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Research Article

"It's Such an Inclusive and Welcoming Environment": Caregiver Perspectives of a Play-Based Program for Autistic Children and Youth

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Abstract

Introduction: Play-based programs provide therapeutic benefits to children and youth with disabilities and their caregivers. However, there is limited literature regarding the effects of these programs on the physical and psychosocial outcomes for autistic children and youth. **Objective:** This program evaluation examined the perspectives of caregivers of autistic children and youth ages 6–18 years in a play-based program in Nova Scotia. **Methods:** A qualitative case evaluation design was employed, with 10 caregivers completing semi-structured interviews. Interviews were conducted virtually using Microsoft Teams and were each approximately 60 minutes in length. Interview data were transcribed verbatim and transferred to NVivo. Data were analyzed using reflexive thematic analysis. **Results:** Three themes were generated: (a) Play (in Their Own Way) is Beneficial, (b) An Important Respite for Families, and (c) A Lot Can Get in the Way of Participation. Findings illustrated that caregivers perceived the program as beneficial for their child's physical and psychosocial development skills. They also highlighted the need for family respite time to rest and recharge. Caregivers noted that there are relatively few inclusive programs specifically for autistic children, and that lack of transportation and high costs can reduce accessibility of programs. **Conclusion:** Play-based programs have notable caregiver-perceived benefits for autistic children and youth, but there may be barriers to participation as well. Findings of this program evaluation may help knowledge users and service providers address program barriers and inform programming moving forward.

Keywords: children, youth, caregivers, play-based programs, autism, therapeutic intervention

Introduction and Background

Play contributes to the health and development of all children and is one of the defining behaviours of childhood (Fehr et al., 2019). Organizations that offer recreation and leisure services often ground programs in play-based approaches to support healthy child development (Woodmansee et al., 2016). Given that children with disabilities often experience barriers to play, play-based programming may be even more important in supporting the health, development, and well-being of these children (e.g., neurodiverse children, such as autistic children[1]; Moore & Phelan, 2021). In comparison to regular structured programs, play-based programs involve multiple elements (e.g., exploration, sensation, imagination) and can be offered in numerous ways (e.g., small or large groups, one-to-one; Boucher et al., 2014). Aside from being fun, play can help improve health, development, and well-being by promoting physical activity and movement (Barblett, 2010), as well as supporting the achievement of developmental milestones, allowing for communication and connection, and encouraging children to communicate in a way that is comfortable to them (Ray et al., 2001). Recreation and leisure services that support children with neurodiversity may use play-based programming to improve children's physical activity (Barblett, 2010), foster interpersonal relationships, support the expression of individuality and creativity (Ray et al., 2001), and allow for the communication of thoughts and emotions in a child's own way (Raghavendra et al., 2011). As a large proportion of recreation and leisure programs are designed for neurotypical children, evidence-informed programming for children with disabilities is needed to allow neurodiverse children to reap the aforementioned benefits (Basso et al., 2021).

In addition to the direct benefits of play-based programming for neurodiverse children, play may also provide support to caregivers and families (Whitmore, 2016). Caregivers and families of autistic children often support the navigation of inaccessible environments for their child and advocate for their child's inclusion (Whitmore, 2016). An autistic child may have additional support needs, leading to increased demand and stress on caregivers and families (Whitmore & Snethen, 2018). Play-based programming could offer important relief for caregivers and families (Karst & Van Hecke, 2012). In many cases, recreation and leisure services with play-based programming are considered by the caregiver and family as respite and deemed essential for improving families' daily functioning (Karst & Van Hecke, 2012). This was particularly true during the COVID-19 pandemic, when fewer school and organized sports programs were available for all children, including children with disabilities (James at al., 2022; Putri & Lutfianawati, 2021). While this difficulty has eased as public health restrictions have been lifted and COVID-19 is no longer considered a public health emergency, many children with disabilities continue to experience the prolonged deleterious effects of the COVID-19 pandemic, such as disengagement from play-based programming, limited opportunities to engage in physical activity, and social isolation (Arbour-Nicitopoulos et al., 2022; Moore et al., 2021). There is a need to improve the availability and quality of supports, such as play-based programming, to children with disabilities, their caregivers, and families as we respond to the collateral consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic (Loades et al., 2020; Putri & Lutfianawati, 2021).

