Author’s response to reviews

Title: A qualitative study reporting maternal perceptions of the importance of play for healthy growth and development in the first two years of life

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Reviewer 1:

• In the "statement of problem" section, it is necessary to consider the importance of exploring parents' perceptions about play and physical activity before mentioning the purpose of the study.
  o In the introduction, the reader is first introduced to the importance of play in early childhood, as well as why parents’ perceptions are crucial for guiding these behaviours (paragraph one). Thereafter, in paragraph three – the purpose of the study is mentioned.

• It is necessary to clarify in detail the criteria for level of participation and selection of participants for the in-depth interview stage.
  o More detail has been added to the participants, and data collection section to outline how participants were selected for each stage of data collection.

• Why isn't screen viewing coded as a subtheme of play barriers, given that it's not directly related to the play?
  o Thank you for this suggestion. We have considered this option, but given that screen time is not necessarily a barrier to play, but rather an alternate activity we believe it should remain separate. Furthermore, screen viewing was discussed as a separate topic, and thus emerged as a major theme rather than a subtheme under barriers to play – thus we believe it better to create the themes and subthemes based on how the data emerged.
Instead of repeating the sentences related to the findings, it is better to analyze and interpret the findings in the discussion section.

Thank you. The discussion has been reworked to include more interpretation of findings and analysis in relation to other studies and cross context comparisons. Some of the findings need to be mentioned in order to introduce the topic of discussion for each paragraph, and in order to relate the present findings to those from other studies.

Qualitative study cannot be the basis for comparing and presenting a theory; therefore, it is better to correct lines 21 to 27 of page fourteen on the comparison of recognizing the importance of physical activity.

These sections have been changed accordingly.

According to the mission of qualitative studies, in the conclusion section, it is better to present questions and hypotheses for future research.

Thank you for pointing this out. We have amended the conclusion as requested.

Reviewer 2:

The manuscript describes a qualitative study to understand how mothers perceive play and physical activity during the first two years of life, the ways to promote this behavior and its barriers. However, there are some suggestions that can improve the paper. Thank you for giving an opportunity for me to review this manuscript.

The following are some of my suggestions for improvements:

Introduction:

The introduction is rather poor, with no specific references to other socioeconomic contexts. A broader discussion to different conditions (e.g. Europe, China, Russia) is necessary. More information about the context of Africa would make a better impression. For example, in the last paragraph the authors provided general information about the low- and middle-income settings, but they can specifically more explain it in the context of Africa. The authors could more explain about the "social and family set up, and the structural environment (lack of safe space)" in the last paragraph.

We have addressed these issues by restructuring the introduction, as well as contextualising these findings with other settings. We have also expanded upon the South African setting and the context within which children are living.

Method:

In what year was the study conducted? The authors have to mention year of conducting the study.

Thank you, the dates of the study have now been included in the methods section.

Please clarify the eligibility criteria for the participants.
Thank you, the eligibility criteria have now been included in the participants section
• The authors did not clearly explain about the sampling method. What was the sampling method?
  - The sampling method has now been expanded upon in the methods section
• Also, the author didn't write about the inclusion and exclusion criteria
  - Thank you, the eligibility criteria have now been included in the participants section
• The number of FGD and IDIs should be clearly mentioned.
  - As stated in the methods section under data collection, 3 FGDs and 12 IDIs were conducted.

For the figure 1, more explanation about cross-cutting topics is necessary.
  - More information on the development of this framework has been provided in the methods section (page 6).

Results:

• The authors should mention the number along with the percent. For example, "Most of the mothers (68%) had more than one child. Most children were male (63%)". Also, this sentence is not clear for reader: "were aged 11(7) months". It is not clear what are 11 and 7. Are they mean and standard deviation of children's age?
  - The number has been included along with the percentages.
  - Yes, these are mean(SD), which has now been stated in the sentence for clarity.
• It is essential to include interviewee's quotations to make statements coherent and strengthen conclusions. For instance: the theme "Gender bias in play" need to be proven based on empirical data. It is suggested that some of the important quotations by themes and sub-themes also mentioned in the text results
  - Thank you, some of the exemplar quotations have now been added in text also.

Discussion:

• Address whether there appear to be any cross-country differences or differences between studies done among the same populations. For example in line 26 in the discussion section the authors discussed about the role of gender in the type of play. The authors could discuss is there any cultural reason, e.g., cultural norms for this finding
  - Thank you. We have now considered additional cross-country comparisons, yet are limited by the paucity of information on this topic, particularly in South Africa. We have attempted to further address the cultural norms behind these findings, yet further research is required to fully understand these norms, as they were not addressed extensively in our discussions and we were not able to find much research on this topic locally.

• In the study limitation, the author did not mention about generalizability of the study.
Thank you for pointing this out, we have now discussed the generalizability in the limitations section