



Fathers' Play Beliefs and Play Participation as Predictors of Children's Playfulness ¹

Babaların Oyun İnançları ve Oyuna Katılımının Çocukların Oyun Eğilimini Yordamadaki Rolü

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Abstract: The aim of this study was to examine the roles of fathers' play participation, play-related beliefs, and demographic characteristics in predicting preschool children's playfulness. The participants consisted of 231 father-child dyads with preschool-aged children living in Denizli, a city located in southwestern Türkiye. Data were collected using the Parent Play Participation Scale, the Play Beliefs Scale, the Children's Playfulness Scale, and a demographic information form. Pearson correlation and hierarchical regression analyses were conducted to examine the relationships among the variables. The findings indicated that fathers' play participation positively predicted children's playfulness and emerged as the strongest predictor. In addition, fathers' play participation differed according to perceived income level and fathers' age, with lower levels of participation observed among fathers with lower income and those of older age.

Keywords: *Preschool children, children's playfulness, father, play participation, beliefs about play*

Özet: Bu çalışmanın amacı, babaların oyuna katılımı, oyuna ilişkin inançları ve demografik özelliklerinin okul öncesi dönem çocuklarının oyun eğilimini yordamadaki rollerini incelemektir. Araştırmanın katılımcılarını, Denizli'de yaşayan okul öncesi yaş grubundaki 231 baba-çocuk çifti oluşturmaktadır. Veriler, Ebeveyn Oyun Katılım Ölçeği, Oyuna İlişkin İnançlar Ölçeği, Çocuklar için Oyun Eğilimi Ölçeği ve demografik bilgi formu aracılığıyla toplanmıştır. Değişkenler arasındaki ilişkileri incelemek amacıyla Pearson korelasyon analizi ve hiyerarşik regresyon analizi kullanılmıştır. Bulgular, babaların oyuna katılımının çocukların oyun eğilimini pozitif yönde yordadığını ve en güçlü yordayıcı olduğunu göstermektedir. Ayrıca, babaların oyuna katılımının algılanan gelir düzeyi ve baba yaşı açısından farklılaştığı; düşük gelir düzeyine sahip ve daha ileri yaşta olan babalarda oyuna katılımın daha düşük olduğu belirlenmiştir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: *Okul öncesi çocuklar, oyun eğilimi, baba, oyuna katılım, oyuna ilişkin inançlar*

1. Introduction

Parents, as children's closest caregivers, begin interacting with their children in various contexts from the moment of birth. Increases in educational attainment, women's participation in paid employment outside the home, and the growing prevalence of nuclear family structures have differentiated fathers' roles within the household (Arslan & Demircioğlu, 2024; Kim & Lee, 2014; Uzun & Baran, 2019; Zhang, 2013). Although mothers continue to hold the primary caregiving role, fathers' involvement in the childrearing process has increased, and fathers have been shown to contribute to children's development in ways similar to mothers (Erol, Canbeldek, & Işıkoğlu, 2023; Schoppe-Sullivan & Fagan, 2020). However, the concentration of traditional roles and caregiving responsibilities largely on mothers

