



Nottingham Trent
University



University of
Northampton

Settled Purpose, Less Settled Practice

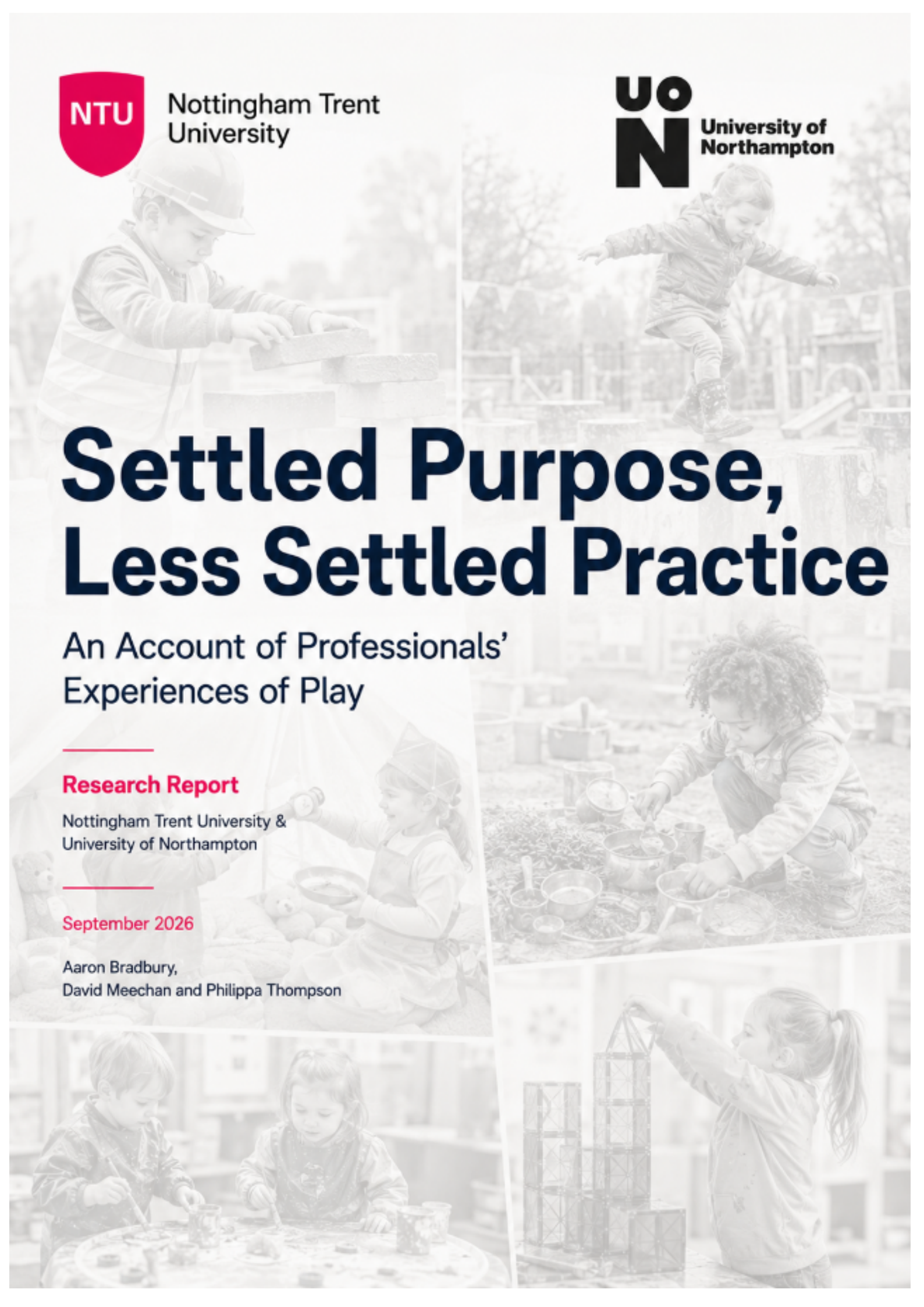
An Account of Professionals'
Experiences of Play

