Play beliefs and responsive parenting among low-income mothers of preschoolers in the United States

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LaForett, D. & Mendez, J.L. (2016). Play beliefs and responsive parenting among low-income mothers of preschoolers in the United States. *Early Child Development and Care*, 187(8).doi 10.1080/03004430.2016.1169180

Abstract:

This study examined associations between parents' developmentally appropriate beliefs about young children's play and responsive parenting. Low-income parents and their children enrolled in Head Start programmes ($n = 231$) in the United States participated in the study. Responsive parenting skills (characterized by high levels of warmth and responsiveness, and lower levels of hostility) were related to parents' beliefs endorsing play as valuable (Play Support) for promoting preschool children's social skills and school readiness. Additionally, higher levels of parent depression were negatively associated with Play Support beliefs while higher levels of parent efficacy were positively associated. Parent education showed a positive relation with Play Support beliefs and a negative relationship with beliefs regarding focusing on academic readiness of children without playful learning (Academic Focus). Implications for understanding play-based approaches for promoting children's developmental outcomes within early childhood programmes and family interventions are discussed.

Keywords: Play | parent beliefs | parenting | low-income | Head Start

Article:

Children's play is widely regarded as a cornerstone for fostering young children's development, evidenced by endorsements from organizations such as the International Play Association (2016), Play England (National Children's Bureau, 2009), the U.S. Play Coalition (n.d.), the American Academy of Pediatrics (Ginsberg, 2007), the National Association for the Education of Young Children (see issue of *Young Children*, May 2014; NAEYC, 2012), and the Society for Research in Child Development (Hirsh-Pasek, Golinkoff, Berk, & Singer, 2009). Collectively, these endorsements reflect current philosophies characterizing play as a learning context for young children to attain and apply an array of burgeoning developmental skills (Fisher, Hirsh-

Pasek, Golinkoff, Singer, & Berk, 2011). These authors specify how play-based learning contexts may vary by type of play, elaborating on three types: free-play, guided play, and playful learning. Although the authors indicate that *free-play* has historically been difficult to define, it may be contrasted with definitions of *guided play* which represents a continuum of play activities intended to foster academic learning with varied degrees of adult involvement in setting up the play environment and engaging with the child in play activities. Further, these authors define *playful learning* as a teaching philosophy encompassing free-play and guided play; that is 'whole-child' in its approach; and promotes children's development across academic, social and emotional, and cognitive domains. Notably, adults, particularly teachers, are often described as having a critical role in guided play and playful learning approaches, and play-based approaches to learning are often featured components of early childhood curricula.

There is also recognition albeit to a lesser extent that parents, as the primary adults in children's lives, hold an important role in promoting children's play. Indeed, there is evidence that parents' engagement in play activities with their children can influence children's outcomes, such as the acquisition of prosocial behaviours conducive to the development of children's social competence (Putallez, 1987; Rubin, Mills, & Rose-Krasnor, 1989). However, what is missing from our current literature is a deeper understanding of the underlying beliefs parents hold that may motivate them to promote their child's play such as the purpose of play activities, its potential developmental benefits for children, and the extent to which parents should be involved in their child's play. Further, there has been little examination of how other parenting characteristics and practices influence play beliefs. To fill these gaps in the literature, the present study draws from Rubin et al.'s (1989) social information processing theory positing that parent beliefs about children's development intersect with other parenting attributes and behaviours, which in turn predict a range of children's social outcomes. Specifically, we examine whether responsive parenting (i.e. high warmth and responsiveness, low hostility), parent depression, and parenting efficacy are associated with parents' play beliefs, with the intention of further understanding potential implications for parents' promotion of children's play.

Research on parent beliefs and play during early childhood

Only a handful of studies have investigated parents' beliefs regarding children's play (Haight, Parke, & Black, 1997; Hatcher, Nuner, & Paulsel, 2012; Huisman, Moody, Gates, & Catapano, 2013). We highlight three studies that examined what parents think is the 'purpose' of children's play, particularly regarding its value for children's development. In one study, Farver and Howes (1993) compared Mexican and US-born mothers on their values regarding adult-directed play, showing that the majority of Mexican parents viewed play as primarily an amusement activity for children, whereas White, American mothers reported that play was important for providing educational benefits to their children. In a study of low-income African-American mothers in the US, Fogle and Mendez (2006) developed a measure of parent play beliefs, where analyses yielded two factors. A *Play Support* factor reflected beliefs that play, while a fun activity, offers a range of developmental benefits to children; an *Academic Focus* factor reflected beliefs that play, as compared with other types of activities like reading, tends to be less meaningful for children's development, thereby suggesting that play is primarily

