

# ‘ THE POLITICS OF PLAY ’

The Importance of Play to Children and Wider Society



# Contents

Executive Summary and Recommendations	3
<hr/>	
1. Play in the UK: The API's Perspective	5
<hr/>	
2. Background to Play in the UK	10
<hr/>	
3. About us: The Association of Play Industries and the Federation of Sports and Play Associations	11
<hr/>	
4. The Importance of Play to Children	12
<hr/>	
5. The Wider Social Benefits of Play	17
<hr/>	
6. What is the Government doing for Children's Play?	22
<hr/>	
7. What would a Conservative Government do for Play?	24
<hr/>	
8. Conclusion	28
<hr/>	

## Executive Summary and Recommendations

- In 2008, the Government launched its 10-year, £235 million National Play Strategy, which is seeing the building or re-development of 3,500 public play areas in England by March 2011, and a long-term vision and actions to deliver overall improved play provision and play space for children in England. In part, it was announced in response to a Unicef report which found that British children are amongst the unhappiest in the world.
- The upwards of 70 member companies of the Association of Play Industries (API), which comes under the umbrella of the Federation of Sports and Play Associations (FSPA), are playing a significant role in delivering the National Play Strategy. They are designing, manufacturing and building these new playgrounds, working on the ground with Local Authorities. With API members delivering over 2,000 play spaces a year, they are the leading providers of playgrounds in the UK.
- Play is vital to children's well-being and development through their formative years. It is instinctive to them and helps them to develop a sense of risk, improves their confidence and self-esteem and teaches them how to socialise. Play also has wider societal benefits; it helps to tackle child and adult obesity, it builds cohesive communities, breaks down social barriers and contributes towards a healthy society. It also helps to reduce anti-social behaviour by young people, by filling children's time constructively.
- Children are spending less time outdoors. There are a number of external factors contributing towards this trend. There is a perception that public spaces are dangerous and therefore parents are not allowing their children to play outside unsupervised. Some parents have also become risk-averse, and are reluctant to let their children undertake activities which may pose a degree of risk.
- Despite the capital investment in play infrastructure and the recognition that children's play provision is improving, there is still work to be done on play and related issues. In order to get children returning to use these new play areas again and again, there are a number of wider political issues which need to be addressed.

The Association of Play Industries recommends that as well as investing in play infrastructure, work needs to be done by the Government to:

- Introduce regular, ongoing funding streams through local authorities to spend on play, and use existing streams wisely;
- Ensure that facilities being built do not require intensive or expensive upkeep or maintenance. This is particularly important given the increasing strain on local authority finances. Good design and construction can minimise maintenance requirements;
- Promote all aspects of children's play, from natural to adventure and from indoor to outdoor. Play of all varieties has a role to play in children's health and development and all forms of play should be promoted accordingly to reflect the community's needs;
- Ensure that the wording of National Indicator questionnaires, which seek feedback on new or refurbished playgrounds as part of the National Play Strategy, adequately reflect all aspects of play and do not support any one particular kind of play provision;
- Make certain that the procurement process is simple and open, so that all suppliers, both large and small, local and unique, are eligible to enter the supply chain;
- Be aware that it is vital that we design play areas and install equipment which children will want to use and return to again and again and not to just design play spaces which are aesthetically pleasing to adults, but without the content to inspire and engage our children;
- Be more imaginative about where new play areas are located, by bringing them closer into the heart of communities, rather than just pushing them out into the corner of playing fields;
- Tackle safety issues around play areas. Addressing problems such as low-level crime, anti-social behaviour and introducing traffic calming measures, will mean that children going out to play independently are safer;

- **Highlight to parents that whilst safety in the playground is important, it is normal for children to be exposed to a beneficial developmental risk;**
- **Further realise how outdoor and indoor play can have a positive effect on children's health, both physically and mentally, and how it links in to their development into positive, healthy and well-rounded adults;**
- **Undertake a public campaign to highlight the benefits of play to children and wider society and the investment in play infrastructure;**
- **Focus on the potential cost-savings of investing in children's play compared to healthcare costs associated with lifestyle health problems later in life; and**
- **Realise the role that play has in creating social cohesion, how it contributes to regeneration and how it can add to the sense of a healthy community.**

## **1. Play in the UK: The API's Perspective**

There can be little doubt that children's play is now higher up the political agenda than it ever has been; both at a national and a local level. The focus began with funding that was made available through the Big Lottery Fund. This led to the engagement of Children's Services Departments in play provision, rather than the traditional audience of Parks Departments. The Big Lottery Fund money saw a wide variety of projects being funded, from fixed play areas to play buses, and the recruitment of a significant number of play workers.

The £235 million then made available centrally, as part of the National Play Strategy, is now further focusing attention on children's play and is engaging County Councils as well as Unitary Authorities. The National Play Strategy is also helping to join up and increase the understanding of children's play across a range of departments throughout participating local authorities, as in order to access funding, every local authority now has to produce a cross-cutting play strategy. The short timescales associated with the delivery of the Strategy, with Wave Two ending in March 2011, are also having the effect of further concentrating this focus.



