

Chwarae Cymru

Play Wales



Playing outdoors in early years settings

A toolkit

www.play.wales

ISBN: 978-1-914361-20-3

© Play Wales

All rights reserved. No part of this publication, other than the resources may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system or transmitted in any form by any person without the written permission of the publisher.

Published by Play Wales, Park House, Greyfriars Road, Cardiff, CF10 3AF.

www.play.wales

Contents

About this toolkit	4
Who is it for?	4
Why has it been developed?	4
How was it developed?	4
Using the toolkit	4
Section 1 – The importance of play	5
Benefits of outdoor play	5
Rich play environment and play value	6
Tool 1: Top tips – being a play champion	7
Tool 2: Template – outdoor play policy	8
Tool 3: Promotional materials for settings	9
Section 2 – Assessing outdoor spaces	10
Tool 4: Features of a rich play environment	11
Tool 5: Self-assessment tool – providing a rich play environment	12
Tool 6: Children as auditors – audit ideas	16
Tool 7: Play space audit checklist	17
Tool 8: Play space audit tool	19
Tool 9: Play value assessment	20
Tool 10: Assessing play value with children	23
Section 3 – Facilitating outdoor play	24
Tool 11: Developing guidelines for outdoor play during inclement weather	25
Tool 12: Information for parents	26
Tool 13: Intervention styles	27
Tool 14: Play types	28
Tool 15: Loose parts	29
Tool 16: Observing children’s play	30
Tool 17: Template – risk management policy	32
Tool 18: Template – risk-benefit assessment	34
Section 4 – Supporting staff	35
Tool 19: Outdoor play training session	36
Tool 20: Questions to support reflective practice	40
Tool 21: Reading list – short pieces with reflective questions	42
Tool 22: Videos with reflective questions	45
Acknowledgements	46
Appendix 1 – Methodology briefing note	47

About this toolkit

Who is it for?

The *Playing outdoors in early years settings* toolkit has been produced to support practitioners and agencies working with babies, toddlers and younger children in early years and childcare settings and for organisations that seek to engage families. For consistency, we will refer to 'children' and 'early years settings' throughout the toolkit.

Why has it been developed?

This toolkit has been produced to support practitioners and agencies working in early years settings to support and advocate for opportunities for children to play outdoors every day.

The purpose of the toolkit is to bring about change at two levels:

- putting children's right to play into practice
- raised awareness of the right to play at family level.

It is designed to:

- provide clear and concise information for early years settings and practitioners to increase opportunities for children in their care to play and spend time outdoors
- provide practical, step-by-step tools and templates to support the facilitation of outdoor play
- provide a framework for Continuing Professional Development (CPD) for setting practitioners.

How was it developed?

Play Wales worked in collaboration with researchers from the University of Exeter and University of Stirling to conduct initial research which informed the development of the toolkit and to carry out an initial evaluation of the toolkit. The project was undertaken in six stages:

- Stage 1: focus group and stakeholder engagement
- Stage 2: toolkit development and refinement
- Stage 3: development of tools for quantitative and qualitative evaluation
- Stage 4: conduct initial evaluation following piloting
- Stage 5: recommendations
- Stage 6: final toolkit produced.

Further information about the toolkit development can be found in the methodology briefing note in [Appendix 1](#).

Using the toolkit

The toolkit is made up of four sections:

- 1. Importance of outdoor play** – this section includes information about the immediate and deferred benefits that access to play brings to children. It also includes a description of a rich play environment, which defines the features needed to help children make the most of their opportunities to play.
- 2. Assessing outdoor spaces** – this section provides a range of tools to audit, assess and plan spaces for outdoor play.
- 3. Facilitating outdoor play** – this section includes ideas for engagement with parents, risk-benefit assessment and observation.
- 4. Supporting staff** – this section includes a skills audit, Continuing Professional Development (CPD) ideas and a reading list of publications with reflective questions.



Section 1 – The importance of 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.

In General Comment no. 17 on Article 31, the United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child notes that play has the key characteristics of fun, uncertainty, challenge, flexibility and non-productivity.

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 have concluded that:

- **Play supports socialisation:** when they play children interact with others, develop friendships and attachments with peers, deal with conflict, and learn respect and tolerance.
- **Play builds resilience:** playing boosts children’s emotion regulation, confidence, creativity, enabling them to cope with stress and challenges throughout life.
- **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 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:** building the structures of the brain and skills such as critical thinking.

Outdoor play is one of the ten evidence-based steps to help children in the early years to maintain a healthy weight promoted in the Public Health Wales Every Child Wales programme for children from birth to five years. Step six focuses on outdoor play, with the ambition that every child will be given the chance to play outdoors every day.

Benefits of outdoor play

It is widely recognised that playing outdoors and outdoor play-based learning is positive and life-enhancing. There is strong evidence that playing and learning outdoors has many benefits for children. Playing outdoors contributes to a range of health and wellbeing outcomes, including:

- increased muscular strength and aerobic fitness
- increased agility, range of motion, flexibility, co-ordination and balance, and decreased fatigue, stress and depression
- lowered blood pressure in children with hypertension (especially for aerobic activity), and improvements in levels of cholesterol and bone density
- increased blood flow and oxygen intake
- improved mental health
- improved self-esteem and cognitive functioning.

Unstructured opportunities to play give children a chance to support their immediate wellbeing whilst naturally building life skills which contribute to long-term development outcomes. Qualities such as problem-solving, teamwork and emotional regulation are being refined when children play. Research also shows that time, space and freedom to play can greatly benefit children’s mental health, relieving stress and reducing the harmful impact of trauma. It is important to remember that playing is something that children do whenever they have the chance. It is their way of supporting their own health and wellbeing.

