





# THE POWER OF PLAY BUILDING A CREATIVE BRITAIN

## Executive Summary

*"Play means doing the things I want to do"  
(aged 4 years)*

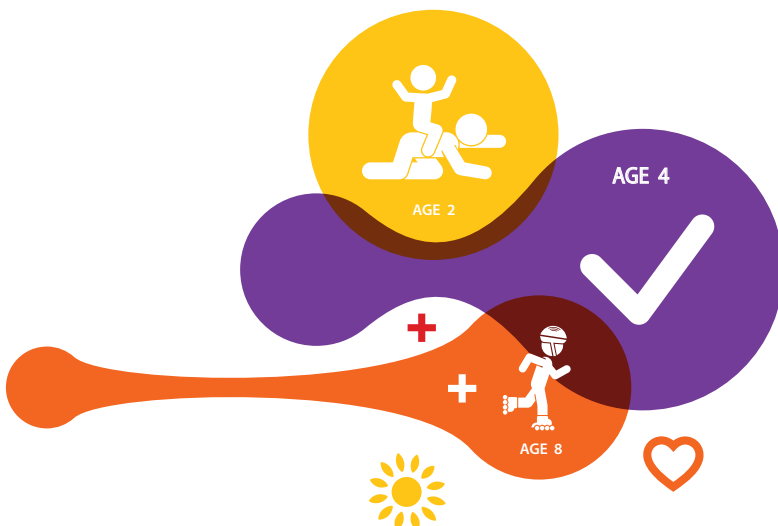
Ask an adult what the word 'play' conjures up for them, and they may share memories of time spent in nature, on the street - playing out, fashioning a daisy chain or a bow and arrow. It may also mean moments of less stress, building a rocket and flying to the very furthest edges of imagination. Play may also have been an urgently needed escape for some who had challenging experiences during childhood. Play in childhood undoubtedly resonates through the ages and as such, it provides a lifelong, multi-generational and community-enhancing opportunity for all.

To educators, play may be viewed as a provision of space for the child to act independently physically and emotionally. The importance of play and associated creative learning is heartily acknowledged by early childhood professionals. However, so often society decides that 'free play' ought to be put to one side, 'to allow children to learn effectively'. It isn't surprising, therefore, that recognition of the value of play dwindles ever more as the pressures of life, and competing needs and attractions, impact upon the family/class/nursery/community. Our environments have also changed; we have busier streets, continuous news alerts warning us about the 'dangers' on our doorsteps and we hear less about opportunities for freedom. Children's lives are easily guided by structured time and structured play, rather than free time for child-initiated and child-led, free play.

Despite this current context, the United Kingdom has such a vibrant history of creative thinkers, from world-renowned researchers and theorists to the best in music and art, technology and science. To ensure the sustainability and enhancement of the UK's position in such industries, and indeed to sustain children's access to the opportunities needed to inspire their entrance into associated career choices later in life, we must be appreciative of the ever-evolving social, cultural and economic landscape. With this in mind, it isn't surprising that the very creators of generative AI are emphasising play as a significant tool and area of focus,

*"I believe that the use of play, the attitude of play, has great potential in the development of AI systems." (Veloso, 2020)<sup>1</sup>.*

If we want the UK to truly achieve in this changing world, with AI advancing at a rapid pace, we will need to prioritise children's opportunities for creativity, with flexibility of mind and adaptability nurtured through free play.



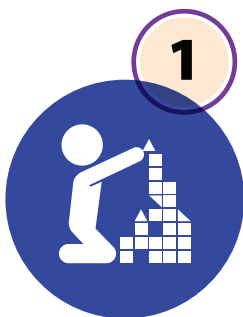


# INVEST IN PLAY

## INVEST IN OUR CHILDREN

### INVEST IN BRITAIN

## Recommendations to policy makers



### Recognise play as a fundamental right: Uphold children's right to play in diverse settings prioritising free, unstructured play.

- The creation of a Department for Children, YP & Families (or Cabinet Level Minister for children) that would have Play as a central focus of their position/department.
- England, like Scotland, should place the UNCRC into Law (see also Just Fair 2023)<sup>2</sup>. This upholds children's right to play as outlined in Article 31 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child (UN 1989)<sup>3</sup>, incorporating its principles and recommendations into national legislation and policy frameworks.
- A working definition of 'Play' is required that speaks of intrinsically motivated children, freely choosing what they wish to do, with the time, space and ability to act autonomously, with choices that make this a realistic possibility.

### Integrate play into educational policies:

- Ensure that policies and practices prioritise children's well-being within political agendas, promoting play as a central component of healthy development with opportunities for free, unstructured play across diverse settings.
- Embed play-based learning in curricula at all levels, embracing it as a core element of the learning process throughout all stages of education and recognising its importance throughout inclusive and age-appropriate activities.
- Ensure every relevant policy and initiative effecting children considers the extent to which it prioritises every child's right and need to play, being mindful of the environments and realities they are growing up within.

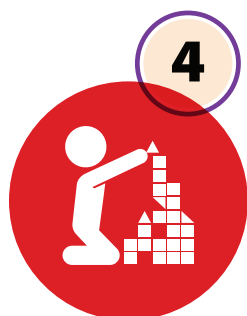


### Invest in play provision:

- Allocate resources and funding to local authorities and communities to develop and maintain play spaces that are accessible, safe, and conducive to children's play, ensuring that this is sustained through adequate funding and resources.
- Strengthen the play sector at both national and local levels, providing support and resources to promote age-appropriate play spaces, catering to the diverse needs and ages of children across different communities.



## Recommendations to policy makers:



### Prioritise play through cross-sector collaboration:

- Foster cross-sectoral collaboration and interprofessional approaches to play that recognise its role in promoting physical, cognitive, emotional and social well-being.
- Prioritise play as a fundamental aspect of childhood development and lifelong learning within multi-professional projects that recognise and embrace the mental, physical, social, and developmental benefits of play across the lifespan.
- Reassess the pedagogic appropriateness of knowledge-based curriculum and its impact on children's wellbeing, engagement and enjoyment of education.

### Prioritise lifelong learning and offer coordinated and dedicated training programs for staff working in schools, early years settings, family hubs, and children's centres:

- Provide ongoing training that reflects play-based learning approaches and supports an understanding of the deeply impactful role of play in the development of the whole child.
- Promote lifelong learning to staff, as well as the significance of ongoing play-based programs for anyone working with children.
- Ensure that those working with young children enjoy equal access to accredited professional qualifications.



### Promote parental engagement in play:

- Empower parents through campaigns and initiatives that highlight the developmental and intergenerational benefits of play.
- Encourage parental involvement in promoting play with play activities they can engage in with their children.