Added to this, the Government has done a considerable amount of work around promoting healthy lifestyles and getting people of all ages engaged with physical activity and exercise. Investing in and promoting children's outdoor play dovetails well in to this agenda and is seen by the Government as a way of instilling physical activity into children and young people's every day lives.

Through this increased attention on play issues, and the additional resources being used to refurbish or build new playgrounds, **there is recognition that the National Play Strategy is a positive force in play policy.** In particular, community involvement and consultation in the design of play areas, which is a formal part of the Strategy, is seen to be working well and education through play is also progressing, with more teachers focusing on the importance of outdoor play to children and their healthy development.

*Introduce regular, ongoing funding streams for play and use existing streams wisely*

It is vital to the needs of our children that play infrastructure receives regular, long-term funding through local authorities. Whilst the £235 million is a huge and welcome investment, it is vital that it is not seen as a 'one-off' and that no more money needs to be spent on play facilities in the foreseeable future. **Regular funding is needed to update and maintain these playgrounds. This will optimise the initial investment and ensure that our children are able to continue to use these play areas for many years to come.**

**Modern, well maintained play areas are the hub of communities and can contribute to creating community cohesion. They are also “revenue neutral” as a small increase in the costs to maintain can often be offset against a reduction in anti-social behaviour and incidents of vandalism occurring.**

*Let children input into play area design*

**Our experience, as the leading providers of play facilities in the UK, tells us that play areas work best when there is high quality, modern equipment, which is exciting, welcoming, well-laid out and maintained, and which is perceived to be a safe place for children to play. Our experience also shows that when children have their say in the design and content of a play space, then they are more likely to use it. Research conducted by the DCSF on the opinions of those who have used some of the newly refurbished play facilities, confirms that children are attracted by a wide variety of exciting equipment. It is vital that we design play areas and install equipment which children will want to use and return to again and again and not to just design play spaces which are aesthetically pleasing to adults, but without the content to inspire and engage our children.**

**We also know that good play facilities go further than simply providing children with just places to play; they promote healthy communities and contribute towards the regeneration of areas. When all these attributes are combined, this is how play facilities are best delivered to our communities.**

*Ensure a diverse mix of play facilities*

Perhaps the biggest political issue is that play has become very fractious, with different play groups and organisations promoting one particular type of play, such as natural play, supervised play or adventure play, rather than a diverse mix of play and play facilities for all children.

**It is important for decision makers to recognise that every form of play has its place and role in children’s recreation.**





### *Keep procurement simple*

Play areas and equipment are quite diverse, with a wide range of styles, materials, activities and play value. It is therefore difficult to compare like for like in a competitive bidding situation. We must remember that what is most important is the benefit being provided for children and communities in general. The procurement process must allow for a wide range of companies to enter the supply chain. There are many local and regional specialist play providers that can enhance the variety of facilities offered. Large procurement strategies are in place around the country with the aim of simplifying the PQP process, however these contracts are dominated by the large multi-national companies. **If we are to provide a wide range of diverse facilities around the country then these procurement contracts need to be open to all API members.**

### *Be more imaginative about where to site new play areas*



**The National Play Strategy document mentions that thought should be given to the citing of play facilities, however it does not go as far as offering ideas or examples.** Traditionally, the UK has always located play areas as blocks of space within a specific area in a park or in the corner of a playing field. However, elsewhere in Europe, play equipment is far more distributed in terms of citing. For example, in housing developments, rather than providing a range of equipment in a single space,



equipment is spaced out, nearer to individual areas or streets. This not only encourages the community to make better use of the equipment, but by the very nature of where it is located, means that there is greater supervision and oversight. One example is swings which are located next to a bus stop, allowing children to play whilst waiting for a bus. In parks, play equipment is quite often distributed across an area, rather than focused on one corner. This encourages children to roam more freely around the space, encountering more of the environment and burning more calories in the process! **The UK needs to be more imaginative about where it locates new play areas, by bringing them closer into the heart of communities, rather than just concentrating them in the corner of playing fields.**

*Ensure all facets of play are represented*

The new National Indicator for Play (NI199), which was introduced in April 2009 and seeks feedback on users' experience of play facilities built or refurbished as part of the National Play Strategy, is also helping those involved with the Strategy in best delivery and lessons learned from Wave One of implementation. However, **it is important that all facets of play are adequately represented in the questionnaires in order to fairly represent all those play providers who are involved in delivering the Strategy.**

*Focus on broader social and political benefits of play*

As well as the issues as highlighted above, there needs to be a tandem stream of work which promotes the benefits of play to children and wider society. **So, whilst we broadly acknowledge that play is now working, there is still work to be done. There are broader political issues around play which still need attention if we are to be able to give our children the best start in life and create a better environment in which to grow up.**

***“High quality, safe and stimulating play opportunities can improve children's personal development and health, give them the freedom and independence to learn valuable lessons in life, and provide them with attractive, accessible facilities that offer more than just hanging around the streets.”***

Department for Culture, Media and Sport



## 2. Background to Play in the UK

A disturbing report by Unicef, published in February 2007, found that out of a league of 21 industrialised countries, British children were among the unhappiest. Following the publication of the report, a letter signed by 300 academics, authors and charity leaders, declared that “the decline in unstructured, loosely supervised play is adversely affecting children’s mental health and threatens young people’s long-term development.”

