

PLAYGROUPS AND CHANGING EARLY CHILDHOOD PARADIGMS

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PLAYGROUPS AND CHANGING EARLY CHILDHOOD PARADIGMS

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Playgroups and Changing Early Childhood Paradigms

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DECLARATION OF ORIGINALITY

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- this thesis contains no material that has been submitted or accepted for a degree or diploma in any other educational institution;
- this is a true copy of the thesis approved by my advisor and thesis committee at Boğaziçi University, including final revisions required by them.

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ABSTRACT

Playgroups and Changing Early Childhood Paradigms

This thesis explores how playgroups in Istanbul reflect shifting paradigms in early childhood practices by analysing mothers' experiences from varied socio-economic backgrounds. Utilizing qualitative research methods, it investigates why mothers participate in these groups and how their perceptions differ or align across social class divisions. In-depth interviews with 31 mothers, from both municipality-run and private playgroups, provide nuanced insights into their motivations, perceived benefits, and the socio-cultural meanings attached to playgroup involvement. Findings reveal a strong consensus among mothers that playgroups significantly enhance children's socialization and independence while offering critical social support and reducing isolation for mothers themselves. Despite their differing class backgrounds, mothers demonstrate notable convergence rather than divergence in their early childhood experiences and concerns. However, class-based differences are evident in the resources mothers access and the types of enrichment they prioritize, illustrating how early childhood practices contribute to social reproduction and class distinction. This research contributes to understanding the interplay between class habitus, parenting strategies, and urban dynamics, emphasizing the importance of equitable early childhood services in mitigating class-based disparities in children's developmental trajectories.

ÖZET

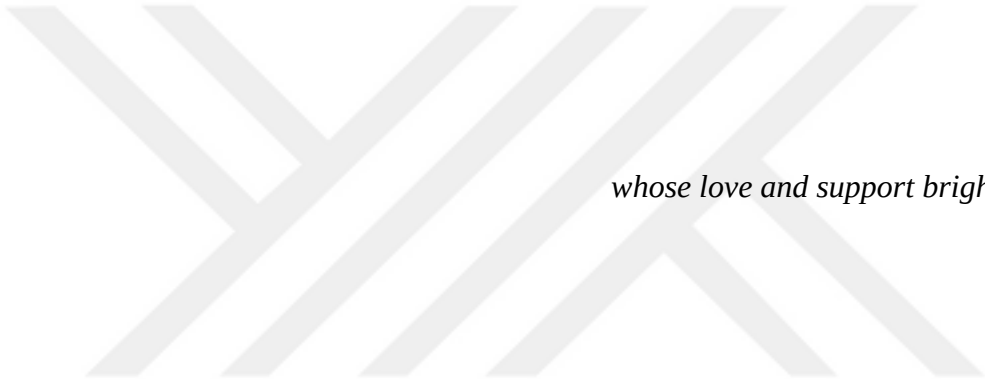
Oyun Grupları ve Değişen Erken Dönem Çocukluk Paradigmaları

Bu tez, İstanbul'daki oyun gruplarının erken çocukluk pratiklerinde değişen paradigmaları nasıl yansıttığını, farklı sosyo-ekonomik geçmişlere sahip annelerin deneyimleri üzerinden incelemektedir. Nitel araştırma yöntemlerini kullanan çalışma, annelerin oyun gruplarına katılma sebeplerini ve sosyal sınıflara göre algılarının nasıl farklılaştığını ya da benzeştiğini araştırmaktadır. Belediye ve özel sektörde düzenlenen oyun gruplarına katılan toplam 31 anneyle gerçekleştirilen derinlemesine görüşmeler; annelerin motivasyonları, oyun gruplarından elde ettikleri kazanımlar ve oyun grubu katılımına yükledikleri sosyo-kültürel anlamlara dair ayrıntılı veriler sunmaktadır. Bulgular, annelerin çocuklarının sosyalleşme ve bağımsızlaşmasında oyun gruplarının önemli rol oynadığı konusunda güçlü bir fikir birliğine sahip olduklarını, aynı zamanda annelerin sosyal destek bulmalarına ve izolasyonlarının azalmasına da katkı sağladığını ortaya koymaktadır. Farklı sınıfsal geçmişlerden gelmelerine rağmen anneler, erken çocukluk deneyimleri ve kaygılarında birbirlerinden uzaklaşmaktan çok ortak noktalarda buluşmaktadırlar. Bununla birlikte, sınıfsal temelde annelerin erişebildikleri kaynaklarda ve tercih ettikleri etkinlik türlerinde farklılıklar ortaya çıkmakta, erken çocukluk pratiklerinin toplumsal yeniden üretime ve sınıfsal ayrımların pekişmesine nasıl katkıda bulunduğu görülmektedir. Bu çalışma, sınıfsal habitus, ebeveynlik stratejileri ve kent dinamikleri arasındaki ilişkiye ışık tutarak çocukların gelişim süreçlerindeki sınıfsal eşitsizliklerin azaltılmasında adil erken çocukluk hizmetlerinin önemini vurgulamaktadır.

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DEDICATION



*To Nazım,
whose love and support brighten my life.*

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION AND METHODOLOGY

1.1 Motivations and aim of the thesis

In Istanbul's rapidly changing urban landscape, early childhood experiences of children are gaining increasing attention. Among emerging trends is the rise of playgroups; organized gatherings where mothers and their young children meet regularly. It is important to recognize that women's withdrawal from the workforce in Turkey following childbirth is driven significantly by structural constraints rather than personal choice. Unpaid caregiving duties, particularly childcare responsibilities, are a primary reason women leave paid employment. According to BBVA Research (2022), approximately half of Turkish women not participating in the labor market identified household responsibilities as their main obstacle to employment, a reason not cited by men at all, underscoring the gendered division of unpaid labor. Additionally, limited availability of childcare services intensifies this issue. For instance, OECD data indicate that less than 1% of Turkish children aged 0-2 are enrolled in early childhood education and care services, substantially below the OECD average of 36% (OECD, 2022). These structural barriers highlight the critical need for comprehensive childcare support policies to improve gender equality and women's labor market participation in Turkey. In this context, the importance of playgroups lies not only in the developmental benefits for children, but also in the way they shape the parenting journey and social support systems. By investigating why mothers join playgroups and how they experience them, this research sheds light on common themes and differences in practices within Istanbul's diverse society.

Given this context, the primary aim of this study is to capture and analyze mothers' narratives about early childhood and their playgroup experiences in Istanbul, and to explore how these experiences differ or converge across socio-economic lines. Using a sociological lens, the research focuses on patterns among mothers who attend different playgroups and illuminates how playgroups function as micro-communities that shape early childhood and motherhood in contemporary Istanbul. This research topic is not only socially significant but also personally meaningful to the researcher. Reflecting on my own experiences with playgroups and motherhood, I came to recognize that the personal and seemingly individual challenges I encountered were, in fact, collective and shaped by broader social structures. This realization served as a key source of motivation for the development of the thesis. Additionally, my occupational role as a sociologist who works with children and mothers in civil society and municipality settings for over 10 years was a significant driver of my interest. Combining personal insight with scholarly inquiry has allowed me to approach the topic with both empathy and rigor, seeking to understand how mothers from different classes navigate early childhood in Istanbul. In line with this aim, adopting a qualitative approach, this thesis examines Istanbul mothers' experiences to explore how participation in playgroups shapes their social networks and influences their parental self-confidence. By focusing on mothers' personal narratives, this study aims to fill an existing gap in the literature regarding the social and emotional impacts of playgroup involvement on urban parents. Thus, in summary, *Playgroups and Changing Early Childhood Paradigms* addresses a vital contemporary issue by weaving together mothers' personal narratives and sociological analysis. Furthermore, global sociological literature has increasingly highlighted how contemporary parenting practices, particularly mothering, have

become significantly intensified. Researchers emphasize that the expectations and efforts associated with raising children today have grown considerably, reflecting a shift toward more resource-intensive and child-focused parental involvement (Faircloth, 2014; Hays, 1996). Much of this literature, however, primarily focuses on middle-class families, as illustrated by Lareau's (2011) concept of 'concerted cultivation,' which captures middle-class parents' deliberate and structured approach to fostering children's development. This study contributes uniquely by demonstrating that such intensified parenting is also increasingly prevalent among lower-class families. Middle-class mothers, benefiting from flexible working conditions and greater economic resources, are commonly able to meet these heightened parenting demands. Yet, this research reveals that lower-class mothers also exert substantial efforts to engage in intensive parenting, driven by a strong commitment to accessing public resources such as municipal playgroups. The substantial time and energy lower-class mothers invest in securing and utilizing these limited public resources indicates that intensive parenting practices are permeating downward through the class hierarchy. Thus, lower-class mothers often expend even greater effort navigating institutional systems to fulfill contemporary parenting ideals, underscoring the depth and widespread nature of this cultural shift. In highlighting these intensified parenting dynamics across class lines, this thesis underscores the need for nuanced analyses that recognize how contemporary parenting practices both reflect and perpetuate social inequalities, laying the groundwork for a detailed methodological exploration in the following section.

1.2 Methodology

1.2.1 Research design and rationale

This study adopted a qualitative research design, using in-depth, semi-structured interviews as the primary method of data collection. A qualitative approach was chosen to capture the nuanced experiences, perceptions, and interpretations of mothers regarding early childhood development and playgroup participation. The research aims to understand how and why mothers engage with playgroups and perceive their impact on childrearing paradigms; these are questions best answered through rich narrative data rather than numerical measures. The flexibility of this qualitative design was essential for uncovering the sociological meanings and personal motivations behind playgroup involvement. Moreover, while international literature has examined the role of playgroups in providing social support to mothers, limited research exists on this phenomenon within Turkey, where cultural norms and familial support structures may differ significantly. This thesis addresses this gap by qualitatively investigating Istanbul mothers' lived experiences and narratives regarding their participation in playgroups. Through these personal accounts, the study aims to reveal whether and how playgroups contribute to mothers' social ties and parental confidence in Istanbul's distinctive cultural context. Given this cultural specificity and limited existing research, employing an exploratory qualitative approach was particularly warranted to build nuanced understanding from the ground up. By using open-ended interviews, the researcher aligned with an interpretivist paradigm that seeks to understand social phenomena through participants' lived experiences (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Overall, the qualitative design and interview methodology were well-suited to revealing the complex social and cultural dynamics of early childhood practices in Istanbul.

1.2.2 Participant selection and sampling

The study focused on mothers of young children (between 1 and 4 years of age) in Istanbul who were actively participating in playgroups, ensuring that all participants had direct experience with the phenomenon of interest. A purposive sampling strategy was used to select mothers from a variety of socio-economic backgrounds and different types of playgroup settings (Patton, 2002). In particular, the researcher sought to include roughly equal numbers of participants from two distinct playgroup contexts: municipality-run playgroups and privately-run playgroups. This approach was taken to capture a broad range of perspectives and to examine whether class or context might shape mothers' experiences. Purposive sampling, as a non-probability sampling technique, is frequently used in qualitative research to deliberately select individuals who are especially knowledgeable about the phenomenon of interest (Patton, 2002). Rather than emphasizing statistical representativeness, purposive sampling prioritizes depth and relevance, allowing for rich, information-dense insights. This strategy enabled the inclusion of mothers who could provide meaningful accounts of their playgroup experiences.

By intentionally varying factors such as the neighborhood, type of playgroup (free public services versus fee-based private programs), and curriculum emphasis (e.g., some private playgroups offering foreign language or specialized activities), the study aimed for a diverse sample that could illuminate commonalities and differences in early childhood paradigms and the mothers' experience. 31 mothers took part in the research. Of these, 15 mothers were recruited from municipal playgroup centers and 16 mothers were recruited from private playgroups around the city. The municipal group participants were accessed through an Istanbul Metropolitan Municipality Family Education Center (ISADEM) in Altınşehir

(Başakşehir district) and Boğazköy (Arnavutköy district), which offers free playgroup sessions. These neighborhoods were targeted due to mostly hosting lower-class backgrounds. The private playgroup participants were drawn from several different neighborhoods (mainly Bahçeşehir and Beşiktaş) and generally reflected middle-class or upper-middle-class backgrounds. All participant names (both mothers' names and their children's names) have been replaced with pseudonyms to preserve confidentiality.

In line with the sampling goals, the inclusion of both groups ensured a mix of socio-economic statuses. For example, some mothers had only a high school education and modest household incomes (e.g., under 25,000 TL or in 25.000 – 40.000 TL per month), while others held university degrees or higher and reported substantially higher incomes (with a few in the 160,000+ TL range)¹. Ages of the participant mothers ranged from early twenties to mid-forties (approximately 23 to 46 years old), capturing both relatively young first-time mothers and more mature mothers with multiple children. The majority were in their late twenties to thirties. Most participants (19 mothers) were first-time mothers with only one child (the child involved in the playgroup), while the rest (12 mothers) had two or even three children, providing insight from both new mothers and those juggling multiple young children. This broad demographic spread (in terms of age, education, income, and number of children) allowed the research to examine playgroup experiences across different life situations and social strata. Mothers from lower-class backgrounds who attend free municipality playgroups have been referred to as 'M' (Municipal Playgroups Participant), while mothers from middle-class backgrounds who attend

¹ It should be noted that the data regarding household income was collected during a period marked by high inflation rates in Turkey. A more detailed explanation and context for these figures will be provided in the following paragraphs to ensure a clearer economic understanding.

fee-based private playgroups have been referred to as 'P' (Private Playgroups Participant). Throughout the thesis, the mother's name is followed by either 'M' or 'P' in parentheses to indicate the type of playgroup they attend. In the same parentheses, the mother's occupational category is also indicated to provide context for class-based analysis. Many of the jobs reported by mothers (particularly among middle-class participants) were highly specific and singular, making individuals easily identifiable. For instance, only one participant among the 31 mothers was a pilot, and mentioning the exact occupation would have immediately revealed her identity. However, understanding a mother's occupational background was sociologically necessary for interpreting her perspectives and parenting practices. To balance these concerns, this study uses the International Labour Organization's ISCO-08 classification system to assign each mother a broad occupational category, thereby ensuring both anonymity and analytic clarity.

The children's characteristics of age were fairly similar across the sample, since all were in early childhood. The playgroup model typically caters to infants, toddlers, and preschoolers, so participants' children were generally between about 1 year and 4 years of age. Many were toddlers around two to three years old at the time of interview. All participant mothers were the primary caregivers of at least one child in this early childhood range and had been attending playgroup sessions with their child.

The study's two cohorts – mothers in a free municipal playgroup (the M group) and mothers in fee-based private playgroup (the P group) – differ markedly in their socio-economic profiles. The M group mothers occupy a lower-class position in contrast to the middle-class status of the P group, as evidenced across education, occupation, and household income. In terms of education, the disparity is striking.

The vast majority of municipal playgroup mothers had at most a high school education (many did not complete secondary school), and only one mother in this group held a university degree. By contrast, almost all private playgroup mothers were college-educated, and many had advanced degrees. In the P group, seven mothers held bachelor's degrees, six had earned master's degrees, and one even possessed a doctorate. Effectively, nearly the entire private sample (14 out of 16) had tertiary-level education, whereas virtually none of the municipal mothers did. Such a gap in formal education levels is a classic marker of the class distinction between these groups. Occupational differences between the groups further reinforce this divide. M group mothers were overwhelmingly outside the formal labor force. The majority were full-time homemakers. Many mothers previously had been employed in low-paying, low-skill jobs such as retail sales. They left these jobs due to childcare and domestic obligations. Only two mothers in the municipal cohort were working in skilled jobs at the time of the study. In sharp contrast, most P group mothers held careers in professional fields.

Among the private playgroup mothers were teachers, psychologists, nurses, dietitians, interior designers, accountants, managers and academicians. Even among the P group mothers who were not currently employed (having left the workforce for childcare reasons), many had white-collar careers in skilled fields (for example, in accounting or foreign trade). These observations indicate that their transition to homemaking was likely shaped more by personal choice or temporary circumstances than by enduring structural barriers. Thus, the private group's employment profile reflects far greater human capital and career orientation, whereas the municipal group's pattern – dominated by domesticity and lower-skilled work – aligns with its more constrained socio-economic position. Household income levels reveal the

clearest gulf. The municipal group's households lived on very modest incomes by Istanbul standards. Most reported monthly household incomes roughly in the 15,000–40,000 Turkish Lira (TL) range, with some even below 15,000 TL. Only one municipal family's income reached beyond that range (into roughly the 40–80 thousand TL bracket). In stark contrast, the private group's households enjoyed far higher income levels. Not a single P group family fell into the low brackets seen in the M group. Instead, their reported earnings spanned the upper-middle-class range. A few private households were at the lower end of that range (around 40–80 thousand TL per month), but the majority were clustered between about 120,000 and 200,000 TL, and several even exceeded 200,000 bracket. The M group presented a relatively uniform lower-income profile. The P group encompassed a more internally differentiated middle-class spectrum in terms of income.

It is important to note, however, that these figures reflect 2024 price levels, a period characterized by significant inflation in Turkey. When interpreting these income ranges, one must consider that substantial currency depreciation and cost of living increases have markedly reduced the real purchasing power of these amounts. (For additional perspective, household incomes at the time can be roughly translated using the 2024 average exchange rate, with 1 USD equaling approximately 30 Turkish Lira.) Even when accounting for the effects of depreciation, the socio-economic divide between the M and P groups remains pronounced. The underlying disparity between their household incomes remains striking, as evidenced by the fieldwork findings. Tellingly, even the least affluent private family enjoyed a higher standard of living than the most prosperous municipal family. In sum, across education, occupation, and income, the mothers in the private playgroup unequivocally represent a middle-class profile, whereas those in the municipal

playgroup fall into a lower-class category. These patterns confirm the significant class divide between the two groups.

By focusing on mothers in Istanbul, the study acknowledges the urban context—where issues like limited outdoor play space, shifting family structures, and diverse educational options make playgroup experiences particularly salient. The decision to center on mothers (as opposed to fathers or other caregivers) was deliberate. In the Turkish context, mothers are most commonly the primary caregiver hence the parent attending playgroups and managing early childhood activities. Therefore, they could provide the most direct and detailed insights into both the practices and the underlying beliefs about early development and playgroups.

1.2.3 Recruitment and access

Participants were recruited through a combination of professional networks and community connections, utilizing a purposive and snowball sampling approach. On the public side, the researcher leveraged her gatekeeper role as an ISADEM worker to connect with mothers at the ISADEM playgroups. With permission from the municipality and center management, the researcher informed playgroup attendees about the study. Interested mothers from the municipal playgroup were then invited to participate voluntarily. This yielded the 15 municipal-sector participants relatively efficiently, as the mothers already had an established relationship with the center. To avoid any coercion, it was emphasized that involvement in the study was entirely separate from the playgroup services and would have no impact on their standing with the center; the researcher approached them as a student-researcher and fellow mother, not in an official capacity.

For the private playgroup participants, recruitment required reaching into different social circles. Finding participants through private playgroups was more challenging. (For details, see section 1.3) The researcher first contacted several local mothers' groups in Istanbul neighborhoods known for active parenting communities (such as Bahçeşehir, Beşiktaş, and Üsküdar). These groups often exist on social media or messaging platforms where mothers share advice and opportunities. A short description of the study and a call for volunteer interviewees was posted or conveyed through group organizers. In some cases, introductions were made: for example, the coordinator of a private playgroup in Bahçeşehir invited the researcher to visit and meet mothers in that community, which led to a few interviews. Snowball sampling was also employed: mothers who were interviewed would sometimes refer or introduce the researcher to friends who met the criteria (having a young child in a playgroup) and might be interested in participating. Through these combined efforts, 16 mothers from various private playgroups were recruited.

Each potential participant was provided clear information about the research aims and what participation entailed, and only those who volunteered with informed consent were included. The recruitment continued until the target sample size (around 30 individuals, balancing the two groups) was reached and thematic saturation was judged to be achieved (i.e., interviews were no longer yielding fundamentally new insights in core areas). It should be noted that the researcher obtained necessary permissions from institutions and authorities before proceeding with interviews. Written approval was secured from the Istanbul Metropolitan Municipality (for conducting research at the ISADEM center and with its attendees), and verbal permission was obtained from the administrators of the private playgroup venues or community groups where needed. This ensured that recruitment and

interviewing in those settings was done ethically and with acknowledgment of the relevant organizations.

1.2.4 Interview procedure and data collection

The primary data source for this research was in-depth semi-structured interviews with each participating mother. An interview guide was prepared in advance to ensure that all key topics would be covered, while still allowing flexibility for mothers to lead the conversation in directions important to them. The interviews (see Appendix A for the list of qualitative interview questions) were conducted one-on-one between the researcher and the mother, typically in a quiet, private space to facilitate open discussion. In the case of the municipal playgroup participants, most interviews took place in a private room at the ISADEM centers. This setting was convenient for the mothers and offered a comfortable, familiar environment (a room at the center) where confidentiality could be maintained.

For the private playgroup participants, interview locations varied. Several were held in offices at the playgroup venues (when a private space was available there), while a few were conducted in neutral locations such as a quiet café, based on the mother's preference. In all cases, efforts were made to ensure audio privacy so that the participants could speak freely without being overheard by others (especially other playgroup staff or attendees). The interviews were semi-structured. The researcher followed the prepared questions but also asked spontaneous probing questions or allowed tangents when the mother brought up new relevant ideas.

On average, interviews lasted roughly 60 to 90 minutes, though a few extended up to nearly two hours when the participants were passionate about the topics. Throughout the dialogue, the researcher remained attentive to the

participant's comfort and cues, sometimes pausing the interview if the mother needed to tend to her child (since some interviews occurred immediately after playgroup sessions, young children were occasionally present, playing nearby). This flexible approach helped create a natural and trusting interview atmosphere. During the interviews, a range of topics was covered to explore both the practical and the sociocultural dimensions of early childhood practices and the experiences of the mothers.

The interview guide was designed to open a dialogue about mothers' lived experiences, beginning with prompts that encouraged them to recount their journey into motherhood and reflect on how their upbringing and personal values shaped their parenting approach. It then invited them to describe their child's developmental milestones and challenges, as well as their hopes and concerns for the child's growth. From there, questions probed the reasons behind choosing a playgroup (what needs they sought to meet for themselves and their children, and which aspects of the group they valued most) before asking mothers to critique their current program and imagine features of an ideal early childhood environment. To situate these choices within broader beliefs, participants were also asked to discuss the significance they attributed to the early years, including preferences for activities, thereby revealing the skills and values they prioritized. Finally, the guide encouraged intergenerational comparisons, urging mothers to contrast their own childhoods with their children's and to articulate the long-term qualities they hope to cultivate.

All interviews (with one exception, recorder malfunctioned) were audio-recorded with the participant's consent. At the start of each session, after obtaining written consent for participation, the researcher also asked for explicit permission to record the conversation. Participants were assured that the audio recordings would be

used solely for transcription and analysis by the researcher, and that the files would remain confidential. Throughout the interviews, the researcher also kept brief field notes on non-verbal cues and her own observations (for example, noting when a mother became particularly emotional or excited on a topic, or any interruptions that occurred). At the conclusion of each interview, participants were asked if they wished to add anything else that had not been covered. This gave mothers an opportunity to share additional thoughts or clarify earlier points, often yielding insightful closing remarks.

In addition to the qualitative interviews, each participant was asked to complete a brief Demographic Information Survey. (see Appendix B) This was a one-page questionnaire designed to collect background and socio-economic information on the mother and her household, providing context for each interview and enabling some comparison across the participant pool. The researcher immediately separated any identifying details (like consent forms or any names on surveys) from the data. Each survey was coded with the participant's pseudonym so that the quantitative data could be linked to the qualitative interview without using real identities. The Demographic Information Survey allowed the researcher to describe the sample in aggregate, giving readers a clear picture of who the mothers were (in terms of age range, occupational background, etc.) and confirming that a diverse range was achieved. Furthermore, the information helped in the analysis phase to interpret whether certain perspectives or experiences mentioned in interviews might be related to the mother's background. In practice, the data were used to roughly classify the 31 mothers into two socio-economic groups. This confirmed that the 15 mothers from the municipal center generally fell into the lower

income and lower education range, whereas the 16 private playgroup mothers mostly had higher income and education (see Appendix C for the list of all interviewees).

It is important to note that the demographic survey data was used in a descriptive and interpretive manner rather than for statistical analysis. Given the qualitative nature of the research and the sample size, the survey results were not subjected to formal statistical tests. Instead, they provided background context (e.g., “many of the private playgroup mothers hold university degrees, whereas most municipal playgroup mothers have high school education or less”) and ensured that the qualitative findings could be understood with socio-demographic nuance. Where relevant, the thesis narrative qualitatively comments on these background factors (for example, highlighting that both a mother with a master’s degree and a mother with a primary school education might surprisingly share the same view on the importance of early socialization, underlining a cross-cutting theme). Thus, the demographic survey was an integral supporting component of the methodology, enriching the interview data and enhancing the depth of analysis.

1.2.5 Data analysis

All interviews were transcribed and analyzed using a thematic qualitative analysis approach. All analysis was first conducted in Turkish on the raw data, to ensure the themes arose from the participants’ actual words. The findings and supporting quotes were articulated in English only during the writing of the thesis. Given the exploratory nature of the research, the goal of analysis was to identify common themes, patterns, and divergences in how mothers talk about playgroups and early childhood, rather than to test a predetermined hypothesis. The data analysis proceeded in several stages. First, the researcher transcribed each interview in full (in

the original language, Turkish) soon after the interview took place. Transcription was done manually by the researcher without the use of automated software, to ensure close familiarity with the data. This process yielded verbatim textual data for 30 of the interviews (and a detailed summary for the one interview where only notes were available due to the malfunctioning of the audio recorder). The researcher then conducted a “close reading” of each transcript, reading and re-reading the texts to immerse herself in the mothers’ narratives. During these readings, she began the initial coding process by jotting down marginal notes, keywords, and preliminary codes that captured notable points or recurring ideas. This open coding was done manually rather than using qualitative analysis software. Doing it manually provided a deep engagement with each transcript and allowed the researcher’s intimate knowledge of the content.

Then, the researcher reviewed the list of codes and started to group related codes into broader themes or categories. For example, codes related to “child socialization” (mentions of wanting the child to meet peers, improve social skills, loneliness of the child, etc.) were clustered together as one potential theme. At this stage, the researcher also paid attention to possible differences between the two sub-groups of participants (municipal vs private). She created simple charts and tables to map which codes or themes appeared in which interviews, noting any patterns like a theme being mentioned by nearly all mothers or perhaps only by those in a certain demographic. For instance, she noted that nearly every participant emphasized the importance of socialization for the child and the mother, regardless of background – this became a dominant theme.

Next, the researcher engaged in a more focused thematic analysis by defining and refining the key themes. She revisited the transcripts to extract illustrative quotes

for each theme and to ensure that each theme was grounded in the actual words of participants (a process akin to axial coding and theme development). By not using software, the researcher remained very close to the raw data at all times, manually cross-referencing and synthesizing, which can enhance interpretive consistency in an in-depth qualitative project. While this approach is time-consuming, it was suitable given the manageable number of interviews and the researcher's familiarity with the content.

The final set of dominant themes and sub-themes that emerged from this inductive analysis formed the basis of the findings chapters of the thesis. Some of the major themes identified included: mothers' motivations for playgroup participation (especially the dominance of socialization goals), the perceived benefits of playgroup for children (e.g. improved confidence, routine, peer interaction skills) and for mothers themselves (social support, alleviation of isolation, exchange of parenting ideas), the influence of socio-economic context (for instance, differences in resources or alternatives available to lower-class vs middle-class mothers, yet a striking overlap in their core concerns and hopes), and changing paradigms of early childhood (such as an increasing awareness of early developmental importance and a sense of pressure to "invest" in children during the first years). Within each broad theme, nuances were captured – for example, under the theme of "early education beliefs," the researcher noted sub-themes around specific topics like early foreign language exposure (opinions varied among mothers, providing a complex picture). The analysis was thus both iterative and interpretative. The researcher moved back and forth between data and emerging theory, refining the themes until they robustly represented the interview content.

