

NATIONAL PLAY & RECREATION POLICY

In preparing this document, several quotations about play have been used. There is a dearth of similar material and definitions on recreation. Important providers of recreational opportunities for young people are the Sports Council and the Arts Council. Therefore in developing a policy for play and recreation, it is important to emphasise the need for co-operation and networking to ensure both that the best quality of service is provided and that resources are not duplicated. For the purposes of this document, it is recommended that play & recreation are regarded as broadly similar activities and are considered together under the general term 'play'.

1. VISION STATEMENT

Every child has the right to play and to participate fully in recreational activities. By working together; parents, local communities, public agencies and voluntary organisations will enable the play and recreational needs of children and young people to be met within the legislative framework.

2. PLAY VALUES

The value of play in the development of children has long been recognised. Many psychologists and educationalists have identified the importance of play as the means by which children come to understand the world around them. Free play fosters the child's Social, Physical, Intellectual, Creative and Emotional development (SPICE) and by so doing:

- *“Play promotes children's development, learning, creativity and independence”*
- *“Play keeps children healthy and active - active children become active adults”*
- *“Play fosters social inclusion. It helps children 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 and interests.”*
- *“Play is therapeutic. It helps children to deal with difficult or painful circumstances such as emotional stress or medical treatment.”*
- *“Play gives children the chance to let off steam and have fun.”*

(Ref. *The New Charter for Children's Play*, Children's Play Council, 1998)

Young people will gain similar benefits when participating in recreational activities.

Play empowers children, supports their right to make choices, discover their own solutions and to develop at their own pace.

It follows, therefore, that provision for children's play and recreation should encompass the following values:

1. A belief in the importance of play and recreation for children and young people and a commitment to ensuring that all children have the opportunity to access quality play and recreational programmes and facilities.
2. The child must be at the centre of the process; with the child's needs and opinions taken into account, consistent with health, safety and respect for the needs of others.
3. There must be consistency and clarity in adult values in relation to play and recreation. Children must be able to see the connection between policy and what actually happens.
4. Every child has a right to a play environment that stimulates and provides opportunities for acceptable risk, challenge and the growth of self-confidence.
5. An environment that seeks to enhance children's development through play and recreation should be designed and planned to ensure that it is inclusive and respecting of all children both in terms of physical access and the imagery used. The images used should be inclusive, without bias regarding gender, membership of a minority ethnic community or other minority group background.
6. The adults with responsibility for play and recreation should aim to promote equality of access, participation and outcomes for all children regardless of gender, ethnic background, ability, religion or membership of the Traveller community.
7. All children have a right to a play and recreational environment free from hazard and which ensures both physical and personal safety, within a setting in which the child feels safe.

3. GENERAL CHARACTERISTICS OF PLAY AND RECREATION

The development of a play and recreation policy should have regard to the following characteristics:

1. It is the children who define the rules, procedures and goals, not the adults.
2. The role of adults will be that of a facilitator not an instructor, teacher or coach.
3. For the purpose of the Council, infants, pre-school children and those children at primary school are deemed to engage in play activities whilst young people (teenagers) will generally undertake recreational activities. However, it must be noted that play or recreation does not follow a developmental calendar and in practice, teenagers can 'play' and younger children can engage in recreation. The term play is linked to younger children and recreation to older children purely to reflect more closely their view of their own activities.

- *“Play is freely chosen, personally directed, intrinsically motivated behaviour that actively engages the child”*
- *“Play does not involve the pursuit of any external goal or reward”*
- *“The main characteristics of play, child or adult, is not its content, but its mode. Play is an approach to action, not a form of activity”.*

(Ref. *Best Play*, Children's Play Council, NPFA, 2,000)

4. UNDERLYING PRINCIPLES

4.1 Important underlying principles to play and recreation are:

1. The Right to Play & Recreation - Article 31 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child:
 - *“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.*
 - *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.”*
2. The National Children’s Strategy ‘Our Children - Their Lives’ states:
“Children will have access to play, sport, recreation and cultural activities to enrich their experience of childhood”

