

Dublin City Development Board

# Play here, Play there, **Play everywhere**



Dublin City Play Plan 2012-2017





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**Partners in the Dublin City Play Plan are Dublin City Development Board members with Dublin City Council as the lead agency. The following agencies have also contributed to its development:**

An Garda Síochána, Ballymun Regeneration Ltd, Children in Hospital Ireland, City of Dublin Youth Service Board, Department of Children & Youth Affairs, Department of Education and Skills, Department of Social Protection, Disability Equality Specialist Support Agency, Dublin City Childcare Committee, Dublin City Council, Dublin City University, Dublin City Community Forum, Dublin City Comhairle na nÓg, Health Service Executive, Irish Congress of Trade Unions, Irish National Teachers Organisation, National Parents Council, Office of Public Works, Rathmines Pembroke Community Partnership, Revitalising Areas through Planning Investment and Development, Súgradh, The Ark.

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# Introduction

Play means  
everything to me.  
Shane aged 11

Dublin City Development Board and our partners believe that play is freely-chosen, personally directed, intrinsically motivated behaviour that actively engages the child. It is an integral part of the human psyche, an indisputable ingredient in the eventful, developmental journey from childhood to maturity. It is essential to the social, physical, intellectual, creative, and emotional development of children and young people.

For many years policy makers have asserted the right of children and young people to play as they emerge from the fragile chrysalis of early childhood moving towards adolescence and from there to adulthood. In 1992, Ireland ratified the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child where Article 31 recognises the importance of play, recreation, leisure, arts and culture in childrens' and young peoples' lives. Article 31 also commits the State to protect and promote the child's right to engage in these activities and to participate fully in an age-appropriate manner (1). The Irish Government and its social partners endeavour to work together to support its implementation in particular through the National Action Plan for Social Inclusion 2007-2016, where they have pledged that every child would have access to quality play, sport, recreation and cultural activities to enrich the experience of childhood (2).

The consultation process that preceded the National Children's Strategy (2000), involving more than 2,500 children and young people, clearly identified that lack of play and recreation facilities was a major issue (3). Both the National Children's Strategy and the National Play Policy Ready, Steady, Play (2004) affirmed children's right to live in an Ireland where the importance of play is recognised and where there would be a range of quality play opportunities to enrich their childhoods (4). In addition the National Recreation Policy for Young People (2007) advocated that children and young people should have a voice in the design, implementation and monitoring of recreation policies and facilities and that their recreational needs should be met through development of youth-friendly and safe environments (5). In line with national policy and in keeping with the citizens of Dublin's vision for the city, the current Dublin City Development Plan 2011-2017 sets out a strategy that will influence the development of a wide variety of good quality opportunities for children's play in the city (6).



Photo: Colm Mahady, Fennell Photography.

# A Message from the Chair

Dublin City Development Board together with our partners has prepared a multi-agency City Play Plan in consultation with children, young people and their communities. Our vision is that Dublin will be a child friendly and playful city and that each partner will provide, facilitate or support a wide variety of high-quality play and recreation opportunities for children and young people that promote healthy child development.



We acknowledge that play is not something that is restricted to younger children; older children and young people also choose to spend the bulk of their free time playing in the company of their friends, even though they themselves may not refer to it as play. Therefore to be truly inclusive, our plan seeks to ensure that strategic planning for play in the city embraces children and young people in the 0-18 age group.

Many people have supported the preparation of this plan including children and young people who contributed very constructively through partner organisations involved in the process. The majority of children, young people and parents gave their views through short interviews conducted at National Playdays in 2010 and 2011 as well as in Dublin City Council's network of recreation centres. In addition the members of Dublin City's Comhairle na nÓg (7), which represents young people across the city, formed a subgroup in 2009/2010 to advise the direction of the plan. The 2011/2012 Comhairle na nÓg members reviewed progress of the plan's development and challenged the thinking around what play is and what it means to be a child-friendly playful city. I also welcome the support of the Dublin City Children's Services Committee which tabled the Play Plan as a priority action in its work-plan 2011-2014.

While it is impossible to name everyone, a very special word of thanks must go to Anne O'Brien, Dublin City Council's former Play Development Officer for her drive and perseverance in keeping play to the forefront and ultimately leading to the development of this Play Plan. I now look forward to the City Development Board working with our partners and other interested parties to help fulfil our mission for a city-wide coordinated approach to provide high quality play opportunities for children and young people in Dublin City.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Mary Freehill". The signature is written in a cursive style and is positioned above a horizontal line.

