

Stuart Lester and Wendy Russell
University of Gloucestershire



Summary report

Play for a Change

Play, Policy and Practice: A review of contemporary perspectives

Play England

Play England aims for all children and young people in England to have regular access and opportunity for free, inclusive, local play provision and play space.

Play England provides advice and support to promote good practice, and works to ensure that the importance of play is recognised by policy makers, planners and the public. For further information visit www.playengland.org.uk.

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As an umbrella body for the children's sector in England and Northern Ireland, NCB provide essential information on policy, research and best practice for our members and other partners.

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This document is a summary of the key findings from the Play for a Change research review. A more in depth exploration of these complex themes can be found in the full research review, now available from Play England.

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Foreword

Adrian Voce, Director of Play England

In a recent exchange, I was (gently) chastised for publicly making a connection (along with more than 270 children's professionals, writers and academics) between escalating mental health problems for children and their diminishing opportunities to play. I was told that 'a reading of the evidence base revealed nothing that could substantiate such a direct link'.

Strictly speaking, this criticism was perhaps justified. Robust empirical research on children's play provision that is of sufficient scope to be conclusive as to its impact, is thin on the ground. The University of Birmingham's national evaluation of the Children's Fund, for example, while suggesting there were indications that play provision may help to reduce young offending, also suggested that further, specific investment in long-term play provision and its evaluation was needed to provide more evidence.

This lack, as yet, of what is routinely referred to in policy circles as 'a robust evidence base' is presumably a main reason why, until very recently, the only significant national investment in play provision in England has been from the national lottery.

Yet, as this impressive literature review demonstrates, the evidence of the role that play has in children's lives and in human development is substantial and wide-ranging. It seems clear that the instinct to play is very deep, that it arises from very fundamental impulses. In playing, from the very earliest age, the human child engages with and learns about the world and about herself, builds crucial relationships with her carers, peers and siblings, and imagines the world she will partly inherit, partly create.

But the strongest message from this review is that all of these important functions of play are incidental in the child's own experience, which has little, if any, cognisance of 'outcomes'. Play is evidently simply how children enjoy being alive in the world now. After basic physical and emotional needs are met, children play. Even when they are not playing, the impulse to do so remains and can help to heal the effects of abuse and neglect.

There is an argument that this is all self-evident. Why do we need to research and validate such a primary form of activity, such an elemental aspect of children's behaviour? Is it not obvious, and have children not played happily without anyone researching it, for millennia?

The answer is both yes and no. Play does appear to be something that has been with us since our earliest evolutionary steps; indeed research of play in the animal kingdom shows that we share many play behaviours with fellow mammals. Some theorists suggest that our evolution itself is steered by the play of our young. And yet many human cultures, not least our own, have undervalued the significance of children's play, curtailing it for the more serious business of family or community survival which, in the modern world equates to academic attainment as a means to economic advancement.

If the research is not conclusive, perhaps this is because most of the studies have been attempts to broaden our understanding of children (and of ourselves) and their play, rather than to identify the role that it has in other outcomes for them. Policy-making must rely upon evidence, but, within an outcomes framework that largely identifies particular indicators of pathology, under-achievement or potential risk, the evidence that finds favour will tend to be that which can demonstrate an impact on these.

The case for children's play provision as an aspect of public policy is, first and foremost, that it is an established human right, recognised under the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) of 1989. There is indeed an argument that the right to play is the one that is most distinctly children's; that it defines, almost, the right to be a child. The 1913 Declaration of Dependence by the Children of America in Mines and Factories and Workshops Assembled (McKelway AJ 1913), a forerunner to the Geneva Declaration of the Rights of the Child in 1924, that itself eventually led to the UNCRC, asserts as its first resolution 'that childhood is endowed with certain inherent and inalienable rights, among which are freedom from toil for daily bread; the right to play and to dream'.

Much of the current policy framework for children has been developed with a view to 'balancing rights and responsibilities' for children. Certainly before the departmental changes in government in June 2007, this had almost become a mantra to rival 'education, education, education'. But this very earliest declaration of children's rights in modern times implies that children have the right not to be responsible: for the adult world to be responsible for them. The world of the child, in which they form and rehearse their range of responses (which is another way of saying they become responsible), is the world of play. The richly imagined but ethereal landscapes – physical, social, cultural and emotional – of children at play are, to many of the researchers and theorists surveyed in this volume, both uniquely the real world of childhood and the training ground for the actual world that they will not simply inherit but create, as adults.

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Some of the research reviewed within does suggest strong links between the enjoyment that children derive from play and its benefits for their all-round health and well-being now and in the future. But there are problems in producing longitudinal research that shows clear statistical cause and effect of an activity as elemental, innate and ubiquitous as children's play. How is the activity in question to be defined accurately when children have been shown to be able to play anywhere and with anything, given the space and permission? How is it to be measured? What price a study group?

Thankfully – for the time-being at least – the argument for investing in children's play provision and for seriously tackling the many barriers to their access to it, appears to have been won. The government, as of December 2007 (after this research review was complete) has adopted a substantive play policy as part of *The Children's Plan* (DCSF 2007), its ten-year strategy to make England the best place in the world to grow up. The government has now fully embraced the principle that there is a societal responsibility to enable 'children to enjoy their childhoods as well being prepared for adult life'.

The Children's Plan investment of £235m in play areas, adventure playgrounds and playworkers – within the context of a national play strategy that will attempt to coordinate planning, traffic, housing, health and children's services around the common aim of giving children more freedom to use these spaces – will not on its own transform the environments where children live and play. But because it is a strategic programme, designed to inform future policy, it should create the opportunity for that fuller evidence base.

Much of the research marshalled and elucidated so admirably in this volume has been instrumental, at least indirectly, in achieving this policy breakthrough. It should now provide future researchers, including the evaluators of the current and future government initiatives, with the map and the compass they will need to assess the real value of play provision. It is a value measurable, first and last, in the extent of children's enjoyment.

 Chapter 1

Background, scope and key messages



Our aim in researching and writing this report is to produce an up-to-date review of research and literature on children's play, with a focus on evidence-based research that can inform policy. This document builds on the work carried out by Cathy Street (2001) of the New Policy Institute that was published as *The Value of Children's Play and Play Provision*, Section 2 of *Making the Case for Play: Gathering the evidence* (Cole-Hamilton and others) published by the former Children's Play Council in 2002. The context of public provision for children's play has changed enormously over the last five years, and the time feels right for a fresh look at the literature underpinning our understanding of the importance of play in children's lives and how this might relate to social policy and public provision for play.

Scope

Our remit was to undertake a review of published research and other literature relating to children's play, focusing on works published since 2001, in order to update the information in *Making the Case for Play: Gathering the evidence* (Cole-Hamilton and others 2002). We have used this document as a starting point to identify three key strands of the literature review, namely:

- the policy context for supporting children's play, including an analysis of the literature on approaches to policy-making and the literature on children and childhood (Chapter 2)
- the literature on the benefits of children's play (Chapter 3) and on children's play patterns (Chapter 4)
- provision for play and working with children at play (Chapter 5).

The report draws on a diverse and at times disparate range of evidence sources. It has been difficult to set boundaries for this desk-based review, since play permeates every aspect of children's lives. We have drawn on a wide range of academic disciplines from the emerging studies of neuroscience, systems thinking and epigenetics to the more

ethnographic studies of the geographies and sociology of childhood, stopping off briefly within philosophy.

Whilst not entirely forgetting the foundation that developmental psychology has given to theories about children and play, this review has largely focused on alternative approaches. We have reviewed the literature on the play of children and young people aged from birth to 18 years, although at times we have also used research on animals, because this provides data that would be impractical or unethical to gather on children and young people. We have drawn on international literature, most notably from 'western' countries such as the United Kingdom, Northern Europe, North America, Australia and New Zealand, as this provides a comparative perspective, particularly on play patterns and practice among similar countries, although demographic and policy data are for England or the UK only. The literature on play itself is growing, but the literature on children and childhood is much bigger, and we have tried to trawl a fair range of books and papers that may give some insights into children's play, even if that is not their main focus. Given the diverse and ambiguous nature of playing and the vast range of studies across these disciplines, we accept that what we offer here is partial and cannot be a wholly

comprehensive review of the research. A detailed list of sources used in this literature review can be found in the resources section at the end of the full *Play for a Change* report.

The authors would like to highlight three key limiting factors to the literature review. Firstly, whilst we both have extensive experience in playwork, neither of us is from a natural science background and we acknowledge our limitations in reading and interpreting complex scientific material, particularly that from neuroscience. Secondly, there were, of course, time constraints, which will inevitably lead to gaps in the evidence collected and reviewed. Finally, in terms of reviewing the literature on provision for play, we acknowledge that there is much taking place at local level that falls outside of this review: we have reviewed the nationally published literature rather than local practice.

This document is a summary of the key findings from the research review. A fuller exploration of the review's findings can be found in the full *Play for a Change* report available from Play England.

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Play, policy, practice and paradigms: a case for realignment

The three strands of the review identified above have formed a triangular framework for analysis as shown in the figure below.

The model has been used for the purposes of analysis only, and is not intended to reduce the complexity of the range of influences on theory, policy or practice.

There is an assumption, or at least an aspiration, that all three points of the triangle align, that (recognising that the cycle can begin at any point) evidence informs policy, which then informs practice, this feeding into further evidence and research and so on. However, what the review unveiled is that this framework more accurately represents a 'tension field' in which the various points of the triangle may find themselves misaligned, or at times taking oppositional positions (Fig 1). This is due in no small part to particular understandings of children and play.

It is worth introducing here a few key concepts that underpin the literature review and are integral to understanding the key messages. One of the consequences of drawing on such a broad range of academic disciplines is an appreciation of diversity, not only in what is studied, but also in the methods of study, the conclusions drawn and, particularly, in the underpinning paradigms each discipline employs. Moss (2007: 243) defines a paradigm as 'an overarching system of ideas and beliefs by which people see and organise the world in a coherent way, a mindset for making sense of the world and our place in it'.

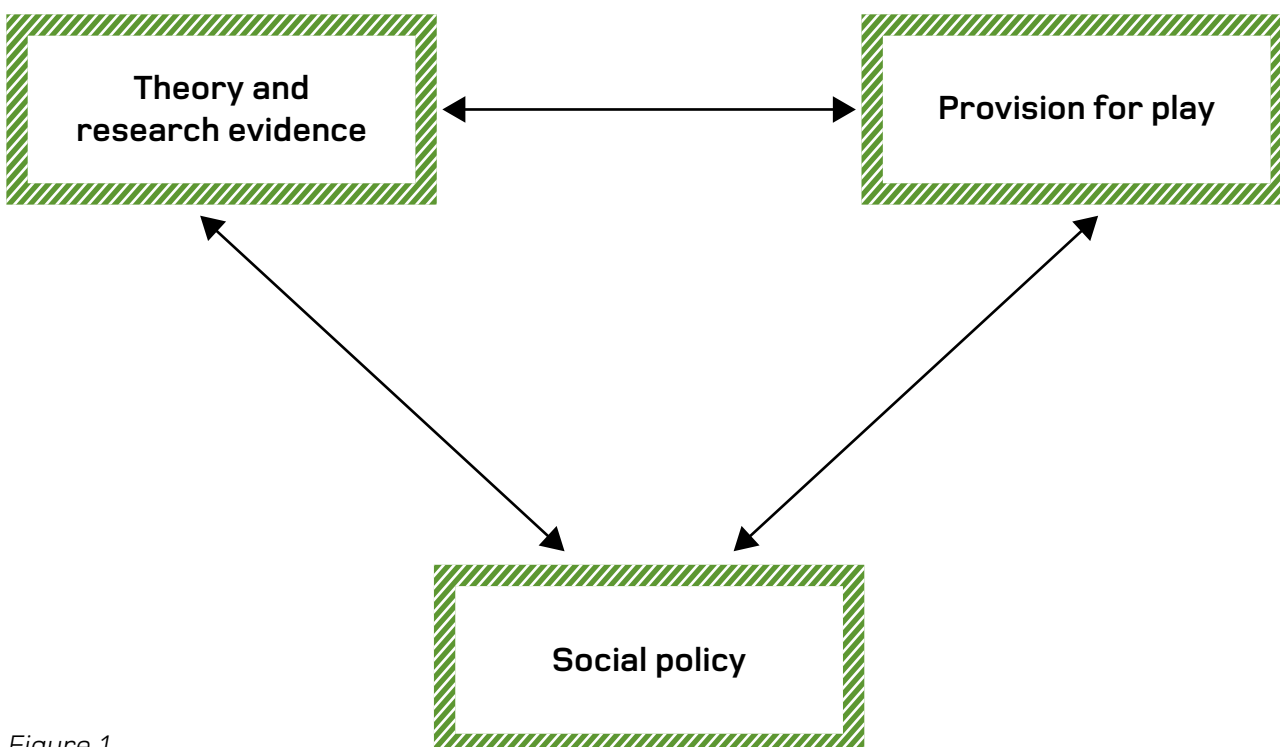


Figure 1.

