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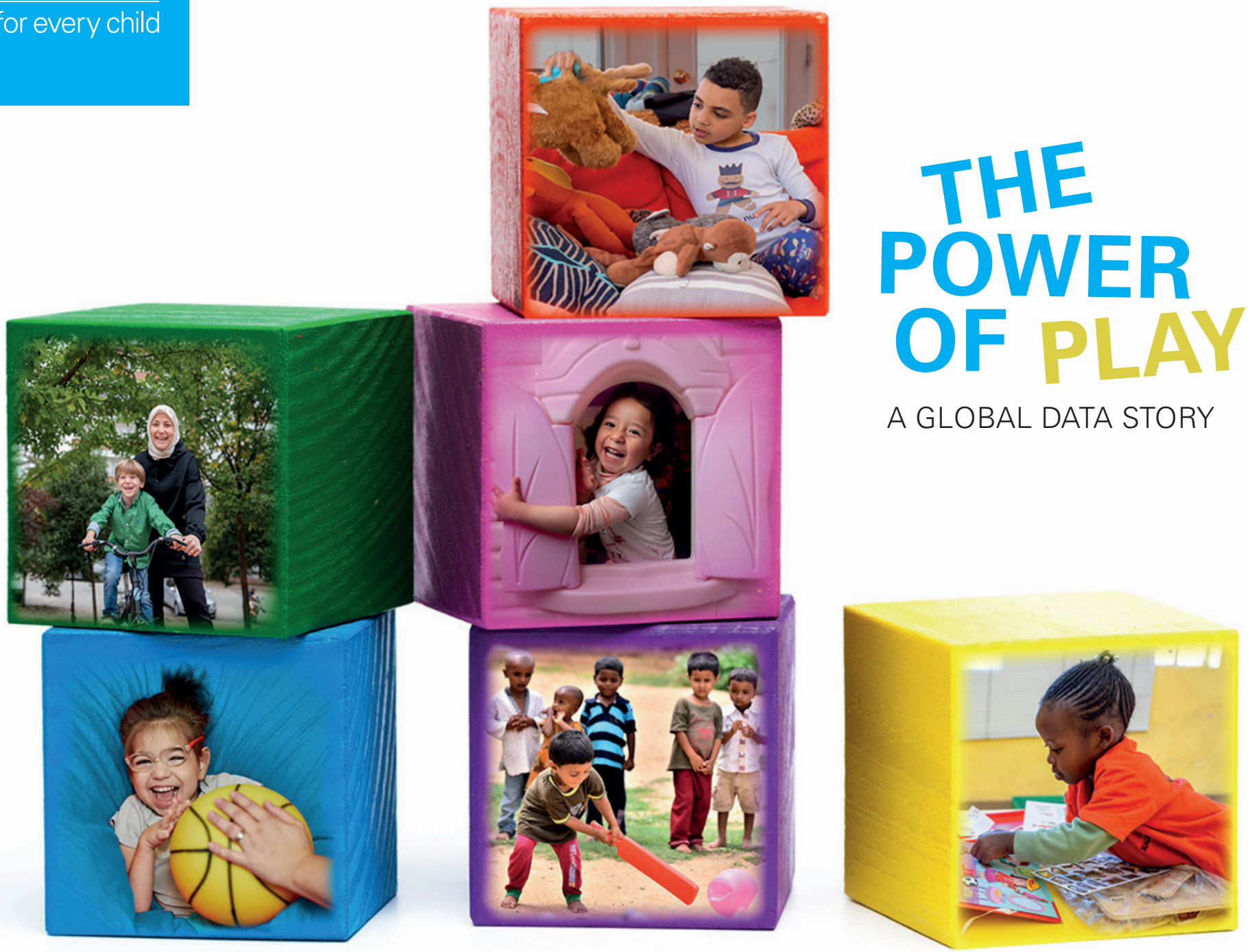

THE POWER OF PLAY

A GLOBAL DATA STORY

UNICEF Office of Strategy and Evidence – Innocenti
Via degli Alfani, 58
50121, Florence, Italy
Email: data@unicef.org

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"When we play together, I feel happy again", says Lamar, her face lit with delight. As she smiles and teases her friends, the daily hardships of growing up in the Syrian Arab Republic's conflict recede, at least for a moment. She has a chance to be just what she is: a child. Across this country, instability has displaced thousands of children like Lamar. To help them, mobile teams routinely visit shelters where their families have taken refuge. The teams arrive with clean clothes, safety information and tips for caregivers. They also bring games and art supplies. That's the part that Lamar and other children look forward to the most.

For children in the Syrian Arab Republic and other fragile situations, play can transport them to another world. It is a shield against uncertainty and stress in the face of constant hardships. It provides children with a safe way to process the world around them and regain a sense of balance, agency and stability, even in the most difficult circumstances.[1]

But play is also critical in children's daily lives beyond situations of hardship. Play is both an end in itself – a source of fun and enjoyment for children – and a means to an end, essential to their physical, social, emotional, language and cognitive development, making it a crucial pathway for early learning *(see Box 1)*. Play is the universal language of childhood – a joyful, self-chosen adventure where the only limit is a child's imagination.[2] The distinctiveness of play is what makes it special; it is a safe space for children to explore emotions, try out ideas and feel a sense of agency without the risk of 'real-world' consequences.[3] There is broad agreement that, whatever form play takes, children should have a sense of ownership while engaging in it.

Play is not just essential to forming and solidifying peer relationships; it also bonds children to their parents and caregivers as well as to their communities and cultures, particularly during the very early and formative years of life when critical neural connections are forming. Even the youngest children learn to connect with caregivers through simple, responsive play. Both quantity and quality matter: The more responsive and warm caregivers are while playing, the more secure children feel, and this contributes to positive socioemotional development.[5] Since young children spend the majority of their time interacting with caregivers within the home environment, these interactions significantly influence how they interpret the world around them.[6]

This report consolidates internationally comparable data from close to 100 countries collected over two decades on a selection of indicators related to play among young children within the home environment *(see Box 2)*. While the focus is on play during early childhood, it is recognized that play extends across all ages and phases of childhood, through middle childhood and even adolescence, while the form it takes and its purpose evolve over time *(see Box 3)*. Given the importance of responsive and playful caregiving in shaping children's development and learning, the report aims to use available global and regional data to shed light on inequities and disparities in young children's experiences of play to reveal which children are missing out on these critical opportunities.

PLAYFUL EXPERIENCES SHARE CERTAIN COMMON CHARACTERISTICS[4]

MEANINGFUL
Children play to make sense of the world around them and of their experiences.

JOYFUL
Children derive pleasure, enjoyment and motivation from their active engagement in play.

ACTIVELY ENGAGING
Children lose themselves in play, often combining physical, mental and verbal engagement.

ITERATIVE
Children play to practise skills, try out possibilities and discover new challenges, all of which contribute to deeper learning.

SOCIALLY INTERACTIVE
Children communicate ideas and learn to understand others through play, which paves the way for creating deeper and more powerful social relationships.

KEY DATA FACTS ON PLAY

Around the world, more than 80 million children aged 2 to 4 years (or 1 in 5) do not engage in regular play with their caregivers at home

Worldwide, over 90 million children under age 5 (or 1 in 7) are without playthings at home

Of all children missing out on playful interactions with their caregivers, 3 in 4 live in sub-Saharan Africa and South Asia

While the proportion of children who play with their mothers or with other caregivers in the home is similar, children are nearly half as likely to play with their fathers

Children in low-income countries are 25 per cent less likely to play with their caregivers compared with children in high-income countries

Children with multiple disabilities, those living in rural areas and in the poorest households, and whose mothers have lower levels of education are all less likely to engage in playful interactions with caregivers at home

Today, about half the world's countries have collected internationally comparable data on whether children have the opportunity to play with their caregivers at home, compared with only 10 countries just two decades ago, when such standardized data were first collected. This steady expansion testifies to a growing commitment to better understand all the factors and experiences that help children thrive, including play

BOX 1

Play in support of child development

As psychologist Jean Piaget noted, "play is the work of childhood."[7] It is the main way in which children develop their physical, social, emotional and cognitive skills and is central to capacity and skill development throughout childhood.

