



# A play friendly school

Guidance for a whole school approach

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*<sup>1</sup> report 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 time, quality places and freedom to play.<sup>2</sup> When asked what is important to them, children consistently mention playing and gathering with their friends.<sup>3</sup>

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.<sup>4</sup> Playing is central to children's physical, mental, social and emotional health and wellbeing. When they play, children contribute to their immediate wellbeing and to their own development.

There is a well-established body of solid evidence that shows the contribution that play, particularly self-organised play, can make to children's long-term and immediate wellbeing, to their physical health and to their mental health and resilience. Various studies<sup>5</sup> have concluded:

- **Play supports socialisation:** when they play children interact with others, develop friendships and attachments with peers, deal with conflict, and learn respect and tolerance.<sup>6</sup>
- **Play builds resilience:** playing boosts children's emotion regulation, confidence, creativity, problem-solving skills and perseverance, enabling them to cope with stress and challenges throughout life.<sup>7</sup>

- **Play is crucial for good health and wellbeing:** being active through play helps children physically and emotionally, contributing to their health and happiness.<sup>8 9</sup>
- **Play supports children to feel part of their neighbourhoods and wider communities:** playing allows children to learn about the world around them, make connections, and develop a sense of identity and belonging.<sup>10</sup>
- **Play supports learning and development:** building the structures of the brain and skills such as critical thinking.<sup>11</sup>

Studies have shown that access to playtime initiatives has resulted in happier pupils, significantly fewer incidents and accidents, and pupils returning to class ready to learn.<sup>12</sup> Example playtime initiatives include: providing traditional play activities, playground equipment, loose parts play materials and staff who understand play.



## 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*,<sup>13</sup> statutory guidance to local authorities, sets out a 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, as well as 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.<sup>14</sup> 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 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 wellbeing. 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 children's play.

Play should not be dismissed as frivolous and a waste of time. Schools should 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' wellbeing.

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* report<sup>15</sup> highlights that schools that apply a whole school approach to supporting health and wellbeing 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 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.

In their definitions of key features of good environments for play, the Welsh Government and the United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child emphasise that children should have the opportunity to interact 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 years.<sup>16</sup> A research report<sup>17</sup> notes that, since 1995, the youngest children have lost 45 minutes a week and children aged 11 to 16 years old have lost over 65 minutes per week.

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

Research suggests that pupils who have afternoon playtime were significantly fitter.<sup>18</sup> This suggests that removing afternoon playtime 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 Finland,<sup>19</sup> 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 wellbeing.



# Steps to a play friendly school

## Permission

- Make a plan that documents how the school organises and implements play time.  
See the [Template – school playtime plan](#) (page 9).
- Identify a staff member who is in a leadership position that can support both the strategic and operational practices to support play.  
See [Being a play champion](#) (page 12).
- Develop a School Play Policy that endorses play and articulates the actions the school is taking to protect children’s right to play.  
See [Template – school play policy](#) (page 13).
- Ensure that staff who supervise playtime receive play or playwork training and mentoring. Many local authorities and play organisations can provide playtime training or other help and support.
- Provide a range of ideas, suggestions and tips for playtime staff to help them support play.  
See [Top tips for supporting children’s play](#) (page 14).
- 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 ideas. Visit the *Playful Childhoods* website for 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*, the Health and Safety Executive’s (HSE) High Level Statement.<sup>20</sup>  
See sample [Template – risk management policy](#) (page 15) and [Template – risk-benefit assessment](#) (page 17).  
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.  
*The Play Wales Older children play too* information sheet 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 the *Play Wales 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](#) (page 18).

- 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](#) (page 22) will help staff to make a plan and the [Template – playing out in all weathers letter](#) (page 23) will help communicate the plan to parents.

## Time

- Aim for at least 60 minutes of outdoor playtime every day<sup>21</sup> 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*<sup>22</sup>.

- Don’t replace playtime with other good practice initiatives, such as the Daily Mile. A core principle for the Daily Mile<sup>23</sup> 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* position paper<sup>24</sup> published by The British Psychological Society’s Division of Educational and Child Psychology.

See [Ideas for protecting playtime](#) (page 24).

**Encourage teachers to think about and agree on a handful of traditional playground games, skipping games, chanting games and clapping games that can be taught in physical education lessons or as part of a history lesson, during the term. As children will then know the games from taught lessons, they will be equipped to initiate them on the playground with little intervention.**



## Contents

### Permission to play

Template – school playtime plan	9
Being a play champion	12
Template – school play policy	13
Top tips for supporting children’s play	14
Template – risk management policy	15
Template – risk-benefit assessment	17

### Space to play

Children as auditors	18
Developing guidelines for playtime during inclement weather	22
Template – playing out in all weathers letter for parents	23

### Time to play

Ideas for protecting playtime	24
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# Template – school playtime plan

The school playtime plan template is designed to help schools document the details of how it organises and implements playtime. This plan should be a written document that can be shared with all school staff, pupils, and parents.

