

Chwarae Cymru
Play Wales



Play provision: realising disabled children's rights

www.play.wales

All children, including disabled children, have a right to play. Play providers and people who work for and with children have important roles in ensuring that right is respected, protected and fulfilled.

This information sheet is anchored in a children's human rights approach and the Playwork Principles. It offers both information and practical suggestions with the goal of creating opportunities for disabled children to realise their right to play. It is suitable for play providers and playworkers whose primary purpose is facilitating play, and organisations and people for whom supporting play is part of what they do.

In this information sheet we use 'disabled child' or 'disabled children' to reflect the Social Model of Disability and to include children who are seriously ill or have life-limiting conditions.

The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) and the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD) use the wording 'children with disabilities' which we have retained in direct quotes. We recognise that some people prefer one form of wording over another for various valid reasons.

A children's human rights approach

Every human has rights that should be respected, protected and fulfilled. This makes each of us a rights holder. To guarantee human rights, governments and others such as schools, organisations, businesses, professionals, parents and carers, have obligations which make them (and us) duty bearers.

The UNCRC and CRPD embed disabled children's right to play in the framework of human rights. Article 31 of the UNCRC enshrines the right to play of all children, without discrimination, and is the starting point for advocates of children's play. The same article encourages the provision of 'appropriate and equal opportunities'¹.

Article 23 of the UNCRC clearly asserts the rights of disabled children, opening with the statement that disabled children 'should enjoy a full and decent life, in conditions which ensure dignity, promote self-reliance and facilitate the child's active participation in the community'². The same words could readily be applied to our aspiration for good play provision and good play spaces. They contain an echo from the famous 1926 David Lloyd George quote that 'play is a child's first claim on the community'.

Play and recreation are described by the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child as a form of 'participation in everyday life'³ expressly valued for the enjoyment and pleasure they afford. This reinforces the links between Articles 23 and 31. The UNCRC should be understood holistically – all rights have importance in children's lives and serve to reinforce each other. The right not to be discriminated against (Article 2) is an underpinning principle.

This has been made clear in *General comment No. 17 (2013) on the right of the child to rest, leisure, play, recreational activities, cultural life and the arts (art. 31)*. GC17, as it is known, recognises that 'multiple barriers impede access by children with disabilities to the rights provided for in article 31'⁴ and reinforces the importance of inclusion and the rights of disabled children throughout. For example, it asserts that 'inclusive education and inclusive play are mutually reinforcing'⁵.

GC17 makes several references to inclusive and accessible spaces both in the public realm and within play provision and schools, including:

- Accessible and inclusive environments and facilities must be made available to disabled children to enable them to enjoy their rights under Article 31.
- Freedom from 'social exclusion, prejudice or discrimination' is a factor for an 'optimum environment' for Article 31.
- Pro-active measures are needed to remove barriers and promote accessibility for disabled children.

- Disabled People's Organisations*, including children themselves, should be involved in planning, design, development, implementation and monitoring of measures needed for Article 31.
- Equipment and spaces in schools should be designed to enable all children, including disabled children, to participate equally.⁶

* Disabled People's Organisations (DPOs) are those controlled by disabled people at the board and membership levels. The role of DPOs includes providing disabled people a voice of their own, identifying needs, expressing views on priorities, evaluating services and advocating change and public awareness.

Disabled children's right to play is protected within the CRPD. Article 7 asserts that measures should be taken so that disabled children 'have full enjoyment of all human rights and fundamental freedoms on an equal basis with other children'⁷. Article 9 deals broadly with equal access and Article 30 with equal access to play, recreation, sporting and leisure activities.

States Parties (Governments) are expected to take appropriate measures 'To ensure that children with disabilities have equal access with other children to participation in play (...), including those activities in the school system'⁸.

*The Right Way: A Children's Rights Approach in Wales*⁹ is a framework for working with children, grounded in the UNCRC, helping to put children's rights at the core of planning and service delivery. The *The Right Way* framework offers a range of resources to put children's rights at the heart of everything we do. Sally Holland, Children's Commissioner for Wales, points out that 'Investing in children's human rights has real benefits for organisations, including contributing to enabling more children and young people to be better involved in public services which leads to better decision making, ensuring there's a real focus on the particular needs of children whose voices can be lost or silenced, creating an environment where public services are accountable to all of its service users'¹⁰.

The Social Model of Disability

The Social Model of Disability was developed by disabled people based on the knowledge they gained from their lived experience. Many of the barriers disabled people face are caused by the way society is organised. Rather than impairments or disabled people's bodies being the problem, it is society which creates and maintains barriers which are the main cause of exclusion. Barriers include people's attitudes to disability, and physical and organisational barriers.