### Update policies to reflect changing needs:

- Review policy at national and local level to ensure that adequate resources and funding are allocated to play provision, infrastructure, and lifelong learning opportunities for educators and playworkers.
- Regularly review and update policies related to play in light of evolving societal needs, technological advancements, and research findings to ensure they remain relevant and effective.
- Consult directly with children when updating policies, to ensure that their voices are heard regarding matters that directly relate to and impact upon their lives.



## Recommendations to policy makers:

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### Address disparities in play opportunities:

- Implement measures to address disparities in access to play opportunities, taking into account disabilities, geographical location, socioeconomic status and other factors that may affect children's engagement in play.
- Address barriers to play and collaborate with communities to create inclusive play environments that meet the needs of all children.

### Support children facing adversity:

- Implement play sufficiency legislation at the local level to ensure that all children have access to high-quality play opportunities.
- Develop targeted interventions and support services that enable children facing adversity, such as those seeking asylum, to access play opportunities and benefit from its therapeutic effects.

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### Support children's community initiatives:

- Support resident-led play initiatives that bring together stakeholders from various sectors to provide children with safe spaces for outdoor play within their communities as well as social interaction, opportunities for learning and a focal point for communities that centre around the child.
- Involve children's input in urban planning and play space development, ensuring their voices are heard and acted upon.



## SECTION 1 DEFINING PLAY

*"Play can be all sorts of stuff we do, can't it"*  
*(Aged 15 years)*

Historically, the nature of childhood and value of play has been surprisingly consistent across European cultures (Cunningham, 2005)<sup>4</sup>. The 1475 engravings of Israhel van Meckenem, specifically 'Children at Play', drew adults into the playful world of childhood and reflected what were deemed at the time to be children's modern games, including the hobby-horse. Meanwhile, the painting of 'Children's Games' in 1560 by Pieter Brugel, depicts a forgotten folk culture of Belgium life and highlighted the forms of play that communities engaged in. It revealed the variety of amusement enjoyed by children and young adults, including barrel play, ring games and small gatherings, reflecting the central role of play in the lives of children and adults. Eakin's paintings (between 1870 and 1876), such as 'Baby at Play', highlighted the phasing out of baby toys and development in the world of language, with the painted alphabet blocks being played with. These artworks illustrate the interest and focus of objects with infants at play, revealing the presence of 'childhood'. This is understood to be significant, because play was often disregarded and trivialised during these times in history.

A more positive focus on play came from Rousseau's view of infants and children, as essentially good and free in spirit, left to 'play' in nature would promote a much richer and more harmonious society. 'Emile' (1762), written by Rousseau as his treatise of a new childhood, served as the inspiration for what became a new national system of childrearing and education, highlighting the connection between freedom and play across classes in building what we would now term, a 'creative' society for the future (Norman 2022)<sup>5</sup>.

Philosophers including Rousseau and Froebel advocated and implemented a unique re-conceptualisation of play and its central importance in children's lives. Friedrich Froebel's (1782-1852) philosophy of education was unique in that he advocated mutual respect and holistic learning through play, as well as the value of experiential learning. Here, a sense of belonging with the family, community, and culture was considered vital (Bruce, 2021)<sup>6</sup>. Froebel believed that play was the child's work and that it provided the best preparation for adulthood.

With this in mind, play therefore, may be constructed differently depending upon the era, discipline or professional position of working with young children but, it can broadly be understood as a rich tapestry of interactions, actions and feelings, in solitude or among others.

The Russian psychologist Lev Vygotsky (1978)<sup>7</sup> characterized play as activity that is,

- desired by the child
- always involves an imaginary situation
- involves the forming of rules, developed and determined by the players themselves, not necessarily determined in advance.

*"I enjoy all types of play like swimming but at the moment play for me is when I catch up and chat with my mates as we game. I know this is different to when I was young and played with Lego & things, but play can be all sorts of stuff"*  
*(aged 15 years)*

*"Play is how I make friends!" TM Down Syndrome*  
*(aged 9 years)*

Play, as we view it, is first and foremost, what one wants to do, as opposed to what one feels obliged to do. As Bruce (2015)<sup>8</sup> highlights, play cannot be pinned down into a neat, measurable definition. In making sense of play, Bruce outlined 12 features of play and believed that three or more features indicated good quality play, wherever and however it is undertaken. Bruce (2020) posted 12 features on The Froebel Trust.

- 1** Free flow play actively uses direct, first-hand experiences, which draw on the child's powerful inner drive to struggle, manipulate materials, explore, discover, and practise over and over again.
- 2** Play exerts no external pressure on children to conform to externally imposed rules, goals, tasks or a definite direction. In this it differs from games. But the externally set rules in games enable children to experiment with breaking, making and keeping rules in the safety of their free-flowing play.
- 3** Play is an active process without an end product. When the play fades, so does its tangibility. It can never again be replayed in exactly the same way. It is of the moment and vanishes when the play episode ends. This aids flexibility of thought and the adaptability central to the intellectual life of the child.
- 4** Play is intrinsically motivated. It does not rely on external rewards. It is self-propelling. Children cannot be made to play. The circumstances and relationships need to be right for the child's play to begin to flow.
- 5** Play is about possible, alternative, imagined worlds which involve 'supposing' and 'as if' situations. These lift participants from the literal and real to a more abstract and higher level of functioning. This involves being imaginative, creative, original and innovative. The symbolic life of the child uses life experiences in increasingly abstract ways.
- 6** Play is sustained, and when in full flow, helps children to function in advance of what they can actually do in their real lives. They can drive a car, perform a heart operation, be a shop keeper.
- 7** Play can be initiated by a child or an adult, but if by an adult he/she must pay particular attention that the adult's play agenda is not the most important or only one. Free flowing play is more like a conversation with each listening to and tuning into the other.
- 8** Play can be solitary and gives children agency and a sense of control over their lives. It supports children in developing awareness and strength in their own ideas, feelings, and relationships. It gives personal space for contemplation and well being because it gives strength to deal with life's events.
- 9** Play might be in partnerships between children or between adult and child. Or it might be in a group with or without an adult participating. Adults need to be sensitive to children's play ideas, feelings and relationships and not invade, overwhelm or extinguish the children's possibilities for free-flowing play. Freedom with guidance is a delicate balance.
- 10** Play is about wallowing in ideas, feelings and relationships and the prowess of the physical body. It helps the process of becoming aware of self in relation to others and the universe. It brings unity and interconnectedness.
- 11** During their free-flowing play children use the technical prowess, mastery and competence they have developed to date. They are confident and in control. Play shows adults what children already know and have already learnt more than it introduces new learning.
- 12** Play is an integrating mechanism which brings together everything the child has been learning, knows and understands. It is rooted in real experience that it processes and explores. It is self-healing in most situations and brings an intellectual life that is self-aware, connected to others, community and the world beyond. Early childhood play becomes a powerful resource for life both in the present and the future.

