



# TAKING OUTDOOR PLAY SERIOUSLY

**Advice for Schools:  
Prioritise Play and take Learning Outdoors**



**PlayBoard NI - Leading the Play Agenda**

[www.playboard.org](http://www.playboard.org)

## Advice for schools - prioritise play and take learning outdoors

Never has getting outdoors been more important. As a result of Covid-19 we have all had to spend more time indoors, and away from our friends and colleagues.

In our recent survey *Your Voice Matters*, children told us they missed their school, their friends, and their teachers. Sadly, children told us they were fearful that their teachers and peers would have forgotten them.

We asked children what they missed most about not being in school and they said:



**91.46%**

Meeting up with  
friends

**71.34%**

Playing in the  
playground

**51.22%**

Talking to my  
teacher

Thankfully, it is now time to get back to doing what we all do best - playing, learning and having fun outdoors!

### Three reasons why you should take your lessons outdoors:

1. It is safer – ‘The scientific consensus is that risk of transmission of COVID 19 is much lower outdoors than indoors. This is primarily because of the natural ventilation provided by air currents which disperse viruses very quickly, diluting them to low concentrations.’ (Ball, Gill and Yates, 2020)
2. Being outdoors helps to improve children’s well-being, happiness and readiness for formal learning. (Khan, Bell and Wood, 2020)
3. Playing builds children’s emotional resilience and physical and mental health strength. (Ernst and Burcak, 2019)

And if that is not enough, playing and learning outdoors provides an opportunity for children to develop a life-long appreciation of the natural world.

## Is your school play ready?

**Things you might want to consider to help make the most of your school grounds for play and learning:**

### **Risk Assessment – Risk Benefit Assessment**

- Update your existing risk assessment plan to incorporate Covid-19 guidance
- Develop a risk benefit assessment for activities and practice and ensure all staff are aware of the details
- Consider access and storage of play and learning equipment and resources
- Implement a maintenance and cleansing regime for material and resources before and after every outdoor play session and get the children to help
- Put up or highlight best practice public health messages outside.

### **Availability of space**

- Review your existing space and consider restricted areas to ascertain if they could be freed up and made safe for play and learning
- Create different zones for different types of play and align the space with a specific curricular outcome area
- Establish one-way routes for entering and leaving the outdoor space – make this a playful activity with playful signage.

### **Keeping pupils and staff safe**

- Establish play bubbles to minimise contact between year groups
- Keep abreast of, and implement the latest Public Health Agency and Education Authority advice and guidance
- Develop a good robust outdoor play and learning policy incorporating core public health measures
- Provide for enhanced hand hygiene practices i.e. outdoor hand washing facilities or sanitising stations.

### **Partnership**

- Reach out to parents and provide information to explain the rationale for hosting classes outdoors
- Issue your outdoor play and learning policy to parents
- Ask parents to provide suitable outdoor clothing in the event of inclement weather
- Establish a participation forum for children. Discuss plans for play and taking learning outdoors and establish a process of co-decision making with the children.

## Let's get outdoors and support learning through play

### Play links the curriculum

The Northern Ireland curriculum identifies six areas of learning:

1. Language and Literacy
2. Mathematics and Numeracy
3. The Arts (including Art and Design, Drama, and Music)
4. The World Around Us
5. Personal Development and Mutual Understanding (PDMU)
6. Physical Education

The outdoor environment provides rich and diverse learning experiences. Play can support the curriculum. Different play zones allow free movement where children can take ownership of their play and learning choices.

How play links to the curriculum:

**Physical Play** zones are fantastic spaces to teach a number of subjects including PE, as it gives children the freedom to move in a number of ways. When moving and manipulating objects, children develop their spatial awareness, gross, and fine motor skills which are an essential foundation for writing skills.

*Physical Education/Literacy and Language/Mathematics and Numeracy*

**Creative Play** allows children to make connections between areas of learning, therefore extending their understanding. Creative zone activities help children to express their emotions and create their own stories and use their imagination.

*PDMU/The Arts/Language and Literacy*

**Natural Play** there is no better way to teach children about the world around us than to fully immerse them in it. With the unpredictability of our weather, each day stimulates new learning opportunities and provides resources for children. Nature zones encourage children to investigate and learn through discovery, observation and investigation.

