

Priorities for Play: Towards 2030 and Beyond

McKendrick, John H.

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PRIORITIES FOR PLAY

TOWARDS 2030 AND BEYOND

EDITED BY JOHN H. MCKENDRICK JUNE 2023

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What now for play?

John H McKendrick



Play is a pluralistic enterprise, and it will come as no surprise to anyone who is familiar with play debates among the play community that the priorities for play that comprise this collection are diverse, at times contradictory, but always conveyed with conviction and passion.

The idea behind this collection was to prime delegates in advance of the 22nd International Play Association Triennial World conference, held in Glasgow in June 2023. There was no need to stoke-the-fire, and seventy priorities were presented. The contributions come from far and wide, spanning seventeen nations spread across five continents. As with its companion collection, *Inspirationally Playful*, there are reflections from parents, playworkers, play advocates, academics, early years workers, and professionals from a wide range of disciplinary backgrounds.

We open with some of the national success stories and work to promote play, with calls to consolidate the principle of play sufficiency, to capitalise on the progress made toward realising the right to play, and to strengthen the commitment to outdoor play. This is not to suggest that all is well in the political realm. There are calls to work holistically and to engage more directly to promote social justice and inclusion. Pleas are made to utilise play to promote health and wellbeing, to promote resilience in managing grief, to facilitate the acquisition of literacy and numeracy, and more generally to enrich children's experience of school. Priorities are articulated for how we use play in the Early Years, and to acknowledge that the potential for playful learning is not restricted to the youngest children. Of course, play has value beyond institutional settings. We are implored to value free play, to promote play to strengthen connections between family and community, and to use planning for play to enrich neighbourhood life for all. Adventure playgrounds, nature, and digital play are specified as priorities. Play space priorities are outlined for large cities, girls, and neighbourhoods. We are reminded that even the youngest of our children must have a say in how play is developed, and that adults have much to learn by following the child's lead in their play. Although we must uphold the right of the child to be heard in matters that impact on them, we must also acknowledge adults' responsibilities to facilitate this. It is also incumbent on us to be reflexive adults, and to continually advance our standing as skilled practitioners by availing ourselves of the training and learning opportunities that are available. This must also mean engaging with new thinking and seminal writing on the theory and practice of play and strengthening the presence of play in research and teaching in Further and Higher Education. Playworkers are also asked to focus more on promoting freedom to play, challenging play deficits, and embracing risk in play. Products and publications to promote play are championed, as is stronger engagement with creative practices and the arts. At another scale and looking to 2030, we are challenged to promote an ecology of play and to rethink what our nations could be by the end of the decade. Our priorities conclude with reflections on play advocacy and legacy.

Working with the principle of play sufficiency

Mike Barclay and Ben Twail



Mike and **Ben**, working together as [Ludicology](#), research and consult on play sufficiency at neighbourhood, municipal and national levels. Their work includes two studies into the Welsh Government's Play Sufficiency Duty ([2019](#), [2020](#)), numerous [local authority play sufficiency assessments](#), and research with [particular groups of children](#).

[General Comment 17](#) recommends that state parties introduce legislation to support children's right to play based on the principle of sufficiency. Whilst examples of countries doing so remain limited to the likes of [Wales](#) and [Scotland](#), there are cities (for example [Leeds](#) and [Dublin](#)), and smaller settlements (including [rural communities in Wales](#)) adopting and working with the concept at a more local level. Such examples illustrate the potential of play sufficiency to offer an [organising principle](#) for the development of more child-friendly communities and organisations, as well as being a powerful policy instrument for upholding children's rights. In all such cases [hyperlocal research with children](#) has been a catalyst for change across multiple levels of policy and practice.

[Play sufficiency is a matter of spatial justice](#), working towards children having equitable access to time and space to fully express their playful disposition, addressing infringements on children's right to play. In doing so, play sufficiency is concerned with the entirety of children's opportunities for play, in and around homes, in schools, in the public realm, and perhaps even digital spaces. The principle of play sufficiency challenges notions of play as a time and space bound activity, moving adult responsibilities [beyond narrow definitions of play provision](#), towards a more collective and comprehensive response. Such an approach requires adults to take account of children's everyday experiences of playing and how these are shaped by, and can shape, the context in which children live.

We need hyperlocal research with children; recognising that children hold [intimate knowledge](#) about their local environments, which they experience differently to adults. The insights generated can reveal ways in which things might be done differently, whilst also re-enchanting adult connections to childhood play.

Committing to the principle of play sufficiency can help communities and institutions orientate their ways of working towards children's agenda of playing. Much of the [potential of play sufficiency lies in its ambiguity](#) and the questions it raises, both in terms of the societal conditions that best support play, and [organisational conditions that enable people to take action](#). Such questions require a research-based response, which in turn encourages a broader consideration of the policies and practices that affect children, including those related to spatial planning, transport, housing, education and more.

Realising every child's right to play in Scotland

Cherie Morgan

Cherie is Director of Projects at [Play Scotland](#). Her role is to work with partners to develop and lead projects that will improve children's opportunities for play in their local community, with a focus on co-creation and action research.



After a quarter of a century of campaigning for a legal duty for play in planning, the [Play Sufficiency Assessment regulations](#) will come into force in May 2023 as part of [The Planning \(Scotland\) Act 2019](#), which is underpinned by [National Planning Framework 4](#). Play Scotland has been at the forefront of developing [co-created tools](#) with children and young people to ensure that children have a voice in planning, a higher priority in the public realm, enjoy more street play, and are provided with sufficient resources, time, permission, and space to play and thrive.

We are working in partnership with the Scottish Government and local authorities to develop the key themes that comprise a Play Sufficiency Assessment (PSA). I have come to the conclusion that inclusion is one of the biggest challenges we face in Scotland. So much more needs to be done to ensure that no child is left behind when it comes to accessing play.

As part of my work, alongside an assessment team, I have visited a range of formal play facilities. I have seen some innovative, challenging, and imaginative equipment. I have seen huge investments in infrastructure. However, when considering these areas through the lens of accessibility, it becomes evident that not all children can overcome barriers such as narrow gates, no wheel-friendly paths, and steps to access these play places.

Adjustments like accessible paths, wide gates, and easy transitions would ensure that children no longer must navigate the barriers that some now accept (or even expect) as a fact of their life. Inclusive infrastructure is needed. We need "destination" parks where all children can experience excitement and thrill through play. We can do better. My hope is that Play Sufficiency Assessments will establish benchmarks and will induce a range of innovative improvements that will benefit not 80%, not 90%, but ALL our children and young people by 2030 and beyond.

Nine priorities for outdoor play in Canada

Louise de Lannoy



Louise completed her PhD at Queen's University in 2019 in clinical exercise physiology. She joined the [Healthy Active Living and Obesity](#) Research Team at the CHEO Research Institute in 2020 where she first became involved with [Outdoor Play Canada](#).

In 2021, Outdoor Play Canada published [Outdoor Play in Canada: 2021 State of the Sector Report](#), which presented a chronology of developments since the publication and release of the [2015 Position Statement on Active Outdoor Play](#), reflected on current practice, and outlined a five-year plan for the sector.

A large cross-sectoral collective consulted over four months, identifying eight major priorities for the outdoor play sector, with key actions determined for each priority. A stakeholder survey was then administered: 302 stakeholders responded, demonstrating much consensus on these eight priorities (>75% agreement). Analysis of these survey responses led to the identification of a ninth priority. This final list was reviewed and endorsed by twelve international experts.

- Promote the health, wellbeing, and developmental benefits of outdoor play.
- Promote, protect, preserve, and invest in outdoor play environments.
- Advocate for equity, diversity, and inclusion in outdoor play.
- Ensure that outdoor play initiatives are land-based and represent the diverse cultures, languages, and perspectives of Indigenous peoples of North America.
- Research and support data collection on outdoor play.
- Reframe views on safety and outdoor play.
- Leverage engagement opportunities with the outdoors during and after COVID-19.
- Increase and improve professional development opportunities in outdoor play.
- Expand and enable cross-sectoral connections/collaborations.

These priorities and their associated actions belong to the whole Canadian outdoor play sector. Thousands have visited the Outdoor Play Canada website and downloaded the report. Interest has been registered from all parts of Canada and from 21 countries outside. We know that the report has been used to inform the development of grant proposals, policy, and research. We hope that it continues to inform the development of the outdoor play sector, in Canada and beyond!

Breaking down the play silos

Alethea Jerebine

Alethea is a Cotutelle PhD student at Coventry University (UK) and Deakin University (Australia). Her [research](#) is investigating cultural norms around risk and safety in children's active physical play from the perspective of parents and policy actors in the education system.



I have encountered many passionate people in the short time I have been researching play. Their expertise and interests are diverse, including public health and the role of play in children's [physical activity](#) and [physical literacy](#) development (my own background); [play-based learning](#) and the role of [play in education](#); [physical education](#), and the role of play in lifelong movement; [evolutionary psychology](#), and the role of play in [human development](#) and [wellbeing](#); [play therapy](#), as a form of psychotherapy; as well as [playwork](#) with its [human rights](#)-based perspective, which celebrates the intrinsic value of children's play.

The body of literature across these disciplines is vast and persuasive, yet the [salience of play](#) is low in [public policy](#), which, to some degree, reflects how play is regarded among the general population. Research has shown that many [parents](#) lack confidence to support their children's play and are unsure how to overcome barriers to it. Even within disciplines concerned with play, such as [public health](#), play must compete for attention with what many others consider to be higher priority issues (such as sport participation and active travel).

What can we do to encourage others to appreciate the importance of play? I believe we need to embrace the [complexity of play](#). We need to break down silos, remain curious, and be on the lookout for ways to collaborate across disciplines and interests. In the words of George Bernard Shaw, "Those who cannot change their minds cannot change anything". Working together, with open minds, may help us discover ways to raise the salience of play and, in turn, embolden our policy makers and leaders to change the way we do 'education' and 'health' and every other aspect of our lives that could be enriched through play.

Play for children with disabilities

Paolo Lucattini



Paolo is a lecturer at the University of Rome “Foro Italico” and at the University of Pisa. His research interests are migratory phenomena and intersectionality; inclusive play, sports, animated movies, and related technologies.

The first part of life represents a moment of extraordinary importance. Neuroscience advises that the formation of new connections (synaptogenesis) between neurons takes place between the third and sixth month of intrauterine life, and between the ages of 6 and 12 ([Lenroot & Giedd, 2006](#)). The last months of gestation and the years from pre-adolescence to early twenties as periods in which a pruning process of connections occurs. This pruning is guided both by genetic makeup and by the principle summarized as “use it or lose it”. The sensory and motor maps that children are developing accompany them throughout life. Reduced use “can lead to those modifications that determine individual differences, or to anomalous modifications in the case of the onset of pathologies” ([Regni & Fogassi, 2019, p.238](#)). The first part of life is characterized by opportunities associated with playing, toys, and contexts for playing. Play is an irreplaceable human activity that allows children to fantasize, fail, look for alternatives, interact, put themselves in other’s shoes, develop social rules, and experiment with creativity and flexibility. ([Autorità Garante per l’Infanzia e l’Adolescenza, 2018](#)). Do children with disabilities play? With whom, where, when do they play?.

LUDI - Play for Children with Disabilities, the international and interdisciplinary network of researchers and professionals, has begun to understand and answer important questions relating to children with disabilities and play. The [results obtained by the network](#) highlight how playing does not yet have a sufficiently central role in the daily practices of the educational and rehabilitation services that gravitate around children with disabilities. These professionals tend to pursue clinical objectives while marginalising opportunities, spaces and times dedicated to creativity, exploration, and discovery ([Bianquin, 2017](#)). Playing seems to be considered only as a means through which to achieve other objectives or to increase skills (ludiform activities), rather than playing for the pleasure of playing (ludic activities) ([Besio et al. al., 2017](#)).

As [Gray \(2013\)](#) argues, only by playing can children (with and without disabilities) acquire the social skills that they will need as adults, such as listening to others, being creative, managing emotions and facing dangers. And so, let them all play.

Equity in play for all children

Ozlem Cankaya

Ozlem is an Assistant Professor in Early Childhood Curriculum Studies at MacEwan University in Canada. Her research focuses on generating evidence to assist educators and parents in effectively supporting young children's cognitive development through play.



Social stratification in children's learning environment, access to play, and learning materials contributes to the [knowledge and achievement gap](#) between low-, middle- and higher-income children. Disposable income enables families to purchase stimulating toys and materials, which low-income families often cannot afford. Indeed, professionals working with children in [impoverished homes](#), often recent refugees and immigrants, single (often teen) parents, and itinerant families, [typically find few toys available](#). Without stimulating toys and materials, children's home play is [typically repetitive, superficial, and interrupted](#), and not conducive to deep-level learning. Despite willingness, [parents do not always have the specialized knowledge, skills, and tools to facilitate learning](#) activities or select the best materials for children.

Creating quality play opportunities in impoverished learning environments is challenging. One potential solution is to train play facilitators, who may be parents, caregivers, educators, or community. The not-for-profit [Mother-Child Education Foundation in Turkey](#) provides an excellent example of this at work. Facilitators are trained to teach parents play-based learning and how to select appropriate play materials and techniques. Practical tips are provided on how to play with children, including asking open-ended questions and following the child's lead. Engaging children in [quality conversations during play can assist learning in some specialised areas](#), such as science and mathematics.

Creating play opportunities for all can also be achieved by using local resources and loose parts, such as natural or recycled materials. Hyndman et al. (2014) [documented a successful example of how milk crates](#), one simple everyday object, were used to encourage cooperation in school playgrounds. The available materials stimulated the students' creative play by creating different structures such as cubbies, boats, rockets, and spaceships, increasing their purpose to work together. Such approaches promote sustainability and empower communities to take ownership of their play environments.

Play alone cannot solve all equity issues related to child development: however, it can and should be used to tackle some inequities. We need to educate community leaders and families on the value of play for children's development and to utilise [evaluation research which demonstrates how sustainable play objects \(natural or recycled materials\)](#) can promote equity in play for all children.

The importance of inclusion in play

Wendy Binnie



Wendy has been working as a Woodland Wellbeing Officer in [Under the Trees](#), an outdoor charity in Falkirk (Scotland) since October 2020. She organises and delivers ASN play sessions.

It is easy to take for granted the ability to walk to the park, to use playground equipment, and to visit soft play facilities. However, when you are part of a family who have additional support needs, none of these things are as simple as they sound. Physical and non-visible disabilities (such as anxiety issues or sensory impairments) can debilitate and exclude. Not everyone is understanding. Not everyone appreciates the regulation struggles that sometimes occur. Not everyone is accepting of how some medical conditions can impact on how you present in public.

I am late diagnosed Autistic with ADHD. I am still learning about myself and understanding my own struggles. This fuels my passion to make sure every family has access to a relaxed and fun form of play. Going out to play should not be stressful. Our environments should be inclusive to all.

I acknowledge that I do not understand everyone's lived experience of play. I do not have all the answers for all the people. However, by asking some simple questions and listening to families, we can make play work better for all. We should never underestimate the therapeutic value of spending time with others who want to understand, and who do not judge.

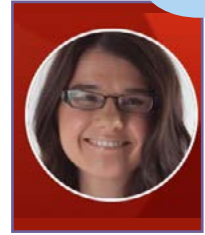
My priority is to try and deliver inclusive and fun play sessions and to help others gain the confidence and have the tools to be able to do the same.

Inclusive OSHC for children with ASD

Fiona McKay and Jennifer Cartmel

Fiona is a Master of Social Work student at Griffith University, Australia. She works in OSHC settings on a casual basis alongside study.

