

PLAY IN A COVID FRAME

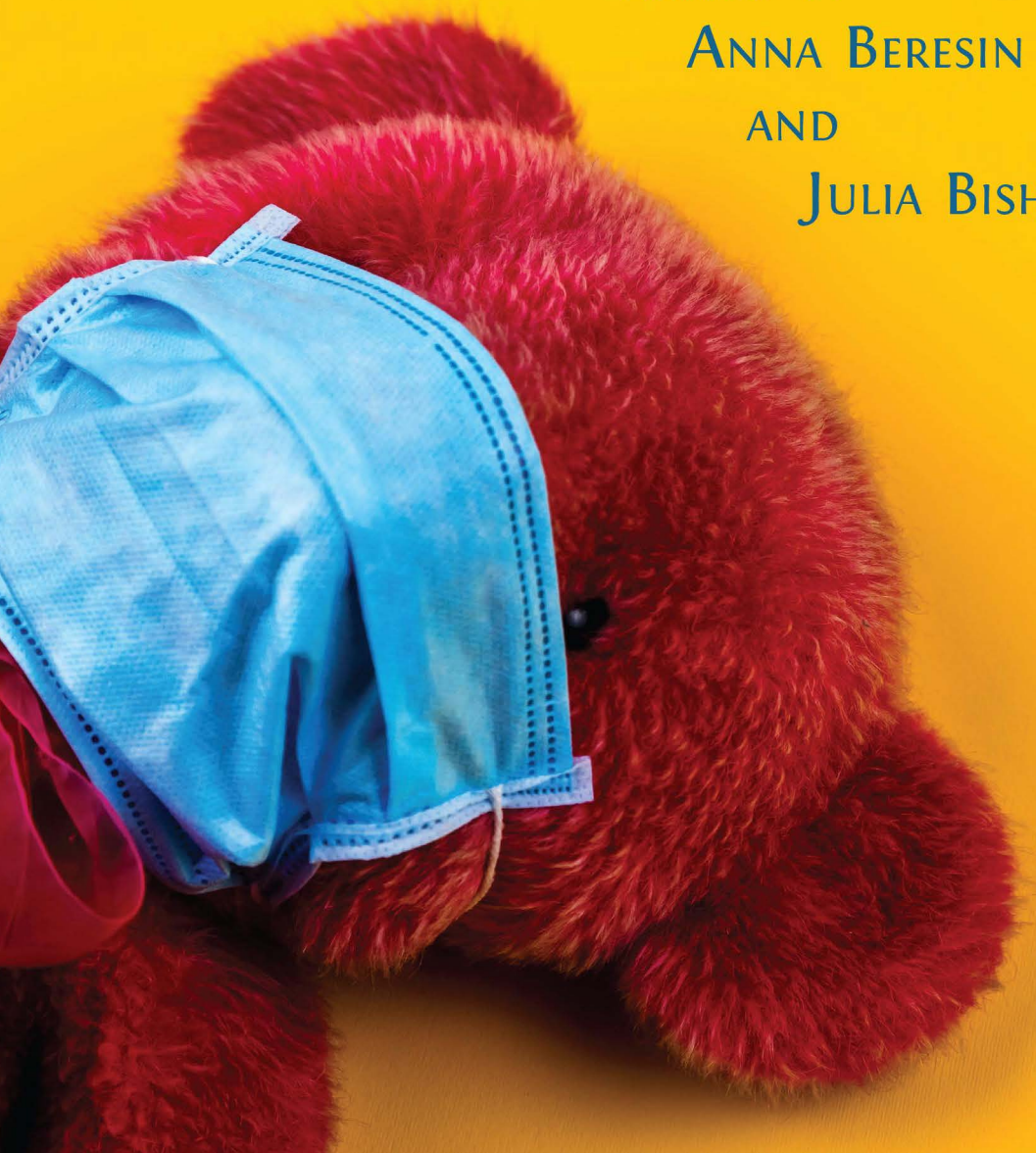
EVERYDAY PANDEMIC CREATIVITY
IN A TIME OF ISOLATION

EDITED BY

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3. Up, Down, Stop, Go, and Everything In Between: Promoting a Resident-Driven Play-Based Agenda during a Global Pandemic in Rochester, New York

