



Playing Out



*Understanding Play Deprivation
in Northern Ireland*

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Executive Summary

Play is a fundamental element of childhood and a recognised right under Article 31 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child. Through play, children develop physical competence, emotional resilience, creativity and social understanding. Play provides opportunities for children to explore the world around them, navigate uncertainty and build relationships with peers.

Over recent years, the environments in which children grow up have undergone significant change. Across Northern Ireland, opportunities for freely chosen, self-directed play have narrowed restricting independence and play choice; changes in neighbourhood design have reduced independent mobility; while increasing academic pressures, socio-economic inequality and the growing role of digital environments have collectively reshaped the conditions in which children play.

These shifts contribute to what can be described as play deprivation - a sustained reduction in the frequency, diversity and autonomy of play experiences available to children and young people.

It is important to note that play deprivation does not mean that children are fully inactive or without access to organised play and leisure activities. Many children participate in structured programmes and supervised play and recreation; however, these experiences cannot fully replicate the developmental benefits of play that is initiated, shaped and directed by children themselves.

Research across the UK and internationally highlights the importance of self-directed play in supporting emotional regulation, social competence and resilience. When opportunities for such experiences decline, the breadth of developmental learning available to children narrows.

The issue is not simply one of leisure or recreation. It relates to the broader developmental ecology of childhood.

Importantly, play deprivation is not experienced evenly across the population. Children living in disadvantaged communities may face reduced access to safe outdoor environments and informal play spaces. Children with disabilities frequently encounter additional barriers relating to infrastructure design, accessibility and social attitudes, limiting both access to and participation within play environments.

Despite growing recognition of the importance of play, Northern Ireland currently lacks a coordinated policy framework to support the child's right to play. While play is referenced across various policy domains, including health, education and community development, there is no comprehensive strategy to assess whether children across different communities have sufficient access to play opportunities.

As a result, play provision often develops unevenly and remains vulnerable to competing policy priorities.

This paper examines the changing ecology of childhood in Northern Ireland and explores how environmental, social and policy factors contribute to play deprivation. It highlights the developmental importance of play and considers the implications of narrowing play opportunities for children and young people's development and well-being.

The paper identifies several areas where structural change could strengthen the conditions for play across Northern Ireland, including:

- Development of a Northern Ireland Play Strategy incorporating play sufficiency principles
- Greater integration of play within planning and neighbourhood design
- Recognition of play as part of children's developmental infrastructure within education settings
- Investment in community play environments and playable neighbourhoods
- Ensuring inclusive play opportunities for children with disabilities.

Addressing play deprivation requires more than the expansion of individual programmes. It requires coordinated action across policy domains that shape the environments in which childhood unfolds.

Strengthening children's access to time, space and opportunity for play is therefore not simply a recreational concern. It is a matter of children's rights, well-being and the long-term resilience of communities.



1.0 Introduction

1.1 PlayBoard NI: Leading the Play Agenda

PlayBoard is the lead organisation for the promotion and development of children and young people's play in Northern Ireland. Established in 1985, the organisation works to ensure that the child's right to play is respected, protected, and fulfilled.

PlayBoard provides strategic leadership, policy advocacy and practical support to advance play as a vital element of children's development and well-being in line with Article 31 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child.

PlayBoard's work includes:

- Campaigning for the recognition of play in policy and practice
- Delivering innovative play programmes and resources
- Supporting play providers with training, guidance, and networking opportunities
- Conducting research to inform and shape play policy
- Through collaboration with key stakeholders, championing inclusive, high-quality play opportunities for all children and young people.

With over 1,900 members from across the UK, Ireland and beyond, PlayBoard contributes to UK and international play policy development through representation on key forums including the UK Play Policy Forum, the UK Play Safety Forum, the International Play Association, the British Standards Institute (BSI) and the International Organisation for Standardisation (ISO).

1.2 Purpose of Report

Over recent decades, the conditions shaping children's everyday lives have undergone profound change. While organised, often adult-led activities have expanded across many areas of childhood, opportunities for freely chosen and self-directed play have progressively narrowed within the everyday environments in which children live. In essence, the amount of time, space and freedom to play available to children and young people has become increasingly constrained by structural and societal pressures.

Taken together, these changes have contributed to what can be understood as play deprivation: a sustained reduction in the frequency, diversity and autonomy of play experiences available to children.

This paper examines the contemporary ecology of childhood in Northern Ireland through that lens, exploring the social, environmental and policy factors contributing to play deprivation and considering the developmental, health and societal implications that follow.

First articulated in the work of play theorist Bob Hughes (2000), including his seminal research undertaken in Belfast during the early 1980s, play deprivation describes the narrowing of children's access to diverse, autonomous and exploratory play experiences over time. Hughes' work demonstrated that children's play reflects the conditions in which they live. When environments are restricted, play does not disappear but adapts; however, this adaptation brings developmental consequences.

Northern Ireland today faces a different set of underlying social and economic circumstances than that of Hughes' Belfast. The pressures are 'quieter' and less visible than the civil disturbance and inter-community conflict that was so prevalent throughout the period known as the 'troubles'. Typically, they include traffic-dominated neighbourhoods, reduced independent mobility, intensified educational demands, digital immersion and persistent socio-economic inequality. Each of these influences the amount of space, time and freedom available to our children and young people.

