

# The Power of Play for Children and Young People's Positive Mental Health

Supporting children and young people's wellbeing through the Covid-19 crisis

May 2020 | Play Scotland Research Briefing



## Introduction

A survey was undertaken by Play Scotland in April 2020 on the impact of COVID-19 on play and childcare settings in Scotland. The impact of COVID-19 on children and families' **mental health and wellbeing** was a major concern.

Respondents highlighted the impact of restrictions on

- **children's play, indoors and outdoors, and their health and wellbeing**
- **children's social needs not being met**
- **the lack of structure in children's lives**
- **school transitions**

The necessary restrictions are making it even more difficult for children and young people to play outdoors and to socialise with their friends. There needs to be particular attention paid to encouraging play and supporting children's social and emotional wellbeing at this challenging time.

## Why playing is important

Children need play to survive and thrive. Play is a life-enhancing experience which fosters resilience, the ability to handle stress, challenges and setbacks. "Just playing" can help build children's capacity to cope with highly stressful situations.

**Play builds health and wellbeing** – being active through play helps physically and emotionally, contributing to their health and happiness

**Play builds resilience** – playing boosts children's confidence, creativity, problem-solving skills and perseverance, enabling them to cope with stress and challenges through life

**Play builds friendships** – playing allows children to interact with others, develop relationships, deal with conflict, and learn respect and tolerance

**Play builds communities** – playing allows children to learn about the world around them, make connections, and develop a sense of identity and belonging

As they grow and develop, play offers children the opportunity to develop a range of physical, emotional and social skills, helping to make sense of the world they find themselves in.

“ It might not seem like it when they're being noisy and making a mess, but playing is a really important thing for your child's mental wellbeing. Playing is a crucial part of how children's minds develop and how they make sense of the confusing world around them. Giving them the space to play and to let their imaginations run wild will help them cope during this time and keep them emotionally and physically healthy. ”

(Parent Club Scotland)

## The decline of mental health and well-being

The impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on play compounds an already recognised worrying problem in childhood. Over the past twenty years there has been a notable rise in mental health problems in children and young people, with an estimated ten per cent with a clinically diagnosable mental health problem. We know children need play to thrive and make sense of their world and that play supports their mental and physical health and wellbeing. Froebel, Montessori and Steiner were the first childhood pedagogues to illustrate the interconnectedness of physical, mental and emotional health. A growing body of evidence charts a decline in the physical and emotional wellbeing of young people and an increasing prevalence of mental health issues.

## Play supports children's mental and physical health

Playing allows children the opportunity to explore their feelings and express themselves in a relatively safe environment, even if these feelings are confusing or painful. The development of a sense of self through play can influence children's ability to cope with stress.

There is increasing evidence that spending time in natural environments can help children who are regularly exposed to stressful events to be less anxious and have a stronger sense of self-worth. Playing and spending time in more natural environments has also been shown to help alleviate the symptoms of ADHD in some children.

## Play is the universal language of childhood

Children explore their feelings and find ways of expressing themselves, through play.

Play has been described as behaviour which is “freely chosen, personally directed and intrinsically motivated”, or as “what children and young people do when they follow their own ideas and interests in their own way and for their own reasons”.

Play is one of the most powerful and important elements in children's enjoyment of their childhood, well-being, health and development. It is a natural and instinctive behaviour which should be encouraged and supported throughout childhood. The value of play, and the need to ensure children have places and opportunities for play, has been recognised in local and national policy in Scotland, in the Play Strategy for Scotland and most recently in the Planning (Scotland) Act 2019.

## Children need time to play

When there is little time in children's lives for them to play freely, a "backlog" of unresolved feelings can develop and children become frustrated and anxious.

In play, children frequently revisit things that are worrying them, giving them a means of dealing with emotional conflict and uncertainties. Play allows children to give voice to their experiences, to have a safe place to express confusing and painful feelings and to find ways of overcoming emotional traumas. Play development and the development of a sense of self in children can increase their ability to cope with stress.

## Play in natural environments is vital

Increasingly, evidence is suggesting that spending time in natural environments, including when playing, is particularly beneficial to children's mental health. Children who experience stress are more likely than others to develop mental health problems but there is evidence that contact with nature helps children, regularly exposed to stressful events, to be less anxious and have a stronger sense of self-worth. There is some evidence that visiting woodland can be important for both rural and urban children, reducing feelings of stress. The natural environment seems to help create a "sense of belonging and identity", which can also improve mental health. Conversely, it appears that stressful urban environments can reduce levels of concentration. Playing in natural surroundings might also be important to children with specific mental health problems including ADHD. Some studies with children diagnosed as having ADHD have indicated that they are positively affected by spending time in natural environments.



