

**URBAN PARENTS' VIEWS ON PLAY AS A TOOL FOR CHILDREN'S EMOTIONAL
EXPRESSION**

By

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A thesis submitted to BRAC Institute of Educational Development in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of
Master of Science in Early Childhood Development

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Declaration

It is hereby declared that

1. The thesis submitted is my original work while completing degree at BRAC University.
2. The thesis does not contain material previously published or written by a third party, except where this is appropriately cited through full and accurate referencing.
3. The thesis does not contain material which has been accepted, or submitted, for any other degree or diploma at a university or other institution.
4. I have acknowledged all main sources of help.

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Approval

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Ethics Statement

Title of Thesis Topic: Urban Parents' Views on Play as a Tool for Children's Emotional Expression

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1. Source of population: Parents having children ages 3-5 years, living in Dhaka.
 - a) Physical risk to the subjects -no
 - b) Social risk-no
 - c) Psychological risk to subjects -no
 - d) discomfort to subjects-no
 - e) Invasion of privacy-no
3. Will subjects be clearly informed about (yes or no)
 - a) Nature and purpose of the study-yes
 - b) Procedures to be followed-yes
 - c) Physical risk-yes
 - d) Sensitive questions-yes
 - e) Benefits to be derived-yes
 - f) Right to refuse to participate or to withdraw from the study-yes
 - g) Confidential handling of data-yes
 - h) Compensation and/or treatment where there are risks or privacy is involved-yes
4. Will Signed verbal consent for be required (yes or no)
 - a) from study participants-yes
 - b) from parents or guardian -yes
 - c) Will precautions be taken to protect anonymity of subjects? -yes
5. Check documents being submitted herewith to Committee:
 - a) Proposal-yes
 - b) Consent Form-yes
 - c) Questionnaire or interview schedule-yes

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Executive Summary

One of the natural ways through which children communicate, learn and express their everyday experiences is play. Although the developmental benefits of play are broadly acknowledged, little is known regarding the use of play to support children's emotional expression in Bangladeshi context. Thus, this study was undertaken to explore the urban parents' views of play as a tool or medium for children's (3-5 years) emotional expression and identify the factors that influence parents' use of play to support children's emotional expression.

The qualitative study was conducted in some urban areas of Dhaka city with purposely selected participants (both father and mother) and followed in-depth interviews and focused group discussion methods to collect and analyze data. The study found that all the participants had a basic understanding of play and they recognised its significance for children's holistic development. Moreover, the participating parents also acknowledged that children naturally express emotions during play. However, despite being aware, the majority of the participants reported that they do not intentionally use play to teach children about emotions and promote emotional expression. This indicated a gap between urban parents' knowledge and practice.

The findings further showed several barriers to play, including lack of time due to busy life, limited free spaces and increased screen time among children. Parents also perceived that urban life's competitive nature restricts children's emotional expression and creativity. The study recommended that intentional play-based parenting practices should be encouraged for facilitating children's emotional expression and contextual barriers that limit opportunities for children's emotional growth should be addressed.

Keywords: Play; Free play; Expressive play; Emotional Expression; Parental views; Urban life

Dedication

I would like to dedicate this thesis firstly, to my younger self who once discovered countless unspoken emotions. This work is a tribute to that little child Asfina and her belief that every child's emotion deserved to be heard, valued and nurtured.

Secondly, I also dedicate this work to my beloved niece Inara Akram, whose play activities and genuine emotional expression, for the first time captured my attention to do my thesis on this topic.

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List of Acronyms

ECD	Early Childhood Development
ZPD	Zone of Proximal Development
IPA	International Play Association
ITLA	International Toy Library Association
ECE	Early Childhood Education
CRC	Convention on the Rights of the Child
ECCD	Early Childhood Care and Development
ECCE	Early Childhood Care and Education
SEL	Social-Emotional Learning
Icddr,b	International Centre for Diarrhoeal Disease Research, Bangladesh
IDI	In-depth Interview
FGD	Focused Group Discussion

Chapter I: Introduction & Background

Introduction

Play is a voluntary activity that allows children to explore their environment with enjoyableness, flexibility and active engagement. Play also helps children to express their emotions. According to Vygotsky, through play children create imaginary situations and act in their everyday behavior that supports emotional as well as cognitive development (1987). One of the first philosophers who discussed play was Plato (427-347 BC). Plato stated that "... the future builder must play at building... and those who have the care of their education should provide them when young with mimic tools" (Lascarides & Hinitz, 2002). Plato believed that to understand the human's role in the world we have to understand play.

However, different play theorists defined play differently. For some theorists, play is fun which occurs naturally. Sluss (2004) identified some key characteristics of play such as play is voluntary which requires active involvement; play is symbolic; it is free from external rules; it focuses on action rather than outcome and play is pleasurable. Maurice Lazarus (1883) Recreation theory stated that through play children restore their energy level. Theorists like Sigmund Freud (1856-1939) and Melanie Klein (1932) also gave importance to play as a support for helping children deal with emotional challenges which is seen in Play therapy. For children who are affected by trauma play-based interventions offer a therapeutic outlet to process distressing experiences (John & Russ, 2025). Moreover, play therapy techniques such as sand tray or playing with dolls help children to externalize their emotions symbolically which helps the caregivers or therapists to understand children's inner emotions and help them to label and manage difficult feelings (Landreth, 2012). Landreth "also added that play serves as an important medium through which

young children explore emotions, practice social interactions and develop problem- solving capabilities”.

Moreover, Erikson in his theory stated that play is a significant tool for a child to develop his/her sense of identity and autonomy (Erikson, 1950). Children develop a sense of self-confidence through play. Vygotsky in his socio-cultural theory highlighted the social aspects of play. According to him play contributes to internalizing social norms and values in children (Vygotsky, 1978). Moreover, Vygotsky introduced the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD). In ZPD play can contribute as a tool for scaffolding a child’s learning process. Piaget also believed that play is a crucial tool for children’s cognitive development (Piaget, 1962). According to Piaget’s view, “play does not lead to further cognitive development, it reflects the level of cognitive development that has been attained” (Saracho, 1995). Pioneers such as the German educator, Friedrich Froebel (1782-1852), the Swiss educator, Johann Heinrich Pestalozzi (1746-1827), and the Italian educator Maria Montessori (1870-1952) believed in the importance of play in children's early years (Saracho & Spodek, 1995). In Froebel’s Kindergarten system play is used as an important medium for children’s education. Even, Montessori method is also based on the observation of children’s play activities.

However, play also became a political agenda for instance, the Council of the European Union promised to create awareness and change attitudes towards children’s play (Cohen, 2019). The International Play Association (IPA), in Latin which is “Ludemos” meaning “we shall play” and the International Toy Library Association (ITLA) recommended national and international policy changes regarding play hence play became politically correct (Cohen, 2019).

Apart from that, play is a crucial tool for understanding children and learning about them by observing what and how they are playing (Landreth, 1987). Not only that, play is also used as a

tool in psychotherapy for children with a view to understanding children's emotions, challenges and unexpressed feelings. As play allows children to communicate their feelings, to think and solve problems (Anderson-McNamee & Bailey, 2010).

Moreover, play is a crucial element for early childhood development. As we know early childhood is the utmost important time for children as it is the stepping-stone of developmental domains such as physical, cognitive, social, emotional and language. Research shows that 75% of brain development occurs after birth and play helps to stimulate the brain development (Anderson-McNamee & Bailey, 2010). Furthermore, play is crucial in early childhood education. Play-based learning has been described as a teaching approach where child directed elements along with some adult guidance and scaffolded learning objectives are involved (Weisnerg, Hirsh-Pasek, et al., 2013). Play gives a natural setting for learning because it is fun, creates curiosity among children and meaningfully supports concept development (Sarker & Rahman, 2020). Play is very important and should be the centre of preschool education because of its socio-emotional, cognitive and linguistic development benefits (Hirsh-Pasek et al., 2009). Also, play plays a crucial role in expressing children's everyday experiences of life and strengthens their imagination as well as creativity. For instance, expressive play which help children to express their feelings and parents can use in this play, materials such as crayons, colored pencils, clay, doll etc. to understand children's emotional expression (Anderson-McNamee & Bailey, 2010). Pretend play helps children to enhance the development of creative thinking and self-control (Singer & Singer, 2005). Bateson (1955), Garvey (1977), Corsaro (1986) and Farver (1992) have contributed in the Communication theory where they stated that "Communication theory views play as necessary for communication purposes because specific communication occurs during play which cannot be

occurred outside of play” (Sluss). Play offers children opportunities to develop social conversations and innovative problem-solving skills (Pyle & Bigelow, 2015).

Apart from that, play is a bridge or connection between children and their parents because through play a child can connect with his/her parents and create strong bonds. Thus, play is a significant medium of communication for children with their parents and surroundings. Therefore, it is obligatory to understand the importance of play as a tool for children’s emotional expression.

Statement of the Problem

Play contributes not only in children’s physical, cognitive development but also emotional expression and regulation thus it is known as the fundamental aspect of child development. Moreover, play is recognized as an important component of child development however there are significant gaps in focusing its role as a medium for emotional expression, specifically within the context of urban Bangladesh and perceptions of parents regarding this. Research on child development focusing on play in Bangladesh has mostly focused on the educational or developmental benefits of play. For instance, one research conducted in Bangladesh highlighted the importance of play-based learning in early childhood education and suggested the government policy formulation and stakeholders’ engagement would be effective for establishing play-based learning in ECE (Alam, 2022). Another study viewed play as the significant tool for children to acquire crucial knowledge and skills through active participation (Mallick & Popy, 2024). Moreover, Ahmed & Sohail in their study focused on the perceptions of children in Dhaka city regarding their play spaces and found out that most of the children are excluded from the play and recreation facilities due to lack of security, poor maintenance and inadequate play facilities and accessories (2008). However, research also done in Bangladesh regarding the importance of play for Rohingya children. For instance, one paper particularly highlighted father’s perceptions of

child play from the Rohingya camps of Cox's Bazar and showed how play is helpful for children to cope with the new environment (Zahra, Sunny, et al., 2026). There is much more research on the importance of play in Bangladeshi context which is discussed in the literature review part of this study. While all these studies recognize that play is very important during early years of a child's life however, the studies do not investigate the importance of play particularly as a medium for a child's expression or sharing emotions. Moreover, there is limited research which addresses or mentions emotional development through play. However, much Western literature gave importance to play that enables children to express their feelings, deal with anxiety and process trauma. We see First world countries like the UK, USA, Canada use play in clinical settings (e.g., play therapy). For instance, one study showed how beneficial therapeutic play is for children during admission to hospital (Aranha, Souza, et al., 2020). Guerney and Stover's seminal research established the foundation for convincing the clinicians and funders in North America regarding Filial Therapy where parents could be trained to sufficiently high levels of competence to recognize emotional changes in their children (1971). In addition, in filial therapy parents are trained to use play as a tool to observe and understand children's emotions, feelings. It also strengthens the parent-child relationship (Ryan, 2007). However, many people in our country view play as just recreation or 'free time activity' rather than perceive play as 'developmental necessity'. Many even do not know play can be a source of children's emotional expression. Thus, opportunities for children to use play as a medium for emotional expression is reduced. However, there is limited research in the context of urban areas located in Bangladesh examining the perception of parents particularly on play as a tool for emotional expression. This creates a gap to understand whether urban parents in Bangladesh recognize play as a medium for children to express their emotions such as fear, anxiety, trauma, anger etc. Moreover, in urban areas in

Bangladesh for instance Dhaka, limited open space, academic pressure, rapidly growing use of digital devices have crucially impacted children's play experiences. Thus, it is important to note that, without having data or knowledge regarding parent's views, beliefs on play, it is not possible to design or develop proper child development programs or educational policies which emphasize play-based healthy emotional development. Thus, this study seeks to explore parents' understanding of play as a tool for emotional expression of children ages 3-5 years in Dhaka, addressing contemporary knowledge and understanding of play as a medium for emotional expression.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study is to explore urban parents' perception of play for children's (ages 3-5 years) emotional expression. This study aims to know parents' understanding of children's play and their views towards how play can be used as expressing children's emotion. Moreover, this study delved into the challenges faced by parents to support children's play activities with a view to understanding children's emotion or feelings.