## School playtime plan

### Vision for playtime

(Name of school) believes that playtime is an important part of the school day. It is important for all the children who attend to have sufficient time and good places to play freely as part of their day.

### Policies which inform this plan

- School play policy
- Risk management policy
- Inclement weather guidelines
- Behaviour regulation policy.

### Staffing for playtime

Playtime is staffed in the following way:

- Describe the supervision structure for all playtimes
- List and describe each person's roles and responsibilities
- Provide information about the training of playtime staff (topics covered, how often it is conducted and by whom)
- Provide information about how student medical conditions will be shared with playtime staff.

### Playtime schedule

The playtime schedule is:

Describe the timings for all playtimes and age groups.

## Implementation of playtime

The procedures for implementing playtime (list and describe the practice for the following and other issues identified by the school):

- Beginning and ending of playtime
- Use and storage of equipment
- Access to toilets and water
- Outdoor spaces for playtime (list and describe or include map)
- Other (list and describe).

## Arrangements for inclement weather

Weather guidelines for when pupils and staff can go outside for playtime during the school year have been developed by (identify person or group).

Weather guidelines will cover the following situations (provide details for each situation):

- Heat-related conditions
- Cold-related conditions
- Extreme weather conditions.

When situations that require playtime to take place indoors, the following applies: (include indoor spaces used and how they are used).

Weather guidelines will be shared with school staff, pupils, parents, and others in the following way (describe how guidelines will be shared).

## Behaviour management strategies for playtime

Lack of play can be a cause of difficulties. Children need down-time, to go outside and move freely, at regular intervals to stay on task, concentrate, contribute to and gain from taught lessons. We do not take away playtime as a punishment for in-class behaviour. Other strategies are implemented to address this and are documented in our Behaviour Regulation Policy. We will use conflict resolution strategies and techniques for playtime so that all children have access to playtime.

Describe:

- Rules, expectations and consequences for behaviour at playtime and how these have been developed
- How playtime staff will use behaviour regulation strategies to ensure that rules and expectations are followed during playtime
- How the rules and expectations for playtime will be communicated.

## Safety at playtime

The school recognises that children will naturally create and seek out challenging situations. While making the most of their play some children may have accidents, get dirty or wet or upset. We recognise that any potential risk of harm to children needs to be balanced with the potential for good that may come from their taking part in a particular form of play.

Regular inspections of spaces and facilities are undertaken by (identify individual or group). This inspection is done (indicate frequency, such as daily or weekly).

In particular, inspections will examine (describe what the person or group is looking for).

Problems with spaces and facilities should be reported to (identify person or group).

The following process is used to correct problems and ensure that standards are met: (indicate how problems are handled).

## Monitoring playtime

Describe how the school monitors playtime

Describe how and who reviews the data collected

Describe how the school uses the data to modify the playtime plan

Describe what information will be collected and how it will be collected.

Consider:

- The number of pupils and ages
- The number of supervisors
- The ratio of children to supervisors
- Weather
- The sorts of spaces where children are playing
- Types of playing observed
- Resources used (what is available, how pupils are using them, are there enough?)
- Injuries.

Describe any other data being collected such as classroom attention behaviour, attainment, and disciplinary actions.

## Being a play champion

These tips are a starting point for expanding your leadership skills in the important area of play advocacy.

### Get prepared

Effective advocacy requires a bit of preparation work. Refreshing your knowledge of the importance of play is a good way to get yourself ready. Reviewing the issues will help you decide how you will distribute information to others.

### Make use of experiences and memories

Often, encouraging others to remember their own play memories can be very evocative and helps them to understand the importance of supporting play. Supplementing facts and research with stories from children and memories from others is an effective advocacy tool.

### Identify your audiences

Who has the power and responsibility to make the change you are looking for? On who will the change impact?

- Senior management team
- Board of Governors
- Playtime staff
- Parents
- Children.

### Reflect on your current advocacy practices

Start by thinking about the ways you currently advocate for your pupils in different environments, such as the staff room, staff meetings, school PTA meetings, governor meetings, school council meetings. What are you doing right now to be an advocate and a leader in these environments? What else could you do to advocate for play?

### Talk with members of playtime staff and children to identify the most pressing issues

To identify where advocacy is required, talk to the people who are affected. Ask what issues are of special concern and agree messages that could be presented to senior management, the Board of Governors or parents.

