

Journey to Early Development: Insights from Mothers, Teachers, and Administrators on Playgroups for Children Aged 0-36 Months

Buket YASLI KUTLUCA^a, Tuğba ABANOZ^{b*}

^a Specialist, Türkiye Ministry of National Education, <https://orcid.org/0009-0007-0968-0611>

^b Assistant Professor, Ankara University, <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-8905-4002> *tugbabaskent@gmail.com / tabanoz@ankara.edu.tr

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Abstract

The study investigates playgroups for children aged 0 to 36 months from the perspectives of mothers, educators, and administrators, using the snowball sampling method, involving 32 mothers, 10 teachers, and 12 administrators. Findings, derived through content analysis as a qualitative research method, indicate that mothers enroll their children in playgroups primarily for socialization and kindergarten preparation, often prioritizing the physical space, and they generally have positive opinions about these groups. Teachers, on the other hand, enjoy working in playgroups because they get to interact with younger children, and the environment provides them with more positive experiences. Playgroups are established by administrators in alignment with the views of mothers and teachers, with the intention of preparing children for kindergarten. Interestingly, while mothers tend to prioritize the physical setting over the educational content when choosing playgroups, the majority of administrators highlight the educational program as one of the strengths of these groups.

Keywords: Playgroup, play, early childhood

Erken Gelişime Yolculuk: 0–36 Aylık Çocuklara Yönelik Oyun Gruplarına Dair Anne, Öğretmen ve Yönetici Görüşleri

Öz

Bu çalışma, 0-36 aylık çocuklara yönelik oyun gruplarına ilişkin anne, öğretmen ve yönetici bakış açılarını incelemektedir. Kartopu örnekleme yöntemi kullanılarak 32 anne, 10 öğretmen ve 12 yöneticiyle veri toplanmıştır. Nitel bir araştırma yöntemi olarak içerik analiziyle elde edilen bulgular, annelerin çocuklarını oyun gruplarına ağırlıklı olarak sosyalleşme ve anaokuluna hazırlık amacıyla kaydettiklerini göstermektedir. Anneler genellikle oyun grubu seçiminde fiziksel ortamı eğitsel içerikten daha çok önemsemekte ve bu gruplar hakkında genel olarak olumlu görüş bildirmektedir. Öğretmenler ise daha küçük yaşta çocuklarla çalışma imkânı ve ortamın sağladığı olumlu deneyimler nedeniyle oyun gruplarında çalışmaktan memnuniyet duymaktadır. Yöneticiler, oyun gruplarını hem annelerin hem öğretmenlerin görüşleriyle örtüşecek şekilde, çocukları anaokuluna hazırlamak amacıyla kurduklarını belirtmişlerdir. Ancak dikkat çekici bir farklılık da ortaya çıkmıştır: Anneler oyun grubu seçiminde fiziksel çevreye öncelik verirken, yöneticiler bu grupların en güçlü yönü olarak eğitsel programı öne çıkarmaktadır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Oyun grubu, oyun, erken çocukluk,

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INTRODUCTION

Social play in early childhood helps children develop cognitive, psychomotor, linguistic, and socio-emotional skills through peer interactions (Stone & La Greca, 1986). Children interact with their peers during play. Children build, maintain, and respond to relationships with other people through both vocal and nonverbal forms of communication (Ökcün, 2008). Playgroups offer a setting where these accomplishments can occur. Armstrong et al. (2020) define playgroups as community initiatives aimed at promoting child development, fostering family and community ties, and supporting parenting strategies.

Unlike daycare, childcare, or preschool, where children are cared for by others, playgroups enable parents to stay, engage with their children, support play, and socialize with other adults (Sincovich et al., 2020). Parental involvement, highlighted by the Preschool Playgroups Association (PPA, 1989), distinguishes playgroups from daycare, with research increasingly affirming the positive impact of maternal care on child development (Strange et al., 2014). Initially created to address the lack of nursery education, playgroups are now recognized by the PPA (Statham & Brophy, 2006) as a valid option emphasizing parental involvement and family support, rather than merely a low-cost alternative to early childhood education. In a four-year study on preschool playgroups, Statham and Brophy (1991) analyzed the role of playgroups in relation to other early childhood services. Their findings revealed that among families using playgroups, the highest proportion of fathers were employed in low-skilled manual jobs in rural areas, while the lowest proportion were in professional or managerial occupations. Additionally, they found that single-parent households accounted for one in five of the families using playgroups, with this pattern being significantly more common in urban areas.

In the literature, playgroups are often referred to as pre-kindergarten programs, aimed at easing children's transition from home to school (Stephens, 1996). These programs are popular and typically serve to children aged 3–4, with participation starting as early as 6 months. A playgroup model that was first established in the United States in the 1970s was introduced to Türkiye in the early 2000s with the aim of franchising. This marked the beginning of playgroups in Türkiye, primarily taking the form of play and music workshops (<https://www.gymboreeclasses.com.tr/>). In Türkiye, playgroups can be established in Ministry of National Education (MoNE) affiliated kindergartens or in nurseries and daycare centers under the Ministry of Family and Social Services (MoFSS), subject to meeting requirements and obtaining a dealership agreement.

One could argue that children's playgroup teachers are their first teachers and the first setting outside of their homes where they deliberately interact. When parents and teachers collaborate, children feel and express themselves more positively (Sincovich et al., 2020). For children in the 0-36 months period, the role of educators is to give children in this age group the chance to experiment and thus help them develop themselves. Teachers' perspectives on play, their beliefs about children's learning, and their integration of play into the curriculum are crucial (Tuğrul et al., 2019).

