

---

## PLAY AND OUTCOMES FOR CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE: LITERATURE REVIEW TO INFORM THE NATIONAL EVALUATION OF PLAY PATHFINDERS AND PLAY BUILDERS

---

*Dr Sue Rogers and Dr Caroline Pelletier (Institute of Education, University of London)*  
*Alison Clark (Roehampton University)*

### Introduction and background

In December 2007, the Government announced a £225 million investment (subsequently increased to £235 million) to support local authorities in improving play spaces for young people aged 8-13 years old. The investment will result in 3,500 new or improved play spaces, and 30 new adventure playgrounds in disadvantaged areas being delivered between 2008 and 2011. Funding is being distributed through 30 Play Pathfinder local authorities receiving approximately £2.5 million each to deliver new and improved play spaces in their local area, including an adventure playground. All other local authorities will receive Play Builder funding of approximately £1.1 million each to deliver improved local play provision.

In mid 2008, the Department commissioned SQW Consulting and Ipsos MORI to carry out a national evaluation of the Play Pathfinder and Play Builder programmes over the period 2008 to 2011. The purpose of the evaluation is to understand the impact of the Government's play investment on children and parents' satisfaction and use of play spaces, as well as wider outcomes linked to children's health and well-being, and impacts on local communities.

Academics from the Institute of Education and Roehampton University were appointed by the evaluation team to review the literature on play, identifying the benefits of play and how these can most appropriately be measured and evaluated. The literature review has subsequently informed the data collection methods that are being used over the lifetime of the three-year evaluation.

### Key findings

The key findings of the literature review can be summarised as follows:

#### *The benefits of play*

There is general consensus that play contributes to the well-being and health of children in different ways. Key benefits arising from play include the following:

- Happiness - plenty of time for play in childhood is linked to happiness in adulthood.
- Physical activity - active play facilitates children's development of spatial abilities and an understanding of the world through the senses and movement.
- Cognitive skills - there is a close link between play and cognitive development.
- Social and emotional learning - make-believe play is related to better overall emotional health and social functioning.

### *Play, physical activity and health*

- Much play amongst children and young people is highly physical, highlighting the importance of provision that allows children to play in physically active ways.
- There is evidence that physical activity acts as a natural preventative to childhood obesity and promotes good health.
- Provision of play spaces and time spent outside are positively associated with levels of physical activity in children and young people. However, physical play is only one type of play. Other types of play, such as creative and social play, may not involve physical activity but have other benefits in terms of social and emotional development. As such, increasing access to play space does not necessarily increase activity levels.

### *Types of play provision*

- Establishing exactly which types of play or provision are most beneficial in promoting health and well-being is difficult to ascertain from the available literature.
- However, there is evidence that play in 'natural settings' may be particularly beneficial to children's well-being.

### *Adult roles in supporting and supervising play*

- There is much debate in the literature about the nature and benefits of adult involvement in children's play, particularly in educational settings.
- There is a fine balance to be struck between adult involvement in enabling positive play experiences and adding 'play value' and involvement that restricts or interferes with children's free and self-expressive play.

### *Changing patterns of play and obstacles to play*

- Concern is evident in the literature about changing patterns of play; a common theme is that safety measures and standards are being put before children's interests and development.

- Obstacles to free self-expressive play identified include: judging play outside of education to be less important for learning and development; not taking account of free play when planning play spaces; and parents being unaware of the benefits of play or how to access stimulating play spaces and experiences.

### *Measuring outcomes associated with play*

- The benefits of play are well documented, however empirical data are scarce as much of the evidence is conceptual or theoretical.
- Studying play in terms of its outcomes is criticised by some as a narrow and instrumental view of play. However, the literature on outcomes demonstrates the positive value of play and is therefore important for play advocacy and policy.
- Children and young people's self-reporting of their play behaviour are important for understanding how play is associated with particular outcomes.

### **Methodology**

The purpose of the review was to inform the methodology for the national evaluation of the Play Pathfinder and Play Builder Programmes. The review intentionally builds upon a recent and comprehensive review of play, policy and practice conducted by Lester and Russell (2008) for Play England<sup>1</sup>.

