

## The Power 2 Play Report

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# THE POWER



WHAT IS THIS PLAY  
OF THE LITTLE  
ONES? IT IS THE  
GREAT DRAMA OF  
LIFE ITSELF

# PLAY



FAR FROM BEING MERE CREATION, CHILDHOOD PLAY IS A CRITICAL DEVELOPMENTAL STAGE WHERE THE SEEDS OF A COLLABORATIVE, COMMUNICATIVE AND INNOVATIVE SOCIETY ARE SOWN.

**Invest In Play, Create Communities, Revel In a Creative Britain**



UNIVERSITY OF  
WINCHESTER



**ALLIANCE**  
4 CHILDREN







In an increasingly structured world, the simple act of play holds more importance for children's development than ever before.

It is the cornerstone of learning, fostering critical skills in problem-solving, creativity, social interaction, and emotional resilience.



## FOREWORD

**In this fast-paced tech-filled world I am often asked: "is play really that important?"**

Important? No, it is much more than that, it is **CRITICAL TO A CREATIVE BRITAIN**.

Tech, is like Junk Food, made to entice, overconsume, and in the end, it is rarely nutritious for the mind or body.

Whereas **PLAY**, well that is your Fruit & Veg, it is the materials that our bodies and minds need to **THRIVE and GROW!**

Whether as CEO of the Alliance 4 Children, a teacher observing learning in action, a public health director promoting well-being, or simply as a parent, the impact of **PLAY** is undeniable. I've seen it spark joy in our youngest, break through the barriers of teenage angst, and even bridge generations as grandparents' faces light up, rolling back the years as they connect with their grandchildren through play.

In a nation beset by global competition, lacking in growth, a cost-of-living crisis, and millions of children in poverty, we need to garner the best of tech to secure the UK's position as a global leader in this new age, that of Artificial Intelligence. To do that, we need to foster creative young people that are learning and growing today. These children are our future, they are the creators, the innovators in the fields of technology, science, arts, and much more that Britain excels at.

## PLAY IN CHILDHOOD

"Play is often talked about as if it were a relief from serious learning. But for children, play is serious learning. Play is really the work of childhood."

*(Fred Rogers Institute, n.d)*



J. Paul Wright | FFPH | FRSPH | MIHPE | FA4C  
Alliance 4 Children – CEO

### WHO WE ARE

The Alliance 4 Children (A4C) is a powerful network dedicated to driving transformative change through evidence-based policy advocacy. We're building a movement to put children's, young people's & families wellbeing at the heart of UK policy.

### OUR CORE OBJECTIVES:

- Dedicated ministerial leadership for children young people & families in each UK nation.
- A UK-wide Future Generations Act.
- Evidence-based policy development.

### OUR COMMITMENT:

- Building cross-party/bipartisan support.
- A collaborative approach to policy change.
- Strategic, multi-channel communication.

### JOIN US:

We're building a movement for change, and we need your voice. Your membership directly supports our mission to create a brighter future for every child.

For more information or to join, contact us at: [info@alliance4children.org](mailto:info@alliance4children.org)

Tech should be a part of children's learning, but not JUNK TECH TIME that consumes their attentiveness, their ability to 'think beyond a screen' and even affects their mental health.

To that, the evidence is profound, we need to place PLAY at the heart of childhood development.

You may ask, but I thought play for children was already a key focus in our society? We wish that were true, but the evidence as below indicates a worrying long-term trend.



The Centre for Young lives (2025) highlighted that time spent playing outdoors has declined by 50% in a generation, and fewer than 3 in 10 children say that they play out on the street.

There were at least 400 playgrounds closed across England between 2012-22. Fields in Trust (2024), a UK charity working to protect parks and green spaces for good, found that over 2 million children in England up to age 9 don't live within a ten-minute walk of a playground.



It is vital to understand that it is the very act of free play that powers children to turn the impossible into the possible, carrying these transformative skills forward to benefit their lives and society. Early childhood professionals heartily acknowledge the importance of play and its associated creative learning, however, society seems to have decided that 'free play' ought to be contained, so children are 'school ready to learn', missing the whole point of what play is all about, that it is the very vehicle for learning that we all need to build a Creative Britain.

GIVE OUR CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE THE



**"Invest in Play, Create Playful Communities and Revel in a Creative Britain!"**



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# Introduction:

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY



### **50% less outdoor play in a generation**

400 playgrounds closed in 2012 - 2022.

### **Recognise play as a fundamental right**

and integrate it into all policy levels.

### **Dedicated leadership, and increased funding**

for play, and mandatory play training for professionals.

### **Balancing digital media with play**

and protecting children online is essential.

Play is fundamental to children's learning, development, and well-being, fostering creativity, social skills, and resilience. Despite its critical importance, there has been a concerning decline in play opportunities for children in England, evidenced by a 50% reduction in outdoor play over a generation and the closure of 400 playgrounds between 2012 and 2022. This report advocates for recognising play as a fundamental right and integrating it into policy at all levels, emphasising the need for dedicated ministerial leadership, increased funding for play spaces, and mandatory play training for professionals. It also highlights the impact of digital media on children's development, stressing the importance of balancing screen time with play-based activities and protecting children from harmful online content. The report calls for England to align with Scotland and Wales by banning all forms of corporal punishment, ensuring children are safe and respected in their homes and communities, and ultimately fostering a "Creative Britain".




# 1. Recommendations: For Political Policy Makers


**Recognise play as a fundamental right:** Uphold children's right to play in diverse settings prioritising free, unstructured play.

'Play' can be defined as something we 'do' in isolation or in the company of others. It can be engaging in activities, influenced by observing others, intrinsically motivating and freely chosen. Play isn't concerned with boundaries of time or space; it is the flow of engagement within play that is significant, enabling endless creative possibilities to occur.

*(Norman, 2024. Lead author).*

 **1** England, like Scotland and other European countries, should place the UNCRC into Law (see also Just Fair 2023), upholding children's right to play as outlined in Article 31 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child (UN 1989) and incorporating its principles and recommendations into national legislation and policy frameworks.

 **2** Implementation of a UK-Wide Future Generations Act as seen in Wales: Building upon the successful model in Wales, we call for the introduction of a Future Generations Act in England, Northern Ireland, and Scotland. This legislation will foster collaborative, long-term strategies to enhance the lives of children and young people across the UK and their places to play freely and through structured activities.

 **3** To ensure that play is recognised and respected in policy surrounding childhood, we recommend the creation of a Department for Children, Young People & Families (or Cabinet Level Minister for Children in each nation) to ensure joined-up thinking across policy areas.

 **4** Addressing the 'reasonable punishment' defence that allows parents and kin to justify smacking and physically disciplining their children in certain circumstances through legislation. Children subjected to physical punishment are up to three times more likely to develop poor mental health and are increasingly exposed to other physical abuse. This restricts their freedom to play in safe, nurturing and secure environments. We call for children in England and Northern Ireland have the same legal protections as the Wales & Scotland.





## 2. National Play Recommendations: Support for Families in Local Communities

The establishment of a NATIONAL PLAY STRATEGY for England that introduces play sufficiency legislation and guarantees opportunities for play across England that align with those in Wales and Scotland. This strategy ideally would be led by a new Department for Children, Young People and Families, or a stand-alone Cabinet Level Minister in each nation for children.



- 1 Adopting the UNCRC into domestic law, to further strengthen the rights of children to play.



- 2 New statutory Department for Education guidance to ringfence time within the school day for breaktimes and lunchtimes, and support for The British Psychological Society call for an extra 10 minutes of play to be restored to the school day.



- 3 Ofsted to include play sufficiency – specifically time to play - as a measure of school performance to encourage schools to boost play in school time and reward those schools who value play highly. Within this, the expectation and recording that school teachers, staff and supervisors will be required carry out, will require high-quality and mandatory play training to enable healthy and active breaktimes and playful learning.



- 4 A national campaign to encourage and support parents to play with their children, as part of the drive to improve school readiness.



- 5 Provision of ringfenced funding for local authorities to maintain and renovate playgrounds and provide new ones in playground deserts.



- 6 Expand Family Hubs and Better Start initiatives nationwide with secure, long-term funding, prioritising play as a core component of their services and support. Ensure that Family Hubs have access to or can facilitate access to safe play spaces. This could include indoor and outdoor play areas.



- 7 Recognise in cross-departmental policy documentation that childhood lasts a lifetime: an investment in childhood and family care reduces isolation, enhances well-being and strengthens the economy in the long term.



# 3. Recommendations: Local Authority and Local Community

**1 Invest in play provision:**  
To support children's play, local authorities should ring-fence resources for accessible, safe, and engaging play spaces with sustained funding for their upkeep. Strengthen the play sector at both national and local levels by providing support and resources to promote age-appropriate play spaces, catering to the diverse needs, an inclusive approach that ensures accessibility for all, and ages of children across different communities.

**2 Prioritise play through cross-sector collaboration:**  
Foster cross-sectoral Local Authority family services collaboration and interprofessional approaches to play that recognise its role in promoting physical, cognitive, emotional and social well-being.

- Prioritise play as a fundamental aspect of childhood development and lifelong learning within multi-professional projects, such as local community play months and application to be able to close roads at the weekend for play, that recognise and embrace the mental, physical, social, and developmental benefits of play across the lifespan.
- Readdress the pedagogic appropriateness of knowledge-based early education and school curriculum and its impact on children's wellbeing, engagement and enjoyment of education.

**3 Prioritise lifelong learning and offer coordinated and dedicated training programs for staff working in schools, early years settings, Family Hubs, Better Starts and Children's Centres:**

- Provide specific Continuing Professional Development (CPD) on play, that reflects play-based learning approaches and supports an understanding of the deeply impactful role of play in the development of the whole child.
- Promote lifelong learning to staff, as well as the significance of ongoing play-based programmes for anyone working with children. Ensure that those working with young children enjoy equal access to accredited professional qualifications and can access ongoing CPD and lifelong learning specific to play.

**4 Promote parental engagement in play:**  
Empower parents through regional/local evidence-based campaigns, underpinned by evidence-based best practice and initiatives, that highlight the developmental and intergenerational benefits of play.

- Through such initiatives, encourage parental/intergenerational involvement in the promotion of play, by the provision/support of engaging activities in accordance with the age/progress of the individual child." More than 'Encourage' we want professionals/LA's to have resources that meet each milestone of a child through teen, that allow engaging play.
- Create, establish and extend a wide variety of early educational programmes, drawing on principles within health, psychology and play therapy for families that value play; from calm, restorative play to actively engaged play.

**5 Update policies to reflect changing needs:**  
A bi-annual review policy at national and local level, aligned to Play England goals, to ensure that adequate resources and funding are allocated to play provision, infrastructure, and lifelong learning opportunities for educators and playworkers.



