



Getting it Right for Play

The Power of Play: an evidence base

Foreword

Play Scotland works to promote the importance of Play for all children and young people, and campaigns to create increased Play opportunities in the community.

As a result, Play Scotland was delighted to receive funding from the Go Play Fund in 2010 to develop a Template and Toolkit for Play. The Toolkit and supporting documents are aimed at Local Authorities to help improve the design and provision of places and spaces for all children, so that they can feel safe and confident playing outside in their neighbourhoods.

Play Scotland appointed Issy Cole-Hamilton to lead the process and write the documents. The process for developing the Toolkit and supporting documents was very straight forward. A Reference Group was established to support the process which also involved a number of consultation events throughout Scotland in 2010/11. After taking full account of the Play Sector's views at these events, Play Scotland developed two types of Indicators: Play Sufficiency indicators and Child Friendly Community indicators. The four tools that were developed to illustrate the indicators were piloted in Aberdeen, North Lanarkshire and South Lanarkshire Local Authority areas in 2011.

“Children need the freedom to play. Play is not a luxury. Play is a necessity”

Kay Renfield Jamieson

“Play stands at the centre of human development, especially in the formative years, but its importance has to be defended by each generation anew, often on different grounds”

Sturrock, Else & Russell (2004)

All the Indicators and Tools are relevant to Local Authorities. However, the Children's Survey and the Quality Assessment Tool can also be used by community groups to help them assess play opportunities and spaces in their local community.

The Power of Play: an evidence base, provides a comprehensive literature review of the benefits of Play to children and the wider community, and acts as a supporting document to the Getting It Right for Play Toolkit. Also available in pdf is the Scottish Play Policy Context which outlines the Scottish Government's commitment to Play in policy and guidance.

Play Scotland is confident that this practical and easy to use Toolkit and supporting documents will improve children's quality of life through play, and help make the Child's Right to Play a Reality in Scotland.

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Contents

Getting it Right for Play

The Power of Play: an evidence base

Chapter 1:	Introduction	4
	The Power of Play review	5
	Play provision in Scotland	7
	Research into children's play	8
<hr/>		
Chapter 2:	The Power of Play	9
	Play in children's health and wellbeing	10
	Play in early childhood	11
	Play and children's cognitive development	13
	Play and children's physical activity	14
	Play and children's mental health	16
	Play and children's emotional well-being	17
	Play and children's social development	18
	Play and learning about risk and challenge	20
	Play as therapy	21
<hr/>		
Chapter 3:	People, places and play	22
	The role of parents	24
	The nature of provision for play	26
	Staffed play provision	27
	Play at school	29
	Playing outside	31
<hr/>		
Chapter 4:	Children's changing play patterns	40
	Changes over time	41
	Constraints on outdoor play	42
	The impact of preventing children playing	48
<hr/>		
Chapter 5:	Conclusion	50
<hr/>		
Appendix 1:	Playwork Principles	52
<hr/>		
References		54
<hr/>		
Endorsements		58

Chapter 1

Introduction



Introduction

Play is the universal language of childhood. It has been described as behaviour which is ‘*freely chosen, personally directed and intrinsically motivated*’, or as ‘what children and young people do when they follow their own ideas and interests in their own way and for their own reasons’² In its call for *A Play Strategy for Scotland*, Play Scotland described play as a natural, spontaneous and voluntary activity which we all benefit from throughout our lives. Children’s play may or may not involve equipment or have an end product. Children play on their own and with others. Their play may be boisterous and energetic or quiet and contemplative, light-hearted or very serious.

The Power of Play review

Play is one of the most powerful and important elements in children’s enjoyment of their childhood, well-being, health and development. It is a natural and instinctive behaviour which should be encouraged and supported throughout childhood. The value of play, and the need to ensure children have places and opportunities for play, has been broadly recognised in Scottish national and local policy. The Scottish Government’s *Early Years Framework* recognises the importance of providing for play, as do guidance documents relating to the planning, development and maintenance of local streets and open spaces.^{3 4 5} However, despite this important recognition, there are many people in positions of power and influence across Scotland who do not consider the provision of play opportunities to be as important as other services, especially at this time of competing demands on relatively scarce resources.

This review of research and writings from acknowledged experts, published by Play Scotland and funded through the Scottish Government’s *Go Play* initiative, summarises published evidence and informed opinion that demonstrates the value of play and play provision to children, their families and their communities. It shows how important playing is for the well-being and development of children, demonstrating why public policy, resource allocation and planning must consider the need for children to have time, encouragement and places to play. It also discusses the influence of different types of play environment on the nature and impact of children’s play experiences and highlights, in particular, the value of outdoor play and the importance of providing local neighbourhood spaces where children can feel safe and confident to spend time outdoors playing and socialising with their friends.

The vital importance of play in children’s lives was recognised internationally when it was enshrined as a fundamental right for all children in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child. Article 31 states that:

- 1. States Parties recognize the right of the child to rest and leisure, to engage in play and recreational activities appropriate to the age of the child and to participate freely in cultural life and the arts.*
- 2. States Parties shall respect and promote the right of the child to participate fully in cultural and artistic life and shall encourage the provision of appropriate and equal opportunities for cultural, artistic, recreational and leisure activity.*

Other Articles in the Convention also have an impact on Children’s Right to Play. For example Article 23 requires equitable treatment for children who are disabled; Article 30 confers on children from minority ethnic groups the right to practice their own culture, language and religion; Article 12 states that children’s views should be taken into consideration in all matters that affect them.⁶ The full realisation of these rights for all children and young people, up to the age of 18 years old, is vital for their health, well being and development, as well as their enjoyment of childhood.

Realisation of the Right to Play is not the only reason for promoting and providing for children’s play. Extensive evidence shows the important contribution of play to children’s well-being and health. It describes how important it is for children to have time and opportunity to play freely throughout their childhoods, making their own choices and building their understanding of themselves and how they relate to the people and environment around them.

In 2007, the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, ranked Scotland 22nd out of 24 countries for the wellbeing of children up to 18 years old.⁷ Although the science of measuring wellbeing is in its early days and the definitions and components measured vary in different studies there is some consistency and, as this review demonstrates, many of the elements can be affected by children's play opportunities and experiences. Saunders and Broad⁸ describe one model of health and well-being developed by young people. Emotional well-being was seen to be a result of social relationships, social health, mental health and physical health. In another study 'health' was affected by an individual's mental, physical and emotional states and also by their relationships and circumstances, including for example, housing and employment.⁹



Generally, children's well-being is seen as a combination of factors including their physical and mental health, their relationships, their feelings and their comfort within the environments they inhabit. Evidence suggests that play cuts across and influences many of these factors, developing "protective systems" that enhance children's own feelings of well-being.¹⁰ (page 22)

Susan Isaacs, the educational psychologist and psychoanalyst who founded the Department of Child Development at the Institute of Education in London in the early 1930s, saw play as a way for children to express their personalities with both healing and cognitive potential. She saw play as the 'child's work', essential to growth and development, and considered that active play was a sign of good mental health.¹¹ For Isaacs, developing a child's independence and learning, was best achieved through play, and the role of adults and early educators was to guide children's play.

The centrality of play to children's normal healthy development is therefore widely acknowledged and without play, a child's ability to develop and function effectively in the world is reported to be "at best impaired and at worst as good as impossible".¹² (page 126-127) Through play, children learn to form attachments, negotiate, take risks and overcome obstacles. They develop friendships and a sense of belonging to a group. This is important for all children but especially for those who are disabled.¹³ The experiences and motivation children gain through playing enable them to build knowledge, practise skills and consolidate thinking power.¹⁴ For children, play provides a place to "experiment with new skills, complex relationships, risk-taking, and thinking through complicated ideas".¹² (page 128) As Casey puts it: "Time spent playing is the natural arena for forming friendships, finding soul-mates and negotiating relationships."¹⁵ (page xi)

There is also substantial evidence demonstrating the value of play in a child developing communication, language, literacy, emotional and social development, spatial and mathematical learning, creativity, and formation of identity.¹⁶ Through play, children learn vocabulary, concepts, problem solving, self-confidence, motivation, and an awareness of the needs of others.¹⁷ Playing contributes to learning through helping children internalise "the links between motivation, emotion and reward. This helps them coordinate their feelings, thoughts and behaviour". This development takes place throughout childhood. Playing with others, or with their surroundings, helps children develop both deep attachments and more transient relationships.¹⁰

Children's understanding of and respect for nature as they grow up may also be connected to their opportunities for outdoor play. "Children who are outdoors more become more confident and competent in wider environments laying the foundations that will enable them eventually to lead their own lives".¹⁷ In Nordic countries the need for children to play outside in all seasons is seen as an integral element of good parenting.¹⁸

Whilst people often describe children's play as a means of practicing skills and emotions for adult life, this is unlikely to be its true purpose. As Lester and Russell point out, play is usually nothing like adult behaviour. Children change and experiment whilst playing, do not follow rules set by others and create worlds where they are in control. For children, therefore, play is behaviour for its own sake, something they do because they enjoy it. For their healthy development however, play is essential and should be encouraged and supported.¹⁹

The role of parents and other adults in supporting and encouraging play throughout childhood, and in playing with their children in early childhood, is important in both widening children's experiences and in helping develop strong emotional bonds.²⁰ As Professor Susan Deacon of Edinburgh University puts it; "We need more parents to be supporting and encouraging young children to learn – and have fun – through play – looking at bugs in the park, banging spoons off biscuit tins and building tents from sheets in their rooms."²¹

Play provision in Scotland

In 2007-8 Play Scotland set up the *Scottish Play Commission*. This wide-ranging consultation incorporated the views of the children's sector, parents, planners and service providers in Local Authorities, the private sector and the voluntary sector.

Of most concern to respondents was the marked decline over time in the extent to which children play freely outdoors and there was a widely held feeling that 'playing out' is under threat and could be a dying culture. Outdoor play was seen as a "particularly unique and important" experience for children which should be encouraged. The constraints on children's outdoor play were considered to be the poor quality of spaces available for outdoor play, the attitudes of adults in the community towards children playing outdoors and a general fear for children's safety.²²

This is demonstrated by an analysis of the location of fixed equipment play areas in Glasgow in relation to social and economic deprivation in 2005, which found that although there tended to be more play areas in deprived areas than in well off areas, the quality of these was poorer in the more deprived neighbourhoods.²³

The *Scottish Play Commission* emphasised the need both to address the barriers to outdoor play and to develop and maintain stimulating, flexible, natural spaces, designed with an understanding of play, which children would find attractive and engaging, and which would tempt them away from the sedentary lifestyles they had become more accustomed to. These spaces might include school playgrounds open out of school hours, adventure playgrounds, community gardens, wild spaces or the street in front of their home. There was also recognition that public spaces designed for all the community to use, including children, encourage intergenerational contact and better relationships within the community.²²



Although the Scottish Play Commission found most concern about the decline of outdoor play, it also recognised that indoor play and play in children's homes could be better supported. It noted that many parents did not have enough time to play with their children and some did not understand the importance of play.²²

National statistics indicate that in June 2010 approximately one in five of the Scottish population, an estimated 1,038,000 children and young people, were under 18 years old.²⁴ (page 21) and according to Government UK child poverty figures, 150,000 children in Scotland, that is almost 1 in 6, did not have access to a safe outdoor space for play. This disproportionately affected children from more impoverished backgrounds and the most vulnerable in Scotland.²⁵

Disabled children from benefit dependant families have particularly restricted play opportunities.²⁶ The *Pupils in Scotland* census 2009 indicated that there were nearly 45,000 children and young people with additional support needs; of those, nearly 11,500 were considered to be disabled.²⁷ Looked-after children also suffer from a disproportionate restriction in their play opportunities as do homeless children and the children of asylum seekers.²²

Research into children's play

Over the past twenty years there has been a considerable advance in the understanding of the benefits of free play to children's lives and development. In 2001 a major and comprehensive review of research into children's play concluded that a very strong case could be made for the immediate and long-term benefits of play to children; and for the wide-ranging benefits of the provision of good play opportunities to children, their families and their communities.²⁸ Since then, reviews published by the Children's Play Council and Play England have added to this body of knowledge and there has been research into both play and play provision in countries around the world.^{10 29} This paper draws on these reviews and also on many other studies and research papers published in the last 10 years.

The research cited in this review comes from many different countries and, where local culture and traditions mean that if similar research were to be undertaken in the UK results might differ, the country has been named. Where the evidence is likely to apply to all children, wherever they live, for example in the influence of playing on children's health and well-being, the country is not identified.



Chapter 2

The Power of Play



The Power of Play

Play “embraces children’s total experience. They use it to tell their stories; to be funny and silly; to challenge the world; to imitate it; to engage with it, to discover and understand it, and to be social. They also use play to explore their inmost feelings.”¹ (page 80)

Play in children’s health and wellbeing

Summary

There is a growing body of evidence demonstrating the vital role of play to many aspects of children’s lives. Because playing includes such a wide variety of experiences it contributes in many different ways to children’s enjoyment and well-being. Imaginative and constructive play are thought to be particularly important for cognitive development whilst play involving art, craft and design help children develop the fine motor skills needed for handwriting. A range of play experiences contribute to, for example, language development, problem-solving, memory and creativity and the exercise involved in physically active play helps increase fitness.



“Wellbeing is generally understood as the quality of people’s lives. It is a dynamic state that is enhanced when people can fulfil their personal and social goals. It is understood both in relation to objective measures, such as household income, educational resources and health status; and subjective indicators such as happiness, perception of quality of life and life satisfaction... There is some emerging consensus that childhood wellbeing is multi-dimensional; should include dimensions of physical, emotional and social wellbeing; should focus on the immediate lives of children but also consider their future lives; and should incorporate some subjective as well as objective measures.”³⁰ (page 2)

Play is a wide-ranging activity and children play in many different ways, usually combining different types of playing. These different types of play contribute in complex, overlapping ways, to children’s enjoyment, health and wellbeing.