For play providers, building our understanding of the Social Model of Disability provides a foundation for planning and developing services. Information on the Social Model of Disability from organisations such as Disability Wales¹¹ is a good place to start.

Here are some practical examples of actions play providers can take, using a social model 'mindset':

- Assess the sensory dimensions of environments and make adjustments to increase comfort and participation.
- Ensure staff have access to regular training and professional development.
- Use the whole environment as flexibly as possible so children have options of spaces that meet their needs.

- Making access to outdoor play space as easy as possible.
- Review policies and procedures to identify hidden barriers.

Each of these steps may require further reading, research and consultation with children, families and other organisations. Understanding more about the context for families with disabled children can transform our staff training, policies and procedures.

Here are a couple of examples: the Family Fund report *Tired All the Time*¹² illustrates sleep deprivation is common amongst families with disabled children and has financial, social and emotional impacts. Another Family Fund report asked *Do Siblings Matter Too?*¹³.

Insights from reports like these, prompt us to ask questions such as:

- Does our provision have space for parents and carers to stop for a quiet moment?
- Does our provision offer space for children to rest during the day?
- Do we have a friendly and enabling attitude when children arrive late or haven't got everything they were supposed to bring?
- How does our provision respond to the daily complexities brothers and sisters of disabled children encounter?
- Does our provision support siblings with their own needs, to choose to play together or have time apart when they wish?



Inclusion and children's human rights within organisational play policies

Working towards an organisational play policy can be a helpful way to establish a shared understanding of our practice in relation to children's rights, our commitment to play and inclusion. Informed by the Social Model of Disability, and bringing together any reading, research and consultation we have carried out, it can help to show that disabled children are welcome.

The process of developing a play policy is an opportunity to include the voices of children and to ensure disabled children's perspectives are listened to. It can also link to play sufficiency, showing how our provision contributes to providing for diverse needs. As part of the Play Sufficiency Duty, every local authority 'should aim to offer play opportunities that are inclusive and encourage all children to play and meet together if they wish to'.¹⁴

Making the play policy available in more than one format helps to demonstrate that everyone is welcome. For example, you could create:

- a summary of the policy in a simple document
- a poster illustrating the important themes
- a video of key points being spoken aloud and with subtitles added (which is fairly easily done on social media platforms)
- a signed version using British Sign Language or Makaton (a language programme using signs and symbols to help people to communicate)
- an easy-read version perhaps also including symbols.

Inclusive communication

Deciding how to present a play policy, or any other organisational information, is an opportunity to think about inclusive communication. Accessibility in communication is as important as physical accessibility. For service providers, this means recognising that people understand and express themselves in different ways. For children (and parents, carers and staff) it means receiving information and being able to express themselves in ways that meet their needs.

Inclusive communication is always a two-way process and communication is rarely only verbal. Different forms of communication (for example, sign language, communication using assistive technology, symbols) can be learned by staff and children so that more children using these forms of communication are included.

All children use many forms of communication as part of the play process – body language, facial expressions, gestures and actions as well as words and sounds. Known as 'play cues', children use these to signal their wish to play and to interact while playing. Recognising and tuning into play cues is a skill that can be practised. It can be especially important to get to know disabled children well to recognise the play cues they use. Sometimes adults can act as a 'bridge' between children if play cues aren't picked up in the to-and-fro of playing. Adults may also be able to help adjust the environment to reduce visual or aural intrusions, such as background noise or harsh lighting, which can be confusing and cause sensory overload.

An inclusive approach to communication is fundamental in enabling disabled children to exercise their rights under Article 12 of the UNCRC which ensures children have the right to express their views freely in all matters affecting them, and for their views to be listened to and respected.

Applying the Playwork Principles

The Playwork Principles are a professional and ethical framework for playwork¹⁵. They complement a children's human rights approach in play with a position of respecting diversity and inclusion.

‘Play: Children’s play is any behaviour, activity or process initiated, controlled and structured by children themselves; it takes place whenever and wherever opportunities arise. Caregivers may contribute to the creation of environments in which play takes place, but play itself is non-compulsory, driven by intrinsic motivation and undertaken for its own sake, rather than as a means to an end. Play involves the exercise of autonomy, physical, mental or emotional activity, and has the potential to take infinite forms, either in groups or alone. These forms will change and be adapted throughout the course of childhood. The key characteristics of play are fun, uncertainty, challenge, flexibility and non-productivity. Together, these factors contribute to the enjoyment it produces and the consequent incentive to continue to play. While play is often considered non-essential, the Committee reaffirms that it is a fundamental and vital dimension of the pleasure of childhood, as well as an essential component of physical, social, cognitive, emotional and spiritual development.’¹⁶

Playwork Principle 1 recognises that all children and young people need to play (see Article 31) while Playwork Principle 2 sets out a definition of play that highlights play as a process that is freely chosen, personally directed and intrinsically motivated.

