



**BIRTH TO 19** 

# Response to The Play Commission's Call for Evidence: Reimagining our ambitions for children's play

## Preface

The right to play for all children and young people up to age 18 is preserved in [Article 31 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child](#)<sup>1</sup>; ratified by the UK Government in 1991. Under the Convention, government has a duty to protect and promote play opportunities for all children and young people.

The early part of the 2000's saw capital investment in play infrastructure in the UK, through the national play strategy and big lottery funding. But since 2010, investment has declined. The government and local authorities de-prioritised play in their spending and planning. Eugene Minogue, CEO of Play England, recently wrote that as play declines, the levels of obesity and physical mental health problems has grown.

Our 50 Things to Do initiative was created to address the crisis facing the UK's youngest children. Their health is getting worse, and their early learning milestones are not being met. More children are also arriving at school not prepared for formal education. This matters because children who are 'school-ready' tend to stay ahead, whilst those that are not school ready and behind their peers struggle to catch up. School leaders tell us that they are increasingly concerned about the rising trend of disadvantaged children arriving into Reception class with well-established poor attendance patterns, low levels of literacy and self-regulation, who then go on to not achieve GLD at the end of the EYFS. Consequently, the attainment gap between disadvantaged learners and their peers is widening. This pattern of poor attendance and achievement then accelerates through primary and secondary school phases. 50 Things was designed to support parents and carers, especially those facing the most significant disadvantage, so that they become more confident in engaging in exciting, playful experiences with their child.

Our passion for play-filled childhood threads through other elements of work, such as providing our Primary Trainee teachers with lessons on play inside and out of the curriculum. Play is at the core of our Early Years Apprenticeship courses, going above and beyond the course requirements, and our Early Years Stronger Practice Hub work has many opportunities for practitioners to explore the value of play, particularly outdoors.

Here at the Birth to 19, we are really pleased to have the opportunity to share our thoughts and evidence to the "Raising the Nation Commission on Play" in partnership with Centre for Young Lives and look forward to reading their subsequent policy recommendations.

Christian Bunting  
*Executive Director of Birth to 19*



Rebecca Oberg  
*Director: Institute for the Early Years*



## Our Recommendations

- Policy-makers must acknowledge the wealth of research and evidence that shows that play promotes effective learning and development.
- Play must be recognised and valued as an essential tool for children's learning within our national educational policy and curriculum.
- All services impacting families and young children must recognise and value play as an essential part of our lives and communities.
- Parents should be provided with the tools and information to develop their confidence to allow their children more freedom to play outside, through initiatives such as 50 Things to Do Before You're Five.
- Education, health and social care services working with families must promote the value of shared family play time.
- Health services must be encouraged to include play as a core element of social prescribing for children and adults of all ages.
- Families must be empowered by local councils to set up street play initiatives.



# Learning through Play

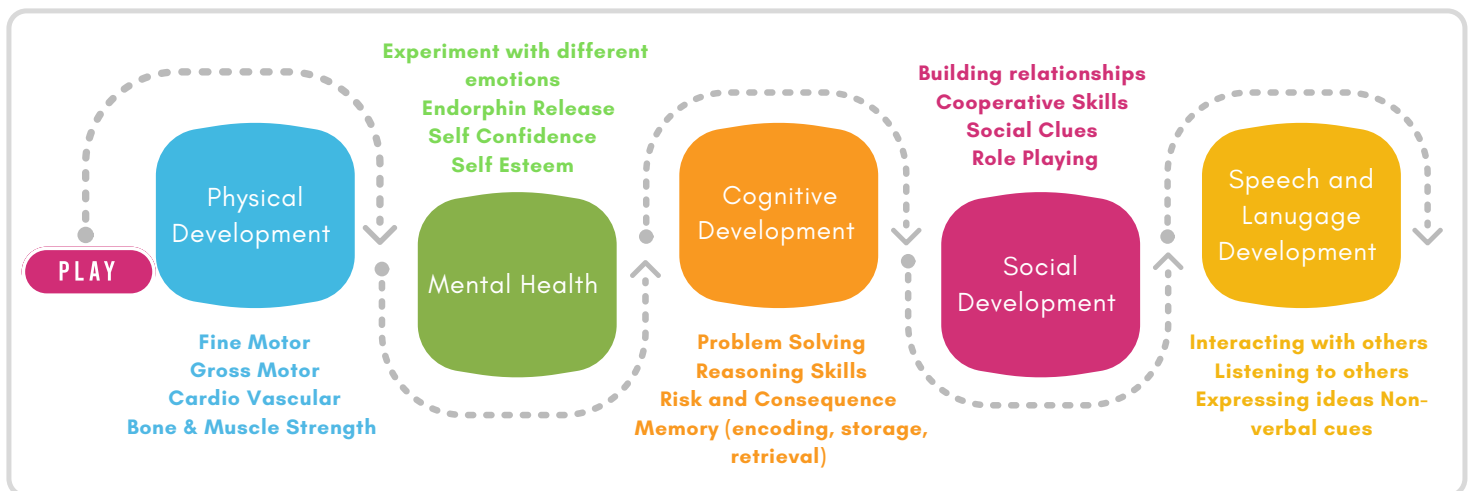
Playing is intrinsically motivating and it's a natural and enjoyable way for children to keep active, stay well and be happy. When children play, they are curious, attentive, excited, and actively engaged in the learning process. Playful experiences which support curiosity and wonder create ideal opportunities for the exploration and experimentation of interests, ideas, emotions and social relationships. Furthermore, playful opportunities are best placed to support children's wellbeing, as play should be happy, light-hearted and free.