Jennifer is an Associate Professor at Griffith University. Her research is focused on outside school hours services.



In Australia, many parents of children with disabilities report problems obtaining high quality and accessible Outside School Hours Care (OSHC) services ([Cartmel & Hurst, 2021](#)). Children with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) endure a severe disservice if they do not get access to the support for wellbeing and development, care, play, and opportunities for friendship, relationship and confidence building that a high quality OSHC service can provide ([Moir & Brunker, 2021](#); [Simoncini et al, 2015](#)).

As we move forward towards 2030, a key priority for all who have an interest in play must be to work together to ensure that we can provide truly inclusive, high quality OSHC to all our children – including those with ASD.

We need to recognise, and commit to meet, the specific needs of children with disabilities. Currently, the Australian Disability Discrimination Act 1992 has references to school settings but there is no reference to OSHC services and a requirement to meet the legislation.

We should review the qualifications required to become an OSHC educator to ensure that the learning is focused on child development, education, and the importance of play. We need to ensure that the content of current qualifications in school aged care and play work in Australia provides these professionals with the breadth of knowledge that enables them to provide high quality care to all children attending OSHC (Cartmel & Hurst, 2021).

High quality training could be developed and provided to all OSHC services throughout Australia, to ensure that educators have the knowledge, skills, and experience to provide an inclusive, and exciting OSHC experience for children with ASD. It is vital that this training recognises that each child is a unique individual and equips educators with skills and techniques enable all children to realise their potential.

Inclusive outdoor play spaces for autistic children

Catherine Latimer



Catherine is a researcher at [Middletown Centre for Autism](#). She completed her PhD on outdoor play and wellbeing in Northern Irish primary schools at Queen's University Belfast.

The outdoor environment with its ever-changing collection of sights, sounds, smells, tastes, and textures, provides the means to strengthen proprioceptive, vestibular, and tactile systems. For autistic children in particular, the outdoor environment is conducive to the teaching of essential life skills and improving readiness for learning.

[General Comment 9](#) on The Rights of Children with Disabilities (UNCRC, Article 23) states that "The attainment of full inclusion of children with disabilities in the society is realized when children are given the opportunity, places, and time to play with each other". However, large undefined spaces, lack of predictable and structured routines, and the types of play that prevail can make engaging in outdoor play a stressful experience for many autistic children.

Barriers must be removed and play spaces and experiences must better understand the challenges faced by autistic children if equal access and full participation is to be achieved. Stakeholders and users, most importantly of all autistic children themselves, must be consulted when play space is being designed.

A survey conducted by [Middletown Centre for Autism](#) revealed that common barriers to outdoor play in the community include: a lack of appropriate equipment to support play for children with additional needs; attitudes and understanding of autism amongst other parents and children in the community; navigating the social demands and expectations of the environment; sensory overwhelm due to noise and crowding; and proximity to inclusive outdoor play facilities within the local area.

With this in mind, we recommend looking to the principles of [Universal Design](#) as a concept for designing outdoor play spaces. A Universal Design playground is one where the designers and providers work to ensure the playground is accessible and usable to the greatest extent possible for as many people possible, challenging, and engaging children of all ages and abilities. In this way we can fulfil the rights of all children to play and flourish together.

Active play for health and learning

Melodie Crumlin

Melodie has over twenty years' experience of working in the voluntary sector and has long been a passionate advocate for children's play, community arts, and youth work.



We believe in [robust evaluation of the work that we fund](#).

According to [Pasi Sahlberg and William Doyle](#), 'Inspiring Scotland's outdoor play fund is developing a vision for Scotland where its children will be the healthiest in the world, both physically and mentally'.

Evaluation of the Active Play Programme found that there was a long-term positive impact of moderate to vigorous physical activity (MVPA) on academic attainment, and it was estimated that 50% of time during an Active Play session is spent in MVPA, which is higher than time spent in commonly played sports and physically active games ([Johnstone, 2016](#)).

Our Active Play work can be led by playworkers, primary school teachers, nursery class teachers, or those within after school community settings. Children take part in at least one weekly one hour session which combines semi-structured games and activities, and unstructured child-led play outdoors. The fun, creative and cooperative games are designed to help the children develop their fundamental movement skills as well as raising their levels of MVPA.

We believe in the power of outdoor play to improve the life chances of Scotland's children. Our children's health and happiness are fundamental to a successful present and future. We want to help more people who work with children to support better health, well-being and learning for each and every child. We want to 'get it right' for every child.

Active Play is effective in improving children's health and wellbeing, and their cognitive and emotional development. It is easy and inexpensive to implement. Most importantly, it is fun. We want to make Active Play a fundamental part of every child's day in Scotland, and across the world.

Play in a hospital setting

Karen Minton



Karen is a third year PhD student at the University of Wales, Swansea. Prior to commencing her research, she was a social worker and service manager in the Third Sector.

I spent regular periods in hospital as a child and, many years later, I also spent time in hospital with my terminally ill daughter. I remember the fear, confusion, and isolation I felt both as a patient and as the parent of a patient, but I have little memory of any play. In contrast, during my two decades as a child and family social worker in the Third Sector, play underpinned each intervention and every relationship.

I began my research to examine play in hospital settings by searching for evidence of policy promoting hospital play. In an early scoping exercise, I analysed forty reports published by Health Boards across Wales. I found just nine sentences that mentioned play within three thousand pages of report. I found just one brief sentence connecting play to the well-being of a child in hospital. A similar scoping exercise across England, Scotland and Northern Ireland produced similar results.

In contrast, I soon encountered much evidence of a commitment to play in hospitals. In interviews with strategists and managers, and through online surveys with hospital play practitioners, passion, pride, and belief in the difference play could make to a child's hospital experience shone brightly. The value of play was described in terms of providing distraction, comfort, pleasure, individualised activities, socialisation, normalisation, coping strategies, and reducing stress and anxiety. There was a belief that play had the potential to reduce medicalised trauma for children in the future. Survey responses from families whose child had encountered play in hospital reinforced these findings.

As I complete my data gathering and continue the thematic analysis and writing up of my research, I am convinced of the benefits that a well-resourced, fully staffed, qualified, and passionate hospital play team can deliver to children in hospital. I urge our governments to remember that children in hospital have the right to play. Hospital play must be prioritised and not sacrificed when decisions are being taken to allocate health care spending.

Returning to ‘safe’ play in health

Sandra S. Cabrita Gulyurtlu

Sandy is Head of Insights and Impact at [Starlight Children's Foundation](#) and was previously the Head of Research for the Office of the Children's Commissioner for England.



Poverty and deprivation present significant barriers to play. [Studies](#) have shown that families living in poverty experience financial constraints which limit their ability to access materials, toys, activities, and other opportunities to play. If your child is ill, treatment and rehabilitation can impact on your finances, time, and ability to access opportunities for play. The intersectionality of poverty, deprivation and illness can have a further compounding effect on limiting a child's access to play.

Childhood illness and long-term medical treatment can be an isolating and a scary experience for the child and their family. [In some cases](#), this results in long-term trauma. However, it is widely documented that by providing opportunities for children to play in these environments, children feel less afraid, and have a more positive experience of healthcare.

Having worked directly in the distribution and delivery of Starlight resources to facilitate children's play in hospital, hospices, and other healthcare settings, during the Covid-19 pandemic, I observed a large-scale shutdown of opportunities for children to play when they most need it. Whereas families we worked with had been able to access some opportunities to play pre-pandemic, post-pandemic, many of these children and families were shielding and locked out of play. We also saw how playrooms shut down in hospitals, toys were removed, and how visits from family and friends were restricted. This made the healthcare environment even more isolating, more sterile, and scarier, including in children's end-of-life care. There are still restrictions on children's play in hospital where playrooms are still closed, and the use of toys/activities are still restricted through concerns over infection control.

My priority for play is for us to stop children from being locked out of play in healthcare. The [RCN](#) has offered guidance on how to play safely in healthcare and we use this advice to open up play to all children who are being deprived of play in these settings.

Play to be heard and to heal

Georgina Thacker



Georgina is a qualified social worker and play therapist. She is currently a PhD student in social work at the University of Stirling, looking at how relationships between children and foster carers are navigated in foster care.

In my master's dissertation in social work, I argued that children expressed their trauma, rarely through words but they showed us it through actions and play. I learnt that we needed to get better at valuing what children 'do' rather than just focusing on what they 'say' and as a professional I wanted to develop skills which helped me understand children's actions better and use this knowledge to be able to advocate for them and led me towards play therapy ([Axline, 1991](#)) as a method for hearing and understanding the experiences of children.

Children come to play therapy for several reasons. My main area of interest is childhood trauma. The experiences of trauma are often very hard for children to process and unconsciously they leak into the daily lives and behaviours of children as they remain unresolved. Play therapy works on the assumption that most of our actions stem from unconscious processes and that given the right conditions (Axline, 1991) we become better able to understand and manage those experiences which impact negatively on our daily interactions.

In the play room, children have access to a variety of toys and self-direct the sessions, enabling them to feel autonomous. Have you ever considered how little choice children have in their daily lives? They are expected to 'cheer up' and 'stop being angry'. In play therapy, there are no good or bad feelings. It is acceptable to have bad thoughts. There is no judgement or expectations on the activities that children do. There is an opportunity to explore feelings within the safety of an accepting relationship.

In practice, I have found puppets are often used by children who have experienced domestic abuse. They assign me a puppet and we navigate the room together, often hiding from the monster who is dangerous and looking for us. As the therapist I can explore feelings whilst playing out these scenarios. I may ask the child, 'I am wondering how this puppet is feeling?' Or 'what is this puppet scared of?' This allows the child to transfer their own experiences onto the puppet, which feels emotionally safe whilst allowing the therapist insight into the child's experiences.

The use of babies allows children to explore their experiences of good and bad parenting, often transferring these feelings towards me where I may be given the role as the punished bad mother, or the longed-for good mother: I accept both without judgement.

I have watched children go from being labelled as aggressive and risky to become independent and having friends. Play has the power for children to be heard and heal, play is never a mindless activity.

Resilience, play and grief in childhood

Donna Hastings

Donna is a Health Play Specialist, Integrative Counsellor, and Childhood Grief Therapist. Having worked in the field of Childhood Bereavement for twenty years she is currently the Child and Families Lead at St Columba's Hospice Care in Edinburgh.



According to [Masten and Obradovic \(2006\)](#), children's play "provides a primary behaviour for developing resilience, thereby making a significant contribution to children's' wellbeing", while [Cattanach \(2003\)](#) asserts that "play and imaginative play, is the place where children can express their defiance, confusion, sadness, and try to make sense of their own particular world, and what it feels like to live there". Providing time for children/young people to explore grief and bereavement in their own way can help a child in their grieving process. Cattanach also suggests that for the child, to play in the presence of someone who listens and can share their story, can be healing.

Through play children can develop social and cognitive skills, mature emotionally, and gain the self-confidence required to manage new experiences and environments. It is thought that in Scotland there are around 26,000 children and young people who experience the death of a significant person in their lives each year. Four children are bereaved of a parent daily and by age 10 over 62% of children will have experienced a bereavement with the most common being the death of a grandparent.

Providing children with an opportunity to explore how a death is impacting their everyday lives can help them manage their grief better. This can be achieved through play. For example, we can make a volcano using Papier-mâché to explore how we feel when we keep all our emotions inside (scrunching up paper with the feelings drawn or written on them and placing them inside the volcano and then engineering an eruption using paint/glitter/creative resources). This can help children to think through the consequences of keeping their feelings to themselves and the destruction that can result if the built up of emotion results in an "explosion"). Thinking about the link between their thoughts, feelings and reactions can help them to consider alternative strategies for expressing and communicating their feelings in a way that can be more supportive for them.

There are many playful approaches to address therapeutic grief that support conversation and enhance understanding for children and young people. Children's lives can be turned upside down and negatively impacted when they are bereaved, and opportunities to play and understand grief in an age-appropriate and timely way, can enable them to manage this life-changing event.

Playing in children's museums

Catie Davis



Catie is the Director at [The Children's Museum of the Upstate-Spartanburg](#) and a doctoral student at Clemson University. Her research focuses on play and how children's museums can positively influence school readiness.

[Bettencourt et al.](#) (2017) have argued that children who enter kindergarten with under-developed social, emotional, and behavioural skills tend to have poorer quality of life and economic outcomes as adults. They also assert that if parental interactions with their children in the first five years of life are sensitive, consistent, and responsive, then positive outcomes follow in terms of social-behavioural competence and developmental well-being.

We know that play exposes children to language and presents opportunities to interact socially. We know that, through play, children can understand turn-taking and learn to express and regulate their emotions. Children with more opportunities to play before kindergarten can draw upon these experiences to help them navigate social interactions with peers and classroom expectations ([LaForett & Mendez](#), 2016).

Children's museums offer opportunities for children to develop these vital skills. Adults can scaffold and act as a guide for these skills and emotions ([LaForett & Mendez](#), 2016). Children's museums give caregivers the space to practice and learn how to enable their children to develop these skills. Parents and caregivers often need examples of school readiness activities to better help their children. Home-based activities such as making books, telling stories, singing songs, and reading books increase literacy-related skills and reading performance ([Puccioni et al.](#), 2018).

Children's museums offer a unique environment for parents, caregivers, and children to interact and play. These museums are designed to enable children to have interactive, imaginative, and fun experiences through play, learning, and discovery ([McInnes & Elpidoforou](#), 2018). We need to better understand how children's museums can increase kindergarten readiness for children from lower socio-economic households through play and at-home parental interactions.

Play can enhance logical skills in early learners

Victor Koong

Victor is the founder and managing director of [A+ Eduplay](#), a dedicated early childhood eduplay institution which is leading the efforts of merging play and early childhood education. Victor is also a vice-chairperson of [Playright](#), a non-profit organization advocating the right to play for children in Hong Kong.



Logical thinking is the ability to analyze information, make connections and draw conclusions. By developing logical thinking skills at a young age, children are better equipped, communicate effectively, and make informed decisions. Moreover, logical thinking helps children develop important social and emotional skills, such as the ability to manage their emotions, work cooperatively with others, and make ethical decisions. These are skills which are critical in an ever-changing world.

Through play, children demonstrate their ability to classify, reason and problem solve. Logical thinking is an integral part of some forms of play. Providing opportunities for children to engage in logical play in an early learner setting can help promote their cognitive development and give them a head start on learning through play that will last beyond the early years. We need to discover the most impactful ways of how children, through playing activities and games, develop, practice, and acquire logical thinking skills.

Focusing on STEM with everyday objects

Keirsten Taylor



Keirsten is a fourth-year undergraduate student at MacEwan University with a Bachelor of Science in Psychology and Biology. She is part of a research group exploring the effects of learning experiences on young children and K-12 students.

Gender stereotypes can limit girls access to Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics (STEM) play. By age two, children begin to understand their gender and preferentially gravitate toward play items associated with their gender. Children are also exposed to gender stereotypes from a young age through family and socialization, which suggest that certain subjects and activities are more appropriate for specific genders. Later on, parents [may unconsciously treat children differently regarding STEM](#) subjects, with boys often encouraged to pursue them unlike girls. Providing equal access to STEM play can challenge these biases.

[Loose parts play](#) (LPP) provides children with open-ended materials with which to explore and experiment. Play with loose parts can promote STEM thinking in three important ways:

First, LPP encourages children to explore cause-and-effect relationships and develop hypotheses about how things work. Through hands-on experimentation with loose parts, such as stacking objects or building structures, children can explore scientific concepts, develop an understanding of basic engineering concepts, and strengthen their STEM skills.