There is now wide recognition that play is crucial to children’s healthy development and quality of life. From very early childhood, play is one of the most important mechanisms for children to connect with the world through learning and interpretation. Whilst playing children pick up and hone a variety of skills and behaviours. Because playing is usually a positive experience it can also help children deal with stress and trauma. It is important both for children’s immediate experience and as a way of gathering knowledge, skills and understanding for the future.¹² Studies also show a clear relationship between outdoor play and physical activity levels, which in turn has been linked to well-being and higher levels of self-esteem in young people.³¹ Play, therefore, is an essential part of normal childhood development helping children develop and display a ‘sense of themselves’. Commentators note that children have to play in order to develop normally. In addition to contributing to the development of children’s co-ordination, strength and social skills, playing helps them develop an understanding of and relationship with their environment.³²

In 2001 a wide-ranging review of the literature on play cited evidence suggesting that the benefits of play to the child were both immediate and long-term; that there were a wide range of individual and social benefits to be associated with play; that play contributed to children's educational development, brain development and opportunities for language development and that it also made an important contribution to children's physical and mental well-being, resilience and reduction in social exclusion.²⁸

More recently, extensive reviews of published material have supported these conclusions. The complex, interlinked influence of playing on children's experience of pleasure and enjoyment, emotional development, reaction to stress, relationships, learning and creativity has been shown to contribute to the health, well-being and resilience. The pleasure children get from playing comes from the sense of control it offers. When playing children can experience and try out important emotions such as joy, anger, fear, sadness, shock and disgust without any real consequences. They can also have some control over uncertain or mildly stressful situations, often of their own making, allowing them to start developing resilience to more harmful kinds of stress. However, as Lester and Russell argue, this is only possible if children are playing freely and in their own way, giving them the opportunity to increase their knowledge and understanding.¹⁰

Children's play opportunities in early childhood and as they grow up, can contribute to their overall development and life chances. Pretty and colleagues³³ suggest that children who are active as toddlers grow up enjoying physically active play, especially in natural environments, may have better health and a longer life than those who are sedentary from early childhood. As children grow up, play remains important to all aspects of their development. The freedom, choice and control play offers allows them to learn about being in groups, sharing, negotiating, resolving problems, and standing up for themselves and each other, building their confidence and resilience.³⁴

"Research suggests that the unique features of play act across a range of health variables: play comprises short, intense periods of activity which involve novel movements, thoughts and behaviours; play with uncertainty promotes moderate stress, which in turn supports high variable heart rates and the development of healthy stress response systems; and as a pleasurable experience, play becomes self-rewarding and builds motivation for more play experiences."¹⁰ (pages 22-23) Physical and mental health have therefore been shown to be closely linked and both are influenced by the child's social and physical environment.

Play in early childhood

Summary

Play in early childhood has been shown to influence the way the child's brain develops. The neural and chemical reactions in the brain, created by the act of playing, support the development of coordinated physical and mental capabilities. The way in which parents play with their young children can also have an effect on their behaviour as they develop and there is some evidence that children whose parents play with them are less likely to have behaviour problems later on.

In addition, active play in early childhood helps build strong bones, muscle strength and lung capacity and, whilst playing, children use their physical skills in spontaneous ways that help them develop sophisticated physical skills and co-ordinated movements.

"Children's play development moves along paths of increasing social, physical and cognitive complexity, which involves using signs and symbols; sustaining episodes of imaginative play, creating rules, roles and play scenarios; and controlling behaviour and actions. Play typically becomes more organised and industrious, more rule-bound, and focused on ends as well as means,"¹⁶ (page 311)

Play is crucial to optimal child development and the extent and nature of children's play opportunities in early childhood may have far reaching effects. In early childhood, play is important in brain development. It also allows children, as they grow and develop, to stretch their imaginations, become more dextrous and physical, understand the world around them and test their emotions.³⁴

"Play may be a way of shaping the brain, maintaining plasticity and potential, and developing a positive emotional orientation and disposition that will enable more complex and flexible playful interaction with the environment."¹⁰ (page 20)

Play in early childhood affects the ways in which children's brains develop and as the brain becomes more complex so does the nature of play, creating an 'upwards spiral' of development.

"Playing appears to create new neural and chemical reactions in the brain which support the development of the brain's capacity to link motivation, emotion and reward and coordinate the systems for perception, movement and thought". Lester and Russell cite Sutton-Smith who suggests that "what play does is to create a sense that for the time of playing, life is worth living, and that motivates children to play more, creating further opportunities for these benefits to accrue".¹⁰ (page 20) At birth only 25% of the brain is developed and by age three 90% of the brain is developed,³⁵ so children's early childhood play experiences may be particularly important.

The extent and manner in which parents play with their young children may have an effect on their children's behaviour as they develop. The evidence is "at least suggestive that positive parenting qualities during play may contribute to fewer conduct problems". (page 110) In one study three year old children, whose mothers played with them, had fewer behaviour problems at four years old than those whose mothers did not interact with them for long, leaving them. Playing was more influential than conversation and other types of interaction.³⁶

Active play in early childhood helps build strong bones, muscle strength and lung capacity, contributing to the development of children's physical skills and capabilities. Children refine their physical skills when they have plenty of play opportunities, especially outdoors, but problems can arise as they grow up if they have not had the level of exercise in the early years that is crucial for healthy physical development. If they are given plenty of play opportunities children have the potential to develop a variety of physical skills. Whilst playing children use their physical skills in spontaneous ways that often include, for example, running, chasing and climbing. In play children move purposefully, frequently changing speed, and this physical play helps children develop a range of sophisticated physical skills and co-ordinated movements.¹⁴ (page 213)



Once infants and toddlers are physically stable enough to explore and move around, or have the dexterity to manipulate toys and other objects, they can begin to get the most out of active play. Active babies use more energy, which decreases their potential for becoming overweight, increases their opportunities for skill development and improves their health status.³⁷ However, the constant demands on children to sit still, slow down, stop running and not climb, curb children's movement and motion. In addition over use of equipment which reduces children's independent movement, such as push-chairs and walking frames, can deter children from experimenting with movement.³⁸

There appears to be less consensus, and little research, on the role of play in developing children's core skills. Although research into core skills development in children is limited, it is clear that, in early childhood, children practice, develop and master skills across all aspects of development including their physical development.³⁹ It is, therefore, important that places for play provide young children with the opportunity to move around by, for example, running, jumping and climbing, as well as giving them the chance to test their boundaries for example through playing with natural elements such as earth, water and fire.²⁹ Development of core physical skills, such as running, jumping, galloping and side-stepping, is most likely to be the result of physically active play rather than something that can be learnt from others.⁴⁰

Both structured activities, directed by adults, and unstructured physical activity, play, are important elements in motor skills development in early childhood. Most infants and toddlers acquire fundamental movement skills through unstructured physical activity and play involving arts and creativity. Children who have not developed proficient motor skills often choose not to participate in physical activities as they get older and as games become more competitive.⁴¹ In addition, research in Sweden has indicated that children at a day nursery with a natural outdoor playing area have better coordination and balance and are more supple than other children. Children with better motor skills also have fewer accidents.⁴²

Early contact with natural environments may also have far-reaching effects on children's development and close contact with nature during childhood appears to lay the foundations for the way children relate to the environment as they grow up. Children aged four years and younger mainly explore and play in the natural outdoor environments with adults, and young children learn attitudes to the outdoors from these adults. Research illustrates that if children have little contact with nature when young this can result in less interest and possibly fear of nature, as they grow up. Children who grow up in towns and cities tend to be more frightened of wild animals such as snakes than those who grow up in the countryside.⁴²

Play and children's cognitive development

Summary

There is considerable evidence that playing helps support children's cognitive development. This includes the development of language skills, problem solving, gaining perspective, representational skills, memory and creativity. Although, to many adults, children's activities whilst they are playing may look meaningless, they are important to and for the child, promoting the development of concentration and attention. Playing in outdoor environments with natural features can also support better concentration and self-discipline in children.

"Play is our need to adapt the world to ourselves and create new learning experiences."⁴³ (page 3)

There is a significant body of research into the influence of different forms of play on children's cognitive development. Constructive and imaginative play have been found to be most supportive of cognitive development.⁴² The evidence demonstrates the importance of play in the development of language skills, problem solving, gaining perspective, representational skills, memory and creativity. Three elements of play are thought to underpin brain-based learning. These are: "orchestrated immersion in complex experiences; relaxed alertness; and active processing (i.e. meta cognition)."¹⁷

“Play is an important vehicle for developing self-regulation as well as for promoting language, cognition and self-competence.”¹⁷

It is therefore important to support and encourage free play in infants and young children. Although these self-directed activities may appear meaningless to adults they hold great purpose and significance for the child and are related to the child’s level of understanding. Allowing children the time and freedom to play freely, completing their chosen activities in their own time and to their own satisfaction, promotes the development of concentration and attention.⁴³

Play involving art, craft and design gives children the opportunity to develop the fine motor skills of hand and finger control required for hand-writing¹⁴ and the physical activity involved in play can increase fitness, also helping improve cognitive development and classroom behaviour.³³ When playing children relax, knowing that adults will not interfere or judge them, alleviating some of the anxiety associated with having to achieve and learn.⁴⁴

Contact with nature, including through outdoor play, has also been associated with children’s ability to concentrate and be self-disciplined.³² One study indicated that the presence of natural features in a deprived area was linked to better concentration and self-discipline amongst the children who lived there. Contact with nature for as little as 10 minutes, can have a positive impact on children’s cognitive functioning. In addition, through exploring their environment children gather information and understanding of their surroundings helping them develop spatial skills such as a sense of direction.⁴²

The alternatives to outdoor play in modern society, for example television, computers, books and school worksheets, may influence children’s perceptual skills by reducing their opportunity to experience a full range of the senses. They offer no opportunities to experience smell, touch, and taste, or the feeling of motion through space, which are all important tools for learning.⁴⁴

“Jean Piaget argued that experiencing the world in three dimensions by physically interacting with it is essential for cognitive development. Throwing things, hitting things, and putting things into water or sand are all crucial for young children’s development. But for many children, their world is now flat”.⁴⁵

Play and children’s physical activity

Summary

Physical activity, through play and other activities, is important for children’s mental and cognitive development as well as their physical health. There is also some evidence that if children are physically active when they are young they are more likely to adopt healthy lifestyles as they grow up.

Active play is the most common form of physical activity for children outside of school and children get more exercise from play than from time spent at clubs and organised activities. Children who walk and play a lot tend also to exhibit greater levels of activity in other areas of their lives. The aspects of physically active play most enjoyed by children include choice, fun, friends, achievement and the possibilities of competition. The element of fun tends to over-ride any known health benefits.

“Opportunities for spontaneous play may be the only requirement that young children need to increase their physical activity.”⁴⁶

Play is an important and enjoyable form of exercise for children. Aspects of physical activity they enjoy include having choice, having fun, spending time with friends, a sense of being part of a team, competition, achievement, showing-off skills, and opportunities for independence in outdoor play.⁴⁷ For children, fun and enjoyment are more important reasons for physical activity than an understanding of the health benefits, even though these are seen as important. If activities known by children to be ‘unhealthy’ are more enjoyable than others, the enjoyment takes priority and health considerations tend to be ignored.⁴⁸

Higher levels of physical activity and fitness in childhood appear to have a wide range of beneficial effects on children’s general health, as well as their physical health, including improving cognitive function and academic achievement. There is growing evidence that increased physical activity in preschool children is associated with improved physical health status and that, as they grow up, active children and young people are also less likely to smoke, or to use alcohol, get drunk or take illegal drugs.⁴⁷ Other research demonstrates that there is a direct relationship between physical activity and health indicators such as blood pressure and bone health and, as they grow, children’s bodies need activity to develop strength and durability.⁴⁹

In 2011 the Chief Medical Officers across the UK published guidelines for physical activity for children. The government’s physical activity guidelines for children under 5 years old, who are not yet walking, discuss the importance of “floor-based play and water-based activities in safe environments” This might include time spent on the stomach including rolling and playing on the floor, reaching for and grasping objects, pulling, pushing and playing with other people, and ‘parent and baby’ swimming sessions. Floor-based and water-based play encourage infants to use their muscles and develop motor skills whilst providing valuable opportunities to build social and emotional bonds. This type of play develops motor skills, improves cognitive development, contributes to a healthy weight, enhances bone and muscular development and supports learning of social skills.⁵⁰

Children of pre-school age who are capable of walking unaided should be physically active daily for at least 180 minutes (3 hours), spread throughout the day. This is likely to occur mainly through unstructured active play such as play involving climbing or cycling, more energetic play including running and chasing games, and walking or skipping to shops, a friend’s home, a park, or to and from a school. It may also include more structured activities. These types of play improve cardiovascular health, contribute to a healthy weight, improve bone health, support learning of social skills and develop movement and co-ordination.⁵⁰

As children get older they should engage in moderate to vigorous intensity physical activity for at least 60 minutes and up to several hours every day and include activities that strengthen muscle and bone at least three days a week. This might include, for example, bike riding, playground activities, fast running, sports such as swimming or football, swinging on playground equipment and hopping and skipping. These activities will improve children’s cardiovascular health, help maintain a healthy weight, improve bone health and improve self-confidence.⁵⁰



Recent research has identified children’s lifestyles, especially the small amount children walk, as one of the factors contributing to the increase in overweight children. Obesity is a major health problem for children across the UK today, including in Scotland, and physical inactivity is seen to be one of the contributory factors. Research into effectively preventing or reducing obesity is complicated by the complex nature of the problem and it is impossible to isolate individual or combined factors. For example physical activity may play a greater role in weight control than indicated by its contribution to energy expenditure.⁵¹ (page 11) Although it is impossible to demonstrate a direct link, it seems that allowing toddlers the opportunity for active play each day, and encouraging walking as part of daily routines, is important in preventing obesity. It also seems that children who sleep fewer hours a day are more at risk of obesity and active children tend to sleep longer.⁵² One report, reviewing expert scientific evidence and advice on obesity, concluded that policies aimed at individuals would never adequately address the problem and that environmental changes are also necessary.⁵³

Outside of school, active play is the most common way for children to get exercise. When asked in one study, what they liked doing, 58% of children aged 4-16 years said 'playing outside near home' and 62% said they would like to play outside more. Playing sport was even more popular but this tended to be associated with school.⁵⁴ Outdoor and unstructured play is, therefore, one of the best ways for children to be physically active and, for many children, is more important than PE lessons at school. Walking and playing have been shown to provide children with more physical exercise than other activities and encouraging them to be out of the home increases their physical activity.⁵⁵

Research with 200 primary school children has shown that, as well as making a significant contribution to children's physical activity levels, walking and play are associated with other behaviours which increase physical activity. For example, children who walk rather than travel in cars tend in general to be more active, and children playing and moving around outside tend to be more active than when indoors. Whilst playing children are more energetic than when they are at organised clubs and children tend to walk to their play places but be driven to clubs.⁵⁵ Encouraging children to play freely "may be an exceptional way to increase physical activity levels while promoting optimal child development."⁵⁶ (page 2)

There is evidence that all children enjoy some type of physical activity,⁴⁸ and that young children are innately active. However, this natural tendency is frequently thwarted by external influences, including adult supervision.⁵¹ In young children the three major influences on their levels of activity are gender, their parents and play. Boys are more active than girls; children are more active if their parents join in with them and children who play outdoors more are more active.⁴⁷

One study of the physical activity of primary schoolchildren, found that on their journeys to and from school, and during the times when children were playing freely, boys were significantly more energetic than girls.⁵⁷ In the UK, amongst older children, the amount of time spent on active play decreases with age for both boys and girls. This is particularly true for girls. There is also evidence that older children and teenagers view the outdoors as the most important place for physically active play⁵⁸, and that children who go out without adult supervision are likely to be more physically active than those who do not.^{59 40}

Play and children's mental health

Summary

Playing allows children the opportunity to explore their feelings and express themselves in a relatively safe environment, even if these feelings are confusing or painful, and the development of a sense of self through play can influence children's ability to cope with stress. In addition there is increasing evidence that spending time in natural environments can help children who are regularly exposed to stressful events, to be less anxious and have a stronger sense of self-worth. Playing and spending time in more natural environments has also been shown to help alleviate the symptoms of ADHD in some children.