Physical development. Both unstructured and structured active play promote children's physical development. When children grab, jump, run, stack, build or learn a new sport, their bodies release endorphins, hone fine and gross motor skills and develop growing muscles.[8] Research has found that the design of children's playgrounds matters and can encourage physical activity, thus contributing to present and future health.[9] On the other hand, when children are denied the chance to play, they lose more than just fun; they lose the vital practice their bodies need to build strength, coordination and lifelong health.[10]

Social development. Play also allows children to develop social skills. Younger children feel safe and close to their caregivers when they play.[11] Preschool-aged children playing with peers learn to solve problems together, negotiate ideas, collaborate and build empathy.[12] Play is an essential part of friendship, even as children age into adolescence. Across all ages, play helps children create and negotiate social bonds as well as practise for other, more complex social interactions in the future.

Emotional development. In the safe, imaginative space of play, children are able to feel and learn to manage their wide array of emotions.[13] Joy, sadness, frustration and anger are common in sports, games and make-believe scenarios. Through play, children can savour enjoyment and safely face defeat; play offers children an emotional training ground. Research shows that a childhood without play can lead to lasting emotional challenges. Because play is what helps a child's brain develop its 'control centre', missing out on these moments can hinder a child's mental and emotional growth.[14]

Cognitive development. In play, children exhibit and deploy their creativity and problem-solving skills. They also develop cognitive skills, such as complex reasoning, memory, concentration, storytelling, emotional expression and abstract thinking.[15] Joy sparks the brain's pleasure centres, releasing dopamine, a natural chemical that feels good and 'unlocks' children's ability to focus, remember and solve problems creatively.[16]

BOX 2

Measuring and monitoring play at the global level

Global monitoring requires the production of comparable and standardized statistics. This can only be achieved through the use of a common set of data collection tools, including a core set of questions easily integrated into existing national data collection efforts.

To address the need for internationally comparable data at the population level, the UNICEF-supported Multiple Indicator Cluster Survey (MICS) programme included standard questions to assess the quality of a young child's home environment, including play with caregivers and the availability of playthings, as part of the third round of surveys (conducted around 2005 and 2006). These standard questions have been included as part of the core survey tools in all subsequent rounds of MICS, including the most recent seventh round, making it the largest source of internationally comparable data on selected indicators of play at home. Data on play collected through MICS – and through national household surveys that have used the standard or an adapted version of the MICS questions – are compiled into global databases. These databases are regularly updated, maintained and published by UNICEF to monitor the situation of play at the global level.

UNICEF also plays a key role in developing new tools for data collection, including in the area of early childhood development. For instance, UNICEF is leading an effort to refine and expand existing MICS questions on play and the availability of playthings at home for children under age 5. Future efforts will focus on filling existing data gaps on play among children aged 5 and older by developing and validating new survey questions that can generate robust and internationally comparable data. This will complement a new time-use module available to countries beginning with the current seventh round of MICS. The module collects information on young adolescents aged 10 to 14 years (based on responses provided by the mother or primary caregiver) and older adolescents aged 15 to 17 years (based on self-reports). It records a list of all the activities a child undertook the day prior to the interview, including routine and self-care activities such as sleeping and eating, as well as school attendance and recreation and leisure, and how much time was spent on each activity. Importantly, it aims to capture if and how much time children spend playing (excluding online gaming) as well as more detailed information on their digital and online engagement (for example, gaming, watching TV or movies and using social media). The data it will produce will generate important insights into how adolescents spend their time, including in play, both offline and online.

BOX 3

Play across childhood

Children of all ages play, but as children transition from one developmental phase to the next, how they play, with whom, for how much time and for what purposes evolve as well. The youngest children, between birth and age 3, tend to play alone or with caregivers, exploring their environments. Children aged 3 to 5 years begin to play more with others, often in parallel play, and engage in pretend or imaginative play. Once children enter formal schooling (after age 5 in most countries), they start to enjoy play that is more structured, competitive and complex, such as games with clear rules.[17] Adolescents tend to prefer sports, video games or creative pursuits.[18]

While play in some form or another is important across all phases of childhood, older children begin to encounter more constraints on the time they can devote to free play as a result of school demands, household chores, constricted spaces and extracurricular activities. Research has suggested that parents increasingly direct older children to focus more on adult-defined activities, as well as on education and chores.[19] A recent LEGO Group online survey targeted two separate samples: parents of children aged 1 to 12 years and children aged 5 to 12 years across 30 countries.[20] The survey revealed that the vast majority of parents surveyed (94 per cent) recognize play as important for their family's happiness and well-being, and most parents (89 per cent) wish they played more. Parents highlighted workload, household chores, time spent on devices and children's homework as the top barriers to family time for play. More than one in four children surveyed reported not being satisfied with how much they play. These findings underscore that both families and children alike acknowledge the value and importance of play but feel constrained in dedicating sufficient time to it.

As children age, their play becomes more complicated, more social, more physical and more mediated by technology. Indeed, play among children of all ages, but particularly for school-aged children, has been transformed by Internet access and digital technology. Children's use of technology for play ranges from playing video games, to watching others play video games on social media platforms such as YouTube or TikTok, to building worlds in Roblox or Minecraft.[21]

Digital play brings many benefits for children, allowing them to maintain friendships outside of school and engage in social or political causes.[22] Research has identified six drivers for children's digital play. Children want to: 1) control and curate their world, developing feelings of autonomy; 2) master challenges and acquire knowledge and skills, enabling feelings of competence; 3) foster, nurture and manage their most important relationships; 4) experience and regulate emotions; 5) develop and express their creativity; and 6) construct and explore identities.[23]

Digital games specifically are active forms of fun, teaching children to solve problems, be persistent and develop spatial reasoning.[24] Children who engage in this kind of play develop digital literacy and a sense of agency in navigating online systems. Digital art and world-building further allow children to express themselves and experiment with identity. This is especially important in contexts where other creative outlets might be limited.[25]

While digital play can be beneficial, it is important to support children in finding the right balance between digital play and other activities. Excessive online play does not cause but is associated with a sedentary lifestyle and can affect children's sleep, mood and behaviour.[26] Digital play spaces that include manipulative monetization techniques, for example by promoting in-game purchases or stealth advertising that children may struggle to recognize or avoid, should not be targeted at children and need to be addressed via policy responses.[27]

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PLAY AT HOME WITH CAREGIVERS