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*"What is this play of the little ones? It is the great drama of life itself"  
(Froebel cited in Liebschner, 1992: 21)<sup>9</sup>.*



## SECTION 2

# PRIORITISING PLAY IN ENGLAND

*"Playing is fun and I love playing with Lanky Box toys!"  
(aged 4 years)*

'Play' forms the very bedrock of learning and development experiences, as a route for self-expression, a tool for tapping into forms of knowledge, a site of freedom and empowerment and as a cultural factor and practice of children and practitioners, as a community. Despite its appearance, play, as a function of living and an intrinsically rewarding experience, is a very serious act of learning. For play to be at the heart of learning in early years practice, we must be playful, lifelong learners ourselves. This is in line with Basu's ideas (2017)<sup>10</sup>, in that we spend our time as playful, lifelong learners from birth, appreciating that the world and our space within it is characterised by movement, mediation, relations and connections (Jones, 2019)<sup>11</sup>. Renowned folklorists Iona and Peter Opie's research on British children's folklore, language, nursery rhymes and games in the playground (Opie and Opie 1959)<sup>12</sup> also highlights the generational connections to play, during the late 20th century, demonstrating that children were continuing to sing and play group games, similar to their predecessors from over a century before.

Play is a fundamental right of all children, as identified within the international human rights treaty, the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child: Article 31 (UN 1989). Although children play in different ways depending upon social, cultural, and environmental contexts, playing is a universal part of development and learning which nurtures children's growth as complex and capable human beings.

We have seen the negative impact of global crises on children and childhoods. Many of us are living through a series of global crises which include the Covid-19 pandemic, rising poverty, diminishing health and mental wellbeing and mass population movements through war and climate breakdown. In addition, there are changing and increasingly diverse family structures, the creation of digital childhoods and the growth of AI, increasing surveillance and privacy intrusion with the dominance of metrics and big data. Reflecting on the state of children's wellbeing and mental health, and the quality and nature of their early experiences that shape their life chances, causes us to re-think our priorities in Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) policy and practice, with the need for greater focus on developing the conditions for children to flourish and feel fulfilment in their lives. Here, flourishing is understood as a vital condition for fulfilment and wellbeing at all stages in life. For children, it includes a life in which joy, love and trust are nurtured, and where every child is encouraged to develop the skills to connect to, and interact with others, experiencing both autonomy and empathy. In a post-Covid world, where we have greater numbers of emotionally troubled children and stressed families, there is an urgent need to ensure that our communities and early years settings within them provide for flourishing, fulfilment and wellbeing in children's learning and development (Pascal et al 2020)<sup>13</sup>.

*"I want to play all day"  
(aged 3 years)*

*"I play hide and seek with my friends!"  
(aged 5 years)*





## SECTION 2: Prioritising play in England

In today's digital age, children are growing up in times of rapid change; extensive opportunities to play are crucial for them to develop flexible minds, creativity, ability to work with others, and resilience to manage future challenges.

Moreover, evidence of the association between time spent playing and child mental health is building more than ever before (Gray, Lancy and Bjorklund, 2023<sup>14</sup>; Zhao and Gibson, 2023<sup>15</sup>; Özcan, Erol and Ivrendi 2024<sup>16</sup>) yet currently, the constraints on children's opportunities to play have increased in recent decades (Dodd et al 2021)<sup>17</sup>. These constraints are felt too by children in communities, such as those families who have children with additional needs and may need more specialist access to play-appropriate resources in the community.

Additionally, those families seeking asylum, who experience a plethora of additional challenges that inhibit their opportunity to play. More broadly, it is reported that one in five children and young people had a probable mental disorder in 2023 (NHS 2023)<sup>18</sup>.

**(MONTESSORI, 1986: 92)<sup>20</sup>.**

"A child who has become master of his acts through long and repeated exercises, and who has been encouraged by the pleasant and interesting activities in which he has been engaged, is a child filled with health and joy and remarkable for his calmness and discipline."

As argued by the APPG for a Fit and Healthy Childhood (2015)<sup>19</sup>, the decline in opportunities to play has a significant impact on children's wellbeing and later life chances and, ultimately, the health of the nation. As such, creating environments that support play is essential for all children.

This means promoting safe, welcoming spaces where children can express themselves freely and feel a sense of belonging. Professional support services (such as those previously accessed in Sure Start centres) that adopt play-based approaches, can facilitate emotional healing and coping strategies for children navigating the complexities of life.

Moreover, integrating play into the curriculum emphasises the value in promoting healthy emotional and social development, ensuring that children have the tools they need to thrive.



## SECTION 3

# THE POWER OF PLAY IN ENGLAND

*“As a child with high functioning Autism, free play allowed me to regulate my emotions that could sometimes feel too much for me.”*  
*(aged 18 years)*

Panksepp (2010)<sup>21</sup> explored the emotional world of animals, and one of the primary discoveries was that all mammals have a series of 'emotional systems' hard-wired in the primitive area of the brain, one of those systems being the 'Play/Rough and Tumble, Physical Social Engagement System'. Because the circuitry for these emotional systems exists in the primitive brain (rather than the more evolved neo-cortex), it indicates that play is inherent in our survival and primitive development. The significance of this is that while the presentation of children's play changes as they develop and grow up, as humans, we never lose our capacity for playfulness. Thus, the notion that we are 'too old' for play is a myth, hence we argue that play is lifelong and if we celebrate this, we can build and nurture a creative Britain. However, as we have argued, in contemporary society, play is not universally accessible to all. Play can be limited when children's basic needs are not met and challenges in children's lives can limit their resources, opportunities, and freedom to play. These could include the lack of space or toys, lack of permission or time or psychological barriers which make it harder for children to feel safe, confident, and comfortable to play.

We argue that play in all its rich variety is one of the highest achievements of the human species, alongside language, culture, and technology in building a creative society. Indeed, without play, none of these other achievements would be possible. As highlighted by Gaskins, Haight and Lancy (2007)<sup>22</sup>, there are three cultural perceptions of play, which continue to be reflected in society today:

**Culturally accepted play:** where parents expect children to play and view it as useful to keep children busy and out of the way, although it is not encouraged, and parents do not participate. Consequently, this results in increased peer play and spaces are used that are not especially structured for play, with natural objects and resources available rather than manufactured toys.

**Culturally cultivated play:** relates to families tending to view play as the child's work and play is encouraged, with adults viewing it as important to play together with their children. The children may often spend time with professionals, who view it as an important part of their role to play with the children to encourage learning.

**Culturally curtailed play:** in this category, play is tolerated but viewed as being of limited value with certain types of play being culturally discouraged (such as fiction or fantasy play).

