

Play After Lockdown

A Play England Briefing



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Introduction

One of the most toxic effects to come out of the current pandemic is the destructive impact it has had on children's play; the spaces they play in, the degree of freedom they experience and their ability to choose what they do and how they do it. Instead, children have been imprisoned in the home, often in the same space as tired and pressured parents. The potential increase in poor mental and physical health from this mix, not to mention its likely developmental consequences is obvious.

This short document is intended to provide a framework making it possible to address the issues arising from the impact on play of corona virus and help those who will be dealing with the fall-out when the virus has abated and as parents begin to take their children to different play and child-care facilities again.

As it has with everything else, the arrival of corona virus has changed how we view play and the conditions we may have to adopt to provide for it in the future. Our initial reaction to it has been to apply measures to protect children using the mechanism of lockdown. In Spain children were totally incarcerated for six weeks.

However, because the virus will be active for some time to come, without access to a vaccine, our response may have to consider other factors for example social distancing, surgical face masks, prohibited playtypes, barring some children, zoning the play space and other measures, which would have been viewed not only as abhorrent but counter-productive only a few weeks ago.

Good physical and mental health, vital outcomes of the play process, depend upon the provision of appropriate physical and social environments capable of meeting the deep-seated biological needs of children as well as those of fun, creativity and freedom of action, all essential to the developing individual; the evidence being that psychopathology can result when these needs are frustrated or unmet.

We might conclude that any frustration of deeper developmental needs caused by the fear and powerlessness experienced as a consequence of the insidious nature of the virus, would result in manifestations of gross and unmistakable psychopathology. Only playing in authentic and happy surroundings can counter this.

Accompanying the earlier and less punitive restrictions was an outcry of concern for the impact they might have if children were unable to play authentically. Perhaps we should re-consider why there was such concern?

The framework is intended to help, by offering simple guidelines for our work, which should make provision possible whilst at the same time, not suffocating the very processes it is intended to help.

We all know that play is an important ingredient of children's lives. And although some of us are more craft orientated, or more sporty, or arty, even risky, we sometimes forget that when we played, normally there were no adults close by. We made it up ourselves, survived the scrapes ourselves, made our own rules and to this day still remember what we did, where and with whom. Now as adults we know that that is because play is an integral component of our biology. We need to play, it is a drive, to play was and still is an essential in every single child's life. And playing gives us not only the wherewithall to navigate the world as we see it as children, it gives each one of us a unique foundation for life. To use a gardening analogy, that foundation not only includes the whole range of tools we may need to help us flourish, plant, prune and plan, it includes the garden shed for storage and the garden or allotment to try new ideas and processes out.

Every child is able to use those tools and processes to navigate the world as they see it, our job is to make sure that they can, but not to tell them how.

Bob Hughes



Play And Wellbeing

The impact of staying at home has had a severe effect on the physical and mental health and wellbeing of children, young people and people of all ages. People of all ages are feeling lonely, missing friends and social interactions. Some children and families have been stuck in overcrowded accommodation with no outdoor space, particularly in the most disadvantaged areas.

This is especially hard for children who do not have control over how and when to meet other children. Lack of play is linked to mental health problems too, with isolation increasing depression for some children.

Play and being outdoors with friends is vital for child and family wellbeing. Playwork is an effective methodology for working with children, based on supporting and responding to children and young people's need for freedom and control in their play.

Play has great therapeutic value for children enabling them to work through trauma, form friendships, explore identity, develop physical and cognitive skills, creativity and resilience, in their own way and at their own pace. Play is important to help children adapt to the changes caused by Coronavirus and lockdown and dealing with transition and returning to school as lockdown eases.

Playwork methodologies can be used by everyone who works with children at play including teachers, social workers, medical practitioners, parks officers, youth workers, early years practitioners and parents.

HOW CAN WE TAKE A PLAYWORK APPROACH?

A playwork approach can be defined as one where children and their play needs are put at the heart of your vision, at the centre of the process. As we adapt to changes taking place around us, ensuring that children have good opportunities to play will be essential.

