

# PLAY STRATEGY

## FOR SCOTLAND: OUR VISION



The Scottish Government  
Riaghaltas na h-Alba



## OUR VISION:

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We want Scotland to be the best place to grow up. A nation which values play as a life-enhancing daily experience for all our children and young people; in their homes, nurseries, schools and communities.





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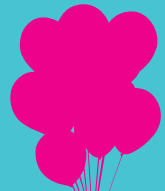
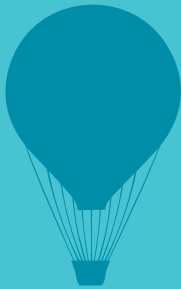
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Aileen Campbell MSP  
Minister for Children and  
Young People

Play is vital from the early stages of brain development and bonding with parents and carers, and promotes independence and autonomy for the teenage years.





Play is the universal language of childhood, it is an activity which exists for its own sake but also has a fundamental role. All children and young people should have the opportunity to play every day and I am delighted to present Scotland's first National Play Strategy.

This Strategy is built on the views of children and young people, parents and carers, the play sector and others involved in their wellbeing. Together with the action plan it seeks to improve the play experiences of all children and young people, including those with disabilities or from disadvantaged backgrounds.

Play is a fundamental part of childhood, taking place within the home from birth, through formal and informal learning, and

in community settings through the use of public spaces and services. Our role as parents and carers is to enable and facilitate play. As policy makers, planners and practitioners it is to ensure play is embedded at the heart of decision making throughout our society and to provide the catalyst for culture change.

Finally, I would like to congratulate and thank all those who have given their time and expertise to the development of this innovative and collaborative vision, and our action plan, which will follow in the autumn.



# STRATEGIC CONTEXT

The Scottish Government's vision for children and young people is clear: for Scotland to be the best place in the world to grow up.

Children's play is crucial to Scotland's wellbeing; socially, economically and environmentally. Our people are our greatest resource and the early years of life set the pattern for children's future development. 'The experiences children have in early life - and the environments in which they have them - shape their developing brain architecture and strongly affect whether they grow up to be healthy, productive members of society' (Harvard University, 2007). Play is an essential part of a happy, healthy childhood and 'when children play their brains do two things: they grow and the become organised and usable' (Hughes, 2013). By investing in all our children and young people now we can strengthen their ability to achieve their full potential.







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Play creates a brain that has increased flexibility and improved potential for learning later in life”

(Lester & Russell, 2008)



Play opens up possibilities in the brain that may be picked up later or discarded; the important feature is that the potential is kept alive, more so than if play never occurred in the first place”

(Lester and Russell, 2007)

Scotland's first national Play Strategy will contribute directly to all of our *National Outcomes* and specifically to ensure our *children* have the best start in life and are ready to succeed, and our *young people* are successful learners, confident individuals, effective contributors and responsible citizens.

'Children's play provides a primary behaviour for developing resilience, thereby making a significant contribution to children's well-being' (Lester and Russell, 2007) which is a key concept in our *Getting It Right For Every Child* approach. This underpins and supports all of our policies for children and young people. This Strategy will complement our proposals in the Children and Young People (Scotland) Bill and further supports our three main social policy frameworks; the *Early Years Framework*, *Equally Well*, and *Achieving our Potential*.

To a child, play is about having fun, but to society it is much more. Play is essential to healthy development from birth to adulthood, contributing to capacity for learning, resilience and the development of physical, cognitive, social and emotional skills. With improved health and educational outcomes come clear economic benefits. Scotland's Chief Medical Officer is very clear about the importance of play, stating that investing in children's play is one of the most important things we can do to improve children's health and wellbeing in Scotland. Furthermore, the right to play is enshrined in the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC). All children and young people should have play experiences as part of their daily lives.