The key to healthy development is the organization of the physical and social environment (Tuğrul et al., 2019). A positive childcare environment engages children through stimulating furniture, equipment, and toys, fostering learning and success. Playgroup administrators ensure this by organizing workshops, planning activities, and handling administrative tasks (Stephens, 1996). Administrators are trusted by parents as role models, offering support, reassurance, and fostering positive relationships through goal-oriented, family-centered approaches, empathy, cultural sensitivity, and effective communication. Strong leadership, cohesive staff, and teamwork are essential for managing playgroups (Williams et al., 2015).

Working with infants is generally less preferred by early childhood educators and teacher candidates, largely because those working with children aged 0–36 months are often perceived primarily as 'caregivers' rather than educators (Ünlü Çetin, 2019). This perception reduces the number of qualified teachers and institutions serving this age group. Playgroups address this issue by providing a well-prepared environment and qualified teachers, thereby maximizing infants' developmental outcomes and enhancing the overall effectiveness of early childhood education during this period. In the literature review -especially in Türkiye- no research on infancy and play groups was found. Recent research in Türkiye has predominantly focused on children's play behaviors in preschool settings, the quality of play environments, and the effects of play-based interventions on child development (Tuğrul et al., 2019; Pekşen Akça, 2020; Uçar & Durualp, 2023). This gap highlights the need to raise public awareness and enhance the competence of educators and administrators in playgroups. This study examines the operation, benefits, and challenges of the increasing number of playgroups while emphasizing the importance of infancy education. It focuses on playgroups for children aged 0-36 months from the perspectives of mothers, educators, and administrators, addressing key research questions:

1. What factors influence mothers' decisions, participation, and experiences with playgroups serving children aged 0–36 months?
2. What are the motivations, experiences, and perceived benefits of teachers working in playgroups serving children aged 0–36 months?
3. What are the motivations, considerations, and evaluations of institution administrators regarding the establishment and operation of playgroups?

METHOD

Research Design

The present study employed a qualitative research design to investigate the perspectives of mothers, educators, and administrators regarding playgroups for preschool children. The study is set up using the qualitative case study research model. A case study is regarded as a special method for addressing scientific questions. This research methodology can be applied when the goal of the study is to provide answers to questions like "what," "how," and "why," when participant conduct is uncontrollable, and when it's unclear how events relate to the contents (Yin, 2003).

Participants

One of the purposive sample techniques, the snowball technique, was used to construct the study group based on volunteerism. In this method, it is aimed to expand the data collection network by contacting other potential participants through the interviewed participants (Patton, 2002). This approach can be particularly useful for achieving greater diversity and depth among participants who share a specific characteristic or experience within a given community (Yıldırım & Şimşek, 2021). The researchers utilized the recommendations of interviewed participants to reach new individuals, thereby forming the study group through this method.

The study group included 32 mothers with children in MoNE, MoFSS, and Municipality-licensed playgroups, 10 teachers, and 12 administrators. Youngest child was 6 months old, and interviews were conducted with the mothers receiving playgroup services. Participant demographics are detailed in Table 1.

Table 1. Demographics of the Mothers, Teachers, and Administrators Participating in the Study

Participants		Mothers (f)	Teachers (f)	Principal (f)
Age	20-30 years	2	4	1
	30-40 years	30	6	11
Sex	Female	32	9	12
	Male		1	
Educational background	Open and distance education	1	1	4
	Associate degree	2	1	
	Undergraduate	21	7	8
	Master	8	1	

Table 2 details the playgroups that the mothers' children attended, the teachers who were employed, and the playgroups that the institution administrators established.

Table 2. Characteristics of playgroups

Organization type	f	Official Authorized Institution	License	Type of service	Lengths of service according to license
Playhouse	5	Municipality	Sanitary Workplace License	Playgroup and cafe	4, 2, or 1 year
Workshop	4	Ministry of Family and Social Services	Nursery and Day Care Center	Playgroup	11, 4, or 2 years
Preschool	1	Ministry of National Education	Preschool	Playgroup	3 years
Bookstore	1	Municipality	Sanitary workplace office	Playgroup and bookstore	4 years

Toy museum	1	Municipality	Sanitary workplace office	Play workshops	11 years
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Data Collection

Qualitative data are often gathered through focus groups, observations, narratives, interviews, and document analysis. This study utilized interviews, a common qualitative method, to collect verbal information on the research topic (Kılcal, 2010). Snowball sampling was employed to expand the sample by reaching out to contacts of mothers or teachers. Data were collected through semi-structured interview forms developed by the researcher based on a literature review. The forms were reviewed by five early childhood education experts and revised accordingly. Three versions were prepared for mothers, teachers, and administrators. The interview protocol included eight questions for mothers, eight for teachers, and seven for administrators. Each interview lasted up to 25 minutes, with an average duration of approximately 15 minutes. Interview were conducted by the researcher, audio-recorded with consent, and held at locations preferred by the participants.

Data Analysis

The study data were analyzed using content analysis, a systematic method for examining and interpreting text-based data. This approach identifies the content, patterns, and themes in written materials through semi-structured questions (Yıldırım & Şimşek, 2011). The process involves coding and categorizing data (Merriam, 2018). The researcher reviewed interview questions and responses to generate codes and organized categories to derive themes. The response categories were derived entirely from open-ended questions, allowing participants to express their views freely without being guided by predefined options.

