



# Play Nurture Plus Handbook





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## Foreword from Helen Ford

Programme Director – Children and Young People’s Mental Health and Maternity,  
NHS Gloucestershire.

**The mental health and wellbeing of children and young people is a key priority in Gloucestershire. We want to make sure our future generations grow up with resilience and are supported with their everyday mental health and emotional wellbeing.**

NHS Gloucestershire, in conjunction with a range of partners, has developed a plan to provide a range of support for children and young people so that they are better able to manage the ups and downs of life, recognising when they may need an extra helping hand.

Providing children with opportunities to explore through outdoor play will help them to benefit on a social, physical and emotional level, supporting them to thrive and grow up with more confidence.

We are therefore delighted to be working with Play Gloucestershire in this element of our strategy to support children and young people’s mental health across Gloucestershire.

## An introduction to Play Nurture Plus

At Play Gloucestershire we believe that outdoor play is an essential part of a healthy and happy childhood.

So many good things happen to children when they are given the time and space for play. And yet today's children are spending less and less time outside, and are suffering from more mental and physical health problems.

Children need to play everywhere and that includes school. We believe that outdoor, child-led play opportunities can improve both enjoyment and progress at school and is an essential part of the school day.

We offer outdoor **Play Nurture** for small groups or individual children who need extra support. Including those whose physical health, emotional health and childhood wellbeing are impacted by anxiety and stress, either as a result of the social and emotional challenges of everyday childhood, or because they are facing complex psychological and physical difficulties that make them particularly vulnerable. It involves us working closely with the school to understand each child's circumstances and meeting their needs, using the **power of play**.

**Play Nurture Plus** is a joint project between **Play Gloucestershire**, **Gloucestershire Healthy Lifestyles and Living**, **Gloucestershire's Clinical Commissioning Group** and **Active Gloucestershire**.

It aims to embed the principles of Play Gloucestershire's award-winning Play Nurture programme in schools.



Sources:  
[www.ukactive.com/wp-content/uploads/2018/09/generation\\_inactive\\_2\\_nothing\\_about\\_us\\_without\\_us.pdf](http://www.ukactive.com/wp-content/uploads/2018/09/generation_inactive_2_nothing_about_us_without_us.pdf) | [digitalnhs.uk/data-and-information/publications/statistical/statistics-on-obesity-physical-activity-and-diet](http://digitalnhs.uk/data-and-information/publications/statistical/statistics-on-obesity-physical-activity-and-diet) | [www.england.nhs.uk/wp-content/uploads/2016/02/mental-health-taskforce-fyfv-final.pdf](http://www.england.nhs.uk/wp-content/uploads/2016/02/mental-health-taskforce-fyfv-final.pdf)

### Did you know?

The **outdoor space** around the home where children go unsupervised has shrunk **by 90%** since the 1970's.



Children now spend just **4 hours** a week outside.

Children ages 5-15 spend nearly **2 hours a day online** per week and **3 hours a day** at the weekend.

Only **23% of boys** and **20% of girls** currently meet the recommendation of **60 minutes** of moderate to vigorous physical activity each day.

**10%** of children and young people aged 5-16 have a clinically diagnosed mental health problem.

If you were to ask yourself **WHAT IS PLAY?** And then you were to ask the next person you saw, the chances are you would both have a different definition. This is because play is complex, and play is an individual thing for all of us.

**Something that almost everyone can agree on though is that play, in its purest most flowing form, is freedom. Play is something you WANT to do, rather than something you feel obliged to do.**

Developed in 2005, **The Playwork Principles**<sup>1</sup> were designed to establish an ethical and professional framework for playwork. Playwork is a profession that began in Britain after World War II, as bombed building sites or streets became areas where children and young people would gather to play amongst the rubble. Adults were introduced to help with supervision rather than shutting the children out (and spoiling all the fun).

### **The Playwork Principles define play as:**

**Play is a process that is freely chosen, personally directed and intrinsically motivated. That is, children and young people determine and control the content and intent of their play, by following their own instincts, ideas and interests, in their own way for their own reasons.**

1. [www.playwales.org.uk/eng/playworkprinciples](http://www.playwales.org.uk/eng/playworkprinciples)





**This handbook is designed as a guide to help schools/organisations create and develop their own **Play Nurture programme**, as well as identifying what makes a good **Play Champion** – the person that can lead your **Play Nurture sessions**.**

We have shared some hints and tips from our qualified and experienced playwork practitioners – our Play Rangers – but also from Play Champions who have used the training to benefit the pupils, school and their own practice.