Throughout the analytic process, the researcher took care to maintain credibility and trustworthiness of the findings. This included continuously comparing new data with existing interpretations (constant comparison method) to avoid bias in theme selection, and looking for disconfirming evidence or exceptions to emerging patterns. Whenever a particular narrative seemed dominant, the researcher would also check if any participant had a divergent view and ensure that minority voices were not ignored in the final analysis. The researcher's prolonged engagement with the participant community (especially through her work at the playgroup center) and the consistency of key findings across diverse participants helped validate that the themes resonated with the mothers' shared reality. The combination of systematic coding, manual in-depth analysis, and mindful comparison across demographic lines yielded a rich understanding of the qualitative data, which is presented in detail in the results chapters.

1.2.6 Researcher reflexivity and positionality

Given the qualitative nature of this study, the positionality of the researcher played an important role and was reflected upon throughout the research process. The researcher was not a neutral outsider but had a dual identity relevant to the topic. She is herself a mother of a young child and also an employee at ISADEM. This insider status conferred both advantages and challenges, which the researcher navigated through reflexive practice.

On the one hand, being a mother allowed the researcher to naturally empathize and connect with participants. She shared many of the experiences and emotions that the interviewed mothers described, such as the trials of raising a toddler, concerns about development, and the search for social support. This likely

helped build rapport and trust during interviews. Participants may have felt that “she understands what I’m going through,” leading them to open up more freely. Indeed, during the interviews the researcher often found a common ground with the interviewees which helped facilitate a conversational rather than interrogative atmosphere. Her familiarity with early childhood terminology and the playgroup context also meant she could follow the mothers’ narratives with ease and ask informed follow-up questions.

On the other hand, the researcher’s insider position required careful reflexivity to avoid undue bias and manage the power dynamics in the research. For instance, as an ISADEM worker, she held a quasi-authority role in the municipal playgroup setting. To ensure this did not influence the participants, she took steps to separate her researcher role from her staff role. When approaching mothers for interviews, she emphasized that she was conducting the study as a graduate student and that there were no right or wrong answers to the interview questions. During interviews at the ISADEM center, she dressed casually and spoke in a peer-to-peer tone rather than any formal or instructive manner, attempting to mitigate any perception that the mothers were being evaluated by a staff member. She was conscious that mothers might initially give overly positive feedback about the playgroup out of politeness or thinking that’s what an ISADEM employee would want to hear. To counter this, she explicitly encouraged honest and even critical opinions, clarifying that her aim was to learn from the mothers, not to audit the program. In the case of private playgroup participants, the power dynamic was different (the researcher was an outsider to them, entering their community). Here, her insider status as a fellow mother helped more than her institutional role, and she made sure to be transparent about her affiliation without letting it dominate the

interaction. Reflexively, she remained aware of how her own experiences and beliefs about playgroups (for example, her preconceived positive view of organized play activities due to her work) could color her interpretation of the data. She kept a research journal in which she regularly recorded her own reactions, assumptions, and feelings after each interview and during analysis. In these memos, she would note if, for example, she strongly agreed or disagreed with a participant's statement, so that she could later ensure that her personal stance did not lead her to inadvertently emphasize or downplay certain data in the analysis.

By engaging in this reflexive journaling and conscious self-checking, the researcher worked to maintain a balance between insider insight and analytical distance. Her positionality as a mother and early childhood practitioner undoubtedly shaped the research. It was, in fact, the motivation for the thesis topic. However, by acknowledging this influence openly, she aimed to use it as a strength (building authentic connections and depth of understanding) while minimizing potential downsides (such as bias or participants giving idealized responses). Ultimately, the researcher's insider perspective provided valuable context for interpreting the data, but all findings were rooted firmly in the participants' own words and validated by the consistency of themes across interviews, rather than the researcher's preconceived notions.

1.2.7 Ethical considerations

This study was designed and conducted with careful attention to research ethics, particularly because it involved human participants discussing personal aspects of their lives and parenting. Ethical approval for the project was obtained from the Boğaziçi University Institutional Review Board in Social Sciences and Humanities

(#2024-41T) before any fieldwork began. (See Appendix D for ethical approval). All procedures were in line with the university's ethical guidelines as well as general principles for research with human subjects. Several concrete steps were taken to address informed consent, privacy, and participant welfare. All participants received a clear, Turkish-language consent form explaining the study's purpose, procedures, risks, and benefits, and were reminded that participation was entirely voluntary. They could skip questions or withdraw at any time with no repercussions. The researcher reviewed the form verbally, answered questions, and obtained signatures for both participation and audio recording; mothers retained their own copy. To protect privacy, all real names and identifying details were replaced with pseudonyms, and any personal specifics that might reveal identity were generalized or omitted. The link between pseudonyms and real identities was stored separately under lock and password protection by the researcher alone. All audio files, transcripts, and notes were kept confidential under password protection, and data will be permanently deleted after the thesis is completed.

1.3 Organization of the thesis

In a metropolis of over 15 million people, where many young families live in small nuclear households away from extended relatives, playgroups offer a new kind of community and an avenue for socialization. The rise of playgroups in Istanbul reflects broader shifts in early childhood and parenting paradigms. Parents are increasingly seeking structured social and educational opportunities for toddlers long before formal schooling begins. Studying playgroups in Istanbul, therefore, offers valuable insight into how global ideas about early childhood are being adapted within a distinct local context.

Istanbul presents a compelling setting for exploring these dynamics. Traditionally, early childhood socialization in Turkey occurred naturally through extended family networks and neighborhood play. However, rapid urbanization, changing family structures, and safety concerns have disrupted these traditional forms of interaction. Only a minority of mothers with young children participate in the formal workforce, and affordable public childcare options remain limited. In this context, playgroups have emerged as an adaptive response to modern urban life, fulfilling both children's and mothers' needs for structured social interaction and support. Municipality-run programs offer free access to playgroups in lower-class districts, while private enterprises provide fee-based alternatives catering to more affluent families. Across the socio-economic spectrum, playgroups have become an important part of how families reimagine early childhood care. Against this backdrop, the aim of this research is to examine how mothers experience and interpret playgroup participation in Istanbul and what these experiences reveal about changing early childhood paradigms and parenting practices. Several core questions guide this study. What motivates mothers to bring their children to playgroups, and what benefits do they perceive for themselves and their children? How do socio-economic factors and the type of playgroup setting shape mothers' experiences? In what ways does the rise of playgroups reflect broader changes in parenting ideologies and early childhood socialization in Turkey's urban context? Through investigating these questions, the study seeks to uncover the deeper social meanings attached to playgroup participation and to document how contemporary mothers navigate new challenges and expectations surrounding early childhood.

Addressing these questions is significant for several reasons. While playgroup participation has been widely studied in Western contexts, relatively little

academic research has examined how similar phenomena unfold in non-Western urban environments like Istanbul. The Turkish setting introduces particular cultural, economic, and familial dynamics that deserve attention in their own right rather than assumed to mirror Western models. Moreover, studying playgroups illuminates how broader societal shifts—such as urbanization, rising educational aspirations—manifest in the microcosm of early childhood practices. By focusing specifically on mothers' perspectives, the study foregrounds women's voices and experiences, offering insight into how they navigate, internalize, or resist the pressures of contemporary parenting culture. Demographic data revealed that participants' ages ranged from their early twenties to mid-forties, with most being first-time mothers of young children between one and four years old. Some mothers had university degrees and professional careers (among them many reported professional hiatus due to childcare), while others had high school education and more precarious economic circumstances. Despite these differences, nearly all participants shared a strong commitment to facilitating their children's early development and socialization, making playgroup participation a meaningful part of their parenting journey.

In analyzing the data, the research observed strong commonalities across socio-economic divides. Both lower-class and middle-class mothers highly valued playgroups for their children's socialization and for their own emotional well-being. Mothers described playgroups as essential venues where children could learn to interact with peers, practice sharing and communication, and gradually gain independence. Equally important, mothers portrayed playgroups as vital spaces of maternal support, where they could meet others experiencing similar joys and struggles. At the same time, the study found that class position shaped certain nuances of the playgroup experience. Middle-class mothers sometimes framed

playgroup participation within a broader project of early educational enrichment, selecting programs with specialized activities such as music, gymnastics, or English exposure. Lower-class mothers, by contrast, often emphasized the scarcity of affordable opportunities and the critical importance of free municipal programs for accessing structured play experiences. These patterns point to both convergence and divergence in how playgroups are utilized and understood across class lines.

There are limitations to the study that must be acknowledged. First, the research sample includes only mothers who were already engaged in either municipal or private secular playgroups at the time of data collection. Efforts were made to recruit mothers also from explicitly religious-oriented playgroups, where young children are exposed to Islamic teachings alongside play activities. Despite attempts to connect with such participants through religious playgroups and social media outreaches, the researcher was unable to secure a sufficient number of participants from religious playgroups.²(See the footnote for more details) As a result, the perspectives of more religiously conservative middle-class families who prioritize faith-based early education are underrepresented in this study. This limitation is recognized in related chapters. Another limitation stems from the focus on mothers. Although justified by the reality that mothers are overwhelmingly the primary attendees of playgroups in Istanbul, the exclusive focus on mothers leaves fathers' potential perspectives unexplored.

² In an effort to incorporate participants from religiously oriented playgroups into the study, face-to-face meetings were conducted with the owners and instructors of three such playgroups. During these meetings, requests were made for assistance in facilitating access to the mothers enrolled in their programs. Despite these direct engagements, no participant referrals were secured through this channel. In parallel, additional outreach efforts were undertaken via social media platforms, targeting a broader range of religious playgroups operating in Istanbul. These attempts similarly did not yield responses. Further efforts included the dissemination of participant recruitment announcements through social media accounts associated with mothers residing in Üsküdar, a district known for a higher concentration of families engaging with faith-based early childhood education. Nonetheless, despite multiple strategies employed, it was not possible to reach a sufficient number of participants from religious playgroups to enable their inclusion in the research sample.

Additionally, another notable limitation is the absence of mothers whose children do not participate in playgroups, or who may not even be aware of such opportunities altogether. This study specifically targeted mothers actively participating in playgroups (municipal or private). The reason for this selection was to clearly understand their motivations for attending, inherently reflecting an orientation toward structured child enrichment activities. Consequently, mothers from both middle and lower class groups examined here might be more similar in their parenting orientations than anticipated, as both groups engage with forms of structured early-childhood development. The study therefore lacks a comparative perspective with families not involved in organized playgroup settings. This is limiting the analysis of how broadly intensive mothering practices have permeated across class divisions. Future research could beneficially address this gap by including a comparative analysis between participating and non-participating mothers, further clarifying the extent and nature of intensified parenting strategies across different socioeconomic contexts. While such comparative analysis would have deepened this study, the practical constraints of conducting extensive qualitative research individually limited the feasibility of this broader scope.

Acknowledging these limitations, helps clearly frame the boundaries and scope of the research presented in this thesis. Following this introduction, the thesis is organized into four main chapters. The first chapter, comprising this Introduction and the Methodology section, lays out the research information, contextual background, and the qualitative approach employed to gather and analyze the data. In structuring the thesis, a separate literature review section was not created. Instead, the literature, field narratives, and sociological analysis were intentionally woven together within each chapter, allowing close interaction between the literature and

the analysis. Rather than reviewing theory in abstraction, relevant academic sources were selected and incorporated around the findings that emerged from the field. This design aimed to render the literature meaningful in light of mothers' own narratives and to ground conceptual insights in the lived realities of Istanbul-based parenting practices. The length and intensity of each subchapter also reflect the distribution of emphasis within the interviews. Topics that mothers engaged more frequently or in greater detail—such as those discussed in Chapter 2.3—are treated with more analytical depth and occupy more space. While other themes that received less sustained attention—such as in Chapter 3.3—are addressed more briefly. These structural decisions were made with the aim of keeping the analytical focus closely aligned with mothers' actual experiences and voices. Particular emphasis was placed on foregrounding the first-hand testimonies of mothers within the specific context of Istanbul. Narratives from mothers belonging to two distinct class backgrounds were collected in relation to their playgroup and early childhood experiences. The thesis thus attempts to reflect both the points of convergence and divergence between these two socioeconomic groups. This thematic and narrative-driven organization provides the foundation for the chapters that follow.

In this first chapter, I discussed the motivations, the methodology and the organization of the thesis. In the following section, I will provide background data regarding playgroups in Istanbul. The second chapter examines playgroups as contexts for early socialization, exploring both children's and mothers' experiences and the role of enrichment activities. The third chapter situates playgroup participation within broader societal pressures and challenges, analyzing the effects of urban living, the intensive mothering ideal, and the influence of social media. The final chapter concludes the thesis by synthesizing the main findings, reflecting on

their sociological significance, acknowledging limitations, and proposing directions for future research.

1.4 Background information on playgroups

Following the Second World War, informal community-based playgroups began to emerge as grassroots solutions to a shortage of early childhood education options. In the United Kingdom, with the withdrawal of wartime nurseries and the influence of attachment theory emphasizing maternal care, many mothers organized voluntary playgroups to provide young children opportunities for socialization under adult supervision (Lloyd, Melhuish and Owen, 1989). Similar developments occurred in other countries. In Australia, community-led playgroups gained momentum in the early 1970s as spaces that simultaneously supported children's development and parents' social needs (Hulusi, 2013). These early movements shared core features of parent involvement, play-based learning, and informal structure, distinct from state-run nursery education.

In Turkey, early childhood education traces back to the late Ottoman period, with private kindergarten initiatives emerging before World War I and the formalization of nursery schools through the 1915 Preschool Regulations. (Aral, Kadan, & Aysu, 2023) However, the spread of preschool education remained limited throughout the 20th century. Although national education reforms after the founding of the Republic emphasized modernization, the expansion of early childhood services progressed slowly. (Between 1932 and 1992, the number of preschools rose from 92 to 4,360 (Göksoy, 2017)) The 1973 Basic Education Law recognized pre-primary education as an official stage, aiming to foster children's development and prepare them for primary school, but widespread access remained elusive. The establishment

of the General Directorate of Pre-School Education within the Ministry of National Education in 1992 marked a significant institutional step (Akyüz, 2019).

Nevertheless, the concept of playgroups as a setting distinct from formal preschools is a relatively new development in Turkey. Playgroups are gaining visibility particularly over the last two decades through NGO-led initiatives, municipal programs and private sector playgroups are increasing in parallel.

In the contemporary Istanbul context, playgroups are short-term gatherings organized for young children, usually infants and toddlers, and their caregivers. These playgroups differ from formal preschools or daycare centers by offering time-limited, flexible sessions without following a semester-based curriculum (İstanbul Büyükşehir Belediyesi Sosyal Hizmetler, n.d.). They are delivered by a combination of private providers, municipal services, and non-governmental organizations. Given that only about one-third of Turkey's three- to five-year-olds were enrolled in preschool as of 2016 (Göl-Güven, 2018), and considering that Istanbul alone had approximately 1.2 million children under the age of five by the mid-2010s (Schreiber and LaForge, 2020), the need for accessible early childhood activities outside of formal education remains substantial. The precise number of informal playgroups operating in Istanbul is difficult to ascertain, as many are unregistered or fluid in structure. Nevertheless, municipal programs suggest a significant and growing scale. The Istanbul Metropolitan Municipality (İBB) runs structured playgroup initiatives through ISADEM (İstanbul Aile Danışmanlık ve Etkinlik Merkezi- Family Counseling and Education Centers) and ÇEM (Çocuk Etkinlik Merkezleri- Children's Activity Centers also knowns as Yuvam İstanbul). They include the parent, especially in playgroup for toddlers aged 1.5 to 3 years, where caregivers actively participate alongside their children (İstanbul Büyükşehir Belediyesi Sosyal

Hizmetler, n.d.). Enrollment in these municipal programs is facilitated through the mobile application, the official website, or daily telephone registration. At this point, a clear sense of dedication emerges. Lower-income mothers expend considerable effort each morning to secure spots for their children in free playgroups. The institution's phone lines are constantly busy during morning hours, and reservations fill up very quickly. All mothers in the field highlighted the significant labor and persistence they put forth to ensure their children's attendance at these playgroups. Some lower class mothers travel from more distant neighborhoods, undertaking bus journeys with young children to attend free playgroup sessions. They put considerable effort into securing a spot. Overall, demand for the municipal playgroup participation remains consistently high, although exact participation figures are not publicly released.

As of late 2024, İBB had established 111 Children's Activity Centers (ÇEM) serving approximately 10,749 children across Istanbul (Bianet, 2024). In addition to these centers, İBB also operates 20 ISADEM throughout Istanbul. These centers offer a combination of preschool education and structured playgroup activities, with a specific focus on promoting equity by prioritizing disadvantaged and low-income families. Beyond metropolitan initiatives, numerous district municipalities have also launched playgroup offerings. For instance, Kadıköy Municipality organizes free, reservation-based play workshops for young children and their caregivers, often requiring early booking due to high demand (Kadıköy Belediyesi, n.d.). Başakşehir Municipality has similarly integrated parent-child play sessions into its Women's Activity Centers (BAKMER), offering multi-week series and drop-in sessions of playgroups scheduled via online and telephone systems (Başakşehir Belediyesi, n.d.). These district programs vary in their scope but share common structural

characteristics with metropolitan models. Başakşehir and Kadıköy municipalities are among the many district municipalities of Istanbul that have begun organizing playgroups within their community centers. The expansion of playgroups into community centers across numerous district municipalities illustrates the institutionalization of early childhood support at the local level. During the research period, no playgroups directly organized by government ministries or state institutions were identified. For instance, the Turkish Ministry of Family and Social Services does not offer playgroups. However, as mentioned earlier, playgroups organized by metropolitan and district municipalities exist through social and educational centers.

Private sector playgroups operate alongside municipal initiatives, primarily serving middle- and upper-income families. While hard data on their exact number is lacking, observations of community forums and online listings indicate a wide range of private playgroups offering diverse programming. These include bilingual immersion programs, arts-focused workshops, early robotics and coding activities, and structured enrichment sessions. Private playgroups typically run longer sessions (around 60 to 90 minutes) compared to municipal ones (around 45 to 60 minutes) and charge fees that vary based on content specialization and district location.³ Despite differences in delivery models, both municipal and private playgroups share several organizational features. Group sizes are deliberately kept small, typically involving four to ten children accompanied by caregivers, guided by one or two

³ During the field research, the price range of playgroups have been investigated. (The participants' playgroups and also neighborhood playgroups- approximately 20 playgroups). The private playgroups in Bahçeşehir and Beşiktaş were priced around 750 TL, which were the main neighbourhoods. The prices in Nişantaşı could reach up to 1500 TL. Specialized playgroups such as foreign language immersion or focused gymnastic vary around 1000 TL. (At 2024 1 \$ ≈ 30 TL) The prices mentioned above refer to single-session participation fees. Private playgroups generally offer monthly registrations, although one-time participation is also possible. Discounts are typically provided for monthly or longer-term registrations.

trained facilitators. Sessions usually follow a structured flow that includes meet and greet, sensory play activities, guided group tasks (such as circle time or story sessions), and free play periods that encourage spontaneous socialization and exploration. Playgroups are often organized by narrow age bands (e.g., 0–18 months, 18–36 months, 3–5 years) to ensure developmentally appropriate activities. Playgroup activities are designed by specialized educators and professionals, including child development specialists, psychologists, preschool teachers, social workers, and sociologists. They welcome children and their mothers to the sessions. Educators are facilitating smooth transitions between different phases of the playgroups, and adapting sessions to the needs and interests of the children present. A key distinction between public and private playgroups lies in accessibility and specialization. Municipal playgroups are generally free of charge and prioritize inclusivity, focusing on ensuring that children from disadvantaged backgrounds can access early learning opportunities they might otherwise lack. In contrast, private playgroups cater to families willing and able to pay for more specialized programs, including those conducted entirely in a second language (e.g., English or French) or offering thematic curricula such as music, sports, science, robotics and coding or literacy enrichment. Participation fees in private programs vary accordingly, with higher prices associated with greater specialization. Although municipal playgroups accommodate a larger absolute number of participants compared to private ones, both formats maintain small group sizes to preserve quality and child-centered attention. Municipal programs, such as those operated under the umbrella of ÇEM, frequently collaborate with universities and early childhood experts to ensure quality programming (Bianet, 2024). Private programs, while less standardized, often market

themselves based on educational philosophy or facility quality, attracting parents seeking tailored enrichment for their children.

Particularly for younger age groups (0–4 years), playgroups do not function as entities like daycare where mothers leave their children. Instead, mothers participate alongside their children, engaging collectively in the activities provided. All 31 mothers in the field participated in the playgroups together with their children. (Sessions generally last around one hour.) This represents a clear indication of dedication. Mothers invest additional time and energy into participating in these playgroups. From a legal perspective, according to Law No. 5580 on Private Educational Institutions, any educational activity requires approval from the Ministry of National Education. Therefore, playgroups are permitted only to offer educational games but cannot implement an academic curriculum. Additionally, as stipulated by Law No. 2828 on Social Services, providing full-time childcare and supervision requires meeting specific conditions and obtaining official authorization. Within the framework of these regulations, playgroups are only authorized to provide short-term services, typically limited to a few hours per session.

Qualitative research shows that playgroups are becoming an increasingly important feature of Istanbul’s early childhood landscape. Their role is particularly vital in an urban environment where safe outdoor play spaces are limited, as previous studies have emphasized that the majority of children in Turkey lack access to adequate playgrounds and must rely on family-organized activities (Gülen and Barış, 2022). Reflecting similar concerns, the Bernard van Leer Foundation’s Istanbul95 program, active in the late 2010s, highlighted that the city had been “notoriously unfriendly” to young children, as rapid urbanization left little room for their needs (Schreiber & LaForge, 2020). In this context, playgroups, whether public or private,

fill a critical gap by offering structured environments for peer interaction, cognitive stimulation, and socialization. Furthermore, they provide much-needed community support for caregivers, helping to mitigate the isolating effects of urban living. In summary, playgroups in Istanbul today form a hybrid ecosystem of public, NGO-supported, and private initiatives. The coexistence of these models reflects both efforts to democratize access to early childhood opportunities and the growing parental demand for enriched, specialized early experiences for young children. As Turkey expands its early childhood services, prioritizing inclusivity, alongside quality assurance and sustainability, must be recognized as a central policy goal to ensure equitable access to playgroup opportunities from the earliest years.

CHAPTER 2

PLAYGROUPS AS CONTEXTS FOR EARLY SOCIALIZATION

2.1 Playgroups as socialization labs for children

Early childhood is a critical period for socialization, during which children acquire foundational skills, values, and roles through interactions with family and peers.

Classic developmental theories long emphasized the family as the primary context for a child's social and moral development (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Bowlby, 1969).

For instance, social learning perspectives highlighted that children internalize behaviors by observing parents (and other models) (Bandura, 1977), while symbolic interactionist views underscored that children develop a sense of self through communication within the family (Mead & Morris, 1934). However, contemporary research (Commerford & Robinson, 2016) suggests that beyond the immediate family, peer group interactions and community settings also play a significant role in early socialization. In particular, organized playgroups, informal gatherings where parents (often mothers) and their young children meet for guided play sessions, have emerged as important environments for early childhood development. Playgroups provide opportunities for toddlers and preschoolers to play and learn with peers, while simultaneously offering parents a venue for social support and shared learning in parenting (McLean et. al. 2022). In urban contexts such as Istanbul, playgroups have gained popularity as many mothers seek enriching social experiences for their children in the face of limited outdoor play spaces and smaller extended families. These early childhood group experiences are also seen by parents as a way to give their children developmental advantages and foster social skills before formal schooling begins.

At the same time, sociological perspectives remind us that children's socialization is embedded in broader structures of family and society. Pierre Bourdieu's concept of habitus is particularly relevant. Habitus refers to the durable dispositions and worldviews that individuals acquire through early socialization within their family and social class context. As Bourdieu observes, early family and class conditions generate a habitus. It is a system of durable, transposable dispositions that structure individuals' perceptions, aspirations, and actions (Bourdieu, 1977). This habitus, acquired through internalization of family-based practices and class norms, embodies class-specific worldviews, predisposing individuals to adopt particular tastes, values, and behaviors (Bourdieu, 1984); and as Bourdieu and Passeron illustrate, these dispositions subsequently shape educational trajectories and life chances, reinforcing intergenerational patterns of inequality (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977). In other words, the parenting practices and values transmitted within the family of origin become internalized, shaping a child's outlook and behavior in lasting ways (reflected later in adulthood) (Kohn, 1977). This means that mothers' approaches to childrearing are often influenced by how they themselves were raised and the cultural expectations they carry. Likewise, parents' aspirations for their children's future – such as educational success or moral character – reflect both their own upbringing and their perceptions of contemporary society. These intergenerational dynamics operate alongside immediate contexts like playgroups, together influencing the child's development.

In the modern era, parents also face new challenges and pressures that can affect the socialization process. The findings of this research showed that urbanization, for example, has introduced concerns about safety and limited freedom for children's play, contributing to parental anxiety in cities like Istanbul. The rise of

intensive parenting norms – the expectation that one must be an ever-attentive “perfect” mother – has led many mothers to feel inadequate or guilty if they fall short of ideal standards (Rizzo, Schiffrin, & Liss, 2013; Henderson, Harmon, & Newman, 2016). Furthermore, the ubiquity of social media exposes parents to constant comparisons with others’ seemingly flawless parenting, sometimes triggering feelings of envy or the fear of missing out on giving one’s child the best opportunities (Lee et al., 2024). All of these factors form part of the context in which early childhood socialization takes place, highlighting why a holistic literature review must span multiple themes – from play and peer interaction to family influences and societal pressures.

Young children’s participation in playgroups has been widely found to foster their social development and early learning. In playgroups, toddlers and preschoolers regularly interact with peers of similar age, allowing them to practice important social skills such as sharing, cooperation, and communication in a safe, supervised environment. Commerford and Robinson (2016) reported that playgroup participation improves children’s abilities to engage in peer play and develop social competencies. In their evidence-based review of supported playgroups in Australia, they noted that regular attendance at playgroups was associated with children learning to share toys, take turns, and negotiate with other children more effectively – behaviors that are foundational for later friendships and group participation in school. These findings align with the broader understanding that early peer interactions contribute to children’s socialization by teaching them how to function as part of a group beyond the family. Playgroups often include guided group activities (such as singing circles or story time) as well as free play periods, both of which can help children learn to follow simple rules, empathize with peers, and

express themselves in group settings. Such experiences mirror what classic child development theorists like Vygotsky (1978/1934) posited – that children’s cognitive and social skills develop through guided social interaction – although here the guidance comes not only from adults but also from playmates.

Empirical research also suggests that attending playgroups may confer cognitive and early academic benefits for children. Williams et al. (2015) found that children who started attending community playgroups at ages 2–3 demonstrated higher early learning competence by the time they reached preschool compared to children who did not attend playgroups (Williams, Berthelsen, Nicholson, & Viviani, 2015). In particular, measures of vocabulary, attention, and pre-literacy skills tended to be more advanced among playgroup-attending children, even when controlling for family background factors. The authors attributed these gains to the stimulating environments provided by many playgroups. Children are exposed to new toys, books, and activities that they might not have at home, and they engage in play-based learning facilitated by caregivers or playgroup leaders. This aligns with the idea that early learning through play can boost school readiness. Indeed, the structured parts of playgroup sessions (for example, group storytelling, singing, or craft activities) often introduce concepts like colors, numbers, or new words in a fun context, effectively enriching the child’s learning before formal schooling begins. Children who regularly participated in playgroups entered kindergarten with better social competence and a familiarity with group routines, giving them a head start in the classroom setting (Commerford & Robinson, 2016). These advantages are especially pronounced for children from families that might not otherwise have access to preschool or ample play opportunities; playgroups can help narrow developmental gaps by providing a form of early childhood education in a community setting.

