with the boys and my husband. I have a university degree in psychology but am currently a stay-at-home mum.

Both my boys attend the same government school. They have completely different characters; while Erik is an outgoing, energetic boy, and a wild child, Ethan is more shy, sensitive and caring. I would describe myself as an introvert, laid back and very anxious, but as a mum I am very hands-on and very close to both boys.

To me, play is something primarily done for fun, but they can also learn in the process. It is also a form of stress relief and it helps me pick up on things that might be worrying them. My children like role-play and imaginary play, but during the pandemic they brought out a lot of old toys and played a lot with construction blocks. Although they are supposed to play in their bedroom, they tend to play all over the house. This was felt more during the pandemic. Toys, however, are stored in their room.

Before the pandemic, we used to be outdoors for 15-16 hours a week as the boys enjoy sports and nature. This completely stopped during the pandemic as we did not go out. As a result, the children became more independent and creative in their play. Screen time also increased from 1 hour a day to 4-5 hours a day and now, we are working on reducing screen time as the boys have become dependent on it.

Both children have become a lot more creative and independent; however, we have noted a lack in social skills which are slowly improving. Since the pandemic, we also noted that Ethan has become less assertive while Erik has become more sensitive and anxious.

4.3.3 Rachel narrative

Participant child: Ruby – 4 years old

Sibling: Ron – 2 years old.

I am a 34-year-old student. I graduated with a BA Accountancy (Hons) and have worked as an accountant for many years. However, since I had my children I developed an interest in teaching so I am currently reading for a Masters in Education to become a teacher. I live in a flat with my husband and two children. Ruby is very lively and a leader whilst Ron is more of a follower and reserved. They both attend the same private school.

I am very close to both children as I spend a lot of time with them. I am also patient with them but also get angry when they fight. Play to me is children having fun, creating ideas and using their imagination. They can experience life through play, it relaxes them, and I also find out things that they are going through by observing their play. Before the pandemic, we would spend about 12-15 hours a week playing outside. When the lockdowns were removed, I increased the time spent outside as I tried to make up for lost time. During the pandemic the children did not play together; they saw each other as a bit extra. We made sure they had toys all around the house since otherwise, they would turn to screens. Screens, however, were many times the only option we had as myself and my husband were both working from home, so screen time more than doubled. However, their play did get a lot messier, as I had the time to plan it and clean up afterwards.

4.3.4 Emma narrative

Participant child: Eman – 8 years old.

No siblings.

I am 37-year-old. My first Degree is in Communication Studies. Subsequently, I read for Diploma in Childcare Management and currently I am the owner of a Childcare where I work as an educator. I live in a house with my husband and son.

I would describe myself as a very calm person and I have a very good trusting relationship with my son. Eman is very social, creative, and energetic. He loves animals and his play consists of building reserves and zoos for his animal figurines. This type of play has been constant from a very young age. Through play children can let their imagination run free. Play is also useful for adults to learn about a child and what s/he is feeling and thinking.

Eman usually plays in his room as he would not need to clear up his play-in-progress at the end of the day.   However, he is still allowed to play anywhere in the house. During the pandemic we also used to play a lot in our roof garden as our outdoor play went from 8 hours a week to nothing at all during lockdown. The pandemic also meant lack of socialisation as Eman did not have the possibility to interact with other children. Eman prefers playing with his toys rather than having screen time. During the pandemic screen time increased as we had the time to watch movies as a family in the evening.

The lockdown allowed me to spend more time with Eman, which helped him become more independent. I must admit that there was a time during the pandemic, when he started exhibiting some mental issues, such as obsessing over little things and lashing out at school due to the pressure that the pandemic exerted on him.

4.3.5 Laura narrative

Participant child: Lena – 8 years old

Sibling: Luana - 11 years old.

I am a 37-year-old mother of two girls who both attend a Church school. I live in a bungalow with the girls and my husband. Luana is very calm whereas Lena is very anxious and a perfectionist. I would describe myself as calm but also a perfectionist in that I like things done properly.

I consider play as a break from routine. It is a free activity directed by children. It is especially important for anxious children as it helps them relax. Before the pandemic my children used to play more with Barbie© dolls and roleplay. Screen time was not limited during the pandemic; as a result, they now prefer playing on their screens rather than playing with their toys. Having said that, during the lockdown they played a lot more. We also spent more time playing as a family with boardgames. Before the pandemic, we used to meet friends for about 15 hours a week which decreased to about 5 hours a week during the pandemic, bar during the lockdown where we were home all day. Since the pandemic, the girls, do not look for their friends as much as before, so we spend more time as a family.

The pandemic affected my children in very different ways. Luana became more isolated and enjoys being alone a lot more. Lena, on the other hand, would have enjoyed meeting her friends during the pandemic. I noticed her stress levels have drastically increased and still asks whether she can hug her friends before meeting them.

4.3.6 Anna narrative

Participant child: Andrew – 4 years old.

No siblings.

I am Hungarian and 40 years old. I have a Masters degree in Business Administration and work as a fitness instructor. I live in a house with my husband and son who attends a government school.

I think I have liberal views on parenting as I do not like to be strict with my son; I would rather explain things to him. I love the outdoors and I feel that it is good for both of us as he can let out all his energy. In fact, before the pandemic, we would be out for about 28 hours a week which is getting back to normal, but during the lockdown we would only go out for a short walk so about 10 hours a week.

Play to me is a means to explore the world. Everything is play. Andrew's favourite type of play is his role play in his kitchen. He also enjoys playing with buttons and money which allow him to use his imagination. He is also able to release his frustrations through play, using it like a meditative experience. During the first lockdown, Andrew was at a stage when he was not really interested to interact with other children. It is now that I see that social play is important given that he is an only child. Within the home, Andrew plays mostly in the living room; however, he frequently also plays in our yard. I set up his room purposely in a way that is not stimulating so that he does not really play there. When in quarantine we also set up the roof area for him to play in, while getting fresh air.

Screen time started during the pandemic in order to follow music lessons. It was months later that he was allowed to watch some children's programs because I do not like him having screen time really. I feel that Andrew has been affected by the pandemic as he is more sensitive to sound and gets overwhelmed at school around so many children.

4.3.7 Paula narrative

Participant child: Petra – 5 years old.

No siblings.

I am 42 years old. I am a lawyer by profession. I live in an apartment with my daughter and my husband. My daughter is very bubbly but also moody. I am an extrovert but also rather moody. My daughter and I have a very good relationship and she feels like she needs to take care of me at times due to my physical disability.

To me, play defines a child, and it helps form the person. Today, I see traditional play as being more important since technology tends to make children forget their need to play. Petra likes playing with playdough, cooking and playing in the yard. She also plays a lot with her animals pretending that they are her children, siblings or even parents. Now, she plays with technology more than anything else; probably because we did not limit it during the pandemic. We are not very strict with having her play in stipulated play areas around the house; however, I do prefer her toys to be kept in her room or in the hall. Before the pandemic, we used to go out about 4 hours a week which decreased during the pandemic. As a result of the pandemic, I think she also got comfortable with being at home and has learned to enjoy her own company. During the pandemic, she used to regularly meet two of her friends (brother and sister) online, whom she has known all her life. They used to play games like hide and seek remotely. Although I think Petra's play time increased during the pandemic, I also think that simultaneously, it decreased due to an increase in screen time. Having said that, I think she has become a lot more creative thanks to the pandemic, as she does more art and craft and invests a lot of time in improving her creative work. I must note that she has also started moaning a lot more after the pandemic if she wants something.

4.3.8 Jessica narrative

Participant child: Joy – 7 years old

Sibling: Joshua - 19 Years old

      I am 40 years old. I live in an apartment with my daughter, who attends a church school, and husband. My older son lives with my mother as he grew up there. I have an O'level standard of education and work as an air freight clerk.

      I would describe Joy as an extrovert, happy and bubbly.   Recently, I noticed that she has become very nervous and gets angry very quickly. I believe that she heard so much "No" over the past two years that she has had enough of it. She also is growing up and wants to do everything by herself, even if it is dangerous. So, she tends to get angry when I do not let her have her way. I am an introvert so our characters are completely different. I enjoy going out with Joy as it feels like I have an adult with me, but she is completely different when at home.

      Play to me means toys, playgrounds … it is more of an activity. When at home, Joy needs to play in her room as much as possible or near me as I will not allow toys all over the apartment. She makes a big mess in her room and gets everything out when playing. Then she takes a long time to clear up as most of her toys are kept in her wardrobe. She does not play much outdoors as I am usually busy with work or housework, but I do take her to my mother's house or the swings sometimes.

       During the pandemic I saw improvement in her drawing and colouring as she had more time to practice this. I also see it as stress relief for her. During the pandemic we still limited Joy's screen time, even though she tried to push her time limit of 1-2 hours a day. When she would get time to play on her tablet, we would tell her to start off with some

revision then we would allow her to watch a video or play a game … but they would still need to be educational.

4.4 Conclusion

From these abridged versions of the participant's interviews, it clearly emerged that although each family had a different experience, all the children's play patterns were disrupted during the pandemic. In the main, the children have experienced a decrease in outdoor play time and an increase in screen time. Some children also experienced a change in their character. The following chapter presents an in-depth discussion and analysis of themes that emerged within the study.

Chapter 5

Discussion and Analysis

5.1 Introduction

This chapter discusses and analyses the narratives in their entirety that were derived from the semi-structured interviews held with eight mothers of young children.   Photo elicitation of photos chosen by the mothers of their children at play before and during the pandemic will also support the narratives. The data is discussed through three main themes that emerged from the data. These helped me answer my research questions by identifying how children's play was affected by the COVID-19 pandemic. This is discussed in contrast to examined literature.

5.2 Thematic analysis using Taguette®

On completion of all eight interviews, I transcribed the audio-recordings which was aided by the automatic audio transcription software Descript® (https://www.descript.com/). Once all the interviews were transcribed, I reviewed each transcription several times by listening to the raw recordings and comparing them to the respective transcriptions to ensure accuracy. Even if all participants spoke in English, given that most participants were Maltese, some Maltese words were still used by the interviewees. In this case, the Maltese words were all translated to English. There were also a few gaps in the transcriptions where participants did not speak clearly. By repeatedly listening to the audio-recordings I was able to fill in these gaps to have a complete and true representation of the participants' statements. Figure 2 is a screenshot of the raw transcriptions as imported from Descript®.

Once I was satisfied that the transcriptions provided an accurate and loyal reflection of the participants' narratives, I began to organise the data by using the online qualitative coding software Taguette® (http://taguette.org/). Thematic analysis was chosen as the most apt method of data analysis for this study as it allowed me to identify common themes that emerged from the rich and detailed data (Alhojailan & Ibrahim, 2012).

All transcriptions were individually uploaded from a Word Document to Taguette® which allowed me to highlight and tag/label keywords, and identify consistencies, patterns or phrases in the data. The software, enabled me to create tags (Figure 3) which I grouped them into eleven sub-themes that ultimately formed three main key themes (Figure 4) . Figure 3 below illustrates some of the tags that were marked in the transcripts as well as the number of times the tag emerged within the study.

The following sections involve an interpretative analysis of the data through an in-depth critical discussion of the emerging sub-themes and themes, discussed in the order as represented in Figure 4.
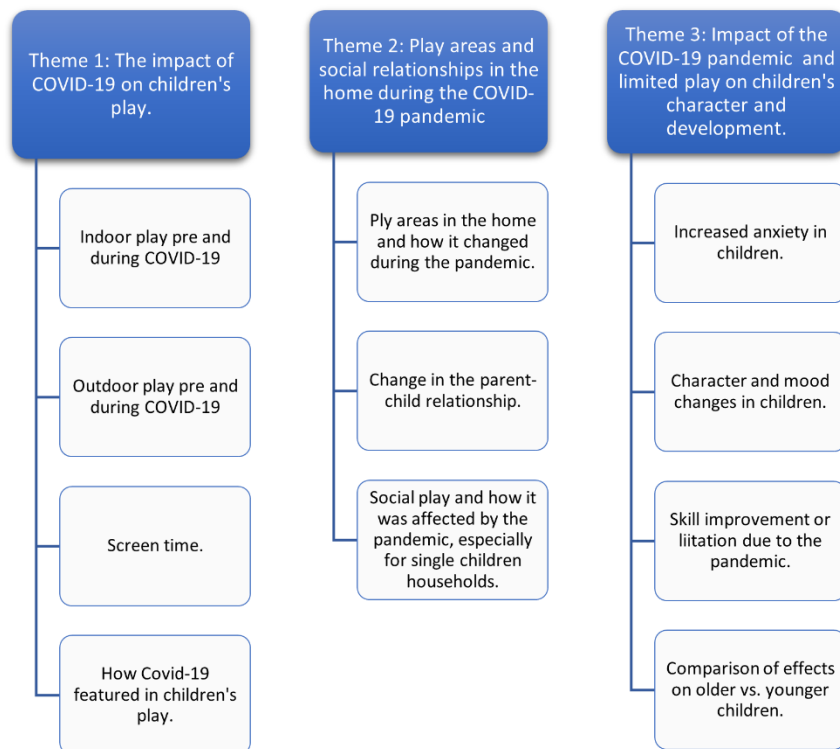
Figure 4: Themes and Subthemes

The three themes shown in the figure are:

Theme 1: The impact of COVID-19 on children's play.
- Indoor play pre and during COVID-19
- Outdoor play pre and during COVID-19
- Screen time.
- How Covid-19 featured in children's play.

Theme 2: Play areas and social relationships in the home during the COVID-19 pandemic
- Ply areas in the home and how it changed during the pandemic.
- Change in the parent-child relationship.
- Social play and how it was affected by the pandemic, especially for single children households.

Theme 3: Impact of the COVID-19 pandemic and limited play on children's character and development.
- Increased anxiety in children.
- Character and mood changes in children.
- Skill improvement or liitation due to the pandemic.
- Comparison of effects on older vs. younger children.

5.3 The impact of COVID-19 on children's play

Howard (2002) claims that children's play depends on culture, religion, and socio-economic background. Although I agree with Howard (2002), I also believe that the type of play children engage in is also affected by their age, a position also supported by Pellegrini (1985) who found that as children grew, their play became more complex. Throughout my study, age was consistently mentioned by parents as a contributing factor that affected children's play.

When asked about their children's play and the changes that may have been noted due to the pandemic, it was not always clear to parents whether the change in play was attributed to the pandemic and/or the children's growth and development. Rachel, Ruby's

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mother, who at the time of the study was 4-years old, stated that "I think her play has changed, but I think the change is more because of the age". This was also supported by Laura, Lena's mother who stated that, "Then during the pandemic, things changed. The play changed over the years even because when they were younger they used to play in one way; their play changed as they grew".

The change in environment that children were exposed to during the pandemic also inevitably affected their play. For example, Kourti et al., (2021) stated that children's outdoor play was greatly limited during the pandemic, while contrastingly, their indoor play increased. In the next section I proceed to discuss the change in indoor and outdoor play before and during the pandemic. This will be followed by a discussion regarding children's screen time during the pandemic and how the pandemic featured in children's play.

5.3.1 Indoor play pre and during COVID-19

As indicated by Laura (Lena's mother), prior to the pandemic, indoor play was very limited due to "extracurricular activities in the afternoon, work commitments, school commitments". This was also expressed by Emily, (Erik's and Ethan's mother) who stated that "we had less time to play … it was just an hour here, an hour there". This is supported by several scholars (see for e.g., Ebbeck and Waniganayake, 2010; Isenberg and Quisenberry, 2002) who claim that nowadays, children have less time to play than in previous generations. However, this changed during the pandemic with Emily stating, "when you suddenly have 12 hours with the children every day, they need to fill their time". Emma (Emmanuel's mother) confirmed that during the pandemic, "We had more free time. So obviously we had more time to play and I had more time to join him as well." Indoor play

therefore, increased significantly during the pandemic, a finding that was also reflected in

Barron et al.'s, (2021) study who found that indoor play increased within all the age groups.

Fear to interact in social gatherings

One major theme that stood out during the interviews was the talk about the lack of

children's parties during the pandemic. Parents in Evans et al.'s (2020) study highlighted a

sense of loss that was felt for children due to the cancellation of events such as birthday

parties. Since parties also fell victim to the pandemic, parents in my study were eager to

share photos of their children's play and party experiences prior to the pandemic, as these

social play experiences were no longer permissible due to restrictions. This is clearly

communicated by Laura (Lena's mother) while talking about Figure 5.