“Being part of the Play Nurture Plus project has shown me how play can help build a relationship and improve communication between grown up and child. It has also influenced me outside of work as I now talk to everybody about the importance of play whether a child or adult.”

**Play Champion Feedback**

**The 5 key principles of Play Nurture are that they promote:**

# 1. The time and space for child-led play

“Time flies when you’re having fun”

When engaged in an activity you love, time can slip away and interestingly, your focus on what you are doing also becomes effortless. In a world of 24-hour news, smart phones and social media, this can be a rare occurrence. You are in the zone, focussed, immersed, or to put it another way you have reached your state of flow.

In play, activities that lead to a state of flow are often child-led, meaning children take charge by exploring topics that they choose and are personally meaningful to them. When children are intrinsically motivated, they engage in an activity because they enjoy it – it is all about the process rather than the product.

**Promoting and facilitating child-led play is about creating an environment rich with play materials that promote imagination.**

**As well as the awareness that play often takes children to the edge of their abilities, physical attributes are tested, and emotional resilience is stretched. Awareness of this means you can say “yes” more often. Giving children the chance to make meaningful decisions and be in control. Helping to build their self-esteem and sense of autonomy.**

It’s important to note that child-led does not mean adults disengage. Adults can play an important role in child-directed play, similar to those very first Playworkers in post war Britain. Observing play, asking questions, ensuring safety of all involved whilst letting things play out is a fine balance to master but once the risk: benefit ratio in your head is satisfied, amazing things can and will happen.



Nurture sessions have had a positive impact on N. He initiates interaction with the Play Rangers (a huge achievement for him) and attends the sessions without support, sometimes without some of the things he carries around to feel safe.”

**Feedback from class teacher**



## 2. The therapeutic benefits from the restorative and healing qualities of outdoor play

10% of children and young people aged 5-16 have a clinically diagnosed mental health problem<sup>2</sup>. Not participating in clubs or organisations are associated with the presence of mental disorder.

Nature is in a constant state of flux. Water freezes in winter, leaves change colour and fall from trees in Autumn, blossom blows on the wind in Spring and ice cream melts in the summer sun – connection with nature in a playful way can boost understanding of cause and effect in a young mind.

In his 1971 article 'How NOT to cheat children, the theory of loose parts'<sup>3</sup>, Simon Nicholson uses the beach as an example of a perfect play environment due to its degree of disorder, availability of mobile components or loose parts, a large variation of living and non-living objects and lots of natural light.

A quality playground/outdoor play experience is where children are afforded the chances to become an artist, scientist, filmmaker, mechanic, planner and architect utilising nature and loose parts as components of their play.

Children get the chance to show their creativity when left to their own devices. They can express themselves and their ideas in the way that they play freely and with things that excite them.

### From boredom comes creativity.

**By being given this space, children learn that their own ideas are important, validating their choices. Since child-led play can include activities like role play, they can also explore specific ideas and emotions that are relevant to them at the time. It's great for letting them work through emotions in a safe space in their own way.**

*"I feel more confident and more gooder [after 8 weeks of Play Nurture sessions]. I used to stamp off and go, but now I don't hurt anyone and sometimes I let my tears down."*

**Play Nurture Attendee**

2. [www.ukactive.com/wpcontent/uploads/2018/09/generation\\_inactive2\\_nothing\\_about\\_us\\_without\\_us.pdf](http://www.ukactive.com/wpcontent/uploads/2018/09/generation_inactive2_nothing_about_us_without_us.pdf)

3. [media.kaboom.org/docs/documents/pdf/ip/Imagination-Playground-Theory-of-Loose-Parts-Simon-Nicholson.pdf](http://media.kaboom.org/docs/documents/pdf/ip/Imagination-Playground-Theory-of-Loose-Parts-Simon-Nicholson.pdf)

### 3. Trusted adults as playful role models

Think back to when you were ten years old.

You are at school either in class or in the playground.

As you picture this scene in your mind, think of the adults that would have been there, what do you remember of them?