Recognition of the existence of different paradigms and discourses ('ways of naming things and talking about them', Moss 2007: 243) brings with it an appreciation of the implausibility of one single truth to explain a phenomenon as complex, multilayered and diverse as playing, or its relation to social policy. The exponential growth of policy initiatives relating to children and young people over recent decades, and the last decade in particular (Roberts 2001; Mcneish and Gill 2006; J Brown 2007b) has been informed for the most part by one dominant paradigm and discourse that has marginalised other discourses and which assumes universal and rational truths about children. These truths include the belief that interventions have a direct and causal link to outcomes beneficial to society if only the right interventions can be identified, measured and embedded into increasingly technical, standardised and regulated practice at the right time in each individual child's life (Wyness 2006; Moss 2007). A key disciplinary perspective that informs this paradigm is child development, with its understanding of childhood as a period of preparation for adulthood (Mayall 2005; Meire 2007; Moss 2007). Key terms used in the discourse include 'development', 'children's needs', 'quality', 'best practice', 'benchmark' and 'outcomes' (Moss and Petrie 2002; Wyness 2006; Moss 2007).

This dominant paradigm embraces a particular view of play as a medium for learning and preparation for adulthood. This is what Smith (as long ago as 1988, and more recently in 2005) calls the 'play ethos', and Sutton-Smith (1997; 2003) the 'progress rhetoric'. The relationship between play, learning and development espoused by this paradigm is, according to Sutton-Smith (1997; 2003) based more on analogy, metaphor and self-referential presupposition than empirical evidence. Burghardt (2005: 381) asserts that 'common assumptions about play are often misleading and claims for the role of play are often suspect'. Smith (2005) suggests that children's play has been 'co-opted' in modern, industrialised societies as a way of improving cognitive and social skills.

These three references are from play scholars spanning academic disciplines from children's folklore, through developmental psychology to ethology. Such a widespread questioning of existing understandings of play demands more

than a passing consideration. The uncritical assumption that playing is a mechanism for learning and development has come to be seen as a self-evident truth. It has also tended to lead to a rather romanticised view of playing that glosses over (or attempts to control) some of the nastier or more disturbing ways of playing (Sutton-Smith 2003; Holland 2003; Kalliala 2006). Meire (2007: 3) summarises this paradigmatic understanding:

Understood as rational, orderly, and rule-governed, play is a civilizing activity and its value lies in its socializing force. This implies, however, that play must be guided in the right, future-oriented directions – into those that are productive and socializing.

In this rational, measurable and technical paradigm, play has a purpose: it is seen as being 'instrumental' in the overall child development project. For this reason, play advocates have tended to focus on this understanding of the purpose of play (Meire 2007). It is particularly evident in social policies which encourage active playing as a way of tackling obesity, or which use playing as a vehicle for academic learning, social development, crime reduction or community cohesion. Powell and Wellard (2007) refer to this as a 'utilitarian' view of playing; throughout this report we refer to it either as 'utilitarian' or 'instrumental'.



'Such a widespread questioning of existing understandings of play demands more than a passing consideration.'

The sources drawn on in this literature review offer additional perspectives on the key concepts of play and development that are more complex, differentiated and relational. In some ways this is unsettling because it becomes difficult to make (with any certainty) specific claims for the importance of playing in the lives of children. For example, to recognise the interconnectedness of genes, brains and bodies, and physical, social and cultural environments, opens up infinite and reciprocal possibilities for influence rather than singular cause and effect, as does recognition of children themselves as active agents in their own lives. This makes it almost impossible to make generalisations or universal claims regarding interventions.

Within these alternative paradigms, an 'instrumental' or 'utilitarian' understanding of play becomes questionable, and we can begin to look at a more intrinsic (sometimes referred to as 'autotelic') value drawn from the process of playing for its own sake rather than from its content (Hakarrainen 1999) or from its purported role in specific learning or developmental progress. As Burghardt (2005: xiii) says, 'much of what play entails may not be as it seems'.

Recent studies of the place of children's play within public policy (Santer 2007; Powell and Wellard 2007) find play to be poorly defined with no coherent understanding across or among policies. This is not surprising, since play scholars themselves are unable to agree a definition (Sutton-Smith 1999; Burghardt 2005). However, as Burghardt (2005: xii) says, this does not diminish its importance:

The problem of defining play and its role is one of the greatest challenges facing neuroscience, behavioral biology, psychology, education and the social sciences generally. Alas, it is rarely recognized as such ... In a very real sense, only when we understand the nature of play will we be able to understand how to better shape the destinies of human societies in a mutually dependent world, the future of our species, and perhaps even the fate of the biosphere itself.

In his overview of attempts to define play both in animals and children, Burghardt highlights the difficulties of identifying characteristics that apply always and only to playing. Harker (2005, cited in Meire 2007: 10) advocates

modesty in theorising about play. Many of the key characteristics often cited, such as freedom of choice, may not always apply absolutely (in group play, there has to be some compromise in order for the play to continue; not every player can do exactly as she or he chooses if they want to remain with the play group) and may also apply to behaviour that might not be play (such as exploration, curiosity or excitement-seeking). That said, the idea of personal choice and control can be found consistently within lists of defining characteristics. Lindquist (2001, cited in Meire 2007: 11) highlights the importance of feelings of power and control within playing, either for the individual or for the group as a whole. Other characteristics of children's play from the literature are that it is 'non-literal' ('as-if' behaviour, the opportunity to turn the world upside down or rearrange it or behave in ways that would not normally be acceptable) whilst having some relationship with non-play behaviours; it is intrinsically motivated (undertaken for its own sake rather than for any external goal or reward); it is accompanied by positive affect (that is, it is pleasurable and enjoyable, positively valued); it is flexible and adaptive (using objects and rules in a variety of ways). Play can also often be repetitive, unpredictable, spontaneous, innovative and creative (Burghardt 2005).

Chapter 3 considers the nature of playing in detail and highlights its diversity. At this stage, given the lack of agreed definition, this report draws on the understanding of play from *Getting Serious About Play* (DCMS 2004: 9), which is also the definition used by the Big Lottery Fund for their Children's Play programme, namely:

what children and young people do when they follow their own ideas, in their own way and for their own reasons.

Such a definition represents a significant field of tension and misalignment in the triangle of evidence, policy and practice. Whilst the idea of self direction might be espoused in policy terms as empowering, or as encouraging autonomy as a developmental milestone, it is likely to be supported only insofar as the play behaviour mirrors or simulates socially acceptable behaviour, or is understood (by its content) to show a direct relationship with instrumental policy objectives. Yet, what the evidence seems to point to, across both natural



‘Much of the evidence from neuroscience suggests that playing is a way of building and shaping the emotion, motivation and reward regions of the brain ...’

(neuroscience) and social (ethnography) science perspectives, is that children deliberately seek out uncertainty (both physical and emotional) in their play (for example, Spinka and others 2001; Sutton-Smith 2003; Kalliala 2006). Such playing with uncertainty is likely to be manifested in play behaviours that may not appear to be ‘positive’ in any linear or causal way. Examples might include war and superhero play, rough and tumble play and play fighting, teasing and bullying, jokes and obscenities, thrill seeking play such as parkour or skateboarding, adolescent experiments with drugs and sex, as well as behaviour in the public realm that is increasingly understood as dangerous or antisocial.

Much of the evidence from neuroscience suggests that playing is a way of building and shaping the emotion, motivation and reward regions of the brain rather than rehearsing specific skills that may be needed later in adult life (Burghardt 2005), and also that playing is a way of building a range of flexible responses across a number of adaptive systems that link the brain, the body and the social and physical environment. First-hand experiences of the raw, primary emotions of fear, anger, sadness, happiness, surprise and disgust (Damasio 2003) are essential for these processes to take place, and are evident in these kinds of playing.

Sutton-Smith (2003) suggests that play provides an excellent safe frame for the expression of these primary emotions that can be held in check by the rules, rituals and

play signals that define the game being played. These rules, rituals and play signals are driven by the more social, secondary emotions (for example, pride, shame, sympathy). This theorising is supported by studies which show that engagement in play helps to develop emotion regulation (for example, Panksepp 2007; Sutton-Smith 2003), peer and place attachment (for example, Gayler and Evans 2001; Mathur and Berndt 2006; Goodwin 2006; Korpela 2002; Corsaro 2003), emotional health through pleasure and enjoyment (for example, Tugade and others 2005; Gervaise and Wilson 2005; Martin 2007) and physical health (for example, Mackett and Paskins 2004).

A key point highlighted by much of the research is the importance of understanding these aspects as being interconnected and mutually dependent (Diamond 2007). Human development is a lifelong process of experiences that connect the brain, the body and the environment in a constant, mutually influencing shaping process (Thompson and Varela 2001; Edelman 2006). Through their play, individual children both adapt to and shape their environments. Such an understanding allows a breaking down both of the concept of the universal child developing through fixed stages towards the goal of adulthood (Wyness 2006) and also of the fixed and opposite understandings of difference as understood through adult/child, girl/boy, black/white, rich/poor and other binaries (Prout 2005). The dominant paradigm of preventative

policies aimed at children 'at risk' of social exclusion has been criticised for focusing too much on the individual child and family. Evans and Pinnock (2007) note that this deficit model overlooks the importance of children's relationship within their social and cultural networks and with their physical environments.

The sense of pleasure and reward derived from play generates an appetite or urge to seek out further stimuli that afford opportunities to play. The expression of this urge is not confined to the times and places that adults set apart for playing. Ethnographic studies of children's own experiences of playing in their local environments and in the school playground show that children continue to use space and time to play in ways that evoke adult nostalgia (challenging the perception that children no longer know how to play), anxiety and recrimination (for example, Percy-Smith 2002; Cloke and Jones 2005; Armitage 2004). Children's ability to engage playfully with their local environments and to actualise what these spaces afford for play depends on their ability to move independently within and across spaces. Restrictions to mobility, a heavy promotion of adult agendas and the determination of outcomes from play, prohibitions and constraints about the use of space and/or dull and featureless environments will narrow the potential of local environments to support children's play (Kytta 2004). Gill (2007) suggests that there is a need to move from a philosophy of protection towards a philosophy of resilience. Understanding children's play patterns can help adults to appreciate how to design spaces that support children's play, or indeed to acknowledge the existence of such patterns and do little other than protect children's right to participate within their local environments (Blinkert 2004).

Key messages

Play for a Change has revealed a resonance between the academic research on the benefits of play for children's health and well-being and the broad aims stated in current policies for children and young people. However, policies and practice do not reflect this resonance because of their instrumental understanding of play and the nature of childhood. These key messages distil the findings of the review.

1. The well-being of children in England

A 2007 Unicef report on the well-being of children in 21 of the world's richest countries ranked the UK bottom. This sends a strong message that we need to think again about children's experiences of childhood. There are many statistics and many moral panics about the lives of children in England. Policy-makers need to heed the fact that, when children and young people themselves are asked about what is important in their own lives, playing and friends are consistently at the top of the list.

2. Play, development and well-being

We are now beginning to understand the interrelationship between genes, the brain, the body, behaviour and the physical and social environment. This has enabled a deeper understanding of how play contributes to children's physical and emotional well-being and to their development. Contrary to the dominant belief that it is a way of learning specific motor, cognitive or social skills, play has an impact on the architectural foundations of development such as gene expression and physical and chemical development of the brain. In turn, these foundations influence the child's ability to adapt to, survive, thrive in and shape their social and physical environments. Children's development and well-being cannot be understood as separate from their environment.

3. Play and resilience

Play can help build resilience – the capacity for children to thrive despite adversity and stress in their lives. Emotions have a key role in playing and play makes a major contribution to developing emotion regulation, building strong attachments and peer friendships, engendering positive feelings, and enabling children to cope with stressful situations through developing creative approaches and problem solving skills.

