FAMILY EXPEREINCES WITH STAY AND PLAY:
A N E A R L Y C H I L D D E V E L O P M E N T P R O G R A M

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Dedication

I dedicate this thesis to my children,

Christopher, Michael and Karen.

I am honoured to be your mother.

Family experiences

Abstract

In this qualitative study, the experiences of families who attended an early child development program *Stay and Play* were explored. *Stay and Play* is an early child development program that promotes healthy parent and child relationships. Belsky's (1984) process model - determinants of parenting and attachment theory served as the theoretical framework for this study.

Twenty-three parents participated and thirty-two children were in attendance - with only four children able to articulate their responses. Person centered interviewing was conducted with thirteen [one-parent] families, and family centered interviews occurred with five [two-parent families]

Utilizing thematic analysis, three themes were established: The functional role *of Stay and Play;* the structural role of *Stay and Play,* and parent's experiences with *Stay and Play.* Parents reported positive experiences with *Stay and Play* and in particular attended sessions to: Enhance parenting skills; bond with their children; and develop peer relationships.

Key words: parent, child, peer relationships, thematic analysis,

Family experiences

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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

The purpose of the study

Strong families make strong communities. Auspiciously, community programs offer support to families in areas of prevention, intervention and crisis. Research has determined that the most crucial time in developing an emotionally, socially, and secure individual is during the early years. The period of infancy to age three in a child's life is implicated in the overall health and well-being in the later years (Ainsworth, 1978; Barrett, 1999; Belsky, 1997; Berlin & Cassidy, 2001; Bowlby, 1988; Bretherton, Lambert & Golby, 2005; Edwards, 2002; Greenspan & Shanker, 2004; Svanberg, 1998; Vacca, 2001). Parents who are sensitive and attentive to the needs of their children teach them to trust their surroundings and encourage positive behaviour (Broom, 1998).

Peters (2007) discussed a Canadian survey involving families from different socioeconomic levels. Over 90% of the parents viewed parenting as their highest priority and 80% agreed that parental influence is absolutely crucial to how a child will mature as an adult. More so, parents who reported having ineffective home environments and parenting practices, had *little* information and education regarding healthy and effective parenting (Peters, 2007).

Quantitative research regarding child development has been conducted. However, it has been clinically focused and "much of this information is informal and superficial" (Peters, 2007, p. 1). Examples of these studies include; a clinical study investigating the association between maternal cognition and ineffective parenting practices (Jefferis & Oliver, 2006); an observation study on the quality of care at center-based child care

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settings in lower income communities (Loeb, Fuller, Kagan & Carrol, 2004); a case study

emphasizing specific techniques applied to enrich the parent/child relationship with

children who are diagnosed with attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (Johnson,

Franklin, Hall & Prieto, 2000); and an objective study investigating the contribution of a

mother's characteristics and a child's characteristics in dyadic interactions (Shulman,

Becker & Sroufe, 1999).

What is the community role in early child development?

Fraser Mustard (2006) stated, "The quality and capacity of our future population

depends on what we do now to support early child development"

(http://www.councilecd.ca p.1). According to the Ontario Early Years Study co-chaired

by the Honorable Margaret McCain and Dr. Fraser Mustard (1999),

> Early child development, as we use the term, can be provided in different settings -
> such as day care or child care centers, home based child care programs, preschool
> programs such as junior and senior kindergarten. It is not the setting that defines
> early child development; it is the activities. In our view, activities must focus on
> parent interaction with their children and play-based problem solving with other
> children that stimulate early brain development through the sensing pathways (Pp.
> 44^5).

Therefore and ideally, community-based early child development should encourage

parent and child attachment through interaction, learning and play. Also, research

demonstrates early child development programs that encourage experiential learning are

beneficial to a child's social/emotional literacy, educational achievements and overall

social development (Belsky, 1997; Berlin & Cassidy, 2001; Greenspan & Shanker, 2004;

Edwards, 2002). Furthermore, it has been suggested that it is cost effective to implement

education programs in the early years, than to necessitate remedial school programs later

on (McCain & Mustard, 1999).

A question that arises is why the parent and child relationship is being addressed outside the home? Simply, parenting skills required to encourage healthy child development are not necessarily innate. Community programs have an opportunity to educate parents with necessary skills to promote healthy parenting (Peters, 2007). When there is strong social and parental support, cognitive skill development for the child is improved and behaviour problems are decreased. Implementing community based early child development programs and parenting initiatives makes sense (McCain & Mustard, 2002). Therefore, the responsibility for early child development and parenting initiatives not only lies within the walls of our parent's homes, but within each community.

Early child development within the Province of Alberta

In 2001, the Alberta Government approved and implemented significant changes in policies that involve children, youth and their families. These collective policy changes are referred to as the Alberta Response Model. Although the key foci were children and youth in the welfare system, other concerns such as the importance to increase and improve preventative programs were addressed. Subsequently, several short and long-term needs were identified and strategies for program development were put in place (Alberta Response Model cited in www.child.gov.ab.ca 2001). The Alberta Response Model recognized that preventative community organizations are crucial to the healthy development of children and families. The Alberta Response Model identifies *Barons-Eureka-Warner, Family and Community Support Services (B-EW, FCSS)* as one of those organizations.

Attachment theory: The important role parents play in child development

Research of how parenting influences child development has been conducted for decades. A case study from 1928 suggested that a child's response to particular situations revealed the extent of intimacy (active sympathy and fellowship) manifested between parent and child. Further, it was observed that the degree of attachment between a parent and child was evident by the child's willingness to share confidences, be obedient to parental requests, and openness to participate in recreational activities (Nimkoff, 1928). Years later researchers continue to identify the critical link between parent and child interactions and its effect on the development of the child (Onyskiw, Harrison, & Magill-Evans, 1997).

In addition, the level of healthy attachment a child experiences with her/his parent(s), the more likely she/he will develop healthy and secure relationships with others as they mature. A loving connection between parent and child in the early years of child development continues through the stages of adolescence to adulthood (Greenspan & Shanker, 2004). A study involving laboratory procedures and home study observation established a link between how a parent was cared for as a child and how she or he bonds with their child. The study further categorized children's behaviour based on this phenomenon (Ainsworth, Blehar, Waters & Wall, 1978).

As well, how a parent responds to her/his child is crucial to the child's cognitive, emotional and social development. Parental warmth and sensitivity has been coupled with the emotional health of children. However, parents who are negative and irritable with their children have experienced developmental problems with them in the later years

(Belsky, 1997). In other words, it has become apparent that a parent's responsiveness to their child's overall development is more crucial than their biological contribution.

Literature indicates the importance of healthy attachment between a parent and their child. Furthermore, it suggests community involvement is an important contributor in educating parents. It is vital for communities to implement opportunities for the development of parent and child bonding, *BE-W, FCSS* recognize this need and are putting research into practice with *Stay and Play.* However, parent's experiences with *Stay and Play* remain unknown. Is *Stay and Play* offering a healthy interactive atmosphere of learning and play for parents and their children? The research question guiding this study was: What are the family experiences with *Stay and Play!*

To date, very little (if any) qualitative research has been conducted that explores parents' perspectives of participating with their children in a community based learning environment. Therefore, this study was warranted. The community based early child development program is entitled *Stay and Play.*

A process model: The determinants of parenting

The process model: The determinants of parenting, along with attachment theory guided this research. This model demonstrates how contributing elements such as: Familial history; parent's personality traits; parent's social network; marriage; employment; and child's characteristics attribute to a child's overall development (Belsky, 1984, p. 84)

However, for the purpose of this study three areas of domain will be discussed: 1) the parent's contributions; 2) the child's contributions; and 3) the contextual sources of stress/support (see Table 1). Copeland and Harbaugh (2005) stated:

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Belsky's process model of the Determinants of Parenting (1984) explicates three essential parenting domains which contribute to successful parenting: 1) parent contributions - defined as personal psychological resources of parents; 2) child contributions - defined as the child's characteristics; and 3) contextual sources of stress and support - defined as the broader social context in which the parent-infant relationship is embedded, (p. 140)

Table 1   Three Components of the Determinants of Parenting

Parental Contributions	Child Contributions	Contextual Sources of Stress/Support
Family History Personality Employment Social Network Marital Relations	Child Characteristics Child Development	Peer Relationships Family Members Community Programs Parent Coaches/Teachers

In this study *Stay and Play* served as a potential source of contextual support that helped increase the parent's knowledge level as well as improves the parent-child relationship. Thus, families' experiences with *Stay and Play* were explored in this study. The intent was to understand the extent to which families experienced support (or stress) as a consequence of attending *Stay and Play.* In addition parental contributions and child contributions were explored; thereby improving parenting responses. *Stay and Play* put into practice the determinants of parenting.

Parents are potentially supported as *Stay and Play* offers opportunities for parent and child interaction and social connection with their peers (both parent and child). It is designed to educate parents and children through experiential learning and play. Parents are instructed to actively participate with their children (infant to five years of age) as they visit each learning area [play station]. *Stay and Play* gives parents an opportunity to share quality time with their children. As Huston and Aronson (2005) stated, "time is a prerequisite for parents to provide intellectual stimulation and social interaction for their

children…Social capital in the family requires both time and attention to the child during

that time" (p. 467). In other words, quality time is a precondition for a healthy child.

Stay and Play is a child development program that is approximately two and half

hours in duration and is offered two - three times a week at Alberta Parent Link Centers,

which are community-parenting centers. There is no cost to the families who attend, no

registration is required and it is open to the public. *Stay and Play* provides individual play

stations, designed to encompass a variety of opportunities for parent and child to learn and

play. Activities include playing with the sandbox, messy play, building blocks, water play,

dress up, cars, trucks, books, balls, story time, sing-a-long and a baby center.

The combination of activities that include education and play support *B-E-W, FCSS*

in their organizational outcome goals. These goals encourage and support parent and child

bonding. Encouraging parent and child attachment, increasing parental involvement with

their child, and improving parenting skills are addressed in the *Stay and Play* program. It

is anticipated that the necessary skills will increase healthy child development, family

support and decrease difficulties in child rearing.

The outcome goals indicated by *B-E-W, FCSS* are not determined by a specific

length of time (one year, two year). In a private conversation Mr. Greg Pratt, Director of

B-E-W, FCSS stated, "It is difficult to effectively determine short and medium term goals,

as the developmental stages of a child in the early years happen quickly." The short term

and medium term goals are *indicators* in determining the parent and child's experiential

and educational development. Mr. Greg Pratt, also stated, "A child or family may

experience growth after the first few visits… For example, a mother and her child had

been attending other play groups in another community and it wasn't until she started

coming to *Stay and Play* that her child started to talk." This experience would indicate 'short term.' Goals [indicators] that may require more time for the child and/or parent to achieve are designated as medium term goals. Long-term goals are not specified as children only attend *Stay and Play* for a period of five years. The short term and medium term goals for parents and children are highlighted (see Tables 2 and 3).

Table 2   *Stay and Play* Goals for Parents

Short Term	Medium Term
Increased involvement with children. Increase in knowledge of parenting. Increase in knowledge of chi development. Increase in social support. Decrease in isolation.	Increase in parenting skills. Decrease in stress. Increase in positive family functioning. Increase in empathy and social; emotional Literacy.

Stay and Play Goals for Children

Short Term	Medium Term
Increase in participation. Decrease in isolation.	Increase in curiosity and Creativity. Increase in relationship building skills. Increase in empathy and social and emotional literacy Increase in problem solving skil

The *Stay and Play* program involves facilitators, known as parent coaches, who are educated in the field of early child development or other related disciplines. Further, *B-E-W, FCSS* frequently provides opportunities for the parent coach to attend parenting and child development classes that are pertinent *Stay and Play*. The parent coach's responsibilities are to organize and oversee the activities; encourage parents to remain interactive with their children; and provide parents with early child hood education.

Why qualitative research?

Quantitative research has been more commonly used in studying community involvement among child development programs (Ainsworth, Blehar et al, 1999). However, qualitative insight into the more intimate details of parenting, community involvement, parent/child attachment and child development remain limited. Particular questions (which included interest in the determinants of parenting, attachment theory, and the outcome goals from *B-E-W, FCSS)* were asked during a semi-structured interview. Thus, parents were interviewed to explore and share their experiences within the context *Stay and Play. A* qualitative study permitted inquiry within a selected area of interest with "careful attention given to detail, context, and nuances" (Patton, 2002, p. 227). A qualitative interview between researcher and family offered opportunity for a richer in-depth understanding of their experiences with *Stay and Play.*

Summary

In summary, I explored the family experiences of those who attended *Stay and Play.* In particular, I sought to better understand the relationship between the parent and child and how the *Stay and Play* program influenced such relationships from the perspectives of parents. In addition, I explored how the determinants of parenting, attachment, and community involvement factored into or shaped the family experiences at *Stay and Play.* These factors were explored within the context of parental and child experiences of *Stay and Play.*

CHAPTER TWO

LITERATURE REVIEW

In this chapter I review the literature in regards to the process model; the

determinants of parenting, attachment theory, and attributing elements (quantity and

quality time), and the importance of program implementation within the community. In

addition, I address literature that is pertinent to each category.

The theoretical framework

Components of a process model: The determinants of parenting

Belsky's (1984) theory of the determinants of parenting [composed of various

categories] elucidated three essential components contributed to successful parenting:

Parental contributions; child's contributions; and contextual sources of stress/support -

each component having subsequent elements (Copeland & Harbaugh, 2005) (see Table 4).

Table 4   Three Components of The Determinants of Parenting

Parental Contributions	Child's Contributions	Contextual Sources of Stress/Support
Family History Personality Employment Social Network Marital Relations	Child Characteristics Child Development	Peer Relationships Family Members Community Programs Parent Coaches/Teachers

Furthermore, "the model assumes that parents' developmental histories, marital

relations, social networks and jobs influence individual personality and general

psychological well-being of parents and, thereby, parental function and in turn, child

development (Belsky, 1984, p. 84).

Family experiences

Parental   contributions

Pluess and Belsky (2009) indicated that the quality of care a child receives has a profound effect on their overall development. Children who are reared in a healthy and positive environment develop skills that assist them in doing the same. A positive or negative upbringing is cyclical. Ideally, parent's who have had positive child-hood experiences will persevere in offering the same or enhanced experiences to their children

Peters (2007) aptly stated "how parents act toward and respond to their children plays a crucial part in their children's social, emotional and cognitive development" (p. 2). In many situations, the parent is the initial caregiver, teacher, and provider. Parents are equipped with their own individual characteristics and personality traits, many of which have been acquired from their early years. Parental sensitivity toward their child is the most significant precursor in a child's healthy development and attachment security (Volker, et al, 1999).

Parent involvement has a multidimensional affect in a child's teaching (Rogers, et al, 2009); and for the most part is the main influence in the overall development of a child. For example, a child's reading ability is primarily determined by how much or how little a parent reads to her/him in the early years (Willms, 1999). Furthermore, how a child chooses to react in situations is often dependent on how a parent reacts in a situation. If a child sees her/his parents become upset easily, a child learns to become upset easily. Children often minor their parents (Edwards, 2002). Therefore, it is crucial for parents to be aware that their children are monitoring their actions, words, and ability to relate to others.

Family experiences

Moreover, parenting practices in the early years have a profound effect on the child's emotional well-being and ability to appropriately process social situations in the later years. Polansky, Lauterbach, Litzke, Coulter and Sommers, (2006) discussed:

> Both parenting quality and attachment early in life were predictive, suggesting that the groundwork for children's cognitive and emotional processing of social situations is founded long before social cognitive biases are readily apparent (p. 339).

It goes without saying that healthy parenting practices in the early years are crucial to the overall development of a child. Conceivably, parents may struggle with knowing what 'exact' practices to focus on. Edwards (2002) suggested that it is essential for parents to focus equally on three domains of parenting: 1) acceptance of their child; 2) awareness of the needs of their child; and 3) guidance of the child through years of development with encouragement.

Another determining factor in how one may parent is that of familial history. A parent's way of parenting is strongly based on their experiences with their own parent. If a parent had positive experiences with her/his parent, she or he is likely to repeat similar parenting practices to re-create similar experiences. On the other hand, if a parent had negative experiences with her/his parent she/he is likely to do the same (Polansky, et al, 2006). History may repeat itself. Erickson's (2008) study concluded:

> How a parent cares for his/her children is strongly influenced by the care the parent received in his/her own childhood. Of course, we cannot go back and change a parent's history, but research indicates that what is most important is how a parent thinks now about his/her own history - facing experiences that were painful, acknowledging their ongoing influence and choosing what to repeat and what not to repeat (p.2).

Family experiences

Child   contributions

A child's experiences in the early years are crucial for their development. Cohen,

Onunaku and Clothier stated:

> In the first years of life, children rapidly develop the social and emotional capacities
> that prepare them to be self-confident, trusting empathetic, intellectually inquisitive,
> competent in using language to communicate and capable of relating well to others.
> (2005, p.1)

Subsequently, children who are not self-assured and struggle with communicating to

others "may be significantly shaped by experiences of insensitive or unresponsive parental

care" (Raikes & Thompson, 2008, p. 323).

How a child is parented may encourage or discourage healthy emotional and

cognitive development. A study by Secco (2002), which assessed the perceptions of

competence in the maternal role of infant care, found that infant behavioural response was

connected to the confidence level of the mother. In other words, the more confident a

mother was the more the infant was comfortable and at ease. In addition, "the postnatal

period is a dynamic time of learning and development within the infant provider role"

(Secco, 2002, p. 108). In essence, when a mother feels confident she creates an

environment for a happier and confident child. Children need a "trustable, secure

[confident] figure [parent] that can be relied upon to be responsive to his/her needs" (Scott

&Dads, 2009p.1443).

> A child who is confident, and secure has likely been a pupil of sensitive parenting
> that fosters optimal care and development... On the other hand if a child
> demonstrates immature behaviour, lacks confidence and is insecure, there is a
> possibility that how the child was parented is a contributing factor (Berlin &
> Cassidy,2001).

A child is looking to the parents for support, care and guidance. Parents whose interactions with their child are insensitive may face emotional challenges with their children in the later years (Greenspan & Shanker, 2004).

Accordingly, children who reside in stressful homes are likely to have difficulty sleeping. Children who are not able to experience a good nights rest have "difficulty with emotional and biological regulation" thus having an effect on child development (Bell and Belsky, 2008, p. 591).

A healthy parent and child relationship is a must. However, children require healthy relationships with their peers as well. Greenspan and Shanker (2004) aptly stated "children must learn to engage emotionally with another. This is the basis for a shared sense of humanity. It is promoted by consistent, nurturing care from a loving caregiver [parent] who will be part of the child's life for years to come." (p. 446).

Stay and Play provided an opportunity for children to 'engage emotionally' with their parents and others through the process of play. Play offers the children important developmental benefits such as social enrichment, emotional well-being, intellectual stimulation and improved understanding of their environment (Ginsburg, 2007).

Contextual   Sources   of Stress/Support

The contextual source of stress/support of a parent is a "phenomenon that can affect both mother [parent] and child" (Jennings, Stagg & Connors, 1991 p.966). Parental . supports include people with whom they [parents] share their parenting experiences with i.e. familial parent, friend, sibling, teacher, coach, etc. Svanberg (1998) pointed out the importance of contextual support:

> It is fortunate that a majority of parents are secure, affectionate and consistent. For
> those parents less fortunate it is important to recognize that different parents will

need different kinds of help with regard to preventive strategies... Parents need educational advice and social and/or emotional support (p.344)

The relationship between the parent and child may be strongly affected by parenting stress (Copeland & Harbaugh, 2005). Therefore, encouraging contextual supports such as *Stay and Play* are crucial in a child's development. Copeland and Harbaugh (2005) suggested, "the use of parenting programs have been shown to be effective at improving maternal mental health, expanding social networks and improving self confidence" (p. 149).

Stay and Play not only offers parental support, it encourages parents to be sensitive to the needs of their child, and have an awareness of their [child] capabilities and developmental stages. Thus, promoting "a variety of highly developmental outcomes, such as, emotional security, behavioral independence, social competence and intellectual achievement" (Belsky, 1984 p. 85).

Furthermore, *Stay and Play* potentially guides parents in understanding their parenting choices have an impact on their child's overall development. Copeland and Harbaugh (2005) indicated:

> While parent functioning can be influenced by changes in any of the domains, parent contribution, consisting of the personal psychological resources of the individual, is identified as the most effective at buffering the parent-infant [child] relationship (p. 140).

Therefore, contextual sources of stress/supports are a key component in a parent's well-being and a child's healthy development.

Attachment theory

Attachment theory is defined as a "special type of affectional bond between individuals [parent and child]" (Edwards, 2002 p. 390). Furthermore, attachment theory

can result in four types of attachment: Secure attachment (positive parent - positive child);

fearful avoidant (negative parent - negative child); preoccupied (negative parent -

positive child); and dismissive-avoidant (negative parent-negative child) (Shaw & Dallos,

2005).

Alternatively, attachment theory is often generalized as secure and insecure

(Edwards, 2002). Secure attachment "provides children with a sense of trust in their

caregiver [parent] and safety in their environment and insecure attachment is if one does

not" (Edwards, 2002 p. 390). Furthermore, the relationship of attachment between a

parent and child is multiple, systemic and changing (Bliwise, 1999). In other words, the

type of attachment between a parent-child may change due to the parent-child

circumstance. For example: If a mother struggled with post-partum depression [resulted in

fearful avoidant or preoccupied attachment] and recovered, she may develop a stronger

attachment with her child [secure attachment].

The relationship of attachment between a parent and child is poignant as a child's

internal operation is affected by the child's attachment and experiences with their

parent(s) (Clarke, Ungerer & Chahoud, 2002). In addition, children who feel cared for and

supported by their parents are more inclined to be caring and supportive individuals and

have a tendency to view the world with benevolence (Belsky, Spritz & Crnic, 1996).

Subsequently, a child who is raised in a loving and secure environment has the

prerequisites to become a secure and loving parent. It is the first step in promoting a

child's healthy emotional and physical development.

