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Play news and briefing from the national charity for play



Playing in the early years

Chwarae Cymru
Play Wales

www.play.wales

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Thank you

A heartfelt thank you to everyone who contributed to this magazine – we couldn't do it without you.

This issue of *Play for Wales*, as well as previous issues, is available to download at www.play.wales

Editorial

Throughout government policies and programmes there is an understandable emphasis on the earliest years of a child's life. It is well established that the environment surrounding a young child has a crucial role to play in their early development.

Interaction with supportive parents and caregivers and having access to things to play with provide children with the encouragement needed for them to thrive and strive, developing their creativity and social skills along the way. Children experience this at home, in early years settings such as nurseries and playgroups, and other public spaces. Access to outdoor spaces also provides opportunities for social interaction with other children.

Across all of these spaces, children have an instinctive desire to interact and express themselves through play. Play is a crucial part of development across the ages, offering unique opportunities for discovery, imagination and activity that supports physical and emotional wellbeing. As a society we must nurture and be responsive to the play needs of all children. It helps to reinforce attachment to people and to places, supporting children's overall wellbeing and happiness.

Although this issue of *Play for Wales* considers play in the early years, we also pay attention to the play of

“As playing is mostly associated with very young children, its value for older children can be potentially overlooked and dismissed.”

older children, too. Playing tends to receive much more attention in the early years of children's lives than in later childhood. As playing is mostly associated with very young children, its value for older children can be potentially overlooked and dismissed. No other activity comes close to matching the importance of play.

Every child has different play needs and wishes that can change with time. Separating children into age and other groups is not necessarily beneficial. Interaction across all age groups is a vital process that supports children to feel more confident and develop a sense of belonging and place. For example, there are traditions of playing and places for play, such as a muddy slope or an old lamppost which has been used for generations as the base when playing games like hide and seek.

Playfulness is a term used to explain the inclination and the drive to engage in play. This behaviour exists and is expressed over the human lifespan but is arguably most present in children and teenagers. Supporting this playful disposition in the early years lays the necessary foundation for children to make the most of their opportunities to play as they grow and develop.

Whether we are based in settings, delivering programmes or developing policy, it is crucial that we recognise and celebrate playing as the evolutionary process by which children experience their lives and their place in the world.

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First ever United Nations International Day of Play celebrated



On 11 June 2024, the first ever International Day of Play was celebrated in Wales and across the world.

It is a day set aside by the United Nations to celebrate children's right to play and its importance for their wellbeing.

In March 2024, following discussions and advocating by various play organisations, the United Nations

General Assembly adopted an annual International Day of Play. Members of the International Play Association (IPA), including IPA Cymru Wales, voted unanimously to advocate to the UN for an International Day of Play at the IPA World Conference in June 2023.

The International Day of Play aims to draw global awareness to the importance of play for every child. This provided a wonderful opportunity for members of IPA Cymru Wales to collaborate on an international campaign to advocate for play.

IPA Cymru Wales collaborated with Play Wales on a joint national call to protect playtime in schools. Together, we asked schools to give all children additional time to play, for example, by making the lunch break longer or providing an extra playtime.

The next International Day of Play will take place on 11 June 2025. Get the date in your diary and watch this space!

More information about IPA Cymru Wales: www.play.wales/about-us/projects-campaigns

Children across Wales have their say on playtime in school

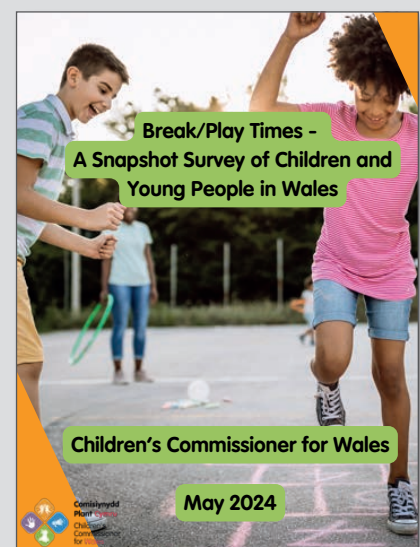
As part of the Children's Commissioner for Wales' Monthly Matters series, children across the country have had their say on playtime in school, with 95% saying playtime is important and 96% enjoying their playtime.

Findings from the *Break/Play Times – A Snapshot Survey of Children and Young People in Wales* show that spending time with friends and having a break from the classroom were the most common answers when asked why playtime is important. Similar answers were given by the children and teenagers when asked what they enjoy about playtime. Those who don't enjoy playtime wanted more time and more things to do to improve their break times.

Almost half of the children who took part in the survey said they sometimes had to miss playtime, mainly as a result of not finishing work or as a consequence of poor behaviour. Missing out on playtime made the children feel sad, annoyed and frustrated.

The survey, conducted in May 2024, attracted 1,290 responses from children and teenagers up to the age of 17. A further 1,020 children and teenagers took part in groups with teachers and youth workers submitting a summary of their views. Collectively, children and teenagers from 21 local authority areas across Wales had their say.

When asked about barriers in providing children with the playtime they need, teachers spoke about a lack of resources and time, and pressures related to delivering the curriculum. To support teachers and staff, Play Wales has produced guidance which provides information about policy and practice to help school communities



take a whole school approach to supporting children's right to play. A *play friendly school* is available to download on our website.

