



A play friendly school

Guidance for a whole school approach

Introduction

All children need to play. This guidance provides policy and practice related information to help school communities take a whole school approach to support children's right to play. It has been developed to respond to Estyn's *Healthy and happy – school impact on pupils' health and wellbeing* report¹, which notes the importance of school play and break times. The guidance is designed to enhance the good work already being done to provide better play opportunities in school and aims to make everyone's time at school happier and healthier.

Play

Children have a right to play, as recognised in Article 31 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC). Playing is one of the most immediate and important aspects of children's lives – they value the time, the space and the freedom to play.² Play involves children doing as they wish in their own time and in their own way. It has the key characteristics of fun, uncertainty, challenge, flexibility and non-productivity.³

Playing is worthwhile for the enjoyment it brings to children and their families in the moment⁴. However, play also has the benefit of having a positive impact on multiple important outcomes including increased physical activity, developing problem solving skills, improving well-being and helping to develop resilience.

Studies have shown that access to playtime initiatives (for example through providing traditional play activities, playground equipment, loose parts play materials and staff who understand play) has resulted in happier pupils, significantly fewer incidents and accidents, and pupils returning to class ready to learn.⁵

National and international policy

In 2010, Wales became the first country in the world to legislate for play through the Children and Families (Wales) Measure 2010.

This places a duty on local authorities to assess and secure sufficient play opportunities for children in their area. *Wales – a Play Friendly Country*⁶, statutory guidance to local authorities, sets out a wide range of Matters across several policy areas that need to be considered.

As part of statutory Play Sufficiency Assessments (PSA), local authorities must assess play within education and school policy.

The statutory guidance notes that schools provide an important opportunity for children to play during the school day and before and after classes. The Welsh Government recommends that local authorities advise schools to provide high quality play space and sufficient time for children to play during the school day.

Article 31 of the UNCRC states that the child has the right to play and to join in other recreational activities. As an indication of the significance the United Nations places on children's play it has published a General Comment on Article 31.⁷ This is an official statement that elaborates on the meaning of an aspect of the UNCRC that requires further interpretation or emphasis.

The General Comment specifically states that schools have a major role to play. This includes through the provision of outdoor and indoor spaces that afford opportunities for all forms of playing and for all children, and that the structure of the school day should allow sufficient time and space for play.

Creating the conditions for play

Children's opportunities for playing in all settings are dependent on a wide range of issues, which are arranged across three themes:

- **Permission:** fear, expectations, tolerance, and the way adults view childhood and play
- **Space:** the amount, design and management of space
- **Time:** how time is structured and the obligations children have on their time.

Ensuring permission for play

When we reminisce about our childhoods many of us will recall happy times spent playing, mostly outdoors and with children of various ages. Children's free time is increasingly scarce and opportunities for outdoor play are decreasing. So, school playtime is vital to children for their fun and relaxation as well as for their health and well-being. It's part of their 'work/life balance'.

Children say that playtimes are an important part of the school day to them. Having welcoming places, enough time and the company of others to play with every day, is very important to all children – as adults we need to foster environments that support this.

To create a culture of permission at playtimes staff need to demonstrate a supportive attitude towards play and the play process.

Schools must not dismiss play as frivolous and a waste of time but acknowledge and support play in its own right – meaning that play is not only used as a vehicle for learning, or for educational or health outcomes that need to be met. Play is valued as integral to pupils' well-being.

Staff who are supervising playtime should have a good understanding of play. Staff need to support and actively encourage pupils to make their own choices with minimal adult intervention, ensuring that playtime is not over organised or over regulated. As a consequence, schools should avoid restricting play unnecessarily through fear or inconsistent playtime rules.



Providing space for play

Some schools feel that the grounds have little to offer pupils if there is no fixed play equipment on site. However, giving time, space and permission to play supports pupils to make the most of the environment.

Estyn's Healthy and happy – school impact on pupils' health and wellbeing report⁸ highlights that schools that apply a whole school approach to supporting health and well-being provide an environment, facilities and space to play, socialise and relax at playtimes.

Most schools will have a tarmac area, which will support active running games and sports, although, consideration should be given to pupils who wish to socialise or contemplate alone. A well-landscaped green and natural space provides obvious positive features for play, such as places to hide and explore. However, if these spaces are not accessible to the pupils, or are restricted, they can become a source of frustration. Schools should review their available space and have a long-term plan for protecting and enhancing their spaces for play.

A rich play environment is one where children of all ages are able to make a wide range of choices – there are many possibilities so that they can invent and extend their own play. It's a varied, inspirational and interesting physical environment that maximises the potential for socialising, creativity, resourcefulness and challenge. It's a place where children feel free to play in their own way, on their own terms.