Second, LPP allows children to use their imaginations to create designs and constructions, promoting innovation and encouraging them to develop unique solutions to problems.

Third, LPP can facilitate cooperation and teamwork. Hyndman et al. (2014) [showed the power of loose parts in the school playground](#), where the use of movable/recycled loose parts materials (e.g., milk crates and cardboard boxes) led to greater interpersonal relations, including teamwork and cooperative play. This increase is marked by the need for children to develop a collaborative idea of how to use the materials.

The open-ended and gender-neutral nature of loose parts materials makes them an excellent resource for STEM play. By breaking down gender stereotypes and providing equal access to STEM play, we can create a more inclusive society that values diversity and promotes STEM involvement for all.

The place for play in our schools

Rodrigo Ramalho

Rodrigo is Head of Department of Education and Physical Activity of the Municipality of Torres Vedras. He has participated in national and international projects in play, including [MLO - Moving and Learning Outside](#)



It is obvious that school plays a central role in the lives of our children and young people. From a very young age, many children spend more than eight hours a day, for many days of the year, in crèches, kindergartens, or primary schools. Arguably, these educational settings are now more important than ever as places for play.

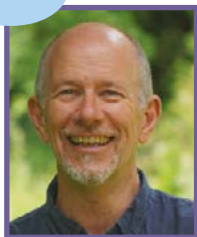
The life of children, outside the school compound, has changed dramatically in recent years. Street games have been replaced by games within four walls; groups of children playing together have given way to children playing alone; friendships forged with friends living nearby have given way to virtual “friendships” with those who live on another continent and which we only cross paths occasionally in virtual space; and free afternoons have given way to structured play times.

In these times, the school is more than ever the space of conviviality. There is a need to reimagine school play. It should be reinvented because play is precious, it can increase the physical and emotional well-being of children, and because it can be a powerful tool to motivate children and to help them learn the so-called curricular contents.

Let us consider [Tim Gill's Play Pyramid](#) and increase the amount of play time at school, either in curricular time or post-curricular time. We need to rethink the school outdoor space: let us remove the artificial environments and catalogue toys and let our children have contact with natural elements and loose parts that they can use to shape the outdoor space of their school. Finally, let us change the way we supervise, or rather, how we watch the children. Let us become playworkers rather than playground inspectors. Let us encourage children to play freely, with words of encouragement.

Every school should have a plan for play

Michael Follet



Michael is a former playworker, teacher, play strategy officer, and school improvement adviser. He is author of [*Creating Amazing Playtimes in Primary Schools*](#) and is founder of [OPAL Outdoor Play and Learning CIC](#).

For many children, school is the only time they get to play freely together outside. However, schools are under pressure to show that they are performing well and, as the judgement of the quality of schools places no value on play, many schools tend to place little or no value on play.

I have spent the past 25 years transforming the way schools provide for play. I have worked in many hundreds of schools in many countries and continents. OPAL Outdoor Play and Learning, the not-for profit organisation I founded, has worked with over 1000 schools and improved play for over one million children ([Lester et al.](#), 2011).

When schools provide great play the children are fitter, more active, and stronger ([Ardelean et al.](#), 2021). They are more cooperative, collaborative, and creative. They use language more, socialise more widely, and are more able to identify and manage risk. They are mentally and physically more resilient. Children say they are happier and enjoy school more. As a result, the litany of aggravating problems that make playtime so problematic for many schools disappear. Petty and pointless 'first aid demands' disappear. As problems disappear, senior leaders get hours of their time back each week and teachers report they have around ten minutes more teaching time per day.

In the UK, 1.4 years of time spent in school is playtime. This is the same amount of time that is spent on literacy and maths and yet almost no school has a plan for play. What organisation would have no idea what quality provision looks like, have no trained staff, have no plan for improvement, and have no evaluation or monitoring for 20% of what they do? Schools in the UK look after children for 190 days every year. Most schools have ample and secure grounds and are well-resourced with staff and budgets. They have everything they need to be able to provide children with the play they need - except the will and a plan.

Changing teachers' approach to recess

Charlene Woodham Brickman and Catherine L Ramstetter

Charlene is a career educator with experience as a teacher, Title I facilitator, technology coordinator, assistant principal, school improvement specialist, and college instructor. **Cathy** is a School Health Consultant with [Successful Healthy Children](#), founding member of [Global Recess Alliance](#), and co-author of American Academy of Paediatrics' Policy on Recess.



[Our research](#) demonstrates that every elementary school teacher acknowledges at least one benefit of recess. However, teachers still use recess as classroom currency, taking it away from pupils as punishment for bad behaviour, or to insist the time is to be used for 'academic' purposes. [Policies to protect recess do not always work in practice.](#)

We argue that professional development should include interactive workshops to reinforce the importance of recess/playful breaks in the teaching-learning process and to demonstrate how play is beneficial to the whole child. It must be shown that withholding recess is detrimental not only to cognitive functioning, but that it also harms student-teacher trust. And learning cannot happen outside a trust-based relationship.

Role modelling can also help. If our administrators can establish a work culture that is playful, not fearful of vulnerabilities, and encourages trust-based interactions, then we create an environment that is more respectful of the value of play. In such a culture, there is no rationale for removing recess.

The physical environment can also support these shifts. This might include providing staff-faculty break rooms with resources for adult play (e.g., puzzles, books, yoga, meditation, and comfortable furnishings). Similarly, protecting time allotted for breaks in the day for faculty and staff communicates a commitment to play for all.

To realise children's right to play in schools, we must commit ourselves to a paradigm shift in which we prioritize play and allow play to permeate the culture of the whole school.

Post-COVID lessons must be learned

Sabilah Eboo Alwani



Sabilah is Principal Investigator on [Global Symposium on Post-Pandemic Play](#) and a Doctoral candidate at the University of Cambridge.

Play has both a stabilising and catalysing effect, making it unique in the early learning landscape. As such, play is especially important for young children's development, and serves as a [protective force](#) in the wake of COVID-19's damage to childhoods.

The well-documented global trend toward [playing less](#) in recent years has been exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic. At the height of the pandemic, peer-to-peer play and outdoor play were significantly [curtailed](#) – and though direct links have not yet been made, literature is emerging that this has coincided with children's increased anxiety, lower socioemotional skills, and [lost learning](#).

More recently, pressure is being placed on school systems and parents to ensure children “catch up” on lost learning, which is squeezing play out of the school day.

Play is a protective force in the face of adversity. As other geopolitical, economic, climatic or ecological crises emerge, play – and playtime – must be protected for children, and recognised as not only the ‘[right](#)’ that it is, but also as the vital [key to children's healthy learning and development](#). Play must be nurtured and encouraged by adults. Play can be harnessed in both high and low resource contexts; can reach children who are remotely located; and can engage and enthuse those who struggle in traditional classroom contexts. Brighter economic futures, higher academic achievement, and improved mental health each has its seed in early childhood play and learning. We need to strengthen the place of play in research, practice, training, resourcing, and programming for education in the years ahead.

Adopting the Froebel approach in primary schools

Tania Czajka

A French native based in Scotland since 1991, **Tania** has been exploring language learning through play and creativity for many years. She specialises in creative puppetry and is the founder of [Le Petit Monde Stories](#).



In a Froebel setting, play is based on the exploration of the world and guided by knowledgeable educators. Children develop a strong sense of ownership of their learning. Froebelian educators practice [freedom with guidance](#), which means that they follow the children's interests and provide rich and challenging experiences to support and guide their learning.

When they arrive in primary school, around the age of 5, children become pupils and, by the end of their first year, they are expected to have developed some academic skills - literacy and numeracy in particular - to a certain level. Thus, teachers plan and lead activities to reach those targets. Freedom to explore, even in a play-based primary 1 class is more limited. In fact, teachers often admit that because the curriculum is so dense, playtime can easily get squashed. Also, teachers who don't have the support of another adult can find delivering lessons while providing rich play-based experiences a challenge.

I believe the Froebel principles, which work so well in nursery schools, should be adapted, and adopted in the primary school environment. Although this presents challenges - the training of teachers and the assessment of the children's levels of competence - it is acknowledged by [Education Scotland](#) that this could achieve, "a balance of teacher and child led learning opportunities, where free play and structured play will provide children with the opportunity to lead learning down their own avenue as well as receive guidance, support and opportunity to extend their learning when working with a teacher".

The ideal Froebelian classroom would feature cooking, community experiences, and access to a natural outdoor space. Scotland is a long way off from this. But there are those who [advocate for it](#) and there are [resources which can support it](#). Scotland needs to start a journey to provide a quality and rich education that is appropriate to the ages and development stages of young learners. More research about the benefits of the Froebel approach within the school environment is needed as are national conversations over its merits.

A plea for play pedagogy

Sarah Aiono



Sarah is a researcher, educator and play advocate in Aotearoa New Zealand. As CEO of Longworth Education, she provides professional development for teachers of children aged 5 – 15 years of age to ensure play continues throughout their educational experience.

The right to play is well-supported in Aotearoa New Zealand. As befits a country that celebrates the great outdoors, the opportunity to play outside in the weekends and after school is recognised as vital to the health and wellbeing of our children. [Important and significant work](#) by play advocates ensures this right to play is upheld around our country.

However, a dichotomy between play and learning exists in our primary school settings, relegating play to a 'nice to have' around the serious work of learning. Our early years curriculum, Te [Whāriki](#), is grounded on a learning through play philosophy. Thereafter, play becomes marginal to learning and a divide emerges between those focused on the testing and assessment of literacy and numeracy, and those who recognise the need for dispositional skill development.

While having a [national school curriculum](#) that is competencies focused and which provides a high level of autonomy to schools, the delivery of educational outcomes is significantly impacted by the [political landscape](#) of the current day. When the public purse is stretched, learning through play is viewed as expendable. Play pedagogy is vulnerable at these times as its outcomes are harder to quantify. Play is seen as frivolous – a bit of a muck-about – with 'real' learning requiring rigor and accountability.

My priority for play would be for policy makers and educators to recognise the positive impact of play pedagogy on the educational success beyond the early years ([Aiono et al.](#), 2019). If children are to succeed as learners in a diverse and challenging world, they need to extend themselves and play provides the means to do so within the safety of the classroom environment. Play should be a priority in educational policy and practice no matter the age of the learner involved.

Play versus the curriculum

Kerry Clark

Kerry is a mum of three and Primary Teacher at Crombie School in Aberdeenshire. She has taught for fifteen years and has a passion to ensure play is part of every child's learning journey regardless of age.



Many teachers struggle to accommodate play within an already packed curriculum. However, we need to challenge the premise that underpins this thinking. Play should not be viewed as an extra or an alternative: it should be integral to the curriculum and guaranteed in every child's journey through education.

It almost seems as if there is an invisible barrier between Early Years and then everything beyond. It is at this point of transition that we need to focus our attention and examine why play diminishes.

The infrastructure is firmly in place for play to succeed as vehicle for learning in the Early Years. Here, it is widely accepted that playful learning works best for young children. Can this model of learning through play coexist with the growing curricular demands and more traditional teaching methods that characterise learning in our primary schools? What must change to facilitate playful learning for all?

The problem is not the children, the lack of resources, or the lack of knowledge. Children are always eager to play and learn, play resources can always be found and adapted without difficulty or cost, and we know how play can be used as a tool for learning.

We need to think differently. Teachers of older children need to look towards their colleagues in the Early Years and challenge themselves to find ways to mimic how play is used to make learning fun. They need to consider whether learning might be enhanced if pupils independently discovered an outcome through free play, rather than be led toward it through a worksheet.

For most children, their favourite thing to do in the whole world is play. We should use play to advance their learning. Playful learning does not have an expiry point, we must find ways to ensure that more older children learn through play.

Policy promotes free play in Hong Kong

Pauline (Po Li) Chan



Pauline (Po Li) is the Associate Head (Teaching) and Senior Lecturer at the Education University of Hong Kong.

Traditionally, although parents and educators in Hong Kong understood that play was an integral part of children's daily lives, they were sceptical about its educational value. This began to change in the mid 1980s as more and more kindergartens began to focus on play. This led to the introduction in 2006 of policy promoting 'learning through play' and 'play-based pedagogy' ([Curriculum Development Council, 2006](#)). A new [Curriculum Guide for Kindergarten Education](#) was introduced in 2017.

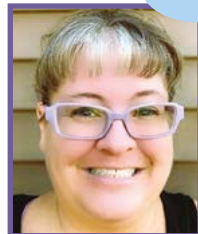
The new guidelines suggest that play should be the core pedagogy of early childhood education and that the ideal is to promote learning through play. Most significantly, the 2017 Curriculum Guide asserted the importance of free play and required that half-day and whole-day kindergartens subsidised by the government should give children, respectively, at least 30 and 50 minutes of free play every day.

Initially, many teachers were sceptical as they perceived that there was not enough space and time for free play in schools. With the assistance and promotion of the Education Bureau, various tertiary institutions (e.g., [The Education University of Hong Kong](#)) and charitable organisations (e.g., [Playright Children's Play Association](#)), kindergartens have found solutions and have been able to deliver on providing opportunities for free play.

Strike a match!

Christel Hennig

Christel is a kindergarten teacher with Edmonton Public Schools (Alberta, Canada). She has been teaching for twenty-three years and has worked with students from pre-school to grade 5.



"Education is not the filling of a pail, but the lighting of fire" is an inspirational quote, often attributed to the poet, William Butler Yeats. To me, it suggests the importance of life-long learning that is learner-centred. It is also a perfect analogy for play!

The things I remember the most about elementary school (sitting in rows, phonics in a workbook, memorizing spelling words, timed [Mad Minutes](#)) are recognized as poor practice by many today. Memorize, learn, regurgitate, forget ... fill the pail, empty it out when ready for the next load, and then fill the pail again. As a learner I eventually realized that the sense of pride and accomplishment at a job well done was because of the journey that had been undertaken and successfully completed ... it was the process not the product that mattered. Just like play!

As I work with my tiny humans now, I know the importance of learning through play. There is, of course, a time and a place to explore literacy and numeracy. However, there must also be time and place for the development of curiosity and problem-solving skills, self-confidence and independence, and the emotional awareness and social skills that one needs to excel in a learning environment. Play is the vehicle that allows these skills to flourish.

And yet, the everyday reality in many schools is that the curriculum, the school system and even parent expectations mandate very little room for play in the classroom. My heart breaks a little more every time I see a teacher using worksheets that are not developmentally appropriate or limiting and dictating the ways students can play with a toy.

My priority for play is that we all recognize and embrace the power of play in the development of every child. I wish that every rock in the park could be seen as a dinosaur egg; that the intriguing stick on the ground could be a magic wand; and that it is possible that you might just have fallen over because someone shook the snow globe that you live in. The possibilities are limited only by the power we give children to engage in play.

Let's forget the pail altogether ... gather the kindling, strike the match, and light that fire!

To play or not to play: that is the question

Lin Moore and Elaine Zweig



Lin is Professor of Early Childhood Education at Texas Woman's University. **Elaine** is Professor of Early Childhood Education at Collin College. They have authored "[*Everyone Plays! Recapturing Play for Children with Special Needs*](#)" in [*Dimensions of Early Childhood*](#) (2022) and [*Play Experiences in Early Childhood Education: Inclusion of Children with Special Needs*](#).

Whether 'tis nobler to let fly the imagination or suffer the pains of academic pressures.

When children shuffle off to dreary days without joy, must then it give us pause.

