



A world without play: An expert view



Experts discuss the importance
of play in children's lives

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Foreword

This report is part of a wider enquiry conducted by Play England and the British Toy & Hobby Association (BTHA) for the *Make Time to Play* campaign, on the impact of play deprivation on children, families and communities entitled “A World Without Play”.

The *Make Time to Play* expert panel convened on Friday 6 May 2011. The British Toy and Hobby Association (BTHA) and Play England would like to thank all panel members (Dr Amanda Gummer, Dr Len Almond, Professor Peter Blatchford, Ruth Clement, Tim Gill, Professor Jeffrey Goldstein, Wendy Russell and Catherine Prisk) for their valuable professional insights.

In the context of a study on a world without play, the panel was keen to emphasise that whilst there are serious detrimental effects on children when they are unable to play, play in itself should not be seen as a means to another end. Play, for children, is as natural as eating or sleeping; and as Adam Philips asserts, ‘there is no purpose to the child’s life other than the pleasure of living it. It is not the child, in other words, who believes in something called development.’ The panel was also cautious of depicting British children as living in a ‘world without play.’ Whilst the consensus was that in recent years children have less opportunity to play, due to various pressures on their lives, it cannot be said that children no longer play. The panel made recommendations of measures that should be taken to ensure children continue to have the time and opportunity to play.

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Play and children's social, emotional and educational development

The panel began by emphasising the strong link between children's play and forming social relationships. Professor Peter Blatchford has observed that about 80% of play at school break times is social. Blatchford and his colleague Ed Baines have identified a number of ways that play and games at break times facilitate social development and have coined the term 'social scaffold' to describe one function that play serves for children at school break times. Through play children make friends, develop social skills and learn reciprocity - how to interact with each other. Len Almond identified that the act of playfulness has a powerful impact on the brain, and this has to impact on learning. Evidence has shown that play teaches skills that are pivotal for schooling such as friendship formation, social skills and working out how to become part of a group. These social abilities have been seen to help collaborative group working, school learning and academic success and help in later life.

For many children, the panel agreed, time for play at school is limited. Peter Blatchford's national surveys, funded by the Nuffield Foundation, have shown clearly that over the past 20 years there has been a progressive reduction in both the number and duration of school break times, and this is because of pressures of the curriculum and a negative view about behaviour at break times. The surveys also showed that the vast majority of pupils value break time because they can meet friends and play. Worryingly, for some pupils break times in school are the only time they get for such activity. To compound the issue, breaks are often identified for the purpose of eating and supplementary learning only. The panel recognised the tragic irony that whilst legislation exists to preserve the conditions of farmed and free-range chickens, no such legislation exists to give children the necessary outlet to unwind during the school day. Indeed, employment law directs that teachers must have breaks during their working day, yet children, who arguably have an even greater need than adults, are overlooked in this policy area. Jeffrey Goldstein cited some research on how Japanese schools are structured; to aid concentration, younger children are allocated more frequent but shorter breaks, which gradually become less frequent but lengthen as they grow older, with the aim of increasing attention and other academic benefits in the classroom. The panel cited Pellegrini's studies which have shown that children learn more in lessons after they are given the opportunity to play. In addition, Wendy Russell drew from Bjorklund's 'cognitive immaturity hypothesis', observing that having the freedom to play during school breaks restores children's belief in their cognitive and social skills and therefore their capacity to engage in cognitive tasks as they have control in their "play world". Seemingly pointless behaviour through play is valuable to children as it increases their self-belief and this increases their confidence to learn when back in the classroom. Anecdotal evidence from the panel identified that having the space to play outdoors is crucial for children's social interaction; therefore space constraints in a teaching environment can have a negative impact on the social development of pupils.