### Choose an issue and write or talk about it and share with others

Select an issue or issues which can be shared with others (for instance the importance of play, inclusion, risk in play). If you are short for time or need some inspiration, you can share blogs written by others. Have a look at some guest blogs on the *Playful Childhoods* website.

### Support children's advocacy skills

How can you support children, families, and new teachers to become more skillful at advocating? Consider direct work with children using the Play Wales *Right to Play workshop* pack.

### Support colleagues' advocacy skills

Encourage teachers to advocate in school meetings and with parents. Remind them that effective advocacy doesn't always have to require speaking out in public meetings. Your colleagues might find the *Top tips for getting other people thinking about the importance of play*, produced by *Playful Childhoods*, helpful.

## Template – school play policy

Adopting a school play policy will make a significant contribution to providing a rich play environment for children. A school play policy states the value that the school places on children's play and commits itself to supporting children's play opportunities. The policy can be shared with children, staff and parents and be included in the school prospectus.

### School play policy

This school recognises the importance of all the children who attend having sufficient time and good places to play freely as part of their day.

To children, playing is one of the most important aspects of their lives. Playing contributes to children's health, wellbeing and happiness as well as to their learning and their ability to learn. Some children only have the opportunity to play with their friends at school.

A very positive contribution can be made to children's lives by valuing their urge and desire to play and providing for a broad range of play opportunities within the school playgrounds before, during and after the school day.

This school recognises that children will naturally create and seek out challenging situations. While making the most of their play some children may have accidents, get dirty or wet or upset. We recognise that any potential risk of harm to children needs to be balanced with the potential for good that may come from their taking part in a particular form of play. We will do our best to avoid children coming to serious physical or emotional harm by carefully managing the play opportunities that we provide.

This school believes that adults' attitude towards, and understanding of, children's play behaviour will have a significant effect on the quality of the play opportunities offered within and outside the school. This school will therefore seek out training opportunities and support research among its staff so that they are confident to facilitate children's freely chosen, self-directed play.

## Top tips for supporting children's play

The more children play the more playful they are likely to become. Being playful ourselves can also encourage play but as a general principle we should be cautious about getting too involved when children are playing.

Adults intervene in children's play in a range of ways which can hinder the opportunity for play. It is useful to be able to recognise examples of interventions to help us consider how we might support play to happen.

### 1 Wait to be invited to play

Staff are sensitive and careful not to take over. Staff organise play activities only when children want them to.

### 2 Enable play to occur uninterrupted

Staff think hard before they organise too much or interrupt the flow of play.

### 3 Enable children to explore their own values

Supporting play requires a sensitive, flexible approach which recognises that children explore and understand value systems through playing and sometimes making mistakes.



# Template – risk management policy

As part of responsibilities relating to inspection and maintenance of the play space, it is necessary to conduct regular operational risk-benefit assessments. It is likely this will be a condition of the insurance.

## Risk management

This is a risk management policy template that can be adapted to meet the needs of the school. The policy sets out the risk-benefit approach to managing risks and allows the inclusion of school procedures, frequency of inspections and routine maintenance programme. Having a risk management policy goes beyond requirements for conducting a risk assessment, to give a robust framework for how organisations manage risks over time and use the knowledge gained to update and improve operational (paper-based) risk assessments.

### Risk management policy

This policy has been developed to provide a coherent, consistent and balanced approach to the management of risk at \_\_\_\_\_ School to ensure greater clarity of understanding around this issue.

In doing so, the policy aims to present some challenge to the existing risk averse nature of our society which can limit children's play experiences. The policy is supported by the High-Level Statement produced by the Health and Safety Executive.

The High-Level Statement – *Children's Play and Leisure: promoting a balanced approach* – makes clear that:

- Play is important for children's wellbeing and development
- When planning and providing play opportunities, the goal is not to eliminate risk, but to weigh up the risks and benefits
- Those providing play opportunities should focus on controlling the real risks, while securing or increasing the benefits – not on the paperwork
- Accidents and mistakes happen during play – but fear of litigation and prosecution has been blown out of proportion.

### Risk management systems

Risk management in this policy is used to refer to all elements involved in the management of risk that can, and should, incorporate much more than paper risk assessments alone. Where all these elements are appropriately supported there is potential to develop more robust and better-informed risk management systems.

### Providing for risk and challenge in play provision

\_\_\_\_\_ School recognises that childhood is full of new experiences, which necessarily involve some degree of risk taking, whether it be physical or emotional. Childhood is a continuous process of trial and error with the potential for achievement, but also the inevitability of accidents. Children would never learn to walk, climb stairs or ride a bicycle unless they were strongly motivated to respond to challenges involving risk of injury.