Councillor Mary Freehill  
Dublin City Development Board

May 2012

# Foreword

Play and a space in which to play are two of the most precious elements of a child's existence. Play stimulates the imagination, adding a sense of 'magic' to life; it unleashes creativity; it nurtures life-long friendships; it allows dreams to be dreamed and remain unfulfilled; it provides a legacy of memories remembered and forgotten. Most of all, play creates a unique social and cultural identity; epitomised for many Dubliners by the familiar catch cry of Dublin children "All in, all in the game is broke up!" as they played around the streets near their homes in years gone by.



Play is a fundamental and integral part of healthy development and well-being. It sows the seeds of experience; encouraging children and young people to learn and develop as individuals and as members of their communities. It transports them from the ordinary to the extraordinary; having fun, enjoying each other's company, expanding their language skills, their fine and gross motor skills, their social skills as well as their problem-solving abilities.

Play is at its most valuable when it happens spontaneously and is freely led by children themselves with adult support when needed. Children who play spontaneously relish freedom and exercise choice and control over their actions. Play provides a relatively safe haven for them but it also allows them test their boundaries and to explore risk. As a result, independence and self-esteem develop; their knowledge base and understanding are broadened and they learn to respond more confidently when challenges occur.

Changes in lifestyle and environment combined with ground-breaking technological advances have all impacted on how children spend their 'free' time. For some children, these changes have encouraged them to isolate themselves, living more solitary lives, having less interaction with their peers, depriving them not only of the opportunity to play but also of the critical physical, mental and social development that playing bestows.

All over the world, children and young people affirm that play is simply the most important aspect of their daily lives. Children and young people in Dublin are no different. Their voices must be heard, their natural instinct to play and have fun must be nurtured, their imagination and creativity must be stimulated. Through the principles adopted in this Dublin City Play Plan, we hope that they will experience the elusive 'magic' of play, that play will allow them to dream their dreams, that it will give them the freedom to experience the joys of childhood and adolescence and support them on their journey to adulthood.



# Play here, Play there, Play everywhere

## Dublin City Play Plan 2012-2017

### Vision

Dublin will be a child-friendly and playful city where all children and young people can enjoy their right to play.

### Mission

We will adopt a city-wide coordinated approach to provide high quality inclusive play opportunities for children and young people.

### Principles

Play is essential to the social, physical, intellectual, creative and emotional development of children and young people.

Children and young people's natural creativity and imagination are enhanced through their enjoyment of play in all its forms.

Children and young people should be given opportunities to play in a way that expresses mutual respect for each other, their surroundings and their communities.

Children and young people have a right to be seen, to be heard and to play in public spaces in the city.

Children and young people should be consulted in all matters concerning play in the city.

Working in partnership is key to achieving our vision that Dublin will be a child-friendly, playful city.

### Themes

1. Develop an awareness of play and promote its value.
2. Work together to ensure that Dublin is a child-friendly, playful city.
3. Create an effective city play infrastructure and improve the design of our play spaces.
4. Work in partnership to facilitate play in the early childcare and education sectors.
5. Support schools to facilitate the right of children and young people to play.

# 1 Develop an awareness of play and promote its value



Photo: Ballymun Regeneration Ltd.

Play happens all the time and everywhere. Every child and young person needs and wants the time and space to play. It is through play that children and young people interact

with the world around them. When play is child-driven, they practice

decision-making skills, move at their own pace, discover their own areas of interest, and ultimately engage fully with the passions they wish to pursue.

When play is controlled by adults, children and young

people respond to adult rules and

concerns and lose some of the benefits that play offers to them, particularly in developing creativity, leadership and group skills (8).

While play is essential for physical health, it also benefits mental and emotional health, because it is where children and young people learn most about getting along with others,

regulating their emotions, trying lots of new things without adult support and learning to manage risk.

The importance of play for social inclusion is invaluable. Playing is how children interact with each other; it is the universal language of children; it has no barriers regarding language, gender, age or abilities. Children and young people's time and space for play is affected by the specific nature of each social division i.e. race, gender, socio-economic, disability and age. Adults' response in addressing the right to play should involve an integrated approach to anti-discriminatory practice by ensuring that conditions are right for play to take place (9,10).

Children and young people are naturally adventurous and physically active and have a strong desire to engage in play that may be

Play is when you join a game you like or having fun with your friends. Play is when you are not working, but having a good time. You don't need toys to play.

