A Plan for Play

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A PLAN FOR PLAY

AN EYE VIEW SERIES REPORT

2023

Children's Alliance

Better starts, brighter futures

VIEW

A PLAN FOR PLAY: AN EYE VIEW SERIES REPORT

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INTRODUCTION

There is a simple, inexpensive and joyful way to address many of the major challenges facing society and its children; addressing the alarming mental health crisis and obesity epidemic and helping to prepare children for an ever-changing work force.

The solution that is all too often overlooked and neglected is - play.

The right to play is so important that it is enshrined in the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child. Research documents its importance to every aspect of child health, development and wellbeing. Yet many children have little or no access to high quality play opportunities. Play provision should be considered in relation to every aspect of children's lives – the design of their neighbourhoods, as well as within the services they access, such as child care centres, schools, hospitals, recreation facilities, parks and adventure playgrounds. Play cannot be relegated to the places and context that adults decide are appropriate It should be woven into the fabric of every aspect of children's lives and the communities they are part of.

Equitable access to play means reducing the insidious gradient of inequity that impacts children's lives even before they are born and continues across their lifespan. Schools are one important venue to ensure equitable access to play. For some children, it will be the only opportunity they have for this nourishing and necessary activity. Play comprises a quarter of the school year, yet teachers and support staff receive no proper training or support to ensure that children in their care – our society's future – have fulfilling play time.

We know that early life experiences set the stage for the future, and that early intervention saves unquantifiable and unnecessary suffering and costs later on – for children, families and society as a whole. We owe it to children and ourselves both now and tomorrow, to make a plan for play that sees every child in every place playing every day.

This report makes that case.

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The Historical Perspective

Chapter One: The State of Play: the historical perspective

Play has long been the subject of controversy. Plato claimed that it influenced the way in which children developed as adults whilst dismissing '*at least some of its forms as irrational and morally questionable'*, Armand D'Angour, '*Plato and Play: Taking Education Seriously in Ancient Greece*', American Journal of Play, volume 5, number 3:
https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/Ej1016076.pdf

To Schiller, 'play' was *'the aimless expenditure of exuberant energy', 'Theories of Play'*: *https://www.encyclopedia.com/children/encyclopedias-almanacs-transcripts-and-maps/theories-play* but Friedrich Froebel (1782-1852) who invented the kindergarten, lauded it as '*the highest expression of human development in childhood for it alone is the free expression of what is in the child's soul'*: *https://early-education.org.uk/friedrich-froebel/*

Susan Isaacs, Isaacs S, 1930, *'Intellectual Growth in Young Children'*, Routledge: London and 1933*, 'Social Development in Young Children'*, Routledge: London and Margaret McMillan, Bradburn E*,* 1976 *'Margaret McMillan: Framework and Expansion of Nursery Education',* Denholm House Press; Nutfield, Surrey, built upon Froebelian foundations, but in twentieth-century Britain, play was still to some, 'recreation', to others 'a break from work' or occasionally, an activity reserved for adult aristocrats. A number of toys continued to be made with adults in mind and children were encouraged to be seen and not heard, Barnes D*,* 2015, *'Play in historical and cross-cultural contexts'*, Fromberg D, and Bergin D, 2015, '*Play from birth to five'*, London: Routledge.

A nostalgic sense lingers of play being 'passed down' from generation to generation with grandparents and associated rosy-cheeked elders benignly sharing experiences of 'the olden days'. The collective 'memory' is comprised of children playing either alone or with friends outside on the street and on rough ground, in grassed and wooded areas. How much it is owed to wishful thinking or the experience of a fortunate minority is debatable – but what is indisputable is that the twentieth-century ushered in a relentless growth of industrialisation and urbanisation together with overcrowded towns and the introduction of the motor car.

The challenges to play in the twenty-first century are that open spaces have disappeared and fewer children are seemingly available to play. Research on city play indicates that traditional group games are either greatly reduced or consisting of only two or three participants, Dargan A. et al, 1990, *'City play New Brunswick, NJ'*, Rutgers University Press. 'Exercise play' (involving whole body movements such as walking, running, jumping, climbing and swinging) and 'rough-and-tumble play' (play-fighting and play chasing) are therefore curtailed by lack of playmates and decreased amount of physical space.

Local communities in the UK have become fractured as more families travel for work opportunities and the old concept of 'neighbours' retreats into the mists of history. Former generations may recall a loose collective and harmonious community supervision of children, but today's burgeoning housing developments and industrial structures have not been accompanied by a flourishing 'community spirit'. Instead, the vacuum has been supplied by adult anxieties about safety.

Such concerns are worldwide:

'As mechanised vehicles had increasingly overwhelmed city, suburban and even rural streets…commercial interests, local governments and watchful adult protectors worked to remove children from…public spaces.'
Chudacoff HP, 2007, *'Children at play: An American history'*
New York. NYU Press: 2002

Children seeking to move within increasingly busy spaces in the twenty-first century have been serenaded at every turn by the siren call of professionals eager to safeguard them from every possible hazard. Cycling freely, with or without friends, on local roads has been replaced by a norm of small clusters of cycling-proficient young people atop efficient machines, decked out in helmets and protective padding. In summary:

'The shortage of at-home playmates, combined with prevailing parental norms about protecting children and enriching their lives, mean that adult-structured activities rather than inter-sibling entertainment increasingly prevail.'
Chudacoff, as above

A by-product of the 'safety lobby' has been the proliferation of 'soft-play centres', colourful indoor spaces forming 'soft-play' environments of padded tunnels, slides and arches in the cause of minimising injury and consequent potential for legal action. Here, children play in a 'safe space' overlooked by adults and free from being 'led astray' by other children or external 'stranger danger.' However, close examination of children's exercise play in these environments has highlighted design weaknesses whereby fundamental movement skills are often limited rather than developed, James K, 2005, *'Learning outdoors: improving the quality of young children's play outdoors'*, Abingdon, Routledge.

At the same time, the value of imaginative and fantasy play for children; considered to be crucial in nurturing the growth of empathy and emotional understanding, Astrida l Seja and Sandra W Russ, 1999, *'Children's fantasy play and emotional understanding'*, Journal of Clinical Child Psychology, (28 92) pp 269-277, has been

influenced by the pervasive rise of electronic media from the 1950s onwards. Opportunities for fantasy play developed but at the same time, character and plot lines shaped children's amusements in a way that to some extent overrode and diminished independent imagination. The 'electronic revolution' can be said to have achieved what the safety lobby could not - diverting many children from outdoor street games and undirected play and corralling them firmly within the confines of their bedroom, in thrall to a game console.

The restrictive impact on freely accessible spaces for play in residential areas has made children's active playtime whilst in school (five to six hours every school week) more relevant than ever – not least because schools have safe play areas with no traffic or attendant stranger danger. However, children's time, space and opportunity for play in school has continued to dwindle as shown by Baines and Blatchford, Baines E and Blatchford P, 2019, *'School break and lunch times and young people's social lives: A follow-up national study'*, London: UCL Institute of Education. The main reason given for the decline is concern that the progressive deterioration of behaviour at lunchtime play will continue on return to the classroom with an adverse effect on academic performance.

Supervisory adults fret about the threat of accidents with the potential for litigation and whilst staffing levels (and costs) continue to rise, there is no official guidance about an appropriate ratio of staff to children at playtimes, National Education Union, 2019, *'Playground Supervision: NEU guidance for members, reps and local officers'*, London: NEU. The effects of a compensation culture on the behaviour of professionals, noted by Lord George Young in 2010 continue apace: *https:///assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/60905/402906_CommonSense_acc.pdf*

All schools have the capacity to improve playtimes but very few have the understanding of how to do it.