Rich play environment and play value

Children play wherever they are and in all sorts of places, but some spaces have been created with the particular intention of supporting children's play. Specialist play equipment isn't necessarily needed. Natural spaces such as woods, beaches, community gardens and rivers also support children's play. Water, trees and bushes change with the seasons and children can use them in a variety of ways, getting a lot out of playing with what is there naturally.

A rich play environment is varied and interesting. It is a place where children:

- can play in their own way
- can make a range of choices
- have many possibilities to create and develop their own play.

In *Wales – a Play Friendly Country*, the Welsh Government states:

'A rich play environment is one which is flexible, adaptable, varied and interesting. It maximises the potential for socialising, creativity, resourcefulness, challenge, and choice. It is a trusted public space where children feel free to play in their own way, in their own time, on their own terms.'

The term 'play value' describes the range and quality of play opportunities and experiences offered by a play environment. It is also used to describe the value a space, or piece of equipment, brings to children to help them extend their play. A space rich in play value creates opportunities for a variety of physical, social and sensory play experiences.



A rich play environment offers all children the opportunity to freely interact with or experience the following:

- other children
- the natural world
- loose parts
- the four elements
- challenge and uncertainty
- changing identity
- movement
- rough and tumble
- the senses.

Section 1 tools

Tool 1: Top tips – being a play champion

Tool 2: Template – Outdoor play policy

Tool 3: Promotional materials for settings

Tool 1: Top tips – 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 evocative and help 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? Who will the change impact?

- Senior management team
- Setting staff
- Parents
- Children.

Reflect on your current advocacy practices

Start by thinking about the ways you currently advocate for the children in your care, in different environments, such as in staff meetings, in network meetings, in staff supervision sessions, in discussions with parents. 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 colleagues 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, to colleagues or to parents.

Choose an issue, 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 blog articles on the *Playful Childhoods* website.

Support children's advocacy skills

How can you support children, families and new staff to become more skilled at advocating? Consider direct work with children using [Tool 6: Children as auditors – audit ideas](#).

Support colleagues' advocacy skills

Encourage co-workers to advocate in meetings and with parents. Remind co-workers 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.

Tool 2: Template – outdoor play policy

Developing and adopting a play policy can make a significant contribution to providing sufficient play opportunities for children. A play policy states the value that the organisation places on children's play. It sets out how the organisation will support children's play opportunities.

The policy can be shared with the children, staff and parents and be included in the information about the wider support service offered.

Play policy statement template

[Name of setting/organisation] recognises the importance of all the children having time and good spaces to play every 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.

A 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 both indoors and outside.

This setting 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 setting 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 setting.

This setting will therefore seek out training opportunities and support research among its staff so our team members are confident to facilitate children's freely chosen, self-directed play.

We can make a positive contribution to children's lives by valuing their wish and need to play and providing for a broad range of play opportunities as part of the services we provide to children and families.

[Name of setting/organisation] commits to working towards children having sufficient everyday opportunities to play as described in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC).

In the short-term we commit to:

-

In the medium-term we commit to:

-

In long-term planning, we commit to:

-

Tool 3: Promotional materials for settings

Playful Childhoods is a website full of fun, easy playful ideas for children to enjoy – from building dens to making splodgy paintings, splashing in puddles or playing hide and seek. The website also includes tips for playful parenting and getting involved in children’s play.

Playful Childhoods is a Play Wales campaign.



The website features a collection of ideas which can be downloaded and printed for use:

- [How to deal with risk and safety when your child plays](#)
- [Top tips for playing with earth, water, fire and air](#)
- [Top tips for playing in the dark](#)
- [Top tips for rainy day play](#)
- [How to deal with play fighting and rough & tumble](#)
- [How to deal with messy play](#)
- [How to deal with climbing and balancing](#)

Section 2 – Assessing outdoor spaces

The role of early years settings is to support children to experience a variety of opportunities that contribute to good physical and mental health. Playing outdoors everyday supports a range of developmental and immediate benefits.

Every setting is different, with certain ways of operating, but all children should have the opportunity to experience:

- access to an outdoor play space and spending time outdoors, every day
- opportunities to move between indoor and outdoor environments at the appropriate age
- chances to explore the natural environment
- diverse and varied resources to help them make the most of the opportunities to play outdoors.

Settings have their own ways of operating and premises that may or may not lend themselves easily to outdoor play. So, it is important to be creative and imaginative when planning and providing for outdoor play.

Within all communities there are places that can be accessed to support more opportunities for children to play outdoors. Neighbourhood parks, allotments, woodland and beaches can all be used to help support better everyday opportunities for outdoor play.



Section 2 tools

Tool 4: Features of a rich play environment

Tool 5: Self-assessment tool – providing a rich play environment

Tool 6: Children as auditors – audit ideas

Tool 7: Play space audit checklist

Tool 8: Play space audit tool

Tool 9: Play value assessment

Tool 10: Assessing play value with children

Tool 4: Features of a rich play environment

A rich play environment is varied and interesting. It is a place where children:

- can play in their own way
- can make a range of choices
- have many possibilities to create and develop their own play.

A rich play environment offers all children the opportunity to freely interact with or experience the following:

Other children – of different ages and abilities with a choice to play alone or with others, to negotiate, co-operate, fall out, and resolve conflict.

