



Encouraging play

Ask children what they enjoy most about school and they'll tell you 'playtime!' For them, playtime isn't just about having a break from lessons – it's about doing what comes naturally, which is playing.

Opportunities for children to play are, however, becoming increasingly limited. Research for Playday 2007 (see 'Sources') showed that regularly playing outdoors near home is much less common for today's children than for previous generations due to lack of appropriate play spaces, negative attitudes to children's play in some neighbourhoods, and the ever-present worry of traffic.

For many children school grounds are the one place where they can find the space and time to play. Yet the national trend, particularly for pupils over seven, has been to reduce and even abolish breaktimes – mainly because of concerns over pupil behaviour.

Research shows, however, that by encouraging play – through improved school grounds and better play opportunities – these concerns can be addressed. For example, in LTL's survey of

700 schools that had improved their grounds, 73 per cent said behaviour had improved, 64 per cent reported reduced bullying, 84 per cent reported improved social interaction and 85 per cent said that healthy active play had increased.

This Groundnotes will look at:

- play and its benefits
- how spaces affect children
- improving play opportunities
- how adults can support play

Play and its benefits

The importance of play for children's physical, emotional and intellectual wellbeing has been well researched and documented over the years. The National Children's Bureau (see 'Sources') describes play as a chance for children to:

- explore physically and intellectually . . . to make choices and consider possibilities
- extend their skills of communication
- give free rein to their imagination
- promote their physical development

- work through events and feelings that absorb them.

The importance of play has been recognised by government in developing its play strategy. 'Play encourages creativity, teaches children to be innovative, to learn about risk and increases their sense of independence. It is essential to children's physical health and development, and helps children learn how to get on with each other.'





How spaces affect children

Despite the clear benefits of play, however, many schools find playtime a challenge. Often the problems relate clearly to the school grounds. For example, a boring environment may encourage teasing, fights, and damage (both accidental and deliberate).

Similarly, inadequate and/or poorly managed space can lead to overcrowding and conflicts. Inevitably, trouble in the playground saps the goodwill of the teachers and lunchtime supervisors, and often spills over into the classroom, disrupting learning.

Mary Cavan, headteacher at Prior Weston Primary School in Islington, has direct experience of how playground space can affect pupils: 'For three years, while our school was being redeveloped, our pupils had to share a small, unstimulating outdoor space. We immediately saw a rise in quarrels and disputes, which invariably spilled over into the classroom and disrupted lessons. Now we are using our new playground – which offers interesting spaces and stimulating equipment – and the change has been astonishing.'

Offering children a play-friendly environment can:

- banish boredom – and with it, playground disputes
- ensure everyone – staff and pupils – enjoys their time outdoors
- help children settle happily and quickly back into their lessons.

Improving play opportunities

Making changes to your play environment needn't, however, be either costly or time-consuming. The key is understanding what children need from the space around them to encourage play and maximising what's already on offer. The National Children's Bureau describes play as 'a range of self-chosen activities, undertaken for their own enjoyment and the satisfaction that results'. Children enjoy and benefit most from a play environment where they can determine their own play, and where there is 'generous scope for them to access materials'.

Opportunities for choice

Allowing children to determine their own play means giving them – within safe limits – choices about where they go and how to use the space. Often in school grounds, for example, there are 'no-go' areas, or areas where only certain age groups are allowed, or where only certain types of activity can take place. Observing how children use the space, and encouraging participation in decisions about the school grounds (see *Planning for change*, Groundnotes July 2008) will give you a clear idea on how to maximise what's on offer.

For younger children especially, for example, nooks and crannies offer places for emotional security and comfort; a sense of physical enclosure and of being able to regulate social interaction, by being alone or with just one or two others. Yet often those perfect hiding places –

behind the shed, in the wooded area, under a bush – are forbidden, maybe for health and safety reasons, maybe because there are concerns about supervision if children are out of sight, or perhaps just because it's always been that way.

