

Sisanda -Brief External Evaluation

Katherine Morse, November 2025

Executive Summary

Sisanda works in communities where chronic stress, instability, and limited emotional support structures shape daily life. The programme strengthens children's emotional well-being by developing Youth Play Ambassadors (YPAs) who model steady, compassionate ways of relating, and by helping caregivers reconnect with their children through simple, shared play. Sisanda's impact is driven by relational transmission: attunement is learned through experience, first within the YPA cohort, then within families, and then within community spaces where belonging is widened and reinforced.

The YPA pathway is the core engine of change. Through PlaySMART, weekly reflective practice, and the Resilience Toolbox, YPAs learn to regulate under pressure, stay curious during stress, and hold space for others with respect and emotional presence. As young people experience belonging, their confidence and identity strengthen, and this relational steadiness becomes the foundation they carry into homes and community settings.

In Play@Home, caregivers are supported to engage in short, playful interactions that prioritise shared attention and emotional reciprocity. Many describe relief at discovering connection that does not rely on discipline or instruction. Play becomes a practical route to warmth, calm, and easier communication. A simple addition—inviting caregivers to recall the games they played as children, or the play they wished for—creates immediate resonance and validates cultural knowledge. Children respond quickly to these shifts with greater confidence, emotional expression and help-seeking, signalling both developmental and protective benefits.

Sisanda's scaling potential lies not in multiplying activities but in expanding relational capacity.

Enriched Play Experiences extend these relational gains beyond the household. Fun Days, Community PlayDates, Circles and volunteer-led activities expose children and YPAs to diverse places, people and ideas, reducing isolation and broadening their sense of belonging. Volunteers function as relational bridges, reinforcing community inclusion and modelling attuned interaction across generations.

Sisanda's scaling potential lies not in multiplying activities but in expanding relational capacity. Deepening involves embedding attuned play in existing communities; widening occurs through partnerships with organisations that share access to youth and children; scaling up requires strengthening reflective supervision to hold increased numbers of YPAs. A community-sourced play archive and digital storytelling offer culturally rooted, low-cost tools that support all forms of scale.

The current monitoring system can be better aligned to Sisanda's relational ethos. Shifting from administrative verification to light-touch reflective prompts—captured by YPAs—would reduce burden on caregivers, strengthen observational skill and provide clearer evidence of relational change over time. Together, these refinements enhance Sisanda's ability to communicate, evaluate, sustain and scale its distinctive relational model.

The Current Model

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Sisanda is a relational change programme working in communities shaped by chronic stress, instability, and limited emotional support structures. The programme strengthens children's emotional well-being by developing Youth Play Ambassadors (YPAs) who model attuned, grounded, and compassionate ways of relating. These young leaders bring play-based relational practice into households and community spaces, supporting caregivers to reconnect emotionally with their children and to establish sustainable habits of shared play. There are currently 22 YPAs (2025) whose practice is scaffolded by PlaySMART, Sisanda's framework for self-awareness, regulation under stress, curiosity, perspective-taking, and compassionate engagement. PlaySMART shapes how YPAs show up in homes, in groups, and at community play events, creating consistency across the programme. Additional benefits for YPAs include growth across education, employment readiness, relationships, sense of belonging, and personal confidence.

A key stepping stone in the development pathway for YPAs is the **Resilience Toolbox training**. This programme builds the YPAs' capacity to facilitate groups, lead activities, and

share relational practices with parents, educators, practitioners, and community partners. It equips them with the skills to contribute meaningfully to community-based training efforts and expands the pool of young facilitators who can support Sisanda's wider programme areas.

For children and families, Sisanda delivers two complementary strands. The first is **Play@Home**, an eight-week cycle of weekly home visits (run twice per year) in which a YPA invites the caregiver into brief, simple interactions that build shared attention, emotional reciprocity, and playful communication. Caregivers receive play sheets to try between visits and are supported to make play a daily habit. Where helpful, YPAs introduce Cosmo Kids Talking Cards as an accessible way to start conversations about feelings and everyday challenges. Families also work with a Resilience Zone visual to notice emotions and practise basic self-regulation; the aim is to reduce stress reactivity and increase responsiveness to children. After the eight weeks, Sisanda conducts a two-month follow-up to check whether play habits and relational changes are holding, and to offer light-touch support if needed.

