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A Play Manifesto



Introduction

The right to play is fundamental for every child. Our children – and our society – will be much the poorer if they're denied that right. There is growing evidence that many aspects of modern life – from computer games to traffic-filled streets – are mitigating against the playful childhood most parents and grandparents took for granted. We need to reassert children's right to play by ensuring that our children have age-appropriate facilities and sufficient time to play freely. This manifesto sets out the key steps needed to make that happen.

If this *cost-effective* manifesto is enacted, it will help achieve:

- a **reduction in the spiralling costs of obesity** for Northern Ireland's health service and economy
- a **reduction in youth crime and anti-social behaviour**

What PlayBoard wants

1. We want the Northern Ireland Executive to earmark annually a portion of the Children and Young People's Fund for play provision and support

Here's why:

- **more than a third of children in the UK never play outside**
- nearly half of all children in the UK spend more than 3 hours a day watching TV or playing computer games¹
- **two in five children in Northern Ireland are unable to access appropriate play, leisure or sports opportunities²**
- **childhood obesity is increasing at an alarming rate:** the proportion of both 12 year olds and 15 year olds in Northern Ireland who are overweight or obese has risen by more than a quarter in the past ten years³
- **nearly a quarter of all P1 pupils in Northern Ireland are either overweight or obese⁴**
- Unstructured vigorous physical play is one of the most effective ways for children to burn off calories - the World Health Organisation recommends 60 minutes each day⁵

- **Children in Northern Ireland see a lack of age-appropriate play and leisure facilities in their area as being a major cause of anti-social behaviour⁶**
- A lack of normal play experiences may be a factor in very violent and anti-social behaviour among adults in later life⁷
- **Research conducted in Wrexham after an adventure playground had been opened showed the rate of juvenile offending fell by 54%⁸**
- Thames Valley Police found a marked reduction in vandalism and petty crime following the installation of play and youth shelter facilities⁹

2. We want the Northern Ireland Executive to use £2m from the Children and Young People's Fund to roll a special programme of school playground support to every primary school

Here's why:

- for the large number of children who never play outdoors and for those without adequate play provision at home or nearby, the **play provision and support provided by a school may represent a child's only opportunity to engage in physically challenging outdoor play**
- **most school playgrounds are little more than flat and uninspiring pieces of tarmac – but schools can transform them at little cost, and use them to much better advantage if they're shown how**
- **PlayBoard is doing just that with its Positive PlayGrounds programme – 70 primary schools are already benefiting from this cost-effective and innovative scheme but, without dedicated government funding, most primary schools in Northern Ireland will miss out**
- The participating schools tell us that Positive PlayGrounds has resulted in:
 - **an increase in children's activity and participation levels**
 - **a significant reduction in bullying**
 - **improved attention-spans in class**
- **the money is available** – the government has already allocated £10m from the Children and Young People's Fund to be distributed to all schools in Northern Ireland in 2006/7 – this follows on from a similar

distribution in 2005/6 for which no purpose was specified – both sums are separate from the Extended Schools programme, also being financed through the Fund¹⁰

- **in England, the government has invested millions of pounds in school playground improvements and support – so why not here?**

3. We want the Northern Ireland Executive to stipulate that primary schools provide a lunchtime break of at least one hour and a morning break of at least 15 minutes

Here's why:

- while it's commonplace for primary schools to provide breaks of this length in England, it appears many primary schools in Northern Ireland only give a lunchtime break of 45-50 minutes, and occasionally even less – **do you think that's enough time for a child to eat their lunch properly, and have time to play and socialise?**
- research commissioned by the Northern Ireland Children's Commissioner found **many children in Northern Ireland want more time for recreational play and rest during the school day¹¹**
- research shows the longer children work without having a break-time, the less attentive they are¹²

4. We want the Northern Ireland Executive to fund teams of community-based 'play rangers' to help facilitate safe and challenging children's play in local parks, streets and neighbourhoods

Here's why:

- nearly **one in five children in Northern Ireland is concerned about the lack of safety in the places where they play or socialise¹³**
- two-thirds of parents in the UK are worried about letting their children play outside¹⁴
- for many children, the streets in front of their homes are where they play most often

- enterprising local authorities in England have pioneered the deployment of 'play rangers' whose remit is to facilitate play opportunities for children, especially where children and/or their parents don't feel it's safe to play outside unsupervised, or where children can't easily access good public play facilities

But does play really matter?

YES!

Play is a surprisingly simple solution to what appear to be complex problems! Play is an innate drive. By prioritising play,

we can tackle the issues of obesity and anti-social behaviour in a simple and natural way. Furthermore, the positive developmental aspects of play assist children in being strong, competent and better equipped to meet the challenges of a global economy.

This manifesto has outlined four simple cost-effective measures which could make a real difference. We hope that the new Northern Ireland Executive won't lose the opportunity to act now to provide a more playful and much richer childhood for our young generation.

1 Royal Bank of Scotland news release, 16th September 2004. The research was carried out by NOP World. Nearly 1000 children aged 7-12 years and parents across the UK were interviewed for the survey.

2 Kilkelly, U. et al. (2004) *Children's Rights in Northern Ireland* (Belfast: NICCY), p. 159.

3 *Investing for Health* (2005) *Fit Futures: Focus on Food, Activity and Young People* (Belfast: Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety), pp. 5-6.

4 House of Commons Hansard Written Answers, 5th June 2006.

5 Mackett, Professor Roger (2004) *Making children's lives more active*, updated edition (London: Centre for Transport Studies, University College London).

6 Davey, C. (2004) *An Analysis of Research Conducted with School Children into Children's Rights in Northern Ireland* (Belfast: NICCY).

7 *Play Wales* (2003) *Play Deprivation* (Cardiff: Play Wales), footnote 5, citing Brown and Lomax, 1969, in Brown 1998

8 Department for Culture, Media and Sport (1999) *National Strategy for Neighbourhood Renewal: PAT 10: The Contribution of Sports and the Arts* (London: DCMS), p.23.

9 *National Playing Fields* (2000) *Best Play: What Play Provision should do for Children* (London: NPFA, Children's Play Council and PlayLink) p.14, citing Hampshire and Wilkinson, 1999

10 NIO news release, 5th June 2006.

11 See Footnote 7.

12 Pellegrini, Anthony D. and Blatchford, Peter (2002) *The Psychologist*, Vol. 15, No. 2., pp60-62.

13 Kilkelly, U. et al., op. cit., p. 162.

14 See footnote 1.