

Writing a Play Policy



Introduction

This is a tool is for individual settings to use to develop their own play policy. **Play Midlothian** and **Play Scotland** collaborated on this document, drawing on their collective experience of play and play policies. We hope providers and projects across Midlothian and Scotland will find this useful in supporting children's need for, and right to, play.



What is a play policy?

A play policy is a helpful – perhaps essential – document for settings to clarify and communicate their approach to children's play, in a form that has approval from the management committee or other governing group.

It can be particularly helpful to create an external facing policy, that both guides the setting's team and informs parents/carers and other interested people on the setting's approach to supporting children's play.

As with other policies, it does not state specific planned actions, but the principles that guide the setting's approach.

Purpose and scope

This document is aimed at settings that have an approach to play to put into words, but would like some tools to make that quicker and easier.

This document does not provide background guidance on play, or in-depth guidance on how to develop a play policy, which is often a wider process than the writing of the document itself. The steps you would ideally take along the way will depend on your specific context. Play Midlothian's training courses (including '[Developing a Play Policy](#)') are options for additional guidance if needed and Play Scotland has additional resources on their [Playful Learning](#) pages.

Rather than provide an example policy for settings to adopt, we decided to provide prompts for you to create a policy that is suited to your setting – it needs to work for your context.

Clarify and communicate your approach to children's play

How to use this guide

The remainder of this document provides sections you can work through, to consider the different elements that your setting might want to include. You may wish to use the below section headings as the structure for your play policy. Or you may find your own preferred heading structure emerges once you have some ideas for the text. **The policy would ideally be a fairly short document (of 1-3 pages max), with a higher level focus that can guide operational plans.**

The examples provide text you could include in your policy for description and context, but by themselves these would not make the document a policy. Take care not to write a collection of information on play. Information should be minimal and illustrative, or help back up your approach. You also need to consider the relationship between the information and the principles and approach your specific setting will follow, and include this too – this should be the main thrust of the document.

For example, imagine that when working through the ‘What is play?’ section the definition that most strikes a chord is from the playwork principles:

“Play is a process that is freely chosen, personally directed and intrinsically motivated. That is, children and young people determine and control the content and intent of their play, by following their own instincts, ideas and interests, in their own way, for their own reasons.”

You may decide to use this definition and include in your policy, in your own words, for example: Our staff will fully support the play process as it unfolds, and not unnecessarily restrict or influence how children play.

You could think about this as you work through the guide, or choose your contextual information first, then think about the link to your principles and approach. The final section of this document prompts this process.

1. What is play?

Within your play policy, it may be helpful to explore the **definition of ‘play’**. Play can mean different things to different people (due to differing professional backgrounds and goals), and that might be reflected in your practice. You should aim to use a definition that you find aligns closely with the values, ethos and practice within your setting. Laying out what it means to your setting will provide a foundation upon which to build the rest of your policy.

It could be helpful to consider whether another form of wording – such as playful learning, the arts, or physical activity – describes your approach. Or perhaps your setting works with a combination of approaches. If so, consider whether these would constitute separate policies, or if you need to include further definitions and clarifications in your play policy, or if they would group together better under a broader title than ‘play policy’. The examples in this document are specific to play.

A few different definitions are suggested below. You may wish to select more than one. Further reading is suggested at the end of this document where you might find other examples that are more appropriate for your setting.

The UNCRC Handbook (2007) describes play: ***“As possibly the most interesting (of the group of concepts) in terms of childhood in that it includes activities of children which are not controlled by adults.”***

Article 31 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) states: ***“States Parties recognise the right of the child to rest and leisure, to engage in play and recreational activities appropriate to the age of the children and to participate freely in cultural life and the arts.”***

The UNICEF Children’s version says simply: ***“Every child has the right to rest, relax, play and to take part in cultural and creative activities.”***

General Comment No.17 of the UNCRC states that: ***“Play is any behaviour, activity or process initiated, controlled and structured by children themselves. Play happens whenever and wherever there is an opportunity to play. The key characteristics of play are fun, uncertainty, challenge, flexibility and non-productivity. These factors contribute to the enjoyment of playing and the incentive to continue playing.”***

The Playwork Principles state that: ***“Play is a process that is freely chosen, personally directed and intrinsically motivated. That is, children and young people determine and control the content and intent of their play, by following their own instincts, ideas and interests, in their own way, for their own reasons.”***

German educationalist Friedrich Froebel suggests that: ***“Play is the highest expression of human development in childhood, for it alone is the free expression of what is in a child’s soul.”***



2. What are the benefits of play?

Once you have defined play, it is important to set out **why play is of benefit to children**. This adds strength to other arguments you may wish to include, particularly if you enable play that could be seen as risky, unconventional or chaotic to an untrained observer.