Another important benefit of playgroup socialization is the opportunity for children to engage in age-appropriate peer play, which has unique developmental advantages. Through interactions with peers, children learn pro-social behaviors and emotional self-regulation. For instance, observational research highlighted by Commerford & Robinson (2016) showed that over the course of regular playgroup meetings, toddlers gradually moved from solitary or parallel play to more interactive forms of play (like simple games of chasing or cooperative pretend scenarios), indicating growing social maturity. These peer exchanges can teach children empathy and conflict resolution; a child might comfort a crying playmate or learn to say “sorry” after taking a toy, experiences that are less likely to occur if the child only plays alone or only with adult family members. As noted by psychologists, playing with other children also spurs language development. Young children often pick up new phrases or improve their communication skills by listening and responding to peers in play. To summarize, the literature strongly supports that playgroups serve as valuable “socialization labs” for young children, where they gain interpersonal skills and early cognitive enrichment in a group context. This body of research underpins the rationale for the present study’s focus on playgroup experiences. If mothers perceive such benefits in their own children, it may explain why they are motivated to join playgroups and what outcomes they expect. However, most existing studies on child outcomes in playgroups have been conducted in Western contexts (e.g., Australia, U.S., U.K.), and there is a relative lack of research examining whether similar social and developmental gains occur in playgroups in non-Western urban settings like Turkey. While being in general alignment with studies across the globe, this thesis addresses that gap by exploring mothers’

observations of their children's development within Istanbul playgroups, thereby contributing local evidence to this global literature.

The qualitative findings from this research show that the mothers in Istanbul are strongly motivated to use playgroups as a means of providing their young children with much-needed peer interaction. In fact, all 31 mothers interviewed – from both lower-class and middle-class backgrounds – highlighted socialization for their child as one of their primary reasons for joining a playgroup. Many mothers expressed concern that, outside of playgroups, their toddlers would have few or no opportunities to play with other children. For instance, İlknur (P, Homemaker), a mother in the private playgroup, emphasized her proactive efforts to secure peer interaction for her son by regularly taking him to parks, playgroups, and activity centers. “I constantly take them to parks, playgroups, and activity centers. I care deeply about their socialization and try to keep them from getting bored”.⁴ Similarly, Aylin (Service and Sales Worker Currently Homemaker) said, “I take Alper to playgroups so he can interact with kids his own age. At home, he is only with us adults. He needs friends his age to play and socialize.”⁵ These strategies illustrate how urban mothers, confronting shrinking informal networks, turn to organized playgroups to support their toddlers' social development and emotional well-being.

In contemporary Istanbul, it is no longer common for young children to play freely with cousins or neighborhood friends or interact with animals in the street as in past generations. Sociological research notes a general decline in informal “street play” and neighborhood child interaction in modern urban settings. (Ivrendi & Işıkoğlu Erdoğan, 2015). As Melis (M, Homemaker) noted, “Raising a child in

⁴ “Sürekli parklara, oyun gruplarına, etkinlik alanlarına götürüyorum. Sosyalleşmelerine çok önem veriyorum, sıkılmamaları için sürekli bir şeyler yapmaya çalışıyorum.”

⁵ “Alper'i, kendi yaşındaki çocuklarla iletişim kurabilsin diye oyun grubuna götürüyorum. Evde hep yetişkinlerle birlikte, akranlarıyla oynayıp sosyalleşmeye ihtiyacı var.”

Istanbul is difficult. They're confined to four walls, whereas in my childhood I saw cows and squirrels in person—here they only see them on TV".⁶ Echoing this concern, Ece (P, Professional Currently Homemaker) added, "We don't have the kind of neighborhood where kids can freely play outside anymore. I cannot even let my child step onto the street alone; cars pass by so quickly. There's no safe space left for children to play outside." These testimonies highlight how urban density and safety concerns confine toddlers indoors, compelling mothers to rely on organized playgroups to provide the play and social contact their children can no longer find freely in the neighborhood. Turkish cultural context in particular has seen a shift. Decades ago, streets echoed with children's games, whereas "nowadays, children play less of these games" and often remain indoors (Ivrendi & Işıkoğlu Erdoğan, 2015). This broader change is reflected in the mothers' concerns that their children are "growing up lonely" without playmates. There is a generational shift. Previous generations in Turkey often had abundant peer play (through siblings, cousins, or neighborhood kids), but today's urban toddlers are more likely to be alone or solely with adults at home. Indeed, Turkey's average family size and birth rate have dropped significantly in recent decades, resulting in more nuclear families with one or two children (Turkish Statistical Institute, 2021; 2022). The consequence of these demographic and societal changes is that many parents now actively seek out organized settings like playgroups to fill the social gap once bridged informally by extended family and community. In line with this, the mothers in this study viewed playgroups as a new entity emerging to meet this need for child social interaction in the spirit of the times, effectively replacing the traditional street or neighborhood play gatherings. Crucially, this motivation of ensuring peer interaction was shared

⁶ "İstanbul'da çocuk büyütmek zor. Sürekli 4 duvar arasında. Ben kendi çocukluğumda inekleri, sincapları görerek tanıdım. Burada ancak TV'den."

across all socio-economic groups in the sample of the field research featured in this thesis. Whether a mother was taking her child to a free, municipality-run play center (typically the lower-class group, indicated by (M)) or to a private pay-to-attend playgroup (the middle-class group, indicated by (P)), the core reasoning was the same: to give their child a chance to socialize with other children in a safe, structured environment. Aslı (M, Professional) described how before attending the playgroup her child had “no one to play with”⁷ in their apartment building and would cling to her all day. Providing the child with peers became a priority. Although toddlers at this age often engage in parallel play rather than direct cooperation, Aslı (M, Professional) noted that simply being around peers has taught him how to share space and find common ground with others his age; “They don’t play directly together all the time... but at least they connect over the same activities. Before, he always needed to be by my side. Now he’s more independent.”⁸ Berna (P, Professional), a middle-class mother likewise said, “We live in a flat and she has no friends here... I wanted her to be with peers her own age⁹.” Regardless of their background, parents saw socialization as “very important” for their children’s well-being and development. Selin (M, Homemaker) gave a telling comparison: “For example, a friend’s child never got the opportunity to socialize. But since Zafer has been in different environments from an early age, he is more social. I think that is a big advantage.”¹⁰ This perspective echoes the literature’s findings that early social experiences can confer a lasting developmental advantage. It is particularly

⁷ “Oynayacak kimsesi yoktu”

⁸ “Sürekli birlikte oynamıyorlar... ama en azından etkinlikler üzerinden bağ kuruyorlar. Önceden sürekli yanımda olmak istiyordu. Şimdi daha bağımsız.”

⁹ “Bir apartman dairesinde yaşıyoruz ve burada hiç arkadaşı yok... Onun, kendi yaşlarıyla bir arada olmasını istedim.”

¹⁰ “Örneğin, bir arkadaşımın çocuğu hiç sosyalleşme fırsatı bulamadı. Ancak Zafer, küçük yaştan itibaren farklı ortamlarda bulunduğu için daha sosyal. Bence bu büyük bir avantaj.”

noteworthy that even mothers from traditionally less privileged backgrounds (who might have less access to organized activities) recognized the value of peer interaction as much as their higher-income counterparts. In short, there was a broad consensus among Istanbul mothers that playgroup attendance was key to ensuring their children do not miss out on essential early social experiences, especially given the constraints of modern urban life.

It is also worth noting that many mothers simultaneously viewed playgroups as beneficial for themselves. While the focus was on children's social needs, a number of participants admitted that their own social isolation as new mothers pushed them toward playgroups. "I took [my child] to the playgroup both for myself and for him... for my own socializing and also for his¹¹," said Umay (P, Homemaker), candidly acknowledging that she craved peer support just as her toddler did. Another mother explained she chose a playgroup because "it provides the social activity and peer interaction we can't do at home... and honestly it's for me to socialize too, because I also couldn't go anywhere."¹² Zeynep (P, Professional). These comments align with the literature that playgroups double as family support programs by connecting parents with one another (Strange et al., 2014; Townley, 2023). Prior studies have found that attending playgroups can reduce mothers' feelings of loneliness and create a network of mutual support among parents (Hancock et al., 2015). In this study, mothers from both income groups mentioned this "two-fold" benefit of playgroups – enhancing the child's social life and the mother's as well – although even those who initially framed it as something "for the mom" ultimately emphasized that it was the child who stood to gain the

¹¹ "[Çocuğumu] hem benim sosyalleşmem hem de onun sosyalleşmesi için oyun grubuna götürdüm."

¹² "Evde yapamadığımız sosyal aktiviteyi ve yaşıt etkileşimini sağlıyor... ve dürüst olmak gerekirse bu benim de sosyalleşmem içindi, çünkü ben de hiçbir yere gidemiyordum."

most. This shared experience of social support further underscores why playgroups have caught on in urban Turkey. They fulfill a need for community that is felt by the whole family. (The topic of mothers' socialization will be examined in more detail in Section 2.2.)

The mothers' narratives about their experiences in playgroups reveal that their expectations for improved child socialization were largely met. In interview after interview, mothers described noticeable positive changes in their children's social skills, confidence, and independence after regular playgroup attendance. These qualitative accounts provide local evidence from Istanbul that mirrors the child development outcomes documented in the playgroup literature. In other words, the "socialization lab" effect of playgroups observed in Western research appears to be occurring in Istanbul as well, according to mothers' observations. One prominent theme was that children became more sociable and less shy as a result of playgroup participation. Many parents recalled that their child initially had difficulty approaching or interacting with other kids, but over time this improved greatly. For example, Ceyda (M, Service and Sales Worker -Currently Homemaker) recounted how her toddler was very fearful of peers before joining the playgroup: "At first he wouldn't go near the other children... he even ran away from kids his own age."¹³ Her son would cling to Ceyda in public and "if someone [stranger] just looked at him he would start crying."¹⁴ This kind of shyness and stranger anxiety is not unusual in toddlers who have had limited social exposure outside the family (Brooker et al., 2013). Yet after a few months of playgroup, the transformation was remarkable: "But now when I take him to the park, he runs after the other kids, saying 'Come on, let's

¹³ "İlk başta diğer çocuklara yaklaşmıyordu... hatta kendi yaşlılarından bile kaçıyordu."

¹⁴ "Eğer biri [yabancı] ona sadece baksa bile ağlamaya başladı."

play together.’¹⁵ Sometimes he even comes to me and says ‘You play too.’¹⁶ In other words, he has largely overcome his fear.” This mother’s testimony vividly illustrates the growth in social confidence that can result from regular peer play. Her son learned to initiate contact with peers and even invite group play – behaviors indicating reduced anxiety and increased social competence. Such outcomes echo Commerford and Robinson’s (2016) observation that children in playgroups gradually shift from solitary play to interactive play as they become more comfortable with peers. In Ceyda’s case, what began as parallel play (or even avoidance) blossomed into cooperative play on the playground. Multiple mothers shared similar anecdotes of blossoming sociability.

For instance, Defne (M, Professional- Currently Homemaker) happily noted that her son “became more social and self-confident by coming to the playgroup.”¹⁷ Another observed that her daughter, who used to stay on the fringes of group activities, eventually started joining in songs and games with other kids, no longer afraid of the crowd – Ebru (M, Homemaker). These maternal observations are subjective, but they consistently point to improved ease in peer interactions – a key aspect of early social development. Mothers also reported gains in their children’s independence and ability to engage without constant parental intervention. Especially for those children who were only-children or very attached to their mother, playgroup provided a gentle separation and new routines. Aslı (M, Professional) described a notable change in her child’s behavior at home: “Previously, [she] was a child who would constantly follow me around the house when I returned from work. Now it is not so much like that. She can play by herself, spend time on her own, and

¹⁵ “Hadi, birlikte oynayalım.”

¹⁶ “Sen de oyna”

¹⁷ “Oyun grubuna gelince daha sosyal ve özgüvenli oldu.”

she enjoys it.”¹⁸ After attending playgroups, Aslı’s daughter began asking whether friends would be present when they went on outings: “When I want to go somewhere, [she] asks ‘Will there be a friend there?’”¹⁹, indicating that the child now actively seeks peer companionship. Aslı attributed these changes directly to the playgroup experience, saying “Thanks to the playgroup, there have been differences like this... we socialized a bit more here.”²⁰ This outcome resonates with the idea that playgroup can ease the child’s dependence on the mother by broadening their social world. The literature suggests that when young children form relationships with peers, they practice coping with short separations from parents and learn to occupy themselves in a group setting (Commerford & Robinson, 2016). Participants’ experiences in this study support this. Children who were once clinging to their parents began to venture into parallel play near other kids, and eventually into interactive play, thereby developing a degree of autonomy. The improvement in independent play is also practically significant for parents – it meant, as Aslı noted with relief, that her daughter could “play on her own and take pleasure in it,” a developmental step that can reduce the pressure on the primary caregiver and prepare the child for nursery or school settings.

Another commonly mentioned outcome was enhanced communication and language skills. Mothers observed that being in a playgroup stimulated their children’s speech and vocabulary. Some saw this in general ways – their child started singing new songs or using words heard from peers – while others gave specific examples. Sevgi (M, Homemaker), for instance, was particularly impressed by her son Emre’s linguistic progress: “The playgroup contributed a lot to Emre in terms of

¹⁸ “Önceden işten eve döndüğümde evde sürekli beni takip eden bir çocuktü. Şimdi durum pek öyle değil. Kendi başına oynayabiliyor, yalnız vakit geçirebiliyor ve bundan keyif alıyor.”

¹⁹ “Ben bir yere gitmek istediğimde, ‘Orada arkadaş olacak mı?’ diye soruyor.

²⁰ “Oyun grubu sayesinde bu tür farklılıklar ortaya çıktı... burada biraz daha sosyalleştik.”

language. In the beginning he was very withdrawn, he wouldn't interact with the other children. Now he communicates with the kids and plays with them.”²¹ Sevgi (M, Homemaker) added that her son had been very keen on learning English, and the playgroup environment further encouraged this interest: “He was very eager to learn English. We used to say English words together on the way. Now his enthusiasm has decreased a little, but he is still interested.”²² It is noteworthy that even among the lower-income mothers, several mentioned language development as a benefit, refuting a stereotype that only highly educated parents notice or value such specific skills. The peer setting of playgroup exposes children to more conversational turn-taking, new vocabulary in songs and stories, and possibly some bilingual exposure (as some playgroups in Istanbul include English songs or have diverse attendees and as some private playgroups actualize only in English for language immersion). Although this study did not formally measure language gains, mothers' reports like Sevgi's suggest that playgroup can supplement language input beyond what the child gets at home.

Additionally, as Berna (P, Professional) pointed out, the playgroup's play-based activities even support motor skills and other developmental domains in an integrated way – for example, a simple group art project can introduce new words (colors, shapes) while also refining fine motor coordination. These multifaceted benefits are exactly what play-based learning frameworks predict (Shonkoff & Phillips, 2000). Importantly, mothers from both the municipal and private playgroups reported similar positive outcomes, indicating that the social benefits of playgroup are not limited to any one class or program type. Whether the playgroup was a

²¹ “Oyun grubu, Emre'nin dil gelişimine büyük katkı sağladı. Başlangıçta çok içine kapanıktı, diğer çocuklarla etkileşim kurmazdı. Şimdi ise çocuklarla iletişim kuruyor ve onlarla oynuyor.”

²² “İngilizce öğrenmeye çok hevesliydi; yolda birlikte İngilizce kelimeler söylerdik. Şimdi heyecanı biraz azaldı ama hâlâ ilgili.”

modest community center gathering or a high-end early education class, what mattered was the peer interaction itself. For example, an economically disadvantaged mother observed that her child “now communicates with other kids and plays with them” whereas before he would mostly stand apart (Sevgi, M, Homemaker), while an affluent mother likewise observed her previously timid child now “runs around with others and says ‘Come, let’s play’” (Zeynep, P, Professional) (Closely echoing Ceyda M’s quote). This convergence suggests that, at a fundamental level, children’s developmental needs for socialization are universal and being met in these playgroups across Istanbul’s socio-economic spectrum. It also speaks to a possible equalizing effect. Mothers noted that playgroups in lower-income districts provided “a safe environment we trust, where our child can socialize” just as much as the private centers did for wealthier families. In the absence of playgroups, the social isolation of young children in cities might be more pronounced among lower-class families (who have fewer alternative outlets like paid classes or large playdate networks). The fact that lower-class participants of this study report outcomes akin to those of middle-class participants is an encouraging sign that community playgroups are helping bridge a socialization gap. Finally, it is interesting to note that some mothers initially placed greater importance on their children's socialization and acquisition of social skills in playgroups, rather than focusing primarily on educational outcomes. Tuba (P, Professional) remarked that at 18–21 months old, her daughter “didn’t learn much” in terms of formal skills – “her attention span is very short... 10 minutes on one activity then she moves on” – but Tuba still found value in the experience because “she sees other children, spends time with peers... [at home] either I become her playmate or she ends up alone.”²³ This reflects an

²³ “İlgi süresi çok kısa... bir etkinlikte 10 dakika kalıyor, sonra başka bir şeye geçiyor.”

understanding that at the toddler stage, the direct teaching of concepts is less important than the exposure to a social environment. Tuba’s pragmatic view is supported by child development experts. Toddlers primarily learn through short bursts of exploration and by observing others, so expecting long focused learning at that age is unrealistic (Shonkoff & Phillips, 2000). What matters is that the child is “getting to be around kids her age”, which Tuba identified as the core benefit. In the interviews features in this study, even mothers who enrolled in more education-oriented playgroups (with structured activities or curriculum) tended to downplay academic gains and emphasize social/emotional growth.

This is consistent with the literature that the immediate, salient outcomes of playgroup attendance for very young children are improvements in social behavior and confidence, whereas cognitive gains (like vocabulary growth), while real, are more subtle and long-term (Commerford & Robinson, 2016; Williams et al., 2015). The mothers’ emphasis on socialization as both the motive and the reward of playgroup participation underscores that they perceive these groups chiefly as a social development intervention at this age – a view well-aligned with developmental science. In conclusion, the integrated findings from the literature and the study’s analysis paint a cohesive picture of why playgroups are valued for children’s socialization. The original literature suggested that playgroups offer crucial peer interaction opportunities, fostering sharing, cooperation, and early friendship skills, and the experiences of mothers in Istanbul strongly corroborate this. Parents are turning to playgroups because modern urban life offers fewer organic chances for young children to play with peers, and they are keenly aware that such play is vital. Through the voices of the mothers in this study, I saw that children who attend

“Diğer çocukları görüyor, yaşlılarıyla vakit geçiriyor... [evde] ya ben onun oyun arkadaşı oluyorum ya da yalnız kalıyor.”

playgroups become more outgoing, independent, and communicative – effectively practicing the “group life” skills that researchers like Vygotsky (1978) theorized and that recent empirical studies have measured. Notably, these outcomes appear to cut across socio-economic lines, suggesting a universal developmental benefit. Any minor differences (for instance, some middle-class mothers using more academic language to describe benefits, or lower-class mothers relying more on free public playgroups) do not change the fundamental pattern of convergence in motivations and outcomes. In both theory and practice, then, playgroups function as nurturing micro-communities where children learn to be social beings. The mothers’ testimonies add a local dimension to global scholarship. They confirm that in Istanbul’s context – with its unique mix of fast urbanization and changing family structures – playgroups are indeed fulfilling the role of “socialization labs” for children, much as they do elsewhere. This convergence of evidence strengthens the argument that facilitating playgroup participation (especially in communities where traditional play networks have broken down) can be a meaningful strategy to support early childhood social development. The next sections will build on this foundation, examining other facets of playgroup experiences (such as parenting practices and broader societal implications). In particular, the deeper sociological analysis of why children began to need playgroups to this extent for socialization will be examined in the following chapters. Ultimately, mothers from both lower-class and middle-class backgrounds converge in bringing their children to playgroups as a way to compensate for limited peer interaction opportunities in modern urban life. Despite their different socio-economic circumstances, they share this underlying motivation, underscoring that concerns about children’s socialization needs transcend class boundaries.

2.2 Playgroups as social capital for the mother

Playgroups are not only beneficial for children; they also provide important social support networks for mothers (and other caregivers). Many mothers of young children, especially in urban environments, report feelings of isolation. Their days may revolve around childcare with limited adult interaction, particularly if extended family is not nearby or if they are not formally employed. Attending playgroups regularly can help alleviate this isolation by connecting mothers with one another, creating a community of peers who are going through similar parenting stages.

Research by McLean et al. (2022) in a systematic review of playgroup outcomes found that a consistent benefit for adult caregivers was increased social connectedness and peer support. Mothers who participate in community playgroups often form friendships, share parenting advice, and provide emotional support to each other during the informal chats that occur while children play. Over time, these relationships can evolve into a supportive network that extends outside the playgroup meetings (e.g., moms arranging playdates, or helping each other with childcare).

McLean et al. (2022) observed that such peer support contributed to mothers' greater confidence in parenting and reduced feelings of stress or incompetence, because mothers realized that others share similar struggles and no one is a "perfect" parent. In short, playgroups often function as much-needed "communities of practice" for motherhood, where learning and mutual aid occur organically. Empirical evidence also highlights mental health benefits for mothers who attend playgroups. Strange et al. (2014) showed that playgroup participation can provide a particularly supportive environment for mothers at risk of postpartum depression or those experiencing parenting stress. In their study, mothers who engaged with local mothers' groups or playgroups reported lower levels of depressive symptoms and loneliness over time.

The playgroup setting gave these mothers an outlet to discuss their challenges—such as infant feeding issues, sleep deprivation, or returning to work—with others who could empathize. Importantly, the presence of other adults at playgroup also meant mothers got a brief respite while their children were occupied with peers. Even a short break from one-on-one childcare, combined with adult conversation, contributed to improved mood and reduced stress. Some playgroups formally incorporate segments for parent discussion or invite guest speakers (e.g., a pediatric nurse or child psychologist) to provide advice, which can further bolster mothers' knowledge and confidence. Another benefit for mothers is that playgroups can serve as a bridge to resources and the broader community. Especially for first-time mothers or those new to a neighborhood, a playgroup might introduce them to local services (like pediatric clinics or child-friendly venues) through the information shared among members. In a study by Bektas et al. (2022) involving mothers from Turkey who live in the Netherlands, mothers described how community groups (including playgroups) enabled them to access advice and support that they otherwise would seek from family. Although Bektas et al. focused on grandmother influence, they underscored that mothers often have dual sources of guidance: traditional family networks and contemporary peer networks. In an Istanbul context, where many young families live in nuclear units apart from grandparents, playgroup peers might partially substitute for extended family advice, helping mothers navigate questions about child nutrition, health, or education. McLean et al. (2022) similarly noted that playgroup attendance is associated with increased knowledge of parenting resources. Mothers become aware of parenting workshops, child development screenings, or early education programs through conversations at playgroup. In summary, the literature portrays playgroups as beneficial not just for child play but as a form of

social capital for mothers. Through these groups, mothers gain friendships, emotional support, practical knowledge, and a sense of communal belonging. This can mitigate some negative experiences of early motherhood (like isolation and uncertainty).

However, much of the existing research on maternal outcomes in playgroups is based on contexts like Australia, Europe, or North America. There is less documentation on how playgroups impact mothers in Turkey, where cultural expectations and social structures may differ (e.g., the role of kinship support). This study's qualitative approach will address that gap by capturing Istanbul mothers' narratives about how playgroup involvement has affected their social connections and confidence as parents. Such insights will help determine whether the "social support" function of playgroups observed elsewhere holds true in the cultural setting of Istanbul.

The interview findings indeed confirm that the social support function of playgroups is highly salient for Istanbul mothers. Nearly all participants reported that beyond benefiting their children, attending a playgroup fulfilled a deep need for their own socialization. Many mothers described feeling isolated at home before joining a playgroup, a condition they attributed to the demands of full-time childcare in a modern urban environment. For example, Tuba (P, Professional), a mother who took a temporary leave from her job to care for her baby, recounted that after leaving the workforce she was with her child "from morning till night" with, "all our social veins... severed."²⁴ She explained that the workplace had been her main social outlet, and once that was gone, she sometimes felt "no trace of my pre-birth self"²⁵ remained. Playgroup meetings, however, gave her a reason to get out of the house and be with other adults. She stated "the child is running around there, we [mothers] drink our coffee... Generally, women prefer playgroups in terms of socialization".

²⁴ "Sabahın erken saatlerinden geceye kadar" "tüm sosyal damarlarımız... koptu."

²⁵ "Doğum öncesi benliğimden eser yok."

²⁶This testimony illustrates how a mother who had lost the social interaction of a job used playgroup as a replacement community, echoing the notion that playgroups create a venue for peer support that mitigates isolation (McLean et al., 2022). Indeed, quantitative research has found that mothers who do not participate in playgroups are significantly more likely to lack friend-based support as their child grows up, whereas consistent playgroup attendees build more robust social networks (Hancock et al., 2015).

In Istanbul's context, only about one-third of women with young children are in the labor force and public childcare options are very limited (Munoz-Boudet & Aran, 2015). Moreover, sociological research indicates that, rather than an individual choice, women's withdrawal from the workforce in Turkey after childbirth is largely compelled by structural constraints (Ekiz Gökmen, 2022). The country's social policies provide minimal support for childcare, effectively relegating childrearing to the family and reinforcing a gendered familialist welfare regime in which mothers are the primary caregivers (Akkan et al., 2023). The pre-school enrollment stands at just 29%, far below the OECD average of 81%. (World Bank, 2015) Public childcare services are limited and this is leaving many mothers with no alternative but to leave paid work. Furthermore, workplaces often lack flexible arrangements or adequate parental leave, exacerbating work-family conflict and pressuring women to quit their jobs once they become mothers (Güven, 2022). As a result, many Turkish women are effectively forced out of employment and confined to the domestic sphere after having children, a situation that can lead to social isolation in the absence of supportive networks (Akkan et al., 2023). Consequently, playgroups appear to fill a crucial gap by providing mothers with regular peer contact that they might otherwise

²⁶ "Çocuk orada koşturuyor, biz [anneler] kahvemizi yudumluyoruz... Genel olarak, kadınlar sosyalleşme açısından oyun gruplarını tercih ediyor."

miss. Many mothers in the study explicitly credited playgroup attendance with relieving their sense of loneliness. They reported that simply being in the same room with other mothers who were “going through the same things” brought immense comfort. Sedef (P, Professional) described the emotional relief she felt upon joining a playgroup:

When I first went, I really enjoyed it. Because there were people in front of you experiencing the same situations in the same period... They are saying ‘Yes, I’m like that too!’ – it gives you so much joy, it relaxes you so much. (See Appendix E, 1)

Hearing others voice similar struggles served as validation of her own experience, making her realize she was not alone or “doing something wrong” as a mother. This kind of peer validation and empathy is exactly what prior scholarship highlights as a key benefit of peer support groups. Harman et al. (2014), for instance, found that mothers attend playgroups largely to find a sense of belonging and validation in their motherhood experience. Likewise, McLean et al. (2022) noted that through sharing stories and coping strategies, mothers in playgroups often come to realize that “no one is a perfect parent” – a realization that can reduce feelings of incompetence or self-doubt. In the interviews of this research, mothers frequently echoed that sentiment. Several laughed about how they would exchange exasperated “me too” stories regarding toddler tantrums, sleep problems, or feeding challenges. Mothers emphasized how this camaraderie reassured them that their difficulties were normal. As Reyhan (P, Professional) observed, mothers have a strong need for such reassurance: “Mothers need this. They are so lonely, unsupported... Their family is out of town. They don’t have help.”²⁷ For Reyhan (P), who is an esteemed professional, a mother of two, and actively striving to maintain a work–childcare

²⁷ “Annelerin buna ihtiyacı var. Çok yalnızlar, desteklenmiyorlar... Aileleri şehir dışında. Yardım alabilecekleri kimse yok.”

balance, the playgroup was so oriented toward mothers' needs that she quipped, "we go to playgroup for the children, but it's like they're not there – it's the mothers who are there, actually. Sometimes the children are being dragged along like a bag on the side."²⁸ This somewhat humorous exaggeration underscores the powerful role of playgroups in addressing maternal social needs. It aligns with the idea that playgroups function as "communities of practice" for motherhood, where women mutually support and learn from one another while their children play (McLean et al., 2022). Consistently, mothers in the study emphasized that these groups made them feel connected and understood, directly countering the isolation that many new mothers face. Playgroup participation also facilitated the formation of meaningful friendships and social networks among the mothers. Several participants recounted that the relationships formed at playgroup extended into their lives outside the scheduled sessions. Yasemin (P, Professional), for example, explained that the moms she met in a community playgroup became close friends:

Our friendships formed there still continue. We even go to gymnastics together now... When we find a nice activity or another group, we say 'let's go together.' The children became friends with each other, and the mothers with each other. We became a clique, it turned out really nice. (See Appendix E, 2)

As a working mother, Yasemin (P) highlighted that most of her playgroup peers were also working parents living in Istanbul "with families far away," and thus the playgroup was instrumental in creating a local support network. This led to ongoing mutual support—planning outings together, helping each other when kids were sick, and sharing personal updates. The extension of playgroup-based ties into lasting friendships illustrates how playgroups can generate social capital for mothers (Bourdieu, 1977; McLean et al., 2022). It also resonates with Hancock et al.'s (2015)

²⁸ "Oyun grubuna çocuklar için gidiyoruz, ama sanki onlar orada değilmiş gibi – aslında orada olan anneler. Bazen çocuklar yanlarında taşınan bir çanta gibi sürükleniyor."

longitudinal findings that persistent playgroup involvement is associated with enduring friendship support. Importantly, these new friendships often cut across backgrounds. Mothers who might not have met otherwise (coming from different neighborhoods or socio-economic statuses) bonded through the commonality of motherhood. Funda (P, Technician and Associate Professional), one of the most socioeconomically advantaged participants, remarked that through the playgroup she “met very nice people [and] made good friendships²⁹” with other mothers, which was “socially very beneficial.”³⁰ She realized that attending each week “cleared my head”³¹, it became a form of self-care. “We sit here with the ladies, enjoy our coffee... The day goes by like [a home visit]. They [the kids] play over there. We chat a bit and share our troubles”³² Funda said, describing the playgroup setting as if it were a relaxing get-together among friends. This highlights how playgroups can serve as an informal social club for mothers, providing enjoyment and stress relief. Such peer-centered leisure is rarely available to mothers of young children, especially those who are home full-time, and is a crucial factor in maternal well-being (Strange et al., 2014). Several mothers noted that before joining a playgroup, they had “nowhere to go and no one to meet” in their daily routine. Afterwards, they not only had weekly gatherings to look forward to, but also an expanded circle of fellow mothers to call on outside of playgroup. These accounts reinforce prior research showing that playgroup participation increases mothers’ perceived social support and friendships (Hancock et. al., 2015). In essence, the playgroup became a community in which the mothers belonged, not just a service they attended for their

²⁹ “Çok iyi insanlarla tanıştım ve güzel dostluklar kurdum.”