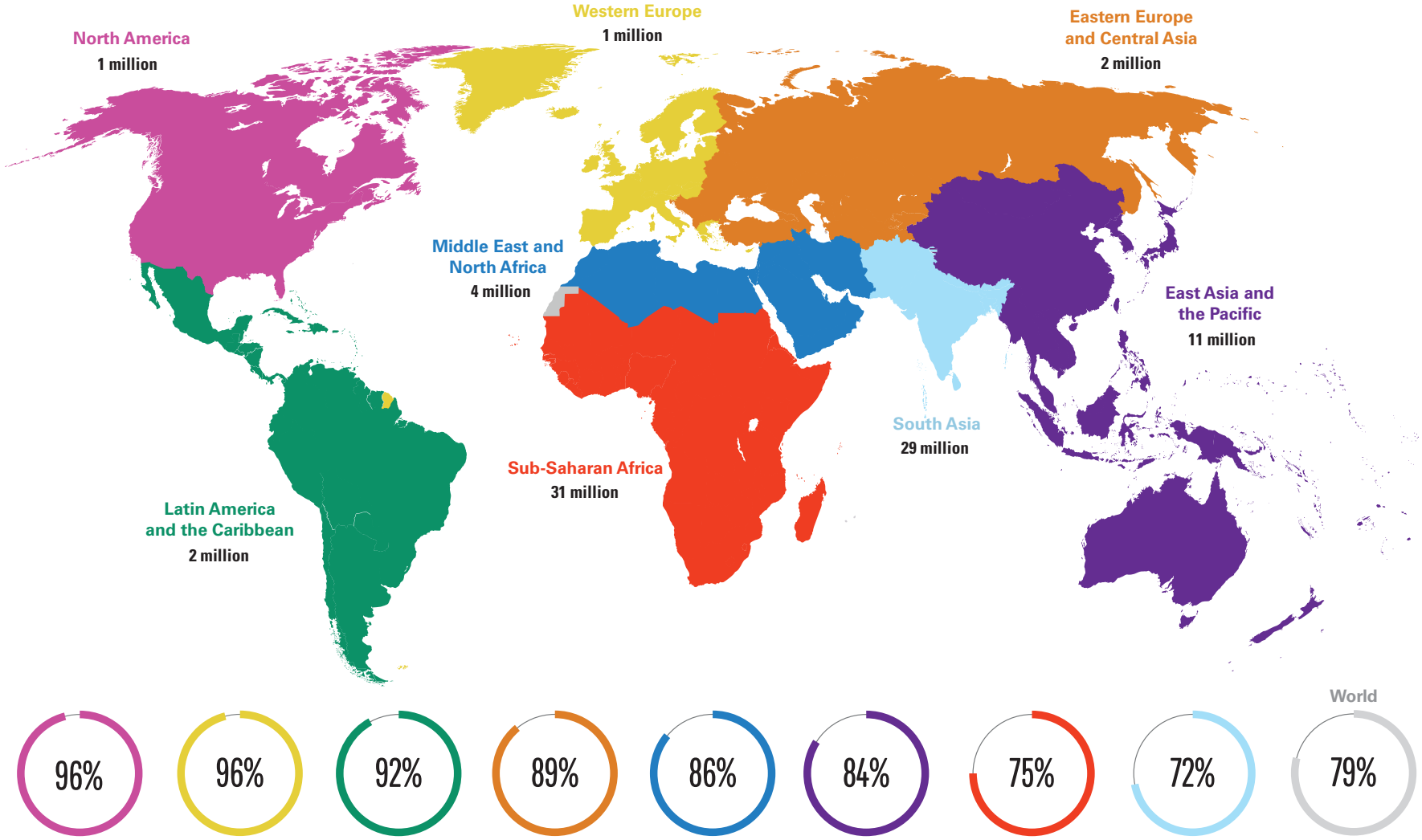
CURRENT LEVELS AND TRENDS

For measurement purposes, the activities considered as 'play' are left open to interpretation by caregivers responding to the survey questions. As such, 'play' should be understood in broad terms to include many possible activities and interactions.

While play is important and encouraged for children of all ages, internationally comparable data are currently available only for children aged 2 to 4 years. Work is under way to close the data gap on play among children under 2 years of age and older than 5 years.

Around the world, more than 80 million children aged 2 to 4 years (or 1 in 5) do not engage in regular play with their caregivers at home. Of all children missing out on playful interactions with their caregivers, 3 in 4 live in sub-Saharan Africa and South Asia

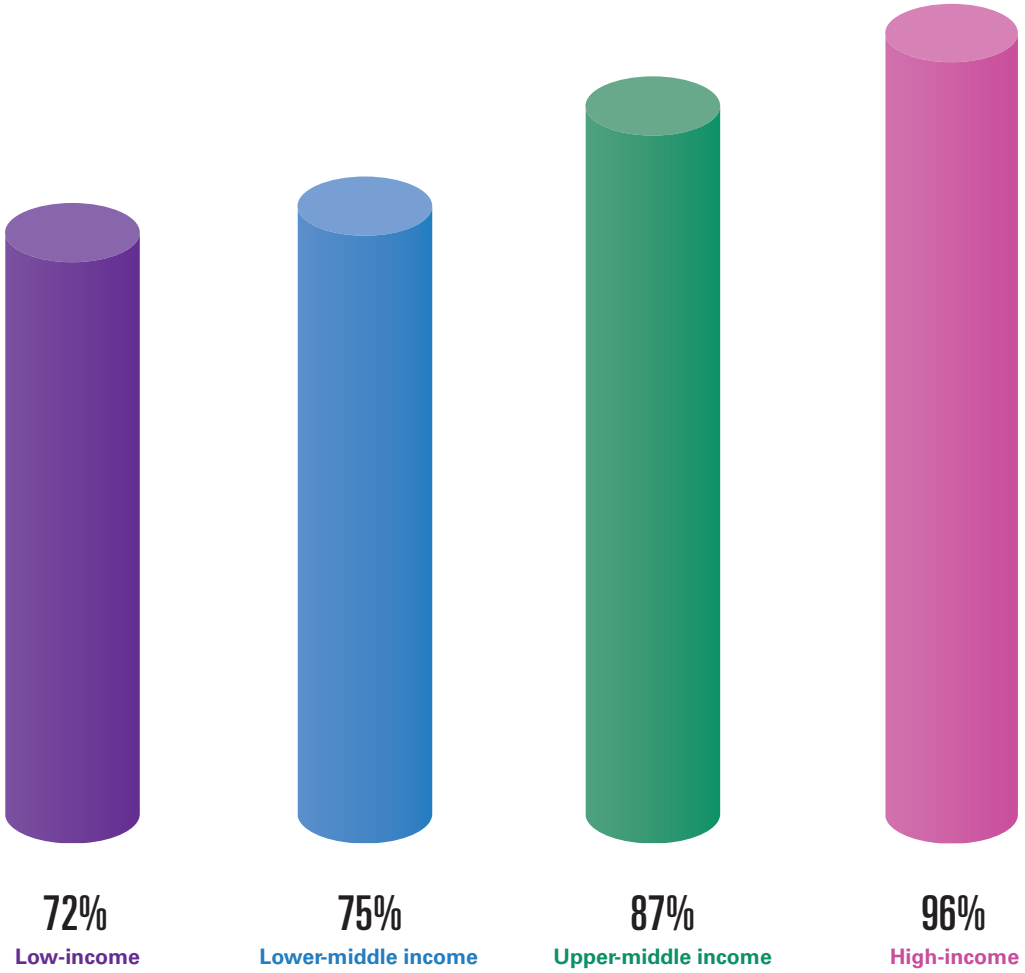
Number of children aged 2 to 4 years who have not played with their caregivers at home in the past three days (map) and percentage of children aged 2 to 4 years who have played with their caregivers at home in the past three days (circles), by region



Note: For more details on methods, data coverage and map disclaimer, see Technical notes.

Children in low-income countries are 25 per cent less likely to play with their caregivers compared with children in high-income countries

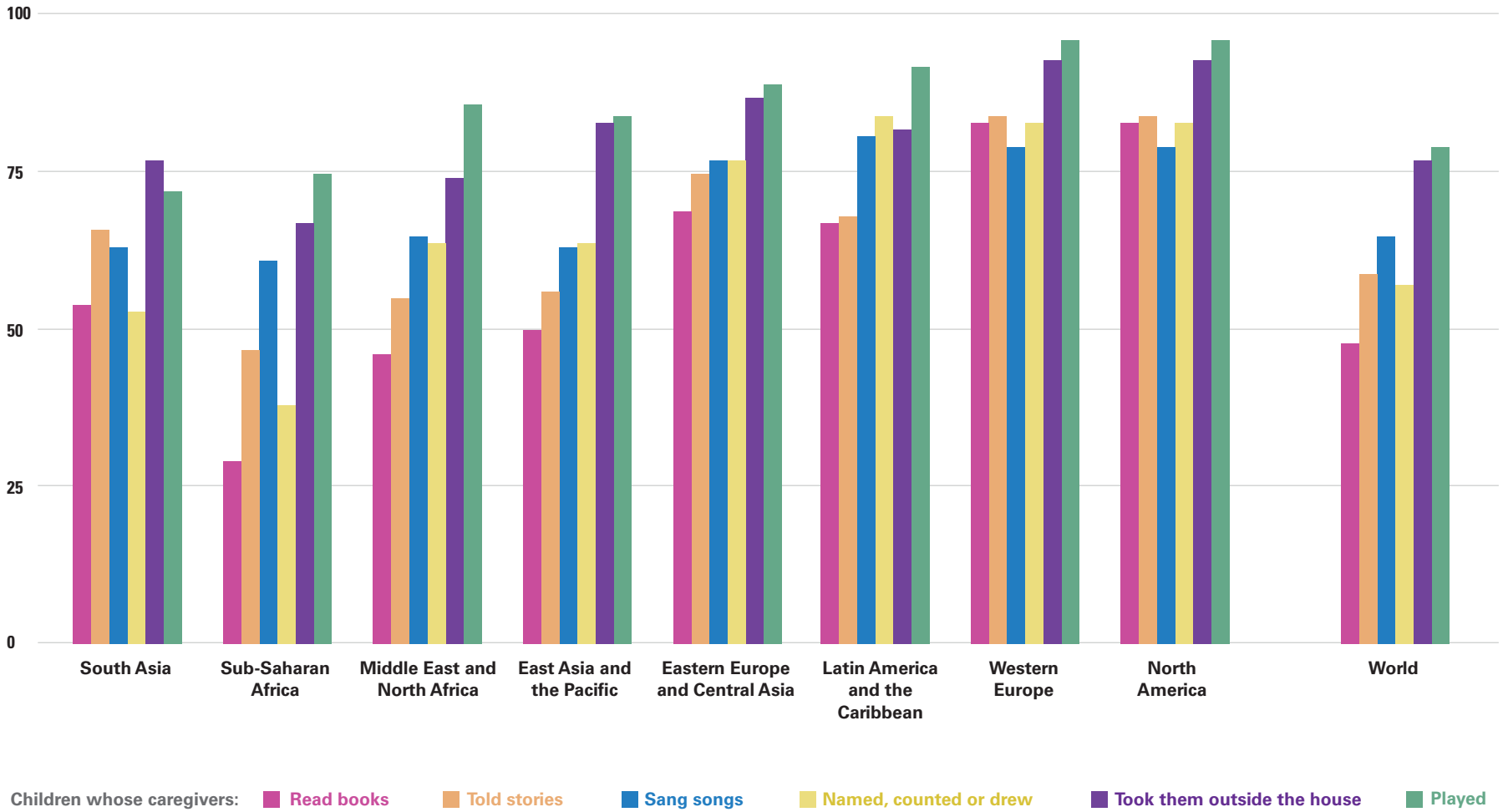
Percentage of children aged 2 to 4 years who have played with their caregivers at home in the past three days, by national income group