Significance and Justification of the Study

This study is justified on the basis of several significant grounds. For instance, emotional regulation is very crucial for mental health during childhood. Many people in Bangladesh do not even know or understand that children also have mental health to be taken care of. In a country like Bangladesh where the significance of 'mental health' is still emerging, understanding play as a tool for early emotional development can be an effective initiative to promote mental health strategies. Moreover, as a signatory of the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) Bangladesh is committed to improve the status of children of the country. In CRC's article number 31, it is clearly stated that "Every child has the right 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” (1989). The Early Childhood Care and Development (ECCD) policy 2013 in Bangladesh also emphasizes supporting children from birth to age 8 in terms of health, nutrition, education, protection and holistic development. One of the missions of ECCD is to “strengthen the capacity of parents, caregivers, community and other service providers to enable them to create a developmentally appropriate and stable environment for children” (*Comprehensive Early Childhood Care and Development*, 2013). As this policy promotes supporting parents with proper parenting skills and knowledge to help their children develop to their full potential, play can be an important tool for building parent-child interaction and development. Furthermore, early theorists even conceptualized play as therapeutic, a sensory experience and contributor to children’s socio-emotional development (Freud, 1920; Montessori, 1897; Vygotsky, 1929). Studies found that the formation of secure attachment happens when parents actively play with their children in early years. The value of play is significantly recognized by researchers within the policy arena and they highlighted the importance of play, its relationship with intellectual achievement and emotional wellbeing (Whitebread, 2012). Children’s playfulness is strongly related to cognitive development and emotional wellbeing. Moreover, play has a significant importance in brain development. As we know, the human brain is only about 25% completed at birth and 75% of the brain development occurs after birth (McNamee & Bailey, 2010). The experiences children go through during early years have profound impacts on shaping their brain structure. A child who does a wide range of recreational activities, actively engages in different types of play, his/her brain develops uniquely and richly (Bergen). One study found that most children during a pre-school environment find it difficult to adjust to the new setting because of the lack of emotional self-regulation skills in children (Shin, et al., 2023). It also highlights the importance of enhancing children’s emotional

development. Play is a great component of early childhood education programs which leads to better learning and developmental outcomes (O’Keefe, Lehrer & Harwood, 2016). One study found that in Bangladesh, recently educational institutions prioritize experimental learning and play-based activities to enhance children’s cognitive, social and motor development (Mallick & Begum, 2024). However, there is another importance of play which is helping a child to express their emotions. Children can communicate their feelings through play as they cannot properly communicate their feelings or emotions verbally like adults. Moreover, developmental psychology now gives importance to play as it provides a safe environment for children to explore emotions. Free play allows children to gain skills that are crucial for their holistic development. For instance, one study investigated the role of free play in enhancing a child’s emotional development during childhood and suggested that free play can facilitate the development of emotional intelligence, resilience, emotional expression and coping strategies (Ahmed, Khan & Mehmood, 2023). According to Batra, it is important to give children a secure environment where they can experience certain autonomy and this can be done through free play that allows children to foster their emotional growth (2013). Landreth (2012) in his book *Play Therapy: The Art of Relationship* stated that “children can express their emotions non-verbally through free play which allows them to express feelings that are difficult to put into words”. Research also gives importance to the supportive role of both caregivers and teachers in nurturing emotional expression during play. For instance, Pyle and Daniels highlighted the significance of close monitoring of children during free play and later developed a reflection of children’s emotional expression (2017). Because through free play children convey their feelings independently which may seem irrelevant from outside but if effectively observed, children express their inner emotions through non-verbal engagement.

Thus, play is a significant tool for improving children's emotional development (San, Myint & Oo, 2021).

This study is justified because children's emotional health or wellbeing is as significant as their physical, cognitive and language development or academic success, yet remains comparatively less explored in the context of Bangladesh. While play has so many benefits in the lives of children which has been recognized, play's role particularly as a tool for children's emotional expression is not sufficiently acknowledged by many parents in Bangladesh. Thus, parent's perception will provide significant insights in this field so that effective culturally appropriate parenting programs and interventions for the importance of play for children's emotional expression can be designed. Currently it is seen that, most of the parents in urban areas are working parents. As a result, they cannot give proper quality time to their children. Consequently, most of the children of working parents feel lonely and they feel confused expressing their emotions. Thus, this research will be beneficial for informing the working parents about the importance of their involvement in play with their children to understand children's feelings and emotions. Moreover, this study will explore how parents perceive the role of play regarding their children's emotional development and how they observe and involve their children in play-based activities. Nonetheless, the findings of this study will play a crucial role in contributing deeper understanding of the value of play through which children express their feelings, manage emotions. It will also create observable impact on parental views on play. Because there are several research studies that delve into the importance of play, its effects on early learning and communication, physical and cognitive development. However, most existing literature or research focusing on emotional expression through play are found through Western contexts where concepts like Play Therapy, Filial Therapy are more established. Less studies have found which explores specifically the role of play as a tool

for children's emotional expression in Bangladeshi context. Therefore, this study is necessary to understand the perspective of parents, more specifically the urban parents regarding play as a tool for children's (3-5 years) emotional expression. The age range (3-5) represents a critical developmental stage for instance, at this age children are still developing verbal skills thus they cannot properly express or articulate complex emotions like jealousy, anxiety, fear or anger etc. Thus, play becomes a medium to express emotions as play is children's natural language. Moreover, parents having 3-5years children are typically mostly involved in children's daily routine including play activities thus play is often co-participated by parents. As a result, this study will give parents more understanding regarding how play reflects the emotions of children. Furthermore, this study will provide evidence on the ways play can be a tool for children's emotional expression through parents' perspective. Parental perceptions and the findings may reveal whether parents recognize play as a medium for children's emotional expression or they see play just as "play". In addition, the findings of the study can be used in further research to contribute to early childhood development, developmental psychology in the context of Bangladesh. It will also incorporate important information which will be beneficial for educators and policy makers to integrate emotionally supportive play environments in schools, homes and communities.

Research Questions

1. How do parents in urban areas perceive the role of play in children's emotional expression?
2. How do parents use play in their daily life with their children to support emotional expression?
3. What factors influence parents' use of play to support children's emotional expression?

Operational Definition

Play: “Play is the child’s natural medium of self-expression” (Axline,1947).

Free Play: “Free play is child-driven, voluntary and undertaken for its own sake, not for external rewards” (Ginsburg, 2007).

Emotional Expression: It refers to the ways through which children express their emotions for instance happiness, anger, fear, sadness etc. through verbal or non-verbal actions.

Parents: In this study, a biological father or mother will be regarded as a parent.

Parental View: Parental views refer to parents’ understanding or beliefs, interpretations.

Phenomenological Study: In this case, parents’ lived experience of observing their children engage in play.

Chapter II: Literature Review

For review of the literature, firstly, the importance of play during early childhood has been focused. Secondly, the global exploration of play and lastly the Bangladeshi scenario of play has been concentrated.

The Role of Play in Early Childhood Development

Play is not just a fun activity for children it also helps to foster children’s physical, cognitive, language and socio-emotional development. Play serves multiple functions in child development however psychologists placed exclusive emphasis on the contributions of play to children’s emotional development and social learning (Sutton-Smith, 1967). For instance, dramatic play helps to promote social and emotional development in children because it allows children to connect and imitate within their social worlds (Edmiston, 2013). Moreover, emotional development is an important aspect of children’s well-being and healthy growth (Akiriza, 2025). Through play children express their feelings more easily whether it is joy, frustration or empathy.

For instance, through imaginative or role-play a child can understand the emotions of others and learn how to regulate their own emotions. Play plays a crucial part in children's social development. Children can engage in different social situations through play. For instance, in cooperative play children develop an awareness of group dynamics and learn when it is their turn and how to listen to others (Akiriza, 2025). Kristina, Kasim, Putri & Nurliani (2026) in their study found that play significantly enhances children's critical thinking (by 40%), problem-solving ability (by 38%), creativity (by 42%) and play also helps children to express feelings, manage stress and build resilience with emotional stability improving by 32%. In addition to that, the study found out, physical activities within play improve children's health with gross motor skills increasing by 45% and fine motor skills by 50%. Moreover, physical play offers a chance for children to exercise and develop muscle strength (McNamee & Bailey, 2010). Play also offers children the ability to master skills that will help them developing self-confidence and to be creative. Apart from that, play contributes to children's cognitive development in many ways. It helps children to develop imaginary and memory which is crucial for thinking about past, present and future (Sittar, 2016). Play also helps children to feel more curious to explore new things new ideas. Play in early childhood education is very crucial. Studies have shown that play gives a safe environment to young learners where they can practice and experience a variety of life-skills including problem solving within a peer group while gaining language skills. Even neuroscientists and play scholars gave important emphasis on the link between brain development and play during early years and it is being found out that high quality play quickly increases neurons' connections at a significant rate (Angier, 1992). Bodrova & Leong (2003) in their study highlighted that play helps to build the foundation that are very crucial for school success and beyond for children.

Moreover, during play interactions and communication enhances language and vocabulary development (Huttenlocher et al, 2010).

Global Exploration of Play

One study examined whether the emotional intelligence of children (ages 5-6 years) differs according to the frequency of outdoor play and it is found that, the frequency of children's outdoor play is positively associated with the type of residence and accessibility of outdoor play areas (Senoz & Kol, 2025). That means outdoor play has a great impact on children's emotional intelligence. Another study in Zambia concentrated on the effectiveness of play based learning as a pedagogical approach for increasing skills development for ECE learners and concluded that when traditional games used in play-based learning, it increased the acquisition of social skills such as resilience, self-esteem, self-confidence, cooperation in children (Mwinsa & Dagada, 2025). However, a qualitative study of South African preschool teachers found that structured play has a great impact on enhancing executive function skills and play-based strategies are effective in different learning environments (Etokabeka, 2024). In a Turkish study about self-regulation and play, it was found that Turkish children's specifically the preschooler's reticence behavior, solidarity play and social play are moderated by executive function and emotion regulation (Hamamcı & Dagal, 2022). The study also suggested that in terms of children's sex, there are crucial differences in children's executive function, parallel play, rough and tumble play (Hamamcı & Dagal, 2022). Another study focused on 331 African American preschool children with a view to examining the stability of their peer play behavior and the relations between emotion regulation, receptive vocabulary and the trajectory of social competence deficits and it was found that children who showed stable maladaptive behavior had lower receptive language skills and emotion regulation than children who showed consistently adaptive behavior (Cohen &

Mendez, 2009). However, in research from Galyer and Evans (2001) conducted in Switzerland, which focused on the effects of pretend play-based training designed to promote socio-emotional competences in 5-6 years old Swiss children found that children who got the training showed significant improvements in the ability to understand emotions than the control group who did not receive the training. Another study was done in Tehran, the capital city of Iran focusing on the effectiveness of play therapy on improving executive functions and cognitive emotion regulation in children with ADHD and it was found that after the intervention there was a significant difference between the experimental group and control group in cognitive emotional regulation and strategies of positive refocus (Roghani, Peymani & Jadidi, 2022). However, children and adolescents can communicate their feelings, emotions through play. Thus, many schools in western countries provide an effective setting for play therapy in various ways (Trice-Black, Bailey & Kiper Riechel, 2013). Moreover, play therapy is developmentally appropriate for children having counselling because play is the natural language of children through which they communicate their emotions, experiences (Ray, Armstrong, Warren & Balkin, 2005). Moreover, Bodrova, Leong & Yudina in their study highlighted the importance of play in social-emotional learning (SEL) interventions in children's lives (2023). Another study conducted in Pakistan highlighted the importance of free play and stated that "free play can facilitate the development of emotional intelligence, resilience, emotional expression and coping strategies (Ahmed, Khan & Mehmood, 2023). McNally and O'keeffe also focused on the importance of play in the context of Ireland and they particularly studied the children's perspective regarding play and stated that "play is significantly valued by children with important implications for educational and care practices, in particular with regards to adult involvement in play" (2025). Apart from that another study suggested that play has a very significant role to play as a foundation of children's learning

and a vital component of physical therapy (Hakstad, Oberg, et al., 2025). Studies even showed that parents who lack the understanding of play in children's lives, they cannot play interactively with their children (Levenstein & O'hara, 1993). There is one study conducted in China which highlighted that Chinese parents give so much importance to play and they perceive it as valuable for children thus they engage as a partner with their children in play (Haight, Wang, Fung, Williams & Mintz, 1995). Grolnick & Ryan (1989) also added that parents' perceptions regarding play and their own self-efficacy can greatly impact a parent's level of involvement in play with their children.