This report seeks to:

- Clarify what is meant by play deprivation
- Examine the contemporary ecological conditions affecting children in Northern Ireland
- Explore the developmental, health and societal implications of narrowing play opportunities
- Identify strategic directions for strengthening play within policy and practice.

At its core, the report highlights that play is not simply recreational in nature, rather it is a central part of the child's developmental infrastructure, supporting emotional regulation, social competence, physical health and resilience. When children's opportunities to engage in diverse and self-directed play are restricted, the impact extends beyond leisure and recreation, impacting upon the foundations of childhood itself.



2.0 The Importance of Play

Play is vital for children and young people's health, well-being and happiness, enabling them to have fun experiences while engaging in activities that support their social, emotional, intellectual and physical development.

Critically, play provides children with opportunities to interact with the world around them, exploring new ideas and concepts while developing understanding and learning new skills that can be applied within more formalised learning environments including school.

2.1 The Benefits of Play

Research highlights the critical role of play in supporting children and young people's development across a number of key areas including:

PHYSICAL HEALTH

Play often involves children engaging in physical activities, for example running, jumping or climbing.

Physical play brings multiple developmental and health benefits. For example, running and jumping support the development of bone density; climbing helps to develop strength and coordination, while running and chasing games develop fitness, stamina, and agility.



LEARNING

Early childhood experiences, including play, are critical in shaping brain architecture, cognitive development and later learning capacity (Center on the Developing Child, 2016).

Play has been shown to have a positive influence on language development, creativity and problem solving, enabling children to explore new ideas and concepts, test their own abilities and learn new things about the world around them.



RISK & CHALLENGE

Children and young people have a natural desire for challenging play, often seeking it out regardless of whether safe provision has been made.

Challenge in play is important as it allows children to test the boundaries of their limitations, develop new skills to overcome challenges, and develop the ability to better manage risk on an individual basis.



SOCIAL SKILLS

Play provides children with opportunities to develop their social and communication skills, enabling them to interact and engage with others, learn to negotiate and share, deal with conflict, and develop and maintain friendships.

At a wider level, play has been shown to contribute to active citizenship, supporting the development of community cohesion.



TEENAGERS & PLAY

Play is often viewed as something only younger children engage in, when in reality it remains a key part of young people's lives throughout their teenage years.

As children become teenagers, social connection becomes increasingly important, with play and recreational activities often providing the central basis for such interactions.



CONNECTIONS TO NATURAL ENVIRONMENT

Playing outdoors in natural spaces (parklands, fields, forests, beaches) not only benefits health and well-being, but also helps children and young people to gain a greater understanding and appreciation of, and connection with the natural environment.



Beyond the developmental benefits of play, it is important to recognise that for children and young people, playing is one of the most important aspects of their lives. Children and young people need, and are entitled to, quality places, spaces and time for play.

2.2 Barriers to Play

Despite the many benefits associated with play, and the progress which has been made in recent years, there are a number of significant barriers that children in Northern Ireland continue to face in seeking to fulfil their natural drive and urge to play.

- The continued lack of a Play Strategy for Northern Ireland, alongside targeted funding streams focused on delivering the Right to Play for all children and young people.
- A lack of understanding about the developmental importance of play across the broader policy arena, leading to missed opportunities to harness the power of play to enhance learning, health and well-being, social development and community cohesion.
- A lack of understanding about the importance of play and a low level of tolerance towards children playing outdoors from adults in the community.
- Increased levels of traffic within residential areas, which limit traditional street and community play opportunities due to safety concerns.
- A loss of accessible public, green spaces which are readily available for children to play in.
- A lack of appropriate play infrastructure (e.g. fixed play areas, open recreation spaces, playable public realm etc.) to meet the play needs of children and young people.
- Limited opportunities for the inclusion of children and young people with disabilities or complex needs within play spaces and environments.

2.3 The Impact of COVID-19

Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, children and young people faced many barriers to meeting their play needs, often based around a lack of time, space and permission to play in the communities in which they lived.

An already challenging situation was further exacerbated by the pandemic, which saw a further decline in physical, social and creative play opportunities, leading to increased levels of inactivity and resulting in poverty of experience.

Social isolation and the excessive use of screens and technology during lockdowns led to many children experiencing increased levels of anxiety, alongside longer-term mental health and emotional issues.

Research undertaken by PlayBoard and Ulster University during the pandemic identified significant concerns regarding the increasing levels of play deprivation during and post social lockdowns.

Children and young people's lack of access to and/or restricted play opportunities during the pandemic has had a detrimental impact on their learning, social development and physical and mental health and well-being. Evidence shows that reduced levels of engagement in active and social play during the pandemic have continued post-Covid, with parents/carers, schools, youth groups, sporting clubs and other stakeholders noting reduced levels of play across all age groups.

2.4 United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child - the Right to Play

At the core of PlayBoard's work is Article 31 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC), an international human rights treaty that grants all children and young people a comprehensive set of rights.