The natural world – weather, trees, plants, bushes, mounds, hills. In situations where there may be some limited access to nature or a natural feature, every effort should be made to ensure children can use natural elements for their play.

The four elements – earth, air, fire and water. Some creative ways to provide supervised experiences for children that don't create unnecessary pressures:

- **earth** – pottery and gardening give children access to earth. If there are earth banks, children will inevitably want to dig holes and caves. When this happens, it is important to help them do this safely
- **air** – access to air can come in the form of flying kites, making windmills, watching the effect of wind on trees and water
- **fire** – provide fire buckets for small fires, indoor cooking and candle making
- **water** – create opportunities to play safely with water, such as water slides, paddling pools, splashing and chasing games.

Loose parts – natural and synthetic materials that can be manipulated, moved and adapted, built and demolished. 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.

Challenge and uncertainty – graduated opportunities for risk taking, both on a physical and emotional level. 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.

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.

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, pulling faces. Mirrors, face paints, make-up, cameras and video can all facilitate exploration of identity.

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.

The senses – sounds, tastes, textures, smells and sights should all be stimulated. Music, food, perfumes, colours, views and different textures do that. 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.

Tool 5: Self-assessment tool – providing a rich play environment

The self-assessment tool allows settings to consider the extent in which it responds to a range of features that help to provide a rich play environment.

- The Feature column sets out a range of criteria to consider for outdoor play.
- The What we are doing well column enables us to evidence the strengths of our provision and list evidence and examples.
- The What we would like to do better column enables us to explain the areas in which the play space, opportunities or provision do not fully meet the criteria.
- The Actions column should be used to show the intended action to rectify shortfalls.

Describe your setting, including ages of children	
Describe your outdoor area(s)	
Describe other outdoor settings used for outdoor play	

Feature	What we are doing well	What we would like to do better	Actions
We have a shared vision of the importance of outdoor play			
Children have access to the outside area in different weather conditions			
Children are taken to a local park or other places of interest			
Children have access to the outside area for most of the day, throughout the year			
Our outdoor area is accessible to all children			
The outdoor area is varied and interesting			

Feature	What we are doing well	What we would like to do better	Actions
The outdoor area supports social interaction			
Children of different ages play together			
Children can interact with the natural world			
Children play with loose parts			
Children can play with the four elements – earth, air, fire and water			

Feature	What we are doing well	What we would like to do better	Actions
There are opportunities for children to play with identity (for example, role play, dressing up)			
There are graduated opportunities for risk taking – both physical and emotional			
Children have the opportunity to play actively and move around			
Children have the opportunity to be creative			
Children have the opportunity to experience sensory stimulation			

Tool 6: Children as auditors – audit ideas

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 large photos of the setting with children can be a good way to look at the features of an area and begin to understand how children are playing within it. Children can draw and use images directly on this to explain what they like about the space and what could be better.

Other methods that include children:

- Drawing pictures of what they like to do.
- Taking photos of what is happening in the play space.
- Giving children cameras to document the play areas.
- Bringing children together in small groups to walk the outdoor area and discuss it as you go along.
- Paying attention to the unique nonverbal ways that babies have of expressing themselves. This can be through sounds, but also physicality: body language such as reaching or nodding, or facial expressions such as smiling.

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.

Tool 7: Play space audit checklist

Identifying the potential for a space to promote play

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. [Tool 8: 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, in fact, 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

[Tool 8: Play space audit tool](#) is intended as an observation resource. Ideally, the audit should be undertaken during different times of the day to see how different age groups use the space. It can be used to audit the space at a setting or in the community.

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 support to meet their own needs). Interaction between all age groups is a vital process that supports all children to make the most of their play.

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. 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) – consider the use of existing natural features. 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 space 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.



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

Movement – take note of how children move when they are in the space. 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.

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.

Tool 8: Play space audit tool

Name of setting:		Site observation made by:	
Site observations:	Observation day and date:	Time of observation period:	Weather:
Key features of site:	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.		
Usage by children and adults (numbers):	Approx. age: (under 1, 1-2, 2-3, 3-4, 4-5, 5+)		Total:
Children in a group:			
Solo children:			
Activity observed by presence of children:		If not present, record of signs of children being there and making use of site:	
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:			

Tool 9: Play value assessment

Use this tool to determine to what extent the setting is offering access to a rich play environment and what factors impact on it.

The setting provides children the opportunity to experience	Never	Sometimes	Often	Normally	Examples or explanation
<p>A varied outdoor landscape For example: structures, different heights/ levels, hills, mounds, slopes, trees, bushes, bridges, pits, swings, aerial runway, garden, ditches, tunnels, open and closed spaces</p>					
<p>Earth (and snow, clay and sand) For example: trowels, forks, spades, buckets, bowls, tubing, sections of down pipes/ guttering, sledge</p>					
<p>Air For example: plastic bags, polythene, balloons, inflatables, earth balls, zip wire, stuff to make kites, windsocks, planes, wind chimes, flags, banners, pumps and syringes, fan, pipes, funnels, panpipes, didgeridoo</p>					
<p>Fire For example: candles, tea lights, matches, storm kettle, cotton wool, twigs, sticks, barbeque, tongs, old baking trays or woks</p>					