Figure 5: Lena at a birthday party pre-COVID-19

I chose this picture [Figure 5] of the children playing at one of Lena's birthday parties, because parties were stopped during the pandemic. I remember my elder daughter used to have a lot of parties. This was one of the few parties my younger daughter attended because now, in Year 4, the parties would slowly stop. Maybe they would choose a couple of friends but they would not have these parties with the balloons and the characters anymore. So I think Lena missed out on quite a lot during the pandemic in this respect. Once for example, we got her friends over before the pandemic … then during the pandemic nothing. We were on our own, you know, especially for the first birthday during the pandemic we were on our own. We did not even invite family, because it was a time when these things were prohibited. We also had vulnerable people in our family, so we were very careful. I think both my children missed out on parties a lot: just these parties and experiences.

<div align="right">(Laura, Lena's Mother)</div>

Laura went on to state that although, before the pandemic, she used to dread having her children invited to parties, she came to appreciate these events after seeing how much Lena missed out on such opportunities to socialise with friends outside of the restrictive school environment (Wilz and Fein, 2006).

To be honest, I used to hate parties. Cause they [my children] used to be invited to so many. I used to complain, "No, not another party!", I used to say ... but then during the pandemic I said, "I wish they still had those things." So now when they have a party, I never complain. I just take them.

<div align="right">(Laura, Lena's mother)</div>

A study by Ümran and Duygu (2022) noted changes in the perceptions of parents during the pandemic. Findings from this study support this. Some of the parents experienced a change in perception in how they looked at parties; whereas before, some considered a party as fun, free, and "good idea", during the pandemic, it became tinged with so much fear, as described by Rachel, (Ruby's mother):

Figure 6: Ruby at a birthday party pre-COVID-19

By simply looking at this photo [referring to Figure 6], while we are experiencing

COVID I get palpitations. This was a birthday party that Ruby was invited to and it

was very good. It was very age-appropriate. There were different stations that the

kids could play in, and here she is playing at a kind of construction section. So there

are a lot of toy trucks, spoons for the kids to dig. At the time I thought it was a

really good idea and I really enjoyed that they used these things; it did not matter if

the kids put them in their mouth. So, over here instead of blocks or sand, they used

Weetabix©. Over there, Ruby is holding a piece of Weetabix© in her hand. She was

eating, and then she put it back down and then another child came and picked up

the same piece and put it in their mouth. And then Ruby picked up someone else's

piece … The thing is that back then we did not even think about it. In fact, I think if I

remember correctly, they were even using the Weetabix© as a road. No one cared

that the children were picking up these Weetabix©, putting them in their mouth

and putting them back down.

(Rachel, Ruby's Mother)

Meeting indoors, interacting and playing in proximity to each other was the norm,

prior to the COVID-19 pandemic. This changed with the pandemic.

Now even the thought of her putting anything in her mouth that someone else

would have touched, let alone, put in their mouth scares me. I would never dream

of taking her to something like that. Now when she picks up something I sanitize

her hands immediately, but back then I really didn't think about it. To be honest, at

the time I think we really let them play freer than now. Although we are kind of

getting back to normal, I do not think it's going to go back... or at least so quickly, to

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the normal that we had before. Our normal today is a different normal. This playing

situation [Figure 6] would never happen now, or at least I would not let her play in

it ... She loved it. She enjoyed it wherever she went. She touched stuff. She put

them in her mouth and no one ever thought twice about it. Now obviously forget it.

Now it would not happen.

(Rachel, Ruby's Mother)

Through the above narrative, supported by the findings of Merina et al., (2023) some

parents are still experiencing lingering anxiety; it is evident that some parents view the social

play experiences that children were exposed to pre-COVID-19 as a thing of the past, and

although at the time of the interviews restrictions were lifted and life was getting back to

normal, parents still did not feel comfortable having their children partake in such free play

experiences. Rachel and Laura's narratives above suggest that although, at the time of the

study, parents did not yet feel that children may be as free in their play for fear of illness,

contrastingly, after months of isolation, they came to appreciate the importance and value

of play and social interaction for children more than they did before the pandemic. This was

also expressed by Szpunar et al., (2022) who also found that parents were eager for their

children to socialise with friends after the pandemic.

Making full use of the indoor space for play

Most of the parents claimed that, while their children had specific areas within the

home to play in, their children were never restricted to one area but rather were allowed to

play in various areas of the house as expressed by Gaby (Gina's mother), "usually they play

in the living room, in their bedroom, my bedroom as well… So they are not really restricted".

This contrasts with Stevenson and Prout's, (2013, p. 136) notion of a "play-space and space-free-from-play" as the majority of parents allowed their children to make use of all the space in the home to play in. This is somewhat in line with what Paula, Petra's mother, stated; that although Petra had specific play areas within the home, she was allowed to play anywhere around the house; however, Petra preferred her bedroom over any other area:

> We are not that strict on where she plays, but she does have her play area.
> However, I try not to have toys all over the place. She has an area in the corridor,
> which is a corner where we put the big toys. She has a tent, she has her kitchen,
> she has a supermarket, trolly…. she has all the large toys there, which do not fit in a
> bedroom. She plays a lot in this area. But as she grows, she is preferring to play in
> her room. So many a time, I am finding sort of bags of food, play food, dolls, cots in
> her bedroom, and she plays in there.

(Paula, Petra's Mother)

As Paula mentioned, when children grew older, they seemed to choose their bedroom as their area of choice, which was also noted by other parents: "…now they play a lot in their room" (Laura, Lena's mother), and "the older one, sometimes I see that she needs a bit of alone time, so she goes to play in her bedroom." (Gaby, Gina's mother). This is echoing the 19th century idea of play areas which were often restricted to the child's bedroom or nursery (Humphries, 2013).

It was only one parent, Jessica, Joy's mother, who strictly kept her home as a "space-free-from-play" (Stevenson & Prout, 2013) with all toys specifically restricted to Joy's bedroom by stating: "I tell her, 'That's your room, that's your space, that's your play area'. Otherwise afterwards it is a whole hassle if we have toys everywhere and make a whole mess". It was clear that toys had to be out of sight, "as much as possible I put the toys in

the wardrobe. So she would not have anything in the middle." It must be stressed however, that Jessica valued play and did not consider it as a waste of time as expressed by some parents in Lester and Russel's (2010) study. It is the play paraphernalia that goes hand in hand with children's play that Jessica did not appreciate.

During the weeks spent at home, parents reported that they saw an increase in their children's indoor play which was also reflected in Eaton et al.'s (2023) and Povsic et al.'s, (2022) findings. This increase in the opportunity and time to play led to children in my study choose to play with toys that had not been touched for several years:

> … they were looking for toys that they had not played with for ages ... maybe they did so, out of boredom probably, but yes, they were looking for toys they had not played with, in a long time. We even started playing as a family, you know these board games that we used to play when we were young, because we all had more time.

> (Laura, Lena's Mother)

Similarly, Emily claimed that her children started playing with blocks that her children ignored prior to the pandemic. Referring to Figure 7, Emily claimed that:

> We had these blocks since before my youngest was even born and my eldest was one. They never played with them. First thing in the morning, everyday during COVID, they played with these blocks. It was their routine every day. They would wake up, play with blocks, fight because," mine is better, yours is better". But that is where I started to see them play more together.

> (Emily, Erik and Ethan's Mother)

Figure 7: Erik and Ethan playing with blocks they had never used before the pandemic

Increased interaction or more conflict between siblings?

Not only did Erik and Ethan play with toys they had forgotten or never played with before, but also began to play more together indoors thus building a closer bond, as their mother claimed:

> they became much more understanding of each other. They started to understand
>
> each of their preferred ways of playing. They learned how to get along better as
>
> well. They fought a lot but became more understanding, maybe cooperative ...They
>
> are more in and enjoy doing the same things now. Might be the age, but I think it is

because they spend so much time together and … I think they created a new way of playing that is a bit of both of them.

(Emily, Erik and Ethan's Mother)

In contrast, some children preferred to play alone as described by Laura (Lena's mother) who claimed that her children, "would play together, but alone…..they would both be playing the same game for example on their tablets but do not speak. They used to fight a lot more also, they had no one else to fight with." Rachel's children also did not play together during the pandemic as she noted that "they saw each other as a bit extra, they didn't use each other to play together." This breakdown in sibling relationship was also noted by Gaby (Gina's mother) who noted that, "I guess they are more in each other's faces. You know, they started annoying each other more." This increased in conflict between siblings during the pandemic was also noted in Zhang et al., (2022) who stated that conflict increased between siblings during the pandemic. He also noted however, that children may develop a closer relationship if conflict is resolved through proper communication. This may shed light on why Erik and Ethan's relationship has developed into a close bond even if they fought, given that their mother has a background in psychology Emily may have been more knowledgeable in how to help her boys resolve their issues.

5.3.2 Outdoor play pre and during Covid-19

As Chatterjee (2018) and Graber et al. (2020) claim, situations of crisis such as a pandemic and the related restrictions, affect children's access to play. This is what happened to Maltese children when schools and other public areas were closed, making playgrounds, parks, and other play spaces inaccessible (Times of Malta, 2020).

Throughout the interviews it was noted that all parents talked about outdoor play over indoor play when discussing play before the COVID-19 pandemic. This is probably because it was outdoor play that was mainly affected during lockdowns (Moore et al., 2020), while children were restricted to play indoors for most of the time.

Children over the age of five are required to spend an average of 60 minutes daily doing physical activity as well as another 60 minutes of vigorous activity three times a week (The Canadian Society for Exercise Physiology (CSEP), 2021.; Australian Department of Health and Aged Care, 2021). Many of the participant mothers were aware of the importance of physical play for children, and prior to the COVID-19 pandemic they used to take them for a considerable number of hours to play outdoors, with the children spending more time playing outdoors during the weekend.
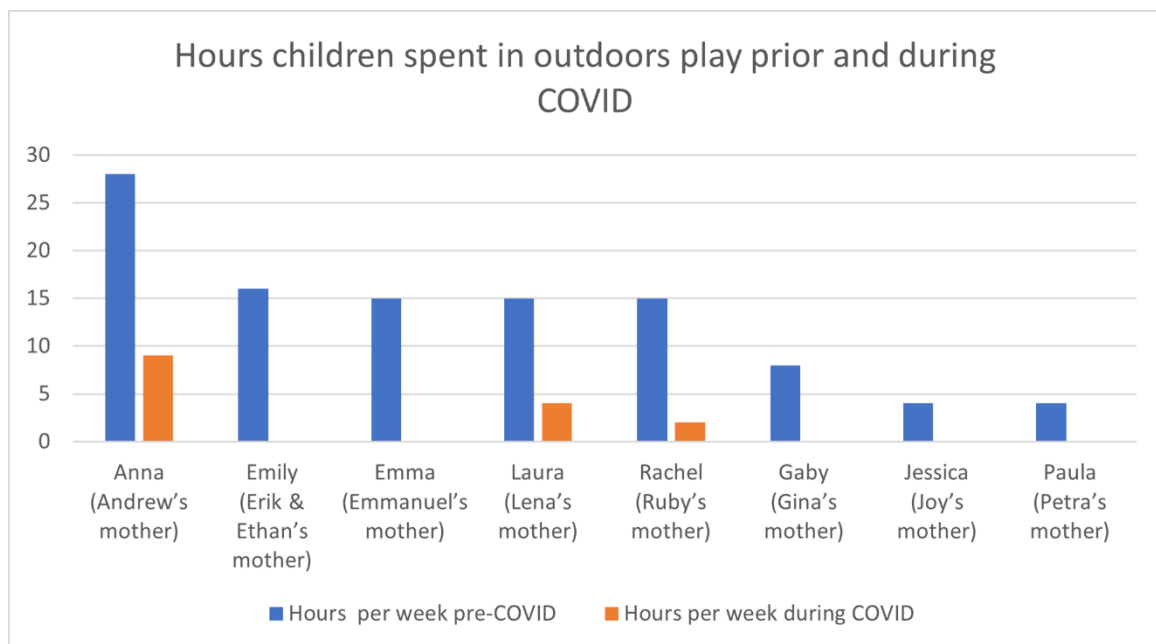
The amount of time children spent playing outdoors before the pandemic varied drastically between 4 – 28 hours a week (Figure 8), with some parents taking their children out for a considerable amount of hours, as indicated by Rachel (Ruby's mother), "we would

go out on the weekend mostly. Then we would go on weekdays maybe just once or twice a week". Similarly, Laura (Lena's mother), claimed that they take their children," 10 hours is out mostly on the weekend meeting friends, playgrounds, and those kinds of activities." This mirrors Souza et al.'s, (2023) finding, where they found that children spent most of their time outdoors on weekends before the pandemic.

Figure 8 also shows the drastic difference in the amount of hours children spent playing outdoors prior and during the pandemic. Five (Emily, Emma, Gaby, Jessica and Paula), out of the nine children did not have the opportunity to play outdoors at all during the pandemic; a phenomenon also investigated by Sum et al., (2022) who, even though at a lower percentage, also found that more than one third of school aged children had no outdoor play during the pandemic.

When enquiring about Joy and Petra's limited time spent outdoors pre-COVID-19, Paula (Petra's mum) stated that she found it difficult to leave her child to play alone outdoors due to her (the mother's) physical disability and her fear of her daughter running off, "many playgrounds are not even secure. Children can open the gates themselves so if she runs out I will not be able to catch up to her." Thus, having a parent with limited mobility restricted Petra's time playing outdoors. Many play areas in Malta are limited, have inadequate equipment and lack in design (Satariano et al., 2021). These inadequacies result in all parents especially someone with a disability, like Paula, to feel that their children are unsafe while playing at playgrounds.

Jessica (Joy's mother) on the other hand, seems to be in a dilemma as although she is aware of the need for Joy to play, she seemed more concerned about managing her housework rather than with spending time with her child outdoors:

Before the pandemic she used to mainly play outside during weekends, especially in summer. Because of work or summer school, we do not really have time to go out during the week. So when she was younger, if I finished early from work, or I do not have much housework to do, I would try to take her for an hour to the swings. This was in winter because in summer I reduced that. To be honest this is an argument I always have with my mother. She always tells me to take her out after work to the beach but I have housework to do. If I take her to the beach or out to swings and I do not do the housework, the next day I will not manage everything. Even though we live in a flat, there is always something that needs to be done.

(Jessica, Joy's mother).

Anna on the other hand spent around 28 hours a week playing outdoors with her son, a routine which she also tried to keep during the pandemic. Even though she has been in Malta for over 14 years, Anna is not Maltese so this difference in culture may be the cause of such a disparity in the above figures. This aligns with Howard (2002) that culture affects children's play. It does also however, stem from the mother's love of being outdoors and her occupation as a fitness and wellness instructor. She stated that:

When we are outside or when we are at the playground, he moves a lot. He seems to have a lot of need for physical movement and enjoys that. But he does not really like it if he is told what to do, where to run. I am hoping that it is kind of an age thing and in a year or two, he will be more motivated by that. But, right now I feel that free play in the afternoons where he can just run around is kind of more than enough and probably most satisfying for me … and for him.