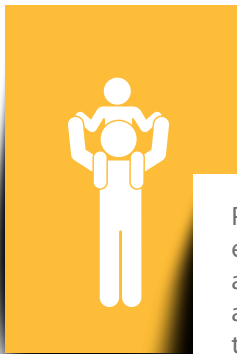
## SECTION 3: The power of play in England

Many children across the UK of different ages report challenges that prevent them from playing as much as they would like to, and in micro groups within societies such as families with children seeking asylum, they experience a constellation of additional challenges that inhibit their ability to play. These include poor mental health resulting from experiencing trauma and displacement; separation from loved ones; the lack of space and resources in hotel accommodation; moving regularly and having limited access to educational settings, and cultural and linguistic barriers. Play can help to mitigate the impact of this adversity on children's development and outcomes. Meanwhile, play deprivation is likely to further exacerbate the harms caused to children by their experiences of migration and seeking asylum and will impair their recovery from traumatic experiences.

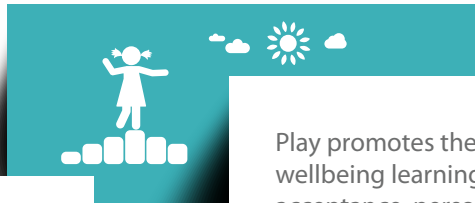
*"Like, when I was younger it fun and stuff and I still play, but as I got older play is now like being and hanging out with my friend."*  
*(aged 11 years)*

*"It gives you a chance to be fun and do stuff, it's good."*  
*(aged 5 years)*

*"It's not boring I can do what I want, and I get to create things and worlds."*  
*(aged 10 years)*



Play is everywhere in all forms and in all guises, it is the work of children.



Play promotes the facets of emotional wellbeing learning awareness, acceptance, personal integration, coping skills and building values including empathy, trust and respect for others while they play.



Play promotes intellectual development of problem-solving skills, initiation and memory, concept formation and association and classification.



Play stimulates a child's perceptual motor development with eye-hand co-ordination, and locomotive skills, as well as learning to control their bodies.

Play is at the heart of language skills and includes receptive, expressive non-verbal and auditory memory and discrimination skills.



Play is universal, culturally rich and inclusive.

Play stimulates the creativity of all individuals as they develop and progress through life.

Play begins where the child is at, not where the adult think they are at.

## SECTION 3: The power of play in England

Specifically, play has been understood to positively impact children's transitions and learning, as well as self-regulation and overall health, with the following examples providing evidence from research.


# THE IMPACT OF PLAY




## TRANSITIONS AND LEARNING

- Play has a positive impact on children's learning as it offers opportunities to 'include . . . [them] . . . in their learning process' and it can contribute to the development of such skills as strategic thinking, planning, communication, numerical abilities, discussion, group decision-making, data processing (Küçükaydın 2024)<sup>23</sup>
  - Basic skills such as literacy and numeracy can [also] be acquired through play (Pyle and Daniëls 2017)<sup>24</sup>
  - In addition, play is important to support children's understanding of social norms such as taking turns and the ability to initiate and maintain conversations (Taylor and Boyer 2020)<sup>25</sup>
  - Play prepares children for school as it supports them to develop their skills as learners, explorers, communicators, and supports the development of empathy (Fyffe et al., 2022)<sup>26</sup>
  - Not only does it support children in consolidating knowledge but also in creating and acquiring new knowledge (Bubikova-Moan, Hjetland, and Wollscheid 2019)<sup>27</sup>
  - Play provides children with a sense of competence and belonging when they engage in classroom life (Lyons, 2022)<sup>28</sup>
  - There is increasing evidence from the science of learning that demonstrates the educational effectiveness of active, playful learning (Blinkoff et al., 2023)<sup>29</sup>.
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## SELF REGULATION

- Socio-dramatic play is important for supporting self-regulation (SR) skills in early childhood and it is understood to be at the centre of children's early learning (Özcan, Erol and Ivrendi, 2023)
  - Children who demonstrate SR skills have high mathematics and language skills (Gözüm and Uyanık-Aktulun, 2021)<sup>30</sup>
  - Playing promotes skills associated with self-regulation, including attention, reasoning and impulse control. In addition, it also promotes the capacity to reflect on and regulate thoughts and emotions (O'Sullivan and Ring, 2018)<sup>31</sup>.
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## SELF REGULATION

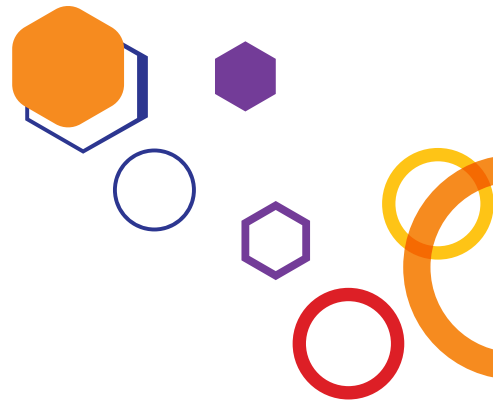
- It has been evidenced that children who spend more time playing adventurously had fewer internalising problems with positive affect during the Covid-19 lockdown' (Dodd et al., 2023)<sup>32</sup>
  - Enhanced peer play ability at age 3 years was associated with lower risk of challenges on all 4 SDQ subscales at age 7 years (Zhao and Gibson, 2023).
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In light of this, we argue that policy needs to prioritise play as vital to the healthy development of young children, with recognition of its role within the home, children's immediate surroundings and wider community spaces. Associated critical and creative thinking are vital skills to develop in childhood and throughout the lifespan. Such skills enable individuals to engage in divergent thinking and create innovative solutions to complex and emerging societal challenges (Russ 2016)<sup>33</sup>.

*"It makes me happy when I play because I get to spend time with my friends and not worry about work or learning at school!"*  
*(aged 10 years)*

*"Work makes me stress and play not so much . . . . . a time for me to relax . . . ."*  
*(aged 5 years)*

*"I think play is fun and can do what I want."*  
*(aged 11 years)*



## SECTION 4 PLAY IN THE COMMUNITY AND ACROSS THE NATIONS

“It’s 1 minute to 10am on a beautiful summer morning in 2023, in East London’s Bethnal Green. Young V&A, a new museum is dedicated to children from birth to early teens, with an approach that is rooted in learning through play, is about to throw open its doors for the very first time.

The excitement is palpable.

The museum site has been shut for a capital transformation that spanned the covid years – those days, weeks, and months in which the country experienced profound play deprivation - with all the concomitant impacts we are now seeing manifest, be that language development, school readiness, mental health.

Bethnal Green is in the London Borough of Tower Hamlets, home to the country’s most deprived children. It is also a dynamic borough of immense cultural diversity and the fastest growing population of young people.

Back to the museum. Out-loud, a countdown starts backwards from ten – it’s as if a rocket were about to launch.