Catriona aged 10

potentially hazardous. Adults are sometimes concerned by the thrill-seeking nature of this type of play: climbing high features, jumping, zip slides or long drop swings and try to prevent it. What can often be forgotten is that children and young people need to encounter real risks if they are to respond confidently to

Play is fun, messy and dirty. I love rollerblading, hopping, playing catch and being on my flicker. I like playing on the green and the seaside. Shauna aged 7

challenging situations and learn how to deal with uncertainty. The health and developmental benefits gained from mastering 'risky' play helps build character and resilience in children and young people and assists them to become self-reliant as they master their environment. We should ensure that we create simulated risk experiences for them by providing well-maintained challenging equipment and activities that satisfy their need to take risks (11).

## Playdays



Photo: Ballymun Regeneration Ltd.

Playdays are aimed at promoting the concept and awareness of play where parents/guardians and children can celebrate the child's right to play. In 2005 Dublin City Council hosted Ireland's first ever Playday in Merrion Square Park. This has now become a national event promoting play and encouraging communities throughout the country to organise energetic and health-focused play activities in their own cities, neighbourhoods, streets, parks and open spaces. It highlights the facilities available in parks and open spaces and promotes the social and health benefits of active play for children. Many of the activities that National Playday promotes involve very limited costs.

The event also highlights the fact that by featuring low-cost games including penalty shoot-outs, relays, skipping and obstacle courses alongside imaginative and creative elements of play such as messy play, art, dress up and den building, a Playday can happen any day. Local communities can take the initiative to host Playdays by making time for play using simple ideas, materials and equipment to provide a variety of play opportunities for children and young people in their local area.

Information on how to organise a Playday is available at [www.dublincity.ie/community/childrenservicesunit/Pages/ChildrensServicesUnit.aspx](http://www.dublincity.ie/community/childrenservicesunit/Pages/ChildrensServicesUnit.aspx)



Photo: Jason Clarke.

Children and young people often refer to the impact of stress on their everyday lives. Research has shown that child-driven, accessible creative free play offers physical, imaginative, creative, social, solitary and intellectual stimulation that may protect children and young people from the effects of pressure and stress (12). Plenty of space and action for young people with their peers can build resilience and well-being and therefore increase their chances of being able to deal with today's stresses.

*We don't do anything in particular, we just want to find a nice place to sit around and chat and have fun.*  
*Aaron aged 16*

However, young people are often discouraged from using public spaces to 'hang out' and regularly assert that interventions from security companies and An Garda Síochána lessen their opportunities to socialise in informal settings with their friends.

Irish data suggests that 1 in 4 Irish children are overweight (13). With concern about overweight and obesity levels rising, the Department of Health & Children and the Health Service Executive published National Guidelines on Physical Activity for Ireland. The guidelines suggest that children and young people should be active at a moderate to vigorous level for at least 60 minutes every

day (14). Recent research (15) shows that 4 out of 5 Irish children do not meet these guidelines. Being physically active through sport and games is hugely beneficial for children and young people. Studies have highlighted the importance of active play in contributing to children's activity levels; increasing physical activity play in Irish children is now seen as one of the solutions to childhood obesity in both its prevention and treatment (16).

Health services themselves recognise the importance of access to play for the many children and young people who spend time and in some cases, extended periods of time, in hospital. The three Dublin children's hospitals engage teams of play specialists to help normalise the lives of children who spend time undergoing hospital treatment. This therapeutic use of play and recreation relieves what can be a stressful experience for many children and young people (17). There appear to be differing levels of recognition of the value of play for children while in hospital among the various hospitals in the city. There should be adequate provision of therapeutic and recreational play for child patients of all ages in any future Children's Hospital in the city.



Photo: Ballymun Regeneration Ltd.

With busy parental schedules taking their toll on time available to 'play', academic expectations of children rising and after-school play time being replaced with structured activities and extracurricular activities, children often have less free time to explore the world on their own and just 'be themselves' (18,19). All children and young people naturally desire to play and need a wide range of good quality play environments (indoor and outdoor) to

stimulate the myriad of physical, social, intellectual and creative development that takes place while they play.

*My favourite place to play is the street. I like the cracks in the ground because you're able to play sticks by dodging them, I also like the walls there because when we're having a water fight you can duck behind and shoot over them.  
Eoin aged 10*

Photo: Anthony Woods.



Photo: Ballymun Regeneration Ltd.



Key Actions:

KA 1	Seek a review of the National Play Policy.
KA 2	Advocate for the establishment of an information and resource centre.
KA 3	Promote research that contributes to the understanding of play and ways to support children's play.
KA 4	Work to promote the value of play, recreation and access to quality play environments for children and young people.
KA 5	Support the development of quality training and awareness programmes on play.
KA 6	Support the development of a city-wide play safety statement.
KA 7	Promote play as the provider and protector of physical and mental health and wellbeing.
KA 8	Support primary health care workers and HSE health promotion officers to promote the health benefits of play to clients in primary care.
KA 9	Encourage hospitals to provide opportunities for play for children and young people.
KA 10	Engage the media in profiling and promoting children's right to play.