The Playwork Principles, the professional and ethical framework for Playwork, provide a useful guide for everyone who works with children at play. Being flexible and responsive to children's play needs

is a key playwork skill that will be drawn on. Advocating for free play and finding an intervention style that supports children's play will also be important.

Can you visualise your play area set up, giving children more space, being able to access loose parts when everything will need to be 2 metres apart? How can you plan this playfully and safely? How will you manage numbers of children on site, limit times, book groups of lower numbers and create physical distance and social bubbles?

HOW CAN WE ALLOW CHILDREN TO PLAY WITH THEIR PEERS FREELY?

Think about how children can have as much freedom and control in their play as possible. Allow them to play in their own way including activities like climbing, balancing, hopping, skipping, jumping and running.

Aim to keep adult interventions to a minimum. Be aware of what is going on by listening and observing while children playing and be prepared to step in only if needed, for example in response to a cue from a child.

Try to avoid shouting and stopping children from playing. If a child is doing something that they shouldn't, try diverting them or helping them to adapt the activity so that they can still enjoy themselves but without putting themselves or others at risk of serious harm. Encourage children to come up with their own solutions to help look after themselves and others.

HOW CAN WE IMPROVE OUR PLAY SPACE?

For inspiration, think back to the things that you enjoyed doing when you were playing as a child and try to encourage and support children to be able to enjoy similar experiences. There are lots of great ideas on the internet for outdoor and nature play as well as indoor play with arts and crafts materials.

Observe how children are playing in your existing play space. Is play happening naturally in your environment or do you need to do more to support it? What would you add to your outdoor environment to prompt playful active games? Do you work with children of different ages and physical abilities, if so, how do you ensure they are included?

Children love to be able to manipulate and adapt the environment for themselves, eg moving things around and adapting their use. Introducing a range of items that can be washed down and disinfected in between use, will greatly increase the range of play that children can enjoy. Anything that rolls or has wheels will work well in a school playground or a street, including balls, skittles, tubes, roller skates, skateboards, scooters or bicycles.

Look out for children playing in your local area. What are they doing? Are there ideas that you can introduce to your play space?

Children love playing with water, particularly in the summer months, so consider whether water play can be safely introduced. This could be something as simple as allowing children to collect and play with water in plastic cups from a hose pipe or water fountain. Encourage children and parents to bring appropriate clothing, eg wellies, outdoor clothes, towels or overalls so that children can experience outdoor play in all weathers or messy play indoors.

HOW CAN WE LISTEN TO AND LEARN FROM CHILDREN?

Transition to a "new normal" will take time and children need to be actively included in the process of change. Listening to children's opinions and feelings is crucial. If a child tells you they've been lonely and or feel worried, how will you respond and what can you learn that will help you support their emotional well-being?

Whether you are asked direct questions that maybe easy to answer or hearing potentially traumatic experiences you will need to really listen. If necessary, you will need to re-assure, respond and in some cases – if you are concerned about Safeguarding – report.

Reflective practice is an essential tool used by playworkers and children's professionals to enable continuous learning, improving awareness of children's engagement with the play environment and with each other. It is helpful to set aside time at the end of each day for the staff team to reflect on children's play and write up thoughts and interactions and use them to increase your understanding of what works and what hasn't worked?

HOW CAN WE INVOLVE CHILDREN AND ENCOURAGE THEIR PARTICIPATION?

Participation should be an active and ongoing process involving children in decision making from day to day activities to wider decisions about how the project is run. Children's participation increases ownership of their play spaces and the ability to feel in control as far as is reasonably practicable.

Children are more competent than adults give them credit for! Taking a participatory approach, as opposed to a more one-off style consultation about specific choices creates a culture of participation and develops confidence and competence. Do children have a meaningful role in your setting are activities initiated by children supported by playworkers? Do children who attend the project have some control over the resource budget allocated to it?