The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child enshrines play not as a 'relief' from work but as such a crucial component of learning and development that it is an internationally protected right of children across the world: *https://downloads.unicef.org.uk/wpcontent/uploads/2010/05/UNCRC_PRESS200910web.pdf?_ga=2.78590034.795419542.1582474737-1972578648.1582474737*

In 2008, the UK Department for Education (DfE) introduced the Statutory Framework of the Early Years Foundation Stage, clarifying that young children learn primarily through play and stipulating that all must be afforded the opportunity to play and explore outdoors on a daily basis. However, this affirmation of the intrinsic value of play to every child has been undermined by the practice of successive subsequent governments in formalising early childhood education; thereby reducing the amount of time dedicated to play-based learning.

Outdoor environments that support children's play have evolved over time.The 1859 Recreation Grounds Act enabled the first 'playground' at Burberry Street in Birmingham and the Physical Training and Recreation Act of 1937 gave local authorities and voluntary organisations permission to provide playgrounds and playing fields. The inclusion of Home Zones within the 2000 Transport Act developed

the concept of play streets introduced in the Street Playgrounds Act of 1938 but constructed outdoor spaces for play had been greatly reduced due to the destruction of cities during the Second World War. Since then, playgrounds that were subsequently built in parks and open spaces initially conformed to a formula of fixed play equipment within an enclosed space using rubber surfacing as a floor, Woolley H, 2007, *'Where do the children play? How policy can influence practice'*, Municipal Engineer, 160:89-95; Woolley H, 2008, '*Watch this space! Designing for Children's Play in Public Open Space'*, Geography Compass, 2 (2):495-512.

The primacy of what has been termed a 'Kit, Fence, Carpet' approach to playing space (Woolley, as above) has been challenged by a body of evidence attesting to the physical and mental benefits of green space and elements of nature for children across a range of ages, Kellert SR and Derr V, 1998, *'A National Study of Outdoor Wilderness Experience'*, Washington DC; Island Press; Bateson PPG and Martin P, 1999, *'Design for a life: How behaviour develops'*, London Cape. A 'natural' type of provision was endorsed by legislation in the Children's Plan of 2008; also a national funding programme of Playbuilder and Pathfinder local authorities in England, but these policies were discontinued following the election of a Coalition Government in 2010.

The playwork profession engages collaboratively with children by seeking to create *'environments that enable children to generate their own play'*, Brown F, 2014, *'Play and Playwork: 101 Stories of children playing'*. 1 ed. Maidenhead; Open University Press.

In 1945, Professor Carl Theodore Sorenson envisaged his innovative 'junk' playground for children in Emdrup, Copenhagen as a reprieve from occupying German forces who considered children's free play to be sabotage, Cranwell K, 2003, *'Towards a history of adventure playgrounds 1931-2000'*, In: N. Norman, ed. '*Architecture of adventure play*'. London; Four Corners publishing, pp. 18-27. Lady Allen of Hurtwood was subsequently inspired to replicate the model in London, Lady Allen of Hurtwood, 2013, Archive, *'Lady Allen Adventure Playground Chelsea, circa* 1970s', using bombsites to create junk playgrounds: *https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1pqMXplAI9Y&t=7s*

By the1950s, these were called 'adventure playgrounds' with the aim of attracting local authority funding and in contrast to uninspiring models conceived by adults that had failed to capture the imagination of children and fulfil their needs. The new spaces were 'pro-child', enabling children to play in ways that supported their wellbeing and development. The term 'playworker' was officially adopted in 1975, Newstead S and King P, 2021, *'What is the purpose of playwork? Child Care in Practice'*, pp. 1-13, and practitioners have now moved beyond the playground into other spaces where children spend non-scheduled time including holiday play schemes, after-school clubs, hospitals, prisons and schools.

From 1950-1970 local authorities encouraged a programme of adventure playground expansion but the 1974 Health and Safety at Work Act heralded a period of decline, exacerbated later by the 1998 National Childcare Strategy's re-focus on formal out of school childcare. Yet the early 2000s brought an increased prioritisation of children's play in government policy. By 2005, the range of playwork training and qualifications

across England ran the gamut from entry to graduate levels, Gregory H, 2005, *'Play Qualifications: Qualified to play'*:
https://www.cypnow.co.uk/other/article/play-qualifications-qualified-to-play

Government involvement peaked with the 2008 National Play Strategy, '*The Play Strategy, Nottingham'*, Department for Children, Schools and Families. Publications, which recognised playworkers as intrinsic to the success of the strategy; committed to introduce a new playwork management qualification and stated an aim of enabling 4000 playworkers to gain a Level 3 qualification. Months later, the global financial crash was used as a rationale for the 2010 Coalition Government's abandonment of the strategy and responsibility for funding play provision was returned to local authorities; themselves to become subject to stringent and enduring budget cuts for over a decade.

By 2021, the status of playworker had declined to the extent that a change to the Regulated Qualifications Framework (RFQ), Gov.UK, 2021, *'Find a regulated qualification'*: *https://www.gov.uk/find-a-regulated-qualification* deemed the qualification to be no longer relevant. Many children now experience out of school time as an extension of the school day instead of an opportunity to play and their access to free play and its associated benefits remains radically reduced.

The modern urban society and suburban conditions cannot be unmade. In the same way:

'We cannot escape the necessity for playgrounds in such an environment. But we can improve our playgrounds so that children may derive more benefit from their play experiences within them.'
Aaron D and Winawer B, 1965, *'Child's Play'*
New York and London: Harper and Row.

Prior to 1960, hospitals were austere and intimidating for children who were deprived of their parents (outside rigid 'visiting hours') and largely expected to be bed-bound, silent recipients of medication. Following the work of various pioneers including Bowlby, Bowlby J, 1952, *'Maternal Care and Mental Health'*, Bulletin of the World Health Organisation. Vol 3.pp.355-534, and the response to a landmark film produced by the psychoanalyst James Robertson, Robertson J, 1952, *'A Two Year-Old Goes to Hospital'*: *http://www.robertsonfilms.info/2_year_old.htm* the UK Government instructed a parliamentary committee chaired by Sir Harry Platt to investigate the care of children in hospital.

Amongst the 55 recommendations aiming to alleviate the anguish, emotional deprivation and suffering of hospitalised children, the Platt Report stated that play facilities should be made available to them, BMJ, 1959, *'The Welfare of Children in Hospital'*, The Platt Report, Br Med J. 1959 Jan 17:1(5115):166-9. PMCID: PMC1992241. Save the Children Fund (SCF) became the employer for Hospital Play Staff in a pilot venture with the aim of asking the NHS to assume responsibility if successful. By 1975, 29 Hospital Play Specialists had established the National Association of Hospital Play Staff, NAHPS, 2019, *'National Association of Hospital Play Staff Milestones'*:
https://www.nahps.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2019/03/NAHP-Milestones.docx

In the wake of Great Ormond Street Hospital (the first hospital dedicated solely to the treatment of children) there are now 27 children's hospitals in the UK, all of which employ Health Play Specialists, play leaders and/or playworkers. Health Play specialists are qualified play practitioners who use age-appropriate therapeutic play techniques to help children to understand their medical condition, its treatment and probable effect upon their daily lives as well as providing a sense of normality and reassurance in a daunting and unfamiliar adult-led environment. The exceptional work done by the often underacknowledged and sparsely resourced play team in a hospital, hospice or outreach post as written for the first time completely by those employed in that capacity is shared in Everett N, Hubbuck C and Brown F, 2023, '*Play in Hospitals: Real Life Perspectives'*, London; Routledge. In 2023, however, full acceptance of the nature and importance of the hospital play team is still to be achieved.