The Welsh Government and the United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child define rich and optimum environments for play, with key features including the opportunity to freely interact with or experience the following:

- other children and teenagers of various ages and capabilities
- the natural world
- loose parts
- the natural elements
- challenge
- playing with identity
- movement
- feelings.



Creating time for play

Around the world, teachers report that children have less time to play at school now than in previous years⁹. A research report¹⁰ notes that, since 1995, the youngest children have lost 45 minutes a week and children aged 11-16 years old have lost over 65 minutes.

The demands on schools to achieve academic targets must not be put above the duty to protect the health and well-being of the pupils in their care. Time and space allocated to play is associated with pupil well-being and should therefore be considered as a positive element of school life.

Research suggests that pupils who have afternoon play were significantly fitter¹¹. This suggests that removing afternoon play for pupils may be detrimental to their physical health. Although afternoon playtime is often removed to focus more on teaching and learning, the same research found no evidence that giving children an afternoon break led to lower attainment in maths and English at Key Stage 2.

In Finland¹², children in primary schools have 15 minutes of playtime for every 45 minutes of lessons because that is what the research says is optimum for academic progress as well as children's well-being.



15 steps to a play friendly school

Permission

- Identify a staff member that's in a leadership position that can support both the strategic and operational practices to support play.

See [Top tips on being a play champion](#).

- Develop a *School Play Policy* that endorses play and articulates the actions the school is taking to protect children's right to play.

See sample [School play policy](#).

- Ensure that staff who supervise playtime receive play training or playwork training and mentoring. Many local authorities and play organisations can provide playtime training or other help and support.

See [Play services directory](#).

- Provide a range of ideas, suggestions and tips for playtime staff to help them support play.

See [Top tips for supporting children's play](#).

- Engage with parents so that they understand the school's commitment to children's play and why it is being promoted. Playful Childhoods' *How to play guides* offer practical advice and pointers.

See Playful Childhoods' [How to play guides](#) and [playful parenting resources](#).

- Take a balanced approach to managing risk in children's play as articulated in *Children's Play and Leisure: promoting a balanced approach*¹³, the Health and Safety Executive's (HSE) High Level Statement.

See sample [Risk Management Policy](#) and [Risk-Benefit Assessment template](#).

To answer queries from parents about this approach, look at the [How to support risky play top tips](#) on the Playful Childhoods website.

- Allow older children and younger children to interact and play together. This promotes a

mutual sharing of games, ideas, materials, and places. This contributes to a feeling of nurturing for older children, and younger children benefit from the extension of their play experiences.

- Don't stop thinking about and providing for play for children at a certain age. Children across all Key Stages, including older children need time to play during the school day.

See [Older children play too](#) information sheet which explores the play of older children, particularly those in early and middle adolescence.

Space

- If you are planning on installing playground markings or zoning, try to use them to support curriculum delivery and to provide a range of activities for children to play together. Markings (such as number squares and targets) can be a useful tool for ensuring that learning can be active in curriculum time. Zoning is best used when it protects areas for more free play and access to loose parts and less structured activity that can be squeezed out by the playing of large ball games which can dominate a space.
- Provide loose parts play materials during playtime. Allow plenty of stuff for lots of children to play with. Not having enough resources can cause conflict and tension during playtime.

See [Resources for playing – providing loose parts to support children's play](#) toolkit.

- Work with children to undertake audit activities. There are a number of ways children can inform the audit of a space to protect and enhance the play spaces available at playtime.

See [Children as auditors tool](#).



- View the weather in a positive manner, rather than as a barrier. Children generally enjoy being outside in all types of weather and seasons. Work with children, parents and staff to identify ways to overcome inclement weather. The [Developing guidelines for playtime during inclement weather](#) will help staff to make a plan and the [Playing out in all weathers letter template](#) will help communicate the plan to parents.

Time

- Aim for at least 60 minutes of outdoor playtime every day¹⁴ by recognising and protecting morning, lunchtime and afternoon playtimes. If these are shortened or reduced, then all of the evidenced developmental, emotional and social benefits are reduced too. For support to make the case, see the findings of the *School break times and young people's social lives study*.¹⁵
- Don't replace playtime with other good practice initiatives, such as the Daily Mile. A core principle for the Daily Mile^{16, 17} is that it should happen during curricular time, rather than be used as a replacement for playtime.
- Rather than withdrawing playtime as punishment for misbehaving or to complete unfinished work, think of other ways to support children to manage behaviour. For support to make the case, see the *Right to Play*¹⁸ position paper published by The British Psychological Society's Division of Educational and Child Psychology and [Protecting playtime ideas](#) from its authors.