The letter went on to say “we believe that a key factor in this disturbing trend is the marked decline over the last 15 years in children’s play. Play - especially when it takes place outdoors – is crucial to a child’s health...and is one of the crucial elements of a good childhood”. The letter was signed off by a call for a “wide-ranging and informed public dialogue about the intrinsic nature and value of play in children’s healthy development.”

**This paper focuses on the benefits of play, not only to children, but to society as a whole.** It examines why play is an important public policy issue: the effect play has on children’s health and well-being and how it impacts on wider society, such as reduced crime, lower levels of adult obesity and improved community cohesion.

With the first wave of the Government's £235 million National Play Strategy having just been delivered, which will see the building or re-development of 3,500 public play areas by 2011, this paper gives a timely overview of how the API perceives the Government is delivering on play. It examines how we can maximise opportunities around this investment in play to improve play provision for our children and young people.

### **3. About us: The Association of Play Industries and the Federation of Sports and Play Associations**

This paper is written by the Association of Play Industries (API), the lead trade body within the play sector in the UK. With over 70 Members it represents the interests of play space designers, manufacturers, constructors and distributors of both indoor and outdoor play equipment and play area surfacing. API Members deliver more than 2,000 play spaces a year.

The API is passionate about play, play which encourages appropriate thrill and reward from assessing and taking risk. Best practice in play design offers visible challenge and risk and members use their years of experience to design and create environments that deliver this within well-developed safety standards.

The API operates under the umbrella of the Federation of Sports and Play Associations (FSPA); the national trade body responsible for representing 18 Associations in the UK's sport and play industries.

The FSPA is known as the voice of the UK sports and play industry and this year celebrates its 90 year heritage serving the trade. Ideally positioned at the heart of the industry, the FSPA acts as the first point of contact for its associations and 500+ member companies, spanning across four main sectors – Play, Sport, Golf and Angling.

Members gain a great deal from being part of the API whilst also benefiting from being a part of the wider FSPA umbrella body, with its broad representation, expertise, and partnerships with government and national associations, all on behalf of the industry.

The member companies of the API are playing a significant role in the delivery of the Government's National Play Strategy, working with Local Authorities to build and

redevelop playgrounds, delivering new, exciting and challenging ways for children to play.

#### 4. The Importance of Play to Children

Play is vital to children! It allows them to use their creativity while developing their imagination, dexterity, and physical, cognitive, and emotional strength. Play is important to children's health, both physically and mentally, and even has a role to play in the development of the brain.

**“Play is instinctive, voluntary and spontaneous as well as vital to develop the potential of all children.”**

International Association of the Children's Right to Play

It is through play that children, at a very early stage, learn to engage and interact in the world around them.

To children and young people themselves, playing is one of the most important aspects of their lives<sup>1</sup> - they value time, freedom and quality places to play.



<sup>1</sup> Why do peoples ages go up not down? Funky Dragon, Children and Young People's Assembly for Wales, 2007

In 2004, the Chief Medical Officer's report urged local authorities to take steps to make neighbourhoods and communities more 'activity friendly' by creating safe environments for playing, walking and cycling. The report also recommended that children should have 3-4 afternoon or evening play opportunities each week; with the suggestion that this would make an important contribution to the health and physical activity of children.

However, many children today are denied play experiences because of busy, hectic highly structured home, pre-school and school lives. Play is very often squeezed out and replaced by other, often sedentary activities, going to clubs, watching TV, DVD and computer games.

A survey commissioned by Play England for Playday in 2007 revealed how under threat opportunities for playing freely outdoors are. Among those polled, 71% of adults said they had played outside in the street or area close to their homes every day when they were children, whereas only 21% of children do so today.<sup>2</sup>

With the Government now investing heavily in play through the National Play Strategy, there is a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity, through the building and re-furbishment of 3,500 play areas in England, for society to truly realise the hugely positive impact play has, and can have, on our children.

**However, in parallel with the financial investment being made in play infrastructure, there needs to be a political focus on making time for play in children's everyday lives. We need to do this, as play has a significant role to ensure our children grow and develop into positive, well-rounded adults, who are able to fulfill their role in their community and broader society.**

*Play is crucial to healthy physical and mental development*

***"Freely chosen, self-directed play has traditionally served the human race well in terms of children's health and well-being – it has a significant contribution to make to the current health agenda."***

Children's Play – Health and Wellbeing, Play Wales

---

<sup>2</sup> ICM (2007) Playday: Our streets too! Street Play opinion poll summary. London; Play England



Play is vital to children's physical, mental, social and emotional health and well-being. Research suggests that playing has an important impact on the physical and chemical development of the human brain. Play "influences children's ability to adapt to, survive, thrive and shape their social and physical environments."<sup>3</sup>

Play also helps to keep children physically fit and active. With increasingly sedentary lifestyles, the levels of obesity in children have risen rapidly over the last 10 years. In 2006, 16 per cent of children aged 2 to 15 were classed as obese. This represents an overall increase from 11 per cent in 1995<sup>4</sup>. An article in the British Medical Journal in 2001 warned of "an obesity epidemic in young children" and went on to say that the main solution should be to "reduce television viewing and promote playing." The report concluded that "opportunities for spontaneous play may be the only requirement that young children need to increase their physical activity."<sup>5</sup>

A lack of play also has the potential to negatively impact children's mental health. A report by the Office of National Statistics in 2005 estimated that one in five children and adolescents suffer from mental health problems, so given these high figures it is important to find ways to address these issues.