Having a parent in prison is one of many adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) that are documented as having a deleterious impact on children's present and future health and wellbeing. In 2019 roughly 312,000 children were estimated to have a parent in prison, Kincaid S et al, 2019, *'Children of Prisoners: Fixing a Broken System'*, Nottingham: Crest Advisory.

Play provision in prison for children visiting a relative is a comparatively new phenomenon and a study of a play facility at HMP Wakefield in 1999 acknowledged the ways in which the unnatural circumstances of prison environment affected children and their play, Tamminen B, 1999, *'A Playwork Facility for Children Visiting Prison: A Case Study'*, Leeds; Leeds Metropolitan University. In addition to germane restrictions on everyday actions such as movement and physical contact, anxiety in children is likely to be induced by the added pressure of being constantly observed by authoritarian prison officers, Tamminen B, 2001, *'Establishing and Operating a Playwork Facility for Children Visiting Prison'*, December 2001, Leeds; Leeds Metropolitan University.

Following the 1999 study, a small number of supervised prison play facilities opened; initially in female establishments, but Lord Farmer's Reports of 2017 and 2019, (Farmer L, 2017, *'The Importance of Strengthening Prisoners' Family ties to Prevent Reoffending and Reduce Intergenerational Crime'*, London: Her Majesty's Stationery Office; Farmer L, 2019, *'The Importance of Strengthening Female Offenders' Family and other Relationships to Prevent Reoffending and Reduce Intergenerational Crime'*, London; Her Majesty's' Stationery Office) not only focused on the benefits of a strong family network for the prisoner but also for the children of prisoners and how having a positive relationship with the parent from whom they are separated can reduce the likelihood of intergenerational offending.

The prison sector responded by increasing family support contracts within all genders and categories of establishment and included play provision in the service. Children who are affected by the imprisonment of a parent are often faced with consequent isolation and struggle to build friendships due to the associated stigma. Therefore, many of the children find themselves for the first time in contact with others in similar circumstances and are able to discuss their situation openly and play without fear of being 'found out.'

The nature of the risk-averse prison environment places restrictions upon the scope and type of play opportunities that are feasible, but it is encouraging that many of the play areas in prison are staffed by trained playworkers.

However, despite a recent rise in the number of play provisions in prisons, an unfortunate consequence of the two Farmer Reports has been that the focus has been more about reducing prisoner reoffending rather than nurturing a child's right to play. It is to be hoped that alongside a wider prison agenda of reducing reoffending, the needs of children who are traumatised by having a parent in prison will not be obliterated and that what is provided for them will truly help them to exercise, strengthen emotionally and simply enjoy their right to play.

Action Points

1.1 Long-term cross-party consensus on the quality of outdoor spaces needed for children's play accompanied by appropriate training of relevant professionals to include landscape architects, park and housing managers and all involved in planning and the assessment of planning applications so that contact with natural elements can be designed into constructed spaces with allowance for what might become 'found' spaces

1.2 Health Play Specialists to be employed across all hospitals that admit and attend to children, not just designated children's hospitals so that their role is recognised for its essential part in providing children and young people with comprehensive care support and respect

1.3 All prisons are staffed with qualified playworkers who can support children with the trauma of having a parent or carer in prison; helping them to exercise their right to play.

COVID Consequences

Chapter Two: Covid Consequences: the effect of the pandemic

Early studies show that children's personal social and emotional development was seriously impacted by the Covid 19 pandemic. Their right to play – while acknowledged – was not sufficiently realised in practice and hence largely ignored from a policy point of view, Treacey L et al, 2022, *'The impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on children's socio-emotional wellbeing and attainment during the Reception Year'*: https://d2tic4wvo1iusb.cloudfront.net/documents/projects/EEF-School-Starters.pdf?v=1652814985

Findings from research conducted by the Sutton Trust included parents' views of the pandemic's impact on their children. 69% of those surveyed reported detrimental influences on children's play and their opportunity to play, Sutton Trust, 2021, *'A Fair Start? Equalising Access to Early Education'*, London: The Sutton Trust. This did include access to play facilities but the greatest impact was not being able to play with friends and family:

'The effect of lockdown on formal learning and attainment is well recognised…. Harder to quantify is the impact of the lack of social interaction with peers. Play with friends is an essential part of learning about social skills for young children.'
Anna Hodgson: Clear Sky Children's Charity:
https://clear-sky.org.uk

Panex-Youth a large-scale research project (2022-2024) aims to understand how young people have adapted during the pandemic and assess the wider impact of such adaptation in South Africa, Brazil and England: http://www.panexyouth.com/

Preliminary findings from the initial cycle of data collection include interviews with key stakeholders from the play/leisure and education sectors and show that play opportunities were largely curtailed. During periods of lockdown, schools, gyms, leisure centres and playgrounds were closed and all group activities were reduced due to social distancing. Later regulations governing the number of household members permitted to mix were particularly constraining for families with more than one child, and in school the segregation of play by age group had a detrimental effect on many pupils.

Overall, outdoor play was made more difficult, controlled and monitored due to social distancing rules and a fining system in place for any forms of play occurring outside family circles, with playgrounds banned and shut down.

The play sector, its staff and workers were not included in national mainstream supporting schemes and a forced collective shift to playing online, e-gaming and virtual socialisation emerged as a result. While online play was preferable to no play at all, isolation allowed cyber-bullying to flourish and without the safety net of qualified school staff to recognise danger signs and intervene in accordance, potential for online grooming increased and unmonitored sexual images proliferated. According to the NSPCC:

'The NSPCC helpline saw a 60 percent increase in contacts from people with concerns about children experiencing online sexual abuse, from an average of 117 per month before lockdown to an average of 187 per month since lockdown': *https://learning.nspcc.org.uk/research-resources/2020/coronavirus-insight-briefing-online-abuse*

Social and mainstream media messaging became pivotal to the Government's strategy to ensure that Covid restrictions were observed.

Spending more time at home watching television and going online, children were subjected to often frightening messaging concerning social contact with others and significant exposure to themes of sickness and death. The ongoing safety measures in schools such as social distancing, the introduction of one-way systems and additional stringent hygiene requirements served to inform children that they themselves were a key health risk to their classmates.

The mental health of children and young people was particularly impacted by radical changes to living circumstances arising from the pandemic. According to the British Medical Journal:

'Between April and September 2021, there was an 81% increase in referrals for children and young people's mental health services compared with the same period in 2019. The increase for adults (19 years and over) in the same period was 11%': *https://www.bmj.com/content/376/bmj.o430#:~:text=Key%20findings%20include%3A&text=Between%20April%20and%20September%202021,the%20same%20period%20was%2011%25*

At the same time, the communication skills of younger children suffered a reverse when they were deprived of their usual play opportunities and this was noted by professionals when the children eventually returned to their early childhood settings. The children also encountered difficulty in adapting to new situations involving socialisation and because the enforced time indoors had restricted them to largely sedentary activities, their physical development was negatively affected, La Valle et al, 2022, *'Implications of COVID for Early Childhood Education and Care in England'*, Centre for Evidence and Implementation.

According to the Panex-Youth study, children and young people living in households of socioeconomic deprivation suffered the extra hardship of lacking outdoor spaces

such as gardens in which to play and children from ethnic minority backgrounds were additionally disadvantaged due to three key factors:

- Limited access and poor quality of green and public spaces around their homes
- Limited opportunities to play at home due to overcrowding, no garden or difficult family conditions
- Digital divide restricting a shift to online playing/socialising and hence enhancing digital-leisure exclusions.