Programs that use neuro-affirming practices such as person-centric and strength-based approaches can help address barriers concerning participation in play for autistic children and youth (Chellappa, 2024). This means providing support through adaptations that affirm neurodiversity in programming (Challappa, 2024; Hood & Carruthers, 2016). Families continue to advocate for play-based interventions and for more play opportunities for autistic children (Cholewicki et al., 2019).

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[1] Having autism (formally autism spectrum disorder) means that a child's brain processes information in another way. Autism exists on a spectrum over time and shapes a child's experiences and interactions with their world. This paper uses and advocates for strength- and rights-based language for children with neurodiversity, in line with neuro-affirming practices.

Although there are previous studies that demonstrate the positive correlation between effective program plans and overall quality of life in children with disabilities (Cholewicki et al., 2019), there is a lack of studies that examine families' perceptions of programs (including those that are play-based) for autistic children and youth specifically.

Purpose

In Nova Scotia, Canada, one in five children live with a disability, and on average one in 34 children are diagnosed with autism (Statistics Canada, 2018). Given the prevalence of autism, there has been an increase in services in the province (e.g., in school settings, in recreation and leisure service settings) available for neurodiverse children (Statistics Canada, 2018). This project conducted a program evaluation of one such program. Program evaluations are a valuable tool to assess the effectiveness of a specific program and provide feedback for improvement (Posavac, 2011). We examined the perspectives of caregivers of autistic children and youth regarding their child's experience in a Nova Scotian play-based program. This program empowers autistic children to develop physical, cognitive, and psychosocial skills. The findings of this program evaluation may inform the organization and community about the caregiver-perceived benefits of, and barriers to, play-based programming. The findings may also provide the organization with caregiver recommendations to improve program delivery, which may aid future program development.

Methodology

Design

This study used a qualitative case study evaluation design and semi-structured interviews to explore caregiver perspectives of their child's experience in play-based programming. A case study approach allows for a detailed examination of a specific group (Creswell & Creswell, 2018), in this case the participants of the program. This program evaluation was grounded in a constructivist world view, which focuses on the specific context in which people live, and recognizes that individuals' experiences and the meaning associated with them are negotiated socially and historically (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). This approach allowed caregivers to share their own unique stories and experiences during interviews. The interview questions were informed by therapeutic recreation principles such as person-centred and strength-based approaches, allowing caregivers to address their children's needs in the program (Whitmore & Snethen, 2018). A research ethics application was prepared and submitted. As the *Tri-Council Policy Statement of Ethical Conduct for Research Involving Humans—TCPS 2* (Canadian Institutes of Health Research et al., 2022) exempts quality assurance/improvement and program evaluation projects, this project was deemed exempt from requiring research ethics approval. Despite being exempt from ethics approval, the evaluation study adhered to ethical and professional standards of conduct (e.g., TCPS 2 ethical principles) in accordance with program evaluation guidelines (Canadian Evaluation Society, n.d.; Canadian Institutes of Health Research et al., 2022).

Program Characteristics

This project evaluates a registered charitable Nova Scotian play-based program for autistic children and youth. Sessions are typically offered as three-hour after-school sessions in a community centre, offered every weekday throughout the year. A typical session might include structured play time (e.g., circle games, guided crafts, swimming, walks on trails) and unstructured play time (e.g., "your choice" games and free play). In line with neuro-affirming approaches, the program is modified and adapted based on the needs of the children attending; individualized goals are made for each participant in addition to the group programming. Staff are composed of experienced early childhood educators, recreation therapists, and volunteers; the ratio of child to volunteer is typically one-on-one.