We all have a role in realising Scotland's vision for play as individuals, parents or carers, members of communities or professionals, by ensuring all children and young people can access play opportunities in a range of different settings which offer variety, adventure and challenge. They must be able to play freely and safely while learning to manage risks and make choices about where, how and when they play according to their age, ability and preference.

We have an ambitious vision for play to be fully realised in Scotland, and it is one which we can achieve together. Scotland is rich with a professional, qualified and well-led play workforce who are passionate and driven and have our children's health and wellbeing at the very core of their professional lives. Beyond that, our health workers, early learning and childcare staff, teachers, youth workers and plethora of out of school care professionals all have a key role in delivering the outcomes of this Strategy. We will publish an action plan later this year which will set out our collective vision for

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Play seems to serve important social, emotional, and cognitive functions”

(Bateson, 2005)



# EVERY CHILD'S RIGHT

Play is fundamental to children and young people's quality of life but first and foremost it is a child's right and one which the *UN Convention on the Rights of the Child* (UNCRC) is keen to see actively applied. The Scottish Government has responsibility for implementing the UNCRC in Scotland, addressing the Committee's recommendations appropriate to local requirements.

Scotland warmly welcomes the UN General Comment on article 31 adopted by the Committee in 2013. The General Comment provides interpretation of the article in detail and aims to raise awareness of its importance, promote a richer understanding of the content and provide guidance for its implementation. It also promotes the child's right to play in the context of supporting all children and young people's rights.

We are confident that, with relevant action to ensure article 31 is appropriately implemented in homes, nurseries, schools and communities including registered childcare settings such as out of school care services, nurseries and playgroups this will support Scotland's children in their journey through childhood and adolescence and into adulthood. It will allow our children and young people to participate in their communities, enhancing their role as part of that community and developing their resilience, confidence and skills to engage as citizens.





Article 31 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child states that every child has the right to rest and leisure, to engage in play and recreational activities appropriate to the age of the child and to participate freely in cultural life and the arts.

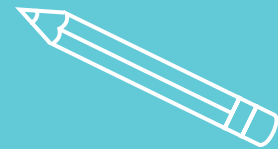


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Play encompasses children's behaviour which is freely chosen, personally directed and intrinsically motivated. It is performed for no external goal or reward, and is a fundamental and integral part of healthy development – not only for individual children but also for the society in which they live.

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Review of research into children's play considers the element of 'fun' to be a central defining quality of children's play”

(Meire, 2007)



## WHAT IS PLAY?

Play comes in many forms. It can be active, passive, solitary, independent, assisted, social, exploratory, educational or just for fun. Moreover, it can happen indoors or outdoors, it can be structured, creative, messy, entirely facilitated by the imagination or can involve using the latest gadget.

What is important is that children and young people have the freedom to choose how and when they play. From the earliest days and months play helps children learn to move, share, negotiate, take on board others' points of view and cultivate many more skills. It remains equally important throughout infancy, childhood, the teenage years through adolescence, and beyond into adulthood and at all ages, stages and abilities.

Many people say it's a child's 'job' to play and the whole of society has a role in ensuring we can support children to behave as children, minimising the pressure on them to grow up too quickly. We consider play as the primary tool for addressing this challenge, through allowing children and young people to experience fun, joy and laughter in a way that is important to them.





# WHY PLAY MATTERS

**To a child play is about having fun. To society it's so much more. Children's play is crucial to Scotland's wellbeing, socially, economically and environmentally.**

The importance of play in children and young people's daily lives and to healthy development has become increasingly recognised in recent years. A growing body of evidence supports the view that playing, throughout childhood, is not only an innate behaviour but also contributes to quality of life, sense of wellbeing and is a key element in effective learning, thereby developing their physical, cognitive, emotional and social skills. 'The research suggests that, from the first stages of growth through to adulthood, play has a central role in developing strong attachments. Play between caregiver and infant helps establish the neural pathways for developing wider attachments with other children and adults' (Lester and Russell, 2007).