For more information about the survey visit: www.complantcymru.org.uk

Research: developing a neighbourhood response to the Play Sufficiency Duty

This research study piloted and evaluated a mentoring package to support staff to develop skills and confidence in undertaking hyperlocal research with children and adults, and to use this research to develop action plans. So, this activity supports both the assessing and securing requirements of the Play Sufficiency Duty.

The research, undertaken with two local authorities in Wales, was funded by the University of Gloucestershire and carried out by Wendy Russell and Donna Gaywood (University of Gloucestershire) with Mike Barclay and Ben Tawil (Ludicology).

In each local authority, key staff members with responsibility for the Play Sufficiency Duty were mentored through the process of planning, executing and analysing ethical hyperlocal research with children and adults using a range of methods. The methods included surveys, creative workshops with children, focus groups and spatial audits. Neighbourhood concept plans were produced in response to research findings, and these were developed into action plans involving key stakeholders.

Key issues that arose during reflective sessions aligned with the conceptual tools developed in

previous research studies into the Play Sufficiency Duty, namely:

- collective wisdom (acknowledging different ways of knowing about local space from children, residents, activists and professionals)
- spatial (in)justice (children's constrained access to land for playing)
- account-ability and response-ability (developing authentic and ethical ways of accounting for the use of space and responses to injustices).

Discussions also considered issues such as local authority staff as researchers, the messiness of real-world research and working with communities, and a deep reflection on dynamic research ethics in a local authority context.

The research report, *Developing a Neighbourhood Response to the Play Sufficiency Duty: a report on the*

neighbourhood research mentoring project August 2023 – June 2024, is available at: www.play.wales/news and www.ludicology.com/the-study

Future work

The research team has secured additional funding for a follow-on project, working with the same local authorities to see what happens next. Mentors (Ben and Mike) will work with each local authority to develop a tailor-made mentoring package to support and research the implementation of the action plans.

Webinar series on play sufficiency

The follow-on funding will also fund partnership working with Play Wales to offer a programme of four webinars on play sufficiency in early 2025. The sessions will consider:

- Introducing play sufficiency
- Play sufficiency at national level
- Play sufficiency at local authority level
- Play sufficiency at neighbourhood level.

More information about the webinars will be available on the Play Wales website later in the year.

Teulu Cymru

The Welsh Government's new Teulu Cymru website offers support for families with practical tips and advice for parenting challenges.

The website features information on a range of topics, from tried and tested parenting tips, to childcare financial support, to tools for learning to talk.

The website also includes links to further information about children's development and wellbeing, as well as the benefits of play and playful tips for parents.

Find out more at: www.gov.wales/teulu-cymru



Playful learning: Giggle Games in a Wales-Quebec partnership

Opportunities for play, laughter, and humour are vital ingredients for healthy and happy childhoods.

Research shows that humorous play is linked to the development of important social and emotional skills in childhood and with building positive close relationships. In schools, humour, games and playful activities support children's wellbeing.

As reported in previous issues of *Play for Wales*, Giggle Games is a bilingual (English and Welsh) free resource for teachers to help integrate playfulness and humour into the classroom. Giggle Games was developed by researchers at Cardiff University in partnership with primary school teachers and Play Wales.

With funding from the Welsh Government, researchers at Cardiff University and Concordia University worked together to introduce Giggle Games to schools in Quebec, for

teachers and pupils to use in English and French. Student teachers in Montreal schools tried out Giggle Games with the help of their cooperating teachers.

One student teacher observed that when she tried the games the environment quickly developed into one filled with the sounds of children laughing, asking questions, playing, talking and working in groups. Not only were students fully engaged in second language learning with the games (the students were French speaking but played in English), but they also benefitted socially.

Another student teacher reflected that, through silliness and laughter, new friendships can form, particularly amongst children who may struggle to be included. These young children, through enjoyment of humorous play, were brought closer to one another and had the opportunity to build relationships with their peers of all abilities. Humorous play could be a



way for older children to work with younger children in a positive way too.

Play is a vital part of children's school experience. Both evidence from research and teachers' reflections show that humour and laughter are not only enjoyed by children during their free time, but also have an important place in the classroom. This was clearly seen when the student teachers in Montreal tried out Giggle Games – play and humour made for learning and joy for both children and teachers.

Cardiff University has a limited number of Giggle Games packs available for schools in Wales – please contact play@cardiff.ac.uk for more information.

Foundations Framework Wales: good practice in physical activity and sporting environments for children

The importance of being active every day has been stated clearly by the Chief Medical Officers in the UK. They recommend children average at least 60 minutes of moderate or vigorous intensity physical activity a day across the week. However, insight in Wales shows that we need to do more to help children be more physically active.

To support physical activity and sporting providers, Sport Wales has co-ordinated a network of national governing bodies of sport, local authorities, sport partnerships, Early Years Wales and Play Wales to co-create Foundations Framework Wales. Due to be launched in autumn

2024, Foundations Framework Wales is a good practice guide for those involved in organising, promoting, and delivering physical and sporting activities for children aged three to eleven years, in extra-curricular, community and grassroots settings.



Crucially, Foundations Framework Wales guides people, places and policies to value child-led play to the same extent as facilitated and adult-initiated opportunities. The framework takes a child-centred approach and offers the basis for providers to create places that offer enjoyable environments to support a child's stage of physical, social, emotional, and cognitive development.

More information: www.sport.wales

Unlocking the power of play in the first 1000 days

Talk with me, Play with Me, Sing with me, Read with me and then I will know what it's all about. Have you ever stopped to think and wonder why play is so vital in the first 1000 days? Julie Powell, Head of Training, Learning and Development for Early Years Wales explores the important role that playing has during the earliest days of a child's life and offers some helpful ideas.



