

# Charter for Children's Play

'We play boulders – that's where you sit on the swing and someone shouts "boulders", they jump on that person then everyone jumps on top until the last one falls off, unless it hurts, then we stop!'

## Introduction

**The *Charter for Children's Play* sets out a vision for play and aims to be a catalyst for individuals and organisations to examine, review and improve their provision for children and young people's play and informal recreation.**

The charter may also serve as a guide and framework to all those involved in developing, revising and implementing play strategies, community plans and children and young people's plans.

Organisations whose services impact on children's play, such as local authorities, voluntary organisations, and health, education and social service providers, can formally adopt the charter in order to raise awareness of the importance of play. The charter underpins all Play England's work and its adoption is a requirement for membership.

## The value of play

Playing is integral to children's enjoyment of their lives, their health and their development. Children and young people – disabled and non-disabled – whatever their age, culture, ethnicity or social and economic background, need and want to play, indoors and out, in whatever way they can. Through playing, children are creating their own culture, developing their abilities, exploring their creativity and learning about themselves, other people and the world around them.

Children need and want to stretch and challenge themselves when they play. Play provision and play space that is stimulating and exciting allows children to encounter and learn about risk. This helps them to build confidence, learn skills and develop resilience at their own pace.

**Play is the fundamental way that children enjoy their childhood. It is essential to their quality of life as children.**

- Playing is fun: it is how children enjoy themselves.
- Play promotes children's development, learning, imagination, creativity and independence.
- Play can help to keep children healthy and active.
- Play allows children to experience and encounter boundaries, learning to assess and manage risk in their lives; both physical and social.
- Play helps children to understand the people and places in their lives, learn about their environment and develop their sense of community.
- Play allows children to find out about themselves, their abilities, their interests and the contribution they can make.
- Play can be therapeutic. It helps children to deal with difficult or painful circumstances such as emotional stress or medical treatment.
- Play can be a way of building and maintaining important relationships with friends, carers and family members.



## Children's right to play

The right to play and informal recreation, for all children and young people up to 18 years of age, is contained in Article 31 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, ratified by the UK government in 1991. The government has a duty under this convention to protect and promote play opportunities for all children and young people.

## UN Convention on the Rights of the Child: Article 31

1. States Parties recognise the right of the child to rest and leisure, to engage in play and recreational activities appropriate to the age of the child and to participate freely in cultural life and the arts.
2. States Parties shall respect and promote the right of the child to participate fully in cultural and artistic life and shall encourage the provision of appropriate and equal opportunities for cultural, artistic, recreational and leisure activity.

## What we mean by 'play'

**'Play is what children and young people do when they follow their own ideas and interests, in their own way and for their own reasons.'**  
(DCMS, 2004)

Play is a generic term applied to a wide range of activities and behaviours that are satisfying to the child, creative for the child and freely chosen by the child. It has frequently been described as 'what children and young people do when not being told what to do by adults.'

As children grow they are more likely to describe these informal recreational activities in ways other than 'playing'. Under the UN Convention, older children's right to their own recreational and cultural lives is as important as younger children's right to play. This charter applies equally to all ages of children.

In the charter, children are defined as anyone under the age of 18 years. This definition draws on that used in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child and ratified by the United Kingdom in 1991.

The essence of play is that it arises from children's innate need to express themselves, to explore, learn about and make sense of their world. Its benefits for children derive

from them making their own choices, following their own instincts. At play, children have a certain freedom and autonomy from adult direction. This freedom – to choose, to explore, to associate, to create, to move around, to challenge themselves and others – is an important part of their lives now; and vital to their development.

The charter, therefore, is underpinned by some key understandings:

- Play is an essential part of every child's life – vital to his or her development. It is the way that children explore for themselves the world around them; the way that they naturally develop understanding and practise skills.
- Play is essential for healthy physical and emotional growth, for intellectual and educational development, and for acquiring social and behavioural skills.
- Play may or may not involve equipment or have an end product. Children play on their own and with others. Their play may be boisterous and energetic or quiet and contemplative, light-hearted or very serious.
- Children's own culture is created and lived through their play.

## Implementing the charter

A detailed guide to implementing the *Charter for Children's Play* is available from Play England. This guide offers action points to children and young people, parents and carers, play providers, policy makers and planners on different ways to promote the charter and work towards better provision for play and informal recreation for all children and young people.



# Charter for Children's Play

## Children have the right to play

All children and young people have the right to play and need to play: free to choose what they do – lively or relaxed, noisy or quiet – with the chance to stretch and challenge themselves, take risks and enjoy freedom. The right to play is enshrined in Article 31 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child.

## Every child needs time and space to play

All children and young people – disabled and non-disabled – whatever their age, culture, ethnicity or social and economic background, need time and space to play freely and confidently with their peers, free of charge, indoors and outdoors, somewhere they feel safe. Play provision should actively include the widest range of children and seek to engage with those from minority groups.

