# EDUCATION IN THE DIGITAL AGE:
THE IMPORTANCE OF PLAY

Play offers rich opportunities for children's development, well-being and learning. It is so important that the right to play is enshrined in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child.

Play can take different forms, such as risky outdoor play, imaginative play or playing video games. Different types of play can have different implications for child development and learning.
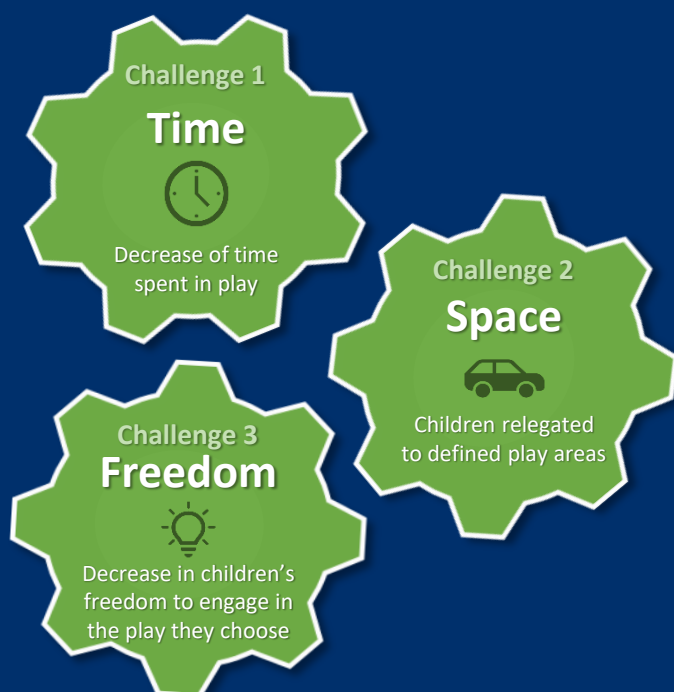
POTENTIAL POSITIVE OUTCOMES OF PLAY
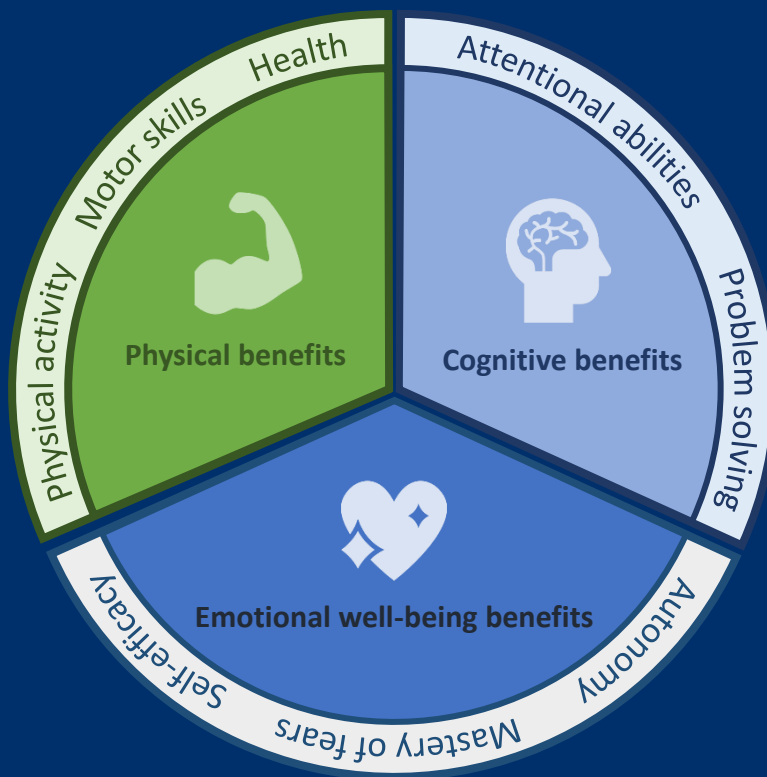
Playful experiences provide children opportunities to engage with others and learn in enjoyable ways. Recognising and building on the power of playfulness and play can support more meaningful educational experiences for all, life-wide and lifelong.

OUTDOOR RISKY PLAY

Unstructured, freely chosen and child-directed outdoor play contributes to health, development and well-being. Risky play occurs when children intentionally seek exhilarating and scary physical play situations that allow them to gain mastery over their fears.

The following three key challenges suggest practice and policy necessary to implement sustained and meaningful change for more supportive play environments.