(Anna, Andrew's Mother)

In pre-COVID-19 times, children enjoyed playing outdoors with others: social play was their preferred type of play. For example, Lena's mother was eager to show pictures of her daughter (Figure 9) swimming in a small pool together with her friends; a common type of play in Malta during the hot summer days.
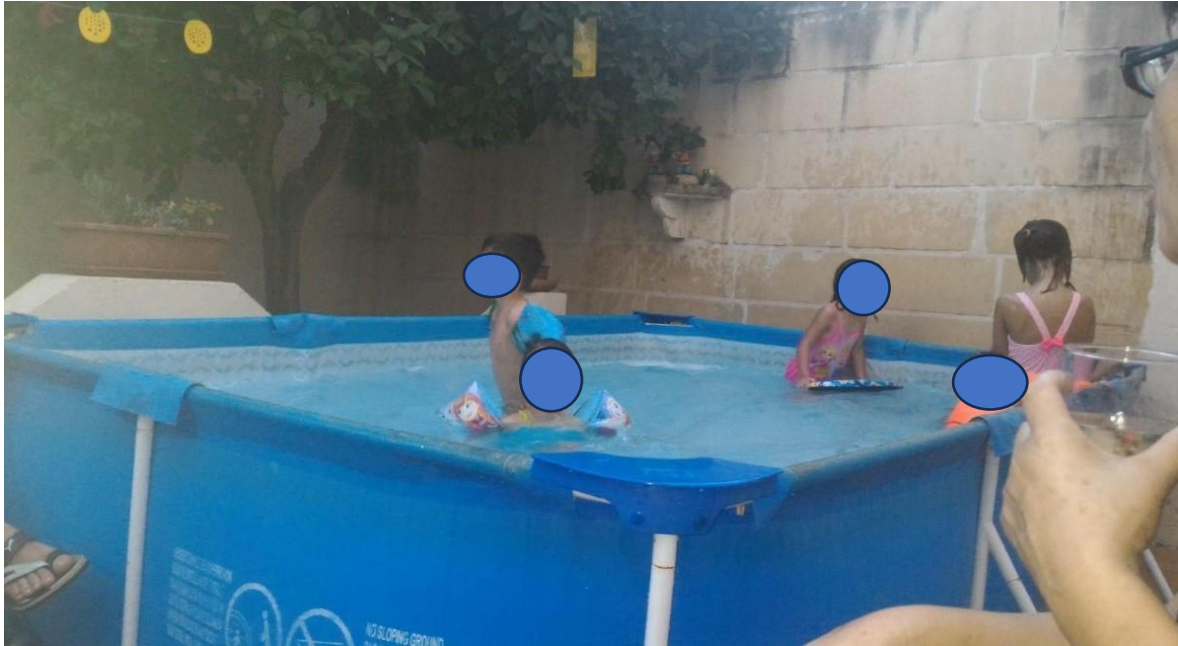
Figure 9: Lena playing in a pool with friend pre-COVID

Similarly, (Gaby) Gina's mother showed a photo of her daughter (Figure 10) drawing while outdoors with her friends in a picnic area.

Figure 10: Gina drawing while outdoors with her friends pre-COVID

On this occasion, the children partook in a lot of social play through creative play while drawing and colouring and while playing traditional games such as catch and hide and seek. They claimed that these play experiences were characterised by laughter, children's freedom to play, "touch stuff" (Rachel, Rubys mother) socialising and "spend[ing] a lot of time together" (Gaby, Gina's mother); – experiences which were prohibited during the pandemic. Through cooperative play, children are able to interact socially, a play experience which normally happens outside the home, which however, children were deprived of during the pandemic (Howard and McInnes, 2013).

Anna (Andrew's mother) and Laura (Lena's mother) also expressed their children's love for social play during outdoor play in pre-COVID-19 times, with Anna stating, "he really used to enjoy playing with this little friend" while Laura stating "they used to play together with other children their own age or maybe a cousin". This time was perceived by mothers as

96

being a happy activity while playing or running around outdoors; a finding supported by Stracciolini et al., (2022).

Referring to a photo taken in pre-pandemic times (Figure 5.11), and in a somewhat nostalgic note, Emily (Erik and Ethan's Mother) asserted that:

Figure 11: Erik and Ethan climbing a tree pre-COVID

We used to go out a lot more (before the pandemic). ... my kids ... were there with their cousins and their friends playing. ... we would meet at a park somewhere where they would play. For me, it is just the typical childhood playing, you know, just letting them be. They made their own games, they would be climbing trees, running after each other, play hide and seek. That was before, literally right before I

think December... not even December, probably February 2020. So it was literally

right before COVID. That is when they used to be at their happiest times before,

playing outdoors. And funnily enough when I took them to the same place with the

same people when the pandemic was over, I thought they would naturally go back

to playing as before, but they did not. We had to remind them what to do. Before

the pandemic (Figure 6) play was natural for them. They needed no prompting.

They just got on with it. They decided to climb the tree ... build things out of the

twigs they find on the floor. They played with what they found. It was very free.

(Emily, Erik and Ethan's Mother)

The above narratives, testify that some children found it harder to go back to the

same play experiences they used to engage in before the pandemic; a finding supported by

Duran and Ömeroğlu (2022) where a mother of a six-year-old boy stated that her child

forgot how to play with others. This loss is therefore not only due to the extended time

spent indoors, but also due to the lack of socialisation that children were exposed to. Added

to that, there might some parents could have still be feeling anxious at the time. This was

claimed by Rachel who stated, "She picked up a twig from the floor and put it in her mouth.

And we sort of were still freaking out that she could not touch anything."

Children's outdoor spaces without the home

Outdoor play during the pandemic was also affected by the availability to an outdoor

space within the home. This would be greatly affected by the parent's economic status as

children from lower socio-economic backgrounds are less likely to have a garden or outdoor

area to play in (Rao & Fisher, 2021). Laura, (Lena's mother) sheds light on some of the

outdoor play that her children were able to experience in their home during the pandemic:

> … and they also play outside. We have a yard where they have their basketball ring,
>
> they have roller blades, they have their scooters. In summer we have a small pool
>
> where they played a lot in it. So they swim a lot. They love swimming and they play
>
> freely, you know. They play together, they invent games in the pool.

<div align="right">(Laura, Lena's mother)</div>

The family's economic status would also affect the play equipment made available to

children, as noted by Laura above. This was noted in Paula's narrative who stated that:

> we have a yard and she likes just going in the sand pit and just getting herself filthy.
>
> We got it in April. And she has a trampoline also . I was trying to focus more on
>
> getting her out for fresh air because obviously there was the lack of play dates … we
>
> had even bought her a ball pit.

<div align="right">(Paula, Petra's mother)</div>

Affording messy play

The extended period that children had to spend indoors during the pandemic, led six

out of the eight parents to experiment with new types of play. For example, some parents

admitted that they allowed their children to experience messy play, a type of play which

they never explored at home before the pandemic. This contradicts Edwards et al.'s (2022)

findings that messy play was not allowed in homes or is unaffordable.

This ability for children in my study to be exposed to these types of play may be

because of four main reasons. One reason was that most of the parents of the study had the

knowledge to appreciate play, especially since most had a tertiary level of education and three out of the participants were, at the time of the study, reading to become teachers, while Emma (Emmanuel's mother) was an early years educator. Another reason was that most of the families, had the space for messy play, with those who did not have a yard using their balconies to provide such experiences. Gaby, who had four children, felt somewhat limited to provide messy play experiences as they did not have a yard or garden, "If I had a garden, I would have done a lot messier play, but they can only play inside. So whatever we do I can not get a hose pipe and clean up." Parents were also financially able to provide their children with materials required for messy play and they also had the time to clean up after their children, "to be honest, we are at home and I have nothing to do, so might as well just leave them make a mess once I have the time to clean up" (Rachel, Ruby's mother).

Parents became creative in thinking of the different types of messy play children could engage in, as indicated by Rachel's (Ruby's mother):

> … once I let them paint the windows from the outside, so they got paint, and they splatted the windows. You are desperately trying to come up with ideas to keep them entertained. Because of that, you do things that are a bit out of your comfort zone as well. I got paint, and they were painting with foam on the glass. They also had time to play with a lot of water play (during the pandemic), which I do not really do now (post-pandemic) because there is no time for it. But during the pandemic, yes, we did. A lot of cooking and baking also.

> (Rachel, Ruby's Mother).

Emily (Erik and Ethan's mother) went as far as giving her children the opportunity to paint a mural on the garden walls (Figure 12). This was supported through her narrative:

We let them paint the garden walls. That was a COVID project. There was a rainbow with flowers. It was more of a scene. They painted the sky and the butterflies. We put the rainbow because they wanted the rainbow. They designed their own wall. We tried to make their outdoor area a little bit more attractive, so it got painted. It is still like that. It is nice though. Like, it is a reminder now. It is still there. Then the next (lockdown) we did the other wall... The first time we did the rainbow wall, the following time we did under the sea. They were given a wall to paint on basically, they were free to do what they wanted.

(Emily, Erik and Ethan's Mother)

The most common types of messy play experienced by the children in my study were water play and creative play using paint, where children played in any outdoor space available: the yard, balcony or roof. Barron and Emmet (2020a), in fact found that in homes where messy play was allowed, this would happen in back gardens and involved water play. However, no studies indicate that children were allowed to paint on the garden walls with paint as experienced by Erik and Ethan. The use of back gardens for play highlights a socio-economic divide, as only those children whose families are more financially stable and living in larger houses rather than smaller apartments could afford to make use of such outdoor space (Barron and Emmet, 2020a).

Outdoor Locomotor play

As a result of the pandemic children's physical play decreased due to lockdowns that restricted outdoor play (Nery et al., 2023). Some of the children in my study were not taken out for locomotor play during the pandemic, "the first one and a half months, we did not go out, not even in the balcony, would I let her go out" (Jessica, Joy's mother) and "we spent a lot of time inside" (Rachel, Ruby's mother). The opposite scenario was reflected by Riazi et al., (2021), who found that parents used bike rides to keep their children healthy during the pandemic. This lack on locomotor play was emphasised by Gaby (Gina's mother) who presented a photo (Figure 13 below) of her children on their bikes stating:

In this photo, taken before the pandemic (Figure 13) they had just gotten the bikes.
I think this was the first time Gina used the bike. They are all still with training
wheels and honestly, I think they really did not use them after this photo, because
then, the pandemic hit and we did not take them out.

(Gaby, Gina's mother)

5.3.3 Screen time

Screen time was experienced by all children of the study during the pandemic.

The increase in screen time during the pandemic

Several recent studies (Sultana et al., 2021; Ozturk Eyimaya & Yalçin Irmak, 2020;
Pandya et al., 2021; Wiederhold, 2020) have shown that screen time increased significantly
during the pandemic. This was supported by the findings of this study where parents
suggested that children's screen time was often unlimited during the pandemic:

if we are home for 12 hours of awake time, there is only so much that they can do. I

mean, they are human at the end of the day. They are not going to repeat the same

thing over and over for 12 hours every day, all day.

(Emiliy, Erik's and Ethan's mother)

Since children had to stay indoors for a prolonged period they got bored playing,

making screen time an attractive option:

To be honest, I let them have more time to play and watch stuff on screens during

the pandemic. They were not attending school, they did not have anything else to

do (extra-curricular activities). They played, but there is a limit to how much they

can play with Barbie$^©$ dolls. They used to dedicate some time to playing outside in

our yard, so that was very important, but then they would not want to just play

with toys. We used to spend the morning working on school tasks and learning, but

then in the afternoon, they used to love watching videos on their tablets and play

online ... So yes, screen time increased, and it increased a lot. To be honest, I was

not stressing to limit it as I did before (the pandemic). Maybe if before I used to tell

them not more than an hour or two spread throughout the day, during the

pandemic I used to let them more, to be honest.

(Laura, Lena's Mother).

This unlimited use of screen time was not a phenomenon that only occurred locally. In

a study by Kirsch et al., (2020) they found that children were pleased with being allowed

unlimited access to screens during the pandemic and children. The overly use of screen

time during the pandemic, made it difficult for parent to limit screen time after the

pandemic. This was noted by Paula, Petra's mother, who even after the pandemic noted

that , "unfortunately, I have seen an increase (in the use of screentime)".

Anna (Andrew's mother), who was previously averse to her son having any screen

time, also stated that the lockdown was the reason why Andrew began getting exposed to

screens. Referring to Figure 14, she stated that:

He started interacting with or having screen time, during the first lockdown with

some online classes. Before he did not really have screen time. There was this

musical instrument museum from my hometown (abroad) … (prior to the

pandemic) we attended in person like two or three times. And then during the

lockdown, they started doing online sessions. The good thing about the pandemic

was that he could attend from Malta, and he really was inspired by it and that

inspired most of his musical interest. He was playing along with the music and with

the videos. He even got some yoga videos he was actually doing this with the

instructor. The traditional kind of screen time when he is just watching came, I

think, quite a bit later. Quite a few months later.

(Anna, Andrew's Mother)

Even if it is recommended by WHO (2019) that children below the age of 2 should not

be given any screen time, this, is not usual. A study conducted by Rathnasiri et al., (2022),

before the pandemic found that out of 340 children, only 14 preschool children had no

screen time whatsoever, while an international study by Dimitrova et al., (2022) found that

children were being exposed to screens from as early as 8 months of age with the time

spent on screens increased as children grew older.

Although screen time increased for all children in the study during the pandemic, this

increase was not always significant.   Emma (Emmanuel's mother) claimed that her son was

not interested in online games and screen time only increased due to an increase in

watching movies together as a family. Jessica (Joy's mother) did not note an increase in

screen time either as they tried to keep Joy on the same routines, she had pre-COVID-19.

The only increase in screen time experienced by Joy (Figure 15) was when she watched

some television or played an educational game while her mother completed some

housework. Usually, such time was limited to an hour. This contradicts a study by Trott et al.,

(2022) who concluded that primary-aged children experienced the largest increase in screen

time, with preschool children (up to the age of 5) experiencing the largest increase in

leisurely screen time.

From the parents' narratives, it was noted that although parents relaxed their children's restrictions on screen time, some parents such as Paula and Laura did not place any limitations at all, a finding also noted by Kirsch et al., (2020). Some parents however, felt the need to justify their decision, indicating that they were still harbouring guilt for allowing their children to have so much screen time. Such a finding was also reflected in a study by Findley et al,. (2022) who found that parents felt judged and guilty for having to resort to screen time during the pandemic.

Screen time as a mode of entertainment

At times screen time inevitably took the role of a babysitter during the pandemic. With parents working from home children experienced an increase in screen time to keep them quiet entertained during this time (Eyler et al., 2021). This was sustained by Rachel who, compared the use of screen during the pandemic with that to after the pandemic:

Screen time increased (during the pandemic). Definitely. I was trying to work. I was working from home, both of us were working from home. It was our only option in a way. So yes, it increased. Now (after the pandemic) I am more in a position where I can limit it, whereas before I was not. During the pandemic, yes, it definitely increased, by more than double.

(Rachel, Ruby's Mother).

The increase in screen time by children was also reported in other studies (Jáuregui et al., 2021; Oh & Vukina,2022;Shahid et al., 2023). Even though parents realised that it was not ideal for children to be exposed to so much screen time, they felt they had no other option than to allow their children to use their screens during the pandemic. In addition, parents sometimes felt at a loss as to how to occupy children with being locked indoors for such an extended period time. Screen time therefore served as a mode of learning, communication and entertainment. This is supported with findings with studies by Ozturk Eyimaya and Yalçin Irmak (2020) and Sultana et al., (2021), who likewise found that screens also served as a break for parents who felt the need to constantly entertain their children. Paula, was aware of the increase in screen time her child was being exposed to during the pandemic, but she felt helpless in controlling it:

Although we have done everything to limit it (screen time), sometimes having to work from home made it difficult. Before the pandemic I used to… getting her next to me with a colouring book, dot to dot, and trying to keep her occupied; then I used to succeed, but there is a limit. During the pandemic, screen time increased because basically we had more time on our hands ... Parents had to work. Sometimes children, must be kept entertained.

(Paula, Petra's mother)

She continued with her argument explaining the struggles she faced to limit screen time:

We used to try to limit her screen time before the pandemic, but with the

pandemic, we relaxed. Petra used to spend a bit more than an hour a day on her

tablet, but I cannot tell you exactly how much. But then, during the pandemic,

when we were stuck at home and we had to work from home, we had to relax our

restrictions because of necessities. Unfortunately, since then, I have seen an

increase in her screen time, however, as of this week, we have literally started

again with the timers to decrease the screen time.

(Paula, Petra's Mother)

Using screen time to play, interact and socialise with others

During the pandemic, children used their screen time to stay in touch with friends and

family (Tulchin-Francis et al., 2021; Pandya and Lodha, 2021; Wiederhold, 2020). The

children of this study also used their screen time to interact and socialise with friends and

family members as Laura, Lena's mother mentions, "When they played online, it was sort of

a way (for them) to interact through this game with their school friends". During online

connections with family and friends, children would not only talk but also played games.

