

**RAISING
THE
NATION**

**PLAY
COMMISSION**



Everything to Play For

A Plan to Ensure Every
Child in England Can Play

June 2025

**CENTRE
FOR
YOUNG
LIVES**

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About the Raising The Nation Play Commission

The Raising the Nation Play Commission ('the Commission') is chaired by entrepreneur and author, Paul Lindley OBE, in partnership with Baroness Anne Longfield CBE, the Executive Chair and Co-Founder of the Centre for Young Lives.

Launched in June 2024, the Commission convened 19 expert commissioners, alongside Paul and Anne, to spark a national conversation about how to encourage and support children and families in England to play more. Through the lens of seven themes, the Commission investigated the benefits of, and barriers to, play through a call for written evidence, oral evidence sessions with expert witnesses, a series of visits, and by consulting children, young people, and families.

Our 20 expert commissioners are:

- Dr Amanda Gummer – CEO, FUNdamentally Children and Chair, Association of Play Industries
- Anne-Marie Canning MBE – CEO, The Brilliant Club
- Arti Sharma – CEO, nurtureuk
- Eugene Minogue – CEO, Play England
- Harry Hobson – Director, Neighbourly Lab
- Prof. Helen Dodd - Professor of Child Psychology, University of Exeter Medical School
- Ingrid Skeels – Co-Founder, Playing Out
- Jo Rhodes – Founder, Challenge 59
- Julika Niehaus – Portfolio Manager, Children's Mental Health Programme, Impact on Urban Health
- Kadra Abdinasir – Associate Director of Policy, Centre for Mental Health
- Laura Henry-Allain MBE – Educationalist, storyteller, producer, and consultant
- Professor Mark Mon Williams - Chair in Cognitive Psychology, University of Leeds & Professor of Psychology, Bradford Institute of Health Research
- Martin Allen Morales – CEO, Institute of Imagination
- Dr Naomi Lott – Assistant Professor in Law, University of Reading
- Prof. Paul Ramchandani – Professor at PEDAL, University of Cambridge
- Dr Rob Hughes - Clinical Assistant Professor, London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine & CEO and Co-founder, Tandem / Early Ideas Limited
- Sue Macmillan - COO, Mumsnet
- Tim Gill – Author & Independent Consultant
- Tom Bridges – Director, Arup
- Zelda Yanovich – Chief Partnership and Strategy Officer & Co-Founder, Fam Studio

About the AI images in this report

In partnership with Fam Studio, we invited children from Surrey Square Primary School in London to help us imagine the future of play in England in a fantastical series of co-creation workshops.

After seeing the world through making custom “Play Vision Glasses” to embrace their play expertise, children tackled the challenges outlined in this report by imagining new ways to make their world more playful.

These images presented throughout the report were created by the children, in collaboration with Fam Studio’s AI Imagination Tool, to share their vision for a playful England with those who can make a difference now.

- **Learning through Play** - Children were challenged to design a new classroom that makes learning more fun.
- **Time to Play** - Children were challenged to design something to make a boring waiting time more fun.
- **Places to Play** - Children were challenged to design something to play with outside after school.
- **Parents and Play** - Children were challenged to design something fun to play with their adult.
- **Digital Play** - Children were challenged to design a new digital tool to play with friends or family.
- **Right to Play** - Children were challenged to design something to make their street more playful for everyone.
- **Health and Play** - Children were challenged to design something to make a visit to a doctor more playful.

About the Centre for Young Lives

The Centre for Young Lives, founded by former Children’s Commissioner for England, Baroness Anne Longfield CBE, is a think tank and delivery unit dedicated to improving the lives of children, young people, and families in the UK. Its focus spans from cradle to career. It promotes the benefits of early help and intervention to break the cycle of disadvantage and support vulnerable children, young people and their families to flourish. It addresses systemic issues, such as poverty, mental health, and education disparities, advocating for reform where it’s needed and a new social contract to help all children and young people to succeed.



Foreword from Paul Lindley OBE

**Chair, Raising the Nation
Play Commission**

Play isn't just preparation for life - it is life.

It's how children explore who they are, how they relate to others, and how they make sense of the world. Children play not because they're told to, but because they're driven to. It's a fundamental expression of humanity, and one of the purest forms of learning, joy, and connection we have. Nothing is more innate - or more natural - than children playing.

And yet - in England - we've made it incredibly hard for children to do so.

Everything to Play For sets out a bold and necessary vision and plan to change that: to restore play to the heart of childhood in England.

We've reached a critical moment. Childhood in this country is under immense pressure - from screen time and shrinking freedoms, to rising inequity, to poor physical and mental health. Yet one of the most powerful tools we have to boost children's physical activity, wellbeing, confidence, and creativity is being overlooked: play.

A generation ago, the idea that we'd need to encourage children to play would have seemed absurd. Play just happened - at school, at home, in our streets. But over recent decades, and the last 15 years in particular, it's been quietly squeezed out. Cuts to services, risk-averse planning, traffic-choked roads, an explosion of 'No

Ball Games' signs, the rise of addictive social media, excessive screen time and shifting societal attitudes have all chipped away at the time, space, opportunity and freedom children once had to play. The impact of this has been greatest for those children already living with disadvantage.

Of course, many children still do play - and in exciting new ways. But it's no longer guaranteed. And when play drops out of childhood, the consequences ripple across education, health, and society.

That's why this report makes the case for something better. It offers children that guarantee. It unapologetically takes a rights-based approach to ensure they can play. Following 12 months of intense and detailed inquiry, and building upon years of dedicated and collective efforts by those in the play sector and beyond, we set out our framework to realise that vision.

Over this last year, the Raising the Nation Play Commission has heard from hundreds of children, experts, and community leaders from many different backgrounds and lived experiences. We've learned from inspiring visits to every corner of England, and to Scotland, South Africa, the US, Denmark and Finland. We've seen what's possible when play is prioritised - and what's lost when it's not.

Our conclusion is clear: play needs political leadership, national investment, and a strategy to match. Without it, we will

continue to fail children. With it, we can unlock a generational shift in children's health, happiness and life chances.

We've made ten headline recommendations - each clear, deliverable within this Parliament, and spanning the breadth of Government responsibilities. From Whitehall to town halls, they are interdependent and mutually reinforcing. Delivering them will require cross-departmental collaboration - the perfect approach for a Government committed to mission-led change.

Our headline recommendation - the glue that binds the rest together - is for a National Play Strategy underpinned by an annual £125 million investment. That's the inflation-adjusted equivalent of England's last play strategy in 2008. We've identified credible funding options, and we urge the Government to act: to restore children's childhoods, secure our national future, and deliver on the pledge it has made to create the healthiest and happiest generation of children ever in Britain. This report - and the plan within it - is a golden opportunity to deliver on each.

I want to thank every commissioner, contributor, child, and organisation who shared their evidence and ideas. I'm especially grateful to Anne Longfield and the Centre for Young Lives for their tireless work championing children's voices. I also want to recognise the many people

and organisations who, over the past two decades, have tirelessly made the case for play - through research, advocacy, and action. This report is co-owned by each of you.

When then Secretary of State for Children, Families and Schools, Ed Balls, introduced the government's 2008 play strategy, he told MPs that fun and exciting opportunities to play are at the heart of a happy, healthy and enjoyable childhood. That argument is even more important today. I'd go further: play is at the heart of a happy, healthy and enjoyable society. And today, I'd ask MPs to ponder this: we have a Minister for Gambling - but no Minister for Play.

Fifteen years after that strategy was allowed to wither away, I sense a new groundswell of optimism and determination to get play back on the political agenda. This report is designed to help deliver that.

Let's choose to be a nation that sees, values and supports our children. Let's give them back the time, space, opportunity, freedom - and the right - to play.

Let's get our children playing again.

Keep smiling,



Paul

Executive Summary

Launched in June 2024 and chaired by Paul Lindley OBE in partnership with Baroness Anne Longfield CBE and the Centre for Young Lives, the Raising the Nation Play Commission has brought together 19 expert commissioners to conduct an extensive year-long inquiry into why play is critical to children's wellbeing, and how it can be restored to every childhood in England.

Through gathering written and oral evidence, national and international visits, and engagement with children, parents, and professionals, the Commission has investigated the benefits of play, what is stopping so many children from accessing it, and what can be done to turn the tide.

Our findings are clear - play is an essential part of childhood. It is the bedrock of development in the early years, of happy and healthy childhoods, and of safe, thriving communities.

But opportunities to play in England are being eroded, due to a growing culture of hostility towards children playing, and a policy landscape which has consistently failed to recognise and harness the vast benefits of play - apart from the short-lived national Play Strategy of 2008.

This is despite clear international recognition of children's right to play, enshrined in Article 31 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC), which England has failed to protect or uphold in policy or practice. In contrast to Scotland and Wales in particular, where play strategies and legal protections are improving opportunities and attitudes towards play, England is an outlier.

This vacuum in national and local play policy has created an environment where many children can no longer play on their own doorsteps, travel independently to school, green spaces, or even their friends' houses - all to the detriment of their happiness, health, and wellbeing.

It can be no coincidence that we now have the unhappiest children in Europe, with one in five suffering from a mental health problem, as well as growing levels of obesity among children in England. We also have record low levels of children arriving at school not 'school ready', and rising numbers of children with Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND). There is a welcome commitment within Government to tackle many of these programmes through the Opportunity Mission, and a range of new policies and programmes for children and young people such as the Young Futures Programme, the Child Poverty Taskforce, and the forthcoming Youth Strategy. Getting children playing again is the key to tackling many of the challenges facing this young generation, and should be a central theme across these initiatives.

What children and parents tell us about play

“ It makes me feel good, sometimes silly, or out of breath from laughing too much

Child, Year 5



Credit: Isle of Play

The Commission has held a series of focus groups - as well as a Youth Panel - with children across England.

Children told us that there are many barriers to playing including poorly maintained playgrounds, short school breaks and lunchtimes, and societal attitudes that devalue and infantilise play as they grow older. One child told us that as they get older, “It’s kind of hardwired into us that we should lose our ability to play and imagine things”.

Some also felt their independence is curtailed by overprotective parents and carers, although others shared their carers’ concerns for their safety, describing fear as the biggest barrier to playing outside.

“One of the main factors is that we live in this area of East London and the reality is that there are gangs and crime everywhere

Child, Year 7

Children told us that they want to play outdoors more, and in playgrounds which are maintained and safe. We heard from children as young as seven who recognised the need for risk in their play.

“When we fall it’s kind of like a lesson.

Child, Year 3

The Centre for Young Lives, on behalf of the Commission, also commissioned a poll of 2,000 parents across England to understand more about their views of play, including its barriers and its benefits. The overwhelming response was that parents value play and want to support it, but they are grappling with many of the barriers that face their children, from addictive digital devices to unsafe streets and public spaces. The poll found:

- Half of parents say they play with their youngest child every day while a further third (35%) say they play with them “most days”.
- Three quarters (76%) of parents agree that people are generally less accepting of children playing outside on the street than when they were a child.
- Over half (55%) of parents say that their youngest child plays outside less than they did as a child. This is even more the case with parents aged over 45 (69%).

To ensure parents have the confidence to let their child play independently, we need to make public spaces safer, primarily through less and slower traffic and less crime, and more welcoming, through a shift towards a culture which embraces children and their right to play again.

Some parents also need extra support to play with their children. This is not due to 'bad parenting' but a result of the immense pressures on their time and, sometimes, finances.

Play as a foundation for life and learning

All children should be able to play. Play is how much of children's development takes place, how they understand the world around them, learn to problem solve, build motor skills, and stay happy and healthy.

Risk is an important part of development. Risky play builds resilience, and can reduce anxiety. Evidence from countries like Finland shows that a balanced approach to risk - supported by safe public spaces and cultural norms - fosters independence and wellbeing.

The evidence and testimony that we have gathered over the last 12 months make it clear that play must be integral to the government's ambitions to support children and young people. Currently, a third of children start school not fully prepared or able to learn. It is often these children who need extra support for special educational needs as they go through school.

The Government aims to increase the proportion of children reaching a good level of development in the Early Years Foundation Stage assessment to 75% by 2028. Maximising play is an essential part of ensuring children have the social, emotional, physical, and cognitive skills that they need to be 'school ready'.

At school, research shows children learn more effectively through playful methods, especially outdoors or in flexible, interactive settings. Play-based learning can also improve engagement, attendance, and teacher satisfaction, but is underutilised in schools due to insufficient teacher training and a rigid curriculum and accountability system. Only 29% of primary school teachers say they feel well or very well prepared to facilitate play after their initial training, a figure which falls further

to 16% for lower-secondary school teachers.

Countries like Denmark are showing how a flexible curriculum and political leadership can enable more playful learning, fostering creativity, collaboration, and student ownership in learning. Practical aspects, such as school uniforms, can also influence children's ability to play freely.

Space to play

Child friendly neighbourhoods are spaces which are safe and welcoming for children to move, play, socialise, and belong. However, an increasing hostility to children's play has grown in many places.

Streets dominated by traffic and no ball games signs, public spaces where young people are not welcome, and fears about crime can prevent children from playing even on their doorsteps, forcing them indoors on to digital devices and away from in-person interaction with their friends. Outdoor play has declined by 50% in a generation and today children travel shorter and shorter distances independently.

Playgrounds are often underfunded, poorly maintained, or designed with limited input from children themselves, rendering them inaccessible to children and parents or carers with disabilities.



Over 400 playgrounds closed across England in the decade to 2022, while the collective annual park budgets for England fell by more than £350 million between 2011 and 2023.

A growing culture of hostility towards play has also become a significant and growing barrier to play. Legally baseless 'No Ball Games' signs send a clear signal that children are not welcome. In London

alone there are over 7,000 signs limiting play and movement for many of the 560,000 children in the capital. As well as signs, neighbours and community groups' noise and disruption complaints always seem to outweigh children's right to play.

The Commission visited Denmark and Finland to see the power of child-friendly neighbourhoods, where a common understanding that children need to play, coupled with child-centred design, not only encourages play but also creates healthy, happy, and welcoming environments for everyone else.

Time to play

Children need protected, unstructured time to play - every day. Without it, their development, wellbeing, and ability to thrive are compromised. However, children's time to play has been diminished by changes in school routines, family life, and broader societal pressures.

! Children at Key Stage 1 now have 23 minutes a day less breaktime on average than in 1995.

At school, children face packed schedules, reduced school break times, and high academic expectations that prioritise performance over wider wellbeing. Many report feeling they don't have enough time to play during the school day due to long lunch queues, lost breaktimes, or homework pressures. The practice of withdrawing playtime as punishment further undermines their ability to play and unwind from lessons.

At home, unlike previous generations, many children today depend on their parents to access play spaces due to safety concerns, lack of accessible outdoor areas, and limited transport options. This dependency places a heavy burden on time-poor parents, whose capacity to support play is constrained by pressures on their own lives.

Playful childhoods, healthy lives

Active, social, and imaginative play directly supports healthy development, builds resilience, and can even mitigate the impacts of trauma and adversity. Therefore, play has an essential role in protecting and promoting public health, as well as in specific healthcare settings where it can be a transformative tool in the treatment of children.

Children in England are experiencing rising levels of obesity, poor mental health, and low levels of physical activity. Those from low-income backgrounds are most likely to be impacted, with children from the most deprived communities twice as likely to be living with obesity than those from the least deprived areas.

When children are suffering from health problems, play can be a vital tool for their treatment and recovery. It can be integrated into clinical settings to alleviate stress and anxiety, shorten procedure times, prevent the need for sedation, and decrease the number of repeat appointments. This benefits children, families, and the health service.

By restoring play to everyday life, we can improve children's health outcomes, reduce long-term pressure on health services, and lay the foundation for happier, more resilient futures.



Digital play

Digital play has its own unique benefits. Playing online can incubate new skills and interests, as well as social connections, happiness, and confidence. More than half of children see digital technology as important for meeting and keeping in touch with friends - something which is often recognised as play when it happens in-person, particularly among older children and teenagers. 68% of children use the internet to find new hobbies, while 'sandbox games', such as Minecraft, encourage high-levels of creativity.

However, the lack of alternative spaces and opportunities to play leaves children with less choice than to spend longer amounts of their time on digital devices. Children tell us they want to play outdoors more, but the lack of opportunities to do so and the addictive nature of screens combine to trap many into a downward spiral, depriving them of the few opportunities they have left to play in the offline world.

This has consequences for their health and wellbeing - both in lost benefits from not playing outside, but also from problems with eyesight, sleep, mood, and their behaviour which are associated with screen and digital device usage.

As a result, bold and urgent action is necessary to create more opportunities for children to play away from their digital devices, and to make the digital world a safe space for children to play so that it can still be accessed in moderation, to obtain its benefits.

Parents and play

Parents, carers, and guardians are instrumental in shaping their children's experience of play. A parent's confidence to both play with their child and to let them play unsupervised outdoors is therefore vital, but parents are faced by a number of barriers to both.

Many parents face financial pressures, a lack of space - particularly in unsuitable or temporary housing - and limited access to toys or outdoor environments. Parents also highlight societal changes that have curtailed safe doorstep play, pushing them toward expensive or less accessible forms of play provision.

Support for parents must be accessible. Initiatives like Save the Children's Pause to Play project, Bradford Birth to 19's 50 Things to Do Before You're Five initiative, and the EasyPeasy app demonstrate that with the right kind of support - whether through financial aid, free resources, peer networks, or digital tools - parents feel more confident and engaged. These programmes, often targeted at disadvantaged families, show that simple, low-cost or no-cost ideas can successfully embed play into everyday life and routines.

Modelling play for parents also emerged as a key theme throughout our inquiry. The closure of Sure Start centres and cuts to the health visiting workforce have left significant gaps in the infrastructure that once supported families with young children, disproportionately affecting disadvantaged families, who are already more likely to struggle with the financial pressures of parenting. Parents who themselves did not play as much as previous generations also face additional barriers to encouraging play among their children.



Summary of recommendations

Play urgently needs to be restored to every child's life. Achieving this requires play to become a political and policy priority, underpinned by national leadership, legal protections, and cultural change.

Our ten recommendations address all three of these areas:

1. A new, cross-departmental National Play Strategy for England, sending a clear signal that play is a national priority, backed by £125 million per year (the same level of funding as the 2008 Play Strategy received, adjusted for inflation).
2. A statutory Play Sufficiency Duty for local authorities, bringing England in line with Scotland and Wales. This duty would require local authorities to regularly assess and secure adequate play provision, particularly in communities where access is limited.
3. Legal protections for children's rights, including:
 - a. Incorporating the UNCRC into domestic law.
 - b. Requiring national and local authorities to carry out children's rights impact assessments.
 - c. Recognising age-based discrimination under the Equality Act.
4. Neighbourhoods are designed and adapted to be child-friendly. This includes:
 - a. Tackling safety concerns - particularly traffic and crime - through a new strategy to make streets safe for play which prioritises children's independent mobility.
 - b. A national ban on 'No Ball Games' signs.
 - c. A commitment to ensure all families live within a safe 10-minute walk of a park or green space.
 - d. Local authorities using creative solutions like play rangers, mobile play stations, and toy libraries to bring play to more communities, and opening school playgrounds for use outside of school hours.
5. The National Planning Policy Framework and related guidance are updated to require developers and planners to consult with children and young people and to adopt pro-play policies in all new developments.
6. Parents are empowered to support their children to play, including:
 - a. An awareness campaign about low or no-cost resources and ideas for play.
 - b. Advice beginning during pregnancy and support from health professionals like health visitors.
 - c. Piloting extended government support for childcare costs under Universal Credit to wraparound and extra-curricular clubs and playschemes.
7. Play is made a foundation of a child's early years. This includes:
 - a. All early years practitioners receive play-based training, as part of their initial training and continued professional development.
 - b. The Early Years Foundation Stage framework should maintain its current emphasis on play and be clear about its role as the principal driver of development.

- c. Local authorities rolling out play-focused Family Hubs, with parent play champions to support and encourage play.
 - d. Local authorities working together with local childcare settings to expand access to indoor and outdoor space and facilities for young children to play.
 - e. Giving fathers more time to play with their babies by introducing six weeks of paid leave.
8. Schools are supported to harness the power of play for learning and wellbeing. This includes:
- a. Teachers, support staff, and school leaders receiving high-quality training on how to integrate play into both the curriculum and daily routines.
 - b. Supporting and requiring schools to develop their own play plans, appoint trained play coordinators, and adopt play as part of whole-school approaches to mental health.
 - c. The primary curriculum embedding play-based learning and free play, with breakfast and afterschool clubs offering play-rich environments.
 - d. The government publishing guidance protecting play at breaktime and lunchtime, and Ofsted including play sufficiency in school inspections.
 - e. Banning punitive practices like withdrawing playtime for poor behaviour.
9. The digital world is made a safe space for children to play where they are free from the addictive grip of smartphones and social media.
- This includes:
- a. Raising the digital age of consent to 16.
 - b. Stricter guidelines for the development of digital games and toys. Health warnings on products and applications which are addictive by design.
 - c. A national digital detox campaign to raise awareness of the adverse effects of excessive use of digital devices and the positive benefits of playing offline.
 - d. Guidance to parents, schools, nurseries, and childminders about the appropriate use of digital devices, including banning the use of smartphones in school during the school day.
10. Play is embedded in healthcare settings and recognise it as a tool to improving health outcomes. This includes:
- a. The Department of Health and Social Care recognising the importance of play within its forthcoming 10 year health plan.
 - b. A national 'Play on Prescription' pilot to enable GPs and health professional to social prescribe play activities for children.
 - c. Play being a standard tool in children's care and treatment with clear guidelines on the availability of play specialists and 24/7 access to play spaces.



Introduction

We need to get children playing again. Our children are spending more and more time in front of screens, from an increasingly younger age. They are less physically active than any previous generation, and less likely to play away from home in the way that previous generations felt safe and able to do. All too often these worrying trends are heightened among children with Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND), children in poverty, and children from ethnic minorities. Many parents recognise and worry that their own children are playing out less than they did when they were children, and children themselves repeatedly express their desire to play out more with their friends.

The Raising the Nation Play Commission was launched by Paul Lindley OBE and Baroness Anne Longfield CBE, on International Play Day in June 2024, to bring about a sea change in the way children's play is prioritised in England. Exactly a year later, this final report sets out what we have found and what needs to change to restore play so it is at the centre of childhood again.

As we have heard from a swathe of experts and professionals working with children over the last year, the consequences for England's children's health, wellbeing, happiness, learning, and development of

this decline in play are clear. Play is being squeezed out of childhoods, with drastic implications for children, our economy and public services.

Our central argument in this report is that England needs a play strategy that boosts children's play, and which recognises that play is critical to childhood (and human) development and should be a vital part of reversing the concerning trends we are seeing in our children. Play should be central to the government's strategy for creating a healthier, happier, and more equal nation – and to breaking down the barriers to opportunity for every child, from the early years to adulthood. The government's welcome forthcoming Youth Strategy, Young Futures programme, Best Start in Life programme and the Child Poverty Taskforce all should all have play as central themes. Play is a critical part of a thriving childhood and so a thriving society.

Over the last 15 years, supporting and encouraging children to play has become both a neglected policy area and neglected in England's culture. Play must become a central part of childhood again, and bring back elements of freedom in a way that children have previously enjoyed – and which it still largely is in, for example, Scandinavian countries.





Credit: Belinda Jiao (co Institute of Imagination)

Terminology

What do we mean by play?

For children and young people of different ages or in different environments, play may look very different. However, there are several characteristics of play we can use to define it.

We like former Health Secretary Frank Dobson's definition in his 2004 seminal review of children's play, *Getting Serious About Play*. He defined play as "what children and young people do when they follow their own ideas, in their own way, and for their own reasons".¹

In a similar vein, the previous 2008 National Play Strategy for England and the present strategies and policies in Scotland and Wales, all refer to play as an activity which is "freely chosen, personally directed, and intrinsically motivated".^{2,3,4}

Notably for both definitions, age is not a condition of a person playing. We have consistently heard how it is not just children in the early years who play -

older children and teenagers need to, and benefit from, play and often face their own unique barriers to doing so. As such, the focus of the Commission is on all children up to the age of 18.

Children and young people

In England, the term 'child' refers to anyone under the age of 18, as set out in the Children Act 1989.⁵ This also aligns with the definition adopted by the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC).⁶

With this in mind, when we refer to children throughout this report we are referring to anyone under the age of 18, although many of the services we describe are also open to young people with special educational needs up to age 25. The term 'young people' is also used in places, in recognition of the fact that many teenagers, particularly older teenagers, may not use the term 'child' to describe themselves. When we do use this term, we are still referring to people who fall under the legal definition of a child.

¹ Dobson, F. (2004) *Getting serious about play: A review of children's play*; <https://cfyl.org.uk/ref/02w>

² Play Scotland (2013) *Play Strategy for Scotland: Our Vision*; <https://cfyl.org.uk/ref/04s>

³ Welsh Assembly Government (2002) *Welsh Assembly Government Play Policy*; <https://cfyl.org.uk/ref/050>

⁴ Department for Children, Schools and Families (2008) *The Play Strategy*; <https://cfyl.org.uk/ref/0le>

⁵ UK Government. *Children Act 1989*; <https://cfyl.org.uk/ref/0r0>. Accessed: 12.05.25

⁶ United Nations (1989) *Convention on the Rights of the Child*; <https://cfyl.org.uk/ref/0z3>

Between June 2024 and June 2025 the Play Commission heard from experts across our seven core themes which have informed the sections of the report:



LEARNING THROUGH PLAY

How to boost learning through play, including the benefits of free and structured play, formal and informal play environments, and child, parent, and teacher-led play.



PLACES TO PLAY

Exploring the availability, accessibility, and safety of public spaces for children (parks, playgrounds, streets, youth centres, early years settings, and schools) and private spaces (gardens, houses, businesses).



TIME TO PLAY

Exploring the changing school day and year (breaks, after school, half term, and holidays) and changing environments outside school.



RIGHT TO PLAY

Consideration of national and local council responsibilities, tenancy agreements, no ball games signs, and the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC). As the right to play cuts across every one of our themes, our findings are shared in boxes across each of the thematic sections.



DIGITAL PLAY

How and where children can play in the digital and real realms.



PARENTS AND PLAY

How parents own relationships to play, and their views on safety, impact how their children play. Similar to the right to play, we have found this to be a cross-cutting theme, so elements of our findings feature throughout the report whilst the rest are captured in a dedicated section.



PLAY AND HEALTH

How play is an integral component of a healthy childhood, and how play can be used in healthcare settings and by healthcare professionals.

We have consulted widely over the last year, inviting evidence submissions and drawing on the rich network of authors who contributed essays to Paul Lindley's 2023 book *Raising the Nation*. We also actively engaged with, and supported, many organisations and bodies that exist to promote more, better, and easier play opportunities, including those that work directly with children and families. We have heard evidence from diverse backgrounds, ethnicities, income levels, and ages, from right across England, Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland, as well as from further afield in the US, South Africa, Denmark, and Finland. Our own expert Commissioner panels include members who are parents, academics, campaigners, activists, service providers, and educators.

A full list of those who have contributed written and given oral evidence can be found on page 140. Above all we have consulted with, listened to, and learnt from children and young people directly throughout.

Finland

Helsinki:

Visits included the Playful Learning Centre at the University of Helsinki and Playground Ruoholahti. We met with Elina Pekkarinen, Finland's Ombudsman for Children, Johanna Laisaari, Deputy Mayor of Helsinki, and representatives of the Ministry of Education & Culture and Finnish National Agency for Education.



Glasgow

Visits to St Martin's Primary School, the Children's Wood, and a PEEK Street Play session

Edinburgh

Visit to The Yard

Denmark

Billund:

Visit to the Capital of Children

Copenhagen:

Visit to Valbyparken Nature Playground and Mary Elizabeth's Children's Hospital

Leeds

Visit to Leeds City Council, including a play street session and the Lincoln Green Play Trail

Bradford

Visit to The Valley Project Adventure Playground

Salford

Youth Panel at secondary school

Immingham

Secondary school focus group

Sheffield

Visit to Sheffield Children's Hospital and Pound's Park

Maidenhead

Primary School visit and focus group

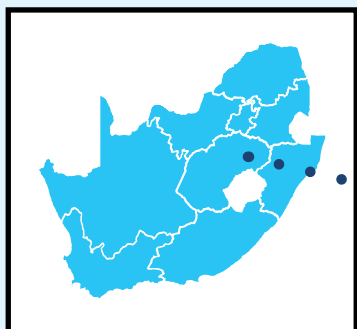
London

- Primary school visit and focus group; Secondary school focus group
- Visit to Surrey Square Primary School
- Visit to the Power of Play, Tower Hamlets
- Oasis Play Adventure Playground

South Africa

Johannesburg:

Visits to the Henley Business School Play Day event, organised by Bright Spark Foundation, and to the Soweto Home Based Care Givers group



What Children and Young People Tell Us About Play

To understand how to return play to the heart of our society, first and foremost we need to hear from children and young people themselves. Time and time again they say they want to play more, spend more time outside and less time on their phones, have longer breaktimes at school and more playful classrooms, have more parks and playgrounds, and safer streets where play is a normal part of life.

Throughout 2024 and 2025 the Commission spoke to children across England – on visits and in focus groups, online and in person - to hear their perspectives about the role of play and what they think needs to change. With the support of Fam Studio we also asked children in co-creation workshops at Surrey Square Primary School in London to imagine the future of play, the results of which are the AI images throughout this report.

We also considered the views of children captured in the literature, including through the written evidence we received.

The experiences and opinions of children we have heard feature throughout this report, and are also summarised in this section.

Our conversations with children included forming a Commission youth panel, a group of 11 young people in Years 7 and 8 from Oasis Academy MediaCityUK, a state secondary school in Salford. In separate formal focus group sessions, we also spoke to:

- Children in Year 5 and 6 at a primary school in London in July 2024.
- Children in Year 7 in an all-girls secondary school in London in January 2025.
- Children across Years 3,4,5 and 6 at a primary school in Maidenhead in February 2025.
- Children in Year 7 at a secondary school in Immingham, Lincolnshire in April 2025.



Youth Panel

Our Commission youth panel was a group of 11 young people in Years 7 and 8 from Oasis Academy MediaCityUK, a state secondary school in Salford. They challenged some of our assumptions and helped to shape our key messages and recommendations for change. They told us:

- They have a strong attachment to digital play – the online world is where they socialise - but there are risks like online harms and addiction which young people should be supported to navigate;
- Outdoor spaces are diminishing due to urban development;
- Break time in schools should be protected and enhanced;
- Feeling safe in public spaces is essential to being able to play – such as in parks or on the way somewhere – but too often this is not the case.
- There was a strong appetite for involvement in decision-making – even where they acknowledged limits to their expertise – and a preference for practical, balanced solutions that enhance play rather than restrict it.

Perceptions of play

Most of our discussions with children began with what they define as play, what they think of when we say the word “play”, and how it makes them feel.

By its very nature, play can take an infinite number of forms and does not look the same for every child. Some children spoke about running around outside, some mentioned games they have made up, and others brought up board games or football. Some children told us about the games they play on their phones and computers, others said how they like to re-enact these games with friends in person. In every conversation, children spoke about playing with friends or family, but also spoke about how they like to play by themselves and use their imagination.

Whilst how children play - and who they play with - varies, a common thread was why children play. We heard about the joy and happiness that play brings. One child told us: “It makes me feel good, sometimes silly, or out of breath from laughing too much”. Another said:

“**There’s almost a thrill. Especially when you win. It makes me happy and when you play your body releases dopamines.**”

Youth panellist

One child told us that they enjoy playing “because then I’m free”.

As well as the joy and freedom that it brings, play is clearly an opportunity for some children to escape, overcome, and process challenges and bad experiences. One primary age child told us that “play is a time to get your mind off everything”, whilst another said that when they play, “I forget I’m living for a few seconds ... [you can] escape the world and go into a game ... where you are transported into another world”.

Play and risk

Throughout our conversations, we have encountered widespread understanding of the benefits of play and the need to take risks.

One seven year old told us at a primary school in Maidenhead in February that the main lesson from play is that “if you get hurt [while playing] then you shouldn’t do that thing again.” Another seven-year-old at the same school agreed and said, “when we fall it’s kind of like a lesson.”

A girl in Year 7 in London echoed these sentiments. She told us how some children aren’t allowed outside due to parents not seeing their child as “trustworthy”, though she felt that children should go outside and be exposed to some risks: “If you don’t let your child out at some point, your child is never gonna learn ... parents should give their children a bit more freedom and free will so that children will be aware of the real world and teach them of the dangers out there.”

Play at different ages

Play looks different for children of different ages, but this certainly does not mean that older children and teenagers do not play. We spoke to children in secondary schools, and they often expressed a desire to play more.

“It’s kind of hardwired into us that we should lose our ability to play and imagine things

Child, Year 7

Some children spoke about not wanting to appear “childish” by playing, especially after making the leap to secondary school, so acknowledged that they may play

differently at home to how they act at school.

“You just put on a mask when you’re at school or in public, but when you are at home you just feel like, I don’t need to pretend to be something when I’m not

Child, Year 7

Play in and around the home

Homes should be a safe space for children to play where they feel comfortable. Homes and the surrounding area should also provide an opportunity to meet other children and play together, something which not all children can access if housing developments or neighborhoods lack safe, communal space. One child we spoke to who lives in a block of flats with an enclosed garden said that she has “met a lot of people my age [in the garden] and we’re still really really close”. As a result, she said: “I feel like a lot more properties should have a bit of an enclosed space [...] so then it’s easier and safer if kids want to let out their energy”.

Digital play

Online or solo digital games featured heavily in the discussions with our Youth Panel and in other focus groups, with the young people often returning to them as examples of the types of games they play. When we asked the Youth Panel if they felt there were any problems with digital play, the response was mixed. Many of the panel said they were aware of the safety-related limitations of online gaming - including exposure to strangers and risks of location

tracking. This was a view reflected across age groups: in the focus group in a London primary school, children had practical ideas about how to stay safe online while playing games, including that the voice chat feature - which allows players in a game to communicate with each other in real time using microphones - should be restricted to protect children.

However, our Youth Panel did not seem overly concerned about these dangers and were even less concerned about the amount of time they spent online or the risk of becoming addicted to their screens. In fact, some were clear that any attempts to limit screentime would be ineffective and might isolate them from their friends.

“ if you set a limit on screentime or take that [phones] away, you’re cutting us off from everyone we speak to

Youth Panellist

Other groups of the same age did acknowledge the dangers of addiction to screens, even if they also weren’t in favour of screentime limits. One girl in Year 7 at a London school said, “Maybe, I’m not supporting it, I think I should have a time limit for screentime because sometimes I feel like it’s kinda bad” [when she gets addicted to a game and plays for an hour].

We asked the Youth Panel about some of our ideas for change in the digital world, as well as their own suggestions. We asked the panel for their perspectives on health warnings on devices, which some thought could be helpful but others thought may be ineffective. When asked for their own ideas, the group suggested more child-friendly versions of popular games, reflecting a desire for balanced safety measures that don’t diminish enjoyment.

Play time at school

One of the clearest and most universal messages we heard throughout our conversations with children was that there isn’t enough time in the school day to play. In every group, children spoke about how long queues to get their lunch, being held back in class due to their or someone else’s bad behaviour, or having to complete homework mean they don’t get time to play during breaktime and lunchtime.

“ So the reason we don’t have time to play is because we’ve got stress, we’re doing homework. All the homework Monday to Friday, we’ve got massive lines [...] at lunch and break with barely any time to do anything. I feel like we should have a bit longer so we have more time to, like, go outside and stuff.

Child, Year 7

The Youth Panel strongly supported protecting play time and saw it as a right rather than a privilege. The practice of withdrawing breaktime as a collective punishment was criticised as unfair.

“ You get more time to socialise. It would help us mentally and physically. Mentally so you don’t get overwhelmed with school, physically because it’s not good for us to eat really quickly.

Youth Panellist

Play in the classroom

We asked children about their perceptions of play within the classroom, with few believing that the two go together. At a primary school in London, some children spoke about liking to fidget and move, and how they struggle to sit still for extended periods of learning. They said they do have movement breaks, which they enjoyed, but these are sometimes withheld as a result of bad behaviour. One child in particular spoke about how they felt being playful and silly helped in the classroom, because:

“ If someone does something silly, it makes me more excited and awake

Child, Year 5

Other children we spoke to also didn’t recognise the classroom as somewhere where play can happen. For some, this was because they don’t associate learning and the curriculum with play, whilst for others it was because of the physical space:

“ I feel like traditional classroom settings don’t really work with most kids because if it’s just like being so obedient, sitting down, being quiet, I don’t think it really works for kids”

Child, Year 7

In this same focus group with students from Oasis Academy Immingham, students suggested classrooms should be designed “in a way that works with the kids” so that they are more engaged and wanting to learn. They also recognised that this may be particularly beneficial for children with ADHD or other educational needs which make a “traditional” classroom less accessible.

Outdoor play: nothing to do and feeling unsafe

The Fair Play consultation, which informed the then Government’s 2008 Play Strategy, found that a desire for more local places to play was one of the strongest messages from children, as their absence was the main concern for not playing outside.⁷ Seventeen years later, the message is the same.

