



# Promoting physical activity through outdoor play in early years settings

Children begin their active lives through play. This is important to their physical, mental and social development and is largely dictated by the opportunities that parents and carers give them<sup>1</sup>. Playing outdoors contributes towards agility, balance, creativity, social cooperation and concentration.

Play is one of the ten evidence based steps to help children in the early years to maintain a healthy weight promoted in the Public Health Wales 'Every Child Wales' programme for children aged 0 to 5 years. Step six focuses on outdoor play, with the ambition that every child will be given the chance to play outdoors every day, for at least three hours.

This can be light activities like walking, as well as more energetic activities like running, dancing, skipping or active games. Short bursts of physical activity in early years settings throughout the day add up and support children to reach, and often exceed, the recommended three hours.

The four UK Chief Medical Officers' physical activity guidelines recognise the importance of play for children's development. The guidelines recommend that children should have as much active play as possible.

The overall message is any activity is better than none, and more is better still.

The CMO's guidelines say:

### Infants (younger than a year old):

- Should be physically active several times every day in lots of ways, including interactive floor-based activity, such as crawling.
- Babies should have at least 30 minutes of tummy time spread throughout the day while awake. They should also have chances to reach and grasp, push and pull themselves up independently and roll over.

### Toddlers (1 to 2 years):

- Toddlers should spend at least 180 minutes (three hours) a day doing lots of different of physical activities, including active and outdoor play, spread throughout the day.

### Pre-schoolers (3 to 4 years):

- Pre-schoolers should spend at least 180 minutes (three hours) a day in a variety of physical activities spread throughout the day, including active and outdoor play. More is better and at least 60 minutes should be normal-to-energetic physical activity.<sup>2</sup>

Active play is one of the easiest and most natural ways that children of any age can engage in the necessary levels of physical activity. When given the opportunity to play children are likely to be physically active by running, jumping, dancing, climbing, digging, lifting, pushing and pulling.

Active play is the most common type of physical activity that children take part in outside school, and unstructured play may be one of the best forms of physical activity for children<sup>3</sup>.

### How playing contributes to children's physical activity levels

- Prolonged and wide-ranging exercise develops stamina (informal sports, chase games, climbing, building). Research suggests that children can gain more physical exercise in regular informal play than in a weekly sports activity<sup>4</sup>.

- Climbing develops strength, co-ordination and balance, while jumping contributes to bone density.
- When children repeat an action as part of their play they are often in the process of calibrating – learning to manage growing bodies – as well as developing agility, co-ordination and confidence.

Practitioners can put some essential components in place to provide younger children with the opportunity to play outdoors. These are permission, time, space and materials.

## Ensuring permission

When we reminisce about our childhoods, many of us will recall happy times spent outdoors in nature. Children need permission from carers to play outdoors. Parents and carers are subject to powerful and sometimes contradictory messages about keeping children safe. However, this should not result in a child not being allowed access to outdoor play. The benefits of playing outdoors greatly outweigh any risks.

To demonstrate a supportive attitude towards outdoor play we should ensure we do not:

- dismiss it as frivolous and a waste of time
- unintentionally be unenthusiastic (even if the weather isn't favourable)
- over regulate and over organise it
- unnecessarily restrict it through fear.

## Creating time for outdoor play in settings

For many reasons children's time for outdoor play has decreased significantly in recent years. By making time for children's outdoor play we promote and value children's freedom, independence and choice and these characteristics perform a crucial role in children's resilience, ability to deal with stress and anxiety, and general wellbeing.

Studies show that children are most physically active during the first 10 to 15 minutes of outdoor playtime<sup>5</sup>. One way to support time for play is to offer more frequent short periods of outdoor play.

Free play is beneficial for all aspects of healthy child development so it is important to balance structured activities with opportunities for free play. Integrating physical activity into the daily routine of other activities helps ensure that free play is not infringed upon. For instance, build activity into numeracy activity and other areas of structured curriculum.



## Providing space for play

A rich play environment is one where children and teenagers are able to make a wide range of choices; where there are many possibilities so that they can invent and extend their own play.

It is a varied, inspirational and interesting physical environment that maximises the potential for socialising, creativity, resourcefulness and challenge. It is a place where children feel free to play in their own way, on their own terms. Quality play provision offers all children and teenagers the opportunity to freely interact with or experience the following:

- **other children and young people** – with a choice to play alone or with others, to negotiate, co-operate, fall out, and resolve conflict

- **the natural world** – weather, the seasons, bushes, trees, plants, insects, animals and mud
- **loose parts** – natural and man-made materials that can be manipulated, moved and adapted, built and demolished
- **the natural elements** – earth, air, fire and water
- **challenge and risk taking** – both on a physical and emotional level
- **playing with identity** – role play and dressing up
- **movement** – running, jumping, climbing, balancing and rolling
- **rough and tumble** – play fighting
- **the senses** – sounds, tastes, textures, smells and sights<sup>6</sup>.

