

Moving Participants to Participation: Designing Effective Communities of Practice

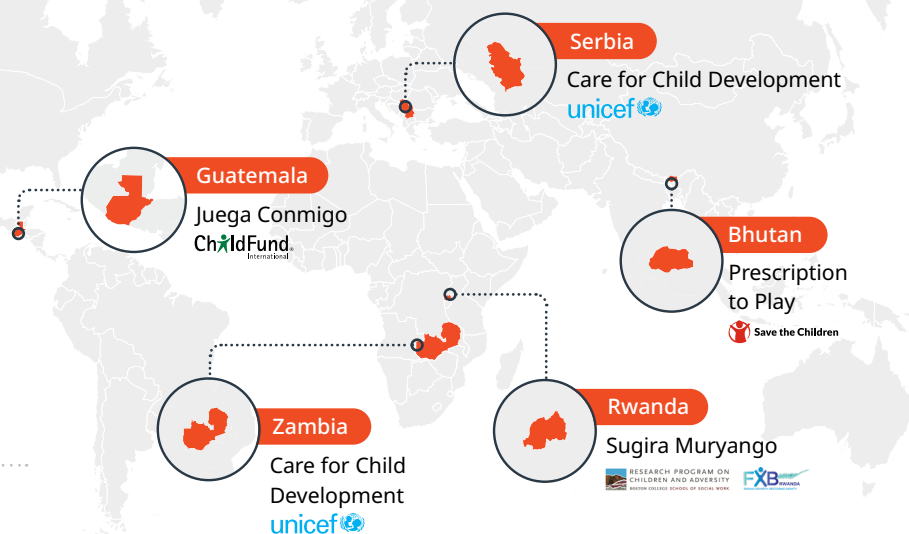
Playful Parenting

CoP Period April 2020-
December 2024

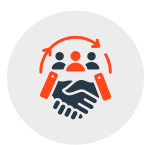
Countries Bhutan, Guatemala,
Rwanda, Serbia,
Zambia

**# of
Participants** ~30 active
participants

**Frequency
of meetings** Virtual: ~every 6 weeks
In Person: every 1-2 years



The **Playful Parenting Community of Practice (CoP)**, active from 2020-2024, consisted of partners implementing and researching playful parenting programs at scale in five countries: Bhutan, Guatemala, Rwanda, Serbia, and Zambia, with support from the LEGO Foundation. FHI 360 conducted [implementation research](#) on the programs and led the Playful Parenting CoP as an avenue to feed data back to programs.



Communities of practice are all too often proposed as a silver bullet to facilitating peer-to-peer learning, but the design process of cultivating effective learning communities needs more attention. The magic of CoPs rests in their participants, those who contribute their time, knowledge, and real-time learning to the collective. Designing communities aligned with those participants is a key piece of optimizing a community's value. Alongside other donors, the LEGO Foundation has supported numerous CoPs over the years, embedding them into broader learning partnerships to accelerate adaptive management of partner grants. The Playful Parenting CoP was one such community. Through formative research on the community, we examine **dimensions of participation and personas of participants** to define a set of design principles for constructing an effective donor-supported learning community.

Dimensions of Participation

In 2022, to better understand how community members participate in the Playful Parenting CoP, FHI 360 developed a tool grounded in three core dimensions defined by Lave & Wenger (1998) as the building blocks for cultivating and evaluating CoPs. These dimensions work in tandem to contribute to learning situated in social participation, an additional construct Neufeld et al. (2013) included in their evaluation of a community of practice.

Methods

Online Surveys

2022-23: n = 33
2024: n = 36
2025: n = 12

In-depth interviews

2022-23: n = 3
2024: n = 6
2025: n = 7

We distilled the dimensions as follows in our evaluation process.

Connectedness: A sense of meaningful relationships with other community members, grounded in a shared repertoire, including common resources and jargons that members use to negotiate meaning and facilitate learning.

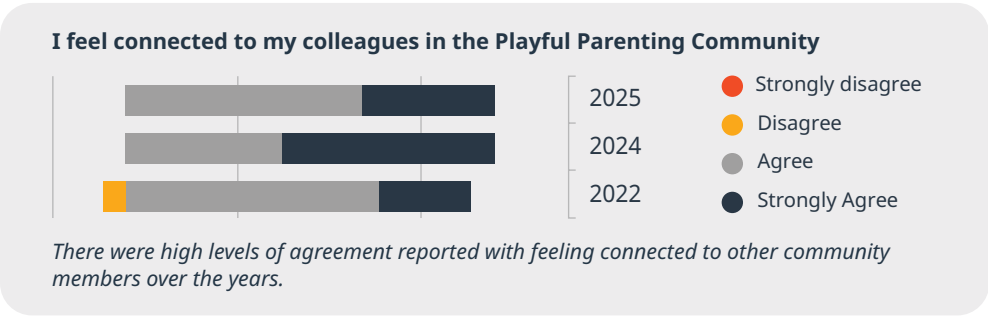
Belonging: A feeling of being accepted, valued, and recognized in a community to support a joint enterprise, a common goal or mission.