We have a duty of care to try and protect pupils and staff from the potentially, long-term, damaging effects of being exposed to serious and unreasonable physical and emotional harm. However, in doing this we must not overlook, or seek it at the expense of, also enabling children to actively participate in their own personal development of health, wellbeing and resilience, as a result of engaging in situations with uncertain outcomes.

## **Risk-benefit assessment**

Decisions about what is reasonable and the desirability of children's engagement and involvement will be made using a risk-benefit approach. This process involves considering the potential benefits afforded by an opportunity alongside any potentially negative outcomes and then making a judgement about whether the potential for injury is proportional to the benefits. That is, do the potential benefits justify allowing risk of injury to remain?

For the purpose of risk-benefit assessments, benefits can be physical, emotional, social or environmental (and are likely to be a combination of all of these). Risk of injury can be identified by considering the likelihood of any potential injury occurring together with the potential severity of that injury.

## **Reasonable controls**

During the risk-benefit process it may be necessary to identify control measures to reduce risk of injury to an acceptable level. However, the control measures that can reasonably be implemented will depend on the resources available. The cost of any potential control measures must be justified by being proportional to the risk of injury involved.

Prior to the implementation of control measures, consideration should also be given to any potentially negative impacts that may result from making that intervention. For example, it is important that children's need to use their environment in novel and unexpected ways is not constrained in the search for providing absolute protection from injury.

Key points:

- There is intrinsic value in children experiencing uncertainty and personal challenge through their play.
- Children need to feel free to experience risk and challenge of their own choice. They will only be able to do this if we allow some degree of uncertainty to remain.
- The play opportunities we create aim to support children to experience reasonable levels of risk for themselves.
- There is a need for balance between ensuring appropriate levels of protection and preserving reasonable levels of uncertainty.
- We aim to manage risk so that whenever reasonably possible the risk of injury children are exposed to is proportional to the potential benefits associated with the situation.
- Controls will be reasonable and realistic whilst ensuring unnecessary risks are minimised.
- Risk management incorporates a number of different elements which work together to form a continuous cycle, improving our practice.
- Children are capable of managing some risk for themselves and their competency will develop as their experience grows.



# Template – risk-benefit assessment

This risk-benefit assessment template is designed to include value-based risk-benefit assessment as described in the Health and Safety Executive (HSE) endorsed *Managing Risk in Play Provision: Implementation guide*.

<b>School:</b>						<b>Date:</b>	
<b>Completed by:</b>						<b>Review date:</b>	
<b>Area / description:</b>	<i>Den building</i>						
<b>Benefits</b>	<b>Risks</b>	<b>Relevant local features</b>	<b>What are you already doing</b>	<b>What further action is needed</b>	<b>Action by whom</b>	<b>Action by when</b>	<b>Date action completed</b>
<p>Pleasure and fun.</p> <p>Physical play and problem-solving opportunities.</p> <p>Exploring environment.</p> <p>Team building.</p> <p>Development of self-confidence and wellbeing.</p> <p>Co-ordination.</p> <p>Achievement of end of result.</p> <p>Social inclusion.</p> <p>Engagement with natural environment and natural elements.</p> <p>Potential for incorporation into imaginative games.</p> <p>Mixing between different age ranges.</p>	<p>Cuts, grazes, bruises from constructing and handling of materials.</p> <p>Cuts, bruises, broken bones from falling/collapsing objects.</p>	<p>Only a small budget exists for increasing the play offer at this site.</p> <p>Building on experience of imaginative play in school time.</p> <p>Local housing and road nearby to call for help.</p>	<p>Providing lightweight material.</p>				

## Children as auditors

Given time, space and permission to play, children will naturally choose to play wherever and whenever they wish. Once what is available to children is known, it can be assessed against how children need to play. Play audits provide a process to measure effectively if children's play needs are being met.

A child at play will naturally and instinctively interpret a space and make changes to it, or else simply move on because the space doesn't offer, or has ceased to offer, what they need. For those responsible for auditing play spaces, the most reliable source of information will be the children. When auditing a play space it is important to remember that this is an adult activity and not children's. It is important not to infringe on children's time, but if they are to feel the play space belongs to them, their participation is beneficial in supporting a sense of ownership.

Some children simply enjoy having a role to play. Their natural curiosity will cause them to ask what is being done when they see adults counting resources and they may want to help. Without duress and with some guidance there are a number of ways children can inform the audit of the play space.

Looking at maps with children can be a good way to look at the geography of an area and begin to understand how children are playing within it.