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continues to limit the visibility of fathers' participation (Wilson & Prior, 2011). Parenting has been conceptualized as a shared framework, while motherhood and fatherhood represent distinct constructs with role-specific characteristics (Volling & Cabrera, 2019). Fatherhood and father involvement refer to actions specific to fathers, whereas motherhood encompasses behaviors typically associated with mothers. Accordingly, alongside studies focusing on mothers, fathers' participation in family processes has increasingly become an important focus of research. Lamb conceptualizes father involvement as consisting of three components: accessibility, interaction, and responsibility. Among these, interaction is defined as direct, one-to-one engagement with the child, such as feeding, helping with homework, or playing together (Lamb et al., 1986). Father-child interaction may vary depending on fathers' monthly income, working conditions, educational level, and age (İzci & Jones, 2021; Norman & Elliot, 2015; Uludağlı, 2024). In addition, broader contextual factors, including mothers' participation in paid employment, family socioeconomic status, national regulations related to working hours, and legal arrangements regarding paternal leave, may shape fathers' involvement and father-child interaction, particularly during early childhood (Biber, 2016; Erdem et al., 2022; Kurt & Özgün, 2024; Norman, Elliot, & Fagan, 2014). At the family level, mothers' preferences to retain control over child-related decision-making processes may further limit fathers' interactions with their children (Altenburger et al., 2018; Meteyer & Perry-Jenkins, 2010). Moreover, research indicates that traditional fatherhood roles remain prevalent (Eren & Şavran, 2024) and that men who endorse traditional gender roles tend to demonstrate lower levels of father involvement (Kaplan & Offer, 2022). Cross-national comparisons further highlight the role of structural conditions in shaping father involvement. In European countries, parental leave is widespread and ranges from approximately 6 to 59 weeks, with both mothers and fathers eligible to take leave, alongside legal regulations allowing flexible or remote working arrangements (Monteiro et al., 2025). In Türkiye, by contrast, paid paternity leave varies between 5 and 10 days depending on the type of employment and is granted based on the father's request. This limited duration may pose a risk for fathers' support of mothers and for the development of father-child bonding. Caregiving responsibilities during early childhood in Türkiye are largely assumed by mothers, a pattern associated with traditional caregiving norms, relatively low female employment rates, and the dominant characterization of fathers as primary economic providers. Although father involvement has increased in some highly educated and dual-income families, remains limited at the national level (Akgöz Aktaş & Ebeoğlu Duman, 2025; Ayta & Şen, 2023; Beyenal, 2019; Gözüm, 2024; Karadeniz & Kaya, 2025; Kılıç & Şenol, 2025; Öztop et al., 2021; Sunar & Fişek, 2005; Ünlütürk, 2023). Fathers' involvement is important for the quality of the couple relationship (Norman, Elliot, & Fagan, 2018), for fathers' own well-being and functioning (Köksal Akyol et al., 2017), and for children's well-being (Önem & Erden Özcan, 2023; Şahin Kırılç & Ummannel, 2023). Accordingly, examining father involvement in early childhood is essential both for making existing inequalities visible and for informing the development of family policies that support child development. There are also differences in the ways mothers and fathers interact with their children (Moon-Seo et al., 2024). Warmth and affection tend to be more prominent in mothers' interactions, whereas playfulness is often more salient in fathers' interactions. Fathers' behaviors during play may be influenced by the child's gender (Liu et al., 2025), and fathers tend to engage more frequently in physically active and highly arousing play with boys (Newland, Coyl, & Freeman, 2013). Nevertheless, play represents one of the shared contexts through which both mothers and fathers interact with their children. Fathers are more likely to spend time interacting with their children through play rather than caregiving activities. Their play tends to be more humorous, spontaneous, and physically exuberant in nature (Cabrera et al., 2014; Cabrera & Roggman, 2017; Damar, 2022; Ertör & Tezel Şahin, 2023; Karaçelik Varol & Bekir, 2025; Özgün et al., 2013; Tezel Şahin et al., 2017; Ünlü Çetin & Olgan, 2018). Fathers also tend to provide children with opportunities for leadership during play (John et al., 2013). Fathers' sensitive play during infancy has been

shown to predict later attachment characteristics (Grossmann et al., 2002), and high-quality play has been associated with father–child attachment (Teufl & Ahnert, 2022). Moreover, father-child play supports children’s cognitive and socioemotional well-being (Amodia-Bidakowska, Laverty, & Ramchandani, 2020; Bocknek et al., 2017; Jeynes, 2016; Kokkinaki, 2019; StGeorge & Freeman, 2017). Despite this growing body of evidence, research on father–child play remains limited compared to the extensive literature on mother–child play (Cabrera & Roggman, 2017; Cho & Ryu, 2023). Given the links between play, playfulness, and children’s well-being, as well as the role of play in parent-child interactions, examining fathers’ play participation in relation to children’s playfulness appears to be particularly important.

1.1. Childrens’ Playfulness

Play is defined as an activity that is intrinsically motivated, freely chosen, and enjoyable (Johnson, Christie, & Wardle, 2005). The context of play has attracted the attention of scholars from different disciplines and has frequently been associated with learning (Ashiabi, 2007; Skene et al., 2022; Wallerstedt & Pramling, 2012), with an emphasis on adult guidance during play (Weisberg, Hirsh-Pasek, & Golinkoff, 2013). Parents are typically the first adults to engage with children in play. According to Gordon (2014), play is a fundamental means of social and environmental interaction from infancy onward and shapes interactions across the lifespan. Through repeated play experiences, children develop neural pathways, enhance well-being, and acquire foundational cognitive and social skills. Parents encourage children’s active participation in play through supportive attitudes (Fogle & Mendez, 2006). In addition, play provides a shared interactional space in caregiver–child interactions that reduces power asymmetries and supports social harmony (Singer, 2013). Accordingly, examining playfulness, which underlies children’s play behaviors in their interactions with the environment is important. Playfulness is defined as an intrinsic tendency that shapes children’s engagement in play and is conceptualized as a multidimensional construct encompassing characteristics such as creativity, curiosity, flexibility, and positive affect (Barnett, 1990; Lieberman, 1977). Playfulness contributes to individual differences in both observable play behaviors and cognitive processes and is considered an important component of healthy development (Fink et al., 2020; Hamm, 2006; Rentzou, 2014). Lieberman conceptualized playfulness as an innate characteristic in children and identified five core dimensions: physical spontaneity, social spontaneity, cognitive spontaneity, expressions of joy, and humor. These dimensions reflect children’s movement and coordination, imaginative engagement, social flexibility, enthusiasm during play, and their ability to integrate humor and playful teasing. Research findings indicate that children’s playfulness is associated with various factors, including gender, age, and sibling status. Accordingly, children’s playfulness may vary by gender, number of siblings, and age (Ata & Macun, 2022; Bay, 2021; Duss et al., 2024; Keleş & Yurt, 2017; Rentzou, 2013; Wustmann Seiler et al., 2024). In addition, playfulness has been found to be significantly associated with individual characteristics such as social development, vitality, positivity, prosocial skills, self-regulation, self-esteem, executive functioning, emotion regulation, empathy, and sensitivity (Barnett, 2018; Duss et al., 2024; Fung & Chung, 2022; Huang et al., 2024; Menashe-Grinberg & Atzaba-Poria, 2017; Tak, 2020). A substantial body of research also highlights the role of play in fostering creativity, adaptability, coping mechanisms, and social competence (Ata & Macun, 2022; Leipold & Bundy, 2000; Pinchover et al., 2016). Children who enjoy play tend to take the lead in group play, share imaginative ideas, engage more frequently with peers, and promote positive emotional interactions (Barnett, 2018; Fink et al., 2020). Taken together, these findings underscore the importance of examining children’s playfulness in relation to their immediate environment, particularly within the family context and in relation to parents, who may play a role in shaping this playfulness. Within the literature, various studies have examined parents’