for entertainment and explicit teaching activities are more beneficial for children's development. A third study by Fisher, Hirsh-Pasek, Golinkoff, and Gryfe (2008) identified three profiles of play beliefs among US mothers (86% White, 5% African-American, 3% Hispanic, 6% other). For *All-Play mothers*, beliefs about play ranged from unstructured and imaginary activities to more goal-directed and structured activities. *Traditional mothers* were more limited and described unstructured activities as playful, and a final group of *Uncertain mothers* were less clear on their definitions of play activities.

Taken together, this small group of studies depicts emerging evidence of variations in the learning value mothers place on play activities across ethnic groups. Interestingly, in several ways these findings reflect the three play types reviewed by Fisher et al. (2011), with some parents clearly adhering to a free-play definition of play that has less impact on children's learning (e.g. typically Mexican-born mothers in Farver & Howes, 1993, *traditional mothers* in Fisher et al., 2008; *Academic Focus* factor in Fogle & Mendez, 2006). Yet, some mothers clearly identified play as having developmental benefits, which might be more aligned with definitions of guided play and/or playful learning (e.g. typically US-born mothers in Farver & Howes, 1993, *all-play mothers* in Fisher et al., 2008; *Play Support* factor in Fogle & Mendez, 2006). These results suggest that parents' play beliefs could influence the degree that they promote play activities at home, what those play activities look like, and the extent of the parents' role in play with their child.

Parenting, depression, efficacy, and child characteristics

Variations in parenting style, degree of parental depressive symptoms, and parenting efficacy have the potential to intersect with parents' beliefs by either supporting or preventing parents to carry out behaviours that are consistent with their beliefs. Specific beliefs about play may intersect with *parenting style*, or the emotional climate, created by the broader parent–child relationship. Darling and Steinberg (1993, p. 488) define parenting style is defined as the 'emotional climate' in which parenting practices (i.e. 'goal-directed behaviours through which mothers perform their parental duties') are expressed. For instance, parents who utilize a more *responsive parenting style* may be more likely to endorse beliefs reflecting the importance of child-directed and developmentally engaging play with an adult. In contrast, a hostile parenting style may be linked to uncertain or less supportive beliefs about play, especially if the overall interactions between the child and parent are characterized by low positive affect. Positive affect and warmth are viewed as foundational components of parent–child play, especially types of play that are imaginative and unstructured.

In addition, extensive past research has shown impairment in mother–child interactions when a mother is *depressed* (Goodman & Gotlib, 2002), where hostile, intrusive, or withdrawn parenting is associated with increased depressive symptoms. As such, depressive symptoms have the potential to disrupt the emotional climate in the parent–child relationship which may relate to parents' beliefs about play and learning. Young children in low-income families are particularly at risk for disrupted parenting due to parental depression. National estimates show disproportionate rates of depression among low-income mothers compared to higher-income mothers (McDaniel & Lowenstein, 2013), and prevalence estimates based on studies of Head

Start children and families suggest that as many as 33–40% of parents endorse moderate to severe levels of depressive symptoms (D'Elio, O'Brien, & Vaden-Kiernan, 2003; LaForett & Mendez, 2010).

Self-efficacy beliefs also can offer insight into whether parents have the tools to engage children in particular ways, especially if a parent is experiencing depressive symptoms. Self-efficacy has been defined as a belief in one's ability to engage in a behaviour to bring about a particular outcome (Bandura, 1977). Family engagement researchers have examined how different levels of parenting efficacy may be one factor in parents' strategies for supporting children's readiness to learn (Downer & Mendez, 2005; Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler, 1997; Iruka, 2008), and previous research has linked depressive symptoms to lower levels of efficacy (e.g. Bor & Sanders, 2004). Thus, the present study examines whether depressive symptoms and low parental efficacy, defined as parents' beliefs in their ability to impact their child's learning, could be associated with parental beliefs about developmental significance of children's play.

