

Section 1

Welsh and Te Whāriki's Curricula

In Wales, play is seen as fundamental to how young children learn and develop, forming the basis of a child-centred, holistic approach in early education (Welsh Government, 2023b; Curriculum for Wales, 2022; Early Years Wales, 2020). Similarly, Te Whāriki in Aotearoa New Zealand places play at the centre of learning, embracing a bicultural, holistic philosophy that views children as confident, capable learners who explore and understand the world through play (Ministry of Education, 2017).

Both the Welsh early years framework and New Zealand's Te Whāriki place play at the centre of holistic development. In Wales, it is recognised as a fundamental right under Article 31 of the UNCRC (Play Wales, no date; UNICEF, 1989) and essential to well-being and learning (Welsh Government, no date b; Gaudreau et al., 2022). Similarly, *Te Whāriki* views play as key to exploration and growth (Ministry of Education, 2017). This shared emphasis highlights a global shift toward valuing play as both a right and a pedagogical tool, prompting professional practitioners to reflect on how play is embedded in practice and whether it truly supports the whole child (Chen, Rouse and Morrissey, 2023).

The frameworks see children as competent and capable learners, with professional practitioners acting as sensitive facilitators who observe, scaffold, and extend play in response to children's interests (Hedegaard, 2020; Nilsson, Ferholt and Lecusay, 2017). However, Te Whāriki is distinct in its explicit bicultural focus, grounded in Te Tiriti o Waitangi and Māori perspectives (New Zealand Government, 2024).

Play in the Welsh curriculum supports the holistic development of the child, fostering cognitive, physical, social, and emotional skills through diverse experiences that encourage problem-solving, movement, collaboration, and language development (Welsh Government, no date b; McArdle, 2023; Welsh Government, 2023a). Similarly, Te Whāriki in Aotearoa New Zealand places play at the heart of early learning, viewing

children as competent and capable learners who make sense of the world through active and engaged play (Ministry of Education, 2017a).

Both curricula are influenced by key play theorists. Piaget (1951) emphasized play's role in cognitive development, reflected in their child-led, problem-solving approaches. Vygotsky's (1978) focus on social interaction and the Zone of Proximal Development is evident in the Welsh curriculum's blend of child-led and adult-facilitated play (Welsh Government, 2023a) and Te Whāriki's emphasis on responsive, collaborative learning. Froebel (1887) and Montessori (1967) championed hands-on, outdoor play, while Erikson (1963) highlighted play's role in building social confidence principles echoed in both frameworks.

However, Te Whāriki is distinct for its explicit bicultural foundation, drawing on Te Tiriti o Waitangi and Māori perspectives to ensure that play is culturally meaningful and inclusive. While the Welsh curriculum appreciates cultural identity, it does not have a comparable Treaty-based framework (Cunha, no date). Despite this difference, both curricula affirm that play is not merely for enjoyment but a powerful driver of holistic development, echoing the consensus of developmental theorists (Gregory, 2024; New Zealand Government, 2025).

In both the Welsh and New Zealand early childhood frameworks, play is not separate from education but is the primary mode of learning (New Zealand Government, 2023; Welsh Government, 2023 b). The Curriculum for Wales (3–16) promotes playful approaches to foster engagement, creativity, and curiosity throughout schooling (Estyn, 2025; Welsh Government, no date b). Similarly, Te Whāriki places play at the centre of early learning, supporting exploration, knowledge-building, and social-emotional development (Ministry of Education, 2019).

While both frameworks position play as central to learning, a key difference lies in their scope. Te Whāriki focuses on the early years up to school entry and is distinctly bicultural, weaving in Māori cultural perspectives that recognise play not only as a means of learning but as a way of connecting with cultural identity and belonging. In contrast, the Welsh Curriculum's emphasis on play continues through to 16 years of

age, ensuring a playful, engaging pedagogy extends beyond the early years (Chan, 2019 and Welsh Government, 2022a).

Creating the right settings for play is a shared principle in the curricula for Wales and Te Whāriki. In Wales, enabling environments are described as safe, stimulating, and rich in open-ended resources that support various play types, from symbolic and constructive play to physical, exploratory, and social play. These environments foster curiosity, problem-solving, and holistic development (Bruce, 2015 and Tinney, 2023).