5

*continued...*

Provide evidence-based key recommendations on 'Play time', to counter the evolving concerns of excessive screen time. Consult directly with children when updating policies, and campaigns based on best evidenced practice to ensure that their voices are heard regarding matters that directly relate to and impact upon their lives.

6

#### **Address disparities in play opportunities:**



Implement measures to address disparities in access to play opportunities, taking into account disabilities, geographical location, socio-economic status and other factors that may affect children's engagement in play.

- Address barriers to play and collaborate with communities to create inclusive play environments that meet the needs of all children.

7

#### **Support children facing adversity:**



Implement play sufficiency legislation at the local level to ensure that all children have access to high-quality play opportunities.

- Develop targeted interventions and support services that enable children facing adversity, such as those seeking asylum, to access play opportunities and benefit from its therapeutic effects.

8

#### **Support Children's Community Initiatives:**



Support resident-led play initiatives that bring together stakeholders from various sectors to provide children with safe spaces for outdoor play within their communities as well as social interaction, opportunities for learning and a focal point for communities that centre around the child.

- The government manifesto pledge to reform planning rules, to build the railways, roads, labs and 1.5 million homes needed, are developed with play as a core outcome, not as a side note (example new housing estates don't just have areas for play, but roads built with safe areas to play, such as pavements as a must).
- Involve children's input in urban planning and play space development, ensuring their voices are heard and acted upon.





# Introduction & Methodology

## Capturing Voices from the Community

Informed by Bansal et al (2019) the author(s) undertook a collaborative approach in researching and developing the Power 2 Play Report. This approach brought together stakeholders working within various individual institutions, organisations, and/or within local and national communities as well as those working predominantly as researchers. This cooperation was fruitful in drawing together the expertise of the Alliance 4 Children (A4C) Early Years Working Group.

The Early Years Working Group evolved from the Children's Alliance conference in 2023 (Norman and Wright, 2023-4) where we established a community of practice. The group grew in numbers, with regular online meetings held. The meetings provided an opportunity for rich discussions and reflections about the state of play from localised and national viewpoints. The members were both stakeholders as well as contributors to the report, disseminating key discussions and findings about play from their organisations, through a reciprocal process.



### Elements of our Collaboration as the Alliance 4 Children Early Years Working Group

1. Establishing the channels for open communication where the working group were able to participate and share their expertise and knowledge.
2. Engaging all partners, including MPs/Peers in the revised edition of the play report so we could reflect on modifications and changes to the first edition.
3. Celebrating and identifying those stakeholders who served as the feedback loop in how we further developed and shared the report.
4. Establishing a professional environment that aimed to respect different cultures, spaces and places we engage in when sharing ideas about theory and practice in local communities.



The Power 2 Play Report aims to make clear and succinct recommendations, illustrated by members' contributions and practice case studies demonstrating the pivotal role of play throughout childhood. In the spirit of collaboration, the report will be disseminated and invitations to provide feedback will continue as national strategies are initiated and changes to legislation occur in relation to the play landscape in England.





# SECTION 1:

## PLAY IN SOCIETY



Play is a fundamental right of all children, as identified within Article 31 of the international human rights treaty, the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UN 1989). Although children play in different ways depending upon social, cultural, and environmental contexts, playing is a universal part of development and learning which nurtures children's growth and recognises them as complex and capable human beings.

Historically, the nature of childhood and value of play has been surprisingly consistent across European cultures (Cunningham, 2005). The 1475 engravings of Israhel van Meckenem, specifically 'Children at Play', drew adults into the playful world of childhood and reflected what were deemed at the time to be children's modern games, including the hobbyhorse. Meanwhile, the painting of 'Children's Games' in 1560 by Pieter Bruegel, depicts a forgotten folk culture of Belgium life and highlighted the forms of play that communities engaged in. It revealed the variety of amusement enjoyed by children and young adults, including

barrel play, ring games and small gatherings, reflecting the central role of play in the lives of children and adults. Eakin's paintings (between 1870 and 1876), such as 'Baby at Play', highlighted the phasing out of baby toys and development in the world of language, with the painted alphabet blocks being played with. These artworks illustrate the interest and focus of objects with infants at play, revealing the presence of 'childhood'. This is understood to be significant, because play was often disregarded and trivialised during these times in history.

A more positive focus on play came from Rousseau's view of infants and children, as essentially good and free in spirit, left to 'play' in nature would promote a much richer and more harmonious society. 'Emile' (1762), written by Rousseau as his treatise of a new childhood, served as the inspiration for what became a new national system of child-rearing and education, highlighting the connection between freedom and play across classes in building what we would now term, a 'creative' society for the future (Norman 2022).



"What is this play of the little ones? It is the great drama of life itself"  
(Froebel cited in Liebschner, 1992: 21).

Philosophers including Rousseau and Froebel advocated and implemented a unique re-conceptualisation of play and its central importance in children's lives. Friedrich Froebel's (1782-1852) philosophy of education was unique in that he advocated mutual respect and holistic learning through play, as well as the value of experiential learning. Here, a sense of belonging with the family, community, and culture was considered vital (Bruce, 2021). Froebel believed that play was the child's work and that it provided

the best preparation for adulthood. With this in mind, play therefore, may be constructed differently depending upon the era, discipline or professional position of working with young children but, it can broadly be understood as a rich tapestry of interactions, actions and feelings, in solitude or among others.

The Russian psychologist Lev Vygotsky (1978) characterised play as activity that is;

- desired by the child
- always involves an imaginary situation
- involves the forming of rules, developed and determined by the players themselves, not necessarily determined in advance.

According to Gray (2013) play can be described within five facets. These are:

1. Play is self-chosen and self-orientated.
2. Play is intrinsically motivated, the process being more valued than the ends.
3. Play is grounded by mental rules, but the rules leave room for creativity.
4. Play is imaginative and wonder.
5. Play is conducted in an alert, active but relatively non stressed frame of mind (np).

Play, as we view it, is first and foremost, what one wants to do, as opposed to what one feels obliged to do. As Bruce (2015) highlights, play cannot be pinned down into a neat, measurable definition. In making sense of play, Bruce outlined 12 features of play and believed that three or more features indicated good quality play, wherever and however it is undertaken.

- 1 Free flow play actively uses direct, first-hand experiences, which draw on the child's powerful inner drive to struggle, manipulate materials, explore, discover, and practise repeatedly.

- 2 Play exerts no external pressure on children to conform to externally imposed rules, goals, tasks or a definite direction. In this it differs from games. But the externally set rules in games enable children to experiment with breaking, making and keeping rules in the safety of their free-flowing play.

- 3 Play is an active process without an end product. When the play fades, so does its tangibility. It can never again be replayed in the same way. It is of the moment and vanishes when the play episode ends. This aids flexibility of thought and the adaptability central to the intellectual life of the child.

- 4 Play is about possible, alternative, imagined worlds which involve 'supposing' and 'as if' situations. These lift participants from the literal and real to a more abstract and higher level of functioning. This involves being imaginative, creative, original and innovative. The symbolic life of the child uses life experiences in increasingly abstract ways.

- 5 Play is intrinsically motivated. It does not rely on external rewards. It is self-propelling. Children cannot be made to play. The circumstances and relationships need to be right for the child's play to begin to flow.
- 6 Play is sustained, and when in full flow, helps children to function in advance of what they can actually do in their real lives. They can drive a car, perform a heart operation, be a shop keeper.
- 7 Play can be initiated by a child or an adult, but if by an adult he/she must pay particular attention that the adult's play agenda is not the most important or only one. Free flowing play is more like a conversation with each listening to and tuning into the other.
- 8 Play can be solitary and gives children agency and a sense of control over their lives. It supports children in developing awareness and strength in their own ideas, feelings, and relationships. It gives personal space for contemplation and well-being because it gives strength to deal with life's events.
- 9 Play might be in partnerships between children or between adult and child, or it might be in a group with or without an adult participating. Adults need to be sensitive to children's play ideas, feelings and relationships and not invade, overwhelm or extinguish the children's possibilities for free-flowing play. Freedom with guidance is a delicate balance.
- 10 Play is about allowing in ideas, feelings and relationships and the prowess of the physical body. It helps the process of becoming aware of self in relation to others and the universe. It brings unity and interconnectedness.
- 11 During their free-flowing play, children use the technical prowess, mastery and competence they have developed to date. They are confident and in control. Play shows adults what children already know and have already learnt; more than that, it introduces new learning.
- 12 Play is an integrating mechanism which brings together everything the child has been learning, knows and understands. It is rooted in real experience, that allows a child to process and explore. It is self-healing in most situations and brings an intellectual life that is self-aware, connected to others, community and the world beyond. Early childhood play becomes a powerful resource for life both in the present and the future.



In short, play can mean many things but at its core, it is a creative endeavour through which children learn, form relationships and make sense of the world around them.

#### **Play is therefore considered a CONSTELLATION of Characteristics:**

- It can be both active and passive.
- It involves intrinsic motivation.
- It prioritises the process, not driven by an outcome.
- Rules can be negotiated or resisted by the individual.
- Play provides a space to immerse oneself in the experience, without distraction (Norman, 2024).

Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi (1990) refers to the mental state of play as flow, similarly to Froebel's ideas about wallowing in play. Attention is attuned to the activity itself, and there is reduced consciousness of self and time. The mind is therefore consumed by ideas, rules, and actions of the play and relatively distracted from external influences. This state of mind is engaged in the play and activities throughout life and has been shown, in many psychological research studies, to be ideal for creativity and the learning of new skills (Gray, 2013).







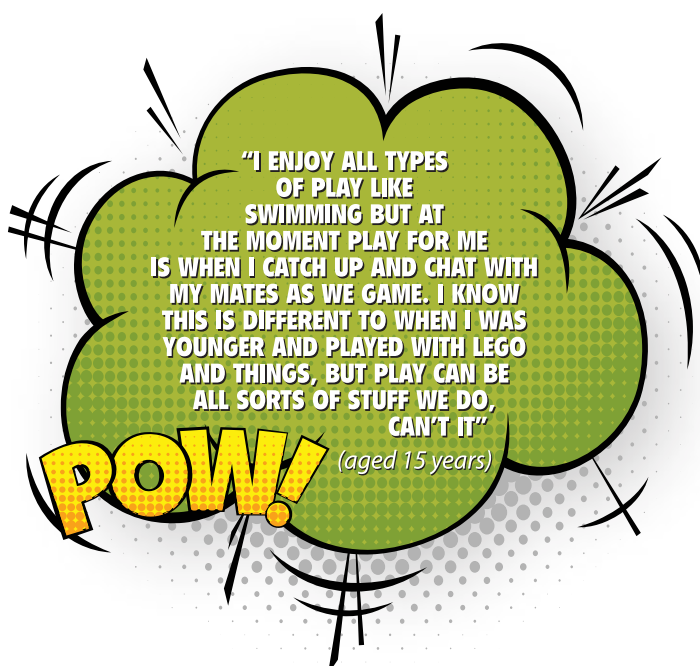


## SECTION 2: PLAY FOR LEARNING AND DEVELOPMENT



‘Play’ forms the very bedrock of learning and development experiences, as a route for self-expression, a tool for tapping into forms of knowledge, a site of freedom and empowerment and as a cultural factor and practice of children and practitioners, as a community. Despite its appearance, play, as a function of living and an intrinsically rewarding experience, is a very serious act of learning.

