Playing and being well

A review of recent research into children's play, social policy and practice, with a focus on Wales

Briefing

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This briefing note on *Playing and being well: A review of recent research into children's play, social policy and practice, with a focus on Wales* presents a context for the review and an evidenced summary of the original narrative that emerged, namely that of a relational capability approach to wellbeing and what this can offer for thinking about adult account-ability and response-ability for children's capability to play. References are numbered in the text with a full list at the end.

It is not a comprehensive summary of findings from our review. It would be impossible to do justice to the breadth, depth, complexity and diversity of research reviewed in the full version in such a short document. A more extensive summary and the full version will be available soon at: www.play.wales

Background and scope

The Welsh Government was the first in the world to make children's play a statutory responsibility for local authorities through its Play Sufficiency Duty, part of the Children and Families (Wales) Measure 2010. The duty requires local authorities to assess and secure sufficient opportunities for children to play. At the time of carrying out this literature review, the Play Sufficiency Duty has been in operation for ten years and the Welsh Government is carrying out a Ministerial Review of Play. *Playing and being well* was commissioned by Play Wales to provide current evidence to inform this ongoing work. It also provides an update to *Play for a Change: Play, policy and practice – a review of contemporary perspectives*(148) and provides a fresh Welsh policy perspective, rather than the previous English focus.

The full review report has four main sections:

- childhood and social policy
- the role of play in children's wellbeing
- children's play patterns
- practice-based examples of supporting children's play in both the public realm and the institutions of childhood.

The review draws mainly on academic research, using 'grey' (less formally published), professional, advocacy and practitioner literature where appropriate. Children's play has been researched across a range of academic disciplines, including biology, evolutionary studies, ethology, neuroscience, psychology, education studies, sociology, geography, anthropology, folklore, philosophy, policy studies and more. Much of the research reviewed is empirical. However, given the concerns expressed by some writers regarding both the colonisation and romanticisation of children's play by adult advocates and researchers alike, conceptual research and theory offer thoughtful insights and so are interwoven.

Sources are as current as possible, but no earlier than 2005 (apart from some classic texts) and are drawn from broadly comparable minority world[1] countries. The review includes children aged 0 to 18 years, although some age ranges have been better researched than others in ways that vary across the four key areas of research.

[1] The term 'minority world' refers to what is more commonly called 'developed' or 'Western' countries, or more recently, the Global North. Its converse, the 'majority world', is so called because the majority of the world's population inhabit those countries that are often termed 'developing'. Although the terms 'majority' and 'minority' world risk oversimplification, they do seek to 'shift the balance of our world views that frequently privilege "western" and "northern" populations and issues' (Punch and Tisdall, 2012, p. 241).

We used an integrative, narrative and creative approach[181, 252], working across diverse disciplinary and theoretical perspectives, synthesising sources into conceptual themes and using this to create an original and political commentary. Given the considerable body of research into childhood, policy and children's play, what we have reviewed is necessarily partial, and given our own research interests and practices, our presentation of the material is also inevitably partial.

A note on knowledge production

Knowledge is never a neutral affair. It is always situated, always imbued with questions of power. Much research into childhood and play is embedded in minority world perspectives that have their origins in Enlightenment age theories and that retain much of their original colonialist assumptions together with the belief in a stable and knowable universe that can be controlled through discovering linear cause and effect. In addition, the way we understand things affects how we act. Narratives, paradigms and understandings contribute to the production of material discursive practices[2] that affect adults' relationships with children across all areas of life.

The twin and entwined processes of account-ability and response-ability, developed in research studies into the Welsh Government's Play Sufficiency Duty [149, 150, 222, 223], offer a useful guide to thinking differently and ethically about children's entanglements with their *milieux* (the physical, social, economic and political environments that children inhabit and also affect). Account-ability refers to the ability to give ethical accounts of children's play and the conditions that support it. Response-ability refers to actions to make space more equitable for playing, at multiple and interrelated scales of policy and practice.