Significant evidence suggests that the first 1000 days, the period during pregnancy and up to the child's second birthday, offers the greatest potential for positive and lasting impact. Play is the foundation for development during this amazing time of growth and change.¹ Living, playing and learning are inseparable during those formative years and play is far more than just an enjoyable pastime for children – it is a fundamental aspect of a child's development.

From the earliest days, even before birth, children engage in forms of play.



The playful kicks a baby makes in the womb, the cooing and babbling sounds, and the simple introduction of peek-a-boo are all foundational elements of play. These activities are not just entertaining – they are the building blocks for more complex cognitive and social skills. Providing babies with opportunities and space for random movements of the arms, legs, hands, feet – as started in the womb – and adding play on their tummy, allows for discovery of their body. This is classed as unoccupied play and the process in developing sensory, motor, communication and social-emotional skills has begun!

Through play, babies and toddlers explore their environment, learn to solve problems, develop language skills and form social connections.

Repetition in every stage of play is key in helping a child to reach their developmental milestones. Whilst the brain will double in size during the first year given the right environment a child also needs a playful adult. Adults play a significant role in children's play by engaging with everyday activities, such as reading stories, singing songs or playing with toys. Supportive adults have a profound impact on a child's development. While play is a natural activity for children, the role of adults in supporting and facilitating play cannot be overstated.

An adult in the first 1000 days brings a wealth of experience and can introduce children to traditional games and activities, providing a link to cultural heritage. An adult who can follow a child's lead from very early on, not only allows them to be in touch with themselves, enjoying activity and creating neural pathways but also developing sensory integration. This is when a child can take in and use information through the senses and respond appropriately. This in turn supports wellbeing and allows a child to thrive.

The sensory systems give young children information about the world, so how does play look through external stimuli:

Tactile (touch) – every physical interaction with a baby's environment activates receptors in the skin, muscles and joints, providing information about the world, which in turn, develops their **proprioceptive sense**. The proprioceptive system provides information about the weight and resistance of objects, muscle relaxation, muscle contraction, stretch and other movements of the body. Starting with tummy time play is the key to a baby achieving milestones like rolling, crawling and eventually walking, enabling the child as they grow to explore cause and effect whilst empowering them to enhance physical dexterity and gain a sense of control. Tummy time can take

place on an adult's body and move onto the floor as neck and head muscles develop.

Vestibular – a child's vestibular system is developed in the uterus by five months, and they spend the next four months exercising it, whilst they are being rocked to and from inside their mother's womb. It provides information about movement, balance and our relationship to gravity. For example:

- Knee bounce rhymes are a fun way to develop a baby or child's sense of balance and core strength, gradually increasing the speed of the bounce. This in turn helps the eyes to focus on a moving object.
- Rocking, bouncing and swinging activities provide a moderate level of vestibular stimulation.²

This in turn supports **auditory** (hearing) – children love to hear familiar sounds and recognise early on voices or music they heard in the womb. Making faces, talking and making sounds, and playing peekaboo games is all part of face-to-face play. Waiting for a response shows a baby that conversations are about taking turns, listening, and responding to social cues.

Singing songs, rhymes and stories is another way to develop auditory play. Singing, dancing and the introduction of actions with rhymes will provide co-ordination, listening skills, concentration and the learning of a new language. This type of interaction has so many benefits and is one of the most important things we can introduce from birth.

Vision (sight) – provides the visual system with information about what we see, while **gustatory** (taste) provides information about what we taste and **olfactory** (smell) gives information about what we smell. Providing everyday objects for children to touch, taste and smell is vital in the stimulation of these senses.

Introduce sensory baskets that encourage curiosity, thinking skills, motor development and independence. Being able to choose an object to play with can be a powerful tool for a baby and begin an interesting and creative journey for a child.

So, to unlock a child's full potential we need to provide a stimulating environment for growth that encourages playfulness, engages them as play partners, offering a safe space for exploration and discovery. If we get it right from birth, play is a magical tool that nurtures babies and young children to flourish in a world of endless possibilities and nurture lifelong transferable skills.

¹ NHS Wales, The First 1000 Days programme – A Public Health Approach to Supporting Parents.

² Early Years Wales (2018) *Active Baby Cards*.

Listening to our youngest children

Anna Westall, Senior Policy Officer at Children in Wales, shares good practice examples of consulting with and listening to our youngest children – and why it's so important to fulfil their right to express their views.

Children in Wales has been working hard to promote the rights of babies and very young children, in line with our vision of: 'Building a Wales where all children and young people have all their rights fulfilled'.

Babies and young children's rights under the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) are often strongly focused on protection and provision due to their age and vulnerability. But, we must not overlook the importance of the participation rights that children are entitled to.

Article 12 of the UNCRC states:

'Every child has the right to express their views, feelings and wishes in all matters affecting them, and to have their views considered and taken seriously'.

Babies and young children are highly capable communicators and have a voice that we need to listen to. This voice is heard and seen in the noises and movements they make, their response to the environment and in their interactions with the people who are with them.

Babies and young children have unique nonverbal ways of expressing themselves. This can be through sounds, but also physicality: body language, such as reaching or nodding, or facial expressions, like smiling.

Many current participation and consultation resources are aimed at children who can use verbal communication, limiting both younger children and children with additional needs (in some cases). Children in Wales has produced resources to support babies and young children to have a voice, and to upskill the early years workforce into competent advocates for children's rights and participation.

