PLAY

A REPORT BY THE ALL-PARTY PARLIAMENTARY GROUP ON A FIT AND HEALTHY CHILDHOOD













PLAY - A REPORT BY THE ALL-PARTY PARLIAMENTARY GROUP ON A FIT AND HEALTHY CHILDHOOD

Please note that this is not an official publication of the House of Commons or the House of Lords. It has not been approved by either House or its Committees. All-Party Groups are informal groups of members of both Houses with a common interest in particular issues. The views expressed in this Report are those of the Group. This Report seeks to influence the views of Parliament and of Government to better address 'Play' and to make recommendations for improved performance.

This report was prepared by a Working Group of the All-Party Group and we are proud to acknowledge the contribution of:

Helen Clark:	Chair of the Working Group
Beverley Kotey:	APPG Secretariat
Phil Royal:	APPG Secretariat
Sally Plumridge:	LeapFrog Toys
Marie Hunter:	Threepipe
Adrian Voce:	Consultant
Neil Coleman:	Outdoor Play and Learning (OPAL) Midlands and Play England
Helen Woolley:	University of Sheffield
Deborah Holt:	Association of Play Industries (API)
Agnes Javor:	Broadcaster, Teacher, Counsellor
Keith Cranwell:	London Play
Dr. Estelle Mackay:	BDA, ASO
Prof. Fraser Brown:	Leeds Beckett University
Mike Wragg:	Leeds Beckett University
Kathryn Salt MBE:	Emotional Education academic
Kathryn Peckham:	Independent Consultant
Valeria Scacchi:	University of Roehampton
Charlene Mulhern:	Birmingham Public Health
Amanda Gummer:	Fundamentally Children
Nicola Day:	Independent Consultant
Dr. Emma Derbyshire:	Nutritional Insight Ltd
Dr. David Whitebread:	University of Cambridge
Nick Draper:	University of Derby
Sally Meyer:	Co-operative Childcare
Rob Wheway:	Children's Play Advisory Service
Judy More:	Infant and Toddler Forum
Urshla Devalia:	The British Society of Paediatric Dentistry (BSPD)

We thank LeapFrog Toys for the financial support that made this report possible and wish to make it clear that LeapFrog Toys neither requested nor received approval of its contents.

CONTENTS

TITLE PAGE 2

CONTENTS PAGE 3

THE ALL-PARTY PARLIAMENTARY GROUP AND THE WORKING GROUP 4

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY 5

SUMMARY OF RECOMMENDATIONS 8

AN OVERVIEW OF PLAY IN THE UK: BARRIERS AND OPPORTUNITIES 14

THE ROLE AND RESPONSIBILITIES OF GOVERNMENT 18

PLAY IN EARLY YEARS SETTINGS, PRIMARY AND SECONDARY SCHOOLS 22

OUTDOOR AND INDOOR PLAY; BARRIERS AND OPPORTUNITIES 28

EDUCATIONAL LEARNING THROUGH PLAY 33

ASSISTANCE/GUIDANCE FOR FAMILIES 36

PLAY AND THE PLANNING SYSTEM 39

PLAY AND THE EVALUATION OF RISK AND SAFETY 42

THE ROLE OF THE MEDIA, ADVERTISING AND THE PLAY INDUSTRY 45

THE TRAINING NEEDS OF THE CHILDREN'S WORKFORCE 48

HEALTH BENEFITS OF PLAY 50

PLAY, DIVERSITY AND INCLUSION 54

GOVERNMENT STRATEGY FOR PLAY AND CONCLUSION 60





THE ALL-PARTY PARLIAMENTARY GROUP AND THE WORKING GROUP

The Working Group that produced this report is a sub-group of the All-Party Parliamentary Group on a Fit and Healthy Childhood.

The purpose of the APPG is to promote evidence based discussion and produce reports on all aspects of childhood health and wellbeing including obesity; to inform policy decisions and public debate relating to childhood; and to enable communications between interested parties and relevant parliamentarians. Group details are recorded on the Parliamentary website at:

http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm/cmallparty/register/fit-and-healthy-childhood.htm

The Working Group is Chaired by Helen Clark, a member of the APPG Secretariat. Working Group members are volunteers from the APPG membership with an interest in this subject area. Those that have contributed to the work of the Working Group are listed on page 2.

The Report is divided into themed subject chapters with recommendations that we hope will influence active Government policy.

The Officers of the APPG are:

CHAIR

Jim Fitzpatrick MP

CO-CHAIR

Baroness (Floella) Benjamin OBE

VICE-CHAIRS

Ian Austin MP, Nic Dakin MP, Diana Johnson MP, Lord McColl of Dulwich, Nigel Dodds MP, Julie Elliott MP, Caroline Nokes MP, Gavin Robinson MP





EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

'You can discover more about a person in an hour of play than in a year of conversation' (Plato).

This report is the fourth of a series from The All Party-Parliamentary Group on a Fit and Healthy Childhood and although it stands alone in its own right, is best considered in that context. The recommendations within it contribute to our vision of 'whole child' health and wellbeing. 'Play' itself requires definition and has been interpreted in many ways by many different people and organisations. In essence it is what children freely choose to do when their time and ability to act are entirely their own. It may be what a child chooses to do when they are not under the control, overt or implied, of an adult. Many people regard play as a 'process' rather than an outcome. It has no defined purpose or agenda other than what is in the mind of the child at that moment. In reality, there are levels of 'adult control' depending on the situation, but what is most important is that no adult is at that moment, steering what is happening. Enablement of play through 'light touch and design' is a particular skill, as is play supervision if it is to remain 'play' rather than an adult-controlled activity of arguably less value.

In February 2015, the US Play Coalition and the Association of Childhood Education International (ACEI) published a paper about the status and standing of children's play in America. *'The Critical Place of Play in Education' (usplaycoalition.clemson.edu, Feb 2015)* opens by asserting that: *'the neighbourhood play so prevalent for Americans in the 1950s-1980s has changed'* and proceeds to depict a generation less likely to walk or cycle to school, play outside in a variety of environments and make diverse neighbourhood friendships. Instead, a toxic brew of adult fear (stranger danger, traffic density), school restriction (shortened playtimes, 'organised' activity, poor use of space) and parental ignorance has resulted in an indoor norm for children that is characteristically passive, sedentary, and solitary; thereby making a strong contribution to the obesity crisis besetting the American population.

An overweight and unhealthy population 'across the pond' is however, no cause for English complacency. This report will explore the barriers and opportunities for children's play in

the devolved United Kingdom (where a holistic approach would be of immense benefit) the resulting impact on children's health; the range of potential solutions available and the role and responsibility of different tiers of government, with practical recommendations for action. The timing is opportune because one of the first policy statements made by Health Secretary Jeremy Hunt after the 2015 General Election signalled a resolve to address a 'home-grown' obesity epidemic head on. This report does not claim that children's play is in any way a panacea for the obesity epidemic, but in combination with other large-scale initiatives on nutrition and physical activity, it can definitely make a major contribution nationwide to the Government's stated aim:

'Health Secretary Jeremy Hunt has vowed to make tackling the 'great scandal' of childhood obesity one of the main priorities of this Parliament. Mr Hunt promised a national strategy to address Britain's spiralling weight problems as he pledged to do more to support GPs and reduce pressure on hospitals….

'I think at the start of a parliament, you have a chance to put in place a national strategy to reduce diabetes and indeed particularly childhood obesity, which I think is a great scandal,' he said. 'Having one in five children at primary school clinically obese is something that we cannot say we accept as something that we're prepared to live with and we absolutely need to do something about that.' ('Great scandal of childhood obesity to be top NHS target,' 'Daily Telegraph', 21st May 2015).

That statement, (made in the presence of London health leaders) and the subsequent announcement of the Prime Minister's intention to introduce a National Obesity Framework must be music to the ears of all who affirm the importance of play as central to child development, including the former Chief Medical Officer of Scotland, Harry Burns:

'Investing in children's play is one of the most important things we can do to improve children's health and wellbeing.'

(www.inspiringscotland.org.uk).

Yet there is much still to be done before *'advocates for children and their play'* can *'unite for a stronger presentation to the world of why play is essential to children's education and healthy development.'* ('The Critical Place of Play in Education' Feb 2015).

In the absence of advocates and champions in government for play, a child's playful experience in England is now likely to be piecemeal, reliant upon geographical location and a matter of happenstance. Co-ordinated and dedicated training for staff who work in schools, early years settings and children's centres, leadership from local authorities and support for parents can foster a virtuous balance between physically active and technology-based play, involving all the family in playful activity and thus ensuring that *'Play is an essential part of every child's life and vital to its development.' (Hampshire Play Policy Forum 2002).*

Children living in some towns and cities are enjoying 'new' play patterns that would have been not new at all to their grandparents. 'Playing Out' schemes involve streets being opened up for play and in the words of a police officer on the Southmead beat in Bristol:

'They are a fantastic idea. The children in the street love it. The whole street gets together and participates with lots of games. They are a great idea and I think it should be pushed as much as possible to bring back the old neighbourly community like the old days!'

Chief Inspector Keven Rowlands reports a positive response by motorists to road closure signage *('most motorists see what is happening and are quite happy to take a small detour,')* and maintains that the initiative has 'whole community' advantages:

'Playing out is not just for the children. It is equally important that it gives an opportunity to neighbourhoods of all ages to get to know each other and support each other... the role of playing out in bringing people together and giving our children the chance to laugh and play together is hugely important to our future.' ('Policing the streets and playing out.' 29th May, 2015).

In a similarly encouraging move, Cllr Peter Morgan, Haringey Council's Cabinet Member for Health and Wellbeing has announced a review of existing play–prohibitive anti ball signs in the borough

(http://www.londonplay.org.uk/blog_entry/3137/news/latest_play-news, 29th June 2015).

Unfortunately, these approaches to play in Bristol and Haringey are not universal. In Belper, uniformed police officers were called to investigate after four year old Tom Corden and sister Zara (six) were the subject of neighbour complaints that their scooter and go-kart street game was 'too loud'. Mrs Corden expressed feelings of bewilderment and disbelief to her local newspaper:

'Andree Corden, who claims the police were on the scene for 45 minutes, has asked: 'What sort of a world are we living in when children cannot play in the street on a sunny day without the police being called? These days, parents are criticised for not letting their children play outside, sticking them in front of the TV or X-Box and feeding them crisps. We encourage our children to play outside and then this happens.'('The Derby Telegraph', 6th May 2015).

In neighbouring Nottinghamshire, police officers, far from emulating their Bristol and Haringey counterparts, issued letters to parents of children playing football on Ena Avenue, Sneiton, stating that the possibility of an idly-kicked ball causing damage to property, constituted anti-social behaviour and insubordinate persistence could incur either a £100 Fixed Penalty Notice or an injunction under Chapter 12 of the 2014 Anti-Social Behaviour Crime and Policing Act. An Enforcement Officer from Nottinghamshire Police further emphasised that any breach of such an order is a criminal offence carrying a prison sentence.

The disparity in attitudes and play opportunities offered to children throughout the UK is deeply disquieting; especially as play is so intrinsically bound up with their health and welfare:

'It is the way children explore the world around them and develop practical skills. It is essential for physical, emotional and spiritual growth, for intellectual and educational development and for acquiring social and behavioural skills. Play is a generic term applied to a wide range of activities and behaviours that are satisfying to the child, creative for the child and freely chosen by the child.'(Hampshire Play Policy Forum 2002).

Constraints on children's opportunities to play have increased in recent decades, with a proportionate impact on their wellbeing, future life chances and, ultimately, the health of the nation, with social and economic ramifications that are detrimental to society. For these extremely compelling reasons, play as integral to government strategy, building upon best practice in the devolved UK and elsewhere, should not be viewed in the light of a policy 'add on' but as an absolute necessity if all our children are to benefit from an opportunity to be playful – and thus afforded a truly 'level' playing field. 'Play' of course in its widest sense as this report will show, is capable of infinite variety. From outdoor 'rough and tumble' to its place in the classroom as well as the playground – from exciting developments with modern technology that are so much more than sitting in front of a screen to adult 'play' in the workplace, playful activity enriches the life of a child and the adult that they will become. Above all, it is inclusive, unlike sport which is, by nature, selective. Absolutely everyone can play.

'The vast majority of children are good at heart and, if given proper encouragement, will flourish and become the adults on which our future rests. But first, they must be allowed to play.'(The Derby Telegraph' 6th May 2015)

Children learn and develop both while playing and through play – they are both learning how to cope with the immediate world around them, and at the same time, acquiring skills that will serve them well in the future. Opportunities for that to happen are fast diminishing.

The preparation and delivery of a national Whole Child Strategy with play at its heart, supported by practice and evidential research, is therefore the most important recommendation in this report.



SUMMARY OF RECOMMENDATIONS

There are many recommendations flowing from this Report. This is a reflection of the work required to recognise the vital importance of play to child development and to create the environment that will reverse the strong recent trend of reducing play opportunities. The recommendations also appear at the end of each relevant section.

AN OVERVIEW OF PLAY IN THE UK: BARRIERS AND OPPORTUNITIES

- Government to require local authorities to prepare children and young people's plans including strategies to address overweight and obesity with its physical and mental/ emotional consequences
- Funding for play to be ring-fenced within local authority budgets
- National audit of lost play provision since the year 2000 to include the impact of recent cuts to local authority budgets
- Reinstatement of appropriate levels of play training as part of relevant professional qualifications
- Play provision to be included as a grading factor in Ofsted inspections and Ofsted inspectors to receive training in play
- Initiatives designed to enable older children to extend play up through the ages

THE ROLE AND RESPONSIBILITIES OF GOVERNMENT IN ENABLING PLAY BOTH IN ENGLAND AND THE DEVOLVED UK AND THE PRACTICE AND MODEL OF OTHER COUNTRIES

- Government to re-affirm its commitment to the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, especially Article 31, the Right to Play and Leisure on the child's terms, not on adult terms
- Inter Departmental Policy Audit for compliance with CRC overseen by Cabinet Minister for Children
- Government to adopt and champion the UN Child Friendly Cities programme with national roll-out
- Restoration of core Government funding for Play England and local play organisations to enable provision to be maximised in the most play-deprived areas.

PLAY IN EARLY YEARS SETTINGS, PRIMARY AND SECONDARY SCHOOLS

- All early years settings required to have a clear Play Policy supported by a structured improvement and implementation plan
- All school staff/ break-time supervisors to be provided with professional training and guidance on the provision of beneficial play experiences to include training in access and inclusion for disabled children
- Training in play to become a part of standard teacher training, including a baseline gap assessment tool such as that provided by OPAL
- Government ownership of the message that play is not just for the early years stage but for all schoolchild development, learning and wellbeing with guidance provided by Play England to assist schools at the different child age-related developmental stages
- A measurable outcome for physical literacy in pre-school and schools with agreed minimum levels of physical literacy, outdoor learning and play to be mandatory in all school as part of the National Curriculum with outcomes assessed within the Ofsted framework and using agreed criteria that have been consulted on to assess play quality
- Each school to appoint a member of staff as curricular lead for play development and physical coordination skills; PSHE to be a core part of the curriculum
- The Sport England Primary Spaces and Sport Premium programmes to be extended to every school with a broader scope to incorporate a wide variety of physical literacy activities including play
- Introduction of statutory guidelines for a standard minimum amount of time for play during the school day (mandated recess and lunchtime breaks which also allow adequate time for eating meals and snacks)
- Government to encourage the improved provision of time and space for children's play within educational settings, after-school and holiday clubs
- Review the introduction (in consultation and following a pilot scheme) of formal instruction in literacy and numeracy until children reach the age of 7.
- More research is required relating the pre-school based play models to the achievement of significantly higher academic marks
- Require schools to offer informal play opportunities pre and post the school day
- Require schools to open up play spaces and facilities to the community outside of school hours

OUTDOOR AND INDOOR PLAY; BARRIERS AND OPPORTUNITIES

- Support provision for children to experience risk and challenge and develop resilience and self-reliance through play, both in their communities and in schools
- Encourage the use of natural materials in playground design and support the development of adventure playgrounds; train school staff to recognise the elements of good design
- Support the Forest School movement and other initiatives to take urban children into rural settings and likewise, through improved training and design, bring the 'rural' play environment into urban schools
- Ensure that every indoor play environment does not take a 'tick box' approach to compliance with standards. Each site should be able to demonstrate how children may benefit from encountering the facility
- Training and guidance documents on indoor play for use by teachers, play supervisors (and perhaps through media campaigns) for parents in a non-patronising and informative manner
- Provide clear communication to parents of the benefits of play in and around the home and how to facilitate it

EDUCATIONAL LEARNING THROUGH PLAY BOTH PRE-SCHOOL AND IN-SCHOOL TO INCLUDE AN EXPLORATION OF THE ROLE AND PLACE OF MODERN TECHNOLOGY IN CHILD PLAY IN HOME AND SCHOOL SETTINGS

- Initial teacher training programmes to include playful learning using technology
- Playful learning to be a key indicator in quality assessments of early years and primary classrooms
- CPD for teachers in teaching through playful means with a focus on integrating technology into the classroom
- Advice/assistance for parents to be provided by Government and made available online and in appropriate settings (children's centres, health centres etc) on criteria for selecting 'tech toys' and how to incorporate them constructively into children's play



ASSISTANCE/GUIDANCE FOR FAMILIES IN FACILITATING A RICH AND STIMULATING PLAY ENVIRONMENT FOR CHILDREN BOTH WITHIN AND OUTSIDE THE HOME

- Professional advice on play for parents and prospective parents to be embedded into ante-natal and pre-pregnancy preparation
- Government support for funding agencies that promote play and play research
- Statutory framework limiting the amount of homework tasks given to primary school students to support more family time at home
- Local authorities to signpost and support parenting initiatives in the community that promote the importance of families having fun and playing together
- Local authorities to encourage and support facilities such as toy-libraries, community centres and play parks to foster parent-child play

PLAY AND THE PLANNING SYSTEM

- Timely, straightforward and trustworthy information and advice to be provided to professionals and families about enabling outdoor play and creating an outdoor environment to facilitate it
- Training for professionals such as planners, landscape architects, architects, engineers, housing developers and housing managers to help them develop an understanding of the importance of play in the outdoor environment and how to plan, design and manage for it
- Local Authorities to devise Healthy Lifestyle Plans covering changes to planning policy guidelines, including provision, maintenance and opening of parks, creating, widening and signposting access to walking and cycling routes, giving greater priority to applications for floodlighting sports faculties and proposals for providing sports and leisure facilities and transport links to them
- An assessment of children's transport to be central to planning decisions in the community including the provision of new housing
- A change to current public sector procurement practice, placing this within the remit of local authority child development experts and restricting invitations to tender to a maximum of three bidders

PLAY AND THE EVALUATION OF RISK AND SAFETY

- Professional training and CPD in benefit-risk assessment for all teachers, relevant local authority officials and Ofsted inspectors
- Public information initiative to raise professional and parental awareness of the accessibility of advice about benefit-risk assessment as listed above and updated as appropriate
- Policy-makers and people working with children to use the term 'benefit-risk assessment' rather than 'risk assessment ' to promote a rational evaluation of activities and situations
- Government to provide the mechanism whereby the public can challenge questionable decisions obstructing children's play that are made by local authorities or schools which appear to be based on spurious 'health and safety' reasons rather than a competent, knowledge-based benefit-risk assessment.