In qualitative research, concepts such as credibility, result accuracy, and researcher expertise replace the reliability and validity criteria of quantitative research (Krefting, 1991). Guba and Lincoln (1982) emphasized credibility as a key focus over reliability and validity. To ensure validity, this study employed triangulation, detailed description, and debriefing (Creswell, 2016). Triangulation was achieved by diversifying data sources, incorporating multiple perspectives from mothers, teachers, and administrators. Participants were coded as M1, M2 (mothers), T1, T2 (teachers), and A1, A2 (administrators) during data analysis.

Research Ethics

The data collection was carried out confidentially with parents', teachers', and administrators' consents under the approval of the research ethics committee of Ankara University. The approval document number is 85434274-050.04.04.04/8168.

FINDINGS

In the following sections, the study's findings are discussed in alignment with the research questions and presented in a structured manner. In the table, the symbol 'f' represents the frequency with which specific expressions were observed in the participants' responses.

Findings Regarding Mothers' Perspectives on Playgroups

Table 3. Reasons for Mothers' Participation in Playgroups for Children Aged 0-36 Months

Theme	Category	Codes	Participants	n
Reasons for Participation in Playgroup	The Effect on Child Development	The Child's Socialization	M1, M2, M3, M4, M7, M8, M9, M10, M12, M13, M14, M15, M16, M17, M18, M19, M20, M21, M23, M24, M25, M26, M27, M28, M29, M30, M31	27
		Physical Development	M1, M2, M3, M6, M7, M8, M9, M10, M12, M13, M15, M16, M21, M22, M24, M27, M28, M31	18
		Cognitive Development	M1, M2, M3, M4, M8, M12, M16, M19, M20, M21, M28, M30, M31	13
		Language Development	M21	1
	The Impact on the Mother-Child Relationship	Mother-Child Communication	M2, M3, M5, M8, M9, M14, M16, M18, M19, M24, M27, M30, M31	15
		Being in the Same Environment with the Child	M5, M8, M9, M14, M19, M23, M24, M30	8

	Getting to Know the Child	M14, M22	2
	Sense of Trust	M3, M30	2
Preparation for Kindergarten	Psychological Preparation	M8, M12, M13, M15, M18, M19, M23, M24, M26, M27, M30	11
	Developmental Preparation	M9, M12, M15, M18, M23, M24, M27, M29	8

According to Table 3, mothers (n=27) primarily cited playgroups' supportive role in children's social and emotional development, emphasizing socialization as a key reason for attending. Below are mothers' direct quotes on socialization purposes:

(M10) *"To ensure that the child who does not go to kindergarten socializes with other children in the desired time period."*

(M31) *"I believe it has a great impact on my son's ability to communicate with his peers and socialize."*

This finding indicates that mothers view playgroups as crucial for children's social-emotional development. Playgroups help children socialize, have fun, explore new play and developmental opportunities (Armstrong et al., 2020), and prepare for school routines and transitions (Williams et al., 2018). In addition to the child's socialization, only one mother (M5) mentioned attending the playgroup for her own socialization, stating, *"...having a coffee, socializing with mothers in the same situation as me, exchanging ideas..."*. Notably, mothers did not discuss the playgroup's impact on their own socialization or development during the interviews.

The researcher observed that mothers often shared positive experiences during data collection. Literature highlights that playgroups offer mothers a social environment, enhance parenting skills, and provide insights into child development (Sincovich et al., 2020), while regular participation can also protect against poor social support outcomes by helping socially isolated parents build supportive networks (Hancock et al., 2015) de Roos et al. (2010) emphasized the importance of parental acceptance, peer connections, skill development, and the benefits of playgroups for children.

Table 4 displays the factors influencing mothers' playgroup selection decision for children aged 0-36 months.

Table 4. Factors Influencing Mothers' Playgroup Selection Decision

Theme	Category	Codes	Participants	n
Factors Influencing Playgroup Selection Decision	Physical Environment	Cleanliness	M1, M3, M4, M5, M6, M8, M9, M10, M15, M16, M17, M18, M22, M27, M31	15
		Materials	M6, M8, M10, M11, M13, M14, M15, M19, M21, M22, M29, M31	12
		Schoolyard	M3, M11, M13, M19, M23, M30	6
	Teacher Qualifications	Attitudes and Behaviors of Teachers	M2, M3, M4, M6, M9, M11, M12, M13, M14, M16, M17, M18, M19, M21, M22, M23, M24, M26, M27, M28, M29, M31	23
		Educational Background	M6, M13, M22	3
		Experience	M21	1
	Content	Learning Opportunities	M4, M6, M11, M18, M19	5
		Developmentally Appropriate Activities	M17, M20	2
		Integrated Activities	M5	1

Mothers prioritize the physical environment when choosing playgroups for their children, as highlighted in the quotes below:

(M10) *"For children in this age group, who tend to touch everything, cleanliness and hygiene are of utmost importance. Toys and materials must either be new or thoroughly cleaned."*

(M11) "A playgroup that actively utilizes the schoolyard, prefers natural materials, and offers options for selection on specific days of the week is considered more suitable for selection."

Another key factor in mothers' playgroup selection is teacher quality. Mothers prioritize warm, cheerful, and affectionate *attitudes and behaviors* of the teachers, as reflected in their preferences. This finding aligns with the literature. Sincovich et al. (2020) have stated that mothers in playgroups find it important for the teachers to intervene when they encounter new challenges, such as when they need support to complete a difficult task or resolve a conflict with another child. Since the playgroups included in the study are aimed at children aged 0-36 months, it is believed that mothers particularly prioritize teachers' attitudes of being warm and cheerful, especially for younger age groups. However, it can be stated that the educational content conducted in playgroups has the least influence on mothers' preferences for playgroups. Yet, a high-quality playgroup must have a well-structured system and integrated activities for children that are implemented meticulously (Lester & Russell, 2010).