Bangladeshi Scenario of Play

The global research studies on play are very wide and broad, however research studies specifically focusing on play within South Asian context particularly in Bangladesh is comparatively very limited. Because in Bangladesh, children's play is shaped by urbanization, gender norms, socio-cultural traditions also socio-economic conditions. Moreover, in Bangladesh, it revealed that the value of play as an early learning instrument depends on the socio-cultural, educational, political and economic factors of the society (Chowdhury & Rivalland, 2012). Therefore, analyzing play in the context of Bangladesh requires considering socio-cultural realities. One study was conducted in the Rohingya camps of Cox's Bazar focusing on Fathers engagement with children and their perceptions of play, it is found that fathers spend more time with their children after the forced-displacement and they are now actively observing their children's play, interaction with peers and play objects (Zahra et al., 2026). Another study focused on the significance of play-based learning on Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) within daycare settings in Bangladesh and suggested that play based activities have a great positive impact on not only in children's cognitive, social and language development but also in emotional development (Mallick

& Popy, 2024). Moreover, there are various research on the importance of play which delves into the benefits of play-based activities and play spaces in urban areas of Bangladesh. For instance, in Rajshahi city one study was conducted in 2025 where it was found out the lack of playgrounds and open spaces are leading children to play indoors, which creates negative effects on child development because outdoor play is very significant for children's holistic development (Frost & Sutterby, 2017). In another study, they focused on how in urban communities the use of digital technology by preschool children replaced traditional play activities. The results showed that half of the children use digital devices two hours in their daily life which affects their sleep disturbances (40.7%), behavioral issues like restlessness (49.6%) (Nath, Paul & Sayeda, 2024). ICDDRBR presented one report in 2024 which highlighted the importance of play-centered approaches for children's cognitive, language, behavioral and physical development (ICDDRBR, 2024). Further research on play as an instructional strategy revealed that pre-primary teachers viewed play as an instructional strategy positively and used the 'free play' and 'guided play' regularly in the classroom (Das & Diba, 2024). Moreover, play can be a great tool for learning vocabulary as well. One case study revealed that children learn foreign language vocabulary more effectively through play (Shirin, 2020). One research in Rajshahi focusing on children access to play and play environment found that because of direct benefits, children love to play active play however this study also highlighted some barriers in children's play such as lack of playgrounds, addiction to electronic games, study pressure, security issues also lack of siblings due to nuclear family (Mahmud). Alahee & Islam in their study focused on the play spaces within the evolving dwelling system of Dhaka city and its impacts on children's holistic development and wellbeing. It is found that play stimulates all developmental domains of ECD and urbanization is totally incomplete without play spaces and harmful for a child's development and wellbeing (2025). However, BRAC

Education Program organized an event focusing on play-based learning, inclusive education and psychosocial development of children and it was shared how play-based approaches to early learning readiness strengthen the socio-emotional development of children and improve the overall education quality (BRAC, 2025). Moreover, BRAC for quality and playful early childhood development, developed the Play Lab Model in 2015 in partnership with the LEGO Foundation and the main purpose of the play labs is to help children learn and heal through play (Play Lab Research Brief, 2021). Rani (2024) in her study focused on parents' understanding of their involvement in play and suggested that though parents acknowledge the importance of their involvement in play with their children, they find it difficult to do due to workload and everyday busy schedule. One study conducted in rural areas of Bangladesh where the findings showed that perceptions of rural mothers' regarding play is positive. They acknowledge that play helps in children's physical, cognitive, language development however, social, emotional and creativity development did not come into discussion despite asking probing questions (Ullah, 2010). Which suggests that rural parents lack the idea of play's importance in emotional development. Another study conducted on father's perceptions on involvement in physical play with their children during COVID 19 in Dhaka city and it was found that because of lockdown fathers got time to play with their children and it created a huge impact on parent-child relationship (Purba, 2021). Moreover, in Dhaka city play-based learning practices created a huge impact on learning outcome according to the perceptions of English medium teachers (Zaman, 2024). Apart from that, one study conducted in the Gulshan slum area regarding parental awareness of play-based learning suggested that it requires so much time investment and there is lack of play spaces and safety and security (Ayun, 2024). Another study reveals that while Bangladeshi parents acknowledge play as an important component for socio-emotional development, emotional expression, and confidence-

building, however many parents are unfamiliar with formal concepts such as “play pedagogy” (Pooja, 2025). Jahan (2021) in her study gave emphasis on community- based play centers in Dhaka city and highlighted that most of the parents understand that play is important for children’s language, cognitive, and brain development however, they gave less importance or neglected the part of emotional development through play. Moreover, one study conducted on working parents and their understanding of play and found out that working parents’ understand the significance of play in their child’s education however, they do not have proper knowledge on how to guide children for learning through play (Mou, 2023).

Thus, the existing literature in Bangladeshi context regarding play has highlighted the importance of play in developmental, social, cognitive, language domains and its importance in learning outcomes, however there remains a significant gap in understanding play as a tool for children’s emotional expression. This gap is particularly notable in Bangladeshi context because in Bangladesh research in children’s play is specifically limited and prioritized by educational and language outcome and less studies focus on emotional or expressive aspects of play.

Chapter III: Methodology

Research Approach and Design

This research used a qualitative approach specifically the phenomenological research approach. Phenomenological research is “a qualitative approach in which the researcher seeks to understand the essence of human experiences about a phenomenon as described by participants” (Creswell, 2013). As it is a perception- based research where the researcher wants to know parents’ perception regarding play as a tool for expressing children’s emotion, the phenomenological approach will be the appropriate method in this regard.

Research Site

This study was carried out in urban areas of Dhaka (e.g. Banasree, Khilgaon, Mugda, Gulshan, Dhanmondi).

Research Participants

Parents (both father and mother) having 3-5 years old children who live in Dhaka.

Participant Selection Procedure

The selection criteria included participants who were the biological parent or primary caregiver (mother or father) of a child, living in Dhaka. Moreover, the parent must have at least one child who is 3-5 years old. Also, the participant will be the parent who actively engages in play activities with his/her child.

Data Collection Method and Procedure

The study used qualitative data collection methods. All data were collected following an in-depth interview (IDI) method with 6 parents where 3 participants were mothers and 3 participants were fathers and in a focused group discussion (FGD) session with 8 parents, where 4 participants were mothers and 4 participants were fathers. Moreover, the time allocation for FGD was 1 hour 30 minutes and IDIs was approximately 45 minutes-1 hours approximately. For IDI and FGD semi-structured questionnaires were developed. However, in this study the purpose of IDIs was to find out parents' individual acknowledgement or understanding of play as a tool for children's emotional expression while FGD delved into the shared knowledge and beliefs among parents regarding play emphasizing on emotional expression and to figure out how urban lifestyle factors create barriers to opportunities for expressive play. It was the researcher's assumption that the findings would reveal a clear gap between parental understanding and actual practice.

Data Management and Analysis Plan

After the data collection process, data was checked thoroughly. Data from FGD and IDIs including the short notes were transcribed in detail with the recording very carefully. As the data was in Bangla language, the transcription was in Bangla form which later was translated into English. After that, the data was coded by coding techniques to identify themes which emerged from the data. Moreover, the data was coded and analyzed manually instead of using any qualitative data analysis software. In addition, reading and memoing were done carefully by the researcher to find out important themes. Lastly, thematic analysis was done with a view to finding out important areas of inquiry of the qualitative data findings.

Validity and Reliability of the Research Tool

After preparing the semi-structured questionnaires for IDI and FGD, it was translated and sent to the respected experts of BRAC IED for checking purposes. Moreover, to ensure the validity and reliability of the study, the tool was first piloted with 1 person with the purpose of testing. Lastly, after piloting and reviewing, the questionnaire was finalized for data collection.

Ethical Issues

At first ethical clearance was obtained from the Ethical Committee of BRAC IED, BRAC University. Moreover, before carrying out the study, informed consent was taken from the participants. Participants were given detailed information about the study, its objective and purpose. They were informed about the reason why they were approached for this study and the inclusion criteria was clearly stated. Moreover, all the participants were assured that their privacy will be maintained and no personal information will be disclosed. Also, the data will be used for study purposes only. If any participant feels any discomfort to answer questions, he/she can skip or leave the interview any time. No participants were forced.

Limitations of the Study

There are some limitations in this study. Due to the unavailability of the participants, the researcher conducted the FGD by including both fathers and mothers in the same session. Thus, the FGD group was not homogeneous. Moreover, all the participants were educated, middle-class parents who live in Dhaka city. As a result, the results of this study may not apply to rural context, parents with lower or no educational backgrounds. Furthermore, only parents who were aware of play and try to play with their children as much as possible were able to participate. Thus, opinions of parents who do not have much understanding of the importance of play or do not actively participate in play with their children were unknown to the researcher.

Chapter IV: Results/Findings & Discussion

This chapter is discussed in two segments. The first segment is the results or findings, part that emerged from the in-depth interviews and focused group discussion done with 11 participants. The findings are presented to provide a clear overview of the urban parents' both fathers and mothers perceptions of play as a tool for children's (3-5) emotional expression, parents' involvement in children's play and the challenges parents' face to provide playtime with their children. Moreover, all the data were categorized into five main themes and six sub-themes to illustrate the views of urban parents' regarding play as a tool for children's emotional expression. In the second segment 'Discussion' part, findings are discussed and analyzed thoroughly based on the IDIs, FGD and researcher's own reflections. After that, recommendations and a conclusion obtained from the study.

Results/ Findings

The results from the qualitative data were merged and described in themes and sub-themes which are:

1. Parents' understanding of play
2. Parents' understanding of children's (3-5) emotional expression
 - 2.1. Difficulties to understand children's emotions
3. Parents' perceptions of play in children's emotional expression
 - 3.1. Play that facilitates emotional expression
 - 3.2. Children's emotions through art, song and dance
4. Parental involvement in play and emotional expression
 - 4.1. Parents' role during play
 - 4.2. Learning Emotions through play
5. Parents' challenges in facilitating play
 - 5.1. Structural and Technological Barriers
 - 5.2. Effect of Urban lifestyle on children's emotional expression

Demographic Information

Among the 11 participants, six were female (mother) and five participants were male (father). Among them 3 mothers and 3 fathers participated in in-depth interviews and 4 mothers and 4 fathers participated in focused group discussion. They all are parents of 3-5 years old children and they live in Dhaka. Parents ranged in age from 31- 45 respectively. All the participants are chosen from urban areas of Dhaka city. All the participants completed their higher education and no one is below Bachelor degree. Among the participants, one father and one mother had bachelor's degrees and the rest of the participants had master's degrees and three of the participants had MBBS degrees. Moreover, except for one mother, the rest of the participants were working

parents. In addition, one father and two mothers were physicians by profession (see demographic information table in Annex-1).

Theme 1: Parents' understanding of play

This section describes the general understanding of parents regarding play. The majority of the participants mentioned that play is what gives children joy, happiness, entertainment and fun. One of the participants said,

“I had my own childhood and I am also experiencing my daughter’s childhood now. So, the word play for me is whatever is giving your heart happiness. Play is basically all the activities that give children happiness, brightened their mind. That is what I think play is for me.” (IDI-1, 27.05.26)

Another participant mentioned, “For me, play is basically what gives us happiness, activities we like to do are called play.” (IDI-3, 26.05.26)

One of the fathers said, “According to me, play is what children do for fun activity, entertainment.” (FGD, 22.05.26) “I also think play is a fun activity which helps children to learn various skills and children feel very happy while playing. That is basically play.” (FGD, 22.05.26) One of the mothers mentioned, “Play means activities which children do for example running, playing with toys. Play is basically a fun time for children.” (FGD, 22.05.26)

However, some of the participants linked play with children’s development and learning skills.

According to one father,

“Play is any kind of sport or whatever children are doing. It can be drawing, painting, playing games or any kind of activity that is a recreational activity for children. Or which helps a child’s cognitive development. Play is any sort of activity that helps children’s physical and mental development. I think these all come under play.” (IDI-4, 31.05.26)

Another father mentioned, “Play is a fun activity which helps children to learn various skills and children feel very happy while playing. That is basically play.” (FGD, 22.05.26)

Moreover, one of the participants thinks play is a kind of activity that children do naturally and it is very helpful for children who have developmental delays. She said, “I think play is a thing which children do naturally. Play is very important for children, especially for those who have developmental delays.” (FGD, 22.05.26)

She also added, “For me play used to be just play, children play. But when I got to know that my son who is now 4 years old, has developmental delay, I started educating myself about the issue and started giving my son structured plays which ultimately helped him to his development.” (IDI-3, 21.05.26)

One of the mothers mentioned,

“Play helps children to develop their intelligence. Also, children learn through play. For example, we also learned alphabets, counting through rhymes, songs or play activities. Nowadays there are so many preschools where children are learning through play. Play also helps to increase the stamina of children, develop their physical growth. Overall, play is everything for children.” (IDI-3, 26.05.26)

Overall, the data showed that every participant has the basic understanding of play and most of them think play is mainly fun, joy, happiness and entertainment for children. Though some of the parents mentioned play as important for children’s development and learning skills.