The play-based program's mission is "to empower and support individuals with autism to be active, lifelong members of the community", and they aim to do this by "working together to fill in gaps in program and service delivery in Nova Scotia" (Learningo, n.d.). The program is centred around optimism, innovation, respect, collaboration, and person-centred programming. This program was established nearly a decade ago; however, a program evaluation has not yet been conducted.

Study Recruitment and Sampling

Caregivers of autistic children and youth ages 5–18 years who attended the play-based program were asked to participate in the evaluation of the program. As the goal was to increase understanding of caregivers' experiences and views of the program, purposeful sampling was used to invite all caregivers with current or past involvement with the program. "Caregiver" is defined here as anyone who may serve as a guardian to a child partaking in the program (Blau & Currie, 2006). This may include parents, grandparents, extended family (e.g., aunts and uncles), and so on. This definition provides a more flexible inclusion criteria and accounts for generational changes that include increased rates of parents handing off day-to-day care of their children to extended family (Blau & Currie, 2006). A recruitment email and information letter were prepared by the authors and distributed by the program staff. Any caregivers interested in participating in an interview contacted the first author directly. Participation was completely voluntary.

Data Collection

Semi-structured interviews were completed online using a secure Microsoft Teams platform (approximately 60 minutes in length, on average). We collected information about the child's gender, age, and geographic location, along with information about programs attended and length of program participation. We then continued with the interview. The pre-constructed interview guide used a constructivist lens and contained open-ended questions with prompts that addressed topics such as (a) benefits of play-based programs for autistic children; (b) how program elements reflected the program's mission, vision, and core values; (c) features of the program that were of importance to caregivers for their children; and (d) suggestions to further develop and improve the programs.

Data Analysis

All interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed verbatim, transferred to NVivo, and coded by the primary researcher. Data analyses were informed by Braun and Clarke's (2006) process of reflexive thematic analysis, which is composed of the following six stages: (a) becoming familiar with the data by reviewing interview transcripts; (b) generating initial codes by highlighting significant points in the interviews and grouping similar ideas together; (c) creating themes by identifying codes that are related to each other in the transcribed data; (d) refining codes and themes; (e) solidifying, naming, and defining themes; and (f) producing a report through the findings section (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2019; Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Reflexive thematic analysis recognizes and reflects on how the backgrounds and perspectives of people with lived experience shape the analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2019). This analysis strategy allowed for a deeper understanding of participants' unique experiences and perspectives, which we believe contributed to rich and meaningful insights into the program's impact.

Results

Participants

A total of ten (n = 10) primary caregivers participated in the virtual interviews. Primary caregivers all identified as being the parent of the child. Child/youth participants of the play-based program were 11.5±4.0 years old (range: 6–18 years old), and 20% and 80% of the participants identified as female and male, respectively. Half of the participants of the program (n = 5) had attended the program full-time for an average of 5.0±0.0 years, and four (n = 4) participants attended part-time for an average of 2.5±0.5 years. One participant (n = 1) had attended the program for four months full-time.

Constructed Themes

The analysis of the data generated three main themes that represent the caregivers' experiences in relation to the play-based program for their children and youth with autism. These interconnected themes were generated based on the objectives of the program evaluation questions to identify and describe participants' perspectives.

Theme 1: Play (in Their Own Way) is Beneficial

The first theme illustrates caregivers' perceived benefits of the program on the physical and psychosocial health of their child, and how caregivers perceived these benefits to be transferred to the child's home environment. As mentioned by caregivers, these benefits stemmed from the person-centred approaches and inclusive programming that were utilized in the program's service delivery. For example, one caregiver mentioned the following:

> *I think [the program] is very beneficial. It's just because it's such an inclusive and welcoming environment as well. They're I guess more at ease and it's easier for them to learn new things because they could just be themselves and not worry about, you know, being judged by other people . . . (Caregiver B)*