Examples in practice

We have worked on a range of projects, using a variety of methods, to consult with babies and young children. Here are some examples.



PLANT YNG NGHYMRU
CHILDREN IN WALES

'I might not be able to talk but I am already communicating with you, watch my expressions, movements and the sounds I make. This is my 'voice'; you just need to learn what it all means.'



Observation is the easiest way to listen to babies, following their interests and verbal and non-verbal cues to help you see the world through their eyes.

What's my favourite activity? Parents were supported to observe their baby as they explored a range of activities and watched to see which one their baby enjoyed the most. They watched their eye movement, facial expressions and body language to help them decide.

Play is how children learn and express themselves, so what better way to carry out consultation and to listen to their views than through play-based methods.

'Allowing children space to role play can both help them process things and share their views'.

We used this approach with a group of three and four-year-olds, using indoor and outdoor role play activities and



circle time, to gather their views on the 20mph speed limit consultation.

Through my eyes – entering a child’s world is a great way to find out what things are like for them and how they experience the world around them. Using methods based on the Mosaic approach, which aims to create an image of children’s world through their own photographs, drawings and observations, we can gain a deeper understanding of children’s perspectives.

These methods were used when we worked with two to four year olds on the Ministerial Review of Play. The children shared what they enjoyed about their indoor and outdoor play spaces.

Their drawings, along with photos and observations, helped input into the recommendations put to the Welsh Government. To find out more about the Ministerial Review of Play, including the consultation with children, go to: www.play.wales/ministerial-review-of-play

My Nursery, My Space, was a participation project where three and four-year-olds shared with teddies the spaces in their nursery that they thought were:

- Fun • Noisy • Special • Happy • Quiet.

Practitioners then used the children’s views to help plan and design the nursery space. Children are experts in their own lives – by listening and observing we can learn a lot about the spaces they use.

Participation model

It is important to create the right environment for babies and young children to have a voice and share their views. This involves the adults around them making them feel safe and secure while supporting them to share their views in a way that is suitable for them. It is then vital that the adults around them listen and act upon these views where appropriate. The Lundy Model demonstrates this:

- **SPACE:** Children must be given the opportunity to express a view
- **VOICE:** Children must be facilitated to express their views
- **AUDIENCE:** The view must be listened to
- **INFLUENCE:** The view must be acted upon, as appropriate.

Parents’ voices

The UNCRC also recognises the vital role parents, carers and family members have in supporting babies and young children’s rights. Parents are one of the strongest supporters of children’s rights, as they consider their best interests, speak up for them, care for them and tend to their needs.

It is therefore important that we support parents to have a voice and understand how they can best support their baby and young child’s rights.

To find out more about how to support parents go to: www.childreninwales.org.uk/professionals/our-work/family-support-and-parenting/parents-connect-wales/parents-connect-wales-hub/



It is important to remember:

- Even the youngest child has rights and a voice.
- We all have a part to play in supporting children’s rights.
- The smallest change can make a big difference.

To find out more about the projects in this article, or suggested methods, go to www.childreninwales.org.uk/professionals/our-work/early-years



Play and physical literacy

Early years critical for laying foundations of physical literacy

Dr. Nalda Wainwright, Director of Wales Academy for Health and Physical Literacy, discusses the science relating to the importance of the early years as a critical time for building a broad range of movement skills that underpin a physically active life and better outcomes for children.

Many of us are aware of the importance of movement for child development. But, growing numbers of young children worldwide are experiencing developmental delays in motor skills (a range of many different movements such as walking, running, kicking, throwing and balancing). This has led researchers to explore the complex relationship between early childhood behaviours, opportunities for movement, and long-term health and activity levels.

In 2008, a ground-breaking model was published that has since become one of the most widely studied in the field of motor development¹. This model emphasises the critical importance of the early years for children to learn to move well. Research consistently shows that young children need rich movement experiences to develop good motor skills by the time they reach the end of the foundation years (ages six to eight)². These motor skills are vital not just for physical activity but also for a child's physical self-perception³.

Children who develop good motor skills tend to have higher levels of physical activity as they grow, which leads to better health outcomes⁴. Beyond physical health, motor skills are also linked to cognitive development, school readiness, confidence, self-esteem, and social acceptance^{5,6}.

Understanding the importance of motor development is only part of the picture. The challenge is compounded by the fact that motor skills can be grouped into two main categories: locomotor skills and object control skills.

Locomotor skills are those that help us get around, such as walking, running, crawling, jumping, hopping and skipping. These skills are universal and are typically developed through play, provided children have enough opportunities to move freely. Activities like walking independently, playing outside, chasing and climbing are essential for developing these skills.

The outdoor environment is particularly beneficial for locomotor skills because it offers uneven surfaces that help children develop balance and proprioception (the sense of where their bodies are in space). The outdoors also provides large, open spaces for children to run, chase and jump, further enhancing their locomotor abilities.

Object control skills are quite different. These include actions like catching, throwing, kicking and striking, and they are culturally specific rather than universal.

For example, in the UK, children typically develop catching and kicking skills, while in Scandinavian countries, skiing and skating might be prioritised. Research shows that object control skills don't develop as naturally as locomotor skills. Instead, they require specific instruction, appropriate tasks, and the right equipment for children to master them⁷.

A study conducted in Wales when the Foundation Phase curriculum was first implemented found that while the play-based, active curriculum supported the development of locomotor skills, object control skills were not improving as expected⁸. The reason? Teachers in schools were not equipped to teach these skills, as it hadn't been necessary in the past.