Recent developments in childhood and play research: towards a radical relationality

There has been a significant growth in academic and commercial interest in children's play over the last 15 years alongside conceptual and methodological developments. *Play for a Change* introduced perspectives that challenged the dominance and exclusivity of the assumption that play's main contribution to childhood was to help them progress through developmental stages towards adulthood. For example, a systems approach sees development as a lifelong reciprocal and entangled relationship of genes, body and environment, with evolution encompassing more than genetic inheritance, thereby disrupting enduring nature/nurture binaries. In addition, *Play for a Change* was published just as what has been called a 'new wave' of childhood studies was emerging that also sought to look beyond classic binaries of nature/culture, adult/child, agency/structure towards a more relational approach[206].

Over the ensuing 15 years, these ideas have been taken up and developed further by childhood research across both the natural and the social sciences. Emerging from and building on 'developmentalism'[3] and the social studies of childhood, the relational turn in childhood studies decentres 'the child', marking a move away from seeing childhood or play as fixed identity categories and towards looking at how both are continually produced through relational practices. Doing so foregrounds movement, the rhythms and flows of everyday life, difference, and continual change.

The ideas are complex and difficult to summarise without oversimplification. Nonetheless, we suggest that what connects these different threads is a radical understanding of relationality. This radical relationality is more than interaction of separate organisms, contexts and processes. Phenomena (for example, space, play, bodies and life itself) do not have stable

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[2] 'Material-discursive practices' is a term that acknowledges the dynamic interrelationships of understandings, meanings, language, material things and practices that can become so embedded as to be seen as common sense, sometimes difficult to look beyond.

[3] 'Developmentalism' refers to the dominance of an over-simplified application of theories of ages and stages of child development, particularly cognitive development, that has become fixed and normative.

and fixed pre-existences but are continually in a process of becoming through and as encounters. Such encounters include other bodies (human, non-human, elemental, organisational), material objects, landscapes, and also the less tangible, such as affects, sensations, desires, as well as social systems and practices (for example, calendars, rules, codes of behaviour, embedded systems of oppression)[8, 147, 176, 186, 207, 211, 212, 241, 247].

We had thought that we would merely report on this relational turn alongside other, still dominant, more human-centred, binary and linear worldviews. However, as we researched the literature on childhood studies, policy, wellbeing, play and children's play patterns, relationality emerged as central both to a significant proportion of the literature and to the narrative we were developing. That narrative is one of a **relational capability approach to wellbeing**.

Policy developments

In line with a relational perspective, perhaps one of the most significant shifts in thinking in the 15 years since *Play for a Change* is in appreciating the relevance of broader policy initiatives beyond policies aimed specifically at children, and the relations between these and children's capability to play. This is evident in the:

- United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child's (2013) General Comment no. 17 on Article 31 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC)
- introduction of the statutory Play Sufficiency Duty in Wales
- statutory incorporation of play sufficiency assessments in Scotland through the Planning (Scotland) Act 2019.

Whilst recognising the value of dedicated play provision, these policy initiatives also acknowledge the importance of paying attention to the conditions that can support children to play out in their neighbourhoods and elsewhere in the public realm. Such a shift has emerged through a range of interrelated forces, including climate change, public health concerns, the influence of advocates for child-friendly environments and, in Wales, the requirement of the Play Sufficiency Duty to work cross-professionally. From this has emerged an appreciation of the relevance of policies such as those concerning sustainable development, spatial planning, urban design, active travel and particularly the Welsh Government's Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) Act 2015. These broader policies bring the politics of space to the fore.