Finally, given previous research documenting child-level influences on parenting (Sameroff, 2009), we acknowledge that child factors likely play a role in the development of parent belief systems. For example, children with rich, extensive vocabularies, and strong emergent language skills could be more engaging to play with as potential partners. Other work involving Head Start children has established that preschool children with high levels of dysregulation are more disruptive within their play experiences with other children (Cohen & Mendez, 2009; Mendez, Fantuzzo, & Cicchetti, 2002). Therefore, qualities that make children more or less attractive playmates could affect parental beliefs about the importance of play, as well as parents' own enjoyment of the play experiences with their children. Given that a bidirectional, longitudinal study is beyond the focus of the current investigation, analyses controlled for children's expressive language ability and emotion regulation (ER). It could be that children's emerging expressive language skills allow parents to experience greater engagement in play; or to the contrary, children's difficult behaviours might prevent parents from sustaining and encouraging play and learning opportunities within the home.

In sum, the literature on parent beliefs about play suggests possible overlap with existing definitions of children's play (i.e. free-play, guided play, playful learning), and that variations in these beliefs may guide the extent to which parents promote children's play and their motivations for doing so. We extend this work to examine parents' play beliefs in the context of the emotional climate of the family, and that specific characteristics of parents, including depressive symptoms and parenting efficacy, may intersect with beliefs in important ways. By understanding how beliefs relate to responsive parenting and key parent characteristics, we may uncover how to target change in the parent–child relationship (e.g. participation in responsive parenting programmes) or other aspects of parents' lives (e.g. treatment for depressive symptoms). This has the potential to better foster the conditions that support parent beliefs that are aligned with promoting children's play. Further, we examine these issues in a sample of parents whose children attend Head Start, a federally funded early care and education (ECE) programme serving low-income children ages 3–5 in the United States (Administration for Children and Families, 2015). Better understanding of associations between play beliefs and

parent characteristics could help shed light on why low-income parents engage or fail to engage in specific parenting practices (e.g. engage in pretend play with their child at home, engage in academic readiness activities such as reading or teaching skills). The following questions were examined:

1. What parent characteristics (depression, self-efficacy) are associated with parent beliefs about the developmental significance of play for children enrolled in Head Start programmes?
2. What is the association between parenting styles (warmth and responsive and/or hostile), above and beyond children's skills and parent characteristics, and parents' play beliefs?

Method

Participants

Children and families ($n = 410$) participating in Head Start programmes in a large metropolitan area in the northeastern United States were recruited for the study. English-speaking, typically developing children were eligible to participate. A total of 246 families agreed to participate (consent rate = 60%). There were 15 cases that were dropped from analysis due to the child not meeting eligibility criteria ($n = 1$, not English-speaking; $n = 4$, significant special needs; $n = 1$ dropped from programme prior to completion of data collection) or concerns about the validity of the data ($n = 6$). Based on χ^2 analyses, there were no significant differences between dropped cases and the remaining sample on sociodemographic variables including child age, gender, ethnicity or parent education, employment status, or educational attainment.

The final sample of 231 families is described in Table 1. Based on demographic questionnaire data completed by parents about themselves and their child, the majority of parents described themselves as the child's mother (78%), and reported a mean age of 31.6 years (SD = 9.0). Most parents identified themselves as African-American (68%), never married (61%), and having a high school education (43%). Just over half of parents were employed (30% full-time, 22% part-time). The average number of children and adults in the home was 2.9 (SD = 1.5) and 1.8 (SD = 0.8), respectively. The children in the sample ($M_{age} = 56.8$ months; SD = 5.7) were primarily African-American (69%) and equally distributed by gender (boys = 52%).

Table 1. Sample demographics.

Variable	Percent	Frequency
Who is respondent (Parent)		
Mother	78	180
Father	10	22
Grandmother	7	15
Other	3	7
Not reported	2	7
Parent's ethnicity		
African-American	68	158
Latino	9	21

White	8	19
Other	6	12
Biracial	6	14
Not reported	3	7
Child's ethnicity		
African-American	69	160
Latino	7	16
White	7	16
Other	5	10
Biracial	10	24
Not reported	2	5
Child is male	52	120
Parent's marital status		
Single, never married	61	140
Married	32	74
Divorced/Separated/Widowed	6	15
Not reported	1	2
Parent's employment status		
Working full-time	31	70
Working part-time	22	51
Looking for work	25	58
Not employed outside home	21	49
Not reported	1	3
Parent's education level		
Less than high school	20	46
High school diploma	43	100
Some college or vocational/tech diploma	30	68
Bachelor degree or higher	6	14
Not reported	1	3