One virtual game that seemed popular during the pandemic, was Roblox©. Roblox©

allows children to create their own avatars in a virtual world that is accessible to all their

friends. Socialisation between children occurred in this virtual space. There are also

chatrooms within Roblox© that children can use and all the games available on the platform

are multiplayer games. The game itself is designed for children between the ages of eight -

eighteen, however, their largest demographic is with children below fourteen as most

games feature cartoon characters. Since the game is developed as a social platform children

spent hours in front of the screen chatting with their friends. Emily, discussed how her

children played with Roblox© and her concerns about it:

> They play Roblox©. I think that was the worst mistake. During the pandemic my
>
> husband introduced them to Roblox to try and boost their morale or something ...
>
> And since then, it has been a battle to make them play it less. It is the way they
>
> used to play with their cousins (during the pandemic). They would meet there
>
> (online) and they could interact (with each other). They used to call each other
>
> from my phone, through a video call, and play together on Roblox©. They will be
>
> playing the same game, but saying (to each other) where they were going, and
>
> what they were doing. So it was a way of keeping in touch with friends. I mean, it
>
> was still playing because they were creating their own scenarios and characters. It
>
> was screen play, but there was still the element of imagination and communication
>
> skills with their cousins online ... It is a nice way of playing. It is just that it is a bit
>
> addictive. That is my only concern with it that it is, it is quite addictive.
>
> (Emily, Erik and Ethan's mother)

This addictive nature of the game was in fact proven by Budayová et al., (2022) who

labelled Roblox© as being one of the more addictive online games. The concern of Roblox©

being addictive was also brought up by Laura, who also extend a warning to me by stating,

"Don't introduce it to your children."

> There is a game called Roblox©. It is nice because it is quite interactive and they
>
> play with their friends online. So they have their group of friends from school. So
>
> even during the pandemic, they used to talk there and play with each other online.
>
> They have kind of their mini self-there. They build a city, build houses, they go to

work; so it is quite interactive and if I do not stop them they go on for hours playing this game. They actually play together there. They are together in the same city. They live in the same house. So they are sitting next to each other, talking to each other virtually within the game. You see them moving around, they used to call each other on MS Teams as well during the pandemic and play this game. They used to talk and play this game and build houses. It is nice, but I mean, it is too much. Spending an hour is okay. But then I see them playing it for a long time. I start getting dizzy seeing them play because they are moving around all the time. So it is not that ideal in my opinion, but they enjoy it, and I thought it would stop after a while, but they love it.

(Laura, Lena's Mother).

Maltese children were not the only children who immersed themselves in digital games such as Roblox© during the pandemic. Einav, (2022) in fact labelled Roblox© as a success story that emerged from the pandemic stating that it has reached up to 200 million monthly active users. It also emerged from the same study that other gaming platforms such as Twitch©, Minecraft©, and Fortnite© (Ryu et al., 2022) were also popular during the pandemic, however, this was not mentioned by the participants of this study.

5.3.4 How COVID-19 featured in children's play

If children are deprived of play, this may lead to adult chronic-depression (Brown, 2014). When under stress, children turn to play to try and overcome their trauma and use it to anticipate and understand the future by creating, oftentimes, grim scenes within their play (Boyd Webb, 2007).

All mothers in my study noted that their children featured the pandemic within their play. COVID-19 featured mainly in children's dramatic play when playing with dolls or soft toys. Children made their toys social distance, wash their hands and wear masks as shown in Lena's play (Figure 16); a finding with a is supported by Egan et al., (2020) who found that 34% of children in their study incorporated the virus in their play. Laura (Lena's mother) and Gaby (Gina's mother) noted that their older girls also created masks for their dolls, "my older daughter likes sewing and she made masks from socks. She created makeshift masks and she had the dolls on her bed wear masks" (Gaby). Such play scenarios reflect the children's new reality, their attempt to process and understand the pandemic and the practicing of new rituals such as the washing of hands and the wearing of masks from their perspective. This reflects Schaefer's (2011) assertion that children use play to re-enact and re-live stressful experiences while gaining a sense of control over them.

Figure 16: Toys wearing masks and social distancing

In another narrative, Rachel described how Ruby, mimicked taking her dolls to the doctor to check if they have the COVID-19 virus and handwashing her dolls – a measure which was repeatedly done during the pandemic. Ruby also included aspects of COVID-19 in her play.

For example, when she played doctor she took the dolls to be checked for the virus. I mean, she does not know too much about the virus, but she knows something. So she washes the dolls' hands more. I mean, she plays in a way that if there was not the virus, she would never have thought of, like washing the dolls' hands. I mean, like she sanitizes her dolls' hands ... She is replicating what she is seeing. So, in their pretend play yes, they copy what they see... so their pretend play changed.

(Rachel, Ruby's Mother)

Emily also mentioned her boys Erik and Ethan playing doctors. However, reflecting Boyd Webb, (2007) who states that children in situations of crisis would create dramatic scenes in their play, her boys also created dramatic and intense scenes by stating that a patient was going to die from contracting the COVID-19 virus, "Playing doctors was also a very common form of imaginary play among my children. When pretending that they were going to the doctor they always mentioned COVID-19 as the cause of illness ... it was always very dramatic." (Emily, Erik and Ethan's mother)

I another incident, Andrew, who has a toy replica of the COVID-19 virus was witnessed by his mother Anna playing with his cousin of the same age by throwing the COVID-19 ball to each other and laughing that they were passing the virus to each other. This was done towards the end of the lockdowns, which may represent the notion that, as Schaefer (2011) emphasised, the children had processed the new situation they found themselves in through play, making COVID-19 no longer as scary as it might have been in the past.

So yesterday his cousin who is his age [4] came over to visit. They were running around the house and they were playing with this ball like, "I have the Corona, it is going to catch you" and they were throwing the ball to each other.If it hit them they

had COVID and they would laugh so much while playing this. So (COVID) it is very

strongly featured in his play even today.

<div style="text-align: right">(Anna, Andrew's mother).</div>

The findings also show that at times there was a gender difference in the children's

dramatic play. While, as described above, girls used role-play to take their dolls to the doctor

to be checked for the virus, a scenario which the boys also enacted, "… they put masks on

their soft toys. Like they were replicating their situation with their soft toys" (Emily, Erik and

Ethan's mother), boys also engaged in, superhero small-world play to defeat the virus. As

observed by Emily, Erik and Ethan tended to take on the role of superheroes to defeat the

villain COVID virus described in her narrative:

> ... they were playing with their superhero action figures, where, the villain was no
>
> longer the classic villain, you know, like Joker and these kinds. It became COVID.
>
> They actually made a foil COVID ball. ... So that became the villain. Their play
>
> included different ways these superheroes, like superman and batman, defeated
>
> the COVID villain. But that is, I think, the major way that COVID featured in their
>
> play: it became the villain attacked by the superheroes … It also got a bit dramatic
>
> sometimes with the boys shouting "You have COVID and you're going to die!!" And
>
> that is where the superheroes came in to save the people from COVID.

<div style="text-align: right">(Emily, Erik's and Ethan's mother).</div>

Therefore, it is evident that COVID-19 featured strongly within children's play as they

tried to make sense of the pandemic (Schaefer, 2011).

5.4 Play areas and social relationships in the home during the COVID-19 pandemic

Having children play in the living areas makes it easier for parents to interact with their children through play which would allow for stronger bonds to build within families (Milteer et al, 2012). Inevitably though it is not only the parent-child relationships that have been affected by the pandemic but also relationships between siblings and other social relationships that were limited during the pandemic.

5.4.1 Play areas in the home and how it changed during the pandemic

Prior to the pandemic, mothers of older children (six years and older) preferred for toys to be stored in their children's bedrooms so as not to have their main living areas taken over by toys as stated by Emily (Erik and Ethan's mother) "now (that they are older) we just put their toys in their bedroom." However, as argued above, all children in my study, except for Joy as her mother expressed, "I'm not going to let her run around everywhere with toys" (Jessica) were free to bring toys to any area of the house and play freely; a finding supported by Stevenson and Prout (2013). In both Stevenson and Prout's (2013) as well as my study it was however emphasised by most mothers, that toys needed to be taken back to their bedroom (in my study) or playroom (in Stevenson & Prout's study) after children were done from playing with them. Parents of younger children in this study, indicated that because they considered their children too young to play unsupervised, they preferred to have them play in the living area of the home and keep their toys there as expressed by Rachel (Ruby's mother), "if someone walks into my house. It is like a playroom, I have toys everywhere". This was also explained by Gaby in her narrative:

Usually, I tell them (referring to her children) to stay in the living room, so I have one area with toys. They are not really restricted. We live in an apartment, so there is not really a big space for them to play in, but they all choose their space. Sometimes they would be playing together and sometimes everyone goes separately.

The toys are stored in their bedroom and we keep the larger toys in the study and they get them out from there. Most of the toys they play with regularly are in boxes and they just pull one out from their room. Many times, they get one container each and they combine the toys all together. Sometimes they do stay in the study or the bedroom, but mostly they come in the living room to play next to us.

(Gaby, Gina's mother)

It seems that this play arrangement changed during the lockdown as many parents felt that children needed to be given more freedom in their play than before the pandemic; a need which was also noted by Brown and Freeman, (2001). Parents also developed a higher threshold for allowing toys and other play materials around the house. One example of such a permissible attitude during lockdown, is seen in Figure 17. The photo shows how Gaby (Gina's mother) allowed her four children to bring out all their pillows, blankets and sheets from their room to build a fort. Gaby noted that although before the pandemic she would have allowed her children to build forts with blankets, she would have never allowed it to reach this point of having all their bedding in the living room. Therefore, the notion that children nowadays do not know how to play anymore (Rhea, 2016; Wright et al., 2000) might not be due to the children's inability to play, but caregivers blocking children's play and not allowing it to develop.

This is a photo of our living room during the pandemic. It is full of blankets. They built a fort there. My tolerance level for that has increased. I allowed it more during the pandemic because before I did not allow such a mess. We would have never arrived at this stage, but they love building forts now. Before COVID they would not have gotten to that level. We used to let them get out some blankets and pretend like they are camping and take books out and read there but they never got everything out like this before the pandemic. They also play with their figurines in the living room under the fort. They just put a tent over their play area and they are still playing in the same way just hidden under the fort.

(Gaby, Gina's mother)

Not only were Gaby's children able to take their play to the next level during the lockdown, but they were also able to build memories as parents became more accepting of their play paraphernalia. This reflects my previous finding regarding messy play where during the COVID-19 pandemic parents were ready to accept situations which would not

have been accepted prior to the lockdown. However, it must be noted that his may not have been the case for all parents. In a study by Casey et al., (2022) parents noted that mess created through play was not ideal or even allowed as some parents struggled to keep up with work commitments, household chores and financial struggles which put a lot of stress on them. This meant that children were not able to develop their play and make a larger 'mess' as parents were already struggling to cope with everyday life. In contrast to this, and in accordance with my study, Deguara et al., (2022) who likewise conducted a study in Malta, found that mothers agreed that due to the pandemic, life inevitably slowed down which meant that they had more time to spend with their children. Even when both parents worked from home, the fact that children did not have to be rushed to school and did not have extracurricular activities aided in the quality time spent at home as a family. Parents in this study had the luxury of having "the time to stay cleaning up" (Rachel, Ruby's mother) which ultimately was the reason their children were able to create such deep play experiences.

Outdoor areas within the home such as yards, terraces, balconies, roofs and gardens, which were previously not used for play were also being utilised during the pandemic. This turned "space-free-from play" into a "play-space" (Stevenson & Prout, 2013, p. 136) for the children. Emma for example, allowed Emmanuel the use their roof to play:

During the pandemic, I used to take him out a lot on our roof garden. I used to use that space much more often than before, obviously, because since we were not going out so much, we used to use the outdoor space in the home as much as possible, to get a bit of sunlight. In fact, I had set up a sand table as well for him so that he can play with it. But really, and truly he never used it before; he played with it just during COVID. Like I said, we had a bit more time, so we could spend some more time playing outside.

(Emma, Emmanuel's mother)

Anna (Andrew's mother) also made use of their roof to create a play area for Andrew, something (Figure 18), which he never made use of prior to the pandemic. This also created a good opportunity for Andrew to play with his toys, and get messy, as well as get some much-needed fresh air, which was very important for Anna. This is captured by Anna's narrative below:

Figure 18: Andrew having some waterplay on the roof

When we could not leave the house at all we started using the roof. We did not use it before because it is too much hassle to set it up. When we needed to stay in the house, I would create different play areas and come up with different activities that we can do on the roof. Some areas we created included an eating corner, a crafts corner, a construction area and a play and messy area. I would create activities that demanded of him to run around, like collecting pegs or take out toys like building blocks ... And of course, he had a water play area like a little pool, basic stuff. These were the main things that he played with on the roof.

(Anna, Andrew's mother)

The narratives show that parents became creative in utilising every space of their home for their children to play, even areas which were not used before the pandemic. This scenario was also depicted by Barron and Emmet (2020a) who found that back gardens, turned into classrooms, play areas, sports pitches, eating areas etc. during the pandemic. In this study, Erik, Ethan, Petra and Lena used their yards to play with scooters or balls; activities that they would have been done outside the house before the pandemic. Rachel (Ruby's mother), who lived in an apartment and did not have a large outdoor area, took her children out on the balcony as it was their only option for fresh air. It must be noted however, that many families that participated in this study come from middle class or upper middle-class which meant that the majority had access to yards and roofs for their children to play in.

It can be argued that although children were deprived from playing in public outdoor spaces, parents still tried to identify outdoor spaces within their homes for their children to play as seen in Barron and Emmet (2020a). Their indoor play on the other hand was able to

be taken to the next level mainly because children were allowed more time to play and parents were more permissible of messiness.

5.4.2 Changes in the parent-child relationships

Play gives parents the opportunity to engage and bond with their children which is extremely important, as the time invested in play allows children to build essential traits (Ginsburg et al., 2007). Examples of these traits that Ginsburg et al., (2007) mention include resilience, compassion, confidence, tenacity which are usually gained within homes where parents have time to play with their children.   This leads to families looking at each other for love and support. Some positive traits emerged during the pandemic from families being forced to stay indoors together, such as having movie nights and playing board games together.

All the mothers in this study who had children over the age of six indicated that family time during the pandemic involved playing board games which they never played before. This is contracted by a study in Turkey by Pala et al., (2022) who similarly found that the use of board games increased during the pandemic. However, this contrasts with findings from Kourti et al.'s, (2021) study who found that board games were not popular during the pandemic with families in Spain. Not only did families in this study play board games during lockdowns, but they also continued this new tradition until at least the time of the interviews. It is evident that the pandemic helped families appreciate each other and realise how precious their time spent together is. It also helped them develop a stronger family bond, "they (the children) played with us as a family with these board games, because we all had more time" (Laura, Lena's mother). This was supported by Gaby's narrative below:

Obviously, because we used to be at home a lot more, we were more motivated to

play with them (the children) more ... before we played a lot less. During COVID,

they even got out a lot of games, like Twister® and Kids Monopoly® which we have

never used... they were stored away in the boxes. During COVID we used them ...

and now they are still being used. It is nice because we never really spent so much

time playing all together.

(Gaby, Gina's mother)

Movie nights were also a fun activity that families were able to share together. This

also emerged in other studies such as that held by Burkhart et al., (2022) and Taylor et al.,

(2022) who also found that families started movie nights as an activity they could engage in

as a family. Even though movie nights are a fun activity that brings families closer, as noted

earlier, mothers felt the need to justify the use of screen time, reflecting Finley et al.'s,

(2002) findings. Laura's narrative below addresses this dilemma:

As a family we had movie nights, for example, which was something we did not do

before (the pandemic). Before the pandemic we used to go out instead of watching

movies. But the children used to love that Saturday night was a movie night and

they still do love it to this day. It is screen time but at the same time, we are

together as a family enjoying a movie and eating. So yes. Screen time increased and

as I said, we still do it because they love it.

(Laura, Lena's mother)

All families in my study consisted of two parents (a mother and a father) and children

who all lived in the same house. Having said that, in all the families, the mothers dedicated

most of their time to raising the children. The pandemic gave fathers the opportunity to

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spend more time with their children thus allowing for the development of a closer relationship between fathers and their children. This was also reflected in Kreyenfeld and Zinn (2021) who found that although a mother's time with their children increased substantially during the pandemic, fathers also spent an average of 2.5 hours more with their children daily during the pandemic. This allowed a special bond to build between fathers and their children – an observation also made by Rachel (Ruby's mother) who mentioned that during the pandemic, Ruby built a closer bond with her father which was not as strong before and she still asks for her "special Daddy time" .