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Effects of the Covid-19 Pandemic on Children

Throughout the nation, healthcare providers, advocates, parents and caregivers are raising red flags about Covid-19's impact on children's mental health and well-being. Rates of psychological distress, including anxiety and depression, have increased in children and youth since the pandemic began. Symptoms of depression and anxiety among youth have doubled to twenty-five percent and twenty percent respectively (Racine et al. 2021). Emergency department visits for suspected suicide attempts were fifty-one percent higher for adolescent girls in early 2021 compared with the same time period in 2019 (Yard et al. 2021). Additionally, pandemic-related cancellations of in-person activities made it more difficult to identify mental health concerns and indications of child abuse (Stewart 2020). Children and youth of colour experienced

additional race-based stressors throughout the course of the pandemic. The murder of George Floyd and many other Black Americans by law enforcement officers, Covid-related hate crimes committed against Asian Americans, increased gun violence and widening political polarity further affect one's mental health.

The benefits of play have the potential to mitigate the impact of pandemic-related trauma. Play relieves stress and reduces anxiety by providing time for relaxation, increasing connectedness with family and friends, and allowing children to make sense of changes by 'playing out' their traumas (International Play Equipment Manufacturers Association 2020). Clinicians and child serving agencies agree that opportunities for play will be vital to children's mental health as they recover from pandemic-related trauma and anxiety (American Academy of Pediatrics 2021; Clay 2020; Global Recess Alliance 2020; Hadani and Vey 2020; Harvard Center for the Developing Child 2020; International Play Association 2020).

Play benefits children in all developmental areas. It aids both physical and cognitive development by strengthening muscles, bones, vital organs and brain functions in children (Clements 2004). Play supports maintaining healthy weight and facilitates the development of key brain functions, including focus and cognitive control (Clements 2004). Playful learning is directly correlated with teachers' reports of less fidgeting, improved behaviour and listening, and greater focus (Slater et al. 2012). An hour of active play improves academic outcomes (Sattelmair and Ratey 2009) and opportunities for integrated play throughout the day cause a student's brain to function more efficiently, leading to improved concentration (Chaddock et al. 2010). Socially, play is crucial to developing language skills, empathy, imagination, self-regulation and life skills, such as cooperation and problem solving (Miller and Almon 2009). Opportunities for play support children's emotional health by reducing feelings of anxiety and providing a means of working through complex feelings and emotions (US Department of Health and Human Services 2008). Additionally, play supports children in building healthy relationships with their peers and adults (Murphey et al. 2014). Strong relationships with adults are critical protective factors as children navigate trauma and events throughout their lives. Children who have strong and healthy relationships with adults are more likely to stay on track developmentally (Ginsburg et al. 2007) and better able

to navigate toxic stress caused by poverty, racism and adverse childhood experiences (Shonkoff, Boyce and McEwen 2009). Play is a quality of life indicator and the foundation to whole child health. It makes for happier and healthier children. Opportunities for both structured and unstructured play are vital for children's education, health, well-being and success.

Despite its many advantages, not all children benefit equally from play. Black and Latino children have historically been discriminated against in the ways in which they move and play within educational systems and during out-of-school time. Students of colour are watched more intently than White students and are forced to navigate 'white gaze' in their everyday settings (schools, neighbourhoods, after-school programming, etc.), often leading to feelings of being watched, judged and not welcomed (Esposito 2011). White gaze also persists in the form of surveillance by school authorities, police and educators, leading to students of colour being adultified and their actions criminalized, as their view of play is seen as violent compared to White students whose play may be viewed as innocent, fun and therefore protected (Wright 2021).

Setting

Rochester is a mid-sized city in Western New York, USA, that continues to bear the effects of concentrated poverty and residential segregation. Redlining exists to this day and racial covenants developed in the 1930s and '40s still appear in many deeds to homes, restricting properties from being sold to, or occupied by, people of colour. With approximately 210,000 residents, 39.4% identify as Black alone, 6.2% identify as two or more races, and 19.4% identify as Latino (53%) (US Census Bureau 2021); one third of city residents live in poverty (31.3%) (Rochester-Monroe Anti-Poverty Initiative 2020). More than 40% of Black and Latino residents are poor, 20% of residents lack a high school diploma, and 47.7% of children live in poverty. The city's extreme poverty rate is over 15% and Rochester is the third poorest city in the nation when compared to the largest seventy-five metropolitan areas (Rochester-Monroe Anti-Poverty Initiative 2020). An astounding 72.2% of White residents own their homes, whereas the same is true for just 31.5% of Black residents. Throughout the nine county Finger Lakes region, 68%

of Black adults and 53% of Latinos live in poverty, compared to only 12% of White adults (Common Ground Health 2020). Inequities persist amongst all economic, education and health outcomes.