and children's playfulness. Findings from this body of research indicate that parents' playfulness influences children's playfulness both directly and indirectly through parent-child relationships (Wei et al., 2025). Nevertheless, children's playfulness remains relatively underexplored in the context of fathers' play participation.

1.2. Parents' Play Participation and Play Beliefs

Play represents a central context in mother-child and father-child interactions. Whether play is parent-led or child-led, and the extent to which it involves mutual enjoyment and active participation, are important for children's well-being and development (Fuertes et al., 2025; Graziano et al., 2015; Schneider et al., 2022; Solter, 2021). By providing a shared interactional space for parents and children, play strengthens emotional bonds and contributes to the quality of the parent-child relationship (Ginsburg, 2007). Parents' beliefs and attitudes toward play are closely related to how they participate in play, the quality of their interactions, and children's playfulness. Parents who view play as a meaningful developmental context tend to provide higher-quality play opportunities and to engage more actively in play; such involvement strengthens the parent-child relationship and supports children's playfulness (Barnett, 1991; Dempsey et al., 2013; Hughes & Fleming, 2015; Lin & Li, 2018; Lin & Yawkey, 2013; Lindsey & Mize, 2001). During play, parents may assume different roles depending on contextual demands, including directive, facilitative, or co-player roles (Liu et al., 2025; Russell et al., 2001). Parents' perceptions of play and their forms of participation vary according to cultural values, parenting norms, educational level, and socioeconomic conditions (Lin et al., 2019; Super & Harkness, 2002). While some parents regard play as a fundamental tool for learning and development, others view it primarily as entertainment or as a complement to academic activities (Babuç, 2015; Erbay & Saltalı, 2012; Fogle & Mendez, 2006). Parents with higher educational attainment generally hold more positive attitudes toward play and participate more actively in their children's play. In contrast, in lower socioeconomic contexts, mothers tend to emphasize play as a means of learning and emotional development, whereas fathers are more likely to approach play as a recreational activity (Eren, 2016; Memiş & Gürsoy, 2022; Işıkoğlu & İvrendi, 2008; Kurt & Özgün, 2024; Lin & Yawkey, 2013; Smith et al., 2015). These variations are linked to culture-specific models and broader structural conditions. In some cultural contexts, play is viewed as a more autonomous and child-directed activity, whereas in more structured settings, parental control is more pronounced (Fasoli, 2014; Fung et al., 2017; Jiang & Han, 2016; Kuschner, 2015; Whitebread et al., 2012). In particular, fathers' play-related beliefs and participation styles have been shown to vary across cultural and family contexts, with fathers tending to engage more frequently in child-led and physically active play, while mothers are more likely to prefer structured forms of play (Creighton et al., 2015; Chuang et al., 2025; John et al., 2013; Moon-Seo et al., 2024). Moreover, socioeconomic constraints may constrain the time and resources available for parents to engage in play that parents are able to devote to play (Barcala-Delgado & Perry-Jenkins, 2025; Edwards, 2000; Göncü, 2001; Gülen & Barış, 2021; Ihmeideh, 2019; İvrendi & Işıkoğlu, 2015; Kumru et al., 2017).