The finding that mothers place little emphasis on playgroup activities contrasts with the literature. Fler (2013) found that families prefer institutions offering well-planned activities. In this study, mothers' focus on the physical environment may be attributed to the younger age of their children.

Table 5 indicates the mother's experience with playgroups serving children aged 0-36 months.

Table 5. Mothers' Experiences with Playgroups

Theme	Category	Codes	Participants	n
Experiences with Playgroups	Positive Experiences	The quality time shared between mother and child	M1, M3, M4, M5, M6, M8, M10, M12, M13, M14, M15, M17, M18, M20, M21, M22, M23, M24, M25, M26, M27, M29, M31	23
		The well-being of the child	M4, M8, M9, M11, M12, M15, M16, M17, M18, M19, M22, M24, M25, M28, M29, M30	16
		Peer learning	M2, M3, M5, M6, M7, M9, M11, M13, M16, M17, M19, M20, M21, M22, M23, M29, M31	17
		Play based learning	M3, M10, M20, M26, M27, M31	6
	Negative Experiences	Time constraint	M10, M14, M22, M31	4
		High cost	M5, M7, M10	3
		Being crowded	M14, M26	2
		Negative Approaches of the Teacher	M25, M27	2
		Lack of Resources in the Physical Environment	M19	1

Table 5 shows that that the interviews indicate that most mothers (f=56) reported positive experiences with playgroups, particularly valuing quality time with their children. This aligns with existing literature, such as a National Children's Bureau study in northern England, which found that approximately half of parents would still choose playgroups even if other care options were available (Statham & Brophy, 2006). Unlike daycare, childcare, or preschool settings—where children are typically cared for by professionals—playgroups are distinctive in that they allow parents to remain present, engage directly with their children, support their play, and interact socially with other adults (Sincovich et al., 2020). From this perspective, playgroups offer parents a valuable opportunity to spend quality time with their children in a shared environment.

The positive experiences mothers report regarding playgroups are particularly significant, as these settings may serve as a supportive context for early development prior to formal preschool attendance. Through playgroup participation, mothers can actively contribute to their children's developmental processes, potentially easing the transition to preschool and strengthening foundational skills in a familiar and emotionally secure environment.

It has been observed that mothers who share negative experiences often include positive feedback, suggesting their criticism may reflect requests for improvements. For instance, mother M22 shared her experiences with playgroups as follows:

"The critique is that the schedule within the college was a bit fast-paced. Towards the end, it felt as though we were rushing. Although we were there for about two to two and a half hours, activities changed every 20 minutes. It was as if we were constantly rushing to transition from one event to another, such as from mealtime to activities."

The study found that some mothers viewed playgroups as an opportunity for quality time with their children and often purchased materials similar to those encountered at the playgroups. This tendency, observed among mothers in professions such as doctors and engineers, aligns with existing literature suggesting that mothers with higher socioeconomic status are more likely to engage in such behaviors. Socioeconomic status is influenced by factors such as income, occupation, and education level.

Seban and Perdeci (2016) highlighted that higher economic status enables families to invest more in their children's success and health. Parents' education and professions influence their income and social status, shaping their investments in children, parenting, and socialization practices. Statham and Brophy (2006) found that urban mothers were more likely to send their children to playgroups than rural mothers, less educated mothers, or those with lower status working husbands (50% vs. 45%). The literature suggests that economic status alone is insufficient for developing awareness; the family's education level significantly influences their approach to their child's education. Mothers' concerns about the high cost of playgroups raise questions about their accessibility. A review highlights a strong link between socioeconomic status and playgroup participation, with children from lower socioeconomic backgrounds in the UK more likely to attend nursery schools, while playgroups are predominantly attended by children from higher socioeconomic backgrounds (Sincovich et al., 2020). However, Armstrong et al. (2020) state that parents' participation in playgroups is important and that parents enjoy them. It is seen that this view coincides with the findings that mothers' positive experiences are more than negative experiences.

Findings Regarding Teachers' Perspectives on Playgroups

Motivations for teachers' working in playgroups are presented in Table 6.

Table 6. Reasons Why Teachers Choose to Work in Playgroups

Theme	Category	Codes	Participants	n
Reasons working in playgroups	Characteristics of the group	Interacting with younger children	T1, T2, T3, T5, T7, T8, T9, T10	8
		Parental support	T1, T4, T6, T7	4
		Number of participants	T1, T6, T9	3
	Working hours	Part-time	T1, T4, T6, T7, T8, T9	6
		Flexible hours	T3, T5, T8	3

Teachers identified the opportunity to engage with younger children as their main motivation for working in playgroups. An engineer who transitioned to child development explained they left their profession to work with younger age groups. A direct quote is provided below:

(T1) "Working here is truly fulfilling on a spiritual level. Engaging in activities with children, looking into their eyes, and receiving their hugs bring me immense joy. Compared to my previous profession, this is undoubtedly much more satisfying."

This finding differs from Ünlü Çetin's (2019) study, which noted that teachers generally avoid working with the 0-3 age group due to being perceived as 'caregivers.' Similarly, Şahin-Sak et al. (2019) found that teachers' professional attitudes vary by age group, with those teaching six-year-olds scoring higher than those teaching four-year-olds. This may stem from six-year-olds being more skilled and ready for primary school, making classroom management and activity planning easier (Şahin-Sak et al., 2019). However, the fact that the teachers in this study stated that they mostly worked in playgroups to be with young children shows that teachers' views on working with young children have started to change. They highlighted flexible, part-time hours as a key factor enabling their participation, which also supports their ability to provide parental care for their own children, as highlighted in the quotes below:

(T4) "I didn't want to work full-time while raising my daughter, but since staying idle wasn't an option, I started looking for an area where I could apply my profession part-time, and I really enjoy it."