Although disabled children may need additional support, some or all of the time, the focus should stay on their right to play in ways that remain within their direction so that they too can ‘determine and control the content and intent of their play, by following their own instincts, ideas and interests, in their own way for their own reasons’ (Playwork Principle 2).

It might well be said that many children’s play is at the mercy of adult agendas, but disabled children’s play is particularly at risk of being hijacked by good intentions and for goals and outcomes set by adults. Therapy, education and treatment may be presented in playful ways, but these are not a substitute for playing. The desire to protect children does not negate their need for risk, challenge and the pleasure to be had from thrilling, adventurous play opportunities if they seek them (Playwork Principle 8).

Disabled children may find they have less time playing without the presence of adults, less choice about who they play with and less control over their choice in friendships than other children (rights associated with Article 15 of the UNCRC, freedom of association).

In this respect, Playwork Principle 3 sets the standard for practice – ‘the prime focus and essence of playwork is to support and facilitate the play process’. Continually working to integrate this Playwork Principle into our professional practice keeps playing at the centre of how we support disabled children’s play without controlling it, censoring it, taking over or ‘helping’ too much.

Playwork Principles – using reflective questions

Reflecting deeply on day-to-day practice helps us learn. For example:

- Have we explored as many ways as possible to enable children to exercise choice in their play?
- Do we look for opportunities to step back, so that children have control and autonomy when they play?
- Have we supported children to test their own limits and encounter risk and challenge in play as much as they wish?
- What have we done to enable children to communicate their wishes and choices?

Accessible and inclusive play space

Ensuring play spaces indoors or out – or flowing between the two – are accessible means minimising environmental and physical barriers to playing. This can mean thinking about things like:

- entrances and exits
- movement around the space
- ease of access to the features
- types of surfaces used
- access to the site or project location and facilities.



The importance of accessible toilets cannot be over-estimated and for many families, availability of accessible toilets is the most important factor in being able to enjoy a day out or to participate in activities. In addition to standard accessible toilets, Changing Places Toilets¹⁷ enable anyone, regardless of their disability, to do the things that others take for granted. Changing Places Toilets provide extra equipment and space so they can be used safely and comfortably by people with profound and multiple learning disabilities or with physical disabilities.

Making things physically accessible is not sufficient alone to create an inclusive play space. Social factors, sensory qualities and play value must also be considered. An inclusive play space aims to enable satisfying play opportunities for all children to play in the ways that they choose, with whom they choose. It may not be possible for every child to access every feature or opportunity of a space in the same way, however no-one should be left on the side-lines. GC17 recommends investment in Universal Design¹⁸ which is all about designing environments and everything in them so that they can be accessed, understood and used to the greatest extent possible

by everyone regardless of their age, size, ability or disability.¹⁹ The Play Wales *Creating accessible play spaces* toolkit explores this further.²⁰

Playwork Principle 5 points to the role of the playworker supporting all children and young people in the creation of a space in which they can play. Playworkers have a uniquely valuable opportunity here in empowering disabled children. Play space can offer children the chance to change, shape and exercise control over aspects of the environment – whether at the scale of sand play or den-building and digging holes, or more dramatically changing aspects of the whole play space. It is not just the resulting space that is important, but the act of changing the environment. Many disabled children have few areas of their lives in which they can exercise control but play spaces should be somewhere they can.

‘Play spaces need to be accessible, inclusive and flexible enough to meet the changing play needs of children. Good play spaces genuinely look and feel as though they belong to the children who use them.’²¹

Get outdoors

The outdoors offers special qualities that enhance inclusive play experiences.²² For various reasons, such as constraints on their time or having to rely on an adult, disabled children may spend less time playing outdoors, despite all the benefits the outdoors offers.

Natural surroundings can feel calmer to be in and freer of the things that can be difficult or distressing for some children indoors, such as artificial lighting and banging doors. It is also often easier to move around, make noise and express oneself freely in outdoor play spaces.

Children can find many things to interact with outdoors meaning their play and interactions do not need to be focused on an adult. Outdoor environments encompass qualities which change with the season, weather and time of day yet offer the reliability of favourite landmarks like a tree or boulder to sit by.

