



State of Play Executive Summary Report

Children's Everyday Experiences of Play
and the Right to Play in Maharashtra, India

April 2026

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Development through Play



The Opentree Foundation was founded on the core tenet that play has the power to change lives.

Play is a life-affirming spark that keeps children spirited and joyful even in the face of adversity. Play drives us to live in the moment. Play needs no language; play is the language for a child to communicate and explore.

Play enriches childhood in ways that lead children to grow into confident, responsible and compassionate members of our society.

Our Vision

A world where all children are empowered through Conscious Play.

Our Mission

To use play as an integral tool to educate and empower children and youth to become well-rounded and contributing citizens of the world.

Our Purpose

For every child to achieve their full potential.

Find out more about our work at opentree.org



State of Play

Children's Everyday Experiences of Play and the Right to Play in Maharashtra, India

Contents

| | |
|-----------------------------|----|
| Introduction | 2 |
| What The Study Found | 4 |
| Access to Play | 6 |
| Forms of Play | 7 |
| Adult Attitudes & Practices | 8 |
| Barriers to Play | 9 |
| Cross-Cutting Patterns | 10 |
| Implications for Action | 11 |
| About the Study | 13 |

“
The findings show that play is present in most children’s lives and that adults overwhelmingly recognise play as important”



Introduction

Why State of Play?

India is home to over 400 million children. For most of them, play, a fundamental right under Article 31 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, is not as present as is commonly assumed.

Global research is unambiguous: play is not a break from development, it is the mechanism through which development happens. Yet in India, this conviction has rarely been tested against local evidence. Studies are few, small in scale, and unable to capture the lived realities of children growing up in low-income schools, Anganwadis, urban slums, and rural communities.

For over 21 years, The Opentree Foundation has worked with conviction in the transformative power of play. This study was commissioned to move that conviction from belief to evidence, generating grounded insights from TOF’s operational areas across urban and rural Maharashtra, producing findings that any organisation working on child development, early education, or child rights can learn from and act on.

About the study: 605 respondents · 36 schools and centres · 6 districts · 3 months of fieldwork



“
Play is not absent from children’s lives, but it is consistently squeezed. And that squeeze follows age, gender, geography, and the pressures adults are under.”



What The Study Found

The Big Picture

The findings reveal a clear pattern: play is present in most children’s lives in some form, and adults overwhelmingly recognise its importance. But the conditions that make play meaningful, adequate time, autonomous choice, safe outdoor space, erode significantly as children get older.

The most important finding is not whether children play at all. It is whether play is adequate, autonomous, and spatially enabling. On all three dimensions, older children and older girls in particular face the greatest constraints.

Four key shifts define the picture:

Time is compressed with age

While around 80–85% of younger children play for two or more hours daily, older children are concentrated in short-duration play. Among girls aged 12–15, 35% play for less than an hour a day, compared to 14% of older boys.

Space narrows to the home

60% of children have no playground within a 10-minute walk. Play is largely concentrated inside and immediately around the home, not because children prefer it, but because outdoor alternatives are limited or considered unsafe.


Mobile play fills the gap

As outdoor play contracts, mobile gaming expands. It begins early (1 in 4 children aged 3–6 already play regularly) and becomes dominant by adolescence (62% of older boys, 48% of older girls play daily).


Girls bear the sharpest constraints

Gender norms, safety fears, and social judgement converge to restrict older girls’ play more than any other group, in time, space, form, and freedom.

At a Glance

82%
of children report getting time to play every day
(but adequacy and autonomy, not frequency, is where gaps emerge)



62%
of boys 12-15 play mobile games daily. Even among 3-6 year olds, 1 in 4 already play mobile games


BARRIERS TO PLAY - TOP ADULT CONCERNS

| | |
|---|-----|
| Fear of physical injury or accidents | 74% |
| Traffic and road safety concerns | 65% |
| Unsafe neighbourhoods or surroundings | 65% |
| Fear of strangers or abduction | 48% |
| Fear of bad language, fights, or negative behaviour | 44% |



35%
of older girls play for less than an hour per day compared to 14% of older boys

98%
of caregivers say play is a child's right, but 65% allow it only after homework and chores are done