Will conscience make us cowards?

Or will we take arms against the arrows of accountability, and by opposing, end them?

Will we lead children to that undiscovered country of laughter and glee?

Perchance to dream of days with play where all children can be free!

Play can bridge the gap

Kiana Krueger

Kiana is a passionate early childhood educator, an undergraduate student, and Research Assistant at MacEwan University. She is part of the [CanPlay Lab team](#), currently researching [parent-child play](#).



Approaching families of different cultures and backgrounds with an open mind and respect for diversity allows for meaningful connections and effective communication. Understanding culture and diversity enables educators to create an inclusive learning environment in which all children can thrive, regardless of their background or identity. It follows that educators need to understand parental beliefs about play-based learning and how cultural norms shape adult engagement in play with children.

Loose parts play contributes to bridging any gap that may exist between home and formal learning environment by providing children with materials they are familiar with and may already be using in their home environment. The comfort that familiar loose parts can bring can make children feel more comfortable and can lead to them becoming engaged in an early learning and care setting. Loose parts facilitate a range of play – accessible to all children - by providing open-ended materials that encourage creativity, problem-solving, collaboration, and inclusivity. The skills and confidence that children develop through playing with familiar and engaging materials can be transferred to other areas of their learning. Educators who are sensitive to diversity should maximise the use simple and readily available materials to create rich environments sensitive to children's cultural practices and experiences.

Connecting people when planning for play

Kieran Brophy and Erica Randle



Kieran is the Assistant Director of [Play Australia](#), leading the [1000 Play Streets movement](#). **Erica** is a Senior Research Fellow in the Centre for Sport and Social Impact (La Trobe University Australia).

Children need to live in neighbourhoods that encourage independent mobility, provide ready access to spaces that facilitate daily active play, and which afford opportunities to develop their physical literacy. Children must be able to explore, discover, make choices, and take risks in their everyday environments. The COVID-19 pandemic highlighted the importance of ‘the local’ as children and families spent more time close to home.

Our neighbourhood spaces foster social connectedness. Through these interactions children acquire social capital; feelings of belonging are strengthened; and perceptions of neighbourhood safety are heightened. Parental perceptions of safety are critical if children are to be granted freedom to independently roam and access environments for play. Parents who know their neighbours are more confident and more likely to let their children out to roam and play.

Social connection should be a key focus during the development of public spaces and should be conceived as an outcome to be achieved. The Play Street concept (championed by [Playing Out](#) in the UK and by Play Australia) aims to empower communities to reclaim their quiet residential streets as spaces for neighbours of all ages to connect and play, challenging the presumption that streets have been, and should be, built for cars (see examples in [United Kingdom](#), [Australia](#), and [New Zealand](#)).

A Play Street is a simple concept. It is a temporary road closure for play, led by community and supported by the local government. During the development phase, neighbours are supported to work together to plan their Play Street. The benefits can extend beyond play. Through Play Streets, neighbours, young and old, come together to form critical local support networks. These networks have been found to have reduced loneliness and isolation, improve support for play, increase informal play and physical activity, and strengthen bonds among families and neighbours.

Building strong social infrastructure is the key lever that opens streets for play and should be a priority when developing built environments and planning for play.

Adventure Playgrounds and the Maker Movement

Kevin Mills

Kevin is an industrial designer, artist, and master craftsman based in Seattle. He works in the museum and children's museum sectors specializing in artifact presentation and interactive exhibit design with an emphasis on specialty fabrication and an eye toward the evolution of play-based learning systems.



The potential interplay between two emerging social movements, the Maker Movement and the Adventure Playground movement, may hold the key to unlocking versatile play spaces better suited to modern concerns. The Maker Movement focuses on designing and building creations from scratch, and is increasingly embraced by children and adolescents. In contrast, the Adventure Playground movement nurtures open-ended spaces that encourage children to engage in spontaneous, play-focused experiences. Both environments foster play, experimentation, and discovery, presenting an opportunity to create truly innovative play environments by combining their shared aspects.

Through thoughtfully designed landscapes, unique material choices, and unconventional technology, these two areas can merge in unexpected and fruitful ways if properly integrated. While the Maker Movement generally promotes goal-oriented endeavors, it can be adapted to place emphasis on the process of how children build, rather than focusing on the outcomes they achieve. Though Maker Spaces typically involve significant investments in technology and carry safety concerns, these issues can be mitigated in this hybrid scenario.

In this setting, 'maker' dynamics coexist with the raw materials of play commonly found in adventure playgrounds. By thoughtfully providing access to more detailed material manipulations, children can readily expand their skill set as creators, foster their ingenuity, and acquire a deeper understanding of the world around them. This can be achieved by equipping children with the means to safely manipulate their play materials in innovative ways.

The safe manipulation of materials requires the use of novel tools, which must be designed and constructed with these considerations in mind. These tools need to be integrated and harmonized with the Adventure Playground dynamics to unlock the constructive learning opportunities offered by this hybrid approach. Such tools will be relatively low-tech and compatible with the non-precious nature of existing play materials, making them better suited to contemporary ideas of resilient and creative play.

Play is for everyone at any time

Michaela James



Michaela is a research officer at Swansea University's Medical School. She also manages [HAPPEN-Wales](#), aimed at improving the health, wellbeing, and education outcomes of primary school children across Wales.

Play is what you make it. It is self-directed. It is done for its own sake, and it is authentic. There are no rules. Play feels like the best expression of being human; where there is no fear of failure and where there are no barriers (or none that cannot be quickly overcome). However, we often restrict play. We marginalise it at the expense of more 'academic' pursuits and sport. We say someone is too old to play.

It is essential that we advocate for the wants and needs of children. We need to give children a range of opportunities to play and be active. We need to make available spaces in which to play (making safe and accessible spaces designed with children in mind). We need to facilitate socialisation and acknowledge that play is integral play to the development, health, and wellbeing of children. We must not overlook the importance of play.

It has been, and always will be, important to protect play. But this is particularly so in times of crisis. If we recognise the value of play as we emerge from the global pandemic, this could be an enormous step forward in terms of protecting the mental health and wellbeing of our children, and of future generations.

[My research shows](#) the importance of protecting spaces to play (including investment in maintenance, upkeep, and safety) and facilitating opportunities for children to be with their friends. These conclusions might not be new, but more needs to be done to influence policy, decision-making and funding to achieve both.

The key priority for play is to protect it. We need to protect spaces and opportunities for play. We need to ensure that it is not limited to an age or a gender. We need to protect the risks and learning opportunities that are part of it. Play should be for everyone, at any time.

Funding multi-purpose urban spaces

Sam Thomson and Alex Franklin

Sam is the founder and Chief Executive Officer of the [Ardagh Community Trust](#). **Alex** was one of the first trustees of Ardagh Community Trust. She is a retired lecturer and researcher.



Spaces in which children can engage safely in physical activities always seem to be under threat in urban areas. That being so, it seems logical to seek collaborations between those working to secure spaces for play and those seeking spaces for sport. However, sport and play spaces are often separate, reflecting that the differences are emphasised between sport (often understood as 'formal', purposeful, rules-centred, elite, and competitive) and active/energetic play (which is conceived of belonging to younger children). Funding streams have been siloed accordingly, normalising and promulgating the artificial segregation of play and sport.

Overarching bodies that govern sport often assert their commitment to promote accessible healthy activities for all (e.g., Sport England's [Uniting the Movement](#) campaign), but the reality is that individual sporting organisations are often obligated – due to the conditions imposed by their funding sources – to focus their investment on tightly-defined projects which prioritise their specific sport. This makes it more difficult to collaborate with other organisations concerned to promote health and wellbeing in their communities. Indeed, it can lead to local representatives of governing bodies promoting the primacy of their sport to the detriment of other considerations and potential partners.

[Gill](#) (2017, p. 5) rightly identified that the child-friendly cities movement's "values were and are beyond reproach, [but that] it has had very little influence on the built form of cities." At least some of the reason for this lack of progress lies in segregated administrative and financial structures which actively promote mono-functional spaces and projects. If policy makers, funding bodies and planners want to create child-friendly cities – with multipurpose spaces for play, sports, and other activities – then administrative systems, structures and metrics must be altered.

Saving the planet, one playground at a time

Cynthia Gentry



Through [Living Playgrounds](#), **Cynthia** designs and builds playgrounds that provide beautiful, healthy, nature-filled environments where children can play freely. She has served on the Executive Board of IPA for the past 12 years.

As a grandparent of five, I find myself hell-bent on wanting to save the planet. The thought of what these adorable children will have to face as they grow up leaves me in an icy panic. Until I figure out how to save the world, I will do what I can by continuing to build playgrounds lush with trees, grasses, native plants, rolling clover-covered hills, healthy soil, hand-built treehouses (and a bit of manufactured equipment).

While children can and do play everywhere, playgrounds should remain a focus of our work and innovation. The deteriorating condition of the planet makes it imperative that we continue to challenge the 'scorched Earth landscape design philosophy' that has underpinned playground design. The norm when building a new playground has been to rip out every living thing and remove every single hill, berm, or root until all that was left was a moonscape with nary an opportunity to trip and fall. Large structures of plastic, steel, PVC, and rubber were introduced, and the entire space was covered with a protective cover of frequently wildly-coloured rubber surfacing.

Playgrounds need to be filled with life. Plantings large and small should be introduced. These should be appropriate for the location, durable, not poisonous, provide year-round interest, and produce great loose parts. Materials used to build structures and manufactured pieces should be carefully evaluated to ensure that they have no adverse impact on the environment.

Nature-rich environments captivate children of all ages. For the planet to survive people must care about it, and one of the best ways for children to develop a relationship with Earth is to play with her. [The proven benefits](#) of playing in nature are far too numerous to list but suffice it to say children who play in beautiful, natural environments are healthier, more resilient, and stronger. Kaiser Permanente, RAND Corporation and [Studio Ludo](#) have also found that mature trees increased the likelihood of longer playground stay time by 19%.

We need to replace scorched earth playscapes with playable gardens. Our children will be happier and healthier. It could be the start of how we start to save the planet after all.

Make neighbourhoods liveable through play

Sreekumar Kumaraswamy, Madhura Kulkarni and Arunima Saha

Sreekumar, Madhura and Arunima

all work with the Sustainable cities and Transport at programme at [WRI India](#). Sreekumar is Programme Director, Madhura is Programme Manager, and Arunima is the Programme Associate.



Young children in Indian cities today face many challenges such as lack of safe access to play areas, lack of stimulating play spaces, lack of age-specific public spaces designed to incorporate their specific needs, and lack of space for play areas in informal settlements. This is significantly impacting their long-term growth and development.

We know that children develop through play. We know that a child's development from the prenatal stage until the age of five shapes lifelong social and developmental outcomes. Thus, 0-5-year-old children require a stimulating environment with access to outdoor play to boost their physical, cognitive, and mental development.

Our work under the [Nurturing Neighbourhoods Challenge](#) is encouraging ten city governments in India to create play spaces for young children and caregivers in neighbourhoods across the city. Cities are thinking about play and carving out spaces for play by reclaiming land and creating play areas by legitimizing play; providing play areas along with caregiver supportive amenities; and ensuring operation and maintenance of play areas by the community by enabling ownership.

This work is also concerned to create sustainable institutional structures to develop play in neighbourhoods. This has led to greater citizen involvement in decision-making processes; co-creation of play spaces through multi-sectoral partnerships; and sensitizing the community about the need for and importance of creating stimulating nurturing neighbourhoods for families.

The result has been an 88% increase in time spent by families outdoors and an increased number of visits to these spaces. These positive results are important in making the case to sustain the work and expand the reach of people-friendly public spaces across the country.

Nurturing child-led play in nature

Deborah Meechan and Martin Winters



Deborah and Martin are both Early Years Lecturers at Glasgow Clyde College. They train future early years practitioners in Forest Kindergarten and delivering Forest School sessions.

Play should be viewed as child-centred and child-led. [*The Playwork Principles*](#) provide a child-centric view of play and clearly position the adult's role as a scaffold to child-led experiences. From this perspective, adult involvement in children's play is by invitation only. Consequently, adults should be wary of defining and directing play, as this undermines it being freely chosen and intrinsically motivated.

The child-centred approach comes naturally to some, but it may challenge others who might worry about their role in a child's learning. Furthermore, it can appear at odds with the plethora of adult-centric policies and frameworks that practitioners in early education and play sectors are expected to follow. A key priority for the ongoing development of qualifications, training and policies in education should be embedding a truly child-centred perspective on play.

Such an approach is embedded in [Forest School \(FS\) principles](#), which align closely with the Playwork Principles, and which encourage play in nature. Nature-based play and outdoor learning provision is increasing across the early years in Scotland. The FS approach supports young people to reconnect with nature through play. It provides a break from technology and opportunities to build meaningful connections with others and nature through self-directed play. However, it should be remembered that the potential of play and play-based learning are not restricted to early years.

We are involved in an ongoing project, with students of Glasgow City Council's [Enhanced Vocational Inclusion Programme](#) (EVIP), to support learners aged 14-15 who have struggled to engage in mainstream education. Our FS sessions aim to improve the holistic health and wellbeing of EVIP students and their attainment. Sessions allow students to play outdoors whilst developing resilience, self-efficacy, and respect for others as well as the environment.

We should provide more opportunities for learners at any age to benefit from nature-based play.

Nature-based play in high-rise estates

Sruthi Atmakur-Javdekar

Sruthi is a part-time scholar and full-time architect, landscape architect, and environmental psychologist. She is the founder-director of [GRIT: environmental design + research studio](#), an interdisciplinary consulting firm.



More than [half of the world's population are living in cities](#). Families with children in some of the most populous countries in the world– especially, in South Asia such as India, China, Indonesia, Bangladesh, Singapore, Malaysia, and Japan – live in the [most dense urban high-rise conditions where providing space for play is a concern](#). Here, young people are directed to play in designated areas with play equipment or multi-utility sports courts, which typically [limit access to nature](#). While high-rise housing estates have manicured landscapes as green spaces, these areas are typically designated [off-limits by the housing management for everyday play](#).

Although bio-diverse areas or ecologically rich areas are designated as public parks in cities, these are often far removed from the high-rise housing developments where families with children live, and accessing these natural areas is challenging on the grounds of cost, time, distance, daily schedules, and traffic conditions.

This dearth of opportunity matters, as we know that children make sense of their everyday world through play and that nature or natural environments offer [rich and diverse play opportunities](#) for children and young people. Research has shown us the value of [children's connection with nature](#).

In our urbanising world, we can expect an increase in high-rise high-density homes. Architects and planners will need to find ways to create green pockets within the built environment, in which children and young people have access to a diverse and versatile natural environment that supports their holistic development. We need natural green areas dotted with wild grasses, tree groves, water bodies, and rock outcrops creating small bio-diverse ecological habitats that go beyond the standardized manicured lawns and planter beds in high-density residential environments, so children can fully exercise their [right to play, leisure and recreation](#).

Knowing nature

Sophie von Maltzan



Sophie is a socially engaged environmental artist, activist, farmer, academic, and landscape architect. She works mainly in collaborative practice.

"I don't want to touch the dirt"

I taught a Land Art and Environmental art specialist module to primary school teacher students at a university in Dublin. Early on during the course, I asked the students to sketch bulbs and then plant them on the campus grounds. The students were enthusiastic until it came to planting the bulbs, when most of them were horrified at having to touch the soil. They said they did not like the texture and did not want to get their fingernails dirty. Many of them were also hardly able to apply sufficient pressure to the spade to dig the holes in the ground for the bulbs.

