



## Play Midlothian

### Play Policy

#### Purpose

The purpose of this policy is to:

- Ensure a best practice approach to play underpins all our services and work
- Share our approach to play with people outwith Play Midlothian

It also highlights how important we believe play to be for children - for their lives in the here and now, as well as their future life chances. Ensuring children can thrive through play drives everything that we do.

#### The right to play

We will recognise and uphold the child's right to play as stated in article 31 of the UNCRC: *'State Parties recognise the right of the child to rest and leisure, to engage in play and recreational activities appropriate to the age of the child and to participate freely in cultural life and the arts.'*

We will advocate for children's right and need to play with our wider community.

#### The benefits of play

We will recognise and promote the wide-ranging benefits of play:

- Play builds health and wellbeing - being active through play helps children physically and emotionally, contributing to their health and happiness.
- Play builds resilience - playing (and undertaking challenges in particular) boosts children's confidence, creativity, problem-solving skills and perseverance, enabling them to cope with stress and challenges throughout life.
- Play builds friendships - playing allows children to interact with others, develop relationships, deal with conflict, and learn respect and tolerance.
- Play builds communities - playing allows children to learn about the world around them, make connections, and develop a sense of place, identity, inclusion and belonging.
- Play is a powerful tool through which children and young people learn to understand the world around them and their place in it.
- Playing and learning outdoors is essential for our children and young people to understand, value, enjoy and protect our natural world.

## The play process

Self-directed play will remain our focus throughout our services, whether open to all or accessed by referral to meet particular needs.

*'Play encompasses children's behaviour which is freely chosen, personally directed and intrinsically motivated. It is performed for no external goal or reward, and is a fundamental and integral part of healthy development - not only for individual children but also for the society in which they live'* (Play Strategy for Scotland: Our Vision, 2013)

We see the attributes of play as being:

- Freely chosen by the child - done in their own way for their own reasons
- Personally directed by the child - following the child's own interests
- Intrinsically motivated - children are naturally driven to play

This means something different to providing a choice of activities. It means that children can take play in whatever direction they wish from start to finish. That can involve blending or changing play types in quick succession, picking up then discarding resources, making up rules then changing them, and creating something then breaking it up. We will value however children play, even where it is hard for an observer to recognise a purpose or benefit.

We recognise that self-directed play has unique benefits that can't be obtained from organised activities, gained because of this freedom, flexibility and focus on process rather than end result.

Playful activities that adults facilitate and are not entirely self-directed can also form part of our offer to children, where judged a helpful support to children, for example as a springboard into new types of play or to support group dynamics. These are designed to offer as much choice, flexibility and fun as possible.

Some of our services work with parents/carers to enable them to support play, and in doing so we start from wherever a family is at with play. This may also mean playful activities at times. The goal will always be to jointly create a path to self-directed play, to the extent possible.

We will be clear with ourselves about when a playful activity is our intent and why, and will not let that facilitation style crossover into children's self-directed play.

## Our role during play

*'The role of the playworker is to support all children and young people in the creation of a space in which they can play...Playworkers choose an intervention style that enables children and young people to extend their play. All playworker interventions must balance risk with the developmental benefit and wellbeing of children.'* (From the Playwork Principles: <https://www.playscotland.org/play/playful-learning/information-on-playwork>)

Our approach to play is that of the playwork profession, underpinned by the Playwork Principles. We do not require our play team to have playwork qualifications specifically, but do require participation in team reflection, training and other learning opportunities to ensure everyone is up-to-date with best practice in playwork.

When staff are present when children play, the main goal is to facilitate play. Our play team will fully support the play process as it unfolds, and not unnecessarily restrict or influence how children play. We will respond enthusiastically to children's invitations to play, without taking over the content or direction of their play. We will choose an intervention style that helps the children's 'play frame' to continue.

We recognise that children have more going on in their lives than play and therefore at times the play team will assist with other needs children have, for example listening to their concerns, helping them to manage their emotions, or letting them know about other services that might benefit them.

This will be underpinned by building effective relationships, and the team engage in an ongoing process of adapting to children's changing strengths and needs.

The opinions, feelings and wishes of children are fundamental to the design of our play services. Through the play process we will observe and listen to the ideas of children, and enable them to take the lead, with our role being to provide resources and support so that children can develop their play. We will also formally engage with children to develop and improve our services, using a range of evaluation tools.

### **Play opportunities**

When planning our play environments, resources and support, we will aim to:

- Enable children to explore as many of the play types as possible
- Create as varied, flexible and enriching an environment as possible, whether natural or built, indoors or outdoors

(See for example <https://www.playscotland.org/wp-content/uploads/Play-Scotland-Play-Types-Toolkit-bringing-more-play-into-the-school-day.pdf>)

We will create regular opportunities to explore: natural elements (water, air, earth and fire); materials that can be manipulated; identity; challenge in relation to the physical environment; movement; sensory experiences; concepts; social interactions, and; a range of emotions.

We aim to offer as varied an environment as practicable, within each session and over time.

We will particularly focus on loose parts - ambiguous materials that do not have a set purpose - and these should be present at the majority of our play sessions. These are usually larger items such as planks of wood, crates, guttering, etc but can also be smaller items such as leaves, shells, pegs, bobbins, etc.

'Loose parts are about real world learning for all children and young people. The process of introducing them and of playing with them involves collaboration, sharing thinking, problem-solving and decision-making.' (<https://www.playscotland.org/loose-parts-play-toolkit>)

We do not usually provide conventional toys, as these are not as flexible. Where we do provide such items, the purpose and quality of these will be carefully considered, with a preference for natural materials over plastic whenever possible (including for environmental

reasons), and with sensitivity to the way some toys can unhelpfully reinforce gender stereotypes. We will also take care to avoid giving the impression that expensive or specialist resources are required for children to play.

### Challenge in play

All children both need and want to tackle challenges and have adventures in order to explore limits, venture into new experiences and develop their capacities, from a very young age and from their earliest play experiences. Children would never learn to walk, climb stairs or ride a bicycle unless they were strongly motivated to respond to challenges which could involve a risk of injury. Undertaking challenges is increasingly understood as vital for children to build resilience, and therefore protects mental health throughout their lives.

*‘Exposure to challenges, with support from parents and carers, playworkers and youth workers... allowing (children) to learn and develop through sometimes risky activities will help build resilience into adult life.’* (Play Strategy for Scotland: Our Vision)

Play Midlothian takes a balanced approach to challenging play opportunities and uses risk-benefit assessment (RBA). In addition to written RBAs for commonly occurring situations, the play team uses dynamic RBA, drawing on their experience of play and particular children, to arrive at a judgment in a particular situation. Children usually have a good sense of their own limits. A moderate amount of risk is a beneficial and healthy part of play. Where staff must intervene to reduce the level of risk, they will, as far as possible, explain to participants why a change to their play is needed, and involve them in identifying alternatives.

Owned by:	Chief Executive
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