Measures

Parent depressive symptoms

Parents completed a shortened version of the Center for Epidemiological Studies Depression Scale (CES-D; Radloff, 1977) to measure their depressive symptoms. The shortened version (Ross, Mirovshy, & Huber, 1983), which has been used in national studies of Head Start families (e.g. Family Child and Experiences Survey), contains 12 items indicative of depressive symptomatology including mood, sleep and eating, and energy levels over the past week. Items are rated on a 4-point Likert scale (0 = hardly/never, 3 = most or all of the time; possible range = 0–36). Scores are summed, with higher scores indicating more severe depressive symptomatology. Cut-scores for determining depression severity are: 0–4 = not depressed; 5–9 = mildly depressed; 10–14 = moderately depressed; and 15 or greater = severely depressed (Administration for Children and Families, 2006). Internal consistency for this version of the

CES-D is high, as demonstrated with Head Start parents (α ranges from .83 to .86; ACF, 2006). In this study, internal consistency was adequate ($\alpha = .86$).

Parenting efficacy

For parenting efficacy, we examined the degree to which parents felt efficacious in contributing to their child's education. Previous research in Head Start samples has shown that parents with high parenting efficacy reported more frequent engagement in home-learning activities with their child (Downer & Mendez, 2005; Waanders, Mendez, & Downer, 2007). The About Being a Parent Scale (ABPS; Wentzel, 1993), a 5-item scale adapted from an instrument of teacher efficacy created by Hoy and Woolfolk in 1993 (Seefeldt, Denton, Galper, & Younoszai, 1998), measured parents' beliefs concerning the ability to influence their child's educational outcomes. Sample items include: 'Even a parent with good teaching abilities cannot teach his or her child as well as a classroom teacher', and 'Parents do not have a powerful influence on children's achievement when all factors are considered.' Items are rated on a 6-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree, 6 = strongly agree; possible range = 5–30). The ABPS has demonstrated good internal consistency (Cronbach's alpha = .86), and has shown similar consistency in Head Start samples. Internal consistency for this sample was adequate ($\alpha = .78$).

Parenting style

To measure parenting styles that do and do not reflect responsive parenting, parents completed the Preschool Parenting Measure (PPM; Sessa, Avenevoli, Steinberg, & Morris, 2001) which contains 43 items rated on a 4-point Likert scale (1 = strongly agree, 4 = strongly disagree). The PPM displays convergent and discriminant validity with other established measures of parenting, such as Block's Childrearing Practices Report. The scales that best measure the emotional climate of the parent–child relationship are responsiveness, positive affect, and hostility. The Responsiveness subscale assesses the degree that a parent effectively acknowledges his/her child's needs and is in tune with and sensitive to those needs (possible range = 4–16; $\alpha = .64$). Whereas warmth and affection in the parent–child relationship is measured by the Positive Affect subscale (possible range = 4–16; $\alpha = .67$), the Hostility subscale assesses negative affect and hostile interactions between the parent and child (possible range = 5–25; $\alpha = .68$). Given the conceptual similarity for children between the Responsiveness and Positive Affect subscales, Sessa et al. (2001) combined these subscales to create a 'Warmth-Responsiveness' scale (possible range = 8–32; $\alpha = .74$). For the present study, we used the Warmth-Responsiveness and Hostility subscales. Internal consistency was comparable to the validation study (Warmth-Responsiveness $\alpha = .71$ and Hostility $\alpha = .66$).

Parent play beliefs

The Parent Play Beliefs Scale (PPBS; Fogle & Mendez, 2006) was used to assess parents' views about the function of play in their child's development. Developed with a sample of African-American children in Head Start, the PPBS contains 30 5-point Likert-type items (1 = disagree, 5 = very much agree) that yield two subscales: Play Support and Academic Focus. The Play Support subscale reflects beliefs that play is an enjoyable activity with the potential to offer a range of developmental benefits to children. A representative item from the Play Support

subscale is: ‘Play can help my child develop better thinking abilities.’ The Academic Focus subscale reflects beliefs that play tends to be irrelevant to children’s social and cognitive development, thereby suggesting parents may implicitly value more academically oriented activities. A representative Academic Focus item is: ‘I do not think my child learns important skills by playing.’ The range of scores of the Play Support subscale is 16–80, whereas the range is 8–40 for the Academic Focus subscale. Internal consistency for both subscales is high (validation study: $\alpha = .90$ and .73, respectively; present study: $\alpha = .92$ and .73, respectively). In addition, the inter-factor correlation from the present study illustrates that the two factors are independent from one another and are negatively correlated ($r = -0.34$, $p < .01$).