There is increasing evidence that demonstrates the educational effectiveness of active, playful learning (Blinkoff et al., 2023). Basic literacy and numeracy skills can be acquired through play (Pyle and Danniels 2017) but it can also contribute towards the development of strategic thinking, planning, communication, numerical abilities, discussion, group decision-making, data processing (Küçükaydın 2024) These skills are crucial to building a Creative Britain.



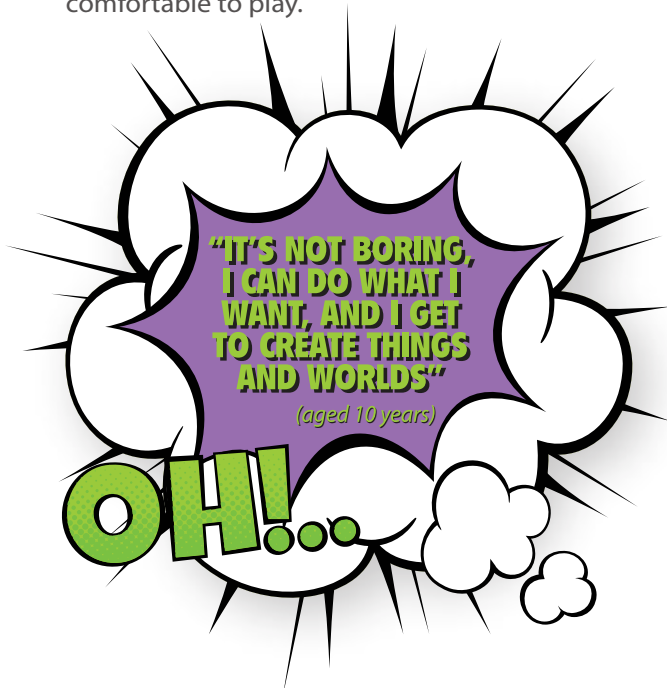
We should also be aware of the vital role of play in developing communication and empathy (Fyffe et al., 2022). Through play, children can explore and develop their understanding of social norms such as taking turns and the ability to initiate and maintain conversations (Taylor and Boyer 2020), providing them with a sense of competence and belonging when they engage in classroom life (Lyons, 2022) or in the wider lives of their communities.

Despite what we know about the value of play, Gaskins, Haight and Lancy (2007) suggest that there are three cultural perceptions of play, which continue to be reflected in society today:

- **Culturally curtailed play:** in this category, play is tolerated but viewed as being of limited value with certain types of play being culturally discouraged (such as fiction or fantasy play).
- **Culturally accepted play:** where parents expect children to play and view it as useful to keep children busy and out of the way, although it is not encouraged, and parents do not participate. Consequently, this results in increased peer play and spaces are used that are not especially structured for play, with natural objects and resources available rather than manufactured toys.
- **Culturally cultivated play:** relates to families tending to view play as the child's work and play is encouraged, with adults viewing it as important to play together with their children. The children may often spend time with professionals, who view it as an important part of their role to play with the children to encourage learning.



In contemporary society, play is not universally accessible to all. Play can be limited when children's basic needs are not met and challenges in children's lives can limit their resources, opportunities, and freedom to play. These could include the lack of space or toys, lack of permission or time or psychological barriers which make it harder for children to feel safe, confident, and comfortable to play.



For play to be at the heart of learning in early years practice, we must be playful, lifelong learners ourselves (Jones, 2024). This is in line with Basu's ideas (2017), in that we spend our time as playful, lifelong learners from birth, appreciating that the world and our space within it is characterised by movement, mediation, relations and connections (Jones, 2019). Creating environments that support play is essential for all children: this means promoting safe, welcoming spaces where children can express themselves freely and feel a sense of belonging.

By reflecting on what we mean by this Norman (2024) offers a principled Person-Centred Approach (PCA) as a model of practice (**CRIB: Connecting Principles with everyday practice**) for those working with the youngest communities both in the home and professional contexts.

A Person-Centred Approach (PCA) includes a framework to reflect on emotional relationships, meeting emotional and social needs, space to communicate together and work creatively together to support wellbeing (Horvath, 2021). For infants and young children to thrive and have positive outcomes, unconditional acceptance to grow a healthy self-concept is essential. This can be achieved by adults supporting and co-regulating children's feelings. Being authentic and accepting children for who they are is at the heart of a PCA, with the adult supporting and facilitating opportunities for children in their care to thrive.

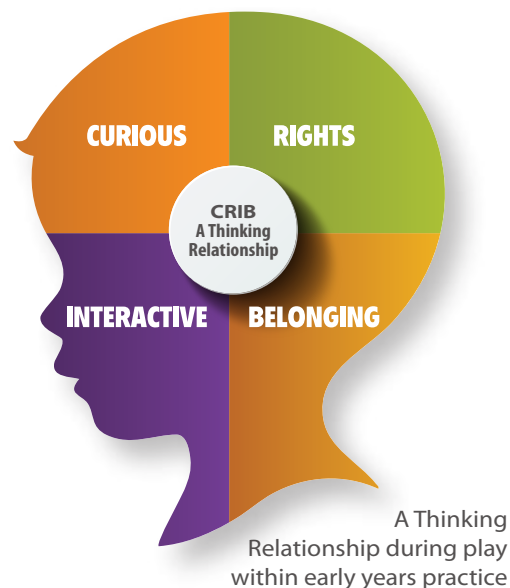
### A Person-Centred Approach (PCA) to a CRIB of Care



A PCA model for practice has been created as a visual way of placing the child at the heart of the Person-Centred Approach (PCA). This model aids a consideration about how care can both be from a feeling's perspective as well as a thinking perspective when engaging in play with children.

From a feelings perspective becoming is the emergent self and is not a fixed or static entity but developing and this enables a consideration to personal and intimate relationships that can occur. By reflecting on play experiences through a PCA lens considerations about how we work ethically, and foster nurturing and intimate relationships can be initiated and sustained. By referring to compassionate care, empathy and warmth towards

the infant is concerned with having a valued understanding regarding the importance of caring for children. Respectful care focuses on respecting the individual child and respecting their individual differences, with play opportunities to celebrating diversity and inclusion (Norman, 2024).

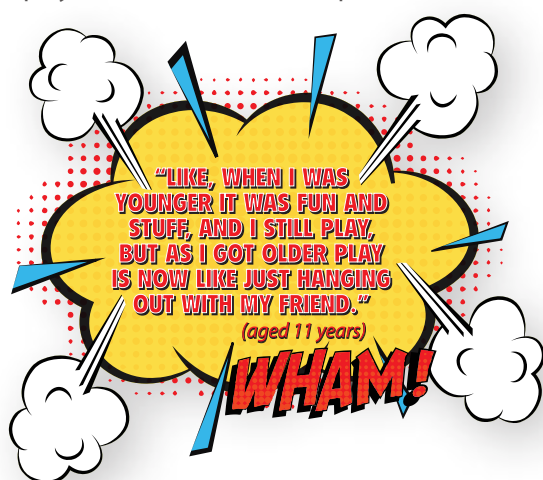


Through play experiences, being curious in the everyday is about wanting to know the why behind practice and exploring everyday thoughts within. Adopting a Rights-based approach relates to considering the rights to play and creating opportunities for agency and voice with children.



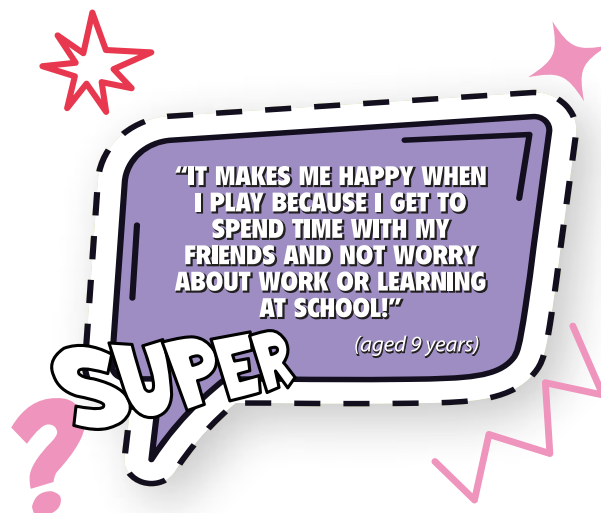
It is also about opportunities for being interactive and finding moments in creating reciprocal relationships with children as they play. Through a sense of belonging a community of practice can be fostered in creating environments that support play (Norman, 2024).

Play Therapy UK (PTUK) – the UK Society for Play and Creative Arts Therapies Limited – is a not-for-profit organisation that is dedicated to promoting the use of play and creative arts as ways of enabling children to reach their full potential. PTUK's clinical evidence base, containing over 12,000 cases, shows that between 77% and 84% of children show a positive change through the use of play and creative arts therapies.



Playing promotes skills associated with self-regulation, including attention, reasoning and impulse control. In addition, it also promotes the capacity to reflect on and regulate thoughts and emotions (O'Sullivan and Ring, 2018). From research (funded by the Squiggle Trust, 2023) about the value of playing and engaging with the material world, in the form of comforters, Norman (2024) evaluated how transitional objects provided the emotional bridge for children, from home to settings. Transitional objects were often played with, squeezed and mutilated as an expression of internal feelings, revealed through their play (Norman, 2024). By highlighting play as a way of emotionally communicating it is argued that play is often navigated and initiated by the children themselves, rather than the adults imposing play on them.

Socio-dramatic play is particularly important for supporting self-regulation skills in early childhood



and it is understood to be at the centre of children's early learning (Özcan, Erol and Ivrendi, 2023). Enhanced peer play ability at age 3 years was associated with lower risk of challenges experienced, as outlined by the strengths and difficulties questionnaire (Zhao and Gibson, 2023) Such skills enable individuals to engage in divergent thinking and create innovative solutions to complex and emerging societal challenges (Russ 2016).