In 1999, the Mental Health Foundation reported that the increasingly limited amount of time that children have to play outdoors was a contributing factor to those young people experiencing mental health difficulties, highlighting just how important play is to children and young people.



---

<sup>3</sup>Play for a Change, Lester and Russell, April 2008, Play England

<sup>4</sup>Statistics on obesity, physical activity and diet, NHS Information Centre, January 2008

<sup>5</sup>Dietz WH (2001) 'The obesity epidemic in young children'. British Medical Journal. Vol 322 pp 313-314.



*Play helps to develop a sense of risk*

***"We mustn't wrap our children up in cotton wool, but allow them to play outside so as to better understand the opportunities and challenges in the world around them, and how to be safe."***

Rt Hon Ed Balls MP, Secretary of State for Children, Schools and Families

Children need and want to take risks when they play. An essential part of the process of a child becoming an adult is the need, and desire, to explore limits and to try new experiences. It is through this that they develop boundaries and coping strategies to deal with challenging situations as adults.

Play provision should aim to respond to these needs and wishes by offering children stimulating, challenging environments for exploring and developing their abilities whilst ensuring that children are not exposed to unacceptable risks.

It is important for there to be a balanced approach to risk around children's play. Indeed the Health and Safety Executive supports this through its Get a Life and sensible risk management campaigns. Play England also advocates reasonable risk when playing, stating "...minor and easily healed injuries in play provision are not necessarily a problem. Indeed they are all but inevitable, especially in challenging, adventurous provision. This approach is more than justified on safety grounds, in spite of the obvious risks, because these risks are outweighed by the benefits.

***"Children benefit from physical activity and even some rough and tumble. We do our youngsters no favours by wrapping them up in cotton wool, which can prevent them from developing skills they'll need in adult life."***

Cllr Margaret Eaton, Chairman of the Local Government Association

**Those responsible for play provision need to take a balanced approach: one that takes into account the benefits the provision offers as well as the risks. The starting point for decision-making should be an understanding of the benefits that the provision offers."<sup>6</sup> It is only when there is acceptance of a degree of risk, that the true benefits of play can fully be realised.**

---

<sup>6</sup>Play England Policy Briefing 6: Managing risk in play provision: A briefing for risk managers

A poll conducted in August 2008, by public opinion researcher company, ICM found:

- More than three-quarters of all children aged 7-16 wanted more adventurous play opportunities than they currently have.
- Half of 7-12 year olds said that they are not allowed to climb a tree without adult supervision or have been stopped from climbing trees because it's considered too dangerous.
- Many children say they have also been stopped from playing ordinary childhood games such as conkers, chase and even hide-and-seek, because of the supposed dangers.
- Forty-two per cent said that they are not even allowed to play in their local park without an adult present.

#### *Play improves confidence and self-esteem*

Children who play have to make decisions – decisions about which games to play, whether to play them, which apparatus to use and with whom to play. There is a strong link between decision-making in children and increased confidence and self-esteem.<sup>7</sup>

The ability of children to make decisions about their play helps them to:

- Discover and learn about his/her body;
- Demonstrate individual preferences;
- Make decisions; and
- Become aware of others and their needs.

Play helps children to learn about themselves and their place and role in the world.