Notes: These estimates are based on the classification of economies by income groups according to 2024 gross national income per capita, calculated using the World Bank Atlas method and produced by the World Bank Group as of 1 July 2025. For more details on methods and data coverage, see Technical notes.

Playing is the most common way that caregivers engage in stimulating interactions with their children; across all regions, reading books is the least common activity

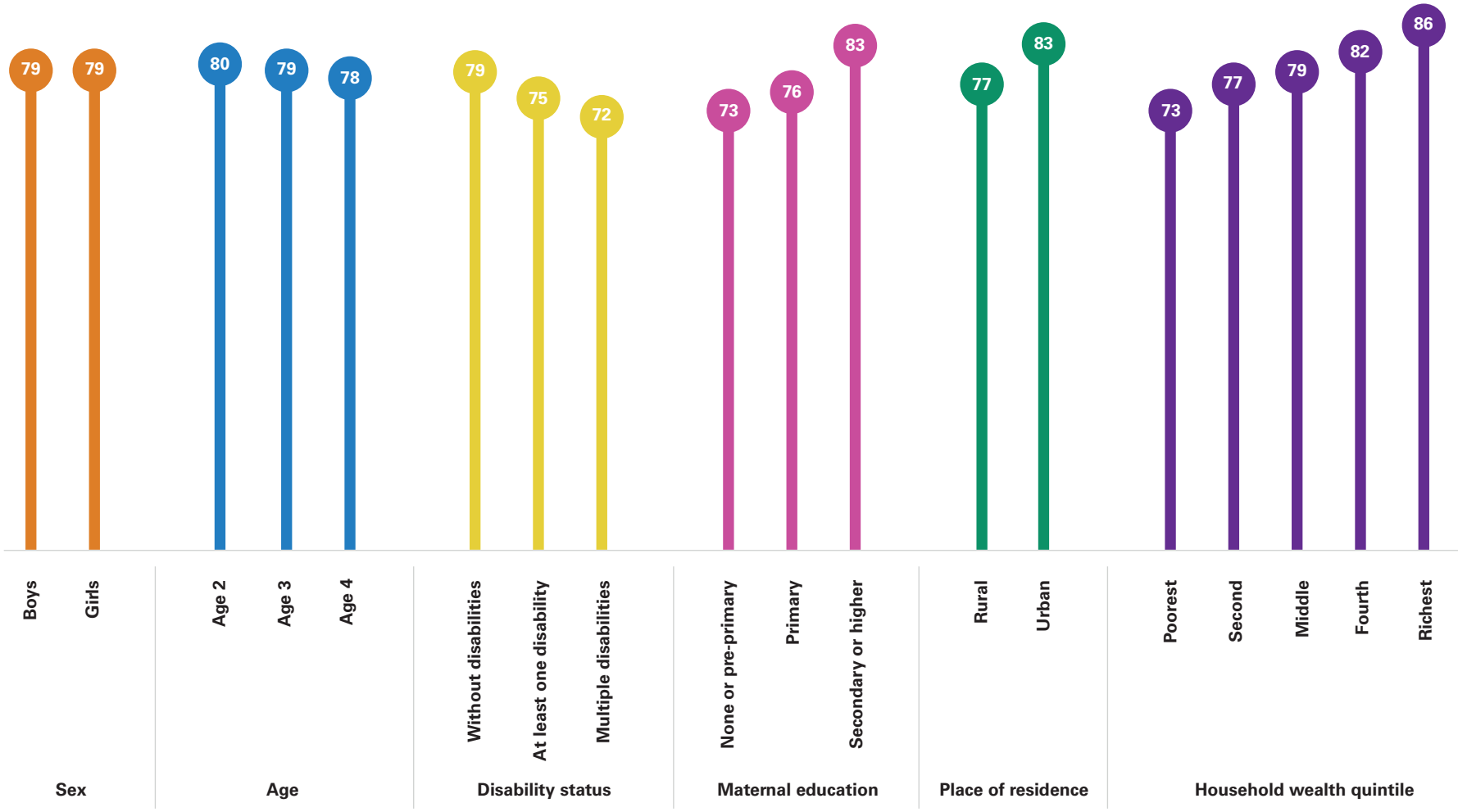
Percentage of children aged 2 to 4 years who have engaged in stimulating activities with caregivers at home in the past three days, by type of activity and region



Note: For more details on methods and data coverage, see Technical notes.

Children with multiple disabilities, those living in rural areas and in the poorest households, and whose mothers have lower levels of education are all less likely to engage in playful interactions with caregivers at home

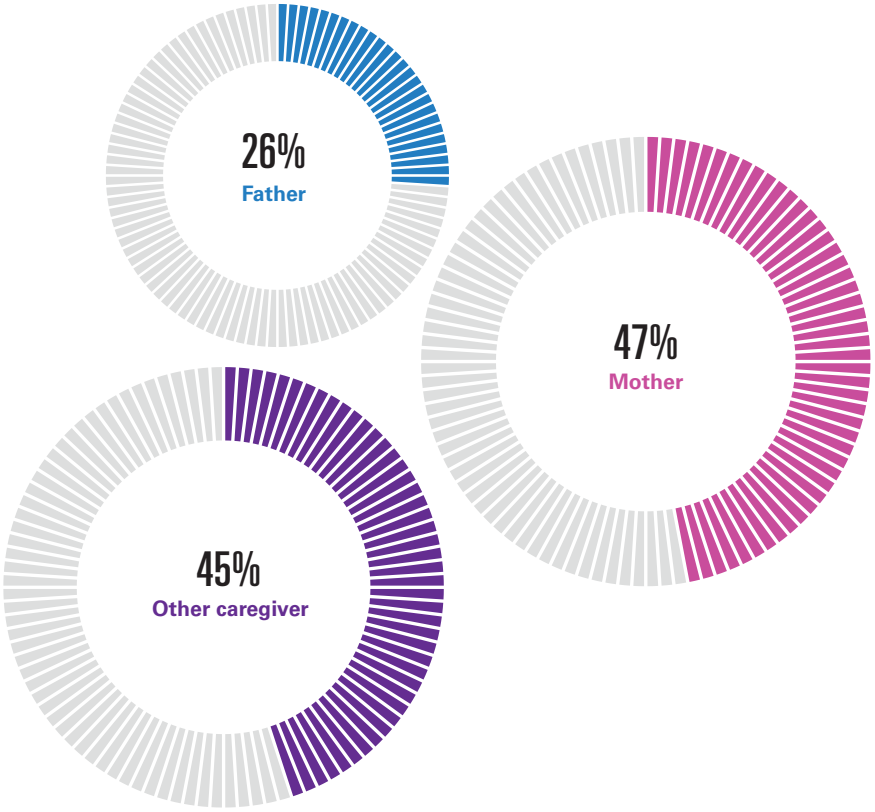
Percentage of children aged 2 to 4 years who have played with their caregivers at home in the past three days, by background characteristics



Notes: 'Children with disabilities' refers to those with difficulties in one or more of the following domains of functioning: seeing, even if using glasses; hearing, even if using a hearing aid; walking, even if using equipment or assistance; understanding or being understood when speaking; picking up small objects with their hands; learning things; playing; and managing emotions. Children with multiple disabilities include children who have difficulties functioning in more than one of the domains. For more details on methods and data coverage, see Technical notes.

