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Suncare SG survey: Singaporean parents believe playtime is important but there is a contradiction between their beliefs and actions

Suncare SG conducted a national survey of over 1000 Singaporean parents with children aged 3 to 6 years old. It found that most parents believe playtime is important. Over 50% consider screen time a favourite play activity with their child, with 94.5% allowing device use on weekends. Despite this, 90% believe non-screen play is vital. This contradiction suggests a need to balance screen time with other play activities.

1. The importance of play for young children

Play is widely recognised as central to children’s learning and development. It is enjoyable, voluntary, and intrinsically motivating, boosting children's happiness and mental health. Through various types of play with toys, books, or other materials, children can play alone or with others. Playtime is crucial for building social skills, learning values, and developing emotional intelligence. It provides opportunities to explore and solve problems while enhancing creativity and reducing stress. Thus, play prepares young children holistically for success later in school, work, and life.

2. Global decline in playtime

Despite the recognised importance and benefits of play, there is a global decline in playtime for children. This decrease is attributed to excessive pressure for educational achievement and a lack of parental awareness about the holistic benefits of play. International research shows cultural differences in how parents perceive play, with Asian parents often viewing play as having little value. This belief may stem from the perceived conflict between play and learning. Even though the distinction between play and learning has been debunked, some

Asian parents still believe play is just for fun and that academic skills can only be developed through repetitive practice and rote learning. Many Asian parents, including those in Singapore, prioritise early academic preparation for primary school. They place significant stress on their children and preschools, enrolling them in various enrichment and tuition classes. This indicates that some parents may need more information on the holistic benefits of play to balance their focus on academics.

3. Supporting play in Singapore

If play and holistic development are crucial for young children, it is important for Singaporean parents to understand and support play. To provide the right information and support, organisations must first listen to parents. To encourage this, Suncare SG conducted a national survey of more than 1000 Singaporean parents with children aged 3 to 6 years old. The survey aimed to find out if parents of young children think playtime is important, what they consider playtime activities, how they play with their child, and how much time and money they spend on their child's playtime. This survey was conducted using OPPI, a research polling house's platform.

4. About the survey

Suncare SG conducted a national survey of 1039 Singaporean parents with children aged 3 to 6 years old. Respondents were either Singapore citizens or permanent residents. The study is nationally represented by ethnicity and housing type as per the report from the Singapore Department of Statistics, September 2023.

a. Singaporean parents believe play is important

The survey revealed that 99.9% of parents feel it is somewhat important or very important for their children to have playtime. Those who provided reasons mentioned the following: fostering learning and development, improving physical health, building social skills, and providing stress relief and relaxation. These responses indicate that Singaporean parents are aware of the benefits and importance of play.

We asked parents to select the one belief statement, out of four provided about the utility of play, that they feel most strongly about. Among those who indicate that play is very important, more than 45% chose “playing together helps me build a good relationship with my child”; 26% feel that children should play just for fun; and the remaining either feel that play helps their child get ready for school or play could take time away from learning (see Figure 2).

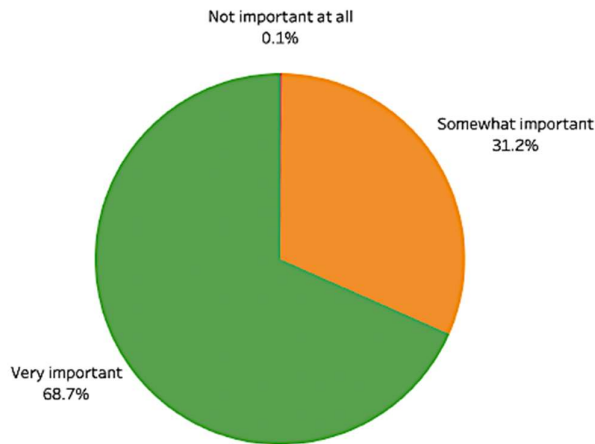


Figure 1. Importance of playtime for child



Figure 2. The statement about play that parents feel strongest about

b. Parents' childhood play experiences

The survey further revealed a positive link between parents' childhood playtime experiences and how much time their child spends playing. Parents

who spent more time playing as a child are more likely to have children who play more, whether indoors or outdoors. This suggests that parents' past play experiences influence their attitudes and behaviors towards their children's playtime, potentially shaping how much their kids play.

