



Play:
health and wellbeing

This briefing provides information on why playing is crucial to children's health and wellbeing and explores ways to respond to children's need for more time and space for free play.

'Providing for children and young people's play is one of the most important things we can do to improve and protect their physical, mental, social and emotional health and wellbeing. A body of evidence recognises playing as an essential part of every child's development and providing opportunities for play that are available and accessible contributes to better health outcomes for children and young people.'

Dr Ruth Hussey OBE, Chief Medical Officer (CMO) for Wales

Children begin their active lives through play. This is important to their physical, cognitive and social development and is largely dictated by the opportunities that parents and carers give them.ⁱ

Free or unstructured play can be defined as children doing as they wish in their own time and in their own way, and it is this sort of play that is increasingly recognised as essential to healthy childhoods.^{vi}

Freely chosen, self-directed play has traditionally had a role in children's health and wellbeing – it has a significant contribution to make to the current health agenda.

The importance of play

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 – recent 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'.ⁱⁱ

'Playing is what children and young people do when they follow their own ideas, in their own way and for their own reasons.'^{iii, iv}

To children themselves, playing is one of the most important aspects of their lives^v

– they value time, freedom and quality places to play. Consultations with children and young people show that they prefer to play outdoors away from adult supervision – in safe but stimulating places. In this situation children tend to be physically active and stretch themselves both physically and emotionally to a greater extent than they would if they were supervised.^{vii}

Government Recognition

The Welsh Assembly Government Play Policy (2002) and the Children Act 1989 demonstrate how much play is valued at national Government level.

In its Child Poverty Strategy for Wales (2011), The Welsh Government recognises the right to play and its contribution to children's development and resilience. The strategy values play as being a vital element in children's development and can provide a strong protective factor in children's lives. The strategy highlights that play can, to an extent, shield children

from the negative aspects of poverty and allow them to develop their resilience to difficulties and uncertainties in their lives. Play contributes towards children's personal and social development, their physical and mental health, and their ability to learn and engage with education. To support this understanding, the Welsh Government has placed Play Opportunities in Part 1: Child Poverty, Play and Participation of the Children and Families (Wales) Measure 2010. This places a legal duty that requires local authorities to carry out play sufficiency assessments in accordance with regulations and guidance. Based on these assessments, local authorities are required to secure sufficient opportunities in their area for children to play.

Creating an Active Wales, the Welsh Government's national physical activity action plan, includes access to high quality play that is physically active as one of its priorities for Active Children and Young People. Active Children and Young People is one of the action plan's four strategic aims.^{viii}

Supporting 'high quality play'

Most children will play without the need for adult intervention, even in the most barren of environments, but an environment rich in possibilities supports their play best of all. Some children need the support of others to make the most of the environment around them and the company of other children.

A rich play environment is:

- a varied and interesting physical environment that maximises the potential for socialising, creativity, resourcefulness and challenge.
- a place where children feel free to play in their own way, on their own terms.

Quality play provision offers **all children** the opportunity to freely interact with or experience the following:

- **challenge and uncertainty** – both on a physical and emotional level
- **changing identity** – role play and dressing up
- **feelings** – pain, joy, confidence, fear, anger, contentment, boredom, fascination, happiness, grief, rejection, acceptance, sadness, pride, frustration
- **loose parts** – natural and man made materials that can be manipulated, moved and adapted, built and demolished
- **movement** – running, jumping, climbing, balancing, rolling
- **other children and young people** – with a choice to play alone or with others, to negotiate, co-operate, fall out, and resolve conflict
- **rough and tumble** – play fighting
- **the four elements** – earth, air, fire and water
- **the natural world** – weather, trees, plants, insects, animals, mud
- **the senses** – sounds, tastes, textures, smells and sights.

Play and physical activity

Physical activity can be structured or unstructured. Unstructured activity can be described as informal or free play with little input or direction from parents or carers.^{ix}

New guidelines on physical activity for the first time identify recommendations specifically for 'Early Years' (under 5 years) in addition to Children and Young People (5 – 18 years).^x

Early Years (Under five years)

1. Physical activity should be encouraged from birth, particularly through floor-based play and water-based activities in safe environments.
2. Children of pre-school age who are capable of walking unaided should be physically active daily for at least 180 minutes (three hours), spread throughout the day.
3. All under five's should minimise the amount of time spent being sedentary (being restrained or sitting) for extended periods (except time spent sleeping).

Children and Young People (5 – 18 years)

1. All children and young people should engage in moderate to vigorous intensity physical activity for at least 60 minutes and up to several hours a day.
2. Vigorous intensity activities, including those that strengthen muscle and bone, should be incorporated at least three days a week.
3. All children and young people should minimise the amount of time being sedentary (sitting) for extended periods.

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. 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 may be one of the best forms of physical activity for children.^{xi}

How playing contributes to children's physical wellbeing:

- Prolonged and wide-ranging exercise develops stamina (informal sports, chase games, climbing, building). Research suggests that children can gain more physical exercise in regular informal play than in a weekly sports activity.^{xii}
- 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 growing bodies – as well as developing agility, co-ordination and confidence.

Play and emotional wellbeing

... the process of playing provides children and young people with the opportunity to adapt to and best fit their complex physical and social environments and to achieve a desirable state of wellbeing.^{xiii}

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, as well as 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.



In terms of children's wellbeing almost every one of the 250 eight to 13 year olds interviewed mentioned that 'time with those they love (friends, family and even pets); being outdoors and having fun ... it was people and not things that made them happy.'^{xiv}

How playing contributes to children's emotional well-being:

- Creating and encountering risky or uncertain play opportunities develops children's resilience and adaptability – and can contribute to their confidence and self-esteem.
- Socialising with their friends 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.

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.

Play in hospitals and other health centres

When children are admitted to hospital, they are at their most vulnerable. They are not only ill, but are also separated from their friends and familiar surroundings. Facilitating opportunities for playing in hospital:

- Creates an environment where stress and anxiety are reduced.
- Helps the child regain confidence and self esteem.
- Provides an outlet for feelings of anger and frustration.
- Helps the child understand treatment and illness. Through play, children are able to effectively learn the sensory and concrete information they need to prepare for hospital procedures and treatment. ^{xv}

Hospital services can contribute to wellbeing by:

- Demonstrating good practice by including comprehensive accessible indoor and outdoor provision for children's play in the planning and development of hospital grounds, wards, staff childcare settings, clinics and surgeries.
- Providing trained playworkers to facilitate play for all children while they are in hospital, as well as and alongside, play that is designed to improve children's understanding of their condition and medical procedures.

The role of healthy schools

Children tell us that play times 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. ^{xvi}

Schools often offer ideal space for children to play and interact with one another. It is important to develop a strong play element in order to provide a healthy school environment.

Healthy school co-ordinators 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 play time (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.' ^{xvii})
- Ensuring that play time is protected. The withdrawal of play time is often used as punishment. School play times are as important to children as break times are to school staff. Like adults, school play time is part of children's 'work/life balance'.
- Advocating against school play times 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.

'I think you shouldn't try too hard to get fit. All you need to do is go for walks every so often and get out on your bike and play with your mates. That's what I do. I get plenty of exercise without realising it. I walk to school, run around at playtime, play football at dinner time and walk home at the end of the day. So, I walk about two miles a day without realising it.' ^{xviii}

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Play Wales is the national organisation for children's play, an independent charity supported by the Welsh Government to uphold children's right to play and to provide advice and guidance on play-related matters.

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