



Why make time for play?

Support for play providers to advocate for staffed play provision

When asked what is important to them, children tell us that playing and being with their friends is one of the most important aspects of their lives. Yet adults often forget how important playing is, and when it comes to finding enough time, or balancing budgets or making planning decisions, playing is often shuffled down the list of priorities.

Making a case for play provision

Children are equal members of our society. We know that every aspect of their lives is influenced by their urge to play, and yet very little of our built and planned environment affords them the opportunity or the permission to play.

There are fewer and fewer children playing out in our parks and streets. One of the reasons for this is a lack of confidence in their safety. Another is an increasing intolerance towards their play behaviour, but also children are reluctant to go out and play if there is no-one to join up and play with. Children growing up today tend to have fewer opportunities to meet up and play independently – staffed play provision can provide such an opportunity.

Staffed play provision within a community shows to the people in that community that playing is important – it also has an important advocacy and outreach role. A staffed play setting is not a play ‘ghetto’ – it should provide a wide range of choices and affordances for play within a child’s community.

Playworkers are trained to advocate for children’s play – to promote the idea that playing is normal and necessary and a behaviour to be welcomed in any place where children travel through or spend time.

Playwork is a profession. Playworkers are trained to support children’s play by providing materials and protected space and permission; they do not direct children’s play or join in unless invited by the children themselves. A common misconception is that playworkers play with children; in reality playworkers enable children to extend their own play by enhancing the play space so that it is a rich play environment.

Play

Play permeates every aspect of children’s lives; this is not a mistake nor is it trivial or unimportant. Playing makes a crucial contribution to children’s health and well-being and the survival of the human race. We wouldn’t have retained this behaviour through our evolution if it wasn’t absolutely essential.

Unless there are external environmental and/or personal biological factors that impede them from playing, given the opportunity children and young people play spontaneously most of the time and anywhere they find themselves.

Right to play

Children have a right to play under the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC). Article 31 of the Convention says:

‘Every child has the right to rest and leisure, to engage in play and recreational activities appropriate to the age of the child and to participate freely in cultural life and the arts.’

In 2010 Wales became the first country in the world to legislate for children’s play. As part of this ground-breaking law, which has become known as the ‘Play Sufficiency Duty’, every local authority is required to assess for and secure sufficient play opportunities for children in their areas. As a result, progress is being made across Wales. Examples of progress can be found at: www.playwales.org.uk/eng/sufficiencycasestudies

Other examples of projects that are contributing to making Wales a play friendly country can be found at:

www.playwales.org.uk/eng/playfriendlyplace

Benefits of play – surviving and thriving

This list of the benefits of play to children is not complete, research continues. However, it has given considerable evidence of the value of play and the range of benefits children gain from playing.

Play is incredibly complex; we are just beginning to see the evidence that shows playing has an impact on how children's genetic make up is expressed, and on the physical and chemical development of the brain. This in turn positively influences the child's ability to survive and thrive.

- Physical and mental health are interlinked and both are supported by playing. Unlike sport and organised activities, playing is child-driven and child-friendly. It appeals to all children.
- Play can help build resilience; the capacity for children to thrive despite adversity and stress in their lives.
- Active physical play helps to relieve depression and anxiety.
- Many children who have experienced traumatic events play out the scenes they have witnessed. Playing in such a way has been shown to be part of the healing process.
- The unpredictable and spontaneous nature of playing supports the development of an ability to respond flexibly to situations.
- Through playing children develop their own sense of place and belonging; attachment to and knowledge of outdoor places contributes to environmental awareness.
- Playing is nature's way of learning. Rather than delivering specific learning outcomes it contributes to a lifelong ability to learn.
- Play is strongly linked to creativity; it involves lateral thinking, imagination and problem solving.
- Children gain a sense of pleasure and reward from playing; humour and laughter help develop social competence.
- Playing allows for the expression and experience of strong emotions within a safe enough context.
- Playing with other children helps individuals to develop strong peer friendships and networks which contribute to children's social, mental and health resilience – particularly for those living in poverty.
- Children's friendships, gained through playing together, are socially beneficial and valuable catalysts to adults' social relationships within communities.