Historically, children would have spent extended periods playing outside in communities, often with older children who would model or support the younger ones, effectively teaching them object control skills. But today, children's playtime in school has been drastically reduced, and the type of extended community play that once facilitated the development of these skills has decreased too. At the same time, teachers, preschool practitioners and coaches are not trained in motor development, leaving a growing gap in our children's development.

Since that original study over a decade ago, the problem has only worsened. Developmental delays in both locomotor and object control skills are now seen in the majority of early years children. Recent studies in Wales have identified delays in over two-thirds of the population, with data showing poor motor skills in 87% of three-year-olds⁹.

But there is hope. The issue can be addressed by upskilling preschool practitioners, teachers and parents to support young children's motor skills. In response to the original research, a programme of professional development for teachers and pre-school staff was developed at the University of Wales Trinity Saint David, drawing on SKIP (Successful Kinaesthetic Instruction for Pre-schoolers) in the USA which had over 20 years of motor development research.

The resulting SKIP Cymru training (Successful Kinaesthetic Instruction for Pre-schoolers in Wales) has been recognised as a professional development case study in the Welsh Government's Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) Act 2015 support materials, *A Journey to a Healthier Wales*. Studies have repeatedly shown that the SKIP Cymru training programme works and teachers and pre-school staff are able to make a significant impact on children's physical development^{9,10,11}, with the latest research showing teachers still impacting their pupils' outcomes over two years after they completed the training¹².

While teachers and preschool practitioners can make a significant impact in their settings, they consistently point out the need to inform parents about the challenges their children face. Many parents don't realise that sitting their child in a buggy for hours or giving them a screen to entertain them can lead to developmental delays in motor skills. They certainly don't intend to hinder their child's development, but they are often unaware of the long-term consequences.

To address this, a team of motor development experts from the University of Wales Trinity Saint David and The Ohio State University, in conjunction with a team from the creative industries, have developed the MiniMovers app. It aims to help parents support their children's motor skills at home, in a park or in the garden. The app uses an algorithm to assign activities tailored to the child's developmental stage, ensuring that they experience success and make good progress. By empowering parents with the right tools and information, we can help bridge the gap in motor development and give all children the best start in life.

The early years are a critical period for motor development, and the benefits of good motor skills extend far beyond physical health. By upskilling professionals and supporting parents to provide children with the right opportunities, we can lay the foundations of good movement skills in the early years that they need to lead active, healthy lives and succeed in school and beyond.

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Balancing play and playful learning

The Foundation Phase is a play-based curriculum for children aged three to seven years, where ‘children learn through first-hand experiential activities with the serious business of “play” providing the vehicle’.¹

Our soon to be published literature review, *Playing and being well: A review of recent research into children’s play, social policy and practice, with a focus on Wales* discusses research related to early years education policy. The review notes that research on the benefits of a play-based approach found that it supports higher levels of pupil engagement and potentially deeper learning² and supports most aspects of physical literacy³.

Curriculum for Wales and the Curriculum for funded non-maintained nursery settings provide the curriculum framework for young children in Wales. Both are based on four purposes in which children are:

- ambitious, capable learners, ready to learn throughout their lives
- enterprising, creative contributors, ready to play a full part in life and work
- ethical, informed citizens of Wales and the world
- healthy, confident individuals, ready to lead fulfilling lives as valued members of society.

These frameworks are underpinned by twelve pedagogical principles which, in the earliest years of children’s education can be characterised through enabling adults, engaging experiences, and effective environments. Play and play-based learning is now included throughout the Curriculum for Wales 2022.

Designing Your Curriculum: Implementation and practical considerations guidance lists play, play-based learning and being outdoors as key features of successful pedagogy throughout school. Play is presented as a right and as something that pupils take seriously:

“ Play and play-based learning supports holistic development across the curriculum. It should be valued by all practitioners as both an end in itself and as something that they should observe closely with the clear aim of seeing how it can enhance learning. ”

The Welsh Government’s *A Quality Framework for Early Childhood Play, Learning and Care in Wales* (ECPLC) aims to deliver a consistent approach to nurturing, developing and learning through the provision of high-quality play-based childcare and education opportunities. It addresses the importance of valuing play as an intrinsic right with immediate benefits for children whilst also noting the need to carefully observe it to sensitively support enhanced learning and development.

These policies and frameworks go some way in addressing concerns raised by the United Nations Committee on

the Rights of the Child. In General Comment no. 17 the committee highlights that early childhood education can be focused on academic targets and formal learning at the expense of participation in play. The General Comment stresses the importance of educational pedagogy, noting that learning environments should be active and participatory and offer playful activities and forms of engagement.

For practitioners, adopting playful pedagogical approaches means that we recognise all children as being capable and competent. Children should be seen as being able to make decisions, show interest, engage in exploration, solve problems and communicate with others.

Policy into practice

Key messages from policy:

- Playful learning is an important part of the Curriculum for Wales and of the aims of Early Childhood Play Learning and Childcare settings.
- Playful learning is structured and planned to some degree by adults.
- Time still needs to be made for children to play that is not planned or structured by adults.

When adults are working with children to support their learning and development, there will be times when they need to plan and design programmes that support learning. This might involve planned games or activities which children can either choose (or not) to be involved in. It is important to recognise that whilst these activities may be playful, they are not play because they are being directed and structured by adults. Too often the term ‘learning through play’ becomes ‘**learning** through play’ and the child centredness of play becomes lost.