³⁰ “Sosyal olarak çok faydalı.”

³¹ “Kafamı boşalttı.”

³² “Biz burada hanımlarla oturuyoruz, kahvemizi yudumluyoruz... Gün, [ev ziyareti] gibi geçiyor. Çocuklar orada oynuyor. Biraz sohbet ediyor ve dertleşiyoruz.”

child. In addition to emotional camaraderie, the playgroups provided a forum for practical knowledge exchange and mutual learning among mothers. Many participants mentioned that they gained valuable information by talking with other moms at playgroup – in some cases, advice or resources that they might otherwise have struggled to find. For instance, Leyla (P, Professional), a highly educated mother of two, noted that “the benefit to my life was sharing information with other mothers... I gained useful information. I even learned about the preschool we now attend from a mother I met at the playgroup.”³³ This example shows how a casual conversation between mothers led to a concrete outcome (finding a good preschool). Other mothers similarly shared tips on childrearing matters and local opportunities. Lale (M, Homemaker), a mother of two with a primary-school education, learned from her playgroup peers about better sleep routines for her toddler. She observed that after implementing some suggestions, “at home, [it] is better than before.”³⁴ In line with this, she reported that playgroup attendance “does me good”³⁵ as well, because it prompted her to take daily walks to the community center and establish a new routine.

These narratives illustrate the knowledge-sharing role of playgroups, where experienced and novice mothers alike swap advice on everything from feeding strategies to which pediatric clinic to visit. The literature supports this peer-education function. Playgroups often increase mothers’ awareness of parenting resources and services in the community (McLean et al., 2022). In environments like Istanbul – where many young parents lack nearby family elders to ask for guidance – such peer-to-peer learning can be crucial. Bektas et al. (2022) documented that immigrant

³³ “Hayatıma katkısı, diğer annelerle bilgi paylaşmaktı... Faydalı bilgiler edindim. Hatta şimdi gittiğimiz anaokulu hakkında oyun grubunda tanıştığım bir anneden öğrendim.”

³⁴ “Evde durum eskisine göre daha iyi.”

³⁵ “Bana da iyi geliyor.”

mothers from Turkey formed peer support systems in Netherlands to compensate for the absence of their traditional family network. The findings of this study suggest a similar dynamic among Istanbul mothers separated from kin. Through playgroup interactions, mothers effectively crowdsource-parenting knowledge, acting as one another's information brokers. Several participants emphasized that hearing how others handled common challenges not only gave them new ideas but also confidence that they could solve their own problems. This peer learning complements more formal sources of parenting advice and can sometimes be more readily trusted, since it comes from fellow mothers in the same boat. As one mother's account indicated, even simply hearing about another child's schedule or seeing how another mother manages tantrums during playgroup can lead to subtle but meaningful adjustments in one's own parenting. These informal lessons contributed to mothers feeling more competent and proactive, an outcome noted in previous studies of playgroup involvement (McLean et al., 2022; Strange et al., 2014).

Another notable theme in the mothers' narratives is that playgroup sessions provided a much-needed respite and sense of personal rejuvenation. This resonates strongly with Strange et al.'s (2014) finding that even short breaks afforded by mothers' groups can improve mood and reduce stress. In this study, mothers frequently mentioned that while their children were happily occupied with toys or peers, they could "breathe" and momentarily focus on themselves. Some described the playgroup time as "my time" or compared it to going on an outing. For example, Hande (M, Homemaker) described feeling "mentally refreshed"³⁶ after each meeting because she could chat freely without constantly entertaining her child. Tuba's (P,

³⁶ "Zihnim, kafam tazeleniyor"

Professional) earlier quote also reflects this: “the child runs around, and we drink our coffee” – a simple act that felt luxurious once she became a full-time mother. Several mothers joked that at playgroup they were able to “be human again for a few hours”, shedding the solitary caretaker role. This indicates that playgroups function as a form of self-care intervention for mothers. By providing a semi-structured childcare environment (where children are present but engaged with others), playgroups grant mothers a temporary relief from intensive parenting duties. Mothers used this time to socialize, but also implicitly to reclaim aspects of their identity outside of “mother.” Indeed, qualitative research in Australia has noted that playgroup participation can help mothers negotiate their identity transition by connecting with like-minded peers and feeling respected as individuals, not just as caregivers (Townley, 2023). In Istanbul, where mothers often feel societal pressure to devote themselves entirely to child-rearing, having a space where they can candidly discuss their own interests or vent about difficulties is especially valuable. Some playgroups even invited guest speakers or organized parental activities (as noted in the literature and also mentioned by a few interviewees), which further contributed to mothers’ personal development. While participants in this study did not focus heavily on formal program components, the informal social break itself was clearly therapeutic. As Funda (P, Technician and Associate Professional) succinctly put it, playgroup was a place where she could “distract her mind”³⁷ and momentarily step away from daily stresses. The significance of this should not be underestimated. Brief but regular relief from stress can accumulate to protect against maternal burnout or depression (Strange et al., 2014). Through these narratives, we see that playgroups in Istanbul provided not only social support but also a form of mental health support for

³⁷ “Aklımı dağıtmak.”

mothers, even if informally, by giving them joy, friendship, and a break in the week's routine. It is important to note that the socialization benefits of playgroups were appreciated across the demographic spectrum of the sample of this research, though mothers' backgrounds shaped their experiences in subtle ways. Higher-income, professional mothers and lower-income, less-educated mothers alike emphasized feeling "stuck at home" before finding relief in playgroups, but the sources of their isolation differed. For instance, as mentioned, Tuba (P, Professional) and others from more affluent backgrounds spoke of missing the workplace camaraderie after leaving their careers to become stay-at-home mothers. In contrast, mothers like Lale (M, Homemaker) – who had never been in formal employment – described a longer-standing isolation associated with being a housewife in a nuclear family. Lale, a homemaker from a low-income district, recounted that she "was always at home"³⁸ with her two young children and that "with two kids I couldn't go anywhere. My excuse was always I have two kids, I can't go out."³⁹ The playgroup, once she discovered it through a friend, "gave me a reason to go out... now I have an excuse to leave the house,"⁴⁰ she said. Her words highlight how, for a mother with limited independent social life, the playgroup became a sanctioned outing that broke her sense of confinement. For the professional and managerial middle-class mothers—who had long relied on daily workplace interactions for social engagement—the playgroup not only offered peer companionship but also actively replaced the camaraderie and intellectual stimulation they lost during maternity leave. Despite these contextual differences, both class groups found common ground in the playgroup setting and derived similar kinds of support from it. Viewed through

³⁸ "Sürekli evdeyim"

³⁹ "İki çocukla hiçbir yere gidemiyordum; bahanem hep 'iki çocuğum var, dışarı çıkamam' oluyordu."

⁴⁰ "Bana dışarı çıkmak için bir neden verdi... Şimdi evden çıkmak için bir bahanem var,"

Bourdieu's (1984) framework of cultural capital, the middle-class mothers' pursuit of intellectual and social stimulation emerges as a natural extension of their accumulated educational and professional resources. Conversely, the habitus shaped by spatial constraints and societal norms for lower-class mothers transforms the playgroup into a vital 'escape space,' offering both social and physical relief (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977). This convergence is significant. Regardless of socio-economic status, mothers experienced early motherhood in Istanbul as isolating, and both groups sought solidarity and connection through playgroups. The interviews did not reveal any major divergence in how different class groups benefited. If anything, they revealed a shared narrative of seeking community. This suggests that the playgroup model is flexible and inclusive enough to meet the social needs of mothers from varied backgrounds. It also reflects broader social changes. In Turkey's urban centers, traditional neighborhood networks and extended family support have weakened for many mothers. This makes formal or semi-formal groups like playgroups a new locus of community (Erdem et al., 2022; Kağıtçıbaşı & Ataca, 2005). Indeed, several mothers noted that they had no relatives in the city and did not really know their neighbors, so the playgroup effectively created a neighborhood-like community for them. In sum, while a working mother might frame playgroup as "my substitute for the office" and a non-working mother might call it "my chance to get out of the house", both perspectives underscore the fundamental role of playgroups in supporting mothers' social well-being. By the end of the study, mothers across different ages, education levels, and incomes all voiced appreciation for the friendships and support gained through playgroup participation, indicating a strong convergence of experience. That said, the data also shows that not every mother derived the same level of social benefit from playgroup involvement. A few outliers

experienced more limited social gains, pointing to possible constraints or unmet expectations. For example, Leyla (P, Professional) was candid that for her, playgroup attendance did not yield a robust in-person social circle. She enjoyed exchanging information with other moms during the sessions (as noted earlier), but “after my second child, socializing became even harder... I did not form a physical social circle”,⁴¹ she admitted. Juggling an infant and a toddler, she found it difficult to keep up contacts beyond the playgroup itself. Instead, Leyla turned to online platforms for support:

Most sharing stayed online – venting and information exchange on forums... I was devoted to my job, and then after also taking care of two kids I had no energy left for face-to-face socializing. Now I mostly do online venting and information exchange. But even that is sometimes enough, because sharing something and knowing you are not alone is important. (See Appendix E, 3)

Her experience highlights that some mothers, especially those with higher fatigue or time constraints, may not fully capitalize on playgroup networking. It also reflects the rise of online peer support. Even when physical meet-ups are challenging, mothers often seek connection through social media groups, WhatsApp chats, or forums. Leyla’s reliance on online support still provided her with the sense that she was “not alone,” reinforcing the core need for validation and empathy. Research on digital communities for mothers supports this pattern. According to Yamashita, Isumi, and Fujiwara (2022), online peer support groups commonly offer informational and emotional support similar to in-person groups, and mothers often feel a sense of community and improved well-being through virtual connections. In Leyla’s case, the playgroup served as an initial bridge (she met other moms there and later continued interactions online when meeting in person became too difficult). Her story suggests that while playgroups generally foster in-person friendship and

⁴¹ “İkinci çocuğumdan sonra sosyalleşmek daha da zorlaştı... Fiziksel bir sosyal çevre oluşturmam.”

support, their impact can be mediated by personal circumstances such as health, energy, or the arrival of additional children. It is a reminder that one size does not fit all. A minority of mothers may experience barriers (physical, emotional, or practical) to fully engaging in the social aspects of playgroups. In this study's field research, Leyla's experience emerged as more of an exception. Since the vast majority of mothers reported that they indeed gained the social support and friendships they sought through playgroup participation.

Some mothers might also encounter negative experiences in certain groups – for instance, judgmental attitudes – which can limit benefits. In the sample of this study, no one explicitly reported negative group dynamics. However, prior studies note that when mothers perceive a lack of acceptance in a playgroup, they are less likely to continue attending (Harman et al., 2014.) Therefore, while the overall findings of this study on socialization are overwhelmingly positive, it is important to acknowledge such variations. Ensuring that playgroups are welcoming and accessible (for example, to mothers with multiple young children or those who are more introverted) can help maximize their social benefit for all participants.

In conclusion, the literature and the analysis of this study together paint a cohesive picture of playgroups as invaluable social havens for mothers. The mothers' narratives in Istanbul strongly affirm that the “social support” function of playgroups observed in Western contexts does indeed hold true in the Turkish setting. Through playgroup participation, mothers across different walks of life acquired friendships, emotional solidarity, parenting knowledge, and an overall sense of belonging to a community of peers. These outcomes mirror the benefits documented by researchers like McLean et al. (2022) – increased social connectedness, confidence in parenting, and reduced stress – now demonstrated in a non-Western, urban context. Notably, the

Istanbul mothers leveraged playgroups to fill the void left by diminishing traditional support structures. With extended family living afar, and limited state-provided childcare, the playgroup became a surrogate support system where mothers collectively navigated the challenges of raising young children. Moreover, from a Bourdieusian perspective, these gatherings function as “surrogate support systems” where mothers—faced with insufficient welfare provisions—strategically accumulate both bonding and bridging social capital to offset structural deficiencies in public childcare and familial networks (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992). Building on this insight, the chapter reveals a clear interplay between structural factors (urbanization, nuclear families, lack of public childcare) and individual agency (mothers seeking out and building their own communities). By coming together in playgroups, these women not only helped one another cope with the day-to-day trials of motherhood but also forged new forms of social capital that can extend beyond the early childhood years.

In short, socialization in playgroups for the mother emerges as a cornerstone of the playgroup experience in Istanbul. It provides mothers with an empowering community context in which they find empathy, exchange knowledge, and gain respite – ultimately contributing to their well-being and effectiveness as parents. This convergence of findings strengthens the argument that any comprehensive understanding of playgroups must consider not just the child outcomes but also the profound social and emotional benefits that mothers derive from these group interactions. The next section will delve into another facet of playgroup involvement, but the evidence presented here firmly establishes that mothers’ socialization in playgroups is a critical dimension with both practical and theoretical implications for early childhood and family studies. Indeed, mothers from both lower-class and

middle-class backgrounds sought out playgroups as a means to alleviate their own feelings of social isolation, finding in these gatherings a source of camaraderie and support among peers. The loneliness of early motherhood and the need for peer support thus emerged as class-transcending experiences. It is illustrating that these social and emotional challenges – and their remedy through playgroups – cut across socio-economic divides.

2.3 Early childhood enrichment in the context of habitus

Many parents view the early years as a crucial window not only for socialization but also for setting a foundation for their child's future learning, character, and class trajectory. In sociological terms, parents are actively trying to shape their child's habitus – the durable set of dispositions and cultural understandings that the child internalizes through early socialization (Bourdieu, 1977). Bourdieu defines habitus as the ingrained worldview and patterns of behavior instilled by one's upbringing, particularly within the family and social class context. By molding their young child's daily experiences, parents aim to endow them with certain skills, tastes, and values that will advantage them later in life. In effect, they are engaging in social reproduction: transmitting class-based competencies and advantages to the next generation (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977). One pattern noted among the Istanbul mothers in this study is a strong emphasis on providing enriching experiences during early childhood (from foreign language exposure to early lessons in music or religion) often using playgroups or similar settings as platforms for these activities. Through such enrichment, parents seek to impart valuable cultural capital to their children (Bourdieu, 1986), whether it be linguistic skills, familiarity with learning routines, or foundational moral values. The belief is that starting education early

(even in playful forms) will confer long-term benefits, aligning the child with desired class values and setting them on a path to future success. In Bourdieu's terms, they hope to invest in their child's "embodied" cultural capital now so that it can later be converted into academic achievement, credentials, and social prestige. This forward-looking strategy of early investment reflects parents' intent to secure both material and symbolic capital for their child (material in the sense of skills and credentials, and symbolic in the form of recognition as a well-raised, advantaged child).

Literature on early childhood education and development widely supports the idea that the first years of life have lasting impacts on cognitive and social outcomes.

Developmental researchers frequently underscore those early experiences – whether at home or in-group settings – can shape neural pathways, learning habits, and socio-emotional growth in ways that persist into later childhood. Indeed, public health and education campaigns in Turkey and globally remind parents that by age five, up to 90 % of brain growth has occurred (First Things First, 2020), and many mothers now report that they "attach great importance to early childhood development" (Shonkoff & Phillips, 2000). For example, Berna (P, Professional) emphasized that "this was very important for her language development as well as psychosocial development. Of course, while playing her motor skills also improve,"⁴² reflecting a holistic view of enrichment. Such evidence lends credence to parents' beliefs that playgroups are more than play—they are strategic investments in their child's developmental trajectory.

In this study's sample of 31 mothers in both groups strongly affirmed the crucial importance of the early years, yet their approaches to providing enrichment reflected their differing resources and priorities. On the whole, the mothers in this

⁴² "Bu, onun dil gelişimi ve psiko-sosyal gelişimi için çok önemliydi. Elbette, oyun oynarken motor becerileri de gelişiyor,"

study saw early childhood as an investment period not to be “wasted”, indicating a convergence in intensive parenting ideals.

Ceyda (M, Service and Sales Worker - Currently Homemaker) stated: “Be it toys, clothes, or chances to go out and see things, I strive so that he isn’t missing anything. I don’t want to spoil him, but I do want to give him every opportunity within our means”. She added that hearing others praise her toddler’s advancement – “What a smart, expressive child” – makes her feel “I’ve been a useful mother” by providing ample stimulation. This testimony typifies how lower-income mothers are also embracing early enrichment, though “within [their] means.” Lacking the financial latitude for costly classes or materials, they often rely on community centers, family help, and improvisation to enrich their children’s environment. Middle-class mothers, in contrast, tend to enroll children in structured activities and even initiate home teaching with private lessons, leveraging greater resources to maximize early development. For instance, Funda (P, Professional) proudly noted, “My son has been growing up with three languages since he was born – Dutch, English, and Turkish,”⁴³ underscoring the proactive steps some private-group mothers take to cultivate skills from infancy. Lower-class mothers do not have access to such polished or professionally curated resources. Still, both socioeconomic groups internalize the message that “earlier is better,” but they operationalize it differently. The municipal-cohort mothers are stretching existing community and home opportunities, and the private-cohort mothers are layering on extra lessons and programs – each in line with their habitus and capabilities. Even as these approaches converge around a shared commitment to early investment, the impact of structural inequality remains obvious. The comparison highlights the reproduction of class

⁴³ “Oğlum doğduğundan beri üç dilde büyüyor – Hollandaca, İngilizce ve Türkçe.”

inequality even in early childhood practices. While all mothers recognize early development as crucial, the resources to realize these aspirations are distributed unequally. As Bourdieu (1984) emphasizes, cultural capital accumulation is easier for those with prior advantages. Lareau's (2011) concept of "concerted cultivation" further shows that middle-class families can systematically orchestrate child development, while lower-class families must improvise within structural constraints. From that angle, the field data from this study illustrate how free public services (like municipal playgroups) serve as essential buffers but cannot fully bridge these deep-rooted inequalities.

Parents in many cultures seek out opportunities like story hours at libraries, music classes for babies, or bilingual playgroups to enrich the infant and toddler years. Such efforts exemplify an increasingly intensive approach to parenting. As Wall (2010) observes, contemporary middle-class parents feel pressure "to turn everyday life occasions to enhance children's capacities, skills, and understanding" (p. 258) – in other words, to treat even ordinary play or routines as opportunities for stimulation and learning. This reflects what Sharon Hays (1996) famously termed the ideology of "intensive mothering," which observes that the mothering style investing enormous time, energy, and resources in maximizing their child's development has become dominant. Indeed, Hoffman (2010) notes that family life is now framed as an on-going curriculum (p. 389) under this child-centered parenting ethos. From bathing and feeding to errands and bedtime, every interaction is seen as a chance to teach or enrich. The idea that "earlier is better" – that virtually all of a child's potential can be unlocked with the right inputs in the first few years – has become seductive and pervasive in parenting culture (Wall, 2010). In the context of Istanbul, mothers frequently voiced this mindset. For instance, Aylin (M, Service and Sales Worker-

Currently Homemaker) emphasized that the way a child is raised in the early years determines the entire trajectory of their later development, echoing the saying that “the tree is bent while it is young”⁴⁴. Such comments reflect a broader cultural conviction that intensive early investment will guarantee later success and happiness if parents can make the “correct inputs” (Wall, 2010, p. 258). As a result, many parents approach toddlerhood very deliberately. They are seeking out structured play activities, educational toys, and expert advice to ensure no opportunity for enrichment is missed.

Playgroups are explicitly designed with an educational or developmental focus in mind, reflecting this intensive early cultivation approach. Buchanan (1995), for instance, outlined what an “ideal” playgroup environment might look like for maximizing a young child’s development. In her study of early childhood practitioners, she described a model play space with diverse, imaginative activity areas all facilitated by attentive adults who scaffold the children’s exploration and learning through play. Buchanan argued that such varied, child-centered settings cater to multiple domains of development and thus provide a holistic early education experience in the guise of play. This vision aligns with more recent thinking in early childhood pedagogy that emphasizes that play-based learning can effectively support cognitive, social, and emotional development in young children (Hirsh-Pasek et al., 2009; Weisberg et al., 2013). Rather than formal instruction, many modern playgroups incorporate gentle curricular elements informally (for example introducing shapes, colors, or cultural traditions through songs, stories, and games). By engaging children in these enriched play environments, parents hope to instill

⁴⁴ "Ben şu an çocuk nasıl yetişirse ileriki yaşlara da o şekilde devam edeceğini düşünüyorum. Şu an o şeyi öğretmezsen ileriki yaşlarda olmaz. Ağaç yaşken eğilir derler ya, çocuğun da yaşken eğilebileceğini düşünüyorum."

curiosity, social skills, and cognitive abilities at an early age, while still preserving a playful atmosphere. For example, a mother might deliberately choose a playgroup that occasionally does simple counting games, science-themed sensory play, or music-and-movement activities, believing this will spark an interest in math, nature, or rhythm in her toddler. While robust evidence on long-term academic impact is mixed (since many factors influence a child's trajectory over years), there are documented short-term gains in school readiness associated with such early enrichment. In one review of playgroup programs, Williams et al. (2015) found that children who started attending community playgroups around age 2–3 showed more advanced vocabulary, attention, and pre-literacy skills by the time they entered preschool, compared to children without playgroup experience. These early advantages lend credence to parents' view that enrichment matters. Even if enrolling a two-year-old in a music-and-math playgroup will not guarantee they become a prodigy, it may give them a head-start or at least ensure they keep pace in an increasingly competitive educational environment. For the parents, seeing any measurable benefit (for example a new word learned, a skill mastered, a behavior improved) provides reassurance that their intensive efforts are paying off. In socio-economic terms, they feel their "investment" is yielding returns, which reinforces the cycle of enrichment. Bourdieu pointed out that the accumulation of cultural capital often requires a "gratuitous expenditure of time, attention, care, concern" – efforts that might seem excessive or inefficient from a strictly economic viewpoint, yet "in terms of the logic of social exchanges, it is a solid investment" (Bourdieu, 1986, p. 244–253). One illustrative example comes from Funda (P, Professional), a middle-class mother, who reported speaking only Dutch to her unborn child throughout

pregnancy and continuing intensive multilingual exposure after birth.⁴⁵ Although this practice offered no immediate economic return, it represented a conscious investment in her child's future accumulation of linguistic and cultural capital. Such deliberate commitments of time and care reflect a deeper social logic. They are aimed at positioning the child advantageously within future educational and social hierarchies.

This approach also aligns with the parents' habitus. It feels natural and necessary to them as middle-class individuals to cultivate their child's talents deliberately, rather than leaving development to chance. According to field findings, lower-income parents likewise recognized the importance of early development, but often adapted their strategies to fit their material realities. Aylin (M, Service and Sales Worker -Currently Homemaker), for instance, explained, "If we don't shape them now, we might miss the chance."⁴⁶ She viewed it as her responsibility to seek out whatever could help her child grow – within the limits of what she could afford. Like many other mothers in the municipal group, her strategy relied more on public services, extended-family help, and practical, home-based activities that reflect a hands-on, resourceful form of nurturing. Returning to the logic of middle-class parenting, Annette Lareau (2011) famously described this approach as "concerted cultivation," whereby parents orchestrate their children's lives through structured lessons, planned play, and continuous intellectual stimulation. This role is deeply tied to their identity as "good" mothers and competent members of the middle class. Lareau contrasts this parenting logic with a more laissez-faire approach observed among lower-class families. However, such a rigid distinction does not fully capture

⁴⁵ "Orhan'a hamile kaldığım andan itibaren ben hep Hollandaca konuştum. Karnımla konuştum. Kuzenlerimle, kız kardeşimle Hollandaca konuşuyorum o bebeklikten buna çok maruz kaldı. Sonra doğduğunda da hiç Türkçe konuşmadım."

⁴⁶ "Şu an o şeyi öğretmezsen ileriki yaşlarda olmaz."

the dynamics present in this study's sample. While it is accurate to say that middle-class parents engage more with "concerted cultivation"; lower-class parents also intend to closely manage their toddlers' development, but within their budgetary limitations.

Although existing literature generally associates intensive parenting with middle-class contexts, findings from this study reveal that such parenting practices are also prevalent among lower-income families, suggesting broader adoption across socioeconomic boundaries. Hays (1996) defines "intensive mothering" as a parenting approach characterized by significant emotional investment, reliance on expert advice, substantial labor demands, considerable financial expense, and a strong focus on the child's development. Similarly, Faircloth (2014) argues that intensive parenting norms have become pervasive cultural scripts defining contemporary motherhood. Further elaborating on class-based parenting styles, Lareau (2011) identifies the concept of the "accomplishment of natural growth," typically associated with lower-income families, whereby children's development generally unfolds naturally with minimal structured parental intervention, provided their basic needs are met. Fieldwork conducted for this study in Istanbul, however, demonstrates significant deviations from this pattern among lower-income families. Despite limited economic resources, all 15 lower-class mothers interviewed actively pursued structured early childhood developmental activities, expending substantial effort to access municipal playgroups and other enrichment resources. Observations from the field revealed that lower-class mothers frequently navigated demanding administrative processes (e.g. daily reservation calls to municipal playgroups), demonstrating remarkable persistence and dedication. Indeed, engaging in these activities required considerably greater investments of time, effort, and personal

commitment for lower-class mothers compared to middle-class mothers, who often leveraged flexible work conditions and financial resources to facilitate access more conveniently. Consequently, this study broadens existing literature by demonstrating that intensive early parenting is not strictly a middle-class phenomenon, but rather a widely embraced strategy adopted creatively and determinedly across class lines. This nuanced picture becomes clearer when examining specific enrichment practices more closely.