4. Play and social policy

The role of play in building children's resilience and in their health and well-being chimes with the emphasis on building resilience in social policy. The evidence is compelling. However, there is a need to move away from an instrumental view of play that *Play for a Change* has found in much policy and practice, and towards a recognition that the benefits of play accrue from its characteristics of unpredictability, spontaneity, goallessness and personal

‘Play can help build resilience – the capacity for children to thrive despite adversity and stress in their lives.’



control, rather than directly from its content. If policy-makers accept the evidence for the significance of play for children’s well-being and development, then play provision should be judged on whether it enables children to play rather than on more instrumental outcomes. Because of the interrelationship with the environment there is no guarantee that playing will deliver on the five Every Child Matters outcomes; we can, however, be confident that these outcomes are more likely to be realised if children can play.

5. Time and space for play

The pleasure and enjoyment that children gain from playing leads them to seek out time and space to play. The prevailing understanding of childhood and play has led to an increase in adult control of children’s use of time and space which in turn constrains the ways in which children can exploit the opportunities that local environments offer for playing. Where children can range independently, their environment becomes a field of ‘free action’ in which they can follow their own desires and create situations of wonder and uncertainty (Kytta 2004). An appreciation of the relationship between the nature of play and an environmental field of free action is crucial in designing play friendly neighbourhoods. This calls for partnership and cross-departmental working at local and national level.

6. The children’s workforce

Evidence from the brain sciences shows that benefits accrue in part from the very characteristics of playing that adults

often find uncomfortable and so seek to suppress. This raises questions, for example, about the effectiveness of anti-discriminatory practices, approaches to challenging behaviour, and if, when and how to direct or intervene in play. The evidence from ethnographic studies of children’s play provides an excellent foundation for building an understanding of play through the eyes of children themselves. Given the significance of play in the lives of children, both from their own accounts and from the brain sciences, it would seem that it should, as a minimum, be part of the common core of knowledge that every adult needs when working with children.

7. Gathering the evidence from practice

The rich source of research about play, drawn from a range of academic disciplines, provides evidence of the need to ensure that children can play. However, this review has shown that there is a dearth of academically rigorous research into how best to make sure that children are able to play, either in the general environment or in children’s spaces. Much of the literature on practice aims to show instrumental outcomes for play provision, whether that be motor, cognitive, social or emotional skills, physical activity or crime reduction. There is a need to gather the evidence on what works best in providing for play for its own sake.



Chapter 2



National and local socio-political context

UK children and young people ranked bottom of the list in a Unicef report on the well-being of children in 21 of the richest countries (Unicef 2007), despite improvements over time, such as the doubling of incomes in the UK over the last 50 years (The Children's Society 2006), falling levels of child poverty, improved educational attainment and falling levels of youth crime (Bradshaw and Mayhew 2005). Although there are 'innumerable sources of evidence regarding [British children's] well-being' (Thomas and Hocking 2003: 9), very few of these reflect measures that are specifically about children's opportunities for playing. Yet in children's and young people's own accounts of their lives, and in their views on what would improve their lives, play and informal recreation consistently rank at or near the top of the list, often higher than more material issues (Children and Young People's Unit 2002; Camina 2004; The Children's Society 2006; UK Government 2007).

Some contemporary literature on childhood suggests that childhood is in crisis: 71 per cent of newspaper stories about children suggests that childhood and young people in one week had a negative tone, with a third of all stories being about violent crime and antisocial disorder (MORI 2004). Other concerns include increased diagnoses of mental health and behavioural disorders, obesity, consumerism and the impact of new technology (for example, Palmer 2006). However, many of these 'moral panics' (Madge 2006; Darbyshire 2007) can be countered by an alternative viewpoint: for example, Hough and Roberts (2004) show a fall in police reported youth crime; Rose (2005) and Timimi (2005) query diagnoses of Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder and suggest that environmental factors may play a significant part; Livingstone (2003) and Cunningham (2006) highlight children's and young people's competence and sophistication in their use of new technologies.

These concerns reflect a number of conflicting ways of conceptualising childhood. Moss

(2007) asserts that the dominant paradigm which informs social policy, and early childhood education and care practice in particular, is one that sees children as the future of the nation, with the role of the professional being to apply technologies (such as early intervention) that will ensure the desired social and economic outcomes. The growth of social studies in childhood has offered alternative ways of understanding childhood, particularly recognising children's own competence in being children and their capacities as social actors rather than passive recipients of services and socialisation processes (Alanen 2001; Prout 2002; Moss and Petrie 2002).

Children and young people have been the focus of a plethora of social policy initiatives over the last decade (Roberts 2001; Mcneish and Gill 2006; Brown 2007). The language and focus of these policies reveals confused and conflated constructions of childhood which include children as innocents in need of protection, as evil and in need of correction and as the hope for the future (Madge 2006; Hood 2007).

‘Some contemporary literature asserts that childhood is in crisis: 71 per cent of newspaper stories about children and young people in one week had a negative tone.’



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Research and campaigning has drawn government attention to the importance of playing in the lives of children and young people (DCMS 2004), culminating in £155 million of Big Lottery Fund money for children’s play in England and the establishment of Play England. However, the place of play in social policy remains both peripheral and confused (Powell and Wellard 2007; Santer and others 2007). There is no single coherent understanding of what is meant by play, and its place in national policy is subsumed within wider policies with no statutory duty attached. Play is valued for its utilitarian and instrumental uses, such as promoting learning, combating obesity or reducing crime, or as part of childcare within economic policy, rather than being recognised for its intrinsic value. Adult-led, structured and ‘positive’ activities are more commonly supported than play that is freely chosen and personally directed, particularly in statutory documents relating directly to children and young people. Documents relating to the environment, public space or neighbourhoods are more likely to recognise play’s intrinsic value (Powell and Wellard 2007). The need to bring these two separate policy spheres of children’s services and local regeneration together has been highlighted (Lammy 2007).

Current social policy undertakes to be evidence-based and outcomes-focused. The five outcomes for children within the Every Child Matters programme are that

they should be healthy, stay safe, achieve and enjoy, make a positive contribution and achieve economic well-being (DfES 2004). There is a focus on early intervention for those deemed ‘at risk’ of poor outcomes, in order to reduce the risk factors and promote protective factors and resilience (France and Utting 2005). This approach has been criticised for its focus on the individual child, suggesting that more could be done in building services that take children’s wider domains into account (family, school, community and neighbourhood) and so tackle the broader, more ecological and structural aspects of social exclusion (Evans and Pinnock 2007; Jack 2006), as well as for the dominant paradigm of technological interventions leading to desired outcomes (Moss 2007). Research into what helps to build resilience shows that small things can make a big difference, and attachments to others, including adults other than primary carers, can help through focusing an interest on the child and in providing potential turning points (Gilligan 2000).

The policy review on children and young people (HM Treasury and DfES 2007), a part of the Comprehensive Spending Review, announces a new emphasis on building resilience. Play can make a significant contribution to building resilience in children and young people, although not in any linear or certain fashion, as is shown in Chapter 3.



'...the place of play in social policy remains both peripheral and confused. There is no single coherent understanding of what is meant by play, and its place in national policy is subsumed within broader policies with no statutory duty attached.'

 Chapter 3



**The importance of play
in children's lives**

A wealth of research addresses the nature of play and its role in both development and well-being. The range of this research reflects just how heterogeneous playing is; indeed it may be this very diversity that is at the heart of understanding play (Sutton-Smith 1997; Burghardt 2005). Numerous claims have been made for the benefits of play, and many seek to explain play as the acquisition of the cognitive and social skills necessary to become a fully functioning adult: the 'instrumental' view of play outlined in Chapter 1 (Wyness 2006). Yet there may be little evidence to support these claims (Burghardt 2005), and increasing attention is given to considering the nature and value of play for the children's lives in the here and now (Pellegrini and others 2007; Burghardt 2005); what play may do is help children to be better children rather than help them prepare to be adults (Prout 2005).

Reframing development

To situate the research evidence it is necessary to reframe an understanding of development, to broaden the traditional perspective of linear and universal progression through normative stages and to appreciate that development is a lifelong process of interrelated interactions between genes, brain, body, personal relationships, communities, societies and the physical environment; development operates on an 'embodied mind embedded in the world' (Thompson and Varela 2001; Edelman 2006; Diamond 2007). This process contributes to the creation of unique, individual and continuously changing idiosyncratic patterns of relationships across these multiple levels of analysis.

Childhood is a period in which the organism is particularly sensitive and open to experiences through the ability of the brain/body systems to express an element of plasticity (Schoore 201; Lewis 2005; Bjorklund 2006). This plasticity enables these systems to be shaped by experience and this shaping also

provides an orientation to future experiences (Lewis 2005). Animals that can display and maintain a high degree of plasticity and behavioural flexibility can better adapt and respond to the pressures and challenges they encounter, and can change their behaviours in more adaptive ways than their less flexible peers (Bjorklund 2006). Research suggests that play performs a pivotal role in developing this behavioural flexibility and responsiveness to environments (Pellegrini and others 2007).

Reframing play

Drawing on research across a wide range of disciplines, it is suggested that play, as a distinct behavioural form, arises from brain-body motivations in response to external and internal stimuli. The act of playing has an impact on the architecture and organisation of the brain, and this leads to the emergence of more complex play forms, which in turn enables the establishment of an increasing repertoire of behavioural structures and strategies (Hughes 2006; Burghardt 2005; Bateson 2005; Panksepp 2007).

While other behaviours can influence adaptive systems, the unique design features of play offer the best way forward in developing flexible responses to the challenges faced by children in adapting to their complex physical and social environments (Bateson 2005; Pellegrini and others 2007). Play enables individuals to sample their environments and to try out a range of behaviours in a relatively low risk fashion. In play, children deliberately seek to place themselves in uncertain situations where they can improvise responses, drawing on conventional movements alongside novel actions in order to regain control and re-establish a sense of balance (Spinka and others 2001). This 'training for the unexpected' also applies to developing emotional flexibility through playing with the emotional aspect of being surprised or temporarily disorientated or unbalanced. Playing, because it is understood as behaviour that is not 'for real', provides a relatively safe context in which emotions can be expressed, exercised and modulated without incurring serious loss of control (Spinka and others 2001; Sutton-Smith 2003). Play appropriates stimuli, experiences, or objects, and distances them from their original meanings, creating a play frame ('as if' behaviour) that allows for greater freedom, interactivity, and creative possibilities (Gordon and Esbjorn-Hargens 2007). The benefit of play, relative to other strategies, is that the behaviours generated through playing can be more innovative and allow for further practice of newly developed behaviours (Pellegrini and others 2007).

The novelty and uncertainty generated in play has influence through a series of complex and reciprocal feedback loops that operate on the 'embodied mind embedded in the world'. Research suggests that the experience of playing stimulates novel neural and chemical reactions and interactions that enhance brain plasticity (Sutton-Smith 1997), develops links between motivation, emotion and reward systems, supports the vertical integration of brain regions, and refines coordination between perceptual, motor and thinking systems (Burghardt 2005; Spinka and others 2001). Thus, play may be a way of shaping the brain, maintaining plasticity and potential, and developing a positive emotional orientation and disposition that will enable more complex and flexible playful interaction with the environment. As Sutton-Smith (2003) suggests, what play does is to create a sense

that for the time of playing, life is worth living, and that motivates children to play more, creating further opportunities for these benefits to accrue.

Play and resilience

Resilience may be described as the ability to withstand or recover from environmental challenges and stress, to spring back from and successfully adapt to adversity (Rutter 2006). Studies note that this ability is a common phenomenon, or 'ordinary magic' (Masten 2001), associated with the operation of basic adaptive systems. Where these systems are in good working order and protected, development is likely to be robust. However, if they are subject to prolonged and severe environmental stress, the risk of developmental problems is increased (Masten 2001; Masten and Obradovic 2006). The evidence presented in the literature review suggests that play, as a unique behaviour, supports and enhances the development of this 'ordinary magic' through its operation across interrelated adaptive systems:

- **Emotion regulation** Play enhances the development of flexible and adaptive emotions. The design features of play – uncertainty, flexibility and 'as if' frames – enable children to develop repertoires for avoiding emotional over-reaction through a range of play strategies such as courage, bravery, resilience, and sociability (Sutton-Smith 2003; Spinka and others 2001; Gayler and Evans 2001; Panksepp 2007).
- **Pleasure and enjoyment and the promotion of positive feelings** Play, as an enjoyable experience, promotes positive affect, which in turn encourages further exploration, novelty and creativity (Panksepp 2007; Burghardt 2005; Meire 2007; Martin 2007).
- **Stress response systems** Play offers the opportunity to create and resolve uncertainty, not so much when placing oneself in jeopardy, but more in relation to feelings of excitement, courage and resilience in the face of imagined disaster (Spinka and others 2007; Sutton-Smith 2003). The moderate level of arousal or anxiety created in play may be beneficial by enabling enhancement of stress response systems and developing repertoires to respond in appropriate ways to

environmental stimuli (Sheets-Johnstone 2003; Flinn 2006; Burghardt 2005; Greenberg 2004; Siviy 1998).

