

Children's Play Policy Forum statement

Play builds children

A crisis in childhood is happening every day, all around us.

Almost 80% of 5 to 15 year olds aren't getting enough physical activity to keep themselves healthy.

Evidence shows that children are physically weaker than previous generations.

10% of children and young people are affected by mental health problems.

Fewer children are allowed to travel on their own to places within walking distance other than school. The figure has reduced from 55% in 1971 to a maximum of 33% in 2010.

More than 20% of children are overweight or obese when they begin school. This increases to more than 30% by the time they leave primary school.

The cost to society of allowing these trends to continue is huge. It includes the human cost of ill health (physical and mental), an increased demand on public services, and damage to the economy through lost productivity and skills gaps.



Modern life is squeezing play – especially outdoor play – to the margins of children’s lives

Our everyday environments and lifestyles mean that the natural growth and development that occurs when children play isn’t happening. Although children in the UK are now generally taller and heavier, their physical strength is decreasing. The mental health of a generation is at risk. Obesity in children is at epidemic levels and increases in life expectancy have stalled.

When everyday play is replaced by highly restricted lives – indoors, on screens and under the constant surveillance of adults – children’s bodies, brains, muscles and minds simply cannot do what they are designed to do. Lack of play leaves children mentally and physically unprepared to cope with life. This affects them in childhood and throughout the rest of their lives.

It is a matter of urgency that play is prioritised – for two important reasons:

- the significance of the harm caused by this lack of play
- the huge benefits that will be gained if we develop environments and everyday lifestyles that support children’s play.

Children need play to survive and thrive

It’s difficult to imagine a childhood without play. When we remember our own childhoods, many of us recall having the freedom to play outdoors in streets, parks and playgrounds, getting up to mischief and enjoying all sorts of adventures.

Building dens and sandcastles, spending hours on swings, slides and roundabouts, even making campfires – all of these helped build our confidence, cement our friendships and encourage us to have a go at things and persevere.

Many of our most important life lessons came from the experiences we had playing – and the ones that involved a few bruises or a good laugh possibly taught us the most. The freedom to take risks is crucial to children’s development.



The Children’s Play Policy Forum
A collective voice for children’s play
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Why has play changed since we were children?

The fun we have when we play – and the motivation to play in the first place – comes from being able to choose what to do, how to do it, when to start and when to stop. Playing is very different to sport and other adult-organised activities, even though they may seem similar. Freedom and choice are what make playing unique. When children play, the rules aren’t set by adults and there is freedom to explore, discover and learn from mistakes. However, for today’s children, playing is different than it was for previous generations.

So, what has changed?

- The volume of traffic has increased.
- Technology and social media are replacing real-life activities.
- Public playgrounds are being neglected and closed.
- Educational pressure, homework and organised activities have increased.
- Parents’ anxiety about children’s safety has intensified.

More play is part of the solution

When they play, children drive their own development. Play has a critical role in building:

- the structures of the brain
- stronger, healthy bodies
- resilience – children’s ability to cope with stress, challenges and setbacks
- skills such as creativity, problem-solving and critical thinking.

Playing also builds:

- children’s sense of identity
- close family relationships
- strong connections within communities.

Our vision for children

All children are entitled to play every day. In fact, it is essential. Playing is a fundamental and vital part of being a child, as recognised in the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child.

Governments have a responsibility for play and leadership is needed. Children’s play deserves a broad and comprehensive approach, involving cross-departmental collaboration and accountability.

Government, the devolved administrations and local authorities can together make sure that children and society are not fundamentally damaged by the lack of play in children’s everyday lives – and that we all gain the unique benefits of children playing more.

Play is a powerful builder of happy, healthy, capable children. It also benefits families, communities and society.