The panel counselled against adoption of the old Chinese proverb 'working hard is beneficial, play is worthless.' The phrase highlights that play can sometimes be seen as a waste of time by those who view time as needing to be 'productive' and seek tangible evidence of 'time well spent'. Allowing children the opportunity to play, both during breaks and as part of play-based learning, was collectively seen as beneficial. Children come back from play breaks refreshed, energised and ready to concentrate. Having the chance to let off steam through play also reduces behavioural issues in the classroom. It was highlighted that the reduction in teaching

time lost to addressing classroom behavioural issues could be helped by giving children the chance to play and learn to get on with each other; this could be significant economically as well as educationally. Yet, there is no universal recognition that play benefits children in the school environment, or at least educational establishments are devaluing the importance of play whilst under pressure to conform to academic directives.

The panel cited an example of a school in Baltimore, US, where pupils were given the choice of no recess or highly structured sport in the belief that the children could not cope with or be trusted with the freedom to play without it leading to bad behaviour. Fears were voiced of a profound misunderstanding when schools take away or structure school break time, a misunderstanding that the use is purely for physical activity thus ignoring the social and other benefits. Some schools restrict time for play in the belief that bullying and anti-social behaviour is exacerbated during this time. Schools have shown a reduction in bullying by reducing or eliminating breaks, however this has removed the opportunity but not the problem. Children need the opportunity to experience social situations and to learn how to deal with the every day challenges of life, or such issues will perpetuate. Bullying in school needs to be tackled so those involved understand why it is wrong, and develop strategies for conflict management, rather than simply removing the opportunity and therefore denying other children the right to positive social interactions.

It should also be noted that the act of playing in itself gives children the opportunity to learn for themselves informally, and this complements the formal learning environment. Research by Ruth Clement suggests that increasingly some parents identify play's main purpose as assisting a child's educational development and are more likely to seek to aid this development through the use of educational toys, overlooking the wider developmental and other benefits of play in general. Clement surmised that this is perhaps due to the fact that many of these wider benefits, such as cognitive, conceptual and social development, are less tangible or visible to adult observation. It could also be due to societal emphasis on the importance of academic education, thus parents are often tempted to 'shortcut' by combining the time children play with a "worthwhile" educational outcome.

Ruth Clement identified research that indicates children often feel they need permission to undertake playful activities that previously were everyday behaviours, such as playing with water. It could be seen that children are increasingly conditioned into conforming to adult-led play activities which could have a detrimental effect on their ability to develop imagination, cognitive ability, confidence and social skills for example. Parents should therefore encourage children to understand that playful activity is a positive part of family life, even when unstructured. Children will naturally make use of toys and alternative props to play, and the only thing that will curtail them is adult chastisement.

Toys were seen as an enjoyable and beneficial prop for children as part of a wide range of play experiences they need to be able to choose from. Toys and other playthings can lengthen the amount of time a child spends playing as the prop can make the game more complex. Jeffrey Goldstein recommended that giving children props for play does not limit their creativity or imaginations, nor does taking away physical objects as children will find opportunities to play, even in extreme situations. Children take an active role and should be encouraged to use their imaginations with the props they use to take play into new directions.

The group generally accepted that the use of new media play does not need to be discouraged, and that recent research has highlighted how new media, far from replacing informal play,

can be incorporated into, and even enhance, children's games and play. Jeffrey Goldstein observed that children may take ideas for fantasy play from the media or other sources but they always 'edit' these scripts in creative ways. In this light, children's response is more 'editor' than 'video recorder'. A general rule of 'everything in moderation' should be adopted. It was noted by the panel that often the only place where children have unsupervised play is online. The panel discussed the existence of a gulf between adults and children with new technology and that until adults become 'digital natives' they won't necessarily understand the benefits of certain playful activity that the current generation of children have developed. It was noted however that too much screen time can lead to a lack of experience of reality, often in more scary settings than real life offers. It was felt there may be a need for more research on the impact of time spent watching television. Len Almond asserted that particularly younger children benefit from playful interaction which television cannot provide; the experience of interacting with things you can see and feel is crucial for children, and television cannot meet that need.