Table 7 shows the experiences of teachers with playgroups.

Table 7. Findings on Teachers' Experiences With Playgroups

Theme	Category	Codes	Participants	n
Experiences with playgroups	Positive experiences	Happiness/Experiences	T1, T2, T3, T4, T5, T7, T8, T9, T10	9
		Quality time	T3, T6, T7, T8, T9	5
		Short-term engagement	T4, T6	2
	Negative experiences	Mother's attitude and behaviors	T3, T4, T5, T6, T7, T9, T10	7
		Short-term engagement	T2, T6, T8, T9, T10	5
		Administrators' attitude	T7, T9	2

Interviews with teachers reveal generally positive views on playgroups, with teachers highlighting that their work in these settings brings them happiness. Teachers' observations on children benefiting from quality time in playgroups align with mothers' experiences. However, teachers also noted that class transitions due to short-term enrollment disrupt the playgroup environment and hinder children's adaptation. Their perspectives on this matter are as follows:

(T2) “There are children who do not want to participate in activities at all. They may not want to interact with their peers and avoid participating in the activities. They could be afraid of other children or parents. I sometimes encounter challenges in helping them gradually engage in the process through short-term participation.”

The interview results align with the literature, particularly McLean et al. (2022) study, who identified key features of playgroups—facilitators, play activities, a safe space, routines, service networks, materials, and venue—as critical for supporting positive outcomes for children and caregivers. Table 6 indicates findings on teachers' opinions on the effectiveness of playgroups.

Table 8. Teachers' Opinions on the Effectiveness of Playgroups

Theme	Category	Codes	Participants	n
The impact of playgrounds	The impact on child development	Physical Development	T1, T2, T3, T4, T5, T7, T8, T9	8
		Cognitive Development	T3, T4, T5, T7, T8, T9, T10	7
		Peer interaction	T1, T7, T8, T9, T10	5
		School adaptation	T8, T9	2
		Secure attachment	T1	1
	The impact on mothers	Socialization	T1, T2, T3, T4, T5, T7, T8	7
		Learning activities	T1, T2, T3, T6, T7, T9	6

Teachers and mothers both emphasize the role of playgroups in fostering children's development, particularly in physical growth. Similar to mothers, teachers highlight playgroups' significant contribution to children's physical development, a finding supported by the literature. Play actively engages children's bodies, promoting physical activity, enhancing motor skills, and reducing the risk of obesity associated with sedentary lifestyles (American Academy of Pediatrics, 2006). De Roos et al. (2010) found that teachers observed natural skill development in children through playgroup interactions, noting improvements in communication, problem-solving, and empathy. In this study, the positive impact of playgroups on children's development is commonly expressed in both mothers and teacher perspectives. Additionally, Playgroups are often the first environments children experience outside the home. For this reason, research indicates that when mothers and teachers collaborate within these settings, particularly for very young children, it contributes to children feeling more positive and expressing themselves more comfortably (Sincovich et al., 2020). In this context, the similarity between mothers' and teachers' views on the impact of playgroups on children's development may be considered a critical point for potential collaborations.

Teachers' and mothers' views on the impact of playgroups on children's development align, particularly regarding *cognitive development* and *peer interactions*. Teachers highlighted improved peer communication, while mothers noted that children learn through peer interactions. These findings align with existing literature. In the study conducted by İvrendi and others (2019), aimed at examining the perceptions of children, mothers, and teachers regarding play in Turkish and Norwegian cultures,

common findings in the definitions of play by mothers and teachers highlighted that play has a positive impact on development and learning, and it serves as a means of communication, reflecting its actual function.

Based on the findings presented in the research, it can be concluded that teachers believe playgroups are important for supporting children's physical and cognitive development, as well as enhancing peer relationships. Teachers with this perspective are believed to have a significant impact on the development of children in playgroups. A teacher who responds to a child's low motivation to engage in social interactions with peers by establishing a close relationship may have a positive influence on the child's social behavior. Children may tend to develop closer relationships with their teachers, enabling the teachers to provide the support they need in the classroom. In this way, teachers can create an engaging social environment where shy children can have positive experiences with their peers, encouraging higher levels of peer interaction. A positive teacher-child relationship can help shy children join in the play of other children. Under the guidance of teachers, shy children can find opportunities to interact with their peers (Aslan & Boz, 2022). In this context, it can be said that teachers with this perspective will support the development of social behaviors and peer interaction in preschool children aged 0-3 years participating in playgroups.

T1 also states, *"Let me give an example from my daughter. When she started preschool at the age of 4, she didn't face any difficulties because a safe environment had been established here. The orientation at the preschool is one week, but for us, it lasts a term. This way, secure attachment is formed."* With this statement, it is suggested that playgroups can help establish secure attachment. This finding aligns with the literature. In the study by Sincovich and colleagues (2020), it was noted that children explored a secure environment in playgroups, and being in the same space as their mothers provided them with social support. Teachers have mentioned not only the impact of playgroups on children's development but also on mothers. They stated that participation in playgroups provides mothers with opportunities to socialize, and that they learn activities suitable for children aged 0-3 years. This, in turn, contributes to their parental roles. It is noteworthy that mothers did not comment on the topic while teachers expressed their thoughts on the effects of playgroups on mothers. It is believed that the reason mothers did not comment is that they prioritize the well-being of their children. In the relevant literature, it is stated that playgroups provide an opportunity for mothers to socialize. The playgroup routine is said to actively support the socialization of parents (Blasi & Hurwitz, 2012). It is observed that mothers and teachers believe that attending playgroups with children will help them be more prepared for preschool. Research has shown a strong connection between play in early years and children's school readiness, meaning their ability to successfully transition into formal education environments. The study by Long et al. (2006) found a relationship between the frequency of various types of play activities, such as pretend play, outdoor play, and play with peers, and children's school readiness. This supports the research findings. Today, it can be said that playgroups, which provide children with safe play environments, fulfill the goal of preparing them for preschool, as mentioned by both mothers and teachers.