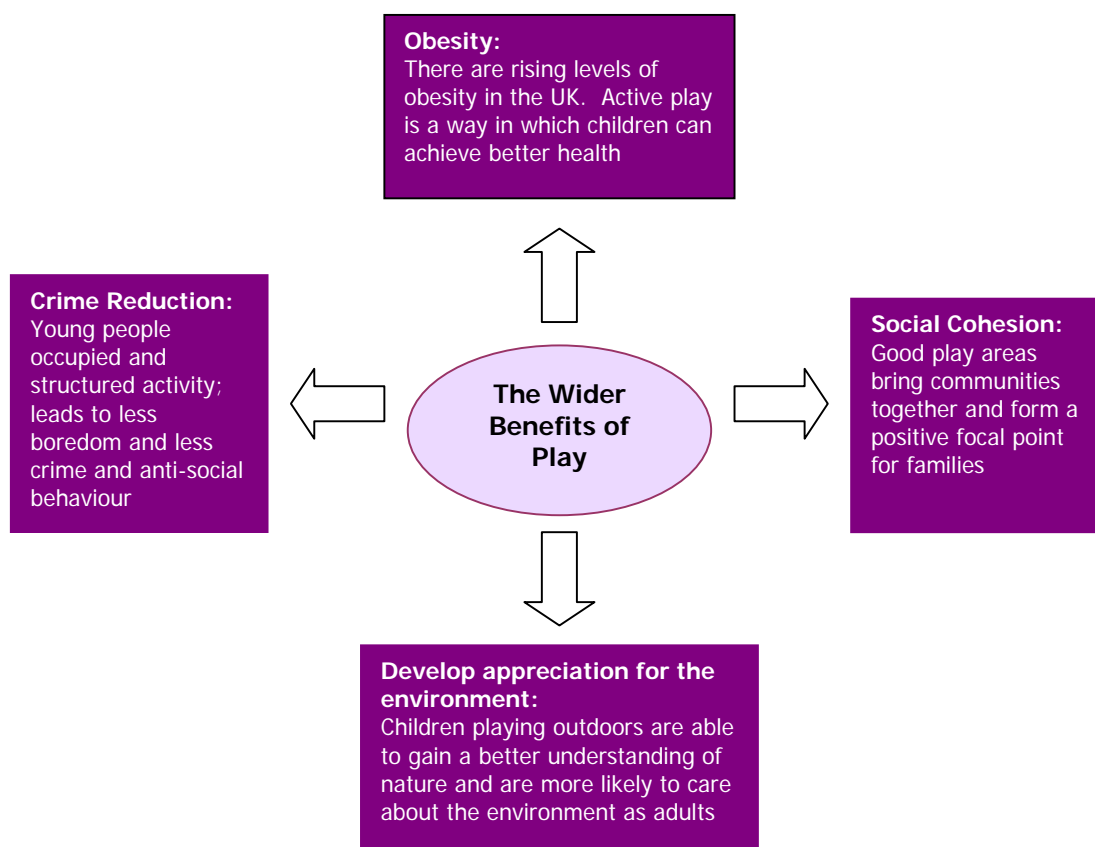
The role that play has in improving confidence and self-esteem in children ties in well to the national curriculum's stipulation to teach children 'citizenship' in schools. The National Curriculum, which was revised in 2008, now identifies three main purposes to citizenship being taught in primary and secondary schools. Two of these are to create *confident individuals* who lead safe and healthy lives, and *responsible citizens* who make a positive contribution to society. Good, well-designed, exciting play opportunities contribute to these ambitions and help children to develop into well-rounded, confident children and adults, who are able to interact well with their peers.

---

<sup>7</sup> Barbara Thompson, Pre-school, Learning Alliance, Under-5 Magazine

## 5. The Wider Social Benefits of Play

Play is not just a matter for children, but it is an issue for the community and wider society. Children need to be able to play freely in their communities, and to feel a sense of belonging. This sense of belonging later influences attitudes towards participation as adults.



### *Play helps to tackle a nationwide obesity crisis*

Obesity in adults is reaching epidemic levels. In 2006, 24 per cent of adults (aged 16 or over) in England were classified as obese<sup>8</sup>. This represents an overall increase from 15 per cent in 1993. The cost to the NHS and wider economy is already £3.6 billion and with obesity levels set to increase, this cost to the Government looks set to continue to rise.

---

<sup>8</sup> Statistics on obesity, physical activity and diet, NHS Information Centre, January 2008

Children who are overweight and obese are more likely to have weight problems as adults. Almost one in four five-year olds and one in three 11-year olds are overweight or obese, according to the national child measurement programme.<sup>9</sup> Obese adults who were also obese children have a higher level of poor health and risk of early death.

These figures show quite clearly that if children are allowed to become overweight and continue this trend throughout childhood and into adolescence, then it is highly likely that they will be overweight or obese throughout their adult lives.

Obesity holds a number of serious short and long-term health problems including:

- Increased risk factors for cardiovascular disease;
- Early onset of diabetes. Diagnosis of diabetes before the age of 20 yrs reduces life expectancy by 15-27 yrs;
- Increased risk of type 1 diabetes, hypertension, sleep apnoea, liver disease;
- Increased risk of developing asthma and the worsening of existing asthma;
- Abnormalities of foot structure and function;
- Obesity is also associated with psychological and social problems, such as poor self-esteem and body dissatisfaction. It is also associated with depression, disordered eating, bulimia; and
- Lower levels of fitness, social and economic discrimination and low-quality of life.

However, there are ways to deal with this obesity time-bomb. One way is to take pre-emptive action and entrench physical play and sport in children's everyday lives. Children who partake in regular play are likely to continue doing physical activity throughout youth and into adulthood, thereby reducing the incidence of obesity.

**Decision-makers should consider that whilst there may be upfront costs in investing in play infrastructure and sporting facilities and (importantly) working to ensure that children use the facilities and return to them time after time to gain maximum physical benefit, these costs will be realised through a reduced number of people using the healthcare system later in life with weight or obesity related problems.**

---

<sup>9</sup> <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/health/7256342.stm>

*Play leads to more physically active and healthier adults*

Closely linked to this is the evidence which shows that children who partake in active play go on to become more physically active and healthier adults.

A recent poll as part of the Government's *Change 4 Life* campaign (April 2009), found that nearly three-quarters (72%) of children do not take part in the recommended hour of daily physical activity outside school.

Indeed, in 2008, the Scout Association warned that hundreds of thousands of children are at risk of future health problems because they do not play outside enough. A survey of 2,000 adults and children found many young people did not know where to go to play outside, and were not motivated by outside activities.