The review focuses on academic research, both in the UK and internationally, to identify evidenced-based research linked to the following:

- Play provision for children aged 8 to 13 years (the target group for the Government's investment in play), and what 'works best' for this age group.
- Outdoor play provision.
- Outcomes associated with outdoor play and how they are measured.
- Adult roles in supporting and supervising outdoor play.

<sup>1</sup> Lester, S and Russell, W (2008) *Play for a Change - Play, Policy and Practice: A Review of Contemporary Perspectives (Summary Report)*, Play England

## Findings

### Policy context

In recent years there has been a renewed interest in the nature and purposes of play, and an increasing body of evidence to suggest that children's access to free play opportunities is both essential for children and beneficial to the wider community. Play is firmly located within the contemporary context of children's services, heralded by the Every Child Matters (ECM) agenda<sup>2</sup>. Children's enjoyment of time is now identified as an outcome in its own right within ECM, and also as an objective of the 'Cleaner, Safer, Greener' liveability agenda forging stronger links between outdoor play and environmentalism. Influential in the development of these recent deliberations is an earlier Government report *Time to Talk* (2007), which set out the findings of consultation with children and young people on their perceptions of play provision, and fed into the development of the *Children's Plan* (DCSF, 2007). Crucially, the document notes a lack of 'safe, stimulating and challenging places for children and young people to go', and that the lack of suitable outdoor spaces was particularly marked for children aged 8-13 years.

In addition, a number of difficulties or barriers to the provision of high quality children's play are identified. These include an underdeveloped appreciation of how play can contribute to social cohesion through the opportunities it offers for friendship formation and cultural understanding, parental anxiety about children's safety, and the lack of 'child-friendly spaces' in many communities coupled with a 'no ball games' culture in open spaces. Within this broader context, the immediate background to the evaluation is the *Children's Plan* and specifically the *Play Strategy* (DCSF, 2008). These embody a strong commitment to children's play on the part of Government, matched by capital investment through the Play Pathfinder and Play Builder programmes.

<sup>2</sup> *The Every Child Matters: Change for Children framework* was introduced by the Department for Education and Skills in 2003 and articulates the Government's aim to ensure that all children, whatever their circumstances, have the support they need to be healthy, stay safe, enjoy and achieve, make a positive contribution and achieve economic well-being.

### An overview of the literature on play

The review suggests that the literature on play can be categorised into two types:

- Literature on outcomes, which report on the measureable effects of different play activities.
- Literature on the experiences afforded by play, which investigates what play is and what it means in children's lives.

Research on play outcomes has a number of characteristics. It tends to use quantifiable methods to measure effects, which means that the 'effect' is usually measured at the level of the individual child (mostly younger children) rather than at a collective level, for example, young people's social networks. A second characteristic is that it focuses on 'effects' which can be measured quantifiably, in a reliable and valid way. Consequently many studies on the effects of play look at the physical effects of play, as measured by physical tests, for example, test of heart rates and motor fitness. Other possible effects of play are often more difficult to measure, especially when they concern effects on social behaviour and emotional well-being.

The view that play can be studied in terms of its outcomes has been criticised by some as upholding a narrow and instrumental view of play, as something which is 'useful for the future' rather than something which children engage in for its own sake today, and which may often challenge adult norms of behaviour. However, the literature on outcomes is suggestive of the positive value of play, and therefore makes an important contribution to play advocacy and policy formulation.

### Play among 8-13 year olds

Traditionally, play has been associated with early childhood, and as such much of the literature deals with the early development of play in the under fives and also play as an instrumental activity in early education. By contrast, little attention has been given to the play of older children, particularly from six through to adolescence, including the target groups of 8-13 year olds ('middle childhood') which is the focus of current Government investment in play. The small body of evidence that does exist for this group suggests that the play of children in middle childhood shares many characteristics of play amongst younger children. For example, it is experimental, exploratory, undertaken for its own

sake, spontaneous, and includes self-imposed goals, risk-taking and active management (cognitive and / or physical).

