



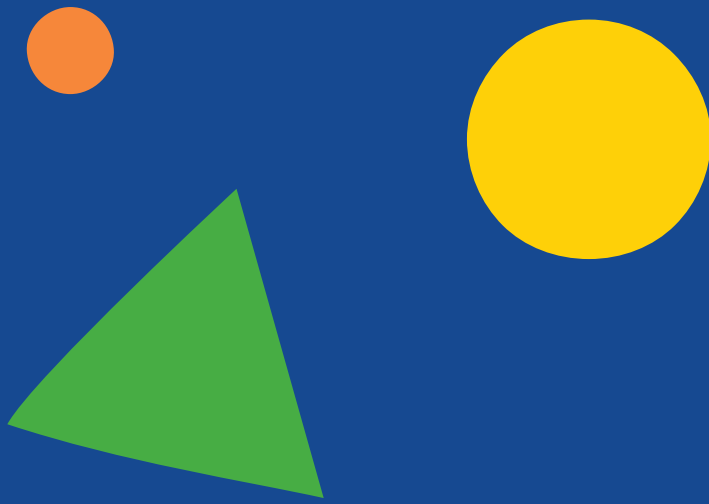
STATE OF

Play

2025

SUPPORTED BY





Report author; Robyn Monro Miller for Play Australia

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Play Australia acknowledges the Traditional Owners of Country throughout Australia and acknowledges their continuing connection to the land, waters and community where children have played for over 60,000 years. We pay our respects to the people, the cultures and the Elders past and present. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people should be aware that this report may contain images of deceased persons

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Introduction

The State of Play 2025 is the first report of its kind to be undertaken in Australia about play for children and young people.

It brings together insights from survey data, research and interviews with industry leaders and experts who are working across a range of areas that intersect with children and their right to play.

This report focuses on the current conditions impacting children's play in Australia and what action is needed to support children's play opportunities.

Six key themes have emerged from the data collected and 31 recommendations for action that will support the development of play initiatives to improve the health and wellbeing of children and young people in Australia and the communities in which they live.

The report includes eight case studies selected from across Australia that highlight grass roots initiatives that are being taken to support children's play. Each example aims to highlight the diverse and creative ways that play is being supported in the Australian community and offer inspiration to others to engage in finding solutions for increasing the play opportunities for Australian children.

Play can be a multidimensional panacea for a range of issues and is now recognised internationally across many levels of Government, who have successfully embedded it in their policy and planning and created national agendas for play.

This is a preliminary report and is not designed to be exhaustive but instead, serve as a catalyst for further discussion and review on the state of play in Australia and support policy makers and stakeholders to make informed decisions when planning for play. This report provides an opportunity to reflect on how we can advance recognition of the important role play has, both in the development of children and young people and in achieving socially cohesive and resilient communities.



Robyn Monro Miller AM
CEO, Play Australia



An Introduction to *Play*

WHAT IS PLAY?

“Children’s play is any behaviour, activity or process initiated, controlled and structured by children themselves; it takes place whenever and wherever opportunities arise. Caregivers may contribute to the creation of environments in which play takes place, but play itself is non-compulsory, driven by intrinsic motivation and undertaken for its own sake, rather than to an end. Play involves the exercise of autonomy, physical, mental or emotional activity, and has the potential to take infinite forms, either in groups or alone. These forms will change and be adapted throughout the course of childhood.

The key characteristics of play are fun, uncertainty, challenge, flexibility and non-productivity. Together, these factors contribute to the enjoyment it produces and the consequent incentive to continue to play. While play is often considered non-essential, it is a fundamental and a vital dimension of the pleasure of childhood, as well as an essential component of physical, social, cognitive, emotional and spiritual development.”

- UN General Comment 17 on Article 31 on UNCRC¹

Why is Play Important?

Play is a biological imperative. It is undertaken by all species with advanced social structures, providing us with tangible evidence that play is not a human concept, created as an indulgence for our young, but a process with a deep biological imperative for survival of a species. Fulfillment of this intrinsic biological urge to play results in an increased capacity for processing and developing pro-social brains that understand how to interact with others and the environment they live in.

Play provides multifunctional benefits for brain and motor skill development.

During play, new circuits are built in the neocortex of the brain. The neo-cortex is responsible for the regulation of emotions, problem solving, and the navigation of complex social interactions. Just 30 minutes of play is enough to significantly modify one third of genes in the brain within one hour (Gordon et al 2003).

Active Play, sometimes known as ‘rough and tumble’ or ‘risky play’ is has been linked to increased brain-derived neurotrophic factor (BDNF). BDNF plays an important role in the growth and development of neurones, neural plasticity, regulation of glucose and energy metabolism. It is also recognised as having a role in social learning and the development of long-term memory (Gordon et al 2002, Huber et al 2007)

The deprivation of play opportunities for children can result in harm to their intellectual and physical development, and also has potential implications for increased longer term mental and physical health impacts (Yogman et al, 2018). For instance, decreased levels of BDNF are associated with neurodegenerative disease such as Alzheimer’s disease, multiple sclerosis, and Parkinson’s disease.

Play is also a human right, under Article 31, of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child. Australia as a signatory to the Convention is a duty bearer to provide for, protect, and promote the child’s right to play.

¹ <https://www.refworld.org/legal/general/crc/2013/en/96090>

What is quality play provision?

The Welsh Government in its statutory guidance on the Play Sufficiency Duty identifies quality play provision in any setting as offering the following opportunities for a child to interact with:

- Other children
- The natural world
- Loose parts
- The four elements- fire, water, air and earth
- Challenge and uncertainty
- Changing identity
- Movement
- Rough and tumble play
- All the senses

These opportunities are often more easily achieved through unsupervised, outdoor play in nature, and we see the term 'nature play' frequently referred to, and developing a strong following in Australia. However, significant differences have occurred in the use of the term and variation in the way researchers define nature play. For this reason, this report identifies nature as an environment conducive to a rich diversity of play experiences, but play is not limited only to this environment.

In preparing this report, stakeholders shared their perspectives on quality play provision some of which include:

- Time space and permission to play – they all cross over. Permission is more about the attitudes of adults.
- Play spaces that invite play including spaces designed by children with materials they want to play with.
- Loose parts spaces are good examples of where children can play. These spaces often look like junk yards and consequently adults who don't understand these spaces are inclined to want to 'tidy them up'. Play spaces that meet children's play needs should be better understood by adults.
- Supportive adults who value play and enable time and space for it to occur (recognising their power to influence and determine what children need and are not afforded).
- Time for play being prioritised and not treated as a luxury e.g. 'when you are done learning, you can have time for play.' Play needs to be a time priority equal to learning and not less important.
- Resources are an important consideration. There must be sufficient resourcing for play, whether that be equipment or funding for spaces or other conditions that can enable opportunities for play.



Report Methodology

The research project was a mixed methodology gathering both qualitative and quantitative data through a desktop review, parent and child surveys and stakeholder scans. Data was analysed and thematically coded to inform the recommendations contained in this report.

1. A nation-wide survey of parents and children on their perceptions of play and participation in play.

The survey questions for children focus on ages 8 – 12 and were based on the same data collection for the Welsh survey “What children say about play in Wales 2022”.

The Australian data set for the children’s survey was compared with the Welsh data set compiled by Play Wales in its report “What Children Say about Wales 2022”.² This use of the questions provided a useful baseline for comparison between the two countries. Parents survey data drew on existing surveys conducted by Royal Children’s Hospital and Deakin University to ensure a larger cross section of parents was achieved.

2. A desktop review of International and Australian National policy frameworks and their relevance to the development of play in Australia was conducted.

3. A stakeholder scan of 32 adults from different sectors with an interest in children and their play, gathered their feedback on the following key aspects:

- Impact of “Play poverty” on children’s health and wellbeing in Australia.
- Conditions for play and impacts on play in Australia.
- Identified barriers to play for children in Australia.
- Opportunities to improve play provision.
- Feedback and comment on the current international position statements on Outdoor Play.

4. Collation of report identifying key themes and recommendations and a call to action.

About the Data Used

1. Play Australia Children’s Survey (2024)

Children’s survey captured feedback from 618 children aged 8-12 years old, via an online Play Australia survey using Survey Monkey from the 2nd quarter of 2024. The survey included questions from the Welsh Play Sufficiency Duty Survey completed across Wales by children and young people capturing their feedback on play sufficiency in their local community. These questions were contextualised for Australia and additional questions added on type of play children enjoy.

Of the respondents, 53% identified as male, 45% as female and 1.5% were nonbinary. 12% identified as having a disability. 2% spoke a language other than English at home.

Regarding age, 35% were 9 - 12, 23% 8-9 years of age and 24% were 6-7 years old.

An additional 15% were under 6 or adults who wished to offer their feedback. This 15% was not included in the data set reported on.

As a nationwide survey, children from across Australia participated with majority from Queensland (35%) and NSW (24%) and the remaining states and territories less than 15% each.

2. “What Children say about play in Wales” Report (2022)³

The data reported on comprised of a total of 6,966 responses from children and teenagers from 15 regions in Wales to their local play sufficiency duty. Note, population of children and teenagers in Wales (562,73011).

3. The Royal Children’s Hospital National Child Health Poll. (2022). Australian families: How we play. Poll Number 28. The Royal Children’s Hospital Melbourne, Parkville, Victoria⁴

This was a nationally representative household survey conducted exclusively by the Online Research Unit for The Royal Children’s Hospital, Melbourne. In an online

² <https://play.wales/play-policy-legislation/our-research/#:~:text=Researching%20children's%20views%20about%20play&text=Most%20children%20and%20teenagers%20across,with%20their%20opportunities%20to%20play.>

³ <https://play.wales/wp-content/uploads/2023/09/What-children-say-about-play-in-Wales-2022.pdf>

⁴ <https://rchpoll.org.au/polls/australian-families-how-we-play/>



Limitations and strengths of data

survey, conducted in the latter half of 2022, Australian parents were asked about their experience, knowledge, and beliefs about play in children and young people. The randomly selected, nationally representative sample of 2,036 parents was weighted to reflect the distribution of the Australian population using figures from the Australian Bureau of Statistics. All respondents were parents or caregivers to at least one child aged less than 18 years and provided data on each of their children. The survey produced data on 3,351 children less than 18 years old.

4. Deakin University Study by Alethea Jerebine⁵

A panel sample of 645 Australian parents/guardians completed an online survey consisting of several validated measures of risk and injury attitudes, and physical activity and play behaviour. Most adult participants (81%) were female. The mean age of the child participants (53% male) was 8.6 years (SD = 2.4).

5. Association for Children with a Disability in Victoria (ACD) Consultation

The ACD consulted with more than 130 children and families of children with disability from across Victoria in 2022 for a shared project with Play Australia and this data, whilst focussing on inclusive play space, design was considered in preparation of this report.⁶

6. Play Australia Stakeholder Scan

40 representatives from across Australia, were invited to participate in confidential interviews based on a set of pre-arranged questions. 32 representatives responded. Representatives were chosen based on their current work in organisations that have an intersect with play.

7. Parent Interviews

Interviews conducted with 10 parents with children aged between 1 and 12, to seek feedback on perceptions of risk and approaches to management of risk with their children.