Studies have verified the importance of parental involvement in the early years of a

child's development. Vellet and Dixon (2008) explained:

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> Research indicates that the early attachment relationship provides an important foundation for later development and that a secure attachment may serve as a protective factor against the negative impact of various adversities, (p. 5)

The positive and stable development of a child in the teenage years is dependent on having a strong emotional connection between the parent and the child in the early years. Furthermore, the level of attachment given by a parent can determine the level of safety and security a child may feel. Positive attachments provide a child with a safe and secure foundation, thus giving them the confidence necessary to explore their environment (Berlin & Cassidy, 2001; Bretherton, Lambert, & Golby, 2005; Edwards, 2002; Peters, 2007; Volker, Keller, Lohaus, Cappenberg, Chasiotis, 1999; Wellman, Phillips & Rodriguez, 2000). Children who have a stronger and healthier attachment with their parents are more likely to receive higher grades.and attend post secondary education (Dunlap, 2004). However, children who are not nurtured in a securely attached environment may struggle in making healthy choices in their teen or adult years.

Consequently, the fundamental nature of the parent and child bond is crucial to the emotional development of the child. However, in a society where both parents and single parents work outside the home, is it possible to attain a healthy level of attachment with a child? What becomes most important: quality time or quantity time?

Quality and quantity time

The importance of quality and/or quantity time in child rearing is a question that is frequently asked. The first years of a child's life are crucial. It is during these years that children acquire the social and emotional skills that prepare them to have self-confidence, trust, empathy, intellect, perception, and communication ability for relating well to others (Dunlap, 2004).

Quantity time between a parent and child is defined as the frequency a parent spends time with their child (National Institute of Child Health and Human Development Early Child Care Research Network [NICHD], 2000). Economic and developmental theories stipulate that the amount of time (quantity) a parent spends caring for their child is an important factor to a child's social and intellectual development (Huston & Aronson, 2005). Subsequently, a limitation of time may limit opportunities for parent and child bonding. However, the number of times a parent spends with their child does not necessarily indicate parent and child bonding is occurring (Nelson & Lomotey, 2006).

Quality time is defined as the type of care parents give their child (NICHD, 2000). Attachment theory suggests that quality time is fundamental to a strong parent and child bond. This bond encourages secure child attachment that may lead to improved social stimulation and less defiant behaviour in the adult years (Huston & Aronson, 2005).

A survey that was conducted on 1,364 newborns from the National Institute of Child Flealth and Human Development Early Child Care Research Network (NICHD) found that cumulative hours [quantity time] a parent or caregiver shared with their child was not a predictor of in the children's cognitive or language development (2000). The study further indicated that the quality of child-care was a more consistent predictor of a child's cognitive and language development. However, it was also observed that quantity time provided an opportunity for quality time to take place (NICHD, 2000).

Children who do not experience frequency of parent and child interactions may find it difficult to pay attention to their parents and/or activity when quality time is attempted (Votruba-Drzal, Coley & Chase-Lansdale, 2004). In addition, the child may not be interested in spending time with their parent; and be unresponsive (Votruba-Drzal, Coley

& Chase-Lansdale, 2004). The frequency of parent-child interactions has an affect on how the child responds to the parent when quality time is attempted. Therefore, creating frequent opportunities for quality time between a parent and child is the significant formula for the parent and child developing a secure and loving relationship.

Furthermore, studies indicated that there is a significant association between children who have 'both' quantity and quality care and their development with literacy, social functioning, emotional development and family relationships (Dworkin, 2003). It stands to reason that parents who can provide both quality time and quantity time with their children have greater opportunities to implement positive parenting and establish stronger emotional bonds and healthier attachments. However, having both is not always realistic. With the probability of both parents and single parents being in the workforce, their ability to have quantity time with their children may be limited (Huston & Aronson, 2005).

The importance of program implementation within the community

What role does the community play in creating opportunities in meeting the needs of parents and their children? Communities ought to recognize there is a "need for strong partnerships between families, governments, child welfare, family support, health, educational agencies and other (Melhuish et al, 2007).

In 2002 the implementation of the Alberta Response Model demonstrated the importance of community involvement through enhancing community partnerships and family supports. Some of the principles of the Alberta Response Model include:

> Community members have an important role to play in supporting children, youth and families in their neighborhoods - child welfare alone cannot keep children safe.
> Children, youth and families do best when they feel connected to and supported by their community.

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> Children, youth and families need to be able to access services early in their community, before a crisis occurs.
> Efforts to promote family strengths and reduce child maltreatment and neglect should be part of the broader social initiative and priorities within teach community.
> Services to children, youth and families should be individualized, recognizing and respecting their unique characteristics (p. 8). '

Thus, community involvement is not only important; it is strongly recommended to strengthen families, foster prevention and health promotion. Research involving 200 Kindergarten students found that children who attended a parenting center with their parents or caregivers were better prepared for school than those who did not. Furthermore, experiences that took place within their community increased the children's self-esteem" (Yau & Ziegler, 2002).

The monies invested in early child development are minimal compared to education costs during adolescence. Several randomized trials conducted on the Flead Start early child prevention program (infant to age five) established that every dollar spent on early child prevention is worth seven dollars in intervention programs in the later years (Cume, 2001). In other words, prevention costs are minimal overall compared to the cost of intervention.

When communities create opportunities for children to interact with peers from different cultures, races, and religions, they had a positive impact in the overall development of self-esteem; children felt more at ease in developing friendships, accepting customs and respecting differences amongst their peers (Dunlap, 2004). Accordingly, community programs that allow children to interact not only with their parents, but also with each other contribute to the child's social and emotional development

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Communities that create and implement programs involving parent and child interactions have the opportunity to strengthen family relationships and increase community awareness as to the importance of healthy child development. "Communities need to know how their children are doing and if community environments are making a difference in early child development outcomes" (The Council for Early Child Development, 2006, p. 8).

Programs implemented within the community are significant in peer relationship building. Parents are given the opportunity to meet others with similar circumstances, thus preventing loneliness and isolation. A fundamental aspect of developing programs within the community is parents' meeting other parents (Polansky, et al, 2006). Increasing social supports assists parents in coping with their everyday struggles of child rearing.

Summary

A parent having one-on-one time with their child potentially improves parent-child attachment and increases the parent's understanding as to the needs, abilities, wants and desires of her/his child. It can be time well spent. Programs, such as *Stay and Play* potentially create a window of opportunity for parents to learn how to enhance the parent-child relationship. Additionally, it may be probable that as parents attend *Stay and Play* they are given the necessary parenting knowledge that will assist them in enhancing or changing how they were parented. Parents are given the opportunity to change that cycle.

The impact of family based community programs is significant. Programs such as *Stay and Play* invite opportunities for both parent and child to strengthen parent-child relationship, develop peer relationships and enhance parenting knowledge. *Stay and Play* creates an opportunity for change.

CHAPTER THREE

METHOD AND DATA COLLECTION

Method

Introduction

In this chapter I explain the methodology applied to this study. Qualitative inquiries utilizing family-centered and person-centered approaches were used to explore the family experiences at *Stay and Play*. Qualitative inquiry requires the researcher to listen to the participants with compassion and understanding. The researcher is to gain deeper insight of the participant's experiences. Patton (2002) observed, "Qualitative interviewing begins with the assumption that the perspective of others is meaningful, knowable, and able to be made explicit" (p. 341). Unlike quantitative research, the purpose of the study was not to test theory, but to understand experience (Patton, 2002). As families shared their stories, an awareness of how families experienced *Stay and Play* emerged.

Family-centered   interviewing

Family-centered interviewing is a superior approach allowing a more 'in depth understanding of the family dynamics. Donalek (2009) aptly said, "rather than focusing on individuals within families or aggregate patterns in family behavior, we can centralize the dynamics of family" (p. 21). In addition, participants may be influenced when family members are present. Madsen (2007) stated "when people interact, they inevitably influence each other, but not always with predictable results (p. 157). According to Daly, Houck and Nelms (cited in Eggenberger and Nelms, 2007) unpredictable results provide 'richness' to the interview process and a "greater understanding of family processes and patterns" (p. 283).

Eggenberger and Nelms (2007) aptly said, "it is proposed that [family interviewing] has a synergistic effect of the group setting and may result in generation of data or illumination of ideas that might not have been uncovered during the individual interviews" (p.283). In addition, family interviews permit multiple perspectives to be heard (Eggenberger & Nelms, 2007).

Interviewing the family permitted me to ascertain what both parents experienced individually and as a couple. All of the family-centered interviews had their children present. However, only four children were able to articulate their responses. The interviews were primarily 'parent' based. I offered to provide a qualified daycare worker to care for their children during the parent portion of the interview, but this offer was declined. All of the family-centered interviews took place in the participant's home. The interviews varied from one hour in length to three hours in length. The variance in time was primarily related to the parent tending to the needs of their children.

Person-centered   interviewing

Levi and Hollan (1998) discussed two types of an interviewing process; 1) the informant - Do you attend *Stay and Play?;* and 2) the respondent - how do you feel about attending *Stay and Play?* Person centered interviewing focuses on the respondent and brings the 'person' to the interview permitting the participant to share their feelings and the researcher to understand them.

Soodeen, Gregory and Bond (2007) indicated that person-centered interviews allow the participant to "freely share their personal perspectives without fear of contradicting or offending the other partner" p. 1246. Participants were open and "freely shared" their experiences during the person-centered interviews. At times, children were in attendance,

but not necessarily contributing to the interview process. Person-centered interviews, although similar to family-centered interviews are client directed.

The participant was authentic and 'free' to express her/his feelings without hesitation, as other family members were not present. Interviewing a participant without another family member in attendance permits the participant to be open, honest and authentic (Knox, 2008).

A semi-structured interview guide guided the family-centered interviews and the person-centered interviews, but participants were able to openly their experiences at *Stay and Play*. The interview guide did not hinder the interview process.

Recruitment process

Inclusion

Eligibility was not based on age, income, cognitive or physical disabilities, race, or religion. Families who participated in *Stay and Play* regularly were deemed eligible to participate in the study. All families met the following inclusion criteria: a) a parent who attended *Stay and Play;* b) had one or more children presently attending *Stay and Play;* c) attended *Stay and Play* on a regular basis (weekly) for a duration of at least 3 months; d) were able to fully comprehend the English Language; and e) were willing to be interviewed.

Exclusion

The following situations excluded a family from participating: a) parent did not reside with the child on a regular basis; b) families who did not speak, read or comprehend the English language.

Family experiences

Recruitment

Prior to ethical board approval I received a letter of permission from Mr. Greg Pratt, Director of *B-E-W, FCSS to* interview the families that attend *Stay and Play* (see Appendix A), Once permission was granted and approval given from the Human Subjects Research Committee, a letter introducing the study and explaining the criteria was distributed to the families by the Parent Coaches (see Appendix B). The Parent Coaches did not choose the families who participated in the study. Simply, they distributed a letter-that addressed the following: The purpose of the study; how the information would be used; the nature of the questions; and the risks and benefits of participating in the study (Patton, 2002). I contacted nineteen families who mentioned to the Parent Coaches that they were interested in the study. All nineteen families volunteered to participate. One family withdrew after the interview process was completed. An explanation was not given as to why and I chose to not pursue the issue. Being employed with *B-E-W, FCSS* as a Teen Specialist, I paid prudent attention in not approaching participants with whom I was familiar.

Sampling

A non-probability sample (purposeful and convenient) was accrued. In total I conducted nineteen interviews with twenty-four parents and thirty-two children - with only four children able to articulate their responses. The data set was comprised of eighteen interviews. I interviewed families from several centers within the *B-E-W, FCSS* geographical area.

Family experiences

Setting

I interviewed thirteen families in their home and five families at the *Stay and Play* Center of their choice. The home-based interviews provided a warm and friendly atmosphere, however there were times when distractions such as the telephone ringing interrupted the interview process. The five interviews that took place at the *Stay and Play* Center had fewer distractions but less of a 'homey* atmosphere. I was grateful to have both options as it made it more convenient for the participants.

Protection of hitman subjects and obtaining consent

Protection of human subjects - ethical framework and consents

An ethical framework is important "because qualitative methods are highly personal and interpersonal … and because in-depth interviewing opens up what is inside people" (Patton, 2002, p. 407). Therefore, upon meeting the participants and prior to the interview process a concerted effort was made in protecting the human subjects by thoroughly discussing the consent and assent forms. As parents were present with their children it was not necessary for the children to sign consent. However, a separate form was required (child assent) giving permission for the children to be in attendance and contribute to the interviews (see Appendices C & D).

Each participant - parent and child were given a pseudonym name prior to the interview process thus respecting their anonymity. As well, the *Stay and Play* site where the participants attended was not mentioned, nor was the name of the patent coach. Furthermore, other names that were mentioned during the interview process were bracketed and addressed as "subject" rather than name - For example [name of child]; [name of friend], etc.

I followed the procedure outlined by Avery (1995) indicating four areas to be addressed in interviewing participants: "Informed consent, maintenance of confidentiality, reciprocity, and degree of risk of potential subjects" (p. 70).

> **Informed consent:** Each participant understood that their participation was voluntary and they could withdraw at any time. In addition, my telephone number as well as my thesis supervisor was provided to the participants.

> **Maintenance of Anonymity:** Anonymity of participant's names, addresses, telephone numbers and name of the community was maintained. All participants and communities were given an anonymous name and identification number. All the names, addresses and telephone numbers have been locked in a separate filing cabinet from transcripts, tapes and data for a period of five years at my home. At the completion of five years, the research information will be destroyed as confidential waste. The participants' names will not be used in any publication of the data.

> **Reciprocity:** I sent a one page executive summary to all the participants. In addition, I sent the preliminary findings by mail to three participants (one from each geographical area of *B-E-W, FCSS),* thus engaging in a member check. The three participants were given seven days to contact me by telephone or e-mail if there were any queries or concerns. None of the participants contacted me by the end of the seven day period.

> **Degree of risk of potential subjects:** There was minimal risk to the participants as a result of this study. I explained the child welfare act to the participants and my obligation to report any abuse, neglect or other concerns mentioned during the interview process. This situation never occurred. However, there were occasions when

participants requested counselling services. When this transpired I referred

participants to local counselling agencies. In addition, special consideration was taken

in interviewing children. When children felt restless or uncomfortable during the

interview I stopped the tape and only proceeded when it was appropriate to do so.

Semi structured interview guide

I applied family-centered interviewing to five two-parent families (five mothers and

five fathers) "this type of interview style is appropriate when trying to obtain data that is

sensitive or personal (Avery, 1995, p.62); and person-centered interviewing to thirteen

one-parent families (11 mothers, one father and one grandmother) as person-centered

interviews draw attention to the individual as informant and respondent (Forthun &

Montgomery, 2009). A semi structured interview guide was developed and "framed" the

interviews (see Appendix F). Questions were asked that pertained to elements of the

process model of parenting, attachment, and the short and medium term outcome goals of

B-E-W, FCSS. During the process of thematic analysis, accurate codes were applied

according to the participant's answer given. For example: Question: What was your

favorite aspect *of Stay and Play?* Answer: Being with my parent-child *(attachment*

theory) or Answer: Visiting with my friends *(B-E-W, FCSS outcome goals)].* I remained

open and engaging during the interview process. This permitted the interviews to be free

flowing, personable, and foster rapport.

In addition to the interview guide, I provided opportunities for the participants to

openly share their experiences with *Stay and Play.* This was an important part of the

interview process, as it offered "maximum flexibility to pursue information in whatever

direction appears to be appropriate" (Patton, 2002, p. 342). By allowing flexibility, the

participants shared more than what was anticipated. Participants openly discussed topics such as there past child-hood experiences, present difficulties with their parents, and concerns about *Stay and Play*.

Interviewing the children was difficult. Only four of the thirty-two children were able to articulate their responses. Therefore, I permitted the parents to assist in the translation. There were times when the children did not articulate their answer, but displayed how they felt about *Stay and Play* by their actions. I interviewed a five-year-old boy who with excitement brought me the family calendar to show me when his *Stay and Play* day was. I too had the pleasure of witnessing a two-year old girl place her stuffed animals and toys in a circle and sing the circle time songs.

I attended five *Stay and Play* programs throughout the *B-E~ W, FCSS* geographical area. This permitted me to gain further insight as to the 'happenings' at *Stay and Play*. I observed the parents and children playing with each other and their peers. I had the privilege of talking to some of the parents (not interviewed) about their experiences at *Stay and Play,* The parents were intrigued by the research study and mentioned they would be happy to be informally interviewed as well. If I had any questions regarding my observations I asked the parent coach who was conducting *Stay and Play* at the time. Attending five *Stay and Play's* and taking field notes when required complemented the themes and sub-themes as appropriate.

Upon completion of the interviews, audio-tapes were transcribed verbatim and checked for accuracy. I did not request an 'oath of confidentiality' to be signed by the transcriptionist. Previously, the transcriptionist signed an oath of confidentiality for

transcribing research data for the University of Lethbridge and breaching the oath of confidentiality had not been a previous concern.

Thematic   analysis

Thematic analysis was applied to the data generated by the interview guide. Elements (patterns in the data) were aggregated into themes and sub-themes. Steps within each stage of thematic analysis comprised: 1) Organize the data analysis. This entailed completing transcriptions accurately, typing field notes and arranging/sorting data by family interview; 2) Read the transcripts. It was important to discern a general sense or feel of each interview. What were the participants saying? What were my overall impression and observation of the data; and 3) Code the data. "Coding is the process of organizing the material into meaningful chunks before bringing meaning to those chunks" (Rossman and Rallis, 1998, p. 171). Having previous awareness that some questions may cover more than one factor, I was precise in my data coding.

Organize the data analysis

After reviewing the transcribed data and field notes I did the following: Coded meaningful units of text; aggregated coded patterns into elements; and aggregated elements into themes and sub themes (Boyatizis, 1998). I focused on key words, key phrases and particular patterns to formulate various 'themes' of interest. Labels were assigned to the following three themes; 1) the functional role of *Stay and Play;* 2) the structural role of *Stay and Play;* 3) parent's experiences with *Stay and Play.*

Trustworthiness

Creswell (2003) observed, "Validity (trustworthiness)…is seen as a strength" (p. 195). The 'key' in attaining trustworthiness is to "establish confidence in the truth of the

findings of a particular inquiry and the context in which the inquiry was carried out"
(Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 289). To establish confidence and foster trustworthiness,
authenticity and credibility of this research the following procedures took place: 1) I sent
the preliminary findings by mail to three participants (one from each geographical area of
B-E-W, FCSS) thus engaging in a member check. The three participants were given seven
days to contact me if there were any queries or concerns. At the conclusion of the seven
days no contact was made therefore I deemed the study to be satisfactory to the
participants; 2) I engaged in family-centered and person-centered interviewing - this
permitted multiple perspectives to be heard; 3) I interviewed families from various *Stay*
and Play programs within the B-E-W, FCSS geographical area allowing multiple
perspectives from multiple communities; 4) I audio-taped interviews and had them
transcribed verbatim; and 5) I enacted peer debriefing with my thesis supervisor.

Summary

Qualitative research was a good fit for this study. Applying family-centered and
person-centered semi structured interviews allowed me to portray the families'
experiences for the purpose of *Stay and Play*. My original intent was to have both parents
present [whenever possible] for the greater part of the interviews, but with work schedules
this was often not possible. However, having both family-centered and person-centered
interviews provided multiple perspectives and a more enriched data set.

CHAPTER 4

FINDINGS

In this chapter I discuss the coding legend to ensure anonymity; the demographic findings and the three themes revealed during the thematic analysis (see Figure 3). They were: The functional role of *Stay and Play;* the structural role of *Stay and Play;* and parent's experiences with *Stay and Play.* Each theme is accompanied by various sub-themes and subsequent categories.

The coding legend

Throughout the findings chapter data offered by the 'adult' participants were coded to ensure participant anonymity. In addition a legend was created to "locate" the source of the data (textual excerpts from the transcripts). The coding legend was as follows: the participant's assigned number; page number from the transcript and the line from which the data began. For example: participant 1, page 2, and line 56 would be coded as [P. 1.2-56]. However, if a quote required more than one page the coding was as follows: Participant's assigned number; page number from data transcribed; the line from which the data began; a slash (/) denoting the page change; and the line from which the data began. For example participant 1, page 2, line 56 [and] page 16, line 690 was formatted as (P. 1.2-56/16-690). Please note: The children who participated were not given a number rather they were stated as [name of child]. Thirty-two children were present during the interviews however; only four children were interviewed. In retrospect, and in relation to the transcripts I deemed it more time efficient to address each child as [name of child].

Family experiences

Collecting demographic information

   After the consent form was signed I completed a brief demographic survey with the participant's (see Appendix E). The demographic survey was not complex. However, I asked questions that were pertinent to the community. For example, the geographical area of *B-E-W, FCSS* had strong religious support. Therefore, I was interested in knowing whether or not the participants attended church. Knowing this might support the notion that families who were comfortable with attending other community functions/groups more readily attend *Stay and Play.* Income and profession were asked to determine what economic groups were represented in this data. It was an interesting finding to note that several economic and religious backgrounds were accounted for among the parents who attended *Stay and Play.* The results of the demographic survey are shown in Table 5.

   The demographic survey provided a deeper look into who attended *Stay and Play.* Does a particular group i.e. religious group; economic group, attend *Stay and Play* more so than others? The demographics were enlightening. The data demonstrated that there was no particular 'type' of group who attended *Stay and Play.* Participants came from a variety of economic and religious backgrounds. Incomes ranged from -$20,000 to $80,000+. There were dual income families that earned - $20,000, and single-family incomes of $80,000+. Additionally, there were families who attended church regularly and some who did not. Overall, I did not discern that the demographic data had any bearing on the findings.