The UNCRC was ratified by the UK Government in 1991, committing all branches of central, regional and local government across the UK to ensuring its fulfilment.

Article 31 of the UNCRC states:



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.

2. States Parties shall respect and promote the right of the child to participate fully in cultural and artistic life and shall encourage the provision of appropriate and equal opportunities for cultural, artistic, recreational and leisure activity.



In 2013, the UN issued General Comment 17, reiterating the importance of play to the lives of children and young people, highlighting in particular that play:

- Supports and enhances learning and academic attainment
- Is fundamental to the quality of childhood
- Supports social development and social connection
- Contributes to mutual understanding through cross-community play.

In its recent periodic review (2023), the Committee made four recommendations for the UK and Northern Ireland aimed at supporting the delivery of the Right to Play.

UN CONCLUDING OBSERVATIONS (UK & N. IRELAND 2023)

- Develop a Play Strategy ensuring the right to outdoor play
- Integrate the Right to Play into school curricula, ensuring children have sufficient time to engage in quality play
- Ensure all children have access to accessible, inclusive and safe public outdoor play spaces
- Involve children in decisions regarding development of play spaces.

If progress is to be made towards successfully achieving the concluding observations it is critical that the NI Executive, under the auspices of the Children and Young People's Strategy, establishes a framework for delivering a Play Strategy with play sufficiency provisions.

3.0 Play Deprivation

3.1 A Working Definition

Play deprivation occurs when children's opportunities to play freely are restricted, limiting their access to diverse and self-directed play experiences.

It does not mean that children are inactive or without access to recreational stimulation. Many children in Northern Ireland participate in organised sport, structured programmes, and supervised activities and, whilst these experiences may be positive and enriching, such activity alone does not fulfil the developmental function of play.

Play, in its fullest sense, is child-led and intrinsically motivated. It is initiated, shaped, and sustained by children on their own terms. From an adult perspective, it may appear random, inefficient, or unpredictable. It may change rapidly as children's motivations shift. Yet it is precisely this flexibility and self-direction that gives play its developmental power. The value of play lies not in an externally defined outcome, but in the experience itself.

Play deprivation therefore arises when opportunities for this kind of autonomous, exploratory, and self-directed play are constrained over time. When the freedom to play narrows, so too does the breadth of developmental experience available to children.

3.2 Origins of the Concept: Bob Hughes and Belfast

The concept of play deprivation was articulated most clearly in the work of the late play theorist Bob Hughes. His early 1980s research undertaken in Belfast, conducted during the Troubles and later referenced in a report titled *A Dark and Evil Cul-de-sac*, examined how children played in neighbourhoods shaped by territorial division, surveillance and fear.

Hughes observed that children did not stop playing under these conditions. Instead, their play reflected environmental constraint. He described children's play as becoming "adulterated by fear and environmental restriction."

From this research he identified three interconnected forms of deprivation:

- Narrowing of range - Referring to a lessening in the diversity of play environments and experiences available. When children's movement is restricted - whether by physical barriers, traffic density or perceived community boundaries - exposure to varied sensory and social play experiences is reduced.
- Reduction of play choice - When adults increasingly determine where, how and with whom children may play, self-ownership of the process diminishes.
- Limitation of mastery and challenge - Through climbing, exploring, negotiating rules and managing peer interaction, children develop competence. When risk and uncertainty are systematically removed, opportunities to develop judgement and resilience decline.

Whilst these insights emerged from a specific geographical and historical context, their relevance extends far beyond it.

3.3 Play as a Developmental System

International research reinforces Hughes' ecological framing of play as a developmental system shaped by environment rather than individual inclination.

Lester and Russell's influential review for the Bernard van Leer Foundation (2010) positioned play as central to children's adaptability in complex and changing environments. They argued that play enables children to experiment with possibility, to imagine alternative outcomes and to respond flexibly to new situations. In playful contexts, children move fluidly between roles, negotiate evolving rules and respond to unexpected challenges. This process strengthens emotional regulation and cognitive flexibility. Importantly, Lester and Russell emphasised that these benefits arise not from structured instruction, but from play's inherent uncertainty and child ownership. It is precisely because play is self-directed and open-ended that it supports adaptive capacity.





Peter Gray's longitudinal analysis of childhood trends in high-income countries (2013) extended this argument. Gray observed that reductions in children's free play over several decades coincided with increases in reported anxiety and depressive symptoms. While he did not suggest a simple causal relationship, he proposed that free play provides children with opportunities to practise coping with uncertainty. In games of chase, rough-and-tumble play or imaginative scenarios involving danger or conflict, children experience fear, excitement and social tension within environments they perceive as controllable. They learn to regulate feelings, recover from minor setbacks and tolerate ambiguity. Without sufficient access to these self-chosen experiences, opportunities to develop internal coping mechanisms may diminish.

Tim Gill's (2007) work on risk further clarifies this developmental dynamic. Gill distinguished between hazard - hidden or unmanageable danger - and healthy challenge, which children can see, assess and navigate. He cautioned that through efforts to eliminate risk entirely, adults may inadvertently remove opportunities for children to develop judgement. Confidence and competence do not emerge from protection alone but develop through graduated exposure to manageable challenge. When environments become overly safe and sanitised, children have fewer opportunities to test boundaries and refine their decision-making skills.

