

Position Statement on The Right to Play

Salford, Tameside and Bury Educational Psychology Service (EPS)

Play is important to and for children of all ages. It is enshrined within the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989). Defining play is difficult, but recurring themes are the spontaneous, voluntary and unpredictable nature of the activity, as well as signs of pleasure and enjoyment (Lester & Russell, 2010). Older children and adults need to play too; it is important for development and enjoyment across the lifespan. We might call it relaxing, socialising, discovering and exploring, or engaging in leisure activities and hobbies where we can experience a state of flow.

Children and young people having sufficient levels of time, space and permission to play has intrinsic benefits, instrumental benefits and institutional benefits. The intrinsic value of play is about play for its own sake. It's about fun, enjoyment, freedom and being in the moment. Through supporting the intrinsic benefits of play, the instrumental and institutional benefits of play will best be realised.

The instrumental benefits are about the value of play beyond play itself. For example, play helps children and young people to:

- enhance positive pro-social behaviours;
- develop social and emotional skills and resilience;
- develop the ability to concentrate and learn and achieve academically;
- feel socially connected and a sense of belonging;
- learn how to problem solve, assess risk and think creatively;
- maintain physical health and its links to mental health;
- regulate stress, emotions and the sensory system.

The institutional benefits are about how the wider school community can benefit from children and young people having good quality break times. For example, play helps to:

- promote better classroom and on task behaviour. With good quality and regular break times, children are more able to focus, particularly neurodivergent children;
- reduce behavioural incidents on the playground, as meaningful engagement is high, and conflict can better be resolved in the moment.

When break times work well, children are happier, healthier, and more able to learn and achieve in class. Research suggests parents also place a high value on play in school. All children should have access to play richness, and the opportunity to play in a way that the child chooses, owns and controls. Research identifies some shared cultural features that autistic children might share, for example strong sensory experiences of play, pretending in ways that might involve order and predictability, sharing experiences with others on the same wavelength, and solitary play as a way to regulate and experience a state of flow. It's important for adults to consider how we notice and respect play preferences, and challenge the idea that there is an optimal way to play.

EPS Commitment

Given the importance of play to and for children and young people, we strongly believe that their access to play should be protected. All children need sufficient time, space and permission to play, and some children may need additional planning and adjustments to

ensure that they can access their right in a way that also does not impinge on others. We will advocate for a play-rights approach through the different functions of our role, for example consultation and training.

We will aim to:

- Raise awareness of the importance of play through systemic work with settings to support time, space and permission to play for all children. This forms the focus of our Right to Play Project, and is also available as a long term training offer.
- Champion diversity within play, for example through our training and use of person-centred approaches to assessment and outcome-setting.
- Share the importance of play with families and services we work with and link in with other services and existing projects around wellbeing and development.
- Arrange any direct work with children and young people outside of break times.
- Explore play themes, skills and interests within casework, whilst developing our assessment materials to ensure that we have the skills to do so beyond the early years.
- Support schools in reflecting on and developing alternatives to withdrawing play access as a consequence for behaviour, as reflected in the [EFS](#) accreditation criteria and work around wellbeing/regulation policies (e.g. through supporting playtime behaviour and using proactive approaches to emotional and behaviour regulation).
- Model having breaks and being playful in the way that we work. This links with the PACE model by Dan Hughes (Playfulness – Acceptance – Curiosity – Empathy) and is good for our own and others' wellbeing.

This position statement was first shared in January 2022, and last updated in June 2024.

This document has been informed by a range of sources including:

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