Theme 2: Parents’ Understanding of Children’s (3-5) Emotional Expression

From in-depth interviews, 3 fathers and 1 mother mentioned that they understand their children’s emotions through their behaviors, facial gestures and by observing children’s attitudes. One mother said,

“I think children during this age express their emotions through physical, facial gestures and behaviors rather than expressing verbally. Also, I think at this age children have so many emotions at once as their emotional development is emerging. As a result, when we fail to understand their emotions or needs properly, they become frustrated. We call it tantrums. I notice my daughter shows so much tantrums sometimes if I do not properly understand what she wants.” (IDI-1, 27.05.26)

One of the fathers said,

“Actually, my son expresses his emotions through facial expression, crying or even screaming. I understand his emotions like happiness, anger or sadness. He is so fond of playing with his car toys. He likes racing games. So, while he plays and races his cars and wins he becomes so happy. When his mother scolds him for something he starts crying. So, I guess these little, little things make us understand what he is feeling, happy, sad or angry.” (IDI-5, 19.05.26)

Another father mentioned,

“I think we understand that by observing her attitude, behavior or characteristics. If she is upset or angry, she speaks angrily, in a louder tone. That time her expression will be different. Also, if she is upset, if we tell her to do something, she does not listen and shows no interest. That's how we understand she is maybe upset or not okay.” (IDI-6, 17.05.26)

Regarding expressing emotions through behavior one father said, “For example, she wants to play more but now is bed time. She does not want to sleep, she wants to play. If we say no to her, she becomes angry and expresses her anger. So, me and her mother understand her emotions during that time by looking at her behavior.” (IDI-4, 31.05.26) However, two mothers mentioned that children express emotions while playing. One mother said, “When he is happy he runs a lot he

likes to run here and there. He will bring his favourite toy and play with it. So, I think these are the ways he expresses his feelings.” (IDI-2, 21.05.26) Another participant said that her daughter expresses her emotions through role play.

“I think children express emotions in so many ways. Through play they express emotions for example role play. My daughter, while playing with her dolls, sometimes role plays as mother and her dolls as her child. She scolds her doll the same way I scold her. Also feed the toys exactly how I feed her. I think children express their everyday experiences while playing.” (IDI-3, 26.05.26)

Moreover, in focused group discussion, it is found that almost every participant both fathers and mothers, mentioned that children (ages 3-5 years) express their emotions through body language, gestures, even drawing, painting rather than verbal communication. One mother said,

“I think they try to express their emotions in various ways. For example, my daughter, as I said earlier, expresses her emotions through drawing things. Sometimes she cries when she gets hurt while playing or running. When she is happy, she smiles and her facial gestures express that happiness. Also, she runs and jumps if she feels excited. So, I think in these ages, children express their emotions in so many ways.” (FGD, 22.05.26)

One father also added that,

“I also think children in this age cannot express emotions verbally but they somehow express emotions in so many ways like you said. I see my son run, jump, and even scream when he feels happy or excited about something. When he is not in a good mood or upset or sick, he does not play like other days or sometimes cries. If he gets angry, he sometimes throws away his toys, planes. So, I think they express emotions in these ways like physical gestures or crying.” (FGD, 22.05.26)

2.1: Parents' difficulties to understand children's emotions

This theme highlights the experiences of parents to understand their children's emotions. When being asked if they find it easy or difficult to understand their children's feelings, majority of the participants replied they find it difficult and challenging sometimes to properly understand their children's emotions. One of the participants said,

“I try to understand her emotions but sometimes it is difficult for me to properly understand. I have to understand her emotions by observing her gestures. For example, one day she got physically hurt but instead of crying she showed anger, so i had to understand it by myself that she is hurt and she does not want to express in words that she is hurt or feeling pain that's why she showed anger. To understand this, I needed to observe her first why she is behaving like this and from where her anger comes from. So, for me it is very difficult at the same time I need patience to understand my child's emotions.” (FGD, 22.05.26)

One mother said, “I actually sometimes find it difficult to properly respond to my son's emotions. Sometimes he shows no interest at all for anything and cries. Usually, I try to comfort him and ask him what he wants but sometimes I also get frustrated and scold him especially when he does not eat properly.” (FGD, 22.05.26)

Another mother said,

“I always say to everyone that parenting is a journey. The way we learn at school that's a journey. Parenting is also a journey where we as a parent learn through the process. When my daughter was a newborn, whenever she started crying, I felt so scared because it was very difficult for me to understand what she wanted during that time. So as a new mother

I found it very tough to properly understand my daughter's emotions, how to respond. But now as I have 3 years of experience, day by day I learn and still I am learning to understand my daughter's emotions and needs. I feel I am now more mature as a mother.” (IDI-1, 27.05.26)

However, one mother mentioned that,

“Being a mother and spending time with my daughter I think I understand her emotions like why she is crying or what she needs. I try to understand. As she is 5 now and can talk a lot, she expresses herself most of the time what she wants. She is very expressive. When I scold her for something which maybe she does not like or hurt her, what she does is, she runs to the bed and keeps her head down. I think this is her way of expressing the feeling that she is hurt. She does not like that I scold her.” (IDI-3, 26.05.26)

Fathers also find it difficult to understand their children's emotions. One of the fathers said,

“I feel difficulty in some cases to understand her emotions. Due to my profession, I have to lead a very busy life. As a result, I do not spend much time with my daughter at home. But, whenever I have some time, I try my best to interact with her, give her some time to create a bond with her so that i can understand her more though it is really tough to understand children's emotions i feel.” (IDI-4, 31-05-26)

Another father said, “I think children show emotions very naturally. If they feel sad, they cry, happy they laugh. If they get angry you will understand it easily.” (IDI-6, 17.05.26)

Two fathers mentioned that they understand their children's emotions through observation and interaction. One of them added,

“I think it is not that easy or that much difficult to understand children's emotions. I try to observe my child when he is with me. My son is very naughty and very playful. So, when

I see he is not that much playful or quiet I try to interact with him to understand what's wrong. So I try to understand his emotions through interaction.” (FGD, 22.05.26)

Another father mentioned,

“My son is very fond of cars and trains. So, one day I noticed he was not playing with his train when I gave his toys to him. He did not want to hold it or even show any anger, so I was so confused about what happened to him. If he was feeling sad or angry about something I had no clue. I tried to ask him but he did not say anything. Finally, after asking his mother, I came to know he was scolded by her because he wanted chocolate. So, it is very difficult sometimes to understand children’s emotions actually. Not always we understand specifically what’s wrong thus we have to understand it by talking or asking questions or interaction.” (FGD, 22.05.26)

Theme 3: Parents’ Perceptions of play in children’s emotional expression

This theme looks into the perceptions of parents regarding play as a medium for children to express their emotions. Moreover, the subthemes delve into types of play parents think bring out children’s emotions most and what are the ways through which children, express emotions according to parents.

Both in IDIs and FGD parents agreed that children express their emotions during play. One of the mothers said, “Yes, I definitely think so. During play children express their everyday experiences and emotions. One of the ways which I notice a lot in my daughter’s case, role play helps her to express what is in her mind or what she is thinking.” (IDI-3, 26.05.26) Another mother said, “Yes children I think express emotion during play. When my daughter sees a ball, she starts saying “Ma ball, ball” which means she wants to play with the ball. That’s how she expresses her emotions, interest through various ways with happiness and excitement.” (IDI-1, 27.05.26)

One mother said,

“Yes, I think most of the time we understand children’s emotions through play. If children feel sadness or sickness then if we give them paints, they may not show interest, they will not show energy. We also understand our children’s energy through play. Suppose, a child loves one specific toy a lot but if he feels sad or unhappy, he does not even want to play with his specific toy which he likes a lot. My son does this. These things, if we observe we understand that maybe he is not well, or something happened to him, he is maybe feeling sick.” (IDI-2, 21.05.26)

One of the participants said, “I think yes. Because when my son plays football, he becomes so excited we can see that he is enjoying and happy. He likes to play with the ball a lot actually.” (FGD, 22.05.26) One of the fathers said,

“Yes, I really think so. As I said before, my son is very fond of his cars. When he is so excited, we understand his excitement by seeing him playing with his cars. He hits one car by another and expresses his emotion of joy or playfulness through his play. Thus, I think that play really helps children to express their emotions.” (IDI-5, 19.05.26)

One of the fathers mentioned that children do express emotions during play but parents must observe carefully to understand that. He said, “Yes, I think play helps children to express their feelings or emotions. If parents notice or observe a child while playing, I think they understand that the child is somehow expressing emotions but we as a parent must carefully observe.” (IDI-6, 17.05.26)

3.1. Play that facilitates emotional expression

When being asked what types of play help children to express emotions most, four participants said that physical play brings out the most emotions in the case of their children. One mother said,

“I personally think that physical play helps a child most to express emotions. For example, when I take my daughter to indoor playgrounds there are so many balls, slippers and playing activities for children. I have noticed when my child wants to play something there, for example she has to jump to cross the place, she asks for my help. As she cannot express verbally but she points her finger towards that way and makes me understand she needs help. Also, there are car settings where children ride cars and adults push the cars. So, my daughter can get into the car by herself but cannot ride it so she says “Mummum car” which means she wants me to push her car. Which means my daughter totally understands what she wants and she communicates her wants emotions through her gestures whether its words or physical gestures.” (IDI-1, 27.05.26)

Another mother said, “I think physical play because it gives children so much fun and physical movements. Children’s excitement is properly visible in physical plays.” (FGD, 22.05.26)

One of the fathers mentioned,

“I think during this age (3-5) children are so energetic and they do not sit in one place quietly. Thus, if my daughter runs here and there and plays with full energy i realise she is okay and healthy. But when she does not play with full enthusiasm, we understand that something is wrong, maybe she is sad about something. So, I think physical play can bring out emotions in my child’s case. If she is happy and excited and also physically healthy, she runs, screams and plays physical games with full energy.” (IDI-6, 17.05.26)

However, other parents think playing with toys and role play help their child to express emotions. One of the participants said, “I think role play. My daughter plays with her grandmother. She scolds her grandmother and says eating vegetables is good. She acts as me and treats her grandmother as a child during play.” (IDI-3, 26.05.26)

According to one father, “My son acts while playing with his toys. I think acting or acting like a character also helps children to express emotions.” (IDI-5, 19.05.26) One mother said,

“In my daughter’s case, what I observed is that she does role play a lot. I think role play helps my daughter to express some of her emotions which I sometimes noticed. My daughter observes her surroundings like how we talk or what we do, then she while playing with her doll or toys try to copy those things. For example, my daughter is now in pre-school. So, she observes her teachers how they teach her and while playing with her toys she tries to act like her teachers and teach her toy A, B, C, D. She plays ‘teacher, teacher’ with her toy this way.” (FGD, 22.05.26)

One father mentioned that his child tries to act like cartoon characters and play which according to him shows his son’s emotions. He said,

“There is a movie named, “Cars” where cars can talk. In this movie different cars play different characters. So, my son loves to watch this anime movie. I noticed he plays with his cars and tries to act like what he watched in the Car movie. For example, one car is helping another car. Also, when he is in a bad mood or his mother scolds him for something, he becomes so aggressive which reflects when he plays with the car. He throws away cars, trains here and there like that. I think his playing with toys depends on his mood or emotions.” (FGD, 22.05.26)

However, two fathers mentioned that their children show emotions while playing with toys but it mostly depends on their children’s mood and situation. One father said,

“What I observed regarding my son is that when he plays with his toys, especially some action figures, if he is in a cheerful mood he plays with toys and executes a happy environment but when he is in an aggressive mood, he makes an environment where his

action figures fight with each other. He let his action figures hit strongly. So, I think this is one way I think my child expresses his feelings.” (FGD, 22.05.26)

Another father said, “What I saw is that when he is happy, he keeps his toys in order and screams while playing but when he is in a bad mood or upset, he does not play like this so i think we understand somehow whether our child is happy or okay by observing if they are playing with excitement or not.” (FGD, 22.05.26)

However, one mother mentioned pretend play according to her helps to show children’s emotions. She said,

“I think pretend play. Though my son plays outdoor games most of the time. What I have observed is that when my son has pain in his stomach during that time he plays with his toys and talks related to stomach pain. His toy is having pain in stomach. Also, when he is happy, he interacts differently with a happy mood. So, I think he is expressing some of his feelings while playing with his toys.” (IDI-2, 21.05.26)

Only one mother mentioned that playing with other children really helps to express emotions. She said, “I have noticed when she plays with other children of her age, she becomes so happy and wants to play, jump, run here and there. I did not teach her that she herself expresses it during play. She herself interacts with other children during play.” (IDI-1, 27.05.26)

3.2. Children’s Emotions through Art, Song and Dance

This subtheme will focus on some creative ways through which children express their emotions. Most of the participants mentioned that through drawing and painting their children express their emotions. One of the participants said,

“I think drawing. My daughter loves to draw. She shows me whatever she draws and feels so happy. I think we can learn or know our child’s world through their lens by what they are drawing.