## 2 Work together to ensure that Dublin is a child-friendly, playful city



Photo: Anthony Woods.

Children and young people play all the time and everywhere. They play in their gardens, on the streets, in school yards, in open spaces, in parks and near rivers or forests (20).

All of these places inspire them particularly if they have features like street furniture, bushes, hills, water, loose materials, toys, indoor or outdoor plants that stimulate the imagination and creativity.

Many of the fields, small rivers or waterways where Dublin children played in the past are no longer accessible for play. Places retaining their wild charm and attractiveness to children and young people must be protected, so that they continue to have access to nature and the wilderness (21). We must take their needs seriously, listen to what they say and attempt to facilitate them.

A child-friendly playful city will encourage and stimulate children and young people to play, move around safely and comfortably, to have their opinions heard, to feel respected and consider themselves meaningful citizens.

Súgradh, the national charity for promoting the child's right to play in Ireland, advocates that children should be able to play 'wherever and whenever' they need and not just in designated play spaces or playgrounds (22). For a child, the outdoor play area is a place for big movement, big expression and big ideas. It forms such an important part of a child's life that it warrants

the same degree of thought and design process as the indoor play areas. A well-thought out play space will ensure that children's and young

*A child-friendly city is where children can feel safe and have places to hang out.*

*Shauna aged 16*

*A child-friendly city is where everyone is equal and young people have a say in their community.*

*Sinéad aged 16*

A child-friendly city is a city with a lot of facilities for young people, where children and their parents can spend quality time in a safe environment. Children have to be able to engage with the city.  
Sheelan aged 18

people's physical and social needs are supported and that they have an opportunity to experience fresh air and explore different forms of play. Both indoor and outdoor play spaces should provide

opportunities to help them to learn about risk and to measure their own capabilities within safe limits (23).

The need for a wide range of different environments for play is a reflection of the multi-dimensional nature of play (24). A city wide coordinated approach will evaluate and document various types of play provision currently available in the city and address them, using a more planned approach. Balanced planning and a better use of



Photo: Greg Dunne

resources will also allow a broader variety of spaces to be defined and enhanced; ranging from natural play spaces to small pieces of land or open spaces where children and young people congregate to equipment – based larger play spaces.

## Re-imagining Public Spaces



In August 2009 Dublin City Council's Architects Division initiated a project called 'Re-imagining Public Space'. Artists Culturstruccion in association with Dublin City Community Section, organised a week-long summer workshop with fifteen 5-10 year olds in the inner city. The idea was to challenge the conventional relationship of who designs our city and the children were asked how they would design

a public space. The group was introduced to the idea of measurement and scale, brainstorming, democratic decision making and talked about strategies for playing in urban areas. The children described a new public place through spoken words alone. This spoken brief was then recorded and passed to the crafts-people at the Dublin City Council Joinery Workshop. The resulting design was temporarily installed on Sitric Road, Stoneybatter and was the centre-piece of a lively street festival. The concept of the design challenged modern day availability of urban streets for play, through promoting the protection of outdoor space by involving the local community in children's play.

CULTURSTRUCCION is a collaborative practice of Jo Anne Butler and Tara Kennedy.

[www.culturstruccion.com/about/about.htm](http://www.culturstruccion.com/about/about.htm)  
[www.dublincityarchitects.ie](http://www.dublincityarchitects.ie)

Up town should be more playful.  
Ben aged 9

Local authorities provide a wide variety of services that address local needs and priorities and at the same time reflect national policy. National indicators are intended to make local government more transparent and accountable on an annual basis in relation to the services it provides as well as contributing towards the establishment of best practice (25). Subsequently play facilities are included in the national service indicators measure. The indicator measures the number of children's playgrounds per 1,000 population directly provided by the local authority and also the number of children's playgrounds per 1,000 population facilitated by the local authority. Although this information is practical and pertinent to the wider community, it is solely a quantitative indicator regarding the use and provision of play facilities. The development of more meaningful and qualitative information to encompass an extensive variety of play opportunities,

places and spaces, more in keeping with the concept of a child-friendly, playful city would be worthwhile. Developing a quality indicator that evokes debate about what quality means and how to assess and achieve it in the context of public provision for children's play, would assist in the evolution of improved and increased play environments. This would afford children and young people a wider choice and experience of play opportunities (26).