Children explore their feelings and find ways of expressing themselves, through play. If children's lives are so structured that there is little time for them to play freely, a 'backlog' of unresolved feelings can develop and children become frustrated and anxious. In play, children frequently revisit things that are worrying them, giving them a means of dealing with emotional conflict and uncertainties.¹ Play allows children to give voice to their experiences, to have a safe place to express confusing and painful feelings and to find ways of overcoming emotional traumas.⁶⁰ Play development and the development of a sense of self in children can influence their ability to cope with stress.⁴² This is exemplified in play provision for sick children which aims to safeguard their emotional well-being and the continuation of normal development, as well as help facilitate coping strategies for the stressful time of illness or hospitalisation.¹²

Increasingly, evidence is suggesting that spending time in natural environments, including when playing, is particularly beneficial to children's mental health. Children who experience stress are more likely than others to develop mental health problems but there is evidence that contact with nature helps children, regularly exposed to stressful events, to be less anxious and have a stronger sense of self-worth. There is some evidence that visiting woodland can be important for both rural and urban children, reducing feelings of stress. The natural environment seems to help create a "sense of belonging and identity", which can also improve mental health. Conversely, it appears that stressful urban environments can reduce levels of concentration.³²

Playing in natural surroundings might also be important to children with specific mental health problems including ADHD. The incidence of ADHD has been increasing rapidly in recent years and is frequently treated with psychostimulant drugs. Panksepp⁶¹ basing his thinking on animal research, suggests that one reason for the increasing incidence of ADHD may be the "diminishing availability of opportunities for pre-school children to engage in natural self-generated social play" although he considers that the notion that "intensive social play interventions, throughout early childhood, may alleviate ADHD symptoms" still needs to be evaluated. Three studies with children diagnosed as having ADHD have indicated that they are positively affected by spending time in natural environments. In one study most of the respondents chose to walk when feeling anxious, especially by a river or in the woods, if they wanted to calm down.³²

Play and children's emotional well-being

Summary

When children are playing they are emotionally immersed in what they are doing, often expressing and working out the emotional aspects of their everyday lives. This helps them understand their own feelings and those of others. In addition, play helps children build resilience through supporting the development and understanding of relationships and through experiencing positive feelings and reactions. The pleasure and satisfaction children experience whilst playing encourages them to extend their interests and creativity, and the excitement and anxiety linked to trying new things helps children learn ways of reacting to other unknown situations.

"A richly orchestrated sense of life helps create a heterogeneous emotional life, which in turn creates a differentiated life of thought. This paves the way for a discerning adult response to the world."¹ (page 77)

Much play involves children using their imaginations. Imaginative play is the beginning of children's 'social imagination' which is "the kernel around which all mature and tolerant societies are formed". Imaginative play contributes to children's "developing emotional wellbeing and self-control, self entertainment, control of fear and anxiety, poise, sensitivity and empathy."¹ (page 83)

When children are playing they are emotionally involved in what they are doing, using all their senses and have the chance to express and work out the emotional aspects of day-to-day experiences.⁴⁴ Imaginary play, especially when the child has imaginary friends, may have a particular role. Some evidence suggests that boys who have imaginary friends have lower levels of aggression, feel happier, have more positive attitudes and a more in-depth, emotionally calmer play experience. Girls with imaginary friends seem less likely to be angry, fearful and sad whilst playing.⁶²

Increasingly, work with children is focusing on 'resilience' as a crucial element in their development and wellbeing. Resilience has been described as children's "ability to cope with difficult situations and to recover from, or adapt to, adversity".¹⁰ It has also been described as "an outlook for children and young people characterised by the willingness to confront challenges, with a sense of confidence that allows them to deal with setbacks. Resilience is built from a foundation of emotional security..."¹⁴ (page 7)

Play helps children build resilience through supporting the development and understanding of relationships, allowing them to experience positive feelings, and giving them the chance to develop their own solutions to problems.¹⁰ Thayer, in discussing the spiritual needs of children with chronic and life-threatening illness describes the importance of rituals in children's lives, often providing feelings of safety and security. Play can be an important part of any ritual, helping to encourage children to express their feelings.⁶³

The mechanism through which play supports the development of resilience is a function of the complicated nature of play, and its role in the many aspects of children's development. Lester and Russell suggest that when playing children are trying things out, learning to adapt and testing different emotions, which allows them to start developing strategies for responding emotionally in real-life situations. The pleasure, the positive feelings about themselves and the satisfaction children have whilst playing encourages them to explore more and to be more creative. They often put themselves in situations where they are not sure of what will happen next and the resulting feelings of uncertainty may increase children's stress levels and feelings of anxiety giving them the opportunity to learn ways of reacting in other unknown or stressful situation.¹⁰

Different types of play operate in different ways giving children varied experiences and benefits. For example, 'empathy' play, play that allows children to put themselves in the place of others, creates a foundation for later empathy and understanding of others. As one researcher put it: "Without empathy play, we may be doomed to live in a world lacking in morality, looking only ever inwards."¹ (page 82) The creativity, imagination and problem solving required and developed in play, therefore helps children develop ways of reacting to a wide variety of situations.¹⁰

Play and children's social development

Summary

For children, play is often a social experience, shared with others. Through play children create and establish friendships. The extent to which they feel part of a group is linked to their opportunities to play with other children. Playing freely with others helps children learn how to see things from differing points of view through co-operating, sharing, helping and solving problems. For children, the social skills they learn through playing can be as important as what they learn at school. Having friends at school and outside of school is important both for protection and companionship, and friendships allow children some independence from family life. For disabled children at specialist schools opportunities to make friends locally through play can be particularly important. The nature of the relationships children develop through play can be influenced by the type of environment as well as the social backgrounds of the children.



“Play is a means of understanding the developing self and others, a means of building rapport and developing relationships between children and between adults and children, and is vital to the collective experience of childhood.”¹³ (page 115)

Play is a social experience for children, creating and establishing friendships through shared activities. Friendships in childhood are important both as a source of support and as an element in children’s developing personal identities.¹⁴ The manner in which children play is also important and different types of play support the development of different types of relationship. For example, at an age when friendships are becoming increasingly important, “pretend play, role play and rough and tumble play allow children to form highly sophisticated attachment systems”.¹⁰ (page 21) The elements of play supporting social development include, “turn-taking, collaboration, following rules, empathy, self-regulation, impulse control and motivation”.¹⁷ Relationships are often strengthened through play and when children play they use their own language, rules and values helping form social bonds and acceptance by other children.¹⁴

Playing in a group helps children develop their own sense of self and identity and the extent to which children feel part of a group, or part of their local community, is influenced by their opportunities to play with other children, for example in outdoor play, school playtime or in play settings.¹⁵ When children and adults play together it helps build and maintain more positive relationships.³⁴

The act of playing can also overcome cultural and other boundaries, helping children understand themselves and others who they might consider to be different from themselves.¹⁰ Children able to play freely with friends learn to see things from another person’s point of view, learning to co-operate, help others, share, and solve problems cooperatively.⁴⁴ Children themselves describe opportunities to be inventive, confident and sociable through play. To them this is as important as the things they learn at school. Through play, they say they learn a range of skills from “caring, sharing and being kind to standing up for oneself or asking for help.”⁶⁴ (page xv)

Play also encourages creativity and imagination, providing opportunities for collaboration and problem solving with other children.³⁸ It has been shown that traumatised children who lose their ability for creative play do not have full access to their problem-solving capabilities, which can make social situations difficult for them.⁶⁵

Having friends at school and outside, is important both for protection and companionship. Friendships also allow children some autonomy, often providing a ‘safe’ space when life at home is difficult.⁶⁶ (page 9) Many disabled children go to specialist schools, some distance from home, so opportunities to make friends locally and play with friends outside of school, can be very limited. Dunn and colleagues⁶⁷ cite research highlighting the importance of children feeling part of their local community which helps foster a sense of belonging and self-worth. This in turn improves attitudes to participation and citizenship as children grow up.⁶⁸

The nature of and environment for play can affect children’s friendship patterns. For example, in one study, children who attended a private school were more chaperoned, less likely to play freely and more wary of others when out and about than those on a deprived housing estate, who were more concerned about and protective of each other. The friendships of the private school children were more organised and less spontaneous and they tended to feel more isolated.⁶⁹

There are also gender differences in the way children form friendships whilst playing. Boys are more likely to play with neighbourhood friends whilst girls are more likely to play with family members.⁵⁶ Research with children in London and the south-east of England has demonstrated distinct gender differences in children’s independent mobility and social networks. Boys tend to travel further, play outside more often, travel to their friends’ homes, or organised activities and cycle, without an adult being present, more often than girls. Boys were also more likely than girls to make friends in the local neighbourhood. Although boys appeared to have more individual freedom than girls, girls tended to spend time in groups of friends, offering them independence from adults in a different way.⁷⁰



Play and learning about risk and challenge

Summary

As they grow and develop children need to learn about risk and how to manage it. It is argued that experiencing the unexpected during play offers children the chance to challenge their physical, emotional and social boundaries, building the skills to understand risk. Risk takes many different forms and, although not always welcome, is seen by children as something they need to manage. If children's activities are dominated by adults their opportunities for testing themselves at their own pace are inhibited. Adult restrictions on children's play can create situations where children will look elsewhere, often to seriously dangerous situations, to get the excitement they might otherwise find through play.



The “greatest cultural change necessary to restore spontaneous human activity in our public realm is a fresh understanding of the importance of accepting risk as an essential component of activity and interaction.”⁷¹

Children and young people need to learn about risk and how to manage it and risk-taking has been described by commentators as an ‘intelligent behaviour’.⁷² It is argued that facing an element of risk during play can help children build their confidence, resilience and self-esteem, helping their creative development and offering them the chance to rise to challenges and extend their physical, social and emotional boundaries, contributing to their ability to learn.⁷³ Natural play environments offer children many opportunities to explore the environment, make decisions and test and stretch their own abilities.³³

Attempting to remove all risk from provision for children may be counterproductive. It is argued that if children are not allowed to take risks whilst playing they might either grow up over-cautious in many everyday situations, or be unable to judge potentially dangerous situations, placing themselves in danger.⁷⁴ When adults try to control and remove every potential source of danger from children's environments, they create a situation which can reduce active play, encouraging children to adopt sedentary lifestyles and encourage children to play out of sight of adults, sometimes placing them in danger.¹⁴ Gleave cites evidence from a number of sources, including Child Accident Prevention Trust, that children often seek out and enjoy playing in areas they consider potentially dangerous – such as wasteland, building sites, subways, trees and quarries.⁷³

Young children also often seek out experiences they think might scare them, enjoying the feeling of conquering those fears. Many children see potentially risky play as a trip into the unknown which can attract and excite them.⁷³ Other studies confirm the importance of children having the freedom to control their perceptions of risk. Many authors cited by Gladwin and Collins have discussed the value of risk-taking to children's neurological, emotional and social development.⁷⁵

Risk takes different forms and is not always welcome but is never-the-less seen by children as something they need to manage. For example, older children in Sutton's study of children from a housing estate in a deprived area, were able to move around freely and had learnt to negotiate potential risks, act independently and be responsible. They were able to make informed decisions and act accordingly and friendships amongst children offered protection whilst they were out and about.⁶⁹

The value of offering children risk and challenge in play has been acknowledged by the Scottish Government and in commenting on the document *Managing Risk in Play Provision: Implementation guide*⁷⁶ the Scottish Minister for Children and Early Years said “Through the debate on risk and in order for play to be truly accepted by our communities, we have a responsibility to ensure that practitioners, parents and even the children themselves know the benefits that play and risk can bring to their education and wellbeing – we all have a part to play in promoting risk management rather than risk aversion.”⁷⁷

Play as therapy

Summary

Play and play work practice is used throughout hospitals and other places caring for children to increase their enjoyment, aid their recovery and support both their physical and mental health.

Play is widely used to aid the recovery of children who are both mentally and physically unwell. Play therapy is used as a means of building communication with a child and can be used in crisis situations to help children ‘play out’ their feared experiences with the aim of helping relieve their anxieties. For young children with cancer, play has been identified as the best way of uncovering the child’s misunderstandings and negative reactions to treatment.^{79 80} The rationale of play therapy assumes that children use play materials to project their inner worlds and provide “a sort of camouflage” to provide distance and psychological safety.⁸¹

The therapeutic benefits of playwork are also highlighted in work with abandoned children living in a Romanian hospital. After spending time in play with playworkers the behaviour of these children, who had previously had virtually no stimulation, changed dramatically: “social interaction became more complex; physical activity showed a distinct move from gross to fine motor skills; the children’s understanding of the world around them was improved; and they began to play in highly creative ways. They no longer sat rocking, staring vacantly into space. Instead they had become fully engaged active human beings”.⁸²

Chapter 3

People, places and play



Summary

If they are to enjoy and benefit from play children need time to play, sufficient space to move around fast and freely, and an environment that offers a wide variety of experiences. In addition they need adults to encourage and facilitate their play and not to inhibit their opportunities for freedom and choice. This means that the people who plan, design and manage local streets, open spaces and parks as well as teachers, play providers, parents and local residents, can all have a major impact on children's play opportunities.

"If policy-makers accept the evidence for the significance of play for children's well-being and development, then play provision should be judged on whether it enables children to play rather than on more instrumental outcomes."¹⁰ (page 13)

To get the full value from play, children need time to play, enough space to move around freely, environments where they feel safe and that offer a range of play experiences and adults and institutions that are happy for children to be playing independently. This means that, as well as parents and carers, those responsible for the roads, streets and open spaces where children live and go to school, and those providing school, play and childcare services, have a major impact on local opportunities for children's play.