Table 5   Demographic Findings

Attendance *at Stay ami Play*-Participants interviewed

Participants Interviewed	Total	Weekly	Twice Weekly	Three Times Weekly	Twice Monthly	Monthly
Mother	16				1	
Father *	6					I
Grandmother	1					
Boys Interviewed	4					
Girls Interviewed	0					

Attendance *at Stay and Play* - Children present during the interview

	Total	Weekly	Twice Weekly	Three Times Weekly	Twice Monthly	Monthly
Boys In Attendance	13	7	5	1		
Girls In Attendance	15	6	1	4	3	1

Participant's Church Attendance

Total Participants	Do Not Attend	Catholic	L.D.S.	United	Mennonitc	Christian
23	2	4	3	3	4	4

Participant's Employment

Total Participants		Homemakcr	Professional	Laborer	
23		8	7	8	

Participant's Total Family Income -18 Families = 23 Adult Participants

-20,000	21,000-35,000	36,000-50,000	51,000-65,000	66,000-79,000	80,000+
2	4	2	3	3	4

Participant's Marital Stains

Participants	Married	Not Married
23	23	0

Note: Six fathers were interviewed, but only one attended Stay and Play.
Legendfor abbreviations: L. D.S. - Latter Day Saint; Christian - Evangelical Christian.

Figure 1   Family experiences with *Stay and Play* and the three emergent themes

Family Experiences With
Stay and Play

I

| The Functional Role of *Stay and Play* | The Structural Role of *Stay and Play* | Parent's Experiences with *Stay and Play* |

Fostering Parenting Skills   **Availability**   **Strengths**   **Limitations**

Child Development   **Schedule**   **Cost**

Parent Development   **Safely**   **Professionalism of the Parent Coaches**
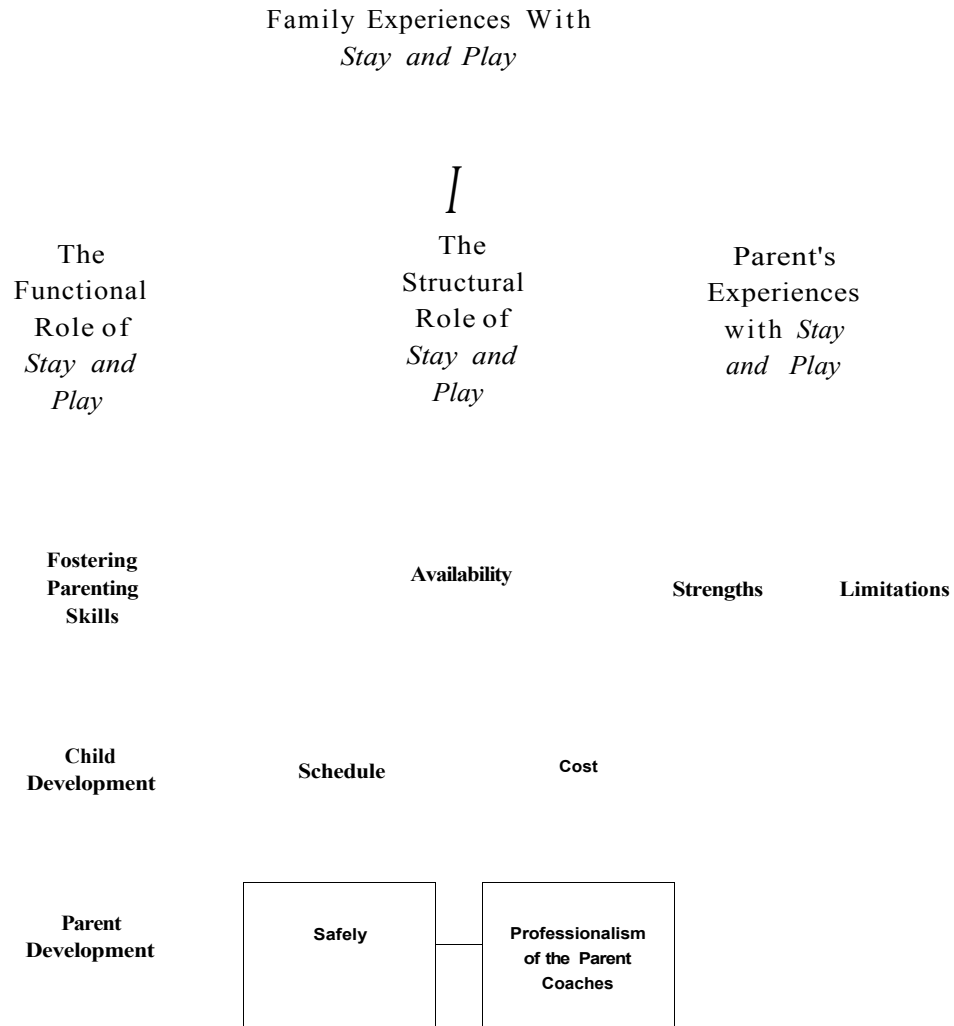
The functional role of Stay and Play

In essence, the functional role addressed the purpose of the program. In other words, what did parents and children learn as they attended *Stay and Play?* Three sub-themes were associated with this theme; fostering parenting skills; child development; and parent development (see Figure 2).

Family experiences

Figure 2

The Functional Role of
Stay and Play

Fostering Parenting Skills	Child Development	Parent Development
Familial history	Circle time	The benefit of quality
Enhancing familial	Messy play	time
history	Creative art center	Parenting skills
Resisting familial	Developing creativity	Learning by others
history	through open play	Learning from parent
Learning from and	Socialization - Relationship	coaches
changing familial	building	Overcoming distances:
history	Socialization - Preparation	Creating social
	for elementary school	relationships
	Socialization - Learning to	Respite: Safe haven
	share	Bringing it home
	Socialization - Learning	
	empathy	
	Socialization - Developing	
	independence/Developing	
	problem solving	

Fostering parenting skills: The functional role of Stay and Play

Participants discussed what they learned from their experiences as a child and how

attending *Stay and Play* assisted them in changing negative parenting experiences or

enhancing positive parenting experiences. As well, participants identified the parenting

skills they learned from attending *Stay and Play* and how these skills helped them in child

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rearing. Furthermore, the participants shared what their children learned from attending *Stay arid Play.*

Familial history

In this section I explore the participants' familial history and its relative impact on how they engaged parenting to date. In particular, participants were asked about how their parents parented them. Participants were also asked to share their most meaningful childhood memories. Sharing their most meaning childhood memories recapitulated their sentiments and heightened the overall impact they experienced as children. As participants conversed about their family history it became apparent that a conscious choice was made to either replicates or resists their parents' style of child rearing.

Enhancement of familial history

Participants readily shared stories about the relationship they had with their parents. How the participants were parented was a powerful and enduring force in their lives. For some, the familial relationship and parenting approaches that they experienced became a childrearing template, which they replicated. Participants commonly voiced their appreciation for the individual time their parents spent with them and that parents were "there" for them.

The following textual exceipts illustrate these findings:

My mom was always there.. .1 remember the vacations. I remember my mom always being there and that each one of us was important.. .each one of the kids would get mom - daughter or mom - son time.. .and so we are doing that with our kids now. (P.14.15-648)

I think it's [parenting style] is very similar to my mom because she did things with us.. .1 remember doing this and that.. .going here and there.. .1 think I'm quite similar to my mom. (P.4.8-365)

Family experiences

> Growing up my parents did outings with the kids and so it would be just me and my
> mom or me and my dad...I'd get to pick the activity and go on an outing with
> them...and so now we are doing that with our kids. (P. 14.7-275)

Even though many participants shared stories of their mother's influence, some also

chose to share stories about their father's influence. Participants stated:

> My dad took care of keeping the house together more than my mom did.. .he made
> sure that we got up and got ready for school.. .he made sure that the chores were
> done...he did the laundry...he did the gardening.,. I have a lot more appreciation for
> everything that my dad did because he took a lot upon himself. (P. 15.7-297)

> My dad is a farmer so he got to stay at home a lot too and he took us camping all the
> time and my mom would stay home.. .she didn't like camping so he would tall of us
> camping on his own.. .He [dad] really spent a lot of time with us where my mom is
> the cleaner and organizer...she didn't have a whole lot of time to play with us...my
> dad made my childhood very, very memorable. (P.8.6-263)

Whether it was their mother or father, participants readily attributed their global parenting

skills or style as arising from their childhood experiences. The 'key' was that a parent

demonstrated love and care by spending time with them as an individual within the

context of family. The importance of a parent/child connection was thusly formed.

Resistance   of familial   history

In contrast, not all participants voiced positive parenting experiences within their

family of origin. Participants purposefully engaged a parenting style that was counter to

their experiences as children. Sometimes participants had to actively resist engrained

patterns of familiarity. It was "easy" for them to slip into a mode of parenting that was

reminiscent of their childhood experiences i.e. "I tend to fall back on my mom's habits."

A grandmother who attended *Stay and Play* with her granddaughter stated:

> There were some things that mom did, but you know the other ones [siblings] had to
> help out...and that wasn't the way I did it in my family [rearing her children]...I
> thought I should take care my children and not their siblings take care of them.
> (P.7.9-389)

Some participants were determined to break the parenting cycle they experienced as children. They painfully revealed the familial history they chose to resist.

> I don't remember my mom ever taking me to the park.. .1 honestly can't remember a time that she read me a story.. .1 could still go to her when I was sad and she would cuddle me, but she was very busy...I find myself having tendencies like my mom but I'm trying to get out of that. (P. 15.6.249)

Participant 15 struggled with her mother's disregard. The only time her mother was demonstrative was when she [the daughter] felt sad. This participant confirmed how the parenting template was deeply embedded by noting, "I find myself having tendencies like my mom." However, she did not want to repeat this pattern. Another participant shared:

> My mom had some health problems and was always on the couch and would never follow through on anything she would say.. .it's been very hard because sometimes I tend to fall back on my mom's habits, but I do try follow through and I try to interact with my kids a lot more.. .so I've changed a lot of the things from what my parents did. (P. 11.7-296)

Participant 11 mentioned that her mother's health problems precluded her ability to engage and follow through. This participant brought to light that not all parents were 'able' to engage with their child, as they would have like. At times, a parent's emotional and/or physical health prevented a healthy parent/child relationship from taking place. The next participant discussed her loneliness:

> I look back as a girl and I think man I missed, I missed so much and I wanted my mom to be there all the time.. .there were so many things that I feel that I missed out on because my mom wasn't around.. .so I want to make an effort to not have to do that with my kids. I want my kids to not have to feel alone. (P. 12.7-289)

Participant 12 was profoundly affected by her family development history. She spoke of the profound loss of connection with her mother. She is now engaged in parenting that will not leave her children feeling alone. Nevertheless, whether their childhood memories were filled with joy or sadness it was evident that the participants

chose to either *replicate* or *resist* how they were parented. Some participants made a concerted effort to not be like their parents, i.e. they attempted to overcome, change or engage their role as parents differently than what they experienced as children. For example "My husband has really struggled with making sure that he's a good parent because he really had a hard upbringing with his parents" (P.2.12-546). However, others chose to emulate their parents. One participant stated, "If I could be half of what my mom is, I think I'd be a success" (P.9.11-449).

The interview question on "family development history" was broad; what surfaced were general accounts of replication and resistance based on how they were parented.

Learning from and changing familial history

Slay and Play had a functional role in assisting and teaching the participants to develop positive and long lasting parenting practices. *Stay and Play* provided opportunities for parents to learn and perhaps re-learn parenting skills - as part of the resistance to their family of origin. As well, *Stay and Play* offered reprieve from the every day routine and provided an environment in which the parents could focus on the child. Participants expressed:

> I actually find I'm more like my mom, but I try to be more like my dad and that's why I come here a lot because then I'm forced to play with them [the children] and I can't clean. (P.8.8-281)

> My mom didn't spend a lot of time with me as a child and I think that I would fall in those footsteps... it would be easy for me to just talk on the phone or to let my kids do their own thing, but I know how important it is especially through *Stay and Play*. (P.15.1-31)

> I don't remember doing this kind of thing [attending *Stay and Play*] ..A think it definitely has affected how I see a relationship with my children the fact that it *[Stay and Play]* really encourages parental interaction with my children and we've tried to maintain that as something that's important. (P.3.1-24)

Stay and Play has become a school of learning for the parents of today ensuring quality time with their children, i.e. engaging and taking an interest in them. Parents reported that the program encouraged them to spend one-on-one time with their children. By doing so, parents left the housework behind, turned off the cellular phones, spent 'quality' time with their children and played. As one participant stated *"Stay and Play* gets you in the play mode...you can go in there and leave your cares behind" (P.1 .2-8).

Stay and Play validated the importance of the parenting role in an environment that was parent and child friendly and supportive. For example, *"Stay and Play* has helped... it defines the importance of time spent with your kids" (P.3.4-157). *Stay and Play* offered a warm and welcoming atmosphere for parents and children to attend.

Child development: The functional role of Stay and Play

This section delves into the impact *Stay and Play* had on the children. For further clarity, various questions were asked throughout the interview process to both parent and child allowing me to assess their overall impression about *Stay and Play.* Even though the interview questions for the children were simple in text I quickly realized that children under the age of five had difficulty grasping the concept of someone else other than their parent asking them questions. Therefore, in most situations, the parent would intercede and re-ask the question to assist the children with their answers. I was grateful to the parent who translated both the question and the child's response.

I made a point of attending five *Stay and Play* programs to observe the parents and children at play and compiled my findings in field notes. If I had any questions regarding my observations I asked the parent coaches who were conducting *Stay and Play* at the time.

Family experiences

Stay and Play offered a variety of play stations. Each play station permitted the children to explore their creativity and learning while being supported by their parents and the parent coaches. A significant ingredient at *Stay and Play* is that 'play' is child driven. Parents are to take their child's lead. The children engaged in a variety of activities including: painting colourful pictures, hiding rocks in a sand box, floating ducks on a water pond, caring for dolls and pretending they were babies, engineering a train track for the trains to ride on, reading tales from various story books, creatively building with blocks, escorting cars and trucks to their destination, dressing up as someone imaginary, singing and dancing with the group, and getting messy with shaving cream, finger painting, and other crafts the parent coaches created.

In addition, children built stronger relationships with their parents, made friends with other children, engaged in creative play, increased their literacy, and learned the importance of play. All children interviewed stated they enjoyed attending *Stay and Play.* However, there were various aspects of *Stay and Play* they enjoyed the most.

Circle time

Circle time was a highly favored activity among the children and their parents. Parents shared how much they appreciated learning the songs, rhymes and actions and the children spoke of and demonstrated the enjoyment of circle time. For example, one mother stated, "I love the nursery rhymes [and] I love music and that [attending circle time] helps me…now my [name of child] always wants the music on" (P.7.13-569).

Circle time occurred when the children and parents came together in a circle, sang rhymes and earned out actions directed by the parent coach. In addition to teaching children songs and rhymes circle time fostered: Music appreciation; memory; language

skills; self-expression; listening skills; social skills; fine motor skills; communication

skills; and thinking skills.

> Even with my nephews and nieces that live in [Name of city] we sing the songs to them and they've picked them up and so it's pretty much our whole family is positively affected by it.. .Yah it's a wonderful program. (P.7.8-334)

> She just loves the singing and dancing and stuff.. .I'm glad that I've come and learned all the songs and I think that's what actually got her talking again... Just doing the actions and making her do the actions before me and it's helped her mentally, I think, a lot. (P.8.9-368)

> My two year old often gets down on the floor and sits her toys in a circle with her and sings 'Oh here we are together, together, together,' .. .she also [points to her toys] in the circle and calls them by name. (P.15.2-56)

> Participant 7 expressed that others were positively affected by circle time.

Participant 8 expressed how through music and actions, her child gained self-confidence

[mentally] and began talking again. I was privileged to witness the child of participant 15

demonstrating circle time. Her daughter set off into the bedroom and came out with

several stuffed toys and dolls. She placed each one carefully in a circle, called them by

name and began singing a song to them that she had learned at circle time.

There were numerous accounts regarding the positive impact circle time had on both

child and parent. A few more examples included: "I guess [circle time] has an impact in

our home because my husband does a lot of songs and rhymes with the kids" (P.2.7-317);

"just seeing the kids' excitement of the songs and rhymes" (P.2.17-768); and "oh I just

love the rhymes when everyone's sitting in circle time" (P. 1.14-605).

Learning the musical rhymes had a literary effect. Children increased their

vocabulary by repeating the songs each time they attended *Stay and Play*. One participant

stated: "repetition, repetition, repetition... when they are young they get the language so

both my kids know all the rhymes and songs off by heart. We do those lots" (P.1.1-39).

Family experiences

Literacy was not only taught in the form of music and rhyme. *Stay and Play* offered a

variety of storybooks for the children to read alone or with their parents. As well, the

parent coaches included reading a story to the children at the close of circle time.

Messy play

Messy Play was designed to teach and enhance a child's self-expression. The parent

coaches regularly chose a different 'messy play.' Messy play consisted of finger painting,

shaving cream, and other homemade creations. These messy play activities based on my

observations, assisted with strengthening the following: The five senses (smelling,

touching, hearing, tasting, and seeing); science skills (observing, comparing, temperature,

thickness, and texture); communication skills (talking, listening and observing behaviour);

language skills (words such as, squishy, gunky, gross, ooey and gooey); self-expression

(artistically and creatively); and fine and gross motor skills (picking up small and large

objects, dexterity, and movement).

As I attended *Stay and Play* I observed messy play, I noticed children playing with

shaving cream; tasting healthy snacks; listening, reciting sounds and jumping up and

down to musical rhymes; building with blocks; dressing up in play clothes; listening and

observing others at play; and communicating with other children.

Messy play was one of the *Stay and Play* activities whereby both parents and

children benefited. Some participants expressed it best as they stated, "my oldest one

didn't like getting his hands dirty all the time and now he loves it because of messy play

(P.8.9-403)"; "messy play is fabulous because you guys make the big mess here" (P. 1.4-

278); and "there was an oatmeal one [activity] where you could play.. .ideas I wouldn't

have had" (P.1.1-33).

Family experiences

Creative art centers - Paint, chalk, crayons, scissors and glue

Other play stations and activities that focused on developing the child's imagination

and creativity included painting, colouring with crayons and chalk, and the use of scissors,

paper and glue. Each of the creative art stations were designed to: Increase the

development of the child's fine motor skills; foster knowledge of colour, shape, and size;

generate awareness and use of space; and increase problem solving skills. The creative art

play stations offered at *Stay and Play* permitted children to experiment with several

activities. For example:

> It helps because they get to go and pick whatever they want to do if its painting,
> water play, sand play, kitchen, read a book, play with cars or build a train, a tower
> whatever they want to do, puzzles - they *[Stay and Play]* have all of that. (P.2.10-
> 423)

Creative art encouraged the children to do what they wanted with the materials they

chose. Participants expressed a great appreciation for these activities and at times brought

their creative art home with them. Participants observed,

> They think that when they bring a picture home that' it's like him bringing money
> home from work...they [children] think that their responsibility is to bring stuff
> home for him to see. (P.8.3-118)

> I'd say the paintings she brings home...she'11 show them to me and explain to me
> exactly what she painted and how it [the picture] changes throughout the
> painting.. .it may or may not look like much but to her it's the world.. .she
> understands the value of doing something with her own hands and that's something I
> view is very important that she learned at *Stay and Play*. (P.9.13-567)

Participants understood the value of their child's creative art piece and the

significance of a child having something tangible to exhibit and lay claim. The child's art

piece was not only a keepsake, but also created opportunities for the child to build a

relationship with their parent.

Family experiences

Developing creativity through open play

The concept of "open play" was advantageous to the development of the child. The various play stations consist of books, toys, paints, etc. which foster creativity, increase literacy, build relationships with parents, siblings and peers, and learn the importance of play. Children and their parents were able to stay at whatever play station they chose for as long as they wanted until open playtime concluded. Participants expressed how they felt about the open concept of play. "I like the different transitions of play like having free play then having a little book reading and a little bit of this and then messy play" (P. 1.4-175); "it's good to have loose structure for them to learn" (P.3.17-748); and "they get to pick whatever they want to do if it's painting, water play, sand play, kitchen, read a book, play with cars, or build a train a tower whatever they want to do, puzzles - they have all of that" (P.2.10-24).

Stay and Play offered the children a variety of games, toys and activities that they may not be privileged to at home.

> They *[Stay and Play]* have more colors here and now he is much more interested in painting than he was before... and the puzzles too.. .he has really gotten into puzzles there so we've had to get a few puzzles for home too (P. 1.5-225).

Parents and parent coaches asked the children questions about their work of art in an open manner. For example, a child was asked what their picture was and not what the parent thought the picture was. The children were not corrected. Having the opportunity to self create opened the door for the children's imagination to grow.

Parents also validated my findings. During the interview process participant 1 mentioned, "No, no we pretend. And so he just is starting to get that idea and he just

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smacks his lips and puts it close to his mouth and says 'we're pretending mom, just pretend'...yah stuff like that he's definitely learned" (P. 1.6-241).

In addition, *Stay and Play* was not gender specific. Boys and girls played with everything the center had to offer. Some boys played with dolls and some girls played with trucks. *Stay and Play* did not appear to reinforce gender stereotypes. As participant 8 expressed, "With my two oldest kids being boys, I didn't have a lot of girl toys at home and so when we've come here my [boys] like to play in the kitchen - they like to play with the dolls - they like to do a lot of that stuff that they don't see at home" (P.8.9-383).

Open play was a favorite among the participants. Children were able to stretch their imagination through engagement in open play. One participant explained, "I think it shows your kids that you want to promote their creativity and social interaction...you're allowing them to broaden their horizons and things like that (P. 10.6-272).

Socialization

Socialization-Relationship building with other children

Relationship building, preparation for elementary school, sharing, empathizing and developing independence can occur through interaction with other children. Children were able to strengthen their relationship with their parents, but they also formed relationships with other children. Participants observed:

> She'll run up to them and try and hold -shake their hand.. .she always says "nice to meet you"... she really enjoys being with the other kids. (P.6.5-191)

> They get to associate with other kids... it helps with their [children] social skills. (P.5.3-121)

> Fie loves to socialize and where we live he doesn't get a lot of socialization out on the farm...on a farm they usually only have each other to play with and when they come to *Stay and Play* they play with everyone else. (P.8.5-198)

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My eldest is a really laid back child and she was really shy when I first came here like she wouldn't talk...she wouldn't say anything...after about a year she started talking. She started interacting with children...if a child would come and play beside her she used to walk away and go play by herself somewhere else but now she's interacting with kids more and she's playing with them not just walking away from them. That's why I started coming [bejcause she just didn't play with other kids at all. (P.17.3-161)

Children acquired social skills and learned how to interact socially with other children. For those children who were isolated from other children, they were afforded regular contact with their peers. The children's network of friends was expanded; shy children were encouraged to become more social. Simply, a stay at home child does not always have the opportunity to step out of her/his comfort zone and make new friends. Participant 3 stated, "it's not a very scary environment for them so that you know the kids tend to just let themselves be themselves... they kind of get to know each other better that way" (P.3.7-280); and another stated, "[name of child] is a little bit shy sometimes so it's good to get out and see other kids and play with new toys" (P.19.3-1).