Below are a few different perspectives on the benefits of play. You may wish to use more than one, or find others from different sources that you feel align better with your setting.

In Play Scotland's Play Types Toolkit: Bringing more play into the school day (2012) it has been noted that: ***"The benefits of play are broad, encompassing: Health and wellbeing; Early childhood development; Cognitive development; Physical activity; Mental health; Emotional wellbeing; Social development; Learning about risk and challenge; Play as therapy."***

"Playing outdoors supports wider learning by helping to boost creativity, imagination and understanding. These benefits are enhanced further when playing outdoors in diverse green spaces and natural landscapes." (Outdoor Play and Learning Coalition Statement).

In Play for a Change, Lester & Russell argue: ***"Play creates a brain that has increased flexibility and improved potential for learning later in life."***

"To a child, play is about having fun, but to society it is much more. Play is essential to healthy development from birth to adulthood, contributing to capacity for learning, resilience and the development of physical, cognitive, social and emotional skills." (Play Strategy for Scotland: Our Vision).

The National Playing Fields Association's document Best Play: What play provision should do for children states that: ***"Play can be fun or serious. Through play children explore social, material and imaginary worlds and their relationship with them, elaborating all the while a flexible range of responses to the challenges they encounter. By playing, children learn and develop as individuals, and as members of the community."***

Playwork theorist Bob Hughes said that: ***"Play is an essential part of a happy, healthy childhood and when children play their brains do two things: they grow and become organised and usable."***

Set out why play is of benefit to children

3. Children's voices

We suggest it is good practice for children to feed into the creation of your play policy – after all, they are the key beneficiaries. This could form a section of its own, but is perhaps best woven throughout – highlighting children's voices throughout your policy will make it lively and more interesting to read. You could use existing consultation and evaluation results, or set up a new process.

Fun and engaging methods encourage children to share their perspectives and ideas. Children can be supported to express their opinions via different modes, for example talking, writing, drawing, or photography. Several tools and methods are available to help you gather children's views, and a quick search on the internet will bring up many different ideas.

Alongside the input from children, consultation with all staff and parents/carers should also happen. This ensures that everyone feels part of the process and that their views and ideas feed into creating the policy/statement.

Play Scotland has produced a toolkit called **Getting it Right for Play** which has a questionnaire that can be used with children to obtain their views. There is also a 'scribble sheet' that can be used with children and young people.

East Lothian Play Association have developed a resource called **Pac-a-Map** which can be adapted to suit.

4. Play opportunities

It is important to outline for parents and carers the **possible range of play opportunities/activities** you may enable in your setting (whether through the particular environment and resources, or through your permission or encouragement). This section lists some possibilities, the descriptions of which should be amended to reflect your own provision. There may be some you would need more training or support on before you would be comfortable including, or others not mentioned here that are particular to your setting.

To support this process, you could work your way through the following four overarching considerations (from Play Scotland's 'Play Types Toolkit: Bringing more play into the school day') and could consider including these headings in your policy:

Time: Children need plenty of time to play. As well as short bursts of play at regular intervals through the day, children benefit from opportunities to immerse themselves in play for more extended periods of time.

Environment: The physical environment is a platform for play. Children need spaces that they can use in their own way and which offer variety, flexibility and, especially outdoors, challenge and natural features.

Resources: Suitable resources for playing, such as loose parts, natural materials, etc., enable children to extend and elaborate on their play activity.

Permission: Children will play with language, ideas and actions in environments where experimentation is valued. Adults' response to playing and learning shows this through 'permission' for trial and error; being allowed to figure things out yourself; collaborating; testing concrete properties of the physical world or abstract ideas and concepts.

Below are some other aspects of play you might want to consider in relation to the environment or ways of playing children may explore. These were originally adapted from information contained in Best Play: What play provision can do for children by Play Midlothian, to aid planning for their play sessions. (Best Play has other content you might find useful for your policy, such as seven play objectives).