## Adults should let children play

Parents, carers and other adults can support children and young people's play by respecting the value and importance of all types of play, playing with their children and by creating opportunities and allowing time for children to play independently with their friends, inside and outside the home.

## Children should be able to play freely in their local areas

Children have the same right to use and enjoy public space as others. Local streets, estates, green spaces, parks and town centres should be accessible for children and young people to move around in safety and offer places where they can play freely, experience nature, explore their environment and be with their friends.

## Children value and benefit from staffed play provision

Children should have access to a choice of staffed facilities where children's play rights and needs are the first priority, such as adventure playgrounds, play centres, holiday play schemes, after-school play clubs, breakfast play clubs, toy libraries, play buses and play ranger services.

## Children's play is enriched by skilled playworkers

Qualified, skilled playworkers are trained to put children's play needs at the centre of their work in a variety of settings, enhancing the range and quality of play experiences for all children. They are the best people to run staffed play provision for school-aged children. The role of the playworker is as important as that of any skilled professional working with children and should be respected and rewarded accordingly.

## Children need time and space to play at school

The school day should allow time for children to relax and play freely with their friends. Young children learn best through play and, as they get older, play supports and enriches their learning. Children learn best if teaching is creative and enjoyable. In school, time and space for play and outdoor learning is as important as formal teaching. School grounds should be good places to play.

## Children sometimes need extra support to enjoy their right to play

Children and young people living away from home or visiting unfamiliar or controlled environments such as hospital, prison, immigration centres, and residential homes and schools, sometimes experience fear, anxiety and discomfort. For these children it is especially important to ensure they have good play opportunities facilitated by trained staff and volunteers.

# Supporting documents

The *Charter for Children's Play* should be used alongside other key play sector documents.

## Best Play

*Best Play* – what play provision should do for children (NPFA, 2000), a fundamental document for the play sector, describes how children benefit from a variety of play opportunities and how play services and spaces can provide these benefits. The seven objectives described in *Best Play* apply to all play provision. The objectives are broad statements, intended to set out how play values and principles can be put into practice.

### The seven play objectives

1. The provision extends the choice and control that children have over their play, the freedom they enjoy and the satisfaction they gain from it.
2. The provision recognises the child's need to test boundaries and responds positively to that need.
3. The provision manages the balance between the need to offer risk and the need to keep children safe from harm.
4. The provision maximises the range of play opportunities.
5. The provision fosters independence and self-esteem.
6. The provision fosters children's respect for others and offers opportunities for social interaction.
7. The provision fosters the child's well-being, healthy growth and development, knowledge and understanding, creativity and capacity to learn.

## Playwork Principles

*Playwork Principles* (Play Wales, 2004), establish the professional and ethical framework for playwork. They describe what is unique about play and playwork, and provide the playwork perspective for working with children and young people. They are based on the recognition that children and young people's capacity for positive development will be enhanced if given access to the broadest range of environments and play opportunities. SkillsActive, the Sector Skills Council for playwork, endorses *Playwork Principles*.

## Kids Inclusion Framework

'Inclusive provision is open and accessible to all, and takes positive action in removing disabling barriers so that disabled and non-disabled children can participate' (Kids, 2005). In the charter, inclusive provision refers to play provision that removes barriers to children often excluded from local mainstream provision because of disability, ethnicity, social or economic background, or any other reason.

## Managing Risk in Play Provision

*Managing Risk in Play Provision* (Play Safety Forum, 2002), is a position statement of the Play Safety Forum, a grouping of national public, private and voluntary agencies involved in play safety. The statement focuses on physical injuries resulting from accidents during play, and the need to establish a balanced understanding of risk and the potential benefits of certain activities. The emphasis is on the value and nature of risk assessment. The statement is also of relevance to organisations concerned with the personal safety of children. The statement is endorsed by the Health and Safety Executive.

### Summary statement

'Children need and want to take risks when they play. Play provision aims to respond to these needs and wishes by offering children stimulating, challenging environments for exploring and developing their abilities. In doing this, play provision aims to manage the level of risk so that children are not exposed to unacceptable risks of death or serious injury.'

## Planning for Play

*Planning for Play* (CPC, 2006), is the guide to developing and implementing local play strategies; produced to support the Big Lottery Fund's Children's Play programme. It sets out recommended principles and processes for a cross-cutting approach to planning for children's play provision and to consider children's need to play throughout the public realm. *Planning for Play* is consistent with the *Charter for Children's Play*.

## References

DCMS (2004) *Getting Serious About Play – A review of children's play*. London, Department for Culture Media and Sport.

NPFA (2000) *Best Play – What play provision can do for children*. London, Children's Play Council. [www.playengland.org.uk/resources](http://www.playengland.org.uk/resources).

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Play England promotes excellent free play opportunities for all children and young people.

Play England provides advice and support to promote good practice, and works to ensure that the importance of play is recognised by policy makers, planners and the public.

Play England works to strategic aims and objectives agreed by its council of members, formerly known as the Children's Play Council.

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