4.2 The Play and Recreation Policy will be guided by the following key principles:

1. Children and youth will be given a real voice in decisions affecting the development and provision of play & recreational opportunities.
2. The principle of **social inclusion** underpins the entire national policy on play and recreation. The adults with responsibility for play and recreation should aim to promote equality of access, participation and outcomes for all children. All children are to be treated in an equitable manner regardless of gender, ethnic background, ability, religion or membership of the Traveller community. In providing for play and recreation, consideration should be given to the needs of children from minority ethnic communities including the Traveller children, children with a disability and children from a disadvantaged background. It is recognised that the process of play and recreation helps to break down barriers between children.
3. Provision of play and recreational opportunities should seek to overcome bias on the basis of gender, disadvantage, ethnicity, ability, health or institutional situation in order to provide equitable opportunities for all children and young people. Such barriers may include homelessness, inadequate, temporary or transient accommodation, residence within an institution, hospital, juvenile centre or other care setting as well as children living in a disadvantaged community environment or an isolated rural area.
4. All play and recreation programmes should be respectful of all children, free of exploitation, bullying, violence, unsafe practices and discrimination.
5. There are increasing pressures on the child’s opportunities for free play. The child’s right to enjoy free play needs to be protected and supported. These pressures are varied and may include: parental expectations of academic progress from an early age, increased pressures for child supervision at all times, traffic dangers, parental fears of ‘stranger danger’, the loss of natural play opportunities through development, and in rural areas; isolation and the lack of transport.
6. It is recognised that children play wherever they are, and not just in designated play spaces or play grounds. Therefore, to realistically provide for children’s play and recreation, our national and local environmental planning guidelines

must contain measures ensuring that our villages, towns and cities become child friendly environments.

5. OBJECTIVES FOR PLAY PROVISION

In terms of delivering best practice in relation to play and recreation, provision should seek to fulfil the following objectives:

- To extend the choice and control that children have over their play, the freedom they enjoy and the satisfaction they gain from it.
- To recognise the child's need to test boundaries and respond positively to that need
- To manage the balance between the need to offer risk and the need to keep the child safe from harm
- To maximise the range of play opportunities
- To foster independence and self-esteem
- To foster children's respect for others and to offer opportunities for social interaction.
- To foster the child's well-being, healthy growth and development, knowledge and understanding, creativity and capacity to learn.

(Adapted from *Best Play: What Play Provision Should do for Children*. Children's Play Council, NPFA. 2000)

6. PROVIDING FOR THE DELIVERY OF PLAY AND RECREATION

6.1 STRATEGY

1. The key players in the development of a play and recreation infrastructure have been identified in the Strategy as: the County and City Development Boards, the Local Authorities and their designated officers, local voluntary and community groups. In addition to the Sports Council, the Arts Council through the Arts Officers will also have a liaison role with the designated play and recreation officer in the development of programmes in local authorities. National voluntary agencies, Health Boards and private enterprise will also be a provider of play and recreational opportunities at the local level and in some instances at the regional level. Parents and the local community will directly influence the availability and nature of play and recreational opportunities. Above all, children and young people must themselves be enabled to take an active role in shaping the development of local services and provision in line with the National Children's Strategy and the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child.

Local authorities have a role in providing for children's play and recreational needs:

- as direct providers of equipped play areas, parks and sports facilities
 - by providing grants and assistance to community groups to meet play needs
 - as regulators in relation to building and fire regulations, health and safety
 - through planning by designating spaces for play, in traffic management by making areas safer for play.
2. The play and recreational needs of children and young people are best met by a co-operative approach based on all relevant agencies and groups working together to provide play and recreational programmes and facilities.

