

IDOP 2025: Global Roundtable Choose Play, Everyday

June 11, 2025



Moderated by Smarinita Shetty
Co-Founder & CEO
India Development Review

— In Conversation With —



Tia Mathisen
Executive Director
Playworks



Dr Sarah Aiono
CEO & Co-Director
Longworth Education



Ingrid Srinath
Chair
Resource Alliance



Shweta Chari
Co-Founder & CEO
The Opentree Foundation

A summary of TOF's global roundtable on reframing play as essential, not optional for children's development, and reclaiming play as a vital tool for equity, resilience and the very heart of childhood.

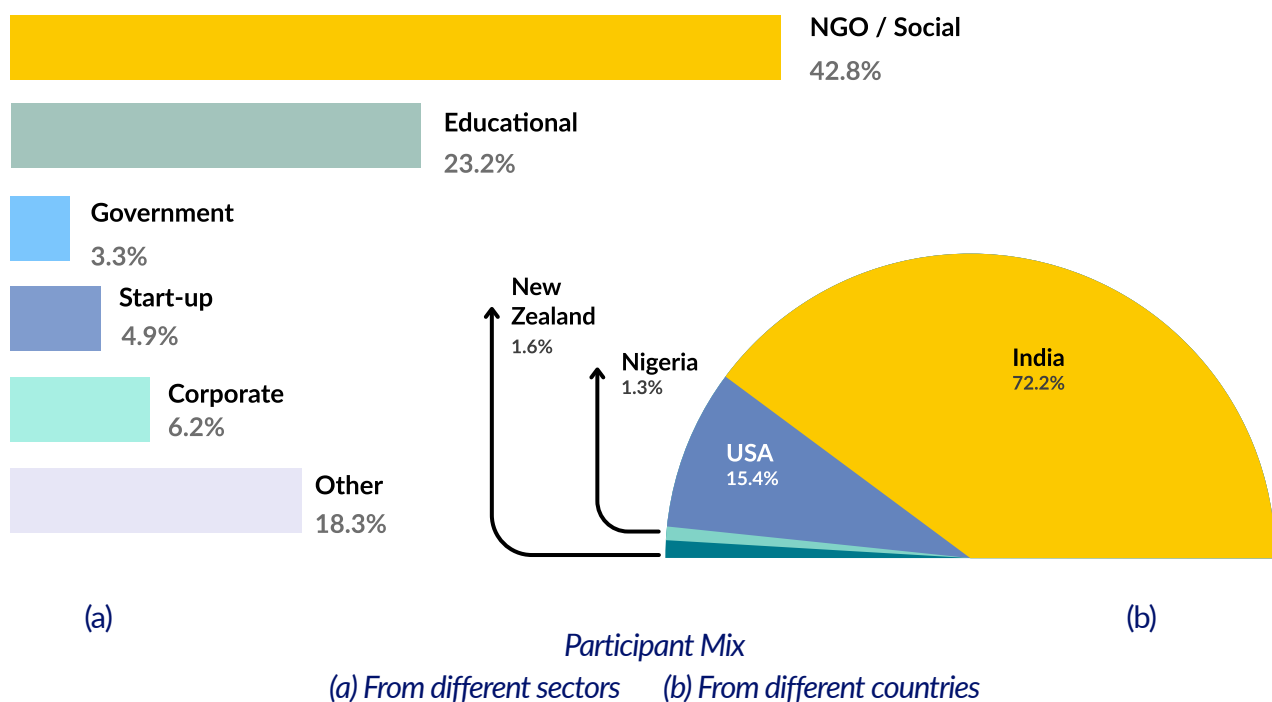
On the occasion of the second International Day of Play, The Opentree Foundation hosted a powerful global roundtable featuring voices from across sectors and geographies, all united by one message:

Play is essential, not optional.

This discussion spotlighted the global disappearance of play from children's lives and explored what it will take to restore it, in education, policy, philanthropy, and communities.

Key themes discussed:

1. The perception gap around play and learning
2. Barriers faced by children from marginalised communities
3. The link between play and socio-emotional development
4. Why play must be embedded in systems, not treated as a luxury



This was more than a conversation, it was a call to action.

Let's make play a movement.

Let's Choose Play, Everyday.