In the raw survey data of children, we found that many of the survey responses were from Queensland, followed by NSW. We also identified that many respondents were generally already engaged in outdoor play and adventure play because of the marketing strategy used to disseminate the survey.

Comparisons between Welsh and Australian children's responses whilst provided some insight, may not be as representative given the limitations in our distribution. However, the use of the same questions has allowed for comparisons to be drawn in the responses.

Despite the consistency of questions asked, the data will not be able to be 'longitudinal' in a statistical sense because the anonymity of the response collection means that Play Australia has no way of knowing who has responded. However, the survey will be able to be repeated in coming years to allow us to maintain a report card on play in Australia.

In collating our own survey responses from parents and carers, we identified similar limitations as per the children's survey. Funding restraints meant we were unable to access a wider data base of families, as achieved in funded research, so respondents were largely already champions of play for their children and the community and not a true reflection of the community.

A comparison of data from the RCH Poll and Deakin university provided confirmation of that hypothesis and so the report quotes from the RCH Poll and Deakin University for parents as being more statistically relevant for our use. Both the RCH Poll and the Deakin study drew on a broad cross section of parents and applied concise testing methods to ensure academic rigour in the data produced.

⁵ <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/37696315/>

⁶ https://www.acd.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2024/08/PlayReport_020924.pdf

What children told us about their *Play* in Australia...

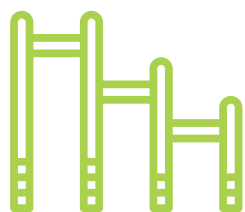
48% of children reported **not having enough time** to play or hang out with friends



Over 70% of children said they play and hang out at home or at homes of friends

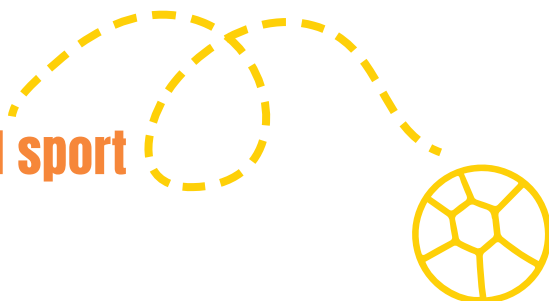


1 in 4 children reported **needing improvement in the opportunities** they had to play outside and hang out with friends



23% of children identified their favourite way to play was on **play equipment and climbing things**

26% identified **playing ball games and sport** as their favourite way to play

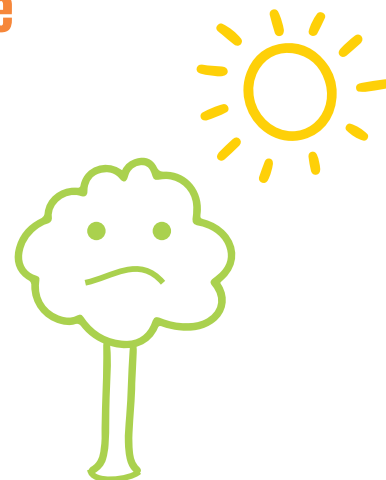


23% identified **hanging out with friends** as their favourite way to play

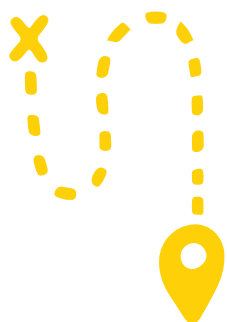


96% of children reported **feeling safe**
when playing or hanging out

15% of children reported **adults being grumpy**
about children playing outside



1 in 2 children reported **not being allowed to play outside**
on their own or with friends



2% of children reported they **do not play outside**

77% of children reported **travelling to places to play**
with an adult **1 in 2** being transported by car



81% of children reported **travelling to school with an adults**
with **64%** being transported by car



What Australia needs for *Play*

Recognition

- Inclusion of play in Australian Government frameworks and policy related to children and environments.
- Investment Dialogue For Australia's Children (IDAC) to include play initiatives
- Decision makers and influencers to understand the benefits of play.

Education

- Training for educators and support staff on play and ways to meet the play needs of children/teens
- A cross-sectoral Playwork qualified workforce
- Phone support and resourcing on play for early childhood and schools
- Education budgets to have quarantined funds for play space upgrades and maintenance
- Mandated play breaks provided for all school students
- Protection of open space for play and outdoor activity
- Accredited Play Therapy used in schools to support children.

Public Health

- An Australian statement of support for the Canadian Paediatric statement on risky outdoor play.
- Health Departments (State and Federal) recognition of play as a preventative health strategy and the inclusion of Play Therapy under Medicare.
- Inclusion of play in state disaster and pandemic preparedness plans.

Access and Inclusion

- Delivery of an Australian Playbourhood trial.
- Local governments supported in the development and delivery of neighbourhood play systems that incorporate international models and indigenous perspectives.
- Distribution of free online learning modules on inclusive play space design to all local governments.
- Resources, webinars and events to support rural and remote children's participation in play.
- Local government forum on Play Sufficiency.
- Play Champions in every Australian local government.





Parent Perceptions

- Awareness of the importance of play with strategies and efforts to reach parents of children of all ages with up-to-date evidence-based information on the wide-ranging benefits risk taking in play, as well as practical advice and support to help parents enable play for their children and understand cultural differences.
- An Australian evidenced-based national position statement on risk in play that supports the Canadian Paediatric Society Position Statement.
- Establishment of a National Risk Safety Forum for Play
- Initiatives to support increased access to risky play for girls and children with a disability and to increase independent mobility.
- Adoption of the 1000 Play Streets movement as a practical approach to educate families, reduce isolation and build social cohesion in local neighbourhoods.
- Engage with media to promote positive news stories on the benefit of play.

Investment in play

- Implementation of a dedicated funding stream to drive free access play opportunities and support and resourcing of the Peak Body.
- Government funding streams across all sectors to include play based initiatives.
- Develop collaborative partnerships between Government, NGO's and corporate and philanthropic sector to support investment in new initiatives.

Driving change

- Showcase innovative examples of practice delivering more play opportunities to children and young people in Australia.
- Australian local government training in the development of local play strategies to reflect the needs of their community with a goal to have 75% of Local Governments with a play strategy in place for their communities by 2030.
- Stakeholders, local government and community representatives to develop a case for a national or state agenda for play.



An Action Plan for Government

Australian Government

- Inclusion of play in Australian Government frameworks and policy related to children and environments.
- Implementation of a dedicated funding stream to drive free access to play opportunities and support and resourcing of the NGO's supporting play
- Inclusion of Play Therapy under Medicare.
- Government funding streams across all sectors to include play based initiatives.
- Maintain investment in current programs supporting play including Toy Libraries and Playgroups.
- Increase investment in new initiatives that support play opportunities.
- Local governments supported in the development and delivery of neighbourhood play systems that incorporate international models and indigenous perspectives.
- Accredited Play Therapy used in schools to support children in need.
- Government funding streams across all sectors to include opportunity to introduce new play initiatives.
- Support collaborative partnerships between Government, NGO's and corporate and philanthropic sector to support investment in new play initiatives outside the mainstream

State and Territory Governments

- Inclusion of play in State and Territory Government frameworks and policy related to children and environments.
- Health Departments recognise play as a preventative health strategy
- Education budgets to have quarantined funds for play space upgrades and maintenance
- Mandated play breaks provided for all school students
- Inclusion of play strategies in disaster and pandemic preparedness plans.
- Review regulations that restrict the running of play streets and community play initiatives.

Local Governments

- Development and implementation of a Local Government play strategy that is broader than just playgrounds.
- Protection of open space for play and outdoor activity
- Local Government adoption of play sufficiency measures
- Quarantine funds for play space upgrades and maintenance
- Adopt the 1000 Play Streets methodology as a practical approach to educate families, reduce isolation and build social cohesion in local neighbourhoods.
- Explore Initiatives to support increased access to risky play for girls and children with a disability and to increase independent mobility.



Play Australia Action Plan

Recognition

- Play Australia to advocate for Inclusion of play in Australian Government frameworks and policy related to children and environments
- Play Australia will develop an information campaign to support decision makers and influencers to understand the benefits of play.

Education

- Play Australia will provide training for educators and support staff on play and ways to meet the play needs of children/teens
- Play Australia to progress the development of a cross sectoral Playwork qualified workforce with Play Wales as partners
- Play Australia extends current phone support and resourcing for early childhood to schools
- Play Australia to advocate for Education budgets to have quarantined funds for play space upgrades and maintenance
- Play Australia to advocate for Mandated play breaks provided for all school students
- Play Australia to work with Governments and NOGO's to protect of open space for play and outdoor activity
- Play Australia to review the roles of school wellbeing staff, such as school counsellors, and develop a position paper on how Play Therapy may also be effective in supporting children in schools.

Public Health

- Play Australia to collaborate with ASDP (Australasian Society for Developmental Paediatrics) to develop an Australian statement of support for the Canadian Paediatric statement on risky outdoor play.
- Play Australia to advocate to Health Departments (State and federal) to recognise play as a preventative health strategy
- Advocate for the Inclusion of play in state disaster and pandemic preparedness plans.

Access and Inclusion

- Play Australia to approach Government for the funding of an Australian Playbourhood trial.
- Support and resource local governments in the delivery of neighbourhood play systems that incorporate international models and indigenous perspectives.
- Access funding to distribute free online learning modules on inclusive play space design to all local governments.
- Approach the Rural Health Alliance to look at opportunities to develop resources and deliver webinars and events to support rural and remote children's participation in play.
- Run a local government forum on Play Sufficiency with view to developing a Play Sufficiency voluntary model in Australia.
- Advocate for the inclusion of Play Champions in every Australian local government.

Parent Perceptions

- Education campaign to raise awareness of importance of play with strategies and efforts to reach parents of children of all ages with up-to-date evidence-based information on the wide-ranging benefits risk taking in play, as well as practical advice and support to help parents enable play for their children and understand cultural differences.
- Support the development of an Australian evidenced based national position statement on risk in play that supports the Canadian Paediatric Society Position Statement.
- Convene a National Risk Safety Forum
- Engage in the development of initiatives to support increased access to risky play for girls and children with a disability and to increase independent mobility.
- Investigate opportunities to continue to drive the 1000 Play Streets movement as a practical approach to educate families, reduce isolation and build social cohesion in local neighbourhoods.

Investment in play

- Play Australia will advocate for Implementation of a dedicated funding stream to drive a free access play opportunities and support and resourcing of the Peak Body.
- Play Australia will advocate for Government funding streams across all sectors to review capacity for inclusion of play based initiatives.

Driving change

- Play Australia to circulate an condensed version of the State of Play report for open consultation and input from the community to address any gaps and seek feedback on opportunities.
- Play Australia will establish an online reference tool for easy access to case studies demonstrating innovative examples of practice delivering more play opportunities to children and young people in Australia.
- Play Australia to co-ordinate development of support and training for Australian local government in the development of local play strategies to reflect the needs of their community with a goal to have 75% of Local Governments with a play strategy in place for their communities by 2030.
- Play Australia to partner with federal or state government for funding of a series of roundtables to bring together stakeholders, local government and community representatives to develop a case for a national or state agenda for play.