The setting provides children the opportunity to experience	Never	Sometimes	Often	Normally	Examples or explanation
<p>Water For example: plastic bottles, jugs, buckets and bowls, polythene sheets/tarpaulins, water bombs, bins, aqua-rolls, pipes and guttering, hose, trowels, washing-up liquid, tubs, water pistols</p>					
<p>Loose parts For example: ropes, tubs, barrels, blankets, bricks, breeze blocks, pallets, boxes, vessels, mats, crates, cushions, ladders, poles, sticks, tape, pegs, old electrical equipment</p>					
<p>Risk For example: props and opportunities for climbing, balancing, building, biking, wrestling, jumping, fire-building, tool use</p>					
<p>The senses For example: varied lighting – lamp, fairy-lights, torches, candles, darkness, incense sticks, cooking and food-tasting, herbs and spices, flowers and plants, range of music from around the world, instruments, a variety of natural textures, colours and images</p>					
<p>Identity For example: hats, wigs, belts, make-up, face paints, mirrors, cameras, range of different types and sizes of fabrics and pieces of material, masks, bags, jewellery, glasses</p>					

Factors that impact on the setting's ability to provide for outdoor play	Tick if appropriate	Brief example or explanation
Internal factors		
The locality of my provision		
The quality of the training I have received		
The size of space we have		
The type of space we have		
The number of staff we have		
Provision is shared		
External factors		
Significant numbers of parents/carers feel that play should not be messy		
Significant numbers of parents/carers feel that children should be kept busy		
Significant numbers of parents/carers feel that children should be kept in during inclement weather		

Tool 10: Assessing play value with children

Location:		
General responses by children (likes, dislikes, happy squeals, reaching for something, pointing):		
Wording for adults	Wording for children	Children's views, drawings or markings
Children of different ages play together	Can you play with everyone here that you want to?	
The natural world	Are there natural things like mud, long grass and shrubs that you can play with?	
Loose parts	Is there stuff to make things with like sheets, pegs, stuff from the house?	
The four elements	Can you/do you want to: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • jump in puddles? • lay in the grass and listen to the wind? • get warm by a fire? • play with mud? 	
Challenge and uncertainty	Are there things which are exciting or a bit scary?	
Changing identity	Are there things to dress up with?	
Movement	Can you: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • run • jump • bounce • balance • skip... 	
The senses	Tell us about the things to: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • touch • smell • taste • make noises with • listen to 	

Section 3 – Facilitating outdoor play

Opportunities for children to play outdoors and explore their natural environment have generally become more limited within local communities. Early years settings can address this by ensuring that children have access to a range of opportunities to play and experience the outdoors every day, in all weathers.

Early years practitioners work in a world where playing is able to take precedence. Ensuring that the environment and atmosphere meet children's needs and right to play is key. The best ways of supporting children's right to play are to:

- enjoy play for what it is
- play with enthusiasm when invited to play
- be a passionate advocate for play.

Children's opportunities for playing in all settings – including early years settings – are dependent on a range of conditions. These can be thought about as part of three broader themes:

- **Permission:** fear, expectations, tolerance, and the way adults view childhood and play
- **Space:** the amount, design and management of play space
- **Time:** how time is structured and the demands on children's time.



Section 3 tools

Tool 11: Developing guidelines for playtime during inclement weather

Tool 12: Template – information for parents

Tool 13: Intervention styles

Tool 14: Play types

Tool 15: Resourcing play – loose parts

Tool 16: Observing children's play

Tool 17: Template – risk management policy

Tool 18: Template – risk-benefit assessment

Tool 11: Developing guidelines for outdoor play during inclement weather



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

It is helpful for settings to view and promote the weather in a positive manner, rather than as a barrier. Children generally enjoy being outside in all types of weather and seasons.

Weather guidelines can cover the following situations [provide details for each situation]:

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

When situations that require play to take place indoors only, the following applies: [include indoor spaces used and how they are used].

Weather guidelines will be shared with staff, children, and parents in the following way: [describe how guidelines will be shared].

Things to consider:

1. Decide on a named member of staff or establish a group which identifies situations that would require play to take place with restricted access to the outdoors or indoors only.
2. Work with staff to identify and agree extreme weather conditions that would require play to take place indoors only (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 restricted access to the outdoors due to acceptable weather conditions, consider the following:
 - What are the designated outdoor areas at your setting during acceptable inclement weather?
 - Are all children and staff aware of these spaces?
 - What shelter is available for children?

Tool 12: Information for parents

Engaging with parents will help them to understand the setting's commitment to outdoor play and why it is being promoted. Providing information about your plans and arrangements will help answer any queries parents might have. It also helps to promote the importance of play beyond the setting.

We are making sure that there are more opportunities for children to play outside every day. Playing outside is important for children. Playing outdoors:

- gives children space to run, climb, roll, jump, hide, and use up energy
- means children can play with natural things like water, sand, mud, grass, bark and twigs
- is fun for children and it allows them to discover the natural world, for example seeing which creatures come out in different weather
- helps children learn about the seasons and our range of weather by experiencing what they are like
- supports children to 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
- helps develop children's senses – sight, hearing, smell, touch and taste
- is less stressful and annoying for adults if children are noisy outdoors, rather than indoors.

Our setting knows 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 setting on the day. We have developed inclement weather guidelines that staff will use to make the decision about when children and staff can go outside to play.

[Insert information about outdoor shelters and other arrangements. 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?



Tool 13: Intervention styles

As adults, it can be difficult to understand and make sense of children's play behaviour but it is important that we remember that playing freely is children's way of learning about their environment.

Adults affect children's play significantly, by:

- shaping (positively or negatively) children's experience of play
- regulating time for play opportunities
- impacting on how and if space is made available
- providing (or denying) materials.

