



# Play in schools and integrated settings:

## A position statement

### Children have the right to play

**All children and young people have the right to play and need to play: free to choose what they do – lively or relaxed, noisy or quiet – with the chance to stretch and challenge themselves, take risks and enjoy freedom. The right to play is enshrined in Article 31 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child.**

*Charter for Children's Play, 2007.*

### Introduction

Play is an essential part of every child's life. It is integral to their enjoyment of their lives, their health and their development. It is how children and young people explore the world around them, naturally develop understanding and practise skills. Play is essential for healthy physical and emotional growth, for intellectual and educational development and for acquiring social and behavioural skills. Play may or may not involve equipment or a dedicated play space and may or may not have an end product. Children play on their own or with others, their play may be boisterous and energetic, quiet and contemplative, lighthearted or very serious. Children's own culture is created through their play.

Over the past few years, the importance of play in children's development has become more widely acknowledged. The Children's Plan published by the government in December 2007, acknowledges both the value of play and the problems children and families encounter in finding suitable spaces for play. *Fair Play: A consultation on the play strategy*, commits significant spending over the next three years to improve children's local play opportunities and experiences. It outlines a longer-term policy framework

to support play provision and recognises the value of play to children's enjoyment of their childhoods.

Children spend a considerable proportion of their time in early years provision, school or other childcare settings. This paper is for all those working with children and young people from birth to 18 years. This includes, teachers, headteachers, learning assistants, early-years practitioners, parents, out-of-school providers, playworkers, school governors and all those involved in children's centres, extended services and other forms of childcare. It is also relevant for managers and planners in Children's Trusts, education advisers, extended school coordinators, play development officers and education and childcare inspectors.

This statement is the result of collaboration between members of the Play, Schools and Integrated Children's Settings Group, a group of representatives from national and regional agencies and local authorities who all share an interest in improving play provision.

## Objective

The overriding objective of this statement is to secure for children and young people an increase in the quantity and an enhancement in the quality of play opportunities within all childcare and educational settings.

The underpinning values and understandings are that children and young people:

- are entitled to respect for their own unique combination of qualities and capabilities
- should have their opinions taken into account and participate in the design and development of play space, while bearing in mind health, safety and respect for the needs of others
- are part of, and contribute to, the wider life of their communities, and their school communities in particular
- have a right to play environments that offer challenge and stimulation and opportunities to take acceptable levels of risk
- have the right to feel part of a community of trust and co-operation.

## The value of play

### Every child needs time and space to play

All children and young people – disabled and non-disabled – whatever their age, culture, ethnicity or social and economic background, need time and space to play freely and confidently with their peers, free of charge, indoors and outdoors, somewhere where they feel safe. Play provision should actively include the widest range of children and seek to engage with those from minority groups (Play England 2007).

### Children need and want to stretch and challenge themselves when they play

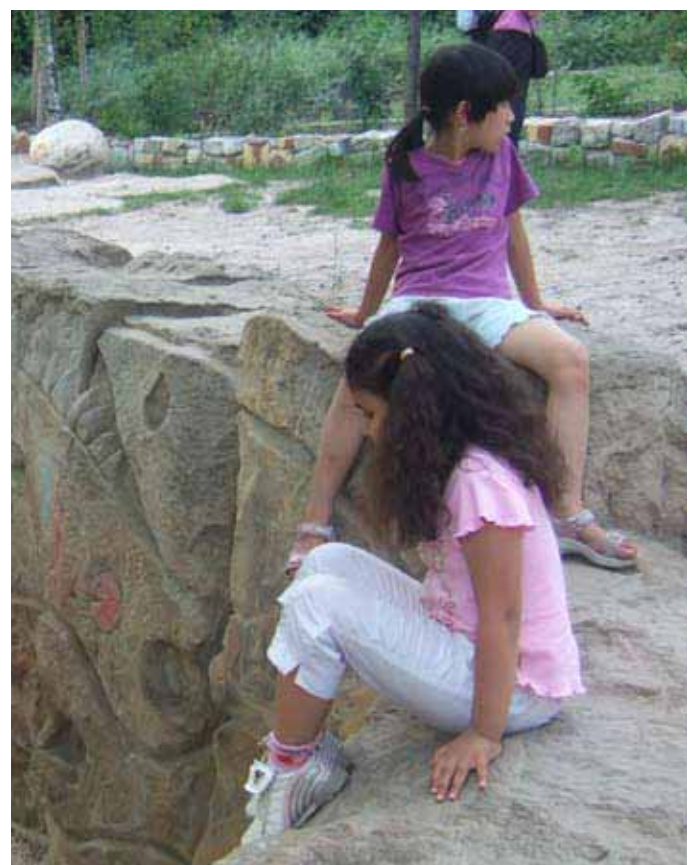
Play provision that is stimulating, challenging and exciting allows children to take risk, which helps them to build confidence, learn skills and develop resilience at their own pace. It also helps equip them to manage risk safely in their lives.