Similarly, Te Whāriki places strong emphasis on creating environments that are physically safe, culturally respectful, and rich in sensory and material resources. It advocates for both indoor and outdoor spaces that are flexible and responsive to children's interests. This includes providing opportunities for symbolic play, constructive play, physical play, exploratory play, and social play, all seen as integral for children's well-being and learning (Ministry of Education, 2017b).

Furthermore, a key distinction is that Te Whāriki explicitly incorporates bicultural perspectives into these enabling environments, ensuring they reflect Māori worldviews and values. While the Welsh Curriculum encourages respect for cultural identity, it does not have an equivalent treaty-based foundation (Williams, Fletcher and Ma, 2023). Overall, both frameworks highlight that enabling environments, indoors and outdoors are integral for nurturing curiosity, creativity, and holistic development through meaningful play (Hearfield, 2024 and Welsh Government, 2023b).

For Wales, play aligns with the curriculum's four purposes, developing children as ambitious, capable learners; enterprising, creative contributors; ethical, informed citizens; and healthy, confident individuals (Welsh Government, 2023c). It serves as the main direction for fostering these attributes by allowing children to explore, collaborate, experiment, and innovate in engaging ways. In contrast, Te Whāriki is structured around five strands. These include well-being, belonging, contribution, communication, and exploration (Ministry of Education, 2017). Play is regarded as the primary means through which children participate in these strands, promoting holistic growth in

environments that respect culture and children's wellbeing (He Kupu New Zealand, no date).

Both curricula view children as competent, capable learners and promote play as a rich, integrated experience supporting cognitive, social, and emotional growth. However, Te Whāriki stands out for its explicit bicultural foundation, grounded in Te Tiriti o Waitangi, which ensures play also fosters cultural identity and understanding of Māori perspectives an emphasis not explicitly present in the Welsh curriculum (Hearfield, 2024 and McNerney, 2016).

The Curricula for Wales and Te Whāriki both place play at the core of early learning, viewing it as essential to children's holistic development. In Wales, play is a guiding philosophy that supports confident, capable learners. Te Whāriki similarly embraces play as a culturally grounded, holistic process, with its bicultural foundation rooted in the Treaty of Waitangi uniquely embedding cultural identity and belonging into every aspect of learning (Cameron *et al.*, 2023)

However, Wood (2014) offers a particular critique of play based learning within early years frameworks like the Curriculum for Wales and Te Whāriki. She acknowledges that although these curricula play at the centre of holistic development, there are challenges to its authentic implementation. Specifically, Wood argues that increasing pressures for accountability and formal assessment can undermine the very nature of play. She suggests that the growing emphasis on school readiness and measurable outcomes can compromise genuine free play, which should be driven by children's natural motivation and creativity (Wood, 2014).

Considering its progressive intentions, the Curriculum for Wales has come under scrutiny from scholars such as Gareth Evans (2023), who argues that the curriculum's promise of autonomy and child-led learning is undermined by accountability pressures and resource constraints. Evans notes that while the framework advocates flexibility, educators often feel driven to align with measurable outcomes, subtly reintroducing adult-led agendas. This echoes Elizabeth Wood's (2014) concerns that even child-centred curricula risk becoming diluted by external performance measures. Both

scholars caution that without ongoing professional development and reflective practice, early years pedagogy can become performative, where play is structured to meet adult goals rather than fostering children's curiosity and agency.

Despite its strengths, implementing Te Whāriki presents challenges. Williams, Fletcher, and Ma (2024) found that many early childhood student teachers lacked a clear understanding of what a bicultural curriculum entails, with confusion around the role of Te Tiriti o Waitangi and limited confidence in using Te Reo Māori and Tikanga Māori in practice. This suggests that without strong foundational knowledge and support, the curriculum's bicultural intent may be inconsistently applied. Similarly, Hedges and Cooper (2018) acknowledge that its broad, open-ended principles can leave educators uncertain about how to apply them in daily practice. These critiques highlight the importance of ongoing reflection and robust professional development to ensure Te Whāriki's aspirations are realised effectively.

Ultimately, both the Curriculum for Wales and Te Whāriki firmly position play at the centre of early childhood education, recognising it as an integral facilitator of holistic development (Ministry of Education, 2017; Welsh Government, 2022a). Each framework values play as a means for fostering cognitive, physical, social, and emotional growth (McArdle, 2023), encouraging children to become confident and capable learners.