It is through play that:

- children learn to use their imaginations and develop creative thinking
- children learn to express themselves
- children build relationships with each other and the adults who play alongside them
- children develop emotionally, physically, and intellectually.

People have been talking about the value of play for a long time. The Ancient Greeks saw play as an integral element of education, a means of positive character building. Plato said "You can discover more about a person in an hour of play than in a year of conversation." Sociologists, educationalists and psychologists have all explored the subject, highlighting benefits from their various perspectives. There is significant evidence that play is the ideal tool to improve physical and mental wellbeing, and build confidence. Play encourages communities to come together and is an ideal approach for young children's learning.

Learning through play is widely accepted by practitioners as an ideal pedagogical approach for children in their early years. Our infographic illustrates how play supports key areas of child development.



**Figure 1**

*Case for Support (2023). 50 Things to Do Before You're Five.*

However, from the beginning of Year 1 (and sometimes from Reception) schools' emphasis on formal learning and assessment is squeezing play-based learning out of the curriculum. As children get older, over-formalised approaches to teaching and learning lead many of them (particularly boys) to become disaffected, jeopardising their own life chances, and those of their classmates.

The English National Curriculum encourages pupils' active involvement in their own learning. As play is a clear medium for such involvement, it can be relatively straightforward to use play as the chosen pedagogical approach to cover such aspects of the curriculum. Play in itself does not constitute a curriculum but can be an integral part of the educational experience.

The research bio-psychologist, Dr Peter Grey, reminds us that most problems in life cannot be solved with formulae or memorised answers of the type learnt in school. They require the judgement, wisdom and creative ability that come from life experiences.<sup>2</sup> Research has demonstrated a strong correlation between higher levels of soft skills (including problem-solving, and planning skills) and upward social mobility. The World Economic Forum's Future of Jobs Report 2023 lists the social and emotional skills of curiosity and lifelong learning and resilience, flexibility and agility within the top five skills on the rise for workers across the globe in the next five years.

**'Business is clear that developing the right attitudes and attributes in people – such as resilience, respect, enthusiasm and creativity – is just as important as academic or technical skills'.<sup>3</sup>**

Neil Carberry

*Director for Employment and Skills at the Confederation of British Industry*

We strongly believe that these skills and attributes needed for upward social mobility are all the skills and attributes developed through play!

