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The Child's Right to Play

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USA



*American Association for
the Child's Right to Play*

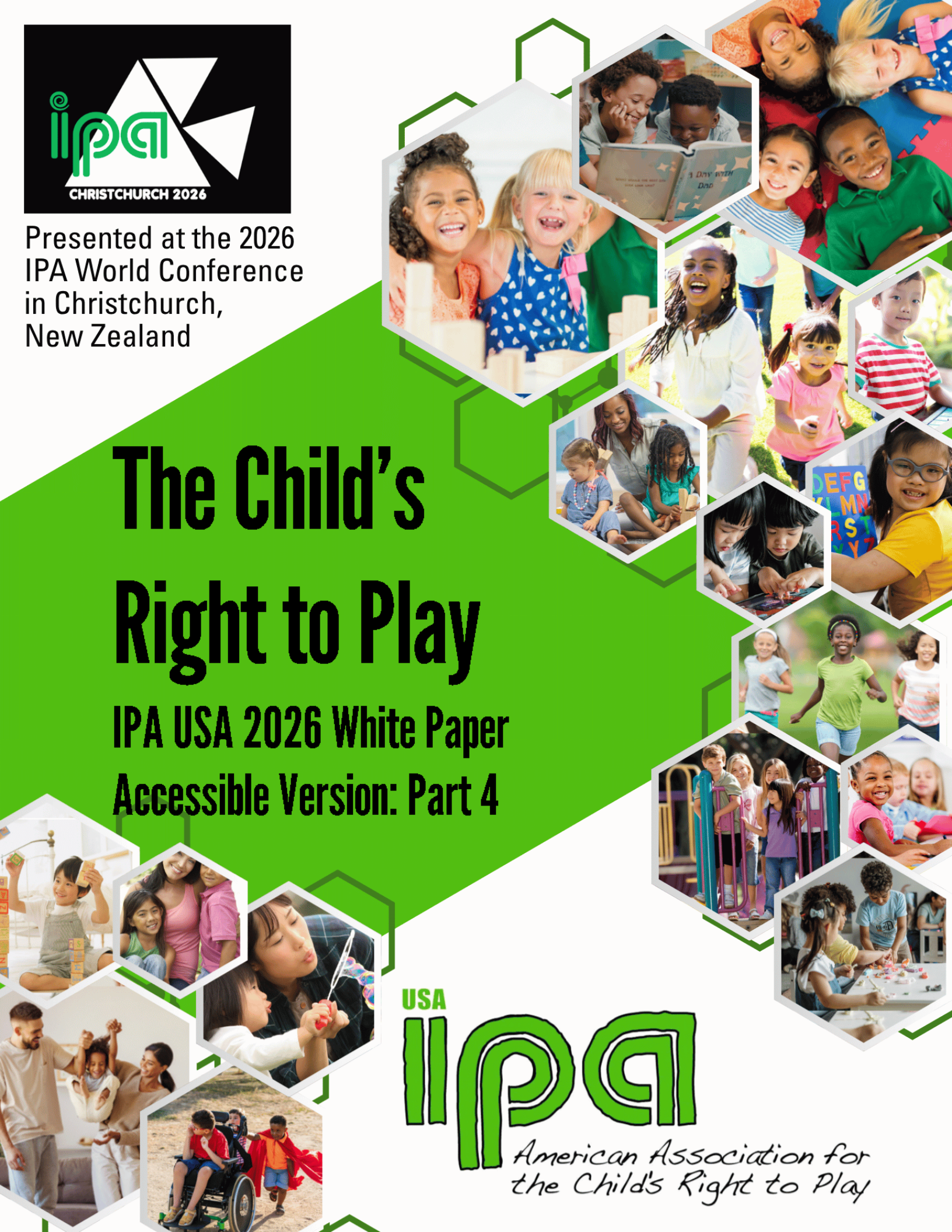


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Executive Summaries

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Leading for Play

Children need more than opportunities to play. They need adults willing to protect, champion, and advocate for play in schools, communities, and public policy. This category of articles explores how educators, families, researchers, administrators, and community leaders are working to create the conditions necessary for play to flourish. From rethinking school readiness and early intervention to strengthening relationships, promoting justice and equity, and restoring time and space for play, these authors challenge long-held assumptions about learning and development. Together, they demonstrate that meaningful systems change is possible when children's rights, needs, and voices are placed at the center of decision-making. The authors provide research, advocacy tools, and practical strategies to help readers lead the movement to protect childhood and advance every child's right to play.

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Press Play: A Story of Play, Inquiry, and Systems Change

Kim Adams, MA, Leadership, Play Advocate and Consultant

Introduction

The Gap Between Play Policy and Classroom Practice

In recent years, California has introduced a program called Transitional Kindergarten (TK), designed to provide every four-year-old child in the state with a "high-quality, play-based learning experience" the year before kindergarten (Saucedo, 2025). TK is intended to align with the California Preschool and Transitional Kindergarten Learning Foundations (PTKLF; California Department of Education, 2025a), emphasizing a developmental approach in which play is integral to the curriculum. The rollout of TK has been problematic due to inconsistent quality.

Expanding a program for four-year-olds into elementary school settings posed curriculum-development and facilities-related challenges (PPIC, 2025). Rapid program expansion meant teacher requirements could be waived. In a survey conducted by the [California Department of Education](#) and analyzed by the [Learning Policy Institute](#), only 52% of TK teachers statewide in 2023–24 had 24 units of early childhood education or child development (Watanabe, 2025). Despite California policy and guidance clearly positioning TK as developmentally appropriate, many TK classrooms look and feel like kindergarten classrooms, with developmentally inappropriate content, adherence to misaligned standards, and the use of report cards.

Though the California Department of Education uses the term Developmentally Appropriate Practice, a growing body of early childhood experts are leaning towards terms such as developmentally focused or developmentally effective. The rationale behind this change in terminology is to place greater focus on child development than on the term "appropriate" (Lawrence, 2026).

Conclusion: The Work Continues

The iterative process of change toward embracing play is ongoing. For it to be sustainable, it must continue to evolve. Entering the 2026–27 school year, FUSD has decided to continue its work by providing more professional learning for principals to

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deepen their understanding of developmentally focused practice in early learning and to provide access to and training on observation tools. This next phase of the work coincides with California's growing emphasis on Preschool through Third Grade (P–3) alignment. As districts across the state work to create more coherent early learning experiences for children, questions about developmentally focused practice become increasingly important beyond TK. The conversations that began in TK about play, observation, assessment, relationships, and child development are now expanding into Kindergarten and the early elementary grades. As part of this next phase of the work, I have been invited to begin a similar process with Kindergarten teachers during the 2026–27 school year, exploring how play and developmentally focused practice are imperative for all children.

In many ways, the district's journey began when it decided to "press play." Even before the first workshop, district leaders were asking questions about developmentally focused practice and how to best support four-year-olds. The workshop helped turn curiosity into action within a system that was ready for change. What began as a single professional learning event evolved into a process of collective inquiry, shared leadership, and systems change. In the children's book *The End Is Just the Beginning* (Bender, 2021), readers are reminded that endings often mark the start of something new. That idea captures the cyclical nature of both play and change. Each shift answered some questions and revealed new ones. While tools and structures will evolve, the commitment remains the same: supporting teachers in creating developmentally focused learning environments where children can learn and grow through play.

Play IS Readiness: Rethinking What Prepares Children for Kindergarten

Jennifer L. Berube, PhD

Introduction

In a preschool classroom, four-year-olds Marcus and Sofia have transformed the dramatic play corner into a veterinary clinic. Marcus, wearing a too-large white button-down, holds a toy stethoscope to the chest of a stuffed dog while Sofia stands nearby with a clipboard. “This puppy is very sick,” Marcus announces. “She needs medicine.” Sofia shakes her head. “First you have to check her temperature. That is what doctors do first.” Marcus considers this, then nods and reaches for a plastic thermometer.

What are we watching here? On the surface, it looks like dramatic play, something we might dismiss as a break from “real learning.” Instead, look more closely. Marcus is holding an imaginary scenario in mind while regulating his impulses to follow the play scenario’s internal logic. When Sofia redirects him, he adjusts without arguing. Sofia is coordinating her behavior with his, monitoring the shared story they are building together. Both children are using language to negotiate meaning, taking turns, managing mild frustration, and sustaining focus on a shared goal.

These skills are not trivial. They are the very capacities that decades of research have identified as the strongest predictors of school success: stronger than knowing letters, stronger than counting, stronger than any of the academic content we have become so anxious for young children to master (Spiegel et al., 2021; McClelland et al., 2014).

We have been asking the wrong question. We ask, “Is this child ready for school?” As if readiness is a threshold to cross. Readiness is not a state children achieve before learning begins. It is a practice. The capacities that predict school success do not sit dormant, waiting to be deployed. They exist only in their exercise. Play is where they are exercised. Play does not build readiness, as if readiness lives somewhere else. Play IS readiness, because readiness is nothing other than these capacities in action. When we remove play, we remove readiness itself.

Throughout this paper, I deliberately use the word "capacities" rather than "competencies". The words carry different assumptions. Capacity (from the Latin *capacitas*, the ability to hold or contain) emphasizes potential, something dynamic that grows and expands through use. Competency (from *competere*, to be sufficient) emphasizes demonstrated skill, something static that can be measured and checked off. Competency is the language of standards-based education and assessment frameworks. It fits a model of readiness as a threshold: children either have the competencies, or they lack them. Capacity fits a different model. Capacities are not proven once and possessed forever. They exist in their exercise. If readiness is a set of competencies, it is a checklist. If readiness is a set of capacities, it is a practice. Play is practice.

Conclusion and Recommendations

The research is unequivocal; the capacities that predict school success are the capacities children exercise in play. When we remove play from preschool and kindergarten classrooms in order to “prepare” children for academic demands, we remove the very context in which readiness lives. We have created a tragic mismatch: children who have had rich play experiences arrive at kindergarten with the very capacities that predict success, only to find classrooms that have dismantled the practices that would sustain them.

What would it mean to take a developmentally responsive kindergarten seriously? It would mean starting, not from standards, not from what first grade will demand, but from the children themselves. Who are five-year-olds? What do they need? What are they capable of, and under what conditions? A developmentally responsive kindergarten would treat these questions as foundational.

This is not a call to lower expectations. It is a call to align expectations with development, to recognize that the capacities we most want children to have are capacities they exercise in play, in relationship, in active engagement with materials and peers. They are not capacities that develop through worksheets or direct instruction in skills children are not yet ready to master.

A developmentally responsive kindergarten would be play-rich, relationship-centered, and designed around what we know about how young children learn. It would

have dramatic play corners, block areas, and time to explore. It would have teachers who deeply understand child development and see their role as supporting the whole child. It would assess children in ways that inform teaching rather than ranking and sorting. Moreover, it would trust that children who are thriving (curious, engaged, regulated, connected) are children who are ready to learn.

A developmentally responsive kindergarten would not require teachers to protect childhood against the institution. It would be the institution that protects childhood.

Reimagining Readiness: The Transformative Power of Play in Language and Literacy

Tori K. Flint, PhD & Myae Han, PhD

Introduction

Play is often described as the work of children (Paley, 2009). Yet, in many contemporary early childhood classrooms, play is treated as enrichment or a reward rather than as foundational to children’s reading readiness and broader language and literacy development (Roskos & Christie, 2011). Children’s play is not simply a “break from learning,” but a primary context in which they experiment with sounds, words, texts, and identities as readers, writers, and speakers (Vygotsky, 1978; Wohlwend, 2011). In imaginative play, children negotiate roles, invent narratives, and draw on their community and cultural funds of knowledge, creating rich opportunities for vocabulary growth, oral language practice, and reading and writing development (Flint, 2016; Souto-Manning et al., 2024).

Neuroscience perspectives further underscore why playful experiences matter for school readiness. Play helps shape neural circuits associated with flexibility, emotional regulation, and complex social communication, which are implicated in language learning and literacy development (Pellis & Pellis, 2010). When children repeatedly engage in varied forms of play, they rehearse the cognitive and social processes that undergird decoding, comprehension, and written expression (Roskos & Christie, 2011). As such, play is not an optional “add-on” to language and literacy instruction but part of the neural training ground through which young children build capacities for engaging with words, print, symbols, and meaning-making (Pellis & Pellis, 2010).

Despite this evidence, policy and curricular reforms framed around reductionist notions of school readiness have increasingly organized language and literacy as discrete skills to be mastered in advance of “real” reading, writing, and language use (Neuman et al., 2007). This paper offers an alternative vision of readiness as a holistic construct that emerges at the intersection of children’s bodies, emotions, relationships, language, and symbol systems and is cultivated through high-quality play (Ehret et al., 2023; Roskos & Christie, 2011). Reimagining readiness in this way positions play as a transformative

force that enables young children to become powerful readers, writers, and speakers, and affirms play as a fundamental right of all children.

Conclusion and Recommendations

This paper has argued that play is not peripheral to language and literacy learning but a transformative and essential context through which young children develop the cognitive, linguistic, social-emotional, and embodied capacities that support school readiness. Drawing on interdisciplinary research, the paper challenges prescriptive, technical conceptions of readiness and critiques policy-driven interpretations of the “science of reading” that privilege discrete, decontextualized skills over meaning-making, engagement, and holistic child development. Across the literature, a consistent pattern emerges: when children engage in sustained, socially rich, and materially supported play, they develop foundational language and literacy competencies—including vocabulary, narrative skill, print awareness, phonological sensitivity, and emergent writing—alongside agency, motivation, and resilient literate identities.

Despite this evidence, play has been increasingly diminished in kindergarten classrooms. Heightened academic pressures, accountability demands, and misconceptions about rigor have led to reductions in time, space, and support for play, often replacing it with extended whole-group instruction, worksheets, and scripted curricula. This erosion of play is particularly concerning given that kindergarten serves as a critical bridge between early childhood and formal schooling. The lack of play in kindergarten not only constrains children’s opportunities to integrate language, literacy, and social interaction, but also risks undermining self-regulation, engagement, and long-term learning trajectories. Bringing play back to kindergarten is therefore not a nostalgic gesture, but a research-based imperative.

Reframing readiness as a holistic and ecological construct positions play as a central instructional practice rather than an optional enrichment activity. To support this shift, several recommendations are offered. First, kindergarten classrooms should intentionally reintroduce extended, high-quality play that integrates print, writing tools, and multimodal materials. Second, professional development must equip teachers to

sustain play while explicitly linking playful activity to language and literacy goals. Third, policymakers and curriculum designers should reconsider readiness expectations and accountability systems that marginalize play. Finally, future research should continue to document how play-based literacy practices support diverse learners across cultural, linguistic, and institutional contexts.

Restoring play to kindergarten affirms children's rights as learners and meaning makers and offers a more just, ecologically grounded vision for early language and literacy education.

Kids Deserve More Than Just Change — They Deserve Justice

Mark Jackson, BS, Criminal Justice

Introduction

Policies influence nearly every part of a child's life—from where they live and go to school, to whether they have safe places to play. That's why policy reform is about more than just laws or government plans—it's about real children and real families. When a policy causes change, people often assume that's a good thing. But change doesn't always mean progress, especially when it leaves out or harms certain groups.

After Hurricane Katrina hit New Orleans, many government systems were overhauled quickly. Public housing was demolished, schools were closed or turned into charter schools, and more police were brought into communities. These changes had significant effects, but they didn't always help families—especially Black families and low-income residents. Thousands were displaced and couldn't return. Children were uprooted from their homes and schools with no clear plan to help them feel safe or rebuild their lives (Gotham, 2007).

Kids in disasters don't just lose homes—they lose routines, friendships, and safe spaces to play and process what's happened. If we don't reform the policies that caused these harms, we risk repeating the same mistakes in future crises.

Conclusion

Children are not just the future—they're the present. And their needs must guide how we build and rebuild our systems. Reform matters because justice is ongoing. Because play is power. Because children deserve more than resilience—they deserve joy.

When we reform policy to reflect that truth, we're not just improving laws. We're improving lives. And we're making space for every child to grow up in a world that makes room for their laughter, rest, questions, and play.

Time, Space, and Permission: Critical Ingredients for Integrating Play in Public Schools

Denisha Jones, PhD, JD

Introduction

Despite the mounds of research that documents how child-led free play supports self-regulation/executive functioning (Colliver et al., 2022; Barker et al., 2014); strengthens peer relationships and social competence, increases physical activity (Flanders et al., 2009; Jaggy et al., 2023; Razak et al., 2018); is associated with gains in cognitive flexibility and problem solving, richer oral language and narrative skills, and stronger social-emotional competence (Nicolopoulou et al., 2015; Pellegrini & Smith, 1998) play continues to disappear from kindergarten and is almost non-existent in first through third grade (Hofferth & Sandberg, 2001; Thompson et al., 2023). Increased pressure to improve standardized test scores and to prove that students are meeting state and national standards has had far-reaching negative impacts on early childhood education. The pushdown of academics into kindergarten resulted in less time for child-led free play. Dubbed a crisis in kindergarten (Miller & Almon, 2009), this troubling trend has prompted early childhood educators and researchers to sound the alarm. However, after the COVID-19 pandemic, claims of widespread learning loss fueled continued pressure to push academics earlier.

This article provides an overview of findings from a yearlong study involving three teachers who participated in the Hatch Partners in Play cohort in Pittsburgh, PA. Two first-grade teachers and a kindergarten teacher in a public school piloted the PlayLab program, which included dedicated time for play with high-quality, open-ended materials three to five times a week. Data collected from initial interviews, two observations, and a final focus group reveal a shift in teachers' beliefs about play and learning and in their role in supporting play, leading to increased children's access to play. This shift revealed three critical ingredients for integrating play in public school early childhood classrooms: time, space, and permission. Next, I will review barriers to play in public schools, then explore how Playlab removed them by addressing three critical ingredients.

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Conclusion

We know that play is vital for children's development and that play is learning. Nonetheless, children spend less time playing in school today, and this growing play deficit is suspected of contributing to a decline in children's mental health (Gray et al., 2023). As early childhood educators, we have a responsibility to advocate for what we know young children need. We must resist the pressure to separate play from learning and inform parents, other teachers, and administrators about the benefits of play.

Playlab is a tool for ensuring all students have access to play. It provides teachers with a structure for integrating play into the classroom. Playlab creates the time, space, and permission for teachers to observe children playing and witness the power of play. Playlab gave students time, space, and permission to demonstrate their capabilities through child-led free play. As the teachers witnessed how protected playtime facilitated students' academic learning, they shifted their beliefs about play. They advocated for more students to have access to Playlab and served as mentors to the other teachers. They also shared Playlab with the parents, inviting them to come to the school and observe their children playing and read their play stories. They reassured families that time for play was a worthwhile investment.

This study sought to understand the role of the teacher in play-led environments. What do teachers do differently when they lead with play? These teachers observed, directed, guided, and learned from play. However, most importantly, they became play advocates. As they witnessed the power of play to boost children's confidence, language skills, cooperation, and problem-solving, they embraced play as essential to academic learning. They took the time, space, and permission needed to remove the barriers to play.

Celebrating Play in Early Intervention: Every Child Deserves a Playful Journey

Lucinda Jones, Early Interventionist and Key Worker

Introduction

Every child has a right to a playful journey throughout childhood, regardless of ability, strengths, identity, or areas of growth. In Bathurst, New South Wales (NSW), Australia, a small yet impactful early intervention service uses its voice to advocate for and celebrate the unique and wonderful play of children with developmental delay, children with disability, and neurodivergent children. Bathurst Early Childhood Intervention Service (BECIS) views play not only as a child's right, but also as a source of joy, belonging, agency, connection, and participation. Joy and play are a powerful combination at the heart of its early intervention approach.

As an author who does not have a disability, careful consideration has been given to the language used throughout this paper. Language choices can influence societal attitudes and understandings of disability (People with Disability Australia, 2019). This paper adopts a disability-affirming and neuro-affirming approach informed by the social model of disability, while recognising that language preferences are individual. For the purposes of this discussion, person-first and identity-first language will be used. For children without a diagnosis but with developmental delay or concern, the term *children with developmental delay* will be used, consistent with terminology currently adopted by Australia's National Disability Insurance Scheme (National Disability Insurance Scheme, 2025).

Currently, Australia's early intervention bodies are reviewing the use of the term *intervention* (Moore et al., 2025). While best practice increasingly recognizes that the term may not be disability-affirming or neuro-affirming, consensus regarding alternative terminology is still emerging. Therefore, this paper will use the term *early intervention* throughout.

Conclusion and Recommendations

BECIS demonstrates how a human rights and strengths-based approach can place play at the center of early intervention. Through partnerships with children, families, professionals, and community, the service actively promotes every child's right to play in ways that are meaningful, joyful, and authentic. Its work illustrates how recognising and celebrating diverse forms of play can strengthen participation, belonging, agency, and wellbeing for children and families.

To strengthen children's right to play within early intervention and beyond, this paper proposes the following recommendations:

1. **Recognise play as a fundamental human right**, not solely as a therapeutic or developmental tool.
2. **Adopt disability-affirming and neuro-affirming approaches** that respect and celebrate diverse forms of play.
3. **Support families in understanding and advocating for play**, including recognising their children's unique strengths, interests, and ways of participating.
4. **Create inclusive communities and environments** where all children can access meaningful play opportunities.
5. **Embed the right to play within policy, practice, and professional education**, ensuring that children's voices, rights, and experiences remain central.

BECIS imagines a world where play is accessible, inclusive, celebrated, and naturally available to all children. It imagines communities where children can play in ways that are meaningful to them and where their play is recognised as valuable and worthy. It imagines families who proudly advocate for their children's right to play and professionals who champion play as a cornerstone of childhood.

Ultimately, every child deserves a playful journey. When children's play is recognised, protected, and celebrated, we create communities in which every child can

confidently say: *"I can play my way. My play is valued. My play is my right."* Let every child's play be celebrated. Let early intervention have a playful heart. Let children play.

Realising the Right to Play through Pedagogy: A Scottish Perspective on Systemic Change in Education "Embedding Play in National Education Systems"

Fiona Kirland, MEd, Play Scotland

Introduction

Play as a Right in Education

'Play is the highest level of child development. It is the spontaneous expression of thought and feeling, an expression which his inner life requires... It promotes enjoyment, satisfaction, serenity and constitutes the source of all that can benefit the child....At this stage play is never trivial; it is serious and deeply significant.'

(Froebel in Lilley, 1967, p. 84)

Children make sense of their world through play. It is how they explore ideas, try things out, and build relationships with the people around them. Careful observation quickly shows that play is where children's curiosity, creativity, determination and problem-solving are most clearly expressed (Bruce, 2015; Moyles, 2015). For those of us working in the play sector, this is not a sentimental claim but a practical one. Play provides a powerful route into learning, wellbeing, belonging and inclusion, particularly when adults are able to recognise the learning taking place and create conditions that support children in leading their own exploration while being thoughtfully and responsively supported (Else, 2014; Athey, 2007).

Play is also very firmly a children's rights issue. Article 31 of the *United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child* sets out the right to rest, leisure and play, and *General Comment No. 17* makes it clear that this right should be realised in children's everyday lives, including within the settings where they spend so much of their time (UN Committee on the Rights of the Child, 2013). In Scotland, the UNCRC has been incorporated into Scots law, strengthening this commitment and duties for public bodies, including schools and local authorities, in day-to-day decision-making (Scottish Government, 2024).

Despite this, many education systems, Scotland's included, struggle to deliver on play. While play is widely recognised as essential in early childhood, it is often progressively constrained as children move through primary education (in Scotland, primary education spans ages 4–12). The pressure to demonstrate evidence of progress intensifies. As they go through school, children lose time, space, and permission to engage in freely chosen, meaningful, and developmentally rich play (Brooker, 2013; Ardelean, Smith, & Russell, 2021). We know that children have a right to play, and that play is a powerful and well-evidenced way for children to learn; however, existing school structures often make this difficult to realise in practice. The gap sits in the misalignment between policy intent, accountability expectations, professional learning, the physical environment, and school culture.

This paper explores how Scotland is working to support schools in embedding play pedagogy as a whole-school approach. Play should not be an add-on, and certainly not confined to the early years, but rather essential from the first year to the last. Drawing on my role as Play Pedagogy Lead at Play Scotland, it outlines how schools are supported to build shared understanding, strengthen leadership, shape environments and practice, and evaluate impact over time. It also highlights the levers that make change more sustainable, which include shared language, credible observation, and supportive leadership. The aim is to offer practical learning for international colleagues seeking to move from strong statements about children's right to play to everyday practice that makes that right real.

Conclusion/Recommendations

1. Position play as both a rights issue and a pedagogical one.

Ensure Article 31 is visible in education policy, school improvement planning and accountability, so it is treated as a core entitlement rather than optional enrichment. Where the UNCRC is incorporated, planning for play is part of meeting public duties, not a discretionary extra.

2. Invest in professional learning.

Prioritise observation, interpretation of play, and practical ways to make learning visible. Use accessible frameworks and resources that connect theory to day-to-day practice.

3. Support whole-school approaches and thoughtful implementation.

Enable leadership teams to protect time for professional dialogue, inquiry, and gradual change. Treat play pedagogy as cultural work that requires follow-through, reflection, and review, not a one-off initiative.

4. Tune environments for equity, depth, and inclusion.

Provide sufficient time and space for sustained play, and ensure that indoor and outdoor environments include open-ended materials that children can transform, combine, and revisit. Use guidance that supports inclusive practice and practical set-up without requiring significant new spend.

5. Strengthen meaningful engagement with families and communities.

Build a shared understanding of the value of play and address anxieties about readiness, progress, and attainment through clear, practical communication and evidence of learning. Plan engagement deliberately and reduce barriers for families who have not always found school welcoming.

The child's right to play is universal, but the conditions that support it must be intentionally created. Scotland's experience suggests that when rights, pedagogy, and practice are aligned, play pedagogy becomes a realistic and powerful way to help children thrive and to shape education that is effective, inclusive, and grounded in children's rights.

The Power of Play: Why Unstructured Time Matters in Primary School

Anne Lamont, MEdSt & Sara Scott, BEd

Introduction

The Felixstow 3 Portfolio is a group of public schools in the northeast metropolitan area of Adelaide, South Australia, comprising 12 primary schools.

[Our strategy for public education in South Australia](#) (Department for Education, 2024) was released in 2023 with the purpose of ensuring every child and young person can learn and thrive. During 2024, school leaders in the Felixstow 3 Portfolio actively engaged with the strategy, focusing on the four Areas of Impact: Equity and excellence, Effective learners, Learner agency, and Wellbeing. Through targeted conversations, we examined how children and young people experience schooling and identified opportunities to foster environments that nurture key dispositions and capabilities, specifically belonging, resilience, persistence, curiosity, creativity, self-regulation and agency.

Time2Play is a two-year initiative (2025–2026) designed to transform learner outcomes by increasing opportunities for unstructured play during the school day. Guided by the principle that all children and young people have the right to play and need to play, the project aligns with Article 31 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (United Nations, 2026). This principle is grounded in the understanding that play is a fundamental human right as well as a vital driver of healthy development and learning.

Conclusion

Through a strategic blend of student agency, educator professional development, family engagement, and robust evaluation, Time2Play is re-establishing play as a cornerstone of student growth, embedding it as an essential practice for long-term wellbeing and learning outcomes. Within the Felixstow 3 Portfolio, the project has provided a practical way to bring South Australia's education strategy to life by creating environments in which children develop essential dispositions such as resilience, curiosity, collaboration, creativity, and self-regulation.

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Early findings highlight clear benefits, including: students are calmer and more focused after play, more able to resolve conflict, more imaginative, and more connected to peers. Families report similar gains at home, and educators have grown in confidence to step back, facilitate rather than direct, and balance risk with opportunity.

As the initiative expands, Time2Play will continue to build a culture that values children's right to play and recognises it as foundational rather than optional. The project provides a scalable, research-informed model for schools seeking to enhance wellbeing and learning by giving children what they need most—time, space, and trust to play.

Ready or Not, Here I Come: Redefining Kindergarten Readiness to Meet Children Where They Are Upon Arrival

Kyler P. Leiter, PhD, Equity, Inclusion, and Trauma-Informed Committee Chair

Introduction

What does it mean to be ready for kindergarten? The definition of kindergarten readiness has changed substantially in our lifetime. In the past, kindergartens were mainly play-based and served as a bridge between home and elementary schools. Today, many kindergartens resemble first- and second-grade classrooms of the past, emphasizing academic skills and structured, teacher-led instruction. As a result, play has been reduced or removed completely, and children are often expected to arrive at kindergarten with established academic knowledge. In this paper, I argue that we must reorient our approach to kindergarten curricula. Instead of focusing solely on academics, we should also prioritize social and emotional development through playful means. In doing so, we can create early childhood education (ECE) programs that are developmentally responsive, engaging, and inclusive of all children and their backgrounds. Only then can we meet children where they are when they arrive in kindergarten.

Conclusion

The current conception of kindergarten readiness, driven by academic standards and standardized testing, has shifted ECE environments away from their foundational roots in social, emotional, and child-led play. This paradigm not only diminishes the joy and curiosity inherent in young children's development but also risks long-term harm to their social-emotional well-being, overall engagement, and equity. International models, such as those in the Nordic region, show that delaying formal academic instruction and emphasizing play and social development can produce high academic achievement without compromising children's overall well-being. These models challenge American policymakers, educators, and families to reconsider the purpose of kindergarten and prioritize developmentally responsive, inclusive, and engaging pedagogies, which will ultimately ease schools' academic expectations for children upon their arrival to kindergarten.

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Reforming ECE requires a collective effort: policy changes, professional development opportunities, and a cultural shift toward valuing whole-child development as a public responsibility (the phrase “it truly takes a village” comes to mind). Children will enter our kindergarten programs with varied experiences and knowledge. To improve kindergarten quality, we must meet children where they are upon arrival, not dictate where they should be on day one. Schools must embrace a balanced approach that recognizes the importance of social-emotional skills, cultural responsiveness, and experiential learning alongside academics. Only through such comprehensive reform can we ensure that kindergarten truly functions as a gateway to lifelong learning, well-being, and success for *all* children, no matter their background. Stakeholders must advocate for policies grounded in the considerations and recommendations stated above. By doing so, we can restore kindergarten to its rightful purpose: nurturing curious, competent, and confident learners prepared for the challenges and opportunities of the future through play.

Reimagining the Educational Ecosystem: Modeling Play, Choice, and Community Partnership for Holistic Development

Angie Nastovska, PhD, iLEAD California

Executive Summary

Education systems across the United States are confronting a convergence of challenges: declining student engagement, increased anxiety and depression among children and adolescents, widening inequities, and mounting pressure to produce measurable academic outcomes. These challenges are not isolated incidents; they are symptoms of systems that have gradually removed play from the learning process.

This White Paper presents a comprehensive, play-centered response through the iLEAD Schools educational ecosystem. Grounded in developmental science and supported by iLEAD California (iCA), the iLEAD model integrates three core pillars—Individualized Learning, Social-Emotional Learning (SEL), and Project-Based Learning (PBL)—to ensure that play functions as both a biological necessity and a rigorous academic method.