- **Identity – experiencing different cultures, and experimenting with character and personality.**

- **Concepts – exploring concepts including measurement, mapping, direction, dimensions, size and sequence.**

- **The senses – stimulating the senses (sight, sound, touch, taste and smell).**

- **Varied landscapes and environments.**

- **The elements – water, air, earth and fire.**

- **Loose parts – materials with no set purpose that can be moved around, combined, and used by children in a multitude of ways.**

- **A variety of resources and tools.**

- **Provision of “focuses” or “provocations” to spark children’s ideas and play.**

- **Physical play and risk.**

Free to Play outlines that: *“Something may be described as having high play value if children are able to play with it in many different ways, integrate it into their own play or use it to expand or elaborate on their own ideas and actions. A tree stump may have huge play value as a spark to the imagination: a stage, a den, a prison, to jump off or lie on.”*

“Playing outdoors enhances learning and is fundamental for children and young people to thrive in health, wellbeing and development. It is our shared responsibility to support and enable all of Scotland’s children and young people to access our diverse greenspaces and natural landscapes and to empower them to enjoy these spaces for the purposes of playing and learning.” (Outdoor Play and Learning Coalition Statement).

The Loose Parts Play Toolkit states that: *“Loose parts create richer environments for children, allowing them to do what they need to do, to follow their interests and go where their curiosity takes them.”* And that *“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.”*

The Play Types Toolkit cites that: *“Moyles demonstrated that for every aspect of children’s development, there is a form of play. In combination, all of them support aspects of physical, intellectual and social-emotional growth and therefore a balance of experience of each of these types of play is beneficial to children.”*

5. Our approach to risk and challenge in play

We also suggest that you **include your setting’s approach to risk and challenge** when children are playing. It is important to put play that carries risks into the context of the benefits those challenges have for children. Making it clear why you allow children to engage in this kind of play, and the process you use to manage this, will help to ensure that parents/carers are informed and supportive of what you are doing.

The document Managing Risk in Play Provision has lots of useful information that could be used to think about this section of the policy and generate discussion between the various policy stakeholders. It also has information on how we can manage risk through a risk-benefit assessment (RBA) approach. RBA’s should be used to identify the benefits, as well as the risks, relating to the opportunities or activities that children explore within the setting. Additionally, you may want to include that all staff carry out on-the-spot risk-benefit assessment (dynamic RBA) when they are observing and supporting children during play. It may also be worth noting that this is something that children are good at doing themselves, and can, if required, be supported in by the adults around them.

There are many helpful resources on risk and challenge in play and some are quoted here.

“Striking the right balance between protecting children from the most serious risks and allowing them to reap the benefits of play is not about eliminating risk. Nor is it about complicated methods of calculating risks or benefits. In essence, play is a safe and beneficial activity. Sensible adult judgements are all that is generally required to derive the best benefits to children whilst ensuring that they are not exposed to unnecessary risk.” (Children’s Play and Leisure: Promoting a balanced approach).

“All children both need and want to take risks 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 involving a risk of injury. Disabled children have an equal if not greater need for opportunities to take risks, since they may be denied the freedom of choice enjoyed by their non-disabled peers.” (Managing Risk in Play Provision: A Position Statement).

“The Care Inspectorate supports care service providers taking a positive approach to risk in order to achieve the best outcomes for children. This means moving away from a traditional deficit model that takes a risk-averse approach, which can unnecessarily restrict children’s experiences attending registered services, to a more holistic risk-benefit model. For example, we encourage services to use risk assessment to support children to enjoy potentially hazardous activities such as woodwork using real tools, exploring nature and playing in the mud and rain. We do not expect written risk assessments to be carried out for daily play activities.” (Care Inspectorate Position Statement 2016).

6. Adults and play

If your setting involves adults in a care, teaching, playwork or other support role with children (i.e. you are not approaching this from a public space perspective only), then it is important to consider **the role of those adults in play**.

This may be woven throughout the policy, or contained in its own section, or a combination. Each of the previous sections of this document have implications for the adults at the setting.

However, there may be additional points that only arise through considering the role of adults specifically. This could include, for example:

- **The training or qualification requirements for adults working with play**
- **Specific roles such as School Play Champion (if your setting is a school that has, or would like to appoint, one)**
- **Listening to children and considering how they will be involved in an ongoing basis**
- **Partnerships (if applicable)**
- **The role of observation of play**
- **The role of reflective practice**

The box opposite contains prompts to aid discussion on the role of adults in your setting. You may have other documents in mind that are more suited to your specific context.

“Permission to play is often all many children need to play and a shift in attitude to one that values play is the single biggest change that adults can make to support children’s play. To demonstrate a supportive attitude towards play we should ensure we do not:

- *dismiss it as frivolous and a waste of time*
- *unnecessarily restrict it through fear*
- *over regulate and over organise it*
- *subvert it for other (adult) purposes”*
(The Role of Adults in Children’s Play).

