London Play submission to the Curriculum and Assessment Review

November 2024

The government's review aims to look closely at the key challenges to attainment for young people, and the barriers which hold children back from the opportunities and life chances they deserve – in particular those who are socioeconomically disadvantaged, or with special educational needs or disabilities (SEND).

'The review will ensure that the curriculum appropriately balances ambition, excellence, relevance, flexibility and inclusivity for all children and young people.'

https://consult.education.gov.uk/curriculum-and-assessment-team/curriculum-and-assessment-review-call-for-evidence/

1. The one size fits all approach adopted within the current curriculum does not support the discovery or development of children's unique strengths and interests and is harmful to wellbeing.

The issue with the current curriculum is that it focuses too much on knowledge without proper consideration of young people's wellbeing and interests. It is top down and does not engage or excite.

Einstein said

"Imagination is more important than knowledge"

"Play is the highest form of research"

The intention of the NC is to ensure that every child and young person has the same knowledge. However, every child is unique and receives knowledge in a different way. One size does not fit all. Equally, basing assessment on 'age related expectations' is unhelpful as everyone develops in a different way and at a different pace. Not all children of the same age are at the same stage. Children benefit from working with children of different ages..Assessment would be better if it was a record of each child's successes rather than tests or exams. All children need to succeed.

Knowledge and understanding of child development and how children learn is fundamental to excellent learning. Currently those who work with children in schools do not have this training. The curriculum is not relevant for most young people and this is one of the reasons many thousands of children are not attending school. Nor is the curriculum flexible enough to meet

the needs of individual students and it is certainly not inclusive. Children may be separated into ‘sets’ or labelled disadvantaged, pupil premium, SEND, or ESOL all of which exclude rather than include.

An understanding of child development is essential because it allows us to fully appreciate the cognitive, emotional, physical, social, and educational growth that children go through from birth and into early adulthood.

2. In particular, schools and the curriculum need to encompass a greater understanding of the benefits of play. They should take a play-based approach to learning, and protect space, time and freedom within the school day for children to simply play.

There is a vast repository of evidence to demonstrate that play improves the cognitive, physical, social, and emotional well-being of children and young people. Through play, children learn about the world and themselves. They also learn skills they need for study, work and relationships . Other skills learnt through play include:

- Improved communication – with friends, peers and adults
- Decision making
- Risk management
- Leadership
- Negotiation skills
- Team working
- Emotional control
- Respect for opinions
- Creativity and innovation
- Resilience
- Planning and research skills
- Adaptability

Many of these are what employers want. (CBI Skills)

All these skills are crucial for people to adapt and thrive in our fast-changing world.

All practitioners in the early years understand that children learn best through play. This does not stop when children are five years old and move to primary school. Those who work with young people in schools need to appreciate this too. From the earliest days, play is how we relate to the world, and to each other. When children have plenty of opportunities to learn playfully, they do what they do best: pursue their natural curiosity. And, as they do, they build skills and aptitudes they'll keep for life. Play both indoors and outdoors is also a fundamental commitment to children throughout the EYFS.

Learning outdoors is also promoted by **Forest Schools** which inspire the many teachers who take part in their training.

https://forestschoolsassociation.org

Play is essential for children's development, building their confidence as they explore, relate to others, set their own goals and solve problems.This needs to continue throughout young people's lives.

All children need to play, ideally every day.

The National Literacy Trust states Play is crucial for developing children's communication and language skills, as well as supporting their learning and wellbeing. Here are 10 reasons why it is so important:

1. Play provides endless opportunities for children to hear and explore the power of their voice, and practice using new and familiar sounds and words.
2. Play stimulates cognitive development; it supports language development, enhances problem-solving skills and encourages creativity.
3. Play unlocks opportunities for children to practice their home language(s) and encounter new words.
4. Play removes barriers, it is inclusive and accessible to all. All forms of communication support play; including facial expression, body language, signing, touch, eye contact and speech.
5. Play supports a variety of skills, physical, gross and fine motor, which will also support writing. Active play promotes muscle development, develops imagination, communication skills, and helps coordination and overall health.
6. Play enables children to practice, revisit and embed deeper learning through experimentation and repetition.
7. Play facilitates natural curiosity, enabling children to make connections, understand what is seen, heard, and experienced in their world.
8. Play enables children to develop independence, perseverance and turn taking skills, supporting them to negotiate and build relationships.
9. Play provides a safe space for children to explore and learn to manage their feelings, helping them to build resilience and develop empathy towards others.
10. Play fosters a love for learning, develops imagination, and helps children grasp concepts in a fun and engaging way.

Similarly – art, drama, literature, music, dance, design, poetry and creative writing – promote teamwork, creative thinking, problem-solving, confidence, critical thinking, self-esteem, communication skills, empathy and wellbeing. These areas are now largely missing in the current curriculum and need to be reinstated.

Children have no choice about the literature prescribed by the exam boards and learning phonics has resulted in demotivating children. Many now do not read for pleasure.

3. Some organisations that promote play

London Play promotes the importance of play for all children. At our Go karting events children arrive to find a pile of wood, wheels, some metal bits and a few tools waiting for them. They will surpass their own expectations by building and decorating a fully operational go cart in under four hours .They learn to work as a team , use their creative and technical skills, and understand how to cooperate. Many of the children have never used hammers, saws, nails or designed a vehicle. So much is learnt in less than a day.

The PEDAL (Play in Education, Development and Learning) Research Centre at the University of Cambridge advocates learning through play.

https://www.pedalhub.net/?s=Play+and+learning+

www.pedal@educ.cam.ac.uk

The following are quotes from the PEDAL website.