Socialization - Preparation for elementary school

Children learned how to build relationships with other children, which prepared them for elementary school. The program taught the children expectations associated with the classroom context. Participants shared:

I've learned how my kids need to spend time with others in order to get that socialization. When my son started school he did not mind me leaving him there at all because I'd gone to these *[Stay and Play]* classes. (P.8.2-71)

Some kids go nuts and jump around and stomp on people and she's not really used to that so it's good to get used to that too before she's off to kindergarten. (P.19.3-123)

We've called it *[Stay and Play]* the school so they think that school [elementary school] is just a bigger kid school. They think they are coming to school and being a big kid already. (P.8.2-78)

Family experiences

Parents understood the potentially difficult transition from home to school. *Stay and Play* prepared the children for school by giving them an opportunity to socialize with other children in a 'school like' environment.

Socialization - Learning to share

Sharing was an important skill fostered within the context of play. When several children wanted a particular toy or play station, they quickly learned how to take turns, be fair, and trade. This helped children handle difficult situations with their siblings and peers. Participants observed, "It's nice to go somewhere there are kids his age that he can learn to share and trade" (P. 1.6-252); "It definitely helps when she can see that she has to share...that part of it is why I wanted her among the kids too" (P.7.7-292); and "she's learned how to share more with other kids, take turns, be fair (P.14.10-441).

Socialization - Learning empathy

The development of empathy in their children was important to the participants. It was observed that the *Stay and Play* program presented opportunities for such development. One participant said it best "empathy, those kinds of things can help them deal with life better than just learning at school" (P. 11.9-401). Empathy served as a life skill and not just something that was particular to early child development. For example when I asked the question "What has been positive about attending *Stay and Play"* one participant mentioned, "I think the empathy.. .learning about the younger kids- they need to learn that" (P.8.9-323). In discussing empathy with another participant she articulated:

> We are trying to teach them that they have choices and if we didn't let them have a choice how are they suppose to learn to develop skills to be better people as they get older... they need to learn certain skills [empathy] so that they can be better people and be better people when they are around other people. (P. 11.9-410)

Participants were quick to note how their children demonstrated empathy. Some of the comments included:

> My eldest one when we sing - if they're singing a tickling song or if there's a baby just sitting there, he'll kind of do a finger on his hand when they're singing - he'll tickle them and he'll let them work with the paint - that's empathy. (P.8.5-226)

> I see it [empathy] if a littler child needs help going up the slide or can't reach the sand one of my boys might go and get the stool for them or help them up the slide.. .things that they've learned from *Stay and Play* they can also pass down to the littler kids - even their brothers. (P. 12.6-249)

> It's a learning process for them learning how to interact with other kids and there's a range of ages so now if my son goes he's one of the oldest kids…he needs to understand that they didn't mean to take that or they didn't mean to draw on your paintings they just don't know….I'd like to think that he's learning that from *Stay and Play* and I think that he's learning compassion. (P.3.7-304)

> *Socialization - Developing independence/development of problem solving*

Stay and Play presented an emotionally safe environment for children to expand their independence and take more risks related to problem solving. Parents stepped back as their children stepped forward in the development of self-confidence. Participants recognized that as their children became more comfortable with their peers - independence was desired and peer learning commenced. A participant articulated, "she's playing more with other kids and stuff so it's given us both a little bit more freedom.. .she's a little bit more independent since we've been going to *Stay and Play"* (P.6.3-116). Another participant stated, "she's has this very big belief she has to be able to do it herself.. .that would be like seeing it from other kid's.. .1 could say that was from being with them (P.7.7-316).

A child's growth in independence also generated growth in confidence and problems solving skills. Participants articulated:

My eldest is a really laid back child and she was really shy when I first came here [Stay and Play]...she wouldn't say anything... After a year she started talking... she started interacting with children....she used to walk away and go play by herself somewhere else but now she's interacting with kids more and she's playing with them not just walking away from them. That's why I started coming cause she just didn't play with other kids at all. (P. 17.3-161)

[Name of child] problem solving skills definitely increase as we go and her communication skills through seeing other children the way they try to convince their parents of certain things.. .they'll try something as simple as throwing a tantrum which didn't work obviously...then [name of child] will try convincing us now because she could hear the older kids say..."well mommy if I do this or if I can have this then l*ll be good for this long... she picks up on that from other kids... I've noticed that's [happened] and for the most part it's a good thing.. .[because] {name of child] will try to use words to solve [her] problems rather than kids that throw a tantrum or cry (P.9.8-348).

After the children became more independent, their ability and desire to problem solve began. "In that environment *[Stay and Play]* we can guide them and help them to learn those skills for problem solving so I think that it is a really good environment for especially social problem solving" (P.3.8-335). Furthermore, parents learned to better accept their children's independence. Participant 12 discussed how her children were solving problems more independently. She stated:

I used to be the first one to jump in and say'don't do this' and 'stop playing' 'don't do that' and try to be the problem solver to begin with before I had the experience [at *Stay and Play]* to let [my] children solve their own problems and now they 're learning t o - I ' m learning too. (P. 12.6-267)

Although it was important to engage the children in problem solving there were times that parental support was needed. Participant 14 shared how her son tried to solve his own problems, but if needed, she was there for him. She shared, "he tries different things and solves problems on his own and if it gets into something he can't handle he'll come and get me, but I think he's learning a lot how to figure things out on his own - trying things out on his own"(P. 14.10-432).

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Family experiences

Finally, *Stay and Play* afforded many growing and learning opportunities for children. It was too difficult to discern which center or which skill was most important. A participant summed it up best when she said, "you know it's one of those things that the parts together make more than they would have separately" (P. 1.10-442).

Participant's shared a great deal of information regarding child development and the functional role of *Stay and Play.* By means of socialization children are learning to create, share, empathize, gain independence and problem solve.

Parent development: The functional role of Stay and Play

The benefit of quality time

Most importantly *Stay and Play* encouraged parent and child to spend one on one time together with little or no interruptions. By attending *Stay and Play* parents discovered their children were interested in 'them' [the parent] and not the activity. Children just want time to be with their parent[s]. As participant 3 stated, "they're [children] not that fussy about what you play with really - they just like that you're there beside them playing with them" (P.3.6-233). Children wanted parents to ignore work, telephone, television and focus on 'only' them. Spending quality time with their children had reported positive outcomes. Parents noticed significant personality changes in their children. For example:

> It encourages me to take that hour or something like that and if one of the kids is saying "please mom can we play this"...and I think yes we can play this... Let's sit down and really just pay attention to each other and ignore everything else cause you can see *at Stay and Play* how much they really appreciate that attention. (P.3.5-210)

> They [the children] like you playing with them and you sitting with them and that's a time when they can have our total attention without "no, no I need to do the dishes" ..."no, no I need to do the laundry...I think at *[Stay and Play]* the kids probably feel more secure because they have the full attention for that time and it's a place where they go and I think they feel more positive. (P. 1.2-127/4-158)

Participant 14 more distinctly explained, "I've always been close to them [children] but it's just improved our relationship with each other in that they're happier being with me" (P. 14.6-256). When parents and children spent quality time together children felt more secure in the parent/child relationship. Quality time was treasured among parents as well as their children. The following participants voiced how they valued the quality time they spent with their children:

> I think it really reminds us of the value of spending that uninterrupted chunk of time one on one with your child really listening to them and playing with them and listening to their imagination and stuff like that.…Any time I think when you can spend one on one time that's going to really build your attachment to each other. (P.3.8-390)

> We have that scheduled time to be together that I am sitting down playing with them.…there's no dishes that I have to leave and go do or laundry that we have to do at the same time… it's somewhere we can go and play and just connect me and the boys. (P.13.3-117)

Fortunately, by attending *Stay and Play* previous parenting practices were realized and changed. Prior to attending *Stay and Play* participant 15 [who experienced a loss of attachment with her mother] was duplicating her family of origin childrearing pattern. She now understands the significance of quality time.

> It's *[Stay and Play]* helped me to realize that I need to spend more time with my children…and talk about attachment and attachment issues... it *[Stay and Play}* helps me to understand that when I've been working for along time and my kids see me and they don't want me to go away. (P.15.1-29/3-135).

Parenting   Skills

Attending *Stay and Play* assisted the parents in learning and attaining various parenting skills. Parents learned from other parents, parenting coaches, or by attending and observing the *Stay and Play* environment. Each source (observation, education, peer

influence) of learning appeared to have had a significant impact on the parents and children.

Learning from   others

All the participants shared how they learned by talking and observing other parents at *Stay and Play.* Participant 3 stated, "Just being around people that give you different ideas and examples about - this is what we do sometimes...or expectations you might have of your children at different stages" (P.3.2-69). Parents learned by observation. Parents who attend *Stay and Play* may be privy to many examples of parenting. For some, they may learn what to emulate, and for others, what not to. Participant 12 spoke about how attending *Stay and Play* has helped her cope with being a new mom.

> I used to be very nervous. I'd never held a newborn baby before I had my own. I moved out into the country by myself with no friends, no family. I knew nothing about raising a family and so I was a very nervous wreck and being able to talk with other moms asking "when did you start feeding your baby pabulum or what do your babies do or how do you handle it …you know, knowing that I'm not alone. (P. 12.3-114)

Parent education is not only taught in the early years. *Stay and Play* educates parents throughout all stages of child-hood development from 0 - 5. Participant 3 affirmed, "being around people that give you different ideas and examples about - this is what we do sometimes.. .or some of the things they bring out to play with or the expectations that you might have of your children and at different stages" (P.3.2-69).

Learning from parent   coaches

Each parent coach is highly educated in the area of early child-hood development. Parent coaches were mentioned during the interview process. Participant 13 expressed, "all the tips that she [parent coach] has posted around .. .I've taken them home and used them" (P. 13.1-19.) Additionally, "they [parent coaches] talk so much about getting down

to their level and how important it is to make these connections and how it is good for their brains and so it's taught me a lot" (P. 15.1-37).

Stay and Play was about parents, children, parent coaches and environment working together and at times it was difficult to determine which component the participant deemed most effective. For example participant 4 articulated:

It *[Stay and Play]* has everything there... I've learned a whole bunch of things there *[Stay and Play].. .*You know they'd [parent coaches] say something and it would sound like the silliest thing ever and then you get to thinking about it and you try stuff that they say and it works... also it's *[Stay and Play]* definitely impacted good ideas from other parents. (P.4.1-32)

Overcoming distances;   Creating social relationships

The foundation of *Stay and Play* is relationships: Relationships between parent and child, parent and parent, child and child, and parent and parent coach. For some participants, the only time during the week that they had contact with another adult was during the time of *Stay and Play.* For example, "I didn't know very many people and I was quite isolated out on the farm so it was an awesome opportunity" (P.18.5-183). Another participant who lived several kilometers from [a town] states, I've had someone to talk to [when attending *Stay and Play]* and I don't have anyone to talk to except my husband" (P.2.8-329). Parents and children can be isolated in rural Alberta. Isolation can create feelings of loneliness and depression. *Stay and Play* creates a social venue that brings rural pa rents-children together with other parents-children.

Distance from a local community was not the only reason parents found it difficult to make friends. *Stay and Play* helped parents to break down barriers that prevented friendships from occurring. For example, "I don't think I would have made friends if I hadn't attended *[Stay and Play]"* (P.11.10-434). Locality is not the only reason for

isolation. Participant 12 shared that she is "a shy reserved person" and stepping outside

her comfort zone was difficult.

> I've always been a very shy reserved person so making friends for me even phoning
> people is very difficult…I'm so in the safe zone.. .but going to *Stay and Play* has
> allowed me to reach outside of that and make new friends, call people [and] be able
> to say can you actually look after my children or can I look after your
> children…could we go for coffee…I think it's a good support system not just for
> myself, but for other moms.. .we talk not just about your kids but your whole life in
> general…you know ifs wonderful. (P. 12.8.331)

Stay and Play helped to create an environment of emotional safety that permitted

'all' who attended the opportunity to make friends and develop a support system. For

example, "I have met a lot of other moms through *Stay and Play* that have had their kids

exactly the same amount apart as mine" (P.M.14-622); and "It's nice to have someone

else to talk to that goes through the same thing that you can tell a problem to and then

[you realize] oh my kids did that too so it makes you feel better.. .It makes you feel like

you're not screwing up too bad" (P.17.7.312).

Moreover, *Stay and Play* was not only for parents. Caregivers and grandparents also

attended. Participant 7 was a grandmother who has attended *Stay and Play* for a couple of

years on a regular basis. She stated:

> Sometimes it happens that they're all just the young moms and I'm the only
> grandma there but the thing is they communicate more with the different generations
> as well so which is a good thing so it helps a lot that way too and then next time you
> know they have different grandparents there as well and then you have them to
> communicate with. (P.7.2-71)

Respite: Safe haven

Additionally, parents reported that *Stay and Play* offered 'respite' for a brief period

of time in a parent's day. Attending *Stay and Play* was a stress reliever for parents who

found it difficult to cope or just get away from it all. By attending, parents were able to

bring to a standstill their daily routine and 'just play. Participants stated:

> 1 guess you would call it my stress reliever of the day.. .it is nice to be able to go and focus on your kids and being able to talk with the ladies at *Stay and Play* and don't have to jump up and answer the telephone and all the other cleaning duties and stuff that needs to be done around home.. .you can just really focus and sit and play with your kids without any interruption. (P.2.1-17)

> I get the break during the day and we get to visit with other people and it's not just me and the kids at home.. .I'm just happier and if I'm happier then my husband's happier because he hates coming home to me being frustrated and upset because then it just makes the rest of the day so much worse (P. 14.3-115)

> I used to worry all about cleaning and other things.. .1 had to get so many other things done and when you come here all you can do is sit and play.. .that's why I like to come here because I focus on playing with them. (P.8.4-159)

Parents just needed an excuse to stop working and start playing. Taking time out of their

busy schedules and playing with their children reportedly reduced their daily stress.

As parents enjoyed respite from their daily concerns, they also recognized the

impoitance of play. Participant 19 was a dad who attended *Stay and Play* with his child

whenever he could. He appreciated being interviewed because he wanted other dads to

know how much run *Stay and Play* was. He shared:

> It is just a time to get out and get away from phones and work and just play.. .You just go crazy and play.. .1 realize that's it's good to have a good rough up time and then a quiet time…when I'm here it's just play time…it's easy to just play. (P. 19.1-18/2-89)

As he attended *Stay and Play* his focus became playing with his child. Other

participants went a step further and shared how attending *Stay and Play* encourages them

to interact more with their children during the week.

> It really gives you that good example of spending time with them. It's so easy to just sort of.. .oh I have to do this.. .oh I have to do that.. .but then when you go again every Monday I think this is really fun and you tell how much they've enjoyed

then it encourages you to do that more [with the children] throughout the week. (P.3.5-197)

Participant 1 observed, "You can go there and leave your cares behind...1 think that *Stay and Play* is a nice little window out of your life" (P. 1.2-60/13-563).

Bringing It Home

Parents learned teaching tools while they attended *Stay and Play*. However, it was not designed for parents to have a safe learning environment for the duration of the program, but to gain a "broader horizon of things to use at home that might not have [been] thought of before" (P.10.2-51). The teaching tools were simple, experiential and clear therefore allowing the parents to apply them at home. For example, "We've gotten play dough and played with play dough [at home]...and we get a lot of the same toys. ..we do some water play and stuff where I used to never do that" (P.8.5-184); and "It *[Stay and Play]* helps you get some ideas for stuff at home... They're some interesting playthings that we wouldn't have done it at home probably if I hadn't seen them here *[Stay and Play]* first (P. 1.1-22).

Interestingly, participant 8 appreciated the schedule of *Stay and Play* that consisted of playtime, circle time, clean up time and snack time. She stated, "I actually found I started doing a schedule similar at *Stay and Play* in the morning to make my mornings go a little bit easier and I just pretty much taken home with it... I just follow the same schedule" (P.8.2-45).

Cultural aspects of participants

The inclusion criteria for the study indicated, "to be able to fully comprehend the English language." However, two parent coaches mentioned there were Mexican and German Mennonite women who understood and spoke English (three mothers and one

grandmother) and who wanted to participate in the study. The parent coaches explained that these women were significant contributors to *Stay and Play* as they attended weekly and encouraged others to attend. Furthermore, the parent coaches stated the women insisted they ask me if l would make an exception. Fortunately, I did not refuse. I interviewed four Mexican and German speaking Mennonite women who attended Stay and Play on a regular basis. A grandmother attended one Stay and Play, while the three other women attended another. Their English language was slightly broken, and their vocabulary limited, but I took the time required to fully explain the consents and the interview process.

The women were passionate about their families and childrearing experiences. Their interviews were brief in duration, but rich in content. Their desires to attend *Stay and Play* were profound. These women openly conversed about how they chose to attend even though it was generally frowned upon to 'socialize' with people who were not of their culture. However, they made a conscious choice to challenge such socio-cuitural expectations and participate weekly at *Stay and Play.* In particular, one participant encouraged her two friends to attend *Stay and Play* and interestingly they were the next two participants to be inteiviewed.

There were some common findings among all four participants; their sincere appreciation for attending a program that was specifically designed for parents and children; building relationships with other women not of their culture; having a parent coach that spoke their language fluently,; and giving their children opportunities they never had experienced. Participants similarly commented that they "couldn't believe there is a program like this." The women valued the time they had playing with their

Family experiences

Stay and Play offered a variety of play stations. Each play station permitted the children to explore their creativity and learning while being supported by their parents and the parent coaches. A significant ingredient at *Stay and Play* is that 'play' is child driven. Parents are to take their child's lead. The children engaged in a variety of activities including: painting colourful pictures, hiding rocks in a sand box, floating ducks on a water pond, caring for dolls and pretending they were babies, engineering a train track for the trains to ride on, reading tales from various story books, creatively building with blocks, escorting cars and trucks to their destination, dressing up as someone imaginary, singing and dancing with the group, and getting messy with shaving cream, finger painting, and other crafts the parent coaches created.

In addition, children built stronger relationships with their parents, made friends with other children, engaged in creative play, increased their literacy, and learned the importance of play. All children interviewed stated they enjoyed attending *Stay and Play*. However, there were various aspects of *Stay and Play* they enjoyed the most.

Circle time

Circle time was a highly favored activity among the children and their parents. Parents shared how much they appreciated learning the songs, rhymes and actions and the children spoke of and demonstrated the enjoyment of circle time. For example, one mother stated, "I love the nursery rhymes [and] I love music and that [attending circle time] helps me.. .now my [name of child] always wants the music on" (P.7.13-569).

Circle time occurred when the children and parents came together in a circle, sang rhymes and carried out actions directed by the parent coach. In addition to teaching children songs and rhymes circle time fostered: Music appreciation; memory; language

skills; self-expression; listening skills; social skills; fine motor skills; communication

skills; and thinking skills.

> Even with my nephews and nieces that live in [Name of city] we sing the songs to them and they've picked them up and so it's pretty much our whole family is positively affected by it...Yah it's a wonderful program. (P.7.8-334)

> She just loves the singing and dancing and stuff...I'm glad that I've come and learned all the songs and I think that's what actually got her talking again.. Just doing the actions and making her do the actions before me and it's helped her mentally, I think, a lot. (P.8.9-368)

> My two year old often gets down on the floor and sits her toys in a circle with her and sings 'Oh here we are together, together, together,' ...she also [points to her toys] in the circle and calls them by name. (P.15.2-56}

> Participant 7 expressed that others were positively affected by circle time.

Participant 8 expressed how through music and actions, her child gained self-confidence

[mentally] and began talking again. I was privileged to witness the child of participant 15

demonstrating circle time. Her daughter set off into the bedroom and came out with

several stuffed toys and dolls. She placed each one carefully in a circle, called them by

name and began singing a song to them that she had learned at circle time.

There were numerous accounts regarding the positive impact circle time had on both

child and parent. A few more examples included: "I guess [circle time] has an impact in

our home because my husband does a lot of songs and rhymes with the kids" (P.2.7-317);

"just seeing the kids' excitement of the songs and rhymes" (P.2.17-768); and "oh I just

love the rhymes when everyone's sitting in circle time" (P. 1.14-605).

Learning the musical rhymes had a literary effect. Children increased their

vocabulary by repeating the songs each time they attended *Stay and Play*. One participant

stated: "repetition, repetition, repetition... when they are young they get the language so

both my kids know all the rhymes and songs off by heart. We do those lots" (P.1.1-39).

Literacy was not only taught in the form of music and rhyme. *Stay arid Play* offered a variety of storybooks for the children to read alone or with their parents. As well, the parent coaches included reading a story to the children at the close of circle time.

Messy play

Messy Play was designed to teach and enhance a child's self-expression. The parent coaches regularly chose a different 'messy play.' Messy play consisted of finger painting, shaving cream, and other homemade creations. These messy play activities based on my observations, assisted with strengthening the following: The five senses (smelling, touching, hearing, tasting, and seeing); science skills (observing, comparing, temperature, thickness, and texture); communication skills (talking, listening and observing behaviour); language skills (words such as, squishy, gunky, gross, ooey and gooey); self-expression (artistically and creatively); and fine and gross motor skills (picking up small and large objects, dexterity, and movement).

As I attended *Stay and Play* I observed messy play, I noticed children playing with shaving cream; tasting healthy snacks; listening, reciting sounds and jumping up and down to musical rhymes; building with blocks; dressing up in play clothes; listening and observing others at play; and communicating with other children.

