



The OPAL Primary Programme Scotland

Outdoor Play and Learning (OPAL) CIC

Supporting school improvement through better play and playtimes

www.outdoorplayandlearning.org.uk



Erasmus+



AWARDS
2019
FINALIST



How to improve playtimes

“OPAL provides all of the structure, training, support and challenge we need to be able to turn around our playtimes. We are still in the early days of developing this, but the INSET that was delivered yesterday has definitely ignited a passion and enthusiasm from the playground staff - we will now capitalise on this renewed energy as we start out on our OPAL journey”.

**Ryan Delaney, Head Teacher,
St Cuthberts RC Primary School,
Glasgow, April 2022**

Head Teacher

“Being involved in the OPAL programme has opened our eyes up to the value of excellent play opportunities at break times on children’s learning and wellbeing. The programme allowed us to audit our existing playtime provision and set long and short-term targets for improving our children’s play experiences.

We can already see the multiple benefits of OPAL, in terms of children’s skills and development, engagement and behaviour in the playground, and this in turn has a positive impact on our staff and families. There is a buzz and excitement right now at Udston Primary as we make this journey together towards outstanding playtimes.”

**Rebecca Turnbull, Deputy Head,
Udston Primary, May 2022**

APPG Parliamentary Report

Recommendations *“Training in play to become a part of standard teacher training, including a baseline gap assessment tool such as that provided by OPAL”*

All Party Parliamentary Group on Fit and Healthy Childhood 2015



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

Professor Sir Harry Burns
Former Chief Medical Officer, Scotland

The OPAL Primary Programme

Children in primary schools spend 20% or 1.4 years of their school attendance in play and yet many schools have no strategic or values-based approach to play across all ages. The Outdoor Play and Learning (OPAL) Primary Programme is a mentor supported school improvement programme. It addresses all the areas schools must plan for to improve the quality of their play opportunities strategically and sustainably.

The OPAL Primary Programme is the only programme of its kind that has been independently proven to sustainably improve the quality of play in primary schools. Research shows that play contributes to children's physical and emotional health, wellbeing, approach to learning and enjoyment of school. Given the importance of play in children's lives, and current concerns about children's health and opportunity to access time and space to initiate their own play outdoors, there are considerable benefits for children, parents, school and the wider community from participating in OPAL's programme.

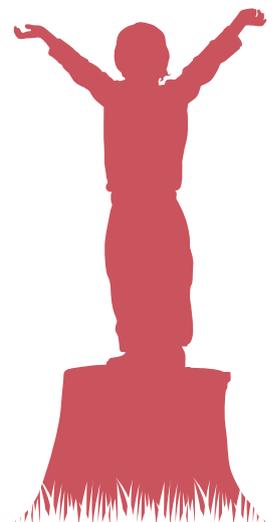
The OPAL Primary Programme supports schools in developing a cultural shift in thinking about and supporting children's play. Its success comes from a series of interrelated actions undertaken with the specialist support from the OPAL mentor. This embeds play into school's policies and practices and establishes clear guiding principles and strategies for initiating changes at playtimes. The results can be transformational and spectacular, showing progress even in 'challenging' school environments.

What is OPAL?

Outdoor Play and Learning (OPAL) is a community interest (CIC) company dedicated to providing services to schools and organisations in the UK to improve the quality of play opportunities for all children. OPAL staff have expertise in teaching, school improvement, landscape design, project management, play and strategic planning.

The OPAL Primary Programme offers schools a structured process, with mentored support provided for up to 18 months and many resources, to enable schools to permanently change both their environment and their culture to enable provision of amazing playtimes every day.

To date OPAL has run programmes in over 800 schools throughout the whole UK and has recently expanded to Canada, France, Poland, New Zealand and Australia. In 2021 OPAL was launched in Scotland.





Q What are the benefits of the OPAL Primary Programme?

✓ More teaching time

Most schools report ten minutes more teaching time per teacher with happier, more creative, and well exercised children who settle to classes much more quickly.

✓ Improved behaviour

OPAL schools report up to an **80% decrease in use of behaviour policies** and a **90% drop in senior leadership time spent in resolving playtime issues**.

✓ Faster core skills development

Children at OPAL schools rapidly develop creativity, imagination, cooperation, resilience, stamina and confidence.

✓ Inclusion

OPAL's approach makes play better for every child, every day...no exceptions!

✓ Happiness and wellbeing

Play is a human need and a human right. Children and staff at OPAL's schools report feeling less stressed and happier, and more excited about school.

Q Is it right for my school?

The programme works in all kinds of schools regardless of the amount or quality of outside space available. OPAL has clients in large cities and in tiny rural villages. It has worked well in additional support needs schools and pupil referral units.

The OPAL Primary Programme was developed in response to demand from schools for help in resolving issues at playtime, including boredom, high levels of accidents and playground incidents, lack of respect for supervisors and a constant stream of low-level behaviour problems, as well as a desire to improve the quality of children's play experiences in school, and a desire by school leaders to pursue excellence in all areas of schools' performance.

Q Why invest in children's play?

Children and young people have the right to play under Article 31 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNRC).

The Scottish Government's Play Strategy for Scotland and Getting it Right for Every Child (GIRFEC) also highlight the need for play to support children and young people's health and wellbeing. The OPAL programme will enable your school to commit to Scotland's Play Charter and become a Play Champion, a school committed to promoting, maximising and embedding play at every level.

Q What else does it link to and how is progress monitored?