THE ROLE OF THE MEDIA, ADVERTISING AND THE PLAY INDUSTRY IN THE PROMOTION OF BENEFICIAL CHILDREN'S PLAY

- The media, advertising and the whole play sector in all its forms to work together on joint initiatives to promote beneficial play as part of a holistic approach to child health and fitness and to take opportunities to stress its importance to policy-makers at all levels

THE TRAINING NEEDS OF THE CHILDREN'S WORKFORCE

- Post Graduate Certificate in Education (Early Years) to be given parity in Qualified Teacher Status, subsequent mentoring programmes, pay scales and career prospects with other Qualified Teacher Status posts
- DfE-commissioned research programmes into the play training needs of the children's workforce
- Training in play to be a statutory requirement for all those working in a professional capacity with children
- The Government to fund a comprehensive study of the factors underpinning successful playwork projects and act upon the findings to require local authorities to fund a range of playwork projects throughout the country
- A professional well qualified and valued Playwork workforce with a professional body
- Quality CPD for a wide range of professionals whose strategic planning and decision-making impacts upon play opportunities
- Develop child friendly environments through Playworkers, e.g. by promoting Play Ranger models; Toolkits on Use of Schoolgrounds and including children and young people in the planning and provision of play spaces

HEALTH BENEFITS OF PLAY: PHYSICAL HEALTH AND NUTRITION, MENTAL AND EMOTIONAL HEALTH - AND PLAY AS THERAPY FOR CHILDREN. HOW PLAY CONTRIBUTES TO THE PUBLIC HEALTH AGENDA

- Re-modelling the direction of education policy to lessen concentration upon testing and teaching to test; allowing more opportunity for free time and child-selected activity
- Further funded research into graduate skill set and the implications for schools policy



PLAY, DIVERSITY AND INCLUSION

- Inclusion and diversity to be embedded in local and national play strategies as well as strategic partnerships. Inclusion must be a specific standard in its own right within national standards and inspection frameworks for play, childcare and leisure
- Training for staff in all educational and leisure settings to improve knowledge and understanding of issues involving disability, equality, diversity and inclusion
- Planning authorities, developers, master planners, landscape architects, architects and the manufacturers of children's play equipment to concentrate on creating healthy playful environments for all children to access. These will not be equipped sites alone, but wild, naturalistic sites too
- Many inclusive play and childcare projects are reliant upon short term funding for what are effectively long term needs. The mainstreaming of funding would emphasise to parents and providers that inclusive provision is a right – as required by the Disability Discrimination Act (CPIS, No 8. Inclusive Play, 2006)
- Local authorities to work with ethnic minority leaders to demonstrate how community-based play can support integration and combat racism
- Dissemination of information and advice nationally and locally on issues of diversity and inclusion

GOVERNMENT STRATEGY FOR PLAY AND CONCLUSION

- Play to be embedded within a Whole Child Strategy under the aegis of a Cabinet Minister for Children responsible for cross-departmental roll out and co-ordination.



AN OVERVIEW OF PLAY IN THE UK: BARRIERS AND OPPORTUNITIES

The right to play for all children and young people up to age 18 is preserved in Article 31 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child; ratified by the UK Government in 1991.Under the Convention, government has a duty to protect and promote play opportunities for all children and young people and this approach would have resonated with senior politicians in earlier times such as David Lloyd George, who championed the importance of children's play, stating:

'The right to play is the child's first claim on the community. Play is nature's training for life. No community can infringe that right without doing enduring harm to the minds and bodies of its citizens.'(David Lloyd George, 1926).

However, these enlightened comments were made 89 years ago and today play is seriously neglected at policy level. Despite extensive, evidence-based research published by Play England ('Save Children's Play' 2011, *http://www.playengland.org.uk/savechildrensplay)* and other voluntary bodies that have demonstrated the benefits of play and the importance of Article 31, the UK government has no promotional programme for UNCRC. There is a dearth of play policy analysts in government; no single ministry holds a portfolio for play and in the absence of any overseeing legislative framework, the administrative aspects of play are at local and charity level.

The 2006 Education and Inspection Act whilst making no direct reference to 'play' states (section 507B) that:

'A local education authority in England must, so far as reasonably practical, secure for qualifying young persons in the authority's area access to:

sufficient educational leisure-time activities which are for the improvement of their well-being and sufficient features for such activities; and

sufficient recreational leisure-time activities which are for the improvement of their well-being and sufficient facilities for such activities.'

Other Acts that have relevance to supervised play work are:

- 2006 Childcare Act
- 2006 Equality Act
- 2006 Road Safety Act
- 2001 Safeguarding Vulnerable Groups

but in practical terms, play has fallen prey to the ravening maw of the deficit and associated budget cuts across a range of services.

Constraints upon local authority budgets have reduced the availability of grants to play organisations, and some local authority play services have been subject to enforced closure. Reduced capital spend has been an impregnable barrier to play and The Heritage Lottery Foundation's data (2014) suggests that 86% of local authority park managers have reported cuts to revenue budgets. Less funding is available both for new high-quality play provision and for the management of existing provision and open space. HLF pinpoints the sale of parks and open spaces to private companies; a trend set to increase with the attendant possibility that communities in the not too distant future may incur a financial charge for the use of local open space.

Community groups wishing to devise projects that promote play are similarly disadvantaged by tightened LA budgets. There is a severe lack of staff both to advise in the search for pertinent funding streams and to assist in writing up consequent bids; a perverse 'saving' in itself because the prioritisation of community access to such information would encourage more local groups to fundraise themselves for play provision.

Assigning play provision solely to diverse local authorities rather than a specific Government Department has in practice served as a recipe for misguided action and a 'hit and miss', 'one size fits all' approach, typified by the NPFA's 'Six Acre Target' initiative. The National Playing Fields Association was formed in the 1920s and one of its early posters depicts a boy in a street wearing football kit accompanied by the

slogan *'all dressed up and nowhere to go'.* The assumption was that the provision of playing fields would satisfy children's playing needs and the NFPA stuck to it by developing its 'Six Acre Target' which suggested a hierarchy of play area provision; LAP, LEAP and NEAP (Local Area for Play, Local Equipped Area for Play, Neighbourhood Equipped Area for Play). This important step was crucially undermined by a lack of understanding about where and how children play with the inevitable consequence that local authorities installed playgrounds to meet the target in places where they would hardly be used.

The Audit Commission's support for the target unwittingly compounded the error; thereby piling additional pressure on local authorities to provide facilities whether or not they were likely to be used. It also led to the ridiculous outcome that if a local area for play (LAP) contained equipment, it 'failed' the guidance; thereby necessitating its removal even if it was fulfilling a useful purpose.

The LAP/LEAP/NEAP approach also illustrates the inadequacies of the 'one size fits all' solution. It was based upon the Milton Keynes model and may be helpful when building a new town but it does not cope with the reality of existing towns and cities. It is highly unlikely that any local authority would take the ludicrous step of demolishing fit for purpose housing to install play areas at sufficient frequency to meet children's everyday play needs and in towns and cities there are many areas where there just is no obvious space to install them.

Over-reliance on adventure playgrounds also falls into the dubious 'big idea' category. Significant numbers were developed in the late 1960s and early 70s under the Urban Programme, followed by a second wave in the mid 80s when the Government-funded Play Board (Association for Children's Play and Recreation) allocated resources for the development of play facilities. More recently, the government's funding of the Play Pathfinder programmes supporting the former Play Strategy funded new adventure playgrounds (and many playgrounds).

Much magnificent work has been done in adventure playgrounds and the play workers have been inspirational advocates of a child's right to play but few have carried out research or received training themselves in children's unsupervised play, both in fixed equipment playgrounds and in the wider environment (roads, streets, and spaces in the public realm). If adventure playgrounds were to be a 'catch all' solution, there would need to be even more of them than primary schools; an entirely unlikely proposition, even in a deficit-free future.

However, some statements in local authority Big Lottery bid documents include the recognition (albeit rarely acted upon) that children's play does not start and finish in a playground because they use opportunities presented by their everyday environment. This acknowledgement is supported by historical precedent; until very recently, children have tended to play (and had the freedom to play) in the streets where they lived, or the equivalent common spaces between and around their homes (Lacey L. 2007, *'Street play – a Literature Review, London: Play England, www.playday.org.uk/playday-campaigns).*



Around the latter quarter of the 20th century a child's 'license' to come and go unaccompanied outside the home was drastically curtailed *(Hillman M., Adams, J., Whitelegg, J., 1990 'One False Move': Policy Studies Institute)* and it is now widely considered to be dangerous, socially unacceptable or both, for children to be outside without adults *(Lacey ,2007b)* and operating without supervision *(Skenazy, L., 2009: 'Free-Range Kids, Giving our Children the Freedom We Had Without Going Nuts with Worry .' John Wiley & Sons)* Today's children are disappearing from public space – certainly in their primary school years. This is the age of the 'battery-reared child' *(Gill, T., 2004 Valedictory Lecture: Children's Play Council, reported in 'The Independent', 2nd September, 2004)* in which the play of children is being constrained and confined as never before.

The reasons for this are multiple and include a misplaced societal fear of 'stranger danger' (when in reality a child stands more chance of being molested within the home), concern about traffic, the development of technology (games consoles being one example) and a shift in attitude towards children playing outside. 'Mosquito' buzzers (high-frequency devices only audible to those under 25) have been installed in some shops and public places in order to drive them away and complaints to the police have increased as in the case of ten year old girls receiving a warning for chalking hopscotch grids in the street ('The Daily Telegraph', 2013).

Yet there are positive counters to the trend and an increasingly vocal lobby for play is making its presence felt as evinced by:

- Lively discussions on social media and the increasing reach of Play England's Facebook and Twitter sites and the increasing API Twitter followers and subscribers to the API non-member newsletter
- The enduring success of Playday, now in its 28th year and attracting regular attendances of 850,000 people
- A growing movement in some schools to make them more playful, as better play leads to improved academic achievement
- Local campaigns for improved play provision led by parents
- The crowd–sourced 'Project Wild Thing' film, produced by the Wild Network bringing the important issue of children's access to nature to a whole new audience
- An increasingly vocal debate amongst political commentators about the state of childhood centring upon the detrimental effect that the lack of children's opportunity to play may have on society in general.



Playing is children's default setting. It is a deep, biological and psychological trait found in virtually all the animal species. It is the way that the young orientate themselves, discover how to engage with, navigate and co-create the world of which they are a part. Play is an evolutionary imperative which means that children who play are acquiring the self-confidence and developing the mental and emotional capacity not just to deal with what life may have in store for them but to live it fully, moment to playful moment. Contrary to its more common treatment by public policy, 'play is not a luxury to be considered after other rights,' (Lester, S and Rusell, W., 2010, 'Children's Right to Play; an examination of the importance of play in the lives of children worldwide.' Working papers in Early Childhood Development, No. 57: Bernard Van Leer Foundation).

Children have the right to play freely but their ability to do so is heavily dependent on how adults conceive, design, develop and manage public space, public services, and play facilities of all types and how they each respond to children. The loss of play opportunities and the importance of playful learning in education are also extremely important and will be covered in detail later in this report.

The importance to society of play is such that it should not be solely assigned to individual local authorities no matter how enlightened they may be.

Government policy and direction is key.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- Government to require local authorities to prepare children and young people's plans including strategies to address overweight and obesity with its physical and mental/ emotional consequences
- Funding for play to be ring-fenced within local authority budgets
- National audit of lost play provision since the year 2000 to include the impact of recent cuts to local authority budgets
- Reinstatement of appropriate levels of play training as part of relevant professional qualifications
- Play provision to be included as a grading factor in Ofsted inspections and Ofsted inspectors to receive training in play
- Initiatives designed to enable older children to extend play up through the ages



THE ROLE AND RESPONSIBILITIES OF GOVERNMENT IN ENABLING PLAY BOTH IN ENGLAND AND THE DEVOLVED UK AND THE PRACTICE AND MODEL OF OTHER COUNTRIES

The 1989 United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) is the most widely agreed global treaty in history. The right to play is enshrined under article 31 and in 2013, general comment 17 on the article clarifies the expectations of the UN that national governments should honour its obligations to *'respect, protect and fulfil'* children's right to play by taking purposeful action on a range of fronts, including 'legislation, planning and funding'. Along with South Sudan and Somalia, the US has not ratified the treaty (although President Obama has addressed the need to do so on numerous occasions). Play may be a component of progressive programmes such as The Harlem Children's Zone *(http://hcz.org/#http://hcz.org)* but is often not at the forefront. Play is largely considered to be a local responsibility without the assurance and security of federal funding. The US has play-supporting organisations (NC Play Alliance; KABOOM; US Play Coalition; US arm of the International Play Association) but they are not tied to government and are invariably financially reliant upon individual states and private foundations and enterprises. *(http://kaboom.org).*

A range of initiatives incorporating play that are linked with education and community support are indicative of a new wave of holistic approaches to policy. The focus is on the early years of childhood with an expansion of Head Start and Early Head Start; comprehensive child development programmes tailored to the needs of low-income children from birth to age five and their families. These initiatives are federally funded and operated locally, but the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) despite being the recipient of federal funding is constantly coping with cuts to its budget. Some local organisations and not for profit organisations partner with the Department of Education and receive financial grants.

Whilst play retains its place in early childhood initiatives and is often a component of local Parks and Recreation strategies (Nature Playgrounds, Fairy Gardens, GET OUTSIDE, Children and Nature Network etc), support for older children's playful opportunities is sparse. Some schemes such as Midnight Basketball offer games, activities, music and crafts for teenagers and take place in accessible community recreation centres but they are confined to the summer months. Youth initiatives are directed and organised (sports and arts schemes, volunteer opportunities) but in the main, teenagers have nowhere to gather together freely and are even subject to evening curfews in some towns and shopping malls. In schools at secondary and elementary level, recess continues to be shortened and many schools, perceiving free play to be disruptive, have replaced it with structured games run by play 'coaches'. The prescriptive (and restrictive) nature of this approach is captured by the Playworks Direct Service promotional material:

'Through our full-time, year-round direct service model, our coaches enhance and transform recess and play into a positive experience that helps kids and teachers get the most out of every learning opportunity. Our rock-star coaches strive to know every child by name, orchestrating play and physical activity through the five components of the Playworks program every day.'

Although it is a duty of adults to create the appropriate opportunities for play, the need for play to be 'transformed', 'orchestrated' and 'controlled' is counter-productive to the right of a child to play freely with all the attendant advantages: 'Play is important to healthy brain development. It is through play that children at a very early age engage and interact in the world around them…Undirected play allows children to learn how to work in groups, to share, to negotiate, to resolve conflicts, and to learn self-

advocacy skills.'(Ginsburg, Kenneth R., 2007, 'The Importance of Play in Promoting Healthy Child Development and Maintaining Strong Parent Child Bonds' Paediatrics Vol 119, pp 182-191). However, one way in which government and other partners in the US consider facilities that are supportive of children's indoor and outdoor play is via the competitive mechanism of identifying the best cities in which to raise them. The Top Ten Best Cities for Families selection is based upon:

'US Census data, FBI crime statistics, reports from the bureau of Labor Statistics, and ratings from GreatSchools.org.' (http://www.parenting.com/family-time/home/top-10-best-cities-families-2014).

A parallel competitively selected Top Ten Cities for Kids:

'Great schools, playgrounds and low crime are only part of the package that makes a city great for children.' (http://livability.com/top-10/families/10-best-cities-kids/2014).

offers many good quality facilities for children with a concentration upon sporting opportunities, but as in the case of Brentwood (US) play is firmly in the mix:

''More than 10 parks in Brentwood offer space to take the kids for a walk, play on playgrounds…both in and around Brentwood are several indoor play facilities that feature pirate ship playhouses, large inflatable slides and dress–up areas.'

A UN driven programme that may have inspired the US cities schemes is the Child Friendly Cities initiative. The UN framework provides a set of guaranteed rights for every young citizen including the right to *'Meet friends and play,'* and is intended to be:

'the embodiment of the Convention on the Rights of the Child at the local level, which in practice means that children's rights are reflected in policies, laws, programmes and budgets. In a child friendly city, children are active agents; their voices and opinions are taken into consideration and influence decision-making processes.' (www.childfriendlycities.org).

Rotterdam has been praised as a particularly inspirational example of a child friendly city, and in the UK Leeds has taken up the baton, basing its child friendly credentials on the top twelve 'wishes' of children, including a safe and welcoming city centre *'with friendly places to go, have fun and play,' (http://www.leeds.gov.uk/c/Pages/childFriendlyCity/12-wishes-for-child-friendly-leeds).* Planning is also underway to make Bath a Child Friendly City. A steering group has been established including partners such as Bath Cultural Forum, 5x5x5 and the Egg Theatre *(http://cfba.org.uk/making-bath-a-child-friendly-city/)*

However, in the UK as a whole, the Child Friendly City framework has never been a big driver for policy although if government wished to commit to Nelson Mandela's belief that:

'There can be no keener revelations of a society's soul than the way in which it treats its children.' (Nelson Mandela, Speech at the launch of the Nelson Mandela Children's Fund, May 8th, 1995, in 'Nelson Mandela In His Own Words', 2003).

perhaps now is the time to champion it.

Widespread recognition that play is central to the health and wellbeing of children is certainly overdue in the UK where there is currently no statutory duty for either national government or local authorities to provide for it, other than as part of the extra curricular responsibilities of schools identified under the Education Act, 1996.

The Welsh Government has, however, adopted a children's rights approach to policy formulation that included a national government play policy (Welsh Assembly Government 2002). This led, over time, to a statutory duty on local authorities to assess and secure sufficient play opportunities for children in their area: probably the first such requirement anywhere in the world. *(Section 11 of the Children and Families (Wales) Measure 2010).* The UN Convention is thus enshrined in the Welsh legislative system.

The Scottish Assembly is fully supportive of the national Play Strategy in Scotland *('Getting it Right for Play – A toolkit to assess and improve local play opportunities', 2012, www.playscotland.org/getting-it-right-for-play/)* and there is enthusiasm for the 'Let us play' campaign in Northern Ireland. Play Scotland, Play Wales and Playboard Northern Ireland are all fully funded by their respective governments but in England, the last decade

has seen some promising initiatives wither on the vine. The word 'play' has been dropped from the political lexicon and was notable for its absence from the 2015 manifestos of all the main political parties, replaced with the catch-all phrase 'physical activity'. There is a clear difference between what is meant by 'physical activity' and what is understood by 'play'.

Physical activity is often adult-led and therefore limits child development in many crucial life-skills areas. Play (which is child-led and freely chosen, personally directed, intrinsically motivated) is better able to promote essential core aspects of mental, social, emotional, character and physical development. Sport, physical activity and PE cannot achieve this alone, as proven by the weaknesses in the school sport premium of £150m per annum. Play must sit as an equal partner if all aspects of child health, fitness and wellbeing are to be promoted successfully.

In England, the 2004 Children Act enshrined the Every Child Matters (HM Treasury 2003) policy of integrated services in health, education and social care working together to improve universal outcomes for children. The enjoyment of informal play and recreation is a component of this outcomes framework but there is no specific requirement on local authorities or other public bodies as to how this is to be achieved or even defined.

In 2008, play as a policy–driver took an upward turn when the UK Government published a twelve year Play Strategy *(DCSF/DCMS,2008)* aiming to guarantee good quality play areas and playable neighbourhoods for every child in the country as part of its Children's Plan to make England the '*best place in the world to grow up*'. The Coalition Government abandoned the strategy in 2010 when the newly restructured and re-named Department of Education (formerly the Department for Children, Schools and Families) first removed the ring-fence from the funding for new play areas that were part of the initial phase of the strategy and subsequently confirmed that there would be no further financial support within the next spending period *(HM Treasury, 2010)*. Play was then removed from Ministerial portfolios for the first time since the 1980s.

The interests of play suffered a further reverse in 2011 with the ending of the Play Pathfinder and Playbuilder (then Engaging Communities in Play) programme and removal of core government funding for Play England. Central Government funding for the Children's Play Information Service ceased in 2011. A library but no information service is now located at the University of Sheffield but this is funded by the university.

According to the Children's Rights Alliance for England, which submits annual reports to the UN on government progress in implementing the Convention on the Rights of the Child, the UK Government's abandonment of the Play Strategy and the subsequent deep and disproportionate cuts in local play provision leave the government 'in breach' of its obligations in relation to children's right to play *(Children's Rights Alliance for England, 2014 'State of Children's Rights in England: Review of Government action on United Nations' recommendations for strengthening children's rights in the UK)*.

There remain many local examples of good practice in England (such as the Leeds Child Friendly City initiative) but in the absence of political will from central government, play has been shunted to the sidelines and directed 'physical activity' and anti-child 'mosquito buzzers' may prefigure the 'rock star' playwork coaches and child curfews in the US. The Government continues to commit healthy funding streams to the School Sports programme but while this may be justified in nurturing the Premiership stars, champions and medallists of the future, it can never act as a stand alone tool in creating a society that is physically and mentally healthy and therefore economically productive. Investing solely in sports is by nature, selective; those least able to compete will inevitably face rejection and may turn away from exercise as a consequence. The 20–30% turned away are exactly the same 20–30% of overweight, inactive children that government needs to target. Sport as a stand alone solution is not reaching them and may actually be alienating them. These children need to play.

Policy options are therefore at a crossroads. The Government must decide quickly whether to persist with a strategy of selecting and funding only the strongest, or to take a different path and support efforts to promote a more general, whole-community approach to raising standards of health and wellbeing. Play is central to that equation:

'Play allows us to develop alternatives to violence and despair. It helps us learn perseverance and gain optimism' (Dr Stuart Brown, http://www.museumofplay.org/education/education-and-play-resources/play-quotes)

RECOMMENDATIONS

- Government to re-affirm its commitment to the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, especially Article 31, the Right to Play and Leisure on the child's terms, not on adult terms
- Inter Departmental Policy Audit for compliance with CRC overseen by Cabinet Minister for Children
- Government to adopt and champion the UN Child Friendly Cities programme with national roll-out
- Restoration of core Government funding for Play England and local play organisations to enable provision to be maximised in the most play-deprived areas.