Many of our Youth Panel told us they feel local play spaces are limited, costly, or have been removed due to urban development decisions in their local area.

“ There’s not much to do and the things there are cost a lot of money.

Youth Panellist

⁷ Department for Children, Schools and Families & Department for Culture, Media and Sport (2008) The Play Strategy; <https://cfyl.org.uk/ref/0kf>

During our conversations with children, feelings about safety were also often raised as a barrier to outdoor play, or travelling independently to other spaces to play and meet friends. Again, this suggests little has changed since the 2008 Fair Play consultation when safety was ranked as the second biggest barrier to playing outdoors by children, and the biggest barrier to children aged 8 - 13.⁸

During our own conversations with children, it was clear that some children share safety concerns with their parents, while others think that their parents are being overprotective and that safety isn't as much of an issue. Where children we spoke to recognised the barrier of safety, it was usually because of crime and anti-social behaviour, often involving older teenagers. As one child put it:

“ One of the main factors is that we live in this area of East London and the reality is that there are gangs and crime everywhere”

Child, Year 7

There was sometimes a mismatch between children's perception of safety and their parents'/carers' concerns. They told us parental restrictions, rooted in fears of crime and unfamiliar locations, often curtail independence - even when young people feel confident about navigating risks:

“ I don't understand why I'm not allowed to friends' houses. I know there's a lot of gangs near me but the areas they are is not where I go. I know the danger and I know how to protect myself.

Youth Panellist

We asked the Youth Panel about potential solutions to increase the availability of and access to spaces to play. Their ideas included more street lighting and more policing, highlighting that safety above all else is the main barrier to playing out.

Playgrounds

Lots of young people feel that outdoor spaces where they may like to play are often poorly maintained, lack a diverse range of facilities and equipment, and are occupied by other people who make them feel unwelcome. Evidence submitted to the Commission from Liverpool City Council sets out what children from Liverpool want from their playground, including more monkey bars, diverse spaces beyond a football pitch, more options that girls enjoy, and also spaces to learn.

“ I would like if there was a library in the park

Child, Year 4⁹

Our focus group with students from Oasis Academy Immingham - a state secondary school - revealed graffiti in the local park as a major problem, for them and for younger children.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Liverpool City Council. Raising the Nation Play Commission call for evidence. 30.10.24

“ Maybe the parents don’t want them [younger children] to like see things like that that are written on like the walls of like the play areas

Child, Year 7

Whilst the often explicit graffiti doesn’t deter the children we spoke to, they did say they are put off from the park by the older teenagers who occupy it:

“ It [graffiti] doesn’t stop us going, but it does younger kids. The teenagers stop us going. There’s even vapes there

Child, Year 7

Adventure playgrounds

While perceptions of local playgrounds were often negative, this is of stark contrast to how many children talk about adventure playgrounds. Adventure playgrounds - which are staffed and often encourage free play with loose parts rather than just fixed equipment - are often safe havens for children within communities. London Play’s conversations with 120 children in April 2025 revealed how much children cherish being able to lead their own play:

“ Here you can actually build whatever you want. Whereas in other playgrounds adults have built it for you and say: ‘now you play with that’

Child, Islington adventure playground¹⁰

Adventure playgrounds are also spaces children recognise as inclusive spaces where they can be themselves and make friends. Children also see them to be places of safety.

“ It’s somewhere where I can play with my disabled brother and be safe

Child, Age 8¹¹

This is in large part due to the presence of staff who form trusting relationships with children, and are experts in meeting their needs whilst also letting children play freely.

“ We get to make besties with the playworkers

Child, Age 10¹²

¹⁰ London Play. Raising the Nation Play Commission call for evidence. 21.05.25

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Ibid.

Conclusion

Our conversations with children highlighted how play is universally recognised and enjoyed but also unique to every child and their development. From imaginative solo games to digital worlds and chaotic playground adventures, play offers joy, freedom, expression, and even refuge. Children value it deeply, not only for fun, but also as a way to connect, cope, and grow.

Yet across all ages and contexts, we heard a consistent message: play is under pressure. Whether it's shrinking breaktimes at school, a lack of safe outdoor spaces, or social

expectations to 'grow out of it', children often feel their opportunities to play are limited or controlled.

These conversations also underscore the importance of children having a meaningful voice in the decisions that affect their lives. The depth, clarity, and honesty with which they spoke about play - from its emotional impact to the barriers they face - remind us that hearing from children is crucial to finding thoughtful, practical solutions. Their insights remind us that play is not a luxury or a distraction. It is a fundamental right, and children are asking for the time, space, permission, and trust to enjoy it fully.





What Parents Tell Us About Play

Parents and carers are sometimes seen as the gatekeepers of children's play, but too little attention is often paid to their own experiences, challenges, and perspectives. To better understand how parents across England view play and their role in supporting it, the Centre for Young Lives commissioned a nationwide poll in January 2025, on behalf of the Commission. The responses of 2,000 parents of children from across England offer a revealing snapshot of a generation of families who overwhelmingly value play, yet are navigating a complex web of barriers that limit when, where, and how their children play.

The survey, carried out between 24th January and 4th February 2025, captured the views of a diverse group of parents. 54% of respondents were female and 46% male, whilst 75% were white and 25% from ethnic minority backgrounds. Almost half (47%) of respondents said they are aged 35 - 44, with 19% 45+ and the remaining respondents aged 18 - 34. For parents with more than one child, we asked for the age of their youngest. 4% were age 0, 37% age 1-4, 36% age 5-9, and 24% age 10-13. Parents with other children older than 13 also participated in the survey.

Respondents came from across England: London (18%); East of England (11%); East Midlands (9%); North East (4%); North West (12%); South East (17%); South West (10%); West Midlands (11%); and Yorkshire and the Humber (10%). 22% of respondents live in a household with a combined income lower than £28,000 and 46% have a household income of more than £48,000.

The results from this polling are used throughout this report - alongside valuable written and oral evidence given by parents themselves or those who work with parents and communities - whilst a summary of

its main findings is also provided in this section.

This section explores what the polling tells us about the current culture of play from a parent's point of view. It highlights the strong commitment parents have to playing with their children while also uncovering where confidence and capacity to support play varies, particularly among younger parents. It also captures how fears about safety, reduced public tolerance for children playing outdoors, and the rise of digital entertainment are reshaping play in the modern childhood experience.

What emerges is a picture of parents who are often trapped by the same pressures and limitations that restrict their children from playing.

Parents and play

Our polling found that most parents understand and value the importance of play and play regularly with their children. However, we did find that younger parents (aged 18-34) report more difficulty in knowing how to play with their children.

- Half of parents (**50%**) say they play with their youngest child every day while a further third (**35%**) say they play with them "most days". For parents in full-time employment, 47% play with their youngest child every day, whilst this figure rises to 55% for those in part-time employment and 61% among those not in employment.
- **90%** of parents agree that it is important for their child's health and development to play regularly. **89%** agree that they know how to play with their children, although this is lower for younger parents (**74%**) and even lower for specifically young fathers (**65%**).



Credit: Jade Reynolds-Hemmings

- Parents with younger children (aged 1-4) are more likely to play with their children every day (**74%**) than parents of children aged 10-13 (**36%**).
- Over a third of children in all age groups spend more time playing by themselves than with their parents or friends. This includes **39%** of 10-13-year-olds and **37%** of 5-9-year-olds.

Outdoor play and the culture of play

Our polling suggests parents recognise there are changing public attitudes towards outdoor play. The majority say their child plays outside less than they did, and a significant majority believe that people are now less tolerant of children playing in public spaces. Safety is the most common factor stopping children playing outside, with feelings of risk varying by region.

- **76%** of parents agree that people are generally less accepting of children playing outside on the street than when they were a child.
- If the Government were to invest in more play space, parents would most favour more outdoor parks and public spaces (**44%**) over playgrounds (**28%**), indoor play areas (**17%**), schools (**11%**) or other spaces.
- **55%** of parents say that their youngest child plays outside less than they did as a child. This is even more so the

case with parents aged over 45 (**69%**). Similarly, **52%** of parents agree that when they played outside, they played further from their house than their child. This rises to **62%** for parents aged 45+.

- The percentage of parents concerned for their child's safety when playing outside differs by region. **36%** said they felt their child is unsafe in the West Midlands, compared to **20%** in London. There is negligible difference between parents of boys and parents of girls.
- Safety (**36%**) and a preference for playing inside (**32%**) are the main factors identified by parents as preventing their children from playing outside.

Digital play

Most teenagers play online every or most days. For many parents, concerns about safety online are equal to fears about children playing outdoors, demonstrating the difficult position in which many find themselves: neither is a desirable option.

- **66%** of 10-13 year olds and **48%** of 5-9 year olds play online every or most days.
- **41%** of parents are equally concerned about their child's safety when they play online and outdoors, **31%** are more concerned about their child playing online, and a quarter (**25%**) are more concerned about outdoor play.

Conclusion

The findings from this polling demonstrate how the decline in opportunities for children to play is certainly not down to a lack of understanding or effort from parents and carers: the vast majority say they actively engage in play with their children and recognise its importance, though younger parents - especially young fathers - say they do feel less confident in how to play effectively.

A key concern is how many parents describe feeling powerless to help their children overcome many of the barriers children face, including a lack of space, safety when playing outdoors, and the grip of digital devices.

Our polling also reveals worrying shifts in how, where, and with whom children play. A significant proportion of children spend more time playing alone than with others, and outdoor play is in marked decline.

Concerns about safety, changing public attitudes, and a growing preference for indoor environments are key barriers to outdoor play. The stark contrast between the freedom parents experienced in their own childhoods and the limitations faced by their children today reflects the broader social and cultural shift that is to the detriment of every child.

Digital play has become a dominant form of play for children of all ages, yet it poses its own set of challenges. Parents are caught in a bind, equally concerned about online safety as they are about physical safety outdoors. This points to a growing dilemma for families: how to balance freedom, safety, and social development in a world where both digital and outdoor environments present serious risks. They also reiterate the need for targeted support - particularly for young parents - and investment in accessible, safe public spaces where children can play freely.





Children's Vision

Purrr-Mission Play Parlour.

A cat-shaped storefront replaces one ordinary house on a London street.

Inside, visitors are free to stroke, snuggle, and play with friendly felines or purchase cat-themed books, toys, and treats—no boring “keep-off” rules here.

The Policy Landscape

The 2008 Play Strategy

The benefits of play and its vital importance during childhood are well-established and backed by decades of evidence, as was the case in 2008 when the previous Labour Government published England's first – and only – Play Strategy, alongside Play England.¹³

As the two Secretaries of State then responsible for the strategy, Children, Families and Schools Secretary Ed Balls and Culture, Media & Sport Secretary Andy Burnham, wrote in its opening lines:

“ Time and space to play safely is integral to our ambition to make England the best country in the world for children and young people to grow up – it is vital to children's physical, emotional, social and educational development.”¹⁴

¹³ Department for Children, Schools and Families & Department for Culture, Media and Sport (2008) The Play Strategy; <https://cfyl.org.uk/ref/1sk>

¹⁴ Ibid.

Backed by £235 million and informed by an extensive consultation, Fair Play, the 2008 Play Strategy aimed to ensure that all children would be able to enjoy local, safe, and exciting places to play. It aimed to achieve this through investing in new facilities co-designed with children and communities, providing support for the play workforce through a new qualification, and by embedding play as a priority locally.

A survey by the National Foundation for Education Research carried out in November 2009, found that children and young people's satisfaction with their parks and play areas increased from 45% in 2008 to 54% in 2009. Whilst the precise impact of the Play Strategy on these results is unclear – other factors such as funding from the BIG Lottery's Children's Play programme also led to investment in play provision at the time – it nevertheless shows that overall investment in play spaces was having a positive impact.¹⁵

What happened to the 2008 Play Strategy?

In its first few years, the strategy's goal was to increase the availability of play facilities where children needed them most. Its 12-year vision would culminate in all children having access to “world-class play and recreation spaces”. These were excellent, well evidenced ambitions, but they were not followed through by the national government after 2010, and there was little encouragement, incentive, or funding for local areas to implement the strategy either. The de-prioritisation of play is evident inside the walls of Westminster and Whitehall – where today no single Department, Minister, or even civil servant has explicit responsibility for promoting children's play in England.

At the same time, the Play Strategy was disarmed of its funding. The Coalition Government, and its newly renamed

Department for Education (DfE), removed the ringfence for play programme budgets and scrapped play facility targets for local authorities. The loss of play-specific funding was compounded by broader cuts to local authorities, limiting their ability to plug the gaps. There has also been a policy shift in attitudes towards play – from the education system to the planning system – which has seen play consistently deprioritised and children's need to play sidelined. The impact of this change on play spaces has been devastating and children now have fewer opportunities to play, despite play remaining just as vital to their physical, emotional, social, and educational development as ever.

Where are we now?

As shown throughout this report, there are now many barriers which restrict children's opportunities to play, including more cars on the roads (both parked and moving), the closure of playgrounds, the dominance of screentime, shortened school break times, and a default use of ‘No Ball Games’ signs in many communal spaces. It is unsurprising that children are spending less time outdoors than previous generations, less time socialising with friends, and less time playing.

Meanwhile, children and young people are facing growing and increasingly complex challenges. Four in ten children now live with an unhealthy weight and more than a quarter are obese. The number of children not ‘school ready’ is a huge cause for concern, as are the numbers of children who are absent from school.

Children's wellbeing and happiness in England are also at record lows. One in five children and young people in England have a diagnosable mental health problem.¹⁶ The crises in young people's physical and mental health are felt at their sharpest within under-served communities.

¹⁵ National Foundation for Educational Research (2010) Tellus4 National Report

¹⁶ NHS England (2023) One in five children and young people had a probable mental disorder in 2023; <https://cfyl.org.uk/ref/2al>

These trends, whilst not unique to England or the UK, are far worse in this country than in many others. The UK had the lowest average overall life satisfaction among 15-year-olds completing PISA across 27 European countries in 2022, with one in five boys and nearly one in three girls reporting low life satisfaction.¹⁷

The need for a new National Play Strategy

The Labour Government elected in 2024 has placed an important emphasis on children's wellbeing and outcomes. Its Opportunity Mission aims to break the link between a child's background and their future success, with four key areas:

- Set every child up for the best start in life;
- Help every child to achieve and thrive at school (with a particular focus on disadvantaged children);
- Build skills for opportunity and growth so that every young person can follow the pathway that is right for them; and
- Building family security.

Ensuring children have the best start in life is the foundation of the Opportunity Mission, and the Government has set a target of 75% of 5-year-olds reaching a good level of development in the Early Years Foundation Stage assessment by 2028.

Among the proposals to achieve this are new and expanded school-based nurseries, reforming training and support for the workforce to drive up standards, and a stronger Early Years sector. This includes investing in Family Hubs and Start for Life programmes, parenting and home learning programmes, improved early identification of SEND, and the creation of the Child Poverty Taskforce. Children and young people are also the focus of broader ambitions and policies, such as a review

of the National Curriculum, funding for breakfast clubs, a commitment to cutting waiting lists for mental health services, and the adoption of the Young Futures programme – local hubs to provide safe and positive places for teenagers.

The DCMS is also due to publish its youth strategy imminently, with the voices of young people at its heart, shaping how the future of youth provision will be delivered based on the community's and young people's needs.

However, this government has yet to fully embrace the transformative power of play to help tackle some of these new and generational problems and is playing catch up with the devolved nations when it comes to implementing policies that support children to play.

The right to play

Children's right to play is recognised in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC).

The UNCRC is an international treaty that sets out the rights of all children, ratified by every country in the world except the US, ensuring children are protected, cared for, and able to develop. Driven by recognition of the centrality of play to a healthy and happy childhood, the right to play is enshrined in Article 31(1) of the UNCRC, which reads:

“ States Parties recognize the right of the child 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.

Enshrining a right to play in the UNCRC recognises that States must take action to respect, protect and enable all children to play. The United Nations' Committee on the Rights of the Child, unsatisfied by the recognition afforded by States to the rights contained within Article 31, published General Comment No.17 on the right of the child to rest, leisure, play, recreational activities, cultural life and the arts, in 2013, to raise understanding among States "of the centrality of the rights in Article 31 in the life and development of every child".¹⁸

As such, implementing the right to play requires measures that address four factors, identified by academic and Play Commissioner, Dr Naomi Lott:¹⁹

- Space: Children need physical and mental space to play freely;
- Time: Children need protected, unstructured time for self-directed play;
- Acceptance: Children need a culture that recognises and celebrates play as a right for all children; and
- Rights: Children's right to play must be protected by legislation, policies, and practices informed by the UNCRC as a whole.

Each of these four factors are equally critical, and failure to implement one will lead to a failure to realise the child's right to play. For example, spaces may be facilitated for children's play but without consideration of children's voices in the design of them, acceptance of children's right to be in, and to play within them, and time to access those spaces, a child's right to play cannot be realised.

Crucially, Article 42 of the UNCRC outlines that all children, young people and adults – including parents – should know about children's rights. Articles 3, 5, 18, and 27 also outline that parents need to be supported through education, training

and other measures on how to best enable children's play, the value of play, and the importance of independent and self-directed play. The principles behind Article 42 were also echoed in submissions to the Commission. For example, that a Play Strategy should include the protection, promotion, and preservation of children's right to play, which includes raising awareness of children's right to play among professionals, policymakers, and parents.²⁰ The UNCRC includes 42 provisions that set out rights covering all aspects of children's lives. These rights are universal - they apply to everyone below the age of 18;²¹ indivisible - they cannot be separated from one another; and interrelated - they depend on each other. A child's right to play must be informed by the whole of the UNCRC, and influences the enjoyment of many other UNCRC rights. This means that implementing the child's right to play will benefit children's enjoyment of other rights, such as their rights to health and education, and that implementing the child's right to play requires recognition of a range of other UNCRC rights, including:

- Article 2: The right of the child not to be discriminated against;
- Article 3: The right of the child's best interests to be a top priority in all decisions and actions that affect children;
- Article 5: The right of the child to be supported to enjoy their rights, according to their evolving capacities;
- Article 6: The right of the child to life, survival and development;
- Article 12: The right of the child to be heard and taken seriously;
- Article 15: The right for children to gather in public space; and
- Article 29: The child's right to an education that develops their personality

18 UN Committee on the Rights of the Child (2013) General Comment No.17 on the right of the child to rest, leisure, play, recreational activities, cultural life and the arts, para.5

19 Lott, N. (2025) 'A Framework for Implementing the Right of the Child to Play: Space, Time, Acceptance, Rights-Informed', Human Rights Law Review, 25 (2); <https://cfyl.org.uk/ref/2qi>

20 E.g. Jackie Boldon. Raising the Nation Play Commission call for evidence. 31.10.24

21 Article 1 UNCRC: "For the purposes of the present Convention, a child means every human being below the age of eighteen years unless under the law applicable to the child, majority is attained earlier."

The UK ratified the UNCRC in 1992, but it has failed to enshrine these rights in domestic law across all four nations. This means that while children's rights should be considered in England, they do not always have the full force of the law behind them. The right to play is protected in Wales and Scotland, but has been neglected in England. Concerned by the retrogressive steps taken by the UK Government in 2010 to withdraw play policies and

reduce funding for play in England, the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child has called on the UK to fully protect and fulfil children's right to play across the country including through legislation, policy and budgetary measures.²² Any attempt to implement the right to play must acknowledge that the right to play applies to all children,²³ and must include children's voices in policy development, design, and execution.²⁴

Equality Act

Under the Equality Act, the Public Sector Equality Duty (PSED) requires local authorities to have “due regard” to eliminating discrimination, advancing equality and fostering good relations between people with a protected characteristic and those without. Although age is a protected characteristic under the Act, this protection does not apply uniformly across all contexts. In particular, the prohibition of age discrimination in services and public functions applies only to adults, not to children and young people. As a result, the Equality Act does not provide children with protection from age-based discrimination outside of employment.²⁵

Although the PSED technically applies to age, its impact on children is uncertain because it is based on the broader framework of the Equality Act, which does not fully extend age protections to them. Additionally, children and young people are not explicitly mentioned in the PSED. It is therefore unclear, as the Town and Country Planning Association told the Commission, whether the PSED applies to children and young people, and whether there is a duty on local authorities to have “due regard” to children.²⁶

As such, many organisations call for children to be explicitly recognised as a distinct group that needs protection, which would ensure their right to be heard is upheld.

22 UN Committee on the Rights of the Child (2016), Concluding Observations on the Fifth Periodic Report of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland. CRC/C/GBR/CO/5; UN Committee on the Rights of the Child (2023), Concluding Observations on the Combined Sixth and Seventh Periodic Reports of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland. CRC/C/GBR/CO/6-7

23 Article 2 UNCRC: “1. States Parties shall respect and ensure the rights set forth in the present Convention to each child within their jurisdiction without discrimination of any kind, irrespective of the child's or his or her parent's or legal guardian's race, colour, sex, language, religion, political or other opinion, national, ethnic or social origin, property, disability, birth or other status. 2. States Parties shall take all appropriate measures to ensure that the child is protected against all forms of discrimination or punishment on the basis of the status, activities, expressed opinions, or beliefs of the child's parents, legal guardians, or family members.”

24 Article 12(1) UNCRC: “States Parties shall assure to the child who is capable of forming his or her own views the right to express those views freely in all matters affecting the child, the views of the child being given due weight in accordance with the age and maturity of the child.”

25 Children's Rights Alliance for England (2014) Making the most of the Equality Act 2010; <https://cfyl.org.uk/ref/2y0>

26 Alice Ferguson (2024) ‘DLUHC Committee Inquiry on Children, Young People and the Built Environment: Consideration of children in policy and decision-making’; <https://cfyl.org.uk/ref/2zc>

Campaigns for Play in England

Despite England's vacuum of play related policy over the past 15 years, a huge amount of national, local, community, and parent-led organisations have stepped up to continue to support children and their right to play.

Play England has long been a feature of the national landscape, having supported the previous Labour government to develop the 2008 Play Strategy. Since that strategy was lost, Play England - led by its Executive Director and Play Commissioner Eugene Minogue - has continued to campaign for a child-friendly England. In January 2025, it supported Tom Hayes MP to table the first parliamentary debate on play for eight years, and the longest for seventeen years.

In May 2025, it published its new 10-year strategy, *It All Starts with Play!*, which sets out a vision for a child-friendly England. This would be built upon children having the space to play wherever they are, play workers being supported and recognised for the transformative work that they do, the play sector receiving proper support and funding, and the country as a whole re-embracing a culture that accepts play as an essential - and natural - part of childhood.

The Commission was delighted to join Play England at the Four Nations Play Symposium in March 2025, where Play England, Play Wales, Play Scotland, and Playboard NI joined forces to share learnings from their respective campaigning and policies.

On a local level, countless organisations - many of which feature throughout this report - work tirelessly to ensure that children have the opportunity to play and to make children's voices heard.

Progress in the devolved nations and internationally

Under their devolved powers, the Welsh and Scottish Governments and the Northern Ireland Executive have adopted policies, and fostered a culture of political prioritisation, to support the needs of children and young people. There are numerous examples of best practice and inspiration from across the devolved nations that the Commission has been able to draw upon. In both Wales and Scotland, delivery of play strategies is overseen by independent expert sector organisations Play Scotland and Play Wales, who ensure the national strategies are needs and evidence led, and who campaign for and represent children's right to play.

Play in Wales

Wales has been a trailblazer, publishing its first play policy in 2002.²⁷ This policy statement - underpinned by a commitment to children's right to play established in the UNCRC - has been the foundation of much of the Welsh Government's play-related policy since. The policy statement affirms the Welsh Government's belief that:

“play is so critically important to all children in the development of their physical, social, mental, emotional and creative skills that society should seek every opportunity to support it and create an environment that fosters it”²⁸

27 Welsh Government (2002) Welsh Assembly Government Play Policy; <https://cfyl.org.uk/ref/32f>

28 bid.

In 2004, the Welsh Government formally adopted the UNCRC as the basis of policy making relating to children and young people and incorporated these rights in Welsh law in 2011 through the Rights of Children and Young Persons (Wales) Measure 2011.²⁹

This came a year after Wales legislated for play through the Children and Families (Wales) Measure 2010, which introduced a Play Sufficiency Duty.³⁰ Against the backdrop of the Government's bid to tackle poverty, the legislation acknowledged that children could have a poverty of 'experience, opportunity, and aspiration'.³¹

The duty in its current form came in two phases: the first, in 2010, requires local authorities to assess whether there are enough opportunities to play within their jurisdiction. Since 2014, local authorities have also been required to secure enough opportunities, should their assessment find they are insufficient.³²

During a webinar hosted by the Commission on the Play Sufficiency Duty, Nathania Minard from Conwy Council, Wales, gave examples of play opportunities the council has been able to secure as a result of the play sufficiency duty, including ensuring that all schools empower play, and that play is considered in housing developments.

Play in Scotland

Like Wales, Scotland has a dedicated Minister for Children, and a policy framework that protects children's right to play. Scotland's Play Strategy, published in 2013, recognises the breadth of the benefits of play across several policy priorities in Scotland, including in health, education,

and reducing inequality.³³

Through the Planning (Scotland) Act 2019, the Scottish Government introduced a Play Sufficiency Duty on local authorities. Alongside the Play Sufficiency Assessments which also are a feature of the Welsh duty, the legislation in Scotland also requires local authorities to consult children on local place plans.³⁴

In January 2024, the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (Incorporation) (Scotland) Act incorporated UNCRC law into Scottish law.³⁵ In Scotland, the legislation requires all public bodies to comply with the UNCRC.³⁶

During the Commission's visit to Scotland in April 2025, we heard how incorporating the UNCRC was hugely significant; embedding children's right to play and their right to be heard – among other things – in law had an “overnight impact”, as there is now an expectation that schools and other settings are to be held accountable to upholding these rights.

We also heard on our visit how Scotland's national guidance for early years practitioners, *Realising the ambition: Being Me*, has been instrumental in supporting practitioners to provide high-quality provision. It underscores play-based learning as central to early development and provides practical advice on creating nurturing environments that promote confidence, creativity, and curiosity.³⁷

In March 2025, the Scottish Government published its Play Vision Statement and Action Plan 2025-2030, which builds on the 2013 Play Strategy and sets out how the Government will “empower and support more play opportunities for all children in Scotland”. It aims to do this through

29 Welsh Government (2022) Children's rights in Wales. <https://cfyl.org.uk/ref/360> Accessed: 24.01.25

30 Welsh Government (2010) Children and Families (Wales) Measure 2010; <https://cfyl.org.uk/ref/3mg>

31 Play Wales (2020) Right to play workshop; <https://cfyl.org.uk/ref/3q8>

32 Play Wales Play Sufficiency. <https://cfyl.org.uk/ref/3gk>. Accessed 24.01.25

33 Play Scotland. Policy Landscape. <https://cfyl.org.uk/ref/3pb>. Accessed: 31.01.25

34 UK Government. Planning (Scotland) Act 2019. <https://cfyl.org.uk/ref/41t>. Accessed: 29.01.25

35 Scottish Government (2024) United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (Incorporation) (Scotland) Act 2024; <https://cfyl.org.uk/ref/440>

36 Children's Legal Centre Wales. UNCRC Incorporation into Law. <https://cfyl.org.uk/ref/45i>. Accessed: 23.05.25

37 Scottish Government (2025) Play Vision Statement and Action Plan: 2025 - 2030; <https://cfyl.org.uk/ref/4ph>



Credit: @drewfussphotography and Hornimans Adventure Playground, London W10

three action areas: parents, place, and practitioners. This includes ensuring parents have the knowledge, time, and confidence to support play, communities have safe, welcoming, and inclusive play opportunities, and that practitioners have the knowledge and confidence to support play and feel valued and recognised for their work.³⁸

Play in Northern Ireland

Play policy in Northern Ireland is underpinned by the right to play established in the UNCRC, enacted by the Play and Leisure Policy Statement of 2009.³⁹ As a result, the Department of Education has led the Play Matters campaign, which aims to increase understanding and recognition of the importance of play through specific training sessions to professionals working with children, and support for parents and carers to build their confidence in playing with their children.⁴⁰

Play was also maintained as a policy focus in the 2011 Play and Leisure Implementation Plan, published by the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister.⁴¹ More recently, the Children & Young People's Strategy 2020-2030 has sustained this focus on children's opportunities to play.⁴² The implementation plan and children and young people's strategy were developed with the support of PlayBoard NI.⁴³

England is the United Kingdom's outlier. English children have fewer protections around their right and access to play than their Welsh, Scottish and Northern Irish peers. They do not have a legal right to play.

Play in Finland

The Play Commission visited Finland in March 2025, to see some of the excellent play projects and facilities available to children and families. We were struck by how play holds a central role within

38 Education Scotland (2020) Realising the ambition: Being Me; <https://cfyl.org.uk/ref/4zf>

39 Northern Ireland Executive (2009) Play and Leisure Policy Statement for Northern Ireland; <https://cfyl.org.uk/ref/4on>

40 Playboard NI. Raising the Nation Play Commission call for evidence. 31.10.24

41 Department of Education. Play Matters. <https://cfyl.org.uk/ref/5fz>. Accessed: 03.09.24

42 Northern Ireland Executive (2020) Children & Young People's Strategy 2020-2030; <https://cfyl.org.uk/ref/5ng>

43 Playboard NI. Raising the Nation Play Commission call for evidence. 31.10.24

Finland's Child Strategy, reflecting the country's commitment to children's rights, wellbeing, and development. The strategy emphasises play as a fundamental right of the child, essential for holistic development, including physical, emotional, cognitive, and social growth. It recognises that through play, children express themselves, learn to interact with others, and build resilience.

Key aspects of the role of play in the strategy include:

- Promoting well-being. Play is seen as a vital contributor to mental health and emotional stability.
- Ensuring participation. The strategy supports children's right to influence matters that concern them, often expressed through play and creative activities.

- Supportive environments. It advocates for safe, inclusive, and stimulating environments that allow for free and guided play both in educational settings and during leisure.
- Equity and Inclusion. All children, regardless of background or ability, should have equal access to play opportunities.

In Finland, upholding children's right to play through policy is particularly effective as a result of one department being responsible for both education and culture, a reflection of the nation's cultural commitment to lifelong learning, and that learning occurs in all public spaces and not just schools. It is perhaps no coincidence that, for the past eight years, Finland has ranked as the happiest country in the world.⁴⁴

Children's Vision

The school's roadway is swapped for an enormous pink bubble-gum machine whose globe spills thousands of candy-coloured balls, turning the street into a car-free ball-pit that anyone can wade, bounce, or roll through. Right-to-Play freedom in the heart of London.







Children's Vision

It's at the gate when people are coming into school. They should have like a little drawing area with some activities in and when the gates open they can put their slip back in, when it's home time they can find their slip, pick it up, and take it home with them. The drawing is on the slip. It should have a post with respect, responsibility and kindness on it.



Play As a Foundation for Life and Learning

Play is an intrinsic component of a happy, healthy childhood and adulthood. Children of every age have a natural urge to play anywhere and everywhere. Play is self-initiated and motivated by an innate desire. This is the magic of play that adults and policy makers so often struggle to understand – it is what children do, and it has a myriad of benefits, but that's not why children do it. As Global Education Advisor Dr Ger Graus told the Commission: “If we want to find out how children play and how important that is, we must stop trying to translate that into GCSE results... what we're actually evaluating are the building blocks.”

Play Commissioner Professor Mark Mon Williams, Chair in Cognitive Psychology, University of Leeds & Professor of

Psychology, Bradford Institute of Health Research, has stressed how play is pivotal to children's healthy development – their learning, health, cognitive and social skills – all of which help children thrive and be ready for school. This can also help reduce the number of children with educational needs that require tailored support later in their education. Many of these benefits can be measured through policy milestones and matrices, such as the government's welcome ambition for 75% of children to reach a good level of development when they start school by 2028, in accordance with the early years foundation stage profile.⁴⁵ However, the importance of play goes far beyond reaching these goals, important though they are. The value of play is a foundation of a happy and healthy life.

Play in early years

In the early years, play can have a transformational effect on children's development. Children supported to develop life skills in their early years live up to 10 years longer, and play is a crucial way this can be achieved. As well as being fun, play is also a serious business.⁴⁶

“ Play is the start of learning... from the youngest of ages, we learn through curiosity

Professor Dr Ger Graus OBE⁴⁷

Play is at the heart of development in the early years, a fundamental period of life with 80% of brain development completed by age 3 and 90% by age 5.^{48,49} As the Department for Education's 'Early years foundation stage statutory framework'⁵⁰ states:

“ Play is essential for children's development, building their confidence as they learn to explore, relate to others, set their own goals, and solve problems

The framework identifies three “prime

areas” of development: communication and language; physical development; and personal, social, and emotional development. Play benefits all three.

The LEGO Foundation has shared studies linking play with language skills. Children copy and mimic others during play, enhancing their expressive vocabulary. Similarly, symbolic play and storytelling boost language skills and receptive vocabularies.⁵¹

“ we had a person who came from Ukraine and as English wasn't her first language... people couldn't really understand her. Me and my friend tried to help her through playing and she started to understand English a bit better as well

Child, Year 6

Play also improves physical development; “core strength, stability, balance, spatial awareness, coordination and agility”.⁵² Free play especially, where children have the most agency in their play, has been shown to have a positive link with gross motor skills development.⁵³ This “agency”, according to Play Commissioner Professor

46 Bradford Birth to 19 (2023) 50 Things to Do Before You're Five: Impact Report; <https://cfyl.org.uk/ref/6mx>

47 Professor Dr Ger Graus OBE. Raising the Nation Play Commission call for evidence. 09.09.24

48 Theirworld. Learning through play (early childhood development). <https://cfyl.org.uk/ref/6z6>. Accessed: 27.01.25

49 NHS. Early learning and development. <https://cfyl.org.uk/ref/6zj> Accessed: 27.01.25

50 Department for Education. Early years foundation stage (EYFS) statutory framework. <https://cfyl.org.uk/ref/731>. Accessed: 26.01.25

51 The LEGO Foundation (2022) Learning Through Play and the Development of Holistic Skills Across Childhood; <https://cfyl.org.uk/ref/757>

52 Department for Education (2024) Early years foundation stage (EYFS) statutory framework. <https://cfyl.org.uk/ref/75e>. Accessed: 23.01.25

53 The LEGO Foundation (2022) Learning Through Play and the Development of Holistic Skills Across Childhood; <https://cfyl.org.uk/ref/76j>

Paul Ramchandani in *Raising the Nation*, “is one of the most powerful driving forces behind children’s development”, as children learn to associate their actions with an effect.⁵⁴

Through playing with others and sharing and negotiating rules and roles, children are also able to develop more complex social and emotional skills, can better understand other people’s and their own needs, be empathetic, work collaboratively, and develop pro-social skills. Problem-solving, emotional regulation, and resilience skills can all also be nurtured through play. They are all vital skills that help children navigate the world around them and the challenges of growing up. Outdoor play in particular enables children to develop a relationship with place and community, and build a sense of belonging.

Children can process their experience of the world through play – what makes them curious, what worries them, what is going to happen next. We should remember how many children quickly began putting masks on their dolls as they played during the Covid pandemic, similarly children who live in areas of conflict often deal with distress, fear and uncertainty through their play.

Supporting a playful start to life

During the early years, children’s brains are developing faster than at any other time in life. Play is essential to this precious foundation, and better opportunities to play can accelerate development and in turn boost children’s life chances for good.

A longitudinal study led by Professor Kathy Sylva has found that a rich early home learning environment, marked by frequent, meaningful interactions

between parents and children, including play, has long-lasting benefits. Children who experience this kind of environment are more likely to continue engaging in play and learning as they grow, supporting their development, behaviour, and education over time.⁵⁵

As ‘first educators’ parents are at the forefront of children’s experience of play as babies and infants – at its best when they can support and engage in children’s play without ‘hijacking’ a child’s independence to play. Given many parents face pressures and barriers to enable play for their children, they need to be supported and empowered, as we explore in a later section of this report.

Parents can have a crucial role in creating the right environment for children to play, while also helping, guiding, and encouraging children by getting involved and playing themselves. A key element to play in infancy is ‘serve and return’ interactions, which are back-and-forth exchanges where the infant child initiates and the adult responds, or vice versa. These interactions are fundamental to the development of social skills and have been cited by many researchers as vital for children, their development, and their wellbeing.⁵⁶ Play provides a natural framework for these exchanges to happen.

“ Play gives children connection to caregivers, family, peers and trusted adults, and teaches them to strengthen their capacity for empathy, care, and love.

Place2Be⁵⁷

54 Paul Ramchandani (2024) Making space for play. In: Lindley, P. (2024) *Raising the Nation: How to build a better future for our children*

55 Toth, K., et al. (2019) Home learning environment across time: the role of early years HLE and background in predicting HLE at later ages. *School Effectiveness and School Improvement*. 31 (1): 7-30; <https://cfyl.org.uk/ref/7cn>

56 Center on the Developing Child. Serve and Return; <https://cfyl.org.uk/ref/7dj>. Accessed: 23.05.25

57 Place2Be. *Raising the Nation Play Commission call for evidence*. 04.10.24

Children's Vision

Imagine a classroom swapped for a rainbow-lit wonder-zone: fluffy, flashing balloons dangle overhead; a soft, cloud-like ball-pit rings the tables; bubbles drift past arcade pods running Roblox maths quests; a hidden “secret-base” nook invites quiet reading; and a giant bubble-gum machine rewards finished tasks with mini challenges instead of candy. Every surface can glow or change colour to match the lesson—blue for science dives, sunset for story time—so pupils literally step into the topic while they bounce, pop, and play their way through the day. Any London school can convert a standard room into this Learning-Through-Play paradise, turning class periods into joyful, multisensory adventures.



