

Cyflwynwyd yr ymateb hwn i ymchwiliad y [Pwyllgor Plant, Pobl Ifanc ac Addysg i weithredu diwygiadau addysg](#)

This response was submitted to the [Children, Young People and Education Committee inquiry into Implementation of education reforms](#)

IER 73

Ymateb gan: Chwarae Cymru

Response from: Play Wales

This is a submission from Play Wales, the national charity for children's play in Wales. We advocate for the right and need for all children to play. Our key areas of work:

- raising awareness
- promoting good practice
- providing advice and guidance across all sectors.

We worked closely with the Welsh Government to develop its Play Policyⁱ, Play Policy Implementation Plan and on its groundbreaking play sufficiency legislation. Section 11 of the Children and Families (Wales) Measure 2010ⁱⁱ places a duty on local authorities to assess and secure sufficient play opportunities for children in their area.

We also drafted the final report for the Ministerial Review of Play Steering Group (2022)ⁱⁱⁱ and accompanying background paper^{iv}.

Play Wales is pleased to have an opportunity to input into this inquiry.

The importance of play

There is a well-established body of solid evidence that shows the contribution that play, particularly self-organised play, can make to children's long-term and immediate wellbeing, to their physical health and to their mental health and resilience. Various studies^v have concluded:

- **Play supports socialisation:** when they play, children interact with others, develop friendships and attachments with peers, deal with conflict, and learn respect and tolerance.
- **Play builds resilience:** playing boosts children's emotion regulation, confidence, creativity, problem-solving skills and perseverance, enabling them to cope with stress and challenges throughout life.
- **Play is crucial for good health and wellbeing:** being active through play helps children physically and emotionally, contributing to their health and happiness.



- **Play supports children to feel part of their neighbourhoods and wider communities:** playing allows children to learn about the world around them, make connections and develop a sense of identity and belonging.
- **Play supports learning and development:** building the structures of the brain and skills such as critical thinking.

International play policy

Article 31 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) states that the child has the right to play and to join in other recreational activities. As an indication of the significance the United Nations places on children's play it has published a General Comment on Article 31^{vi}. This is an official statement that elaborates on the meaning of an aspect of the UNCRC that requires further interpretation or emphasis. It identifies that play has the key characteristics of fun, uncertainty, challenge, flexibility and non-productivity.

General Comment no. 17 emphasises that playing is of positive benefit to children's educational development and should be facilitated during the course of every day throughout early childhood education, as well as in primary and secondary school. General Comment no. 17 notes that schools have a major role in the promotion of the right to play across the following areas:

- Curriculum demands
- Educational pedagogy
- Physical environment of settings
- Structure of the day.

National play policy

In 2010, Wales became the first country in the world to legislate for play through the Children and Families (Wales) Measure 2010, placing a duty on local authorities to undertake triennial Play Sufficiency Assessments. *Wales – a Play Friendly Country*^{vii}, statutory guidance to local authorities, sets out a range of Matters across several policy areas that need to be considered.

As part of statutory Play Sufficiency Assessments (PSA), local authorities must assess play within education and school policy.

Between 2019 and 2022, the Welsh Government undertook a Ministerial Review of Play, an in-depth and collaborative review of its play policy work. A cross-professional steering group of play and playwork specialists and policy officials from across the Welsh Government was set up to support the review.

The steering group considered the range of national policy and delivery initiatives that support children in accessing their right to play across educational settings. The discussions highlighted the need to ensure that play is valued in these settings, not only for instrumental educational outcomes, but also for the immediate wellbeing benefits it brings to children of all ages.

The importance of play in schools

Children say that playtimes are an important part of the school day:



- 98% of the children surveyed as part of the Wales Children’s Omnibus Survey (2022) said they look forward to playtime at school
- 82% said they especially like playtime as it allows them to spend time with their friends.

Evidence suggests that school playtime initiatives aimed at enriching opportunities to play are linked to a range of improvements in:

- academic skills
- attitudes
- attention
- behaviour
- social skills
- social relations between different groups of children
- enjoyment of and adjustment to school life.^{viii}

In the Wales Children’s Omnibus Survey (2022), 61% of children say they have missed playtime. The most frequent reasons for this are to catch up with work or because a teacher feels they had misbehaved. More recent surveys undertaken by some local authorities as part of their statutory Play Sufficiency Assessment 2025 suggests that this is still the case for many children, with children reporting that break and lunch times are being shortened or tightly managed, particularly in response to behavioural concerns.