Research points to the strong statistical correlation between some of the most vulnerable children in our schools and their level of risk when play is absent from their lives and from their learning experiences. When children live in poverty or come from stressful or chaotic home situations there is growing evidence of their diminishing capacities in executive function and particularly self-regulation. In the General Comment no. 17, the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child recommends giving children time, space and freedom to play as part of the school day.<sup>4</sup> It notes that schools have a major role in promoting the right to play in the following areas of school life

Children who need to play the most are those who experience it least. They often have playtime detentions or miss their play because:

- They haven't finished their work
- They haven't completed their homework
- They have misbehaved
- They are having an 'intervention' to improve specific skills

It is these children, more than any, who need the opportunity to play and to engage with playful approaches to learning. "If children are tense then both their body and their brains are in a state of alert, which may be valuable for self-preservation, but is less useful for learning. When the brain is relaxed it is far more likely to absorb in optimal ways, the experiences, opportunities and teaching that it receives."<sup>5</sup> We enjoy sharing positive experiences of schools in Scotland, who have embedded play pedagogy into their whole school with our student teachers. We would like our government to consider how this can be done in England.

Dr. Olga Jarrett, with her colleagues at Georgia State University's Department of Early Childhood Education, approached an urban school district that had a no-recess policy. They received permission for two fourth-grade classes to have recess once a week so they could observe the children's behaviour on recess and non-recess days. Their results showed that the 43 children became more on-task and less fidgety on days when they had recess. 60% of the children, including five with attention deficit disorder, worked more and/or fidgeted less on recess days.<sup>6</sup>

Our 50 Things to Do Before You're Five project has been embraced by many schools and early years settings to encourage playful approaches to learning, within the setting and at home. Every 50 Things to Do Before You're Five activity helps children learn, with a focus on relationships, language development and playing together, supported by their most important teachers – parents.

50 Things to Do achieves this through:

- Establishing healthy habits that can last a lifetime, including active lifestyles, exploring the local area, and doing activities together as a family.
- Building cultural capital, helping them to develop the knowledge, experiences, and communication skills that will prepare them for their future success.
- Increasing parental knowledge of the activities they can do and how and why they support their child's development so that they can adapt activities and continue to support their child's development beyond the activities in the app.

On the 50 Things app and website, drop-down activity tabs contain suggestions of relevant age and stage-appropriate words and vocabulary to use with children.

50 Things helps parents to be increasingly confident in using purposeful language with their child as they play.

**63%**  
of parents said that since using the 50 Things to Do Before You're Five app, they communicate more purposefully with their child whilst they are playing.



Whilst this was not an intended output, we are pleased to have seen that it helps build relationships with practitioners and parents, which is key to improving attendance. A wide range of evidence shows family learning to be an effective way of promoting and facilitating increased parental participation and engagement with the school.<sup>7</sup> Family learning has also shown to improve school attendance, reduce persistent absenteeism and improve pupils' attainment.

We want our government to recognise the wealth of research that demonstrates the value of play in children's holistic development and learning, across all ages. And in turn, ensure that those responsible for teaching provide opportunities for playful learning strategies and free play opportunities in their curricula.



## Places to Play

Whilst protecting and creating spaces for children to play is not our direct area of work, Birth to 19 upholds the importance of building and adapting infrastructure for play, creating new spaces and opportunities for play both locally and nationally. We are particularly interested in seeing green spaces – where children and families can connect with nature – integrated into planning.



**“Time spent outdoors, in nature, increases life expectancy, improves well-being, reduces symptoms of depression and increases a child’s ability to function in school.”<sup>8</sup>**

Children’s opportunities for free play have decreased in recent years for a variety of reasons, such as busier streets, less convenient access to green space and concerns for children’s safety. Through our engagement with families and community groups we often hear that playing in residential areas is met with hostility due to noise, busy traffic and fear of safety.

Ensuring children have access to spaces to play is key to improving outcomes for children. Time spent outdoors is a consistent predictor of children’s physical activity.<sup>9</sup> Moreover, playing has been shown above to be a major contributor to children’s physical activity, consuming more calories per minute than the equivalent structured physical activity event.<sup>10</sup>

The pandemic has had a significant and continuing effect on the lives of every child in the United Kingdom. It negatively impacted children’s wellbeing and development, particularly those from disadvantaged families living in overcrowded accommodation without garden access or the material or digital resources to facilitate play and learning at home. Practitioners working in health, children’s social care and education tell us that as a result of the pandemic, inequality gaps are widening.

We know that many young children did not have their usual access to playgrounds and outdoor space, and to other facilities and groups where they could socialise. It is also known that physical activity is lower in low-income households.<sup>12</sup>

From our experience and conversations across the region, there appears to be some signs of behaviour change within families of children who were born after the end of the pandemic, with a perceived increased reluctance being seen to play outside.