“

We can redesign systems and reimagine spaces, but unless policymakers, funders, and families see play in action and redefine what success looks like for children, it will remain undervalued. Seeing a child learn through play is what makes the case real.

-Ingrid Srinath, Chair, Resource Alliance

The State of Play

Play is shrinking, globally

Children across socio-economic backgrounds, gender and abilities, are increasingly deprived of meaningful play opportunities.

Only 25% of today's children report playing a few times a week, a stark drop from 75% among their grandparents' generation.

82% of children globally wish they had more time to play. 73% of parents agree, yet few systems act on this shared longing.

Play continues to be misunderstood

Adults continue to view play as a reward, break or frivolous activity, rather than a critical right and tool for development.

Increasingly, play is only valued if it directly improves academic outcomes or builds career paths (e.g., sports). Otherwise, it is dismissed as a distraction.

Play paucity is an overlooked crisis.

The steady disappearance of play from children's lives is met with alarming indifference. This neglect isn't just a childhood issue, it's a quiet crisis eroding our collective well-being and imagination.

Access to Play is a systemic problem

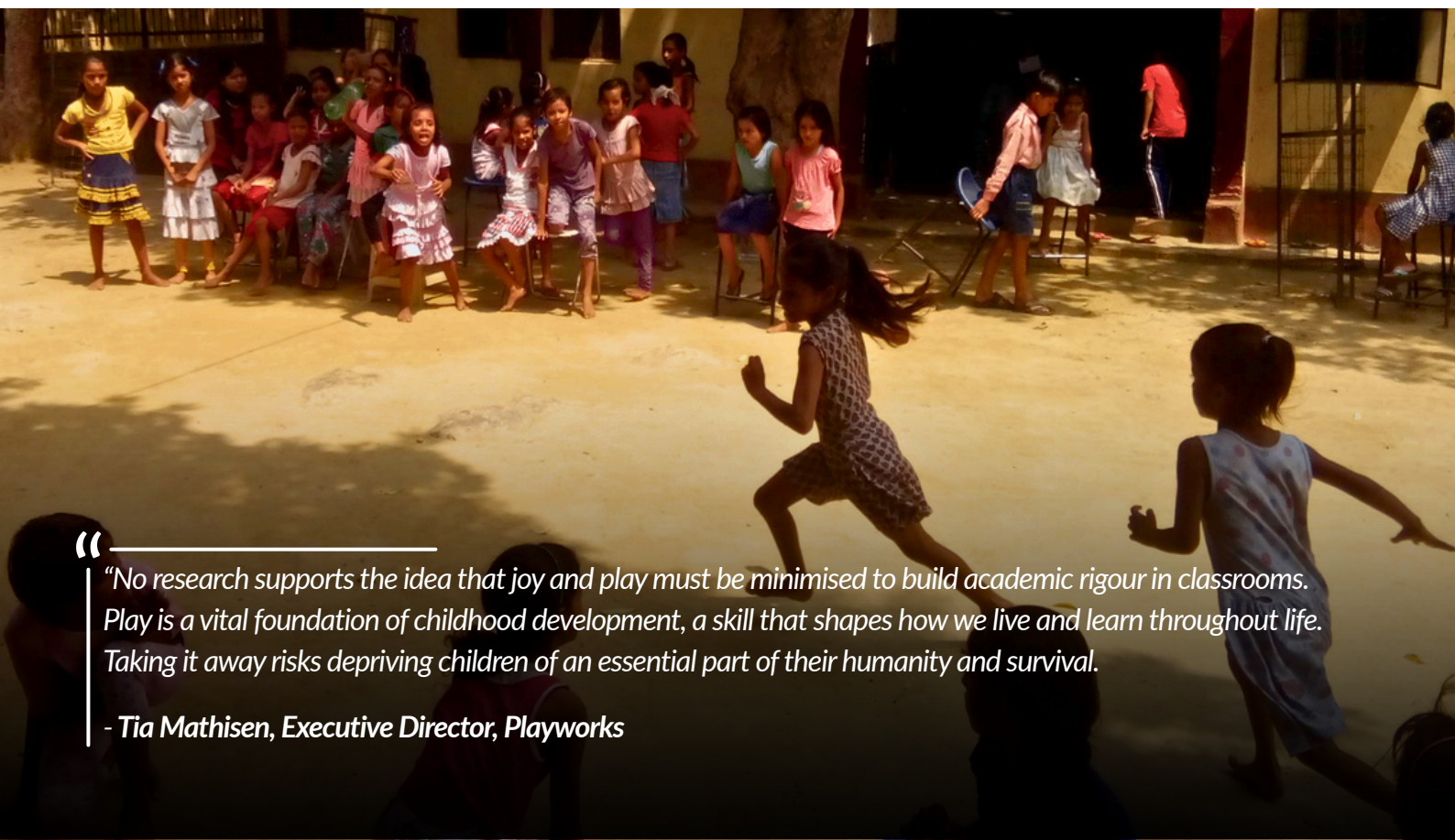
Gender and socio-economic status shape who gets to play, and who does not. Older girls are often burdened with household work, while children from low-income communities may be pushed into labour, with limited access to safe, inclusive play spaces in both rural and urban-poor areas.