For much of the pandemic's duration, the amount of time that people could spend outside was strictly limited to one period of exercise and only essential travel. Communal play areas were cordoned off or shut completely while non-essential items in shops and supermarkets such as toys and children's play activities were made unavailable and were often 'taped-off'; a visual prompt that play was not considered to be an essential activity. Children's opportunity for spontaneous physical play was directly impacted as a consequence, affecting their physical development, gross motor skills and overall self esteem and confidence.

A review of research in 17 countries noted differences in children's behaviours when more indoor play took place and outdoor activities were restricted. Findings included different ways of playing and the associated effects on moods and wellbeing. COVID 19 itself was clearly observed to have become an element in children's pretend play, Kourti A et al, 2021, *'Play Behaviours in Children during the COVID-19 Pandemic'*, A Review of the Literature. Children 2021, 8,706: *https://doi.org/10.3390/children8080706*

It has been suggested that younger children's educational experiences were more disrupted than those of older children because they have a greater need for play-based approaches as well as adult and peer relationships and interactions, Pattnaik J and Jalongo MR, (eds.), 2022, *'The Impact of COVID-19 on Early Childhood Education and Care, International Perspectives, Challenges and Responses'*, Educating the Young Child 18, pp 67-89.

The type of early childhood provision already implemented in a country prior to the pandemic affected the outcomes for children. In England, government-funded provision is a minor component of the service and staff working in these nurseries continued to receive their salaries. Those in the majority independent childcare sector were disadvantaged because of a lack of funding, Rothe A et al, 2022, *'Lessons from the COVID-19 Pandemic: A Qualitative Study of Government Policies Relating to the Early Childhood Sector Across Ten Countries'*, and Pattnaik J & M. Renck Jalongo (eds.) '*The Impact of COVID-19 on Early Childhood Education and Care, International Perspectives, Challenges and Responses'*, Educating the Young Child 18, pp 67-89.

Many settings closed because they were no longer financially viable during the pandemic and have remained shut post pandemic; thus further reducing the opportunities for play and learning with peers and adult support. The rising costs of childcare have resulted in a lack of access for many parents and carers who are struggling with post pandemic effects of stress, unemployment, debt, food insecurity and rising mental ill health. Therefore, they cannot afford the extra financial burden

of childcare away from the home and once again, younger children have been mostly affected, LaValle, as above.

The reduction of play, leisure and social interaction opportunities during the pandemic led to a range of small-scale adaptations. In some cases, schools opened their playgrounds for vulnerable children; allowing them to play safely and play workers and play organisations developed innovative ways of gathering children together to play online. Adventure playground workers delivered play packs and food to vulnerable families. 'Hidden' public spaces and, at times, the private and domestic spheres became places for young people still to meet and socialise illicitly and some parents, individuals and play workers reclaimed streets organically (ie outside of play street schemes) using chalk hopscotch markings and play trails on pavements and outdoor spaces, King P, 2021, *'How have adventure playgrounds in the United Kingdom adapted post-March Lockdown in 2020?'*, International Journal of Playwork Practice, 2(1), Article 1: *https://doi.org/10.25035/ijpp.02.01.05*

Other ways of rectifying the damage wreaked by the changes to children's lives imposed by the Covid pandemic are beginning to emerge worldwide:

'We became an OPAL (Outdoor Play and Learning) School specifically to address the differences in our students post Covid. They weren't interacting as much; we had more rough play as they have been distanced for so long and generally not as social. We're seeing a massive change now we've started OPAL':
St Christopher's International School, Penang, Malaysia, 2023

Action Points

2.1 Government to commission research into the outcomes for children and young people of restriction on their right to play during the Covid-19 pandemic and issue good practice guidelines to all Government Departments

2.2 Cross-Departmental strategy in preparation for a future national public health emergency must ensure that the 'right to play' is placed at the heart of all policy-making.

Case Studies

Chapter Three: Case Studies: examples of current practice

Play in its myriad forms, contributes to children's physical health, mental wellbeing, approach to learning and wider response to life's challenges. The examples below show its diversity and positive impact on children in a variety of circumstances.

Play therapy

Play therapy is used worldwide to help children who are struggling with their mental health. Most have experienced some kind of trauma, ranging from isolated incidents to pervasive and complex forms of abuse.

Issues include developmental or medical trauma, anxiety-related conditions, depression, complex grief, Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) and Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD). Children with high numbers of Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) also fostered and adopted children frequently access these services and data from Play Therapy UK (PTUK) has shown an 87% success rate in the most difficult cases, 2022, PTUK: *https://playtherapy.org.uk*

Some children from nurturing homes need support because they are neuro-diverse in a society that is unsympathetic to their needs and the therapist must offer empathy, congruence and unconditional positive regard so that children can experience repairs in relationships within an emotionally safe and playful environment.

Play enables children to interact with the world and begin to learn and understand social relationships. During play therapy, they are empowered to process unresolved aspects of trauma and other difficult feelings and experiences. Progression is largely unconscious, creating themes in play via metaphor and symbolism. The therapist observes strands and feelings and reflects with care to the child.

Case study provided by Clear-Sky Children's Charity: *https://clear-sky.org.uk*

A seven-year-old child was referred for Play and Creative Arts Therapy upon return to school after Covid lockdown; due to an experience of domestic abuse within the home. The child had little access to play during lockdown; they had adopted a caring

role for a younger sibling due to parental stress and within the home, play was seen as 'unimportant' in comparison with academia. The child had few toys and resources with which to explore creative play and within the therapy space, demonstrated high academic ability; opting for mathematical equations instead of engaging with the toys or creative outlets on offer.

Initially, games with rules such as 'Jenga' or 'Connect 4' were a safe container for introducing play and the child's teacher spent quality time with them for 15 minutes per week, engaging in games of the child's choice. After around 12 sessions, the child was investigating new play models and participating in sensory and role play enabling them to explore memories of traumatic events and process difficult emotions securely. Upon the family's move to a safe home environment, parental capacity increased and the mother and child participated in weekly painting sessions; a time valued and eagerly anticipated by both.

The child accessed the therapy space for 30 weeks during which time a supportive team of school staff, social care and the child's mother noted positive changes. The child now engaged with peers on the playground and had developed close friendships. They were no longer perceived as 'withdrawn' and were more interactive in lessons and expressive in creative work such as art. Further improvements were seen in classroom learning, demonstrating that if a child's emotional needs are met, their capacity for intellectual functioning improves, even if there is no reason for concern.

Play therapy is often used to communicate unconscious feelings through displacement with the therapist; allowing children to 'act out' thoughts and emotions directly or symbolically, K Senko, Harper Bethany, 2019, '*Play Therapy: An Illustrative Case'*: *https://europepmc.org/article/MED/31440400*

Forest Schools

'Forest School' is an activity programme whereby children of all ages and developmental stages are taken out of the classroom and into wooded spaces (on school grounds or in local parks and woodlands) to engage in playful child-centred activity. The concept is underpinned by a set of core values, Forest School Association (FSA), *2023: https://forestschoolassociation.org* as below:

1. Forest School is a long-term intervention, preferably enabling participants to experience changing seasons. Leaders plan, observe and adapt to meet the participants' needs
2. The wooded environment is intended to stimulate a lifelong relationship between participants and the natural world
3. The interests and abilities of participants are paramount and are developed through shared playful activities
4. Forest School provision aims to promote holistic development encouraging resilience, independence and creativity
5. All sessions are led by qualified Forest School practitioners who engage in continuing professional development (CPD).