PLAY IN EARLY YEARS SETTINGS, PRIMARY AND SECONDARY SCHOOLS

The curriculum framework documents in the UK emphasise the importance of learning through play. Section1.8 of the section on 'Areas of learning and development' of the Statutory Framework for the Early Years Foundation Stage (DfE, 2014:9) states that:

'Each area of learning and development must be implemented through planned, purposeful play and through a mix of adult-led and child initiated activity. Play is essential for children's development, building their confidence as they learn to explore, to think about problems and relate to others. Children learn by leading their own play, and by taking part in play which is guided by adults.'

However there is currently a crisis in play beginning at the early years stage where over a twenty year time span, the curriculum has been increasingly prescribed by governments with the consequence that early years professionals have become more preoccupied with monitoring and organising the children than with planning for play activities to support development *(Hunter, T., Walsh, G. 2014 'From policy to practice? The reality of play in primary school classes in Northern Ireland in International Journal of Early Years Education, 22(1), pp.19 -36).*

This is in stark contrast to the theories of pioneering educationalists of former eras such as Froebel *(1782–1852),* Montessori *(1869–1952),* Macmillan *(1860-1931)* and Isaacs *(1885–1948)* whose work emphasised the relevance of play in an outdoor environment; the importance of children having contact with nature and learning that was active, participatory and creative underpinned by respect for children and an understanding that children are competent. In many early years settings around the country, playgrounds now have a uniform 'style' that has not changed since the 1980s with the emphasis firmly upon provision of a bright, colourful and often 'themed' physical appearance which may be satisfying to adult eyes rather than focusing on continual engagement and a richness of offer to children.

Susan Linn *('The Case for Make Believe: Saving Play in a Commercialized World', 2008)* believes that for children *'The capacity to play is a survival skill'.* She focuses on the crucial role of play (in particular, make-believe or pretend), in fostering creativity and maintaining mental health. The increasingly didactic nature of early years' learning relies upon an assumption that this will lead to positive academic outcomes, yet there is persuasive evidence to the contrary. Favouring a more playful approach to learning in early years settings, R. A. Marcon's longitudinal study *('Moving up the grades; relationship between pre-school model and later school success.' Early Childhood Research and Practice,* Vol. 4 (1) p. 517 – 530 2002) has demonstrated that, by the end of their sixth year in school, children whose pre-school model had been play-based achieved significantly higher marks that those who had experienced academically-directed pre-school programmes. Findings from other studies include:

- Play-based provision boosting scientific and mathematical ability *(Hirsh-Pasek, K., Golinkoff, R., 2009 'The Great Balancing Act: Optimizing Core Curricula through Playful Pedagogy', in Zigler, E., Barnett, S., Gilliam, W. (eds.) The preschool education debates.')*
- Play's key role in the development of divergent thinking whereby children learn to cooperate, share and take turns *(Singer, D. and J. Singer, 1992, 'The House of Make-Believe', Harvard University Pres: USA)*
- High quality play-based pre-school education making a positive difference to academic learning and wellbeing through primary school years with an extended period of such provision being of particular benefit to children from disadvantaged households *(longitudinal study of 3,000 children funded by The Department of Education in the UK, Sylva, K., Melhuish, E.C., Sammons, P., Siraj-Blatchford, I. & Taggart, B., 2004 'The Effective Provision of Pre-School Education Project: Technical Paper 12 – The Final Report: Effective Pre-School Education. DfES / Institute of Education, University of London)*

Some contemporary neuroscientific evidence also suggests that formal instruction in the early years is unwise. Blaustein ('See! Hear! Touch! The basics of learning readinesses, 2005, Journal of the National Association for the Education of Young Children, *http://www.journal.naeyc.org/btj/200507/01Blaustein.asp).* The paper contends that children directed to learning by rote in early years settings will concentrate upon a very specific skill, using parts of the brain that are immature; thus potentially endangering normal brain development and growth.

Together, these and other findings supply evidence that a playful approach to learning is beneficial to children in early years' settings and has a lasting legacy on their later academic performance. Such an approach should therefore be championed by government and fully incorporated into the professional training of the early years' workforce.

Whilst there is a growing awareness of the importance of play in early years' settings, what is not yet properly acknowledged is that it is completely integral to the health, wellbeing and learning of the primary school child. The outside environment in a school can be a strong driver in enabling play-based learning in Key Stages 1, 2 and 3 and might include the following characteristics:

- Physically diverse
- Generous
- Supportive
- Secure

(White, J. and Woolley, H., 2014 'What makes a good outdoor environment for young children?' In Maynard, T. and Waters, J. (eds.) 'Exploring Outdoor Play in the Early Years,' Berkshire, UK and New York, USA. McGraw Hill and Open University Press).

'Physically diverse' suggests a range of landscape features including slopes, terraces and raised surfaces to encourage a wide variety of play opportunities. A 'generous' environment promotes enquiry, discovery and thought and might involve sand, vegetation, water and other open-ended materials that are known as 'loose parts'. 'Supportive' environments allow for 'down-time'; furnishing opportunities for rest and seclusion and a sense of feeling 'secure' can feature pathways linking indoor and outdoor locations and a known and familiar place to store equipment. Overall, a good outdoor environment supports children's need to pursue their own investigations outside the school room and gives them a sense of independence and empowerment. Bullying is often a result of a lack of other, more positive and creative activities to occupy some children, so they seek out other, more destructive entertainments.

However, to perhaps the majority of people, 'play in primary schools' conjures up the image of a traditional school playground; largely consisting of tarmac and limited (if any) green space, dominated by boys playing football, with little opportunity for other activities to take place. Access to green space has been found to be beneficial to children in a number of ways, including reducing the symptoms of Attention Deficit Disorder (ADD). Research from the US where, at the time, there were 2 million children with ADD revealed that such children functioned better than usual after activities in green settings and also that the greener a child's play area, the less severe their symptoms proved to be *(Sullivan, W. C., 2001, 'Coping with ADD- the surprising connection to green play settings,' Environment and Behaviour', 33(1): 54-77).*

A study in Barcelona has also found that learning taking place in green environments has such positive outcomes as improving memory and reducing inattentiveness. The study received wide media attention:
(http://www.theguardian.com/environment/2015/jun/15/green-spaces-improve-school-childrens-mental-development-study-finds)

The development of cognitive skills has been authoritatively linked to high quality creative and pretend play with such pluses as enhancing social communication, negotiation and role-taking, problem solving, improvisation and joint planning *(Bergen, 2002, Lester and Russell, 2008)* in addition to the notable physical and mental health benefits. Yet there are new obstacles and ones of historical heritage that frustrate play in UK primary schools to the detriment of children's health, learning and wellbeing.

In some schools (as in the US), the amount of time allowed for play outdoors or break time has dwindled over the years. This was initially uncovered when the first national survey of school break-times, covering 1990–1996, demonstrated that 26% of schools had made changes, usually shortening them and 12% of infant and 26% of junior schools had abolished afternoon break. By reducing these break-times, children's opportunity for enjoying the benefits of free play has been curtailed.

However, there are other negative aspects of historical descent operating in school playgrounds today.

School playgrounds in former times were frequently treated as places where adults could control and monitor children's activities, prioritising strict discipline before a move towards the activities of drilling and marching. Similar controls have been identified as occurring in English schools now, sometimes where rules exist for whole sections or zones in school playgrounds resulting in children having limited spatiality. Such controls include the allowance (or prohibition) of certain activities in specific zones and seeking to mould children's behaviour (Thomson, 2005). The effect of this type of management is to make playtime a source of anxiety and distress rather than a central contributory factor to children's overall health and happiness:

'Many schools will deliberately 'kettle' children within a small area of tarmac, unnecessarily preventing them access to their field during the winter, placing clothing priorities before children's health and increasing the likelihood of negative behaviour and sedentary habits occurring, deploying nonsensical excuses about contaminated mud or dirty clothing,' Coleman, N.Outdoor Play and Learning OPAL) July 2015).

There is also an urgent need to address the quality of playtime experience for disabled children. A study in the north of England focused on the inclusion of them in primary school playgrounds and revealed a range of organisational, social and physical barriers which often combined to hamper their enjoyment and participation. Organisational impediments include the issue of time. Sometimes a disabled child would follow an accustomed routine (such as being taken to the toilet or helped to put a coat on) with the consequence that they arrived late onto the playground and therefore missed the very important start of play. Others would miss playtime altogether because of therapy of some sort. Often the choice to sacrifice or jeopardise playtime was made by adults without the children being involved in the decision about their daily routine.

An accompanying issue is the importance of staff training so that they are properly sensitive to the needs and desires of an individual disabled child. Social barriers were the result of child-child relationships and child-staff relationships. Physical barriers concerned playground design and might include access to the playing space and fixed play equipment where this existed. Seemingly straightforward issues such as being able to get onto a grass area were sometimes identified as barriers to the inclusion of disabled children with mobility impairments and the use of fixed play equipment that was inappropriate could also be a hindrance *(Woolley, H., Armitage, M., Bishop, J., Curtis, M., and Ginsborg, J, 2005 'Inclusion of Disabled Children in Primary School Playgrounds'. London: National Children's Bureau with Joseph Rowntree Foundation.)*

Over the last 10-15 years, there has also been a shift from the predominantly play-based curriculum traditionally associated with the first year of primary schooling in England to more formal teacher-led instruction. Children in England are being required, from even age 4 to increasingly learn via formal instruction. However, mounting opinion suggests that 4 and 5 year olds might not be ready for the formal teaching methodologies that they encounter in primary schools and that being compelled to participate in such approaches at an early age may result in stress and developmental harm to young children *(Sykes, E., Bell, J. and Rodeiro, C, 2009, 'Birth date effects: a review of the literature from 1990-on' University of Cambridge: Cambridge Assessment).*

Some research demonstrates that early introduction to formal learning approaches to literacy does not boost children's long-term reading development and there is also evidence that children who started earlier formal instruction in reading developed less positive attitudes towards it and, by age 11, showed poorer textual comprehension than those who

had started later *(Suggate, S.P., Schaughency, E.A. & Reese, E., 2013 'Children learning to read later catch up to children reading earlier.' Early Childhood Research Quarterly, http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.ecresq.2012.04.004)*

Similar results emerged in an international study in which the relative reading achievement of 15–year-old students across 55 countries (controlling for social and economic differences) was examined; tellingly, results suggested no association between the start date of formal reading instruction and later reading capability *(Suggate , S.P., 2009 'School entry age and reading achievement in the 2006 Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA)' International Journal of Educational Research, 48, 151-161).* Other research *(Christie & Roskos, 2006, Sykes et al, 2009)* has indicated that play-based activities as opposed to formal instruction have offered the most powerful support for the early development of phonological and literacy skills and that 4 and 5 year-old children may not be ready for formal education particularly in the social and emotional context. Findings increasingly show that a play-based approach to learning introduced in the first primary school years is most likely to help children to become more competent life-long learners as well as becoming emotionally well-adapted and socially confident. A mounting body of opinion would go even further by arguing that children should start primary school at a later age *(http://www.cam.ac.uk/research/discussion/school-starting-age-the-evidence; http://www.toomuchtoosoon.org/school-readiness.html; https://theconversation.com/hard-evidence-at-what-age-are-children-ready-for-school-29005)*

The importance of play for children, however, does not end upon transfer to secondary school. It will look somewhat different to the casual observer but will still have the capacity to promote learning, resilience, self confidence, creativity and wellbeing in every teenage pupil. Unfortunately, most playgrounds for the over 12s are flat, open and windswept spaces, reliant upon balls and benches. Many secondary school Head teachers may assert that their pupils do not play and impose a set of restrictive rules for break times and a clear order of sanctions for breaching them.

There is now growing opinion that a number of children at secondary starting age lack basic capability in balance, co-ordination and agility as well as advanced skills such as catching or striking objects *(Campbell, 2013)*. Appropriately stimulating playgrounds can offer subtle and engaging ways of developing physical literacy and the provision of a range of facilities and opportunities can have a direct effect on children's activity levels at break. One study *(http://www.ltl.org.uk/pdf/The-value-of-play-in-11-18-secondary-schools1429523246.pdf , Haugh 2008)* suggests that physical activity at break can be boosted by three times through the introduction of more facilities and Fitmedia Fitness *(http://fitmediafitness.co.uk/fitmedia-movement/)* provides a sound, scientific research-centred method of assessing physical fitness and physical literacy in secondary school pupils.

There is now widespread concern covering the political spectrum about the long term detrimental effects of physical inactivity and awareness that bad habits for life can be established and confirmed during the school years. New research by UK Active has found that:

- The cost to the UK economy of direct and indirect inactivity is £20bn per year with NHS England Chief Executive Simon Stevens stating that an extra £8bn per year is required by 2020 to maintain health services – in addition to £22bn of efficiency savings
- An inactive person spends 73% more days in hospital and visits a doctor 5.5% more frequently than an active individual
- Inactive people are also significantly more likely to suffer from depression and dementia than physically active adults.

Central funding initiatives like the Government's Sport Premium initiative are designed to combat the ills of inactivity by improving the quantity and quality of the school sport and PE offer and designated financial resources have encouraged many schools to invest in teacher CPD, improved sport and PE facilities and external coaches and specialists. Yet competitive school sports are not alone the answer (or even the main component) to the detrimental effects of inactivity.

The rigid rules and rituals of school sport and PE can serve to alienate many children who may label themselves (or be labelled by others and thus excluded) as 'non-sporty'. This then discourages participation and physical literacy in later childhood and adolescence and establishes a pattern of sedentary and inactive behaviour into adulthood that is likely to remain a habit for life.

The UK Active report: *(/http://www.ukactive.com/downloads/managed/ukactive_Kids-Generation_Inactive-single_pages.pdf)* notes a growing trend of sedentary behaviour for children at break time: *'Not all children are involved in moderate to vigorous physical activity during break time. For pupils who are already disengaged with physical activity, this time is more often than not, spent sedentary'.*

The report advocates *'providing periods of engaging structured activity during break time to engage even the most inactive children,'* but the likelihood is that forcing children who are already disengaged into structured activities may disengage them even more. There are other ways of being active that do not involve formal sport and teacher-led provision. Break time for adolescents is first and foremost an opportunity for social interaction without direct adult supervision and is clearly their version of 'free play'. Some research has shown that girls are more likely to take part in informal physical 'education' than a structured PE lesson. They are happy to walk, dance and jump in social groups, and improvements to physical space and staff attitudes will help all pupils to put aside their concerns of body image, self esteem and peer pressure and become more active *(Hyndman, 2012)*. There are also clear benefits to their mental health. One in ten children will experience mental health issues and this increases during the adolescent years. The rate of adolescent self-harm has seen a 70% rise and rates of depression and disorderly conduct doubled towards the end of the millennium *(Young Minds UK, 2013)*. In addition, three reports *(Nuffield Foundation 2013, Twenge 2000, Gray 2011)* have shown that the decline in opportunities to enjoy freely chosen outdoor play has been a key factor in the decline in children's mental wellbeing.

As in early year's settings and primary school, play in its own form can be extremely beneficial to the mental, physical and academic wellbeing of secondary school children. The current preponderance of flat, open spaces with hard surfaces does not support this and is likely to encourage sedentary behaviour, but a range of affordances (physical features that, whilst not purposely designed for play, have the capability to afford numerous playful interactions and/or processes) and secluded, well-designed social spaces can support the opportunity for small groups of pupils to interact, perceive and manage risk and 'try out' new ways of interacting with others. Especially at secondary school, girls and boys 'play' in different ways. Girls are much more socially motivated so playful activity needs to be compatible with their social activities. Boys tend to be more competitive and more inclined to 'play' at sport (e.g. kicking a ball around) until they are older. When trying to extend playful activities into secondary schools, it is important to bear in mind the gender differences in order to successfully facilitate play for longer in children's lives.

'Children who do not have the opportunity to control their own actions, to make and follow through on their own decisions, to solve their own problems, and to learn how to follow rules in the course of play, grow up feeling that they are not in control of their own lives and fate. They grow up feeling that they are dependent upon luck and on the goodwill and whims of others, a frightening feeling indeed when one realises that luck goes both ways and that others are not always dependable', (Gray 2011).

To enable and encourage the freedom and interactional play of children at secondary school, school staff need training that will involve the ethos of the school as well as the physical environment, but the outcome will be long term benefit to children and thence society as a whole. The importance of play for children of all ages and in all its aspects is paramount and a culture/ethos of play and the support of many opportunities for various types of physical activity at playtimes has been found to be fundamental to children attending any school and at any age *(www.outdoorplayandlearning.org.uk OPAL Outdoor Play and Learning CIC).*

RECOMMENDATIONS

- All early years settings required to have a clear Play Policy supported by a structured improvement and implementation plan
- All school staff/ break-time supervisors to be provided with professional training and guidance on the provision of beneficial play experiences to include training in access and inclusion for disabled children
- Training in play to become a part of standard teacher training, including a baseline gap assessment tool such as that provided by OPAL
- Government ownership of the message that play is not just for the early years stage but for all schoolchild development, learning and wellbeing with guidance provided by Play England to assist schools at the different child age-related developmental stages
- A measurable outcome for physical literacy in pre-school and schools with agreed minimum levels of physical literacy, outdoor learning and play to be mandatory in all school as part of the National Curriculum with outcomes assessed within the Ofsted framework and using agreed criteria that have been consulted on to assess play quality
- Each school to appoint a member of staff as curricular lead for play development and physical coordination skills; PSHE to be a core part of the curriculum
- The Sport England Primary Spaces and Sport Premium programmes to be extended to every school with a broader scope to incorporate a wide variety of physical literacy activities including play
- Introduction of statutory guidelines for a standard minimum amount of time for play during the school day (mandated recess and lunchtime breaks which also allow adequate time for eating meals and snacks)
- Government to encourage the improved provision of time and space for children's play within educational settings, after-school and holiday clubs
- Review the introduction (in consultation and following a pilot scheme) of formal instruction in literacy and numeracy until children reach the age of 7.
- More research is required relating the pre-school based play models to the achievement of significantly higher academic marks
- Require schools to offer informal play opportunities pre and post the school day
- Require schools to open up play spaces and facilities to the community outside of school hours



OUTDOOR AND INDOOR PLAY; BARRIERS AND OPPORTUNITIES

It is important that children should be given the regular opportunity to enjoy healthy and energetic indoor and outdoor activity and the feeling of wellbeing that it brings. The outdoor environment has traditionally offered children much scope to explore their own area, using a range of different spaces such a private spaces (front and back yards, driveways), parks and streets. They did not restrict themselves to the play areas specifically designated as 'theirs', but utilised car parks, paved areas and roads *(Hole, V, 1966 'National Building Studies Research Paper 39: Children's play on housing estates.' London: HMSO)* and pavements, wild and planted areas, walls, fences and access areas.
(Department of Environment, 1973).

More recent research depicts a radical shift in these behaviours. A study based in Sheffield *(Woolley, H. and Griffin, E., 2014 'Decreasing experiences of home range, outdoor spaces, activities and companions: changes across three generations in Sheffield in north England,' Children's Geographies DO1: 10.1080/14733285.2014.952186. between design approach and play value of outdoor play spaces)* has identified the contrasting experience of the free-wheeling grandparent generation, and today's children; generally restricted to visiting a friend a few doors away. Whilst their seniors roamed at will, playing with large groups of friends and sometimes relatives, modern counterparts met only one or two others. A quiet revolution in children's play has occurred and it is unlikely to have been instigated by children who have an inborn urge to push the boundaries and take up challenges. The mainspring of the change to patterns of children's play is adult fear.