One salient example of this class-based divergence is in approaches to early foreign-language exposure, an enrichment many Istanbul parents view as essential for future success. According to the survey data, 73% of the municipal group wanted their child to start learning English during the playgroup years. Several mothers explicitly stated they did not want to wait until primary school, fearing that delaying might mean “missing the chance” for their child to get ahead. Middle-class mothers were also unanimous about the importance of English, yet a smaller proportion (roughly 56%) favored toddler-age instruction. Some preferred to wait until their child had firm command of Turkish before adding another language, reflecting a nuanced stance that early academic enrichment should not come at the expense of the mother tongue. As Dilara (P, Professional -Currently Homemaker) explained, “first he should master Turkish – we’ll teach a foreign language later.”⁴⁷ This slight hesitation may reflect developmental awareness or confidence in future opportunities. In contrast, the eagerness of municipal mothers aligns with their view of English as rare and valuable capital. Notably, private-group mothers who endorsed early English often implemented it directly. For example, Yasemin (P, Professional) began to speak and teach English when her child was 6 months old. Additionally,

⁴⁷ “Önce ana dilini tam öğrensin istiyorum. Yabancı dili daha sonra öğretiriz.”

Leyla (P, Professional) always spoke two languages at home. Thus, while both groups value bilingualism, the balance between aspiration and implementation reflects broader class dynamics. These divergences coexisted with common ground – a shared belief in cultivating the child early, in line with classed hopes and capacities.

Beyond survey figures, qualitative data reveal that early English exposure is valued not only as a skill but also as a form of cultural and symbolic capital. Many mothers in this study described wanting their child to develop ‘*kulak dolgunluğu*’—ear familiarity in English—through songs, cartoons, or simple vocabulary games. Ceyda (M, Service and Sales Worker - Currently Homemaker) explained if they have ‘*kulak dolgunluğu*’, “it’s easier for them to learn later”⁴⁸. It is a belief echoed by others who saw early exposure as building long-term linguistic receptivity. Developmental linguistics supports this intuition. The toddler years are considered a sensitive period for language acquisition, where even casual contact can lay the foundation for bilingualism. From a Bourdieuan perspective, English proficiency represents both national and global cultural capital, especially in a globalized metropolis like Istanbul where English is tied to higher education and upward mobility. As Kolluoğlu and Dinçer (2023) observe in high school setting of Istanbul, both secular and religious middle-class parents increasingly seek “global cultural capital” for their children (an asset bundle that includes English, digital literacy, and cosmopolitan outlooks). In this study’s context, a toddler who can sing the ABCs or name animals in English is not merely cute but symbolically potent. She signals her family’s alignment with elite educational pathways. English becomes a class signifier, connoting preparedness, ambition, and distinction.

⁴⁸ “Kulak dolgunluğu olursa sonradan öğrenmeleri daha kolay oluyor.”

This symbolic dimension is especially visible in competitive parenting cultures, where mothers share tips about English-language daycares or toddler music classes with native speakers. Saying “my three-year-old understands English” carries prestige among urban families and reinforces one's identity as an informed, proactive parent. As Apple (2001) notes, in such climates parents aim to “sculpt the habitus of their children” to be at ease in elite settings and to discern “desirable practices and objects” (p. 415). Among private playgroup families, this sculpting is already underway. 9 out of 16 toddlers were already receiving English input through structured programs, private tutors, or bilingual parenting. For municipality-group mothers the aspiration was widespread. 73% desired English instruction during playgroup years. However, limited access often rendered their commitment to aspirational rather than actionable. Still, the consensus across both cohorts was clear. English is not an optional enrichment but a non-negotiable tool for future advantage.

Another important dimension of early enrichment in Istanbul involves moral and cultural socialization, particularly through religious exposure or the transmission of core values during toddlerhood. Many families in this study believed that foundational ethical habits (like respect, empathy, or spiritual awareness) should take root early, in the same developmental window as cognitive skills. This belief translated into a variety of everyday practices. Some mothers described teaching toddlers how to say simple prayers, celebrating religious holidays with child-friendly rituals, or sharing moral stories with spiritual themes. Many mothers created opportunities for value-based education through family routines or peer networks. Zeynep (P, Professional), for instance, began teaching her 3-year-old basic prayers at home and organized occasional playdates with families from the same mosque

community, where small practices like saying “*Bismillah*”⁴⁹ before meals were normalized. In her view, these early habits would instill a sense of moral awareness from the start. Yasemin (P, Professional), by contrast, emphasized a secular framework. She deliberately chose a playgroup that celebrated national secular holidays and emphasized kindness and sharing, aligning with her upbringing in a secular Republican household.

Importantly, while most playgroups in Istanbul are secular unless explicitly affiliated with religious teachings, it is worth noting that the city is also home to a number of private religious playgroups. However, this study does not encompass those settings and therefore does not reflect the full spectrum of early childhood education experiences in the city. Attempts were made to include religiously affiliated private playgroups—many of which combine play-based activities with instruction on topics such as Ramadan, the life of the Prophet, or basic Quranic literacy—but it proved difficult to reach a sufficient number of participating mothers from these programs (as discussed in detail in Section 1.3). These religious playgroups are fee-based and typically attended by religiously observant middle-class families. As a result, this cohort remains underrepresented in the current sample, and the findings presented here should not be interpreted as fully representative of religious middle-class parenting orientations in Istanbul.

Survey data of the field research reflect a cultural divergence within the existing sample. A clear majority of municipal mothers (73%) supported some form of toddler-age religious instruction, while only 19% of private playgroup mothers did the same. Yet, despite these differences in content and emphasis, the underlying intent converged. All mothers sought to raise children with strong moral values. For

⁴⁹ It means ‘In the name of God’ in Arabic. It is commonly used in religious contexts.

some, this meant revering elders and God; for others, it meant fostering independence, empathy, or civic responsibility. These practices—religious or secular—serve as early expressions of habitus, reflecting broader class-based orientations toward moral development in early childhood.

These choices reflect how parents transmit not only skills but also worldviews as part of the child’s habitus. In response to whether children should receive religious education in the early toddler years, 73 percent of municipality mothers—who predominantly represent lower-class families—expressed a clear desire for religious instruction (either formal or at home). For example, Banu (M, Service and Sales Worker- Currently Homemaker) says that “I want to send her to a Qur’an preschool (*“sübyan okulu”* in Turkish) too—as soon as possible. I want the Qur’an and religious lessons to be given more intensively.”⁵⁰ Yet it is worth saying that Banu is something of an edge case in the field sample. Majority of the municipality parents favor a more informal approach, teaching simple prayers or moral stories at home, or arranging occasional sessions in community settings rather than enrolling toddlers in dedicated religious preschools. In practice, their preference is for relaxed, family-centered religious transmission, which is embedded in everyday life. In contrast, only 19 percent of private playgroup mothers—who are generally middle class—expressed support for early religious instruction. Many of these mothers articulated a preference for postponing formal religious education, emphasizing autonomy and emotional readiness instead. Elif (P, Homemaker), for instance, explained her reluctance by stating, “I don’t think it’s right to pressure [my child] with ‘memorize this prayer,’ ‘perform the prayer,’ ‘read the Qur’an,’ or ‘do

⁵⁰ “Kur’an’a da yollamak istiyorum. Biran önce işte sübyan okuluna gitsin. Kur’an’a, işte din dersine daha da yoğunluk verilir.”

this and that.”⁵¹ This contrast suggests that, within our sample, lower-income parents exhibit a substantially stronger inclination toward early religious education than their private-playgroup counterparts do. However, it is important to note that private religious playgroups—where upper-middle-class families with similarly strong faith commitments send their children—were not accessible to the researcher, potentially underrepresenting middle-class religious preferences. Regardless, because the municipality sample more accurately reflects lower-income families, these findings point to a genuine class-related difference in early-childhood religious education desires in our study. Even when delivered informally or in relaxed, home-based settings, lower-class mothers still express a clear intent to introduce religious values from an early age.

In Bourdieu’s terms, this pattern reflects how lower-income parents’ habitus—shaped by community religiosity and moral traditions—naturally inclines them to prioritize religious instruction as a foundational element of their children’s socialization. This aligns with work on how value transmission in Turkey has shown that familial attitudes and values form the base of a child’s outlook, even as society modernizes (Kağıtçıbaşı & Ataca, 2005). The Istanbul mothers’ efforts at early moral enrichment underscore that they are not only concerned with ABCs. Being a “good person” is equally a part of the class-cultural package they hope to instill. For more religiously oriented families, raising a child who is polite, respectful, and has basic religious knowledge by age 5 can be a form of cultural capital within their community, and ultimately a component of symbolic capital (the family’s reputation as upright or devout). For more secular families, imparting values of independence, curiosity, or gender equality at a young age is tied to their habitus of republican

⁵¹ “Bence çocuğa ‘bu duayı ezberle’, ‘namazını kıl’, ‘Kur’an oku’ ya da ‘şunu yap, bunu yap’ diye baskı yapmak doğru değil.”

secular modernity. Both groups are using early childhood as a stage for habitus formation, but the content of that habitus – secular or pious – differs. Either way, parents are deliberately cultivating dispositions that they consider crucial. Whether it is a habit of saying thank you and please, showing empathy in play, or revering elders and God, the goal is to naturalize these behaviors in the child from the start. Bourdieu (1977, p. 72) would note that the primary habitus formed in the family during early childhood will later structure how the child approaches formal education and society. A child whose early habitus includes, for instance, disciplined routines, comfort with books, and a sense of right and wrong, may navigate the school system with greater ease, because those dispositions align with what teachers expect of a “well-behaved, bright” child. As Ece (M, Professional -Currently Homemaker) puts it, she wants her daughter to be “a good person, someone who knows how to empathize. I want her to think before she acts.”⁵² This insight gives an additional motive for parents to focus on early moral and social training. Additionally, it is not only about being a good person, but also about being the kind of person who fits into their environment. In short, early enrichment in the moral realm is part of shaping “the right kind of person” – a child who embodies the family’s class-based values, whether those are secular-progressive or religious-traditional.

From a Bourdieuan perspective, all these early enrichment activities – educational playgroups, baby gymnastics, toddler music classes, early English, and moral guidance – are contributing to the child’s cultural capital and shaping their habitus in line with the parents’ class position. Across both municipality and private playgroup cohorts, all mothers without exception expressed a desire for playgroups to include specialized field/subject courses, such as swimming or gymnastics, coding

⁵² İlk olarak iyi bir insan olsun, empati kurmayı bilsin. Bir adım atmadan önce, karşısındakini mutlu mu mutsuz mu edeceğini düşünsün

or robotics, musical instrument or team sport etc. This is underscoring a universal emphasis on structured enrichment in early childhood programs. By engaging their children in structured, adult-guided activities from a young age, both lower-class and middle-class parents are intending to practice what Lareau (2011) called concerted cultivation, actively developing their child's skills and orientations in a concerted (planned and deliberate) manner. Although Lareau's ethnography was U.S.-based, the concept resonates strongly in Istanbul's urban context. These mothers are consciously cultivating language ability, scholastic readiness, and social demeanor, rather than leaving development to unfold naturally.

Pierre Bourdieu (1996) argued that in modern societies, the transmission of privilege is increasingly school-mediated rather than purely through inherited wealth. What this means is that middle-class families now rely on educational credentials and skills to maintain their class status across generations, and thus they treat education (broadly defined, starting in infancy) as a central project of parenting. Indeed, Bourdieu (1996) noted that the education system has become "a central stake in the struggle for the monopoly on dominant positions" (p. 5). My findings in Istanbul align with this. The parents pour resources into early education because they see it as the first step in a long educational journey that will determine their child's social trajectory. Middle-class families tend to invest in early education as a means of safeguarding their existing social status, whereas lower-class parents treat these resources as an avenue to facilitate upward mobility and improve their children's future class position. This is precisely the outcome the parents hope for. They would like to ensure that their children enter formal education already equipped with the cultural dispositions and competencies that align with institutional expectations.

This broader logic of class reproduction becomes visible in the everyday decisions mothers make about enrichment, particularly in their engagement with playgroups. For instance, Ceyda (P, Service and Sales Worker- Currently Homemaker) explicitly described how she carefully sought out enrichment activities to enhance her son's early skills, noting, "If I had not discovered this playgroup, perhaps my son would not have become this social and active."⁵³ Her conscious effort to find and engage her child in structured early education illustrates a middle-class strategy of preserving and extending social advantage. The private investment exemplifies a planned deployment of resources to ensure the cultivation of skills aligned with maintaining class position. Lower-class mothers shared similar aspirations, though their access strategies were shaped by resource constraints. Aylin (M, Service and Sales Worker- Currently Homemaker), a participant from the municipal playgroup, expressed a deep aspiration for her child's educational and professional success, emphasizing, "I really want Alper to be well educated. I very much want him to specialize in a field and reach good places."⁵⁴ Banu (M, Service and Sales Worker -Currently Homemaker) similarly revealed a profound desire for social ascent, confessing:

I dream of a wonderful life for my children – in which they end up in truly good places. Perhaps it is my own ego or the fact that I never experienced this myself, but I want my children to achieve the best possible positions. I will do everything in my power, such as taking them to playgroups, to make that happen. (See Appendix E, 4)

These narratives from lower-class mothers demonstrate how free early education services are not merely valued for immediate benefits, but are emotionally

⁵³ "Eğer burayı, bu oyun grubunu keşfetmeseydim, belki bu kadar sosyal ve aktif olmayacaktı."

⁵⁴ "Ben Alper'in eğitilmiş olmasını çok istiyorum. Beğendiği, istediği, hobisi olan bölümün üzerine de yoğunlaşsın. Alanında uzmanlaşmasını çok istiyorum ve iyi yerlere gelsin."

invested in as long-term strategies for changing their children's future class trajectories.

While earlier sections have outlined the general class-based disparities in access to enrichment, this distinction warrants further attention when examined through mothers' direct accounts of navigating limited resources. Lower-class mothers prioritized access and affordability as key concerns. Aylin (M, Service and Sales Worker -Currently Homemaker) explicitly articulated this pragmatic approach, explaining, "The activities offered here are the same as the ones offered at private centers. That's why I chose to bring him here, because I cannot afford private ones."

⁵⁵Furthermore, she emphasized the limited availability of other opportunities:

"Outside of this playgroup, we honestly cannot do anything else for child development."⁵⁶ Through such accounts, it becomes evident that lower-class mothers primarily valued municipal playgroups for providing critical early experiences that would otherwise be financially inaccessible, reinforcing the essential role of free public services in promoting a more equitable start for children across class lines.

The class-based variation in how enrichment is accessed and interpreted aligns with broader patterns observed in the literature. Apple (2001), for instance, observes that middle-class parents, in pursuing this goal, want to "sculpt the habitus of their children" so that their children will be at ease in elite environments and "have the ability to discern the desirable" people, places and practices (p. 415). We see exactly these sculpting tendencies in the narratives of the mothers. We see it in action as well- for instance, a parent deliberately teaching a preschooler how to behave in a classroom circle time, or how to introduce themselves to a new teacher.

⁵⁵ "Sonuçta burada yapılan etkinliğin aynısı özel bir yere götürdüğümüz zaman da aynısı yapılıyor. O yüzden buraya getirmek istedim çünkü özele gücüm yetmez."

⁵⁶ "Çocuk gelişimi için valla oyun grubu dışında başka hiçbir şey yapamıyoruz açıkçası."

These are small things, but together they form a disposition of ease and familiarity with the educated milieu. By the time the child enters primary school, she will likely feel “at home” in that setting, having effectively been in quasi-school environments since toddlerhood. In Bourdieu’s terms, the child will have incorporated certain dispositions (like inquisitiveness, self-regulation, and comfort with authority figures) that teachers reward, thus converting the early cultural capital into academic success. This is precisely the outcome the parents hope for.

This is consistent with the global trend of intensive parenting, where parents pour substantial time and resources into fostering each child’s talents (Hays, 1996; Faircloth, 2014). In Turkey, scholars have observed the emergence of a distinctly intensive mothering culture in the past two decades (Sadıkoğlu & Erdoğan Coşkun, 2024). For example, Sadıkoğlu and Erdoğan Coşkun’s (2024) qualitative study of middle-class mothers in Istanbul found that as children grow out of babyhood, these mothers increasingly shift focus toward educational enrichment – enrolling kids in courses, playgroups, and eventually preschools as early as possible so that they will not “fall behind” their peers. My interviews echoed this pattern. Leyla (P, Professional) whose daughter was 2 and half years old, was already researching which private kindergartens had the best reputations, saying, “If she doesn’t get in at 3, she might be behind at 5.”⁵⁷ Ceyda (M, Service and Sales Worker- Currently Homemaker) described feeling guilty if a week went by without taking her toddler to some kind of organized activity because, in her words, “I don’t want to waste his golden years just sitting at home.”⁵⁸

This illustrates a culturally specific manifestation of intensive parenting in Istanbul. Even during what used to be considered nursery years, there is a mounting

⁵⁷ “Eğer üç yaşında başlayamazsa, beş yaşında geride kalabilir.”

⁵⁸ “Onun altın yıllarını evde oturarak boşa harcamak istemiyorum.”

pressure to introduce structure and learning. Many of these mothers explicitly tied such efforts to being a “good mother.” They internalize the idea that a good mother is one who is constantly providing enrichment and opportunities. If they were to do otherwise – say to adopt a more relaxed, hands-off approach – they fear being judged as negligent or “lazy.” Ceyda (M, Service and Sales Worker-Currently Homemaker) frankly admitted, “I think if I just let him play at home all day, I’d feel like a bad mom. My own mother-in-law might say I’m not educating him enough.”⁵⁹ This sentiment resonates with Ball’s (2003) observation that for parents, a child’s educational success (even at early stages) is seen as “a proof of good and wise parenting”, whereas failing to make the “right” choices can make a parent feel – or be seen as – a failure (Ball, 2003, p. 164; Reay, Crozier, & James, 2011, p. 101). In other words, the stakes of early enrichment are not just the child’s future, but the mother’s own identity and social standing. There is a reflexive aspect. By doing all this work for her child, a mother is also demonstrating her own cultural capital and fulfilling the normative expectations of her class. This dynamic constitutes a form of symbolic capital for the parents. Being recognized as an involved, enrichment-oriented mother confers a certain honor or status among one’s peers. Mothers swap information on activities and strive to keep up, and those who excel in providing opportunities often earn admiration. As one interviewee Aysun (P, Professional) jokingly put it, “In our circle, the mom who’s always got some new class or idea for her kid – we call her the ‘super mom’.”⁶⁰ While said with humor, it reflects that intensive investment has become a competitive arena and a marker of distinction. At the same time, most mothers genuinely believe they are acting in the child’s best

⁵⁹ “Sanırım onu bütün gün evde sadece oynamasına izin verirsem kötü bir anne olduğumu düşünürüm. Kayınvalidem de çocuğu yeterince eğitmediğimi söyleyebilir.”

⁶⁰ “Çevremizde, çocuğu için sürekli yeni bir kurs ya da fikir bulan anneye ‘süper anne’ deriz.”

interest, not just their own. The dispositions driving them – ambition for the child, anxiety about the future, a sense of duty – are deeply ingrained parts of their habitus. It is handed down perhaps from their own parents and reinforced by the current parenting culture. These dispositions compel them to seek every advantage for their child. And indeed, many mothers derive real joy and emotional capital (Reay, 2005) from seeing their little ones learn new things. Ceyda's (M, Service and Sales Worker Currently Homemaker) face lit up as she described how her shy son had learned to socialize better through a weekly playgroup: "He used to cling to me, but now he runs off to play. It's worth all the effort, seeing that progress."⁶¹ Such emotional rewards keep parents engaged in the intensive process despite the challenges. It is important to acknowledge that these enrichment efforts can introduce tensions and contradictions as well. Parents want to give their children an early advantage, yet child development experts often caution against pushing academics too early at the expense of free, unstructured play.

The global literature on early childhood generally advocates play-based, child-led activities in the early years, warning that overly formal instruction or overscheduling can be counterproductive (Hirsh-Pasek et al., 2009). Many of the enrichment activities described by my participants – singing songs, playing games, interactive story time in another language – are play-based and age-appropriate, which aligns well with developmental best practices. However, the intensity of the parents' focus can sometimes tip into anxiety. Several mothers admitted that they occasionally worry they are not doing enough. Nazlı (M, Homemaker) said she felt guilty whenever she saw posts on social media of another toddler in a new gymnastics class or doing an art project, asking herself "should I also sign mine up

⁶¹ "Eskiden bana yapışırdı, ama şimdi oyun oynamaya koşup gidiyor. O ilerlemeyi görmek, tüm çabaya değer."

for something like that?”⁶² This speaks to the social pressure and comparative element that accompanies intensive parenting in the modern age (Gillies, 2005; Tosun, Öztürk, & Özdemir, 2020). Mothers are keenly aware of what others are doing, and no one wants their child to be the one who is left behind. As Gillies (2005) observes, middle-class parenting has become an “anxiety-rich” enterprise – parents continuously fear that a misstep or an omission now could have lasting repercussions. The irony is that this anxiety exists even when parents are arguably going above and beyond. In this study, even mothers who were providing abundant enrichment often voiced self-doubt. There is thus a delicate balance they try to strike. They are providing a rich array of experiences, but not so much as to overwhelm the child or themselves. A few mothers expressed concern about “overscheduling” their toddlers. Hazal (P, Professional- Currently Homemaker) reflected, “Sometimes I wonder, are we doing too much? She is only three. I have her in two different playgroups plus swimming. I think she enjoys it, but I also don’t want her to feel pressured.”⁶³ Ceyda (M, Service and Sales Worker -Currently Homemaker) mentioned deliberately keeping two weekdays free of any structured activities, calling them “our lazy home days,”⁶⁴ to let her child just play freely and watch cartoons, because she sensed he needed that downtime. This indicates that while they are committed to early enrichment, these mothers are also trying to heed expert advice about not overloading young children. The tension between the drive for advantage and the ideal of a relaxed childhood is something many negotiated consciously. It also maps onto a broader discourse in Turkey: traditional family

⁶² “Benimkini de böyle bir şeye yazdırmalı mıyım?”

⁶³ “Bazen merak ediyorum, acaba çok mu ileri gidiyoruz? Daha üç yaşında. Onu iki farklı oyun grubuna ve yüzme dersine götürüyorum. Bence bundan keyif alıyor, ama aynı zamanda baskı hissetmesini de istemiyorum.”

⁶⁴ “tembel ev günlerimiz”

wisdom versus new expert knowledge. Some grandparents in the families of the study, for example, reportedly questioned why these little children need classes – “*biz sizi böyle mi büyüttük?*” (“did we raise you like this?”). Whereas pediatricians, teachers, and online parenting groups often encourage stimulating activities. Mothers thus find themselves in a web of influences, trying to satisfy societal expectations on both ends. They want to be modern, proactive parents (in line with their class and peer norms), but they also hear echoes of older, perhaps simpler approaches telling them not to stress the children or themselves.

This nuanced balance is reflected in Turkey’s limited research to date. While we have considerable knowledge about Western contexts of early enrichment, we know less about how these dynamics play out in Turkey specifically. Do Istanbul mothers truly believe “earlier is always better,” and how do they gauge success or burnout in this process? My interviews indicate that many do subscribe to the “earlier is better” mantra for things like language learning or basic academics, citing examples such as a couple hours per week of fun English exposure being “beneficial” for a three-year-old. Yet, they are also aware of the lack of definitive local data on outcomes. There was a recurring sentiment of hope rather than certainty – mothers say “I feel it will help him later” or “At least she’s not falling behind,” revealing that these beliefs are strongly held but not empirically guaranteed. This thesis aims to shed light on how Istanbul mothers navigate these complexities of early enrichment, and how they perceive the outcomes of their efforts. By capturing mothers’ own narratives, we gain insight into the subjective logic of their parenting habitus. Ultimately, examining these practices tells us as much about the parents’ social world as about the children’s development. The choice to take a toddler to a playgroup or to teach them a prayer is imbued with meanings about what these

mothers value, what they aspire to, and what they fear of. It is evident that habitus is not a passive background here but something actively shaped and deployed by mothers. Through small actions – selecting this playgroup over that one, speaking one language or another at home, emphasizing this moral principle or that – parents are engineering a habitus for their child that they hope will position the child favorably in the future. It is a blend of traditional emphases (for example, many still stress obedience and family loyalty, hallmarks of Turkey's familial culture) with modern strategies (early education, individualized attention, extra curriculars) to produce what they hope is a well-rounded, capable child. In doing so, these parents are effectively attempting to reproduce or improve their class position under evolving circumstances. They intuitively understand Bourdieu's insight that the family habitus underlies a child's later experiences in school and society, so they work from the start to make that foundation as solid as possible. The enrichment activities of early childhood, then, are not trivial pastimes. They are a form of cultural work that carries significant weight in the intergenerational transmission of advantage.

The study's exploration of this topic will contribute to a deeper understanding of how Turkey's class habitus is being reconstituted in the early years of childrearing. The study shows how global ideas of intensive parenting and local cultural expectations intersect in the microcosm of playgroups and toddler lessons. By analyzing these practices and the meanings mothers attach to them, we gain insight into the ongoing making of class identity and social inequality at the very start of life. The comparative insights of the study reinforce that intensive early parenting is no monopoly of the middle class. It is embraced across the socio-economic spectrum, with each group calibrating their efforts to their means and values. Indeed, while middle-class mothers often channel enrichment toward

preserving their advantage and refining specific talents, lower-income mothers treat early development opportunities as a vital avenue for upward mobility, converging in the belief that no early learning opportunity should be missed. This nuanced understanding of how class shapes early enrichment practices underscores the adaptability of universal parenting aspirations across socioeconomic lines. It also sets the stage for examining broader societal implications in the next chapter. In the chapters that follow, this analysis is extended to consider how early investments in children's development intersect with concerns over urban safety, the internalization of intensive mothering ideals, and the affective pressures generated by social media, thereby offering a multidimensional account of parenting, habitus, and social reproduction in contemporary Istanbul.

CHAPTER 3

CONTEMPORARY CHALLENGES AND PRESSURE IN PARENTING

3.1 Raising a child in the city: safety and anxiety in an urban environment

Urban living offers families access to many resources (schools, parks, hospitals, cultural activities), but it also introduces unique stresses for parents of young children. In Istanbul, a densely populated mega city of over 18 million, safety and environmental concerns loom large in the minds of the mothers interviewed in this study. The literature on urban parenting stress indicates that parents in cities often worry about both tangible dangers (like traffic, crime) and the general urban lifestyle's impact on their children. Tezel (2011) provides a vivid case study from Istanbul: Even in ostensibly secure gated communities, parents expressed ongoing anxiety about letting their children play outside freely. They cited fears such as speeding cars within the complex, insufficient play areas, and strangers entering the premises. This resulted in highly supervised play. Parents felt they could not let the child out of sight even in what should be a safe environment, which in turn was described as exhausting for the mother (Tezel, 2011, pp. 428 – 431). Such anecdotes align with research from other contexts. Kimbro and Schachter (2011) found that urban U.S. mothers in high-density neighborhoods had significant fear of outdoor play, often disproportionate to actual crime rates. They discovered that a mother's perception of danger – influenced by disorderly surroundings or lack of social cohesion – predicted restricted outdoor play for children more than local crime statistics did. Applying this insight to Istanbul, it becomes clear that even in neighbourhoods deemed statistically "safe" mothers may still limit children's outdoor activities. It is driven by anxieties heightened by accident reports or general urban

disorder, thus favouring indoor or structured, supervised environments such as playgroups. To rephrase, one direct consequence of the safety concern is that many urban parents turn to organized playgroups or indoor playgrounds as alternatives to unsupervised outdoor neighborhood play.

While this provides some peace of mind, it can inadvertently limit children's freedom to explore and can add to a parent's logistical load (having to constantly arrange safe outings rather than simply letting the child play out front). Mayne et al., in a Philadelphia study, found that mothers who perceived their neighborhoods as safe and had trust in their community experienced significantly lower chronic stress. Conversely, lacking that sense of safety was correlated with higher stress, even if the objective crime rate was not high (Mayne et al., 2022). This underscores a key point. Subjective safety, how secure a mother feels, is critical. For Istanbul mothers, subjective safety might be undermined by factors like heavy traffic everywhere, sensational media reports of child abuse, abductions or accidents, or simply the sensory overload of a crowded city that feels uncontrollable. Indeed, my findings show that nearly all participants (>95%) – across both lower class (municipality playgroup) and middle class (private playgroup) groups – expressed deep unease about raising a child in Istanbul. As Tuba (P, Professional) put it, “raising a child in Istanbul is very hard... we are in tremendous anxiety every day”⁶⁵ – she described having a constant voice in her mind saying “be careful, be careful”,⁶⁶ never able to let her guard down. She tells her relatives in a quieter town, “You have no idea what kind of luxury you are living in... here we're always on alert. We never feel calm. Raising a child here is not easy at all”⁶⁷. This vivid testimony illustrates how

⁶⁵ “İstanbul’da çocuk yetiştirmek çok zor... Her gün büyük bir kaygı yaşıyoruz.”