Child characteristics

We included two child characteristics as covariates to examine how individual child differences might shape parent beliefs. To measure children’s expressive language ability, children were assessed with the Expressive One-Word Picture Vocabulary Test – Revised (EOWPVT-R) (Gardner, 1990), a 143-item scale designed for children aged 2–12 years requiring children to verbally identify an object, action, or concept when presented with a picture. Standard scores have a mean of 100 (possible range = 55–145) and a standard deviation of 15. Internal consistency using KR-20 coefficients range from .84 to .92, with a median reliability of .90. The EOWPVT-R has demonstrated concurrent validity with the Peabody Picture Vocabulary Test – Revised (.41–.61) and with the vocabulary subscales of the WPPSI-R and WISC-R (Mendez et al., 2002).

To capture children’s ER skills, we asked teachers to complete the ER subscale of the Emotion Regulation Checklist (ERC; Shields & Cicchetti, 1997). The ERC was developed to measure young children’s affective lability, intensity, valence, flexibility, and situational appropriateness. The ERC contains 24 items rated on a 4-point Likert scale (1 = rarely/never, 4 = almost always). The ERC has demonstrated adequate convergent and discriminant validity. The 8-item ER subscale has a possible range of 8–32, with adequate internal consistency ($\alpha = .83$). In this study, the ER subscale showed high internal consistency ($\alpha = .89$).

Procedures

This study was conducted in accordance with university IRB approvals; permissions from Head Start programme administrators; approvals from the Head Start programme parent policy council; and review of measures by the parent leadership of the programme. All family demographic and parent data were collected via parental report on a series of questionnaires completed at their child’s Head Start centre. For a small number of parents whose children rode the bus to school, parents completed their questionnaires at home and returned them to the teacher in a sealed envelope later collected by researchers. Trained data collectors conducted individual assessments of children’s vocabulary skills at the Head Start centre. Teachers completed rating forms of children’s ER skills. All data collection from parents, teachers, and children occurred within a 6–8-week period.

Analytic approach

Preliminary analyses included computing descriptive statistics and conducting Pearson product–moment correlations. The primary research questions for the study were addressed by conducting two series of hierarchical regression analyses that examined parent characteristics (depression, efficacy) and responsive parenting as predictors of parents' beliefs about play. The first regression analysis focused on Play Support as the dependent variable, whereas the second examined Academic Focus as the dependent variable. Both regression models controlled for child characteristics. As such, the steps for each regression series were: (1) child characteristics as covariates (expressive language ability, ER), (2) parent education, (3) parent depressive symptoms, (4) parent efficacy about education, and (5) and responsive parenting (high warmth-responsiveness, low hostility).

Results

Table 2 presents descriptive statistics for the variables used in the analyses. For the child covariates, teachers on average reported children to exhibit high levels of ER relative to the scale mean. Children's expressive language skills on average were more than one standard deviation below the population mean. For the parent characteristics, frequencies were computed to determine the prevalence of depression symptoms in the sample, with nearly one-third of mothers reporting a clinically significant level of depressive symptoms: 43% Never Depressed, 28% Somewhat Depressed, 19% Moderately Depressed, and 10% Severely Depressed. Further, parents tended to report higher than average levels of parent efficacy and warmth-responsiveness yet low levels of hostility relative to their scale means. For the play beliefs outcome variables, parents endorsed higher levels of Play Support and lower levels of Academic Focus relative to the scale means.

Table 2. Means, standard deviations, and ranges for regression variables.

Variable	**Source**	**Mean (Observed)**	**SD (Observed)**	**Range (Observed)**	**Scale Mean**	**Min**	**Max**
Child Variables							
ERC Emotion regulation	Teacher	25.55	3.99	16-32	20.0	8	32
EOWPVT-R Expressive language	Child	82.77	11.49	59-118	100.0	55	145
Parent Characteristics							
CES-D Parental depression	Parent	6.61	5.64	0-24	18.0	0	36
ABPS Parent efficacy	Parent	24.54	4.83	10-30	17.5	5	30
PPM Warmth-responsiveness	Parent	28.55	2.88	19-32	20.0	8	32
PPM Hostility	Parent	9.22	2.57	5-17	15.0	5	25

Parent Beliefs							
PPBS Play support	Parent	64.73	9.85	38-80	48.0	16	80
PPBS Academic focus	Parent	17.16	5.05	8-33	24.0	8	40

Notes: Emotion Regulation Checklist (ERC); Expressive One-Word Picture Vocabulary Test – Revised (EOWPVT-R); Center for Epidemiology Studies Depression Scale (CES-D); About Being a Parent Scale (ABPS); Preschool Parenting Measure (PPM); Parent Play Belief Scale (PPBS).