The Findings Regarding Administrators' Perspectives on Playgroups

Table 9 shows the administrators' perspectives on playgroups.

Table 9. Reasons Why Administrators Decide to Establish Playgroups

Theme	Category	Codes	Participants	n
Reasons for Establishment of Playgroups	Individual reasons	Job seeking	A2, A4, A6, A7, A8, A9, A10, A11, A12	9
		The need to be together with their own child	A2, A3, A5, A10, A11	5
		Seeking an institution for their own child	A2, A3	2
	Responding to societal needs	Seeking for a new concept for preschool education	A4, A5, A8, A12	4
		Preparation for preschool	A1, A10, A11	3
		To support for children's development	A1, A7	2

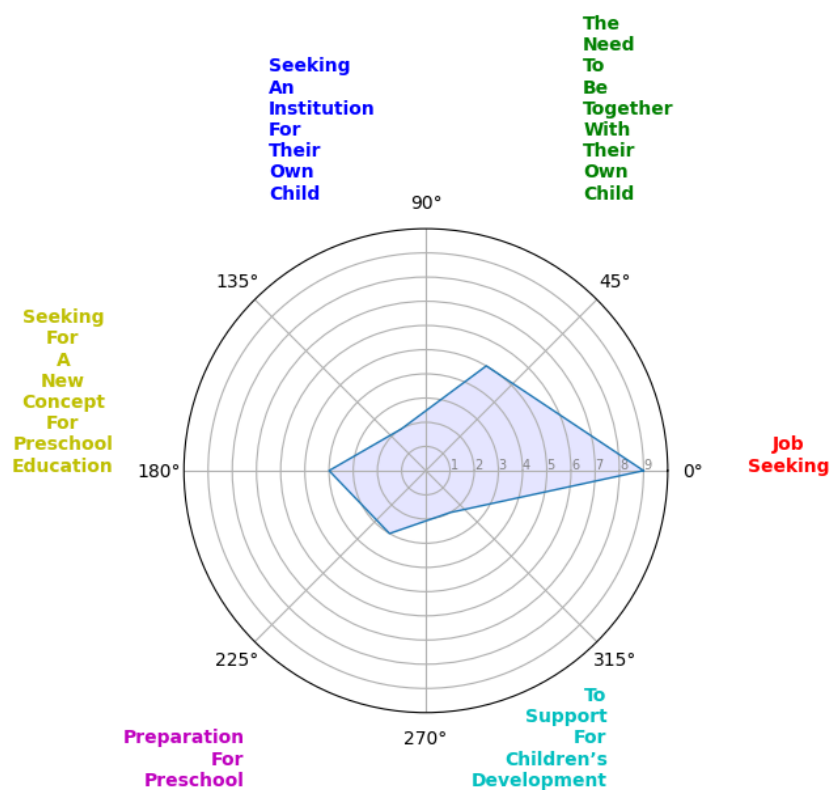
An overview of the results regarding the reasons for administrators establishing playgroups is also provided in Figure 1, depicted through a radar chart. Figure 1 shows that the administrators primarily opened playgroups for personal reasons, particularly due to their job seeking.

One of the most critical findings of this study is that administrators to establish playgroups primarily stems from personal reasons, such job seeking. This indicates that some playgroups may be established with commercial motives rather than purely educational ones, also

one might conclude that the creation of playgroups was initially driven by individual career motivations rather than a deliberate educational or community-based agenda. This finding can suggest that personal and economic factors may influence the establishment of early childhood educational programs, with administrators using such initiatives as a means to address their own professional or financial needs. Additionally, this finding has important implications for policy and practice, as it suggests a need for monitoring and support to ensure that playgroups maintain their educational objectives.

Besides, the administrators acknowledged that they shared a common understanding with the mothers and teachers about the creation of playgroups aimed at preparing children for preschool education. However, unlike the mothers and teachers, the administrators offered very few opinions regarding the importance of supporting children's development.

Figure 1. Radar chart of the number of codes in the “Reasons for Establishment of Playgroups” theme



These findings indicate that administrators may not fully understand the impact of playgroups on children's development or may have limited awareness regarding the significance of this issue. Changing contemporary conditions emphasize the findings of Clements' (2004) research, which highlights the significant impact of playgroups on children. It has been observed that today's children spend less time engaging in outdoor play compared to the previous generation, dedicating more of their time to television and computer games. Children no longer play at home or in front of their houses; instead, preschools have become the primary spaces where they can engage in play. This shift places a substantial responsibility on educational institutions to meet children's need for play (Tuğrul et al., 2019). From this perspective, the importance of administrators having adequate awareness on this issue is underscored once again. It has been observed that administrators with backgrounds in child development and early childhood education express their motivation for establishing playgroups as stemming from a desire to introduce a unique concept they perceive to be underrepresented in the market, as well as to support children's development and creativity. The statements of these administrators suggest that they believe playgroups contribute significantly to children's developmental and creative growth. Notably, the two administrators who emphasized this point are graduates in the field, indicating an awareness of the importance of this subject and

reflecting their intention to establish institutions aimed at fostering children's development and creativity. The literature often emphasizes the role of play in fostering creativity in children. Play helps children explore their creativity, free thinking, socialization, leadership, and decision-making skills (Tuğrul et al., 2019). The statements of A7 regarding the matter are directly shared below:

"From my previous experiences, I observed the significance of having routines and rhythm instruction in children's social environments. I wanted to establish a playgroup to support the development of their visual and musical memory, foster sensory engagement through materials such as sand, water, and grass, and provide opportunities for creativity with developmentally enriching toys."

