



The Right to Play

Young
Researchers
Investigate
Article 31
2013





Play is an
entitlement
of childhood
(UNCRC, 1989).





YOUNG RESEARCH TEAM

PlayBoard's Young Research Team

PlayBoard's Young Research Team are a group of ten children and young people aged from 8-12 years old who have been supported by PlayBoard to become young peer researchers, collecting the views of young people from their area in Northern Ireland. The team have learnt about the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child and in particular, the 'right to play' (Article 31). The young researchers developed new research skills and carried out their own peer research through interviews with other children.

This report details how PlayBoard's young researchers went about exploring the views of children and young people about play and

about things that might stop them from enjoying their 'right to play'. They wanted to find out about what and how children and young people play and what can help make the right to play a reality for children and young people. *"We have been listening to what our friends and other children have to say about their right to play and telling adults what children and young people think"*.

We hope that this information will help governments, councils, teachers and parents understand what they should do to make the right to play a reality for children in Northern Ireland and make it a better place.





Introduction

Children’s play is first and foremost a matter of human rights. As enshrined in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC, 1989), all children and young people have the right to play and have an intrinsic need to play. Play provides opportunities for children and young people to be free to choose what they do, and to challenge themselves, take risks and enjoy freedoms.

More recently the importance of play to the health and wellbeing of children and young people was emphasised by the United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) in the General Comment 17 on Article 31, which was released in February 2013. Recognising the importance of play, the General Comment states that play is *“essential to the health and well-being of children and young people; the development of creativity, imagination, self-confidence, self-efficacy and physical, social cognitive and emotional strength and skills”* (GC 17, para. 9).

PlayBoard encourages children and young people’s participation and supports them to have their voices heard in line with UNCRC Article 12 – Respect for the Views of the Child). PlayBoard fundamentally believes that it is important for children and young people to have a say in making laws and policies, and in designing services and facilities that relate to the right to play. By way of example, play policies or laws to do with schools; the design of parks and other local facilities or on the availability of play opportunities in their area. Children and young people have the right to say what they think on all subjects and adults who are making the decisions about children must take account of their views. Children and young people should be supported to be able to express their views and be able to make free choices about the play activities they want to take part in.

What is the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child and the 'Right to Play'?

The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child

The countries of the United Nations have written conventions which say they agree to make the world peaceful and fair. The convention of the rights of the child means that governments should make sure that every child is treated fairly and equally. This is a promise made by governments to children to ensure that children's rights are respected, protected and fulfilled.

The Right to Play

Article 31 of this convention is a promise made by almost every government to children and young people. It says that children have the right to rest, play and take part in art and cultural activities¹. In particular, we are interested in that every child has the right to play.

¹ Article 31 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child covers a range of areas including play, recreation, rest and the right to participate in cultural and artistic activities. The wording of Article 31 is: 1.States Parties recognize 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.

"It's not safe because cars are driving up and down my street and people are parking their cars on the footpath".

What is play and why is it important?

Play is fun, challenging, uncertain and flexible. It can happen anywhere and at any time when children have the opportunity. If someone makes you do it, it is not playing! Although parents and carers can help children play, they should not force children to play.

Play means having free choice. Children play purely because they want to play, and not to achieve something else. Play takes many different forms. It doesn't have to be physical activity – it can be purely imagination. Children can play in groups or alone. The way children play changes as they get older. Many adults think play is unnecessary. However, play is a vital part of childhood, and is necessary for every child's healthy development – not just physical development but social, mental and emotional development too.

General Comment 17 of the UNCRC tells us how important play is. It states that children need to play in order to grow, learn and that play is a way of taking part in everyday life. It is valuable purely for the fun and enjoyment that children get from it. Research shows that playing is central to children's development, and that in the early years it is especially important for the growth of the brain. Through play, children learn by doing, they explore and experience the world around them learning to understand it. Children can play on their own, together with other children or with adults who support them. Loving and caring adults can help children to develop through play.

For adults, playing with children helps them to understand the child's point of view. It builds respect between adults and children and helps them communicate better. Children benefit from joining in activities with adults, including organised sports and games. However, if there is too much adult control, children don't benefit as much.



