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DECP POSITION PAPER

Children's right to play

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POSITION PAPER

Introduction

DECP position paper on Children's Right to Play¹.

Article 31 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC, 1989) states the right of all children to have rest and leisure, to engage in play and recreational activities and to participate in cultural life and the arts. However, concerns that the obligations to uphold article 31 rights were not being addressed by governments (David, 2006) prompted advocacy by the International Play Association (IPA, 2010). Ultimately this led to the publication of General comment No. 17 (the child's right to play, leisure and recreation

[UNCRC, 2013]) which elaborates on the right of every child to play, as well as identifying at risk groups, including girls, children living in poverty, children with disabilities, and children from indigenous or minority communities (pp.15–16). The General comment defines play as behaviour initiated, controlled and structured by children, as non-compulsory, driven by intrinsic motivation, not a means to an end and that it has key characteristics of fun, uncertainty, challenge, flexibility and non-productivity (UNCRC, 2013, pp.5–6).

The importance of play

Children regard playing as one of the most important aspects of their lives and value time, freedom and places to play (IPA, 2010). The importance of play to children's physical, emotional, social and intellectual wellbeing, and health has been well researched and documented (Lester & Russell, 2008, 2010).

Some of these benefits occur immediately as children play, while others develop over time. The intertwined benefits of play relate to its intrinsic value (entertainment, enjoyment and freedom) as well as its instrumental value (learning and development) (Moyles, 2006). Key characteristics of play, including uncertainty, challenge and flexibility, influence 'children's ability to adapt to, survive, thrive and shape their social and physical environments' (Lester & Russell, 2008, p.126). Through play, children experience a range of emotions including frustration, determination, achievement, disappointment and confidence,

and through practice they can learn to manage these feelings (Sutton-Smith, 2003). The importance of children being able to play without intrusive adult controls or structure has been recognised as an important factor in promoting lifelong attributes, such as resilience and flexibility and the development and maintenance of children's social relationships (Mannello, Casey & Atkinson, 2019).

The Children's Play Policy Forum (2019) noted that, in the context of alarming trends in relation to inadequate levels of physical exercise, obesity, and the rates of mental health problems in children and young people, that play can help improve physical and emotional wellbeing; as well as create a sense of identity and strengthening relationships within families and communities.

¹ This statement makes reference to the paper Atkinson, C., Bond, C., Goodhall, N. & Woods, F. (2017). Children's access to their right to play: Findings from two exploratory studies. *Educational and Child Psychology*, 34(3), 20–36.

Barriers to play

Despite the evidenced benefits for children, including older children, there are temporal, spatial and psychological factors which limit children's access to play (Barclay & Tawil, 2013; Finney & Atkinson, 2019). In recent times opportunities for play, as defined by the UNCRC's (2013) General comment, have been affected by factors such as increased traffic, technology and social media, closure of play facilities, educational pressures and parental anxieties about safety (Children's Play Policy Forum, 2019).

Within the family, fears for children's safety and a tendency to overprotect and avoid risk can diminish access to play (Lester & Russell, 2010). Parents are encouraged to focus on academic learning (Belfield & Garcia, 2014) and pressures from parents' work patterns can result in children spending out of school time in adult-directed facilities such as clubs, child-care centres or after school provision. Pressure from the national curriculum and national strategies (DfE, 2014; Early Education, 2012) means that often schools are primarily concerned with targets and outcomes (Maynard & Chicken, 2010). Where play-based activities form part of the curriculum, these are often adult-led and outcome-focused, and perceived by children as 'work' rather than play (Goodhall & Atkinson, 2017). A recent survey of schools across England found a reduction in the length

of school break times since 1995. The authors report that break times have reduced by 45 minutes per week for children in Key Stage 1 (aged 5 to 7) and 65 minutes per week for young people in secondary school (aged 11 to 16) (Baines & Blatchford, 2019). This study also found that 60 per cent of primary and secondary schools that responded to the survey reported that children might miss a full break or lunch time due to misbehaviour or to catch up on work.

Through our personal and professional interactions with children, we know that they are often more capable of playing than adults give them credit for and find time and space for play wherever and whenever conditions allow. However, children will struggle to play when their basic needs are not met or where the environments they live in are so constraining that they are unable to play. Schools can provide children with the access to time, space and permission for playing, which is an essential part of their everyday lives. This is particularly important for children who have their play restricted by factors such as poverty, domestic or environmental circumstances, recognising that with access to play opportunities children can enjoy their childhoods despite also experiencing financial and social disadvantage (Long, 2017).

The DECP Position

The DECP fully endorses children's right to play (UNCRC, 1989). We are concerned by the diminishing opportunities for play within the lives of children. We challenge the approach that prioritises outcomes of play, which adults see as important for children, over the process and enjoyment of playing. We advocate for a rights-based approach to children's play (Davey & Lundy, 2011). In doing so the DECP supports the sentiments of the European Early Childhood Education Research Association which states:

Play is a meaningful activity for children and one of their basic rights. Yet the outcomes are diverse. They are noticeable, but not always measurable. Learning occurs during play in multiple ways and children could gain a lot from supportive adults allowing them the space, time and interaction to develop their play activities. Play is also valuable on its own right as a meaningful socio-cultural activity and not just because of its relation to learning.

(2013, p.4)

From this perspective, the DECP position is:

- Child-led play is a critical enabler of children's holistic development and wellbeing.
- Educational psychologists have a key role in championing opportunities for child-led play for all children both in and outside school, for example through:
 - Challenging practice that restricts or reduces access to play.
 - Advocating for access to play within casework.
 - Supporting whole-school initiatives to promote play.
- Withdrawing break time opportunities for play in school should never be used as a punishment (e.g. for misbehaviour or completing unfinished work), nor the threat of withdrawal be used to control children's behaviour.
- All children and young people should have access to free, high quality, local opportunities for play.
 - This is particularly important for children who may currently experience exclusion from play e.g. disabled children, children living in poverty or children from minority communities.

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