While the presentation of children's play changes as they develop and grow up, as humans, we never lose our capacity for playfulness (Panksepp, 2010). Thus, the notion that we are 'too old' for play is a myth: play is lifelong and, if we celebrate this, we can build and nurture a Creative Britain.

**By acknowledging the power of play across disciplines is to connect play concepts and understandings from different areas of study (including research and concepts of play from psychology, sociology, anthropology, history, through to science, neuroscience and philosophy perspectives) and theory and consider how they relate to each other, rather than focusing solely on one perspective.**

**We recognise play as being essential.  
We firmly believe that community organisations have a particular role in supporting the development of a Creative Britain, by providing places dedicated to play (Norman, 2024).**







## SECTION 3: PLAY IN TIMES OF CHANGE



We have seen the negative impact of global crises on children and childhoods. Many of us are living through a series of global crises which include the Covid-19 pandemic, rising poverty, diminishing health and mental wellbeing and mass population movements through war and climate breakdown.

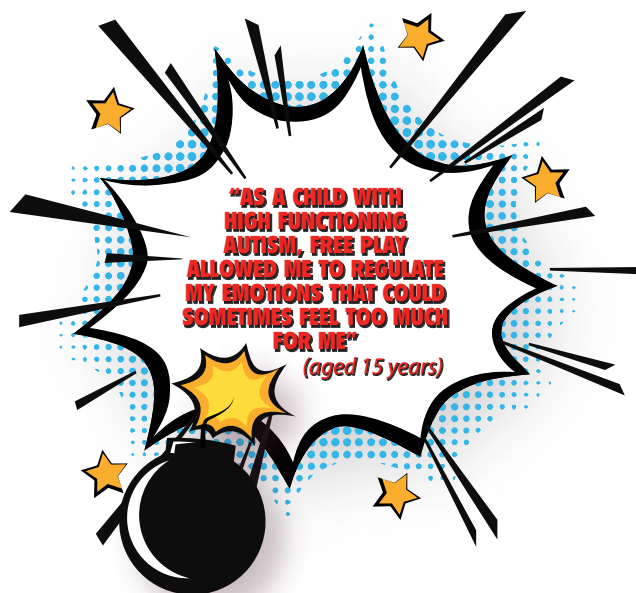
In addition, there are changing and increasingly diverse family structures, the creation of digital childhoods and the growth of AI, increasing surveillance and privacy intrusion with the dominance of metrics and big data. Reflecting on the context of children's wellbeing and mental health, and the quality and nature of their early experiences that shape their life chances, causes us to re-think our priorities in Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) policy and practice, with the need for greater focus on developing the conditions for children to flourish and feel fulfilment in their lives. Here, flourishing is understood as a vital condition for fulfilment and wellbeing at all stages in life. For children, it includes a life in which joy, love and trust are nurtured, and where every child is encouraged to develop the skills to connect to, and interact with

others, experiencing both autonomy and empathy. In a post-Covid world/Cost of Living continuing crisis, where we have greater numbers of emotionally troubled children and stressed families, there is an urgent need to ensure that our communities and early years settings within them provide for flourishing, fulfilment and wellbeing in children's learning and development (Pascal et al 2020).

In today's digital age, children are growing up in times of rapid change; extensive opportunities to play are crucial for them to develop flexible minds, creativity, ability to work with others, and resilience to manage future challenges. Moreover, evidence of the association between time spent playing and child mental health is building more than ever before (Gray, Lancy and Bjorklund, 2023; Zhao and Gibson, 2023; Özcan, Erol and Ivrendi 2024) yet currently, the constraints on children's opportunities to play have increased in recent decades (Dodd et al 2022). These constraints are felt too by children in communities, such as those families who have children with additional needs and may require more specialist access to



play-appropriate resources in the community. Other micro groups within societies such as families with children seeking asylum, experience a constellation challenge that inhibit their ability to play. These include poor mental health resulting from experiencing trauma and displacement; separation from loved ones; the lack of space and resources in hotel accommodation; moving regularly and having limited access to educational settings, and cultural and linguistic barriers. Play can therefore help to mitigate the impact of this adversity on children's development and outcomes. Meanwhile, play deprivation is likely to further exacerbate the harms caused to children by their experiences of migration and seeking asylum and will impair their recovery from traumatic experiences.



The NHS (2023) reported that 1 in 5 children and young people now have a probable mental disorder. As argued by the APPG for a Fit and Healthy Childhood (2015), the decline in opportunities to play has a significant impact on children's wellbeing and later life chances and, ultimately, the health of the nation. Professional support services (such as those previously accessed in Sure Start centres) that adopt play-based approaches in the community, can facilitate emotional healing and coping strategies for children navigating the complexities of life.









## SECTION 4: PLAY IN THE COMMUNITY

**Dr Helen Charman, 2024)**

*It's 1 minute to 10am on a beautiful summer morning in 2023, in East London's Bethnal Green. Young V&A, a new museum is dedicated to children from birth to early teens, with an approach that is rooted in learning through play, is about to throw open its doors for the very first time. The excitement is palpable. The museum site has been shut for a capital transformation that spanned the covid years – those days, weeks, and months in which millions of children across the country experienced profound play deprivation - with all the concomitant impacts we are now seeing manifest, be that language development, school readiness, mental health.*

*Bethnal Green is in the London Borough of Tower Hamlets, home to the country's most deprived children. It is also a dynamic borough of immense cultural diversity and the fastest growing population of young people. Back to the museum.*

*Out-loud, a countdown starts backwards from ten – it's as if a rocket were about to launch. And in some ways, it is. A rocket that is a clarion call for the vital importance of play in children's lives – and for free, civic spaces that validate, invite and promote this. The museum queue snakes from the forecourt all along Bethnal Green Road, back to the tube and beyond. At countdown, the queue starts jumping. Up and down it goes, the volume ever louder with each number.*

*The children's excitement cannot be contained a moment longer. Children have co-designed this museum. They wanted 'the world's most joyful museum' and this is what awaits them. When the doors open, within half an hour a thousand people are inside. We are at capacity.*

*In the children stream, on micro-scooters, in prams, wearing dress up, skipping, exclaiming, and claiming this space as theirs. This pattern has continued apace since the museum opened last summer, welcoming almost half a million young visitors and their families. Children play with exuberance and intent at Young V&A. They seem to understand the entire environment has been designed around the primacy of play in their young lives. A joyful environment is a playful environment, and every millimetre of this space has been designed with that in mind.*

*Playfulness was first conceptualized by Lieberman (1965), who described the trait as being comprised of five components: physical, social, and cognitive spontaneity as well as joy and a sense of humour.*

*And it is the conjunction of play and joy that sits at the heart of Young V&A. Those half a million people – the majority of them under 5 years old – are voting with their feet. Their caregivers recognize the vital importance of play in the early years and through childhood.*

*But also, perhaps these numbers also demonstrate the paucity of free access to civic spaces that are designed to promote playfulness and learning through play. Every town and every city need something equivalent.*

*The case for play has never been more urgent.*

In 2010-11, the three-year average spends on England's parks and open spaces, including funding for national parks was at almost £1.4bn but by 2021-22 the figure is estimated to have dropped to just over £1bn. The list of Councils forced to cut their park budget by more than 40% is dominated by the North and the Midlands. Some councils – including Sunderland, Gloucester and Barnsley – have been forced to cut back by more than 80% since 2011. However, the situation is not uniformly bleak, with a new source of playground funding opening up via housebuilders, and new playgrounds being built or planned around the country.



Mark Hardy, chair of the Association of Play Industries, has seen a trend towards funding larger central play areas, with smaller doorstep spaces seemingly abandoned (Hardy 2023 np). Councils share the Government's aim in its disability action plan for the creation of more accessible playgrounds, but it is argued that this needs to be supported by the necessary resources to improve and maintain existing facilities, if this is to be achieved. Hardy (ibid) advises that "there are some really terrific playgrounds being put in around the country right now, some funded with help from Section 106 money. You can do a lot if you have the money, we are seeing a move away from boring provision. My big ask is that we see that play is too important to leave to a local authority to juggle. There needs to be centralised funding... Scotland and Wales both have a play sufficiency duty, but England does not."

To counteract the decline in opportunities for play, Play Scotland has conducted a review (published in 2021) of Scotland's Play Strategy since the pandemic. The report highlights responses of play organisations to the pandemic and provided evidence of the impact of emergency measures for children and young people. It takes account of mitigating measures that the Scottish Government put in place to support children's play at a time of national crisis. The eight recommendations from Play Scotland (2021) were:

- 1 Refresh the Play Strategy and ensure national and local leadership.
- 2 Renew the national and local commitment to outdoor play.
- 3 Listen to children and young people and act on what they say.
- 4 Ensure the inclusion of all children and young people.
- 5 Ensure cross-sectoral and inter-professional approaches to play.
- 6 Sustain and support play provision through adequate funding.
- 7 Maintain a focus on playful learning and play in schools.
- 8 Strengthen the play sector nationally and locally.



Moreover, Planning Authorities must:

- identify and map formal play spaces
- assess and provide statements with regards to

the overall (a) quality, (b) quantity, and (c) accessibility of formal and informal play spaces. They must also consult with children, their parents and carers during the assessment.

England's Play Strategy (Department for Children, Schools and Families 2008), aligned in its ethos of including children and backed by £235 million at the time, indicated that there was a need to ensure that;

- Communities consider children's needs and interests – communities are truly child-friendly.
- Children and young people have their own views to be reflected in local decisions about how their neighbourhoods are designed and developed, by working with local partners and the housing industry.
- The need for guidance that brings together best practice for planning officers on supporting children's play and recreation.
- There is support for professionals who design and manage neighbourhoods to understand the importance of play and child-friendly spaces.
- We foster a more positive approach to young people across society.



Meanwhile, in 2010, Wales protected children's play in Law. The Welsh Government recognised that it needed the involvement of others to achieve its aim of a play-friendly Wales, that provided sustainable opportunities for children to play. It understood that it would also be necessary for local authorities, their partners and other stakeholders to work towards this. As a result, the Government passed a Law protecting children's right to play, giving local authorities a statutory responsibility (known as a duty) to both assess and ensure that their area provides children with enough opportunities to play. The Play Sufficiency Duty, included in the Play Opportunities section of the Children and Families (Wales) Measure 2010, and in 2022 a Ministerial review on Play was completed as part of Play Wales. "Wales: A Play Friendly Country" is Statutory Guidance to Local Authorities on assessing for and securing sufficient play opportunities for children in their areas.

