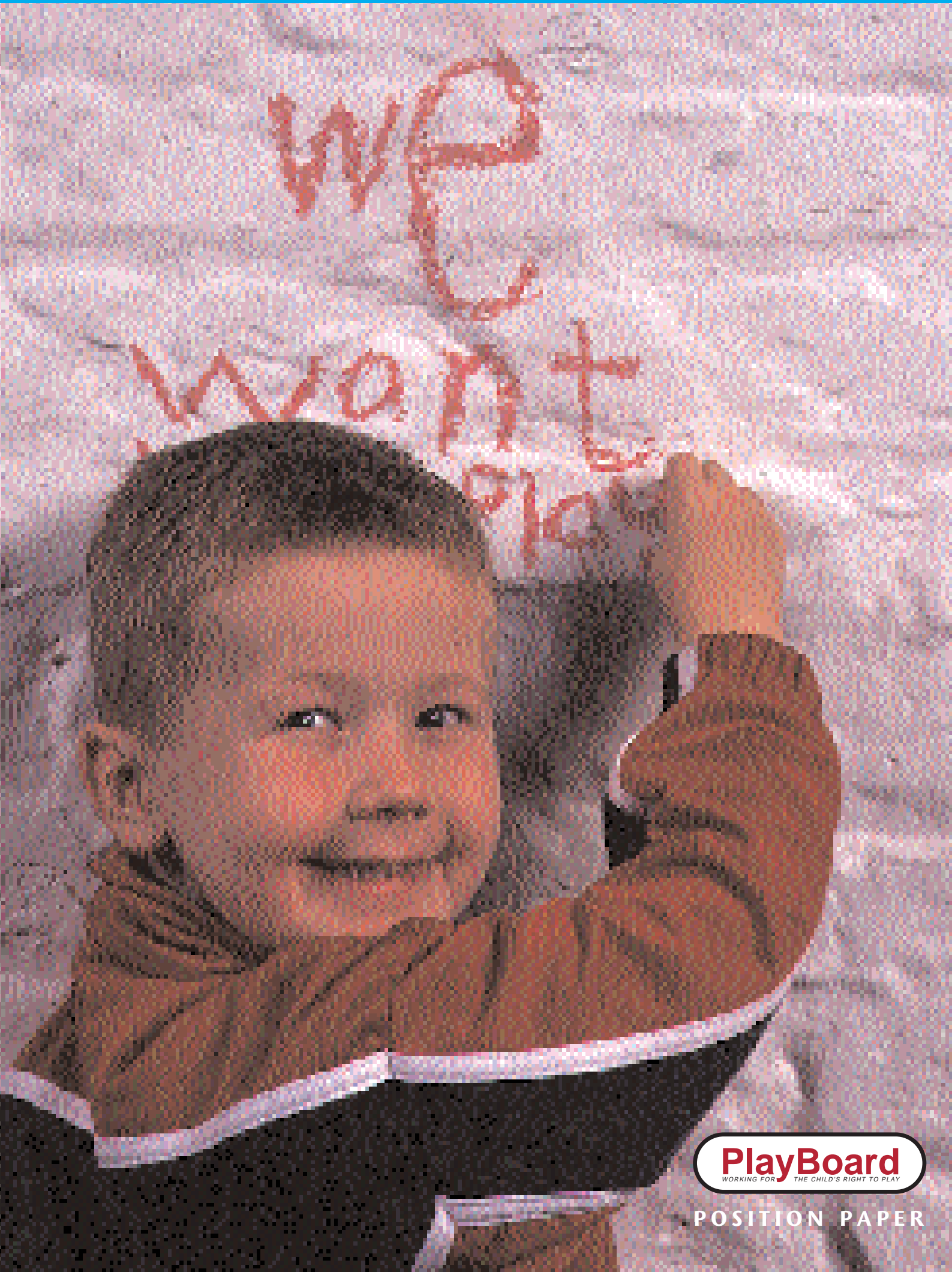


A POSITION PAPER ON PLAY



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- “ “ 1. State Parties recognise the right of the child 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.
2. State Parties shall ... encourage the provision of appropriate and equal opportunities for cultural, artistic, recreational and leisure activity. ” ”
- (UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, 1989)**

