



Easy-to-Understand version of the ‘Right to Play’

General Comment No. 17 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, by PlayBoard’s Young Research Team

The right of the child to rest, play, recreational activities, cultural life and the arts



WHAT IS THIS? A GENERAL COMMENT is a document by the United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child that gives advice to all the world’s Governments about children’s rights. This is General Comment No. 17, which is about the right to rest and play, and to take part in artistic and cultural activities. Because we are interested in researching the right to play, we have left out some of the stuff about arts and culture and looked at the right to play. Although we have changed most of the difficult words, there are a few important ones that you need to understand. These are in blue, and are explained in the boxes on the right of the page.

Introduction

1. **Article** 31 of the **Convention** on the Rights of the Child is about children’s right to rest and play, and to take part in artistic and cultural activities.
2. The Committee on the Rights of the Child thinks Governments are not paying attention to children’s right to play. They don’t do enough to make sure all children have somewhere to play. The laws don’t protect children properly and children are being left out of national and local planning.
3. For some groups of children it is difficult for them to enjoy their right to play equally; especially girls, poorer children, disabled children, and children from **minority** groups.
4. Also, changes in the world affect children’s **opportunities** to play:
 - More and more people are living in towns and cities, especially in poorer countries.
 - Children see more violence at home, in schools, on TV and on the streets.
 - There are more advertisements for toys and games, and more play activities that you have to pay for.
 - For many children, in both rich and poor countries, longer school hours, too much homework and having to work – either at home or outside – mean they don’t have time to play.
5. The General Comment was written to help find solutions to these problems and so that Governments will understand about the importance of the right to play and make sure this right is respected. All children in every part of the world have the same right to play. It doesn’t make any difference where they live, their nationality or culture, or who their parents are.

Convention: Agreement between Governments of different countries.

Article: A Convention is made up of paragraphs, and each one has a number. These are called the “Articles” of the Convention.

Minority: A group of people who are smaller compared the rest of the people in a country.

Play opportunity: A general way to talk about all the places children play, the things they play with, the people they play with and the activities they do.

The importance of Article 31 in children's lives

6. Children need to play in order to grow and learn.

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.

7. Through play, children learn by doing, exploring and experiencing the world around them and so they learn 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.

8. For adults, playing with children helps them 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.

Development (of a child): The way children start out as babies and change as they get older until they become teenagers and finally adults.



Article 31: What the important words mean

9. **'Play'**

'Play' means activity controlled by children themselves. 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.

10. 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 pure 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.

11. **'Provision of appropriate opportunities':**

Governments must make sure children have the right kind of **opportunities** to be able to play. This means Governments must make laws and **policies**, set budgets and provide services so all children can enjoy their right to play.

12. **'Appropriate to the age of the child':**

A child's age is important in deciding what kinds of activities they can do, where it is safe to play, and the kind of adult supervision they need to keep them safe.

As children get older, as well as wanting to play they want places to hang out with their friends. They also want to take risks and face challenges. This is important for teenagers, as it gives them a sense of who they are.



Policy: When a Government or an organisation says what it is going to do about some subject and why.

Article 31 and the four General Principles of the Convention

13. The UN **Convention** on the Rights of the Child has four main principles:

1. **Non-discrimination**
2. The best interests of the child come first
3. The right to life, survival and **development**

Discrimination: Treating people unfairly because they are different.

4. The right to be heard.

The next part explains how each of these principles affects children's right to play.

14. **Non-discrimination** (Article 2):

All children must be able to enjoy their right to play without **discrimination**. Everyone must be treated fairly; it doesn't matter what race, colour, nationality, gender or religion they are, what language they speak, their political views, whether they are rich or poor or are disabled.

15. Some groups of children need extra support to make sure they are not discriminated against. These include girls, disabled children, poor children, children who live in hospitals, orphanages or prisons, **refugee** children, working children, especially those who live or work on the streets, travellers and migrants, children from **minority** groups and children without parents.

16. **The best interests of the child** (Article 3):

For all laws, Government decisions and services which affect children's play, the Government must consider whether they are in the best interests of children; for example, health and safety regulations, school hours, town planning and transport, or providing parks and green spaces.

17. **The right to life, survival and development** (Article 6):

Governments must ensure each child's **development** as much as possible. They should recognise how the right to play supports children's **development** at all ages.

Governments should make sure parents, carers, Government and council workers, and everybody who works with children knows how important play is for children's **development**.

18. **The right to be heard** (Article 12):

Children have the right to say what they think on all subjects, and adults who are making decisions about children must take account of the children's views.

Children should get support to be able to express their views and they should be able to make free choices about the play activities they want to take part in.

19. It is important for children to have a say in making laws and **policies**, and in designing services and facilities that relate to the right to play. For example, they might be asked about play **policies**, or laws to do with schools, design of parks and other local facilities; or they might be asked for their views on the **play opportunities** in their area.