Caregivers found it helpful that the program was designed to be responsive to participants' needs rather than trying to fit the participant into the program. This was evident from the structure of the program and how the sessions were facilitated. For example, some caregivers referred to the flexibility of the program structure and the one-on-one interaction as important program elements. One caregiver observed *"they don't have a super set structure for their programs because every child is different and [has] a wide range of skills"* (Caregiver E). Many caregivers expressed that grouping participants based on ability and interests rather than age has made it more inclusive for their children to participate and interact with their peers. Since everyone's needs and interests are unique, the types of activities and facilitation techniques were also adapted depending on the individual. As mentioned by another caregiver, the program *"encourages whatever play [the child] wants to do"* (Caregiver F). Caregivers indicated that, overall, the strength-based, person-centred approach to programming benefitted their child and motivated their child to keep attending.

Among benefits noted, caregivers shared that the program was most helpful with improving physical skills of participants. More specifically, caregivers described the improvement of their child's fundamental movement skills, an increase in their child's daily physical activity, and an improved motivation to be active. Caregivers expressed that their children enjoyed the physical component of the program, as it involves both unstructured physical activities (e.g., free play) and structured physical activities (e.g., circle games, yoga). One caregiver mentioned that their child *"loves doing activities outside when they go for walks . . . so if he's active and swimming, we'll definitely notice that when we pick him up that he's less hyper, less excited, just a bit calmer"* (Caregiver B).

In addition to physical benefits, the program also offered psychosocial benefits for participants. Since autistic children and youth may express themselves differently or may use verbal language and expression in a neurodiverse way, caregivers felt that their children thrived when given the opportunity to freely express themselves through play. One caregiver stated that *"the playing I find is a really good tool for them to be able to communicate with the kids that are like themselves you* *know, non-verbal and have specific needs"* (Caregiver G). Because participants did not have to rely on verbal language to play, participants were able to communicate and express themselves as they wanted to. In addition to communication and social interaction, caregivers also found that the program was effective in supporting the child's self-regulation skills. For example, caregivers noted that their children were able to handle emotions better and solve problems on their own; they attributed these gains to the program. Another caregiver noted that the program allowed participants to *"work through types of situations from a social standpoint"* (Caregiver J), which helped children develop social relationships and improved their experience in the program, overall.

Caregivers not only mentioned the physical and psychosocial benefits observed during program participation, but also expressed seeing improvements in physical and psychosocial functioning at home. For example, a caregiver described an improvement in their child's endurance and concentration on tasks at home: *"he's able to just hold our hand or walk next to us a lot longer due to going to the program"* (Caregiver G). Similarly, caregivers described the program as helping with interactions at home between them and their child. One caregiver said that *"I'm starting to see an increase in . . . his requesting things . . . he is also definitely showing more of an awareness of his surroundings"* (Caregiver H). Although the program focuses mainly on play aspects, caregivers recognized that the learned skills from the program provided benefits to the overall growth of their child both inside and outside of the program.

Theme 2: An Important Respite for Families

The second theme represents how, in addition to seeing the program support positive outcomes for their children, caregivers themselves experienced benefits. One expressed that finding programs is *"one of the more difficult things for families in our situations to access"* (Caregiver D), and therefore having this program as an option has added to families' lives because of the extra support they receive. The same caregiver mentioned that *"if you're also supporting a family, then you're also supporting the kid"* (Caregiver D). Another caregiver stated that raising an autistic child can come with its challenges, so having this program is a *"form of respite"* (Caregiver C). The play-based program has allowed families to recuperate, supporting their mental health and helping with their parenting practices and overall family functioning. One caregiver added that they *"realize the advantages of the sort of interactions that the program offers"* (Caregiver C) and stressed the importance of access to this program for families of autistic children and youth, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic. The lack of programming during this time was extremely difficult for families. Caregivers expressed that, with the closure of schools and cessation of programs, their children lost a sense of structure in their lives. One caregiver stated that *"losing the program was really hard on [their child] . . . we were stressed about it"* (Caregiver D). Many caregivers described their appreciation for when the program reopened again after COVID-19 public health restrictions loosened.

