

Submission to the Productivity Commission Inquiry into Mental Health

Play as a pathway to mental wellbeing

Based on my nearly 30 years' experience in the early childhood and play sectors, the growing array of research evidence and ongoing conversations with international play experts and advocates, I believe that the reduction in time, space and permission for unstructured, self-directed play experiences has impacted on children's ability to develop the resilience necessary to manage the typical ups and downs of everyday life, leaving them ill-prepared for more serious stressors; and is a possible contributor to the increasing rates of mental illness in children and young people.

While the primary focus of the inquiry is on serious mental health issues, for me, the relatively low-cost ideas to improve play opportunities in children's services and schools, frees up time & resources to provide more targeted/intensive support for those children & families that need it.

Play is difficult to define and is often linked with adult agendas, rather than being allowed to develop and flourish from children's own intrinsic motivations. However, we believe that by paying more attention to play, by increasing the knowledge of parents, early childhood and school education teams about play and about creating enriched play environments and supporting play, children's wellbeing can be better fostered and they can develop the skills and dispositions to better manage the normal ups and downs of life.

When children are engaged in fulfilling play experiences, levels of stress hormones reduce and positive mood hormones increase. Children and young people in upper primary and lower secondary years typically have much less access to unstructured play than younger children. Creating opportunities for positive play experiences for children in this age group has the potential to buffer against the risks from future exposure to drugs and alcohol – embedding the concept that having fun together with friends/peers/teachers, doesn't require artificial stimulants.

There are many other beneficial outcomes from providing enriched play environments, supported by knowledgeable adults – improved physical literacy, reduction in obesity, increased intuitive learning and intellectual curiosity, development of flexible and creative thinking, improvement in social skills, increased school attendance.

Importantly, it is unstructured play in enriched environments that present the most opportunities for positive outcomes. As opposed to adult-led sports, after school activities and passive entertainment, unstructured play puts children in charge – they make the rules, challenge the rules, change the rules, adapt the rules for new players or conditions – they practice being a member of their communities.

When the quality of the play experiences available to children is high, the drive to continue and extend the play as long as possible, children are encouraged to manage their own behavior to avoid being expelled from the play. Schools that provide rich play opportunities have very few problems with bullying. Importantly,

children need practice to develop this play literacy and schools need to exercise care in supporting children to resolve conflicts during play time, without removing children's opportunities to learn these skills themselves.

The international trend towards the 'schoolification' of childhood and pressure to meet academic milestones earlier than previous generations has eaten into the time available for unstructured play opportunities. This pressure has further increased where the publishing of data from standardised tests has allowed comparison between schools. In some schools unstructured play has almost been eliminated from the school day.

While schools and children's services have a duty to care to protect children from harm, surplus or inappropriate safety rules within early childhood and school settings, applied to children's play times, has reduced opportunities for children to experience the thrill of testing and developing their physical skills at their own pace. It is through this type of play that children attain a sense of mastery over their bodies and their environments – key features of physical literacy. Research also suggests that limiting exposure to risky play experiences in childhood can lead to anxiety and fear phobias in adolescence. In contrast to the restrictions placed on children to follow their own drive for risky play, children are compelled to take many academic risks throughout their time in school, all at the discretion of the school timetable and education curriculum.

Increased housing density, while sometimes concentrating children and families geographically, typically results in limited space for social gathering and unstructured play. The design of urban communities continues to struggle to meet the play needs of children and young people, typically segregating play into small barren spaces with limited variety in the types of play experiences available.

Similarly, the design of outdoor school environments is typically focused on providing for sport, while minimising initial build and ongoing maintenance costs, with little, if any, consideration of the play and learning potential from well-designed and managed, green school grounds. Recent Australian research highlights the poor recognition of the benefits of 'in between' spaces (particularly of 'green' spaces) within school environments in helping to balance gender inequities in play and allowing children to manage their own play experiences.