1.3. Present Study

The purpose of the present study was to examine the relationships among fathers' play beliefs, fathers' participation in children's play, and children's playfulness in the Turkish context. Previous research on children's playfulness within the family context has primarily focused on parental playfulness (Wei et al., 2025; Wu et al., 2024) and general parental involvement (Choi & Lim, 2021). However, studies specifically examining fathers' play participation remain limited, and fathers are often underrepresented in this line of research (Tandler & Proyer, 2022). This gap is noteworthy given evidence suggesting that fathers are more likely to engage in play than in other caregiving activities and often adopt a peer-like interaction style (Bidakowska et al., 2020; John et al., 2013; Menashe & Atzaba-Poria, 2016; Tezel Şahin et al.,

2017). Prior research has shown that the quality of fathers' play interactions is associated with children's language, academic, and socioemotional outcomes, and that supportive behaviors during play are positively related to children's playfulness (Caughy et al., 2020; Lin et al., 2020; Dumont & Paquette, 2013; Flanders et al., 2010; Gregory et al., 2019; Waldman-Levi et al., 2022). In the Turkish context, parenting practices differ between mothers and fathers, and fathers' play interactions are shaped by cultural norms, working conditions, income level, and parental education. Play preferences may also vary by child gender, and traditional perceptions of fatherhood may limit father-child interaction (İvrendi & Işıkoğlu, 2008; Karadeniz & Çakmakçı, 2021; Karadeniz & Kaya, 2025; Özdemir et al., 2020; Tükel & Uzunöz, 2020). Although fathers' time spent in play and interaction remains limited in Türkiye, recent evidence points to a gradual shift in father-child relationships, with fathers increasingly engaging with their children in public play spaces, even in socioeconomically disadvantaged contexts (Ünlü Çetin, 2020). Moreover, fathers' beliefs and perceived competencies may buffer the negative effects of constraints such as demanding work conditions and physical fatigue on father-child interaction (Freeman et al., 2008). Participation in parenting education programs among fathers from low- and middle-income groups has been associated with improvements in fathers' knowledge and skills, as well as increases in children's play behaviors (As Çiftçi, 2022; Evans & Jakiela, 2025; Özyeşer Cinel & Tezel Şahin, 2021; Özyürek et al., 2018; Salcı & Ceylan, 2024). Fathers' roles are often overlooked in low- and middle-income countries yet changing gender roles may support greater paternal involvement (Evans & Jakiela, 2025). Building on this evidence, the present study examined the associations between fathers' play beliefs, play participation, and children's playfulness. The sub-research questions of the study are as follows:

1. What are the levels of fathers' play participation, fathers' play beliefs, and children's playfulness?
2. Do fathers' play participation and play beliefs, along with father and child-related characteristics, significantly predict children's playfulness?
3. Do fathers' play participation levels differ according to child gender and father characteristics (age, perceived income)?

2. Methodology

In this study, a correlational survey model, one of the descriptive research approaches, was employed to examine the relationships among fathers' play beliefs, fathers' play participation, and children's playfulness. Correlational designs are commonly used to assess the direction and strength of relationships among variables without manipulating them (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). The model guiding the study is presented in Figure 1.

Figure 1

Model of the Study



Note: Control variables included father's age, education level, perceived family income, child age, and child gender.

2.1. Procedures

Ethical approval was obtained from the University Social and Humanities Research and Publication Ethics Committee prior to data collection. The online survey was distributed to schools and individuals via social media. The first section included an informed consent form outlining confidentiality and the exclusive use of data for research purposes; the second section collected demographic information; and the final section comprised measures of fathers' play beliefs, play participation, and children's playfulness.

2.2. Participants

The survey link was distributed to schools and individuals via social media in Denizli, a city located in southwestern Türkiye. Participants were fathers of preschool-aged children living with their spouses. The study sample comprised 231 father-child dyads. The ages of the fathers ranged from 19 to 53 ($M = 35.25$, $SD = 4.72$). As presented in Table 1, 56.7% of the fathers were aged 35 years or younger, whereas 43.3% were aged 36 years and older. In terms of educational level, 51.9% of the participants had higher education or above, while 48.1% had a high school education or lower. Regarding perceived income level, 23.4% reported low income, whereas the majority (76.6%) reported a moderate-income level. Most of the children (90.9%) were attending preschool. Based on age grouping, 12.6% of the children were aged 3–4 years and 63.2% were aged 5–6 years. The gender distribution was 51.9% girls and 48.1% boys. In terms of children's social interaction opportunities, most children spent time with their parents (97.8%), peers or older children (91.8%), and relatives (86.6%) (see Table 1).

