CASE WESTERN RESERVE UNIVERSITY
President's Leadership Development Program

Capturing the Impact of Play: Developing a Reflection Tool for a Community-Based Early Childhood Program

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Leadership Action Project Executive Summary

Submitted to the President's Leadership Development Program
at Case Western Reserve University

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Project Overview & The Social Issue

Access to early developmental programs is a major challenge for many families, especially those who are unsure whether their child needs additional support or where to begin. While early, play-based experiences are critical for developing communication, social skills, and self-regulation, families often face barriers such as limited program availability, cost, and a lack of clear information about how programs support their child's development.

At the individual level, families may struggle to recognize developmental concerns or understand how play supports learning. At the community level, smaller organizations may provide high-quality programs, but lack the tools to clearly communicate their impact. At the systems level, funding and access to early intervention services are often tied to measurable outcomes, which can disadvantage play-based programs that are harder to quantify.

This project partnered with The Treehouse Ohio, a community-based organization that provides therapist-led, play-based developmental groups for young children. Rather than creating a new program, this project focused on strengthening how an existing organization documents and communicates the value of its work in order to support access for more families.

Project Type & Approach

This project was an applied Leadership Action Project, focused on creating a practical, real-world solution in partnership with a community organization.

The project involved designing and piloting a brief digital observation and reflection tool for Treehouse staff to complete after play groups. The tool was designed to take less than five minutes and capture key aspects of each session, including: developmental skill areas addressed, strategies used by staff to support participation, how children responded and engaged, and accommodations and modifications used.

The tool was developed collaboratively with Treehouse staff to ensure it was realistic, useful, and aligned with their existing practices and values. It was then piloted during play groups and refined based on feedback and usage patterns.

Deliverables & Impact

The primary deliverable of this project was a finalized digital observation and reflection tool that Treehouse can continue to use beyond the project period. In addition, the project produced findings from over two months of playgroups and data that can be used for advertising and to apply for grants. The success of the project was assessed by how consistently staff were able to complete the tool, feedback on ease of use and clarity, the usefulness of the information collected, and the ability to identify patterns across sessions.

The tool successfully captured meaningful information about how play supports development in real time, without adding a significant burden to staff. It provided Treehouse with a clearer way to communicate its approach to families and potential funders.

By strengthening Treehouse's ability to document and communicate its impact, this project contributes to social change by supporting the sustainability of a community-based program and helping more families access early developmental support.

Leadership Reflection

This project was deeply connected to my values of equity, access, and meaningful communication. I believe that all families deserve access to supportive, developmentally informed environments, and that information about these opportunities should be clear and accessible.

This project reinforced that the foundation of leaders is credibility. Building a tool that staff would actually use required listening, adapting, and ensuring the project met real needs rather than imposing an external solution.

It also demonstrated that the foundation of leadership is relationships. The success of this project depended on collaboration with Treehouse staff, whose expertise and feedback shaped the tool at every stage.

This experience also highlighted that leadership is non-positional. As a student intern, I was not in a formal leadership role, but I still contributed meaningfully by identifying a need, collaborating with others, and following through with a solution.

Finally, this project showed that leadership is driven by values. Decisions throughout the project, from prioritizing feasibility to focusing on accessibility, were guided by a commitment to supporting families and community organizations in sustainable and realistic ways.