

# Briefing

## Explaining Play



### What is play?

Play is, "Children and young people following their own ideas and interests, in their own way and for their own reasons, having fun while respecting themselves and others." (The Play Strategy, Department for Children, Families and Schools, 2008)

Getting messy. Having fun. Letting off steam. When we talk about children playing outdoors, the possibilities are endless. It might mean hanging around on the monkey bars of a newly refurbished play area. It might mean chasing each other across a wide-open field. It might mean inventing a game around a park bench with their friends that only they understand.

Children of all ages want to have opportunities to play outdoors, regardless of their background, physical ability or where they live. As Adrian Voce, Director of Play England, notes, "After their basic physical and emotional needs are met, children play."

Play can be both unsupervised or supervised, unstructured or facilitated by, for example, play rangers or older children.

### The opportunities for outdoor play

The places where children play outdoors will include play areas, adventure playgrounds, parks, fields, and other open spaces not necessarily considered by adults as places that children would play.

Over 80% of children would prefer to play outside, and parents – in principle – believe children should be free to experience adventurous play.<sup>1</sup> Unfortunately, parental perceptions about the safety of their children when playing outdoors, as well as their beliefs that there are no, or poor outdoor play facilities are inhibiting outdoor play: a quarter of all eight to 10 year olds have never played outside without an adult.<sup>2</sup>

The challenge is how to influence parents' perceptions so that they can overcome the barriers that prevent them from allowing their children to play outdoors. By challenging their perceptions, we aim to influence parents' behaviour, so that they allow their children to play outdoors more often.

This won't happen overnight – influencing attitudes and behaviour takes time. This challenge should be seen as a long-term commitment facilitated by a more immediate campaign linked to the capital build of new and refurbished play areas in your area.

<sup>1</sup> [www.playday.org.uk](http://www.playday.org.uk)

<sup>2</sup> Home Office/DfES Citizenship Survey 2005

### The benefits of play

Play is an essential part of every child's life. It allows children to develop a sense of wellbeing, it develops their emotional responses and helps them to manage risk. It improves their interpersonal skills, develops their learning capabilities and increases their ability to interact with other children in their community. It can help prevent obesity, can increase resilience to mental health problems and can make them feel more independent. Above all, play is fun!

### The barriers to outdoor play

When you ask children about what stops them playing outdoors, they'll say it's because there aren't any play areas near where they live, that the play areas are boring, or that it costs too much.

When you ask adults, however, three key barriers emerge:

- Concerns about traffic – their fear, for example, of children having to cross busy roads in order to get to play areas
- Concerns about their child's safety when playing outdoors – their fear, for example, of their children being injured or bullied by older children when playing outdoors
- Concerns about the lack of suitable outdoor play area – their belief, for example, that there are no play areas near to them

Of course, these barriers will vary from location to location: parents of children in rural areas, for example, are more likely to perceive traffic as a problem than those living in urban areas. Barriers will also vary according to a number of other factors, including (among others) ethnicity, household income, and age and gender of children. You will probably already have a good idea as to the key barriers to outdoor play that exist in your area.

Parents feel their children are less safe than they were in the past, despite evidence to the contrary.

### The Outdoor Play Campaign Toolkit

The Outdoor Play Campaign Toolkit has been produced by the Department for Children, Schools and Families to inspire, support and enable local authorities in promoting outdoor play, and their new or refurbished outdoor play areas. The toolkit was created following extensive consumer research and in consultation with local authorities and aims to build on the work they have already done around outdoor play areas. It has been designed to meet the different needs of local authorities, while creating consistency in outdoor play communications across the country by providing templates and how to guides for your use.

Its aim is to help you communicate to parents and the communities in which they live, to change their perceptions and alter attitudes and, ultimately, behaviour towards outdoor play. You can find further information, including how to guides, examples of campaign activities and downloadable posters, from [www.dcsf.gov.uk/campaigns/outdoor\\_play](http://www.dcsf.gov.uk/campaigns/outdoor_play)