Research Report

Nottingham Trent University &
University of Northampton

September 2026

Aaron Bradbury,
David Meechan and Philippa Thompson



Settled Purpose, Less Settled Practice

Professionals' Experiences of Play with Children Aged 0–8

Aaron Bradbury, David Meechan, and Philippa Thompson

Nottingham Trent University and the University of Northampton

2026

Contents

Abstract	Page 4
Authors	Page 5
Executive Summary	Page 6
Introduction	Page 7
Key Findings	Page 8
The Central Finding	Page 9
Recommendations	Page 10
Chapter 1: Why Play Matters Now	Page 13
Chapter 2: About the study	Page 16
Chapter 3: How Professionals Understand Play	Page 19
Chapter 4: What Successful Play Looks Like	Page 23
Chapter 5: The Challenges Facing Play	Page 29
Chapter 6: Patterns Across the Study	Page 34
Chapter 7: Recommendations	Page 40
Further Research	Page 42
References	Page 44

Abstract

An online survey of 88 professionals working with children aged 0-8 across England and the devolved nations found 99% agreed that play develops social and emotional skills. Professionals share a settled understanding of what play is for, but not an agreement on what this looks like in practice. Open survey responses produced seven themes from a profession who deeply value play but question the systemic environment within which they are meant to support it. Child agency and intrinsic motivation are identified as defining markers of successful play, mentioned by 83 of 88 participants and accounting for 29% (n=288) of the total (n=1010) coded dataset. Curriculum pressure is the most frequently cited barrier and workforce knowledge the most named challenge.

The role of the adult is the one area where the data resists a consensus. What play looks like in practice is far less settled than why it is of value. In part, this can be linked to curriculum pressure, workforce instability, and structural conditions that prevent professional knowledge from being enacted consistently. The task ahead is not persuading those that work directly with children aged 0-8 years of age that play matters, but of building the policy and structural conditions that allow professionals to enact what they already know.



Authors

Aaron Bradbury

Dr Aaron Bradbury is a Principal Lecturer in Early Childhood Studies at Nottingham Trent University and co-founder of Early Years Reviews. His work focuses on play, children's rights, belonging, curriculum, policy and the lived experiences of young children. Aaron has led and contributed to numerous national and international projects relating to play and early childhood education and is widely recognised for his advocacy of children's right to play. He is Chief Editor of Play Matters and Editor and Chief of the Play and Pedagogy Journal and Co-Chair of the Early Childhood Studies Degrees Network (ECSDN). His work is underpinned by a commitment to ensuring that childhood is valued not simply as preparation for the future, but as something of significance in the here and now.

Philippa Thompson

Philippa Thompson is currently a Senior Lecturer and Senior Fellow in the Nottingham Institute of Education at Nottingham Trent University). Philippa has over 20 years' experience working in Higher Education complemented by extensive experience in the early years sector as an early years teacher, LA adviser and Sure Start Community Teacher. Externally, Philippa is a member of the Coalition for Early Years on the Birth to Five Matters Non-Statutory Guidance for the EYFS; chaired the QAA ECS Subject Benchmark Statement Review in 2022 and was recently awarded Chair Emerita for her work as co-chair with the ECSDN. She is a published author with texts focused on co production with parents and families, play and outdoor learning. Philippa was recently part of the editorial team for the publication 'Play Matters'. Her doctoral research considers the hidden voice of parents of children with food allergies and anaphylaxis in early childhood.

David Meechan

David Meechan is a Senior Lecturer in Education and Course Leader for the BA (Hons) Top-up in Early Years, Childhood and Family Studies at the University of Northampton. With over 15 years of experience working in education, David also co-leads the Early Childhood Education and Care Special Interest Group within the Centre for Education and Research at the University of Northampton. A key focus of his work is on professionals' experiences and voice. He uses survey methodology to capture practitioners' views, opinions, and experiences of the policies and practices affecting children in the early years. David's work is underpinned by a strong belief in giving a voice to the profound wisdom and experience that exists within the Early Years sector.