However, Te Whāriki uniquely embeds play within a bicultural framework shaped by the Treaty of Waitangi, ensuring cultural identity and belonging are central to learning (Cooper & Hedges, 2014). In contrast, the Welsh curriculum emphasizes play as a lifelong pedagogical approach extending to age 16 (Welsh Government, 2023b). Both frameworks affirm play as a universal right and a foundation for lifelong learning and well-being (Play Wales, no date; UNICEF, 1989).

Section 2

The Unique Child

In an early year setting, the concept of the unique child means recognising that every child develops in their own way and at their own pace. It is based on the principle that

no two children are the same; each one has their own interests, experiences, strengths, and needs (Department for Education, 2024).

Within Wales, the principle of recognising each child as unique is central to early years education and care, as embedded in the Curriculum for Wales and the Early Childhood Play, Learning and Care (ECPLC) Plan (Welsh Government, 2023b). The Curriculum for Wales highlights that children develop rapidly from birth to five and encourages professional practitioners to create learning environments that respond to each child's interests and developmental stage, fostering belonging and pride (Early Years Wales, 2020; Welsh Government, no date a).

The Early Childhood Play, Learning and Care (ECPLC) plan further prioritises respecting children's rights, enabling strong relationships, and ensuring inclusive, accessible provision for all (Children's Parliament, 2022; UNICEF and UNESCO, 2024; Welsh Government, no date b). This comprehensive focus is just as integral when it comes to assessment and support, ensuring that all children's needs are identified and met in a fair, responsive, and inclusive way (Department for Education, 2023). Together, these frameworks guide professional practitioners in delivering personalised, inclusive, and responsive early years education that supports every child's unique developmental pathway, as highlighted in Department for Education (2023) guidance and further acknowledged by Grenier (2025).

Wales' early years education prioritises recognising each child as unique, with a clear commitment to inclusive practice for children with Additional Learning Needs (ALN) (Vanello, 2025). The Curriculum for Wales encourages professional practitioners to adapt teaching and learning to meet every child's needs, ensuring that all children, including those with ALN, can thrive and feel a sense of belonging (Welsh Government, 2022b). The Early Childhood Play, Learning and Care (ECPLC) Plan reinforces this by promoting accessible, play-based learning that respects each child's rights and developmental journey. These frameworks work alongside the ALN and Education Tribunal (Wales) Act 2018, which ensures children with ALN receive tailored support through Individual Development Plans (IDPs), underpinning a fully inclusive approach to

early years education (Welsh Government, 2021a). An IDP is a dynamic form of assessment that gathers and reviews information about a child's strengths, needs, and progress. Each IDP is unique to the child, it reinforces the principle of recognising each child as an unique individual and ensures that assessment and support are truly personalised (Newport County Council, 2024).

Moreover, while these policies reflect a strong commitment to inclusive education, research highlights a gap between policy intent and practice. Stewart, MacDonald, and Waters-Davies (2024) note that despite progressive aims, implementation is often hindered by differences in professional practitioner training and resource allocation. Furthermore, Symeonidou *et al.*, (2020) argue that inclusive education requires not only structural support but also a cultural shift in how difference is perceived and accommodated within educational settings (Kefallinou, Symeonidou and Meijer, 2020). Early years assessment plays an integral role in bridging this gap by ensuring that each child's unique needs, including those with ALN, are identified and supported in practice, not just in policy. To achieve this, sustained investment in professional development, inter-agency collaboration, and simplified IDP processes are essential. Only through such systemic alignment, alongside effective and individualised assessment practices, can the inclusive vision of Welsh early years education be fully realised (Bianchi, Nasi and Rivenbark, 2021).