Children's play as a matter of spatial justice

Children's play is inherently spatial in that it always happens somewhere. The concept of spatial justice, used in four research studies into the enactment of the Play Sufficiency Duty[149, 150, 222, 223], opens up ways of looking at how spaces are produced through interrelationships between design of the built environment, legal and governance systems that give precedence to keeping the economy moving, and the ways these are entangled with political and social norms and everyday spatial practices [147, 210, 240]. It also allows for a shift from a 'damage'[225, 256] narrative (focusing on what is wrong with children) towards recognition that when conditions are right, play emerges as children's own way of doing and being well, offering a much more affirmative account. The concept of spatial justice has been recognised in the Welsh Government's Ministerial Review of Play[179], and by the Future Generations Commissioner, who has urged Public Service Boards (PSBs) to recognise how the production of space contributes to injustices when drawing up their wellbeing plans[92, 130].

The Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) Act 2015: the possibility of relational and spatial approaches to policy

The Welsh Government's Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) Act 2015 has radical aspirations and potential. The act places Wales amongst a small number of wellbeing economy governments (including Scotland, Iceland, New Zealand and Finland) that focus on sustainable development through not only economic wellbeing but also social, environmental and cultural wellbeing. The act requires public bodies and PSBs to plan for a sustainable future

through setting localised objectives for meeting seven nationally identified wellbeing goals:

- a prosperous Wales
- a resilient Wales
- a healthier Wales
- a more equal Wales
- a Wales of cohesive communities
- a Wales of vibrant culture and thriving Welsh language
- a globally responsible Wales[130, 269].

However, its radical potential operates alongside traditional policy narratives evident in how children are constructed in the act and its associated policy documents. Currently, children do not *explicitly* feature much in the performance indicators for the Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) Act 2015 other than in terms of health measurements and child development. In the guidance documents there is a focus on children's vulnerabilities[93]. These are examples of a social investment policy narrative, firmly embedded in post-austerity forms of neoliberalism,[4] where 'the child is discoursed in policy as the site for the production of compliant but active and economically self-sufficient citizens'[54, p. 12].

Whilst universal policies such as education and health affect all children, their underlying ideologies, production and practices play out differently across intersectional groupings that are classed, racialised, gendered and dis/ablised[5] with targeted policies often further entrenching inequalities [84, 132]. Neoliberalism, the social investment model and austerity measures have combined to increasingly 'responsibilise' citizens, encouraging individuals to be less dependent on the state and to make good choices regarding their own health, safety and wellbeing [130] and that of their children [84, 133]. Such responsibilisation can also, albeit inadvertently, produce notions of blame, particularly of poor mothers (in all senses of the word)[12, 85, 98, 143, 214, 227].

Even when couched within the language of children's rights, social investment narratives still dominate. Whilst much of the academic debate concerning children's rights has focused on participation, there are far more articles of the UNCRC addressing issues of protection and provision that construct 'the child', understood as individual and universal, in terms of their development and future citizenship[138, 267]. Given the Welsh Government's rights-based approach to policies for children alongside clearly discernible social investment narratives, such arguments raise interesting challenges to the notion of children's right to play. However, the Welsh Government's foundational principles of partnership working and social justice can to some extent work with these tensions and critiques. The Play Sufficiency Duty requires both cross-professional working and taking children's views into account, supporting the development of what has been termed a 'collective wisdom' in accounting for and being responsive to conditions for children's play[149, 150, 222, 223].

Despite the dominance of a social investment model, there are broader possibilities within the Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) Act 2015 beyond economic and deficit constructions of children. If children are included as members of communities, the picture becomes much more hopeful. Two aspects of the act and ensuing developments are of particular interest in this regard: the focus on spatial justice and the focus on wellbeing.

The act requires PSBs to take a localised, place-based perspective in drawing up wellbeing plans, opening up opportunities for spatial justice[129, 130]. However, the first round of assessments showed 'very limited consideration of the significance or cause of spatial differences'[92], with the commissioner urging PSBs to

[4] Neoliberalism refers to political and economic ideologies and practices that see human wellbeing as arising from 'individual entrepreneurial freedoms' (Harvey, 2007, p. 2) and the accumulation of wealth. It has emerged from policies in the 1970s onwards that have seen a withdrawal of the state from a traditional social welfare role, the increasing incursion of the markets and associated managerial ideologies into public services and the deregulation of finance and other systems seen as restricting market forces.