Challenges in making the right to play a reality for all children

The general comment addresses challenges to making the right to play a reality for all children, these include:

- Lack of awareness of the importance of play;
- Dangerous environments;
- Adults who don't like to see children use public places;
- Getting the balance right between risk and safety;
- No access to nature;
- Too much pressure to do well in school;
- Children and young people's days being too structured and programmed;
- Electronic media; and
- Advertising of toys and play activities.



What governments must do:

Article 31 says governments must guarantee the right to play for all children.

There are three kinds of things governments have to do:

- a) *Respect rights*: the government must not stop children and young people from enjoying their right to play;
- b) *Protect rights*: the government must stop other people from interfering with children's right to play;
- c) *Fulfil rights*: the government must make sure that all children get the necessary services, provision and opportunities to enable them to enjoy their right to play.

Even where resources are limited, the government must do all it can to make sure all children can enjoy their right to play, and must not do anything that stops the enjoyment of this right.

The Young Researchers report what they did:

From May to October in 2013, we met most Saturday mornings in the PlayBoard office. In our first meeting we made our own name badges and played games to get to know each other.

We learnt about the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child on the 'right to play'. We learnt that all children have the right to play, and drew pictures to show how we like to play and what happens if we can't play. We also had a quiz to learn more about the United Nations and children's rights on the 'right to play'.

We worked on a booklet about the General Comment on the Right to Play and tried to make it easier to understand and then we played games outside with the parachute. In our third session we had a treasure hunt, following clues around the PlayBoard building to find out more about the General Comment on the Right to Play.

By doing this we were able to understand the General Comment more and write our own easy-to-understand leaflet.

PlayBoard helped us turn our easy-to-read leaflet into a poster and took it to the official launch of the General Comment at the United Nations in Geneva.

After this we talked about what we needed to find out in our research about the right to play. Everyone had ideas for questions to ask in our interviews. We agreed on 12 questions to put on our questionnaire sheet. We developed this questionnaire and carried out a pilot first.

During the summer holidays we carried out field research through face to face interviews with 111 other children aged 4 to 17 (76 girls and 35 boys). PlayBoard also helped us get information from children at after-school clubs in rural areas. We gathered all the information together and looked at what we found.

We also did drawings of what our ideal playground would look like. We discussed the findings of the interviews and these were used to inform the studies recommendations. We brought our recommendations together and then worked together to turn it into a presentation for the PlayBoard conference and report. In our last session we practiced doing the presentation for the conference and added the finishing touches to our report.



The findings from our research:

The findings from our research are based on the following themes: children and young people's favourite things to play; where they play; when and who they play with; what stops them from playing; what happens when they can't play; playing outside; being allowed to play; safe places to play in their area and anything they would change in their area so they could play outside more.

Favourite things to play

We asked children what they thought and we found out that traditional street games are still the most popular kind of play. Football (soccer) is the most popular sport, and was more popular than playing on the Xbox and/ or Playstation. Some girls said they would like to play football but cant.