In the context of early childhood education in Wales, the timely identification and support of children with Additional Learning Needs (ALN) is a cornerstone of inclusive practice. Recognising and responding to these needs from the earliest stages not only promotes equitable access to learning but also lays the foundation for long-term educational success. A proactive, collaborative approach, rooted in observation, reflection, and partnership with families and professional practitioners are essential to ensure that every child's development is nurtured in a way that is both meaningful and personalised (Estyn, 2024b). Effective early identification and observation are integral in ensuring that young children with Additional Learning Needs (ALN) in Wales receive appropriate support and inclusive learning experiences. Furthermore, early identification and observation are essential for supporting young children with ALN in Wales (Welsh

Government, no date a). Professional practitioners carry out continuous, reflective observations within everyday routines and play-based activities to monitor each child's development (Welsh Government, 2023a). This involves engaging with parents and carers to gather their perspectives and collaborating with ALNCOs and multi-agency professionals (Estyn, 2024b). These early assessments help professional practitioners identify emerging needs quickly, so they can tailor support and remove barriers to learning. This holistic, child-centred approach ensures that every child's unique strength and needs are recognised and responded to effectively (Crawford, 2019).

However, Wood and Hedges (2016) argue that early childhood curricula are shaped by two dominant paradigms. Developmental psychology and policy frameworks can have problematic implications for supporting children with Additional Learning Needs (ALN) (Saracho, 2023). Developmental psychology's focus on universal norms may marginalise those whose learning does not align with these expectations, while policy-driven accountability often clashes with the flexible, responsive approaches required for inclusive ALN practice (Center on the Developing Child, 2024). To address these tensions, Wood and Hedges propose "working theories," which foreground co-constructed curricula based on children's lived experiences and inquiries. This perspective aligns with the inclusive aspirations of the Curriculum for Wales and the Early Childhood Play, Learning and Care Plan (Welsh Government, 2022a; Welsh Government, 2023b). Moreover, the persistent gap between policy intentions and practice can lead to tokenistic implementation unless practitioners have robust training and reflective practice. The Children's Commissioner for Wales (2024) also underscores the need for a rights-based approach, ensuring that children's voices and needs are genuinely integrated. Bridging this gap is integral for realising the holistic and inclusive aspirations of early years education for ALN learners in Wales (Freeman-Green, Williamson and Cornelius, 2023).

The role of Early Years Additional Learning Needs Coordinators (ALNCOs) is integral to supporting inclusive practice in early years settings. ALNCOs are tasked with facilitating the early identification of Additional Learning Needs (ALN), ensuring that potential barriers to learning are promptly recognised and addressed (Estyn, no date; Estyn,

2024b). Their responsibilities extend to coordinating with multi-agency professionals, including health, social care, and education, to plan and implement targeted interventions that reflect each child's specific strengths and challenges (Stefanija Ališauskienė *et al.*, 2023). Central to this role is the commitment to tailoring support strategies to the individual child, fostering an environment that is both inclusive and responsive to their unique developmental pathway (Spandagou, 2020; Worgan, 2023). Equally important is ALNCo's role in assessment gathering, interpreting, and sharing evidence of each child's progress to ensure that interventions are meaningful and effectively meet their needs (Murphy, Greenway and Conn, 2024). This collaborative and child-centred approach to assessment and support is essential for upholding the principles of inclusion outlined in the Additional Learning Needs and Education Tribunal (Wales) Act 2018 and ensuring that all children have equitable opportunities to thrive in their early learning experiences (Leggett, 2023).

Despite the statutory role of ALNCos in designing strength-based interventions, a persistent implementation gap between inclusive policy and practice often leads to tokenistic approaches (Worgan, 2023). Inclusion, rather than being a foundational principle, is frequently marginalised as an add-on (Spandagou, 2020), with superficial practices that prioritise compliance over authentic engagement (Stefanija Ališauskienė *et al.*, 2023). This performative stance risks reinforcing deficit discourses that frame children with ALN as problems to manage, rather than as competent and capable learners (Wood and Hedges, 2016). Assessment in early years should be tailored to each child's strengths, recognising their unique abilities and using these as the foundation for planning meaningful learning experiences (Birth to 5 matters, 2021). Realising truly inclusive practice demands a reorientation towards children's strengths as the basis for planning, assessment, and participatory learning (NAEYC, 2019). Additionally, ALNCos play a pivotal role in maintaining high-quality assessment in early years settings by guiding the use of IDPs as flexible tools to monitor progress, identify needs, and tailor support for children with ALN. Through collaborative, evidence-based practice, they foster inclusive environments that recognise and respond to each child's developmental journey (Beaton and Edwards, 2021; Lindqvist, 2025).

