



Play: mental health  
and well-being

Playing is central to children's physical, mental, social and emotional health and well-being. Through play, children develop resilience and flexibility, which contributes to physical and emotional well-being. Play involves children doing as they wish in their own time and in their own way. It has the key characteristics of fun, uncertainty, challenge, flexibility and non-productivity.<sup>1</sup>

Children have a right to play, as recognised in Article 31 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC). Playing is one of the most immediate and important aspects of children's lives<sup>2</sup> – they value time, freedom and quality places to play. As an indication of the significance the United Nations places on children's play it has published a General Comment on Article 31. This is an official statement that elaborates on the meaning of an aspect of the UNCRC that requires further interpretation or emphasis. The General Comment specifically states that play is *'essential to the health and well-being of children and promote the development of creativity, imagination, self-confidence, self-efficacy, as well as physical, social, cognitive and emotional strength and skills'*<sup>3</sup>.

Children have an inborn urge to play – research suggests that playing has an impact on the physical and chemical development of the brain. Playing *'influences children's ability to adapt to, survive, thrive and shape their social and physical environments'*<sup>4</sup>.

The Welsh Government recognises the importance of play in children's lives and states in national guidance:

*'The Welsh Government places great value on play and its importance in the lives of children in our society. We believe that children have a fundamental right to be able to play, and that play is central to their enjoyment of life and contributes to their wellbeing.*

*We also believe that play is essential for the growth in children's cognitive; physical; social and emotional development. There is much evidence to support this belief and an increasing*

*understanding of play's contribution not only to children's lives, but also to the well-being of their families and the wider community'*<sup>5</sup>.

## Play and emotional well-being

Concern over the decline in children's opportunities to play have been linked to an increase in poor mental health<sup>6</sup> and Welsh teenagers have amongst the poorest life satisfaction rates across the UK<sup>7</sup>.

Playing allows for peer interactions that are important components of social and emotional well-being. When playing alone, children begin to recognise their own emotions, feelings, and thoughts, as well as how to control them. Children also learn to feel comfortable with being by themselves and learn ways to manage their boredom on their own.

Through playing children experience a range of emotions including frustration, determination, achievement, disappointment and confidence, and through practice, can learn how to manage these feelings.

How playing contributes to children's emotional well-being:

- Creating and encountering risky or uncertain play opportunities develops children's resilience and adaptability – and can contribute to their confidence and self-esteem
- Socialising with their friends on their own terms gives children opportunities to build emotional resilience, to have fun and to relax
- Fantasy play allows for imagination and creativity, but it can also be a way of children making sense of and 'working through' difficult and distressing aspects of their lives.

## Playing and the Five Ways to Well-being

The Five Ways to Well-being are a set of evidence-based messages<sup>8</sup> aimed at improving the mental health and well-being of the whole population.

- **Take notice** – slow down, appreciate, recognise your own and others' talents
- **Connect** – meet up, join in, phone a friend, listen
- **Be active** – get up and have a go, walk, run, cycle, dance, garden, sing
- **Keep learning** – try something new, have a go, ask how, where and why
- **Give** – share what you have, smile at others, volunteer.

We know that given time, space and permission children will play. We also know that playing is crucial for children's mental well-being, but how does it link with the five ways?

**Take notice** – When children are playing they take notice of their environment, and through playing, engage with it and adapt to it. When children have time and space for play, they will engage with their environment and the people in it in a range of ways.

**Connect** – Playing has a central role in creating strong attachments to both people and places. This means that children not only connect with each other but also with adults in their environment. Equally important, they also create strong connections with the places where they live and play.

**Be active** – Increasing evidence shows that playing is the most effective way to get children physically active. All children play, whilst not all children wish to participate in sport or more structured physical activity.

**Keep learning** – Playing allows children to learn in their own way and interact with new and novel concepts in a way that is not stressful. Through experimentation, interaction and adaptation children continue to learn through playing long after formal teaching and learning has ended for the day.

**Give** – Children learn how to give and share with others through playing. This involves the negotiation of shared space, sharing ideas and resources for playing and sharing with each other. For older children who are allowed to play with and around younger children, giving occurs naturally and mutually as they share games, places for playing and nurturing or extending younger children's play.