Participation in the OPAL programme provides the perfect opportunity for everyone to be involved in taking forward a whole school, sustainable development initiative which includes the community. To support the main objectives of the OPAL programme, schools will have access to three self-evaluation surveys, which can be used as baseline data for progress towards the How Good is Our School Quality Indicators and also as a guide for evidencing impact on outcomes for children and young people.

The OPAL programme can also provide opportunities for sustainable development and improvement through connections to other whole school community programmes such as Rights Respecting Schools and Eco Schools Scotland.





Q What does the OPAL Programme involve?

The OPAL programme comprises of eight mentor-supported, structured sessions, spread over 12-18 months or as long as the school needs. These sessions are:

- Introduction and Audit meeting
- Development meeting 1
- Development meeting 2
- Development meeting 3
- Award Audit and final plan meeting
- Inservice half day on play
- Grounds master planning workshop
- Parents meeting
- Certificate presentation

The process starts with a structured audit carried out by the mentor and the school together. The audit covers 18 critical cultural and environmental conditions which affect the quality of children's play. This is followed by an inservice day which informs the whole-school community of the programme and brings together their agreed values and principles to form a play policy.

OPAL uses a development tool which allows the school and the mentors to work out a detailed play policy, strategy and action plan individually tailored to the specific needs of the school. This is followed by development meetings, and additional phone support, held throughout the year, to support the school in embedding their plans and implementing them.

Meetings are also held to inform parents of the changes the school will undertake to improve play and to form a long-term plan on how to improve school grounds to increase play opportunities. The final meeting in the programme is the OPAL award audit, where progress is mapped, award status of silver, gold or platinum is agreed and the next development phase is planned.

It is important to realise that the OPAL Primary Programme requires 100% commitment from the Headteacher, Staff and Parent Council to see the programme through and make it permanently embedded within the culture of the school. Experience has shown that the programme will inevitably fail without the full commitment and ongoing support of the Headteacher, the senior leadership, and the play working group.

Q Has it been independently verified?

An independent evaluation of OPAL was commissioned by Play England and carried out by academics Drs Wendy Russell and Stuart Lester from Gloucester University and Dr Owain Jones from the University of West of England in 2011. This demonstrated the effectiveness of OPAL and established the benefits for schools from participating in the OPAL Primary Programme.

The report 'Supporting School Improvement Through Play' can be downloaded for free from the OPAL website www.outdoorplayandlearning.org.uk under 'free resources'.

In 2015 a report on play by the All Party Parliamentary Group (APPG) on childhood cited OPAL four times as good practice and in 2018 OPAL won first place in the European Schools Moving Together Awards. Also, in 2018 and 2020 Rearson University in Toronto published research showing how OPAL improved happiness and wellbeing in Canadian school children. In 2020 Sport England awarded OPAL £250,000 to support the development of online training for schools and expand our reach. In 2021 OPAL partnered with Play Scotland to extend the offer to Scottish schools.



The Case for Play in Schools:

A review of the literature.

This review was commissioned by

Outdoor Play and Learning (OPAL) CIC. It forms part of their Sport England funded project to increase their capacity and services supporting play in schools. The three broad aims of this project are to enable more schools to improve playtimes, to make the support and resources for this better and to support schools for longer. We were given a very broad brief to produce a desktop evaluation report on the academic evidence available that can inform OPAL's approach to play in schools.



Q How much does it cost?

Changes produced by OPAL are not exclusively reliant on large capital investment and instead encourage creativity and responsiveness to local conditions and needs. OPAL mentors can enable schools to ensure maximum long-term play value from any investments in play. A standard OPAL Primary Programme package costs £4999 (plus VAT if charged) plus Mentor travel expenses. Small schools may split payment over two financial years.

Q Why do we need to teach children to play?

We don't! The programme works because it is targeted predominantly at the adult staff at the school, and focuses on values, strategy, planning, staffing, design and resourcing, not directly at the children, though there is always an element of interaction throughout the programme.

OPAL is founded on the principles and values of playwork, where the role of the adults is to understand, celebrate, resource, nurture and support the play process.

OPAL will support your school to create a play team of support staff who will apply the playwork principles to the oversight of play.

Q What about Inspection and Health and Safety?

The OPAL Primary Programme has been shown to support behavioural and inclusion improvements as well as more general wellbeing. OPAL helps schools deliver a clear vision and planned approach for better childhoods and futures for all children, covering many of the 15 quality indicators contained within 'How good is our school'.

"We often hear that parents are not comfortable with their children being exposed to risky experiences." - Ultimately, the Headteacher has to decide whether their school exists to provide a fully rounded education, and to make sure every child gains the developmental experiences that everyone needs but isn't getting from home life any more. OPAL mentors have excellent knowledge of current Health and Safety Executive and the Care Inspectorate guidance on children's play and they empower schools to use this advice to support a risk-benefit approach to health and safety.





Play Strategy for Scotland (2013)

The Scottish Government's vision for children and young people is clear: for Scotland to be the best place in the world to grow up. A nation which values play as a life-enhancing daily experience for all our children and young people: in their homes, nurseries, schools and communities.

How do I get in touch?

OPAL has helped make play better in hundreds of primary schools and early years settings. Our experienced team of OPAL Mentors will be able to help you create happier playtimes, design better play spaces and enable staff to support wonderful play.

If you would like more information, would like a virtual introductory meeting or want us to come out and talk to you then please contact us via our website.



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Get in touch and share about outdoor play!



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