

Focus on play

How play supports children's mental health

This briefing provides information for Regional Partnership Boards and Public Service Boards. It considers the crucial role of children's play in promoting positive mental health and wellbeing and discusses ways that local and regional plans can support play.

Play and wellbeing

When children play, they contribute to their wellbeing and to their own development.

A well-established body of evidence shows the kinds of contribution play, particularly self-organised play, can make to children's long-term and immediate wellbeing, physical health, mental health and resilience. Examples include:

- **Play is crucial for good health and wellbeing:** being active through play helps children physically and emotionally, contributing to their health and happiness.
- **Play supports socialisation:** when they play, children interact with others, develop friendships and attachments with their peers, deal with conflict, and learn respect and tolerance.
- **Play builds resilience:** playing enables children to cope with stress and challenges throughout their lives by boosting their regulation of emotions, confidence, creativity, and problem-solving skills and perseverance.
- **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.

- **Play supports learning and development:** playing builds the structures of the brain and skills such as creativity, problem-solving and critical thinking.

During times of uncertainty playing:

- helps to give children a feeling of normality and joy during an experience of loss, isolation and trauma
- helps children to overcome emotional pain and regain control over their lives
- helps children make meaning of what has happened to them
- enables children to experience fun and enjoyment
- offers children an opportunity to explore their own creativity.

National and international policy on play

In 2010, Wales became the first country in the world to legislate for play through the Children and Families (Wales) Measure 2010.¹ This places a duty on local authorities to assess and secure sufficient play opportunities for children in their area. The Play Sufficiency Duty, as it has become known, requires local authorities to submit to the Welsh Government:

- A Play Sufficiency Assessment (PSA) every three years
- Annual Play Action Plans and Progress Reports.

Each local authority in Wales has an officer with responsibility for play sufficiency.



Internationally, the importance of play is recognised and protected in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC). Article 31 of the UNCRC states that children have the right to play, and to join in a range of recreational activities. As an indication of the significance the United Nations places on children's play, it has published General Comment no. 17 on Article 31² to clarify its importance.

The General Comment stresses that play is initiated, controlled and structured by children. It defines play as non-compulsory, driven by intrinsic motivation, not a means to an end. It notes that the key characteristics of play are:

- fun
- uncertainty
- challenge
- flexibility
- non-productivity.

It identifies aspects of an optimum environment which need to be present to support children's play needs:

- time, that's free from other demands, including therapy, treatment and rehabilitation
- freedom from stress
- space in a diverse and challenging outdoor environment with access to supportive adults, when necessary
- opportunities to invest in their own space and time so as to create and transform their world, using their imagination.

About playwork

Playwork can be described as the art of working with playing children. Playwork is child-centred and ensures that play is the main focus. Playworkers work in a range of settings, including open access playwork provision.

In open access playwork provision, playworkers supervise children, aiming to support them so they can choose what they play and who they play with. Children who can get to and from the setting on their own are generally allowed to do so.

Open access playwork provision:

- takes place in community buildings, public open spaces and staffed adventure playgrounds
- is staffed by playworkers
- is targeted at local communities and responds to children's play needs
- may or may not be regulated by Care Inspectorate Wales (CIW)
- can be seasonal or year-round
- has more flexible arrangements around children leaving and arriving to support children's independent mobility.

Synergising national policy drivers

A Healthier Wales: plan for Health and Social Care places an emphasis on keeping people well and healthy. There is a focus on integrated whole system coordination and approach.

The Welsh Government's NEST framework aims to ensure a whole system approach for developing joined up mental health, wellbeing and support services for children of all ages, parents and caregivers.

When the Welsh Government asked children what words best described how support for mental health and wellbeing should feel, they came up with NEST:

- **Nurturing** – taken care of and cherished
- **Empowering** – feeling strong and listened to
- **Safe** – feeling protected and able to be yourself
- **Trusted** – reliable and there for you.