Rochester is home to 3500 acres of park and green space. Despite seemingly adequate park space, many kids do not have access to safe and accessible places to play or be physically active. Just one quarter of the city's residents thought their neighbourhood was great for children to play outdoors compared to sixty-four percent of residents in neighbouring suburbs (Common Ground Health, My Health Story 2018). Past Healthi Kids surveys found that only seventeen percent of youth reported playing at parks and playgrounds, with eighty-two percent of all play occurring in vacant lots, parking lots or streets. Two thirds of residents (65%) did not feel safe letting their child walk to a park in their own neighbourhood (Healthi Kids 2022). These numbers are alarming but not surprising, resulting from decades of structural policies, institutions and environments that perpetuated systemic racism locally.

Vast inequities in educational and health outcomes exist as well. In 2021, graduation rates of the Rochester City School District (RCSD) increased to sixty-eight percent, up eighteen percent since 2013 (Murphy and Stern 2021), and despite ninety percent of the RCSD student population being children and youth of colour, eighty-two percent of teachers in the district are White, creating one of the largest gaps between diversity of a student body and the diversity of teaching staff within the state of New York (Education Trust New York 2017). The health disparities prevalent at the community level persist with youth of colour. African American and Latino children and families in the City of Rochester experience worse health outcomes than the White/non-Latino population in Monroe County, including higher rates of obesity and increased likelihood of premature mortality (Common Ground Health 2021). Black children and youth in Monroe County are nearly two times as likely to report three or more Adverse Childhood Experiences than White students (29% versus 16%) (Common Ground Health 2021). Furthermore, the pandemic exacerbated existing disparities with Black and Latino residents in Monroe County dying from Covid-19 at a rate three times higher than Whites and were five times more likely to be hospitalized (Common Ground Health 2020).

Healthi Kids Coalition

The Healthi Kids Coalition formed in 2008 as a grassroots initiative of Common Ground Health advocating for safe and accessible play spaces in schools and neighbourhoods in Rochester. With over eighty members, Healthi Kids partners to transform policies, systems and environments to support physical, social, emotional and cognitive development of all kids from birth to eight years old. We embrace the diversity of all family structures in our community and believe in the power of youth and resident voices to co-create solutions. Our resident-led advocacy agenda prioritizes healthy learning environments, foundations for health in early childhood, equitable communities and the power of play. The coalition recognizes the need to eradicate inequities caused by racism, adverse childhood experiences, poverty, ableism and community violence, and to support the youngest members of our community. We work to advance policies to ensure that all kids regardless of ZIP code, economic status, sexual orientation, gender, race, religion, or ability have the support they need for the healthiest start in life.

Healthi Kids recognizes the importance of play to children's overall health and well-being. Advancing safe and accessible opportunities for play in schools and neighbourhoods are key focal points of our work. Our work to advance play in schools began in 2009 when we partnered with students and their families to assess the frequency with which recess was being offered in schools. This led to the creation of a recess report card demonstrating inequities in play between students in the Rochester City School District and students in suburban districts throughout the rest of the county. In 2014, Healthi Kids partnered with the RCSD Parent Advisory Council to find a district-wide solution to ensure that no child was denied recess. Together we advocated that every child, regardless of ability, would have daily active recess and that recess could not be taken away as a form of punishment. This work led to the creation of a twenty-minute mandatory daily active recess policy within the RCSD. We supported schools with the implementation of these policies by providing technical assistance, resources and materials, in addition to partnering with national experts to provide ongoing professional development opportunities for administrators, staff, and teachers across the district.