Drawing on examples from site-based schools, online, homeschool, independent study programs, trauma-informed pathways such as Empower Generations, and community partnerships with the LEAP Children’s Museum, this paper demonstrates how play can be systematically embedded across leadership, instruction, and community engagement. The paper concludes with actionable recommendations for educational leaders, policymakers, and advocates seeking to uphold the child’s right to play while strengthening academic achievement and community resilience.

Conclusion and Recommendations

The iLEAD model demonstrates that play is not a luxury but a necessity for healthy development and effective learning. When play is embedded into systems, leadership practices, and community partnerships, children thrive academically, socially, and emotionally.

Educational leaders are encouraged to model play at the systems level, expand flexible learning modalities, formalize community partnerships, and integrate Individualized Learning, SEL, and PBL as a unified framework.

By embracing these recommendations, educational systems can honor the child's right to play while preparing young people for resilient, connected, and purposeful lives.

Strengthening Child, Teacher, and Parent Relationships Through Play

Chris Navarro, MA, Director of School & Community Programs; Richard A. Kissel, PhD, Chief Program Officer; & Tivy Whitlock, PhD, Community Programs Educator

The DoSeum

Introduction

It takes a village to raise a child. This African proverb is deeply relatable, as evidenced by its widespread use (Goldberg, 2016). The persistence of this sentiment suggests that, throughout time, humanity has acknowledged that every adult in a child's life should work *together* to nurture, grow, and teach our children. In this spirit, The DoSeum uses the term caregiver rather than “parent” to acknowledge the variety of families in our “villages” today. Children benefit when caregivers and teachers cooperate. Further, caregivers and teachers benefit from external support provided by community partners in third spaces – spaces outside of home and occupation (school or work). Places like children's museums can serve as safe, public spaces for educators and families to interact without the pressures inherent to the strict formal roles of “student” or “teacher”. Informal educators can facilitate authentic, joyful learning activities – rooted in play – to empower friendly interactions and enrich relationships between caregivers and teachers, benefiting their children. This is one of the essential values of museums – allowing students, teachers, and caregiver chaperones to enjoy field trips. But beyond the limited engagement of field trips, how can museums foster deeper, more impactful connections? The DoSeum's *Strengthening School & Family Relationships* (SSFR) program fosters community learning through play – inviting families, teachers, and school administrators to celebrate and support one another in a third space.

Conclusion/ Recommendations

With the average American spending less than five percent of their life in the classroom (Falk & Dierking, 2010), museums and other third spaces can and should embrace both their opportunity and responsibility for strengthening young learners' education. While many museums offer a standard program portfolio of daily workshops or demonstrations, one-and-done field trips, and camps, for example, The DoSeum's commitment to its community has expanded and evolved to think beyond the standard.

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SSFR is one program that resulted from this approach, and it has demonstrated that embedded partnerships yield the most impactful and most rewarding results.

While many teacher professional development programs within the museum industry emphasize one-day sessions, which can yield a high number of participants, The DoSeum's approach is one of quality over quantity, presenting deeper and more meaningful experiences for teachers that, in many cases, lead to actual change in the classroom via a true partnership between museum staff and our partner schools.

Though the SSFR program has been continually adapted, one element remains consistent: play. Play is essential to the DoSeum experience and has provided a stable foundation for SSFR's goals. Keeping play at the center of SSFR family nights connects families and their educators, transforming their communities into centers of joyful learning.

Ready for Me: A DEY Campaign to Change the Narrative About Going to Kindergarten

Michele Hemenway Pullen, university degrees in **Psychology and Counseling**, as well as **Learning and Behavior Disorders. Specialized Pedagogy:** background training in **Waldorf Education** and **Early Childhood Education**; Denisha Jones, PhD, JD; Hans Petersen, MSE; and Sierra Roussos, MAE

Introduction

In 2023, Defending the Early Years (DEY) launched regional Working Groups (WGs) to support early childhood advocates in working together to address issues related to our national campaign and to restore the link between high-quality and child development (Defending the Early Years, n.d.). We began with six regional groups, each with two co-facilitators, and 6-25 members recruited from our networks. Potential working group co-facilitators completed an online application and participated in a virtual informational interview. Once we determined that they met the criteria for successfully leading a working group (experience leading adults, understanding of local issues, etc.), they signed an agreement and began recruiting members.

Our Kentucky Working Group (KWG), co-facilitated by co-authors Michele and Hans, held regular meetings with an active group of 12-16 members. At one of our quarterly meetings for all the co-facilitators, they shared their art campaign titled Ready for Me, which engaged children, teachers, and parents in sharing what schools needed to be ready for children. Using funds from a DEY mini grant, they hosted sessions throughout the community and facilitated participants in creating art in response to prompts about schools being ready for children. In 2025, we presented their work at the Network for Public Education conference in Columbus, Ohio, and, at the request of another WG co-facilitator, we agreed to make Ready for Me a national campaign for DEY.

Conclusion

Taking Ready for Me National

The KY WG, Ready for Me, recognizes the essential role that children's and early childhood professionals' voices must play in identifying what schools need to be

genuinely ready for incoming kindergarteners. The power of art as advocacy offers one effective way to bring those voices into the public sphere. Lily Yeh's work in art activism demonstrates how creative expression, particularly when created by those who are often unheard, can elevate lived experiences and shift public narratives in meaningful ways.

As the KY WG developed the Ready for Me model, the work of other DEY Regional Working Groups stalled for various reasons. During this period, one co-facilitator expressed interest in adapting and implementing the KY WG's Ready for Me model within their own region. From this conversation, the idea of a National DEY Ready for Me Advocacy Campaign emerged.

The potential of this project to empower young children, early childhood educators, and advocates across the country, while serving as a vehicle to bring their voices to the forefront of the kindergarten readiness conversation, is significant and compelling—this potential alone warrants action.

In collaboration with the remaining co-facilitators, DEY had hoped to launch a national campaign. It began to develop accessible, adaptable resources that early childhood educators and advocates could use across diverse contexts. Due to DEY's closure on June 30, 2026, Michele from the KY WG reached out to the International Play Association USA affiliate to discuss transferring the Ready for Me initiative. In early June 2026, the Governing Board of IPA USA adopted Ready for Me. All participating cohorts from the DEY original "Ready for Me" campaign will now join this effort. We will be able to build on our work from DEY and the considerable local and international reach of IPA USA, a not-for-profit organization.

The goal remains to create a comprehensive toolkit that includes informational materials, implementation guidelines, and advocacy support, in a format that is clear, inclusive, and usable, with additional guidance and support as needed. By doing so, Ready for Me aims to support locally grounded advocacy efforts while advancing a shared national narrative: schools must be ready for children, not the other way around. Ready for Me was born, nurtured, and experienced its own period of early childhood in the loving embrace of Defending the Early Years. We are ready to join the world of

liberation and play now outside that safe, warm place and will hope to honor it through our continued thread, the not-so-invisible one that joins us all.

Play as a Biological Necessity The Importance of Attractive and Playable Outdoor Play Spaces for the Healthy Development of All Children

Suzanne Quinn, PhD, KOMPAN Play Institute

Introduction

Play, as an activity, is important across the lifespan, but especially for children and youth. Play is a biological necessity, a byproduct of enabling conditions, and should be present in healthy, unstressed children and adults (Burghardt, 2010b).

In the U.S. and many places worldwide, dedicated outdoor play spaces for children (playgrounds, play parks, playscapes) provide the conditions and environments in which children can play. These playgrounds, play parks, or playscapes support physical fitness, social connection and development, cognitive and creative enrichment, and experiences in nature. In this article, I will explain why active outdoor play matters, especially for children, and share recommendations from the Physical Activity Alliance, the American Academy of Pediatrics, and others. I will also present research on the importance of active outdoor play; what attracts children to dedicated outdoor play spaces; the importance of considering children of all abilities; how this information supports advocacy for dedicated outdoor play spaces in communities; and how to design these spaces effectively.

Conclusion/ Recommendations

Active outdoor play has benefits for children in all areas of their development – physical, social, cognitive, creative, and in their connection to local ecologies. Children need nourishing experiences that are accessible to them and their families. Communities benefit from dedicated play spaces for people's health and well-being.

Research indicates that to be effective and attract people to stay and play, these spaces should be innovative, featuring enjoyable, unique equipment and natural elements. Apply Universal Design Principles to the design of dedicated outdoor play spaces so people of all abilities can enjoy the health and social benefits.

Unstructured Outdoor Play is Essential for Sport Readiness

Deborah J Rhea, EdD, LiiNK Project Director, Professor, Kinesiology, &
G. Kate Webb, PhD, Adjunct Professor
Texas Christian University

Introduction

Children do not necessarily know what their brains and bodies need; they depend on their parents, teachers, and other influential adults to provide developmentally focused movement opportunities. Unstructured outdoor play is fundamental for healthy brain and body development in childhood. Sadly, adults sabotage children by bypassing the developmental process and replacing unstructured outdoor play with sports.

Overall, adults want children to be healthy and happy, but the opposite trend is growing among children. If we pause to reflect on why this generation is the most unhealthy and unhappy of all, it is due to the removal of play from children's lives and the adult push for children to participate in sports and competition before they are developmentally, physically, and emotionally ready (Forrest et al., 2025).

Unstructured outdoor play lays the foundation for a child to be sport-ready. Sport readiness is the child's overall state (physical, mental, emotional, social) to meet the demands of a sport (Purcell, 2005). Therefore, parents need to understand that sport readiness develops naturally through daily outdoor play, which provides valuable opportunities for long-term motor skill development (Aicinena, 1992; Kochanek et al., 2019).

Consider the following two scenarios of park spaces a child might have access to. Which of these scenarios would lay the foundation for healthy development, and which one would fall short?

Scenario One: A parent working on soccer drills with their two sons (ages 7 and 10). The parent sets up cones, an agility ladder, and a soccer goal as a circuit. The sons would do the explained circuit drills– with eyes down and seemingly uninspired – receive a few minutes of feedback from the parent before trudging back to the start of the circuit to run robotically through the exact same sequence again.

Scenario Two: Parents sitting on a blanket while their kids (10 and under) chase birds, climb a tree, swing, or dig for fossils. They use physical skills such as running, dodging, stopping, starting, skipping, accelerating, and strategizing, as well as laughing, throughout their play.

Scenarios One and Two can be seen throughout the United States. The first scenario is adult-directed, repetitive, and boring. This is NOT the secret formula for children's health, fitness, and sports readiness. The second scenario illustrates the joy, excitement, laughter, physical challenges, and strength-building that occur when children lead their play.

Conclusion

Sport readiness is a child's ability to meet the demands of participation in sport and to learn the values and skills required to do so successfully (Aicinena, 1992; Harris, 2000; Kochanek et al., 2019). Sport-ready children must meet developmental milestones in muscular strength and neuromuscular control. Setting these milestones for each age group and then testing children for these competencies is necessary to understand their developmental level. Researchers have assessed components such as muscular strength and neuromuscular control in physical education classes (Webb et al., 2025a; Webb et al., 2025b). Integrating these assessments into schools and sports programs on a large scale will help determine children's health and identify where intervention strategies are needed to help children become sport-ready. Although some national physical testing standards exist, they need revision to assess the muscular strength components included in the above studies and accurately gauge sport readiness among our youth.

Current trends in state legislation are making strides toward protecting and increasing recess time during the school day. California's Senate Bill 291, passed this year, requires all school districts to provide 30 minutes of daily recess, separately distinct from meal and physical education times (CDE, 2025). School adoption of recess protocols, such as The LiNK Project, along with legislative recognition of required recess time, will significantly increase the percentage of children who enter adolescence with a sport-ready foundation.

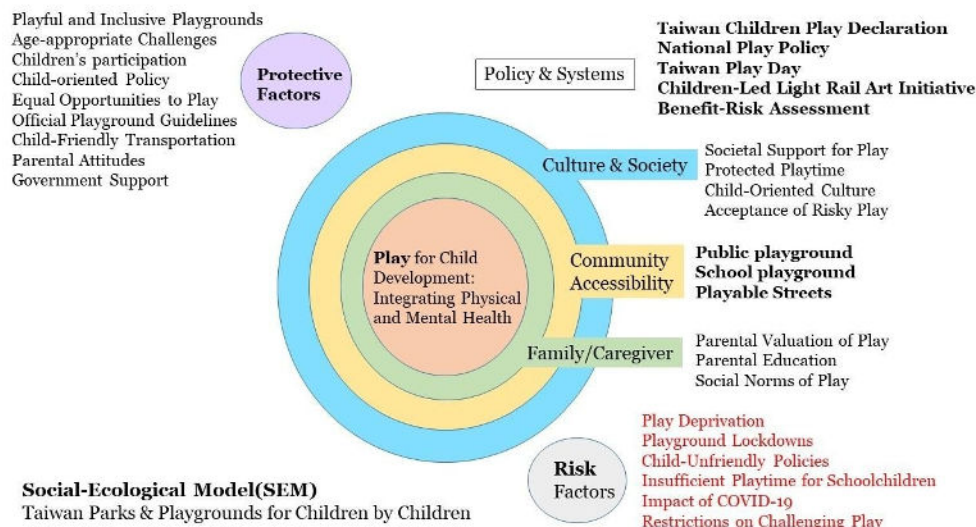
Overall, when children have unstructured outdoor play throughout the school day, parents purposefully trade sedentary time for it. If parents realize sports should not replace outdoor unstructured free play time, the U.S. will present a new generation of sport-ready children who have increased baseline health, a lower chance of future comorbidity, more positive trends in mental health and social-emotional skills, confidence in the ability to move, increased opportunity for advanced skill, and decreased injuries. Outdoor unstructured play opportunities allow children to develop their limbs and muscular strength naturally, thereby increasing sport readiness and lifelong physical activity opportunities for generations to come.

Restoring Time and Space for Play in Taiwan

Wei-Shun Tseng, OT, Ju-Pi Pan, Cindy Chung, Jackie Wang, &
Jen Hsiu-Chuan Wang
Play Taiwan

Introduction

Registered as a non-profit organization in 2017, Play Taiwan originated from a spontaneous grassroots movement led by parents dedicated to reimagining children's play environments. Over the past decade, Play Taiwan has spearheaded a national play revolution, advocating for high-quality, engaging, and diverse play spaces. Central to Play Taiwan's strategy is applying the Social-Ecological Model (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). This framework recognizes that a child's development is not isolated but shaped by nested layers of environmental influence (Figure 1).



Play Taiwan's Advocacy Framework: Applying the Social-Ecological Model (2017–2025)

The organization strategically operates across these levels to ensure systemic sustainability by:

- **Macrosystem (Policy & Legislation):** At the highest structural level, Play Taiwan engages in policy reform and legislative advocacy. A landmark achievement is drafting the *Taiwan Children's Play Declaration*, which provides

a foundational framework for government agencies to recognize play as an essential right, not a luxury. By amplifying children's voices in urban planning, Play Taiwan ensures that play rights are anchored in national governance and legislative frameworks. Furthermore, we extend the Right to Play beyond traditional playgrounds into the broader urban fabric through initiatives such as the Children's Light Rail Art Project, facilitating children's direct participation in urban governance.

- **Exosystem & Mesosystem (Social & Cultural Climate):** The organization actively reshapes the cultural narrative surrounding childhood through public education and media outreach, emphasizing that playtime is development time. This shift encourages parents, educators, and the public to value play as vital to cognitive, emotional, and physical health.
- **Microsystem (Community & Physical Environments):** On the ground, Play Taiwan has supervised the renovation of nearly 500 children's playgrounds. These efforts have transformed Taiwan's public spaces from standardized equipment into inclusive, themed, and sensory-rich environments.

By intervening at every level of the social-ecological hierarchy, Play Taiwan ensures that playgrounds are not merely physical sites, but free, accessible public assets. This holistic approach guarantees that every child—regardless of socioeconomic background—can exercise their fundamental right to play and rest in a fair, equitable, and developmentally supportive environment (Russo & Pereira, 2025).

Government authorities must prioritize children's right to play and formally integrate it into national and urban planning policies. It is time to listen to the children. By addressing these environmental and regulatory barriers, we can ensure that every child—regardless of age—has the time, space, and freedom to play.

Conclusion

The surge in developmental delays and the vanishing of play are warnings we cannot ignore. By applying the Social-Ecological Model, Play Taiwan remains committed to dismantling regulatory and environmental barriers that stifle growth. We

call upon global stakeholders to join us in this revolution. It is time to listen to the children, invest in their freedom, and ensure that every child—regardless of their background—has the time, space, and community support to simply play.

Achieving this vision requires not only grassroots advocacy but also institutional commitment. Taiwan's evolving policy landscape offers a historic opportunity to embed children's play rights into national governance structures.

As the Ministry of Health and Welfare undergoes organizational restructuring in 2026 to establish the Child and Family Support Administration, we see a critical foundation for advancing children's participation in public policy. This new agency should integrate child protection, family support, and play advocacy to create comprehensive developmental environments.

Play Taiwan remains committed to providing expertise and recommendations, with priorities including: developing innovative and challenging play spaces; implementing Benefit-Risk Assessments; establishing Play Sufficiency policies; creating Climate-Resilient Playgrounds; formalizing children's participation in urban planning; and building Playable Cities.

The play revolution is no longer a choice; it is a necessity for a sustainable and equitable future. The question before us is simple: will we build a world where children can grow, or one where they are merely managed? The answer must be clear—and the time to act is now.

White Papers



USA
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the Child's Right to Play*

Leading for Play

[Press Play: A Story of Play, Inquiry, and Systems Change](#)

[Play IS Readiness: Rethinking What Prepares Children for Kindergarten](#)

[Reimagining Readiness: The Transformative Power of Play in Language and Literacy](#)

[Kids Deserve More Than Just Change — They Deserve Justice](#)

[Time, Space, and Permission: Critical Ingredients for Integrating Play in Public Schools](#)

[Celebrating Play in Early Intervention: Every Child Deserves a Playful Journey](#)

[Realising the Right to Play through Pedagogy: A Scottish Perspective on Systemic Change in Education](#)

[The Power of Play: Why Unstructured Time Matters in Primary School](#)

[Ready or Not, Here I Come: Redefining Kindergarten Readiness to Meet Children Where They Are Upon Arrival](#)

[Reimagining the Educational Ecosystem: Modeling Play, Choice, and Community Partnership for Holistic Development](#)

[Strengthening Child, Teacher, and Parent Relationships Through Play](#)

[Ready for Me: A DEY Campaign to Change the Narrative About Going to Kindergarten](#)

[Play as a Biological Necessity: The Importance of Attractive and Playable Outdoor Play Spaces for the Healthy Development of All Children](#)

[Unstructured Outdoor Play is Essential for Sport Readiness](#)

[Restoring Time and Space for Play in Taiwan](#)



Press Play: A Story of Play, Inquiry, and Systems Change

Kim Adams, MA, Leadership, Play Advocate, and Consultant

Introduction

The Gap Between Play Policy and Classroom Practice

In recent years, California has introduced a program called Transitional Kindergarten (TK), designed to provide every four-year-old child in the state with a "high-quality, play-based learning experience" the year before kindergarten (Saucedo, 2025). TK is intended to align with the California Preschool and Transitional Kindergarten Learning Foundations (PTKLF; California Department of Education, 2025a), emphasizing a developmental approach in which play is integral to the curriculum. The rollout of TK has been problematic due to inconsistent quality.

Expanding a program for four-year-olds into elementary school settings posed curriculum-development and facilities-related challenges (PPIC, 2025). Rapid program expansion meant schools could waive teacher requirements. In a survey conducted by the [California Department of Education](#) and analyzed by the [Learning Policy Institute](#), only 52% of TK teachers statewide in 2023–24 had 24 units of early childhood education or child development (Watanabe, 2025). Despite California policy and guidance clearly positioning TK as developmentally appropriate, many TK classrooms look and feel like kindergarten classrooms, with developmentally inappropriate content, adherence to misaligned standards, and the use of report cards.

Though the California Department of Education uses the term Developmentally Appropriate Practice, a growing body of early childhood experts are leaning towards terms such as developmentally focused or developmentally effective. The rationale behind this change in terminology is to place greater focus on child development than on the term "appropriate" (Lawrence, 2026).

Problem Statement

Play is critical to healthy human development (Cankaya et al., 2023; Copple Bredekamp, 2009; Ginsburg, 2007; Ginsburg, 2018; Nicholson, 2021; Pyle & Danniels, 2017; Ryan & Northy-Berg, 2014). Unfortunately, play has increasingly disappeared

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from classrooms in response to the academic pushdown that is taking place in the United States education system. Correlations with the decrease in the amount of time children have for free play can be drawn to well-meaning yet flawed initiatives such as No Child Left Behind, the Every Student Succeeds Act, and Race to the Top. These initiatives link funding to standardized test scores, resulting in a dramatic decrease in time for play within the school day (Bernt-Santy, 2024). Child advocates are raising the alarm as rates of childhood obesity continue to rise (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2026). Concerns about children's mental health have also increased, with rising rates of anxiety and depression among children and adolescents (Gray, 2011).

According to a 2020 UNICEF report, children in the United States rank 32nd among 38 developed nations in well-being (UNICEF Innocenti, 2020). Gray (2011) argues that the most straightforward explanation for these trends is that, as a society, we have increasingly forced children into settings that make them unhappy and anxious while depriving them of the activities that make them happy.

Despite the realities of correlational data linking negative childhood outcomes to insufficient time for play, teachers have continued to prioritize academics over developmentally focused practices. Even educators who studied theorists such as Jean Piaget and Lev Vygotsky, who identified play as a driving force in development, are doubling down on academic rigor as a cornerstone of education for our youngest learners (Taylor & Boyer, 2020). The California Department of Education published a document titled *The Powerful Role of Play in Early Learning* (Nicholson, 2021), in which the State Superintendent of Public Instruction stated that, despite decades of research highlighting its benefits, play is disappearing from early childhood classrooms across the nation. Unfortunately, children's opportunities to learn through play are increasingly being replaced by teacher-directed instruction and developmentally inappropriate content—changes that are not supported by developmental science (p. ix).

Background

Nancy Adler remarked in an interview, "There's no question to me that the 21st century is the century of learning. Moreover, what has become most important is learning how to learn, not learning any specific content" (Kawamura & Eisler, 2013, p.

12). This emphasis on learning how to learn shifts the focus from acquiring specific academic content to developing the dispositions needed to engage with content in meaningful ways. Dispositions such as initiative, agency, attention maintenance, self-control, and curiosity emerge in our earliest years in and through play. Additionally, play prepares the central nervous system for learning and is the process by which humans (and many animals) build prosocial brains. "The experience of play changes the connections of the neurons at the front end of your brain," says [Sergio Pellis](#), heard on Morning Edition. "And without play experience, those neurons are not changed" (Hamilton, 2014). One framework that resonates with me asks, "How do learners experience choice, wonder, and delight?" (Baker & Ryan, 2021). This question shifts the focus of learning from simply acquiring information to fostering curiosity and agency, enabling both children and adults to explore and discover knowledge in ways that bring joy and enthusiasm.

Furthermore, play is identified as a legitimate right of childhood by the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC). However, play is still disappearing from childhood. The question is, how can schools, districts, and educational systems create the conditions necessary for play to thrive? Before we can answer that question, we must consider what we mean by "play." Peter Gray (2017, p. 218) identifies five characteristics of play that help distinguish it from other activities: it is *self-directed, intrinsically motivated, guided by rules that emerge from participants' minds, imaginative, and conducted in an active yet relatively stress-free frame of mind*. Understanding these qualities will help adults who make decisions for children to distinguish between play and adult-directed activities that may be playful but are ultimately controlled by adults and do not offer the same developmental benefits.

Over the past several years, my work in early education has expanded beyond the classroom as I have become a voice for elevating play in early learning by providing workshops and keynotes. I have, however, wondered if one-off workshops or keynotes make a significant difference in shifting the systems in place that have displaced play as the primary mode of development for young children. Inspiration matters, but change is iterative. The following is the story of one school district in California moving the dial on

embracing play in early learning through iterative cycles of challenge, inquiry, experimentation, adaptation, and reflection.

Strategies

From One Workshop to Systems Change

What started as a one-time professional learning event for Fremont Unified School District (FUSD) has expanded into an over-two-year (and counting) process of learning, inquiry, discovery, and intentional shifts that bring about real systems-level change. The district's interest in play did not begin with that first workshop. District leaders had already begun asking questions about developmentally focused practice in TK. The workshop became a catalyst in a system ready for change.

The energy in the room was high. People were engaged, asking questions, and beginning to reconsider the role of play in teaching and learning. Educators began thinking differently about what they offered young children, but the question about how to make the shifts necessary to embrace play as pedagogy remained. This provided an opportunity for FUSD to engage in a creative problem-solving session to address the question, "What is moving us forward, and what is holding us back from embracing play as pedagogy?"

Following the initial professional learning event, I was invited back to facilitate a creative problem-solving session that brought together multiple perspectives: TK teachers, school principals, and district leaders. What emerged from this first creative problem-solving session was not a request for a new curriculum or program. People wanted more opportunities to learn together. This became the catalyst for more professional development and inquiry focused on play. The district made a significant commitment to the work, providing multiple full-day professional learning opportunities and releasing teachers from their classrooms to participate. A focus group was also launched for educators who wanted to engage in deeper reflection and inquiry.

Professional learning focused on play as pedagogy, observation and documentation, typical development, and the role of relationships in learning. Teachers made meaningful shifts in their curriculum and classrooms, but roadblocks remained.

When Assessment Became the Barrier

One such roadblock emerged during a second large-group creative Problem-solving session. Throughout this paper, I present quotations from participants in professional learning events anonymously to protect confidentiality. "We are working with a report card that does not reflect a pedagogy of play" (Anonymous participant, 2024).

Teachers could modify schedules, classroom offerings, and environments, but if they were expected to report on developmentally focused milestones rather than standards, their efforts would be undermined. District leadership heard the concern and responded by creating a work group of TK teachers to create an alternative to the existing report card. The work group wrestled with questions like: How do we make learning through play visible? How do we communicate growth to families? How do our assessment tools align with what we value? Those conversations eventually led to the development of Growing and Learning Reflections (GLR). The GLR became a “family-facing” tool created by Educators for educators. It replaced traditional standards-based ratings with narrative observations grounded in the California Preschool and TK Learning Foundations (PTKLF 2025a) and Desired Results Developmental Profile (DRDP, 2025b). The guidebook describes the purpose of GLR: In our classrooms, authentic observation is not just a method of assessment. It is the foundation for planning curriculum, guiding instruction, and forming strong connections with children. The GLR is how we share this learning with families (Fremont Unified School District, 2025). A group of teachers piloted the GLR during the 2024–25 school year. Based on feedback from teachers and families, the tool was refined and adopted districtwide during the 2025–26 school year.

Inquiry in Practice

The formation of a focus group became the vehicle for an action research project. A group of nine TK teachers met over the school year. Teachers identified questions about their practice, made small changes, reflected on the results, and used those reflections to guide further inquiry. These small shifts over time led to changes in schedules, classroom environments, and teacher/child interactions. The focus group

provided a space for teachers to reflect, experiment, learn from one another, and build community. Participants described feeling less isolated and more confident advocating for play-responsive practices. As these teachers changed, they noticed a ripple effect at their school sites. While the purpose of the focus group was to support individual growth, an unexpected outcome was the emergence of teacher leadership. The district created a stipended TK Lead position for each attendance area, and these roles were primarily filled by those teachers who participated in the focus group.

Building Internal Capacity

It became apparent that supporting TK teachers would need to extend well beyond my contracted time with FUSD, so I met again with district leadership and proposed a TK Leads facilitation training. The goal became to create conditions in which the work could continue without my leading it. The workshop introduced the TK Leads to a Facilitation Arc, a framework designed to help groups move through conversation, inquiry, and problem-solving in purposeful ways (Wolf, 2024). To support the effort, I developed a facilitation field guide (Adams, 2026b) grounded in the idea that facilitation creates the conditions for people to think, learn, and work together (Heron, 1999).

Rather than positioning the TK Leads as experts with answers, the goal was to help them become facilitators of learning within their own attendance areas. In doing so, the district began building internal capacity to sustain the work long after any single professional development series had ended. I wanted to teach the very thing I was trying to do...help a group move forward without carrying the work for them.

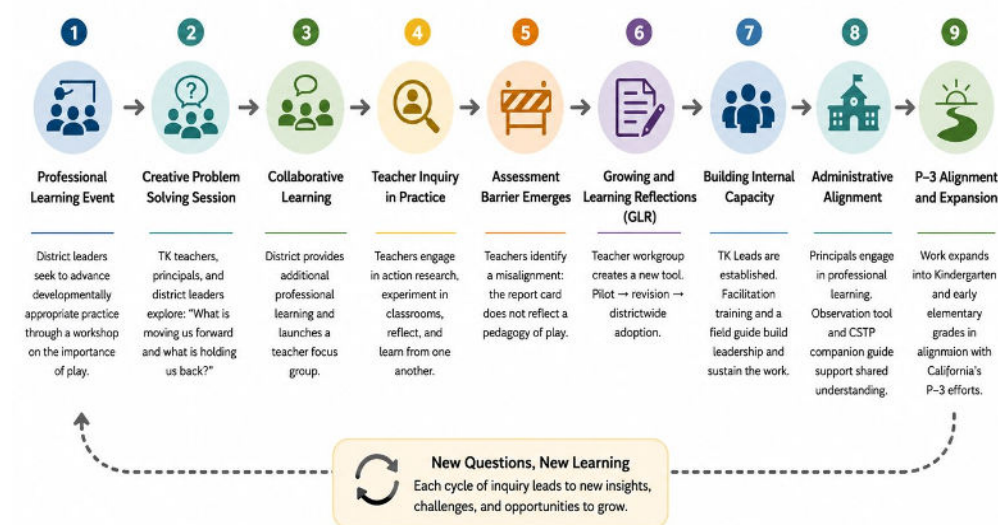
TK Leads are uniquely positioned as classroom teachers who advocate for their peers and serve as a bridge among teachers, principals, and district leadership. They facilitate learning, support reflection, and provide teacher-requested opportunities for collaboration. Having TK leads in place provides leadership at a critical level of the system.

Bringing Principals Into the Work

As the work to embrace play continued, other challenges emerged. One such challenge surfaced at a professional development day: "We are working hard to provide

developmentally focused activities and environments, and then our principals come in to observe and evaluate us, and we are marked down for not providing academic support" (Anonymous participant, 2025). Teachers were feeling the pull to apply a traditional elementary school model to four-year-olds. Teachers felt they could not fully embrace play as pedagogy if those evaluating their practice viewed play as a lack of teaching. Again, the district heard the concern and responded by providing professional learning opportunities for all district elementary school administrators. Principals responded positively as they saw firsthand through site visits what a developmentally focused, play-forward environment looked and felt like. Coupled with the professional learning, I created an observation tool and a companion guide for principals to use in interpreting and applying the California Standards for the Teaching Profession (CSTPs) through a developmental lens in TK. The tool is designed to support shared understanding, accountability, and collective support for developmentally focused, play-responsive teaching in TK. It is aligned with California early learning frameworks, informed by practitioner inquiry, and intended to defend the intentional use of play as the primary context for learning (Adams, 2026a). With the principals sharing a common understanding of developmentally focused practice, play in TK became a shared value at multiple levels of the district system.