The type of environment for play is also important, having an impact on children and young people's experiences, choices and relationships, both with other people and with the environment itself. In particular, outdoor play especially in natural spaces is beneficial and provides experiences which cannot be replicated indoors.

Children and young people need adults to encourage and facilitate their play, whilst not inhibiting their opportunities for freedom and choice. This means that everyone involved in planning, designing and managing local streets, open spaces and parks such as early learning and childcare staff, youth workers, teachers and play practitioners, parents, carers and local residents, particularly those willing to offer their services as volunteers, can all have a major impact on children and young people's play opportunities.





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There is a body of evidence which demonstrates the effectiveness of play in promoting problem-solving abilities” (Bergen, 2002)

The *Early Years Framework* is very clear about the importance of positive parenting in the early years and our *National Parenting Strategy* clearly emphasises to parents, carers and practitioners the benefits of play, from stimulating our babies from day one, to creating opportunities for all children and young people to explore, be active and enjoy the learning opportunities provided by play throughout their lives.

Seeing the difference play can make in a child's development is delightful and benefits the whole family through supporting bonding and building relationships. Play allows children to experience and make sense of their world, to challenge themselves, practise skills and manage their emotions, interact with others or enjoy time alone. Numerous studies, including *Growing Up In Scotland* show play to be a crucial factor in a child's educational achievement. The benefits from playing and having fun cannot be underestimated.

Creating an environment that provides rich play experiences is critical in meeting the needs of our children and young people. Offering them choices to develop the skills of expression, thought, curiosity, movement, problem solving and achievement provides a sound basis for fostering the development of useful skills and attributes which will serve them well throughout life. As children grow they can continue to hone these skills contributing to family life and the wider community through shared activities and hobbies, sport, recreation and leisure activities, developing management and leadership skills and supporting younger children to participate.





# IN THE HOME

Parents and carers are a child's first educators and have a crucial role to play in encouraging their development. Supporting children to grow up in a rich home learning environment, providing secure boundaries and guidance and offering emotional stability from the first days of life is fundamental to holistic child development.

The last three decades have seen significant changes in the way we live. Increasingly busy lifestyles can often be the reason for a lack of play opportunities or uptake. We know that parents and carers feel pressure for their children to have the newest toys and the latest games consoles and regularly attend structured activities such as dance classes and swimming lessons. They often feel they need to be seen to be 'as good as other parents' and that this is primarily achieved through spending money.

“

I've learned kids are happy playing with almost anything, you don't have to buy expensive toys”

(A parent, 2013)





Free play opportunities provide the biggest benefit in a child's development and we should support Scotland's parents and carers to feel positive about providing their children with a rich variety of experiences, which do not cost a lot of money. It is important to remind ourselves our time, guidance and support to play is just as important in making a difference for children and young people.

Play changes as children grow up and at the pace and stage appropriate to them. Outdoor play opportunities are needed at all ages and stages as a frequent part of family life. As children grow older they need opportunities to develop independence through playing outdoors, helping to develop and practise important life skills within the real world.

The *PlayTalkRead* campaign aims to encourage parents and carers to engage more with their babies and young children through day to day experiences supported by the availability of online resources and within their own communities. Created using the *play@home* principles, it offers practical solutions for involving children in daily life. These can be used to strengthen bonding and communication, improve parenting skills and introduce physically and mentally healthy attitudes from the first days of life. *PlayTalkRead* also benefits from the *Bookbug* principles, encouraging parents and carers to read together with their children from birth using the Bookbug packs given to every child in Scotland and participating in storytelling and Rhymetime sessions. It aims to encourage families to make regular use of local facilities such as libraries and community centres.

There is a role for the family, as a loving and nurturing unit and as individuals within the family, in supporting play in and around the home, spending quality time together through shared interests and hobbies or playing games outside and in. Of course, every family is different. Long-term health conditions, physical or learning disabilities, unemployment and bereavement are only some of the issues affecting families across Scotland every day. Many more children and young people now live in one parent families and may require greater support from the wider family and community in which they live. It is important to recognise that play can be used as an invaluable and unique therapy, caring for children and young people to increase their enjoyment, support recovery and aid physical and mental wellbeing, within the home, the community and in health settings.