How Article 31 links with other rights in the Convention

20. **Article 13: Freedom of expression**

Freedom of expression is an important part of the right to play. Children must be able to express themselves in whatever way they choose, as long as it doesn't harm other people.

21. **Article 15: Free association**

Children have the right to choose their friends, and to join clubs and organisations. This is an important part of their right to play. Children need to relate to other children to make friends and learn to get along together.

Governments must make sure children have places to meet freely in their community. They must respect children's right to join clubs and associations. Children should never be made to join an organisation if they don't want to.

22. **Article 22: Rights of refugee children**

It is hard for **refugee** children to enjoy their right to play. They are cut off from their own traditions and culture, and at the same time they feel excluded from the culture of the new country they have come to.

Refugee: Someone who has had to leave their own country and cannot go back.

It is important to make sure that **refugee** children have equal **opportunities** to enjoy their right to play, the same as children from their host country.

23. **Article 23: Rights of disabled children**

Accessible and inclusive places to play must be available for disabled children so they are able to enjoy their right to play. This means places and spaces to play must be designed and organised so that everyone can join in and no-one is left out. Families, carers and people who work with disabled children are encouraged to understand that they are equal and active participants in play, and that enjoying their right to play is a way to support children's **development**.



24. **Article 24: Right to health care**

The right to play supports children's health, well-being and **development**. Children in hospital need to be able to play as this helps them get better quicker.

25. **Article 27: Right to a decent standard of living**

Overcrowded housing, dangerous environments, unhealthy conditions, poor food or harmful work can all deny children the chance to play. To make sure children can enjoy their right to play, Governments must make sure they have decent housing, and there should be jobs for their parents.



26. **Articles 28 and 29: Education rights**

Schools must support the **development** of the child's personality, talents and abilities. Enjoying their right to play is essential for children to achieve this.

The right to play has real benefits for children's education. Play is good for children of all ages, but it is especially important in the first years at school, as it is one of the most important ways young children learn.

27. **Article 32: Child labour**

In many countries children have to work at a young age and this can deny them their right to play. Governments must protect child workers from conditions that stop them enjoying their right to play.

28. **Articles 19, 34, 37 and 38: Violence, abuse and exploitation**

Living with violence of any kind makes it hard for children to enjoy their right to play. Bullying by other children can also be a problem. Children will only be able to enjoy their right to play when Governments act to keep them safe from violence.



29. **Article 39: Helping children who have suffered recover and have a normal life**

Children who have been neglected, abused or suffered violence are entitled to help with recovery and having a normal life. Play helps children deal with painful experiences and come to terms with them. Play helps them act out difficult experiences, so as to make sense of their past and cope better with their future.

What children need for a good play environment

30. Children have a natural urge to play and find ways to play in the most difficult situations. However there are some things all children need to fully enjoy their right to play:

- Freedom from too much stress;
- Freedom from **discrimination**;
- Protection from violence;
- A clean environment free from pollution, traffic and other dangers so they can move freely and safely in their local neighbourhood;
- Free time to do what they want without adult control;



- Space to play outside in an environment that offers challenges, but with adults around to help when you need them;
- A chance to play in natural environments and experience the animal world;
- **Opportunities** to create your own spaces and imaginary worlds;
- **Opportunities** to join in games, sports and organised activities with other children, with trained leaders or coaches where necessary;
- Parents, teachers and society in general understanding the importance of the right to play.

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

31. **Lack of awareness of the importance of play:**

In many parts of the world, people think play is a waste of time. Parents, carers and Governments think study or working is more important and that play is noisy and unnecessary.

Some adults are not good at joining in or don't know how to help with children's play. Adults don't understand that play is a human right and that it is important for children's health and **development**. If they do think play is good for children, they usually prefer sport and competitive games rather than imaginative or social play.

Older children often like to seek places to meet with their peers. Governments need to see what play looks like and where play takes place for older children as this is important for their exploration of identity and belonging.

32. **Dangerous environments:**

Most of the world's poorest children face dangers like polluted water, open sewers, over-crowded cities, uncontrolled traffic, lack of local safe play areas or green spaces, or cultural facilities, 'slum' settlements or violent or polluted areas.

Children need to be able to go out to places that are free from dangers. They should be able to move around on their own safely. Younger children need safe places to play close to their own homes. When young children are playing outside, parents and carers need to be able to keep an eye on them.

33. In places where there have been wars, children can be harmed by landmines and unexploded bombs. Children's natural desire to explore increases the risk of them potentially stepping on a landmine.

Other things that put children in danger include high levels of crime and violence, community unrest, drugs, gangs, risk of kidnapping and child trafficking, hostile adults, aggression and sexual violence.

