

**Response to Draft Report on Mental Health.
Productivity Commission
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The draft report on Mental Health does not make any reference to the importance of play for good mental health. This omission is of concern and in the final draft should be addressed.

Numerous pieces of research can be cited to support links between mental health and play including but not limited to:

The American Academy of Paediatrics
(2018) <https://pediatrics.aappublications.org/content/142/3/e20182058>

And

Dr Peter Gray (2011)
https://www.researchgate.net/publication/265449180_The_Decline_of_Play_and_the_Rise_of_Psychopathology_in_Children_and_Adolescents

International research and examples of leading practice in safeguarding and promote children's access to play can shape and inform mental health initiatives as part of a holistic approach to achieving population mental health for all children

If we are serious about mental health then investment in a national play strategy should be a Government priority for health and wellbeing and early intervention.

The World Health Organization (WHO) defines health as 'a state of complete physical, mental and social well-being and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity'. More recently, positive mental health was defined by WHO as being 'a state of well-being in which the individual realizes his or her own abilities, can cope with the normal stresses of life, can work productively and fruitfully, and is able to make a contribution to his or her community.' These elements are all achieved during play.

Play is a biological imperative. Play is undertaken by all species in the animal kingdom with complex social structures. Most recently it has been discovered that even the reptilian brain of crocodiles has capacity for play.

The process of play has a deep evolutionary role in the developing brain and provides multifunctional benefits for brain and motor skill development. Play builds new circuits in the prefrontal cortex of the brain which controls our executive functions. This relates to the regulation of emotions, problem solving and the navigation of complex social interactions. Studies show that during play the neocortex of the brain is activated with almost one third of genes changed after 30 mins of play.

Play also supports development of adaptability as it is the spontaneity of play that supports the brain to train for the unexpected. This coupled with the release of hormones that reduce stress, links play

to increasing a child's resilience and serves an important role in the development and maintenance of good mental health.

Play ensures children thrive rather than just exist. Play sits within the animal kingdom alongside nutrition and caregiving and should have the same importance applied to it in our health system.

Lack of understanding of what play is has resulted in the hijacking and creation of artificial play experiences for children has only service play deprivation in our community and exacerbate the decline of play and increases in mental health issues.

The key role adults have when it comes to play is to provide sufficient time for it to occur, space for it to develop, and reassurance that the play belongs to the child and is important. Play is spontaneous and does not have a set outcome. It is intrinsically motivated by the child. The beauty of play is that it is free and has capacity to resource itself through the child's own imagination, exploration and invention.

I attach as a supporting document information and references accessible from the Canadian Health Authority. In addition, I express support for the submission tendered by Play Australia as the leading organisation in Australia promoting the importance of play for healthy development.

Play as an element for prevention and supporting good mental health **should** be referenced in the final report. There are a number of elements that contribute to good mental health, time and opportunity for children to play freely is one of them.

Robyn Monro Miller
Sydney, 22 January 2020