

Open consultation

Reforming the Mental Health Act

Submission from the Association of Play Industries*

The system should be reformed toward a more holistic approach that prioritises early intervention and prevention as well as crisis care. Outdoor play is essential for the normal development of children and without it their physical, mental and emotional health is damaged. Increasingly however, children are being pulled indoors by screen-based entertainment and a concomitant decrease in public, free-to-use play areas. The physical inactivity epidemic in children is a major contributory factor in the growing mental health crisis. Providing outdoor play opportunities is both a protective and a preventative public health measure and urgent and sustained investment in a national network of community playgrounds is needed to safeguard children's mental health.

Public play areas are in steep decline and yet they are the most popular place in which children play outdoors. In 2016 the Association of Play Industries (API) carried out research¹ into the state of England's playgrounds and discovered an alarming decline in play provision. Between 2014/15 and 2015/16 local authorities across England closed 214 children's playgrounds, and when asked about future plans they admitted their aim to close a further 234.

Using Freedom of Information Act requests the API again asked those same local authorities for updates on their playground provision and the picture is one of continued decline:

- By 2020/21 there will have been a decrease in spend on play facilities of 44% since 2017/18.
- In 2016/17 local authorities closed 63 playgrounds and in 2017/18 a further 70 playgrounds have been closed.
- Since 2014 local authorities have closed a total of 347 playgrounds across England.
- There will be a decrease in spend on playgrounds of over £13m each year on average across England.
- Local authorities estimate a decrease in their spending on playgrounds of £25m by 2021.

¹ [Nowhere To Play, API, 2016/18](#)

With no dedicated funding for playgrounds from central government or third-sector grants, play provision falls to local authorities who face competing priorities for their tight budgets, a situation likely to worsen significantly post-pandemic.

There has been a rapid and dramatic change from outdoor to indoor time, with children playing outdoors far less than previous generations. By the age of eight, the average child will have spent nearly one full year of 24-hour days on discretionary screen time (DST) and an average young adolescent using screen devices will spend seventy-six 24-hour days a year on DST. Playgrounds fulfil a unique role in improving children's levels of physical activity, social interaction and mental health. Outdoor play is associated with better social skills in preschool children, and those aged 7-14 spending more time outdoors are found to be less likely to have peer relationship problems and have better psychosocial health.²

The vast majority of children in the UK live in urban areas and without playgrounds their opportunities to play outside are few. For children in the 1 in 8 UK households without gardens³, playgrounds are often the only outdoor space in which to play. Playgrounds are the heart of communities; just like the local shop, pub or school, playgrounds connect people every day. Playgrounds are inclusive, promoting equality by allowing children from all walks of life and all abilities to play together. These dedicated, child-centred spaces are a vital tool in nurturing children's mental health, offering not only physical activity opportunities but also a sense of community and of being connected. Children's lives are increasingly structured and playgrounds present them with the chance to play freely, devising their own rules and playing in order to make sense of the world around them.

Research⁴ carried out by the Association of Play Industries via Mumsnet, the UK's largest parenting website, showed that children play out more when there is a playground nearby. The survey of 1111 parents with children aged between 2 and 12 found that 9 out of 10 parents who were not close to a playground said that having access would make their child play outside more. Of those with access to a playground, 61% said it does make their child play outside more and over half (53%) of parents said more access to playgrounds would make their child more active.

Moreover, the study revealed that many parents think playgrounds help tackle mental health and sleep problems, as well as childhood obesity. Over a quarter of parents surveyed with children experiencing mental health problems said that the lack of outdoor play facilities in their area has played a role in their children's difficulties. Similarly, 26% of parents with children who have sleep problems say that a lack of outdoor play facilities in their area has played a role in their children's sleep difficulties. 72% of parents of children with health issues

² [A Movement for Movement, API, 2019](#)

³ [Office for National Statistics, 2020](#)

⁴ [Play Must Stay, API, 2019](#)

such as obesity said that the lack of outdoor play facilities in their area has played a role in their children's problems.

The relatively modest investment required to create a sustainable network of public playgrounds across the UK would have a substantial, positive effect on the mental health of children and represent a simple yet highly effective public health measure. The pandemic has exposed serious inequalities amongst children and young people: public play facilities for all children are essential if we are truly to 'Level Up' and 'Build Back Better' and place children's mental health at the heart of recovery.

*The API campaigns for policy recognition of the value of play. Play delivers a raft of wide-ranging benefits to children's development, health and wellbeing and every child has a fundamental right to play. The API believes that provision of high-quality play facilities has a vital role to play in tackling the nation's physical inactivity epidemic and as well as addressing wider societal problems like exclusion and anti-social behaviour. The Association of Play Industries (API) is a non-profit trade association. It represents manufacturers, installers, designers and distributors of outdoor play equipment and promotes best practice and high-quality play provision within the play industry.