Taken together, these perspectives converge on a consistent insight. Play supports development not despite its unpredictability, but because of it. Autonomy, exploration, and manageable uncertainty are not peripheral features of play; they are its developmental engine.

From this standpoint, play deprivation cannot be understood as a simple reduction in leisure time. It represents a contraction of developmental opportunity. When children have fewer chances to direct their own activity, to encounter varied environments, and to navigate challenge independently, the rehearsal of adaptability, resilience and social competence becomes narrower.

The issue, therefore, is not whether children are occupied. It is whether they have sufficient access to the kinds of experiences that build the capacities required for life in an increasingly complex world.

3.4 Shifting Pressures, Persistent Effects

The enduring insight from Hughes' Belfast research is that children's play often reflects the conditions in which they live. Play does not develop in isolation from its environment; it mirrors it.

In 1980s Belfast, territoriality, division, and fear shaped the boundaries of childhood. Children learned quickly where they could and could not go, with their daily geography defined by both visible and invisible lines. The constraints on play were overt and immediate.

Today, the pressures shaping childhood are different. They are less dramatic, less visibly political - but no less influential. Traffic density, reduced independent mobility, time scarcity, digital immersion, academic intensity, and cultural risk aversion each influence the space, time, and freedom available to children. The form of restriction has changed, but the ecological principle has not.

When environments narrow, then play narrows, and when play narrows, developmental opportunity contracts.

Understanding play deprivation as ecological reframes the discussion. It moves the conversation beyond whether children are busy or well supervised. Instead, it asks a more fundamental question: do children have sufficient access to varied, self-directed experiences that allow them to build resilience, judgement, and social competence over time?

Play is not a cultural luxury or a nostalgic indulgence. It is a developmental necessity - woven into the architecture of childhood itself.

3.5 Unequal Exposure: Disability and Play Deprivation

While play deprivation affects many children, it is not experienced evenly across the population. For children with disabilities, restrictions on play opportunity are often more structural and more persistent.

Environmental design, inaccessible infrastructure, negative social attitudes, and limited inclusive provision combine to restrict both access to play environments and meaningful participation within them. In this sense, children with disabilities frequently encounter a compounded form of play deprivation, where barriers exist not only in the quantity of play opportunity available, but in the quality and accessibility of those opportunities.

Evidence from Northern Ireland illustrates the scale of this challenge. Research undertaken with families of disabled children found that despite the development of new and improved play parks, many continue to face significant barriers to participation in everyday play environments. Families report difficulties relating to physical access, infrastructure design, attitudes, and the limited availability of equipment that enables meaningful participation.

Crucially, many children may be able to enter a play space yet remain unable to actively take part in play within it. This distinction between access and participation is fundamental. Inclusive play environments must not simply allow children to enter a space; they must enable children to play within it with dignity, choice and challenge equivalent to their peers.

When children with disabilities are excluded from everyday play environments, the effects extend beyond leisure. Opportunities for social connection, physical development, independence and emotional resilience are reduced. In this way, disability can magnify the developmental consequences associated with play deprivation.

Understanding play deprivation therefore requires attention not only to the quantity of play opportunities available to children, but also to the equity of access and participation across different groups of children.

4.0 Shifting Pressures on Childhood

The preceding sections have established that play reflects the conditions in which children live. If play deprivation is ecological, then attention must turn to the specific environmental conditions shaping childhood in Northern Ireland today.

The pressures facing children are no longer defined by visible territorial boundaries or overt conflict. Instead, they arise from quieter but equally influential structural changes within the environments in which children grow up. These pressures are embedded within the design of neighbourhoods, the organisation of children's time, patterns of mobility, economic inequality, and the increasing role of digital environments.

Individually, each of these influences may appear modest or manageable. However, their cumulative effect can significantly reshape the amount of time, space, and autonomy available for play.

Understanding these pressures is essential for understanding how play deprivation emerges within contemporary childhood.



4.1 Streets, Space and Independent Mobility

Across many communities, traffic-dominated streets reduce children's freedom to roam independently. Residential roads increasingly function as corridors for vehicles rather than shared social spaces.

In previous generations, neighbourhood streets frequently acted as informal play environments where children cycled, played ball games, and gathered with friends. Today, increased traffic density, road design prioritising vehicle flow, and concerns about safety have altered how these spaces are experienced by families.

As streets become less navigable for children, play is displaced. It moves indoors, into designated spaces, or into structured environments. While these environments may offer valuable opportunities, they rarely replicate the diversity and spontaneity of play that emerges within everyday neighbourhood spaces.

The reduction of independent mobility represents one of the most significant shifts in contemporary childhood. When children cannot move freely through their local environments, opportunities for exploration, discovery, and spontaneous social interaction are diminished.

Independent mobility also plays an important developmental role. Navigating neighbourhood spaces enables children to assess risk, negotiate social relationships, and develop confidence in their own decision-making. When these opportunities decline, the everyday rehearsal of independence becomes more limited.