Figure 1 *Key Milestones in the FUSD Play Journey*



Learning, reflection, and collaboration continue to generate new questions and move the work forward.

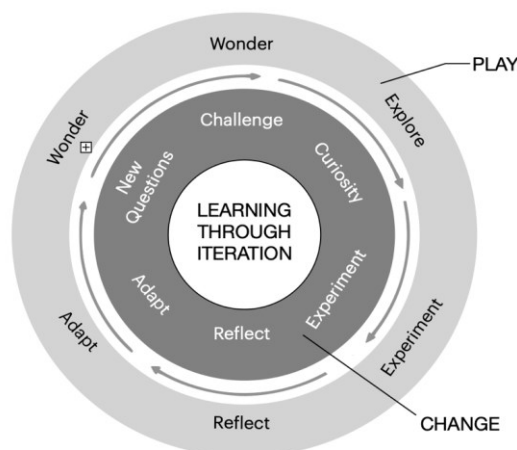
[See Appendix for long description of Figure 1](#)

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Lessons from the Journey

Looking back across this journey, several lessons emerge about what it takes to create meaningful systems change around play. The first is that meaningful change was not mandated; change emerged through inquiry, collaboration, and experimentation rather than through top-down directives. Each time a challenge arose, the group asked important questions, developed solutions, and bravely tried new ideas. Looking back, the process itself mirrored many of the principles found in creative problem-solving, action research, and the Facilitation Arc. A challenge would emerge; stakeholders would come together around a question; ideas would be generated and tested; feedback would be gathered; and solutions would be refined. Each answer led to new questions and new opportunities for growth.

Figure 2: *Play and Change as Iterative Processes*



[See Appendix for long description of Figure 2](#)

Play and Change as Iterative Processes

This conceptual model emerged from the FUSD experience. It is offered as a way to visualize the iterative processes described in this paper and the parallels observed between children's play and organizational change. The model draws on concepts from play, action inquiry (Torbert, 2004), creative problem-solving, and the Facilitation Arc (Wolf, 2024).

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Perhaps most interestingly, the process mirrored the way children play. Children embrace wonder, experiment with possibilities, observe what happens, adapt their thinking, and try again. The district's journey unfolded in much the same way. The process often began with curiosity about a challenge and a willingness to wonder what might be possible. Progress was not linear. It was iterative. As Adrienne Marie Brown (2017, p. 105) writes in *Emergent Strategy*, "Transformation does not happen in a linear way, at least not one we can always track. It happens in cycles, convergences, explosions."

Learning together mattered, teacher voice mattered, inquiry mattered, developing leadership mattered, and sustainability mattered. Change was necessary, but it was not always moving forward in a predictable way. A second lesson is that sustainable change requires leadership at multiple levels of the system. No single person or group could have moved this work forward alone. Children were not passive recipients of the change. Their interests, questions, play themes, and developmental needs increasingly became the source of curriculum and informed teacher decision-making. Teachers made meaningful shifts to their practice and increasingly embraced play as central to learning, observation, assessment, and relationships. District leaders listened deeply, committed resources, and supported innovative and untested ideas. Families provided feedback that helped refine new tools and approaches. Principals began developing a shared understanding of developmentally focused practice and became important advocates for TK within the broader elementary school system. The emergence of TK Leads created additional capacity to sustain and deepen the work over time. Sustainable change emerged not from any single initiative, but from the collective efforts of people across the system working toward a shared vision.

Conclusion: The Work Continues

The iterative process of change toward embracing play is ongoing. For it to be sustainable, it must continue to evolve. Entering the 2026–27 school year, FUSD has decided to continue its work by providing more professional learning for principals to deepen their understanding of developmentally focused practice in early learning and to provide access to and training on observation tools. This next phase of the work

coincides with California's growing emphasis on Preschool through Third Grade (P–3) alignment. As districts across the state work to create more coherent early learning experiences for children, questions about developmentally focused practice become increasingly important beyond TK. The conversations that began in TK about play, observation, assessment, relationships, and child development are now expanding into Kindergarten and the early elementary grades. As part of this next phase of the work, I have been invited to begin a similar process with Kindergarten teachers during the 2026–27 school year, exploring how play and developmentally focused practice are imperative for all children.

In many ways, the district's journey began when it decided to "press play." Even before the first workshop, district leaders were asking questions about developmentally focused practice and how to best support four-year-olds. The workshop helped turn curiosity into action within a system that was ready for change. What began as a single professional learning event evolved into a process of collective inquiry, shared leadership, and systems change. In the children's book *The End Is Just the Beginning* (Bender, 2021), readers are reminded that endings often mark the start of something new. That idea captures the cyclical nature of both play and change. Each shift answered some questions and revealed new ones. While tools and structures will evolve, the commitment remains the same: supporting teachers in creating developmentally focused learning environments where children can learn and grow through play.

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Appendix

Long Description for Figure 1

This visual infographic details a 9-step professional learning and implementation model designed to integrate play-based pedagogy across a school district. The process forms a continuous feedback loop connecting early learning workshops to district-wide alignment.

Process Steps

1. **Professional Learning Event** - District leaders seek to advance developmentally appropriate practice through a workshop on the importance of play.
2. **Creative Problem Solving Session** - TK (Transitional Kindergarten) teachers, principals, and district leaders explore: *"What is moving us forward and what is holding us back?"*
3. **Collaborative Learning** - District provides additional professional learning and launches a teacher focus group.
4. **Teacher Inquiry in Practice** - Teachers engage in action research, experiment in classrooms, reflect, and learn from one another.
5. **Assessment Barrier Emerges** - Teachers identify a misalignment: the report card does not reflect a pedagogy of play.
6. **Growing and Learning Reflections (GLR)** - Teacher workgroup creates a new tool. Pilot → revision → districtwide adoption.
7. **Building Internal Capacity** - TK Leads are established. Facilitation training and a field guide build leadership and sustain the work.
8. **Administrative Alignment** - Principals engage in professional learning. Observation tool and CSTP companion guide support shared understanding.
9. **P-3 Alignment and Expansion** - Work expands into Kindergarten and early elementary grades in alignment with California's P-3 efforts.

Continuous Learning Loop - A dashed arrow loops back from **Step 9** to **Step 1**, anchored by a central callout box:

- **New Questions, New Learning:** Each cycle of inquiry leads to new insights, challenges, and opportunities to grow.

Footer Statement: *Learning, reflection, and collaboration continue to generate new questions and move the work forward.*

Long Description for Figure 2

This diagram depicts an iterative learning model structured as concentric circles with a central core, showing how play and change interact continuously.

Center Core

- **Central Text:** "LEARNING THROUGH ITERATION" set inside a white circle.

Inner Ring (Dark Gray — Labeled "CHANGE")

Immediately surrounding the center core is a dark gray ring labeled **CHANGE** via a callout line. It includes six internal mindset drivers arranged around the circle:

- **Top:** Challenge
- **Top Right:** Curiosity
- **Bottom Right:** Experiment
- **Bottom:** Reflect
- **Bottom Left:** Adapt
- **Top Left:** New Questions

Transition Ring

Separating the inner and outer rings is a thin white track featuring continuous clockwise arrows, signifying a recurring cyclic flow.

Outer Ring (Light Gray — Labeled "PLAY")

The outermost band is shaded light gray and labeled **PLAY** via a callout line. It outlines five actionable phases matching the cycle:

- **Top / Top-Left:** Wonder
- **Right:** Explore
- **Bottom-Right:** Experiment
- **Bottom:** Reflect
- **Bottom-Left:** Adapt

Play IS Readiness: Rethinking What Prepares Children for Kindergarten

Jennifer L. Berube, PhD

Introduction

In a preschool classroom, four-year-olds Marcus and Sofia have transformed the dramatic play corner into a veterinary clinic. Marcus, wearing a too-large white button-down, holds a toy stethoscope to the chest of a stuffed dog while Sofia stands nearby with a clipboard. “This puppy is very sick,” Marcus announces. “She needs medicine.” Sofia shakes her head. “First you have to check her temperature. That is what doctors do first.” Marcus considers this, then nods and reaches for a plastic thermometer.

What are we watching here? On the surface, it looks like dramatic play, something we might dismiss as a break from “real learning.” Instead, look more closely. Marcus is holding an imaginary scenario in mind while regulating his impulses to follow the play scenario’s internal logic. When Sofia redirects him, he adjusts without arguing. Sofia is coordinating her behavior with his, monitoring the shared story they are building together. Both children are using language to negotiate meaning, taking turns, managing mild frustration, and sustaining focus on a shared goal.

These skills are not trivial. They are the very capacities that decades of research have identified as the strongest predictors of school success: stronger than knowing letters, stronger than counting, stronger than any of the academic content we have become so anxious for young children to master (Spiegel et al., 2021; McClelland et al., 2014).

We have been asking the wrong question. We ask, “Is this child ready for school?” As if readiness is a threshold to cross. Readiness is not a state children achieve before learning begins. It is a practice. The capacities that predict school success do not sit dormant, waiting to be deployed. They exist only in their exercise. Play is where they are exercised. Play does not build readiness, as if readiness lives somewhere else. Play IS readiness, because readiness is nothing other than these capacities in action. When we remove play, we remove readiness itself.

Throughout this paper, I deliberately use the word "capacities" rather than "competencies". The words carry different assumptions. Capacity (from the Latin *capacitas*, the ability to hold or contain) emphasizes potential, something dynamic that grows and expands through use. Competency (from *competere*, to be sufficient) emphasizes demonstrated skill, something static that can be measured and checked off. Competency is the language of standards-based education and assessment frameworks. It fits a model of readiness as a threshold: children either have the competencies, or they lack them. Capacity fits a different model. Capacities are not proven once and possessed forever. They exist in their exercise. If readiness is a set of competencies, it is a checklist. If readiness is a set of capacities, it is a practice. Play is practice.

Problem Statement

Between 1998 and 2010, American kindergarten underwent a dramatic transformation. Bassok and colleagues (2016) documented these changes in detail: time devoted to teacher-directed instruction in literacy and mathematics increased substantially, while time for play, art, music, and child-initiated activity declined. Kindergarten teachers in 2010 reported beliefs and practices more closely resembling those of first-grade teachers from a decade earlier. The kindergarten that nurtures imagination, with block corners, sand tables, and dramatic play areas, has been steadily replaced by something that increasingly resembles the elementary school classrooms once reserved for older children.

Then the cascade began. As kindergarten became more academic, preschool and preK programs felt pressure to follow suit, to “get kids ready” for this new, more demanding kindergarten. If kindergarteners were expected to read, then four-year-olds needed to learn their letters. If kindergarteners were doing worksheets, then preschoolers needed to practice sitting still. The logic seemed irrefutable: if we do not prepare them, they will fall behind.

Notice what this logic assumes. It assumes that the academic kindergarten is the fixed point, the thing we must prepare children for, rather than asking whether that kindergarten itself is appropriate. It creates a vicious cycle: each level reshapes itself to prepare children for an overly academic level above it. This paper challenges that entire

premise. The question is not, How do we prepare children for academic kindergarten? The question is: What do children actually need to thrive, and are our preschools and kindergartens providing it?

The middle school movement named this principle decades ago: education should be developmentally responsive, using the distinctive nature of children -who they are, what they need, how they learn- as the foundation upon which all decisions are made (NMSA, 1995). The term differs importantly from the more familiar “developmentally appropriate practice.” Developmentally appropriate practice (NAEYC) asks: What practices are appropriate given this developmental stage? It is about matching teaching to development and avoiding inappropriate practices. Developmentally responsive (AMLE, formerly NMSA) asks: Are we actively responding to who these children actually are? It places the responsibility on the school to respond to children, not on children to meet the school’s expectations.

A veteran kindergarten teacher, reflecting on how expectations have changed over her career, put it simply: “We’re asking them to do so much more than we’ve ever asked five-year-olds to do. And their needs are still the same. They still need a hug. They still need to tie their shoe... They just want to know that someone’s there to take care of them and love them and they are safe” (New Hampshire kindergarten teacher, personal communication, January 29, 2026). The expectations have changed. The children have not.

We now have evidence that academic instruction in the preschool and kindergarten years does not produce lasting benefits and may cause harm. In Tennessee’s randomized controlled trial of state pre-K, children who attended preschool showed initial gains but, by sixth grade, were performing worse than the control group on achievement tests, with more disciplinary infractions and more special education referrals (Durkin et al., 2022). Marcon (2002) found that children from academically directed preschools showed lower achievement by fourth grade than children from play-based programs. Studies have documented higher stress behaviors (nail-biting, stomachaches) in kindergarteners whose classrooms feature more worksheets and less play (Burts et al., 1992). Conversely, the American Academy of Pediatrics reports that

play helps children manage stress: preschoolers randomly assigned to play showed a twofold decrease in anxiety compared to those who listened to a story, and children in play-rich classrooms show lower cortisol levels throughout the day (Yogman et al., 2018). However, even as this evidence accumulates, many kindergarten classrooms continue in the opposite direction.

When a kindergarten teacher describes her work as “bringing playful learning into a school that does not protect childhood” (Massachusetts kindergarten teacher, personal communication, January 29, 2026), something has gone wrong. The system designed to serve children now requires teachers to carve out space for children’s needs despite institutional pressure.

Background

The human brain is not born ready. It is built, connection by connection, through experience. In the first few years, more than one million new neural connections form every second (Center on the Developing Child, 2023). Which connections strengthen and which fade depends on which circuits are used. The architecture that will support all later learning is under construction, and the materials come from the child’s daily experiences.

At the front of the brain sits the prefrontal cortex, where executive function resides. Executive function includes working memory (holding information in mind while using it), inhibitory control (resisting impulses and staying focused), and cognitive flexibility (shifting when circumstances change). The Harvard Center on the Developing Child describes executive function as an “air traffic control system,” managing multiple demands at once (Center on the Developing Child, 2011, p.1). When the system struggles, small frustrations can become meltdowns, and classroom demands can feel overwhelming.

The preschool years are critical: the prefrontal cortex develops rapidly and is exquisitely sensitive to experience during this period. Neuroimaging research confirms that the prefrontal cortex is already functionally active in four-year-olds (Moriguchi & Hiraki, 2013) but continues to develop for another two decades. Play-based programs for three- to five-year-olds have shown improvements in executive function, language,

and motor skills (Gibb et al., 2021). The experiences children have during these early years shape the neural architecture on which all later executive function depends.

Why does executive function matter for school readiness? It matters because it is one of the strongest predictors of academic success, stronger than the academic content knowledge we have become so anxious to teach. A meta-analysis of 305 studies found that executive function components (working memory, inhibitory control, cognitive flexibility) predicted reading, math, and language outcomes across elementary school (Spiegel et al., 2021). McClelland and colleagues (2014) found that children's ability to regulate attention at age four predicted reading and math achievement through second grade, even after accounting for early academic skills. The children who arrived knowing the most letters were not necessarily those who learned to read most successfully; the children who could manage their attention were.

Vygotsky (1978) proposed that pretend play is the “leading activity” (p. 102) of the preschool years, the experience through which children develop their highest capacities for abstract thinking and self-regulation. He observed that pretend play is inherently rule-governed: if a child is pretending to be a mother, she must act as mothers act. The rules emerge from the play itself, and children willingly submit to them, regulating their behavior not because an adult told them to, but because the play requires it. “In play,” Vygotsky wrote, “the child always behaves above his average age, above his daily behavior” (p. 102). In play, children do things they cannot yet do reliably in other contexts.

Let us return to Marcus and Sofia. When Sofia redirects Marcus, he must hold the play scenario in working memory while processing new information. He must inhibit his initial impulse (to give medicine) in favor of a different action (take the puppy's temperature). He must flexibly shift his plan. All three components of executive function are working together here. In many contexts, a four-year-old who was told he was doing something wrong might argue or cry. However, in his play with Sofia, Marcus adjusts smoothly. He wants to be a good doctor, and the rules of being one emerge from within the play.

Appropriate Approaches and Strategies

If play builds the capacities that matter most for school success, what does this mean for teaching practice? The answer is not to abandon all instruction, but to recognize that play and learning are not opposites. The most promising approaches honor both children's developmental needs and educators' instructional goals through what researchers call guided play.

Guided play occupies the middle ground between free play and teacher-created, teacher-directed play (DuBois-Garofalo et al., 2026). Adults set up environments with learning goals in mind, introduce materials and provocations, and engage with children's play in ways that extend thinking. Meanwhile, children retain agency and direct the play. The adult is a play facilitator, not a director. Research suggests that guided play can be more effective than direct instruction for certain learning goals, particularly those involving deeper understanding and transfer (Weisberg et al., 2016).

Tools of the Mind, a curriculum grounded in Vygotsky's theories, centers mature make-believe play in the kindergarten day. Mature play is sustained, rule-governed pretend play in which children take on roles, use props symbolically, and negotiate scenarios with peers (Bodrova & Leong, 2007). Children engage in extended sociodramatic play with teacher support rather than teacher direction. Randomized controlled trials have found that children in Tools of the Mind kindergarten classrooms showed gains in executive function, reading, and writing, and that both children and teachers experienced more joy in school (Diamond et al., 2019). The curriculum works because it treats executive-function development as foundational.

The key insight is that executive function develops through meaningful practice in contexts that matter to the child. Play provides this meaningfulness. Children retain information longer when learning is playful and emotionally engaging (Wang & Aamodt, 2012). When Marcus inhibits his impulse to give medicine immediately, he does so because he wants to be a good doctor, not because an adult told him to wait. The motivation is intrinsic. This allows the practice to be repeated hundreds of times without becoming tedious, and allows skills developed in play to become genuinely internalized.

Contrast this with a worksheet asking children to circle only triangles. The child may complete it correctly, but she is doing so because the teacher said to, not because she has any investment in the outcome. The practice is thin and unmotivated, and the learning rarely sticks. What is worse: much of what academic pushdown prioritizes are constrained skills (Paris, 2005): skills like letter names that have a ceiling. Once a child knows all 26 letters, she is done. At the same time, the capacities that matter most for long-term success- vocabulary, comprehension, self-regulation- are unconstrained. They keep growing, and they grow through play.

Conclusion and Recommendations

The research is unequivocal; the capacities that predict school success are the capacities children exercise in play. When we remove play from preschool and kindergarten classrooms in order to “prepare” children for academic demands, we remove the very context in which readiness lives. We have created a tragic mismatch: children with rich play experiences arrive at kindergarten with the very capacities that predict success, only to find classrooms that have dismantled the practices that would sustain them.

What would it mean to take a developmentally responsive kindergarten seriously? It would mean starting, not from standards, not from what first grade will demand, but from the children themselves. Who are five-year-olds? What do they need? What are they capable of, and under what conditions? A developmentally responsive kindergarten would treat these questions as foundational.

This is not a call to lower expectations. It is a call to align expectations with development and recognize that the capacities we most want children to have are capacities they exercise in play, in relationship, and in active engagement with materials and peers. They do not develop through worksheets or direct instruction in skills children are not yet ready to master.

A developmentally responsive kindergarten would be play-rich, relationship-centered, and designed around what we know about how young children learn. It would have dramatic play corners, block areas, and time to explore. It would have teachers who deeply understand child development and see their role as supporting the whole child. It

would assess children in ways that inform teaching, not ranking and sorting. Moreover, it would trust that children who are thriving (curious, engaged, regulated, connected) are ready to learn.

A developmentally responsive kindergarten would not require teachers to protect childhood against the institution. The institution would protect childhood.

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Reimagining Readiness: The Transformative Power of Play in Language and Literacy

Tori K. Flint, PhD & Myae Han, PhD

Introduction

Play is often described as the work of children (Paley, 2009). Yet, in many contemporary early childhood classrooms, play is treated as enrichment or a reward rather than as foundational to children’s reading readiness and broader language and literacy development (Roskos & Christie, 2011). Children’s play is not simply a “break from learning,” but a primary context in which they experiment with sounds, words, texts, and identities as readers, writers, and speakers (Vygotsky, 1978; Wohllwend, 2011). In imaginative play, children negotiate roles, invent narratives, and draw on their community and cultural funds of knowledge, creating rich opportunities for vocabulary growth, oral language practice, and reading and writing development (Flint, 2016; Souto-Manning et al., 2024).

Neuroscience perspectives further underscore why playful experiences matter for school readiness. Play helps shape neural circuits associated with flexibility, emotional regulation, and complex social communication, which are implicated in language learning and literacy development (Pellis & Pellis, 2010). When children repeatedly engage in varied forms of play, they rehearse the cognitive and social processes that undergird decoding, comprehension, and written expression (Roskos & Christie, 2011). As such, play is not an optional “add-on” to language and literacy instruction but part of the neural training ground through which young children build capacities for engaging with words, print, symbols, and meaning-making (Pellis & Pellis, 2010).

Despite this evidence, policy and curricular reforms framed around reductionist notions of school readiness have increasingly organized language and literacy as discrete skills to be mastered in advance of “real” reading, writing, and language use (Neuman et al., 2007). This paper offers an alternative vision of readiness as a holistic construct that emerges at the intersection of children’s bodies, emotions, relationships, language, and symbol systems and is cultivated through high-quality play (Ehret et al., 2023; Roskos & Christie, 2011). Reimagining readiness in this way positions play as a transformative

force that enables young children to become powerful readers, writers, and speakers, and affirms play as a fundamental right of all children.

Problem Statement

Readiness as a Multidimensional Construct

Despite widespread recognition that school readiness is a multidimensional construct encompassing cognitive, language, social-emotional, physical, and self-regulatory development, early childhood education policy and practice continue to emphasize narrow, skills-based indicators of readiness, particularly early academic outcomes (Snow, 2006; Wohlwend, 2011). Such approaches often frame readiness as a fixed set of competencies children must demonstrate prior to school entry, placing disproportionate responsibility on children and families while overlooking the role of educational systems and learning environments in shaping readiness. This reductionist view risks marginalizing children whose developmental pathways do not align with standardized expectations and may undermine equitable access to high-quality early learning experiences.

Scholars have challenged this child-deficit framing of readiness, arguing that readiness is socially constructed and context-dependent, shaped by cultural norms, institutional practices, and policy decisions rather than residing solely within the child (Graue, 2006). The National Education Goals Panel (1995) similarly conceptualized readiness as an ecological system involving children's readiness for school, schools' readiness for children, and family and community supports. However, despite these conceptual advances, a persistent gap remains between theory and practice, as many early childhood programs continue to prioritize discrete academic skills over integrated developmental competencies.

Research demonstrates that early language development, executive functioning, and social-emotional skills—particularly self-regulation—are robust predictors of later academic achievement and school adjustment (Duncan et al., 2007). Yet instructional approaches that support these domains, such as **play-based learning**, are often undervalued or inconsistently implemented in early childhood settings. Play has been shown to support physical, cognitive, linguistic, and social-emotional development

simultaneously (Hirsh-Pasek et al., 2009; Johnson et al., 2005), positioning it as a critical mechanism for promoting holistic school readiness. The problem, therefore, lies in the misalignment between prevailing expectations of readiness and evidence-based, developmentally focused practices.

Misreading the “Science of Reading”

One of the most influential forces shaping this misalignment between evidence and practice is the recent policy turn to the “science of reading.” In recent years, the “science of reading” has been taken up in ways that marginalize play and has been mobilized to justify highly structured literacy programs that foreground explicit, sequential instruction in phonological awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension. Although this research details component skills, its policy translation often recasts reading readiness as a decontextualized technical proficiency made up of isolated subskills, presumed to be best developed through tightly scripted lessons and rapid-paced practice (Duke & Cartwright, 2021). This interpretation constrains expectations for early childhood classrooms, crowding out play-based experiences in favor of teacher-centered whole-group instruction, seatwork, and worksheets (Roskos & Christie, 2011). These shifts mirror what researchers describe as the squeezing out of imaginative play in favor of practices framed as more rigorous and efficient (Burnett & Merchant, 2020; Mannard, 2023).

Such implementations misread both the science and the child by privileging discrete decoding skills over meaning-making, language use, and engagement, which are foundational to early language and literacy development (Flint & Han, 2026). When reading is framed primarily as accurate decoding and recall, play is easily dismissed as extraneous or inefficient. Yet, young children’s play is a *primary* site where phonological, semantic, and syntactic knowledge are woven together within meaningful, emotionally rich activities (Wohlwend, 2011). Within imagined stores, construction sites, or superhero narratives, children improvise written artifacts, negotiate storylines, and engage with peers and print-rich spaces, integrating reading, writing, listening, and speaking with comprehension and composition (Roskos & Christie, 2011; Thiel, 2015).

Accordingly, this paper argues that play must be centered as the primary engine of readiness. Reframing “science of reading” conversations through a play lens foregrounds play as essential for early reading, writing, and language development (Burnett & Merchant, 2020; Wargo, 2025; Wohlwend, 2011; Yoon, 2019).

Background

Within play-rich early childhood environments that provide space, materials, and time for self-directed activity, children construct foundations of reading, writing, and language by creating texts through talk, drawing, movement, and imaginative enactment, integrating oral language, early writing, and narrative in socially meaningful ways (Han, 2021; Wohlwend, 2011). Playful literacies support creativity and meaning-making as children negotiate identities as capable authors and readers and experiment with vocabulary, story language, and written representations that matter to them (Yoon, 2019). Across ages and spaces, this work converges on play as a ‘literacy of possibilities’ that stretches how learners participate within and across modes of representation (Kuby et al., 2015).

From this perspective, play functions as a powerful site where children exercise expertise and agency in language and literacy. In classrooms designed for multimodal engagement, children draw on images, movement, talk, and print to create meaning together, seamlessly blending play, language, and literacy as they read, enact, and construct shared texts with peers (Brownell, 2023; Kuby et al., 2015; Rowsell & Wohlwend, 2016). Through these multimodal practices, children learn that meaning is not confined to words on a page but can be shaped through gesture, sound, image, and material action. Imaginative play further foregrounds embodied language and literacy as children compose ‘live-action texts’ with their bodies, voices, and materials, expanding narrative and interpretive repertoires (Thiel, 2015; Wohlwend, 2011). As play extends into digital spaces, new possibilities emerge for multimodal composing, with young learners remixing texts, images, and gestures across physical and virtual environments (Flint & Adams, 2024; Wargo, 2025).

Research on conventional literacy outcomes links these playful experiences to alphabet knowledge, print awareness, and comprehension (Neuman et al., 2007). When

environmental print and writing materials are integrated into play spaces, children recognize letters and words and dictate, draw, and write messages that strengthen sound-symbol connections (Roskos & Christie, 2011). Research also shows that professional development that supports teachers in designing and sustaining play increases the likelihood that classrooms embed rich materials and opportunities for emergent reading, writing, and speaking into instructional practices, connecting imaginative activity with measurable gains in language and literacy (Han, 2021; Han et al., 2023).

Studies of sociodramatic play deepen this picture by showing how shared imaginary scenarios and evolving storyworlds nurture the language, narrative, and symbolic abilities that support early reading and writing (Flint, 2025; Rowe, 2012; Wohlwend et al., 2019). As children play or act out stories together, they develop plots and characters through movement, dialogue, and shared imagination. These embodied storylines often inspire children to record or extend their play beyond the moment, using marks, drawings, and emergent writing to represent key events or ideas. Through this shift from action to symbol, children transform lived episodes into written and visual texts (Han, 2021; Vygotsky, 1978). In this way, playful storyworlds serve as a bridge between collaborative storytelling and emerging composing practices that weave together play, talk, and print.

Across this body of research, play consistently appears as a key driver of language and literacy development. When children have sustained opportunities for self-directed and guided play, they develop alphabetic knowledge, print awareness, vocabulary, narrative competence, comprehension, language skills, interpretive flexibility, and literate identities (Han, 2021; Roskos & Christie, 2011; Neuman et al., 2007). These findings challenge restrictive conceptions of readiness and invite educators and policymakers to recognize play as a central mechanism through which language and literacy flourish in the early years (Burnett & Merchant, 2020; Kuby et al., 2015; Mannard, 2023).

Strategies and Approaches

Teaching Language and Literacy Through Play

Play-based learning is an empirically supported approach for fostering early language and literacy development (Han et al., 2010). A growing body of research demonstrates that young children acquire foundational literacy skills most effectively when learning occurs in meaningful, playful, and socially interactive contexts (Hirsh-Pasek et al., 2009; Neuman et al., 2007). Importantly, empirical studies have addressed the critical question of whether play makes a measurable difference in children's learning outcomes. Han et al. (2010) found that play-based learning environments positively influenced young children's language and literacy development, providing strong evidence that play is not merely enjoyable but instructionally powerful. These findings underscore the importance of intentionally designed play experiences that integrate language and literacy learning within child-centered practice.

Based on this evidence, we recommend several practical strategies for supporting language and literacy development through play in early childhood classrooms. First, educators should **develop literacy-enriched dramatic play settings** by embedding print materials such as labels, signs, posters, and other forms of environmental print within play areas. When children engage in pretend scenarios—such as grocery stores, doctor's offices, or family roles—they naturally incorporate functional reading and writing behaviors, including making lists, reading signs, and storytelling. These experiences support print awareness and help children understand the purposeful use of literacy in everyday contexts.

Second, teachers should **intentionally support oral language through guided play**. Oral language and vocabulary development are central to literacy learning, and play provides authentic opportunities for extended conversations, negotiation, explanation, and narrative construction. Educators can enhance these interactions by planning vocabulary aligned with play themes, modeling rich and varied language, and encouraging children to repeat and apply new words during play. Such intentional scaffolding strengthens expressive language and comprehension.

Third, **alphabet knowledge can be taught through playful, multisensory games**. Activities such as letter-matching games, memory games, rhyming games, and sorting tasks promote letter recognition and sound-symbol connections. Songs, movement, and embodied learning—such as forming letters with body movements—further support engagement and retention by integrating physical activity with cognitive learning.

Fourth, **teachers can incorporate movement-based phonological awareness activities** through chanting, singing, puppet play, and sound-based games. These playful experiences help children attend to, manipulate, and discriminate sounds in words, laying the foundation for later decoding skills.

Fifth, **readers' theater and reader response activities** offer opportunities to deepen comprehension and engagement. During interactive read-alouds, children can dramatize stories, retell narratives using props, or express responses through drawing and discussion. Such playful responses position children as active meaning-makers and foster positive dispositions toward reading (Flint, 2016, 2025; Rosenblatt, 1994).

Finally, **integrate playful writing experiences** across play contexts. Writing menus, signs, messages, and stories allows children to experiment with marks, letters, and words in meaningful ways, supporting fine motor development and early spelling knowledge (Bodrova & Leong, 2007).

In conclusion, research clearly shows that play makes a difference. Teaching literacy through play supports alphabet knowledge, phonological awareness, comprehension, writing, and oral language development while promoting motivation and engagement. When thoughtfully designed and intentionally guided, play-based literacy instruction offers a powerful, evidence-based approach to early childhood education.

Conclusion and Recommendations

This paper has argued that play is not peripheral to language and literacy learning but a transformative and essential context through which young children develop the cognitive, linguistic, social-emotional, and embodied capacities that support

school readiness. Drawing on interdisciplinary research, the paper challenges prescriptive, technical conceptions of readiness and critiques policy-driven interpretations of the “science of reading” that privilege discrete, decontextualized skills over meaning-making, engagement, and holistic child development. Across the literature, a consistent pattern emerges: when children engage in sustained, socially rich, and materially supported play, they develop foundational language and literacy competencies—including vocabulary, narrative skill, print awareness, phonological sensitivity, and emergent writing—alongside agency, motivation, and resilient literate identities.