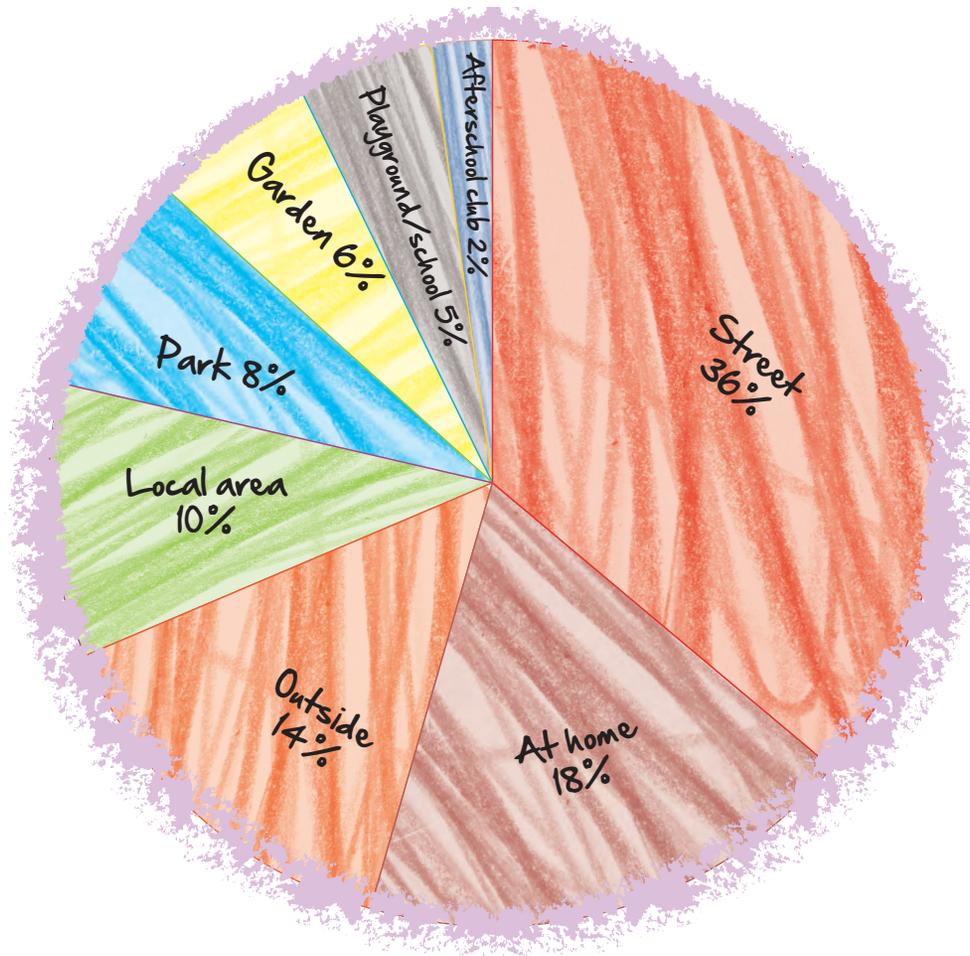
Table A. Favourite things to play



Where children and young people play

We asked children where they like to play, most children said they play outdoors when they can but they also play at home indoors. Children said that they play mostly in the street and the next most common place is their home. Children said they also play in the park, some said in their gardens, at after-school clubs and in the school playground.

Table B. Where children and young people play



When do children and young people play and who they play with

Most children said they play every day after school. Most children also said that they play with friends (69%) and some play with brothers and sisters (15%) or neighbours (4%). A few children said they play by themselves or with their iPad or tablet.

What stops children and young people from playing

We found out that rain or bad weather is the main problem that stops children playing outside. They said they don't want to get wet or parents don't want them to get wet.

Traffic can stop children playing and can cause accidents. Traffic should be controlled so children can play safely. For example: speed-bumps, safe crossings, and warning signs that children are playing.

Children can sometimes feel like they have too much homework and it sometimes take up too much of their time.

Fighting or rioting can be a problem that makes it dangerous to play outside (*"but there are some children who want to go to the riots, as for them it is fun and exciting"*).

Some parents can be over-protective: They don't let their children play outside enough. Often children are grounded as a punishment, stopping them from playing.

Also children themselves can stop other children from playing, by bullying them or just not letting them play.

What happens when children and young people can't play

It is important for children to be allowed to play. We found out that when they can't play, children can feel sad, upset, angry or annoyed. At times they cry and feel lonely. It is important to recognise this and let children play as much as possible.

Playing outside

Most children said they were allowed to play outside whenever they wanted to (60%), though some had said they have to finish their homework first. Some children said they were only allowed to play outside sometimes (37%), most of these were younger children. Overall, most children want to play outside more than what they are allowed to.

"I feel sad, angry and upset when I can't play".

“I would change grumpy people that shout when children make noise”.

Safe places to play outside, near where they live

Most children said they have a safe place to play outside near where they live (72%).

About 1 in 5 said they don't have a safe place to play outside (21%). Those who didn't have a safe place to play said it was because:

- Cars and traffic, also that they live too close to main roads (and in the countryside – children said there were too many tractors);
- Some children said that the places to play are too far away from home; or that,
- It's too dangerous because of fighting or rioting on the streets.