[5] The term 'dis/ablised' is used to refer to the ways in which the entanglements of histories, policies and everyday habitual practices and spaces are experienced differently by disabled and non-disabled people.

'think more deeply about the relationship between space and well-being; to move beyond viewing space as merely a container for (in)justice, viewing it instead as something that contributes to (in)justice'[130, p. 907].

Given the interrelatedness of wellbeing and spatial justice embedded in the Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) Act 2015, it is worth looking more at how wellbeing is framed within public policies relating to children.

Children's wellbeing and policy

There is a significant body of literature discussing how to measure children's wellbeing, spanning objective and subjective measures and children's own views [26, 27, 42, 43, 55, 61, 103, 141, 213]. Nevertheless, the identification of domains and indicators for measuring children's wellbeing – deciding what matters and what counts – is (often uncritically) based on cultural, adult and class-based assumptions as to what constitutes a good childhood[14, 35, 55, 87]. A key critique of the concept of wellbeing and the ways that it is used in research and policy is that it is individualistic, that is, wellbeing is constructed as something that an individual possesses and as something that can – and should – be acquired or achieved, thereby rendering individuals responsible for their own wellbeing. Given this, measures of subjective wellbeing can act as a smokescreen for more structural issues of inequality.

A relational capability approach to wellbeing

The capability approach has been explored by a growing number of children's wellbeing researchers [32, 56, 81, 136, 229], drawing on the works of philosopher-economist Amartya Sen and philosopher Martha Nussbaum. The approach is fundamentally a social justice one, seeing wellbeing as arising from the opportunities, resources and freedoms for people to be able to be and do what is of value to them. In Sen's model, capabilities refer partly to the existence of resources and partly to each individual's capability to convert such resources into 'functionings'. Conversion factors operate across personal, social and environmental levels[215]. A key criticism of this approach has been its emphasis on individual freedom and rational choice[88].

A relational approach recognises that wellbeing is not fixed and does not reside inside the bodies and minds of individual children but emerges in fluctuating ways both from and as the entanglements of bodies, space, material objects, desires, histories and much more [7, 63, 147]. We propose a relational capability approach that pays attention to the 'material and discursive entanglements that render children capable'[186, p. 56].

Play is recognised in Nussbaum's ten core capabilities of life, which she lists as:

- bodily health
- bodily integrity
- the development and expression of senses
- imagination and thought
- emotional health
- practical reason
- affiliation (both personal and political)
- relationships with other species and the world of nature
- play
- control over one's environment (both material and social)[188].

However, playing is not a panacea for the injustices that children face through both their status as children and other intersections of injustice. The current economic, geopolitical and environmental crises present real threats to children's capability for life, bodily health, bodily integrity and other elements in Nussbaum's list that depend on just access to adequate food, housing, healthcare, education and other basic public services as well as financial, social and environmental security.

In addition, seeing play unproblematically as a force for good romanticises it and can obscure forms of playing that, for example, reproduce, perform and perpetuate power inequalities[47, 48, 49, 102, 113, 137, 173, 253, 254], or that is addictive[235], dangerous, or harmful in other ways[245]. Furthermore, much of the literature makes generalisations about children's experiences of playing. 'Play' and 'children' easily become homogenised, normative concepts that erase the experiences and functions of play for children who do

not fit the ideal child mould[50, 66, 79, 102, 104, 119, 172, 239]. Bringing a relational approach to both playing and being well acknowledges harmful forces that can produce forms of play that are not conducive to being well. However, if all the conditions are right for children to engage in forms of playing that they value, it is more likely that moments of being well will also emerge.