And in some ways, it is. A rocket that is a clarion call for the vital importance of play in children’s lives – and for free, civic spaces that validate, invite and promote this. The museum queue snakes from the forecourt all along Bethnal Green Road, back to the tube and beyond.

At countdown, the queue starts jumping. Up and down it goes, the volume ever louder with each number. The children’s excitement cannot be contained a moment longer.

Children have co-designed this museum.

They wanted ‘the world’s most joyful museum’ and this is what awaits them. When the doors open, within half an hour a thousand people are inside. We are at capacity. In the children stream, on micro-scooters, in prams, wearing dress up, skipping, exclaiming, and claiming this space as theirs.

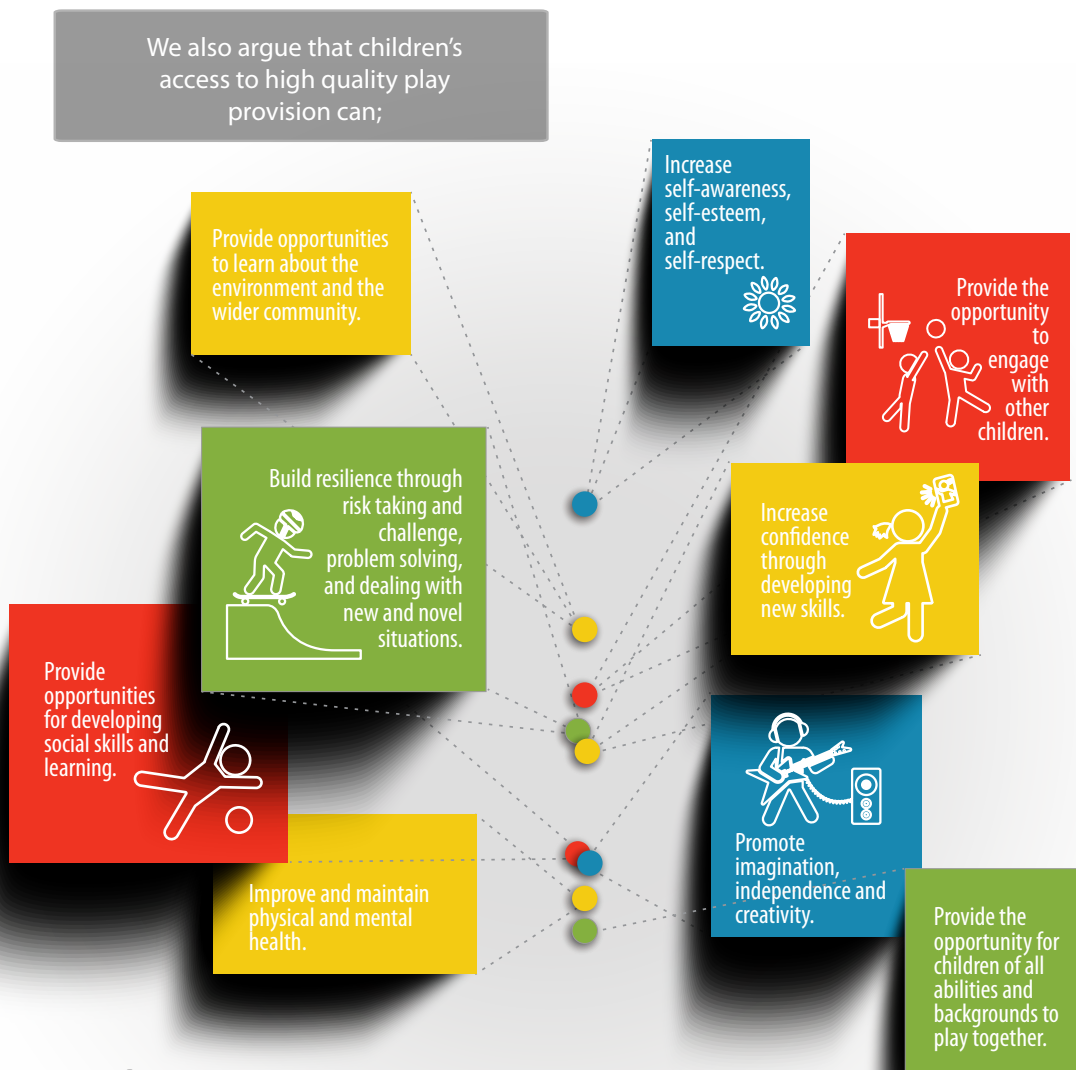
This pattern has continued apace since the museum opened last summer, welcoming almost half a million young visitors and their families. Children play with exuberance and intent at Young V&A. They seem to understand the entire environment has been designed around the primacy of play in their young lives.



## SECTION 4: Play in the community and across the nations

A joyful environment is a playful environment, and every millimetre of this space has been designed with that in mind. Playfulness was first conceptualized by Lieberman (1965), who described the trait as being comprised of five components: physical, social, and cognitive spontaneity as well as joy and a sense of humour. And it is the conjunction of play and joy that sits at the heart of Young V&A. Those half a million people – the majority of them under 5 years old – are voting with their feet. Their caregivers recognize the vital importance of play in the early years and through childhood. But also, perhaps these numbers also demonstrate the paucity of free access to civic spaces that are designed to promote playfulness and learning through play. Every town and every city need something equivalent. The case for play has never been more urgent.” (Charman, 2024).<sup>34</sup>

According to Play England (2020)<sup>35</sup> having time and space to play gives children the opportunity to meet and socialise with their friends, keeps them physically active, and gives the freedom to choose what they want to do. They argue that play has many benefits for children, families, and the wider community, as well as improving health and quality of life.



QUALITY PLAY  
PROVISION

## SECTION 4: Play in the community and across the nations

In 2010-11, the three-year average spends on England’s parks and open spaces, including funding for national parks was at almost £1.4bn but by 2021-22 the figure is estimated to have dropped to just over £1bn. The list of councils forced to cut their park budget by more than 40% is dominated by the North and the Midlands. Some councils – including Sunderland, Gloucester and Barnsley – have been forced to cut back by more than 80% since 2011. However, the situation is not uniformly bleak, with a new source of playground funding opening up via housebuilders, and new playgrounds being built or planned around the country.

Mark Hardy, chair of the Association of Play Industries, has seen a trend towards funding larger central play areas, with smaller doorstep spaces seemingly abandoned (Hardy 2023 np)<sup>36</sup>. Councils share the Government’s aim in its disability action plan for the creation of more accessible playgrounds, but it is argued that this needs to be supported by the necessary resources to improve and maintain existing facilities, if this is to be achieved. Hardy (ibid) advises that “there are some really terrific playgrounds being put in around the country right now, some funded with help from Section 106 money. You can do a lot if you have the money, we are seeing a move away from boring provision. My big ask is that we see that play is too important to leave to a local authority to juggle. There needs to be centralised funding...Scotland and Wales both have a play sufficiency duty, but England does not.”