Other methods that include children:

- Drawing pictures of what they like to do
- Interviewing other children about their interests
- Producing and completing questionnaires with their peers
- Taking photos of what's happening in the play space.

It is important to remember that with any children's involvement with auditing they do not feel they are being promised something that can't be delivered. Asking children a range of questions and encouraging participation will help children see the possibilities. This is a mapping stage that also involves interpretation of the space and what happens within it to support decision-making processes.

If at any point through the process mixed messages are conveyed, over the future development of the setting or resources, children will feel disengaged and their sense of ownership damaged.



Children across different stages of understanding will interpret things varyingly, so keeping participation developmentally appropriate will help reduce the risk of misunderstandings happening.

## Identifying the potential for a space to promote play

### Play space audit checklist

A play space audit is a valuable tool to use when identifying the potential for playing. If children already use the space for playing, there will be evidence of this. The play space audit tool is designed to help identify where children are playing, what they are doing and how often they use the space for playing. It should be noted that apparent signs of neglect, such as litter or broken branches on trees, are often signs of positive use by children.

A play space audit also helps in other ways. Firstly, it forms part of the participation and engagement process and can help the gathering of evidence to support what the children are saying. Secondly, conducted at regular intervals (for example six monthly) it can be used to help monitor how the space is being used and how often.

### How to conduct a play space audit

The play space audit tool on the following pages is intended for an observation that should take a minimum of 30 minutes. Ideally, this should be undertaken during different times of the day to see how different age groups use the space. For example, undertake an observation before or after school to observe pre-schoolers using the site with their parents or carers. Choosing when to undertake observations will depend on the school.

There are a number of play behaviours that are described in more detail below to help with the observation. There will be play behaviours that can be identified without needing to see children playing. For example, if children gather and meet on boulders or seated areas, there will be signs of wear from scuffing feet or holes dug with toes or sticks.

All children have different play needs and wishes that can change with time. Separating children into age and other groups is not necessarily beneficial



(although some may need particular support to meet their own needs). Interaction between all age groups is a vital process that supports all children to feel more confident about playing out. For example, traditions of playing, rules of games, places for play such as an old lamppost which has been used for generations as the base when playing games such as hide and seek or What's the time Mr Wolf?

### Things to look out for

**Walking, travelling through space** – If there is a pathway running through the space it may be that children play as they move through it even if they aren't intending to stop. Behaviours can include swinging off trees, jumping over things, running down a bank, free running/parkour. Actions which change the way children travel through the space, such as re-routing a pathway, can be considered as they may encourage better or more play opportunities.

**Sitting and gathering** – Even without formal seating areas there will be places where children choose to gather. Evidenced by signs of wear on the ground near seating areas, under climbing frames, at the base of trees/boulders or items brought in to the space.



Where there are no current obvious opportunities for formal seating areas, or gathering places, creating these will help to make the space a more social place that can be used by a range of ages – from families with younger children to older children gathering and chatting with their friends. Seating should be placed in circles, U or L shapes to encourage social play – placing benches in a line does not reflect how people like to gather and socialise.

**Use of natural features (for example trees, bushes, mounds, hills)** – Use of existing natural features should be considered. Informal access points into wooded areas, and signs of litter or items brought into the space under trees/bushes could show den building activity or secret spaces. Wear on bark or bases of trees and broken limbs on trees show evidence of children climbing trees.

**Playing with the elements** – Evidence of children having access to a range of natural elements to play should be considered. Children have a fascination with the natural world and should have the opportunity to experience water, earth (mud), fire and air. The grounds should be considered for access to any or all of these. It is important that these elements can be incorporated using a sensible risk management approach.

**Movement** – Evidence of how children move when they are in the space should be considered. There should be a range of opportunities to move in different ways in the play space, for example running, jumping, climbing, balancing, rolling, swinging, sliding, dancing and chasing.

**Use of the senses (taste, smell, sight, sounds, textures)** – Observe children moving through the space. Rustling leaves, sand, touching bark, feeling cold metal, rolling in grass, playing with shadows all provide opportunities for sensory play.

**Rough and tumble** – Children learn about their own physical limitations, strength, controlling anger and boundaries through rough and tumble. This can come in many forms including play fighting, cops and robbers, chasing, and hide and seek. It will be clear from laughter, smiles and other facial expressions that this is a game and the children are treating it as such.

**Risk and challenge (physical)** – Are children experiencing increasing levels of challenge? This doesn't need to be high risk activity, it can be as simple as a young child building up from jumping off the bottom rung of a ladder to the second and then the third. Where there are opportunities for children to take physical risks they will generally look for ways to improve and increase the challenge.