Encourage choices in play by taking a fresh look at your school grounds and considering:

- **variety** – children need intimate places and open places, places for noisy and quiet play, places for large and small groups. If children are particularly drawn to an out of bounds area, explore ways in which it can be safely used – perhaps by thinning shrubs.
- **relaxation** and encouragement – children need to feel safe and supervised but not overlooked; they want to be able to watch activities or choose to take part in them.
- **room** to move about – with plenty of space for each and every child. If, for example, there are a variety of different spaces available – soft and hard surfaces, flat and undulating areas, walls and fences – they will not all crowd in one area.
- **room for others** – children encourage one another in their play, so places should be provided for larger scale activities and shared experiences to take place.



Opportunities for active and adventurous play

For children's physical health and development, opportunities for active and adventurous play are vital. Features that encourage this type of play also offer children the chance to try out and develop new skills, inspire them to explore, experiment and challenge themselves and each other. They also help them gain confidence in a secure environment which they may be able to use later when they are in less familiar surroundings. And, of

course, this type of play especially encourages children to let off steam, ready to return to the classroom.

Encourage active and adventurous play by taking a fresh look at your school grounds and considering:

- **installing** features like basketball hoops and netball rings, targets and grids on walls and the ground, trails and circuits, ropes, tyres, traversing walls and adventure playground equipment. Features such as these can also be used as stimuli for pupils to create their own new games.
- **zoning** your grounds. By separating quiet areas from active play areas you can minimise conflicts over the use of space, and make supervision of breaktimes easier. Children often find particularly worrying areas where there is little definition of place or activity, so giving different areas of the grounds distinct identities by dedicating them to different activities helps to increase the child's sense of security. It's useful to create visual divisions between the different zones. This need not be a physical barrier – such as a fence or a wall or planting – but a change of colour on the ground surface or walls.
- **providing as much variety** for children as possible with sports equipment, bats and balls, bean bags etc. Many schools use a key ring system to ensure equipment is returned and encourage independence. Each child is given (perhaps after paying a deposit) a key ring with their name or number attached to it. When they borrow equipment they hand in their key ring, which is hung on a board to show what they have borrowed. Once such a system is established, pupils can be put in charge.



Opportunities for creative play

A range of inexpensive but flexible 'play' equipment can greatly enhance creative play opportunities for children in school grounds – especially those who are less interested in sports. You don't need to put it all out every day – ringing the changes helps keep children stimulated. The key is to offer variety, and equipment that offers good play value.

Encourage creative play by taking a fresh look at your school grounds and considering:

- **natural resources** already available in your grounds, such as trees, leaves, pebbles, flowers etc.
- equipment that offers **flexibility**. For example, loose parts – a term used to describe things that children can move and manipulate in their play – offer a large amount of play value. They rarely have one fixed purpose and can be used and manipulated by children for a wide range of purposes.
- equipment that is **cheap**. In order to keep children playing but without breaking the budget, Shelly Newstead, author of *Playtime! A practical guide to putting play back into the playground* (see 'Sources') recommends scrapstores as a fantastic source of free and cheap equipment for playtimes: 'They collect

useable waste material such as card, paper and interesting shaped pieces of plastic(!) and many also sell discounted craft materials.'

How adults can support play

Encouraging play in the school grounds means ensuring everyone involved – from parents and governors, to teachers, break time supervisors and even the caretaker – understands and appreciates the value of play and is encouraged to contribute towards the success of playtime.

Zally Huseyin from Playwell, an organisation that supports a whole-school approach towards play, points out that it is especially important to get parents on board: 'Parents often limit schools by insisting on certain restrictions within the playground because of concerns about injury. Consequently there are schools where simple active games like cartwheels, leapfrog or handstands are forbidden.'