*The World Around Us/Mathematics and Numeracy/Language and Literacy*

**Loose Parts Play** populating an area with loose parts can ignite children's imaginations to create play props or construct a desired item, e.g. fort, stage, skyrocket! Playing with loose parts encourages planning, resourcing and sourcing, negotiating skills, establishing rules and measuring and exploring different concepts and shapes.

*Language and Literacy/Mathematics and Numeracy/The Arts/The World Around Us/Physical Education*

**Chill Out** zones are fantastic areas for children to relax and reflect away from the chaos of the classroom. Teachers could use this area to support independent reading and learning in PDMU. Chill out zones provide children with the space, time and opportunity to engage in reflections and mindfulness.

*PDMU/Language and Literacy*



## Play helps children deal with crisis

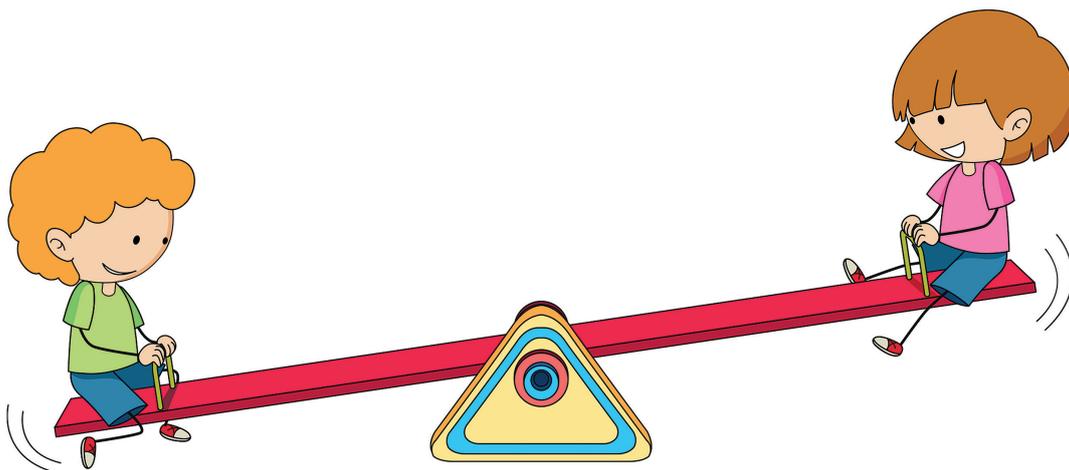
Play is natural, when you observe children at play you will note it can be active, quiet, done in groups or whilst on your own. Play is an intrinsically motivated action, it is often an unplanned process in which thinking, feeling and doing can flourish. When children are playing, they can be inventive and creative; it is the most natural and open way children learn. Aside from the wide reaching benefits identified above, play is also therapeutic, it allows children to develop their inner resources and build resilience to cope with and make sense of the difficulties and uncertainties they experience through crisis situations such as they have recently experienced during Covid-19.

## Give your Permission, Space and Time for Play in the new school day!

Children have been in lockdown; now more than ever time for free play needs to be protected, not dismissed because of Covid-19 restrictions.

On return to school children will need three things from you, their teachers. In order to re-adjust, relax and become familiar with new routines and catch up with friends, children will need permission, space and time to play.

- **Permission:** Schools should promote a playful culture by promoting a supportive attitude towards play throughout the school day.
- **Space:** Schools should review their available space and have a long-term plan for protecting and enhancing their spaces for play.
- **Time:** Schools should not replace children's free play with alternative learning initiatives; these should occur during curriculum time.



## References

Ball, D., Gill, T. and Yates, A. (2020) COVID 19 and Children's Play. 1st ed. [pdf] UK: Play Safety Forum. Available at <https://playsafetyforum.files.wordpress.com/2020/06/covid-and-childrens-play-psf-1.pdf>

Ernst, J., and Burcak, F. (2019) Young Children's Contributions to Sustainability: The influence of Nature Play on Curiosity, Executive Function Skills, Creative Thinking, and Resilience. Sustainability 2019, 11 (15), 4212. Available at [www.mdpi.com/2071-1050/11/15/4212](http://www.mdpi.com/2071-1050/11/15/4212)

Khan, M., Bell, S., and Wood, J. (2020) Place, Pedagogy and Play: Participation, Design and Research with Children. London: Routledge.