Executive Summary

This report presents findings from a collaborative study undertaken by Aaron Bradbury and Philippa Thompson at Nottingham Trent University and David Meechan at the University of Northampton (Lead Organisation). An online survey was completed by 88 professionals working with children aged 0-8, including practitioners, nursery leaders, headteachers, playworkers, consultants, lecturers, and advisers. Sixty-one per cent had between 11 and 30 years of experience (median: 20 years), and 73% held a Level 6 qualification or above. The majority were based in England, with additional contributions from Scotland, Northern Ireland, Wales, and a small number of international settings. The sample is best understood as a purposive collection of highly experienced, highly qualified professionals, not as a representative cross-section of the diverse early childhood workforce.



Introduction

Play occupies a distinctive place within early childhood education. It is simultaneously recognised as a fundamental right of childhood, a context for learning and development, and a means through which children build relationships, explore ideas, express emotions and make sense of the world around them. Across research, policy and practice, there is widespread agreement that play matters. Yet there is far less agreement about what play should look like in practice and how professionals can protect it within increasingly complex educational systems.

This report presents the findings of a collaborative study undertaken by Nottingham Trent University and the University of Northampton. Drawing upon the experiences of 88 professionals working with children aged 0–8 across a range of settings, roles and phases, the study explores how play is understood, how successful practice is recognised, the challenges professionals encounter and the changes they believe are necessary to strengthen opportunities for children to play.

The findings reveal an interesting paradox. Participants demonstrated a remarkably settled understanding of the purpose of play. Across settings and professional roles, they consistently described play as essential to children's wellbeing, development, identity and sense of belonging. However, their accounts also revealed considerable uncertainty regarding the conditions required to support and sustain play in practice. Curriculum pressures, accountability measures, workforce instability and differing interpretations of the adult role all emerged as significant themes.

The title of this report reflects this central tension. Settled Purpose, Less Settled Practice recognises that the challenge facing the sector is not one of convincing professionals that play matters. Rather, it is one of creating the conditions in which their knowledge, experience and professional judgement can be enacted consistently and confidently.

Ultimately, this report seeks to contribute to a growing conversation about the place of play in children's lives. More importantly, it seeks to ensure that the voices of those working most closely alongside children are heard. Their message is clear: the question is no longer whether play matters, but whether the systems surrounding children are willing to protect the time, space and relationships that play requires.

We would also like to thank Dr Karen Boardman for reviewing this report and providing a rigorous peer review of the content and clarity of the report.

Key Findings

The findings reveal a profession that is deeply committed to play and remarkably consistent in its understanding of why play matters. However, they also expose significant tensions between professional knowledge and the realities of practice. The key findings represent the strongest patterns identified across the study.

Professional understanding of the purpose of play is settled. Play is the primary context through which young children develop the social and emotional foundations that underpin and support future learning and development. Ninety-nine per cent of respondents agreed that play develops social and emotional skills.

Child agency is the defining marker of successful play, by the widest margin of any finding in the study. Eighty-three of 88 participants named it; it accounts for 288 of the 1,010 total coded appearances (29%) across the dataset. When professionals describe what successful play looks like, they describe children directing, children deeply involved and children choosing.

Observation is the primary source of professional knowledge. Ninety-eight per cent agreed that watching children at play shapes their professional understanding. This was ahead of formal training (83%), workplace philosophy (76%), their own childhood experience (73%), and the curriculum (61%).

Adult understanding matters more than adult facilitation. Eighty-one per cent rated adult understanding and valuing of play as the single most important condition for successful play. Adult facilitation ranked last, at 25%. Professionals described successful play as children leading whilst adults read the room.

The adult role is where broad consensus ends. Asked whether play requires knowledgeable adults: 50% agreed, 27% were neutral, and 23% disagreed. This reflects the diversity of professional roles and views in the sample, EYFS, playwork, and Reggio-influenced practice each answer that question differently.

Curriculum pressure is the dominant barrier. Forty-one per cent identified it as a frequent constraint with a further 30% saying it applied sometimes. Practitioners described curriculum impacting on what they could do regardless of what they knew.

Workforce knowledge is the sector's biggest challenge. In open-text response, knowledge gaps in the wider workforce were the most frequently named challenge. When asked to rate barriers however, only 14% of respondents reported professional knowledge and confidence as a personal barrier.