"Creating a Play Friendly Wales", the Statutory Guidance to Local Authorities on assessing for sufficient play opportunities provides a valuable model to draw from in re-examining local play provision across England, with a focus on,

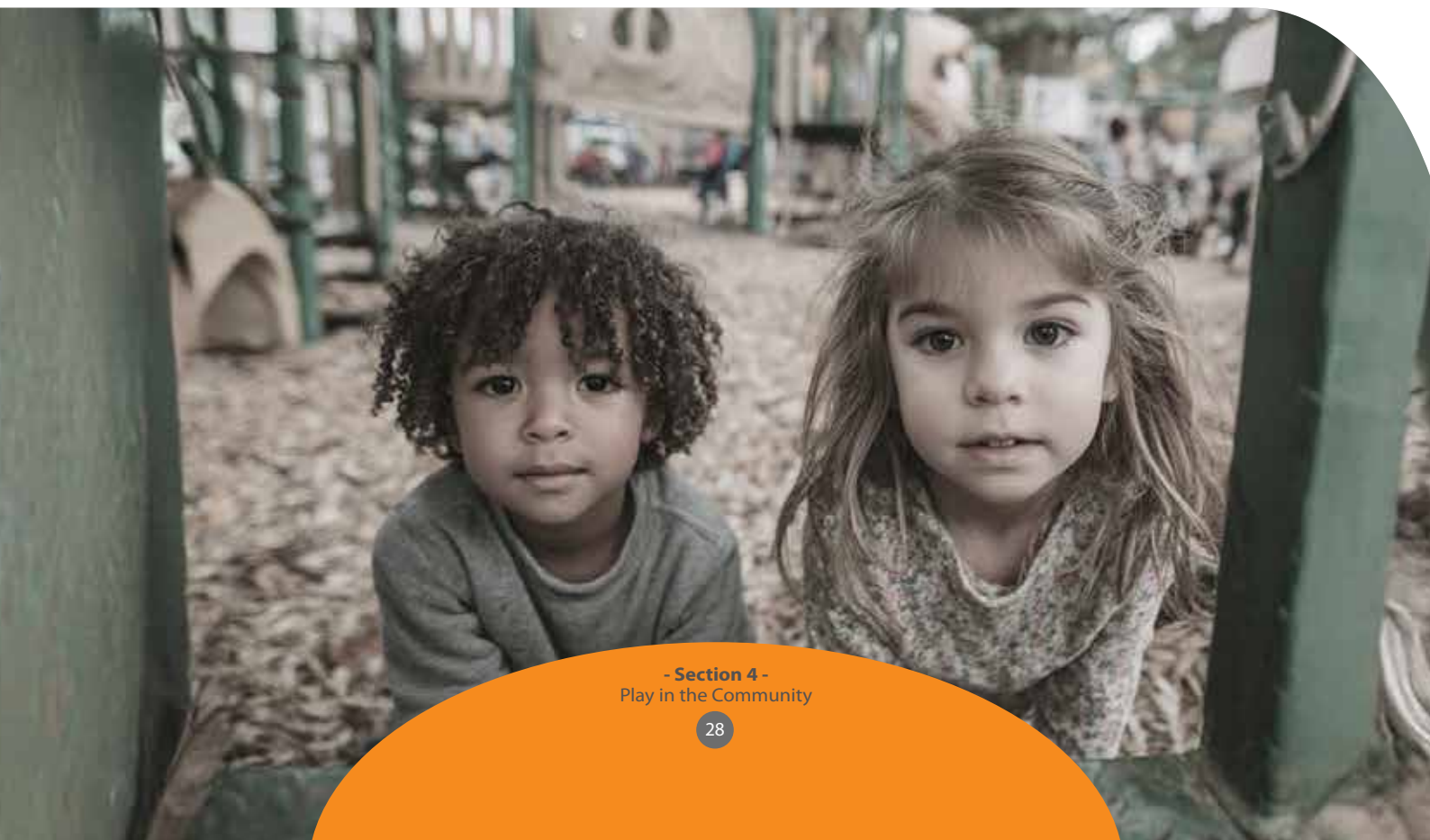
- Population of the local authorities (children and their needs).
- Space available to children (condition and its accessibility).
- Supervised Play provision.
- Charges for Play provision.
- Access to play provision.
- Marketing and Promotion of Play provision.



Meanwhile, in Newcastle, West End Children's Community is bringing people from a range of organisations together in a coordinated way. It is committed to tackling poverty and improving outcomes for children to increase the range and quality of play opportunities. The vision of the West End Children's Community is that 'The West End is a place where children, young people and families feel safe and have opportunities to participate in play, recreational and cultural opportunities that can benefit their learning, development, happiness and well-being'. The development of a play strategy is intended to help achieve this vision. Previous consultation with children in Newcastle has found that children do not feel that their play areas are of a good quality, and they require more space for play that is close to home. Further consultation with children in the West End is needed (Thorpe, Laing, and Boldon 2020).

Communities should therefore consider,

- Buildings and facilities used by play services are frequently seen as a focal point for communities.
- It offers opportunities for social interaction for the wider community and supports the development of a greater sense of community spirit, promoting social cohesion.
- Public outside spaces have an important role in the everyday lives of children and young people, especially as a place for meeting friends.
- Parks and other green spaces are popular with adults taking young children out to play and for older children and young people to spend time together.





## SECTION 5: POWER AND PLAY

The POWER OF PLAY is unparalleled. Through play, children develop their sense of self, their relationships with others and explore 'ways of being and behaving' (Grimmer, Veale, Thompson and Bradbury, 2025). Through play, children test limits, push boundaries, process both emotions and experiences, make sense of the world and how to communicate and negotiate within it (Botrill, 2022). In doing so children can often exhibit behaviours that adults find challenging or even shocking.

Risky play involving elements of danger, speed or rough and tumble not only supports physical and emotional development but supports problem solving and critical thinking (Kingston-Hughes, 2022). However, with cuts in funding making it difficult to maintain playgrounds and other facilities, opportunities for children to engage in this type of play are increasingly limited by disappearing play spaces (Association of Play Industries, 2018). To compound this curtailing of children's natural instinct to engage in physical play, they are often chastised for engaging in this

natural and necessary behaviour (Grimmer, 2019). If we are to empower learning through play, we must learn to look beyond the behaviour at what the child is communicating (Grimmer, 2022).

Children learn social behaviour not only through direct experience but by observing others. In his famous Bobo doll experiment, Bandura (1971) illustrated how children's behaviour is impacted by what they see adults doing. In this study, Bandura showed how children who observed physically and verbally aggressive behaviour towards the inflatable Bobo doll were more likely to imitate this. This has obvious implications for parents and educators who act as role models for social behaviour, self-regulation and communication. Bringing this into the 21st century the scientific evidence continues to link exposure to violent media with increased risk of aggressive behaviour (Bushman, et al, 2001).

By reflecting on the power that violent screen viewing has on children and young people, and the long-term implications on their own behaviour, this draws attention to how real-time

violence and disciplinary approaches are impacting children in the short and long term. Currently, in England the 'reasonable punishment' defence allows parents to justify physically disciplining their children in certain circumstances, but research shows this practice increases the risk of serious physical assault and negatively affects



children's development and health. According to a report by the RCPCH, (2025) children subjected to 'smacking' and physical punishment are up to three times more likely to develop poor mental health and are potentially more than twice as likely to experience serious physical abuse. Despite the evidence presented, children in England continue to lack the same legal protections as the devolved nations. As of 2025, The Children's Wellbeing and Schools Bill presents a unique opportunity to improve the lives of our most vulnerable children and young people, and a child focused piece of legislation has the potential to enable children to feel safe in their communities and families. Considering this though a play perspective there is the necessity for children to engage in play behaviour that starts with the child themselves, in a nurturing non-threatening environment, that is not determined, led, restricted or imposed by the adult caring for them. Play we argue comes from within, intrinsically motivating and whilst at play we feel we can wallow and be in a state of flux/flow, free from the distractions of what is going on around.

In promoting intrinsic motivation, the drive to engage in play, for their own sake rather than for external rewards Deci and Ryan's Self-Determination Theory (SDT), (2002)

highlighted that three psychological needs should be met. They proposed that all individuals have three fundamental psychological needs: Autonomy, Competence, and Relatedness.

- 1 **Autonomy:** This need refers to the desire to feel that personal actions are self-initiated and that a sense of control is maintained, influencing personal behaviour, and individual choice, rather than enforced on by others.
- 2 **Competence:** This need reflects individuals desires to feel effective in dealing with their environment and to master tasks they face. It is about building knowledge, skills, and a sense of mastery that is personally significant.
- 3 **Relatedness:** This need is about feeling connected to others, which invites a sense of belonging, with a sense of warmth and mutual support experienced. The emphasis is therefore on a sense of connection to others and positive social interactions (Ryan and Deci, 2002).

These three needs are viewed as essential for optimal psychological functioning and well-being, fostering intrinsic motivation and engagement. By highlighting how children's psychological needs could be met through a nurturing environment,





with safe and trusted adults, Ryan and Deci (2002) offers a powerful shift from influence to action in how we could support children when they lead and engage in play. It can also aid the adults understanding about what aspects of play choices motivates children and then support their interests (Norman, 2024). By enabling autonomy, facilitating competence and creating a sense of connectedness it potentially balances real world play rather than the often turned to virtual world of play, as the child grows and develops. By increasingly favouring the virtual world of play there is the concern that children are inevitably exposed to violent images and violently orientated gaming, becoming normalised by the child in their viewing and interactions.



Studies have shown that children and young people exposed to violent images online through video games, films and television programmes can become desensitised to violence and even extreme violence can become normalised. Concern about exposure to violent, misogynistic or extremist behaviour has grown as social media use has become more common even for very young children. To date, policy has failed to keep up with the changes in behaviour that have accompanied the shifts in society accompanying the rise of technology, failing to keep children safe online. As the recent Netflix series 'Adolescence' (2025) has highlighted, many parents are painfully and dangerously unaware of what their children are being exposed to online. However, it is not just online that children are exposed to behaviour that, if replicated in play, is deemed inappropriate.

Children who experience or witness domestic violence are profoundly impacted in their emotional, cognitive and social development.