Recognition of Play in Australian Government Policy and Planning

Despite extensive international and Australian evidence that play is a key factor in the healthy development of children and essential for brain and physical development, the importance of play remains largely overlooked within Australian Government policy.

Since 2020, there have been four significant national frameworks released which are related to population health and urban planning:

- The National Action Plan for Health of Children and Young People 2020 – 2030⁷
- National Preventative Health strategy 2021-2030⁸
- Measuring What Matters⁹ (Australia's First Wellbeing Framework)
- National Urban Policy¹⁰.

The Australian preventive health frameworks provide guidance and priority actions for specific approaches to improve the health and wellbeing of children and young people, including identifying the need to seek out innovative models and options to provide an environment in which children and young people can be healthy and thrive. Yet none of these national frameworks developed for population health or urban planning refer to the significance of play. Instead, these identify a wide range of issues impacting on children including physical activity and sport.

In Australia's First Wellbeing Framework "Measuring What Matters, 'Time for recreational and Social Interaction' and 'Social connections' were identified as metrics. These metrics did not include any reference to children and young people or identify play as a discrete and important area.

These gaps in national policy have been identified by stakeholders as having trickle down effects on local level child and community wellbeing. Examples provided by stakeholders included:

- Play not being seen as a vital component of children's development
- Over prescription of medications for children and young people
- Increases in mental health challenges such as depression, anxiety, delayed social skills and dysregulation
- Children's play is delayed as they not had opportunities to play in earlier years, hence what is normal play in younger years (e.g., turn taking) is considered a behavioural issue in older children
- Not equipping parents with skills for play and understanding importance of play
- Open access play opportunities not considered for funding streams
- Parents lack of value for play in schools and early childhood settings
- Limited play options in low socioeconomic areas and new estates
- Homelessness services can have limited space where families are in one room with no room to play
- No mandates in new housing estates and urban developments for open access play

⁷ https://www.health.gov.au/resources/publications/national-action-plan-for-the-health-of-children-and-young-people-2020-2030?utm_source=health.gov.au&utm_medium=callout-auto-custom&utm_campaign=digital_transformation

⁸ https://www.health.gov.au/sites/default/files/documents/2021/12/national-preventive-health-strategy-2021-2030_1.pdf

⁹ <https://treasury.gov.au/policy-topics/measuring-what-matters>

¹⁰ <https://www.infrastructure.gov.au/sites/default/files/documents/national-urban-policy.pdf>

¹¹ <https://treasury.gov.au/policy-topics/measuring-what-matters>

- Sanitisation of public spaces that exclude children from playing
- Lack of independent mobility for children

Measuring What Matters¹¹ refers to work that will be undertaken for children via the Investment Dialogue for Australia's Children¹², however, concerns remain that the investment dialogue, although still in its infancy, remains silent on the use of play as a preventative health measure. This has been identified as an opportunity for Play Australia to show strong leadership and advocacy on the holistic benefits and importance of play.

Play has fared better in the Australian Government Early Childhood space, The Early Years Strategy 2024-2034 released by the Australian Government in 2024 has recognised play as an outcome "Children have the opportunity to play and imagine."

In education, play has also played a higher profile being included in both the national frameworks for children's services and playwork practice as well as mandating outdoor and indoor space requirement for children to ensure adequate space for play.

The inclusion of play in these government policies is not surprising for most stakeholders, as champions for play exist in those environments and strong advocacy for play has occurred over the past 30 years.

Sadly, the lack of play champions in other parts of Government and the NGO sector have resulted in the gaps that do exist in Australian Government policy. The presence of a strong national advocacy group for play is only just in its infancy, despite its 110 year history, Play Australia has remained predominantly state-centric until 2023.

¹² <https://www.investmentdialogue.org.au/>



Play as a Public Health Strategy

Play has been identified through early years frameworks and playgroups as significant to education and learning, yet little weight has been applied to its importance in improving health and well-being.

Play as a supporting factor contributing to good mental health in children and young people was identified by stakeholders as overlooked as a strategy for improving public health.

Research conducted following Covid lockdowns showed a direct correlation between good mental health and adventurous, risky play, these results were improved upon for children from low socio economic environments¹².

Parents and carers reported that more than 1 in 3 children aged 5–18 (35%), experienced a negative impact on their mental health (RCHpoll 2021) because of Covid-19 lockdowns. In reflecting on their experience of COVID -19 lockdowns, 88% of children self-reported it had impacted how they played, with over 40% reporting it to have a significant impact on their play (Play Australia Big Play Survey 2024).

A focus on harm prevention and maintaining safety, coupled with the increase in regulatory burden and insurance requirements, has seen children's capacity for developing risk appetites and challenging themselves decrease as mental health issues increase. A national survey by the Australian Psychological society¹³ (2022) showed an increase in mental health disorders in children including 45% of children presenting with social anxiety, 39% with peer related anxiety and 36% with screen addiction.

However, play to date in Australia has not been included in any public health strategies nor was

play identified in targeted Coronavirus Response Packages offered by some Governments, including \$59.4 million in funding by the Victorian Government for Mental Health and Wellbeing in April 2020 and \$73 million in funding from the NSW Government's Covid mental health package.

In reflecting on this, several stakeholders believed that the development of a public health play strategy in partnership with Play Australia would have offered cost effective tangible outcomes for the mental health and wellbeing of children and the community. A strategy would have included such things as provision of additional hours in open access playgrounds, increases in delivery of Play Streets and the provision of playworkers in public parks and schools.

The Canadian Paediatric Society in 2024 released a statement on risky play and injury prevention.¹⁴ Feedback on this document was sought as part of the stakeholder scan, with most responses positive. The development of a document for the Australian context was seen as an important step forward to developing an increasing awareness of the benefits of play. Some in the field noted that they were less inclined to see the focus on injury prevention and take an approach to emphasise the developmental importance of such play.

Recognised by the WHO as a world health priority, loneliness is another high-ranking health issue for many Australians. One in three people, over the age of 18 in Australia reported feeling lonely, with Australians aged 18 to 24 most affected by loneliness, according to the State of the Nation 2023 report by Ending Loneliness Together¹⁵. Community play initiatives such as playgroups, toy libraries are recognised for their capacity support and grow

¹² Dodd HF, Nesbit RJ, FitzGibbon L. Child's Play: Examining the Association Between Time Spent Playing and Child Mental Health. *Child Psychiatry Hum Dev*. 2023 Dec;54(6):1678-1686. doi: 10.1007/s10578-022-01363-2. Epub 2022 May 14. PMID: 35562504; PMCID: PMC9106508.

¹³ <https://psychology.org.au/about-us/news-and-media/media-releases/2022/children-18-months-to-18-years-showing-serious-men>

¹⁴ <https://cps.ca/en/documents/position/outdoor-risky-play>

¹⁵ https://endingloneliness.com.au/wp-content/uploads/2023/10/ELT_LNA_Report_Digital.pdf



social connection, however lesser known initiatives such as Play Streets (see case study) and Free access community playgrounds (see case study) also offer opportunities to relieve social isolation and grow social connection. In a study undertaken by La Trobe University for the 1000 Play Streets project, 90% of adults surveyed reported feeling more confident to talk to their neighbours in future.

In addition to mental health and loneliness, 25% of Australian children are overweight or obese,¹⁶ and these figures have not decreased despite a range of measures to increase participation in sport and structured physical activity. In response to this, there is an urgent need to use a range of play strategies as a means for increasing the physical activity of children.

In consideration of appropriate health strategies for children, play therapy is a technique used in child counselling to assist children who are experiencing emotional difficulties. It is an expressive therapy using toys and play to allow the child to explore their emotional world. Currently, play therapy is not covered by medicare and is under review by the NDIS. This was identified as an area of health care that has not achieved the recognition other forms of therapy receive, and it is believed this is due to the use of play and the low status of play in many public health administrations.

Play as a public health strategy has capacity to offer cost effective solutions to modern health issues impacting children, but it appears that raising the profile of play via engagement with health care advocates is the starting point.

¹⁶ <https://www.aihw.gov.au/reports/overweight-obesity/overweight-obesity-australian-children-adolescents/summary>

The Role of Play in the Australian Education System

Australian schools were identified by several stakeholders as where they believe the greatest systematic play deprivation is currently occurring for children and young people. The current structure of the school day, school environments and lack of professional development were cited as causes of this deficit.

Despite a wide body of evidence for the use of play in schools, the benefits are not being accessed by all, nor seen as supported in Education policies. References to ‘crowded curriculum’ and a lack of understanding about how to support play within school environments, has resulted in limited play opportunities across Australian primary schools and even less in secondary schools.

There are several exemplary schools across Australia who are leading the way by embedding play into the school day and achieving results in improved behaviour, attendance and academic achievements. Examples of schools implementing Forest School programs; outdoor learning; loose parts play; time tabled class time for child- led outdoor play and risk-building play opportunities. A growing network of these schools exist in Queensland. However, with 9563 schools across Australia¹⁷ these schools are in the minority with less than an estimated 2% known to be pursuing innovative delivery of play strategies to support children. The question was raised by one stakeholder “How can we make this (play innovation) the norm in all schools?”

In reflecting on this question, it was observed that for most schools, time for play and space for play, is impacted by limited or no access to adequate play spaces. Playground space per school student is not stipulated, or protected, unlike within early childhood regulations that are mandated across the country.

The lack of mandatory playground space requirements for schools has resulted in buildings being placed over playground areas, adults limiting access to playground space, restrictions being placed on children’s mobility (e.g., no running, cartwheels or chasing) and the non-utilisation of other local parks and play areas as alternative options.

This lack of regulation extends to children’s access to play breaks which are not protected in terms of length or frequency. To address this issue, a National Position Statement on the Importance of School Recess for Active Play¹⁸ was released at the end of 2024 by ACHPER Australia, and was co-developed with A/Prof Brendon Hyndman. (see case study)

The statement provides a sound argument on the importance of play in schools and links it to the curriculum. The impact of this statement is yet to be evaluated, but it is seminal in being the first of its kind developed by the Education sector and is an important and meaningful step forward.

However, the complexity of incorporating play into institutions without adequate support is seen by many as problematic. Support needs must be addressed rather than be forced upon an already strained education system.

Two themes that emerged in reflection of the challenges for schools were based on budget and human resources;

1. Schools are provided with no budget for maintaining play spaces once installed.

- Principals often have to budget for competing demands on resources and play spaces are seen as lower priorities.

¹⁷ <https://www.abs.gov.au/statistics/people/education/schools/latest-release>

¹⁸ https://www.achper.org.au/common/Uploaded%20files/Position%20Statements/National%20Position%20Statement%204_The%20importance%20of%20play%20at%20recess_v2_2024-2026.pdf

- There is limited knowledge of playground design or seeking professional expertise to improve the design of playgrounds in state schools.
- Play space is often dedicated to sporting courts and ovals. Sports are promoted with space and resources over space and resources for other forms of play.
- There is no access to external non-commercial support for schools to seek advice on matters pertaining to play spaces.

2. Lack of understanding of play and playwork principles by educators and support staff resulting in:

- Play is controlled with adult rules.
- Play is not incorporated into the school day to promote learning.
- Play is simply banned when issues arise.
- Play cycles are interrupted or misunderstood.
- Education and information on the benefits of play not conveyed to parents.
- Play can often be associated with a view of negative behaviours.
- Play Therapists are not utilised for student counselling and support.
- WorkSafe inspectors often do not support risky play or loose parts play.

