

Chwarae Cymru
Play Wales



Play: health and wellbeing

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Freely chosen, self-directed play has traditionally had a role in children's health and wellbeing – it has a significant contribution to make to the public health agenda.

Children begin their active lives through play. This is important to their physical, cognitive and social development and is largely dictated by the opportunities that parents and carers give them.¹

The importance of play

Playing is crucial to children's physical, mental, social and emotional health and wellbeing, and therefore to their families and to communities as a whole. Children have an inborn urge to play – recent research suggests that playing has an impact on the physical and chemical development of the brain. It 'influences children's ability to adapt to, survive, thrive and shape their social and physical environments'².

It is clear that playing has a positive impact on multiple important health outcomes including increased physical activity, reducing childhood obesity, improving wellbeing in children and helping to develop resilience. However, it is vital that playing is recognised as worthwhile for the enjoyment it brings to children and their families in their immediate lives.

To children themselves, playing is one of the most immediate and important aspects of their lives³ – they value time, freedom and quality places to play, particularly outdoors away from adult supervision. In this situation children tend to be physically active and stretch themselves both physically and emotionally to a greater extent than they would if they were supervised⁴.

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, as defined by the United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child⁵.

Government recognition

The Welsh Government recognises the importance of play in children's lives and states in national guidance:

'The Welsh Government places great value on play and its importance in the lives of children in our society. We believe that children have a fundamental right to be able to play, and that play is central to their enjoyment of life and contributes to their wellbeing.'

We also believe that play is essential for the growth in children's cognitive; physical; social and emotional development. There is much evidence to support this belief and an increasing understanding of play's contribution not only to children's lives, but also to the wellbeing of their families and the wider community.⁶

Supporting 'high quality play'

Most children will play without the need for adult intervention, even in the most barren places, but an environment rich in possibilities supports their play best of all. Some children need the support of others to make the most of the environment around them and the company of other children.

A rich play environment is:

- a varied and interesting physical space that maximises the potential for socialising, creativity, resourcefulness and challenge.
- a place where children feel free to play in their own way, on their own terms.

Quality play provision offers all children the opportunity to freely interact with or experience the following:

- **challenge and uncertainty** – both on a physical and emotional level
- **changing identity** – role play and dressing up
- **feelings** – such as joy, confidence, fear, anger, contentment, boredom, fascination, happiness, pain, grief, rejection, acceptance, sadness, pride and frustration
- **loose parts** – natural and man-made materials that can be manipulated, moved and adapted, built and demolished
- **movement** – running, jumping, climbing, balancing and rolling
- **other children and young people** – with a choice to play alone or with others, to negotiate, co-operate, fall out and resolve conflict
- **rough and tumble** – play fighting
- **the four elements** – earth, air, fire and water
- **the natural world** – such as weather, trees, plants, insects, animals and mud
- **the senses** – sounds, tastes, textures, smell and sights.

Play and physical activity

Physical activity can be structured or unstructured. Unstructured activity can be described as informal or free play with little input or direction from parents or carers.⁷

The four UK Chief Medical Officers' physical activity guidelines⁸ recognise the importance of play for children's development. Modern life has made things comfortable for us and many of us spend a long time being inactive at home and at work – this doesn't burn off the energy we are consuming.

The physical activity guidelines for children and teenagers aged 5 to 18 years recommend that:

- All children should engage in moderate to vigorous intensity physical activity (MVPA) for at least 60 minutes every day.
- Children should engage in a variety of types and intensities of physical activity every day to develop movement skills, muscular fitness and bone strength. Activities can include hopping, skipping, and swinging on playground equipment using body weight or working against resistance.



- Children should aim to minimise the amount of time spent being sedentary, and when possible should break up long periods of not moving with at least light physical activity.