Theme 3: A Lot Can Get in the Way of Participation

The final theme highlights the challenges that program participants and their families encounter when accessing inclusive programming, including barriers to the program itself. Firstly, caregivers indicated that there are few inclusive programs and resources available to fit their child's needs. Many attributed this challenge to a personal lack of knowledge about available programs or a lack of adaptations available within existing programs. During the interviews, caregivers voiced difficulties in finding suitable recreation and leisure services for their neurodiverse children within their communities. Caregivers expressed how the lack of program options for autistic children and youth made it more challenging to find support. One stated that despite their efforts in seeking appropriate recreation and leisure services, *"there's really nothing that offers specialized [supports]"* (Caregiver I). Another caregiver said that *"getting inclusion is extremely hard"* and other programs caused them to feel *“singled out as being different, and it was awkward”* (Caregiver H). Not being able to access inclusive programs proved a challenge for families.

For many families, the cost of recreation and leisure services can also limit access and participation. Caregivers expressed how high registration costs and limited availability of low- and no-cost programming were limiting factors to their child’s participation. One caregiver stated that *“it’s hard ‘cause we really want [our child] to be there all the time, even throughout the year, but it’s just so costly and so far away”* (Caregiver G). Some caregivers noted the program fees for adapted and/or inclusive programs were higher compared to programs for neurotypical and able-bodied children. For example, one caregiver explained that the play-based program’s fees were four times more than the average cost of regular after-school programs for children and youth:

> *it’s a lot of money . . . it’s a lot, like it’s $75 a day, in comparison to after-school care for my other child is $14. So, like or, you know, summer camps, typical families might spend, you know, $1000 in the summer if their kids are full-time. I spend $4000. Like it’s a lot of money and that makes it hard for a lot of families. (Caregiver D)*

Lack of funding for respite opportunities can be overwhelming for families. Some families expressed that they can only enroll their child in the program part-time due to high costs. One caregiver said *“it’s a very expensive program so . . . that’s a real barrier of the program. There are families who would love for their kids to [attend], but they just cannot afford the cost”* (Caregiver E). In addition to high costs, lack of transportation options was also a concern expressed by caregivers. One caregiver observed that *“it is a big barrier for a lot of families who want to put them in the program but can’t because they don’t have a way to get them there”* (Caregiver B). While transportation is a factor in difficulty, there is also a challenge of scheduling and time. Most caregivers expressed that although the program’s timing aligns with school systems, it also interferes with their work hours, which can make it inaccessible for some. Another caregiver stated that *“transportation has really been an issue I find, it’s just hard when you have a kid that needs to go somewhere you know is good for him, but you can’t take him just because it’s far away”* (Caregiver H). Overall, caregivers suggested that barriers to programs for their children negatively impacted their child’s mental health. They explained that there is a hidden cost of their time as they advocate for their child’s inclusion.

Discussion

The purpose of this program evaluation was to gain a deeper understanding of caregivers’ perceived benefits and challenges of a local play-based program for their autistic children. The generated themes identified caregiver perspectives of a play-based program and highlighted the impact of this program for autistic children and youth, the importance of a strength-based approach in program delivery, and the need for increased respite and support for families. This evaluation also identified recommendations to improve programming.