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

To demonstrate a supportive attitude towards outdoor play we should ensure we do not:

- dismiss it as frivolous and a waste of time
- unintentionally be unenthusiastic

- over-regulate and over organise it
- unnecessarily restrict it through fear
- only use play as a vehicle for learning, educational or health outcomes that need to be met.

A permissive attitude can be reinforced by choosing an intervention style that enables children to extend their play.

Examples of intervention styles

Wait to be invited to play

Practitioners are sensitive and careful not to take over.

Enable play to occur uninterrupted

Practitioners should try not to organise too much or interrupt the flow of play.

Leave children to develop skills at their own pace

Play is a mechanism that enables children to develop their own skills, abilities and judgement. Children should be supported to manage their play at their own pace and through trial and error.

Leave the content and intent of play to the children

Playing is an integral part of the child's experience of the world. Within safe limits, how it is done is a matter for children – it is their agenda.

Let the children decide why they play

Play is a behaviour without reward or a set goal. It is a child-led process for which prizes or incentives are not necessary.

Only organise when the children want me to

From time to time, children may run out of ideas or want to try something new. They will sometimes ask for ideas, help to do something, or for a resource they need.



Tool 14: Play types

Play can take many forms. It can be noisy, chaotic and social while it can also be quiet, focused and solitary. Because it is so varied many have attempted to categorise play behaviour into different types. Play expert Bob Hughes identified 16 play types which can be observed when children play, some of which are listed below. For more information see our [Play types information sheet](#).

Categorising play types can be useful when we are providing opportunities for children to play, however these are not set in stone – there are more that can be identified.

The various play types attempt to describe the full range of children’s play behaviours and how they

might contribute to children’s physical, mental and emotional development.

By observing children’s play and reflecting on the types of play we see, we can come to a better understanding about the children’s play needs and preferences. Whilst children may not necessarily display all the play types, if children seem to only be playing in ways which demonstrate a small group of play types, this may alert practitioners to widen the opportunities available to children. For example, if there is a clear dominance of rough & tumble and locomotor play, the children may benefit from the opportunity to engage in creative play, imaginative play and object play.

<p>Communication Play</p> <p>For example: songs, mime, jokes, facial expression (the play face), clapping games, gestures and poetry.</p>	<p>Locomotor Play</p> <p>For example: chase, tag, running, hide and seek, tree climbing.</p>
<p>Creative Play</p> <p>For example: where children have access to lots of different creative mediums and tools, where there is plenty of time and where getting messy is not a problem.</p>	<p>Object Play</p> <p>For example: examination and novel use of almost any object, such as a ball, a marker, a piece of cloth, even live or dead animals.</p>
<p>Dramatic Play</p> <p>For example: a dramatisation of parents taking children to school, of a TV show, of a conversation between two people, of a religious or festive event, a funeral.</p>	<p>Rough & tumble</p> <p>For example: play fighting, wrestling and chasing, where children involved are laughing and squealing and from their facial expressions obviously enjoying themselves.</p>
<p>Imaginative Play</p> <p>For example: patting a dog that isn’t there, eating food that doesn’t exist, or singing into a non-existent microphone.</p>	<p>Social Play</p> <p>For example: building or painting something together, co-operatively moving/carrying something, informal team games or parachute games.</p>
<p>Symbolic Play</p> <p>For example: using an object like a piece of wood to symbolise a person or a flag to symbolise a group or tribe.</p>	<p>Mastery play</p> <p>For example: making a dam in a stream, digging holes and making mounds in earth and sand.</p>

Tool 15: Loose parts



Resources can be found or provided to facilitate and encourage play. Resources such as sand, water, shells, fabric, buckets, boxes, rope, tyres, bottles, pots and pans, wooden spoons, wood and scrap materials of all kinds have come to be known as 'loose parts'. This refers to anything that can be moved around, carried, rolled, lifted, manipulated or combined to create interesting structures and experiences.

Loose parts create richer environments for children to play, giving them the resources they need to extend their play. Loose parts aren't prescriptive and offer limitless possibilities. A stick, for example, may become a fishing rod near real or imaginary water, a spoon in a mud kitchen, a tool to nudge a football that is stuck in a tree – it can be thrown, floated, snapped, pinged, bent, hidden, added to a pile, burnt, tied to something else, split, catapulted or discarded.

Static, unchanging play spaces do little for children, whereas environments which can be manipulated, where things move and can be moved open worlds of possibility. At a beach, for example, there is an abundance of water, sand, stones, rocks, smells, sights, vistas and textures which enable children to be highly inventive and creative in their play.

Natural environments such as mature woodland or beaches often provide significantly more loose parts with higher levels of possibilities than many artificial play spaces such as an asphalt school playground or an urban park.

Children who play outdoors or in large indoor spaces with others do not need many toys. By providing perhaps just a few well-chosen toys but numerous loose parts we can enrich the play space and facilitate play.

The list of possible loose parts is endless but can include:

- natural resources – straw, mud and pine cones
- building materials and tools – planks, nails and hammers
- scrap materials – old tyres and off-cuts of guttering
- bark which can be both safe playground surfacing and a loose part
- and, most essentially, random found objects.

Tool 16: Observing children's play

Observing children playing can support us to think about how and why children are playing and the things that we can do to respond to their play needs. You can use these questions to draw some conclusions about playing and to identify steps you can take to safeguard or develop opportunities for playing. This form provides a format to use, although observations can also be recorded using a voice recorder, reflective diary or other method.

