

It's all about play...

Play is critically important to children's development, healthy growth, well-being, creativity and ability to learn.

Early Childhood Forum 2008



This leaflet has been produced to highlight how and why play is such a vital part of early childhood. 'Play underpins all development and learning for young children. Most children play spontaneously, although some may need adult support, and it is through play that they develop intellectually, creatively, physically, socially and emotionally.'¹

Children's right to play

The right to play and informal recreation, for all children and young people up to 18 years of age, is enshrined in Article 31 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, ratified by the UK government in 1991.² Therefore, government has a duty to protect and promote play opportunities for children and young people of all ages, interests and abilities. Likewise, parents have a responsibility to ensure play is an integral part of their children's childhood. All those who work with children need to provide a diverse range of play activities, which support children's development.

Charter for Children's Play

The Early Childhood Forum (ECF) welcomes the *Charter for Children's Play*³, which sets out a vision for play. We hope the charter will act as a catalyst to ensure that everyone in the children's workforce, parents and communities take responsibility for addressing children's needs for play and informal recreation.

Children can develop and learn through play

Play is part of development and learning, and vice-versa. Freely chosen play is important and is fun in its own right. It is how children enjoy themselves, each other and their families.

Children, disabled and non-disabled, whatever their age, culture, ethnicity or social and economic background need and want to play. Children choose how and what they play and they play because it is satisfying. Children play from birth and throughout their lives. For babies and toddlers, play is an important part of developing attachments with the external world, particularly with mothers, fathers, carers and the wider family. Through activities such as nursery rhymes, peek-a-boo, songs, hand and finger games, young children and adults learn how to interact and relate to one other. As they grow and develop, children and young people carry on exploring the world through play, developing socially and emotionally, testing out ideas and reflecting on the world around them.

Early Years Foundation Stage

The Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) provides a strong foundation for young children's development and emphasises the importance of learning through play and also the role of play in its own right. The whole of the EYFS,

which applies to childminders, early years settings, and nursery and reception years in schools, is now focused on learning through play and active learning. 'For the first time, the Early Years Foundation Stage brings together early learning and care, recognising that we need to support children's development in the round and offer high quality play-based early learning that will allow children to achieve their full potential.'⁴

'Play and exploration in early years settings means children are able to choose activities where they engage with other children or adults or sometimes play alone, and during those activities they learn through first-hand experience – by actively "doing". They need sufficient space, time and choice with a range of activities, some of which have been planned and prepared by the practitioners on the basis of their observations of individual children's current interests, learning styles and stages of development.'⁵

Play helps keep children safe

Risk-taking is an essential feature of play and of all environments where children play. Children need the chance to encounter acceptable risks as part of a stimulating and challenging learning environment: 'All children both need and want to take risks in order to explore limits, venture into new experiences and develop their capacities, from a very young age and from their earliest play experiences.'⁶

Play is essential to children developing knowledge, understanding and experience of managing risk, which is crucial to help children stay safe: '...children need also to be able to learn, have new experiences and enjoy their childhoods, so we will help families strike the right balance between keeping children safe and allowing them the freedom they need.'⁷

If children learn about exploring and managing risk at a young age it will give them more confidence to continue to do this throughout their childhood. It will also help their parents become more confident that play, particularly outdoor play, is a crucial aspect of their children's learning and development.

Through play, children gain self-confidence, independence and resilience. They access essential information about themselves and the world around them. Play is vital for children's social and emotional development. Playing outdoors, exploring their community and natural environment is essential to children's health. 'Good health is vital if children and young people are to enjoy their childhood and achieve their full potential. If we can establish good habits in childhood, this will provide the basis for lifelong health and wellbeing.'⁸



Children will play everywhere and in all weathers, given the chance



What happens when children play?

Children of all ages play instinctively if given the time, space, opportunity and permission to do so. They also need time to stand and stare, to reflect and to 'chill out'.⁹

Children learn through initiating play for themselves by choosing what they want to do, how they want to do it and when to stop and try something else.

Children learn from social play where they can make up and use different rules with other children, develop friendships and take part in collaborative play.

Children use physical play to enjoy movement for its own sake as well as set their own challenges and learn their own boundaries.

Children like socio-dramatic play where they act out real and potential experiences such as playing shops. They also often play out difficult situations over and over again.

Children enjoy rough and tumble play that involves touching, tickling, gauging relative strength, discovering physical flexibility and having fun.

Children learn through fantasy play where they play out situations that are unlikely to happen in real life or play out real life through fantasy.

Adults supporting children's play

Children need adults who understand that it is important to let them play, who know when to and when not to intervene, and who value children's play in its own right because:

- children have a natural inclination to play
- children engage in play for its own sake
- children play everywhere.

Children get most benefit when adults understand that play and active first hand experience is fundamental to their development. When children play they are engaging in a complex process that affects all aspects of their development. 'The Early Years Foundation Stage expects all practitioners to meet the individual needs of all children in their care and to provide a diverse range of play-based activities tailored to support children's development.'¹⁰

Adults can support children's play by:

- having a playful approach to play and planned activities
- listening to children and valuing their contribution
- providing opportunities for children to learn about risk and test boundaries
- valuing friendships and children's time with each other
- ensuring children can play in spaces where children can initiate their own play activities and play on their own
- building on children's interests and what they enjoy doing naturally
- encouraging children to extend their range of experiences
- talking with children about their play.

About the Early Childhood Forum

ECF is a coalition of 53 professional associations, voluntary organisations and interest groups united in their concern about the care and education of young children from birth to eight.

Part funded by the Department for Children, Schools and Families (DCSF), it aims to bring together partners in the early childhood sector to debate issues, celebrate differences and develop consensus to champion quality experiences for all young children from birth to eight and their families. It promotes inclusion and challenges inequalities.

See www.ncb.org.uk/ecf for more information.



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References

- ¹ DFES (2007a) *Early Years Foundation Stage: Practice Guidance*. London: Department for Education and Skills/The Stationery Office.
- ² In the charter, children are defined as anyone under the age of 18 years. This definition draws on that used in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child and ratified by the United Kingdom in 1991.
- ³ Play England (2007) *Charter for Children's Play*. London: Play England.
- ⁴ DCSF (2007) *The Children's Plan: Building brighter futures*. London: Department for Children, Schools and Families.
- ⁵ DfES (2007b) *Early Years Foundation Stage Effective Practice: Play and Exploration*. London: Department for Education and Skills/The Stationery Office.
- ⁶ Play Safety Forum (2002): *Managing Risk in Play Provision* London: Children's Play Council.
- ⁷ See endnote 4.
- ⁸ See endnote 4.
- ⁹ Adapted from Hughes, B (2002) *A Playworkers Taxonomy of Play Types*. London: Playlink
- ¹⁰ See endnote 4.

Photos courtesy of Play England and Steiner Waldorf Schools Fellowship.