Adult-led activities can genuinely enhance children’s enjoyment, learning and development. However, practitioners and settings need to reflect on whether they have a balance that favours children’s freely chosen, personally directed play as the primary method for children’s learning and development. Adults in this scenario become facilitators and observers helping children to shape their own learning through their play and are sensitive to the dangers of taking over and overly directing children’s play.

Points for reflection

- How do you create a balance between planned and unstructured time?
- Do children get the chance to play in their own way in your setting?
- How can you use your observations of children’s play to help you understand how children are developing?

¹ Welsh Government (2015) Curriculum for Wales: Foundation Phase framework, Cardiff: Welsh Government, p. 3.

² Wainwright, N., Goodway, J., Whitehead, M., Williams, A. and Kirk, D. (2020) Playful Pedagogy for Deeper Learning: Exploring the implementation of the play-based foundation phase in Wales, *Early Child Development and Care*, 190(1), 43-53.

³ Wainwright, N., Goodway, J., Whitehead, M., Williams, A. and Kirk, D. (2016) The Foundation Phase in Wales – a play-based curriculum that supports the development of physical literacy, *Education 3-13*, 44(5), 513-524.

Playing: the culture of childhood

Many of us have fond memories of growing up and playing in groups of children of different ages – with siblings, cousins and neighbours. Playing across the ages provides rich and lively experiences where older and younger children can thrive.



It supports the development and acceptance of playfulness, which is a distinct feature of human behaviour across history and cultures.

Every child in every culture plays. Human children have a particularly long childhood (18 years) that allows for plenty of play and all types of play, which in turn nurtures health, happiness and creativity.

As General Comment no. 17 on Article 31 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) notes, **'children create and pass on culture through imaginative play, songs, dance, stories, games and festivals'**.

When they play together, older children feel a sense of responsibility and younger children feel supported and encouraged to try new things and gain confidence. This supports all children to feel connected to each other and to the places where they play. Younger children learn by watching the older children around them and then copying the behaviours they see. Older children also see and copy playful behaviour which comes so instinctively to younger children.

Practitioners in playwork settings who work with children aged five to fifteen view children as competent and active participants in their play. The play spaces in which they operate enables them to respect and work with each child's unique qualities and needs.

We can draw on playwork skills to support multi-age play:

- Communicate the importance of play across the ages with parents and caregivers to help them understand the value for their children.

- Provide flexible spaces which allow children of different ages to play alongside and with each other. Ideas include, offering:
 - o plenty of loose parts play materials
 - o sensory play, such as sand, water and mud
 - o outdoor space for large traditional games, like hide & seek and hopscotch
 - o natural play space for treasure hunts, playing in leaves and tree climbing
 - o music, which encourages children to lead activity such as fun dancing and musical chairs
 - o arts and crafts supplies, to allow share skilling and co-operation.

Play is at the core of children's lives and is vital for their health, happiness and creativity. As has been the case for generations through play, children:

- develop a sense of, and value for culture
- are encouraged to explore cultural ideas and celebrations, fostering an appreciation for diversity
- work together, negotiate, and build relationships
- feel connected to each other, their settings and their neighbourhoods
- create and pass on games, songs and stories
- absorb culture, customs and practices.

For more information and ideas about supporting play between children of different ages, visit our *Playful Childhoods* website: www.playfulchildhoods.wales/all-about-play/play-for-everyone/how-to-support-play-between-children-of-different-ages

Building a brighter culture of play on **Playday** and every day

A water fight to cool down in Barry



On Wednesday 7 August 2024, Wales and the rest of the UK celebrated Playday, the annual national day for play. Playday is a day to celebrate every child's right to play and to emphasise the importance and value of play in children's lives.

The campaign theme for Playday 2024 focused on the rich and lively culture of children's play. It highlighted that playing generates a culture of childhood. Play is at the core of children's lives and is vital for their health, happiness, and creativity.

The theme was chosen to remind us that playing is children's culture, it's not a luxury. It's how children develop relationships across age groups, express their creativity, and learn about their place in their neighbourhoods and wider community.

Across Wales, thousands of children and families enjoyed a day of fun at local and regional events. Playday organisers collaborated locally to make sure that children and families in their area could mark the national day for play, with record numbers reported in many areas.



Cardboard fun at a Cardiff park



Creative clay modelling in Swansea



Exploring the sand pit in Wrexham city centre

Date for your diary

Playday 2025 will take place on Wednesday 6 August!

Messy muddy play in the Vale of Glamorgan



Play Wales projects: update report

Chwarae Cymru
Play Wales

In the last few issues of *Play for Wales*, we have reported on some of Play Wales' project work and fundraising successes. Here we provide a brief update on some of our projects.



Early years outdoor play project

Play Wales has been commissioned by Cardiff and Vale Local Public Health Team to research and implement a project to increase outdoor play in early years settings in its region.

Activity includes:

- A public education campaign to promote the benefits of play – producing a range of evergreen bilingual social media content and manage a campaign with consistent messages to be used by Cardiff and Vale Local Public Health and partners to highlight the importance of play for a happy and healthy childhood.
- A toolkit for early years outdoor play – establishing a focus group of early years settings to determine the tools, templates and resources that settings would benefit from to provide and support outdoor play. From this, we will produce and publish a bilingual *Outdoor play toolkit* for dissemination to practitioners and settings.
- An evaluation framework – working with academic partners to develop an evaluation framework to support a strategic legacy to this short-term project. This framework will enable us to engage with practitioners to identify lessons learnt from the various activity and how the project has informed practice and improved opportunities for children at setting level.

