
ASSESSMENT OF THE INFLUENCE OF PLAY EQUIPMENT ON CHILD DEVELOPMENT IN PRESCHOOLS IN LAFIA, NIGERIA'S LOCAL GOVERNMENT AREA

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Abstract: This study assessed the influence of play equipment on child development in preschools in the Lafia Local Government of Nasarawa State, Nigeria. The study design was descriptive survey research design. This design was used because the study was set to harvest the opinion of teachers and parents on the role of play equipment in child development. The study population comprised all teachers and parents of preschools in Lafia Local Government Area. Convenient sampling technique was used to select 110 teachers and parents for the study. Four research questions were developed to guide the study. Descriptive statistics of percentage and mean were used to answer the research questions. The findings revealed that play equipment influences a child's intellectual development, manipulation skills, and ability helps the child to be active and lively. It was concluded that play equipment has a significant positive influence on children's developmental stages. Recommendations were made that parents, preschools and the society at large should strive to make available play equipment for the use of children from very tender age, and the government should allow more importation of play equipment and encourage the manufacture of locally made toys by providing an enabling environment for manufacturers.

Keywords: Play Equipment, Child Development, Preschool Education, Lafia Local Government, Nigeria

Introduction

Early childhood generally comprises the first eight years of an individual's life. The education given during these years of child's life plays a very significant role and helps in proper growth and development of children (Lee, 2016). The United Nations High Commission for Human Rights has recognized play as a right of every child because it is so important to optimal child development. This birthright is challenged by forces such as child labor and exploitation practices, war and neighborhood violence, and limited resources available to children living in poverty (Mahoney, 2016).

However, even children who are fortunate enough to have abundant resources and who live in relative peace may not be receiving the full benefits of play. Many of these children are being raised in an increasingly hurried

and pressured style that may limit the protective benefits they would gain from CDP (Hart, 2016). Every child deserves the opportunity to develop to their unique potential. Child advocates must consider all factors that delay optimal development and press for circumstances that allow each child to fully reap the advantages associated with play (Eccles, 2016; Tassoni, 2018).

Play is seen as the child's way of learning. Through play, children receive information from the surrounding environment to use in their physical and mental development. Through play, children learn and develop as individuals, and as members of the community (Shonkoff, 2020; Nicholson, 2021). The developmental benefits of play include creativity and imagination, problem-solving, discovery and reasoning, symbolic thought, and the ability to cooperate. Play can be defined as freely chosen, personally directed, and intrinsically motivated behavior that actively engages the child (Perry, 2021).

Nearly all children engage in play activities regardless of nationality or cultural background. Play is important for children because it is enjoyable; there is value in play merely for the joy of doing so, and children need not have particular goals in mind to have fun. However, play also can be a rich vehicle for children to develop divergent thinking, language, abstract thought, conversation, and problem solving skills. While the outdoors is often viewed as a place principally for non-goal directed play, the outdoors can be just as supportive of the same variety of developmental skills as indoor play. Therefore, the outdoor physical environment should be designed to support the full spectrum of children's play (Bergen, 2022).

Decades of research have shown that play is an important mediator in young children's physical, social, cognitive, and language development. In spite of this, Nigeria faces many pressures. The growing emphasis on standards, assessment, and accountability in schools has reduced outdoor and active physical play. Play has been all but eliminated in many schools and centers to make room for quieter academic learning (Stipek, 2016). In public school settings, preschools and kindergartens have become particularly regimented and adult-directed, with teachers feeling compelled to increase literacy and numeracy instruction at the expense of play time (Golinkoff, 2014). Passive television viewing and the use of other media are also replacing active play and have even been found to distract young infants (Schmidt, 2018).

Play allows children to use their creativity while developing their imagination, dexterity, and physical, cognitive, and emotional strength. Play is important for healthy brain development. Through play, children at a very early age involve and interact with the world around them. Play allows children to create and explore a world they can master, conquering their fears while practicing adult roles. (Lee, 2016).

Play helps children develop new proficiencies that lead to enhanced confidence and the resiliency they will need to face future challenges as the master their world.. Directionless play allows children to learn how to work in groups, share, negotiate, and resolve conflicts, as well as self-advocacy skills (Perry, 2021). Play is seen as the business of the child. Through play, children learn, discover, and build within an environment that is open to manipulation. Children need physical environments that will support and promote their play process (Lee, 2016; Kate, 2016).

Playgrounds play an important role in the modern world of children. The ideal outdoor playground for today's urban children should be a replica of natural outdoor environment. They should also inspire physical, social,

emotional, mental and creative play (Schneider, 2019). Playgrounds also need to allow children to experiment and control the environment that will offer an active learning atmosphere for facilitating their knowledge construction. Through the use of the playground equipment, the child develops spatial and visual perception. Today's playgrounds have little value in terms of play. The traditional type of playground equipment does not provide creative opportunities for children to play in unimagined ways and does not provide enough challenge. These types of playground structures are enjoyable to use but they do not allow children to practice their creative abilities because of repetitive actions. Children quickly get bored of inflexible and fixed playground structures. Traditional playground equipment is designed for the development of children's motor skills. As previously stated, the design of playground equipment should promote the intellectually, socially, emotionally and physical development of the child. Therefore, this study focuses on the influence of play equipment on child development in preschools in the Lafia Local Government Area of Nasarawa State.