Making sense of the guidelines

- Moderate intensity activities, such as cycling, make us warmer, breathe harder, and our heart beats faster, while still being able to talk.
- Vigorous activities, such as running fast, playing tag and scooting, have similar but greater effects, and make talking much harder.
- Muscle- and bone-strengthening activities such as hopping, skipping, and swinging involve using body weight or working against resistance.
- Sedentary behaviour is activity with very low energy expenditure, primarily sitting or lying down. Sedentary activity includes screen-time (watching television, computer use, video games), sitting to read, talk, do homework, or listen to music.

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.⁹

How playing contributes to children’s physical wellbeing:

- Prolonged and wide-ranging exercise, such as informal sports, chase games, climbing and building, develops stamina. Research suggests that children can gain more physical exercise in regular informal play than in a weekly sports activity.¹⁰
- 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.

Play and emotional wellbeing

‘The process of playing provides children and young people with the opportunity to adapt to and best fit their complex physical and social environments and to achieve a desirable state of wellbeing.’¹¹

Concern over the decline in children’s opportunities to play have been linked to an increase in poor mental health and Welsh teenagers have amongst the poorest life satisfaction rates across the UK.¹²

Playing allows for peer interactions that are important components of social and emotional wellbeing. When playing alone, children begin to recognise their own emotions, feelings, and thoughts, as well as how to control them. Children also learn to feel comfortable with being by themselves and learn ways to manage their boredom on their own.



Through play children experience a range of emotions including frustration, determination, achievement, disappointment and confidence, and through practice, can learn how to manage these feelings.

How playing contributes to children's emotional wellbeing:

- Creating and encountering risky or uncertain play opportunities develops children's resilience and adaptability – and can contribute to their confidence and self-esteem.
- Socialising with their friends on their own terms gives children opportunities to build emotional resilience, to have fun and to relax.
- Fantasy play allows for imagination and creativity, but it can also be a way of children making sense of and 'working through' difficult and distressing aspects of their lives.

In a study that compared the wellbeing of children in the UK, Sweden and Spain almost every one of the 250 children (aged 8 to 13) interviewed in all three countries mentioned that 'time with those they love (friends, family and even pets); being outdoors and having fun ... it was people and not things that made them happy.'¹³

Playing is the most natural and enjoyable way for children to be active, keep well and be happy. Play is a key mechanism for meeting and exceeding physical activity guidelines, developing resilience and dealing with stress and anxiety. It provides effective strategies for dealing with uncertainty and contributes to good physical and mental health. Every aspect of children's lives is influenced by their urge to play, and self-directed, self-determined playing offered by quality play opportunities increases children's opportunities to build their own resilience and support their own health and wellbeing.

References

¹ Department of Health (2011) *Start Active, Stay Active: A report on physical activity for health from the four home countries' Chief Medical Officers* (Crown Copyright).

² 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.

³ Dallimore, D. (2019) *'I learn new things and climb trees' – What children say about play in Wales*. Cardiff: Play Wales.

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

⁵ 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: UN Committee on the Rights of the Child.

⁶ Welsh Government (2014) *Wales – a Play Friendly Country*. Cardiff: Welsh Government (Crown Copyright).

⁷ *Start Active, Stay Active: A report on physical activity for health from the four home countries' Chief Medical Officers*.

⁸ Department of Health and Social Care, Welsh Government, Department of Health Northern Ireland and the Scottish Government (2019) *UK Chief Medical Officers' Physical Activity Guidelines* (Crown Copyright).

⁹ *Start Active, Stay Active: A report on physical activity for health from the four home countries' Chief Medical Officers*.

¹⁰ 'Children's independent movement in the local environment', *Built Environment*.

¹¹ *Play for a Change – Play, Policy and Practice: A review of contemporary perspectives*.

¹² Royal College of Paediatrics and Child Health Wales (2017) *State of Child Health 2017 Recommendations for Wales*. Cardiff: RCPCH Wales.

¹³ UNICEF (2011) *Children's Wellbeing in the UK, Sweden and Spain: The Role of Inequality and Materialism*.



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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.