Also, we can know their imagination through that. I feel children's imagination is more purified than us, more innocent." (IDI-4, 31.05.26) One mother said, "I think drawing helps in this case. Because my daughter loves to paint and she becomes very happy if we praise her about her drawing." (FGD, 22.05.26) Another participant said, "My daughter likes to paint, draw. Colour pencils are a great attraction for her." (IDI-1, 27.05.26)

One of the fathers mentioned,

"I think drawing is a great way to express emotions because it is important what the child is drawing, whom they are trying to draw, which colour they are using. For example, my son tries to draw a car though he cannot properly draw it but when i ask him what did you draw, he says it is a car, blue car. So, it also expresses that maybe he likes blue cars or he saw blue-colored cars and thus drew them." (IDI-5, 19.05.26)

Among the participants, two fathers mentioned cuddling is another way through which their children express their emotions. One father said,

"I think cuddling and also the way they demand things, the ways they want things also can be ways to express emotions. For example, my son when he wants something he asks in one way and asks his mother differently. His mother is strict in some ways so I try to be flexible with him. So, he may feel more comfortable asking me to give him toys or something compared to his mother. So, he comes to me first when he wants something or (Abdaar) things." (IDI-5, 19.05.26)

Another father said, "What I have observed, my daughter while cuddling expresses emotion. For example, if she is angry with me for something and I ask her to cuddle me, she doesn't want to cuddle. She shows her anger or sadness through not cuddle with me. If she is in a good mood or wants something she cuddles me a lot." (IDI-6, 17.05. 26)

Three of the participants mentioned that music, singing, dancing and rhymes facilitate children to express emotions. One mother said, “Yes, definitely. For example, I have noticed my daughter loves music a lot. She starts dancing whenever music starts. She also tries to imitate the song and tries to sing. Through music I think she is expressing her love for it.” (IDI-1, 27.05.26) Another mother said,

“ I think of singing because my son loves it when it is raining. " So he often sings “Jhor elo elo jhor, Rain rain go away” he becomes so happy and runs to the window. When he wants to play outside but that time suddenly its raining, he becomes sad and says Rain rain go away. So I think through songs, rhymes my son expresses his emotions as he has speech delay.” (IDI-2, 21. 05. 26)

One father said,

“Also, my daughter is very fond of music and dance. I must say she is a big Shah Rukh Khan fan. She loves to hear his songs on TV and dance with so much enthusiasm. At this age she tries to hold mike and tries to sing. I think music also connects emotions. Whenever we change our TV channel from music, she starts crying or shows anger. So I think my daughter expresses her emotions through music. She becomes very happy when music starts.” (IDI-4, 31.05.26)

However, two parents said that interaction and communication facilitate their children to express emotions. One mother said, “My daughter is so expressive and talks a lot. So, in the case of expressing, she expresses a lot if she does not like something. She has so many questions to ask. She asks me, asks her father whatever comes into her mind. So, I think interaction with parents or anyone helps a child very much to express her emotions.” (IDI-3, 26.05.26)

Another mother said,

“Sometimes my children express their feelings or emotions to their grandmother. When they are angry with me for any reason, or they do not want to tell me something fearing I would scold them, they go to their grandmother and tell her. Or sometimes if they get new toys, they run to Nanu and show her how excited they are. So, I think children in this way also express emotions.” (FGD, 22.05.26)

One participant mentioned that her daughter shows the emotion of anger by refusing to eat. She said, “She is a little dramatic. If she gets angry, she refuses to eat. She does this when I scold her. So, her not eating is another way she expresses her anger I think.” (FGD, 22.05.26)

Theme 4: Parental Involvement in Play and Emotional Expression

This theme emphasizes on whether the participants play with their children or not. Moreover, it also looks into what kind of activities they do and role they play during play. As most of the participants are working parents, most of them said they try to play with their children when they get the opportunity, however due to a busy work schedule they cannot play regularly with their children. One of the participants said,

“To be very honest, as I am a physician and doing a job, I have to spend most of the time outside from home. Thus, I get less time to play with my daughter. But my family members really cooperate with me. My in-laws are really supportive. They take care of my daughter. My daughter plays with her fupu, chacha or interacts with them so much. And when I am at home I especially try to interact or communicate with her.” (IDI-1, 27.05.26)

One of the fathers said, “Actually not often but sometimes. Yes, I do see him playing by himself but whenever I find time to play with him or interact I do so. And I do car game thing a lot with him where he is playing with one car and I with another. We race with each other's cars to see which one comes first. So, when he wins he becomes so happy.” (IDI-5, 19.05.26)

Another father said,

“I cannot provide much time for playing with my daughter as I most of the time go outside for work purposes. But I play sometimes, mostly at night I try to give some time to my daughter. She really likes to play with me and she wants to play with me more. We live in a joint family so during our free time we elders sometimes play ludo. So my daughter really loves to play this though she cannot play as she is so small now. But she loves to do this activity with me.” (IDI-6, 17.05.26)

One of the mothers said, “Actually I recently started my job. As a result, I cannot give much time to play with my daughter. But I try to play whenever I get some time or talk to her about what she is doing. Also, I try to take her in an open space so that she can play outdoor games.” (FGD, 22.05.26)

Moreover, one of the fathers gave emphasis on the natural environment and said,

“I also do not give much time for playing with my son because of my job or busy schedule. But whenever I am free, I try my best to give him time or interact with him. During weekends we plan to go outside so that he gets the outer environment experience or see nature. Because most of the time he is at home, playing at home so for me it is very important that children should feel nature or spend some time in nature.” (FGD, 22.05.26)

Two of the fathers said they do not play much but they try to spend time with their children whenever they can. One said,

“In my case, it is unfortunate that I am not able to give much time to my child as most of the time I have to travel for business purposes. So, in this busy work load situation I feel it very difficult to have a balance and give proper time to my son. But whenever I can, I try to take my family outside. My son also loves to play outside, he runs here and there. I

sometimes take him to our terrace with me, he plays there and i keep my eye on him so that he doesn't go around the corner. So that's how I try to spend time with him rather than playing.” (FGD, 22.05.26)

Another father said,

“What I enjoy most with my daughter is gardening. I do gardening specially in the morning. We have a terrace where I have various trees. So my daughter loves to go there and does gardening with me. She waters the plants with me. I tried to teach her the names of the colours during that time. Colour of flowers. During that time there is also sunlight. It also helps to have vitamin D. She really enjoys it and at this little age she knows many fruit's names and she also smells trees which I teach her. She smells the lemon tree and says, papa lebu. I think it also helps to give her sensation like seeing, smelling, touching which is very important for children during this age. Also, I try to travel with my family during weekends if I manage time. I have noticed she loves to travel, going outside.” (IDI-4, 31.05.26)

However, two mothers said they play with their child actively. One said,

“Yes, I do play with her. Sometimes I draw with my daughter. For example, I draw something and then I ask her if she can draw like this. I actually try to give her tasks. She tries to draw by observing. I also try to teach her painting. Sometimes, she plays with legos and builds various things. She plays with her dolls and sometimes I also join her in play and I observe what she is doing and ask her questions.” (IDI-3, 26.05.26)

Another mother said,

“Yes I do play with my child and I try to play interactive play because my target is he may speak and learn to talk, interact more. I try to teach him noun, verbs. Whenever I play with him or not necessarily always play, when I interact with him about something I try to

describe more. For example, when I do gardening, I try to involve him also and talk to him saying “Look at this tree, I am giving water to the trees”. All these activities giving food to the pets or gardening I think my son take this as play rather than as task. Because when he gives food to the birds, he thinks it is also play.” (IDI-2, 21.05.26)

4.1. Parents’ role during play

When being asked what role (e.g., observer, participant, guide) they play while playing with their children, most of the participants said they observe and sometimes guide. One of the mothers said,

“It actually depends on my time. Most of the time I act as an observer when I am at home. As I come home after work, I have to prepare food for her and feed her so I do not get enough time to play with her on working days. But when I am at home, I try to participate with her. For example, she is drawing something. I try to guide her then appreciate her, whether she is dancing or singing I also try to take part. And I don't actually guide her but sometimes she runs so fast I get scared if she gets hurt so then I try to advise her not to run fast.” (IDI-1, 27.05.26)

Another mother said, “I think I guide her when she plays with her balls and if she struggles with it. But what i do a lot is observe her what she is doing, is she safe or not. What kind of play she is playing. As she goes to school, I try to understand what she is learning from school also.” (IDI-3, 26. 05.26)

One of the fathers said, “Actually my daughter plays freely. I do not guide her or suggest anything but yes I sometimes observe her what she is doing. Also, when I play with her I try to notice which things she finds more interesting. As I said, she loves to play with her cooking set so I observed she has a great interest in cooking.” (IDI-6, 17.05.26)

Another father said, “I do not guide but I do interact with my daughter what she is doing or playing.” (FGD, 22.05.26)

However, one of the mothers gave importance to children playing freely and said,

“I think when we let our child play freely or team play with them it helps them to develop problem solving skills. They learn by themselves. I thus try to let my child play freely, independently. Also, one thing I do with my daughter is that, if she does something wrong or makes mistakes, I do not immediately tell her it is wrong directly. I try to indirectly guide her, give her hints so that she herself corrects things. I try to appreciate her when she does something.” (FGD, 22.05.26)

However, four participants said they try to both observe and participate during play with their children. One of the mothers whose son has speech delay said,

“As I said before, he has speech delay so my plan for him as individual development is different. Because my aim or goal for him is to develop his language development. I try to play with him actively where I can add more interaction with him. But I also give him a floor to play freely and ask him questions like “can you say what I will do now?” So always my main target is to develop his speech.” (IDI-2, 21.05.26)

One father said,

“Not like I intentionally observe him but whenever I am at home, I try to watch what he is doing, what kind of play or how he is playing. He most of the time plays with his toys alone. But sometimes I play with him like a participant or competitor. Like I said about racing cars with him. I try to play with him like a child actually whenever I play so that he may feel he is playing with a child like him. But I don't guide him while playing, I want him to play freely but it should be safe.” (IDI-5, 19.05.26)

Another father said, “For me, I usually do not observe much but I try to actively involve my son in play if I play with him. You can say I also act like a child with him when I play. We plan how we will play. He instructs me baba this is your car and that is mine. I do not guide him mostly but sometimes. I let him play freely most of the time so that he can make decisions on his own.” (FGD, 22.05.26)

One participant said, “I try to play with my child as a team player but when he struggles at some point, I try to guide him, give him some hints.” (FGD, 22.05.26)

4.2. Learning Emotions through play

When it was asked to the participants that, have they ever used play intentionally to teach their children emotions, in FGD most of the participants said no however only one father said yes and he mentioned,

“I try to teach my child kindness. For example, when my child becomes aggressive, he hits toys, throws his toys here and there. So, I say look, the toy you hit it is hurt now it is crying say sorry. Do not hit baba, it is not good. If you hit it will hurt. What I observed is that now my son says sorry. So, this is something he is learning.” (FGD, 22.05.26)

One mother said, “Not exactly emotional but I taught my child about sharing things with others, I tried to act with my family members in front of her saying let's share this food. So, she observes this and learns about sharing. That's how she learned about sharing. But I have not used play intentionally to teach her emotions.” (FGD, 22.05.26)

