

PACYP 05

Ymchwiliad i weithgarwch corfforol ymhlith plant a phobl ifanc

Inquiry into physical activity of children and young people

Ymateb gan Chwarae Cymru

Response from Play Wales

September 2017

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**RE: Inquiry into physical activity of children and young people**

1.1 Play Wales is the national charity for children's play. We work to raise awareness of children and young people's need and right to play and to promote good practice at every level of decision making and in every place where children might play. We provide advice and guidance to support all those who have an interest in, or responsibility for providing for children's play so that one day Wales will be a place where we recognise and provide well for every child's play needs.

1.2 We worked closely with Welsh Government on its groundbreaking 'Play Sufficiency' legislation. Section 11 of the Children and Families (Wales) Measure 2010 places a duty on local authorities to assess and secure sufficient play opportunities for children in their area. The Play Sufficiency Duty is part of the Welsh Government's anti-poverty agenda which recognises that children can have a poverty of experience, opportunity and aspiration, and that this kind of poverty can affect children from all social, cultural and economic backgrounds across Wales.

1.3 *Wales – A Play Friendly Place*, the Statutory Guidance to local authorities on assessing for and securing sufficient play opportunities for children in their areas, demonstrates that developing conditions to support children's play requires cross-sector work.

1.4 Although there are limited longitudinal studies assessing the longer-term impact of play for health, there is evidence (and it is widely accepted) that playing is central to children's physical, mental, social and emotional health and wellbeing (Lester and Russell, 2008) and play is enshrined in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child. Through play, children develop resilience and flexibility, contributing to physical and emotional wellbeing. To support this inquiry, we draw the Committee's attention to the very useful definitions of play and recreation provided within the United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child, General Comment No.17 on Article 31 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child.

1.5 For children themselves, playing is one of the most important aspects of their lives; they value time, freedom and quality places to play. Consultations with children and young people show that they prefer to play outdoors away from adult supervision – in safe but stimulating places (National Assembly for Wales, 2010; Little Voices Shouting Out, 2015; Children's Commissioner for Wales, 2016). In this situation children tend to be physically active and stretch themselves both physically and emotionally to a greater extent than they would if they were supervised (Mackett, et al., 2007).

1.6 Playing is one of the easiest and most natural ways that children of any age can engage in the necessary levels of physical activity. Research (Mackett and Paskins, 2008) suggests that children burn more calories when they are free to play than through almost any other activity, including organised sports.

**Play and physical activity**

1.7 When given the opportunity to play children are likely to be physically active by running, jumping, dancing, climbing, digging, lifting, pushing and pulling. Active play is the most common type of physical activity that children take part in outside school, and unstructured play may be one of the best forms of physical activity for children (Lester and Russell, 2008).

1.8 How playing contributes to children's physical wellbeing:

- Prolonged and wide-ranging exercise develops stamina (informal sports, chase games, climbing, building).
- Climbing develops strength, co-ordination and balance, while jumping contributes to bone density.
- When children repeat an action as part of their play they are often in the process of calibrating – learning to manage growing bodies – as well as developing agility, co-ordination and confidence.

1.9 Play Wales is pleased to have an opportunity to input into the physical activity of children and young people inquiry. Our submission will be framed around the relevant terms of reference.

### **What do we know about physical activity levels in children in Wales? How robust is the data on this issue?**

1.10 Play Wales was a member of the expert group which produced The Active Healthy Kids Wales 2016 Report Card (Stratton, et al, 2016). The main sources of data for *Active and Outdoor Play* were surveys undertaken with children and young people. The data recorded play behaviour, not specifically play activity, as the group took the premise that given the right conditions, more children will play and be physically active. Although there is a lack of evidence for early years, there was strong evidence available for children aged 7-16 which was not available in the previous Report Card. The *Community and the Built Environment* section used data from the National Survey for Wales and Beth Nesa? | What Next? which included questions on the physical and built environment. The Report Card notes gaps in data and includes recommendations to improve grades in the future.

### **The extent to which Welsh Government policies are aimed at whole populations and/or particular groups, and what impact that approach has on addressing health inequalities.**

1.11 It is right to note that for the past 17 years the Welsh Government has funded play provision, through the Play Grant, Play Theme of Cymorth and more recently, the Families First funding programme. These funding streams, despite some local issues of allocation, have supported the implementation of Welsh Government's positive and ground-breaking legal and policy developments on play.

1.12 Whilst the Welsh Government has clearly taken measures to deliver its commitment to children's play, insufficient resources are committed to monitoring and evaluating the impact of the wider initiatives. In particular, there is a history of inadequate accompanying guidance for funding programmes which local authorities and their partners have used to support community based play provision as play projects aligned well as a delivery model to both Families First and Community First funding programmes.