Screens continue to replace play in the absence of spaces — even children from underserved communities are spending their limited resources on screens.

Learning vs Play: The False Divide

Play is often seen as unproductive because it's spontaneous and child-led, lacking the measurable outcomes of structured learning.

There's a growing belief that children need more structure to "succeed," leading to resistance against the perceived openness of play.



“No research supports the idea that joy and play must be minimised to build academic rigour in classrooms. Play is a vital foundation of childhood development, a skill that shapes how we live and learn throughout life. Taking it away risks depriving children of an essential part of their humanity and survival.

- Tia Mathisen, Executive Director, Playworks



Barriers To Play

Mindset Barriers:

- Play does not contribute to future success
- Play and learning are different
- Play can be unsafe, or distracting
- Girls do not need to play as much as boys
- There is no connection between Play and development

Resource Barriers:

- Lack of open spaces
- Staffing constraints in schools
- Missing evidence to support Play
- Lack of time due to excessive structure

Systemic/Structural Barriers

- Gaps in knowledge of Play
- Gender biases, socio-economic disparity
- Diluted child labour laws
- Lack of play-centric policies
- Excessive screen time among all children

“

For 20 years, we've fought to embed play where it matters most, right into the heart of schools and communities. From rural classrooms to urban centres, we've trained playworkers, created play spaces on-site, and even carved out play periods in school timetables, because play isn't optional, it's essential.

- Shweta Chari, Co-founder & CEO, The Opentree Foundation

The Impact of Play Paucity

Poor Physical Health

Children lacking play show poor coordination, motor skills, balance, fitness, and rising rates of obesity and diabetes due to sedentary lifestyles.

Poor Social Skills

Without play, children miss out on critical peer interaction. They struggle to negotiate, handle disagreement, read social cues, and navigate real-world relationships.

Emotional Dysregulation

Play teaches frustration tolerance, empathy, and self-control. Without it, emotional resilience is weak or absent.