Together, Play@Home, the Resilience Toolbox, and Enriched Play Experiences form a coherent developmental pathway

The second strand is **Enriched Play Experiences** in community settings, designed to widen children's and caregivers' relational horizons and reduce social isolation. These include large **Fun Days**, neighbourhood **Community PlayDates (CPDs)**, and smaller **Circles** sessions, which can involve children, YPAs, and volunteers. Circles often form around shared interests or opportunities—such as the **Hiking Circle** led by Fundi Digital, where seven YPAs recently experienced a mountain environment for the first time. These experiences are intentionally designed to offer connection with diverse places, people, ideas, and ways of being, helping YPAs and children develop confidence, curiosity, and a sense of belonging beyond their immediate neighbourhoods. Volunteerism occurs not only through Community PlayDates but significantly through Fun Days and Circles, where volunteers of different ages collaborate with YPAs to create safe, inclusive play spaces.

Across these events, caregivers are quietly coached on how to join their child's lead in play, how to use emotion language in the moment, and how to support children's confidence and curiosity in new environments. Children encounter peers and adults from outside their usual geographical boundaries; caregivers practise attuned play in a group context; and YPAs deepen their facilitation skills while building supportive relationships with volunteers.

and community partners. These events occasionally run in partnership settings (such as hospitals or special schools), ensuring children who are often excluded also experience joyful, attuned play with trusted adults.

Together, **Play@Home, the Resilience Toolbox, and Enriched Play Experiences** form a coherent developmental pathway: attunement and playful habit-building begin in the home; confidence, belonging, and relational skills are strengthened in community spaces; and YPAs enter a structured growth journey that builds their leadership, employability, and capacity to support others.

Achievements / Wins

Many describe finding new, easier ways to connect with their children—through shared humour, eye contact, or imaginative play.

Sisanda has established a strong developmental pathway for YPAs. They report increased confidence, emotional steadiness, and a growing sense of purpose. They learn to stay present during stress, listen without defensiveness, and hold space for others with compassion. These shifts emerge through repeated practice in a supportive peer environment and through structured reflection. Over time, young people who entered unsure of their voice come to see themselves as capable of leading and contributing meaningfully in their communities. The Resilience Toolbox has strengthened this trajectory by giving YPAs foundational facilitation and training skills, increasing their readiness to support parents, educators, practitioners, and community partners. These skills widen their opportunities for participation in broader community initiatives and position them as trusted youth leaders.

Relational change is also visible among caregivers in Play@Home. Many describe finding new, easier ways to connect with their children—through shared humour, eye contact, or imaginative play. They often express relief at discovering forms of closeness that do not rely on discipline or instruction. This shift supports more patience, warmth, and calm in family interactions, and play begins to function as a practical tool for regulating stress and restoring enjoyment. The two-month follow-up suggests that these habits can stabilise over time, with some caregivers continuing to use emotion language, shared play routines, and calming strategies long after the structured sessions have ended.

Children respond directly to these relational changes. They become more expressive, confident, and willing to seek help when needed. Some caregivers and YPAs note improvements in school engagement and peer relationships. In several cases,

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strengthened trust in caregivers has enabled children to share experiences of distress that they had previously held alone. This suggests that Sisanda's work supports both emotional development and a meaningful child protection function through increased relational safety. The Enriched Play Experiences offer additional developmental benefits: exposure to diverse people, places, and ideas expands children's sense of possibility and belonging, reinforcing social confidence and reducing isolation.

Community-facing work reinforces these changes. Fun Days, Community PlayDates, and Circles create visible, joyful public spaces that signal belonging, inclusion, and collective care. Volunteer participation—not only in CPDs but significantly in Fun Days and Circles—widens the relational ecosystem around children and YPAs. Events such as the Hiking Circle give young people access to environments they may never have encountered, supporting curiosity, confidence, and a sense of achievement. These community events model an alternative social identity for children and youth: one grounded in safety, connection, and mutual support. Children who have limited access to safe public play environments experience themselves as part of a broader social world. This reduces isolation, challenges expectations of exclusion, and strengthens the sense of being seen and valued.

Sisanda's achievements reflect a coherent, relationally grounded model in which change is reinforced across home visits, peer spaces, and public settings. The emerging consistency of these pathways—YPA development, caregiver confidence, child emotional expression, and community inclusion—signals a strong foundation for deeper impact and future scaling.

Change Mechanism

Sisanda's impact is driven by the transfer of attuned relational practice: first within the Youth Play Ambassador (YPA) cohort, then into families, and then into children, with community play spaces and volunteer involvement widening and stabilising these shifts.

Play is the medium that makes this transmission acceptable, familiar, and low barrier; the mechanism itself is relational.