Adventurous or 'risky' play as offered by Forest School has been shown to improve the mental health and wellbeing of children, Mariana Brussoni et al, 2015, '*Risky play and children's safety: balancing priorities for optimal child development'*, acting as a counter-weight to children's declining patterns of physical activity: *https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/23202675/*

Studies have shown that Forest School play-focused physical activity enables children to place gained knowledge in context; drawing upon and expanding classroom learning, Angela Garden and Graham Downes, 2023, *'A systematic review of forest schools literature in England'*, International Journal of Primary, Elementary and Early Years Education, enhancing connection to nature and promoting environmental sensitivity and awareness: *https://doi.org/10.1080/03004279.2021.1971275*

There is also an opportunity to enhance team working; developing children's collaborative abilities. These core attainment objectives, listed in the National Curriculum for Physical Education across all key stages, 2013, '*National Curriculum in England PE programmes of study'* GOV.UK: *https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/national-curriculum-in-england-physical-education-programmes-of-study* equip children with fundamental life skills. Forest School promotes inclusive learning stimulated by play-based activity in green spaces and enables children to meet some curriculum attainment standards while benefiting their mental and physical health and wellbeing. There is a strong case for their adoption within education settings across the age range.

Living with Nature: improving children's outdoor spaces for play in social housing areas in Sheffield

This project arose in response to the ongoing under-funding of outdoor play areas in the green spaces within the housing land of Sheffield Housing Services (SHS).

Years of decreased funding had resulted in damaged (subsequently removed) pieces of play equipment that no longer met European health and safety standards. An approach from the relevant housing officer to Professor Helen Woolley from the University of Sheffield was to result in the development of the first Play Strategy in England for a social housing provider. Professor Woolley formed an improvements team consisting of colleagues and some Landscape Architecture undergraduates at the University of Sheffield, the housing officer and two helpers from CABE Space (the national organisation then supporting green and open spaces).

A successful application to the Big Lottery Reaching Communities Fund in 2010 was supported by Sheffield and Rotherham Wildlife Trust (SRWT) and paid for the secondment of a Chartered Landscape Architect, a community engagement officer and administrative support within SRWT. The Play Strategy identified 28 sites within the social housing area where outdoor play space required improvement or complete refurbishment and prioritised tenant and resident engagement and involvement.

Initial steps aimed to re-focus community attention on the spaces and a series of activity 'Fun Days' encouraged people to visit them. Children from local primary and early years' settings enhanced the physical aspect of the spaces by planting bulbs

and flowers; sometimes incorporating fundraising for local concerns such as a children's hospice. Arts and creative activities for all ages were developed throughout the life of the project and a dog show and a sports day involving two local schools were so successful that they became annual events; continuing after the original funding had ceased and until Covid restrictions ended the schools' participation.

Community engagement varied in type and degree depending upon the nature of the particular community and whether it was served by a Tenants and Residents Association (TARA). The overriding priority on one site was to demolish a wall behind which local addicts had become accustomed to take their prescribed methadone. In time, it was removed and some simple interventions were put in place to enhance the appearance of the site and its perceived safety and play value.

At the other extreme of the community engagement scale, it became clear that the TARA was primarily interested in the condition of the housing stock rather than that of the outdoor green spaces. Therefore, the housing officer encouraged the establishment of 'Friend of' groups (now a familiar grouping for many parks and green spaces in England; often helping with maintenance and fundraising).

Assisted by the housing and community engagement officers, the group sought alternative funding streams following the exhaustion of the original Big Lottery source. Nine years later, many 'Friends of' groups still exist, seeking to improve their local green spaces for play and biodiversity via funding applications, community events and planting days.

The key environmental legacy of the Living with Nature project is the re-designed and built sites; sources of increased opportunity for children's play itself also as a social legacy. A Master's dissertation highlighted the increase in play value, using the Woolley/Lowe tool, Woolley H and Lowe A, 2013, *'Exploring the relationship between play value and design approach of outdoor play spaces'*, Landscape Research, 38(1) 53-74, demonstrating that children have become aware of the green spaces, feel a sense of 'ownership' and use them for play and other activities.

The social legacy of Living with Nature (in addition to the increased play opportunities) is the continuance of Friends groups; enhanced community collaboration and cohesion and higher levels of integration spanning all ages. This achievement is primarily due to the project team in building trust and fostering the enthusiasm of local communities so that the green spaces are now widely used and valued and children living in the housing areas have a much-improved environment in which to play.

Play Bradford

Eccleshill Adventure Playground, opened by Bradford Metropolitan District Council (BMDC) in 2003 and incorporated as a charity in 2008, is known locally as 'The Big Swing.' In May 2020 the charity renamed itself 'Play Bradford'.

In 2019, Bradford was ranked the fifth most deprived local authority in England, City of Bradford Metropolitan District Council Indices of Deprivation:

https://ubd.bradford.gov.uk/media/1533/indices-of-deprivation-2019-on-the-day-alert.pdf

It is the fifth largest metropolitan authority and the country's youngest city with the largest head of child population in England, City of Bradford Metropolitan District Council 2023 About Bradford's Economy: https://www.bradford.gov.uk/business/bradford-economy/about-bradfords-economy

Play Bradford's name reflects the number of additional services that it has developed in order to:

> *'Improve the lives of children in the Bradford District by using the power of sustainable play as a catalyst for social change,'*
> Play Bradford, 2023:
> https://www.playbradford.org.uk

In 2003, The Big Swing was developed in accordance with the founding principles of the adventure playground movement. Many of these had closed by the early 2000s due to under-funding and an increasingly litigious risk-averse culture. However, The Big Swing's pioneers (prominent members of Bradford's voluntary sector play associations now employed within BMDC's Early Years and Childcare Service – EYCS) reaffirmed the original principles. Bradford was the first authority in England to produce a district-wide play strategy and representatives of EYCS sat on the Children's Play Council; helping to drive a golden era of government investment in children's play and playwork.

On 11 December 2007, the Government announced a ten-year plan for children in England including a commitment to develop 30 supervised adventure playgrounds nationwide, high quality training for 4,000 playworkers and a national strategy for children's play. The Big Swing was cited as an example of good practice in the final national Children's Play Evaluation to the Big Lottery Fund, Voce A, 2017, *'A Policy for Play'*, Bristol: Policy Press. However, the new Government in 2010 precipitated a near total disinvestment in all that had been accomplished beforehand, Voce A, 2015, *'The State of Playwork'*, International Journal of Play, 4(3) pp. 217-223.

The Big Swing's survival and evolution into Play Bradford has attracted understandable interest. A recent study, Long A, 2023, *'Surviving; A grounded theory of the sustainability of children's play services in England'*, PHD thesis Leeds Beckett University, argued that the adventure playgrounds that withstand the financial squeeze deploy partnership working to diversify income streams and respond to changing social agendas.

Play Bradford has been well-placed to respond to the paramount social issue of public health. In 2022, Sport England increased its grant allocation in recognition of adventurous play's role in improving health outcomes for children, Sport England (nd) *'About Us'*: https://www.sportengland.org/about-us

The most recent quarterly accounts for Play Bradford showed it in receipt of grants from 27 separate sources; financing the delivery of four major projects with The Big Swing at the centre. Free open-access play is available for children aged five to

sixteen and over 3,000 attended the playground in 2022. The charity's 'Platter Project' ensures that every child attending The Big Swing receives at least one daily meal of home-cooked food and to date, Play Bradford has provided over 4,000 warm meals to local children.

Play Bradford's Mobile Adventure Playground (MAP) brings adventurous play to the community; visiting eight park locations with a van of materials after the close of the school day and during school holidays so that children can create their own temporary play spaces. In partnership with some local schools, Play Bradford also offers curriculum-based alternative education sessions and free play sessions at The Big Swing for children from the district's Special Inclusive Learning Centres (SILCs)and Pupil Referral Units (PRUs).