Developing an ethos

Creating an encouraging environment also means moving away from telling children what they can't do ('play on the field when it's wet', 'jump off the wall', 'climb the trees') and working instead on finding – within safe limits – ways in which the children's natural inclinations can be allowed. Zally suggests a number of

approaches towards creating a positive play ethos, including:

- agreeing a series of statements ('This school promotes positive play', 'This school encourages physical and imaginative games' etc) which are displayed around the school.
- running a workshop for different members of the school community. Talk about play, ask them to remember what games they played as children, what they enjoyed about playing etc.
- writing a formal play policy outlining the school's attitude and approach towards play (see 'Setting up a play policy' below).

Passing on play ideas

Besides helping to establish a positive attitude towards play, adults within the school community can also be used as a valuable resource by passing on games they played as children themselves. A simple and effective way to do this, recommends Zally, is for one adult to teach each class one new game, and then ask each child from that class to find one child from another class to pass the game on to. If older children are allowed to play alongside younger children, this is an ideal way of also encouraging different age groups to mix and care for each other. Other ways to ensure new games are being introduced into playtime is to establish older children as play leaders or school buddies.

Managing disputes

Even the most stimulating school grounds won't prevent some playground disputes taking place. Children will naturally disagree, and learning how to resolve arguments productively is an important part of their development. When problems in the playground occur supervisors should be encouraged to:

- remove other children who are not involved so there isn't an audience
- if necessary take the children involved to a 'cool it zone' so they can calm down
- let each child put their point of view
- ask each child what they think should happen now.

By passing the problem back to the children they are more likely to find a resolution they can both be happy with and in the process learn important skills such as compromise and negotiation.

Setting up a play policy

A useful foundation on which to build your planning and provision for play in your school grounds is to write a Play Policy. This will have a number of tangible benefits for your school, including:



Encouraging friendship

For children who find it hard to join in or don't have a friend to play with that day, special 'friendship' places – a bench, for example, or similar – are a great idea. These provide a special place in the school grounds where pupils can go to feel safe, relaxed and cared for – a place where they'll find someone else who is looking for a companion too, or where a playtime supervisor will look after them, or find them another child to play with. It may be

appropriate to have a different special place for different year groups, or a place that everyone can use.

Playground squads are also useful to help encourage every child. These are teams of pupils, made up of the older children in junior, infant or primary schools. Their role is to help support the adults on duty at break and playtimes – adding invaluable extra pairs of eyes and ears, and acting as an approachable link between teaching and ancillary staff and pupils.

- a common understanding of the role of play and physical activity within the school environment
- a practical working tool for developing and improving the play environment
- an induction document for new staff. This should set out your rationale for, and commitment to provision for play in your school. The process of producing a policy should itself ensure that everyone within the school, by understanding what you are trying to achieve, is able to participate in its development.

For further information on writing play policies, download the information sheet *Writing a play policy* from the Member Services pages of our website www.ltl.org.uk.

Sources

- Playday – a national campaign co-ordinated by Play England working in partnership with Play Wales, Play Scotland and Play Board Northern Ireland. Find out more by visiting www.playday.org.uk.
- Play England www.playengland.org.uk
- National Children's Bureau www.ncb.org.uk
- *Playtime! A practical guide to putting play back into the playground* by Shelly Newstead (Common Threads

Publications, 2007)

www.commonthreads.org.uk

- *The Friendship Stop* – a feature of the Quality Circle Time Model developed by Jenny Mosley www.circle-time.co.uk

Further resources

Playwell provides practical and hands on training for the whole school community to help promote positive play in schools. Visit www.playwelluk.co.uk

www.humankinetics.com for a range of books packed with playground games.

Available to download from the Member Services pages of our website:

Groundnotes *Playground design for better behaviour*

Groundnotes *Physical activity and active play in school grounds*

Groundnotes *Adventure*

Information sheet *Writing a play policy*

© This resource was originally created as part of the Schoolgrounds-UK membership scheme from the national school grounds charity

Learning through Landscapes operating in Scotland as

Grounds for Learning (registered charity no. in England and Wales 803270 and in Scotland SCO38890).

To find out more about membership call 01962 845811 or visit www.ltl.org.uk