Benefits of staffed play provision to children

Staffed play provision is a relatively new concept and as yet there is limited research into its effectiveness. What we do know is that children's play is beneficial for all the reasons we have just listed and that their well-being and development cannot be understood as separate from their environment.

Quality staffed play provision is an environment in which children can play in a way that is spontaneous, flexible, unpredictable, imaginative and directed by themselves – the very environment contributes to their health and wellbeing.

Playworkers working to the Playwork Principles support all children and young people in the creation of a space in which they can play.

There are external environmental and/or personal biological factors that impede some children from playing. Such children can be supported to play in an environment where there are trained playworkers who know how to intervene where necessary to facilitate playing. This extends the advantages of playing to children who might not ordinarily have the full breadth of opportunity.

Quality staffed play provision can change the feel of a neighbourhood where children who might not normally meet and socialise can mix in a safe enough context. This provides experience of other people and more opportunities for wide social networks that contribute to children's resilience.

Our society is increasingly risk-averse; there are fewer and fewer opportunities to spontaneously express risk-taking behaviour. Within quality staffed play provision there is an understanding that children naturally seek out uncertainty and challenge as part of their play. Playworkers are trained to risk assess, to consider the benefits of children's action and intervene only if there is a significant chance that children will come to harm. Play provision gives a 'safe enough' space in which children can be 'in control of being out of control'.



Within quality staffed play provision there is an understanding of all forms and types of play behaviour, this may not be the case elsewhere. For instance rough and tumble play contributes positively to children's resilience and social bonding (particularly for boys) but unfortunately it tends to be prohibited in many households and school environments.

There is evidence that many parents are now more restrictive of their children's freedom to range and play away from home than in previous generations. Quality staffed play provision within local neighbourhoods can give children and families confidence that they can play out without coming to harm and provide a 'safe enough' choice of places to socialise and play away from the home.

Children's lives are increasingly colonised by adult-led activities. Within quality staffed play provision children are encouraged to be free agents; making their own decisions, creating their own place to play, directing their own play. Children value environments where they can be themselves and be spontaneous.

Children constantly seek out novel, new and diverse choices, new channels for exploration and discovery, new opportunities and stimuli to be happy and healthy. Staffed play provision can provide the new possibilities that children need to get the most benefit from their time playing. In comparison, fixed equipment playgrounds tend to have limited possibilities for children's play.

Sometimes children's play is impeded by adult disapproval and adult values. As part of their play children need to be silly, fall out of friendship,

experience rough and tumble, make noise and mess, to destroy as well as create, to be rude and cruel and learn the consequences from their peers. Expressing these needs is frowned upon within many environments and situations but they are accepted as part of the range of children's play within quality staffed play provision.

Children are involved in decision-making processes within play provision; from deciding and negotiating how they play with one another, to choosing new playworkers. This provides an opportunity for participation that is often lacking in other areas of their lives.

The playwork curriculum, as it is supported within quality staffed play provision, includes playing with the elements. Children are encouraged to play with earth, air, water and fire within a safe enough context where there are adults on hand who continually risk assess and support safe practice. For some children this is their only experience of the elements – or the only place in their lives where playing with them is permitted.

Where children are traumatised by events in their lives the playwork approach supports the playing out and recreation of difficult experiences in a sensitive and non-judgemental way. For instance a child who has witnessed extreme family violence might recreate such events when playing. A playworker is trained to take into account the circumstances and the play drive of the child and to respond without disapproval. Such play may not meet the same sensitive approach in other places in the child's life.

Wider benefits of staffed play provision

Good quality staffed play provision can also provide benefits to the wider community. Quality staffed play provision can create a hub for a community, in much the same way as schools do during term time.

They offer non-threatening opportunities for adults and young people to volunteer and become involved. Staffed play provision provides job opportunities and workforce development within communities.

Children and families value quality staffed play provision; the relationships they make through it and the contribution it makes to communities. The better and more comprehensive the play provision within a community, the more families are likely to be attracted to live there, because they know their children will be valued and their children's needs will be met.

Freely chosen play is critically important to all children as part of their everyday lives and within their own communities. Staffed play provision is a valuable choice that supports and promotes children's right to play within their community.



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