1.13 Evidence (Play Wales, 2003, 2006, 2009, 2011 and Lester and Russell, 2014) suggests that complimentary initiatives such as Integrated Children's Centre funding, Communities First, Families First and Community Focused Schools were not used to best effect for children's play. Play Wales is concerned that changes to Families First and Communities First programmes will result in the closure of community based play projects, thus, resulting in the unintended outcome of less access to opportunities for active play.

1.14 Government should consider funding streams or programmes which support staffed playwork provision in its own right for all of the benefits it brings to children and their communities and for the infrastructure needed locally via play development teams. Investment is needed to support local authorities to take forward play sufficiency actions to increase children's play opportunities.

**Barriers to increasing the levels of physical activity among children in Wales, and examples of good practice in achieving increases in physical activity, and in engagement with hard to reach groups, within Wales, the UK and internationally.**

1.15 Children and parents report a range of barriers preventing children playing out as many adults recall from their childhoods: safety fears, traffic, time pressures, reduction in spaces to play. This is reinforced by the priority decision of the Children's Commissioner for Wales to campaign for play opportunities (Beth Nesa, 2016). Also, National Survey for Wales (2014-15) found that only 50% of the adult population are satisfied with places for children's play.

1.16 Our experience shows that play friendly adults and initiatives in communities helps to remove or reduce these barriers, meaning more children can play out with confidence.

**Examples of good practice**

1.17 For instance, in terms of good practice, a project which piloted the use of school grounds, using the Play Wales *Use of school grounds for playing out of teaching hours* toolkit (Play Wales, 2016), features as a case study in the World Health Organisation's review of impacts and effectiveness of Urban Green Space Interventions.

1.18 We draw the Committee's attention to findings gathered by colleagues at Glyndŵr University from local experiments that indicate that access to quality play opportunities supported by playworkers during playtime helps improve activity levels (Taylor, Tawil and Baker 2014). In a school based research project across six schools in Wrexham, physical activity levels of children were assessed in normal playtime and in sessions which were led by playworkers. Playworkers operated under the Playwork Principles<sup>1</sup> and implemented a playwork intervention. In the playwork led sessions, children were given access to a wide range of loose parts<sup>2</sup> play materials and encouraged to engage in self-directed play, as part of this playwork intervention. Children wore heart rate monitors and accelerometers<sup>3</sup> to build a picture of the children's physical activity levels. Physical activity is measured using different intensities: moderate physical activity (MPA), vigorous physical activity (VPA) and a combination of the two; moderate and vigorous physical activity (MVPA). The study showed:

- Loose parts play increased MPA, VPA and MVPA when the initial levels of physical activity were taken into account
- Loose parts play had a greater effect on girls and significantly increased the amount of health enhancing physical activity undertaken
- Loose parts play increased physical activity in those individuals and schools that had previously been the least active.

A similar study in Australia found that loose parts play had a significant long-term effect on physical activity (Hyndman et al, 2014). Loose parts play is relatively low cost compared to most other interventions and loose parts can be 'refreshed' regularly to maintain interest.

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<sup>1</sup> The Playwork Principles establish a professional and ethical framework for playwork.

<sup>2</sup> Loose parts are natural and man-made materials that can be manipulated, moved and adapted, built and demolished. More can be found here: <http://www.playwales.org.uk/login/uploaded/documents/Publications/loose%20parts%20toolkit.pdf>

<sup>3</sup> Heart rate monitors measured the stress placed on the heart during play at lunch time and accelerometers measured the frequency, intensity and duration of children's physical activity.

1.19 A recent report, *Why temporary street closures for play make sense for public health* (University of Bristol, 2017) suggests that supporting local residents to temporarily close their streets for play<sup>4</sup> could make a meaningful contribution to children's physical activity levels, with children three to five times more active during playing out sessions than they would be on a 'normal' day after school. Using GPS and accelerometers, it was found that children were outdoors for a large proportion (>70%) of the time the streets were closed and spent on average 16 minutes per hour in MVPA. It also found that outdoor, active play was more likely to replace sedentary and screen-based activities, than structured physical activities. Currently, only Monmouthshire Council supports this low-cost, grassroots model<sup>5</sup>, although Cardiff Council supported Play Wales to pilot sessions with residents in August 2017 and Play Wales continues to advocate for a less bureaucratic local system.

### **Value for money of Welsh Government spending to promote exercise in children.**

1.20 While the benefits of how playing improves general physical health are recognised (Department of Health, 2011) it has been generally overlooked by mainstream health policy.