Gaps in Language and Communication

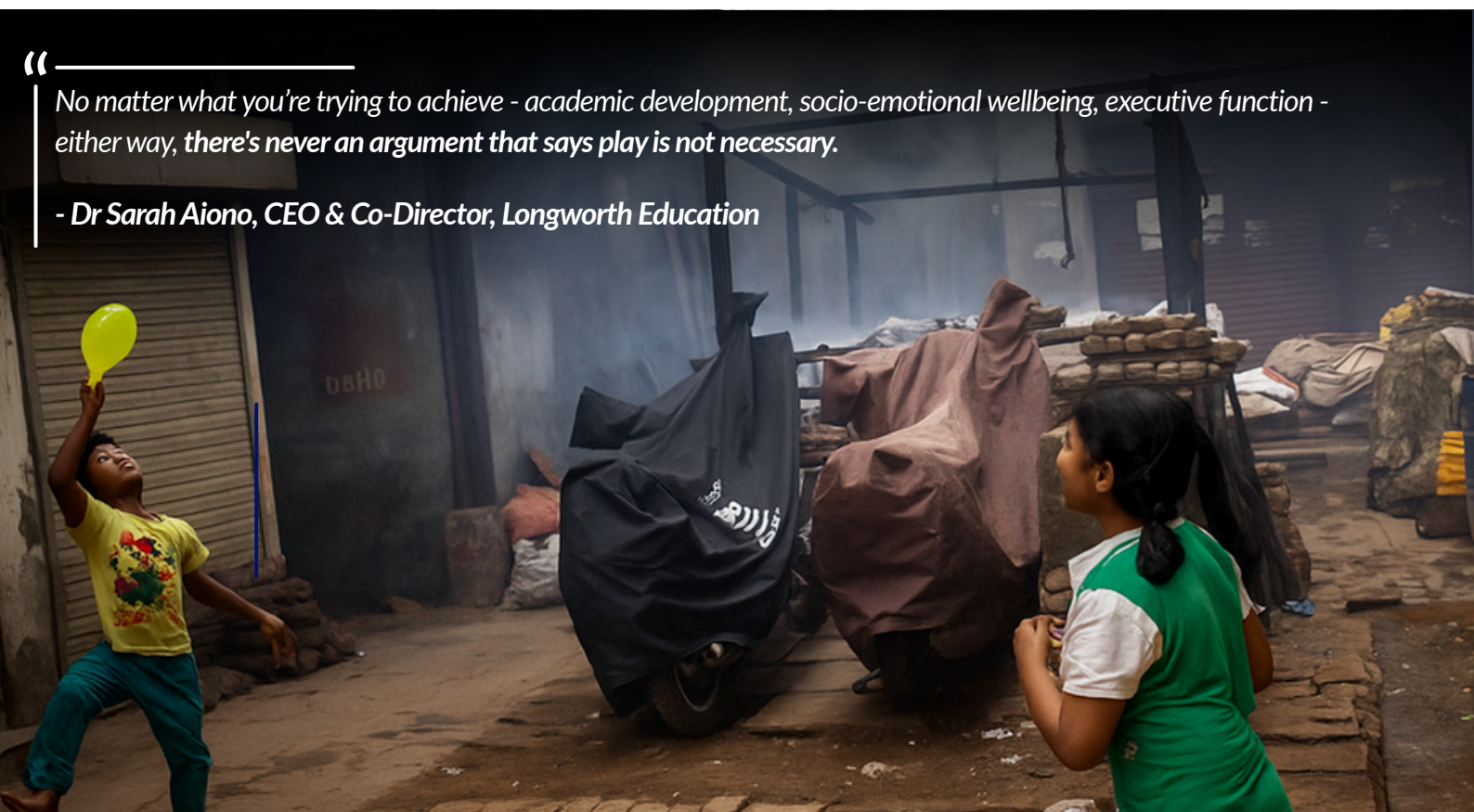
Play lays the foundation for oral language, which is essential for reading, communication, and overall literacy.

Cognitive Deficits

Everything from critical thinking to emotional intelligence and executive function develops naturally through play, without children even realising they're learning.

No matter what you're trying to achieve - academic development, socio-emotional wellbeing, executive function - either way, there's never an argument that says play is not necessary.

- Dr Sarah Aiono, CEO & Co-Director, Longworth Education



“

We've been relentlessly stubborn about this, and we're not giving up. Because it's obvious. Play is the foundation of everything: art, books, games, sports, wonder... civilization itself. And yet, it's still not understood. Children are losing their childhoods, and that shapes the society we become. This is solvable. We can build beautiful mindsets early. We must.

- Shweta Chari, Co-founder & CEO, The Opentree Foundation



Way Forward

1 Create Play advocates through experience

Policymakers, educators, and leaders need to feel the power of play, so they can recognise play as a field of knowledge and right — not an afterthought.

2 Redefine success for children

As long as we judge children only by grades and academic benchmarks, play will never be prioritised. We must include joy, social skills, creativity, and well-being, and incorporate these into metrics.

3 Make room for Play, consciously

Whether structured play time, or whole-school approaches, educators must be empowered with actionable strategies. Play becomes sustainable when teachers see it working in their own classrooms.

4 Shift the lens, change the practice

Teachers often struggle to see “learning” in free play because of rigid training. But once they're guided to notice social-emotional learning within play, their perspective changes, and they can't unsee it. That shift in mindset is key.

5 Make Play visible

We need clear, consolidated data that connects the dots for funders and policymakers. A robust evidence base combined with firsthand experiences is essential to driving meaningful, lasting change.

6 Turn play into a movement, not just a moment

Change can't rely on one-on-one conversions. We need scale. Play must move beyond niche projects into a broader public movement, one that shifts societal norms and expectations around childhood, learning, and wellbeing.