The biggest barrier to outdoor play is demonstrably increased levels of road traffic in residential areas. Parental fear of traffic accidents coupled with a reduction in the availability of streets as play space can result in children being conveyed by car to a play area further away *(Tandy, C., 1999, 'Children's Diminishing Play Space: a Study of Intergenerational Change in Children's Use of their Neighbourhoods,' Australian Geographical Studies 37(2): 154-164: Karsten, L., 2005 'It all used to be better? Different generations on continuity and change in urban children's daily use of space,' Children's Geographies 3(3): 275-290).*

In particular, societal fears about child safety have resulted in increased parental over-supervision and as a survey of parental attitudes in 16 countries *(Singer, D.G., Singer, J.L., D'Agostino, H. and Delong, R., 2009, 'Children's pastimes and play in sixteen nations: is free-play declining?' American Journal of Play, Winter 2009: 283-312)* has shown, this is a worldwide issue. Mothers who participated in the survey, from countries across Europe and on four other continents, expressed a reluctance to allow their children to play outside on grounds of burgeoning traffic levels, crime, harassment, violence, the possibility of abduction and even dirt and germs. The world beyond the front door is increasingly viewed as one that is hostile to children, as evinced by a report written for the UK National Trust *(Moss, S., 2012, 'Natural Childhood', National Trust, UK)* containing evidence that the area where children are permitted to range unsupervised around their homes has shrunk by 90% since the 1970s.

An overriding parental fear of stranger danger can mask the potential harm that children may encounter in private spaces *(Valentine, G. and McKendrick, J. 1997, 'Children's outdoor play: Exploring parental concerns about children's safety and the changing nature of childhood experience,' Environment and Behaviour 40(1):111-143).* The fear culture leads to parents making decisions based on an exaggerated perception of risk *(Spilsbury, c., J., 2005, 'We don't really get to go out in the front yard' – children's home range and neighbourhood violence,' Children's Geographies 3(1): 79-99)* and is complemented by the view that children are insufficiently competent to negotiate public space and will not recognise danger *(Valentine, G., 1997, "Oh yes I can." "Oh no you can't": children and parents' understandings of kids' competence to negotiate public space safely,' Antipode 29(1): 65-89).* The fear is further augmented by the effect of high profile stories in the media featuring abduction *(Spilsbury, 2005)* and the elements combine to entrench the barriers to outdoor play for 21st century children.

A further factor is societal pressure to maximise children's opportunities to succeed, leading to an increase in parental over-scheduling of them and intensive parenting where they are constantly supervised *(Bussoni, M., Olsen, L. L., Pike, I., & Sleet, D.A., 2012, 'Risky play and children's safety:*

Balancing priorities for optimal child development,' International journal of environmental research and public health, 9(9), 3134-3148).

As a consequence, children's opportunities to engage in outdoor and risky play have been further impeded and many urban playgrounds are invariably neat and tidy, supplying playful options that are neither properly challenging nor exciting. The momentum of the 'Kit Fence Carpet' style of playground (Woolley, H 2007 'Where do the children play? How policies can influence practice,' Municipal Engineer vol,160 pp.89-95) with its recognisable, fenced-in fixed play equipment on brightly coloured rubber surfacing has served to separate children from natural elements with their attendant playful possibilities and provides limited play opportunities (Woolley, H & Lowe, A 2013 'Exploring the Relationship between design approach and play value of outdoor play spaces,' Landscape Research, vol.28, no. 1,pp.53-74, DOI:10.1080/01426397.2011.640 432).

The growth in this type of playground was driven largely by Local Authorities, who commissioned such play areas as they were seen as easy to maintain, safe, secure and with long life spans, and therefore cost effective.

All these changes have been made in name of child safety and protection, but are in fact exposing children to negative outcomes in terms of their development and learning. In addition, there is evidence to show that injuries, especially from long-bone fractures, actually went up when KFC sites became the surfacing of choice *(http://recmanagement.com/feature_print.php?fid=201401fe03).*

Risky play involving perhaps rough and tumble, height, speed, playing near potentially dangerous elements such as water, cliffs and exploring alone with the possibility of getting lost gives children a feeling of thrill and excitement and other accompanying benefits to include:

- Risk assessment and mastery leading to a well-grounded sense of risk *(Sandseter, E. B. H., 2009a, 'Risky play and risk management in Norwegian preschools – A qualitative observational study.' Safety Science Monitor, 13(1), 1-12)*
- Management of fear; learning when feelings of fear indicate that behaviour is unsafe; learning to balance feelings of fear and excitement *(Sandseter, E.B.H., 2009b, 'Children's expressions of exhilaration and fear in risky play.' Contemporary Issues in Early Childhood, 10(2), 92-106)*
- A forum within which to test physical skills and hone perceptual-motor capacities *(Fromberg, D. P.., & Bergen, D. (Eds.), 2006, 'Play from birth to twelve: Contexts, perspectives and meanings.' Taylor and Francis)*
- A crucial sense of competence which forms a foundation for the development of healthy self-esteem, self-reliance and resilience in the face of life's stressors.

As such, it is imperative that freely chosen outdoor play, including a healthy component of risk is supported and encouraged in childhood. It is also the child's choice of preference because observations of children engaging in outdoor play as well as collected interview data with young children on their play choices demonstrates that children overwhelmingly prefer play experiences that are developmentally exciting and challenging and gravitate towards higher-risk play equipment *(Little, H., & Eager, D., 2010, 'Risk, challenge and safety: Implications for play quality and playground design.' European Early Childhood Education Research Journal, 18(4), 497-513).*

Outdoor play provides an environment that discourages uniformity and is sensitive to individual learning styles. It complements and enhances all aspects of children's development and learning through its physical and open–ended nature. Governmental championing and furtherance of current effective initiatives would go some way to counter the negative myths about outdoor play and promote its clear benefits to children of all ages. Play England led on delivery of **Get Involved in Play;** a programme which dramatically increased the number of volunteers in support of children's play and accounted for 25% of the volunteers generated by the Cabinet Office Social Action Fund Programme *(http://www.playengland.org.uk/getinvolvedinplay).* Over an eighteen month time span, it was successful in:

- Creating 1.2 million outdoor play opportunities
- Recruiting over 47,000 volunteers, ranging from fundraisers to woodcutters
- Supporting the involvement of over 29,000 young volunteers

- Inspiring 50,000 more people to involve themselves in social action, donating time, money and resources to get more children playing outside more often.

Adventure playgrounds (as mentioned earlier) are part of the mix; providing children with opportunities to engage in risky outdoor play with minimal adult intervention, and other non-profit organisations have also given children and their families a setting within which to experience outdoor, and at times, risky play experiences. The National Trust has an extensive programme of events for children and actively supports their play experiences. For example, its *'50 things to do before you're 11 and three quarters'* publication, suggests many ways in which parents can challenge and support their child to engage safely in risky and outdoor play.

The school setting itself can be a key context within which greater facilitation of risky play can occur. Ideally, schools and early years settings would be encouraged to offer not only facilities for outdoor play but also extended periods of time where children can be outdoors *(Tovey, H., 2010, 'Playing on the edge: Perceptions of risk and danger in outdoor play'. In P. Broadhead, J. Howard & E. Woods (Eds.), 'Play and Learning in the Early Years.' London: Sage)*. 'Forest Schools' use outdoor play and risk daily to support children's education. Their foremost aim is to enable children to freely experience and play in the natural outdoor environment and by so doing, foster the growth of self-esteem, self-confidence and self-reliance (Maynard, T., 2007, *'Forest Schools in Great Britain: an initial exploration', Contemporary issues in early childhood, 8(4), 320-331)*. There are other ways in which risky outdoor play can be promoted, such as the Derbyshire Young Adventurer of the Year awards, run by The University of Derby:

'Adventures don't have to take place in far-flung parts of the world. Derbyshire has it all right on the doorstep, campsites, trails, lakes, footpaths and youth hostels. The Young Adventurer Awards are the perfect opportunity to recognise the skill, leadership, confidence and determination of Derbyshire's young people. … there are inevitably, trips and falls, scrapes and tired legs. We get lost and find our way again. These are memorable times,' 'The Derby Telegraph', 14th July, 2015).

However, not all play occurs in outdoor settings and play indoors both at home and in school has also been subject to some striking and detrimental misconceptions. Unfortunately, by the time they have reached Key Stage I and Key Stage 2, some children think that play (especially of an imaginative nature) has nothing to do with school as it can only happen in sport or some other 'outside the classroom' activity.

They might be all too familiar with a teacher's assurance that they can play only after they have finished their 'work' – as if play by nature, was frivolous, inconsequential, a bit of light relaxation and meriting none of the seriousness of 'work'. Teachers might think that their professional obligation to deliver the curriculum is only possible via direct teaching. Here, the classroom environment itself can be stifling and inhibiting, serving to militate against the very best of intentions. A room that is over-cluttered with furniture presupposes hours of sitting down with paper and pencil but interminable wall displays can also be counter-productive, emphasizing finished products rather than processes and questions.

Even in the early years, resources might not be open-ended. Manufactured play products can enhance learning, understanding and development or they can hinder it and the best play items of any type are those that encourage the child to lead the narrative and tell the story. Natural items offer complete flexibility and the best ones create a world of possibility for the child to direct play with the adult taking on the role of enabler/supplier/observer. Unfortunately, play as a central part of classroom activity has poor status. The 2013 version of the National Curriculum only name-checks one type of play (role play) in its non-statutory guidelines for teaching reading comprehension in KS1 *(DfE, 2013)*.

There are some clear wins for supplying toys in the school classroom, including:

- Links with the school and home environment for insecure new starters
- Icebreakers to engender new relationships
- Use as part of role playing (provided that it is not sole purpose)
- A companion, (ideally for a limited time) until the child is able to make use of well-designed social situations/ school environments to begin building relationship skills
- Statement to peers such as 'We like the same things' or 'we share similar status'
- Developing a sense of responsibility
- Encouraging sharing, though they could equally trigger jealousy or conflict (itself a learning opportunity and a resolution of it is an important part of social and emotional development. It should not be seen as a negative)
- Collectable and card games enabling more advanced social and emotional development if managed by staff in the right manner; this tends to work best with older, more mature pupils who have already developed their personal skills sufficient to manage basic feelings/ emotions
- Use for therapeutic interventions and to support different styles of learning

There will be some children in the classroom who have special needs or rarely experience the possibilities of indoor play at home, which might include board games or at-themed activities. This is a Personal, Social, Health, Citizenship and Economic Education (PSHCEE - a planned programme of learning through which children and young people acquire the knowledge, understanding and skills they need to manage their lives, now and in the future) issue, not a play issue and the toys are used as tools which form part of a programme including pastoral support.

There is evidence that play is important in physical, cognitive, emotional and social development. The infant and later toddler learns that the caregiver (therefore the outdoor world) is ready to respond and engage and that it is safe to explore and experiment. It is an enormous step when a child engages in symbolic play and pretends that a spoon, for example, is now a car. This development is not confined to young children. Higher order reflective thinking is also dependent on emotional experiences that arise in nurturing relationships with teachers and peers *(Shanker, S., 2003, 'The Vital Role of Emotion in Education'. In Olfman, Sh. (ed), 'All Work and No Play,' Westport, Connecticut: Praeger).*

It would be desirable for all teachers to spend less time on the didactic 'delivery of the curriculum' and more time interacting playfully with children, thus becoming more attuned perhaps to the needs of those pupils whose early life had not been based upon secure attachment. Advocates of relational pedagogy (Froebel, Steiner, Montessori and the Reggio Emilia school) avow that a respectful and learning relationship between teachers and learners depends upon how well the teachers know the learners and also themselves. Engaging in play with all its uncertainty is the ideal way to create this atmosphere but there is rarely an opportunity in teacher training to develop playfulness and creativity and still less are such traits recognised, appreciated and part of the inspection process.

Integrating play opportunities within the classroom experience has been shown to be a significant factor in healthy child development:

'Decades of empirical research has established that children's imaginative play is a valuable resource for their social, emotional, cognitive and language development' (Singer et al, 2003).

Yet despite studies such as that of Whitebread and Jameson *('Play Beyond the Foundation Stage: Storytelling, Creative Writing and Self-Regulation in Abler 6-7 year Olds'. In Moyles, J. (ed), 'The Excellence of Play' 3rd ed. Maidenhead, Berkshire: Open University Press)* showing that a 10 minute play intervention improved storytelling, creative writing and self regulation, there is little encouragement and directive for teachers to introduce play into their teaching. Schools such as N. Walsham Junior Infant & Nursery now ensure outdoor play and learning (OPAL) lessons are part of the weekly curriculum throughout the year.

Whilst play may have been squeezed out of the classroom, there can be at least as many barriers to it inside the child's home. Children's lives may be determinedly over-scheduled; homework takes up a chunk of time, there might not be

enough space in an overcrowded home, parents might believe that they cannot afford the expensive toys that they have been persuaded are 'essential' for children's play, children's activities may be focused upon various screen-based activities to the exclusion of imaginative play and worried and stressed parents may be unable to facilitate a playful atmosphere or even tolerate one.

There are many opportunities for children to benefit from both indoor and outdoor play at home, in school and in the community, but currently barriers are frustrating progress and ultimately inhibiting child development. A culture of insecurity compounds an over-emphasis on adult-led activity that can be narrowly didactic such as providing extra supervised compulsory sports in break time or sitting children in front of a screen to 'occupy' them instead of enabling them to be creative. Parents and teachers need support and guidance in how to provide an environment that encourages play for its own sake and opens up the world to children with children themselves directing outcomes. Unless future generations are to experience the detrimental effects of the demise of children's play, it is time to redress the balance.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- Support provision for children to experience risk and challenge and develop resilience and self-reliance through play, both in their communities and in schools
- Encourage the use of natural materials in playground design and support the development of adventure playgrounds; train school staff to recognise the elements of good design
- Support the Forest School movement and other initiatives to take urban children into rural settings and likewise, through improved training and design, bring the 'rural' play environment into urban schools
- Ensure that every indoor play environment does not take a 'tick box' approach to compliance with standards. Each site should be able to demonstrate how children may benefit from encountering the facility
- Training and guidance documents on indoor play for use by teachers, play supervisors (and perhaps through media campaigns) for parents in a non-patronising and informative manner
- Provide clear communication to parents of the benefits of play in and around the home and how to facilitate it

EDUCATIONAL LEARNING THROUGH PLAY BOTH PRE-SCHOOL AND IN-SCHOOL TO INCLUDE AN EXPLORATION OF THE ROLE AND PLACE OF MODERN TECHNOLOGY IN CHILD PLAY IN HOME AND SCHOOL SETTINGS

Play is central for children's cognitive development and learning. All types of physical, constructional and social play contribute to their self-management or self-regulation and a growing body of research evidence has demonstrated that these skills predict educational achievement, emotional wellbeing and life outcomes more powerfully than any other aspects of learning *(Whitebread, D. & Coltman, P., 20122 'Developing young children as self-regulated learners.' In Moyles, J., Georgeson, J. & Payler, J. (Eds) 'Beginning Teaching: Beginning Learning: In Early Years and Primary Education.' Maidenhead: Open University Press)*.

A recent major US longitudinal study *(McClelland, M. M., Acock, A. C., Piccinin, A., Rhea, S. A., & Stallings, M. C., 2013 'Relations between preschool attention span-persistence and age 25 educational outcomes', Early Childhood Research Quarterly, 28(2), 314-324)* found that attention span or persistence in children aged 4 significantly predicted their maths and reading skills at age 21 as well as the likelihood of them completing college by age 25. The majority of this relationship was direct and was not significantly mediated by maths or reading skills at age 7, highlighting the key role of regular play for later educational attainment and learning.

Some neuroscientific studies have supported the concept of play as a central mechanism in learning. Pellis & Pellis *(S. & V., 2009 'The Playful Brain: Venturing to the limits of neuroscience,' Oxford, UK: One World Publications)* have reviewed many studies showing that playful behaviour leads to synaptic growth, especially in the front cortex (the section of the brain responsible for all the uniquely human higher mental functions). This has lent further endorsement to a range of experimental psychology studies that have consistently demonstrated the superior learning and motivation arising from playful as opposed to instructional approaches to children's learning. In play contexts with adult support, known as 'guided play', children's performance has been shown to match or even outstrip that of children who have experienced direct instruction *(Hirsh-Pasek, K., Golinkoff, R., Berk, L. & Singer, D. 2009 'A mandate for playful learning in preschool: Presenting the evidence,' New York, NY: Oxford University Press)*.

However, some writers advise caution about what constitutes 'play' in an educational setting. David Elkind ('The Power of Play: learning what comes naturally', 2008) argues that the important role of free play in physical and psychological wellbeing has been disregarded in many areas:

'School administrators and teachers- often backed by goal-orientated politicians and parents – broadcast the not-so-suitable message that these days, play seems superfluous, that at bottom, play is for slackers, that if kids must play, they should at least learn something while they are doing it.'

This line of thought finds echo in the findings of Maria Oksnes *('The carnival goes on and on. Children's perception of their leisure time and play in SFO', Leisure Studies, vol 27, issue 2, Taylor Francis, 2008)* arising from research with a group of children in Norway in which she analyses children's own perceptions of play in relation to a 'spare time programme' which provided provision for them before and after school. Oksnes conducted focus groups with children aged 7 and 8 and observed their play in the programme over a three week time schedule. From the data collected, it became evident that the children's own definition of 'play' was ambiguous and there was ultimately no agreement over what was meant by it. There was a general consensus that leisure time is associated with playing, freedom and the ability to do as they wish under their own direction, rather than an activity that is compulsory and under adult control. For this reason (and despite the children's enjoyment of the programme) they viewed neither school time nor the spare time programme as leisure

time. Rather, the programme provided a safe alternative for them to go to while their parents worked full time. These findings suggest that although children can and do enjoy organised activity, they do not necessarily regard it as 'leisure time' or 'free time'. Oksnes argues that providing an opportunity for free, unstructured play is important, even if children have access to more formal recreational activities.

More recently, she has drawn on theoretical work to discuss the role of play in children's lives and described play and leisure time as 'instrumentalised' (2008) in the sense that it is purely viewed as a means of learning rather than something to be enjoyed for its own sake. This it is claimed, caused the development of 'good' or 'correct' forms of play that contribute towards children's academia or prepare them with life skills, rather than simply playing for enjoyment. Mayall (2000) uses the term 'scholarisation of childhood' to describe the idea that academic learning has crossed into all aspects of children's lives *(http:www.maketime2play.co.uk/wp-content/uploads2015/01/AWORLDWITHOUTPLAY-a-literature-review.pdf).*

Whilst the role of play (whether directed or free) in children's learning is certainly not a new concept, the increasing reliance on technology in daily life has introduced a component into the world of play that was not available to earlier generations. Introducing Information and Computer Technology (ICT) into early years and primary settings and ensuring technological literacy for young children is vital *(Barr, V., & Stephenson, C, 2011 'Bringing computational thinking to K-12: what is involved and what is the role of the computer science education community?' ACM inroads, 2(1), 48-54)* but technology in early years and primary school settings should fit in with the ways that children learn best, rather than dictating the manner in which they are taught. In the home too, parents need help in selecting 'tech toys' that will fit into a balanced diet of play and foster imagination and creativity rather than encourage an overload of sedentary and repetitive screen-time.

Some of the things that parents should look for when making a tech toy choice include:

- Toys and apps from trusted brands developed with or by educational experts
- Clear and convincing skill descriptions, as well as supporting materials that explain **how** and **why** the toy is educational and what parents can do to extend the learning with their children
- The incorporation of clear learning objectives that are developmentally and age-appropriate with skills presented in ways that are engaging and adapted for each child
- Audio and clear icons for pre-readers.

Whether in school or the home, children need a variety of different technological applications that encourage a broad range of different developmental outcomes, including creativity, self expression and language *(Siraj-Blatchford, I.. and SIraj-Blatchford, J, 2000 'More that Computers: Information and Communications Technology in the Early Years,' London, Early Education: The British Association for Early Childhood Education).* Children need to be able to play with technology and explore it freely which will provide them with a sense of mastery of it as a tool to support their exploration of the world. Importantly, ICT applications should be controlled by the child and allow children some autonomy over the course of the programme, thus nurturing self-expression as they explore the virtual world freely. Studies in the UK *(Siraj-Blatchford, J. and Whitebread, D, 2003, 'Supporting Information and Communication Technology in the Early Years.' Buckingham: Open University Press)* have shown that well-designed computer games offering open-ended or problem-solving challenges to children are likely to share the same benefits of problem-solving or constructional play with objects. Other skills that can be developed include pro-social play and vocabulary.

Children frequently play with technology on their own, but modern technology in the classroom or at home should have the facility to support collaboration between children themselves and children and teachers/parents. Children can play together at the same time, in a turn-taking manner and to either compete or work towards a common goal. The best multi-player games offer the opportunity for children of different ages and curricular levels to play together with tailored curriculum for the individual children as appropriate. Many technology-based applications support pretend and imaginative play so instead of using physical props, such as dressing-up clothes and household objects, children can work together to draw and create imaginative scenarios or characters on the screen. Neither does technological play mean play of a purely sedentary nature. 'Wearable' technology can support children in being active and playing outside with friends. LeapFrog Toys have developed a device of this type called a 'Leapband' that has helped to enable children to express themselves physically and move through pretend play as they press an activity button and receive responsive prompts such as *'wiggle like a worm'* or *'pop like a popcorn'.* Schools should offer children both play options; technology play indoors and outdoors and dressing up and loose parts play. These choices should be offered from early years' settings right through to Year 6.