> I think I am lucky that I spend a lot of time with them, so we are quite close and we enjoy spending time with each other. We enjoy each other's company, and they enjoy talking to me ... ... but I can tell it is because of the time I spend with her ... When, during the pandemic, my husband was working from home, she got much closer to him. I was the one who, during the pandemic, disciplined them, whereas my husband was more the fun one ... he finished work, came out of his room and played and did fun things with them. So Ruby developed a closer bond with her daddy. But we both have quite a close relationship with them, and they enjoy spending time with us, separately and together. But Ruby especially built a very close bond with her daddy and now that life is back to normal, she still asks me when she is going to have her special Daddy time again.

> (Rachel, Ruby's mother)

Mother's relationships with their children were also affected, for example, Jessica and her daughter Joy baked food during the pandemic (Figure 19), which not only was a fun activity they did together but also helped teach Joy some cooking skills; thus also encouraging her to be independent, "That is when we started baking cookies. Because of

COVID, we started making sweets … we managed to do muffins during Easter. We also baked cookies to help pass the time. And we still do them till today" (Jessica).

Figure 19: Joy baking with her mother

This emergence of cooking or baking with children, which was also mentioned by Gaby, Gina's mother was reported in an Australian study by Nanayakkara et al., (2023) who found that 62% of parents interacted with their children from the age of five through cooking much more than before the pandemic.

> But for example, now they are a lot more involved in cooking. My older one, it is not that she knows how to cook, but she can help me a lot more now than she used to. Even Gina, you know, gets very interested in helping out.
>
> (Gaby Gina's mother)

As attested by Jessica, they also used cooking as a fun activity for her to interact with Joy and build their mother-daughter relationship:

(Referring to cooking), I found something that we can do together. She used to look forward to it. She would want to put on her apron to do the cooking. And it is something different, you know, even for her. Because before, when I would be cooking, she would want to help me stir and I did not use to let her because I would be scared that she was going to drop a pot on her. When during the pandemic we began making sweets and biscuits, I began to trust her more; letting her mix and crack the eggs ... while enjoying each other's company.

(Jessica, Joy's mother)

It is evident that although COVID-19 brought a lot of restrictions for families and young children, there were positive effects on relationships within families in my study. This however, was found to not always be the case as while some families reported more affection and connection, some other family relationships may have worsened resulting in less interaction (Eales et al., 2021). It must be noted however, that due to the nature and social class of my participants, none of the families in my studies were experiencing any drastic financial problems or other challenges during the pandemic which would have inevitably affected their family life during this period.

5.4.3 Social play and how it was affected by the pandemic, especially for single child households

According to Christner et al., (2021), children who came from single-child households may have experienced extreme isolation during the pandemic, as they were devoid of any peer contact whereas siblings tended to engage more intensely with each other. Although the children of my study (Petra, Andrew and Emmanuel) who did not have siblings

experienced some level of social isolation, in contrast to Christner et al., (2021), their parents, perhaps due to our Mediterranean nature and close ties, made the extra effort during lockdown for their children to socialise with family as well as friends via video chat. Gaby (Gina's mother) and Emily (Erik and Ethan's mother) who had more than one child stated that their children played with friends or cousins from single child households through screens.

During these video chats, children who did not have siblings had the opportunity to talk to their friends; however, what stood out during the interviews was how children were able to play games which would normally be played in person. This contrasts with Koller (2023) who found that due to the pandemic, play inevitably became a solitary activity which made children feel isolated from their friends. During the pandemic, Gina and her siblings, Petra as well as Joy were able to play with their friends virtually through screens that involved imaginary role play, hide and seek as well as board games which children played with each other even though they were in separate households; a phenomenon that, to my knowledge, was not replicated in other studies. One instance, for example, was when Gaby set up a video call between her four children and a friend's child. Communicating in a virtual way, the children dressed as pirates, and used washing baskets as ships and kitchen utensils as oars (Figure 20). They enacted an imaginary scenario while communicating through screens, developing their play in the same way they would have done if they were in the same room. Therefore, the single child in his house was able to partake in the imaginary play and socialise with Gina and her siblings, even though he resided in a different village. Explaining this play episode, Gina stated that:

Figure 20: Gina ad siblings playing pirates through the screens

At the peak of the pandemic we did not meet friends or cousins either. But we used to do online meetings. It would not be very regular but, for example, a friend of mine has an only child and he was getting very lonely, and we used to set up the laptop. And once I really enjoyed watching them playing pirates, you know, getting the clothes baskets, putting on bandanas on their heads and playing across the screen. It was really cute.

(Gaby, Gina's mother)

Another instance of social interaction between friends, was when Petra met her friends through a Zoom® call for a sing-along session which then turned into a hide-and-seek game remotely. Although children in Koller et al.'s, (2023) study lamented about the inability to play games such as hide and seek during the pandemic, Petra and her friends still managed to play so by hiding behind chairs, pillows, and their parents while the other child tried to find them via the screen. This shows the children's creativity and imagination when they are left to play and are able to come up with their own ideas. Most frequently, it was the parents who limited the play experience as they did not believe that the children were able to play hide and seek from a distance:

> They would meet online. They used to play instruments online from separate living rooms. They would pretend to play a song and sing it altogether. The dad of the other children also played the guitar so he would play, and we would have a whole sing-along session. We really used to enjoy these meetings because it gave the kids, and even us, some normality, I think. The kids even used to somehow play hide and seek online which was incredible to watch. So my daughter would be at home in our living room while her friends, who are siblings, would be in their living room and they would hide behind cushions, chairs … anywhere in the area of the screen and try to spot where the kids on the other side are hiding through the screen. It was amazing to watch as I would have never thought of it, but they came up with it all on their own. I think us parents actually mentioned to them that it is silly and they can not play hide and seek through the screen but they managed anyway.
>
> (Paula, Petra's mother)

Traditional board games such as "Guess Who? ©" were also played remotely. Joy and her friend discovered they had the same version of the game in their homes. While the use

of games such as board games increased during the pandemic (Pala et al., 2022), there was no evidence that these types of board games were played remotely:

> She (Joy) used to play through a Messenger® call, like a video chat with a friend of hers. They used to play board games or colour together while they chatted. You know, they used to play Guess Who? © They happened to find out that they have the same version of the game. So one used to sit on one side of the screen, and the other on the other side, and they would play this game ... But otherwise that's it, if she didn't chat with this friend, she was alone.
>
> (Jessica, Joy's mother)

5.5 The impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic and limited play on children's character and development

According to recent studies such as Christner et al., (2021) and Deguara et al., (2022), children as well as their parents experienced stress as a result of lockdown. A primary challenge faced by families concerned the lack of socialisation due to lack of play opportunities outside of the household,. According to Christner et al., (2021) older children (7-10) experienced emotional symptoms whereas younger children (3-6) seemed to have experienced hyperactivity and conduct problems which undoubtedly had a negative effect on children's life satisfaction.

For the children in my study, the pandemic came at a very sensitive and important time in their life. The children were at an age where they would benefit greatly from socialising with other children. It also came at a time where socialisation is increased due collaborative celebrations such as birthdays which were discussed earlier in the chapter. In

chapter 2, I also discussed how Brown (2014) discovered that social and emotional

development was greatly impacted by the inability to cope with the challenges of our ever-

changing world. This is significantly relevant as the children in this study were not only living

in an ever-changing world but had their worlds completely flipped upside down during the

COVID-19 lockdowns; the results of which is still emerging.

5.5.1 Increased anxiety in children

After the first lockdown ended and parents started taking their children to play

outdoors, many mothers in this study noted that their children exhibited elements of

anxiety. Child anxiety in Coelho et al., (2022) was related to level of parental anxiety as well

as the knowledge about the pandemic. The mothers in this study, mentioned that their

children experienced an extreme fear of people. Emma's narration below describes an

incident when her child Emmanuel, was walking in the street and saw another boy

approaching him. He was so afraid of him that he abandoned his scooter:

> I remember one time I took him out with his scooter to play outdoors. And there
>
> was another boy who was approaching him. When this boy walked towards him, he
>
> literally dropped his scooter on the floor and ran away. I found his behaviour as very
>
> odd because he is not that kind of child; he is not afraid of being with or around
>
> people. But, you know, at that point I just felt the need to explain to him that, he
>
> did not need to be that worried about it.

(Emma, Emmanuel's mother)

The parents also came to the realisation that their own insecurities were being

reflected in their children, which correlates with Nimphy et al.'s (2023) findings who

concluded that parental fear of the pandemic was being reflected in their children. This fear resulted in social anxiety presented in children as observed by Anna's (Andrew's Mother) narrative below:

> I noticed that when we go for a walk, and he sees someone coming from the other direction, he would stop and run back to us. This made me realise how much our talk about COVID was affecting him, telling myself that, 'I really need to watch how I communicate with him'.   Then I heard a friend of mine talking to her son, explaining that he just needs to give the other person some space rather than being afraid of him. And I thought it is a really clever way of telling her son how to deal with people by staying at a bit at a distance away to give him the space he needs; and that is, to be honest, valid in non-pandemic situations as well. It is good. This child was made aware that everyone needs their space; so that is what we should all do: just giving each other some space. So then it (this fear of others) kind of passed after a few weeks. But this prompted me to watch how we are navigating this (COVID) because I did not want things to get scary for him.

> (Anna, Andrew's mother)

The children who suffered the most, however, were children who already portrayed signs of anxiety before the onset of the pandemic. This reflects Courtney et al.'s, (2020) findings who state that although children with social or performance anxiety may have felt an alleviation of their anxiety symptoms while in lockdown, these symptoms were likely to be followed by a worsening of the symptoms once normal activities resume.

Figure 21: Lena playing in the countryside with her mask on after restrictions were lifted

Laura, for example, mentioned how her daughter Lena, who in the Summer of 2022, long after the restrictions were lifted and masks no longer remained obligatory, still insisted on wearing a mask when out in public. This reliance on the mask persisted even when out in the countryside with no people around (Figure 21) as she would otherwise not feel safe. It is only when she was back in the safety of their car that she would remove the mask.

Laura stated:

> My young child still wears the mask. She wears it everywhere. As I said, she is more
>
> anxious. I think she is way more anxious than she was before …This could be due to
>
> the pandemic or maybe it is because she is growing up and school requirements are
>
> harder or they have increased. I do not know, but I think it (COVID-19) affected her

anxiety. Even the fact that she was scared for a long time to approach people. I

think it affected her mentally. So, there was a change, especially with her anxiety.

(Laura, Lena's mother)

Furthermore, Laura claimed that although Lena was always an anxious child, her

anxiety increased and she panicked and cried more than she would have done before the

pandemic. Children who are more prone to symptoms of anxiety may have heightened

symptoms when in a school environment due to presence of provoking situations found

such as peer pressures, presentations, examinations etc. (Courtney et al., 2020; Haddad &

van Schalkwyk, 2021). Given that after the pandemic Lena went back to school in year 4,

which is the year that examinations start in Malta, this may have also been a trigger for the

spike in her levels of anxiety.

5.5.2 Character and mood changes in children

In their study, Egan et al., (2021), referred to the socio-emotional impact of the

pandemic on young children. Their findings indicate that children experienced feeling down

and moody with an increase in behavioural issues during the pandemic. This was also

reflected in the children of this study. Anna (Andrew's mother) and Jessica (Joy's mother)

both noted that their children experienced an increase in frustration, even after the

lockdowns were lifted and life went slowly back to normal. Anna, Andrew's mother narrated

an episode, when they were discussing the launch of a new vaccine and their son shouted at

them to stop talking about vaccines:

He observed and listened to what we were saying. I do not think he really

understood what it was about, but he could feel that it was something a bit

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negative. He goes to a nursery, which is next to a vaccination centre and I think he used to see people queue up to take vaccines. There was a sign for people to keep a little bit of distance from their playground. And I guess their teachers used to tell them either not to go too close to the crowd or, the children used to ask, why were all those people queuing. The teachers used to tell them that they were there to have their vaccination. And it was super interesting. We were taking Andrew to school one morning. It was way after vaccination started. So we are talking one and a half years into the pandemic and, we were just discussing COVID, and from the child seat, from the back seat, he shouted, "STOP This VACCINATION!"

<div align="right">(Anna, Andrew's mother)</div>

The child may not have understood what a vaccine is, but it was evident that he had reached his limit with hearing about vaccines and viruses, especially since he attended daycare close to an area where vaccines were given hence having probably heard about them also in his day-care. Although it is important for children to be informed about what is going on around them, some children might not want to hear about the virus and anything related to it such as vaccines as it may be seen as a boring topic, may have heard too much information about it, or it might make them sad or scared being the cause of many deaths (Bray et al., 2021).

Jessica also noted that her daughter Joy was more easily frustrated. If for example, the mother replied in the negative to the child's request to go to the swings or another outdoor activity she would be upset as can be denoted from the narrative below:

For example, not going to swings and parties (during the pandemic) affected her in a negative way. Whenever, this past year I said "No" to a request of hers, like wanting to go to a party, she used to get frustrated and start yelling something on

these lines: "I WANT to go, I cannot miss it." And then I realised that I cannot tell

her, "no" all the time. Even if, for example, when we simply walk past a playground,

the second she sees swings, she goes running to have at least one go down the slide

... she has to do it. .. she has missed it so much, that she does not care whether it is

raining or it is sunny. You know, she begs me, "Take me to the swings!". And

sometimes I would not be able to take her and she gets very frustrated. She tells

me," We are going to start again with the no?". So she is annoyed. Now she has had

enough of hearing that she cannot do stuff and cannot go to places.

<div align="right">(Jessica, Joy's mother)</div>

It must also be noted that Joy was very limited with her play experiences within the

home as her mother did not allow her a lot of freedom to play; therefore, this could also

have been a contributing factor to her increased frustration and her need to socialise with

other children more. Joy, however, is not an isolated case of a reduction in children's

tolerance levels as supported by Pisano et al., (2020) who found that over 53% of children in

their study exhibited an increase in their intolerance and irritability to rules and demands set

upon them.

Parents have also noted that children were moodier and more emotional as a possible

result of the pandemic due to the added stress posed on children. Many children exhibited

increase in anxiety, anger, withdrawing etc (Kumar & Najar, 2021). This was also illustrated in

the findings of this study. For example, Gaby stated:

I am not sure if it is because of COVID, or whether my older one is growing and is

approaching puberty, but she is a lot moodier. Usually, she is very caring and

empathises a lot. She is very emotionally intelligent. Over the last year, I would say

she has become very moody. She gets angry a lot quicker. Even with my youngest

one, she gets angry at her more easily. Like she takes care of her a lot, but sometimes, you know, she gets too emotional, over little things.

<div align="right">(Gaby, Gina's mother)</div>

These above narratives show that children are demonstrating stronger negative emotions such as anger and frustration and lower tolerance levels, due to their experiences of restrictions and loss of opportunities. Symptoms of anger were also reported. This sense of anger was also noted by early years educators in the UK who noted that children that returned to school after the pandemic displayed shortened attention spans, snatching, shouting and anger (Ofsted, 2020).

Social isolation is correlated to increased levels of hypertension as well as increased rates of suicide (Escalante et al., 2021). This is alarming since Laura, Jessica and Gaby who all have children over eight years of age all communicated that their children experienced increased isolation. They noted that children were getting used to being on their own and began to prefer playing on their own even when they had the opportunity to socialise with others. Children seem to have become so comfortable with being alone and interacting through screens and online games that they did not seek to interact with others. This was highlighted by Laura:

> Before the pandemic, my child, used to play with her friends. In that year or two of the pandemic, where we spent more time on our own, she got used to enjoying her own company, but on the other hand she became less social. She was always the introvert type, and always liked to stay on her own, but I think the pandemic made it a bit worse.

<div align="right">(Laura, Lena's mother)</div>

The changes in children's lives during the pandemic and the loneliness from being away from peers may have been the reason for a change in children's behaviour and/or a change in their view about the world and their self-image. These changes may have had a negative impact on children's relationships resulting in increased isolation as well as an increase in their conflict with others Sonuga-Barke and Fearon (2021). Gaby, Gina's mother expressed similar feelings of isolation about her children:

> I saw that it (the pandemic) has affected them; for example, they became more introvert. I think, possibly because of masks ... I am not really sure, but I think because she continuously had to cover her face with a mask, Gina closed off herself a bit.... she became more introvert when they meet others ... you know, it worries me.