Wendy Russell observed that adults can sometimes make judgements on what is beneficial or non-beneficial play. She observed that generally speaking children seek out opportunities for playing because it is enjoyable, the feeling of life being worth it for the moment of playing is beneficial in itself. The panel universally identified that play fighting and 'rough and tumble' play is frequently curtailed by adults, as it is misinterpreted as poor behaviour, with fears that real fighting will ensue. However it should be recognised that in fact children (especially boys) will frequently play fight with their friends and there is a value of allowing children to do so, this value is very much for the 'here and now', not just developmental. Play fighting builds social skills and the boundaries of what is acceptable behaviour (children tell each other when things have gone too far and learn for next time). Cath Prisk recommended that children's workers and some parents need to better understand the difference between play fighting and real fighting, citing the example that owners of dogs know the difference between playing and real fighting in their pets, and parents too can usually identify the difference in their children - from the amount of time the play continues and the facial expressions and body language of the children. Interestingly it was noted that women break up play fights faster than men, often seeing aggressive behaviour rather than a form of social play. Peter Blatchford cited Peter K Smith, 'if they stay friends, it's play fighting.'



Play and children's health and wellbeing

The panel discussed how children's health is being hindered by a lack of opportunities for play. Concerns were particularly raised that children are not engaging in as much physically active play as they need to. Wendy Russell probed that play can help alleviate or even prevent some health issues such as obesity, mental health and hyperkinetic disorders but cautioned that it can't be taken in isolation from all other aspects of children's minds, genes, bodies and environments. Wendy Russell asserted that whilst concerns about the quality of contemporary childhood may to some extent be warranted, it does not seem that this equates to the kinds of stress children experience through complete play deprivation as described in the literature. Dr Len Almond led discussions on emerging evidence of a decline in British children's physical activity levels, with a decline in physically active play a contributing factor. Evidence shows that physically active play can meet children's recommended daily physical activity levels, and therefore it is crucial to the obesity agenda. Almond identified that 16% of five year olds are obese, and this proportion doubles by the age of eleven. Whilst obesity in this age group is often attributed to unhealthy eating, Almond counters that by the age of five, most children's eating habits are settled, therefore the increase in proportion of obese children by the age of eleven must be due to a reduction in activity levels. As sedentary behaviour is now seen as an independent risk factor for health, addressing sedentary behaviour and low levels of physical activity in children is a major component in reducing children's obesity and preventing future health problems. The current British recommendation for children is at least 60 minutes of moderate-intensity physical activity each day, and more if a person is obese. Almond recommends that physically active play is a major component for reducing the obesity agenda and therefore an influence on children's later health.

Whilst gym membership and healthy lifestyle promotion is big business for the adult market, for children an enjoyable and cost effective method of reversing rising obesity levels is to allow children to simply play. Taking the analogy of an adult wanting to keep fit, motivation is very often a limiting factor. For children however, the desire to run outside, to climb, to scoot fast down a path, is unbounded. Children do not play actively because they are consciously trying to stay fit, they play in this way because they naturally want and need to as human beings. Amanda Gummer suggested that there is a natural 'virtuous circle' in which increasing the level of activity increases playfulness, and playing increases levels of physical activity. Gummer suggested that children's eating and sleeping patterns improve when they have had active play during the day; Eat well - Play more - Sleep better, with active play at the centre of the cycle.

The group identified that when children walk to school (or any other destination) with other children, their physical activity levels naturally increase through play. Often a limiting factor for children's physically active play is adults' time, especially where work pressures affect family life. Ruth Clement identified that time pressures on working parents mean that spending time playing with their children or indeed walking them to school can be difficult, and that working parents often feel the guilt associated with this. Clement suggested that schemes designed to increase children's physical activity levels should try to incorporate practical solutions which enable more parents to participate, solutions such as encouraging schools to open their gates earlier so that working parents can walk their children to school, whilst still arriving at work on time. Len Almond cited another solution, giving the example of a school that had painted yellow lines 250 metres either side of the school gates. This forced parents and

children to leave the car and walk the final part of the journey to school, and improved children's attention at the beginning of lessons substantially. Wendy Russell identified that many parents fear being judged if they don't accompany their children to and from school, and therefore take children by car, increasing the amount of traffic on the road. Discussing the danger of traffic to children, Russell quoted Hillman, cautioning, what we do is remove the children, whereas perhaps we should consider removing the cars. The panel suggested that parents should encourage their child's friends to accompany their child when they are thinking of going out. Not only is it more fun and safe for children, but it also increases the likelihood that they will engage in physically active play. It also makes it easier to encourage a child out for a walk as they see it as a fun activity with their friend and so parents should hear fewer complaints.

