



Helpful tips for parents  
to support children's play

## Physical activity guidelines for children and young people

Guidelines on physical activity recommendations for children under the age of five and children and young people aged five to 18 years\*:

### Early years (under five years)

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

### Children and young people (five to 18 years)

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

Playing is the most natural and enjoyable way for children and young people to be active, keep well and be happy. Parents and carers can find simple ways to include time and space for playing in their children's daily lives. All kinds of play can help children to be more active.

Playing together is a great way to spend time as a family and help develop children's confidence and communication skills. It can also help parents and other family members stay active too!

## Sit less, move more

Modern life has made things comfortable for us and many of us spend a long time in sedentary activity that doesn't burn off the energy we are consuming.

Of course, it's important to relax, but we also need to find time in the day to get up and about. Inactive children are at risk of storing excess fat in their bodies – just like their parents. The solution is simple – get up and play!

Being up and about and playing burns energy and helps prevent serious illnesses like type 2 diabetes, heart disease and cancer in later life. It also helps children explore, learn about their world and feel happy. Making sure there is time, space and freedom to play is a great way of making sure everyone is moving around and having fun!

## Addressing parental concerns

The best things about playing are that it's fun, anyone can join in, and it doesn't have to cost much at all. We understand that there are things that may be stopping families from playing together, and parents from making time and space and giving freedom for their children to play.

### 'There's nowhere for my children to play'

Most children will play anywhere given time, space, freedom and others to play with. Local authorities and play associations in Wales are working to provide play facilities and staffed play provision in their area. Search for your local authority's website online or visit [www.playwales.org.uk](http://www.playwales.org.uk) for a list of play contacts in Wales.

Everyone's neighbourhood is different, but wherever people live there's sure to be a local park, playground or 'playable' space nearby. Where there aren't designated play areas or parks, there are often other open spaces that can be used for playing.



### ‘What about when it’s raining?’

Adults are often more put off by bad weather than children! Splashing around in puddles can be great fun – every jump burns calories and adds to our daily physical activity recommendation. Healthy children and adults that are properly dressed and use good judgment do not need to let a bit Welsh rain put an end to playing and staying active outdoors. Taking common sense steps make it easier to let children play in the rain.

**Dressing for the weather** – making sure that old clothes and wellies are worn immediately make it easier to spend time outside. We are less likely to stress about exploring water and mud if we are wearing older clothes and shoes.

**Keeping it fun** – think about how the rain water can be used to add fun. Think water slides, water balloon games, hunting for worms. When we are more comfortable being out in wet weather, we can start thinking about mud – mud pies, mud slides and mud painting.

We shouldn’t beat ourselves up when it’s time to call it quits. When we are positive and even excited about going outside, chances are

children will be too. Children are less upset about challenging weather conditions than adults – especially when they are allowed to play with water or mud.

But, if they start to complain about being cold or wet once you’re outside, it helps to troubleshoot. Where exactly are they cold? Is it because their clothes aren’t appropriate? If so, change them. Are they worried about getting muddy? How about going for a walk exploring the neighbourhood instead? If nothing helps, go back inside. At the end of the day, playing outside is supposed to be fun.

The home is a great place for playing – particularly when the weather is stormy or it’s too dark to be out. Children can make creative use of even just the corner of a room if they have friends, toys or other bits and pieces and freedom to play.

There’s lots of fun ideas that don’t require too much room, including old favourites like hide and seek or building a den out of cushions and blankets. Older children still need room and space to play inside – children need to rough and tumble as part of their play.

## 'I'm on a really tight budget and can't afford toys or play equipment'

Most of us have a free outdoor play area or facilities near to where we live. And whether children are playing indoors or outdoors, there are things you can find around the home that can be used. Cushions make great stepping stones, a blanket over a table makes an instant den, and empty cardboard boxes can be made into cars, castles or even spaceships!

## 'It's not safe for my children to play outside'

Most of us remember the joy and freedom of playing out as children. The benefits to us were enormous:

- We met and had adventures with friends
- We knew our own neighbourhood well and travelled around it freely
- We got to know the characteristics of local people – who to avoid and who to trust – and they got to know and trust us (or not!)
- We were physically active
- We were self-reliant, resourceful and independent.