Table 10 indicates the Characteristics Considered by Administrators When Establishing Playgroups.

Table 10. Key Considerations for School Administrators When Establishing a Playgroup

Theme	Category	Codes	Participants	n
Key Considerations	Learning Process	Learning Environment	A1, A2, A3, A4, A5, A7, A9, A10, A12	9
		Curriculum	A1, A4, A5, A8, A9, A12	6
	Educational Background of Educators	Bachelor's Degree	A2, A4, A6, A9, A10, A11	6
		Out-of-Field Graduates in Education	A1, A5, A7, A8	4
		High school degree	A3, A12	2
		Municipal	A4, A6, A7, A8, A10, A11, A12	7
	Official Permits and Licenses	Ministry of Family and Social Services	A1, A2, A5, A9	4
		MoNE	A3	1
	Enrollment for playgroups	Information forms	A2, A9, A10, A11	4
		One on one interviews	A1, A3, A4	3

One of the dynamics affecting learning processes, the appropriateness of the learning environment for the younger age group, was frequently emphasized by institutional administrators (n=9). Following the interviews conducted with the administrators, it was emphasized that the educational background of the staff is considered when forming playgroups. It was observed that the educational qualifications of the staff members who work in and lead these playgroups vary. The administrators have suggested that graduation is not important and that what matters is communication with children and themselves. This finding, obtained from the administrators, contradicts the existing literature. McFarland-Piazza et al. (2012) stated that the quality of practice and programs increases in institutions with qualified teachers, which leads to higher benefits for children and greater interest in the institution. In this study, it is assumed that educators with relevant field degrees will prepare more effective and developmentally appropriate programs for infants and will also be able to identify developmental problems more quickly. The administrators have stated that, in accordance with regulations, they are officially registered as cafes or bookstores with permits obtained from the municipalities; however, in practice, the institutions predominantly function as playgroups. Additionally, some administrators have indicated that, based on the permits they received from the MoFSS, they are officially registered as nurseries and daycare centers, yet they primarily operate as playgroups. One administrator mentioned that, in accordance with the regulations and the permit obtained from the MoNE, their institution is officially recognized as a kindergarten, while also offering playgroup activities alongside this service. Table 11 illustrates how the administrators evaluated the playgroups.

Table 11. Findings on Administrators' Evaluations of Play Groups

Theme	Categories	Codes	Participants	n
Evaluations of Play Groups	Strengths of Playgroups	Openness to Innovation	A2, A3, A4, A6, A10, A12	6
		Curriculum	A1, A3, A7, A8, A12	5
		Learning Environment	A1, A3, A10, A12	4
	Areas for Improvement in Playgroups	Number of Staff	A9, A10, A11	3
		Learning Environment	A5, A12	2

Mothers identified the physical environment as the primary factor in choosing playgroups, while administrators emphasized the strength of their educational programs. Mothers made few remarks about

educational content, suggesting a potential mismatch between the priorities of mothers and the focus of administrators. The following are statements from administrators regarding the "openness to innovation" code, the most frequently mentioned theme (n=6):

(A2) "This institution is open to all kinds of innovations. My school is an art-focused institution. Feedback from parents and teachers is welcomed and considered during the evaluation process. In this sense, it is a school with significant potential for development."

(A12) "I am incredibly innovative and highly attuned to modern practices. I maintain a strong international focus and am committed to ensuring that families in our community are aware of and able to experience educational developments occurring abroad. We actively pursue professional development opportunities, frequently attending training sessions in Ankara, Istanbul, and even internationally. My sister, who is also a preschool teacher, collaborates with me in these efforts. Our dedication is reflected in the positive feedback and satisfaction expressed by the families we work with."

In their evaluations of playgroups, administrators identified the physical environment as both a strength and an area for improvement. However, in their statements regarding the reasons for establishing playgroups, administrators emphasized the positive impact of playgroups on children's school readiness while offering limited perspectives on the broader developmental benefits of playgroups for children. When these findings are considered together, it suggests that administrators' focus on the physical attributes of the school may stem from viewing them as a factor influencing parents' decision to choose the institution. Notably, only one administrator highlighted the role of play in supporting children's creativity. Furthermore, playgroups are often conducted within formal early childhood education and care settings, such as kindergartens, preschools, and center-based childcare (McLean et al., 2022). In recent years, there has been a growing body of research emphasizing the significance of early childhood education, leading to increased awareness among parents regarding their children's education (Aslan & Boz, 2022). Although research on the 0-3 age group is limited, international studies provide valuable guidance for researchers in this field. Efforts are being made to adapt these studies to the local context, including the establishment of playgroups. The reasons for opening these playgroups, as expressed by the administrators in the study, align with the literature in addressing societal needs.