Table 3 reports Pearson correlations among the study variables. Parent education was positively associated with parent efficacy and warmth-responsiveness, and negatively associated with parent hostility.

Table 3. Correlations among regression variables.

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
(1) Play support								
(2) Academic focus	-0.34**							
(3) Expressive language	0.06	-0.17**						
(4) Emotion regulation	0.12	-0.14*	0.16*					
(5) Parent education	0.16*	-0.20**	0.22**	0.03				
(6) Parent depression	-0.15*	0.07	-0.08	-0.04	-0.07			
(7) Parent efficacy	0.24**	-0.18**	0.16*	0.01	0.25**	-0.10		
(8) Warmth-responsiveness	0.34**	-0.16*	0.04	0.15*	0.16*	-0.14*	0.22**	
(9) Hostility	-0.34**	0.15*	-0.14*	-0.07	-0.13*	0.34**	-0.24**	-0.35**

*p < .05. **p < .01.

For parent characteristics, parent depressive symptoms were negatively associated with parent warmth-responsiveness and positively associated with parent hostility. In addition, parent efficacy was positively associated with parent warmth-responsiveness, and negatively associated with parent hostility. Similarly, warmth-responsiveness was negatively associated with parent hostility.

With regard to the child covariates, children's expressive language skills were positively related to parent education and parent efficacy and negatively associated with parent hostility. Children's ER skills were positively correlated with parent warmth-responsiveness.

Finally, higher levels of parent education, parent efficacy, and warmth-responsiveness were positively associated with Play Support. Furthermore, lower levels of parent depression symptoms and hostile parenting were positively related to Play Support. In contrast, lower levels of parent efficacy and parent warmth-responsiveness were positively associated with Academic Focus play beliefs. As with Play Support, lower levels of parent depression symptoms and hostile parenting were positively related to Academic Focus. Bivariate correlations were all in the expected direction.

Hierarchical regression analyses

Table 4 displays the beta weights, parameter estimates, standard errors, and ΔR^2 for the individual predictor variables at each step of the equation. Parent education, parent depression, parent efficacy, and aspects of parenting style uniquely contributed to Play Support at each respective step of the equation. Specifically, higher levels of parent education, parent efficacy, and warmth-responsiveness predicted parents' endorsement of play as important to promoting children's learning. In addition, higher levels of parents' depressive symptoms and hostile parenting negatively predicted parents' endorsement of play. In the final model, only the parenting style variables (i.e. warmth-responsiveness, hostility) remained as significant predictors, with the full constellation of predictors accounting for 25% of the variance in Play Support, $F(7, 218) = 11.93$, $p < .0001$, *adj.* $R^2 = 0.25$.

Table 4. Hierarchical regression with parent characteristics predicting parent beliefs about play.

	Play support[a]	Academic focus[b]				
Predictor	B	SE B	β	B	SE B	β
Step 1						
Constant	60.23	4.83		22.32	2.43	
Expressive language	0.05	0.06	0.06	-0.06	0.03	-0.14*
Emotional regulation	0.31	0.17	0.13	-0.14	0.08	-0.11
Step 2						
Constant	58.42	4.83		23.27	2.43	
Expressive language	0.02	0.06	0.03	-0.05	0.03	-0.11
Emotional regulation	0.31	0.16	0.13	-0.14	0.08	-0.11
Parent education	1.93	0.79	0.16*	-1.00	0.40	-0.17*
Step 3						
Constant	59.73	4.82		22.99	2.45	
Expressive language	0.01	0.06	0.02	-0.05	0.03	-0.10
Emotional regulation	0.31	0.16	0.13	-0.14	0.08	-0.11