“

There were lots of ideas I can use with my son and his blind father so he can be more involved”

(A mum visiting the PlayTalkRead bus in Ayrshire, 2013.)





# AT NURSERY AND SCHOOL

**All learning environments, including nurseries and schools need “free play”. This is commonly defined as “behaviour that is *freely chosen, personally directed and intrinsically motivated*”. This form of play has the potential to contribute powerfully and positively to some of the most significant areas of school life, from early years to secondary, and mainstream to special schools.**

Play supports the development of social skills and collaboration. It stimulates physical activity and the development of important physical competencies. It encourages creativity, imagination and problem solving. When children have access to natural spaces for play, it fosters a sense of close connection with and respect for, nature. Staff in early years have an important role to play in maximising outdoor play experiences for children. Many learning establishment practitioners recognise the potential of the outdoor environment and use it as creatively and positively as possible.

Teachers who have closely observed free play in schools have identified a wide range of curriculum experiences and outcomes that are being delivered without any formal input from teachers. Schools that provide rich outdoor free play environments report happier children, better break-time behaviour and children who are better able to concentrate in class. These experiences are important

for all children and young people, including those with additional physical, behavioural or learning needs.

Learning through play is widely acknowledged as a key component of good practice in the early years, both indoors and outdoors. In early learning and childcare settings, *Pre-Birth to Three Positive Outcomes for Scotland's Children and Families* promotes the importance of planning and supporting play. To support play effectively practitioners need to be knowledgeable and sensitive about the timing and nature of interventions or interactions. One of the most important aspects of supporting play is ensuring that children and young people have the time, space and freedom to initiate, plan, lead and conclude their own play. When practitioners are reflective and intervene appropriately they are able to take account of children's interests and prior knowledge and make provision for next steps and new experiences.

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From early years and onwards *Curriculum for Excellence* promotes playful learner-led approaches in the classroom and outdoors in nursery, primary, secondary and special schools. However, the greatest potential to develop free play in schools is outdoors before and after school, during break times and, through out of school care.

Recent years have seen positive developments for play opportunities in Scottish schools and early years settings. Approaches such as nature and forest kindergartens typify how free play in nature can be integrated into the curriculum on a frequent and regular basis throughout the year, in almost all weathers.

*Curriculum for Excellence through Outdoor Learning* encourages the creative use of the outdoors as a context for helping children and young people to develop their skills for learning, working and living in a complex and changing world. Outdoor free-play offers a powerful way of providing some of these enriching outdoor experiences on a daily basis.

Some schools through the *Rights Respecting Schools* award recognise and value children's right to play as part of their ethos. Innovative playful approaches have become more widespread within the curriculum such as digital games-based learning which motivate and engage many children, helping them to understand key concepts in many subject areas.

Most children and young people have access to a safe outdoor play space at school. This

is important for all children and young people but particularly for those who don't have access to a private garden, nearby park or a safe street to play in. Nursery gardens and school playgrounds are accessed by children on a daily basis: during, before and after nursery and school.

Most children and young people will spend around 1500 hours of their life in their school playgrounds; for many this will be more than in any other outdoor play setting. School grounds are also places where children and young people can take an active role in developing and looking after their play spaces, building a sense of ownership and active participation. In some areas school playgrounds are accessible out of school hours to the wider community, providing thousands of extra hours of play opportunities for children and young people.

There is a need to build on these successes so that regular free play becomes a reality for all children and young people in every nursery and school, particularly outdoors, embracing play in all weathers and ensuring ongoing maintenance and stewardship of outdoor play spaces.