The limitations for play within our residential neighbourhoods can be ameliorated by improving the quality of play environments within early childhood and school settings. While changing the physical environment within these settings to improve the quality and diversity of play and learning experiences can require specialised knowledge and sometimes significant capital investment; less costly interventions, such as increasing adult knowledge about play and changing the setting's attitudes towards play, providing free or low cost loose materials and giving children greater freedom to follow their own play motivations, have been shown to bring about more sustainable cultural change.

Many play that a more holistic approach be implemented in this sector. By focusing on improving the quality of the play culture within these settings, children's wellbeing can be fostered and they can develop the skills and dispositions to better manage the normal ups and downs of life.

Observations of children's play can identify children struggling to develop the level of play literacy of their peers, and who might need extra support or specialised intervention. Such observations can also identify positive skills and attributes in children that might not be visible within the classroom, allowing teachers to develop more holistic understanding of children's strengths, interests and dispositions.

There has been a significant reduction in children's opportunities for unstructured play experiences in their homes, schools and local neighbourhoods, which can limit the potential for the known benefits of unstructured play –

- Creativity and flexible thinking – particularly with the inclusion of loose materials into the play environment
- Social skills – through problem solving and negotiating conflict
- Physical health and gross motor skills
- Learning – through fostering skills such as attention, concentration and memory
- Resilience and risk management – through uncertainty in play, children develop coping skills to be independent and manage adversity
- Mental and emotional health – promoting positive self-concept and self-esteem; and decreasing anxiety and depression.

Since the 1950s and 60s – the golden years of play – when children had more play time at school, less homework and more wide-ranging play options outside of school, time for play has reduced and importantly, opportunities for self-directed, unstructured play has reduced, with a range of negative consequences –

- Poorer physical health – obesity, difficulty sitting, meeting physical skill milestones;
- Increased rates of conduct and attention disorders; and
- Increased rates of anxiety, depression, suicide and feelings of helplessness among children and young people.

While there has been efforts to increase opportunities for physical activity to improve children's physical health, outside of high quality early childhood settings, little attention has been paid to increasing opportunities for other valid and valuable types of play, such as creative, dramatic, exploratory, mastery, risky, rough and tumble, socio-dramatic and symbolic.

For example, when children engage in socio-dramatic play they act out real experiences from their lives, even negative experiences, which help them work through and make sense of their worlds; and engaging in risky play allows children to overcome fears, find strength and courage, develop mastery and build resilience.

Focusing only on sport and physical play and limiting opportunities for children to engage in other types of play, can limit opportunities for growth and development in other important areas.

Governments and organisations in other jurisdictions, such as Wales, Scotland, Northern Ireland, the European Union, United States of America and Canada, recognising the wide-ranging benefits of play, have developed policies and programs focusing on play. For example,

- The Canadian Public Health Association has published a Position Statement, *Children's Unstructured Play* and a series of infographics on unstructured play;
- The American Academy of Pediatrics published *The Power of Play: A Pediatric Role in Enhancing Development in Young Children*, providing guidance to doctors on talking to parents about the importance of play in children's development and wellbeing;
- Wales introduced legislation requiring local authorities to assess and improve the sufficiency of play opportunities for children;
- Supported by the European Union, the Play-Friendly Schools program provides play training to schools in Austria, Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland and Slovakia, towards improve play experiences for children and creating happier school environments.

The draft report includes recommendations related to upskilling teachers and educators on supporting emotional wellbeing and having for schools to have a teacher dedicated to student mental health. I would advocate that increasing the knowledge of teachers and educators in relation to creating the conditions for quality play experiences, would help to reverse the current trend of increasing rates of anxiety and depression among children and young people, while also fostering all the other benefits that good play affords.

Through my own professional experience, I've observed the positive changes in settings that have changed their physical and cultural environment to better support play. They have become happier places to be, play times are more creative and collaborative with fewer behaviour problems; and there are often unexpected academic improvements, such as improvements in language and creative writing.

I agree strongly that supporting children and young people within school settings is an ideal strategy – these settings are where the majority of children during the majority of their waking hours. I believe that focusing on play in schools is a cost-effective strategy to improve whole school mental wellbeing – for both students and teachers.

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Some of the Research relating to play and mental wellbeing

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