Table 1

The Demographic Characteristics of the Participants

Variable	Category	n	%
Fathers' educational level	High school or lower	111	48.1
	Higher education or above	120	51.9
Perceived income level	Low	54	23.4
	Moderate	177	76.6
Child attends preschool	Yes	210	90.9
	No	21	9.1
Child's age	3–4 years	85	12.6
	5–6 years	146	63.2
Fathers' age	35 years or younger	131	56.7
	36 years and older	100	43.3
Child's gender	Girl	120	51.9
	Boy	111	48.1
Children's time spent with relatives	Yes	200	86.6
	No	31	13.4
Children's time spent with peers/older children	Yes	212	91.8
	No	19	8.2
Children's time spent with parents	Yes	226	97.8
	No	5	2.2

2.3. Measures

Play Participation Scale

Father play participation was measured using the Parent Play Participation Scale developed by İşikoğlu and İvrendi (2008). The scale includes 15 items rated on a four-point Likert format and comprises three subdimensions: Academic Play, Sociodramatic and Physical Play, and Initiation and Encouragement for Play. Total scores range from 15 to 60, with

higher scores reflecting greater parental involvement in children's play. In the original validation study, the overall internal consistency coefficient Play was .78, while in the present study it was .82.

Children's Playfulness Scale (CPS)

Children's playfulness was assessed using the Children's Playfulness Scale (CPS) developed by Barnett (1990, 1991). The CPS consists of 23 items across five dimensions: Physical Spontaneity, Social Spontaneity, Cognitive Spontaneity, Manifest Joy, and Sense of Humor. Items are rated on a five-point Likert scale ranging from 1 ("not at all like the child") to 5 ("exactly like the child"). Previous studies have reported strong internal consistency for the CPS, with alpha coefficients between .84 and .89 for the subscales and .88 for the total scale (Barnett, 1990, 1991; Keleş & Yurt, 2017). In the present study, the internal consistency coefficient for the total scale was .85.

Beliefs About Play Questionnaire

Parents' beliefs about play were measured using the Beliefs About Play Questionnaire developed by İvrendi and Işıkoğlu (2008). The questionnaire consists of 12 items and yields a two-factor structure representing Positive and Negative Play Beliefs. Exploratory factor analysis in the original study indicated factor loadings ranging from .49 to .81, with the two factors explaining 45.75% of the total variance. Reliability analyses showed satisfactory internal consistency, with Cronbach's alpha coefficients of .86 for the Positive Play Beliefs subscale and .63 for the Negative Play Beliefs subscale, indicating acceptable reliability for research purposes. In the present study, Cronbach's alpha coefficients were .75 for the Positive Play Beliefs subscale and .60 for the Negative Play Beliefs subscale.

Family Demographic Information Form

Information was collected regarding the father's educational level, fathers' age, father's perceived income level, the child's age and gender, whether the child had received preschool education, and whether the child spent time with the mother, father, relatives, peers, and older children.

2.4. Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using IBM SPSS Statistics (Version 23.0). Preliminary analyses examined missing data, outliers, and the assumptions of normality, linearity, homoscedasticity, and multicollinearity. Analyses were conducted on complete cases ($N = 231$). Normality was assessed using skewness and kurtosis values alongside graphical inspection (histograms and Q-Q plots). Skewness ranged from -0.451 to 0.384 and kurtosis from -0.450 to 2.303 , indicating approximate normality according to commonly accepted criteria (Tabachnick & Fidell, 2013). Given the sample size, parametric analyses were deemed appropriate. Hierarchical multiple regression analyses were conducted to examine predictors of children's playfulness. In Step 1, demographic variables were entered; in Step 2, children's social time variables; in Step 3, fathers' play beliefs; and in Step 4, fathers' play participation. Changes in explained variance (ΔR^2) and F-change statistics were used to evaluate the contribution of each block. Pearson correlation coefficients were also computed to examine bivariate associations among study variables and to support their inclusion in the regression models.

3. Results

3.1. Descriptive Statistics of The Study Variables

Descriptive statistics for the studied variables are presented in Table 2. Children's playfulness scores ranged from 59 to 109 ($M = 85.16$, $SD = 9.86$). Negative play beliefs ranged from 5 to 18 ($M = 9.45$, $SD = 2.26$), and positive play beliefs ranged from 9 to 28 ($M = 22.87$, $SD = 2.55$). Fathers' play participation scores ranged from 25 to 60 ($M = 39.42$, $SD =$

5.97). All descriptive analyses were conducted with a total sample of 231 fathers, and no missing data were observed for the variables included in Table 2.