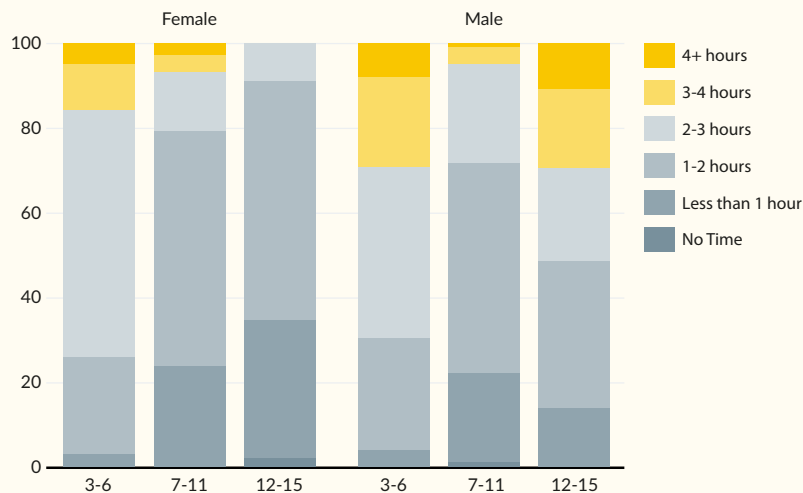
60%
of children report they don't have a playground within a 10-minute walk from home



40%
of teachers cannot recall receiving any training on how to integrate play into classroom learning

“**It is necessary. Yes, play is necessary, studies are also there. Children should not put too much pressure. If children start playing too much, then attention reduces on studies and increases on playing.” Parent, FGD**

Fig. 1. How much time is spent playing daily – by age group & gender



Access to Play

Access is widespread in principle, uneven in practice

The majority of children report playing daily. But daily play and adequate play are not the same thing.

As children grow older, play time compresses and play space contracts. Older children, particularly girls, experience reduced duration, more conditions placed on when they can play, and greater restriction on where.

This chart shows the sharpest compression for girls aged 12-15, 35% of whom play for less than an hour a day compared to 14% of older boys.

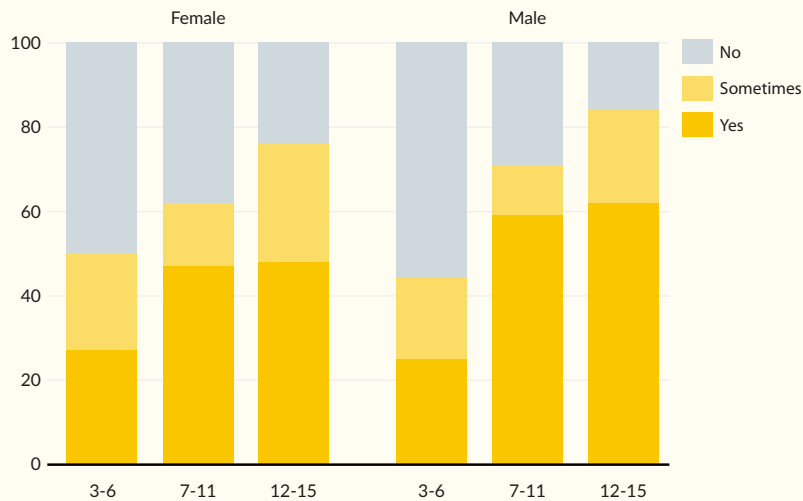
Where children play: Play is concentrated inside and near the home. 82% play near home, 79% inside the home. Only 26% access a park. 60% of children report no playground within a 10-minute walk.

Who decides: Most children retain some autonomy over what they play. 68% say the child decides, 52% say the child and friends decide together. But adult-directed play and restriction increase with age.

Why parents stop children from playing: Academic reasons (68%) are the single biggest driver of restriction, followed by safety concerns (53%), behavioural issues (30%), and running errands (22%).

“**The area outside is so unsafe. Other kids speak foul language and I don’t want my child to get influenced. It is better he sits at home and plays on the phone than be around those types of people.” Parent, FGD**

Fig. 2. Does the child play mobile games?



Forms of Play

What children play changes, and not always for the better

Children engage in diverse forms of play, but the forms shift significantly with age. Creative and exploratory play decline as children grow older, while physical and digital play become more prominent.

From a gender perspective, boys engage more in physical and exploratory play; girls engage more in creative play. These differences become more pronounced with age.

Mobile play is now mainstream, and it starts early.

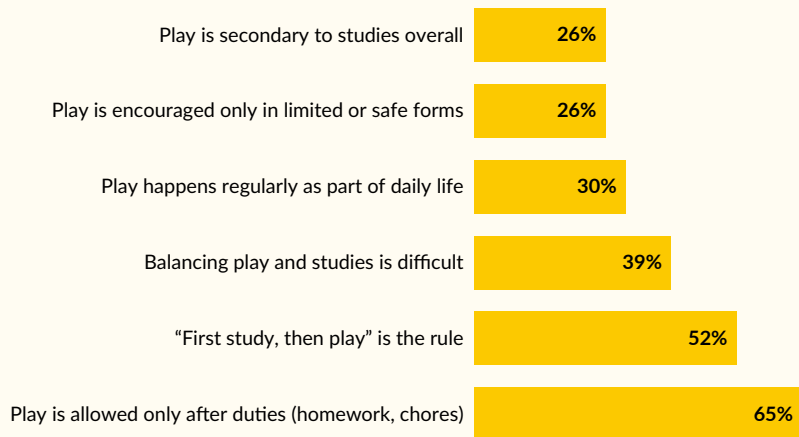
Even among 3–6 year-olds, approximately 1 in 4 children already play mobile games regularly. By ages 7–11, nearly 6 in 10 boys (59%) and almost half of girls (47%) play mobile games regularly. By ages 12–15, this rises to 62% of boys and 48% of girls.