While the proportion of children who play with their mothers or with other caregivers in the home is similar, children are nearly half as likely to play with their fathers

Percentage of children aged 2 to 4 years who have played with their caregivers at home in the past three days, by relationship to caregivers



BOX 4

Gender dynamics of play

The way children play today has changed alongside historical shifts in family structures, safety concerns, commercialization of toys and changing social norms around what constitutes 'good parenting'. These global dynamics and trends that have shaped play over the decades also carry important implications for how boys and girls play and for the disproportionate burden of unpaid parenting shouldered by mothers.

Although all children play, not all children play in the same way. Research has identified a 'play gap': Parents tend to encourage boys to play with certain items, such as blocks and science kits, more often than girls.[28] Mothers are more likely to engage in pretend play with their daughters, not with their sons. Fathers are more likely to play rough with their sons but not with their daughters.[29] This discrepancy can reinforce gender stereotypes. And playthings for boys usually focus on competition, problem-solving and spatial reasoning, while toys for girls more often promote domesticity and nurturing.[30]

When we limit the way children play based on their gender, we miss a vital chance to connect. A boy who is discouraged from 'pretend play' misses out on its benefits, such as bonding and creativity, just as a girl kept away from building blocks misses the opportunity to master spatial skills.

When we limit the way children play based on their gender, we miss a vital chance to connect.

Across cultures, prevailing gender norms are also likely to shape boys' and girls' play in different ways. For example, the disproportionate burden of unpaid work on girls may leave less time for play. In addition, girls have generally been found to re-enact themes related to social and domestic activities as part of their play.[31] They also tend to demonstrate more varied pretend play than boys.[32] Boys may be granted greater independent mobility and have less supervision during play. They also have been found to take up more space as they play and be more likely to play farther away from school buildings or from home.[33]

Findings from high-income countries such as Australia, Canada, United States and several countries in Western Europe suggest that mothers tend to spend more time with children than fathers, including time at play.[34] The higher the mother's level of education, the more she engages in structured or educational play, such as reading, playing music, teaching songs, drawing, painting and playing sports or indoor games.[35] Even though an increasing number of women in high-income countries now work part- or full-time jobs, several studies have shown that employed mothers today spend as much or more time in active childcare, including play, than stay-at-home mothers did a few generations ago.[36] Today, many mothers replace previously unstructured activities such as watching television or 'hanging out' with a more deliberate use of time and play.[37] This could be linked to the rise of more intensive parenting and increased demands and expectations on parents to cultivate their children's cognitive and social development through engaged and educational play.

Across all countries, regardless of national income level, the reasons why mothers tend to take on more childcare than fathers include factors such as work arrangements, parental leave policies and cultural attitudes towards gender and parenting. An analysis of time-use data in Australia, Denmark, France and Italy found that even in homes where fathers have only part-time jobs, mothers still spend more time caring for their children.[38] The way fathers and mothers spend their time in unpaid

work at home also differs, with fathers' involvement tending to be concentrated in more interactive and recreational activities such as play, while mothers continue to assume a disproportionate share of managing routines, supervising activities and engaging in time-sensitive caregiving tasks.[39]

As with mothers, fathers with higher levels of education have been found to spend more time with their children, including time at play, compared with fathers with lower levels of education. A study conducted in Spain found that fathers with a college degree were more likely to engage in interactive care, such as reading or educational play.[40] Other studies have also found that fathers tend to care for and play with their children more on weekends, with mothers taking on a greater share of childcare on weekdays.[41]

Research has identified a strong positive relationship between a father's engagement in stimulating play and a child's development.[42] However, fathers still spend significantly less time with their children than mothers, and even interventions designed to improve parenting skills are overwhelmingly directed at mothers.[43]

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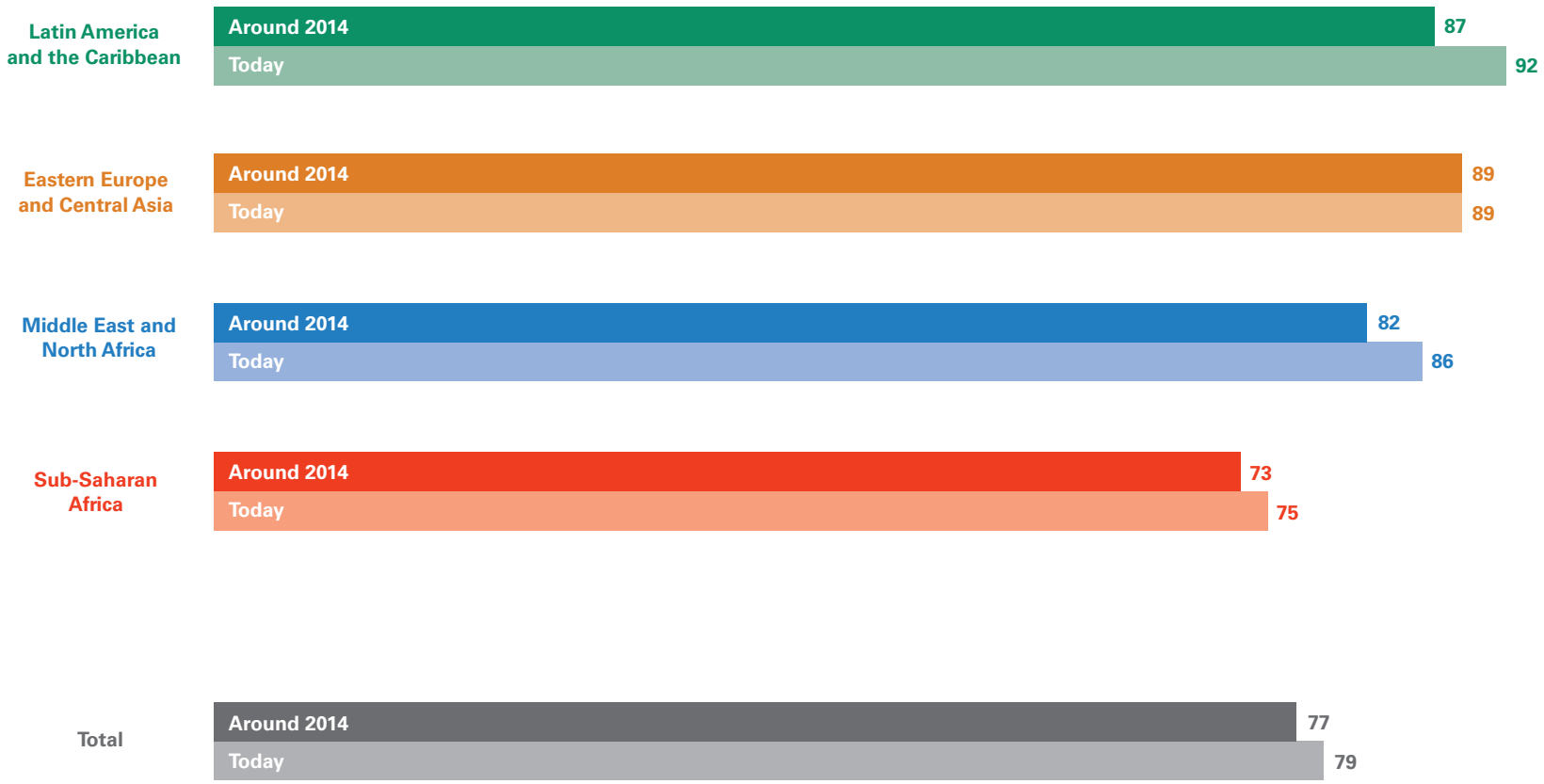
In countries with data and across selected regions, children who play with caregivers are more likely to be developmentally on track than children who do not play with caregivers

Percentage of children aged 2 to 4 years who are developmentally on track in health, learning and psychosocial well-being, by whether they have played with their caregivers at home in the past three days and by region

Notes: This analysis should not be interpreted as indicating a causal relationship. In addition, this association does not control for other potentially confounding factors. For more details on methods and data coverage, see Technical notes.

Overall and across selected regions, the proportion of children who play with caregivers at home has remained practically the same over time

Percentage of children aged 2 to 4 years who have played with their caregivers at home in the past three days around 2014 and today, by region



Note: For more details on methods and data coverage, see Technical notes.

PLAYTHINGS AT HOME

CURRENT LEVELS AND TRENDS

Playthings include homemade toys such as dolls, cars or other toys made at home; toys from a shop/store or manufactured toys; and household objects such as bowls or pots, or objects found outside such as sticks, rocks, animal shells or leaves (that are used as playthings).