Messy play was one of the *Stay and Play* activities whereby both parents and children benefited. Some participants expressed it best as they stated, "my oldest one didn't like getting his hands dirty all the time and now he loves it because of messy play (P.8.9-403)"; "messy play is fabulous because you guys make the big mess here" (P. 1.4-278); and "there was an oatmeal one [activity] where you could play...ideas I wouldn't have had" (P. 1.1-33).

Family experiences

Creative art centers - Paint, chalk, crayons, scissors and glue

Other play stations and activities that focused on developing the child's imagination

and creativity included painting, colouring with crayons and chalk, and the use of scissors,

paper and glue. Each of the creative art stations were designed to: Increase the

development of the child's fine motor skills; foster knowledge of colour, shape, and size;

generate awareness and use of space; and increase problem solving skills. The creative art

play stations offered at *Stay and Play* permitted children to experiment with several

activities. For example:

> It helps because they get to go and pick whatever they want to do if its painting,
> water play, sand play, kitchen, read a book, play with cars or build a train, a tower
> whatever they want to do, puzzles-they *[Stay and Play]* have all of that. (P.2.10-
> 423)

Creative art encouraged the children to do what they wanted with the materials they

chose. Participants expressed a great appreciation for these activities and at times brought

their creative art home with them. Participants observed,

> They think that when they bring a picture home that' it's like him bringing money
> home from work…they [children] think that their responsibility is to bring stuff
> home for him to see. (P.8.3-118)

> I'd say the paintings she brings home…she'll show them to me and explain to me
> exactly what she painted and how it [the picture] changes throughout the
> painting…it may or may not look like much but to her it's the world… she
> understands the value of doing something with her own hands and that's something I
> view is very important that she learned at *Stay and Play*. (P.9.13-567)

Participants understood the value of their child's creative art piece and the

significance of a child having something tangible to exhibit and lay claim. The child's art

piece was not only a keepsake, but also created opportunities for the child to build a

relationship with their parent.

Developing creativity through open play

The concept of "open play" was advantageous to the development of the child. The various play stations consist of books, toys, paints, etc. which foster creativity, increase literacy, build relationships with parents, siblings and peers, and learn the importance of play. Children and their parents were able to stay at whatever play station they chose for as long as they wanted until open playtime concluded. Participants expressed how they felt about the open concept of play. "I like the different transitions of play like having free play then having a little book reading and a little bit of this and then messy play" (P. 1.4-175); "it's good to have loose structure for them to learn" (P.3.17-748); and "they get to pick whatever they want to do if it's painting, water play, sand play, kitchen, read a book, play with cars, or build a train a tower whatever they want to do, puzzles - they have all of that" (P.2.10-24).

Stay and Play offered the children a variety of games, toys and activities that they may not be privileged to at home.

> They *[Stay and Play]* have more colors here and now he is much more interested in painting than he was before... and the puzzles too...he has really gotten into puzzles there so we've had to get a few puzzles for home too (P. 1.5-225).

Parents and parent coaches asked the children questions about their work of art in an open manner. For example, a child was asked what their picture was and not what the parent thought the picture was. The children were not corrected. Having the opportunity to self create opened the door for the children's imagination to grow.

Parents also validated my findings. During the interview process participant 1 mentioned, "No, no we pretend. And so he just is starting to get that idea and he just

smacks his lips and puts it close to his mouth and says 'we're pretending mom, just

pretend'... yah stuff like that he's definitely learned" (P. 1.6-241).

In addition, *Stay and Play* was not gender specific. Boys and girls played with

everything the center had to offer. Some boys played with dolls and some girls played .

with trucks. *Stay and Play* did not appear to reinforce gender stereotypes. As participant 8

expressed, "With my two oldest kids being boys, I didn't have a lot of girl toys at home

and so when we've come here my [boys] like to play in the kitchen - they like to play

with the dolls - they like to do a lot of that stuff that they don't see at home" (P.8.9-383).

Open play was a favorite among the participants. Children were able to stretch their

imagination through engagement in open play. One participant explained, "I think it

shows your kids that you want to promote their creativity and social interaction.. .you're

allowing them to broaden their horizons and things like that (P. 10.6-272).

Socialization

Socialization-Relationship building with other children

Relationship building, preparation for elementary school, sharing, empathizing and

developing independence can occur through interaction with other children. Children were

able to strengthen their relationship with their parents, but they also formed relationships

with other children. Participants observed:

> She'll run up to them and try and hold -shake their hand...she always says "nice to
> meet you"...she really enjoys being with the other kids. (P.6.5-191)

> They get to associate with other kids... it helps with their [children] social skills.
> (P.5.3-121)

> He loves to socialize and where we live he doesn't get a lot of socialization out on
> the farm.. .on a farm they usually only have each other to play with and when they
> come to *Stay and Play* they play with everyone else. (P.8.5-198)

Family experiences

> My eldest is a really laid back child and she was really shy when I first came here
> like she wouldn't talk...she wouldn't say anything...after about a year she started
> talking. She started interacting with children...if a child would come and play
> beside her she used to walk away and go play by herself somewhere else but now
> she's interacting with kids more and she's playing with them not just walking away
> from them. That's why I started coming [be]cause she just didn't play with other
> kids at all. (P.17.3-161)

Children acquired social skills and learned how to interact socially with other

children. For those children who were isolated from other children, they were afforded

regular contact with their peers. The children's network of friends was expanded; shy

children were encouraged to become more social. Simply, a stay at home child does not

always have the opportunity to step out of her/his comfort zone and make new friends.

Participant 3 stated, "it's not a very scary environment for them so that you know the kids

tend to just let themselves be themselves... they kind of get to know each other better that

way" (P.3.7-280); and another stated, "[name of child] is a little bit shy sometimes so it's

good to get out and see other kids and play with new toys" (P. 19.3-1).

Socialization - Preparation for elementary school

Children learned how to build relationships with other children, which prepared

them for elementary school. The program taught the children expectations associated with

the classroom context. Participants shared:

> I've learned how my kids need to spend time with others in order to get that
> socialization. When my son started school he did not mind me leaving him there at
> all because I'd gone to these *[Stay and Play]* classes. (P.8.2-71)

> Some kids go nuts and jump around and stomp on people and she's not really used
> to that so it's good to get used to that too before she's off to kindergarten. (P.19.3-
> 123)

> We've called it *[Stay and Play]* the school so they think that school [elementary
> school] is just a bigger kid school. They think they are coming to school and being a
> big kid already. (P.8.2-78)

Family experiences

Parents understood the potentially difficult transition from home to school. *Stay and Play* prepared the children for school by giving them an opportunity to socialize with other children in a 'school like' environment.

Socialization - Learning to share

Sharing was an important skill fostered within the context of play. When several children wanted a particular toy or play station, they quickly learned how to take turns, be fair, and trade. This helped children handle difficult situations with their siblings and peers. Participants observed, "It's nice to go somewhere there are kids his age that he can learn to share and trade" (P. 1.6-252); "It definitely helps when she can see that she has to share.. .that part of it is why I wanted her among the kids too" (P.7.7-292); and "she's learned how to share more with other kids, take turns, be fair (P. 14.10-441).

Socialization - Learning empathy

The development of empathy in their children was important to the participants. It was observed that the *Stay and Play* program presented opportunities for such development. One participant said it best "empathy, those kinds of things can help them deal with life better than just learning at school" (P. 11.9-401). Empathy served as a life skill and not just something that was particular to early child development.

For example when I asked the question "What has been positive about attending *Stay and Play"* one participant mentioned, "I think the empathy.. .learning about the younger kids-they need to learn that" (P.8.9-323). In discussing empathy with another participant she articulated:

> We are trying to teach them that they have choices and if we didn't let them have a choice how are they suppose to learn to develop skills to be better people as they get older.. .they need to learn certain skills [empathy] so that they can be better people and be better people when they are around other people. (P.11.9-410)

Participants were quick to note how their children demonstrated empathy. Some of the comments included:

> My eldest one when we sing - if they're singing a tickling song or if there's a baby just sitting there, he'll kind of do a finger on his hand when they're singing - he'll tickle them and he'll let them work with the paint - that's empathy. (P.8.5-226)

> I see it [empathy] if a littler child needs help going up the slide or can't reach the sand one of my boys might go and get the stool for them or help them up the slide....things that they've learned from *Stay and Play* they can also pass down to the littler kids - even their brothers. (P.12.6-249)

> It's a learning process for them learning how to interact with other kids and there's a range of ages so now if my son goes he's one of the oldest kids....he needs to understand that they didn't mean to take that or they didn't mean to draw on your paintings they just don't know....I'd like to think that he's learning that from *Stay and Play* and I think that he's learning compassion. (P.3.7-304)

> *Socialization - Developing independence/development of problem solving*

Stay and Play presented an emotionally safe environment for children to expand their independence and take more risks related to problem solving. Parents stepped back as their children stepped forward in the development of self-confidence. Participants recognized that as their children became more comfortable with their peers - independence was desired and peer learning commenced. A participant articulated, "she's playing more with other kids and stuff so it's given us both a little bit more freedom...she's a little bit more independent since we've been going to *Stay and Play*" (P.6.3-116). Another participant stated, "she's has this very big belief she has to be able to do it herself....that would be like seeing it from other kid's....1 could say that was from being with them (P.7.7-316).

A child's growth in independence also generated growth in confidence and problems solving skills. Participants articulated:

> My eldest is a really laid back child and she was really shy when I first came here [Stay, and Play]...she wouldn't say anything...After a year she started talking...she started interacting with children....she used to walk away and go play by herself somewhere else but now she's interacting with kids more and she's playing with them not just walking away from them. That's why I started coming cause she just didn't play with other kids at all. (P.17.3-161)

> [Name of child] problem solving skills definitely increase as we go and her communication skills through seeing other children the way they try to convince their patents of certain things...they'll try something as simple as throwing a tantrum which didn't work obviously...then [name of child] will try convincing us now because she could hear the older kids say..."well mommy if I do this or if I can have this then 1*ll be good for this long... she picks up on that from other kids...I've noticed that's [happened] and for the most part it's a good thing... [because] {name of child] will try to use words to solve [her] problems rather than kids that throw a tantrum or cry (P.9.8-348).

After the children became more independent, their ability and desire to problem solve began. "In that environment *[Stay and Play]* we can guide them and help them to learn those skills for problem solving so I think that it is a really good environment for especially social problem solving" (P.3.8-335). Furthermore, parents learned to better accept their children's independence. Participant 12 discussed how her children were solving problems more independently. She stated:

> I used to be the first one to jump in and say 'don't do this' and 'stop playing' 'don't do that' and try to be the problem solver to begin with before I had the experience [at *Stay and Play]* to let [my] children solve their own problems and now they 're learning to - I'm learning too. (P. 12.6-267)

Although it was important to engage the children in problem solving there were times that parental support was needed. Participant 14 shared how her son tried to solve his own problems, but if needed, she was there for him. She shared, "he tries different things and solves problems on his own and if it gets into something he can't handle he'll come and get me, but I think he's learning a lot how to figure things out on his own - trying things out on his own"(P.14.10-432).

Finally, *Stay and Play* afforded many growing and learning opportunities for children. It was too difficult to discern which center or which skill was most important. A participant summed it up best when she said, "you know it's one of those things that the parts together make more than they would have separately" (P. 1.10-442).

Participant's shared a great deal of information regarding child development and the functional role *of Stay and Play*. By means of socialization children are learning to create, share, empathize, gain independence and problem solve.

Parent development: The functional role   of Stay and Play

   The   benefit of quality time

Most importantly *Stay and Play* encouraged parent and child to spend one on one time together with little or no interruptions. By attending *Stay and Play* parents discovered their children were interested in 'them' [the parent] and not the activity. Children just want time to be with their parent[s]. As participant 3 stated, "they're [children] not that fussy about what you play with really - they just like that you're there beside them playing with them" (P.3.6-233). Children wanted parents to ignore work, telephone, television and focus on 'only' them. Spending quality time with their children had reported positive outcomes. Parents noticed significant personality changes in their children. For example:

> It encourages me to take that hour or something like that and if one of the kids is saying "please mom can we play this"...and I think yes we can play this... Let's sit down and really just pay attention to each other and ignore everything else cause you can see at *Stay and Play* how much they really appreciate that attention. (P.3.5-210)

> They [the children] like you playing with them and you sitting with them and that's a time when they can have our total attention without "no, no I need to do the dishes" ..."no, no I need to do the laundry...I think at *[Stay and Play]* the kids probably feel more secure because they have the full attention for that time and it's a place where they go and I think they feel more positive. (P. 1.2-127/4-158)

Participant 14 more distinctly explained, "I've always been close to them [children] but it's just improved our relationship with each other in that they're happier being with me" (P.14.6-256). When parents and children spent quality time together children felt more secure in the parent/child relationship. Quality time was treasured among parents as well as their children. The following participants voiced how they valued the quality time they spent with their children:

> I think it really reminds us of the value of spending that uninterrupted chunk of time one on one with your child really listening to them and playing with them and listening to their imagination and stuff like that... Any time I think when you can spend one on one time that's going to really build your attachment to each other. (P.3.8-390)

> We have that scheduled time to be together that I am sitting down playing with them.. .there's no dishes that I have to leave and go do or laundry that we have to do at the same time…it's somewhere we can go and play and just connect meand the boys. (P.13.3-117)

Fortunately, by attending *Stay and Play* previous parenting practices were realized and changed. Prior to attending *Stay and Play* participant 15 [who experienced a loss of attachment with her mother] was duplicating her family of origin childrearing pattern. She now understands the significance of quality time.

> It's *[Stay and Play]* helped me to realize that I need to spend more time with my children.. .and talk about attachment and attachment issues.. .it *[Stay and Play]* helps me to understand that when I've been working for along time and my kids see me and they don't want me to go away. (P.15.1-29/3-135).

Parenting   Skills

Attending *Stay and Play* assisted the parents in learning and attaining various parenting skills. Parents learned from other parents, parenting coaches, or by attending and observing the *Stay and Play* environment. Each source (observation, education, peer

influence) of learning appeared to have had a significant impact on the parents and children.

Learning from others

All the participants shared how they learned by talking and observing other parents at *Stay and Play*. Participant 3 stated, "Just being around people that give you different ideas and examples about - this is what we do sometimes...or expectations you might have of your children at different stages" (P.3.2-69). Parents learned by observation. Parents who attend *Stay and Play* may be privy to many examples of parenting. For some, they may learn what to emulate, and for others, what not to. Participant 12 spoke about how attending *Stay and Play* has helped her cope with being a new mom.

> I used to be very nervous. I'd never held a newborn baby before I had my own. I moved out into the country by myself with no friends, no family. I knew nothing about raising a family and so I was a very nervous wreck and being able to talk with other moms asking "when did you start feeding your baby pabulum or what do your babies do or how do you handle it ...you know, knowing that I'm not alone. (P.12.3-114)

Parent education is not only taught in the early years. *Stay and Play* educates parents throughout all stages of child-hood development from 0-5. Participant 3 affirmed, "being around people that give you different ideas and examples about - this is what we do sometimes.. .or some of the things they bring out to play with or the expectations that you might have of your children and at different stages" (P.3.2-69).

Learning from parent coaches

Each parent coach is highly educated in the area of early child-hood development. Parent coaches were mentioned during the interview process. Participant 13 expressed, "all the tips that she [parent coach] has posted around .. .I've taken them home and used them" (P.13.1-19.) Additionally, "they [parent coaches] talk so much about getting down

to their level and how important it is to make these connections and how it is good for their brains and so it's taught me a lot" (P. 15.1-37).

Stay and Play was about parents, children, parent coaches and environment working together and at times it was difficult to determine which component the participant deemed most effective. For example participant 4 articulated:

> It *[Stay and Play]* has everything there... I've learned a whole bunch of things there *[Stay and Play]*...You know they'd [parent coaches] say something and it would sound like the silliest thing ever and then you get to thinking about it and you try stuff that they say and it works.. .also it's *[Stay and Play]* definitely impacted good ideas from other parents. (P.4.1 -32)

Overcoming distances: Creating social relationships

The foundation *of Stay and Play* is relationships: Relationships between parent and child, parent and parent, child and child, and parent and parent coach. For some participants, the only time during the week that they had contact with another adult was during the time of *Stay and Play.* For example, "I didn't know very many people and I was quite isolated out on the farm so it was an awesome opportunity" (P.18.5-183). Another participant who lived several kilometers from [a town] states, I've had someone to talk to [when attending *Stay and Play]* and I don't have anyone to talk to except my husband" (P.2.8-329). Parents and children can be isolated in rural Alberta. Isolation can create feelings of loneliness and depression. *Stay and Play* creates a social venue that brings rural parents-children together with other parents-children.

Distance from a local community was not the only reason parents found it difficult to make friends. *Stay and Play* helped parents to break down barriers that prevented friendships from occurring. For example, "I don't think I would have made friends if I hadn't attended *[Stay and Play]"* (P. 11.10-434). Locality is not the only reason for

isolation. Participant 12 shared that she is "a shy reserved person" and stepping outside

her comfort zone was difficult.

> I've always been a very shy reserved person so making friends for me even phoning
> people is very difficult...I'm so in the safe zone...but going to *Stay andPlay has*
> allowed me to reach outside of that and make new friends, call people [and] be able
> to say can you actually look after my children or can I look after your
> children...could we go for coffee...1 think it's a good support system not just for
> myself, but for other moms....we talk not just about your kids but your whole life in
> general...you know if's wonderful. (P. 12.8.331)

Stay and Play helped to create an environment of emotional safety that permitted

'all' who attended the opportunity to make friends and develop a support system. For

example, "I have met a lot of other moms through *Stay and Play* that have had their kids

exactly the same amount apart as mine" (P.14.14-622); and "It's nice to have someone

else to talk to that goes through the same thing that you can tell a problem to and then

[you realize] oh my kids did that too so it makes you feel better...It makes you feel like

you're not screwing up too bad" (P.17.7.312).

Moreover, *Stay and Play* was not only for parents. Caregivers and grandparents also

attended. Participant 7 was a grandmother who has attended *Stay and Play* for a couple of

years on a regular basis. She stated:

> Sometimes it happens that they're all just the young moms and I'm the only
> grandma there but the thing is they communicate more with the different generations
> as well so which is a good thing so it helps a lot that way too and then next time you
> know they have different grandparents there as well and then you have them to
> communicate with. (P.7.2-71)

Respite: Safe haven

Additionally, parents reported that *Stay and Play* offered 'respite' for a brief period

of time in a parent's day. Attending *Stay and Play* was a stress reliever for parents who

found it difficult to cope or just get away from it all. By attending, parents were able to

bring to a standstill their daily routine and 'just play. Participants stated:

> I guess you would call it my stress reliever of the day...it is nice to be able to go and focus on your kids and being able to talk with the ladies at *Stay and Play* and don't have to jump up and answer the telephone and all the other cleaning duties and stuff that needs to be done around home...you can just really focus and sit and play with your kids without any interruption. (P.2.1-17)

> T get the break during the day and we get to visit with other people and it's not just me and the kids at home.. .I'm just happier and if I'm happier then my husband's happier because he hates coming home to me being frustrated and upset because then it just makes the rest of the day so much worse (P. 14.3-115)

> I used to worry all about cleaning and other things... I had to get so many other things done and when you come here all you can do is sit and play.. .that's why I like to come here because I focus on playing with them. (P.8.4-159)

Parents just needed an excuse to stop working and start playing. Taking time out of their

busy schedules and playing with their children reportedly reduced their daily stress.

As parents enjoyed respite from their daily concerns, they also recognized the

importance of play. Participant 19 was a dad who attended *Stay and Play* with his child

whenever he could. He appreciated being interviewed because he wanted other dads to

know how much fun *Stay and Play* was. He shared:

> It is just a time to get out and get away from phones and work and just play... You just go crazy and play.. .1 realize that's it's good to have a good rough up time and then a quiet time...when I'm here it's just play time,..it's easy to just play. (P. 19.1-18/2-89)

As he attended *Stay and Play* his focus became playing with his child. Other

participants went a step further and shared how attending *Stay and Play* encourages them

to interact more with their children during the week.

> It really gives you that good example of spending time with them. It's so easy to just sort of...oh I have to do this...oh I have to do that...but then when you go again every Monday I think this is really fun and you tell how much they've enjoyed

then it encourages you to do that more [with the children] throughout the week. (P.3.5-197)

Participant 1 observed, "You can go there and leave your cares behind.. .1 think that *Stay ami Play* is a nice little window out of your life" (P. 1.2-60/13-563).

Bringing It Home

Parents learned teaching tools while they attended *Stay and Play.* However, it was not designed for parents to have a safe learning environment for the duration of the program, but to gain a "broader horizon of things to use at home that might not have [been] thought of before" (P.10.2-51). The teaching tools were simple, experiential and clear therefore allowing the parents to apply them at home. For example, "We've gotten play dough and played with play dough [at home]...and we get a lot of the same toys... we do some water play and stuff where I used to never do that" (P.8.5-184); and "It *[Stay and Play]* helps you get some ideas for stuff at home... They're some interesting playthings that we wouldn't have done it at home probably if I hadn't seen them here *[Stay and Play]* first (P. 1.1-22).

Interestingly, participant 8 appreciated the schedule *of Stay and Play* that consisted of playtime, circle time, clean up time and snack time. She stated, "I actually found I started doing a schedule similar at *Stay and Play* in the morning to make my mornings go a little bit easier and I just pretty much taken home with it...I just follow the same schedule" (P.8.2-45).

Cultural aspects of participants

The inclusion criteria for the study indicated, "to be able to fully comprehend the English language." However, two parent coaches mentioned there were Mexican and German Mennonite women who understood and spoke English (three mothers and one

grandmother) and who wanted to participate in the study. The parent coaches explained that these women were significant contributors to *Stay and Play* as they attended weekly and encouraged others to attend. Furthermore, the parent coaches stated the women insisted they ask me if I would make an exception. Fortunately, I did not refuse. I interviewed four Mexican and German speaking Mennonite women who attended Stay and Play on a regular basis. A grandmother attended one Stay and Play, while the three other women attended another. Their English language was slightly broken, and their vocabulary limited, but I took the time required to fully explain the consents and the interview process.