(Gaby, Gina's mother)

Due to restrictions on social distancing, young children were told to stay away from other children, not to play with them and not to share anything with them. Post-pandemic, parents are now noticing that their children are struggling with sharing or playing with others. This was also reflected in a study by Marsh and Blackwell (2023) who found that teachers noted that children, especially those coming from single child household are finding it increasingly harder post-pandemic to share and play with others. Parents mentioned that it is very challenging to unteach what they have been teaching their children over the past two years. This argument was presented by Rachel:

> I mean, you know, it should not be like this. It is sad. We were telling them not speak to children, not to go near them, not to share. And now we are trying to unteach what we taught before, because now it is okay to share. Before, during the pandemic they could not even take a cake to school for their birthday and share it

with their friends. So now it is a struggle to get back to that. If Ruby has a packet of crisps, for example, she does not find it easy to let somebody have, you know, to share with someone else. So she looks back and she asks me, "Can I share?" Before she would have just done it. I think this is going to be a problem for a lot of children her age. The time when they should have been learning to share we were telling them not to. Now once things are getting better, we are telling them the opposite of what we have been teaching. So now it is like trying to undo the damage kind of.

(Rachel, Ruby's mother)

As stated by Isenberg and Quisenberry (2002) and Ebbeck and Waniganayake (2010) it is important for children to process any stressful situations through play and to come to terms with all the changes, insecurities and uncertainties posed by the pandemic. This position is supported by IPA (2017) who argues that dramatic play may provide children with a sense of stability and normality.

5.5.3 Skill improvement or limitation due to the pandemic

A significant improvement was noted in children's creativity. Children who naturally enjoyed drawing and painting had more time to focus on these skills simply because they had the time to do so. Also, the pandemic gave parents the opportunity to allow their children to paint as opposed to only drawing, which prior to the pandemic, was not accepted due to its messiness. The time that children spent on developing their creativity by drawing and painting helped them not only improve their art skills but also to explore other avenues such as the writing and illustrating their own books. According to Prusiewicz et al., (2023) younger children do more art activities and use more art material when at school,

however the opposite may be said as children grow older. Accordingly, as children grow older, less art experiences are being had at school probably because of the educational demands set in place. Therefore, while at home during the pandemic, older children had more time to develop their creativity, for example, Joy, who was six years old at the time, went as far as creating, writing and illustrating her own book (Figure 22) as explained by Jessica's narrative below:
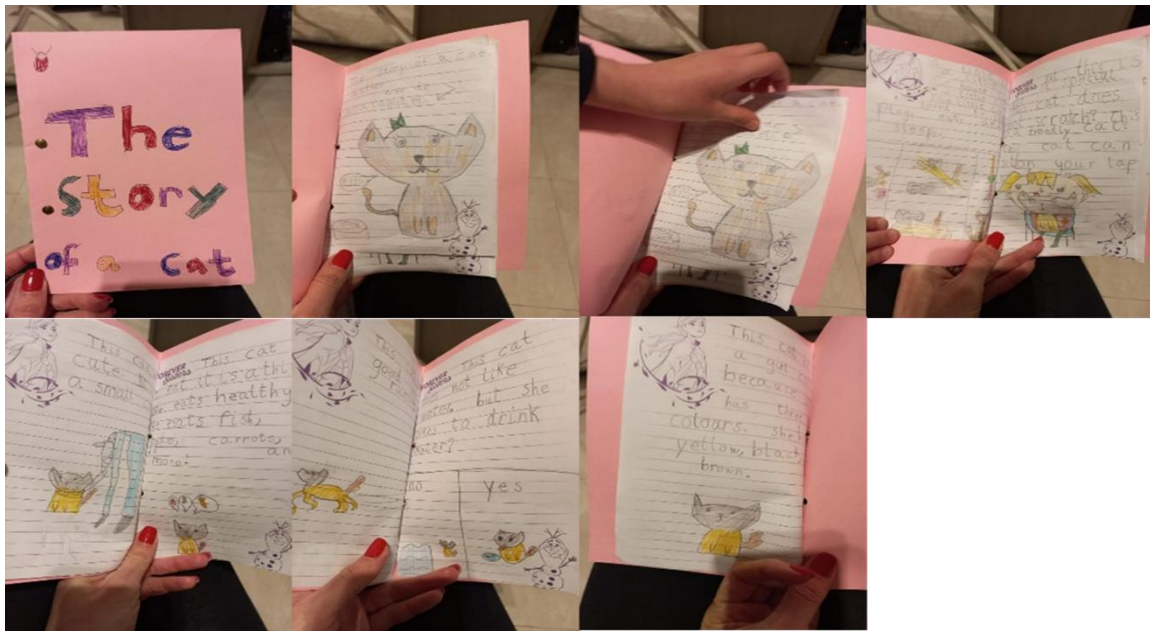
Figure 22: Joy's story book

She enjoys colouring a lot. And that has increased (during the pandemic) ... If she does not know what to do, she would like either to colour or now she even started writing stories. She told me that she is going to start writing her own books. She is spending a lot of time colouring and drawing ...I think it (drawing) is therapeutic. It alienates her and helps her forget everything that is going on. It is a stress relief for her. Having her at home for so long gave her more time to draw and colour so she got a lot better at it than if she was at school because then she would not have had time so much time to colour and draw with her homework and extracurricular

activities. They only do art once a week at school and the lesson is not very long, and in that time, she has to do what the teacher tells her so she cannot really be creative and create something that she wants.

<div align="right">(Jessica, Joy's mother).</div>

This was also a sentiment expressed by Rachel (Ruby's mother) of her children's schools which highlights the lack of importance that is given to the arts in certain schools. Children should be encouraged to develop their creativity and express themselves through the arts as it is through the arts that children may be able to learn about their world, build meaning and explore ideas and feelings that represent their experiences (Aland, 2005). The arts are what students required during these difficult times. However, the opposite happened when the decision in many local schools was made to cancel such lessons.

> Because of the pandemic, and having more time on her hands, Ruby got more into arts and crafts and creativity like paint and things like that. They are things she can do alone also. She does a lot of art now at home. Maybe if there was not the pandemic, I might not have had the time introduce art to her. So for her before the pandemic painting was something she did only at school. Now it is not. She has everything on her desk: her watercolours and stuff, which she can use whenever she wants. Before she did not do that because she did not have the materials. During the pandemic, they were available, and she had the time, and now it is like she got used to doing it. Because let us be honest, they really were not doing art anyway at school; so at least at home she can create and paint what she wants.

<div align="right">(Rachel, Ruby's mother)</div>

A limitation that was noted by Emily (Erik and Ethan's mother), was that children seemed to lose their natural ability to come up with ways to keep themselves occupied during outdoor play. Before the pandemic, Erik and Ethan together with their cousins would naturally start playing when out in nature by climbing trees (Figure 12 above), playing catch or simply playing with random items such as found sticks. However, when after the pandemic they were taken to the countryside, the children seemed to be at a loss as to what they could do (Figure 23). As Emily stated:

Funnily enough when I took them afterwards (the pandemic) to the same place with the same people, I thought they would naturally go back to it (playing freely outdoors), but they did not. We had to remind them what they could do.

(Emily, Erik & Ethan's mother)

Figure 23: Ethan feeling as a loss in nature after COVID

This proves that the shift does not come naturally to children. For play to get back to normal it should be encouraged by parents by providing space to play (Zaman & Khanom, 2021). Having been locked inside for so long, children seemed to have lost their ability to play; giving them the opportunity to play freely outdoors, to experience this element of risk would help them re-adjust to their new-found free play and enhance their independence (Hancock & Gillen, 2007).

5.6 Conclusion

In this chapter I examined the data gathered from the interviews supported with photo elicitation. I began by discussing the impact that COVID-19 had on children's indoor and subsequently outdoor play, how the pandemic featured in children's play, how play changed and how children used it to process and overcome the changes which were happening all around them. Subsequently, I analysed the changes experienced by children to the play areas in the home and the impact of the pandemic on children's relationships with other members of the family and access to social play. Finally, I assessed the impact that the pandemic had on children's character and development. In my final chapter I will conclude by giving an overview of my findings and providing recommendations to stakeholders. I will also identify the limitations of my study as well as suggest areas for further research.

Chapter 6

Conclusion

6.1 Introduction

This chapter concludes this dissertation. I begin this chapter by providing a summary of the key findings while addressing the research questions. Subsequently, I suggest several recommendations to various stakeholders who work in the area of education. Subsequently, I present the limitations to the study and conclude by providing recommendations for future research.

6.2 Overview of findings

The aim of this study was to discover how the COVID-19 pandemic affected children's play. Data was collected through a narrative-inquiry approach using semi-structured interviews which were supported by photo elicitation to explore the views of eight parents, all mothers, of children aged between three to eight years. In the coming sections I refer to the findings discussed in Chapter 5, to answer my main research question: "What are the perspectives of parents on children's play during the COVID-19 pandemic?" This is done by also addressing the three subsidiary research questions:

1. How did the COVID-19 pandemic impact children's play?

2. How did the COVID-19 pandemic feature within children's play?

3. How did the change in, or lack of, play during the COVID-19 pandemic impact children's development?

Due to the small sample size of my study, no generalisations can be made in the area. However, the findings contribute to the understanding of how individual children's play was affected by the COVID-19 pandemic, which can echo the experiences of other children in Malta.

6.2.1 The perspectives of parents on children's play during the COVID-19 pandemic

In contrast to findings from Moon-Seo et al's., (2023) study who found that Asian parents gave a greater weight to learning that may be achieved through play, parents of this study did not consider the learning through play a top priority but rather valued play as a fun activity which helps children relax and develop.

6.2.2 The impact of COVID-19 on children's play

During the pandemic, outdoor play was the type of play that was mostly affected; a finding supported by Moore et al., (2020) and Salway et al., (2022) who similarly found that outdoor play greatly decreased. This is because children were restricted to stay indoors for months during lockdowns. To make up for the lack of outdoor play in public play areas, the parents of this study took children's play to outdoor spaces within the home when possible; in yards, balconies, roofs and gardens, spaces which previously were never used for such a scope.

Spending more time inside the house, compelled parents to be more tolerant and allowed their children to make use of areas in the house that were previously banned for play. They were also more accepting of their children making a mess in areas in the house (eg. creating a fort in the living room) and using messy materials, such as the use of paint and water play which were more tolerated. Conversely, this provided children with new opportunities for indoor play, new skills to learn and the time to engage in a more in-depth and creative way.

The use of screens for play and other activities increased drastically during the pandemic, a finding supported by Tulchin-Francis et al., (2021). Andrew, who did not have

access to digital technology prior to the pandemic since it was not allowed by his parents, gradually started to increase his screen time. Children who had restricted use of technology prior to the pandemic such as Lena and her sister, and Erik and Ethan, were allowed unlimited use. Children used technology in a multitude of ways: to follow online lessons, to play digital games on their own and with others virtually, to interact and talk with other persons, to watch movies, amongst others. After the lifting of restrictions, parents harboured feelings of guilt as they did not feel comfortable with the amount of time their children were exposed to screens. This is supported by Finley et al., (2002) who also found that parents in his study felt guilty for allowing their children to be exposed to so much screen time.

Mothers claimed that the lack of opportunity for their children to play outdoors and meet other children in playgrounds, extra-curricular activities and other public spaces, affected children's ability to socialise with peers. To occupy their time, children therefore turned to toys and board games that were not used before the pandemic. Restricted to staying for days indoors, children were compelled to be innovative in coming up with ideas for their social play by using digital media to communicate and play games with their friends that would normally only be done in person. Examples of such play experiences included engaging in dramatic role place, playing hide and seek and "Guess Who?"[©] games which children managed to play together through the screens.

6.2.3 COVID-19 featuring in children's play

Mothers reported how COVID-19 featured in children's play.   This was done primarily through dramatic play such as playing doctors. Parents reported that when their children (Lena, Ruby, Gina, Erik & Ethan), engaged in role play, they made their dolls or soft toys

social distance, wash their hands and wear masks. On other occasions, Ruby involved herself with cleaning her toys with sanitiser to prevent them from catching the virus; thus children were processing their daily routines, preventive ways as well as perhaps their fears of catching the COVID-19 virus. Another way that COVID-19 featured in children's dramatic role-play was when Erik and Ethan engaged in superhero play to defeat the virus. COVID-19 was portrayed as the villain as it was killing people, with the children engaging in different ways of how the superheroes defeated the virus.

6.2.4 The impact of the change in children's play during the pandemic on children's development

Since COVID-19 came at a critical time for the children in my study, children's creative, social and emotional development amongst others were greatly impacted by the pandemic as was manifested by various of the narratives recounted. Children's emotional development was impacted in different ways. One of the issues which parents noted during the pandemic was that their children became moodier and angrier. It also emerged that children got frustrated with the simple mention of vaccines or of having to stay indoors for prolonged periods of time.

Parents of children who already showed low levels of anxiety prior to the pandemic, claimed that during and after the pandemic their anxiety increased, a finding supported by Courtney et al., (2020). Children such as Lena insisted on using the mask when outdoors even after restrictions had been lifted.

Children's social development was also impacted. During the pandemic children had fewer opportunities to interact with others. It was noted that children were becoming

scared of other people walking in the street. Several mothers narrated that on a number of

occasions, their child would run away from people walking in their direction in the street,

with even leaving their belongings behind. Parents of older children also claimed that their

children showed signs of social isolation were they frequently preferred to spend time alone

in their room rather than socialise with friends.

Parents of younger children also claimed that after the pandemic, their children

struggled greatly with the concept of sharing. They blamed this on the fact that during the

time when children would learn how to socialise and share around the ages of 3 – 4 years,

they were isolated and were taught not to interact and share.

Parents reported that during the pandemic they engaged in playful activities with their

children, such as playing board games and having movie nights, which are still being

practiced post COVID-19. These play activities helped parents appreciate the time spent

with their children and develop a closer relationship with their children, a finding supported

by Deguara, et al., (2020).

The pandemic also impacted children in positive ways. As argued above, because

children were restricted to stay indoors, parents became more tolerant and allowed their

children to use paint and other messy materials. Parents reported that there was a

significant improvement in the children's artistic and creative capabilities. For example,

Ruby, who was never allowed to paint at home, during the pandemic was provided with

paints at hand so that she can use and develop her creative skills accordingly.

6.3 Recommendations for stakeholders

In this section, I provide recommendations to different stakeholders, namely parents, primary teachers and policy-makers in order to promote play as a means of counteracting the impact that the lack of play due to the COVID-19 pandemic has left on children.

6.3.1 Recommendations for parents

Considering that children were kept indoors for an extended period of time and were deprived of social play during the pandemic which led to some children being socially-awkward, it is recommended that they are increasingly exposed to the outdoors and taken to playgrounds and parks where children will not only be able to get some fresh air, which they also lacked during the pandemic, but they will also have the opportunity to develop their physical skills, improve their immune systems (Dyment & Bell, 2005; Bilton, 2010) and above all, it will enable them to meet other children and play and interact with them, thus giving them the possibility to socially interact with others.

Another way to encourage play in social settings is to organise more indoor social activities for children such as playdates and celebrate birthday parties and other events. Parents need to come up with innovative ways to help children meet each other, play together, and interact. This is also especially important for young children who are struggling with concepts of sharing and playing with others.

6.3.2 Recommendations for educators

Due to the lack of play experienced throughout the pandemic, children should be provided with more play experiences both outdoors and indoors.

Given that outdoor play was very limited due to restrictions during the pandemic, children should be provided with adequate time to play outdoors in order to help achieve their 60 minutes of daily exercise. This may be achieved by providing children with spaces that are large enough for them to partake in locomotor play such as running and being provided with equipment that would help in this this respect such as skipping ropes and balls.

Educators should also see that children are given opportunities indoors to interact and socialise more through different types of social play activities such as role-play, object play and narrative play which can be incorporated into lessons. Moreover, this can also turn learning into a fun experience and allow children to work at a higher mental level (McInnes et al., 2011; Vygotsky, 1978). Since children have been deprived of such activities, it is recommended that children are given a gradual introduction to group work and group play by first having children work in pairs then gradually increasing the size of the groups, to help them get used to working with others.

It is also suggested that artistic activities be included in lessons. This can be done by asking children to paint a picture and talk about it, or draw a picture and write about it, or reflecting a comprehension they would have written. Children can also be asked to create manipulatives for mathematics to be used in lessons eg. creating 3D shapes, creating a clock etc. This will help children who may not have the resources available at home to develop this area and children who are intrinsically creative to improve their skills.

