September 2021

Focus on play

Supporting the right to play in schools

This briefing provides information and guidance for head teachers, teachers and school governors. It considers the crucial role of children's play in promoting positive mental health and discusses ways schools can promote play.

The right to play

The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) Article 31 states children have the right to access play, rest and leisure. With the uncertainty caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, play opportunities are vital to helping children make sense of their experiences, problem-solve, reconnect with their peers, and promote their own well-being.

To highlight the importance of play, the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child published General Comment 17[1] setting out how play provides a way for children to externalise difficult, unsettling or traumatic life experiences and offers specific guidance to schools as to how this might be achieved. See *Returning to school – supporting play* section for more information.

Play and well-being

Playing is the most natural and enjoyable way for children to keep well and be happy. It can contribute to improved well-being for everyone during times of uncertainty and change.

Playing is something that children do whenever they have the chance. The onset of the coronavirus means we had to deal with uncertainties and unknowns very quickly and with little preparation. Being at home for long periods of time and not being able to see friends and visit familiar places is a confusing situation. During times of uncertainty playing:

- helps to give children a feeling of normality and joy during an experience of loss, isolation and trauma
- helps children to overcome emotional pain and regain control over their lives
- helps children make meaning of what has happened to them, and enable them to experience fun and enjoyment
- offers children an opportunity to explore their own creativity.

About Play Wales

Play Wales is the national charity for children's play. We work to raise awareness of children and teenagers' need and right to play and to promote good practice at every level of decision making and in every place where children might play. We worked closely with Welsh Government on its groundbreaking 'Play Sufficiency' legislation. Section 11 of the Children and Families (Wales) Measure 2010 places a duty on local authorities to assess and secure sufficient play opportunities for children in their area.

Creating the conditions for play

Play is children's way of supporting their own health and well-being. Children will find opportunities for play, even in the most adverse of circumstances. When they return to school, every child will need time and space to play.

Children's opportunities for playing in all settings – including schools – are dependent on a wide range of issues, which are arranged across three themes:

- **Permission**: fear, expectations, tolerance, and the way adults view childhood and play
- **Space**: the amount, design and management of space
- **Time**: how time is structured and the obligations children have on their time.



The role of schools in supporting play

Children cannot learn effectively when they are stressed or overwhelmed. Studies of brain development indicate that children who have experienced trauma find it difficult to maintain attention, remember things, manage behaviour and regulate emotions, and can have mental health issues in adolescence and adulthood[2].

Estyn's *Healthy and happy – school impact on pupils' health and wellbeing* report[3] highlights that where a whole school approach is applied to health and well-being, provision of a space to play, socialise and relax at break times is a significant feature.

When schools reopen, children will benefit from plenty of opportunities to play out the experiences of the previous months – to benefit from the therapeutic aspects of play.

The UN General Comment 17 notes that schools have a major role in the promotion of the right to play across the following areas:

- Physical environment of settings
- Structure of the day
- Curriculum demands
- Educational pedagogy.

Actions to turn policy into practice

Physical environment of settings

- Audit the school grounds to identify all usable space, especially small spaces, which can be good for quiet, creative, and contemplative spaces. Children are very good at this – see the 'children as auditors tool' in *A play friendly school* guidance[4].
- Use fun equipment or visual referencing to promote physical distancing – use chalk for floor markings – 'who can draw/jump a two metre line?' or 'who can find a two metre stick?'
- Consider all available outdoor spaces – identify how the school field, car park areas, tarmacked areas and forest school site can be better used.
- Recognise the importance of being active whilst playing and consider a risk-benefit approach – strict rules like 'no running' and 'no ball throwing' undermines the physical and immediate benefits of playing.
- Barriers don't have to be boring – use bunting, fun shapes and patterns or hay bales.

Structure of the day

- Make the outdoors available for the whole day to enable extended outdoor access for more children.
- If the time spent in school spans several hours, make sure that there is adequate breaks from the teaching environment.
- Find ways to develop a more responsive and flexible structure to adapt to the needs of learners – provide more time and opportunity for outdoor play and learning.

Curriculum demands

- Given what we know about the impact of trauma and upheaval on learning, we should consider reducing curriculum demands on children.
- Allow opportunities for play, emotional growth and social connection.
- Child-led learning experiences which facilitate free play will ensure no child gets left behind.
- Cultural and arts activities were restricted during lockdown – consider how these can be reintroduced.

Educational pedagogy

The UN describes the importance of learning environments being active and participatory.

- Involve children in the planning and organising of time and space for play, including discussions about activities, inclusion, equipment management, socialising, and handwashing.
- Make playful activities central to learning, for older children as well as for those in the early years. Where the boundaries between schoolwork and play are more 'blurred', children feel a greater sense of control over their own learning experience[5].
- Remain mindful that learners have experienced a major change to their life and routine. Children may be more energetic, active, or withdrawn. They may have less capacity to self-regulate, resolve their own conflicts, or reconnect with friends.
- Be aware that children may invent playground games to help them manage the most recent change and reconnect with one another.
- Try to avoid a reliance on structured or sedentary activities, such as watching films or videos. These do not provide learners free choice and peer interactions and should not be used as substitutes for playtime.
- Ensure good communication with parents. Some may benefit from information and reassurance about why things look or seem different from a traditional school day.

Conclusion

Playing is the most natural and enjoyable way for children to keep well and be happy. Supporting play is a vital element of supporting re-engagement and transition. When children return to school, efforts to improve well-being should focus on providing sufficient time and space for play. This will enable children to be given time to rebuild relationships, social skills and connections with the school environment.



This edition of* Focus on play *has been informed by a blog post written with Dr Cathy Atkinson, Senior Lecturer in Educational and Child Psychology at the University of Manchester: Prioritising play to promote wellbeing.

References

[1] United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child (2013) *General comment No. 17 (2013) on the right of the child to rest, leisure, play, recreational activities, cultural life and the arts (art. 31)*. Geneva: Committee on the Rights of the Child.

[2] Tobin, M. (2015) Childhood trauma: Developmental pathways and implications for the classroom in *Changing Minds: Discussions in neuroscience, psychology and education*. Camberwell: Australian Council *for* Educational Research.

[3] ESTYN (2019) *Healthy and happy – school impact on pupils' health and wellbeing*. Cardiff: Crown Copyright.

[4] Play Wales (2020) *A play friendly school*. Cardiff: Play Wales.

[5] Goodhall, N. and Atkinson, C. (2019) How do children distinguish between 'play' and 'work'? Conclusions from the literature, *Early Child Development and Care,* 189:10, 1695-1708.

Further reading

A play friendly school – provides policy and practice related information to help communities take a whole school approach to children's right to play.

Play First: Supporting Children's Social and Emotional Wellbeing During and After Lockdown – a letter to the four nations' government Ministers written by academics with expertise in children's mental health.

Leading sensible health and safety management in schools – references the Health and Safety Executive (HSE) and Play Safety Forum's joint statement: *Children's Play and Leisure: promoting a balanced approach*.

Top tips playing and being well – explains for parents how playing helps children deal with change and stress.

Supporting children's play in schools – a Continuing Professional Development reading list for school staff with an interest in improving opportunities for playing.

Older children play too – explores the play of older children, particularly those in early and middle adolescence (around the ages of 11 to 16).

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