When undertaking new and challenging tasks children's creative ideas and participation are essential. New boundaries, including physical distancing, social bubbles, better hygiene and hand washing as well as appropriate behaviour, work better for all when discussed, negotiated and agreed with children. Children need to know their participation is real so how will you act on and support their ideas?

HOW CAN WE SUPPORT CHILDREN'S CHOICE AND AGENCY?

The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child sets out rights for all children. Article 31 states children have the right to play, article 12 gives children the right to express their views and have them taken seriously and article 15 is about the right to freedom of association, IE children meeting others and joining groups. How do you take children's views seriously and enable children to make choices, within agreed safety boundaries?

Countries around the world going into lockdown have seen children housebound, not able to exercise their rights to association and to play. Children of all ages say one of the freedoms they have missed is seeing friends. Play times can provide child friendly places for children to play, to meet old and new friends, test boundaries and take risks not just physical but emotional too.

What plans do you have for staff to support children's choices? Are there policies and processes you need to adopt to give children more choice and control? Do you have robust systems, IE risk benefit assessments, in place to support children safely?



Health And Safety And Play

How best to manage risk has always been a prime consideration in planning for play. Professionals have to strike a balance between children and young people's need for fun, excitement and challenge, with the need to keep them safe from unacceptable risk of harm.

Striking that balance has never been more challenging. Fortunately, Risk Benefit Assessment, developed by playworkers in conjunction with government and the Health & Safety Executive provides a tool that can help children to get outdoors again and enjoying the benefits of play.

An element of risk taking in children's play is beneficial. Risk helps the development of physical skills such as walking, cycling, climbing, swimming, learning to fall safely, balance, life skills, social skills, experiencing failure and learning to recover, resilience, health, fitness, exhilaration and fun, self-esteem, self-awareness and ability to make judgements and to deal with risk and challenge.

Small accidents and upsets – trips, slips, falls, grazes, arguments, tears and disputes – are all part of the experience of growing up. Learning to cope with setbacks and manage emotions like fear, anger and a degree of distress are essential life skills.

Play providers also have a duty of care to the children, young people, staff, volunteers and members of the public who use our services to take reasonable care to avoid causing harm.

ARE WE MAKING SURE THAT CHILDREN GET THE BENEFITS OF PLAY WHILST MINIMIZING THE RISKS FROM CORONAVIRUS?

With playgrounds in parks still closed, we need to think about creative ways that children can still have some fun and enjoy playing, where possible making the most of outdoor space – like parks, school playgrounds, ball courts and streets. The evidence indicates that transmission of Coronavirus is much less outdoors, so think about games, sports and activities that children can do individually, in pairs, or in small groups whilst socially distancing. For example, tennis, junior golf, running, jumping, skipping, bowling, chalking, hopscotch and many other games can be adapted for a small number of children maintaining social distancing. Try to take a playful approach based on responding to children's needs and wishes. Ask the children to come up with their own games. Have a simple supply of equipment and things to play with that can be disinfected in between use.

ARE WE SUPPORTING CHILDREN AND FAMILIES TO GET THE BENEFITS OF PLAY?

Children and families are understandably fearful about the risks of contracting Coronavirus. Encourage and support families to allow their children to play by explaining the benefits of play for children's health and wellbeing, learning and resilience. With playgrounds closed, Coronavirus and lockdown have intensified children and families' fears of being outdoors, of dirt and disease and of contact with other people. However reasonable this may be, it has to be balanced against the risks to young people's physical and mental health and well-being from being indoors and away from their friends for prolonged periods of time. Use Risk Benefit Assessment to identify the risks and benefits of play for children and take a balanced approach.

ARE WE SUPPORTING CHILDREN WHO LIVE IN SHIELDED HOUSEHOLDS?

Children with physical conditions putting them at highest risk of Coronavirus. They should not be attending play provision. Children with household members that fall into this group should also stay at home. It is important to stay in touch so that shielded families can feel included. You can use online video conferencing software, telephone and email to stay in touch with parents and – where parental permission is granted – with children and young people. Make sure that safeguarding and privacy settings for online play services are fully implemented. Consider sending playful ideas, small gifts and treats (for example, a play bag or parcel with things for children to play with), and messages of support to boost morale.