Despite this evidence, play has been increasingly diminished in kindergarten classrooms. Heightened academic pressures, accountability demands, and misconceptions about rigor have reduced time, space, and support for play, often replacing it with extended whole-group instruction, worksheets, and scripted curricula. This erosion of play is particularly concerning given that kindergarten serves as a critical bridge between early childhood and formal schooling. The lack of play in kindergarten not only constrains children’s opportunities to integrate language, literacy, and social interaction, but also risks undermining self-regulation, engagement, and long-term learning trajectories. Bringing play back to kindergarten is therefore not a nostalgic gesture, but a research-based imperative.

Reframing readiness as a holistic and ecological construct positions play as a central instructional practice rather than an optional enrichment activity. To support this shift, this paper offers several recommendations. First, kindergarten classrooms should intentionally reintroduce extended, high-quality play that integrates print, writing tools, and multimodal materials. Second, professional development must equip teachers to sustain play while explicitly linking playful activity to language and literacy goals. Third, policymakers and curriculum designers should reconsider readiness expectations and accountability systems that marginalize play. Finally, future research should continue to document how play-based literacy practices support diverse learners across cultural, linguistic, and institutional contexts.

Restoring play to kindergarten affirms children's rights as learners and meaning makers and offers a more just, ecologically grounded vision for early language and literacy education.

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Kids Deserve More Than Just Change — They Deserve Justice

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Introduction

Policies influence nearly every part of a child’s life—from where they live and go to school, to whether they have safe places to play. That’s why policy reform is about more than just laws or government plans—it’s about real children and real families. When a policy causes change, people often assume that’s a good thing. But change doesn’t always equal progress, especially if the changes leave out or hurt certain groups.

After Hurricane Katrina hit New Orleans, many government systems were overhauled quickly. Public housing was demolished, schools were closed or turned into charter schools, and more police were brought into communities. These changes had significant effects, but they didn’t always help families—especially Black families and low-income residents. Thousands were displaced and couldn’t return. Children were uprooted from their homes and schools with no clear plan to help them feel safe or rebuild their lives (Gotham, 2007).

Kids in disasters don’t just lose homes—they lose routines, friendships, and safe spaces to play and process what’s happened. If we don’t reform the policies that caused these harms, we risk repeating the same mistakes in future crises.

Problem Statement

When Change Hurts Instead of Helps

In Delaware today, a housing crisis is unfolding. Rent is going up, affordable housing is limited, and many families are struggling to find stable shelter. Shelters are overcrowded and underfunded. As of 2024, over 1,000 people in Delaware experience homelessness on a given night, and many of them are children (National Alliance to End Homelessness, 2024).

Children who are homeless face enormous barriers. They may move frequently, miss school, or struggle with anxiety and trauma. Often, they don’t have any safe place to play. But play is not optional for children. It helps them manage stress, build social

connections, and make sense of their world. It's how they learn to cooperate, create, and heal.

Policies that fail to protect children's housing and well-being make it impossible for play to thrive. When families are just trying to survive, play gets pushed aside—even though it's essential for child development. That's why reform is necessary. Policies need to support safe, stable homes, community spaces, and unstructured time for kids to be kids.

Background

Reform Means Listening to Kids and Their Communities

One of the biggest problems with many policies is that they are written without input from the people most affected. When families and communities are left out of decision-making, policies often reflect the priorities of powerful groups, not the needs of everyday people.

Reform means inviting voices that have been excluded. It means asking parents what support they need and asking kids what makes them feel safe, happy, and free to play. It also means shifting from policies that control children—through over-policing, excessive testing, or rigid discipline—toward policies that nurture them.

For example, many schools have cut back on recess and play time to focus more on academics. But research shows that children concentrate better, learn faster, and behave more positively when they have time to move, imagine, and explore (Ginsburg, 2007). Reforming education policy to prioritize recess, physical education, and play-based learning would benefit children in every part of their lives.

We must also recognize that play equity is not the same for all children. Children in affluent neighborhoods may have access to parks, playgrounds, extracurriculars, and safe streets. Children in under-resourced areas often have none of these, reflecting long-standing patterns of concentrated poverty and unequal community investment (Wilson, 1987). Reform means closing that gap—not by giving kids permission to play, but by giving them the resources and environments to do so.

Reform Is a Sign That We Care

It's not always easy to admit when something isn't working. But being willing to reform old systems shows that we are paying attention and that we care about the outcomes. Children's lives are shaped by the systems adults create—whether it's housing, education, or healthcare. When those systems fail, children feel it first. We don't have to accept outdated policies as permanent placements. Reform allows us to update policies to reflect new research, modern realities, and community voices. It allows us to say: “We've learned from the past. We can do better.”

Reform also builds public trust. When families see that governments are willing to change harmful policies, they are more likely to engage, participate, and believe in those institutions again. That's especially important for communities that have experienced long histories of neglect, racism, or exclusion.

Appropriate Strategies

Policy Recommendations: Building a System That Honors Childhood

If we want a society that supports children's well-being, we must start by making room for joy, imagination, and rest in children's daily lives. Here are some key reforms that can help create a system where play is not only protected—but encouraged:

- 1. Restore and Expand Recess and Play in Schools**

All children should have multiple opportunities during the school day for unstructured, outdoor play. Research from the American Academy of Pediatrics shows that recess improves attention, mood, and social development (Ginsburg, 2007). Schools should be required to provide a minimum amount of daily playtime, especially in early childhood and elementary grades.

- 2. Create Safe, Accessible Community Play Spaces**

Local governments must prioritize funding for parks, playgrounds, and recreational programs—especially in low-income neighborhoods. Equity in play starts with access. Municipal planning should ensure that every child can reach a safe play area within walking distance of home.

3. **Invest in Trauma-Informed Systems**

In the wake of disasters or family crises, children need trauma-informed support. Policies that provide mental health services in schools, train teachers in social-emotional learning, and reduce punitive discipline help children feel safe enough to play again.

4. **Increase Affordable Housing and Family Stability**

A child cannot thrive if their basic needs are not met. Housing policies must ensure long-term affordability and stability. This includes support for transitional housing, rental assistance, and programs that prevent eviction and displacement.

5. **Include Families and Youth in Policymaking**

Children may not vote, but their voices matter. Policy design should include input from families, educators, and even young people themselves. Participatory budgeting and school councils are two ways to bring community perspectives into policy reform.

Case Study: What Happens When Play Is Prioritized

In the city of Boston, the Parks and Recreation Department worked with child development experts and community members to create a “Play Space Equity Initiative.” This plan involved mapping underserved neighborhoods and using feedback to design new, culturally inclusive play areas. The result? A measurable increase in outdoor activity and a stronger sense of neighborhood pride among children and parents alike.

This is just one example of how intentional reform, driven by equity and participation, leads to better outcomes. We can’t simply assume policies will trickle down to help children. We must design them with children in mind from the start.

The Role of Play in Racial and Social Justice

Play is not a separate issue from justice—it reflects it. When children of color are overpoliced, underhoused, and deprived of green spaces, their opportunities for play are stripped away. These disparities are connected to broader systems of racial inequality and social control that disproportionately affect Black communities (Alexander, 2010).

When children in poverty are denied safe afterschool programs or live in unsafe neighborhoods, their freedom to imagine and explore disappears.

A study by Playworks (2023) and the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation found that students of color and students in low-income schools are less likely to have access to quality recess environments. That inequity has long-term effects on learning, social skills, and emotional health. It reinforces cycles of disadvantage.

Reform must not only protect play—it must correct the structural racism and classism that limits who gets to enjoy childhood. Reform should challenge practices that over-discipline Black students, criminalize play in public spaces, or defund community programs in underserved areas. Play is a justice issue because it reflects whether we believe all children are equally worthy of joy.

Democracy and the Right to Joy

Reforming policy is about more than fixing mistakes—it's about renewing our values. In a democratic society, policy should be a tool for the people. That means it should respond to the voices of those it affects—especially children, who are so often spoken about but rarely heard.

Letting kids play isn't just about leisure—it's about creating the kind of society we want to live in. A place where joy is normal, where safety is shared, and where every child can grow with freedom and dignity. A society that defends a child's right to play is a society that takes democracy seriously.

Conclusion

Children are not just the future—they're the present. And their needs must guide how we build and rebuild our systems. Reform matters because justice is ongoing. Because play is power. Because children deserve more than resilience—they deserve joy.

When we reform policy to reflect that truth, we're not just improving laws. We're improving lives. And we're making space for every child to grow up in a world that makes room for their laughter, rest, questions, and play.

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Time, Space, and Permission: Critical Ingredients for Integrating Play in Public Schools

Denisha Jones, PhD, JD

Introduction

Despite the mounds of research that documents how child-led free play supports self-regulation/executive functioning (Colliver et al., 2022; Barker et al., 2014); strengthens peer relationships and social competence, increases physical activity (Flanders et al., 2009; Jaggy et al., 2023; Razak et al., 2018); is associated with gains in cognitive flexibility and problem solving, richer oral language and narrative skills, and stronger social-emotional competence (Nicolopoulou et al., 2015; Pellegrini & Smith, 1998) play continues to disappear from kindergarten and is almost non-existent in first through third grade (Hofferth & Sandberg, 2001; Thompson et al., 2023). Increased pressure to improve standardized test scores and to prove that students are meeting state and national standards has had far-reaching negative impacts on early childhood education. The pushdown of academics into kindergarten resulted in less time for child-led free play. Dubbed a crisis in kindergarten (Miller & Almon, 2009), this troubling trend has prompted early childhood educators and researchers to sound the alarm. However, after the COVID-19 pandemic, claims of widespread learning loss fueled continued pressure to push academics earlier.

This article summarizes findings from a yearlong study involving three teachers who participated in the Hatch Partners in Play cohort in Pittsburgh, PA. Two first-grade teachers and a kindergarten teacher in a public school piloted the PlayLab program, which included dedicated time for play with high-quality, open-ended materials three to five times a week. Data collected from initial interviews, two observations, and a final focus group reveal a shift in teachers' beliefs about play and learning and in their role in supporting play, leading to increased children's access to play. This shift revealed three critical ingredients for integrating play in public school early childhood classrooms: time, space, and permission. Next, I will review barriers to play in public schools, then explore how Playlab removed them by addressing three critical ingredients.

Problem Statement

Barriers to Play in Early Childhood Classrooms

Early childhood education covers ages birth through 8 and overlaps with public schools for kindergarten through 3rd grade. As kindergarten emphasis shifted to school readiness and test scores, early childhood teachers reported less time for play (Fowler, 2018; Levin & Van Horn, 2016). Moreover, once schools removed play from kindergarten and replaced it with learning centers, it never returned in first through third grade. Recess, which was used to ensure that all children in elementary and middle schools had free time to engage in physical activities, has also declined in public schools (Thompson et al., 2023).

As mentioned earlier, increased demand for accountability through improved test scores has contributed to the decline in play. However, other factors also create barriers to play. Teachers' beliefs about play have been documented as a barrier to increasing play in early childhood classrooms (Lynch, 2015; Ta, 2021). Though many early childhood teachers value play as the leading activity in development, some are unwilling to embrace it as pedagogy, or they face scrutiny from colleagues who lack training in early childhood education (Lynch, 2015). In her study of kindergarten teachers' online posts about play, Lynch (2015) noted that some acknowledged feeling pressure to engage in more academic instruction, or that they were judged negatively if their students were seen playing. The pressure from first-grade teachers who believe free play is wasted time makes it difficult for many kindergarten teachers to set aside time for play. Kindergarten teachers, now expected to teach kids how to read and write, tend to criticize play-based preschools because the children are not ready for academics. The push to downplay academics based on erroneous beliefs about school readiness (see Jones et al. in this volume) often forces teachers to abandon play under pressure to focus on academics. At this rate, should we expect 2-year-olds and 3-year-olds to play less so they can be ready for preschool?

Beliefs about play from parents and school administrators can also create barriers to play. Some parents do not see play as learning and worry their child will fall behind or struggle to keep up, so they request more academic instruction in preschool

and kindergarten. Kane (2016) studied parental beliefs about play and found that parents viewed play and learning as mutually exclusive, with play considered less important than developing literacy and math skills. Teachers can subscribe to the play-learning binary (three teachers in this study did so before instituting Playlab), and many administrators also fail to understand play and learning as mutually inclusive (play is learning). When parents and administrators fail to value play, early childhood teachers who believe in play are often pressured to reduce the time devoted to it (Holly & Dyke, 2026).

Other barriers to play in early childhood classrooms stem from school reform measures that claim to help low-income children of color achieve academic success. Levin and Van Horn (2016) interviewed 34 experienced early childhood teachers in schools serving low-income children affected by neoliberal school reform efforts. The teachers shared how these reforms actually harmed the children they were supposed to serve by increasing classroom test preparation, focusing on narrow skills, and reducing time for child-led play. The academic pushdown or schoolification of early childhood (Kane, 2016) is often included in reforms targeting children who are marginalized by their race and social class. Instead of supporting early childhood teachers in implementing culturally responsive practices and building their capabilities through agency and autonomy, these children receive a high dose of prescribed rote learning that restricts their movement and limits their development of critical thinking skills. Children born into wealthy white families can opt out of schoolification by paying for preschools and private schools that focus on developing soft skills and executive functioning and include ample time for child-led free play (Farran, 2025).

Ta (2021) argues that a lack of professional development to support early childhood teachers in developing a play pedagogy is another barrier. With the emphasis on academic learning, most teacher training focuses on introducing new curricula and instructional strategies to improve test scores. Many early childhood teachers lack the skills to embrace play as pedagogy. In my research on teachers' roles in play-led environments, I was surprised when one of the most experienced teachers of young children asked me what they should be doing while the kids were playing. Though early childhood teachers often value play as a much-needed break from learning, they are not

prepared to use play as pedagogy. As we see many states, such as California, New York, and New Mexico, expand access to early childhood education and care, we must ensure that teachers are prepared to lead with play if we do not want to see it disappear.

Background

Hatch Partners in Play and Playlab

Partners in Play was piloted in 2021 to build a space for equitable, true play experiences in public schools. Inspired by the Anji Play philosophy and approach created by Cheng Xueqin in Anji, China, true play is the right of all children to engage deeply and uninterrupted in an activity of their choosing. Troubled by the decline of play in public school classrooms, Shannon (Hatch Founder) and Dahlia (Program Director) founded Partners in Play as an equity-based strategy to bring play back into public schools. The initial cohort included 10 teachers from 3 schools who participated in monthly workshops on true play. Three teachers from a Title 1 school serving a predominantly Black, low-income community piloted Playlab during that initial year.

Playlab is defined as

“protected, extended periods of child-led free play—outside of recess and specials—with an intentional focus on exploration of materials, collaboration, socio-emotional learning (SEL), storytelling, and problem-solving. Playlab offers children high-quality, open-ended materials and invites them to explore freely, collaborate with others, or work independently, guiding their own experiences.”
(Hatch Partners in Play, n.d.)

As a research partner, I was invited to study the initial Partners in Play Cohort as part of my research on teachers' roles in play-led environments. Eight teachers from three locations (see Table 1) participated in the initial interviews to explore their current practices, focusing on classroom play and beliefs about it. We conducted observations in March and May. In March, we visited all three sites, but observed only a few teachers. In May, observations were conducted at a single location with three teachers. We conducted an exit focus group with the three teachers who participated in the second observation.

Table 1 Partners in Play Initial Pilot 2021-2022

Teacher	School	Grade	Initial Interview	Observation
SA	Fox (private)	Kindergarten	Yes	March
FK	Fox	1st	Yes	March
DD	Fox	Kindergarten	Yes	None
CK	HES Community School (public)	1st	Yes*	March and May
MJ	HES Community School	1st	Yes*	March and May
CR	HES Community School	Kindergarten	Yes*	March and May
FJ	Lower School (charter)	Kindergarten	No	None
BC	Lower School	Primary ELA	No	None
VA	Lower School	Primary Math	Yes	None
LL	Lower School	Kindergarten	Yes	March

*Participated in exit focus group

Approaches

Playlab began as a one-hour, two- to three-days-a-week play invitation led by Shannon and Dahlia. Each week, they facilitated Playlab in three classrooms at HES Community School. Each playlab introduced new open-ended materials and loose parts, allowing children to explore however they wanted. Two essential guidelines were provided: playlab was a protected space and could not be withheld as punishment, and a child could not be removed from playlab for any reason. This made sure that all children experienced playlab. At the end of playlab, children were given their journals and asked to reflect on their play. Playlab facilitators and teachers wrote down the students' dictated reflections. Shannon and Dahlia also reflected on the play they observed by crafting play stories, which they reviewed with the children. Gradually, each teacher began facilitating their own playlab each day and writing play stories (Rao & Merenstein, 2025). By the second observation, Playlab was increased to 60-90 minutes. When asked why Playlab was longer, they noted how the benefits of Playlab made it easier to teach the curriculum. More importantly, they noted that Playlab fostered a stronger sense of community, leading to a decrease in challenging behaviors.

Teachers and Children Need Time, Space, and Permission to Play

At the end of the pilot year, the three teachers who implemented Playlab became Ambassadors for the Hatch Partners in Play program. Based on the positive experiences they noted in their classroom, including a strengthened sense of community and gains in literacy skills, they recognized that protected time to play benefited all students. As a result, they advocated expanding Playlab to all kindergarten and first-grade classrooms, as well as establishing a dedicated Playlab classroom. Each teacher went on to present their experience and the benefits of Playlab in public elementary schools.

Data analysis of observations and interviews revealed three critical ingredients for Playlab's success: time, space, and permission. Finding time in any classroom for a new activity is not easy. Teachers are under tremendous pressure to meet benchmarks, assess student learning, and ensure students meet standards. Thus, asking teachers to make time for play seems impossible. Nonetheless, because these teachers were in the cohort and wanted to learn more about Playlab, they made the time. Shannon and Dahlia began slowly, allowing the teachers and students to become familiar with Playlab. As the original Playlab facilitators, they also gave the teachers time to observe.

During my first observation, I noticed that the children in CK's classroom appeared less engaged during Playlab. They sat quietly in small groups playing but did not have the same energy as the kids in MJ's class. By the second observation, there had been a noticeable change, and all three classes were actively engaged in a variety of play experiences. One key difference was time. As the children had more time to get used to Playlab, their engagement deepened. As they recognized that this was their protected time to play, their play changed. Time is a key factor in integrating play in public schools. Teachers need to make time for play, and students need time to play. Building Playlab into the daily routine ensures time.

Space is also a critical ingredient for integrating play in public schools. During my initial visit, it was still cold and snowy, so Playlab took place in the classrooms. During my second visit, it was held both indoors and outdoors. The outdoor Playlab space was held in a corridor between two buildings, not in the playground. The teachers were adamant that Playlab be distinguished from recess. They felt that if others saw Playlab

as another form of recess, it would not be valued. So, they brought materials outside and created a new play space.

Whether in the classroom or outdoors, children need space to play. Space includes full access to the physical location and materials. Though the children spent every day in their classroom, during Playlab, they had greater access to the room. As they spent more time in Playlab, they began to explore the room more and select materials they had not used before. Each week, they were introduced to new open-ended materials that also allowed them to deepen their play. Many of the play stories Shannon and Dahlia wrote demonstrated how the students engaged with new materials. The combination of indoor and outdoor spaces, along with easy access to play materials, supported both the teacher and the children as they engaged in Playlab.

Given that negative beliefs about play create barriers to play-led teaching and learning, teachers need permission to lead with play. Shannon and Dahlia met with the administrators at HES Community School to create buy-in for Playlab. They also worked with a district-level contact to ensure Playlab would be supported. One of three teachers, CR, shared that her principal did not think Playlab was a good idea. Her kindergarten class had the lowest scores on the literacy assessment, and he thought they should spend more time reinforcing literacy skills rather than playing. CR decided to stick with Playlab, though she was concerned she might not be able to, given the pushback she was receiving. MJ and CK, who had more seniority at the school, used their power to encourage CR to remain committed to Playlab. They gave her permission to challenge her principal and keep Playlab in her classroom. In my second observation, I was informed that her class had achieved the highest literacy score of any kindergarten class. Now she had all the permission she needed to continue with Playlab.

Children also need permission to play. At the beginning of Playlab, I noticed that the teachers were more controlling. During the first observation, I noted that each teacher issued 15-20 controlling directives during play. They said things like, “do not do that”, “do not go there”, “that is not how you use that”, and “this is not recess, make a better choice”. They put limits on students' play to ensure it was “productive”. During the second observation, I only heard 2-3 controlling directives during Playlab. The

students had more permission to play. In MJ's classroom, the children hopped up on the desks and began playing a game with the hollow blocks. They did not ask first; they just did it. This would not have been allowed to happen during the first visit, but MJ did not interfere. He observed them but let them walk around on top of the desks. As he began to trust the children's ability to play, he permitted them to play as they chose.

Conclusion

We know that play is vital for children's development and that play is learning. Nonetheless, children spend less time playing in school today, and this growing play deficit may contribute to a decline in children's mental health (Gray et al., 2023). As early childhood educators, we have a responsibility to advocate for what we know young children need. We must resist the pressure to separate play from learning and inform parents, other teachers, and administrators about the benefits of play.

Playlab is a tool for ensuring all students have access to play. It provides teachers with a structure for integrating play into the classroom. Playlab creates the time, space, and permission for teachers to observe children playing and witness the power of play. Playlab gave students time, space, and permission to demonstrate their capabilities through child-led free play. As teachers saw how protected playtime supported students' academic learning, they shifted their beliefs about play. They advocated for more students to access Playlab and served as mentors to other teachers. They also shared Playlab with parents, inviting them to the school to observe their children playing and read their play stories. They reassured families that time for play was a worthwhile investment.

This study sought to understand the teacher's role in play-led environments. What do teachers do differently when they lead with play? These teachers observed, directed, guided, and learned from play. However, most importantly, they became play advocates. As they witnessed play's power to boost children's confidence, language skills, cooperation, and problem-solving, they embraced play as essential to academic learning. They took the time, space, and permission needed to remove the barriers to play.

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Celebrating Play in Early Intervention: Every Child Deserves a Playful Journey

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Introduction

Every child has a right to a playful journey throughout childhood, regardless of ability, strengths, identity, or areas of growth. In Bathurst, New South Wales (NSW), Australia, a small yet impactful early intervention service uses its voice to advocate for and celebrate the unique and wonderful play of children with developmental delay, children with disability, and neurodivergent children. Bathurst Early Childhood Intervention Service (BECIS) views play not only as a child's right, but also as a source of joy, belonging, agency, connection, and participation. Joy and play are a powerful combination at the heart of its early intervention approach.

As an author who does not have a disability, careful consideration has been given to the language used throughout this paper. Language choices can influence societal attitudes and understandings of disability (People with Disability Australia, 2019). This paper adopts a disability-affirming and neuro-affirming approach informed by the social model of disability, while recognising that language preferences are individual. For the purposes of this discussion, person-first and identity-first language will be used. For children without a diagnosis but with developmental delay or concern, the term *children with developmental delay* will be used, consistent with terminology currently adopted by Australia's National Disability Insurance Scheme (National Disability Insurance Scheme, 2025).

Currently, Australia's early intervention bodies are reviewing the use of the term *intervention* (Moore et al., 2025). While best practice increasingly recognizes that the term may not be disability-affirming or neuro-affirming, consensus regarding alternative terminology is still emerging. Therefore, this paper will use the term *early intervention* throughout.

The Issues

Play in Jeopardy

Play is a fundamental human right. Article 31 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (United Nations, 1989) states that children have the right to rest, leisure, play, and recreational activities. This right belongs to every child, regardless of race, gender, language, culture, religion, nationality, disability, or any other aspect of identity. The United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities further reinforces that children who have disability have the right to play (United Nations, 2006). Casey (2021) argues that realising the right to play for children with disability requires active efforts to remove barriers and create inclusive play opportunities.

Despite these international commitments, children do not experience play opportunities equally. Research suggests that children with developmental delay, children with disability, and neurodivergent children frequently encounter barriers to meaningful play participation. An international study by Moore et al. (2023) found that children with disability often have fewer opportunities for play than children without disabilities. Societal attitudes, inaccessible environments, limited inclusive opportunities, and adult assumptions about what counts as "appropriate" play can restrict children's playful experiences. When adults view play through a deficit lens or see it primarily as something to improve, manage, measure, or control, they can diminish children's right to play. Brown (2024) describes this broader societal trend as contributing to play deprivation and highlights its potential consequences for children's wellbeing and development.

Play should be fun, self-directed, flexible, challenging, and freely chosen (United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child, 2013). It does not depend on productivity or adult-defined outcomes. Yet the play of children with developmental delay, children with disability, and neurodivergent children is often scrutinized, interrupted, or judged against normative expectations. As a result, the joy, agency, and diversity inherent in their play may go unrecognised. Protecting the right to play requires a shift away from

adult agendas and toward recognising and valuing children's own ways of engaging with the world.

Play is in jeopardy and must be addressed. The right to play for children with developmental delay, children with disability, and neurodivergent children must be actively promoted within early intervention and within society more broadly.

Background

BECIS is committed to promoting, advocating for, and celebrating all children's play. Small in size yet ambitious in purpose, the service works alongside children, families, professionals, and the wider community to elevate the importance of play and the joy it brings. BECIS champions every child's playful journey and believes that advocacy for play is a shared responsibility.

Bathurst Early Childhood Intervention Service (BECIS)

Located in Bathurst, New South Wales, BECIS sits among Australian native flora and fauna. The environment reflects the service's philosophy of belonging, acceptance, and connection. Families frequently describe BECIS as a place where they feel safe, welcomed, and celebrated. It is a place where children and families can be themselves without judgment, where diversity is recognised as a strength, and where play is valued in all its forms.

Established in 1981, BECIS was the first early childhood intervention service west of the Blue Mountains in New South Wales. Over the decades, it has evolved in response to changing evidence, policy, community needs, and understandings of disability and child development. The service remains a not-for-profit charitable organization governed by a volunteer board and supported by a dedicated community.

BECIS employs a team of highly skilled early childhood specialists, speech pathologists, allied health assistants, educators, administration staff, and leaders. Together they bring extensive expertise in child development, family-centered practice, and inclusive education. While their professional knowledge is considerable, their commitment to children, families, and play drives their daily practice.

The sounds of children's play fill the BECIS environment. Sometimes play is energetic and loud. Sometimes it is rhythmic, imaginative, quiet, sensory, or wonderfully chaotic. Each form of play is valued and celebrated as an authentic expression of childhood.

BECIS draws upon the principles of the *National Best Practice Framework for Early Intervention* (Moore et al., 2025). The service supports approximately 200 children and their families each year, partnering with them to build participation, belonging, agency, and capability across home, community, early childhood education, and school settings. This work is grounded in a commitment to human rights, strengths-based practice, and the recognition that disability reflects human diversity rather than a deficit (Australian Human Rights Commission, 2025).

Appropriate Approaches and Strategies

When a human rights approach guides early intervention, play becomes essential, not optional. Because play is a child's right, protecting and promoting opportunities for play must be a core responsibility of services that support children and families. Play is not simply a mechanism for achieving developmental outcomes. It has inherent value and meaning for children, and protecting that value is fundamental to rights-based practice.

General Comment No. 17 on Article 31 of the UNCRC defines play as a behaviour, activity, or process initiated, controlled, and structured by children themselves (United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child, 2013). Play is intrinsically motivated, undertaken for its own sake, and arises whenever and wherever opportunities exist. Play allows children to experience autonomy, enjoyment, challenge, flexibility, creativity, and exploration. It contributes to physical, social, emotional, cognitive, and spiritual well-being and development.

Gray (2013) further supports this understanding. Gray describes play as self-chosen, self-directed, intrinsically motivated, imaginative, and relatively stress-free. Play helps children practise and build essential physical, social, emotional, and intellectual skills while nurturing curiosity, confidence, and resilience. Gray argues that play is a

biological necessity and a vital pathway through which children learn about themselves, others, and the world around them.

BECIS uses this understanding of play to shape its early intervention approach. Families are supported to recognise that every child is born with curiosity, playfulness, and a powerful capacity to learn through play. When families understand that play is not merely entertainment but a biological and developmental necessity, they become stronger advocates for their child's right to play and for recognising their child's unique ways of engaging with the world.

Play is inherently diverse. What motivates one child may not motivate another. Children's interests, sensory experiences, communication styles, imaginations, and ways of interacting with their environments differ considerably. The play of children with developmental delay, children with disability, and neurodivergent children may not always align with dominant expectations of play, yet it remains authentic, meaningful, and valuable. A strengths-based perspective requires adults to recognise and celebrate this diversity rather than seek to change it.

At BECIS, we view all play as valid. We understand children's play as an expression of identity, agency, strengths, interests, and capabilities. Families are encouraged to celebrate their children's unique forms of play and to advocate for environments where this play is welcomed and respected. Through this approach, children experience the freedom, acceptance, and recognition they deserve.

BECIS does not have goals to change children's play. Adult agendas are intentionally set aside whenever possible so children can play in ways that are meaningful to them. Professionals do not direct play toward predetermined outcomes; they create the conditions for play to flourish. Skilled practitioners facilitate, observe, scaffold when appropriate, and respond flexibly to family priorities while protecting children's autonomy and rights.

This does not mean there are no moments where adult involvement is necessary. Rather, it means that adult involvement is thoughtful, responsive, and guided by the individual child and family. Human rights and strengths-based practice require flexibility, recognizing that family priorities and child preferences may vary from day to

day. Skilled practitioners balance responsiveness to family goals with protection of children's rights and opportunities for self-directed play.

Play teaches children to solve problems, negotiate relationships, regulate emotions, take risks, be creative, and explore possibilities. By taking time to observe children's play without unnecessary interruption, practitioners and families gain valuable insight into children's strengths, interests, motivations, and capabilities. Seeing play in this way enables early intervention to become a celebration of children's competence, identity, and development rather than a process focused primarily on deficits or remediation. For BECIS, play is not separate from early intervention. Play is the heart of it.

Conclusion and Recommendations

BECIS demonstrates how a human rights and strengths-based approach can place play at the center of early intervention. Through partnerships with children, families, professionals, and community, the service actively promotes every child's right to play in ways that are meaningful, joyful, and authentic. Its work illustrates how recognising and celebrating diverse forms of play can strengthen participation, belonging, agency, and wellbeing for children and families.

To strengthen children's right to play within early intervention and beyond, this paper proposes the following recommendations:

1. **Recognise play as a fundamental human right**, not solely as a therapeutic or developmental tool.
2. **Adopt disability-affirming and neuro-affirming approaches** that respect and celebrate diverse forms of play.
3. **Support families in understanding and advocating for play**, including recognising their children's unique strengths, interests, and ways of participating.
4. **Create inclusive communities and environments** where all children can access meaningful play opportunities.

5. **Embed the right to play within policy, practice, and professional education**, ensuring that children's voices, rights, and experiences remain central.