Tim Gill voiced fears of a proportion of children who now live a 'constrained childhood.' The panel identified an emerging term of 'bucket babies', in which children are strapped into car seats, push chairs, high chairs and cots for long parts of the day for ease of parenting. In some very young children their amount of sedentary behaviour could be as much as 10-12 hours a day; equivalent to a long haul flight – every day. This could potentially have an impact on neuron development as well as an impact on physical health. Len Almond recommended that parents need to be encouraged to facilitate play with younger children, especially with children under the age of one, and this should form a crucial part of parenting advice.

Amanda Gummer and Len Almond considered that a lack of social play in particular can have an impact on children's emotional and mental health. The panel suggested that a lack of play can be a contributing factor to mental health issues in children, but there are other contributing factors too and more research is needed. Play, because it is fun and gives pleasure and enjoyment, can have an impact on adaptive systems which make children more resilient and this may make them more able to cope with pressures which can lead to mental health issues. Play can help give children a more positive outlook, increase cortisone in the body, alter stress receptors, change children's attitudes to friends and places and encourage more creative learning. Wendy Russell suggested that rather than play helping to develop specific skills, it helps build 'architectural foundations' for the adaptive systems that contribute to resilience. Russell described that for children, play makes them feel better and consequently engage more, which in turn makes them feel better and creates a positive cycle, leading to healthy children enjoying their childhood and becoming healthy adults too.

The panel reiterated that whilst play has benefits for children's health, wellbeing and development, the main benefit of play for children is that it is a fundamental part of being a human being. Jeffrey Goldstein quoted Brian Sutton-Smith, 'children don't play for something in the future'. Children play because it gives a sense of freedom, a lack of constraints, and it is fun. Blatchford summarised that play is about the fun (the 'here and now'), secondarily it is about development, and on the whole it is about being human.

Play and communities

Wendy Russell identified that decreasing levels of play have not resulted purely from personal behaviour, it's about the environment, and lots can be done to make it easier for children to be able to play. The group agreed that giving children the chance to play and be physically active is not just a parent's responsibility but society's as a whole. They concurred that children need more than a nuclear family and that the adage 'it takes a village to raise a child' is clichéd but true. Tim Gill referred to recent calls for streets to be occasionally closed to traffic to allow children to play freely and safely. Jeffrey Goldstein described the practice in Utrecht of providing an infrastructure in which communities can insert poles into roads to close them off to traffic and create instant playgrounds at a cost of circa fifty pounds. Neighbourhoods rotate road closures outside rush hours and school hours across different neighbourhood streets to give a fair balance of road use. The committee suggested that such a system could be a way for communities to come together to become more play and activity friendly.

Tim Gill suggested that children who experience every day life in their community feel a greater sense of connection and reciprocity beyond the immediate family and this paves the way for neighbourliness and trust. Amanda Gummer recommended that neighbourhood play can be an antidote to social isolation. Wendy Russell observed that children who travel in their community by car are more likely to identify threats in their neighbourhood such (as strangers and crime), and very often judge the threat disproportionately, whilst children who walk in their neighbourhood will view such threats moderately and consider traffic the greatest threat.

The panel suggested that the Canadian model of grading local communities on their play opportunities could be adopted. Canadian provinces are given a happiness rating including the play and leisure facilities they provide. Adopting such a system would identify the UK's most playful communities and create child friendly cities.