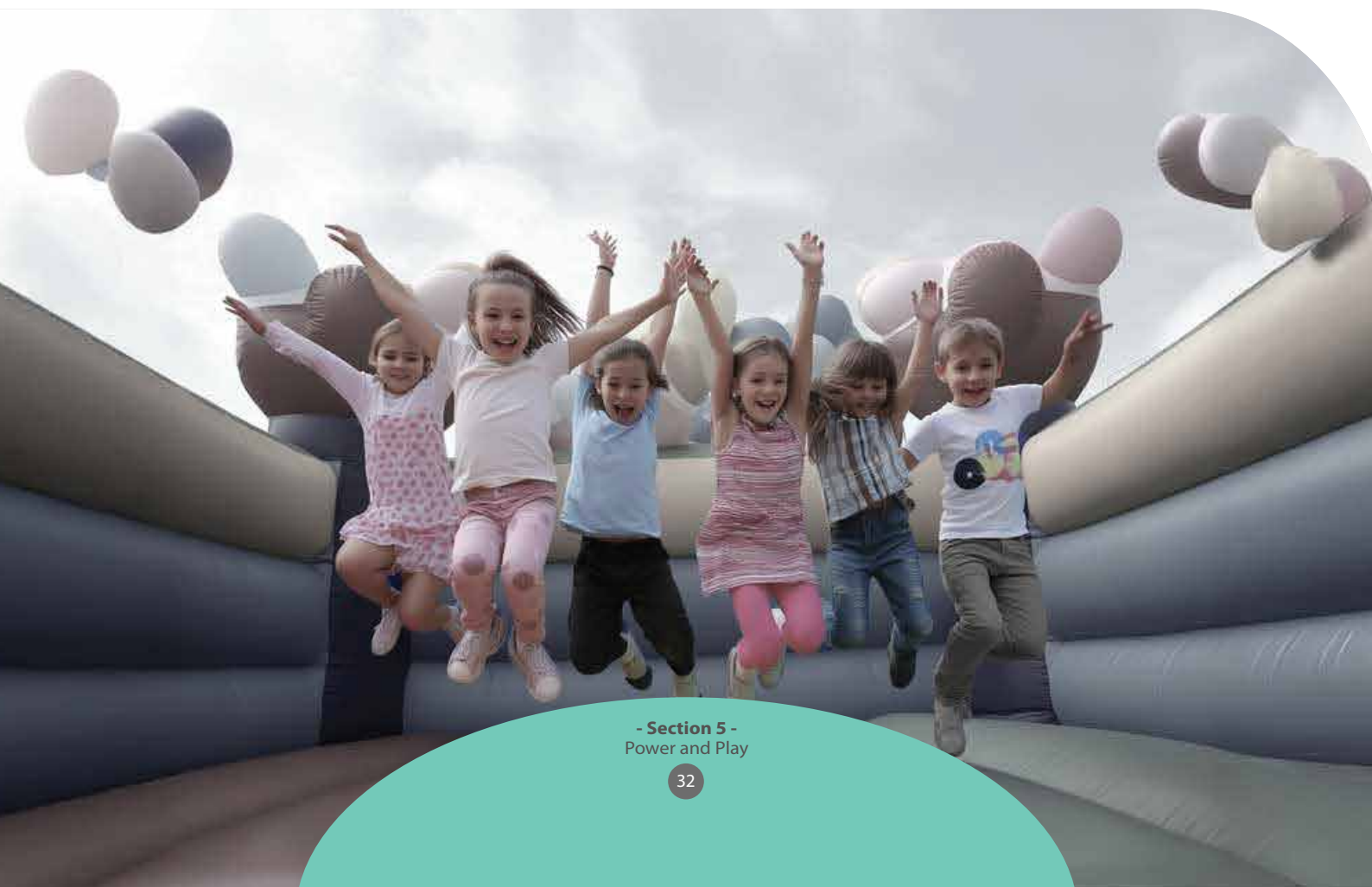


Exposure to violence within the home environment can normalise aggression as a method of conflict resolution and communication, with serious implications for children's behaviour in play (Early Intervention Foundation, 2022). Play can become a space where these experiences are processed, often through violent or aggressive re-enactments, which adults may find difficult to interpret (Grimmer, 2022). In the context of empowering play, it is essential that adults recognise such behaviour not as simply 'bad behaviour', but as communication of trauma that requires sensitive, informed responses rather than punishment (Radford, 2020). The home should be a secure base for a child. Where it is not, the effects ripple out into every other area of their life, including their capacity for safe, exploratory play.

In addition to witnessing domestic violence, direct experiences of emotional, physical and sexual abuse or neglect profoundly influence children's behaviour, particularly in how they engage with others during play. A child who has experienced abuse may replicate abusive behaviours or exhibit withdrawn, fearful play patterns (NSPCC, 2023). Of relevance is the ongoing debate around corporal punishment, often euphemistically referred to as 'smacking'. Despite overwhelming evidence of its harm, the physical chastisement of children remains legally permitted in England under the guise of 'reasonable punishment' (Hickman and Rose, 2023). Recent studies reinforce that physical punishment is associated not only with increased aggression in children but also with long term mental health difficulties (Heilmann, Mehay and

Watt, 2023). As momentum towards a full legal ban build, it is crucial that public attitudes shift towards understanding smacking as an act of violence, not discipline, one which undermines children's right to feel safe and respected within their own homes. Corporal punishment was banned in schools in 1986 in England, yet parents are still allowed to use 'reasonable means' to chastise children in their own homes which might, if used in other circumstances, constitute assault or battery (Hickman and Rose, 2023). There is a significant body of research highlighting not only that its efficacy as a means of promoting positive

behaviour is extremely limited, but also that a strong correlation exists between corporal punishment and violent behaviour both in childhood and later life (World Health Organisation, 2021). Physical or corporal punishment not only impacts social and emotional development but also impairs cognitive development (Maneta, White and Mezzacappa, 2017). It is little wonder that all forms of physical punishment of children including smacking, hitting, slapping and shaking were banned in Scotland in 2019 and in Wales in 2022, but shocking that England is yet to catch up.





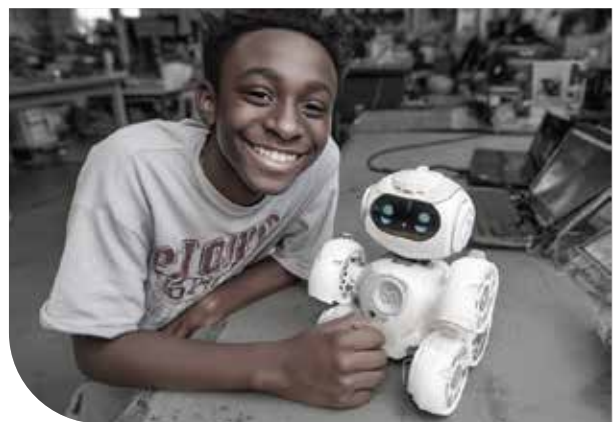




## SECTION 6:

### 'THE ELECTRIC PLAYGROUND' IN THE LOCAL COMMUNITY

Within contemporary society, children are often described as 'digital natives' (Prensky, 2001), a term assuming their natural affinity with technology. In addition, there is greater appetite to nurture children's digital literacies, enabling them to contribute effectively to the technological demands found within employment across sectors (OECD, 2023). However, the extent to which children are confident and proficient in the use of technology very much depends upon their socioeconomic status and family circumstances (UNESCO 2021) as well as spatial, material, and temporal factors (Holmes and Burgess, 2022). This also widens the discourses about how parents themselves could manage their own screen time and model behaviour with their young children. Often an area more challenging to outline, with parents not always forthcoming about how much time is spent themselves on their mobiles and online more generally. By modelling behaviour, we have outlined some key considerations.



## HOW OUR SCREEN USE AFFECTS OUR CHILDREN



Prioritising direct interaction is essential for healthy development.

Studies highlighted that **\*TECHNOFERENCE** is linked to three significant aspects of parent-child interactions:

- 1. Parent directiveness:** how often parents give instructions to their children, either verbally or non-verbally.
- 2. Responsiveness:** how quickly and effectively parents respond to their child's needs.
- 3. Scaffolding:** how parents adjust their behaviours to create a supportive framework for their children's learning experiences.

By being more mindful of our device use, we can foster better interactions and a stronger connection

Birth to 2 years

Set aside screens and **focus on face-to-face** interaction. Infants particularly benefit from loving expressions and our voices. Avoiding screen distractions strengthens bonds and enhances language skills. This is evident in everyday moments, such as playing at the park, trying new foods, or breastfeeding. **Using smartphones while feeding can lead to slower responses to a baby's needs.**



**Making eye contact, sharing smiles, and engaging in conversation are crucial for their development**

2 to 4 years

*I'm just checking what time your football starts*



**Be a good role model.** Young children learn by watching adults and they need to see faces and expressions. If they see you distracted by scrolling, it interrupts both your attentions, making it harder to learn language and manage their emotions.

**Instead, we need to use smartphones around children only when absolutely needed for tasks, and explain what we're doing out loud**

5 to 8 years

When using screens in front of children, it's important to use it thoughtfully. Set clear rules, like no screens during meals, bedtime, or while playing and be consistent. Remember, children are learning how to manage their attention, behaviour, and emotions. **The habits you show as an adult play a big role in helping them develop these skills.**



**When using tech to help with learning, do it together with your kids**

9 to 12 years



**Work together as a family to establish screen time boundaries that everyone agrees on using our family digital plans**

**Talk openly about your screen time with your kids.** Encourage them to share their thoughts on when and why technology is used. As children grow, they start to understand concepts of fairness and hypocrisy. By demonstrating thoughtful and intentional use of technology, we can help them build trust and enhance their self-awareness.

13 to 17 years

**Set a good example for your kids by practicing what you preach.** Establish limits on your own screen time to show them the importance of balance. Consider sharing helpful tools like screen time apps and focus modes, and work together to create a digital plan for the whole family.



**Our actions set an example for them in how they handle their focus, develop their sense of self, and navigate relationships with others**

**\*TECHNOFERENCE** - describes the distraction caused by our tech usage when with children and young people



HEALTH PROFESSIONALS FOR SAFER SCREENS

created with input from Alliance4Children



for support and advice, including family plans

(Skuza, 2025)

- Section 6 -

'The Electric Playground' in the Local Community



Children's reliance upon screen media has raised serious public health concerns since it might harm their cognitive, linguistic, and social-emotional growth. Muppalla et al (2023) examined the effects of screen time on many developmental domains and covered management and limitation techniques for children's screen usage. They indicated that screen media had a wide range of cognitive consequences, with both beneficial and detrimental effects. Whilst screens can improve education and learning, too much time spent in front of a screen and multitasking with other media have been related to declines in executive functioning and academic performance.



As screen time reduces the amount and quality of face-to-face interactions between children and their caregivers, it can also have an impact on language development. Contextual elements like co-viewing and topic appropriateness are key in determining how language development is impacted. Additionally, according to Muppalla et al, (2023) excessive screen usage has detrimental effects on social and emotional growth, including a rise in the likelihood of obesity, sleep disorders, and mental health conditions including depression and anxiety. It can obstruct the ability to interpret emotions, fuel aggressive conduct, and harm one's psychological health in general. Setting boundaries, utilising parental controls, and demonstrating good screen behaviour are all techniques that parents may use to manage children's screen usage. The reduction of the possible negative impacts of excessive screen time, and the promotion of children's healthy development and well-being, could be sought by increasing knowledge and encouraging alternative play-based activities that stimulate development.