4.2 Time, Attainment and the Structure of the School Day

Changes within the education system have also influenced children's play opportunities.

Schools understandably place significant emphasis on academic attainment and measurable outcomes. Educational achievement plays a crucial role in shaping life opportunities and therefore remains an important priority. However, the cumulative effect of increasing instructional demands has been a gradual reduction in discretionary time within the school day.

Break times may be shortened, tightly supervised, or structured around organised activities. In some contexts, play is positioned primarily as a tool to support behaviour management or improve readiness for learning rather than as an activity with intrinsic developmental value.

Yet the developmental significance of play lies precisely in its autonomy and unpredictability. Through self-directed play, children initiate activity, negotiate rules, experiment with ideas, and manage uncertainty without predetermined outcomes.

When children's time becomes highly organised and outcomes become the primary focus of activity, opportunities for such self-directed experiences become more limited.

Given the amount of time children spend within education settings, changes within the structure of the school day can have a significant influence on the broader ecology of childhood.

4.3 Inequality and Unequal Access to Play

Socio-economic inequality further shapes children's access to play opportunities.

Children living in areas of disadvantage are more likely to experience limited access to safe green space, higher traffic exposure, and fewer informal gathering environments. Public spaces may be less well maintained or perceived as less safe, influencing parental decisions about children's independent movement.

Economic constraints can also limit access to organised recreational activities. Where participation in sports clubs, activities, or transport requires financial resources that families cannot easily provide, children's range of play experiences may narrow further.

In this way, inequality shapes not only material conditions but also environmental and social opportunities. Where spatial restriction intersects with economic hardship, children may experience a compounded reduction in play opportunities.

Understanding play deprivation, therefore, requires attention not only to the availability of play environments but also to the unequal distribution of those environments across communities.



4.4 Digital Immersion and the Indoor Shift

Digital technologies now form a central part of children's lives. Online environments provide entertainment, creativity, and opportunities for communication that previous generations did not experience.

It is important not to frame digital engagement solely as a risk or problem. Digital environments offer genuine benefits and can provide valuable forms of interaction and learning.

However, digital engagement can also displace embodied, outdoor, and socially negotiated forms of play. As opportunities for independent movement decline and children's time becomes more structured, screen-based activities increasingly fill the available space.

The issue, therefore, lies not in the existence of digital play but in the balance of children's experiences. When physical exploration, outdoor environments, and peer interaction become less accessible, digital engagement can become the default form of activity rather than one element within a broader ecology of play.

4.5 Cumulative Pressures on Childhood

Taken together, these environmental pressures reshape the everyday contexts in which childhood unfolds.

Traffic-dominated streets limit mobility. Structured time reduces autonomy. Inequality influences access to space and opportunity. Digital environments reshape how children interact with the world around them.

None of these eliminates play entirely. As Hughes observed, children continue to play even under constrained conditions. However, when the diversity of environments available to children narrows, so too does the range of experiences through which development can occur.

The issue, therefore, is not whether children are busy or supervised, but whether they have sufficient access to varied, self-directed experiences that allow them to explore, experiment, and develop resilience over time.

Understanding these pressures provides essential context for examining the broader developmental consequences that follow.





5.0 The Consequences of Narrowing Play

Play is one of the primary arenas in which children rehearse the capacities required for adulthood. Through self-directed play, children encounter uncertainty, negotiate relationships, manage conflict, and test their capabilities. These experiences build adaptive capacity and confidence. When the range and diversity of play experiences available to children diminish, opportunities to rehearse these capacities also decline.

Within this context, play should be understood not simply as recreation but as part of the developmental infrastructure of childhood. Restrictions on play opportunity therefore carry implications not only for children's leisure experiences but for their long-term well-being, health, and social development.

This matters particularly within the Northern Ireland context. Demand for children's mental health services continues to rise, whilst public health discourse increasingly emphasises prevention and early intervention. Prevention, however, cannot rest solely on service provision - it must also look to the everyday environments in which protective capacities are formed.

Play functions as low-cost, community-embedded prevention infrastructure, strengthening emotional self-regulation before distress escalates. It builds tolerance for uncertainty through manageable challenge and supports peer connection without formal facilitation.

When opportunities for autonomous play contract, so too does this preventative capacity.

5.1 Emotional Well-being and Resilience

Play provides children with opportunities to encounter and regulate a wide range of emotions. Through play, children experience excitement, frustration, uncertainty and social tension whilst learning to calm themselves after disappointment, recover from minor setbacks and navigate disagreements with peers.

These experiences allow children to move repeatedly between emotional activation and recovery, strengthening emotional regulation and resilience.

When opportunities for self-directed play decline, these everyday rehearsals of emotional regulation also become less frequent. Emotional challenges may increasingly be managed through adult intervention rather than through the child's own navigation of the experience.

Whilst adult support remains essential for safety purposes, resilience develops most robustly when children have opportunities to practice managing challenges independently within environments they perceive as manageable.

Within a context where demand for children's mental health services continues to rise, the importance of such everyday resilience-building experiences becomes increasingly significant.