Natural and loose parts play materials can offer particularly immersive and engaging play opportunities and there are no right or wrong ways to play with these. There can be rich yet gentle sensory environments outdoors which can be especially attractive and satisfying to play in and with. Meanwhile children can find different levels and type of challenge outdoors especially in more natural or wild spaces if they are available in our play provision or by going out to visit them nearby.

We can make adaptations as necessary, with the involvement of the children, to support their choice over how they fully access all the play environment offers. For example, we might:

- identify different ways to reach a play feature – a scramble up a hill, a gentle gradient, a steady bridge or a wobbly plank
- create simple resting and gathering places such as a log seat or swing seat
- create markers such as bells, symbols or flags on routes or in spaces, to help children locate themselves
- provide shelter so that children can rest, have protection from the elements or have time away from hustle and bustle.

Conclusion

Inclusive play provision helps to realise the rights of all children and gives us the opportunity to demonstrate the values fundamental to a rights-based approach. In the words of the UNCRC, these are about bringing children up in a spirit of 'peace, dignity, tolerance, freedom, equality and solidarity'²³.

Playing is one of the most important aspects of children's lives and all children should have equal opportunities to play alongside other children, as they choose, in community settings, play spaces, play provision and schools. Playing with or alongside other children provides a range of benefits for all children, such as a sense of belonging, fun and enjoyment, while at the same time building confidence, independence, health and skills.

There are many practical and achievable steps we can all take towards more inclusive play provision. By taking these steps, in collaboration with children, we can improve play opportunities for everyone.



References

¹ United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child (1989) *Convention on the Rights of the Child – Article 31*. Geneva: UN Committee on the Rights of the Child.

² *Convention on the Rights of the Child – Article 23*.

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 (article 31)*. CRC/C/GC/17: United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child, par. 10.

⁴ *General comment No. 17 (2013) on the right of the child to rest, leisure, play, recreational activities, cultural life and the arts (article 31)*, par. 50.

⁵ *General comment No. 17 (2013) on the right of the child to rest, leisure, play, recreational activities, cultural life and the arts (article 31)*, par. 27.

⁶ *General comment No. 17 (2013) on the right of the child to rest, leisure, play, recreational activities, cultural life and the arts (article 31)*.

⁷ United Nations General Assembly (2007) *United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities CRPD*. United Nations General Assembly.

⁸ *United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities CRPD*, Article 30, par. 5d.

⁹ Children's Commissioner for Wales (2017) *The Right Way – A Children's Rights Approach*. Swansea: Children's Commissioner for Wales.

¹⁰ *The Right Way – A Children's Rights Approach*.

¹¹ Disability Wales, [The Social Model of Disability](#).

¹² Family Fund (2013) *Tired All the Time: The Impact of Sleep Difficulties on Families with Disabled Children*. Family Fund Trust for Families with Severely Disabled Children.

¹³ Family Fund (2015) *Do Siblings Matter too?* Family Fund Trust for Families with Severely Disabled Children.

¹⁴ Play Wales (2020) *Play Sufficiency in Wales*. Cardiff: Play Wales.

¹⁵ Playwork Principles Scrutiny Group (2005) [Playwork Principles](#), held in trust as honest brokers for the profession by the Playwork Principles Scrutiny Group.

¹⁶ *General comment No. 17 (2013) on the right of the child to rest, leisure, play, recreational activities, cultural life and the arts (article 31)*, par. 14c.

¹⁷ [Changing Places Toilets](#).

¹⁸ *General comment No. 17 (2013) on the right of the child to rest, leisure, play, recreational activities, cultural life and the arts (article 31)*, par. 58e.

¹⁹ For information see [The Centre for Excellence in Universal Design](#).

²⁰ Play Wales and Alison John & Associates (2017) *Creating accessible play spaces*. Cardiff: Play Wales.

²¹ Play Wales (2021) *Childhood, play and the Playwork Principles*. Cardiff: Play Wales.

²² Scottish Government (2021) [Early learning and childcare – Out to Play: guidance for practitioners supporting children with additional support needs – section 11](#). Edinburgh: Scottish Government.

²³ *Convention on the Rights of the Child*, preamble.

Author: Theresa Casey

Theresa is a freelance consultant and writer on play, inclusion and children's rights. Theresa has held a number of roles in Scotland and internationally to advance children's right to play, including for children in situations of crisis. Recent publications include *Free to Play: a guide to creating accessible and inclusive public play spaces* and the *Loose Parts Play Toolkit*.

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.