“When children play they are engaging in a complex process that affects all aspects of their development. The role of the adult in play is equally complex, because the adult must develop a repertoire of responses that are appropriate to each individual play situation, appropriate for children at different points in their development and responsive to a range of individual needs.”
And: *“From their very early days, babies and toddlers need opportunities to play freely. Adults should respond to their playful responses and be proactive in initiating these too.”* (Free Play in Early Childhood).

“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.” (Extracts from the Playwork Principles).

7. Our promises for play

You likely now have a variety of content for your play policy. This final section of our guide is to encourage you to check that you have included information about your principles and approach – your promises for children’s play.

These would most likely be spread throughout the document, in the relevant sections. Another approach would be to keep other types of information brief, for context, and collate all the intentions of your setting under a final ‘promises for play’ heading. However, it may be easier for external readers to understand your approach in direct response to the associated definitions and context.

Essentially, you will need to review the text you have created, think about what you are hoping to convey, and decide on the final structure you think best helps the reader to navigate this.

You may wish to put an overarching promise for play at the outset of your policy, to open with a strong statement of intent. For example, include a ‘principles’ section in which you state your setting’s commitment to upholding children’s right to play (or whatever focus or form of wording feels most relevant to you).

It is advisable to think about your promises for play as a team, creating a space for open and honest dialogue. This a good way to encourage staff and volunteers to think about their own values and beliefs around children’s play, and how these might influence their practice.

You could use questions prompts such as the below to guide this discussion:

- **What do staff and volunteers aim to do within the setting in terms of supporting children’s play rights?**
- **What are the key aspects of facilitating children’s play that staff will be expected to be aware of and respect?**
- **If you are in a school, what is the difference between the play you provide in the classrooms and the play that happens in the playground?**

This would support people to think about ideas and issues, and unpick what that might mean for the children in your setting.

The below examples of ‘promises for play’ are not intended as recommendations of content, as that will depend on your setting, but more as a style guide for the wording of your policy:

- **We will advocate for children’s play needs to our wider community**
- **Even if we don’t always understand why children are playing in a particular way, we will respect their play process**
- **Our aim will be to maximise the range of types of play children can engage in at every session**
- **We will ensure loose parts are available for children at every session, as we believe these offer children the most potential for their play**
- **We will primarily focus on free or cheap materials, and use toys selectively, to avoid promoting the commercialisation of children’s play**
- **Our staff will ensure that resources are freely available for children to make their own selection from without needing to ask**
- **We will balance the risk of harm against the benefits of how children are playing, to promote their health and wellbeing in the round**
- **Staff will allow children to make mistakes and learn from these during play**
- **Staff will leave the content and intent of play to the children**
- **Staff will be willing and enthusiastic playmates for children, when invited into play by them**

Once your policy is complete and approved, you will need to regularly review how well you are implementing your intended principles and approach, and if need be develop an action plan for improvement.

Further References and Reading

Best Play <https://www.playscotland.org/resources/best-play-what-play-provision-should-do-for-children>

Bruce, T (2005) Early Childhood Education

East Lothian Play Association Pac a Map
<https://elpa.org.uk/pac-a-map>

Free to Play <https://www.playscotland.org/play/playful-communities/free-play-guide>

Getting it Right for Play
<https://www.playscotland.org/play/playful-communities/getting-it-right-for-play>

HSE Statement on Children's Play and Leisure
<https://www.playscotland.org/resources/18199>

Loose Parts Play Toolkit <https://www.playscotland.org/loose-parts-play-toolkit>

Managing Risk in Play Provision <https://www.playscotland.org/play/playful-learning/managing-risk-play-provision>

Outdoor Play and Learning Coalition Statement
<https://www.playscotland.org/resources/scotlands-outdoor-play-learning-coalition-position-statement>

Play for a Change <http://www.playengland.org.uk/resource/play-for-a-change-play-policy-and-practice-a-review-of-contemporary-perspectives>

Playtypes Toolkit <https://www.playscotland.org/play/playful-learning/play-types-toolkit-bringing-play-school-day>

Playwork Principles <https://www.playscotland.org/play/playful-learning/information-on-playwork>

Scotland's Play Strategy <https://www.playscotland.org/about/play-strategy>

The Role of Adults in Children's Play
https://issuu.com/playwales/docs/role_of_adults_in_children_s_play

UNCRC <https://www.unicef.org.uk/what-we-do/un-convention-child-rights>

UNCRC Children's Version <https://www.unicef.org/child-rights-convention/convention-text-childrens-version>

<https://www.playmidlothian.org.uk/training>

<https://www.playscotland.org/playful-pedagogy>

<https://www.playscotland.org/play/playful-learning>

(Websites accessed September 2020)

