

Mr Gavin Williamson CBE MP
House of Commons
London
SW1A 0AA

6th May 2020

Dear Mr Williamson,

Play First: Supporting Children's Social and Emotional Wellbeing During and After Lockdown

We are aware of the Prime Minister's imminent announcement on the relaxing of Covid-19 lockdown restrictions. At this time, many children's emotional health will be suffering due to loneliness and isolation. As experts in children's mental health and development we urge the Government to prioritise children's social and emotional wellbeing in all decisions related to the easing of lockdown restrictions and the reopening of schools.

We would like to highlight the following evidence-based recommendations that should be a priority consideration:

1. The easing of lockdown restrictions should be done in a way that provides all children with the time and opportunity to play with peers, in and outside of school, and even while social distancing measures remain in place.
2. Schools should be appropriately resourced and given clear guidance on how to support children's emotional wellbeing during the transition period as schools reopen. Play should be a priority during this time, rather than academic progress.
3. Public health communications must recognise that many parents and teachers are anxious about their child's academic progress and the risk posed to children in easing lockdown restrictions. The social and emotional benefits of play and interaction with peers must be clearly communicated, alongside guidance on the objective risks to children.

We hope that when policy decisions are made in the coming weeks and months that children's emotional health is given the consideration it deserves. Poor emotional health in children leads to long term mental health problems, poorer educational attainment and has a considerable economic burden.

We have attached a short document outlining our more detailed recommendations and the evidence that underpins them. If this is of interest or you would like to find out more about our recommendations, please do get in touch with Prof Sam Cartwright-Hatton (s.cartwright-hatton@sussex.ac.uk), Dr Kathryn Lester (k.lester@sussex.ac.uk) or Prof Helen Dodd (h.f.dodd@reading.ac.uk).

Yours sincerely,



Prof Sam Cartwright-Hatton
Professor in Clinical Child Psychology



Dr Kathryn Lester
Senior Lecturer in Developmental Psychology



Prof Helen Dodd
Professor in Child Psychology

On behalf of Prof Robin Banerjee (University of Sussex), Dr Jenny Gibson (University of Cambridge), Rachel Hurding (The Ellis C of E Primary School, Barnsley), Alison Lacey (University of Sussex), Dr Maria Loades (University of Bath), Dr James Murray (Guernsey CAMHS), Prof Alison Pike (University of Sussex), Prof Paul Ramchandani (University of Cambridge), Prof Shirley Reynolds (University of Reading), Dr Wendy Russell (University of Gloucestershire), Zoe Singh (Lydgate Infant School, Sheffield), Prof Nicola Yuill (University of Sussex)

Endorsements

Dr Alexander Van Tulleken, BMBCh MPH

“The social skills we learn and friendships we make as children last a lifetime. These recommendations recognize and encourage children’s need for play and the value of this time. I hope that schools will be resourced and encouraged to allow this. I am perhaps not a very mature adult but I remember very fondly playing as a child and it brings me happiness even decades later.”

André Tomlin, The Mental Elf Founder, National Elf Service

Anita Grant, CEO Islington Play Association

“These recommendations are the minimum we would like to see considered in the return to natural, supportive, healthy conditions for the children of Islington, many of whom have suffered disproportionately in this period of ‘lockdown’ and restriction on their natural play behaviours especially in terms of access to outdoor play. Play is key to children’s development, health and wellbeing and is also fundamental to the development of resilience. This document makes important and relevant recommendations at a time of unprecedented challenge and paves the way for recovery from the effects of isolation and social restriction experienced by the children.”

Anita Grant, Play England

“Play is key to children’s development, health and wellbeing and is also fundamental to the development of resilience. This document makes important and relevant recommendations at a time of unprecedented challenge and paves the way for recovery from the effects of isolation and social restriction experienced by the children.”

Bernard Spiegall, Director of PLAYLINK

“I welcome the publication Play First: Supporting Children’s Social and Emotional Wellbeing During and After Lockdown. Thanks to you and colleagues for the work that has gone into it. PLAYLINK is happy to endorse the publication.”