## Play and children's emotional well-being

When children are playing they are emotionally immersed in what they are doing, often expressing and working out the emotional aspects of their everyday lives. This helps them understand their own feelings and those of others.

In addition, play helps children build resilience through supporting the development and understanding of relationships and through experiencing positive feelings and reactions.

The pleasure and satisfaction children experience whilst playing encourages them to extend their interests and creativity, and the excitement and anxiety linked to trying new things helps children learn ways of reacting to other unknown situations.

### The power of imaginative play

A lot of children's play involves them using their imaginations. Imaginative play contributes to children's developing emotional wellbeing and self-control, self entertainment, control of fear and anxiety, poise, sensitivity and empathy.

When children are playing they are emotionally involved in what they are doing, using all their senses and have the chance to express and work out the emotional aspects of day-to-day experiences. Imaginary play, especially when the child has imaginary friends, may have a particular role. Some evidence suggests that boys who have imaginary friends have lower levels of aggression, feel happier, have more positive attitudes and a more in-depth, emotionally calmer play experience. Girls with imaginary friends seem less likely to be angry, fearful and sad whilst playing.

## Play builds resilience

Increasingly, work with children is focusing on “resilience” as a crucial element in their development and wellbeing. Resilience has been described as children’s “ability to cope with difficult situations and to recover from, or adapt to, adversity”. It has also been described as “an outlook for children and young people characterised by the willingness to confront challenges, with a sense of confidence that allows them to deal with setbacks. Resilience is built from a foundation of emotional security.”

Play helps children build resilience through supporting the development and understanding of relationships, allowing them to experience positive feelings, and giving them the chance to develop their own solutions to problems. Play allows children to work through difficult issues such as death, grief and loss. Play can be an important part of any ritual, helping to encourage children to express their feelings.

## Play tests emotions

The mechanism through which play supports the development of resilience is a function of the complicated nature of play, and its role in the many aspects of children’s development. Lester and Russell suggest that when playing children are trying things out, learning to adapt and testing different emotions, which allows them to start developing strategies for responding emotionally in real-life situations. The pleasure, the positive feelings about themselves and the satisfaction children have whilst playing encourages them to explore more and to be more creative. They often put themselves in situations where they are not sure of what will happen next and the resulting feelings of uncertainty may increase children’s stress levels and feelings of anxiety giving them the opportunity to learn ways of reacting in other unknown or stressful situations.

## Play must be prioritised to support children and young people’s mental health and wellbeing

Play Scotland continues to campaign for children’s right to play in this crisis, and when normal life resumes, whatever shape that may take. The creativity, imagination and problem solving required and enriched by playing helps children develop ways of reacting to pressure and stress and is vital to how they will manage their anxieties and adapt to their changing world.

Play Scotland are asking the Scottish Government together with the play, childcare and education sector to provide guidance to families and the public on the importance of play for children’s wellbeing, and particularly outdoor play during all phases of COVID-19 measures. Specific attention should be given to the needs of children and families with a range of circumstances including: poverty; poor housing; disability; young carers.

Guidance should be developed to support outdoor play in community spaces, particularly for children with no access to gardens – so that children can play safely outdoors, in line with COVID-19 measures.

**Play is vital to supporting children and young people’s mental health and wellbeing.**

# Play is for everyone

keep a playful mind-set

encourage play indoors, and outdoors  
in nature as much as possible

talk to children about their worries -  
and talk to someone about yours

think about things that make you feel happy -  
your favourite place or memories

take a break from social media and bad news

stay connected to friends and family

be kind to yourself and others

take deep breaths

play or listen to music

stay active, eat well and sleep well

and remember laughter is the best medicine

“ Investing in children’s play is one of the most important things  
we can do to improve children’s health and wellbeing in Scotland. ”

Professor Sir Harry Burns,  
Former Chief Medical Officer in Scotland

## Further information

More from the Power of Play can be read here:

[playscotland.org/resources/getting-it-right-for-play](https://playscotland.org/resources/getting-it-right-for-play)

More about Play Types can be read here:

[playscotland.org/play/playful-learning/play-types-toolkit-bringing-play-school-day](https://playscotland.org/play/playful-learning/play-types-toolkit-bringing-play-school-day)

### Committed to PLAY



### Taic do Chluiche



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