Many children also spend some of their first years in an early years setting. The Commission heard how raising the status of early years practitioners is essential to fully harness their potential for enabling play and encouraging parents to do the same. Dr Helen Bilton, Professor of Outdoor Learning and Play, told the Commission that it is “criminal” that a hairdresser requires more training than an early years practitioner. Yet working with young children is a highly skilled and impactful role, critical to their development and learning. This contribution should be recognised and elevated to the same professional standing as teachers.

Elevating the profession also means ensuring early years practitioners are equipped with the right skills and understanding when it comes to play. With the Government aiming to recruit 40,000 additional early years Practitioners by September 2025, the Education Development Trust stressed to us the importance of training that emphasises the value of play and the distinction between supporting and directing it. This is important when practitioners work closely with parents, helping to create “ripples of good practice” that reach far beyond the hours spent in a nursery or setting.⁵⁸

Power of Play – Tower Hamlets

In February 2025, the Commission visited the Power of Play collaborative initiative in Tower Hamlets, London. Through a consortium led by The Institute of Imagination in partnership with The LEGO Group and funded by The LEGO Foundation, the programme aims to enhance access to play and change attitudes towards playful learning in the borough, by offering a blend of play opportunities at home, school, and in the community for underserved children and their families.

Each partner in the collaboration makes a unique contribution to the project:

- **Ambition Aspire Achieve:** focuses on providing inclusive learning-through-play opportunities to children with SEND. They also transform and activate local green spaces through their mobile 'Play Van'.
- **EasyPeasy:** provides free access to the EasyPeasy app to Tower Hamlets residents. The app contains personalised parenting tips and ideas to support families to build playful, positive connections. They also collaborate with local 'Parent Champions' to organise parent and carer meet-ups, support play practices at home, and create digital content for the community.
- **Institute of Imagination:** established a borough-wide school network to promote peer-to-peer educator training and integrated play into the school day, as well as delivering "Days of Play" across the whole school day. Schools have developed into local caregiver hubs to actively engage and increase parental confidence in learning through play.
- **Save the Children:** co-created Play Innovation Labs with three local

community groups where playful solutions tailored to the needs of local Tower Hamlets children were created. These include a Play Pack, Family Play Parties, and Messy Play workshops.

- **Young V&A:** focuses on place-based programming, providing a focal point for the community to engage in learning-through-play activities, facilitated by its Play Champion team based at the Young V&A.

By bringing together a group of organisations with a shared mission but expertise in different areas, the initiative is able to reach a broader age range, across different parts of Tower Hamlets, and in a variety of settings. At its heart is a commitment to co-creation; the Commission heard how bringing children and families along the journey of co-design and co-production strengthens their confidence to join-in. Exhibits have been designed to be engaging and inclusive, a true reflection of their ethos that "children are experts in their own lives". Moving forward the consortium is seeking to adopt and adapt this programme to reach more communities around England.



Play and risk

Some play can involve risk - climbing trees, using tools, riding bikes downhill, or using public spaces independently. When children play in a risky or adventurous way, they can experience feelings of thrill, excitement, and fear. Providing children with opportunities to play in adventurous or risky ways may reduce a child's risk for anxiety.⁵⁹ Both written and oral evidence provided to the Commission has shown how the element of risk found within free play also helps children to learn and develop.⁶⁰

“ when we fall it's kind of like a lesson

Child, Year 3

Children's independent mobility varies drastically across the globe. Research has found that Finland, Germany, Norway, Sweden, Japan and Denmark have some of the highest levels of children's independent mobility.⁶¹

During the Commission's visits to Denmark and Finland we observed the wide cultural gap between approaches to risk in Scandinavian countries and England. Speaking to parents at a local playground in Helsinki, there was a shared understanding that children cannot be protected from every possible danger and that trying to do so only inhibits their development and happiness.

By age seven, Finnish children can travel to places within walking distance and cycle to places alone, and by age eight they can cross main roads, travel home from school, and go out after dark alone.⁶²

“ The risks of grazed knees and the odd broken bone pale into insignificance when set against the long-term health problems facing sedentary and overweight young people

Ben Highmore⁶³

Of course, there are essential conditions which make this approach to parenting possible: children are accounted for, and reflected in, the design and use of public space in Finland, and educated in how to use this space safely to mitigate the risks that inevitably do exist. In Helsinki, a 'Traffic Park' has provided traffic education for children since 1958. Lessons help young children learn the rules of the road and how to move safely through public space. Finland has also implemented traffic-calming measures, such as lowering speed limits in most urban areas, and over the past ten years has reduced road deaths by 29% – above the EU average reduction of 16%.⁶⁴

Due to improved traffic safety, as well as broader cultural norms, young children are typically seen walking to school or to other places without adult supervision.

In Japan, there's a strong cultural belief that children should be able to navigate the city on their own, which supports their independence in walking to school and running errands. This is also supported by low speed limits, very few cars parked on

59 Helen Dodd & Kathryn Lester (2021) Adventurous Play as a Mechanism for Reducing Risk for Childhood Anxiety: A Conceptual Model. Clin Child Fam Psychol Review. 24: 164-181. <https://cfyl.org.uk/ref/7gg>

60 Ben Highmore. Raising the Nation Play Commission call for evidence. 12.09.24

61 Policy Studies Institute (2015) Children's Independent Mobility: an international comparison and recommendations for action; <https://cfyl.org.uk/ref/81m>

62 Policy Studies Institute (2015) Children's Independent Mobility: an international comparison and recommendations for action; <https://cfyl.org.uk/ref/81v>

63 Ibid.

64 Forbes (2024) Why Can't All Countries Be Like Finland When It Comes To Road Safety? <https://cfyl.org.uk/ref/83q>

the curb, and ‘walking school buses’ where children walk to school together.⁶⁵

Risky play is also an essential component of adventure playgrounds, which are further explored in the Space to Play section. Beyond parents, schools and playworkers have a role in allowing children to play in a risky or adventurous way.

Play-based pedagogy

Play and learning are inseparable: wherever and whenever children play, they are developing skills and learning about the world and their place in it. However, our ‘learning through play’ theme also examined how play can be used more purposefully in the classroom - in an indoor or outdoor environment - to improve learning outcomes and make school more accessible and engaging.

Last year, fewer than a third of all pupils in England (28%) said they often find their learning interesting, whilst less than half (47%) say they are quite or very happy at school.⁶⁶ Evidence submitted to the Commission by the Big Education Multi-Academy Trust linked this dissatisfaction with the current attendance crisis⁶⁷ with a fifth of pupils missing more than 10% of school during the previous academic year.⁶⁸ Conversely, we heard that 92% of children say they learn better when learning is made playful.⁶⁹

Play Commissioner and CEO of nurtureuk, Arti Sharma, highlighted throughout the Commission how important it is to ensure a child’s emotional needs are met, ensuring they feel safe, valued, and supported, so that they can engage fully with learning. Nurture-based approaches

recognise that relationships, emotional well-being, and social connections are just as important as academic instruction. Play can be an important part of this approach and is a vital tool for teachers.

The Big Education Multi-Academy Trust has also linked this boredom in school with difficulties in retaining teachers,⁷⁰ a position echoed by Kim Foulds, Vice President of Content Research & Evaluation at Sesame Workshop:

“ Playful learning supports children’s development holistically but also supports teacher training and teacher job satisfaction and teacher retention... when you have teachers who are happy in their job they’re better at their job.”⁷¹

However, only 29% of primary school teachers say they feel well or very well prepared to facilitate play after their initial training, a figure which falls further to 16% for lower-secondary school teachers.⁷² Clearly there is a need for teacher training, the curriculum, and the school environment to equip and empower teachers to facilitate learning through play.

During a focus group with Year 6 pupils at a primary school in South London, one participant described how being playful and a bit silly in the classroom “makes me

65 Forbes (2024) Why Can’t All Countries Be Like Finland When It Comes To Road Safety? <https://cfyl.org.uk/ref/83q>

66 Edurio (2024) High-Quality, Inclusive Education; <https://cfyl.org.uk/ref/8ef>

67 Big Education. Raising the Nation Play Commission call for evidence. 09.09.24

68 Department for Education, Pupil absence in schools in England: Academic year 2023/24, <https://cfyl.org.uk/ref/8qi> Accessed: 22.04.25

69 Real Play Coalition (2018) Value of Play Report; <https://cfyl.org.uk/ref/8t2>

70 Big Education. Raising the Nation Play Commission call for evidence. 09.09.24

71 Kim Foulds. Raising the Nation Play Commission oral evidence. 09.09.24

72 Department for Education (2019) The Teaching and Learning International Survey (TALIS) 2018: Research report; <https://cfyl.org.uk/ref/8ho>

more excited and awake”, and therefore more engaged in the lesson.

Preschool, the value of a play-based pedagogy is particularly clear. The Effective Provision of Pre-School Education (EPPE) Project was the first major longitudinal study in Europe of children’s development between

the ages of 3 and 7. It found that most effective pre-school centres used play-based environments as the foundation for a mixture of ‘teaching’ and “freely chosen yet potentially instructive play activities”.⁷³

The project also found that free play can provide the best environment for children’s thinking to be extended and is therefore likely to be the most effective vehicle for learning when coupled with

teacher-initiated group work.⁷⁴ Another study examining the learning of children aged 4-5 found that children are able to learn better when they are taught outdoors – and this is particularly the case for children who struggle with their attention.⁷⁵

“ I don’t think there’s much of a big difference because every time I’m writing it feels like I’m playing with my words”

Child, Year 4



Children’s Vision

A smart hopscotch runway embedded in the classroom floor, where each numbered or coloured square is a live answer pad. During Kahoots, maths drills, or spelling races, pupils leap onto the square that matches their choice—no hand-held devices needed.

73 Kathy Sylva et al. (2004) The Effective Provision of Pre-School Education (EPPE) Project: Findings from Pre-school to end of Key Stage1; <https://cfyl.org.uk/ref/91f>

74 Ibid.

75 M. Atkinson, et al. (2025) Differential effects of an urban outdoor environment on 4–5 year old children’s attention in school, Journal of Environmental Psychology, 104; <https://cfyl.org.uk/ref/9my>

Children's right to playful learning

Within the UNCRC, a child has both a right to play (Article 31) and a right to education (Article 28). Article 29(1) sets out the purposes of the right to education. State Parties agree that the education of the child should be directed to:

- a. The development of the child's personality, talents and mental and physical abilities to their fullest potential;
- b. The development of respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms, and for the principles enshrined in the Charter of the United Nations;
- c. The development of respect for the child's parents, his or her own cultural identity, language and values, for the national values of the country in which the child is living, the country from which he or she may originate, and for civilizations different from his or her own home;
- d. The preparation of the child for responsible life in a free society, in the spirit of understanding, peace, tolerance, equality of sexes, and

friendship among all peoples, ethnic, national and religious groups and persons of indigenous origin;

- e. The development of respect for the natural environment.

Understanding the importance of play for children's learning and academic achievement, broad skills development, connection to nature and sense of belonging, it is evident that the right to education can only be realised by implementing a child's right to play. Play-based learning should be seen as supporting a child's right to education. Yet, as play is understood as free, voluntary, and self-directed, play must also be supported beyond education purposes.

Measures to implement the right to play in the context of education must also be mindful of principles in the UNCRC that speak to non-discrimination (Article 2), the rights of children with disabilities to a full and decent life (Article 23), and the right of the child to be heard on all matters affecting them – including the design and delivery of their education (Article 12).

Learning through play in Denmark

During our March 2025 visit to Denmark, we heard how the flexibility in their curriculum empowers educators to build in learning through play in the classroom across all ages. Local decision-makers have the power to set the agenda and issue curriculum-related guidance. For example, under the leadership of Billund's mayor, who has set learning through play as a key priority as part of her 'Capital for Children' agenda, local schools are encouraged to embed playful learning in the curriculum.

We saw this in action at Vester Skole, a secondary state school which has implemented project-based learning to

encourage age-appropriate playful and development-focussed learning. Children and young people are encouraged to come up with their own ideas, work as a team, and apply multiple different skills and topics to one project. At the International School of Billund we saw open classrooms where children take part in interactive projects which include moving around and participating in groups, rather than sat at a desk looking at a board. Both schools also told us about their student-led parents' evenings where children report back to their parents about what they are learning.

Dressing to play

What you wear can set you up well or restrict your ability to play and this is particularly apparent in the school environment. We heard from teachers, children, and experts about how traditional uniform policies – such as blazers, ties, skirts, and shiny shoes, particularly at primary school age - can prevent or discourage children from being active and playing freely.

Some parents may worry about children's clothing becoming stained or damaged, or about dirt causing their child to become ill. For some low income families, the cost of clothes may also be an additional barrier to encouraging their children to play in ways that may make their clothes dirty or damaged.

The Commission visited an OPAL primary school in Maidenhead, which recently changed its uniform from shirt, tie, and skirt or trousers to the PE kit, which is a polo top, jumper, and black tracksuit bottoms. We spoke to Year 3 to Year 6 children from the school. All agreed that they could study better now that they were more comfortable in their uniform and most were less bothered about getting muddy, although one said, “it bothers my Mum a lot.” One 10-year-old told us, “You can move your legs more” and it is “so comfy”. Another said that their cousins from other schools wanted to change their uniforms too so that “I wouldn't have to wear a suit every day.”





Children's Vision

A sleek, silver-clad mini-stadium that swings its gates open the moment school's out, inviting friends to dash straight onto a lush green pitch built for freestyle fun.



Space to Play

Children can theoretically play anywhere, if the conditions allow. They need free and easy access to space, to be and feel safe, and feel welcome. This section considers how space to play has been eroded in both public and private spheres, how children's independent mobility has been curtailed, and how a cultural shift has erected barriers to play in the space that does remain. It sets the vision for all children in England to live in playful neighbourhoods where they are healthy, happy, and able to feel like they belong.

Child-friendly playful neighbourhoods

Children's need to play cannot be reduced to specific places, such as a fenced off playground with a clear boundary between where play should and should not happen. Playgrounds can be an important focal point within the community, but they are just one of many spaces that form a playful

neighbourhood. As, if not more important, are the network of streets, green and public spaces, homes and estates, and public buildings in a local area which children are too often excluded from because they are not formally designated 'play areas'. Play Commissioner Tim Gill is a global expert in child-friendly neighbourhoods and has shared much of his expertise throughout this year-long inquiry. His book, *Urban Playground: How Child-Friendly Planning and Design Can Save Cities*, establishes a number of strategic indicators such as children independently travelling to school, playing outside within sight of their home, and having a choice of outdoor spaces in their neighbourhood to meet friends and play.

This section makes the case for child-friendly playful neighbourhoods across England that are safe and welcoming for children to move, play, socialise and belong.



Credit: Association of Play Industries

Gemma Hyde, Projects and Policy Manager at the Town and Country Planning Association, explained to the Commission how children want to play everywhere: in their homes or in other buildings they visit, on the way to school, in spaces with fixed equipment, or in open spaces in nature. The problem is therefore not just that there is an insufficient quantity of spaces, but that we have lost focus on the fact that all these spaces are for children and young people as much as anybody else.⁷⁶

Belfast's Urban Childhoods Masterplan, developed by Arup in collaboration with Belfast City Council and the Resilient Cities Network, is one such example of child-friendly planning. Recognising that 35%

of Belfast's population is aged 25 or under, the project places children at the heart of urban planning. It incorporates input from children aged 6 - 18 to inform design strategies that include affordable housing, green spaces, traffic calming measures, and sports facilities. The initiative also emphasises grassroots engagement, utilising underused spaces for temporary installations like pop-up play parks to test ideas and shift perceptions of the city centre. A key outcome is the Urban Childhoods Design Toolkit, which provides practical guidance for integrating child- and family-friendly interventions into urban design processes.⁷⁷

⁷⁶ Gemma Hyde. Raising the Nation Play Commission oral evidence. 16.09.24

⁷⁷ Arup. Putting children at the centre of Belfast regeneration. <https://cfyl.org.uk/ref/9zs> Accessed: 23.05.25

Leeds City Council – Child Friendly Leeds

Leeds City Council launched Child Friendly Leeds in 2012 with a vision of making the City a place where “children are valued, supported, enjoy living and can look forward to a bright future.”

In 2024, £32,000 worth of play provision was funded through the Play Enabling Grant, and 77 Play Streets took place. Ofsted rated Leeds’ children’s services as ‘outstanding’ in 2018 and in 2022, commenting that a culture has been promoted across the city where “children and young people are at its heart.”⁷⁸

Leeds Councillor and Executive Member for children and families, Helen Hayden told the Commission that the policy was slowly embedded across the local authority, beginning with moving traffic away from residential areas to free up shared space, enabling children to play on the streets. In 2022, the council spoke to thousands of children to assess its Child Friendly Leeds policy, with children highlighting the importance of safe spaces to play, and more permission to play, as being key issues.⁷⁹

Leeds Community Play, a network of 11 people and organisations including Leeds City Council and Play Anywhere, designed and held a DIY Festival of Play and Creativity in 2024. It included pop-

up spaces across the city centre to be used for play over six days. Funding was drawn from a public and private sector partnership collaboration between the UK Shared Prosperity Fund, Leeds City Council and Northern Bloc Ice Cream.⁸⁰

The Commission visited Leeds, where we saw the play policy come to life in an area of dense social housing in the east of the city. The council is working with planners to build playful pathways to and from school, and there are plans to turn a well-used sloping path on the way to school into a ‘scooter hill’ with space for children to ride their scooters to school, as well as seating and flower beds. Mobile play containers are transported onto the grassed areas between housing blocks and opened to bring play equipment, supported by playworkers to the heart of estates. Dozens of children were having a great time in their temporary play space on the day we visited, with the noise of laughter and enjoyment echoing around the blocks.

In a nearby part of the city, we visited a local library that has been transformed with play boxes, crates and an outdoor play equipment area developed with the community as a welcome space for children and their families.

Billund: Children’s Capital

The home of The LEGO Group, the town of Billund has long been a pioneer of child-specific planning and development. In 2010, Billund was established as the Capital of Children, and in 2012 The LEGO Foundation and Billund Municipality together created the company “Capital of Children” tasked with delivering this ambition. In 2020, Billund also became the first UNICEF Child Friendly City, and in 2021 the first ever Children’s General Assembly was held there.

On our March 2025 visit, the Play Commission met the team at the Capital of Children and visited Billund’s Mayor Stephanie Storbak who has made play one of her key priorities. The Capital of Children company is working on a 20-year plan with four focus areas: learning through play, urban development, commerce centre and global perspective. We heard from the mayor how local responsibility for education has enabled her to lead a culture of learning through play throughout schools.



Credit: Playing Out

Some local authorities, including Leeds City Council, are playing a transformative role in driving forward whole-area playful neighbourhood strategies which prioritise play across planning and development, parks and recreation, traffic, health and education. We have seen councils in the UK and internationally where play has been made a local priority, with children placed at the heart of the design of their communities, creating spaces suitable not just for play but for everyone to enjoy. This includes the development of play streets, which are semi-permanent sessions which give priority to children and families to play in the street over cars and other traffic⁸¹

A survey of residents of ‘play streets’ – undertaken by Playing Out – reveals the benefit to the wider community of local space where children can play. The survey found that:⁸²

- 94% felt they now know more people on their street;
- 91% felt their street is a safer and friendlier place;
- 91% felt they belong more on their street;
- 95% felt more involved in their community; and
- 88% reported children interacting with other adults on the street.

78 Child Friendly Leeds. About us; <https://cfyl.org.uk/ref/9ko>. Accessed 25.03.25

79 Councillor Helen Hayden. Raising the Nation Play Commission oral evidence. 27.01.25

80 Marie Williams. Raising the Nation Play Commission call for evidence. 31.10.24; Child Friendly Leeds. Leeds Community and Festival of Play. <https://cfyl.org.uk/ref/a16> Accessed: 25.03.25; Leeds City Council (2024) Get ready for fun with Leeds’s first ever Festival of Play. <https://cfyl.org.uk/ref/afv> Accessed: 25.03.25

81 Active Westminster. Active Streets Programme - Let’s Play Outside; <https://cfyl.org.uk/ref/ah9> Accessed: 23.05.2025

82 Playing Out (2023) Resident survey report 2023; <https://cfyl.org.uk/ref/awn>

Play Sufficiency Duty – Learning from Wales

In Wales, the Play Sufficiency Duty is framed as part of its government's anti-poverty agenda, which recognises that children can have a poverty of experience, opportunity, and aspiration. This duty is included in the 'Play Opportunities' section of the Children and Families (Wales) Measure 2010.

The Duty requires local authorities to:

- Complete and submit Play Sufficiency Assessments (PSAs) every three years to the Welsh Government;
- publish online the action that they are taking to ensure children have sufficient opportunities to play; and
- develop and submit Play Action Plans to the Welsh Government every year, along with progress reports.

Analysis of PSAs by Play Wales found that the Play Sufficiency Duty “has served as a national driver for the planning of play provision locally”. It also found across all PSAs a continued commitment to the principles of consultation, participation, and engagement with children and parents.⁸³

Mike Barclay and Ben Tawil, founders of Ludicology, and Dr Wendy Russell, have carried out several reviews of the Welsh Play Sufficiency Duty, four of which were commissioned by Play Wales. They found that the duty's requirement to work cross-departmentally has been particularly effective, with play sufficiency officers able to engage with colleagues in planning, housing,

landscape architecture, highways, active travel, parks and recreation, green and blue space, public health, and education.⁸⁴

Dr Russell also told the Commission that aligning national and local policies, fostering good relationships between Play Wales and the Welsh Government, and involving children in research have been critical factors in the success of the Play Sufficiency Duty.

Dr Russell et al. have also seen value in working on a hyperlocal neighbourhood level and told the Commission that, while there is a wealth of general evidence which helps us to understand the barriers to and benefits of play, a localised approach helps adults to understand the specific challenges of specific spaces facing specific children.⁸⁵

Nathania Minard, Senior Play Development Officer at Conwy Council, emphasised the importance of collaboration, legislation synergy, innovation, accountability and creativity in an effective Play Sufficiency Duty. By making it a statutory duty, she said, it becomes the norm for all local authorities to prioritise play.

83 Play Wales (2022) State of Play 2022; <https://cfyl.org.uk/ref/adh>

84 Dr Wendy Russell, Mike Barclay & Ben Tawil. Raising the Nation Play Commission oral evidence. 01.10.24

85 Ibid.



Children's right to public places to play in England

According to the UNCRC, a child's right to play (Article 31) is inseparable from their right to gather in public spaces (Article 15). However, children and young people's use of a public space in England is often prohibited, formally or informally, through a culture that presents children in public spaces as nuisances or as vulnerable.

Children's play spaces are often separated into 'zones', such as playgrounds, but play more often takes place in non-designated space. For a child, divisions between a play area and a 'non play area' do not exist; play happens wherever the child decides to play. There is also an inequality in access to green spaces, and some playable spaces are not accessible to all children.

Recognising children and young people's use of public space for play is vital to realising their right to play. Jackie Boldon, a Play Consultant in North East England, argued in her submission to the Commission that a Play Strategy should include the protection, promotion, and preservation of children's right to play, which includes raising awareness of children's right to play among professionals, policymakers, and parents.⁸⁶

A child's rights approach to space for play requires:

- Acceptance of children's play in public spaces, both around and away from their homes;
- Children's voices in the design of play spaces and urban environments, including for doorstep play – ignoring their voices is a breach of their right to be heard (Article 12);
- Equitable access to play space, including independent mobility and design of transport services;
- Measures to support inclusion of all children in play spaces, including considering gender, race, poverty, disability and age and the unique and intersectional barriers faced by children;
- Design of play spaces that meet the needs of, and facilitates play for, adolescents, girls and children with disabilities;
- The removal of measures that prevent children's play in the public space – measures that aim to deter children's presence in public spaces (such as No Ball Game Signs) are discriminatory and a breach of their Article 2, 15 and 31 rights;
- Education of police, housing associations and community groups on the child's right to play in public spaces, and guidance on how to take a fair, balanced approach to addressing disputes.

Barriers to play

Outdoor play can happen in so many places and spaces: from doorsteps to parks to playgrounds - indeed almost anywhere and brings enormous benefits. It can develop a child's independence and sense of community and belonging,⁸⁷ as well as benefiting their mental health and development.⁸⁸

“ For children, outdoor play is as basic a need as sleep, a nutritious diet, supportive care, education and interaction

Association of Play Industries⁸⁹

As our polling of parents showed, a growing number of children are not spending enough time outside. Over half of parents told us that their youngest child plays outside less than they did as a child, and the Real Play Coalition - made up of The LEGO Foundation, ARUP, IKEA, National Geographic partners, and UNICEF⁹⁰ - estimates that outdoor play has declined by 50% in a generation.⁹¹

Doorstep play, which refers to play in spaces immediately outside of homes, should be the most accessible and readily available opportunity for children to play informally and regularly. However, the number of children playing out on the street is no longer as common as it once was.

There are a range of factors behind this decline. Expansion of the built

environment, increased road traffic, and safety concerns among children and parents all came up in evidence submissions to the Commission as well as to the then Levelling Up, Housing and Communities Committee inquiry last year.⁹² We spoke to Year 6 children who attend an inner-London primary school. When asked what stops them from playing outside, one child's immediate response was: “it's probably fear”.

This section examines the range of financial, policy, and cultural barriers which stand in the way of the creation of playful neighbourhoods in England. Many local authorities are in financial difficulty and have directed funds and their focus over time towards crisis intervention as funds have diminished. With no statutory duty to secure opportunities to play, this means that some children are increasingly left with nowhere to go to play. The planning system also has little requirement for planners or developers to consider the needs or views of children and young people.

The visible decline in play space - such as the loss of playgrounds and green spaces - feeds into a culture of intolerance towards play. As play is no longer viewed as essential, decision makers close off the space that does remain.

Hostility towards play

Throughout our evidence sessions we heard how a ‘culture of hostility’ towards children and young people and their freedom to play and use public space, is proliferating across parks, estates, and town centres and discouraging children from playing. This culture shows up in complaints about noise and disruption, community objections to children playing - or even just being

87 Playing Out (2023) Resident survey report 2023; <https://cfyl.org.uk/ref/bgr>

88 Dodd, H., Nesbit R., & FitzGibbon, L. (2023) Child's Play: Examining the Association between Time Spent Playing and Child Mental Health; , Child Psychiatry Hum Dev. 54(6): 1678-1686; <https://cfyl.org.uk/ref/bic>; McCormick, R. (2017) Does Access to Green Space Impact the Mental Well-being of Children: A Systematic Review, Journal of Pediatric Nursing, 37; <https://cfyl.org.uk/ref/2RX>

89 Association of Play Industries. Raising the Nation Play Commission call for evidence. 22.08.24

90 Real Play Coalition (n.d) Playful Cities Toolkit: Resources for Reclaiming Play in Cities; <https://cfyl.org.uk/ref/c0y>

91 Real Play Coalition (2018) Value of Play Report; <https://cfyl.org.uk/ref/cce>

92 UK Parliament. Children, young people and the built environment - Levelling Up Committee launches inquiry; <https://cfyl.org.uk/ref/cv0> Accessed: 12.12.24



Credit: Aileen Shackell

present – as well as ‘No Ball Games’ signs. While ‘No Ball Games’ signs have no legal standing and are not enforceable, they send a clear message that children’s play is not welcome.

The Commission’s polling of parents reveals the extent to which anti-play sentiments are growing: three-quarters of parents (76%) agree that people are generally less accepting of children playing outside on the street than when they were a child. In Play England’s polling, two-thirds of children in 2022 said that they

had been asked to stop playing – the most common reasons were for making too much noise or for playing ball games.⁹³

“ The right of older people to peace and quiet trumps the right of children to play

Louise Watson⁹⁴

More Ball Games



Credit: London Sport

Earlier this year, the Play Commission was delighted to support the launch of London Sport’s ‘More Ball Games’ campaign to tackle the use of ‘No Ball Games’ signs and other systemic barriers to play and sport across England’s communities. In London alone, over 7,000 of these signs restrict many of its 560,000 children and young people from playing and being active.⁹⁵ Endemic to the growing culture of intolerance towards children and play, these signs have no legal basis yet send a clear signal: children are not welcome.

93 Play England (2023) Play England 2023 Playday report: Findings from the 2022 survey; <https://cfyl.org.uk/ref/cbz>

94 Louise Watson. Raising the Nation Play Commission oral evidence. 17.09.24

95 London Sport. London Needs More Ball Games; <https://cfyl.org.uk/ref/d9f> Accessed: 17.04.25

‘No ball games’ sign “trampled” children’s right to play

Jasmine is a mother of three living in West London. She and her children have long valued the communal garden outside her home, which is a safe space where her children can spontaneously play with neighbourhood friends and feel a sense of belonging in their community.⁹⁶

In early 2024, several No Ball Games signs appeared without any consultation or prior warning to the residents. Jasmine was told this was in response to complaints about the grass not growing and potential damage to nearby buildings. “It felt like everything was being blamed on the kids”, she told the Commission.⁹⁷

Jasmine felt that the signs changed the tone of the garden. Children began feeling like they were “doing something wrong” simply by playing ball. Parents felt judged for not constantly supervising in a space designed for passive oversight, and the signs empowered some adults to tell children off.

“Their right to play has been completely trampled on,” she told the Commission. “They’re at the bottom of the pecking order.” Other parents shared her concern and frustration.

She pursued multiple routes to raise this issue with her housing provider: first speaking with local neighbourhood staff, then writing to local councillors, and eventually escalating it through the formal complaints process. But no action was taken. “I felt a strong sense of injustice,” she said. “I can’t believe no one listened.”⁹⁸

Her case is now awaiting investigation by the Housing Ombudsman. Meanwhile, Jasmine has turned her attention to planning documentation. Policy S4 of the London Plan requires at least 10m² of dedicated play space per child in new housing developments - space that must be genuinely playable and not feel hostile to children.⁹⁹ There is no indication that informal ball games were ever intended to be excluded. When she contacted planning enforcement, she was told the issue fell outside their remit, as approved plans did not explicitly reference a ball area. However, they referred her to the planning team, who have since visited and are now exploring possible next steps.¹⁰⁰

Following national media coverage¹⁰¹, Jasmine also secured a meeting with the provider’s regional housing leadership. She told the Commission: “It was a constructive conversation - the first time I felt truly heard by our housing provider. That left me feeling hopeful”.

Reflecting on her experience, Jasmine believes children’s rights must be embedded into housing design and estate management to prevent conflict: “But allocating playable space on paper is not enough,” she said. “The real challenge is how to design and manage shared spaces so children can play freely - while also meeting the needs of all residents living in close proximity. That balance is possible. But when it isn’t prioritised, children are the first to lose out.”¹⁰²

96 Jasmine Hoffman. Raising the Nation Play Commission oral evidence. 27.01.25

97 Ibid.; Jasmine Hoffman. Raising the Nation Play Commission call for evidence 15.05.25

98 Jasmine Hoffman. Raising the Nation Play Commission oral evidence. 27.01.25

99 Mayor of London (2021) The London Plan: The Spatial Development Strategy for Greater London; <https://cfyl.org.uk/ref/dj3>; Mayor of London (2012) Shaping Neighbourhoods: Play and Informal Recreation, Supplementary Planning Guidance; <https://cfyl.org.uk/ref/dzs>

100 Jasmine Hoffman. Raising the Nation Play Commission call for evidence. 15.05.25

101 Ibid.

102 Jasmine Hoffman. Raising the Nation Play Commission oral evidence. 27.01.25

Planning for play: no consideration for children

From new home developments to parks, playgrounds, and the broad public realm, the planning system has a defining role in the extent to which public spaces are created that are child-friendly, inclusive, and playful. The National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF) outlines the Government's planning policies for England and how they should be applied. It must be taken into account in preparing development plans and is a "material consideration" in decisions taken by local planning authorities.¹⁰³ The Government published a reformed version of the NPPF in December 2024 as part of its plan to deliver 1.5 million new homes and critical infrastructure.¹⁰⁴

Until recently, any mention of children was almost entirely absent within the framework. We welcome the recent changes in the latest version, including the protection of "formal play spaces".¹⁰⁵ However, the revised framework still neglects most play spaces which are 'informal', such as streets, town squares, and public buildings. The NPPF should go much further if public and private spaces are to be developed that meet the needs of children. Indeed, evidence and testimonies submitted to the Commission highlight how the absence of a requirement to look at any new spaces through a children's lens is at the heart of the reason why so many spaces are not safe or welcoming for children and young people.¹⁰⁶

“ There’s value in talking about children and young people as a reason for doing things; they get to play outside and experience things. We’ve taken that away

Gemma Hyde¹⁰⁷

However, evidence submitted to the Commission and the conclusions of the Levelling Up, Housing and Communities House of Commons Select Committee inquiry into children, young people and the built environment in 2024, both highlight how, as the NPPF demands consideration of so many priorities (for example, net zero, affordability, and biodiversity), any priorities not specifically written into the NPPF will be ignored.¹⁰⁸

While big-picture, child-friendly design principles are well established and evidenced, and do not need repeat consultation, evidence submitted to the inquiry also highlighted the unique perspective that children and young people have of their local communities and spaces. Capturing this local insight in a meaningful consultation with children and young people in the design of their communities is essential if the areas where they live are to meet their needs now and in the future.¹⁰⁹

103 Ministry of Housing, Communities & Local Government (2024) National Planning Policy Framework; <https://cfyl.org.uk/ref/fi8>

104 Ministry of Housing, Communities & Local Government. Government response to the proposed reforms to the National Planning Policy Framework and other changes to the planning system consultation; <https://cfyl.org.uk/ref/fsf>. Accessed: 25.12.24

105 Ministry of Housing, Communities & Local Government (2024) National Planning Policy Framework, <https://cfyl.org.uk/ref/ftz>

106 Helen Griffiths. Raising the Nation Play Commission call for evidence. 16.09.24

107 Gemma Hyde. Raising the Nation Play Commission call for evidence. 16.09.24

108 Sarah Scannell. Oral Evidence to the Levelling Up, Housing and Communities Committee Inquiry into children, young people and the built environment [HC 49]; <https://cfyl.org.uk/ref/fmr>

109 Town and Country Planning Association (2024) Raising the healthiest generation in history: why it matters where children and young people live; <https://cfyl.org.uk/ref/fwc>

The London Plan

The London Plan includes a range of principles to improve development in the interests of children, whilst also bringing in specific policies that must be followed, so that:

- Development proposals for educational and childcare facilities must link to existing footpaths and cycle networks so that children can travel actively to school more easily and safely;
- Facilities must have entrances designed in a specific way to encourage walking and cycling there safely;
- Individual boroughs must prepare development plans that are informed by a needs assessment of children and young people's play and informal recreation facilities, to help increase provision of key facilities for play and recreation, especially in residential developments;
- A specific amount of play space of 10 sqm per child should be provided, giving a clear metric of success;
- Boroughs should do more to ensure children and young people are included in decision making, so that their needs are better understood; and
- Developments should encourage children and young people to move around freely through safe streets and footpath networks that connect to more formal play provision, green spaces, and parks.

As well as a legal requirement to consider and seek children's local views and needs, both children and property development professionals need to be much better supported in the process. For example, currently, children are largely unaware how they could share their opinions,¹¹⁰ and many developers do not know how to ethically and constructively involve the youth voice in their work. In oral evidence to the Commission, Dr Wendy Russell highlighted the positive examples of the Place Standard School in Scotland and the Voice. Opportunity. Power toolkit developed in England by ZCD Architects in partnership with Grosvenor, Sport England, and the TCPA.¹¹¹

“ I live in a block of flats with a courtyard in the middle, I've met a lot of close friends there...a lot more properties should have space... so that it's easier and safer if kids need to let out their energy

Child, Year 7

110 Public Map Platform. Written Evidence to the Levelling Up, Housing and Communities Committee Inquiry into children, young people and the built environment [CBE 017]; <https://cfyl.org.uk/ref/g80>

111 Dr Wendy Russell. Raising the Nation Play Commission call for evidence. 17.09.24

The rewards for creating a planning system which is designed to include children's views and meet their needs are significant. The Commission has consistently heard how spaces which are right for children are also right for everyone else because they are accessible, green, inclusive, and fun.

Environmental barriers: traffic

For many parents and children, concerns are about cars on the road. Over half of parents (53%) view traffic as a barrier to play, with a record 41 million vehicles now driving on UK roads, and 80% of public space being given over to streets.^{112,113}

Children are at a greater risk of injury from these vehicles than adults, so parents and carers are understandably even more worried as a result.¹¹⁴ One 10 year old child told us they wanted to play outside on the street, so the Government should “slow down cars.”

As well as safety concerns, the rise in vehicles on the road – moving or parked – has displaced children and young people from many streets by physically occupying spaces which used to be free for them to play in.