DO OUR STAFF NEED TO WEAR PPE?

PPE should only be used as a last resort. By far the most effective approach is to wash hands regularly and maintain good hygiene and implement social distancing by keeping at least 2m apart. You do not need PPE if you are doing general supervision in a school, after school club or outdoor setting. PPE has to be used correctly and can cause problems if it is isn't (for example, if people take it on and off, touch their face or touch multiple surfaces with gloves). You may use it when close contact is needed e.g. when doing first aid.

CAN WE REOPEN OUR ADVENTURE PLAYGROUND?

Adventure playgrounds will not be able to use playground equipment until government guidance allows this. However, they may use buildings and outdoor space to provide a range of other support services for children and families, including: one-to-one sessions for disabled children, safe space for vulnerable families and providing food supplies.

Government guidance states that each venue should make their own decisions about when their facilities are ready. Adventure playgrounds that are planning small group activities should familiarize themselves with government guidance and carry out a thorough risk benefit assessment. Playground equipment may need to be cordoned off. You will need to consider how to manage numbers in line with government guidance.

Adventure playgrounds may also wish to consider adapting to provide play ranger services in local parks, estates, streets, sports pitches, ball courts and public spaces. This would involve playworkers working in public spaces with small groups. They would need to ensure that government guidance on social distancing is maintained.

For adventure playgrounds that remain closed this is an ideal time to work on planning, policies and procedures and implementation of the Play England guidance, Quality in Play.

ARE WE MEETING REGULATORY REQUIREMENTS?

The Health and Safety at Work Act 1974 applies to activities for children. The Act does not require elimination of risk and accidents – that would not be possible. The legal requirement is to carry out a suitable and sufficient assessment of the risks associated with a site or activity and to act accordingly. For children's activities, the process recommended by the Health and Safety Executive is to carry out a Risk Benefit Assessment ([link to Managing Risk in Play Provision](#)).

Professionals also need to make sure that there are sufficient staff with first aid qualifications and food hygiene certificates and that procedures are in place for lone working, lifting and handling and working at height.

ARE WE CARRYING OUT ADEQUATE RISK BENEFIT ASSESSMENTS?

Create a supportive culture for employees to work together to find solutions to health and safety concerns that enable children to get the maximum benefit from playing. Rather than automatically stopping risky activities, consider whether there is a way to adapt the activity so that children can still enjoy the fun aspects.

Risk benefit assessments will have to be reviewed in view of Coronavirus guidance and new procedures put in place. A written risk benefit assessment should be carried out for all areas where children play including (but not limited to) playgrounds and playground equipment taking the virus into account. Written assessments should also be carried out for planned activities that include a significant element of risk (eg use of tools, high temperatures, significant fall heights). A risk benefit assessment should consider the benefits of the activity, alongside the risks. It is also worth training staff in dynamic risk benefit assessment. Children are creative in their play and not all play can be planned for. Staff can manage this through dynamic risk benefit assessment – using their knowledge and professional judgement to respond appropriately to unplanned activities.

HOW ARE WE IMPLEMENTING OUR DUTY OF CARE?

Professionals working with children have a duty of care to the children they are working with. Consider what would a reasonable parent do? Duty of care affects the decisions that you make about staff ratios and supervision requirements. Implementation of Coronavirus guidance is likely to require a review of staff ratios – as you will need more staff to supervise a smaller number of children than usual. Your Risk Benefit Assessment should also highlight other key areas that need supervision including gates and entrances, which should be supervised or secured at all times and toilets that also require supervision.

HOW CAN WE PREPARE PLAYGROUNDS FOR REOPENING?

All play providers should have an inspection regime in place. This includes the arrangements and recording of daily, monthly and annual checking of play facilities for soundness, wear and tear, damage, maintenance and cleanliness. Playground equipment should be inspected annually by a qualified inspector and all recommendations implemented in good time. Wooden structures should be checked quarterly for rot by an experienced inspector. Checks should be carried out daily (or more frequently) for cleanliness, litter, hazards and sharps – and action taken to resolve.