⁶⁶ “Dikkat et, dikkat et.”

⁶⁷ “Ne kadar lüks içinde yaşadığınızı hiç hayal edemezsiniz... Burada sürekli tetikteyiz. Hiç rahat hissetmiyoruz. Burada çocuk yetiştirmek asla kolay değil.”

pervasive and chronic the sense of vigilance is for Istanbul mothers. This situation is mirroring what quantitative studies like Kimbro and Schachter (2011) have noted about maternal fear outweighing actual risk. Mothers in my study often reflected on how different their own childhoods were – typically filled with free outdoor play – compared to the constrained experience of their children. Funda (P, Professional) recalled: in her youth, play was entirely in the street, “that’s gone now”.⁶⁸ She noted, “in our time it felt safer. Maybe it was not actually safer, but we did not hear about bad things, so we were not conscious of the dangers. Maybe now we are too aware. Everyone’s protective instinct is very high”.⁶⁹ Broader research echoes this sentiment, highlighting how previous generations enjoyed greater freedom partly due to limited awareness, while today's parents face heightened anxiety from being overwhelmed with information.

Over three-quarters of mothers in a U.S. survey admitted they restrict outdoor play due to safety concerns. Even as violent crime rates have declined, they are citing media-fueled awareness of dangers as a major reason (Clements, 2004). Istanbul mothers exemplify this paradox. Despite living in a city or neighborhood that is relatively safe in some respects (e.g. low violent crime), they feel unsafe. Social media and news reports swiftly circulate every incident or potential hazard, amplifying a climate of fear. As Tuba (P, Professional) explained, “There were dangers in the past too but I think because of social media we hear about bad events much more. I feel there’s a real security problem”.⁷⁰ Even living in a good neighborhood or a gated apartment complex does not fully ease this worry. Mothers

⁶⁸ “Şimdi bu bitti.”

⁶⁹ “Bizim zamanımızda daha güvende hissediyorduk. Belki aslında daha güvenli değildi, ama kötü şeyleri duymadığımız için tehlikenin farkında değildik. Belki şimdi çok daha bilinçliyiz; herkesin koruma içgüdüğü çok yüksek.”

⁷⁰ “Geçmişte de tehlikeler vardı ama bence sosyal medya sayesinde kötü olayları çok daha fazla duyuyoruz. Gerçek bir güvenlik sorunu olduğunu hissediyorum.”

described how they still would not let their child play outside unsupervised; a pattern also observed by Tezel (2011) in Istanbul's gated communities. In my interviews, Reyhan (P, Professional, mother of two) who resides in such a complex said that letting her young children go downstairs to ride their bicycle alone was out of the question. "It's never like 'okay, I'm going out to ride my bike.' I sit there watching them... They [my children] get annoyed with me, but there's nothing to do".⁷¹ This kind of constant supervision has become the norm, even though it can strain the parent-child relationship and exhaust the mother. The picture that emerges is one of hyper-vigilance: an ever-present anxiety that something could go wrong if the mother's attention lapses even briefly. Another urban challenge repeatedly raised by Istanbul mothers is the lack of child-friendly spaces. Istanbul has parks and playgrounds, but they can be insufficient in number or quality relative to the huge population. Some neighborhoods have only small, crowded playgrounds near busy roads, which mothers do not find relaxing or safe. As Selin (M, Homemaker) lamented, the parks are – small and right by the roads – so "children can run off towards traffic if not watched every second".⁷²

Research supports that access to green spaces and safe play areas improves the parenting experience and child outcomes. For example, Kim, Cho & Kim (2021) found that Korean mothers who reported ample nearby parks, playgrounds and child-friendly facilities had significantly lower parenting stress levels. The presence of a safe park where a child can play without constant hazard translates to a parent being able to relax a bit and feel confident about the child's well-being. In Istanbul, efforts have been made to create such spaces (like "*millet bahçeleri*", large public parks).

⁷¹ "Hiçbir zaman 'tamam, ben dışarı bisiklete binmeye çıkıyorum' gibi bir şey mümkün değil. Oturup onları [çocuklarımı] izlemek zorundayım... Çocuklarım bundan rahatsız oluyor ama yapacak bir şey yok. "

⁷² "Çocuklar her saniye izlenmezse trafiğe doğru koşabilir."

However, not every family has easy access to them, and reaching them might involve battling traffic – a catch that can deter their use. Dilara (P, Professional- Currently Homemaker) from a higher-income district noted the irony that she pays significant amounts of money to enroll her toddler in nature-oriented playgroups “so he can play with soil,”⁷³ because otherwise the child has few opportunities to be in green spaces. “We spend extra money for this, which feels so strange to me”.⁷⁴ If mothers feel there is no convenient, safe outdoor space, they often confine the child to indoor play. As Sedef (P, Professional) explained, outside the home “the environment is not safe”,⁷⁵ so she finds herself constantly cautioning her child. “I’m giving warnings nonstop, and I even bother myself by how often I’m scolding”.⁷⁶ In social gatherings, she prefers to herd the children into her child’s childproofed room. If guests are over, she will say, “let’s go play in his room where it’s safer,” and if no guests are around, “we’re completely in his room all the time”.⁷⁷ This illustrates how the perceived lack of safe public space turns the home into the primary (and sometimes sole) play zone, a phenomenon that can cause its own guilt and dilemmas. Lale (M, Homemaker) mentioned feeling uneasy that their kids spend so much time “within four walls”⁷⁸ and from a similar angle, Pelin (M, Professional) stated that children often resort to screens or TV for entertainment; “today’s kids just have a tablet or phone in hand, they don’t do other activities”.⁷⁹ She partly blamed herself and other parents: when her child is restless and she has housework or a guest, handing him a device is the easy solution. Pelin (M, Professional) echoed this sentiment; “in our childhood we

⁷³ “toprakla oynayabilmesi için”

⁷⁴ “Bunun için ekstra para harcıyoruz, bu bana çok garip geliyor.”

⁷⁵ “Çevre güvenli değil.”

⁷⁶ “Durmaksızın uyarı yapıyorum ve ne kadar sık azarladığının farkındalığı bile beni rahatsız ediyor.”

⁷⁷ “Bütün zamanımızı tamamen onun odasında geçiriyoruz.”

⁷⁸ “dört duvar arasında

⁷⁹ “şu andaki çocuklarda elinde tablet, telefon. Başka yaptıkları bir aktivite yok.”

always played physical games, everything was organic, and I think I was happier as a child.”⁸⁰ This trade-off weighs on mothers’ minds. They worry that in shielding kids from outside dangers, they might be inhibiting their social and physical development or encouraging excessive screen time.

Here again, the literature notes this conundrum. Lack of safe outdoor options has been linked with increased indoor sedentary behavior for kids and heightened parental concern about the consequences (Burdette & Whitaker, 2005; Ginsburg, 2007). Mothers find themselves constantly balancing physical safety against other aspects of well-being. Urban living also means dealing with crowding and overstimulation, which can affect young children (who may become fussy or overwhelmed in noisy, crowded environments) and thus add strain to parents. Taking a toddler on public transportation in rush hour or through a busy market can be a nerve-racking experience. Parents worry about the child getting lost in the crowd, catching germs, or simply having a meltdown due to sensory overload.

Consequently, many Istanbul mothers limit where they are willing to go with their children, potentially isolating themselves further. They might stick to a small radius of trusted environments (home, a nearby friend’s home, a familiar playgroup) and avoid exploring the wider city, because the unpredictability is too stressful.

According to Tezel “planners and policy makers regrettably do not place priority on children’s well-being when making decisions about new urbanization policies” (2011, p. 427), implying that constant vigilance is needed when navigating it with children. In my study, Lale (M, Homemaker) voiced similar feelings. “Because Istanbul is such a big city, even kinship ties are very weak, existing only within the

⁸⁰ “Hani ben şu anki çocuk nesline bakıyorum bir de bizimkine bakıyorum. Bizim zamanımıza daha güzeldi her şey. Hani her şey organikti. ... Bence ben çocukluğumda daha mutluydum.”

nuclear family”, she said.⁸¹ She described how in her rural childhood she grew up seeing animals in person, whereas her Istanbul-raised child knows such things only through television – a shorthand for the more constrained, nature-disconnected life of an urban child. In addition to missing nature, the weakening of extended family networks in a vast city means parents have fewer readily available helpers to rely on. Traditionally, Turkish culture is very family-oriented, and in smaller communities, relatives or neighbors might watch out for each other’s children (Kağıtçıbaşı, 1996). In modern Istanbul, especially in newer apartment complexes, that communal support is less accessible. Yet, as the old saying reminds us, “it takes a village” to raise a child—a communal safety net that is now weakening in Istanbul’s sprawling urban landscape. This lack of “village” to help nurture the child places even more pressure on the mother to be ever attentive when outside the home. A few mothers in the study also expressed discomfort with the social environment of the city – beyond physical dangers. They worried about negative influences, saying they were cautious about their child mixing with the “culture” of the streets. For instance, Zeynep (P, Professional) feared that her son could pick up foul language or rude behaviors from the diverse crowds at public parks or even at school, reflecting a moral or cultural anxiety tied to the urban setting. Such concerns, while not universal, highlight how some parents perceive the city’s social heterogeneity as a threat to the values or etiquette they wish to instill. Parents want to curate their children’s social experiences—such as choosing certain playgroup environments—to instill the very dispositions and tastes of their own class habitus, thereby ensuring its reproduction in the next generation. This borders on overprotection and speaks to class-based apprehensions (for example, some higher-income parents wishing to shield their

⁸¹ “İstanbul çok büyük bir şehir olduğu için akrabalık ilişkileri bile çok zayıf. Çekirdek aile içerisinde ancak.”

children from what they see as coarser elements of city life). Nonetheless, it is part of the reality for parents who constantly calculate all types of risk in an urban mosaic – from traffic and crime to culture and peer influence.

The literature indicates some potential solutions or coping mechanisms for urban parenting stress, and my data provide examples of these in action. Building community networks is one commonly cited buffer. Mayne et al. (2022) highlight that mothers who felt a strong sense of community – trusting neighbors, knowing other parents nearby – had lower stress even in the same physical environment. Social cohesion can thus moderate urban stress. If a mother knows her neighbors and they all keep an eye on the playing children, she might feel more at ease despite living in a big city. In Istanbul, some neighborhoods (often older, close-knit districts or historic “*mahalle*”) still have that traditional cohesion, whereas others have become more anonymous and fragmented (Keyder, 1999). Our participants often lamented the latter. Vildan (P, Professional) observed that “there are people who have lived in the same building with me for five years, and we never met”.⁸² In contrast, she fondly remembered her own childhood in a smaller community; “Our neighbors had been around for many years. My childhood was spent visiting back and forth with neighbors, playing in the apartment entrance and the street. For us childhood was essentially the street and the neighbors”.⁸³ Now, she noted, “kids’ interactions have greatly decreased. They have fewer friends and chances to socialize”. “That’s why we need playgroups more, so they can have the chance to play together and build those play skills”.⁸⁴ This testimony illustrates how, in the

⁸² “Benimle aynı binada beş yıldır yaşayan insanlar var ve biz hiç tanışmadık.”

⁸³ “Komşularımız yıllardır yanımızdaydı; çocukluğum komşulara gidip gelerek, apartman girişinde ve sokakta oynayarak geçti – bizim için çocukluk özünde sokak ve komşulardı.”

⁸⁴ “Çocukların etkileşimleri büyük ölçüde azaldı; daha az arkadaşı ve sosyalleşme fırsatı var.”
“Bu nedenle oyun gruplarına daha fazla ihtiyacımız var; böylece birlikte oynama ve oyun becerilerini geliştirme fırsatı bulabilirler.”

absence of organic neighborhood play and kin support, mothers actively seek out organized groups or classes to create a substitute community for their children. Playgroups, in this sense, serve a dual purpose. They are a safe space and a social space, addressing both the safety anxiety (being supervised and in an enclosed environment) and the isolation issue (providing interaction for child and mother). Notably, participating in a playgroup itself gave some mothers a network of peers to share information and watch over each other's kids, which can alleviate anxiety. However, there is an inequity underlying these solutions. Families with sufficient resources can afford private play centers, frequent outings to child-friendly venues, or even moving to "better" (safer, greener) neighborhoods, whereas low-income families might be stuck in small apartments in dense areas with few safe parks. In this study, a few higher-income mothers indeed took steps like moving to less crowded suburbs or paying extracurricular activities to mitigate the city's impacts. For example, Sedef (P, Professional) recounted deliberately relocating from a very dense apartment block as she said; "we lived two years in one flat and only ever saw one of our neighbors, and even then, we never learned their name".⁸⁵ She moved to a less populous area in hopes of a more child-friendly environment. By contrast, mothers with fewer means often had little choice but to "close the doors" on the outside world and rely on their own vigilance. Feride (M, Homemaker), a lower-class mother with a more limited income, described being forced indoors for her child's safety:

We feel compelled to enclose ourselves in a glass dome to keep the child safe, because the outside world feels too unpredictable... In terms of security, it is very uncomfortable. For example, we do not let our child out into the street. When I was small we used to play outside all the time, but now I can't allow him to do so (See Appendix E, 5)

⁸⁵ "İki yıl boyunca aynı dairede yaşadık ve sadece bir komşumuzu gördük; üstelik o zaman bile adını öğrenemedik."

These differences in coping underscore how social class can shape the experience of urban parenting. The anxieties are shared, but the ability to alleviate them varies.

It is worth noting that while numerous studies document the general phenomena of parental anxiety in urban settings (e.g., in the U.S., Europe, East Asia), there has been fewer focused research on Istanbul or Turkey in this regard. My thesis contributes to filling this gap by capturing mothers' voiced experiences of these urban challenges, adding qualitative depth to what broader studies have found. The convergence between the experiences of participants from both lower-class and middle-class backgrounds, as well as the international literature is striking. Moreover, this study also highlights culturally specific nuances such as concerns about city "culture" or the particular ways the participants attempt to alleviate their anxieties.

In conclusion, raising a child in a city like Istanbul often entails navigating a minefield of safety concerns and environmental limitations, which can significantly elevate a mother's day-to-day anxiety. The mothers I interviewed – almost unanimously – conveyed that they are not happy about the prospect of bringing up children in Istanbul's current conditions, primarily due to feelings of insecurity and the stress of constant alertness. The literature affirms that these fears are not trivial. They have real effects on parenting behavior (e.g., keeping children indoors, constantly supervising, experiencing chronic stress) and even on children's lifestyle (less free outdoor play, more structured activities or screen time). Importantly, this worry cut across income levels in my sample. Both wealthier and less affluent mothers shared the same core anxieties about traffic, crime, pollution, and general chaos, indicating a broad-based phenomenon. Any differences were in degree and coping strategies – for instance, higher-income parents might buffer the risks by

purchasing safer play opportunities or relocating, whereas lower-income parents may rely on extended family or simply endure the constraints – but the emotional landscape of worry was common to all. This near-universal vigilance and concern highlight an urgent area for urban policy (such as improving play infrastructure and community safety initiatives) as well as for further research. Moreover, the tremendous pressure these mothers feel to keep their children safe at all times does not exist in a vacuum. It feeds into other dimensions of motherhood. Many of the women described feeling that they must manage everything perfectly to compensate for the hostile environment, and they often internalize blame or guilt when they fall short. As we move on to the next topic, we will see how this climate of constant concern contributes to the ‘perfect mother’ ideal and mothers’ feelings of inadequacy. The constant vigilance and anxiety of city parenting, in other words, is one facet of a larger set of contemporary pressures on mothers. Moreover, many mothers expressed a profound mistrust in governmental and social institutions to protect their children, reflecting an erosion of faith in the social state’s ability to offer real reassurance. This institutional vacuum intensifies their sense of personal responsibility, compelling them to assume sole accountability for their children’s safety. Leyla (P, Professional) stated:

I cannot look to my children’s future with confidence. In my day, for example, there were drunks or perverts, but it was all hidden away. I am even afraid of students who smoke. ... Environmental factors at this point can undo in a very short time what we have built up for years. Sometimes we cannot even trust our closest relatives. (See Appendix E, 6)

Consequently, by unpacking the urban safety anxiety outlined here, we gain insight into the backdrop against which mothers strive to be “good mothers” – an effort made all the more challenging by the stresses I have discussed. The following section will delve into how these high expectations and pressures manifest in

mothers' psyches and self-perceptions, building on the context of risk and responsibility that I have detailed in the urban environment.

3.2 The “perfect mother” ideal and maternal feelings of inadequacy

Modern motherhood, across much of the world, is shadowed by an implicit ideal. The notion that a ‘good mother’ is endlessly devoted, patient, knowledgeable, and capable – in short, practically perfect. This ideal has been described in academic literature as intensive mothering (Hays, 1996) or the “new momism” (Douglas & Michaels, 2004). It describes a type of mothering that puts children’s needs above all, constantly stimulate their development, and shoulder the majority of child-rearing responsibilities with a smile. The result of this cultural ideal is that many mothers feel they are never doing enough or never doing it quite right. They experience guilt and self-doubt, a pattern clearly identified in our context as maternal feelings of inadequacy. Henderson, Harmon and Newman empirically examined this phenomenon, finding that mothers who internalized idealized motherhood norms indeed reported more stress, more guilt, and lower self-efficacy. Even mothers who consciously disagreed with the pressures (i.e. they “did not buy into” intensive parenting fully) were not immune – the societal messages were so pervasive that they felt the weight regardless (Henderson et al., 2016). Henderson et al. referred to the “price” mothers pay for these expectations, notably in terms of mental health. Higher rates of depressive symptoms were correlated with feeling the need to be a perfect parent. In other words, feeling pressured to be a perfect mother is associated with heightened stress, anxiety, guilt, and even parental burnout (Meeussen & Van Laar, 2018, p. 5). In Turkey, as Sadıkoğlu and Erdoğan Coşkun (2024) discuss, the intensive mothering ideology has taken hold among urban mothers, intersecting with

local norms of family and expert advice. Mothers in their study expressed that they try to adhere to all the guidelines from pediatricians, parenting books, etc. to be a “good mother,” and feel pressure to design their lives around their children. However, they also actively negotiate these pressures – sometimes pushing back or finding their own balance – indicating a tension between expectation and reality. The common thread is that they feel the pressure strongly. Şahlar and Üstündağ-Budak (2020) provide a historical perspective on how working mothers of Turkey, in particular, juggle careers with the expectation of intensive parenting. They note that highly educated mothers often set very high standards for themselves, attempting to excel both at work and in mothering, which is virtually impossible to sustain without strain. The authors invoke the concept of “momism,” suggesting that mothers are culturally positioned as the ultimate experts and caregivers for their children, expected to be simultaneously a teacher, therapist, doctor, and best friend to the child. In this narrative, the mother is responsible for every detail of the child’s well-being—from nutrition to cognitive stimulation—and other potential caregivers (fathers, grandparents, etc.) are less prominent. Consequently, when anything goes wrong – if a child has a developmental delay, a behavioral issue, or even just a bad day – mothers may blame themselves for not being perfect enough, which has been put upon them by the society. This self-blame reflects what scholars call the “intensive mothering” mandate (Hays, 1996; Romagnoli & Wall, 2012), wherein mothers internalize an unrealistic level of responsibility for outcomes.

Our data indicate that many mothers in the study spoke of trying to “keep up with everything and be the perfect mother, taking on all roles.” This encapsulates the multitasking overload: being the primary caregiver, teacher, playmate, housekeeper, etc., often while also working a job or managing extended family duties. Not

surprisingly, among the interviewees of this study, feeling inadequate (“*yetersiz*” in Turkish) is common. This refrain of not being “enough” came through vividly in the interviews. For example, Tuba (P, Professional), one of the middle-class mothers, bluntly described the current social climate by saying: “I think this era is an age of inadequacy for parents. That feeling is always inside you... it’s already within you, and it also comes from outside.”⁸⁶ Her comment captures how pervasive the sense of inadequacy has become. It is both internally generated and externally reinforced. The sentiment ‘inside you’ suggests a personal inner critic common to many mothers, while ‘coming from outside’ points to societal messages (from family, community, media) that constantly remind mothers of what they “should” be doing better. Tuba’s experience mirrors Henderson et al.’s (2016) observation that pressures for perfect motherhood can feel inescapable. Mothers may intellectually recognize the ideal is unattainable, yet still feel insufficient when comparing themselves to it (Henderson et al., 2016; Forbes et al., 2020). This aligns with the concept of self-discrepancy: a gap between one’s real self and the ideal “perfect mom” self can breed chronic guilt and shame (Henderson et al., 2016; Collins, 2021). Several mothers described how motherhood, unlike paid work, has no off-hours or breaks – a reality that feeds into feelings of inadequacy. Sedef (P, Professional), an interviewee who is a teacher by profession, drew a telling contrast between her job and motherhood:

We are teachers, but we have set working hours. After that time is over, we have no responsibility. However, with motherhood, it never ends. The process goes on continuously, and even as someone in this [childcare] profession, I kept asking myself, ‘Will I be able to do this?’ (See Appendix E, 7)

Here, Sedef voices a common anxiety. Even a well-prepared, educated mother felt unready for the totalizing nature of motherhood. Her description

⁸⁶ “Bence bu dönem, ebeveynler için yetersizlik çağı. O duygu her zaman içinizde... zaten içinizde var ve aynı zamanda dışarıdan da geliyor.”

highlights that motherhood is a 24/7 role with no clear boundaries or downtime. Psychologically, this lack of pause can be overwhelming. Sociologists have noted that modern mothers often experience a “double bind” – they are expected to devote themselves endlessly to childrearing, yet often must also work or handle other duties, leading to an impossible situation (Arendell, 2000). Sedef’s worry – “Will I be able to do this?” – exemplifies the anticipatory self-doubt that arises from knowing no matter how much energy she pours into motherhood, it still might not feel like enough. This echoes research on the mental load of motherhood, wherein mothers carry a constant awareness of children’s needs that can be mentally exhausting (Walzer, 1996). It also reinforces Sahlar and Üstündağ-Budak’s (2020, p. 117) point about educated working mothers feeling stretched to an unsustainable degree. When the “workday” of parenting never ends, mothers like Sedef (P, Professional) inevitably wonder if they can live up to the ideal of doing it all with ease. The consequence, as Sedef admitted, is a persistent self-questioning. She even gave a concrete example from her early parenting experience. When her infant refused to eat homemade purees during the weaning stage, she turned the blame inward, asking “Am I not able to cook tasty food? ... He is not eating – maybe he doesn’t like it? Do I just have no skill?”⁸⁷ She concluded, “Once you have a child, you start criticizing yourself. You are always asking: ‘Am I not doing it right? Am I not capable?’”.⁸⁸ Her words reveals how quickly minor difficulties (a baby’s fickle appetite) transform into a series of self-doubts about her competencies as a mother. Rather than attributing the issue to the child’s normal behavior or other factors, Sedef’s instinct was to question her own adequacy – “Am I not capable? Is there something wrong

⁸⁷ “Lezzetli yemek pişiremiyor muyum? ... Yemiyor – belki hoşuna gitmiyor mu? Benim hiç becerim yok mu?”

⁸⁸ “Çocuğunuz olduğunda kendinizi eleştirmeye başlıyorsunuz. Sürekli ‘Bunu doğru mu yapmıyorum? Yeterli değil miyim?’ diye soruyorsunuz.”

with me?” Such internalized self-critique is precisely what the intensive mothering ethos engenders. Mothers are conditioned to believe that every aspect of the child’s well-being hinges on their efforts. Scholars have termed this tendency “mother blame”, noting that modern mothers often hold themselves responsible for outcomes that are beyond their control (Douglas & Michaels, 2004; Henderson et al., 2016). Sedef’s experience resonates with these findings. She illustrates how an endlessly high bar for “good mothering” turns routine challenges into evidence of supposed maternal failure, fueling feelings of inadequacy.

In our interviews, mothers consistently described living what they called a “child-centered life”, in which children’s needs dominate nearly every aspect of family routine, planning, and emotional energy. Many participants emphasized that this level of child focus marks a dramatic shift from how they themselves were raised. As Umay (P, Homemaker) reflected, “In the past, children weren’t taken so seriously... they had no say. Now everything the child says is so precious, you have to listen”.⁸⁹ Today’s mothers often organize all daily activities around their young children. Aylin (M, Service and Sales Worker- Currently Homemaker) confessed that after her baby was born, she “put everyone else aside and continued life only for my child”, illustrating how the child became the sole focal point.⁹⁰ With two little ones, Leyla (P, Professional) described her day-to-day existence as “completely revolving around them... running around for housework, the kids’ needs, and outings, it’s become impossible to spare time for myself”.⁹¹ Yet even with such total devotion, mothers reported a persistent sense that it is never enough. “We do

⁸⁹ “Eskiden çocuklar bu kadar ciddiye alınmazdı... söz hakları yoktu. Şimdi ise çocuğun söylediği her şey çok değerli; dinlemek zorundasınız.”

⁹⁰ “çocuk olduktan sonra herkesi bir yana atıp sadece çocuğun için hayatına devam ediyorsun. Yani ben en azından öyle yapıyorum.”

⁹¹ “Tamamen onların (çocukların) etrafında dönüyor... ev işleri, çocukların ihtiyaçları ve dışarı çıkmalar için koşturmak, kendime vakit ayırmayı imkânsız hâle getirdi.”

everything for our kids but never feel it's enough. This whole process is a reflection of a modern child-centered family life... This cycle is exhausting,"⁹² explained Leyla (P, Professional), noting how contemporary parenting discourse constantly urges parents to do more. In short, child-centered orientation now defines their everyday motherhood, setting an extraordinarily high bar for what they feel they must provide.

Indeed, contemporary parenting practices emphasize children's needs, interests, and developmental goals more than ever before, reflecting a fundamental shift toward a child-centered family structure. Historically, families were organized in a more adult-centered manner, with children expected to fit into adult responsibilities and contribute practically to the household (Ariès, 1962). Over time, parenting ideologies underwent a significant transformation, shifting dramatically toward a child-centered family structure in which children's emotional, educational, and developmental needs became central. Zelizer (1985) vividly documented this shift, describing how children evolved from economically useful contributors to family life into emotionally cherished but economically "useless" members whose needs increasingly dictated family priorities. This change culminated in what Hays (1996) termed "intensive parenting," where parents began investing substantial time, resources, and emotional labor to actively foster their children's development. Importantly, this transformation is not confined to Western contexts. In Turkey, traditional family structures historically emphasized children's practical roles and responsibilities within the family. However, recent decades have seen a marked shift toward valuing children primarily for emotional fulfillment and their developmental potential (Kağıtçıbaşı & Ataca, 2005; Sunar & Fişek, 2005). These scholarly insights collectively confirm a significant paradigm shift from adult-centered to distinctly

⁹² "Çocuklarımız için her şeyi yapıyoruz ama hiçbir zaman yeterli olduğunu hissetmiyoruz. Bu süreç, modern çocuk merkezli aile yaşamının bir yansıması... Bu döngü çok yorucu ve yıpratıcı"

child-centered family practices. It is happening in both international and Turkish contexts, validating the assertion that contemporary parenting is fundamentally child-oriented compared to previous generations.