Play Bradford coordinates the district's Community Play Partnership supporting community-based organisations in introducing adventurous play opportunities to local children and the most recent community development work has been the re-commissioning of a vacant community centre in the Bolton Woods area. Now occupied by a number of local organisations, it offers a range of services including sports activities for older children and parent and toddler sessions. The centre is working with Play Bradford to attain independent charitable status and has support from BMDC to develop the parkland surrounding the centre into an open access adventure playground.

Play in all environments: Happy Lane San Francisco, CA

Nestor Fernandez of the Telegraph Hill Neighbourhood Centre (TelHi) initiated the Tell Hi Play Everywhere Challenge project called 'Happy Lane.' The street outside his office was transformed into a play area with the aim of promoting physical and mental health by encouraging children to 'play anywhere' using the environment they happened to be in as a play source. Brightly coloured signs were placed on the public sidewalk and asphalt games were added, encouraging skipping, hopping and jumping and leading to a chalkboard containing the question 'What makes me happy?'. The project leaders engaged community participation and activities were included to stimulate physical activity and conversation using some of the prompts including ones on healthy eating:
https://kaboom.org/playbook/case-studies/happy-lane

Nicolae: Abandoned at birth: a therapeutic playwork case study

After Ceausescu's overthrow, worldwide media exposed the fact that over 100,000 children in Romania were detained in orphanages and thousands of babies were infected and dying with AIDS.

Nicolae was abandoned after birth in a dilapidated paediatric hospital in the aftermath of the totalitarian regime. He was born three months prematurely with substantial brain damage; weighing under two pounds. Despite being scheduled for transfer to a children's mental health hospital, he had remained in the paediatric hospital for 10 years.

Professor Fraser Brown and a playworker team funded by Leeds-based charity, the White Rose Initiative, began working in the hospital in 1999.

Nicolae and 15 other abandoned children aged between 9 months and 12 years were tied to their cots where they rocked gently and made little noise. Their nappies were changed once daily; their mattresses had no sheets; the ward was unclean and they were treated with shared needles. It was impossible to tell which children had been born with brain damage and which were the product of a shockingly abusive current environment. Some were believed to be HIV positive and Nicolae had the muscular-skeletal structure of a 4-year-old with neither speech nor discernible social skills.

Playworker Sophie Webb's diary extracts (2014) trace the course of her work with Nicolae. At the end of the first day:

'Even when we entered the room there was no sound from the children. They just looked at us. The smell of urine in every room was almost unbearable….. There were rags around their waists….. ripped up sheets, tied to keep the nappies in place. These rags were also used to tie the children to their cots. ……Giving the children a cuddle was strange as they either held on too tightly or they remained stiff and unfeeling.'

The new Director of Hospitals for the town had allocated a room for the playworkers' use but initially the children could not play:

'Some just sat and seemed bewildered and vacant.'

In the early days, Nicolae could not walk freely but by the end of the second week:

'He's improved so much…..I make sure that every morning I walk around the room with him several times. He's using the walker a lot more now…It's so strange when I remember he's 10 years old and here I am helping him to walk like you would a baby.'

Nicolae's fascination with shoes enabled playworkers to encourage his progress with mobility:

'I have played 'shoes' with him for the past two weeks and that appears to have led him to trust me. Today…..I stood him in the middle of the room, about four steps away from me. Usually, he just sits down and crawls over to the cots, but this time he walked towards me with his arms stretched out for a hug. I think these may have been his first independent steps – after 10 years.'

This technique is called 'joining', Kaufman R, 2023, *'ABA vs The Son-Rise Program',* Autism Treatment Centre of America: *www.autismtreatmentcenter.org/contents/other_sections/aba-vs-ron-rise-program.pfp*
whereby instead trying to curtail the child's obsessive behaviour, the playworker joins in; this helps to build trust which in turn enables the playworker to encourage the

child to adopt alternative behaviours. Within a few weeks, Nicolae had progressed from ‘playing shoes’ with the playworker to independent walking.

His confidence grew and Nicolae played physically with the other children; then adopting a more sophisticated behaviour of teasing:

‘I’ve noticed touch is very important to him…..When the big fluffy duck is on the floor, he lies under it for ages – really happy for others to climb all over him…..When he does interact with one of the others he tends to tease them. …He knows what he’s doing because he laughs to himself afterwards.’

Within six months’ experience of playwork, a fully-engaged Nicolae was playing with other children and the therapeutic team. Despite his obvious disabilities present from birth and having suffering prolonged and sustained neglect, his developmental progress far exceeded professional expectations. Nicolae had responded to therapeutic playwork, Brown F, 2018, *‘Therapeutic Playwork: Theory and Practice’* and Brown F and Hughes B (eds), 2018, *‘Aspects of Playwork’*, Lanham, MD; University Press of America.

Unfortunately, he regressed after being transferred to a children’s mental hospital and when Professor Brown saw him again two years later, Nicolae was sedated by drugs in a ward containing many disturbed children. Nicolae’s play was severely restricted because children were not allowed to use the beautiful external hospital grounds.

However, when Professor Brown met Nicolae by chance, six years later, the eighteen-year-old was living in a special therapeutic centre built in connection with Romania’s entry into the European Union. He was taller than Professor Brown and his living environment was now ‘entirely positive’:

‘How is it possible for a child who at the age of ten looked like a four-year-old, to subsequently grow to a ‘normal’ height? Perhaps humans have a natural growth pattern that can be re-triggered given the right environment. This is something that requires more research.’
Professor Fraser Brown, April 2023

Play within school: Outdoor Play and Learning (OPAL): examples of current practice

The OPAL Primary Programme was conceived and developed over 20 years ago by Michael Follett; building upon professional experience as a playworker, teacher and play strategy officer.

The mentor-supported programme addresses all 18 areas that a school must plan for if playtimes are to improve in a sustainable way so that problems including boredom, high levels of accidents and playground incidents, lack of respect for supervisors and a constant stream of low-level behavioural matters are resolved instead of continuing into class time with negative outcomes for teaching and learning.

Participation in the programme has benefited children, parents, the school and wider community. Schools are encouraged to develop a cultural shift in supporting children's play and success derives from a series of interrelated actions taken with specialist guidance from each OPAL mentor. The transformative outcomes can be seen in all kinds of schools regardless of the amount or quality of outside space available. Play is embedded into a school's policies, practices, guiding principles and strategies for initiating changes at playtimes are established. The programme has been successfully adopted by schools in the UK's towns, cities and rural areas and has also worked well in pupil referral units and special schools.

Each allocated mentor works with a school to devise a unique, detailed play policy action plan and this is followed by a series of development meetings and online/telephone support throughout the duration of the programme. Meetings are held to engage parents and involve them in a long-term plan to improve the school grounds and to maximise play opportunities. The final meeting is the OPAL award unit; progress is mapped and a status of silver, gold or platinum is bestowed prior to planning the next development phase. For the programme to become embedded within school culture, it must enjoy the 100% support of the headteacher, senior leadership team and the OPAL programme working group.

Platinum level OPAL schools are often also rated as Outstanding by Ofsted. OPAL which is founded upon the principles of playwork sees the adult role as one of supporting and celebrating a child-led play process rather than controlling or 'policing' it. It is in tandem with the 2019 Ofsted Inspection Framework and is targeted primarily at the school's adult staff, focusing on resources, values strategy and design.