Table 2

Descriptive Statistics of Children's Playfulness, Fathers' Play Beliefs, and Play Participation (N=231)

Variables	Min	Max	M	SD
Children's Playfulness	59	109	85.16	9.86
Negative Play Beliefs	5	18	9.45	2.26
Positive Play Beliefs	9	28	22.87	2.55
Father Play Participation	25	60	39.42	5.97

3.2. Predictability of Fathers' Play Beliefs and Play Participation for Children's Playfulness

Pearson correlations among the study variables are presented in Table 3. Fathers' play participation ($r = .44, p < .01$) and positive play beliefs ($r = .34, p < .01$) were positively associated with children's playfulness, whereas perceived family income showed a small positive association ($r = .16, p < .05$). Based on these associations, fathers' age, education level, perceived family income, children's age, and child gender were included as control variables in subsequent analyses. Hierarchical regression analyses were conducted to examine whether fathers' play beliefs and play participation predicted children's playfulness beyond socio-demographic factors (see Table 4). In Step 1, the model including control variables was not statistically significant, $F(5, 225) = 2.19, p > .05$, explaining a small proportion of variance (Adjusted $R^2 = .025$), and only perceived family income emerged as a significant positive predictor ($\beta = .14, p < .05$). In Step 2, the inclusion of fathers' play beliefs significantly increased explained variance ($\Delta R^2 = .116, \Delta F(2, 223) = 15.48, p < .001$), and the model became significant (Adjusted $R^2 = .136$); positive play beliefs significantly predicted children's playfulness ($\beta = .35, p < .001$), whereas negative play beliefs were not significant, and the effect of perceived family income remained significant. In Step 3, fathers' play participation accounted for additional variance ($\Delta R^2 = .108, \Delta F(1, 222) = 32.75, p < .001$) and emerged as a strong positive predictor ($\beta = .36, p < .001$). In the final model, positive play beliefs remained significant ($\beta = .24, p < .001$), whereas socio-demographic variables were no longer significant. Overall, the model explained 24.4% of the variance in children's playfulness (Adjusted $R^2 = .244$).

Table 3

Correlations among Study Variables

No	Variables	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
1	Father age	1.00								
2	Father education level	-.09	1.00							
3	Perceived income	-.22**	.06	1.00						
4	Child age	.16*	-.07	-.10	1.00					
5	Child gender	.02	.06	.14*	-.00	1.00				
6	Child playfulness	-.13	.11	.16*	-.02	-.03	1.00			
7	Father play participation	-.20**	.03	.21**	-.22**	.01	.44**	1.00		
8	Father positive play beliefs	-.13	.01	.01	-.04	.09	.34**	.32**	1.00	
9	Father negative play beliefs	.09	-.33**	-.03	.08	-.05	-.04	-.07	-.19**	1.00

Note. N = 231. * $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$

Table 4

Hierarchical Regression Analyses for Fathers' Play Beliefs and Play Participation Predicting Children's Playfulness

Variables	Step 1			Step 2			Step 3		
	B	SE	β	B	SE	β	B	SE	β
Father age	-1.72	1.34	-.09	-0.84	1.28	-.04	-0.15	1.20	-.01
Education level	1.94	1.29	.10	2.42	1.29	.12	2.40	1.20	.12*
Perceived family income	3.36	1.57	.14*	3.65	1.48	.16*	2.21	1.41	.10
Child age	0.11	0.68	.01	0.16	0.64	.02	0.81	0.61	.08
Child gender	-1.08	1.30	-.06	-1.71	1.23	-.09	-1.45	1.15	-.07
Positive play beliefs				1.36	0.24	.35***	0.93	0.24	.24***
Negative play beliefs				0.29	0.29	.07	0.28	0.27	.06
Fathers' play participation							0.60	0.11	.36***
Adjusted R ²		.025			.136			.244	
R ² Change		.046			.116			.108	
F Change		2.19			15.48***			32.75***	

Note. B = unstandardized coefficient; SE = standard error; β = standardized coefficient.

* p < .05, ***, p < .001. Dependent variable: Children's playfulness.

3.3. Differences in Fathers' Play Participation

An independent samples t-test was conducted to examine differences in fathers' play participation across demographic variables (see Table 5). Fathers' play participation did not differ significantly by child gender, $t(229) = -0.21$, $p > .05$, or education level, $t(229) = -0.48$, $p > .05$. However, a statistically significant difference was observed for perceived income level, $t(97.85) = -3.39$, $p < .01$, with fathers reporting a moderate income level demonstrating higher play participation scores than those with a low income level. In addition, fathers under 35 years of age reported significantly higher play participation scores compared to those aged 36 years and older, $t(229) = 3.08$, $p < .01$.

Table 5

Independent Samples t-Test Results for Fathers' Play Participation

Variables	Group	N	Mean	SD	t	df	p
Child's Gender	Girl	120	39.34	5.82	-0.21	229	.836
	Boy	111	39.50	6.16			
Perceived Income	Low income	54	37.20	5.32	-3.39	97.85	.001
	Moderate income	177	40.10	6.01			
Education Level	High school or less	111	39.23	6.34	-0.48	229	.635
	Bachelor's degree or higher	120	39.60	5.63			
Fathers' Age	35 years or younger	131	40.46	5.86	3.08	229	.002
	36 years and older	100	38.06	5.87			