Date:		Time:	
Number of children:		Duration:	
Ages of children:		Weather:	
Space – in what sort of spaces are children playing?			
Resources – what are children playing with? Are there enough things to play with?			
Play behaviour – how are children playing? How does it make us feel?			
Other staff – how are they responding to children's play? Are they helping children to play or stopping them from playing?			
Challenge and uncertainty – are children managing risks for themselves? Are there hazards that need to be controlled?			
Play types – are children displaying a range of play types?			
What are your initial reflections about what is happening?			

Action planning

As a result of the observation, what steps can be taken to safeguard or develop opportunities for playing?

Actions to protect opportunities for outdoor play	Who needs to be involved?
Actions to develop opportunities for outdoor play	Who needs to be involved?

Tool 17: 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.

This is a risk management policy template that can be adapted to meet the needs of the setting. The policy sets out the risk-benefit approach to managing risks and allows the inclusion of setting 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 [name of setting/organisation] to ensure greater clarity of understanding around this issue.

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

[name of setting/organisation] 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 children 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.

Tool 18: 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*.

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

Section 4 – Supporting staff

We do our jobs well when we feel valued, know what we are meant to be doing, can learn from any mistakes and receive praise when we do things well. Staff induction, supervision and support, and mentoring allow a focus on staff wellbeing, as well as providing professional and personal development.

A thorough induction process welcomes new people quickly and efficiently and provides a positive and supportive environment. Many settings use a written induction checklist and a timetable to ensure that all areas are covered.

Once essential organisational procedures and policies have been shared and understood by the staff, the induction period can be used to identify learning and skills of staff to understand their role in supporting children's play.

Checklist for a play specific induction

Taking a child-centred approach provides a useful framework for us to consider how we might use the induction process to reinforce how we provide children with access to the broadest range of environments and play opportunities. A play specific induction should include:

- introducing and reinforcing the issues of children's rights
- principles and values essential for working with children
- health, safety and security
- listening to and communication with children and families
- understanding development and behaviour
- keeping children safe from harm
- a balanced, common sense approach to managing risk and challenge.



Section 4 tools

Tool 19: Outdoor play training session

Tool 20: Questions to support reflective practice

Tool 21: Reading list – short pieces with reflective questions

Tool 22: Videos with reflective questions

Tool 19: Outdoor play training session

This short training session is designed to be delivered in your setting by an experienced member of the team or early years network.

A number of participatory training techniques are provided which will help practitioners think in practical terms about the importance of outdoor play and how to facilitate it.

Tips for facilitators:

- These activities work well in training sessions for a minimum of five participants and a maximum of about 30.
- With a larger group, you might want to have a second facilitator.

The length of time to allocate to the activities will vary depending on the size of the group:

- You can work through the activities over a number of sessions or pick and choose the ones that seem most relevant. However, we recommend using activities to complement each other and provide a basic shared level of understanding.
- Use the various tools referenced here as handout sheets for the participants to take away.
- Make these activities fun in your own way, for example, with a large bell for timed activities, introducing elements of playful competition, preparing colourful visual aids, bringing your own personality to your facilitation style.
- Adapt activities as necessary using your knowledge of the participants.
- Try to adapt the activities to the level of the participants.



Thinking about outdoor play

The aim of the session is to support practitioners to consider and plan for outdoor play in early years settings.

The outcomes are:

- practitioners feel equipped and supported to provide opportunities for children to play outdoors
- practitioners understand their role in facilitating outdoor play.

Time	Description and activity	Activity	Resources
30 - 45 minutes	<p>Barriers to playing outdoors:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • To increase understanding of the context in which children play, particularly outdoors • To identify ways of finding solutions. 	<p>Ask the group to think of the things that might stop or get in the way of children playing outdoors in the setting.</p> <p>Record the ideas on separate pieces of paper and peg them up on a 'washing line' or lay them on a table.</p> <p>Once you have 10 to 15 suggestions, group the same issues together. Choose one issue and discuss what could be done to reduce or remove the barriers (this could be done in small groups or one large group).</p> <p>Facilitate feedback from the group.</p> <p>Points to consider:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Are some children more affected by the problem than others? • What range of solutions might be useful? • Who has the power or ability to make that change? (for example, can the team do this? A manager? Advisory groups?) 	Paper, a washing line or string, clothes pegs

Time	Description and activity	Activity	Resources
20 - 30 minutes	<p>Understanding loose parts:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> To encourage creative thinking about loose parts. 	<p>Label five sheets of paper, each with one of the following headings:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Examples of loose parts that would be easily found in the local environment Examples of things you can do with loose parts (such as build a den, experiment) Ideas for sources of loose parts (for example factory offcuts, builders yard) Suggestions for managing loose parts (for example, checking them for hazards such as nails sticking out of wood, storage) What is the role of adults in a play session with loose parts? <p>Divide participants into small groups, each with one of the large sheets of paper and ask them to write down their ideas and responses.</p> <p>After five minutes ask the groups to pass the paper to the group on their left so they all have a new sheet.</p> <p>The groups now add as many more ideas as they can without repeating any that are already there. Bring all the sheets together and compare the ideas gathered.</p>	Paper, a washing line or string, clothes pegs
40 - 60 minutes	<p>Creating environments for play:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> To share ideas about features that support playing outdoors To encourage a focus on creating environments supportive of play To think creatively about what might be achieved even in unpromising environments. 	<p>In groups of three or four give participants 30 minutes to model an environment for play – this could be a ‘dream play environment’ or model to take account of the setting.</p> <p>Ask the groups to consider:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> What features of a rich play environment will you try to include? What loose parts and resources will you make available? What types of play will the space enable? How would you manage the space? (optional extra question) <p>Points to consider:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> How could ideas from these designs be used in reality? 	<p>Small loose parts, modelling materials (such as clay, plasticine, home-made dough)</p> <p>Useful and basic play items</p>