Learning: Knowledge generated as a product of social participation

Given the multi-modal nature of the Playful Parenting CoP, the tool also looked at **modality** to compare participants' experiences of virtual and in-person meetings.

A SENSE OF CONNECTION – FOSTERING CONNECTEDNESS

Participating in the community profoundly increased participants' sense of connection to one another. The format and content of meetings helped them to feel better connected to other early childhood development (ECD) practitioners encountering similar challenges in the field. They appreciated the opportunity to share experiences, challenges, and successes, which helped them feel part of a larger community.



"It makes me feel connected to a global initiative rallying around ECD." (Survey, 2022)

In-person meetings were particularly important for fostering that sense of connection. Comments after the first in-person meeting in 2022 illuminated the value of in-person interactions after two years of purely virtual connections. The in-person format allowed for more meaningful participation from all community members, as they felt more actively engaged and present. It also provided an opportunity for more varied collaboration across the community, facilitating the relationship building central to learning in a CoP.

"Now I know everyone and how they react to differently situations, I feel comfortable and know how better to interact with [them] than online." (Survey, 2024)

PROFESSIONAL SUPPORT – OFFERING BELONGING



The Playful Parenting CoP has been a valuable source of professional support for its members, offering them a space where they felt they belonged. In this way, the CoP helped participants not only to perform their day-to-day job activities but also grow as ECD professionals. Community members shared that participating in the CoP allowed them to gain connections to key experts in the field, as well as enhance their knowledge of existing evidence and tools on parenting. For many, participating in the community bolstered their confidence, giving them a safe space to reflect critically on best practices and growing evidence.

“Now, the CoP gives me a sense of confidence in other professionals applying and measuring early childhood programs around the world that can serve as a repository of knowledge.” (Survey, 2022)

“I have realised it was a great opportunity for both personal and professional growth. Being a part of COP pushed me to step out of my comfort zone, engage more and develop better communication and collaboration skills.” (Survey, 2025)

I feel a positive sense of achievement when this community thrives



Higher levels of Strongly Agree with this item indicates a growing sense of belonging to the community.

CROSS-COUNTRY SHARING – SITUATED LEARNING



“The community has many colleagues from different organizations with varied and rich experiences and technical expertise...Just listening to these colleagues has enriched my learning and understanding.” (Survey, 2022)

Community members describe the value of the CoP in facilitating situated learning via cross-country sharing, an exchange that might not otherwise take place. Having access to the experiences of teams in other countries uncovered common challenges and innovations in implementing parenting programs worldwide, contributing to the sense of connectedness described above. From the Rwanda team borrowing the Bhutan team’s revisions to active coaching to the Zambia team learning from the Serbia team’s supportive supervision structures, partners gained relevant strategies to strengthen their own implementation through the CoP.

I frequently interact with members of this community to solve common challenges



There were consistently higher levels of disagreement with this item across the life of the CoP.

“I don’t think (at least from our side) we bridged the gap to interact with members of the community to solve common challenges without FHI’s facilitation. I feel that more in-person meetings could have helped.” (Survey, 2025)

“[I am]going away with network of rich friendships and cross-cultural richness because of the interaction through COP.” (Survey, 2025)

By uncovering parallels in programmatic experiences, community members also identified areas for partnership and collaboration. However, the lack of frequent interactions between meetings represented a barrier to this continued collaboration. Collaborations outside of meetings were usually driven by FHI 360 in the form of external dissemination opportunities. Another barrier to cross-country learning consistently raised was the matter of time. Community members shared that there was often insufficient time to adequately discuss

the complexities of each country and program. This was particularly true in the virtual format.

THE VIRTUAL FORMAT – A FLEXIBLE YET LIMITED MODALITY



Modality was a key factor shaping participants' perceptions of the dimensions of participation. The virtual format of the CoP was acknowledged for its convenience and flexibility. While the virtual format enabled connection across a widely dispersed community in multiple time zones and geographies, it had limitations. Like many other groups worldwide, the Playful Parenting CoP tapped into virtual platforms like Zoom and Teams to connect during the pandemic, however, they could not replace in-person interactions. Participants describe often being distracted during virtual calls and unable to fully participate. The timing of virtual meetings presented a recurring challenge, particularly as this CoP represented 4+ time zones spanning the globe, with Guatemala 11-12 hours behind Bhutan. The nature of virtual meetings meant discussions and participation were often more structured, resulting in fewer informal connections between community members.