Parent education	1.84	0.79	0.16*	0.99	0.40	-0.16*
Parent depression	-0.27	0.12	-0.15*	0.06	0.06	0.06
Step 4						
Constant	62.26	4.82		22.15	2.47	
Expressive language	-0.00	0.06	-0.00	-0.04	0.03	-0.90
Emotional regulation	0.32	0.16	0.13*	-0.14	0.08	-0.11
Parent education	1.33	0.79	0.11	-0.82	0.41	-0.14*
Parent depression	-0.24	0.12	-0.14*	0.05	0.06	0.05
Parent efficacy	0.39	0.14	0.19**	-0.13	0.07	-0.13
Step 5						
Constant	62.64	4.36		22.11	2.48	
Expressive language	0.00	0.05	0.00	-0.04	0.03	-0.09
Emotional regulation	0.18	0.15	0.07	-0.13	0.08	-0.10
Parent education	0.84	0.72	0.07	-0.76	0.41	-0.13
Parent depression	-0.07	0.11	-0.04	0.03	0.06	0.03
Parent efficacy	0.18	0.13	0.09	-0.11	0.07	-0.10
Warmth-responsiveness	1.17	0.22	0.34**	-0.13	0.12	-0.08
Hostility	-0.76	0.25	-0.20**	0.10	0.14	0.05

[a]$R^2 = 0.02$ for Step 1; $\Delta R^2 = 0.03$* for Step 2; $\Delta R^2 = 0.03$* for Step 3; $\Delta R^2 = 0.03$** for Step 4; and $\Delta R^2 = 0.17$*** for Step 5. [b]$R^2 = 0.04$* for Step 1; $\Delta R^2 = 0.03$* for Step 2; $\Delta R^2 = 0.00$ for Step 3; $\Delta R^2 = 0.02$ for Step 4; and $\Delta R^2 = 0.01$ for Step 5. *p < .05. **p < .01. ***p < .001.

Child expressive language and parent education emerged as unique predictors in earlier steps of the model predicting Academic Focus. Specifically, higher levels of children's expressive language and parent education negatively predicted beliefs that play tends to be irrelevant to children's development and learning. However, these individual variables did not remain significant in the final model, $F(7, 218) = 3.11$, $p = .004$, *adj.* $R^2 = 0.06$. No other parent characteristics were significant predictors of Academic Focus.

Discussion

These findings add to a small number of studies examining parents' beliefs about play, and enhance our understanding of how responsive parenting and key parent characteristics

(depression, self-efficacy) relate to these beliefs. We believe our study sheds light on the types of experiences low-income parents are endorsing as important for their children's development. This sample of low-income parents, primarily mothers, whose children attended Head Start, varied in the extent to which they endorsed beliefs reflecting play as an opportunity to promote children's development (Play Support factor) or beliefs suggesting that play is irrelevant to young children's learning and that they are better served by more formalized and structured activities that promote learning (Academic Focus factor). These parents tended to have favourable views of play that were consistent with existing definitions of *guided play* and *playful learning*, which emphasize the idea that play serves as a learning context for young children. In contrast, parents were less inclined to endorse statements depicting play as exclusively an activity to be done for fun and entertainment, which is somewhat aligned with definitions of *free-play*. Our study confirms that many low-income parents do endorse beliefs involving the importance of play for fostering optimal development.

Identifying variations in parents' beliefs about play is important for understanding whether play-based approaches to learning within ECE settings may fit or not fit with parents' notions of preparing children for school. The Head Start Performance Standards explicitly reference play-based approaches in their standards for early learning. Similarly, the NAEYC (2012) has endorsed play as a central experience for children in order to foster a wide range of developmental outcomes across social, cognitive, language, and emotional domains. However, in the past decade, early childhood has seen an infusion of other explicit teaching or adult-guided instructional models designed to promote specific skills for children prior to entry into kindergarten, namely vocabulary and other emerging literacy skills (Copple & Bredekamp, 2009). Evidence-based curricular approaches are now required elements for programmes such as Head Start, and parents who are interested in promoting school readiness for their children may be drawn to aspects of ECE settings that appear more 'academic' in their preparation. To further examine parents' notions of how to prepare children for school, future research could use qualitative and observational methods to gather more detailed descriptions how low-income parents use play at home to foster social and pre-academic skills (e.g. Bulotsky-Shearer, McWayne, Mendez, & Manz, in press; Smith, Stagnitti, Lewis, & Pépin, 2015).