We all have a responsibility to support and prepare our children to play out confidently in their community:

### 1. Prepare children to be road safe

We can prepare children for walking and cycling independently by telling them and showing them from an early age how they can keep themselves safe on and around roads.

### 2. Familiarise children with their neighbourhoods

We can walk and cycle in the local area and help children to identify safer routes to play spaces and other places they need to access independently in their community.

### 3. Work with children

Once they are competent enough to travel around and play out without us, we can make agreements with children on where and how long they go out and play. It helps both us and them if they can tell the time, know their neighbourhood and know their address and phone number.

### 4. Keep our worries in perspective

We can try and be realistic about our fears for children's safety. For most people in most areas, the benefits of playing out far outweigh the risks.

### 5. Take a community approach

We can get to know local people – neighbours and other families – and agree to keep an eye out for children. The more children who play out, the safer our children will be.

## 'My children just want to spend all their free time playing on the computer or watching TV'

Computers are now part of children's lives and culture and once again there is a balance to be met – time for computers and time for school and time for playing. Computer games are designed to be compulsive and we adults need to keep an eye on the amount of time spent at the screen and actively encourage children to switch off and play differently. Taking part in computer games that encourage physical activity doesn't use as many calories as playing freely outdoors.

Some adults encourage computer use and TV watching because it 'keeps children occupied and out of harm's way' – yet they are in physical danger because of the long-term health effects of doing so much sitting down, and great care needs to be taken to protect children and young people online.



Children follow adults' example – if parents and carers spend a lot of their free time watching TV or on their electronic devices, children will naturally do the same.

### 'I can't take the mess and noise!'

It's normal for children to be noisy and messy when they're playing. Noise shows that children are communicating and interacting! If the noise is a real problem, try suggesting other quieter games or that children go somewhere else where they will have more freedom to be themselves. To manage mess – make tidying up into a game or turn a blind eye (what is more important, valuable play experiences or tidiness?). Make sure there is somewhere that children can make their own.

### The benefits of play

Children benefit most from having a wide range of play experiences, contributing to their health and wellbeing. This can be achieved by making sure that children are able to choose from different places, experiences and resources that offer physical, emotional, social and creative opportunities.

These are just a few examples of the ways in which children play and the main benefits that children get from this variety of activities.

- Climbing develops upper body strength, co-ordination and balance as well as confidence and self-esteem
- Joking, chatting and making up games with other children supports children's ability to communicate as well as their resilience and wellbeing
- Running and chasing games develop fitness, stamina and agility
- Walking or running along the tops of walls aids concentration, agility and balance
- Repeatedly jumping from steps or practising on a bike or with a skipping rope helps children to calibrate – to learn to manage their growing muscles – as well as developing co-ordination and confidence

- Fantasy play uses imagination and creativity, but it can also be a way of children making sense of difficult aspects of their life.

### Playful parenting

To support children's play it's less about what you do and more about the way you do it. Children need permission, time, space and materials to get the most from playing.

1. Try to let children choose what they play, how they play and who they play with. Children receive a lot of instruction from adults in their day to day lives – playing in their free time should be led by them.
2. Try to let children solve their own problems. Showing children, the 'right way' to do something shortcuts the learning process.
3. A detailed plan of activities is not needed. Taking a step back and supervising from a distance means that children will be more likely to play in their own way and gain the benefits of experimenting and experiencing things for themselves.
4. Let children enjoy physical challenges like climbing trees. Try not to be over-protective if the worst that can happen is a bump, a bruise or a scrape.
5. There is no need to provide lots of toys and equipment. By providing perhaps just a few well-chosen toys but numerous loose parts play resources we can enrich the play space and facilitate play. Loose parts are natural and man-made materials that have no specific purpose. Playing with things such as fabric, guttering, cardboard boxes and tubes, tyres, sticks, tarpaulins, string and rope allows children to get creative and resourceful.

\* Department of Health (2011) *Start Active, Stay Active: A report on physical activity for health from the four home countries' Chief Medical Officers* (Crown Copyright).



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