

Focus on play

Public health professionals

This briefing for public health professionals provides information about how to support better opportunities for children to play in their own communities. Children and young people need and are entitled to quality places and time for play as part of their everyday life within their own community.

Our advocacy work is based on the growing body of solid evidence that supports both the long-term and immediate benefits of providing for children's play. Studies show that the long-term health benefits of playing include boosting physical activity levels which helps to tackle child obesity, and supporting children to become more resilient.

Everyone knows that playing is good for children. Evidenced studies show that play projects:

- are just as effective as sport and PE programmes in boosting physical activity levels and hence helping to tackle child obesity
- support children to become more resilient through the development of their emotional and social self-management skills
- provide powerful opportunities for children to engage positively with their school and the wider community, and with nature and the environment
- encourage neighbourliness, volunteering and social action, and improve community cohesion.

Children and parents report many barriers to playing – speed and volume of traffic, lack of outdoor space and grumpy grownups. We need to

address barriers to playing; this is a task for all of us. Policy on planning, traffic, housing and open space, schools and childcare have a direct effect on opportunities to play.

The right to play is enshrined in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC). Welsh Government, with all party support, has taken an international lead in adopting a Play Policy and more recently legislating for children's play in Wales; the first government in the world to do so, for which it rightly receives continued wide acclaim.

To support children to realise their right to play and improve their sense of wellbeing, there is a need to continue this momentum and consider the following initiatives:

In schools: recognition of the need for play before school, during play/break times and after school hours. Addressing this need could involve playtime support including training and awareness-raising for school staff and parents, coupled with the provision of suitable equipment and materials for active, creative play. See our *Use of school grounds for playing out of teaching hours toolkit*: www.playwales.org.uk/eng/schoolstoolkit

In neighbourhoods: recognition of children's need to play out in their community. Addressing this could involve the wholesale reduction of traffic speeds, support for the development of regular sessional road closures in residential streets, and linked to active travel policies. Also, support for parents and residents to facilitate

street play projects by reducing red-tape around traffic regulations, consultation, and insurance. See an example of community led street play sessions here: <http://bit.ly/streetplayabergavenny>

By considering, supporting and investing in play, public health professionals can be confident that their actions will result in improvements in children's health and wellbeing, and hence a reduction in the pressures on the National Health Service and the public purse.

The importance of play for children's health and wellbeing

Freely chosen, self-directed play has traditionally served the human race well in terms of children's health and wellbeing – it has a significant contribution to make to the current health agenda. Free, unstructured play is children doing as they wish in their own time and in their own way and it is this type of play that is increasingly recognised as essential to healthy childhoods.

Playing is crucial to children's physical, mental, social and emotional health and wellbeing, and therefore to their families and to communities as a whole. Children have an inborn urge to play – research suggests that playing has an impact on the physical and chemical development of the brain – it influences children's ability to adapt to, survive, thrive and shape their social and physical environments.

To children and young people themselves, playing is one of the most important aspects of their lives – they value time, freedom and quality places to play. Consultations with children and young people show that they prefer to play outdoors in stimulating places. In this situation children tend to be physically active and stretch themselves both physically and emotionally.

There is increasing concern about the mental and physical health of children and young people. At the same time there is growing evidence from health professionals and researchers that play makes a significant contribution to the fitness and wellbeing of children.

Play and physical activity

When given the opportunity to play, children are likely to be physically active by running, jumping, dancing, climbing, digging, lifting, pushing and pulling. Active play is the most common type of physical activity that children take part in outside school, and unstructured play is one of the best forms of physical activity for children. Active play is one of the easiest and most natural ways that children of any age can engage in the necessary levels of physical activity.

The contribution that playing makes to children's physical wellbeing includes:

- Prolonged and wide-ranging exercise that develops stamina (informal sports, chase games, climbing, building).
- Climbing develops strength, co-ordination and balance, while jumping contributes to bone density.
- When children repeat an action as part of their play they are often in the process of calibrating – learning to manage their growing bodies – and developing agility, co-ordination and confidence.

Play and emotional wellbeing

Playing allows for peer interactions that are important components of social and emotional wellbeing. When playing alone, children begin to recognise their own emotions, feelings, and thoughts, and how to control them. Children also learn to feel comfortable with being by themselves and learn ways to manage their boredom on their own. Through play children experience a range of emotions including frustration, determination, achievement, disappointment and confidence, and through practice, can learn how to manage these feelings. The contribution that playing makes to children's emotional wellbeing includes:

- Creating and encountering risk or uncertainty in their play opportunities develops children's resilience and adaptability, contributing to their confidence and self-esteem.