3. The role of parents in the provision of appropriate and stimulating play and recreational opportunities should be recognised and supported. The National Policy on Play and Recreation should include measures to assist parents in understanding their child's development and in providing for their play and recreational needs.
4. School and the school playground as contexts for play by children, especially in the primary school years are recognised as being of vital importance. However, issues of insurance, fear of litigation and the cost of adult supervision do affect school policies on how children can play and the degree of freedom which children enjoy at break-time. The National Policy on Play and Recreation emphasises the importance of actively promoting and facilitating play opportunities in the school situation and urges the promotion of best practice in this area, together with funding of pilot initiatives. The opportunity to play games, to run, to be physically active and to let off steam during break-time should be available to all children in all of our schools. The social needs of children and young people are to be supported by the appropriate design and provision of social spaces in the school environment.
5. Children and young people are to be supported in their participation in decisions on play and recreational provision and programmes.
6. Provisions should be included to ensure accessibility of play and recreational opportunities for disadvantaged children and young people e.g. those children and young people who are homeless, or living in inadequate, temporary or transient accommodation; or resident within a care situation, hospital or juvenile centre; or living in a disadvantaged community environments i.e. halting sites or an isolated rural areas
7. It will be necessary to establish short, medium and long term objectives as a first priority. These objectives may include:

Short term:

- Adoption of National Policy on Children's Play and Recreation
- Preparation of job description for the designated play & recreation officers
- Appointment of local authority play and recreation officers
- Production and adoption of local play policies with community involvement
- Preparation of budgets
- Conference for County & City managers and relevant local authority staff
- Initiation of research into status of play and recreational provision
- Playwork training needs analysis
- Preparation of short term training plan for play & recreation officers
- Preparation of brief for a National Play & Recreation Centre

Medium term:

- Delivery of training support for the local authority play officers
- Establishment of a National Play and Recreation Centre
- Revision of guidelines for open space and play/recreation provision
- Preparation of play policies for other relevant agencies

Long :

- Establishment of third level training course in play work
- Research into aspects of play and recreation as determined by the National Play and Recreation Centre

- Implementation of local play policies and programmes

6.2 KEY PROVISIONS

6.2.1 Policy on Play and Recreation

1. All elements of the National Play & Recreational Policy should be proofed to ensure equality of access based on gender.
2. All elements of the National Play & Recreational Policy should be proofed in relation to their potential impact on disadvantaged children and young people, children and young people with disabilities and those from minority ethnic groups.
3. All local authorities will be expected to develop a local policy on play and recreation within an agreed time frame. Local policies are to embody a similar commitment to equality of access, participation and outcomes for all children and young people. Such policies are to include a commitment to anti-discrimination and anti-racist principles and practices. A draft structure for a local play policy is included in Appendix 1.
4. The nature and scope of a play and recreation policy requires clear definition and it is expected that appropriate guidelines will be prepared by the Children's Office or a nominated body.
5. It is expected that the development of a play and recreation policy by a local authority or voluntary agency will be undertaken in partnership with both local community interests and local children and young people.
6. All organisations working with/providing services for children and youth, are to be encouraged to develop a policy on play & recreation in line with national policy.
7. All agencies or community groups providing play & recreation projects & services that are funded by grant aid will be required to have a play & recreation policy in place before grants are allocated.
8. It is recognised that some local authorities may be reluctant to provide for play and recreation due to insurance and litigation concerns. The concerns can be addressed through displaying 'due diligence' by involving the community, including children, in the location and care of play facilities, having play facilities designed, equipped, installed and maintained to the relevant standards, having regular inspections by trained staff, keeping records of inspections and incidents, carrying out prompt repairs, having independent annual safety inspections, and providing facilities for teenagers and young people.

6.2.2 The Environment for Play and Recreation

1. The play and recreational needs of children and young people can only be realistically met if our environments are planned with them in mind. It is recommended that planning guidelines, such as housing layouts, traffic management schemes and local area plans should be 'child proofed' to ensure that informal play spaces, places to socialise, safe walking and cycling routes and facilities for activities are planned for.
2. It is recommended that guidelines for the spatial provision of playgrounds are developed by the Department of the Environment and Local Government in consultation with the National Children's Office or its designated officer. It is also recommended that the existing Departmental guidelines on Parks and Open Spaces

are revised in order to adequately provide for the needs of children and young people.

3. It is recommended that the availability of facilities for play and recreation could be enhanced by a greater shared use of existing and planned provision, particularly schools by the community.

