



6 PLAY IN SCHOOLS

Smart Play Network have been supporting schools to develop their outdoor play resources through the several projects (including Play on Wheels and Active Play) and the Play in a Pod programme for many years. One of the activities we ask school staff to do during training sessions is to list all the opportunities for play that children have during their school day. The next task is to think about how these play experiences might be improved.

What teachers and support staff list varies according to their understanding of play and of course all schools are different, but our work with teachers leads us to describe children's school play experiences in three categories.

1. Free play of break time in the morning and during lunch, usually outdoors though often weather dependent.
2. Self-directed freely chosen play during allocated classroom time. This is more common for P1 to P3s, but is often part of a school-wide positive behaviour initiative called Golden Time (poor behaviour loses you Golden Time).
3. Early level of Curriculum for Excellence, where learning by doing or 'active learning' is championed. Playful, exploratory activities and rule-based games might be used to encourage learning. Phrases like 'structured play' or 'purposeful play' are often used where activities with choice, and creativity are set up to support learning.

Adults perceptions and children's experiences

Children's experiences may differ from adults intentions for children's learning or play. We can improve play by paying more attention to children's experiences and by thinking through our intervention as adults. Does what we say or do improve or impede a child's experience? Finally, but most importantly, it's the environment we provide that makes the difference.

The playground

While free, self-directed play is available at break time, children might find this experience stressful. Open ended outdoor play in a plain concrete environment with no flexible play resources puts pressure on social interaction, which not all children find easy and playground staff can find hard to support. Perhaps a child spends break time roaming alone or avoiding bullies.

Numerous studies have found benefits for children's overall wellbeing from improving playgrounds. Reduced behaviour problems, increased physical abilities, team working and resilience are examples. Improvements include developing physical landscapes as well as providing loose parts to create a flexible environment in which children can choose how to play. Access to play outside should not be limited to dry weather – providing coats or room to store wellies and waterproofs can be rewarded by improved indoor behaviour. Children with freedom to splash in puddles might well be happier children when they return to the classroom.





The classroom

Free time to play in the classroom similarly benefits from open-ended flexible resources that encourage children's imaginations and provide the most choice for self-direct play. While cars and toys and use of the iPad may be popular in classrooms, it's possible to develop play resources indoors that are similar in principle to the loose parts flexible play that might be available outside. Bricks and natural materials for building and arranging, material and pegs for dens could be useful additions to Lego and cars or home corner environments.

Classroom role play areas might be created with children to support particular learning outcomes or experiences in mind, for example shop or post office to support literacy or numeracy. While these experiences may well be supported by these environments, there will be a range of learning arising from the negotiations and creativity of the play that is enacted here. Similarly literacy and numeracy will be supported by the free outdoor play in a rich and flexible environment.

Play as a sanction

Some settings choose to reward children's positive behaviour with play. While teachers emphasise the reward of, for example, free play at Golden Time, children may well focus on the sanction of 5 or 10 minutes of exclusion from play as a consequence of poor behaviour. While schools report that they focus on developing positive relationships and systems of reward, using play as a sanction gives a confused message about the value of play in schools. If play is really valued and supported, should it be routinely withdrawn? If it is regularly taken away, how does this support respect for Article 31 which emphasises all children's right to leisure and play? Training guidance for support staff published in 2013 refers to 'playtime buy back' with children being supported to get their play time back through 'showing good skills to meet agreed targets'. Suggesting that children are not automatically entitled to play, but need to earn it.

Find out more about Play in a Pod

Programme at:

<https://www.smartplaynetwork.org/play-in-a-pod>

Action to improve play in schools

Supporting schools to improve children's experience of play means:

- Encouraging school staff to consider the numerous research studies on the benefits of play.
- Encouraging playground and play resource development in classrooms, with loose parts that provide flexible play experiences.
- Supporting all weather play, with rain no longer stopping free play outdoors.
- Supporting playful and play-based learning, particularly in early primary.
- Challenging the idea of using play as a sanction: *How Good is Our School 4* states that a feature of highly effective practice is that "The whole learning community has a shared understanding of wellbeing and children's rights", perhaps this is a useful starter for prompting discussion around how play features in school behaviour management policies.



Smart Play Network Members Support

Member you have access to telephone and email support. For more information about the topics covered in this guidance sheet, or any other queries you may have about your project, please contact us using: 0131 554 2620 or admin@smartplaynetwork.org