



International Play Association
Promoting the Child's Right to Play

Declaration on the Importance of Play 2014



The **Declaration on the Importance of Play** reaffirms IPA's stated aim and intent to:

- Protect the right to play
- Preserve the right to play
- Promote the right to play

IPA promotes the right of all children and young people to time, freedom and space to play in their own way.

IPA endorses the premise that playing is a universal behaviour, and that the benefits to children and young people achieving their right to play are shared by all races and people around the world.

IPA will foster and facilitate evidence gathering and exchange (beyond and between international borders):

- to inform, invigorate, critique and enhance research, policy and practice relating to play, environments for play and playwork
- recognising that international professional networking and relationship building encourages mutual support and promotes understanding

IPA commits to promote the position that playing is a vital, universal behaviour, essential for children to be children and thrive in the modern world.

Play is a fundamental part of life; it is a biological, social, cognitive necessity for individual children, but also has benefits for society and the human species.

The drive to play is innate; it is a process that has evolved because it advantages the development of bodies, relationships and minds. Playing is a process, not an activity; for example, simply moving the body contributes to efficient and effective muscular growth and physical health and wellbeing; playing helps children with flexibility, agility, balance, coordination and satisfaction. Play takes many forms, replicating the evolution of play through bodily actions, social interactions and the development of symbolic thinking.

Play is self-chosen, for without active choice and engagement the activity is empty and reduced in meaning and significance. Performing an activity fully immersed in a feeling of energised focus, full involvement, and enjoyment in the process of the activity is good for children. Satisfaction through play is defined by the player, with no extrinsic goals.

Play is pleasurable for each child; it gives enjoyment, satisfaction and 'fun' in the moment of playing – it is a valued part of childhood. Play aids emotional regulation, by helping children understand and moderate primary emotions

(anger, fear, disgust, shock, sadness and joy) into more nuanced and subtle forms (grief, pleasure, displeasure, affection, contentment, exasperation, disappointment).

Play is the way humans develop efficient brains; playing enhances cortical connections and neural organisation; when humans play, the nerve signals the body generates create neural pathways that help with brain development and brain plasticity (flexibility). By so doing playing contributes to developing ‘effective systems for learning’ rather than particular learning outcomes.

Playing is a child’s free, open, boundless, and self-controlled activity; through play children discover the differences between themselves, others and the world in which they live. These discoveries help them become individuals and independent, self-sufficient and autonomous.

Playing is vital to the understanding, development and maintenance of valued relationships with others. Playful interactions with others help in understanding relationships and attachment, language, roles and social structures.

By playing children learn what works and what does not; it is creative, flexible and adaptable; it helps with the development of flexible, adaptive strategies to the problems that life offers children. Understanding that life is not always ‘fair’ or ‘good’ helps children to adapt to problems in life and develop resilience and optimism to deal with stressful or traumatic events in the future.

Play is chaotic and transformative; it helps children be spontaneous, highly creative, original, and open. Playing connects to ‘threshold experiences’ and opens up ‘worlds of possibility’ that children recognise as mysterious and ‘magical’.

Children can and will play in most places. A rich environment for play includes: natural elements; opportunities for risk and challenge; places to express emotions; stimulation for the senses; chances for social interactions; interesting and varied physical and human environment and sufficient space to do what is wanted. Children will play more in environments that afford opportunities for various types of play. Children have different and varied play needs throughout childhood and adolescence; environments should offer endless variety and stimulation to children.



The human species is attracted to newness, humans are curious, with a desire for new experiences as they become adult. This gives humans a capacity to find stimulation and interest in everything around them. Children need varied and stimulating environments and experiences in order to thrive, in adults this playful drive is translated in creative and innovative activities.

Context

The General Comment No. 17 (2013) on United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) Article 31 launched in September 2013 was a welcome reminder of the right of children to rest, leisure, play, recreational activities, cultural life and the arts. However IPA’s focus is on children’s right to play and so IPA has prepared this Declaration on the Importance of Play.