Middle childhood occupies a significant phase in human life<sup>3</sup> at a time in which we might expect to see profound changes in the ways that children play. For example, within the 8-13 year old age group, children are subject to a number of important transitions which are educational (changing schools), social (becoming independent), and biological (adolescence). This combination of factors is likely to engender changes in a sense of identity, body and self-image. In addition, children of this age will spend more time away from their parents and become increasingly influenced by other adults and their peers? All of these factors are likely to impact upon, and shape the ways in which children in middle childhood engage in play provision.

#### *Outcomes and benefits associated with play*

There is substantial empirical and theoretical research to support the view that play *per se* is very important for human experience and development<sup>4</sup>. However, play by its very nature is notoriously difficult to define or reduce to measurable outcomes and the benefits of play for children and young people are often difficult to discern from the literature, which is often more conceptual and philosophical in nature than evidence-based<sup>5</sup>. Play is universally recognised to have positive attributes, but it is difficult to isolate causal relationships between particular play activities and outcomes, due to the complex relationships between play and other social activities in children's lives.

Despite this there is a vast international literature on play, extending back for more than a century that argues for its benefits. Play can be viewed on many levels in terms of its outward signs and apparent demands on social, emotional and cognitive functions.

<sup>3</sup> Hanvey, L (2002) *Middle Childhood: Building on the Early Years: A Discussion Paper* National Children's Alliance.

<sup>4</sup> Smith, P.K and Pellegrini, A (2000) 'A child's perspective and children's participation', *Children, Youth and Environments*, vol 16 (2).

<sup>5</sup> Lester, S and Russell, W (2008) *Play for a Change – Play, Policy and Practice: A Review of Contemporary Perspectives (Summary Report)*, Play England

The US-based *Alliance for Childhood* summarises the key benefits of play as follows:

- **Physical development:** the rough and tumble of active play facilitates development of spatial abilities and an understanding of the world through the senses and movement. Physical play is a natural preventative for the current epidemic of childhood obesity.
- **Academic performance:** there is a close link between play and healthy cognitive growth. It lays the foundation for later academic success in maths, reading and writing.
- **Social and emotional learning:** research suggests that social make-believe play is related to increases in cooperation, empathy, and impulse control, reduced aggression, and better overall emotional and social health.

In terms of physical development, the literature indicates that much play is highly physical, enabling children to exercise their muscles and minds within the safety of the play or game<sup>6</sup>. With this in mind, it is important that adequate and appropriate provision is made for children to play in such a way that supports the benefits that might accrue from such activity. It is possible to identify from the studies of the benefits of physical activity that outdoor play is likely to contribute to the health and well-being of children and young people. However, physical play is only one type of play and the associated increase in levels of physical activity is only one benefit. Other types of play, such as creative and social play, may not involve physical activity but have other benefits in terms of social and emotional development. As not all play is physically active, a number of studies find that increasing access to play space does not necessarily increase physical activity, for example where the nature of play is more introspective, creative or social. Interventions which aim to increase children and adolescents' participation in organised and free-time physical activity should also promote the benefits associated with being active, parental support and the provision of safe and enjoyable opportunities to be active.

<sup>6</sup> Smith, P.K and Pellegrini, A (2000) 'A child's perspective and children's participation', *Children, Youth and Environments*, vol 16 (2).

## *'What works' - different types of outdoor provision*

International literature on the benefits of particular types of play provision suggests that outdoor play in environments that include natural elements, as opposed to conventional playgrounds, appears to be particularly beneficial for children's well-being. In urban settings natural features are also attractive to young people and are likely to encourage participation in play.

### *Changing patterns of play and obstacles to play*

Although the international literature confirms the UK-based studies on some of the benefits of outdoor play, concern is evident about changing patterns of play internationally. For instance, Clements<sup>7</sup> provides evidence from the US for the following changes often noted in the literature: children are spending less time outdoors than they did 30 years ago; participate in different activities outdoors (fewer street games and more organised sports); and participate in more indoor than outdoor activities. Another common theme in the literature, across all types of play, is that safety measures and standards are being put before children's interests, development and health.

Perceived changes in patterns of play lead onto a focus on the obstacles to play. Obstacles to free self-expressive play identified in the review include<sup>8</sup>:

- Play which happens outside education is often judged to be peripheral in its importance to 'learning' and 'development', leading to a limited view of the playground as a space for physical activity rather than for the rounded development of the child.
- Self-expression and freedom of play is often not taken into account when planning play spaces, resulting in playgrounds planned on more restrictive principles being underutilised.
- Parents are often unaware of the benefits of play, or how to give their children access to imaginative and stimulating play spaces and enable play within them.