5.2 Physical Health and Embodied Confidence

Active play contributes to children's physical development. Running, climbing, balancing, and exploring uneven terrain supports coordination, cardiovascular health, and physical literacy. These experiences allow children to develop confidence in their own bodies and to understand how to assess and respond to risk.

Physical competence is further closely linked to confidence and participation, with children who feel physically capable being more likely to explore new environments, attempt challenges, and engage socially with peers. Where opportunities for active play decline, children have fewer opportunities to develop this embodied confidence.

From an environmental perspective, play spaces that are overly predictable, highly sanitised, or risk averse can limit access to the graded challenges that are so critical to developing competence and confidence.

5.3 Social Skills and Everyday Negotiation

Play functions as a social rehearsal space.

Within peer-led play, children negotiate rules, resolve disagreements, and form alliances without immediate adult intervention. Leadership shifts, cooperation evolves, and conflicts emerge and resolve within fluid social contexts.

These interactions allow children to develop communication skills, empathy, and the ability to interpret the perspectives of others.

When play becomes highly structured or predominantly adult-directed, opportunities for this form of independent social negotiation may decline. Adults act to resolve disputes quickly and efficiently, in doing so reducing opportunities for children to practice resolving them themselves.

The presence of adults is not inherently problematic - the issue arises when children have limited space to manage social dynamics independently. Over time, reduced exposure to such experiences narrows opportunities to 'rehearse' the essential skills of cooperation, compromise, and resilience within peer relationships.

5.4 Inequality and Compounded Disadvantage

The consequences of narrowing play opportunity are not evenly distributed. Children living in disadvantaged communities can often experience multiple environmental constraints simultaneously, with limited access to green space, exposure to traffic filled streets, restricted mobility, and economic barriers to organised activities combining to reduce access to varied play environments.

As previously highlighted, play functions as an important resilience mechanism within challenging contexts, providing opportunities for exploration, stress relief, and peer connection beyond immediate circumstances. Where access to such opportunity is uneven, inequality can deepen not only in material terms but also in developmental experience.

Ensuring access to sufficient play opportunities therefore represents not only a universal childhood concern but also an issue of equity and social justice. Without deliberate attention to play within policy and planning frameworks, the children who may benefit most from diverse play opportunities may be those with the least access to them.



6.0 Where the Gaps Remain

The preceding sections have demonstrated that play deprivation is not the result of individual parental choice or isolated institutional practice, rather it emerges from the cumulative effect of spatial design, time structures, mobility patterns, inequality, and cultural norms. If the conditions shaping childhood are systemic, then the response must also be systemic. Yet within Northern Ireland's policy architecture, structural protection for play remains underdeveloped.

Whilst Article 31 of the UNCRC (the Right to Play) and the value of play are referenced within strategies relating to well-being, public health and education, such references are typically brief and high-level. They signal recognition, but rarely translate into clear, actionable commitments to address the systemic barriers that limit children's play opportunities.

Northern Ireland lacks a Play Strategy incorporating play sufficiency provisions. There is no statutory requirement to assess whether children and young people across different communities have adequate access to varied, inclusive and self-directed play opportunities as exists within the other devolved UK nations. In the absence of such a framework, play provision remains uneven - shaped by local discretion, short-term funding cycles and isolated programme activity rather than embedded, system-wide responsibility.

The absence of a Play Strategy creates vulnerability. When play is not protected through statutory or strategic mechanisms, it competes with other priorities. Housing density may increase without proportional attention being given to informal green space; traffic flow may be prioritised without explicit consideration of independent child mobility; educational performance may be emphasised without safeguarding discretionary time for play. Whilst each decision may appear reasonable within its own policy domain, collectively they act to reshape childhood ecology, limiting play and leading to reduced developmental opportunities.

Responsibility for play intersects across departments - infrastructure, education, health, communities, etc. - yet cross-departmental integration remains limited. Planning processes often consider environmental sustainability without fully assessing childhood accessibility; transport strategies may address safety without framing mobility as a developmental opportunity, whilst health policy may prioritise early intervention without recognising play as key part of the preventative infrastructure.

The result is a structural disconnect between recognition and delivery. In practice, this means that many of the decisions that shape children's everyday lives are taken without explicit consideration of how they influence opportunities for play.

- Housing developments may proceed without sufficient consideration of playable space.
- Public realm projects may prioritise aesthetic improvement while overlooking the needs of children as users of space.
- School policies may focus on behaviour management and attainment without recognising the developmental importance of unstructured play.

Individually, these decisions can appear minor, but collectively they contribute to a narrowing of childhood play environments. This gradual erosion of play, whilst rarely intentional, occurs through the accumulation of small decisions made across multiple policy domains, none of which are explicitly responsible for protecting play. As a result, the ecology of childhood and play can shift significantly without any single policy change appearing decisive.

The United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child, in its most recent Concluding Observations, called for the development of comprehensive strategies to secure children's right to play, including the provision of accessible outdoor space and sufficient time within education settings. These recommendations reinforce a central point: rights require implementation mechanisms.