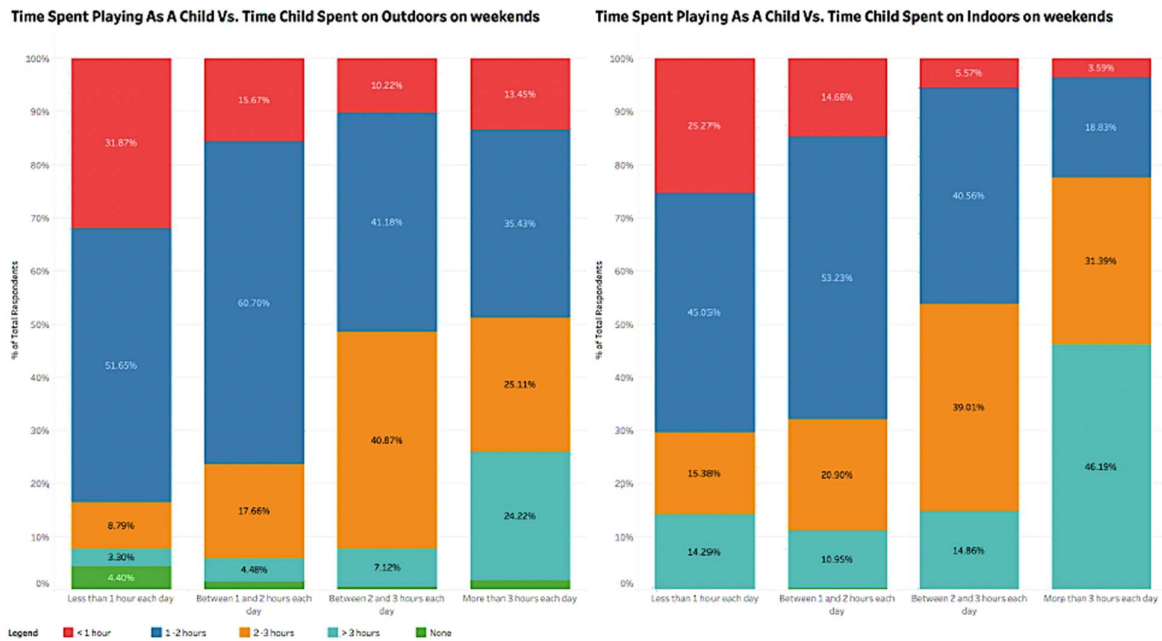


Figure 3. Time spent play as a child versus how much time their child spends playing on the weekend

c. Screen time and other play activities

More than 50% of surveyed parents indicated screen time (e.g. watching videos, TV, and playing mobile games) as a favourite play activity with their children, even though more than 90% of them agree or strongly agree that their child should not have screen devices when playing on their own (Figure 4). This indicates a contradiction between parents' beliefs and their actions, suggesting a need to balance screen time with other play activities. Further, most respondents (94.5%) allow their child to play with devices during the weekend, typically for 1-2 hours per day (Figure 6). As children get older, screen time becomes more common (Figure 7).

Other popular playtime activities mentioned by parents were physical games (e.g. sports, playing with balls, ring toss), arts and crafts (e.g. drawing,

painting, crafting), tabletop games (e.g. board games, card games, puzzles, blocks), and reading together.

In Singapore, medical practitioners¹ recommend that young children ages 3 to 6 should have less than 1 hour of screen time in a day and limited to age-appropriate content. Screen time promotes sedentary behaviour (i.e. sitting or lying down) which is considered to increase children’s risk of developing various health issues such as obesity, cardiovascular alteration, bone density reduction and mental health problems.