Finally, in order to participate fully in their social and economic spheres as the adults they will become, it is imperative that children learn and become familiar with technology from an early age and that, through play, learning specific skills concerning ICT is introduced. A recent initiative whereby programming skills are now integrated into the curriculum is a good example of the rising emphasis of programming skills and computer science in primary and secondary school *(Dredge, S. 2014, and 4th September. 'Coding at school: A parent's guide to England's new computing curriculum. 'The Guardian').*

At a primary school level, understanding computer programming provides children with a forum to hone skills in literacy and numeracy and, crucially, think logically about novel solutions to problems. At home and in school, tech toys can be of great value if they are used as opportunities to support and enhance other activities and provided they are developmentally appropriate, aligned with goals and learning objectives set by parents and teachers and easy for adults as well as children to implement and use.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- Initial teacher training programmes to include playful learning using technology
- Playful learning to be a key indicator in quality assessments of early years and primary classrooms
- CPD for teachers in teaching through playful means with a focus on integrating technology into the classroom
- Advice/assistance for parents to be provided by Government and made available online and in appropriate settings (children's centres, health centres etc) on criteria for selecting 'tech toys' and how to incorporate them constructively into children's play

ASSISTANCE/GUIDANCE FOR FAMILIES IN FACILITATING A RICH AND STIMULATING PLAY ENVIRONMENT FOR CHILDREN BOTH WITHIN AND OUTSIDE THE HOME

If children in every setting are to experience the best possible start in life, all the services that they encounter must be delivered in partnership with their parents and families. Studies continue to show that many parents remain unaware of how important their own role is in their children's learning and a number of barriers can get in the way of them creating rich play environments. These range from work pressures and patterns to family responsibilities (having children of varying ages), inappropriate knowledge of child development and simply not understanding how they can make a difference through play. Here, access to information and effective interventions from professionals can increase parents' confidence in playing with their children in and outside the home. The influence of the home is *'enduring, pervasive and direct' (Desforges with Aboucher', 2003)* and while teachers and the early years workforce may accrue a wealth of expertise in how young children learn and how each child operates, unless there is a sharing of information between them and parents, a child's learning needs will be neither fully understood, nor met.

The first step is for practitioners themselves to have a secure understanding of the five key types of play identified as physical, play with objects, symbolic, pretence/socio-dramatic and games with rules *(Whitebread, D., 2012, 'Play, learning and development', in D. Whitebread (Ed.) 'Developmental psychology and early childhood education; a guide for students and practitioners, London UK: Sage)* so that they are fully equipped to offer support to parents. Adults can and should participate with their children during play experiences but the play must be essentially child-directed. This concept is perhaps particularly hard for the parents of today (aged 20-40) to grasp after growing up whilst being constantly exposed to poor childhood play. The same applies to today's teachers and supervisors. The most successful experiences are ones in which the adult is open and willing to 'go with the flow' while providing an environment that is warm and responsive to a child's interactive signals. Engaging with children in this way is of course, enjoyable in its own right but has also been shown to have crucial implications for later school readiness and language abilities, over and above any impact of socio-economic status *(Hughes, C., Daly, I., Foley, S., White, N., & Devine, R. T., 2015 'Measuring the foundations of school readiness: Introducing a new questionnaire for teachers – The Brief Early Skills and Support Index', (BESSI). British Journal of Educational Psychology.')*.

In play, children learn how and when to express or control their own emotions. 'Rough and tumble' is probably the most fundamental form of physical and active play in childhood and includes activities such as running, chasing and play wrestling. Even play-fighting requires a good deal of self-control and restraint, serving as practice for exercising restraint in more serious contexts, but unless parents and other adults are supported to recognise it, they may misinterpret and label a child as 'aggressive' simply because he or she prefers a particular type of play. It is important to look out for signs that children who are play fighting are having fun and that the 'fight' is equal. If one child looks as if they are being overpowered and not enjoying the play, it may have gone too far, but normally children pick up clues from each other about how and when to stop and will tell each other when they have had enough.

A 'Play Diet' pyramid can show parents how to understand the benefits of giving children access to a wide range of play opportunities *(Gummer, A., 2015, 'Play: Fun ways to help your child develop in the first five years.' Vermilion)*. The concept is a useful tool by which to demonstrate the relative value of various play activities and distinguishes between, for example, playing on video games consoles and imaginative free play. It is equally important to support parents' confidence in their own ability to provide an energising and playful environment Children copy most from those to whom they are most closely attached

and will be alert to signals that 'playing with the children' is a chore. Almost any environment can facilitate play, but a playful physical environment can encourage and extend it. Parents need advice both on how to maintain their own playfulness and how best to facilitate children's play both inside and outside the home.

When children are older, their parents should encourage them to be autonomous and independent in their play. The importance of this has been highlighted in a recent study *(Barker, J. E., Semenov, A. D., Michaelson, L., Provan, L.S., Snyder, H. R., & Munakata, Y., 2014, 'Less-structured time in children's daily lives predicts self-directed executive functioning.' Developmental Psychology, 5,593. http:/doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2014.00593)* and demonstrates that the more unstructured time children had including both indoor and outdoor unsupervised free play and family excursions to the seaside, museums etc., the better their executive functioning – a cognitive skill that supports planning and decision - making, memory and academic achievement. Current, largely unfounded, societal fears about child safety have resulted in increased parental over-supervision serving to curtail children's opportunities to engage in independent play and creating ills of a different nature:

'Was it so clever of us to eradicate all risk from our children's lives so that now the only place for them to truly go wild is on the internet? The irony is that, while parents strain every sinew to keep their children safe from damage, that safety itself is stifling the development of children.' 'The Spectator', 27th July 2015).

It will inevitably take time and a concerted effort to shift the prevailing misconception that equates 'outside' with 'danger' but a renewal of interest in adventurous playgrounds, well designed playgrounds of all types and a culture supporting children to play in outdoor environments of all kinds – thus affording children the opportunity to engage in outdoor risky play can serve to show parents a way in which to support this without feeling that they are jeopardising or disregarding their safety. There is undoubtedly a role for public play facilities to have risk and challenge built in to the provision.

An important principle for parents to keep at the forefront is for the play environment and the materials within it to be as open-ended and flexible as possible so that children are not constrained and can use their natural creativity to explore and invent different play activities. Many parents today feel pressurised to indulge in 'tiger parenting'; a perceived need to keep their children busy rather than creating their own fun. Another negative influence is 'pester power', resulting in the purchase of costly toys advertised on television and played with for a short time before being discarded. Play does not have to be expensive and need not necessitate financial outlay on the latest toy fads or expensive equipment. Many household items can be appropriated by children and incorporated into their play. For example, in socio-dramatic play, adults can actively support young children by supplying a range of 'props' such as dressing up materials to stimulate imaginative and creative activities. Play involving small toys and craft materials can encourage fine motor skill development and parents can also make 'everyday' experiences playful, for example, providing their child with opportunities to help with the cooking or gardening.

With respect to physical play a wide range of environmental features and materials, many of which cost nothing can support children to challenge themselves physically. Outdoor space provides a wealth of opportunity for running; large natural structures such as mounds, slopes, bushes, trees, rocks and logs can be climbed and used for balancing and swinging. By modelling active behaviour themselves, parents can help children to enjoy their bodies and what they can do. This should not make adults feel the pressure to 'perform' and 'succeed' in the manner of an Olympic athlete; the emphasis is rather that being active is fun, increases confidence and enables people to understand their bodies and connect with other people. These principles apply to parents whose children are under five – and are equally applicable throughout childhood. Also, the issue of whether to allow children freedom to leave the home and play elsewhere is an extremely serious one and children in other countries are allowed much greater freedom at a much younger age than in the UK, even though the traffic and other safety issues are the same. Lenore Skenazy *(http://www.freerangekids.com/)* amongst others has suggested that this is partly why children in some other countries are more advanced than UK children in terms of educational ability and other developmental matters.

Parents who are confident in facilitating a playful environment for their children will reap the reward of seeing those children developing the ability to understand and interpret the messages from the world around them – whether at home, school or in the wider community. The skills children learn through play will sustain them throughout the life course and their parents are their first and best teachers – but they need to be able to access help and support to create those rich and diverse play experiences. Assistance is certainly 'out there' in the form of play advice websites such as *www.FundamentallyChildren.com,* organised play sessions within the community, children's centres and toy libraries, but in order to be able to access these, parents first need to know of their existence. Advice and support for parents in the provision of children's play is as essential as offering information about their feeding and should be embedded into ante-natal and pregnancy–preparation programmes as well as early years settings.

Just as helping parents understand how to provide a nutritious diet for their children can set those children on the pathway to fitness and health, supporting them at every stage to provide an environment for those children that is rich and playful 'gives children the opportunity to explore and interact with their world.' (Department of Health, 2009).

RECOMMENDATIONS

- Professional advice on play for parents and prospective parents to be embedded into ante-natal and pre-pregnancy preparation
- Government support for funding agencies that promote play and play research
- Statutory framework limiting the amount of homework tasks given to primary school students to support more family time at home
- Local authorities to signpost and support parenting initiatives in the community that promote the importance of families having fun and playing together
- Local authorities to encourage and support facilities such as toy-libraries, community centres and play parks to foster parent-child play



PLAY AND THE PLANNING SYSTEM

In 1968, Lady Allen of Hurtwood, the first Fellow of the Institute of Landscape Architects (now the Landscape Institute) identified the main challenges appertaining to children's outdoor environments. She raised the lack of understanding of the range and variety of outdoor spaces that children might play in, limits to the legislation that support children's outdoor environments, the knowledge-base of planners, funding for the development of outdoor spaces in housing developments, a lack of revenue funding to maintain outdoor spaces and the need for cross professional working of architects, landscape architects, planners, engineers and clients to support children's out door environments *(Hurtwood, Lady A, 1968, 'Planning for play'. London: Thames and Hudson)*. Many of these challenges remain relevant today.

The Labour Government of 1997-2010 addressed some of the issues and in the green space sector, the Urban Green Spaces Taskforce led to the establishment of CABE Space and the development of green and open space strategies where managers of green spaces and playgrounds were encouraged to collaborate with planners to identify current assets, needs and possible future provision. Big Lottery funding was used to establish Play England which to some extent worked with CABE Space in the development of play strategies. The Government funded the Pathfinder Play Builder programme and invested £235 million into a refurbishment of existing playgrounds and the development of new ones together with adventure playgrounds in Play Pathfinder local authorities. The Play Shaper programme, led by Play England, provided training for a range of built environment professionals, local authority staff and police and could be built upon in a revised programme.

The principle underpinning the protection and development of space for children's play and the necessity of strategic planning for it was initially established by the first Mayor of London in 2004 as a policy within the London Plan (the region's over-arching spatial development strategy). It was retained by the current Mayor and the elevation of children's play within planning policy so that crosscutting play strategies were linked to the open space strategies that inform Local Development Frameworks was adopted by the national government. Some local authorities were inspired to emulate the London approach and prepare area-wide play strategies based on audits of existing provision and a prioritisation of further improvement plans in order to achieve the right balance of staffed play provision, unsupervised play areas, playable public space and after-school play centres. However, the election of the Coalition Government in 2010 brought with it the demise of CABE Space as an independent body (with a remnant being embedded in the Design Council) and Play England receiving only short-term funding associated with specific projects. The planning policy guidance notes, including PPG17, (Revised National Planning Guidance for Open and Recreational Space) were abandoned and replaced by the National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF). There is now speculation about what the recently elected Conservative Government's approach to the planning side of children's play provision might be.

The NPPF was emblematic of the 'big society' agenda and to some extent can be regarded as very democratic because it provides for communities to make decisions about planning issues. Yet these ideas were already being voiced in some Conservative circles prior to the Hilton/Cameron big society unveiling. As far back as 2002, referring to the dehumanising effects of poor quality neighbourhoods and their role in fostering criminal activity, the then Shadow Home Secretary, Oliver Letwin, spoke about how society should nurture and cultivate its opposite, which he called 'civic' society:

'At its simplest, this means making neighbourhoods safe for children to play in. More trusting than adults, children may be the first to recolonise the shared spaces of safer neighbourhoods. But then parents may gather round their playing children and start chatting among themselves, perhaps keeping an eye on each other's children… This is the start of community'. It is also how communities used to work in years gone by.

The principle of NPPF is therefore laudable, but there are issues concerning its future roll out. Questions which the approach raises include:

- Who is responsible for developing these neighbourhood plans?
- How does a local authority (responsible for approving the boundaries) ensure that an area is not left out of a plan as more neighbourhood plans develop in an area?

- Who is being involved in the development of a neighbourhood plan?
- What happens if nobody wants housing in their area? (the lack of a strategic or regional plan may result in significant difficulties with allocation of land for housing)
- Are children involved in the development of neighbourhood plans and if so, how?
- Are schools being engaged in the process of developing neighbourhood plans?

Listening to the opinions of children is a right enshrined in the UN CRC, but working with children (as with any community) is more about extending aspirations; helping them to become aware of what can happen in, and be provided and managed in, outdoor environments rather than confirming them in their present knowledge. They might not know, for example that they can have play spaces and playful landscapes rather than playgrounds. They may not be aware that they can have home zones, play streets, safe routes to school, better quality green spaces and urban parks; neither may they understand their merits if they have never experienced a good example of them. A good approach is to quietly observe what happens after the work is done; when children are playing in the space – and learn from this for future schemes.

Another issue that is virtually ignored by current planners is children's transport because their walking, cycling and scootering is not regarded as 'journeys'. When carrying out research for the Joseph Rowntree Foundation, Wheway and Millward *('Child's Play: Facilitating play on housing estates' Wheway R& Dr Alison Millward, 1997 , reprint, 98 , Chartered Institute of Housing and Joseph Rowntree Foundation)* estimated that on an estate with a population of 100 children, if only half were allowed to play out, that would still make a total of 281,000 journeys per annum. The three most important factors in where children play are all to do with location. Can they get there safely? Can they see and be seen by a trusted adult? Is the location a place where there is a strong possibility that they will meet other people in the community and not just children? Research has found that where play places fulfil these three criteria, they are likelier to be used and less likely to be vandalised than areas that do not satisfy those criteria. Children's transport should be a central consideration in any planning decision-making about children's play; concentrating upon the short journeys that children will make in their neighbourhood rather than solely prioritising as so often in the past, matters such as subsidised bus and train transport.

Current housing and house building is also a key issue. There is a widely acknowledged consensus around the need to build many more houses but this recognition should go hand in hand with a concerted effort to inform and educate housing developers about the importance of play in the outdoor environment and that such provision should prioritise playful landscapes in which houses and other facilities are set. Many existing housing areas have poor quality external environments with forgotten spaces that do not serve the needs of children and the wider community well. A project called Living with Nature has worked with 24 social housing areas across the the city of Sheffield to support the communities to use forgotten green and play spaces. The project ended in 2014 but some of the communities now organise their own annual sports days, dog shows, and fun events annually. Many of the activities devised include play opportunities for children and many of the play spaces have been improved in quality so that they now offer children better play opportunities and increased contact with nature. However, sadly such initiatives are not the norm and today 'no ball games' signs still proliferate in many housing areas.

The current public sector procurement practice is also acting as a drag on children's outdoor play and is failing them and their local communities. UK public procurement practice is 90% more expensive than the European average, taking 53 days longer *(http://www.gatewit.com/en/content/show/id/857).* Members of the Association of Play Industries (API) have reported tenders inviting submissions from over 10 contractors. The idea that inviting large numbers of contractors to bid for work is good practice and is the best way of proceeding is erroneous and this flawed procurement culture can actually devalue play by encouraging less reputable companies to engage in the process, cutting corners on quality, standards, materials and safety in order to deliver cheaper deals. The rationale for the original

tender – the provision of high quality play spaces that meet local need is then obscured. As play is a developmental issue, the API would urge the new government to take the responsibility for decision–making about local play provision away from procurement departments and place them firmly with local child development experts in the local authority. Ideally, these decisions would be made by Parks and Planning staff (and Housing Officers where appropriate) who have been properly trained to know how to evaluate a play design before commissioning one. Not all local authorities will have dedicated child development staff, as they tend to exist in unitary and country councils, not the district councils where the open spaces are typically managed. Additional guidance and education is also needed for architects and local planners who are responsible for building the new academy schools. New guidance for architects with play at the centre will enable the creating of public spaces and school settings in which good quality play can take place. In a new build school, the exterior is usually left until last, when all the plans have been completed and the money has all been allocated. This is an afterthought of the worst kind.

In conclusion, to support fundamental alterations in matters of planning that will encourage and enable play for the benefit of children and the empowerment of local communities, a change in the culture of society about children in outdoor environments is urgently required. The lobbying of housing providers, planners, architects, landscape architects, highway engineers, managers of existing housing is essential as well as information campaigns aimed at parents in new and existing housing, teachers and head teachers (to encourage walking to school and more community use of school playgrounds) and relevant officials with play delivery responsibility in local authorities.

The current dominant concept remains the depressing maxim that children should continue to be seen but not heard. This needs to be addressed, challenged and changed to afford children their right to play out and explore the environment in their local neighbourhoods.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- Timely, straightforward and trustworthy information and advice to be provided to professionals and families about enabling outdoor play and creating an outdoor environment to facilitate it
- Training for professionals such as planners, landscape architects, architects, engineers, housing developers and housing managers to help them develop an understanding of the importance of play in the outdoor environment and how to plan, design and manage for it
- Local Authorities to devise Healthy Lifestyle Plans covering changes to planning policy guidelines, including provision, maintenance and opening of parks, creating, widening and signposting access to walking and cycling routes, giving greater priority to applications for floodlighting sports faculties and proposals for providing sports and leisure facilities and transport links to them
- An assessment of children's transport to be central to planning decisions in the community including the provision of new housing
- A change to current public sector procurement practice, placing this within the remit of local authority child development experts and restricting invitations to tender to a maximum of three bidders

PLAY AND THE EVALUATION OF RISK AND SAFETY

It is the responsibility of parents, society and government to protect children from undue harm but this should not entail eliminating all risk. There is also a duty on parents and 'teachers' of all kinds to prepare children for adulthood, which includes ensuring that they experience a series of measured, intended 'teaching risks' so that they might learn important lessons from each experience and therefore be better equipped when ultimately faced with a serious risk at work, when crossing the road, when driving and when called upon to protect the public. Parents, teachers and play providers can be ultra-cautious of risk in play, due to fear of harm to the child and also a dread of potential legal consequences. Research shows, however, that perceived danger in play may be excessive in comparison to the actual figures.

Dr Mark Tremblay, the Chief Scientific Officer of the ParticipACTION Report Card in Canada assesses the prevailing climate of opinion in this way:

'We have lost the balance between short-term safety and long-term health….what many adults recall from their childhood as thrilling and exciting play that test boundaries – such as exploring the woods, rough housing, moving fast or playing at heights – is often called risky play these days. While these activities could lead to injuries, the vast majority are minor,' (http://blog.participation.com/en/its-time-to-let-kids-scrape-a-knee-2015-participation-report-card/).

The essence of Dr Tremblay's words finds an echo in advice given by the UK Health and Safety Executive:

'Play is great for children's wellbeing and development. When planning and providing play opportunities, the goal is not to eliminate risk, but to weigh up the risks and benefits. No child will learn about risk if they are wrapped in cotton wool.' (Health and Safety Executive, 2012, 'Children's play and leisure- promoting a balanced approach'.)

Yet parents, teachers and play providers need encouragement to allow children to take age-appropriate risks. There is a need to correct current misperceptions such as a simplistic equation of risk with danger (hazard). Danger from a hazard, such as a frozen lake or from a moving swing at head height is different from the promotion of intended, risky, challenging play experiences that might afford positive learning experiences for children. Risky play could include physical tests of ability and mental challenges of determination or imagination, but might also include situations such as a child attempting to make a new friend, and, in so doing, chancing rebuff, rebuttal and the consequent injury to feelings.