To counteract the decline in opportunities for play, Play Scotland has carried out a review (published in 2021) of Scotland’s Play Strategy since the pandemic. The report highlights responses of play organisations to the pandemic and provided evidence of the impact of emergency measures for children and young people. It takes account of mitigating measures that the Scottish Government put in place to support children’s play at a time of national crisis. The eight recommendations from Play Scotland (2021) were:



The policy framework for Play in Scotland includes The Town and Country Planning (Play Sufficiency Assessment) (Scotland) Regulations and Guidance 2023. Planning Authorities must assess the Sufficiency of Play Opportunities for Children when preparing an Evidence Report to inform the making of the Local Development Plan.

## SECTION 4: Play in the community and across the nations

### Moreover, Planning Authorities must:

- identify and map formal play spaces
- assess and provide statements with regards to the overall (a) quality, (b) quantity, and (c) accessibility of formal and informal play spaces. They must also consult with children, their parents and carers during the assessment.

In addition to this, 'Froebelian Futures' is a groundbreaking three-year programme (2021-2024) funded by The Froebel Trust which aims to strengthen and deepen child and community-centred early years practice across Scotland. The programme is designed to increase understanding of a Froebelian approach to early education.

The programme aims to foster collaboration in the early years sector and provide Froebelian training for more early years educators. The new initiative will see a £1 million investment in Froebelian education in the UK, including £450k in The University of Edinburgh and Cowgate Under 5s. With the second Froebel funded 3-year programme under the same scheme, known as the Froebel Partnership, it is designed to do similar work as the Scottish programme but across England and Wales. Led by Guildford Nursery School and Family Centre and working in partnership with CREC and New Zealand Seven Stars Kindergarten the Froebel Partnership is very concerned with children's flourishing and wellbeing and has devoted a year of work to the centrality of play.

England's Play Strategy (Department for Children, Schools and Families 2008)<sup>37</sup>, aligned in its ethos of including children and backed by £235 million at the time, indicated that there was a need to ensure that:



More recently, in Newcastle, West End Children's Community is bringing people from a range of organisations together in a coordinated way. It is committed to tackling poverty and improving outcomes for children to increase the range and quality of play opportunities. The vision of the West End Children's Community is that 'The West End is a place where children, young people and families feel safe and have opportunities to participate in play, recreational and cultural opportunities that can benefit their learning, development, happiness and well-being'.

The development of a play strategy is intended to help achieve this vision. Previous consultation with children in Newcastle has found that children do not feel that their play areas are of a good quality, and they require more space for play that is close to home. Further consultation with children in the West End is needed (Thorpe, Laing, and Boldon 2020)<sup>38</sup>.



## SECTION 4: Play in the community and across the nations

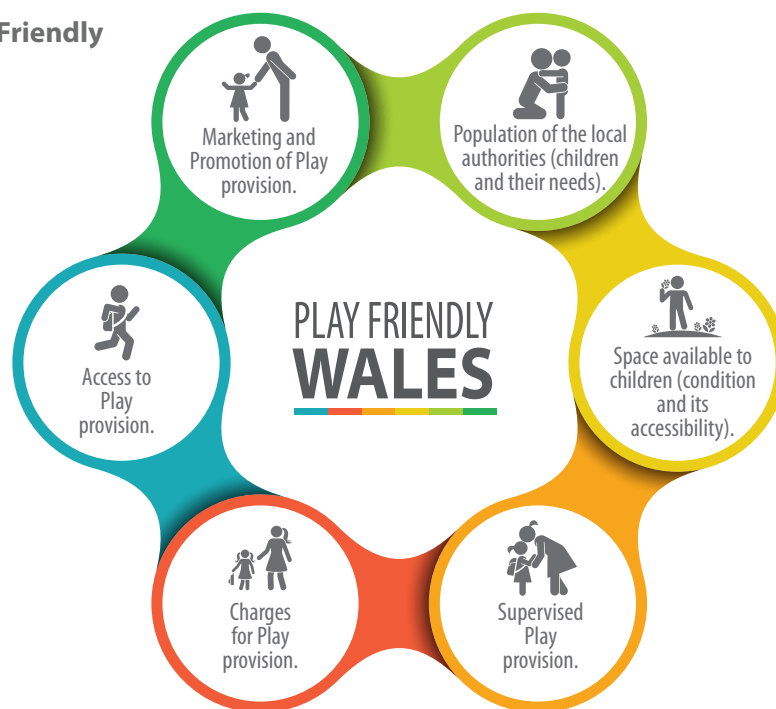
Meanwhile, in 2010, Wales protected children's play in law. The Welsh Government recognised that it needed the involvement of others to achieve its aim of a play friendly Wales, that provided opportunities for children to play.

It understood that it would also be necessary for local authorities, their partners and other stakeholders to work towards this. As a result, the Government passed a law protecting children's right to play, giving local authorities a statutory responsibility (known as a duty) to both assess and ensure that their area provides children with enough opportunities to play.

The Play Sufficiency Duty, included in the Play Opportunities section of the Children and Families (Wales) Measure 2010, and in 2022 a Ministerial review on Play was completed as part of Play Wales. "Wales: A Play Friendly Country" is Statutory Guidance to Local Authorities on assessing for and securing sufficient play opportunities for children in their areas.

### "Creating a Play Friendly Wales",

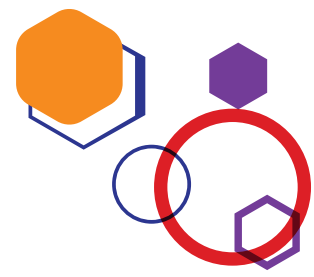
the Statutory Guidance to Local Authorities on assessing for sufficient play opportunities provides a valuable model to draw from in re-examining local play provision across England, with a focus on:



Children, their parents, and families need a whole community of services to grow up happy and healthy. Hence it is important that the next Government commit to a Baby and Toddler Guarantee to ensure that the rights of all the youngest citizens are met, and future generations are able to reach their full potential, through a preventative approach with parents supported in community free-play spaces (UNICEF 2022)<sup>39</sup>.

Furthermore, in reference to the online red book given to parents/carers when they have a child, there should be an interactive approach to home play and schematic play, with short films to highlight 'everyday play opportunities' within caregiving approaches, linking to health, wellbeing, bonding and attachment, alongside the developmental play lens currently included (NHS nd)<sup>40</sup>. In addition, it is important to note that:

- Buildings and facilities used by play services are frequently seen as a focal point for communities.
- It offers opportunities for social interaction for the wider community and supports the development of a greater sense of community spirit, promoting social cohesion.
  - Public outside spaces have an important role in the everyday lives of children and young people, especially as a place for meeting friends.
    - Parks and other green spaces are popular with adults taking young children out to play and for older children and young people to spend time together.

