

Cynulliad Cenedlaethol Cymru | National Assembly for Wales

Y Pwyllgor Plant, Pobl Ifanc ac Addysg | Children, Young People and Education Committee

Ymchwiliad i Gwella Iechyd Emosiynol ac Iechyd Meddwl Plant a Phobl Ifanc | Inquiry into The Emotional and Mental Health of Children and Young People EMH 03

Ymateb gan: Chwarae Cymru

Response from: Play Wales

1.1 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.

1.2 We worked closely with Welsh Government on its groundbreaking 'Play Sufficiency' legislation. Section 11 of the Children and Families (Wales) Measure 2010 places a duty on local authorities to assess and secure sufficient play opportunities for children in their area.

1.3 The Play Sufficiency Duty comes as part of the Welsh Government's anti-poverty agenda which recognises that children can have a poverty of experience, opportunity and aspiration, and that this kind of poverty can affect children from all social, cultural and economic backgrounds across Wales. The statutory guidance to local authorities on assessing and securing sufficient play opportunities for children in their areas (*Wales – A Play Friendly Place*) demonstrates that developing conditions to support children's play requires cross-sector work.

1.4 Play Wales is pleased to have an opportunity to input to the inquiry into the emotional and mental health of children and young people. Our submission will be framed around the terms of reference. We are disappointed that the terms of reference for this inquiry do not include a stronger investigation regarding access to play opportunities because of the well accepted and wide range of benefits playing brings to the health and wellbeing of children and young people.

1.5 Although there are limited longitudinal studies assessing the longer-term impact of play for health, there is evidence that playing is central to children's physical, mental, social and emotional health and wellbeing (Lester and Russell, 2008) and play is enshrined in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child.

1.6 It is widely accepted that early playing for infants and young people is vital to the development of their imagination, risk-taking abilities, cognitive functioning, physical skills and social cooperation, and that freely chosen play in adolescents moulds their social brain pathways.

## **Health benefits of playing**

1.7 Through play, children develop resilience and flexibility, contributing to physical and emotional wellbeing.

1.8 For 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 (National Assembly for Wales, 2010; Little Voices Shouting Out, 2015; Children's Commissioner for Wales, 2016). 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 (Mackett et al, 2007).

1.9 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 (Lester and Russell, 2008).

## **Play and emotional wellbeing**

1.10 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.

1.11 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.

1.12 How playing contributes to children's emotional wellbeing:

- 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.

1.13 A key finding from evidence is that children's play provides a primary behaviour for developing resilience, thereby making a significant contribution to children's wellbeing (Ipsos MORI and Nairn, 2001). This evidence suggests that play contributes to developing resilience through a number of interrelated systems including:

- Emotional regulation
- Pleasure and enjoyment of promotion of positive feeling
- The stress response system and the ability to respond to uncertainty
- Creativity and the ability to make new and different connections
- Learning
- Problem solving
- Attachment to people and place (Masten and Obradovic, 2006).

1.14 The generally accepted social, physical and cognitive benefits of play help make the case that playing is an important element in helping to build resilience. Having enough time, space and permission to play helps children to:

- Develop a sense of self sufficiency and independence
- Feel that they have a sense of control in their world
- Feel connected to others and their community
- Experience a range of emotions including frustration, determination, achievement, disappointment and confidence, and through practice, can learn how to manage these feelings
- Develop imagination and creativity
- Make sense of and 'work through' difficult and distressing aspects of their lives
- Socialise with their friends and negotiate with others on their own terms.

### **Addressing Adverse Childhood Experiences through play**

1.15 Even under persistent stressful conditions, the negative consequences of toxic stress can be alleviated through the provision of play opportunities. Playing generates concrete and first-hand experiences that underpin much of a child's development. It is widely agreed that early experiences influence how children learn, cope with stress, form friendships and adult relationships, and how they view themselves and their world.

1.16 Stable, nurturing relationships with caring adults can prevent or reverse the damaging effects of toxic stress. Many of the issues that parents might find challenging can be addressed by improving access to play opportunities and services that are facilitated by staff who understand and advocate for play. Quality provision increases children's ability to support their own wellbeing and aids parents in understanding and coping with their children's development. It also supports children where opportunities to play are absent in the home.