As Dr Sanjiv Nichani (OBE) highlights within Key Issues - Health Professionals For Safer Screens (2025) there is now substantial evidence regarding the concerns that excessive screen time and social media are contributing to the mental health issues in children. The health issues that are significantly concerning include, problems with sleep, eyesight, speech and language development, emotional and social growth, eating habits, body image, educational achievement, and cognitive performance. Behaviour Addiction is also on the rise with one in four children and young people excessively engaging with their smartphone. Skinner (2025) the health director for Health Professionals for Safer Screens outlines that screen time with young children should therefore, as standard practice, be avoided at,

- mealtime
- bedtime
- school pick up.





This is outlined in the following tables highlighting the recommendations regarding screen time use during childhood.

# Birth to 5 years

'Studies have shown that too much screen time can cause babies and toddlers to **learn fewer words** and have **slower language development**. Excessive use of screens is also being strongly linked to **behavioural difficulties** in very young children.'

0 - 24 months

30 mins  
2 - 5 year olds

Bigger is better

Try a cuddle or a game

Phones, tablets and computers should not be in any child's bedroom overnight.

**Watching lots of short videos is being linked to concentration difficulties in children.**

## RECOMMENDATIONS:

- 1 NO screen time** between **birth - 24 months** except for video chatting with family and friends.
- 2 30 MINS screen time.** Children aged **2 - 5 years old** should not be on screens for more than **30 mins per day**.
- 3 BIGGER screens.** If your child is ready to **play a short game** then try to use a larger screen like a **tablet or computer screen**. These cause less visual strain than a phone.
- 4 AVOID** using a device to **settle your child** down. Evidence shows this makes their anger and frustration worse in later life. **Instead try a book, a game outdoors, or just a cuddle.**
- 5 \*SLEEP HYGIENE.** Under **5s** should **not use a screen** for at least **2 HOURS BEFORE BEDTIME**, to aid their natural sleep pattern.

\*'SLEEP HYGIENE' is a term used for healthy habits and behaviours that help support a good night's sleep.



'Studies show a clear link between **excessive** screen use and **difficulties with concentration, sleep, and mental health**. Children must get **outside in daylight** for at least **76 mins** per day to help protect their eyes from **\*short-sightedness**.'



No screens



Keep active

M	T	W	T	F	S	S
Not more than 1-2 hrs/day						Up to 2 hrs/day



Screen-free time together



Reports suggest adults touch their phones over 2000 times a day.



Sleep Hygiene.  
No screens  
1 hour before bedtime

## RECOMMENDATIONS:

1

### WAKING UP WITHOUT screens

It is recommended that social media/screens are not used for the first hour of the day.

2

**1-2 HRS PER DAY** is the suggested screen time in the week and not more than **2 hours on weekends**.

3

**STAY ACTIVE** Encourage physical activity, ideally outside, for **1-2 hours a day**.



Watching lots of short videos on platforms such as TikTok and YouTube is being linked to concentration difficulties in children.

4

### SCREEN-FREE time together

Children will often mimic behaviours of the adults around them. **Consider your own social media usage/ phone checking behaviour.**

5

It is recommended that screens **should not be used 1 HOUR** before bedtime. **Phones, tablets and computers should not be in a bedroom overnight.**



\*Myopia (short-sightedness) is typically corrected with glasses but may increase the risk of severe eye conditions later.





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Creating spaces and places beyond screens in the community, where young children and parents feel valued and supported is therefore valuable. Norman (2023) advised that children from an early age evaluate the world around them, from their internal and external interpretations as they are experienced. For some, their external experiences may not correspond to their internal feelings, and they move towards a digital world as a way of avoiding their lived realities.

According to The World Health Organisation (WHO, 2024) physical activity (and there-within play) should be a priority, with arguably sedentary activities such as screen time reduced.

**Infants (less than 1 year) should:**

Be physically active several times a day in a variety of ways, particularly through interactive floor-based play; more is better.



**Children 1-2 years of age should:**

Spend at least 180 minutes in a variety of types of play, including moderate-to-vigorous-intensity physical activity, spread throughout the day.

They should not be restrained for more than 1 hour at a time (e.g., prams/strollers, highchairs, or strapped on a caregiver's back) or sit for extended periods of time. For 1-year-olds, sedentary screen time (such as watching TV or videos, playing computer games) is not recommended (WHO, 2024).

In support of this Kemp and Josephidou (2020) led a Froebel Trust funded research project exploring the engagement of under twos outdoors. They found that the existing research in 2020 revealed two dominant ideas within current early years practice through the discourses of being outdoor with infants. These were:

- Safety
- Being Active.

In their exploration of the existing literature, they noted outdoors was perceived as a space to be physically active with many research papers associating outdoor environments as a space to engage in physical activity, the physically active child is seen as the 'ideal' child. However, the impact of both safety and being active hindered rather than promoted outdoor play when discussing infants, resulting in them being often excluded from the outdoors. With the focus on physical activity, there was an assumption that the outdoor environment was predominately appropriate for those children who could already master walking, the older child. Furthermore, the idea that the outdoors was considered a risky space for infants when thinking about safety was revealed in its absence from the research literature.

**Children 3-4 years of age should:**

Spend at least 180 minutes in a variety of types of physical activities at any intensity, of which at least 60 minutes is moderate- to vigorous intensity physical activity, spread throughout the day; more is better (WHO, 2024).

As Marina Umaschi Bers, highlight in their book; Coding as a Playground, also focuses on how young children (ages 7 and under) can engage in computational thinking and be taught to become computer programmers, a process that can increase both their cognitive and social-emotional skills. Coding can engage children as producers, rather than merely consumers of technology in a playful way. Coding becoming a new literacy, a new playground that children could develop computational thinking, communication and personal expression in ways unconsidered before.

Hargreaves (2021) states the concept of digital play, and more widely in our thinking about the electric playground, refers to various activities that children may engage with, using digital devices and toys as they play. This can be dancing and singing to YouTube, drawing with an app, or make pretend and symbolic play using an old mobile phone that no longer works. Playing with digitally augmented toys, pets, and dolls' houses, as well as interacting with voice assistants, may also be used in developing understanding and language. Therefore, these can include toys and devices that can be played with, both off or online and whilst the argument of playing offline with games and

toys such as electronic story books can be engaging, they still lack a mixed approach to play, with many young children playing in a solitary manner.

### Toddlers Tech and Talk Project

Since June 2022, as a UK-based team at Manchester Met, Strathclyde, Lancaster, Swansea Universities and Queens University Belfast, they have been leading a groundbreaking research study, Toddlers, Tech and Talk, that explores how very young children (from birth to age 36 months) use technology at home, and how tech might be shaping what they learn about language and literacy.

Across this multi-stage project, which included a large-scale survey, interviews with UK parents and practitioners and in-depth case studies with 40 families and children at home, we worked from a post-digital perspective. "The post-digital pertains to a moment in human history whereby practices and digital technologies are intertwined with the daily actions and interactions of people." (Edwards, 2023, p777). A post-digital lens is helping us to understand how digital technology is omnipresent in young children's lives at home, in ECEC and in

wider communities.

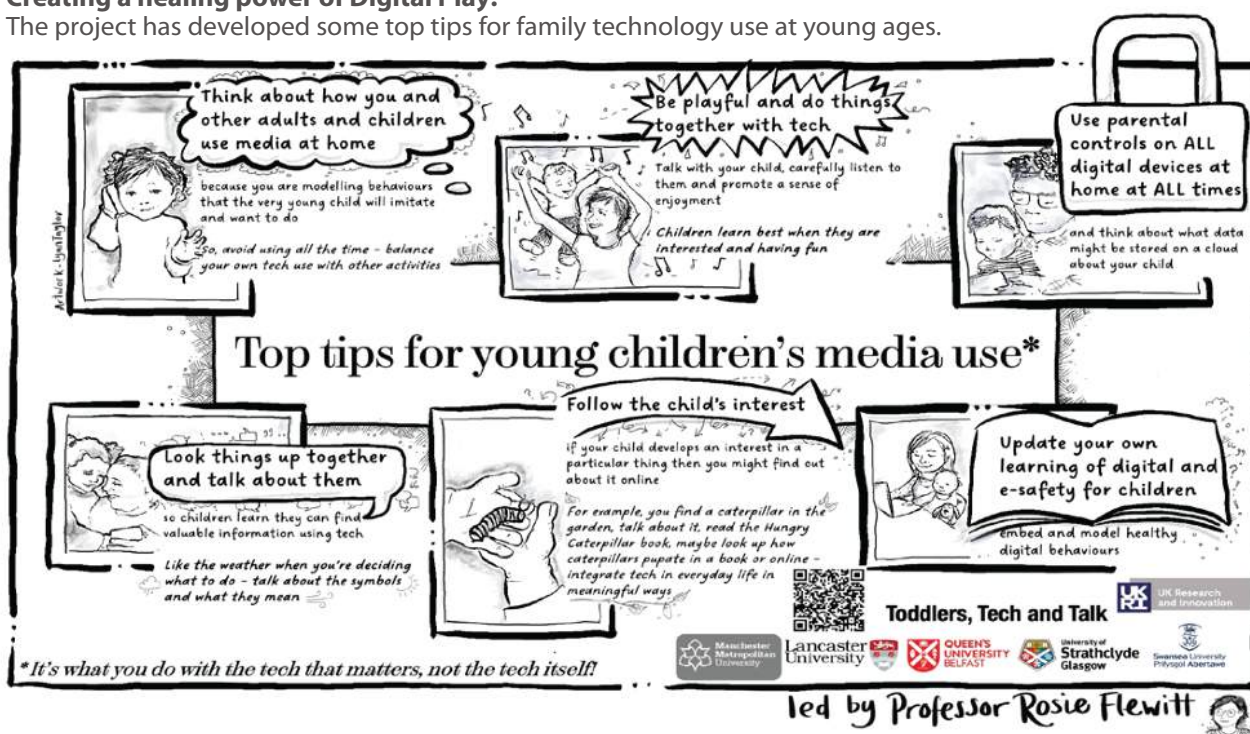
This has led us to two key questions: Is it even possible to resist children's engagement with technologies in the contemporary world? Or is it more helpful to recognise children's inevitable interactions with digital devices and find ways to ensure this engagement aligns with high-quality learning experiences?

The project not only demonstrated the extent to which children's lives are technologised from birth with 98% of families claiming to have good internet access at home, and the same proportion had at least one smartphone but also demonstrated that children had many opportunities to learn from and with digital devices.

The project presents rich findings to demonstrate the ways that very young children can experience rich learning experiences with technologies, if the resources are used effectively. This was largely because parents are mindful about the role of technologies in their babies and toddlers' lives, balancing their concerns about the risks of tech overuse with the opportunities offered by digital media for learning, creativity and well-being.