The women were passionate about their families and childrearing experiences. Their interviews were brief in duration, but rich in content. Their desires to attend *Stay and Play* were profound. These women openly conversed about how they chose to attend even though it was generally frowned upon to 'socialize' with people who were not of their culture. However, they made a conscious choice to challenge such socio-cultural expectations and participate weekly at *Stay and Play*. In particular, one participant encouraged her two friends to attend *Stay and Play* and interestingly they were the next two participants to be interviewed.

There were some common findings among all four participants; their sincere appreciation for attending a program that was specifically designed for parents and children; building relationships with other women not of their culture; having a parent coach that spoke their language fluently,; and giving their children opportunities they never had experienced. Participants similarly commented that they "couldn't believe there is a program like this." The women valued the time they had playing with their

children, as when they were at home with their children, they would be tending to the "daily chores," more so than tending to their children.

The Mexican and German speaking participants commented on how their children will have more opportunities in school than they did because attending *Stay and Play* improved the children's' comprehension of the English language.

Interviewing these four women was poignant. The Mexican and German Mennonite women had similar experiences at *Stay and Play* as other participants however; their level of appreciation was significant. The glow in their faces and the passion expressed in their voices was unforgettable. The Mexican and German Mennonite women had "richness in gratitude."

Summary

The experiences shared by the parents' were overwhelmingly supportive. Initially, the purpose of the study was to ascertain the parent's experiences at *Stay and Play*. However, so much more was discovered. As the interviews transpired parents began to share not only their experiences at *Stay and Play* but also how *Stay and Play* helped them in break or enhance the cycle their childhood experiences of being parented. Furthermore, parents developed friendships with their peers and enjoyed the respite offered by the program. As well, the parents shared how much their children had grown by attending *Stay and Play*. They [parents] noticed their children gained confidence as they made friends and built a social network.

The Structural Role of Stay and Play

The structural role comprised the 'nuts and bolts' of *Stay and Play* and was designed to give parents and children the opportunity to spend quality time together as they play

Family experiences

and learn. Structural components included: Schedule; availability; cost; safety; and

professionalism of the coaches (see Figure 3)

Figure 3   The Structural Role of *Stay and Play*

The
Structural
Role of
Stay and Play

Schedule	Availability	Cost	Safety	Professionalism Of The Parent Coaches
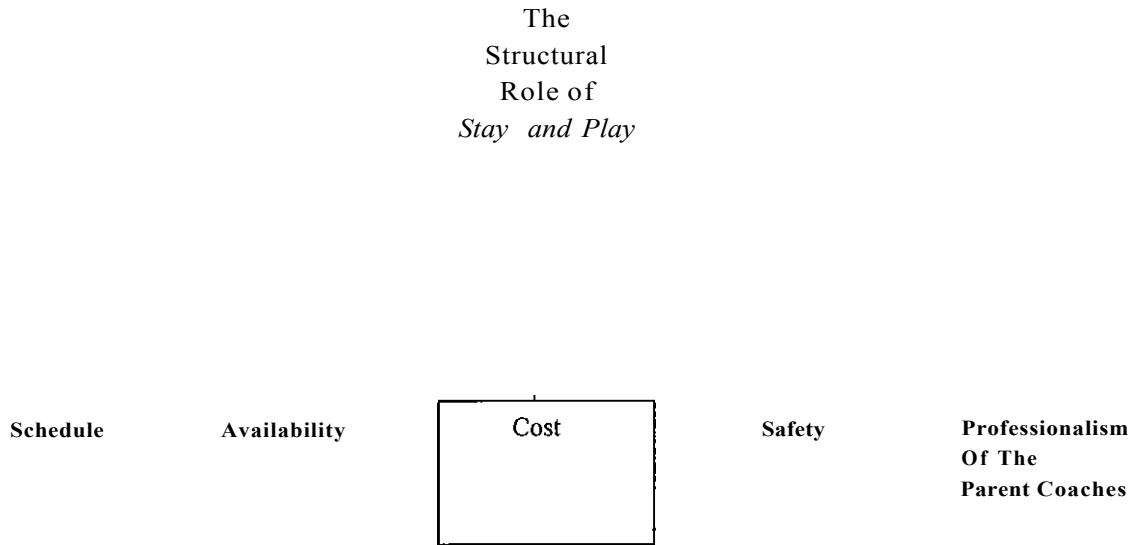
Schedule

     Stay and Play is a structured program with unstructured play. Each *Stay and Play*

program conducted within *B-E-W, FCSS* areas have the same schedule. *Stay and Play* runs

for approximately 2 *Vi* hours and the schedule is as follows:

>   Open play - one hour

>   Clean up time

>   Circle time - one hour

>   Snack time - *V2* hour

     All times listed are approximate and the order of activities may differ. Open play is

the first event that allows the parents and children to participate in unstructured play and

have quality time with each other. After open play the children are asked to clean and

while doing so all [parent coaches, parents and children] join in for a clean-up song. Once the toys are put away circle time begins. Circle time is structured with the parent coach reading stories and singing rhymes with the children and their parents. Once circle time has ended the children are asked to sit at a table and have a healthy snack.

Participants 4 and 15 appreciated the structure, they expressed, "it's repetitive and as they do it over and over they realize, okay now it's time to sit in circle time and do songs and stories" (P.4.6-254); and "I like that there's structure...1 like that we can go there and they can make the biggest mess they want but then it always gets cleaned up because sometimes at home it's hard to have that structure" (P.15.23-1055).

Furthermore, parents were not expected to stay for the duration but knew that the schedule remained the same. Thus, a parent could arrive "late" and still participate in the program. Participant 3 stated, "it's a good full morning but it doesn't feel too long for us...if you miss the first half hour it's fine-just come in...or leave early" (P.3.3-100); and participant 1 noted, "you don't have to be there at the beginning or stay right to the end - you can come and go as you please- that really helps... if we are there at quarter to 10:00 and we need to leave by 11:00 that's okay - it's not a big deal (P. 1.2-80).

Participants were pleased in knowing what to expect when they visited any *Stay and Play* within the *B-E-W, FCSS* area. A few more comments included, "wherever you go it's the same" (P.l.15-680); and "the routine is priceless" (P.2.10-454).

Availability

Besides having the freedom of arriving and leaving when needed, most of the *Stay and Play* programs were offered on different days during the week with both morning and afternoon hours. Participant 17 preferred the morning as she explained, "It *[Stay and Play]*

is in the morning.. .it's before nap and stuff.. .it ends at noon so we can go home, eat lunch and then take a nap and then it makes the day go by a little faster" (P.17.2-55) Parents were appreciative of having the different options and the opportunity to attend more than once a week. Participant 2 thoroughly enjoyed attending *Stay and Play* any time it was offered and she commented "I would pick the beginning of the week, the middle of the week and the end of the week... [and go] if they had it on Saturdays (P.2.6-223).

Cost

The *Stay and Play* program is offered without cost to parents, therefore permitting 'all' parents and children under five no matter what their income the opportunity to attend. All participants interviewed made comments in regards to free attendance. Some of the comments were, "This *[Stay and Play]* is fabulous... [and] you're not paying anything" (P. 1.16-692; "We don't pay for it *[Stay and Play]* - it's free...that's really a bonus...and you just go when you want to" (P. 13.13-590); and "I like that it's *[Stay and Play]* free and that you get to know other people" (P.14.18-798).

Economic barriers were eliminated, as there was no cost associated with the *Stay and Play* program. Families who attended were not concerned as to whether or not they 'financially' fit in. Her or his social economic status was of no concern to anyone and everyone was treated equally.

Safety

A few of the participants commented on how important it was to them that *Stay and Play* was a safe environment for their children to attend. The program only purchased items that were safety warranted. Play items were displayed in an open room concept so participants were present with the children at all times. Additionally, parent coaches were

constantly nearby in the room for the duration of the program. The children and the

parents were never left alone.

Having a 'physically' safe place for the children to play eased the concerns of many

parents. One participant in particular expressed how she felt about the physical safety of

the program. She stated:

> It is a safe place too... there is not a whole lot they can get into there - there's less limitations on them I guess.. .you don't have to worry that they are going to get into something bad and they know that they are safe to play with anything and do pretty much anything. (P.1.3-132)

However, parents were not only concerned about the physical safety of men-

children. They were also concerned about how their children were 'emotionally' treated.

Parents did not want to put their children in an environment where bullying occurred as

participant 3 explained:

> The grownups are in charge so it's a really good safe environment for them to learn social skills with other kids cause there's no bullying and you know - not that kids at that age would do it on purpose, but you know you'll get personality types that would tend to steal toys or they don't know how to socialize yet so it's a really safe environment for them to learn and I think. (P.3.6-255)

Even though children of the age infant - five attended *Stay and Play,* it was

important to realize that bullying could still happen. As participant 3 mentioned, children

have different personality types and as they are learning to socialize it is crucial that all

personality types learn the importance of kindness, respect and empathy. *Stay and Play* is

a venue where this is taught.

Professionalism of the Coaches

The parent coach is skillfully trained to work with children and their parents. Not

only are they educated in the area of child development, but also each year they attend

other workshops, conferences and training sessions to keep their skills updated and intact.

Family experiences

The parent coaches were praised by many of the participants for their professionalism, support, friendliness and acceptance. For example, "Actually, I would say [parent coach] was really nice... she really accepted you there and I think she was the only one that actually [did] the first couple of times that I went... she did a really good job to make you feel at home" (P.7.1-18).

Although, the parent coaches were technically skilled, it was the emotional support they offered to the parents that was most often mentioned by the participants. Participant 2, a parent of two autistic children, identified the need for emotional support. She strongly emphasized how 'wonderful' the parent coaches had been to her.

> They [parent coaches] are just wonderful... they're all just.so encouraging and they know the right things to say.. .1 don't know how but they do.. .when they [parent coaches] here something they call me and tell me.. .1 appreciate that beyond words.. .it's just the support.. .those ladies [parent coaches] are the only people who have supported me in this town because even my husband's family are no support whatsoever because they don't agree with having special needs children. (P.2.7-309/9-372)

The parent coaches remain with the *Stay and Play* center to which they have been assigned. This brings staff continuity to the program and encourages a stronger connection between parents/child and parent coaches. Continuity was recognized as strength.

Participant 3 noted:

> We've had more or less the same facilitator at ours for the whole time... .that's been a big reason I think too why my children have really enjoyed it.. .she's [parent coach] made a good effort to for connections with the kids - not just my kids but all the kids.. .for example [child's name] shouts her name she's so excited to see her. (P.3.15-394)

In essence, the parent coaches were the foundation for the *Stay and Play* program. Without their [parent coaches] support, updated knowledge, friendliness, and continuity the program may not be where it is today: Well attended, highly supported and a safe

place for parents and children to attend. The parent coaches excel at what they do. As participant 2 observed, "The ladies at *Stay and Play* are amazing and I can't say enough good stuff about them" (P.2.7-306).

Summary

The structural supports of any program are the external elements that organize and implement the day-to-day doings, comings and goings. Without efficient 'structure' programs such as *Stay and Play* would cease to operate effectively. According to the participants the structural aspects of *Stay and Play* were not only was effective, but superior.

Parent's experiences with Stay and Play

Parent's experiences with the Stay and Play program

This particular theme identified the positive and negative aspects of the *Stay and Play* program. In other words, what did parents like and dislike about the program? Collectively, the themes with their various sub-themes and elements offer an understanding of the *Stay and Play* program within the *B-E-W, FCSS* geographical area.

As this was not an evaluative study, this section 'addresses the parents' perspective on the strengths and limitations associated with *Stay and Play*. There are always strengths and concerns associated with any program (see Figure 4)

Family experiences

Figure 4

Parent's Experiences with *Stay and Play*

Parents' experiences with
Stay and Play

Strengths   Concerns

Strengths

There were numerous comments made about the strengths of *Stay and Play*. Therefore I chose strengths that were mentioned several times during the interview process. One of which was building relationships. Many participants shared that attending *Stay and Play* was the highlight of their week. They [participants] enjoyed meeting other parents, having quality time with their children and knowing their children were making new friends. One participant said, "I did work between having my children and I made sure I didn't work on Monday's so I could go to *Stay and Play"* (P.3.11-479). Interestingly, as this participant shared her story, her son quickly ran to the refrigerator, pulled the calendar off the door and showed me all the Mondays marked with an *'S & P.'*

Participants expressed how building relationships with their peers and parent coaches had decreased anxiety, improved patience, and improved their confidence as a parent. Participant 17 shared "It's *[Stay and Play]* had a positive impact because I know how to handle meltdowns a little bit better and they [children] see I stay calm so they kind of calm down too" (P. 17.3-92).

Family experiences

Another strength of *Stay and Play* was circle time. In fact, many mentioned that circle time was one of their favorite aspects of *Stay and Play*. Participant 9 observed "My favorite part *[of Stay and Play]* is the songs [circle time]...I learn them [and] she learns them....we both like them....she likes to sing...we both do....we're always singing" (P.9.13-584).

Developing creativity through open play, which included a variety of toys, games, and books, was frequently mentioned. Having an array of activities enhanced the time parents and children spent at *Stay and Play* while alleviating pressure on the parent to supply the materials and activities at home. Participant 13 explained, "[I like] the variety of activities and toys... [Because] I don't need that here [at home] because we can go play with it there *[Stay and Play]* every week and that's good enough" (P. 13.13-596).

In addition, the structure of *Stay and Play* was often addressed during the interview process. Having unstructured play within a structured environment was viewed positively by parents and children. As participant 11 indicated, "I kind of like the structure - how it's structure - you go from one thing to another and move on" (P. 11,11-483).

Stay and Play was free and open to all parents and children from the ages (infant - five). Participant 14 noted, "I like that it's free and that you get to know other people" (P. 14.18-798). With today's financial burdens it is optimal that professional programs are available at no cost and available to everyone.

The strengths of *Stay and Play* cannot be addressed without speaking to the professionalism of the parent coaches. Participants commented on how their particular parent coach was the "very best". "I really appreciate all the effort and work that the other teachers [parent coaches] put into it *[Stay and Play]* (P.13.13-588). The warm and friendly

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approach was inviting to all who attended *Stay and Play* and likely contributed to the

success to the program.

The communities of *B-E-W, FCSS* have been hospitable in providing space and

opening their doors to all who wish to attend. Participants say it best. "I think it's a

wonderful program and they should keep going because that's a very good community

thing" (P.7.14-607); and:

> It's *[Stay and Play]* valuable to a community...especially in a small community like
> this one.. .1 think where you know we maybe don't have as many opportunities as
> larger cities and it just allows parents to get out and get to know each other and see
> what's out there and gives you a good opportunity to learn about your kids and
> spend time with them...it's so good. (P.3.12-546)

> *Stay and Play* is the best resource that I've come across anywhere and we've lived
> all over... and they don't have [a] community resource like this *[Stay and Play]...I*
> was amazed when we came and we found that they had a program like this... It's just
> nothing I've experienced before...it's an asset to families. (P.2.18-801)

In closing, the parents appreciated having a cost free, friendly and fun environment

to be with children. Having unstructured play within a structure environment allowed

parents to spend quality time with their children and build peer supports.

Concerns

Participants were somewhat apprehensive about sharing their concerns. However,

the participants who stated their concerns wanted them addressed in the study. Certain

participants expressed more concerns then others - thus fewer participants are present in

this section.

Although participants were reassured regarding their anonymity, they requested that

I turn off my recorder and only document concerns in my notes <u>without any recognition</u>

<u>by participant number or program area</u>. Therefore, as I addressed their concerns I noted

that the participant did not want to be identified.

Parent coaches suggesting teaching toots

Some participants stated when they felt 'pushed' into accepting different teaching strategies the parent coaches offered. As well, not all the participants agreed with the teaching strategy the parent coach was teaching. One participant [not identified] stated, "When I mentioned to the parent coach that I didn't like their idea I was told to try it anyway...I thought she was rude...I'm the parent."

Other participants had similar concerns in regards to the lesson on sharing. [It is important to note that not all the parent coaches were mentioned as teaching this particular principle at their *Stay and Play].* According to the participants, the parent coaches taught that children sharing the toy they are currently playing with are not correct. Rather, when a child wants the toy another child is playing with, they are to wait for the toy to be available rather than ask to play with it at that time.

According to the participants [that shared this concern] the stated the philosophy behind the 'no sharing' teaching strategy is when a child is asked to share a toy that they are playing with and the child gives up the toy it halts the child from embracing and enhancing their creativity. Furthermore, when a child has to wait to play with the toy it presents the child with an opportunity to solve the problem of not having the toy they wanted to play with.

Another participant mentioned that her parent coach said, "How would you like it if you were watching a television show or something and someone came and just changed the channel." The participant shared with me her reply, "I wouldn't want someone to come and just change the channel, but if they asked if they could change the channel, I may let them especially if there was something they needed to watch.... but if they don't

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ask how am I going to show kindness." The participant further stated that "it is okay for anyone to ask, we just shouldn't expect them to do it and if they don't do it that's okay.' This participant was troubled by this philosophy.

Another participant with the same concern told me that when she encouraged her child to share at the *Stay and Play,* the parent coach went over to her and told her not to do that because "sharing was not allowed." This participant further said "I felt embarrassed and disrespected as a parent because the parent coach was not quiet when she said it and lots of people heard.. .also who made her the expert on parenting [name of child]. She further stated, "They are supposed to be teaching us tools, not rules."

Other participants stated that the parent coaches made them feel inadequate as parents. One stated "sometimes, they [parent coaches] make me feel like I'm a bad mother and sometimes I come home crying because I didn't do things exactly the way they told me to.. .1 keep going because I have so many friends there now and so does my children;" and "sometimes I feel that [name of parent coach] doesn't think I'm a good parent... she's always correcting me."

I empathized with each participant knowing how difficult it was for them to share their feelings. When I asked them [participants] individually as to why they would prefer to not have their comments 'on the record' their replies were - "just in case she hears the tape sometime.. .1 know you [researcher] told me that they wouldn't know but you never know for sure;" I don't know I just feel better doing it this way"; "I know her and I don't want her to not like me;" and "what if she says something to someone at the Hub [the *Stay and Play* center] then I'm really embarrassed." I respected their requests and recorded their remarks without any recognition.

Family experiences

Favoritism

Other concerns were addressed. Participant 14 wanted to address some of the concerns her friends had. She said that when she told some of her friends that she was going to be interviewed they asked her if she would tell me their concerns as well. She stated:

> I know friends of mine have been kind of singled out by the people [parent coaches] who run it and told that maybe their kids are too rambunctious...and that they are not allowed to take certain classes because they don't want to provide the childcare for their kids...they've never done it to my kids cause my kids are pretty easy going and everything...but it's just not right that they get singled out that way...the coaches need to realize that every child is different - every mom is different (P. 14.20-846/21-945).

Additionally, participant 14 wanted the reader to know that sometimes the parent coaches were rather insistent in participation of certain activities. She further stated:

> I'm sure that they feel like their suggesting and that they're trying to do what's right, but sometimes they just say it and you feel like they're not suggesting...you feel like they're telling what you're doing is wrong and that you're being a bad parent by doing it the way you are...1 know that I'm doing the best I can and that they're trying to help me in their own way...but I know for other people it's gotten to the point that they may not take the criticism - constructive or not...1 mean sometimes it feels like they force you try things with the kids...they can't force you to do it...they can tell you the benefits...but it feels like they're forcing or they're telling you to. (P.14.22-969/P.23-1015)

Another participant felt that the parent coaches were insistent on another issue. She said:

> There's someone that's at the *Stay and Play* and she does volunteer work there and she makes me a little uncomfortable cause she always wants to hold my baby... and I don't know how I can say no, don't do that because the parent coaches are like "oh go ahead let her take your baby so that you can play with your other kids...I'm not super comfortable with that (P.15.24-1089).

Based on the participant's comments they appreciated the efforts of the parent coaches, but would like to have their opinion recognized and respected.

Family experiences

Being in the presence of other parents and other children

Not all parents were in agreement with respect to child-rearing practices. As some participants described, "Some of the parents just-you know are judgmental" (P.6.8-324); and "its hard going there *[Stay and Play]* sometimes because there's this lady that just yells at her kids" (P.5.6-231). Parents found it difficult observing other parenting styles that were not in concert with their own approaches. For some it was more trying than others. For example, participant 9 stated that being around other parents at *Stay and Play* as they were watching their children was her 'least favorite thing.' She stated:

> My least favorite thing about *Stay and Play..* .I'd have to say other parents not watching their children while we're there...you know [name of child] is playing with a toy and someone else comes and grabs it and the mom is talking or not paying attention... [There are] examples of parenting that we wouldn't allow to happen with our child [that is] happening right in front of her (P.9.13-595)

Some participants were troubled with other parenting styles but still chose to come to *Stay and Play* on a regular basis.

Another participant was concerned with negative behaviour from other children. Participant 5 explained, "The negative thing about *Stay and Play* is the bad kids...they're always bratty and throwing stuff...one was throwing sand at the little girls face" (P.5.6-247). Children being in the presence of other children have its pros and cons.

Not advertised enough

Participants noted that they 'wished' they had heard about *Stay and Play* sooner than they did. Many of the participants heard about *Stay and Play* through word of mouth. For the most part the *B-E- W, FCSS* area is rural and verbal communication may be limited. For instance, participant 17 lived several kilometers from the nearest village and thought she should had been made aware earlier that the *Stay and Play* program was offered there.

Family experiences

She voiced "I didn't know about it until someone else went there and then they told me
about it…1 wish I would have found out earlier …1 would have started coming more"
(P.17.1-5); and participant 14 mentioned "It's not advertised so much…[you] kind of have
to learn about it by word of mouth" (P. 14.1-13).

   The problem with messy play

   For most participants, messy play was a positive experience. However, there were
parents who deemed otherwise. Simply, messy play used materials that were messy.
Participant 14 stated, "I'm a clean person and I don't like messy play…1 don't let them
paint and stuff like that" (P. 14.7-318).