HOW CAN WE PREPARE FOR INDOOR PLAY?

For indoor play, arrangements need to be made to help children maintain social distancing and minimize the risk of infection. This might include having one-way systems in and out of buildings, maintaining good ventilation, arranging for each child to have their own arts and crafts materials and toys.

A fire risk assessment should be carried out and tested regularly. Other routine testing to be carried out includes PAT testing of electrical equipment, checks and servicing of fire equipment and gas boilers, water safety (Legionella), especially when buildings have not been used for any length of time. Use of hazardous materials and equipment should be safely supervised and stored away from children.

ARE WE COMMUNICATING OUR POLICY?

Employers have responsibility for health and safety as employers. They may also have health and safety responsibilities for premises. All employees also have a responsibility to keep themselves and others as safe as practicable.

Having a Health & Safety Policy and publicly available information (eg on your website or literature for parents) that sets out the benefits as well as the risks of play activities can help communicate your approach to children, parents and staff.



Leadership And Management

The emergence of Covid 19 has caused an unprecedented global disruption to children's lives. The impact has been enormous for all and this includes your staff and all your users and stakeholders. The feeling of powerlessness and fear experienced when decisions are made that are externally imposed reflects many children's experience much of the time!

WHAT ARE OUR AIMS AND VISION?

The key to leadership and management is clarity and commitment to your vision. Think about the type of experience you want to offer children. Your aims may be educational attainment, socialisation or therapy but for your organisation to avoid mission drift and to support your staff, clarity of objectives is fundamental. Your aims may be influenced by funders, the environment or parental pressure but if you place the playing child at the heart of your vision you will be able to lead an authentic organisation. In all discussions be honest!

WHAT ABOUT LAWS AND REGULATIONS?

Make sure you can meet the requirements of the law and regulation relevant to play provision in your area. This may range from Ofsted to health and safety executive guidance. If there are other non-statutory pressures, for example from your funders, then keeping up to date with developments and good practice can support you in discussing how to comply with these additional requirements. Clear accountability and hierarchy are crucial. Depending on your legal structure the framework for this will differ. Always make sure that feedback about the children's experience is considered at every level including the strategic.

HOW DO WE ENGAGE AND GET FEEDBACK?

Consultation and feedback are vital for a well-planned service and meaningful communication with those we are managing is important so engage your staff, the parents, and the children as you plan your service. Ensure that people with experience or at least a keen interest, in children's play are part of the decision making process for your organisation – if this is out of your control then make sure you lobby, feedback on and advocate for children's play at every opportunity to ensure that effective, ethical decisions are made for children at every level.

DO WE HAVE TIME FOR REFLECTION AND THE ABILITY TO REFOCUS RESOURCES?

Being responsive and interactive is key when working with children. Children will be affected by their own environments and experiences and will need different levels of interaction or intervention from you at different times. Reflection is the tool that underpins the thinking of adults working with children and should be given the time and support it needs. Resources must be flexible and adaptable and should be managed in line with needs including workforce development, recruitment and good practice.



People

HOW DO WE CHOOSE OUR PEOPLE?

Some people love to be around children, enjoy the constant changing nature of the work and have patience with and interest in the children as individuals. These are the kind of people we need! All of us have been affected by the recent pandemic. It has made us think a lot about mental health, both our own and others. It seems more important than ever now that we have the right people on our teams, so job advertising should be open, job descriptions should be clear and comprehensive, and the recruitment processes should help to select staff wisely.

HOW DO WE SUPPORT OUR PEOPLE?

Even when we have our team there will always be room for improvement. We all continue to learn from each other and from our experiences together. Every individual staff member or volunteer has the potential to support each organisation and its aims. People thrive in situations where they experience autonomy, respect, and recognition. All organisations should think about how these factors can be introduced into their people management.

