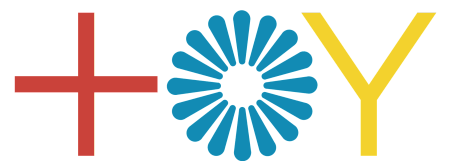




IMPACT EVALUATION AND POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

Executive Summary



FOR INCLUSION

toys to share play to care

Implementation and up-scaling of a successful model

TOY to Share, Play to Care[1] is a two-year project (January 2019 – January 2021) that builds on previous work undertaken by International Child Development Initiatives (ICDI)[2], a Netherlands-based non-governmental organisation. Specifically, it follows up on the project *TOY for Inclusion, 2017-2019*.

The *TOY to Share, Play to Care* consortium comprises ten partner organisations based in nine European countries.

The initial *TOY for Inclusion* project developed and piloted Play Hubs, i.e., low-threshold, community-based, and informal early childhood spaces open to young children, their families, and community members of local Roma communities. Play Hubs offer toys for borrowing (toy libraries), stimulating activities for young children, opportunities for inter-generational encounters, and generally safe and welcoming spaces for everybody.

The follow-up project *TOY to Share, Play to Care* takes the existing Play Hubs as its starting point and builds on their experiences in order to scale up the model.

[1] It is an Erasmus Plus project, KA3 – Social inclusion and common values. www.toy4inclusion.eu

[2] www.icdi.nl

SPECIFIC AIMS:

- to establish additional Play Hubs in the participating countries, under the mentorship of existing ones.
- to reach out to marginalised and 'hard to reach' communities beyond the Roma communities.
- to increase involvement and long-term commitment of local authorities.

16
PLAY HUBS

opened between
2017 and 2020

8 EU
COUNTRIES

Croatia, Hungary, Italy,
Latvia, the Netherlands,
Slovakia, Slovenia
and Turkey

> 10.000 CHILDREN
(30% from vulnerable groups)

> 5.000 ADULTS
(parents and grandparents)

> 1.000 PRACTITIONERS
(20% from vulnerable groups)

PROJECT EVALUATION

THE FRAMEWORK

TOY to Share, Play to Care is a learning project that provides practice-based evidence for the development and implementation of inclusive, community-based and -embedded services for young children and their families. The project design includes a comprehensive data collection, monitoring and evaluation framework to enable shared learning from project experiences.

The framework consists of three elements:

- Initial and continuous documentation and monitoring of local capacities and needs (stakeholder mapping), Play Hub usage, reach and activities (data collection and monitoring protocols and tools)
- Utilization-focused impact evaluation, documenting participants' experiences and their views on what supports or constrains making a difference
- External evaluation of project conduct and achievement

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

1. What does impact/making a difference mean to your locality in relation to inclusive early years community initiatives i.e., this project? How do you know? For whom?
2. What do you envisage will help you make a difference to your locality in relation to inclusive early years community initiatives?
3. What do you envisage will make it difficult to make a difference in relation to inclusive early years community initiatives?

The research questions were explored using a qualitative methodology for data collection and analysis.

“Different tomorrows are possible. The struggle is no longer reduced to either delaying what is to come or ensuring its arrival; it is necessary to reinvent the future. Education is indispensable for this reinvention.”

Paulo Freire

FINDINGS: Context matters but a shared framework is crucial

The findings of the impact evaluation indicate that, not surprisingly, participants' descriptions of what making a difference entails are closely connected to their specific local contexts and situations. This is in line with the overall aim of TOY to Share, Play to Care to unlock the capability and resources of local communities to respond to local early childhood needs.

As impact is specific and localised, so are the factors that facilitate or hinder success. However, combining the localised findings in a bigger picture allows us to map out commonalities and threads.

We identify three dimensions of impact:

1

VALUES

Overarching values such as a shared orientation towards **social cohesion** as a desirable outcome, **empowerment** of individuals and communities, and recognition, respect and strengthening of children's individual and group **identity**.

2

RELATIONSHIPS (both internal and external)

In the first instance, a focus on **relationships with children and families** (rather than a focus on the 'delivery' of a programme) is key to the success of all TOY to Share, Play to Care Hubs. It is the crucial factor that **allows for differentiation** as it recognises and **embraces the agency of children, families and communities** in the local interpretation of the TOY to Share, Play to Care model.

Second, but equally important, is the programme's focus on facilitating **relationships between relevant actors (institutional and individual)** in the locality. The ability to orient, for example, local schools, existing services and municipal administration towards a shared goal of reaching out to marginalised young children tends to be the key factor for the **sustainability** of the Hubs.

3

STRUCTURES

Structures are a necessary complement to an approach guided by shared values and shaped by relationships with others. In the case of TOY to Share, Play to Care we found **two structural elements** that contribute to the success of both the Hubs and the overall project.