Helping children establish active lifestyles through play (which is child-led and freely chosen, personally directed, intrinsically motivated) and connecting with nature all improve mental wellbeing, coronary and respiratory health, and also helps reduce obesity and type 2 diabetes.<sup>15</sup>

**“The impact of staying at home has had a severe effect on the physical and mental health and wellbeing of children, young people and people of all ages. Lack of play is linked to mental health problems too, with isolation increasing depression for some children.”<sup>11</sup>**

[Play England](#)

**75%**

**of parents said that since using the 50 Things to Do, their child has gone outside to play more often.**

Initiatives such as our own 50 Things to Do have encouraged families to get out and play more.

William Bird, GP and founder of Intelligent Health told us “as a GP, I can’t make a child healthy, like you can. I can treat disease, give vaccinations, but I can’t set a child’s brain, body and immunity in a resilient way, for the rest of their life. That’s what 50 Things to Do can do.”

Professor Mark Mon-Williams, Director of the Centre for Applied Education Research told us that "There is a huge amount of evidence that shows the fun activities encouraged by 50 Things will literally ensure children enjoy longer healthier lives. This is why all of us at the Centre for Applied Education Research are passionate advocates of 50 Things, and why we support their team in continually evaluating and improving their approach so that every child across the UK can thrive."

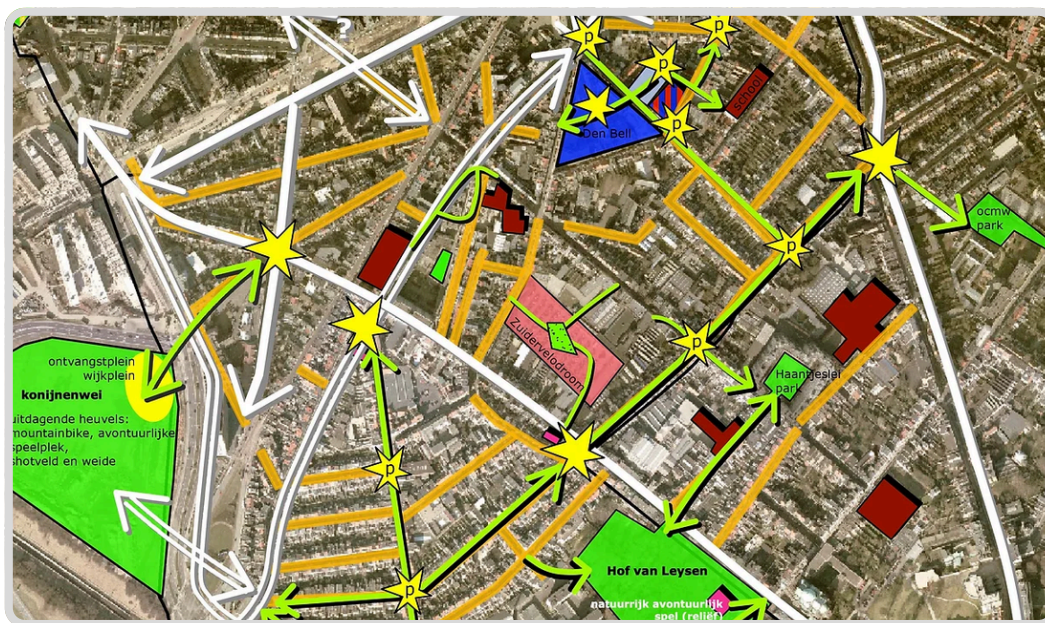
Isn't it time for play to be used much more widely in social prescribing?

Families can become isolated from their communities for a variety of reasons. Often, cultural and language barriers prevent families from accessing resources, as well as making them less confident in exploring spaces available for play in their communities. Being locked out of play opportunities has a detrimental impact on children's development, especially if the family doesn't have an existing support network. Encouraging children and families to explore their own local landscapes, communities and cultural venues alongside the local history that defines the places they live increases the connection between families and the communities around them.

**70%**  
of parents said that since using the 50 Things to Do Before You're 5, their child has had more opportunities to socialise within their local community.