1.17 Nurturing and play-friendly environments – or lack of them – affect the healthy development of children. A rich play environment is flexible, adaptable, varied and interesting. It maximises the potential for socialising, creativity, resourcefulness, challenge and choice. It is a trusted space where

children feel free to play in their own way, on their own terms. Characteristics of quality children's spaces include chances for wonder, excitement and the unexpected, but most of all opportunities that are not overly ordered and controlled by adults. These spaces are crucial to children's own culture and for their sense of place and belonging.

1.18 Interventionist programmes can be useful in minimising some of the damaging impact, but they must be complemented by a focus on supporting children to be active participants in building their own resilience. It is essential that the systems which underpin the provision for children living in and experiencing adverse conditions do not erode their right to explore and develop through play as enshrined in the UNCRC.

1.19 Play is central to a healthy child's life. Trying to change behaviour or build new skills later in life ultimately requires more intervention and is more expensive. It is difficult to influence positive change in adults who are living with the consequences of damaging circumstances in childhood. It is far more practical to provide nurturing and play-friendly community based experiences earlier in life.

1.20 We recommend instead, that CAMHS moves away from narrow, diagnostic criteria based on the symptoms of already established psychiatric disorders. What is needed is a more preventative, multidisciplinary and holistic approach, designed to provide for healthy development and to tackle at source the wider problems with which children, adolescents and their parents and carers are faced in life. This is the sort of help that they have demanded whenever they have been asked, which has often been ignored in favour of traditional approaches, and which is being diverted onto overloaded third sector organisations.

### **Play and links with education (emotional intelligence and healthy coping mechanisms)**

1.21 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 (Gill 2014). As Gill points out, setting up studies and interventions, gathering data, and exploring different factors and variables are all more straightforward in school than in family or community contexts, and as a child spends more than six hours a day and 28 weeks of the year at school, for at least 12 years of life, children have considerable opportunities to play. International empirical evidence suggests that school playground break time (also referred to as playtime) initiatives aimed at enriching play opportunities and increasing children's access to them are linked to a range of improvements in academic skills, attitudes and behaviour, and to improved social skills, improved social relations between different ethnic groups, and better adjustment to school life (Gill 2014). Efforts to improve physical activity and wellbeing in schools should focus on more than just sport and physical education:

- The provision of adequate breaks for play should be mandatory and inspected as part of whole school inspection. Play Wales is concerned with the increasing queries it receives from parents and practitioners 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 in receipt of mental health services. For many children, school play time is the main chance they have to play, be active and socialise with their friends.
- School landscape design and playground design which supports play should feature in new school design from the outset. Play Wales can provide further information and signpost to resources for this.
- School communities should be encouraged to consider making their outdoor space available for playing when the teaching day ends and during weekends, as noted in Welsh Government guidance (Welsh Government, 2014).

### **Playing – an integral part of childhood**

1.22 Although the benefits of play for children are substantial and wide ranging and its effects are felt far into adulthood, play is an integral part of childhood and children place great value on having plenty of places and time to play (Ipsos MORI and Nairn, 2011). Children are ‘active agents’ (Lester and Russell, 2008) in their own development, and should be seen for who they are not just for who they might become (Lester and Russell, 2010). When play and playing is valued, it follows that children are valued.

1.23 Children have always needed effective coping skills, and while our changing world brings many advantages, the need to provide time and space to play is as important as ever. Childhood for many has become full of heightened pressures and busy schedules intended to keep children busy and safe.

1.24 When children’s time is highly scheduled by others it can hardly be seen as their time. Freely chosen play, when children themselves choose when, how and what to play, not only offers benefits that protect against stress and other pressures, but also gives children opportunities to discover their own interests and competencies.

1.25 When children personally direct their play, they decide the rules and roles they take within their play and create worlds they can master. Unscheduled free time for children should not be seen as nonessential. It is vital to children for their fun and relaxation as well as for their health and wellbeing. It is part of their ‘work/life balance’.

1.26 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.

1.27 We strongly advise that providing opportunities and time for self-directed play features within any children and young people's mental health strategy.

## References:

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