- **Creativity** The key relationship between play and creativity exists in the flexibility of responses to novel and uncertain situations and the non-serious interpretation of a range of stimuli. Play supports adaptive variability rather than logical and narrow responses (Sutton-Smith 1997; Bateson 2005; Greenberg 2004; Russ 2004).
- **Learning** The primary benefits of play are found within the integration of motivation, emotion and reward systems rather than the higher cognitive aspects of brain development (Burghardt 2005). Through this integration, individuals are better able to co-ordinate their emotions, thoughts and actions into personally meaningful behaviours (Russ 2004; Bergen 2002).
- **Attachment to people and place** Play has a central role, from the first moments of life through to adulthood, in developing strong attachments (Panksepp 2001; Schore 2001; Decety and Jackson 2005). Forms of pretend play, role-play and rough and tumble play enable children to develop highly sophisticated attachment systems (Goodwin 2006; Freeman and Brown 2004; Pellis and Pellis 2007), particularly during the period of middle childhood when peer friendships take on more significance (Booth-Laforce and others 2005; Panksepp 2007; Mathur and Berndt 2006). Within their play cultures, children experiment with identity, exploring who they are or might be (Guss 2005; Corsaro 2003; De Castro 2004). Class, gender, disability, ethnicity and so on work in concert to influence the diverse ways in which children play or indeed are excluded from play (Punch 2003; Morrow 2006; Aydt and Corsaro 2003; Epstein and others 2001), but the act of playing offers a potentiality to transform these wider social forces into new ways of being and construct new identities (Guss 2005; Goodwin 2006; Jarvis 2007). This process also incorporates adaptation and transformation of tools and symbols (technology and language) into new cultural forms and expressions (Sorensen and others 2007; Valkenburg and others 2005; Huffaker and Calvert 2005; Goodwin 2006; Thomas 2004).

Just as children need strong social attachments, attachment to place may also be seen as a key adaptive system. The creation of a sense of place is vital not only to a sense of well-being but also to maintaining the quality and vitality of the environment (Derr 2002). Children's places are not simply a physical space, but places where they carry out everyday environmental transactions (Matthews and Tucker 2006). Children's play in their immediate neighbourhoods offers the potential to: wander through different spaces and create 'off-path' adventures (Cornell and others 2001); create their own special places away from adult gaze (Kylin 2003; Derr 2002); learn to care about their valued spaces, in particular natural spaces that offer high affordance for diverse play forms (Lester and Maudsley 2006; Bixler and others 2002; Wells and Leckies 2006); and add to the narratives and histories that add significance and meaning to place (Derr 2006).

Factors that impinge on playing

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It cannot always be guaranteed that playing will generate the benefits identified above, since playing is one element in a range of factors influencing children's health, development and well-being (Burghardt 2005). While play may enhance the adaptive systems that act in combination to build resilience, a complex range of internal (endogenous) and external (exogenous) factors may act in concert to destabilise these adaptive systems (Rutter 2006). The full research review considers the literature on play deprivation, Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) and Autism Spectrum Disorders within this context.

Where experiences are limited and threatening, the brain may develop adaptive neural connections that are likely to constrain flexibility and openness in both emotional and behavioural responses to situations (Lewis 2005). If play is beneficial, then it would follow that depriving children of the opportunity to play will have harmful effects on their well-being (Panksepp 2007; Bateson 2005). While play deprivation as a single variable may be difficult to verify, the inference that play takes place in a relaxed field (where the organisms feels relatively secure and free from stress) suggests that where there are environmental

threats and stressors, play behaviours will be reduced or terminated (Burghardt 2005; Pellegrini and others 2007; Siviy and others 2003). Where this is profound and prolonged, there will inevitably be an impact on adaptive systems (Masten 2001). Animal based research suggests that play/environmental deprivation results in increased fear and over-vigilance to novel situations and decreased ability to respond effectively to stressful situations (Pellis and Pellis 2007; Cui and others 2006). Long-term experience of stress will shape the mind/body to develop inappropriate reactions to social situations and, as such, early stress may have a cumulative influence on playfulness throughout development (Arnold and Siviy 2002).

Equally, animal research indicates that environmental enrichment (the provision of attractive stimuli in an environment) will increase play behaviours and thus enhance brain plasticity, reduce anxiety-like behaviour, promote physical activity and enhance immune systems (Cui and others 2006; Benaroya-Milshtein and others 2004). While the environments for children are highly complex, attention needs to be given to providing sufficient quality and quantity of 'good things' to support play and build resilience to stress and adversity (Vellacott 2007).

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Play and well-being

Current thinking about well-being has moved away from attempts to measure separate elements such as health and material wealth to considering the quality of relationships between body, mind and environment, including social networks (Almqvist and others 2006; Prilleltensky 2005). The evidence presented in the literature review would suggest that play operates across adaptive systems, enhancing and refining these systems and enabling children to adapt to their unique and complex environments. It represents the development of protective systems, not in a 'defensive' mode, but one that seeks to place children in better than neutral positions, that is, to enhance their current level of subjectively felt well-being.

Health

Physical health is intimately connected to mental health and vice versa, and both are also connected to features in the social and physical environment (Diamond 2007; BMA

2006). Physical activity supports children's health in a number of ways, including the development of motor skills and increased energy expenditure (Alton and others 2007; Ekeland and others 2005; Saakslähti and others 2004), and regular physical activity can help prevent chronic diseases (Warburton and others 2006). Physical activity relieves depression and anxiety by providing opportunities for social interaction, increased feelings of self-mastery, self-esteem and self-efficacy, and stress relief. Active and free play is a particularly effective form of physical activity (Batch 2005; Poulsen and Ziviani 2004).

Research suggests that the unique design features of play act across a range of health variables: play comprises short, intense



'While there is an assumption that play has a functional relationship to learning, a deeper and broader appreciation of the nature of play is often not fully explored.'

periods of activity which involve novel movements, thoughts and behaviours; play with uncertainty promotes moderate stress, which in turn supports high variable heart rates and the development of healthy stress response systems; and as a pleasurable experience, play becomes self-rewarding and builds motivation for more play experiences (Burdette and Whitaker 2005; Poulsen and Ziviani 2004).

Social capital

Social capital is a somewhat elusive and multifaceted concept that has become increasingly influential in framing social policy (Leonard 2005; Barnes and Prior 2007). A fundamental feature of social capital is the importance of social networks and trust in promoting a sense of belonging and well-being (Putnam 1995; Halpern 2005). The diverse research presented in this review suggests that play represents a biological, social and environmental resource that operates across basic adaptive systems and through this provides children with an opportunity to acquire valued 'social capital' and associated well-being. However, a number of studies express concerns over the ways this process is understood (and largely ignored) by adults (Fattore and others 2007; Leonard 2005; Morrow 2004).

Children's ability to actualise or 'mobilise' social capital through play is subject to highly complex and interrelated factors (Bassani 2007). Studies into children's social capital indicate that there is a range of practical, environmental and economic constraints that impact on children's ability to develop their social networks through playing out in their immediate neighbourhoods (Morrow 2004; Offer and Schneider 2007), an issue which is explored in more detail in Chapter 4.

Learning

While there is an assumption that play has a functional relationship to learning, a deeper and broader appreciation of the nature of play is often not fully explored (Lofdahl 2005). The interest of the educational field in the relationship between play and learning lies within a narrow instrumental approach through the design and management of playing experiences to meet clearly defined educational goals, often expressed through such phrases as learning-centred play and play-based learning (Farne 2005; Pramling Samuelsson and Johansson 2006). Such

approaches fail to recognise the inherent nature of play and thus diminish the potential that this form of behaviour may offer to support learning (Lofdahl 2005; Howard and others 2006). Several studies have questioned the limitations of adopting a narrow instrumental approach and highlight the importance of teachers being 'play literate' in order to optimise this process fully in the classroom (Targeton 2005; Lofdahl 2005).

Summary

A key theme that emerges from the review of research is that play is an emotional endeavour, and it is this that shapes the architecture of the brain. The unique design features of play (for example, control, uncertainty, flexibility, novelty, routine, adaptiveness, non-productivity) provide motivation and reward in a continuous cycle of mind/body engagement with the social and physical environment. The research suggests that this process enhances a range of basic adaptive systems necessary for developing resilience and well-being. From this perspective, we can see how play can make a significant contribution in broad, principled terms to the five outcomes of the Every Child Matters agenda: be healthy, stay safe, achieve and enjoy, make a positive contribution and achieve economic well-being (DfES 2004). However, this will not be through a linear cause-effect relationship, and the 'outcomes' of playing cannot be externally determined and measured. Indeed attempts to do so will inevitably frustrate the very qualities inherent in children's play. Such an understanding of play allows those responsible for creating places for play to move beyond a focus on the content of playing, as an indication of skills to be rehearsed for future adult life, towards an understanding of a more fundamental and emotional purpose for play.

The diagram and associated text on the following pages is an attempt to pull together key aspects of the research reviewed to show how the emotional experience of the process of playing can contribute to the five Every Child Matters outcomes. The relationship between playing and the five outcomes is depicted as a spider's web in order to emphasise the interrelationship between genes, brain, body and environment.

Play, the five outcomes and the big picture

Everything is interconnected

The evidence presented in *Play for a Change* shows the interconnectedness of environment, health, well-being and development. The emerging brain sciences make it clear just how far genes, brain, body and environment interact continually in a lifelong developmental process. The brain is complex, a vast network of actual and possible synaptic connections. The continual interaction of genes and environment determines the growth of new synapses and which synaptic connections become actualised, thereby determining the architecture of the brain.

Playing and adaptability

Playing, with its unique characteristics of unpredictability, novelty, flexibility, personal control, imagination and 'as if' potential, has an impact on gene expression, brain connectivity and brain chemistry, which in turn influence the

child's ability to adapt to, survive and thrive in her or his social and physical environments and to shape that environment. Although play can help to develop specific skills, its primary benefits are to do with emotions and motivation (Burghardt 2005), which underpin specific skills development and flexible behavioural responses as well as health and well-being.

Playing and resilience

In particular, play can help build resilience, the capacity for children to thrive despite adversity and stress in their lives. Key elements of resilience are the ability to regulate emotions, strong attachments and peer friendships, enjoyment and general positive and optimistic feelings, being able to cope with stress, being physically and mentally healthy. Play makes a fundamental contribution to all of these elements.



'...play can make a significant contribution in broad, principled terms to the five outcomes of the Every Child Matters agenda ...'



Play in this context is flexible, unpredictable, imaginative, peer/self-directed, 'as-if' behaviour