There is support for inclusion of training in play as part of professional accreditation requirements. Emerging evidence suggests children's active play in schools can be promoted by fostering a risk tolerant and play friendly culture in schools through play facilitation training (e.g., risk-reframing, conflict resolution) and engaging stakeholders in the development of school policies and rules that balance the benefits of play against potential risks¹⁹.

¹⁹ Jerebine A, Fitton-Davies K, Lander N, Eyre ELJ, Duncan MJ, Barnett LM. "Children are precious cargo; we don't let them take any risks!": Hearing from adults on safety and risk in children's active play in schools: a systematic review. *Int J Behav Nutr Phys Act.* 2022 Sep 1;19(1):111. doi: 10.1186/s12966-022-01344-7. PMID: 36050699; PMCID: PMC9438168.



Access and Inclusion to places for play



The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child identifies play in Article 31 as the right of every child. In implementing this right, it is not just access to play, but also inclusion.

Inclusion as an area for intervention, rather than accessibility alone, offers a comprehensive approach that considers the subjective experience of children in these spaces. Inclusion means creating environments where all children have equal access to opportunities for engaging in the physical and social aspects of play.

In urban planning and design and in the allocation of space, all levels of government are involved in a process that often necessitates prioritising the needs of some groups over others. In many cases these needs are not assessed based on the most vulnerable but instead on other factors that may include a vocal majority or a national political strategy. Children are often not at the forefront of design or planning, yet, the impact of design and planning that does not cater for the needs of children, based on the evidence for the benefits of play, will have long term implications for the health and wellbeing of successive generations. The WHO-UNICEF-Lancet Commission's 'Children in All Policies' (2020: 299)²⁰ argues for a radical change in policy making and that 'redesigning neighbourhoods to give children spaces to play' should be included in policy making.

In considering how environments create themselves, planners must recognise that play happens anywhere and is not just related to places assigned to children by adults. Play emerges because of a range of conditions, and adults have a role to identify and replicate those conditions to create environments for play to occur. Internationally the term "Spatial Justice" is being used in assessing and supporting children's use of public space. This term implies the removal

of barriers to play so all children have fair and equal access to, and participation, in public space.²¹

Stakeholders consistently identified five key groups who were seen as having the most barriers to access and inclusion in spaces to play in Australia.

- Children in low socioeconomic environments living in high density housing
- Families with a member who has a disability
- Children in rural and remote locations
- Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children
- Girls

Children in low socio economic environments were seen as frequently not accessing play due to living conditions, with high density housing often leading to limited outdoor space and concerns for safety with competing demands for space by different interest groups. This remains an issue for urban planning with increases in density and a loss of green space. Quarantining space and having mandated standards for developers in terms of play provision are seen as necessary. It was noted that even with mandates, some developers work around these with options of carefully manicured gardens and spaces that are then not inclusive of children and may even have signage stating that.

Free access staffed playgrounds were created over 50 years ago in Australia to provide a designated space for children to play. Due to limited access to funding streams and vacant land, these 'adventure playgrounds' as they were known, were limited and a number have closed. With only three remaining in Victoria (see case study) and three newly established in Queensland, the model is an effective but highly

²⁰ [https://www.thelancet.com/journals/lancet/article/PIIS0140-6736\(21\)00718-2/fulltext](https://www.thelancet.com/journals/lancet/article/PIIS0140-6736(21)00718-2/fulltext)

²¹ <https://eprints.glos.ac.uk/10156/2/10156-Russell-%282020%29-Childrens-right-to-the-good-city.pdf>



undervalued one with significant benefits to children and the community. These spaces generally operate in a part time capacity and are reliant on donations and small funding streams. The lack of sustainable core funding remains problematic for their ongoing viability.

Whilst there has been an increase in Accessible Playgrounds access to local playgrounds within walking distance near home remains an issue for many families. In planning for accessibility, it is not just children with a disability, but children with parents who have a disability that need to be supported. In play space design there remains a broad array of quality in terms of design and initiatives, and many cater for the physically disabled not those with other types of ability. Low cost modifications without the need for expensive specific equipment in existing playgrounds

have been identified as solutions to promote accessibility and inclusion. Play Australia and the Association for Children with a Disability (ACD) have worked together on an online training module based on feedback²² from parents and carers to support local government to implement a sensitive approach to making more play spaces accessible for all families however this has been slow to take up.

Of particular interest was the inclusion of remote and isolated children in the list. They were aptly described “the invisible children”, the perception that living in rural and remote areas afforded children more opportunities for play than available to children in metropolitan areas. However, while children in these areas may often enjoy the freedoms of open spaces for unstructured play, it was said they frequently

²² https://www.acd.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2024/08/PlayReport_020924.pdf



lack opportunities to interact with peers outside their immediate family. This limits their ability to participate in play-based, organised activities to optimise their social and emotional development. In addition, children living on stations were known to frequently be required to work on the station from a young age with limited or no time to play. An anecdote shared by a stakeholder was of a seven year old scoffing when given a toy car, replying “I don’t play anymore, I have to work now.”

Approximately 28% of Australia’s population lives in rural and remote areas (ABS, 2022), where geographic isolation creates unique challenges. A recent Contact (2024) survey found that 100% of respondents in these areas identified significant barriers to accessing early childhood and wellbeing programs for children aged 0–12 years. These challenges stem from social isolation, limited services, smaller populations, and the vast distances between communities. Access to playgroups was observed to sometimes have social hierarchies, with station owners’ wives not mixing with the station worker families and Aboriginal families accessing separate services for playgroups. In addition, many remote and isolate areas do not have well maintained playgrounds, some were maintained by volunteers, but this was not always consistent.

The prolonged drought and the COVID-19 pandemic were seen to have exacerbated the existing barriers to play and social interaction, compounding the negative effects on children’s development, resilience, and emotional wellbeing. The lack of accessible play opportunities, combined with the stress and uncertainty caused by these broader challenges, stakeholders report has created lasting consequences for many children in rural and remote areas.

A huge investment by both Federal and state governments on pump tracks, parkour and skateboard parks was viewed as being open to gender bias. These locations were reportedly accessed by 95% boys and only 5% girls. The 5% girls were often not necessarily playing but watching. Girls were seen to either must be brave stepping into the boys play arenas or they choose not to participate. Whilst these activities can engage and benefit many young people, the absence mostly for affirmative action in delivering a strategy to develop and enhance female engagement in these government investments results in girls become even more isolated and lacking opportunities for play and physical activity.

According to the most recent (2016) Census data, while Indigenous Australians make up just 2.8.% of the total population, they represent 1.5.% of the population living in the major cities and 41.7.% of the population in very remote Australia. There is recognition that a strong sense of cultural identity is essential to wellbeing in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities. Research has also shown it is a protective psychological factor for Indigenous peoples coping with the stresses of living in intercultural contexts, notably for youth. The opportunity to embed cultural identity in the development of play spaces through sensitive community consultation was seen as an important requirement for supporting the principle of inclusion into spaces for play.

Overwhelmingly, stakeholders supported the concept of spaces for play as not just playgrounds and consultation with children on Play spaces and open access areas should be mandatory. In considering a community inclusive of children, care and attention should be given to how more communities can be made playful and engaging. In planning for children, it was seen as important to look at the whole play system, not just parks and playgrounds.

In looking at what neighbourhood play system looks like for a child and how it supports children in a local area to access play opportunities, consideration should be given to the following*;

- Parks
- Playgrounds
- Streets
- Walking paths
- Play corridors
- Bike tracks
- Playgroups
- Adventure Playgrounds
- Use of school play spaces
- Toy Libraries
- Bus stops
- Public art and street scapes
- Pop up play spaces

- Skate parks
- Shopping centres
- Signage in the community
- Events

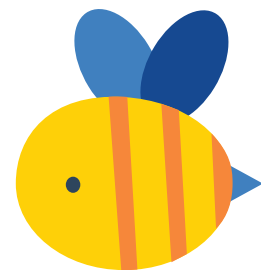
*List not exhaustive

Initiatives both here and overseas have resulted in the development of play opportunities that enhance children's experience of play and build social cohesion in community. There is no one model seen as meeting all needs, but in considering the development of a neighbourhood play system, the following models were identified as having a proven evidenced based and would form part of the assemblage of strategies provided for:

- 1000 Play Streets
- Playful Learning Landscapes
- Neighbourhood Play System
- Park IT

The concept of play sufficiency used in Wales is rights based and embedded in Welsh legislation. Local authorities in Wales are required to consider how they can enable and uphold the right to play for every child in their area – not just enable individual children to exercise their right to play. If just one child is unable to exercise their right, the right to play is not being upheld. In reviewing the data sample date collected for Australia a comparison was made with the data collected in Wales. While such legislation suggests that children and teenagers in Wales will have more time, space and freedom to play than Australian children who do not have the protection of such legislation, the initial results from our statistically small sample would indicate that for the children who responded, they share relatively equal opinions toward satisfaction in their play spaces and the amount of time they have to play.

For Australia, the concept of play sufficiency could be used to support local governments address issues of accessibility and inclusion. In the absence of legislation, there is still the opportunity for local government to take up the concept. State government financial incentives may assist in developing awareness and understanding and increasing interest from local governments. Once play sufficiency measures are in place, the improved outcomes and returns to local government, and their communities should provide the incentive to maintain.



Parental Perceptions of Play

Play is recognised by 95% of parents in the 2024 RCH poll, as important for childrens health, including their physical wellbeing and brain development.

Parents in metropolitan areas were more likely, than those in regional areas, to think play was a waste of time (14% vs 2%), with more than half of parents (56%) saying their child needed to spend more time in free and unstructured play. This recognition by parents and caregivers of the importance of play was also reflected in interviews with parents and stakeholders.

However, the poll highlighted that an average of one in four parents had a range of misconceptions about play and its interpretation, with several inaccurate beliefs reflected in the data that would commonly be identified as barriers to play;

- 38% of parents believed play always needs to be supervised by an adult.
- 27% of parents believe an adult should always step in to sort out the problem if children disagree when playing.





- 22% believe that play always needs to be organised by an adult
- 35% think play is better with toys (and toys are expensive)
- 32% felt it was not good for play to involve risk.

The RCH poll identified differences between rural and metropolitan attitudes to supervision with parents in regional areas less likely than those in metropolitan areas to report that play should always be supervised (28% vs 41%) or organised (10% vs 24%) by an adult.

It was noted by stakeholders that these misconceptions about play exist across the community. This was seen as the result of a lack of reader friendly information and in some cases, commercially driven, by external groups keen to sell a product or programme to families.

Another consideration is the concern that we have missed a generation of children when it comes to outdoor adventurous play.

The decline in play opportunities characterised the late 1980's and 1990's as more women entered the workforce and children entered formal unregulated after school programs. It was a common misconception that good parenting meant your children had a range of highly structured, instructional after school classes to attend. This culture resulted in less time for children to play without direct adult supervision, in mixed age groups, outdoors in the street or local play spaces, which was typical of many children's neighbourhood experiences prior to that time. It is therefore possible that adults who they themselves did not have the opportunity to grow up in an environment where unsupervised, child directed play was commonplace, will be more hyper vigilant in the approach they take with their own children.

