School-age Childcare – Creating Quality Toolkit

A supportive toolkit to enhance quality development for school-age childcare providers.

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Introduction

Article 31 of the UN Convention on Rights of a Child (UNCRC) states:
“Every child has the right to relax, play and take part in a wide range of cultural and artistic activities”.

A well-planned, relaxed and stimulating play environment supports the development of children’s friendships and responds to their instinct to play. High-quality play opportunities, which reflect a wide range of experiences and perspectives, capture children’s interests and enable them to enjoy meaningful and engaging play.

Effective play provision offers a balanced combination of adult-led and child-initiated experiences, with choice and autonomy for children being central to good practice. Providing opportunities for children to encounter and manage appropriate levels of risk is also essential, as it supports the development of confidence, resilience, and practical skills.

Play settings should value and listen to children, ensuring that their views and experiences are embedded in all aspects of provision. At the same time, individual needs must be recognised and supported to promote full participation and inclusion for every child.
Staff play a key role in creating this environment. They should have a strong understanding of playwork principles, enabling them to engage, inspire and support children effectively. Positive partnerships with parents and carers are equally important, helping to ensure consistency and shared understanding of children’s needs and experiences.

There are a wide range of play-based settings in which these principles can be applied. These include sports clubs, breakfast and after-school clubs, holiday schemes, activity-based clubs, play centres, open access provision, adventure playgrounds, Play Ranger services, play barges, hospital play services, play therapy, and street play initiatives. Each setting offers different types of play opportunities but shares a common commitment to supporting children’s play and wellbeing.

This document is designed to support playworkers, managers and practitioners working within out-of-school and holiday provision to develop high-quality play environments. It serves as an introductory resource and should be used alongside our more comprehensive guidance, ‘Beyond Quality Framework.’

Throughout this document, we refer to the ‘Playwork Principles’, which underpin all aspects of effective play provision.

What is play?

Play is a concept that can appear contradictory when we examine it closely. It is both serious and light-hearted; seemingly trivial, yet deeply meaningful; imaginative and spontaneous, while at times shaped by rules and structure. Although play often takes place in imagined or fictional worlds, it is closely connected to children's real-life experiences and helps them to understand, explore and make sense of the world around them. While it is often viewed as a childhood activity, play also underpins many of the skills, creativity and achievements seen in adult life. – Gray, 2017.

Play England's 'Charter for Children's Play' defines play as: "What children and young people do when they follow their own ideas and interests, in their own way, and for their own reasons."

This definition emphasises the importance of choice, autonomy and intrinsic motivation in children's play, highlighting its central role in supporting development, wellbeing and learning.

Reflecting on practice:
Ask yourself…

- Are there activities that I consider as play and activities that I don't consider as play?
- What play experiences do I remember as a child? How do I support children to create memorable play experiences?
- How do I enable children to play freely in a variety of different ways?
- How do I support risk taking in children's play?
- How do I support parents, schools and other settings to understand the value of children's play?

Why not discuss this as a team to ensure a consistent approach?

Playwork principle 1: "All children and young people need to play. The impulse to play is innate. Play is a biological, psychological and social necessity and is fundamental to the healthy development and well- being of individuals and communities."
Playwork principle 2: "Play is a process that is freely chosen, personally directed and intrinsically motivated. That is, children and young people determine and control the content and intent of their play, by following their own instincts, ideas and interests, in their own way for their own reasons."

Why play?

Children's right to play is a human right defined by Article 31 of the UNCRC – see introduction. Free play has markedly reduced for many children in recent years, despite the many benefits to them. Some of the benefits of freely chosen, child-initiated play are:

- The promotion of healthy brain development – The benefits of play: Effects on the learning brain – in play children are solving problems, creating, thinking, experimenting and creating connections in the brain. Children who are unable to access play have brains up to 30% smaller than those who do.
- Reduction of stress and anxiety – when children play, they generate benzodiazepine naturally which helps to reduce stress levels. Play can support children in processing experiences.
- The development of children's communication skills – Early learning: 10 reasons why play is important – through play children try out new vocabulary, talk with adults and friends and use their imagination in storytelling and role play.
- An improvement in physical and mental health – it is recommended that school age children take part in four to five hours of physically active play every day.
- A chance to explore their environment and wider community.

The above benefits may occur naturally in play.

Reflecting on practice:
Ask yourself…

- How do I know which of the children I work with are experiencing stress or anxiety and how do I support them?
- How do I ensure children have access to physically active play?
- How do I support children to explore their wider community through play?
- How can I find out more about healthy brain development in the age range I work with?

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Playwork principle 3: The prime focus and essence of playwork is to support and facilitate the play process and this should inform the development of play policy, strategy, training and education.
Playwork principle 4: For playworkers, the play process takes precedence and playworkers act as advocates for play when engaging with adult led agendas.