6.3.3 Recommendations for policy-makers

Children have been deprived of play experiences that have affected them in many ways.   Policy makers should develop play programmes in schools to help children learn how to play with others. Play therapy should also be considered for those children who may be suffering due to the lack of play experienced during the pandemic. There should also be an increase of mental health educators in schools to monitor as well as assist students who are struggling to make friends and interact with others.

Another recommendation includes the promotion of play with parents as well as educators, encouraging them to allow children to play more while providing them with more awareness and knowledge of how to help struggling children. For example, and as argued above, outdoor learning experiences should be promoted to help reduce student exposure to screens and thus making them more active.

Support play by providing more resources, materials and equipment for children to play with. Findings in this study that are supported by findings in other international studies (Ozturk Eyimaya & Yalçin Irmak, 2020; Pandya & Lodha, 2021; Sultana et al*., 2021;* Wiederhold, 2020) indicate that children's screen time drastically increased during the pandemic. Therefore, more hands-on, tangible and real materials, resources and equipment should be made available for learning to take place without the need to over relying on interactive whiteboards or tablets.

6.4 Limitations of the study

One of the limitations of that study is that all parents, except one, had a tertiary level of education, who could have been more aware and knowledgeable about the benefits of play for children and therefore more able to provide their children with open-ended play experiences. They were also aware of the negative effects of a sedentary lifestyle and of the use of screen time for an extended period . This also suggests that parents came from a more stable socio-economic background, resulting, in larger homes and thus, more space for indoor and outdoor play opportunities, as well as more playful resources and materials . The study therefore, may not provide the effect of the pandemic on play of children who come from lower socio-economic backgrounds, who had less space, less resources, and less knowledgeable parents.

This study was a qualitative one, conducted with only eight parents. While this provided an in-depth analysis, the findings cannot be generalised to the whole population. Another limitation of the study was that, due to restrictions of the pandemic and the uncertainty the pandemic brought, I could not hold observations of the children at play in their home settings. Moreover, it was not possible to hold conversation with the children. However, this limitation was partially overcome by asking the mothers to share photographs of their children at play before and during the pandemic as a point of discussion, and to provide a snapshot of the children's play experiences at the time.

6.5 Areas for further research

Further research is required to assess the impact of COVID-19 on children's play in Malta. It would be interesting to conduct a qualitative study on the impact of children's play from children's perspective and therefore, to get their feedback about how their play was affected during the pandemic, in their own words.

Further research is also required to gauge whether the problems identified in this study would still be present and affecting children in a couple of years' time. A quantitative national study would provide general data about the situation of children's play in Malta and discover whether the problems identified in this study have increased, decreased or even solved over the past year. A qualitative study on these lines would then provide a review of the impact of the pandemic on children's development to evaluate whether children are still struggling with social issues, anxiety and withdrawal and whether they still remember what they experienced during the COVID-19 pandemic.

6.6. Conclusion

This study explored the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on children's play from the parents' perspective. The first chapter introduced the study and gave a general overview of play, the aim and theoretical framework, as well as the background and significance of my study. The second chapter provided an overview of the literature review by referring to various studies and theories related to children's play and play during situations of crisis. Chapter three highlighted the methodology used by giving an overview of the epistemological and ontological positions adopted for this study. This was followed by discussing the research questions, recruitment of participants, the data collection process as

well as ethical considerations that were considered. Subsequently, chapter four presented

an abridged form of the narratives that emerged during the interviews to provide an

overview of the participants' contexts, views and experiences. Chapter five involved a

discussion and analysis of the narratives aided by photo elicitation. The fifth chapter

concluded the dissertation by answering the research questions, offered recommendations

to parents, primary educators and policy makers, and identified a number of the limitations

of the study. It also provided suggestions for future research.

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Appendices

Appendix 1.1 Interview Questions (English)

1. How old are you? (20-30; 31-40; 41-50; 51+)

2. How many children do you have? What are their ages?

3. What qualifications have you got? What is our occupation?

4. What do you understand by play and provide some examples of play experiences? Has this perception changed at all due to the pandemic?

5. Can you describe your children's play experiences before the virus started? What type of play did s/he engage in?

6. On average, how many hours of play in a week were spent indoors/outdoors before the virus hit? Has the Virus affected this?

7. Has your child's play changed since before the pandemic hit? Do you attribute the change in your child's play experience to the virus? If so, how?

8. Has the virus featured in any way in your children's play? Please elaborate by giving examples.

9. During the pandemic and subsequent lockdown did your child have the opportunity to play with friends their own age?

10. What change (if any) did you see in sibling relationships related to play?

11. Do you think that children's play has increased/decreased due to COVID-19? Why?

12. Has screen time increased or decreased due to the pandemic? Why?

13. Has your child increased playing online games more during the pandemic?

14. Has the change in play due to the COVID-19 pandemic affected your child in any way? If so, how?

15. Have you noted any limitations or improvement in skills and competencies due to the type of play experiences your child was exposed to in the past two years? Can you elaborate?

16. Have you noted any character/mood changes or struggles in your child in the past two years? Are they still present now that restrictions are being lifted?

17. Would you like to add any comments / thoughts that relate to play and the pandemic?

Questions related to photos

18.   Can you describe what your child is doing in the first / second pre-COVID photo?

19.   What resources/materials/toys is your child using in their play?

20.   Can you describe what your child is doing in the first / second during COVID photo?

21.   What resources/materials/toys is your child using in their play?

22.   What changes can be noted between the photos pre and during the pandemic?

Appendix 1.2 Interview Questions (Maltese)

1. Kemm għandek żmien? (20-30, 31-40, 41-50, 51+)

2. Kemm għandek tfal? Kemm għandhom żmien?

3. X'Qualifiki għandek? X'inhu ix-xogħol tiegħek?

4. X'tifhem bil-kelma "logħob"? Tista' tagħtini eżempji ta' esperjenzi ta' logħob? Il-pandemija affettwatlek il-perċezzjoni tiegħek tal-logħob?

5. Tista tiddeskrivili l-logħob tat-tifel/tifla tiegħek qabel ma feġġet il-pandemija? X'tip ta' logħob kien/et tilgħab?

6. Bejn wieħed u ieħor, kemm-il siegħa fil-ġimgħa kien/kienet tqatta' tilgħab ġewwa/barra qabel il-pandemija? Dan il-ħin ġie affetwat mill-pandemija?

7. Il-pademija biddlet l-esperjenza tal-logħob tat-tfal? Taħseb li din il-bidla kienet dovuta għal pandemija? Jekk iva, kif?

8. Meta t-tifel/a tiegħek kienet tilgħab, ġieli semma/iet il-virus? Elabora billi tagħti xi eżempji.

9. Waqt il-pandemija meta kulħadd kien id-dar, it-tifel jew tifla tiegħek kellu/a l-opportunità li jilgħab/tilgħab ma tfal oħra ta' mparu/a?

10. Innutajt xi bdil fir-relazzjoni ta' bejn l-aħwa relatat mal-logħob?

11. Taħseb li l-logħob żdied/naqas minħabba il-COVID-19? Għaliex?

12. Il-ħin quddiem l-iscreens żdied jew naqas matul il-pandemija? Għaliex?

13. It-tifel/a tiegħek żied/et fil-logħob online waqt il-pandemija?

14. Il-bidla fil-logħob minħabba l-pandemija taħseb li affettwat lit-tifel/tifla tiegħek b'xi mod? Jekk iva, kif?

15. Innuttajt xi limitazzjonijiet jew titjib fl-iżvilupp ta' ħiliet minħabba t-tip ta' logħob li kien/et tilgħab f'dawn l-aħħar sentejn? Tista' telabora?

16. Innutajt xi tibdil fil-karattru/burdata jew xi diffikultajiet fit-tifel/tifla tiegħek dawn l-aħħar sentejn? Qed tara xi bidla issa li r-restrizzjonijiet qed jispiċċaw?

17. Trid tagħmel iktar kummenti / taqsam ħsibijiet dwar il-logħob waqt il-pandemija?

Mistoqsijiet relatati mar-ritratti

18. Tista tiddeskrivi x'inhu/inhi j/tagħmel it-tifel/tifla fl-ewwel u fit-tieni r-ritratt ta' qabel il-COVID?

19. X'riżorsi/marterjal/ġugarelli qed jużaw it-tfal fil-logħob?

20. Tista tiddeskrivi x'inhu/inhi j/tagħmel it-tifel/tifla fl-ewwel u fit-tieni r-ritratt ta' waqt il-COVID?

21. X'riżorsi/marterjal/ġugarelli qed jużaw it-tfal fil-logħob?

22. X'differezi tista' tinnota fir-ritratti minn qabel u dawk waqt il-pandemija?

Appendix 2.1: Information letter to parents (English)

Date:_____

Dear _____,

My name is Enrica Caruana and I am a student at the University of Malta, presently reading for a Masters in Teaching and Learning in Early Childhood and Primary Education. I am presently conducting a research study for my dissertation titled "*Play as the invisible casualty of COVID-19. The perspectives of Maltese parents on the impact of the Coronavirus on children's play.*"; this is being supervised by Dr. Josephine Deguara. This letter is an invitation to participate in this study. Below you will find information about the study and about what your involvement would entail, should you decide to take part.

The aim of my study is to discover how the pandemic has affected the play of Maltese children aged 3 - 8 years old. I will be investigating how play has been impacted from a parent's perspective within the local scenario. Your participation in this study would help contribute to a better understanding of how children's play has changed and whether this has affected Maltese young children in any way. We will also look into how the pandemic has featured within your child's everyday play. Any data collected from this research will be used solely for the purposes of this study.

Should you choose to participate, you will be asked to take part in an interview with me. This will take to approximately 45 minutes. During this interview, I will ask you questions related to your child's play pre and during the COVID pandemic. You will also be asked to provide photos of your child at play before as well as during the pandemic. The photos will be used in the interview in order to extend and support the conversation about play through the images. The photos will then be published within the dissertation to support argumentation. These photos MUST NOT include any identifiable objects such as school uniforms, badges etc. If your child's face is showing, it will be blurred to ensure that your child will not be identifiable. You will then join a focus group of 3-4 parents who have children of a similar age to your child. We will discuss children's play and how this has been affected by the pandemic as a group. The interviews and focus groups will be held at a place and at a time that is convenient for you. The interviews will be audio-recorded for ease of reference and for transcription purposes only. However, the audio-recordings will not be submitted with the dissertation.

Data collected will be securely stored in an encrypted format on a password-protected hard drive. Once the study is concluded, the recordings will be destroyed.

Participation in this study is entirely voluntary; in other words, you are free to accept or refuse to participate, without needing to give a reason. You are also free to withdraw from the study at any time, without needing to provide any explanation and without any negative repercussions for you. Should you choose to withdraw, any data collected from your interview will be erased as long as this is technically possible (for example, before it is anonymised or published), unless erasure of data would render it impossible or seriously impair the

achievement of the research objectives, in which case it shall be retained in an anonymised form.

If you choose to participate, please note that there are no direct benefits to you. Your participation does not entail any known or anticipated risks.

Please also note that, as a participant, you have the right under the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) and national legislation to access, rectify and where applicable ask for the data concerning you to be erased. All data collected will be erased after 18 months of completion of the study.

A copy of this information sheet is being provided for you to keep and for future reference.

Thank you for your time and consideration. Should you have any questions or concerns, please do not hesitate to contact me by e-mail enrica.caruana.05@um.edu.mt; you may also contact my supervisor over the phone: +356 23403816 or via email: josephine.deguara@um.edu.mt.

Sincerely,

_____   _____

Enrica Caruana   Dr. Josephine Deguara

Masters in Teaching and Learning 2021-2023   B.Ed. (Hons.), M. ECEC, PhD

E-Mail: E-Mail:

Mobile No.:   Office number:

Appendix 2.2: Participant's Consent Form (English)
"Play as the invisible casualty of COVID-19.

The perspectives of Maltese parents on the impact of the Coronavirus on children's play."

I, the undersigned, give my consent to take part in the study conducted by Enrica Caruana. This consent form specifies the terms of my participation in this research study.

1. I have been given written and/or verbal information about the purpose of the study; I have had the opportunity to ask questions and any questions that I had were answered fully and to my satisfaction.

2. I also understand that I am free to accept to participate, or to refuse or stop participation at any time without giving any reason and without any penalty. Should I choose to participate, I may choose to decline to answer any questions asked. In the event that I choose to withdraw from the study, any data collected from me will be erased as long as this is technically possible (for example, before it is anonymised or published), unless erasure of data would render impossible or seriously impair achievement of the research objectives, in which case it shall be retained in an anonymised form.

3. I understand that I have been invited to participate in an interview and focus group during which the researcher will ask questions related to my child's play in order to analyse any changes that might have occurred due to the COVID-19 pandemic. I am aware that the interview and focus group will take approximately 45minutes to 1 hour each. I understand that the interview and focus group is to be conducted in a place and at a time that is convenient for me and will be audio-recorded.

4. I understand that I will be bringing and discussing photos of my child playing before and during the pandemic. I am aware that any identifiable aspect and school uniforms will not be included in any of the photos.

5. I am aware that, by marking the first-tick box below, I am giving my consent to the researcher to use photographs in the dissertation.   In that case, the face of my child will be blurred to protect my child's identity.

   MARK ONLY IF AND AS APPLICABLE

☐ I agree that photographs of my child (with face blurred) will be included in the dissertation.

☐ I do not agree that photographs of my child (with face blurred) will be included in the dissertation

6. I understand that my participation does not entail any known or anticipated risks.

7. I understand that there are no direct benefits to me from participating in this study. I also understand that this research may benefit others by: enabling parents, educators and policy makers to see whether children and specifically children's play has been effected due to the pandemic within the local scenario.

8. I understand that, under the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) and national legislation, I have the right to access, rectify, and where applicable, ask for the data concerning me to be erased.

9. I understand that all data collected will be stored in an anonymised form on a password-protected hardisk and will be destroyed after completion of the study.

10. I have been provided with a copy of the information letter and understand that I will also be given a copy of this consent form.

11. I am aware that, by marking the first-tick box below, I am giving my consent for this interview and focus group to be audio recorded and converted to text as it has been recorded (transcribed).

MARK ONLY IF AND AS APPLICABLE

☐ I agree to this interview and focus group being audio/video recorded.

☐ I do not agree to this interview and focus group being audio/video recorded.

12. I am aware that extracts from my interview may be reproduced in these outputs, either in anonymous form, or using a pseudonym [a made-up name or code – e.g. respondent A].

13. I am aware that focus group discussions should be considered confidential and that I should not disclose details of those participating and/or of the nature of discussions to others.

14. I am aware that my identity and personal information will not be revealed in any publications, reports or presentations arising from this research.

15. I am aware that my data will be pseudonymised; i.e., my identity will not be noted on transcripts or notes from my interview, but instead, a code will be assigned. The codes that link my data to my identity will be stored securely and separately from the data, in an encrypted file on the researcher's password-protected computer, and only the researcher and academic supervisor will have access to this information. Any hard-copy materials will be placed in a locked drawer. Any material that identifies me as a participant in this study will be stored securely and will be destroyed after 18 months of completion of the study.

I have read and understood the above statements and agree to participate in this study.

Name of participant: _____

Signature: _____

Date: _____

_____   _____

Enrica Caruana   Dr. Josephine Deguara

Masters in Teaching and Learning 2021-2023   B.Ed. (Hons.), M. ECEC, Ph.D.

E-Mail: E-Mail:

Mobile No.:   Office No.:

Appendix 3.1: Information letter to parents (Maltese)

Data:_____

<div align="center">**Ittra ta' Tagħrif**</div>

Għażiż/a_____,

Jiena Enrica Caruana, studenta fl-Università ta' Malta, u bħalissa qed insegwi il-kors tal-Masters fil-Tagħlim tas-Snin Bikrin u Edukazzjoni Primarja. Ir-riċerka għad-dissertazzjoni tiegħi jisimha: *"Play as the invisible casualty of COVID-19. The perspectives of Maltese parents on the impact of the Coronavirus on children's play."*; it-tutur tiegħi hi Dr. Josephine Deguara. B'din l-ittra nixtieq nistiednek tipparteċipa f'din ir-riċerka. Hawn taħt għandek issib aktar informazzjoni dwar l-istudju li qed nagħmel u fuq xi jkun l-involviment tiegħek jekk tiddeċiedi li tieħu sehem.