34. Even where there are parks and playgrounds, they are often in places where children are unsupervised and exposed to danger so it is not safe for children to play there. The loss of safe places to play outside means there is a greater need for Governments to act to protect children's right to play.

35. **Adults don't like to see children use public places:**

In many parts of the world, adults do not want to see children use public places. For example, they ban children from going out in the evening, they complain about noise, they set too many rules for using playgrounds and won't let children hang out in shopping malls. Children playing out are seen as a nuisance and criticised even though they have done nothing wrong. Older children in particular are viewed as a threat and are moved away from areas.

Governments should encourage good communication between children and adults so that adults have a better understanding that children have rights and to make sure that they have places to play.



36. Getting the balance right between risk and safety:

Fears about the risks to children playing out mean they are over-protected and kept indoors. This limits their freedom to play.

There needs to be a balance between reducing risks (e.g. closing local streets to traffic, improving street lighting, or creating safe playgrounds in schools) and helping children learn to identify risks and keep themselves safe.

Some children and young people themselves pose a threat to other children. This may take the form of bullying, peer pressure to carry out high levels of risk taking or by older children abusing those younger than them.

Children must not be harmed but they do need some risk and challenge as this is a big part of play and does have benefits. Balance is needed as 'good risk' in play supports children's learning, growth and development.

37. No access to nature:

Children learn to appreciate and care for the natural world by playing in it, and by exploring nature with adult support. Play in natural settings also helps children develop agility, balance, creativity, co-operation and concentration.

In a world where more and more children live in towns and cities, children have less access to parks, forests, beaches and other natural areas. Children who live in big cities may have no chance to play in green spaces.

Children and young people in low income urban areas are most likely those who do not get access to enough green spaces.



38. Too much pressure to do well in school:

In many parts of the world, children are denied their right to play because they are under too much pressure to do well at school. For example:

- Extra classes and homework are taking up all children's free time;
- School time-tables don't recognise the importance of play;
- Teachers may not make enough **opportunities** for learning through play;
- Even nursery classes set targets and focus on formal learning so at times children have less chance to play.

39. Children's days are too structured and programmed:

For many children, their right to play is limited because they have to do adult-led activities after school like P.E., extra classes or domestic chores which leave no time for free play.

Children are entitled to free time that is not controlled by adults, even to do nothing if they want. It is not good for children's health and well-being for them to spend all their free time on programmed and competitive activities.

Many approaches to working with children tend to focus on health, nutrition, and education. Greater understanding of the benefits of play is needed. Play supports and compliments all areas of children and young people's development.

40. Electronic media:

All over the world children and young people are spending more time watching television, social networking, texting, gaming, listening to music, watching films, posting photos and making new kinds of digital art. Technology is becoming central to children's lives.

Whilst this can have a lot of benefits, Governments should make sure all children and young people have equal **opportunities** to enjoy these. Children need access to a range of technologies to enjoy their right to play fully in the modern world.

41. However, like all play types access to these opportunities are not without risk:



- Children can suffer from on-line bullying or get access to pornography. Many children go to internet cafés, computer clubs and game halls where there is no supervision to stop them seeing harmful material;
- Spending a lot of time playing violent video games may be linked to aggressive behaviour;
- Opportunities for online gaming where children can talk and communicate to others without protection can be concerning.
- For hundreds of years children have learnt traditional games, songs and rhymes on the street and in the playground. Now that they spend more time watching TV and playing computer games, these old games are disappearing.

42. Advertising of toys and play activities:

The companies which sell toys and games are given too much uncontrolled advertising space. This can influence children and young people and pressurise parents into buying toys and games which may not be in the best interest of the child.

Children who need extra support to enjoy their right to play

43. Girls:

The problems for girls can include too many domestic chores or being made to look after younger brothers and sisters, over-protective parents, nowhere safe to play out, and traditional beliefs about what girls are allowed to do. All these things stop girls enjoying their right to play, especially as they get older.

44. Another problem can be gender stereotyping in girls' and boys' play. Parents and carers, TV, magazines and toy companies can sometimes encourage this, and this stops girls and boys doing the things they want to do. It gives boys an advantage because boys' games prepare them for success at work when they grow up, while girls' games encourage them to stay at home and be wives and mothers.

These things can stop girls enjoying their right to play, and can at times cause [discrimination](#) and inequality. The Committee is asking all Governments to take action against [gender stereotypes](#).

45. Children living in poverty:

Many of the poorest children cannot enjoy their right to play because they live in dangerous and neglected neighbourhoods, where they have no room to play at home and nowhere safe to play out. They have no money and often they have to work.

These problems can be worse for children without parents. Children living or working on the street get no [play opportunities](#), and are often kept out of city parks and playgrounds.