- “ “ Play... expresses a child's relation to himself and his environment and without adequate opportunity for play, normal and satisfactory emotional development is not possible ” ”
- (Lowenfield, Action for Play, 1997)**

The importance of play in contributing to the general health and well-being of children, extending through childhood and beyond, is universally acknowledged. As an essential ingredient to the social, physical, intellectual, creative and emotional development of children, play provides a mechanism for children to explore the world around them:

- **Social play** enables children to learn communication, negotiation and listening skills, helping them learn to interact in a positive and appropriate manner with others and develop self esteem and confidence. Evidence suggests that children with access to quality play opportunities have demonstrated better leadership, entrepreneurial and problem-solving skills to peers who do not have the same access.
- **Physical play** has a direct impact on fitness, strengthening bones, aiding emotional health and increasing the capacity of the cardiovascular system. Even non-physical activities, such as board games and arts and craft activities, assist in both physical and mental brain development, stimulating the brain and helping develop fine motor skills. In addition, Northern Ireland has one of the highest rates of coronary heart disease in the world, and evidence suggests that the course of events leading to this disease begin in childhood. Also, research into children's mental health demonstrated a link between rising levels of stress and mental health problems in children and restrictions on their ability to access challenging unsupervised play.

- Play assists in a child's **intellectual development** as it is a learning process in itself. Play offers a holistic approach to learning, incorporating social, emotional, creative and physical development. Through the use of books, or whilst reading or writing, playing games or using drama, children are developing cognitively and intellectually. Play provides the child with opportunities to freely express himself/herself and prepares the child for later life:

“ *The adult's ability to use free time for the cultivation of the mind, spirit and personality ... is greatly determined by the child's experiences during the formative years* (Levy). ”

- **Creative play** provides children with opportunities to express themselves, develop creatively, experiment and learn how and why things work. Children absorb information and critically examine the adult world. By doing, risking and failing in play, children learn how to deal with their environment and to understand their abilities and limitations.
- The focus of play is about the child being at the centre of the process. Helping children make, establish, maintain and dissolve relationships are fundamental to **emotional development**. Play also has a therapeutic role in helping children work through negative experiences, express themselves, build relationships and establish trust with peers and adults.

Play and Society

Children learn from an early age about gender, culture, race, disability, and because of the political history of Northern Ireland, sectarianism. As children grow and develop, their attitudes become more concrete and by the age of about nine, they will have acquired the values that will stay with them for the rest of their lives. Consequently, negative, stereotypical images of other individuals or groups may also be absorbed. Play opportunities that include and create positive images of all members of society have a crucial role in the healing process.

PlayBoard has, in its ground-breaking *Games Not Names* training and resource pack, identified sectarian behaviour in the play activities of children as young as three. Children's play provides for leadership skills vital for a future, prosperous society. Play has also demonstrated its effectiveness at bringing divided communities together. PlayBoard is committed therefore to ensuring that free play opportunities are also free from discrimination so that the play truly belongs to the child.

Conclusion

As demonstrated by Article 31 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, the entitlement of the child to participate in play, leisure, cultural and artistic activities is a right - not a privilege. However, as is often the case where children are concerned, this right is often overlooked when adult agendas are given priority over the needs of children.

The fact that access to quality play opportunities is important to the child's healthy development is indisputable. However, in a wider perspective, good play provision can - and should - result in a healthier society. Quality play provision has a role to play in impacting on the reduction of poverty and crime, lowering health service costs, creating longevity, developing a sense of community and citizenship and helping children grow up with a more balanced perspective.

For these reasons, PlayBoard as an organisation is committed to addressing the imbalance between the child's *right* to quality play and children's *actual* access to quality play.



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