Play is a vital and fundamental part of the human experience; it is important to the lives of children in that it gives them pleasure in being alive and is essential to their healthy physical and mental growth, able to function in the culture and society in which they are born.

Yet there is a widespread lack of understanding of the value of play, and it is often considered a trivial part of children’s lives or dismissed as an unnecessary distraction from ‘more important’ activities such as



preparedness for adult life, work and formal education. However growing evidence shows that playing especially up to the age of seven years can enhance educational achievements and life chances when children leave school.

Children's play is behaviour, activity or processes initiated, controlled and structured by children themselves and it takes place whenever and wherever opportunities arise.

Adults may contribute to the creation of environments in which it takes place, but play itself is non-compulsory, driven by intrinsic motivation and is undertaken for its own sake, rather than as a means to an end. It involves the exercise of autonomy, physical, mental or emotional activity, and has the potential to take infinite forms, either in groups or alone. These forms will change and adapt throughout the course of childhood.

The key characteristics of play are fun, uncertainty, challenge, flexibility and non-productivity. Together, these factors contribute to the enjoyment it produces and the consequent incentive to continue to play.

This **Declaration on the Importance of Play** is based upon the substantial evidence that has arisen in the last twenty years, showing how fundamental and vital play is to children and therefore society and our species.

Furthermore, the Declaration highlights the growing evidence of the effects of lack of time and space for play and the serious and life-long effects on children's bodies and minds. We wish to alert the wider community to this evidence and call for action to address this deprivation before the affects cause lifelong damage to more children.

We recognise that in many countries there is disagreement about of the value of play, and so it is allocated a trivial part of children's lives or dismissed as an unnecessary distraction from what are considered 'more important' activities such as formal education and preparedness for adult life and work; on the contrary playing is essential for all of these outcomes.

Play Deprivation – what happens when children do not play?

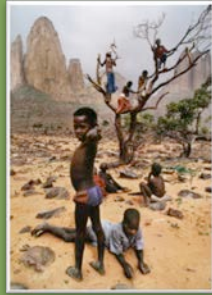
Play is clearly pleasurable and joyous for children; it contributes to positive emotion and is a recognised and valued part of childhood that is increasingly being denied or curtailed by the actions of adults and society, resulting in reports of unhappy children from around the globe.

Play deprivation is highly detrimental to affected children, communities and society as a whole. Not playing deprives children of experiences that are regarded as developmentally essential and results in those affected being emotionally, physically, cognitively and socially disabled.

If normal play experiences are absent the child is more likely to become violent and antisocial. Although data on the impact of not playing for humans is sparse, the findings of the studies that do exist give cause for concern. If children are kept in and not allowed out to play, they are likely to manifest symptoms ranging from aggression and repressed emotions and reduced social skills, to inactivity and an increased risk of obesity. Adults reporting environmental restrictions on play (e.g. having less time to play) are more likely to be overweight and have less healthy lifestyles.

If children do not play, then their brains will not grow as they should. Continuous sensory deprivation – lack of human contact and other forms of sensory deprivation – causes symptoms ranging from depression and withdrawal to a gradual loss of electrical activity in the brain, and affects other factors.

There is a great danger that the effects of the current changes in society and the environment will have a lasting impact on our children and their children, thus affecting the whole species. The study of human genetic material (epigenetics) has shown that the effects of deprivation on one generation can 'echo' through subsequent generations.



How the Declaration was Written

The editor and lead facilitator was the late Professor Perry Else (Sheffield Hallam University), who prepared the draft Declaration based on work done earlier. Participants in the working process for the Declaration included Bob Hughes (Play Education), Mike Greenway (Play Wales) and latterly Meynell Walter (Meynell Games). Other members of IPA-EWNI commented during the draft stages of the paper, drafts were made available to IPA members for comment and a final edit was presented by the IPA Board to the IPA Council of National Representatives.

The draft Declaration by Professor Perry Else was based on an academic paper with extended comments supported by formal references. If time and other priorities permit, this longer version will be updated and released for those audiences who would use it when ready.

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