A right that is acknowledged but not structurally protected remains contingent. In practice, this means that children's access to play continues to depend largely on where they live, the resources available within their community, and the priorities of individual institutions, rather than on a consistent commitment to delivering the Right to Play across Northern Ireland.

The ecological framing advanced earlier in this report - drawing on Hughes' insight that children and young people's play mirrors their environment - implies that environmental reform is necessary if play sufficiency is to be realised. Without a coherent framework aligning planning, transport, education, and health the pressures described will continue to accumulate.

This is not a question of whether individual play programmes exist. Many valuable initiatives supporting children's play are delivered across Northern Ireland by community organisations, schools, and local authorities. Rather, the issue is whether the overall system consistently supports - or inadvertently restricts - the conditions required for autonomous play.

At present, the system lacks that coherence. Strengthening the role of play within policy requires more than the expansion of individual programmes. It requires the development of a coordinated framework capable of aligning planning, education, health, and community policy around a shared understanding of play as an essential component of childhood development and well-being. The following section outlines a number of strategic priorities that could support this transition from recognition to implementation.



7.0 Strategic Priorities for Addressing Play Deprivation in Northern Ireland

Addressing play deprivation requires coordinated action across multiple policy domains. The following strategic priorities identify key areas where structural change could significantly strengthen children’s access to time, space, and opportunity for play within Northern Ireland.

Strategic Priority	Rationale	Proposed Policy Actions	Anticipated Impact
1. Develop a Northern Ireland Play Strategy with Play Sufficiency Duties	<p>Despite broad recognition of the importance of play, Northern Ireland currently lacks a comprehensive Play Strategy.</p> <p>Without a coordinated framework, responsibility for play is dispersed across multiple departments and agencies, resulting in fragmented provision and uneven access to play opportunities across communities.</p> <p>A Play Strategy incorporating play sufficiency principles would establish a mechanism for assessing whether children have adequate time, space and opportunity to play within their everyday environments.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Develop a cross-departmental Play Strategy under the Children and Young People’s Strategy framework. • Introduce Play Sufficiency Assessments at regional and local authority level. • Establish accountability mechanisms across planning, education, infrastructure and community policy. • Align with Article 31 of the UNCRC and the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child recommendations. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provides a coherent policy framework for delivering the Right to Play. • Ensures play is embedded within decision-making across government. • Enables identification of areas where children experience restricted access to play opportunities.