Statement of the problem

Children at present are different from children a decade ago. Since the modern city environment surrounds the child with a metal, concrete, and glass world, the need for constructing outdoor environments for children arose. Even though today, play patterns are directly affected by changing family life styles and technological development, the benefits to children are still what they were 100 years ago. Nonetheless, 21st century public playgrounds represent a limited aspect of children's play needs. Today's kids grow up faster and stay young longer. The play structures that used to attract kids in the 1970s are now used only a little by 8- year olds. A 10-year-old only plays when there is no other option. There is a need for play equipment to be sufficiently challenging and interesting. Another aspect of changing life styles that affects the quality of play is that children are more obese than ever, and studies have shown that these children are less likely to engage with play equipment. The primary inhibitor of play for children is their passive and uncreative way of spending their time with other things. It prevents children from engaging in social interactions, abstract thinking, creativity, and play. This study aimed to assess the influence of play equipment on child development in preschools in the Lafia Local Government Area of Nasarawa State, Nigeria.

Purpose of the study:

This study aimed to assess the influence of play equipment on child development in preschools in the Lafia Local Government Area of Nasarawa State. Specifically, the objectives of the study are as follows:

1. establish if play equipment has any influence on children's intellectual development.
2. ascertain if play equipment helps in gross motor ability.
3. determine if play equipment influences children's manipulative skills.
4. investigate if play equipment makes children active.

Research Questions

This study answered the following research questions.

1. What is the influence of play equipment on a child's intellectual development?
2. What is the influence of play equipment on a child's gross motor ability?
3. What is the influence of play equipment on a child's manipulative skills?

4. What is the influence of play equipment on making the child more active and lively?

Methodology

This study employed a survey research design to assess the influence of play equipment on child development. The survey research design is an accessible and efficient way for respondents to share their perspectives. It allows a researcher to collect structured data from individuals' groups to gain deeper insights into their thoughts, behaviors or experiences related to a topic (Anikweze, 2016). The study population consists of all preschool caregivers and parents of children in the Lafia Local Government area.

A convenient sampling technique was employed in this study. Convenient sampling is a non-probability sampling method where units are selected for inclusion in the sample because they are the easiest to access for researcher. This can be due to geographical proximity, availability at a given time, or willingness to participate in the research (Anikweze, 2016). The data gathering instrument consisted of a fixed- choice questionnaire. The questionnaire consisted of twenty (20) items related to play equipment and child development with different options. The responses were used to answer research questions from which valid decisions and conclusions were drawn. The research instrument was validated by research, measurement, and evaluation experts from the Federal University of Lafia, Nigeria. Their comments and suggestions led to the refinement of the precision of the instrument. This ensures the relevance of the questionnaire to the research topic. Therefore, a logical validity index of 0.84 was obtained. A pilot study established a reliability coefficient of 0.75 for the instrument. The researcher personally administrated the instrument to all the preschool caregivers and parents after full explanation of the contents to the participants. The instrument was collected on the spot, thereby leading to high return and usability. A total number of 110 questionnaires were distributed. The entire questionnaire was administered accordingly, while five questionnaires were either incorrectly filled or not returned. The collected data were answered using descriptive statistics of simple percentage and mean.

Results

Research question 1: What is the influence of play equipment on a child's intellectual development?

Table 1: Responses on the Influence of Play Equipment on the Intellectual Development of a Child

Variable	Strongly Agreed	%	Agreed	%	Disagreed	%	Strongly Disagree	%	Total	%
1	55	52.4	41	39.0	5	4.8	4	3.8	105	100
2	48	45.7	45	47.9	10	9.5	2	1.9	105	100
3	43	41.0	47	44.8	14	13.3	1	1.0	105	100
4	6	5.7	30	28.6	38	36.2	31	29.5	105	100
5	22	21.0	64	61.0	13	12.4	6	5.7	105	100
Total	174	33.16	227	43.26	80	15.24	42	8.38	105	100

Means x 34.8 33.16 45.4 43.26 16.0 15.24 8.4 8.38 105 100

Table 1 shows that 34.8% of the respondents strongly agreed that play equipment influence intellectual development of a child, 45.4% agreed with the notion, 16.0 % disagreed with the view, and 8.4% strongly disagreed.

Research question 2: What is the influence of play equipment on a child's gross motor ability?

Table 2: Responses on the influence of play equipment on the child's gross motor ability.