The physical environment for play provides the "tools and raw materials; the props and the backdrops" for play (page 16) and prompts the way children use their imagination and creativity to develop their own games and play. If the environment is not properly cared for it gives children the impression that adults do not care about their play and can contribute to them feeling excluded and marginalised.¹⁵

If play spaces and facilities are to give children the experiences they need, they have to be well designed and maintained to ensure children can frequently find "new and interesting experiences that test and absorb them". "The job of play provision, as well as to entertain and engage children in fun, is to challenge and engage them as they develop physically and psychologically."⁸³ (page 8)

This view is supported by other researchers. For example Foley discusses the importance of the physical environment where children live and play as making an important contribution to children's health,⁸⁴ whilst others have shown how play provision can be a place where children from different social groups mix, making an important contribution to community well-being. It is also suggested that good play provision can reduce anti-social behaviour, vandalism and crime, possibly through offering children alternatives, and play provision can support local economies through providing jobs and volunteering opportunities.²⁸

Planning and design must take account of the needs of all children, ensuring that disabled children, as well as others, have access to and are supported in using play spaces. Children playing together, and their parents meeting and talking whilst they do so, helps develop community relations and friendships and helps reduce the isolation experienced by many disabled children and their families.⁶⁷ In addition, children's views of the settings where they find themselves, for example in hospital, childcare or school, are strongly influenced by their play experience there.¹⁵

The role of parents

Summary

Parents playing with their children from birth is an essential part of the bonding process and has benefits for both the child and the parent. The extent and nature of parents' play with their young children can have an effect on the way in which children develop and form relationships as they grow up. As children get older the role of the parents in play changes and parents need to withdraw, allowing children to play with their peers and other children. This allows children to gain confidence in building relationships and develop their autonomy and independence. The approach of mothers and fathers to playing with children tends to differ, with fathers being involved in more physically active play and mothers in more creative play.

“Competent children have parents who play frequently with objects,; are sensitive and responsive to their child's behaviour; and show high levels of positive affect, praise, and social stimulation. In contrast, interfering parents have children who show lower levels of competence.”²⁰ (page 363)

Children's first playmates are usually their parents and playing with children is an important element of positive, proactive parenting.⁸⁵ It involves close communication between the parent and the child, requiring the parent to become closely involved at the child's level. Through playing with babies in early childhood, as well as caring for their basic needs, parents are learning about the individual needs and characteristics of their new baby whilst the baby is experiencing social stimuli including looking, smiling, talking and touching. When parents are playing with their young children they are telling the children that they are paying full attention and helping to build enduring relationships. In play, parents get the chance to “glimpse into their children's world”, learn how best to communicate with them and have an opportunity to offer gentle, nurturing guidance.³⁴ (page 4)

Parents playing with their children may influence the development of more harmonious relationships later. Children experiencing rewarding, cooperative, friendly interactions, are also learning how to keep an adult's attention. Learning the skills of how to play with others is often used when supporting children with challenging behaviour.⁸⁵

In the early stages parent-child play centres around visual, auditory and physical stimulation which then develop into more social, cooperative and collaborative interactions as the child begins to develop social skills. Playing with babies in first six months usually involves adults mimicking the facial expressions, hand movements and sounds made by the baby, as well as frequently exaggerating and slowing down their own expressions and movements.²⁰

As young babies develop, the parents' play with them tends to become more complex and reciprocated. Playing with their babies is a positive experience for them as well as their child and they are seen to be having fun when they make faces, alter their voices, change their speed of speech and make nonsense words and unusual sounds. In time the play becomes increasingly collaborative with the baby taking on a more active role. Babies learn how to incorporate their newly learned skills into more complex social interactions with their parents. But by the time children are four or five years old, the role of adults alters and too much involvement can interfere with, rather than enhance, the play process.²⁰

Through playing with their children parents can influence the child's cognitive development but as they develop one of the most important factors may be supporting and encouraging the child's growing independence. This might include, for example, encouraging the child to solve problems, answering difficult questions, encouraging them to achieve stretching goals and negotiating complex rules for games. All these methods occur in other activities between the child and parents so it not possible to say that play exclusively offers these benefits, but it does seem to have an important role.²⁰



The approach of mothers and fathers to playing with their children, and in their children's development, has been shown to differ and the extent and nature of the way fathers play with their toddler children may have an important impact on the development of children and their relationships with others and the world around them. "Fathers' formative influence was found in their functioning as a sensitive, supporting and gently challenging companion during exploration".⁸⁶ (page 327)

Research in Quebec, into all aspects of parenting young children, found that rough and tumble play tends to be the domain of fathers rather than mothers. From 2-10 years old fathers are involved in more vigorous play with their children than mothers are. They also play more physical games with their sons than their daughters. Mothers are more involved in "cognitive object mediated play and role-playing" and more with daughters than sons.⁸⁷

Parents' attitudes and approach to play and physical activity are also important and the *Growing up in Scotland* study, of children aged 2 to 4 years old, found that the children of parents who considered exercise to be 'very important' and who felt it 'very important' that their child could 'run around and play outside', were likely to be the most active. Parents of more active children were also more likely to play outdoors with their children. Whilst nearly half of all mothers of the most active children had played outside with their children in the week before the interview, only one in four of the mothers of the least active children had done so.⁸⁸

There is less research into the role of parents in their children's play after the age of 2 years old. However, it is clear that as children grow up parents can influence the nature of their children's play through the opportunities they provide, the information and example they set the child, and the way they respond to the child's behaviour. Responsive, child-centred parenting is associated with more social play than harsh, coercive parenting. Also, children who enjoy their play experiences with their peers tend to have parents who make opportunities for them to be with other children, take an interest in their friendships and discuss their friends with them.²⁰

However, as children get older there is a tendency, amongst many parents, to ensure their children take part in organised, adult-led activities outside of school hours. These organised activities have been shown to benefit children but there is concern that if children spend most of their out-of-school time in organised activities, with little time for free play, they may suffer some developmental or emotional distress. There is little information about the best balance between structured time and free play, where the children take the lead and develop their own play. As free play has been shown to offer children benefits that may help protect them from the effects of pressure and stress, it seems that a balance is required. As Ginsburg suggests "It is likely that the balance that needs to be achieved will be different for every child based on the child's academic needs, temperament, environment, and the family's needs."³⁴ (page 7)



By the time children are 10 and 11 years old they are more influenced by their peers than their parents when it comes to decisions about sporting and physical pursuits. However, there is evidence that parents' attitudes to physical activity have a noticeable impact on their children's activity levels. Research with parents of 10-11 year old children has found that although parents understood the importance of physical activity to their children's health and their important role in encouraging this, they rarely participated in activities as full families because of the demands of work, school and the diverse interests of family members.⁸⁹

The nature of provision for play

Summary

If local spaces are to offer children the range of experiences they need and thrive on, they must be well designed and maintained to ensure children have regular access to new and interesting experiences that stretch and absorb them, whatever their age, interests and ability. The existence of good spaces and opportunities for play allows children from different social groups to mix, can reduce socially unacceptable behaviour and vandalism and provides children and young people with places they can feel both safe and independent.

The type of environment available to children for play has a major impact on the nature of that play so careful consideration must be given to the planning and design of public spaces. The way in which children relate to each other can alter depending on whether or not there are natural features in the environment and the extent to which the needs of children of differing ages, interests and abilities have been addressed.

“The richer the range of possibilities the environment offers, the more chance of a child finding the possibility that they in particular need.”¹⁵ (page 21)

The type of environment, including the design of play spaces and the play features and equipment offered, can affect the nature of that play, influencing both the extent to which children can move around and be physically active, and the way children interact with each other.³³ To promote physical activity and imaginative play, spaces need to offer sufficient space and age appropriate equipment or features to allow children to move around, fast and slowly, change direction, move objects around, change the appearance of things, and explore a variety of natural and manufactured objects and surfaces.³⁸

The nature of the space also influences the way in which children relate to each other. For example, one US study reported in Bird³², noted that when children played in equipped play areas their social hierarchy developed according to their physical ability, with the tougher more physical children dominating. However, in an open grassy area planted with shrubs, more fantasy and social play developed and the imaginative, creative children were more in evidence.⁹⁰ In other research, in schools, it was found that bullying was more likely to occur in plain tarmac play areas, with limited space, than in play areas where children were encouraged to relate to nature. Although there were other differences in the characteristics of the schools studied it was considered that the more interactive and engaging natural environment helped reduce bullying.⁹¹



The nature of the play environment is particularly important in inclusive provision. As Casey (2010) puts it: “Making sure disabled children are given the chance and welcomed to play with other local children will help them get involved in children’s sub-culture, giving them pleasure and promote inclusion through other areas of their lives”.¹⁵

Play provision must also be able to balance the need to protect children from unacceptable hazards with the need to provide opportunities for risk, challenge and excitement.⁴⁰ Providers must understand and be able to identify which types of risks are acceptable. An “acceptable risk” has been described as one which “it would be reasonable to assume will not result in harm, or where any resulting harm is itself acceptable”. An “unacceptable” risk is one which “it would be reasonable to assume may lead to harm, and where any resulting harm is itself unacceptable”.⁹² Although there are differences in the ways boys and girls use equipment, play areas need to offer children challenge, diversity or variation, and complexity.⁴²

The distance children have to travel to their local play spaces is a major factor in their decisions about whether or not to use those spaces. The ones they use most tend to be closest to home, and if a play space is more than a few hundred metres away from home children are less likely to use it. However, the distance children are prepared to travel to play depends on their age and the facilities available.⁴⁰

Staffed play provision

Summary

Staffed play provision is often popular with children, especially where the staff work in line with the playwork principles, allowing children opportunities for freedom and choice whilst not organising and directing their play. The relationships children have with staff in these settings is often different to their relationships at school or home and children welcome the presence of adults they know will support them, but not organise or dominate them.

Adults can help facilitate play through creating an environment where children feel safe, can play in a variety of ways, and can choose how and with whom to play. Staffed play provision can also play an important role in children’s developing relationships with their community, helping them feel a part of the neighbourhood and offering opportunities for them to meet others, creating social networks and cutting across social divides.

“The stories of the children demonstrate that, while they love well-designed playgrounds and attractive, spacious play areas, it is the staff – the ‘software’ – rather than the ‘hardware’ of play equipment that, for them, really makes the difference.”⁶⁴ (page xiv)

For some children one of the most important places for play is in provision staffed by skilled childcare and playworkers. The *Better Play Evaluation*,⁹³ showed how staffed provision fosters physical, emotional, mental and social health. As well as offering opportunities for exercise, the projects evaluated supported children’s increasing self-confidence, pride and sense of self-worth. The staff’s skills and knowledge were crucial to this.

Research for Play England in 2009 found that, in staffed play provision it was the presence of the staff that made the biggest difference to the children’s play experience. The presence of play workers, whether in play settings or in open space, as play rangers, provided an atmosphere of safety, increasing the confidence of children to play freely, and increasing the range of play experiences offered in the space provided. Children using staffed provision felt that the presence of playworkers offered them the opportunity to “play games, take risks, test boundaries, and socialise with others in a way that is not always possible at home, on the street, at school or in unsupervised playgrounds.” (page xiv) Parents also saw staffed play provision as making a major contribution to their children’s and their own lives. They saw it as offering a range of benefits relating to their children’s learning, health and friendships but primarily for the opportunities it gave the children to play freely and in their own way.⁶⁴

The relationships children have with the staff in play settings is often different from the relationships they have with adults at home or at school. Children and playworkers often see each other as partners in decision-making and children are grateful for the presence of a “friendly grown-up who wants nothing from them but for them to be themselves.”⁶⁴ (page xiv) For children who are disabled the attitudes of the staff are at least as important as the physical accessibility of the place. Good provision addresses physical access, support for a child to participate and the provision of suitable activities and resources.⁹⁴

The success of the staffed play projects described in *People Make Play* was due in part to the fact that they were staffed by playworkers whose practice was rooted in the Playwork Principles. (see appendix 1) The role of the adults in these settings was to create an environment which offered different types of play experience, allowing children to play freely whilst “striking a balance between allowing full expression through play and cultivating an atmosphere of safety, tolerance and mutual respect.”⁶⁴ (page xv) Integral to good playwork is reflective practice which links theory and practice to inform and improve the service to children.⁹⁵

Staff in play provision also have an important role in creating links with children’s families and communities. One evaluation in England found the most valued staff were those who were most responsive to the children’s needs and also connected with their families. They liked “individually tailored support, negotiated with children and parents, holistic family orientated approaches ... addressing needs of parents and other family members as well as children, trusting relationships with project workers, multi-agency approaches and sustained services.”⁹⁶ In staffed play provision parents can learn about their children and understand their behaviour better, by learning how to observe their children playing and play with or alongside them.⁹⁵

Gleave cites research demonstrating that staffed adventure playgrounds in particular, can offer children risk and challenge, but in an environment where, in general, they feel safe.⁷³ Adventure playgrounds encourage children to explore, move around and stretch and challenge themselves, promoting healthy physical, emotional, mental, social and creative development and an investigation into the economic benefits of play provision has suggested that: “investment in an adventure playground has a positive rate of return and is therefore a good use of public resources”.⁹⁷ (page 22)



Active play is very important for children's physical health and the staff in play provision have a central role in ensuring the play environment is designed to allow children to move around freely and energetically. Adults can help to facilitate active play through creating an environment where children feel safe but still have the freedom and independence to explore and play freely. The role of staff in supporting play is to understand the children's interests, observe their play, provide suitable resources, interact appropriately, and only intervene when invited by the child or when absolutely necessary.⁴⁰ In a small study of after-school provision in the USA it was demonstrated that there was significantly more time spent in physical activity during free-play sessions than in organised, adult led sessions. Physical activity was more likely to be discouraged in adult-led sessions.⁹⁸

Staffed play provision can also play an important role in children's developing relationship with their local communities. Using staffed play provision has been shown to help children feel at home in their neighbourhood "transforming it into a trusted place in which they feel welcome, know their peers and others, and consider themselves to be at home."⁶⁴ Research has also demonstrated that new play projects in deprived areas can make a significant difference to neighbourhood social interaction and the sense of community ownership and positive play experiences can support children who are otherwise disadvantaged, by "providing a protective and compensatory factor in their quality of life".⁹⁵ (page 12)

Parents and carers can also benefit economically from staffed play provision through being able to work or train, knowing their children are being cared for. This results in more stable working patterns, the ability to work for longer hours, more stable earnings and less dependence on benefits. In addition childcare and play provision provides employment and volunteering opportunities in local communities.⁹⁹ Parents also see opportunities for volunteering and gaining valuable skills. In addition parents benefit from the chance staffed play provision gives them to meet with others, create social networks and cut across social divides that would not otherwise be breached.⁶⁴

Play at school

Summary

For many children, who do not play outside in their local neighbourhoods, school play times can be their main opportunity to play with their friends. Opportunities for play at school form an important element in children's overall views about school, and can have a marked affect on children's behaviour and approach to learning within the classroom. However, in many schools break-times are dominated by organised clubs and classes, and children who misbehave in class are often denied play opportunities as a punishment. Schools therefore play a crucial part in ensuring children can get the enjoyment, health and developmental benefits of play.

