



Getting it Right for Play

The Power of Play: an evidence base summary

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 two supporting documents which are available in pdf with Getting it Right for Play are: the Power of Play, a comprehensive literature review of the benefits of play to children and the wider community; and 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.

Marguerite Hunter Blair
Chief Executive

Contents

Introduction	2
The Power of Play	3
People, places and play	5
Children's changing play patterns	7
Conclusion	8

This document is a short summary of a detailed literature review, *The Power of Play: an evidence base*, published by Play Scotland January 2012. All research is fully referenced in the fuller version, which is available as a pdf from Play Scotland.



Introduction

The importance of play in children's daily lives and healthy development has become increasingly recognised in recent years. A growing body of evidence supports the view that playing, throughout childhood, is not only an innate behaviour but also contributes to children's quality of life, their well-being and their physical, social, emotional and cognitive development. The type of environment for play is also important, having an impact on children's experience, choices and relationships, both with other people and with the environment itself.

Much debate has taken place over the years about the precise role of play in children's development. It has frequently been suggested that through playing children are practicing skills for adult life, it is now becoming more widely accepted that play is a behaviour that exists for its own sake and has a fundamental developmental role. From the early stages of brain development and bonding with parents, to the independence and autonomy of the teenage years, play makes its contribution. As they grow and develop, play offers children 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.



The right to play is enshrined in the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child and the importance of ensuring children have opportunities and spaces to play, where they feel safe and can enjoy themselves without adult direction, is now widely accepted. It is also recognised in Scottish Government policy relating to early childhood, spatial planning and roads and traffic management. However, despite this, there are still some people who do not consider the need to invest in play spaces is as important as other types of investment.

“Children today still need the peace of a long, slow-paced, active and engaged childhood, with plenty of time to finger slime, peer into water, and make hosts of new discoveries that consolidate the process of knowing self and the world.”

In 2008 Play Scotland initiated the Scottish Play Commission which found that the marked decline over time in the amount of time children play freely outdoors was of major concern and recommended that constrictions on outdoor play, such as the poor quality of spaces available, the negative attitudes of adults towards children and the general fear for children's safety, should be addressed. It also recognised that indoor play and play in children's homes could be better supported and that that many parents do not have enough time to play with their children and some do not understand the importance of play.

This literature review is published by Play Scotland and funded through the Scottish Government's Go Play initiative. It presents a strong body of evidence and expert opinion demonstrating the crucial role of play, especially outdoor play, in children's enjoyment of their childhood, their health and their development. It also discusses the importance of creating spaces and opportunities where children can play freely in their local neighbourhoods.



The power of play

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 co-ordinated 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 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 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 both their physical and mental health.



People places and play

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.

The role of parents

A parent 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.



The nature of provision

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.

Staffed play provision

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.

Play at school

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.

Playing outside

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.



Local streets and open spaces

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.

Moving around the neighbourhood

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.

Dedicated play parks

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.

Natural spaces and features

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.



Children's changing play patterns

Changes over time

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.

Constraints on outdoor play

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



The impact of preventing children playing

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

Conclusion

The right to play, enshrined in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, is a public policy issue that should be seen as a priority for governments at both national and local level. This literature review shows why this is so important as both recognition of a fundamental human right and as a crucial element in children's health, well-being and development.

If children are to enjoy the full benefits of play, the adults around them must understand and value the power of free play and ensure the provision of good quality spaces and opportunities that meet the needs of children of differing ages, abilities, interests and cultures. The local spaces where children might play must be good quality, near their homes, where they and their parents feel safe, and offer natural features, space to move around and a variety of opportunities for physical, emotional and social activity.

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.

This creates an ideal opportunity for children's play to become a fundamental, universal responsibility of children's services across Scotland.

Issy Cole-Hamilton

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The Power of Play

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The Power of Play Summary

Author: Issy Cole-Hamilton

The Scottish Play Policy Context

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Getting it Right for Play Toolkit

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