Greater recognition and understanding of the concept and value of free play and playtimes is needed, particularly in primary, secondary and special schools. The importance of outdoor play times for disabled children and young people with complex healthcare needs specific proactive attention.



# IN THE COMMUNITY

**As a society we need to encourage children and young people to spend time outside and to start exploring the fantastic and often wild and open space which Scotland has in abundance, be it in the local town, city or countryside. Children playing outdoors is something we want to see happening much more in all outdoor places including green space, parks and streets that are valued by the community.**

We know that a variety of different community settings are also important for many children and young people, such as nurseries, out of school services, playgroups and playschemes after school and in the holidays; and in youth clubs and community centres across the country.

Outdoor play doesn't necessarily mean visiting the local play park, sometimes it means playing kerby on the street or investigating local wildlife. The beauty of outdoor play is more than appreciating your natural surroundings and breathing in fresh air, it's on your doorstep, it's free and all children and young people can get involved – regardless of their background, gender, age, stage or ability, together with the whole family.

We know that open space allows children and young people to be physically active and challenge themselves so they sleep and eat well and form healthy habits that will stay with them for life. In particular, daily contact with nature and playing in natural spaces has additional benefits and promotes greater use of these community green spaces as adults.

The type of environments available for play have a major impact on the nature of that play so careful consideration should be given to the planning and design of public spaces and particularly for communities within the built environment. Children and young people should have access to play spaces, whether they are park areas or informal spaces where they choose to play. *Scottish Planning Policy* sets out that planning authorities should protect valued open space, and seek to address needs identified in open space strategies. There should be clean, safe and welcoming spaces for children and young people to play and gather where they are not considered a nuisance by others in their communities, as set out in *Designing Places* and *Designing Streets*. Stimulating environments reduce the incidence of aggressive and destructive behaviour. The importance of interesting outdoor spaces designed in partnership with children and young people cannot be overstated.





Most children and young people want to be able to play outside in the local neighbourhood where they live. They enjoy spaces that offer them the opportunity to experiment, to challenge themselves physically, to feel free and to socialise. *Green Infrastructure: Design and Placemaking* encourages architects, planners and developers to take account of the landscape and notes that green infrastructure can create pleasant, stimulating places for fun, play and relaxation.

Older children and young people can choose to participate in youth services which provide somewhere safe to be with their friends, hang out and have fun.

Exposure to challenges, with support from parents and carers, play workers and youth workers, balancing their understanding of keeping children safe from harm while allowing them to learn and develop through sometimes risky activities will help build resilience into adult life. That is why we want to see parents, carers, professionals and volunteers adopt a risk-benefit approach to play. We value the long-term benefits of play and exposure to risk – both in terms of physical health and in developing resilience and mental wellbeing and aim to support parents and carers, communities and professionals in recognising the benefits of this approach. The changing nature of

the outdoors makes it a more interesting, stimulating place to play, and allows children the sense of fun and freedom they crave whilst promoting their physical, emotional and psychological health.

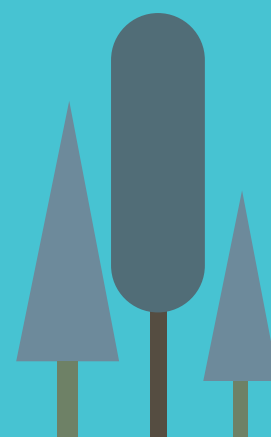
In addition, children and young people who play outdoors more often have better social networks, are more confident and are more involved in their local communities than those who are outside less often. Opportunities for, and experience of outdoor play vary widely, but there are some distinct differences in the experiences of girls and boys, those who are disabled, those from different social backgrounds and those from varied types of housing environment. Religious and cultural beliefs may also influence play opportunities and experiences.

If local spaces are to offer children the range of experiences they need and thrive on, they must be well designed and maintained to ensure children have regular access to new and interesting experiences that stretch and absorb them, whatever their age, interests and ability. This includes attending to issues with regards to the whole play landscape and environment such as measures to curb or calm traffic, provision of well-lit footpaths and walk ways, shelter and gathering spaces, litter bins and appropriate equipment for older children and young people.