“One particular change that has been investigated in this context concerns the amount and quality of free time that children have to engage in their own, self-initiated activities and play. A range of available evidence indicates that free time use has greatly changed in the past few generations. A report written for the UK National Trust, for example, stated that the area where children are allowed to roam unsupervised around their homes has shrunk by 90% since the 1970s.”

Mental health

“At the same time, changes in education policy have substantially restricted the amount of learning done through play and increased pressures on children at school, with very high levels of stress related to examinations reported A comprehensive anthropological study

shows the decline in children's opportunities for free play over the past half century in the USA explicitly linked this decline to a parallel increase in mental health problems.

Studies have focused on the relationship between children's free play opportunities and their mental health. These studies have also investigated the environmental and social factors supporting and inhibiting play, the consequences of play deprivation for mental health, and the effectiveness of play in therapeutic treatments of mental health conditions.

Professionals working in childcare, education, and paediatrics need to be aware of the importance of children's play, in all its many forms, and how opportunities for playful experiences can be supported in mental health difficulties. At the same time, therapeutic approaches geared towards children with mental health difficulties can often benefit from the inclusion of practices designed to support and encourage children's free,autonomous play.”

“Around the world, research trends are showing that there is more play and playfulness in schools. From age four to fourteen (and beyond), children are leading their own learning, exploring the unknown, and finding joy in facing challenges at school. However, most students beyond early childhood do not currently have the opportunity to learn playfully in school.”

Academic achievement

“While many schools reduce playtime in favour of time in the classroom, there is a wealth of evidence to show that high-quality playtimes hugely benefit children’s academic attainment and improve behaviour both in the playground and in class.”

What happens when children play

When children play they explore, experiment, become resilient, learn to understand their strengths, take risks and manage their feelings. Through practical activities, running, jumping and climbing they develop physical skills and are healthier.When playing, children are

absorbed, engaged, motivated.They choose and enjoy what they do. They use their imagination, take initiative, cope with challenges and solve problems. Play is open ended, has no restrictions and no identified outcomes. Anything is possible. Adults observe, encourage, support.

'Loose parts' (materials of all kinds) enable creative play , problem solving and

- Develop a sense of independence as children have the freedom to explore different materials autonomously.
- Encourage language development as children communicate their ideas and knowledge with their peers, educators, parents and carers.
- Build creativity , problem-solving, curiosity and abstract thinking skills as children explore the materials and discover new ways of playing with them.
- Enhance fine motor skills as children pick up, hold and manipulate materials in multiple ways.
- Facilitate collaboration, sharing and belonging as children interact with others around them engaged in the play.
- Increase physical play and activity along with gross motor skills as children move and transfer their creations and use them in further imaginative play.

Play is for all ages and children of different ages enjoy playing together . They learn from each other as they try out various ways of using the materials. Cardboard boxes can become a shop, a den, a city, a train, a boat ...the possibilities are endless.

Schools are only option for many children to get their daily dose of play

Many playgrounds are poorly maintained and equipment is damaged. Cars dominate the streets. Parents are fearful of children going out on their own. So children are kept inside, often on screens, sedentary but 'safe'.

London Play works with local authorities and residents to close streets from time to time so that children can play outside their home. The charity also supports groups trying to improve local playgrounds and areas. But it far from certain that children will be able to play outside school hours.

Meanwhile, every child goes to school – or should do. Schools therefore need to be places where children can play happily and creatively. as part of the curriculum. Providing a stimulating environment and recognising the importance of play should be expected of every school. This will help academic learning and behaviour improve.

OPAL (Outdoor Play and Learning) supports schools to do this

Play deprivation can inhibit social and emotional learning, and damage early child development. A play-deprived child may find it harder to interact with others throughout their lifetime, leading to poor resilience in certain situations, and reduced self-control. Play deprivation can also result in depression. Schools which deprive children of their playtime as punishment are causing untold harm

Play supports mental health, reduces obesity, enables children to feel successful and raises their self esteem. The current curriculum and assessment system of tests and examinations fails in all these respects.

Unless and until schools are able to provide a curriculum which meets the needs and develops the interests and talents of every child the current issues of mental health , special needs , obesity, behaviour and absenteeism will not be resolved.

A play based curriculum for all young people which encourages children's participation and lets them lead , is practical and exciting, as in the best early years settings and Nursery Schools ,will be far more successful than making any limited changes to what we have now. Children and young people do amazing things when given the space, time and freedom to play and will develop their own learning. They can grow the skills they need. The whole curriculum needs to embrace this.

A case study – the power of play to engage excluded children

Some comments from students who have been excluded from school, attend alternative provision and spend an afternoon a week at Somerford Grove, a local adventure playground.

'It's really good to go to Somerford Grove on Fridays. I like learning more in a practical way and it helps me to be outside and doing physical jobs."

"I really like Fridays at Somerford Grove. I think I am better at learning this way than in the classroom as I can find it hard to sit still. Then when I can't sit still I might get into trouble. This isn't a problem at Somerford Grove as we are active all day."

"I really like working with other people and learning new skills. I like that we are helping the community too because I used to come to the playground when I was a little kid."

"I really like it when it's cold and we light a fire and then we all sit around it and talk about stuff. I think that's one of the things I have loved most."

"I think I definitely want to work outside like Jake when I am older. Maybe work with young people too. I don't think an office would work for me."

Constructive suggestions

1. All teachers to undergo play training to understand its benefits
2. An expectation in the curriculum that opportunities to take a play-based approach to learning will be adopted wherever possible
3. A minimum standard for length of playtimes
4. Schools to sign up to a charter on play
5. Standards for size and quality of school play areas
6. No more removing play as a punishment
7. Above all, listen to children and young people.

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