Not everyone understands play. Fifty-four of 88 participants identified misunderstanding by parents, leaders, or society as a barrier. Where play in practice is not understood, practitioners carry the additional burden of explaining what they do as well as doing it.

The Central Finding

This study reveals a profession with a remarkably settled understanding of what play is for. Across roles, settings and levels of experience, practitioners consistently describe play as central to children's development, identity, relationships and wellbeing. The debate is no longer about whether play matters.

What remains unsettled are the structural conditions within which that understanding can be enacted consistently. Where practice appears less secure, this should not be read as a failure of professional commitment or belief. Rather, it is the predictable consequence of systems that place increasing pressure on curriculum delivery, produce workforce instability, and continually erode accumulated knowledge through low pay, poor status and high turnover.

The significance of this finding is important. It suggests that improving play pedagogy is not primarily a matter of persuading practitioners of the value of play. That work, in many ways, has already been done. The challenge now is structural: whether the systems surrounding early childhood education can protect the time, space, professional trust and workforce stability that play requires. The question of whether play matters has been answered. The systems question has not.



Recommendations

Commitment 1: Invest in professional knowledge and culture

Audience: central government and sector leadership bodies

Drivers: workforce retention, investment and continued professional development (CPD)

- Address pay and contractual stability as prerequisites for knowledge retention.
- Embed the adult role debate in CPD frameworks that reach practitioners already in post.
- Create professional learning communities at local level where shared understanding of responsive practice can develop.



Recommendations

Commitment 2: Reform the structural conditions

Audience: The Department for Education

Drivers: Inspection and assessment frameworks

- Remove or substantially revise assessment measures that reduce play to a compliance activity.
- Extend play entitlement, as part of the curriculum, beyond the EYFS boundary into Key Stage One.
- Require Ofsted to recognise child-led practice, alongside practitioners' depth of knowledge and understanding, as evidence of quality, not absence of structure.



Recommendations

Commitment 3: Build shared understanding beyond the Early Years, Early Childhood and Playwork professions.

Audience: Higher education, training and education providers, local authority parent engagement leads, and professional body leadership.

Drivers: What is taught before professionals enter settings, and what is communicated to families once children arrive

- Include the evidence base for pedagogies of play in Initial Teacher Training Primary, Early Years Teacher Status and Early Childhood Studies degrees.
- Develop accessible, locally tailored materials for families, produced in partnership with settings.
- Treat definitional clarity as a sector-level priority. The profession cannot advocate clearly for what it has not defined clearly.





Chapter 1: Why Play Matters Now

Play is not simply a pedagogical strategy. It is the means through which children make sense of the world, build relationships, express emotions and develop confidence (Yogman et al., 2018). In England and internationally, it appears in policy frameworks, training programmes, and inspection criteria as a cornerstone of early childhood education. In the same systems, practitioners face curriculum demands, accountability requirements, and school readiness agendas that constrain the time, space, and professional autonomy that play requires. The result is a familiar tension: play is valued in principle but squeezed in practice.

Defining play has long challenged researchers because it is simultaneously a biological, psychological, pedagogical and socio-cultural phenomenon. Contemporary scholarship increasingly rejects narrow developmental definitions in favour of understanding play as a dynamic, relational and rights-based process through which children construct meaning, exercise agency and participate in their worlds (Wood, 2014; 2020). Rather than asking whether play leads to learning, Pelligrini (2009); Pyle et al., (2017) and Whitebread et al., (2017); Colilles, Pascal and Bertram (2026) all contribute to the discussion that play constitutes a distinctive way of learning, being and becoming, shaped by children's interests, relationships and cultural contexts.

Wood's work has been particularly influential in reframing play as pedagogy. She argues that play exists on a continuum between child initiated and adult guided experiences and that high quality practice depends on practitioners making sensitive pedagogical decisions that preserve children's agency while extending thinking (Wood, 2014; 2020).

This perspective aligns with Nutbrown's (2011) conceptualisation of play as the context in which children develop language, identity, creativity and sustained shared thinking. Together these authors challenge simplistic dichotomies between free play and formal teaching, instead positioning play as an intellectually rigorous context for learning.