Photo: Ballymun Regeneration Ltd.

#### Key Actions:

KA 1	Establish a city-wide Play committee as a sub-committee of the City Development Board to implement the Dublin City Play Plan.
KA 2	Involve children, young people, their parents/guardians, carers and those working with children and young people in participative consultation about the play opportunities and play services in the city.
KA 3	Develop a city-wide coordinated approach to the development of good quality play opportunities in the city.
KA 4	Each agency will agree to a Play Declaration identifying its commitment to facilitating or providing quality play environments for children and young people.
KA 5	Listen to children and their perspectives on play.
KA 6	Engage families and communities in facilitating and celebrating children's play.
KA 7	Encourage and support the development of more appropriate service indicators in relation to quality play environments.



# 3 Create an effective city play infrastructure and improve the design of our play spaces



Photo: Ballymun Regeneration Ltd.

Young people have informed the Government through the consultation for *teenspace*, National Recreation Policy for Young People, (5), aimed at young people between the ages of 12 and 18, that they want improvements in ‘recreation’ and ‘youth facilities’. Providing a public play space is a way of acknowledging the play needs of children and young

people living in the community and at the same time dealing with barriers that installing a conventional playground can create. Including a shared public space where they can be seen and heard

assists in developing good community spirit and a sense of belonging amongst local children and young people within their neighbourhoods and communities. It also provides the opportunity to develop a public space designed more specifically to address local issues and concerns. Parents often

express their concerns about their children’s access to play. We need to support and work with them and the wider community to develop an awareness of play so that local spaces can be fully utilised, making the play experience more interesting, engaging and fun-filled for children and young people.

A well-designed play space must offer children and young people of all abilities a rich play environment where they can have a wide variety of play experiences and interact with and learn about the natural environment where possible. Successful play spaces offer movement and physical activity with space and features that allow a range of energetic and strength-building play experiences. Children and young people can engage in positive social interaction in a play space playing alone or with others, negotiating, co-operating, competing or resolving conflicts. Opportunities for risky play in a play

Not so much the parents but I think the teens should help design the place they’ll hang out in!  
Sophie aged 13

space allows them to test the limits of their capabilities including rough and tumble, sports and other games (27).

Natural elements introduced into a green space will multiply the possibilities for imaginative play (28). Plants can introduce change, smell, colour, touch, wildlife and many other items of mystery while different smells made by plants and leaves can significantly enhance the play experience. Features like hills, rocks, tracks and bushes can make the environment more interesting. Sand and water can be manipulated and help children to absorb basic knowledge about density, weight, flow, and volume. A chance to experiment and manipulate natural and fabricated materials, use tools and have access to bits and pieces of all kinds and shapes creates variety and diversity for children and young people's play.

Creating an artistic multi-sensory stimulating environment in play spaces can also

encompass a variety of creative opportunities. They offer sensory stimulation by providing access to elements like music and sound. Stimulating installations and space designs can develop the creative 'roots' and 'wings' for children, inspiring free play. Functional and creatively engaging play spaces can offer 'magical' qualities that can enhance and harness the imagination of children. These spaces, whether indoor or outdoor, should be visually, aurally, orally and creatively developed by, for and with children, artists, planners, designers, architects and landscape architects (29).

You should put a giant maze for teens to play chasing in.  
Lisa aged 15

Photo: Ballymun Regeneration Ltd.



## Developing a Natural Play Space

Residents living near Mount Bernard park in Phibsborough contacted Dublin City Council's Play Development Officer with a view to improving play opportunities in the park. A local committee was established to advance the project with a limited budget.

A consultation session was held with local children and young people where they explored how to make the park more play-friendly. Using drawings and model making as part of the consultation process, the children and young people included hills, tunnels, rope swings, sand and mazes in their responses, all of which are features of a natural play area. Working together, local residents with the help of Dublin City Council's Parks Section have begun to turn the children and young people's ideas into

reality. They have created a willow tunnel, installed tree trunks for play and secured ropes to the trees as swings. This innovative play project is ongoing,

Information on supporting communities to develop a natural playspace is available at [www.dublincity.ie/community/childrens-servicesunit/Pages/ChildrensServicesUnit.aspx](http://www.dublincity.ie/community/childrens-servicesunit/Pages/ChildrensServicesUnit.aspx)



Photo: Ballymun Regeneration Ltd.