Mobile play is not inherently harmful, but the evidence base raises concern. A systematic review of studies involving over 160,000 children found associations between frequent mobile phone use and increased symptoms of anxiety, depression, and attention difficulties. When mobile play substitutes for outdoor, exploratory, or social play rather than supplementing it, the developmental cost is real.

This exchange captures something important: mobile play often expands not by choice, but by default, when safer, richer alternatives are unavailable.

“
When kids play their stress becomes less and they get relaxed.” Parent, FGD

Fig. 3. Is play conditional?



Adult Attitudes & Practices

Adults believe in play, but practice tells a different story

98% of caregivers say play is a child's right. 99% of teachers say children benefit from play. These numbers are striking and encouraging.

But belief and practice diverge sharply.

65% of caregivers allow play only after homework and chores are done. 52% report that “first study, then play” is the household rule. Only 30% describe play as a regular, unconditional part of daily life.

What adults think children gain from play: Both caregivers and teachers identify three primary benefits: joy and emotional wellbeing, physical health and stress relief, and learning and overall development. These align closely with the evidence base, which is encouraging for programme efforts to deepen this understanding.

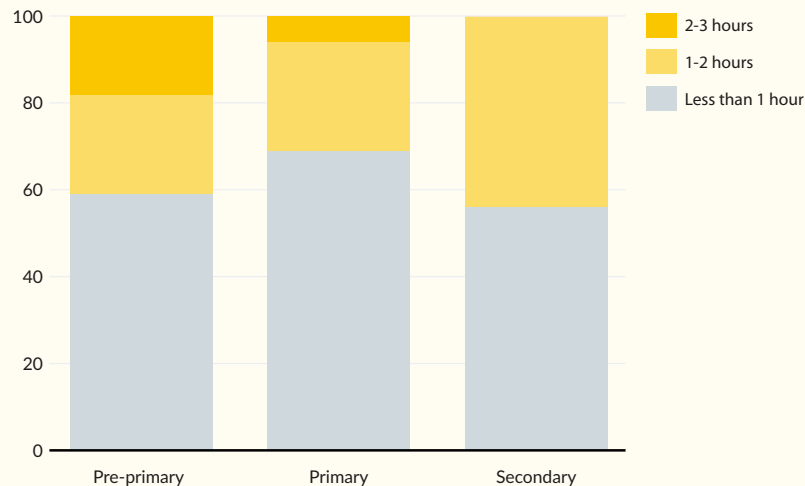
Teachers: belief is there, training is not. 85–95% of teachers believe play and learning can go hand in hand. Many already incorporate play through action songs, maths games, language activities, and storytelling.

But 40% of teachers cannot recall receiving any training specifically on integrating play into classroom learning. Among those who have, two organisations, ToyBank and Mulyavardhan, account for the majority of training cited.

Safety fears shape gatekeeping — differently for boys and girls. Parents worry more about boys as they get older, but restrict girls' play more. 61% say girls' play is more restricted than boys'. 65% say boys are allowed more freedom to play outdoors. Social judgement, fear of gossip, pressure to prioritise academics, concern about being seen as irresponsible parents, compounds these dynamics.

The UNCRC (2013) states: Barriers to the enjoyment of Article 31 include lack of recognition of its importance, unsafe environments, gender and disability discrimination, overemphasis on academic achievement and lack of investment in play provision. The findings of this study map directly onto each of these.

Fig. 4. Daily play time available in school



Barriers to Play

Barriers are systemic, interlinked, and accumulate across environments

The barriers children face are not random. They follow a logic: academic pressure from institutions, safety fears from physical environments, gender norms from social contexts. And they reinforce each other.

Attitudinal barriers: Play is widely valued but treated as conditional, permitted only once duties are done. This framing, common among both caregivers and teachers, systematically positions play as less important than academic achievement.

Environmental barriers: 60% of children have no playground within a 10-minute walk. Fear of physical injury (74%), traffic (65%), and unsafe neighbourhoods (65%) push play indoors. The absence of safe outdoor spaces is both real and perceived, and the effect is the same.

Cultural and social barriers: Gender norms restrict older girls' play in time, space, and form. Social judgement, from neighbours, community expectations, and fear of being seen as irresponsible, leads parents to constrain play even when they believe in its value.

