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TO PLAY



# PLAY AND CARE

The relationship between play and care is often fractious, with concerns around balancing the need to allow children freedom to play with independence and autonomy and constraining their freedom in the interests of safety. This PlayBoard briefing paper explores the debate around the impact of care on the quality of children's play experience.

## Play

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*Play has the greatest value for the child when it is free and his own*

**(Issacs 1968).**

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Play, by definition, is “*freely chosen, personally driven and intrinsically motivated*” (Hughes). The importance of play in the development of children and in preparing them for adulthood is universally accepted. As such, play invariably involves a level of risk and challenge for children, and for this reason is all the more engaging to the child and has a greater capacity for the child to develop.

## Care

“**Care**” is described in the English Dictionary as “*protection, charge, and supervision*”. Whilst play is generally accepted to be child-focused and child-led, care on the other hand tends to be viewed also as part of an adult agenda for children.

### Play, Care and the Family

Research has shown that in recent years, family values and parent's views on necessary levels of supervision, impact on the child's freedom to ‘go out and play’ freely (Petrie, 1986).

There are concerns around allowing children the freedom to come and go from “open access” PlayClubs, playgrounds and other provision as they choose, and ensuring their safety and parents' peace of mind.

Evidence that children are being denied opportunities to play freely because of their parent's anxiety for their safety has become newsworthy in recent times. Although parents have every right to protect their children from harm from strangers, abduction and worries of traffic, there is the very real danger that exaggerating these fears leads to over-protectiveness. Research from The Children's Society reveals that children are so cosseted from challenging play that they cannot assess risk for themselves. In addition, the Mental Health Foundation, in findings published from

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an inquiry into children's mental health, revealed that a rising incidence of stress and more serious problems was linked, in part, to children no longer being allowed to take risks in unsupervised play.

## **Play and Care Provision**

There are also tensions in the play/care provision debate around the identification of customer/client/user groups, and prioritising the needs of children and parents. Within playwork, the customer/client/user is the child with activities, facilities and provision designed according to their needs. However, in some cases, providers appear uncertain as to who their target group actually is. Conflict exists in some quarters where providers feel that they are primarily providing care for children whose parents wish to access training, employment and education opportunities and for parents who can afford to pay the market price for childcare, with the play element coming secondary.

In recognising the implications of the above, PlayBoard as a play agency, felt strongly committed to exploring its conviction on providing school age childcare (playcare) which offered parents the peace of mind they were paying for but also a stimulating, challenging and safe environment for children. The result is the PlayCare initiative:-

The PlayCare Initiative has assisted in the development of an infrastructure of community PlayClubs, established by organisations originating from a grass-roots level and comprising parents and community representatives. The Clubs have been formed in order to ensure that a multitude of needs of parents, children and the local community are met. In the case of PlayClubs, PlayBoard has been emphasising the need to provide quality, liberated and accessible play opportunities within a care setting, thus fulfilling the often-competing needs of child and parent.

Although many children attend PlayClubs because of demands placed on their working parents, the playworkers within the PlayClubs strive to address this issue by ensuring that the provision itself is child-centred and focused, promoting children's participation in decision-making, programme planning, choosing play activities and purchasing play equipment, etc. The clubs also provide children with their own space to play freely with friends or relax after a hard day at school. PlayClubs present children with the opportunity to participate in structured activities such as arts and crafts, drama, music and sport, *if the child wishes to do so*. In this way, balance is achieved.

The vast majority of out of school clubs, whether “care” based or “open access” offer the playwork curriculum which is the guarantee of quality recognised by National Training Organisations for both the play and care sectors and the Qualifications Curriculum Authority. This ensures that school age children have a *choice* of activities that are *specific* to their development. Also, services should be facilitated by playworkers who are skilled and qualified in planning creative, stimulating play within care and open access environments.

## **Conclusion**

Although concerns exist, there is a certain amount of interdependence between play and care, with tensions appearing to stem from the target user group of provision. Quality playwork, regardless of the setting, is intrinsically caring. By the same measure, quality care for children has creative and stimulating play opportunities at its heart.

A balance needs to be struck between protecting children and infringing their rights and appropriate provision which takes account of the varied play needs of children which are highly complex and multi-faceted. That balance should take account of the very clear differences between play and care for school age children. Restricting the child’s freedom to take risks and access stimulating play opportunities could result in children growing up less independent and without the social skills that come from interactive, challenging play.

In Northern Ireland, government recognises the need to support care provision but does not fund free play provision at regional level at all. It is crucial that all who have a responsibility for children recognise the fact that throughout their lives, children have a right to quality play, care and education and that these services should be provided by government to ensure the holistic, healthy development of children.



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