Challenge 1
Time
Decrease of time spent in play

Challenge 2
Space
Children relegated to defined play areas

Challenge 3
Freedom
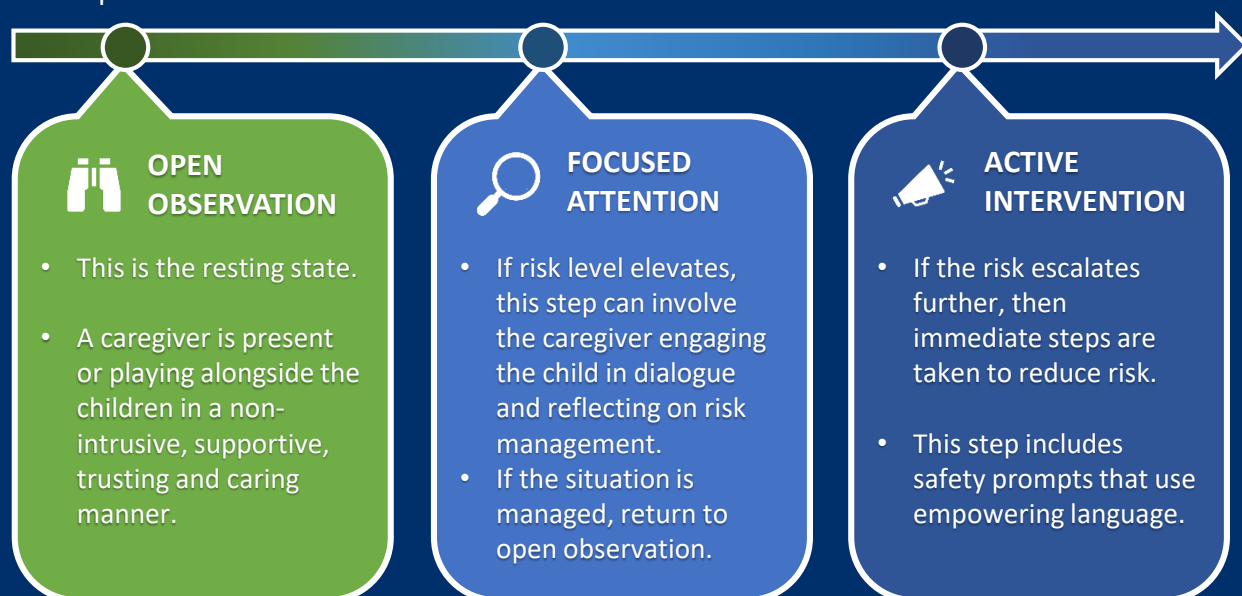Decrease in children's freedom to engage in the play they choose

Children are:

- more physically active and less sedentary when playing outside than when indoors

- more physically active when unsupervised by adults and with their peers

Statistics show that perceived fear of injury may not be in line with the likelihood of an accident. This may result in overly strict limitations and few risky play opportunities.

DYNAMIC RISK BENEFIT ASSESSMENT

A risk benefit assessment (RBA) is an integrated approach to help balance the benefits of play activities with any inherent risk. There are three levels of attention described in the dynamic RBA process:

OPEN OBSERVATION
- This is the resting state.
- A caregiver is present or playing alongside the children in a non-intrusive, supportive, trusting and caring manner.

FOCUSED ATTENTION
- If risk level elevates, this step can involve the caregiver engaging the child in dialogue and reflecting on risk management.
- If the situation is managed, return to open observation.

ACTIVE INTERVENTION
- If the risk escalates further, then immediate steps are taken to reduce risk.
- This step includes safety prompts that use empowering language.

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DIGITAL PLAY

Play in the digital environment can help children relax and unwind, and multiplayer games allow children to socialise with their friends.

Action video games

Games that combine time pressure and the capacity to swiftly shift from distributed to focused attention, as well as between goals and sub-goals. Playing these games is associated with:

- enhanced attentional control
- positive effects on perceptual, attentional and cognitive skills, and multitasking

From entertainment to educational games

Some games are support learning without being specifically designed as educational tools. One example is Minecraft, which is popular in both formal and informal education because it can:

- enhance the development of digital skills
- positively impact social and interpersonal skills

NOT ALL (DIGITAL) PLAY IS CREATED EQUAL

There is much debate about the impact of digital technologies, including playing video games, on human cognition. When attempting to determine potential harm or benefits, it is important to account for a number of elements:

🎮	**The type of media matters**	Social media does not have the same effects as playing video games
💬	**Context matters**	Screen time for shared activities does not have the same impact as watching a video alone
🖥️	**Content matters**	Educational video games do not have the same impact as social simulation videogames
🖥️📱	**Delivery interface matters**	The device used can distract from or contribute to achieving learning objectives
🧩	**Interactivity matters**	The interactivity of action video game play does not elicit the same attentional processes as a puzzle

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EXAMPLES OF SAFE PLAYSPACE POLICIES

The provision of play spaces is often regulated by specific guidelines and frameworks from different ministries, such as education or health ministries. Some examples include:

Czech Republic — **The Department of Health** ensures that the sanitary requirements are met for play premises and facilities of educational and social institutions.

Ireland — **The Department of Education and Skills** provides guidelines on safe play spaces to improve design and functionality of school buildings.

Japan — **The Ministry of Land, Infrastructure, Transport and Tourism** provides Guidelines for Safety of Playground Equipment in Urban Parks.

Latvia — **The Consumer Rights Protection Centre of Latvia** created the guidelines for safety requirements for child play spaces.

Russia — State standards were defined for equipment and coverage of children's playgrounds, building codes and rules, and sanitary norms.

Sweden — **The National Board of Housing, Building and Planning** gave recommendations on the quality of outdoor environments and play spaces.

DIGITAL PLAY AND DATAFICATION

Despite the opportunities of digital play, children face risks to their privacy and their data can be used for inappropriate purposes (e.g. commercial marketing, malicious contact). Data derived from digital activity falls into three categories:

1. Data given
Data children share about themselves or that is shared by others.

2. Data traces
Data left online through cookies or metadata for example.

3. Inferred data
Data derived from analysing data given and traces.

KEY READINGS

- Burns, T. and F. Gottschalk (eds.) (2020), *Education in the Digital Age: Healthy and Happy Children*, Educational Research and Innovation, OECD Publishing, Paris, https://doi.org/10.1787/1209166a-en.

- OECD (2020), *Growing up Online: Addressing the Needs of Children in the Digital Environment*, https://www.oecd.org/sti/ieconomy/growing-up-online.pdf.

- Hooft Graafland, J. (2018), "New technologies and 21st century children: Recent trends and outcomes", *OECD Education Working Papers*, No. 179, OECD Publishing, Paris, https://dx.doi.org/10.1787/e071a505-en.

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