"Sometimes it is great to reach people that is far away, but sometimes the hour is not the best for me (too early in the morning) and that affects my participation." (Survey, 2022)

"In person interactions provides the opportunity to explain nuances and complexities and take time to share more details. This format is definitely more effective for cross country sharing and learning." (Survey, 2025)

Personas: The Driving Force of the Playful Parenting CoP

Participants are the engine behind all learning that takes place within a CoP and the Playful Parenting CoP boasted a richly diverse member base. The personas below were developed using data from surveys and interviews over the years. They offer a glimpse into the participants who shape a donor driven, multi-country, thematically focused community like the Playful Parenting CoP – enabling us to better understand and design a learning community that delivers genuine value to those very participants:



THE BUDDING PROFESSIONAL

The Budding Professional is **early to mid career** and **started attending the CoP halfway through implementation**, during which time they **became a parent** themselves. They work at a **local non-profit** and are based in the country of program implementation.



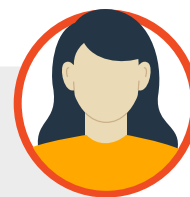
We got practical tools to help us in our day-to-day navigating scaling up a program, but also... other tools to help us in our professional development."



I do not think without the [CoP]... I don't think I would have had that kind of **in-depth knowledge sharing opportunity across the various programs** in the different countries."

THE SEASONED PRACTITIONER

The Seasoned Practitioner has **been in the ECD sector for over 15 years** and has a **background in academia**. They have **attended the CoP since the very beginning** and manage a wide portfolio of ECD programs in the country of program implementation. They are a parent with young children.



THE COMMUNITY LEARNER

The Community Learner is a **mid career professional** and **loves to connect and socialize with others**. They have **attended the CoP since it began in 2020**, when the pandemic began and **when their children were very young**.

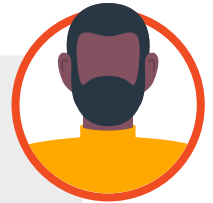


Anyhow, these **energizers** might seem not **important**, but I really think that **these parts of the sessions were helpful for this connection...** and to release also the stress because... when you are part of the implementation research, you always somehow feel observed..."



And so the community of practice was one of the **sources of information and learning in general for me**, like in my career, especially specifically about early childhood development.”

THE PROACTIVE PROFESSIONAL



The Proactive Professional is a mid career professional that has **attended the CoP off and on since the beginning**. The program they support **doesn't have implementation research associated with it** but they still find value in attending CoP meetings.

Design Principles for Communities of Practice

So, what do we make of these dimensions and personas? They allow us to design thoughtfully for the varied needs and interests of a community such as the Playful Parenting CoP. Our experience leading this community, as well as the literature we reviewed, led us to develop a set of design principles for successful CoP collaboration:

- Foster a culture of **honesty and safety internally** first
- Connect to **global initiatives** to expand connectedness, belonging & learning beyond the community
- Create structured opportunities for **frequent & organic connections**
- Maintain **continuity between meetings** via a content calendar and regular updates
- Define **thematic areas to facilitate collaboration** on shared areas of interest
- Engage community members to **drive content and expand ownership** of the community
- Plan an **in-person meeting** early in implementation if possible and hold regular in-person meetings

For the Budding Professional...

- Design 5 minute “homework” assignments between meetings (e.g.: practical exercises using a new tool)
- Connect interested members for mentorship opportunities between meetings

For the Proactive Professional...

- Encourage participation in relevant community spaces/learning groups
- Design 5 minute “homework” assignments between meetings (e.g.: practical exercises using a new tool)
- Ensure meeting documentation is shared and readily accessible in multiple formats (e.g.: AI-generated notes, recording highlights, newsletters)
- Tap into the motivation to define thematic calendar and organize smaller meetings

For the Seasoned Practitioner...

- Provide opportunities to share expertise from other implementation experiences
- Ensure meeting documentation is shared and readily accessible in multiple formats (e.g.: AI-generated notes, recording highlights, newsletters)
- Offer opportunities to lead thematic working groups based on area of expertise
- Connect interested members for mentorship opportunities between meetings
- Organize opportunities for site visits to other programs

For the Community Learner...

- Leverage icebreakers and playful activities to create a sense of comfort and familiarity
- Expand the community member base to include stakeholders at all levels (e.g.: the workforce)
- Create social opportunities to get to know other community members between meetings
- Facilitate smaller, regional in-person interactions as feasible

These design principles offer an evidence-based blueprint to fostering the connectedness, belonging, and learning essential to multi-modal, donor-driven communities of practice, and can be adapted for similar communities.