## Useful links

PlayBoard NI - Space to Play - A Design Toolkit [www.playboard.org/shop/](http://www.playboard.org/shop/)

PlayBoard NI - Coronavirus - Play Matters [www.playboard.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/Coronavirus-Play-Matters-More-Than-It-Ever-Did.pdf](http://www.playboard.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/Coronavirus-Play-Matters-More-Than-It-Ever-Did.pdf)

PlayBoard NI – Play Matters resources - [www.playboard.org/what-we-do/play-matters-project/play-matters-resources/](http://www.playboard.org/what-we-do/play-matters-project/play-matters-resources/)

Department of Education - Education Restart Programme including New School Day guidance [www.education-ni.gov.uk/landing-pages/education-restart](http://www.education-ni.gov.uk/landing-pages/education-restart)

Education Authority guidance for schools [www.eani.org.uk/supporting-ea-staff](http://www.eani.org.uk/supporting-ea-staff)

Public Health Agency guidance - [www.publichealth.hscni.net/news/covid-19-what-situation-northern-ireland](http://www.publichealth.hscni.net/news/covid-19-what-situation-northern-ireland)

Play Scotland - Play Types Toolkit - Bringing more play into the school day [www.playscotland.org/resources/print/Play-Scotland-Play-Types-Toolkit-bringing-more-play-into-the-school-day.pdf?plsctl\\_id=11593](http://www.playscotland.org/resources/print/Play-Scotland-Play-Types-Toolkit-bringing-more-play-into-the-school-day.pdf?plsctl_id=11593)

Inspiring Scotland - Loose parts play - A toolkit [www.playscotland.org/resources/print/Loose-Parts-Play-A-Toolkit-pdf-1.pdf?plsctl\\_id=10920](http://www.playscotland.org/resources/print/Loose-Parts-Play-A-Toolkit-pdf-1.pdf?plsctl_id=10920)

Education Scotland - Outdoor Learning <https://education.gov.scot/improvement/Documents/hwb24-ol-support.pdf>

Play Wales - A Play Friendly School [www.playwales.org.uk/login/uploaded/documents/Schools/Schools%20guidance/A%20play%20friendly%20school%202020.pdf](http://www.playwales.org.uk/login/uploaded/documents/Schools/Schools%20guidance/A%20play%20friendly%20school%202020.pdf)

Play First: Supporting Children's Social and Emotional Wellbeing During and After Lockdown [www.sussex.ac.uk/about/documents/play-first--supporting-childrens-social-and-emotional-wellbeing-during-and-after-lockdown.pdf](http://www.sussex.ac.uk/about/documents/play-first--supporting-childrens-social-and-emotional-wellbeing-during-and-after-lockdown.pdf)



**WE ALL  
MUST DO IT  
TO GET  
THROUGH IT**

 **STAY SAFE**

 **SAVE LIVES**



Department of  
**Education**

PlayBoard is the lead organisation for the development and promotion of children and young people's play in Northern Ireland.

PlayBoard's TOPS (Taking Outdoor Play Seriously) Quality Assurance Programme and Award for Outdoor Play is aimed at supporting schools to bring about a comprehensive transformation of their school environment in order to encourage and support outdoor play and outdoor learning.

[www.playboard.org/what-we-do/tops-taking-outdoor-play-seriously/](http://www.playboard.org/what-we-do/tops-taking-outdoor-play-seriously/)

For more information on PlayBoard's school programmes email:

[shauneen.mccusker@playboard.co.uk](mailto:shauneen.mccusker@playboard.co.uk)

**PlayBoard NI**

7 Crescent Gardens  
Belfast BT7 1NS  
T: 028 9080 3380  
E: [info@playboard.org](mailto:info@playboard.org)  
W: [www.playboard.org](http://www.playboard.org)



**Social Media**