What I would change in my area so I can play outside more often
“change the waste ground into a big park because it is close to my house”.

“Cars because they're blocking your way so tell people who own the cars to move them to a car park”.

Changes that would children like to see so they could play outside more

Above all, children want to see less cars and traffic, and safer roads. Children also said that they would like to see:

- More parks, and better parks with good playgrounds;
- Less rubbish and cleaner streets;
- Less grumpy people;
- No strangers or bad people hanging around;
- More youth clubs and play centres; and
- Have more friends to play with.

“I want less homework
so I can play”.



Recommendations from the Young Research Team

Important things for schools to think about

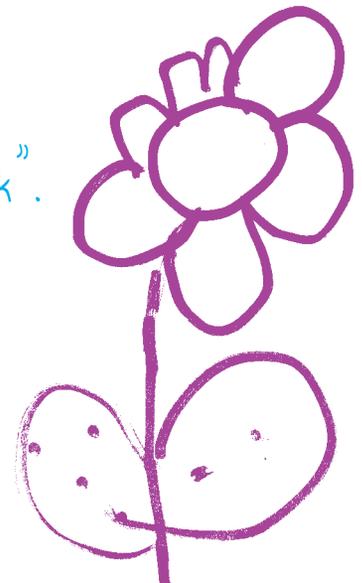
- Have more play in the school day;
- Not give children too much homework;
- Have more learning through play;
- Have longer break-times with more time to play outside;
- Organise more outside play events after school; and,
- Organise more shared play in schools to help bring peace.

Important things for parents to think about

- Let their children play outside more;
- Take their children to the park more often;
- Take more interest in their children’s activities;
- Pay more attention to what their children have to say;
- Don’t ground children as a punishment; and,
- Have a PIN or password to make sure children use on-line computer games safely and sensibly.

“Parents could play more often and add play into their work”.

“Mums and dads should bring us to parks more often
and parents take an interest in our activities”.



Important things for local councils and Government to think about

Children and young people had lots of ideas about what Government and local councils could do to ensure that all children can enjoy their right to play. They felt that the main areas that government and local councils could help with within their local area was to ensure that children and young people have access to play and leisure facilities; have safer communities; make sure that there shared spaces and ensure inclusion for everyone.

- Make more parks, sports fields and play areas;
- Provide better security at parks;
- Have play areas suitable for different ages;
- Keep parks and playgrounds clean;
- Parks and play areas should be shared between communities;
- Provide more zebra crossings and restrict cars in areas where children play;
- Close off some streets and roads for children to play in on a temporary basis;
- Put on more free events for children and families, and help with transport to go to them;
- Have youth centres with disco's and other activities for children so they are not out on the streets at night;
- To have community police on our street who understand the importance of play, to help us feel safe;
- Have children's computer games in a different section than adult games;
- Make sure low income families get help to take their children out, or access to kids' clubs; and,
- Get people to talk instead of fighting.



“Councils can make projects for parks and they could get all the ideas from children”.

Most children said that they would like to see less cars, traffic and safer roads. Some people said that they want “a better park, less grumpy people, less rubbish and more youth clubs”.



“There should be more grass pitches, football pitches and safer places to play”.



“The councils should close off roads for children to play on the street on different days. They should have more free events for children and parents to play”.

Overall Recommendations

General Comment 17 of the UNCRC says children need freedom from stress, availability of rest appropriate for their age and development, availability of leisure time which is free from demands, accessible space and time for play which is free from adult control and management; recognition by parents, teachers and the wider society of the value and legitimacy of Article 31 rights.



Schools

Learning environments should be active and participatory and offer especially in the early years, playful activities and ways of engaging children and young people. As stated in Articles 28 and 29 of the UNCRC, education must be directed to the development of the child's personality, talents and mental and physical abilities to the fullest potential. The UN Committee emphasises that Article 31 rights are of positive benefit to children's educational development and that inclusive education and inclusive play are mutually reinforcing and should be facilitated during the course of every day throughout early childhood education, care and school. While relevant for all children, play is particularly significant in the early years of schooling where research evidence demonstrates that play is an important means through which children learn.