This hyper- vigilance extends to children's participation in adventurous play, commonly described as "risky" play.

Many parents (80%) expressed a preference for children to spend more time outdoors, however a significant minority of parents (38%) believed risk should not be a

part of play. However, play and risk co-exist, risky play is not a category of play, as often described, risk is an element of the play experience. In acknowledging this, it is understood that there is some play that places a child at additional physical risk and as a result term "risky play" was coined.

Much of this perception of risk may be due to a lack of understanding about what the definition of "risky play" is.

Risky play is any thrilling or exciting activity that gives children opportunities to challenge themselves and may involve a risk of physical injury. It has widely recognised to be categorised into 6 categories;²³

1. Play at great height
2. Play at high speed
3. Play with use of dangerous tools
4. Exposure to dangerous elements in nature
5. Rough and tumble
6. Appearing to disappear or get lost.

For many children, and indeed adults, what constitutes this "risky play" is the only type of play they have engaged in. In the survey of Australian children, at least half of respondents identified their favourite form of play as falling into one of the 6 categories. These categories also need to be put in context. "Great height" for a 4 year old is very different for a 10 year old or a 15 year old, as is "high" speed or "dangerous" tools.

There is considered by some stakeholders a 7th category in risky play that is often overlooked: emotional risk. Emotional risk may be such things as entering a play space, negotiating to enter a game, making a new friend, leaving a game or managing conflict.

The RCH indicated that adults also place barriers to children exploring emotional risk, with approximately one in four parents believing play needs to be organised by an adult and that adults need to resolve children's disagreements during play.

²³ Hansen Sandseter, E. B., Kleppe, R., & Ottesen Kennair, L. E. (2022). Risky play in children's emotion regulation, social functioning, and physical health: an evolutionary approach. *International Journal of Play*, 12(1), 127–139. <https://doi.org/10.1080/21594937.2022.2152531>



The conclusion drawn by researcher Alethea Jerebine from her survey of parents, is that whilst most parents recognise the benefits of risk-taking for their children, many are unwilling to allow their children to play adventurously. The research identified types of risk, unlike the RCH poll, and therefore the results indicate a much higher percentage of risk averse parents²⁴.

Key findings from the study:

- Parents' risk tolerance can have a significant impact on how active their children are.
- Children whose parents were tolerant of risk were around three times more likely to meet the Australian physical activity guidelines of an hour a day of physical activity.
- Most Australian parents (almost four in five) are risk-averse and limit their children's participation in risky activities.
- Children whose parents are more tolerant of risk are more physically active and play more adventurously.
- 78 per cent of parents weren't keen on their children taking risks when they played, and put limits on things like climbing trees, riding bikes fast down hills, rough-housing and play-fighting.

The adult fear of "what will happen?" if children are left to play without adult intrusion, and the associated community expectations attached remains problematic. The adult expectation that every child is "supervised", and every conflict is "mediated", every child is "included", and every child is "safe", remains a significant challenge to the democracy of children's play. As one stakeholder commented "Why do we accept injury in sport, but not in play?"

In assessing parents' responses to the term 'risk taking' in play, it is safe to assume that each parent would look at risk through a difference lense based on their own experiences and cultural understandings. This in turn will determine their risk appetite.

One of the cultural differences identified is approaches to risk taking in play between Indigenous and non-Indigenous communities, particularly in rural and remote locations.

Indigenous communities are seen to embrace play as an important part of childhood and for a child learning about their cultural identity. The exposure to risk in play is seen as a common and essential element for a child's developing self-responsibility and competency. In Indigenous communities, the practice of mixed age group play, where older children are responsible for younger children and children have a responsibility to look out for each other, is common. Whilst this approach is not dissimilar to the experience of many non-indigenous children growing up in the mid 19th century, today this approach in some communities, conflicts with non-indigenous practices. When this happens, Indigenous parents report feeling shamed by the non-indigenous community for their approach to play, despite it being recognised as developmentally appropriate by many non-indigenous play advocates and child development specialists and an established expectation in an indigenous childhood for over 60,000 years.


Given Australia's traumatic past with the forced removal of Aboriginal children, some parents and elders also saw allowing traditional approaches to play as risking intervention from external agencies. As a result, over the years, some have restricted play to conform to non-indigenous community expectations. Likewise, for victims of forced removal, there was often limited experience of play, and this was observed to sometimes impact cultural understandings of play.

Other cultural differences in play were raised as sometimes based on gender or ability.

Girls and children with a physical disability were often seen as having less access to challenging play and not considered in play with any levels of physical risk. This often results in play that has limited physical activity. The concept of "Dignity of risk" was raised as an important consideration in planning for access and inclusion in spaces for play. Whilst this is an accepted concept in many Australian institutions including Aged Care,²⁴ it is not as widely considered, or applied in the Australian play context as much as stakeholders believe it should be. Whilst some progress has been made with increasing access to children with a

²³ Playing it safe: The relationship between parent attitudes to risk and injury, and children's adventurous play and physical activity. Psychol Sport Exerc. 2024 Jan;70:102536. doi: 10.1016/j.psychsport.2023.102536. Epub 2023 Sep 9. PMID: 37696315.

²⁴ <https://www.agedcarequality.gov.au/sites/default/files/media/consumer-guide-a4-poster-what-is-dignity-of-risk.pdf>



disability, and a range of examples were provided, it was noted by several stakeholders that girls, particularly adolescent girls were becoming even more isolated and lacking access to physical activity.

Ensuring more targeted information that explains the dignity of risk and addresses the detrimental developmental implications of stereotypes was seen as assisting to address these barriers. In addition, drawing on positive role models for risk taking in play such as Arisa Trew²⁴ and Aaron Fotheringham²⁵ can change perceptions from incapacity to capacity.

In consideration of parent perceptions an additional observation was made from the results of the Australian children's survey regarding children's independent mobility.

How children and young people access play to play demonstrates a high level of reliance on cars and adults, with children and young people in both Australia (77%) and Wales (48%) showing transport by car to play activities was a significant mode of travel.

Play Wales, in reviewing play sufficiency in Wales, found that parental restrictions (often with well-meaning concerns) most commonly result in children and teenagers not able to play outside. Data from this review by Play Wales showed teenagers not allowed to play outside has increased from previous years, and some regions recorded over half of all children and teenagers are restricted from playing outside. The data also showed that there was a decrease in children and teenagers travelling independently to play.

Parents in the RSH poll cited time, safety concerns and weather as stopping children playing outdoors. These same factors could be impacting the survey results from children and young people in Australia and Wales when it comes to transporting of children.

Building the level of trust in neighbourhood and increasing neighbourhood engagement is an important step in supporting children's independent mobility and play opportunities. The Play Streets (see case study) evidence based outcomes

demonstrated that opportunities to facilitate neighbourhood play events was a successful strategy for building trust and social cohesion with over 85% of participants identifying that they had changed perceptions about their neighbourhood and the people in it as a result.

Drawing on the results from Wales, even with access to play spaces and legislation to promote play sufficiency in the community, parents and caregivers need to be engaged from an early stage and the qualities and benefits of play coupled with strategies to support play that build trust in the community.

In June 1991, the 'Reducing the Risks of Cot Death' health education campaign was formally launched by the National Sudden Infant Death Syndrome (SIDS) Council of Australia. In Australia the number of SIDS deaths subsequently declined by 86% from 522 in 1985 to 73 in 2003²⁶, by 2022 only 15 deaths national were attributed to SIDS²⁷. To positively impact children's access to play and participation in risky play, we need a national campaign of similar coverage and investment.

With 61% of parents reporting, they often find playing with their child hard or boring, the opportunity to offer free practical advice and resources was seen as important by parents themselves with 58% of parents expressing a desire learn more about how to play with their child.

Evidence based positions statements were seen by stakeholders as valuable tools but needed translation into reader friendly format for parents and community. Resources in languages others than English were also seen as essential, with several stakeholders identifying cultural differences as often a barrier to play for many children.

When examining how to increase outdoor play opportunities for children and young people, changes to Government policy and practice may not be enough, parental perceptions are a critical element in ensuring all children have access to high quality play experiences and so strategic action to address this needs to be a priority in planning.

²⁴ <https://www.olympics.com.au/olympians/arisa-trew/>

²⁵ <https://www.guinnessworldrecords.com/records/hall-of-fame/aaron-fotheringham-longest-wheelchair-ramp-jump>

²⁶ <https://www.nhmrc.gov.au/about-us/resources/impact-case-studies/safer-sleeping>

²⁷ <https://rednose.org.au/page/facts-and-figures>

Investment in Play

Despite the existing evidence base regarding the importance of play for human development, the absence of investment in open space community play initiatives and education and advocacy remains in Australia.

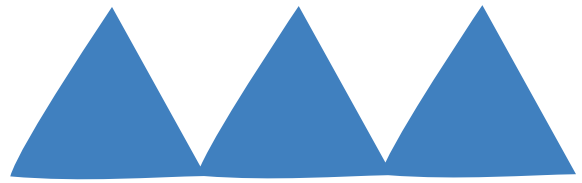
The absence of funding was consistently identified by stakeholders as creating missed opportunities to increase health and wellbeing in the population and increase social cohesion. Play was described by one funder as “often misunderstood from an outcomes perspective and therefore underinvested in.”

There are a range of examples of inequities in the funding support provided for play initiatives and the exclusion of open access play in funding opportunities that would meet the goals of the funding. were identified. Play, with a proven evidence base was not considered as a panacea to the issue.

Examples

- In April 2020, \$59.4 million in funding was announced by the Victorian Government for a Mental Health and Wellbeing Coronavirus





Response Package. The funding package incorporated an expansion of services available to assist children, young people, and their families, including online and phone counselling services, a platform for online therapy and peer support and digital resources to help parents manage anxiety and promote emotional wellbeing. Social connection supports for young people were also funded, including a youth engagement strategy for children and young people.

- In October 2012, NSW Government announced a \$130 million COVID-19 mental health recovery package of which \$17.9 million over four years for new child health and wellbeing community-based hubs for children to strengthen support for parents, improve intervention early in life and increase access to multidisciplinary care and Statewide Community Court Liaison Service for children aged up to 12 and their families
- The Victorian Government invested \$1.3 million in the Let's Stay Connected Grants Program to support people to stay connected despite pandemic restrictions. This program supported only 3 grants with a focus on young people, none of which included open access play opportunities.
- The Australian government publicly funds a national survey (Ausplay) to provide data on participation in sport and physical activity by Australian adults and children. No data is collected on children's engagement in play activities.

These examples are not exhaustive and many examples across Australia were offered for missed opportunities to harness and use play as a means of service delivery and support.