**Loose parts can be natural or synthetic and include:**

- Wood
- Containers
- Shapes
- Toys
- Stones
- Stumps
- Sand
- Gravel
- Fabric
- Twigs
- Logs
- Stones
- Flowers
- Rope
- Balls
- Shells.

**Making materials available for play**

While children can and will play anywhere and with almost anything, there are resources we can provide that can facilitate and encourage active play such as sand, water, shells, fabric, buckets, boxes, rope, tyres, bottles, wood and scrap materials of all kinds. Such materials are cheap and accessible, and simply leaving a pile of them for children to explore will increase the motivation and intensity of their play and activity levels.

Children who play outdoors with others do not need many toys. By providing perhaps just a few well-chosen toys but numerous loose parts we can enrich the play space and facilitate play. Loose parts<sup>7</sup> refers to anything that can be moved around, carried, rolled, lifted, piled one on top of the other or combined to create interesting and novel structures and experiences.

Having loose parts available allows children to use the materials as they choose. Providing loose parts supports children to play in many different ways and on many different levels. Environments that include loose parts tend to be more stimulating and engaging than static ones.

Providing loose parts regularly and as an integral part of the activity in settings provides parents and carers with ideas that they can replicate in the home environment.



## Conclusion

We should be aware of the importance of play and we should take action to promote and protect it. Any intervention we make should acknowledge play's characteristics and allow sufficient flexibility, unpredictability and security for children to play freely<sup>8</sup>.

- We must consider children's play spaces as important environments that should be protected.
- We should advocate that children's play is essential for healthy development and wellbeing. It is a legitimate behaviour and their human right – this applies to children playing indoors and outdoors.

- Children's play is often chaotic, frantic and noisy, and children's play spaces are often messy, disordered and idiosyncratic. We need to understand that children's conception of a desirable play space does not look like an adult's. We need to be tolerant of mess and dirt!
- We can support children's play by providing loose parts and rejecting over-commercialism.
- We can prioritise children's time to play freely. If we over-supervise or over-protect we take away the child's free choice and the very thing that makes their behaviour play.

## Thinking sensibly about health and safety

When we provide outdoor play opportunities for children we should take a common sense approach to health and safety. Accidents will happen but it shouldn't deter us – the benefits of outdoor play far outweigh the risks – scrapes, bumps and bruises are all part of growing up.

### Prepare

Make sure the play environment is checked and that checks are recorded. Make sure checks are a mix of visual checking and physical testing. All settings should have clear procedures on what should be checked, by whom and how often.

Making sure that the physical needs of children and staff are met goes some way in equipping them to be outdoors. Making sure that each child and adult has appropriate clothing and shelter for wet weather, sun protection on sunny day, that water is available in warmer months, and that hats and coats can be accessed in the winter helps to ensure that playing outdoors is a positive experience for everyone.

### Expect the best

Do not look for the smallest and most unlikely possibility of getting hurt in every activity. A very long chain of 'what ifs' are very unlikely to happen and they should not be the focus of our practice.

Practitioners should use a careful but positive and practical approach. We assess whether a child is competent to make decisions about risk and hazards for themselves and we support them in their decision unless there is a real risk of serious harm.

### Enjoy

Early years practitioners are privileged to be able to operate in a world where playing takes precedence. One of the best ways we can work within the guidance is to enjoy the play process. The enjoyment of play for what it is, to play with enthusiasm when invited to play, and to be a passionate advocate for play, are the best ways to ensure an environment and atmosphere where young children can have their needs and rights met.



## References

<sup>1</sup> Public Health Wales (2016) '10 steps to a healthy weight'.

<sup>2</sup> UK Chief Medical Officers (2019) *UK Chief Medical Officers' Physical Activity Guidelines*. Crown Copyright.

<sup>3</sup> Lester, S. and Russell, W. (2008) *Play for a Change – Play, Policy and Practice: A review of contemporary perspectives*. London: National Children's Bureau for Play England.

<sup>4</sup> Mackett, R. *et al* (2007) 'Children's independent movement in the local environment', *Built Environment*, 33, 4, 454-68.

<sup>5</sup> Gill, T. (2014) *The Play Return: A review of the wider impact of play initiatives*. London: UK Children's Play Policy Forum.

<sup>6</sup> Welsh Government (2014) *Wales – a Play Friendly Country*. Cardiff: Welsh Government.

<sup>7</sup> Nicholson, S. (1972) The Theory of Loose Parts: An important principle for design methodology, *Studies in Design Education Craft & Technology*, 4 (2), 5-14.

<sup>8</sup> Lester, S. and Russell, W. (2010) *Children's right to play: An examination of the importance of play in the lives of children worldwide*. The Netherlands: Bernard van Leer Foundation.



[www.play.wales](http://www.play.wales)

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