"School break-times offer children time and space to feel, think and act in ways that are significantly different from the structured classroom and to reap the associated benefits in terms of general health, development and well-being. Crucially, when they talk to adults about what is important in their lives, space and time to play outdoors has shown to be at the top of the list of children's desires and preferences."¹⁰⁰

Children's experiences of school are important in their well-being and quality of life and during the school day children need breaks when they can play freely, mix with others on their own terms and choose and direct their own activity. Children's opportunities for play at school form an important element of their views about schools. "Play helps children adjust to new surroundings as well as giving them a basis for extending their learning."³⁴ In some primary schools, sport and active play are used by teachers to make lessons more interesting, keeping the attention of the children.⁴⁸

For many children, outdoor playtime at school has been shown to be the time when they are most physically active, especially during longer breaks.⁵⁷ In school break-times primary school children have systematically been observed playing sustained games such as chase, skipping, rhyming and clapping games, and pretend play.¹⁴

Research in schools has shown that playground interventions in school can help increase children's activity levels⁹⁵ and environmental changes in school playgrounds, for example providing playground markings, activity courses, and appropriate equipment have been found to increase children's activity levels at

breaktime.⁴⁷ Other research has also suggested that, although children are more active during longer breaks, the longer they play the less active they become. Children have been shown to be more active when they are playing ballgames, have free access to non-fixed equipment and when there are suitable markings on the ground. However, when teachers manage or observe children in the playground the children's activity levels tend to be reduced.¹⁰¹

Children in the UK can have up to 600 break periods at school per year, providing valuable opportunities to take part in daily physical activity. Research has shown that primary school boys and girls may spend about one third of breaktimes in energetic play with boys tending to be more active than girls.⁴⁷ However, in many schools this is also a time for organised activities and clubs. For example, in Scotland a 2006 report showed that 25% of extracurricular activities in secondary schools took place at lunchtime and 27% of primary and 29% of secondary school pupils attended lunch or breaktime clubs.¹⁰²

It is also argued that offering children a variety of play opportunities, including with children of different ages, and in natural environments, can reduce aggressive behaviour and conflict in school playgrounds.¹⁰³ However, in some schools children have been systematically prevented from playing in ways that bring them into contact with nature. School staff have been observed stopping children from climbing trees, on grounds of health and safety; playing in puddles and water in case they get dirty; and moving objects, in case they cause damage. One reviewer in Canada commented that: "Destructive behaviour is sometimes encouraged by...large, boring, open play areas, where space is not broken up by trees, low bushes, hedges or other natural boundaries...environments like this, which often incorporate little or no natural shade, make it impossible for small peer groups to get away from each other."¹⁰⁴

Ways of ensuring schools offer the best possible play opportunities include, for example, allowing children to play outdoors in all weathers and providing appropriate clothing for this; ensuring the play areas include plenty of scrap materials and objects that children can move around, change and manipulate; and supporting teachers and staff in allowing children to test and challenge themselves, sometimes taking risks, when they play.¹⁰⁰ Guidance from the Scottish Government to schools, and endorsed by the Health and Safety Executive, recommends that teachers and others taking children outside for lessons and other activities should adopt an approach to risk assessment that incorporates a conscious consideration of the benefits of the activity alongside the potential risks, balancing the two so as not to eliminate all possible challenge in an attempt to ensure maximum safety.¹⁰⁵



Playing outside

Summary

Most children want to be able to play outside in the local neighbourhood near where they live. They enjoy spaces that offer them the opportunity to experiment, to challenge themselves physically, to feel free and to interact with others. The changing nature of the outdoors makes it a more interesting, stimulating place to play, and allows children the sense of fun and freedom they crave whilst promoting their physical, emotional and psychological health.

Children's physical activity levels are related to the amount of time they spend outdoors and are therefore affected by the weather and seasons. They are also influenced by the attitudes of adults to outdoor play and children who spend time outdoors without an adult tend to be more active than when there is an adult. In addition children who play outdoors more often have better social networks, are more confident and are more involved in their local communities than those who are outside less often.

Children's opportunities for, and experience of outdoor play vary widely, but there are some distinct differences in the experiences of girls and boys, those who are disabled or not disabled, those from different social backgrounds and those from varied types of housing environment. Religious and cultural beliefs may also influence children's play opportunities and experiences.

“Where children can range independently, their environment becomes a field of ‘free action’ in which they can follow their own desires and create situations of wonder and uncertainty. An appreciation of the relationship between the nature of play and an environmental field of free action is crucial in designing play friendly neighbourhoods.”¹⁰ (page 13: citing Kylvta 2004)

Most children enjoy playing outside and many would like to be able to do so more often than they do now. For many, outdoor play is their favourite type of play, allowing them to experiment, take physical risks and have a sense of freedom. It also offers them better opportunities to interact with others and build personal relationships.¹⁰⁶ Research in Australia has shown that children who regularly use public open spaces do so because “it was fun, they could run around and be active, and play with friends and family.” (page 413) They also enjoyed having enough space to play with balls, ride bikes and use the playground equipment. Many also enjoyed the natural environment where they could hide in bushes and trees and play with their pets.¹⁰⁷

The changing nature of the outdoors makes it a more interesting play place for children than indoors and children value the times that are able to play freely, with their friends, in and near their homes.⁶⁶ However, frequently children do not use their local parks and open spaces, especially if they feel unsafe or intimidated by older children, or if play equipment is run down and vandalised.¹⁰⁶ Children often feel that decisions about their local neighbourhood do not respect their needs.¹⁰⁸

Ensuring there are good quality spaces for children to play outside in their local neighbourhood makes an important contribution to children's health. For example, good quality spaces allow children, not only to be physically active, but also to “draw on their own resources, develop their identity and social relations, connect to the community, [and] have contact with nature...”¹⁰⁹ (page 394). A number of researchers have demonstrated that outdoor play, especially in more natural environments, gives children a sense of freedom, healthier personal development, increased cognitive functioning, emotional resilience, and opportunities for self-discovery.³³

Extensive evidence from around the world demonstrates that playing outdoors is very important for children's physical activity levels. For example, in Scotland, the *Growing up in Scotland* study found that three-quarters of the least active children had not run around or played outside with their mother in the week prior to the interview.⁸⁸



Children's physical activity levels have been shown to be related to the amount of time they spend outdoors so can be affected by the season and the weather and both have been found to be related to different patterns and levels of physical activity in adults and children.¹¹⁰ Children are more active in summer and less active in winter and this is probably due to the amount of time they spend outside.¹¹¹ One study showed that 89% of 3-5 year olds played outside in July as compared to only 21% in January.⁴⁷ There are also significant gender differences in the way children play, especially outside. Boys tend to be more physically active, more competitive and enjoy taking more risks, whilst girls are more likely to enjoy more imaginative play, are less physically active and spend more time talking to each other.^{56 106}

The nature of the outdoor space also affects children's activity level and one study of a New Zealand play setting, found that children were more active when the outside spaces was altered to include football goals or dens. Outdoors there were also fewer rules, more space, and running and shouting were more acceptable, encouraging children to be more active.¹¹²

Children playing outside seek contact with their friends and, for this to be possible, they need to be able to move around their local environment as widely and safely as possible from a young age.¹¹³ Research for Playday 2010 based on both primary and secondary research, illustrated the importance of being able to play out in the local neighbourhood to children's social and physical well-being. Children who played outside less often had fewer social networks, were less self-confident and were less involved in their local communities.¹⁰⁸

Where children do play outside regularly this is not always because they choose to, but can be because being indoors can lead to family tensions, especially where there is little room inside their homes.⁶⁹ Shelter, the housing charity, estimates that 1.6 million children in Britain live in bad, overcrowded housing that is unfit for habitation or is temporary accommodation. Living in poor housing conditions has a negative effect of children's ability to form friendships and on their enjoyment of their free time.¹¹⁴

Creating and maintaining good quality spaces and facilities for play can be important for social cohesion. Adults see children playing as a catalyst for adults to form friendships and social networks "helping families to get to know each other and improving community spirit".¹⁰⁸ When adults in a community know each other there tends to be less crime and the more different people meet, the safer a neighbourhood becomes. ¹¹⁵One study in Switzerland showed that families whose children did not play outdoors much had poorer social networks.¹¹⁶



Disabled children can be as keen to play outdoors as others, to make choices and to socialise with friends, but many feel they will be unsafe or bullied if they go out in their local neighbourhoods. The families of disabled children are also more likely to be poorer than others, increasing their disadvantages,¹¹⁷ and disabled children are frequently excluded from mainstream play opportunities by the design of the play spaces, inadequate routes to them and the attitudes of others.⁹⁴

The distance needed to travel to play spaces also affects the extent to which they are used and this too is related to gender. As children grow and gain independence boys living near parks or public open spaces are more likely to be allowed out alone than those living further away. Although the same is true for girls fewer are allowed out alone. Boys allowed out alone also tend to be at home less often than others and to spend more time outdoors or at friends' homes.⁵⁹ Other research shows that people need to live near green spaces if they are to use them regularly.³³

There are also differences in children's outdoor play patterns between children from different social groups. For example, one study showed that children living in a disadvantaged housing estate spent much of their free time playing outside with their friends in the local neighbourhood whilst those attending a fee-paying school were more likely to be involved in organised clubs and activities, or to play in each others' homes. One reason was that lack of space at home made it harder for children from the estate to play in their friends' homes.⁶⁹

Outdoor play, therefore, gives children the opportunity for exercise and social interaction, as well as helping them to develop physically, emotionally and psychologically.⁷⁴ There is also evidence of other health benefits. For example a study of 12 year old Australian schoolchildren concluded that spending time outdoors had a protective effect for myopia (short-sightedness) in children.¹¹⁸

The value of outdoor space for children's play has been recognised in other countries, for example in Rotterdam urban design is underpinned by a set of planning guidelines which are based on the principle that all public space is a potential play area and that all new and renovated developments should allow a clearly defined amount of safe, easily accessible, attractive space for children to play.¹¹⁹

Local streets and open spaces

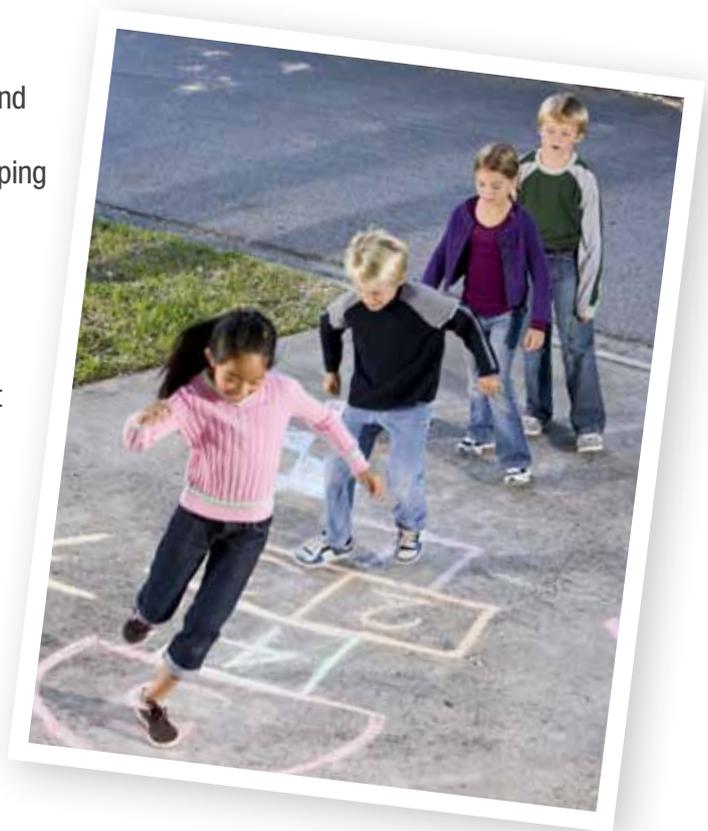
Summary

Children's outdoor play is most commonly in the streets and open spaces near their homes so the quality of the built environment has a significant effect on their well-being. Street play is good for friendships, socialisation, developing independence and learning about risk and challenge. Where it is sufficiently safe for children to walk, rather than go by car, children often do so and benefit from the physical exercise and opportunities for play and social contacts. Attractive local environments, where children can play and travel around feeling safe, help them develop feelings of trust, a sense of belonging and a good understanding of their neighbourhood and community.

“Children's play in their immediate neighbourhoods offers the potential to: wander through different spaces and create 'off-path' adventures; create their own special places away from adult gaze; learn to care about their valued spaces, in particular natural spaces that offer high affordance for diverse play forms; and add to the narratives and histories that add significance and meaning to place.”¹¹⁰ (page 21)

The built environment has a significant effect on children's opportunities for play, active recreation and sport, affecting their opportunities for freedom and independence and their health.⁷¹ "Children's developing relationship with their environment, through free exploration and play, is vital to both their sense of well-being and to the quality of that environment."¹⁰ (page 21) The design of outdoor play spaces needs to consider the chronological development of children and their need for different types of stimuli and experiences at different ages and stages of their development.¹²⁰

Street play is good for friendships, socialisation, developing independence and realistic understanding of risk.⁶⁹ Safe local streets and parks are valued by children, and encourage communities to take responsibility for their surroundings.¹²¹ Children themselves value the freedom they find in these outdoors spaces.⁵⁸



There is also evidence that children who frequently play in good quality local open spaces become physically fitter, have better social networks and can entertain themselves for longer than those always supervised by adults.⁴⁹ Children appear to be more active when rules, policies and supervision allow for non-competitive, free play.¹²² Attractive local environments can therefore improve physical activity levels³¹ and evidence suggests that the amount of physical activity children get can depend on the type of environment.