Summary

The panel unanimously agreed that whilst play has important benefits for children's health, development, wellbeing and social abilities, it must crucially be seen as a fundamental element of being human. A world without play is a world of robots. Without play, we are functional, potentially productive, but not human. Play, for children, is a freedom that must be protected and should never be taken away. The panel recognised that giving children the opportunity to play is beneficial for wider communities too, and to ensure that children can play is a collective responsibility. If we want the children of Britain to enjoy their childhood and grow into healthy, happy and socially responsible adults, it is not just up to parents; we all have a role to play.

Recommendations for a play-friendly society

The panel made recommendations which can broadly be addressed to schools, local authorities/policy makers and families.

Recommendations for schools

- Give children the time to play at school, to burn off excess energy, socialise and enjoy themselves. Reverse the trend of supplementary lessons encroaching on play time.
- Target senior management to reemphasise the consequence and cost of a lack of play, to reverse the decline of play time in schools.
- Research should be provided to give evidence of the value of play time at school, both to educational attainment and social value. Also economically in the preventative effect that play can have reducing behavioural issues, thus increasing staff time to teach.
- Identify practical recommendations of play opportunities that schools can introduce.
- Work with school architects and designers, focussing on the optimum environment that can enable children to play and counter the view that new schools can be built without play facilities or playgrounds.
- Enhance pupil voices to give children the opportunity to make recommendations for improving the school environment for play.
- Address attitudes to certain types of play, promoting the benefits of play fighting and rough and tumble play, and supporting practitioners to identify play and non-play behaviour to avoid unnecessary curtailment of children's play.
- Introduce measures to support parents to allow their children to walk accompanied or independently to school. For example, open school grounds earlier so that working parents can walk to school with their children, and open later to enable children to play until parents can walk to collect them from school.
- Recognise that the time children spend at school is crucial to their daily play needs. Children should ideally be able to play before school, during a morning break, at lunchtime, during an afternoon break and after school.
- Recognise that the school setting has a pivotal role in collective community upbringing, and that play at school acts as an important social conduit.

Recommendations for local authorities and policy makers

- Relax red tape of street closures and introduce practical measures or programmes to encourage more mutual use of public space.
- Ensure that children have enough designated spaces to play, but also recognise that the public realm should be welcoming and accessible for all community members, which includes children and their need to play.
- Work with planners, both transport and built environment, to ensure that children's play needs are considered in new developments and redevelopment of local space.
- Introduce a 'green flag' or report card system grading local areas on child and play-friendly criteria.
- Work with schools, recognising their role as important community settings, to introduce measures to support children's play needs.

- Work with health practitioners to promote the benefits of play to children’s wellbeing and future health.
- Support parents to be able to feel confident allowing their children to play unsupervised in their local community.

Recommendations for families

- Throughout childhood, introduce small steps to giving your children the freedom to play unsupervised.
- Realise that the threat of strangers doing harm to your child is rare, and whilst it should not be ignored, the more children can play freely, the greater their ability to manage their own safety independently.
- Recognise the importance of play, and that whilst benefits can be physically intangible, play is crucial for your child’s development, health, for building friendships and for their happiness – all play is beneficial, even if it is not “educational”.
- Recognise that physically active play can meet your child’s daily recommended activity levels and introduce more opportunities for your children to engage in physically active play. An easy way is simply to bring your children’s friends with you when you go out – the children will naturally play actively without need for encouragement.
- Notice the difference in your family life when your children have the opportunity to play actively. Build active play into your daily routine to improve the family environment – it can help to reduce arguments, improve eating habits and improve sleep.
- Recognise that play fighting and rough and tumble play are important elements of children’s natural behaviour, and learn to recognise the difference between play fighting and real disputes.
- Make the time to walk to school and other destinations, this is important time for your child to play actively, socially and make sense of their environment. Try to take turns with other parents to supervise younger children.
- Don’t feel guilty if you don’t have time to play with your children. Kids benefit from playing independently, and giving them the freedom to play unsupervised is not only good for your children, it gives you the time for other priorities too.



