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Play and 'making poverty
less damaging for children'

Recent changes in policy and funding arrangements impact on provision for children's play in Wales. Here we explore some of the background, and examine how play provision meets new priorities.

The Welsh Government has published a new Child Poverty Strategy for Wales which says:

The right to play and its contribution to children's development and resilience

The Welsh Government sees play as being a vital element in children's development and something that can provide a strong protective factor in children's lives. It can, to an extent, shield children from the negative aspects of poverty and allow them to develop their inner resources and build resilience to difficulties and uncertainties in their home and other part of their lives. Play contributes towards children's personal and social development, their physical and mental health, and their ability to learn and engage with education.

To support this understanding, the Welsh Government has placed Play Opportunities in Part 1: Child Poverty, Play and Participation, of the Children and Families (Wales) Measure 2010. This will place a duty on local authorities to assess and secure sufficient play opportunities for children in their areas as far as reasonably practicable.

Families First is the Welsh Government's key programme for designing better integrated support for families living in poverty. Its principal focus is on supporting families through interventions at the preventative and protective stages. The programme aims to drive improvements to family support design and delivery.

In October 2010 the Welsh Government issued a statement informing all Children and Young People's Partnerships across Wales that 2011/12 will be a transition year with a clear mandate for all Cymorth profiles to be aligned to the Families First Principles.

Children have a right to play, and whilst this is increasingly recognised, there is still a need to highlight how playing and staffed play provision can positively impact on children and families who are experiencing poverty.

Here, we explore how provision for playing responds to the Families First Principles:

Family Focused

- Play provision is often available when families need it most (afterschool, during school holidays, evenings and weekends) filling in gaps when other services are unavailable.
- Play provision gives an opportunity for both children and adults to extend their social and peer networks – which is proven to increase resilience.
- Many of the problems that parents say they find a challenge (for instance managing aspects of children's behaviour) can be addressed by improving children's access to play opportunities that meet their needs and quality space for playing.
- Play provision offers informal respite for both parents and children – particularly during school holidays.
- Parents working at or attending staffed play projects have an opportunity to observe their children's play, and to speak with playworkers who can make sense of play behaviour – parents feel more confident and

better able to manage their children's play needs away from the staffed provision.

- Playing together is important for family bonding – the example provided within play services can help parents relax enough to play with their children and to get ideas for low cost or no cost play opportunities.
- Many parents are concerned about letting their child play out; playwork supported provision provides parents with the opportunity to allow their children to play freely away from the home in an environment overseen by trained adults.

Bespoke

- Quality play provision takes place in diverse settings - projects start by researching the characteristics and needs of the local community and the spaces where children and young people are most likely to want to gather, and provide an environment that is tailored to the needs of local children and young people.
- Successful play projects operate to the Playwork Principles, with an emphasis on freely chosen, self-directed play and children's self-determination ... a bespoke service different from most of those traditionally offered to children and young people.
- Research has strongly suggested that older children value the important and on-going roles that play providers play in their lives; a 'play philosophy' which values individual choice, expression and development in a supportive setting.

Integrated

- Quality play provision relies on strong partnership working between services and also with community members who can contribute.
- Quality staffed play provision gives a neighbourhood a 'melting pot' where children who might not normally meet and socialise can mix in a safe enough

environment; this provides experience of other people and more opportunities for wide social networks that contribute to children's resilience.

- Volunteers, trustees and staff are very often recruited from within the local community.
- There is growing recognition from policy partners who value play for a mix of intrinsic and instrumental reasons. They are aware of the difference that play provision make to their work in terms of, for example, community safety and combating anti-social behaviour.

Pro Active

- Community based play provision appeals to families who most benefit from early preventative services, as there is no formal referral system.
- Most staffed open access play provision is offered free of charge.
- There are external environmental and/or personal biological factors that impede some children from playing. Such children are supported to play in an environment where there are trained playworkers who know how to intervene where necessary to facilitate playing. This extends the advantages of playing to children who might not ordinarily benefit.
- Playing has an impact on how children's genetic make up is expressed, and on the physical and chemical development of the brain. This in turn positively influences the child's ability to survive and thrive. Children who have developed a playful innovative response to their environments ... may adapt to these in flexible ways, displaying resilience.
- Regular active physical play helps prevent disease and relieves depression and anxiety.
- Playing is strongly linked to creativity – it involves lateral thinking, imagination and problem solving.

Intensive

- The ‘team around the family’ approach promoted within the Families First strategy concentrates on priority cases – the team (social workers etc) should understand the benefits of playing in developing resilience. Working in partnership with play providers, families could be signposted and supported to access play provision.
- Good play provision has traditionally provided a space in which children can develop for themselves to meet their needs and wishes and where the space can grow with children; space that reflects children’s journey and space that they grow attached to.
- Where children are traumatised by events in their lives the playwork approach supports the playing out and re-creation of difficult experiences in a sensitive and nonjudgmental way.

Local

- Play provision works best when local people are involved in it, providing spaces ‘close to home’ which children can access safely and independently when they are able to.
- Quality staffed play provision can create a hub for a community, in much the same way as schools do during term time or chapels and churches used to, they offer non-threatening opportunities for adults and young people to volunteer and become involved.
- Quality play provision is developed locally and contributes to community cohesion, peer and place attachments and social inclusion because it is specific to the community.

Play and resilience

There is no doubt about it, playing contributes to all children’s ability to survive and thrive – and it’s particularly valuable to disadvantaged children. The evidence is clearly catalogued in recent literature (see *Play for a Change*).

Growing up in poverty and deprivation can potentially have a huge impact on both the physical and mental development of individual children. Interventionist programmes can be useful in minimising some of the damaging impact of poverty, however, they must be complemented by a focus on supporting children to be active participants in building their own resilience. We know that every aspect of children’s lives is influenced by their urge to play, and that the kind of self-directed, self determined playing offered by quality play provision increases children’s opportunities to build their own resilience.

Staffed play provision increases children’s ability to support their own wellbeing and aids parents in understanding and coping with their children’s development. Play is central to a healthy child’s life, and provision for play should be central to any framework that informs programmes on how best to support children and families.

The New Child Poverty Strategy for Wales is available to download on the Welsh Government website:

<http://wales.gov.uk/topics/childrenyoungpeople/poverty/newcpstrategy/?lang=en>

This information sheet is informed by:

Play Wales' consultation with the All Wales Strategic Play Network

The Playwork Principles

People Make Play, commissioned by Play England from Demos, which shows how staffed play services, often run by the voluntary sector, are an increasingly vital element in the multiagency approach to improving outcomes for children, families and communities and are also thought to be more cost-effective than established statutory services.

www.playengland.org.uk/resources/people-make-play

Play for a Change: Play, Policy and Practice: A review of contemporary perspectives, by Stuart Lester and Wendy Russell of the University of Gloucestershire, this is a comprehensive review of the evidence underpinning current thinking on play, to support contemporary understanding of the importance of play, and how this relates to social policy and practice.

The Venture Book: A Case Study of an Adventure Playground, by Fraser Brown, based on conversations with Malcolm King and Ben Tawil. This booklet provides a glimpse of The Venture, an adventure playground in North Wales that has survived and provided services to children for over thirty years.





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www.playwales.org.uk

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.

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