Play: mental health and wellbeing
Playing is central to children’s physical, mental, social and emotional health and wellbeing. Through play, children develop resilience and flexibility, contributing to physical and emotional wellbeing.

To children themselves, playing is one of the most important aspects of their lives – they value time, freedom and quality places to play. Consultations with children and young people show that they prefer to play outdoors away from adult supervision – in safe but stimulating places. In this situation children tend to be physically active and stretch themselves both physically and emotionally to a greater extent than they would if they were supervised.

Children have an inborn urge to play – research suggests that playing has an impact on the physical and chemical development of the brain – it ‘influences children’s ability to adapt to, survive, thrive and shape their social and physical environments’.

**Play and emotional wellbeing**

Playing allows for peer interactions that are important components of social and emotional wellbeing. When playing alone, children begin to recognise their own emotions, feelings, and thoughts, as well as how to control them. Children also learn to feel comfortable with being by themselves and learn ways to manage their boredom on their own.

Through play children experience a range of emotions including frustration, determination, achievement, disappointment and confidence, and through practice, can learn how to manage these feelings.

**How playing contributes to children’s emotional well-being:**

- Creating and encountering risky or uncertain play opportunities develops children’s resilience and adaptability – and can contribute to their confidence and self-esteem.

- Socialising with their friends on their own terms gives children opportunities to build emotional resilience, to have fun and to relax.

- Fantasy play allows for imagination and creativity, but it can also be a way of children making sense of and ‘working through’ difficult and distressing aspects of their lives.

**The Welsh Government recognises the importance of play in children’s lives and states in its national Play Policy:**

‘Play is so critically important to all children in the development of their physical, social, mental, emotional and creative skills that society should seek every opportunity to support it and create an environment that fosters it. Decision making at all levels of government should include a consideration of the impact of those decisions, on children’s opportunities to play.’

**Playing and the Five Ways to Wellbeing**

In 2008, the UK Government’s Foresight project on Mental Capital and Wellbeing commissioned The New Economics Foundation (NEF) to explore the issues around
mental health and wellbeing and develop actions for increasing mental wellbeing. The resulting ‘Five Ways to Wellbeing’, promoted by Public Health Wales, are:

**Take notice** – slow down, appreciate, recognise your own and others’ talents

**Connect** – meet up, join in, phone a friend, listen

**Be active** – get up and have a go, walk, run, cycle, dance, garden, sing

**Keep learning** – try something new, have a go, ask how, where and why

**Give** – share what you have, smile at others, volunteer.

We know that given time, space and permission children will play. We also know that playing is crucial for children’s mental wellbeing, but how does it link with the five ways?

**Take notice** – When children have time and space for play, they will engage with their environment in a range of ways. When children are playing they take notice of their environment, and through playing, engage with it and adapt to it.

**Connect** – Playing has a central role in creating strong attachments to both people and places. This means that children not only connect with each other but also with adults in their environment. Equally important, they also create strong connections with the places that they live and play.

**Be active** – Increasing evidence shows that playing is the most effective way to get children physically active. All children play, whilst not all children wish to participate in sport or more structured physical activity.
Keep learning – Playing allows children to learn in their own way and interact with new and novel concepts in a way that is not stressful. Through experimentation, interaction and adaptation children continue to learn through playing long after formal teaching and learning has ended for the day.

Give – Whilst the evidence gathered by NEF doesn’t point as strongly to the mental health benefits of children and young people ‘giving’, it is clear that children learn how to give and share with others through playing. This involves the negotiation of shared space, sharing ideas and resources for playing and sharing with each other. For older children who are allowed to play with and around younger children, giving occurs naturally and mutually as they share games, places for playing and nurture or to extend younger children’s play.

Brain development and deprivation

In The Ambiguity of Play Brian Sutton-Smith cites Huttenlocher’s work on brain imaging, implying that children under the age of 10 have at least twice the potential brain capacity of adults. This overcapacity is linked to human evolution because it enables the brain to retain what he calls ‘its potential variability’.

Sutton-Smith suggests that this over-capacity will be used more effectively if children are exposed to diversity of experience through playing. He argues that if children play, their brains will grow larger than they otherwise would, therefore dramatically improving their capacity to store and process information.

If this huge ‘neuronal overcapacity’ is not taken up by the age of around 10, it will die off. This suggests that play is implicated in children’s brain development, and in evolution itself. It follows that a play deprived future will have serious consequences.

Huttenmoser et al refer to what they describe as ‘battery children’ and attribute play deprivation symptoms to:

‘A lack of play resulting from traffic and parental fears of predatory adults, battery children are then often aggressive and whine a lot. By the age of five they are emotionally and socially repressed, find it difficult to mix, fall behind with school work and are at much greater risk of obesity.’

Note: for more information about play deprivation, read our Play deprivation: impact, consequences and the potential of playwork information sheet written by Professor Fraser Brown.
‘Play is our window on the world. Through it, the infant learns about objects and how to manipulate them. The toddler explores the world with his new-found legs and a biochemical urge to roam. The young child communicates and cooperates with others to manage risks, to solve problems and expand creative imagination. In adolescence, free unstructured play molds the brain pathways that are being laid down to guide our relationships, establish our role in life and make compromises with people around us. And all the time, play is the key to physical fitness and emotional wellbeing.

Play is essential to our cognitive, emotional, social and physical development. As a doctor and psychiatrist, I have dealt at first hand with the disastrous consequences that may result from a lack of opportunity to play and adults’ inability to let it happen. Young people become fearful of the world in every way and will grow up into parents who will block their own children’s development in turn.

Watching TV and working the computer are important, and so is organised recreation like sport. But they are not nearly so important for development as free-for-all, rough-and-tumble play. And the research is proving it. So turn everything off and get out there to play. And remember, while you’re having fun, that this is the very best thing you can do!’

Dr Mike Shooter, former President of the Royal College of Psychiatrists

References


Play Wales is the national organisation for children's play, an independent charity supported by the Welsh Government to uphold children’s right to play and to provide advice and guidance on play-related matters.