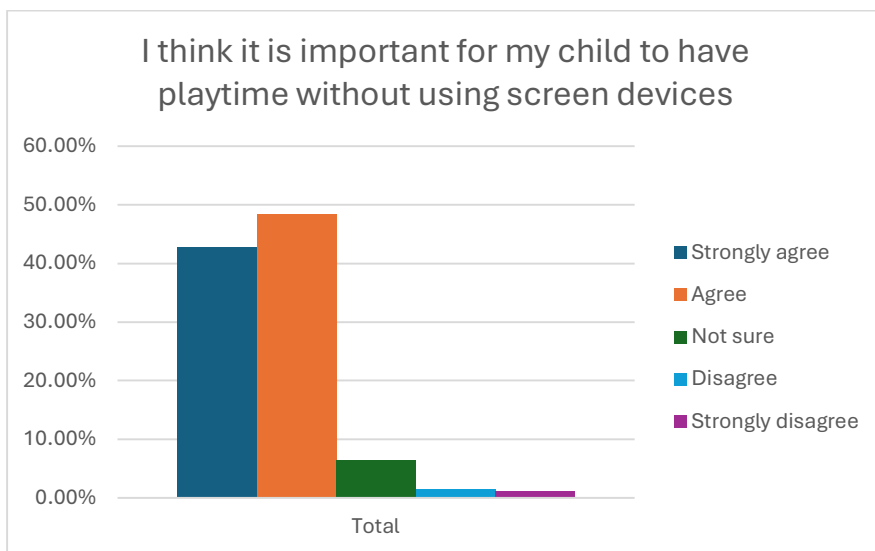


Figure 4. I think it is important for my child to have time to play on his/her own without using devices with screens

¹ College of Paediatrics & Child Health of Academy of Medicine Singapore (2022). Singapore integrated 24-hour activity guidelines for early childhood.