Additionally, the study revealed a discrepancy between administrators and mothers regarding the perceived strength of the educational program (curriculum): administrators viewed it as a key strength, whereas mothers places less importance on it. This difference may have potential consequences for program implementation and parent engagement, highlighting the need for better communication and alignment between administrators and families to ensure that program goals are effectively met. Similarly, Ngadni and Shuang (2024) found that differences in perceptions among principals, teachers, and parents can influence home-school collaboration and, consequently, the effectiveness of early childhood education programs. This underscores the importance of structured communication and alignment between administrators and families to support program goals.

Based on the findings, it is believed that mothers feel comfortable bringing their children to playgroups. These groups often provide opportunities for supporting children's multifaceted development, especially in terms of social skills, that teachers enjoy working, and that administrators are open to engagement and collaboration with other components of the playgroup to provide better service. Additionally, the playgroups they have established are perceived by mothers and teachers as inclusive and accepting environments.

On the other hand, the findings reveal distinct motivational patterns among parents, teachers, and administrators regarding playgroups, which may signal potential tensions or misalignments in expectations and implementation. While parents primarily view playgroups as a means of supporting their children's social development and building stronger parent-child bonds, teachers tend to emphasize developmental benefits more broadly—particularly physical development—and appreciate the professional advantages of flexible, low-pressure work environments. In contrast, administrators are often driven by personal and practical considerations related to program management and personal needs, such as employment opportunities or the ability to be close to their own children.

These differing perspectives suggest that while all groups value child development, the emphasis and rationale behind their engagement with playgroups diverge. Such misalignments may result in tensions regarding the goals and daily practices within playgroups. For instance, administrators' focus on practical and administrative concerns might conflict with teachers' expectations for pedagogical quality, or parents' desire for emotionally

enriching experiences. Without a shared, clearly articulated vision, these differing motivations could affect the coherence and consistency of the program, potentially undermining its effectiveness.

CONCLUSION

Mothers' perspectives on playgroups were categorized into three themes: attendance reasons, selection factors, and experiences. The main motivation for attendance was fostering children's socialization, with physical development also noted, though language development was not mentioned. Participation reasons included enhancing parent-child relationships and preschool readiness. Selection factors centered on the physical environment, teacher quality, and content, with cleanliness and outdoor space as priorities. Most mothers reported positive experiences, appreciating quality time and peer learning, though some expressed concerns about session length and costs.

Based on interviews with teachers, playgroups were categorized into two main impacts: child development and effects on mothers. Teachers agreed with mothers that playgroups primarily support children's development, particularly physical growth. Additionally, playgroups provided mothers with opportunities for socialization, learning new activities, and spending quality time with their children, which helped prepare the children for preschool. Teachers in playgroups emphasized the appeal of working with younger children, highlighting the importance of parental support and low class sizes. Flexible, part-time hours were also key factors in their decision to work in playgroups. Teachers reported positive experiences, particularly enjoying the happiness it brought, and valued the quality time children spent in playgroups. However, challenges related to maternal attitudes and frequent class changes were also noted.

Institution administrators mainly established playgroups due to individual factors, such as the need for employment and the desire to be with their children. They also aimed to prepare children for preschool. Administrators with backgrounds in child development believed playgroups fostered children's development. The key focus for administrators was the suitability of the learning environment for young children, along with the importance of a strong learning environment. Staff education level and permits from municipalities and ministries were also considered.

As a conclusion, it can be said that the findings largely indicate that, from the parents' perspective, participation in the program is motivated by a desire to spend meaningful time with their children and to strengthen the parent-child bond. From the perspectives of teachers and administrators, the results point to the perceived practical benefits and conveniences that such programs bring to their professional responsibilities.

Despite its contributions, this study has several limitations that should be acknowledged. First, the purposive sampling procedure limits the generalizability of the findings, as the study's results may not be applicable to all playgroup settings for children aged 0-3 years. Second, another limitation is the relatively small sample size, which was relatively small and may not be fully representative of the target population, which limits the generalizability of the findings.

Implications and Future Research

- Seminars and training sessions can be organized to support positive parenting roles that enhance the effects of playgroups on parents attending these sessions.
- The impact of attending playgroups on children's development can be addressed as a multidimensional study and explored through a mixed-methods research design involving direct observations.
- Official collaborations could be established to develop or improve a curriculum for children aged 0-3, with a flexible and adaptable content focus designed to better meet the needs of families attending playgroups.
- Policymakers and playgroup administrators or coordinators should establish structured communication channels and feedback mechanisms between administrators and parents, such as regular meetings, surveys, or workshops, to align expectations and improve mutual understanding of the educational program's objectives, thereby enhancing program effectiveness and parent engagement.

- Administrators should place significant emphasis on the training and support of teachers actively engaged in playgroups. In this context, with the support and guidance of the licensing authorities, it is crucial to ensure that the institution's personnel undergo training in child development and education. This is particularly vital for the identification and assessment of children in the 0-3 age group, as it plays a pivotal role in their early development.
- Institution owners and administrators should undergo certain stages prior to the establishment of playgroups, and it should be ensured that they receive training on the operations of the playgroups.
- Policymakers and early childhood program administrators should ensure that playgroup evaluations and improvements address not only the physical environment but also the full spectrum of children's developmental outcomes. Professional development for administrators could emphasize the importance of recognizing and supporting social, emotional, and cognitive benefits, in addition to school readiness, so that programs meet both parental expectations and children's holistic developmental needs.
- State-supported mobile playgroup services could be provided by municipalities, thereby creating opportunities for every child to participate in playgroup activities.

Statements of Publication Ethics

This study included the use of human participants. All participants were made aware that their responses would remain confidential and anonymous. They were also aware that they could withdraw participation at any point. All participants provided their informed consent.

Conflict of Interest

The authors declare that they have no potential conflict of interest.

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