



# Why Play Matters in Primary Schools



*Enhancing Learning  
and Development*

## Introduction

Play is a primary driver of children's learning, development and well-being. A strong body of international research demonstrates that high-quality play within school environments supports cognitive, social and emotional development while strengthening engagement, concentration and readiness to learn.

Against a backdrop of growing concerns around children's mental health, physical inactivity and educational pressure, play offers a preventative, evidence-informed and cost-effective approach to improving outcomes. High-quality play supports executive function, resilience and self-regulation - skills that underpin academic achievement and lifelong well-being.

Schools play a uniquely critical role. For many children, the playground is the only consistently accessible outdoor space where they can engage in physically challenging and socially developmental play. Where schools actively support a range of play opportunities, evidence shows improved behaviour, enhanced inclusion and stronger learning outcomes across the curriculum.

By harnessing children's natural drive to play, schools can strengthen curriculum delivery, well-being and whole-school culture.

## PlayBoard: Leading the Play Agenda

PlayBoard is Northern Ireland's lead charity for children and young people's play, with over 40 years' experience translating research, policy and playwork theory into practical, scalable programmes for schools.

Established in 1985, PlayBoard works with children, families, schools, communities and decision-makers to ensure access to high-quality play that supports learning, well-being and inclusion. Its work in schools delivers impact through three core strands:

- Direct delivery of evidence-informed play programmes, improving learning, well-being, resilience and social development.
- Workforce development, building staff confidence and capacity to embed play-based approaches across the school day.
- Research, evaluation and policy engagement, driving innovation and best practice in school-based play.

With over 1,800 members, PlayBoard also contributes to UK-wide and international play policy through representation on key forums, including the UK Play Policy Forum, the UK Play Safety Forum, and the International Play Association.

# Play programmes

## TAKING OUTDOOR PLAY SERIOUSLY

Transforming play policy and practice within schools

22

TOPS Awards

## POSITIVE PLAYGROUNDS

Supporting schools to enhance their outdoor environments

20+

Years

400+

Schools

## PLAYFUL MINDS YEAR ONE

- ✓ Delivered **15** programmes
- ✓ Supported **352** children
- ✓ Trained **165** practitioners
- ✓ Engaged **218** parents

## OUR GENERATION ~ SPACES TO BE:

MARCH - DECEMBER 2025

- ✓ Delivered to **18** schools
- ✓ Supported **644** children
- ✓ Engaged **77** practitioners

“ You know, when all this is done and we leave this school, this is one of the things I'm really going to remember.

Pupil ”

“ One of the best programmes ever implemented in school.

School Principal ”

# The importance of play in schools

Play is fundamental to children's development and well-being, and schools are central to ensuring equitable access to high-quality play opportunities. When well-planned and supported, play contributes significantly to physical health, emotional well-being, social development and learning.

Non-directed play supports resilience, creativity, problem-solving and independence. Through play, children develop the skills needed to manage relationships, regulate emotions and engage positively with learning.

High-quality play also improves behaviour, engagement and readiness to learn. Children who return from play settled and focused create more effective learning environments, supporting improved teaching and learning outcomes.

Outdoor play offers unique opportunities for inclusion, physical activity and connection with the natural environment. Well-designed spaces enable children of all abilities to play together, strengthening peer relationships and equality.

## Enhancing play in schools

Since 2005, PlayBoard has worked in partnership with schools to enhance play through a structured, evidence-informed approach.

Delivery is organised around two complementary pillars, ensuring play is embedded as a sustainable element of school culture rather than a standalone intervention. Together, these pillars support improved play environments, stronger mental health and well-being outcomes, and increased staff confidence to embed play-based approaches across the school day.

### Pillar 1: Enhancing play time and outdoor environments

High-quality playtime is a critical but often undervalued component of the school day. Research indicates that non-directed, freely chosen play supports physical activity, social development and emotional regulation, while also reducing conflict and behavioural incidents.

PlayBoard's playtime and outdoor play programmes support schools to move beyond a narrow focus on supervision and behaviour management, towards a developmental, child-centred approach that recognises play as a vital component of learning and well-being.