Environmental factors: anti-social behaviour and crime

For others, the worry can be more about other people, anti-social behaviour, and crime. Our focus groups with children and young people have revealed the anxiety that some feel at going to the very spaces where they should be able to play happily with their friends and family. Helen Lomax and Kate Smith's research, *Children's Lives*

in *Changing Places*, heard similar views. They found that both boys and girls have fears of gangs and violence, but have different strategies to manage the risk. Whilst boys may still venture outside in groups, girls were more likely to say that they don't feel comfortable going out without an older male family member.¹¹⁵

“ we're in East London; the reality is there's gangs and crime everywhere

Child, Year 7

These concerns are shared by adults: almost half the population (48%) rank crime and anti-social behaviour as their biggest concern about their local area.¹¹⁶ Again, this has a disproportionate impact on girls and young women; Lomax and Smith found “parents are much more likely to restrict girls' independent spatial mobility”.¹¹⁷

Whilst barriers to accessing outdoor spaces are numerous, such spaces are a vital component of a playful neighbourhood and are most valued among parents, perhaps because they don't necessarily require a parent's time and supervision for their child to access them. The Commission's polling of parents found that if the Government were to invest in more play space, parents would most favour more outdoor parks and public spaces (44%) over playgrounds (28%), indoor play areas (17%), schools (11%) or other.

112 RAC. New data reveals record 41.4 million vehicles on UK roads; <https://cfyl.org.uk/ref/gro>. Accessed: 29.01.25

113 London Play. Raising the Nation Play Commission call for evidence. 01.11.24

114 Town and Country Planning Association (2024) Raising the healthiest generation in history: why it matters where children and young people live; <https://cfyl.org.uk/ref/hog>

115 Helen Lomax & Kate Smith. Raising the Nation Play Commission call for evidence. 20.12.24

116 Home Office. Public polling on community safety; <https://cfyl.org.uk/ref/hfk>. Accessed 01.02.25

117 Helen Lomax Kate Smith. Raising the Nation Play Commission call for evidence. 20.12.24

Parent-led Playing Out

Playing Out, co-founded by Alice Ferguson and our Commissioner, Ingrid Skeels, is a parent-led initiative dedicated to restoring children's freedom to play in the streets and public spaces around their home. Ingrid has amplified the voices of the countless parents she has supported, conveying to the Commission the serious - and very real - fears that so many parents have about letting their children out to play, particularly because of traffic on the road. The movement celebrates the power of play streets to bring communities together and enjoy the benefits of playing out, free from the dangers of traffic.

Playing Out have supported over 100 local authorities to put in place supportive play streets policies and their website provides free advice, guidance

and support for parents, residents and community organisations that want to take advantage of this. As a result, 1,600 communities have regularly opened up space to play on their doorstep since 2009, with 25,000 parents and residents making it happen, and 50,000 children directly benefiting. Playing Out estimates that more than one million extra playing out hours have been created as a result.¹¹⁸

Bristol City Council has supported Playing Out through the UK's first Temporary Play Street Policy, established in 2011. The policy simplifies the process for residents to temporarily open play streets for up to three hours a week. As of August 2024, 287 Bristol streets and estates have benefitted from the scheme, which equates to approximately 8,000 children playing out.¹¹⁹

Children's independence and cultural views of playing out

Parents want their children to be safe. Over the past few decades, exacerbated by worrying stories in the press and on social media, fears of their children playing outside unsupervised have escalated – particularly since the pandemic, which entrenched a view that keeping children inside means keeping them safe.¹²⁰ Traffic, gangs, anti-social behaviour, low numbers of police, strangers, gangs, drug paraphernalia, and broken glass are all cited as concerns.¹²¹ These fears are particularly pronounced in urban areas and in many cases are well-evidenced and entirely rational.¹²²

For example, a parent living in inner-city Leeds told the Commission that the dangers of letting children play outside are not only in parents' minds. She talked about the problems in her local area with street alcoholism, drug addiction, bullying from older children, gangs and county lines, and prostitution. As a result, she did not feel comfortable letting her children play in a nearby green space. Part of the problem was the lack of community feeling and a lack of trust in other people and neighbours in their community to step in to help their children if needed.¹²³

However, others told the Commission that these concerns are disproportionate and that some children are being 'overprotected' to their detriment. While some risks need to be acknowledged and

118 Playing Out. Raising the Nation Play Commission call for evidence. 31.10.24

119 Bristol City Council. Raising the Nation Play Commission call for evidence. 29.10.24

120 Sue Atkins. Raising the Nation Play Commission oral evidence. 07.04.25

121 Caroline Scott. Raising the Nation Play Commission oral evidence. 30.10.24

122 Intelligent Health. Raising the Nation Play Commission call for evidence. 26.10.24

123 Catherine Peacock. Raising the Nation Play Commission oral evidence. 08.04.25

addressed or managed - such as traffic danger and violent crime - it is important to distinguish actual risks from perceptions of risks.

The perception of risk leads to a reduction in the use of local spaces which in turn is seen to make those spaces more risky.¹²⁴

“ We live in a world that is perceived as endlessly dangerous for young people and children, by parents and carers who probably experienced a much more permissive upbringing in terms of their ability to roam.

Dr Ben Highmore, Professor of Cultural Studies, University of Sussex

Alongside increasing fears of risks around children left unsupervised, the fear of being perceived as a neglectful parent is real for some parents. Over the last 50 years, the age at which children are allowed to play outside unsupervised has steadily increased, due to, among other factors, concerns about social acceptability and what is considered ‘good’ parenting.¹²⁵

Some of these attitudes are clearly culturally dependent. We heard from one parent who now refuses to allow her 8-year-old son to make his own way home from school after being made to feel like a negligent parent for doing so by the school headteacher. In parts of Scandinavia she pointed out, parents are seen as negligent

if they over protect their children and don’t support them to be independently mobile.

One parent living in Switzerland shared her experience of the different attitudes to children walking to school independently from a young age. In Switzerland she explained, the culture, infrastructure, and community are set up to support this.

Messaging from the government is aimed at drivers, so that they are extra cautious during school hours. Children also receive bright reflective sashes and road safety training from police, and parents are supported with resources. There’s a strong sense of collective responsibility: an expectation that neighbours look out for all children, not just their own.¹²⁶

One study shared with the Commission found that children in the UK spend on average 31 fewer minutes a day unsupervised than German children (36 minutes compared to 67). Another study has found that UK parents are more risk averse than their German counterparts and are more likely to agree with an overly cautious parent in a hypothetical scenario.¹²⁷

“ Some look at those who do [let their children play out] and think they’re irresponsible and [they] don’t care about their kids.

Catherine Peacock, Parent

Amandine Alexandre, a French mother living in London and a volunteer at the campaign group Mums for Lungs, shared

124 Chester Zoo. Raising the Nation Play Commission call for evidence. 31.10.24

125 Sally Watson. Raising the Nation Commission call for evidence. 30.10.24

126 Playing Out (2018) Bea’s Walk to School – and why it matters; <https://cfyl.org.uk/ref/iud>. Accessed 22.04.25

127 Ellen Weaver. Raising the Nation Play Commission call for evidence. 31.10.24

a similar sentiment with the Commission. She described the huge impact that School Streets - roads outside schools with restrictions on motorised traffic at the start and end of the school day¹²⁸ - had on creating a safer and quieter environment on the way to school. Even so, the English father of her child was much more anxious than she was by the prospect of letting their 7-year-old son do the 3-to-4 minute walk to school unsupervised.¹²⁹

While UK law does not specify the age at which a child can legally be left unsupervised, there is common case law which generally sees 14 years old as the benchmark below which a parent may be seen to be negligent. However, this has not been seen to relate to children in the public realm and many parents would benefit from reassurance that children's free, independent play is not a sign of neglect and on the contrary is vital to their development.¹³⁰

“ It can be very challenging for parents to go against what has become the cultural norm, that children should be supervised at all times.

Ellen Weaver, Chair of the Board of Directors of Playing Out

Utah in the USA enacted the Child Neglect Amendment Legislation in 2018, which explicitly describes what neglect does not include: engaging in independent activities

such as travelling to and from school, playing outdoors, or being alone at home, so long as their basic needs are met and they are mature enough to avoid harm.¹³¹ It is striking that such a provision needs to be explicitly stated in law, however it does provide clarity for parents.

That the act of letting a child play freely outside must now be protected in law is indicative of a cultural shift that has occurred over recent years; what was once the social norm is now very much the opposite.¹³² Katie Staniforth, a parent who implemented play streets almost every week for two years, told the Commission that this initiative “gave [my daughter] so much,” including confidence to move independently. She highlighted that a key barrier to allowing more children to play outside is that it has not been normalised everywhere but offered hope that this culture change could be reversed if parents get used to seeing children play out.¹³³

Children's declining mobility

Worries about traffic and crime and poor public design – not only prevent children playing outdoors but also restrict independence. Children's ability and freedom to get around independently is shrinking. The Commission's polling found that 52% of parents agree that when they played outside, they played further from their house than their child, which rises to 62% for parents aged 45+. Research has found that children are now 2 years older than their parent's generation when they are allowed out unsupervised.¹³⁴

Dr William Bird MBE, CEO of Intelligent Health, conducted research with a family in Sheffield, and found that over four generations, the distance children are

128 Department for Transport & Active Travel England. School Streets: how to set up and manage a scheme; <https://cfyl.org.uk/ref/iss>. Accessed 12.05.25

129 Amandine Alexandre. Raising the Nation Play Commission oral evidence. 08.04.25

130 Ellen Weaver. Raising the Nation Play Commission call for evidence. 31.10.24

131 Utah State Legislature (2018) S.B. 65 Child Neglect Amendments; <https://cfyl.org.uk/ref/2fL>; Ellen Weaver. Raising the Nation Play Commission call for evidence. 31.10.24

132 Playing Out. Raising the Nation Play Commission call for evidence. 31.10.24

133 Kate Staniforth. Raising the Nation Play Commission call for evidence. 08.04.25

134 Dodd H., et al. (2021) Children's Play and Independent Mobility in 2020: Results from the British Children's Play Survey; <https://cfyl.org.uk/ref/3Jh>, Int J Environ Res Public Health. 18(8):4334

allowed to roam at the age of eight had fallen from six miles in 1919 to just 300 yards in 2008.

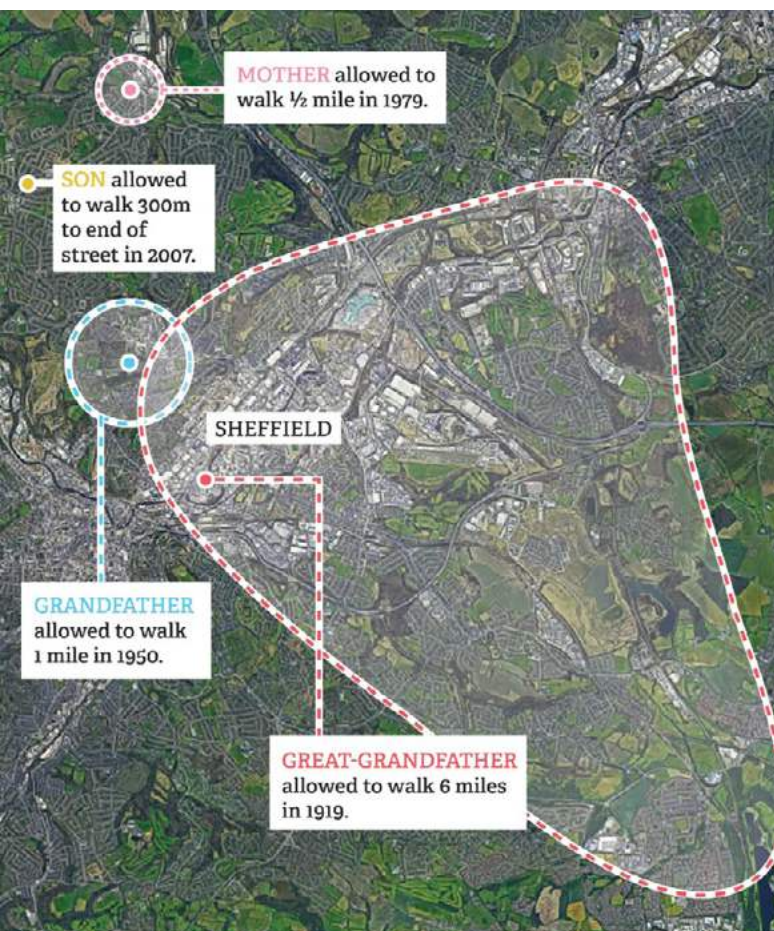


Figure 1: Map of a family's roaming by generations. As pictured in the Daily Mail (2007)¹³⁵

Vicky, the mother referenced in Figure 1, attributed the shrinking distance to a lack of safety, with areas such as the woods now only accessible by crossing a busy road.¹³⁶ These parental concerns are echoed within many submissions to the Commission, as well as by the expert witnesses we heard from during our 'Places to play' evidence session.

Children can become dependent on parents and carers to take them to a space where they can play – and even then, not all parents and carers are able to do this. This highlights the need for more safe, local, free play spaces with easy reach of every child's home.

As Create Streets put it in their evidence to the then Levelling Up, Housing and Communities Committee Inquiry into children, young people and the built environment:

“ we continue to design for a ‘backseat generation’ that needs to be driven to be able to play and be active rather than being allowed to do this in their own street¹³⁷

Such dramatically reduced freedom to roam not only limits access to other spaces, it also deprives children and young people of an opportunity in itself to play. Several written and oral evidence submissions have highlighted how children don't distinguish between travel and play – they may 'play on the way' or simply explore an area with no intended destination.¹³⁸

“ children don't see it as mobility, they see it as playing

Ben Addy, Sustrans¹³⁹

Declining local playgrounds

The closure of playgrounds across England, or loss of them into states of disrepair, has left a visual scar of the wider decline in opportunities to play for children. It has also deprived parents, carers, and communities of a vital meeting place.

¹³⁵ Intelligent Health. Raising the Nation Play Commission call for evidence. 26.10.24

¹³⁶ Mail Online. How children lost the right to roam in four generations; <https://cfyl.org.uk/ref/k6k>. Accessed: 09.12.24

¹³⁷ Create Streets. Written Evidence to the Levelling Up, Housing and Communities Committee Inquiry into children, young people and the built environment [CBE 074]; <https://cfyl.org.uk/ref/kki>

¹³⁸ Playing Out. Raising the Nation Play Commission call for evidence. 31.10.24

¹³⁹ Ben Addy. Raising the Nation Play Commission oral evidence. 17.09.24



Credit: Tim Gill

Data relating to the provision of playgrounds is held at a local level, making it difficult to paint a comprehensive national picture. However, the data that is available, as well as evidence heard by the Commission, depicts a clear trend of a decline in formal public places to play. Councillor Jon Hubbard, the Vice-Chair of the Children and Young People's Board at the Local Government Association (LGA), told us how some local authorities have found innovative ways to keep delivering play facilities without funding, but on the whole cuts to budgets are a significant barrier to improving access to play.¹⁴⁰

Freedom of Information requests sent to every local authority that 429 playgrounds closed across England in the decade leading up to 2022, with the actual number likely to be even higher given that not every local authority responded to the request.¹⁴¹ Now, over 2 million children

in England (32%) who are aged up to nine do not live within a ten-minute walk of a playground.¹⁴²

Where there are playgrounds, many have fallen into states of disrepair due to a lack of regular maintenance. Over the past decade, over half the population (56%) have noted that the quality of their local park or play area has declined.¹⁴³

“There is glass on the floor in the local park, and the monkey bars are too low down. I fall and hurt my head.”

Girl, Year 4¹⁴⁴

140 Cllr. Jon Hubbard. Raising the Nation Play Commission oral evidence. 25.11.24

141 Aggregate Industries (2023) FOIs reveal a continuing decline in play park facilities in the UK; <https://cfyl.org.uk/ref/kyi>. Accessed: 28.01.25

142 Fields in Trust (2024) Green Space Index 2024; <https://cfyl.org.uk/ref/knt>

143 Fields in Trust. Raising the Nation Play Commission call for evidence. 01.11.24

144 Liverpool City Council. Raising the Nation Play Commission call for evidence. 30.10.24

Liverpool Primary School Parliament¹⁴⁵

Liverpool City Council consulted children from the city's Primary School Parliament to understand their perspectives on play. They stated that they wanted play spaces which:

- Have good facilities and interactive play;
- Allow everyone to take part;
- Are safer and have nice environments;
- Are sensory; and
- Have adult playleaders' to support.

When asked to expand on the above, children stated a desire for more diverse equipment beyond football goals, soft and safer surfaces, and more inclusive equipment for girls. Some children also expressed a desire to combine play with educational opportunities, with one child suggesting a library within a park would provide space for reading, drawing, and imaginative play.



Credit: Liverpool City Council

The primary cause for the decline is cuts to local budgets: the collective annual park budgets for England, which accounts for local authority play provision, fell by more than £350 million in real terms between 2011 and 2023,¹⁴⁶ and spending on play facilities in England fell by 44% between 2017/18 and 2020/21.¹⁴⁷

The Play Gap Report highlights the postcode lottery in funding for play spaces. Between 2018/19 and 2022/23, Manchester saw a 35% fall, whereas the largest fall in revenue expenditure was 88%.¹⁴⁸

“ This ‘postcode lottery’ perpetuates systemic inequity, denying countless children the enriching play environments they deserve.

The Play Gap Report

Research by the Association of Play Industries (API) as part of the Equal Play campaign, found some areas of the UK to be well-served by playgrounds, while others considerably less so. In the West Midlands, there are 929 children per playground – the most in the UK. It also has the highest rates of child obesity in England.¹⁴⁹ London has the second highest density of children per playground (866), more than double the density in Wales (392).¹⁵⁰

¹⁴⁵ Ibid.

¹⁴⁶ The Guardian (2023) England's playgrounds crumble as council budgets fall; <https://cfyl.org.uk/ref/lgo>

¹⁴⁷ Association of Play Industries (2017) Nowhere to Play

¹⁴⁸ ESP Play (2024) The Play Gap Report

¹⁴⁹ Association of Play Industries. Equal Play Press Release; <https://cfyl.org.uk/ref/lqg>. Accessed 10.02.25

¹⁵⁰ Association of Play Industries (2022) Equal Play; <https://cfyl.org.uk/ref/lfn>

Nature Playground, Valbyparken

Hosted in Copenhagen's largest park, the world-famous Nature Playground is the city's most visited playground and the playground where people spend the longest time. Opened in 2001 to replace an old and dilapidated construction playground, the Nature Playground is built on rubbish dump soil from Valbyparken's historical roots as an old landfill site, which has naturally created a row of mounds to give children a high view of the playground itself. The entire playground is embraced by a circular 210-metre wooden bridge, which "floats" half a metre above the ground. As Helle Nebelong, who made the plan to renovate the playground in 2022, says: "My driving force is to create playgrounds where the children want to be [...] A key to that is creating environments that are more

like nature than classic playgrounds and by adding elements that challenge the fine and gross motor skills and stimulate the senses and the courage to challenge oneself and explore the surroundings."

The Nature Playground is staffed full time by "pedagogues" who provide small free refreshments, support children to stay safe, and oversee the park. During the Commission's visit in March 2025, we saw busloads of small children arrive and participate in activities led by the pedagogues. We observed whittling and fire making classes, in which the 5 year old children were trusted with small knives and axes to really take charge of their projects. These kindergarten buses pick up children locally and take them out for the day to different locations across the city, always in nature.

Sadly, unsafe environments, combined with often insurmountable distance can render even the most inspiring, inclusive and well-designed playground or park useless if it is not accessible to its intended users – particularly those children living in low income households.

Playgrounds serve as a visible public statement of a community's commitment to its children. By signalling that children's right to play is recognised and prioritised, well-placed and well-used playgrounds can help shift social norms around play. As more families use the space, it can become not only safer but also perceived to be so,

encouraging more parents to use the space and let their children play.

Putting the play back into school playtime

Playful neighbourhoods make the most of all aspects of the community for children's

play, so school playgrounds and playtime are a vital resource given that they are so prominent in every child's day-to-day life. However, effective design and resourcing of school playgrounds is as essential as giving children the time to explore them.





Credit: ParkPlay

Surrey Square

Surrey Square Primary School's teachers told us they feel more than a school, much more like a family. They serve a community facing significant challenges, including housing insecurity and financial hardship, yet through building strong relationships and having a commitment to wellbeing, they have seen positive outcomes in academic progress, staff retention and in the overall well being of all the school's stakeholders. A key component of their well-being strategy is their unbending commitment to play.

The Commission visited the school during spring 2025, and as soon as we walked through the expansive playground their commitment to play was clear to see. Having invested in the Outdoor Play and Learning (OPAL)

scheme, their children spent breaktime using tyres to dam up puddles that created small pools in which they raced their scooters backwards and forwards through. Children were running around, laughing and making plenty of noise, having fun.

Talking to parents, we learned the difference the scheme has made. They felt that their children have been given permission to play freely during playtime and that they love it. In addition, we heard of how the school's plans and actions to recover from the effects of Covid, included incorporating play into the teaching schedule – a serious, child-led but teacher-supported, weekly hour to build the confidence, and social and emotional capacity of their children through play.

Sadly, over recent years, many school playgrounds have become less and less playful.

Recent polling by Teacher Tapp found that only 7% of children can bring ropes or elastic to school for jumping games in the playground, a fall of over 17% over the previous six years, and that under three-quarters of schools (74%) have markings for games such as hopscotch, compared to 81% in 2019.¹⁵¹ Teachers have also noted a decline in quality of outdoor play spaces as children get older; 33% of people working in early years rate their outdoor play spaces

as excellent, which drops to only 8% of teachers in Primary schools.¹⁵²

Of course, playgrounds do not need to be full of prescriptive markings or specialist equipment. The Good School Playground Guide, published by Learning through Landscapes, encourages the use of trees and shrubs, varied topography, logs and boulders, sand, and loose materials to provide different sensory experiences, physical challenges, and spaces to explore.¹⁵³ What matters most then is that space to be active, imaginative, and playful exists in every playground.

¹⁵¹ Teacher Tapp. Sleep and habits, playground games and ECT expectations vs reality; <https://cfyl.org.uk/ref/lhq>. Accessed 06.02.25

¹⁵² Association of Play Industries (2025) The State of Outdoor Play in Primary Schools

¹⁵³ Learning through Landscapes (2025) The good school playground guide; <https://cfyl.org.uk/ref/lum>

The Outdoor Play and Learning (OPAL) programme

The OPAL Primary Programme helps schools to improve their culture of play through mentoring and practical support. Schools are supported to develop a play policy and equip their staff with training in play work. The Opal programme has been shown to sustainably increase physical activity across all age groups and so many schools use the School Sports Premium to fund it. Other sources include PTA fundraising, Pupil Premium, and health initiatives.

Michael Follett, Founder and Director of OPAL, places particular importance in schools having a dedicated play lead: in the same way that a school would employ a literacy coordinator to improve literacy outcomes in school, a play lead is necessary to ensure that breaktime are being effectively and strategically planned to maximise benefits for pupils and the school environment.¹⁵³

Participating schools report ten minutes more teaching time per day per teacher, improved behaviour, and happier playgrounds.¹⁵⁴

An independent study of OPAL and non-OPAL participating schools found that OPAL schools had higher levels of school satisfaction, and that teachers were more aware of the benefits of breaktime for cognitive development.¹⁵⁵

The Commission has visited OPAL partner schools and seen its programmes being delivered first-hand. During a visit in July 2024 to an OPAL primary school in inner-London, we saw a school making use of scrap material for children to play with, including spare tyres, food crates, and buckets and spades. During a visit to Riverside Primary School in February 2025 we heard how OPAL had supported it to maximise its available space which had previously been disregarded.

This opened up a wooded area for children to dig-in and play on rope swings. We noticed that no children were playing on the expensive, fixed play equipment at any point during our visit, but were instead playing around it with loose parts, fancy dress, and imagination-based games.

“My favourite thing about OPAL is that new things keep on adding”

Child, Year 3

Riverside Primary School’s headteacher described how children are often inspired to initiate elaborate imaginary games together. He shared a story of how one group of children started an Indian takeaway through play by using pots and pans to create pretend food, set up the tables as a restaurant, and use the scooters to be make-believe ‘deliveroo’ drivers. This game continued for several weeks and involved more and more children. When we spoke to the children themselves, they shared how the Indian takeaway play was not a one off, and that creating a fun game often spreads through the whole school.



Credit: OPAL

¹⁵⁴ Michael Follett. Raising the Nation Play Commission oral evidence. 16.09.24

¹⁵⁵ OPAL. The OPAL Primary Programme: Supporting school improvement through better play and playtimes; <https://cfyl.org.uk/ref/m88>

¹⁵⁶ Ed Baines, Will Piercy & Mine Sak Acur. Raising the Nation Play Commission call for evidence. 31.10.24



Credit: @drewfussphotography and Hornimans Adventure Playground, London W10

Well-resourced and well-designed playgrounds have the potential to be valued assets not just during the school day but for the whole community to use all-year round.

“ During weekends, evenings and school holidays, some school grounds could become community playgrounds, parks or growing spaces¹⁵⁷

In Scotland, some local authorities are already employing school playgrounds for wider, community use, whereas others raise concerns about vandalism and site security. The solution proposed in The Good School Playground Guide is to move toward cross-departmental asset planning and management, to ensure that schools and education budgets don't have to bear the costs that arise out of wider use.¹⁵⁸

A toolkit developed by Play Wales highlighted that schools participating in projects to use their grounds for play out of school hours were supportive. Parents valued having the time, space and permission to enable their children to play, and they benefited from interacting with peers and professionals.¹⁵⁹

During one of our oral evidence sessions, Carley Sefton, CEO of Learning through Landscapes, told us how opening school playgrounds in evenings and at weekends can be the easiest way of enabling children to enjoy unsupervised play time, and that this is common practice in other countries such as Australia, France, and the Netherlands. She advised that the key to keeping these spaces safe and maintained is to nurture a protective attitude among the children themselves, which is achieved through co-creation and supportive messaging around loving the space.¹⁶⁰ Indeed, studies carried out as part of the UNICEF Child Friendly Cities campaign found that young people are more likely to take ownership of, and engage with, spaces when they are involved in the design process.¹⁶¹

¹⁵⁷ Learning through Landscapes (2016) The good school playground guide; <https://cfyl.org.uk/ref/mfo>

¹⁵⁸ Ibid.

¹⁵⁹ Play Wales (2025) Opening school grounds for play: A toolkit for schools and partners; <https://cfyl.org.uk/ref/mpe>

¹⁶⁰ Carley Sefton. Raising the Nation Play Commission oral evidence. 16.09.24

¹⁶¹ UNICEF (2022) Effective, representative, and inclusive child participation at the local level; <https://cfyl.org.uk/ref/mor>

Adventure playgrounds

Adventure playgrounds are unique worlds for children. Set apart from the more structured and confined environments of school, playcentres and many play areas, adventure playgrounds offer an opportunity for children to experience play in a rich, engaging environment which excites, tests boundaries, builds confidence, resilience, skills and friendships – and is great fun.

Drawing on natural play environments and materials children are supported to use their imagination and creativity to develop a strong sense of agency, ownership and self-belief and build skills – making and taking responsibility for assessing and managing risk and directing their own engagement.¹⁶²

Somerford Grove Adventure Playground - Haringey Play Association

Somerford Grove Adventure Playground is based in Haringey and offers free-of-charge indoor and outdoor play spaces, including jumping off & climbing platforms, drop slide, swings, small soft play room, a nature area, sand and water play, mud kitchens, campfire, den building loose parts and tools.

Sereena Keymatlian, Director of Haringey Play Association, shared with the Commission that the adventure playground is located in Northumberland

Park, amongst the most deprived areas in England, and is often described as a “back garden” for children and young people.

Last year, the Adventure playground worked with 775 children 75% of whom come from Black and global majority backgrounds, offering 1191 hours of outdoor supervised play. With a turnover ranging from £157,000 and £222,000, the Adventure Playground costs roughly £287 per child a year.

Oasisplay: inclusive adventure playgrounds

Oasisplay is a network of staffed adventure playgrounds across Lambeth. At each site a team of trained playworkers are available to support disabled and non-disabled children and young people to ensure they get the most out of the playground and its activities. They have also developed a flexible and responsive inclusion offer for children and families, which includes:

- A Short Breaks Service – including After School Clubs, Saturday Clubs and Holiday Playschemes, for children and young people referred by Lambeth Children with Disabilities Service.

- Stay and Play – This service allows parents/carers to bring their child/young person to Oasis Play during any of their play sessions. Parents/carers have the opportunity to play with their child/young person within a fun, supportive, and inclusive play environment. Stay and Play requires no referral, and is free for families to use.

The Commission visited Oasisplay's Adventure Playgrounds in April 2025, when we saw children with complex SEND playing alongside other children throughout the day, enjoying a high-quality, exciting adventure playground offer, staffed: safe and free for them to use.

Children using adventure playgrounds have control of the space and are able to ‘self-build’ (and demolish) their play structures. This control over the space, as well as children’s ability to come and go, means children develop a strong sense of community, belonging, and ownership.¹⁶³ Sadly, it is this risk which, in a growing climate of risk aversion, has contributed to a decline in the use of adventure playgrounds, which – coupled with a severe lack of funding – has forced many to close.

The Commission heard directly from playworkers in adventure playgrounds about the unique role that these spaces can play in communities. Adventure playgrounds were described as “children’s community centres”, the “heart of children’s community”, and as respected spaces for children that the wider community revolves around.

London Play asked more than 120 children attending adventure playgrounds what they thought. Children shared that they felt excited by the variety of opportunities to play and the agency it provides them.¹⁶⁴

“ Here, [if] you want to do something – you do that something. In the park, [if] you want to do something...hmm let’s see if you are allowed to do that thing? No!”

Child, Islington adventure playground¹⁶⁵

Adventure playgrounds were seen as a place where they can make friends and be themselves: a place of safety and inclusion.

“ It’s somewhere where I can play with my disabled brother and be safe.

Child, Age 8¹⁶⁶



Credit: Somerford Grove Adventure Playground

¹⁶³ Professor Ben Highmore and Dr Mike Wragg. Adventure Playgrounds Briefing Document submitted to the Raising the Nation Play Commission. 13.05.25

¹⁶⁴ London Play. Raising the Nation Play Commission call for evidence. 21.05.25

¹⁶⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶⁶ Ibid.

The Valley Project

The Commission visited the Valley Project, an adventure playground in Bradford, in March 2025. The adventure playground encourages children to build structures, be messy, try arts and crafts, and explore. Led by and run for the local community, young people and their families have the freedom to shape and co-produce the space.

The Valley Project team run regular open access sessions where children use hand tools to build dens, treehouses, climbing and jumping towers and let their imaginations run wild. By sourcing a wide range of recycled 'loose parts' from local businesses, they keep resource costs down and provide the children with a wide range of building materials to shape their play space to suit their needs. The Valley also provides campfire cooked meals and snacks every day.

The project supports integration within the community by being inclusive and based around activities requiring cooperation. It aims to boost mixing when children and young people are out of school, lowering the chance of future gang involvement and boosting

life chances through supporting the development of social competence, self-esteem, and positive relationships. The project also operates a flourishing Young Leaders programme, developing young people's confidence and leadership skills and encouraging pro-social behaviours.

It was clear from talking to members of the community how valuable the Valley is to Holme Wood as it has grown to offer services for the entire family unit, with food and clothing parcels available for struggling families, and emotional and practical support on hand. These services continued during the Covid-19 pandemic and provided a lifeline to many families in need during this time. This commitment to helping the community of Holme Wood even during this most difficult of times has created trust across the community in both the Valley Project and Laura and Steve. The result of this trust is the ability of an adventure playground to offer the community access to public services through introductions, referrals and advocations despite the widespread scepticism towards external support agencies within Holme Wood.

The enabling role of playworkers is at the heart of adventure play – opening up and supporting opportunities for engaging play on children's own terms. It is precisely because playworkers don't seek to obtain a particular outcome that adventure playgrounds enable play in all its forms to happen, and so the widest range of play's benefits can be enjoyed. Some of these benefits are felt in the moment, whilst others will be much more long lasting, shaping and improving children's futures, as well as the immediate.¹⁶⁷

A study on playwork in Wrexham found that every £1 invested generated £4.60 in immediate and deferred benefits over 7 years – including increased physical activity, educational outcome, crime reduction, improved adult mental health, and social capital.¹⁶⁸

Play workers also enable parents to allow their children to play independently, as they also feel that the environment is safe and their children are sufficiently supervised.

167 Professor Ben Highmore and Dr Mike Wragg. Adventure Playgrounds Briefing Document submitted to the Raising the Nation Play Commission. 13.05.25

168 Social Value UK (2016) An analysis of the economic impact of Playwork in Wrexham; <https://cfyl.org.uk/ref/owg>

“ I can only go to [the] adventure [playground] my mum will not let me play out on my estate because it’s not safe

Child, Age 10¹⁶⁹

Beyond offering a vital – and increasingly rare – opportunity to play freely, we were told that adventure playgrounds have the potential to “revolutionise children and families’ services” as they are often able to connect with children and families who are less likely to use more mainstream or statutory services. Some also work with parents to signpost services that they may need.¹⁷⁰ The Commission heard that many adventure playgrounds provide free meals to all children who attend, such as Felix Road in East Bristol.

Play Bradford

Play Bradford is a charity dedicated to improving the lives of children in Bradford through the power of play. It has four major projects, at the centre of which is the Big Swing Adventure Playground. Big Swing provides free, open-access play for children aged 5-16, and is open during term time and school holidays. Last year, more than 3,000 children played at the adventure playground. Children who attend the Big Swing all receive at least one home-cooked meal a day, and it has so far provided 4,000 hot meals to local children.¹⁷⁰

Play Bradford also runs the Mobile Adventure Playground, which is a van that visits eight locations in parks across Bradford after school and during the school holidays. Inside the van are loose-parts material with which children can create their own temporary adventure play spaces.¹⁷¹ Play Bradford also works with a number of local schools to provide education and free play sessions for children in Special Inclusive Learning Centres and Pupil Referral Units.¹⁷²



Credit: Play Bradford

¹⁶⁹ London Play. Raising the Nation Play Commission call for evidence submission. 21.05.25

¹⁷⁰ Professor Ben Highmore and Dr Mike Wragg. Adventure Playgrounds Briefing Document submitted to the Raising the Nation Play Commission. 13.05.2025

¹⁷¹ Dr Mike Wragg. Raising the Nation Play Commission call for evidence. 16.05.25

¹⁷² Ibid.

¹⁷³ Ibid.

Adventure playgrounds first arose in Emdrup, Denmark, in 1943 as a “junk playground”, containing a range of materials and tools for children to build, demolish and rebuild as they chose. Adventure playgrounds were brought to the UK by Lady Allen, making use of the bomb-sites that were present in many cities after WWII. They gradually became more established, with larger timber structures built, and more playworkers required to run them. An adventure playground is a space that children can regard as their own, which gives children the agency to build, shape, and transform their environment using their creativity, curiosity, and hands-on experimentation.¹⁷⁴

The value of adventure playgrounds extends far beyond just providing a place to play; they are a vital cog in communities and a pillar of support for many families. Across the country they are variously feeding children who would otherwise go without, providing educational opportunities for children who are unable to attend mainstream school, helping people find work through volunteering, keeping children safe, and enabling parents and carers to be economically active by providing ‘free’ childcare.

Lester's Yard

Lester's Yard is an adventure playground created by Isle of Play based in Isle of Man. It is run by playworkers and around 800 children are registered. The adventure playground provides opportunities for children aged 4 to 16 to socialise, use tools, build, climb, destroy, and cook food.¹⁷⁴

Isle of Play also offers a Mobile Playscheme, a van with resources – including rope swings, ziplines, and natural materials – that goes to local parks for children to play with during the school holidays. As many as 200 children can turn up in parks that are otherwise usually empty.¹⁷⁵



Credit: Isle of Play

174 Harry Shier (1984) Adventure Playgrounds: an introduction; <https://cfyl.org.uk/ref/pxs>

175 Chris Gregory. Raising the Nation Play Commission call for evidence. 23.04.25

176 Ibid.

Inclusive play spaces for all children and young people

If play spaces are designed without incorporating the views and needs of all likely users, there is a danger that many groups of people in the community will feel excluded from the benefits. We heard frequently that public playgrounds, parks, and other play spaces do not meet the needs of all children, rendering them inaccessible or even dangerous.

We also heard that public play facilities are especially important to families living in poverty and to many ethnic minority families, who are less likely to have access to private gardens to play. There is a clear need for an emphasis on equity and inclusion in play strategies and planning decisions at both a national and local level.

We heard too how girls often feel that playgrounds and play spaces aren't designed with them in mind. Make Space for Girls, an organisation that campaigns for public spaces and facilities for girls, say that skateparks, BMX tracks, and Multi-use Games Areas (MUGAs) make up 94% of facilities provided 'for teenagers' in parks, and of the teenagers using these facilities, 88% are boys, rising to 92% for MUGAs.¹⁷⁷ Most other facilities are shelters, which are often next to the skate park or MUGA.