The first change occurs within the YPA group. Young people enter a predictable, safe peer environment structured around PlaySMART. In weekly training, rehearsal and debrief sessions, they practise noticing their own emotional state, regulating under stress, and staying curious about others. Through repeated experience of being seen, respected and held to account, a pattern emerges: belonging enables confidence; confidence allows attunement; and sustained attunement develops into leadership. The addition of the **Resilience Toolbox** provides a structured stepping stone for identity development, supporting YPAs to practise facilitation, manage group dynamics, and take on greater responsibility in community-facing roles. What is cultivated is not a set of techniques, but a way of relating—steady, respectful, emotionally present, and oriented toward connection rather than control. This identity shift is what enables YPAs to carry relational safety into homes.

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The relational bridge to families forms when a YPA invites a caregiver into brief, simple play with their child. The simplicity is intentional: shared attention, following the child’s lead, naming feelings in everyday language, and tolerating small frustrations without escalation. Caregivers who initially see play as something “for children” begin to experience it as a practical route to closeness and easier communication. The YPA’s non-judgemental presence models a slower, more attuned rhythm of interaction. Over time, the caregiver begins to adopt this rhythm and play shifts from a novel activity to a regular habit of connection. Where there is already some desire for closeness, this habit stabilises naturally; where readiness is limited, more scaffolding is needed early on to prevent play from becoming a mechanical exercise without emotional transfer.

Children respond quickly to these changes. When a caregiver becomes more consistent and emotionally available, the child’s vigilance reduces and curiosity increases. Short, predictable play moments create conditions in which children express more, try more, and seek help more readily. The same emotional safety that supports joyful exploration also increases the likelihood of disclosure when something is wrong. The child-level effect is

therefore not only “more play” but improved emotional regulation, expression, and help-seeking—elements closely linked to both learning readiness and protection.

Community-facing work then extends and confirms these shifts. **Fun Days, Community PlayDates, Storytime Circles, and interest-based Circles (such as the Hiking Circle)** create shared spaces where new relational patterns are mirrored at scale. The presence of volunteers from varied ages and backgrounds functions as social bridging: children and YPAs encounter difference in a supportive setting, practise inclusion, and develop a sense of belonging that reaches beyond immediate neighbourhood boundaries. This **exposure to diverse spaces, people, and ideas** is an important mechanism of change. It broadens relational templates, challenges internalised limits (“people like me don’t belong there”), and expands both confidence and curiosity for YPAs and children. For caregivers, seeing others play and interact similarly reduces stigma and increases confidence. Community-level reinforcement is what helps new habits hold.

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Two elements support the sustainability of change. The first is internal capacity: self-awareness and compassion developed through PlaySMART in YPAs, practised by caregivers, and experienced by children. These capacities lower the effort required to return to connection after stress. The second is habit: short, daily play that becomes part of family rhythm and identity. Together, they protect relational gains against the everyday pressures of life in high-stress environments.

The mechanism has boundaries. Change occurs most effectively where there is at least some caregiver openness and where YPAs can maintain emotional steadiness. Progress is slower in households where stress or danger is overwhelming, or where the YPA requires more reflective support. These are signals to adjust intensity and strengthen supervision, not signs of programme failure. Within these parameters, the model remains coherent: PlaySMART forms the YPA; the YPA reshapes caregiver-child interaction; the child’s emotional safety and curiosity grow; and community spaces, volunteers, and exposure to new environments broaden and stabilise belonging. This is the engine of Sisanda’s impact.

Revised Theory of Change

Sisanda’s theory of change rests on the principle that emotional attunement is learned through experience rather than instruction. When young people, caregivers, and children

encounter consistent, non-judgmental connection, they begin to replicate it. Sisanda's programmes—Youth Play Ambassadors (YPAs), Play@Home, Enriched Play Experiences, Resilience Toolbox training, and structured volunteer participation—create multiple layers where this relational experience can take root, be practised, and be reinforced across different contexts.



At the organisational level, Sisanda provides a stable holding environment grounded in predictability, safety, compassion, and reflection. This is where the PlaySMART framework is taught and lived. PlaySMART offers a shared language and sequence through which YPAs learn to regulate their own emotional states, stay curious under stress, listen before reacting, and treat others with dignity. These internal capacities form the foundation of all change that follows. The organisational holding environment also includes the **Resilience Toolbox**, which serves as a developmental bridge for YPAs to learn facilitation, group leadership, and communication skills. This prepares them to support training with parents, educators, practitioners, and community partners, strengthening the programme's capacity for community-led impact.