BECIS imagines a world where play is accessible, inclusive, celebrated, and naturally available to all children. It imagines communities where children can play in ways that are meaningful to them and where their play is recognised as valuable and worthy. It imagines families who proudly advocate for their children's right to play and professionals who champion play as a cornerstone of childhood.

Ultimately, every child deserves a playful journey. When children's play is recognised, protected, and celebrated, we create communities in which every child can confidently say: *"I can play my way. My play is valued. My play is my right."* Let every child's play be celebrated. Let early intervention have a playful heart. Let children play.

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Realising the Right to Play through Pedagogy: A Scottish Perspective on Systemic Change in Education

"Embedding Play in National Education Systems"

Fiona Kirkland, Med, Play Scotland

Introduction

Play as a Right in Education

'Play is the highest level of child development. It is the spontaneous expression of thought and feeling, an expression which his inner life requires... It promotes enjoyment, satisfaction, serenity and constitutes the source of all that can benefit the child....At this stage play is never trivial; it is serious and deeply significant.'

(Froebel in Lilley, 1967, p. 84)

Children make sense of their world through play. It is how they explore ideas, try things out, and build relationships with the people around them. Careful observation quickly shows that play is where children's curiosity, creativity, determination and problem-solving are most clearly expressed (Bruce, 2015; Moyles, 2015). For those of us working in the play sector, this is not a sentimental claim but a practical one. Play provides a powerful route into learning, wellbeing, belonging and inclusion, particularly when adults are able to recognise the learning taking place and create conditions that support children in leading their own exploration while being thoughtfully and responsively supported (Else, 2014; Athey, 2007).

Play is also very firmly a children's rights issue. Article 31 of the *United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child* sets out the right to rest, leisure and play, and *General Comment No. 17* makes it clear that this right should be realised in children's everyday lives, including within the settings where they spend so much of their time (UN Committee on the Rights of the Child, 2013). In Scotland, the UNCRC has been incorporated into Scots law, strengthening this commitment and duties for public bodies, including schools and local authorities, in day-to-day decision-making (Scottish Government, 2024).

Despite this, many education systems, Scotland's included, struggle to deliver on play. While play is widely recognised as essential in early childhood, it is often progressively constrained as children move through primary education (in Scotland, primary education spans ages 4–12). The pressure to demonstrate evidence of progress intensifies. As they go through school, children lose time, space, and permission to engage in freely chosen, meaningful, and developmentally rich play (Brooker, 2013; Ardelean, Smith, & Russell, 2021). We know that children have a right to play, and that play is a powerful and well-evidenced way for children to learn; however, existing school structures often make this difficult to realise in practice. The gap sits in the misalignment between policy intent, accountability expectations, professional learning, the physical environment, and school culture.

This paper explores how Scotland is working to support schools in embedding play pedagogy as a whole-school approach. Play should not be an add-on, and certainly not confined to the early years, but rather essential from the first year to the last. Drawing on my role as Play Pedagogy Lead at Play Scotland, it outlines how schools are supported to build shared understanding, strengthen leadership, shape environments and practice, and evaluate impact over time. It also highlights the levers that make change more sustainable, which include shared language, credible observation, and supportive leadership. The aim is to offer practical learning for international colleagues seeking to move from strong statements about children's right to play to everyday practice that makes that right real.

Problem Statement

The Gap Between Rights and Reality

Despite Article 31 of the *United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child* clearly protecting children's right to play, this remains one of the least realised rights within formal education. In many systems, school cultures are shaped by formal attainment, standardisation and performance measures. When the pressure is on to evidence progress quickly and visibly, play is often treated as optional, or as something that sits outside the main business of learning (Ardelean, Smith, & Russell, 2021; Brooker, 2013). The challenge is not that educators do not value play; it is that

conditions can make it difficult to protect, prioritise and defend it. This is especially true when timetables, assessment expectations, space constraints, staffing pressures, and unspoken norms about "what counts" combine to narrow children's daily experience.

A common misconception, still surprisingly persistent, is that play is mainly for younger children and should give way to more formal methods as they grow older. In primary schools this often translates into play being confined to breaks, or used as a reward once the 'real work' is completed, creating a false divide between play and learning (Bruce, 2015; Moyles, 2015). That divide matters because it reduces children's opportunities to develop agency, creativity, collaboration, and deeper thinking, and it can also narrow the ways children can show what they know and can do. It can also particularly disadvantage children who communicate, regulate, or demonstrate competence in ways that are more visible in play than in formal tasks. When we view play as something separate from learning, we also risk missing what play reveals about children's interests, their working theories, their strengths, and their support needs (Athey, 2007; Nutbrown, 2011; Hedges & Cooper, 2018).

There are also perceived barriers to a play pedagogy approach. Many teachers report limited access to professional learning that supports planning for play pedagogy, observing learning in play, and making that learning visible in ways that feel credible to colleagues, leaders and families. Where play is undervalued, practitioners can feel they are constantly justifying their approach, particularly in upper primary where pace, coverage and attainment expectations can be intense (Ardelean, Smith, & Russell, 2021). These pressures are compounded by parental anxieties and wider societal narratives about readiness, attainment and what "good schooling" should look like, especially where families feel the stakes are high. In that context, staff can end up playing it safe, not because they doubt play, but because they are unsure how to evidence learning in ways that will be recognised.

These issues are not unique to Scotland. The gap between what we know about play and what many children actually experience in school points to the need for cultural, structural and pedagogical change. Without that shift, the right to play risks remaining a principle we endorse rather than a lived reality in classrooms every day. If

we want Article 31 to be meaningful in education, then play needs to be planned for, protected, and defended with the same seriousness as other entitlements.

Background

Scotland's Policy and Practice Context

Scotland's current focus on play pedagogy sits within a longer journey of policy, practice and research that places children's rights, wellbeing and holistic development at the centre. Our national curriculum, *Curriculum for Excellence*, creates space for learning that is active, relevant and responsive and an expectation that children have opportunities to explore, create, collaborate and make meaning, rather than simply receive information (Education Scotland, 2023).

Alongside this, *Realising the Ambition: Being Me* strengthened national guidance on developmentally effective practice, positioning play as central in the early years and highlighting relationships, responsive environments and children's agency as foundations for learning (Education Scotland, 2020). Although often associated with early years, it has also fuelled professional discussion about high-quality learning across the primary education stage (in Scotland, primary education spans ages 4–12), particularly when wellbeing and rights are taken seriously.

A key development has been the strengthening of the children's rights context. Article 31 of the UNCRC sets out the right to rest, leisure and play, and *General Comment No. 17* clarifies how states should respect, protect and fulfill that right in everyday life, including within education (UN Committee on the Rights of the Child, 2013). In 2024, Scotland incorporated the UNCRC into Scots law through the *UNCRC (Incorporation) (Scotland) Act*, placing duties on public bodies, including schools and local authorities, to give due regard to children's rights in decision-making and service delivery (Scottish Government, 2024). For schools, this reinforces the expectation that play is not simply a pedagogical preference; it is part of what rights-based education looks like in practice.

This rights-based direction is reflected across Scotland's wider play policy landscape. Scotland has had a national *Play Strategy* since 2013, which sets a clear

ambition for play and establishes a strong foundation for recognising children's right to play. The new *Play Vision Statement and Action Plan 2025 to 2030* builds on the strategy, focusing delivery around three drivers: parents, place and practitioners, and calling for action so that children have time, space and permission to play in daily life. (Scottish Government, 2013; Scottish Government, 2025). Work on play sufficiency, place-based approaches, and child-friendly planning continues to strengthen the wider context for schools, recognising that opportunities for play are shaped by education and by communities, infrastructure and culture.

Within this evolving landscape, Play Scotland has worked to connect policy, research and practice in ways that are useful to schools. Resources such as the *Play Types Toolkit* have been developed to help schools bring more play into the school day. *The State of Play in Scotland*, which captures ongoing challenges and opportunities in children's access to play, has supported the case for play across settings and ages (Scott-McKie & Casey, 2017; Play Scotland, 2023). At the practice level, progress is strongest when staff deepen their understanding of play pedagogy and change everyday approaches, particularly in observation, interaction, and environment design, so that learning through play is recognised, valued, and evidenced. Local practitioner networks across Scotland also provide peer support and professional dialogue that help colleagues test ideas and sustain change over time. Froebelian principles sit within this wider mix for many practitioners, offering a coherent rights-and-relationships lens alongside other approaches.

In this rights-based and practice-focused context, Scotland's approaches and strategies work to embed play pedagogy in primary schools have gathered momentum. In my role at Play Scotland, I support schools in making sense of this landscape and translating it into practical change. This includes building shared understanding across staff teams, developing environments that invite exploration and collaboration, and strengthening observation and reflection to make learning through play visible. The next section outlines the approaches that have been most helpful when schools want change that is sustainable, inclusive, and credible within existing school expectations.

Strategies

What Supports Sustainable Change

Scotland's progress in embedding play pedagogy in primary education has been strongest where it is treated as a whole school change process rather than an individual initiative or a short-term improvement theme. What schools often need first is not a list of activities but a shared understanding of what play pedagogy means, why it matters for children's learning and wellbeing, and how it connects to curriculum expectations and children's rights. When staff have time to explore the research together, reflect honestly on current practice, and agree a common language, play pedagogy becomes easier to protect and more likely to be sustained (Moyles, 2015; Brooker, 2013).

A practical starting point is to review children's daily experience, asking the questions: where are children offered genuine choice and agency, and where do timetables, routines, or narrow expectations restrict play? Observation is essential, and when schools invest in observation and reflection, they tend to become more responsive, and planning shifts from delivering content to building the conditions for meaningful learning. Just as importantly, it gives staff credible evidence they can use in conversations about progress, including for children who may not show their strengths as clearly in formal tasks.

Leadership makes a real difference. Schools that sustain play pedagogy usually have senior leaders who champion it by creating conditions for staff to develop confidence and take considered risks. That includes protecting time for professional dialogue, supporting manageable pilots, and ensuring play pedagogy is reflected in improvement planning rather than treated as an add-on. Play pedagogy is relational; it depends on adults who are attuned to children and understand when to step in to extend learning and when to step back and let children lead (Bruce, 2015; Else, 2014). In practice, supportive leadership is often the difference between a good idea and a change that survives a difficult term.

A whole-school approach also requires attention to environments, both indoors and outdoors, and to the materials children can access. Loose parts are widely used in Scottish schools because they invite creativity, collaboration, problem-solving and

sustained engagement without prescribing outcomes (Casey & Robertson, 2019). This is not about expensive resources; it is about selecting open-ended materials that children can transform, combine, revisit and repurpose, which supports agency and deeper learning. Schools have also found that working explicitly with play types helps to protect a range of play opportunities across the school day (Scott-McKie & Casey, 2017). The important shift is not the resources themselves; it is the way adults design for choice, possibility, and inclusion.

Children's participation is another essential strategy. If the aim is rights-based practice, children cannot simply be recipients of change; they need to be involved in shaping it. Approaches such as the Mosaic Approach offer practical methods for listening to children's perspectives and using their insights to inform environments, routines, and learning experiences (Clark & Moss, 2011). Research using creative methods also shows that children often communicate powerfully through non-verbal forms of expression, with implications for how we gather views, particularly for younger children and those with additional support needs (Blaisdell, Arnott, Wall, & Robinson, 2019). In Scottish schools, this can involve children helping to design spaces, deciding how materials are organised, and sharing what helps them feel confident and included. These are often small changes, but they can shift the culture quickly because children feel a real sense of ownership.

Family engagement also matters, particularly because play pedagogy can challenge beliefs about what learning should look like. Families are often supportive once they understand the rationale and can see evidence of learning, but they may need reassurance and opportunities to ask questions. The Education Endowment Foundation guidance on working with parents highlights the importance of respectful relationships, practical strategies, and reducing barriers to engagement (Education Endowment Foundation, 2022). In practice, this can include sharing observations, photographs, and children's voices; inviting families into learning conversations; and making links between play and curriculum learning visible without reducing play to a checklist.

Taken together, these approaches show that play pedagogy is not about adding more to workloads; it is about shifting how learning is designed, how children are

positioned, and how adults understand their role. Scotland's experience suggests that when schools invest in shared understanding, leadership, environments, observation, participation and family engagement, play pedagogy becomes sustainable, and a realistic way to uphold children's right to play within everyday education.

Making Article 31 Real in Schools

Scotland's work to embed play pedagogy in primary education offers a practical example of how the child's right to play can move from a statement of intent to something children experience in the everyday life of school. What has been most striking in this journey is that sustainable change has not come from a single intervention or a set of activities; it has come from schools taking a whole school approach, investing in shared understanding, and building the confidence to value children's agency, wellbeing and voice as part of learning and progress. In a context where the UNCRC is incorporated into Scots law, the right to play is not simply a principle; it is a responsibility, and that has strengthened the case for ensuring play is protected, prioritised and planned for across the primary years (Scottish Government, 2024; UN Committee on the Rights of the Child, 2013).

For international colleagues, the Scottish experience underlines that play pedagogy is not confined to the early years, nor is it separate from learning. When educators are supported to observe closely, plan responsively and shape environments that invite curiosity, collaboration and depth, play becomes a powerful context for inclusive learning, particularly for children who may not thrive within narrow models of instruction and assessment. It also shows the importance of listening to children and involving them in shaping their learning environments, because rights-based education requires participation, not just provision (Clark & Moss, 2011; Blaisdell, Arnott, Wall, & Robinson, 2019). Even where the policy landscape differs, the transferable lesson is consistent: sustainable play pedagogy needs leadership permission, shared language, and credible evidence that learning is happening. Based on the evidence and learning outlined in this paper, the following recommendations are offered for policymakers, school leaders, practitioners and the wider play sector.

Recommendations

1. Position play as both a rights issue and a pedagogical one.

Ensure Article 31 is visible in education policy, school improvement planning and accountability, so it is treated as a core entitlement rather than optional enrichment. Where the UNCRC is incorporated, planning for play is part of meeting public duties, not a discretionary extra.

2. Invest in professional learning.

Prioritise observation, interpretation of play, and practical ways to make learning visible. Use accessible frameworks and resources that connect theory to day-to-day practice.

3. Support whole-school approaches and thoughtful implementation.

Enable leadership teams to protect time for professional dialogue, inquiry, and gradual change. Treat play pedagogy as cultural work that requires follow-through, reflection, and review, not a one-off initiative.

4. Tune environments for equity, depth, and inclusion.

Provide sufficient time and space for sustained play, and ensure that indoor and outdoor environments include open-ended materials that children can transform, combine, and revisit. Use guidance that supports inclusive practice and practical set-up without requiring significant new spend.

5. Strengthen meaningful engagement with families and communities.

Build a shared understanding of the value of play and address anxieties about readiness, progress, and attainment through clear, practical communication and evidence of learning. Plan engagement deliberately and reduce barriers for families who have not always found school welcoming.

The child's right to play is universal, but the conditions that support it must be intentionally created. Scotland's experience suggests that when rights, pedagogy, and practice are aligned, play pedagogy becomes a realistic and powerful way to help

children thrive and to shape education that is effective, inclusive, and grounded in children's rights.

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The Power of Play: Why Unstructured Time Matters in Primary School

Anne Lamont, MEdSt & Sara Scott, BEd

Introduction

The Felixstow 3 Portfolio is a group of public schools in the northeast metropolitan area of Adelaide, South Australia, comprising 12 primary schools.

[Our strategy for public education in South Australia](#) (Department for Education, 2024) was released in 2023 with the purpose of ensuring every child and young person can learn and thrive. During 2024, school leaders in the Felixstow 3 Portfolio actively engaged with the strategy, focusing on the four Areas of Impact: Equity and excellence, Effective learners, Learner agency, and Wellbeing. Through targeted conversations, we examined how children and young people experience schooling and identified opportunities to foster environments that nurture key dispositions and capabilities, specifically belonging, resilience, persistence, curiosity, creativity, self-regulation and agency.

Time2Play is a two-year initiative (2025–2026) designed to transform learner outcomes by increasing opportunities for unstructured play during the school day. Guided by the principle that all children and young people have the right to play and need to play, the project aligns with Article 31 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (United Nations, 2026). This principle is grounded in the understanding that play is a fundamental human right and a vital driver of healthy development and learning.

Problem Statement

Unstructured play, which is voluntary, self-directed, and imaginative, has declined significantly in recent decades. Children today are estimated to have lost 10 to 12 hours per week of free play compared to previous generations, largely due to more structured activities, fewer play breaks in schools, and more time spent in online environments. In the 1970s, Australian schools typically provided play breaks, totalling 80 minutes or more each day. Today, most schools offer two breaks—recess and lunch—amounting to approximately 50 minutes per day. Currently, children in Australia have

more compulsory instruction time during primary school than children in other Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) countries. The average hours of instruction each year across primary schools in OECD countries is 800 hours; in the South Australian public education system there are over 1000 hours of instruction each year in primary schools. South Australia has the longest instructional week in Australia of 1600 minutes, compared to 1425–1550 minutes in other states.

Background

Time2Play is grounded in contemporary research highlighting play as essential to children’s development and wellbeing. Jonathan Haidt’s (2024) *The Anxious Generation* identifies play as central to building resilience, creativity, and social competence, warning that the “phone-based childhood” has eroded these capacities. He calls for extended, unstructured recess and minimal adult oversight, reminding us that “play is the work of childhood.” His research helped shape Time2Play’s focus on increasing unstructured playtime and redefining the adult role as facilitator rather than supervisor.

Finnish educator Pasi Sahlberg (Sahlberg & Doyle, 2019), co-author of *Let the Children Play*, has directly supported the project through professional learning and advice. His research presents play as a developmental necessity, drawing on global evidence and the Finnish education model to advocate for longer recesses and playful learning environments.

Developmental psychologist Peter Gray’s (2013) *Free to Learn* demonstrates how self-directed play fosters independence, emotional resilience, and adaptability. His work strengthened Time2Play’s understanding of play as freely chosen and led by children.

Angela Hanscom’s (2016) *Balanced and Barefoot* underscores the physical and sensory benefits of outdoor play, showing how movement-rich environments support core strength, attention, and emotional regulation. Her insights reinforced Time2Play’s emphasis on outdoor, unstructured activity.

The documentary *Chasing Childhood* (2020) revealed how excessive structure and supervision limit children’s capacity for independence and risk-taking. Time2Play

schools used the film to engage parents and communities in re-evaluating the balance between safety and freedom.

The American Academy of Pediatrics (Yogman et al., 2018) recommends daily play for all children. Together, these resources provide the foundation for Time2Play, affirming that unstructured, child-led play is not optional, but fundamental to healthy development and lifelong learning.

Appropriate Approaches/Strategies

Time2Play is a strategic, research-informed initiative with the potential to create long-term change in how schools value and provide opportunities for play. By combining increased playtime, educator development, community engagement, and rigorous evaluation, the project aims to restore play to its rightful place as a cornerstone of healthy childhood development and a catalyst for engagement, wellbeing, and learning.

Time2Play has five core objectives for participating schools:

1. Increase the time allocated for unstructured play
2. Build educator understanding of its developmental benefits
3. Evaluate its impact on wellbeing, engagement, and learning (particularly for children facing barriers)
4. Clarify the role of educators in facilitating play
5. Engage families and communities in recognising its value.

Participating schools committed to increasing unstructured playtime during the school day, engaging in twice-termly professional learning meetings for teachers and leaders, involving principals in project updates, and sharing insights and observations throughout the process. For most schools, this began with two classes engaging in an extra 30 to 60 minutes of unstructured playtime per week. As the year has progressed, many schools have increased the number of classes participating and the frequency or length of time allocated to unstructured play.

Implementation of the initiative has included professional learning workshops, such as *Lunchtime Arguments are Awesome* by Adam Voigt (2025) from Real Schools, which reframes playground conflict as a critical opportunity to develop social competence. Parent engagement has also been prioritized, with events such as a workshop by Madhavi Nawana Parker (2025) from Positive Minds Australia about supporting children to be more resilient, manage disappointment and conflict, and solve problems.

The University of South Australia is evaluating the initiative in partnership, using tools such as the Wellbeing and Engagement Collection (WEC), observations, surveys, and narrative evaluations. Early findings are encouraging. Teachers report that children are increasingly able to resolve conflicts, negotiate, engage in imaginative play, and extend play beyond recess and lunch. Parents note that their children are spending more time outdoors after school and on weekends and are showing greater creativity and problem-solving ability in their play. Students themselves describe feeling happier and more excited to be at school, expanding their friendship groups, and enjoying greater autonomy in play decisions. In some cases, they have even taken the lead in shaping playground guidelines, such as organizing “stick summits” to agree on safe ways to use sticks during play.

To build educators’ understanding of students’ views on effective play skills, children across year levels were asked, “*What makes you and other children good at unstructured play?*” Their responses revealed that gender and age shape preferences, dispositions, and social behaviours in play.

Summary of Gender Trends in Unstructured Play

Boys favored physical, active, and construction play—climbing, digging, or inventing games—focused on mastery and fun. They valued teamwork but expressed less emotional reflection, viewing nature mainly as a resource for building.

Girls preferred collaborative and imaginative play, using storytelling and creativity to foster inclusion and emotional connection. They emphasized kindness, empathy, and shared creativity, seeing nature as a source of inspiration. The following table shows the characteristics of play by age/year group.

Table 1*Summary of Developmental Trends in Unstructured Play*

Age/Year Group	Key Characteristics of Play
Reception – Year 1 (Ages 5–6)	• Emphasis on kindness, sharing, taking turns • Enjoy simple, imaginative games • Excitement from nature and newness
Year 2 – Year 3 (Ages 7–8)	• Growing use of imagination in group games • Start to build and role-play more complex scenarios • Begin reflecting on emotions in play
Year 4 – Year 5 (Ages 9–10)	• Play involves planning, strategy, creativity • Clearer group roles and more structured games • Stronger social dynamics (e.g. fairness)
Year 6+ (Ages 11–12)	• High self-awareness; view play as relaxing and developmental • Use of tools (safely) and materials • Blend of autonomy and teamwork
Overall Maturity Trend	Play evolves from spontaneous and social → to collaborative and imaginative → to reflective and strategic as children age

Unstructured play evolves significantly with age and reflects different emphases by gender:

- Boys often externalize their play — action, tools, mastery, and building.
- Girls often internalize and socialize their play — collaboration, emotion, reflection, and inclusivity.
- As children grow older, play becomes more self-aware, collaborative, and connected *to personal and academic growth*.

Risks, Hazards and Benefits

A key challenge for school leaders in the Time2Play Project is managing the risks of unstructured play. While they recognise its importance for wellbeing and positive student outcomes, they must also uphold their duty of care. This is complicated by parental pressure shaped by “safetyism,” an unhealthy drive to eliminate all risk, amplified by media and social platforms. Combined with complex policy and risk assessment processes, this makes it challenging for schools to judge when play’s benefits outweigh potential risks or when a risk becomes an unacceptable hazard.

Participant feedback showed that fear of risk limited opportunities for meaningful unstructured play. To address this, we partnered with Nature Play SA (n.d.), a not-for-profit organization that inspires creative and sustainable engagement with nature.

Through case studies and an immersive cubby-building experience, participants explored the difference between a *risk* (something that helps children learn and grow) and a *hazard* (something that offers no benefit and poses serious harm). For example, balancing on uneven surfaces and using sticks can build confidence, coordination, and problem-solving skills, while broken glass or sharp metal in loose parts present unacceptable hazards.

Next Steps in the Project

- Continuing research and providing professional development opportunities, i.e., connecting with experts in loose parts play, attending conferences on play, examining neuroscience research
- Amplifying children's voice in schools and across the school system in South Australia
- Engaging the community so that families and local government understand the benefit of unstructured play for children and young people and advocate for it, i.e., development of green spaces in local areas
- Embedding unstructured play in the school day by ensuring each educator understands what it is, what it isn't, and its significance for supporting all children to thrive
- Scaling up the project at each school to involve all classes across all year levels

Outcomes of the Time2Play Initiative

The Time2Play project has delivered a range of significant outcomes that positively impact student wellbeing, engagement, creativity, resilience and learning.

Key findings and results include:

- Students demonstrated increased ability to resolve conflicts, negotiate, and problem-solve, e.g., children using a ‘fix-it board’ to independently resolve conflicts.

“As a teacher, I did not realise how much time I spent mediating students and involving myself in their problem-solving until I started to step away during unstructured play times and students started to solve their own conflicts.”

(Emma, Time2Play educator)

- Students showed greater engagement with learning after time spent in unstructured play activities.

“Elvie, a Year Six student with a strong interest in the environment, often felt restless after extended classroom time. During unstructured play among the school’s trees, she observed nature and built habitats for imaginary creatures, finding the experience calming and refreshing. Back in class, she felt more focused and engaged, illustrating how outdoor, unstructured play supports wellbeing, curiosity, and readiness to learn.”

(Nathan, Time2Play educator)

“I’ve noticed that when my children come in from Time2Play, they are more engaged, calmer, and focused. They work more collaboratively, listen to one another more thoughtfully, and approach challenges with more energy and optimism than I have previously seen. After spending time exploring freely—building, imagining, negotiating—they return to the classroom ready to take risks in their learning, solve problems creatively, and support one another. I see them being more connected and more helpful towards each other.”

(Sue, Time2Play educator)

- Students engaged independently in imaginative and creative play, e.g., using loose parts materials in new and unique ways.

“Being involved in Time2Play has opened my eyes and expanded my mind. I was initially fearful of not having enough provocations, parts, or resources available for our younger years. However, the worry of boredom turning to robust,

boisterous or rough activity was quickly squashed. I now reflect on the past year and the amazing play I have witnessed, with unstructured play increasing ideas, imaginations, social skills and mixed year level play flourishing in our school.”
(Bec, Time2Play educator)

- Students expanded their friendship groups, and improved decision-making in play activities, e.g., children engaging with other children outside their friendship group and building stronger bonds.

“Alex often arrived home mentally exhausted and presented with ‘big behaviours’. He told mum that he played by himself at school. Since the introduction of unstructured play breaks, he has shown an interest in using planes and balls on the oval and has begun inviting other children to join him. He is now happier and comfortable in his environment at school, and Mum has said that he comes home happy and emotionally regulated.”

(Matthew, Time2Play educator)

- Educators observed improved social skills among students, including teamwork, inclusion, and empathy, e.g., children negotiating group decisions and the fair distribution of resources during both unstructured play and when returning to the classroom.

“One afternoon in the pine forest, Jayce, a Year 5 student who often struggled to engage in class, led his classmates in building a shelter from sticks, sand, and tarpaulins. Taking initiative, he delegated tasks, welcomed suggestions, and adapted the design, showing strong teamwork and flexibility. The pride he felt as peers praised his work reflected growing confidence that later carried into the classroom, strengthening his engagement, leadership, and communication skills through hands-on play.”

(Amy, Time2Play educator)

- Student agency is evident through initiatives such as shaping playground guidelines (e.g., "stick summits") and developing play agreements.
- Teachers noted how unstructured play involving one or two classes only resulted in children playing more imaginatively and creatively and with different peers,

compared to play during whole-school recess and lunch breaks, e.g., building forts rather than playing soccer.

- Student resilience and perseverance strengthened, e.g., especially evident in some neurodiverse students who once needed over 20 minutes to join play but now engage more quickly and stay involved longer.
- Emotional and physical self-regulation skills strengthened; e.g., for children in their first year of schooling, beginning each day with unstructured play led to a significant reduction in separation anxiety.

- Positive shifts in parental perceptions, with reports of children spending more time engaging in creative, outdoor play after school and at weekends.

“On the weekend, Otis, our 5-year-old, excitedly led us to our local park. Drawing on skills learned through unstructured play, Otis showed us how to use fallen sticks and rope to build a sturdy fort. He explained each step to us, showing confidence in his problem-solving and communication abilities. We worked together, laughing and sharing ideas, until the fort was complete. We are delighted to see Otis so engaged and eager to teach us something new.”

(Amy and Harry, parents)

- Greater family and community engagement, e.g., through workshops and sharing documentaries on developing dispositions for unstructured play.
- Teachers gained a deeper understanding and confidence in facilitating and observing unstructured play as a learning tool, e.g., reflecting on their capacity to step back and create space for children to problem-solve, persevere, and resolve conflicts independently.

“Olivia, aged 6, has been timid and shy all year during ‘nature play’ but has recently found the confidence to climb trees and attempt obstacle courses. She says she is scared but knows she’ll be OK, even though it’s high and hard. She was observed engaging in self-talk as well as sharing her feelings with her peers and then being incredibly proud, elated, and excited when she was successful, then

sharing her achievement with everyone.”

(Izzy, Time2Play educator)

- Educators learned to balance risk and freedom effectively.
“As an educator, Time2Play has increased my confidence to allow children to take risks during play, not only in timetabled unstructured play times, but also at recess and lunch playtimes. Time2Play has empowered me to follow my instincts and allow children to explore with the knowledge that I can reassure parents about any ‘adventure injuries’.”
(Nicole, Time2Play educator)
- Interactive play in a diverse, multi-aged environment that includes peers with varying abilities fostered essential skills such as empathy, reciprocity, sharing, problem-solving, perspective-taking, and cooperation.

Conclusion

Through a strategic blend of student agency, educator professional development, family engagement, and robust evaluation, Time2Play is re-establishing play as a cornerstone of student growth, embedding it as an essential practice for long-term wellbeing and learning outcomes. Within the Felixstow 3 Portfolio, the project has provided a practical way to bring South Australia’s education strategy to life by creating environments in which children develop essential dispositions such as resilience, curiosity, collaboration, creativity, and self-regulation.

Early findings highlight clear benefits, including students who are calmer and more focused after play, better able to resolve conflict, more imaginative, and more connected to peers. Families report similar gains at home, and educators have grown more confident stepping back, facilitating rather than directing, and balancing risk with opportunity.

As the initiative expands, Time2Play will continue to build a culture that values children’s right to play and recognises it as foundational rather than optional. The project provides a scalable, research-informed model for schools seeking to enhance

wellbeing and learning by giving children what they need most—time, space, and trust to play.

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Ready or Not, Here I Come: Redefining Kindergarten Readiness to Meet Children Where They Are Upon Arrival

Kyler P. Leiter, PhD, Equity, Inclusion, and Trauma-Informed Committee Chair

Introduction

What does it mean to be ready for kindergarten? The definition of kindergarten readiness has changed substantially in our lifetime. In the past, kindergartens were mainly play-based and served as a bridge between home and elementary schools. Today, many kindergartens resemble first- and second-grade classrooms of the past, emphasizing academic skills and structured, teacher-led instruction. As a result, play has been reduced or removed completely, and children are often expected to arrive at kindergarten with established academic knowledge. In this paper, I argue that we must reorient our approach to kindergarten curricula. Instead of focusing solely on academics, we should also prioritize social and emotional development through playful means. In doing so, we can create early childhood education (ECE) programs that are developmentally responsive, engaging, and inclusive of all children and their backgrounds. Only then can we meet children where they are when they arrive in kindergarten.

Problem Statement

The definition of *kindergarten readiness* has undergone a radical transformation in the last 30 years. Historically, kindergarten was conceptualized as a developmental stage in which children grew socially, emotionally, physically, and cognitively through play and experiential learning. In this traditional sense, readiness to enter kindergarten was measured not by academic knowledge or ability but by a child's aptitude for navigating social interactions, managing emotions, and participating in self-directed exploration (Muelle, 2013). Play was regarded as the primary vehicle for this learning, fostering creativity, problem-solving, and social competencies essential for later academic success.