6.2.3 Funding

1. It is recommended that funding support is provided to local authorities for a minimum term of 3 years, to fund the employment of a dedicated play & recreation officer.
2. It is recommended that project and programme funding is provided to local authorities to enable the dedicated officer to develop the local play and recreation strategy and programmes.
3. A realistic budget for the development of a national policy, funding for the designated play & recreation officers, funding for the National Play & Recreation Centre for Children and Youth and funding for research, promotion and training will be required.
4. Central funding support for voluntary agencies and community groups in developing play and recreation provision is required.

6.2.4 National Play and Recreation Centre

It is recommended that a National Play & Recreation Centre for Children and Youth is established as a first priority. It is imperative that the centre has a close functional relationship with the National Children's Office and the Minister for Health and Children. (e.g. Model for Civil Service Child Care provision). The main functions of the Centre will be to:

1. Oversee the development of play and recreation services
2. Provide advice and support on all issues surrounding play and recreation including policy and practice to agencies, community groups, statutory bodies, the public, children and youth.
3. Be an advocate on play and recreation for children and young people.
4. Identify funding requirements, priorities and guidelines
5. Provide a co-ordinating role with local designated officers
6. Provide training directly or in liaison with other agencies/Third level institutions.
7. Identify research areas and to undertake or contract out the designated research function.
8. Establish quality control guidelines and evaluation
9. Developing mechanisms for involving children in decision making on play and recreation.
10. Establish a national information & library service
11. Advise on the development of equality and anti-discriminatory policies on play and recreational provision.

6.2.5 Personnel and Training Issues

1. Each local authority will designate an officer to be responsible for the development of play and recreation activity (ref. Strategy)

2. It is recommended that the play & recreation officer will have a background of training and experience in children's play and recreation. It is quite possible that the dedicated officer appointed by local authorities will not have a background in play and recreation. In that case, it is recommended that in-service training is provided to support the officer in developing the requisite knowledge and skills. Provision will need to be made for continued in-service training support.
3. The dedicated play and recreation officer will require in-service training in anti-racism practises.
4. It is recommended that play and recreational programmes and facilities provided directly or indirectly by local authorities, by community groups or by national voluntary agencies are staffed by personnel with an appropriate background and training in playwork and children's recreation.
5. It is recommended that the role of parents in meeting the play and recreational needs of their children be supported by appropriate training and awareness raising initiatives.
6. It is recommended that a conference addressing the development of play and recreation services for children and youth is organised for County and City Managers, relevant staff and other key players.

6.2.6 Research

Priority areas requiring research are:

1. National survey of existing play and recreation provision and needs analysis.
2. Identification of pilot projects in a range of situation
3. Playwork and recreational training needs analysis
4. Development of planning guidelines providing for children and youth
5. Barriers to the development of facilities for play and recreation; in particular the availability of insurance cover and vandalism
6. Barriers to the equitable access and participation in play and recreation including those experienced by children living in disadvantage, on halting sites, in rural isolation or from being members of a minority ethnic community.
7. It is recommended that a training needs analysis of the requirements for formal and informal training in playwork and recreation for children and young people be undertaken.

6.2.7 Standards

1. All play and recreation facilities are to be constructed and maintained to the appropriate Irish / European standard.
2. It is recommended that research be undertaken into our current provision and that targets and quality standards be set for the ongoing development and evaluation of play and recreational facilities and services over a fixed time period.

APPENDIX 1.

STRUCTURE FOR A LOCAL AUTHORITY PLAY POLICY

- Vision Statement
- Play Values - right to play, SPICE, NCS
- Existing Services and Provision
 - Responsibilities, aims and objectives, how they are provided
- Service Delivery
 - Types of play settings: open space hierarchy, child-friendly town/city, supervised play areas, holiday play schemes
- Statements of Intent
 - Quality standards
 - Accessibility: disabled, special needs, minority ethnic communities, disadvantaged, isolated
 - 'Best Play' indicators
 - Consultation: community, parents, children
 - Training
 - Range of play opportunities
 - Partnership - statutory, voluntary sectors
 - Environmental play
 - Fixed equipment playgrounds - Standards, design, installation, age segregation, maintenance schedules, records, procedures, staff responsibilities, independent annual inspection

(Ref. Based on Belfast City Council Play Policy)