

The Power of Play leaflet is extracted from Getting it Right for Play, The Power of Play: an evidence base, published by Play Scotland. Full details at www.playscotland.org



The Power of Play

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"Play embraces children's total experience. They use it to tell 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"
(Jenkinson 2002)

Play Scotland is the National organisation for play in Scotland delivering the Child's Right to Play in Scotland and campaigns to create increased play opportunities in the community.

Play Scotland is often asked what are the benefits of play...

play is powerful, and we have listed below a brief summary:

Play in children's health and wellbeing

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.

Play in early childhood

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 coordinated movements.

Play and children's cognitive development

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 and children's physical activity

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.

Play and children's mental health

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.

Play and children's emotional well-being

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.

Play and children's social development

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 cooperating, 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 and learning about risk and challenge

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.

Play as therapy

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