At the YPA level, belonging to a reliable peer group builds confidence, identity, and purpose. Through repeated cycles of training, role-play, Circles participation, and debriefing, YPAs translate emotional safety into practical interaction. They experience themselves as capable, valued, and connected—a shift reinforced by exposure to new spaces and experiences, such as hiking circles or partnered community events. These experiences broaden their relational world and challenge internalised beliefs about where they belong. As YPAs embody PlaySMART capacities, they become steady, credible relational figures in their communities.

Children experience the effects of these shifts directly. As caregivers become more attuned and predictable, children show less vigilance and more curiosity. They express themselves more openly, play more freely, and seek help with greater confidence.

Within families, the YPA's presence introduces a new rhythm of connection. During Play@Home visits, caregivers are invited into short, playful interactions that emphasise shared attention, responsiveness, and emotional presence. The YPA's non-directive stance signals respect and reduces feelings of being evaluated. Over time, caregivers often move from watching to joining; play shifts from being programme-linked to becoming a familiar daily habit. Simple tools—the play sheets, Cosmo Kids Talking Cards, and the Resilience Zone—help caregivers name feelings, notice states, and respond with greater calm and warmth. These relational gains tend to stabilise when paired with caregiver readiness and sustained YPA support.

Children experience the effects of these shifts directly. As caregivers become more attuned and predictable, children show less vigilance and more curiosity. They express themselves more openly, play more freely, and seek help with greater confidence. Because trust and emotional safety increase, children may disclose distress that they had previously kept hidden. In this way, the model supports emotional development and strengthens pathways for protection.

At the community level, Enriched Play Experiences extend and consolidate these relational gains. Fun Days, Community PlayDates, Storytime Circles, and partnership play sessions allow families, YPAs, and volunteers to share joyful interaction in public spaces. Exposure to **diverse people, places, and ideas**—a defining feature of Circles and other interest-based groups—broadens relational and spatial horizons. This kind of social bridging reduces isolation and supports a sense of belonging beyond immediate neighbourhood boundaries. Caregivers see that attuned play is not unusual or judged; YPAs practise

facilitation with support; children see themselves as part of a wider, welcoming social world. When these community experiences mirror the relational tone of Play@Home, new habits are more likely to endure.

The model is relational, experiential, and cumulative—the more contexts in which

Across these layers, one feedback loop repeats:

1. **Sisanda provides a safe organisational space for practising PlaySMART.**
2. **YPAs model attuned, grounded interaction with caregivers.**
3. **Caregivers develop relational reciprocity with their children.**
4. **Community play spaces and volunteers reinforce belonging and shared norms.**
5. **Self-awareness, compassion and habitual shared play sustain change after formal support ends.**

attunement is encountered, the more durable the change. Through this process, play shifts from being an activity to being a **social technology for connection, regulation and resilience**. The outcome is not simply that children play more, but that young people, caregivers and communities learn ways of being together that are emotionally safe, responsive and sustaining.

Opportunities for Improving M&E, Training, Website Narrative

Sisanda's monitoring and evaluation system is currently serving two different purposes: documenting participation and tracing relational change. The first is administrative; the second is developmental. The tools used to record participation—signatures, attendance sheets, and self-monitoring logs—are often experienced by caregivers as burdensome, and in some cases as surveillance. This unintentionally positions families as people who must verify the work of YPAs rather than as participants in a shared process of connection. A more aligned approach would focus on brief reflective prompts about how play felt, what the caregiver noticed in the child, and what has changed since the previous week. These reflections can be captured by the YPA rather than the caregiver, keeping the caregiver in

the role of active relational partner rather than record-keeper. This shift would also strengthen YPAs' observational skill and reinforce PlaySMART in practice.

There is also an opportunity to build a stronger relational bridge at the start of the Play@Home cycle. Caregivers have their own childhood history with play and this affects how play is understood and valued. A simple addition to the first session, inviting caregivers to recall the games they played as children and who they played with, could create immediate resonance and safety. It helps caregivers reconnect with their own experiences

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of joy, attention, or companionship, even if these were rare, and it signals that their memories and cultural knowledge matter. This can soften resistance, shift the framing of play from something “new” to something remembered, and provide the YPA with material for attuned engagement. Documenting these remembered games, songs, and relationship stories could also become a small but meaningful research activity. Over time, it would build a community-specific play archive that can be incorporated into training materials for YPAs. At present, training materials do not fully reflect the cultural and relational histories of the families Sisanda serves, and this may contribute to the difficulty some caregivers have in valuing and adopting playful behaviour. A community-sourced play archive would honour local knowledge, strengthen cultural relevance, and enrich the training curriculum.