Our work to advance play in neighbourhoods began between 2010 and 2013 when we partnered with community members in five neighbourhoods throughout the city to conduct playability assessments to answer questions about where kids were playing and what we could do to improve existing play spaces. Results revealed that access to play in parks and at playgrounds is limited, causing kids to play in non-traditional spaces like streets, sidewalks, empty lots and parking lots. Results further indicated that neighbourhood and traffic safety, unsafe access to parks, and unkempt playgrounds are key barriers that deter parents from letting their children play outdoors altogether.

Armed with data, residents advocated for a number of policies, systems and environmental changes to address neighbourhood safety, policies and programmes to slow down traffic, improve walkability and bikeability, and promote playability. Examples of action taken include amending the city-wide speed bump policy, advocating for a complete streets policy, pushing to lower the residential speed limit and creating a way for residents to communicate crime prevention needs in their neighbourhood. This initial work documented inequities in access to play amongst children in Rochester and evolved to form the PlayROCs Advocacy Committee as part of the Healthi Kids Coalition.

PlayROCs Advocacy Committee

The PlayROCs Advocacy Committee grew out of the Healthi Kids Coalition in 2015. Residents affiliated with this committee led a grassroots campaign convening neighbourhood associations, block clubs, churches, community organizations and nonprofits to build and advance a play-based agenda. The team of thirty-two resident leaders and organizational partners created an agenda that advances a community vision for play, advocates for change, recognizes community bright spots and coordinates community resources. For the past seven years, the committee has advocated for play and playful learning to be prominently featured in Rochester 2034, the city's comprehensive plan. We piloted innovative built environment strategies, such as story walks, a downtown Play Walk and other tactical urbanism installations, in addition to working with the City's Department of Recreation and Human Services to transform their approaches to encourage neighbourhood

play by piloting play streets and creating a playful sidewalk policy. The campaign amplifies community voices and catalyzes city residents to bring play back into the daily lives of Rochester's children.

The Healthi Kids Coalition and PlayROCs Advocacy Committee are community-engaged entities in which residents, parents, caregivers and youth are embedded throughout planning and implementation processes. In December 2019, the PlayROCs Advocacy Committee identified potential policy levers to continue to advance their play-based agenda. To truly make a difference in the lives of city children, residents were aware of the need to expand their work to the Rochester City School District. The committee was planning this expanded portfolio of work when the Covid-19 pandemic began in March 2020. The abrupt closing of schools and community centres in conjunction with social isolation and the lack of play opportunities underscored the importance of this work.

Early in the pandemic, members of the committee raised the alarm about the impact Covid-19 was having on their children. Increased social isolation, the effects of online learning and the chronic toxic stress experienced by families were affecting our children physically and mentally. This caused the committee to develop an advocacy agenda addressing the need for unstructured play throughout Covid-19. Goals of the agenda included safeguarding play in learning environments, ensuring children across Rochester had access to play and advocating for changes in the built environment to support play in everyday spaces. This chapter documents the programmatic response of the coalition and advocacy committee during the pandemic and was not designed as a research study.

Advocating for Supportive Play Environments during Covid-19

Since its inception, the PlayROCs Advocacy Committee has worked to transform Rochester's public settings into more playful spaces. The committee wanted to ensure that environmental changes continued to occur throughout the pandemic. During this time, we piloted innovative place-making approaches, like story walks and playful sidewalks. Teams created playful sidewalks in several neighbourhoods and expanded

the downtown Play Walk to include an element called ‘the Ripple’, a tactical urbanism installation featuring constantly changing colours, rotating panels and pixelated illustrations. Local teens were integral to designing these spaces and installations. One teen recalled that ‘the Ripple was developed by city teens for the benefit of our community. It is exciting to see our vision of what we wanted to see at the Play Walk become a reality’. We also continued to advocate for built environment changes that promoted play in several city capital improvement projects and worked alongside the city’s Department of Recreation and Human Services to advance their ‘Ten Minute Walk to Park’ plan.