Despite these caveats, play is included in Nussbaum's list precisely because it can contribute in significant ways to wellbeing. Much of the contemporary research into playing and being well emphasises the entanglements of mind, body, senses, affect, movement and *milieu*. This is the case with research from evolutionary studies, neuroscience, (post) developmental psychology, sociology, anthropology, geography, philosophy and more. The research reviewed also shows how the capability to play is positively correlated with all the other capabilities in Nussbaum's list[187]. For this reason, protecting and promoting children's capability to play, particularly for children already facing social and spatial injustices, is in line with both children's rights and the social investment model of policy described above[187]. In other words, protecting and promoting children's capability to play well makes sense in terms of both justice and economics whilst recognising the powerful forces of neoliberalism and the legacy of colonialism.

How play contributes to wellbeing

The relationship between play and wellbeing, both immediate and more long-term, has long been asserted in the literature[101, 178, 182, 228, 244, 251, 271], but what that relationship might be, and the quality of the evidence for it, is more problematic. Part of this is to do with play's great variety alongside the diversity of players[3, 115, 245]. Part of it is to do with how 'wellbeing' might be understood. A relational and spatial approach sees wellbeing as fluid and dynamic, more as something that children do than a fixed state that children have[86]. Wellbeing as a process rather than a state emerges from the continuous production and reproduction of complex relations among people and other bodies (non-human, organisational, elemental), desires, circumstances, practices, places, systems, histories, values, landscapes, material objects, genes, politics and so on[14, 15, 147, 201, 270].

The biological process of homeostasis[6] means that children constantly seek out ways of feeling better, often through playing[74, 147]. When children can participate fully in playing, the pleasure this gives rise to is central to wellbeing, health and adaptiveness, both for the time of playing and beyond[52, 64, 90, 108, 192, 194, 257]. This statement is more than the truism that play is fun.

Understanding wellbeing and homoeostasis as fluid and emergent foregrounds the importance of movement, both bodily movement (from molecular to gross motor) and the process of change[83, 147]. Bodies are experienced and lived, and orientation to the world is in terms of what the world offers for action, what it affords. From this perspective, cognition and perception are not only brain functions but rather something that humans do, mostly through movement[67, 234].

The pleasure of playing well motivates children to seek out more playing[76, 255]. Playing in ways that are valued by the player releases neurotrophins that can have more lasting protection against depression [192, 193, 194, 196]. The pleasure of playing can arise from experiencing the vitality of emotions such as fear, anger, disgust and surprise and overcoming them, for example through pretend play, rough and tumble play, risk-taking, rude rhymes, horror stories, video games and generally mucking about[83, 108, 192, 194, 195, 197, 199, 200, 231, 245, 259]. Such forms of playing help prime neural networks to respond flexibly and creatively to novel situations without over-reacting, thereby developing the capacity to deal emotionally with being surprised or temporarily out of control[6, 111, 135, 198, 200, 230, 236, 260]. In this way, play's entangled embodied, sensual, dynamic and affective dimensions can add to its vitality and contribute to physical health and strength, emotion regulation and healthy stress response systems.

Alongside this, playing well also provides the relational context for developing healthy attachment systems to caregivers (through early forms of play such as peek-a-boo and tickling)[29, 105, 106, 107, 124, 171 175, 192], friends

[6] Homeostasis is an automatic, dynamic response to fluctuating assemblages of mind-body-senses-environment conditions.

(through conflicts as well as affective solidarity and support)[17, 24, 45, 58, 75, 88, 116, 189, 202, 242, 266, 268, 276], other non-human animals[62, 82, 182, 190, 212, 250], and to place [20, 23, 40, 122, 123, 126, 134, 140, 159, 162, 163, 264, 265, 274], contributing to a sense of security and belonging and the sense for children of being able to affect their own lives and the lives of others.

All this means that, when conditions are right, **children can create their own wellbeing**. This presents a strong ethical, moral, economic and social argument for adults to work towards producing those conditions through both policies and practices. If playing is seen as one of the ten central human capabilities (for all ages), as it is in Nussbaum's list of core capabilities, then a relational capability approach to wellbeing would need to pay attention to the spatial, temporal and affective conditions that support the resources, opportunities, freedoms and therefore capability to play. Such attention can be developed through the twin processes of account-ability and response-ability.

