Ideas and information for parents and carers of children aged between 4 and 11 years

Opal

For all parents

The Power of Playtime!

Outdoor play, every day, will change your child's life

Step inside to find out:

Why it's important for children to play outside every day
How you can help change school playtimes
3 key ways you can help

Plus a pull out and keep sheet
including **8 top tips** for more outdoor play at home and **3 sure-fire outdoor play starters**

Outdoor Play and Learning (OPAL) CIC

Supporting school improvement through play

www.outdoorplayandlearning.org.uk

Dear parents, carers and guardians

This booklet will give you some easy ideas to help your children be happier, healthier and (even) more physically active than they are now. All this, we promise, with much less effort from you! A big claim for a small book, but we know the Power of Playtime!

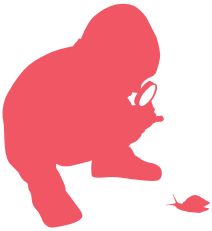
What we think of as 'childhood' may seem very different now to your experiences growing up. But although the world may have changed, children are still exactly the same – they want time to play and be with their friends.

All the research says time playing outdoors is time well spent. Children who play outdoors move more, sleep more, eat better, are happier and care about the planet more. They are even less likely to need glasses! However, with busy lives, busy schools, busy roads and busy neighbourhoods, most children don't get to play out anywhere near as much as you, your parents or grandparents did. This booklet will go through how you and your child's school can help turn that around for not just your children, but all their friends too.

Michael Follett
Director of Outdoor Play and Learning (OPAL) CIC.

Michael Follett

is author of Creating Excellence in Primary School Playtimes and is the UK's leading expert on school playtimes.



What are your
play memories?

Take a moment to think about your own childhood play.
What did you enjoy most?
Were there adults around, or just other children?
What did you learn from those experiences?
How would your play memories compare with your parents', or grandparents'?
What are the differences to your children's everyday play experiences?

Making dens, throwing snowballs, dressing up, building and dismantling things, getting muddy, play fighting, playing cricket in the street and chasing games are not frivolous pastimes; they are a necessary part of childhood, the experiences that help make us who we are.

Having time, space and permission to play is essential for mental health, physical strength and creating the friendships that will support your child for life – as they probably did for you, your mum or dad, aunties or grandparents.

Are children losing

The Power of Playtime

In a global survey, 97% of teachers said playtime is critical for children to reach their full potential, but in the UK children have lost over 45 minutes of playtime at school every week since the 1990s.

In England 1 in 5 children get to a 'green space' like a local park less than once a month, and in 2020, under coronavirus restrictions, 60% of children said they had even less time outdoors than they usually do.

Sources: Dr W Russell et al, 2021 OPAL Literature review; The People and Nature Survey for England: Children's survey, 2020, Natural England.

About the OPAL Primary Programme

The award-winning OPAL Primary Programme helps schools improve children's play experiences.

OPAL has been developed over the last 20 years by Michael Follett, previously a teacher, a playworker and a school advisor.

In short, the programme helps schools plan for and invest in play in the same way they plan for literacy, maths or safeguarding.

As part of the programme, the headteacher introduces:

- **more space to play**
- **more stuff to play with**
- **a risk-benefit approach so children are safe to take the risks they need**
- **training for the staff that look after children's play.**

There are now over 500 OPAL schools worldwide, and all these schools have told us their children are more active, more resilient and more creative.

Children in OPAL schools make deeper friendships, concentrate and behave better in class, and have less time off sick. Finally, most importantly, they are happier. And so are the teachers!

Schools work best as a community – the school staff and school governors in OPAL schools all support the programme, which means they truly transform children's play.

Turn to page 5 to see what you can do

When I play outdoors ...

Pull out and keep sheet

I'm really **active**

I sleep better

I make **friends**

I fly!

I learn to trust myself and feel trusted by you

I fall ... and I get up

I explore

I learn about nature ... and learn to care for the planet

I work out my problems

I try out 'real life'

I get to know how my body moves and where it ends

I am LOUD

I am quiet

I get dirty

I build GRIT

I have lots to talk about

I'm sick less often

I am happy ... and when I'm happy, I want to keep playing

Play is what I do when grown-ups stop telling me what to do.

3 Sure-fire outdoor play starters

1 Den making

Make a place to store sticks, boxes, material, rope, solar powered lights, pegs … stuff to build dens of all sizes that can be pulled out and played with.

Can grown-ups please give me more time and space to play?

Can you …

- Add soft toys/farm animals/cars/plastic plates and cups etc?
- leave the den up all week - or longer - to see how it grows?

How about planning a garden or living room camp out? It might be as good as a holiday!

2 Mud kitchens and imagination laboratories

Mud kitchens and imagination laboratories are fantastic for role play and experimenting for all ages. This could be the best way to encourage a budding interest in medicine – or baking! You can buy kits, but children will love an old table and a few old saucepans just as much.

Can you …

- provide old pots, pans, forks, wooden spoons and chopsticks?
- add water, leaves and twigs to make perfumes and potions?
- make the play colourful and bubbly with food colouring, washing up liquid or washable paint?

If you can't use mud, then try sand, sawdust, pea gravel, rice or just water. Be warned… you may be invited to dinner for mud pie and gravy!

3 Outdoor chalking

Chalk is fantastic for 'pop-up' play. It washes off with water, so one rainstorm and you're back to a blank canvas!