Coordinating Resources to Advance Play at Home

Families expressed that they were overloaded with information when researching play activities for children during Covid, but rarely did they have the necessary materials to implement the lessons or ideas seen online. Healthi Kids and PlayROCs Advocacy Committee members actively worked to ensure that children had access to unstructured play materials early in the pandemic. Together we assembled and distributed play kits, partnered with the city to support Covid-friendly programming and infrastructure that prioritizes unstructured, resident-driven play (e.g. toy libraries, bringing recreational programming and staff to non-traditional spaces, and play streets), and coordinated community resources to share with families during the pandemic. To date (as of May 2022), Healthi Kids, in partnership with the City of Rochester Department of Recreation and Human Services, has distributed 6500 play kits to kids at thirty-two different locations throughout the city. The kits focused on unstructured play materials for children aged two to ten years old and included frisbees, sidewalk chalk, crayons, football, beach ball, jump ropes, colouring books and flyers on the importance of play, all in a drawstring bag. For the first wave of distribution, kits were distributed at every R-Center and at School 8 through the school meal programme. Since then, Healthi Kids staff have heard from members of the PlayROCs advocacy committee and other neighbourhood associations that we need to expand this distribution network to ensure that all kids have access to the kits. One member of the committee summarized her thoughts:

Prior to Covid, members of the PlayROCs Advocacy Committee rallied their neighbours to plan activities with kids in the neighbourhood and at our local R-Center. Because of Covid contagion and restrictions, we were limited with what we could do. With the play kits, we are trying to provide positive things for our kids to focus on while they are dealing with all the uncertainty of Covid. Through play kits, I have been able to keep my great-grandkids active and entertained while they're at home, as I still worry about letting them play at playgrounds and touching equipment after other kids, for my own health and theirs.

We will continue to engage our grassroots network of sixty neighbourhood associations, block clubs, churches and residents across the City of Rochester to distribute kits. Each group can sign up to receive a certain number of play kits to distribute directly to children in their neighbourhood.

A Community Vision for Playful Learning

To prioritize play during Covid and build a community vision for playful learning in the RCSD, we worked with partner agencies to host listening sessions and conducted a short survey to get feedback from parents and students. Listening sessions occurred between May and September 2021 and included ninety-six caregivers, students and organizational leaders. Additionally, 115 survey responses were collected between April and August 2021. This multi-pronged approach allowed the team to hear from students and families about the perceived importance of playful learning, a landscape analysis of what was and was not happening in their schools, and what they would want to see happen in their schools and across the district to advance playful learning opportunities.

The PlayROCs Advocacy Committee worked together with RCSD family and student leaders and organizational partners to build an authentic vision reflecting family and student voices. From these discussions, Rochester City School District students and families developed the following vision statement for playful learning:

Play is central to the education and well-being of our children.
To support our kids, we must maximize the potential of play in

a culturally responsive and sustaining way within our education system. All children (pre-kindergarten through grade twelve) in the Rochester City School District must have equitable access to playful learning and unstructured play opportunities throughout the day (in school, out of school, and during the summer).

To carry out this vision, families and students urged leadership to prioritize six elements including focusing on mental health, implementing playful learning within a culturally responsive framework, focusing on inclusion, providing more opportunities for play outside of the classroom, embedding playful learning in the curriculum and ensuring consistent enforcement of policies.

1. Focus on mental health and emotional well-being: Parents and families were all too aware of and worried about the impact Covid-19 has had on their children. One parent shared, 'Play is meaningful. It can bring out the happiness in you and keep you young, help to release mental anguish and physical pain, keep you spiritually connected. This is what our students need right now'. Participants shared how playful learning should be prioritized to support children's mental health and well-being following pandemic-related trauma.
2. Implement playful learning within a culturally responsive framework: Participants wanted to ensure that a playful learning framework was implemented that was student-centred and affirmed racial, linguistic and cultural identities. One adult participant shared, 'I wish we had a culturally responsive school district that did everything from pedagogy to curriculum to the way we look at play and social interaction'. A student leader also confirmed the need for the vision to be implemented within a culturally responsive lens, stating the need for 'hiring and retaining teachers who look like our students, who are Black and Latinx and speak other languages. We want anti-racist trainings and responsive curriculum. Play is part of all of that... play and outside spaces and learning environments are really important'. Hiring and retaining Black and Latino teachers is a vital step in ensuring that 'learning encounters [are] more relevant to and effective for [ethnically diverse students]' (Gay 2010: 31). Furthermore,

teachers need the time and space to reflect on their perceptions of and interactions with students of colour. Playful learning should be advanced within a paradigm that celebrates the way Black and Latino children play and centres their voices in the learning process instead of requiring students to assimilate to Eurocentric culture (Wright 2021).