Additional resources and reading

Children's Access to Play in Schools – The Play-friendly School Label – a handbook for schools produced through the work of the European 'Children's Access to Play' Project (CAPS). CAPS, is a project in the UK, Hungary, Slovakia, Czech Republic, Poland, and Austria which aims to support schools to become more play-friendly.

Children's right to play position paper – a position paper on the importance of play to children produced by The British Psychological Society's (BPS) Division of Educational and Child Psychology.

From muddy hands and dirty faces... to higher grades and happy places Outdoor learning and play at schools around the world – a report looking at how much time children around the world spend playing and learning outside as part of the school day.

Healthy and happy: School impact on pupils' health and wellbeing – an Estyn report that evaluates how well primary and secondary schools in Wales support the health and well-being of pupils.

Loose parts play and the Welsh Inspectorate Frameworks – provides information as to how embedding loose parts play links to aspects of the Estyn Common Inspection Framework and key areas of the Care Inspectorate for Wales framework.

Play in the curriculum – suggestions for ways that play can be incorporated into areas of the curriculum.

Playtime matters – a report comparing playtime worldwide and highlighting the evidence case for making playtime a key part of the school day.

Right to play workshop – includes information as to how the workshop links to the Wales Curriculum and Estyn's self-evaluation manual.

School break and lunchtimes and young people's social life: A follow-up national study – provides findings from a school playtime national survey in England.



References

- ¹ ESTYN (2019) *Healthy and happy – school impact on pupils' health and wellbeing*. Cardiff: Crown Copyright.
- ² Children's Commissioner for Wales (2016) *Beth Nesa? What Next?*.
- ³ United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child (2013) *General comment No. 17 (2013) on the right of the child to rest, leisure, play, recreational activities, cultural life and the arts (art. 31)*. Geneva: Committee on the Rights of the Child.
- ⁴ Gleave, J. and Cole-Hamilton, I. (2012) *A world without play: A literature review*. London: Play England/The British Toy and Hobby Association.
- ⁵ Gill, T. (2014) *The play return: A review of the wider impact of play initiatives*. London: UK Children's Play Policy Forum.
- ⁶ Welsh Government (2014) *Wales – a Play Friendly Country*. Cardiff: Welsh Government Crown Copyright
- ⁷ *General comment No. 17 on the right of the child to rest, leisure, play, recreational activities, cultural life and the arts (art. 31)*.
- ⁸ *Healthy and happy – school impact on pupils' health and wellbeing*.
- ⁹ Prisk, C. and Cusworth, H. (2018) *From muddy hands and dirty faces... to higher grades and happy places Outdoor learning and play at schools around the world*. Winchester: Learning through Landscapes.
- ¹⁰ Baines, E. and Blatchford, P. (2019) *School break and lunchtimes and young people's social life: A follow-up national study*. Final report (EDU/42402) to the Nuffield Foundation.
- ¹¹ Brophy, S., Todd, C., Marchant, E. and James, M. (2019) Children who have afternoon school breaks are fitter but need a supportive environment. *The Conversation*.
- ¹² Finland has researched the importance of regular breaks, of high-quality outdoor spaces and regular time outdoors been fully recognised and embraced, noted in *Playtime Matters* report (Outdoor Classroom Day, 2019).
- ¹³ Health and Safety Executive (2012) *Children's Play and Leisure: promoting a balanced approach*.
- ¹⁴ The *Playtime Matters* report (Outdoor Classroom Day, 2019) notes that Finland is the only country which has researched the importance of regular breaks, of high-quality outdoor spaces and regular time outdoors. In Finland, children in primary schools have 15 minutes of playtime for every 45 minutes of lessons because that is what the research says is optimum for academic progress as well as children's well-being.
- ¹⁵ *School break and lunchtimes and young people's social life: A follow-up national study*.
- ¹⁶ From the Daily Mile Cymru's Core Principles: 'The Daily Mile should happen during curricular time, at least 3 times a week. Ideally, the class teacher should decide when to go out – they know their class and can respond flexibly to their needs.'
<https://thedailymile.cymru/steps-to-success>
- ¹⁷ Marchant, E., Todd, C., Stratton, G. and Brophy, S. (2020) The Daily Mile: Whole-school recommendations for implementation and sustainability. A mixed-methods study. *PLoS ONE* 15(2).
- ¹⁸ Hobbs, C., et al. (2019) *Children's Right to play position paper*. Leicester: The British Psychological Society Division of Educational and Child Psychology.



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