The framework consists of six core principles for improving mental health and wellbeing services. It notes that children need to be given time, space and permission to play and socialise. Playing is crucial for children's mental wellbeing, but how does play and playwork link with the NEST principles?

Trusted adults

Playing together is important for family bonding and developing trusting, secure attachments with parents or primary caregivers.³ Playworkers are listed in the NEST framework as possible trusted adults. Research⁴ suggests that children and teenagers value the important and on-going roles that play providers have in their lives – a 'play philosophy' which values individual choice, expression and development in a supportive setting.

There are external environmental and personal biological factors that hinder some children from playing. Such children can be supported to play in an environment where there are trained playworkers who know how to intervene, where necessary, to facilitate playing. This extends the advantages of playing to children and teenagers who face multiple barriers to accessing the many benefits of play.

Playworkers understanding their role as trusted adults and supporting children's mental health and wellbeing upholds this key principle. In addition, it is important that other services, for example education, health and social care acknowledge the importance of playworkers in children's lives.

Wellbeing across education

The Welsh Government's Framework on embedding a whole school approach to emotional and mental wellbeing⁵ and Estyn's *Healthy and Happy – school impact on pupils' health and wellbeing* report⁶ discuss the importance of having time to play in schools.

Protecting playtime in schools is a low/no cost way to support wellbeing and the everyday realisation of children's right to play. Services and schools recognising the importance of protecting playtime and regularly advocating for play uphold this key principle.

Children enjoying playtime and engaging in enriched play opportunities in school can have a positive effect on their sense of wellbeing in education. It is linked to a range of improvements in academic skills, attitudes, attention and behaviour, and to improved social skills, increased social relations between different groups of children, and better enjoyment of and adjustment to school life.⁷

Co-produced innovations

Quality playwork provision takes place in diverse settings – playworkers start by researching the characteristics and needs of the local community and the spaces where children and teenagers are most likely to want to gather. As a result, playwork settings can provide an environment that is tailored to the needs of local children and teenagers.

Good play and playwork provision provides a space in which children can develop and change it for themselves to meet their needs and wishes and where the space can grow with children. It's a space that reflects children's play needs and that they grow attached to.

Playwork provision that works to the Playwork Principles of facilitating freely chosen, personally directed play is an example of continuous co-production in action.

Easy access to expertise

Playwork provision appeals to families who most benefit from early preventative services, as there is no formal referral system. Most open access playwork provision is offered free at the point of access. Playworkers also often act as informal community link workers, signposting families to other support services where needed.

Playing together is important for family bonding – open access playwork provision can help parents relax enough to play with their children and gather ideas for low cost or no cost play opportunities.

As trusted adults, it is important that playworkers get the support and expertise they need to help them support and 'hold on to' the children they work with.



Safe and supportive communities

Playwork provision contributes to stronger, more play friendly communities, which have a wide-reaching impact on children, teenagers and adults.^{8 9} Playing is how children build social networks and create positive attachments to people and places in their community.

The NEST framework asks services to consider the overall needs of the children they work with. This should include understanding the individual's opportunities for play and the importance of play to their overall wellbeing and development.

No wrong door

Open access playwork provision is often available when families need it most – afterschool, during school holidays, evenings and weekends – filling in gaps when other services are unavailable. It also offers informal respite for both parents and children – particularly during school holidays. It gives an opportunity for children and adults to extend their social and peer networks, which contributes to increased resilience.

Playworkers can often identify when families would benefit from more specialist services and can signpost them without stigma. More broadly, playworkers have been responsive in diverse ways to the impact of austerity on the children and families with whom they work, and particularly so through the COVID-19 pandemic.¹⁰

Ensuring integrated approaches to play and wellbeing

Being able to play is dependent on children having the right conditions, specifically time, space and permission. This in turn is dependent on a range of social, cultural, economic and political factors. The organisation of societies influences what play provision children have access to, where they play and with whom they play.