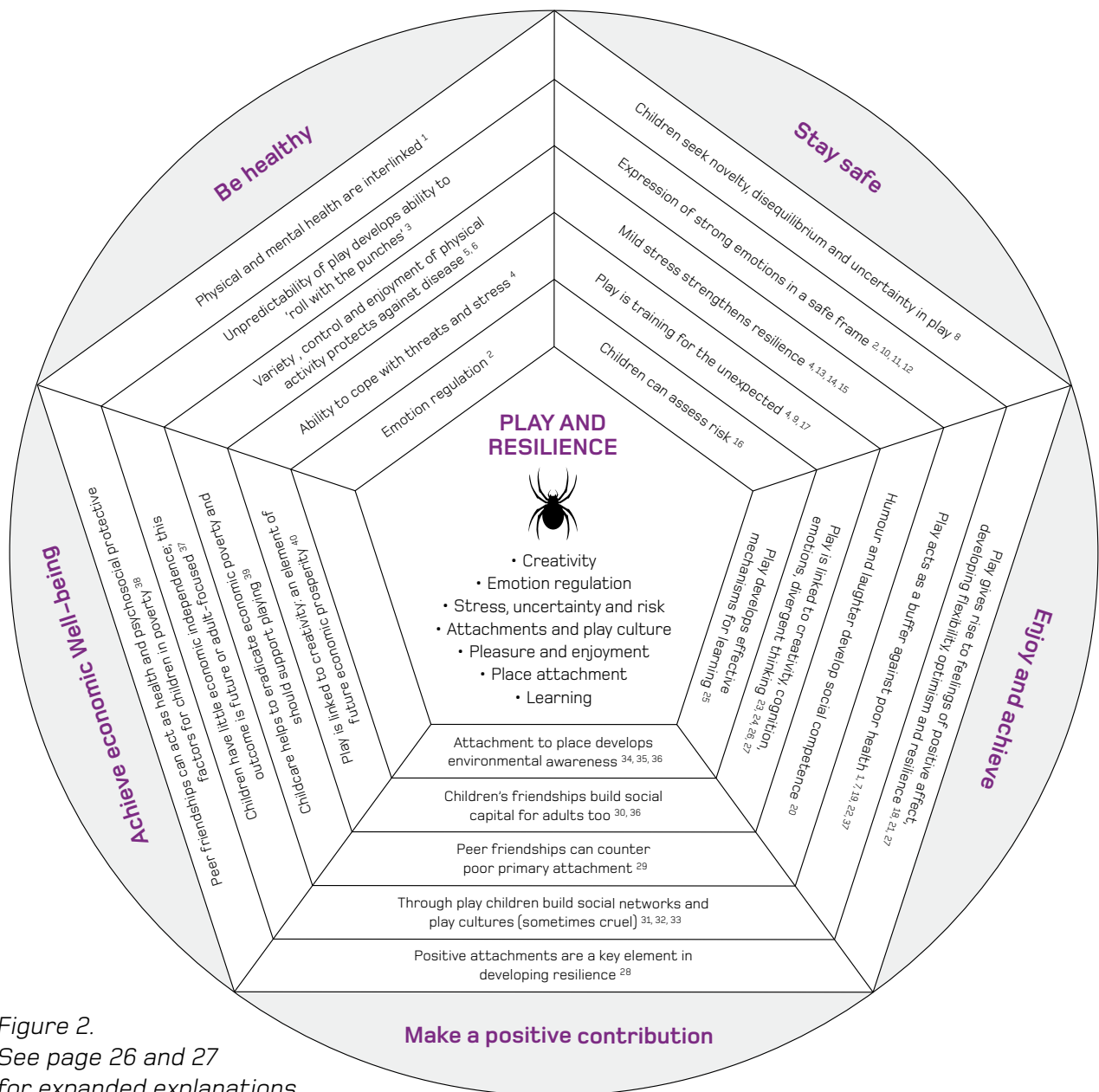


Figure 2.
See page 26 and 27
for expanded explanations.

Resilience and social policy

The policy review on children and young people (HM Treasury and DfES 2007), a part of the Comprehensive Spending Review, announces a new emphasis on building resilience, with a focus on three protective factors: high educational attainment, good social and emotional skills and positive parenting. The section on social and emotional skills highlights self-awareness, the ability to manage feelings, motivation and empathy. The evidence presented in *Play for a Change* shows how play is a highly effective mechanism for achieving this.

The spider's web diagram above shows the interrelationship between play, resilience,

social and emotional skills and the five outcomes, linking these to the resilience factors adapted from Masten and Obradovic (2006). Attempts at fitting the wide-ranging evidence generated from this review into discrete outcome boxes runs the risk of reducing this highly complex form of behaviour to simplistic linear and causal relationships, exactly the thing that current studies into the nature of resilience warn against (Rutter 2006). The key benefits of playing given here serve as an illustration of the complexity and interconnectivity of the relationship between play, well-being and the Every Child Matters outcomes.

1. Mental and physical health are interlinked.
2. Play provides a way of experiencing the primary emotions (anger, fear, sadness, happiness, disgust and shock) that are necessary for survival, at the same time keeping them in check through the rules and rituals of playing (Sutton-Smith 2003), thus helping to develop emotion regulation.
3. The unpredictability of play helps develop neural capacity to 'roll with the punches' of everyday social interactions (Siviy 1998).
4. Those who have not had exposure to novelty or the unexpected through play may pay more attention to potential threats and become more stressed by these threats (Fox and others 2007).
5. The enjoyment, challenge and self-direction of playing, as well as the range of motor actions, are more effective than externally directed exercise regimes that may be boring or stressful (Poulsen and Ziviani 2004).
6. Regular physical playing helps prevent chronic diseases (Alton and others 2007) and relieves depression and anxiety (Garcia and Baltodano 2005).
7. Enriched natural environments, strong social networks and enjoyment create the best opportunity for play and physical health (Burdette and Whitaker 2005).
8. Children seek novelty, disequilibrium and risk in their play (Spinka and others 2001; Kalliala 2006).
9. Play is 'training for the unexpected', both physical and emotional (Spinka and others 2001).
10. Play allows for the expression and experience of strong emotions within the safe frame (Sutton-Smith 2003).
11. Rough and tumble play is 'a sane and safe way of putting our vulnerabilities on the line' (Sheets-Johnstone 2003).
12. Risk-taking in play offers a way of being 'in control of being out of control and so enjoy a sense of both risk and mastery simultaneously' (Gordon and Esbjorn-Hargens 2007).
13. Mild stress is beneficial in terms of creating a variable heart rate (Yun and others 2005) and developing resilience (Rutter 2006).
14. Beneficial mild stress strengthens integration between emotional and executive functions in the brain (Panksepp 2001).
15. Play allows us to 'roll with the punches' associated with daily social interactions (Siviy 1998).
16. Children are capable of assessing risk (Levin and Hart 2003).
17. There is evidence that parents have become increasingly restrictive when it comes to unsupervised play and independent mobility. There is growing concern that there might be long-term costs to a generation of children that have had less opportunity to experience the world, make mistakes and learn from these experiences (CAPT 2002).
18. The enjoyment of playing leads to 'positive affect' (feeling good) and this has benefits for flexible thinking and problem solving, mastery and optimism and enhances performance (Isen and Reeve 2006; Pressman and Cohen 2005).
19. Positive emotions can be a buffer against maladaptive health outcomes (Tugade and others 2004).
20. Humour and laughter help develop social competence (Loizou 2005).
21. The enjoyment of playing promotes flexible thinking and facilitates the acquisition of personal resources that can be drawn on in times of need (Frederickson 2006).
22. Positive emotions generate psychological resources by promoting resilience, endurance and optimism (Salovey and others 2000).
23. Young children who are successful at playing with peers also show greater cognitive, social and physical abilities than those who are less skilled at playing (Fantuzzo and others 2004).
24. There is a positive relationship between cognitive skills and high quality play (Gmitrova and Gmitrov 2004).

25. Play helps to develop effective mechanisms for learning rather than specific learning (Burghardt 2005).
26. Pretend play engages many areas of the brain because it involves emotion, cognition, language and sensorimotor actions (Bergen 2002).
27. Play, particularly pretend play, is linked to creativity in the sense that it involves divergent thinking, symbol substitution, positive affect, problem solving skills and emotion regulation (Russ 2004).
28. Positive attachments are a key element in developing resilience, and begin with the primary carer but also develop through wider social networks as children grow (Hofer 2006).
29. Positive peer friendships may compensate for poor early attachment (Booth-Laforce and others 2005).
30. Children's friendships build social capital for both children and adults (Weller 2007).
31. Pretend play, role play and rough and tumble play enable children to develop sophisticated attachments with peers (Andresen 2005; Freeman and Brown 2004; Reed 2005).
32. Through peer play children make positive contributions to their own social networks and to the development of play cultures (Corsaro 2003).
33. Play culture can be cruel (Hughes 2006) and can also evoke adult disapproval (Kalliala 2006; Ross 2004).
34. Children's outdoor play helps to build attachments to place; playing in the natural environment helps develop environmental awareness (Lester and Maudsley 2006).
35. Children and young people can make a positive contribution to the design, building and maintenance of public spaces (CABE Space 2004; Brothwell 2006).
36. Children's play within their local communities enables children and young people to develop relationships with adults who are beyond the family and live in their neighbourhood. These forms of neighbourhood relations establish a strong sense of community and less fear of crime and, in turn, these later variables consequently reduce feelings of loneliness during adolescence (Prezza and Pacilli 2007).
37. As children have little economic independence, this outcome relates either to the current drive to eradicate child poverty, or to children's potential place in the employment market as adults.
38. Children's peer friendships can act as health and psychosocial protection factors for children living in poverty (Attree 2004).
39. The growth in out of school childcare is a key element of the government's drive to eradicate child poverty; however, children's ability to engage in free play varies across provision (Barker and others 2003).
40. Creativity is seen as an important element of education for future economic prosperity (NACCCE 1999); play is an important contributor to creativity (Russ 2004).

 Chapter 4

Children's play patterns



Children's lives are complex, unique and situated in specific and diverse locations (O'Brien and others 2000, Spencer and Blades 2006). Their social transactions occur in the home, school, playground, street, shopping areas, natural spaces and all the places in-between. Also children are increasingly developing virtual spaces and online identities through the use of media technology (Valkenburg and others 2005). Children's spatial patterns will also be a reflection of a web of factors including gender, ethnicity, family culture, and local and global factors as well as local place characteristics.

A number of studies have attempted to discover children's own experiences of space and place (for example, Roe 2006; Armitage 2004; Burke 2005; Thompson and Philo 2004). Such studies, along with the development of a range of research tools to enhance understanding of children's 'ways of seeing' (Burke 2005), have produced detailed descriptions of the things children actually do and what they find of particular value in their immediate environments. Collectively, these studies provide evidence of the ways in which children use both formal (adult planned spaces designed for children) and informal sites (spaces not specifically sanctioned by adult authority) in their daily play experiences. A common theme that emerges from this research is that these informal spaces are often the most attractive to children.

Playing out

Numerous studies have explored the ways in which children access and use their local environments for playing. The general impression from these is that children's daily transactions with their local environment involve a 'chaotic multitude of places, items and persons' (Rasmussen and Smidt 2003: 89). Studies repeatedly highlight the value of natural space for children's play, the importance of diverse landscape elements and opportunities, natural materials and varied topographical features (Roe 2006; Fjortoft 2004; Burke 2005). Observations of children's playful use of their

local spaces often reveal a tension between what has been designed by adults and children's actual use and appropriation of public space (Rasmussen 2004; Thompson and Philo 2004). Children are rarely allowed to take possession of visible public space, and tend to find space around the edges and transitional spaces between landscaped areas and overgrown sites (Armitage 2004; Elsley 2004). These spaces often represent 'children's places', sites found close to where they live and which can only be defined by children themselves, in contrast to 'places for children', the places specifically designed by adults for use by children (Rasmussen 2004). Yet to adults such spaces

often appear to be sites of 'disorder, mess, destruction and prohibited behaviour', often incurring parental disapproval (Rasmussen 2004; Percy-Smith 2002; Cloke and Jones 2005).

Studies highlight the value children place on being with friends, having fun, messing about, playing sport and doing something different (Percy-Smith 2002; Thompson and Philo 2004; Chawla 2002) as well as their use of designated play spaces designed by adults in ways that often contravened adult intended use and, as such, become a focus for further tension (Elsley 2004). While children value local parks and play places, they are critical of the poor condition of many of these spaces and the inappropriateness of the equipment and its ability to support their changing needs (Warpole 2003).

These studies suggest that children play everywhere, and children need access to a diversity of spaces to support their everyday play. Understanding children's play patterns can help adults appreciate how best to design spaces to support children's play, or indeed to acknowledge the existence of such patterns and do little other than protect children's right to participate within their local environments. In this way, an understanding of children's preferences would lead to a radical redesign of public spaces to ensure that children have access to them and are accepted as children in them (Blinkert 2004).

Playing at home

The home has become an increasingly significant element of the landscapes of children's play (Valentine 2004; Percy-Smith 2002; Karsten and van Vliet 2006). Widespread concern over the safety of children in the outdoors (see later in this section) has meant that the spatial independence of children has become increasingly restricted (Hillman 2006). In addition, children themselves see the home site as a place of safety and security and will often prefer this to the perceived risks presented by the outdoors (Harden 2000). However, it should be recognised that this is certainly not a universal pattern; for some children, their place of residence may be a place of fear and violence, while for others, increasing time spent indoors may lead to increasing tension with parents over the use of space (Manzo 2003).

There is limited research into children's play patterns in the home largely arising from the perception of this space as 'private' and not available to external enquiry. With the apparent shift from outdoors to indoors, the home provides children with a variety of resources for their own (often unsupervised) use, both alone and with friends. However, this does not necessarily imply that children have independent control over this space (Nilsen and Rogers 2005).

'Understanding children's play patterns can help adults appreciate how best to design spaces and support children's play ...'



Research suggests that the bedroom is particularly important in the home as a space children come to appropriate and claim as their 'own', especially as children get older (Mayhew and others 2004). Traditionally, boys have been allowed into public spaces while the bedroom offers girls a separate cultural space. With the apparent reduction in access to public spaces and the increasing proliferation of modern technologies, the bedroom culture is being transformed into a 'digital bedroom' – a private space for children's cyber play – which engages both boys and girls in an attractive virtual space where children can express and experiment with their identity (Mitchell and Reid-Walsh 2002; Kearney 2007).