Giving children the opportunity to play freely is of utmost importance.
You can find out more about the importance of play in the lives of children Play England's Publications.

What is my role?

The central purpose of playwork is to support and facilitate the play process. The role of the playworker is to enable all children and young people to create and access spaces in which they can play freely. This includes providing an environment that stimulates curiosity, imagination and engagement, and maximises opportunities for a wide range of play experiences.

A key aspect of playwork practice is the approach of 'low intervention, high response'. This means supporting children's play without directing or controlling it. Interventions, where necessary, should be thoughtful and proportionate, ensuring that children retain ownership of their play. For play to remain meaningful, it must allow for flexibility, unpredictability and a sense of emotional and physical security. Fundamentally, children's play belongs to them.

In practice, there may be limitations within a setting, or constraints linked to the type of provision, which affect how playworkers apply this approach. However, playwork skills are grounded in the values and understandings set out in the Playwork Principles. Effective playworkers aim to intervene as little as possible, using careful observation and professional judgement to respond sensitively and appropriately when support is needed, while always prioritising the child's freedom to explore and direct their own play.

Reflecting on practice:
Ask yourself…

- What are my top three playworker qualities?
- Would my colleagues agree with this?
- How do I feel when children don't need me?
- How do I balance knowing when to interact and when to stand back and observe?
- How do I ensure the child's voice is heard?
- How do I communicate with children?

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Playwork principle 5: The role of the playworker is to support all children and young people in the creation of a space in which they can play.
Playwork Principle 6: The playworker's response to children and young people playing is based on a sound up to date knowledge of the play process, and reflective practice.

Playworkers need to be: Able to balance needs, adaptable, approachable, considerate, consistent, creative, fair, inspirational, listeners, non-judgemental, observers, people who love to play, reflective, respectful, safe, sensitive, silly, tireless, and more.

What does play look like in my provision?

Play can look very different depending on the environment and the individuals involved. Children and adults engage in play in a wide variety of ways, shaped by their interests, experiences and preferences. For example, some may enjoy den building and imaginative or role play, while others may be drawn to construction activities, creative expression, or more physical forms of play such as rough and tumble.

Recognising this diversity is essential when supporting children's play. There is no single 'right' way to play; instead, a rich play environment should provide opportunities for many different types of play, allowing all children to engage in ways that are meaningful to them.

Bob Hughes' book 'A Playworker's Taxonomy of Play Types', identifies 16 different types of play, highlighting the breadth and complexity of children's play experiences.

Finding out and testing one's own and other's limits – rough and tumble	Acting out life experiences – socio-dramatic	Where everyone follows set rules – social play	Using their imagination – creative play
Play using words, for example, telling jokes – communication play	Acting out assigned roles – dramatic play	Movement for movement's sake – locomotor play	Encountering risky experiences – deep play
Exploring through senses – exploratory play	Make-believe play – fantasy play	Where conventional rules do not apply, for example you can defy gravity – imaginative play	Control of the elements, for example, building dams – mastery play
Play using a sequence of hand-eye manipulations – object play	Exploring ways of being – role play	Exploring history, rituals and stories – recapitulative play	Using one thing to symbolise another – symbolic play

Reflecting on practice:
Ask yourself…

- How do I feel about play types? Am I comfortable allowing all different types of play in the setting?
- How do children in my setting experience different play types?
- How do I need to change or develop our play space to support more play types?
- Does my setting facilitate children's free choice of play?

All play types are as important to the development of the whole child as each other. If children are unable to engage in one or more of them, they may suffer from “play deprivation”.

How do I keep children safe whilst they play?

Risk taking in play is a normal part of children’s play and is any play opportunity which allows the child to feel uncertain or to overcome a personal challenge. Risk taking whilst playing is giving children the opportunity to push their boundaries physically and/or emotionally. A risk benefit assessment acknowledges that there is an element of risk in everything that happens and assesses the risk and the benefits to the child. Children are given the chance to stretch themselves, and test and develop their own abilities without being exposed to unacceptable risks of serious injury. By providing opportunities for children to encounter and manage risks we are enabling them to have the chance to develop their own risk assessing skills.

The early years foundation stage (EYFS) statutory framework sets out the standards for the learning, development and care of children from birth to five years in England. It is based on the principle that every child deserves the best possible start in life, along with the support needed to fulfil their individual potential.

The framework includes Safeguarding and Welfare Requirements which providers must meet to ensure children are kept safe, healthy and well supported. These requirements apply to all early year’s provision on the Early Years Register and represent best practice for settings operating under the Compulsory and Voluntary parts of the Childcare Register.