However, the value of sport and play should not be underestimated. Research suggests that children who partake in physical activity are more likely to mature into physically active adults and therefore become healthier adults.

Commenting on the *Change 4 Life* survey, Marni Craze, children's education manager for World Cancer Research Fund, said: "This survey is a concern because it is important children get into the habit of being regularly physically active as early as possible. This is because habits formed as children can last into adulthood and there is convincing evidence that being physically active reduces risk of cancer and other chronic diseases."

In 2008, the Children's Minister expanded on the benefits of physical activity, saying: "Research shows that taking part in activities such as sports and drama not only increases pupils' confidence but also improves their educational achievement".

*Play breaks down social barriers, creates cohesive communities and contributes towards regeneration*

The Local Government Association has defined a cohesive community as one where:

- There is a common vision and a sense of belonging for all communities;
- The diversity of people's different backgrounds and circumstances is appreciated and positively valued;
- Those from different backgrounds have similar life opportunities; and
- Strong and positive relationships are being developed between people from different backgrounds in the workplace, in schools and within neighbourhoods.

The development of unstaffed play areas promotes community cohesion, as good, local play areas and child-friendly public space helps to bring the whole community together and to break down social and cultural barriers. Play is a significant contributor towards social cohesion, as often, where children play together, parents and carers talk together and socialise. Indeed, in our experience, the process of consultation and community engagement prior to the development of a play space is the singularly most important factor to creating community cohesion.



The Government's Planning Policy Guidance Note 17 on planning for open space, sport and recreation, states that "a significant amount of provision should be located on amenity green space which services wider needs than just sport, for example dog walking." Open spaces such as these are natural meeting places for people of all ages, genders, race, religion etc (e.g., people with young children, people jogging/exercising or simply walking in the nearby parks, people walking their dogs, etc.), spontaneously promoting social interaction between them.

**Children's playgrounds are often located on such green spaces, further encouraging social interaction and community cohesion.**



New or re-built play areas can also contribute towards a sense of regeneration in an area. With the National Play Strategy stipulating that communities must be consulted over the design of play areas, and also that feedback is sought on children's and families' views of these play areas once they are up and running, this helps to make communities feel more involved and connected to the fabric of their local environment. The idea being that if people have a greater connection to the areas in which they live, they will take greater care of it, adding to a feeling of regeneration and rejuvenation.

*Play helps to reduce crime and anti-social behaviour*

The Home Office report *Offending, Crime and Justice Survey*, published in December 2006, highlighted that 25% of young people aged between 10-25 offend in some way, with 7% of all young people classified as frequent offenders.

For 10-15 year olds, the most common offending includes anti-social behaviour; being drunk or taking drugs. It is estimated that 2.8 million young people have committed at least one offence in the last 12 months and disturbingly, 1.8 million people have committed a violent crime.

**Providing children and young people with good quality, suitable play equipment keeps them occupied and encourages them to spend their time more productively, meaning that they are less likely to break the law.** The API's experience in designing, developing and building play equipment means that we are able to provide play equipment areas which will engage children and young people of all different ages.



Play and sports schemes, particularly those running through school holidays, which engage children and young people and keep them from becoming bored are particularly successful at lowering crime rates and keeping young people occupied in a positive and structured way.

*Play helps to develop an appreciation for the environment*

Children's play is often linked in people's minds to the outdoors. Through playing in the natural environment, children develop an awareness and appreciation of the natural world. Sara Knight, a Senior Lecturer at Anglia Ruskin University on Early Years says that "engaging children in natural outdoor spaces on a regular basis is good for their overall learning, development and general wellbeing".

Significant changes in society, such as traffic, fear of strangers and the increase in computer based leisure, have created barriers for children spending time in the outdoors. However, children still state that they wish to play outside both alone and with friends.

**Policy and decision-makers should be aware of the importance of children feeling connected to the outdoor environment, and through appropriate play, of the positive effect it can have on their attitudes and sense of responsibility towards nature as adults.**

## **6. What is the Government doing for Children's Play?**

Following the Unicef report which gave the UK such a dismal rating on children's happiness, in April 2008, the Department for Children, Schools and Families published a consultation, entitled Fair Play, asking for children's views on what they would most like from their local play sites. The results were used to inform the Government's £235 million National Play Strategy, which is currently seeing the building or redevelopment of 3,500 public play areas across England by 2011.

**"Play is a central part of any happy childhood and essential to learning and development"**

Rt Hon Ed Balls MP  
Secretary of State,  
Department for Children,  
Schools and Families

The first wave of the roll-out has just ended, with 500 playgrounds having been delivered through 63 local authorities. The second wave began at the start of April 2009, with approximately 90 local authorities being offered funding. All top tier local authorities will receive at least £1 million, and 30 pathfinders will get on average £2.5 million to build new or significantly refurbish existing play areas.