My favourite place to hang out is a place where you can sit down and hide from the rain, wind and cold.  
Laura aged 16

Dublin has around 1,500 hectares of parks, open spaces and parkland in addition to over 100 playgrounds managed mainly by Dublin City Council with a smaller number managed by other providers. These playgrounds vary in size and

type of location from large playgrounds with many pieces of play equipment in park settings, to smaller playgrounds with fewer pieces of equipment set closer to home. Significant investment has been made in playground development in the various urban regeneration projects around the city; where children and young people have been consulted in the design process and where new and challenging pieces of play equipment have been installed.

Play for many children and young people can also mean football, hurling and other games. These activities are considered play when they are informal and led by young people themselves, however, once formal teams and structured competition are involved, games

become sport. Multi-use games areas known as MUGAs, usually placed near playgrounds, cater mostly for informal games or for young people's 'hanging-out' space and therefore should be considered play spaces.

Bearing in mind population figures and changing living habits in the city, any play facilities that are installed should be suitable for the site, the numbers and age profiles of children and young people for whom they are provided (30, 31). A multi-agency shared data

Photo: Ballymun Regeneration Ltd.



base of locally identified playable spaces will assist play-planning in the longer term.

Developing such a model of coordinated play provision will ensure that accessible play opportunities are freely available to all children and young people.



I wish for more things for age 10, 11, 12 like there's lots of places for little kids but slides an' all are fun at first, but then you get bored. I'd like places with water fountains where you could play with sand an' all.  
Sinéad aged 10

Key Actions:

KA 1	Work with agencies to identify additional support that can be given to protect existing play spaces and develop new play spaces in all local areas.
KA 2	Develop a multi-agency database of playable places and spaces city-wide and work to protect them by designating them as play spaces.
KA 3	Promote engagement with parents/guardians, carers, children and young people and other local groups about the purpose of 'play' spaces.
KA 4	Encourage partnerships that allow a merging of creative processes with children, young people, artists, planners, designers, architects and landscape architects.
KA 5	Ensure that play areas are well located, accessible to all and responsive to local needs.
KA 6	Promote the use of best practice guidelines in the design of outdoor play spaces.
KA 7	Work with children and young people to support, defend and lobby for their right to play and to be able to play within reach of their own homes.



Photo: Colm Mahady, Fennell Photography.

# 4 Work in partnership to facilitate play in the early-childcare and education sectors



*When we are let go outside and play, I play duck duck goose.  
Aoibhe aged 3.5*

The importance of early childhood in the life cycle is supported by extensive research and particularly by the evidence emerging from the field of neuroscience. The brain develops at its fastest rate in the first 5 years and is making connections that play an important role in every child's capacity for well-being and for on-going learning and development. Parents play the most important role in their children's lives at this stage but increasingly early childhood services are also part of the experience.

The Organisation of Economic Co-operation Development (OECD) statistics (32) for Ireland in 2008 record that 30% of children under 2 years spend part of their day in childcare services

and we know that with the introduction of the free preschool year over 90% of 3-5 year olds are in early childhood settings. For many children it is their first experience away from their primary carers and their first real opportunity to spend time with peers. Smaller families and reduced opportunities for neighbourhood play often mean that for some children the childcare setting is where they first experience play with other children.

Irish early childhood education policies centralise the importance of play for children and Aistear, the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment in the Early

Childhood Curriculum Framework, establishes play as the most important context for children's learning (33). It tells us that children develop their sense of well-being, identity and belonging as they

*I play with my friend.  
We play Mas and Das.  
Laura aged 4.5*

Just pick up  
anything and then  
you can play with it.  
Clara aged 4

communicate, explore  
and think together in play.  
Play is their mechanism for  
coming to understand the  
world around them, for  
learning the skills,  
knowledge, attitudes and  
practices that allow them to be competent  
contributors in their communities. Add to this  
the pleasure children derive from play and the  
sense of freedom, adventure and  
togetherness that children experience in play,  
and we have a very good case for ensuring  
every child's right to play.



## Playing Outside



Poppintree Early Education Centre (PEEC) is a purpose built crèche which opened in January 2011. Although the outdoor space provides the spatial freedom for free play there was an obvious absence of natural landscaping which presented limitations in the level and type of play opportunities that the children could experience.

In order to develop this space PEEC explored other options that could be easily achieved through collaborating with local groups and organisations i.e. Poppintree Youth Project, Poppintree Community and Sports Centre and Global Action Plan (GAP). An alternative space at the front of the building was identified where a natural outdoor space was developed.

As a direct result, the children now participate in environmental play activities on a daily basis: feeding the birds, watering the flowers and plants and seasonal planting alongside free play activities such as exploring the garden, digging and playing in a natural space where they can enjoy the smells, sounds and wildlife of the natural environment all around them.