However, in IDI only one father said he taught his daughter emotion through play sometimes. He said, “Yes, I did sometime. For example, if her doll falls on the floor, I say to my daughter look your doll gets hurt. The doll is crying. I do this to grow sympathy or empathy in my daughter so

that she can feel that emotion. Also, learn that she should not hurt others during play.” (IDI-4, 31.05.26)

Theme 5: Parents’ Challenges in Facilitating play

According to the majority of the participants, lack of time, free space and screen time are the biggest challenges. One of the mothers said,

“Firstly, the main barrier I face is the lack of time for sure. Nowadays you will see the majority of parents both father and mother, are job holders. So, the lack of time is the biggest challenge for me, I think. Personally, I feel I want to play with my daughter a lot but I am unable to do so as when I return home most of the time, I feel so tired. As a result, I cannot give her that proper play time. I feel upset regarding this sometimes. That is why I try my best to give her proper time during holidays. I try to give her quality time.” (IDI-1, 27.05.26)

Another mother mentioned, “As I am a working parent, sometimes there is a lot of pressure at work and during that time I do not give much quality time to my child. So much work pressure and time are mainly the barriers for me in this case. After coming home, sometimes I feel so tired so it becomes tough for me to give proper time to my child during that time.” (IDI-3, 26.05.26)

One of the fathers said,

“I firstly face barriers in case of time and secondly lack of free space. In our country, especially in Dhaka, there are no free spaces for children to play outdoor games. Our work-life balance is also miserable I think, especially for a profession like ours. There are no open grounds near our homes where children can play freely and safely. Also, there is a hygiene issue for children. I think third world countries like ours, this is a great issue.” (IDI-4, 31.05.26)

Another father said,

“I think giving enough time to my child is a great challenge for me. As I am a working person, I have to spend most of the time outside home. As a result, I feel it would be great if I could give more time to my daughter, interact with her. So, I try to make up for this during my days off. For example, we go outside during weekends. On Fridays I try to spend more time with her. She also loves going to restaurants where there are play spaces for children. We take her there so that she can enjoy.” (IDI-6, 17.05.26)

According to another father, “Yes, I also think time is the most challenging thing. I have to spend most of the time at work thus I cannot give much time to my child. Her mother mostly takes care of her but I try to interact and spend time with her whenever I can.” (FGD, 22.05.26)

5.1. Structural and Technological barriers:

However, in FGD most of the participants found screen time and lack of free spaces as barriers to their children’s play. One of the participants said,

“I think in Dhaka city, finding an open space where children will play safely is really tough. Also, as I am a working mother, I cannot give much time to my child mostly. As a result, my daughter nowadays watches cartoons or shorts on YouTube. She also watches rhymes videos. I feel screen time is affecting her and the cartoons she is watching also impacts her. She tries to act like how the cartoon character acts. In cartoons most of the things are fictional characters which are not real. So, she tries to copy that for example, showing magical power.” (FGD, 22.05.26)

Another participant added,

“I also think nowadays screen time is a great risk for kids. It creates addiction. For example, I do not like the song “Baby shark”. I feel it is an addictive song when a child hears this

song, he/she just says baby shark do do do... in subconscious mind. Thus, we try our best to not give my son screen time that much. I saw somewhere that screen time or short reels limit the attention span of children. It is easy to keep a child busy by phone but I personally think it is not the appropriate way.” (FGD, 22.05.26)

One father from IDI also mentioned,

“I also see nowadays a big threat is screen time. Many children do not want to eat if they do not get the screen time. I have many patients whose children are addicted to their phones. Having too much screen time also reduces physical movements. We see children are being diagnosed with diseases, obesity because of this. I even find patients whose children are not having proper cognitive development, language development because of excessive screen time. I think it is a warning issue for our society. We all should work on this.” (IDI-4, 31.05.26)

One of the fathers said,

“In my case, nowadays children are not having proper outdoor games facilities. Lack of free spaces, playgrounds and Dhaka's air pollution is another barrier in my point of view. I feel various tensions when I go outside with my child regarding safety, security and so on. I feel there is no proper healthy playing environment in our country. Also, time is another obstacle for me in providing playtime to my child.” (FGD, 22.05.26)

However, one parent finds it difficult to balance time between two kids. She said,

“Lack of space and children’s addiction to screens are a big issue now. Also, I think giving proper time to our children is another issue. Though I am a homemaker, I have to do so many things at home that I cannot give proper time, Play time to my daughter. I also have a 2 years old daughter. I have to give so much time to her care. I also should give proper

time to my elder daughter I know but sometimes I fail to manage time and give proper attention. So balancing time and attention between my daughters are challenging for me sometimes.” (FGD, 22.05.26)

5.2. Effect of urban lifestyle on Children’s emotional expression

When the participants were being asked if they think urban lifestyle limits or enhances their child’s creativity and emotional expression, all of the participants said it creates limitations. Most of the parents mentioned the lack of free spaces and outdoor play facilities in urban areas negatively impacting their children and another group of parents found excessive screen time, less interaction and less physical play as barriers. One of the participants said,

“I think it varies from person to person. I think there are more negative impacts rather than positive. There is much noise outside and no place for outdoor play for children. I think outdoor play is very important for children but in urban life like Dhaka we do not have this privilege to give our children free spaces where they can play safely. Also, I think nature is important for children. I am a nature lover. I really love to spend time in nature. Nowadays it is very rare to find an open field where children can play football, basketball or cricket. Most of the children play at home. Also, there are various indoor play spaces like babuland. Which is a good substitute in this case. Children can play with other children and interact with each other. But I feel this is eventually an indoor space, not outdoor.” (IDI-3, 27.05.26)

One of the fathers also mentioned lack of space and he also talked about the urban architecture plan which is creating limitations to children’s proper growth. He said,

“I want to say children love to play specially with one another. In Dhaka we are seeing there are lots of apartments here and there. There is no playground. So, I think every

apartment should have at least one space or open ground where different ages of children can play with each other. When we were children, we used to play with our neighbors. But in Dhaka one neighbor does not even know another neighbor. There is no interaction. So, I think before building an apartment, there should be a design where there is a common space for children where children can play safely and also interact with one another. They will learn from one another. It will also enhance socialization. We see most of the children in urban communities are growing alone, many of the children do not know how to share, how to care or interact with others.” (IDI-4, 31.05.26)

One of the mothers also said regarding the urban architecture plan and mentioned,

“I think in our urban areas like Dhaka, space plans are not focused on children or child friendly. It is so materialistic. Children do not get the opportunity to play freely due to lack of open space. As I can give my son a proper natural environment and free space when we visit our village which is a rural area. But in urban areas specially in Dhaka it is the most busiest city and our urban developers or architects are not giving proper priority in designing child friendly space design. They are more concerned in the outlook or beautifying buildings rather than practically designing spaces which will be child friendly I think. As a result, children are not doing proper play activities like playing with ball, basketball or crickets now they are playing at home or indoor plays and watching TV. I think that's why urban life definitely limits the creativity of children.” (IDI-2, 21.05.26)

Two of the participants from FGD also gave emphasis on the lack of open field and outdoor games opportunities for children in urban life which ultimately creates limitations. One of the fathers said,

“I think limitations are more in the case of urban lifestyle. For example, we as kids used to play different outdoor games with other children. This helped to build team work, leadership mindset I feel. But my son most of the time plays indoor games as he does not get the opportunity to play outside. I think this creates a great limitation on the overall wellbeing of children due to urban lifestyle.” (FGD, 22.05.26)

One mother mentioned,

“I also agree with bhaiya. Playing in an open field freely is very important for children. They learn team work, leadership as bhaiya said. Also I think playing with other children helps children’s language development and socialization. They get the opportunity to create bond, become friends.” (FGD, 22.05.26)

Excessive screen time and less interaction with others are other barriers according to some participants. One of the mothers mentioned,

“Due to busy life, we cannot interact that much with our children as a result they are now addicted to phones. You will see children are watching cartoons or youtube videos reels instead of playing, excessive screen time also impacting their physical and emotional health I think. I even saw children who talk like cartoon characters which is not healthy at all. This also impacts a child’s own creativity and language development. They try to copy what they watch in youtube reels. Also, children become easily irritated if you do not give them what they want. I think excessive screen time and less physical activities are impacting our children dangerously. It is also creating limitations on their creativity, development and emotional health.” (IDI-3, 26.05.26)

One of the fathers said,

“Definitely, it is creating limitations. I think in the near future the limitation will increase more. I also see nowadays a big threat is screen time. Many children do not want to eat if they do not get the screen time. I have many patients whose children are addicted to their phones. Having too much screen time also reduces physical movements. We see children are being diagnosed with diseases, obesity because of this. I even find patients whose children are not having proper cognitive development, language development because of excessive screen time. I think it is a warning issue for our society.” (IDI-4, 31.05.26)

According to one participant,

“I feel our children are stuck at home. They live in a cartoon world. Internet, screen time limit their thinking ability or creativity I think. I feel we as a parent should sometimes keep our child away from city life and give them the experience of rural environment, nature, away from the internet. This will help them to develop their physical as well as emotional health.” (FGD, 22.05.26)

Another participant thinks screen time limits children’s thinking ability. She said,

“Nowadays children are giving so much time to watch cartoons. Also, some children eat while watching youtube videos on mobile. I think it hampers our children seriously. They develop less attention span. Their thinking capability also hampers because of this.” (FGD, 22.05.26)

However, three participants from FGD found the competitive mentality of urban lifestyle as a risk which creates limitations to children’s natural growth. One of the fathers said,

“During our time we did not have any pre-schooling. We were not in any competition. I was not. I used to just play during my childhood. I did not have the pressure on me to be the first in the class. However, in Dhaka I see there is competition in everything. There is

competition for admission in a pre-school. I feel children need more and more play time during this age. Overall, this urban lifestyle seriously affects the natural growth of the children I think. We as a parent keep our child in the same style which is not healthy I think.” (FGD, 22.05.26)

Another father added, “I also agree that urban lifestyle creates limitations to a child’s creativity and emotional expression. Also, competition is another issue that limits the creativity of children.” (FGD, 22.05.26)

One of the mothers said, “I also agree with you because I also feel when a child is admitted into a preschool suddenly there starts a competition. Parents think they have to do this and that and give so much pressure to little kids. I think this also suppresses the creativity of children.” (FGD, 22.05.26)

Discussion

The study aimed to explore the perceptions of urban parents’ regarding play as a tool for children’s emotional expression. This section discusses the study findings focusing on the core objective of this study and researcher’s reflection. Moreover, the findings from the results are discussed under all five themes.

Theme 1: Parents’ Understanding of Play

The findings revealed that the majority of the participants have the basic understanding of play. When they hear the word “play” the first thing comes to their mind is that play is fun, joy and entertainment for children. Moreover, most of the parents said that whatever activities that give happiness are called play and play is a fun time. However, some of the participants mentioned play linking it with children’s development and learning skills. They think play is very important for children’s cognitive, mental and physical development. Similarly, one study found that play

significantly enhances children's critical thinking, problem-solving ability, creativity and physical activities within play improve children's health with gross motor skills increasing by 45% and fine motor skills by 50% (Kristina, Kasim, Putri & Nurliani, 2026).

It is important to mention that, only one participant who is a mother of a four years old boy, said that her child is having speech delay. Thus, she found play as a great tool for her child's language development. According to her, she found structured play, interactive play very helpful which is helping her child to learn skills and deal with speech delay. One study also focused on the impact of play in children's language development and suggested that interactions and communication during play facilitate language and vocabulary development (Huttenlocher et al, 2010). Moreover, all the participants agreed that children learn through play, a finding similar to the result obtained by one study titled, "Rethinking play and child-centredness within early childhood curriculum in Croatia" (2025).

Theme 2: Parents' Understanding of Children's (3-5) Emotional Expression

From the findings it is noted that all the participants have similar opinions regarding understanding their children's emotions. The findings indicate that the majority of the participants mentioned that children ages 3-5 years express emotions through facial gestures, body language, attitude, behavior even crying, screaming and laughing rather than verbal communication. In one study it is also found that crying, bodily movements, combined with facial expression are some cues that infants use to express emotions (Sullivan & Lewis, 2003).

