



Caregiver Experiences with Play: Recommendations for Providers, Policymakers, and Caregivers to Promote Child Well-Being and Reduce Family Stress

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*Caregiver
advisory group
member



*The Weitzman Institute convened a caregiver advisory group to better understand play in the context of the **Prescription for Play** program, which promotes caregiver education on play in the primary care setting.*

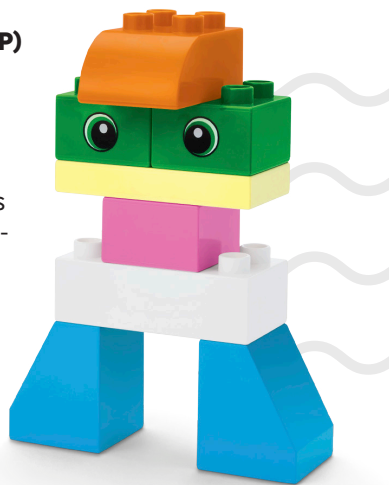
Executive Summary

Play strengthens bonds between caregivers and young children, allows young children to develop important cognitive, socioemotional, and physical skills, and relieves caregiver and child stress. The recent Surgeon General's report, *Parents Under Pressure*,¹ encourages policies and programs to reduce caregiver stress and recommends that policymakers consider caregiver voices when planning these solutions. In line with this recommendation, the Weitzman Institute convened a caregiver advisory group to better understand play in the context of the Prescription for Play program, which promotes caregiver education on play in the primary care setting. Advisory group caregivers emphasized how much they value playing with their children, gave valuable programmatic input, and identified several themes, which, along with current research and our work, resulted in the following key recommendations.

1. Providers should discuss the importance of play during visits; make offices more play-friendly; offer age-specific ideas on play in after-visit summaries; and refer stressed caregivers to appropriate resources.
2. Public policies should incorporate caregiver voices; leverage the primary care setting to help caregivers build and maintain safe, stable, and nurturing relationships; support programs like parental leave and accessible childcare to help caregivers balance play and caretaking with work and life responsibilities; and champion high quality, culturally-relevant, affordable health care.
3. Caregivers should be mindful of screen time for themselves and their young children; be creative with play when time or materials are short; seek local parenting groups and support; and advocate for more play and safe play spaces in schools and communities.

Introduction

The **Prescription for Play (P4P)** program promotes learning through play by supplying free LEGO® DUPLO® brick kits and educational materials to pediatric health care providers for delivery to 18- to 36-month-old patients during routine well-child visits. Encouraging play in families with young children is important as play fosters strong bonds between caregivers and children, promotes a child's cognitive, socioemotional, and physical development, and reduces stress for both caregivers and children.² The Weitzman Institute, a research, education, and policy organization, with support from The LEGO Foundation, brings P4P to clinics and caregivers across the United States.



The inclusion of patient and caregiver voices is an important part of the work at the Weitzman Institute. The Surgeon General's recent report on parental stress reaffirms the importance of this work, calling for researchers and stakeholders to "utilize parent advisory groups and other models to involve parents and caregivers in all phases of programming, from ideation to implementation."¹

The main objective of the caregiver advisory group was to solicit actionable input to inform:

1. Future directions of the P4P program
2. Recommendations for providers
3. Recommendations for policymakers
4. Recommendations for caregivers

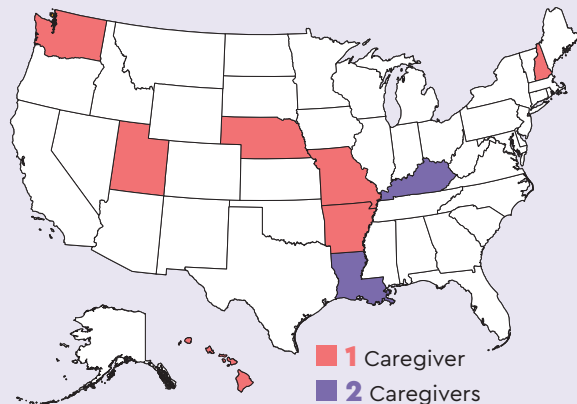
In August and September of 2024, Weitzman Institute convened a caregiver advisory group consisting of diverse caregivers of young children who have participated in the P4P program.

- Over 90% of the caregivers spoke English at home.
- Nearly half received Medicaid or Children's Health Insurance Program (CHIP) benefits.
- Over 45% visited community health centers for care.
- 20% identified as gay or pansexual.