Research in England, with children living on a deprived housing estate, has shown that the types of games they were playing were often traditional and mostly involved physical exercise. The hard spaces were important to the children as places to meet their friends and open spaces were crucial to children's social relationships.⁶⁹

Feelings of trust, a sense of belonging and mutual support are more likely to develop in places where people regularly see each other¹²³ and this could be supported by ensuring the preservation of good quality public space where children feel safe and where they can congregate and play without being considered a nuisance by neighbours and other users.⁶⁹

When playing outside in local spaces children also benefit from contact with the natural world, experiencing the changing seasons, finding out about plants, developing large-scale spatial awareness and familiarity with their neighbourhood.¹²⁴

In his foreword to the policy document *Designing Streets*, John Swinney MSP, the Cabinet Secretary for Finance and Sustainable Growth, acknowledged the importance of local streets in the success of local communities, "Scotland's best streets provide some of the most valuable social spaces that we possess.... Well-designed streets can be a vital resource in social, economic and cultural terms; Attractive and well-connected street networks encourage more people to walk and cycle to local destinations, improving their health while reducing motor traffic, energy use and pollution."⁵ (page 1)

As children's outdoor play is most commonly in the streets and open spaces where they live, the local environment is a key factor in children's wellbeing. These local spaces are particularly important to children with little or no play space at home.^{40 38} But evidence suggest that children in the poorest families, and those who are most vulnerable, are most affected by run-down and neglected environments.¹²⁵

Moving around the local neighbourhood

Summary

Much play takes place as children travel around their neighbourhood, especially on their way to and from school. Although when children are walking with adults they tend to walk more quickly, they move around more, diverging from their route more often, when there are no adults present. Children's independent travel to school has been seen by parents in one area of Scotland as an important time for them to learn responsibility, time management and how to take their own decisions.

“At the level of communities and neighbourhoods, children's physical health and activity needs to be supported by nice, safe environments for children to walk, cycle and, perhaps most importantly, play in.”⁸⁴ (Page 91)

Children's outdoor play and their movement around their local neighbourhood is very closely linked and much play takes place as children go from one place to another. Short local journeys, on foot or by bicycle, are frequently times for play and experimentation, and play often involves moving around local spaces and routes for fun, adventure and investigation.

Children's journeys to and from school are also an important opportunity for play if they are able to travel independently. The UK National Travel Survey indicates that more children walk to school in Scotland than in England and Wales. This was also found by Ross who found that children in Fife were more likely to walk to school than children studied in England. In Scotland 86% of children travelled to school without an adult, 75% walking.¹²⁶ In later research Ross described the many opportunities for spontaneous play on children's journeys to and from school. As she observed “Such free-play can only occur when children are able to set their own agenda, making decisions along the way, setting the pace, observing, interacting and reacting as they travel.”¹²⁷ (page 383)

Photographs taken by these Scottish children, walking to school without accompanying adults, show children walking in all weathers, exploring their environment, interacting with adults in their everyday routines, observing natural features, forming relationships with friends, identifying significant places and making decisions. For these children the journey to and from school offers a wide range of both solitary and sociable play experiences.¹²⁷

Cycling is also important for physical exercise and research in the East of England has demonstrated that children who cycle to school are much more active at other times and are aerobically fitter than other children. There is also a suggestion that children in rural areas, across England may be more active than other children.³³

Other evidence suggests that children, when walking along roads, tend to walk faster when accompanied by an adult than if on their own, but expend a similar amount of energy even when there is no adult with them. The researchers speculated that this suggests that, without an adult, children “behave in a more meandering fashion, possibly interacting with other children or the environment, and so moving across space less quickly.”⁵⁹ (page 464) Mackett and his colleagues, in their study of 8-11 year old children in Hertfordshire, showed that children's travel behaviour in their local neighbourhood varies when they have an adult accompanying them and when they do not. Children tend to move around more when there is no adult present although they move faster, in one direction, when there is. Also boys are allowed more freedom than girls for all types of travel around their local neighbourhood.⁵⁹

In Scotland the existence of small, local schools, attended by local children, seems to make it easier for primary school children to walk to school. In the survey of children in Fife, three in four children lived within one mile of their school. Of the children living within half a mile of their school, 95% walked but none of the children living more than 2 miles away did. Ross also found that children tended to travel to school separately but leave school and walk home with their friends. In this study parents viewed school journeys as an important time for children when they could be responsible, learn about time management and take their own decisions. This view amongst parents was important in their decision to let their children walk to school.¹²⁷

However, in the UK generally, traffic is a major issue affecting younger children's ability to play outdoors. Busy roads, in both rural and urban areas, limit children's scope for play in their street and safe road crossings are essential for children's independent mobility.⁴⁰ Where it is sufficiently safe and interesting for people to walk, rather than travel by car, they often do so and are more likely to socialise with friends as they do so. This is especially true for boys with local friends of similar ages who are more likely than others to walk or cycle for journeys of up to a mile.¹²⁸

Taking similar factors to these into account in Denmark, the *Rotterdam Planning Norms*, require that in residential neighbourhoods there are spaces for play which are centrally situated, visible from housing, in unpolluted location, have access to sun and shade and that cars are not allowed to park on the side of the road where children play.¹¹⁹

Dedicated play parks

Summary

Play parks and designed play areas are popular with children although they are often seen as being primarily for younger children. However, recent improvements in the design of play areas has helped overcome some of the problems associated with static, fenced, fixed equipment play parks and the use of more natural materials, undulating surfaces and imaginative landscaping. This allows children to experience irregularity and develop the skills and abilities necessary for assessing physical risk.

“Social development is now believed to be a precursor for cognitive development so play provision offering opportunities for cooperative play, modelling behaviour, conflict resolution, turn-taking etc, like well designed play areas, are important.”¹²⁹

For many children the places they enjoy playing include play areas and play parks specifically designed for them and there is evidence that the design and nature of these play parks can have an important impact on the benefits children get from play. For example, the use of natural materials and undulating surfaces can provide a stimulating landscape, where children can experience the irregularity and develop the skills and abilities necessary for assessing physical risk. Recent changes in play area design have shown that play parks can provide opportunities for more exciting and natural play, and that there are many examples of this in Scotland.¹³⁰

Research published in 2009, assessing the impact of refurbishing nine play parks in Glasgow, asked local children how they used the play areas, what they liked or disliked about them and how they felt they could be improved. Most of the children in the study used their local play parks regularly with 64% saying they did so at least once a week, although 32% said they did not use them very often. The children looked forward to playing outside in their local play parks, where they could meet friends, sit and chat, play and have the freedom to run about. They most liked nearby play parks so they could walk there on their own or with friends. But some children said they would like play parks even closer to where they lived. Favourite equipment included spinning discs, tyre swings, climbing frames and flying foxes but there were many requests for more equipment, particularly when parks were busy and older children forced the younger ones off the equipment.¹³¹

The children from Glasgow who did not use their local parks very often said this was partly because they felt unsafe or were bored. They were keen to see more interesting activities being organised there. Although the children wanted better equipment to play on, they also spent time playing in the wilder, more natural areas including playing in the wild meadows, making dens and climbing trees. Nearly one in three of the children said they sometimes played in fields.¹³¹

In another study, with disabled children in England, over half the children used outdoor play areas less than once a month. The reasons for not playing out more included lack of accessible routes to the play spaces, the lack of suitable play equipment, unsuitable transport, poor parking and toilet facilities and the fact that there was little or no information telling them about suitable facilities.¹³²

The way in which the design of a playground can affect children's play is described in early findings from Hughes' modifications to adventure playgrounds in the London Borough of Islington. These have indicated that modifying the play features in the playground, to encourage more physically active play, can achieve this.¹³³ Hughes' modifications to five adventure playgrounds, all different in their nature, led to increased locomotor play in the spaces offered, with increases ranging from 15% to 56%. Not only did the activity in the modified area increase but activity levels across the playgrounds also seemed to rise.⁸³

Natural spaces and features

Summary

Children seem to be attracted to environments containing natural features and, given the choice, prefer to play in open spaces where there are trees and other natural elements. The presence of natural features in underprivileged neighbourhoods seems to have a positive effect on children's social contacts, concentration, self-control and ability to deal with stressful events. Natural environments change over time, offering opportunities for imaginative, creative, dynamic, social and decision-making play. The existence of green spaces in a neighbourhood may also help strengthen community ties by encouraging people to spend more time outdoors where they can meet in both planned and incidental ways.

"The powerful combination of a diversity of play experiences and direct contact with nature has direct benefits for children's physical, mental and emotional health. Free play opportunities in natural settings offer possibilities for restoration, and hence, well-being."¹³⁴ (pages 59-60)

Children seem to be particularly attracted to natural environments for play and, given the choice, often prefer to play in open spaces where there are trees than where there are not.¹³⁵ It is suggested that this might be because of the diversity and feeling of 'timelessness' these spaces offer.³² Natural environments encourage children to develop all types of play, including more imaginative forms of play, which in man-made environments is often overshadowed by play involving physical ability.³² (page 66)

Free play and exposure to nature are also increasingly being recognised as essential to healthy child development. The benefits include improved levels of attention, better fitness and motor functioning and lower sickness rates.¹³⁶ The inclusion of natural features in inclusive provision is important for disabled children offering similar opportunities and benefits as it does to non-disabled children.⁶⁷



Natural environments vary in nature and change over time offering opportunities for more imaginative, creative, dynamic, social and decision-making play.³³ One study found that primary school-aged children had a “special bond” with the natural environment finding it more attractive than a built-up environment. Research into children’s preferences for different types of landscape, indicate that “savannah-like” landscapes are most popular, apparently appealing to “innate, instinctive feelings of familiarity and safety.”⁴² (page 68) Another study in Sweden, which compared two nurseries, one with a playground area surrounded by tall buildings with low plants and a cycle path, and one with a mature orchard and some woodland where children played outside every day in all weathers, found that the children using the more natural play area had better motor co-ordination and concentration abilities than the others.¹³⁷

Natural environments seem to satisfy children’s need to experience “familiarity and changeability at the same time”. For example, “a tree is a permanent and trusted element in a child’s world, but changes with every season”. The variety of shapes, materials and colours found in nature stimulate children’s imaginations and exploring in natural environments can help satisfy their need for adventure and freedom. “It is by interacting with the non-human world that children come to know themselves and their boundaries, thus also providing an important lesson on interacting with other people”.⁴² (page 68)

These types of environment are more likely to stimulate diverse and creative play than purpose built play parks and evidence suggests that, when schools integrate the use of natural environments into their curriculum, children’s academic performance improves.³²

Evidence from a number of studies suggests that green, natural features in a deprived neighbourhood help promote children’s social contact, concentration, self-discipline and ability to deal with stressful situations.⁴² For young people in disadvantaged circumstances natural spaces can offer respite and escape from frequently noisy and stressful family lives.⁴⁰ One study, in a poor housing complex in Chicago, found that children are more likely to play in spaces where there were trees or grass than in the relatively sparsely vegetated playgrounds.³²

Children have been shown to experience intense emotions when in natural environments and it seems that, when close to nature, they are helped to make meaning of their lives, developing a sense of purpose and discovering a sense of values.⁴² One evaluation of Forest Schools in England demonstrated that playing in woodland increased children’s knowledge and understanding of nature, increased their confidence and independence and made them more likely to initiate their own play.¹³⁸

Natural environments for play are not only important places for children to learn about the natural world, but the “richness and novelty” of the outdoors stimulates children’s brain development.



The experience children have outdoors is important as a basis for literacy, science and other types of learning.¹²⁰ A number of studies have shown that contact with nature can have a positive effect on children's concentration and self-discipline. One study showed that, when people (both adults and children) in a built-up area could see natural features from their windows, or when there were plants in an office, attention spans were increased.⁴² People who use green space regularly are also more likely than others to be physically active.¹³⁹

Dutch research into children's experience of nature suggests that children regard nature as important and stimulating in its own right, not just as a place for activities, and that access to nature close to home 'the jungle around the corner' is fundamental to personal development.⁴²

Contact with nature has also been shown to have a positive impact on mood, concentration, self-discipline and physiological stress, and there is some evidence that those suffering from anxiety cannot recover as quickly when there are not enough green spaces in their surroundings as when there are.⁴² The factors influencing mental health might include increased physical activity, natural daylight, stimulation of the senses and beauty.¹³⁹

In addition, walking in 'wilder' nature, has been shown to have a positive effect on recovery from 'attention fatigue' and for children with ADHD, being in a natural environment has been found to reduce the symptoms of the disorder.⁴² Research with children aged 7-12 yrs with ADHD found that children's concentration was significantly better after walking in natural settings and that ADHD symptoms were better controlled by children in green space than those in outdoor urban space or indoors. This effect was consistent regardless of age, sex, family income, severity of condition, and whether from urban, suburban or rural homes. Although children were better off alone in all three environments, when the children were in groups, only 'green exercise' benefited symptoms significantly. One study found a noticeable reduction in the symptoms of ADHD amongst children who had been playing, during the previous week, in areas with significant amounts of grass and tree cover.⁴²

Children who play in more natural areas grow up with a greater environmental awareness than those who do not and having an understanding of nature from a young age seems to promote a more caring attitude towards the natural environment.⁴² One study showed that children under 12 years old, who had spent time in woodlands, were most likely to visit woodlands for pleasure as adults.³² Two other studies, of secondary school students, also revealed the positive impact on children of playing in wild environments. Students who had played in natural environments in their childhood were less frightened of both wild animals and getting lost as they grew up. They also needed fewer modern comforts than those who had only played in an urban environment as children.⁴² Others cite research indicating that children who play in natural spaces are more likely to seek out these types of spaces for both exercise and mental relaxation when they are adults.³³

Research from the USA demonstrates a link between the presence of green spaces and stronger personal ties in neighbourhoods. The presence of trees in an urban space encouraged greater use of public space and improved people's moods.³³ Natural environments can also strengthen communities by encouraging people to spend more time outdoors, where they can meet in both planned and incidental ways and help create a sense of belonging and identity.³²

Although the evidence of the positive effect of nature on children's development is convincing it is mostly based on small scale studies and looks at children at one point in time. Further research is required if the longer-term effects of children's contact with nature is to be properly assessed.⁴²



Chapter 4

Children's changing play patterns



Children's changing play patterns

Given the opportunity children will play wherever they are. For most, their preferred playing places are in the outdoor spaces around the roads, streets and places close to where they live and go to school. But for many their play opportunities in these spaces are restricted by both concerns about the safety of public open spaces and the attraction of indoor alternatives such as television, computer games and the internet.³³

Changes over time

Summary

Children's play patterns have changed over time and the extent to which children play outside has decreased significantly over the past 30 years. Today's children are constrained by their parents' and their own fears for their safety, a general loss of community cohesion, the loss of outdoor space as more housing is built with smaller public spaces included, increased volume and speed of traffic and negative adult attitudes. In addition, concern amongst providers about health and safety issues has frequently resulted in existing play facilities being bland, offering few opportunities for children to stretch and challenge themselves.