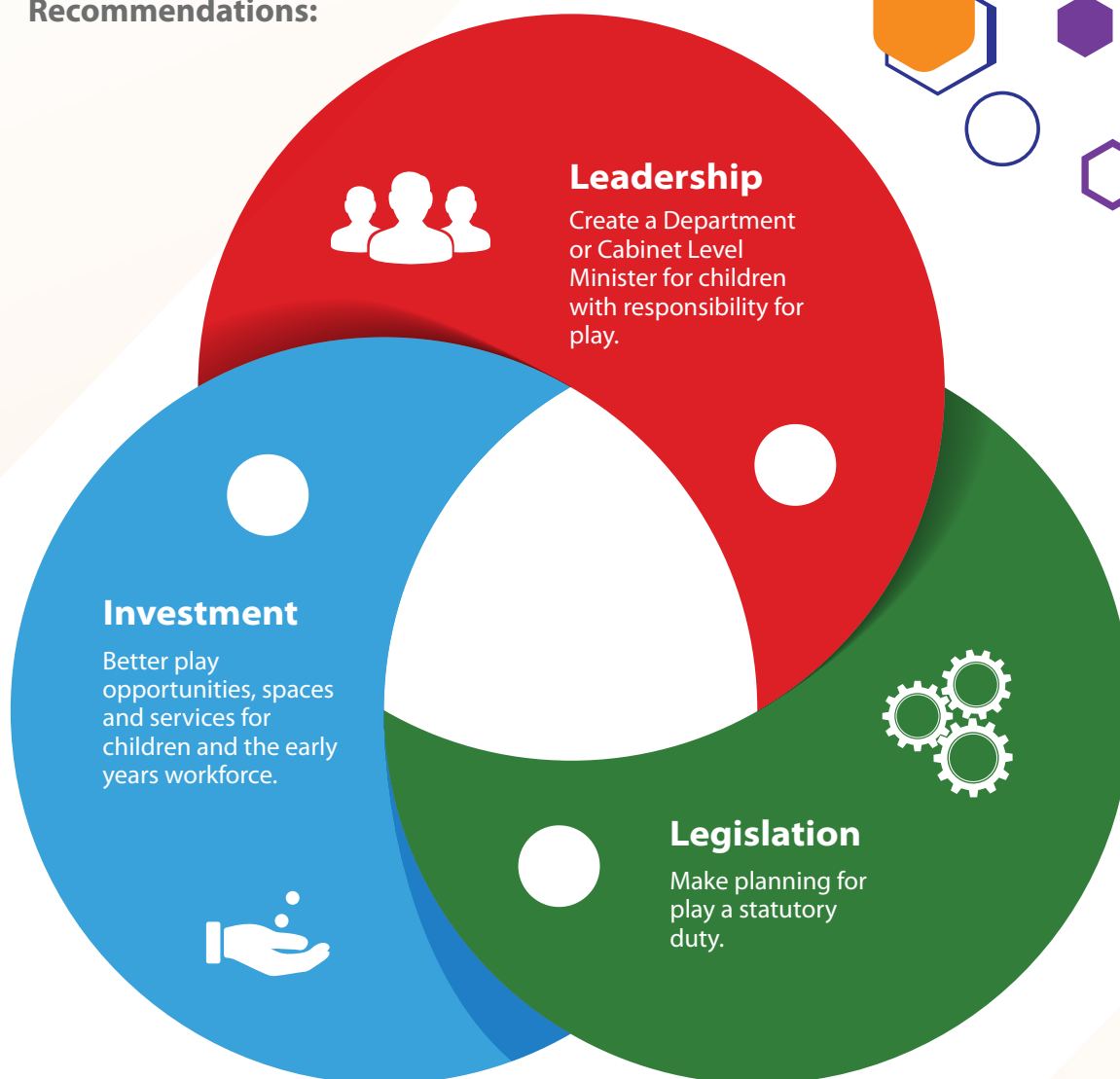


## SECTION 5 REQUIRED ACTIONS

### In agreement with Play England, we argue for the:

- 1** A re-introduction of a Play Strategy for England - In 2008 The Secretary of State for Children, Schools, and Families (then Ed Balls MP) with the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport, published the first national play strategy for England, backed by the children's plan investment of £235 million (worth £370 million in today's prices). This investment was used to make sure that every residential area had a variety of high-quality places for all children to play safely, and free of charge. Such an ambitious plan would help to create a society that is creative, free-thinking and would assist in social & emotional well-being.
- 2** Re-introduction of Sure Starts or equivalent.
- 3** UK Government to commit to a Baby and Toddler Guarantee.
- 4** Development of an online Parent Club developed centrally to highlight the best 'contributions from local communities – professionals and professionals with parents/carers'. This aid families to all become involved in play to ensure young children have a range of interactions (especially important after the effects we have seen on the youngest children in the Covid era).
- 5** A workforce and sector sustainability strategy to put a graduate in every early years setting (Jones 2024)<sup>41</sup>, starting with those in areas of greatest deprivation, and those who are working with under fives (see Early Education, nd)<sup>42</sup>.
- 6** Delivery of open access play and mental health community spaces/services for parents, children, and young people in each community, connecting to the widening of Family Hubs/reintroduction of Sure Starts (and their being targeted services to those areas in most need).
- 7** Opportunities for children to access local authority funds for their community to build safe and secure green spaces for all the local communities to utilise (rather than it being a postcode lottery to accessibility).
- 8** Play from Birth, The Red Book - The online red book given to parents/carers when they have a child should have an interactive approach to home play and schematic play, with film shorts to highlight 'everyday play opportunities'.
- 9** Increased funding to widen play programmes, with a focus on infants and play with their parents alongside sessions aimed at parents with children in current Family Hub settings.
- 10** Children to have access to spaces that are age appropriate across communities and reduce the labelling in what was initially allocated as play spaces replaced with signs such as 'No Ball Games' deterring games and social presence of children.
- 11** Provision of a dedicated programme alongside sex education that discusses/teaches cultural and societal issues on preconception care, child development, importance of play (for all children) as a core subject within secondary education PSHE/Science lessons. This would also include a mandatory emotional learning and mental health curriculum starting from the early years.
- 12** Provision for funding for community groups to develop inclusive initiatives such as baby signing, sensory activities and infant massage.

Recommendations:



*"We played with clay a while ago that my mum had brought home. That was fun and messy, and we played with it for ages."  
(aged 10 years)*

*"I play and it makes me feel relaxed as I can often get hot and stressed with school work."  
(aged 10 years)*

## 10 Key Recommendations for Professionals

No.  
01

Be informed by your pedagogy, planning and environments, ensuring that they reflect a child's right to play, with opportunities for autonomy, movement and deep engagement, mindful of the spaces, time and permissions this requires.