3. Focus on inclusion: Participants shared that they would like to see playful learning opportunities inclusive of all students, including those with disabilities. One participant shared how students with disabilities were excluded from playful learning opportunities. 'Students with disabilities are not seeing modifications being made. If the child couldn't play the game, [they] had to research the game and write a report about the game. That is not supporting playful learning for that child'. Adaptations and accommodations need to be available for students with disabilities to ensure all children have access to playful learning.
4. Provide more opportunities outside of the classroom: Participants also want more opportunities for playful learning outside of the physical classroom, such as playing outside, outdoor lessons, field trips and other experiential learning opportunities. One student leader shared, 'Covid-19 took away a lot of our play opportunities. I wish we had more hands-on play and field trips. Things that get us away from our laptops and desks'. Families and students added that it is a challenge to know what opportunities are available outside of the school setting.
5. Embed playful learning into curriculums and daily practice: Family and student leaders stated that embedding playful learning into curriculum and daily instructional practice is critical to ensure that all kids have equitable access to play. Examples of this include field trips, Math-in-Movement curriculum, learning centres and incorporating music in the classroom. One participant shared, 'when kids are engaged because it's relevant and of interest to them, then they'll learn!' Another shared that currently, 'play is an afterthought, not woven into the day'. Many stressed their concerns that

some playful learning opportunities are dependent on school resources and teachers' perceptions of play.

6. Ensure consistent enforcement of policies: Some playful learning opportunities do exist and if policies were enforced, it would go a long way to supporting a vision for playful learning. One parent shared frustration with the daily recess policy implementation, stating that 'the policy does not allow to take away play time as a punishment, but some schools do! How are we enforcing this?' Building a framework of accountability around existing district policies is a first step to ensuring playful learning happens within the district. Without this framework, administrators and teachers have limited incentive to implement playful learning.

While creating this vision for playful learning, families and students developed guiding principles for its implementation in the RCSD and our community. Families felt strongly that playful learning opportunities should be offered for students in pre-kindergarten through to grade twelve to ensure that every child has access to play throughout their educational experience. Playful learning includes both structured and unstructured activities and, most importantly, a playful learning framework must be culturally responsive, sustaining and inclusive. Teachers and staff should receive appropriate anti-racism training and be cognizant of potential biases that they bring to the classroom, including perceiving children of colour to be older than they actually are and thus more culpable for their actions. Any approach to learning should not vilify, adultify, or persecute Black and Latino children for the way they learn, grow and play.

Implementing the Vision for Playful Learning

The PlayROCs Advocacy Committee looked at play activities within three broad categories, including

- unstructured play opportunities (e.g. recess and brain breaks)
- play embedded in curriculum and instructional practices (e.g. physical education, art, music, field trips, experiential learning activities) and

- play opportunities during out-of-school time (e.g. school clubs, after-school programmes, sports teams).

Students, parents and caregivers prioritized unstructured playful learning, specifically access to recess, as the most essential element of their vision. A student leader stated, 'Kids need to have recess. A lot of kids, if you don't turn in your homework, you don't get recess. But that's not fair. When you take away recess, you're taking away our education'.

By embedding playful learning in curriculum and instructional practices, RCSD's pre-kindergarten programme is an exemplary model and has consistently ranked as one of the best in the nation for the past two decades. Play is the primary learning mechanism in this programme. Teachers set up the classroom each day with diverse, open-ended materials for children to explore and learn through creativity, trial and error, and fun, based on the nationally recognized HighScope pre-k curriculum. Daily routines include a 'plan-do-review' sequence, inspiring children to choose what they will, carry out their ideas and reflect upon the activities with adults and other children. These higher-level thinking skills are linked to the development of executive functions necessary for success in school and life. Parents and students want to see this model of embedding play into the curriculum implemented (with adaptations as necessary based on age) for all grade levels and to include more opportunities for experiential learning, field trips, art, music and physical education programmes.