Schools should be open to looking at their policy and practice in regards to children's play and play-time playground experiences, exploring issues of benefits, risks and challenges in play. Schools should look at how they can enhance the valuable and important spaces within the school estate and develop strategies for encouraging physical and social developments amongst children during recess periods.

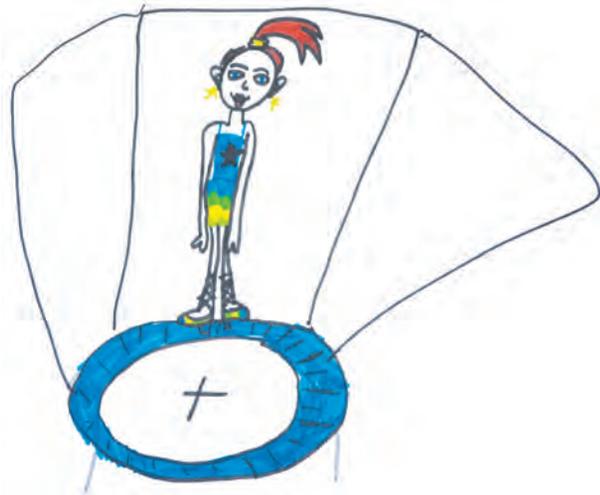
Teaching staff should think of ideas and ways to have fun and interactive playtimes, learn new games and remember the old traditional games. Encourage older children to share and play games with the younger ones in the playground and incorporate a school council and play buddies scheme. Schools should provide a rainy day/wet playtime resource box for those times where children can't get out into the playground. A playground audit can also help schools identify any gaps in their play provision and identify how the children make use of their playground. Schools should include children's voices in the planning and design of their playgrounds and play spaces as well as any ways to include playful learning.

All professionals involved within schools should receive on-going training on the rights of children in terms of play and leisure. Such training would provide guidance on how to create and sustain environments in which the right to play and leisure can be most effectively realised for all children.

Parents

Play is also important for parents too! Despite the increasing pressures of modern life, finding time to play with their children is a great opportunity for them to benefit from the shared experiences that helps strengthen the bond between parent and child. Good quality play needn't cost anything except time.

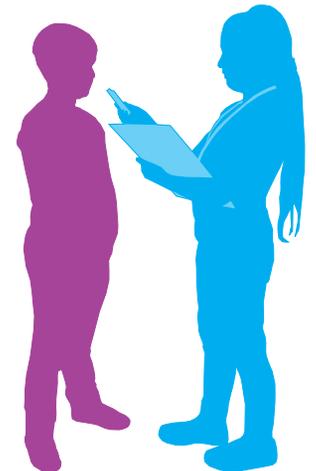
Explore how and why children play and the benefits of play in children's lives. Parents should increase their awareness of play and gain ideas of how to do this both at home and in the community. They can support play at home with the 'stuff' that can be found around the house.



Parents should avail of any guidance, support and facilitation from the Government or organisations on a child's right to play, for example on how to listen to children while playing; create environments that facilitate children's play; allow children to play freely and play with children. It could also address the importance of encouraging creativity and dexterity; balancing safety and discovery; and the development value of both play and guided exposure to recreational activities.

Some tips for parents:

- Try setting aside 20 minutes each day that you are free from distractions and are relaxed in each other's company;
 - Play is a child's world so it's important to let them take the lead;
 - Listen to your child and try not to take control of things;
 - Take time to think about how you used to play as a child, this is a chance to rediscover those simple pleasures over again. Don't feel that you have to be in charge of the play.
- For more ideas PlayBoard's 'Make Time For Play' leaflet has some wonderful ideas on things to play!