*'The Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) Act 2015 is about improving the social, economic, environmental and cultural wellbeing [of] Wales. It will make public bodies think more about the long-term, work better with people and communities to prevent problems and take a more joined up approach. Securing children's right to play will be an important part of contributing to and improving the wellbeing of future generations.'*

**Sophie Howe, Future Generations Commissioner for Wales**

## **Brain development and deprivation**

It is widely accepted that early playing for infants and children is vital to the development of their imagination, risk-taking abilities, cognitive functioning, physical skills and social cooperation<sup>9</sup>. Children's play provides a primary behaviour for developing resilience, thereby making a significant contribution to children's well-being<sup>10</sup>.

In *The Ambiguity of Play*, Brian Sutton-Smith cites Huttenlocher's work on brain imaging, implying that children under the age of 10 have at least twice the potential brain capacity of adults<sup>11</sup>. This overcapacity is linked to human evolution because it enables the brain to retain what he calls 'its potential variability'.

Sutton-Smith suggests that this over-capacity will be used more effectively if children are exposed to diversity of experience through playing. He argues that if children play, their brains will grow larger than they otherwise would, therefore dramatically improving their capacity to store and process information. It follows then, that if this huge 'neuronal overcapacity' is not taken up by the age of around 10, it will die off and contribute to play deprivation.

Play deprivation is the name given to the idea that not playing may deprive children of experiences that are essential to their development and result in those affected being both biologically and socially disabled.

For more information about play deprivation, read our *Play deprivation: impact, consequences and the potential of playwork* information sheet written by Professor Fraser Brown.

*'Play is our window on the world. Through it, the infant learns about objects and how to manipulate them. The toddler explores the world with his new-found legs and a biochemical urge to roam. The young child communicates and cooperates with others to manage risks, to solve problems and expand creative imagination. In adolescence, free unstructured play molds the brain pathways that are being laid down to guide our relationships, establish our role in life and make compromises with people around us. And all the time, play is the key to physical fitness and emotional well-being.'*

*'Play is essential to our cognitive, emotional, social and physical development. As a doctor and psychiatrist, I have dealt at first hand with the disastrous consequences that may result from a lack of opportunity to play and adults' inability to let it happen. Young people become fearful of the world in every way and will grow up into parents who will block their own children's development in turn.'*

*'Watching TV and working the computer are important, and so is organised recreation like sport. But they are not nearly so important for development as free-for-all, rough-and-tumble play. And the research is proving it.'*

**Dr Mike Shooter, former President of the Royal College of Psychiatrists**

## References

<sup>1</sup> United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child (2013) *General comment No. 17 (2013) on the right of the child to rest, leisure, play, recreational activities, cultural life and the arts (art. 31)*. Geneva: Committee on the Rights of the Child.

<sup>2</sup> Children's Commissioner for Wales (2016) *Beth Nesa? What Next?* Swansea: Children's Commissioner for Wales.

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<sup>3</sup> *General comment No. 17 (2013) on the right of the child to rest, leisure, play, recreational activities, cultural life and the arts (art. 31)*, page 4.

<sup>4</sup> Lester, S. and Russell, W. (2008) *Play for a Change – Play, Policy and Practice: A review of contemporary perspectives*. National Children's Bureau for Play England: London.

<sup>5</sup> Welsh Government (2014) *Wales – a Play Friendly Country*. Cardiff: Welsh Government (Crown Copyright).

<sup>6</sup> Gray, P. (2011) The Decline of Play and the Rise of Psychopathology in Children and Adolescents, *American Journal of Play*, volume 3: 443-363.

<sup>7</sup> Royal College of Paediatrics and Child Health Wales (2017) *State of Child Health 2017 Recommendations for Wales*. Cardiff: RCPCH Wales.

<sup>8</sup> Developed by New Economics Foundation from evidence gathered in the Foresight Mental Capital and Wellbeing project (2008).

<sup>9</sup> Bergen, D. (2009) Chaos & Complexity Theories in Education Group, *'Play and Brain Development as Complementary Nonlinear Dynamic (Chaotic/Complex) Systems'*.

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<sup>10</sup> *Play for a Change – Play, Policy and Practice: A review of contemporary perspectives*.

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<sup>11</sup> Sutton-Smith, B. (1997) *The Ambiguity of Play*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.





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Play Wales is the national organisation for children's play, an independent charity supported by the Welsh Government to uphold children's right to play and to provide advice and guidance on play-related matters.

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