Prof Cathy Creswell, Professor of Clinical Developmental Psychology, University of Oxford

“I welcome and fully endorse the recommendations made by the PlayFirst group. While the COVID-19 pandemic has presented a lower risk of physical health problems for children and young people, it has had a disproportionate impact on their normative developmental opportunities (including opportunities for social and outdoor play), education, and it has, in many cases, caused high levels of family stress. Ongoing discussions about the timing and manner of how schools reopen is causing further uncertainty for children and families and what is most clear is that any plans for schools to be reopened need to take clear and careful steps to ensure that children and families feel safe and that children’s emotional needs are at the forefront of all decision making. Furthermore, plans for transitioning back to school must be developed in partnership with families in recognition of the huge variability in children’s experiences of and responses to the pandemic.”

Children’s Play Policy Forum and the Play Safety Forum

“Every child in the UK will have been affected by this lockdown. Some of those experiences will have been positive and beneficial, but also it will have been traumatic and for some it will have been extremely traumatic. Playing with their peers will be one of the most effective ways in which children will be able to open themselves and assimilate all those experiences.”

Early Childhood Forum

“The Early Childhood Forum wishes to endorse this excellent document. It is essential at all times but especially now that the importance of play for children is well understood by parents, policy makers and all those who work with and provide for children.”

East Lothian Play Association

Prof Elaine Fox, Professor of Psychology and Affective Neuroscience, University of Oxford

“Children are our greatest resource and their emotional needs must be centre stage in policy making regarding the lockdown and return to school.”

Prof Esther Crawley, University of Bristol

Dr Guddi Singh, BA, MB BChir, MPH, MRCPCH, EADTM&H, Pediatric Registrar, Giuy’s & St. Thomas’ NHS Foundation Trust

“The importance of play in child mental health and emotional wellbeing is all too easily overlooked, and sadly even more so in the midst of a global pandemic. As a paediatrician, I know that play is central to brain growth and producing happy, healthy adults in the future. As we look beyond lockdown, these recommendations will support both families and schools to prioritise play and social interaction - key ingredients for a kinder society.”

Kidscape

Kirsty Williams, Minister for Education, Welsh Government

Krutika Pau, Director of Children's Services, Starlight

Learning through Landscapes

"LTL are delighted to support the #playfirst campaign. Children and young people needing time to play has never been more important than now. As we see schools planning to return, play is a key way of supporting their mental & physical health as well as helping them adjust to the new normal of school life"

London Play

Mike Shooter CBE, Chairperson Play Wales, Consultant Child Psychiatrist, and Former President of The Royal College of Psychiatrists

OPAL (outdoor Play and Learning)

Sir Partha Dasgupta, Frank Ramsey Professor of Economics, University of Cambridge

Pembury House Nursery School and Children's Centre (Haringey)

PlayBoard Northern Ireland

Play Scotland

Dr Pooky Knightsmith, Mental Health Educator, Speaker, Author & Advisor

Dr Rachel Dann, Chartered Educational Psychologist

"Having been forwarded your document around the essential nature of play for children and their mental health and emotional well-being I am emailing to endorse and support your message to the government. Relationships and play are key to providing a safe and stable environment where children and young people can come to terms with difficult experiences and emotions as well as try to make some sense of what has happened to them. I therefore agree completely with your points about the fundamental right of play for children and the importance of social relationships to both their development as well as their ability to be and build resilience in the face of adversity. I would be happy to support your campaign in anyway I can."

RNIB, Children, Young People and Families Service

Sarah Darton CEO, Family Links the Centre for Emotional Health

The Association of Child and Adolescent Mental Health

The British Association for Behavioural and Cognitive Psychotherapies

The Educational Institute of Scotland

Theresa Casey, Past-president, International Play Association: Promoting the Child's Right to Play

Tim Gill, Visiting Research Fellow, University of Reading

"I am very happy to endorse the recommendations in the Play First report and letter to the Education Secretary. For children, playing is as vital as breathing. Yet all too often, adults fail to appreciate this. Children will need a great deal of support through these tumultuous times. And the best support we can give them is to ensure they have space and time to play."

Young Minds