Play for children in temporary accommodation

Concerned with the growing numbers of children living in temporary accommodation such as bed and breakfasts and hotels, Play Wales developed a project to support play in these places.

Being homeless and living in temporary accommodation can cause adversity and uncertainty. Children may find themselves with limited space and may be expected to be indoors for long periods of time. Our research identified that these children have limited opportunities to play both in the living environment and in community-based provision.

Funding from The Moondance Foundation is enabling us to work with our network of play officers to understand the limitations and opportunities in temporary accommodation. So far, we have sourced and supplied Play Packages, which included no-cost and simple ideas and resources for families to support play in limited living space in:

- Caerphilly
- Cardiff
- Flintshire
- Rhondda Cynon Taf.

Next steps include the supply of setting-based play equipment and supplies, which will be available to families staying in temporary accommodation, and rolling out the project to more areas.

Stay and play

Play Wales has a toolkit to help head teachers, governors and others to work together to make school grounds available to local children out of teaching hours.

Following the COVID-19 pandemic, we have worked with several organisations in various locations to further pilot the use of school grounds for child-led play when the school day ended. We found that the desire of schools to provide such services has increased considerably. But they do need support.

Funding from the Millennium Stadium Charitable Trust and Future Valleys Construction's Communities Initiatives has enabled us to help local authorities to support schools.

Play development teams and community focused schools teams are working with schools to

implement the Stay and play project in Carmarthenshire, Merthyr Tydfil, Monmouthshire and Swansea, with two other areas being identified.

Following the pilot, we will share the findings and update our *Use of school grounds for playing out of teaching hours* toolkit.

Play in hospital scoping

The wellbeing of children and teenagers who are patients in hospital or community settings, such as children's hospices, can be supported by the provision of play.

Play Wales was commissioned by Cwm Taf Morgannwg Public Health Team to undertake an audit on the provision of play in its region. We worked with staff on the children's wards in Prince Charles Hospital (Merthyr Tydfil), Princess of Wales Hospital (Bridgend) and Royal Glamorgan Hospital (Rhondda Cynon

Taf) to engage with children and their families to find out about what hospital play meant to them.

The purpose of the audit was to understand the capabilities, opportunities and motivation of children, parents and carers to engage in play during a hospital admission.

We also wanted to understand this of staff, determining the capabilities, opportunities and motivation to support play in hospital settings.

Findings determined that there is a commitment at ward level to provide a more play friendly hospital experience.

Workforce development

National Occupational Standards Review

Play Wales is excited to be working as part of the UK Playwork NOS Consortium to undertake a review of the National Occupational Standards (NOS) for playwork during 2024 and 2025.

The UK Playwork NOS Consortium comprises Play Wales, Play Scotland, PlayBoard Northern Ireland, Play England and the Playwork Foundation. The consortium has been meeting since October 2021 and was established to plan strategically across the four nations for the future of workforce development and sector skills initiatives, including a future review of the NOS.

National Occupational Standards (NOS) are statements of the standards of performance for a given sector. For playwork, they include the knowledge, understanding and skills required to be a playworker, playworker in charge or playwork manager. NOS are agreed by the sector and are used as the basis for the development of qualifications. They can also be used to support the development of job descriptions and staff appraisals.

In Wales, it is a requirement that playwork qualifications are underpinned by NOS to be regulated and approved for staff working in registered settings.

The progress of the review to date includes:

- A scoping exercise of strategic/regulatory use of the current playwork NOS
- Submission of a business plan including plans for consultation and engagement on the resulting standards
- Engagement with the four nations' Playwork Education and Training Councils add (PETCs)
- Production of information to inform the sector about the review.

A recruitment exercise was undertaken during July and August 2024 to identify individuals to help with developing and scrutinising the new NOS. The Writing Group and the Expert Reference Group will both meet regularly to develop the new standards, with wider consultation with the sector happening in Summer 2025. The consortium aims to have the final standards ready for publication by the end of 2025.

NOS review updates will be made available via UK Playwork NOS Consortium members' websites. For information from Play Wales visit www.play.wales/playwork/workforce

Spotlight on ...

In each issue, we talk to a professional in the world of play and playwork to provide an insight into the diversity of the workforce and the job roles in the sector. For this issue, we spoke to Sarah Sharpe, a registered childminder and owner of Poppins Day Care in the Vale of Glamorgan.

What is your job title and what does your role involve?

I am a registered childminder caring for children from birth to 12 years of age. I provide a home from home environment where children feel safe and are able to form positive, secure relationships.

What is the most important or enjoyable aspect of your work?

I enjoy being in the moment, exploring the world around us and enjoying the seasons and the changes that brings. Spending my days with children of various ages is a privilege and I enjoy being able to slow down and enjoy the small things like watching a bird collecting things for its nest, a snail slowly moving around carrying its home and the many questions, curiosity, awe and wonder these observations spark.

Can you tell us a bit about yourself and how you got into play/playwork?

I have been a childminder for 12 years and I signed up to the Level 3 Transition to Playwork not really knowing what to expect. I was very pleasantly surprised and the course has had a very positive impact on my way of thinking.

How has undertaking playwork qualifications helped you in your current role?