### Managing risk in play provision: summary statement

Children need and want to take risks when they play. Play provision aims to respond to these needs and wishes by offering children stimulating, challenging environments for exploring and developing their abilities. In doing this, play provision aims to manage the level of risk so that children are not exposed to unacceptable risks of death or serious injury (Play Safety Forum 2002).

Good children's play provision aims to:

- extend the choice and control that children have over their play, the freedom they enjoy and the satisfaction they gain from it
- recognise children's need to test boundaries and respond positively to that need
- manage the balance between children's need to play and the need to keep them from being exposed to unacceptable risks of serious injury
- maximise the range of play opportunities both indoors and outside, and maximise the amount of time for play
- foster independence and self-esteem
- increase children's respect for others and offer opportunities for social interaction
- improve the child's well-being, healthy growth and development, knowledge and understanding, creativity and capacity to learn (NPFA et al 2000).



## Play in schools and integrated children's settings

The term 'play' is understood in a number of different ways by different groups of people working with children. It is not the purpose of this paper to define one universal meaning of the term, or create a hierarchy of meanings. The aim is to look at how play is understood in practice, that is, in the different contexts within which play occurs in schools and integrated settings for children from birth to 18 years.

For the purposes of this paper, the time children spend in school and integrated children's settings and travelling to and from these settings has been described under five headings. They are:

- children's centres and early-years provision
- planned, structured curriculum part of the school day
- non-curriculum part of the school day, ie breaks and lunchtimes
- extended services and out-of-school provision
- the journey to and from school.

## Children's centres and early years provision

Play is a vital part of early childhood. The Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) states clearly that play underpins all development and learning. 'Children's play reflects their wide-ranging and varied interests and preoccupations. In their play children learn at their highest level. Play with peers is important for children's development.' (DCSF 2007). The EYFS spans early childhood from birth to six years old age. During this time, children may spend time with a childminder, in a playgroup, nursery, Children's Centre, nursery class and reception class in school.

Play and exploration in early years settings means children are able to choose activities where they engage with other children or adults, or sometimes play alone. They learn through first-hand experience – by actively doing, thinking and talking to others.

Young children need quality indoor and outdoor space, time and choice of a range of play activities. They benefit from stimulating environments that encourage self-initiated, freely-chosen play – combined with practitioner-planned activities based on observation of individual children's developmental needs and interests.

## Planned, structured, curriculum part of the school day

### Children need time and space to play at school

The school day should allow time for children to relax and play freely with their friends. Young children learn best through play and, as they get older, play supports and enriches their learning. Children learn best if teaching is creative and enjoyable. In school, time and space for play and outdoor learning is as important as formal teaching. School grounds should be good places to play (Play England 2007).

All play at school has a fundamental role in enabling children and young people to engage positively with the complexities of the world around them.

Play-based learning, from the teacher's perspective, may have learning outcomes, whether or not the child is aware of this. In order to achieve the identified outcome, the play-based method is likely to be, to some extent, structured, managed, directed or assessed by the teacher, however informally. Teachers may sometimes intervene to guide the child's play to assist the child's learning and to develop curriculum knowledge and understanding. Teachers and others working in schools need to be aware that children may direct their play towards other ends. To sustain high quality play, it is crucial to understand the importance of the child's self-directed play. In this context, teachers use the term 'play' to identify activity that is fun or pleasurable for the child, is deeply involving and allows space for children's spontaneity within a consciously adult-structured environment.

## Non-curriculum part of the school day

During the school day, children need breaks when play is freely chosen and controlled by the child. Adult intervention is best kept to a minimum, and, although they have a key role in designing the physical environment, adults have, in principle, no role in structuring, directing or managing a child's play. Where adults can be involved, however, is by employing playwork skills to offer a wider range of play opportunities. In this part of the school day there is no necessary or pre-determined outcome or product of play.

## Extended services and out-of-school provision

Children are increasingly spending their free time in non-family childcare. This might be before and after school, at weekends or during school holidays. Adults that work with children and young people in these settings should have a high level of playwork skills, obtained through playwork qualifications or endorsed training. Out-of-school periods may be directly controlled by the school or provided by voluntary and community or private sector organisations and form part of its extended services. This part of the day may be on the school premises or in other locations such as play centres, adventure playgrounds, parks, childcare settings or community centres. External play providers may use the school premises for this provision.

## The journey to and from school

For many children, the only opportunity they have for playing outside with their friends is on the journey to and from school. The school journey is a great opportunity for young people to learn about the area they live in and develop independence.