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Habits of healthy outdoor exercise as adults are linked to patterns of use established in childhood”

(Thompson and others, 2008)







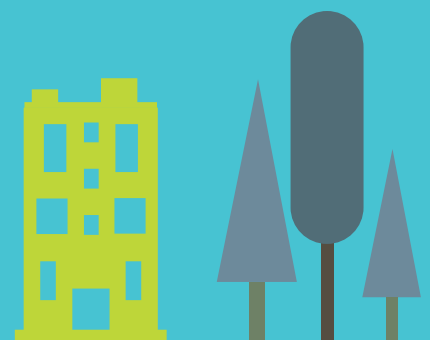
The social and cultural space for play can be as important as the physical environment and schemes which encourage communities to work together to support both intergenerational and age and stage related play serve an important purpose in establishing child and play friendly neighbourhoods. The existence of good spaces and opportunities for play allows children and young people from different social groups to mix, can reduce socially unacceptable behaviour and vandalism and provides children and young people with places where they can feel both safe and independent.

Avoiding the outdoors because of fear of traffic, concerns of personal safety or even the weather can impact on opportunities to play. Fears for children's safety have at times resulted in restricted access to outdoor play. While the risks are real, the perception of them is often higher than the reality and should be balanced against the benefits of outdoor play. We know that learning to deal with challenges will help build children's resilience into adult life. Learning to enjoy the outdoors in our climate and manage risks and challenges will help children and young people grow and develop into healthy confident adults.



To place oneself at risk does not only mean that one places oneself in jeopardy, but also that one is situated in a zone of potential and development”

(Lindqvist and Nordanger, 2007)





# POSITIVE SUPPORT FOR PLAY

**We need to foster a positive and supportive environment in order to enable quality play opportunities for all children in Scotland. This includes valuing children and young people and the importance of play.**

Essential to achieving this is a professional, qualified, well led workforce with the skills and confidence to provide support and advice to parents and carers about play so that they in turn provide more play opportunities for children and young people outwith established settings.

Leaders and practitioners together, across the public, private and voluntary sectors, can shape the culture and practice of play in Scotland as it moves forward and we will enable that through cross sector and sector specific CPD. The infrastructure will be supported to have an active and

sustainable role in delivering this Strategy, including the contribution of play organisations.

The workforce should universally emphasise the value of risk through play. Practitioners should be bold in providing challenging play opportunities, managed through risk-benefit assessment. Taking a controlled risk and seeing it payoff is essential to becoming a confident individual. The media also has a key role to play in promoting and fostering positive attitudes towards play in society.

**This sets out our vision for the future of play in Scotland. Our action plan will follow this autumn which will set out how we aim to achieve this.**



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## WITH THANKS TO:

### THE WORKING GROUP

**Julia Abel**, Inspiring Scotland

**Tam Baillie**, Scotland's Commissioner for Children and Young People

**Kathie Cameron**, CoSLA

**Lesley Fox**, Smart Play Network

**Marguerite Hunter Blair**, Play Scotland

**Ian McLaughlan**, Scottish Pre-School Play Association

**Irene Miller**, NHS Health Scotland

**Eric Mitchell**, Capability Scotland

**Siân Neil**, Education Scotland

**Juliet Robertson**, Creative Star Learning

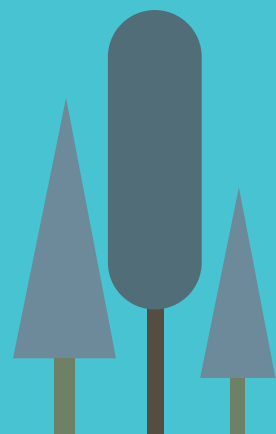
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**The children and young people whose views have shaped this Strategy.**

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