I am an advocate for children's play and I feel very strongly about giving children the freedom to explore independently to build their confidence, resilience and self-esteem. Risky play no longer fills me with anxiety, and I can see the benefits far outweigh the risks. Intrinsically motivated play means that no two days are the same and the children are in control. Knowing what interests the children allows me to plan my home environment to enhance their knowledge and fulfil their urges.

Is there anything you find challenging about your job?

Being a childminder can be lonely and isolating but I am very lucky to collaborate with many wonderful childminders and childcare professionals. Winning the Clybiau Plant Cymru Kids' Clubs Playworker of the Year 2024 award was a very proud moment. I'm pleased I have inspired others along the way and I'm able to advocate for children's right to play.

Workforce development

Play Wales summer conferences

It's been a busy summer for Play Wales, not least because of two exciting professional development events that have taken place.

In May, we worked in partnership with the six north Wales local authorities to deliver the Play sufficiency – understanding your role in the statutory duty event. This one-day seminar, held in Colwyn Bay, invited delegates to find out more about the Play Sufficiency Duty and plan together with colleagues from a range of local authority departments. Delegates included representatives from departments such as play, childcare, planning, environment and economy, as well as leisure services, social services, and countryside services.

With the next round of Play Sufficiency Assessments due in June 2025, the seminar provided the opportunity to mobilise key stakeholders and begin action planning. With an interactive format, delegates were encouraged to put some of the conceptual tools from our Understanding play sufficiency training into practice. Delegates were also introduced to case studies from other parts of Wales on how play sufficiency is being put into practice.

'Excellent event, good mixture of presentations and workshops. Very interactive and great energy in the room.'

'Very good, thought provoking especially around the word "sufficiency" which made us all think, individuals have different expectation of what sufficient is.'

In July, we again arrived in a beautiful, secluded location in the heart of Powys for the annual Playworkers Forum. This event has been running for 16 years and we are extremely proud that it continues to re-energise and inspire playworkers who attend from all over Wales and other parts of the UK. The Willow Globe near Rhayader provides us with ample space for camping, workshops and games.



Billed as a 'playwork conference under canvas,' this year we welcomed 50 delegates to talk, reflect and learn from each other. Topics of conversation included playwork and youth work, playwork in residential care, playwork in pupil referral units, playwork and loose parts and finally, playwork and play sufficiency.

As ever, there was the chance to help build the skills that playworkers have at their disposal. The opportunity to gain some practical skills included creating simple structures with ropes, bottle rockets, paper planes and even having a go at smelting pewter!

The event is traditionally playful, so playworker games gave way to an evening of reflection and laughter around the fire. The second day provided no opportunity for rest and there was plenty more vibrant discussion and a chance to watch *Play – The Movie*, a collaborative film created with children by the creative team at Tŷ Pawb and the Wrexham Play and Youth Support Team.

'I love it, I relax, I catch up with people, I update myself, I get challenged, it's amazing.'

'The absolute highlight of our working year.'

'I gained a lot of new information that I didn't know before the forum and made some new contacts with other organisations that were there from Wales.'

Next conference

On 21 November 2024 our annual national conference will return to Cardiff. The conference – Playing and being well: research into practice – will include the launch of our literature review of recent research into children's play, social policy and practice, with a focus on Wales.

Keynote speakers include the authors of the review, Dr Wendy Russell, Mike Barclay and Ben Tawil, as well as the Children's Commissioner for Wales, Rocio Cifuentes.

For more information and to book your place visit: www.play.wales/events

Playful Communities

‘Slow down drivers so we can play’

Four boys from Bethesda in Gwynedd have made their own road signs to encourage drivers to slow down on their street so it’s safe for them to play outside.

After seeing the colourful signs on a road with a 20mph speed limit, close to the secondary school in the town, we went to chat with Efan, Gruff, Robin and Elgan about their effort to make their neighbourhood a safe and play-friendly place.

Robin, who’s 11 years old, said: **‘At the moment our street isn’t a nice place to play because the cars speed. So, we have had to make signs to tell them to slow down.’**

The boys, who are neighbours, enjoy playing on their bikes and scooters and playing games like kerby and cricket on the road outside their homes. But, as a lot of cars speed along the road it’s not possible. To solve the problem, eight-year-old Gruff and nine-year-old Efan came up with the idea of placing big colourful signs on the side of the road to draw drivers’ attention. Gruff tells us more about creating the signs: **‘We made the signs, then we were busy placing the letters in a big size and painting them. Then we placed them in the grass, so people know to slow down because we want to play here’.**

Speaking about the success of the signs, Efan said: **‘We are happy the signs work. We are really happy because now we can play’.**

Gruff added, **‘Having 20mph roads is a good idea because a lot of children are happy with it, but cars are still speeding here’.**

The signs have also drawn some attention on social media with local residents praising the children for their efforts: **‘Well done boys – colourful signs like these are needed so drivers pay attention’** and **‘Brilliant, we need more signs like these’.**



‘Slow! We are playing’

With the rest agreeing, twelve-year-old Elgan’s message for drivers in the area is:

“ Slow down. We want to play so will you please slow down. ”

The last word came from Robin:

“ Stop speeding. I’d like to live a bit longer – I wouldn’t like to be like a pancake! Maybe if the council place big signs and speed bumps we wouldn’t have to build our own signs – we could play. ”

Across Wales, organisations and groups run play projects or make sure children have opportunities to play in their communities. In each issue, we share an example of a project that’s helping to make a community more playful.

For more examples of playful communities in Wales visit: www.playfulchildhoods.wales/play-in-the-community/inspiration