The training pathway for YPAs is strong in relational depth but is not fully specified in existing documentation. Much of the learning lives in the experience and intuition of senior staff. This has protected quality but makes the model difficult to describe, replicate, or scale. Articulating the developmental arc of a YPA—from arriving and finding belonging, to practising attunement, to taking up leadership—would give structure to what is already happening. The PlaySMART framework is a strong foundation for this. What is needed now is a clear description of the progression steps, the reflective questions that support each stage, and the types of support that help when a YPA feels unsteady. This should not become a rigid manual; it should be a practical guide that names how growth happens and how to hold it well. Integrating insights from Circles, Fun Days, and Resilience Toolbox training would further strengthen the documentation of how relational capacity is cultivated over time.



The website currently communicates the importance of play and the challenges facing children in high-stress environments. What is less visible is *how Sisanda works*. The narrative focuses on play as an activity rather than on the relational process that makes change possible. The work of YPAs, the developmental role of PlaySMART, and the contribution of volunteers to widening belonging are not yet central in how the programme is presented. There is an opportunity to articulate that Sisanda is not primarily delivering play sessions but enabling a relational shift that moves from young person to caregiver to child to community. Making this sequence visible would help funders, partners, and volunteers understand what is distinctive about the model and what is required to sustain it.

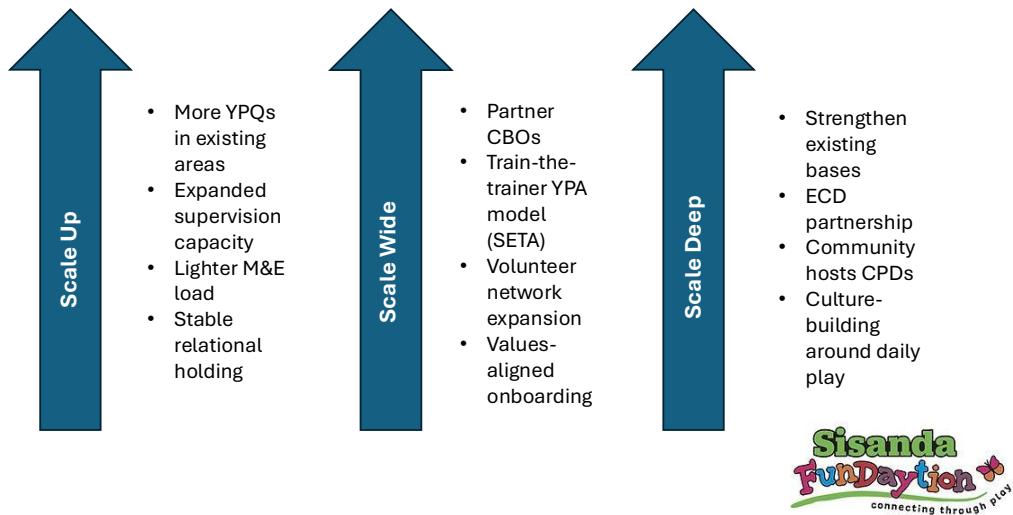
Together, these adjustments—light-touch reflective monitoring, a culturally resonant entry point into play, a community play archive, an explicit YPA developmental pathway, and a website narrative that centres relational change—would reinforce Sisanda’s core identity and make the model easier to communicate, support, and scale over time.

Opportunities to Scale

Sisanda is already functioning as a relational ecosystem that moves change through young people → caregivers → children → community. The question of scale is therefore not simply how to do more, but how to protect the mechanism that makes change possible while increasing reach or depth. The opportunities for scale fall into three pathways—deep, wide, and up—each of which requires different forms of readiness and infrastructure.

Scaling deep focuses on strengthening the relational fabric within the communities where Sisanda already works. This would mean offering additional layers of support to caregivers and children so that play and emotional attunement become part of the everyday culture of the neighbourhood. Two practical routes for deepening are already visible. The first is supporting Early Childhood Development (ECD) centres to integrate play-based emotional attunement into daily routines. This would require careful design to avoid the common pattern where ECD staff step back during external play facilitation; instead, YPAs would coach alongside staff rather than in place of them. The second route is growing Community PlayDates so that they can run without staff presence. This would require identifying local “community hosts” who can hold safe, inclusive space, and equipping them with light-touch structure and monthly check-ins. Deepening scale preserves the intimacy and belonging that are core to the model; it requires slow, relationally attentive growth rather than expansion by numbers.