   Playing with paint, shaving cream and other 'messy' items may stain the clothing
worn by both the parent and the child. Some participants stated, "It is difficult to try and
get the food colour out of her clothes" (P. 18.5-201); and "I'm not very big into what they
call messy play - I'm not a big fan of that.. .1 leave a couple of minutes before it begins,
the same with painting" (P.7.13-584).

   Although the parent coaches continually stressed to parents "dress for mess" some
parents had other errands to run before or after *Stay and Play,* thus making it difficult for
them to wear clothes that were suitable for the messy play activity. Messy play may not be
for everyone who attends *Stay and Play* but the mess does remain at *Stay and Play* and
when the children take part in the activity it opens up the child's imagination to create the
impossible.

   On a side note -1 observed a messy play activity. The activity was for the children
to slide on a soapy [shaving cream] slip and slide outside on a warm day. The children
thoroughly enjoyed it. However, a child who wanted to participate [almost] could not

because she was attending another function directly after *Stay and Play*. The situation

ended well because after looking for clothing, the parent coaches found some [much

larger] clothes for her to wear. However, if clothes were not found she would have been

very disappointed. This singular experience helped me to appreciate the parent's point of

view in not wanting their clothes ruined or wet and at the same time appreciated the level

of enjoyment the children shared.

Summary

In summary, the parents' experiences at *Stay and Play* were mostly positive. Parents

are building relationships with their children as well as their peers. Parents and children

are learning skills that will direct them in the years to come. Skills such as: Learning the

value of: Parent-child bonding; play; listen; read; music and rhymes; and relationship

building with your peers.

I respected the participants sharing how they felt about the strengths and limitations

of *Stay and Play*. The limitations were fewer in comparison to the strengths however;

knowing both can be a teaching guide for the administrators of *Stay and Play*. However,

my study was not an evaluation of *Stay and Play* and the comments expressed are to be

deemed 'experiences' rather than 'evaluative.'

CHAPTER 5

DISCUSSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The research question, What are families' experiences with *Stay and Playl,* is

discussed in this chapter. I will provide an overview of the study and a synopsis of the

literature review. Also, I discuss the theoretical framework, method and subsequent

findings. Recommendations for research will conclude the chapter.

Overview of the study

Stay and Play is an early child development program implemented by *Barons-*

Eureka-Wavner, Family Community andSupport Services {B-E-W, FCSS). It promotes

healthy parent and child relationships by utilizing the philosophy that children are to lead

in play activities. This permits children to be creative explorers, to build self confidence,

and ask open ended questions by using language such as "who, what, where, when and

how." This promotes problem solving, imagination, curiosity and creativity. Furthermore,

parents are.encouraged to sit on the floor with their children thus enabling them to be at

their [child's] level. By doing so, parents see things from the child's perspective. This

philosophy and approaches to play are frequently reinforced each time the parent and

child attend *Stay and Play.*

Prior to researching families' experiences of *Stay and Play* I requested approval

from Mr. Greg Pratt, Director of *B-E-W, FCSS,* (see Appendix A). I also obtained ethical

clearance from the Human Subject Research Committee in advance of implementing the

study. Parent coaches assisted me in enlisting participants by presenting parents with a

letter (see Appendix B) when they attended *Stay and Play.* Interested participants

provided the parent coaches with their telephone number and requested that I contact

them. All interested participants were interviewed. Twenty-four parents participated in the study. In addition, I had thirty-two children in attendance, i.e., during the parents' interviews. One adult participant asked to have her interview removed from the study. This participant did not explain her decision; however, my sense was that she felt vulnerable in light of her perspectives regarding *Stay and Play*.

Participants were interviewed in their home or at the *Stay and Play* center they attended. Prior to the interview I met with participants to complete an adult consent form (see Appendix C) and child assent form (see Appendix D). In addition, participants completed a demographic survey (see Appendix E).

I conducted five semi structured family-centered interviews (both parents present) and thirteen semi structured person-centered interviews. In addition, thirty-two children were present, however only four were interviewed. The interviews varied in duration from one to three hours, as there were times when parents had to stop and tend to their children. The interviews were audio-taped and transcribed verbatim. Three themes emerged through the process of qualitative data analysis: *The Functional role of Stay and Play; the Structural role of Stay and Play;* and *Parent's experiences at Stay and Play.* The three themes represented pattern of experiences from families who attended *Stay and Play* (see Figure 1, p. 35).

The *Functional role* of *Stay and Play* addressed the 'purpose' of the program (see Figure 2, p. 36). The sub-themes of fostering parenting skills, child development and parent development were associated with this theme. *Stay and Play* appeared to be meeting the functional needs of the families. Participants expressed how they took pleasure in building relationships with other parents, playing with their children, and

improving their parenting skills. While attending *Stay and Play,* parents and children were able to choose their activity from the assortment of play stations that included: Creative ait, painting, messy play and circle time.

The *Structural role* of *Stay and Play* was the 'nuts and bolts' of the program (see Figure 3, p. 61). It addressed the day-to-day routine of the program such as: scheduling program activities; program availability i.e. day and time; identifying the creative art or messy play projects for that day; noting safety procedures when needed; preparing a healthy snack; conducting circle time rhymes; and attending to the cleanliness of the center. Participants appreciated attending a clean, safe, organized and professional environment. The structure of *Stay and Play* was designed to have similar program schedules and routines in all their communities within the *B-E-W, FCSS.* Similarity and continuity with each *Stay and Play* provided familiarity for both parent and child.

The *parent's experiences* with *Stay and Play* were overwhelmingly positive (see Figure 4, p. 67). Participants expressed how they enjoyed strengthening the parent-child relationship; meeting other parents; playing with their children; learning songs and rhymes; and finding respite from their daily work and life routines. In addition, participants shared what they deemed as limitation associated with *Stay and Play.* Participants had difficulty with some of the parent coaches who rigidly expected parents to follow their [coaches'] parenting philosophies and approaches to "hands on" parenting. Some participants were also concerned about the messy play activity, i.e., it was potentially damaging to the children's clothing. Finally, some parents were not comfortable having their children observe other parents and children.

Family experiences

A few participants indicated that attending *Stay and Play* was a stressful experience. However, the findings were overwhelmingly positive. The findings indicated that *Stay and Play* is a contextual source of support that fosters healthy parenting and creates a venue for peer relationships.

Synopsis of the literature

I reviewed literature on the determinants of parenting - specifically the components of parental contributions, child contributions, and contextual sources of stress/support (Belsky, 1984; Copeland and Harbaugh, 2005; Peters, 2007; Pluess & Belsky, 2009; Svanberg, 1998). As well, I explored literature on attachment theory and its attributing elements quality and quantity time (Berlin & Cassidy, 2001; Bretherton, Lambert, & Golby, 2005; Clarke, Ungerer & Chahoud, 2002; Dunlap, 2004; Huston & Aronson, 2005; Edwards, 2002; Greenspan & Shanker, 2004;Vellet & Dixon, 2008).

Further literature was observed on the cyclical effect of parenting (Belsky, 1984; Erickson, 2008; Pluess & Belsky, 2009; Polansky et al, 2006). Research denotes "that how a parent cares for his/her children is strongly influenced by the care the parent received in his/her own childhood (Erickson, 2008, p. 2).

In addition, I reviewed the impact family based community programs had on the parent - child relationship (Alberta Response Model, 2002; Currie, 2001; Dunlap, 2004; Melhuish et al, 2007; Yau & Ziegler, 2002). The literature suggests that programs such as *Stay and Play* invite opportunities for both parent and child to strengthen parent-child attachment and enhance parenting knowledge. As well, it may be probable that as parents attend *Stay and Play* they are given the necessary parenting knowledge that will assist

them in enhancing or changing how they were parented. Parents were given the

opportunity to change the cycle.

Theoretical framework

The philosophical underpinnings of Belsky's (1984) process model - determinants of

parenting (see Table 6) and attachment theory were pertinent for the study. However, only

three components from the process model - determinants of parenting were considered for

this study; parent's contributions; child's contributions; and contextual sources of

stress/support. To date, the process model - determinants of parenting steers the research

conducted at the "Institute for the Study of Children, Families and Social Issues at

Birkbeck, University of London, United Kingdom" (Peters, 2007, p. 2)

Table 6 Three Components of the Determinants of Parenting

Parental Contributions	Child's Contributions	Contextual Sources of Stress/Support
Family History Personality Employment Social Network Marital Relations	Child Characteristics Child Development	Peer Relationships Family Members Community Programs Parent Coaches/Teachers

The relationship between the process model - determinants of parenting, and

attachment were identified as participants repeatedly shared how their childhood

experiences affected how they parented, and subsequently influenced their children's

overall development. These findings can be directly linked to the process model - the

determinants of parenting. Belsky (1984) observed, "[there] are three general sources of

influence on parental functioning: 1) the parents' ontogenic origins [family history] and

personal psychological resources; 2) the child's characteristics of individuality; and 3) contextual sources of stress and support.

Parents who experienced positive parenting and childhoods chose to replicate their parental family history in terms of the parenting process. Parents who recalled difficult or negative parenting and childhoods chose not to replicate their parental family history. They actively repatterned their approaches to parenting. Unlike themselves, they wanted their children to experience positive parenting and childhoods. According to the participants, one of the key forces behind their approach to parenting was based on their family history, i.e., how they were parented within their families' of origin. This finding is extensively noted in the literature (Belsky, 1984; Pluess & Belsky 2009; Polansky etal, 2006; Volker et al, 1999). Of note is that *Stay and Play* enabled participants to change their parenting approaches; they learned how to be better parents.

Belsky's (1984) process model - the determinants of parenting was effective in guiding the research. It provided a theoretical basis for the connection between parenting and childhood experiences, as well as the relationship between parenting and child development. Recently, Pluess and Belsky (2009) indicated that the quality of care a child receives has a profound effect on her/his overall development. Furthermore, parental sensitivity toward their child is the most significant precursor in a child's healthy development and attachment security (Volker, et al, 1999).

Further, attachment theory provided a wealth of knowledge regarding the significance of the healthy relationship between parent and child. Research indicates that a child who experiences sensitive and secure parenting may be confident and succeed emotionally, physically and academically throughout their lifetime. In contrast, a child

who experiences insensitive and insecure parenting may lack the same (Berlin & Cassidy, 2001; Greenspan & Shanker, 2004; Vellet & Dixon, 2008).

The theoretical underpinnings of the study were the process model - the determinants of parenting, and attachment theory. Further, the primary focus was to gain insight as to the contextual source of stress/support that the parents experience while attending *Stay and Play*. Although, the study did not lend itself to an 'in depth' look into secure and insecure attachment, the findings revealed that secure attachment occurred between parents and their children.

Method

Qualitative research served as the methodology for this study. I applied family-centered and person-centered interviews using semi structured interview guides (see Appendix F). Twenty-three adults [17 women and six men] participated in the study. There were 32 children [17 boys and 15 girls; infants to age five] who were in the interview space. Of this number, four children formally participated in the interview process. I conducted thirteen person-centered interviews [12 parents and one grandparent] and five family-centered interviews [five mother/father dyads]. The participants regularly attended *Stay and Play* i.e. at least once a week. The interviews were audio-taped and then transcribed verbatim. In addition to audio-taped interviews, I took field notes and attended five *Stay and Play* programs for observation. Upon completion of the transcription and field notes the data were analyzed by means of thematic analysis. The major findings [themes and sub themes] are outlined in Figure 1 p. 35.

Applying family- and person-centered semi structured interviews allowed me to portray the families' experiences with *Stay and Play*. My original intent was to have both

parents present [whenever possible] for the interview, but with work schedules this was

often not possible. However, having both family-centered and person-centered interviews

provided multiple perspectives and a richer data set.

Linkage   of major findings   with   recent   literature

   The functional   role   of Stay   and Play

   From the perspectives of the participants, the functional role of *Stay and Play*

promoted healthy parenting and healthy child development (see Figure 2, p. 36).

Participants noted that playing together with their children enhanced the quality of their

relationship, encouraged socialization with their peers [both parent and child], and

fostered the emotional well-being for the parent and child. Ginsburg (2007) aptly

observed,

> Play is essential to development because it contributes to the cognitive, physical,
> social, and emotional well-being of children. Play also offers an ideal opportunity
> for parents to engage fully with their children (p. 1).

   As the quality of the parent-child relationship improves so does the possibility of a

child experiencing healthy development. Belsky, et al (2007) identified, "parenting quality

significantly predicted the developmental outcomes much more strongly than any of the

child-care predictors (p. 693)." There are certainly other factors that effect child

development such as biology, environment, peer influence, and physical and emotional

disabilities; however, there is no greater predictor of 'successful' child development than

'successful' parenting (Belsky, 2007)

   Other positive outcomes occurred as quality time increased between the parent and

child. Participants reported that their children were physically and emotionally healthier,

happier, and better prepared for elementary school as a consequence of attending *Stay and*

Play. "Many of the skills children acquire are fundamentally dependent on their interactions with their caregivers and the broader social environment" (Peters, 2007, p. 2). *Stay and Play* is an example of one such social environment.

A learning environment for both parent and child potentially influences the quality of relationship and how they express themselves (Raikes & Thompson, 2009). As the quality of the relationship between the parent and child improved so did the manner in which they spoke to each other. Participants identified that communication with their children improved as the quality of their relationship grew. In particular, this finding is in keeping with Rudolph,

Caldwell and Conley, (2005). They discussed:

As children are developing in the early years their concept of self is primarily shaped by their social environment and experiences. If children are praised for what they have accomplished and receive approval from their social network [emphasis added] they are more likely to develop healthy psychological attitude and greater self-confidence as they mature.. .Furthermore, these children are likely to engage in pro-social behaviours, such as cooperation and help giving and to inhibit antagonistic behaviours such as aggression [emphasis added] (p. 311)

The underlined text reflects participants' observations regarding their children within the *Stay and Play* context. By attending *Stay and Play,* participants were afforded opportunities to praise their children. The children learned social skills, established social networks, and were encouraged and supported to adopt pro-social behaviours such as help-giving, cooperation, caring, and empathy.

Stay and Play also created an opportunity for parents to socialize with other parents. Relationship building among parents was a catalyst for change. As a consequence of such relationships, parents established a safety net for each other. When parents expressed their difficulties in child-rearing, other parents would share similar experiences, thus

'normalizing' the situation. The assurance parents received helped them to feel 'not so alone' (Rose, 2009). *Stay and Play* is a venue where 'interaction' between other parents occurred.

The structural role of Stay and Play

The structural role of *Stay and Play* is the foundation on which the program is built (see Figure 3, p. 61). The foundation of childhood programs plays a crucial role in achieving positive outcomes with early childhood development (Cohen, et al, 2005). *Stay and Play* strived for optimal results as it met the 'physical' requirements of a clean, safe, organized and professional program. Participants knew what to expect each time they walked into a *B-E-W, FCSS, Stay and Play* center. All *B-E-W, FCSS Stay and Play* programs [within *B-E-W, FCSS*] had similar activities and play stations; although the orderliness of the activities may have varied. For example, some *Stay and Play* centers had the messy play activity before the circle time activity. However, each *Stay and Play* afforded a 'pressure free' atmosphere of being able to come and go and visit with others at their convenience. Belsky (1984) commented:

> It would be inappropriate to assume that more social network contact with friends, neighbors, and relatives is always advantageous. Contact that would normally function supportively may become stressful if taken to an extreme. Indeed, what is probably most beneficial is a 'goodness of fit' representing the match between support desired and support received (p. 88).

According to the participants, *Stay and Play's* environment had a "goodness of fit." Even though parents and children were surrounded with opportunities to socialize with their peers, *Stay and Play* did not 'force' parents to do so.

Participants were appreciative of *Stay and Play* being free of charge; especially families of little income. Some participants stated *Stay and Play* was the only activity

their child could attend as other extra-curricular activities such as soccer, baseball, dance, etc. was something they [participants] could not financially consider. *Stay and Play* is available to all parents and children at no cost, registration or obligation to attend.

Parent's experiences with Stay and Play

The particular strengths and limitations of parent's experiences with *Stay and Play* are identified in this theme (see Figure 4, p. 67). As this was not a program evaluation study, 'only' the parent's perspectives are noted, i.e., an evaluation of *Stay and Play* would require data from several other program-related sources.

Strengths - Parent's perspectives

Participants repeatedly shared their positive experiences. Parents recognized the importance of spending quality time with their children and made a conscience effort in doing so. The frequency of parent and child interactions "may influence their [child's] attention, actions, and the responses they elicit from caregivers" when quality time is attempted (Votruba-Drzal, Coley & Chase-Lansdale, 2004, p. 296). Creating frequent opportunities for quality time between a parent and child is part of the formula for developing a secure and loving relationship. Many of the *Stay and Play* programs within the *B-E-W, FCSS* are scheduled weekly or bi-weekly allowing 'frequent' opportunities for quality time between the parent and child. Research indicated that a healthier parent and child bond is beneficial to the child's overall development. Polansky, et al (2006) discussed:

> Both parenting quality and attachment early in life were predictive, suggesting that the groundwork for children's cognitive and emotional processing of social situations is founded long before social cognitive biases are readily apparent (p. 339).

> As well, children require healthy relationships with their peers. Greenspan and

Family experiences

Shanker (2004) observed, "Children must learn to engage emotionally with another. This is the basis for a shared sense of humanity. It is promoted by consistent, nurturing care from a loving care giver [parent] who will be part of the child's life for years to come" (p. 446).

Participants expressed that their children were learning to empathize and care about other children at *Stay and Play*. According to participants, their children were demonstrating empathy at *Stay and Play* by reaching for a toy or playing with another child when she/he was playing alone. Furthermore, participants discussed their children are gaining confidence as they play with other children their own age. Participants stated *Stay and Play* was a 'prefix' to parent pre-school and/or kindergarten as their children were learning how to play with other children; they experienced unstructured play within a structured environment, and attended a scheduled activity on a regular basis.

Participants frequently mentioned building relationships. Many shared that attending *Stay and Play* was the highlight of their week. They [participants] enjoyed developing friendships with other parents and the parent coaches. Furthermore, participants articulated that building relationships with their peers and parent coach decreased anxiety, enhanced their patience, and improved their confidence as parents. Participants voiced that their confidence levels increased. As parents built relationships with other parents they felt more at ease with their children and the parenting decisions they made. Research by the National Conference of State Legislatures (2005) indicated that increase support systems among parents improved the quality of childrearing.

Another strength of *Stay and Play* was circle time. In fact, many participants mentioned that circle time was one of their favorite aspects *of Stay and Play*. Circle time is an activity where children and parents gather in circle to learn songs, rhymes and

actions taught by the parent coach. Parent and child participating together enhances the

parent-child relationship and fosters creativity.

Creativity is developed by observation and participation. Children and parents are

given The opportunity to play and 'act like children.' Edwards (2002) indicated that

children mirror their parents. Therefore, when a parent feels secure participating in circle

time, the child feels secure in doing the same. Circle time is a unique activity as bonding

between parent - child transpires within a 'group' activity. As I observed circle time I

noted the parents and children were only interested in playing/singing with each other - it

was like no one else was in the room.

Furthermore, circle time and particularly music not only lends opportunity for parent

- child bonding it decreases anxiety and stress (Yu et al, 2009) and promoted literacy,

creativity, phonological memory, and cognitive knowledge by means of recurring words,

rhythm and actions (Bolduc, 2006, Gromko, 2005). Studies demonstrated that children

who learn and participate in musical activities such as circle time have higher grade point

averages and musical aptitude than those that do not (Peynircioglue, 2002; Bolduc &

Montesinos-Gelet, 2005). Circle time is a healthy, educational and musical way to play.

Additionally, developing creativity through open play, which included a variety of

toys, games, and books, was frequently expressed. Participants appreciated having an

array of toys for their children to play with as it alleviated the stress of purchasing items

beyond their budget. *Stay and Play* provided an opportunity for children to 'engage

emotionally' with their parents and others through the process of play. Play offered the

children important developmental benefits such as social enrichment, emotional well-

being, intellectual stimulation, and improved understanding of their environment

Family experiences

(Ginsburg, 2007). Participants commented on the professionalism of the parent coaches. I attended five *Stay and Play* programs. It was evident that the parent coaches did the very best to empathize with the families, efficiently organize the activities, and answer any questions regarding parenting and/or child development.

Concerns — Parent's perspective

Based on their experiences with *Stay and* Play, participants identified several concerns such as: The philosophy of sharing, telling and not teaching, and favoritism. Participants were apprehensive about sharing their concerns for fear the parent coach may become aware of who and what they were sharing. Justifiably, as participants were from rural areas with limited population and it was not uncommon to know their parent coach personally. I respected their situation and proposed to not audio-tape their responses, but document them without pseudonym name, participant number, or *Stay and Play* location. Noting their concerns contributed 'thoroughness' of the study.

Philosophy   of sharing

The participants indicated they have been told by the parent coach not to encourage 'sharing toys' among the children. When a child wanted a toy that another child was playing with, she or he was not to ask for the toy, but rather wait until the other child was finished playing with it.

In contrast, a recent study by Joly and Stapel (2009) indicates that children learn the value of giving and not receiving if they have been taught the concept of sharing. In addition, encouraging children to share toys and other material possessions, teaches them holistically the merit in sharing (Joly & Stapel, 2009). Simply, the concept of sharing is not about giving up ones' toy, but demonstrating kindness to others (Joly & Stapel, 2009).

Family experiences

Consequently, there is more than one philosophy of sharing and participants would have

liked the parent coach to ask them about their philosophy.

Telling and not teaching

This leads into another concern whereby the parent coach 'told* the parents rather

than taught the parents, Participants would have preferred the parent coach to *teach* about

various parenting philosophies [lessons] and then let the parents decide on their course of

parenting action. A parent coach may mean well as she or he encourages the parent to

change or improve her/his practices; however, parents pointed out they would rather be

validated and not criticized. "Coaching is not telling people what to do, but giving them a

chance to examine what they are doing in light of their intentions"(Rush, Shelden &

Hanft, 2003, p. 34). The parent coach's main responsibility is to 'support' the parent and

not 'change' the parent (Rush, Shelden & Hanft, 2003, p. 34)

Participants shared that parent coaches openly expressed their contrary opinions in

front of other parents who were attending *Stay and Play.* This left the parent feeling

embarrassed and inadequate. At times, a particular participant felt 'bullied' by the parent

coach. The definition of *adult* bullying is when the perpetrator dominates and 'singles out'

the victim with the intent of the victim submitting to their [perpetrators] point of view

(Baillien et al, 2009). Participant's expressed that they did feel "singled out" and "over-

powered," and when participants felt bullied, their ability to learn 'shut down.'