Play is children's own way of taking care of themselves and of ensuring their own health and wellbeing, embracing an assets-based rather than deficit view of children's own capabilities. It makes sense for policies beyond the Play Sufficiency Duty to pay attention to the conditions that support children's ability to engage in self-organised play.

As discussed in the Welsh Government's *Ministerial Review of Play Background Paper*,¹¹ since the commencement of the Welsh Government's Play

Sufficiency Duty, Play Wales has commissioned four small-scale research studies. The research studies have applied an assets-based approach to play sufficiency, by articulating throughout the reports that play is what children do when the conditions are right and establishing it as their way of maintaining their own health and wellbeing. This is most evident in the 2020 study,¹² which aligns the process of play sufficiency with the approach taken in the Well-being of Future Generations Act (Wales) 2015, the Social Services and Well-being Act (Wales) 2014 and by Public Health Wales, highlighting that 'an assets approach identifies factors that support good health and well-being and relies on working locally with communities'.¹³

As adults we need to help children by raising play on the agenda at every appropriate opportunity. We need to support the provision of sufficient time and space for children to play every day. Even under persistent stressful conditions, the negative consequences of toxic stress can be alleviated through the provision of play opportunities. Playing generates concrete and first-hand experiences that underpin much of a child's development. It is widely agreed that early experiences influence how children learn, cope with stress, form friendships and adult relationships, and how they view themselves and their world.

Whilst playing comes instinctively to children, the support of parents, practitioners, policy makers and the wider community is necessary to ensure children have the freedom, spaces and time to themselves to act on their natural instincts. This requires:

- Responsive practitioners and caregivers who understand the need for play
- Supportive communities where playing is tolerated and celebrated
- Policy programmes which provide play spaces and opportunities.

Regional Partnership Boards and Public Service Boards can contribute by:

- Having a play sufficiency lead officer or play advocate on your children's sub-group
- Listening and co-producing with children
- Thinking about how your decisions impact on play
- Thinking about how your commissioning promotes freely chosen opportunities for playing
- Using partnerships to join up thinking on play – for example, housing and highways linking with leisure for safe routes
- Using Play Sufficiency Assessments to inform your wellbeing plans and strategic plans.

Play can help alleviate the impacts of trauma and contribute to immediate wellbeing and to long-term improvements in children's lives. Provision for play should be central to any framework or programme that aims to support the health and wellbeing of children and families.



References

¹ Children and Families (Wales) Measure 2010 Chapter 2.

³ United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child CRC (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.

⁴ Russell, W., Barclay, M. and Tawil, B. (2023) *Playing and being well. A review of recent research into children's play, social policy and practice, with a focus on Wales Summary*, Cardiff: Play Wales.

⁵ Beunderman, J. (2010) *People Make Play The impact of staffed play provision on children, families and communities*, London: National Children's Bureau.

⁶ Welsh Government (2021) *Framework on embedding a whole-school approach to emotional and mental well-being*, Cardiff: Welsh Government.

⁷ Estyn (2019) *Healthy and happy – school impact on pupils' health and wellbeing*, Cardiff: Estyn.

⁸ 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.

⁹ 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.

¹⁰ The Means (2016) *An analysis of the economic impact of Playwork in Wrexham – May 2016*, Cardiff: Wales Council for Voluntary Action.

¹¹ King, P. (2021) *The Impact of COVID-19 on Playwork Practice*, *Child Care in Practice*, 29,11, pp. 1-17.

¹² Ministerial Review of Play Steering Group (2023) *Ministerial Review of Play Background Paper*, Cardiff: Welsh Government.

¹³ Russell, W., Barclay, M., Tawil, B. and Derry, C. (2020) *Making it possible to do Play Sufficiency: Exploring the conditions that support local authorities to secure sufficient opportunities for children in Wales to play*, Cardiff: Play Wales.

¹⁴ Cited *ibid*, p.16.



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