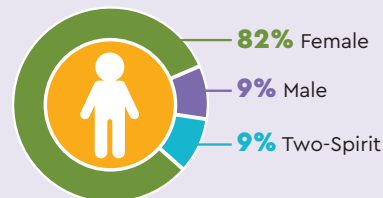
The caregivers gave input on their experiences with the P4P program and their perspectives on play in their homes and communities.

Caregiver Demographics

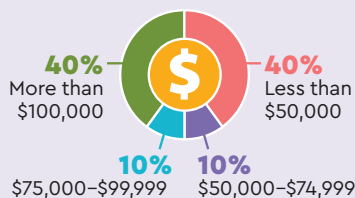
Caregiver Advisory Group Participants by State



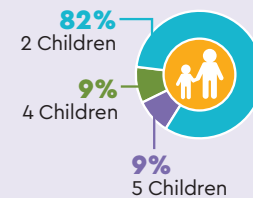
Gender Identity



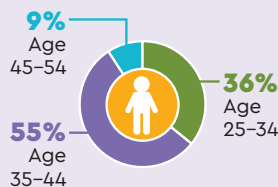
Annual Income



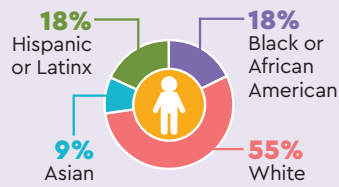
Number of Children



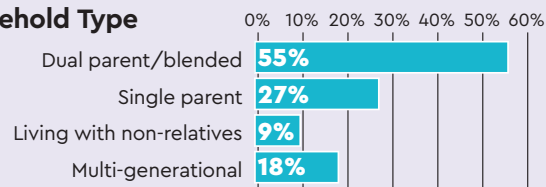
Caregiver Age



Race or Ethnicity



Household Type



Caregivers identified several key themes (see Table 1). Using these themes, and informed by current nationwide policy priorities and published literature, the project team offers the following recommendations for providers, policymakers, and caregivers.

Recommendations for Providers



RECOMMENDATION #1:

Use the P4P kits as a chance to educate caregivers on the importance of play and child development.

- Open the kit, use the kit guidance to explain the importance of play for young children and caregivers, and/or use the kit during exams and developmental assessments.



RECOMMENDATION #2:

Make visits and clinical spaces more play-friendly for young children.

- Alternatives to shared toys include treasure boxes, coloring sets, or sensory walls.
- Train clinical support staff, and empower them to engage families on the importance of play.



RECOMMENDATION #3:

Include age-specific ideas on play and its importance in after-visit summaries.

- Caregivers reported that they read after-visit summaries, though some are dry or do not mention the importance of play or ideas for creative play.
- These summaries can also include age-appropriate information on play and benefits, e.g., how play builds fine motor skills, fosters creativity, and increases self-confidence by age group.



RECOMMENDATION #4:

Talk to caregivers about their own stress and health or financial difficulties, and make play-related recommendations accordingly.

- As time permits, screen caregivers for mental stress and exhaustion.
- Refer caregivers to mental health or social service providers when appropriate.

"Providers need to be modeling play in their office waiting and exam rooms, having open-ended materials available and providing a simple quick play exchange with each child at least at some point during each office visit."

"For me the thing that gets in the way [of play] the most is work and different responsibilities after work."

"There's a lot of days where, it's the mental and emotional part of it all, I just put on the fake smile."

Recommendations for Policymakers



RECOMMENDATION #1:

Elevate caregiver voices.

- Continue to include the voices of caregivers in both policy discussions and the planning of programs that reduce caregiver stress and foster positive caregiver-child relationships.



RECOMMENDATION #2:

Leverage the primary care setting to help caregivers build and maintain safe, stable, and nurturing relationships with their young children through activities like play.

- Advocate for the increased role of community health workers, doulas, family navigators, child life specialists, and other support staff in primary care, who often interact with caregivers and have opportunities to discuss the importance of play.
- Increase training opportunities regarding trauma-informed care and family-centered best practices.
- Champion the accessibility of parenting education and other supportive services in the primary care setting.



RECOMMENDATION #3:

Adequately fund programs that complement primary care and provide resources to families.

- Increase funding for childcare, early childhood programs like Head Start, and home visiting programs.
- Provide caregiver resources like playgroups, support groups, and parent education programs.
- Create and maintain safe outdoor play spaces.



RECOMMENDATION #4:

Ensure working caregivers have access to flexible schedules and sufficient leave.

- Sick, family, and personal leave allow time for caretaking as well as play.
- Flexible schedules can help caregivers balance work-life demands and other obligations.



RECOMMENDATION #5:

Support access to high quality, culturally-relevant, affordable medical and behavioral health care for all caregivers and children.

- Increase visibility and availability of Employee Assistance Plans and other options to help caregivers access health care and social supports.