## POSITIVE PLAYGROUNDS

*Positive PlayGrounds* is PlayBoard's longest-running school-based programme and provides the foundation for its wider framework of work in education. First launched in 2005, the programme was developed in response to persistent challenges identified by schools in relation to playtime, outdoor environments and behaviour.

Schools consistently reported overly restrictive rules, risk-averse practice, underused outdoor spaces and limited recognition or training for staff supporting playtime. Playtime was frequently viewed as a behaviour management problem rather than a developmental opportunity.

Grounded in playwork principles and child development research, *Positive PlayGrounds* supports schools to reframe playtime as a vital component of learning, well-being and social development. The programme moves practice away from control and containment towards facilitation, inclusion and positive risk-taking.

Delivered through targeted staff training, practical support and environmental review, *Positive PlayGrounds* has supported over 400 primary schools across Northern Ireland to strengthen understanding of non-directed play, reduce restrictive practices, improve inclusion and participation, and make more effective use of outdoor spaces.

Schools consistently report calmer playgrounds, reduced behavioural incidents, improved social skills and increased pupil confidence and ownership of play. Importantly, the programme builds internal capacity, enabling schools to sustain improvements beyond initial delivery and providing a strong platform for wider whole-school transformation.



“

The children are much more content. We notice that they are much happier having a lot of choice and variety. Children feel that they have ownership over their playtime... we have all come to recognise that the power of outdoor play cannot be underestimated.

**St Nicholas' Primary School**

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# TAKING OUTDOOR PLAY SERIOUSLY (TOPS)



## Practice improvement to whole-school transformation

The *Taking Outdoor Play Seriously (TOPS) Quality Assurance Award* is PlayBoard's flagship, whole-school programme, designed to deliver meaningful and sustained transformation in how schools understand, value and provide for play.

Delivered over the course of a full academic year, *TOPS* recognises that sustainable improvement is most effective when it is underpinned by strong leadership, shared ownership and meaningful participation. The programme works in partnership with Boards of Governors, senior leaders, teaching and non-teaching staff, parents and children to embed play within the culture, ethos and daily practice of the school.

Drawing on evidence from whole-school improvement research and child development theory, *TOPS* supports schools to move beyond isolated interventions towards a systemic approach in which play is recognised as a critical contributor to learning, well-being and inclusion.

### Whole-School Play Framework *Six interrelated areas supporting whole-school change*



Through a structured process that includes staff training, play audits, working groups, pupil participation activities and environmental development, *TOPS* enables schools to critically review existing practice and implement sustainable improvements across the school estate.

Schools completing the *TOPS* process are independently assessed against clear quality criteria, including the extent to which play is embedded within the school's culture and ethos, the quality and range of outdoor play experiences provided, the effectiveness of participative structures that give children an ongoing voice and engagement with parents, carers and the wider community.

Schools meeting the required standards are awarded the *TOPS Quality Assurance Award*, which is valid for two years. To retain the award, schools undertake a structured review process, supporting continuous reflection, accountability and improvement.

Feedback from participating schools consistently highlights the depth of change achieved through *TOPS*. Rather than focusing solely on playtime, schools report a fundamental shift in how play is understood, valued and used across outdoor spaces, classroom practice and whole-school ethos. Staff confidence increases, outdoor learning becomes more embedded and school environments become calmer, more inclusive and more supportive of children's well-being and learning.

*TOPS* is widely regarded by schools as a meaningful and prestigious recognition of whole-school commitment to placing play at the heart of learning, well-being and school life.



Our staff have been so encouraged by the whole positive impact *TOPS* has had on our children's play, our children as a whole, our staff, and our school environment.  
**Carr Primary School**

Before, most of my lessons were inside but I now take my class to the sand pit to practice letter and number formation; to the mud kitchen to link in with our spring topic; perfume making with spring flowers; and small world tuft trays to study the mini beasts the children collected as part of our World Around Us.

I have also seen other teachers in other year groups using the playground to facilitate outdoor lessons which was rare to see pre-*TOPS*.