However, the findings also revealed that all the participants find it difficult sometimes to understand their child's emotions properly. The majority of them said they try to understand their children's emotions through observing their gestures and behavior as they do not speak or communicate their feelings directly. One father mentioned understanding children's emotions is

not easy at the same time not very difficult because they somehow express their emotions through crying or smiling. But what every parent should do is observe their children's behavior carefully. However, one mother mentioned that her daughter is very expressive thus she can understand what her daughter wants or feels easily through interaction or observing her behavior. Therefore, it can be suggested that parents understand their children's emotions by observing and interacting, however sometimes they find difficulties to understand properly.

Theme 3. Parents' Perceptions of Play in Children's Emotional Expression

Responses from the participants suggest that every participant agreed, children express their emotions during play. According to some parents, when their children run, jump it shows they are very happy and enjoying themselves. However, they also added that when children feel sad or sick, they show no interest in playing or doing things that they usually like. Moreover, the participants shared that children express their everyday experiences during play with their toys, dolls or even role play. One study suggested that free play helps children to develop emotional intelligence, resilience, emotional expression and coping strategies (Ahmed, Khan & Mehmood, 2023). Moreover, some participants gave emphasis on observation during play for understanding the child's emotions or feelings. They think that children somehow express themselves while playing and to understand that we should carefully notice what they are saying or doing.

However, when the participants were being asked what types of play they think facilitates children's emotions most, majority of them said playing with toys and role play help their children to express emotions. One of the participants remarks that during play when children act like a character, they express emotions or their experiences.

The findings also revealed that some participants mentioned physical play as helpful for expressing children's emotions. Four of the participants think that their children express their

emotions for example happiness, excitement most when they play physical games, for example running, jumping. One of the fathers said that during these ages (3-5) children are so energetic. As a result, when his child plays with full energy and runs, he can show happiness, joy in his child's face. It also helps parents realize their child is healthy and okay. One of the mothers also mentioned that children's emotions or feelings are properly visible during physical play.

One of the mothers mentioned that pretend play helps her child to express emotions most. She added that when her child becomes sick having stomach pain, he expresses that feeling or experience during pretend play.

However, the results also found one parent who thinks children express their emotions most when they play with other children. Playing with peers helps children to express their emotions and they also learn interaction, socialization. One study suggested that in cooperative play children develop an awareness of group dynamics and learn when it is their turn and how to listen to others (Akiriza, 2025).

However, while being asked what are the ways that help children express emotions, majority of the participants said drawing and painting help their children in expressing. One of the fathers added that drawing and painting are great ways to express emotions. It is important what the child is drawing, what color they are using. Because all these things are connected to their likes and dislikes.

The findings also revealed that cuddling is another way through which children can express their emotions. Among the participants two parents mentioned their child when they want something or show love, they cuddle them. This indicates that cuddling can be a medium through which children can show emotions.

Moreover, three participants gave importance to music, singing and rhymes through which children express emotions. One of the participants mentioned his daughter loves music so much that when music is played, she expresses her love, happiness through dancing and facial gestures. However, one participant added that singing and rhymes help her child to express his feelings because he has speech delay. Her son loves to play football, so when it rains, he becomes sad. He expresses his sadness through songs like “rain rain go away”. These findings suggest that music, dancing are ways through which a child can express their feelings.

Apart from that, two participants think interaction and communication help their children to express emotions because their children talk a lot and ask so many questions. One of the participants said her children express their feelings to their grandmother whether it is joy or sadness. It indicates that interaction with parents or anyone also facilitates expressing children’s emotions.

Theme 4: Parental Involvement in Play and Emotional Expression

The findings revealed that all of the participants try to play with their children when they get the opportunity but majority of the participants are working parents thus, they find it difficult to provide proper time to play with their children. Almost everyone shares the same opinion in this case. However, they try to spend time doing activities like gardening, going outside and actively interacting with their children.

Moreover, the findings showed that during play the majority of the participants act as an observer and sometimes guide. They mentioned that when we let out children play freely it helps to develop their problem -solving skills. Findings also suggest that parents do not strictly guide their children during play but they give hints or help their children if they face any difficulties or confusion about something.

However, only four participants play the role of an active participant and observer at the same time. One of the mothers mentioned that due to his son having speech delay, she intentionally gives him structured play for playing and she tries to actively engage with him, interacting with him so that he can overcome his language delay and develop problem solving skills. Another parent suggested he tries to play with his child like a competitor and let him play freely so that it can build his decision -making skills.

The results revealed one concerning thing regarding teaching children emotion through play. The majority of the participants in focused group discussion have not ever used play intentionally to teach their children emotions. Only one participant from FGD said he once did so to teach his child kindness and empathy. Moreover, one father from IDI mentioned he sometimes teaches his daughter sympathy through playing with dolls. However, one of the mothers said she does not exactly teach emotion but she tried to teach her child sharing through play. These findings suggest that perhaps urban parents lack actional pedagogical models related to facilitate children's emotional expression. They are perhaps unaware of how to guide emotional conversations during play. Thus, the majority of the participants never tried to teach their children emotions through play. Though few of them tried. However, if we look at the Western frameworks such as Filial therapy where parents are formally trained by qualified play therapists specializing in Filial therapy to form a therapeutic relation with their children and handle emotional expression through play (Ryan, 2007). Moreover, "Filial Therapy facilitates the interpersonal and emotional development of children and provides their caregivers with training and experience in a comprehensive set of parenting skills. These skills are based on non-directive play therapy" (Ryan, 2007). Thus, western frameworks like filial therapy can be an effective way through which urban parents in Bangladesh can learn and identify children's emotional expression during play.

Theme 5: Parents' Challenges in Facilitating play

In this section, the result showed that the majority of the working parents said, lack of time, free spaces, and excessive screen time are the biggest barriers in providing playtime for children. As they are working parents, they have to spend most of the time outside as a result, they find less time to spend with their children. Lack of time also creates limitations to their involvement with their children in play-based activities. According to one study, the results also revealed that though parents acknowledge the importance of their involvement in play with their children, they find it difficult to do due to workload and everyday busy schedule (Rani, 2024). However, only one participant was a housewife but she also agreed with others that giving proper time to her children is a big challenge for her. As she has to do household chores and she finds it difficult to give proper time between her two daughters. The findings suggest that not only working parents but also the parents who are homemakers find it challenging to spend proper quality time with their children. However, all of the participants try their best to spend quality time with their children whenever they find time for example, during weekends they go outside and some of the parents do interact with their child while gardening.

Moreover, the findings revealed that all participants mentioned that urban lifestyle has created limitations on children's creativity and emotional expression. Due to the lack of free spaces in Dhaka, children do not get the opportunity to play physical games outside. As a result, it not only creates bad impact on their physical growth, but also it creates limitations on their social and emotional development. Similar to this, one research showed that the lack of playgrounds and open spaces are leading children to play indoors, which creates negative effects on child development because outdoor play is very significant for children's holistic development (Frost & Sutterby, 2017). Moreover, the results also indicate that, though there are various indoor play

settings in Dhaka for example Babuland, these will never give the children the benefits of outdoor play. Parents mentioned that when a child goes outside, plays in an open field, mixes with other children it will help them to learn leadership skills, socialization which will not be possible playing alone at home. The findings also pointed out that due to less interaction with others and lack of physical games children are now getting addicted to watch Youtube videos, cartoons, even reels in mobile phones. Some children watch TV instead of playing. The results indicate that excessive use of screen time and less physical activities are impacting children seriously. It hampers their thinking ability, attention span and effects negatively on emotional health. Similarly, in another study, they focused on how in urban communities the use of digital technology by preschool children replaced traditional play activities. The results showed that half of the children use digital devices two hours in their daily life which affects their sleep disturbances (40.7%), behavioral issues like restlessness (49.6%) (Nath, Paul & Sayeda, 2024).

Apart from that, the results came up with one important fact that is urban architecture plans. Parents said that in Dhaka city, the architecture plans are not child-friendly. There are so many buildings which are made focusing on the outer look but there are not enough spaces for children where they can play freely. The result indicates that children, due to lack of space, play indoor games at home and they do not get the chance to interact with other children playing outside with the neighboring children. Even one father suggested that before building apartments, there should be a design where there will be common spaces for children where children can play safely and interact with other children. It will create a huge impact on children's development.

However, participants from FGD shared their concern regarding the competitive lifestyle of urban life which is creating limitations to children's natural growth. According to them, nowadays when a child is admitted to pre-school suddenly there starts a competition. Parents put pressure on the

children that they have to do many things at once. This tendency suppresses the creativity and development of children.

Conclusion

This study titled “Urban Parents’ Views on Play as A Tool for Children’s Emotional Expression” explored the perceptions of parents regarding play as a medium through which children express their emotions. The findings indicate that urban parents have a general basic knowledge and understanding of play. Moreover, the participants are well aware of the importance and benefits of play in children’s physical, cognitive, language, social-emotional development. All the participants agreed that children (ages 3-5 years) naturally express their emotions during play. This suggests that parents are aware of the connection of play and children’s emotional expression. Findings also revealed that there are some creative ways such as music, singing, dancing, drawing and cuddling through which children of these ages express their emotions. However, despite having knowledge of play and children’s emotional expression, findings revealed a gap between parents’ awareness and actual practices of play-based activities with their children. All the participants agreed that play provides opportunities for emotional expression, however majority of them mentioned that they have never intentionally used play as a strategy to teach children emotions or support children’s emotional development. Only three parents reported that they once taught their child kindness, empathy and sharing during play. This suggests that although parents are aware of play’s importance, they may not have the proper understanding or guidance of how play can be used purposefully to teach children emotions.

Apart from that, the study identifies several challenges faced by parents to provide meaningful play time for their children. Lack of time due to busy work schedules and lack of free spaces were the most frequently reported challenges. In addition to that, the use of television, excessive screen

time emerged as another risk for children that limits their play. Moreover, the study identified the impact of urban lifestyles which is creating limitations to children's emotional expression and creativity. The results revealed that the competitive nature of urban society creates pressure on both parents and children. As a result, children are having less opportunities to do creative, imaginative play that helps to facilitate emotional expression.

To sum up, it can be said that although urban parents recognize the importance of play and the connection between play and children's emotional expression, purposeful use of play for supporting children's emotional expression remains limited. Moreover, working on the challenges and barriers that are faced by urban parents in providing playtime may help create and facilitate a more supportive environment for children's emotional well-being.

Recommendations

The following are some recommendations that are based on the results of the study.

- Parental awareness programs, workshops should be introduced based on play as a medium through which children express their emotions so that parents can get aware and learn strategies to support their children's emotional regulation and expression.
- Parents including both father and mother should be encouraged to include even a short period of regular playtime with their children because lack of time was identified as the major challenge for parents in this study.
- Create access to child-friendly free spaces in urban areas. Since lack of free spaces was identified as a big challenge for parents regarding children's play, the government, architects, urban planners and local community should work together

to create playgrounds, open fields for children so that they can engage in recreational activities.

- Limit screen time and encourage active play. Excessive use of digital device, TV screens was found as a barrier to children's playtime that also has an impact on expressing emotions. Thus, urban parents should replace the screen time with some creative, interactive activities for children so that they can facilitate children's emotional expression and wellbeing.
- A similar study should be conducted on a larger population that may include parents from rural areas and more diverse samples to get the bigger picture in terms of the perceptions and practices of parents regarding play as a tool for children's emotional expression.

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Appendices

Appendix-1: Demographic Information of the Participants

Demographic Information (IDI)

Serial	Name	Age	Educational Qualification	Occupation	Child's Age	Child's Gender	Location of Residence
1. Mother	A	32	MBBS, MPH	Physician	3	Female	Banasree
2. Mother	B	32	Bachelors	Freelance Architect	4	Male	Dhanmondi
3. Mother	C	33	MPH	Job Holder	5	Female	Banasree
4. Father	X	34	MBBS	Physician	3	Female	Banasree
5. Father	Y	38	MSc.	Data Engineer	4.5	Male	Khilgaon
6. Father	Z	45	BSc.	Engineer	5	Female	Khilgaon

Demographic Information (FGD)

Serial	Name	Age	Educational Qualification	Occupation	Child's Age	Child's Gender	Location of Residence
1. Mother	A	42	MBBS	Physician	3	Female	Mugda
2. Mother	B	31	Masters	Corporate job holder	4	Female	Gulshan
3. Mother	C	32	Bachelor of Architecture	Freelance Architect	4	Male	Dhanmondi
4. Mother	D	35	Masters	Homemaker	5	Female	Khilgaon
5. Father	E	37	Masters	Corporate Job holder	5	Male	Banasree
6. Father	F	40	Masters	Businessman	5	Male	Gulshan
7. Father	G	38	Masters	Data Engineer	4.5	Male	Khilgaon
8. Father	H	45	Bsc.	Engineer	5	Female	Khilgaon

Appendix-2: Research Tools

In-depth Interview Questionnaire

In-Depth Interview (IDI) Guideline (English):

Research Title: Urban Parents' Views on Play as A Tool of Children's Emotional Expression

Demographic Information		
Date of Interview:	Start Time:	End Time:
Location: _____		
Name of the Participant: _____		
Age: _____ Educational Qualification: _____ Occupation: _____		
Age of children: _____ Gender of Children: _____		

Theme 1: Understanding of Play

Goal: Explore how parents define and value play

1. What comes to your mind when you hear “play”? What is play according to you?
2. Do you think play is important for children? Why or why not?
3. What kinds of play activities does your child enjoy most?
4. In your opinion, can play be a means of learning for children?