Although still popular, playing outside in the local neighbourhood is much less common for children today than it was for their parents and grandparents. Recent UK Playday research indicated a major reduction in outdoor play with 90% of today's adults saying they used to play outside regularly but nearly 30% of today's children saying they hardly ever do. There has also been a major reduction over time in "community spirit" and a decline in the number of local friendships children have.¹⁰⁸

There is a widespread belief that local neighbourhoods are much less safe places for children to play than they used to be. This is demonstrated in one study which found that, whilst remembering some of the environmental problems from their childhoods, today's parents and carers felt that things had got much worse and that their children's experience was very different from their own.¹⁴⁰ Studies reported in 1973 and 2005 show that, in the early 1970s around 75% of children played in the streets and pavements near their homes but 30 years later only 15% did so.⁵⁶

The distance children travel independently from home has also changed dramatically over the past forty years. By the late 1990s the radius from home in which children regularly moved around independently, their 'play range', was only one ninth of what it was in 1970.¹⁴¹ This meant that by the 1990s, a child of 9 years old was allowed to play outside only to the same extent as a 7-year-old from 20 years earlier.⁵¹ A more recent study by the Policy Studies Institute suggests that although there has been less deterioration in children's opportunities for independent mobility over the past ten years there has been no improvement (unpublished) and children are still routinely curtailed in their opportunities for independence and freedom in their neighbourhoods.

For many children, this change in lifestyle means they now spend significantly more time indoors watching television, playing electronic games and using the internet. One study found that, on Sunday afternoons, 32% of children from the poorest families in the UK watch television.¹⁴²

Changes over time in outdoor play patterns are not unique to the UK and children in many countries now play outside less than previous generations did. A five year, longitudinal study of children in Australia showed that the average amount of time spent outdoors significantly declined over time amongst all the boys and the older girls. Parents were more likely to encourage the older boys to play outdoors than the girls and for most children lack of adult supervision at home tended to be associated with less time outdoors. Having someone to play with outside was important but, for girls, parental encouragement also seemed very important.¹⁴³ Children in the Netherlands have similar experiences in outdoor play as those in the UK and are also experiencing a depletion in the amount of space available to them for play, especially in urban areas.⁴²

Constraints on outdoor play

Summary

There are a number of wide-ranging concerns which prevent children from playing out more frequently than they would like to and than is good for them. These have been well-documented and include:

- The safety of the neighbourhood
- Fear of other young people
- Loss of the sense of community
- The nature of the built environment
- Lack of suitable spaces
- Unsafe roads
- Negative adult attitudes
- Lack of opportunity for risk and challenge

Despite the fact that children would like to be able to play outside more, and the well documented benefits of them doing so, there are many reasons why they do not. The most important constraint on children's outdoor play is their, and their parents, concerns for their safety. There is a widespread belief that allowing children out to play, without adult supervision, might put them in harm's way and there is great pressure on parents to ensure their children are fully protected. They consider the streets and roads to be dangerous and that there may be no one around "who's there for you, looking out for you".¹⁴⁰ (page 19)

Children are also concerned about families arguing and falling out; not fitting in with other children; busy traffic; threat of crime; bullying by older children and run-down play areas.¹⁴⁰ Parents hold similar views and talk about safety, the quality of parks and urban design as influences on children's opportunities for, or barriers to, free play, walking and cycling.¹⁰⁷ Meanwhile, children in other countries have similar experiences. For example research in Australia found children reporting busy roads, car pollution or lack of playground equipment as barriers to outdoor play.¹⁴⁴

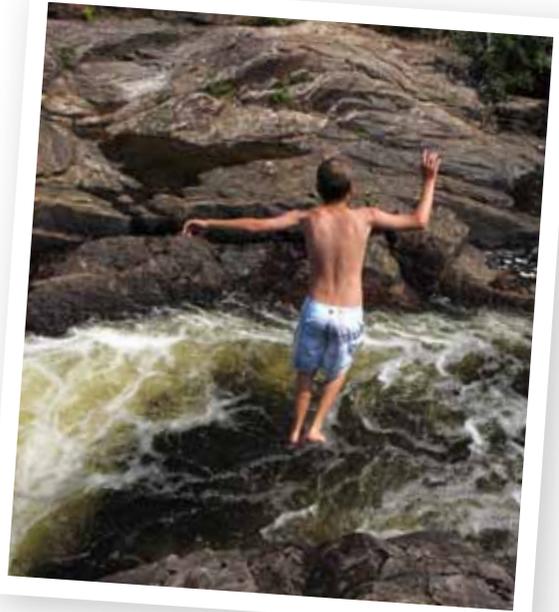
These concerns are particularly acute for children who are disabled and reasons given for the exclusion of disabled children from mainstream play facilities frequently include fears over safety, lack of funding and inaccessible venues. As families with disabled children are more likely to live with poverty and experience social exclusion than others these children can be doubly disadvantaged.⁹⁴

In some areas the loss of land to new houses and developments robs children of their social spaces and the ability to move freely around their neighbourhoods and it is not uncommon for children's needs in public space to be completely overlooked in planning and development.⁶⁹

Parents can also limit their children's play opportunities by ensuring they are frequently occupied in organised and 'educational' activities.¹⁰⁷ This has been found to be particularly true for children in well-off families.⁶⁹ Parental support for all types of activity is very influential and, for younger children, this means having time to take them outside to play if they are not allowed out alone.⁵¹

General safety concerns

There is extensive evidence that parents have major concerns about allowing their children to play outside, fearing primarily for their children's safety. This has become so embedded in the public consciousness that if parents allow children to play or travel around their local neighbourhoods without an adult they are often seen as irresponsible.⁴⁷ One recent study found that most children under 10 years old were not allowed to play outside unless they were supervised. When children were allowed out their parents preferred that they visit well populated public spaces, such as shopping centres or cinemas as they felt their children would be safest there.¹⁰⁶ Another survey found that 42% of children aged 7-12 years were not allowed to play in their local park without an adult present.¹⁴⁵ For children playing in some Glasgow play parks bullying or the threat of violence is a significant problem. Of those surveyed, 23% of children and 29% of young people said they could feel frightened in their parks.¹³¹



Parents who allow their children out to play outside without adult supervision often impose boundaries and restrictions. This has been clearly described by children living on a housing estate in a deprived area of England and those taking part in another survey. Both groups described their parents' role in setting boundaries and rules for their children whilst out playing.^{69 146} If they are outside playing younger children tend to play in the streets near their homes so they can get home quickly and easily and their parents can look out for them. However, there is some evidence that older children feel their parents can be over-protective, restricting them from being out in their neighbourhood as much as they would like.⁴⁰

In general, parents and children have similar concerns about safety whilst out playing, although they talk about them differently and have different priorities. Parents are concerned about the spread of gang and drugs culture into their neighbourhoods, an increase in the possibility of their children encountering 'dangerous' adults, greater contact with violent attitudes, bad language and overtly sexual dress. For many families this is not merely a fear but the reality and, in one study, economically deprived and single mothers living in social housing, had seen this type of behaviour in their neighbourhoods and some have witnessed serious violence.¹⁴⁰ The *GoWell* study in Glasgow found that those who were concerned about gang activity, drunken or rowdy behaviour, problem families in the neighbourhood, vandalism and litter, tended to be those who were more fearful of young people in general.¹⁴⁷

Parents and carers tend to feel that negative, aggressive attitudes are to be found in all types of community "from middle class mother cutting them up in their SUVs, to hoodies in the parks their children were supposed to play in". In this study there was a feeling that violent attitudes, bad language, sexual behaviour and putting people down is part of a way of life now, from which it is very difficult to protect children.¹⁴⁰ (page 57)

There is also evidence that parents believe these changes in neighbourhoods and society to be, in part, a result of local and national policies. In the Counterpoint research adults felt that Health and Safety regulations had made it much harder to run communal activities, which could help bind communities; that communities and neighbourhoods tended to be adult rather than child oriented and that there were too few safe, adequate, supervised facilities, both outdoors and indoors.¹⁴⁰



Children's own concerns are demonstrated in research with children on a housing estate in a deprived area of England who were aware of possible risks when they were outside, and frequently discussed with their parents where they should and should not go.

The younger children were allowed out less frequently and were supervised more closely especially as parents of the younger boys were concerned they might be bullied.⁶⁹ Research in Glasgow has indicated that supervision by adults in play parks would help children feel safer and therefore enjoy using them more.¹³¹

The *Growing up in Scotland* study also found that children's living circumstances affected their outdoor activity levels with 29% of children with low activity levels living in the most deprived areas, and only 14% living in the least deprived areas.⁸⁸

Fear of other young people

Amongst the reasons given by children for not playing outside more is their fear of other young people which tends to focus on crime and bullying. Whilst children of all ages are concerned about getting mugged in the streets and areas near their homes, younger children are worried about being abducted by strangers and are fearful of older children. Older children are afraid of bullying and of being drawn into fights with other young people. Children who do not play outside unsupervised report that this is because their parents or carers are particularly concerned about both traffic and bullying by older children.⁴⁰

Bullying, although frequently discussed in relation to schools, is also widespread outside of school and often takes place in the public spaces where children play. In one survey nearly half of the children who reported having been bullied said this happened when they were not in school but in their local neighbourhoods.¹⁴⁸ Of the children who reported feeling unsafe in their neighbourhoods, 20% claimed it was because of bullying from other children.¹⁴⁹ Others also report children's fear of being bullied as an important constraint on their outdoor play.¹⁰⁷

These worries affect their use not only of general public open spaces but also local parks and play parks and there is some evidence of gangs of young people choosing children's playgrounds to gather.¹⁵⁰ In Glasgow the people in the *GoWell* study most likely to think that young people hanging around were a problem included younger adults, people with poor social support, those who were out in their neighbourhoods most often and those with children under 16 years old. The people who rated their local youth and leisure services, play areas, parks and schools as "poor" were also more likely than others to consider teenagers hanging around as a problem. These findings are similar to, but do not exactly replicate, other similar surveys. However, whilst these concerns are very real they do not always reflect reality. The *GoWell* project also cites research into social housing in Glasgow indicating that less than 5% of those surveyed had had a direct experience of young people causing problems.¹⁴⁷



Research with children from some black and ethnic minority communities has also found that many felt they could not use local play facilities dominated by local white British children who had racially abused them. Young Muslim women, wearing hijab, had also experienced racist comments whilst out with their friends.¹⁵¹

Loss of a sense of community

Parents tend to feel happier about their children playing outside if there are other children out playing too.¹⁰⁸ But neighbourhood changes over time has reduced parents' confidence in letting their children outside to play. In one study parents reported feeling that, although in the past they had been able to rely on neighbours and other people in the local community to help watch their children, they could not do this now. They did not know how their neighbours would react if asked to keep an eye on their children and did not know their children's friends' parents sufficiently well to rely on them. They felt they had to rely on their children to be sensible to be safe.¹⁴⁰

Levels of community trust are also of concern to people who might want to help children they think are in difficulty. For example, 44% of adult men responding to the 2010 Playday survey were concerned that if they were to offer help to a child they might be accused of trying to abduct them.¹⁰⁸ Fear of being accused of causing harm, or being seen as acting suspiciously, was also cited by Scottish adults in 2007 when asked for reasons why they might not offer help to children and young people.¹⁵²

Children with fewer friendships play outside less.¹⁰⁷ This is particularly true for disabled children who are frequently marginalised and often over-protected, missing out on opportunities to develop friendships through play and missing opportunities to stretch and challenge themselves. Disabled children tend to lead more restricted lives than others and the combination of poor accessibility of transport and play spaces, and discriminatory attitudes from others, make it very hard for many disabled children and their parents to use the play spaces that do exist.⁹⁴



The nature of the built environment

The nature of the built environment can affect children's opportunities for outdoor play and therefore physical activity.³³ Changes in the design of transport systems, local neighbourhood environments, and opportunities for unstructured play and sport have, over time, reduced opportunities for physical activity.⁵¹

Housing conditions also affect children's ability to form friendships and enjoy their free time. One survey found that children who live in poor housing conditions are less likely than others to have had friends visiting their homes. Also, when children move house frequently, for example when made homeless, they do not have time to build relationships and consolidate friendships.¹¹⁴

Residential areas with a high proportion of people from lower socioeconomic groups tend to be less safe and have higher rates of unintentional injury than areas with a higher proportion of more advantaged families. In general, children from the poorest families face a higher risk of death from unintentional injury than those who are more advantaged,¹⁵³ although there is no specific data on inequalities in unintentional injuries caused during outdoor play and leisure activities.⁷⁴

Although recent research has highlighted many of the barriers to physical activity in contemporary lifestyles, and begun to recognise the important role of the built environment in determining levels of physical activity, this research is at an early stage and there have only been a few studies in the UK.

Lack of suitable spaces and provision

Local public spaces are some of the most important places for play, but in many areas these have become lost to children either through neglect or through building and development. Both children and parents report that the lack of suitable spaces and provision in their locality contribute to the fact that children play outside less often than in the past. Not only have many spaces and facilities been lost but also they are often inappropriate for children of different ages and interests, unattractive, unkempt and offer little of interest to children. In many areas, there has been a slow but continuous loss of outdoor recreational facilities and spaces, with free, open access provision outdoors being replaced by indoor provision or provision requiring booking and payment. In some areas local, small equipped play parks have been removed and larger play areas opened in more central locations or provision has been removed rather than refurbished or maintained.¹⁵⁴

In addition the need to build housing on un-used, urban land can reduce children's places to play. This was demonstrated by children living on a Glasgow housing estate who reported that there was less space for them to play than they would have liked because much of the local space was boarded off or being used for building.⁶⁹

Many public play areas are seen by children as boring and have become over-regulated with health and safety concerns curtailing the imaginations of designers and providers. As a result, many children, especially as they get older, find there are no interesting places for them to play. A survey conducted in northwest England in the late 1990s showed that the majority of parents of 8-11 year olds were dissatisfied with play facilities¹⁵⁵ and there has been little to indicate since that this position has changed. Other, more recent research, has indicated that half of all children report that there is nowhere to go and play in their area.¹⁵⁶

There is also considerable evidence that many of the play areas that do exist are inappropriate for many children. This is especially true for children who are disabled or have specific needs. In their recent research with disabled children, KIDS found that the parents of children with greater support needs tended to be less satisfied with the play spaces available to their children than parents of children requiring less support.⁹⁴

Older children also often find it difficult to find play spaces that meet their needs. In one study older children frequently said that all the playground facilities were designed for young children and held no interest for them, discouraging them from going there.¹⁰⁷

Lack of routine maintenance can also be a deterrent. In research in Glasgow children reported that many parks had problems with broken glass and rubbish, that there was nowhere to lock bicycles, that theft was a problem and that equipment needed to be maintained more regularly when it had been vandalised.¹³¹ The cleanliness of play spaces is especially important for disabled children as litter, and dog mess, for example, may be a particular hazard for children who like to explore their surroundings through touch, taste and smell.⁶⁷ Also, if playgrounds are places where gangs gather, children tend not to use them and parents are fearful of letting their children out to play.⁴⁵