Regular supervision and appraisals for example are just two of the ways we can listen and respond to the needs of the workforce. Remember people need a good work/life balance to be at the top of their game.

ARE THE POLICIES AND PROCEDURES CLEAR AND EASY TO UNDERSTAND?

Human Resources are very important and ensures that processes are clear for staff and for others involved in our provision. Job Descriptions should be practical, covering the skills needed; contracts need to be timely and filed correctly and personnel files must be held securely. Policies should be clearly written and easy to understand and follow so that their expectations are clear. Senior staff should recognise that they are modelling the approach of the organisation and always seek to respond fairly and thoughtfully to all issues.

HOW DO WE IMPROVE PRACTICE?

Regular meetings and debriefs are the best way to ensure good communication and to support the self-reflection that is vital for high quality play-based provision. Staff and volunteers are the main resource we have and they need the space and time to think about what works and what they would like to achieve with the children. Good provision will always continue to improve if experimentation and freedom are encouraged. Keeping journals and diaries are also useful tools and will help to support the reflection of individual staff and develop the observational skills that are so important when creating responsive ways of working with children.

WHAT OPPORTUNITIES DO WE CREATE FOR OUR PEOPLE?

Needless to say, appropriate training is extremely important for anyone working with children. Some training is mandatory, focussing learning on how to respond in difficult situations e.g. first aid. Some is intended to support the work with children, i.e. creating a play-centred space with the necessary

ambiance i.e. a playwork approach and finally, some training intended to widen the knowledge and expertise of your team whether as individuals or as a group should also be on offer. Giving staff the space to create their own learning development plan will help them to feel more in control, engaged and thoughtful about the future. Remember, an engaged, empowered workforce will deliver the best provision for children.

Further Reading

The Playwork Principles, Playwork Principles Scrutiny Group, 2004, <http://www.playengland.org.uk/playwork-2/playwork-principles/>

Design for Play: a guide to creating successful play spaces, Play England, 2008 <https://www.playengland.org.uk/resource/design-for-play/>

Managing Risk in Play Provision, Play Safety Forum, 2013, <http://www.playengland.org.uk/resource/managing-risk-in-play-provision-implementation-guide/>

Best Play: what play provision should do for children, National Playing Fields Association, PLAYLINK, Children's Play Council, 2000, <http://www.playengland.org.uk/resource/best-play/>

Quality in Play, the national quality assurance framework for play provision, <http://www.playengland.org.uk/resources-list/quality-in-play/>

Play builds Children, Children's Play Policy Forum, 2019, <https://childrensplaypolicyforum.wordpress.com/play-builds-children/>

Coronavirus: what happens next? Sport England, 2020, <https://www.sportengland.org/how-we-can-help/coronavirus/coronavirus-what-happens-next>

Prioritise play when schools reopen, say mental health experts, The Guardian, 2020 <https://www.theguardian.com/education/2020/may/07/prioritise-play-when-schools-reopen-say-mental-health-experts-coronavirus-lockdown>

Covid-19 and children: what does the science tell us, and what does this mean as the lockdown is eased? Rethinking Childhood, 2020, <https://rethinkingchildhood.com/2020/05/14/covid-19-children-science-lockdown-schools-childcare-outdoor-play/>

The govt guidance, <https://www.gov.uk/coronavirus/education-and-childcare>

Statement on Play from Play First, <https://www.theguardian.com/education/2020/may/07/prioritise-play-when-schools-reopen-say-mental-health-experts-coronavirus-lockdown>

Play types, <https://www.playscotland.org/resources/play-types-poster/>

USEFUL WEBSITES

Play England, www.playengland.org.uk

PlayBoard Northern Ireland, www.playboard.org

Play Scotland, www.playscotland.org

Play Wales, www.playwales.org.uk

Children's Play Policy Forum, <https://childrensplaypolicyforum.wordpress.com>

Play Safety Forum, <https://playsafetyforum.wordpress.com/>

Playing Out, <https://playingout.net/>

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