However, a dramatic paradigm shift has occurred. Driven by accountability policies, standardization, and a narrow focus on measurable academic outcomes, the

definition of kindergarten readiness shifted from a developmental perspective to an academic one. This focus increasingly centers on children's ability to demonstrate early literacy skills (i.e., phoneme isolation, syllable segmentation, grapheme identification) and numeracy skills (i.e., rote counting, basic addition, numeral and shape identification) acquired *before* kindergarten begins. This redefinition has profound implications for children's early school experiences. Because of pushdown academics, many kindergartens now feature structured, teacher-led activities and minimize play-based, experiential methods. This shift toward academic standards has devalued social and emotional development in the primary grades, which research shows is critical for later academic achievement (Hirsh-Pasek et al., 2009).

Furthermore, this academically-driven approach tends to overlook the diversity of children's backgrounds and lived experiences, leading to inequities in educational outcomes. Children from historically marginalized communities, who may have different cultural norms or less access to early learning opportunities, often face disadvantages when standardized curricula fail to recognize their unique strengths and contexts (Gunn et al., 2021). Emphasizing academic skills at such an early age can suppress natural curiosity, which is typically built through play. Additionally, the low-stakes environment created through play supports accessible social dynamics, which produces cultural exposure and the development of empathy through diverse peer interactions (Waite & Rees, 2014); something completely missed within whole-group instruction.

This paper critically examines how the current kindergarten readiness framework, driven by state-issued standards and accountability measures, negatively affects children's social, emotional, and overall developmental well-being. I argue that an overemphasis on academic performance and the growing use of scripted instruction undermine kindergarten's foundational purpose as a developmental stage. I then call for reimagining ECE policies grounded in developmentally responsive practices that meet children where they are cognitively, physically, and emotionally upon kindergarten entry.

Background

Historical Perspectives on Kindergarten

The origins of kindergarten as an educational institution trace back to Friedrich Fröebel's pioneering work in Germany in the early 19th century. Fröebel emphasized hands-on activities, play, and social interaction. This pedagogical framework viewed children as active learners whose natural curiosity should be nurtured through engaging, child-centered experiences (Shirakawa & Saracho, 2022). Fröebel's philosophy profoundly influenced early American kindergarten educators, such as Susan Blow and Elizabeth Peabody, who prioritized play as the primary mode of learning and focused on fostering social competence, emotional regulation, and motor skills within instruction (Muelle, 2013). During this time, "play [was viewed] as the work of children," a phrase contributed by Maria Montessori (1936, p. 196).

The mid-to-late-20th century marked a turning point, as kindergartens began incorporating more formal instruction, especially in literacy and numeracy, mirroring elementary school expectations (Muelle, 2013). Kindergartens served as a transitional stage, neither entirely child-centered nor solely academic, but emphasizing a balance of social, emotional, and cognitive growth through developmentally responsive means (i.e., play). This shift was partially driven by the belief that early academic success predicted later achievement, a premise supported by research but generally misunderstood or overgeneralized. The 1983 publication of "A Nation at Risk" intensified this trend, warning of declining American educational standards and advocating for increased accountability across public school settings. Although it targeted higher grades, the movement toward standardization seeped into early childhood. Many states then adopted curriculum frameworks emphasizing early literacy and numeracy benchmarks (Institute of Medicine and National Research Council, 2015).

The No Child Left Behind Act further cemented the focus on measurable outcomes (NCLB, 2002). ECE programs faced increasing pressure to demonstrate student progress through standardized assessments, especially as publicly funded programs shifted to full-day schedules. This pressure increased the prevalence of drill-and-practice activities, skill-based curricula, and scripted programs, limiting teachers'

ability to adapt instruction to children's individual needs, cultural contexts, and developmental appropriateness (Bassok et al., 2016).

This shift has been associated with a steep decline in play-based pedagogies. Play, long regarded as a vital component of ECE programming, was disregarded in favor of direct instruction and scripted lessons designed to meet specific benchmarks. Consequently, children's opportunities for social interactions, creativity, and exploration decreased. Research indicates that such practices can impair children's social-emotional development, executive functioning, and motivation; skills that are crucial for academic success and physical and mental development (Hirsh-Pasek et al., 2009). Additionally, in these new kindergartens, children sit for longer intervals, utilize higher-level thinking abilities (often leading to cognitive fatigue), and participate in fewer unstructured social activities (Miller & Almon, 2009). This ultimately leads to behavioral outbursts that hinder the instruction that caused the original dysregulation (Skinner, 2018): a true catch-22.

International Comparisons and Alternative Approaches

In contrast, countries like Finland have maintained a developmental view of early childhood. Finnish children typically start formal literacy and numeracy instruction around age seven (three years after American children), with a strong emphasis on play, social-emotional learning, and individualized instruction. Finnish educators prioritize the child's holistic development, fostering curiosity, creativity, and social skills before academic rigor (Sahlberg, 2015). This approach correlates with Finland's high performance on international assessments (i.e., PISA), demonstrating that delaying formal instruction does not hinder later academic achievement and may, in fact, elevate it. Similarly, in Canada, New Zealand, and throughout Europe, early childhood policies emphasize play-based learning, cultural responsiveness, and family engagement to a much higher degree than their American counterparts. These nations recognize that children's diverse backgrounds and experiences should be valued and integrated into curricula, promoting equity and inclusion, and the outcomes speak for themselves (Ainscow, 2020).

The Need for a Paradigm Shift

Given the evidence from international models and developmental science, there is a compelling case for reorienting kindergarten policies toward a more balanced, developmentally responsive approach. This includes recognizing that social-emotional skills, cultural competence, and experiential learning are fundamental to children's success, both academically and in life. Recent research underscores the importance of social-emotional competencies, such as self-regulation, empathy, and cooperation, in predicting academic achievement (Hirsh-Pasek et al., 2009). This understanding challenges the current emphasis on rote skills, standardized testing, and academic rigor at the expense of fostering resilient, socially competent, and motivated learners, underscoring ECE's original purpose. Ultimately, such programs infringe on children's innate needs and rights to play (Toblin, 2019). It is hypothesized that if kindergarten programming were redesigned to foster social competencies alongside academics, the pressure to prepare children for kindergarten could be lifted. Therefore, we must shift our thinking on kindergarten readiness, moving from what kids *should* know when entering kindergarten to what we can do to meet children where they are holistically (socially, emotionally, physically, culturally, and yes, even academically) when they arrive in kindergarten.

Strategies

Considerations

To reconstruct a kindergarten readiness framework, kindergarten programming needs a complete overhaul. In order to foster a more equitable, developmentally responsive, and research-based approach to kindergarten education, several key aspects should be considered:

Prioritizing Social-Emotional Development

Standards and curricula should explicitly emphasize social-emotional skills. Schools should incorporate professional development focused on creating nurturing environments that support children's emotional well-being, self-regulation, and interpersonal skills (Gunn et al., 2021). These skills underpin academic success and are

particularly vital for children from historically marginalized backgrounds who may face additional challenges outside of school.

Valuing Children’s Diverse Backgrounds and Lived Experiences

Children enter kindergarten with a rich tapestry of backgrounds, cultures, languages, and prior experiences. Curricula should be culturally responsive and inclusive, recognizing and valuing these differences. Teachers should incorporate children’s stories, family traditions, and community assets into daily routines to foster a sense of belonging and identity (Heckman & Mosso, 2014). This approach not only enhances engagement but also addresses achievement gaps rooted in socio-economic and cultural disparities.

Emphasizing Play and Experiential Learning

Research consistently demonstrates that child-led play and experiential learning settings promote cognitive, social, and emotional development, as well as academic development (especially regarding oral language development and problem-solving abilities; Miller & Almon, 2009; Ridgway et al., 2015). High-quality pre-K and kindergarten programs should allocate substantial time for both child-led and guided play opportunities, including imaginative play, outdoor exploration, and hands-on activities. Educators should serve as facilitators and observers, guiding children’s discoveries rather than dictating playful interactions or setting rules for play scenarios (Hirsh-Pasek et al., 2009). Such environments foster creativity, problem-solving, and collaboration; skills that are vital for success in the 21st-century workforce.

International Models and Policy Implications

Countries like Finland exemplify how delaying formal academic instruction until children are developmentally ready can yield positive results. Finland’s emphasis on play, social-emotional learning, and individualized support has produced high international rankings without sacrificing children’s well-being or engagement (Sahlberg, 2015). These models suggest that early academic pressure is unnecessary for later high achievement and that fostering a love of learning and social competence

creates a more sustainable educational foundation. Therefore, we must look to these successful models to improve our own.

Supporting Equity and Inclusion

Recognizing and verifying children's lived experiences requires intentional efforts to address systemic inequities. Schools should consciously implement policies that support bilingualism, incorporate culturally relevant curriculum, and provide additional resources for children facing economic disadvantages. Such strategies ensure that all children have equitable opportunities to succeed and feel valued in their kindergarten environment (Viskovic, 2021). Inclusive curricula can never be scripted, as teachers must have the autonomy to adapt as needed.

Community Outreach and Parent Engagement

School systems should invest time and resources in the larger community to connect with families. Additionally, local and state resources should help families prepare for school expectations as their children age, including methods to build children's independence and social skills. This could include information on how child-led play lays the foundation for later learning, as well as how the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's (2022) Learn the Signs initiative can help parents understand realistic age expectations and developmental milestones. These resources can help families prepare children for the social dynamics they will inevitably encounter in school (Hindman & Morrison, 2011).

Policy and Practice Recommendations

To implement these reforms, policymakers and administrators should:

1. Use a developmentally responsive framework as the guiding principle for early childhood standards;
2. Increase funding for ECE programs that prioritize child-led play, social-emotional learning, and family outreach;
3. Provide ongoing professional development that equips teachers with skills in culturally responsive, child-led play, and social-emotional pedagogies;

4. Advocate for the inclusion of child-led play pedagogical instruction in higher-education institutes to better prepare pre-service teachers;
5. Develop authentic assessment tools that are formative, developmentally responsive, and culturally sensitive, moving away from high-stakes standardized tests;
6. Engage families and communities as partners in children's learning, recognizing their vital role in supporting the holistic development of their children; and
7. Recognize that play is not a frivolous activity and a break from learning, but rather a child's innate right and preferred method for acquiring new skills and knowledge.

Conclusion

The current conception of kindergarten readiness, driven by academic standards and standardized testing, has shifted ECE environments away from their foundational roots in social, emotional, and child-led play. This paradigm not only diminishes the joy and curiosity inherent in young children's development but also risks long-term harm to their social-emotional well-being, overall engagement, and equity. International models, such as those in the Nordic region, show that delaying formal academic instruction and emphasizing play and social development can produce high academic achievement without compromising children's overall well-being. These models challenge American policymakers, educators, and families to reconsider the purpose of kindergarten and prioritize developmentally responsive, inclusive, and engaging pedagogies, which will ultimately ease schools' academic expectations for children upon their arrival to kindergarten.

Reforming ECE requires a collective effort: policy changes, professional development opportunities, and a cultural shift toward valuing whole-child development as a public responsibility (the phrase "it truly takes a village" comes to mind). Children will enter our kindergarten programs with varied experiences and knowledge. To improve kindergarten quality, we must meet children where they are upon arrival, not dictate where they should be on day one. Schools must embrace a

balanced approach that recognizes the importance of social-emotional skills, cultural responsiveness, and experiential learning alongside academics. Only through such comprehensive reform can we ensure that kindergarten truly functions as a gateway to lifelong learning, well-being, and success for *all* children, no matter their background. Stakeholders must advocate for policies grounded in the considerations and recommendations stated above. By doing so, we can restore kindergarten to its rightful purpose: nurturing curious, competent, and confident learners prepared for the challenges and opportunities of the future through play.

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Reimagining the Educational Ecosystem: Modeling Play, Choice, and Community Partnership for Holistic Development

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Introduction

Education is frequently described as preparation for life rather than life itself. This framing has led many systems to prioritize efficiency, compliance, and standardization at the expense of curiosity, joy, and human connection. Yet decades of research in neuroscience, psychology, and education affirm that children learn best when they are actively engaged, emotionally safe, and intrinsically motivated.

Play is the primary way children make sense of the world. Through play, they experiment with ideas, negotiate social relationships, practice self-regulation, and build cognitive flexibility. Despite this, play has steadily disappeared from many educational environments, particularly in upper elementary, middle, and secondary education.

The iLEAD (i/I am a/an lifelong learner, empathetic citizen, authentic individual, design thinker) philosophy challenges this trajectory by reconceptualizing education as a dynamic ecosystem. Within this ecosystem, play is not a reward or an enrichment activity; it is the core method of learning. It weaves play into the fabric of school culture. By treating families as "educational partners" and the community as a "classroom," iLEAD has developed a model where play is the primary vehicle for growth across a diverse range of learning environments. Modeling these values from the administrative level down to the learner helps create a culture of authentic engagement. This White Paper outlines how iLEAD Schools and iLEAD California intentionally design systems that protect play while maintaining academic rigor and accountability.

Problem Statement – Issues

The traditional education system faces several serious challenges that limit how children grow, learn, and thrive. While schools are often focused on academic achievement, many systems unintentionally overlook how children naturally learn best. At the heart of this problem is the gradual removal of play from everyday learning experiences. Three major issues stand out.

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2.1 The Play–Learning Divide

In many schools, play and learning are treated as two separate things. Play is often seen as something children do during recess or free time, while "real learning" is expected to happen quietly at a desk. This sends the message that play is fun but unimportant, and learning is important but uncomfortable.

For children, this creates confusion and frustration. Play is how children naturally explore ideas, ask questions, and make sense of the world. When learning feels serious, stressful, or disconnected from curiosity, students are more likely to lose interest. School can start to feel like a list of tasks to finish instead of a place to discover and explore.

As children get older, play opportunities usually decrease even more. Worksheets, tests, and lectures often replace creativity, imagination, and hands-on learning. This can lead to boredom, anxiety, and a lack of motivation—especially for students who learn best by doing, building, or collaborating with others.

2.2 Limited School Options for Families

Another major issue is the lack of variety in school design. Many families are offered only one school model: a traditional campus where students sit in classrooms most of the day and follow a fixed schedule. While this works for some children, it does not work for all.

Children who are neurodivergent, experiencing trauma, parenting, working, traveling, or learning at a different pace often struggle in rigid school settings. Families with unique needs may feel they have no real choice but to stay in a system that does not fit their child.

When schools do not offer flexible options—such as independent study, home-based learning support, or specialized programs—children who learn differently are often labeled as struggling or disengaged. This lack of choice creates barriers to success and prevents many children from accessing joyful, meaningful learning experiences.

2.3 Schools Operating in Isolation

The third challenge is that many schools function in isolation from their surrounding communities. Learning is often limited to the classroom, even though powerful learning opportunities exist in museums, parks, libraries, and community organizations.

When schools do not partner with community resources, children miss out on hands-on, real-world experiences that bring learning to life. They may struggle to see how what they learn in school connects to everyday life. This disconnect can make learning feel abstract and irrelevant.

Schools also miss opportunities to strengthen community relationships. When families, nonprofits, and schools work together, children benefit from stronger support systems and richer learning environments. Without these partnerships, schools carry the responsibility alone, and children lose access to meaningful, play-based experiences beyond the classroom.

Background

The iLEAD model was developed in direct response to these systemic challenges. It draws on research in brain development, trauma-informed education, motivation, and experiential learning to create environments where children can thrive academically and emotionally. At the heart of this model are three integrated pillars that form a clear, intentional "Method of Play" across all grade levels.

These pillars guide how we design learning, support students, and make decisions at both the classroom and campus level. Play is not treated as an extra activity or enrichment; instead, it serves as a shared foundation that shapes curriculum, relationships, and learning environments throughout the entire educational experience.

Individualized Learning acknowledges that children develop at different rates and through different pathways. iLEAD replaces uniform pacing guides with Individualized Learning Plans (ILPs), allowing learners to explore concepts deeply and master skills at their own pace, without the pressure of constant comparison to others. In addition, learners participate in Learner-Led Conferences (LLCs) and Learning

Showcases—structures that place learners at the center of their education. Through these experiences, learners develop a voice in their learning, reflect on their growth, and take ownership of their progress by sharing their work and goals with families, educators, and peers.

Social-Emotional Learning (SEL) provides the emotional foundation necessary for play. Neuroscience research demonstrates that stress inhibits learning, while supportive relationships enhance neural integration and executive functioning (Siegel, 2020). SEL practices enable learners to take risks, collaborate, and recover from failure.

Project-Based Learning (PBL) serves as the academic expression of play. Through sustained inquiry and authentic problem-solving, learners engage in meaningful work that integrates academic standards with creativity and purpose. In this way, play becomes rigorous, relevant, and transferable.

iLEAD Core Values as a Living System for Play

At iLEAD, play is supported not only through programs and learning models, but through the values that guide how people work together every day. These core values (Solution-Oriented, Inclusive Collaboration, Commitment to Excellence, Servant Leadership, Integrity, Empathy) shape decisions, relationships, and daily operations. They serve as a lens for designing learning and a system that protects play across classrooms, schools, and the wider community.

iLEAD's mission—Free to Think. Inspired to Lead—reflects a belief that children and adults learn best in environments where they feel safe to ask questions, try new ideas, and grow. The vision is to develop lifelong learners, empathetic citizens, authentic individuals, and design thinkers. Staff live these ideas daily through how they interact, support learners, and address challenges.

Being solution-oriented means focusing on what can be done rather than who is at fault. When problems arise, learners and adults are encouraged to experiment, adjust, and try again. This mirrors the way children play—testing ideas, learning from mistakes, and moving forward with confidence.

Inclusive collaboration ensures that everyone feels heard and valued. Play thrives when people work together respectfully, listen to different perspectives, and solve problems as a team. This value supports strong relationships between learners, educators, families, and community partners.

A commitment to excellence means striving to grow rather than striving for perfection. At iLEAD, play and high expectations exist together. Learners are encouraged to think deeply, reflect on their work, and improve over time, using play as a pathway to meaningful learning.

Servant leadership guides how adults lead within the organization. Leaders support others, model curiosity, and work alongside their teams. This creates trust and shows learners that leadership is about service, collaboration, and shared responsibility.

Integrity ensures that decisions align with iLEAD's mission and values in every setting. When values are consistent, learners and families can trust that play-based learning is not temporary or optional, but a core part of the educational experience.

Empathy is the foundation of a safe and supportive environment. By leading with care and understanding, iLEAD creates spaces where learners feel comfortable taking risks, expressing themselves, and learning from one another. This emotional safety is essential for play, growth, and connection.

Together, these core values function as a living system. They are practiced daily through human interactions and operations, ensuring that play remains central to learning, relationships, and community life.

Appropriate Approaches and Strategies

To ensure that play is accessible to all learners, iLEAD offers multiple educational pathways designed to meet the diverse needs of families and communities. These pathways include site-based campuses, online programs, homeschools, independent study options, and specialized trauma-informed programs. By offering multiple entry points into learning, iLEAD ensures play-based education isn't limited to one type of student or family structure, but remains flexible, inclusive, and responsive to real-life circumstances.

One example of this flexibility is Empower Generations, a program designed specifically for pregnant, parenting, and traumatized teens. For these learners, traditional school environments often feel unsafe or unwelcoming. Empower Generations uses play as a healing and developmental tool, integrating Social-Emotional Learning (SEL) and Project-Based Learning (PBL) to help students rebuild confidence, agency, and purpose. Academic work is connected to real-life experiences, including parenting, health, and personal growth, allowing learners to see themselves as capable, successful individuals rather than defined by past challenges.

Sustaining play-based systems also requires intentional leadership. iLEAD California supports schools through professional learning, systems design, and collaborative projects that model creativity, reflection, and shared responsibility. When school leaders and support staff engage in playful problem-solving, design learning environments, reimagine spaces, or collaborate across departments, they show that play is not only appropriate for children but also essential for adult learning, innovation, and organizational health.

Community partnerships further extend iLEAD's educational ecosystem beyond school walls. A school should not function as an isolated institution, and the partnership between iLEAD and the LEAP (Learn, Experience, Act, Play) Children's Museum is central to this approach. iLEAD serves as a key sponsor and collaborator in LEAP's mission to establish a permanent, state-of-the-art children's museum in Santa Clarita, dedicated to hands-on, play-based learning for children and families across the region.

Through this partnership, iLEAD and LEAP co-create learning experiences that blend education, wellness, and community engagement. One example is the Healthy Heroes Pop-Up initiative, which hosts play-based STEAM wellness labs in public spaces. In these pop-ups, iLEAD volunteers act as curators, designing interactive exhibits and teaching community members about topics through play. These experiences allow staff and students to apply academic knowledge, practice communication skills, and engage meaningfully with audiences of all ages.

A recent Healthy Heroes collaboration illustrates the Method of Play in action. iLEAD learners designed a human-sized digestive system maze for a LEAP pop-up

event. To complete the project, students applied biological concepts through hands-on construction (PBL), collaborated to solve design and logistical challenges (SEL), and explained their work to toddlers, parents, and community members (community engagement). Learning became active, joyful, and purposeful—rooted in play and connected to real-world impact.

In addition to museum partnerships, iLEAD is expanding access to future-focused opportunities through its College Connect dual enrollment program. This initiative allows high school learners to take college-level courses while still enrolled in high school, blending independence, choice, and real-world responsibility. By offering dual enrollment alongside play-based and project-based learning, iLEAD demonstrates that play and academic rigor are not opposites, but complementary elements of a strong educational ecosystem.

Together, these pathways and partnerships demonstrate how schools, families, higher education institutions, and community organizations can collaborate to protect the child's right to play while preparing learners for meaningful participation in the world beyond school.

Conclusion and Recommendations

The iLEAD model demonstrates that play is not a luxury but a necessity for healthy development and effective learning. When play is embedded into systems, leadership practices, and community partnerships, children thrive academically, socially, and emotionally.

Educational leaders are encouraged to model play at the systems level, expand flexible learning modalities, formalize community partnerships, and integrate Individualized Learning, SEL, and PBL as a unified framework.

By embracing these recommendations, educational systems can honor the child's right to play while preparing young people for resilient, connected, and purposeful lives.

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Strengthening Child, Teacher, and Parent Relationships Through Play

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Introduction

It takes a village to raise a child. This African proverb is deeply relatable, as evidenced by its widespread use (Goldberg, 2016). The persistence of this sentiment suggests that, throughout time, humanity has acknowledged that every adult in a child's life should work *together* to nurture, grow, and teach our children. In this spirit, The DoSeum uses the term caregiver rather than “parent” to acknowledge the variety of families in our “villages” today. Children benefit when caregivers and teachers cooperate. Further, caregivers and teachers benefit from external support provided by community partners in third spaces – spaces outside of home and occupation (school or work). Places like children's museums can serve as safe, public spaces for educators and families to interact without the pressures inherent to the strict formal roles of “student” or “teacher”. Informal educators can facilitate authentic, joyful learning activities – rooted in play – to empower friendly interactions and enrich relationships between caregivers and teachers, benefiting their children. This is one of the essential values of museums – allowing students, teachers, and caregiver chaperones to enjoy field trips. But beyond the limited engagement of field trips, how can museums foster deeper, more impactful connections? The DoSeum's *Strengthening School & Family Relationships* (SSFR) program fosters community learning through play – inviting families, teachers, and school administrators to celebrate and support one another in a third space.

Background

A school community includes educators, students, caregivers, and partners who work together to improve the school and enhance students' learning opportunities (Epstein & Salinas, 2004). While teachers and administrators have long understood that functional relationships with caregivers are essential to children's education, it is all too easy for school faculty and caregivers to misalign their efforts and – at worst – end up in conflict, to the detriment of their children's learning. Unfortunately, we are all too

familiar with the archetypes of “bad” students, caregivers, and teachers. And the pace of school life – especially the vast scope and rapid sequence of academics – makes it seem as though authentic, positive interactions between students, their families, and their teachers are unattainable. However, informal educators in third spaces can serve as liaisons between families and educators, fostering lifelong, joyful learning and building strong bonds between teachers and families.

School and caregiver partnerships have been successfully implemented in schools since the 20th century, but these efforts have been largely limited to people of privilege – predominantly White middle-class families (Auerbach, 2007). The standard models of caregiver engagement implemented by schools over the last thirty years do not include marginalized families. Research focused on marginalized families affirms that these caregivers – far from being “bad” caregivers – have the best intentions for their children yet may lack access points to participate fully as a partner in their child’s education (Auerbach, 2007). Research into school and family relationships begins with Joyce Epstein (Center for Research on Elementary and Middle Schools, 1986). Epstein, as Director of the National Network of Partnership Schools (NNPS), with Karen Clark Salinas – senior research assistant at the Center on School, Family, and Community Partnerships at Johns Hopkins University and communications director of the NNPS – have provided a framework and case studies of effective school and community partnerships (Epstein & Salinas, 2004). Central to Epstein and Salinas’s recommended approach are multiple access points of participation for six types of caregivers (Epstein & Salinas, 2004). Since the 1990s, Epstein’s model of family and school partnerships has dominated research, policy, and practice (Epstein, 1997). Yet this model is limited.

Susan Auerbach – Professor Emeritus, California State University, Northridge – and her peers have demonstrated that school systems mirror the inequities of the dominant culture. People of color and low socioeconomic status (SES) have found it challenging to access effective partnerships with teachers. It is all too easy for educators to assume that people of color and/or low SES are uninvolved in their children’s education when they are unresponsive to the typical channels of communication and do not participate in “legitimate acts” of caregiver involvement such as the PTA, field trip chaperones, or fundraising – acts which may be out of reach for families that struggle

with financial means and whose time is necessarily occupied by their job (Auerbach, 2007).

How do families that struggle with finances, lacking access to resources, support their children's education? To answer this question, Auerbach and colleagues utilized three years of ethnographic data in a longitudinal study of students and their families conducted at a large, racially and socioeconomically mixed high school in the Los Angeles metropolitan area that was 46% Anglo, 34% Latino, 12% African American, and 8% Asian American. Researchers recruited students for this research through the Futures Project, a partnership with the University of California, Los Angeles, that combined a small college access program with a study of the educational trajectories of students of color. Researchers identified these students in a ninth-grade Achievement through Individual Determination (AVID) college-preparation class. Some families were intentionally selected to explore the construction of parenting roles in working-class people of color who lack a college education yet want college for their children. Some of these family samples include immigrant families whose unique experiences affect parenting roles. Caregivers selected for the study had a range of educational attainment, "from no formal schooling to one semester of university, with about half having less than a high school diploma and half having completed high school or some community college". Most of these caregivers were employed as skilled laborers, in sales, or in clerical jobs. English fluency, marital status, and their child's high school GPA all varied (Auerbach, 2007).

Through their research, Auerbach and her colleagues developed an "Alternative Typology of Parent Roles," which demonstrates the broader support that the struggling families of color in their study demonstrated – which contrasts with Epstein's standard model of school and family engagement (Auerbach, 2007). Auerbach and her research team's experience mirrors the experience of the teachers in *Strengthening Schools and Family Relationships* (SSFR). These educators anticipate that the unique caregiving roles among struggling families of color will vary from the traditional model of caregiver engagement. Teachers in the SSFR program readily recognize the caregiver roles outlined in Auerbach's "Alternate Typology" – in their own students' families and sometimes in their own.

Auerbach and her team conclude that it is in the best interest of educators to strive for a better understanding of how their families support their students; this will equip them to promote collaborative partnerships – better engaging all caregivers with “respectful, culturally sensitive, home-school relations” (Auerbach, 2007). Educators in the SSFR program learn to apply this approach, using play as a means of connection. Play provides a universal frame of reference and an authentic way to inspire wonder and learning. In 2016, The DoSeum’s Education team asked what could be done to address the fact that the standard model of caregiver engagement does not work for every school community, and what role The DoSeum could play in the solution; the resulting program was SSFR.

Appropriate Approaches/Strategies

The DoSeum’s *School and Community Programs* team facilitates the SSFR program in collaboration with local public school educators in San Antonio, Texas. Play-based learning activities bring students, their caregivers, and their families together in the spirit of community and lifelong joyful learning. Teachers participate in *Professional Learning Community* (PLC) sessions focused on each school's unique needs.

The DoSeum’s SSFR program launched during the 2016-2017 school year. The first schools selected to participate were established partners in The DoSeum’s STEM Afterschool program. In partnership with Communities In Schools, The DoSeum outreach program targeted struggling schools. These schools’ demographics mirror those in Auerbach's (2007) research.

Schools in the San Antonio Independent School District (ISD) included Douglass Academy and Washington Elementary. Douglass’s community reported that 95% of residents were economically disadvantaged, with 99% at the Washington campus. Douglass’s student population was predominantly Hispanic/Latinx (88%) with smaller populations of White (4%), Black (7%), and mixed race (1%) students. Students with Limited English Proficiency made up 17% of Douglass’s and 19% of Washington’s students. Washington’s student population was also predominantly Hispanic/Latinx (81%), with a larger Black population (17%) and smaller populations of White students (1.7%) and mixed-race students (0.3%). Walzem Elementary is a school in the North

East ISD with similar student demographics: 91% economically disadvantaged and 55% having Limited English Proficiency – and 81.9% Hispanic/Latinx, 9.5% Black, 3% Asian, 2.5% White, 2.3% mixed race, 0.5% Native American, and 0.3% Pacific Islander. In the next phase of growth, HB Gonzalez Elementary in Edgewood ISD joined the program. Edgewood’s demographics mirrored the first schools in SSFR with 85% economically disadvantaged and 31% Limited English Proficiency – and 95.1% Hispanic/Latinx, 2.8% Black, 1.3% White, 0.5% Asian, and 0.3% mixed race.

Teachers in the SSFR program participate in three ninety-minute PLC sessions facilitated by DoSeum educators. During these sessions, educators reflect on and discuss their current approach to family engagement, study articles about school and family engagement – including Epstein and Auerbach’s research- and envision ideal interactions with their students’ families. Teachers plan and set goals in advance of each of the two family nights, which alternate with the PLC sessions. Teachers respond to surveys to confirm goals, assess themselves and their school, and affirm their commitment to caregiver engagement. The surveys provide data for The DoSeum to improve.

During family night visits to The DoSeum, participants engage in playful learning activities. Activities range from open-ended engineering design challenges with models that enable role-playing, playful testing, or gamified competition. SSFR activities provide innovative, joyful learning experiences in The DoSeum, while modeling what can be done outside The DoSeum – back at the school campus, at home, or in other third spaces.

Early SSFR activities have included designing “robotic” arms made from upcycled materials or parachutes that could be tested from a second-floor launch area. An activity based on The DoSeum’s Spy Academy exhibit has families use the Engineering Design Process to build a spy hideout – complete with secret passages and traps. In another role-play-based activity, students take on the role of one of the three little pigs and design shelters that can withstand “The Big Bad Wolf,” simulated by an air cannon. In another activity, students take inspiration from the children’s book *Rosie Revere, Engineer* by Andrea Beaty (2013) and build the creative skill of upscaling what others

might consider rubbish into tools and materials for engineering design. In a city-building activity, families play a gamified version of a city council. In all of these activities, teachers and caregivers are invited to play with and support learners in their thinking processes. Adults foster growth mindsets, critical thinking, and collaborative behavior. They model how to approach new challenges as they play and learn together.