### Creating a healing power of Digital Play:

The project has developed some top tips for family technology use at young ages.



Permission included and a full summary report of findings is available at <https://e-space.mmu.ac.uk/636881/1/TODDLERS%2C%20TECH%20AND%20TALK%20Summary%20Report%20.pdf>







## SECTION 7: CONCLUSION

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Play has been considered from both the child and the adults' perspectives. We have included a call for national and local policy recommendations. If we are to truly empower children through play, we must recognise that this empowerment extends beyond the playground. It requires a collective commitment to safeguarding children's rights to safe, stimulating environments, in both the physical and digital world. Protecting play spaces is essential; they are not optional extras, but critical hubs for children's development and wellbeing.

At the same time, urgent legislative action is needed to regulate children's exposure to violent and harmful content online, recognising that their experiences in digital spaces increasingly shape their real-world behaviour. Supporting parents and carers with access to evidence-based strategies for behaviour management is vital, helping to replace outdated practices rooted in punishment with approaches that nurture resilience, empathy and self-regulation.

Finally, England must align with the progressive steps taken by Scotland and Wales and ban all forms of corporal punishment not just in the community and schools, but in the home too.

Children have a fundamental right to grow up free from violence, whether it is labelled as discipline or otherwise. Empowering play demands nothing less than the creation of a society where children are respected, protected, and valued. In the long-term, Building a Creative Britain.

**Please Scan and Respond to become part of the wider voice of Alliance 4 Children and the value of Play**





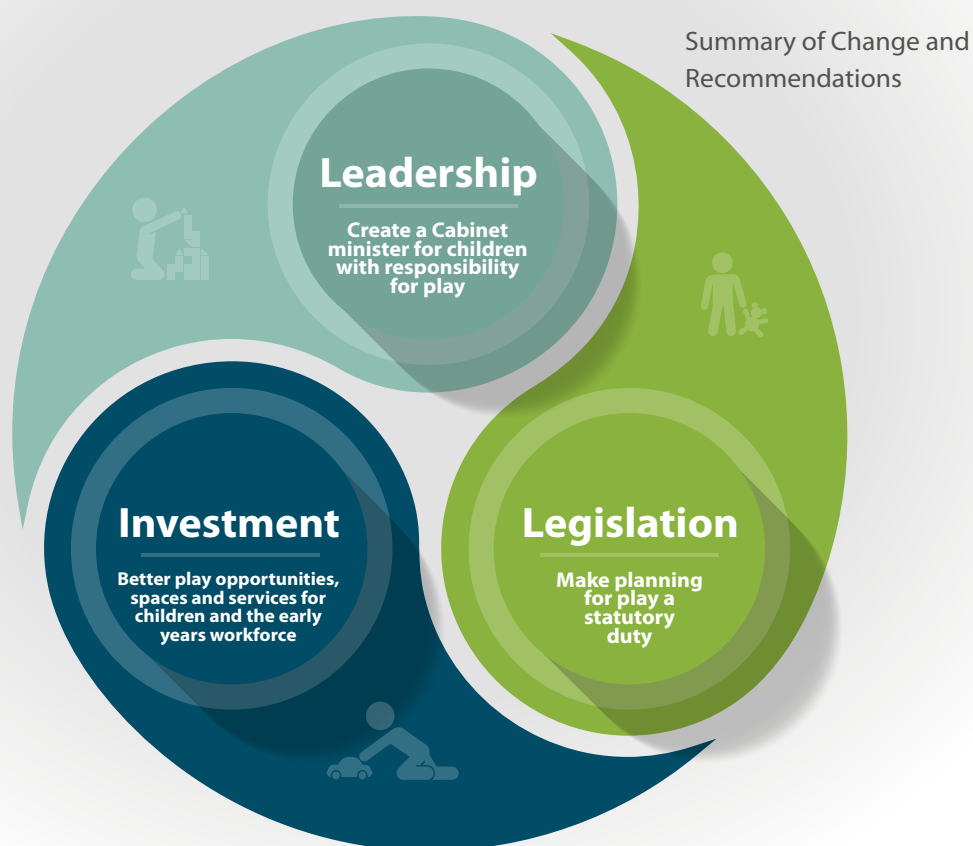




# SECTION 8:

## SUMMARY OF CHANGE AND RECOMMENDATIONS

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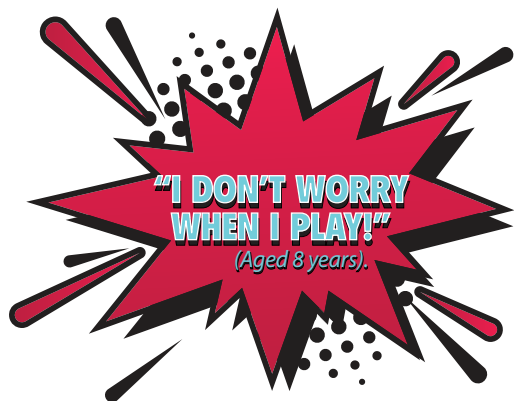






**1 Recognise play as a fundamental right: Uphold children's right to play in diverse settings prioritising free, unstructured play:**

- The creation of a Department for Children, Young People and Families (or Cabinet Level Minister for children) that would have play as a central focus of their position/department.
- England, like Scotland, should place the UNCRC into Law (see also Just Fair 2023). This upholds children's right to play as outlined in Article 31 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child (UN 1989) incorporating its principles and recommendations into national legislation and policy frameworks.
- A working definition of 'Play' is required that speaks of intrinsically motivated children, freely choosing what they wish to do, with the time, space and ability to act autonomously, with choices that make this a realistic possibility.



**2 Integrate play into educational policies:**

- Ensure that policies and practices prioritise children's well-being within political agendas, promoting play as a central component of healthy development with opportunities for free, unstructured play across diverse settings.
- Embed play-based learning in curricula at all levels, embracing it as a core element of the learning process throughout all stages of education and recognising its importance throughout inclusive and age-appropriate activities.
- Ensure every policy and initiative effecting children considers the extent to which it prioritises every child's right and need to play, being mindful of the environments and realities they are growing up within.



**3 Invest in play provision:**

- Allocate resources and funding to local authorities and communities to develop and maintain play spaces that are accessible, safe, and conducive to children's play, ensuring that this is sustained through adequate funding and resources.
- Strengthen the play sector at both national and local levels, providing support and resources to promote age-appropriate play spaces, catering to the diverse needs and ages of children across different communities.



**4 Prioritise play through cross-sector collaboration:**

- Foster cross-sectoral collaboration and interprofessional approaches to play that recognise its role in promoting physical, cognitive, emotional and social well-being.
- Prioritise play as a fundamental aspect of childhood development and lifelong learning within multi-professional projects that recognise and embrace the mental, physical, social, and developmental benefits of play across the lifespan.
- Reassess the pedagogic appropriateness of knowledge-based curriculum and its impact on children's wellbeing, engagement and enjoyment of education.



**5 Prioritise lifelong learning and offer coordinated and dedicated training programs for staff working in schools, early years settings, family hubs, and children's centres:**

- Provide ongoing training that reflects play-based learning approaches and supports an understanding of the deeply impactful role of play in the development of the whole child.
- Promote lifelong learning to staff, as well as the significance of ongoing play-based programs for anyone working with children.
- Ensure that those working with young children enjoy equal access to accredited professional qualifications.

**6 Promote parental engagement in play:**

- Empower parents through campaigns and initiatives that highlight the developmental and intergenerational benefits of play.
- Encourage parental involvement in promoting play with play activities they can engage in with their children.

**7 Support children's community initiatives:**

- Support resident-led play initiatives that bring together stakeholders from various sectors to provide children with safe spaces for outdoor play within their communities as well as social interaction, opportunities for learning and a focal point for communities that centre around the child.
- Involve children's input in urban planning and play space development, ensuring their voices are heard and acted upon.

**8 Address disparities in play opportunities:**

- Implement measures to address disparities in access to play opportunities, taking into account disabilities, geographical location, socioeconomic status and other factors that may affect children's engagement in play.
- Address barriers to play and collaborate with communities to create inclusive play environments that meet the needs of all children.

**9 Support children facing adversity:**

- Implement play sufficiency legislation at the local level to ensure that all children have access to high-quality play opportunities.
- Develop targeted interventions and support services that enable children facing adversity, such as those seeking asylum, to access play opportunities and benefit from its therapeutic effects.

**10 Update policies to reflect changing Needs:**

- Review policy at national and local level to ensure that adequate resources and funding are allocated to play provision, infrastructure, and lifelong learning opportunities for educators and playworkers.
- Regularly review and update policies related to play in light of evolving societal needs, technological advancements, and research findings to ensure they remain relevant and effective.
- Consult directly with children when updating policies, to ensure that their voices are heard regarding matters that directly relate to and impact upon their lives.









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Building on a successful history with the CHILDREN’S ALLIANCE charity, our expert Early Years Working Group has joined the new Not-for-Profit ALLIANCE 4 CHILDREN in Spring 2025. This enhanced our capacity to generate significant evidence-based, action-oriented policy recommendations and drive positive change for children, young people, and families.

We are appreciative of the guidance provided by our Honorary Presidents, Baroness Ruth Lister and Vice-President Baroness Frances D’Souza.

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AGE 5  
BURIED IN SAND  
PRESTATYN BEACH

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With special thanks to Anji Wright, COO Alliance 4 Children on the artwork and graphics within the report.

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The background of the page is a light cream color. It is decorated with a complex pattern of overlapping, organic, wavy shapes in various shades of blue, purple, pink, red, and orange. These shapes are interconnected, creating a sense of flow and movement. Scattered throughout the background are numerous dashed lines in the same color palette, many of which form loops or spirals, further enhancing the dynamic and creative feel of the design.

“ Talking about ‘play’ is a lot more than talking about an activity children engage in. It is to underline that play, in its economic, emotional, aspirational, and educational forms, will inexorably shape what is possible for children as they grow into adolescence and maturity. It will shape their hopes, their achievements, their own capacity as carers and parents, their trust in their own ability to make a difference in society, and their trust that they are worth taking seriously. It is crucial that the government does not lose sight of this because of anxious short-termism. By placing the UNCRC into law, upholding children's right to play as outlined in Article 31, and incorporating its principles and recommendations into national legislation and policy frameworks, we are not just investing in play, but investing in a Creative Britain. There are solutions that will work without bankrupting us, solutions that can be discussed with and owned by those most directly affected. But ignoring or minimising the issue will indeed bankrupt us at a much more fundamental level. ”

*Baroness Lister of Burtersett CBE – President of the Alliance 4 Children  
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