Critically, genuine inclusion including assessment demands a shift in power dynamics: from adult-led decision making to shared, co-constructed practices that respect children's voices and experiences (Children's Commissioner for Wales, 2024). However, achieving this requires not only reflective capacity building for ALNCoS but also structural support, such as adequate time, resources, and multi-agency liaising to enable meaningful, individualised support (Käosaar *et al.*, 2023).

Equally important is the role of assessment in this process; child-led, reflective assessment practices are essential for identifying and celebrating each child's unique learning journey. When assessment is used as a tool for listening to children's voices and valuing their strengths, it can shift practice away from deficit thinking towards genuine inclusion. Without addressing these underlying systemic barriers, however, there is a risk that the aspirational rhetoric of inclusive education remains unfulfilled, particularly for children with ALN whose needs and voices are already marginalised in traditional, one-size-fits-all curricula (Grigorieva, Lazurenko and Solovyova, 2022; Pincock and Jones, 2020 and Rapp and Corral-Granados, 2021).

The Individual Development Plan (IDP) framework in Wales supports play-based curricula by helping practitioners monitor children's evolving interests and needs while emphasising play and exploration (Saracho, 2020). Introduced under the Additional Learning Needs and Education Tribunal (Wales) Act 2018, IDPs replaced the fragmented SEN system with a consistent, person-centred approach (Welsh Government, 2021a). They integrate education, health, and social care to create holistic, evolving support that follows the child from early years to post-16, ensuring continuity and reducing disruption (Estyn, 2024a, 2024b; Snap Cymru, 2024). For professional practitioners, this means greater clarity, accountability, and flexibility in tailoring provision, ensuring that every child is fully included and supported to achieve their full potential (Florian and Graham 2020; Welsh Government, 2020; Welsh Government, 2021a).

Furthermore, IDPs enhance the play-based curriculum by providing a personalised, adaptable framework that supports holistic development and functions as an assessment tool. Their child-centred approach aligns with play pedagogy, enabling

evolving, tailored support. However, inconsistencies in training, administrative burden, and weak integration into daily practice can undermine their effectiveness. Maximising impact requires clearer alignment with play strategies, consistent use, and a stronger understanding of IDPs as dynamic assessment tools (Snap Cymru, 2024; Welsh Government, 2023d).

In summary, although ALN assessment tools like Individual Development Plans (IDPs) are intended to deliver personalised and holistic support, they must be critically examined within the wider framework of play-based curricula (National Association for the Education of Young Children, 2022). Approaches like the Curriculum for Wales and Te Whāriki highlight the integral role of play and exploration in children's all-round development, including those with ALN (New Zealand Government, no date). Yet, a persistent tension exists between these progressive, child-led concepts and the demands of policy-driven accountability (Cowie and Hipkins, 2022). Without ongoing professional development and a commitment to truly inclusive practice, there is a concern that tools like IDPs become superficial, focusing more on paperwork than on nurturing each child's unique learning journey (Moses, 2021).

To genuinely realise the potential of play-based, inclusive education, ALN assessment must transcend a compliance mindset, instead embracing co-constructed, flexible practices that recognise and celebrate the individuality of every child (Danniels and Pyle, 2022). Addressing this gap between policy and authentic practice is vital for fostering equitable opportunities and fulfilling the promise of early years education (Woods and Hedges, 2016).

Section 3

Welcome! In this blog, I will explore why play is not just fun, it is essential for young children's mental health, helping them grow emotionally, socially, and resiliently from the very start.

I will delve into why early mental health matters, how early experiences shape children's emotional resilience, and the practical ways caregivers, professional practitioners and

communities can build strong foundations for lifelong well-being (Cardiff and Vale University Health Board, 2024; Harvard University, 2025; North Carolina Department of Health and Human Services, 2025). Whether you are a parent, early years professional practitioner, or simply someone who cares deeply about children's futures, I invite you to join me on this journey of learning, reflection, and action.

The early years of a child's life are a precious time of growth, discovery, and wonder (Thread, 2025; UNICEF, 2021). It is in these formative years that the seeds of lifelong well-being are sown. But just as children's bodies need nurturing, so do their minds and hearts. Supporting young children's mental health is not just important; it is integral (Aparna, 2025; Littlebird Care, 2023).