The SSFR program aims to engage more than half of the students' families in each teacher's class. To remove the potential financial barriers to this engagement—with support from generous funders—The DoSeum offers this program at no cost to our school partners. The DoSeum also reimburses schools for bus costs to transport families to The DoSeum. Dinner is provided, and DoSeum staff provide childcare for younger siblings who attend the event.

The program aims to instill a culture of joyful, lifelong learning within families and strengthen connections within the school community. Teachers, caregivers, and students participating in the program collaborate to develop campus-based programs with the support of The DoSeum and other community partners. These “Campus Cooperative Initiatives” have included using SSFR family nights to restart a defunct PTO, hosting a family read-along night, and scaling school-based STEM activities to a superplayful scale by inviting the San Antonio Fire Department to bring their big ladder from which to drop eggs in student-designed contraptions – making a joyful spectacle out of a traditional STEM activity.

Program Adaptations

The DoSeum is intentionally responsive and ever-evolving. During the COVID pandemic, The DoSeum adapted the SSFR program. Hybrid events were coordinated – with some families joining online from home and some attending masked, socially distanced events at The DoSeum. Two new community partners emerged during this time – A&M-San Antonio's ASPIRE Program, which develops partnerships with the university and surrounding school districts, and Opportunity Home. ASPIRE supported recruiting new schools from the East Central and Harlandale ISDs.

In 2022, the San Antonio Housing Authority renamed and reset its organizational mission, becoming Opportunity Home. Opportunity Home reached out

to The DoSeum seeking services. The SSFR program provided a model that met Opportunity Home's needs, allowing a pilot partnership. After two successful years with Opportunity Home, challenges became evident in adapting the school-based model to a large-scale nonprofit serving more than 62,500 children, adults, and seniors and employing over 600 staff. The program was valued for building relationships with families. This sparked new, creative ideas for a customized, nonprofit version. To guide this shift, we scheduled a debrief and planning meeting with key stakeholders. This dialogue helped determine how to customize the Opportunity Home partnership. We learned that the PLCs needed to be reframed for nonprofit administration, as play-based learning was not always viewed as a "professional" training. At the same time, the Opportunity Home staff affirmed that play was meaningful, especially for adults who may not have had opportunities to play as children. These experiences reminded families to play together and offered parents time to connect with their children. Opportunity Home staff were inspired to use the family connections at SSFR family night events to promote literacy by providing book giveaways to support learning at home. Although Opportunity Home is no longer in SSFR, the family night experiences showed what is possible in our ongoing partnership.

Meanwhile, the school-based SSFR program continues to thrive. Because the program is intended as a multi-year partnership, we added additional resources to the PLC. In later years of the program, teachers step away from the school perspective and examine parenting styles through the lens of human development (Awiszuz, 2022). Our PLC sessions focus on how parenting styles affect child development. Teachers are invited to make personal connections with caregivers before addressing academics to support the whole child better. Educators' discussions in the PLCs allowed them to adjust parent/teacher interactions during family nights preemptively – brainstorming the best ways to engage with each type. Educators in SSFR have noted that our family night events have been their first positive interactions with specific parents, and they felt better equipped to have those interactions because of the PLCs.

To provide holistic support to the educators in this program, we have incorporated consultation with mental health experts into our PLCs. Keeping DoSeum's mission of joyful learning close at heart, we have co-created sessions with a local

adventure therapist focused on teacher rejuvenation through play. The activities give educators time to reflect on why they entered education, connect meaningfully to those reasons, and use play to create objects that anchor them to those reasons. Teachers are provided with various media- Legos, clay, shrink plastic- to create a physical object that anchors them to their passion for teaching. Sessions begin with a physical movement piece that improves focus and centers on celebrating classroom wins. These activities often use balls, hula hoops, and ropes to incorporate play.

Data from the surveys conducted from 2017 to 2020 affirm the value of SSFR. An average of 20 educators participated in the PLC sessions annually – earning continuing professional education credit required to maintain teacher certification in Texas. Six to seven hundred students and their families participated in the family nights annually, with an average of 160-170 children and 160-170 caregivers each semester.

Post-program teacher surveys found:

- 90% of teachers were more confident in their ability to engage with caregivers because of SSFR,
- 78% committed to changing how they work with families because of the program,
- 89% talked with caregivers outside The DoSeum about interactions during the SSFR family nights, and
- 100% would recommend the SSFR program to other educators.

The post-program caregiver surveys reported:

- 95% of caregivers had at least one pleasant interaction with their child's teacher at an SSFR event,
- 90% reported they decided to do more educational activities with their child outside of school because of the program, and
- 100% stated they and their children learned something new during their visit(s) to The DoSeum.

Conclusion/ Recommendations

With the average American spending less than five percent of their life in the classroom (Falk & Dierking, 2010), museums and other third spaces can and should embrace both their opportunity and responsibility for strengthening young learners' education. While many museums offer a standard program portfolio of daily workshops or demonstrations, one-and-done field trips, and camps, for example, The DoSeum's commitment to its community has expanded and evolved to think beyond the standard. SSFR is one program that resulted from this approach, and it has demonstrated that embedded partnerships yield the most impactful and most rewarding results.

While many teacher professional development programs within the museum industry emphasize one-day sessions, which can yield a high number of participants, The DoSeum's approach is one of quality over quantity, presenting deeper and more meaningful experiences for teachers that, in many cases, lead to actual change in the classroom via a true partnership between museum staff and our partner schools.

Though the SSFR program has been continually adapted, one element remains consistent: play. Play is essential to the DoSeum experience and has provided a stable foundation for SSFR's goals. Keeping play at the center of SSFR family nights connects families and their educators, transforming their communities into centers of joyful learning.

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Ready for Me: A DEY Campaign to Change the Narrative About Going to Kindergarten

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Introduction

In 2023, Defending the Early Years (DEY) launched regional Working Groups (WGs) to support early childhood advocates in working together to address issues related to our national campaign and to restore the link between high-quality and child development (Defending the Early Years, n.d.). We began with six regional groups, each with two co-facilitators, and 6-25 members recruited from our networks. Potential working group co-facilitators completed an online application and participated in a virtual informational interview. Once we determined they met the criteria to lead a working group successfully (experience leading adults, understanding of local issues, etc.), they signed an agreement and began recruiting members.

Our Kentucky Working Group (KWG), co-facilitated by co-authors Michele and Hans, held regular meetings with an active group of 12-16 members. At one of our quarterly co-facilitator meetings, they shared their art campaign, Ready for Me, which engaged children, teachers, and parents in sharing what schools needed to be ready for children. Using funds from a DEY mini grant, they hosted sessions throughout the community and helped participants create art in response to prompts about schools being ready for children. In 2025, we presented their work at the Network for Public Education conference in Columbus, Ohio, and, at the request of another WG co-facilitator, we agreed to make Ready for Me a national campaign for DEY.

The Problem

Reframing Readiness

DEY has addressed school readiness in several reports and blog posts (Farran, 2025; Feeny, 2016; Katz, 2015). The focus on school readiness has changed

kindergarten from play-led environments that support whole-child development to spaces where academics, standardized assessments, and teacher-directed instruction dominate most of the school day (Farran, 2025; Miller & Almon, 2009). Furthermore, this change has led to a demand that publicly funded preschools focus on school readiness (Brown, 2018), thereby placing more developmentally harmful experiences on younger children.

Although school readiness became a policy goal and states tied funding for early childhood education to proving that children were being prepared for school, a clear understanding of what school readiness meant and the best way to achieve it remained absent. Brown (2018) identified four framings of school readiness situated within education reform discourses: "*the nativist, empiricist, social constructions, and interactionist perspectives*" (p. 288). He notes that "how stakeholders frame this construct informs the ways in which they understand the process by which children are ready for school, the problem of school readiness itself, and the means through which government should address the issue" (p. 288).

The *nativist perspective* understands readiness as something that develops within the child with no input from family, teachers, or schools, while the *empiricist framing* takes the opposite approach and views readiness as something outside of the child; the focus is on what the family, teachers, and schools do to make children ready for school. Brown (2018) notes that this perspective dominates early childhood education in the US.

The *social constructions* and *interactionist* perspectives take a hybrid approach to understanding school readiness. *The social constructionist approach* acknowledges that school readiness is dependent on a variety of social factors, meaning that in one context a child can be ready while in another they would not be. The *interactionist framing* recognizes that both the child and the school contribute to school readiness, valuing the interaction between what the child brings and what teachers do at school. *The interactionist framing* shifts the notion that children must be ready for school to the idea that schools must be ready for the children.

Ready for Me takes an *interactionist approach* to school readiness. Traditional approaches that begin with a presumed deficit in the child and their family and demand that early childhood teachers be held accountable for addressing these supposed deficits have led to what Miller and Almond (2009) deemed a crisis in kindergarten. Thus, we believe we must reframe the narrative of school readiness if we are to restore the link between what we know about child development and what we understand to be high-quality early childhood experiences. This reframing must begin by dismantling deficit thinking rooted in traditional school-readiness approaches and by reconceptualizing what school readiness means and how best to achieve it.

Ready for Me rejects the premise that young children are deficient before they enter kindergarten. Children are born curious and eager to construct knowledge through hands-on, engaging experiences. Environmental and biological challenges can impact a child's ability to pursue their curiosity and to construct knowledge, but that does not make them inherently deficient. A child who does not know their letters, or numbers, or how to spell or write their name, but can recognize when their emotions change, or demonstrate respect for elders, or take initiative in solving problems, is not deficient.

Academic knowledge should not be the only basis for defining school readiness. Katz (2015) argued that we should assume intellectual skills and dispositions, those that relate to skills of the mind, such as analyzing, questioning, predicting, and reasoning, are inherent in all children. Furthermore, in the early years, a developmentally focused curriculum would encourage and motivate children to develop academic skills through intellectual pursuits, rather than prioritizing academic instruction at the expense of intellectual development.

Once we reject the implicit deficit view of children, we can realize that school readiness is the development of intellectual skills and dispositions that support the use of academic skills in environments that foster hands-on, child-led, engaging experiences. This reframing of school readiness removes the need for teacher-directed instruction and standardized assessments that only serve an academically focused approach to school. Instead, teachers need to get to know the children, understand the knowledge, skills, and dispositions they bring to the classroom, and create experiences

that allow children to engage in intellectual activities that naturally encourage the development of academic skills. This intellectual approach to school readiness requires that we shift our thinking from how we make children ready for school to how we get ready for the children who will come to our school. Ready for Me is our attempt to bring about this much-needed reframing.

Background

Ready for Me and the Kentucky Work Group (KY WG)

As cohort co-facilitators, Hans and Michele began the work in Louisville, KY, as the city launched its first initiative to create a mixed-model universal pre-K for all 3- and 4-year-olds. Hans, along with 20 others in early childhood-adjacent high-level administrative roles (15 women, 6 men, predominantly white, some with early care and education experience, and 1 parent with children aged 0 to 5), served on an advisory group that met biweekly from June to November 2023 to craft an implementation plan. Guided by a retired business leader, the Director of the Mayor's Office of Early Childhood Development, the Director of the Mayor's Office of Philanthropy, and a Project Manager from the Office of Philanthropy. As this process evolved, Hans continued to share information about Thrive by Five's (TB5) work with the KY WG. At the group's regular meetings from July 2024 through February 2025, and through weekly email correspondence, members offered feedback, asked questions, and shared information within their professional worlds.

Working group members included the Director of Early Childhood Education at the area's only Historically Black College and University (HBCU); an early childhood teacher who served with Michele as our representative of the Consent Decree Coalition related to the murder of Breonna Taylor; the director of the West Louisville Math and Science Center, a community based organization serving the "West End", a Black community within a segregated city; and the Birth-to-12th-Grade School Impact Coordinator for a statewide refugee support community organization.

Other members were directors of various early childhood spaces, including Skillz 4 Life, the city's only trauma-informed childcare center; Auburndale Head Start, a Spanish-speaking-only facility; a private preschool program; a YMCA childcare center;

and the YMCA after-school enrichment program, the largest in the city serving all Jefferson County Public Schools.

The most active member, Kim Pirog, the founder and director of Side by Side Studios in Louisville, enthusiastically participated and became a full partner in the Ready for Me art campaign as it evolved. While Side by Side Studios has a home base near downtown Louisville, it primarily serves the broader community by providing expressive art opportunities in parks, childcare settings, and community centers in areas considered "expressive arts deserts" within a highly segregated city. Many other members who could not attend meetings participated via email, sharing their thoughts and ideas throughout the process. Since the original mayor's office advisory group concluded its work and made its recommendations for the plan announced in March 2024, several concerns remained central to the KY WG:

- The advisory group was composed primarily of white members, with one or two exceptions, and those in the most influential roles were white.
- Participants did not take action to address the lack of diversity.
- Corporate leadership was particularly dominant, with a strong presence of white men.
- Representation from across the city was lacking.
- The panel lacked representation from the range of agencies working with early childhood facilities.
- The panel lacked inclusion of people working in early childhood education.
- Participants lacked understanding of the day-to-day lives of children in the early childhood community.

In particular, there was a lack of understanding of the current circumstances of children in early childhood settings, including but not limited to:

- Identity development in early childhood
- The role of play in early childhood
- Neuro, sensory, and motor development in early childhood
- The impact of poverty in early childhood

- Multilingualism as an asset in early childhood
- The persistence of deficit-based descriptions of early childhood

Despite ongoing questions and repeated concerns raised by the KY WG, none of these issues were addressed, and no meaningful changes were made.

Because of continued concerns about the impacts of these dynamics on the early stages of the "universal pre-k" expansion, the KY WG met in November 2024 with the two women leading this work before hiring an Executive Director. During this meeting, the group shared ways they could support one another and address their concerns. As the KY WG had access to many of the individuals and perspectives excluded from the process, the group felt it was essential to facilitate access to those voices to increase their chances of being heard.

As a result, 4 KY WG members were invited to serve on work groups formed by the Board Chair. However, group members reported disappointing experiences within these work groups. In one case, a member, a former program director and NAEYC administrator, was told she was wrong when she shared factual information with the committee about early childhood education and teachers. None of the other work group members had professional experience or expertise in early childhood. At this point, as committees were being formed, decisions about the direction of the approved \$5 million budget from the Louisville Metro Council were already underway.

Strategies

Early in 2025, the KY WG identified two areas they believed they could effectively address as initial steps toward the vision for early childhood in Louisville. The first was the question of "kindergarten readiness," which had come to drive every budget decision, policy discussion, and political move. The second was identifying the best strategy for addressing this issue from the perspectives of children, families, and teachers. The second strategy focused on ensuring that the voices and experiences of children, families, and teachers were acknowledged. As Kim Pirog said, "You have to make it so big that it cannot be ignored."

After much deliberation and reflection, it became clear to the group that they wanted to change the narrative around going to kindergarten. As Michele and Hans continued to formulate this idea, Michele began writing about it. Drawing from those writings and from the children she saw during her daily classroom visits, the words "not me ready for kindergarten... kindergarten, be ready for me" emerged. Thus, "Ready for Me," as group members repeated it again and again, offered clarity and direction for the work.

Michele and Hans, as well as members of the KY WG, had previously worked with the artist Lily Yeh in Louisville. Her considered and measured approach to using visual arts as a vehicle for social change was a natural fit for this effort. Gathering art was a practice that many members, particularly those at Side by Side Studios, were already doing. The group adjusted the lens by asking the artists to visualize what kindergarten would look like if it were truly ready for the children of this community. What would it need? What would be on the walls, in our hands, and in our arms? How many pathways would lead to the outdoors, and how many wild spaces would there be? What kind of food would we find there? Would we grow it? Who would be there, and what would they know about me? What would I want them to know about me? What would my adults want them to cherish and see in me? What would my community agree to if kindergarten were ready for me? Would it insist on a new way of viewing community helpers? A new way of holding them accountable for shared safety? As mentioned earlier, would it mean setting aside your beliefs about who I am and what I lack, and letting what I have to offer and how I shine step forward? What would it all mean?

The next step was to gather adults together and ask them, using art materials, to lay down their dreams in response to our questions (see Figure 1). When KY WG exhibited the artwork in spaces such as the Muhammad Ali Center, paper taped to tables invited the community to respond with their own experiences.

Side by Side Studios entered juvenile (in)justice facilities to ask teenagers and young adults to use the art materials and answer the same questions. The KY WG then set up displays of the teenagers' and young adults' artwork at high schools across the city. Across settings, the paper-covered tables revealed deep knowing and a longing to connect.



Figure 1: Ready for Me flyer created by DEY Kentucky Area Working Group

A common thread emerged: the realization that no one had ever been asked, "What does school need to know to be ready for me?" Joy and disappointment recurred in the art (see Figures 2 and 3).



Figures 2 and 3: Muhammad Ali Center Council of Students at the Muhammad Ali Center in Louisville, KY. Photo credit: Side by Side Studio

Thus, as we arrive at this moment, we must now ask: who needs to see this and who needs to hear this? The governor of KY has announced a universal pre-K launch as part of his presidential campaign. He and the mayor of Louisville have appeared together, expressing their shared support for early childhood. At the same time, citing statistics focused on deficits and fears, without acknowledging the breadth of humanity in each child.

The KY WG group will continue gathering art to exhibit during the 2026 Week of the Young Child and will invite both the governor and the mayor to the event. The group has outlined specific asks and plans to make it public at that time as we join our colleagues and friends in the National Ready for Me campaign.

Our asks:

- Can we invite you to an ongoing conversation about your efforts to bring early childhood programming into existing and new spaces?
- Please consider refraining from using only statistics on deficits in families and children when promoting your early childhood agenda.
- Please consider leading with this as your primary message: Children are born ready to be themselves.
- We will focus on supporting each adult in every classroom the children find themselves in to create a space where children indeed find *themselves*.
- We will make our early childhood spaces ready for children in the ways they tell us are necessary.
- We will allow children their universal human right to play.
- We understand this will build the communities our children deserve and, as they grow up, will belong to them in increasingly influential ways.
- We will be who we want them to become.

Conclusion

Taking Ready for Me National

The KY WG, Ready for Me, recognizes the essential role that children's and early childhood professionals' voices must play in identifying what schools need to be

genuinely ready for incoming kindergarteners. Art as advocacy offers one effective way to bring those voices into the public sphere. Lily Yeh's work in art activism demonstrates how creative expression, particularly when created by those who are often unheard, can elevate lived experiences and shift public narratives in meaningful ways.

As the KY WG developed the Ready for Me model, other DEY Regional Working Groups stalled for various reasons. During this period, one co-facilitator expressed interest in adapting and implementing the KY WG's Ready for Me model within their own region. From this conversation, the idea of a National DEY Ready for Me Advocacy Campaign emerged.

The potential of this project to empower young children, early childhood educators, and advocates across the country —while also bringing their voices to the forefront of the kindergarten readiness conversation —is significant and compelling; this potential alone warrants action.

In collaboration with the remaining co-facilitators, DEY had hoped to launch a national campaign. It began to develop accessible, adaptable resources that early childhood educators and advocates could use across diverse contexts. Because DEY closed on June 30, 2026, Michele from the KY WG reached out to the International Play Association USA affiliate to discuss transferring the Ready for Me initiative. In early June 2026, the Governing Board of IPA USA adopted Ready for Me. All participating cohorts from the DEY original "Ready for Me" campaign will now join this effort. We can build on our work from DEY and the considerable local and international reach of IPA USA, a not-for-profit organization.

The goal remains to create a comprehensive toolkit that includes informational materials, implementation guidelines, and advocacy support, in a format that is clear, inclusive, and usable, with additional guidance and support as needed. By doing so, Ready for Me aims to support locally grounded advocacy efforts while advancing a shared national narrative: schools must be ready for children, not the other way around. Ready for Me was born, nurtured, and experienced its own period of early childhood in the loving embrace of Defending the Early Years. We are ready to join the world of

liberation and play now outside that safe, warm place, and we hope to honor it through our continued thread, the not-so-invisible one that joins us all.

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Play as a Biological Necessity: The Importance of Attractive and Playable Outdoor Play Spaces for the Healthy Development of All Children

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Introduction

Play, as an activity, is important across the lifespan, but especially for children and youth. Play is a biological necessity, a byproduct of enabling conditions, and should be present in healthy, unstressed children and adults (Burghardt, 2010b).

In the U.S. and many places worldwide, dedicated outdoor play spaces for children (playgrounds, play parks, playscapes) provide the conditions and environments in which children can play. These playgrounds, play parks, or playscapes support physical fitness, social connection and development, cognitive and creative enrichment, and experiences in nature. In this article, I will explain why active outdoor play matters, especially for children, and share recommendations from the Physical Activity Alliance, the American Academy of Pediatrics, and others. I will also present research on the importance of active outdoor play; what attracts children to dedicated outdoor play spaces; the importance of considering children of all abilities; how this information supports advocacy for dedicated outdoor play spaces in communities; and how to design these spaces effectively.

Problem Statement

Why Active Outdoor Play is Important

A robust body of research supports active outdoor play as a primary activity for child development (American Academy of Pediatrics, 2021; Lee et al., 2025). The 2025 position statement on active outdoor play (Lee et al., 2025) draws on strong evidence that children are more active outdoors and that active outdoor play benefits children across physical, social, cognitive, and spiritual domains. They also cite findings indicating that the health benefits of physical activity in nature are greater than those of exposure to nature or physical activity alone (Christiana et al., 2021).

Promoting active outdoor play for children is urgent. Only 20-28% of children aged 6-17 meet the physical activity recommendations in the U.S. (HHS, 2018; Physical

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Activity Alliance, 2024). For children over the age of 5, the guidelines recommend at least 1 hour of moderate-to-vigorous physical activity per day, including aerobic and muscle-strengthening activities (Centers for Disease Control, accessed February 2, 2026). In addition, the rising prevalence of child and youth mental health concerns (American Academy of Pediatrics, American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry and Children's Hospital Association, 2021; Shim et al, 2022) calls our attention to the benefits that could be gained by having opportunities for active outdoor free play in dedicated and naturalized play environments.

To gain benefits from dedicated outdoor play spaces, ensure they are attractive and nourishing for people with a broad range of abilities, and pay close attention to design features that support children and families who may face barriers due to physical or cognitive differences. These design features ensure that the outdoor space supports both physical diversity and neurodiversity.

Background

Outdoor play spaces designed to attract children and their families and inspire a range of movements have become an important resource for supporting children's health and wellbeing.

National playground studies in the U. S. have found that innovative outdoor playgrounds attracted 2.5 times more users, generated almost 3 times as much moderate to vigorous physical activity, and had 31% more users per square foot than standard or traditional playgrounds (Cohen et al., 2020; 2023a; 2023b; Talarowski et al., 2019; Young et al., 2023). Innovative playgrounds were defined as having at least three of the following: a variety of surface types, naturalized and planted areas designed for play, open-ended structures that do not dictate play sequence, and moveable equipment.

In a study examining children's perspectives on the attractiveness of playgrounds, Jansson (2010) found that children were drawn to unique, thrilling equipment not available elsewhere in their communities. In an observational study of children's use of public playgrounds, Refshauge et al. (2013) found that the most-used playgrounds had the greatest variety of play activities, including opportunities for both

active and sedentary play. Similarly, Reimers and Knapp (2017) found that playgrounds with a greater variety of play activities and thrill attracted the most users and supported more active play.

Research on the benefits of inclusive playgrounds for people with differing abilities found that opportunities for exciting, social play experiences are important for all children (Brown et al., 2021; Wenger et al., 2021). It is also important to encourage children of differing abilities to play together, rather than segregating them with specialized equipment that does not appeal to all. In a study of users' perspectives on playgrounds, Lynch et al. (2020) found that variety, thrill, challenge, and usability are important for children of all abilities. A subsequent scoping review by Morgenthaler et al. (2023) also supports these findings, highlighting the importance of the social dimensions of play, especially when children with differing abilities play together.

Appropriate Approaches/Strategies

When considering approaches and strategies for designing dedicated outdoor play spaces, it is important to begin with an understanding of play as a specific behavior with defining characteristics (Burghardt, 2010b). This will have implications for how dedicated play spaces are designed and programmed.

First characteristic of play: Play is always voluntary. The person playing must be able to choose to play and what to play.

Second characteristic of play: it is an activity that is done for its own sake – children, and people of all ages and all abilities, play to have fun (Gray, 2013).

Play can offer benefits, such as exercise and skill-building from active outdoor play, but it is done simply because it is fun. This distinguishes 'free play' from organized sports activities led by adults, rather than free play led by children's interests and motivation. Two other characteristics of free play that distinguish it from organized sports are:

Third characteristic of play: Body movement is modified relative to the activity's ordinary function in everyday contexts, and it involves repeating an action while allowing variation in those repetitions. One example, often seen exclusively in

dedicated outdoor play spaces, is climbing. Climbing is a functional activity. Climbing is a form of mobility, and it can serve a survival function. Climbing stairs to move between levels is useful for most people. Climbing a tree, mast, or ladder is another example that may not be relevant or achievable for everyone, but is relevant to many people, and, arguably, all of us depend on others' ability to do these things for our collective survival. Climbing may take the form of moving across a surface by aid of an assistive device. This could be a challenge, especially for persons who have barriers due to the limits of their bodies in terms of strength, muscle control, and fatigue, but this can be designed for on a playground with attention to opportunities in landforms, resting places, and flexible membranes strategically placed to support a range of abilities.

When children or adults play at climbing, they modify the climbing and provide opportunities to vary it. For example, climbing a net or rope structure on a playground offers variations that let children choose different pathways and movements; a hillside to climb with ropes to hold onto is another example of climbing play.

Fourth characteristic of Play: Intentional design to provide access to a spectrum of challenge levels in climbing and mobility is essential for people of all abilities. Universal Design Principles support this (KOMPAN Play Institute, 2024).

While Universal Design Principles can apply to any built environment or object, specific principles relate to outdoor playground equipment and dedicated play spaces (Moore et al., 2023). The main points encompassed by Universal Design Principles related to outdoor playgrounds are accessibility, multifunctionality, variety of play and social experiences (including social, solitary, and parallel play), usability (through ease of use, a broad spectrum of effort, and play signals), transparency (clear sight lines), and thrill. Moore et al. (2020) explain that Universal Design Principles for playgrounds have the greatest potential to support public playground design because they align with equity, inclusion, and children's rights.

Universal Design Principles also provide strategies for designing for people who are blind or have low vision (BLV). One aligned strategy is to use high-contrast colors on movable play activities and the playground surface to indicate play zones. Universal Design Principles can also support neuro-inclusion in outdoor play spaces. Children

with ADHD, Autism, and sensory processing conditions may require additional support for sensory and social needs. Research has found that to support neuro-inclusion, it is important to offer both peer play and solitary play opportunities on outdoor playgrounds. Opportunities for solitary or parallel play (when children play side by side without direct interaction) help children to play on their own terms, or if they want or need to regulate the stimulation that often occurs on playgrounds (Brown et al., 2021; James et al., 2022; Pawlikowska-Piechotka, 2011; Prellwitz & Skär, 2007). Areas for children to take a break on the playground (such as naturalized areas or relaxed yet playful seating) will also help them stay in the play space while regulating their senses and emotions.

An emerging area of research examines how freestanding, ground-level play panels with dynamic play activities can support children with diverse cognitive styles (including those with Autism, ADHD, and sensory processing disorders), as well as children with limited mobility (including those who use wheelchairs or assistive devices). This is because they are easy to use, can support group, individual, and parallel play, and are designed to let children play in areas of the playground with reduced sensory stimulation. It is important, however, to design and select these freestanding play panels so that they are for play – meaning they are fun, social, stimulating, and supportive of movement (KOMPAN, 2025).

Conclusion/ Recommendations

Active outdoor play has benefits for children in all areas of their development – physical, social, cognitive, creative, and in their connection to local ecologies. Children need nourishing experiences that are accessible to them and their families. Communities benefit from dedicated play spaces for people's health and well-being.

Research indicates that to be effective and attract people to stay and play, these spaces should be innovative, featuring enjoyable, unique equipment and natural elements. Apply Universal Design Principles to the design of dedicated outdoor play spaces so people of all abilities can enjoy the health and social benefits.

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Unstructured Outdoor Play is Essential for Sport Readiness

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Introduction

Children do not necessarily know what their brains and bodies need; they depend on their parents, teachers, and other influential adults to provide developmentally focused movement opportunities. Unstructured outdoor play is fundamental for healthy brain and body development in childhood. Sadly, adults sabotage children by bypassing the developmental process and replacing unstructured outdoor play with sports.

Overall, adults want children to be healthy and happy, but the opposite trend is growing among children. If we pause to reflect on why this generation is the most unhealthy and unhappy of all, it is due to the removal of play from children's lives and the adult push for children to participate in sports and competition before they are developmentally, physically, and emotionally ready (Forrest et al., 2025).

Unstructured outdoor play lays the foundation for a child to be sport-ready. Sport readiness is the child's overall state (physical, mental, emotional, social) to meet the demands of a sport (Purcell, 2005). Therefore, parents need to understand that sport readiness develops naturally through daily outdoor play, which provides valuable opportunities for long-term motor skill development (Aicinena, 1992; Kochanek et al., 2019).

Consider the following two scenarios of park spaces a child might have access to. Which of these scenarios would lay the foundation for healthy development, and which one would fall short?

Scenario One: A parent working on soccer drills with their two sons (ages 7 and 10). The parent sets up cones, an agility ladder, and a soccer goal as a circuit. The sons would do the explained circuit drills– with eyes down and seemingly uninspired – receive a few minutes of feedback from the parent before trudging back to the start of the circuit to run robotically through the exact same sequence again.

Scenario Two: Parents sitting on a blanket while their kids (10 and under) chase birds, climb a tree, swing, or dig for fossils. They use physical skills such as running, dodging, stopping, starting, skipping, accelerating, and strategizing, as well as laughing, throughout their play.

Scenarios One and Two can be seen throughout the United States. The first scenario is adult-directed, repetitive, and boring. This is NOT the secret formula for children's health, fitness, and sports readiness. The second scenario illustrates the joy, excitement, laughter, physical challenges, and strength-building that occur when children lead their play.

Problem Statement

For children to develop physically, emotionally, cognitively, and socially, unstructured outdoor play is essential to healthy development. Children's bodies demand the opportunity to be physically active every day. Adults, not children, have led the trend we have seen over the past fifty years. This has created a developmental model that is counterproductive to a child's health and may, ultimately, destroy their enthusiasm for life. This cultivated developmental model assumes that sports can replace unstructured outdoor play and produce similar holistic developmental outcomes.

In reality, substituting structured sports for free play can hinder development in significant ways, as unstructured, self-directed outdoor play is crucial for developing balanced limbs (Webb & Rhea, 2023a), motor skills (Campbell-Pierre & Rhea, 2023; Sutapa et al., 2021), brain neuroplasticity (Cebolla & Cheron, 2019; Pedersen, 2019), social negotiation (Rhea, 2021), and emotion regulation (Rhea et al., 2025). While sports can provide physical activity, they often lack the imagination, intrinsic motivation, and autonomy found in unstructured outdoor play (Gray, 2017).