**Playing with props/loose parts** – Evidence of children bringing props in from outside to enhance their play may be seen. This could be an old sheet for a den, toy cars to build a road in the mud or using natural elements such as stones, flowers, leaves, berries to build small worlds, potions or simply to create a pile or sort and categorise items.

**Playing with identity** – Children will play with who they are and what they look like. This could be role play games, such as mummy and baby, doctors and nurses, soldiers, or changing how they look with mud on their faces, dressing up games or pulling faces.

## Play space audit tool

<b>Name of school:</b>			<b>Site observation made by:</b>	
<b>Site observations:</b>	Observation day and date:	Observation period (e.g. half term/ after school/ during school day/weekend/ evening):	Time of observation period:	Weather:
<b>Key features of site:</b>	Brief description of main features including access points (such as slopes, trees, shrubbery, vantage points, areas to hide, things to climb up or clamber over, seating and gathering points, level areas; as well as any manufactured play equipment features that may have been installed). Note any specific areas of usage shown, for example by worn grass, broken branches. These can be further detailed below in any activity observations made.			
<b>Usage by children and adults: (numbers)</b>	Approx. age: (e.g. Under 5, 5 to 8, 8 to 13, 13 to 15, 15+)			Total:
Children in a group:				
Solo children:				
<b>Activity observed by presence of children:</b>			<b>If not present, record of signs of children being there and making use of site:</b>	
Walking, travelling through the space:				
Sitting, gathering:				
Use of natural features (e.g. trees, bushes, mounds, hills):				
Playing with elements (water, earth [mud], fire, air):				
Use of senses (taste, smell, sight, sound, texture):				
Movement (e.g. running, jumping, climbing, balancing, rolling):				
Rough and tumble:				
Risk and challenge (physical):				
Playing with props/loose parts:				
Playing with identity:				

# Developing guidelines for playtime during inclement weather

It is important to take a common-sense approach to deal with inclement weather at playtime. Weather that exposes children to extreme conditions can be harmful to health and wellbeing, but everyday weather can enhance children's experiences.

## Things to consider:

- 1** Decide on a named member of staff or establish a group which identifies situations that would require playtime to be held outdoors with restricted access or indoors.
- 2** Work with staff to identify and agree extreme weather conditions that would require playtime to be held indoors (might include thunder, lightning, high wind, extreme heat or cold or poor air quality). Non-weather-related issues, such as construction projects or safety issues might also influence a decision.
- 3** When the decision has been taken to allow outdoor play with restricted access to the outdoors due to acceptable weather conditions, consider the following:
  - What are the designated outdoor areas at your school during acceptable inclement weather?

- Are all pupils and staff aware of these spaces?
- What shelter is available for children?
- What indoor space is available for children who wish to access it?

## **4** When the decision has been taken to hold playtime indoors, consider the following:

- What are the designated indoor areas at your school?
- Are all pupils and staff aware of these spaces?
- Is there adequate space to accommodate free movement for the number of pupils?

## **5** Develop documented guidelines for weather conditions and share with all school staff, pupils, and parents. Include information about how to dress and prepare. You can use the [Template – playing out in all weathers letter to parents](#) (page 23).

## **6** Produce a 'wet play checklist'. During wet play:

- There are clear systems to decide and communicate the decision
- It is clear to all staff which indoor spaces can be used
- It is clear to all pupils which indoor spaces can be used
- There are adequate numbers of staff to supervise the space
- All lunchtime staff are clear about procedures to evacuate the building if necessary
- Resources are suitable for the range of pupils
- Wet play is planned for
- Wet play is reviewed
- Children are asked about their experience of wet play and improvements are made based on feedback.



## Template – playing out in all weathers letter for parents

### Playing out in all weathers

This term we are introducing more opportunities for children to play outside every day during playtimes. Playing outside is important for children.

- It gives children space to run, climb, roll, jump, hide, and use up energy.
- It means children can play with natural things like water, sand, mud, grass, bark and twigs.
- It's fun for children to discover the natural world, for example seeing which creatures come out in different weather.
- It helps children learn about the seasons and our range of weather by experiencing what they are like.
- It helps children learn about looking after themselves – for example, being aware of how slippery ice can be, and of the need to drink water and wear a hat when it's sunny.
- It helps develop children's senses – sight, hearing, smell, touch and taste.
- It's less stressful and annoying for adults if children are noisy outdoors, rather than indoors.

Our school believes that outdoor play is good for children and we will encourage it all year round except in very bad weather. The decision regarding outdoor play will be made by a leadership team member in charge of the school on the day. We have developed inclement weather guidelines that staff will use to make the decision about when pupils and staff can go outside for playtime.