Are there staff you liked? Any staff you disliked perhaps?

Why?



There is a power balance shift when adults enter a child's world. In a school setting for example, power is generally held by the adults.

"I've learned that people will forget what you said, people will forget what you did, but people will never forget how you made them feel."

This quote from American poet, memoirist and civil rights activist Maya Angelou, sums up beautifully what we are trying to achieve by using Play Nurture as a tool to help young people build relationships of mutual respect and trust with their peers and with the significant adults in their lives.

Building this trust by promoting child-led play, we offer children a level of independence that simply cannot be provided by adult-led play. They can learn to make their own choices, and explore what they can do with this freedom. Not only do they learn that their opinion matters, but they practise making choices with sensible boundaries in place.

"[Play Nurture Plus] has had a huge significant impact on P. She is often wary around unfamiliar adults and finds transitioning to new activities a challenge. After the initial process of transitioning, we are now seeing the positive impacts it is having. Sharing a space with different children and adults is already an achievement and a positive step... It is something that she looks forward to every week and is currently one of the highlights of her term."

Feedback from class teacher

“Playing outdoors has positive physical and emotional outcomes for teachers as well as pupils. We have observed that free play helps teachers see their pupils in a different light and strengthens bonds between them. Teachers acquire a ‘playworker’s frame of mind’. They learn to step back and intervene only when necessary, how to observe and act according to the pupils’ behaviours and motivations and how to create challenging and engaging play spaces.”

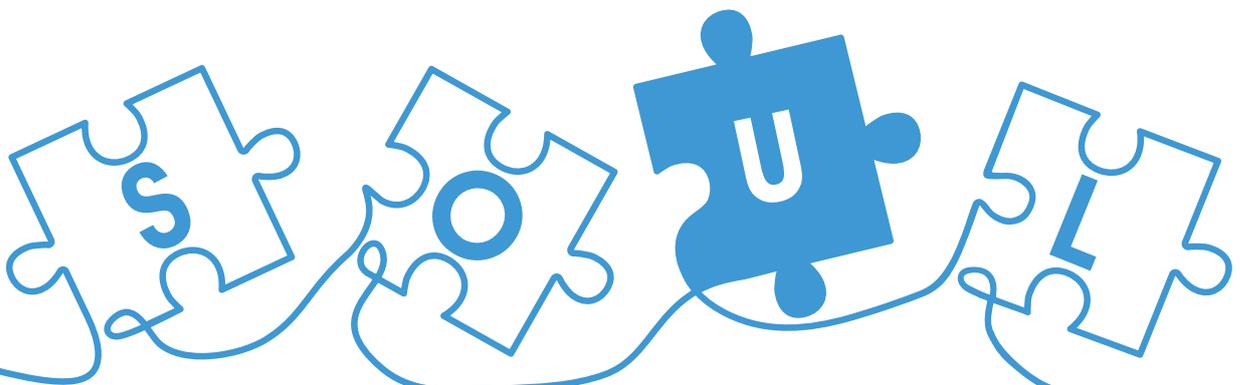
**Mar Sanchez, training manager Smart Play Network**

## 4. Active listening and engagement with children on their terms

We all like to think we are being listened to, whether it is talking to a friend, a partner or an employer. We want to feel our thoughts and feelings are being heard and considered.

**When a child is at play it is very similar, they want to be heard and noticed. They use play as a way of communicating with us, in addition to, or instead of using language.**

To help us translate this play we employ the tactic of **SOUL**, we **S**ilently, **O**bserve, **U**nderstand and **L**isten.



When observing a child at play we can start to notice what they are telling us with their actions and their game plot lines – their functional behaviour. By observing and listening we can pick up the thread of the game, notice that what appears to be two people fighting and shouting, is them recreating a scene from a film they’ve seen. When observing a child playing with toys, we may notice that the child is playing out a significant or even traumatic event they have witnessed or been through.

Observation is work. It is far from slacking off and it is sometimes harder not to impose yourself on a game and intervene or ask questions, especially if something comes up that requires further consideration in terms of childhood wellbeing.

Respecting quiet moments can be a powerful tool for a deep conversation. It gives all involved the chance to reflect and continue with this process. So often we rush to “fill” silence, right before someone has a breakthrough thought to share.