30 minutes	<p>The role of adults:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> To increase understanding and confidence about the role of adults in supporting play. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> What features are particularly popular? Are there ideas which would be great but hard to implement? Are there any solutions? <p>Using the intervention styles in Tool 13, ask participants in small groups to discuss an intervention style and what it might mean in practice. Each group can choose several and work through them before you stop to ask for feedback.</p> <p>Facilitate feedback from the group.</p> <p>Points to consider:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Are different intervention styles suitable at different times? Do some intervention styles feel more comfortable or familiar than others? Does anyone in the group want to ask advice from other members of the group? Are there any occasions when some styles would not be suitable? 	<p>Tool 13: Intervention styles</p>
20 minutes	<p>Risk-benefit assessment</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> To increase understanding and confidence about providing challenge and uncertainty in settings. 	<p>Participants discuss play scenarios and whether they would be happy to let an activity take place and whether if at any point they would stop the activity.</p> <p>Give participants scenarios of play opportunities which could be classed as risky, for example:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> balancing on logs climbing using tools. <p>Ask participants to identify risks to the activity and place a ball in the bowl labelled 'risk'. Do the same with 'benefits'.</p> <p>Compare the bowls and facilitate a discussion about how to advocate the benefits and how to mitigate the risks.</p>	<p>Clear plastic buckets, bowls or washing up bowls, one labelled 'benefit' and one labelled 'risk', play balls</p>

Tool 20: Questions to support reflective practice

Reflective practice is a term used to describe thinking about our interactions with children, our observations of their play and actively questioning our motives, actions, feelings or concerns.

Reflection can be undertaken in a variety of ways including:

- Individually – writing in a diary, notes or mind maps, thinking, reading
- Group – team meetings, de-briefing, supervision with managers, peer support
- Actively – reflecting while doing, cleaning, driving, running, acting things out.

It is important that, having actively questioned our practice, we take action and think about what we would change, what we would continue to do in the same way, and how we share our reflections with others. Reflective practice should be used to inform future practice, policies, assessment of risk and challenge and organisational approaches.

In working through a reflection, you may be thinking of a whole play session, an individual episode of play or a series of incidents. You may want to think it through because the way children or adults dealt with matters went really well, was unusual or puzzling, or could have been improved.



Things to consider

Describe what happened

How did I/we intervene?

What was the response to the intervention?

What was the impact? (for the child or children, colleagues, others, the environment)

What can I/we learn from this?

What are the consequences for my/our future practice?

Tool 21: Reading list – short pieces with reflective questions

Playful activities and outdoor play should be central to early years settings.

We have put together a list of bite-sized discussion points about outdoor play. This is a starting point for reflection and Continuing Professional Development for those with an interest in improving children's opportunities for playing in early years settings.

Children's right to play

Key messages:

- All children have a right to play
- Children's right to play should not be sacrificed at the expense of formal academic targets and learning.

Article 31 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) says:

'Every child has the right to rest and leisure, to engage in play and recreational activities appropriate to the age of the child and to participate freely in cultural life and the arts.'

Article 31 has been described as the 'forgotten right' so on 1 February 2013 the United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child adopted General Comment no. 17 that clarifies for governments worldwide the meaning and importance of Article 31.

General Comment no. 17 states that early childhood education 'is increasingly focused on academic targets and formal learning at the expense of participation in play and attainment of broader development outcomes' and goes on to recognise that 'curriculum and daily schedule often lack recognition of the necessity of or provision for play, recreation and rest'.

So, for those working in early years settings, the challenge is to ensure that play is recognised in its own right as a fundamental component of an enjoyable healthy childhood.

Points for reflection:

- Children's rights include the right to education, to religious beliefs and to be free from harm. Is the right to play seen as equally important in your setting?
- What do you do to make sure that staff, parents and children are aware of the right to play?

Further reading:

The Play Wales website contains further information and resources on the UNCRC and the [right to play](#).

Balancing play and playful learning

Key messages:

- Playful learning is an important part of the Curriculum for Wales and 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 in support of 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 really 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?

Playwork

Key messages:

- Playworkers' main focus is on supporting children's play
- Reading about playwork or undertaking playwork training or qualifications may be useful for practitioners in early years settings.

Playwork is a way of working with children where the main focus is supporting children's play (rather than education or care). Playworkers work to the Playwork Principles and often work in after school clubs, staffed adventure playgrounds and holiday playschemes.

Good quality playwork training will help early years practitioners to understand approaches to supporting children's play for its own sake. This would include:

- the use of observation and reflective practice to help us to understand children's play
- when and how to intervene (get involved) in children's play
- responding to children's cues to play
- how to balance risk with benefits to children's wellbeing and development.

Points for reflection:

- Have any staff in your setting completed playwork training or qualifications?
- Are there ways you can use playwork as an approach in your setting?
- How can playwork support children in your setting alongside more adult-led activities?

Further reading:

The Play Wales website contains further information and resources on playwork, for example:

- Information on [playwork qualifications and training](#)
- A series of [playwork guides](#) that explain the playwork approach in detail

Risk taking in play

Key messages:

- Risk taking in play is important for children's development and wellbeing
- Every child's idea of risk is different
- Practitioners need to support children to take risks but not push them into situations that are unnecessarily risky.