I ran a similar workshop in a pre-school and planted bulbs with three- to five-year-old children. The children greatly enjoyed digging their hands into the moist, crumbling topsoil: they did not want to stop. This reminded me of a project I completed in a nursing home some years ago, where several residents told me that, in their youth, it was a common practice to go out digging in the vegetable garden to ground oneself and reconnect with nature, when one was feeling detached or worried about something.

During my research with the preschool children, I observed that what the children aged three to five enjoyed most was imaginative play with natural loose parts, such as willow rods, sticks, leaves, bark, sand, and water. But when it got colder in November and December they were not allowed to go into their yard as often as the supervisors did not want to go out, as they themselves got cold while standing and watching the children play. The children getting dirty and wet also made their work harder.

My conclusion is that grown-ups are limiting children's instinctive affinity to all things natural. We need to encourage their minders to allow the children to engage with nature and to do so in ways that involve children in the process of designing their own environment.

Digital play for the 21st century

Suzannie Kit-Ying Leung

Suzannie is an assistant professor in the Department of Curriculum and Instruction at The Chinese University of Hong Kong. She has an interdisciplinary background of visual arts, psychology, and early childhood education.



The use of technology and screen media by young children has raised concerns among professionals and public health organizations. Excessive screen time is associated with exposure to unsafe and inappropriate content, and increased risk of obesity, sleep problems, speech delay, and emotional and behavioural problems ([Bruni et al., 2015](#); [Byeon & Hong, 2015](#); [Council on Communications and Media, 2016](#); [Lau & Lee, 2021](#)). The World Health Organization recommends that children under five years of age should spend no more than one hour per day on sedentary screen time, and infants under one year should not be exposed to electronic screens at all ([World Health Organization, 2019](#)).

However, it seems impossible to completely isolate children from technological devices. While the amount of time children spend on technology is important, we must also consider how they utilize these devices. Technology has been successfully integrated into special early childhood education settings to support the learning of children with special needs ([Donohue and Schomburg, 2017](#)). [The International Society for Technology in Education](#) (2007) suggests that children should explore basic concepts and skills in technology by the age of five years by using digital cameras, audio and video recorders, printers, and other technologies in kindergartens. Scholars have also argued that digital devices can aid children's learning in various areas, such as literacy ([Marsh, 2012](#)), arts ([Terreni, 2011](#)), and mathematics ([Jowett et al., 2012](#)).

I have examined the use of video arts in children's digital play ([Leung et al., 2020](#)). I considered a video-making program for nine gifted children between the ages of 5 to 8 years during a summer Creativity and Talent Development Program at the University of Hong Kong's Centre for Advancement in Inclusive and Special Education. The children were introduced to cinematic language, technical skills, and narrative skills during a two-day intensive workshop. The children were highly motivated to express themselves and could create a one-minute video by operating a digital video camera, drawing storyboards, and using cinematic language. They explored professional devices through epistemic play; used film language to share their toy-playing stories; and created their own one-minute video through ludic play. The children engaged in concurrent exploratory activities, using digital video recorders and toys to create imaginative and innovative play.

There is a role for digital play in early childhood education.

Puncturing play in Dhaka

Tasniva Rahman Mumu



Tasniva is a PhD researcher at the University of Edinburgh. The focus of her research is on exploring ways in which cities can become more play friendly for children in densely populated neighbourhoods.

Dhaka, the capital of Bangladesh, has a population density of 30,093 residents per square kilometre. The [World Health Organization \(WHO\) recommends](#) a minimum of nine square meters of open space per person in urban areas. Dhaka has less than one square meter of open space per person. Dhaka has a severe lack of open spaces for children to play. This is particularly concerning as 28% of the city's population are children who are under the age of 15.

Most of the population have very limited access to urban open space, which has an adverse impact on citizens' physical, cognitive, and social development. Here arises the question: where are the children in highly densely populated neighbourhoods playing? In most cases, the answer is likely that they are not playing. And girls are hardly seen playing outdoors.

Furthermore, the continuing growth of Dhaka is exacerbating the lack of play opportunities for children. This problem needs to be addressed urgently.

Through spatial analysis and communication with the community in a case study area, I identified underutilized, unrecognized leftover spaces, including spaces between buildings, at the back of buildings, and dead ends. I am using the concept of [Urban Acupuncture](#) which means that I am puncturing play in identified spaces, using appropriate vegetation and materials to purify the environment, harvest rainwater, prevent water clogging and finding affordances to play.

These small-scale interventions can have a significant impact on the overall well-being of the community. By replicating this work with other communities, we can create a more inclusive and sustainable urban landscape, which will be one that offers opportunities for girls as well as boys.

Making Space for Girls

Imogen Clark and Susannah Walker

Imogen and **Susannah** are the co-founders of the charity Make Space for Girls. Imogen, a lawyer, and feminist, studied for a post graduate certificate in gender studies at Birkbeck, University of London. Susannah is a former TV producer turned author.



'Why would I go to the park? There's nothing there for me.'

The quote above is from Lily, aged 14, and she's got to the heart of the problem that we want to solve.

Make Space for Girls campaigns for parks and other public spaces to be more welcoming to teenage girls. When facilities are provided for teenagers, these tend to be skate parks, pitches, and BMX tracks, and all of which are dominated by boys. Teenage girls have nowhere they want to go.

This is a question of rights and inequality, but it also has a big impact on the health and wellbeing of teenage girls. [Under one-half of teenage girls](#) meet the government's minimum activity levels. But how can we expect them to be active when they do not have anything to be active on, or anywhere to be active? Girls are also three times as likely as boys to be suffering significant mental distress, and [research has proved](#) that time spent outdoors can significantly improve depression and anxiety in young people. So, by making space for girls, we have an incredible opportunity to improve their health and wellbeing.

But equally important is the rights of teenage girls to play. The UK has signed up to the [UN Convention on the Rights of the Child](#), which asserts that all children have a right to play up to the age of 18. But our parks are covered in notices which say, 'No Children Over 12' and they do not contain anything which is designed with girls in mind.

But don't just listen to us – talk to teenage girls. [Girlguiding found that](#) 82% of girls thought that they should be more involved in the design of parks. And when we work with them, they tell us they want swings and social seating, trampolines, playful spaces, and a chance to be out in nature.

So, what are we waiting for? Let's build something different. Teenage girls must become one of our priorities for play.

Making space WITH and FOR girls and young women

Matluba Khan



Matluba is trained as an architect and a landscape architect. She is a lecturer in urban design at Cardiff University. Her research focuses on participatory design and planning of children's spaces for their learning and wellbeing. Her co-designed project with children received multiple accolades including EDRA Great Places Award 2016 and ASLA Honor Award 2017.

Girls and young women are on the margins.

Globally girls and young women are often designed out of the school grounds, parks and play spaces. Whether it's a peri-urban community in Bangladesh or an inner urban neighbourhood in the UK, you are likely to find fewer girls and young women in public spaces. Where present, they are often pushed to the edges with boys and young men dominating the grounds for play. Policy and practice have too long disregarded the impact of playlessness on girls and young women and the role of place in this playlessness. [Girls are less physically active than boys, adolescent girls are more likely to be obese than their male counterparts.](#)

Make spaces FOR girls and young women.

More spaces need to be created to respond to the play needs of girls and young women. There is a lack of research and scarcity of good practices. While some needs are universal, local action plans are necessary for creating play opportunities for girls and young women. Priorities for action should be decided in consultation with girls and young women. In a recent project [A Grangetown to Grow Up In](#) over 150 children and young people identified more spaces for girls and young women as a priority area for intervention in their neighbourhood.

Do not assume! Make space WITH girls and young women.

The Grangetown consultation challenged some of the misconceptions around children's preferences for play and community spaces. Girls and young women in Grangetown want to engage in sports like football and basketball, but many did not feel they had the support and infrastructure to do so.

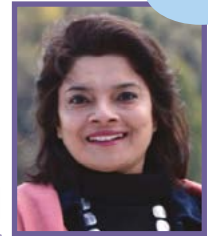
How to make space WITH girls and young women

We need to co-design play spaces with local girls and young women as they are the experts of their lives in their community. Map making, drawing, focus groups are among the many methods that can be used to find out what girls and young women want from their neighbourhood, the value they attach to places, and their fear and uncertainty they encounter in others. Public spaces need to offer more diverse opportunities for play for all ages and genders ([Khan, 2017](#)).

Pull all the levers to create play spaces for children

Sudeshna Chatterjee

Sudeshna is an urban practitioner, evaluation specialist, researcher, and [published author](#). She is a board member of IPA-World and program director at the [World Resources Institute \(WRI\) India Ross Centre for Cities](#).



Children need access to common public spaces in the local environment that they perceive to be meaningful and playable: these might not align with what adults want for children ([Lester and Russell](#), 2010). We know what is required: the features of an optimum environment for play have been defined in [General Comment 17 \(GC-17\) on Article 31 of the United Nations Convention of the Rights of the Child](#).

The [2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development](#) spotlighted children in targets related to public spaces and sustainable transport systems. Since then, cities around the world have shown an interest in investing in more child friendly infrastructure and public spaces and in creating child friendly cities through urban planning. In 2018, when the UN Child Friendly Cities Initiative (CFCI) updated its [framework](#), the right to play was identified as one of the five key goals.

Following the [Tenth Session of the World Urban Forum](#), UNICEF, UN-Habitat, and WHO have been developing Global Principles and Guidance for Public Spaces for Children. Findings are based on global consultations with children ([World Vision](#), 2020), expert interviews and surveys, a review of existing guidance from different countries and agencies, and the development of 50 case studies of implemented public space projects drawn from 36 countries representing three different contexts—planned environments, informal settlements, and those in contexts of disaster and humanitarian emergencies. A conscious effort was made to learn from global South by including 22 case studies from where the majority of the world's children live and play in cities. All too often these are neglected or under-represented in the literature on public spaces for children.

General Comment 17 outlines the obligations of municipal governments for making public spaces available and accessible for children's play. Many city governments, particularly from the global North, fulfil these obligations. However, in the global South, the involvement of national and regional governments is often critical for policy direction and budget allocation, as it is at these higher levels financial resources reside, and the urban development agenda is set. But power also resides beyond government. We have found that civil society and communities in different countries are at the forefront of transforming neighbourhood public spaces - the urban spatial scale at which most public spaces for children are located - through bottom-up processes of participatory planning or programming in public spaces while also connecting with enabling government policies.

Promote play in Indian childcare

Ridhi Sethi



Ridhi is an Assistant Professor at the Department of Human Development and Childhood Studies, University of Delhi. She is the founder of an early childhood network called [Child Care for All](#) which disseminates the latest research in early childhood.

My interest in play began when I started visiting early childhood centres to study the child care arrangements of working parents in India. I was surprised to find that outdoor space was limited and inaccessible to children. Outdoor play spaces such as sandpits were unkempt and under-used. I went to high fees paying centres which claimed to provide 'high quality' experiences. Children were kept indoors on the premise that it protected them from the high temperatures outside. This, apparently, was what parents wanted.

We need to engage with parents and help them understand what constitutes quality. Every parent wants the best for their children. However, in the absence of legislation, accreditation, or adequate information, parents draw on what is often a very limited understanding of play. Adults tend to dismiss the importance of physical play and do not provide children with encounters with nature through play. Increasingly, children are absent from our neighbourhoods and are spending more time playing digital games.

We need to collaborate for children's wellbeing. Children enjoy climbing, sliding, swinging, running, and jumping, but they are being denied opportunities. Centres have created stimulating indoor spaces, but these provide adequate opportunity for physical activity. In the absence of any regulatory norms in India, these number of these centres is expanding apace. There are [some recommendations on good practice](#) in national documents, but they are not mandatory. My work has also found that a lack of teacher training is lowering the quality of caregiving. I recommend mandatory training of teachers in early childhood care and education in India. This must be based on understanding child-environment transactions through play.

Give voice to the children

Kirti Zala

Since 2011, **Kirti** has led [aProCh](#) (a Protagonist in every Child), which aims to make cities more child friendly. She holds an M.B.A. & MSc in Finance. She is passionate and strong advocate of building a better world for children.



Cities need to enable children to become citizens who are the protagonists of their own world. This means meeting their needs, especially for play.

Rapid urbanization and economic inequality create a competitive landscape for resources in cities, with the consequence that decision-makers are less likely to take into account the needs of children and youth. This makes it more difficult than need be for children to interact with their peers. Participation is a fundamental principle of social inclusion, and 'fitting in' and 'joining in' with the everyday activities and expectations of peers is of critical importance in children's lives. The participation imperative extends beyond the social realm to encompass the political realm that shapes our city spaces.

The very people who may have the most to gain from participation are often the same people who are least likely to participate in the policy processes. Children are subject to public policy and are some of the highest users of public services but, all too often they have been excluded from the policy process ([Davis et al.](#), 2006).

Although the importance of outside play is widely acknowledged, modern urban environments limit children's opportunities. Together, alongside children, we need to invest in planning and designing better environments for children. Collaborative and concerted action by all stakeholders will convey the message that the city cares for its children. This is in everyone's interest, as [research shows](#) that children who are nurtured are more likely to give back to their nurturer.

We need to empower the child's voice and believe that 'every child can'. We need paradigm shift - we need to stop thinking about children as being the future - we need to think of children as the NOW!

Amplify and celebrate the infant voice

Vicky Armstrong, Anne McFadyen and Josephine Ross



Vicky is Research Fellow and Art Therapist at the University of Dundee. **Anne** is Adviser, Perinatal and Early Years, at the Scottish Government. **Josephine** is Reader in Developmental Psychology at the University of Dundee.

Infants need secure, responsive relationships to regulate their physical and psychological states, and infant mental health lays the foundation for social and emotional wellbeing throughout the lifespan. Recognising the importance of infant mental health, and our duty as the adults around infants to keep their perspective at the centre of their care, the Scottish Government published the [*Voice of the Infant Best Practice Guidelines and Infant Pledge*](#). These guidelines were co-produced by a short-life working group on behalf of the Infant Mental Health Implementation and Advisory Group, which was part of the [*Scottish Government's Perinatal and Infant Mental Health Programme Board*](#). They have at their foundation the Scottish Model of Infant Participation, based on Article 12 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (adapted from [Lundy](#) (2007) and [Government of Ireland](#) (2019)). Attention is paid within this framework to space, voice, audience, and influence.

These new best practice guidelines provide direction on how to take account of infants' views and rights in all encounters. They offer suggestions on how those who work and play with babies and very young children can notice, facilitate, and share the infant's feelings, ideas, and preferences that they communicate through their gaze, body language and vocalisations. They will help those who work and play with infants to be mindful of the infant's views and to meet their duty under the United Nations Convention of Children's Rights to support meaningful participation with even the very youngest children. The Infant Pledge states clearly what babies and very young children should expect from those around them, and we hope that sharing this work as widely as possible will help professionals, parents, and the public tune into and amplify the voice of the infant. Given the importance of infant mental health in paving the way for healthy life outcomes, and the role of play in supporting healthy psychological and physical development in infants, celebrating the infant voice must be a key priority for play now, towards 2030, and beyond.

Follow the child's lead

Gretchen Kamke

Gretchen is an occupational therapist who is certified in DIRFloortime®. She trains families, clinicians, and educators how to connect and support individuals on unique developmental trajectories.



How a child spends their time is a window into their emotional world - and this emotional world is what helps a growing individual make sense of themselves, interpersonal relationships, the world around them, and their place within that world. When we follow a child's lead they feel as though their interests are worthy of celebration and their expertise can be shared, explored, and expanded. It affords opportunities to strengthen regulation, engagement, two-way communication, shared social problem solving, symbolic/logical thinking, and abstract reasoning.