Complementing these pedagogical perspectives, Else (2014) conceptualises play as a biological imperative rather than a discretionary activity. Drawing upon evolutionary and neuroscientific evidence, he argues that play supports neurological development, emotional regulation, resilience and adaptability. Similarly, Pellegrini (2009) contends that play fulfils important evolutionary functions, promoting social competence, self-regulation and physical wellbeing. Gray (2013) extends this argument by suggesting that self-directed play is essential for developing autonomy, problem-solving and mental health, warning that declining opportunities for free play may adversely affect children's wellbeing.

Alongside developmental and evolutionary perspectives, rights-based scholarship has significantly reshaped contemporary definitions of play. Thompson (2024) argues that authentic play should be recognised as a fundamental right of childhood rather than simply an educational strategy. From this perspective, play enables children to exercise agency, build relationships and create meaning within responsive environments that respect their competence. This position is reflected in *Play Matters* (Bradbury et al., 2025), which conceptualises play as joyful, relational, democratic and central to inclusion, challenging increasingly performative and schoolified approaches to early childhood education.

International evidence further strengthens this synthesis. Whitebread and colleagues argue that play supports executive function, self-regulation, motivation and metacognition, illustrating that playful experiences underpin both immediate engagement and long-term learning dispositions (Whitebread et al., 2017). These findings reinforce the view that play should not be positioned in opposition to learning but recognised as one of its most powerful pedagogical expressions.

Policy guidance reflects these theoretical developments. *Birth to Five Matters* (Early Years Coalition, 2021) positions play as the principal medium through which babies and young children explore, communicate and develop understanding, advocating enabling environments, responsive relationships and respect for children's agency. Collectively, the literature demonstrates that contemporary definitions of play have moved beyond developmental or instrumental interpretations. Instead, play is best understood as an intrinsically motivated, relational and rights-based process that simultaneously supports children's wellbeing, identity, participation and learning. Such a synthesis provides a robust conceptual foundation for examining playful pedagogies within increasingly accountability driven early childhood systems. Recent scholarship has clarified several things. Playful learning, such as combining active engagement, meaningful experience, social interaction, and intrinsic motivation, provides an effective context for children's cognitive, social, and emotional development (Zosh et al., 2022).

Play is recognised as contextually variable, shaped by relationships, environment, and children's own purposes rather than reducible to a single set of behaviours. Contemporary scholarship increasingly locates play within a discourse of children's rights and agency, positioning it not only as essential for development but as an expression of children's participation in their own lives (UNICEF, 1989; Lundy, 2007). Concern has been raised, however, about the conditions in which play approaches are now practised. In England, accountability systems present dominant narratives of the capable learner that can redirect attention away from broader developmental purposes and toward measurable indicators (Bradbury, 2013; Bradbury and Hare, 2025). Debates about school readiness such as who should be ready, for what, and at what cost, have intensified pressure on settings to introduce formal instruction earlier, with documented effects on the space available for child-led activity (Sproule et al., 2019; Moss, 2023).

What the scholarship tends not to foreground is more simple: children do not play because adults have identified developmental outcomes. Rather, they play because it is enjoyable, intrinsic, self-chosen and a personally meaningful act (King and Newstead, 2017). This distinction sits behind many of the professional accounts that follow. What the research has not settled is how professionals working within these conditions make sense of play: how they define it, what they count as success, where they locate the obstacles, and what they believe would need to change.

The adult role within play remains an active debate within both research and practice traditions. Some approaches position the knowledgeable, responsive adult as central to making rich play experiences possible (Vygotsky, 1978; Siraj-Blatchford, 2009). Others position adult withdrawal as the condition for genuine play. Both traditions are represented in contemporary early childhood provision, and neither has resolved the question of how practitioners work between them under systemic pressure.

This study addresses that gap directly. It draws on the responses of 88 professionals working with children aged 0–8 across a range of roles, settings, and frameworks. Rather than seeking to establish what play is or to adjudicate between theoretical traditions, it asks what this particular professional community believes, what tensions they carry, and what the shape of their agreement and disagreement reveals about the current state of play practice.