Current funding models for specific play based programs and sport and recreation infrastructure have shown increases in investment by both National and State Government across the last 4 years. This is recognised as positive progress and to be maintained. Examples provided included:

- \$12.4 million to Toy Libraries and Playgroup by Australian Government
- \$1.9 million over four years to Playgroups by Victorian Government
- \$3.6 million for Bush Kinder over 4 years by Victorian government
- \$7.4 million Better Parks and Playgrounds program by Victorian Government
- \$2.4 million over 3 years to Playgroup by Queensland Government
- \$30 million Pick my Park initiative by the Victorian Government
- \$50 million by the NSW Government into Parks for People program as part of a \$150 million open space investment
- \$7.4 million for Better Parks and Playground Program by Victorian Government
- \$16.7 million over 3 years for more public and open space by NSW Government
- \$1.9 billion invested by Victorian Government into sport and recreation infrastructure since 2014

However, open access play, adventures playgrounds, community play initiatives, mobile play services, professional development and support have all failed to date to attract a sustainable funding framework. Nor are they supported or recognised within the existing funding opportunities offered to other service types. These barriers are magnified for rural and remote families and children who face additional limitations based on the financial impact in reaching isolated communities.

This is despite these programs all having strong evidence based results and are independently assessed of achieving positive outcomes.

As a result, where these service do not fit within prescribed existing models, they face a daily struggle to exist and maintain the essential levels of service that are making real and sustainable differences to children and communities.

Driving the change for *Play*

Play Australia in speaking with stakeholders and reviewing current initiatives has identified an increasing awareness and deliberate approach by a range of NGO's and Local Governments to address issues related to play deprivation for children in Australia.

This report has compiled a snapshot of the innovation taking place across Australia through a range of case studies. In addition, some of the following developments are contributing to a driving positive change for play:

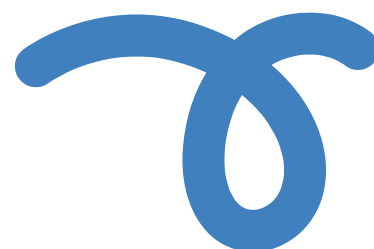
- Play and play work have been included in the learning frameworks for both early childhood and Outside School Hours Care.
- Government Investment in Toy Libraries and Playgroups through funding has increased under the current Australian Government and through several state governments.
- At present, an estimated 20% of 537 Local Governments²⁸ in Australia have a play strategy or policy in place or are working on developing one. Whilst many have policies centred on their playgrounds only, there is a growing consciousness that play has a greater role in supporting the positive benefits in the community
- 30 Local Governments participated in the Play Australia 1000 Play Streets project and some Councils have adopted initiatives that use play as a strategy to drive community engagement.
- The RCH, Melbourne conducted its annual Health Poll on the topic of Play and has included playfulness as a value in the RCH strategic plan.

- Play Australia is hosting the first Asia Pacific conference on play in Melbourne, June 25-27 2025 featuring high level provocations and action plans.
- A Churchill Fellowship has been awarded to Play Australia CEO, Robyn Monro Miller AM to study countries with Governments that have recognised play initiatives to support children's health and wellbeing. The study will include Canada, Scotland, Wales, Ireland and Finland and identify processes, critical success factors, barriers and the outcomes being achieved for communities. The work will shape and influence approaches to the development of a national agenda for play in Australia. This work will be undertaken in September – November 2025.

“It’s a big bad wicked problem and it needs a community to solve it.”

- Hyanho Moser, describing Logan's story on the power of change for play.

²⁸ <https://alga.com.au/facts-and-figures/>





Education



National Position Statement “The importance of school recess for active play”

A/Prof. Brendon Hyndman
Associate Dean Academic (Acting)
Faculty of Arts & Education, Charles Sturt University

Tell us about the initiative.

The release of new national position statement in collaboration with ACHPER National relating to “The importance of school recess for active play”. ACHPER is the leading professional association in Australia representing the HPE and Recreation (R) learning areas in Australian schools. This Position Statement has been developed for the purpose of stating ACHPER’s position toward the recreational opportunities associated with encouraging students’ play during school recess periods.

The national position statement is based on the knowledge that an educated nation, comprising of active and healthy young people, is a strong investment in the future of the Australian population.

Why was this position statement necessary?

Recess periods in schools have often been undervalued and under-resourced for children and young people’s development in comparison with timetabled classes. This national position statement that has been co-developed with ACHPER National can help provide guidance from global research for school teachers and practitioners of key research-informed considerations in relation to this important segment of the school day for student wellbeing.

This statement recognises that school recess opportunities provide an important opportunity to

support children’s intellectual, physical, social and emotional development with specific opportunities to strengthen the health and wellbeing of young people. The assertions of this position statement have strong foundations in school recess-related research related to children and adolescents.

How do you envisage it will be used to support play in schools?

The statement is underpinned by a range of research evidence from experts around the world and links to the Australian Health and Physical Education Curriculum, that can help schools link to a range of curricular points across students’ schooling journeys and to help support and justify resourcing.

What has been the response since it was released over Summer 2024-2025?

Incredibly positive that this position statement can help provide additional attention and focus on such an overlooked, yet important developmental time period for Australian primary and secondary schools, outside of Early Childhood contexts.

Access link to learn more:

https://researchoutput.csu.edu.au/ws/portalfiles/portal/562766272/National_Position_Statement_4_The_importance_of_play_at_recess_v2_2024-2026.pdf



TOP 4 ISSUES FOR PLAY IN SCHOOLS

- 1** More governments and educational systems/ organisations need to support play opportunities with funding provisions and integration into professional accreditation requirements to create a more balanced educational environment to align with the more structured classes and timetabling. The evidence for supporting the learning, wellbeing and skill development of students outside scheduled classrooms continues to accumulate to help transfer into the classroom endeavours.
- 2** Play and recreational opportunities make up a significant part of the school day- which equates to a significant time portion of a child's schooling journey (e.g. thousands of recess periods, before/after school opportunities, equating to over one year of potential learning).
- 3** Secondary school spaces are especially vulnerable to lacking adequate or suitable facilities, and research continues to show that there is a lower understanding of adolescent physical activity and play needs, and these secondary school environments are very under-resourced. Students often have increased sitting and standing facilities in secondary schools, are less likely to meet national physical activity guidelines to prevent chronic diseases and require different (not less) opportunities to engage their physical skills and habits after learning fundamentals at primary school.
- 4** We also need more shade provisions to prevent the impacts on students' active play behaviours from weather extremes.

Nature Play

Nature Play in the Park, Nature Play WA

Tell us about the initiative.

Nature Play in the Park is a community-based program developed by Nature Play WA in partnership with The ORIGINS Project (a collaboration between The Kids – formerly Telethon Kids Institute and Joondalup Health Campus) and supported by the Minderoo Foundation. The program provides families with young children the opportunity to engage in unstructured outdoor play in local parks and natural spaces. Through guided but flexible nature-based activities, the program encourages exploration, creativity, and social interaction, fostering both physical and emotional well-being in children.

Why was this project developed?

The project was developed to address the growing concern about the decline in children's outdoor play, increasing screen time, and its impact on physical and mental health. Research highlights the importance of early childhood experiences in nature for cognitive, emotional, and social development. This program aims to create accessible opportunities for families to experience the benefits of nature play, particularly for those who may not have regular access to green spaces.

How was it developed?

Nature Play WA collaborated with child development researchers, early childhood educators, and community health professionals to create a program that is evidence-based and engaging for families. The program was designed to be flexible, allowing children to play freely while incorporating gentle facilitation to encourage exploration and interaction with the natural environment. Sessions are held in local parks and include activities such as sensory play, loose parts play, and storytelling, ensuring a diverse and enriching experience for children and their caregivers.

How does it support play?

Nature Play in the Park supports play by:

- Providing a safe, inclusive, and engaging outdoor environment for unstructured play.
- Encouraging children to use their imagination and creativity through open-ended play opportunities.
- Fostering physical activity through movement-based play in natural settings.
- Supporting social and emotional development by encouraging peer interaction and cooperation.
- Offering caregivers insights into the importance of play and ways to incorporate it into daily routines.

What have been the benefits you have seen so far?

- Increased engagement from families in outdoor play beyond program sessions.
- Positive social interactions among children, building confidence and social skills.
- Improved physical activity levels in children participating in the program.
- Enhanced caregiver awareness and appreciation of the benefits of nature play.
- Strengthened community connections, with parents forming informal support networks.

What are the challenges?

- Ensuring accessibility and inclusivity for all families, including those with diverse needs and backgrounds.
- Weather-dependent programming, requiring contingency plans for extreme conditions.
- Limited funding and resources to expand the program to more locations.
- Encouraging ongoing engagement beyond program sessions, particularly for families new to outdoor play.



What has been the response from parents and the community?

The response has been overwhelmingly positive, with parents expressing appreciation for the opportunity to connect with their children and nature. Many have noted improvements in their children's confidence, curiosity, and willingness to explore the outdoors. Community groups and local governments have shown interest in supporting and expanding the initiative, recognizing its value in fostering healthy childhood development.

What insights did you receive from the project?

- Many families are eager for opportunities to play outdoors but lack knowledge or confidence in facilitating nature play.
- Providing simple, low-cost activities can be highly effective in engaging children and caregivers.
- Regular access to green spaces significantly impacts children's willingness to engage in outdoor play.
- Programs that encourage intergenerational participation, such as involving grandparents, enhance social connections and support networks.

Access link to learn more:

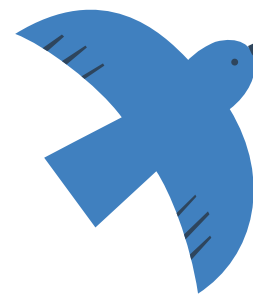
<https://www.natureplaywa.org.au>

TOP 3 ISSUES/WISHES FOR NATURE PLAY

- 1 Access to green spaces:** Ensuring all communities, especially urban and disadvantaged areas, have accessible nature play environments.
- 2 Inclusivity in play:** Developing more opportunities for neurodivergent children and those with disabilities to engage in outdoor play.
- 3 Sustained community engagement:** Encouraging ongoing nature play beyond structured programs through community-driven initiatives.

"I've never seen my child so engaged and happy outdoors. This program has given us the confidence to explore more as a family."

– Parent participant



Local Government

“Passport to Play” Maribyrnong Council

Tell us about your initiative.

Passport to Play is an interactive resource for children co-designed by local children to support their development and encourage play and creativity in their local neighbourhoods and launched in early 2023.

The Passport to Play resource aims to support play by identifying spaces, places and play ideas that children and families can enjoy together in the City of Maribyrnong. Children are the experts in play and are valued members of our community - they hold the passport to play.

The resource features a range of artworks and comments from local children across the municipality and input from local children who provided feedback and comments on what play means to them, who they like to do it with, why it's important and how they like to play in their neighbourhood

Why was this resource developed?

38% of Maribyrnong households have children and the LGA has 38% of residents with a language background other than English so this initiative was designed to respond to the needs of our community. We wanted to increase our local communities' interests in the public play spaces and educate families on the importance of play. Play is a fundamental part of every child's development, and we recognise it leads to increased health and wellbeing, social cohesion, learning and development and community connection.

This is particularly important as we began to recover from the impacts of COVID-19.

How was it developed?

A Leadership Group of children aged between 5 and 11 from Footscray Primary School led the development with a project officer from Council. Workshops were also held throughout 2022 with local children to gather these comments, including at local libraries, community centres, playgroups, primary schools and childcare centres. Wherever possible, consultation facilitators also asked adults present to reflect on their own childhood and memories of play.

What insights did you receive from the project?