Children develop on their own unique journeys, and while some follow a more predictable path, others may require more attunement to support the developmental process. There are drawbacks in an "I do, then you do" approach to teaching. It devalues the child's inner experience and does not support initiation or ideation from the child's perspective.

In contrast, we can start by getting curious about the child's unique individual differences related to how they process the world in terms of sensation, motivation, motor execution, and communication/language processing. We can value the power of following a child's lead and their inner drive, creating powerful interactions that support the individual, making them feel safe enough to explore and challenge themselves to stretch and broaden their developmental capacities.

Dr. Stanley Greenspan has created a framework for human development, [DIR®](#), which is a helpful guide on knowing where and how to join an individual where they are developmentally. DIRFloortime® is the practice of using that guide to join individuals in their passions - following their lead to strengthen relationships that fuel the developmental process. In DIRFloortime® we take the knowledge of a child's unique profile, as well as our understanding of where they are developmentally, to forge meaningful and nurturing relationships to support their sense of agency, communicative competency, and an overall feeling of well-being - all through playfully following their lead and creating opportunities to expand the interaction.

Following a child's lead is a powerful tool for adult players looking to join and support a child's development in robust and meaningful ways. A child develops the capacity to play with others when others play with them and the best way to do that is to follow their lead.

The Pikler approach

Julia Manning-Morton



Julia is a lecturer, trainer, and author in early childhood. She is secretary to the [Pikler \(UK\) Association](#).

The Pikler approach to play for children aged 0-3 years emphasises the importance of free, uninterrupted, autonomous, self-initiated exploratory play from the youngest age, as a primary way in which children's sense of competence and self-efficacy is supported. According to Pikler 'a child who achieves things through independent experimentation acquires an entirely different kind of knowledge than does a child who has ready-made solutions offered to him (sic)' ([Roche](#), 1994). In the Pikler approach, the play of babies and young children must be supported by certain conditions:

Protection and tranquillity: For a child to be able to engage in autonomous free play, they must first have received sufficient personal sustenance from their carer through slow, attentive, respectful caregiving.

Free movement: If children are allowed to move without interference, they not only develop good physical and spatial awareness, but they also develop confidence in their abilities and mastery of their world. Floor play should be a central focus, where play things are placed on a firm floor with low platforms to climb onto and over when babies become mobile.

Uninterrupted time: Once care needs are met, infants should have the opportunity to explore without interruption. Self-chosen activity extends a child's abilities and initiates self-regulation – choosing when to be active and when to rest.

Resources that closely match the child's physical skills and interests:

Playthings should match the infant's manipulative abilities and be placed in a way that supports their movement. They should have access to a range of materials that offer opportunities for different types of play.

The Adult: The Pikler approach is child-led and adult-facilitated. The adult's role is active non-participation, being attentive, present and sensitively engaged with children when invited, watching and pausing before intervening or interacting unnecessarily.

The environment: The safe space should be free of unnecessary furniture and other distracting or risky items. Babies and young children should spend much time outside

The Pikler approach is a way to realise the right of infants in the UK to play freely, actively, and autonomously.

Valuing the thinking of our youngest citizens

Laura Wilhelm and Carla Gull

Laura has 25 years of experience in early childhood education, and is Professor, and Vice-Principal for Professional Learning at Kaplan. **Carla** also has 25 years of experience in education. Together they are writing, *Living Loose Parts: Creatures of Curiosity*.



As [Magda Gerber](#) describes, when we treat babies as capable and dynamic learners, we amplify their potential to master new concepts and afford them the respect they deserve. [Elinor Goldschmid's](#) work honours the child and encourages the use of authentic materials to extend their thinking. Sure, toys with flashing lights and loud noises grab children's attention, but they do not sustain it or allow for the baby to show us what they are thinking in the same way that open-ended heuristic materials do. The Theory of Loose Parts by [Simon Nicholson](#) outlines the need for children and adults to experiment, explore, invent, and enjoy. Young children continually learn about the world around them through textures, reflection, colour, shapes, language, sounds, temperatures, and other variables.

Using all their senses, babies inquire through simple curiosity as they touch, smell, see, taste, and hear the world around them. With no preconceived notion of how to use the materials, they discover physical possibilities through exploration, interaction, and manipulation. Simple household objects become fascinating phenomena. The natural world affordances of wind, sun, grass, and leaves captivate attention and build understanding of nature's transience throughout the seasons.

As educators, we must create a yes environment where permission is granted to interact within the child's sphere with risks considered and mitigated. We can model curiosity ourselves, taking lessons from a young child as they delight in the face of another curious being. As caring co-creators of learning experiences, we provide time and space as a priority for play.

As we move past the most recent global pandemic and reflect on what matters most, our youngest citizens will benefit from respectful interactions and opportunities to reach their intellectual potential, both as the babies and toddlers they are today, and the adults they will become.

Playtime is not over

Karen McCarthy



Karen is Associate Professor of Occupational Therapy at Dominican University of California. She is enrolled part time alongside the [P4Play](#) program working toward a PhD in Occupational Science.

Adults are both “pushed and pulled away from play” ([Brown](#), 2009, p.144) due to roles, responsibilities, or socio-cultural norms that do not prioritize play. Adults may feel shame and be encouraged to “put childish things behind them” ([Walsh](#), 2019, p.12). There is an assumption that adults grow out of play and continuing to play is “considered abnormal, stunted, or even unhealthy” ([Brown & Stenros](#), 2018, p.217). Play is not portrayed as a productive use of time ([Van Fleet & Feeney](#), 2015). Despite some efforts to infuse play into work, play is generally expected to take place outside work time (Deterding, 2018). Play is allowed if it does not take up too much time or interfere with adult responsibilities (Rogerson & Gibbs, 2018).

Despite these obstacles, some adults sustain play. Rogerson and Gibbs (2018) found that board gamers altered how they played when they became parents, negotiating the context, time, location, and medium of play, to balance their commitments with their desire to continue playing tabletop games. Authority external to the players was also cited as permission to play, which could include research justifying play, communicating the rationale for play, or asserting the value of play. Alibis are deployed to disguise the real reasons for engaging in play (Deterding, 2018). For example, telling people you are playing for work, charity, or health benefits. Audience management is used to avoid embarrassment (Deterding, 2018). For example, you might play in private spaces or virtual spaces, so that you do not encounter your work colleagues who would judge your behaviour as unprofessional. Or you can use audience aggregation and play with a group who are all there for the same reason, giving legitimacy to your and their play. For example, people gathering for a festival.

Despite an array of barriers, adults have used a variety of strategies to enable play. As professionals, scholars, and adults ourselves, we need to address potential barriers to adult play.

We need play-focused training!

Isabel Ferreira and Marta Figueiredo

Both **Isabel** and **Marta** work at the Escola Superior de Saúde do Alcoitão. Isabel is Director of the Department of Occupational Therapy and Marta is Professor at the Department of Occupational Therapy.



The training for occupational therapists working with children and youth focuses on the occupation and its role in the development of the person. Training in sensory processing and child development is unquestionable, but what about the wider issues of how occupations support well-being and everyone's right to play?

To address these wider issues, we decided to redesign our training courses for those working with children and youth. Rather than offering separate courses on different topics, a group of Occupational Therapists, specialized in Paediatrics, came together, and agreed to structure our training around play.

We looked for best practices, evidence-based practices, and practice-informed theories. We networked. Borders were not a problem, and colleagues came together from Portugal, Spain, Ireland, USA, and Brazil. We were mindful that other professionals also play with children and learning that was not focused on occupational therapy was made available to other health professionals, psychologists, and social workers.

We developed the first postgraduate course dedicated to play in Portugal. As we write, the first cohort are completing their studies. They speak positively of their experiences. We look to the future and plan to update and improve our offering, always drawing on state of the art knowledge about play.

Our priority in developing the next iteration of the course is to develop partnerships and collaborations, working together to support play and how children's rights are realised through them.

What next for play advocacy in England?

Adrian Voce OBE



Adrian is Head of policy at Starlight, the national charity for play in healthcare. He was formerly President of European Network for Child Friendly Cities, founding Director of Play England and the first Director of London Play. He is author of [Policy for Play: Responding to Children's Forgotten Right](#).

Advocates need to engage with public policy. But for our arguments to gain traction beyond our own networks, they need to resonate within two interconnected domains: the political discourse about child policy; and its popular debate. The challenge is to develop and promote a narrative of children's play compelling enough for the mainstream media to be interested in it, and for this narrative to include a clear and relatable policy ask. This gives rise to a perennial dilemma for play advocates. The most widely accepted definitions of play recognise that it is essentially non-productive ([UNCRC, 2013](#)), but the policy discourse around children is dominated by a construct of education and development that emphasizes attainment. We need a policy narrative that can set a different agenda.

There is an aversion in some advocacy circles to problematizing childhood because this panders to the instrumentalist agenda. Yet policy narrative theory suggests campaigns work best when proposals are seen as the solution to an identifiable problem. The play advocacy network should not shy away from this. In the healthcare field, play practitioners are increasingly seen as a powerful resource for the mitigation of medical trauma in children. Highlighting this is proving an effective way to promote more and better play services in hospitals and other settings ([Starlight, 2022](#)), with support for children to play recognised as an integral component both of good care and effective treatment ([NICE, 2021](#)).

Moving 'upstream' from healthcare into public health policy, we know about the role of play in the maintenance of children's wellbeing and resilience, and there is growing evidence of links between children's health problems and the shrinkage of their time and space to play ([Tonkin and Whitaker, 2019](#)). The priority should be to align with the wider network advocating for children's policy that places their holistic wellbeing ahead of the economy's demands on their education. The last time England had a secretary of state for children, not just education, the government launched an ambitious and wide-ranging play strategy ([DCSF, 2008](#)). This was only curtailed because of a radical shift to austerity in the wake of the financial crash. Something similar is needed again. We should highlight the blight on children's wellbeing caused by diminishing space and opportunity to play – it is a public health crisis.

And the policy asks? We need a cross-cutting strategy that would see resources and support for children's play embedded within policies for planning and public health, as well as healthcare and a reformed education system.

Focus on the process of play

Pete King

Pete has a PhD in Childhood Studies from Swansea University and is the programme manager for the MA Developmental and Therapeutic Play and MA Childhood Studies programmes.



One priority for play is to compare the process of play across different domains, contexts, and professions and, with who might be considered typically developed and atypically developed children.

The Play Cycle, with its focus on process, informs the practice of all adults involved in play, including parents and carers, and those who work in open access adventure playgrounds, closed-access childcare settings (after-school clubs and holiday playschemes), and within play therapy and other therapeutic contexts (for examples in hospitals). An observational tool, the Play Cycle Observation Method (PCOM), has been developed to assist this work.

Whilst other issues also matter – there may still be a need to define play or to use play to meet adult-initiated outcomes – there is always the risk that this leads to division and a fracturing of the play community, as professions and interest groups become protective of how and why play is important in relation to their own knowledge and understanding.

The Play Cycle is an integrating force – examining how different elements of the Play Cycle (play cue, play return, play frame and annihilation) ([King & Newstead, 2020](#)) and how the adult supports children's play ([King & Newstead, 2021](#)) can be compared to find similarities and differences across different contexts. Whilst the Play Cycle originated in playwork, there is scope for it to be used anywhere where children play, and possibly also to support outcome-based play, for example in play-based learning.

Reflexive adults

Shelly Newstead



Shelly has worked in the international playwork field for over thirty years and created the [PARS model of playwork practice](#). She is the Managing Editor of [International Journal of Playwork Practice](#) and Editor of the [Advances in Playwork Research](#) series (Routledge).

My priority for play is for all adults to become aware of how their own play priorities impact children's experiences of play.

A wide range of 'play professionals' recognise that play offers powerful and wide-ranging benefits to children. What is less frequently discussed is how adults' understanding of the nature and value of play has a direct effect on the way that children experience play. So much of children's play opportunities are mediated through the adult lens, whether through adult-designed play spaces or teachers making time for play in the school day. Different understandings of the importance of play and its benefits result in different forms of provision and practices.

Of course, no one understanding of play is 'better' or 'worse' than any other. Structured play, unstructured play, guided play, free play (and all the other terms that adults come up with to describe their different approaches to play) each provide tremendous benefits for children. However, it is important that children who spend a lot of their free time being supervised by adults can experience the delights and benefits of play in all its multi-faceted glory.

Many adults are drawn to work in children's play because of an intuitive feeling that 'play is good for children'. However, without taking a reflexive approach to working out why play is important to them personally, adults can project inappropriate priorities onto children, restrict the acceptable forms of play, and give children mixed messages about expectations and boundaries. Children are at times subjected to accusations of 'inappropriate behaviour', when in fact they are just confused about the forms of play that are acceptable to the adult world in specific circumstances.

Reflexive practice is at the heart of PARS playwork practice. Understood as a complex process of self-awareness and critical reflection, it demands that we genuinely examine how our own attitudes and behaviours (as adults) might have an impact on children's experience at any given moment. Reflexion (rather than reflection) is a powerful tool which makes our adult priorities manifest and helps us to question their relevance to children.

A new vision for playwork

Rob Wheway

Rob started as an adventure playworker in 1971, working on various roles supporting and advising on play. For the last 30 years he has also inspected many hundreds of fixed equipment playgrounds.



The role of the playworker should change from the defender of play facilities to one that is focused on increasing the number of children who have freedom to play. The success of playwork should be judged accordingly. We need to ask, has this number increased or decreased because of playwork's actions or influence?

Most play occurs in the children's local environment. Verges, pavements, roads (if calmed), concrete patches at garages, patches of grass, and clumps of bushes can all provide play opportunities. These are exciting because in children's imagination they are more than they appear to others. Usage of these spaces by children is a key indicator of a successful built environment but is often ignored.

The playworker of the future will need to be able to appraise environmental quality. Where it is unsatisfactory, playwork needs to identify the modifications that will allow play to take place. Playwork will be responsible for existing facilities, both supervised ones such as adventure playgrounds and unsupervised ones such as fixed equipment playgrounds. They will be able to advise on new or newly developing playgrounds thus avoiding money being spent on facilities that are hardly used.

Children's play is often regarded as a nuisance. Playworkers should be able to mediate between children and the complainers, ensuring that the resulting agreements do not limit children's freedom to play. Some children do not visit existing facilities because of fears of other children. Playworkers would have a role in helping these children to overcome their fears and to recommend modifications/initiatives which will encourage usage.

There has been a massive loss of environmental play due to the domination of the car ([Wheway and Millward, 1997](#)). As recently as the 1970s it was normal for primary school children to walk to school unaccompanied. This also meant they would be able to play out in their own street near to their homes. Children's freedom to play is usually ignored when local authorities are considering the design of housing and transportation. Playworkers of the future will have a significant role to play in transport and neighbourhood planning.

Playwork must move beyond facility management to embrace environmental management and play in the wider city.

Bringing back risk, fear, and excitement

Mariana Brussoni



Mariana is a professor and developmental psychologist at the University of British Columbia. She studies the loss of risk in children's outdoor play and how to bring it back. Her [lab](#) developed [risk reframing tools](#) for parents and educators.

I want to imagine a world where we don't hear a litany of "no!" "be careful!" or "that's not allowed" in play spaces but rather "that looks fun!" or "see you at dinner time"; where parents, caregivers, educators, play providers, and governments don't use fear as a basis for making decisions about how children should play, but rather prioritise children's needs; where the importance of children's voices and agency in shaping their communities and their play opportunities is commonly recognized; where play can and does take place everywhere in a community, not just in spaces where adults decide it should be.