Parental/teacher fear of risk is often exacerbated by the publicity arising from individual examples of when things go wrong; the effect of which inevitably obscures any rational evaluation of how likely this is to happen. A pertinent instance of this is the knock-on effect of the death of a child at Glenridding Beck in 2002 *(http://www.hse.gov.uk/aala/glenridding-beck-investigation.pdf)* and the consequent prosecution of a teacher. The tragedy led to many schools drawing back from arranging school trips, despite the efforts of the Health and Safety Executive to restore a sense of balance:

'To put the Glenridding tragedy in context, however, it has been estimated that in England there are 7-10 million visits per year which involve educational or recreational activity. The overwhelming majority of these visits are carried out safely and responsibly by teachers who take the time and effort to get things right. The benefits to children of these trips are immense.'

A climate of adult fear is pervasive. Interviews with 70 parents of children aged 8-11 revealed that the vast majority considered that today's children were at greater risk than their forbears *(Valentine, G., 2004 'Public Spaces and the Culture of Childhood.' Aldershot: Ashgate, in Gleave, J. 2008).* Parents also thought that public spaces were more dangerous for children than their homes, contradicting the 2004 NSPCC statistics, showing that greater risks lay in private spaces. By contrast, a series of focus groups conducted with children aged 11-18 in order to investigate the role of wild adventure space for play *(Thompson, C.W., Travlou, P., and Roe, J, 2006 'Free Range Teenagers: The role of wild adventure pace in young people's lives,'*

Edinburgh: OPENspace, in Gleave, J.2008) recorded them stating that the main issue acting as a deterrent from adventurous outdoor activity was the fear expressed by their parents and teachers.

Play providers, schools and communities have similar concerns for safety, prioritising this over enjoyment and developmental learning, due to a settled sense of fear about possible legal action *(Gill T., 'No Fear: Growing up in a risk averse society,' London: Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation , in Gleave, J. 2008)*. These worries are also prevalent in the US and predictably fuelled by media interest, but again, news stories can mislead.

As Susan G Solomon *(http://www.play-scapes.com/play-design/resources/what-does-20m-in-playgropund-injuries-actually-mean? 27th May 2015)* has stated, headlines such as the New York Post's *'City shells out $20M over kids' playground injuries'* warrant further scrutiny. According to Solomon: *'The subtitle, 'Protecting Kids on NYC Playgrounds' does not immediately explain that this is a compilation of personal injury claims brought against the city during the period 2005 – 2014. It covers all of NYC's almost 1,000 playgrounds…… It is heartening that the claims were spread throughout the city. No playground had more than 7 claims in the almost decade long period under review. Fifteen playgrounds had between 4 and 7 claims. The rest had only 1 or 2 actions.'*

Similarly, in the UK, research shows that the risk of playground injuries is very low. Statistics adapted from Ball *(2000b)* demonstrate that less than 10 non-fatal injuries occur for every 100,000 hours that children play in public playgrounds *(Ball, D., Gill, T. and Spiegal, B., 2008, 'Managing Risk in Play Provision': Implementation Guide for Play England; figure 1, p.11)*. Professor David Ball also found that in comparison with the 500-600 child fatalities that occur nationally each year, the data indicates just one playground-related fatality every 3-4 years. Professor Ball has attempted to dissuade people from the negativity of 'how can I make my playground safe?' and encourage them towards the positive 'How can I make my playground into a good experiental opportunity for children and young people?' *(http://davidjball.com/2012/10/children-and-young-peoples-play , 2012)*

Indeed, a failure to provide children with play experiences that are insufficiently risky or challenging may, albeit inadvertently, have outcomes that are potentially hazardous. Children need to learn to make their own risk assessments and manage their own limitations as they grow and develop to ensure that they continue to push their own boundaries. The corollary of a lack of risk is invariably disengagement and boredom. They may then attempt to use play equipment inappropriately to challenge themselves – for example, by climbing onto the roof of a unit if the nets/slides etc are not of a challenging height. This can lead to anti social behaviours or vandalism of play equipment, or even injury to the child if the equipment is not used for its intended purpose.

Highlighting the benefits of activities whilst acknowledging and managing the risk would produce rational assessments of activities and situations. The language used by policy makers and all adults working with children should foster a balanced approach such as using the term 'benefit-risk assessment' in place of 'risk assessment' with its attendant negative connotations. A growing body of opinion supports the importance of allowing children to take risks in play from the premise that they can learn much from these behaviours. Gill *(2007)* argues that children who are granted the opportunity to assess and deal with risks in play can learn important life skills and experience for the real world. It is a stance that is supported by Christensen and Mikkelsen *('Jumping off and being careful: children's strategies of risk management in everyday life.' Sociology of Health and Illness, vol.30, no.1. Pp112-130)* who found that children aged 10-12 demonstrated the ability to evaluate risks, while simultaneously assessing their personal physical abilities and limits. They contend that this process allows children to learn from their own mistakes and develop awareness of their particular limitations. When evaluating the risk and safety of play activity it is important to remember the reason that children are engaging in it. As Ball *(2002)* states:

If the purpose of an activity is not directly considered, then a balance between risk and benefit cannot be struck and one is in danger of considering only one side of the equation.'

Arguably the greatest barrier to balanced benefit-risk assessments of children's play opportunities is the lack of basic professional training available at university and via CPD for teachers and local authority officers, plus a common ignorance about the availability of up to date guidance.

In fact, there is a wealth of information including:

- *'Managing Risk in Play Provision' – Implementation guide, 2008 and updated (MRiPP), The Children's Play Safety Forum:* an invaluable guide used worldwide and endorsed by the Health and Safety Executive (HSE), the Royal Society for the Prevention of Accident (RoSPA), the Institution of Occupational Safety (IOSH) and the API amongst others
- The Risk-Benefit Assessment (RBA) Form; available in two template formats; as a freely available blank form for repeated use by anyone and as a hypothetical worked example based on a tree swing. Commissioned and developed by The Play Safety Forum; as with The MRIPP, co-authored by Ball, Gill and Spiegel
- *'Common Sense, Common Safety' (https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/60905/402906_CommonSense_acc.pdf) ,* submitted by Lord Young to the government in 2010 and endorsed at that time by the Prime Minister
- *'High level statement on children's play' Health and Safety Executive, (http://www.hse.gov.uk/services/education/index.htm).*

In addition, to eliminate the likelihood of hazard in the use of fixed play equipment, regular repair and maintenance is vital as is servicing and replacement of worn out parts and all staff should be fully aware of this. Before opening a new play area of this type, a post-installation inspection should take place, undertaken by a registered, certificated Register of Play Inspectors International (RPII) inspector.

Recognition of the value of risk in play is encapsulated in the Welsh Government's Play Sufficiency Toolkit (2012):

'Children need to feel free to experience risk and challenge of their own volition and they will only be able to do this if we allow some degree of uncertainty to remain.'

Judith Hackitt, Chair of the Health and Safety Executive (HSE) puts it like this:

'Outdoor play and learning is an important part of our children's education….We should all make sure that needless health and safety excuses do not get in the way of activities. Of course take sensible and reasonable precautions, but let young people play.'

For this to occur what is urgently required is clear and positive messaging (initiated by government and disseminated locally and in all health and educational settings) informing parents of the many positive aspects of children's play. If the manifold benefits to their child's learning, wellbeing and development, including improved examination performance are emphasised at the outset then the majority of parents will surely understand the wisdom of a school or local authority exposing their child to the carefully managed and planned, risky play experiences from which he/she will learn. In this way, a lot of the distress, misunderstanding and argument over children acquiring minor injuries in school and elsewhere can be avoided.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- Professional training and CPD in benefit-risk assessment for all teachers, relevant local authority officials and Ofsted inspectors
- Public information initiative to raise professional and parental awareness of the accessibility of advice about benefit-risk assessment as listed above and updated as appropriate
- Policy-makers and people working with children to use the term 'benefit-risk assessment' rather than 'risk assessment ' to promote a rational evaluation of activities and situations
- Government to provide the mechanism whereby the public can challenge questionable decisions obstructing children's play that are made by local authorities or schools which appear to be based on spurious 'health and safety' reasons rather than a competent, knowledge-based benefit-risk assessment.

THE ROLE OF THE MEDIA, ADVERTISING AND THE PLAY INDUSTRY IN THE PROMOTION OF BENEFICIAL CHILDREN'S PLAY

The media in all its forms can be a strong promoter of children's play interests, especially in influencing parents and governments as to the wisdom of letting children play outside for their better health, development and wellbeing. It is easy to suggest that media 'scaremongering' is the definitive factor in leading parents to choose the 'safer' option of allowing their children to stay sedentary at home, playing on a mobile, tablet or computer, and coverage of a school trip accident, or a 'stranger danger' abduction is always going to trigger parental fears. Yet to suggest that the media should not publicise such occurrences is naïve, unrealistic, over-protective and lacking in balance in just the same way as the prevalence of a 'cotton wool' culture that would prevent children straying beyond the garden gate: *(The Daily Telegraph, 2015, 'Cotton wool culture stops children playing',* http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/health/children/9519175/Cotton-wool-culture-stops-children-playing.html)

Life, like play, contains risk and censoring the right to know about it will do nothing to contribute to a fit and healthy society. In any case, there are now encouraging signs that mainstream media outlets are signing up to the child health agenda and acknowledging the central importance of play in achieving positive outcomes. The obesity epidemic, with its attendant consequences to health and burden on the National Health Service might have been presented solely in terms of a stream of weight-blame stories twenty years ago and women (in particular) might have been pointed in the direction of various 'silver bullet' diets (Atkins, Cambridge, High Fibre etc) and celebrity exercise tapes (Green Goddess Diana Moran, Jane Fonda). These fat-fighting strategies look extremely dated now and, usefully, many newspapers and radio/television programmes are looking at the issue in a holistic manner; recognising that the origins of adult obesity are rooted in unsatisfactory childhood patterns of nutrition and activity and that safeguarding the next generation's welfare should start at the ante natal and even pregnancy-planning stage. The importance of play in the healthy development of children has been stressed by 'The Daily Mail':

'Many parents believe an idyllic childhood is one spent outside playing with friends- much like the one they probably had. But it's a different story when it comes to their own children, who are being forced to stay inside over fears for their safety. As a result, the amount of time today's youngsters spend on outdoor activities has slumped in the space of a generation,' (29th March, 2014).

Other Mail articles in recent times have covered the following issues

- The health and developmental benefits of risky play
- Children who play outside having a stronger sense of purpose than those confined to sedentary indoor pursuits
- Playing outside boosting the academic performance of children
- Children who stay inside missing out on the benefits of engaging in traditional outdoor play games
- Children who play outside having better eyesight than those who stay predominantly inside

All of these themes are the subject of academic papers and are supported by evidential research; they present some extremely important beneficial effects of play – especially the key finding that children playing outside are likely to have better eyesight - the problem is that few parents will ever read them. They are far more likely to come across articles on such topics in an accessible form in popular newspapers and therefore those whose policy interest is to promote child health and wellbeing should start from a premise of working **with** constructive media outlets on the message, rather than focusing narrowly on the incidence every now and then, on stories that can be interpreted as 'scaremongering'. Parents obviously access information from many and varied sources but responsible newspaper articles should not be dismissed. They can play a constructive role.

Social media also has a significant and increasing role in the promotion of positive play messages; stimulating interest and providing opportunities for people to come together around an idea. One such site is 'Playing Out' *(http://playingout.net/).* Introductory information lists its purpose as being 'a resource for everyone who wants children to be able to play out in the street where they live' and the contents include a mix of playing outside ideas, examples of good practice, a lively blog and personal experience. Another user-friendly site of a similar nature is 'Pop up Play' *(https://popupadventureplaygrounds.wordpress.com/).*

There is perhaps a slight difficulty in describing 'play', as much depends on which type of play is being considered. Play with toys has some commonality with play on fixed manufactured equipment but also many differences. Likewise, play provision for children in a primary or secondary school will have different requirements from play in pre-school or commercial Early Years settings. All these differences can easily become muddled in the media by those not familiar with the more technical aspects of children's play.

Advertisers could do much to promote a more positive image of play, but there will be some inevitable clashes between the commercial self-interests of advertising companies and the greater good. Sponsorship of play organisations or events (and possibly play facilities/playgrounds) can be a positive tool, but will always depend upon the willingness of the sponsor to put the interests of children ahead of their particular marketing strategy. For successful campaigns, advertising needs to continue to carefully target appropriate audiences to ensure that the intended recipients are receiving the correct messaging about beneficial children's play. Two specific targets must be:

- Parents: advertising should encourage them to enable their children to go outside to play and embrace 'the great outdoors' rather than fretting about a child grazing their knee
- Children: the emphasis should be on shifting their attitude from staying inside and playing on Ipads, mobile phones and video games to heading outside to play and thus creating their own adventures. Good tech/apps can support this approach.

Advertising is an extremely powerful tool and so it is important to ensure that the messaging and branding reflect this accordingly. Advertising outlets also need to be carefully considered to ensure that the right messaging is being heard by the right people via the right platform. There is also a key role for advertising in promoting responsible and age-appropriate screen time, (LeapFrog Toys, for example, offer advice to parents via tech-usage guides) rather than unlimited or excessive usage – plus the need for parental controls.

The play industry itself has a great responsibility in respect of continually promoting and reinforcing the ideology of how children's play should be an integral part of their growing up. This can be achieved via a variety of factors.

Parks are built to be safe, hence all the necessary accreditations and safety requirements implemented for each and every play equipment. However, unlike in the US, play equipment standards are 'good practice' rather than legally binding – and perhaps a statutory change would increase parental confidence. Meanwhile, it is important for the play industry to continually repeat messaging to encourage parents to understand that parks are safe places for children to play within and can benefit their wellbeing both physically and mentally. The equipment is specifically built to challenge children's ability and they can find this both fun and rewarding. Another important factor is that it is crucial for the play industry to continually form and maintain relationships between specially selected partners to celebrate national events such as 'Playday' to help to strengthen credibility and messaging and to continue to ensure that play will always be on the agenda. National Children's Day UK (an initiative of Save Childhood Movement), has also been active in organising play events since 2014. The first year's theme was 'reconnecting children with nature', followed in 2015 by 'the science and magic of play' *(http://www.nationalchildrensdayuk.com).*

In conclusion, it is very important for all three industries – the media, advertising and play – to work in concert to strengthen and improve all of the contributing factors that form the promotion of beneficial children's play. It is equally important that the play lobby of academics, campaigners and policy enthusiasts adopt a similarly constructive attitude in their dealings

with them. By working together and targeting the right people at the right time with the right messaging, advertisers can help to make children more pro-active and encourage parents to allow their children to play outside. By continuing and developing a holistic approach to child health and fitness, the media can help to change parental perceptions of all the 'risk and dangers' of the outdoors and reinforce that outdoor playgrounds of all types are meant to be safe enough and fit for purpose – and that the natural outdoor environment exists to be challenged, enjoyed and explored. Finally it is crucial for the play industry to continue to spot opportunities where positive promotion of beneficial play can be taken advantage of. By creating special celebration days and forming strong partnerships with relevant companies (without sacrificing the best outcomes for children on the altar of marketing) play is likely to continue to gain acceptance for the many benefits it can bring to all children and their families.

RECOMMENDATION

- The media, advertising and the whole play sector in all its forms to work together on joint initiatives to promote beneficial play as part of a holistic approach to child health and fitness and to take opportunities to stress its importance to policy-makers at all levels



THE TRAINING NEEDS OF THE CHILDREN'S WORKFORCE

Adults who work with children need appropriate training to understand, promote and deliver the beneficial nature of play in all settings; thereby acquiring the skills to communicate these messages with confidence and commitment to the adults in children's lives. In this way, healthy behaviours will be established and embedded from early childhood onwards that will continue into later years and be of benefit during the life course *(Keon, W., 2009. 'Focusing on Childhood Obesity' Conduit 3, 4)*.

'The children's workforce' is an umbrella phrase; by nature encompassing all professionals working with children in a range of sectors including education; health; social, family and community support; youth; justice and crime prevention; sport and culture, and early years and childcare.

Governmental guidance stating that play should be the driver in effective early years teaching is crucially undermined by a continuing lack of professional recognition for those charged with delivering it. A Post Graduate Certificate in Education (Early Years) does not attract Qualified Teacher Status; neither does it bring with it equivalent pay, status, career or promotion prospects. The qualification must be awarded parity with every other Qualified Teacher Status, complete with a full 6-12 month programme of post qualifying mentoring and support if the skills and talents of those required to enrich the most formative years of child development are to be retained. Facilitating a 'love of children' is insufficient remuneration for their work and dedication.

In primary schools, training such as is found within the OPAL programme *(http://www.oudoorplayandlearning.org.uk/)* can influence the quality, ethos and culture of the entire school play environment for the better when the process is led by the Head teacher and has the active involvement of all teaching staff and playtime supervisors. This should be the remit of a formally recognised Play Co-ordinator, reporting directly to senior management, as is appropriate for the staff responsible for the 20% of schooling that play is. The programme equips staff with the knowledge about the five main types of play in which children engage, and enables them to work together with confidence as a 'play team' so that they can make balanced judgements about the quality of the playtime offer at the school, what fixed equipment they might purchase and what surfacing material and landscaping best serves the school's stated learning objectives. Staff are equally in need of training in how to facilitate and promote the different type of 'play' occurring in secondary school settings and crucially, those who interact professionally with children do not always work within the perimeters of a school or other educational setting. There is a lack of empirical research in the subject of play training for the children's workforce but it is recommended, on the strength of the data supporting the holistic developmental importance of child-led free play that training in play should be statutory for all professionals who work with children

As acknowledged by Nutbrown (Nutbrown, C, 2013 'Shaking the foundations of quality? Why 'childcare' policy must not lead to poor-quality early education and care', (http://www.shef.ac.uk/polopoly_fs/1.263201!/file/Shakingthefoundationsofquality.pdf) what matters most is the quality of the experiences offered to young children. High quality experiences come only from high quality staff; effective professionals continually developing their own knowledge, skills and understanding, respecting and valuing all phases of childhood and equipped with the confidence to engage imaginatively and knowledgeably with parents. Training in play should therefore be considered not in the light of an option, but as integral to both the initial qualification and ongoing professional development of the entire children's workforce.

The profession of playwork sits within the early years and childcare sector of the children's workforce *(CWCDC, 2009, The National Archives, 2012, (http://webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/20120119192332/http:cwdcouncil.org.uk/).*

Playwork is an approach that is centred upon the child's agenda rather than that of an intervening (and interfering) adult. Each child has his/her individual social, physical, intellectual, creative, emotional and spiritual needs. Working with children where they are in their lives at a moment in time is a fundamental element of playwork.

Childhood is essentially a social construct. Playworkers recognise that, and avoid making too many socially constructed judgements about the children's play behaviour. Playworkers therefore adopt a non-judgemental, non-prejudicial, non-directive, and largely reflective approach to their work. In essence, playwork is essentially concerned with enabling children to exercise control over their play by recreating the flexibility that is increasingly absent from children's play environments.