Ivydale Primary, Nunhead, London 537 pupils, testimonial 1:

'OPAL has improved playtimes at Ivydale beyond our expectations. The most stark difference has been the absence of a gender divide. Boys and girls voluntarily choose to play with anything and everything; boys dress up in princess costumes and dance on the stage just as often as the girls, the girls can be found racing round in buggies, or digging in mud as much as the boys.

This has completely got rid of any battles over football and the sports cage now the least used space in the playground. The level of engagement of all children, including with SEN, is noticeably higher, incidents and injuries have dropped markedly as children stay focused on their play, and the atmosphere in the playground is one of joy and delight rather than frustration and tension experienced previously. The quality of play in the older children, who have had a good run of OPAL, has been noted by staff throughout the school.'

Beech Green Primary, Gloucester, 410 pupils, testimonial 2:

'All children can access all areas and play with any equipment or activity or person they wish, regardless of what age they are. Sometimes, children with additional needs who found playtimes tricky would 'hide' at the edge of the playground, or cling onto a member of staff. Very little of that goes on now there is always something for everyone to do. Our provision is no longer just a few footballs, we have a (huge)

sandpit, digging zone, building zone, mud kitchens, café, dress-up shed, bikes and scooters and music, long grass which has been 're-wilded' into a meadow, tree climbing and playing with sticks…….Staff and pupil wellbeing has improved – playtimes are more positive and full of laughter and enjoyment ……Not everyone will be on board, but perseverance and holding the children's best interests at the heart of all decision-making will ensure that the journey is valuable and worthwhile.'

Action Points

3.1 Departments of Education; Communities and Local Government; Environment, Food and Rural Affairs and Health and Social Care to establish a Standing Committee to examine ways in which Inter Departmental working and policy alignment where appropriate can involve play as a tool to facilitate social cohesion and improve mental and physical health outcomes for the increasingly diverse communities in the UK.

The Plan for Play: The Way Forward

Chapter Four: The Plan for Play: the way forward

The place of play in society should be hugely significant. It satisfies a basic human need to express imagination, curiosity and creativity; key resources for a knowledge-driven world, The Lego Foundation, 2018, *'Learning through play'*: https://www.unicef.org/sites/default/files/2018-12/UNICEF-Lego-Foundation-Learning-through-Play.pdf

The Early Years Learning Framework (EYLF) defines it as:

'A context for learning through which children organise and make sense of their social worlds, as they actively engage with people, objects and representations.'
DEEWR, 2009, p6:
https://www.petitjourney.com.au/play-based-learning

Through play, children build resilience and coping skills, learn to navigate relationships and deal with social challenge in addition to confronting fear, Milteer RM and Ginsberg KR, 2011, *'The importance of play in promoting healthy child development and maintaining strong parent-child bond: Focus on children in poverty'*, Paediatrics 2011: peds-2011. Play and creative therapies are also a pivotal source of early intervention for child (subsequently young person and adult) mental health.

According to Article 31 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child: https://www.unicef.org.uk/wp-ontent/uploads/2010/05/UNCRC_united_nations_convention_on_the_rights_of_the_child.pdf

1. *'States Parties recognise the right of the child to rest and leisure, to engage in play and recreational activities appropriate to the age of the child and to participate in cultural life and the arts'*

2. *'States Parties shall respect and promote the right of the child to participate fully in cultural and artistic life and shall encourage the provision of appropriate and equal opportunities for cultural, artistic, recreational and leisure activity.'*

UNICEF ascertains that governments and societies are investing far too little in the mental health of children, young people and their caregivers:

'We pay a high economic price for this neglect – around US $387.2 billion worth of lost human potential that could go towards national economies each year. The cost in terms of how it affects real lives, however, is incalculable. Suicide is the fourth leading cause of death among 15 to 19-year-olds. Every year, almost 46,000 children between the ages of 10 and 19 end their own lives – about 1 every 11 minutes.'
The state of the world's children, 2021, *'On My Mind; Promoting, protecting and caring for children's mental health'*:
https://www.unicef.org/reports/state-worlds-children-2021

Within the UK, government and societal support for play could benefit every child and the health and economic wellbeing of the future adult society.

However, within the current UK education system, the developmental needs of children for play-based pedagogy are being overridden in favour of a rigid focus on testable outcomes from the outset. An overcrowded curriculum leaves little room for play, OECD, 2020, *'Curriculum overload: A way forward'*:
https://www.oecd-library.org/sites/3081ceca-en/index.html/itemId=/content/publication/3081ceca-en&_csp_=94ec37e0edcf50a660fed00bab5bf702&itemIGO=oecd&itemContentType=book

The meaning of 'education' and what parents understand by it has become narrowed to academic study and a perception that this should begin at an ever-younger age:
https://buildingbetterbrains.com.au/brief-history-of-play

In addition, the current system of Initial Teacher Training (ITT) and professional development opportunities that are currently available do not equip teachers with the appropriate knowledge and understanding to plan meaningful play-based learning for children in the early years and beyond. UNICEF has highlighted that most teachers lack professional development that focuses on learning through play:
https://www.unicef.org/sites/default/files/2018-12/UNICEF-Lego-Foundation-Learning-through-Play.pdf

Children in Finland begin formal instruction in numeracy and literacy when they are seven. The emphasis is placed on creative play for cognitive, social and emotional development:
https://pasisahlberg.com/finlands-educational-success-is-no-miracle/

When afforded time and space to play outside via provision such as Forest School, benefits have been shown to include improvements to health and wellbeing as well as social and academic performance:
https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s10648-023-09750-4

It is perhaps time to revisit the age at which UK children start school. In Sweden as well as Finland, children do not start school until they are seven and in Austria and Portugal, the starting age is six:

https://www.nfer.ac.uk/school-starting-age-european-policy-and-recent-research

It is inaccurate to suggest that play is 'separate' from the growth of literacy and numeracy skills. Play lays the foundation for literacy and is crucial for developing children's communication skills. Through play, children learn to make and practice new sounds, try out new vocabulary on their own and with friends and develop listening skills, *Grugeon E, 2005, 'Listening to learning outside the classroom: student teachers study'*, playground literacies, Literacy, 39 (1) pp.3-9. They also exercise their imagination through storytelling:
https://literacytrust.org.uk/resources/10-reasons-why-play-important/
and play can build self-worth, increase powers of concentration and school readiness:
https://www.familylives.org.uk/advice/early-years-development/learning-and-play/why-play-matters

Play is the medium whereby children first learn to make sense of their thoughts and feelings.

Children are often too young, confused, worried or afraid to articulate what is happening or has happened to them. They are often unable to reflect on their present behaviour and make links between this and traumatic experiences. Play and creative arts therapies enable a child to safely explore their feelings with the help and guidance of a therapeutic practitioner who will usually work with those who are seen to be at risk of poor outcomes or harm. Early support is vital to prevent problems escalating and becoming entrenched:
www.who.int/activities/improving-the-mental-and-brain-health-of-children-and-adolescents
and the aspects of a child's life reached by play therapy, encompassing behaviour, social and emotional skills, attention and regulation will have, if unattended, an immediate effect on their ability to learn and thrive in the classroom. Play therapy is therefore both an effective early intervention and a preventative measure for young person and adult mental health. It must be a part of future planning for both statutory mental health provision and play's role in society. Despite the fact that positive findings from play therapy continue to mount these objectives have yet to receive validation by government: https://playtherapy.org.uk

Although play features in Welsh and Scottish government policy, it is not acknowledged in any meaningful way by the UK Government. Play is determinedly 'outside' the curriculum and there is no legal requirement to provide sufficient time, outdoor space or management knowledge to facilitate it.