The Government's National Play Strategy signifies the biggest ever commitment towards play the UK has ever seen. At the time of its announcement, Adrian Voce, the Director of Play England, identified the importance of play to both children and wider society and the need for play's wider benefits to be recognised, saying **"what is needed now is cross-party support for a sustained commitment to the measures proposed and a positive response from local government – led by Children's Services but with a coordinated effort from environment, planning, housing, traffic and open space departments. The strategy is a massive step towards England again becoming a more child-friendly country. For it, and the funding, to have the impact they need, local authorities must now make play the priority that it has always been for children."**

With Wave One of the delivery of the National Play Strategy having recently come to an end, the Government published the results of a survey of children and parent's experiences of some of the recently improved play areas. Whilst these play areas had been enhanced via funding from non-Pathfinder/Play Builder sources, the types of improvements made were similar to those which Play Pathfinder and Play Builder investments are funding.

The findings are good, with parents and children being positive about the improvements made to play areas: they felt they spent longer periods of time on the sites due to the increased variety and appeal. Local authorities have reported higher numbers of users following improvements.

The variety of high-quality equipment on the sites was central to parents' and children's positive impressions and were the main reason why children wanted to visit. **Local authorities stressed that consulting children and parents was vital in delivering a play site that met local users' needs and expectations.**

*"I really did like what they've done. It was big, it was spacious, there was lots to do, there was lots of different materials that they've used...I think they've done it really well."*

Parent, DCSF Research

*"Everything that they've got on there, I think it's ideal because they've got little ones separate from the bigger ones, so it's more ideal for them...And I just like how they've done it, with building a wall round it and everything. It just looks nice."*

Parent, DCSF Research

The fact that play areas catered for all age groups, from toddlers to teenagers, was spontaneously mentioned by parents as the best aspect of the park as this supported family visits.

The Government's capital spend on play infrastructure is unprecedented. It is a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to give children and young people high quality play facilities, thereby aiming to encourage children out of their houses and get them playing outdoors.

**However, the Government needs to remember that there are a number of complex social and political issues surrounding play which have led children and families, in recent times, to abandon the playing field in favour of the computer game. It is only once these factors are addressed, in parallel with introducing modern and exciting outdoor equipment, that children will lay down the computer console in favour of the climbing frame and the full benefits of outdoor play will once more be realised.**

## **7. What would a Conservative Government do for Children's Play?**

In January 2008, the Conservative Party published their Childhood Review, entitled "More Ball Games", which focused on improving children's well-being, through increasing their access to outdoor and informal play.

The report focused on three main areas which have been negatively affecting children's play:

- Creating a safer and more protected outdoor space, to allow parents and children to feel comfortable spending their time outside;
- Dealing with the issue of bullying;
- An increase in aversion to risk taking for children.

The Conservative Party recognises that these are not straightforward tasks, but that tackling issues such as accessibility and safety is an essential part of any strategy for giving back children their childhood. In the introduction to the report, David Willetts MP, Chair of the Childhood Review, wrote "The loss of confidence in outside space, combined with greater exposure to commercial influences, a reduction in the availability of sport and a growing culture of risk aversion are significantly harming the childhood of too many children. We owe it to them to act."

### *The dangers of public space and the impact on children*

The Review highlights evidence to show that adults are now more mistrusting of each other than ever before, with only 28% of adults believing that “most people can be trusted.”<sup>10</sup> An article in the Daily Mail on 28<sup>th</sup> May 2009 highlighted this trend, saying “children are growing up trusting no one because adults are seen as suspicious unless they have been vetted”. This mistrust in other people is leading families to become increasingly isolated, often without any support network for their parenting. This lack of general trust is having the effect of parents not letting their children play outdoors as they do not have confidence that local play parks and public spaces are safe.

The report also highlights that access to outdoor space suitable for children is seen as dangerous because of the increase in the volume of traffic, crime and bullying. Even play areas, which are specifically designed for children, are viewed with caution. If children are to be able to regain their childhood and their right to play outdoors, then the Conservative Party sees it as a priority to address these underlying social issues.



The Review argues that whilst the Government’s Children’s Plan is welcome and the rebuilding of 3,500 playgrounds before March 2011 is vital to get children re-engaged with outdoor play, **infrastructure on its own is not sufficient to draw children and families back to playgrounds.** If the new playgrounds being built are not protected, the risks to children could increase not decrease, manifesting the situation.

---

<sup>10</sup>European Commission; Euro Barometer: Social Capital; 2005

### *Action needed to reclaim public spaces*

The Childhood Review suggests a number of measures which should help reclaim public spaces and playgrounds for children:

- **Include children in the British Crime Survey**

The British Crime Survey does not include crimes against or crimes committed by children. The lack of acknowledgement that these crimes exist makes it impossible to address the issue.

- **Adult supervision in public areas**

The Review suggests that the presence of adults in public places would help to minimise the fears of children relating to crime and bullying. Some suggestions include park rangers and walking buses (where children walk in groups to school).

- **More police on the streets**

Police on the streets need to be more visible. By having more police out on the streets, not behind their desks, low-level disorder crimes, such as anti-social behaviour, which commonly affects children, would be significantly lower.

- **Children must be allowed to play**

The report stresses that children must be allowed to play outdoors and should not be stopped or questioned for doing so. Children should be able to be seen and heard and this needs to be considered by those working to make streets safer.