First, at both individual and project level, a **recognition and understanding of the professional structures within and around the Play Hubs**. This starts with a clear understanding of one's own professionalism and qualification (an informal early childhood setting does not mean it is less professional). It extends to the recognition and understanding of the professional necessities, practices, potentials and constraints of those professionals and actors who are situated outside the Hubs but are crucial for its success.

Second, at both local level and the level of the overarching TOY to Share, Play to Care project, questions arise of **positioning in relation to the formal education system**. A key success factor appears to be the capability of local Play Hubs to clearly define their identity as informal settings while, at the same time, relating their activities to the compulsory school system: **preparation, transition, enrolment, retention, and educational achievement**.

In summary, we found that **TOY to Share, Play to Care is making a difference through shared values and orientations interpreted and put into practice in diverse ways in diverse contexts**.

Despite overwhelmingly positive experiences at the local level, participants identified a number of **obstacles**. They told us that making a difference is made difficult by:

- **Lack of trust**, e.g., in professionals, administrations, and generally 'the state' by members of marginalised communities.
- **Lack of clarity of aims**, e.g., between specific (local) and general (project level) aims in relation to the level of formal learning to be provided in an informal Play Hub, or between professionals and officials of different backgrounds.
- **Lack of access**, e.g., access to communities by Play Hub personnel due to location of settlements. More crucially, marginalised children and families' lack of access to services, transport, sanitation.
- **Lack of resources**, most importantly to make the Play Hubs sustainable beyond the project phase, and to ensure their continuation during crises and disruption, as exemplified by the COVID-19 pandemic.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS: learning from TOY to build grassroots competent systems

Several lessons can be learned from the experiences made in the TOY to Share, Play to Care project. They revolve around a central challenge that is also an opportunity for more effective use of resources at local, national and EU level.

The central question arising from the impact evaluation is:

How can we develop shared values, knowledge(s), and practices while embracing, enabling, and empowering diverse local (situated) creative inventions and interpretations of the shared framework?

Addressing this question from a perspective of policy points to the need for a conceptual and practical shift from policies that aim at traditional implementation of programmes to **policies that enable interpretation and local meaning-making by all actors**, and most importantly by early childhood professionals, children, families, and community members.

The shift goes beyond the need to fund local projects. It requires (and opens an opportunity for) **systems of governance and decision making that are designed to continuously and systematically learn from the diversity** of local experiences, as well as readiness to use these experiences to critically question and recalibrate overarching policy aims and approaches. Policy making, in such contexts, will be **cyclical**, rather than linear ('top-down' vs. 'bottom-up'). Governance will be understood as **intrinsic** rather than extrinsic; it recognises the agency of all (including children, families, communities, early childhood professionals) which it seeks to empower.

Aspiration and aim: to enable the growth of Grassroots Competent Systems

The policy recommendations drawn from TOY to Share, Play to Care assume an aspiration and aim to **enable the growth of grassroots competent systems for young children, their families and communities, and ultimately for society on the whole.**

They are presented in this report at three levels: **local, national (or regional), and European.**

While each level has specific requirements and potential for change, the levels are connected and depend on each other as they come together to enable competent systems.

The recommendations in this report are based on the analysis of the data gathered for the impact evaluation of this specific project. Nonetheless, they connect to policy recommendations drawn from a solid body of research evidence gained from previous projects over two decades.

LOCAL LEVEL

Provide spaces for systematic, dialogic, cross-sectoral encounters between stakeholders: community members, professionals from a wide range of backgrounds, policy- and decision makers

NATIONAL LEVEL

Combine national guidance (policy frameworks, strategies etc.) with equally strong support for regional and local democracy

EU LEVEL

Assume initiative and leadership internally, towards member states and externally, towards international organisations and forums (e.g., OECD, G20)



'TOY to Share Play to Care' project, 2019-2021

Published in January 2021

Authors: Mathias Urban, Gillian Lake, Geraldine French, Fiona Giblin, Thérèse Farrell (Early Childhood Research Centre, Dublin City University)

Design & layout: Giulia Cortellesi

Suggested citation: Urban, M. et al (2021) TOY for Inclusion Impact evaluation and policy recommendations. Executive summary. Dublin: ECRC

Full research report available at [this link](#).



With the support of the Erasmus+ Programme of the European Union



OPEN SOCIETY FOUNDATIONS

This publication was funded by the European Union's Erasmus+ Programme (KA3 Social Inclusion) and the Open Society Foundations (OSF). The contents of this publication are the sole responsibility of the partners of the project and can in no way be taken to reflect the views of the European Union or OSF.

www.toy4inclusion.eu



PEDAGOŠKI INŠTITUT