This delightful space was developed at quite a low cost as it was incorporated into the budgets and programme plans of the participating groups and organisations. The children and young people involved have gained from working for the benefit of their local community as well as experiencing more of a sense of ownership of their own place. Providing a space that allows children to play in natural surroundings helps to develop an instinctive respect and understanding for the natural environment; it also ensures varied play experiences that are ever-changing on a daily basis.

Wild About Play Education Centre, networking project based in South West England. [www.bgci.org/education/2268/](http://www.bgci.org/education/2268/)

I like to play with slinky, cars and trains. Slinky is from Toy Story.  
 Luke aged 3.5

Aistear noted that studies conducted in European countries found that children prioritised play when consulted about what they like to do in childcare settings. In an Irish context

a study conducted on behalf of Start Strong in 2010 with more than 600 children aged 3 to 5 in 39 early childcare and education services found that play and access to outdoor space were very important to them (34).

The Síolta guidelines, the National Quality Framework for Early Childhood Education designed to guide early years practitioners and childminders in the provision of quality services for young children, emphasises that play is critical to their physical and emotional well-being and an integral element of their development (35).



Photo: The Ark.

Early childhood practitioners are skilled play facilitators. They understand that children need time and space to play. They need the freedom to come up with their own ideas and to control the content and direction of play. Adults are there to help, to provide stimulating environments, to ensure that all children have access to play, to support skill development and to ensure that the dynamics allow for thinking, imagination and creativity (36).

Key Actions:

KA 1	Work with key agencies that have an expertise in early childhood play and education.
KA 2	Promote an awareness of the importance of play in early childhood among parents/guardians and educators.
KA 3	Promote the implementation of the Síolta and Aistear frameworks which centralise play in the early childhood curriculum.
KA 4	Promote a balance between structured play and free play and open access to play in early-childcare and education sectors.
KA 5	Promote and support a debate about the value of free play in early and school aged childcare settings.
KA 6	Work with childcare providers to identify additional supports needed for the provision of quality play.
KA 7	Promote the use of Government guidelines and the exploration of creative and natural play ideas in childcare outdoor spaces (37).
KA 8	Develop a plan for the implementation of information and training in partnership with relevant agencies for pre-school inspectors.
KA 9	Support linkages with pre-school inspectors in their assessment of play and play spaces for children.
KA 10	Encourage greater continuity between the play-based approach in pre-schools and primary schools.

# 5 Support schools to facilitate the right of children and young people to play



Photo: Ballymun Regeneration Ltd.

Where play and creating opportunities for time to play is concerned, the school environment offers exciting possibilities as school is the place where children and young people spend the second greatest amount of their day. Research shows a clear link between children enjoying their time at school and definable educational outcomes.

Where children enjoy school, their attendance levels are higher, their attainment

is greater and behavioural problems are fewer (38, 39). Schools who take a 'whole child' approach demonstrate their acknowledgement and understanding of the concept of play and their commitment to supporting the child's right to play, through the development of quality play opportunities in schools.

The development of positive play experiences in schools will have equally affirmative effects on

the use of public play facilities and the way in which children play in their own neighbourhoods after school hours. Putting constructive interventions in place and enabling children and young people to enjoy traditional play opportunities during the school day, creates an environment of mutual respect and deters them from engaging in anti-social behaviour once they leave the school grounds.

The importance of directed forms of play in a teaching context has been acknowledged for many years. An increased emphasis on the value of play in teacher-training would lead to a greater knowledge and understanding of play and the benefits of 'free' play provision and how to make it accessible to children and young people in schools. Other staff such as

Special Needs Assistants and parents also need to be supported to acquire skills and information that address play and the provision of play opportunities.

*I wish that we'd have more room to play, like more colour in the yard, would like things drawn on the ground like in the girls' yard. We're allowed to run but it's an issue so we're afraid we won't be.*

*Eoin aged 10*

*I don't get enough playtime in school as I have to do work all day.*

*Scott aged 6*



## Play Through Design

Presentation Primary School Warrenmount is an inner-city school located in the Liberties which caters for 310 boys and girls. Pupils, teachers and parents identified a need to improve the playtime experience as children did not have activities or equipment to play with at break times. This led to boredom, disagreements and less enjoyable play, particularly for the infants – many of whom have little English when they start school.