All children need and want to take risks physically and emotionally as they grow up. This is true regardless of their culture or background, or what impairments or behaviour they may come with.

developing physical and emotional capacities, challenging ourselves in new ways and gaining direct experience of the consequences of our actions. Being brave and conquering a fear is something that is very important to children and a sign of growth.

Risk taking means providing opportunities for all children to encounter or create uncertainty, unpredictability and potential hazards as part of their play. It does not mean putting children in danger of serious harm.

Every child is different – one child's idea of a risky situation might be different to another. Practitioners do not force children to do anything that they feel is beyond them or encourage them to go any further than they feel safe. Neither do they simply leave children to fend for themselves.

Points for reflection:

- What risk taking is common in your setting?
- Do practitioners know how to sensitively support children's risk taking in play?
- Does your setting make use of risk-benefit assessment?



Further reading:

The Play Wales website contains further information and resources on [play and risk](#).

Loose parts

Loose parts provide enormous value for play and efforts should be made to provide them in some way. Practitioners may need to be resourceful and creative – obtaining nondescript materials that can be used flexibly may work best.

Loose parts give children resources to help them create rich environments for their play. Because loose parts are not prescriptive, they offer many possibilities. Children are often very drawn to making dens and shelters – this is achievable with sticks, fabric and blankets. Scrap cardboard can be used to make signs, shields, costumes and masks. Sticks become fishing rods, spoons in a kitchen or a magic wand.

Further reading:

Resources for playing – providing loose parts to support children's play – with examples from settings across Wales, this toolkit demonstrates how providing loose parts play materials offers limitless opportunities for learning and creativity and help children extend their own play and learning. It has been developed to support adults in the play, early years and education sectors to provide loose parts play within their settings.

Reflection points:

- Thinking about introducing loose parts, or using them more in your setting, what are the opportunities? What are the challenges? Which parts of the toolkit could you use to address some of these opportunities and challenges?
- How might you source more and varied loose parts?

Resources library

Play Wales has a range of useful resources to support play.

Tool 22: Videos with reflective questions

Playwork Essentials videos

The [Playwork Essentials videos](#) are bite-size introductions to aspects of playwork and include links to further resources. They are aimed at playwork learners and anyone who works with children who wants to understand more about using a playwork approach.

The videos provide a brief overview of aspects of playwork practice – what are the implications for you in an early years setting?

Can you think of ways to embed aspects of a playwork approach in your work?



Acknowledgements

Play Wales received funding from Cardiff and Vale Local Public Health Team, Cardiff and Vale University Health Board to pilot and publish this toolkit.

We are grateful to the following for their support and contributions:

- Cardiff and Vale Local Public Health Team, Cardiff and Vale University Health Board
- Cardiff Healthy & Sustainable Preschool Scheme Officer
- Laurels Day Nursery
- Little Scholars Nursery
- Plantos Day Nursery
- Poppins Daycare
- Research team:
 - Professor Helen Dodd, University of Exeter
 - Dr. Lily FitzGibbon
 - Gill Hearnshaw, University of Exeter.



Appendix 1 – Methodology briefing note

Play Wales worked in collaboration with researchers from the University of Exeter and University of Stirling to conduct initial research which informed the development of the toolkit and to carry out an initial evaluation of the toolkit. The project was undertaken in six stages:

- Stage 1: focus group and stakeholder engagement
- Stage 2: toolkit development and refinement
- Stage 3: development of tools for quantitative and qualitative evaluation
- Stage 4: conduct initial evaluation following piloting
- Stage 5: recommendations
- Stage 6: final toolkit produced.

Public Health Practitioners supporting the Healthy & Sustainable Pre-school Scheme suggested settings to pilot the draft toolkit. These settings volunteered to take part in a Development Focus Group, which included piloting the content.

The focus group discussions centred around two main questions:

1. What are the challenges and opportunities in providing rich outdoor play environments and experiences in early years settings?
2. What might be useful to include in a toolkit to support provision of rich outdoor play environments and experiences in early years settings?

Recommendations from the focus group were considered when designing the toolkit. The draft toolkit was taken to the focus group for initial comments and feedback. Key messages from this feedback informed edits to the toolkit. Following this, site visits were made to settings where members of the focus groups worked. The visits included informal discussion looking more closely at the draft toolkit, which helped with further refinement of the content.

To collect quantitative data for the initial evaluation of the draft toolkit, the research team developed a questionnaire for practitioners. Qualitative information was gathered via the inclusion of some open comment questions.

The detailed notes from the initial focus group were used to guide the development of the questions, alongside discussions with Play Wales regarding the aims of the toolkit. The research team focused the questions on areas where we could reasonably expect that the toolkit might have an impact.

Before and after having access to the draft toolkit, practitioners and managers in the pilot settings were asked, via questionnaires, to report on:

- their access to information about outdoor play and how to support it in their setting
- what helps and hinders outdoor play
- the frequency of access to a rich play environment, including how easy it is to find ideas to increase opportunities.

The post pilot questionnaire, circulated after settings had access to the toolkit, also included questions specifically asking for feedback on the toolkit. The final version of the toolkit was developed following recommendations from the evaluation research.





Bwrdd Iechyd Prifysgol Caerdydd a'r Fro
Tim Iechyd Cyhoeddus
Cardiff and Vale University Health Board
Public Health Team



NHS
WALES
GIG
CYMRU | Bwrdd Iechyd Prifysgol
Caerdydd a'r Fro
Cardiff and Vale
University Health Board

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.