Children's play today

Thinking about children's opportunities for play from a relational capability approach turns attention towards the conditions of children's everyday lives and the extent to which these can support or constrain opportunities for playing, noting that both may be the case at the same time. A relational approach to accounting for children's play can attend to the complexities of these conditions, recognising that they are situated and negotiable[164, 165, 208, 219], and that children's lives are dynamic, continuously changing over time and space[91]. Where conditions are conducive, playing emerges through and as encounters between children, other bodies and the materiality and affective atmospheres of their *milieux*.

Children play anywhere and everywhere[258], and so accounting for children's play patterns requires looking beyond designated times and spaces for playing. It also means paying attention to the intersections of macro level structures, forces and influences and the micro detail of children's everyday experiences. The full review considers children's play patterns in the home and other institutions of childhood, in digital spaces and in the public realm, noting that children's digital and non-digital lives are intimately interwoven [18, 53, 219, 243, 273].

Overall, the research we reviewed presents a seemingly contradictory picture of, on the one hand, a lively culture of play expressed in a range of contexts, and on the other, stark intersecting inequalities and spatial injustices that constrain children's capability to play across these contexts.

Such inequalities have been driven by multiple forces, particularly:

- the pervasive effects of late capitalism[160], including the 2008 global financial crisis and associated austerity politics[72, 133, 174];
- the inroads of commercial interests into children's play in the form of:
  - digital opportunities
  - the toy industry
  - out-of-school activities and commercial play provision, putting such opportunities beyond the reach of some children[117, 167, 168];
- and, in the public realm:
  - the dominance of traffic[22, 31, 94, 127, 154, 205, 232, 233]
  - increasing privatisation of public space[89, 109, 145, 180, 237]
  - issues of neighbourhood safety and structural marginalisation[20, 25, 77, 95, 96, 100, 120, 121, 203, 263, 274].

The studies reviewed highlight how play emerges from the conditions of children's lives and how children will seek out moments of playfulness, both fleeting and more sustained, in their desire to make life better (at least for the time of playing) and to be well[147]. The many different ways that children play today, evident from the research, challenge the often-cited view that children's play is in decline[28, 39, 46, 99, 110]. Such a claim conflates change with decline and is also caught up in adult narratives of valuing some forms of play over others[4, 151, 238, 277]. In particular, there is concern over the decline in children's self-organised outdoor play, although some researchers caution against over-simplistic, over-romanticised and universal claims in this regard[120].

Both macro-level quantitative research and more micro level qualitative studies trace a decline in children's freedom of movement and their associated capability to play out across many minority world contexts[80, 97, 144, 154, 155, 156, 166, 233, 213], with the most significant reductions occurring between 1970 and 2000[232] – over twenty years ago. This is predominantly due to concerns for children's safety brought about by dramatic increases in traffic and an associated erosion of community networks from which fears arise about others who are unknown [71, 146, 224, 262]. These fears play out in gendered, dis/ablist, racialised and classed ways but are also highly influenced by localised spatial arrangements[20, 41, 77, 120, 121, 203, 222, 263], with evidence that where conditions are right children continue to play out from a relatively young age[20, 153, 264]. Whilst neoliberal political forces seek to responsibilise individual parents and caregivers for their children's wellbeing [161, 261], research reveals that adults' willingness and opportunity to allow children out to play has much more to do with the reality of the conditions of their everyday lives[69, 166, 246, 262].

Similarly, the extent to which adults in other institutions of childhood, for example schools, provide for play and allow children freedom to play is shaped by the social, cultural, organisational and spatial conditions within which they work, including imposed standards, regulatory processes, competitive league tables and safety concerns[9, 272]. Despite this, most (but not all) children enjoy playing in schools and other forms of adult supervised provision, sometimes resisting rules in playful ways[118, 183, 185, 248, 249]. There has also been an exponential growth in organised out-of-school activities since the 1990s following (and to some extent in response to) the corresponding decline in children's outdoor play since the 1970s[118, 232, 233, 261].