Whilst there are some great initiatives, such as Child Friendly Cities and Play Streets, (which are just being launched in our home city of Bradford), we would like to see consideration given to ensuring access to safe spaces to play is a legal requirement in planning.

We want our government to embed play into policy and learn from other nations, such as Scotland. Scotland places a statutory duty on local authorities to undertake Play Sufficiency Assessments as part of their strategic planning and for children to be consulted on local place plans. Two other good examples of what's possible include Sweden. Stockholm, with a population of just under 1 million people, see public parks and gardens covering 40% of the city's area (a total of nearly 10.5 square miles of parks), with over 300 playgrounds.<sup>14</sup> In Belgium, planners in Ghent and Antwerp built playable streets. Antwerp's 'Play Web' ensures that spaces for play can be accessed independently by prioritising active mobility and reducing the dangers posed by traffic.



**Figure 2**  
*Play Web (2007). Antwerp.*



## Parents and Play

Playing as a family provides the ideal bonding opportunity. When you're playing together the hormone oxytocin is released, reducing stress and blood pressure, as well as playing a role in parent-infant bonding. We value this because, "A baby's social, emotional, and cognitive development is impacted by their relationships. Early intervention to help parents and carers meet their baby's social and emotional needs can help to foster secure attachment relationships. Secure attachments may lead to improved developmental outcomes including reduced risk of some mental health difficulties in later life."<sup>15</sup>

**9 in 10 families say play strengthens family bonds and helps parents connect with their child's emerging personality, keeping them energised and involved as their children grow.**<sup>16</sup>

Playing as a family also has a positive impact on parents. Research suggests that parents aspire to interact with their children. But somehow, life gets in the way of the things many of us want to do. There can be many different demands on low-income parents - fewer resources, less social support, fewer peers around them who might encourage playful behaviour.

"Disadvantage in early childhood is not just a matter of financial income flows, but also depends on the quality of time parents can spend with their children and the parenting resources they can allocate for early development."<sup>17</sup>

The wellbeing and mental health of both children and their parents needs to be prioritised in order to support other areas of children's development. In Play Boosts Wellbeing for Life, The Lego Foundation reminds us that "when we're enjoying ourselves, our brain releases a chemical called dopamine, a neurotransmitter that's a crucial part of how we motivate ourselves. And healthy levels of dopamine are also linked to better memory, creativity and mental flexibility. So while children are enjoying playing they're also busy building up crucial skills for living well."<sup>18</sup>

Often, when families are playing together you will hear laughter. This laughter triggers our body's natural feel-good chemicals, endorphins, which promote our sense of wellbeing. Furthermore, you don't even have to be laughing yourself, just hearing others laugh triggers neurons in your brain, which makes you feel as if you are laughing too!

50 things to Do Before You're Five's playful approach inspires families to do activities together, making simple activities fun and engaging. Our interest in wellbeing and play prompted us to ask practitioners who promote the initiative in their settings whether 50 Things to Do can impact positively on wellbeing. Our study of 40 settings across East Sussex, Peterborough and Wakefield, found that...

**82%**

said that using 50 Things to Do Before You're Five promoted playfulness in their children and families.

**76%**

of settings said that their families are enjoying using 50 Things to Do Before You're Five.

How did they know this? Their feedback included:

"Parents are always happy in the observations they share of them doing the different activities."

"The photos they share show lovely playful activities."

50 Things to Do gives parents inspiration and shows them how to do playful activities with their children, rather than passing judgement on their parenting skills. Its non-prescriptive approach empowers parents to play how and when they want to. Our focus on families having fun together is a deliberate approach, promoting an inclusive, non-judgmental way for parents to engage fully with their children's learning and development. The report published in 2020 by The Royal Foundation "State of the Nation: Understanding Public Attitudes to the Early Years" highlighted, as one of its key insights, that 7 out of every 10 parents feel judged by others. Among these parents, almost half felt this negatively impacts their mental health.<sup>19</sup> Furthermore, the report noted that "Feeling judged can reduce parents' engagement in activities that would support their child's development." Initiatives that engage parents in a non-judgemental way can have a positive impact, as we have seen.

In a national survey of our 50 Things users...