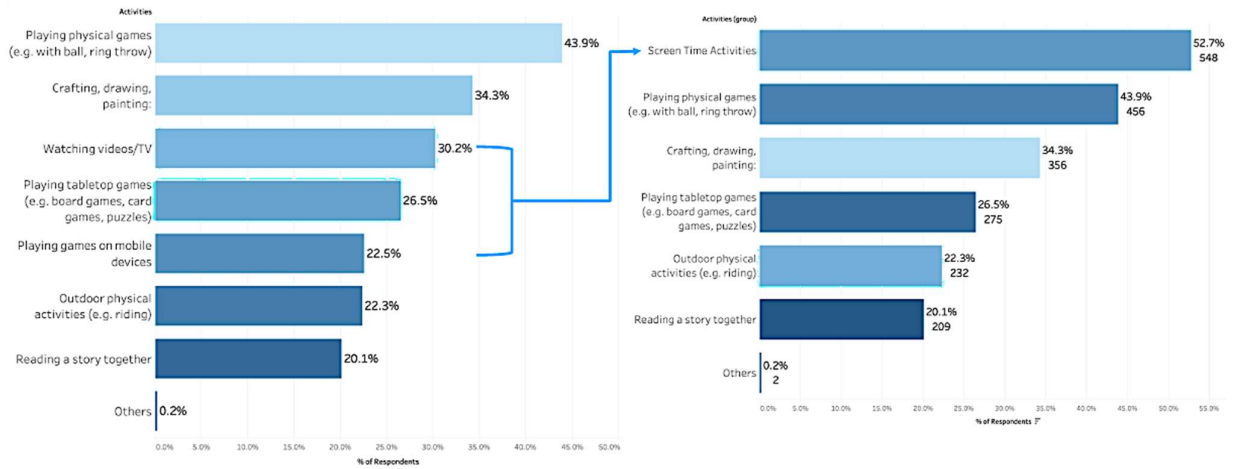


Figure 5. Favourite playtime activities with their child

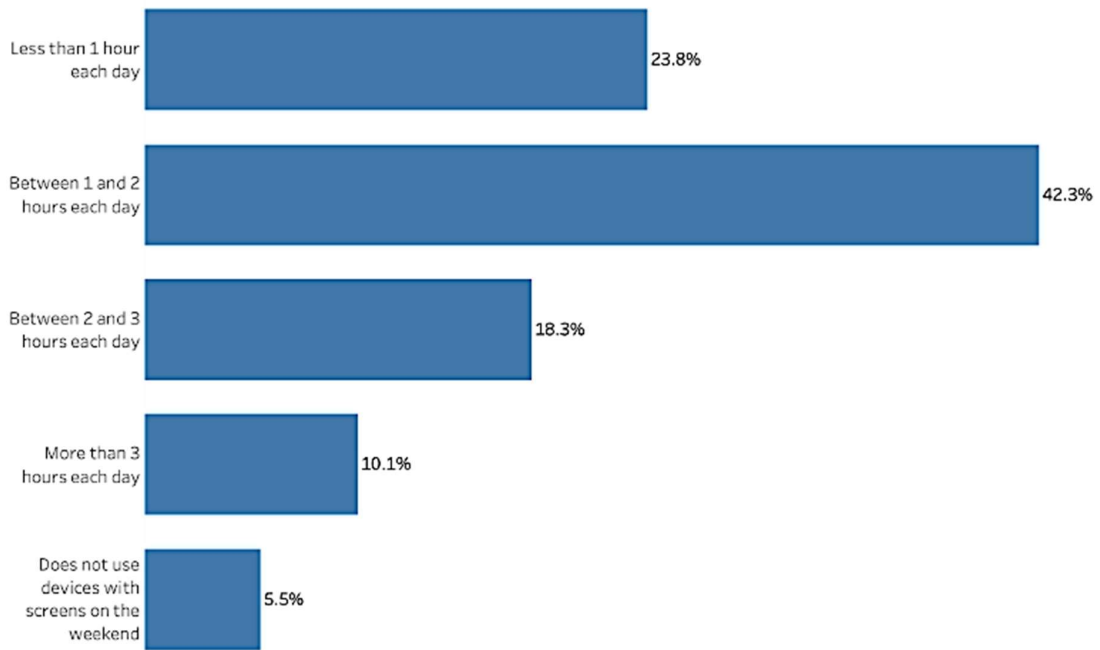


Figure 6. How much time does their child play with devices on a weekend

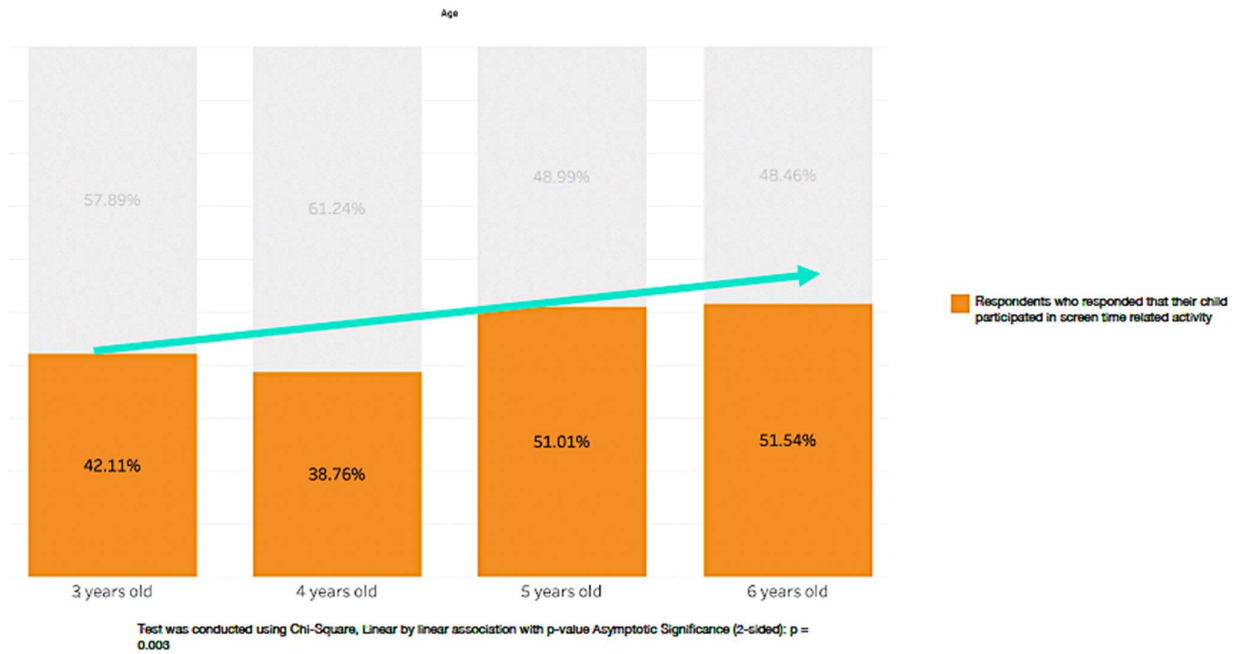


Figure 7. Screen time activity by age

d. Weekend outdoor playtime

Close to 20% of parents surveyed indicated that their child spends less than 1 hour outdoors per day on the weekends. Slightly over 50% indicated that their child spends between 1 and 2 hours outdoors per day on the weekends. The outdoor activities mentioned included having picnics, reading, playing boardgames and painting. Not all of the outdoor playtime constitutes physical activities of vigorous intensity.