The most recent analysis of the training needs of the playwork workforce was conducted in 2010 by Skills Active, the Sector Skills Council for playwork. The characteristic of playwork that distinguishes it from affiliated professions is that the agenda to which it works is child rather than adult-determined and is predicated upon a set of principles that supply a professional and ethical framework *(PPSG, 2005, 'The Playwork Principles', Cardiff)*.
The principles state that:

- The impulse to play is innate in all children and young people and is fundamental to the healthy development and wellbeing of individuals and communities
- The play process is freely chosen, personally directed and intrinsically motivated
- The prime focus of playwork is to support and facilitate the play process and this should inform the development of play policy, strategy, training and education
- Playworkers act as advocates for play when engaging with adult led agendas
- The role of playworker is to support all children and young people in the creation of a space in which they can play
- The playworker's response to children and young people playing is grounded in a sound, contemporary knowledge of the play process and the reflective practice
- Playworkers recognise their own impact on the play space and the impact of children and young peoples' play on the playworker
- Playworkers select an intervention style that enables children and young people to extend their play. All playworker intervention must balance risk with the developmental benefit and wellbeing of children

Yet facilitating play is not the sole preserve of playworkers and people can style themselves as 'playworkers' without any dedicated training. Curriculum guidance across the UK has stated that effective early years teaching should be delivered through play (e.g. Department for Education and Skills 2007; Welsh Assembly Government 2008b). However, the guidance does not necessarily result in greater opportunities for children to learn by playing and modules in play no longer feature in the Early Years Educator and Early Years Teacher qualifications. It is essential that these are reinstated as part of an overall approach that will combine a deep appreciation of the value of play that embraces indoor and outdoor freedoms of exploration together with an understanding of the holistic nature of child development. It should also include training in good nutrition and how best to conduct observations so that the learning that is occurring in children engaging in all manner of pursuits is recognised.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- Post Graduate Certificate in Education (Early Years) to be given parity in Qualified Teacher Status, subsequent mentoring programmes, pay scales and career prospects with other Qualified Teacher Status posts
- DfE- commissioned research programmes into the play training needs of the children's workforce
- Training in play to be a statutory requirement for all those working in a professional capacity with children
- The Government to fund a comprehensive study of the factors underpinning successful playwork projects and act upon the findings to require local authorities to fund a range of playwork projects throughout the country
- A professional well qualified and valued Playwork workforce with a professional body
- Quality CPD for a wide range of professionals whose strategic planning and decision-making impacts upon play opportunities
- Develop child friendly environments through Playworkers, e.g. by promoting Play Ranger models; Toolkits on Use of Schoolgrounds and including children and young people in the planning and provision of play spaces

HEALTH BENEFITS OF PLAY: PHYSICAL HEALTH AND NUTRITION, MENTAL AND EMOTIONAL HEALTH - AND PLAY AS THERAPY FOR CHILDREN. HOW PLAY CONTRIBUTES TO THE PUBLIC HEALTH AGENDA

Play has a central role in helping children reach their true potential. Taking part in play not only helps to promote children's physical wellbeing but also assists their development in four major areas:

- Cognitively
- Emotionally
- Socially
- Nutritionally

From a nutrition stance, the correct balance of nutrients helps to support children with their playing activities and can provide an opportunity for adults and children to enjoy food together in a fun environment. Key nutrients needed to support play are:

- Energy – for the body to run efficiently, grow and move
- Carbohydrate – to aid the recovery of normal muscle function after long lasting physical exercise leading to muscle fatigue and the depletion of glycogen stores in skeletal muscle
- Protein - for normal growth and development of muscle and bone in children
- Docosahexaenoic acid - for the maintenance of normal brain function and vision
- Vitamin B2, B6 – contribute to the reduction of tiredness and fatigue
- Vitamin D – supports growth and development, particularly bone health and muscle strength. Adequate Vitamin D is not provided through a healthy balanced diet. Sufficient intake must be supported through supplementation of 10mcg/day
- Calcium – contributes to normal energy-yielding metabolism, normal muscle function and bone development
- Iodine – contributes to normal energy-yielding metabolism and cognitive function
- Iron – contributes to normal energy-yielding metabolism and the reduction of sickness and fatigue
- Magnesium – contributes to normal energy - yielding metabolism and the reduction of tiredness and fatigue
- Zinc - contributes to normal cognitive function and protein synthesis
- Selenium – contributes to the protection of cells from oxidative stress
- Water – contributes to the maintenance of normal physical and cognitive function and regulation of body temperature.

(British Nutrition Foundation, 2015 'Energy and Energy Balance,' http://ww.nutrition.org.uk/nutritionscience/energy.html)

A diet supplying an appropriate balance of energy, protein, micronutrients and fatty acids is central to child development and helps to provide the tools needed to get the most out of play. The five food groups are:

- Bread, rice, potatoes, pasta and other starchy foods
- Fruit and vegetables
- Milk, cheese and yoghurt
- Meat, fish, eggs, nuts and pulses
- Foods high in fat and sugar

The Infant and Toddler Forum's resources on Portion Sizes provide information about a balanced diet and the amounts to give *(http://www.infantandtoddlerforum.org/media/upload/pdf-downloads/1.3-_Portion_Sizes_for_Children_1-4_years.pdf).*

However, the right to engage in play, as enshrined in Article 31, UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (2013) is being severely compromised in respect of today's children because of diets that increasingly point towards a predominantly sedentary lifestyle and the resultant prevalence of overweight and obesity. This was not the case in earlier years. Writing to 'The Times', a reader observes:

'There are no fat children in my school photograph from the 1950s. Everyone in the class has a pinched expression and knobbly knees, though I was never underfed….visiting my home village recently, I noticed that the streets no longer echo to the sound of children walking or cycling to and from school, nor did I hear them playing on the yard at morning and afternoon breaks; the tracks of the common have returned to grass through lack of use.

Perhaps it needs the cold eye of an actuary to compare the fatalities that would ensue from greater numbers of children walking or cycling to school with those caused by obesity; to set the grazed knees and broken collar bones that would doubtless result from playing British Bulldog and other boisterous playground games with the long term effects of sitting in the classrooms at break times, grazing on crisps and sugary foods.'(Mr John Anslow, Walton Le Dale, Lancashire, 15th January, 2014).

The recognition of obesity as a major problem for adults is not new – but the issue has now become alarmingly pertinent for children. The Director General of WHO Margaret Chan has acknowledged that *'ending childhood obesity is one of the most complex health challenges facing the international community during this century' (Address to the Childhood Obesity Commission, Jan 13th 2015, Geneva: World Health Organisation).*

With 20% of children presenting as overweight or obese before even starting at primary school, a considerable number will have difficulty in fully participating in play activities not only near the home but in the school playground. These children may well be subjected to weight stigma. Recent evidence confirms that obesity reduces all types of beneficial physical activity and creates a vicious circle of increasing body fatness and a lifestyle that is increasingly reliant upon sedentary pursuits *(WHO 2015, Interim Report of the Commission on Ending Childhood Obesity. Geneva).* Also, 'comfort' eating and eating to increase pleasure and happiness exacerbates obesity and is a substitute for the happiness and pleasure that play can provide.

The play activities of children make an essential contribution to preventing and reducing obesity. Encouraging children to play and combining this with their introduction to truly nutritious foods is acquiring credence as an approach that makes sense. In the 24-hour food environment surrounding the UK, children and their families are being encouraged to associate food products with active pursuits – but not in accordance with the principles of sound nutrition as outlined above. Milk, fruit and vegetables are being replaced by 'sports' drinks, fruit juice, cakes, sweets and biscuits *(Piernas, C and Popkin, B. 2010 'Trends in Snacking Among US children. Health Affairs).*

Some of these drinks can contain as much as 20 teaspoons of sugar, namely Rockstar, Monster and Red Devil *(Revealed: The energy drinks with TWENTY teaspoons of sugar,' 'The Daily Mail', 26th February 2015).* Such drinks are active agents in children 'piling on the pounds', serve no purpose and can contribute to dental decay which may lead to pain and infection; however, children and their families may associate them specifically with outdoor play and activity. This beverage link to children's playful and sporting engagement needs more detailed consideration, funded research, publicity and action. The perversity of sugary beverage sponsorship to support play/movement/exercise activity in order to sell more products leading directly to obesity and dental disease; ultimately preventing the health benefits of playful activity needs to be addressed.

At the same time, policy makers should aim to change the culture by advertising the merits of combined play/healthy nutrition approaches some of which are listed below:

- The HENRY (Health, Exercise, Nutrition for the Really Young) programme, commended by the British Dietetic Association which has trained 10,000 practitioners and combines healthy eating with active play ideas
- Infant and Toddler Forum resources on growth and measurement of toddlers, physical activity and play and development of healthy eating habits *(https://www.infantandtoddlerforum.org/toddlers-to-preschool/growth-and-development-of-toddlers)*
- MEND (Mind, Exercise, Nutrition, Do It) had courses in 350 UK locations but as tenders from primary care trusts for child obesity programmes dropped from 12 in 2011 to just 3 in 2012, it was adopted by MyTimeActive; a 10 week course to re-educate whole

families about their eating habits, teach them about nutrition, cooking and food labels and encourage them to exercise *(Boseley, S 2013, 'Child obesity programmes struggle to survive cuts', 'The Guardian' 18th February)*

- EatSleepPlay Initiative in the Children's Museum in Manhattan (CMOM), endorsed by Michelle Obama; arts and literacy health-based project using creative and fun ways to engage children and their parents to make simple changes in the area of nutrition, sleep and active play ('EatSleepPlay' Health Initiative 2013, A children's Museum of Manhattan (CMOM) Initiative in partnership with National Institutes of Health (NIH) We Can! Curriculum).

Play is a crucial component of children's physical health but is also seen as being of vital importance to the wellbeing of emotionally healthy children and fulfilled self-aware adults:

'It is in playing and only in playing that the individual child or adult is able to be creative and to use the whole personality, and it is only in being creative that the individual discovers the self' (Winnicott, D.W. 1971 ,'Playing and Reality,' London and New York: Routledge Classics).

Play is a context within which children develop emotional skills; especially emotion regulation and emotion understanding – skills which are necessary for successful interpersonal relationships. A recent study by Lindsay and Colwell *(Lindsey, E.W. & Colwell, M. J. 2013 'Pretend and physical Play: links to pre-schoolers' affective social competence.' Merrill-Palmer Quarterly, 59(3), 330-360)* showed that involvement in play at 5 years of age was associated with greater emotion expression understanding and improvements in emotion management one year hence. The benefits of risky play in developing a child's sense of competence and emotional resilience are widely acknowledged. What is increasingly recognised by evidence-based research is that 'play deprivation' has an extremely detrimental effect on the psychological and mental health of children. Gray *(Gray, P. 2011, 'The Decline of Play and the Rise of Psychopathology on Children and Adolescents.' American Journal of Play, 3(4), 443-463)* presents evidence to the effect that the decline in free play options for children in recent decades runs parallel to a disturbing increase in stress and mental health problems amongst children.

In the UK, approximately 20% of children experience mental health illness and a recent study *(Fink, E., Patalay, P., Sharpe, H., Holley, S., Deighton, J.,& Wolpert, M. 2015 'Mental Health Difficulties in Early Adolescence: A Comparison of Two Cross- Sectional Studies in England From 2009 to 2014.' Journal of Adolescent Health, 56(5), 502-507)* has shown that this figure is rising. Without adequate access to play, the authors maintain that children are deprived of the opportunity to develop important emotional skills, leading to an increase in anxiety levels, depression, and feelings of hopelessness, narcissism and even suicide.

In 'Toxic Childhood' *('How the Modern World is Damaging our Children and what we can do about it', Orion 2006 and updated in 2015),* Sue Palmer states that many children today do not know how to play, think, learn or behave correctly and points to an increase in children presenting with ADHD and dyslexia. A recent Sky News programme *(7th June, 2015)* examined a perceived boost in the preponderance of anxiety symptoms, mental health issues and stress-related problems in secondary school pupils and supported those findings by conducting an interview with the Head teacher of Cheltenham Ladies' College, Eve Jardine- Young. Teachers at this internationally renowned independent school are now being trained to spot the indicators of mental illness in their pupils and Ms Jardine-Young claimed that the average age at which depression was first diagnosed had fallen from 29 in the 1960s to 15 and a half in the early 21st century. Hence the school had decided to consider dropping homework.

The fact that earlier generations spent much time as children engaged in healthy outdoor play can be weighed against the scenario for the children today who attend schools that are essentially and increasingly progress-driven, especially at secondary level. Break time is often shortened and the school day is frequently extended by 'enrichment' lessons. Whilst former secondary school Year Heads were experienced teachers undertaking pastoral roles, the positions are now being filled by non-teachers who have a 'Learning Manager' role to monitor progress scores. The theory underlying this shift in school culture is lambasted in 'The Independent on Sunday' *('Give Childhood back to children', Peter Gray, 12th January, 2014):*

'If we want our offspring to have happy, productive and moral lives, we must allow more time for play, not less. Because students spend nearly all of their time studying, they have little time to be creative or discover their own passions…..life cannot be solved with formulae or memorised answers of the type learnt in school… but in life experience embedded in play.'

Whilst children who are the recipients of this type of education display mounting symptoms of unrest and anxiety, Grey observes that 'over the past 50 to 60 years, we have been continuously decreasing the opportunities for our children to play.' Schools are the equivalent of exam factories and children are suffering the consequences of play not being embedded into the curriculum.

Finally, play can be of great benefit when used in a therapeutic approach to enable children to cope with events and experiences that are challenging or stressful. Evidence indicates that they spontaneously engage in socio-dramatic pretence play relating to stressful or traumatic situations arising from their own lives such as going to hospital or to the dentist. Play of this type can be facilitated and supported by adults working in therapeutic contexts also with children who have been subjected to abuse or who have experienced profound grief *(Clark, C.D.2006, 'Therapeutic advantages of play.' In A. Goncu & S. Gaskins (Eds.), Play and Development: Evolutionary, Sociocultural and Functional Perspectives. Pp.275-293, Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum)*.

Playful therapeutic interventions for children coping with adversity (or those who present with emotional or behavioural difficulties) can address the particular individual developmental stage of the child. In addition, they can support children to give expression in their own way to complex and challenging emotions in a safe environment; thus enabling then to come to terms with their own experiences. By doing so, play therapy provides a context for learning problem solving and mastery and has been shown to be a convincing therapeutic option for children (Bratton, , S.SC., Ray, D., Rhine, T.,7 Jones, L. 2005, 'The Efficacy of Play Therapy with Children: A Meta-Analytic Review of Treatment Outcomes,' Professional Psychology; Research and Practice, 36(4), 376).

Play, considered from all perspectives, is essential to the wellbeing of children. Combined with good nutrition, it promotes their physical health, improves their academic and social learning outcomes and reduces their susceptibility to mental illness and anxiety. It can increase feelings of self-esteem and self-reliance and act as a tool in enabling them to understand and deal with traumatic events. It has been suggested that today's children, named 'Generation Z' and credited with a higher understanding of themselves and one another, have the potential for a greater awareness, understanding of, and sensitivity to, the world in which they live. Yet play, such an important component in fostering these qualities, is being crudely elbowed out of their lives.

Play is essential to the building of harmonious and structural-functional societies which are *'a complex system whose parts work together to promote solidarity and stability,' (Moffitt K, 2012 'Structural-Functional Theory in Sociology' (http://study.com/academy/lesson/structural-functional-theory-in-sociology-definition-examples-quiz.html).* If, as the Royal College of Nursing has claimed, *'all four countries of the UK (now) seek to address the underlying causes of ill health such as unhealthy lifestyles'(RCN, 2012 'Public health, (http://www.rcn.org.yk/development/practice/public_health)* they must learn from the evidence and give play its place within the strategies and initiatives that they devise with the aim of creating a world in which Generation Z and their successors can feel at home and flourish.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- A 'combined' evidence-based approach to play and nutrition and development of pilot schemes to build awareness
- Research into the linking of beverages promotion to children's activity/play programmes
- Teacher training and CPD programmes to include modules in the social and emotional benefits of play
- Parenting classes at all stages to emphasise the importance of play in promoting children's mental and emotional health
- Therapeutic play provision to be available in educational as well as non educational settings

THE ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL BENEFITS OF PLAY

Play facilities and a play–rich culture improve the health and wellbeing of children and families. The beneficial changes that arise when play is prioritised are financial (less vandalism), local (community cohesion through shared events), emotional and physical (greater self confidence) and resource value (increased volunteering and raised capacity). Local play strategy groups engaged in co-determining the shape and role of neighbourhood play services encourage citizen involvement in local authority decision-making and voluntary play service management puts parents and citizens in a lead role in service delivery with statutory bodies. The parents, whose children use play services, have capacities and assets in general terms which are just as, if not more, important than the service on offer.

Voluntary sector play initiatives facilitate the provision of street play and 'one off' play events further the increased participation and social action that are a crucial part of civic life. Parks, playgrounds and natural areas which are child-friendly increase the benefits of being out in the open air for the whole family whilst the simple matter of doing things together strengthens the family unit.

For children, there are obvious health gains from engaging in the physical activity afforded by play but social benefits are equally important and include:

- Acquiring new skills
- Developing self esteem and self confidence
- Making independent decisions
- Feeling able to ask for help and information
- Increased emotional resilience
- Feeling safe from bullying and gang membership

Supervised settings employing qualified play work staff operate with similar aims and objectives to those of the detached or club youth worker and the agendas that have been raised by Youth Parliaments embrace issues such as supporting accessible space to enable children free access for leisure activities.

Just as a play-rich culture has resultant benefits to society as a whole, a play deficit has human costs. These include an increase in diagnoses of mental health conditions such as anxiety, depression and obesity and the overall negative effect of failing to make time for play are aptly described by Chris Mercogliano when he suggests that young people are being deprived of *'that precious, irreplaceable period in their lives that nature has set aside for exploration and innocent discovery ('In Defence of Childhood', 2007)* thus leaving them ill-prepared for adulthood. These costs to children will almost certainly represent an immediate and potentially ongoing cost to the exchequer. In 2006/07 obesity and obesity-related illness was estimated to have cost £148 million in in-patient stays in England *(Dr Foster Research, 2008 'Weighing up the burden of obesity: a review by Dr Foster Research' London) and projections suggest that indirect costs could be as much as £27 billion by 2015 (Butland B, Jebb S, Kopelman P et al, 2007 'Tackling obesities: future choices' project report (2nd Ed) London: Foresight Programme of the Government Office for Science)*.

However, ill-preparedness for adulthood arising from a reduction in play as cited by Mercogliano may carry more significant (albeit indirect) economic and societal costs. Play is well-documented as behaviour that is central to the development of highly esteemed 'soft' cognitive and social employability skills, defined by Universities UK/CBI as team working; communication; critical thinking; creativity; innovation; enterprise and problem-solving *(Universities UK & CBI, 2009, 'Future Fit preparing graduates for the world of work')*. For example, play promotes flexible thinking and facilitates the acquisition of personal resources that can be drawn upon in times of need *(Fredrickson B, 2006, 'Unpacking Positive Emotions: investigating the seeds of human flourishing' The Journal of Positive Psychology, 1 (2): 57-59)*. The pleasure arising from playing has benefits for flexible thinking and problem-solving and enhances performance *(Isen, A. & Reeve, J, 2006 'The Influence of Positive Affect on Intrinsic and Extrinsic Motivation: facilitating enjoyment of play, responsible work behaviour and self-control,' Motivation and Emotion, 29(4): 297-325)* and there is a positive

relationship between cognitive skills and high quality play *(Gmitrova, V and Gmitrova, J., 2004, 'The Primacy of Child-Directed Pretend Play on Cognitive Competence in a Mixed-Age Environment: Possible interpretations,' Early Child Development and Care, 174(3): 267-279).* Play is also related to creativity in the sense that it involves divergent thinking, symbol substitution, positive affect, problem solving skills and emotion regulation *(Russ S, 2002 'Play in Child Development and Psychotherapy,' New Jersey: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates)*

Causation is difficult to prove, but there is also a distinct correlation between a reduction over time in children's free-play opportunities and reports from employers in the UK and US of university and college graduates being unable to demonstrate these types of 'soft' skills valued so highly by employers. A recent study *(Mourshed, M., Farrell, D. & Barton, D., 2012, 'Education to Employment: Designing a System that Works,' New York: McKinsey & Company)* found that 45% of US employers claimed that the primary cause of entry-level job vacancies was an absence of these skills in graduates. The same study found that only 42% of employers worldwide believe that new graduates are adequately prepared for work and a 2014 study by Career Builder *('The Shocking Truth About the Skills Gap' http:www.careerbuildercommunications.com/pdf/skills-gap-2014.pdf)* found that 40% of students lack problem solving capacity. The Career-Builder research also found that 39% are insufficiently creative in their thinking and that 37% of the students have inadequate skills in oral communication.

Yet schools, the very institutions charged with developing the characteristics required of the economic contributors of the future, have reduced the amount of time and space allocated to play and this downward pressure on children's free time looks set to continue as reforms which further increase classroom time are rolled out *(Blatchford, P, Pellegrini, T, Baines, E and Kentaro, K, 2002, 'Playground Games: their social context in elementary/junior school. Final report to the Spencer Foundation 2002 http://www.breaktime.org.uk/SpencerFinalReport02.pdf).*

The reforms are partly a response to the gap in academic attainment (particularly in maths) between UK and East Asian school children as identified in the PISA assessments and TIMS studies of school pupils' academic achievement as reported on by Jerrim and Choi (2013, *'The mathematics skills of school children: How does England compare to the high performing East Asian jurisdictions?' DOQSS Working Paper No. 13-03. London: Institute of Education. University of London).* However, the authors also point out that education reforms inspired by traditional East Asian models might not be the most effective way to close the attainment disparity.