**67%**

**of parents said that since using 50 Things to Do Before You're 5, they feel more confident to try new things with their children.**

**87%**

**of parents and carers agreed that they feel more confident in supporting their child's learning and development with the help of 50 Things to Do Before You're Five.**

We have many examples, like the ones below, from parents.

"50 Things has given me confidence to try new things with my daughter, it's placed more value on the simple things that we can enjoy together and I've loved it! I haven't needed to spend a fortune and my daughter has really responded to the time we spend together trying some of the suggestions. It's brought the wonder back, rather than just sticking to what I know!" (Fran, parent)

"50 Things soon becomes a way of life when you have a young family; days can be planned around the app. The whole project has made me so mindful of the benefits early interaction with little people has on their future life chances. I find myself asking more questions to my 4-year-old because of all the 50 things ideas we do together." (Lindsey, parent)

Parental engagement in Early Years learning is consistently associated with children's subsequent academic success. According to the Education Endowment Foundation, on average, parental engagement programmes evaluated to date have led to a positive impact of approximately four additional months' progress over the course of a year. Our 50 Things to Do approach is designed to support the most impactful pedagogies and parenting approaches in the home learning environment which in turn help to secure relationships and interactions between parents and child. 50 Things to Do is premised on parents as the key agents of early development and learning and we know that our approach is having an impact on both parents' engagement with home learning and in turn on children's development.



When early years settings help families to make their home a great place to play and learn, they support children's development and contribute to improved life chances, as The Effective Provision of Pre-School Education (EPPE) Project reported "All parents who regularly involve their children in early home learning activities that 'stretch a child's mind' can enhance their children's learning and development."<sup>20</sup>

Recent research with Early Years Settings and Childminders who use 50 Things to Do Before You're Five provides some really positive feedback, with:

**75%**

**of settings say parents have engaged with more home learning activities since having 50 Things to Do in their setting**

"The children love telling us what they have taken part in at home and they love sharing their photos and stories about what they have got up to."

"Parents are showing a real interest in completing the 50 Things before their children are five and we have embedded it well into our long-term plans. We have seen that they are using it without our input, they are really proud to show us what they have done. We now have lots of photos in the children's learning journeys of all the nice things which we didn't before, they are really keen to come and show us what they have done."

**73%**

**of settings stated it has improved relationships with parents**

"It has really encouraged joined-up thinking with parents, sharing the activities between us."

"It has helped with conversations about our day & children talk about the day when they go home."

**64%**

**reported that since having 50 Things to Do Before You're Five has improved practice**

"Practitioners' interactions have been better developed."

"We (the practitioners) are more engaged with home learning."



When 50 Things to Do is commissioned by a region area, this then encourages cross-agency working, bringing teams together to work towards shared local and national goals. For example, rather than health visitors, early years practitioners, health improvement teams (the list can go on!) across an authority, working in isolation to meet individual targets, 50 Things to Do provides the opportunity for collaboration that helps individual agencies to achieve their own targets within the bigger picture. Moreover, it enables parents to recognise that services are not isolated.

Health and Family Support service providers have told us:

"50 Things to Do includes activities that you would be encouraging anyway as a health visitor, covering the key themes you want to promote with parents. It inspires families to do playful activities that they can afford that bring benefits to their children, increasing parent's engagement in their child's development."  
(Health Visitor, Calderdale)

"For me, I like the simplicity and beauty of the 50 Things concept ... as a way of supporting parents to connect in a fun and creative way, with their little one ... perhaps things that are often taken for granted!?"  
(Relate Bradford)

"I like the way you can use 50 Things in bite size chunks- it has supported our engagement with families in a simplistic way to enable them to interact positively with their children." (Better Start Bradford)