## *Adult roles in supporting and supervising outdoor play*

The nature and benefits of adult involvement in children's play has been the subject of debate for many decades. This is particularly the case in educational settings, where play can be viewed by adults in instrumental terms as a vehicle for delivering prescribed curricula and for learning 'real world' things, whereas children essentially regard play as a vehicle for friendship and pretending together<sup>9</sup>.

The review by Lester and Russell (2008)<sup>10</sup> includes a brief section on adult / child relationships and adult involvement in play, in which they argue that adults need to appreciate the different ways in which children play. This includes play which is 'not nice' from an adult perspective but which may be of interest and value to children, for example play fighting. Lester and Russell argue that the essence of play 'flexibility, unpredictability, spontaneity and imagination' is precisely what makes it of such benefit to children's development and well-being. Thus, there is a fine balance to be struck between adult involvement that promotes positive play experiences and adds 'play value' and involvement that restricts or interferes with children's free and self-expressive play. The literature suggests that training of play workers is essential to allow adults to support children's own self-initiated activity and enable positive play experiences.

### *Methods for evaluating play provision*

The literature on methodologies for evaluating play provision is characterised by two key features. First, there is a heavy emphasis on the importance of participative methods, which involve children, young people and the wider community in *designing* facilities, effectively blurring the distinction between design and evaluation. Second, multi-method approaches (including quantitative approaches such as surveys and qualitative approaches such as depth interviews and observations) are strongly favoured as they allow triangulation of evidence from different sources and so help capture the complexities involved in trying to 'get as close as possible to the everyday worlds of ... young

<sup>9</sup> Rogers, S and Evans J. (2008) *Inside Role Play in Early Childhood Education: researching children's perspectives*, London: Routledge.

<sup>10</sup> Lester, S and Russell, W (2008) *Play for a Change - Play, Policy and Practice: A Review of Contemporary Perspectives (Summary Report)*, Play England

<sup>7</sup> Clements, R. (2004) 'An investigation of the state of outdoor play'. *Contemporary Issues in Early Childhood*, 5(1)

<sup>8</sup> Ashley, B (2007a) 'Training to work with the free time needs of 'the forgotten group'', *Playrights*, vol 29 (3)

people'.<sup>11</sup> Ongoing participation with evaluation on the part of children and young people is central to the success of play initiatives, and reflects wider trends in the assertion of children's rights and the development of children's services.

## Conclusions and implications

The findings of the literature review show that measuring health and well-being outcomes empirically and establishing causal links with play is challenging and contested, and that there is considerable scope for improving the evidence base on the benefits of play provision for 8-13 year olds in particular. The Play Pathfinder and Play Builder evaluation itself has the potential to make an important contribution to this evidence base.

The research design for the evaluation is based on a mixed methods approach, including quantitative and qualitative methods, aimed at establishing the impact of the Government's investment in play and understanding the play experiences of children and young people. The evaluation will triangulate findings from household surveys, audits of play spaces, observations of activity in play spaces, local area case studies, secondary data analysis, and qualitative interviews with children and families. The evaluation will be completed at the end of 2011, with a final report published in early 2012. The Department and the evaluation team will also publish other key outputs from the evaluation in order to contribute to the evidence base on play and inform the work of policy makers, local authorities and play workers charged with implementing the Government's play strategy.

## Additional Information

Further information about this research can be obtained from Adele Rowe, 4FL-ARD, DCSF, Sanctuary Buildings, Great Smith Street, London SW1P 3BT

Email: [adele.rowe@dcf.gov.uk](mailto:adele.rowe@dcf.gov.uk)

*The views expressed in this report are the authors' and do not necessarily reflect those of the Department for Children, Schools and Families.*

<sup>11</sup> Matthews, H and Tucker, F (2006)'On the other sides of the tracks: the psychogeographies and everyday lives of rural teenagers in the UK' in Spence, C and Blades, M (eds.) *Children and their environments: learning, using and designing spaces*. Cambridge University Press.