Opportunities to Grow



Scaling deep could also draw on a new, culturally anchored resource: a **community play archive**, built from caregivers' recollections of childhood games, songs, and relationships. Documenting these stories would reinforce cultural pride, normalise play as part of community identity, and create a locally grounded set of materials for YPA training and caregiver engagement. This archive could become a distinctive Sisanda asset for deep scaling—rooting the model more firmly in lived community histories.

Scaling wide means introducing the model into additional communities. The most viable route for this is partnership with organisations that already have a presence in those communities—church youth groups, community-based organisations, after-school programmes, and volunteer networks. The key condition is that the partner has both

adolescents/young adults and children in their catchment. Wide scaling would require codifying the YPA training pathway and developing a Train-the-Trainer model for local coordinators. The PlaySMART framework can serve as the backbone of this. Before wide scaling begins, Sisanda would need (1) a clearly articulated YPA developmental sequence, (2) an orientation process that ensures values alignment, and (3) lightweight supervision structures (likely monthly reflective circles). Wide scale introduces variability; fidelity is protected by relational supervision and reflection, not by scripted delivery.

A powerful addition to wide scaling is the idea of **scaling the relational method, not the programme structures**. Sisanda's impact does not depend on specific activities but on the transmission of attuned relational practice through PlaySMART-trained young people. This means Sisanda could offer PlaySMART training, reflective practice models, and attunement-based facilitation skills to partner organisations—even those that run different activities entirely. This creates a pathway for wide impact without requiring Sisanda to replicate full programme structures across new sites.

Scaling up means increasing the number of YPAs and families served in current communities. This is the most straightforward numerically, but it risks saturation of supervisory capacity if not paced. To scale up without erosion of quality, Sisanda would need to expand reflective holding capacity—either by developing senior YPAs into peer-mentors or by training additional staff facilitators who can anchor weekly debriefs. Scaling up would benefit most from improvements to monitoring systems, because a lighter reflective documentation method would free YPAs' cognitive and emotional bandwidth to focus on relationships rather than compliance.

Sisanda can also scale up by strategically investing in an **alumni YPA network**. YPAs who move into schools, ECD centres, youth programmes, health settings, and small businesses carry PlaySMART relational practices with them. They become “relational ambassadors” who spread attuned, grounded interaction far beyond Sisanda’s immediate reach. Documenting and lightly supporting this network would create a durable, low-cost form of scaling that grows organically as YPAs take up new roles.

Across all three pathways, the central determinant of scale-readiness is the strength and

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clarity of the YPA pathway. YPAs are the transmission mechanism. Their steadiness, attunement, and capacity to hold emotional intensity without moving into control or withdrawal are what allow change to occur in homes. For scaling to succeed, the

developmental arc of a YPA must be explicit, not tacit. When the identity shift is named and scaffolded, it becomes replicable; when it is left implicit, it remains dependent on the original staff team and cannot transfer.

Volunteerism also has an important role in scale. Volunteers widen belonging and act as relational bridges beyond the immediate neighbourhood. As scaling occurs—especially wide scaling into new communities—volunteers can support cross-community connection, challenge internalised social boundaries, and reinforce the message that children and YPAs are part of a larger social world that sees and values them. For this reason, the volunteer pathway should be made visible as a structured part of the model rather than an add-on.

Finally, Sisanda could strengthen scale through **digital storytelling**. Short stories or visual snippets of YPAs, caregivers, Circles, and Enriched Play Experiences can function as accessible training tools, donor engagement material, and public representations of relational practice. Digital storytelling scales narrative, identity, and visibility—elements that reinforce the relational ecosystem and support donor and partner engagement.

In summary, Sisanda is scalable, but only if scale is understood as the thoughtful expansion of relational capacity, not the multiplication of activities.

In summary, Sisanda is scalable, but only if scale is understood as the thoughtful expansion of relational capacity, not the multiplication of activities. Deepening strengthens cultural integration in existing sites; widening extends belonging across communities; scaling up increases reach while holding depth. In all cases, the core holds: PlaySMART shapes the YPA; the YPA reshapes the caregiver-child relationship; shared play becomes habit; community spaces, volunteers, and culturally rooted play practices widen and stabilise belonging. Any scaling strategy that preserves this sequence will maintain impact. Any strategy that short cuts relational formation will dilute it.