



Building resilience  
– the importance of playing

All children have the right to play as enshrined in Article 31 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC).

*'Each element of article 31 is mutually linked and reinforcing, and when realized, serves to enrich the lives of children. Together, they describe conditions necessary to protect the unique and evolving nature of childhood. Their realization is fundamental to the quality of childhood, to children's entitlement to optimum development, to the promotion of resilience and to the realization of other rights.'*<sup>1</sup>

Resilience is often thought of as the ability to 'roll with the punches'. Some children can rise above adversity to adapt to serious challenges, stress and risks without much help. For others, this is less easy and they will need support to do so. Hence, resilience is a concept involving not only the psychological qualities of the child but also the child's family, social networks and neighbourhood.

It is our response to life's experiences – both the good ones and the very challenging and worrying ones – as well as how we access others to help us.

Psychologists have identified some of the 'internal' factors that make a person resilient:

- A positive attitude
- Optimism
- Ability to regulate emotions
- The ability to use failure as useful feedback<sup>ii</sup>
- Problem solving abilities.

Childhood provides the opportunity to develop a range of flexible responses to the changeable environment that children often confront.

When faced with an uncertainty, playing allows children to develop and practice new behaviours without excessive risk.

Play has specific features that allow children to try out, in relative safety, new strategies and solutions to challenges. Playing promotes both physical and emotional flexibility through the rehearsal of new and unexpected behaviours and situations. It allows children to modify behaviour to meet the challenges of their environment and, over time, to change that environment itself. This flexibility is integral to the play process<sup>iii</sup>.

*'Taking a resilience perspective involves finding ways to beat the odds for individual children and also to change those odds for disadvantaged children more generally. Play therapists have an important role to play in supporting children to imagine, process and practise "resilient moves" they can make for themselves. As part of their wider professional responsibilities and networking, play therapists can advocate for change on behalf of disadvantaged children in general.'*

Professor Angie Hart

## How playing contributes to resilience

A key finding from evidence is that children's play 'provides a primary behaviour for developing resilience, thereby making a significant contribution to children's wellbeing'<sup>iv</sup>. This evidence suggests that play contributes to developing resilience through a number of interrelated systems including:

- Emotional regulation
- Pleasure and enjoyment of promotion of positive feeling
- The stress response system and the ability to respond to uncertainty
- Creativity and the ability to make new and different connections
- Learning
- Attachment to people and place<sup>v</sup>
- Problem solving.

The generally accepted social, physical and cognitive benefits of play help make the case that playing is an important element in helping to build resilience. Having enough time, space and permission to play helps children to:

- Develop a sense of self sufficiency and independence
- Feel that they have a sense of control in their world
- Feel connected to others and their community
- Experience a range of emotions including frustration, determination, achievement, disappointment and confidence, and through practice, can learn how to manage these feelings
- Develop imagination and creativity
- Make sense of and 'work through' difficult and distressing aspects of their lives
- Socialise with their friends and negotiate with others on their own terms.



## Building resilience through play

Adults can support children to build resilience through play, both at home and in play settings. This can be achieved by encouraging choice and independence and ensuring access to a rich play environment. A rich play environment is one where children and young people are able to make a wide range of choices; where there are many possibilities so that they can invent and extend their own play.

This could be any space or setting, either outdoors or inside, and may include:

- local play areas
- parks
- play centres
- staffed adventure playgrounds
- out of school care
- mobile play provision
- playgroups and nurseries
- schools.

A rich play environment is a varied inspirational and interesting physical environment that maximises the potential for socialising, creativity, resourcefulness and challenge. It is a place where children feel free to play in their own way and on their own terms. Quality places for play offer all children and young people the opportunity to freely interact with or experience the following:

- **other children and young people** – with a choice to play alone or with others, to negotiate, co-operate, fall out, and resolve conflict
- **the natural world** – weather, the seasons, bushes, trees, plants, insects, animals and mud

*'Free play gives the growing child the cognitive ability to solve problems, the emotional ability to withstand hardship, the social ability to help each other, and the physical ability to carry it all through. Play is the foundation stone of resilience in children, no matter what life may throw at them!'*

Dr Mike Shooter, Consultant Psychiatrist (retired) and Chair of Play Wales

- **loose parts** – natural and man made materials that can be manipulated, moved and adapted, built and demolished
- **the natural elements** – earth, air, fire and water
- **challenge and risk taking** – both on a physical and emotional level
- **playing with identity** – role play and dressing up
- **movement** – running, jumping, climbing, balancing and rolling
- **rough and tumble** – play fighting
- **the senses** – sounds, tastes, textures, smells and sights
- **feelings** – pain, joy, confidence, fear, anger, contentment, boredom, fascination, happiness, grief, rejection, acceptance, sadness, pride and frustration<sup>vi</sup>.

## Playing – an integral part of childhood

Although the benefits of play for children are substantial and wide ranging and its effects are felt far into adulthood, play is an integral part of childhood and children place great value on having plenty of places and time to play<sup>vii</sup>. Children are 'active agents'<sup>viii</sup> in their own development, and should be seen for who they are not just for who they might

become<sup>ix</sup>. When play and playing is valued, it follows that children are valued.

Children have always needed effective coping skills, and while our changing world brings many advantages, the need to provide time and space to play is as important as ever. Childhood for many has become full of heightened pressures and busy schedules intended to keep children busy and safe.

When children's time is highly scheduled by others it can hardly be seen as their time. Freely chosen play, when children themselves choose when, how and what to play, not only offers benefits that protect against stress and other pressures, but also gives children opportunities to discover their own interests and competencies.

When children personally direct their play, they decide the rules and roles they take within their play and create the worlds they can master. Unscheduled free time for children should not be seen as nonessential. It is vital to children for their fun and relaxation as well as for their health and wellbeing. It is part of their 'work/life balance'.

Play is a key mechanism for developing resilience and dealing with stress and anxiety. It provides effective strategies for dealing with



uncertainty and contributes to good physical and mental health. A child who has developed their resilience can respond and adjust more effectively to difficult circumstances. They are more able than other children to overcome adversity, and of course what we adults do to help them on the way is vitally important.

## References

<sup>i</sup> General comment No. 17 (2013) on the right of the child to rest, leisure, play, recreational activities, cultural life and the arts (art. 31). Geneva: Committee on the Rights of the Child

<sup>ii</sup> Psychology Today, *Resilience* [online] Available at: [www.psychologytoday.com/basics/resilience](http://www.psychologytoday.com/basics/resilience) [Accessed 30 October 2015]

<sup>iii</sup> Lester, S. and Russell, W. (2008) *Play for a Change: Play, Policy and Practice: A review of contemporary perspectives*. London: Play England

<sup>iv</sup> Masten, A. and Obradovic, J. (2006) 'Competence and resilience in Development', *Annals of the New York Academy of Science*, 1094: 13-27. Cited in *Play for a Change*

<sup>v</sup> *Play for a Change: Play, Policy and Practice: A review of contemporary perspectives*

<sup>vi</sup> Welsh Government (2014) *Wales: A Play Friendly Country*. Cardiff: Welsh Government

<sup>vii</sup> UNICEF (2011) *Children's Well-being in the UK, Sweden and Spain: The Role of Inequality and Materialism*

<sup>viii</sup> *Play for a Change: Play, Policy and Practice: A review of contemporary perspectives*

<sup>ix</sup> Lester, S. and Russell, W. (2010) *Children's Right to Play: An examination of the importance of play in the lives of children worldwide*. The Hague: Bernard van Leer Foundation

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