Things to try out

- Use as much space as possible - a car park, pavement or a car-free road is perfect.
- Encourage experiments – as well as drawing with chalk, you can crush it, grind it up, make powder, add water, etc.
- Introduce classic games like hopscotch, noughts and crosses or hangman, or suggest they write a long story or poem on the ground. Photograph it to share.

9 Top tips

for more outdoor play at home

1. Explore the outdoor places near home where your children can play every day – a garden, balcony, park or street.
2. See if you can arrange for your child's friends to join in … it's more fun with more children.
3. Let the children decide how they play and be there to support them when needed.
4. Check the weather, and make sure everyone is dressed to play outdoors. If you are going out with your children, take additional warm clothing, snacks and a hot drink if it is cold.
5. See what happens if you step back and just watch … or try letting them lead you in their play.
6. Introduce stuff to play with to build/make/create. If they build a den or structure, can they leave it up for a while?
7. Let them take some risks and make mistakes!
8. As soon as you think you can trust them, leave them to it … and enjoy some well-deserved time to yourself.
9. Children love physical play with friends and you. Tickling, wrestling, play fights, chase and horseplay build bonds and emotional intelligence.

3 ways to help your child's school to increase play across the day

1 Dress for success!

When children aren't allowed out to play they tend to be less able to concentrate, and less well-behaved … meaning they will learn less in the afternoon. To make sure children play outdoors every day they need to be warm, dry and comfortable, with the right clothing for all kinds of weather.

In winter:

- wellies or waterproof shoes/boots
- a waterproof (not 'showerproof') coat
- waterproof trousers if at all possible
- layers of clothes – so extra leggings and socks; thin and thick jumpers
- hats/scarves
- spare shoes and clothes (just in case they get wet).

In summer:

- a hat that will stay on
- light long sleeve T-shirts
- sun cream
- spare shoes and clothes (just in case they get wet)
- swimming kit (optional).

These are the same clothes your children need to play outdoors at weekends and in the holidays, so it is worth making sure they have them.

Talk to the school if you need support. Outdoor clothing is usually tough so you can get good-quality raincoats and wellies in second-hand stores, through local community groups, on Freecycle, or by asking friends and family. There are lots of helpful blogs and support groups online if you are new to getting outdoors. It will take some experimenting to get it just right, but it's definitely worth it.

In addition, make sure you are comfy, warm and dry too so when you go out to play as a family, you don't want to come home first!

2 Ask your child's school what you can donate

Loose parts are materials that have a high play value - which means they can be used in a multiple of ways by children in their play. Ask your school if there is anything you can donate to support playtimes. Old junk, bric-a-brac or business waste (in case you know a builder, plumber, gardener or office manager) are all loose parts.

Things you could offer include:

- old suitcases, attaché cases, handbags or toolboxes of any type
- kitchen pots, pans, baking trays, worktables, wooden spoons, chopping boards
- fabric (large sheets/brightly coloured material) or tarpaulins
- wooden or plastic pallets, boxes, trays or crates
- pegs (for holding stuff together)
- old clothes for dressing up
- tyres from cars, scooters, motorbikes and bikes
- child car seats, buggies or pushchairs.

3 Help your child to have a play-filled future

Become an advocate for play by talking to your child's school about the play experiences your child is having at home and the impact they have. It's also important to talk to other parents about the difference more play is making; about what you did when you played at school and at home; and discuss what needs to change.

It may be that people in the community can help make it easier to walk to school, create play spaces around the school, or help to make nearby nature trails.

Make sure you tell the teachers how important playtime is to your child, or share how great it is on social media.

If they're ready to really start improving playtimes, tell them about OPAL.

Find out more about loose parts play:
www.playscotland.org/play/playful-learning/loose-parts-play/

Opal

Supporting school improvement through play

Be aware,

you go outdoors to play at your own risk ...

but you'll open the door to some amazing new experiences!

Inspiration for outdoor play at home

Websites:

- Backyard Nature
  www.backyardnature.org
- National Trust 50 things to do before you're 11¾
  www.nationaltrust.org.uk/children-and-nature
- NSPCC, Is my child ready to go out alone?
  https://learning.nspcc.org.uk/research-resources/leaflets/out-alone
- Ordnance Survey Greenspaces map
  https://getoutside.ordnancesurvey.co.uk/greenspaces/
- Play England
  www.playengland.org.uk
- Playing Out
  www.playingout.net

Books:

- Linda McGurk, There's No Such Thing as Bad Weather: A Scandinavian Mom's secrets for Raising Healthy, Resilient, and Confident Kids. 2017, Simon and Schuster.
- Fiona Danks and Jo Schofield, The Wild Weather Book: Loads of things to do Outdoors in Rain, Wind and Snow. 2013, Frances Lincoln.
- Michael Rosen, Michael Rosen's Book of Play: Why Play Really Matters, and 101 ways to Get More of it in Your Life. 2019. Wellcome Collection.
- Michael Follett, Creating Excellence in Primary School Playtimes, 2017 JKP.

About OPAL

OPAL is the UK's leading not-for-profit organisation working with primary schools to transform children's play through the OPAL Primary Programme. Hundreds of schools and tens of thousands of children are benefiting from the changes OPAL helps schools to make.

Thanks to Sport England for funding the publication of this booklet.

Outdoor Play and Learning (OPAL) CIC

Supporting school improvement through play

Get in touch and share about outdoor play!

www.outdoorplayandlearning.org.uk

@OPAL_CIC

@OpalOutdoorplay

THE NATIONAL LOTTERY

SPORT ENGLAND