Yet there is little evidence that reducing playtime leads to improved behaviour. In fact, some engagement with schools has indicated that they acknowledged that the strategy has had limited impact. At the same time, approaches to managing behaviour during breaks tend to favour structured activities, further reducing children’s opportunities for self-directed play.

This practice flies in the face of the Welsh Government *Framework on embedding a whole-school approach to emotional and mental well-being*^{ix}, which places a strong emphasis on the importance of play. In particular, the framework notes that the removal of playtime as a punishment denies children their right to play and can cause stigmatisation and anxiety, too.

Conclusion

The right to play, set out in the UNCRC, is universally accepted. A compelling body of evidence demonstrates that play boosts children’s emotional regulation, confidence and perseverance, equipping them to cope with stress and challenges throughout life, supports learning and development. It builds the structures of the brain and skills such as creativity, problem-solving and critical thinking.

For several years, there have been significant policy changes to schools and education in Wales. The Curriculum for Wales strongly supports the importance of play, particularly in the early years and primary phases. For example, the Health and Wellbeing Area of Learning and Experience explicitly highlights the importance of physical activity, play and outdoor learning. There is also a



growing focus on student enrichment in response to the Curriculum for Wales, with recreational activities built into secondary school timetables. How playful and open-ended these activities tend to be is likely to depend on the staff responsible for them.

In primary schools, the Foundation Phase embeds play-based learning in the early years. However, as children move into upper primary, the emphasis often shifts toward more formal, structured learning. For the Ministerial Review of Play, the Welsh Government commissioned Children in Wales – through its Young Wales initiative – to consult with children across Wales about their experiences and thoughts on play.

Through this work, children of all ages feel that schools and the education sector are responsible for ensuring that there are sufficient opportunities to play. They are clear that playing is not only important for children in primary school. Children aged between 12 and 18 feel that schools and education providers should allocate more time for play and more opportunities for children to meet up during the school day. They suggested that playtime or break time for children aged 12 to 18 in schools and colleges must be considered.

As well as changes to the curriculum there are a multitude of school based programmes focusing on increasing the levels of physical activity amongst children, on better school meals and on supporting children's mental health, in an aim to address the growing concerns about the physical and mental health of children and young people. As concerns grow about the 'epidemic' of child anxiety and unhappiness, there seems to be an almost acceptance of the contemporary barriers that prevent and discourage children's play. As the Ministerial Review of Play highlights, these barriers include:

- changes in neighbourhoods, including increased car use, increased traffic, changing work patterns
- parental restrictions due to perceptions of neighbourhood safety
- an increase in participation in structured activities and educational demands
- increasing intolerance towards children and young people playing and meeting up.

Against this backdrop, a constant in children's lives, and at school, is play and break time – those bits of the school day when children of all ages meet friends to play and socialise, eat, and relax. As pointed out in the Ministerial Review of Play Background Paper, a child spends more than six hours a day and 28 weeks of the year at school, so these are places where there should be considerable opportunities to play. This is not the case for many children in Wales..

Creating the conditions for good playtimes in schools is about both the physical space and the culture of the school: both operate in tandem to produce an environment where children can play. This can be achieved by ensuring that national support for schools includes:

- guidance for well-designed playable space
- policies and scrutiny ensuring that adequate time is given for both lunch and playtime, protecting playtime and not withdrawing it.



ⁱ <https://play.wales/wp-content/uploads/2023/03/Play-Policy.pdf>

ⁱⁱ <https://play.wales/play-policy-legislation/play-sufficiency/>

ⁱⁱⁱ <https://play.wales/wp-content/uploads/2023/02/Ministerial-Review-of-Play-FINAL-REPORT.pdf>

^{iv} <https://www.gov.wales/sites/default/files/inline-documents/2023-10/ministerial-review-of-play-background-paper.pdf>

^v See Russell, W., Barclay, M. and Tawil, B. (2024) *Playing and being well – A review of recent research into children’s play, social policy and practice, with a focus on Wales Literature Review*, Cardiff: Play Wales.

^{vi} United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child CRC (2013) *General comment No. 17 (2013) on the right of the child to rest, leisure, play, recreational activities, cultural life and the arts (art. 31)*, Geneva: Committee on the Rights of the Child.

^{vii} Welsh Government (2025) *Wales – a Play Friendly Country*, Cardiff: Welsh Government.

^{viii} Russell, W. (ed.), Ardelean, A. and Smith, K. (2021) *The Case for Play in Schools: A review of the literature*, Bristol, Outdoor Play and Learning, Bristol: OPAL.

^{ix} <https://gov.wales/sites/default/files/publications/2021-03/framework-on-embedding-a-whole-school-approach-to-emotional-and-mental-well-being.pdf>