Play-based programs provide opportunities for children and youth to participate in physical activity, express themselves creatively, and interact with peers (Karst & Van Hecke, 2012). Play-based programs have the potential to benefit all children. However, there are relatively fewer recreation and leisure services options for neurodiverse children. When autistic children engage in play-based programs, they may experience even greater physical and psychosocial gains compared with their neurotypical peers simply because they have had fewer opportunities to participate. One of the aims of this program evaluation was to explore parent-perceived benefits of this particular play-based program for autistic children and youth. In other studies, play-based programs have contributed to a better sense of inclusion and belonging, increased physical skills, and improved psychosocial well-being of children (Hood & Carruthers, 2016). The caregivers in this present study observed similar benefits. Moreover, caregivers noticed that these benefits were transferred to other settings, like the child's home. Because autistic children and youth tend to experience more barriers in accessing physical and social activity, it is important to amplify inclusive opportunities (Anaby & Pozniak, 2019; Putri & Lutfianawati, 2021). In our evaluation of the local play-based program, caregivers believed that the program benefitted their children's physical health and promoted the development of fundamental movement skills and physical activity. Improved physical skills have been observed in other studies (Kuper et al., 2014). Further, autistic children can often be isolated and excluded from social contexts (Reichman et al., 2008), and caregivers in the present study highlight that the program's inclusive approach has supported their children using strength-based approaches, which, in turn, has proven beneficial for the participants' psychosocial health (from the perspectives of their caregivers). Programs such as this play-based program have the potential to promote inclusion for autistic children and youth and increase their overall quality of life (Anaby & Pozniak, 2019; Ratcliff et al., 2018).

A key characteristic that helps this program yield the aforementioned benefits is its strength-based approach. Historically, health and human service programming was rooted in problem-oriented approaches (i.e., medical model, biological model). It has only been recently that these approaches have shifted to strength-based and person-centred approaches. A strength-based approach utilizes a child's strength, capabilities, and aspirations (Anderson & Heyne, 2013). Many autistic children have the capacity to participate and excel in recreation and leisure activities, particularly when given the freedom to be successful in their own way (Lee et al., 2024). Recognizing and embracing a strength-based approach in programs for children with neurodiversity moves our society toward a model of acceptance and inclusion. Community recreation and leisure services that employ strength-based approaches are saying that participants are welcome to come as they are (Anderson & Heyne, 2013; Hood & Carruthers, 2016). This aligns with the neurodiversity paradigm that views autism as a neurodiversity, rather than a disorder, and acknowledges the capabilities and competencies of autistic children (Autism Nova Scotia, n.d.; Donaldson et al., 2017).

Returning to our findings, the second theme indicated the importance of respite for caregivers of autistic children and youth. Caregivers in the present study expressed that the program allowed them to recuperate from daily stressors. This finding supports existing literature that demonstrates that respite opportunities may improve the quality of life not only for autistic children, but also for their families as well (Reichman et al., 2008). Caring for an autistic child comes with both fulfillment and challenges; respite opportunities can provide caregivers time to rest and recharge (Schopler & Mesibov, 2013). In the present study, caregivers described the program as a support for their mental health. This finding supports existing literature that suggests a need for more programs and respite opportunities that are catered to the needs of autistic children and youth and their families (Cuzzocrea et al., 2016). This need was especially clear during the COVID-19 pandemic and related restrictions, which disrupted the daily lives and structure for children with disabilities and their families (Arbour-Nicitopoulos et al., 2022; Masi et al., 2021). Because routine is important for many autistic children, lack of structure can be distressing (Eshraghi et al., 2020). Caregiving comes with numerous child-related daily tasks. For caregivers of children with disabilities, this workload can be even greater (Home, 2004). Caregivers of children with disabilities may spend additional time finding accessible programs, navigating inaccessible environments, and advocating against ableism; balancing life and parenting responsibilities can take a toll on the health and well-being of caregivers (Parchomiuk, 2022). Respite opportunities can help alleviate some of these hidden labours. With more respite opportunities available for families, caregivers may feel restored and gain more confidence in their nurturing, which in turn may improve parenting practices and the family's relationships.