Research shows that where alternative facilities to MUGAs and skateparks are provided in parks, girls are three times as likely to use them.¹⁷⁸ When we spoke to young people, we heard that girls experience a stereotyped expectation around what they want from play spaces when they are not making use of spaces like football pitches and MUGAs:

“for girls, there's this expectation that you're supposed to be sitting down gossiping or something

Child, Year 7

Many girls may be more likely to use skateparks or MUGAs if they were less male-dominated spaces, or if there were cultural and behavioural changes so that spaces were more welcoming to all. Others may prefer different types of play facilities altogether, as indeed may many boys. It is evident that further research and engagement with girls to understand and deliver what they want from parks is needed at a national and local level. Overall, there needs to be more space, catering to different interests and needs, for more children. Lack of space, or contested space, is increasing various tensions between users.

MUGAs are a rare example of a play space being designed specifically with teenagers in mind, even if they end up being dominated by teenage boys. Play remains vitally important in adolescence, yet few other spaces exist for teenagers; especially since the number of youth clubs has fallen dramatically - by more than two-thirds - across England and Wales since 2010.¹⁷⁹ As a result, many young people congregate in public spaces, feeding a stigma around young people 'hanging out' in public spaces and perceptions of anti-social behaviour.

177 Make Space for Girls (2023) Parkwatch Report; <https://cfyl.org.uk/ref/qgp>

178 Ibid.

179 UNISON. Closure of more than a thousand youth centres could have lasting impact on society; <https://cfyl.org.uk/ref/qvw>. Accessed: 05.02.25

Credit: OPAL

**“ it’s kind of
hardwired into us
that we should lose
our ability to play and
imagine things**

Child, Year 7

The stigmatisation of adolescent play has been a recurring theme in our inquiry. We have heard how teenagers “get a lot of bad press”, with adult expectations placed upon a group of people who aren’t adults and still have a lot of development to do.¹⁸⁰

WeMindTheGap - a social mobility charity working with young people to provide opportunities and improve life chances - has witnessed adults express concern about young people, simply for “meeting friends in the street and being a teenager”.¹⁸¹

The Yard, Edinburgh

The Commission visited The Yard in Edinburgh in April 2025 to see how the centre champions child-led, inclusive play. Its facilities are designed to cater to diverse needs, including an adventure play space, sensory room, soft play area, and art room. All the spaces are wheelchair accessible, including the large boat swing in the adventure play area, ensuring all children can participate in all activities.

We also know that many playgrounds and other places to play are not accessible to children with SEND. Research by Scope has found that only 1 in 10 playgrounds are accessible to disabled children and nearly three-quarters of playgrounds are places where it would be difficult for disabled and non-disabled children to play together.¹⁸² As a result, more than half of families with disabled or seriously ill children report that it is difficult to find play and leisure equipment which meet the needs of their children.¹⁸³

Family Fund’s evidence presented to the Commission highlights how discrimination can be just as much of a barrier to disabled children playing out. 94% of families have experienced a negative reaction to their disabled or seriously ill child whilst on a family outing, and one parent told Family Fund how places don’t provide thought for disabled children and “unfortunately, other members of the public don’t either”.¹⁸⁴

We saw how all the spaces are open, allowing children to move freely to wherever they feel comfortable. Some children were playing in groups, others were playing alone or with a member of staff. This clearly challenged the assumption that children need to always play with others in order to enjoy themselves or reap the benefits of play as those playing alone were clearly enjoying themselves just as much as others.

180 Sarah Jayne Blakemore. Raising the Nation Play Commission oral evidence. 25.11.24

181 WeMindTheGap. Raising the Nation Play Commission call for evidence. 05.09.24

182 Scope. Let’s Play Fair; <https://cfyl.org.uk/ref/qvh>. Accessed 27.01.25

183 Family Fund (2023) Family Poll; <https://cfyl.org.uk/ref/qyi>. Accessed: 29.01.25

184 Family Fund. Raising the Nation Play Commission call for evidence. 30.10.24

Play at home

Children spend more time playing at home than any other location and spend more time playing in their gardens – if they have one – than they do anywhere else outdoors.^{185,186}

“ I feel like a lot more properties should have a bit of an enclosed space... so then it's easier and safer if kids want to let out their energy

Child, Year 7

However, the stark reality is that one-in-eight British households have no garden, rising to more than one in five in London.¹⁸⁷ With playgrounds and schools closed during the COVID pandemic lockdowns, children in these households suffered most, with little to no access to green space and places to play freely.

In England, Black families are nearly four times more likely than White families to have no access to outdoor space at home and 2.4 times more likely even after accounting for factors such as the higher ethnic diversity of urban areas – where garden access is likely to be lower.¹⁸⁸

Unsurprisingly, garden access also varies by income: a survey by Natural England found children from higher income households (£50,000+) are more likely to have access to a garden than those from low- or mid-income households.¹⁸⁹

Playful space at home is not only important given the decline in opportunities to play elsewhere, but because the privacy of the home can provide a safe space where children feel they can truly be the child they are. We heard in our focus groups how children, particularly teenagers, want to play but don't feel comfortable doing so because of social pressures to 'grow-up' and act more like an adult.

“ You just put on a mask when you're at school or in public, but when you are at home you just feel like I don't need to pretend to be something I'm not

Child, Year 7

All of this shows just how crucial it is that homes and neighbourhoods are designed with the intention of creating a safe and healthy environment which has adequate space for children to play. When this doesn't happen, we exacerbate existing inequalities for children who do not have access to a garden.¹⁹⁰

185 Dodd, H., et al. (2021) Children's Play and Independent Mobility in 2020: Results from the British Children's Play Survey; International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health. 18: 4334; <https://cfyl.org.uk/ref/rh9>.

186 Helen Dodd. Raising the Nation Play Commission call for evidence. 31.10.24

187 Office for National Statistics (2020) One in eight British households has no garden; <https://cfyl.org.uk/ref/rmh>. Accessed: 12.12.24

188 Ibid.

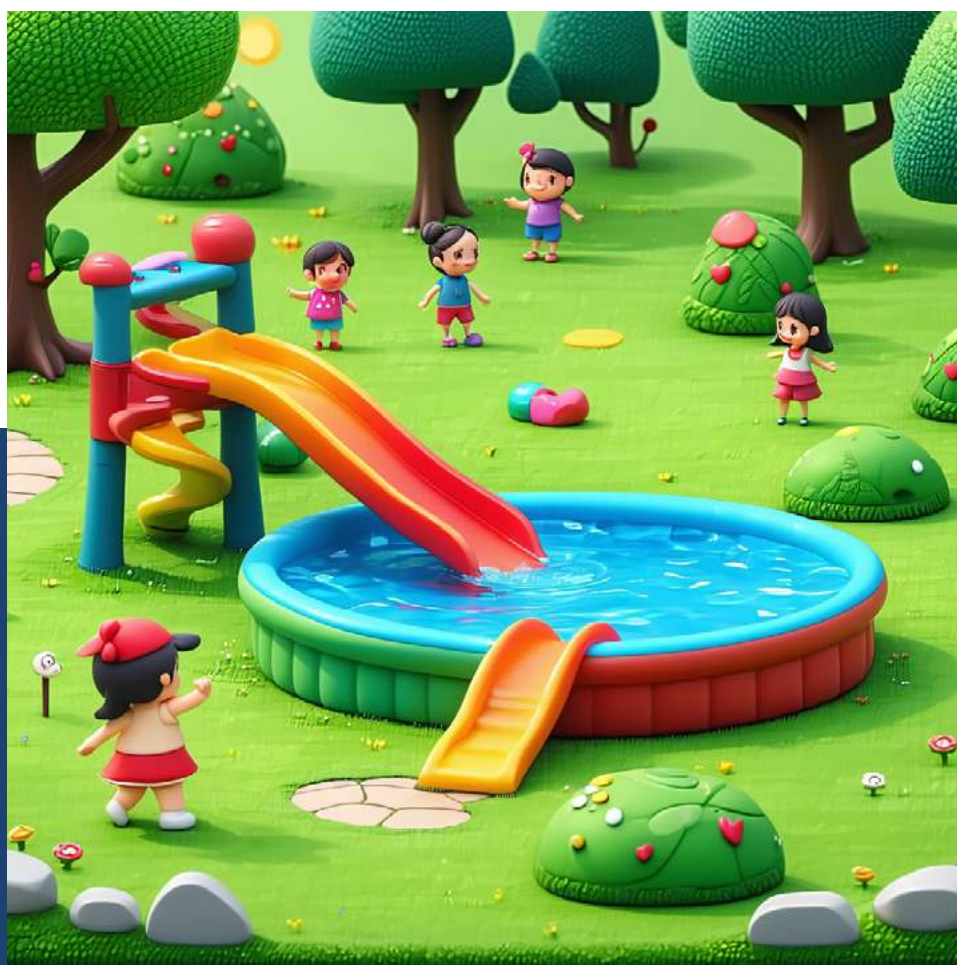
189 Natural England (2024) The Children's People and Nature Survey for England: 2024 update; <https://cfyl.org.uk/ref/rqk>

190 Dodd, H., et al. (2024) Written evidence to Levelling Up, Housing and Communities Committee inquiry into children, young people, and the built environment [CBE 027]; <https://cfyl.org.uk/ref/rp>

Creating playful homes and communities

With support from Play Commissioner Professor Helen Dodd, Redrow's 2024 Playmaking Report, *Breaking the Grass Ceiling*, outlines the company's commitment to fostering playful, nature-integrated communities. Recognising the decline in outdoor play among children,

Redrow aims to design developments that encourage safe and accessible play for all ages. In developments such as Hackwood Grange in Derbyshire, this has led to wider streets and cul-de-sacs, creating safer environments for children to play.¹⁹⁰



Children's Vision

A low, candy-coloured paddling pool—striped in bright red, blue, green, orange, and purple—nestles into parks and playgrounds as a cool, bare-foot retreat. Kids (and tired parents) can kick off their shoes, wiggle their toes in the water, or swoosh toy boats while chatting with friends. No deep end, no queues—just an anytime, anywhere place to play, chill, and keep summer days happily splashy.





Time to Play

Whether it be in school or in their leisure, the time children have to play competes with many other responsibilities, distractions, and demands. The pressures on schools of academic achievement and delivering an overloaded curriculum has squeezed out the time children get to play during the school day. At home, children's limited freedom to move and play independently often means their playtime depends on when adults are available to supervise them – reducing opportunities for children and increasing pressure on parents.

Time to play in school

Breaktimes and lunchtimes at school make up a significant amount of the time that children spend playing and provide a vital opportunity for free play, which also indirectly improves learning outcomes within the classroom. Whilst play within the curriculum and classroom is being underutilised - as set out earlier in this report - dedicated time for children to play freely during breaktime and lunchtimes has also been eroded.

Playtimes which are physically active can help children to concentrate better in the classroom,¹⁹² which we saw confirmed with the findings from our first focus group of children which we held with groups of Year 6 students in July 2024. Several children spoke about struggling to complete sedentary tasks for 1-2 hours at a time and that they found their movement breaks to be a welcome and necessary rest.

Over the course of the school year, breaktimes account for up to 22% of time spent in school, yet there is no

requirement of schools to have dedicated staff or a strategy to maximise the benefits of the time that children spend in the playground.¹⁹³

This is predominantly a result of a growing direct, and indirect, pressure on schools to deliver a cumbersome curriculum with a narrow focus on rote-learning, examination, and assessment. Directly, the burgeoning curriculum is squeezing time out of the school day for anything that isn't coverage of the curriculum's content. Indirectly, the curriculum's narrow focus sends an implicit signal to schools that play is to be de-prioritised.

Surveys carried out in 1995, 2006, 2017, and 2021 reveal the extent to which the time reserved for children to play at school has been cut.¹⁹⁴

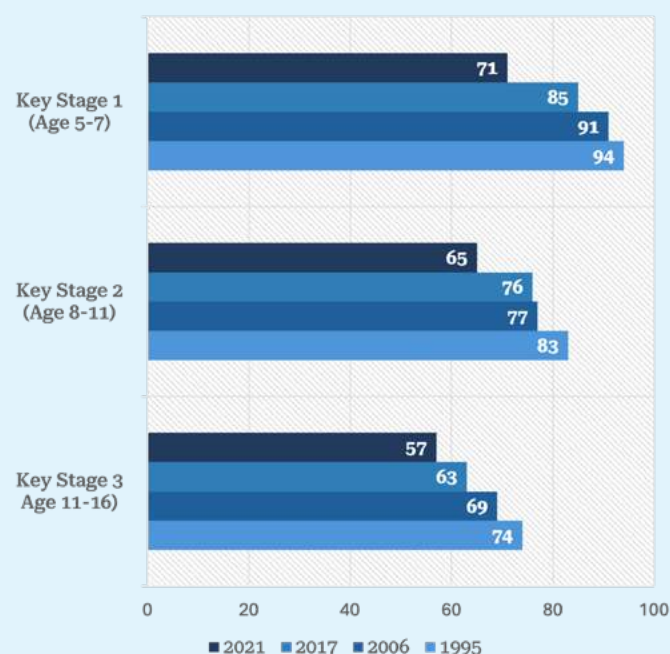


Figure 2: Average total breaktime in minutes per day in England's schools across four national surveys

¹⁹² Smith, P. & Pellegrini, A. (2023) Learning Through Play. In: Encyclopaedia on Early Childhood Development; <https://cfyl.org.uk/ref/s0g>

¹⁹³ OPAL (2021) The Case for Play in Schools: A review of the literature; <https://cfyl.org.uk/ref/s9g>

¹⁹⁴ Ed Baines, Will Piercy & Mine Sak Acur. Raising the Nation Play Commission call for evidence submission. 31.10.24. The 2021 survey was carried out after schools had fully re-opened following the Covid-19 pandemic.

Children at Key Stage 1 enjoyed 23 minutes less breaktime a day on average in 2021 compared to their parents' generation in 1995. The average total time dedicated to breaktime in a day fell by 18 minutes over the same period for Key Stage 2, and 17 minutes for Key Stage 3. The actual time that children have to play is even lower, once the time it takes to queue for lunch and eat food is taken into account.

Whilst average breaktimes have fallen across the board, schools in under-served areas are more likely to have seen a fall in the total time allotted for breaktimes. At primary school level, and to a lesser extent at secondary level, schools with a higher proportion of children in receipt of free school meals – an imperfect measure of child poverty – have shorter breaktimes. At secondary level, a significant gap can be observed between maintained and independent schools, with breaktimes in the latter not having experienced any discernible decline since 1995.¹⁹⁵

Finland's breaktime guidance

During the Commission's visit to Finland, we met with representatives of the Ministry of Education and Culture, and the Finnish National Agency for Education. They described how play is a backbone throughout the school day, as it is during childhood more widely.

Guidance in Finland recommends that children should have a 15-minute break for every 45 minutes of learning, with studies showing shorter lessons with more frequent breaks increase attentiveness.¹⁸⁹

There are several explanations for this concerning trend. Firstly, we heard from several witnesses and in submissions to

our call for evidence how the pressure of curriculum coverage and the emphasis on knowledge acquisition and academic assessment have impacted the school day. Galiema Amien-Clote, the headteacher of Rotherhithe Primary School in London, told us how the time required to cover the curriculum is too overbearing, so schools have to sacrifice playtime, the very time which children had used to hone skills and provide the opportunity for them to apply their learning.¹⁹⁷

“The pressure for teachers to make sure children are learning Maths and English in particular and not falling behind, playtime ... it's kind of not important, it doesn't feel like it's important, but actually it is, everybody needs a break and space to just do something else and have a bit of a brain break.

Teaching Assistant¹⁹⁸

A curriculum with such a narrow emphasis on rote learning and examinations, reinforced by a highly pressurised accountability system has led many schools and teachers to view breaktimes as nothing more than a loss of valuable teaching time which could be given over to further coverage of the curriculum's content.

¹⁹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁹⁶ The Atlantic. How Finland Keeps Kids Focused Through Free Play; <https://cfyl.org.uk/ref/sev>. Accessed: 21.04.25

¹⁹⁷ Galiema Amien-Clote. Raising the Nation Play Commission oral evidence. 07.10.24

¹⁹⁸ Nesbit R., Harvey K., & Dodd, H. (2025) "I think that we should, but I don't think that we can": What school staff think about adventurous play in schools in England, Journal of Adventure Education and Outdoor Learning. 1-18; <https://cfyl.org.uk/ref/3il>

The surveys of school breaktimes also captured changes in teacher attitudes over time too: 71% of secondary school teachers in 2017 – an increase from 68% in 2006 – felt that the main value of breaktimes is the opportunity they provide for pupils to eat and drink.¹⁹⁹ In other words, they are a chance to merely re-fuel before re-entering the classroom.

In comparison, the percentage of secondary teachers who believe the main value of breaktimes to be in the opportunity they provide for pupils to socialise with their peers has fallen from 69% in 1995 to 60% in 2006 and further to 57% in 2017.²⁰⁰

It is vital that the time that is left in the school day for free play is protected. However, a significant number of schools punitively withhold breaktimes from children, preventing them from benefiting from the time they do have during the school day to play and rest. The 2017 survey uncovered the extent to which this is common practice in schools: 53% of secondary schools and 58% of primary schools withhold some of or even entire breaktimes for behavioural reasons.²⁰¹

As with the total time allowed for breaktime, the practice of withholding breaks also varies with economic disadvantage: primary schools that carry out this practice are statistically more likely to have a higher proportion of pupils receiving free school meals, especially when the reason for the break being withheld is poor behaviour.²⁰²

The 2017 survey also sought the views of pupils in Years 5, 8, and 10, which revealed that over 80% said there are times when they have missed a breaktime. Pupils attributed this to their own misbehaviour 28% of the time, but to others misbehaviour almost half the time (49%). The survey also found that boys were more likely to have

missed a breaktime than girls.²⁰³

Time to play outside of school

In the 2006 and 2017 surveys, children and young people in Year 5 (age 9-10), Year 8 (age 12-13), and Year 10 (age 14-15) were asked how often they spend time with their friends outside of school. Overall, the percentage who said they do spend time with their peers fell from 91% to 86% over the 11 years, but it is the fall in the frequency that children meet up with their friends that is even more alarming.²⁰⁴

Between 2006 and 2017, the percentage of young people who said they meet with their peers every night outside of school halved from 18% to 9% and the percentage who said they meet a few times a week fell from 46% to 36%. Conversely, 17% said they meet up less than once a week in 2017, up from 6% 11 years earlier. The percentage who ‘rarely’ meet up also rose from 9% to 14%.²⁰⁵

In previous generations, when outdoor space was safer and more accessible and it was easier to get around independently, children over 9 or 10 were not so dependent on their parents’ free time in order to play outside with their friends. Today, children’s lack of independent mobility often leaves them dependent on caregivers to take them to spaces where they can play, which would otherwise be inaccessible due to distance, obstacles such as major roads and traffic, or a general concern about leaving the home without an adult. Children’s time to play is therefore often dependent on their parents’ time, which in turn is highly precious. As a result, many time-poor parents now have to balance their many other responsibilities with finding time to enable their child to play.

199 Ed Baines, Will Piercy & Mine Sak Acur. Raising the Nation Play Commission call for evidence. 31.10.24.

200 Ibid.

201 Ibid.

202 Baines, E. & Blatchford, P. (2019) School break and lunch times and young people’s social lives: A follow-up national study; <https://cfyl.org.uk/ref/tal>

203 Ibid.

204 Ibid.

205 Ibid.



Credit: Association of Play Industries

There are also many barriers to parents having time to play with their children. The rising cost of living, childcare fees, housing costs, insecure work and low wages mean some caregivers are spending more time than they used to trying to make ends meet and dealing with the anxiety of an uncertain financial future. Many families have working caregivers, which can leave less time for adults to be at home playing with their children.²⁰⁶ One study found that children with parents who work full time

played outside less often than parents who work part time.²⁰⁷

To maximise time that they spend with their children, many parents told the Commission that employers should give families more parental leave, flexible working opportunities, and shorter working hours; and that employers should be more aware of employees' family commitments including children's plays and sports days.²⁰⁸

Children's right to time to play

Many children face multiple demands on their time that reduces their opportunity to play, such as competitive sports, domestic chores, caring duties, addictive digital devices, competitive schooling, homework, and pressures on academic achievement. Children's time to play needs to be respected and protected, and free from external pressures. Time for play is a core component of the right to play.

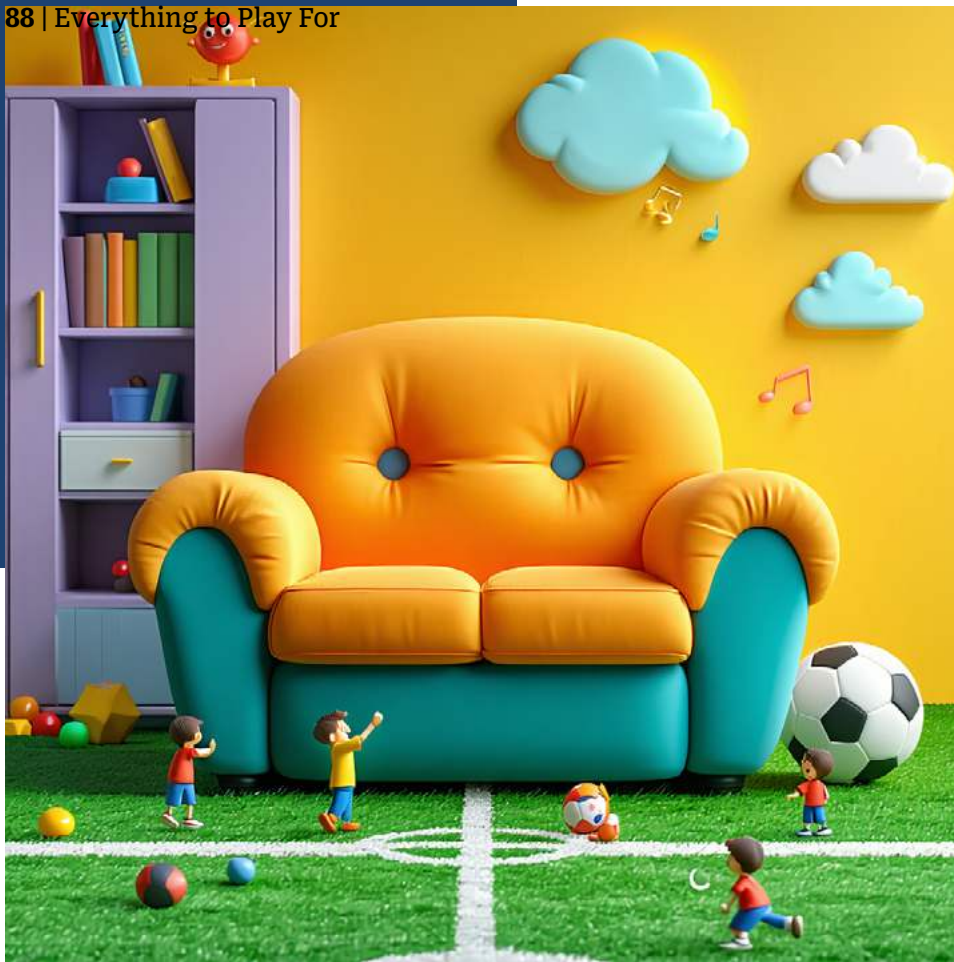
A child right's approach to ensuring time for play would consider that:

- Children must have protected time for unstructured, self-directed play, and this time must be beyond time allocated for rest;
- Children must have time to play within and outside of the school day;
- Some children need additional measures to protect their time to play, including adolescents and children with additional responsibilities within the home, such as financial or caring responsibilities.

206 Stevie Bode. Raising the Nation Play Commission call for evidence. 16.09.24

207 Dodd, H., FitzGibbon, L., et al. (2021) Children's Play and Independent Mobility in 2020: Results from the British Children's Play Survey; <https://cfyl.org.uk/ref/v84>

208 E.g. Sue Atkins. Raising the Nation Play Commission oral evidence session. 07.04.25; Playboard NI. Raising the Nation Play Commission call for evidence. 31.10.24; We Mind the Gap. Raising the Nation Play Commission call for evidence. 09.09.24



Children's Vision

A boredom-proof waiting-room setup featuring “the world’s comfiest chair” beside a mini indoor football pitch. The pitch’s metal rebound walls clang with each goal, adding real-stadium excitement, while simple rules—no fighting, no schoolwork, no dull stuff—keep the vibe playful and positive for kids awaiting their turn at the doctor’s.



Playful Childhoods, Healthy Lives

The government has committed to creating ‘the healthiest generation of children ever’. For this vision to become a reality it will require the natural vitality, creativity, sociability and resilience that children manifest in their play to be fully supported and harnessed by public policy.

Play Commissioner Julika Niehaus, a Portfolio Manager for the Children’s Mental Health Programme at Impact on Urban Health, has told the Commission how play is essential not only for promoting physical development, but also for nurturing positive mental health and supporting children to live well and thrive. It is therefore a vital tool in tackling health - and wider - inequalities which disproportionately impact from low-income and minority ethnic backgrounds.

Regular, independent play helps children build resilience, manage stress, and develop key social and emotional skills that contribute to long-term wellbeing. Play can also help children with recovery from health problems when they are there. The Commission visited hospitals and health centres where we saw how play supports children to manage fear and anxiety, aid communication, and support faster recovery during treatment. In clinical settings, play is a vital therapeutic tool that supports children’s emotional wellbeing and resilience.

This section explores both of these areas: play as a key, determining factor of public health, and as a specific tool within the clinical environment and healthcare. Regarding the former, embedding

play more widely into public health approaches will be crucial to delivering the government's ambition to raise the healthiest and happiest generation, and reduce inequalities in doing so.

Tackling a generational children's health crisis

Play is the number one way that children stay active – running in the park, chasing their friends, climbing trees or kicking about with a ball. Play is also how children process and cope with bad experiences, worries, and challenges. It is no coincidence that as children's access to play has declined, children's health has significantly deteriorated too.

The crisis in children's health and well-being should concern us all:

- More than a fifth (22%) of children aged 4-5 were overweight in 2023/24, rising to more than a third (36%) for children aged 10-to-11-years old;²⁰⁹
- More than half (52%) of children and young people were not active;²¹⁰
- A fifth of children and young people age 8-to-16 had a probable mental health problem in 2023; an increase from 12.5% in 2017, and the UK is the European leader for youth unhappiness;²¹¹
- 40% of children aged 8-to-16, and almost two thirds (64%) of 17-to-23-year-olds experience sleep problems three or more nights per week.²¹²

Children from the most disadvantaged communities are impacted the most:

- Children in the most deprived parts of England are twice as likely to have obesity than children in the least deprived areas – and this gap has widened since 2009/2010.²¹³
- Children who face multiple forms of inequality – such as being a girl, coming from a low-income background, being Asian or Black, or lacking access to nearby parks or sports facilities – are the least physically active and report the lowest levels of positive attitudes toward activity.²¹⁴

Healthy bodies

When children play, whether they're climbing a tree, building a tower, using a wheelchair to race, playing catch, or taking part in role play – they often engage their bodies and imaginations, learning healthy habits and behaviours in ways that reflect their unique abilities.²¹⁵ The physical benefits of play include maintaining a healthy weight, developing motor skills, building bone and muscle strength, coordination, balance, strength, and endurance.²¹⁶ Outdoor play offers unique benefits for children's development, as it encourages movement that further enhances motor skills, agility, and preventing obesity. In a study by API, 72% of parents of children with health issues such as obesity said that the lack of outdoor play provision has an impact on their child's health.²¹⁷

209 NHS Digital (2023) Mental Health of Children and Young people in England, 2023; <https://cfyl.org.uk/ref/vjg>

210 Ibid.

211 Ibid.

212 Ibid.

213 IPPR (2024) Revealed: Childhood obesity is twice as high in England's most deprived places than in affluent areas; <https://cfyl.org.uk/ref/vme>

214 Sport England (2024) Active Lives Children and Young People Survey: Academic year 2023-24; <https://cfyl.org.uk/ref/w8i>

215 Intelligent Health. Raising the Nation Play Commission call for evidence. 26.10.24

216 London Play. Raising the Nation Play Commission call for evidence. 01.11.24

217 API (2019) Play must stay: A childhood crisis; <https://cfyl.org.uk/ref/wdf>

Healthy minds

Educational psychologist, Dr Jaspar Khawaja, shared with the Commission that self-directed play is essential to meeting psychological needs, including autonomy, feeling capable, and having meaningful connections with other people. He highlighted that playing can have positive impacts on children's executive functioning, emotional control, social ability, and self-regulation. Children participating in risky play, such as climbing a tree, can also reduce the likelihood of future phobias and anxiety.²¹⁸

“ Play does not only promote immediate joy, it also provides the conditions whereby mental capacities and attitudes are formed that support future wellbeing.

Dr Jaspar Khawaja²¹⁹

In natural environments play has been shown to reduce stress, boost mood, and contribute to overall emotional wellbeing.²²⁰ Research has also found that adventurous play is associated with lower symptoms of anxiety and depression.²²¹ The connection to nature is linked with children's wellbeing, and lack of access to nature can lead to obesity, lower cognitive and academic performance, and may

negatively impact children with ADHD symptoms.²²²

Play can help children to process what is happening in their lives, from joyful experiences to traumatic ones. In natural environments it has been shown to reduce stress, boost mood, and contribute to overall emotional wellbeing.²²³

Playing indoors also benefits children's health and development. Engaging in activities such as colouring, board games, and imaginative play can help children develop fine motor skills, enhance attention spans, and build emotional resilience. Research indicates that creative activities can reduce the levels of stress hormone cortisol.²²⁴

Being deprived of play has negative consequences for children's short- and long-term physical and mental health, including their social capacity and ability to handle risk. In the Chair of the Board of Directors of Playing Out, Ellen Weaver's submission to the Commission, she wrote that the “decline in free play is contributing to long term mental health problems in children and adolescents, impairing their ability to go on to function as competent, healthy adults.”²²⁵

Alison Tonkin, Head of Higher Education at Stanmore College and author of two books on play and health in childhood, spoke with the Commission about the benefits that play brings to children's physical health. She told us how the pandemic has given a deficit model of the impacts of taking away play opportunities, which is having a negative impact on mental health and social skills that we are seeing in children and young

218 Dr Jaspar Khawaja. Raising the Nation Play Commission call for evidence. 30.08.24

219 Ibid.

220 Chester Zoo. Raising the Nation Play Commission call for evidence. 31.10.24

221 Dodd, H., Nesbit R., & FitzGibbon L. (2022) Child's Play: Examining the Association Between Time Spent Playing and Child Mental Health. *Child Psychiatry & Human Development*. 54(6):1678-1686

222 Intelligent Health. Raising the Nation Play Commission call for evidence. 26.10.24; Wildlife and Countryside Link. Raising the Nation Play Commission call for evidence. 01.09.2024

223 Chester Zoo. Raising the Nation Play Commission call for evidence. 31.10.24

224 Intermountain Health (2025) How theater and arts camps can boost your child's health this summer; <https://cfyl.org.uk/ref/xht>

225 Ellen Weaver. Raising the Nation Play Commission call for evidence. 31.10.24

people today.²²⁶ Research undertaken by PlayBoard NI and Ulster University similarly found that children and young people in Northern Ireland felt that their play opportunities during lockdown were restricted, which impacted their health, wellbeing and development. They found that engagement in active play declined from 53% to 31%.²²⁷



The right to healthy playful childhoods

Realising a child's right to play is critical to realising the child's right to health. Article 24 of the UNCRC stipulates that children have a right to "the enjoyment of the highest attainable standard of health and to facilities for the treatment of illness and rehabilitation of health". This requires that:

- Children are enabled to play due to the mental and physical health benefits that play brings;
- Play is included within healthcare settings;
- Children's voices are included in the design of healthcare settings, services and practice.

Play as therapy

Play Therapy is a therapeutic approach that helps children express and process difficult emotions through creative activities. Since children often lack the words to describe how they feel, play provides a natural and safe way for them to explore their experiences and develop emotional awareness, as well as to help them communicate both.²²⁸ Through play, children can build confidence, expand their emotional vocabulary, and improve

self-esteem, focus, creativity, and social skills. Play Therapy is particularly helpful for children dealing with trauma, anxiety, family breakdown, illness, abuse, bullying, or difficulties with emotional or behavioural regulation, as well as issues around sleep, eating, or toileting.²²⁹ It can be particularly beneficial for preschool and school age children who are in a transition period and need support to manage feelings. Research, including a meta-analysis of play therapy, has found that play is a beneficial treatment for children with behavioural problems, including aggressive behaviours.²³⁰

Social prescribing

Social prescribing holds huge potential as a public health tool, connecting people to local community resources and activities to support their health and wellbeing. Through referrals to non-clinical services like volunteering, arts activities, or green spaces, often facilitated by a link worker or community navigator, social prescribing can help people stay well in a way that can be more effective and efficient than clinical treatment.

While social prescribing models have primarily focused on adults in England,²³¹ there is growing recognition of its potential benefits for children and young people as well. Play-based activities can be a vital part of this approach. For example, children might be referred to staffed adventure playgrounds, therapeutic play sessions, nature-based play, or local youth clubs that provide safe and creative environments to connect and grow.

In Brazil, the 'playful backyards' movement – known as quintais brincantes – helps children connect directly with nature. Many participants are referred

226 Alison Tonkin. Raising the Nation Play Commission oral evidence. 28.04.25

227 PlayBoard Northern Ireland (2020) Our Voices Matter; <https://cfyl.org.uk/ref/xyv>

228 Play Therapy UK. What is Play Therapy?; <https://cfyl.org.uk/ref/yoz>. Accessed 29.04.25

229 British Association of Play Therapists. What is Play Therapy?; <https://cfyl.org.uk/ref/yrz>. Accessed 29.04.25

230 Parker, M., Hollenbaugh M., & Kelly, C. (2021) Exploring the Impact of Child-Centered Play Therapy for Children Exhibiting Behavioral Problems: A Meta-Analysis, *International Journal of Play Therapy*. 30(4):259-271; <https://cfyl.org.uk/ref/yfz>

231 NHS England (2020) Social prescribing and community-based support; <https://cfyl.org.uk/ref/yvi>



Credit: Briony Campbell

by paediatricians or psychologists, particularly children with ADHD, benefit from routine, or struggle with concentrating. In these playful backyards, children are able to play in nature, such as playing with trees, water, and clay, and they grow their own fruits and vegetables. The movement also says that spending time in nature “boosts immunity, reduces the risk of obesity, and improves blood and respiratory circulation.”²³²

London Violence Reduction Unit’s Social Prescribing Pathway is designed to support local systems to deliver social prescribing services for those at risk of violence.²³³ Social prescribing can support children and young people’s wellbeing and reduce loneliness, as well as being economically effective. Barnardo’s LINK Cumbria Social prescribing service benefits the Government £1.80 for every £1 invested.²³⁴

Health Spot: Tower Hamlets

Health Spot is an integrated offer of services for young people, including a GP clinic, which operates out of the Spotlight Youth Centre in Tower Hamlets, London. The model is now being replicated across other boroughs in North East London. Spotlight and its youth workers offer a welcoming safe space for 11–19-year-olds as well as adults up to 25 years old with SEND or who have care experience. The model helps to ensure health services are not “hard to reach” for young people and are designed with their rights and their needs in mind.

The GP service is a fully kitted doctor’s surgery where young people can have their health needs met with the support of youth workers. The surgery offers regular accessible appointments alongside sexual health and substance misuse support offers, mental health and emotional wellbeing support, social

prescribing, speech and language service and health workshops. GPs regularly refer young people to activities within the youth centre, such as boxing, music, mentoring, employability and training.

All the young people who use the Health Spot service would recommend it to their friends. A review of 800 consultations with the Health Spot reveal that the model is reaching a representative profile of young people in the local area in terms of ethnicity. More than two thirds of consultations were with young people presenting with mental health and emotional wellbeing difficulties, and more than 50% had no current support for these needs. 65% of consultations were with young people who had been or were currently open to children’s social care and 19% of consultations were with NEET young people - indicating that the accessibility of the model ensures those most vulnerable are able to access.

232 Children & Nature Network, Brazil | Movimento dos Quintais Brincantes; <https://cfyl.org.uk/ref/z2k>. Accessed: 02.06.25

233 NHS England Social Prescribing; <https://cfyl.org.uk/ref/zdm>. Accessed: 24.04.25

234 Barnardo’s (2023) The Missing Link – Social Prescribing for Children and Young People; <https://cfyl.org.uk/ref/zjs>

Prescription for Play, USA

Prescription for Play is a US programme collaboration between Weitzman Institute and The LEGO Group. It includes LEGO DUPLO brick kits for 18-to-36-month-olds, resources for parents, a virtual hub, toolkits, and downloadable colouring pages, which are given to families during routine child visits.²³⁴

In 2024, over 1 million play kits were given to families, and 5,212 health professionals have been enrolled on the programme since it began. This led to every provider saying that they discussed play more regularly with families. For parents, many say that they played with their child more, and could now use play to teach their children skills.²³⁶

Play in healthcare settings

Staying in hospitals and other healthcare settings can be distressing for anyone. For children and young people, these environments can be particularly unfamiliar, stressful, and frightening. A survey found that over half (54%) of children are worried or scared about visiting the doctor or hospital.²³⁷

The experience of being unwell, separated from home routines, and surrounded by medical equipment and procedures can be a distressing experience for both children and their parents. Play can have a vital role in supporting children to understand procedures, to reduce stress, reduce feeling of pain, build resilience, give children control and autonomy, and experience joy and playfulness in an otherwise often distressing time.²³⁸ Ensuring that children are supported during their hospitalisation and avoiding negative experiences can help their recovery and help their ability to cope with future treatment.

