

Learning through play

The importance of play

When we talk about play, people naturally think about young children, however all children and young people should have the opportunity to play every day. Play is important for the early stages of brain development and playing with your child can help build relationships for later life. But no matter what age we are, play helps to develop important skills for learning, life and work.

Encouraging play is one of the best things you can do for your child, whatever their age, and it's free.

Children and young people have a right to play. The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child states (in Article 31) that every child should have:

"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."

United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child

What is play?

Free play is what happens when children and young people follow their own ideas and interests in their own way, and for their own reasons. They can do this on their own or with others. It can happen inside or outside. Children and young people should be given the choice of how and when they play. Play is just as important for your teenager as it is for your baby or young child.

There is lots of information available about the health and wellbeing benefits of play. Active play helps to build strong bones and muscles. Children and young people explore their feelings through play, and this can help them build resilience and cope with stress.

Play is how young children make sense of the world. There is also evidence to show that play in early childhood can influence the way your child's brain develops, helping to co-ordinate their mental and physical capabilities. Through play, children and young people of all ages develop problem-solving skills, imagination and creativity, language and observation skills, and memory and concentration. Children and young people use play to test their theories about the world and their place in it.

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

Lester & Russell, 2008

How can I help?

When you play with your baby or young child it is an important part of the bonding process. How you play with your child when they are young can have a positive impact on how they form relationships when they are older.

As your child grows up your role will change. They will need you to take a step back and allow them to play alone and with their friends. This helps to build their confidence and independence. Teenagers appear to spend less time playing freely, and their behaviour more closely reflects that of adults, with the focus more on spending time with friends, socialising, and taking part in recreational activity.

- There are lots of different things you can do to encourage your child or young person to play.
- Get the environment right – turn off the TV!
- Encourage play, especially outdoors, remember to allow freedom and choice.
- Encourage your child to play outside in all kinds of weather.
- Give your child enough time to finish their play.
- Allow your child to take and manage risks in their play.
- If you have to stop your child playing, try to give them plenty of warning to allow them to bring their play to a close.

Dealing with risk

Children and young people need opportunities to play in lots of different situations, experiencing adventure and challenge. Play should be free and safe. Your child will learn to manage risks and make appropriate choices about where, how and when they play.

While risks are real, they need to be kept in proportion and controlled. They shouldn't affect the opportunities children and young people have to play outside. The goal for you as parents is not to eliminate risk in play, but to weigh up the risks and the benefits. Learning to manage risks and challenges will help your child or young person to grow and develop into a healthy, confident adult.

Some useful phrases to respond to risk-taking activities:

- 'Go as high as you are confident.'
- 'Stop where you feel safe.'
- 'Look at what that other boy/girl is doing.'
- 'What do you think?'

- 'Can you go a little further?'
- 'Remember what happened the last time? What did you do that worked?'
- 'That's OK, have another go.'
- 'I'll stand here, just in case you need some help.'
- 'Think it through.'

Related links

[Play Strategy for Scotland: Our Vision](#)

The national play strategy is available to read online or to download from the Scottish Government website.

[Play Talk Read](#)

Easy, fun ways to help your child be happier, learn more and enjoy a better start in life.

[Outdoor safety for kids](#)

Browse some basic safety guidelines for children.

[Water safety for children](#)

Find tips on keeping children safe around water.

[Child-proofing your home](#)

Get advice on keeping your house safe for children.