1.21 To support children's play, complimentary policies can be examined to determine to what extent they support playing:

- **Children's ability to play outdoors locally ought to be promoted.** It should be easier for communities to close their streets for street play sessions (through, for example, changes to the Road Traffic Regulation Act (1984), removing the requirements for parents to take out expensive local advertising to inform people about the temporary closure of a street for play). Government should actively promote urban design that gets children more active, by better enabling them to travel independently and play out on their local streets and in their neighbourhoods.
- **Confusion and concerns over health and safety regulations that are preventing many children from taking part in active outdoor play must be addressed.** Half of children polled for a Playday survey in 2008 said they had been prevented from climbing a tree because it is 'too dangerous' (ICM/Playday 2008). Play Wales supports the Health and Safety Executive's (HSE) statement on the importance of considering the *benefits*, as well as the risks, when assessing children's play (HSE, 2012).
- **There is an urgent need to address the negative perceptions of children and young people playing in their communities.** The intolerance of children and young people playing out in their communities is having an increasingly detrimental effect on the health of children. The restriction imposed on children's freedom of movement by the misuse of anti-social behaviour orders has contributed to a negative view of children and young people accessing public space and made children less active.

### **The role of schools, parents and peers in encouraging physical activity, and the role of Sport Wales, NHS Wales and Public Health Wales in improving levels of physical activity.**

#### **Schools**

1.22 It has been found that the majority of authoritative systematic reviews and evaluations which quantify evidence of the wider outcomes and impact of play interventions and initiatives focus on play in school (Gill, 2014). As Gill points out, setting up studies and interventions, gathering data, and exploring different factors and variables are all more straightforward in school than in family or community contexts, and as a child spends more than six hours a day and 28 weeks of the year at school, for at least 12 years of life, children have considerable opportunities to play. International empirical evidence suggests that school playground break time (also referred to as playtime) initiatives aimed at enriching play opportunities are linked to a range of improvements in academic skills, attitudes and behaviour, and to improved social skills, improved social relations between different ethnic groups, and better adjustment to school life (Gill, 2014).

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<sup>4</sup> Street play sessions can be viewed at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sbBOqxGPMus>

<sup>5</sup> Abergavenny Street Play:

<http://www.playwales.org.uk/login/uploaded/documents/Right%20to%20play/Wales%20A%20Play%20Friendly%20Place%20issue%2042.pdf>

Efforts to improve physical activity and wellbeing in schools should focus on more than just sport and physical education:

- The provision of adequate breaks for play should be mandatory and inspected as part of whole school inspection. Play Wales is concerned about the increasing queries it receives from parents and practitioners regarding the withdrawal of playtime (including lunch time play break) to shorten the school day, or, more concerning as part of a behaviour management policy. For many children, school play time is the main chance they have to play, be active and socialise with their friends.
- School landscape design and playground design which supports play should feature in new school design from the outset. Play Wales can provide further information and signpost to resources for this.
- Initiatives that are intended to increase physical activity in schools should make specific reference to time for play alongside other physical activity interventions.
- School communities should be encouraged to consider making their outdoor space available for playing when the teaching day ends and during weekends, as noted in Welsh Government guidance (Welsh Government, 2014).

### **Sport Wales**

1.23 Although there are some local examples of local partnership working between play and sport development teams in Wales, Sport Wales does not engage well nationally with the play and playwork sector. When developing programmes and messaging regarding play, physical literacy and activity for children, it should be encouraged to work more widely and in partnership with Play Wales to ensure synergy of message.

### **Public Health Wales**

1.24 Play Wales welcomes the recognition of children's play in PHW's public health programme, *Every Child Wales*. PHW has worked in partnership with Play Wales on the campaign messaging regarding Step 6 of the programme (children should play outdoors every day.) This programme focuses on children aged five and under; we advise that PHW maintains this commitment to children's play by promoting all of the health benefits that playing brings to children and young people of all ages in future programmes and campaigns. To support the programme, the latest issue of our *Focus on Play*<sup>6</sup> publication provides information to support public health professionals to consider the role they hold in supporting better opportunities for children to play in their own communities.

### **Conclusion**

1.25 Play Wales has advocated for inclusion and recognition of children's play in a range of similar inquiries and consultations (such as the Public Health Bill, Getting Wales Moving Action Plan, Wellbeing of Future Generations Act) over the years.

1.26 Despite the obvious and well accepted views regarding the role playing has in increasing physical activity levels, we continue to advocate for a rights based approach to policy making regarding play. Differentiating types of play, to support those deemed to be more supportive to children being active, might have the unintended outcome of neglecting all of the other very important elements of it.

1.27 Interventionist programmes can be useful in encouraging more physical activity; however, they must be complemented by a focus on supporting children to be active participants in building their own resilience and resourcefulness. We know that every aspect of children's lives is influenced by their urge to

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<sup>6</sup> [www.playwales.org.uk/eng/focusonplay](http://www.playwales.org.uk/eng/focusonplay)

play, and that self-directed, self-determined playing offered by quality play provision increases children's opportunities to build their own resilience and support their own health and wellbeing.

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