“Play creates a sense of normality for the child in hospital.”

Evelina London, Guy's and St Thomas' NHS Foundation Trust's children's services²³⁹



Credit: @drewfussphotography and Hornimans Adventure Playground, London W10

²³⁵ Prescription for Play and Weitzman Institute (2024) Caregiver Experiences with Play: Recommendations for Providers, Policymakers, and Caregivers to Promote Child Well-Being and Reduce Family Stress

²³⁶ Weitzman Institute (2025) Prescription for Play Research Report; <https://cfyl.org.uk/ref/zwl>

²³⁷ Starlight. (2023). Reducing Trauma for Children in Healthcare. Play in Hospital Report 2023

²³⁸ Starlight (2021) The importance of play in hospital; <https://cfyl.org.uk/ref/zlf>

²³⁹ Evelina London. Raising the Nation Play Commission call for evidence. 22.11.24

What does play look like in healthcare settings?

In 2024, academics at the Centre for Play in Education, Development and Learning (PEDAL) gathered evidence on the role of play in healthcare settings for the Play Commission. Their report set out the vital role of play in good quality healthcare for children.

In healthcare, play can take many forms. For instance, children can engage in playful activities to have fun and relax, and to distract them if they are waiting for care or while they are recovering. This can look like storytelling, play areas, and craft activities.²⁴⁰

Play can also be used to explain treatments or to reduce discomfort or pain. This can include role playing, toys, and puppets to demonstrate a treatment to to distract a child during a procedure.²⁴¹

Parents and professionals such as paediatricians can create everyday moments of play, such as engaging a child in a playful way to explain their health or treatment, or pretending that an oxygen reader is a crocodile coming to bite a child's finger.²⁴²

Play teams, which consist of Health Play Specialists and Play Workers, are specially qualified play practitioners who support play and use play in therapeutic ways. This can include organising

daily play services in the playroom or at the bedside; helping children cope with anxiety, fear, and stress during procedures; using play to help children understand procedures; reduce pain or help children cope with pain; and support their development.²⁴³

The Commission also heard evidence from Sallyanne Pitt, Head of Play at Great Ormond Street Hospital (GOSH). She described the two main roles within a play team: play specialists and play workers. Play specialists provide therapeutic intervention, which is a type of role play where children can experience a procedure before needing to do it in real life, such as a blood test or scan. Play specialists often use real medical equipment as part of this play so children can gain a deeper understanding of the procedure. This is to reduce the risk of trauma and hospital induced anxiety and can make the procedure more efficient.²⁴⁴

Sallyanne described how play workers bring joy, fun and laughter to children in hospital, by bringing in what children would normally have in their home and community. This can range from colouring in and playing video games, as well as playing cricket in the corridors, playing basketball in the wards, to playing with balloons, to ensure that children who are able to keep active.²⁴⁵

240 Hogg S., Graber K., Mendiola P., and Ramchandani P. (2024) Play: A Marvellous Medicine

241 Ibid.

242 Ibid.

243 Ibid.

244 Sallyanne Pitt. Raising the Nation Play Commission oral evidence. 28.04.25

245 Ibid.



Credit: Briony Campbell

Great Ormond Street Hospital (GOSH) has a play team of 60 people who interact with 200-300 children every day that it operates. This can include preparing children for procedures such as surgery through role play and drawing, bringing fun into the hospital, and building relationships with the whole family. Playing can improve children's recovery time.²⁴⁶

Once a year, GOSH holds a day of street play, where the outdoor space is opened to all children who can use it. This includes children using bikes, playing with balls, playing in sand, and using chalk. These experiences, Sallyanne shared, are vital to give children childhood experiences that they may be missing out on.

In their report for the Commission, PEDAL outlined how children can find hospitals scary. The physical environment of hospitals – with the sterile walls and bright lights – are not always built with children's experiences in mind. Children often have to be in confined spaces, such as their bed. The experience of being unwell and needing unpleasant procedures can also make children feel anxiety and fear.²⁴⁷

Starlight, the national charity for children's play in healthcare settings, wrote to the Commission highlighting the integral role of children's play in supporting their experience of hospital stays and improving their recovery. They shared the anxiety and fear that many children can feel when they are in hospital, feeling unwell and needing medical treatment.²⁴⁸

“ I feel scared and no one understands me.

Child in Starlight's written evidence²⁴⁹

A recent literature review by the PEDAL centre at the University of Cambridge, finds that play in children's healthcare can reduce stress and discomfort during medical procedures; help children express and manage emotions; foster their dignity and agency; help building connection and belonging; and preserve their sense of childhood. Overall, the review finds that 'integrating play into care systems can help humanise the healthcare experience and promote better outcomes for children and young people now and into the future'.²⁵⁰

246 Great Ormond Street Hospital (n.d.) Our Play Team; <https://cfyl.org.uk/ref/bkz>

247 Hogg S., Graber K., Mendiola P., and Ramchandani P. (2024) Play: A Marvellous Medicine

248 Starlight. Raising the Nation Play Commission call for evidence. 31.10.24

249 Ibid.

250 Pedal (2025) Playing with Children's Health?; <https://cfyl.org.uk/ref/bgg>

The Children's Hospital, Sheffield

In November 2024, the Commission visited Sheffield Children's Hospital, where play plays an integral part in supporting children's wellbeing and recovery.

Part of a network of children's hospitals with a strong commitment to play, the hospital has a team of skilled play specialists which works with children on every ward and department to provide engaging play to relax, distract, and nurture young patients - and their families - including during significant procedures.

The Commission met three-year-old Bradley who was happily playing with cars and tractors around a race track

following a surgery on his kidney. His mum said that play has been able to give him a sense of normality and an otherwise uncertain time.

The hospital is also making the most of tech advancements using Virtual Reality headsets to reduce anxiety for children, especially ahead of needles, operations, or instead of general anaesthetics which also helps children recover more speedily and brings notable financial and time savings. Helen McQuillan, the radiology manager, shared that they will be installing an MRI play simulator rocket scanner to help children understand what to expect for their MRI exam.



For some children, difficult experiences can be traumatic – nearly 1 in 10 adults, equivalent to over 4 million, in the UK have said that negative childhood healthcare experiences impacted their mental health and wellbeing.²⁵¹ Research has also found that persistent negative experiences at hospitals can lead to PTSD, anxiety and medical phobias. This is particularly the case for children experiencing deprivation, who are more likely to experience health inequalities, be admitted to hospital, and receive poorer quality healthcare.²⁵²

When children are able to play in a healthcare setting, they are able to have fun and positive experiences which can bring a sense of normalcy. Play can also

be a powerful source of distraction, either distracting children from unpleasant experiences, or from pain and discomfort.²⁵³

Through using Starlight resources of play in healthcare settings, the percentage of children appearing anxious according to healthcare professionals fell dramatically from 77% to just 7%.²⁵⁴ Health play specialists also offer a valuable contribution to the efficiency of healthcare services. By helping children feel calmer and more informed, they can shorten procedure times, reduce the need for sedation or anaesthesia, and decrease the number of failed or repeated appointments.²⁵⁵

Evelina London Children's Hospital

The Commission heard from Guy's and St Thomas' NHS Foundation Trust's children's service, Evelina London, who highlighted that children and young people admitted to hospital are often at their most vulnerable. At Evelina London Children's Hospital and Royal Brompton Hospital, the teams of qualified healthcare play specialists and play assistants provide a play service seven days a week. Play services can include mobile units for infants, crafting sessions for younger children, or borrowing a book or playing on the Xbox for teenagers.

The play teams also provide support for children who have needle anxiety, by helping to distract them when receiving a blood test. Royal Brompton Hospital implemented a programme of specialised support by the play team for children with cystic fibrosis who struggled with needle anxiety and found

that the programme resulted in better compliance.

The playteam supported one child who experienced severe anxiety around the multiple invasive medical procedures she had to undergo. After the play team supported her, she was able to be calmer during procedures. In her own words, she said about the play team, "They are so fun and kind, they talk me through everything, and I know that it's going to be alright."



Credit: Evelina London Children's Hospital

251 Pedal (2025) Playing with Children's Health?; <https://cfyl.org.uk/ref/bgg>

252 Starlight (2024) Prioritising play in healthcare in areas of deprivation; <https://cfyl.org.uk/ref/c8v>

253 Hogg S., Graber K., Mendiola P., and Ramchandani P. (2024) Play: A Marvellous Medicine

254 Ibid.

255 Starlight. Raising the Nation Play Commission call for evidence. 31.10.24

Mary Elizabeth's Children's Hospital

In March 2025 the Commission visited a new children's hospital in Copenhagen opening in 2027, which has had play baked into the very core of the design, from its construction, to its interior design; from its staff's training to the whole system culture. As one of the architects states, "The ambition is to create a hospital with a "home-esque" and informal atmosphere where patients and their families will have a safe journey with relatable contexts and playful frameworks." [Stig Vesterager Gothelf, Design Partner at 3XN Architects]

Starlight and NHS England Toolkit on play

Starlight and NHS England chaired a joint taskforce on children's play in healthcare with the aim of producing new guidance and standards for health play services, together with recommendations for workforce development.²⁵⁷

As a result of this work, Starlight produced a health play workforce strategy, entitled 'The Best Possible Experience for Children' in June 2024 and, in June 2025, NHS England published 'Play Well: a toolkit for children's play in healthcare', comprising new guidelines for NHS commissioners and trust leaders, and new standards for service managers.²⁵⁸

The toolkit, developed in close collaboration with the professional body, SOHPS (Society of Health Play Specialists) and other children's health professionals, aims to demonstrate why therapeutic play should be an integral

part of paediatric care; and how health play services should be commissioned, designed, staffed and resourced. The recommended standards come with an audit tool to monitor and evaluate services with a view to ensuring good practice and quality improvement.

Play interventions in healthcare settings not only provide many benefits for the children and young people receiving treatment but are also economically beneficial. Health play interventions such as those modelled by Starlight forecast a reduction in the average treatment time in paediatric services by 6 minutes, freeing up 6,500 staff days, valued at £2.2 million. Reducing children's anxiety so that sedation can be avoided can prevent as many as 100,000 treatments per year, saving £1 million per year.²⁵⁶



Credit: Jade Reynolds-Hemmings

part of paediatric care; and how health play services should be commissioned, designed, staffed and resourced. The recommended standards come with an audit tool to monitor and evaluate services with a view to ensuring good practice and quality improvement.

Starlight is asking the government to adopt the key elements of health play workforce strategy as part of the refreshed NHS workforce strategy, and for its new 10-year health plan to include strategic support for children's play in healthcare based on adoption and implementation of the new guidelines and standards across the NHS.

²⁵⁶ Pro Bono Economics (2023) A break-even analysis of Starlight's Distraction and Boost Box services; <https://cfyl.org.uk/ref/cgw>

²⁵⁷ Starlight (2023) A Common Purpose; <https://cfyl.org.uk/ref/dlw>

²⁵⁸ Starlight (2024) The best possible experience for children; <https://cfyl.org.uk/ref/dms>

Another example of the transformative powers of play for children and young people's experiences in healthcare settings is evidenced in a North Devon Hospital's safer approach to carrying out MRI scans by reducing the need of using general anaesthetic. Common practice uses general anaesthetic for children who need an MRI. Instead, the child and family was shown the scanner room and received support from play specialists before their test. This increased the number of children having an MRI scan without general anaesthetic, which is safer, and for younger children there was a 100% increase. This also reduced bed days in a specialist unit, saving £49,000.²⁵⁹ Evelina London Children's Hospital runs a similar programme for MRI scans, known as the 'Rocket MRI simulator', reducing anxiety in children and thereby reducing the need for general anaesthetic. About the programme, consultant radiologist said,²⁶⁰

“ As a direct result of the play team's involvement in our service we're very proud to perform almost all of our paediatric CT imaging without any sedation or anaesthetic. This produces better images (particularly of the lungs), is quicker and less labour-intensive reducing waiting lists and is considerably safer and cheaper.

Dr Tom Semple in Evelina London's written evidence

Many children can find hospital difficult or confusing when they do not understand why they are in hospital, and may feel that they have no agency. Play can provide children a sense of control and agency, and give an opportunity for them to share their feelings and perspectives.²⁶¹

“ By valuing play, we are valuing children's rights, and their perspectives.

PEDAL²⁶²

Play can also transform children's understanding of their health. The literature review by PEDAL wrote that “play is a language children can understand,” and described how play can help them understand and make sense of their illness. By using play, children can create their own narrative about what is happening to them.²⁶³

“ ...everyone is talking to my Mum and Dad, but they're not talking to me.

Child quoted in PEDAL's review²⁶⁴

The review gave an example of a young girl diagnosed with leukaemia, who created a 'Blood-Soup' to understand her condition. By using washing up liquid, Skittles, marshmallows and glitter, she was shown how her blood worked differently compared to her healthy brother's blood, and what the treatment was doing to the girl's blood to make her feel better.²⁶⁵

259 NHS England (2019) The Atlas of Shared Learning; <https://cfyl.org.uk/ref/dws>. Accessed: 24.04.25

260 Evelina London. Raising the Nation Play Commission call for evidence. 22.11.24

261 Hogg S., Graber K., Mendiola P., and Ramchandani P. (2024) Play: A Marvellous Medicine

262 Ibid.

263 Ibid.

264 Ibid.

265 Ibid.

Play provides a sense of calm and reassurance in an otherwise often stressful and uncertain environment. For children who may find their experiences scary, play can help to reduce their levels of stress and understand their difficult feelings, and understand why they are in hospital. These benefits can all support the children's family and health professionals.²⁶⁶

Despite the many benefits that play provides for children, families, and staff in healthcare settings, only 15% of NHS trusts have play service policies or guidance. Many hospitals also lack sufficient funding to provide play provision, with over half (53%) of hospitals reporting that they had no budget for resources for play – and of those that did, over 60% had a budget of less than £500 per year.²⁶⁷ For example, the play work delivery at GOSH, Sallyanne confirmed, is completely charity funded.

Evelina London told the Commission that the play service relies heavily on charitable donations from charities, donors and companies, and called on the NHS to incorporate play services as a central part of care and provide funding to those services.²⁶⁸

Starlight estimates that at least 3,000 new health play staff are needed for children in acute paediatric care, and more would be needed to have 24/7 cover in A&E. Currently, however, there are just 570 health play specialists, almost half of whom work part time, meaning that most hospitals that do have play provision are not able to provide it on weekends, and many hospitals lack adequate support to help children navigate the confusing and sometimes fearful experience of being in hospital.²⁶⁹ This places greater strain on clinical staff, who may not have the time or training to address children's emotional needs during procedures.

Children's Vision

A bright, multicoloured “toy-book” issued to every hospital room worldwide. Each plastic volume opens like a pop-up comic, packed with friendly robot figures and a built-in draw-and-erase tablet.



²⁶⁶ Ibid.

²⁶⁷ Starlight (2021) The importance of play in hospital; <https://cfyl.org.uk/ref/f9w>

²⁶⁸ Evelina London. Raising the Nation Play Commission call for evidence. 22.11.24

²⁶⁹ Starlight. Raising the Nation Play Commission call for evidence. 31.10.24



Children's Vision

A fast-paced digital card game starring vibrant elemental creatures. Lead Zarky—an orange-horned, lime-green scaling with whip-long arms—and Moonlight—a radiant, sapphire-blue night-glower with amethyst horns and a comet-tipped tail—into head-to-head tabletop battles.



Digital Play

Our children and young people are navigating their way through an uncharted and ever-evolving digital world. They are growing up in an environment where digital devices are ubiquitous, and where their digital lives are blurred with the physical world in a way that was unimaginable even a decade ago.

An increasing number of children are going online and at a younger age. In 2024, 84% of 3-to-4-year-olds spent time online. This grew to 96% of 5-to-7-year-olds, and to 99% of 12-to-15-year-olds. As a result, digital play is now a part of the everyday life of most children. As 'digital natives' they navigate games, social spaces, and entertainment through screens and over the internet, often during time which previous generations spent playing outdoors.

But the prominence of phones and devices in children's worlds has not happened in isolation – it has arisen in the context of the erosion of real-life things to do and places to go. As social media apps were growing in sophistication and ubiquity in the 2010s, youth clubs and children's centres were being closed down. As playgrounds and schools closed during the pandemic, children found themselves indoors with fewer options – and short-form video content quickly filled the gap, often at the expense of more imaginative or active forms of indoor play.

What we mean by digital play

As Lydia Plowman notes in her report, Digital Play, there is no simple or standard definition on digital play. Broadly, digital play refers to children's use of digital devices and smart toys to do any manner of freely chosen activities. For example, dancing to songs played on YouTube, using an app to draw or be creative, or using a digital object such as a mobile phone in role-play.²⁶⁵

Digital play also encompasses video games, with a particular discourse emerging about the benefits and dangers of “sandbox games” – such as Minecraft – which offer freedom to explore and be creative without providing a particular end goal.²⁶⁶

Not all digital devices are made equal. Some are designed with children's wellbeing in mind, offering opportunities to connect with friends, explore interests, support learning, and relax. Many children and young people enjoy using digital devices and the internet, and their presence is increasingly woven into daily life. For example, one child in a focus group conducted by the Commission explained how they enjoy video games because of the sense of escapism it offers.

“ [You can] escape the world and go into a game, [where you're] transported into another world

Child, Year 6

However, some digital devices present harm to children. Some devices and platforms rely on addictive algorithms that encourage compulsive use, and unrestricted access to such digital devices and the internet can pose risks to children's physical and mental health, such as those arising from excessive screentime, declining physical health, and



Credit: Digital Schoolhouse

reduced wellbeing. It can also increase risks to children's privacy, online bullying, exploitation, and harmful content.

From the reams of oral and written evidence received by the Commission, it is clear there is a wide spectrum of views on both the benefits and dangers of different types of digital play. Most submissions gave a mixed view, highlighting that when done well and designed to benefit children's wellbeing, digital play can be beneficial for children. However, the evidence of the harms that social media, excessive screentime, and digital devices can impress on children's lives are also becoming clearer.

270 Plowman, L. (2020) Digital Play; <https://cfyl.org.uk/ref/flkj>

271 BBC Future. The psychology behind why children are hooked on Minecraft; <https://cfyl.org.uk/ref/flkd>. Accessed: 03.04.25



Children's rights in digital play

Protecting children's rights in the digital environment is just as important as in the physical world.⁴³

In General Comment No.25 on children's rights in relation to the digital environment, the United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child said "the digital environment promotes children's right to culture, leisure and play, which is essential for their well-being and development," but the environment "may expose children to risks of harm". The Committee advises States to take safety-by-design approaches.⁴⁴

Professor Sonia Livingstone, who led the drafting team for General Comment No.25, told the Commission that children's rights to voice, privacy, safety, and freedom from commercial exploitation also needs to be taken into account when examining how children can enjoy their right to play in the digital world.

A children's rights approach would require:

- Equality of access to digital devices, and education and guidance on digital literacy and safe use, across demographics;
- A recognition that digital forms of play are often more accessible to children with disabilities than other forms of play, but digital play must not be seen as the only appropriate form of play for children with disabilities;
- Protection in digital spaces to ensure that there are safe digital play spaces for children. Just as food products must meet certain quality and health standards in the UK, so too should digital products that are accessible to, or aimed at, children;
- Guidance and support for children's play and digital use, in line with their evolving capacities;
- Acknowledgement and promotion of the benefits of other forms of play for children, such as outdoor play.

How children play online

Children experience the digital world in different ways, from watching videos and playing online games, to using social media and messaging and even to playing with 'digitally augmented' toys.²⁷² As children have grown up in a world where digital devices are part of everyday life, they often pick up technological skills intuitively, and there is a "blur" between the physical and virtual world.²⁷³

During the pandemic, when children weren't allowed to meet in-person because

playgrounds and schools closed for most children and learning moved online, many turned to digital devices for education, entertainment, and social connection. With tight and sometimes unclear restrictions around going outdoors, screen use surged by 52%.²⁷⁴

However, for some children, the pandemic exacerbated the digital divide — 9% of households with children did not have home access to a laptop, PC, or tablet, limiting not only their ability to access online lessons but also opportunities for

272 Plowman, L. (2020) Digital Play; <https://cfyl.org.uk/ref/fqh>

273 Dr Ben Highmore. Raising the Nation Play Commission call for evidence. 16.09.24

274 Madigan, S., Eirich R., & Pador, P.(2022) Assessment of Changes in Child and Adolescent Screen Time During the COVID-19 Pandemic. JAMA Pediatr. 176(12):1188-1198; <https://cfyl.org.uk/ref/g2q>

digital forms of play and interaction.²⁷⁵ This highlights two distinct inequalities in children's digital experiences during the pandemic: one of access, where some were excluded from digital participation altogether, and one of overexposure, where others faced excessive screentime, often without support or supervision.

The prominence of screens and digital devices in our lives had been consolidated long before the pandemic but these habits became further ingrained, shaping how children engage with the digital world long after the lockdowns ended. Over three-quarters (76%) of children aged 5-7 now use a tablet, mostly to make video calls, watch videos, or use social media.²⁷⁶ Children tend to play on tablets independently and are often given devices if their parent or carer needs to focus on a task other than childcare.²⁷⁷

Video gaming

“Online games [are] the latest evolution of play. [...] We're drawn to it instinctively as human beings.”

Shahneila Saeed, Programme Director for Digital Schoolhouse²⁷⁸

Online gaming is one of the other primary uses of digital devices. Our survey found that nearly two-thirds of parents reported their children play online frequently, with 66% of parents of 10- to 13-year-olds and 64% of parents of 14- to 18-year-olds saying their child plays online every or most days.²⁷⁹ A separate study found that

79% of children report playing single and/or multiplayer games, which vary across devices and platforms.²⁸⁰

One of the most popular games with children, Minecraft, encourages a high level of creativity, with players able to choose their own path without a predetermined outcome. These types of games can develop creativity as they require adaptation through experiential learning, as well as demanding a degree of patience and trial-and-error.²⁸¹ The widespread popularity of the game is likely to be down to the fact that it provides another outlet for children's creativity. It enables users to build using 'blocks' to create whatever they can think of.²⁸²

Digital play: the potential to be meaningful and beneficial

Many children do enjoy learning new skills, connecting with friends, and relaxing through digital play. It is in the context of this “internet of extremes”²⁸³ that we should seek a healthy balance between keeping children safe and at arms-length from dangerously addictive devices, whilst also acknowledging that digital play can support some children to learn and connect with others. Some parents also see a mobile phone as an essential item for their child to leave their home independently.

Learning and development

Digital play can facilitate learning in a unique way if an app or toy is designed well. This includes: understanding how to use digital devices; developing 'skills to learn', such as persistence, engagement, and confidence; socio-emotional learning,

275 Children's Commissioner (2020) Children without internet access during lockdown; <https://cfyl.org.uk/ref/g7i>.

276 Ofcom (2024) Children and Parents: Media Use and Attitudes Report; <https://cfyl.org.uk/ref/g89>

277 Plowman, L. (2020) Digital Play; <https://cfyl.org.uk/ref/g9w>

278 Shahneila Saeed. Raising the Nation Play Commission oral evidence. 04.02.25

279 Centre for Young Lives poll of 2,000 parents. Carried out 24.01.25 - 04.02.25 by Stack Data Strategy.

280 Internet Matters. Raising the Nation Play Commission call for evidence. 14.10.24

281 Tracy Harwood. Raising the Nation Play Commission call for evidence. 22.10.24

282 BBC Future (2025) The psychology behind why children are hooked on Minecraft; <https://cfyl.org.uk/ref/gvn>.

Accessed: 03.04.25

283 Internet Matters (2025) Children's Wellbeing in a Digital World: Year Four Index Report 2025; <https://cfyl.org.uk/ref/h90>



Credit: Digital Schoolhouse

for example sharing and communicating; developing creativity and curiosity; learning about the role of technology in everyday life; and developing fine motor skills, such as using a mouse, typing on a keyboard, or using a game console.²⁸⁴

“Online creation is a form of play, providing accessible ways for young people to express their creativity and to share it with like-minded people.”

Internet Matters²⁸⁵

Global TIES for Children, a research centre, told the Commission that their ‘Watch, Play, Learn’ videos produced by Sesame Workshop, which were watched by Colombian and Venezuelan migrant children via WhatsApp links

sent to parents, was found to support the development of children’s emotional skills, particularly their ability to identify emotions.²⁸⁶

Digital technology can also enable children to discover new interests themselves. Internet Matters told the Commission that 68% of children use the internet to find new hobbies, and they found that 36% of children used it to learn new sports skills. For teenage girls, over a quarter (28%) use digital devices to explore their creativity by engaging in creating fandom content and dances.²⁸⁷

Inclusion

The digital world can also provide neurodivergent children with opportunities to relax, enjoy themselves and engage with other children in a way that may be more difficult offline. Many (42%) neurodivergent children say they are able to relax through playing online games, as well as feeling part of a community (31%),²⁸⁸ whilst half of respondents to a survey said that gaming helps them make friends online.²⁸⁹

284 Plowman, L. (2020) Digital Play; <https://cfyl.org.uk/ref/hjg>

285 Internet Matters. Raising the Nation Play Commission call for evidence. 14.10.24

286 Global TIES for Children. Raising the Nation Play Commission call for evidence. 10.06.24

287 Internet Matters. Raising the Nation Play Commission call for evidence. 14.10.24

288 Internet Matters. Raising the Nation Play Commission call for evidence. 14.10.24

289 Internet Matters (2024) More than a Game: Exploring neurodivergent young people’s relationships with online games platforms; <https://cfyl.org.uk/ref/i3f>

Digital Schoolhouse case study

Ukie's Digital Schoolhouse is a programme that connects with schools to provide training to deliver free creative computing workshops, including video game tournaments (Esports), which bring digital play into the classroom in meaningful, inclusive ways. Since 2014, Digital Schoolhouse has grown and now works with a network of 70 schools and reaching an estimated 50,000 pupils each year.

The Commission spoke to Shahneila Saeed, Director for Digital Schoolhouse, who created the programme to fulfil the need of a better computer science curriculum. She outlined the benefits children can enjoy through developing computer science skills. She also highlighted the benefits that digital play can bring children, particularly neurodivergent children. Games have a real value of levelling the playing field, as they enable children who are neurodiverse to play alongside their peers on the same level that they may not have otherwise.

Digital Schoolhouse runs an Esports tournament which allows children aged 12 to 18 to participate as players and be recruited to manage and run the tournament. Through this tournament, 67% of children said that friendship bonds grew, and 80% said their team working skills increased. The tournament also led to almost 9 in 10 children's interest increasing in pursuing a career in the video games industry. Digital Schoolhouse also runs an Esports



Credit: Digital Schoolhouse

tournament for primary schools, which are delivered during lessons and all teachers said they found that pupils were either 'very' or 'extremely' engaged with the resources.²⁹⁰

In 2021, a report by Digital Schoolhouse found that 52% of lead teachers found that pupils with SEND engaged 'a lot' with computer science lessons, and 91% agreed that the resources appeal equally to both girls and boys. Almost all (95%) said pupils on free school meals were able to engage with resources and lessons.²⁹¹

290 Digital Schoolhouse (2021) Junior Esports Tournament Pilot Evaluation Report; <https://cfyl.org.uk/ref/hke>

291 Digital Schoolhouse (2021) Digital Schoolhouse: An inclusive approach to teaching computing?; <https://cfyl.org.uk/ref/hm8>

“ [Neurodivergent children] can overcome ‘offline’ barriers to social wellbeing through digital play and the online gaming space.

Internet Matters²⁹²

There are some digital devices which have been created with neurodivergent children specifically in mind. Kumsal Kurt described to the Commission the development of a robotic ball named ‘Fizzy’, which was developed as a tool for therapists to use to increase engagement and development of neurodivergent children through playing games with Fizzy. The invention was found to “significantly increase the concentration of a 6-year-old autistic child prone to distraction”, and also helped children to practice social behaviours.²⁹³ Kurt said, “Children view Fizzy as more than a toy – they interact with it as a friend.”²⁹⁴

Another example of a digital device that is designed for children’s wellbeing is ‘Purrble’, a soft toy with a racing ‘heartbeat’ that slows and begins to purr when stroked and held. The act of calming Purrble can help children regulate their own emotions in the process. A study of 20 families found that 95% of parents felt that Purrble calmed down their child when they needed it.²⁹⁵

Wellbeing

Digital play can support children’s wellbeing, especially if it responds to

children’s interests and desires.²⁹⁶ Digital technology plays an important role in social connection, with 82% of children feeling it is crucial to keep in touch with friends,²⁹⁷ 50% seeing the internet as important for finding supportive communities, and 56% seeing it as important for meeting good friends.²⁹⁸ Research by UNICEF and The LEGO Group, involving over 300 children across 13 countries, found that social connection is key to children’s wellbeing — and that social media can help support this by fostering a sense of belonging.²⁹⁹

Around two thirds of children feel that video-gaming is beneficial to their health and wellbeing.³⁰⁰ It is seen as a touch point with friends, especially for boys, and some children say they prefer to play games online than with friends in real life.³⁰¹ Esports Youth Club, a London-based group that holds in-person events for young people to play competitive video games, found that 92% of young people felt a general increase in mood after attending an in-person gaming session, and 88% said they had made at least one new friend.³⁰²

Enabler of outdoor play

A large element of the debate about the use of digital devices, particularly mobile phones, revolves around the issue that many parents feel their child is safer when they own a phone, despite any associated online risks. The Commission’s poll of parents asked if they were more concerned about their child’s safety when they play outdoors or online, or if they were equally concerned. The absence of a clear majority for any answer reflects the difficult position in which parents find themselves.

²⁹² Internet Matters. Raising the Nation Play Commission call for evidence. 14.10.24

²⁹³ Kumsal Kurt. Raising the Nation Play Commission call for evidence. 29.10.24

²⁹⁴ Ibid.

²⁹⁵ Purrble. Purrble Companion; <https://cfyl.org.uk/ref/ikk>. Accessed: 12.05.25

²⁹⁶ Birth to 19. Raising the Nation Play Commission call for evidence. 28.10.24

²⁹⁷ Internet Matters. Raising the Nation Play Commission call for evidence. 14.10.24

²⁹⁸ Internet Matters (2025) Children’s Wellbeing in a Digital World: Year Four Index Report 2025; <https://cfyl.org.uk/ref/iyh>

²⁹⁹ UNICEF (2022) Responsible innovation in technology for children; <https://cfyl.org.uk/ref/j7z>

³⁰⁰ Children’s Commissioner (2024) Digital playgrounds: Children’s views on video gaming; <https://cfyl.org.uk/ref/jiw>

³⁰¹ Ofcom (2024) Children’s Media Lives 2024; <https://cfyl.org.uk/ref/jzb>

³⁰² Esports Youth Club (2024) 2024 Review



Credit: Digital Schoolhouse

The most popular response (41%) was that parents are equally concerned.³⁰³

Digital devices such as smartphones can allow parents and children a feeling of security and safety when a child is away from home. Almost nine in ten (87%) parents believe a child is safer when they can be contacted through their smartphone, which increases to 90% if they can be tracked via GPS. Most children (78%) also feel safer through their smartphone.³⁰⁴

“The only reason [my mum] let me [go outside to the shops] is because she gave me a phone.

Child, Year 7

As children become increasingly cut off from outdoor space due to concerns about traffic, crime, or intolerant neighbours, for some carrying a phone is a necessity if they are to be able to play outdoors, even if this does simultaneously potentially expose them to the dangers of the online world.

Playful by design

Some of the evidence submissions to the Commission outlined how digital play can be designed to be beneficial for children and support their wellbeing. Youth Sport

Trust told the Commission that digital play should be used to “inform, encourage and inspire play and physical activity, rather than stifling opportunities or driving activity towards digital engagement and isolation.”³⁰⁵ Professor Sonia Livingstone, Director of the research centre Digital Futures for Children, described the ‘Playful by Design’ toolkit, designed to give designers support for improving children’s opportunities for play in the digital world. The toolkit includes cards with prompts and principles to guide developers to create digital products, putting children’s needs first and enable free play.³⁰⁶

The LEGO Group ensures that digital play experiences are safe by design by protecting children’s rights and putting children’s interests first. To do this, they support children and families to learn good digital habits through free resources and games, ensure that children’s voices are heard, and build experiences that are age appropriate.³⁰⁷

In their written submission to the Commission, The LEGO Group outlined joint research with UNICEF examining “the interaction between the design of digital play experiences and children’s well-being,” and to develop a framework of how best to design play for children.³⁰⁸ The report identified eight components of a well-being framework, including competence, emotional regulation, self-actualisation, empowerment, social connection, creativity, safety and security, and diversity and inclusion as fundamental

303 Centre for Young Lives poll of 2,000 parents. Carried out 24.01.25 - 04.02.25 by Stack Data Strategy.

304 Internet Matters (2025) Children’s Wellbeing in a Digital World: Year Four Index Report 2025; <https://cfyl.org.uk/ref/kvc>

305 Youth Sport Trust. Raising the Nation Play Commission call for evidence. 31.10.24

306 Professor Sonia Livingstone. Raising the Nation Play Commission call for evidence. 17.10.24

307 The LEGO Group, Responsible engagement with children; <https://cfyl.org.uk/ref/knj> Accessed: 02.06.25

308 The LEGO Group. Raising the Nation Play Commission call for evidence. 29.10.24

to creating a digital world that supports children's wellbeing. To achieve this, developers should consider how to best improve children's experience of each of the components, such as allowing children to play an active role in problem solving, limiting ads or pop-ups, allowing children to alter their characters, designing activities children can improve at, allowing children to connect safely with peers, create challenges that are open-ended, as well as protecting children from harms.³⁰⁹

The ubiquity of phone use and the erosion of offline play

Despite what we have heard about the benefits of digital play, we also know that digital play is consuming too much of children's lives, and the digital world is not always created with children in mind. The more time children spend on the digital world, the less opportunity they have to play in other ways that can foster connection, nurture development and learning, and build a healthier body and mind.

Excessive screentime

“ I think I should have a time limit for screentime [because] sometimes I feel like it's kinda bad [to play a game for over an hour]

Child, Year 7

Children's screentime surged by 52% during the pandemic, adding an average of 84 extra minutes per day.³¹⁰ Since then, these

habits have become ingrained, with screen use continuing to rise. 12-to-15-year-olds are now spending an average of 35 hours a week on their smartphones, (almost the equivalent to a full-time job).³¹¹

Many children are concerned about their time spent online. A quarter of children (25%) said that they feel unable to control how much time they spend online, which rises to over a third (34%) of children with SEND. These children are also increasingly choosing to stay online over real-life opportunities to meet friends, with 22% reporting they have done this compared with 14% last year.³¹²

Less Screentime, More Play Time

The Commission is pleased to support the Less Screen Time More Play Time campaign, which focuses on reducing screen time for children under five and encouraging families to engage in play. The campaign hopes to engage parents, early years professionals, community groups, and healthcare settings to spread the message that screen-free play is vital for young children's development.³¹³

Addictive by design

There have long been concerns that smartphones, social media, and video games have been designed to be addictive and to make users want to keep using them, even when they would prefer not to. Evidence given to the Commission relating to digital play often featured warnings that digital devices, particularly smartphones, are designed to be addictive and must be treated differently to other devices. As Health Professionals for Safer Screens told the Commission,

309 UNICEF (2022) Responsible innovation in technology for children; <https://cfyl.org.uk/ref/l2p>

310 Madigan, S., et al. (2022) Assessment of Changes in Child and Adolescent Screen Time During the COVID-19 Pandemic: A Systematic Review and Meta-analysis. JAMA Pediatr. 176(12): 1188-1198; <https://cfyl.org.uk/ref/l3j>

311 University of Birmingham (2025) School bans alone not enough to tackle negative impacts of phone and social media use; <https://cfyl.org.uk/ref/l09>

312 Internet Matters (2025) Children's Wellbeing in a Digital World: Year Four Index Report 2025; <https://cfyl.org.uk/ref/lw5>

313 50 Things to Do, Less Screen Time, More Play Time; <https://cfyl.org.uk/ref/lzg> Accessed 02.06.25

“Smartphones must be treated differently from other internet-enabled devices because there are many differences in how children can use them to access unsafe or inappropriate content and - critically - because of their fundamentally ‘addictive by design’ and omnipresent functionality.”