- **Ensure there are exciting outdoor play opportunities**

Outdoor play facilities, including those being built as part of the National Play Strategy, need to be inventive and exciting to attract children to use them and to keep them returning again and again.

### *Bullying stops children from playing outside unsupervised*

The Review also focuses on bullying as one of the reasons that children are not playing outside in unsupervised play spaces. Bullying (and the fear of bullying) is contributing to the decline in outdoor play.

The report suggests that bullying can be combated through:

- Adult supervision in public places;
- Mixing age groups to help avoid bullying, whereby older children could organise activities for younger children;
- Children should be taught to be more street aware, so they can deal with encounters in public spaces. Known as 'street proofing', this could help build a wider culture to safeguard children.



*Children need to be able to take reasonable risks whilst at play*

The Review recognises the role of play in learning to manage and evaluate risks. It says “play and recreation provide an arena for children to assess and manage risk. They learn what constitutes acceptable and unacceptable risk.”

The report discusses the compensation culture which has developed both in and out of schools, which is preventing children from playing normal childhood games from fear of litigation.

The Review highlights how the USA and Western Australia have taken steps to avoid the compensation culture, through laws that state that the action must be seen as ‘reckless disregard’ on behalf of the play providers. They have also introduced the measure that play providers are not bound to warn individuals of an obvious risk. The Conservatives argue that we must adopt these or similar measures if we are to put a stop to compensation culture in the UK. The report also explores the possibility of teenagers being responsible for looking after each other and younger children.

**The API welcomes the Conservative Party’s focus on these issues around children’s play. Like the Conservatives, we believe that in addition to the £235 million being spent on building and refurbishing play areas, there needs to be another programme of work alongside this capital investment, which will tackle issues such as mistrust, isolation, bullying and the compensation culture, to ensure that these new facilities will be well-used in the future and will encourage children to play outdoors once again.**



## 8. Conclusion

Whilst there can be little doubt that the National Play Strategy is a welcome and positive force for the future of play in the UK, it is vital that it is not seen as the beginning and end of improving children's play.

The research conducted by the Department for Children, Schools and Families, on recently improved play facilities, shows that there has been an improvement. Those play areas which have received investment are being used more frequently by families and children and equipment is more varied and exciting and this is a positive move forward.

However, despite this good start, it is vital that when the second wave of the National Play Strategy comes to an end in March 2011, and the 3,500 new or rebuilt play areas in England are completed, that the political spotlight does not move away from children's play.

There needs to be long-term investment and commitment to maintain the play infrastructure we are putting in place, and a programme of work on issues around play, which will maximise the impact of these new play facilities on our children's health and well-being. Our recommendations as outlined below, are based on our many years of experience in children's play and have been drawn up with these aims and ambitions in mind and to support the Government's drive to make the UK a better place for our children to grow up.



**The Association of Play Industries recommends that as well as investing in play infrastructure, work needs to be done by the Government to:**

- **Introduce regular, ongoing funding streams through local authorities to spend on play, and use existing streams wisely;**
- **Ensure that facilities being built do not require intensive or expensive upkeep or maintenance. This is particularly important given the increasing strain on local authority finances. Good design and construction can minimise maintenance requirements;**
- **Promote all aspects of children's play, from natural to adventure and from indoor to outdoor. Play of all varieties has a role to play in children's health and development and all forms of play should be promoted accordingly to reflect the community's needs;**
- **Ensure that the wording of National Indicator questionnaires, which seek feedback on new or refurbished playgrounds as part of the National Play Strategy, adequately reflect all aspects of play and do not support any one particular kind of play provision;**
- **Make certain that the procurement process is simple and open, so that all suppliers, both large and small, local and unique, are eligible to enter the supply chain;**
- **Be aware that it is vital that we design play areas and install equipment which children will want to use and return to again and again and not to just design play spaces which are aesthetically pleasing to adults, but without the content to inspire and engage our children;**
- **Be more imaginative about where new play areas are located, by bringing them closer into the heart of communities, rather than just pushing them out into the corner of playing fields;**
- **Tackle safety issues around play areas. Addressing problems such as low-level crime, anti-social behaviour and introducing traffic calming measures, will mean that children going out to play independently are safer;**

- Highlight to parents that whilst safety in the playground is important, it is normal for children to be exposed to a beneficial developmental risk;
- Further realise how outdoor and indoor play can have a positive effect on children's health, both physically and mentally, and how it links in to their development into positive, healthy and well-rounded adults;
- Undertake a public campaign to highlight the benefits of play to children and wider society and the investment in play infrastructure;
- Focus on the potential cost-savings of investing in children's play compared to healthcare costs associated with lifestyle health problems later in life; and
- Realise the role that play has in creating social cohesion, how it contributes to regeneration and how it can add to the sense of a healthy community.





**ASSOCIATION OF PLAY INDUSTRIES**  
*c/o Federation of Sports and Play Associations*

**Federation House, Stoneleigh Park, Warwickshire, CV8 2RF**  
**Tel: 02476 414999 | Fax: 02476 414990**

**[www.api-play.org](http://www.api-play.org)**

**[www.sportandplay.com](http://www.sportandplay.com)**