46. Disabled children:

Disabled children have many barriers that stop them enjoying their right to play such as lack of accessible infrastructure, dignified toileting and suitable parking. There are often high costs associated with adapted play and there is often a lack of play value at existing play opportunities. Disabled children can lack opportunities to get out to parks, playgrounds, cinemas etc. due to lack of support, transport or facilities not meeting their needs. Some children don't go to regular schools or other places where children play and make friends; some stay at home all day. The negative attitudes of others can also be a barrier: some children find it hard to communicate and find that people don't listen to them.

Gender stereotype:
Saying that all boys must be like a typical boy and all girls must be like a typical girl

Governments have to make sure disabled children have equal **opportunities** to play.

47. **Children in institutions:**

Many children have to live in institutions such as residential homes, hospitals, detention centres (like prisons for children in trouble with the law) and **refugee** centres. In these places there is little opportunity to play – or none at all.

Governments need to work harder to enable these children to live in families, but until that happens, they should make sure that all these institutions give children **opportunities** to meet and play freely with other children in the community.



48. **Children from minority communities:**

Religious or racial **discrimination** stops children from **minority** communities enjoying their right to play. Fear of rejection, hostility or violence may stop them joining in play activities with other children.

49. **Children in wars and disasters:**

In times of war or disaster, many people think the right to play is a lot less important than providing food, shelter and medicines. However, in these situations, play can be very important as it helps children who have experienced suffering, or lost their home or family members, get some normality and happiness back in their lives.

What Governments must do

50. **Article 31** says Governments must guarantee the right to play for all children everywhere. 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 who try to stop children from enjoying their right to play;
- c) **Fulfil rights:** The Government must make sure everyone gets the necessary services, provision and **opportunities** so they can enjoy their right to play.

51. Even where resources are limited, the Government must do all it can to make sure children can enjoy their right to play, and must never do anything that stops the enjoyment of this right.

52. To make sure the right to play is **respected**, the Government must:

- a) Provide support and guidance for parents and carers, to help them understand the importance of play and create environments to allow children to play freely.
- b) Raise public awareness about the value of play and try to change the negative attitudes which stop children from enjoying their right to play.

53. To make sure the right to play is **protected**, the Government must:

- a) Make laws to make sure every child has equal access to natural space, parks and playgrounds without any kind of **discrimination**.
- b) Make laws to make sure that all organisations and businesses respect children's right to play. This includes rules to protect working children, and better safety standards for playgrounds, toys and games etc.
- c) Protect children from harm: There must be child protection **policies** for everyone working in play. This must also protect children from bullying.
- d) Increase children's access to the internet, but make sure they are safe on-line. Help children learn to protect themselves on-line and to use the internet responsibly and report any unwanted activity.



- e) Protect children's right to play in wars and disaster situations. Make sure there are safe places where children can play so as to have a more normal life. In areas where there are landmines, mines should be available to clear them away so children can go out to play safely.
- f) Control the advertising of toys on television, especially toys that encourage violence or reinforce [gender stereotypes](#). Limit the amount of advertising allowed during children's TV programmes and limit access to harmful material or gaming networks and improve information for parents and teachers to raise awareness of potential harm,.
- g) Make sure there is a way for children to make complaints and get something done about it if their right to play is violated. Children should know who they can complain to and how to do this.

54. To make sure the right to play is **fulfilled**, the Government must do the following things (and they should consult with children and children's organisations about how to do this):

- a) Consider making a new law on children's right to play and develop a national Action Plan on the right to play.
- b) Collect information and do research on children's play, the problems children face and how to solve these. Children themselves should be involved in this research.
- c) Make sure different government departments work together on children's right to play, and that national Governments work in partnership with local authorities.
- d) Make sure the amount of money spent on children's play is fair in comparison to the amount spent on adults. Give extra money to make sure disabled children have equal [opportunities](#) to play.
- e) Make buildings, parks and playgrounds accessible to everyone, including children who use wheelchairs.
- f) Make sure the environment is child-friendly and promotes children's well-being, both in towns and in the countryside. This includes parks, sports fields and playgrounds which are safe and inclusive to all children. There should be large open spaces and nature, where children have priority over cars.
- g) Ensure children can play safely within their areas by putting in road traffic measures, including speed limits, levels of pollution, school crossings and traffic lights.
- h) Make sure there are clubs, sports facilities, organised games and activities for both girls and boys of all ages of all communities.
- i) Everyone who works with or children, or whose work affects children, should get training on children's rights, including the right to play. They should learn how to make sure all children can enjoy their right to play.
- j) Schools are important in making sure children can enjoy their right to play:
 - Schools should have enough space for play, indoors and outdoors;
 - Girls and boys should have equal [opportunities](#) to play at school;
 - Children should be involved in the design of school playgrounds;
 - School timetables should allow enough time for play;
 - The amount of homework set should leave enough time for children to rest and play;
 - There should be playful activities and fun ways of learning in the classroom, especially in the first years at school.