However, play meets policy objectives on physical health, mental health, activity levels and resilience. For the past five years, Sport England's annual Active Lives survey of primary-age school children has consistently revealed that 'Active Play' is the preferred activity for schoolchildren; ahead of Team Sports, Cycling, Dance, Active Mile or other classification of activity: https://sportengland-production-files.s3.eu-west-2.amazonaws.com/s3fs-public/2022-12/Active%20Lives%20Children%20and%20Young%20People%20Survey%20Academic%20Year%202021-22%20Report.pdf?VersionId=R5_hmJHw5M4yKFsewm2vGDMRGHWW7q3E

However, the trend is for schools to continue to reduce the time made available for children to play freely during the school day and poor behaviour is cited as a major cause of the problems. This is perhaps to be expected as playtime 'supervisors' have no suitable training, oversight, authority, professional knowledge or even the correct job description despite overseeing what amounts to one-fifth of school life. In fact, poor quality playtime supervision is frequently detrimental to play: *https://www.nuffieldfoundation.org/project/a-follow-up-survey-of-break-and-lunch-times-in-schools*

A further persistent barrier to better play in schools is risk perception. Many valuable play activities are prohibited by schools on misguided health and safety grounds due to senior leadership ignorance about what is actually permitted by law. Many headteachers, local authorities, academy trusts, health and safety inspectors and insurers are all too often unaware of the High Level Statement on Managing Risk in Play and Leisure, produced by the Health and Safety Executive (HSE) in concert with the play sector because they have not received training in this sound approach to risk management in play provision: *https://www.hse.gov.uk/entertainment/childs-play-statement.htm*

The failure to make the best use of school grounds is a common inhibitor of playful opportunity.

OPAL's observations, based on 1000 UK primary schools found that almost all confined their pupils to very small areas of asphalt during playtimes for 80% of the year, based on reasons varying from the grass being slippery, dirty and dangerous to access, to the possibility of children being hidden from view. After engaging in the OPAL programme, schools developing 'a plan for play' often increased their amount of playable space by several hundred percent; a transformation costing only the time needed to support schools in introducing better, sustainable supervision practices; there was no capital cost.

Not-for-profit organisation, OPAL (Outdoor Play and Learning) has proved through transforming play in over 1000 UK primary schools that 'plan for play' schools are able to reap considerable benefit for a relatively small financial investment including:

- Behavioural improvements in and outside the classroom, leading to an average of 10 minutes more teaching time per day per teacher and several hours per week regained senior leadership time
- Increases in all children's activity levels, especially girls and children who do not enjoy PE and sport
- Increased parent/community engagement with the school
- The multiple mental and physical health and wellbeing benefits listed earlier. The NHS (2011) even suggest that playtimes within school settings could help children to develop both their bone and muscle strength and also their undertaking of moderate to vigorous physical activity levels that support wider health benefits, NHS, National Health Service, 2011, *'A Physical activity guidelines for children and young people'*: *https://www.nhs.uk/Livewell/fitness/Pages/physical-activity-guidelines-for-young-people.aspx*

As school time takes up a significant part of childhood, all schools should be required to have a policy stance on play and be able to demonstrate within it how they will provide fully inclusive quality opportunities for all children. Currently, many schools are, by contrast, spending the PE and School Sports Premium on coaches for specific sports with children who are not 'sporty' relegated to the margins of space, time and available resource.

It is also important to note that including playing fields on school grounds is no longer a 'given'; particularly during challenging economic periods. Planning applications for construction on school playing fields have steadily mounted – growing, for example, from 625 applications in 1999 to 1,322 in 2009, Fields in Trust, 2011, *'Loss of Sites'*.

Unless the trend is halted, schools may soon lack playing fields and playgrounds, as they would only be required to provide suitable outdoor space instead of adhering to previous stringent rules that mandated space allocation based on the number of students and a minimum area of 5,000 square metres, Harrison A, 2012, *'School playing fields: 31 sales approved'*: *http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-19291911*

Outside school and away from home and garden, playgrounds are the most popular spaces for children's outdoor play at least once a week. The Association of Play Industries' (API) research in recent years has uncovered an alarming decline in public play spaces: *https://www.api-play.org/news-events/nowhere-play-campaign/* and significant disparity between regional play provision *https://www.api-play.org/news-events/equal-play-campaign/* amounting to a postcode lottery. A Freedom of Information Act survey of local authorities revealed that some areas of the UK have almost five times the number of children per playground as others, with some areas well served and others severely lacking.

The vast majority of children live in built-up urban areas and those from the 1 in 8 UK households without a garden: *https://www.ons.gov.uk/economy/environmentalaccounts/articles/oneineightbritishhouseholdshasnogarden/2020-05-14* are dependent upon public space for outdoor play and exercise. With 929 children per playground, the West Midlands has the worst play provision and for many children, community playgrounds are their only chance to play outdoors. Many disabled children are denied the opportunity to enjoy their local playground because 50% of sites are not accessible to them and the charity Scope has called upon the Government to invest in a multi-million-pound inclusive playground fund: *https://www.scope.org.uk/campaigns/lets-play-fair/*

Play defined as freely chosen, personally directed, intrinsically motivated behaviour that actively engages the child, National Playing Fields Association, Children's Play Council and Playlink, 2000, '*Best play. What play provision should do for children'*, London: NPFA, is the right of all children.

Within the UK, this dynamic medium can afford the chance of life-affirming opportunity for every child. It is the responsibility of successive generations to ensure that every child has every right: *https://www.unicef.org/child-rights-convention*

It is the **duty** of leaders from government, business and communities to ensure that *every* child has the right to **A Plan for Play.**

Action Points

4.1 Government to revise the current system of Initial Teacher Training (ITT) and professional development opportunities currently available for teachers so that they are properly equipped to plan play-based learning for children in the early years and beyond. Whilst ITT course content will vary dependent upon age group, all courses should include training in the importance of the Early Years and play. The revision will also entail a reconsideration of the current age for starting primary school in the UK

4.2 Government to ensure statutory provision of play and creative arts therapy services in all primary schools as an early intervention/ preventative measure for children's mental health and wellbeing

4.3 Ring-fenced central government funding of play to enable local authorities in the UK to provide every child with the opportunity to play in a local, safe, high-quality playground

4.4 The Department of Education (DfE) to support, encourage and inform, all primary age range schools to devise a school plan for play, based on proven best practice and playwork principles. CPD for all practitioners in schools should include the importance of EY and lifelong play

4.5 Plans for play and their effectiveness to be part of Ofsted Inspection. Ofsted inspectors and local authority/multi academy trusts, health and safety advisers to receive appropriate training in high-quality playtime experiences so that they are able to identify and advise as needed as part of a supportive school-improvement strategy. The above should also apply to ITT

4.6 All staff overseeing playtimes should receive training in the theory and practice of playwork in schools. This should include those who deliver PE and school clubs (many companies/coaches do not have ITT and appropriate qualifications/training concerning the teaching of children)

4.7 The recommendation of UNCR (2013) and NICE (2021) that all children be enabled to enjoy their right to play whilst sick and to receive the support of dedicated play practitioners to help reduce attendant stress and trauma to be endorsed by the Government. The report of the NHS England Taskforce in conjunction with children's charity Starlight: *https://www.starlight.org.uk/play-in-hospital-report-2022* concerning ways in which commissioning, design and delivery of children's healthcare can do more to protect this fundamental right for children will be published in 2023 and the Government should confirm that it will implement its recommendations in full

4.8 Play to be included as a protected characteristic within the terms of the 2010 Equality Act 2010: *https://www.dundee.ac.uk/guides/protected-characteristics-explained* thus providing statutory recognition of its fundamental contribution to the development of all human beings at the critical time window of childhood.

Children's Alliance

Better starts, brighter futures

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