Structured play generally entails an adult 'providing direction and a specific task in order for children to learn a new skill', such as Capture the Flag or board games (Playground Centre 2021). This form of play is particularly important in the classroom, as it allows children to practise achieving an established goal in a fun and effective way. It also teaches valuable life skills, such as active listening, cooperation and sportsmanship (Chatzipanteli and Adamakis 2022). Educators must understand the importance of play in achieving learning outcomes and 'design age-appropriate experiences that both stimulate and gratify children's natural curiosity and desire to understand their world' (New York State Department of Education 2021a), with the goal for 'early childhood education settings, including schools [...] to build capacity by strengthening cognitive and social development through intentional play experiences' (New York State Department of Education 2021b). An

RCSD parent leader expressed that 'right now, play and learning are seen as separate from one another. Play is not appreciated for the value it brings as part of our kids' educational experience'.

Students and parents also expressed the desire for more playful learning opportunities in out-of-school programmes and settings. Out-of-school time (OST) programmes are additional venues for playful learning to occur and many students receive the benefits of music, art, field trips, experiential learning and unstructured play within these settings. OST programmes provide a foundation for playful learning by integrating the things families and students have identified as important into their learning experiences. Nationally, kids of all ages spend an average of eighteen-and-a-half hours a week in OST programmes, amounting to nearly thirty-six percent of additional instructional time outside of the school day (Redd et al. 2012). OST programmes can help promote social-emotional skills, support overall health and well-being, explore new opportunities and address the opportunity gap for students in traditionally under-resourced neighbourhoods, providing care for students while their families work (Healthi Kids 2017; Vandell, Reisner and Pierce 2007).

A child's access to play in Rochester largely depends on their school and/or teacher. Families, community partners and students pointed to the inequitable distribution of existing resources. Families shared that while some schools have 'all of the resources', others have none. They want to see these resources available to all district students. Some teachers report feeling tethered to their school's curriculum, which prioritizes teaching to a test rather than providing opportunities for play. At the same time, many parents believe teachers either do not want to or do not know how to utilize play to teach or engage with children. Inconsistent implementation of policies and allocation of resources across district buildings have families increasingly concerned with RCSD's intent to promote playful learning. The Healthi Kids Coalition continues to support the implementation of this vision by coordinating resources, advocating for district policy amendments and providing professional development opportunities to district staff, students and families.

Effects of Covid-19 on Children and Youth in Rochester

The negative effects of the pandemic will be felt for decades to come, especially by parents, children and youth living in poverty. During the 2020–21 academic year, all suburban schools within Monroe County implemented hybrid learning models utilizing both in-person and virtual options with some suburban schools returning to full-time in-person learning by the end of that year. RCSD remained remote for the entire school year without a hybrid option. Children were physically out of schools for over a year, with the expectations that even our youngest children would learn online. This situation created impossible scenarios for working parents and contributed to a decline in academic outcomes across the district, fewer opportunities for play and further social isolation for our city's youth.

Locally, parents and caregivers worry about reduced opportunities for their children to play. The vast majority of parents (87%) agree that play is more important now than ever before because it encourages self-confidence, less screen time and more physical activity; however, only two in five families report that their children are playing more now than before the pandemic (International Play Equipment Manufacturers Association 2020). Parents with limited options feel that they are failing their children. One parent shared, 'I've failed in reference to where my kids were and where they are now. I'm an advocate for play, but due to Covid, my family's gone backwards instead of forwards'. Parents and caregivers shared that they tried to encourage play by finding opportunities outside of school, but play activities were limited during this time. A parent leader within the RCSD stated, '[Playful learning is] even more important now than before...[there's a] huge gap in social interactions that our children have. This needs to be a core element to everything we do—parents, teachers, leaders'. Another caregiver offered, '[My kids are] still trying to understand how things have changed and what's going on. It's still difficult to explain to them everything that's happened. [Covid-19] has changed them' (Table Talk Primary Caregiver Participant). Another parent advocate summarized the effects on children who have been able to access play compared with those who have not:

We have seen more clearly than ever how the wellness of children is affected by play or the lack of it. As a parent, I noticed and experienced that during the pandemic, when consistent opportunities for play, connection, and exploration were provided in schools and other spaces, children seemed to be more able to maintain and cultivate a sense of wellness. They seemed better able to navigate the challenges and uncertainty. The converse was also true. Children and families who did not have access to resources and environments that maintained a culture of play, exploration, and connection seemed to be more vulnerable to stress and crisis.

