

Written evidence submitted by Dr Naomi Lott
School of Law, University of Reading on 6th February 2025
Children's Wellbeing and Schools Bill
House of Commons Public Bill Committee

1. The following is a response to the Call for Evidence on the Children's Wellbeing and Schools Bill. I am a Lecturer in Law at the University of Reading, School of Law. My area of specialism is children's rights, and particularly the right to play.¹ I completed my PhD, at the University of Nottingham and funded by the Economic and Social Research Council, on this topic and have published a book on the same.² I have also conducted empirical research with children aged 2-18 on barriers and facilitators of their play.

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2. My submission focuses on the importance of play for children's wellbeing, education and development. It evidences that it is not possible to meet the objectives of the Children's Wellbeing and Schools Bill, and the government's missions regarding children's health and opportunities, without protecting the child's right to play.

3. Play is Critical to the Wellbeing of Children of All Ages

4. Labour's Manifesto pledged two bold ambitions: to 'raise the healthiest generation of children in our history'; and to 'break down barriers to opportunity'.

These goals can only be achieved through enabling and supporting children's play. Play is critical to children's health and wellbeing, and provides access to the skills development necessary for future opportunities.

5. Supporting children's outdoor, doorstep, play benefits the wider community, decreasing loneliness and supporting community resilience, cohesion and the overall health and wellbeing of local residents.³
6. Any parent, teacher, parliamentarian or government minister seeking to support wellbeing and education, should be informed on children's play and seek to centralise play in everyday life.

7. Mental Health and Emotional Development

¹ Parts of this submission were also submitted to the Levelling Up, Housing and Communities Committee for the Call for Evidence on Children, Young People and the Built Environment.

² PhD completed in 2020. N Lott, *The Right of the Child to Play: From Conception to Implementation* (Routledge, 2023)

³ A Stenning, 'Tackling Loneliness with Resident-Led Play Streets', (Playing Out: March 2020); M Meyer et al., 'The Effects of Play Streets on Social and Community Connectedness in Rural Communities' [2021] 18 *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health* 19, 9976; S A Bennet et al., 'Playground Accessibility and Neighbourhood Social Interaction Among Parents' [2012] 108 *Social Indicators Research* 199-213

8. Children’s play helps prevent or reduce symptoms of anxiety, develops resilience, reduces the impact of traumatic events, and develops the skills necessary to understand, regulate and manage emotions. The emotional benefits of childhood free play are long term.
9. Children’s play, particularly active play, outdoor play, and play with others, is crucial for healthy emotional development and supports positive emotional intelligence.⁴

Emotional intelligence relates to ‘the ability to recognise and perceive the meanings of emotions and their relationships, to assimilate emotion-related feelings, to understand the information related to emotions, to manage them, and reason and problem-solve on the basis of them’.⁵ Critically, this also relates to the ability to regulate emotions.

10. Evidence suggests that emotional intelligence is a significant predictor (direct correlation) of academic achievement and particularly so for ‘at-risk students’, more so than ethnicity and gender.⁶
11. Play is necessary for healthy development of subcortical regions of the brain, particularly the amygdala (important for emotional regulation) and the dorsal raphe nuclei (important for managing fear and anxiety).⁷
12. Research in the UK shows that supporting children’s adventurous and outdoor play helps prevent mental health problems. Such play benefits ‘children’s mood and mental health’.⁸ Children who spend more time engaging in adventurous play have ‘fewer internalising problems’, less symptoms of anxiety and fewer symptoms of ADHD.⁹

This positive impact was found to be stronger for children in lower income households.¹⁰

13. Play opportunities in school can reduce the need for mental health referrals/support, improve academic outcomes, and reduce behavioural disruptions.¹¹
14. Research shows a correlation between a reduction in free play and an increase of anxiety, depression, narcissism and psychopathology in children.¹² Reductions in outdoor play have also been correlated with a reductions in children’s levels of resilience and imagination.¹³

⁴ Lott (n2) at 28-33

⁵ Lott (n2) at 30

⁶ P Nelson, ‘Emotional intelligence and academic achievement in 11th grade at-risk students’, Ed.D Thesis (Walden University, 2009)

⁷ S Pellis, V Pellis, and B Himmler, ‘How Play Makes for a More Adaptable Brain: A Comparative and Neural Perspective’ [2014] 7 *AmJPlay* 73, 89-90

⁸ H Dodd et al., ‘Child’s Play: Examining the Association Between Time Spent Playing and Child Mental Health’ [2023] 54 *Child Psychiatry Hum Dev* 1678-1686

⁹ Ibid; P Wildenauer, ‘Children’s Access to Free Play in Nature in Relation to Mental Health and Overall Mental Well-being’, Master’s Thesis (Bethel University, 2024)