Incredibly positive that this position statement can help provide additional attention and focus on such an overlooked, yet important developmental time period for Australian primary and secondary schools, outside of Early Childhood contexts.

Access links to learn more:

<https://www.maribyrnong.vic.gov.au/Residents/Children-Young-People-and-their-Families/Passport-to-Play#:~:text=The%20Passport%20to%20Play%20resource,hold%20the%20passport%20to%20play.>

<https://youtu.be/RcNWiXK3MnM>





RESIDENT REFLECTIONS ON PLAY IN THE COMMUNITY

- *"We play for care, and we play for fun." 7 years old*
- *"When you've had a bad day, play helps you express yourself." 11 years old*
- *"In India we played in every corner of the village. The local festivals. We had picnics and did running races. We played without supervision." Mother, 30 years old*
- *"The neighbourhood kids would play together. We'd ring the bell of houses in the street and run away." Father, 32 years old*
- *"Traffic was less but other things still happened. But we didn't know about it. People weren't frightened like they are now."*
- *"I remember sliding down hills on pieces of tin and playing footy with wrapped up paper. There was no pressure on us." Grandmother, 83 years old*

Health

Play Active – The Kids Research Institute Australia

Tell us about the initiative.

Play Active is an evidence-based physical activity program designed to boost energetic play in Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) settings. It provides clear guidance on how much physical activity, sedentary time, and screen time children should have in care.

Led by The Kids Research Institute Australia and The University of Western Australia, Play Active is co-created with the ECEC sector to provide unique evidence-informed guidelines that support Directors and Educators to ensure all children get enough energetic play every day.

Why was this resource developed?

Children love energetic play, and it's essential for their happiness, confidence, health and development. However, many young children don't get the recommended three hours of daily physical activity, including 60 minutes of energetic play. Australia has a D- in children's physical activity, unchanged since 2015. Despite ECEC services playing a key role in supporting children's health and development, there is no guidance on how much physical activity, sedentary behaviour, and screen time children need while in care. With no existing ECEC-specific physical activity available, we collaborated with multi-sector partners to develop the Play Active program, tailoring it to specifically align with the Early Years Learning Framework and National Quality Standards.

How was it developed?

Play Active is led by the Child Physical Activity, Health and Development team at The Kids Research Institute Australia in collaboration with national and state partners from the ECEC, government, play, public health, and research sectors. Play Active builds on 10 years of research involving extensive consultation with stakeholders to develop an evidence-based ECEC physical activity policy and implementation supports including professional development, training and resources.

How do you envisage it will be used to support play in early childhood?

Play Active provides ECEC services with a tailored physical activity policy, free professional development, and practical resources to help meet and exceed National Quality Standard 2.1: 'Each child's health and physical activity is supported and promoted.' It offers:

- An easy 5-step process for directors to self-assess their service's current practices and develop and implement a tailored Play Active physical activity policy that aligns with National Quality Standards and is easy to incorporate into Quality Improvement Plans.
- A quick 3-step process for educators to complete FREE, online professional development.
- Access to a Members area on the Play Active website and an 'Play Activation Pack' full of physical activity and energetic play resources, professional development, and support to boost energetic play.

Play Active membership applies to the whole service, benefiting directors, educators, and families.

What has been the response since it was released?

Play Active has gone national since its launch in 2024 with over 250 services and 700 educators engaging with the program so far.

"Since we started implementing Play Active, educators have found it easier to plan and integrate spontaneous physical activities with the children. Making use of short bursts of time to increase heart rates and have some fun between activities has been a great way to fill gaps in the day". (Director – Child Care Centre, Perth Children's Hospital)



Play Active evaluation shows 100% services adopted the Play Active policy. Satisfaction was high, with more than 80% directors and educators reporting very positive experiences.

What insights did you receive from the project?

When ECEC services were equipped with resources provided by Play Active, it led to an increase in educators' practices to support and promote children's physical activity in their care. Services valued the practical resources and support provided through Play Active, reinforcing the need and appetite for a clear and easily implementable physical activity policy in early childhood settings.

Access link to learn more:

Website: playactive.org.au

Facebook: [Play Active](#)

Instagram: [@playactiveaus](#)

TOP 3 ISSUES NEEDING TO BE ADDRESSED FOR FUTURE SUCCESS IN HEALTH

1

Amending National Childcare Regulations so that ECEC services are required to have a physical activity policy. They already need to have a healthy eating, sun protection and sleep policy!

2

Increased delivery of Play Active across Australia to ensure children's energetic play increases, supporting their health and development.

3

Ongoing funding and partnerships to enable the longer-term sustainability and delivery of Play Active to all ECEC services across Australia.

Health

“PARK IT”

Outdoors Victoria initiative delivered in partnership with Play Australia, Hume City Council, Artbus, La Trobe University and Primary School Communities, with funding from the Victorian Government.

Tell us about the initiative.

“PARK IT” empowers car-dependent families to drop-off students at PARKS, within 1km from school, enabling more opportunities for children, alongside their communities, to walk to/from school.

A key focus is improving child-friendly pathways from PARK to/from SCHOOL by;

- i. creating more play for children and
- ii. growing support for children’s independent mobility through family engagement.

Why was this project developed?

This project has been developed for a couple of key reasons:

1. To create more connected Victorian Primary School communities that confidently engage in regular active travel together, both to and from school, for better health & wellbeing; and
2. To reduce traffic congestion out the front of primary schools, to create safer outdoor environments for children and communities.

How was it developed?

In 2024, Outdoors Victoria and the Victorian Government, hosted Tim Gill in a forum series that sought to inspire greater discussion and action on child friendly environments, to better protect the rights of children to play in our cities.

In 2025 the Victorian Government released the “Kids Active Travel” program, a new funding opportunity

to increase walking and bike riding to Victorian Primary Schools.

Outdoors Victoria and Hume City Council successfully applied for the funding with support from Play Australia and other engaged partners, to deliver “PARK IT”, inspired by Tim’s research and advice.

How do you envisage it will be used to support play in the community?

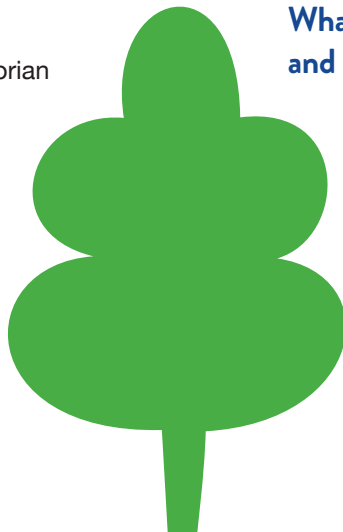
“PARK IT” helps to broaden the conversation about active travel, to encompass “play on the way”, which historically has not been a strong focus in active travel policy development in Victoria. “PARK IT” also embraces a playful workshop process to engage School Communities in the co-design of their child friendly pathways, from PARK to SCHOOL, and through the creation of more “play on the way” offers for children, via the use of vinyl sticker decals on footpaths.

This leads to the creation of more child friendly pathways that both Primary School Students and their broader Communities can access and use daily.

What has been the response from community and families?

“PARK IT” is currently being piloted at three Primary Schools within Hume City Council during the 2024-25FY, one of those schools that has successfully activated their new child friendly pathway has been Roxburgh Park Primary School, in term 4 2024.

Initial impacts, as reported by our project evaluation partner in La Trobe University, have been encouraging:





- Before PARK IT, no children were using the park or parents using the pathway, to walk children to school.
- Activation days saw a significant increase in the use of the park and the pathway; and
- There was improved social connection between the PARK IT children. They created a sense of identity and connection together.

What insights have you received from the project?

Parent reservations with giving children independence, trust in safety of community .

Our top 5 five project insights (so far) include:

- The co-design process is important to improving engagement with the pathway PLUS having children recruit support from parents is effective.
- PARK IT can deliver a more connected school community that engages in active travel for better health & wellbeing.
- PARK IT can deliver a reduction in traffic congestion out the front of primary schools, creating safer environments for school communities.
- For success, the PARK IT process needs to be easy for school leadership to engage and implement (i.e. place as little burden on the school as possible).
- Weather influences attendance.

Access link to learn more:

Interested parties can contact Kieran Brophy, Projects Lead - Outdoors Victoria at
Email: kieran.b@outdoorsvictoria.org.au

TOP 3 ISSUES FOR PROMOTION OF INCIDENTAL PLAY IN THE COMMUNITY

- 1 Addressing car culture to create safer environments for children, by tackling car congestion around our neighbourhoods and providing greater active travel opportunities for families, who are overly dependent on car travel.
- 2 Building whole-of-community support for play within neighbourhoods, particularly amongst parents and caregivers who are the gatekeepers of our children, making decisions about their children's neighbourhood mobility every day; and
- 3 Unlocking greater policy and infrastructure support for children's play through engaged and active partners, such as Local Governments, and Primary Schools.



Early Childhood

ECA's Statement on Play

Early Childhood Australia

Tell us about the initiative.

In 2019 ECA convened a multidisciplinary Advisory Group, with national and international expertise, to advise on ECA's first Statement on Play for the early childhood sector.

We explored the crucial role and expertise of early childhood educators and teachers in supporting young children's play and promoting awareness of its impacts for the whole child. Families, other adults and entities across the community—through their work and in their homes, venues and services—have a role in creating opportunities for play and removing obstacles to play.

Why was this resource developed?

This Statement considers play and young children aged from birth to eight years. The right to play, however, extends to every child of any age, ability or background and is relevant in schools and other learning environments, services and communities in which children participate. The Statement promotes the place of different types of play in young children's lives and advocates that we hold space and time for play, with children as active agents in their play.

How was it developed?

The Advisory Group, many critical friends and contributors helped discuss and sift ideas and identify evidence, resources and gaps in understanding and practice.

How do you envisage it will be used to support play in early childhood?

The Statement and principles can be used by those with an interest in promoting the right of every child to play. They contain transferable concepts that can be taken up in ways that honour the children

with whom they work and the context in which they operate. All adults have a stake in the protection, preservation and promotion of children's play-based learning. The audience for the Statement is as broad and diverse as the settings where children attend, learn and play every day. It is highly applicable to a diversity of contexts and respectful of child, family and community.

The Statement provides clear, accessible concepts and language and can be used by early childhood professionals and play advocates to animate discussion, guide and challenge practice and be a key resource when planning for and reflecting upon children's experiences in early childhood settings and environments.

What has been the response since it was released?

The Statement on Play has been embraced and well received by the early childhood sector. Early childhood professionals, academics and those who work championing play with children and families have engaged deeply with the Statement.

To date there have been over 8,200 printed resources distributed including, the ECA Statement on Play, Play Principles for Educators and Leaders, Play Principles for Parents and Carers and the Learning Through Play posters. Digital copies of these materials have been downloaded over 2,700 times. Online engagement with the website content to date is 2,382 views and ECA social media platform posts have generated 330 likes and 132 shares.

A recent example of how the Statement can be a catalyst for deep conversation and collaboration was a mixed-mode conference on play hosted by



South Australia's ECA Committee and Play Australia, thoughtfully underpinned by the Statement. This event animated key content and promoted professional learning with the child at the centre.

What insights did you receive from the project?