When we prioritize building healthy relationships through play, play-based learning, recess and out-of-school time, we have the potential to mitigate the trauma and impact of the pandemic on our children. All children within the Rochester City School District deserve this opportunity.

Ensuring Equitable Opportunities for Play

Not all children have access to safe spaces to play. Data from the Healthi Kids Coalition's playability plan demonstrates that over sixty percent of parents in the City of Rochester say the lack of safe places to play in their neighbourhood is a problem, eighty-two percent of kids throughout the city do not play in traditional parks or playgrounds (Healthi Kids 2016) and sixty-five percent of residents state that they would not feel safe letting their child walk to a park in their neighbourhood (Healthi Kids 2022). Results from a large regional survey reveal that only one quarter of city residents believe their neighbourhood is great for children to play outdoors, a figure three times lower than responses from their suburban counterparts (Common Ground Health 2018). Barriers to play in Rochester neighbourhoods have been identified by residents through multiple studies. Top barriers to neighbourhood play include neighbourhood safety, traffic safety and the condition of playgrounds (Healthi Kids 2016).

Families and students in the RCSD have stressed that if play is not happening in neighbourhoods, then we must ensure that playful opportunities are happening throughout the school day. A PlayROCs

Advocacy Committee Member stated that 'It's important we focus on play in schools because [not all kids have the] opportunity to play in their neighbourhood'. To advance our community's playful learning vision, we must examine play and playful learning through a lens accounting for anti-racism, diversity, equity and inclusion.

The Work Continues

Common Ground Health catalyzed residents across the city to re-conceptualize traditional notions of play, while continuing to advocate for safe and accessible play for all. Covid-19 elevated the importance of this work, as play became an opportunity to facilitate healing and promote resilience in children during a time of chronic uncertainty. Residents are actively planning the next phase of work focused on additional investments in play infrastructure at home and at school on behalf of the school district, city and county. However, advocating with local government takes time and residents are unwilling to sit back and wait for bureaucratic red tape to clear. Efforts are underway to create an 'unstructured play' endowment fund with a local foundation to support residents, neighbourhood associations, block clubs, parent-teacher organizations and the faith community to fund innovative initiatives that promote unstructured play in neighbourhoods and in schools. This will help to provide a mechanism to fund resident-led solutions to address current barriers to play. This fund will also enable supporters in the community to have a dedicated space to donate funds towards these initiatives. The funding could be used to pilot and implement several strategies in neighbourhoods including but not limited to: story walks, playful sidewalks, interactive elements in public spaces, play streets, play kits, recess kits, weather-appropriate clothing for outdoor play, pop-up programming in neighbourhoods, youth workers in parks, play materials in neighbourhoods (e.g. ball bins, toy libraries) and additional innovative ideas that support play in neighbourhoods and at school. This fund would be managed by the foundation and governed by members of the PlayROCs Advocacy Committee. Should this fund be eligible to residents in the broader Finger Lakes region, we will identify residents from other geographic locations to review their applications as well. This fund will allow children in the Greater Rochester and Finger Lakes

region to have enhanced access to play by supporting interventions in their neighbourhood.

Play is critical to the physical, social-emotional and cognitive development of children and a child's preferred way of learning. When we live in kid-friendly environments that support play, the likelihood of chronic disease, obesity, behavioural health issues and crime-related injury decrease. When we provide kids with time and space for unstructured play, we provide them with the opportunity to grow, learn and improve their overall academic performance. A parent advocate reflected on their work with Healthi Kids and the PlayROCs Advocacy Committee:

Our work together has taught me about the link between play and healthy being, especially for children. During Covid, I was able to use the knowledge and tools I gained to ensure the wellness of myself and my child. Even though life was challenging at times, I knew to include play to help us stay connected, joyous and motivated. We have an amazing opportunity to positively impact children and families via play, something we often overlook when it comes to our wellbeing. As we experienced the pandemic, we had to be more innovative and expand our ideas of what play is, how we experience play together and how we could stay connected, even while being physically apart.

Play is critical for children throughout periods of trauma. It provides opportunities for children to heal and build essential relationships with caregivers, and allows for the release of ongoing stressors. The most critical thing our community can do for our children to mitigate the toxic and chronic stress of a pandemic is to let them play.

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