Using non-verbal feedback (nods, smiles, eyebrow raises etc), by mirroring their body position (getting on the ground and making “VROOM!” noises with cars if that’s what they have asked you to do), by repeating back or summarising their words or their play “I see you’ve drawn a line there” or “I can see that lion looks angry at its cub...” we begin to let them know we are attentive to their play and are available to join in, if invited.

“My favourite memory [from the Play Nurture sessions] is learning emotions”

Play Nurture Attendee



# 5. An environment of mutual respect and acceptance

**Our actions can impact on long term play opportunities and relationships.**

The expectations we place upon children, to behave in a certain way, or play in a certain way because of age, gender or ability are at odds with child-led play. Expectations can often restrict a child in terms of thinking outside of the box. When child-led play is promoted, not only can amazing things happen, but strong long-lasting relationships can be forged.

The relationship needs to be based on expectancy not expectation.

“Expectation focuses on behaviour, expecting the child to be a certain way, to exhibit certain behaviours that have previously been identified... Expectancy has a dynamic quality of anticipation of being together. Expectancy is alive, dynamic, an unknown potential”

**Garry L Landreth (Play Therapy – The Art of the Relationship)**

By using playful interventions rather than authoritarian ones, we can start to build an environment of mutual respect as we show different ways of dealing with things, while respecting their right to play. There may of course be some reasons why we step in – most often for their safety or the safety of others. Those moments can be discussed and a rationale given to explain certain actions.

“I have learned how important play is not just for the children, but for the staff too. It is a chance for you to interact with the children in a different way.”

**Play Champion Feedback**



## Levels of Playful Intervention (Sturrock & Else 1998)<sup>4</sup>

**Play Maintenance** – this is where children are playing, and the adult is there with little or no direct involvement in the play apart from observing what is happening (SOUL)

**Simple Involvement** – this is where we, as adults, become a resource for play. A child may ask us to tie some fabric to make a cape or ask for something that is out of reach. Discussion about safety in terms of things around necks can be had here. Instead of saying no at this point, it is more the case of 'what if?'

**Medial Involvement** – this is when we are invited in to become involved. We may end up getting dressed up by them and becoming king or queen or their baby to care for. On occasion we may need to invite ourselves into a game or pause the narrative and ask "is this fun play fighting or is it serious?" and make suggestions that allow play to flow, with minor adaptations for safety and or enjoyment "what if you did karate moves in slow motion like in the movies?"

**Complex Involvement** – this is when we are involved in the game and without us the play would break down. We now have to balance the needs of others in the group. We may have to adulterate play to have a leave of absence from the game we are participating in to change the way another game is played for safety purposes.

## Play Champions

A Play Champion will be someone that is passionate about play and who recognises the positives that child-led play can provide.

The role of Play Champion is one that needs support from senior leadership so they can be the driving force behind using play as a resource to help improve the physical and mental well-being of pupils in the school.

We asked the children taking part what makes a good **Play Champion** and they replied with someone that is:



## Some helpful hints and tips...

Using our learned experience of providing Play Nurture Group sessions in schools across Gloucestershire, we suggest that each Play Nurture session is at least 90 minutes, with a break for some social snack time together. The number of those invited will depend on your own capacity, whether you have Play Champions working in tandem or lone working.

Inviting the child, via a letter home, is a key part of the process. It helps to dispel fears of this being an intervention or even a punishment and welcomes them to a group of people selected to have fun outdoors together.

4. [www.oxonplay.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2015/11/Colorado-Paper.pdf](http://www.oxonplay.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2015/11/Colorado-Paper.pdf)

## First Session

Welcome your group by being inviting and playful. Here you can discuss a **NO HURT** rule.

- No hurting yourself or others on purpose
- No damaging the play kit (Scrap on Scrap rule when using kit as weapons)
- No hurting the Play Rangers and/or Play Champions/members of staff

*You can make this rather serious conversation a bit playful by role playing the hurt that may be caused, feign some tears, or act out blood gushing from an injury.*

Make the point that this is their [the children's] time, they are in control and the adults will only step in when invited/if we feel that hurt may occur or if a 'big' school rule is going to be broken – for example running out of school, or using threatening/abusive language/behaviour.

Inform the children they can join in with as much or as little as they like, and they are not under any obligation to attend/stay in the sessions.