Following a process that involved consultation with the City Council's Play Development team and Parks Section, training from Playboard NI and ongoing discussions with children and parents, a committee was formed to develop a design action plan. The design incorporated ideas from the consultation process such as providing facilities for shelter, seating, plants, friendship benches, activities and home corners for the infants. Other design-focused improvements included access to areas that had been traditionally off-limits to the children: new seating placed strategically around the yard to provide colour and environmentally friendly

play areas and 'play boxes' for each class that contained a wide variety of play equipment and materials for play. The school also implemented the 'buddy' system which involved the installation of a 'buddy' bench, information board and games programme. Fifth and sixth class pupils volunteer for the position to 'buddy' the junior and senior infant and first classes.

Since Warrenmount School made these improvements the children engage in increased and improved play activities on a daily basis. Feedback on the new and improved playtime schedule has been positive: children who in the past tended to spend a lot of time alone now have something to play with and buddies to look out for them, bickering and fighting have been reduced, there are fewer incidents recorded in the yard book and the new junior infants settled into a large playground very well.

Presentation Primary School Warrenmount website at [www.warrenmountprimary.com/index.html](http://www.warrenmountprimary.com/index.html)



Schools have the potential to play a very significant role in developing play provision and should be encouraged to make their yards or play areas more playful and child friendly (40). The addition of simple items encouraging free play like loose materials, interesting landscaping, planting for the senses, division of spaces and seating areas would significantly enhance the play experience. In densely-built urban areas

where open space is at a premium, the local school grounds could provide a valuable open space for children and young people. Allowing children the freedom to be physically, mentally and socially active whilst ensuring safety is undoubtedly a challenge for schools and their managements. There is a need for schools to be supported by the wider community and other agencies to help address their concerns.

The journey to and from school can also be used for informal play and socialisation. However motorised transport limits today's children's opportunities to be physically active on the school journey (41). Children and young people report that they enjoy meeting and chatting to friends en route to school. It is an ideal time to be physically active, get some fresh air, sense nature and gain independence.

Schools should give students a place in the yard to keep as their own and ask what the students want to happen in the school.  
Karen aged 16



#### Key Actions:

KA 1	Support schools by producing a design guide with suggestions about creating quality play space and including realistic advice on risks and benefits.
KA 2	Improve the co-ordination between the Health Promoting Schools, the Active School Flag, the Green Schools Active Transport Programme and the Primary Schools physical education curriculum as well as clarifying their roles within an Active Schools Network.
KA 3	Promote the importance of break-time for children in terms of play and socialising in addition to maintaining the 'fun and enjoyment' elements of the school day.
KA 4	Promote the greater use of school grounds after school and support schools in overcoming obstacles to this.
KA 5	Encourage schools to look at developing mobility plans to encourage children's movement, mobility and independence.
KA 6	Work in partnership to influence the content of the teacher training curriculum in relation to play.

## A Final Word: Comhairle na nÓg

Upon reading the draft of the City Play Plan we, the members of Comhairle found it enjoyable and interesting to see such a refreshing view on Dublin's playful side of life for children and young people.

We particularly welcomed the idea of encompassing the entire 0-18 age bracket within the plan, as many Comhairle members fit in the older half of this age group and feel sometimes when play is being discussed, that the focus is mainly held on young children rather than teenagers, who ought to be included too. The activities of teenagers such as simply hanging out and chatting in the local park often aren't viewed as play, but they are!



While reading through the plan our team made many comments: one of them being on how essential we feel play is in the lives of children, and how unfortunately sometimes, the importance and necessity of play for children and young people isn't fully recognised. Play introduces and encourages many positive skills to children from a young age, such as teamwork, creativity and facing challenges. As well as all of this, play also allows children to experience beneficial and



appropriate levels of risk. Comhairle members went on to discuss rules surrounding play in the lives of children and young people and how much of an unwanted hindrance it can be. Free play was regarded as much better than organised, controlled playing. The strictness concerning some things like parks with signs saying 'No Ball Games' and the simple fact that young people aren't allowed sit around and play guitar in St. Stephen's Green is unnecessary and unwanted. Play is a person's right, it isn't merely a suggestion or an idea!

When discussing the themes within the plan, we agreed with the general principles and ideas in all of them. Concerning the right to play in schools, especially secondary schools we feel curriculum based P.E. can often be harsh on teenagers. More choice on how individuals wish to play is needed, young people should be allowed express themselves through how they want to play just as much as any other way. Comhairle members agreed schools need to be less controlling and more accepting of their students' right to play.

The main points we made during our discussion agreed fully with the overall idea of the play plan, to encourage play and to ensure that play is available to all children of the City of Dublin. We recognised how play is essential to the life of every child and how important it is that freedom of expression through play is allowed for everyone. As the Irish playwright George Bernard Shaw once said, *"We don't stop playing because we grow old; we grow old because we stop playing"* (42).

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Photo: The Base Youth Project.



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