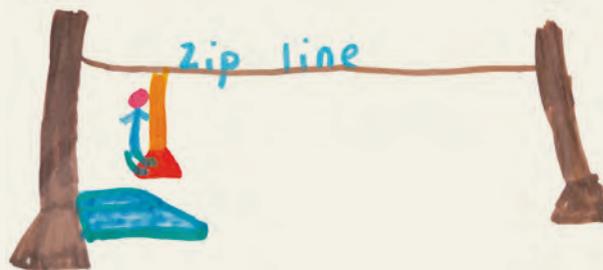


Government

“Councils can make projects for parks and

Investment is needed to raise awareness to challenge widespread cultural attitudes which attach low value to Article 31 rights. As stated in the General Comment 17, Article 31, Government should devote resources into:

- Raising public awareness of both the right to, and the significance of play and leisure for both boys and girls of all ages in contributing to the enjoyment of childhood, promoting the optimum development of the child and building positive learning environments;
- Provide measures to challenge negative attitudes, particularly towards adolescents, which lead to limiting opportunities for the enjoyment of Article 31 rights. In particular, opportunities should be created for children to represent themselves in the media.
- Legislation is required to guarantee access for every child, without discrimination on any ground, to all recreational environments including public and private spaces, natural space, parks, playgrounds, services and events.
- Legislation, regulations and guidelines should be introduced, together with the necessary budgetary allocation, and effective mechanisms for monitoring and enforcement, to ensure that all members of civil society, including the corporate sector comply with the provision of Article 31, including:
 - Establishment of safe and accessibility standards for all play and recreational facilities, toys and games equipment;
 - Obligations to incorporate provision and opportunity for the realisation of Article 31 rights in urban and rural development proposals.
- In post conflict situations, government should take active measures to restore and protect article 31 rights in post conflict situations:
 - Encouraging play and creative expression to promote resilience and psychological healing and explore identity and belonging;
 - Creation or restoration of safe spaces, including schools, where children can participate in play and recreation as part of the normalisation of their lives.
- Government should provide guidance, support and facilitation on a child's right to play for parents and other caregivers in line with article 18 (2). Such training might offer practical guidance, for example on how to listen to children while playing; create environments that facilitate children's play; allow children to play freely and play with children. It could also address the importance of encouraging creativity and dexterity; balancing safety and discovery; and the development value of both play and guided exposure to recreational activities.



they could get all the ideas from children”.

- Measures should be introduced to promote online access and accessibility, as well as safety for children, including action to empower and inform children to enable them to act safely online, to become confident and responsible citizens in digital environments, and to report abuse or inappropriate activity when it is encountered.
- Measures are also needed to limit access to harmful or adult-rated material and gaming networks; improve information for parents, teachers and policy makers to raise awareness of the potential harm associated with violent games; and develop strategies for promoting safer and attractive options for children.
- Government should initiate action to review policies concerning the marketing of toys and games to children, including through children’s television programmes and directly related advertisements. Also limit exposure to advertising during peak viewing times for children.
- Independent, effective safe and accessible mechanisms must be in place for children to make complaints and seek redress if their article 31 rights are violated. Children need to be aware of both who they can complain to and the procedure for doing so.

Governments must ensure that the best interests of children are the primary concern in making decisions that may affect them. All adults should do what is best for children. When Government make decisions, they should think about how their decisions will affect children. This particularly applies to budget, policy and law makers (Article 3, UNCRC).

Children and young people have lots of ideas about how government could help improve their right to play and it is important for government to listen to children and young people and get them more involved to help with these issues. Children and young people should be included in the planning and design of play spaces and be able to share any ideas they have; and, Government should make sure that children and young people know what it is going to do and what this will look like.





PlayBoard

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

Since its establishment in 1985, PlayBoard has been committed to supporting the child's rights to play through a combination of service delivery and development; campaigning and lobbying; awareness raising and working in partnership with others to put play on the agenda of policy makers and resource providers.

PlayBoard is a membership organisation which exists to promote, create and develop play opportunities aimed at improving the quality of the lives of children and young people.



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Acknowledgements

PlayBoard would like to thank all who have contributed to the development of this report. We would particularly like to thank the members of PlayBoard's Young Research team who carried out this research as well as the children and young people involved in taking time to fill out the interview questions which informed the recommendations of this report.

PlayBoard's Young Research team have also developed an easy to understand version of the UNCRC General Comment 17 (on Article 31) and poster on the challenges in making play a reality for children and young people.

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