Health Professionals for Safer Screens³¹⁴

While watching video content can be enjoyable and relaxing for children, it's important to distinguish between the screen itself and the design features that drive excessive use, often at the expense of other activities including play. Endlessly scrolling short-form videos is not a form of play. But online platforms use the markers of playful activities to draw young people in and keep them on their phones rather than engaging in offline play. Designs such as bright colours, sounds, vibrations, notifications, and a never-ending scroll can all make smartphones addictive and stimulate the release of dopamine.³¹⁵

Younger users are particularly sensitive to these features and studies have shown they can be addicted to apps such as TikTok in less than 35 minutes.³¹⁶

In 2019, it was found that nearly a quarter of children and young people use smartphones in a way that is consistent with behavioural addiction, which also came with an increased likelihood of poorer mental health.³¹⁷ A comprehensive review of smartphone addiction revealed issues including feelings of insecurity, strained relationships, sleep problems, low mood, gambling, hyperactivity, and behavioural issues.³¹⁸

Parents of neurodivergent children have also reported the negative impact that digital play can have on their children's emotional regulation. 6 in 10 (59%) of parents of neurodivergent children either strongly or slightly agree that their child's behaviour has changed for the worse when they are gaming online, and 60% say they have arguments with their child about their gaming habits.³¹⁹

Smartphone Free Childhood is a grassroots organisation that advocates for a cultural change that enables children to grow up without using smartphones. It has grown to a community of over 200,000 parents who are choosing to wait to give their child a smartphone until at least the age of 14. The Commission spoke to the co-founders, Daisy Greenwell and Joe Ryrie, who argued that smartphones are addictive by nature and are a “gateway” to dangers associated with apps and the internet. Removing the smartphone, they said, is the “simplest and easiest” way to minimise harms children may be subject to online.³²⁰

314 Health Professionals for Safer Screens. Raising the Nation Play Commission call for evidence. 17.09.24

315 Ibid.

316 The Times (2024) TikTok can become addictive in less than 35 minutes, documents show; <https://cfyl.org.uk/ref/lzg>

317 Sohn, S. Y., Rees, O., Wildridge, B., et al. (2019) 'Prevalence of problematic smartphone usage and associated mental health outcomes amongst children and young people: a systemic review, meta-analysis and GRADE of the evidence', BMC Psychiatry 19, 356

318 Health Professionals for Safer Screens., Raising the Nation Play Commission call for evidence. 17.09.24

319 Internet Matters (2024) More than a Game: Exploring neurodivergent young people's relationships with online games platforms; <https://cfyl.org.uk/ref/mas>

320 Daisy Greenwell and Joe Ryrie. Raising the Nation Play Commission oral evidence. 04.02.25

“Children shouldn’t be subject to the intentionally addictive, profit-driven design.”

Joe Ryrie, *Smartphone Free Childhood*³²¹

SafeScreens argue there needs to be legislation to restrict supply of marketing of addictive-by-design smartphone products and social media platforms, whereby phones are restricted to utilities and calling. They point to examples in France and Australia where the respective

prime ministers have spoken out against smartphones and made moves to introduce smartphone or social media bans for those of certain ages.³²²

Addictive design can be particularly damaging for neurodivergent children, as they may be more likely to engage deeply with repetitive or highly stimulating activities like video games, making it harder to disengage. Addiction is the largest concern that parents have with their child’s gaming; 41% of parents told an Internet Matters survey that this was their largest concern with their child’s gaming, and 35% of neurodivergent children also say they have concerns about becoming addicted.³²³

Banning social media for under 16s

Australia: In 2024, the Australian Government passed the Online Safety Amendment (Social Media Minimum Age) Act, which introduces a minimum age requirement of 16 for certain social media platforms, including Snapchat, TikTok, Facebook, Instagram and X, to protect children from risks associated with social media.³²⁴

New Zealand: In New Zealand, draft law was introduced in May 2025 to similarly ban children under 16 from using social media.³²⁵

France: In 2024, the French President said he was in favour of banning social media for those under 15, and banning phones for children under the age of 11.³²⁶

England: In 2023, England introduced its Online Safety Act, which aims to protect children and adults online, including a requirement on tech firms to assess risk of harm to children and take steps to mitigate risks if children are likely to use their service. It also requires some sites to use more effective age checks. Currently, England has not made direct moves to introduce a higher age limit for social media.³²⁷ The Protection of Children (Digital Safety and Data Protection) Bill, a Private Members’ Bill introduced by Josh MacAlister MP, requires the Government to review the digital age of consent within a year from March 2025.³²⁸

321 Ibid.

322 SafeScreens. Raising the Nation Play Commission call for evidence. 17.09.24

323 Internet Matters, (2024) More than a Game: Exploring neurodivergent young people’s relationships with online games platforms; <https://cfyl.org.uk/ref/mtp>

324 eSafety Commissioner Australian Government (2025) Social media age restrictions; <https://cfyl.org.uk/ref/mvw>. Accessed: 12.05.2025

325 The Guardian (2025) New Zealand’s prime minister proposes social media ban for under-16s; <https://cfyl.org.uk/ref/n25>. Accessed: 12.05.2025

326 Euronews (2025) France’s AI minister calls for a Europe-wide ban on social media for children under 15; <https://cfyl.org.uk/ref/n3a>. Accessed: 12.05.2025

327 Department for Science, Innovation and Technology (2024) Online Safety Act: Explainer; <https://cfyl.org.uk/ref/n6y>; Ofcom (2024) How the Online Safety Act will help to protect children; <https://cfyl.org.uk/ref/n9n>

328 House of Commons (2025) Protection of Children (Digital Safety and Data Protection) Bill (as introduced); <https://cfyl.org.uk/ref/nhu>

The risks and challenges of digital play

Digital play is very often indoors and sedentary, meaning children are missing out on important time spent outdoors being more active, both of which are key to their physical and mental health. Online play is also often solitary, in terms of physical presence, reducing the opportunities children have to engage with others in the offline world and to learn about real life socialisation.

This is often time spent alone, feeding into the crisis of childhood loneliness.³²⁹

The Commission's polling found that over a third of children aged five-to-nine-years-old and almost four in ten children aged 10-to-13-years-old spend more time playing alone than with family or friends.³³⁰ According to Youth Sport Trust, 78% of parents feel that their children are spending too much time online and not enough in person. When children were asked, 46% of 7- to- 8-year-olds and 38% of 9- to- 11-year-olds said that they spend more time online or watching TV than they do talking to their family.³³¹

Unrestricted access to the internet can also leave children vulnerable to harmful content and exploitation. While one in three internet users is a child, many are not using a digital environment that was designed with their safety and well-being in mind.³³²

Therefore, in the same way that children need to play outdoors and this needs to be facilitated through removing serious risks - such as dangerous traffic or crime - guardrails are needed in the digital world so that its benefits can be harnessed too.

“ [There is an] increasingly polarised online landscape – where the internet is becoming both more essential and, at the same time, more distressing for children”

Internet Matters³³³

According to Ofcom, almost a third (31%) of children and young people playing online games communicate with strangers either via game chat messaging or using a headset.³³⁴ A significant number of children (30%) aged as young as eight participate in these types of online games, with the figure rising by only 6 percentage points to 36% for ages 16-17.

Lost time

Time spent on screens is time not being spent elsewhere. While screentime rockets, time spent with friends, family, and playing outside have all reduced.³³⁵ A survey found that 62% of parents believe digital distractions mean children are spending less time being active.³³⁶ At the same time, children in England are experiencing worsening mental and physical health, and increased feelings of loneliness. Smartphones have been referred to by some as “experience blockers”, pushing children to spend more time in the virtual world than the offline world.³³⁷

329 Dr Lynn McNair. Raising the Nation Play Commission oral evidence. 04.02.25

330 Centre for Young Lives poll of 2,000 parents. Carried out 24.01.25 - 04.02.25 by Stack Data Strategy.

331 Youth Sport Trust (2023) PE and School Sport: The Annual Report 2023

332 New Economics Foundation (2021) I-spy: The billion dollar business of surveillance advertising to kids; <https://cfyl.org.uk/ref/nkk>

333 Internet Matters (2025) Children's Wellbeing in a Digital World: Year Four Index Report 2025; <https://cfyl.org.uk/ref/nrk>

334 Ofcom (2024) Children and Parents: Media Use and Attitudes Report; <https://cfyl.org.uk/ref/nxy>

335 Save the Children (2022) Only one in four children play out regularly on their street compared to almost three-quarters of their grandparents generation; <https://cfyl.org.uk/ref/oct>. Hughes, A. Alice Hughes (2023) Study reveals the typical family only spends just six hours together each week, The Independent; <https://cfyl.org.uk/ref/oeh>

336 Youth Sport Trust (2023) PE and School Sport: The Annual Report 2023; <https://cfyl.org.uk/ref/ojf>

337 Smartphone Free Childhood. What's the problem with kids and smartphones? <https://cfyl.org.uk/ref/ol7>. Accessed: 03.04.2025

“It’s not just what kids are seeing, it’s what they’re not doing.”

Joe Ryrie, Smartphone Free Childhood³³⁸

Yet without somewhere to go and something else to do, removing screens is only solving half the problem. Such widespread use of digital devices amongst children suggests they are choosing to spend time on screens of their own volition. However, we must view this trend in the wider, changing context of childhood.

The erosion of space, time, and permission to play in public spaces has inevitably left many children with fewer places to go to play other than into the online world. Many children say this is not their preference. In a survey of 6-to-17-year-olds, 43% of girls and 37% of boys said they would like to play more with friends face to face, whereas just 10% of girls and 18% of boys said they would like to “do something playful on the internet” more often.³³⁹ In 2022, the DCMS Youth Review found that young people want more opportunities to meet people outside of school, form new friendships, and participate in different activities.³⁴⁰

“[There is a] misnomer that technology is what children want – in fact many children prefer play spaces, indoors and out, social play and more, not a tablet”

Matt Robinson, Learning through Landscapes³⁴¹

This view was also echoed by Playing Out, who told the Commission that the issue is not just that devices are addictive to children, but also that children “do not have the choice to play out and be active” instead. When such opportunities do arise, “children consistently choose to be outside, playing with other children in real life”.³⁴²

The Commission also heard from campaign group Smartphone Free Childhood that when children do not have the option to use smartphones, they often return to offline interests and creative pursuits.³⁴³

As almost all children spend time online, there will be a variation in what they do, although some activities or sites are near universal in their popularity. For example, watching videos on YouTube is the most popular use of digital devices by children of all ages.³⁴⁴

“I don’t really play games...I go on YouTube and TikTok and stuff.”

Child, Year 7

Whilst spending time on these sites may not be considered “digital play” as such – although as we have noted, the definition is imperfect – the consequence of spending such long amounts of time on screens does spill over into offline interactions. More time spent watching videos on YouTube, usually done alone, has led to a decline in watching TV shows which are more likely to be watched together as a family.³⁴⁵

338 Daisy Greenwell and Joe Ryrie. Raising the Nation Play Commission oral evidence. 04.02.25

339 Digital Futures Commission (2021) Playful by Design: Free play in a digital world; <https://cfyl.org.uk/ref/os7>

340 DCMS (2022) Youth Review: Summary findings and government response; <https://cfyl.org.uk/ref/otq>

341 Matt Robinson. Raising the Nation Play Commission call for evidence. 30.07.24

342 Playing Out. Raising the Nation Play Commission call for evidence. 31.10.24

343 Daisy Greenwell and Joe Ryrie. Raising the Nation Play Commission oral evidence. 04.02.25

344 Ofcom (2024) Children and Parents: Media Use and Attitudes Report; <https://cfyl.org.uk/ref/ozh>

345 Plowman, L. (2020) Digital Play; <https://cfyl.org.uk/ref/poz>

Digital play and parents

Many parents are concerned about their children's screen habits - nearly half report struggling to get their child to step away from their screen.³⁴⁶ A third of parents with children aged as young as three or four say they find it difficult to control their child's screentime.³⁴⁷ In its submission to the Commission, Triple P emphasized that parents' primary concern is the impact of excessive use - 69% of parents have reported noticing negative effects when their children spend too much time on screens.³⁴⁸

Addressing this issue means not only reviewing children's screentime, but also parents' own screentime. As the children's charity Coram told the Commission:

“all too many parents are themselves modelling over-use and over-reliance on technology”³⁴⁹

Much of the evidence presented to the Commission emphasised the importance of fostering a healthy relationship with digital play. This includes equipping parents with the knowledge to understand online safety and the impact of screentime, as well as encouraging open conversations with their children about these issues. 82% of children's main source of information about online safety is their parents, who can act as “media literacy ‘mentors’ by modelling digital behaviour.”³⁵⁰ Parents' screen

use and their beliefs about the effects of excessive screentime are among factors that are associated with screentime.³⁵¹ Triple P outlined programmes that they provide to support parents to develop healthy screen habits, which should in turn also benefit their children.³⁵² Stevie Bode, deputy head of school in East Essex, concurred, saying that there needs to be “training for families on online safety.”³⁵³

“We are in danger of a degree of hypocrisy if we bemoan children playing on screens when the adult world seems equally addicted to a world of emails, social media, and websites.”

Stevie Bode³⁵⁴

However, as Daisy Greenwell and Joe Ryrie outlined to the Commission, there is a “new digital divide” where children with parents who are tech-savvy, aware of online harms, and monitor their children's online activities will benefit more than those whose parents do not.³⁵⁵ As Internet Matters found, almost a quarter (23%) of parents in the highest socio-economic group managed their children's online behaviour, much higher than those from the lowest socio-economic group (11%).³⁵⁶

346 Association of Play Industries and Mumsnet (2019) Play Must Stay; <https://cfyl.org.uk/ref/pkp>

347 Ofcom (2024) Children and Parents: Media Use and Attitudes Report; <https://cfyl.org.uk/ref/ppf>

348 Triple P. Raising the Nation Play Commission call for evidence. 25.10.24

349 Coram. Raising the Nation Play Commission call for evidence. 14.11.24

350 Internet Matters. Raising the Nation Play Commission call for evidence. 14.10.24

351 Morawska, A., Mitchell, A., & Tooth, L. (2023) Managing Screen Use in the Under-Fives: Recommendations for Parenting Intervention Development. Clin Child Fam Psychol Rev 26: 943-956.

352 Triple P. Raising the Nation Play Commission call for evidence. 25.10.24

353 Stevie Bode. Raising the Nation Play Commission call for evidence. 16.09.24

354 Dr Ben Highmore. Raising the Nation Play Commission call for evidence. 16.09.24

355 Daisy Greenwell and Joe Ryrie. Raising the Nation Play Commission oral evidence. 04.02.25

356 Internet Matters (2025) Children's Wellbeing in a Digital World: Year Four Index Report 2025; <https://cfyl.org.uk/ref/rtz>

Children and young people we spoke with in our focus groups shared the ways that their parents talk about online safety, and the ways they monitor their online activity.

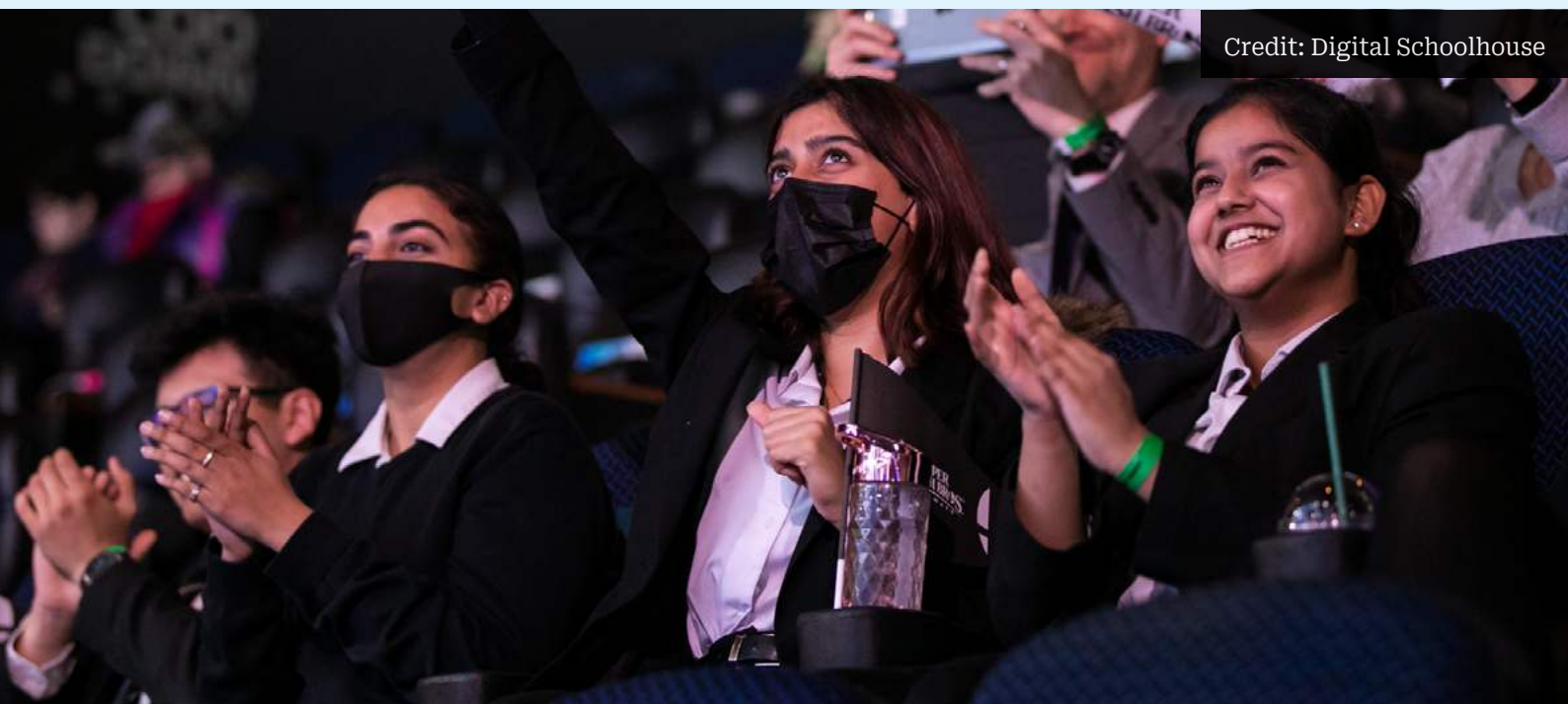
One Year 7 girl told us that her mum receives notifications when she downloads new games and can block the internet when she's online. Her mum also sets time limits on her phone, and has a strict rule concerning adding people online:

“ It doesn't matter if you've known this person [online] for a long long time [...] I can only add people if I'm right next to them and I can see it's definitely them and I know them really well, like my step-cousins or my best friend, otherwise it's not safe and they can steal your information.”

Child, Year 7

The stripping back of opportunities to play in their communities means that too often children have nothing to do but use their digital devices to play or to scroll. We saw this particularly during the pandemic when children were not allowed to play outside and social media became an even more significant presence in their lives. In turn, today the grip of addictive smartphones keeps children from playing as much as they would like to and many children describe wanting to spend less time on their phones and more time playing and socialising in person. To get children playing more we need to address both of these things: the lack of opportunities to play in their communities and the grip of devices on their time. Our full suite of recommendations are designed to address both these issues, , by restoring play as a political and policy priority and putting it back at the heart of childhood, and by ensuring children can play safely, and without risk of addiction, on digital devices.

Credit: Digital Schoolhouse





Children's Vision

A take-anywhere, light-up button cube big enough for the whole family to gather round. It encourages parents to join in quick reaction games.



Parents and Play

Parents, carers, and guardians play a central role in shaping children's early experiences, and are usually their child's first introduction to play. As a child's first play partner, a parent's understanding of the value of play – and how to engage in it – can lay the foundation for rich and meaningful play from the early years onwards.

The Commission received over 50 written submissions on the role of parents in play and heard from 16 expert witnesses about how parents can be better supported to play with their children, as well as supporting their child to play independently. We constantly and consistently heard how many parents face difficult barriers to playing with their children, and these barriers can particularly impact parents who have a

low income or are disadvantaged. Reasons ranged from some lacking confidence or understanding about what play is and how it supports children's development, to the same barriers facing their children, like limited space and time. Some also recognised misconceptions about play – such as the idea that play only takes place in designated places, such as a park, or with designated and sometimes expensive items like toys. Many raised the brilliant play opportunities that can be created with low- or no-cost, such as using everyday objects.

Parents also face barriers in enabling children to play independently. Limited access to safe environments in the context of growing fears about traffic and crime can make it difficult for parents to feel comfortable allowing their children to play

out. The grip of digital devices on children can also make offline alternatives appear less appealing. Societal norms can also put excessive pressure on parents to supervise their children closely and restrict their opportunities for independent play, even when they may be ready for this.

For parents to be confident in letting their children play outside independently, the Commission heard that they need to feel that they will be safe enough and have spaces where they are welcome.

The Commission's polling of parents reveals that the barrier to playing with their children for most parents is not a lack of appreciation of the importance of play: 85% of parents told us they play with their child every or most days and 90% agreed that it is important for their child's health to play regularly. Instead, the Commission repeatedly heard that parents need to be given more support regarding what good play looks like, and that modelling play for adults is key to achieving this. Younger

parents are less likely to feel confident in playing with their child (74% of parents aged 18-to-24 vs 90% parents aged 35-to-44). It is even lower for young fathers (65%).

This reinforces evidence provided to the Commission by the charity Home-Start UK, which suggests that parents who haven't experienced play in their own lives are less likely to bring that element through in their own parenting.³⁵⁷ Younger parents are more likely to have grown up in this era of limited opportunities to play, and are the first generation of parents to have had this gap in play experience. By empowering parents through modelling play, today's children can enjoy playful childhoods and become playful adults, benefitting future generations.

This section focuses on how parents can be empowered to support and enrich their children's play, but parents' feedback about independent, outdoor play is included in other sections of this report.

Parents and the right to play

Parents have an important role in supporting children's rights, and their right to play. As primary caregivers and the adults with most control and influence over children's lives, parents hold responsibilities under the UNCRC for assisting children in the enjoyment of their rights. Yet, across the UNCRC it is also clear that parents must be supported in their child rearing (e.g. Articles 3, 5, 18 and 27).

A child rights approach to play and parents requires that:

- Parents are supported through education, training and material measures to enable and understand children's play across the ages, the value of play, and the

importance of both parent-child and independent child-led play (Articles 3, 18, 24(2)(e), 27);

- Support for parents must be mindful of intersectional challenges posed by differences in, for example, gender, race and socio-economic background, to ensure that children are not discriminated against based on their parents' status (Article 2);
- Parents must be enabled to provide, in a manner consistent with the evolving capacities of the child, appropriate direction and guidance in the exercise of their right to play (Article 5).

Barriers to play

As explored in other themes, parents' fears about their children's safety can restrict their freedom to play independently and unsupervised. Families can also lack the space both inside and near their homes. One parent who spoke to the Commission described how it is often overlooked that some houses – as well as flats – lack gardens and outdoor space for play.

The Commission heard that for parents who are in low-income or disadvantaged households, these barriers can be even greater. National Childbirth Trust (NCT) told the Commission how families with babies and young children living in temporary or unsuitable accommodation can face many barriers to play, including limited space to move around, limited access to toys, and spending long periods of time in a buggy due to concerns about the safety of the accommodation. Families living in high-rise accommodation often lack access to outdoor spaces and may find it hard to practically access play provision, if – for instance – there is no lift in their flat for a buggy. These environmental constraints can affect children's development, contributing to outcomes such as delayed crawling or walking, flat head syndrome, delayed speech and potty training, attachment disorders and behavioural challenges – through no fault of parents, but as a result of the conditions they are living in.³⁵⁸

In Kind Direct – a UK charity focused on distributing consumer products – shared with the Commission that over a quarter (26%) of parents from low-income households did not have enough toys or equipment for their children over the summer, and 13% could not afford toys, books or games in the last year and had to go without.³⁵⁹ With the cost of living crisis, families are finding it more and more

challenging to afford basic resources, and the National Literacy Trust found that 20% of parents and 36.1% of parents struggling financially were buying fewer books due to the cost of living crisis.³⁶⁰

The “play paywall” also creates financial barriers to access play provision, such as the cost of playgroups, access to soft play centres, transport to green spaces, cost of expensive toys, and over-reliance on digital technologies for play.³⁶¹ The societal change that restricts doorstep play – which is low cost or free – has also pushed parents to have to provide alternative tools or play provision, which is often behind the play paywall. This deepens inequalities between children, including worsening health inequalities for the poorest children.

Case study: Pause to Play³⁵⁷

Save the Children's Pause to Play project in Cardiff offered low income parents a grant of £350 (with £50 allocated for age-appropriate play resources) and an in-person intervention with a family practitioner.

Parents reported that the grant significantly reduced the financial pressure they were experiencing and reduced stress. By relieving immediate financial worry, parents felt they had more time and energy to engage in play and this led to increased engagement with the play sessions. Parents reported connecting with others and sharing play ideas with one another, including how household items could be used for play at home.

“[It gave the opportunity] to be able to think of something other rather than worrying. And that's the children and play.”

Pause to Play Practitioner

358 National Childbirth Trust. Raising the Nation Play Commission call for evidence. 04.10.24

359 In Kind Direct. Raising the Nation Play Commission call for evidence. 30.10.24

360 National Literacy Trust (2023) Children and young people's access to books and educational devices at home during the cost-of-living crisis; <https://cfyl.org.uk/ref/rpl>

361 Evie Keough. Raising the Nation Play Commission call for evidence. 29.10.24

362 Save the Children. Raising the Nation Play Commission call for evidence. 01.10.24

Facing adversity, including poverty, can put pressure on a parents' mental health, and limit the mental space to engage in play with their children.³⁶³ With the cost of living crisis and other pressures on parents, many may also be struggling with their mental health. As Home-Start UK articulated:

“ Play requires patience, curiosity and kindness and a relaxed parent is more able to bring these qualities to their interactions with their child. Conversely, if a parent is facing external challenges, then it is much harder for them to find the capacity to play with their children.”³⁶⁴

Parents, particularly those living in poverty or facing additional challenges, need to be supported to provide play opportunities for their children. This can mean addressing the external pressures that parents face so that they have more time and capacity to play or supporting parents to understand how to play. Families need safe homes – whether temporary accommodation or otherwise – that provide enough space to play.

At the same time, creating safer, more welcoming space on families' doorstep – where children can play, move, socialise, and feel a sense of belonging at no cost – would help to ease the pressure on parents

to seek out expensive play provision or buy costly toys. It would also ease time pressure on parents, by enabling children to play independently without the need for parental supervision or time. Enabling more spaces to accommodate children's play would help ensure that all children, regardless of background, have equal access to the benefits of play as they grow.

Supporting parents to play

Giving adults more capacity to play can also improve parents' own mental health, as play is proven to have positive impacts on the brain, allowing the release of endorphins, and fostering relaxation regardless of age.³⁶⁵

Modelling play

Beyond removing external pressures on parents and providing safe spaces for families, building parents' confidence in play emerged as a recurring theme throughout the Commission's evidence sessions.³⁶⁶ As Evie Keough from Boromi told the Commission, “Parents don't automatically learn how to play and interact with their child upon becoming a parent,” which is especially true for parents who themselves were not played with as a child by their parents.³⁶⁷

Home-Start UK emphasised to the Commission that some parents need to be supported in their understanding of the importance of play and what is meant by play, including modelling play for parents,³⁶⁸ which highlights the “developmental and intergenerational benefits of play.”³⁶⁹ Amanda Dawkins Smith, founder of Play 4 All and Childcare Solution told the Commission that parents need to be shown that it's “okay to be silly” when playing with their child.

363 Ibid.

364 Home-Start UK. Raising the Nation Play Commission call for evidence. 29.10.24

365 National Institute for Play, n.d. Play Note: The importance of play for adults; <https://cfyl.org.uk/ref/tcz> [Accessed: 17.04.25]

366 E.g. Evie Keough. Raising the Nation Play Commission call for evidence. 29.10.24; We Mind the Gap. Raising the Nation Play Commission call for evidence. 09.09.24; Save the Children. Raising the Nation Play Commission call for evidence. 01.10.24

367 Evie Keough. Raising the Nation Play Commission call for evidence. 29.10.24

368 Home-Start UK. Raising the Nation Play Commission call for evidence. 29.10.24

369 Children's Alliance. Raising the Nation Play Commission call for evidence. 09.10.24



Credit: ParkPlay

The Commission heard it would be most impactful if play is framed as being an important way of spending time with children – woven into daily life, rather than treated as a separate, goal-oriented activity. Dr Denise Wright spoke to the power of small, consistent habits, like reading a story at bedtime, as everyday opportunities for connection through play.³⁷⁰ Playful interactions can be part of routine moments: brushing teeth, getting dressed, or waiting for a bus.³⁷¹

Research has found that the quality of the home learning environment is more important than the parents' occupation, education or outcome in terms of children's intellectual and social development.³⁷² Professor Bertha Ochieng told the Commission that socioeconomic status can impact the confidence that parents feel when playing with their children. She said that making resources available that reduces the financial pressure on them is vital for parents to participate more in creative activities with their children.³⁷³

EasyPeasy

EasyPeasy is an app-based parenting programme for parents of children aged 0-to-5. The app provides parents with parenting advice and simple low- or no-resource playful interactions to implement into everyday life. The programme is for all families but is particularly targeted at low-income or disadvantaged households.³⁷⁴

Since 2017, EasyPeasy has supported over 394,000 children in their early years and currently partners with 18 local authorities to deliver the programmes. Over half (56%) of families are from low income households and almost a quarter (24%) are ethnic minority families.³⁷⁵

Jen Lexmond, the CEO and Founder of EasyPeasy shared how the programme focuses on parents and home learning environments to drive more playful interactions between parents and children. She described the outreach approach to reach families who may not have money or awareness, such as through health visitors or libraries.³⁷⁶ A randomised control trial found that children involved in the intervention achieved school readiness rate at 4% higher than their peers who were not involved, highlighting how play is a core tool to reach school readiness targets.³⁷⁷

370 Dr Denise Wright. Raising the Nation Play Commission oral evidence session. 07.04.25

371 Save the Children, Raising the Nation Play Commission call for evidence. 01.10.24

372 Evie Keough. Raising the Nation Play Commission oral evidence session. 08.04.25

373 Professor Bertha Ochieng. Raising the Nation Play Commission call for evidence. 31.10.24

374 EasyPeasy. Raising the Nation Play Commission call for evidence. 17.01.25

375 Ibid.

376 Jen Lexmond. Raising the Nation Play Commission oral evidence session. 04.02.25

377 EasyPeasy. Raising the Nation Play Commission call for evidence. 17.01.25

50 Things To Do Before You're Five

50 Things to Do Before You're Five provides screen-free ideas and activities for families with young children. This includes fun, low or no-cost experiences for the whole family, indoors and outdoors, which are great ways to support children's development.

The website and the app provide details of how to do each activity and there are suggested words to use in conversations during the activity to increase children's vocabulary, adaptations that can be made if children have additional needs, and list of books related to the activity. On the events tab, parents can find lists of low or no cost events near them that are perfect for children and families, so that going out doesn't have to cost a fortune.

Bradford Birth to 19 - the creator of the resource - has partnered with 22 local authorities to date, with over 100,000

downloads of their materials. Almost three quarters of parents (72%) using the resources feel more able to help their children play and learn in more and different ways.³⁷³

Providing every local authority in England with access to the scheme so every family can access it is estimated to cost £10 million over three years, not discounting the 22 which already have access. Giving all 75 family hub areas access is estimated to cost £4 million.³⁷⁴



Credit: Bradford Birth to 19

An early childhood parenting programme in Jamaica from 1986 worked with parents to show simple ways of interacting with their young children using low-cost homemade toys, books and conversation. A 20-year follow-up found that children who participated in this programme had performed better in school, were happier, had higher IQs, better mental health, and earned more money than their peers.³⁸⁰

So much evidence submitted to the Commission was clear that play does not need to be expensive. It can involve being in nature or using everyday objects. There were many examples of programmes modelling low- or no-cost play, such as the Healthy Movers programme from Active Dorset. Laura Roberts, the Early Years Physical Officer from Active Dorset, told the Commission that the Healthy Movers programme enables parents to support their children to play, and beyond those

sessions. There is also a website including home activity cards and YouTube videos for families to continue what they have learned at home, focusing on everyday objects. For instance, socks rolled up can make a ball, or kitchen roll squares can be stones across a pretend river.³⁸¹

This support should begin as early as possible – even during pregnancy.³⁸² Research shows that reading and singing to the unborn baby can begin to foster connection and communication through play-like interactions.³⁸³ Evie Keough highlighted the 'baby blindspot' that starts even before birth in terms of support for parenting and said that even having basic understanding of early development can have significant impact on parents' confidence.³⁸⁴

378 Bradford Birth to 19 (2023) 50 Things to Do Before You're Five: Impact Report; <https://cfyl.org.uk/ref/uwg>

379 Bradford Birth to 19. Raising the Nation Play Commission call for evidence. 28.10.24

380 Reach Up and Learn (c.2016) Policy Brief: Reach Up: An Early Childhood Parenting Programme; <https://cfyl.org.uk/ref/v6p>

381 Laura Roberts. Raising the Nation Play Commission call for evidence. 30.09.24

382 Home-Start UK. Raising the Nation Play Commission call for evidence. 29.10.24

383 Health Service Executive (2022) Bonding with your baby in pregnancy <https://cfyl.org.uk/ref/vt7>. Accessed: 23.05.25

384 Evie Keough. Raising the Nation Play Commission oral evidence session. 08.04.25

Reaching families

There are many avenues in which families can be reached to be given support for play. The most obvious are schools, early years settings, family hubs and children centres, where parents can see “meaningful and attractive activities which appeal to children”.³⁸⁵ Professionals that interact with families should also have the role of highlighting the importance of play, including health visitors and speech therapists.³⁸⁶

“[Early years settings] should all be doing quality play and they should all be injecting that into the parents.”

Dr Helen Bilton³⁸⁷

The spaces where parents are, beyond schools and nurseries, should also be utilised: for instance, waiting rooms in dentists and doctors, cafes, and supermarkets – as well as utilising digital platforms such as TikTok.³⁸⁸ This could mean integrating play within these spaces; having notice boards with information about play and information packs on play to take home;³⁸⁹ using community-based activities can help to build parents’ confidence in outdoor play and shift attitudes around ‘risky play’;³⁹⁰ and creating easily-digestible, short videos with parenting tips including easy ways to integrate play into everyday life which could be shared on digital platforms.

“If families and early years professionals are supported and empowered to have rich interactions with young children, this could help mitigate the setbacks of socioeconomic disadvantage on children’s development.”

PEDAL

Many parents can feel isolated and separated from support; a survey by Action for Children found that 66% of parents with children aged 0-to-5 wanted to have more high-quality support available to help their parenting.³⁹¹ Programmes and opportunities that allow parents to come together can greatly help parents to feel more connected and with the sense of togetherness.³⁹² It is important that these spaces are non-judgemental, where parents feel valued and respected.³⁹³

The Commission heard many examples of programmes, classes, and courses that support parents to play with their children.³⁹⁴ When opportunities to engage with other parents are provided, such as family arts and craft sessions or events in local communities, parents say that they want more of it.³⁹⁵

³⁸⁵ Robin Warren. Raising the Nation Play Commission call for evidence. 29.10.24

³⁸⁶ Sue Atkins. Raising the Nation Play Commission oral evidence session. 07.04.25

³⁸⁷ Helen Bilton. Raising the Nation Play Commission oral evidence session. 07.04.25

³⁸⁸ Sue Atkins. Raising the Nation Play Commission oral evidence session. 07.04.25

³⁸⁹ Helen Bilton. Raising the Nation Play Commission oral evidence session. 07.04.25

³⁹⁰ Janine Coates. Raising the Nation Play Commission call for evidence. 31.10.24

³⁹¹ Action for Children (2022) Parenting services under pressure: unequal access to early years support in England; <https://cfyl.org.uk/ref/x2r>

³⁹² Sue Atkins. Raising the Nation Play Commission oral evidence session. 07.04.25

³⁹³ Amanda Dawkins Smith. Raising the Nation Play Commission oral evidence session. 07.04.25

³⁹⁴ E.g., Paige Wilson. Raising the Nation Play Commission call for evidence. 10.09.24; Place2Be. Raising the Nation Play Commission call for evidence. 04.10.24; The Centre for Emotional Health. Raising the Nation Play Commission call for evidence. 18.09.24

³⁹⁵ Laura Richardson. Raising the Nation Play Commission call for evidence. 22.08.24

Supporting new parents to play

National Childbirth Trust (NCT), the charity supporting about-to-be and new parents through pregnancy, birth and early parenthood helps them to play with their babies.



Credit: National Childbirth Trust

Its Talk and Walk meetups provide parents with a safe space to connect with other parents and their babies and gives the babies sensory benefits during the walk. One parent said the classes were “brilliant” as they could not afford nursery, and for some they provided the only opportunities for parents to mix with others.³⁹⁶

Daniella Abraham, chartered manager and Head of Volunteering at NCT, shared with the Commission that parents are learning from other parents how to play with their babies and children.³⁹⁷

Stay and Play sessions provide parents with space to engage with their children’s learning and development, and to connect with other parents. Some Stay and Play sessions cater to particular groups of parents; 3 Little Birds Foundation, for instance, is a Stay and Play group based in South East London that provides support for Black families. Some sessions that 3 Little Birds Foundation hosts are for families with children with SEND.³⁹⁸

Liverpool Family Hubs – Wonder Hubs

Liverpool’s Family Hub offers a ‘Welcome to Play’ creative course for parents with children aged 0-to-5. It has been shown to inspire parents to repeat activities at home, have more confidence to play, and to have more ideas for playing, as well as understanding the importance of play.