Good quality playthings are those that are safe, developmentally appropriate, versatile and open-ended. They should support children's development by fostering imagination and sparking creativity and by promoting skill development and cognitive growth as opposed to providing passive entertainment. More important than the source is the function of the toy and whether it is beneficial for child development and learning.

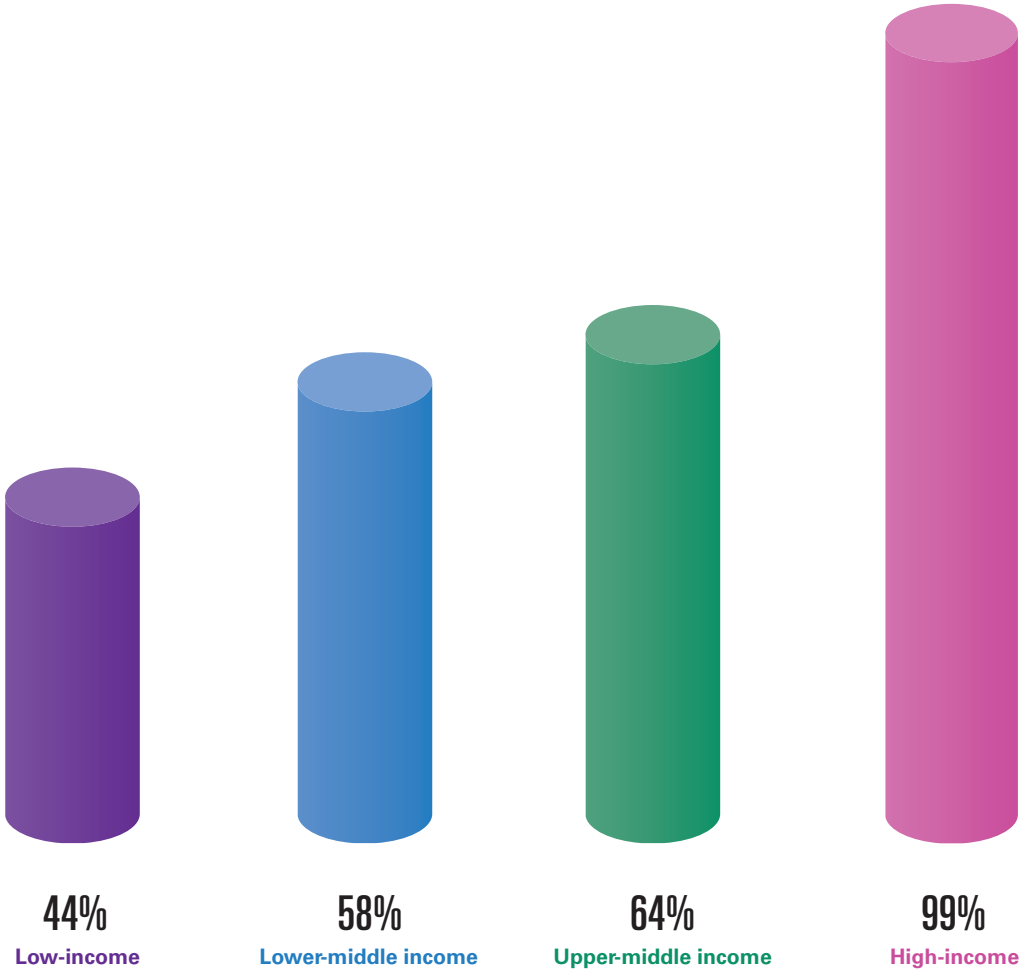
Worldwide, over 90 million children under age 5 (or 1 in 7) are without playthings at home. Of all children with no playthings at home, 2 in 3 live in sub-Saharan Africa and South Asia

Number of children under age 5 who do not have playthings at home (map) and percentage of children under age 5 who have two or more types of playthings at home (circles), by region

Notes: For the regions of North America and Western Europe, levels are assumed to be 100 per cent according to research from selected countries in these regions suggesting that toy ownership is universal. For more details on methods, data coverage and map disclaimer, see Technical notes.

Less than half of children in low-income countries have a sufficient variety of playthings at home compared with practically all children in high-income countries

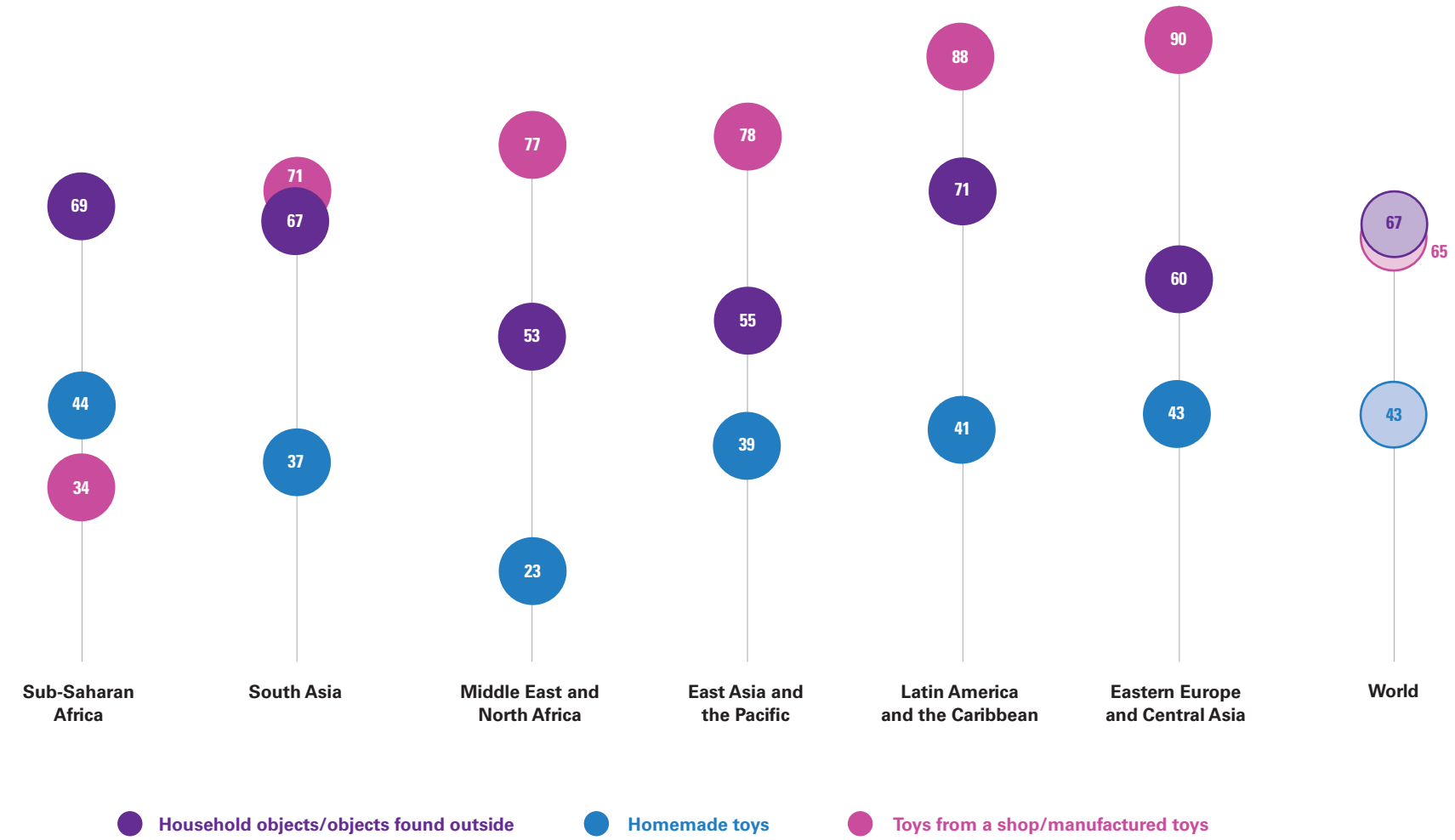
Percentage of children under age 5 who have two or more types of playthings at home, by national income group



Notes: These estimates are based on the classification of economies by income groups according to 2024 gross national income per capita, calculated using the World Bank Atlas method and produced by the World Bank Group as of 1 July 2025. For more details on methods and data coverage, see Technical notes.