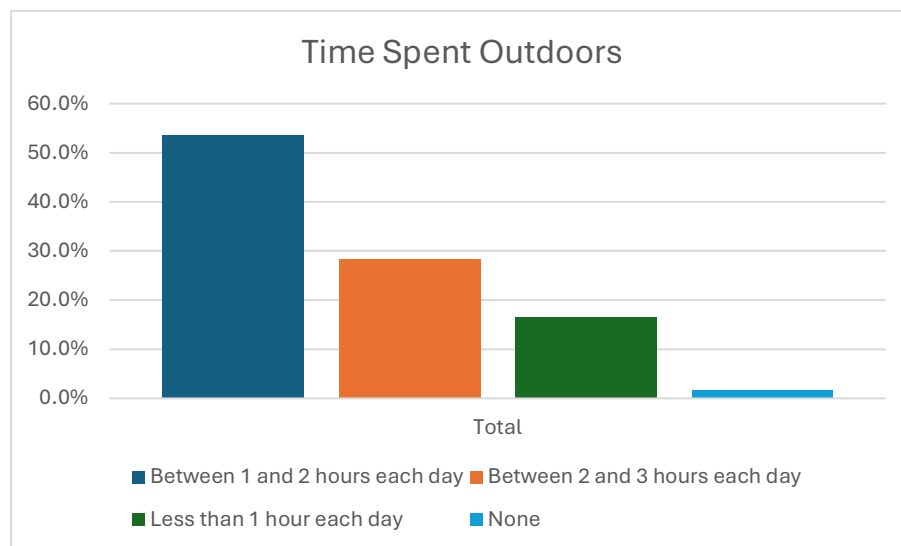


Figure 8. Time child spends outdoors on the weekend

Medical practitioners recommend that children aged 3 to 6 accumulate at least 180 minutes of physical activity of any intensity spread throughout the day, with at least 60 minutes of that being moderate-to-vigorous intensity, preferably outdoors.

e. Spending on playtime activities

Most parents spend less than \$100 per month on their child’s playtime activities. Indoor activities such as indoor playgrounds, toys and games, and sports facilities were the most common and expensive activities mentioned by parents. This is likely due to the costs associated with entrance fees, equipment, and subscriptions for these activities.

Further, the survey found a positive link between parents' housing type, education level, and the amount of money spent on playtime activities. That is, parents with higher education levels or private properties tend to spend more on their children's playtime activities.