- Socialising with their friends or on their own terms gives children opportunities to build emotional resilience, to have fun and to relax.
- Fantasy play allows for imagination and creativity, but it can also be a way of children making sense of and 'working through' difficult and distressing aspects of their lives.

Addressing Adverse Childhood Experiences through play

Even under persistent stressful conditions, the negative consequences of toxic stress can be alleviated through the provision of play opportunities. Playing generates concrete and first hand experiences that underpin much of a child's development. It is widely agreed that early experiences influence how children learn, cope with stress, form friendships and adult

Creating time for outdoor play in settings

For many reasons children's time for outdoor play has decreased significantly in recent years. By making time for children's outdoor play we promote and value children's freedom, independence and choice and these characteristics perform a crucial role in children's resilience, ability to deal with stress and anxiety, and general wellbeing.

relationships, and how they view themselves and their world.

Stable, nurturing relationships with caring adults can prevent or reverse the damaging effects of toxic stress. Many of the issues that parents might find challenging can be addressed by improving access to play opportunities and services that are facilitated by staff who understand and advocate for play. Quality provision increases children's ability to support their own wellbeing and aids parents in understanding and coping with their children's development. It also supports children where opportunities to play are absent in the home.

Nurturing and play-friendly environments – or lack of them – affect the healthy development of children. A rich play environment is flexible, adaptable, varied and interesting. It maximises the potential for socialising, creativity, resourcefulness, challenge and choice. It is a trusted space where children feel free to play in their own way, on their own terms. Characteristics of quality children's spaces include chances for wonder, excitement and the unexpected, but most of all opportunities that are not overly ordered and controlled by adults. These spaces are crucial to children's own culture and for their sense of place and belonging.

Interventionist programmes can be useful in minimising some of the damaging impact, but they must be complemented by a focus on supporting children to be active participants in building their own resilience. It is essential that the systems which underpin the provision for children living in and experiencing adverse conditions do not erode their right to explore and develop through play as enshrined in the UNCRC.

Studies show that children are most physically active during the first 10-15 minutes of outdoor playtime. One way to support time for play is to offer more frequent short periods of outdoor play. Free play is beneficial for all aspects of healthy child development so it is important to balance structured activities with opportunities for free play. Integrating physical activity into the daily routine of other activities helps ensure that free play is not infringed upon. For instance, build activity into numeracy activity and other areas of structured curriculum.

Play is central to a healthy child's life. Trying to change behaviour or build new skills later in life ultimately requires more intervention and is more expensive. It is difficult to influence positive change in adults who are living with the consequences of damaging circumstances in childhood. It is far more practical to provide nurturing and play-friendly community based experiences earlier in life.

The role of healthy schools

Children tell us that playtimes are the most important part of the school day to them. Many children also tell us that at school is the main opportunity they have to spend time playing with their friends. Schools often offer ideal space for children to play and interact with one another. It is important to develop a strong play element to provide a healthy school environment. Healthy school coordinators can ensure play is set within the healthy school approach by:

- Advocating for well-designed playable space when capital improvements are being made.
- Advocating that adequate time is given for both lunch and playtime (children tell us that they often rush eating their lunch at school to have more time to play. 'People will chuck their lunch away so they have more time to play and other people sneak out of the canteen').
- Ensuring that playtime is protected. The withdrawal of playtime is often used as punishment. School playtimes are as important to children as break times are to school staff. Like adults, school playtime is part of children's 'work/life balance'.
- Advocating against school playtimes being shortened.
- Advocating for the use of school grounds out of teaching hours to provide space for children to play freely in their own communities.

The role of public health professionals in promoting play

As adults we need to help children by raising play on the agenda at every appropriate opportunity – with parents and carers, with school management, with decision makers and planners. We need to support the provision of sufficient time and space for children to play every day within their communities. Children with impairments in particular may need support to access play and socialise with their friends.

Those of us who take an interest in, or have a responsibility for, children's health and wellbeing can contribute by:

- Promoting the importance of play in health publicity campaigns.
- Including the support of play provision for all children in health or related strategies and plans including Local Development Plans, child poverty strategies and health, social care and wellbeing strategies.
- Considering impacts on children's play in Health Impact and Health Equity Impact assessments.
- Providing information to parents which highlights the value of playing and its role in a healthy lifestyle.
- Creating links with local play services. Trained playworkers facilitate opportunities that support children to play freely with their friends in their own communities.
- Identifying partnership funding to appoint playworkers in communities.



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