Why should we all care deeply about outdoor risky play? Because research continues to document how important it is for just about every aspect of [children's development, health and well-being](#); as well as how it is [disappearing](#) from children's everyday worlds. We are already living in a situation where children's [anxiety and depression rates are at an all-time high](#), [physical activity rates are low](#), [screen time](#) is superseding outdoor play, and critical thinking skills are suffering. This is not just about play anymore. And the issue is ever-more urgent as children who grew up with these restrictions as the norm are now parents themselves, making it harder to imagine change.

There are major societal forces to contend with, including (but not limited to) parenting norms, the enticement of screens, widespread and misplaced moral panic over children's safety, cities designed for cars and not children, and society's views of children. I remain hopeful and heartened despite these challenges, because we have more voices than ever working on change, and we have increasingly robust research evidence pointing the way forward.

In Canada, since releasing the [Position Statement in Active Outdoor Play](#) in 2015, we have seen the field galvanized with involvement of multiple sectors, such as public health, education, child development, city planning, and so on, and work by passionate champions in these sectors to advocate for change. We have more tools in our toolbox, emergence of new and better play spaces, and norms are shifting, albeit slowly. So, I will dare to dream and aspire to a vision of a world in which someday soon we will see every child playing outside every day.

Risk-taking in play environments

Alissa Rupp

Alissa is a leader in the design of places for community building, informal education, and lifelong learning. She believes that we can improve public life through the serious work of creating spaces where art, nature, culture, and play intersect.



To thrive in an ever-changing world, children develop the ability to adapt. Adapting successfully requires trying new things, preferably in a context where 'failure' is survivable. The instinct to protect children from failure is strong, so adults often shield children from contexts perceived as risky. Yet this can limit children's opportunities to adapt, or to learn from bad decisions when stakes are low.

Children's museums provide a unique environment where parents trust that children are safe, children encounter new challenges in a playful space, and adults and children alike learn how to react to mistakes or failures. And these environments are play-based, and often place-based! So, what does it mean for us to build environments that encourage children to assess – and take – risks as they develop?

As a rule, we want our kids to be happy and safe, and we want them to do well at something. What we do not always talk about is that being happy, safe, and good at things all take practice. In every aspect of life, we must try things, learn, get better, mess up, and then try again. And all of that involves taking some amount of risk.

Risk is generally thought of as something to be mitigated, or even avoided. While it is clearly our job to get kids to adulthood in one piece, that process can be hard to watch when we see kids taking physical, social, or emotional risks. But kids are more likely to be successful on that path to adulthood if they learn about taking risks, and if they can then translate what they learn into another skill: good decision-making.

If we dive deeper into what we want for our kids, we will likely say that we want them to GROW – emotionally, physically, and intellectually – and we want them to become COMPETENT at things that match their developmental milestones. If we want them to grow, they (and we) may need to take some risks. They (and we) will need to TRY THINGS, in the full knowledge that sometimes they will fail. Let us use some of our safest places – museums, early learning facilities, schools, libraries to help them become (and feel) competent in many arenas; become skilled decision makers; develop their sense of agency; and develop resilience.

And, as often as we can, let's do it through PLAY!

Creating a complete eco-system of play

Caroline Essame



Caroline is the CEO and founder of the social enterprise [CreateCATT](#). She is an associate lecturer in Singapore and an art therapist, occupational therapist and play specialist in England. She wrote [*Why Play Matters - 101 Ideas for Developmental Play to Support all Children*](#).

[Peter Gray in his TED Talk](#) reflects on the decline of play since the 1950s. Across the world, it is apparent that we now need to advocate more than ever for play in children's lives. It goes beyond children: we need to promote a wide-ranging play eco-system for everyone. Post-pandemic, we have seen increasing compassion fatigue, burn out and a rise in anxiety. As a clinician who uses play and creativity for wellbeing and healing, I believe we need to build a better eco-system at all levels to harness the super-power of play for adults as well as children. We need to show, not just tell, about why play matters. We need to re-embed play in the human psyche and build playful neural pathways. Not just in children but within us all.

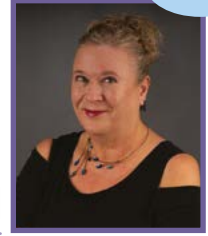
It has been my pleasure to work with some of the greatest play advocates across the globe, including [BRAC in Bangladesh](#) supporting play in the Global South and in refugee camps; the LEGO Foundation and their initiatives in play-based learning; UNICEF with their call to acknowledge children's right to play; and the [Asia-Pacific Regional Network of Early Childhood](#) promoting playful parenting and play in nature. From all these collaborations, what has become most apparent is that if you reignite the spirit of playfulness in adults, then a community of playfulness evolves and a deep passion to advocate for play for all will emerge.

Playfulness needs to be introduced in all aspects of the human development eco-system. We need it in early childhood, in schools, in universities, in offices (many West Coast US companies have led the way on this), in hospitals, in parents and in local communities. We need to connect with joy, frolic in nature, sing in the rain and not think so much but revel in the doing, being and creating. Our priority for play today and beyond should be to bring back playfulness into everyone's lives, at all levels.

Redressing the play deficit

Debra Lawrence

Debra has over 40 years of experience in early care and education. She is currently the President of the American Association for the Child's Right to Play, the International Play Association, USA affiliate.



Children's lives have drastically changed since I was a child. Much more emphasis is now placed on readiness for the future. Play has been transformed in a wide range of settings, including home, early childhood programs, formal school settings, and the wider neighbourhood. Some forms of play, such as outdoor play, recess play, risky play, and child-led play are being marginalised if not replaced with structured sports, structured recreation, tutoring, homework, and technology.

We need to develop a campaign to help others recognize that play is essential to healthy development. We need to protect childhood. We need to create an organized movement to promote child-initiated play. We need to facilitate access to risky play and natural environments and move away from using screen technology like Smart Boards, tablets, ipads, computers, and television to entertain or teach.

We must start with what is known about how the brain develops and our understanding of the importance of dispositions of learning [Bruce Perry](#), a neuroscientist and child psychologist, helps us understand that the foundation of healthy development is based on what he describes as the learning cycle. For a child to reach their unique potential, gifted at conception, they must have rich and enduring opportunities to be curious, explore, make discoveries, gain pleasure from these discoveries, repeat them, master them, and increase their self-confidence. Play is the means to achieve this. In child-initiated play, as opposed to guided or structured play, children naturally progress through the learning cycle.

Play is the key to ameliorating the damage caused by traumatic events and lack of adequate nutrition. Play prospers when children feel safe enough to be curious and explore, and have warm, caring, and supportive relationships with the adults surrounding them. If the goal is for every child to reach their potential, then the focus should be on helping parents, educators, and policymakers recognize the need to fund basic needs and unstructured time for play.

The toothpaste is out of the tube

Penny Wilson



Penny is a playworker, who has loved every moment of her 40ish years doing this incredible job. She has worked in inclusive Adventure Playgrounds, a Play Association and with Assemble an architectural and art collective, to establish [AssemblePlay](#).

We have really made a mess of this, haven't we?

Play was all around us. It was so ubiquitous that no-one paid it much attention. We assumed that, like our planet, it would just carry on regardless of how badly we treated it. Now, cities are built for cars and businesses - rat runs for the fittest scamperers. Not places for living. We delude ourselves that play is trivial, flimflam, worth-less, something easily replaceable with pavlovian training, teaching targets, conveyor-belt early years with no 'present moment' value. 'Play', within a formal education, is a way to mould a compliant workforce. I am sick of explaining, patiently, why play is vital and the negative effects of play deprivation. I am fed up trying to prove the bleeding obvious. In human existence, play has always been huge, if largely unobtrusive. It has a purpose. What arrogance to try to expunge it and replace it with adult led agendas. Making childhood into a vainglorious project?

Dominant educational agendas almost entirely repress play. Even children's 'free' time is crammed with measurable product-based activities. Something is off kilter. It would be bonkers to deride education and whittle it out of children's lives, permitting only play. But is it any more acceptable to do the reverse? We cannot waste precious play moments any longer.

What if we took playwork seriously? What if we practised in the service of play? Playworker adults do not 'know best'. We know more things, but we will never again be as skilled as children are at playing. Play is what their glorious brains are designed to do. Ours have moved on and we can never fully regain that play-based state.

So how about this? We teach adults how to understand and support play, based on the underpinning [playwork principles](#). We work with parents, not to look for a teachable moment, but to step back and with subtle support, assist them to observe their children playing and learn from these observations? Why not show other professionals, how to work with humility and without adulteration, to watch children in a play environment and learn from watching them how to inform and improve their practice.

Play has been squeezed out of everyday childhood. To preserve play for our species we need to be bold, creative, inventive, play advocates. There's no turning back time to a 'golden age' when children roamed. Those times are gone.

The toothpaste is out of the tube.

Every moment of missed playhood is irretrievable.

We need to rewild play. Make the extraordinary ordinary again.

Play is central to a happy, healthy childhood

Play England (written by trustee Helen Dodd)

Play England is the national play advocacy organisation for England. It campaigns for a child-friendly country where all children and young people have freedom to play at home, at school, in parks, and public spaces.



Children's opportunities for play, including risky play, and their independent mobility are increasingly restricted in western societies. In 2021, research showed that children were waiting almost two years longer for independent mobility than their parents had ([Dodd et al., 2021](#)). That's two years without the freedom, fun, adventure, and experiences that independent mobility promotes. Research commissioned by Play England, in partnership with Save the Children shows a clear decline in children's street play in England over the previous two generations. Importantly, this work also shows that children who regularly played out on the street had better wellbeing. This 'creeping lockdown' on childhood ([Playful Planet, 2021](#)) is a symptom of a broader issue in England: the relative lack of consideration given to children's needs at all levels of decision making. When children get forgotten, play gets forgotten. The COVID-19 pandemic shone a light on the extent to which children's needs and happiness are overlooked, with public playgrounds closed for an extended period and pubs allowed to reopen before schools and other children's places.

At Play England we want decision-makers to pay more attention to children and young people's needs and wants. We are facing unprecedented levels of mental health problems in children and young people ([NHS Digital, 2022](#)). If ever there was a time to stop and think about what we might be getting wrong, and how to put it right, now is the time. We also want to see more understanding that children do not need to be engaged in adult-led, structured activities all the time. Free play, where children choose what to do, when to start, when to stop and who to play with, offers children opportunity to explore, experience and express emotions. Children are experts in free play, but they need to be given the chance to do it; they need adults to get out of their way.

A recent Unicef briefing highlighted that childhood is not just about becoming an adult but also about being a child ([Hogg and Moody, 2023](#)). Childhood is not merely a warm-up for adulthood; a happy childhood should be a goal in and of itself, and play is a vital ingredient of a happy childhood. It is a happy coincidence that play also supports healthy development, including the prevention of anxiety and promotion of physical activity.

When advocating for children's right to play, we can draw on children's right to a happy childhood as well as the importance of play for healthy development, depending on the audience. Being and becoming are not in competition with one another. Our vision is that we can unite around a message that children matter and that play is vital for a happy, healthy childhood.

Play is a “cure all”

Aga Chojnacka-Al Atat



Aga is the Founder and Chair of [Alternatywy 3](#) (The Three Alternatives Foundation - Kindness, Curiosity, Creativity) that supports parents, teachers, and schools in building relationships, environments, and programmes that put children - their rights, needs, and potential first.

We live in a world with rising rates of depression, anxiety, and self-harm among children and youth. Some adults link it to COVID-19 induced isolation, some to a decline in a healthy diet and living habits, and others point to social media and technology and their toxic impact on developing brains. It is hard to dispute the significance of these factors. However, anthropological, sociological, psychological, and educational research also point in another direction - the decline in play and the play deprivation our children face daily. To better understand the value of play and its “cure-all” properties, we should recognize its versatility and multiple benefits for practically all aspects of our lives across all ages.

Play is biological. We are wired for play and seek it out as a natural way of learning about ourselves, others, and the world.

Play is self-regulatory. When deprived of play, we de-regulate - “sink very low or climb way too high” - becoming emotionally unstable.

Play is social. It’s an arena for relationship building, friendship fostering, and countless negotiations and dialogue.

Play is agentic. It is a way of us taking ownership of, and responsibility for, our choices.

Play is physical. Our bodies were designed for climbing, jumping, pushing, pulling, and tumbling, all of which play facilitates.

Play is mental. It is a beautifully complex language. In those moments of play and playfulness, we can tap into our natural potential, ingenious ideas, and creative potential.

Play is diverse. In play, we learn that our differences are what makes us beautiful and special and learn to value this diversity in ourselves and others.

Play is equitable. It only requires collective resources that can allow us to discover who we are and what we can do - with what we have.

Play is balance. It is physical, social, emotional, and mental.

Play is joy and happiness. It is the truest form of expression of our human spirit and promise of who we might grow into.

I have painted a rainbow of play colours and qualities. We need to celebrate the many possibilities play offers and own play as a universal “cure-all” for the ailments of the XXI century.

Play is the way!

David Krishock

David is Co-Founder of [The Bright Day Foundation](#), a charitable organization whose sole purpose is to advance a global awareness of the benefits and advantages of play and play-based learning for our children.



The Bright Day Foundation was recognized as a charitable organization in 2005, but our story begins much earlier. Co-Founder, Laurel Tucker Krishock had her first child in 1987, left her profession as advertising agency Creative Director to care for Tucker, and as a new parent navigated all the what's, where's, and why's of motherhood.

It became obvious from the start that young Tucker wanted a say in daily activities – from going to the lakefront beach, to watching the trains trolley through the town square in Lake Forest, Illinois.

It also became obvious to Laurel that children could learn much, if not all, through playful experiences – all the letters and words, all the numbers and math, all the science and problem solving. Laurel helped form a local collective of parents to promote play as a way for their children to learn. At that time and place, play-based learning was a radical notion and one that was not taken seriously.

Forward to 1999 - Tucker was 12 years old and his younger brother Bennett was aged 7. Both boys were given an opportunity to create their own path based on what they loved most, and we found them schools that supported their passions. They thrived, as did their friends. And, as we did our research, we learned that many more children, many more organizations, in many more countries were benefiting from more play and play-based learning.

We have shared this knowledge through publishing books and producing play products. We began partnering globally with some of the most knowledgeable, best-practice play organizations in the world. Our work has evolved into a feature film documentary to enable us to reach a larger audience. The film tells the story of the importance of play, and play-based learning.

Bright Day's global partners have become the story-tellers, sharing their best-practices. The film takes its audience - teachers and parents, to places they have never seen before – to schools and play-centres that utilise play every day to help better educate children. This film will be complete in 2023 and hopes to inspire and facilitate learning through play.

Play Day Handbooks

Pat Rumbaugh



Pat, The Play Lady, inspires children and adults to play through her series of [Let's Play books](#), work she co-creates with Christine Alexander and for the [Let's Play America's Play Day Handbooks](#).

In March 2009 I founded a play committee in Takoma Park, Maryland USA. I had witnessed the decline in fun free play like I had experienced as a child. I discovered the non-profit [KaBOOM](#) was naming cities A Playful City USA if you applied, mapped your playgrounds, and held a Play Day. The City of Takoma Park was named A Playful City USA nine years in a row until the program ended.

