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Valuing Play-Based Learning for Quality Early Childhood Education in Ethiopia, 2026

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PlayMatters seeks to improve holistic learning outcomes and well-being for **800,000** refugee and host community children ages 3-12+ who live in refugee and host community contexts in **Ethiopia, Uganda and Tanzania** using **Learning through Play** methodologies.

In Ethiopia PlayMatters project implements in Afar, Benishangul-Gumuz, Gambella, Tigray, Somali Regions and expanding to Amhara and Oromia regions to scale Playful learning approach and strengthen education systems. The project is Implemented by the consortium of International Rescue Committee (IRC) and Plan International Ethiopia in partnership with the LEGO Foundation.



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Overview

This policy brief is informed by the outcomes of the National Conference on Play-based Learning (PbL) and the International Day of Play (IDoP) Celebration, held on June 10–11, 2025. The event was hosted by Kotebe University of Education (KUE) in collaboration with the PlayMatters Consortium—International Rescue Committee (IRC) and Plan International Ethiopia (PIE)—alongside other partners. The conference highlighted the importance of play as an active teaching and learning approach within Ethiopia’s Early Childhood Education system. The celebration was guided by the motto: “*Choose Play—Everyday*”.

The conference provided a national platform for education policymakers, researchers, academics, system actors, children, and development partners to collectively examine how PbL can be more effectively harnessed to enhance the quality, inclusive, and relevance of early learning, while strengthening children’s holistic development outcomes. The demonstrations, discussions, research presentations, and recommendations shared during the event form the basis of this policy brief.

This policy brief seeks to translate the insights generated from the conference into actionable, evidence-informed recommendations for Ethiopia’s Early Childhood Development and Education (ECDE) sector. Its objectives are to raise awareness among policymakers about the vital role of play in fostering holistic child development and lifelong learning, provide a strategic framework for implementers and educators to integrate play into early learning practices and support policy dialogue by aligning national priorities with coordinated global evidence. Ultimately, the brief seeks to bridge the research, policy, and practice by advocating for the integration of Play-based learning to enhance the equality of early childhood education.

The National Conference on Play-based Learning, held in conjunction with the International Day of Play celebrations, convened a wide range of voices and expertise. Through scientific research presentations, inspiring keynote addresses, and dynamic stakeholder discussions, the event highlighted key achievements that underscore the transformative power of play in advancing holistic learning and child development. These outcomes demonstrate a collective commitment to embedding play-based learning within Ethiopia’s Early Childhood Education sector and provide a strong foundation for actionable policies and practices.

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Major Observations

Proven Benefits of Play-based Learning: Neuroscientific evidence affirmed that play significantly enhances children’s cognitive, emotional, and social development. It stimulates brain regions associated with memory, problem-solving, empathy, and emotional regulation—promoting holistic growth and equipping children with critical life skills such as resilience, motor coordination, and communication.

Policy-Practice Congruence: Despite strong national and global endorsements of Play-based Learning, its application in Ethiopian classrooms remains limited, inconsistent, and often superficial. Policy frameworks such as the ECDE Strategy lack clear implementation tools and are constrained in addressing teacher capacity and resource needs. A fundamental disconnection persists between the official value placed on play and its practical understanding and use by educators. Furthermore, systemic challenges exacerbate this issue, as governments may often be constrained to provide the essential infrastructure, and resources to sustain and scale these vital learning approaches.

Cultural Contexts and Play Resources: Local games and culturally embedded play practices offer a powerful, low-cost foundation for learning. However, many schools lack culturally responsive pedagogy. Evidence shows that integrating local language, symbols, and games boosts engagement, numeracy, and comprehension—highlighting a missed opportunity for equity and relevance in early education.

Pedagogical Implementation of Play-based Learning: It is often narrowly implemented through teacher-led, outcome-driven activities (“play on the child”), while child-initiated explorations (“Play by the Child”) and guided, interactive play (“Play with the Child”) are underused. Research calls for a shift toward more balanced, meaningful play experiences that promote creativity, autonomy, and collaborative problem-solving.