What children say they want from parks includes: a range of equipment, including more natural features, where they can challenge themselves and take some risks. They also want age appropriate equipment, separated out, with more attention being paid to the needs of older children.¹⁰⁶ In addition to the maintenance and type of features and equipment in a play space other factors can make a major difference to the use of a space by children who are disabled. These include signs for playgrounds, near-by parking or easy access by foot, and nearby, accessible toilet facilities.⁶⁷



Unsafe roads

Children play most frequently around the streets and roads near their homes and whilst walking and cycling on local journeys in their neighbourhood. But for many these opportunities are severely restricted by traffic.¹⁰⁷ One report in 2003 found that 23% of children who were afraid to walk or play alone in their neighbourhoods were concerned about danger from traffic.¹⁴⁹

Pedestrian casualties, especially among children in more deprived neighbourhoods, are a major cause for concern in the UK which has a higher rate of child pedestrian deaths than neighbouring European countries.¹⁵⁷ Children in deprived areas are up to three times more likely to be killed on the roads compared with other children.⁷¹ Although there has been a decrease in the number of child pedestrians killed or seriously injured in the past 20 years, evidence suggests this may be influenced by the decline in the number of children walking and playing out on the streets as much as on improved traffic management.¹⁵⁸

Negative adult attitudes

Intolerant adults complaining about noise and nuisance can also prevent children from playing outside more^{47 51} and younger children report that grumpy neighbours get annoyed with them for playing outside, often telling them to play elsewhere.⁴⁰ These attitudes are also transmitted to parents and can affect their approach to letting their children play outside. Nearly 40% of parents in one 2010 study were concerned that their neighbours would disapprove if their children were playing outside.¹⁰⁸

Children are frequently treated with hostility in their own communities and research by Scotland's Commissioner for Children and Young People has found that adults' views are more influenced by negative experiences of children and young people than by positive experiences. They also found that people who had more regular contact with children and young people tended to have more positive attitudes to them in general.¹⁵² In the Go Well study of adults in the most deprived neighbourhoods in Glasgow, it was found that people in just over half of the households surveyed thought that teenagers "hanging around" in their area was a problem.¹⁴⁷

In addition to the overt hostility they sometimes experience, children are also confronted with a variety of signs of intolerance. These include, for example, notices forbidding them from playing in a specific space, children not being allowed into some places without adults, "tutting and disapproving noises" being made around children and families and adults considering that "children should be seen and not heard".¹⁴⁰ (page 67)



These attitudes can become institutionalised and children report that, especially as they get older, police tend to move them on if they are in groups. Young people in one study said that they were frequently dispersed and moved on by the police when they had done nothing wrong, even though it was fun to be out in groups with their friends.^{40 69}

There are also times in staffed childcare provision when children are restricted in their opportunities for outdoor and active play.¹⁵⁹ Practitioners have been found to limit outdoor play because, for example, they consider the outside to be dangerous, that if children are playing freely they are not learning, that children should not go outside in bad weather or that being outside is less healthy.⁴⁰

Lack of opportunity for excitement and challenge

Children say that many of the play areas that exist in their neighbourhoods are boring and offer no opportunities for challenge and excitement and it appears that, in many areas this is the result of a deliberate attempt by designers and providers to 'design out' any possible opportunities for accidental harm to children. In some schools some playground games are banned because staff are fearful of civil or criminal proceedings that might be brought against them if a child is injured.⁷⁴

Evidence suggests that investment in these 'safer playgrounds' has made no measurable difference to children's safety.⁷¹ The number of serious accidents on playgrounds has remained static for many years with roughly one death every three or four years for the past twenty years.^{160 161} Less than 2% of hospital attendances by children are connected to equipment in playgrounds and only 40% of non-fatal accidents in playgrounds are due to playground equipment.¹⁶⁰

Disabled children, like all children, enjoy and benefit from playing in ways that extend and challenge them, sometimes taking risks. But for many, these opportunities are not on offer, denying them fun, as well as the chance to extend their physical, emotional and social boundaries.⁶⁷

There are also gender differences in the way adults approach risk taking amongst children, with male carers taking a more relaxed approach than female.⁷³

The impact of preventing children playing

Summary

Restrictions to children's play opportunities and experiences impede the enjoyment of their childhoods and can have long-term and damaging effects on their physical, emotional, social and cognitive development.

If children do not get good opportunities for play their development and well-being are likely to be negatively affected. Although research designed to monitor the direct effect of play on children's health and development is ethically and practically virtually impossible, there has been research with animals. If animals are not given the opportunity to play they exhibit greater fear and over-caution in new situations and a decreased ability to cope with stressful situations. Animal research also shows that when animals are given an environment and the opportunity to play, they do so and the plasticity of their brains is increased. They are also more physically active, show lower "anxiety-like" behaviour and their immune systems are healthier.¹⁰ In children, Lester and Russell cite the work of others in saying that the "persistent absence of play may disrupt emotion-regulation systems, which in turn will diminish children's physical, social and cognitive competence."¹⁶²

Outdoor play is particularly important, especially for children's physical activity, but a 2000 MORI Survey of Sport and the Family,⁵¹ found that 80% of parents believed 'children today get less exercise because parents are afraid to let them go out alone'. Small studies since then show little change in the situation.¹⁶³ In young children those who spend more time outdoors are more active. Never-the-less there is evidence that parents and carers are often reluctant to take their children out, especially in cold weather.¹⁶⁴

In one study, parents of some middle-years children, who were trying to organise their children's free time activities, were getting into increased arguments with their children. Children had begun to flout rules about returning home at an agreed time, would not tell their parents where they had been, were getting involved in bullying or truanting and some were becoming involved in petty crime. Parents on the other hand were out looking for their children in the local area and phoning friends and neighbours to find out where their children were. For these families, parental concern about the dangers of the local neighbourhood made it very difficult for them to manage the balance between their children's safety and independence.¹⁴⁰



Chapter 5

Conclusion



Conclusion

“... children’s play belongs to children; adults should not destroy children’s own places for play through insensitive planning or the pursuit of other adult agendas, or by creating places and programmes that segregate children and control their play”.¹⁹ (page x)

The right to play is enshrined in the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, and the UK government and the Scottish Government are responsible for ensuring that all children are able to enjoy that right. Providing for play, therefore, is a public policy issue and should be seen as a priority for governments at both national and local level. This literature review shows why this is so important, not only as recognition of a fundamental human right, but also because playing is a crucial element in children’s health, well-being and development.

The evidence cited in this review shows that it is becoming widely accepted that play is a behaviour that happens for its own sake and has a fundamental developmental role from a young age. Play has been shown to make an important contribution to many aspects of children’s well-being, including their physical, social and emotional health and to their cognitive development and learning. As children grow, play offers them the opportunity to develop and hone a range of physical, emotional and social skills, helping them make sense of and relate to increasingly complex people and the environments they encounter.

Although it may not be possible to demonstrate a direct causal effect between play and many specific aspects of development and well-being, as so many interlinked factors are involved, it is clear that children will enjoy their childhoods more and are more likely to reach their full potential, if they have the time, space and encouragement to enjoy a wide variety of play experiences as they grow and develop from birth to adulthood.

Children will only enjoy the full benefits of play as they grow up if the adults around them: parents, carers, neighbours, teachers, planners, policy makers and politicians, understand and value the power of free play and ensure that children not only have time and encouragement to play but are also provided with good quality spaces and opportunities where they can play in different ways, with different people, and which offer experiences appropriate for their age, ability, interest and culture.

The environments where they play have an impact on children’s play experiences, their relationships with others and their understanding of the world in which they are growing up. The evidence cited in this review demonstrates that children need good quality places to play, near their homes, where they and their parents feel they are safe, and that offer natural features, space to move around and a variety of opportunities for physical, emotional and social activity. More natural environments, in particular, seem to have an important impact on children’s well-being and healthy development.

These spaces can only be provided for all children if governments, at both national and local level, consider children’s play needs in all planning and policy that impacts on the services and spaces where children live and go to school.

Ensuring good opportunities, especially for outdoor play for all children, requires a strategic approach that cuts across departmental remits such as planning, transport, leisure, childcare and education. Therefore spaces for play in Scotland need to be developed with the needs of children in mind and should be created with the involvement of children, young people, voluntary organisations and other community members.

The Scottish Government has addressed this to some extent in the *Early Years Framework* and in guidance to planners, transport departments and local authority leisure providers. However there is still much work to be done in Scotland to ensure that the Right to Play for every child, with all the benefits that this confers, becomes a reality. The proposed Children’s Rights Bill and Children’s Services Bill, and accompanying legislation, offer a seminal opportunity to enact this commitment.

Issy Cole-Hamilton
12 November 2011

Appendix 1

Playwork Principles



Playwork Principles

These principles establish the professional and ethical framework for playwork, and describe what is unique about play and playwork, and provide the playwork perspective for working with children and young people.

They are based on the recognition that children and young people's capacity for positive development will be enhanced if given access to the broadest range of environments and play opportunities:

1. All children and young people need to play. The impulse to play is innate. Play is a biological, psychological and social necessity, and is fundamental to the healthy development and well being of individuals and communities.
2. Play is a process that is freely chosen, personally directed and intrinsically motivated. That is, children and young people determine and control the content and intent of their play, by following their own instincts, ideas and interests, in their own way for their own reasons.
3. The prime focus and essence of playwork is to support and facilitate the play process and this should inform the development of play policy, strategy, training and education.
4. For playworkers, the play process takes precedence and playworkers act as advocates for play when engaging with adult led agendas.
5. The role of the playworker is to support all children and young people in the creation of a space in which they can play.
6. The playworker's response to children and young people playing is based on a sound up to date knowledge of the play process, and reflective practice.
7. Playworkers recognise their own impact on the play space and also the impact of children and young people's play on the playworker.
8. Playworkers choose an intervention style that enables children and young people to extend their play. All playworker intervention must balance risk with the developmental benefit and well being of children.

Playwork Principles Scrutiny Group, Cardiff 2005. Endorsed by SkillsActive, Sector Skills Council for Playwork, 2005

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Endorsements

Message from the Minister

Most of us carry great memories of playing outside as a child. However we regularly hear in the media and through research about how little time today's children spend playing outdoors. Outdoor activities that were part of growing up when I was young feature less and less in children's lives today. The Scottish Government recognises that Play is central to how children learn and develop, and how they are motivated to be physically active.

I am very pleased to endorse Play Scotland's seminal publication, *Getting it Right for Play*, which has been funded through the Scottish Government's Go Play initiative.

Getting it Right for Play is a timely and practical resource for everyone involved in providing increased quality play opportunities for children and young people in Scotland.

There are three parts to *Getting it Right for Play*, a strategic review of the evidence base outlining the benefits of play to children and the wider community; a comprehensive Scottish Play Policy context; and a Toolkit aimed at Local Authorities, to stimulate improvement in the design and provision of play opportunities for children to play outside in their neighbourhoods. Community groups and schools which are interested in their local neighbourhoods will also find some of the tools very useful.

The aspiration of *Getting it Right for Play*, is that:

“Wherever they live, children and young people of all ages, abilities and interests, should be able to play in a variety of ways, in high quality spaces, within sight of their homes or within easy walking distance, where they feel safe whether or not they are accompanied by adults.”

Developing play spaces and play opportunities for children, and removing barriers to play is a priority in the Early Years Framework. I commend Play Scotland for their work in this area and I recognise the important contribution that *Getting it Right for Play* can make to improving children's quality of life through play.

I hope that Local Authorities and Community groups will use this practical toolkit to deliver improved play opportunities for our children and young people as part of our mission to make Scotland the best place in the world to grow up.”

Aileen Campbell, MSP

Minister for Children and Young People

Endorsements

Message from the Funder

Supporting the development of Play in Scotland

Play makes a tremendous contribution to a child having a happy and healthy childhood, in turn making them much more likely to grow up into happy and healthy adults. It is abundantly clear that a child's early years has a huge influence on their later life and the role of Play during this time is vital.

Inspiring Scotland launched Go Play in 2009, in partnership with the Scottish Government, to increase the opportunities for Play for children aged 5 to 13 years and support the play sector to develop and grow. Since then, I have been impressed by the work that has enabled so many more children to benefit from Free Play.

I am also delighted with the range of work undertaken to support the development of Play across Scotland. The Play Scotland, Getting it Right for Play Toolkit and supporting documents has been designed with this very much in mind. The Toolkit will help Local Authorities assess the opportunities for Play in their areas, and provide a strong rationale for promoting play provision and the opportunities for Play across a range of areas. This complements other work developed from within the Go Play portfolio, including the Go Play Outcome and Evaluation Framework, which helps to support the sector to articulate the benefits of Play and assess when play organisations can have the most impact.

I am confident that together these resources will be a lasting legacy of Go Play and will ensure more children in Scotland have the opportunity to grow through Play.

Andrew Muirhead

Chief Executive, Inspiring Scotland

Endorsements

Stimulating improvement in the design and provision of local places and spaces for play is an important goal. It is doubly so knowing, as we do, that play is of fundamental importance to children. Yet many children in Scotland do not have ready access to satisfying, enriching play spaces on their doorsteps or in their neighbourhoods. Children can and will play almost anywhere and their choices may not be those of adults, but we have a responsibility to ensure their right to play is translated into opportunities on the ground. In grappling with a complex area the Toolkit offers achievable steps in understanding the local context for play, helping to pave the path towards improvements.

Theresa Casey

President, International Play Association: Promoting the Child's Right to Play

Investing in children's play is one of the most important things we can do to improve children's health and wellbeing in Scotland. I think this Toolkit is a great way for Local Authorities and Communities to come together to encourage more play opportunities in local areas. Children playing outside contributes to the resilience of communities in Scotland.

I welcome this Toolkit which has been funded from the Go Play Programme and wish Play Scotland every success with their work in this area.

Sir Harry Burns

Chief Medical Officer Scotland

I am pleased to support the Toolkit produced by Play Scotland which in my view is a valuable and much-needed resource that will help everyone who engages with children to understand the importance of promoting good opportunities for play."

"Play is a fundamental right of children, and an international body of evidence recognises it as an essential part of every child's development.

"I believe the Toolkit has the potential to promote a wider understanding of the importance of play, particularly outdoor play. As such, it will be a useful complement to NHS Health Scotland's mental health indicators for children and young people, which identified the need to develop better measures around the access children and young people have to play opportunities.

Tam Baillie

Scotland's Commissioner for Children and Young People

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The Power of Play

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The Power of Play Summary

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The Scottish Play Policy Context

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Getting it Right for Play Toolkit

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