The study was guided by four research questions:

Research Question 1: How do professionals working with children aged 0–8 understand and define play?

Research Question 2: What examples of successful play pedagogy can be identified by professionals working with young children?

Research Question 3: What challenges do professionals face when implementing a pedagogy of play?

Research Question 4: Based on the findings of this study, what recommendations can be made to enhance play opportunities for children aged 0–8?



Chapter 2: About the study

The study adopted an interpretivist approach, on the grounds that professionals' understandings of play are shaped by their experience, their settings, and the professional traditions they work within. Capturing such understandings required methods that allow participants to explain and narrate. Data was collected using an online survey that combined both numerical and open-ended responses. The numerical elements were used to identify patterns of agreement and disagreement across the sample, enabling analysis of where responses converged, diverged, and the extent to which these differences were pronounced. The open text elements were designed to access the reasoning behind such positions: the language professionals used to describe play, the examples they share and the barriers they make visible. Neither element alone would have produced the account that follows. The study's analytical value lies in reading the numerical and thematic analysis alongside the direct quotes. These provide an indicator of the realities that exist and are experienced by professionals.

Analysis proceeded in three phases following the Scale, Choice and Insight methodology (Meehan, 2026). Phase A examined the numerical responses descriptively, identifying patterns, frequencies, and areas of convergence or divergence. Phase B applied thematic analysis to the open-text responses, producing seven confirmed themes from 54 codes across the full dataset. Phase C was the integration phase and viewed the two bodies of analysis together by research question. This allowed for further consideration of where the findings aligned, where they diverged, and what each made visible that the other could not.

A total of 88 professionals completed the survey, representing a wide range of roles, settings and curriculum frameworks. However, while the sample is not demographically representative of the early childhood workforce, it offers valuable insight into current professional perspectives on play. It is best understood as a purposive collection of engaged, experienced, and highly qualified professionals. These characteristics should be understood as an important context for the findings rather than a limitation. The views presented here reflect deep, accumulated professional knowledge and are the perspectives this study sought to capture.

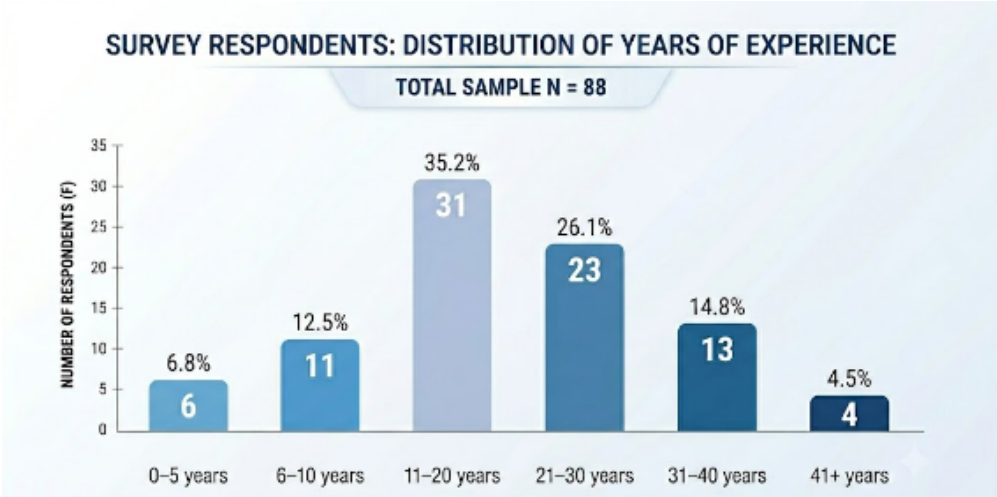


Figure 1: Years of Experience

The survey sample reflects a highly experienced and professionally qualified workforce. Most respondents reported between 11 and 30 years of experience, with the largest group (35.2%) having worked in the sector for 11–20 years. This suggests that the data is shaped by practitioners with substantial accumulated knowledge of early childhood practice.

