

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

As experts in children’s mental health and development, we urge that **children’s social and emotional wellbeing be prioritised in all decisions relating to the easing of lockdown and re-opening of schools**. We recognise the vital importance of mitigating risks related to the spreading of Covid-19. We also recognise that there is concern about the impact of lockdown on children’s education. Nevertheless, children’s social and emotional needs must also be considered as a priority at every decision point.

In this document, **we make a number of evidence-based recommendations designed to support children’s social and emotional wellbeing. We focus on the need to afford children opportunities to play with peers in the coming weeks and months**. Our recommendations are focused, in particular, on the needs of children aged 3 to 11.

### Why children need to play with their friends

It has been six weeks since British children last played in-person with a friend. Recent data shows that around two-thirds of primary school children are currently feeling lonely. This represents an increase of approximately 50% compared to normal levels<sup>1</sup>. Loneliness and social isolation adversely affect children’s short- and long-term mental health<sup>2</sup>. Importantly, the *duration* of loneliness, rather than its intensity, is most strongly related to poor outcomes. Given these facts, it is likely that many children’s emotional health is suffering during lockdown. These negative impacts will be greatest for children from marginalised and disadvantaged groups. We know that poor emotional health in childhood is linked to long-term mental and physical health difficulties, and poor academic and occupational functioning. It is the number one predictor of adult life satisfaction<sup>3</sup>. Mental health problems during childhood also place a significant economic burden on society<sup>4</sup>.

Children’s social interaction with their peers happens primarily via play. Although some children will be spending more time playing during lockdown, either alone or with parents or siblings, children across the UK currently have a *play deficit* because they are deprived of the chance to play with peers. Play with peers is critically important for children’s social, cognitive and literacy development<sup>5</sup>.

Play is so essential to children’s wellbeing that The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, Article 31, defines play as a fundamental right. Play has substantial benefits for children’s holistic development and emotional wellbeing<sup>6</sup>. Outdoor play, in particular, is linked to increased physical health as well as social and emotional health<sup>7</sup>. Play is beneficial during times of anxiety, stress and adversity<sup>8</sup>: it provides a sense of control and independence; it helps children make sense of things they find hard to understand<sup>9</sup>; it supports their coping and resilience<sup>10</sup>. In highly stressful situations (e.g. war zones, in hospital, in orphanages) research shows that playing with other children is therapeutic.<sup>11,12</sup>

Given this evidence we make the following recommendations.

### General Recommendations

1. **That, once it is safe to do so, the loosening of lockdown is done in a way that allows children to play with their peers as soon as possible**. For example, gatherings of children could be allowed, even if these are very small, must be held outdoors, or are restricted in frequency.

2. **That public health messages to families and education staff provide clear information on the social and emotional benefits of play, including outdoor play, and clear guidance on the objective risks to children.** Many parents and teachers will be anxious about putting children at risk, and about educational progress, so it is vital these concerns are addressed in public health communications.

### Recommendations for when children return to school

1. **That decision-makers take a risk-benefit approach when making decisions about children's social interaction and play in schools.** The Health and Safety Executive advises a risk-benefit approach, which aims not to eliminate all risk but to strike a balance: maximising benefit whilst ensuring that children are not exposed to unnecessary risk<sup>13</sup>.
2. **That all children are given time at school to play with their peers, even while social distancing remains necessary.** We recognise that a traditional break-time at school may not be feasible whilst social distancing remains necessary. However, we would like to see a creative approach taken, such that all children have frequent opportunities to play with their peers each day. For example, children could go out to play in pairs or small groups on a rota system throughout the day. Play time should be available to all children who want it, irrespective of behaviour or attainment, whilst recognising that some might prefer the structure of the classroom or feel anxious about unstructured play at first. As soon as it is possible to do so without significantly increasing physical risks, children should be allowed to play with their peers without socially distancing, even if at first this is in pairs or small groups or within 'social bubbles' that allow repeated mixing with a small number of contacts. Without the need to socially distance, children will be able to play freely. 'Free play' is particularly beneficial for emotional wellbeing.<sup>7,10,14</sup>
3. **That schools are appropriately resourced to support children's emotional wellbeing, especially during the transition period when social distancing measures are still in place.** After many weeks without peer interaction, being allowed into school but made to remain 2m away from friends will be difficult and upsetting for many children. It is vital that this is recognised and that schools are given the time and resources to support the transition, with children's wellbeing in mind.
4. **That in the short-term, schools should be guided to focus on encouraging play and supporting children's social and emotional wellbeing. There should be less focus on educational attainment.** Children cannot learn effectively when they are struggling emotionally. Teachers should, therefore, be given clear guidance to focus on emotional wellbeing in the coming weeks and months. Only then will children be ready to re-engage with formal learning.
5. **That playing and learning outdoors should be recommended where schools have the facilities.** The mental and physical health benefits of outdoor play and the effectiveness of outdoor learning approaches have been well-documented.<sup>15,16,17</sup> These approaches should, therefore, be used wherever possible, given the likely reduction in risk of infection outdoors.
6. **That where necessary, individual plans for transitioning children back to school should be developed in partnership with families.** There will be huge variation both in children's experiences of lockdown and in their anxieties about returning to school. Additional support will be required for many, such as children who are experiencing grief, children with special educational needs and children with existing mental health problems.

### Conclusions

We hope that those making policy decisions in the next weeks and months will consider children's social and emotional wellbeing when doing so. In particular, we ask that policies facilitate the highest quality social interaction and play among our children.

#PlayFirst

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## 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 Spiegel, 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

Here are some suggested places to go for more information and ideas if you are a school or childcare setting who want to think about creative ways of supporting children's play and/or outdoor learning.

Play Wales

<https://www.playwales.org.uk/eng/schools>

<https://www.playwales.org.uk/eng/aplayfriendlyschool>

Play Scotland

<https://playscotland.org>

Play Scotland play types toolkit

<https://www.playscotland.org/playful-learning/play-types-toolkit-bringing-play-school-day/>

PlayBoard Northern Ireland

<https://www.playboard.org/what-we-do/tops-taking-outdoor-play-seriously/>

<https://www.playboard.org/what-we-do/positive-playgrounds/>

<https://www.playboard.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/Coronavirus-Play-Matters-More-Than-It-Ever-Did.pdf>

Play England

[https://www.playengland.net/resource\\_types/schools/](https://www.playengland.net/resource_types/schools/)

IPA's Play in Crisis resources ((not for schools specifically, but may be helpful)

<http://ipaworld.org/resources/for-parents-and-carers-play-in-crisis/>

Welsh Government's guidance for schools that have been open for children of keyworkers, this includes some advice around play:

<https://gov.wales/sites/default/files/publications/2020-04/guidance-hubs-schools-coronavirus-provision.pdf>

Play Friendly Schools

<http://playfriendlyschools.eu/>

Learning through Landscapes

[www.ltl.org.uk/resources](http://www.ltl.org.uk/resources)

Outdoor Classroom Day

<https://outdoorclassroomday.com/resources/>

Outdoor Play and Learning

<https://outdoorplayandlearning.org.uk/>