¹⁰ Dodd et al., (n8)

¹¹ K A Allee-Herndon, D Dillman Taylor and S Killingsworth Roberts, ‘Putting play in its place: presenting a continuum to decrease mental health referrals and increase purposeful play in classrooms’ [2019] 8 *International Journal of Play* 2, 186-203

¹² P Gray, ‘The Decline of Play and the Rise of Psychopathology in Children and Adolescents’ [2011] 3 *American Journal of Play* 4, 443-463

¹³ Wildenauer (n9)

15. A study of over 150,000 children in Spain assessed proximity to outdoor play spaces and diagnoses of a range of psychological development (mental and behavioural) disorders in children.¹⁴ Residential proximity to outdoor play spaces related to lower prevalence of disorders of psychological development, with stronger impacts regarding outdoor green spaces and greater diversity of outdoor play spaces.¹⁵

This impact was stronger for those in low economic status areas.¹⁶

16. Play is crucial to the development of children's sense of independence, self-worth and self-confidence.¹⁷

17. Physical Health and Development

18. Play is crucial for the development of fine and gross motor skills. Everything from building towers from blocks, playing football in the park, climbing a ladder to a slide, climbing trees and skateboarding with friends, develops muscle strength and hand-eye coordination. These skills are crucial for undertaking everyday tasks such as writing, dressing, brushing teeth, and for future possibilities such as future sports potential and overall health and abilities.

19. Play has a unique role in children's physical health (e.g. addressing obesity, and health benefits associated with physical activity).¹⁸ Efforts to support children's physical activity are often directed to structured and adult-led physical activity programmes, such as organised sport and school PE lessons. Such interventions can be costly, and evidence suggests that they are less effective in addressing issues such as childhood obesity than supporting children's free-play.¹⁹

20. Outdoor free-play is particularly beneficial for children's physical health. A study of 2278 participants evidenced that higher engagement (1hr+) in children's outdoor play related to lower levels of sedentary behaviour and higher levels of moderate-to-vigorous activity outside of the play activity; and a study of 570 participants found 'outdoor play in early childhood negatively predicted PC use/gaming in later childhood'.²⁰

21. Sedentary behaviour, including sedentary play, can have serious impacts on children's physical and mental health.²¹

¹⁴ C Perez-del-Pulgar et al., 'The relationship between residential proximity to outdoor play spaces and children's mental and behavioral health: The importance of neighborhood socio-economic characteristics', [2021] 200 *Environmental Health* 111326

¹⁵ Ibid

¹⁶ Ibid

¹⁷ R Brockman, K Fox and R Jago, 'What is the meaning and nature of active play for today's children in the UK?' [2011] 8 *International Journal of Behavioural Nutrition & Physical Activity* 15:1-7, 2; L Bunker, 'The role of play and motor skill development in building children's self-confidence and self-esteem' [1991] 91 *The Elementary School Journal* 5: 467-471, 469-470

¹⁸ Lott (n2) p.33-34

¹⁹ I Janssen, 'Active Play as a Strategy for Preventing Childhood Obesity: 4th National Obesity Summit' [2015] 39 *CanJ Diabetes* s6; I Janssen, 'Active Play: An Important Physical Activity Strategy in the Fight Against Childhood Obesity' [2014] 105 *CanJ PublicHealth* e22

²⁰ C Nigg et al. 'Relating outdoor play to sedentary behavior and physical activity in youth - results from a cohort study' [2021] 21 *BMC Public Health* 1716

²¹ Lott (n2) p.66-68

22. Natural, or nature-based, play is more engaging and active than play on traditional ‘kit, fence, and carpet’ playgrounds.²² This has implications for urban design and the availability and design of play in schools.

23. Education, Critical Thinking, Problem Solving

24. Supporting children’s active play supports children’s educational achievement.²³

25. Play improves children’s attention, inhibition and impulse control.²⁴

26. Supporting free play in schools has been shown to reduce behaviour management issues both during breaktimes and in classrooms after play.²⁵

27. Children’s play is critical for literacy and mathematical understanding, as well as problem solving, creativity, and children’s social development.²⁶ An education system that is not sufficiently supported by children’s free play, particularly outdoor play, will fail to see children achieving their full potential.

Play provides children with the cognitive framing to understand what they are taught in the classroom.