Teacher Training as a Catalyst for Change: Targeted training significantly improves educators’ ability to implement learning through play. Skilled teachers apply more balanced, inclusive, and context-responsive approaches in play. When paired with strong school leadership, training directly contributes to improved learning outcomes, especially in early grades.

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Play-based Learning in Emergency and Crisis Contexts: In emergency settings, PbL supports children's emotional recovery by creating safe, and nurturing environments. Context-specific tools—such as localized and trauma-sensitive multi-media content have proven effective in helping children heal, learn, and adapt, even under the most challenging conditions. Despite the growing interest in PbL and the strengths above, multiple systemic and practical **barriers** were raised, hindering PbL's effective adoption and scalability. These challenges can be categorized into five key areas:

- i. **Policy Gaps and Weak Institutional Frameworks:** Current policy frameworks lack clear operational guidance for implementing PbL in Pre-Primary and Primary Education. The 2023 ECDE Policy, for example, offers limited support for classroom-level integration of play. PbL principles are also poorly embedded in teacher training programs and infrastructure standards. This disconnects between policy and practice results in insufficient support for educators and weak national commitment to embedding play into the formal curriculum.
- ii. **Conceptual and Scientific Ambiguities:** Educators and policymakers face persistent conceptual paradoxes, such as play as a goal vs a means, structure vs. freedom, teacher control vs. child agency, cultural relevance vs global standards, and traditional vs digital games. These unresolved incongruities complicate curriculum design, instructional delivery, and consensus-building across education systems.
- iii. **Public Misconceptions and Low Awareness:** Misunderstandings about the value of play are widespread. Many parents and administrators still view play as unproductive or irrelevant to academic success. This perception leads to resistance against PbL and pressure on teachers to prioritize traditional, teacher-directed instruction.
- iv. **Professional Gaps and Malpractices:** Many educators are unfamiliar with PbL methods due to limited training and professional development. Common malpractices include overreliance on free play without facilitation, minimal child participation, poor classroom organization, and inadequate use of culturally relevant materials. These gaps not only reduce PbL's effectiveness but also reinforce inequalities, particularly affecting rural areas, girls, and children with disabilities.
- v. **Administrative and Logistical Constraints:** Implementation suffers from weak leadership, poor supervision, and inconsistent political commitment. These are compounded by large sized and overcrowded classrooms, shortages of safe, inclusive and stimulating learning environment, low teacher motivation and capacity, and fragmented stakeholder collaboration. The lack of coordinated efforts across government sectors, NGOs, and educational institutions undermines the sustainability and scalability of PbL programs.

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While significant barriers to implementing play-based learning have been identified, evidence from the conference emphasizes that these challenges can be effectively addressed by leveraging existing **opportunities** within the education system. The following major opportunities present a pathway to overcoming these barriers and further strengthening achievements in play-based learning.

- i. **Strong Government Commitment:** The Ministry of Education (MoE) and Regional Education Bureaus (REBs) are actively committed to integrating learning through play into early learning. The ECDE Policy Framework, Pre-primary education teacher training strategies, in-service training modules, piloted curricula, and new national teacher guides and workbooks explicitly reflect this commitment. Furthermore, refugee education policies increasingly support the use of PbL in displacement settings.
- ii. **Cultural Alignment and Community Practices:** Play is deeply rooted in Ethiopian culture. Local games using natural materials (e.g., stones, sticks, & sand) are widely practiced and offer a cost-effective, scalable foundation for PbL. These culturally relevant practices bridge home and school environments, enabling equity in learning. Parents, elders, and community leaders are key partners and knowledge holders in this space.
- iii. **Expanding Partnerships and Platforms:** Collaborative efforts among government bodies, NGOs, and academic institutions are growing. National and international events such as the International Day of Play, Open Days (Teachers' Day, Literacy Day), and educational conferences serve as platforms to advocate for and promote PbL. The active role of higher education institutions in research and evidence generation further supports scaling efforts.
- iv. **Global Alignment and Policy Support:** Play-based learning aligns with global conventions on children's rights. The recognition of play as a fundamental right by the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, and the recent endorsement of June 11 as the International Day of Play, create strong advocacy opportunities to elevate PbL in national agendas.
- v. **Scientific Evidence:** Research from various impact studies demonstrates the significant benefits of PbL on children's holistic development and learning outcomes. In Ethiopia context Learning through Play proves effective even in contexts of conflict and crisis. Impact evaluation study indicates that the PlayMatters program has significantly strengthened teaching quality, enhanced children's learning outcomes, and improved social-emotional skills and wellbeing in Ethiopia's Somali region. The impacts are broad and substantial: teachers demonstrated major gains in instructional practices, classroom management, and student engagement, while children achieved large improvements in numeracy and social-emotional learning, alongside moderate gains in literacy and overall wellbeing.