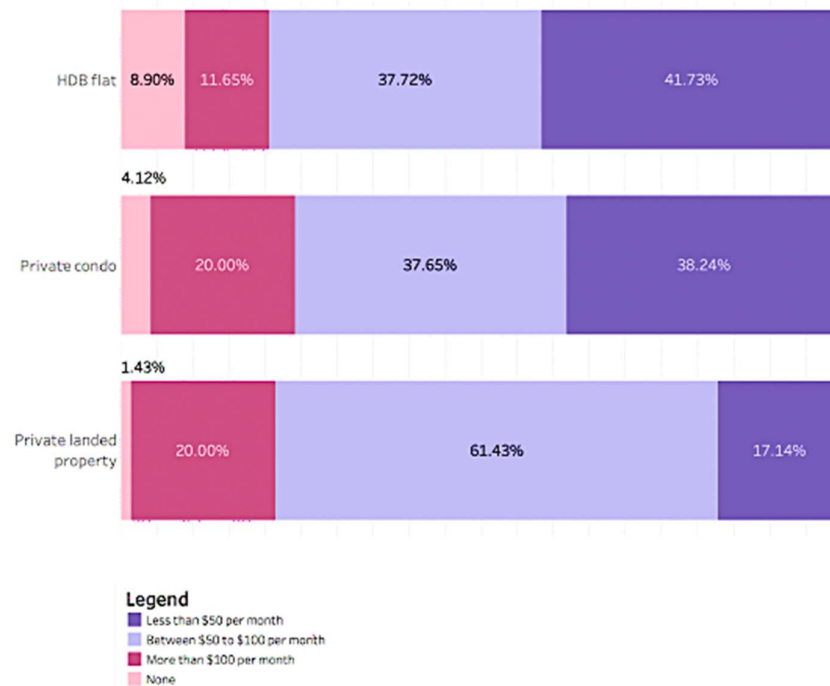
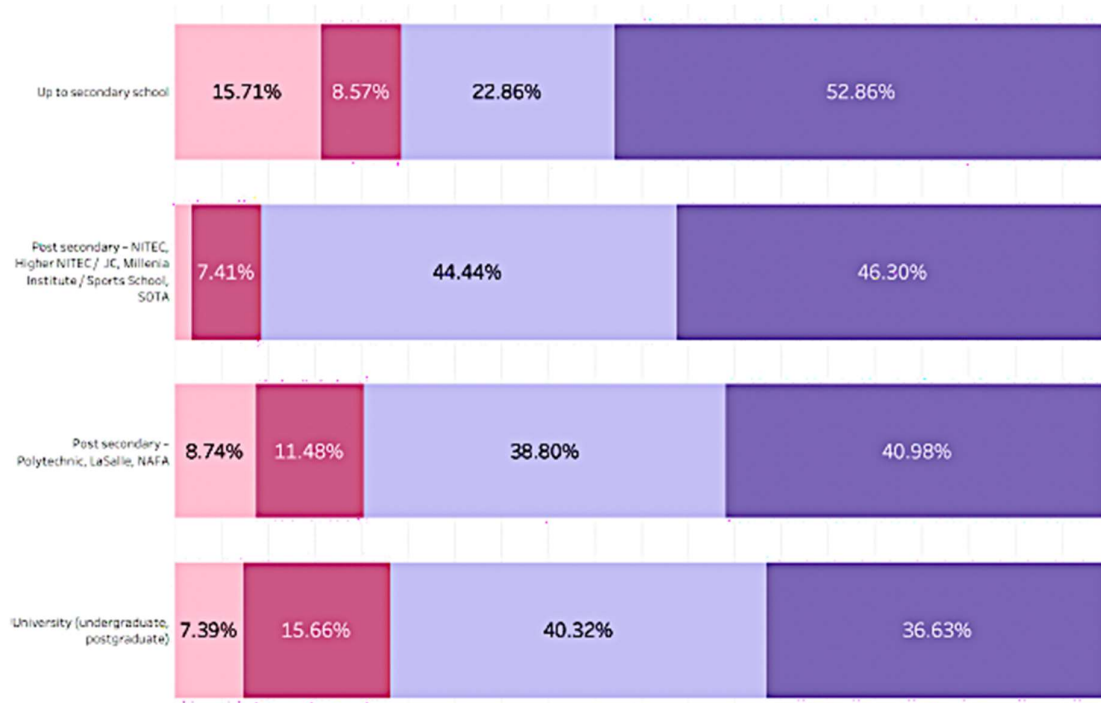


Figure 9. How much money is spent on child’s play activities per month, based on living arrangements



Legend

- Less than \$50 per month
- Between \$50 to \$100 per month
- More than \$100 per month
- None

Figure 10. How much money is spent on child's play activities per month, based on education level