Through our caregiver interviews in this study, we learned of the difficulties caregivers face in finding and accessing inclusive recreation and leisure programs for their children. Existing literature demonstrates that these challenges may be caused by lack of appropriate supports for this population (Schopler & Mesibov, 2013). Appropriate supports include low-cost options for recreation and sport, accessible spaces and transportation, and inclusive environments (Tesfaye et al., 2023). To help implement these supports, there is a need to promote leisure education and increase adaptation capacity within available programs in the community (Ratcliff et al., 2018). Adaptations that can be made include integration of goal setting and strength-based and person-centred approaches in programming (Bult et al., 2011; Urbanowicz et al., 2019). Despite the policies in place that support the inclusion of children and youth with disabilities, there is a lack of implementation of these policies (Cuzzocrea et al., 2016). Therefore, addressing these barriers is a priority considering that there is legislation in Nova Scotia that aims to make Nova Scotia accessible and barrier-free by 2030 (Accessibility Act, 2017). When there is a lack of supply to meet high demand for supports, it can be difficult for families to function. Caregivers in this study often felt that accessing recreation services was a struggle because of the lack of options that fit the needs of their children. This essentially caused feelings of exclusion and isolation for these families. This finding aligns with existing literature that speaks about the negative effects of social isolation on the overall well-being of autistic children and youth (Larsen et al., 2022). Difficulties in accessing opportunities can be an additional burden on families who already face challenges within underserved communities, and this can be detrimental for the health of children and youth (Loades et al., 2020).

One of the main goals of improving inclusion is to provide opportunities that are affordable and accessible for the targeted population (Anaby & Pozniak, 2019). Most of the caregivers emphasized that the high cost and lack of transportation options for the program have been a barrier to their child's/youth's participation in the program. This finding aligns with literature that demonstrates programs for this population are still limited and very challenging to access; this can cause significant negative impacts to families needing these supports (Barblett, 2010; Whitmore & Snethen, 2018). All children have the right to access services that support their needs and goals (Accessibility Act, 2017; Anaby et al., 2018). However, caregivers found that there is a lack of equal opportunities for their children/youth. Families emphasized their inability to keep up with the high costs of the programming, which negatively impacts their child's or youth's participation in the program. They also expressed their feelings about societal and health systems failing to perform their duties to serve the needs of the community. This finding supports the existing literature that speaks about societal systems not providing enough support for resources (Kakooza-Mwesige et al., 2022), and this emphasizes the need to develop more programs for autistic children and youth.

Strengths and Limitations

This program evaluation highlights caregivers' perceived benefits of a play-based program for autistic children and youth. We engaged caregivers of children who participated in the program. Lived experience perspectives help improve the relevance of the findings, while also empowering participants to tell stories that matter to them (Beames et al., 2021). Key recommendations that evolved from the results of this study include improving leisure education awareness, reducing cost and transportation barriers, and continuing to make inclusive program adaptations for families who require additional supports. While we did access the perspectives of caregivers in this project, we did not have an opportunity to interview the children. It would be advantageous for future projects to note children's perspectives, as well using modalities feasible with neurodiverse children. We may be able to involve children in future program evaluations by finding opportunities for children with disabilities to participate in interviews. Some recommendations for engaging this population include collaborating with caregivers and using customizable interview techniques (Teachman & Gibson, 2013).

Further, it may be difficult to generalize the results of this project to other play-based programs. While we would expect that programs with similar characteristics (e.g., physical play components, social play component) may yield similar benefits as perceived by caregivers, it is not possible to extend the findings to other programs or other groups of children. Future work may explore characteristics of programs and use an implementation science approach to determine the important underlying components to program success for autistic children.

Conclusion

This program evaluation illustrated the positive impacts of play-based programs on the physical and psychosocial outcomes of autistic children and youth and their families. Additionally, we identified key barriers that need to be addressed to increase participation in programs. The findings of this study are intended to inform the program about their work and inform the community on how to further develop programs that cater to this population and their caregivers. Strength- and acceptance-based program designs for autistic children and youth can help to ensure no child is left behind from engaging in meaningful recreation and leisure.

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Conflict of Interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

Ethics Declarations and Participant Consent

This project received an exemption from the Research Ethics Board committee, as it was determined to be within the scope of program evaluation. Informed consent was obtained from participants prior to all interviews. No participants were identified, and all personal information was kept confidential.

Author Note

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