Institutional and systemic barriers: Academic schedules crowd out play in schools. More than half of teachers report children get under an hour of daily play at school, well below the National Curriculum Framework's recommendations of up to two hours for children aged 3-6. 40% of teachers have received no relevant training.

Cross-Cutting Patterns

Five shifts that define children's play in Maharashtra

The study's findings converge on five interconnected shifts, each reflecting how different pressures accumulate across children's daily environments.

1

A shift in mediation

Both parents and teachers widely recognise the importance of play. But this positive attitude does not translate consistently into enabling conditions. Play is regularly sidelined by academic expectations and household responsibilities.

2

A shift in time

As children grow older, playtime contracts. Girls experience a steeper decline than boys. This compression is compounded by adult attitudes that treat play as a reward rather than a right.

3

A shift in space

The unavailability of nearby play spaces pushes play indoors. Safety concerns reinforce this. The result is that most children play primarily in or around the home, not by preference, but by default.

4

A shift in form

As outdoor, exploratory, and creative play contracts, mobile-based play expands. This shift is not uniform across children, but the trajectory is clear and begins younger than most adults assume.

5

A shift in equity

Gender norms shape the time and freedom children have to play, and older girls bear the sharpest end of every constraint. The gaps in play time, outdoor access, and autonomy all widen with age and are most pronounced for girls.



Implications for Action

What needs to change

The findings point to the need to move from recognising the value of play to systematically enabling it. This requires coordinated action across policy, programmes, and everyday practice, in schools, homes, communities, and the broader systems that shape children's lives.

Position play as core to education systems: Play should be embedded within schooling as part of how children learn, not treated as an add-on limited to early years. India's National Education Policy 2020 and the National Curriculum Framework for the Foundational Stage provide a clear policy mandate. The challenge is translating that mandate into daily practice.

Enable play through school design and teaching practice: Schools can act as consistent, equitable spaces for play if supported appropriately. This means protecting time for play on school timetables, equipping teachers with practical tools for play-based learning, and using school infrastructure as a play resource, particularly for older children and girls, who have fewer alternatives.

Strengthen neighbourhood play infrastructure: Children's access to play depends on safe, accessible spaces beyond the home. Investing in inclusive community play spaces and activating existing spaces such as school grounds for community use would directly address one of the most consistently cited barriers.

Translate positive attitudes into everyday practice at home: Caregivers need support to convert belief into action. Practical guidance on how to enable play within everyday routines, alongside messaging that normalises balancing play and academic responsibility, can shift household practices.

Address barriers to equitable access: Expanding play requires targeted attention to who gets to play, where, and how. This means recognising and designing around gender inequities, particularly for older girls, and ensuring inclusive approaches that reach the most constrained children.



Conclusion

This study shows that children's play remains visible across everyday environments, but is consistently squeezed as children grow older. The constraints are not random. They follow age, gender, geography, and the pressures adults are under.

Children who lose space for self-directed play also lose the daily practice of making decisions, managing frustration, and figuring things out. These things don't show up on a report card, but they matter enormously.

The findings here are a starting point. For TOF, they are a basis for sharpening programmes and deepening impact. For others working in child development, education, or policy, they are an invitation to ask similar questions in their own contexts.



About the Study

Methodology

Study design: This study employed a cross-sectional, mixed-methods design, combining structured surveys and interviews with six caregiver focus group discussions. The design prioritised identifying patterns, variation, and trajectories rather than producing causal estimates.

Respondents: 605 total respondents across 36 schools and centres in six districts

- Children: 228
- Caregivers: 299
- Teachers / Anganwadi workers: 78
- FGD participants: 30

Districts covered: Ahilyanagar · Beed · Latur · Mumbai City · Mumbai Suburban · Pune

Age groups: 3–6 years (early childhood) · 7–11 years (middle childhood) · 12–15 years (early adolescence)

For children aged 3–6, caregiver proxy reporting was used given developmental limitations. Children aged 7–15 participated directly.

Sampling: Stratified by school/centre type (government, government-aided, private, Anganwadi, community), sex, and age group.

Statistical precision: At the aggregate level, findings carry a 95% confidence interval with an estimated margin of error of ± 5 –6%. The study is analytically generalisable to the contexts represented and supports credible cross-district comparisons and subgroup analysis.

Ethical safeguards: Informed consent, child assent, confidentiality, and voluntary participation throughout.

Full methodology available in the complete State of Play report (April 2026).

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We thank Social Venture Partners for their support in enabling this work. Their belief in the importance of building evidence around play has made it possible.

We acknowledge the Programme Delivery Team at The Opentree Foundation, whose commitment on the ground ensured the research reflects the lived realities of children and adults across diverse contexts.

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