

About Play Wales

Play Wales is the national charity for children's play. We work to raise awareness of children and young people's need and right to play and to promote good practice at every level of decision making and, in every place, where children might play. We provide advice and guidance to support all those who have an interest in, or responsibility for providing for children's play so that one day Wales will be a place where we recognise and provide well for every child's play needs. Our team of seven works across Wales – our work includes:

- Policy
- Information service
- Advice and support
- Workforce development.

Our response

Our response will focus on how children being educated otherwise than at school can realise their right to play. It will respond to the following points:

- Outcomes and well-being of children and young people EOTAS
- The quality of support provided to children and young people in the range of EOTAS provision
- Professional development support for Pupil Referral Unit staff, including those who provide home tuition
- The potential risks for children and young people EOTAS

Outcomes and well-being of children and young people EOTAS

There is evidence that playing is central to children's physical, mental, social and emotional health and well-being¹ and play is enshrined in the United

Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child. It is widely accepted that playing is vital to the development of imagination, risk-taking abilities, cognitive functioning, physical skills and social cooperation.

Through play, children develop resilience and flexibility, contributing to physical and emotional well-being. For many children, school playtime is the main chance they have to play, be active and socialise with their friends.²

It has been found that the majority of authoritative systematic reviews and evaluations which quantify evidence of the wider outcomes and impact of play interventions and initiatives focus on play in school.³ International empirical evidence suggests that school playground playtime and break time initiatives which increase children's access to enriching play opportunities are linked to a range of improvements in academic skills, attitudes and behaviour. Other benefits include improved social skills, improved social relations between different ethnic groups, and better adjustment to school life.⁴ Efforts to ensure that children and young people EOTAS receive sufficient time, space and opportunities to play with other children will contribute to improved outcomes and well-being.

The quality of support provided to children and young people in the range of EOTAS provision

It is widely reported that over the past decades, children's free play with other children has declined sharply. Over the same period, anxiety, depression, suicide, feelings of helplessness, and narcissism have increased sharply in children, adolescents, and young adults.⁵

Estyn's new *Healthy and happy – school impact on pupils' health and wellbeing* report⁶ evaluates how well primary and secondary schools in Wales support the health and well-being of their pupils. The report makes several references to school play and break times.

The report highlights that schools that apply a whole school approach to supporting health and well-being provide an environment, facilities and space to play, socialise and relax at break times. It raises concerns that pupils in these schools are less physically active and can find it hard to relax during playtimes which affects their well-being. The report recommendations include:

- Taking a whole-school approach to support all pupils' health and well-being
- Training new teachers to understand and support pupils.

Educational services supporting children and young people EOTAS should be mindful of Estyn's report and recommendations.

The provision of adequate breaks for play should be mandatory and inspected as part of whole school and educational service provision inspection. Play Wales is concerned with the increasing reports regarding the withdrawal of playtime (including lunch time play break) to shorten the school day, or, more concerning as part of a behaviour management policy. The latter is particularly worrying for some children who may be EOTAS. As the Division of Educational and Child Psychology (The British Psychological Society) points out educators should not use the threat of taking away play or break time from schoolchildren as a punishment, or to catch up on unfinished work.⁷

Professional development support for Pupil Referral Unit staff, including those who provide home tuition

Learning about children's play will give teachers, assistants and supervisors confidence to support children to play in their own way. Offering playwork qualifications as part of Continuing Professional Development will provide opportunities for career progression. Course evaluation materials from former learners who undertook Play Wales' playwork qualifications⁸ suggest that undertaking a playwork qualification supports the development of teaching skills, providing a unique insight into the important role playing has in supporting learning, development, resilience and cohesion.

Children need reflective adults around them to support them in their playful adventures. For each child to be able to play in their own way, their individual needs and dispositions have to be considered. Playful practices underpinned by an understanding of each child's own cultural understanding and interests are vital to support children to realise their right to play.

It is beholden on adults to observe and listen to children at play and learn from them about the best way to support their development. Adults need to be advocates for play and this means understanding as much as possible about why and how children play and the sensitivities needed by adults to interact in play and playful experiences. Understanding the innate potential of play for children will enable all adults to uphold children's right to play and the later known benefits to society of play-based learning.

Children respond positively and quickly when adults convey an acceptance of play. For example, it is known that children for whom play is a regular and fulfilling occurrence in the classroom complete teacher-directed tasks more quickly.⁹

The potential risks for children and young people EOTAS

It is possible that children and young people EOTAS may be experiencing anxiety and stress caused by trauma or Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs). Growing up with Adverse Childhood Experiences will likely have a huge impact on the physical, mental and emotional development of children. Responsive caregivers who understand play and supportive places where playing is tolerated and celebrated can break the cycle of damaging childhood experiences. They can reverse the impacts of toxic stress and contribute to long-term improvements in children's outcomes.

Play is a key mechanism for developing resilience and dealing with stress and anxiety. It provides effective strategies for dealing with uncertainty and contributes to good physical and mental health. A child who has developed their resilience can respond and adjust more effectively to difficult circumstances.

Play Wales strongly advises that providing opportunities and time for self-directed play features within any strategy for children and young people EOTAS.

¹ Lester, S. and Russell, W. (2008) *Play for a Change – Play, Policy and Practice: A review of contemporary perspectives*. London: National Children's Bureau for Play England

² Cited in Play Wales (2019) *Focus on Play – Play and education*. Cardiff: Play Wales

³ Gill, T. (2014) *The Play Return: A review of the wider impact of play initiatives*. UK Children's Play Policy Forum

⁴ Ibid

⁵ Gray, P. The Decline of Play and the Rise of Psychopathology in Children and Adolescents, *American Journal of Play*, Spring 2011

⁶ Estyn (2019) *Healthy and happy – school impact on pupils' health and wellbeing*. Cardiff: Crown Copyright

⁷ Division of Educational and Child Psychology (2019) *Children's right to play position paper*. Leicester: The British Psychological Society

⁸ <https://www.playwales.org.uk/eng/qualifications>

⁹ Howard, J. (2015) cited in J. Moyles (ed.) *The Excellence of Play (4th edition)*. Maidenhead: Open University Press