While toys from a store and household objects are the most common types of playthings globally, regional variations are found. Children in sub-Saharan Africa are most likely to play with household objects or things found outside the home, while children in most other regions typically play with store-bought toys

Percentage of children under age 5 who have two or more types of playthings at home, by type of plaything and region



Note: For more details on methods and data coverage, see Technical notes.

Children living in the poorest households and in rural areas, and whose mothers have little or no education, are all less likely to have an adequate variety of playthings at home

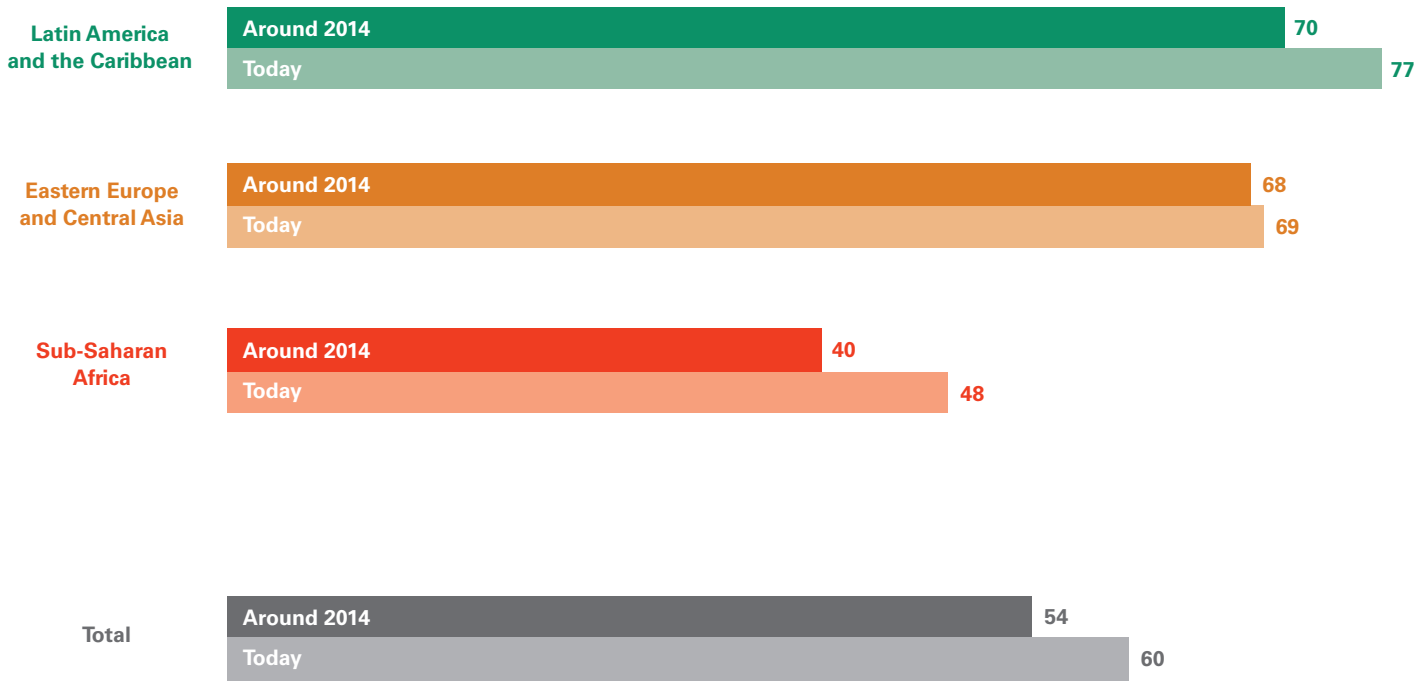
Percentage of children under age 5 who have two or more types of playthings at home, by background characteristics

The significantly lower level observed among infants under 1 is likely due to the fact that the available information largely reflects types of playthings that tend to be more typical for children aged 1 and older.

Note: For more details on methods and data coverage, see Technical notes.

Overall, and particularly in sub-Saharan Africa and Latin America and the Caribbean, it appears slightly more common today for children to have playthings at home than a decade ago

Percentage of children under age 5 who have two or more types of playthings at home around 2014 and today, by region



Note: For more details on methods and data coverage, see Technical notes.

FROM DATA TO ACTION

A GLOBAL MOVEMENT TO ELEVATE PLAY

Play in children's lives is not a luxury; it is a necessity. Ensuring that play is a sacred and core part of every child's life is a shared responsibility.

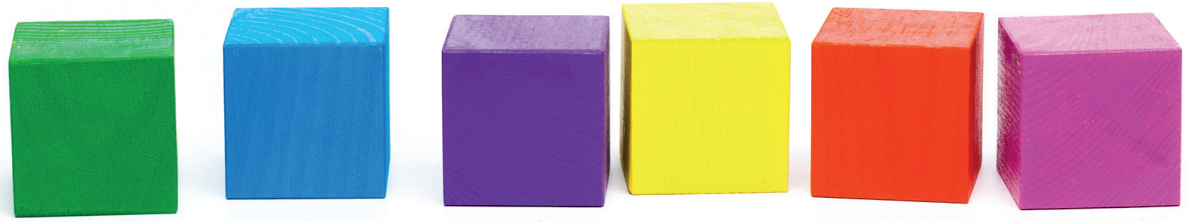
Today, 95 countries – about half the global total – collect internationally comparable data on whether children have the opportunity to play with their caregivers at home. Only 10 countries did so just two decades ago, when such standardized data were first collected globally. This steady expansion testifies to a growing commitment to better understand all the factors and experiences that help children thrive, beyond the basics required for survival such as good health, adequate nutrition, and safe water and sanitation.

It is important to keep in mind that while the data indicate disparities in children's play opportunities and access to playthings at home, they could also reflect structural inequities that can limit caregivers' capacity to provide nurturing, play-based interactions. The data presented in this publication underscore an urgent need to create an ecosystem of support for caregivers that includes supportive policies, systems and programmes such as parental leave, social protection, quality early childhood education and evidence-based parenting interventions, so they have the time, resources and access to services to engage meaningfully in their children's development.

This publication is a first step towards using the available data to document how many children still miss out on play as a central part of childhood. It demonstrates the feasibility and importance of monitoring play at the global level and showcases that internationally comparable data for a large number of countries are readily available. It is also a call to apply this evidence to protect and preserve children's precious time and spaces devoted to play.

INTERNATIONAL DAY OF PLAY

Every year on 11 June the world celebrates the International Day of Play, a key global moment that spotlights play as a cornerstone of childhood. UNICEF calls on governments, businesses and other stakeholders to ensure every child has access to safe and environmentally healthy spaces to play, while also strengthening the foundations of play by supporting playful parenting and expanding access to early childhood education grounded in learning through play. Together, these actions can turn the right to play into a reality for every child.



Michael has never had an easy life. He grew up in an orphanage. As an adult, he fled the violence convulsing South Sudan, taking refuge in Uganda with his wife and their two children.

In disrupted lives, routine restores a sense of safety and normalcy, something Michael knows well. Each day, he plays with his children. "I will always continue to play. It helps children," he says simply.

A game with pebbles on the ground becomes a moment for family bonding, joy and teaching. Michael cares for his children by giving them more than just healthy diets, a good education and a safe place to live – he makes time to engage in the playful interactions they need to thrive.

TECHNICAL NOTES

Indicators

Two types of indicators are used in this publication: burden and prevalence. 'Burden' refers to the total number of children who have not played with caregivers at home in the past three days and do not have playthings at home; 'prevalence' refers to the proportion of children who have played with caregivers at home in the past three days and have two or more types of playthings at home. While prevalence is an indication of the likelihood that children will benefit from play and the availability of a sufficient variety of playthings at home, the burden indicates the magnitude of the issue – that is, the number of children deprived of play and playthings at home.

Play and stimulating activities with caregivers

Definition

The indicator on play captures whether children have played with caregivers at home in the three days preceding the survey interview. Information is also captured on whether children have engaged in any of the following stimulating activities with caregivers at home in the three days preceding the survey interview: reading books or looking at picture books; telling stories, including lullabies; singing songs; going outside the home; and naming, counting or drawing things.

Data sources

Multiple Indicator Cluster Surveys are the main data source for the majority of comparable national-level prevalence estimates of caregiver engagement in play and other stimulating activities. These data are collected in MICS through a standard question administered to the mother or primary caregiver (in situations where the mother is deceased or not living in the household) of children aged 2 to 4 years. The question asks whether any person aged 15 or older living in the household engaged in any of the six activities with the child in the past three days. If the child has been engaged in the activity, information is also recorded on whether it was the mother, father or other person in the household who did the activity with the child (multiple responses are allowed).