Sustrans, the sustainable transport charity, runs a national Safe Routes to Schools information service, aimed at schools, parents, pupils, local authorities and all those who are interested in Safe Routes to Schools Projects. These projects are in place all over the UK and enable young people to make journeys in a safe and active way. Schools work with parents, local authorities and other organisations to explore issues related to the school journey and come up with solutions.

## The role of adults

### Adults should let children play

Parents, carers and other adults can support children and young people's play by respecting the value and importance of all types of play, playing with their children and by creating opportunities and allowing time for children to play independently with their friends, inside and outside the home (Play England 2007).

An adult's role is to support and enable children's play by creating a physical, social and emotional environment in which they can experience a variety of different types of play.

In early childhood provision, the core activity is play, but the adults create the environment and support children in the way most appropriate to each child.

In the planned, structured, curriculum part of the school day, teachers and practitioners must be given the freedom to use professional judgement to relate play to the curriculum and to intervene sensitively to maximise learning.

In both the non-curriculum part of the school day and the out-of-school day, when creating quality free-play opportunities is the objective, all practitioners, including teachers, must be given the freedom to work to the playwork principles outlined below, and be themselves supported to increase their skills through playwork training and qualifications.

## The playwork principles

These principles establish the professional and ethical framework for playwork and are to be regarded as a whole.

1. All children and young people need to play. The impulse to play is innate. Play is a biological, psychological and social necessity, and is fundamental to the healthy development and well-being of individuals and communities.
2. Play is a process that is freely chosen, personally directed and intrinsically motivated. That is, children and young people determine and control the content and intent of their play, by following their own instincts, ideas and interests, in their own way for their own reasons.
3. The prime focus and essence of playwork is to support and facilitate the play process and this should inform the development of play policy, strategy, training and education.
4. For playworkers, the play process takes precedence and playworkers act as advocates for play when engaging with adult-led agendas.
5. The role of the playworker is to support all children and young people in the creation of a space in which they can play.
6. The playworker's response to children and young people playing is based on a sound up-to-date knowledge of the play process and reflective practice.
7. Playworkers recognise their own impact on the play space and also the impact of children and young people's play on the playworker.
8. Playworkers choose an intervention style that enables children and young people to extend their play. All playworker intervention must balance risk with the developmental benefit and well-being of children (Play Wales 2005).

SkillsActive, the Sector Skills Council for playwork, endorses the playwork principles.

## Recommendations

In order for changes in practice to take place, the Play, Schools and Integrated Children's Settings Group believe that the following developments need to take place in government policy. It recommends:

1. Government provides guidance to local authorities and all primary and secondary schools on minimum standards to provide for children's free play needs before, after and during the school day, including a minimum allocation of time for break-times and lunchtimes.
2. Government issues more detailed guidance on developing outdoor, inclusive, play-friendly environments in schools and integrated children's settings. It would be beneficial for this to be a statutory requirement for all new-build and refurbishment projects, for example through Building Schools for the Future.
3. Government provides guidance and necessary regulations to enable that school grounds become accessible, inclusive and are opened-up for free play space outside the school day.
4. Primary and secondary school grounds, Children's Centres and early years settings should be judged and developed against the play environment criteria set out in *Best Play: What play provision should do for children*.
5. Knowledge and understanding about play and its importance to children's development should be included as a requirement in both the Qualified Teacher Status (QTS) and head teacher professional standards.
6. Playwork training, qualifications and an understanding of playwork principles should be available to all adults who interact with children and young people in the non-curriculum part of the school day.
7. Government amends the Early Years Foundation Stage to require all early years settings to provide children with good access to high-quality outdoor play space adjoining the premises.
8. Government considers the need to develop a 'Foundation Phase' that continues up to seven years of age.
9. Government encourages schools to use a whole school approach to develop and implement successful play policies as suggested in the National Union of Teachers (NUT) play policy, *Time to Play* (NUT 2007).
10. Government encourages schools and integrated children's settings to nominate a senior manager to promote and secure quality play opportunities and develop playwork skills of staff.
11. Government ensures that the value and importance of play is recognised in Ofsted inspections, and that the joint Ofsted/SkillsActive training module *Putting Play into Practice* should be reviewed, and inspectors required to attend this training.
12. Play is a principal and recognised part of Healthy School status. All Healthy School coordinators to promote the importance of play in children's health and well-being.



## References

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Play Wales (2005) *Playwork Principles*. Cardiff, Play Wales.

## Groups that support this statement are:

4Children  
Arts Council England  
Association of Teachers and Lecturers  
Barnardos

Common Threads  
ContinYou  
Council for Disabled Children  
Early Childhood Forum  
KIDS  
Learning through Landscapes  
Leicester City Council  
London Play  
National Children's Bureau  
National Day Nurseries Association  
National Union of Teachers  
Nottingham City Council  
PLAYLINK  
Play England  
Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea  
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