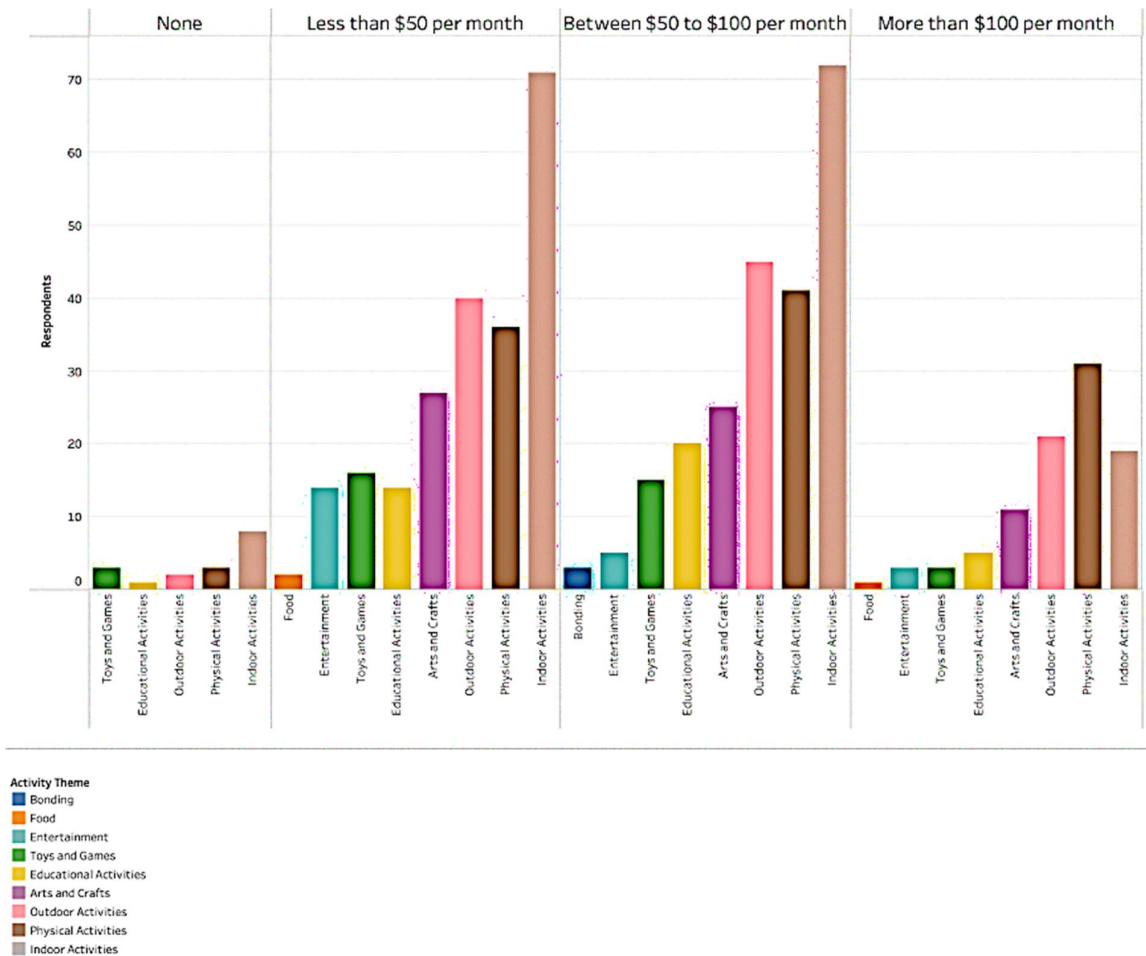


Figure 11. How much money is spent on child’s play activities per month, categorised by activity theme

- Head of Special Projects at Suncare SG, Ciara Yeo, said: "Suncare SG carried out this survey to better understand how Singaporean parents view playtime with their children. Given the pressures many parents of young children are under, we're encouraged to see that so many recognise the importance of play for their children's development. Let's continue to support a balanced approach to playtime, incorporating a variety of activities that nurture their growth and happiness. Together, we can ensure our children thrive both now and in the future."
- Associate Professor Sirene Lim, who is the vice-dean of the S R Nathan School of Human Development at the Singapore University of Social Sciences, assisted with this survey. She said: "I think the results are pretty encouraging in that most

parents see the benefit of having their children engage in play activities. However, the data also indicates that some parents may require some support or ideas to be able to offer their children playtime that is not screen-dependent and more physically active, inexpensive, creative and fun.”

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About Suncare SG

Suncare SG is a newly established IPC dedicated to supporting the well-being of children and youths in Singapore. It operates the Lighthouse in Punggol which is a safe space for children and youths to engage in activities which are research informed and beneficial to their well-being. For more information, please visit

www.suncaresg.com.