The project drew together a breadth and depth of seminal and contemporary research around the importance of play in the lives of children. The Statement neatly articulates principles that can guide reflective practice and learning and teaching, and support advocating for children's right to play and the crucial role of play in children's learning, development and wellbeing.

Access link to learn more:

<https://www.earlychildhoodaustralia.org.au/our-work/eca-statement-on-play/>

TOP THREE ISSUES FOR PLAY IN EARLY CHILDHOOD

1

Developing a shared understanding with parents and caregivers that play is intrinsically valuable and essential for children's learning and development and every child has a right to have play in their life.

2

Using play as a means connect children to their world, their cultural identities, to others and to other ways of knowing, doing and being.

3

Acknowledging Children's right to play as a collective responsibility: all adults have a role in understanding, protecting and valuing the importance of play for every child, in every community.

Community

The Venny, Fitzroy Melbourne

David Kutcher, Director

Tell us about the initiative.

The Venny was established in 1981 to provide a free supervised backyard and junk yard playground for children and young people living in public housing and the broader community.

We use community development, trauma informed and play based practices to:

- reduce inter-generational disadvantage and welfare dependence early in the cycle;
- encourage and support children to develop life skills and resilience; and
- build a functioning, vibrant, diverse and connected community, bridging socio-economic and cultural divides.

Our services include drop-in play sessions, early intervention and prevention programs for at risk kids and pop-up play experiences at Kensington, Fitzroy, North Melbourne, Ascot vale and Flemington housing estates. We facilitate risk-taking play opportunities for children and young people.

We know if we 'get in early' and provide at risk children with support, invention and care, we can prevent more serious psychological and emotional harm or entrenched patterns of harmful behaviour taking hold.

Why is this important to the local community?

The Venny is unique. It was built by the community and managed by community. It's a place to belong, have freedom and form connections.

Our model:

Hands of Support - We support children and families. We help fill gaps in systems when they appear. We connect with community, schools, support agencies and families to provide wrap-around care. This can include practical assistance such as food security, education and health.

Heart of Play Work - Play is at the heart of what we do. We have been providing risk-taking play opportunities and developing our own practice for well over 40 years.

Our practice is based on play work principles and our staff are play workers. Play is our daily practice.

Home for Children - We are the backyard for public housing, and we welcome the whole community. We provide the rhythms and rituals of a home. Our home contains trees, a permaculture vegetable gardens, animals, a fire, and plenty of play opportunities. The Venny has been built with and by the community. All Play sessions and programs are free

How does it support play in the community?

The Venny runs free play sessions daily.

In fact, every play session, every program and every initiative are free.

It's based on the three frees.

Children and young people and families can enter for free.

Children and young people are free to choose what they do.

Children and young people are free to come and go.

How many children and families access The Venny in a week/ year?

Across all sites approximately 700-900 children, young people and parents/carers attend per week.

What have been some of the benefits of participation by children?

- What the science tells us:
 - Build resilience
 - Connections and friendships
 - Improve mental health
 - Improve physical health
 - Improve motor skills
 - Build problems solving skills
 - Build risk assessment skills
 - Improve confidence and identity
 - Improve concentration
 - Improve sleep
 - Provides happiness



● **What Parents tell us:**

- My child's behaviour has improved.
- Their grades have gone up.
- They are happier.
- They are healthier.
- The meals and food packs help us.
- I have some respite now.
- My child is now friends with her bully and they play together.

● **What the Children tell us:**

- I am so happy here.
- It's fun and there's always something to do.
- I like climbing high.
- I belong here. It's ours!
- I love the fire and playing with the other kids.
- I can do so many tricks on the trampoline.
- I can't believe this is my backyard.
- I am free to be me.
- This is me.
- The Venny taught me to ride a bike.
- I like that I can be silly.

● **What alumni tell us:**

- The Venny staff make everyone who walks in feel seen, loved, included and valued.
- The Venny provides a home away from home and a family other than our own.
- I have the best memories here. This was my safe place.

- I learnt how to build and work with tools and machines.
- We lived in the flats but had our very own backyard.

Access link to learn more:

<https://thevenny.org.au/>

TOP 3 ISSUES FOR FREE ADVENTURE PLAYGROUNDS

1

Lack of understanding, support and resources for free play-based programs and playgrounds/spaces designed and built specifically for middle years children and upwards

2

Costs due to regulatory requirements- without the financial support of donors, philanthropy and government Community backyards can't survive unless we move to a user plays model eliminating the very people we aim to service.

3

'Safetyism' Children should be kept as safe as necessary not as safe as possible. Safety measures that aim to protect children can be harmful when they are too restrictive.

4th issue (The word Adventure Playground. What is it?)

Community



1000 Play Streets

Co-ordinated by Play Australia with local community partners.

Tell us about the initiative.

1000 Play Streets is an audacious goal to establish 1000 play streets across Australia to support communities living in quiet residential streets (particularly those experiencing high levels of social isolation) and reclaim their streets, as places for neighbours of all ages to connect and play, via the use of temporary street closures.

Inspired by Playing Out (UK) the Australian 1000 Play Streets movement is about empowering local communities to support their children to have freedom and space to play outside on a daily basis and to ensure communities actively support Article 31 giving our children a right to play in neighbourhoods.

Why was this project developed?

Play Australia wanted to create stronger and healthier communities by (i) supporting children's rights to access outdoor play every day; (ii) growing social connections between neighbours; and (iii) improving systems for play - inclusive of tackling poor policy and legislation at all levels of government.

Our aim to make it easy for partners to take our information/resources and implement at a community level.

How does it support play in the community?

Since launching in 2021, we have seen: 30+ Local Governments across our 6 States; help 3000+ Australians participate in play streets; made possible by 150+ local volunteers and community groups ...and these numbers continue to grow due to the quality partnerships and strong foundations we have created.

1000 Play Streets has a number of innovative aspects to grow Local Government support for the campaign

- A FREE online toolkit of planning advice for Local Government (with templates, recommendations, evidence of benefits and video stories from practitioners/communities);
- Online support networks of support for Local Government practitioners, encompassing special presentations to highlight different ways of working;
- A partnership support package of resources featuring consulting, signage, equipment and community engagement materials;
- Provision of user friendly accessible research, supported by La Trobe University and University of Geneva, to help Local Governments better connect with communities with greatest needs (to embrace equitable play streets); and
- We have facilitated the development of collaborative partnerships between Federal, State, Local and Community representatives who are working together to make adopting play streets an easy process and ensure long term change resulting in longevity.

What has been the response by community and families ?

1000 Play Streets, through the use of resources and support, empowers local residents and associated Community Partners (for example: Neighbourhood Houses & Family Services) to take a strong lead on "hosting" their Play Street.

This means local people define what their Play Street looks like and this also ensures the implementation is reflective of local culture and reflects the needs and interests of the community.



Many of our participating communities have diverse cultural backgrounds and they have enjoyed sharing their unique culture via food and play - this helps not only build connection between culturally diverse neighbours, but it also builds a strong foundation for future conversations and understanding of each other.

What insights have you received from the project?

La Trobe University have supported both process and impact measurement. Impact has been captured a number of ways including (i) online surveys post-gathering; (ii) observation sheets; and (iii) interviews. Our knowledge translations demonstrate that Play Streets:

- Grows children's outdoor play (86% of surveyed participants with children reported they are now more likely support their child/ren to play on the streets more regularly)
- Grow social connection (90% of adults surveyed reported feeling more confident to talk to their neighbours in future) which is essential in boosting parent confidence to afford children freedom to play in streets ongoing.

Access link to learn more:

<https://www.playaustralia.org.au/1000-play-streets>

TOP 3 ACTIONS FOR MAINTAINING 1000 PLAY STREETS EVENTS IN THE COMMUNITY

1

Funding to support the administration and roll out of play streets across LGA's is critical. Once established many play streets can become part of an annual LGA plan, however, most require a planning stage to consult and work with the community on the concept.

2

Need for a state/territory planning consent to support road closures for street play events.

3

The inclusion of Play streets in every LGA Play Strategy.



Thank you

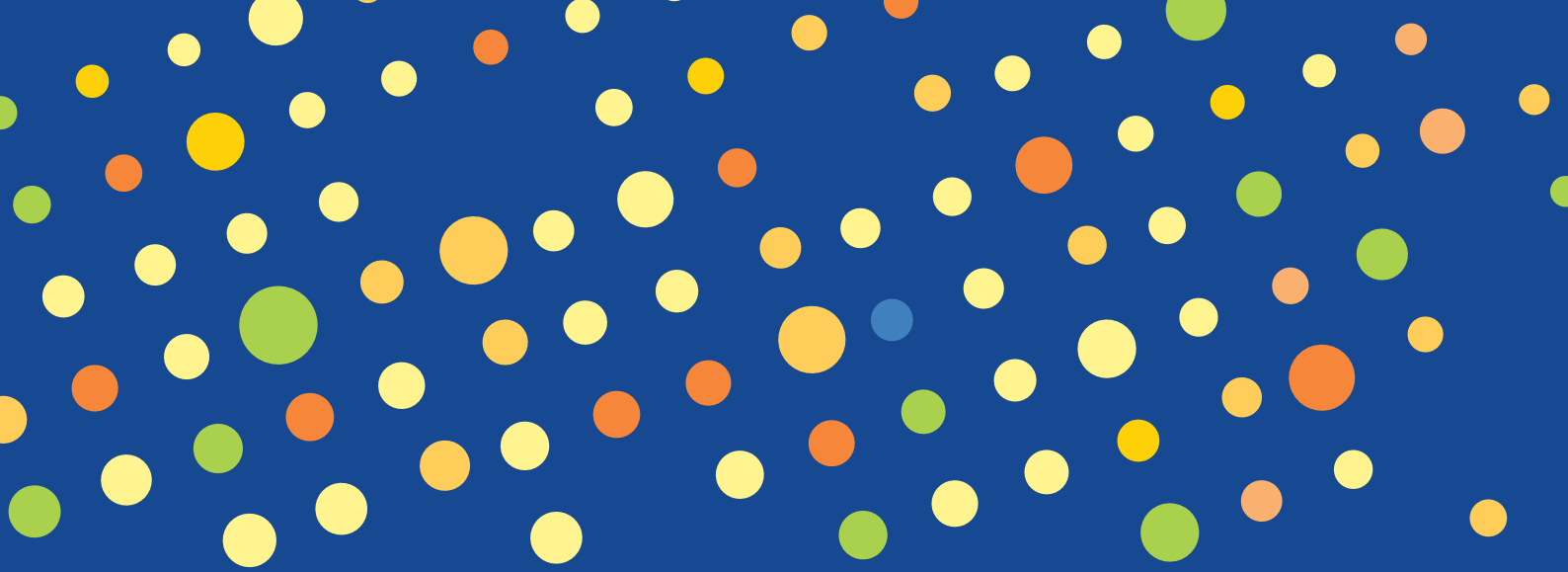
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17. Julie Hourigan, Shine for Kids
18. Dr Brendan Hyndman, Charles Sturt University
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33. Dr Anthea Rhodes, Royal Children's Hospital Melbourne
34. Cat Sewell, Polyglot Theatre
35. Dr Jill Sewell, Australasian Society for Developmental Paediatrics
36. Judd Walsh, Victoria University
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38. Debbie Williams, Toy Libraries Australia
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