As play and free time is sidelined in UK domestic education policy, the very countries that it is attempting to emulate are changing direction. They are responding to the deficit in 'soft' skills noted by employers by reducing the academic burden and factoring in more time for free and self-initiated behaviour in the school day in the recognition that this will help to broaden children's interests, boost their creativity and foster a more rounded development leading to better adult outcomes *(Klein, R., 2013 'China's Education Proposal Could Mean Less Homework For Students' http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2013/09/03/china-education-regulations_n_3862080.html).*

Chinese students are widely acknowledged to be good at tests but lacking in other vital skills with high instances of anxiety and depression and their Ministry of Education has released draft guidelines for education reform including 10 regulations to lessen the workload burden on school children. One of the regulations states that primary schools may no longer set any form of written homework for students in grades one to six. Similarly, in an attempt to shift the 'teaching to test' culture, Shanghai is considering withdrawing from the PISA assessment process 2015. It is working to develop its own evaluation system which reduces the emphasis on test scores.

South Korea is another nation acclaimed for its children's high test scores and outstanding academic achievement but recent documentation suggests that the country's highest scoring graduates are unfit for the jobs on offer *(Guilford, G. 2013 'An elderly crisis and a youth crisis; South Korea's got it all.' http://qz.com/76423/anelderly-crisis-and-a-youth-crisis-south-koreas-got-it-all/)* In order to participate most effectively in the fastest growing sectors of the global economy, East Asian children are being offered new educational approaches which

afford them extra time for self-directed pursuits. These countries are responding in this way to the fact that leading companies in the expanding knowledge economy and global creative industries have openly stated that play, fun and opportunities for freely-chosen activity are key drivers of productivity, innovation, creative thinking and entrepreneurship in the workplace. Meanwhile, ostrich-like, UK educational policy makers are pedalling furiously in the opposite direction.

What is needed is balance; a well-structured combination of formal learning periods, supervised activities (e.g. after school and lunchtime sports, clubs etc) and a minimum of 1.5 hours per day, divided up sensibly, of child-led freely accessed playtimes in a high quality 'natural' environment enabled by trained, confident and knowledgeable school staff, not external contractors.

An increase in the constant pressure to do things faster, assimilate more information, assume more responsibilities and acquire more skills is causing an unprecedented rise in stress at work *(Vijay, M and Vazirani N, 2011 'Emerging Paradigm – Fun in the Workplace to Alleviate Stress' SIES Journal of Management. 7 (2) March 24-30)* with the outcome that employers are resorting to unorthodox approaches in order to improve employee productivity and ensure employee satisfaction. Google and 3M have now implemented strategies that allow freedom to play and freedom to fail in the workplace. The ethos of companies such as 3M is to offer employees the freedom to pursue their own interests in the hope of promoting and encouraging creativity and innovation. This ethos encourages employees to engage in 'playful' activities that are traditionally considered time-wasting such as going for a walk, playing pinball or lying in the sun *(Lehr, J. 2012 'Imagine – How Creativity Works' New York; Houghton Mifflin Harcourt)*. Fluegge defines workplace fun as 'any social, interpersonal or task activities at work of a playful or humorous nature which provide the individual with amusement, enjoyment or pleasure.' *('Who Put the Fun In Functional? Fun at Work and its Effects on Job Performance' 2008 (http://etd.fcla.ed/UFUFE0021955/fluegge-e.pdf).*

In a world in which creativity, entrepreneurship and global competence are increasingly being seen as new 'basic skills', educational reforms which marginalise children's free time are doing a disservice to the cause of a strong and prosperous economy. They are doggedly eliminating the opportunities for cultivating creative and entrepreneurial talents and ensuring that the citizens of the 21st century will be ill-prepared for life's challenges. Research shows that the more successful an education system is in the traditional sense as indicated by narrow test scores, the less likely it is to cultivate entrepreneurs. PISA scores, for example, have been found to be negatively correlated with nations' entrepreneurial confidence and activities *(Zhao, Y. 2012 'World Class Learners: Educating Creative and Entrepreneurial Students,' Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin)*.

In other words, success in the world of work is reliant upon the opportunity to play.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- Re-modelling the direction of education policy to lessen concentration upon testing and teaching to test; allowing more opportunity for free time and child-selected activity
- Further funded research into graduate skill set and the implications for schools policy

PLAY, DIVERSITY AND INCLUSION

There is a compelling case for 'play provision' to be a fully inclusive strategy, encouraging and celebrating greater diversity and social cohesion with children of different genders, ages and backgrounds all playing together in the same shared space. Play is a way of surmounting barriers, especially within schools, where children who are new to the country and may not as yet be competent in the language, can still communicate with others and form friendships simply by playing together. This does, however, require a playful, rich and varied environment to exist; something that is lacking in many schools. Inclusive play should be open and accessible to all, fostering an environment where diversity is valued and respected. It should aim to reflect the complex society in which we live and challenge stereotypes. The Early Years Foundation Stage and Every Child Matters framework build conditions for inclusive play across their themes and guidance by promoting enabling, enjoyable and safe environments to develop positive relationships, be healthy and achieve economic wellbeing.

The following statement from HM Inspectorate of Education sets the aim: *The more successful schools are in achieving inclusive outcomes for their pupils, the better are the chances that these young people will go on to prosper in later life and achieve broader social inclusion in society.' (Casey, T. 2002 'P.inc Play Inclusive Action Research Project', The Yard).*

It is supported by research findings; notably evaluations and observations of inclusive projects pointing to language improvement and progress in social development and communication *(Ludvigsen, et al, 2005, 'Let's Play Together: Play and inclusion, Evaluation of Better Play Round Three', Barnado's, Casey, T, 2002 as above, Woolley et al, 2006, 'Informing Change: Inclusion of disabled children in primary school playgrounds,' Joseph Rowntree Foundation with The National Children's Bureau).*

However, disabled children in particular, face obstacles. The term 'disabled' itself should be extended to include children with emotional or cognitive conditions that also make it more difficult for them to access play opportunities. Despite the move towards inclusion and a range of legislative guidance supporting the child's right to play, these obstacles can be both environmental and social. Environmental barriers that exclude children with impairments, such as uneven surfaces and narrow gates can easily be changed. In respect of equipment, many member companies of the Association of Play Industries have specialist knowledge and wide experience of developing accessible, inclusive play areas that support physical literacy and the development, health and wellbeing of children with diverse needs. The children themselves are often involved to ensure a sense of collective ownership, pride, teamwork and excitement. Yet social barriers are more difficult to dislodge. Fear, embarrassment or discriminatory attitudes also need to be addressed so that an accessible play space is also an inclusive one in which disabled children and their families feel welcome *(Dunn, Moore and Murray, P, 2004, 'Research on Developing Accessible Play Space- Final Report,' London OPDM).*

In research for the National Playing Fields Association which led to the publication *'Can Play, Will Play – Disabled children and access to outdoor playgrounds' (John A and Wheway R, 2004, National Playing Fields Association)* the authors found that the barrier to play was more often social than physical. When asked what would make their local playgrounds accessible, the parents of disabled children invariably listed matters such as accessible toilets and ramps etc. However, if they were then asked if they actually accompanied their child to the playground, their answers were in the negative – largely because they feared that the child might be subject to bullying and taunting from able bodied children. Parents are naturally protective, but this can have the effect of preventing the child from joining in with other children – and thereby isolating them.

Wheway and colleagues also undertook a small study involving the opinions of parents about indoor play. The people surveyed were reluctant to bring their disabled child to an open session of the facility; preferring the perceived 'safety' of a closed session when only other disabled children could attend. However, when asked if they would like to come to a session where there would not be many other children and they could be gradually introduced to an open session, they agreed that this would be a good idea. Some projects such as the Better Play Programme which supported 225 schemes *(Chris Cregan et al, 2004, 'Let's Play Together: Evaluation Better Play Round 3, Barnado's)* had the objective of creating

integrated play for able bodied and disabled children to play together, thus increasing the number of disabled children accessing play provision. The projects were short term and prey to funding difficulties and problems in respect of transport, but the evaluation found that the positive nature of relationships between the children increased the longer the contact lasted. Being able to attend local regularly organised projects was seen as one way to ensure that awareness of the needs of disabled children was increased. However, what also emerged from the evaluation was that some parents still had a clear preference for separate provision over integrated, showing a need for much more outreach work by play or youth workers supporting parents to let their children play out with others in the same street or play area. When this can be achieved the benefits are manifest as in findings published by the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister in 2003 *('Developing Accessible Play Space: A good practice guide, London ODOM),* demonstrating that enabling disabled children and young people to play in the same public places with their siblings and other children has wider benefits for social inclusion, community building and networking.

Children from ethnic communities also encounter barriers to engagement in play. For some parents, culturally committed to a work ethic, the very word 'play' acts as a deterrent but much more pervasive is a fear of discrimination and a general suspicion that children from ethnic minority communities may encounter racist abuse when attending play settings. There is also a significant lack of role models, i.e. an insufficient number of play workers from ethnic groups and many play service providers have failed to grasp the importance of alternative forms and methods of communication with ethnic minority populations. Taken together, these factors make children from ethnic communities a 'hard to reach' group when accessing and using play facilities.

The Barnado's 'Let's Play Together' evaluation highlighted the complex interplay between gender, age and ethnicity in the successful delivery of a play programme, emphasising that understanding the local communities in terms of attitude and culture is critical to achieving a common acceptance and trust in the project/ programme:

The *'capacity of projects to be fully inclusive in terms of gender, ethnicity, disability and age was contingent on a range of factors including type of organisation, the available play environment and the culture and experience of play workers and the level of resources including staffing.'*

Fear is all too often a driver of policy choices that militate against inclusive play opportunities at school. Many schools operate a play separation strategy by Key Stage on the grounds of child safety, but such timorousness is refuted by the example of other primary schools that do not do this and experience no significant problems. Primary schools such as Beacon Rise in Bristol and Stowford Primary in Devon have used their play environment as a key school improvement tool and have noted a huge reduction (sometimes as high as 90%) in daily low-level negative playground behaviour as a consequence *(Coleman N, Outdoor Play and Learning, August 2015).*

Segregating children at play time by age is an unnatural position whereas the historical precedent has always been that children of all ages will instinctively play together. In this way by making and breaking friendships and testing themselves against each other, they will develop optimistic strategies for life, including coping with bullying, strengthening character and becoming more aware of the world around them.

The current thinking of policy makers that sport offers better outcomes in attracting and engaging with 'hard to reach' groups also needs challenging because it can overlook the fact that:

- Play differs from sport which is trainer and coach-led rather than free play enabled and supported, but never directly controlled, by playworkers
- Play does not need expensive equipment, just imagination and experience
- Play affords opportunities to engage in activities that promote self esteem, confidence and peer acceptance emerging from the play activity whereas achievement in sport is often limited to those who already have these attributes; thereby disengaging/ isolating other children even more

- Sport-oriented solutions to attract 'hard to reach' groups are often led by amateur enthusiasts rather than trained play workers embedded in the community.
- Physical coordination skills essential for later participation in sport throughout childhood can be developed through play particularly active outdoor play

Not all experiences of play will or can be the same. The greater the choice and access to provision in settings that actively combat the effects of racism, sexism, gender discrimination and disability then the greater the potential for achieving equality in society. The frequency and intensity of participation in play settings offering a broad range of play activities can enhance a child's sense of self-worth and contribute to their health, personal development and feelings of belonging to a wider community. This will be of benefit to the wider society in reducing the negative effects of social isolation and exclusion. Play can be very effective in the most deprived communities where, often, children are left to fend for themselves by disinterested or absent parents/guardians especially in the school environment. Many children deprived in this way react with extreme violence when put under pressure during play or sports. They learn how to modify this behaviour through daily exposure at playtime to positive role models, such as older children with good social skills.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- Inclusion and diversity to be embedded in local and national play strategies as well as strategic partnerships. Inclusion must be a specific standard in its own right within national standards and inspection frameworks for play, childcare and leisure
- Training for staff in all educational and leisure settings to improve knowledge and understanding of issues involving disability, equality, diversity and inclusion
- Planning authorities, developers, master planners, landscape architects, architects and the manufacturers of children's play equipment to concentrate on creating healthy playful environments for all children to access. These will not be equipped sites alone, but wild, naturalistic sites too
- Many inclusive play and childcare projects are reliant upon short term funding for what are effectively long term needs. The mainstreaming of funding would emphasise to parents and providers that inclusive provision is a right – as required by the Disability Discrimination Act (CPIS, No 8. Inclusive Play, 2006)
- Local authorities to work with ethnic minority leaders to demonstrate how community-based play can support integration and combat racism
- Dissemination of information and advice nationally and locally on issues of diversity and inclusion

GOVERNMENT STRATEGY FOR PLAY AND CONCLUSION

Such is the ubiquity of children's play, and so diverse the factors that either constrain or support it within the public realm that an effective play policy must engage with and coordinate changes to a wide range of domains and functions. These encompass:

- Planning
- Architecture and landscape architecture
- Traffic
- Policing
- Housing developers and managers
- Park planners, designers, providers and managers
- Leisure and cultural services including their catering facilities
- Schools
- Children's services
- Early years' and childcare provision
- Prisons
- Hospitals
- Immigration centres
- Housing for the homeless and children's homes

as well as play services themselves.

The Play Strategy of 2008-2010 provided some £235m of funding to the sector. The Playbuilder target of creating 3,500 play spaces and 30 Pathfinder adventure playgrounds was not delivered, and a significant number of play spaces remain undeveloped and in need of renewal and we would urge government to recognise that this lack of funding for play areas significantly reduces opportunities for play.

Rather than resurrecting the Play Strategy (and risking the misconception that its overriding purpose is to improve and increase the number of fixed equipment play areas) a cross-departmental, long-term Whole Child Strategy co-ordinated by a Cabinet Minister for Children in which play is embedded at every stage, always in partnership with initiatives on food and nutrition, the early years, child health and social care, education and family policy is the best way to realise the UN's General Comment 17. Only in this way will play be understood by all tiers of government as of equal significance to children's wellbeing and future life chances as their other rights under the CRC. For play to be given its full recognition as a driver in health objectives, academic achievement, social and community cohesion, economic productivity and creative and entrepreneurial zeal, it is important that it comes under the aegis of a Secretary of State not just for Education but for Children.

Once this essential change has been made, conditions will be created whereby children's play is discussed and examined as part of political decision-making across a wide policy remit, fostering valuable partnerships at all levels of the political process. Rather than being viewed in isolation, inevitably as an add-on or afterthought, play's role can be identified as part of the strategy to meet broader government objectives – such as tackling the national obesity crisis, identifying key employment and training targets that play programmes can be a part of or including play initiatives as a dynamic component of volunteering, community cohesion and social action programmes and sports excellence initiatives, where even the best sports exponents started out learning what they enjoy most and are very good at, simply by playing (running, jumping, throwing, kicking a ball around etc).





The problems where play can best be employed to address are often blends requiring partnerships and networks to be set up to facilitate outcomes and a Whole Child Strategy led by the Secretary of State would prioritise analysis and communication to increase understanding from parents to professionals and politicians locally and nationally about the potential of play to bring life-enhancing improvements across a wide policy spectrum.

At national government level, the WCS would be making cross departmental partnership and policy links and for play to make a lasting and beneficial impact it is important that these are also established locally. Again, there is a need for accessible information and this would certainly include:

- Strong guidance for local authorities and others (especially Health Care Commissioners) that reflects the changes in areas including policy, delivery mechanisms etc and provides advice about what they can do locally in terms of planning and commissioning, how to support community activism and encourage volunteering and social action around children's play
- Specific guidance for educational settings on the provision of active play learning environments as part of a whole school strategy for promoting wellbeing through life
- Guidance on the development of local tools that can be used not just by statutory agencies but by local people who want to become advocates for change and improvement in their area. Play Scotland's *'Getting it Right for Play' toolkit (http://www.playscotland.org/getting-it-right-for-play/)* is a useful model.

A partnership approach involving collaboration between departments for transport and highways and planning should address calming the traffic flow in residential areas and around children's transit routes, introducing 'shared space' streetscapes, 'Home Zones', pedestrian areas and play streets wherever possible with lower (15 or 20 mph) speed limits as the norm for residential streets not so designed or designated. This would be complemented by a re-consideration of national planning policy and guidance thereby placing a duty on planning authorities to ensure minimum qualitative and quantitative standards for children's play space in new developments, supported by good practice guidance for the creation of child-friendly public space within spatial development strategies, local development frameworks and relevant master plans.

Arts, museum and heritage partnerships at local level have been shown to be successful in engaging with hard to reach children and

building a sense of community and shared goals. There is a good example of this in Bath *(http://www.forestofimagination.org.uk/).* The playground and play setting is often the first out-of-school encounter with art, music and drama through informal play. The playground and play setting engages children in creative activities such as art, drawing, designing posters, writing poems, rap poetry and murals; craft activities, working with wood and scrap materials or engaging in imaginative play, creating dance works. A hugely successful example of an arts-themed event was a 'Pop Up' arts project in a community centre in the Gladstone area of Peterborough. Young people of all cultures were enabled to take place in arts projects that inspired both the artists responsible for delivery and the young people taking part. Volunteer and community outreach work at the Fusiliers Museum in Northumberland helped local children to engage with WW1 stories of soldiers from the front and a St Georges' day event at the same museum afforded an opportunity for families and visitors to speak to current serving soldiers as well as to take a look at the displays, 'dress up' by trying on replica clothing and hats and handling real artefacts from WW1. However, funding for many community arts/heritage projects has been lost because no structures exist by which to recognise the informal education which emerges from play activities. There is now a need to investigate alternative funding streams for this type of activity involving perhaps a greater role for business aligning in dynamic partnerships with national and local government in supporting diverse and high quality play-rich activity.

In the same way, a Secretary of State for Children with a cross-departmental remit could foster a partnership approach for play with organisations such as Sport England rather than feeling obliged (as at present) to 'choose' between the promotion of sport and play. Rather than competing, whereby one or the other will always lose out, play organisations in the community could be encouraged to collaborate with Community Sports Partnerships; in particular creating programmes for joint funding, community games and multi-skills clubs. Play organisations working in partnership with youth services should aim to ensure that programmes have sufficient recreational outputs as well as targeted provision. Initiatives in this area, especially for the 13-18 age group have the potential for beneficial effect across the policy spectrum from fulfilling health objectives to lessening the likelihood of vandalism and low-level crime.

For play to become an agent for positive change within a Whole Child Strategy, it is essential that re-modelling of available advice and the development of dynamic cross-cuttings partnerships should be accompanied by legislative action. The Welsh Government *(Children and Families Measure 2010 Section 11)* adopted a 'play sufficiency' duty to address the levels of play provision for different communities in Wales. The Play Sufficiency Assessment is a comprehensive guide to addressing the matters that should be included in an audit to ensure that the particular area provides an adequate number of play opportunities. The assessments identify the strengths and weaknesses of provision against population, age groups,



diversity, open space and supervised provision. From the assessment, Play Action plans are drawn up. The impact of the play sufficiency duty in Wales has yet to be authoritatively evaluated, but as an interviewee in Lester and Russell's early analysis found, *'everything that governments do has an impact upon children's ability to take time and space for playing, including the design of public space and roads, institutional practices in places such as schools, practices that reproduce fears.'* (Lester, S. & Russell, w. 2012 'Leopard Skin Wellies, a Top Hat and a Vacuum Cleaner Hose: An analysis of Wales' Play Sufficiency Assessment Duty,' Cardiff: Play Wales/University of Gloucestershire).

Their report found 'a sense of excitement' emanating from the process and *'a collective wisdom'* emerging through *'supportive and collaborative networks… within a community of practice of adults looking to support children's play.'*

In conclusion, the words 'collaborative' 'community', 'excitement' 'network', 'adults supporting the play of children' define the optimum role of play within a new Whole Child Strategy for Children. As this report has demonstrated, play cannot be shunted into the corner of a single department (such as Education) regarded as inferior to another pursuit (such as sport), confined to a particular age group (such as early years and primary) or restricted to a specific type (such as fixed equipment playgrounds). Its positive outcomes are not limited to one policy objective like health or education or even to children alone – because skills, characteristics and ways of relating to the world learned through play will resonate throughout the life course.

A Whole Child Strategy will have play at its core and a healthy, productive and cohesive society will have play as its watchword.
In the words of a popular song:

'Let the children have their way
Let the children play
Let the children play' ('Santana' lyrics taken from 'Let the Children Play', 1977)

The sentiment may be simple – the meaning is profound.

RECOMMENDATION

- Play to be embedded within a Whole Child Strategy under the aegis of a Cabinet Minister for Children responsible for cross-departmental roll out and co-ordination.

October 2015













A report of the All-Party Parliamentary Group on a Fit and Healthy Childhood kindly sponsored by LeapFrog Toys. Design and print provided courtesy of the Association of Play Industries.

appg

Leap Frog

API
Association of Play Industries
www.api-play.org