Theme 2: Perception of Emotional Expression in Children

Goal: Understand parents' awareness of children's emotions

5. How does your child usually express emotions like happiness, anger, or sadness?
6. What signs or behaviours help you understand how your child is feeling? Can you share an example of a time your child expressed a strong emotion?
7. Do you think children at this age (3–5) can clearly express their emotions? Why or why not?

Theme 3: Role of Play in Emotional Expression

Goal: Link play with emotional understanding and expression

8. Do you think play helps children express their emotions? How?
9. Have you noticed your child expressing feelings during play? Can you give examples?
10. What kinds of play (e.g., pretend play, drawing, physical play) seem to bring out emotions most?

11. Are there any other ways(e.g. singing, cuddling or anything) you think is easy for children to express their emotions?
12.How important is play compared to talking when it comes to emotional expression for children?

Theme 4: Parental Involvement in Play

Goal: Explore how parents participate and guide play

13. How often do you play with your child? What kind of activities do you do together?
14.What role do you usually take during play (observer, participant, guide)?
15.What challenges do you face when engaging in play with your child? Is there any way you overcome those challenges? If yes, how?

সাক্ষাৎকারের প্রশ্ন (বাংলা):

শিরোনাম: শহুরে অভিভাবকদের দৃষ্টিভঙ্গি: শিশুদের আবেগ প্রকাশের একটি মাধ্যম হিসেবে খেলা

থিম ১: খেলাধুলা সম্পর্কে ধারণা

উদ্দেশ্য: অভিভাবকেরা খেলাধুলাকে কীভাবে সংজ্ঞায়িত করেন এবং এর গুরুত্ব কীভাবে দেখেন তা জানা

- ১। “খেলা” শব্দটি শুনলে আপনার মনে কী আসে? আপনার মতে খেলা কী?
২। আপনি কি মনে করেন শিশুদের জন্য খেলা গুরুত্বপূর্ণ? কেন বা কেন নয়?
৩। আপনার শিশুটি কোন ধরনের খেলাধুলা সবচেয়ে বেশি পছন্দ করে?
৪। আপনার মতে, খেলা কি শিশুদের শেখার একটি মাধ্যম হতে পারে?

থিম ২: শিশুদের আবেগ প্রকাশ সম্পর্কে ধারণা

উদ্দেশ্য: শিশুদের আবেগ সম্পর্কে অভিভাবকদের সচেতনতা বোঝা

- ৫। আপনার শিশু সাধারণত আনন্দ, রাগ বা দুঃখের মতো আবেগ কীভাবে প্রকাশ করে?
৬। কোন লক্ষণ বা আচরণ দেখে আপনি বুঝতে পারেন আপনার শিশু কী অনুভব করছে? এমন কোনো ঘটনার উদাহরণ দিতে পারেন কি, যখন আপনার শিশু খুব শক্তিশালী কোনো আবেগ প্রকাশ করেছিল?
৭। আপনি কি মনে করেন এই বয়সের (৩-৫ বছর) শিশুরা তাদের আবেগ স্পষ্টভাবে প্রকাশ করতে পারে? কেন বা কেন নয়?

থিম ৩: আবেগ প্রকাশে খেলাধুলার ভূমিকা

উদ্দেশ্য: খেলাধুলা কীভাবে আবেগ বোঝা ও প্রকাশের সঙ্গে সম্পর্কিত তা জানা

- ৮। আপনি কি মনে করেন খেলাধুলা শিশুদের আবেগ প্রকাশে সাহায্য করে? কীভাবে?
৯। আপনি কি কখনো লক্ষ্য করেছেন যে আপনার শিশু খেলাধুলার সময় তার অনুভূতি প্রকাশ করছে? উদাহরণ দিতে পারেন কি?
১০। কোন ধরনের খেলা (যেমন অভিনয়ধর্মী খেলা, আঁকাআঁকি, শারীরিক খেলা) আবেগ প্রকাশকে সবচেয়ে বেশি প্রকাশ করে বলে মনে হয়?
১১। খেলাধুলা ছাড়াও আর কী কী উপায়ে (যেমন গান গাওয়া, আদর করা বা অন্য কিছু) শিশুদের জন্য আবেগ প্রকাশ করা সহজ হয় বলে আপনি মনে করেন?
১২। শিশুদের আবেগ প্রকাশের ক্ষেত্রে কথা বলার তুলনায় খেলাধুলা কতটা গুরুত্বপূর্ণ বলে আপনি মনে করেন?

থিম ৪: খেলাধুলায় অভিভাবকের অংশগ্রহণ

উদ্দেশ্য: অভিভাবকেরা কীভাবে খেলাধুলায় অংশ নেন ও দিকনির্দেশনা দেন তা জানা

১৩। আপনি কত ঘন ঘন আপনার শিশুর সঙ্গে খেলেন? আপনারা একসঙ্গে কী ধরনের কার্যক্রম করেন?

১৪। খেলাধুলার সময় আপনি সাধারণত কী ভূমিকা পালন করেন (পর্যবেক্ষক, অংশগ্রহণকারী, নাকি নির্দেশদাতা)?

১৫। আপনার শিশুর সঙ্গে খেলায় অংশ নিতে গিয়ে কী ধরনের চ্যালেঞ্জের মুখোমুখি হন? সেগুলো কাটিয়ে ওঠার কোনো উপায় আছে কি? যদি থাকে, কীভাবে?

Focus Group Discussion Questionnaire

Focus Group Discussion (FGD) Guideline (English):

Research Title: Urban Parents' Views on Play as A Tool of Children's Emotional Expression

Serial	Name	Age	Educational Qualification	Occupation	Child's Age	Child's Gender	Location of Residence
1.							
2.							
3.							
4.							
5.							
6.							
7.							
8.							

Theme 1: General Perception of Play

1. When you hear the word “play,” what comes to your mind?
2. What kinds of play do your children usually enjoy?
3. In your opinion, how important is play in a child's daily life?
4. Do you think play is mainly for fun, learning, or something else?

Theme 2: Understanding Children's Emotions

5. How do children aged 3–5 usually express their emotions?
6. Do you find it easy or difficult to understand your child's feelings? Why?
7. How do you usually respond when your child shows strong emotions (e.g., anger, sadness)?

Theme 3: Play as a Tool for Emotional Expression

8. Do you think children express their emotions during play? How?
9. What types of play (e.g., pretend play, drawing, games) help children express emotions more? Is there any other way for children to express emotions?

Theme 4: Parental Role in Play

10. Do you play with your child? If yes, what kind of activities do you do?
11. Do you guide your child during play or let them play freely? Why?
12. Have you ever used play intentionally to teach your child about emotions?
13. What are the main barriers you face in providing playtime for your child? (e.g., lack of space, time, safety, screens)?
14. How do work schedules impact your interaction with your child?
15. Do you feel urban life limits or enhances your child's creativity and emotional expression? How?

ফোকাসড গ্রুপ ডিসকাশন প্রশ্নাবলি:

থিম ১: খেলা সম্পর্কে সাধারণ ধারণা

১. “খেলা” শব্দটি শুনলে আপনার মনে কী আসে?
২. আপনার সন্তান সাধারণত কী ধরনের খেলাধুলা করতে পছন্দ করে?
৩. আপনার মতে, একটি শিশুর দৈনন্দিন জীবনে খেলার গুরুত্ব কতটা? কেন?
৪. আপনি কি মনে করেন খেলা মূলত আনন্দের জন্য, শেখার জন্য, নাকি অন্য কিছু জন্ম?

থিম ২: শিশুদের আবেগ বোঝা

৫. ৩-৫ বছর বয়সী শিশুরা সাধারণত কীভাবে তাদের আবেগ প্রকাশ করে?
৬. আপনার সন্তানের অনুভূতি বোঝা কি আপনার জন্য সহজ নাকি কঠিন? কেন?
৭. আপনার সন্তান যখন তীব্র আবেগ (যেমন রাগ, দুঃখ) প্রকাশ করে, তখন আপনি সাধারণত কীভাবে প্রতিক্রিয়া জানান?

থিম ৩: আবেগ প্রকাশের মাধ্যম হিসেবে খেলা

৮. আপনি কি মনে করেন শিশুরা খেলার মাধ্যমে তাদের আবেগ প্রকাশ করে? কীভাবে?
৯. কোন ধরনের খেলা (যেমন অভিনয়ভিত্তিক খেলা, আঁকাআঁকি, বিভিন্ন গেম) শিশুদের আবেগ প্রকাশে বেশি সাহায্য করে? আবেগপ্রকাশের অন্য কোনো উপায় কি আছে?

থিম ৪: খেলায় অভিভাবকের ভূমিকা

১০. আপনি কি আপনার সন্তানের সঙ্গে খেলেন? যদি খেলেন, তাহলে কী ধরনের কার্যক্রম করেন?
১১. আপনি কি খেলার সময় আপনার সন্তানকে নির্দেশনা দেন, নাকি স্বাধীনভাবে খেলতে দেন? কেন?
১২. আপনি কি কখনও ইচ্ছাকৃতভাবে খেলার মাধ্যমে আপনার সন্তানকে আবেগ সম্পর্কে শেখানোর চেষ্টা করেছেন?
১৩. আপনার সন্তানের জন্য খেলার সময় নিশ্চিত করতে প্রধান বাধাগুলো কী কী? (যেমন জায়গার অভাব, সময়ের অভাব, নিরাপত্তা, স্ক্রিনের ব্যবহার ইত্যাদি)
১৪. কাজের সময়সূচি আপনার সন্তানের সঙ্গে আপনার মিথস্ক্রিয়াকে কীভাবে প্রভাবিত করে?
১৫. আপনি কি মনে করেন শহুরে জীবন আপনার সন্তানের সৃজনশীলতা ও আবেগ প্রকাশকে সীমিত করে নাকি উন্নত করে? কীভাবে?

Appendix 3: Consent Form

Informed Consent Form:

Title of the Research: Urban Parents' Views on Play as A Tool of Children's Emotional Expression

Researcher's Name: Asfina Akram

Purpose of the Research: I am conducting this research as a part of my master's degree requirement from the Institution of Educational Development (IED), BRAC University. The aim of the research is to explore the perceptions of urban parents on play as a tool for children's emotional expression.

Expectation from the Participants: If you agree, you will be expected to share information regarding your views on children's play also, sharing information regarding your practice and observation of playing with children to support their emotional expression.

Risks and Benefits: There is no direct or indirect risk to you or your children for participating in this study.

Privacy, Anonymity and Confidentiality: All the information collected from you will remain strictly confidential. The researcher would be happy to answer any of your queries regarding the study and you are welcomed to contact with the researcher.

Future use of Information: Some of the information collected from this study may be kept for future use. However, in such cases information and data supplied to other researchers, will not conflict with or violate the maintenance of privacy, anonymity and confidentiality of information identifying participants in any way.

Voluntary Participation: Participation in this study is completely voluntary. It is up to the participant to decide whether to take part in this study. If the participant decides to be a part in this study, s/he will be required to sign a consent form. After signing the consent form, the participant is still free to withdraw at any point without giving a reason. Withdrawing from this study will not affect the relationship the participant has, if any, with the researcher. If the

participant withdraws from the study after the data collection is completed, the data will be returned to the participant or destroyed. Thanks for cooperating in this study. For any query, please contact the researcher at asfina.akram22@gmail.com

Consent:

I understand the aforementioned information and got the opportunity to ask questions. I understand that my participation is completely voluntary and that I am free to withdraw any point of the research without giving a reason.

Participant's Name & Signature: _____ Date: _____

Researcher's Signature: _____ Date: _____