factsheet

Children's Play Information Service

No.15 The Benefits of School Playtime

Introduction

The benefits of school playtime are widely acknowledged, yet many schools have reduced the time available for playtime (Blatchford and Baines 2006). This has been due to a combination of factors, including more pressure on curriculum time, the perceived deterioration of the behaviour of children at playtime (Pellegrini and Blatchford 2002; Blatchford and others 2002) and concerns about health and safety (Thomson 2005). However, there have been many calls for playtimes to be valued as an important part of the school day (for example NUT 2007; Play England 2007), and children themselves have reported that school is the main chance they have to spend time playing with their friends (Play England 2009).

This factsheet gives an overview of some of the research on the benefits of playtime (mainly in primary schools) and discusses how children and schools can benefit from playful playtimes.

Definition of play

Play can be defined and understood in a number of different ways, but all the research cited in this factsheet focuses on the form of play which is commonly referred to as 'free' or 'unstructured' play. This construction of play is defined by the playwork field as, "a process that is freely chosen, personally directed and intrinsically motivated" (PPSG 2005). Similarly, The Play Strategy (DCSF 2008) defined play as, "children and young people following their own ideas and interests, in their own way and for their own reasons…". Whilst some children do of course choose organised games and structured activities at playtime, this factsheet focuses on the importance of children having unstructured time which is not under the direct control of adults during the school day.

Playtime and physical health

`The free time available within school during break times and lunch times is clearly being underutilized in the context of promoting physical activity.' (Waring and others 2007).

Several studies (for example Burdette and Whittaker 2005; Verstraete 2006) call for schools to facilitate more physical activity at playtimes. 'Free play' can involve children in high levels of physical activity (Mackett 2008)

and children are more physically active when playground rules, policies and supervision allow for non-competitive, open-ended play (Bell and Dyment 2006). Playtimes therefore offer children an important opportunity to increase their daily physical activity through "unstructured physical activity during playtimes" (WHO 2007) and, as Bagby and others (2007) point out, this can be done without changing the rest of the school day.

Whilst a more recent study cautions against making direct associations between physical activity and weight loss (Metcalf and others 2010), there are a wide range of health benefits associated with physical activity in play (BHF 2010; CMO 2004; Saakshlati 2004). A longer playtime would allow children to gain the most benefit from physical activity, as studies found that higher physical activity levels were associated with longer playtimes (Ridgers and others 2007; Parrish and others 2009).

Playtime and mental health

`We are forcing our young people to grow up too quickly and not giving them the spaces and experiences they require to be safe and confident. We are creating a generation under stress.'
(McCulloch 2008)

Children also benefit from physically active play in terms of their mental health. Children with lower physical activity levels have more symptoms of psychological distress than more active children (CMO 2004).

Playtime also offers children opportunities to deal with stress. Children greatly value the ability to do what they want at playtime (Blatchford and Baines 2006) and those children who are able to play in their own way may experience a greater "sense of self", which has been linked to an increased ability to deal with stress (Creswell and others 2005). Children who make their own decisions, use their own initiative and feel good about themselves are more likely to develop positive self-esteem (MHF 1999), and Boulton's study (2005) links "children's recess experiences and their concurrent and emerging self perceptions".

A sense of achievement is frequently identified as one of the key protective factors for resilience, and Lester and Russell (2008) present a detailed review of the evidence which links play to the development of resilience. As Howard and others (1999) note in their review of the resilience literature, "Schools can provide children with positive experiences that are associated with either success or pleasure", and playtime is an opportunity for both success and pleasure in children's own terms within the school day.

Playtime and social skills

`We should bear in mind that children do also enjoy and probably get benefits from the kinds of play that adults do not prefer'.
(Smith 2010)

Evaldsson and Corsaro (1998) point out that play enables children to establish and maintain

a peer culture which is often in direct contrast to the adult culture. Where adults see chaos and danger, children often see play and excitement that has been arrived at through carefully negotiated rules (spoken and unspoken), which are unrecognisable to adults (Jarvis 2007). As Adams (1993) points out, not all learning opportunities in the playground are what would be regarded as 'positive' by adults; "we need to accept that pupils sometimes learn social skills and survival tactics from negative experiences in school grounds - how to deal with power structures, how to cause trouble, how to avoid it". Blatchford and others (2002) conclude that initiating and suggesting ways of playing is one of the ways children establish social contacts, and Butler and Weatherall (2006) point out that children develop and practice complex social and negotiation skills in order to gain membership of self-initiated play frames.

Children from ethnic backgrounds and children with disabilities benefit from 'free' play at playtime in terms of social development and inclusion. Blatchford and others (2003) found that playtimes can encourage children from different ethnic groups to play together. Woolley and others (2006) suggested that afternoon playtimes and playtimes which allowed mixed age groups to play together could improve the inclusion of children with disabilities in the playground.

Playtime and the classroom

`By squeezing out time to play, or by relegating it to 'Friday afternoons' or similar marginalising, children are being forced to turn away from their own super-efficient learning mechanism. The irony is that this is usually done in the name of education.'
(Bailey and Farrow 1998).

Several studies positively associate what children do at playtime with learning in the classroom. For example, a study by Hill and others (2010) confirmed that physical exercise benefits cognitive performance within the classroom and Grugeon (2005) describes how children's play narratives in the playground can contribute to children's literacy skills.