Variable	Strongly Agreed	%	Agreed	%	Disagreed	%	Strongly Disagree	%	Total	%
6	22	21.0	61	58.1	10	9.5	2	1.9	105	100
7	18	17.1	78	74.3	6	5.7	3	2.9	105	100
8	16	15.3	83	79.0	5	4.8	1	1.0	105	100
	16	15.2	81	77.1	5	4.8	3	2.9	105	100
10	14	13.3	72	68.6	11	10.5	8	7.6	105	100
Total	90	16.36	375	71.42	37	35.3	17	16.3	105	100
Means x	18.0	16.36	75.5	71.42	7.4	35.3	3.4	16.3	105	100

Table 2 shows that 18.0% strongly agreed with the notion that play equipment helps the gross motor ability of a child, while 75.5 agreed, 7.4 disagreed, and 3.4 strongly disagreed that play equipment does not help the gross motor ability of a child.

Research Question 3: What is the influence of play equipment on a child's manipulative skills?

Table 3: Responses on influence of Play Equipment on a child's Manipulative Skills.

Variable	Strongly Agreed	%	Agreed	%	Disagreed	%	Strongly Disagree	%	Total	%
11	25	23.8	75	71.4	2	1.9	3	2.9	105	100
12	19	18.1	77	73.3	8	7.6	1	1.0	105	100
13	19	18.1	79	75.2	5	4.8	2	1.9	105	100
14	14	13.3	88	83.8	2	1.9	1	1.0	105	100
15	14	13.3	73	69.5	11	10.5	5	4.8	105	100
Total	91	17.32	392	74.64	28	5.34	12	2.32	105	100
Mean	18.2	17.32	78.4	74.64	5.6	5.34	2.4	2.32	105	100

Table 3 shows that 18.2 strongly agree with the notion that play equipment has an influence on a child's manipulation skills, whereas 78.4 agreed, 5.6 disagreed and 2.4 strongly disagreed that play equipment has no influence on a child's manipulative skills.

Research question 4: What is the influence of play equipment on making children active and lively?

Table 4: Responses on Influence of Play Equipment on making Children Active and Lively.

Variable	Strongly Agreed	%	Agreed	%	Disagreed	%	Strongly disagreed	%	Total	%
16	18	17.1	65	61.9	19	18.1	3	2.9	105	100
17	16	15.2	75	71.4	14	13.3	0	0.0	105	100
18	11	10.5	79	75.2	15	14.3	0	0.0	105	100
19	11	10.5	65	61.9	26	24.8	3	2.9	105	100
20	4	3.8	16	15.2	44	41.9	39	37.1	105	100
Total	60	11.42	300	57.12	118	22.48	45	8.58	105	100
Mean	12.0	11.42	60.0	57.12	23.6	22.48	9.0	8.58	105	100

Table 4 shows that 12.0 of the respondents strongly agreed with the notion that play equipment helps the child to be active and lively, while 60.0 agreed, 23.6 disagreed, and 9.0 strongly disagreed with the notion that play equipment does not help the child to be active and lively.

Discussion of the Findings

The results of the research on preschools teachers and parents reveal that play equipment play a crucial role in the intellectual development of children right from a very tender age. This assertion supports the view expressed by Stipek (2016) that play materials help children acquire important concepts of the world around them. Therefore, Play equipment plays a significant role in a child's total development. A preschool that is well equipped with play equipment will enhance a child's overall development. The researcher Personal observation shows that the majority of the parents who put their children in preschools are interested in the quality of the play equipment at such centers, as they know it will have a positive influence on their children intellectual development.

The findings of this study further affirmed the findings of Hart (2016) and Kate (2016) who stated that the display of certain play equipment in the form of hangings will help children develop muscles in large and small movement. Parents will not happy to have a child who cannot move or hold any play equipment or object that can facilitate gross motor ability in children.

Moreover, play equipment influences child manipulative skills. This agrees with Lee (2016) submission that the ability of a child to bend down from the waist to pick up toys, roll and throw a ball, and hold drink from a cup with or without help from adults will help with manipulative skills.

A correlation has been found between play equipment and manipulative skills of children. Exposure to various types of play equipment helps to a great extent the manipulative skills of a child. Based on the outcome of the researcher's findings, play equipment plays a great deal in helping a child's mood. The majority of the respondents agreed that play equipment helps a child to be active and playful and brings out their strength, especially when they have more toys to play with. Therefore, play remains a key way in which children learn and socialize.

Conclusion

Based on the findings of this study, play equipment has a significant positive influence on the developmental stages of children. Parent, caregivers and society in general should make environment conducive and

fascinating by providing equipment that is capable of helping children to grow in their intellect, manipulative skills, gross motor movement, and activities. Not forgetting the human resources as these children need an adult to guard and build them in the use and manipulation of the toys or play equipment within their reach.

Recommendations

Based on the findings of this study, the following recommendations were made:

1. Parents, preschools and the society at large should strive to make available play equipment for the use of children from very tender age.
2. The parents, preschools, and the society at large should work harmoniously together for the children's emotional and mental development.
3. Government, non-governmental organizations, and philanthropists should all rally around in crusading the importance of play equipment in the development of children and providing such equipment for poor homes and preschools.
4. A regular visit and supervision by the Ministry of Education and Women's Affairs, which oversees the establishment of preschools, should be encouraged.
5. The government should allow more importation of play equipment and encourage the manufacture of locally made toys by providing an enabling environment for manufacturers.

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