

Play Matters

Playing Outdoors



Briefing Sheet 2

PLAY

Children have an innate urge to play from birth right through to teenage years. Freely chosen play (play which is directed by children) is critically important for all children as part of their everyday lives, and access to quality, unstructured play is known to help improve children's overall health, well-being and development.

CHANGING WORLD OF PLAY

Children growing up today are experiencing decreasing opportunities to play independently outdoors and yet there's something about open outdoor spaces, where there are fewer rules and restrictions that is hugely exciting for them. The sense of freedom gained from playing outside and running about without limits, generally brings a happiness that is hard to rival. Outdoor play is one of the most natural ways that children of any age can engage in physical activity. Children who spend time playing outdoors enjoy running around, as well as climbing, balancing, dancing, digging and jumping – **being physically active through play is good for children's health and well-being.**

BENEFITS OF OUTDOOR PLAY

At a time when there is increasing concern around the mental and physical health of children and young people, the benefits of outdoor play and how it positively impacts on children's fitness and well-being needs to be highlighted.

When outdoors, children's play and leisure activity can offer many opportunities including:

- running and chasing which can develop good physical fitness, agility and stamina;
- jumping and running which can help develop bone density, develop large muscle groups and stability;
- climbing which can help develop coordination, balance and strength;

- freedom and space can encourage more expansive physical movement leading to good physical exercise and help prevent obesity;
- playing outdoors allows children to develop self-confidence, independence, self-esteem and gives them the opportunity to develop an awareness of limits, boundaries and challenge in their play;
- playing outdoors also gives children the freedom to shout, make noise and let off steam, and being in the open air often offers time away from busy routines or schedules;
- being outdoors is good for eye health; more time spent outdoors is related to reduced rates of short-sightedness (myopia) in children and young people; and
- whilst playing outdoors children are less inhibited and are more willing to try out new activities, engage with others, solve problems, explore the natural environment and foster social connections and resilience.

During winter months children can suffer from lack of direct natural sunlight. The sunlight is known to be the best natural source for our bodies to produce vitamin D, which releases serotonin (which helps regulate emotion and mood and is linked to happiness) in the brain. Enabling children to access outdoor natural light daily helps maintain healthy levels of vitamin D and serotonin which is good for their overall mental health and well-being.

Inactive children are at risk of storing excess fat and actively playing outdoors is one of the easiest and most natural ways that children (of any age) can engage in physical activity. Being active will burn energy and can help prevent illnesses such as obesity, type 2 diabetes, and heart disease or cancer in later life.

Of course, playing outdoors also offers children all kinds of valuable learning opportunities and appreciation of the natural world (regardless of the weather!).

The
ATLANTIC
Philanthropies



Play Matters is a Department of Education project funded through the Early Intervention Transformation Programme (EITP) which is a Northern Ireland Executive/ Atlantic Philanthropies Delivering Social Change Signature Programme, funded jointly by the Delivering Social Change fund, DoH, DE, DoJ, DfC, DfE and The Atlantic Philanthropies. EITP aims to improve outcomes for children and young people across Northern Ireland through embedding early intervention approaches.

In a nutshell playing outdoors isn't just fun for children – it is essential for their overall health, well-being and development.

BABIES AND TODDLERS

Young babies and toddlers love to use their bodies to wriggle, crawl, walk, run, jump and climb and the more opportunities that they have to be physical and burn off energy, the more content and happier they will be. Afford babies and toddlers the opportunities to play outdoors just like older children – lay a rug on the grass and let your baby kick, roll or crawl, let your toddler explore their outdoor surroundings by letting them toddle alongside you rather than being in a buggy, or visit a local park where they can toddle around and play in a safe environment.

CHANGING WORLD OF OUTDOOR PLAY



Many of us will have fond memories of playing outdoors as we were growing up. It was generally then accepted that once children were old enough and confident enough to play outdoors that they then could roam freely within neighbourhoods

and communities either alone or with friends.

Kick the can Kerbsie Two ball river jumping Hopscotch Bubbles German Jumps Tag skipping Scavenger Hunt Chalks Kites Swing Ball Bottles & Water Picnics Dress Up Den Building Hide and Seek climbing trees mud and muck Fairy Gardens Jacks

Children's opportunities to play freely outdoors are reducing and sadly we see fewer children playing outdoors in our streets or in our parks. There are a variety of reasons for this including concerns about traffic, perceived dangers around children taking risks, less green space, worries about bullying and strangers, pressure on children's time and negative attitudes towards children and young people. Children with particular needs or a disability can face further barriers such as physical or attitudinal issues. As a result, children are missing out on valuable opportunities to play freely outdoors and from the many benefits for their health and well-being derived from doing so.

MAKE TIME FOR PLAYING OUTDOORS

During childhood children undergo rapid and wide ranging physical and psychological developments and it is these that lay the foundations for their future health and well-being. In terms of physical activity Public Health guidelines specify that physical activity should be encouraged from birth; children of pre-school age who are capable of walking unaided should be physically active for at least 3 hours in a



day and that children aged 5 to 18 should be engaged in moderate to vigorous activity for at least 60 minutes and up to several hours every day. **There is no better or more natural a way to meet these guidelines than to PLAY OUTDOORS!**

Lead by example – from an early age encourage children to be outdoors. Fresh air and physical exercise is good for adults too.

Prioritise time for outdoor play – allow children the space and freedom to play outdoors. Encourage some of the old traditional games such as skipping, hopscotch, kerbsie and tag. Children will love to see an adult share these!

Get to know your neighbourhood by walking and cycling in the local area. Allow children the opportunity to get to know their area for playing. Agree boundaries and no-go areas.

Encourage others within your community to allow children outdoors to play. The more children there are outdoors playing the safer and friendlier the neighbourhood will be.

Teach children how to stay safe outdoors from an early age. Show them road safety skills and how to deal with particular situations.

Take time-out and stay nearby if you are worried about children's safety. Sit discreetly and read or have a chat with friends and remember the independence and fun that you had as a child playing outdoors!

Try to keep worries in perspective and remember children learn by doing. The more children play outdoors the more confident they will become, gaining skills for staying safe.

Time outside in the natural environment costs nothing. Encourage children to play outdoors, use their imagination and have fun.

Turn off screens to encourage children to explore outdoors. Time spent at sedentary activity (including screens) should be minimised.



Play outdoors

whatever the weather – wrap up warm on cold wet days and remember sunscreen on hot sunny days. Every day has a new possibility – jumping in puddles, flying kites, building dens, melting ice, or playing in snow.

The benefits of outdoor play far outweigh the risks – scrapes, bruises, bumps and falls are all part of growing up. **Equipping children to keeping safe outdoors is essential but affording children the time, space and opportunity to access outdoor play is essential.**