In less than five years, this local play committee had grown into the non-profit [Let's Play America](#) (LPA). It was holding three Play Days a year besides closing streets to play and adding play experiences to other events. I became known as the Play Day expert. I regularly spoke about Play Days at conferences, was interviewed by the media, and wrote articles on play.

During COVID-19, Let's Play America held three virtual Play Days and published two Play Day Handbooks, one for in-person Play Days, and another for virtual Play Days. These two [Play Day Handbooks](#) have helped many people and communities. The non-profit [changeX.org](#) heard about the Play Day Handbooks. They asked me to submit a Play Day Project, which was immediately approved and funded. People from around the world have been applying for the Play Day Project funding and over twenty communities have been successful.

Play Day Handbooks are one way in which we can encourage more community play.

Expressing emotion through art-based play

Chun-Hui Wang

Chun-Hui is the chief of Children's Exploratorium of Hsinchu City in Taiwan. She advocates working with children during the process of developing educational projects in various museums in Taiwan.



According to the research conducted by [Focus on the Family in Taiwan](#), less than 50% of people talk to their family members everyday while 83% of caregivers lack patience to listen to their children.

In Taiwan, we are taught not to express emotions. As a result, adult caregivers dismiss and fail to respond to children's emotions. Without the guide of experienced caregivers, children can find it difficult to make sense of their world and their reactions to it. There are concerns over the longer-term mental health problems that may result from this.

We decided to promote trauma-informed care to enable adults and children to identify their emotional states and work through hard times with art. We have developed a 'Trauma Dressing Pack' which allow children and their caregivers to play with art in a way that enables them to better understand themselves and others' feelings. We designed cards based on the collection of National Museum of Fine Art and deliver a series of workshops for children aged six to twelve and their caregivers. These workshops comprise a Feelings collage; First aid for trauma; and an Emotional Resilience Superhero). Children and their caregivers respond to the cards and are encouraged to share their opinions through the medium of art. Through art-based play, children and their caregivers can make sense of their emotions and are more open to discussing them.

Mural art for children's play in Bangkok

Pilaiporn Nunma



Pilaiporn is a full-time lecturer at Faculty of Architecture, Chiang Mai University, in Thailand. Her interests centre on promoting children's play space in the city, child environment, and community development.

Neighbourhood play, child participation and a community-led approach are crucial factors in developing a child-friendly environment in a metropolitan city like Bangkok. [Our previous research](#) and the resulting creative adaptation of Duang Khae Alley demonstrated how grassroots work led by the [Foundation of Child Development](#) demonstrated that it is possible to transform the urban environment through and for play.

Mural art is one of the tools that we used. Murals now adorn the 250 meters wall along Hua Lam Pong train station and the walls of nearby houses. I was interested to find out if this inspired children's play in this high-density residential area. We have observed temporary play installations popping-up near the mural wall on annual festival days. By observing and interviewing local people, we have learned that these mural walls are inspiring play. The murals are more than symbols that define and distinguish their neighbourhood.

I aim to increase children and community involvement in creating child-friendly spaces in Thailand. Children's right to play should be more widely understood in our country. I actively promote mural art to inspire community play and advocate for its integration in public playgrounds across Bangkok.

Retaining our humanity through the Expressive Arts

Charlotte Allan

Charlotte Allan is a PhD candidate at the University of Strathclyde School of Education. She is a theatre maker specialising in work for under-fives and their accompanying adults.



What is it we expect when we ask a child of primary school age 'what do you want to be when you grow up?' Do we assume they share the same internal drop-down menu of known roles or job titles that we do? Is what you want to be in the future different from what you want to be today?

This task of future-oriented goal setting brings together knowledge of the self and the world within a speculative framework. It can be daunting to predict the world our children will inherit. Artificial Intelligence (AI) may be the next dramatic shift in technology, like fire or printing, that changes how we relate to one-another and build our communities. At the time of writing, thankfully, open-source AI is still reassuringly terrible at writing theatre scripts. Perhaps what you will want to be in twenty years' time does not exist yet. Perhaps you will be the one to invent it.

But what has all this got to do with play?

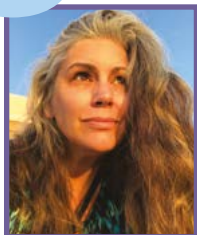
Within a results-driven, instrumentalist culture the playful component of artistic practice is at risk. This endangers the quality of our artistic output and threatens to cut off one of the paths through which play continues to enrich lives beyond childhood.

Like play, creative practice is important in and of itself. Though sometimes there is a product, enjoyably shared with others, there is inherent value in the process. Collaborative, imaginative play is a living and embodied process where shared imaginations create a community thriving on the richness of individual difference. In the metaphorical (or literal) dance between self and other, we can deepen our understanding of both.

Artificial Intelligence is aggressively normative. Art is the opposite, asking always for a unique offer and unique interpretation. This is what makes it so powerfully human, and something we all need to access. Space must be made and retained for children (and others) to play with the questions: what do I want to be? What do I connect with? What is my unique contribution?

Collective autonomy

Suzanne Axelsson



Suzanne has worked over thirty years in early childhood education with a focus on children's autonomy, democratic approaches, and inclusion. Her books include [*The Original Learning Approach*](#) and the Swedish [*Risky Play and Teaching*](#).

Original Learning came out of a place of frustration - where play, learning and teaching were being pitched against each other. I needed some kind of cognitive and emotional space to develop ideas about education that truly valued play and children.

My wish is for something like Original Learning to find its way into every preschool and school around the world, where play is not seen as a break from the teaching but is essential to a quality education. I want adults, regardless of the age they teach, to become play-responsive educators, where their observations of play inform how they teach within a community of learners. This means we need to move beyond seeing autonomy as merely an individual state, but rather as a collective sense of well-being; where individuals can feel safe to be themselves together with others who understand them.

I have been working as a play-responsive educator for over a decade. Children's play informs how I teach. It involves lots of listening activities, games, and explorations; trust-building (children and adults); story-telling; experimenting with multiple ways of doing something, and much more. The mutual trust, and ability to listen to understand each other results in more time for play, because conflicts and misunderstandings are resolved quickly by the children themselves. The atmosphere of autonomy and empowerment also mean that any teaching I offer is welcomed like a gift; in part because the art of giving is in knowing what the receiver wants and in part because the children know that they too can suggest what gifts can be shared with the group.

My research into Indigenous methodologies, knowledge and culture has led me to believe that we need to move away from individualised views of play and learning and look towards how individuals can bloom within a community that listens to understand. This collective play has the potential to expand beyond current norms because each child can thrive in their own autonomy together with others, which includes playing alone and parallel play. When we feel safe to be ourselves, we can be free to play in the way that benefits our own brain development. This is well-suited to autistic children who mask their own needs to fit in.

My dream is to change the education system into one in which play is the way to achieve more inclusive and creative learning.

Mapping the provision of play in Higher Education

John H McKendrick

John was Chair of the Academic and Practitioner Panel at IPA Glasgow 2023. He has edited several collections of papers on children's play, including [*Prospects for a Playfully Play-Full Scottish Education*](#) for the Scottish Education Review.



At the same time as there has been growing political commitment to play, the status of play in higher education has at best stalled, if not diminished.

I have witnessed some significant advances in children's play: not least, [*General Comment No. 17*](#) on the right of the child to play (2013), the UK Government's of [*Getting Serious About Play*](#) (2004), which paved the way for a £235 million 'National' Play Strategy, the launch of a [*National Play Strategy in Scotland*](#) (2013), and the introduction of a [*Play Sufficiency Duty*](#) in Wales (from 2012).

There are clusters of excellence in play across higher education. Consider, for example, the centres of research excellence in play at the University of Cambridge ([*Play in Education, Development and Learning*](#)), the European collaboration led by University College Cork ([*People, Place, Policy and Practice for Play*](#)), or the University of British Colombia ([*Play Outside Lab*](#)). There are also specialist degree offerings, such as the three taught postgraduate courses approved in the UK by the [*British Association of Play Therapists*](#).

Over the course of my academic career (which stretches back to around the Millennium and a study of [*The Business of Children's Play*](#)), I have been External Examiner for three different undergraduate playwork degree programmes (Northumbria, Leeds Beckett University, and the University of Gloucestershire). At the latter, I was also part of the approval panel for a taught postgraduate programme that focused on play. All these courses have been withdrawn, and there is currently a dearth of provision of play education in higher education across the UK.

The United Nations' SDGs acknowledge the importance of access to higher education and the need to increase the number of people with relevant skills (albeit the latter is framed as skills for financial success). National governments recognise that there is a need for more citizens to acquire more of the skills that further and higher education provides to ensure that we are better able to meet the economic and social challenges that present in the years ahead.

For others to value play as much as we do, and for playworkers to be remunerated more fairly, we need to evidence the case for undergraduate education focused on play. And we need to better understand what is currently provided across existing degree programmes.

2030 – a playful prediction on the ecology of play

Gregor Mews



Gregor is a curious scholar of the human and the urban condition in space and time. He is the author of the international multiple award-winning book [Transforming Public Space through Play](#) and co-leads the [BASC Lab](#) at the University of the Sunshine Coast, Australia.

"Life does not merely operate at the level of individual organism (a presumed stable being) but emerges from the self-organising capacities of organic and non-organic materials to co-create novel formations, a continuous and fluid state of becoming". (Lester, 2020, p.71)

It is the year 2030 and societies across the world have learned from the systemic issues that were amplified during the COVID-19 pandemic ([Aerts et.al, 2020](#)). A focus on urban health has transformed the human condition ([Mews & Muminovic, 2020](#)). More importantly, the Right to Play has achieved universal policy recognition without the necessity to demonstrate health or learning gain. This achievement is due to a collective and holistic co-designed play manifesto that participants at the IPA 2023 World Congress created.

One of such recommendation referred to the transformative potential of the Ecology of Play framework. This idea developed by Mews and Ritson over the course of the 2020s, embraced non-reductive complexity and openness while being evidence-based. It brought together different lines of flight to making design decisions related to play. Its theoretical inspiration derived from [Deleuze and Guattari's](#) (1987/2021) non-linear, rhizome thinking that can territorialise and deterritorialise social relations related to play. This nonlinear approach and its capacity to embrace relationality, non-duality and agency, amplified and celebrated the works of scholars such as [Lester and Russell](#) (2014) who realised the potential of play to not just shift disciplinary ontology of practices as we know it, but also to enable a new sense of ability to respond.

This 'response-ability' ([Barad, 2007](#)) transformed our thinking, and enabled humans to move beyond their superiority thinking and doing, and to realise that divisions between nature and culture are obsolete. It recognised that relationality, difference, and agency are strong lines of flight in our worldly becoming. In this new world, the 'Ecology of Play' framework has become a potent means to shift human minds allowing them to see new possibilities for play. It heralded the end of a social world that followed a neoliberal ideology that dehumanised spatial practices associated with risk aversion, spatial segregation, social (in)justice, and outcomes obsession.

This note is dedicated to the memory of Stuart Lester, in recognition of a lifetime of commitment to play-related research.

2030 - Reclaiming play in Wales

Siôn Edwards

Mae **Siôn** yn weithiwr chwarae niwroamrywiol yn Canolfan Phlant Integredig Y Fenter, Wrecsam (gogledd ddwyrain). **Siôn** is a neurodivergent playworker at [The Venture](#) Integrated Children's Centre, Wrexham (north east Wales). He is also the Chair of [The Playwork Foundation](#), a UK-wide charity for play, playwork, and playworkers.



It's 2030, and a lot has changed in Wales. The Welsh Government are on-track to achieve Cymraeg 2050 targets with over 800,000 Welsh-speakers nationally. Thanks to the Wellbeing of Future Generations Act, poverty and inequality have reduced, people are living healthier and longer, and people are learning to a higher standard and learning well into maturity. In our environment, rivers run clean and forests and greenery stretch from coast to coast. And, on the back of New Zealand and Scotland following suit, a bill is now in its third reading in Westminster for a Wellbeing of Future Generations Act in England.

The national Play Strategy has just turned 5 and has brought unprecedented funding and resources for playwork provision and playwork training. Everyone in the playwork workforce, including governmental and local authority staff, is playwork trained and all practitioners working with children and young people are trained up to Level 3 in Playwork: Principles into Practice (P3). We've had the "new" curriculum for 7 years and free play is an intrinsic and protected part of the school day (= more breaks, no detentions) and schools cannot negatively impact upon play outside of school (= no more homework).

It's summer in Wrecsam and playworkers and play advocates from around the world are converging on the city for the IPA Cymru conference. Having been City of Culture in 2029, there's plenty of accommodation, excellent transport infrastructure, and a wide variety of amenities to cater for the global audience. As a new "Capital of Play", Wrecsam not only boasts a play-friendly city centre but a mixture of built physical features interwoven with a tapestry of permanent and pop-up playwork provision, extending from the urban fringe deep into the peri-urban apogees of the county.

Nationally, children's play continues to be prioritised by Welsh Government, local authorities and statutory bodies. Play Sufficiency Impact Assessments are a headline consideration in planning applications and all Community Councils have a compulsory allocation to fund local playwork provision from precepts. Also, businesses and organisations who actively improve play sufficiency within the proximity or their premises and/or improve play opportunities for the children of their staff (i.e. through working arrangements and/or through the financial support of playwork provision in lieu of childcare) receive tax reductions as an incentive.

Crucially, children and young people are playing - everywhere! Affordances for play are in abundance and everyone understands the importance of play.



The IPA Glasgow 2023 Legacy

IPA Scotland Board

The IPA Scotland Board comprises of 12 individuals from a variety of disciplines and geographic locations who are committed to helping Scotland be the best place to grow up through promoting Article 31 of the UNCRC. Our Board includes two former and

one current Board member of IPA World and we are proud of our central role in the wider organisation over the past 20 years as well of course to be welcoming you all to Glasgow.

Scotland is recognised as one of the world's leading nations for its support and practical action for children's play. The right to play is backed by policy and practice across all sectors. IPA Scotland envisaged that the IPA World Conference 2023 in Glasgow would provide an opportunity to examine how [UN General Comment No. 17 \(2013\) on the right of the child to rest, leisure, play, recreational activities, cultural life and the arts \(art. 31\)](#) has influenced policy and practice in Scotland. Additionally, as Scotland is setting out to implement and integrate children's rights into all parts of Scottish life by making the Convention on the Rights of the Child part of Scots law, we saw an opportunity to future-proof children's right to play. We hope that our conference has create a lasting in two other ways.

First, children and young people's lived experience and participation, both local and international, is a cornerstone of the programme before, during and after the conference. We established the first children and young people's participation advisory group for the conference and co-produced principles for participation. Additionally, children and young people have been supported to attend the conference and engage with delegates, making the conference a space for shared collaboration and celebration. Our hope is that this approach to children and young people's participation will be inspire delegates, and their future work around article 31. We are confident that this is a shared priority with the IPA which will be developed in future World Conferences.

Second, when planning the conference, we worked hard to ensure that, as far as possible, decisions were guided by a desire to ensure children and young people have a healthy planet, and we sought to minimise our environmental impact. Could this be the greenest IPA World Conference yet? Our efforts include encouraging UK delegates to think carefully about modes of travel; minimising paper use, and providing delegates with paper free, compostable lanyards. Carbon offsetting calculations were used to take into account our international reach and conference size. As such, we will establish four acres of new woodland in the West of Scotland to celebrate the conference and offset over half of the carbon emissions associated with delegate travel. This will create a lasting environmental legacy.

IPA Scotland is proud and honoured to be the home branch for the 22nd IPA Triennial World Conference. We believe the theme of rights and possibilities captures our desire to achieve a better future for our children.





Notes