**St Colmcille's Primary School**

## Pillar 2: From play environments to mental health and emotional resilience

While high-quality playtime and outdoor environments create the conditions for positive development, PlayBoard recognises that children's experiences of play are also shaped by their emotional well-being, relationships and wider life circumstances. As pressures on children's mental health continue to grow, play has an increasingly important role in supporting emotional resilience, self-regulation and positive coping strategies.

In response, PlayBoard delivers two key targeted, play-based mental health and well-being programmes that complement universal play provision. Informed by research in child development and emotional literacy, these programmes use playwork approaches to support children to understand and manage emotions, build resilience and develop positive relationships in age-appropriate, inclusive and non-stigmatising ways.

### PLAYFUL MINDS

*Playful Minds* is a targeted early-intervention programme designed to strengthen mental health, emotional well-being and resilience in children aged four to nine years through play. The programme recognises play as a natural, non-stigmatising medium through which young children explore emotions, relationships and coping strategies.

Grounded in playwork methodology and informed by research in child development and emotional literacy, *Playful Minds* supports both children and the adults around them. The programme integrates practitioner training, direct play-based sessions with children and meaningful engagement with parents and carers.

I have noticed that children's relationships have changed as a result of the programme. They are bonding better together and there are fewer arguments.

**Teacher**



Children participate in a series of facilitated play sessions that explore identity, emotions, managing big feelings, relationships and belonging in age-appropriate and engaging ways. Through play, children develop emotional awareness, emerging self-regulation skills and confidence in navigating challenge.

Practitioners receive dedicated training focused on children's mental health, emotional development and the role of play in supporting well-being. This strengthens staff confidence and supports sustainability by embedding learning into everyday practice. Parent and carer engagement further reinforces consistent, supportive approaches across home and school.

Delivery data demonstrates strong demand and scalability, with the programme consistently exceeding participation targets. Schools report improved relationships, reduced conflict and increased confidence in supporting children's emotional well-being through play-based approaches.



## OUR GENERATION - SPACES TO BE

*Spaces to Be* is a targeted play-based programme supporting children aged nine to 11 years to strengthen mental health, emotional resilience and positive relationships, while also developing empathy, identity awareness and understanding of difference.

Developed within the specific social and cultural context of Northern Ireland, *Spaces to Be* recognises play as a powerful and developmentally appropriate medium through which older children can explore emotions, identity, belonging and difference in inclusive, non-stigmatising ways.

The programme combines practitioner training with facilitated play sessions for children. Training supports practitioners to understand children's mental health, brain development, adversity and the role of play in peacebuilding, alongside developing confidence to facilitate play that supports emotional literacy, perspective-taking and positive intergroup relationships.



Children participate in a structured series of play sessions exploring emotions, coping strategies, relationships, identity and community. Through play, children build empathy, problem-solving skills and a stronger sense of belonging, supporting positive attitudes towards others and increased inclusivity.

Delivery figures demonstrate strong demand and reach across schools and communities. Feedback highlights increased practitioner confidence, improved peer relationships and the value of play as a vehicle for supporting both well-being and peacebuilding outcomes.

### 100% OF PARTICIPATING STAFF SAID:

- Training will have a positive impact on their practice
- They will apply what has been learned in real-life work situations
- They would recommend PlayBoard training to schools and settings
- The trainers were excellent

“The whole-school approach to the training has given us the confidence to make changes.”  
**Teacher**

## Archie's Adventures in Emotions Book and Resources

In August 2023, we launched our own story book and accompanying resource designed to support children in understanding and managing their emotions.

*Archie's Adventures in Emotions* follows our programme mascot, Archie Bear, as he helps Little Lion explore eight primary emotions. Through playful, engaging experiences, children are supported not only to recognise these emotions but, most importantly, to learn practical ways to manage them through play.

The storybook is complemented by an activity pack containing a wide range of play-based ideas closely linked to the story, its characters and the emotional themes explored throughout.

The book and resource are fully embedded across our programmes. Children participating in *Playful Minds* and *Spaces to Be* receive their own Archie Bear, helping to reinforce emotional learning in a meaningful and consistent way. Participating schools and settings also receive a copy of the storybook, the resource pack, and an Archie Bear, enabling them to continue supporting children's emotional development as part of their everyday practice.