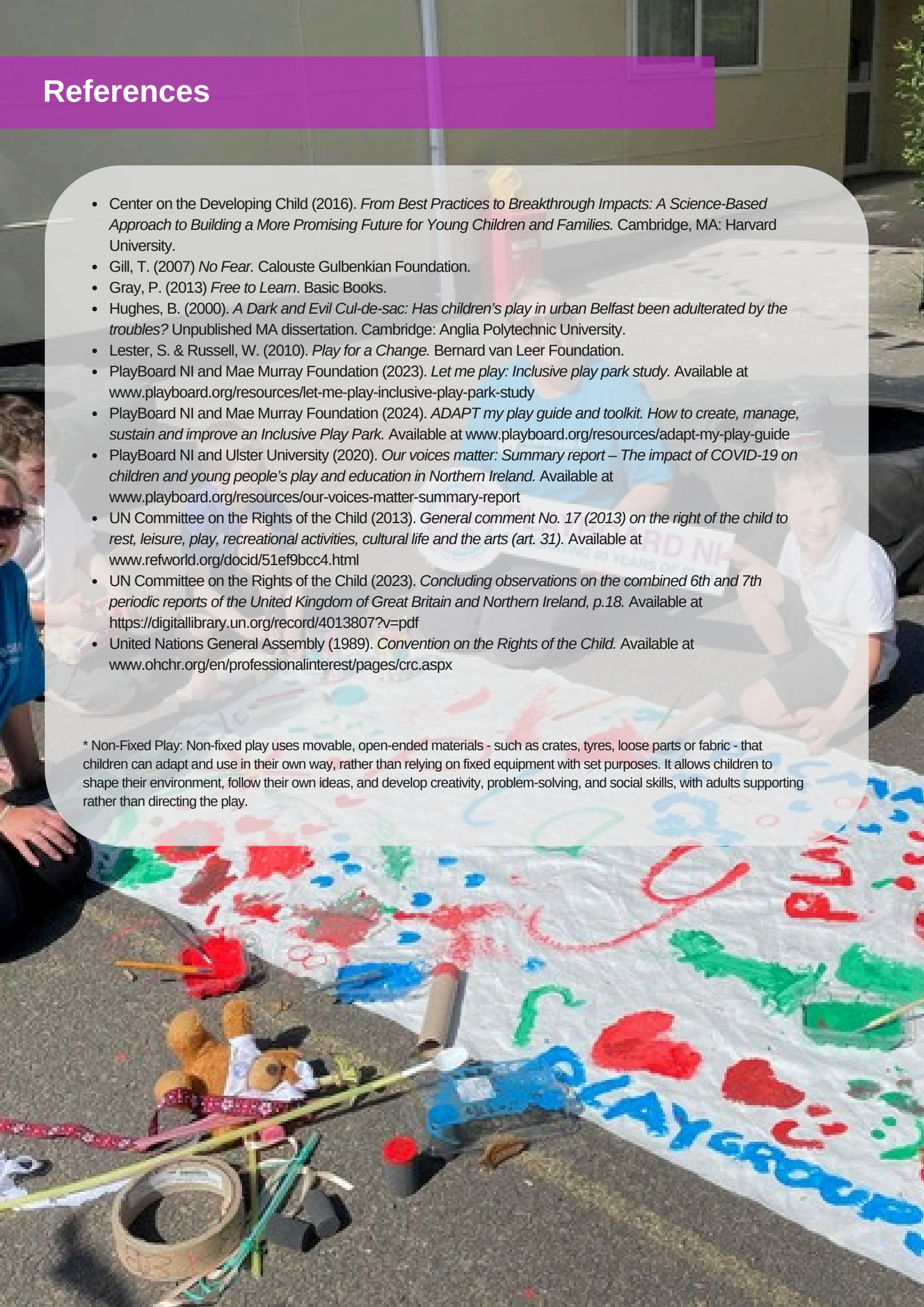
Strategic Priority	Rationale	Proposed Policy Actions	Anticipated Impact
<p>2. Embed Play Sufficiency within Planning and Spatial Policy</p>	<p>The design of neighbourhoods significantly influences children’s ability to play.</p> <p>Traffic-dominated streets, high housing density and limited informal green space can restrict independent mobility and reduce opportunities for spontaneous outdoor play.</p> <p>Current planning frameworks in Northern Ireland do not consistently require the consideration of children’s play needs when shaping residential environments.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Integrate play sufficiency principles explicitly within the NI planning framework (including revision of existing Planning Policy Statements 7 and 8). • Require Child Impact Assessments for major housing developments and public realm schemes. • Promote “playable neighbourhood” design principles within local development plans. • Strengthen provision of accessible and inclusive public play space within new residential and public realm developments. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Creates neighbourhoods that support everyday play and independent mobility. • Reduces environmental barriers that contribute to play deprivation. • Strengthens community well-being and child-friendly urban design.
<p>3. Strengthen the Role of Play within Education Settings</p>	<p>Schools represent one of the most consistent environments in children’s daily lives and for many children the school playground may be the only accessible outdoor play space available.</p> <p>The developmental value of play is however frequently positioned as being secondary to academic priorities.</p> <p>Highly structured supervision models and shortened break times can act to restrict opportunities for self-directed play during the school day, reducing children’s physical, social and intellectual development.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Develop education policy guidance recognising play as a key component of children and young people’s developmental infrastructure. • Protect adequate break times within the school day. • Encourage play-friendly playground design and outdoor learning environments within schools, focusing on the full utilisation of available space and introduction of non-fixed* play opportunities. • Provide teacher and staff development on play-based approaches to well-being and learning. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Enhances children’s well-being, resilience and social development. • Supports emotional regulation and peer relationships. • Reinforces the importance of play within the broader ecology of childhood.

Strategic Priority	Rationale	Proposed Policy Actions	Anticipated Impact
<p>4. Invest in Community Play Infrastructure and Playable Neighbourhoods</p>	<p>Opportunities for spontaneous play within communities have declined due to traffic density, reduced independent mobility and limited accessible green space.</p> <p>Community environments remain critical settings where children encounter peers, explore their surroundings and develop independence. Strengthening local play infrastructure can help restore these everyday opportunities.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Expand investment in inclusive parks, green spaces and community play environments. Promote traffic calming and safe streets initiatives to support independent mobility. Encourage local authorities to adopt playable neighbourhood approaches. Support community-led play initiatives and temporary play streets programmes. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Restores everyday opportunities for spontaneous play. Strengthens community cohesion and social interaction. Improves children's physical health and independent mobility.
<p>5. Deliver access to Inclusive Play Environments for Children with Disabilities</p>	<p>Children with disabilities frequently experience compounded play deprivation due to barriers in infrastructure, equipment design and social attitudes.</p> <p>Research in Northern Ireland highlights that many play environments allow access but fail to support meaningful participation.</p> <p>Ensuring that play spaces are genuinely inclusive requires a shift from minimum accessibility standards toward design approaches that enable full engagement.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Require the application of universal design principles in play space providing Ensure public investment in destination level play parks adheres to the <i>ADAPT my Play</i> toolkit, in line with the UK Statement on Inclusive Play. Embed co-production with disabled children and families as essential within playpark design processes. In line with <i>ADAPT my Play</i>, ensure accessible infrastructure (including Changing Places facilities) are available at destination level playparks. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Ensures children with disabilities can participate fully in play. Reduces structural exclusion within play environments. Promotes social inclusion and equal access to developmental opportunities.

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* Non-Fixed Play: Non-fixed play uses movable, open-ended materials - such as crates, tyres, loose parts or fabric - that children can adapt and use in their own way, rather than relying on fixed equipment with set purposes. It allows children to shape their environment, follow their own ideas, and develop creativity, problem-solving, and social skills, with adults supporting rather than directing the play.





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