Adults assume that if children participate in sports early enough and maybe even specialize in one sport, they will develop more quickly and become better athletes than those who do not participate in sports early in life. Specialization at an early age has been shown to increase muscle imbalances and injury rates, and to decrease physical performance over time (Puzzitiello et al., 2021; Rugg et al., 2021; Stricker et al., 2020).

Participating in a sport at an early age does not produce sport readiness; unstructured outdoor play does. To improve a child's overall health and fitness so they can lead a healthy life and succeed in sport, we must consider how to appropriately develop sport readiness in children.

Background

Sport readiness means a child has established baseline health and will navigate childhood and, eventually, adulthood with confidence, functioning at the advanced levels of movement, mobility, and explosiveness needed for sports. These positive elements increase the likelihood of lifelong physical activity while reducing injury risk (Basso et al., 2021; Rosengren et al., 2021a; Rosengren et al., 2021b).

Unstructured outdoor play gives children a perfect space to be physically active, coordinate limb movements, and vary limb movement directions through fundamental skills such as walking, running, jumping, dodging, cutting, crawling, and climbing (Campbell-Pierre & Rhea, 2023; Dankiw et al., 2020; Webb & Rhea, 2023a). School and home are the perfect places to provide outdoor play opportunities. Sadly, these opportunities are missing in both places.

Recess in School for Sport Readiness

Fifty years ago, the American school system understood the value of whole child development and the need for indoor and outdoor movement breaks. This was evident in play and imagination stations within the classroom, an emphasis on physical education, music, and art, and multiple outdoor recess breaks each day, which provided ample opportunities for physical activity. Over the past 25 years, standardized testing for 3rd through 12th graders, competition-focused physical education opportunities, and the rampant use of technology have prioritized academics over whole-child development (Panieti-Madan & Ranganathan, 2023). These standards quickly removed children's individual developmental achievements and forgot that children are social, physical, spiritual, emotional, and cognitive beings (Stoewen, 2025). Governmental policies imposed on the American school system have caused it to lose its soul and shift from whole-child development to predominantly academic and competitive pursuits. This has left a void in opportunities for children to build sport readiness during the

school day through the most opportune means: recess, defined as outdoor, unstructured free play.

One highly successful recess intervention, The LiiNK Project® (Let's inspire innovation 'N Kids), focuses on whole child development in elementary and middle school settings. The LiiNK intervention is a multi-year, routinely scheduled, teacher-embraced model that includes four 15-minute recesses (outdoor child-directed play breaks) and 15-minute character lessons (Positive Action®) daily. LiiNK research has shown that children with 60 minutes of daily recess have decreased stress levels (Rhea et al., 2025), improved happiness and positive emotions (Clark & Rhea, 2017), decreased off-task behaviors (Rhea & Rivchun, 2018), and maintained greater attentional focus when returning to the classroom (Lund et al., 2017). The LiiNK research team has also found that children with 60 minutes of recess exhibit exponentially more moderate-to-vigorous physical activity (MVPA) and have significant gains in postural balance, movement skills, and muscular strength development compared to those who receive 30 minutes or less of daily recess (Farbo et al., 2024; Farbo & Rhea, 2022; Rhea et al., 2026; Webb et al., 2025a; Webb et al., 2025b). The increased MVPA, postural balance, movement skills, and muscular strength provided by school recess are essential for enhancing whole health and sport readiness in children and preparing them for structured activities, such as Physical Education (PE).

Physical Education (PE) can play a key role during the school day in supporting sport readiness. PE is a structured, planned, intentional, and adult-supervised environment designed to improve motor and social skills as well as physical fitness and lifetime physical activity. The PE teacher must create a fun, safe, and engaging environment to advance social, emotional, cognitive, and physical skills. Even the best PE programs in the world cannot replace the benefits of recess. For the PE environment to be successful, a child must first practice moving their body and limbs in their chosen planes during free play to build the foundation of strength, coordination, mobility, flexibility, and confidence needed for structured physical activity if recess has been prioritized throughout the child's life. Free play allows children to apply the structured skills introduced in PE.

Physical Activity at Home for Sport Readiness

Before the 1980s, children played outside from the time they came home from school until they were called in to have dinner. Over the past few decades, this has all changed. Parents have become more fearful of their children playing outside due to safety concerns and a lack of areas to play. One key shift to address these issues was introducing sport development to younger children (starting at age 5). Most parents believed introducing their child to sport at a younger age would improve their physical fitness, emotional control, and social well-being. The intent of this early introduction for children was basic motor skill development related to the sport of interest and a safe, healthy place to be physically active. In most cases, it quickly became much more competitive without taking the child's developmental considerations into account. Most children have neither become more physically fit nor appropriately developed social and emotional skills.

Many parents have substituted outdoor play for organized sport. Organized sport, being another structured active environment, is similar to PE. It is often misunderstood in childhood as an appropriate replacement for outdoor unstructured play. Parents often check off the daily physical activity box for their child when the child attends practice or a game, not realizing the child gets fewer opportunities to be physically active than during recess or unstructured outdoor play at home. The components of sport do not provide the choice and variety of limb movements that outdoor free play offers and therefore lack many of the elements that prepare the future athlete for advanced movement skills and a reduced risk of injury. This is evident in youth sports, where repeated skill sequences often lack variety and intensity of movement for years on end. Increased injuries and surgeries in high school athletics testify to the detrimental effects of this repetition, particularly the lack of physical activity variety that unstructured free play offers (McLellan et al., 2022; Okoruwa et al., 2022).

Early participation in sport, especially early specialization, has led parents to believe their child is fit for a future in sports. The reality is that their child is "skilled" for future sport, but their body is not conditioned or prepared for the impacts of future sport. Negating the variety of movement from outdoor free play in childhood negates

the muscular, bone, joint-stabilizing, and neuromuscular development needed for success and injury prevention in higher levels of organized sport (Beato et al., 2021; Hulteen et al., 2018; Kokštejn et al., 2017; Payne & Isaacs, 2017; Pedersen, 2019; Rosengren, 2021a; Sutapa et al., 2021; Widodo et al., 2022).

Therefore, PE and/or organized sports cannot replace unstructured outdoor play; they should be secondary and supplemental. Children will be successful, confident, safe, and strong in structured opportunities only after they have developed properly through choice-directed, unstructured free play in the natural outdoor environment. The beauty of this actuality is that outdoor free play is accessible to most children, if purposefully sought, with fewer financial obligations and time constraints than organized sports. Additionally, when children are allowed to play outdoors freely, the vast majority (97%) engage in limb movements that prepare the body for the development of muscular strength and neuromuscular control, thereby enhancing sport readiness (Webb & Rhea, 2023a).

Appropriate Approaches/Strategies

The key to sport readiness in childhood is increased time spent in unstructured outdoor free play. Strategies to increase time spent playing outdoors at school and home are given below.

School Setting Strategies

First, every school district should adopt a recess policy that includes at least four components: 1) recess is offered at least twice daily for 20 minutes each; 2) recess is protected from tutoring or punishment; 3) recess is unstructured and outdoors; and 4) electronic devices or any other reading materials should be available during this time.

Second, as a teacher, parent, or coach, identify school board representatives, state legislature representatives, and state boards of education members with whom you can build a rapport about examining procedures and protocols such as those found with The LiiNK Project to provide quality recess settings essential for whole child development and sport readiness. A few sport readiness talking points for school districts to adopt LiiNK practices or similar are:

1. Children will have fewer discipline issues and be more focused in the classroom, on the field, or in the gym.
2. Children will develop resiliency and intrinsic motivation so they will be much better equipped for school, for sport participation, and for life; children will be more socially responsible and emotionally regulated;
3. Children will develop strong bones, muscles, joints, and nervous systems, prepped and ready for advanced opportunities in physical education and sport.
4. Physical educators should assess muscular strength and neuromuscular control to ensure they are physically ready for complex motor skills and participation in sports.

When children do not have daily time for play and recess, physical issues such as limb imbalances, lateral vs. vertical movement weaknesses, decreased neuromuscular control, and poor bone/muscle/joint development can develop and lead to sport injuries. Therefore, these assessments are essential to develop sport-ready children.

Home Setting Strategies

- Parents must begin monitoring all daily screen time (cell phones, iPads, televisions, etc.) and develop a purposeful plan to replace at least 1 hour of that time with outdoor free play. Parents, be ready for mood swings and resistance as you replace sedentary screen time with unstructured outdoor play. Electronics, similar to drugs, are emotionally and chemically addicting. At first, you'll see irritability and resistance to detoxing, but hold your ground. You will see amazing changes in your child's emotional state and activity levels within a few short weeks, with more gains as time progresses.
- Make sure the outdoors is accessible to children daily. If safe, have children go outside for at least an hour when they first come home from school, as this has many physiological and cognitive benefits for sport readiness and overall child/adolescent health. Outdoor physical movement removes excess cortisol or stress hormones from the body that build up stress after a long day at school, it reboots hormone and insulin sensors for increased energy and moods in the evening (Al Zaki et al., 2023; Li et al., 2023), it brings oxygen to the brain for

cognitive clarity (Raine et al., 2023), and it allows for much needed reflection time alone, and/or social time with siblings/peers (Qiu et al., 2025). As a parent of four, I feel that the best time for outdoor playtime on weekdays is immediately after school. Children are drained from the sedentary school day and the overloaded focus time. Parents often mistake the first hour at home for a time to rest or do homework, when it's actually the best time to get kids moving. They become more energized and can focus on homework once they have had time to play and refresh their bodies and minds.

- Wait until children are at least 10 years old before introducing them to more competitive sports programs, but keep them playing outdoors in the neighborhood. For children under the age of nine, the goals of participation are to be active, have fun, and have a positive sports experience through learning and practicing fundamental skills. Competition is not the goal. Intense training at a young age can lead to burnout, with an estimated 70% of young “athletes” dropping out of sports by age 13 (Seligman, 2025). Furthermore, sport specialization should not occur until late adolescence, around ages 15-16 (Brenner et al., 2016; Seligman, 2025). This means children should participate in different sports across seasons throughout the year, rather than one sport year-round. Sport specialization for young children increases risk for depression, stress, anxiety, and issues around self-worth and attrition, in addition to compromising joint health and appropriate physical development, leading to sport injuries and mental health issues (Puzzitiello et al., 2021; Rugg et al., 2021; Stricker et al., 2020)

Conclusions

Sport readiness is a child's ability to meet the demands of participation in sport and to learn the values and skills required to do so successfully (Aicinena, 1992; Harris, 2000; Kochanek et al., 2019). Sport-ready children must meet developmental milestones in muscular strength and neuromuscular control. Setting these milestones for each age group and then testing children for these competencies is necessary to understand their developmental level. Researchers have assessed components such as muscular strength and neuromuscular control in physical education classes (Webb et

al., 2025a; Webb et al., 2025b). Integrating these assessments into schools and sports programs on a large scale will help determine children's health and identify where intervention strategies are needed to help children become sport-ready. Although some national physical testing standards exist, they need revision to assess the muscular strength components included in the above studies and accurately gauge sport readiness among our youth.

Current trends in state legislation are making strides toward protecting and increasing recess time during the school day. California's Senate Bill 291, passed this year, requires all school districts to provide 30 minutes of daily recess, separately distinct from meal and physical education times (CDE, 2025). School adoption of recess protocols, such as The LiiNK Project, along with legislative recognition of required recess time, will significantly increase the percentage of children who enter adolescence with a sport-ready foundation.

Overall, when children have unstructured outdoor play throughout the school day, parents purposefully trade sedentary time for it. If parents realize sports should not replace outdoor unstructured free play time, the U.S. will present a new generation of sport-ready children who have increased baseline health, a lower chance of future comorbidity, more positive trends in mental health and social-emotional skills, confidence in the ability to move, increased opportunity for advanced skill, and decreased injuries. Outdoor unstructured play opportunities allow children to develop their limbs and muscular strength naturally, thereby increasing sport readiness and lifelong physical activity opportunities for generations to come.

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Restoring Time and Space for Play in Taiwan

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Play Taiwan

Introduction

Registered as a non-profit organization in 2017, Play Taiwan originated from a spontaneous grassroots movement led by parents dedicated to reimagining children's play environments. Over the past decade, Play Taiwan has spearheaded a national play revolution, advocating for high-quality, engaging, and diverse play spaces. Central to Play Taiwan's strategy is applying the Social-Ecological Model (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). This framework recognizes that a child's development is not isolated but shaped by nested layers of environmental influence (Figure 1).

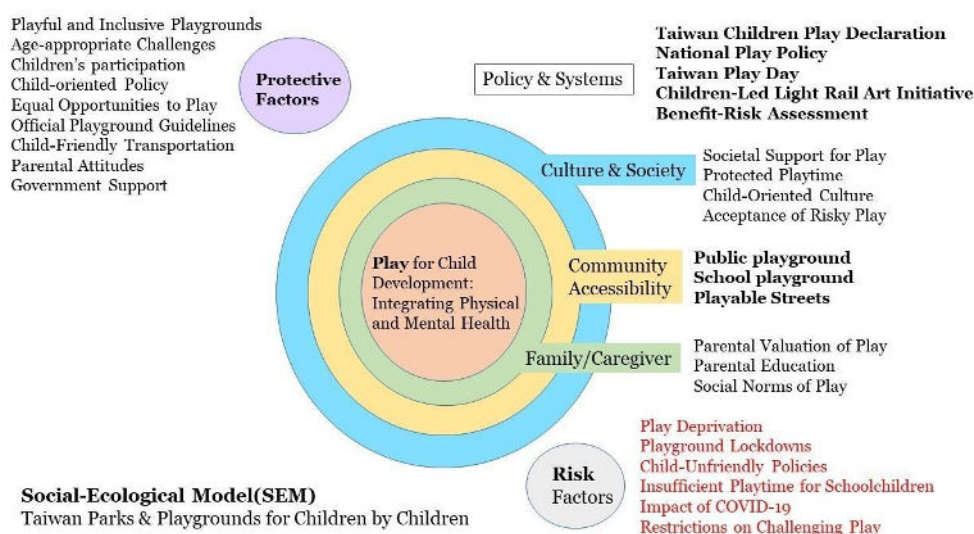


Fig. 1. Play Taiwan's Advocacy Framework: Applying the Social-Ecological Model (2017–2025)

[See Appendix for long description](#)

The organization strategically operates across these levels to ensure systemic sustainability by:

- **Macrosystem (Policy & Legislation):** At the highest structural level, Play Taiwan engages in policy reform and legislative advocacy. A landmark

achievement is drafting *the Taiwan Children's Play Declaration*, which provides a foundational framework for government agencies to recognize play as an essential right rather than a luxury. By amplifying children's voices in urban planning, Play Taiwan ensures that play rights are anchored in national governance and legislative frameworks. Furthermore, we extend the Right to Play beyond traditional playgrounds into the broader urban fabric through initiatives such as the Children's Light Rail Art Project, facilitating children's direct participation in urban governance.

- **Exosystem & Mesosystem (Social & Cultural Climate):** The organization actively reshapes the cultural narrative surrounding childhood through public education and media outreach, emphasizing that playtime is development time. This shift encourages parents, educators, and the public to value play as vital to cognitive, emotional, and physical health.
- **Microsystem (Community & Physical Environments):** On the ground, Play Taiwan has supervised the renovation of nearly 500 children's playgrounds. These efforts have transformed Taiwan's public spaces from standardized equipment into inclusive, themed, and sensory-rich environments.

By intervening at every level of the social-ecological hierarchy, Play Taiwan ensures that playgrounds are not merely physical sites, but free, accessible public assets. This holistic approach guarantees that every child—regardless of socioeconomic background—can exercise their fundamental right to play and rest in a fair, equitable, and developmentally supportive environment (Russo & Pereira, 2025).

Government authorities must prioritize children's right to play and formally integrate it into national and urban planning policies. It is time to listen to the children. By addressing these environmental and regulatory barriers, we can ensure that every child—regardless of age—has the time, space, and freedom to play.

Problem Statement

The rate of identification of children with developmental delays has substantially increased in Taiwan. According to statistics from the Ministry of Health and Welfare (MOHW, 2023), the number of early intervention recipients increased from 26,392 in

2021 to 34,781 in 2023. Drawing on research from the Hsin-Yi Foundation (2022) and the National Science and Technology Council (Chang & KIT Project Team, 2025), a critical correlation exists between environmental restrictions and developmental setbacks.

Findings indicate that over 80% of Taiwanese lower-grade elementary students fail to meet World Health Organization (WHO) daily physical activity guidelines. This deficiency is attributed to sedentary lifestyles, a lack of regular exercise, and limited engagement in household chores or diverse outdoor play. While the post-pandemic cohort exhibits marked delays in social-emotional, communication, and motor domains, the rise in recorded cases also reflects heightened parental awareness and improved screening efforts.

Urban Heat Island (UHI) Effect

During a 2025 field audit of a playground in Taiwan, Play Taiwan used infrared thermometry, which revealed that stainless steel and concrete slides reached temperatures as high as 50°C (122°F). Rubber safety surfacing exceeded 60°C (140°F), whereas natural turf remained at 28°C (82.4°F). Natural loose-fill surfacing (e.g., pea gravel, bark, engineered wood fiber, sand) maintains surface temperatures 8°C (46.4°F) to 14°C (57.2°F) lower than synthetic alternatives while offering tactile sensory experiences.

Play Poverty

Based on a comprehensive survey with 2,467 respondents (Hsin-Yi Foundation, 2022), a stark play gap exists: while preschool children access outdoor playgrounds 1–2 times per week, school-age children do so only 1–2 times per month—a reduction of over 75%. Reclaiming playtime is a fundamental right, not a luxury, and requires urban planning that prioritizes accessible play infrastructure, school recess reform, and climate-resilient cool play spaces.

However, data alone tells only half the story. Direct interviews with children reveal that the vanishing of play is not merely a result of academic pressure. It is a systemic failure driven by inadequate play spaces, restrictive institutional regulations,

and the escalating threat of extreme heat. Children are expressing a clear desire to play, yet they are being systematically excluded from their own childhoods. To bridge this gap, urban planning must prioritize accessible play infrastructure, school policies must be reformed to protect recess, and climate-resilient cool play spaces must be developed.

Background

Consistent with the scoping review by Uibel et al. (2022), findings underscore a strong correlation between extreme thermal environments and risks to pediatric health. Children are inherently vulnerable within social and environmental structures due to their limited life experience, reduced adaptive capacity, and unique physiological differences. Specifically, children possess higher metabolic rates and lower sweat rates than adults. These biological factors limit their efficiency in heat exchange with the surrounding environment, rendering them more sensitive to thermal stress, less capable of maintaining thermal homeostasis, and disproportionately susceptible to the deleterious effects of extreme heat, air pollution, and radiation (Balbus & Malina, 2009; Vanos, 2015; Tarpani et al., 2023). Consequently, urban playgrounds that lack sufficient greenery and shade pose an acute risk of overheating, particularly for children under five (Tarpani et al., 2023).

Children in Taiwan are currently at a critical crossroads of a Play Crisis. This crisis is driven by a long-standing systemic imbalance between academic achievement and healthy play development; the deprivation of outdoor play opportunities due to extreme climate events and Urban Heat Island (UHI) effects; and a trend toward sterile, monotonous play spaces fueled by a societal overcorrection for safety and risk aversion. Combined with a structural deficiency in play time, these factors are silently constricting the essential space children need to grow.

Research by Tarpani et al. (2023) underscores that urban playgrounds lacking sufficient greenery and shade pose a high risk of overheating, particularly for children under five. In response to heightened societal anxiety and excessive safety expectations, we advocate for four core pillars: *prioritizing playtime*, *age-appropriateness*, *the fundamental right to play*, and *the courage to embrace risk*. This represents more than just the current state of play advocacy in Taiwan. It is a vital milestone we must achieve

over the next decade. Our goal is to forge a play-friendly, climate-resilient society that respects the value of adventure and remains steadfastly centered on holistic child development.

Strategies to Achieve Taiwan's Children's Play Declaration

Play Taiwan proposes five pillars of action.

1. **National Recognition of Play:** High-profile public events, such as "Taiwan Let's Play Day" (June 7, 2025) in front of the Presidential Office Building, elevate the "Right to Play" to a national priority (Taipei Times, 2025). President Lai pledged collaboration between central and local governments to safeguard play rights and expand play spaces.
2. **Climate-Resilient Play Environments:** In alignment with design strategies proposed by Tarpani et al. (2023), integrating vegetation, shade structures, and natural permeable surfaces (e.g., sand, engineered wood fiber) significantly mitigates heat risks and improves microclimatic comfort.
3. **Reframing Safety via Benefit-Risk Assessment (BRA):** Shifting playground safety management from a "zero-risk" mindset to a Benefit-Risk Assessment (BRA) framework enables managed risk essential for resilience (Play Safety Forum, 2025). In 2025, the MOHW, MOI, and MOE formally declared unified support for integrating BRA across Taiwan.
4. **Healthcare Integration ("Play Prescriptions"):** Implementing Social Prescribing through "Play Prescriptions" written by pediatricians, occupational therapists, and clinical psychologists to address vision care, developmental milestones, and mental health (Yogman et al., 2018).
5. **Safeguarding Dedicated Time for Play in Schools:** Protecting the "Right to Recess" in alignment with UNCRC Articles 12 and 31 (United Nations, 1989) by guaranteeing at least 60 minutes of daily unstructured play or physical activity.

Recommendations

President Lai has pledged to foster collaboration between central and local governments to safeguard children's right to play (Figure2). Emphasizing the vital link between play and public health, the administration will direct relevant agencies to systematically expand play spaces and protect dedicated play time for all children.



Fig.2. Imagination is National Power: Empowering the Next Generation: National Strategies for Advancing Children's Right to Play.

These high-profile public events challenge traditional perceptions of state-protected perimeters, inviting the next generation into the heart of the country's sovereign center. By turning the seat of the Presidency into a position that advocates for play, the movement elevates the Right to Play to national priority status. It secures a formal commitment from the highest echelons of the state, signaling that children's welfare and agency are now central to the nation's governance and identity. [View event highlights.](#)

In alignment with the UN's (2024) inaugural International Day of Play, this proposal urges the government to elevate the Right to Play to national priority status. By securing formal recognition and commitment from the Presidential Office—drawing inspiration from global precedents such as the U.S. White House Easter Egg Roll and the U.K.'s Lessons at 10 and National Playday- Taiwan can evolve from a restrictive framework into a proactive system that safeguards child development through play.

Climate-Resilient Play Environments

According to Tarpani, E. et al. (2023), integrating vegetation and permeable surfaces into playgrounds significantly improves microclimates and enhances children's thermal comfort. Specifically, trees mitigate heat by blocking direct solar radiation and modulating local airflow.

Mitigating Extreme Heat Risks: As the UHI intensifies, it is imperative to establish and enforce infrastructure standards for playgrounds. At the Coordination Meeting for the Prevention of Child and Adolescent Accidental Injuries, we proposed establishing heat-injury prevention mechanisms and enhancing playground shading in direct response to climate-driven play challenges.

At the Extreme Heat Crisis Public Hearing for Children's Climate Policies, we propose adding sun-shading inspection items to the Children's Playground Self-Inspection Checklist, with a clear priority on natural or shaded structures. We advocate for the strategic use of natural surfacing materials (e.g., sand, engineered wood fiber, or gravel) to minimize the large-scale installation of synthetic rubber, which exacerbates the UHI effect. Furthermore, we recommend expanding water play features and enhancing nighttime lighting to enable extended operating hours, ensuring families can play safely and comfortably during cooler evening hours.

Reframing the Narrative: Transitioning to Benefit-Risk Assessment (BRA)

Shift the paradigm of playground safety management from a zero-risk focus to a Benefit-Risk Assessment (BRA) framework. This policy change recognizes that managed risk is essential for healthy child development, allowing for more challenging, diverse, and engaging play spaces that foster resilience and physical literacy.

In a significant stride for children's rights, the Ministry of Health and Welfare (MOHW) and Play Taiwan co-hosted the New Perspectives on Play Benefits and Risk: 2025 International Conference on Playground Design and Child Development (Figure 3). During this landmark event, representatives from three key central government agencies—the Social and Family Administration (MOHW), the National Land Management Agency (MOI), and the K-12 Education Administration (MOE)—formally

declared their unified support for integrating the BRA framework into the management and design of Taiwan's children's playgrounds.



Fig. 3. New Perspectives on Play Benefits and Risks: Findings from the 2025 International Conference in Taiwan

In a landmark move, we released the Benefit-Risk Assessment Form: Practical Examples, which was officially authorized by the UK Play Safety Forum for translation by Play Taiwan. This document serves as a practical reference for government authorities, inspection agencies, and designers nationwide.

This is far more than a form; it signals a fundamental shift in Taiwan's play-space design philosophy—moving from a restrictive "zero-risk" mentality to a balanced "Benefit-Risk Equilibrium."

Healthcare Integration: Implementing "Play Prescriptions"

Advancing Social Prescribing through Outdoor Play: We advocate for the systematic adoption of Social Prescribing, focusing on implementing Play Prescriptions. This initiative seeks to integrate play into diverse ecosystems, including early intervention systems, pediatric healthcare, and NGO-led advocacy. By empowering professionals—including pediatricians, occupational therapists, and clinical psychologists—alongside NGOs acting as Link Workers, we enable the utilization of outdoor play as a formal methodology or clinical intervention.

A Practical Framework: Collaborative Play Prescriptions. Developed through collaboration between pediatricians and occupational therapists, these prescriptions serve as a tangible tool for child health. A proposed framework for Play Prescription may include:

- **Dosage & Environment:** The recommended minimum of 1 hour of daily play in public parks or specialized playgrounds.
- **Targeted Play Modalities:** Healthcare and developmental professionals—including occupational therapists, pediatricians, and clinical psychologists—prescribe tailored play activities based on specific developmental needs. These include Gross-Motor Play, Sensory Play, Social-Interactive Play, and Musical & Water Play.
- **Resource Mapping:** The prescription incorporates an Integrated Playground Map, allowing practitioners to check off specific locations best suited for the intervention or recommend trusted NGO partners to facilitate the play experience.

This approach aims to revolutionize holistic child wellbeing by addressing key public health challenges:

- **Vision Care:** Preventing myopia through consistent exposure to natural light and outdoor depth perception.
- **Developmental Milestones:** Supporting age-appropriate physical, social, and cognitive growth.
- **Mental Health:** Fostering emotional resilience and psychological stability.
- **Lifestyle Optimization:** Combating physical inactivity, balancing sedentary screen time, and strengthening parent-child attachment through shared play experiences.

Safeguarding Dedicated Time for Play and Physical Activity in Schools

Protecting the Right to Recess: Time as a Non-Negotiable Asset. In alignment with UNCRC Articles 12 (The Right to be Heard) and 31 (The Right to Play), we advocate for the formal safeguarding of school recess. Playtime must be protected as a

fundamental right and never sacrificed for remedial instruction or disciplinary measures. To achieve Play Justice, we call for a policy guarantee of at least 60 minutes of daily unstructured play or physical activity for every student, ensuring that the school schedule respects the developmental biological necessity of movement.

Reimagining Campus Landscapes: Creating Diverse and Challenging Play Spaces

- We urge schools to transition from sterile, standardized rubber-mat playgrounds toward "Climate-Resilient Play Environments". This evolution involves integrating natural loose-fill materials (such as sand and engineered wood fiber), varied topography, and strategic vegetation to mitigate the UHI effect.
- By embracing a BRA framework, schoolyards can provide diverse sensory stimuli and managed challenges, transforming the campus into a primary setting for fostering resilience and physical literacy.
- Scaling Impact through School Play Days: Cultivating a Play-Positive Culture

Play Taiwan promotes School Play Days as a catalyst for cultural change, temporarily reimagining and dissolving traditional campus boundaries.

Through the introduction of Loose Parts Play, pop-up materials, and student-led initiatives, these events demonstrate the transformative power of self-directed play. These initiatives serve as a practical proof of concept for educators and parents, shifting the social mindset from risk aversion to a culture that celebrates adventure and child-led exploration.

Conclusion

The surge in developmental delays and the vanishing of play are warnings we cannot ignore. By applying the Social-Ecological Model, Play Taiwan remains committed to dismantling regulatory and environmental barriers that stifle growth. We call upon global stakeholders to join us in this revolution. It is time to listen to the children, invest in their freedom, and ensure that every child—regardless of their background—has the time, space, and community support to simply play.

Achieving this vision requires not only grassroots advocacy but also institutional commitment. Taiwan's evolving policy landscape offers a historic opportunity to embed children's play rights into national governance structures.

As the Ministry of Health and Welfare undergoes organizational restructuring in 2026 to establish the Child and Family Support Administration, we see a critical foundation for advancing children's participation in public policy. This new agency should integrate child protection, family support, and play advocacy to create comprehensive developmental environments.

Play Taiwan remains committed to providing expertise and recommendations, with priorities including: developing innovative and challenging play spaces; implementing Benefit-Risk Assessments; establishing Play Sufficiency policies; creating Climate-Resilient Playgrounds; formalizing children's participation in urban planning; and building Playable Cities.

The play revolution is no longer a choice; it is a necessity for a sustainable and equitable future. The question before us is simple: will we build a world where children can grow, or one where they are merely managed? The answer must be clear—and the time to act is now.

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Appendix

Long Description for Figure 1

This graphic presents a **Social-Ecological Model (SEM)** titled "*Taiwan Parks & Playgrounds for Children by Children*" that details the factors influencing play and child development.

Core Framework (Concentric Rings)

At the center of the visual framework is a multi-layered circle diagram:

- **Center Core (Salmon/Peach):** "Play for Child Development: Integrating Physical and Mental Health"
- **Layer 1 (Green Ring): Family/Caregiver**
 - *Associated Factors:* Parental Valuation of Play, Parental Education, Social Norms of Play
- **Layer 2 (Yellow Ring): Community Accessibility**
 - *Associated Factors:* Public playground, School playground, Playable Streets
- **Layer 3 (Blue Ring): Culture & Society**
 - *Associated Factors:* Societal Support for Play, Protected Playtime, Child-Oriented Culture, Acceptance of Risky Play
- **Top Level (Boxed Header above outer ring): Policy & Systems**
 - *Associated Factors:* Taiwan Children Play Declaration, National Play Policy, Taiwan Play Day, Children-Led Light Rail Art Initiative, Benefit-Risk Assessment

Flanking Factors

Protective Factors (Top-Left)

Enclosed by a purple circular label labeled **Protective Factors** is a list of positive systemic and environmental influences:

- Playful and Inclusive Playgrounds
- Age-appropriate Challenges
- Children's participation
- Child-oriented Policy
- Equal Opportunities to Play
- Official Playground Guidelines
- Child-Friendly Transportation
- Parental Attitudes
- Government Support

Risk Factors (Bottom-Right)

Enclosed by a light-gray circular label labeled **Risk Factors** is a list written in red text highlighting structural and environmental challenges:

- Play Deprivation
- Playground Lockdowns
- Child-Unfriendly Policies
- Insufficient Playtime for Schoolchildren
- Impact of COVID-19
- Restrictions on Challenging Play