A lack of playtime has been found to have a negative impact on children's performance in the classroom. Pellegrini found that the longer children worked on standardised tasks without having a break time, the less attentive to the task they became (Pellegrini and Davis 1993; Pellegrini and others 1995). Ridgway and others (2003) reported that "levels of inappropriate behaviour were consistently higher on days when participants did not have recess, compared with days when they did have recess" in a small study which included children who had been diagnosed with Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD). Classroom behaviour was also found to be better in children who had at least a 15-minute playtime during the school day in a study of data on more than 10,000 children (Barros and others 2009).

The problem with playtime?

`By school age, children have come to expect quite arbitrary and, from their point of view, meaningless demands to be made upon them by adults...'
(Bruner 1972)

Anybody who has observed a noisy, slightly chaotic school playground will know that children do not play in order to benefit their physical health (Hemming 2007), or to maintain good mental health, to develop their social skills or even to enhance their performance in the classroom. Nevertheless, the research shows that when children play in a way which can be described as "a process which is freely chosen, personally directed and intrinsically motivated" (PPSG 2005), all of those windfall outcomes of free play can have a positive impact on children's learning, development and general well-being. Yet many schools continue to restrict free play, shorten the length of playtimes or remove them altogether. So what's the problem with playtime?

Many schools have developed policies and practices (either written or "ad hoc" (Thomson 2005) which have the effect of restricting the movement of children in the playground (McKenzie and others 2010). Geographical restrictions include the division of older and younger children into separate areas; 'zoning' which involves constructing physical barriers for specific types of play; and restricting 'adventure playground' equipment to specific classes on specific days. Green areas are often declared 'out of bounds', either permanently or for the majority of the school year. Access to fixed features (for example, equipment sheds and rubbish bins), is often banned, or restricted by the installation of fixed equipment, even though these `nook and cranny' spaces are often vital for children's play purposes (Armitage 2005).

Further behavioural restrictions are imposed in the form of 'banning' - schools regularly 'ban' forms of play which involve children in active or novel forms of movement, such as running, handstands, kicking balls, playing with sticks, digging, rough and tumble play and 'twirling' on railings. Whilst of course there are many forms of play which do not involve movement, these geographical and behavioural restrictions on playful physical movement can result in playtimes where children play very little, and playgrounds become places where children are reduced to just wandering about aimlessly, or "mooching"(Thomson 2003*a*).

Well-intentioned interventions can thwart play and create further problems (Jarvis 2007), yet adults often find it hard to let go of their own fears and concerns. Bundy and others (2009) increased the activity levels of children through encouraging free play at playtime and found that the level of injuries did not increase. However, teachers still "perceived an increased risk and encountered dilemmas regarding duty of care". Whilst some supervision of playtime is necessary, adults on school playgrounds need to carry out

risk-benefit assessments (Newstead 2008; Ball and others 2009) where "potential positive impacts are weighed against potential risk" (Lord Young 2010), so that the benefits of playtime do not automatically become a casualty of the drive for safety.

So 'the problem with playtime' simply could be that children are not *allowed* to play on their own terms. Children who are not able to move freely around the playground in the way that suits their play narratives will become bored and frustrated, potentially causing the types of behaviours that the restrictions are trying to manage (Thomson 2003*b*). In addition to which, children who are not able to play at playtime miss out on a range of physical, mental and educational benefits that free play affords (Ramstetter 2010), or as Bell and Dyment (2008) put it, "the sterile landscapes of conventional school grounds present a much greater health risk than rocks and trees – the risk of depriving children of the quality and variety of experience that are crucial to their healthy development."

Written by Shelly Newstead, December 2010

Useful online resources

Play England (2008) *Play in Schools and Integrated settings: A position statement.*
A position statement on improving play opportunities in schools.
http://www.playengland.org.uk/resources/play-in-schools-and-integrated-settings-a-position-statement

Play Wales (2005) *Richer Play in Schools: A guide for schools wishing to improve play opportunities for children and young people*.
http://www.playwales.org.uk/page.asp?id=56

Play England (2009) *Play in Schools: Film on the importance of play in primary schools.*
http://www.playengland.org.uk/resources/play-in-schools

Playlink (1999) *Play at School*. London: Playlink.
http://www.playlink.org/publications

Key organisations

The organisations listed below provide some free resources of interest to those looking to improve their school playtime.

Children's Play Information Service
National specialist library and information service on all aspects of children's play.
http://www.ncb.org.uk/cpis

Learning Through Landscapes
Charity that aims to enable schools and early years setting to make the most of their outside spaces for children's education and well-being.
http://www.ltl.org.uk

The Playtime Project
Set up by Common Threads, this project aims to share good practice.
http://www.playinschools.org.uk

Play England
Play England has a Play in Schools Group that brings together national and regional

agencies and local authority representatives who have an interest in improving play provision within schools. http://www.playengland.org.uk

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social activities and interactions', *British Journal of Developmental Psychology*, 23 (2), pp.209-226.

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Metcalf, BS and others (2010) `Fatness leads to inactivity, but inactivity does not lead to fatness: a longitudinal study in children' *(EarlyBird 45). Archives of Disease in Childhood.*

MHF Mental Health Foundation. (1999) *Bright Futures – promoting children and young people's mental health*. London: Mental Health Foundation.

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NUT National Union of Teachers (2007) *Time to Play - NUT Play Policy*. London: The Membership and Communications Department of The National Union of Teachers. http://www.teachers.org.uk/docs/files/PlayPolicy4925_0.pdf

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The Children's Play Information Service produces factsheets and student reading lists on a variety of play topics, and can also provide customised reading lists in response to individual requests.

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