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Call to Action

Building on these achievements, the conference articulated a clear call for action to accelerate the integration of Play-based learning within Ethiopia's ECDE sector. These recommendations are structured into four thematic areas: redesigning policies to embed play as a core principle, strengthening policy implementation for effective practice, generating further evidence through rigorous research, and driving advocacy priorities to sustain momentum and stakeholder engagement.

Call for Policy Redesign

Integration in Operational Tools: PbL must be sufficiently incorporated into ECDE policies, strategies, standards, curricula, and lesson plans. Ministry of Education needs to revise the 2023 ECDE Policy Framework to offer concrete guidance on how to conceptualize PbL and put it into strategic operation. ECDE standards need to set out minimum quality indicators for play based materials and spaces need to be defined in the ECDE standards. Strategies need to explicitly articulate how local games, stories, and cultural contents should be integrated into the ECDE curriculum design.

Balanced Play Approaches: The operational tools that the Ministry of Education develops need to promote both child-led and adult-guided play. Play-based assessment tools should also accompany the curriculum and teacher guide to help teachers properly monitor children's holistic learning.

Inclusive Scope of Integration: Colleges of Teacher Education in Ethiopia should embed learning through play in the pre-service teacher education program, continuous teacher professional development initiatives, and technology devices that are accessible to teachers like smart phones to foster holistic, inclusive, crisis-responsive, and transitional learning for diverse learners.

Legislative Support: The Ethiopian government should legally mandate children's right to play by requiring minimum playtime, resources, and dedicated spaces not only in preschools but also in community settings. Local production of play materials should be incentivized.

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Call for Improvement of Policy Implementation

A phased systemic shift is needed to improve policy implementation—focusing on cultural change, teacher capacity, participatory governance, and accountability. This includes curbing unrealistic planning, addressing misreporting, and developing practical tools for implementation. Key actionable areas include:

- **Implementation Frameworks:** The Federal Ministry of Education needs to develop detailed implementation manuals of learning through play outlining classroom practices, teacher roles, and material use.
- **Governance and Institutional Structures:** The Federal Ministry of Education needs to institute governance structure and strengthen coordination across federal, regional, woreda and school levels with integrated leadership and participatory ECDE-community partnerships.
- **Capacity Building:** Non-Governmental organizations like IRC and Plan need to support the scale up of training for teachers, administrators, and community leaders on Pbl strategies, especially using local materials.
- **Logistics and Play-Based Resources:** The Ethiopian Government should prioritize budget allocations for affordable, locally sourced, and culturally relevant play materials. Flexibility in daily school schedules should allow for more frequent child-led play. Investment in teacher training must focus on culturally responsive pedagogy and game-based learning. Classrooms should be improved through better layouts, appropriate furniture, and adherence to minimum standards for play resources. Where possible, reduce teacher-child ratios, especially in urban settings, and adopt Pbl models suited to large classes. Safe, inclusive play spaces must be developed both at school and community levels.
- **Collaboration and Partnership:** Effective Pbl requires strong collaboration among government, communities, parents and partners. Stakeholders should be engaged through awareness campaigns, joint play activities, and inclusive planning. Regional Education Bureaus must integrate Pbl into early grade curricula, while community members—including artists and elders—can contribute traditional games and cultural content. Strengthening teacher training and continuous learning is essential. Gender-sensitive workshops and community-driven initiatives promote cultural authenticity and shared ownership.