Children and young people's use of media technologies represents complex and multiple contradictions for adults. On the one hand adults value their children being 'safe' indoors, yet at the same time there are anxieties and tensions about what children actually get up to (Crowe and Bradford 2006). Much of the research into children's media use is criticised for adopting highly generalised approaches and failing to take into account the specific social, economic and cultural context for use of these technologies by children.

The contradictions and confusions are compounded by conflicting results from studies into the harm or benefits of playing games (Buckingham 2000). There are increasing concerns and 'moral panics' about the health risks associated with watching television and games playing (Gentile and others 2004). Many studies highlight the harmful impact of playing violent computer games, citing increased levels of violence and aggression and decreased academic and positive social behaviour. Similarly, video game playing and watching television are implicated in children's increasing sedentary lifestyles and associated health problems (Clements 2004; Jordan and others 2006).

However, other studies would suggest exactly the opposite: new technologies enable children and young people to establish strong peer communities and become rich social events in their daily lives (Scott and Hodgetts 2006).

Constraints on children's play

While children will play anywhere, the contemporary environment may have a significant impact on children's ability to find time and places to play, although again it should be emphasised that this is not a universal pattern. A number of studies (Morrow 2004; Thomas and Hocking 2003; Unicef 2007) suggest serious questions are being raised about children's quality of relationships to their local environments across the following interrelated factors:

Environmental stress

There is a cumulative effect of poor environments for children living in poverty. Family stresses, housing conditions and poorer social networks do not support play (Evans 2004). Increasingly, research also suggests that environmental neurotoxicants (such as lead, mercury and cadmium) have a harmful impact on social and cognitive development, including play behaviours. Exposure to such toxicants is higher for children living in poorer neighbourhoods (Hubbs-Tait 2005).

The culture of fear and risk aversion

Compared with their parents, and even more so to their grandparents, children's lives today are much more circumscribed (Hillman 2006). There is evidence that parents are increasingly restrictive when it comes to children's independent outdoor play and transport to and from school (CAPT 2002). Gill (2007b) suggests that 'bubble-wrapping' children has a detrimental impact on their health and development and that there is a need to move from a philosophy of protection towards a philosophy of resilience. While many adults have positive memories of playing out and recognise the value of this for their children, the combination of societal fear and an overwhelming sense of parental responsibility creates a 'parent paradox' (Clements 2004). Parents actively attempt to balance these competing sets of cultural orientations regarding the health and well-being of their children (Jenkins 2006). Equally children adopt a wide range of strategies to reassure parents of their competence to negotiate their immediate environments independently (Valentine 2004; Backett-Milburn and Harden 2004).



‘Children place great emphasis on their ability to play out with their friends in their immediate local neighbourhoods ...’

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Children in the public realm

Children are excluded from full participation in activities and spaces both through the legal frameworks and the everyday practices that reinforce the natural authority of adults (Vanderbeck and Dunkley 2003). Research indicates that children’s opportunity to range independently has considerably diminished (Kytta 2004; Karsten and van Vliet 2006; Spilsbury 2005; Hillman 2006; Veitch and others 2006). Restricting children’s independent mobility has an adverse effect on the development of spatial skills and limits the opportunity to become familiar with their local environment and so develop connections with it (Rissotto and Giuliani 2006). In addition, research also suggests that the more children are confined to their homes, the less opportunity they have to access community social resources and establish strong friendships and a sense of community (Prezza and Pacilli 2007). A number of research studies suggest that restricting children’s mobility also has a harmful impact on children’s health (Mackett and Paskins 2004; Alton and others 2007).

Children in rural areas

While most of the research into children’s use of their local environments focuses on urban areas, there are equally worrying trends in rural areas. Recent research into the lives of children living in rural areas has questioned much of the traditional perspective of the countryside as a ‘rural idyll’ (Matthews and Tucker 2006; Giddings and Yarwood 2005). Rural children appear to be subject to the same pressures as urban children, and studies highlight the constant struggles of children and young people to achieve the rural dream (Matthews and Tucker 2006).

Institutionalisation of childhood

In response to adult concerns over children’s safety in the outdoors, there is an increasing trend to structure the free time of children (Christensen 2002). Children are spending more time in special ‘places for children’ with professional adults, and less time in ‘children’s places’ of their own making and choosing (Rasmussen 2004; Tillberg Mattsson 2002; Zeiher 2003). This decreases children’s self-directed time and leads to adult censorship of children’s behaviours (Rasmussen and Smidt 2003).

The temporal regulation of children's lives and children's lessening ability to have a say over their use of time is a matter of concern for children. 'Everyday' time for children is busy, and children's own use of time is threatened by the many plans and commitments made on their behalf by others (Christensen 2002). Studies from the US question the impact of 'over-scheduling' on children and young people's well-being, noting that the greater the amount of time that students reported participating in activities, the higher the self-reported levels of anxiety (Melman and others 2007).

Conflicting space use

Several studies discuss the conflict between children's and adults' value of space, noting that adults' desire for safety, order and visibility contrasts with children's desire for disorder, cover, loose materials and so on (Rasmussen 2004; Thompson and Philo 2004; Ross 2004). This also extends into the design of children's play spaces, and a number of studies highlight the mismatch between an adult construct of children's play spaces and what children value and prefer to do in their own time (Rasmussen 2004; Hart 2002; Warpole 2003; Armitage 2004; Frost 2006).

School playgrounds

It is generally acknowledged that the school playground offers a valuable space and time for children's play (Pellegrini and others 2004). However, there are increasing concerns over the reduction of time allocated to play within the school day and increasing adult prescriptions about children's use of these spaces (Armitage 2005; Thompson 2005; Rasmussen 2004).

Summary

Children's subjective expressions of happiness and well-being include feelings that they have strong and valued roles within the local community, a sense of connectedness, space to play and meet with friends, and an interesting and vibrant street life (Chawla 2002). These social advantages appear to outweigh standard economic indicators (although children's ability to achieve their desired states of well-being will be influenced by socio-economic forces). Currently, children are often restricted or excluded from public space and placed in 'caretaking' spaces of home and 'professional' institutions.

While current social policy is targeted towards the reduction of child poverty, this may not be sufficient to remove children from the poverty of not being able to access their immediate local environments and actualise the affordances that these spaces offer (Woolley 2006). Children place great emphasis on their ability to play out with their friends in their immediate local neighbourhoods; failure to support this will impact on children's subjective assessment of well-being.

The evidence presented at this stage of the review clearly suggests the need for a paradigm shift in the design of children-friendly spaces, from a narrow development of purpose-built places for children (usually single purpose) to a much wider appreciation of children as members of a local community and a recognition of their needs for a wide range of spaces; from 'lightly structured space for children's outdoor, unsupervised play, to the more structured institutions encountered by children in their daily lives' (Moss and Petrie 2002: 177).

 Chapter 5



**From policy and
theory into practice:
provision for play**

Gathering the evidence: evaluation of play provision

This section reviews the literature pertaining to public provision for children's play. It focuses on nationally published literature whilst recognising that this does not take account of examples of local practice. There is a lack of peer-reviewed literature on public provision for play.

The government emphasises the importance of evidence-based and outcomes focused policy and doing 'what works' (Cabinet Office 1999; Bullock and others 2001). In terms of children and play, it is difficult to assess the effectiveness or impact of provision because of the lack of longitudinal data and the difficulties of attributing change to a particular intervention. Both research and evaluation are influenced by cultural and political context; objectivity and certainty are therefore not possible (Robson 2002; Taylor and Balloch 2005).

The nationally published literature on evaluation which includes play provision is limited to national programmes such as Sure Start, Children's Fund, New Deal for Communities, Positive Activities for Young People and the lottery-funded Better Play programme. Within this, understandings of play, and therefore the impact of play provision, vary (Mayall and Hood 2001; Powell and Wellard 2007): projects that focus on government programmes for children tend to use an instrumental understanding of play (that it contributes directly towards learning, development or crime reduction for example) and those that focus on communities, public space and regeneration tend more towards an understanding of the intrinsic value of play (that it has a value in its own right). The evaluation of the Better Play Programme drew on the Best Play objectives (NPFA and others 2000) and therefore explicitly addressed the quality of play opportunities. There is little reference to the role of play in developing resilience and protective factors, even though this is at the core of much public policy relating to children and young people, and is particularly highlighted in the policy review on children and young people (HM Treasury and the DfES 2007), a part of the Comprehensive Spending Review, which announces a new emphasis on building resilience.

Planning for play

A lack of planning for play within local authorities was highlighted as an issue in *Making the Case for Play* (Cole-Hamilton and Gill 2002), although the introduction of the Every Child Matters programme, Children and Young People's Plans, the inclusion of play into Local Area Agreements, and particularly the need for a play strategy in order to access the Big Lottery Fund's funding for children's play have all helped to change this (PlayToday 2007; CPIS 2007). The Children's Play Information Service (CPIS 2007: 2) announced that at the launch of the Big Lottery Fund's Children's Play programme, less than a hundred local authorities had a play strategy, whereas by October 2007, nearly all 355 had one. Surveys of Children and Young People's Plans (Payne and others 2006; Powell and Wellard 2007) show variation in the extent to which play is included, and also in understandings of the nature and purpose of play and play services. Play is often included as an aspirational aim but features less often in clear measurements and targets. Often play is understood as being structured and supervised activities. There is a need for local authorities to take a wide and flexible view of providing for play, and to avoid seeing it purely as playgrounds and supervised activity provision (PLAYLINK 2002). Indeed, children's preferences for playing in ways and places that perhaps incur adult disapproval, raises particular challenges for planning for play (Kylin 2003; Thompson and Philo 2004), and it may on occasion be more a question of attitude than design (Blinkert 2004). Gill (2007b: 82) recognises that 'opening up the public realm for children requires strong leadership and a willingness to overcome other imperatives and confront powerful opposing interests'. The timing and scope of the review has not allowed for a survey of play strategies.

Audits and assessment of need

Local authorities are required to carry out audits and assessments of need in their planning for play (DfES 2005a; Children's Play Council 2006b; Phillips 2006). Ways to measure the quality of spaces have been developed (Children's Play Council 2006a; CABE Space 2007), but this is not without its challenges, as the quality of a space as 'playable' is subjective and contextually dependent (PLAYLINK 2007). Research into children and young people's views on their environments

shows that children and young people are often positive about their local environments and have strong views about how to improve them (CABE Space 2004; Camina 2004; Elsley 2004; Armstrong and other 2005). More places to play, both supervised and unsupervised, and feeling safe to play in their neighbourhoods, were consistent requests. However, such requests often took low priority in regeneration schemes (Camina 2004).

Participation and consultation

The principle of children and young people's participation is embedded in social policy (United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child 1989; Children and Young People's Unit 2001; Wade and Badham 2001; Kirby and others 2003; DfES 2005a). Authentic and effective participation can bring a number of benefits, including developing self-confidence and a sense of citizenship and inclusion for children and young people, building positive intergenerational relationships and challenging of stereotypes (Kirby and others 2003; Davies 2006). However, research also shows that children and young people's requests for improved places to play and things to do often take a low priority, resulting in delays in changes (DTGR 2002; Chawla and Malone 2003; Camina 2004; Elsley 2004). Adult attitudes towards children play a part in this: adults often do not consider children as competent to make useful contributions, seeing them as dependent on adults to make the best decisions about their lives (Jans 2004; Cockburn 2005).

Participation is often interpreted as playing a part in democratic processes such as children's committees, schools councils and youth parliaments. There is a tendency for these to be tokenistic and unrepresentative (Badham 2004; Cockburn 2005; Clark and Percy-Smith 2006). Despite this, those involved feel they are worthwhile but more attention needs to be given to the processes of participation and the level of involvement from children and young people (Middleton 2006).

Rather than seeing participation as replicating adult democratic systems, alternatives could be to differentiate between child participation and child perspectives (Skivenes and Strandbu 2006); or for children to participate in playful and meaning-making ways (Jans 2004). When consulting children about play, a number of potential obstacles can be drawn from the

literature: our tendency to try to apply adult rationality as the benchmark of assessing competence (Archard 2004); our desire to maintain our power as adults (Badham 2004); the confusion of a civic engagement agenda with one of authentic participation (Badham 2004; Jans 2004); our lack of understanding of what children are saying because we are hearing it through adult ears (Skivenes and Strandbu 2006).

A number of playful and child-centred ways of facilitating children's participation through understanding the child's perspective have been developed including games, model-making, and visual representations of environments using photographs, pictures and maps (Clark and Moss 2004; Burke 2005; Wood and Korndorfer 2005). However, adults, especially playworkers, still need to guard against 'adulterating' children's play with adult agendas of fixed outputs, targets and timescales (MacIntyre 2007).