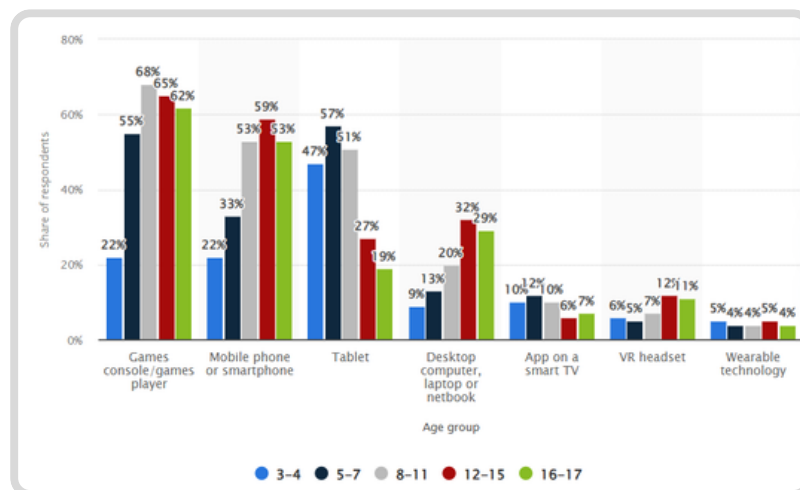
We want our government to acknowledge that play brings so many benefits to children as individuals, groups, families, communities and society as a whole. In doing this, agencies can become empowered to promote the value of play and playfulness to the children and families they work with.



## Digital Play

We regularly hear from practitioners we work with that they feel torn between encouraging families to reduce screen time, whilst also recognising that there are many great digital tools available to support families and children.

The press frequently reports negative impacts of screen time – and the age of children spending significant time online is getting younger. We are told that “Introducing technology to children at a young age can have adverse effects in their personal lives, their relationships with others, and their health in the future. It can also lead children to social isolation and give rise to other serious physical and mental diseases such as obesity, computer vision syndrome, and depression.”<sup>21</sup> ‘Excessive screen time can also exacerbate poor posture and musculoskeletal issues with children hunching over screens for extended durations. It may also lead to imbalances in muscle strength and flexibility, increasing the risk of orthopaedic problems and chronic pain in later years.’<sup>22</sup> ‘Exposure to blue light emitted by screens suppresses the production of melatonin, a hormone essential for regulating sleep-wake cycles.’<sup>23</sup>



**Figure 3**

*Devices used for gaming by children in the United Kingdom (UK) as of December 2023, by age group.*

But we also know that using technology within an educational setting can be beneficial, “Children today have access to a vast array of digital resources that cater to their individual interests and learning styles, empowering them to explore diverse subjects and build essential skills. Whether it’s solving puzzles on a tablet, exploring virtual museums or collaborating with peers in online forums, technology has democratised access to knowledge.”<sup>24</sup>

There definitely are digital offers that support play, indeed, research produced as part of the Responsible Innovation in Technology for Children (RITEC) project has “convincingly demonstrated that digital play has a particularly positive impact on children’s well-being when it responds to their deep interests, needs and desires.”<sup>25</sup>

Whilst 50 Things can be seen as a digital offer, we have worked hard to ensure that it’s more than that. We feel it is appropriate for us to point out we are not digital experts or innovators! **We are not for or against the use of technology, but we do want children to spend more time engaging with real objects, people and places rather than screens. Not because we know screens are bad, but rather because we know that playing with objects and people, especially outdoors, is good.** Initial engagement with our 50 Things initiative is often online via our website and apps. We use digital platforms as ways to spread the word. But we want families that use 50 Things to Do to use it as a tool for inspiration to go out and do something, without technology.

## End Note

We welcome the establishment of the commission on play by the Centre for Young Lives, and look forward to reading the published recommendations of the Commission.

It is clear that England's youngest children face great challenges, most especially those growing up in relative and absolute poverty. Our current generation is facing a sustained cost of living crisis, and is showing worsening health, wellbeing and learning outcomes. Having had the chance to play, learn and have fun taken away from them, children can struggle to cooperate, and show the resilience they need to thrive.

However, in the face of all these problems and challenges, we have a unique opportunity to make systemic changes. With a new government, and a new mandate, we can build a more positive, play-filled future if we join policy, listen to the sector and commit to a long term approach.

## Contact Us

### Website

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**BIRTH TO 19** 

**50**  **things to do**



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## List of Illustrations

**Figure 1** - Case for Support (2023). 50 Things to Do Before You're Five. p.7

**Figure 2** - Play Web (2007). Antwerp. [Online] <https://www.citiesforplay.com/lessonsfromantwerp>

**Figure 3** - Devices used for gaming by children in the United Kingdom (UK) as of December 2023, by age group. Statista (2023). [Online]. <https://www.statista.com/statistics/274424/devices-used-by-children-for-gaming-in-the-uk/>