During an oral evidence session, Dr Denise Wright, family learning

coordinator for Liverpool Children’s Centres and Family Hubs, shared the range of programmes offered to focus on modelling and inspiring play. When parents work on a specific area through play, supported through these programmes, it can help to narrow the attainment gap and promote better habits, such as reading before bed.³⁹⁹

396 Daniella Abraham. Raising the Nation Play Commission oral evidence session. 07.04.25; National Childbirth Trust. Raising the Nation Play Commission call for evidence. 04.10.24

397 Daniella Abraham. Raising the Nation Play Commission oral evidence session. 07.04.25

398 Instagram. 3 Little Birds Foundation. <https://cfyl.org.uk/ref/yho>. Accessed: 12.05.2025

399 Dr Denise Wright. Raising the Nation Play Commission oral evidence session. 07.04.25



Credit: National Childbirth Trust

The closure of Sure Start centres was identified as one cause of the lack of support that families with young children can feel. Many pointed to there being a need for joined-up infrastructure that supports the whole family, including building parental awareness and confidence of play, such as the Start for Life offer.⁴⁰⁰ Analysis from the Institute of Fiscal Studies (IFS) revealed that access to a Sure Start centre between the ages of 0-to-5 benefitted children's educational achievement, and these impacts were

particularly great for those from under-served backgrounds.⁴⁰¹

Moreover, cuts to the numbers of health visitors, who reach out to families with babies and young children, means that many families miss out on support that they need. Since 2015, there has been a 40% cut to the health visitor workforce, leading to a shortage of 5,000 health visitors in England, and more than 434,500 children miss out on the health visiting reviews that they are eligible for.⁴⁰²

400 Evie Keough. Raising the Nation Play Commission call for evidence. 29.10.24

401 Institute for Financial Studies (2024) The short- and medium-term impacts of Sure Start on educational outcomes; <https://cfyl.org.uk/ref/yzy>

402 Institute of Health Visiting (2024) State of Health Visiting, UK survey report; <https://cfyl.org.uk/ref/yml>

Boromi

Boromi is a non-profit, early years organisation building a national 'Network of Play', creating more opportunities for hands-on, offline and language-rich family play into the spaces and places families are every day. Founded in 2017 through an innovation award, Boromi has spent the past eight years working in close partnership with schools and nurseries to establish Play Libraries for nursery and reception children (ages 3+) within settings across the UK. These Play Libraries offer families free, evidence-based, high-quality play bags each term to borrow, take home, and explore together.

In 2022, Boromi expanded its offer with the launch of 0+ Play Libraries, supporting families from birth to primary age. These are now delivered through partnerships with a diverse range of community settings such as Family Hubs, libraries, leisure centres, and cafés - offering families free access both in situ and in the home.³⁹⁸ Increasingly, Boromi is seeing the growth of place-based, community-rich partnerships to build local 'play networks' - infrastructure that combines Play Libraries with broader family support offers, embedded in the everyday spaces that surround families.

A two-year evaluation of Boromi's school-based Play Libraries found that children using the Play Library experienced a 25 percentage-point increase in communication skills. Parents also reported greater confidence, knowledge, and ideas for play.³⁹⁹ Similarly, the more recent evaluation of their community-based Play Libraries showed that 93.5% of families agreed the Play Library gave them more ideas

for things to play again and 100% said they would recommend visiting it to a friend. All community settings involved also said they would recommend the Play Library to another setting, found it easy to manage, and reported that the Play Library increased interaction with families.⁴⁰⁰ The annual net price for an individual Play Library is £795 plus delivery, which is around £66 per year to account for delivering and collecting Play Libraries.

Evie Keough, Founder and CEO of Boromi, shared with the Commission that the core of their work and impact is not about the resources themselves, but about showing how you don't need expensive materials or lots of time set aside to play. Playful moments can be woven into the everyday routines and rhythms of family life, using everyday household objects and ordinary moments. A playful mindset and an understanding of the importance of play, she argued, are the most powerful resources of all.⁴⁰¹



Credit: Boromi

403 Boromi. What we do. <https://cfyl.org.uk/ref/yjw>. Accessed: 22.04.25

404 Boromi (2023) Impact Evaluation Report 2021-2023; <https://cfyl.org.uk/ref/ykt>

405 Boromi (2024) Pop-in Play Libraries – 22-24 Pilot evaluation report; <https://cfyl.org.uk/ref/yml>

406 Evie Keough. Raising the Nation Play Commission oral evidence session. 08.04.25

ParkPlay

ParkPlay is a charity that builds happier, healthier communities by helping local people create and sustain their own free, outdoor play opportunity into local parks every week. ParkPlays has helped communities launch 85 ParkPlay events, with over 17,000 people registered. The benefits of ParkPlay include improved mental and physical health, bringing communities together and connecting people, and improved confidence, training and skills, especially in the communities of greatest need.⁴⁰⁷

Rick Jenner, the CEO of ParkPlay, spoke with the Commission about the impact of ParkPlay. He emphasised that ParkPlay is open to anybody, and most ParkPlays become spaces for parents and their children usually of ages 2 to 12.⁴⁰⁸

Rick highlighted that parents living in disadvantaged communities who may feel more stressed and time-restrained can find it more difficult to find space and time for their children to play, which can have a knock-on impact on relationships within the family and parents' confidence. When parents come to ParkPlays, while they may feel nervous or hesitant at first, once they engage with the activities, they can find that the ParkPlays serve as an “antidote” to the week’s stresses.⁴⁰⁹

“People are just having fun and enjoying themselves.”

Rick Jenner, CEO of ParkPlay

ParkPlays are largely run by volunteers who create a welcoming and inclusive setting where their communities can



Credit: Park Play

play and be active in a less structured way that works for each individual. ParkPlay works with other organisations and community groups in the area who already have the connections and trust of local people, and want to engage with their community in a different way. ParkPlay becomes a space for the community where children and parents can connect, play, and be active.⁴¹⁰

ParkPlay is a scalable model that delivers positive health impacts and builds community relationships. The setup fee for the local authority is £5,000 and beyond that, the ongoing costs are very low.⁴¹¹

A report by Active Essex found that ParkPlayers report higher levels of physical activity and wellbeing. They estimated that ParkPlay could be worth £4.6 million to £18.2 million annually in terms of wellbeing improvements, with a social return on investment of £30 for every £1 spent.⁴¹²

407 ParkPlay. About. <https://cfyl.org.uk/ref/ytc>. Accessed 12.05.25

408 Rick Jenner. Raising the Nation Play Commission oral evidence session. 08.04.25

409 Ibid.

410 Rick Jenner. Raising the Nation Play Commission oral evidence session. 08.04.25

411 Ibid.

412 Active Essex (2024) Project Case Study: ParkPlay; <https://cfyl.org.uk/ref/zk3>

Supporting fathers to play

In written evidence to the Play Commission, the Fatherhood Institute emphasised the need to specifically support fathers' involvement in play with their children. Employment practices and parental leave policies, as well as gendered social norms, constrain their capacity to play with their children.⁴¹³ Adrienne Burgess, Head of Research at the Fatherhood Institute, told the Commission about the loneliness some fathers experience and the assumption many services take that the mother should be the primary contact. She also highlighted that fathers may not feel welcomed at particular classes, even if they are targeted for parents generally. Fathers are also more likely to work longer hours than mothers,

and are only offered two weeks' statutory paternity leave. Having more flexible working policies and explicitly welcoming fathers into spaces for parents, she said, would be beneficial.⁴¹⁴

Parents taking action

Throughout all our evidence gathering, we came across many parents who feel so strongly about play that they have taken action to change things: parent led networks like Playing Out, Mums for Lungs and Smart Phone Free Childhood. For each of these, there are hundreds of thousands more parents taking smaller actions every day, speaking up online or just wishing that things were different for their children. This is a vast resource and support network to tap into.

Children's Vision

A memory-match game set in a sun-dappled meadow where plush, fried-chicken critters frolic among flower-strewn "hills." Players take turns flipping over brightly illustrated chicken cards, testing their recall to find matching pairs while the chubby, golden mascots cheer them on. Designed for playground or picnic-blanket play.



413 Fatherhood Institute. Raising the Nation Play Commission call for evidence. 30.10.24

414 Adrienne Burgess. Raising the Nation Play Commission oral evidence session. 07.04.25



Conclusion

It is time to give children their childhoods back. Too many of our children are spending their most precious years sedentary, doom scrolling on their phones and often alone, while their health and wellbeing deteriorates. It is no coincidence that the least happy generation, the generation with the highest rates of obesity and rising ill health, is the generation that plays less and less. And it is the children in low income families, the children with the least, who are impacted the most.

We have been struck by the evidence we have heard over the last year about the many barriers that stand in the way of children doing exactly what they should be doing: playing. From a crammed curriculum to rising traffic, from closing playgrounds and youth centres to a growing “no-ball games” anti-play culture – there are mountains to climb for children to play. We also heard from parents who just don’t know where to start when it comes to finding safe and accessible places for their children to play. By stripping back so many opportunities for play in the offline world, we have cleared the way for smartphones to invade children’s lives.

For too long play has not been a priority in government. The loss of a play strategy in England after 2010, drastic funding cuts, and a failure of any government department to hold responsibility for protecting children’s play, have sidelined play.

But there is so much to learn from what has happened in the years since the 2008 Play Strategy was abandoned.

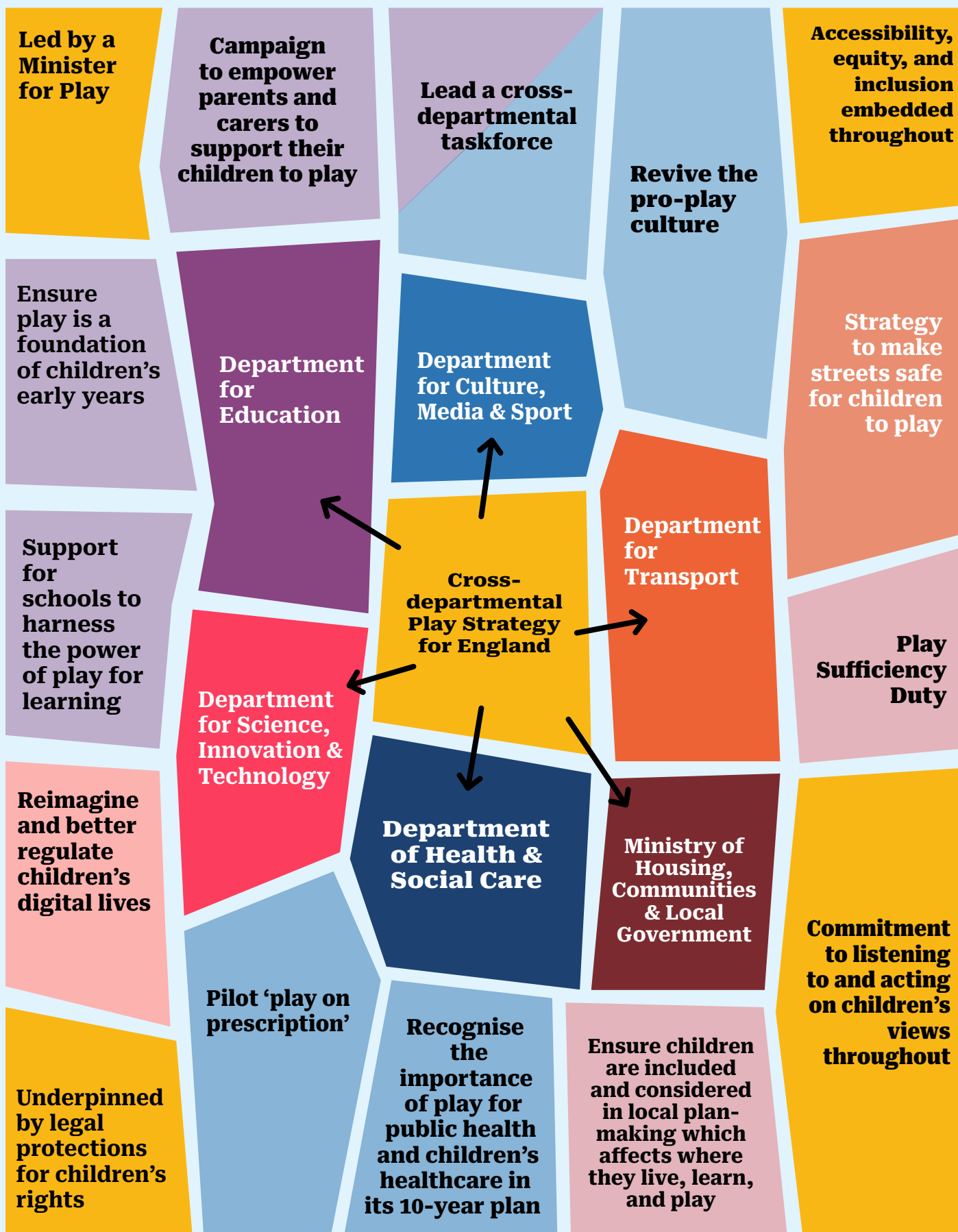
The Commission has visited countries where children’s play is at the heart of government strategy – embedded across education, health, local government and beyond - because it is seen as the central fabric of life. In these countries we have visited schools where play is as important as quiet learning, we have seen staffed parks which are at the heart of child-centred communities, walked round housing developments which are alive with the shouts and laughter of children, visited hospitals designed with play as a core principle and seen play being prioritised for children living in violent and unsafe neighbourhoods.

All of this is within our grasp in this country. But England needs a play strategy to make it happen. Our report lays the framework for a child-friendly England with cross-departmental buy-in at the top of government and which puts children’s play first. We make the case that play is serious business and should be non-negotiable in children’s lives.

Childhood is such a narrow, precious, critical time of life, that has been consistently and constantly eroded for this generation of children. They will never get their childhoods back unless we intervene now. It’s time to get children playing again.

Recommendations

A framework for a National Play Strategy



Our vision

Play is a fundamental part of childhood, so we need to get our children playing again. First and foremost this requires play to be a political and policy priority, to remove the barriers to play and to enable a broader, cultural shift in attitudes towards risk, childhood independence, and play.

Nationally, the government needs to send a clear signal to local government, schools, and families that play is a crucial part of its agenda to improve school readiness, to raise the healthiest and happiest generation of children, and to break down the barriers to opportunity. It is also not just a case of showing that play is vital to policy aims, but that play is a foundation of our society and communities. It is a question of culture, and how we treat children and all of our futures.

Launching a cross-departmental National Play Strategy for England would do exactly this, underpinned by a commitment to incorporate the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) into domestic law, and by a play sufficiency duty for England's local authorities to ensure all children have enough time, space, and opportunity to play.

Enshrining children's right to play and their right to be heard in law is central to ensuring everyone, from schools to planners, actively considers the needs and views of children. This is an important step to ensuring that children have opportunities to play, whether at school, at home, or in civic spaces, or in their early years, mid-childhood or during adolescence.

Creating truly playful communities is not just about better street design, traffic management, and reduced crime, but also about a reversal of the growing culture of intolerance towards children playing. In turn, this will also encourage more parents to have confidence they can let their children play out more freely, in the knowledge that their children will be both having a great time and are also safe.

Recommendation 1: A new, cross-departmental National Play Strategy for England.

England needs a new National Play Strategy. For too long, play has been dismissed as an afterthought, rather than the essential component of a happy, healthy childhood that overwhelming evidence shows it is. Wales and Scotland already have Play Strategies which are improving children's access to play.

This should set a 10 year vision to ensure all children can access local space to play where they live, in school, and in the public realm, with a focus on inclusion, safety, local accessibility, and alignment with the emerging Government Youth Strategy.

England's strategy should be cross-departmental, led by the Secretaries of State for Culture, Media & Sport and for Education, and including representatives from the Department of Health and Social Care, the Ministry of Housing, Communities, and Local Government, the Department for Science, Innovation and Technology, the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, HM Treasury, the Department for Transport, and the Home Office. This approach fits foursquare with the Government's mission-led approach and recognises that play is fundamental to every aspect of children's lives.

We recommend that the cross-departmental strategy:

- Is backed by an annual budget of £125 million to the end of this parliament, an amount which reflects the uprated budget for the 2008 Play Strategy. This need not require additional general taxation or a spending review settlement to fund, but could be funded by a combination of sources, for example: raised from the Soft Drinks Industry Levy, using unspent developer contributions (such as S106 reserves - the funds

held by councils and collected from developers to mitigate the impact of new developments), the UK Shared Prosperity Fund, the Dormant Assets Scheme, National Lottery grants, Sport England programme funding, Active Travel funds, capital investment budgets, public private collaborations, and partnerships with philanthropic funders.

- Is led by a Minister with an explicit responsibility for play. It makes no sense that we have a Minister for Gambling but no Minister for Children's Play nor any team of civil servants responsible for play.
- Prioritises accessibility, equity, and inclusion, ensuring that all children and families have the time, space, and opportunities to play which reflect their needs, interests, and identities.
- Includes ringfenced funding (as part of the £125m annual budget we are proposing) for local authorities to maintain and renovate playgrounds, and provide new ones.
- Commits councils and Integrated Care Boards to embedding play within their local priorities for children's health and wellbeing.
- Aligns with the Government's Young Futures programme, Family Hubs, and youth strategy plans to embed accessible, equitable, and inclusive age-appropriate play spaces and support for families to play.
- Influences and informs the government's SEND reforms and recognises play as the essential mechanism through which children acquire the foundational skills needed to achieve and thrive in education. Play can help more children be ready for school and decrease the number of children with educational needs requiring tailored support within the classroom.
- Is recognised by the Child Poverty

Taskforce to ensure opportunities to play are available for families on the lowest incomes and who may not have access to private gardens and other play spaces - including through a new infrastructure of family hubs.

- Commits to a costed plan to develop a recognised, skilled, and sustainable play workforce, underpinned by professional standards, drawing on Play England's workforce development activity, including the review of National Occupational Standards.

Recommendation 2: A Play Sufficiency Duty for England.

Local authority budgets are stretched and facing competing priorities. Without a statutory duty, backed by national leadership and oversight, requiring local authorities to protect or secure opportunities to play, they are being lost at great cost to children, young people, and the rest of society.

We recommend:

- The Government introduces a Play Sufficiency Duty on local authorities, bringing England in line with Scotland and Wales.
- The duty should require local authorities to regularly and periodically assess the sufficiency of opportunities to play in their areas and require them to secure further opportunities where they are found to be lacking. Assessments should be grounded in a focus on ensuring all children have opportunities to play and that spaces are inclusive and accessible.
- The duty should be accompanied by ring-fenced funding for local authorities to secure and maintain further provision.



Credit: Isle of Play

Recommendation 3: Legal protections for children's rights.

Effective play-related policies in the devolved nations are underpinned by the UNCRC becoming incorporated into their respective domestic laws, as had been the case since 2011 in Wales and 2024 in Scotland. This legal incentive to recognise the rights of children, such as their right to be heard or their right to play, has been instrumental in protecting and securing opportunities to play.

We recommend:

- The UNCRC is fully incorporated into domestic law, providing a clear legal foundation to enforce children's rights, guarantee meaningful child participation in policy and practice, and to protect all children against discrimination in accessing play.

- Children's rights impact assessments are required on a national and local level when developing new policies and legislation affecting children's lives and opportunities to play.

Children's rights are recognised under the Equality Act, protecting children from age-based discrimination. |

Recommendation 4: Neighbourhoods are designed and adapted to prioritise children's lives and needs, making them safe, playful, and suitable for all citizens.

We need to revive the culture which embraces play and childhood independence so parents and carers are confident to allow their children to play again. This starts with tackling the safety

concerns of many children and parents - primarily traffic and crime - as well as making housing developments and street designs more playful and child-friendly. In doing so, entire neighbourhoods will become more playful, children will have their independent mobility restored, and will be able to play outdoors, on their doorsteps and beyond.

We recommend:

- The Department for Transport creates a Safer Streets for Children strategy that prioritises children's safety and independent mobility across national and local transport decision-making.
- Local authorities reduce the speed and volume of traffic where children play, live, and learn.
- Sport England engages with Active Travel England on its work to help deliver a more active commute to and from school for children across England, and explore opportunities to enable play and physical activity initiatives.
- The Department for Transport updates the existing Play Streets legislation (Section 29 of the Road Traffic Regulation Act 1984) to clearly allow for Street Play (temporary closures) and School Streets (timed closures). This would create a single, clear legal framework - making it easier for parents and communities to organise safe play in their streets and simplifying implementation by councils to support consistent and fair rollout across England.
- A national ban on 'No Ball Games' signs and updating the model bylaws for Parks and Open Spaces to create more welcoming, healthier, and active environments that support children's right to play.
- Local authorities increase opportunities to play through the use of play streets, play rangers, play buses, mobile play stations, and toy libraries to bring play to more communities and families - especially in areas of disadvantage.
- Local authorities establish - through a Play Sufficiency Duty (recommendation 2) - how local assets can be maximised to ensure children have safe spaces and places to play throughout neighbourhoods and not just in designated areas like parks, playgrounds, and pitches.

Credit: Somerford Grove Adventure Playground



- Local authorities ensure that school playgrounds are open for play outside of school hours, including at weekends and during school holidays.
- National government commits to ensuring that everyone has access to a park or other green space within a safe 10-minute walk of their home, as advocated by Fields in Trust, Play England, and others.

**Recommendation 5:
To support recommendation 4, the National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF) should require planners and developers to seek and act on the views of children and young people and consider their needs.**

We welcome the recent changes to the NPPF to protect formal play spaces, but the planning system must go further in positively promoting and protecting children's right to play throughout the public realm. When it comes to play, children and young people are the experts; they know where and how they like to play, so seeking and acting on their views is essential if we are to create playful spaces which meet their needs.

We recommend:

- The Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government revises national planning policy and guidance (including the NPPF, Planning Practice Guidance, and National Model Design Code) to require that children and young people be considered and included in plan-making and decisions that shape the environments they live, learn, and play in.
- These revisions should include a requirement that developers and housing providers adopt a pro-play policy that recognises children's right to shared doorstep space and informal play opportunities throughout their

neighbourhoods. Providers should adopt approaches that balance needs and support community-based solutions in all new developments.

Recommendation 6: Parents and carers are empowered to support their children to play.

Many parents and carers say that the pressures of daily life mean that they don't have the time or resources to find opportunities for their children to play, so many of the other recommendations in this report aim to remove some of these barriers. This recommendation focuses on directly empowering parents and carers to support their children to play.

We recommend:

- The Department for Education introduces an awareness campaign for parents on the importance of play and how to enable children's play as part of the push to increase school readiness. This could include:
- Sharing examples and ideas of using low-cost resources, including household objects, to help boost children's opportunities to play.
- Publishing antenatal advice for parents to foster playfulness from pregnancy and supporting health visitors to suggest play ideas for babies.
- Supporting all parents to be able to enable their children to play regularly and ensure children can play out safely more freely without parents having to fear of being seen as a 'bad' parent.
- Using the spaces that parents visit, such as doctors' and dentists' waiting rooms, supermarkets, and cafes to share support and guidance to grow parents' confidence to support their child to play in different ways.
- The Department for Education pilots more affordable play schemes after

school and during school holidays - including by extending government support for childcare costs under Universal Credit to wraparound and extra-curricular care.

Recommendation 7: Making play a foundation of children's early years.

Improving child development in the early years with and through play will be essential to meeting the government's milestone to increase the number of children reaching their development goals before starting school. Early years settings and childminders need to be supported and equipped to follow a play-led approach to make the most of these precious years, with the right staff skills, facilities and space for children to play in their early years.

We recommend:

- All early years practitioners receive play-based training, as part of their initial training and continued professional development.
- The Early Years Foundation Stage framework should maintain its current emphasis on play and be clear about its role as the principal driver of development.
- Local authorities roll out play-focused Family Hubs which:
 - ◆ Recruit parent play champions to encourage and support play;
 - ◆ Provide positive places for parents to meet;
 - ◆ Work with health visitors, Early Years Practitioners, schools, and other professionals that work with families to support parents to play with their children of all ages.
- Local authorities work together with local childcare settings to expand access to indoor and outdoor space and facilities for young children to play. This could include play buses

to transport children to community spaces like parks, beaches, and indoor play facilities as well as mobile play libraries to bring toys and activities to childcare settings.

- The Department for Work and Pensions and Department for Education help fathers have more time to play with their babies by introducing into employment rights legislation a right to six weeks of paid leave reserved specifically for fathers and partners in their baby's first year.

Recommendation 8: Schools are supported to harness the power of play for learning.

Play is foundational to childhood, and to education. It is how children learn about the world and their place in it. There are therefore huge benefits if schools are equipped to harness the power of play, both indoors and outdoors as part of the curriculum in the classroom, and in the playground.

We recommend:

- School leaders, teachers, teaching assistants, after-school club staff, and supervisors receive high-quality play training as part of their teacher training and CPD to enable playful learning within the classroom and healthy and active playtimes.
- The Department for Education requires and supports schools to develop their own plan for play, which includes trained play coordinators and a recognition of the importance of play within the curriculum.
- Play be recognised and utilised within whole school approaches to mental health and wellbeing.
- The new National Curriculum for primary schools includes high-quality play-based indoor and outdoor learning, as well as free play, and sets out how this benefits children, including after they reach school age.

- Experiences at breakfast and afterschool clubs in Primary Schools and in community settings such as holiday programmes are predominantly play based.
- The Department for Education issues statutory guidance to ringfence time within the school day for play during breaktime and lunchtime so children have sufficient opportunities for free play. We suggest reinstating the 10 minutes to the school day, as called for by the British Psychological Society's Time to Play campaign.
- The Department for Education makes clear that the withdrawal of playtime as punishment for bad behaviour or for running out of time to finish classwork is not acceptable.
- All primary schools move towards adopting 'always-active uniforms', in line with the calls from the Active Uniform Alliance.
- Ofsted includes play sufficiency as a measure of school performance. This would encourage schools to boost play in school time as a vehicle for learning and growth inside and outside the classroom and reward those schools who value play highly.
- Minimum requirements are introduced for school playgrounds to ensure that they are safe and accessible for all children and have enough space for them.
- Primary Schools have an annual 'Day of Play' (we suggest 11th June: the United Nations International Day of Play), during which learning takes place through free and guided play.

Recommendation 9: Reimagine and better regulate the digital lives of children.

It is clear that there is a balance to be found between the time children spend online and the creative and fun benefits

of digital life. Video gaming has been a part of childhood for over forty years, yet the national debate around screentime barely existed until relatively recently. That ongoing debate is crucial for good reason - there is growing evidence showing how many children are spending huge amounts of poor quality time on digital devices including on apps which encourage addictive behaviour. This can have an adverse impact on the physical and mental health of some children and is also one of the contributors to the loss in time children spend playing 'offline', as well as on other, non-harmful digital platforms.

It is important to note that one of the many reasons children are spending more and more time online is because of a reduction in opportunities for children to play 'offline'. If we want our children to spend less time glued to their phones, we need to provide them with more opportunities to play offline - through a National Play Strategy and Play Sufficiency Duty - alongside tackling some of the drivers which keep some children online for too long. We also need to regulate to protect children playing online in the same way as we regulate to protect them when they play offline.

We recognise that online play can be both beneficial and hugely enjoyable for children and parents. Children told us this repeatedly in our focus groups. However, we do not believe this precludes the need for a regulatory and cultural shift to reduce the amount of time children are spending online, particularly on smartphones and those apps with addictive designs, which often do not constitute play. It is time for a major rethink about the role of social media in children's lives, and how to support parents and others to encourage children to spend more time playing offline.

We recommend:

- The Government legislates to make the digital world safe for children to play:
 - ◆ The Government should commit to raising the digital age of consent to 16.

- ◆ The Department for Science, Innovation and Technology should introduce stricter guidelines for digital games and toys targeted at children and young people, based on the 'Playful by design' toolkit created by Digital Futures Commission.⁴¹⁵¹
- ◆ The Department for Science, Innovation and Technology should mandate that digital products and services that are marketed to children - which don't require digital consent - do not include 'addictive-by-design' features such as 'streaks' or endless scrolls. Any products and applications featuring these should carry health warnings on their packaging or in the app-store and should only be available to adults.
- The Government sets out a clear plan to disrupt the addictive grip of digital devices on children's lives in order to open up children's time to play. The Government's National Play Strategy (our Recommendation 1) should include a specific commitment to a step-change in the quantity and quality of children's use of digital devices. Such a change should be achieved through a combination of stronger regulation, public engagement and information (including to parents, children, and young people) and addressing addictive 'push' factors that have driven children online and indoors:
 - ◆ The Government should develop and regularly update evidence-based guidance to schools, nurseries, and childminders about the appropriate use of digital devices, including banning the use of phones in school during the school day facilitated by 'smartphone pouches' or similar. Those children who require access to a smartphone for health or wellbeing reasons can do so at the discretion of headteachers.
 - ◆ The Department for Culture, Media & Sport should promote a national digital detox campaign to raise awareness among parents and young people about the adverse effects of excessive and unhealthy use of digital devices and services, with a particular focus on social media risks. This campaign should emphasise the importance of and opportunities for offline play, and offer healthy, active alternatives to time spent on social media and streaming platforms. In addition, it should include advice to parents about their own use of digital devices and the risks of 'technoference' in parenting and play.
 - ◆ The Government should provide updated age-specific guidance to parents, carers, and young people about both quantity and quality of use of digital devices and services in childhood, with a particular reference to the risks of online harms associated with some social media 'features' including endless scrolls, image taking/sharing, and addictive-by-design features like 'streaks', and emerging technologies including advanced AI. This guidance should be informed by: (1) emerging research evidence; (2) engagement with children, young people and parents; and (3) mandated data disclosures by major tech platforms. Given the pace of change in digital devices/services, the Government should also support linked rapid action-research into the impact on children and their education.

Recommendation 10: Embed play in healthcare settings and recognise and use it as a tool to improve public health outcomes.

Play brings many benefits to children's physical and mental health. To help achieve the Government's plans to raise the healthiest generation of children in our history, to cut waiting times for planned paediatric services, and to provide children with preventative mental health support we recommend:

- The Department for Health and Social Care recognises the importance of play in children's health and healthcare within the forthcoming 10-year health plan.
- The Government pilots 'Play on prescription', working with local authorities, Integrated Care Boards (ICBs), GPs, and community groups.
- NICE guidance is updated to include play in hospitals, which includes a clear ratio of the number of play specialists and/or play workers needed per number of child patients and requires play spaces and opportunities to be available 24/7 when a child is in hospital.
- ICBs follow the new NHS England / Starlight guidelines on play in healthcare in commissioning children's services.
- The neighbourhood health model being developed by ICBs should include community health play specialists to enable new child health hubs to be as accessible as possible to children and young people.

Credit: @drewfussphotography and Hornimans Adventure Playground, London W10



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Finally, our particular thanks go to the children and young people who shared their thoughts and perspectives as we developed our key findings and recommendations for this final report, and to our expert commissioners for their guidance and feedback and their tireless work to promote the importance of play.

Oral evidence witnesses

Adrian Voce, Starlight and Playful Planet

Adrienne Burgess, Fatherhood Institute

Aida Cable, Thrive at Five

Ali Oliver, Youth Sport Trust

Alison Tonkin, Stanmore College

Amanda Dawkins, Play 4 All and Childcare Solution

Amandine Alexandre, Parent

Amber Ogunsanya, Inclusive Play Specialist

Anna Scott Marshall, British Paralympic Association

Ben Addy, Sustrans

Ben Tawil & Mike Barclay, Ludicology

Candice James, Max Roach Centre

Carley Sefton, Learning Through Landscapes

Caroline Essame, CreateCATT

Catherine Peacock, parent

Ceri Gibbins, Clarion Futures

Cllr Helen Hayden, Leeds City Council

Cllr John Hubbard, Local Government Association

Craig Jones, Junior Adventures Group

Daisy Greenwell & Joe Ryrie, Smartphone Free Childhood

Daniella Abraham, National Childbirth Trust

Dinah Bornat, ZCD Architects

Dr Abi Miranda, Anna Freud

Dr Denise Wright, Liverpool Children’s Centres and Family Hubs

Dr Ed Baines, UCL Institute of Education

Dr Elizabeth Kilbey, Consultant Clinical Psychologist

Dr Helen Bilton, University of Reading

Dr Kate Paradine, Voice 21

Dr Lynn McNair, University of Edinburgh

Dr Michael Yogman, Harvard Medical School

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 Rotherhithe Primary School
 Gemma Hyde, Town
 and Country Planning
 Association
 Gillian Mahon & Ellen
 Fesseha, Right to Play
 Hannah Keegan, Fortuna
 School
 Harriet Grant, The Guardian
 Helen Griffiths, Fields in
 Trust
 Helena Good MBE,
 Daydream Believers
 James Gowans, API
 Jasmine Hoffman, Parent
 and resident
 Jen Lexmond, EasyPeasy

Kate Robinson, Sir Ken
 Robinson legacy Foundation
 Katherine Freerer, Parent
 Katie Staniforth, Parent
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 Louise Watson, Private
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 Marianne Mannello, Play
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 Mark Lawrie, StreetGames
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 Penn State Brandywine
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Reedah El-Saie, Brainspark
 Games
 Rick Jenner, ParkPlay
 Rowen Smith, The Centre
 for Emotional Health
 Ruth Marvel, The Duke of
 Edinburgh's Award
 Sallyanne Pitt, Great
 Ormond Street Hospital
 Sarah Jayne Blakemore,
 University of Cambridge
 & Wellcome Trust PhD
 programme, UCL
 Sarah Macshane and Lucy
 Dormandy, The Lego Group
 Shahneila Saeed, Ukie
 Sophia Giblin, Treasure
 Time
 Stephanie Cook, Author
 Sue Atkins, Parenting
 Expert, Broadcaster, and
 Author
 Susan Sandouka Husemeyer,
 Wild About Play

Written evidence submissions

A Place in Childhood
 Active Dorset
 Adele Cleaver
 Adrian Voce
 Angela Ben-Arie
 Assemble Play
 Association of Play
 Industries
 Bethan Morgan & Cath Prisk
 Big Education
 Birth to 19
 Blossom Federation
 Boromi
 Bristol City Council
 Caroline Scott

Chester Zoo
 Children's Play Advisory
 Service
 Children's Alliance
 City of Doncaster Council
 Community Playthings
 Coram
 Council for Learning
 Outside the Classroom
 Digital Futures for Children
 Dr Amanda Norman
 Dr Angela Colvert
 Dr Ben Highmore
 Dr Ed Baines, Will Piercy, &
 Mine Sak Acur

Dr Janine Coates, Dr Helena
 Pimlott-Wilson, and Dr
 Verity Postlethwaite
 Dr Jaspar Khawaja
 Dr Linda Plowright-Pepper
 Dr Michael Martin
 Dr Ryan Bramley & Professor
 Jennifer Rowsell
 Dr Sally Watson
 Dr Soizic Le Courtois,
 Manogya Sahay, & Qiming
 Liu
 Dr Wendy Russell, Mike
 Barclay, & Ben Tawil
 Dreams Network
 EasyPeasy

Education Development Trust	Make-Do Play	Starlight
Ellen Weaver	Malcolm Tozer	Stevie Bode
Emily Adlington	Matt Hickford	StreetGames
ESP Play	Matt Robinson	The Centre for Emotional Health
Family Fund	Mike Wragg	The Children's Society
Fatherhood Institute	Mine Sak Acur, Professor Kerstin Sailer, Dr Ed Baines, & Professor Alan Penn	The LEGO Group
Fields in Trust	National Childbirth Trust	The Open University Centre for Children and Young People's Wellbeing
Football Foundation	NCS Trust	The Valley Project
Global TIES for Children	OPAL	Town and Country Planning Association
Groundwork UK	Outdoor Play Canada	Triangle Adventure Playgroudn
Gwealan Tops Adventure Playground	PACT Creative Training	Triple P
Haringey Play Association	Play Bradford	UK Adventure Playground Network
Health Professionals for Safer Screens	Play England	UK Children's Play Policy Forum
Helen Lomax & Kate Smith	Play Gloucestershire	UK Coaching
Home-Start UK	Play Included	WeMindTheGap
Hugh Dames	Playboard NI	Wild about Play
Impact on Urban Health	Playful Futures	Wildlife and Countryside Link
In Kind Direct	Playing Out	Yorkshire Endeavour Academy Trust
Institute of Imagination	Professor Alison Stenning	Youth Sport Trust
Intelligent Health	Professor Bertha Ochieng & Christopher Owens	
International Play Association England	Professor Helen Dodd	
Internet Matters	Professor Monica Lakhnpaul	
Isle of Play	Professor Tracy Harwood	
Jackie Boldon	Richard O'Neill	
Julie Gilleland	Roman Road Adventure Playground	
Jupiter Play	Rowen Smith	
Kent Police and Crime Commissioner	SafeScreens	
Kumsal Kurt	Save the Children	
Laura Richardson	Sereena Keymatlian	
Lawn Tennis Association	Shiremoor Adventure Playground	
Liverpool City Council	Slade Gardens Adventure Playground	
Local Trust	Sport England	
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