Providing opportunities for play

Children play anywhere and everywhere, and public provision for children to play ranges from removing barriers to playing in public spaces, to supporting play in children's services such as schools and hospitals, through to unsupervised and supervised dedicated play settings.

(Largely) unsupervised places for play

The street used to be the main place where children played, and although children do still play in the street, this has declined due to the increase in traffic, parked cars and adult fears. Home zones, developed from a Dutch model, aim to return priority to social use rather than cars through the design of streetspace. Generally, research shows that the benefits of home zones include stronger communities and increased social activity, more children playing, more satisfaction with the local neighbourhood and greater safety. However, they are very expensive, take a very long time to develop, and do not suit all people (Biddulph 2001; DfT 2005; Gill 2007a). Cheaper and simpler alternatives are being explored through Sustrans' DIY Streets initiative. Children from poorer families are four times more likely to be injured or killed on the roads than their better-off peers; those from more well-off families tend to

travel more in cars and be more cut off from and fearful of their neighbourhoods (Grayling and others 2002; Appleyard 2005; Alton and others 2007; DfT 2007). Cutting traffic speeds reduces child pedestrian accidents by 70 per cent (Grayling and others 2002) and encourages children to play out more, giving them naturally arising opportunities for physical activity (Whewy 2007).

Much of the evaluation literature on play areas is concerned with the process of making improvements through neighbourhood initiatives. There is little follow-up on the use of areas following improvements. Neighbourhood projects such as New Deal for Communities and the *Neighbourhood Play Toolkit* (Children's Play Council 2006), have helped to bring needed improvements to local play areas. Participation does not necessarily lead to a greater sense of ownership, although in some projects there was a reported sense of greater community cohesion (Barraclough and others 2004; Kapasi 2006). Involving young people in the design of youth spaces and parks was found to have a number of benefits, including engagement, shared creativity, greater understanding between generations, more effective design of space, plus increased confidence and other transferable skills (CABE Space 2004; Brothwell 2006).

There is a growth in projects that support children's play in the natural environment, and evaluations of these show benefits for children in terms of personal development, well-being and connection to the environment. Projects vary in their aims and their approach, with some having a focus on environmental education, some offering structured activities and others supporting more free play. A number of national environmental organisations support projects and research aimed at encouraging children to use the natural environment (Milligan and Bingley 2004; Maudsley 2005; Murray and O'Brien 2005; Gill 2006; Ward Thompson and others 2006).

There is also a growth in detached playwork projects such as play rangers, where teams of playworkers run play sessions in parks and other public spaces. Children have said that they are not allowed to play in parks or that they are worried about bullying; play rangers can help make public space safer and more attractive for playing (Follett 2007; Rees-Jones 2007).

Those responsible for public provision for play need to recognise children's desire and need to play anywhere and with everything and think beyond 'places for children' to 'children's places' (Rasmussen 2004).

Supervised play and playwork

Some 132,730 people are employed in the playwork sector in the UK. The role of the playworker is generally accepted as facilitating play for children and young people aged four to 16 years in their out of school time (SkillsActive 2006a). What this means in practice is the subject of some debate. The underpinning principle is that play that is freely chosen, intrinsically motivated and personally directed is essential to children's well-being and healthy development. Given this, the role of the playworker is one of creating a physical and social/emotional environment where children can play freely rather than organising and directing activities aimed at particular ends. This creates a number of tensions for playworkers, who may be pulled towards direction, control and intervention, either to meet specific instrumental policy or funding aims or because of their own emotional responses to children's play. Playwork itself is fundamentally an intervention (Conway 2003), and has been justified as compensatory: opportunities for free play in the general environment are so restricted as to present a threat to children's health, well-being and development, and sensitive playwork can help compensate for this lack (Hughes 2001; Brown 2003).

There is a growing body of literature on theories of playwork, including:

- Brown's (2003) concept of compound flexibility, in which the flexibility of the play environment enables play and experimentation, which increases the possibilities of the play environment, and so on in a developmental spiral.
- Hughes' (2001) evolutionary playwork approach, which emphasises the evolutionary and biological bases for playing and argues that playwork should work to support children's freely chosen and personally directed play rather than imposing socialisation or other adult agendas.
- Sturrock and Else's (1998; 2005) therapeutic playwork, which draws on psychoanalysis to suggest that playing can itself be a

healing process and that playworkers should therefore support children's own play expressions and be alert to the emotional impact this has on them as playworkers.

To date, little of this has been used to develop an evidence base for playwork; although small-scale personal accounts are beginning to emerge (Head 2001; Russell 2006; Smith and Willans 2007), there is a need for more rigorous research into playwork practice and its relationship to theory. Evaluations of the lottery-funded Better Play programme (Creegan and others 2004; Youlden and Harrison 2006) sought to evaluate projects against the seven objectives outlined in *Best Play* (NPFA and others 2000), and although projects were broadly deemed to have met these objectives, there was some variation in interpretation. For example, not all the projects worked to a definition of play as being freely chosen, personally directed and intrinsically motivated; in some projects freedom of choice was understood as choice between activities rather than self direction. In the projects where activities were mainly adult-led, the children enjoyed themselves, but in the projects where children's play was freely chosen, the children were more effectively supported in developing independence and the children themselves felt respected and valued. In an evaluation of adventure playgrounds in south London, playworkers described their role as 'making sure they created a safe environment with stimulating activities' (Franklin 2002: 32). Yet the meanings of the words 'safe' and 'activity' are contextually specific here, and there is recognition that activities can include 'hanging out' and spontaneous play, and safety is constructed as the need to balance the importance of risk-taking and preventing serious harm.

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Children themselves have said that the most important factors in a play setting are 'freedom, choice and control over what they chose to do, space to do their own thing and access to the outdoors, a variety of toys, equipment, trips and things to do, friendships with other children and their relationships with staff' (Manwaring 2006: 6).

Out of school childcare

The unprecedented growth in out of school childcare over the last 15 years (Barker and others 2003) has taken place alongside a reduction in open access play provision (Head and Melville 2001; Hallsworth and Sutton 2004; Play England 2006). A recent survey of the playwork workforce found that most respondents worked in settings 'either based on school premises or connected with schools in some way' (SkillsActive 2006b: 12). The nature of the relationship between the school and the out of school club determines how far the club reflects the ethos and norms of the school or how far a more playwork-oriented approach can be implemented. Generally speaking, children's use of time and space is determined by staff, although children found ways of contesting this and creating spaces where they could determine their own play (Smith and Barker 2000; Barker and others 2003). The research on children's own views on out of school care consistently shows that they value being able to socialise with friends and having control and direction over their own playing, they want to be able to play outside, they want staff that are caring, friendly, helpful and playful, and they want to be treated with respect and to have a say about how the club is run (Mooney and Blackburn 2003).

'Concerns have been expressed for some time now regarding the tendency of schools to reduce children's time for free play in school playgrounds ...'



Play in schools

Childcare is part of the core offer of the government's extended schools programme and the importance of children being able to play in these services is explicitly acknowledged, as is the importance of working with the play sector (DfES 2005; Ofsted 2006). However, concerns have been expressed that the extended schools agenda has too heavy an educational focus, and that there is a need to make extended schools services culturally distinct from school in order to attract those who are alienated from mainstream school culture (Barnardo's 2006).

Concerns have been expressed for some time now regarding the tendency of schools to reduce children's time for free play in school playgrounds, with one estimate that play and lunchtimes in primary schools in England and Wales have been reduced by as much as a half since 1971 (Armitage 2005). The opportunity for free, active play (as distinct from physical education programmes) at break times has benefits both for children's health and also for children to return to work with renewed attention and capacity for cognitive work (Scott and Panksepp 2003; Pellegrini and Bohn 2005; Holmes and others 2006). One international study found that Finnish schools ranked best based on students' test performance, and that among several distinctive features of these schools is the requirement of a 15-minute recess every hour with opportunities to play (Alvarez 2005).

School staff have seen playtime as problematic, because of a perceived reduction in traditional playground games and a corresponding increase in aggression and bullying. A number of studies show that children do still play contemporary versions of traditional games (Bishop and Curtis 2001; Armitage 2005), and that perhaps adults' perceptions of aggression may be due to a misreading of rough and tumble play, particularly play fighting. Research has shown that play fighting is more about social bonding between friends and not about aggression (Smith and others 2002). Adults tend to control the use of playground space, through prescribing (particular areas are reserved for particular activities), proscribing (some areas are out of bounds) or privileging (special areas are used on special occasions) their use. Although these rules are sometimes

imposed arbitrarily by adults, children are aware of them and will both police each other to ensure their observance and also at times find creative or direct ways of flouting them (Thomson 2005).

There is a renewed interest in school playgrounds, brought about through a number of initiatives including the Growing Schools programme, the government's Learning Outside the Classroom and extended schools agendas and the Building Schools for the Future programme (DfES 2006a; 2006b; 2006c). A number of projects have been working on the design of playgrounds and other interventions that offer a range of opportunities, encourage participation and reduce behavioural problems, particularly bullying (Visser and Greenwood 2005; Learning through Landscapes 2006; Play Board 2007). In addition, research has shown that the design of playgrounds using zoning of areas can significantly increase rates of physical activity, although after six months, levels had fallen again (Ridgers and others 2005; Ridgers 2007). However, redesigning playgrounds without any real knowledge of how children use them runs the risk of destroying some of the special places and props that children have used in their play over many years (Factor 2004; Armitage 2005).

Play in early years settings

As with play in the primary school classroom, there is a lack of a coherent and well-defined understanding of play in terms of its place within early years practice. Despite the prominence given to play, particularly within the Early Years Foundation Stage, there is a discrepancy between the ideology of the importance of play in the early years and actual practice, which is constrained by an emphasis on curriculum, attainment targets and testing (Adams and others 2004; Rogers 2005; Santer and others 2007). The debate between a play-based approach to learning and a more teacher-directed approach is lively (for example, Broadhead 2001; Farne 2005; Walsh and others 2006; Santer and others 2007), yet there is a suggestion that play and learning need not be seen as separate, and that teachers can use playful interactions to encourage specific learning (Pramling Samuelsson and Johansen 2006). Much of this involves creating the time and space and rich resources for exploration and playful engagement, showing through playful

interactions that children's play is valued, having the confidence to let play develop, and recognising that children are competent to do this (Abbott and Nutbrown 2001; Howards and others 2002; David 2003; Pramling Samuelsson and Johanssen 2006).

The evaluation of the quality of early learning, play and childcare services in Sure Start local programmes notes that 'early childhood services are dominated by professional, white, middle class constructs of play'. Parents' play with their children reflects the norms of the home culture, and some parents view playing as recreational and may not subscribe to the educational value of play. This raises particular issues for working with parents within Sure Start local programmes, and there is a paucity of previous research into these interrelationships which might inform any evaluation (Anning and others 2005).

Play provision for all children: a closer look at particular groups and particular circumstances

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Whilst broad generalisations can be made about the benefits of play and about childhood, public provision for play needs to pay particular attention to specific groups of children and those living in specific circumstances. Childhood is not a singular, universal phenomenon experienced in the same way by all children. Age is only one mode of diversity or social division. Children are also boys or girls, they belong to a vast range of cultural and ethnic groups, they are born into a particular social class and lifestyle, they may or may not be disabled in a variety of ways, and they may be living in particular circumstances that affect their health and well-being. None of these categories is either singly or statically experienced by children and, although some generalisation can be made, children's own experiences of these social categories vary according to context (Morrow and Connolly 2006). The very act of categorising in this manner runs the risk of generalising and stereotyping.

The difficulty for those involved in working with children and young people is in recognising just how complex and diverse these categories can be, to recognise the importance of children's own experiences of them and to acknowledge

children's own competence in navigating them through their social relations as children. Failure to recognise these factors may mean that interventions intended to reduce the negative aspects of discrimination and stereotyping may indeed serve to further entrench attitudes and identities (Bhavnani 2005; Morrow and Connolly 2006).

The full literature review report looks at a number of categories of groups and circumstances, namely: social exclusion; inclusion and disabled children and young people; ethnicity and racism; Gypsy and Traveller children; refugees and asylum seeking children; homeless children; gender; children in public care; play in hospitals; play in prisons; and children and trauma. The quantity and focus of the literature varies a great deal for each of these headings and for many there is a distinct lack of nationally published data. The detail is not reproduced here; rather this summary considers general themes found in the literature on practice.