(Insert information about outdoor shelters and other arrangements such as lunchtime clubs which are held indoors. You may also wish to inform parents if arrangements are in place so there is a choice available for children who wish to remain inside)

Please ensure your children are dressed for the weather so they can join in properly – for example they might need wellies, waterproof jackets and gloves or sunscreen and sun hats, depending on the weather.

We are hoping to build a supply of wellies and raincoats. Have your children outgrown anything that can be donated?

## Ideas for protecting playtime

‘My call to local authorities and other organisations, is for them not to see play ... as something which “is nice to have”. There is evidence that the activities under Article 31 are critical to children’s intellectual, emotional and social development. It’s critical therefore that local authorities and other organisations build the environments that provide our children with the opportunities to enjoy play and free time with those children and their families, in order to achieve the best results.’<sup>25</sup>

Children’s Commissioner for Wales

All adult employees have breaks built into their daily work pattern to promote socialisation, alertness, rest and physical activity. Pupils require breaks for the same reason and the benefits of play are well recognised. However, the practice of withdrawing playtime as a punishment for bad behaviour, slow progress or forgetting equipment (such as PE kit) is still common across many schools.

When playtime is withdrawn or parts of it withheld, children are publicly humiliated, and for many that experience creates a negative situation. Excluding children from playtime can make them vulnerable to name calling, isolation or bullying. Removing this playtime exclusion from behaviour regulation strategies will encourage collaboration and co-operation, which helps children be happy and healthy.

### So, if we are saying that we shouldn’t withdraw playtime as punishment, what can we do?

The principle that playtime is fundamental to learning and to the child’s school experience is key. Playing needs to be seen as both a right, and an important part of the school day. Before withdrawing playtime or part of it, the following questions can be asked:

- What message is withholding playtime as punishment trying to convey?
- Why is this punishment seen as the answer?
- Do children receive clear guidance about positive behaviour? Is there plenty of praise and recognition when they are on task?

- Has the school moved toward behaviour regulation rather than behaviour management policies so that greater emphasis can be placed on preventative approaches rather than imposed punishments?
- Does the school use proactive approaches to behaviour regulation as articulated in the *Improving behaviour in schools guidance report*<sup>26</sup> published by the Education Endowment Foundation?
- Is there a very clear explanation as to why playtime is withdrawn?
  - If it is about completing work, is the child easily distracted, or finds work hard and genuinely in need of a break?
  - If it is due to behaviour, have restorative punishments been tried? Has the child been provided with another opportunity to make amends, such as apologising to peers or staff?
- When developing or reviewing behaviour regulation policies, has the school reflected on whether play is a privilege or a right?

## Playtime behaviour

If playtime is cut short due to playground behaviour, consider these questions to support children:

- Do children have a sense of belonging at playtime? Do they have friends or someone to play with? If not, is there support on the playground or ways for them to find someone to play with?
- Do children have the social, emotional, friendship and conflict resolution skills they need?
- Do children understand the playtime rules?
- Do children have something to do?
- What is the playtime ethos?
- Do staff interact, talk with and pay attention to children who are behaving positively?
- Are children being unintentionally rewarded by being removed from playtime (through adult attention for example)?



## Supporting playtime behaviour

- Has the school assessed the play opportunities available to ensure they meet the children's needs? 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](#) (page 18).
- Has the school worked with children to devise succinct and easy to understand playtime rules that are clearly understood by all?
- Do the rules and activities promote certain types of positive behaviours, such as:
  - Communication
  - Verbal conflict resolution
  - Understanding personal space
  - Collaboration?
- Do all children and staff understand the consequences for not following the playtime rules?
- If the removal of playtime is due to difficult or dangerous behaviour in the playground, can the child's right to play be accessed through other means such as short-term individual activities outdoors or indoors which lead to skills building with the goal being about ensuring future playground access?

Research<sup>27</sup> suggests that a whole school approach to playtime is needed and playtimes need to be planned for and considered like other parts of the school day.

We recommend a whole school approach that incorporates the following strategies:

- Teach children the skills that they need (for example assertiveness skills, friendship related skills, emotion management and empathy, and sharing and cooperation skills) through lessons, assemblies or interventions. Staff on the playground can reinforce and model these skills in context.
- Provide children with a way of resolving conflict. Train playground staff and children to mediate conflicts. Teach conflict resolution skills to all children through lessons, assemblies, modelling, or role play as part of the curriculum delivery.