Our analyses also showed ways that other parent characteristics might intersect with parents' play beliefs. Parents who reported using responsive parenting characterized by high levels of warmth and responsivity and low levels of hostility endorsed the highest levels of beliefs that depict play as a vehicle for children to learn a variety of social and school readiness skills. In contrast, these predictors did not account for associations with beliefs that play is less meaningful for children's development, although bivariate associations suggest that such beliefs may be more salient for parents with less education. Moreover, the study confirms well-established associations between maternal depression and parenting (Goodman & Gotlib, 2002), where depressive symptoms were associated with low warmth and responsivity and higher rates of hostility. Our data add nuance to these associations by establishing a negative association between depressive symptoms and beliefs endorsing play as important for children's development, thereby extending our understanding of depression and children's outcomes. This finding is worthy of greater attention in future studies to determine whether depressogenic

cognitions (e.g. negative beliefs regarding a person's ability to impact their children or their lives) might explain why parents would endorse lower importance for play for their children. Or, other important mediators could explain links between parent beliefs and depressive symptoms (e.g. parenting stress, fatigue) which might help clarify this newly uncovered association.

Generalizations and causality claims for this study are limited by its correlational design as well as possible omitted variable bias (e.g. time constraints due to multiple jobs or nonstandard work hours that limit parent–child play opportunities, parenting stress, whether the child is the firstborn). We also acknowledge the limitation that all parent measures were obtained via self-report. Future studies on this topic would benefit from incorporating objective measures of parenting behaviour, such as conducting observations of parent–child play. Finally, mothers were the primary participants in the study, which prevents generalizability of these findings to fathers.

Conclusions

This study advances our understanding about parent play beliefs, and how they may relate to other parent characteristics such as responsive parenting and depression. These nuanced associations can help inform our understanding of the barriers and facilitators of parents' use of play strategies to promote their children's growth and development. Strengths of this study include targeting low-income parents with the goal of uncovering heterogeneity in parents' play beliefs; this is important because low-income families are often portrayed from a deficit perspective suggesting less parent engagement in their children's education. Another strength was the use of a multi-dimensional, empirically derived tool, the PPBS (Fogle & Mendez, 2006) to assess parents' play beliefs that was developed and validated with a similar population of low-income mothers. Thus, this study contributes to needed research illustrating normative development and family life among low-income families. We are only beginning to understand how parents develop beliefs about play, what parent–child experiences are viewed as valuable and essential for development, and how parents feel about early childhood care and education settings valuing play-based learning.

Consideration of parents' play beliefs has the potential to inform parent-focused efforts that incorporate parents' use of play-based interactions with their child; this is particularly the case for low-income families who are often the target of programmes seeking to promote young children's development and family functioning. Specifically, family engagement initiatives within ECE settings and home-based family focused interventions would benefit from considering how parents' own skills and internal resources intersect with their capacity for engaging in play with their child. Indeed, the National Center for Children in Poverty's (Smith, Robbins, Stagman, & Mahur, 2013) summary of research on parent engagement found that parents' use of play-based learning approaches with their child was a key component of parent engagement activities, particularly for preschool-aged children. In addition, home visiting programmes such as the Nurse Family Partnership (Olds, Kitzman, Cole, & Robinson, 1997) espouse a parent empowerment approach and play-based curriculum that includes informing parents about the importance of play, whereas Parents as Teachers focuses on responsive parenting and includes a curriculum featuring the role of play in children's learning and a number of play activities for parent–child dyads (Castro, Mendez, Garcia, & Westerberg, 2012).

Information from the present study suggests that such initiatives and programmes should consider parents' play beliefs in addition to providing psychoeducation on the developmental significance of children's play. These efforts should be coupled with attention to parents' own skills and internal resources which may include identifying concurrent supports for parents (e.g. responsive parenting programmes, mental health referrals) and making adaptations for parents impacted by parental depression. Because children's development and school readiness, maternal health, and responsive parenting are among the wide range of targets for home visiting programmes (see Paulsell, Avellar, Sama Martin, & Del Grosso, 2010), such programmes may be aptly suited for attending to the intersection of parent beliefs and other parenting characteristics and behaviour. By attending specifically to parents' mental health and their capacity for warm and responsive parenting, family engagement initiatives and home-based programmes have the potential to leverage existing or newly developing parent skills and internal resources that may foster parent beliefs aligned with the importance of play for young children's learning and development.

Acknowledgement

Portions of this work were completed at Temple University, Philadelphia, PA, USA.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

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Additional information

Funding

This work was supported in part by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services under grant [90YD0177].