No.  
02

Utilise play within all areas of children's learning as they develop their processes of thinking, making connections and analysing information.

No.  
03

Implement holistic opportunities for play-based learning that mindfully focus on the development of dispositions for lifelong learning and play rather than focusing singularly on measurable outcomes.

No.  
04

Ensure practice consistently provides opportunities for play, inside the classroom and outside within nature and green spaces.

No.  
05

Ensure practice consistently provides opportunities for children to play with friends, to engage in social interactions and groups of various sizes, developing social and communication skills, behavioural and emotional regulation, connections, and friendships.

No.  
06

Utilise holistic approaches to play that engage the setting, family and wider community, nurturing relationships, mutual collaboration and understanding.

No.  
07

Implement systems of reflection, audit and assessment that determine the extent to which adult choices, teaching styles and environments are facilitating children's access to play, nurturing opportunities and experiences.

No.  
08

Implement systems of reflection that capture children's engagement throughout the day, allowing resources, pedagogy and provocations to be flexible and impactful.

No.  
08

Involve children in decisions regarding their opportunities to play, both in the classroom, at home and in the wider community.

No.  
10

Communicate with parents in ways that assist their understanding of the importance of play, providing them with clear and practical ways of nurturing play with their child.

*"It gives you a chance to be fun and do stuff, its good."  
(aged 5 years)*

## 10 Key Recommendations for Policy Makers

### 01 | **Recognise play as a fundamental right: Uphold children's right to play in diverse settings prioritising free, unstructured play.**

- The creation of a Department for Children, Young People and Families (or Cabinet Level Minister for children) that would have Play as a central focus of their position/department.
- England, like Scotland, should place the UNCRC into Law (see also Just Fair 2023). This upholds children's right to play as outlined in Article 31 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child (UN 1989) incorporating its principles and recommendations into national legislation and policy frameworks.
- A working definition of 'Play' is required that speaks of intrinsically-motivated children, freely choosing what they wish to do, with the time, space and ability to act autonomously, with choices that make this a realistic possibility.

### 02 | **Integrate play into educational policies:**

- Ensure that policies and practices prioritise children's well-being within political agendas, promoting play as a central component of healthy development with opportunities for free, unstructured play across diverse settings.
- Embed play-based learning in curricula at all levels, embracing it as a core element of the learning process throughout all stages of education and recognising its importance throughout inclusive and age-appropriate activities.
- Ensure every policy and initiative effecting children considers the extent to which it prioritises every child's right and need to play, being mindful of the environments and realities they are growing up within.

### 03 | **Invest in play provision:**

- Allocate resources and funding to local authorities and communities to develop and maintain play spaces that are accessible, safe, and conducive to children's play, ensuring that this is sustained through adequate funding and resources.
- Strengthen the play sector at both national and local levels, providing support and resources to promote age-appropriate play spaces, catering to the diverse needs and ages of children across different communities.

## 10 Key Recommendations for Policy Makers

04

### **Prioritise play through cross-sector collaboration:**

- Foster cross-sectoral collaboration and interprofessional approaches to play that recognise its role in promoting physical, cognitive, emotional and social well-being.
- Prioritise play as a fundamental aspect of childhood development and lifelong learning within multi-professional projects that recognise and embrace the mental, physical, social, and developmental benefits of play across the lifespan.
- Reassess the pedagogic appropriateness of knowledge-based curriculum and its impact on children's wellbeing, engagement and enjoyment of education.

05

### **Prioritise lifelong learning and offer coordinated and dedicated training programs for staff working in schools, early years settings, family hubs, and children's centres:**

- Provide ongoing training that reflects play-based learning approaches and supports an understanding of the deeply impactful role of play in the development of the whole child.
- Promote lifelong learning to staff, as well as the significance of ongoing play-based programs for anyone working with children.
- Ensure that those working with young children enjoy equal access to accredited professional qualifications.

06

### **Promote parental engagement in play:**

- Empower parents through campaigns and initiatives that highlight the developmental and intergenerational benefits of play.
- Encourage parental involvement in promoting play with play activities they can engage in with their children.

07

### **Update policies to reflect changing needs:**

- Review policy at national and local level to ensure that adequate resources and funding are allocated to play provision, infrastructure, and lifelong learning opportunities for educators and playworkers.
- Regularly review and update policies related to play in light of evolving societal needs, technological advancements, and research findings to ensure they remain relevant and effective.
- Consult directly with children when updating policies, to ensure that their voices are heard regarding matters that directly relate to and impact upon their lives.

## 10 Key Recommendations for Policy Makers

08

### Address disparities in play opportunities:

- Implement measures to address disparities in access to play opportunities, taking into account disabilities, geographical location, socioeconomic status and other factors that may affect children's engagement in play.
- Address barriers to play and collaborate with communities to create inclusive play environments that meet the needs of all children.

09

### Support children facing adversity:

- Implement play sufficiency legislation at the local level to ensure that all children have access to high-quality play opportunities.
- Develop targeted interventions and support services that enable children facing adversity, such as those seeking asylum, to access play opportunities and benefit from its therapeutic effects.

10

### Support children's community initiatives:

- Support resident-led play initiatives that bring together stakeholders from various sectors to provide children with safe spaces for outdoor play within their communities as well as social interaction, opportunities for learning and a focal point for communities that centre around the child.
- Involve children's input in urban planning and play space development, ensuring their voices are heard and acted upon.

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*"Playing is fun and I love playing!"  
(aged 4 years).*

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Play often stems from curiosity and a desire to understand the world. This curiosity-driven exploration can spark new ideas and interests, fueling the creative process. The act of playing provides an holistic and multi-faceted approach to developing creativity. It engages the mind, encourages exploration, fosters social skills, and creates a positive and enjoyable environment that is conducive to innovative thinking.



**WHEN CHILDREN ARE RELAXED AND HAVING FUN, THEIR MINDS ARE MORE OPEN TO CREATIVE THINKING. REDUCED STRESS CAN ENHANCE COGNITIVE FLEXIBILITY AND IMPROVE PROBLEM SOLVING ABILITIES.**

CHILDREN, THEIR PARENTS AND FAMILIES NEED A WHOLE COMMUNITY OF SERVICES TO GROW UP HAPPY AND HEALTHY, AND IT'S THE EASE OF SUCH ACCESS AND AVAILABILITY THAT CAN SUPPORT BABIES AND TODDLERS TO GROW UP TO BECOME HEALTHY AND EMOTIONALLY RESILIENT ADULTS AND FUTURE GENERATIONS ARE ABLE TO REACH THEIR FULL POTENTIAL, WITH PARENTS SUPPORTED IN COMMUNITY FREE PLAY SPACES AND PLACES.