- Ask playground staff to reinforce and pay attention to positive behaviour, talk with children and create a playful ethos.
- Promote a sense of belonging by supporting those children who need additional support to join in and providing children with ways of finding someone to play with (for example loose parts play that any child can join in with).
- Provide games and activities that are not all sports or competitive based and provide activities that promote free play.
- Provide games that are informed by pupils' ideas and ensure that all children know how to play the games. Encourage teachers to think about and agree on a handful of traditional playground games, skipping games, chanting games and clapping games that can be taught in physical education lessons or as part of a history lesson, during the term. As children will then know the games from taught lessons, they will be equipped to initiate them on the playground with little intervention.

*With thanks to the authors of the [Children's right to Play position paper](#) published by The British Psychological Society Division of Educational and Child Psychology for their insight and ideas.*

## 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** – 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 wellbeing 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.

**Playful Childhoods website** – aimed at parents, carers and those working with children the website is full of ideas and tips to inspire opportunities to play for children of all ages. *Playful Childhoods* is a Play Wales campaign. [www.playfulchildhoods.wales](http://www.playfulchildhoods.wales)

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

**Reading list for teachers: Supporting children's play in schools** – a Play Wales list of recommended resources for thinking about play in school.

**Resources for playing – providing loose parts to support children's play** – a Play Wales toolkit supporting those working in play, early years and education settings to provide loose parts play.

**Right to play workshop** – a Play Wales workshop that aims to raise awareness about the right to play. It includes suggestions for ways that play could be incorporated into the six areas of learning and experience.

**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.

**The Case for Play in Schools: A review of the literature** – explores the value of diverse playtime experiences for children's development.

## References

<sup>1</sup> ESTYN (2019) *Healthy and happy – school impact on pupils' health and wellbeing*, Cardiff: Crown Copyright.

<sup>2</sup> Dallimore, D. (2023) *What children say about play in Wales*, Cardiff: Play Wales.

<sup>3</sup> See: Children's Commissioner for Wales (2018) *Spotlight Report: Article 31*, Swansea: Children's Commissioner for Wales; *What children say about play in Wales*.

<sup>4</sup> 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.

<sup>5</sup> See for example: 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; Whitebread, D., Basilio, M., Kuvalja, M. and Verma, M. (2012) *The Importance of Play*, Toy Industries Europe.

- <sup>6</sup> Panksepp, J. (2008) Play, ADHD, and the Construction of the Social Brain: Should the First Class Each Day Be Recess?, *American Journal of Play*, vol. 1, no. 1.
- <sup>7</sup> *Play for a Change – Play, Policy and Practice: A review of contemporary perspectives.*
- <sup>8</sup> UK Chief Medical Officers (2019) *UK Chief Medical Officers' Physical Activity Guidelines.*
- <sup>9</sup> Whitebread, D. (2017) Free Play and Children's Mental Health, *Lancet Child Adolescent Health*, 1(3), November, 167-9.
- <sup>10</sup> Gleave, J. (2010) *Community Play: A literature review*, London: Play England.
- <sup>11</sup> Pellis, S. and Pellis, V. (2013) *The playful brain: venturing to the limits of neuroscience*, Oxford, UK: Oneworld Publications.
- <sup>12</sup> Russell, W. (ed), Ardelean, A. and Smith, K. (2021) *Playtimes in primary schools: a review of the literature*, Bristol: Outdoor Play and Learning (OPAL) CIC.
- <sup>13</sup> Welsh Government (2014) *Wales – a Play Friendly Country*, Cardiff: Welsh Government.
- <sup>14</sup> *General comment No. 17.*
- <sup>15</sup> *Healthy and happy – school impact on pupils' health and wellbeing.*
- <sup>16</sup> 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.
- <sup>17</sup> 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.
- <sup>18</sup> 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*.
- <sup>19</sup> 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).
- <sup>20</sup> Health and Safety Executive (2012) *Children's Play and Leisure: promoting a balanced approach.*
- <sup>21</sup> 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 wellbeing.
- <sup>22</sup> *School break and lunchtimes and young people's social life: A follow-up national study.*
- <sup>23</sup> 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.'  
[www.thedailymile.cymru/steps-to-success](http://www.thedailymile.cymru/steps-to-success);  
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).
- <sup>24</sup> Hobbs, C., et al. (2019) *Children's Right to play*, Leicester: The British Psychological Society Division of Educational and Child Psychology.
- <sup>25</sup> *Spotlight Report: Article 31.*
- <sup>26</sup> Education Endowment Association (2019) *Improving behaviour in schools guidance report*, London: Education Endowment Association.
- <sup>27</sup> Bristow, S. and Atkinson, C. (2020) Child-led research investigating social, emotional and mental health and wellbeing aspects of playtime, *Educational & Child Psychology*.



[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.