Play serves as a fundamental mechanism for emotional development and mental well-being in early childhood. It offers a dynamic context in which children can explore and express emotions, develop self-regulation, and build resilience (Cole, Stoop, and Cardwell, 2023; Tominey *et al.*, 2017). Through imaginative and social play, children form secure attachments with caregivers and peers, fostering a sense of safety, belonging, and emotional security (Moore, 2021). These interactions support the development of coping strategies and adaptive behaviours, which are essential for navigating future challenges (Buzanko, 2024). As such, play is not merely recreational but a critical component of early mental health, shaping children's capacity to relate to others and thrive emotionally throughout life (Center on the Developing Child at Harvard University, 2024; Child Mind Institute, 2025; United States Department of Health and Human Services, 2024 and Warner, 2024)

Moreover, play is a powerful contributor to young children's mental health, offering a natural and joyful way to support emotional and social development. Through play, children learn to navigate relationships, express feelings, and develop empathy, skills that are essential for building positive connections with others (Ho and Funk, 2018). Whether it is sharing toys, taking turns, or engaging in imaginative scenarios, play provides a safe space for practicing social interactions and emotional regulation. According to Yogman *et al.*, (2018), play also fosters resilience and self-confidence,

helping children feel valued and connected. These early playful experiences lay the foundation for strong self-esteem and long-term emotional well-being, making play not just beneficial, but essential for healthy mental development in the early years (Children's Mercy Hospital, 2025; Mayhew, 2025 and Shafer, 2018).

Furthermore, play is an integral mechanism for supporting children's mental health, particularly in the context of environmental adversity and trauma (Kimble, 2022; Play Scotland, no date; Thomson and Janet, 2025). It offers a developmentally appropriate means for children to process emotions, build resilience, and experience a sense of control and safety. When adults engage in play with children, they reinforce secure attachments and communicate emotional availability and support (UNICEF, 2022). While play cannot eliminate the impact of adverse experiences, it provides a protective buffer, fostering emotional regulation, self-worth, and long-term psychological well-being (Yogman *et al.*, 2018). As such, play must be recognised not merely as recreational, but as an essential component of early intervention and mental health support (Haoyue, Donna and Oyam, 2024).

Play is a vital early intervention tool in children's mental health. It enables natural emotional expression, offering insights into a child's inner world (Child Psychiatry Today, 2024). Through play, caregivers and professionals can detect distress, build trust, model emotional regulation, and foster healing, making it both diagnostic and therapeutic (Ho and Funk, 2018).

According to Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs, physical health forms the base of human motivation. Basic physiological needs, such as sleep, nutrition, and physical safety must be met before children can progress to higher levels of emotional security, social connection, and self-actualisation. When children have consistent routines, nutritious meals, and adequate rest, they are more likely to feel safe and supported, enabling emotional growth and resilience. Thus, promoting healthy lifestyles is not just beneficial, it is essential for fulfilling foundational human needs (Belson, Snelling and Heap, 2018).

Cultural identity and a sense of belonging are integral to young children's emotional well-being. Through culturally meaningful play, children explore their heritage and develop pride in who they are (Ang, 2025; Kids Matter, no date). Community resources, such as early years centres, parenting groups, and mental health services offer essential support, helping families navigate challenges and build resilience (Cardiff and Vale University Health Board, 2025). Respecting diverse parenting practices and cultural views on mental health is crucial; when early years practitioners embrace cultural differences with sensitivity, they foster inclusive environments where all children can thrive (Freud, 2024).

To conclude, play is not merely a leisure activity; it is an integral foundation for emotional development and mental well-being in the early years (Elkind, 2023 and Teach Kloud, 2025). Through play, children explore emotions, build resilience, and form trusting relationships. For professional practitioners and caregivers, fostering playful environments is a meaningful investment in lifelong mental health. By valuing play as a core component of learning and development, we empower children to thrive, mentally, emotionally, and socially (Bayat, 2025 and Lorina, 2025).

By embracing play, we're not just supporting children's development; we are building a healthier, more resilient future where every child has the right to thrive (National Institute for Play, 2018).

Let us commit to embedding play at the heart of education, ensuring every child has the freedom to learn, grow, and belong. Thank you for listening.

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