Useful as they are, studies into the decline in children's everyday freedoms do not account for the myriad entangled influences on children's play patterns. Such influences need to be understood in the context of the mesh of local socio-political and spatial conditions and powerful structural forces including globalised (late) capitalism and commercialisation, neoliberal education and austerity politics, poverty, racism, cishetero/sexism[7] and an ableist culture, influences that repeatedly arise in the studies reviewed.

The erosion of children's everyday freedoms to play in the public realm places a greater emphasis on playing within the boundaries of home[71, 132, 153], with bedrooms and gardens (for those children who have them) becoming increasingly significant[2, 13, 16, 80, 153]. Such changing play patterns are caught up in a growing consumer culture of commercial toys and digital technologies[71, 152]. The dominance of market forces means that well-funded commercial and market research produces toys, games and brands (including digital toys and games) whose social and cultural value become an integral element of children's cultures, challenging simplistic and negative connotations of consumerism[51, 157, 214, 273, 275]. Children's capability to participate in such cultures (including both access to private space at home and engagement in paid for after school activities) depends on what their families can afford[117, 167, 168, 273, 275].

In many ways, new digital technologies have transformed children's lives[10, 34], opening up novel and exciting opportunities for playing, although the ways in which children play with them commonly reflect more traditional accounts of playing[65, 158, 169]. These digital technologies are both attractive and convenient for children, designed as they are to appeal to children's sociability[219]. There are of course concerns for children's safety online. However, unlike fears regarding neighbourhood safety where adult responses are often prohibitive and seek to remove children from the public realm, measures and strategies to protect children online tend to be more nuanced, focusing on education and some attempts to regulate digital platform providers[1, 128, 153].

In many ways, the pandemic intensified these changing play patterns, revealing both existing inequalities in private space and access to digital resources and increasing children's reliance on digital technologies for play[70, 112, 184]. However, children themselves, when asked, continue to indicate a strong

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[7] Cisheterosexism refers to discrimination against lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer or questioning, intersex, asexual and more (LGBTQIA+) people, including the assumption of a heterosexual and cisgender (someone whose gender corresponds to the sex registered at birth) norm.

desire to play out[44, 59, 60, 73, 114]. Nonetheless, it could perhaps be argued that relatively little effort has been made in respect of children's capabilities to play in the public realm compared to levels of financial investment in the commercial play, toy and digital play industry, despite recent moves towards planning and designing for child-friendly environments[11, 30, 33, 97, 142, 218].

In sum, the capability to play out emerges from relations among sufficient environmental resources and the capability to access them. Children's capability to convert resources into 'functionings'[215] plays out across multiple interrelated personal, social and environmental factors that are classed, racialised, gendered and dis/ablised. In seeking to work with such relationality of conditions, the concept of play sufficiency may be useful as both a proxy and an organising principle for child-friendly environments, revealing much about how particular places work in respect of children's capability to play out. In particular, given the relationship between playing and being well, the capability to meet up and play outside regularly, from a young age and without the need for direct adult supervision or accompaniment can contribute to children's overall capability to do and be well. Furthermore, many of the issues that need to be addressed in securing play sufficiency for all align with environmental concerns and other principles enshrined in the Welsh Government's Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) Act 2015.

The full review gives several examples of actions taken in support of children's play.

Closing thoughts: a relational capability approach and an ethical response-ability

Bringing all these ideas and the literature reviewed together, we suggest that a relational capability approach to children's wellbeing requires paying attention to the spatial, temporal and affective conditions that support children's capability to play. The twin processes of account-ability and response-ability, together with Amin's four registers of repair, relatedness, rights and re-enchantment[5] offer a framework for doing this that can embrace the interrelatedness of policies, practices, diverse children, communities, the built environment, environmental sustainability, economies and more across multiple scales. This framework has been a core feature of research into the Play Sufficiency Duty for the past decade[149, 150, 222, 223] and can serve to underscore the relational capability approach promoted throughout this review.