4. Discussion

The present study examined the associations between fathers' play beliefs, fathers' play participation, and children's playfulness. Overall, the findings indicate that fathers' play participation showed the strongest association with children's playfulness, whereas socio-demographic variables explained little variance. This finding suggests that children's playfulness may be shaped less by demographic characteristics and more by interactional experiences within the family context. In addition, the analyses revealed that fathers' play participation differed by perceived income level and fathers' age, but not by child gender or fathers' educational attainment. This section discusses these findings and

their implications. The findings showed that when fathers' play participation, play beliefs, and father- and child-related characteristics were examined together as predictors of children's playfulness, demographic variables explained only a small proportion of the variance. Among these variables, fathers' education level emerged as a significant predictor in the final model, whereas fathers' age, perceived family income, child age, and child gender were not significantly associated with children's playfulness. This finding is consistent with previous studies suggesting that parental demographic characteristics do not necessarily lead to meaningful differences in children's play tendencies (Bay, 2021; Bozdemir, 2023; Fung & Chung, 2022). Taken together, these results suggest that fathers' educational background may play a more meaningful role than other demographic factors in shaping father-child play interactions. The study was conducted primarily with fathers from low- and middle-income groups. Nevertheless, the results indicate that higher education levels, positive play beliefs, and fathers' play participation are significantly associated with children's playfulness, even within relatively disadvantaged socioeconomic contexts. Specifically, positive play beliefs significantly predicted children's playfulness, whereas negative play beliefs were not significantly associated with it. Fathers who perceive play as enjoyable, valuable, and developmentally important may be more inclined to support play environments that encourage children's spontaneous, expressive, and joyful participation. The absence of a significant relationship between negative play beliefs and children's playfulness suggests that less favorable attitudes toward play may not show a direct association with children's playfulness, particularly when fathers maintain supportive and responsive interactions during play. However, this interpretation requires further empirical investigation. Fathers' play participation emerged as the strongest predictor of children's playfulness. This finding aligns with previous research demonstrating that fathers' supportive behaviors during play, including encouragement of autonomy and the expression of their own playfulness, are associated with children's playfulness (Cope, 2024; Wu et al., 2024). In addition, the quality of positive parent-child interactions has been shown to contribute to children's playful engagement (Wustmann Seiler et al., 2024). Through play interactions, fathers provide opportunities for shared enjoyment, emotional closeness, and reciprocal engagement, which are key components of children's playfulness. From a broader family systems perspective, fathers' play involvement may not represent a unique developmental contribution but rather a complementary role within the broader network of parental influences on child development (Menashe-Grinberg & Atzaba-Poria, 2017; Teufl & Ahnert, 2022; Vente & Bögels, 2016). The strong association between fathers' play participation and children's playfulness also highlights the importance of interaction quality rather than merely the quantity of play. Fathers' engagement may be particularly beneficial when accompanied by sensitive communication and empathic responsiveness during play interactions (Adak Özdemir et al., 2025; Mills-Koonce et al., 2015; Olsavsky et al., 2020). Overall, these findings suggest that children's playfulness is more strongly associated with father-child interaction processes than with demographic characteristics. Accordingly, encouraging fathers' involvement in play and fostering positive play beliefs may represent important targets for family-based interventions aimed at supporting children's socio-emotional development and learning. Policies that promote gender equality and active fathering, such as flexible work arrangements, paternity leave, and access to early childhood services, may create greater opportunities for father-child play. In addition, providing guidance to fathers on engaging with their children during play may enhance the quality of these interactions and support more positive developmental outcomes (Demir Öztürk & Aksoy, 2020; Dicle, 2024). Given that play represents a context encompassing affection, shared enjoyment, and learning within the father-child relationship (Volling & Cabrera, 2025), increasing opportunities for father-child play may ultimately contribute to children's well-being. The findings also indicate that fathers' play participation differed according to perceived income level and fathers' age, whereas no significant differences were observed with respect to child gender

or fathers' education level. While these results are inconsistent with some previous studies (İvrendi & Işıkoğlu, 2010), they are consistent with others (Schoppe-Sullivan et al., 2013). Fathers who perceived their income level as moderate reported higher levels of play participation than those who perceived their income as lower. This finding suggests that economic hardship may indirectly limit fathers' participation through increased stress, time constraints, and competing responsibilities. Previous research has similarly emphasized the role of socioeconomic conditions in shaping fathers' play participation (Garcia et al., 2022; Yuan et al., 2025). Research with low-income fathers further indicates that egalitarian gender role beliefs and workplace flexibility can mitigate the negative effects of economic disadvantage on fathers' involvement in play (Barcala-Delgado & Perry-Jenkins, 2025). In addition, cross-cultural research suggests that structural resources may be more influential than cultural traditionalism in explaining differences in fathers' participation in child-related activities (Roopnarine et al., 2024). The results also showed that younger fathers reported higher levels of play participation than older fathers. Although increasing age is often associated with greater emotional maturity, age-related declines in physical energy may limit engagement in sustained and physically active play interactions. Previous research has similarly documented that physically demanding forms of play tend to decrease with paternal age (MacDougall et al., 2012).