The 2025 updated framework strengthens safeguarding expectations, with a particular emphasis on safer recruitment, including the requirement to obtain references, and clearer procedures to ensure that only suitable individuals work with children. It also includes enhanced expectations around safeguarding training, whistleblowing procedures, and the management and follow-up of children’s absences.
Additional updates reinforce good practice in areas such as maintaining children’s privacy, supporting safer eating, and ensuring robust policies and procedures are in place to always promote children’s safety and wellbeing.

Playwork principle 7: Playworkers recognise their own impact on the play space and the impact of children and young people’s play on the playworker.

Playwork principle 8: Playworkers chose an intervention style that enables children and young people to extend their play. All playworker intervention must balance risk with the developmental benefit and wellbeing of children.

A comprehensive checklist of these requirements can be found in ‘School-age Childcare Quality Framework.’

Suitable people

Providers must ensure that all individuals working with children are suitable to do so. This includes obtaining an enhanced Disclosure and Barring Service (DBS) check for all staff, and volunteers where appropriate, as well as ensuring any other required suitability checks are completed in line with statutory requirements. References must be obtained to verify applicants' suitability.
Providers must also have effective systems in place to ensure the ongoing suitability of staff, including consideration of any disqualification requirements.

At least one person involved in the recruitment process should have knowledge and understanding of safer recruitment procedures to help identify and deter unsuitable individuals.

All new staff must receive an induction to help them understand their roles and responsibilities. This must include information about safeguarding and child protection, the provider's policies and procedures, and guidance on appropriate interactions with children. An example induction checklist can be found in Appendix 1.

Reflecting on practice:
Ask yourself…

- How and when do we assess risks and benefits to children? Do we consider different types of risks?
- Am I sure we are meeting all the Safeguarding and Welfare requirements? How do I know? How often are these reviewed?
- How do we support new employees in their role? How often do we review our induction process?
- Has at least one member of staff involved in recruitment undertaken Safer Recruitment training?

Why not discuss this as a team to ensure a consistent approach?

How do I ensure all children have equal opportunities?

“All children are morally and legally entitled to play within their own community whatever their culture, impairment, gender, language, background, behaviour or need. Inclusive play means that all children and young people have equal access to good quality local play provision. This means that they can play with others or alone as they wish in a rich environment that supports their play needs and gives them access to a wide range of play opportunities.” – Play: Inclusive Provision, Play Wales.

To be fully inclusive we need to consider the following factors in our setting:

Environment
Our environment is adapted to meet all children’s individual play needs.

Attitudes
Adults are positive role models and support and facilitate play for all children.

Policies
Our policies fully reflect the needs of the children in our setting and are clearly written.

Families
All families are welcomed in our setting, and we communicate effectively with them.

Ethos
We have a clear ethos, written by our team, which everyone strives to always achieve.

In quality inclusive out of school provision, staff will have undertaken training and professional qualifications and professional development that supports inclusive play. Regularly monitoring and evaluating the effectiveness of the provision in meeting the play needs of all the children helps to identify areas of weakness.

Reflecting on practice:
Ask yourself…

- How do we ensure we are offering inclusive play opportunities for all children?
- Do we discuss, understand and respond to individual children’s needs?
- What does our setting need to do to develop inclusion?
- Do our policies reflect an ethos of inclusive practice?
- How do we change communication methods with families when needed? Do we get to know families in advance of children starting?
- What are our setting strengths and how do we build upon these?
- Do we ensure all members of staff understand the inclusive ethos?
- How do we obtain support if we need it?
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Aspect	Useful resources
Inclusion	SEND Support: Resources Cambridgeshire Development Journal 2024. Size: 1,064KB File format: pdf OAP Audit Tool Final. Size: 966KB File format: pdf EY SEND Toolkit What is Inclusive Practice? Supporting Inclusive Practice
Playwork	The Playwork Principles - Play Wales Play Wales Play England Play Scotland
Behaviour, attitudes and establishing routine	Supporting Positive Interactions Talking Together in Cambridgeshire - Practitioner resources Early Years Transitions Toolkit 2026
Children's welfare and wellbeing	Help for early years providers : Health and wellbeing Physical Development in the EYFS Forest School Cambridgeshire HAF & Wraparound Providers - Knowledge Hub Cambridgeshire Early Years and Childcare: Designated Safeguarding Lead for Early Years & Childcare (PVI) - Knowledge Hub

Glossary

Child and play centred playwork that responds to the play needs of the children, not to external requirements.

Child protection and safeguarding the duty of adults to care for children in a way that neither they nor others cause harm to children and to report and record all concerns related to a child being harmed.

Children's rights children's entitlements under law and the UNCRC, this includes play and their involvement in decisions that affect them.

Children We use this term to encompass all children and teenagers up to the age of 18 regardless of impairment, their gender, race, religion or belief, language, sexuality, health, economic or social status and any other individual characteristics.