This global and local shift toward child-centered family practices is reflected vividly in the personal narratives of the mothers interviewed for this study. Equally striking for these mothers is a sense that the very mission of motherhood has changed, encapsulated in the frequently heard question during the interviews; “Am I a mother or a playmate?” Many interviewees noted that they are expected not only to care for their children but also to serve as constant play companions, a role they believe their own mothers did not have to fulfill. “I feel like I have to play with my child all the time,”⁹³ Vildan (P, Professional) complained, “I catch myself wondering, did we play enough today? What new game should I set up next?”⁹⁴ She observed that a generation ago, kids would play together and argued; “that wasn’t a deficiency – they would amuse each other. But now parents have taken on that role. The child’s playmate is the mother or father; it used to be the neighbor’s kid”.⁹⁵ Indeed, several mothers pointed out that with more isolated nuclear families and weaker community ties today, children often lack same-age playmates nearby, leaving mothers to fill the void. Defne (M, Professional -Currently Homemaker) admitted bluntly, “I am my son’s playmate”,⁹⁶ while Tuba (P, Professional) laughed that “our roles have shifted – I’m Arzu’s mom and at the same time her playmate”.⁹⁷ This new expectation that a “good” mother should actively entertain, educate, and

⁹³ “Çocuğumla sürekli oynamak zorundaymışım gibi hissediyorum.”

⁹⁴ “Kendimi bugün yeterince oyun oynayıp oynamadığımı ve sırada hangi oyunu kurmam gerektiğini merak ederken yakalıyorum.”

⁹⁵ “Bu bir eksiklik değildi – birbirlerini eğlendirirlerdi. Ama şimdi ebeveynler bu rolü üstlendi. Çocuğun oyun arkadaşı anne veya baba; eskiden komşunun çocuğu olurdu.”

⁹⁶ “Ben oğlumun oyun arkadaşıyım.”

⁹⁷ “Rollerimiz değişti – Arzu’nun annesiyim ama aynı zamanda oyun arkadaşıyım.”

play with her child throughout the day was especially palpable among middle-class moms in the study (who mentioned the “mother or playmate” dilemma more frequently), though lower-class moms felt it too. Mothers described straining to be creative, fun play-partners on top of their other duties, often inspired by expert advice and parenting media. Many even cited Montessori’s adage that “play is the child’s work” to justify devoting so much effort to play. However, not all mothers embrace this norm without ambivalence. Defne (M, Professional-Currently Homemaker) for example said, “we shouldn’t become the child while raising the child. We need to be parents”,⁹⁸ voicing concern that constant playtime indulgence may dilute parental authority or discipline.

More commonly though, mothers expressed guilt or inadequacy if they could not live up to the playmate ideal. Tuba (P, Professional) turned to organized playgroups for support. “I was afraid my daughter wasn’t socializing... I’m her mom and also her playmate, so I take her to the playgroup to fill that gap,”⁹⁹ she explained. By seeking such outside resources, mothers like Tuba found ways to cope with the pressure of being the ever-present playmate.

Overall, this blurring of mother and play-partner reflects a broader transformation in parenting culture. Early childhood socialization as discussed earlier is now seen as a central maternal responsibility requiring intensive hands-on engagement. This redefinition of motherhood’s role, while rewarding at times, also heightens the self-scrutiny mothers apply to themselves. It fuels the cycle of trying to “do it all” and the inevitable feelings of inadequacy when reality makes that impossible.

⁹⁸ “Çocuğu yetiştirirken onunla çocuk olmamalıyız. Ebeveyn olmalıyız.”

⁹⁹ “Kızımın sosyalleşmediğinden endişe ediyordum... Onun hem annesi hem oyun arkadaşım, bu boşluğu doldurmak amacıyla onu oyun grubuna götürüyorum.”

Maternal guilt emerged as a powerful undercurrent in many of the interviews, cutting across both lower-class and middle-class participants. Mothers frequently described feeling guilty for any perceived shortfall in their parenting. They spoke of guilt when they were too tired to engage actively with their child, guilt when they took time for themselves, or guilt when they felt they had not provided some experience or resource that other children were getting. Vildan (P, Professional), for instance, explained that she and her husband constantly try to come up with engaging activities for their toddler, and if on some days they “cannot manage it”¹⁰⁰ or feel “too exhausted,”¹⁰¹ they are hit by “*vicdan azabı*” – a Turkish term for moments of conscience or guilt. She then made a striking confession: “Honestly, I take my child to playgroups partly to cover up that guilt... to lighten the burden of my conscience.”¹⁰² Here we see how guilt is driving maternal behavior. Vildan (P, Professional) explicitly uses the playgroup as a coping mechanism for her feelings of inadequacy. When she feels she is not providing enough stimulation herself, she enrolls her child in a structured group activity to compensate. By doing so, she can reassure herself that the child is getting the interaction and play he needs, thus easing her guilt. This insight underscores an important dynamic. The intensive parenting culture not only creates anxiety, but also propels mothers toward certain solutions – in this case, seeking formal activities or external help to meet the ideal via playgroups. Hays (1996, p. 8) noted that intensive mothering is “child-centered, expert-guided, emotionally absorbing, labor-intensive and financially expensive.” Indeed, Vildan’s (P, Professional) comment illustrates this: feeling inadequate in her own labor, she turns to an “expert-guided” resource (a playgroup run by instructors)

¹⁰⁰ “üstesinden gelemiyoruz”

¹⁰¹ “çok yorgun hissediyoruz”

¹⁰² “Dürüst olmak gerekirse, çocuğumu oyun gruplarına suçluluk duygusunu örtbas etmek için götürüyorum... vicdan azabımı hafifletmek için.”

and is even willing to bear expense or effort to do so, all in service of being a “good mother.” It also reflects what Douglas and Michaels (2004) observed about the “new momism”. It often pushes mothers into consuming products or services that promise to fill the gaps. Here the “product” is a playgroup, which is on the surface for the child’s benefit but doubles as a salve for the mother’s guilt. In line with Douglas and Michaels’ analysis, the marketplace of parenting thrives on such maternal anxieties – selling everything from educational toys to mommy-and-me classes as solutions for the never-enough feeling. My findings provide a concrete example of that phenomenon at work through playgroup context. It was remarkable that nearly all participants of this study explicitly articulated experiencing feelings of inadequacy at some point in their motherhood journey, underscoring the profound emotional distress caused by these experiences.

Another mother, Dilara (P, Professional- Currently Homemaker), shared a similar story of trying to remedy her perceived shortcomings. “I don’t really like playing,”¹⁰³ she admitted, “so I felt I was not enough for [my child] in that regard. That’s why I made that choice.”¹⁰⁴ In her case, the choice was to hire an “*oyun ablası*” essentially a babysitter or companion whose specific role was to play with her toddler. Dilara, who has a higher-income household and attends a private playgroup, invested in this solution because she personally did not enjoy floor play and thus worried her child would be deprived of stimulation. Over time, as her child grew, the hired play companion would take him to the park to play with other kids. Seeing how much her son benefited from social play, Dilara eventually decided, “he should come to a more crowded place” and enrolled him in a playgroup. Dilara’s account reveals two important facets of the perfect-mother ideal. First, it shows the

¹⁰³ “Ben oyun oynamayı sevmiyorum,”

¹⁰⁴ “Bu yüzden [çocuğum] için yeterli olmadığımı hissettim. Bu nedenle bu seçimi yaptım.”

internalization of a very specific standard: that a “good mother” plays with her child (and enjoys it). Many mothers do not actually enjoy endless toddler play yet they often feel guilty admitting it because the ideal says a good mother should relish every moment with her child. Dilara’s frank statement (“I don’t like playing”) is refreshingly honest, yet immediately she frames it as a personal inadequacy (“I felt I was not enough for him”). Rather than recognizing that not every parent is an enthusiastic playmate and that children can also play independently or with peers, she concluded she was failing her son in this respect. The second facet is how she sought an external remedy; hiring an “*oyun ablası*” and later using a private playgroup. This indicates that even among higher-income mothers, who can afford paid enrichment, the pressure of intensive mothering drives them to outsource what they feel they cannot personally supply.

Ebru (M, Homemaker) on the other hand, provided an example centered on developmental milestones and comparisons. She recounted how, upon observing what other children were learning in the playgroup (and seeing posts on social media about home activities), she realized she had “never had him do those things at home.” One particular detail worried her:

I never even had him hold scissors at home until he came here [playgroup]. I talk to so many other mothers – ‘Can yours use scissors yet?’ – And I think, is it that I am not enough? Did I fall short because he cannot use scissors? ... Should I see myself as inadequate in this? Is it my fault? I have those fears... like maybe I am not doing something right, I am not keeping up. (See Appendix E, 8)

Because Ebru’s family relies on the free municipal program, she has not been able to provide every fine-motor activity that she sees on the social media at home, and she immediately personalized the gap as evidence of her own failure. She even described fear that she is failing her son. This vividly illustrates how, in a lower-income context, mothers too internalize the perfect-mother standard and measure

themselves against any perceived shortcoming in their child's progress. Ebru's focus on a developmental task (scissor use) also reflects how lower-class mothers can feel pressured to create a richly educational home environment. They are often aware of every developmental benchmark and may feel guilty if they are not actively cultivating each skill (Hays, 1996). Rizzo et al. (2013) found exactly this type of belief – that mothers are the “most necessary” parent and must always center the child's learning needs – to be correlated with higher stress and lower life satisfaction in mothers. Ebru's anxious questioning embodies the toll of holding such intensive parenting attitudes. She is doing what Rizzo et al. describe as the “parenthood paradox”; the harder she tries to be an optimal parent (keeping track of all the little skills and activities), the more she finds areas where she falls short, thus undermining her confidence. Moreover, as Ebru's example shows, modern mothers do not even need direct criticism from others – self-comparison can do the job. She proactively compares notes with other moms (“Does your child do this yet?”), a practice that often leaves mothers feeling inferior. The advent of social media amplifies this effect on a broad scale. Ebru (M, Homemaker) mentioned seeing things online that mothers do with their kids. Studies have noted that social media highlights curated moments of perfect parenting, which can feed into feelings of inadequacy for viewers (Chae, 2015). Although social media is the focus of Section 4.3, it's worth noting here that mothers like Ebru are keenly aware of what others are doing, both online and offline, and they measure themselves against those idealized yardsticks. This constant comparison loop is a well-documented source of “mom guilt” in contemporary parenting culture.

Interestingly, some mothers in this study showed a degree of resistance or reframing in the face of these pressures. Pelin (M, Professional) exemplified a nuanced self-assessment. She said:

A lot of questions [are] always spinning around” in my head— questions like “Am I doing it right? Is it enough? Could I do more?” and “My son is very aggressive sometimes – is that coming from me? Or my daughter is calm – is that because of me? (See Appendix E, 9)

These reflections demonstrate how Pelin, like Ebru, internalizes both her children’s negative and positive traits as reflections of her parenting. The assumption that a child’s temperament or behavior is “because of” the mother is a hallmark of the intensive mothering narrative. It shows how mothers often assign themselves outsized influence (and thus blame or credit) for who their child is. Yet after voicing all these self-doubts, Pelin (M, Professional) concluded: “I can’t say I’m a very perfect mother, but I can’t say I’m a very bad mother either. The best is probably that I’m a moderate sort of mother.”¹⁰⁵ In essence, Pelin staked out a middle ground – she labeled herself “average” or “good enough.” This is noteworthy because it suggests an attempt to reject the binary implied by the perfect mother ideal (either you are perfect or you are a failure). Pelin’s perspective resonates with the classic concept of the “good enough mother” introduced by pediatrician Donald Winnicott (1964). Winnicott argued that children do not need flawlessly perfect mothers; rather, children benefit from caregivers who are “good enough” – attentive and loving, but also human and imperfect, which ultimately helps the child adapt to reality. Pelin’s self-evaluation (“not perfect, not terrible, just moderate”) is essentially an endorsement of being good enough. It is as if she is giving herself permission to be an ordinary loving mother rather than a super mother. This attitude can be seen as a

¹⁰⁵ “Dediğim gibi çok mükemmel bir anneyim diyemem ama çok kötü bir anneyim de diyemem. En iyisi herhalde orta derecede bir anne gibidir yani.”

quiet form of resistance to unrealistic standards. However, it is telling that Pelin still prefaced it by saying she “can’t say [she’s] perfect.” The very need to qualify that indicates how strong the ideal is. Even to identify as moderate, she first has to distance herself from the expectation of perfection. That expectation looms so large that mothers feel compelled to acknowledge it (often apologetically) whenever they discuss their own parenting. Pelin’s approach, though, does provide a hopeful note that some mothers are finding ways to balance their self-criticism with self-compassion. In fact, many mothers in our playgroups found solace in confiding in each other about these very insecurities. As one theme in the data of this study, mothers reported that talking openly in the playgroup setting about their “bad mom moments” or worries and hearing others echo “me too” was profoundly relieving.

As also analyzed in section 2.2, this kind of peer support and socialization – essentially mutual normalization of imperfection – emerged as a key coping strategy. Several mothers noted that realizing “everyone has tough days” made them feel less alone and less like a personal failure. This reflects a well-known benefit of mother-to-mother support; it can reduce feelings of isolation and validate one’s experiences (McLeish & Redshaw, 2017). In a qualitative study by McLeish and Redshaw (2017), mothers described peer support as helping to overcome feelings of disempowerment and stress by “being heard” and by learning that others struggled too. I saw the same dynamic in my playgroup observations. Mothers would swap anecdotes of chaos or “mom guilt,” often laughing together, and in doing so they were subtly chipping away at the facade of the perfect mother. In those moments, honesty acted like an antidote to the oppressive ideal – a point also emphasized on mothers’ support networks. This insight ties back to Sadıkoğlu and Coşkun’s (2024, pp. 594-595) finding that mothers of Turkey seek out supportive peers and that

sharing their challenges, even while feeling guilty, is a form of ‘micro-resistance’ to intensive mothering demands. By admitting, “I feel like a bad mom sometimes” and having another mother respond, “I feel that way too,” these women collectively create a counter-narrative: that it is normal to not enjoy every moment and that nobody is perfect. Such candid sharing can foster a healthier self-perception, reinforcing that the problem lies not with individual mothers’ shortcomings but with the unattainable standards themselves. Peer support, therefore, emerges as a crucial buffer against feelings of inadequacy, complementing what formal interventions (like parenting classes) try to do in building maternal self-efficacy. During the interviews, the sentiment of multiple mothers could be condensed to “we’re all learning as we go, and that’s okay.” This simple affirmation encapsulates a powerful reframing of the motherhood ideal – from impossible perfection to continuous learning – which can significantly alleviate maternal anxiety.

Still, despite these pockets of relief and resistance, the expectation of maternal self-sacrifice and perfection remains very strong in the broader culture. Many mothers in this study felt they must devote all their time and energy to their children, often at the expense of their own needs. The internalized guilt made it difficult for them to take breaks or ask for help. They feel they must keep up with everything. This often entails sacrificing personal time, rest, hobbies, and even career ambitions, which can over time lead to resentment or a loss of self-identity. Mental health professionals warn that a mother who completely neglects her own well-being will eventually burn out. This burnout can manifest as chronic fatigue, irritability, depression, or other health issues (Meeussen & Van Laar, 2018). Yet, as several mothers noted, the immediate guilt of taking time for oneself (say, to go out alone, pursue a passion, or simply rest) often dissuades them from doing so. This is

especially true in contexts where alternative caregiving options are limited or stigmatized. For example, if reliable daycare is unavailable, or if cultural norms do not encourage fathers to share childcare equitably. In Turkey, the notion that “*annelik kutsaldır*” (“motherhood is sacred”) is deeply ingrained (Aracı İyiyaydın & Ergun, 2025). On the surface, this cultural reverence for motherhood is affirming. Mothers are highly valued. However, it backfires by implying that motherhood must be carried out in a near-sacred manner – flawlessly and joyfully. In such a climate, any hint of ambivalence or struggle can make a mother feel as if she is profaning a sacred duty. The women in this study often expressed reluctance to admit negative feelings like frustration or boredom, even to close family, for fear of judgment. They felt a need to outwardly maintain the image of the devoted, capable mother at all times. Culturally, a mother is often expected to grin and bear any hardship, reinforcing the notion that seeking help or taking a break is a sign of weakness or selfishness. This is consistent with the findings of Aracı İyiyaydın and Ergun (2025), who note that pronatalist discourse of Turkey surrounds mothers, placing significant pressure on women to live up to an idealized mother figure. Mothers are expected to make every effort for their children and do so gratefully. Under such social expectations, it becomes extremely difficult for a mother to say “I am overwhelmed” without feeling like she is somehow failing the cultural script. Our interviews reflected this tension. Even when mothers confessed their inadequacy feelings to me (often with visible relief at unburdening), they frequently followed up with statements like “but of course I love being a mother” or “I know others have it worse, I shouldn’t complain.” This shows how deeply the sanctified view of motherhood is internalized – it polices mothers’ expressions of their own difficulties. Consequently,

the pressure is reinforced not just externally but from within, as mothers berate themselves for not meeting an impossible ideal of constant selflessness.

In quantitative terms, the link between feeling inadequate and maternal mental health is well-established. For instance, one recent study measured parenting self-efficacy (a mother's belief in her competence) and found that mothers with lower self-efficacy indeed had higher stress levels (Bloomfield & Kendall, 2012). Conversely, high self-efficacy can buffer stress – if a mother trusts her own judgment and feels confident in her parenting, she is less rattled by challenges like a toddler's tantrum or a developmental hiccup. A mother who does not constantly question herself might experience a child's difficult behavior as just that – a difficult moment – rather than as evidence of her incompetence. On the other hand, a mother who is plagued by self-doubt may spiral into worry at the slightest problem, wondering what she did wrong to cause it or how her shortcomings might harm her child. Thus, building maternal self-efficacy is a goal that many interventions aim for (e.g. through parenting classes, support groups, or therapy) because it can improve mothers' resilience and well-being (Bloomfield & Kendall, 2012). Ironically, however, the intensive mothering ideal – by setting an unattainable bar – tends to erode self-efficacy rather than enhance it. No matter how well a mother is doing, she can always think of something she ought to be doing better. This undermines her confidence, as there is a perpetual sense of falling short. Several mothers in my study described that even on days, they felt accomplished; they would see a social media post or hear a comment about another mother's effort and immediately feel deficient again. In this way, the perfect mother ideal becomes a moving target. Even as women improve in one domain, the goalposts shift, keeping them in a constant state of “not enough.”

In summary, the “perfect mother” ideal is a pervasive cultural script that contributes to widespread feelings of inadequacy among mothers. The literature from both Western and Turkish contexts concurs that internalizing this ideal is associated with negative emotional outcomes for mothers. It includes stress, guilt, anxiety, and depression. Our findings indicate that this pressure cuts across socio-economic lines. Mothers in both lower-class and middle-class groups experienced the weight of unrealistic expectations and the ensuing self-doubt. The intensive mothering mandate is maintained by a confluence of social norms, media portrayals, family expectations, and even peer interactions, creating a powerful normative environment in which mothers constantly evaluate themselves. While mothers do find some ways to cope (for example seeking support from peers, selectively pushing back on certain demands, or redefining success in more moderate terms), the challenge remains significant. By acknowledging how widespread and damaging the perfect-mother ideal can be, this study illuminates how these pressures play out in mothers’ own experiences and voices. These personal narratives put a human face on the statistics. This reinforces existing arguments in the literature that society should shift toward providing mothers with more practical support, rather than continuing to promote unrealistic expectations. (Üstündağ-Budak, 2020). Importantly, addressing maternal well-being is not only for the sake of mothers (though that is reason enough) but also for the sake of children. A mother who is more relaxed, confident, and supported is in a better position to provide the sensitive and responsive care that children truly need (Korjenevitch and Dunifon, 2010). In contrast, a chronically stressed or guilt-ridden mother – feeling never “good enough” – may have difficulty being present and emotionally available, which can ironically undermine the very child outcomes that intensive parenting was supposed to optimize (Wall, 2010). In short, helping

mothers let go of the perfect mother myth and the feeling of inadequacy could benefit the entire family. This ties into the next subsection. One major amplifier of the perfect mother pressure in the contemporary era is the arrival of social media, which can turn parenting into a public performance and fuel constant comparisons. We now turn to how digital media intensifies the scrutiny and self-judgment that mothers experience.

3.3 Social media influence and parental FOMO

Contemporary urban life and changing family structures have fundamentally altered how young children socialize, compelling parents to actively construct opportunities for peer interaction. In past generations, children in Istanbul (as elsewhere) often grew up surrounded by siblings, cousins, and neighborhood playmates. They were enjoying spontaneous play in streets or communal yards. Today's parents describe a far more insular experience for their toddlers. They have small nuclear families and living in high-rise apartments with few, if any, same-age children nearby. Ceren (P, Manager), for instance, complained that "we live in an apartment flat and [my daughter] has no friends here... I wanted her to be with peers her own age."¹⁰⁶ Such accounts highlight the erosion of informal "street play" culture. It is "no longer common for young children to constantly play with cousins or neighborhood friends in the street as in past generations." Parents actively seek out playgroups, playdates, and other structured activities as a remedy for this loss of organic peer contact. In other words, social venues that previous generations took for granted now must be deliberately produced. Kernan (2010) observes that modern childhoods increasingly require consciously constructed social spaces, as the natural embeddedness of

¹⁰⁶ "Bir apartman dairesinde yaşıyoruz ve [kızımın] burada hiç arkadaşı yok... Onun kendi yaşlılarıyla olmasını istedim."

children in community life has diminished. Istanbul mothers in our study echoed this reality. All emphasized the need to engineer a social environment for their toddlers. Notably, this motivation transcended socio-economic status. Both lower-class and middle-class parents stressed the importance of early peer interaction to avoid their child growing up in isolation. They shared a belief that without parental initiative, their children would “miss out” on crucial social experiences during the formative early years. Indeed, several mothers contrasted their own freer childhoods with their child’s constrained context, expressing concern that unless they intervened, the child would have “no one to play with.” In short, the rise of playgroups as a popular venue in Istanbul reflects these broader urban and demographic shifts. With traditional kin and neighborhood networks weakened, the playgroup becomes a consciously crafted substitute for the village square or family courtyard of old.

Importantly, this transformation is not driven solely by practical necessity. It is also intertwined with contemporary parenting anxieties. Mothers join playgroups out of genuine desire to nurture their child’s social development, but their narratives reveal an underlying pressure to do so. Many feel an implicit obligation to optimize every aspect of their child’s early experiences, which became a hallmark of intensive parenting culture. Providing peer play is thus seen as part of “good” motherhood today, especially when natural peer access is lacking. Several interviewees pointed that they worried a homebound only-child might fall behind socially or emotionally without regular playmates. This proactive socialization can be read as a response to a subtle “fear of missing out (FOMO)” in parenting. The fear that if they do not arrange the right activities, their child could miss key developmental opportunities. Zeynep (P, Professional) candidly explained that the playgroup “provides the social activity and peer interaction we can’t do at home... and honestly it’s for me to

socialize too, because I also could not go anywhere.”¹⁰⁷ Her comment underlines how both child and parent experience isolation in the modern urban setting – the child lacks playmates, and the mother lacks support – and how a playgroup addresses both needs. Even mothers who initially framed playgroup participation as something “for the mom” ultimately emphasized that it was the child who stood to gain the most. This dual rationale speaks to the joined well-being of parent and child in early years.

The deliberate construction of children’s social lives is occurring in a hyper-aware parenting climate, one that is increasingly amplified by the digital era. Although the details will be explored later in this section, it is evident that constant exposure to parenting information and images (often via social media) heightens mothers’ awareness of what could be provided for their child. This creates an added motivation to keep up – to ensure one’s child is not left out of beneficial experiences that others might be accessing. Thus, the turn toward organized playgroups illustrates not only a response to urban isolation but also a prelude to the digital-age pressures shaping parenthood. In sum, as informal child-driven play recedes, Istanbul’s mothers have turned to structured peer gatherings as the new socialization scaffold. This shift reflects both the structural necessities of urban nuclear-family life and the cultural logics of anxious, resource-intensive parenting in the 21st century. Indeed, deeper analysis reveals that the concerns expressed by mothers regarding their children’s outdoor play environments warrant deeper sociological analysis beyond common complaints about urban traffic or physical safety. Defne (M, Professional, Currently Homemaker) vividly articulated this sentiment:

To me, early education is like entering a perfume shop. If my

¹⁰⁷ “Evde yapamadığımız sosyal etkinliği ve yaşıtlarıyla etkileşimi sağlıyor... Ve dürüst olmak gerekirse, benim de sosyalleşmem için çünkü ben de hiçbir yere gidemiyordum.”

children enters a perfume shop, inevitably, they will smell like roses. However, if they enter a room filled with smoke, inevitably, they will smell bad. Teaching certain things early is akin to bringing a child into a perfume shop. (See Appendix E, 10)

This metaphor eloquently captures the implicit parental anxiety about ensuring children are exposed to environments perceived as culturally and socially enriching, reflecting Pierre Bourdieu's concept of habitus. From this critical perspective, organized playgroups symbolize more than just safe play. They serve as strategic venues for parents to socially position their children, driven by the fear of their children missing crucial developmental opportunities. Indeed, the intensive efforts mothers put into accessing these structured activities reveal deeper anxieties around social belonging and class reproduction. Participation in playgroups thus embodies a dual objective. Parents aim not only to secure immediate developmental benefits for their children but also to align themselves with certain desirable social groups. The underlying motivation frequently involves parents' anxieties about social acceptance, as activities like early coding classes often reassure parents themselves more than addressing children's developmental needs. Ultimately, these parenting decisions reflect broader class-based aspirations. They are driven significantly by mothers' fear of exclusion from desirable parenting groups and anxiety over missing critical opportunities to strategically shape their children's habitus, thereby ensuring advantageous positioning within the social hierarchy.

In other words, the effort to socialize children through playgroups arises not only from practical necessities or deeper class anxieties as highlighted above, but is also significantly driven by contemporary parenting culture and external pressures amplified through social media. Many mothers in the study acknowledged a subtle yet pervasive sense of competition or anxiety underlying their parenting choices. In their interviews, they often alluded to comparing themselves with other mothers –

especially via social media – and worrying about giving their child every possible advantage. In other words, alongside genuine concern for their child’s happiness, they felt an external pressure to “keep up” with what other parents are doing. This phenomenon can be understood as a form of parental FOMO, where mothers fear their child might miss out on important experiences or fall behind peers unless the parent is constantly proactive. Social media exposure appears to intensify this fear. Tuba (P, Professional) candidly described how Instagram and neighborhood gossip made her question herself:

With social media and the people around, you start wondering; Is my child falling behind? Are the others learning so much more?’ ... For example, my friends talk about all the activities they do – ‘we did this sensory play, we taught them that’ – and I am not doing many fancy crafts at home. So, then you start to think, will mine be left behind? (See Appendix E, 11)

Likewise, Ebru (M, Homemaker) admitted that whenever she sees posts of other mothers doing educational activities, she is seized by a worry that “I’m not doing enough, I’m somehow inadequate... I get caught in these fears.”¹⁰⁸ Even Leyla (P, Professional), an exceptionally well-educated mother, shared that she lives with a constant feeling of “Should I be doing more?”¹⁰⁹ and wonders if she is missing something her child might need. She attributed this anxiety partly to the internet age, “where everything is presented as if it’s possible,”¹¹⁰ combined with the high cost of living in Turkey that makes her stress about providing the best. These personal testimonies resonate with recent literature on social comparison and intensive parenting. Glatz et al. (2023) found that parents who frequently compare themselves to others on social networking sites report higher parenting stress and lower self-efficacy. This is indicating that constant online comparison can undermine a

¹⁰⁸ ‘Yeterince yapıyor muyum? Bir yerlerde eksik kalıyor muyum?’ gibi kaygılara kapılıyorum... Bu korkuların içinde boğuluyorum.”

¹⁰⁹ “Daha fazlasını mı yapmalıyım?”