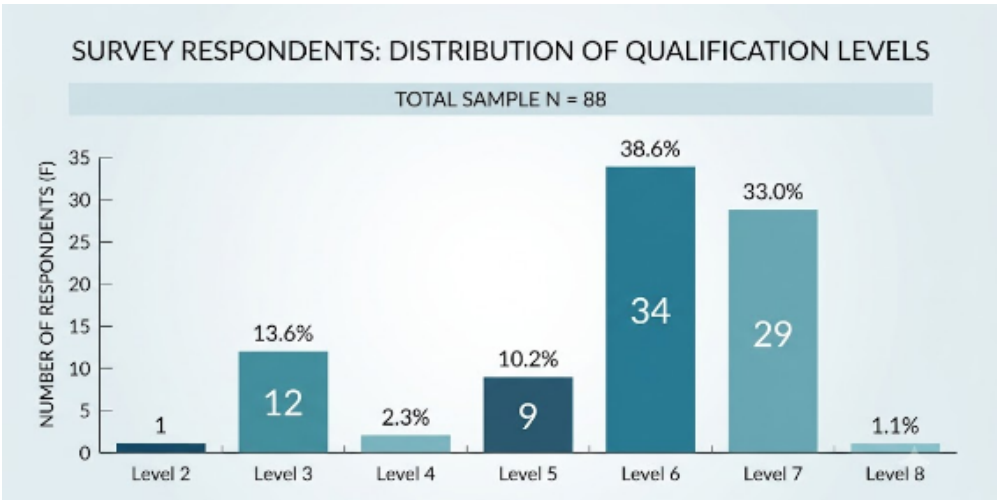


Figure 2: Highest Qualification

Qualification levels were similarly high, with the majority holding Level 6 (38.6%) or Level 7 (33.0%) qualifications. This indicates that the responses largely reflect graduate and postgraduate perspectives, offering insight into how highly qualified professionals understand and interpret play within contemporary practice.

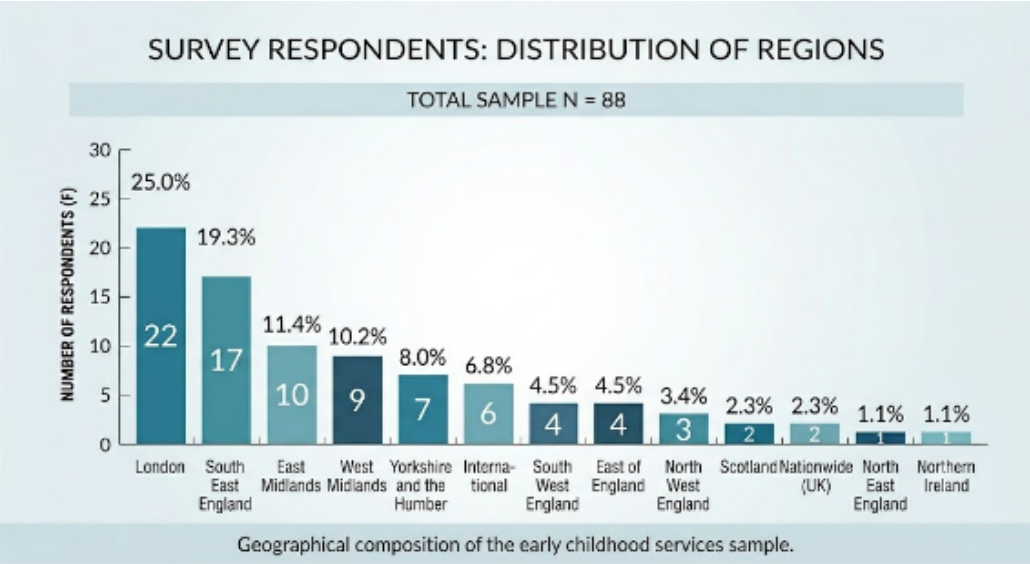


Figure 3: Location

Respondents were geographically distributed across a range of regions, with the largest concentrations in London (25.0%) and the South East (19.3%). Smaller but notable representation was evident across the Midlands, Yorkshire and the Humber, and other parts of England, alongside a limited number of responses from Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. While the sample is weighted towards southern England, the spread of responses offers insight into perspectives across a broad geographical range of early childhood contexts.