Discrimination Make unjust distinctions or fail to recognise support needs resulting in failure to acknowledge an individual's right to participate in play and exercise freedom of choice.

Inclusion Ensuring that play provision is open and accessible to all and takes positive action in removing barriers so that all children can play.

Loose parts Materials that can be used flexibly for play – they can be moved around, manipulated, used as props or to change the environment.

Play deprivation If children do not play, they will lack experience that is developmentally essential and this may lead to them being biologically and socially disabled.

Playwork is something that takes place whenever adults set up and facilitate a space where children go to play. Playwork is about facilitating and enriching opportunities for all children to play. Playwork is about observing how children use different bits and pieces and identifying the play value of these things to maintain and continue to facilitate the play process

Playwork principles the professional and ethical framework for playwork.

Risk The possibility of a hazard causing harm.

Risk-benefit assessment an assessment of risk which also considers the benefits of the activity to the playing child.

Induction into your new role as a playworker

As a new member of the staff team, you will be given a job description and a copy of the settings policies. You will also undergo an induction process and be given a mentor to help you settle into your new role. As part of the induction, your mentor will discuss and talk through the settings practices. The following table help you to understand what you need to know to be an effective playworker and a valued team member.

By the end of day one you will have…		
Had a meeting with your line manager, and discussed: • The job role responsibilities. • The aims and mission statement. • Confidentiality. • The history and governance structure. • Your personal mentor. • Safeguarding and child protection. • Human Resources. • Induction process. • Training and continuous professional development. • Grievance and disciplinary matters. • Sickness Absence notification. • Holidays how to book them. • Supervision and Appraisal System. Had a tour of the provision and briefly discussed: • Setting security including doors and boundaries. • Indoor and outdoor play spaces, including which areas are accessible for children. • Location of resources and equipment. • Car parking, break facilities, toilets, lockers/facilities for personal items during work hours. • Notice boards and where to find key information. • Routines, daily timetables. • Health and safety information. • Fire evacuation procedures and exits. • First aid facilities. Been introduced to your colleagues and briefly discussed their roles, including: • Your mentor.		

• Designated person for safeguarding. • Designated person for special educational needs (SENCo). • Designated person for equalities (ENCo). • First aiders. • Been provided with keys/passes and/or alarm codes, if applicable.		
By the end of week one you will have…		
Spent time with your mentor, and discussed: • All club policies and procedures. • Daily routines, for example, how to answer the telephone, arrivals/collections, and the processes that need to be followed. • Health and Safety including setting boundaries, fire evacuation, first aid. • The location of accident and incident forms and how to use them o How to engage with parents/carers. • Playwork and best practices, for example, how, and when, to engage with children. Met with the settings Designated Person for Child Protection, and discussed: • The setting safeguarding policies/procedures. • The location of specific forms and how to record concerns about children or adults. • Been booked on to Basic Child Protection training, that provides information on local procedures preferably with the local authority. Met the designated person for SEND, and discussed: • Policies and procedures. • Individual children's specific needs. • Medication and allergies. Met with ENCo, and discussed: • Policies and procedures. • The location of prejudice related incident forms and how to use them.		
By the end of month one you will have…		
Ongoing support from your mentor, including discussion, job shadowing, effective peer-on-peer observation, to gain confidence in all areas of your role: • Growing confidence to engage appropriately with children, knowing when you should stand back and when to interact. • Growing confidence to discuss and implement the setting policies.		

• Growing confidence to discuss the aims, vision and governance structure of the setting and be aware of the statutory requirements that it needs to follow. • Identify and celebrate your successes. • Identify areas for development and actions to support your continuing professional development, including qualifications. Met with the setting Designated Person for Child Protection, and discussed: • Your understanding of safeguarding and child protection policies and procedures • The signs and indictors of abuse and neglect. • How to record concerns about children or adults. Met the designated person for SEND, and discussed: • Yours understanding of relevant policies and procedures • How to support individual children with SEND so that they can engage in all areas of the setting. • Administering medication and considering allergies to keep individual safe. Met with ENCo, and discussed: • Your understanding of relevant policies and procedures. • How to support the setting to accept difference and be fully inclusive. • Your understanding of prejudice related incidents and how to record them. Undertaken a monthly probationary review with your line manager and set up regular monthly meetings.		
By the end of month six you will have…		
Ongoing support from your mentor, including discussion, job shadowing, effective peer-on-peer observation, to build upon your confidence and expertise in all areas of your role: • Acquired full knowledge of all essential policies and procedures. • Identified key people for on-going support/networking, for example, designated persons • Undertaken a three, four month and five-month review with your line manager. • Achieved key objectives set during your induction to the standard required. • Demonstrated capability to meet the requirements of the role to the standard set. • Following successful completion of probationary period, undertaken an appraisal with line manager and devised key objectives and an on-the-job training plan for the next six to 12 months.		