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- **Implementation for Impact:** To ensure lasting impact, PbL must be implemented through consistent, evidence-based, and collaborative practices. Community engagement using asset-based approaches fosters ownership and sustainability. Continued gender-responsive workshops and local programming support positive parenting and long-term early childhood development.
- **Model Centers for Scaling Up:** PlayMatters, Right-to-Play and others be involved in developing model centers to showcase best practices, pilot innovations, and support scale-up. These demonstration sites can host exhibitions, peer learning, and networking events. All initiatives must involve community input to ensure authentic cultural representation and avoid superficial portrayals.
- **Monitoring and Accountability:** Ministry of Education needs to establish a robust monitoring and accountability system to track progress, assess impact, and guide improvements. This includes setting clear targets, collecting regular feedback from stakeholders, ensuring transparency in decision-making and resource use, and making data-driven adjustments to sustain effectiveness.

Call for Generating Further Evidence through Rigorous Research

The conference emphasized the urgent need for rigorous, context-sensitive research to strengthen Play-based learning. Key priorities suggested for researchers in Kotebe University of Education, Addis Ababa University and others include:

- **Evidence Generation:** Conduct systematic reviews and longitudinal studies to assess the long-term impact and sustainability of PbL, especially using local evidence.
- **Local Play Resource Mapping:** Urgently document and map traditional games, stories, and songs-linking them to developmental domains and curriculum outcomes (e.g., foundational numeracy).
- **Cultural Relevance:** Test and refine context-appropriate PbL models over imported approaches, ensuring alignment with Ethiopia's diverse sociocultural settings.
- **Inclusive Practices:** Explore effective PbL strategies across varied settings-urban, rural, and emergency contexts-and for children of different abilities, promoting culturally responsive and inclusive pedagogy.
- **Implementation Research:** Examine how ECDE and PbL policies are enacted at regional and school levels, moving beyond isolated case studies to identify scalable, evidence-based practices.

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Call for Advocacy Priorities

Effective advocacy is essential to address misconceptions—such as play being merely recreational or academically unproductive—and to clarify misunderstandings that hinder the full integration of learning through play in Ethiopia’s education system. Accordingly, PlayMatters, Right-to-Play and other organizations are then expected to join hands with the mainstream media in Ethiopia to work on key advocacy strategies that include:

- **Combat Misconceptions:** Use diverse communication platforms (radio, mobile, community events) to reshape public perceptions and promote play as a serious, evidence-based pedagogical tool.
- **Parental Engagement:** Organize school and Woreda-led workshops targeting parents, particularly those with limited formal education, to raise awareness of Pbl’s developmental benefits.
- **Celebrate Local Knowledge:** Launch culturally grounded campaigns that validate indigenous practices as meaningful learning tools and connect families to the educational value of play.
- **Promote Culturally Responsive Methods:** Share local and global evidence on how game-based, inclusive approaches enhance engagement and academic outcomes.
- **Community Collaboration:** Encourage families, communities, and local leaders to co-create educational materials that reflect their values and culture, reinforcing their roles as co-educators in children’s early learning.

In summary, Play-based Learning (Pbl) is gaining momentum in Ethiopia’s Early Childhood Development and Education (ECDE) sector. The recent National Play-based Learning Conference and IDoP, hosted by Kotebe University of Education with PlayMatters Ethiopia and Right to Play—have reinforced its importance by surfacing key insights and policy priorities. The event, featuring exhibitions, speeches, and research presentations, highlighted Pbl as a vital approach to early education while surfacing key policy concerns. Although progress has been made in expanding Pbl across Pre-primary and Primary Education settings, challenges remain due to gaps in operational tools and weak implementation practices. To address these, this policy brief emphasized the need for contextually grounded strategies, stronger integration of Pbl into ECDE frameworks, enhanced advocacy and awareness, improved implementation capacity, and robust evidence generation to guide future reforms.

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National level IDOP celebration at Kotebe University of Education,

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