Recommendations for Caregivers



RECOMMENDATION #1:

Limit screen time for yourself and your children.

- Research shows parental use of technology negatively affects young children.³
- The American Academy of Pediatrics recommends extremely limited screen time for children under two, and less than one hour per day for children between ages two and six.⁴



RECOMMENDATION #2:

Be creative when time or materials are short. Use chores and bath time as quality playtime, mix and match toys or activities to maximize the fun, and emphasize quality over quantity.

- Caregivers' children love to help cook (or play with pots and pans), clean, and play with caregivers with and without toys at bath time.
- Combine the LEGO bricks with play dough, sorting bins, water, or other sensory toys—then, count, classify, and create!
- If age appropriate, encourage open-ended and child-led play. Busy caregivers and children benefit from high quality, enriching play, even when time is limited.



RECOMMENDATION #3:

Seek out neighborhood playgroups, caregiver support groups, or other local resources.

- If you aren't sure where to start, see [FindHelp.org](https://www.findhelp.org) for ZIP Code-level resources.



RECOMMENDATION #4:

Advocate! If your child isn't getting enough playtime in school or childcare, email leadership with evidence on the importance of play.

- You don't need to stop there. Contact your local representatives to discuss local play spaces and other community resources that may reduce caregiver stress and improve child health and well-being.

"It's important for us as parents to advocate for more [play]. I'm always the first to email at the beginning of the year about not enough time on the playground. It's important to voice your opinion on it."

"Screens are so prevalent now that kids are losing the ability to be imaginative. My [child] told me she wanted screen time to learn how to play with her toys!"



Recruitment and Structure

To form the caregiver advisory group, the team distributed recruitment materials to P4P-participating providers and clinic offices, requesting they share the materials with their patients. As Weitzman strives to inspire innovation to ensure that effective, efficient, and equitable primary care is available to underserved populations, the team was particularly interested in recruiting caregivers who represent patient populations served by Health Resources and Services Administration (HRSA)-supported health centers. The team selected 11 applicants to join the caregiver advisory group, ensuring group members represented a wide variety of income levels, geographic regions, family structures, and identities. Nearly half of the members received care from a health center or safety net clinic and most worked with children and families in some capacity. The two advisory group meetings took place in August and September 2024 via Zoom, with 10 and 11 members from across the United States participating, respectively. A Weitzman program manager and senior health policy analyst facilitated the meetings. The caregivers also had the opportunity to review and contribute to this document. The P4P team used the key themes listed in Table 1, as well as current research and our experience working with caregivers and providers, to create the following recommendations.

Table 1. Key Themes

Caregivers enjoy participating in the P4P program with their care provider.
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• While some received the P4P kit with education or guidance from the provider or on the importance of play, many did not but would appreciate these conversations.• Seeing a participating provider influenced or reinforced how caregivers play with their children.• Provider participation makes caregivers feel like they share the same values with providers.
Caregiver experiences with play in their provider offices varied.
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Some providers include ideas for age-appropriate play in visit summaries or other handouts, which caregivers appreciate and want more of.• Provider offices have gotten less play-friendly since COVID.• Some providers focus on literacy and language but caregivers would like to see this information in the context of play.
Caregivers value playtime with their children and discussed favorite games and ways to make more time for play.
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Caregivers love creative activities like scavenger hunts, tea parties, crafts, homemade modeling dough, and outdoor play.• Having a multi-generational household makes play easier, as does having an accessible, well-organized play area.• If chores spill into playtime, caregivers make chores fun, integrating play into cooking, cleaning, and bath time.
Caregivers also face many barriers to play.
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Work, chores, and older siblings compete for playtime.• Nearly all caregivers said that exhaustion is a barrier to play.• Screens can be a barrier to play if not properly managed.

Closing

Play is integral for child development, caregiver-child relationships, and reducing child and caregiver stress. Play nurtures children's cognitive, socioemotional, and physical growth while strengthening bonds within families and fostering a sense of shared joy and resilience. Caregivers from our advisory group enjoy both playing with their children and encouraging child-led play, cite fatigue and time limitations as their main barriers to play, and are more satisfied with providers who recognize and discuss the importance of play. Caregiver voices guided the provider, policy, and caregiver recommendations above, and overall themes closely align with recent Surgeon General's policy priorities.¹ While more research on the positive benefits of play to caregivers is needed, policies related to health care, paid leave, and community resources are a start toward addressing caregiver challenges, creating more supportive environments for play, and building healthier families and communities. Most famously stated by Fred Rogers and brought up repeatedly by our caregivers, "play is really the work of childhood."



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Rx4Play.org