¹¹⁰ “bütün her şeyin mümkünmüş gibi sunulması”

mother's confidence in her own parenting. Lee et al. (2024) specifically studied social media use among millennial mothers and observed that seeing idealized snapshots of other children's achievements and activities often triggers envy. This envy could be motivating in some cases, but more often leads to feelings of inadequacy and increased parental stress. Our participants' remarks illustrate exactly this dynamic. They know on a rational level that every child and family is different, yet emotionally they still feel compelled to match what they perceive as the standard set by others. This is very much in line with what Tosun et al. (2020) documented in Turkish context: mothers on social media experienced a mix of admiration and inferiority, sometimes inspired by others' ideas but also often feeling guilty or "less than" when confronted with images of seemingly perfect motherhood. In Tosun et al.'s study, as in the interviews, mothers acknowledged that social media presents a curated "highlight reel" and not everyday reality, but that awareness only partially buffers the emotional impact. They still felt the inner pressure – as Tuba put it, a "socially internalized pressure" – to measure up. One outcome of this pressure is that mothers may enroll in more activities (like playgroups, music classes, etc.) not only for their child's sake but to alleviate their own fear that they might be neglecting an important opportunity that other children are receiving. In effect, social media has amplified the ethos of intensive parenting, spreading it across peer networks. What might begin as genuine interest in helping a child socialize can be magnified by online comparisons into an almost obligatory checklist of experiences a "good mother" should provide. The "Instagram mom" phenomenon – where influencers portray an ideal of constantly engaged, creative parenting – sets an aspirational benchmark that many mothers find daunting. Mothers in both lower class and middle class pointed out that when constantly exposed to images of toddlers in enrichment

classes and elaborate home crafts, even unstructured, child-led play can begin to feel insufficient or indulgent in comparison. This competitive undercurrent was palpable in the interviews and reflects a broader cultural script that mothers should leave no stone unturned in enriching their child's early years which was analyzed in previous literature (Hays, 1996; Sadıkoğlu & Erdoğan Coşkun, 2024).

Despite these pressures, it is important to note that the core motivation of mothers in seeking out playgroups remained the child's well-being and social happiness. The narratives I collected were filled more with hopes for children to laugh, play, and make friends than with overt references to "getting ahead." Even the most anxious mothers ultimately framed their efforts in terms of ensuring their child does not miss a happy childhood. No significant differences emerged between demographic groups on this front. Both affluent, highly educated mothers and those from more modest backgrounds shared strikingly similar language when discussing their goals for their children in playgroups. The universality of this theme suggests that, regardless of socioeconomic status, mothers see early peer socialization as essential in today's environment. If any nuances were present, they were subtle.

Ultimately, social media and the accompanying fear of missing out (FOMO) have emerged as powerful structural pressures that shape maternal behavior and mothers' engagement with playgroups. Throughout this section, mothers voiced specific anxieties about living up to the idealized standards of parenting perpetuated by curated online depictions of "good motherhood." In response, they deliberately sought out authentic peer interactions in local playgroups as a counterbalance to those norms. They are finding comfort in sharing real-life challenges and successes with other mothers. This dynamic underlines the dual function of playgroups as both child-focused and parent-affirming spaces. Playgroups facilitate children's social

play and development while simultaneously providing mothers with a supportive community that validates their parenting experiences and eases FOMO-driven worries. In sum, the interplay between digital influences and face-to-face support networks highlights how contemporary parenthood is negotiated between the pressures of social media and the grounding reassurance of peer community.



CHAPTER 4

CONCLUSION

The thesis set out to investigate how early childhood paradigms are changing in contemporary Istanbul by examining parenting practices and the role of playgroups across social classes. The findings demonstrate a clear shift from a previously adult-centered family organization, characterized by adult authority and priorities dominating family routines (Gillis, 1996), toward a child-centered model, in which both middle-class and lower-class mothers increasingly prioritize their young children's developmental needs and social experiences. Mothers from diverse backgrounds uniformly expressed that the early years are of paramount importance, viewing playgroup participation as an “investment” (see chapter 2.3) in their child's development. This convergence signals that intensive early parenting ideals – once thought to be the domain of the urban middle class – have permeated across class lines. Indeed, all 31 mothers in the study, regardless of socio-economic status, highlighted the need to support their toddlers' socialization and learning from the very first years of life. Such agreement on the significance of early childhood points to a broader paradigm shift. Parents citywide now see the toddler years not as a passive phase to simply endure, but as a critical window for actively shaping their children's futures.

A central finding of the research is the vital role of playgroups as social spaces that embody these new paradigms. For the children, playgroups function as early socialization “laboratories” (see chapter 2.1) where toddlers learn to interact, share, and participate in group activities in a structured setting. In Istanbul's dense urban environment – where traditional neighborhood play is often curtailed by safety

fears and limited outdoor space – playgroups effectively replace the informal peer interactions that previous generations took for granted. Mothers across the class spectrum shared a common anxiety that, without playgroups, their children would have no one to play with and might miss learning social skills. By enrolling in playgroups these parents actively respond to that anxiety in a child-centered way. They are reorganizing family schedules around weekly sessions to ensure their little ones regularly meet and play with peers. The result is a new norm in early childhood. Even in lower-income households, a young child's day-to-day life is partially organized around structured play and social learning outside the home. This is reflecting the widespread belief that such early experiences are essential for beneficial development.

Equally important, the study found that playgroups serve as crucial social spaces for parents, especially for mothers, thereby extending the benefits beyond the child. Playgroups operated as communities of support, helping to alleviate the isolation that many urban caregivers face. In the study, mothers consistently reported that attending playgroup not only enriched their child's life but also expanded their own social networks and emotional support. Many described forging friendships with other mothers and engaging in mutual learning (for example swapping parenting tips, sharing childcare advice, and empathizing over common struggles). In sociological terms, these peer connections represent a form of social capital generated through the playgroup. For instance, a mother who lacked nearby family could find in her playgroup peers a surrogate community to help navigate challenges like toddler tantrums or preschool applications. Over time, such relationships often extended beyond the playgroup itself, evolving into sustained networks of reciprocal support. This indicates a shift in maternal roles. Contemporary mothers are not solely

caregivers confined to the private sphere, but active agents seeking community resources and knowledge to enhance their parenting. The playgroup thus emerges as a social space of motherhood. They become a modern-day equivalent of the extended family or neighborhood support system, tailored to the needs of today's child-centered, feedback-seeking parents.

Notwithstanding these shared patterns, the thesis also uncovers important divergences in how middle-class and lower-class families experience and utilize playgroups. Class-based differences in resources and habitus shape the nuances of participation. Middle-class mothers, who typically have higher education and income, often approached playgroups as one component of a broader strategy of “concerted cultivation” (Lareau, 2011). They tended to be more intentional about selecting playgroups or early enrichment classes with specific pedagogical features (for example, ones incorporating music sessions, foreign language immersion or gym classes) aligning with their aim to provide diverse stimuli for their child. For these families, playgroup attendance was sometimes framed as an educational enrichment activity alongside others, reflecting a habitus attuned to planning and optimizing children's experiences. In comparison, lower-class mothers, many of whom faced financial constraints, placed emphasis on the scarcity of such opportunities and the critical importance of free municipal programs for accessing any structured play at all. Their engagement was often driven by necessity and improvisation within constraints. The municipal playgroup might be the only safe, organized outlet available for their child. These mothers valued the playgroup deeply as a means of inclusion. It is a way to give their children experiences that would otherwise be out of reach. Thus, while both groups shared the overarching goal of enriching their children's early years, the middle-class families tended to multiply and customize

enrichment activities, whereas the lower-class families maximized the limited options at their disposal. This divergence underscores how class inequality continues to influence the execution of intensive parenting. The middle class can mobilize greater cultural and economic capital (e.g., paying for classes, accessing expert advice) in pursuit of the same child-centered goals that lower-income parents pursue through publicly provided avenues. In sum, there is convergence in values (all parents want the best for their young children) alongside divergence in modalities (how that “best” is delivered). This dynamic is shaped by the unequal distribution of resources and knowledge.

The research also highlighted several paradigm shifts relating to the content and context of early childhood itself. One notable shift is the rise of structured play as a dominant mode of early childhood engagement. Parents today are increasingly inclined to supplement or even replace unstructured free play with organized activities. This trend is driven partly by urban safety concerns and partly by the influence of child development experts. In Istanbul, virtually all mothers voiced anxiety about letting children play unsupervised outdoors amid traffic, crowded streets, and perceived dangers; this pushes them toward controlled environments. Organized playgroups, indoor playgrounds, and curated “educational” play sessions have thus become the safe alternatives to the once-common neighborhood play. The “free-range” childhood of past generations has given way to highly supervised routines. This shift reflects a broader tension, which could be due for further research. The structured play can provide rich learning opportunities but it may also limit children’s autonomy and spontaneous exploration. Many mothers in the study were aware of this trade-off. Some expressed a wistful longing for the freedom they enjoyed in their own childhoods, even as they felt compelled to restrict their

children's independence for safety's sake. The paradigm of a child's daily life has therefore transformed – now marked by scheduled playdates and adult-organized activities – which in turn redefines what early childhood looks like in an urban, modern setting. A toddler's social world is no longer left to chance. It is deliberately orchestrated by parents in response to both hopes (for enrichment) and fears (for safety).

Another paradigm shift illuminated by the thesis is the intensification of the maternal role under what Sharon Hays (1996) termed the ideology of “intensive mothering.” Across the interviews, mothers depicted an ideal of the “good mother” as one who devotes enormous time, energy, and resources to her young child – a portrayal consistent with what Hays described as “child-centered, expert-guided, emotionally absorbing, labor-intensive and financially expensive” parenting. In practice, this meant that mothers felt compelled to constantly stimulate their child's development and to attend diligently to every aspect of their well-being. Many participants recounted how they tried to follow recommendations from pediatricians, parenting books, and social media gurus, often at the cost of their personal time and career ambitions. Indeed, several middle-class interviewees had temporarily left professional jobs to focus on childrearing, implicitly prioritizing the child's needs above their own professional development. This intensive parenting ethos was not limited to the middle class. Lower-income mothers also internalized high standards for themselves. Despite having fewer material resources, they strived to implement advice from experts and expressed guilt when they felt they fell short. Such examples from the field illustrate how pervasive the “new paradigm” of motherhood has become. Mothers of all classes feel the weight of heightened expectations to be ever-engaged, ever-vigilant parents.

Crucially, the thesis' findings show that these parenting anxieties and playgroup practices are interrelated. On one hand, various anxieties drive the turn to playgroups. For example, anxiety about social isolation – the worry that a child without siblings or neighborhood friends will miss key social skills – motivated mothers to seek out playgroups as a remedy. Likewise, anxiety about urban dangers propelled parents toward indoor, supervised gatherings as a safer alternative to public playgrounds. On the other hand, playgroup involvement in turn influences parental anxieties, both alleviating and reshaping them. Many mothers reported that joining a playgroup eased their fears on certain fronts. They saw their child make friends and thrive socially, which assuaged worries about social development, and they themselves felt less alone in their parenting struggles, which reduced feelings of incompetence or maternal guilt. The peer support available in playgroups often helped normalize the challenges of parenting. The sharing functioned as a subtle collective coping mechanism. By openly admitting to each other that they sometimes felt like bad mothers and hearing others echo the same sentiment, the women created a counter-narrative. “No mother is perfect, and that is okay.” In this way, the playgroup space provided a grounding reassurance against the relentless comparisons and ideals found online. At the same time, it is acknowledged that new anxieties can also emerge within these settings. For example, a mother might compare her child's speech or behavior to another child in the group and develop fresh worries. Nevertheless, the overall evidence suggests that the solidarity and practical knowledge gained through face-to-face interactions at playgroups help mitigate the affective pressures generated by social media and societal expectations. Essentially, the playgroup becomes a mediating environment where the pressures of modern parenting are negotiated and tempered through community support. This insight

underscores the interplay between structure and agency. While larger cultural forces drive mothers into certain practices, the mothers actively use those very practices to cope with and adapt to those pressures.

Interpreting these findings through the lenses of habitus, social reproduction, and social capital provides a deeper understanding of their sociological significance. The study shows that mothers' approaches to early childhood are not arbitrary individual choices. They reflect the internalized values and experiences of the mothers themselves, which often correspond to their class background. Middle-class mothers in the study, for instance, often grew up with more educational opportunities and now perpetuate a habitus oriented toward planned enrichment and institutional engagement. Lower-class mothers may have had more unstructured childhoods and limited access to formal activities, yet their participation in municipal playgroups indicates a potential shift or expansion of habitus. They are incorporating new practices into their repertoire, perhaps aspiring to a middle-class style of parenting. In doing so, these mothers are actively engineering a habitus for their own children that they hope will yield future advantages. This relates directly to social reproduction. By consciously cultivating certain skills, behaviors, and forms of capital in their young children, parents are attempting to either reproduce their class status or improve upon it. The thesis findings highlight that intensive early-childhood investments are viewed by both groups as crucial for securing a child's future in an increasingly competitive society. Importantly, however, the outcomes of these efforts are mediated by structural conditions. While middle-class parents can confidently convert cultural capital into continued academic success for their children, lower-class parents face more uncertainty – they can lay the groundwork, but external factors like school quality and economic barriers will influence whether their child

can truly “catch up” or leap ahead. In this light, the expansion of municipal playgroups and similar public resources can be seen as an intervention that softens the mechanisms of social reproduction by providing lower-income families some of the early childhood opportunities that wealthier families routinely obtain. It is telling that the lower-class participants in this study reported child social outcomes comparable to those of middle-class participants. This suggests that accessible playgroups may help bridge certain developmental gaps at the start of life, even if they cannot wholly equalize long-term inequities rooted in schooling and income. Therefore, equitable early childhood services are essential for reducing class-based inequalities in children's developmental trajectories. Policymakers should prioritize and expand such services to ensure that all children, regardless of socioeconomic background, have fair opportunities to thrive equitably from the very beginning.

Finally, from a social capital perspective, the networks that mothers build through playgroups represent an investment in relational resources that can yield benefits down the line. These connections might translate into information or simply enduring friendships that provide emotional and practical assistance. The mothers are accumulating social capital that not only bolsters their immediate well-being but could also indirectly support their children. In this sense, the intergenerational transfer of advantage is not only about formal education or finances, but also about these informal networks of support and knowledge which parents activate for their children's benefit.

In drawing together the threads of this study, it becomes evident that the changing paradigms of early childhood in Istanbul are multifaceted and carry broad social implications. Parents' lives are increasingly child-centric, and early childhood is now widely recognized as a foundation for lifelong trajectories. The rise of

playgroups and similar initiatives indicates a growing societal commitment to early childhood well-being, one that policymakers and community leaders can harness. For instance, acknowledging that parents across classes are eager for safe, enriching environments for their children, there is a clear mandate for expanding affordable early childhood programs, parent-and-child classes, and family-friendly public spaces. Bridging the gap between the resources available to different classes in this domain is crucial – the study suggests that when given access, lower-income families are just as enthusiastic and participatory in early childhood programs as their middle-class counterparts.

At the same time, the findings also raise flags about the pressure cooker that modern parenting has become. The intensification of motherhood and the ubiquity of structured activities risk placing an undue burden on parents (mothers in particular) and potentially on children as well. The fact that even community playgroups – sometimes feed into competitive parenting narratives is a reminder that the best intentions of intensive parenting can have unintended side effects. Within society, a balance must be struck between encouraging positive parenting involvement and recognizing the need to relieve parents of unrealistic expectations. In this regard, the informal support systems that emerged in the playgroups are a heartening development. They represent organic, parent-led efforts to create a more sustainable and emotionally positive approach to raising children amidst high demands. Future policies might build on this by facilitating parent support networks, offering parenting education that emphasizes not just child development but also parental well-being, and promoting messages that counter the perfectionism trend.

While this research has yielded rich insights, it is not without limitations. The study focused on a specific subset of Istanbul families – mothers who were already

engaged in either municipal or private playgroups – which naturally excludes the perspectives of parents who do not participate in playgroups. Additionally, the middle class sample was limited to secular playgroup settings, and the perspectives of more religiously conservative middle-class families are underrepresented. Another limitation is the study's focus on mothers, which leaves the role of fathers largely unexplored. Given that mothers remain the primary caregivers in this context, this focus was analytically justified. However, fathers' involvement in early childhood and their own anxieties merit investigation in their own right. Future research could build on these insights by including fathers or other caregivers, conducting comparative or longitudinal studies, or examining the effects of digital parenting culture and online peer support.

In conclusion, this thesis encapsulates a moment of profound social transformation witnessed through the intimate lens of mothers' narrative. The convergence of middle-class and lower-class families around child-centered values reflects a broader cultural shift. Early childhood has become a pivotal project for society at large, laden with hopes for social mobility, fears about future uncertainties, and aspirations for giving the next generation a strong start. At the same time, the persistent divergences – rooted in social inequality – remind us that not all families can pursue these ideals with equal ease. The study's findings underscore the resilience and resourcefulness of mothers who, within their means, strive to implement emerging parenting paradigms. These everyday actions by mothers are, in aggregate, reshaping the social landscape of early childhood. They signal to educators, policymakers, and community stakeholders that the first years of life are no longer seen as trivial; they are deemed consequential by parents from all walks of life. The broader social implication is that investments in early childhood could have

multiplying effects – enhancing child development outcomes, fostering social cohesion among parents, and potentially narrowing opportunity gaps if made accessible to all. Ultimately, this thesis paints a portrait of Istanbul’s parents navigating the new normal of raising children under intensive, and sometimes intense, conditions. It reveals their collective ingenuity in transforming playgroups into support systems and their unwavering commitment to their children’s well-being despite the pressures. Such insights carry a hopeful note: even amid rapid urban change and globalizing influences, mothers are finding ways to adapt, connect, and uphold the promise of childhood. As they do so, they are quietly redefining what it means to parent and to grow up in 21st-century Istanbul, leaving a legacy of changed paradigms that will reverberate in years to come.

APPENDIX A

SEMI-STRUCTURED INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

1. What is the story of your journey to motherhood?
2. What sources of support or information have you relied on throughout your child-rearing journey?
3. How would you describe your parenting style? How do you see yourself as a mother?
4. What kind of family did you grow up in? What was your mother's parenting style like? Is your own approach to parenting is similar to hers or different?
5. Could you describe your child's developmental journey?
 - a. What challenges have you faced?
 - b. What expectations do you have for your child's development?
6. How do you view your child's future? What kind of future do you imagine for your child?
7. What is it like to raise a child in Istanbul?
8. What led you to join the playgroup? What was your motivation?
9. In what ways, if any, do you feel the playgroup has benefited your child?
10. Do you have any criticisms of the playgroup you attended? What would your ideal playgroup be like?
11. What are your thoughts on early childhood development?
12. In what ways, if any, do you support your child's development?
13. What type of person do you envision your child growing into?
 - a. What values do you hope to cultivate in your child?
 - b. What values from your own family do you hope to pass on to your child and preserve?
14. What are your thoughts on foreign language education in early childhood?
15. What are your thoughts on offering specialized lessons (such as robotics, music, sports, or dance) in early childhood?
16. What are your thoughts on providing religious education in early childhood?
17. In what ways is your child's childhood similar to or different from your own?
18. Is there anything else you would like to add?

APPENDIX B

DEMOGRAPHIC INFORMATION SURVEY QUESTIONS

First Name	
Last Name	
Age	
Gender	
Number of Children	
Number of People in Your Household	
Name of Your Child in the Playgroup	
Age of Your Child in the Playgroup	
Gender of Your Child in the Playgroup	
Your Neighbourhood	
Your Educational Attainment	
Your Spouse's/ Your Child's Father's Educational Attainment	
Your Occupation	
Your Spouse's /Your Child's Father's Occupation	
Household Monthly Income	☐ Less than 15,000 TL ☐ 15,000–25,000 TL ☐ 25,000–40,000 TL ☐ 40,000–80,000 TL ☐ 80,000–200,000 TL ☐ More than 200,000 TL
Are You a Homeowner?	☐ Yes ☐ No
How much do you spend per month on your children's education, development, and leisure activities?	

APPENDIX C

LIST OF INTERVIEWEES

	Pseudo Name	Private or Municipal	Standardized Occupation ¹¹¹	Pages Referred
1	Aslı	M	Professional	41, 44, 45
2	Aylin	M	Service and Sales Worker Currently Homemaker	39, 68, 71, 81, 82, 105
3	Aysun	P	Professional	84
4	Banu	M	Service and Sales Worker Currently Homemaker	77, 81
5	Berna	P	Professional	41, 46, 66
6	Ceren	P	Manager	119
7	Ceyda	M	Service and Sales Worker Currently Homemaker	43, 44, 47, 67, 74, 81, 83, 84, 85, 86
8	Defne	M	Professional Currently Homemaker	44, 107, 122
9	Dilara	P	Professional Currently Homemaker	73, 94, 110, 111
10	Ebru	M	Homemaker	44, 111, 112, 113, 123
11	Ece	M	Professional Currently Homemaker	40, 79
12	Elif	P	Homemaker	77
13	Feride	M	Homemaker	98
14	Funda	P	Technician and Associate Professional	56, 59, 67, 70, 92
15	Hande	M	Homemaker	58
16	Hazal	P	Professional Currently Homemaker	86
17	İlknur	P	Homemaker	39
18	Lale	M	Homemaker	57, 60, 94, 95
19	Leyla	P	Professional	57, 62, 63, 74, 83, 100, 105, 106, 123
20	Melis	M	Homemaker	39
21	Nazlı	M	Homemaker	85
22	Pelin	M	Professional	94, 113, 114,

¹¹¹ Based on ILO's International Standard Classification of Occupations (ISCO-08)

23	Reyhan	P	Professional	54, 93
24	Sedef	P	Professional	54, 94, 98, 103, 104, 105
25	Selin	M	Homemaker	41, 93
26	Sevgi	M	Homemaker	45, 46, 47
27	Tuba	P	Professional	47, 48, 52, 58, 60, 91, 92, 103, 107, 108, 123, 124
28	Umay	P	Homemaker	42, 105
29	Vildan	P	Professional	97, 107, 109
30	Yasemin	P	Professional	55, 73, 76
31	Zeynep	P	Professional	42, 47, 75, 96, 120



APPENDIX D

ETHICAL APPROVAL

T.C.

BOĞAZİÇİ ÜNİVERSİTESİ REKTÖRLÜĞÜ

Sosyal ve Beşeri Bilimler İnsan Araştırmaları Etik Kurulu (Sbinarek)

Sayı : E-84391427-050.04-182209

30.05.2024

Konu : 2024-41T Kayıt Numaralı Başvurunuz Hakkında

Sayın Doç. Dr. Bülent KÜÇÜK

Tez danışmanlığını yürüttüğünüz öğrenciniz Ayla Günerhan Adaklı'nın "Oyun Grupları ve Değişen Erken Dönem Çocukluk Paradigmaları" başlıklı projesi ile Boğaziçi Üniversitesi Sosyal ve Beşeri Bilimler İnsan Araştırmaları Etik Kurulu (SBİNAREK)'e yaptığınız 2024-41T kayıt numaralı başvuru 23.05.2024 tarih ve 2024/04 sayılı kurul toplantısında incelenmiş ve projeye etik onay verilmesi uygun bulunmuştur.

Bu karar tüm üyelerin toplantıya on-line olarak katılımıyla ve oybirliği ile alınmıştır.

Onay mektubu tüm üyeler adına Komisyon Başkanı tarafından e-imzalanmıştır.

Bilgilerinizi rica ederiz.

Saygılarımızla,

Dr. Öğr. Üyesi Işıl ERDUYAN

Kurul Başkanı

Bu belge, güvenli elektronik imza ile imzalanmıştır.

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APPENDIX E

LONG QUOTES IN TURKISH

- 1) “Yani ben ilk oyun grubuna gittiğimde çok keyif aldım. Çünkü aynı dönem aynı durumları yaşayan birileri var karşınızda. Aynı şeyleri. Ya ‘evet ben de böyleyim’ deyip haykırırlar, o kadar keyif veriyor ki sana. O kadar rahatlatıyor ki.” (Sedef, P, Professional) Page: 54
- 2) “Oradaki arkadaşlıklarımız hâlâ devam ediyor. Jimnastiğe birlikte gidiyoruz... Güzel bir etkinlik veya yeni bir grup bulduğumuzda ‘haydi beraber gidelim’ diyoruz. Çocuklar kendi aralarında arkadaş oldular, anneler de öyle. Bir grup olduk, gerçekten çok keyifli oldu.” (Yasemin, P, Professional) Page: 55
- 3) “Paylaşımlarım daha çok online platformlar üzerinden, bilgi ve dertleşme düzeyinde kaldı... Önceden işime çok bağlıydım; ancak iki çocuğum olduktan sonra yüz yüze sosyalleşmeye hiç enerjim kalmadı. Şimdi çoğunlukla çevrimiçi dertleşiyor ve bilgi paylaşıyorum. Yine de bazen bu bile yeterli oluyor, çünkü paylaşımlar sayesinde yalnız olmadığınızı bilmek gerçekten çok kıymetli.” (Leyla, P, Professional) Page: 62
- 4) “Çocuklarıma çok güzel bir hayat hayal ediyorum. Yani güzel yerlerde olsunlar. Bilmiyorum belki de egomu tatmin etmek istiyorum belki de görmemişlik. Çok güzel yerlere gelsinler benim çocuklarım. Oyun grubuna götürmek gibi, elimden gelen her şeyi yapacağım.” (Banu, M, Service and Sales Worker -Currently Homemaker) Page: 81
- 5) “Çocuğu güvende tutmak için kendimizi bir cam fanusun içine kapatmak zorunda kalıyoruz, çünkü dış dünya çok öngörülemez geliyor. Güvenlik açısından çok rahatsız edici. Örneğin, çocuğumuzu sokağa çıkarmıyoruz. Ben küçüklüğümde hep dışarıda oynardım ama şimdi buna izin veremiyorum.” (Feride, M, Homemaker) Page: 98
- 6) “Çocuklarımin geleceğine güvenle bakmıyorum, bakamıyorum. Benim zamanımda da örnek veriyorum alkoliği, sapığı vardı ama gizli gizliydi. Ben sigara içen öğrencilerden korkuyorum. ... Çevresel faktörler bu noktada bizim yıllarca inşa ettiğimiz şeyi çok kısa vadede bozabiliyorlar. Bazen çok yakın akrabalarımıza bile güvenemeyebiliyoruz yani.” (Leyla, P, Professional) Page:100
- 7) “Biz öğretmeniz, ama belirlenmiş çalışma saatlerimiz var. O süre dolduğunda hiçbir sorumluluğumuz kalmıyor. Ancak annelikte bu asla bitmiyor. Süreç aralıksız devam ediyor ve çocuk bakımı mesleğinde olan biri olmama rağmen kendime sürekli ‘Bunu başarabilecek miyim?’ diye soruyorum.” (Sedef, P, Professional) Page:103

8) “Buraya [oyun grubuna] gelene kadar ona evde makas bile tutturmamıştım. O kadar çok başka anneyle konuşuyorum ki – ‘Seninki makası kullanabiliyor mu artık?’ – ve düşünüyorum ki, acaba ben yetersiz miyim? Makası kullanamıyor diye mi eksik kaldım? ... Kendimi yetersiz mi görmeliyim bu yüzden? Suç bende mi? Bu korkuları yaşıyorum... belki doğru bir şey yapmıyorum, belki yetişemiyorum.” (Ebru, M, Homemaker) Page: 111

9) “Aklımda sürekli bir sürü soru dönüyor – doğru yapıyor muyum? Yetiyor mu? Daha fazlasını yapabilir miyim? ... Oğlum bazen çok agresif oluyor – bu benden mi kaynaklanıyor? Ya kızım sakınse – bu da ben miyim diye düşünüyorum.” (Pelin, M, Professional) Page: 113

10) “Bence erken yaşta eğitim, parfüm dükkânına girmek gibidir. Çocuğum bir parfüm dükkânına girerse ister istemez gül gibi kokacaktır. Ama duman dolu bir odaya girerse, ister istemez kötü kokacaktır. Bazı şeyleri erken yaşta öğretmek, çocuğu parfüm dükkânına sokmak gibidir.” Defne (M, Professional, Currently Homemaker) Page: 122

11) “Sosyalin içe dönük bir baskısı oluyor. Bizimki geri mi kalıyor ne yapıyoruz diye bir sorguluyorsun kendini. Sosyal medya ve çevre etkisiyle insan ‘Benim çocuğum geri mi kalıyor, diğerleri çok mu şey öğreniyor?’ diye düşünüyor. Arkadaşlarım bazen ‘Şöyle etkinlikler yaptılar, böyle şeyler öğrendiler.’ diyorlar. Ben evde tıraş köpüğü sıkıp içine oyuncaklar atmak gibi aktiviteler pek yapmıyorum. Dolayısıyla ‘Bizimki geri mi kalacak?’ diye sorgulamaya başlıyorsunuz.” (Tuba P, Professional) Page: 123

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