Some Demographic and Health Surveys, as well as other national surveys, have included the standard version of the MICS question or a slightly adapted version.

Coverage and methods

The prevalence of play and other types of stimulating activities with caregivers at the global level represents a population-weighted average of the regional estimates. The burden figure reflects global prevalence of children who do not play with their caregivers at home applied to the global population.

The prevalence of play and other types of stimulating activities with caregivers at the regional level represents population-weighted averages of the national estimates for countries with available data within each region. The burden figure reflects regional prevalence of children who do not play with their caregivers at home applied to the regional population.

The estimates on stimulating activities with caregivers, including play, are based on data collected between 2010 and 2024 for a subset of 95 countries covering 60 per cent of the global population of children aged 2 to 4 years. Population coverage was above 50 per cent for Eastern Europe and Central Asia and for sub-Saharan Africa, and just below this threshold for Latin America and the Caribbean (46 per cent). Population coverage for East Asia and the Pacific, Middle East and North Africa, and South Asia was below 50 per cent due to the lack of nationally representative and comparable data for the most populous country in each of these regions. An effort was made to find research on children's engagement in play with caregivers in these contexts. However, in light of the limited availability of any prevalence estimates, it was considered a reasonable approach to assume that prevalence levels in these countries are likely to be similar to those observed among neighbouring countries in the same region.

For two regions for which there was no country with comparable survey data (North America and Western Europe), an alternate methodology was used. The estimates were informed by the regional prevalence for Eastern Europe and Central Asia, with an adjustment to remove countries with observed prevalence levels that were significantly different from the regional average.

The estimate for high-income countries was calculated on the basis of available data for 10 countries (from several regions) and by applying the regional prevalence for North America and Western Europe to those high-income countries within these two regions to account for low data coverage.

Adjustments

In a subset of 27 countries, the latest data on stimulating activities with caregivers, including play, are from older sources and only refer to children aged 3 to 4 years. An assessment was conducted to evaluate whether there was any significant difference in regional levels across age groups, calculated on the basis of countries with complete data by age. Overall, the differences

across all regions were minimal and would not significantly impact the resulting estimates. Therefore, no adjustment was introduced for this subset of countries.

To account for countries that were missing information on any of the background variables, regional values were adjusted to align with the total values, which were based on a larger set of countries. This adjustment was informed by a ratio of two values for each region: the total value based only on countries with complete data within each disaggregation category and the total based on all countries with data. For all levels of disaggregation, the gaps were not large, and the adjustment for most regions was minor. The resulting global estimates represent population-weighted averages of these adjusted regional estimates.

Trend analysis

Both global and regional trendlines were informed by a subset of 62 countries with broadly comparable data at two points in time, representing 28 per cent of the global population of children aged 2 to 4 years. The baseline value describes levels around 2014, reflecting data with a reference year within five years of 2014, or the earliest point available. Ratios of baseline values to latest values were calculated at global and regional levels for the subset of countries with trend data, and these ratios were then applied to the current global and regional values based on a larger set of countries.

Population coverage was deemed too low for East Asia and the Pacific and South Asia; therefore, no trend is presented for these two regions. Population coverage for the remaining regions was as follows: 55 per cent for Eastern Europe and Central Asia, 39 per cent for Latin America and the Caribbean, 34 per cent for Middle East and North Africa, and 49 per cent for sub-Saharan Africa. For regions with population coverage below 50 per cent, caution is warranted when drawing conclusions from the trend analysis.

Analysis of the relationship between developmental outcomes and play

A subset of 87 countries had data on both children's developmental outcomes and children's engagement in play with caregivers. This subset of countries represents 31 per cent of the global population of children aged 2 to 4 years. Population coverage was deemed too low for East Asia and the Pacific, Middle East and North Africa, and South Asia; therefore, no estimates are presented for these regions. Population coverage for the remaining regions was as follows: 63 per cent for Eastern Europe and Central Asia, 43 per cent for Latin America and the Caribbean, and 57 per cent for sub-Saharan Africa.

Playthings at home

Definition

The standard indicator on playthings captures whether children have a sufficient variety of play materials in the home. This is defined as having at least two of the following: homemade toys such as dolls, cars or other toys made at home; toys from a shop/store or manufactured toys; or household objects (such as bowls or pots) or objects found outside (such as sticks, rocks, animal shells or leaves) that are used as playthings. Therefore, for this indicator, the prevalence reflects those children with two or more playthings while the burden captures those children without any playthings.

Data sources

Multiple Indicator Cluster Surveys are the main data source for the majority of comparable national-level prevalence estimates on the availability of playthings at home. These data are collected in MICS through a standard question administered to the mother or primary caregiver (in situations where the mother is deceased or not living in the household) of children under age 5 that asks whether the child plays at home with any of the three types of playthings.

Some Demographic and Health Surveys, as well as other national surveys, have included the standard version of the MICS question or a slightly adapted version.

Coverage and methods

The prevalence of playthings at the global level represents a population-weighted average of the regional estimates. The burden figure reflects global prevalence of children without any playthings applied to the global population.

The prevalence of playthings at the regional level represents population-weighted averages of the national estimates for countries with available data within each region. The burden figure reflects regional prevalence of children without any playthings applied to the regional population.

All of the estimates are based on data collected between 2010 and 2024 for a subset of 93 countries covering 60 per cent of the global population of children under age 5. Population coverage was above 50 per cent for Eastern Europe and Central Asia and for sub-Saharan Africa, and just below this threshold for Latin America and the Caribbean (46 per cent). Population coverage for East Asia and the Pacific, Middle East and North Africa, and South Asia was below 50 per cent due to the lack of nationally representative and comparable data for the most populous country in each of these regions. An effort was made to find research on the availability of playthings for children in these contexts. However,

in light of the limited availability of prevalence estimates, it was considered a reasonable approach to assume that prevalence levels in these countries are likely to be similar to those observed among neighbouring countries in the same region.

For two regions for which there was no country with comparable survey data (North America and Western Europe), an assumption was made that the prevalence of children under age 5 without any playthings at home is below 1 per cent, informed by research from selected countries in these regions suggesting that toy ownership is universal.

The estimate for high-income countries was calculated on the basis of available data for 10 countries (from several regions) and by applying the assumed regional prevalence of 100 per cent for North America and Western Europe to those high-income countries within these two regions to account for low data coverage.

Adjustments

To account for countries that were missing information on any of the background variables, regional values were adjusted to align with the total values, which were based on a larger set of countries. This adjustment was informed by a ratio of two values for each region: the total value based only on countries with complete data within each disaggregation category and the total based on all countries with data. For all levels of disaggregation, the gaps were not large, and the adjustment for most regions was minor. The resulting global estimates represent population-weighted averages of these adjusted regional estimates.

Trend analysis

Both global and regional trendlines were informed by a subset of 58 countries with broadly comparable data at two points in time, representing 27 per cent of the global population of children under age 5. The baseline value describes levels around 2014, reflecting data with a reference year within five years of 2014, or the earliest point available. Ratios of baseline values to latest values were calculated at global and regional levels for the subset of countries with trend data, and these ratios were then applied to the current global and regional values based on a larger set of countries.

Population coverage for the regional trend analysis was deemed too low for East Asia and the Pacific, Middle East and North Africa, and South Asia; therefore, no trend is presented for these three regions. Population coverage for the remaining regions was as follows: 34 per cent for Eastern Europe and Central Asia, 39 per cent for Latin America and the Caribbean, and 48 per cent for sub-Saharan Africa. Because population coverage for all these regions is below 50 per cent, caution is warranted when drawing conclusions from the trend analysis.

General notes on interpretation

Confidence intervals are not shown in this publication. Caution is therefore warranted in interpreting the results since apparent differences between regions or among groups may not be significant. Key messages were developed taking confidence intervals into account; in cases where the title indicates a difference among regions or population groups, it has been confirmed as statistically significant.

Rounding convention

Values below 100 million are rounded to the nearest million.

UNICEF regional classification

Regional estimates are presented according to the regional classification used for reporting by UNICEF. A full listing of countries and areas by UNICEF regional groupings can be found in *The State of the World's Children 2025 Statistical Compendium*, UNICEF, November 2025.

Map disclaimer

Maps are stylized and not to scale. They do not reflect a position by UNICEF on the legal status of any country or territory or the delimitation of any frontiers.

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