Social exclusion is a concept that is wider than poverty or class, which recognises the dynamic and multidimensional nature of exclusion from social, economic, political and cultural systems (Byrne 2005). From children's perspectives social exclusion is more about feeling different and not being able to join in social and other activities (Ridge 2002, cited in Buchanan and others 2004: 19). Minority ethnic and disabled children are disproportionately likely to live in deprived areas and be socially excluded (Buchanan and others 2004).

The concepts of risk and protective factors and prevention in social policy discussed in Chapter 2 can be seen in initiatives such as Sure Start, On Track and the Children's Fund, which are targeted at children and families 'at risk' of social exclusion. Buchanan and others (2004) highlight the role of such initiatives in supporting the development of resilience as a protective factor, particularly through helping to build strong social networks, managed exposure to risk and acute (rather than chronic) stressors, and the opportunity to experience control, agency and mastery. Drawing on the evidence presented in Chapter 3, we may assume that these are aspects that can be effectively addressed through play provision.

The National Evaluation of the Children's Fund (a government programme aimed at tackling social exclusion for children aged between 5 and 13 years and their families) lists clubs, playschemes and play provision amongst the most numerous of services delivered under the programme. The analysis of the benefits of these services focused on the value of safe space, with staff highlighting the need to be flexible and responsive and parents highlighting the value of children being away from undesirable influences, developing skills and broadening horizons, whereas children saw them as places to have fun and make friends across age ranges. Whilst play provision features frequently in the services discussed in the report, there is little discussion on how playing itself could contribute to developing resilience within these services (Edwards and others 2006).

The nationally published literature on play provision for particular groups of children and those in particular circumstances shows a growing distance between the assumptions underpinning practice and the findings from the geographies of childhood and the brain science research into play and peer friendships outlined in Chapters 3 and 4. The practice evaluation research shows a focus on access to provision, with less attention in the literature paid to supporting play (with a few exceptions), and with the beginnings of questioning over traditional approaches to anti-discriminatory practice.

The starting point is the importance of recognising that all children need to play and that some children face greater barriers than others in accessing opportunities to play. Often, for children in extreme circumstances, immediate survival needs are a priority and play can sometimes be forgotten; where opportunities are created, benefits are tangible (for example, Cuninghame and others 2001; Tamminen and Bailey 2001; Shatwell 2003; Chambers 2004; Andrews 2005; Beirens and others 2006; Walker 2006). There is a debate as to whether separate or inclusive provision is preferable. The importance of community-led provision for particular cultural or religious groups is acknowledged (Maan 2005); at the same time there is an assertion that playing together reduces ignorance and prejudice and therefore aids community cohesion (Cantle 2001; Bruegel 2006), although this remains contested (Bhavnani and others 2005). Much

of the literature reviewed here shows that children from different cultural groups, or disabled and non-disabled children, often play 'in parallel' and that this is a cause for concern (for example, Kapasi 2002). It may be, given the lack of agreement on the benefits of being encouraged to play together, and the research showing the importance of children's own peer friendships (Booth-Laforce and others 2005; Qualter and Munn 2005), that further research in this area is warranted. In some cases, the culture of settings served to perpetuate stereotypes and entrench attitudes (Smith and Barker 2001; Holland 2003; Brooker 2006; Connolly 2006).

As the literature reviewed in Chapter 3 suggests, self- and peer-led playing can be cruel, yet it is the creativity, flexibility, uncertainty, sense of control and 'as if' nature of play that are understood to aid development of such capacities as emotion regulation and empathy. In addition, the research on resilience, risk and stress (Rutter 2006) shows that experience of mild stress or adversity has beneficial consequences for brain architecture and neurochemistry, helping to develop coping strategies; the removal of mild stressors and the decrease in variety of environmental cues may have a negative impact on resistance to disease (Yun and others 2005). Such research calls into question a 'zero tolerance' approach to teasing and conflict in children's play, as does research showing that children tend to argue more with close friends than with others outside their friendship groups (Qualter and Munn 2005). If adults who work with children at play interrupt these forms of playing with the well-intentioned aim of encouraging pro-social behaviour and preventing discrimination, could this be as counterproductive as it has been suggested that attitudes towards play fighting (Smith and others 2002) and war play (Holland 2003) may be?

Yet there is also a tendency to idealise play's intrinsic motivations and freedoms (Sutton-Smith 1997; Henricks 2006). The individualistic notion of personal control and freedom cannot relate absolutely to playing in groups since there has to be a level of negotiation and cooperation in order to agree how the play frame will progress: 'play ... exhibits social structures only somewhat dissimilar from those found in other parts of life' (Henricks 2006: 8). Power structures are played out

within play frames and more powerful children decide the roles within the play and who can or cannot join in (Lofdahl and Hagglund 2006). In some cases the challenges and stresses for the children with lesser status may be beneficial (Rutter 2006); for others, persistent or extreme exclusion may indeed be harmful.

These are challenging questions yet there is a need to address them through research.

Adult–child relations and adult involvement in play

The workforce in early years and school-age childcare services is of central importance ... How good the services are depends on the people working in them. The workforce – how it is organised, how it is trained, its pay and other employment conditions, how gendered it is, how the work is understood – goes to the heart of policy... The workforce ... has been neglected for decades. There has been little new thinking and no major reforms to produce a workforce for the 21st century. (Moss 2003: 1)

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This statement focuses on the gendered nature of the early years and childcare workforce. However, the sentiment can be extended to the quality of the work itself: there is a gap between the more recent theories about play, childhood, gender and ethnicity and the literature on practice.

Structure, direction and intervention

As we have seen throughout this report, evidence of the benefits of play, and particularly of play provision, is clouded by two areas of confusion: firstly, the lack of a consistent understanding of what is meant by play, and secondly, directly following on from this, the level of direction and control by adults involved in such provision. The debates on the level and appropriateness of interventions are dependent upon the particular understanding of the purpose and function of play in any given setting, which range from those who claim that intervention restricts children's ability to explore, take risks or engage in free play, to those who assert that participation shows adult acceptance of play, builds relationships and extends learning (Sandberg 2002). Research shows that children's perception of teachers' involvement in play differs from adults' own perceptions: rather than the adult being a facilitator or playmate,

or someone who can usefully extend play, children see adults as often interfering, and useful in certain contexts only. The research concludes that 'teachers should be sensitive, observant and engaged, but should not control, decide or interrupt play' (Sandberg 2002: 21).

Given the evidence outlined in Chapters 3 and 4 of this review, it should be clear that children's own control of their playing (in groups as well as individually) is part of its essence, as are its characteristics of flexibility, unpredictability, spontaneity and imagination. It is these characteristics that make play so effective in its role in brain architecture and chemistry, with the attendant benefits of resilience, emotion regulation and enjoyment as well as in the foundations for social competence and cognitive functioning. Given such a pedigree, it should be beyond doubt that adults who work with children at play should do their utmost to support this process.

Behaviour

'Problem behaviour' is attracting increased attention in the media and in public policy. Policies are becoming increasingly interventionist and punitive; at the same time interventions are targeted at younger children. What constitutes problem behaviour, particularly in the institutions where adults work with children, comes to be constructed within this discourse and within the institution's expectations of behaviour. If these institutions curtail the expression of playing, through control of time and space, then children's attempts to play in their own way may well be understood as problematic (Brown 2007). A more informed understanding of the nature of play, which includes the recognition that play is not always 'nice', may lead to a response that supports and values play rather than a confrontational, controlling one. Observations have shown that where this can happen, the play develops more playfully rather than aggressively (Holland 2003; Russell 2006). Supporting the development of pretend play with children on the autistic spectrum disorder was also found to be effective in reducing displays of challenging behaviour (Thornton and Cox 2005).

The importance of relationships

Caregivers, teachers and social workers should remember that the detail of what they do with children counts. The rituals, the smiles, the interest in little things, the daily routines, the talents they nurture, the interests they stimulate, the hobbies they encourage, the friendships they support, the sibling ties they preserve make a difference. (Gilligan 2000: 45)

Research into children's views of playworkers found that relationships with staff varied from child to child. Some liked the playworkers to join in; for others playworkers were insignificant to their play. Children valued the informality of their relationships with playworkers and the fact that they allowed them freedom to play in their own way. Key themes emerging from the discussions showed that children wanted their playworkers to be:

- nice, kind, caring and friendly
- good cooks (food was important to many)
- joining in (although children often wanted to be free from adult interruptions, they also at times wanted the playworkers to play with them)

- fairness (particularly in terms of preventing bullying or other children interrupting play: being good at telling off was seen as a positive quality)
- good fun and playful
- helpful
- not shouting (Manwaring 2006).

Furedi (2005) suggests that the Criminal Records Bureau checking procedure for adults who work with children alters the relationship between staff, children and parents, as it is based on an assumption that adults in general are not to be trusted and are a potential threat to children. Such a level of suspicion is problematic for adult-child relations. Nevertheless, Gilligan's (2000) research into the importance of everyday caring relationships can provide a counter perspective, as given in the quotation above. Much of the literature examined in this chapter has, either explicitly or implicitly, been about the role of adults in supporting children's play. A play-centred (ludocentric) relationship with children has the potential to be highly beneficial for both children and adults.



'Children valued the informality of their relationships with playworkers and the fact that they allowed them freedom to play in their own way.'

 Concluding remarks



This literature review has covered a broad span of research, policy documents, evaluation reports and academic papers on childhood and play. Current social policy is rooted in the risk-focused prevention paradigm, and the policy review on children and young people (HM Treasury and DfES 2007), a part of the Comprehensive Spending Review, announces a new emphasis on building resilience. The emerging evidence from the brain sciences suggests that playing, as a spontaneous, flexible and goalless 'as if' behaviour, plays a significant role in the development of the brain's structure and chemistry, which gives rise to emotional and physical health, well-being and resilience, as well as laying the foundations for cognitive functioning and social competence. Given this weight of evidence, we should be ensuring that children can play, whether in their bedrooms, gardens, local neighbourhoods or dedicated children's settings.

The evidence also suggests that it is the very characteristics of personal direction, unpredictability, flexibility and so on that make play so special. So any public provision for play must recognise these characteristics and be planned, implemented and evaluated with this in mind. If the evidence for the significance of play for children's well-being and development is accepted, then provision should be judged on the outcome of whether children can play, not on any more instrumental outcome or direct link to any of the five Every Child Matters outcomes. There is no guarantee that play provides all these benefits; we can, however, be confident that these benefits are more likely to accrue than if children cannot play.

Such an understanding of play also relies on the other disciplines from which we have drawn evidence in this review, namely the sociologies and geographies of childhood. These studies have been amassing evidence that have challenged our understanding of childhood as a period of socialisation and preparation for adulthood during which children are weak and dependent. They have shown that children are competent social actors capable of negotiating complex social landscapes, building relationships through play, testing

and contesting adult authority and power in direct and subtle ways. They have also shown that children have not forgotten how to play, rather that we as adults may have forgotten how to see how they are playing, or remember what it feels like. Such an understanding of children has a number of challenges for our relationships with them, especially if we are seeking to support their play.

The evidence presented here suggests that there is a need to rethink the knowledge that adults take with them into their work with children. The evidence from practice raises questions about, for example, the effectiveness of anti-discriminatory practices and approaches to challenging behaviour, as well as if, when and how to intervene in play. The scope and timing of the review has not allowed for any consideration of the current education and training landscape; however, the issue of training has been raised in a number of the sources reviewed. Given the significance of play in the lives of children, both from their own accounts and from the brain sciences, it would seem that it should as a minimum be a part of the common core of knowledge that every adult needs when working with children.



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Play for a Change

Play, Policy and Practice: A review of contemporary perspectives

Play for a change, completed in October 2007, illustrates substantial and wide-ranging evidence of the importance of play in the lives of children.

Despite this, discussion of play has been consistently undervalued in public policy for children, which tends to focus on children's development into adulthood while overlooking the importance of the physical, social, cultural and emotional worlds that children both inhabit and create in their daily lives.

Play for a Change updates the information in *Making the Case for Play*, published by the former Children's Play Council in 2002. Using this text as a starting point, the authors identified three key strands of literature, these are:

- the policy-making context supporting children's play
- literature on the benefits of play and on children's play patterns, and
- the provision for play and working with children.

This document summarises the key findings from Lester and Russell's review. A more detailed analysis of published research and literature underpinning contemporary understandings of the importance of play – and how this relates to social policy and practice – can be found in the full research report, available now from Play England.

Since the completion of this review, the government has published *The Children's Plan* (DCSF 2007) and *Fair Play* (DCSF 2008), a consultation on the national play strategy. These recent government initiatives acknowledge that play is fundamental to children's enjoyment of their everyday lives.

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Making space for play

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