**Remember we want them to want to be there, so they have autonomy and have that desire to GET OUT & PLAY!**



## Every Session

**TIME WARNINGS.** Before asking play to stop (end of session, snack time, important announcement) try and introduce a 5-minute warning. This number can be increased and decreased depending on need, but we wouldn't suggest going below 2 minutes. This warning allows the children to finish a game or get it to a point where a pause won't affect the flow of the game/activity on its resumption.

There are number of ways you could offer this Time Warning;

- You could hold up a 5-minute warning sign and let the children notice this message during their play,
- You can inform colleagues within the same space and they can pass the message on to the children they are with or close to,
- You can announce the 5-minute warning,
- You can use music to identify the end of play – The Mission Impossible Theme Tune or The Final Countdown by Europe as examples.

## Social Snack Time

This will work differently with each school and for each child. Try and make this a social element of the session for everyone to gather in one place and spend time together. This is the chance to discuss likes and dislikes in terms of food and chat about healthy options as well as treats.

Give the group a time warning and then invite them over when it is appropriate.

Sitting together around a table or on a tarpaulin leads to sharing, chatting and allows everyone to re-set before playing again after (depending on when you choose to have your snack time). *In one school we have used social snack time to gather everyone together when our playground is being used by the rest of the school for morning break, returning to play when the area is empty again. This is a good use of time and resources, ensuring play can happen for the majority and minority in the shared space.*

**Social snack time provides the opportunity to assign roles and responsibilities at this point and could be a good way of boosting confidence and communication skills of those quieter members or for others providing some much needed focus.**

## Summary

Try and make time at the end to summarise the session. To reflect on what has happened, to praise people for their imagination, art work, help etc. This offers a chance to discuss next week and the type of equipment that would be popular. If you have had an issue in terms of challenging behaviour you can re-visit the No Hurt rule and discuss how next week is a blank slate and you can start again.

Avoid using threats in terms of "you won't be coming back next week if your behaviour continues" – **the sessions are aimed at working with children to help them regulate their emotions and improve their wellbeing, among other outcomes, so weekly sessions actually benefit them.**

We have noticed that some children struggle with endings and these summary sessions may need to be dynamic and happen during a group game/activity.

Whether it is a summary session or an activity make sure you mark the end of the session so the children can process their time and be ready to return to class and their school setting.

## Last Session(s)

Similar to the Time Warnings given during play, discussing the end of the project is a good way to allow the children in your sessions [and you] to process the end of your time together as a group. In the weeks running up to the end of your project, reflective discussions can take place highlighting the end of the project looming, but also concentrating on the positives of the time spent at play. This is also an opportunity to gather some feedback from the pupils to help with any evaluation or report writing, or next steps.

## Equipment

Loose Parts – [www.playscotland.org/wp-content/uploads/1-Loose-Parts-Play.pdf](http://www.playscotland.org/wp-content/uploads/1-Loose-Parts-Play.pdf)

Sports equipment – school sports cupboard

Arts and crafts – school arts cupboard

Specialist kit – stomp rocket, slackline, giant gym balls, kites

## Other play links that may be useful

[www.grcltd.org](http://www.grcltd.org)

[www.childrenscrapstore.co.uk](http://www.childrenscrapstore.co.uk)

[www.outdoorplayandlearning.org.uk](http://www.outdoorplayandlearning.org.uk)

[www.playengland.org.uk](http://www.playengland.org.uk)

[www.playwales.org.uk/eng](http://www.playwales.org.uk/eng)

[www.playscotland.org](http://www.playscotland.org)

[www.playboard.org](http://www.playboard.org)



# Now over to you

Having more play opportunities with trusted, positive, playful role models is something that all children benefit from. We want to help schools and organisations weave play and Play Nurture into everyday.

This handbook was co-produced with educators who provided guidance and support to make it accessible to adults that work with children and young people.

We hope the ideas, the principles and the framework that underpin **Play Nurture** will help you to create a bespoke offer that suits the needs of your pupils/the young people you work with.

“I’ve learned that something as small as playing with bubbles can brighten a child’s day, and now we need to find more ways to incorporate play.”

## Play Champion

If you would like more information, or the opportunity to discuss your play needs then please get in touch.



## Play Gloucestershire

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