L-għan tal-istudju hu li niskopri kif il-pandemija affetwat il-logħob tat-tfal Maltin ta eta ta' bejn it - 3 - 8 snin, mill-perspettiva tal-ġenituri. Sehmek jgħin biex ikun hawn iżjed għarfien dwar kif ġie affetwat il-logħob tat-tfal u jekk dan kellux xi effetti fuq it-tfal Maltin. Ser inkunu qed inħarsu wkoll kif/jekk il-pandemija biddlet il-logħob tat-tfal. L-informazzjoni kollha li tinġabar fir-riċerka tintuża biss għall-fini ta' dan l-istudju.

Jekk taqbel li tipparteċipa, tintalab tipparteċipa f'intervista miegħi li ddum madwar 45 minuta, fejn ser niddiskutu l-logħob tat-tifel/tifla tiegħek qabel u matul il-pandemija. Intom mitluba tipprovdu xi ritratti tat-tfal tagħkom waqt il-ħin tal-logħob qabel u wara li waslet il-pandemija Malta. Dawn ir-ritratti ser jintużaw waqt l-intervista sabiex jgħinu u jissapportjaw id-diskussjoni dwar il-logħob tat-tfal. Kopja tar-ritratti mbagħad jiġu ppubblikati fid-dissertazzjoni biex jissapportjaw l-argumentazzjoni. Dawn ir-ritratti ma jistgħux ikollhom oġġetti bħall uniformi jew tikketti b'ismijiet jidhru u jekk ikun hemm wiċċ it-tifel/a tiegħek jidher fir-ritratti dawn ser jiġu mċajpra sabiex tkun protetta l-identita tat-tfal. Wara dan ser tingħaqad ma 3-4 ġenituri oħra li għandhom tfal tampar it-tifel/tifla tiegħek u flimkien ser tiddiskutu kif ġie affetwat jew jekk inbidilx il-logħob tat-tfal tagħkhom. Ghall-intervisti u l-*focus groups* ser niltaqghu f'post u ħin li hu komdu ghalikom. L-itnervisti ser jiġu rrekordjati b'mod awditorju biex jigi eliminat r-riskju li naqbeż dettalji important li jistgħu jagħmlu differenza fl-ideat li ser tkunu qegħdin taqsmu miegħi u ma xulxin. Dawn ir-rekkordjar awditorji m'humiex se jiġu ppubblikati fid-dissertazzjoni u se jkunu mħassra ladarba jiġi ffinalizzat ix-xogħol. Matul l-istudju dawn ir-ritratti ser jinżammu ġo kexxun imsakkar u jkunu distrutti ladarba jiġi ffinalizzat ix-xogħol.

L-informazzjoni miġbura ser tinżamm b'mod sigur f'format kriptat fuq hard drive protett bil-password. Ladarba l-istudju jiġi konkluż, ir-reġistrazzjonijiet jinqerdu.

Il-parteċipazzjoni tiegħek f'dan l-istudju tkun għal kollox volontarja; fi kliem ieħor, inti liberu/a li taċċetta jew tirrifjuta li tieħu sehem, mingħajr ma tagħti raġuni. Inti wkoll liberu/a li twaqqaf il-parteċipazzjoni tiegħek fl-istudju meta tixtieq, mingħajr ma jkollok tagħti spjegazzjoni u mingħajr ebda riperkussjoni. Jekk tagħżel li tirtira mir-riċerka, l-informazzjoni li tkun laħqet ittieħdet fl-intervista miegħek tithassar dment li dan ikun teknikament possibbli (ngħidu aħna, qabel ma tiġi anonimizzata jew ippubblikata), u sakemm l-għanijiet tar-riċerka jkunu jistgħu jintlaħqu u ma jintlaqtux serjament. F'dak il-każ, l-informazzjoni tiegħek tintuża u tinżamm anonima.

Jekk tagħżel li tipparteċipa, jekk jogħġbok innota li m'hemm l-ebda benefiċċju dirett għalik. Il-parteċipazzjoni tiegħek ma fiha l-ebda riskju magħruf jew mistenni.

Bħala parteċipant/a, għandek id-dritt, skont ir-Regolament Ġenerali dwar il-Protezzjoni tad-Data (GDPR) u l-leġiżlazzjoni nazzjonali, li taċċessa, tikkoreġi u fejn hu applikabbli, titlob li l-informazzjoni li tikkonċernak tithassar. L-informazzjoni kollha li tinġabar fl-istudju tiġi mħassra wara 18-il xahar li jitlesta l-istudju.

Qed ngħaddilek kopja ta' din l-ittra biex iżżommha bħala referenza.

Grazzi tal-ħin u l-kunsiderazzjoni tiegħek. Jekk ikollok xi mistoqsija, tiddejjaqx tikkuntattjani fuq enrica.caruana.05@um.edu.mt; tista' tikkuntattja wkoll lit-tutur tiegħi fuq: +356 23403816 jew elettronikament fuq: josepine.deguara@um.edu.mt.

Tislijiet,

_____   _____

Enrica Caruana   Dr. Josephine Deguara
Masters in Teaching and Learning 2021-2023   B.Ed.(Hons.), M. ECEC, PhD
E-Mail: E-Mail:
Mobile No.:   Numru tal-uffiċċju:

Appendix 3.2: Participant's Consent Form (Maltese)
"Play as the invisible casualty of COVID-19.

The perspectives of Maltese parents on the impact of the Coronavirus on children's play."

Jiena, hawn taħt iffirmat/a, nagħti l-kunsens tiegħi li nieħu sehem fl-istudju ta' Enrica Caruana. Din il-formola tal-kunsens tispjega t-termini tas-sehem tiegħi f'din ir-riċerka.

1. Ingħatajt l-informazzjoni bil-miktub u/jew bil-fomm dwar l-iskop tar-riċerka; kelli l-opportunità nagħmel il-mistoqsijiet, u kull mistoqsija ngħatajt tweġiba għaliha b'mod sħiħ u sodisfaċenti.

2. Nifhem ukoll li jiena liberu/a li naċċetta li nieħu sehem, jew li nirrifjuta, jew li nwaqqaf il-parteċipazzjoni tiegħi meta nixtieq mingħajr ma nagħti spjegazzjoni jew mingħajr ma niġi penalizzat/a. Jekk nagħżel li nipparteċipa, jaf niddeċiedi li ma nweġibx kull mistoqsija li ssirli. F'każ li nagħżel li ma nkomplix nieħu sehem fl-istudju, l-informazzjoni li tkun laħqet inġabret mingħandi titħassar dment li jkun teknikament possibbli (ngħidu aħna, qabel ma tiġi anonimizzata jew ippubblikata), u sakemm l-għanijiet tar-riċerka jkunu jistgħu jintlaħqu u ma jintlaqtux serjament. F'dak il-każ, l-informazzjoni tiegħi tintuża u tinżamm anonima.

3. Nifhem li ġejt mistieden/mistiedna nipparteċipa f'intervista u focus group fejn ir-riċerkatriċi ser tistaqsini mistoqsijiet sabiex tanaliżża l-perspettiva tiegħi dwar kif il-logħob tat-tifel/tifla tiegħi setgħa ġie effettwat mil-pandemija tal-COVID-19. Jiena konxju/a li l-intervista u l-focus group ser iddum bejn wieħed u ieħor bejn 45 minuta u siegħa kull waħda. Jiena konxju/a li aspetti li jistgħu jiġu identifikabbli bħal uniformi jew tikketeti bl-ismijiet m'humiex se jiġu inkużi fir-ritratti li se jkunu wżati. Nifhem li l-intervista se jsir/ssir f'post u f'ħin li huma komdi għalija.

4. Nifhem li ser nkun qed nipprovdi u niddiskuti ritratti tat-tifel/tifla tiegħi jilgħab/tilgħab qabel u matul il-pandemija. Jiena konxju/a li kull aspett identifikabbli u uniformi skolastika ma jiġux inklużi fl-ebda wieħed mir-ritratti.

5. Konxju/a li, jekk nimmarka l-ewwel kaxxa t'hawn taħt, inkun qed nagħti l-kunsens tiegħi biex r-riċerkatriċi tkun tista' tuża r-ritratti fit-teżi tagħha. F'dak il-każ il-wiċċ tat-tifel/a tiegħi ser ikun imċajpar biex l-identita' tat-tifel/a tiegħi tiġi protetta.

   IMMARKA BISS DAK LI JAPPLIKA
   ☐ Naqbel li ritratti tat-tifel/a tiegħi (bil-wiċċ imċajpar), ser ikunu inklużi fit-teżi.
   ☐ Ma naqbilx li ritratti tat-tifel/a tiegħhi (bil-wiċċ imċajpar), ser ikunu inklużi fit-teżi

6. Nifhem li l-parteċipazzjoni tiegħi ma fiha l-ebda riskju magħruf jew mistenni.

7. Nifhem li bil-parteċipazzjoni tiegħi f'dan l-istudju, m'hemm l-ebda benefiċċju dirett għalija. Nifhem ukoll li din ir-riċerka taf tkun ta' benefiċċju għall-oħrajn għax: permezz tar-riżultati li ser jinġabru ser inkunu nistgħu naraw kif ġew affettwati t-tfal, speċifikament il-logħob tat-tfal minħabba il-pandemija. B'hekk ġenituri, edukaturi u dawk li jfasslu l-politika, ikunu jistgħu jaraw jekk hemmx bżonn li jinbidlu ċertu aspetti fil-logħob li noffru lit-tfal Maltin.

8. Nifhem li, skont ir-Regolament Ġenerali dwar il-Protezzjoni tad-Data (GDPR) u l-leġiżlazzjoni nazzjonali, għandi dritt naċċessa, nikkoreġi u, fejn hu applikabbli, nitlob li l-informazzjoni li tikkonċernani titħassar.

9. Nifhem li l-informazzjoni kollha miġbura fuq kompjuter protett minn password, se titħassar meta jintemm l-istudju

10. Ingħatajt kopja tal-ittra ta' tagħrif biex inżommha u nifhem li se ningħata wkoll kopja ta' din il-formola tal-kunsens.

11. Konxju/a li, jekk nimmarka l-ewwel kaxxa t'hawn taħt, inkun qed nagħti l-kunsens tiegħi biex l-intervista u l-focus group jiġu rrekordjati bl-awdjo u maqluba f'kitba fl-istess waqt (traskrizzjoni).

IMMARKA BISS DAK LI JAPPLIKA

☐ Naqbel li l-intervista u focus groups jiġu rrekordjati bl-awdjo/ vidjo.

☐ Ma naqbilx li l-intervista u focus groups jiġu rrekordjati bl-awdjo/ vidjo.

12. Konxju/a li siltiet mill-intervista tiegħi jistgħu jiġu riprodotti b'mod anonimu jew bl-użu ta' psewdonimu [isem ivvintat jew kodiċi - eż. parteċipant A].

13. Konxju/a li d-diskussjonijiet fil-focus groups għandhom jitqiesu kunfidenzjali u li m'għandix insemmi d-dettalji tal-parteċipanti u/jew in-natura tad-diskussjonijiet ma' ħaddieħor.

14. Konxju/a li l-identità tiegħi u d-dettalji personali tiegħi mhux se jiġu żvelati f'xi pubblikazzjoni, rapport jew preżentazzjoni li tista' toħroġ minn din ir-riċerka.

15. Jiena konxju/a li l-informazzjoni tiegħi se tkun psewdonimizzata, jiġifieri l-identità tiegħi mhix se titniżżel fit-traskrizzjonijiet jew fin-noti tal-intervista, imma minflok, se niġi assenjat/a kodiċi. Il-kodiċijiet li jorbtu l-informazzjoni dwari mal-identità tiegħi se jinżammu b'mod sigur u separat mill-informazzjoni, f'file kodifikat fuq il-kompjuter tar-riċerkatriċi, protetti b'password, u r-riċerkatriċi u t--tutur akkademiku biss sejkollhom aċċess għal din l-informazzjoni. Kwalunkwe materjal stampat se jitqiegħed f'armarju msakkar. Kwalunkwe materjal li jidentifikani bħala parteċipant/a f'dan l-istudju se jinżamm b'mod sigur u se jinqered wara *18-il xhar.*

Qrajt u fhimt l-istqarrijiet t'hawn fuq, u naqbel li nipparteċipa f'dan l-istudju.

Isem il-parteċipant/a: _____

Firma: _____

Data: _____

_____   _____
Enrica Caruana   Dr. Josephine Deguara
Masters in Teaching and Learning 2021-2023   B.Ed. (Hons.), M. ECEC., Ph.D.

E-mail: E-mail:
Mobile No.:   Numru ta' L-ufiċċju:

Appendix 4.1: Information letter children (English)
Information about the study to be read to the children

Before the study, the mother or father will verbally explain the children's role in the study by reading the below text. This text is written in simple words so that the children can easily understand what is required if they choose to participate.

Text that will be read to the children

Dear children,

I am Ms Enrica.   I am currently learning how to become a teacher, just like your teacher at school. To do so, I need to learn more about children. I would like to know about your play and if it has changed because of the Virus.

With the help of your mother or father, I would like to use photos of you while you are playing. The photos, which will be chosen by yourself, will show you playing before the virus came to Malta, and some other photos will be of you playing after the virus came to Malta

Finally, I will meet your mother or father and talk about your play which is shown in the photos and whether your play has changed from before the onset of the virus to during the virus. It is important for you to know that I will cover your face if it is showing in the photographs, and no one will be know who you are. Throughout the study, I will not mention who you are nor your name. The photos will be deleted or given back to your parents once the study is finalised.

If you accept to participate, I will call your mother or father to meet them so we can discuss all the fun things you do while you are playing.

Thank you for listening.

Ms Enrica

Assent Form

My name is Ms. Enrica,

Would you like to be part of my study by:

- Giving me permission to use your photos related to your play before and during the virus came to Malta?

- You understand that your participation will remain anonymous and you will not be required to answer any questions.

If you agree, colour the happy faces.

Name: _____

Appendix 5.1: Information letter children (Maltese)

Qabel jibda l-istudju, l-omm u/jew l-missier tat-tifel/tifla ser jispjegaw l-irwol tat-tfal verbalment billi jaqraw t-test t'hawn taħt. Dan miktub bi kliem sempliċi sabiex it-tfal ikunu jistgħu jifhmu aħjar.

Test li jrid jinqara lit-tfal individwali

Għażiż/a _____,

Jiena Ms Enrica. Bħalissa qed nitgħallem kif insir għalliema bħal l-għalliema tiegħek l-iskola. Nixtieq li nsir naf aktar dwar il-logħob tiegħek. F'dan l-istudju ser nipprova nifhem jekk inbidel il-logħob tiegħek minħabba il-Virus COVID-19.

Kull ma trid tagħmel huwa li bil-kunsens tiegħek, il-ġenituri jipprovduli ritratti tiegħek waqt il-ħin tal-logħob qabel u waqt il-pandemija tal-COVID-19. Bil-għajnuna tal- mama' jew lil-papa' tagħżel xi ritratti tiegħek tilgħab qabel ma ġie il-virus, u oħrajn waqt li kien hawn il-virus Malta.

Fl-aħħar ser niltaqa mal-mama' jew papa' u ser nitkellmu dwar ir-ritratti u il-logħob tiegħek biex naraw kif inti kont tilgħab qabel u waqt il-pandemija. Nixtieqek tkun taf li meta nuża r-ritratti ser ngħatti/nċajpar wiċċek, allura ħadd m'hu ser ikun jaf min int jew ikun jista' jiddentifikak.

Jekk taċċetta li tipparteċipa fl-istudju tiegħi billi nuża r-ritratti tiegħek, jiena ser nikkuntatja lill-mamá u l-papa' biex niltaqa magħhom u jgħiduli dwar il-logħob favorit tiegħek.

Grazzi talli smajtni.

Ms. Enrica

Formola ta' Kunsens

Jiena Ms. Enrica,

Trid li tieħu sehem f'dan l-istudju billi:

- Tagħti permess biex nuża ritratti tiegħek tilgħab qabel u waqt il-pandemija tal-COVID-19?

- Tifhem li l-parteċipazzjoni tiegħek ser tibqa anonima (ħadd mhu ser isir jaf min inti) u m'għandekx bżonn tirrispondi l-ebda mistoqsija.

Jekk iva, pinġi l-uċuħ li jitbissmu.

Isem: _____