28. Play, particularly in natural or other outdoor environments, is critical for healthy cognitive development for children. Play has direct impact on the development of the child’s brain, and correlates to brain mass.²⁷

29. Play develops the problem solving and creativity skills necessary for innovation and success in the world of work, breaking down barriers to opportunities and supporting employment potential.²⁸ Informed employers choose to ask candidates of childhood play experiences, aware of longitudinal benefits of childhood play into adulthood.²⁹

30. Outdoor and active play opportunities are particularly beneficial for children from lower socio-economic backgrounds.³⁰

²² I Fjortoft, ‘Landscape as Playscape: The Effects of Natural Environments on Children’s Play and Motor Development’ [2004] 14 *ChildYouthEnviron* 21; S Herrington and M Brussoni, ‘Beyond Physical Activity: The Importance of Play and Nature-Based Play Spaces for Children’s Health and Development’ [2015] 4 *CurrObesReps* 477; A Luchs and M Fikus, ‘A Comparative Study of Active Play on Differently Designed Playgrounds’ [2013] 13 *JAEO* 206

²³ SH Son and S Meisels, ‘The Relationship of Young Children’s Motor Skills to Later Reading and Math Achievement’ [2006] 52 *Merrill-Palmer Q* 755

²⁴ H Burdette and R Whitaker, ‘Resurrecting Free Play in Young Children: Looking Beyond Fitness and Fatness to Attention, Affiliation, and Affect’ [2005] 159 *Archives of Pediatrics and Adolescent Medicine* 46-50, 47

²⁵ W Russell, ‘The Case for Play in Schools: A Review of the Literature’, *OPAL* (October 2021)

<https://outdoorplayandlearning.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/10/The-Case-For-Play-In-Schools-web-1-1.pdf>

²⁶ Lott (n2) at 16-27

²⁷ J Byers, ‘The Distribution of Play Behaviour among Australian Marsupials’ [1999] 3 *JZool* 349, S Brown, *Play: How It Shapes the Brain, Opens the Imagination, and Invigorates the Soul* (Avery 2010) at 40-41; Pellis et al., (n7)

²⁸ N Lott, ‘Establishing the Right to Play as an Economic, a Social and a Cultural Right’ [2022] 30 *International Journal of Children’s Rights* 3, 755-784

²⁹ Ibid

³⁰ Dodd et al., (n8); C Perez-del-Pulgar et al., (n14)

31. Recommendations:

32. The devolved nations have set an example for robust, long term protection of the child's right to play through (a) incorporating the right to play into domestic legislation; and (b) enforcing change to local and national government practice through policy changes.³¹
33. The right to play should be included in national legislation through the incorporation of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child into domestic legislation.
34. The Children's Wellbeing and Schools Bill should include a requirement for a National Play Strategy, built on the successes of the devolved nations and previous Labour governments.³²
35. The National Play Strategy must seek to ensure that children have adequate time and space for play, that children's right to play is accepted at the community level, and that children's play is implemented with a knowledge and implementation of other relevant rights (e.g. children's voice, non-discrimination, children's best interests).³³
36. Communities should be made aware of the benefits of play for children and society as a whole, through an awareness raising campaign. This should also seek to address cultural fears regarding children's presence in the public space, and differences between anti-social behaviour and play.
37. Teachers and OFSTED must be trained on the benefits of free play both in and out of school. A 'plan for play' should be a requirement for all schools.
38. Planning and urban design that enables easy access to natural and diverse outdoor play spaces should be encouraged, with requirements on housing developers and urban planners to consider children's safe independent mobility.
39. Consultation with children will benefit the development of effective play policies, and is in line with their rights.³⁴

I would be pleased to speak further about my response and am available at n.r.lott@reading.ac.uk.

***** ENDS *****

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³¹ Children and Families (Wales) Measure 2010; Rights of Children and Young Persons (Wales) Measure 2011; Play and Leisure Implementation Plan (Northern Ireland) 2011; Play Sufficiency Assessment (Wales) Regulations 2012; Play Strategy for Scotland: Our Action Plan (2013); Scotland's Children and Young People (Scotland) Act 2014; Services Co-operation Act (Northern Ireland) 2015; Planning (Scotland) Act 2019; Wales Ministerial Review of Play (2022); United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (Incorporation) (Scotland) Act 2024

³² Labour's 2008 Play Strategy; M O'Hara, "This is the first serious national play strategy", *The Guardian* (9 April 2008) <https://www.theguardian.com/society/2008/apr/09/play.strategy.expert.view>

³³ N Lott, 'A Framework for Implementing the Right of the Child to Play: Space, Time, Acceptance, Rights-Informed', *Human Rights Law Review* (Forthcoming)

³⁴ R Jansens et al., 'The Representation of Children's Participation in Guidelines for Planning and Designing Public Playspaces: A Scoping Review with "Best Fit" Framework Synthesis' [2023] 20 *International journal of environmental research and public health*, 5823; Convention on the Rights of the Child (adopted November 1989, entry into force September 1990) 1577 UNTS 3, Article 12