Amin's four registers for a good city also need to be considered relationally when reviewing adult response-ability for children's capability to play. As such relatedness can be seen in the broadening out of adult support for play from designated play provision (which could, arguably, include toys and digital games) to include children's capability to play out in the public realm[11, 36, 37, 38, 97, 125]. Our review highlights that a major constraint on children's capability to play out comes from traffic, either moving or stationary. This offers increasing synergies between play advocacy and the political agenda for environmental sustainability, including active travel, low traffic neighbourhoods and greening the built environment. **Relatedness** is also evident in the ways that play advocates and policy makers are increasingly working cross-professionally with those working in planning, highways, housing, parks and open spaces, green infrastructure, education and more. This is particularly apparent in Wales given the requirement to do so in the Play Sufficiency Duty, a feature of the duty that has been described as one of its biggest successes[222, 223]. Equally, response-ability for children's capability to play works in tandem with developing an account-ability for children's satisfaction with their opportunities to play. This too can be developed both through networking and professional development and also through ethical research with children to map their neighbourhoods. In addition, facilitating play in a range of settings, including hospitals, prisons and cultural institutions further contributes to **relatedness.**

The austerity agenda has had a big impact both on play and playwork services and the infrastructure to support this. Attempts to **repair** the effects of such cuts at service level have included diversification of services and roles, both in terms of income generation and working more closely with families struggling because of austerity measures, particularly through feeding children. At policy level, national government

efforts to mitigate the worst effects of austerity and the cost-of-living crisis can work productively with the play sector, as has been the case, for example, in Welsh Government funding for play services to both build back after the pandemic and to feed children in the school holidays through the Summer of Fun and Holiday Hunger Playworks programmes.

Repair can also be seen through the reparations made in the physical infrastructure of urban environments, many of which have been implemented through broader sustainability policy agendas. Yet, although physical changes can alter everyday spatial practices (such as removing traffic), children's capability to play out also depends on such changes being sensitive to local context and histories[201] and often also needs changes to the social production of space through activation[204]. Such activation can be provided by playworkers and other play advocates who can appreciate forms of children's playfulness often obscured in over-simplified, individual and instrumental understandings of play's value, including children's ingenuity, nonsense and more taboo forms of playing[139, 147, 170, 216, 217, 220, 245]. Equally, studies of children's play cultures show its capacity for nonsense, sophisticated subversion and imagining the world anew[68, 139, 147].

What happens when play advocates work with other adults to bring these forms of playfulness to light, either through encouragement to pay attention to children or through sharing their own memories of playing as a child, is that they become animated and begin to smile[78, 223, 226]. These are powerful engagements that surface a **re-enchantment** with play, although it is important not to over-romanticise. Such engagements can counter the forces of contemporary disenchantment with childhood evident in the negatively-valanced – and very real – concerns about obesity, mental health, crime and more[147]. Re-enchanting adults through reconnecting them to the vitality, thrill, pleasure and nonsense that playing can offer is often an effective and affective way of showing that playing is how children can help themselves to be well.

Running through all this is Amin's register of **rights**. As with many theories of wellbeing and play, rights are often conceived as being possessed by individual rights-holders. In Amin's vision, rights are held in common, and a good city is a 'socially just city, with strong obligations towards those marginalised'[5, p. 1015]. Rights refers to more than access to resources and services and also includes the right to participate in the production of public spaces[57, 210, 221]. Such a view makes possible a relational perspective on rights that can sit alongside a **relational** capability approach to children's wellbeing through adult account-ability and response-ability.

The evidence contained within the full literature review provides a strong argument that working towards the production of such conditions has an ethical, moral, social, environmental and economic basis. Children's capability to play is of political importance for both its intrinsic value (as a social justice issue) and because of its instrumental value in terms of its contribution to the wellbeing of children and communities and its connections with sustainable development. Supporting children's capability to play is therefore in line with both the Welsh Government's rights-based, social democratic policies for children and other broader policies, including the over-arching Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) Act 2015.

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