Favoritism

Participants stated the parent coach 'seemingly' favored specific children and

families that attended *Stay and Play.* According to the participants, the parent coach

would converse and tend to the same parents and children each week. Participants

90

expressed that the parent coach did not make them feel as welcome as others and they [participants] would stop attending if their friends were not there *[Stay and Play]* As well, one participant was distressed by the parent coach asking her friend not to attend an activity with her children because they were "unruly and did not listen." Participants felt that *Stay and Play* was available for all to attend and the parent coach ought to respect and treat everyone equally.

Limitations of the study

Interviewing children under the age of Jive

I am passionate about children. However, interviewing them proved to be challenging. There were thirty-two children present, however only four were interviewed. Often their vocabulary and speech were difficult to understand and their attention span limited. Initially, I offered a licensed day-care worker to tend the children while I interviewed the parents for the first hour. However, only one participant accepted this support. Interviewing the parents with their children created several stops and starts on the audio-tape which at times became difficult for my transcriptionist to follow. As well, there, were times the children were playing along side the interview thus making the interview difficult to transcribe. Often, the children wanted to sing into the microphone and hear it repeated. This process was time consuming, but effective. After the children heard their voices on the audio-tape they were content to permit the interview to continue.

The semi structure interview guide

The semi structured interview did not undergo a face validity check. Therefore, questions were asked during the interview process that some of the participants deemed 'awkward.' These were subsequently altered or eliminated. For example: The question:

Does attending *Stay and Play* have a positive or negative effect on your marriage, and if so, why?; was confusing to many participants. Even though I understood the rationale behind the question [linkage to the process model of parenting, Belsky, 1984], the participants did not. Therefore, I chose to not ask the question for the latter part of the interviews. As a result, it would have been beneficial to have "tested" or piloted the semi structured interview guide with families who did not participate in the study. Establishing face validity of the semi structured interview guide would have added rigor to the study.

Day time visits

All participants requested that their interviews take place during the day, which prevented many of the fathers from attending. Fortunately, six fathers were able to participate. Listening to both parents' perspectives allowed for a deeper and richer interview. Simply, I was able to hear horn the mothers and fathers viewpoint. When both parents were present, the interview took on a different dynamic than that of a one-parent interview, as both parents would discuss their responses before responding to the question.

Being the counselor

As a family and teen counsellor I was comfortable applying family-centered and person-centered interviewing. My skill set permitted me to create a safe and trusting relationship with the participants. On the other hand, my purpose for the interview was solely research and not to assist the participants with personal matters. When counselling situations emerged I referred them to other family counsellors. In particular, one couple began to discuss some difficulties they were experiencing. After listening to their concerns [to ascertain as to where to refer] I explained that under regular circumstances I would be happy to assist however, as they were participants it would have been inappropriate and

unethical for me to do so. The couple understood and I referred them to a family

counsellor who was practicing in their area.

Being employed by Barons-Eureka-Warner, Family and Community Support Services

Prior to the interview process I explained to the participants that I was employed by

B-E-W, FCSS and had been for six years. I further clarified that if any concerns about *Stay*

and Play were discussed, I would remain neutral. In other words, I would not side with

Stay and Play. It was important that the participants knew of my employment status and

possible biases to maintain trustworthiness of the study. When participants were

somewhat apprehensive in sharing their concerns about *Stay and Play,* I turned off the

audio-tape and documented their concerns verbatim in my field notes. I assured the

participants their pseudonym name, participant number and community name of where

they attended would not accompany any of the concerns identified.

Recommendations for   Research

There is a significant volume of research in the area of early child development.

However, very little, if any research has been conducted on programs such as *Stay and*

Play. It would be of interest to research other programs which are similar to *Stay and*

Play. Having an awareness of the effectiveness of other *Stay and Play* [type] programs

may promote new ideas and practices I would further suggest that *BEW, FCSS* conduct an

 evaluation on the *Stay and Play* programs within their 'own' communities. An evaluation

would assess practices that are not effective. This current research study indicated some

Stay and Play programs are meeting the parent's needs more so than others. Perhaps

assessing the individual programs within *B-E-W, FCSS* would address concerns and

encourage successes.

Conducting research with parents from different cultural communities who attend *Stay and Play* would be of value. *Stay and Play* is currently being offered to the Mexican and German Mennonite population within the *B-E-W, FCSS* geographical area. Insight into their experiences would present information as to whether or not *Stay and Play* is meeting their needs and the needs of their community.

In addition to researching early childhood programs, further research on the process model of parenting is warranted (Belsky, 1984). The process model of parenting was an effective tool in guiding the research for this study. Therefore, it may be of benefit to further investigate early childhood development programs implementing this model.

Recommendations for further   Government   Implementation

"The early years of life lay the foundation for a child's development today and during the course of his or her life" (National Conference of State Legislatures, 2005, p. 1) Community programs for early child development are essential. Communities ought to encourage the Federal and Provincial Governments to implement programs such as *Stay and Play:* Centers that encourage parent and child bonding, creativity, and parent education. Furthermore, families are ever changing and community programs currently implemented may not be meeting their needs. It is imperative that parent, child and community research be up to date and accurate to determine effective approaches to child development (Bowen, 2005).

Summary

The purpose of the study was to permit parents the opportunity to share their experiences about attending *Stay and Play,* I was delighted with their positive responses, and came to understand the need to address their negative experiences. Some experiences

touched my heart.

When I visited with the Mennonite women at *Stay and Play,* I observed that the parent coach spoke English and German fluently. Without missing a beat she would go back and forth with both languages as she communicated with those in attendance. It felt like I was visiting family. This parent coach had such an influence on the families that attended, a father [who spoke English only] drove several kilometers to take his daughter to this particular *B-E-W, FCSS Stay and Play,* even though another *Stay and Play* [not implemented by *B-E-W, FCSS]* was directly across the street from where he lived.

Another interesting experience was when I met with the participants in their homes. I had eleven home visits and seven of the visits included a tour of their home; one participant showed me her food storage supply. I never requested a home tour. Rather, the participants asked if I would like to see their home. The interviews were enriched, as the home visits increased the trust between the participant and me.

Parents who attended *Stay and Play* spoke about healthier relationships with their children. It was interesting to discover the profound importance of the connection between familial history, parenting and child development. The process model - the determinants of parenting (Belsky, 1984) and its components: Parental contribution; child contribution; and contextual source of stress/support were a beneficial guide to this finding. In addition attachment theory confirmed the importance of the parent-child relationship. Mutually they demonstrated the significance of implementing programs that foster healthy parenting; strengthen the parent-child bond; and create a venue for relationship building.

It is quite remarkable that within a simple two and half hour time frame, parents and

Family experiences

children enjoyed quality time with each other, building relationships, captivating the

importance of creativity, and cultivating 'family' one step at a time.

[POST-SCRIPT] - CHAPTER 6

RECOMMENDATIONS *¥OK STAY AND PLAY*

REQUESTED BY PARTICIPANTS

This chapter conveys recommendations for *Stay and Play* as requested by participants. The recommendations verbalized by participants will 'briefly' discuss a continuation of strengths or address concerns. A more detailed outline of the strengths and concerns is found in Chapter 4 and Chapter 5. Furthermore external program elements that *Stay and Play* can 'physically' alter or continue are discussed. Therefore, intrinsic factors such, as parent-child bonding, and relationship building are not identified.

Continuation   of strengths

Participants recommended there be a continuation of unstructured play within a structured environment, and the ability to come and go as they please. As well, *Stay and Play* continued being offered to everyone without registration or cost.

Participants could not say enough about circle time. This was an activity, directed by the parent coach, where parents and children gather in a circle to sing songs, rhymes and performs actions. Furthermore, participants benefited from learning various songs/rhymes and presenting them to family members who did not attend *Stay and Play,* Participants stated that *Stay and Play* would not be the same without circle time and they would like to see it continued.

Participants expressed respect and appreciation for the parent coach. A participant stated he could attend a *Stay and Play* program [not *BEW, FCSS)* near where he lived, but chose to attend a *B-E-W, FCSS Stay and Play* several kilometers from home because of the professionalism of the parent coach. Participants reported the parent coach was both

willing and able to answer any parenting and child development questions and teach them [participants] various parenting skills employable at home. Furthermore, participants' stated knowing who the parent coach was each week was 'key' to why they attended *Stay and Play* regularly. Therefore, consistency of the parent coach is significant.

The variety of play stations and activities available at *Stay and Play* was noted as exceptional. Parents appreciated the different play stations, books, and creative art projects. Participants further expressed how *Stay and Play* provided their children with opportunities to play with different toys and art materials that they were unable to afford i.e. play kitchen, sand table, water table, paint easel, etc.

Participants requested *Stay and Play* be more frequent and further implemented in *B-E-W, FCSS* communities. Participants could not get enough of *Stay and Play,* especially those who lived in rural areas - *Stay and Play* was the only activity available in their community. Participants expressed their need to socialize with their peers, and simply "get away from it all."

Addressing concerns

Participants requested *Stay and Play* be advertised in the local newspaper and/or school flyer. Several participants stated that they would have attended *Stay and Play* earlier, if they had known it was available. One participant with three young children from a rural community did not hear about *Stay and Play* for approximately two years. Eventually, she was informed about *Stay and Play* after visiting a public health nurse. The need to advertise *Stay and Play* was frequently mentioned by the participants.

Concerns in regards to messy play were often discussed. *Stay and Play* stipulated to "dress for mess," however; participants stated that dressing appropriately for messy play

was not always an option. Additional concerns were the possibilities of their children

ingesting glue and paint or accidentally having it go into their hair and eyes. There were

also families that could not afford clothing strictly for messy play. It was suggested that

Stay and Play made available a messy play schedule and/or provide play clothing during

messy play, thus altering this limitation.

Participants would like the parent coach 'teaching' them how to parent rather than

'telling' them how to parent. Participants appreciated learning new parenting and child

development teachings and philosophies; however, participants stated they would be more

apt to learn if the parent coach respected their point of view. Participants stated altering

the parent coach's attitude would enhance their comfort level and openness to learn at

Stay and Play.

Summary

This chapter was designed to inform *B-E-W, FCSS* of suggestions requested by the

participants based on their experiences *with Stay and Play*. Although some concerns were

noted, the strengths outweighed the concerns identified by participants. Thirteen out of

eighteen participants discussed the strengths associated with *Stay and Play* and not the

concerns.

Reflection

I have grown from this experience and have learned far more about the research

process than anticipated. I was impressed with the sincerity and openness of the

participants and found their comments compelling.

As I listened to each participant share their experiences at *Stay and Play,* I grasped

the 'worth' of *Stay and Play* as parents and children strengthen their relationship; socialize

with peers; foster creativity; and learn the value of play. Unexpectedly, was the finding discussed by all participants; as they attended *Stay and Play* they made a conscious effort to change or enhance their parent's style of childrearing.

I was fortunate having the support of *Barons-Eureka-Wamer, Family and Community Support Services* Director, Greg Pratt and the parent coaches. Without their support the study would not have been possible. The parent coaches assisted me in finding participants and identified the importance of the study to prospective participants.

Finally, there were participants who I will always remember, especially those who crossed cultural boundaries. My heart went out to the families who live at a distance from any village and/or town. Participants expressed that rural life can be very lonely and attending *Stay and Play* was the only occasion they had to escape from isolation and socialize. I wonder if *B-E-W, FCSS* is aware of the profound impact their program is having on the families within their communities. It is my hope that *Stay and Play* will continue and grow because it is doing so much good for so many.

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Family experiences

Appendix A

Letter of Permission to:

Barons-Eurcka-Warner, Family Community and Support Services

To be dated prior to being given

Mr. Greg Pratt
Director,
Barons-Eureka-Warner, Family Community and Support Services
2012 - 1 8ᵗʰ Street
Coaldale, Alberta

Dear Mr. Pratt:

I would like your permission to access family participants in the *Stay and Play* program in the area of *Barons-Eureka-Warner* for my Masters Thesis.

The purpose of the study is to explore and gain further insight into the families' experiences with the *Stay and Play* program. This is not a program evaluation. Ideally, I would like to interview 15-20 families approximately that attend *Stay and Play* on a regular basis.

Various questions will be asked to the family participants (parents and children) during the interviews, which will further my understanding of the *Stay and Play* program.

All participants will be informed that the interviews are anonymous and that the study is not affiliated with *Barons-Eureka-Warner, Family Community and Support Services.* Flowever, you will be privy to an executive summary of the results at the completion of the study.

I would like to thank you for your consideration.

Sincerely,

Margie Spry-Hartley

Family experiences

Date: (will be dated closer to interview process)

Hi,

My name is Margie Spry-Hartley and I am a graduate student in the School of Health Sciences at the University of Lethbridge. Currently, I am doing a study on the *Stay and Play* program in a small community in rural Alberta, and would like to invite you to participate. Your participation will assist me in understanding your experiences with *Stay and Play.*

You and your children, those who attend and those who do not, will be asked some questions that will allow each member of your family an opportunity to share their feelings and experiences about the program. Your commitment will entail one interview for approximately 1.5 hours. I will meet with the parent(s) for the first 60 minutes and include the children in the interview process for the last 30 minutes. I will provide a qualified day care worker to care for your children during the adult portion of the interview. I am happy to interview your family at your home or the Parent Link Center, where *Stay and Play* is currently being offered. Furthermore, I will send an executive summary to all participants. In addition, a letter addressing my preliminary findings will be mailed to five of the participatory families. The families chosen will represent a full range of the experiences shared during the interview process. Upon receipt and review of the letter, I will contact the five chosen families with a phone call prior to completion of my study to address any concerns.

The interviews will be anonymous, as your names will not be used during the interview process. Please note that this study is voluntary and if you choose to withdraw at any time you are free to do so without any concern. All information you have given will be destroyed. Any questions or concerns you may have, please do not hesitate to contact me.

I am hoping your family will choose to participate. Participating in the interview will afford you the opportunity to reflect on your parenting role.

Sincerely,

Margie Spry-Hartley

Appendix C

Adult Consent Form

University (
Lethbridj

PARTICIPANT (ADULT) CONSENT FORM

Faculty ol Educj

Family experiences with *Stay and Play*

You are being invited to participate in a study entitled Family experiences with *Stay and Play:* Exploring An Early Childhood Prevention Program implemented by *Barons-Eureka-Warner, Family Community and Support Services* program at the Alberta Parent Link Center in Alberta. Margie Spry-Hartley will be conducting the research and is a graduate student in the Faculty of Health Sciences at the University of Lethbridge.

As a graduate student, I am required to conduct research as part of the requirements for a degree in Master of Science, Health Sciences. It is being conducted under the supervision of Dr. david Gregory.

The purpose of this research project is to gain further insight into the understanding and overall effectiveness of the *Stay and Play* program at the Alberta Parent Link Centers. Research of this type is important because it will increase the knowledge of the importance of early childhood development. Hopefully, this awareness will encourage other communities to implement a *Stay and Play* program and/or other programs that may contribute to the betterment of early childhood development.

You are being asked to participate in this study because you are active participants in the *Stay and Play* program at the Alberta Parent Link Center. If you agree to voluntarily participate in this research, your participation will include one family interview, which will be approximately 1.5 hours in length. The parent(s) will be interviewed for the first 60 minutes and the children interviewed with their parents for the last 30 minutes. During the time the parent(s) are being interviewed, I will provide a qualified day care worker to care for the children. In addition, I will send a three to five page summary discussing my preliminary findings to each of the participants. However, only 5 families (participants) that represent a full range of the experiences shared will receive written information by mailing discussing my preliminary findings. After receipt of the written information I will further follow up with a phone call to the five families addressing any concerns they may have.

There are no known or anticipated risks to you by participating in this research as all interviews will be strictly anonymous. However, any concerns in regards to child protection or safety that may arise during the interview process <u>must</u> be reported under the

child family enhancement act. For further information:
http://text.alis.gov.ab.ca/welcometoalbeita/familylaw.asp

The potential benefits of your paiticipation in this research include furthering research and understanding into the importance of programs such as *Stay and Play*. It is important to note that no monies will be provided to the participants. The participants are voluntary and are not coerced in any way.

Your paiticipation in this research must be completely voluntary. If you do decide to participate, you may withdraw at any time without any consequences or any explanation. If you do withdraw from the study your data will be destroyed.

The researcher, Margie Spry-Hartley, will protect your anonymity (your name, names of your children and your community) and the anonymity of the data. You, your children and the community will be given a synonymous name.

Anonymity is further protected by: Data from this study will be in a locked filing cabinet, with the written transcripts being kept separate from the audio-tapes. The material is kept for a period of 5 years and will be disposed of by shredding of the transcriptions and destroying of the tape recordings.

It is anticipated that the results of this study will be shared with others in the final presentation of my study. The information from this study may be submitted for publication. The anonymity will remain protected and the names of the adult participants, names of the children participants, and the name of community will not be identified.

Please note that you are free to withdraw from the interview process without any obligation to the study and all information given will be destroyed. In addition to being able to contact the researcher and, if applicable, the supervisor, you may verify the ethical approval of this study, or raise any concerns you might have, by contacting the Chair of the Human Subjects Research Committee at the University of Lethbridge (403-329-2425).

Your signature below indicates that you understand the above conditions of paiticipation in this study and that you have had the opportunity to have your questions answered by the researchers.

*Name **of** Participant*   *Signature*   *Date*

A copy of this consent will be left with you, and a copy will be taken by the researcher.

Family experiences

Appendix D

Parental Permission

Date:

I/We_____authorize our child(ren)_____
to participate in the family interview for the study of Family experiences with *Stay and Play:* Exploring the Parent and Child Relationship within an Early Child Prevention Program implemented by Barons-Eureka-Warner, Family and Community Support Services.

Parent(s) signature

Family experiences

<u>Appendix E</u>

Demographic Survey

Name	Age	Gender	Level of Education	Attend *Stay* and *Play*	Month & Year (first attended)

1) How often did your family attend the Parent Link Center?

2) Religious affiliation: _____

    Practicing: yes_____no

3) Employment:

    Single income _____

    Dual income _____

4) Gross family income:

    Less than $20,000_____

    $21,000 -$35,000 _____

    $36,000 -$50,000   .____.

    $51,000-$65,000 _____

    $66,000 - $79,000 .____

    More than $80,000_____

Family experiences

5)   Occupation of parents:

Family experiences

Adult/Child Questionnaire

Note: Parent's and children are given the option of choosing to answer the questions.

This is a question guideline and not to prevent a free flowing interview process.

Some guiding questions for parents

1) Flow did you come know about *Stay and Play* and why did you choose to come?

2)   Has attending *Stay and Play* had an impact on how your parent? If so, can you give

me an example?

Probes:

> Are you finding you are spending more time playing or doing similar *Stay

and Play* activities with your child at home? i.e. reading, singing. If so, can

you give me an example?

> Do you find you are gaining more knowledge in regards to parenting from

Stay and Play? If so, can you give me an example?

> Is *Stay and Play* offered at an ideal time for your schedule? If not, how can

it be improved?

3) Has *Stay and Play* had a positive or negative impact on your marriage relationship?

(This question is being addressed to explore the other factors stated in the process

model - the determinants of parenting).

Probes:

> Has the relationship changed since attending *Stay and Play?* If so, can you

give me an example?

Family experiences

> Do you find you respect each other's responsibilities more and how the responsibilities contribute to the marriage and family? i.e. working parent, stay at home parent, etc.

4) Has *Stay and Play* had a positive or negative impact on your relationship with your children? If so, can you give me an example?

Probes:

> Has the relationship changed since attending *Stay and Play?* If so, can you give me an example?

> Do you feel closer to your child? If so, can you give me an example?

5) Has *Stay and Play* had a positive or negative impact on your family relationship?

Probes:

> Has the relationship changed since attending *Stay and Play'?* If so, can you give me an example?

6) Has attending *Stay and Play* changed how your spend time with your children? If so, can you give me an example?

Probes:

> Do you find you are spending more quality time or quantity time with your child/children? If so, can you give me an example?

7) Have you noticed a change in the character of your child since you have been attending *Stay and Play?*

Probes:

> Has your child developed more curiosity and creativity? If so, can you give me an example?

Family experiences

> Has your child developed more friendships? If so, can you give me an example?

> Does your child have more compassion for her./his friends and/or family members? If so, can you give me an example?

> Does your child try to solve their problems on their own first? i.e. If your child is playing with a toy and another child comes to take that toy, does she/he turn to you to solve the problem, or does she/he come up with a constructive solution her/his own? If so, can you give me an example?

8) Were your parents actively involved in your lives when you were children? If so, can you give me an example?

Probes:

> Describe how your parents parented?

> Is your parenting style similar or different to your parents'? If so, can you give me an example?

9) Has attending *Stay and Play* offered you opportunities to connect with other parents? If so, can you give me an example?

Probes:

> Has the program fostered a network of friendships that you choose to participate with? If so, can you give me an example?

10) Does your employment allow you to attend *Stay and Playl*

Probes:

> If not, what would you suggest to *Stay and Play* that would give you an opportunity to attend?

Family experiences

11) Has attending *Stay and Play* changed your understanding of the emotional needs of your spouse, children and friends? If so, can you give me an example of each? (Please note; this question is designed to address other factors of the process model - the determents of parenting, Belsky, 12984).

12) What was your favorite aspect of *Stay and Play?* Can you give me an example?

13) What was your least favorite aspect of *Stay and Play?* Can you give me an example?

   Some guiding questions for children:

14) Do you like to come to *Stay and Play?* If so, what is it you like about *Stay and Play?*

15) FIave you made friends *at Stay and Play?* If so, can you tell me about it?

16) Did you attend *Stay and Play* when you were your sisters or brothers age?

   (Question 16 is to be answered by children that do not attend).