4.1. Cultural Context and Implications for Practice

The present findings should be interpreted within the cultural and socioeconomic context in which fatherhood, parenting roles, and play are socially constructed. Family dynamics and child-rearing processes are shaped by factors such as education, economic status, and urbanization, with cultural norms and income differences contributing to variation in parental roles and time spent with children (Greenfield, 2016; Kağıtçıbaşı, 2012). In Türkiye, fathers are often positioned primarily as economic providers, while daily caregiving responsibilities are more strongly associated with mothers or other family members. In families where both parents are employed, the presence of alternative caregivers, such as grandparents, may further limit fathers' opportunities for direct play involvement (Altan & Tarhan, 2018; İvrendi & Işıkoğlu, 2010). Consistent with cross-national evidence, parental time investment in children is also closely linked to hours spent in paid work and culturally shaped gender role expectations (Gauthier & DeGusti, 2012). Together, these contextual factors may help explain the moderate levels of fathers' play participation observed in the present study and align with research emphasizing culturally shaped paternal roles (Bozok, 2018; Kisbu et al., 2023). Although perceived income level did not emerge as a significant predictor in the final model, the lower levels of play participation observed among fathers in the low-income group should be interpreted with caution and may reflect structural constraints, such as long working hours, that limit opportunities for engagement in play. Nevertheless, prior research indicates that fathers from lower socioeconomic backgrounds may hold positive beliefs about interaction and play with their children (Çorapci et al., 2025). Taken together, these findings suggest that the association between fathers' play participation and children's playfulness may be more strongly related to the quality of play participation than to its frequency or quantity alone. This emphasis on interaction quality appears to reflect broader parenting processes rather than parent gender per se, as evidence from both fathers and mothers highlights the central role of responsive communication and supportive interaction during play (Adak Özdemir et al., 2025; Fagan et al., 2014; Piskernik & Ruiz, 2020). Despite contextual constraints, the strong association between fathers' play participation and children's playfulness suggests that play may represent a particularly accessible and meaningful interactional context for fathers. Across cultures, fathers tend to engage with their children more through play than through routine caregiving, positioning play as a key pathway for emotional closeness and sensitive interaction (Paquette, 2004; Giallo,

2013; Roopnarine & Wusirige, 2025). From a practical perspective, these findings suggest that interventions should prioritize supporting the quality of parent–child play for both mothers and fathers, rather than evaluating parental roles in isolation, in order to enhance children’s playfulness and broader socioemotional well-being (Wu et al., 2024; Wustmann Seiler et al., 2024)

5. Conclusions and Recommendations

The findings indicate that fathers’ play participation emerged as a key factor in shaping children’s playfulness. Variations in fathers’ play participation by perceived income level and age suggest that structural and contextual factors may influence paternal engagement. Despite its contributions, this study has several limitations. Its cross-sectional design precludes causal interpretations of the relationships between fathers’ play participation, play beliefs, and children’s playfulness, as children’s playfulness may also elicit greater paternal engagement. In addition, child-related developmental factors, such as cognitive development, were not included and should be considered in future research (Sethna et al., 2017). The reliance on fathers’ self-reports limits the findings and highlights the need for multi-informant and observational approaches. Moreover, other paternal and maternal factors shaping father–child relationships were not examined (Pekel-Uludağlı, 2024). The study was also conducted in a single province, and participants were recruited via social media, which may have introduced volunteer bias and may limit the generalizability of the findings (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Nevertheless, the study contributes to the literature by demonstrating that fathers’ play participation is a key predictor of children’s playfulness beyond demographic characteristics and play beliefs. These findings highlight the importance of interactional processes in play and suggest that interventions promoting fathers’ responsive and active involvement in play may support children’s development.

Declaration of Conflicts of Interest

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

Declaration of Generative AI Use

OpenAI’s ChatGPT (GPT-4o) was used for grammar refinement, improving language clarity and overall readability, and for generating figures based on author-provided data and instructions. All conceptual, analytical, and interpretive aspects of the study were conducted solely by the authors.

Ethical Statement

This study involved the collection of data from human participants. Informed consent was obtained from all participants electronically. The research was approved by the Pamukkale University Social and Human Sciences Research and Publication Ethics Committee (Session Date: 17.11.2021; Approval No: 68282350/22021/G021).

Author Contributions

The first and second authors developed the conceptual framework of the study, designed the research, and managed the manuscript preparation process. The first author conducted the analyses and led the writing of the manuscript. The second author collected the data and provided writing support and handled reference formatting. Both authors reviewed the manuscript and approved the final version. This study was derived from the non-thesis master’s project of the second author, conducted under the supervision of the first author.

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