Ethics

The study received ethical approval through the University of Northampton as the lead organisation for ethical approval, and was conducted in accordance with the principles set out by the British Educational Research Association (BERA, 2024). Participation was voluntary, all responses were collected anonymously, and participants were informed of their right to withdraw. No identifying information is included in this report. Trustworthiness is addressed through the transparency of the analytical process and the visibility of the data on which interpretive claims are based, consistent with Lincoln and Guba's (1985) credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability framework. The audit trail is reconstructable; generalisability is not claimed.



Chapter 3: How Professionals Understand Play

Definition

Settled: What play is for .

Not Settled: What it looks like in practice, and where the adult stands within it

The consensus: the purpose of play is not in dispute.

Agreement is high on what play is for, that it varies significantly and what it produces. However, agreement is less so when considering who needs to be involved, and whether it needs to have measurable learning outcome. See Table 1 for full breakdown of responses.

Statement	Agree	Neutral	Disagree
Play is a tool for developing social and emotional skills	99%	1%	0%
Play varies significantly depending on context	92%	7%	1%
Play is child-led and spontaneous	83%	15%	2%
Play can include structured learning activities	69%	17%	14%
Play requires knowledgeable adults	50%	27%	23%
Play should be free from adult intervention	22%	38%	40%
Play should have measurable learning outcomes	16%	32%	52%

Table 1: Perceptions of Play

Where professional knowledge of play comes from.

The primary vehicle for shaping professional's understanding of play comes from observing children at play. Importance is also given to professional training and education, workplace philosophy and policies, as well as a professional's own childhood experience. What impacts less to professionals is the curriculum that they work within and parental expectations of play. See Table 2 for full breakdown of responses.

Factor	Very much	Neutral	Not at all
Observations of children at play	98%	1%	1%
Professional training or	83%	11%	6%
Workplace philosophy and	76%	17%	7%
Own childhood experiences	73%	20%	7%
The curriculum worked within	61%	26%	13%
Parental or caregiver	48%	35%	17%

Table 2: Factors shaping professional understanding

Participants were also asked whether their understanding of play had changed and what had driven that change. The responses provide insight to a profession in flux and a broader movement towards a more expansive view of play's purpose.

Years ago, play was something that happened in addition to 'education'. Now I believe play IS education as well as child development

Deputy Nursery Manager, 27 years experience

...through following early years experts on social media and attending conferences, I have discovered the importance of play for the children I work with and have battled with leadership to try and get them to understand the purpose and benefits of play

Early Years Lead, 8 years experience

Career progression and interest - I have worked as a childminder, in a nursery, as a TA in reception, then trained to become EYT. Froebel training. I used to work in outer London and my move to East Sussex has changed my role as I could not work in schools here as play was not valued.

Lead Facilitator, 17 years experience

A question that split the consensus

Whereas a consensus had formed around why play is important, there was less when participants were asked whether play requires a knowledgeable adult. Nearly a quarter of respondents (23%) disagreed, against half (50%) who agreed. The open responses that follow reveal an alternative narrative that believes the adult's most skilled act when relating to play is awareness and restraint- not involvement and facilitation.

Adults often 'interfere' with children's play to be seen to be 'doing' something without the knowledge that their connected presence is the 'doing'.

Wellbeing and Early Help Specialist, 35 years experience

Back off and let children explore and play freely. Offer guidance when it is asked for or needed. Observe and learn about the children in your care in real time. Children are always the best they've ever been. They have passions and agency.

Deputy Manager, 15 years experience

Children given space and time to create their own models/role play scenarios only supporting when invited in and giving snippets then standing back again. When children are supported in this way it boosts their self esteem and gives them confidence to play further

Manager, 31 years experience

Play/exploration/a child's work is inherent. It is always there. Children play to learn. It is only adult expectations and control that has withdrawn play from children. Not in our setting. Children are entitled to a childhood. Play is childhood.

Deputy Manager, 15 years experience

Such different perspectives are not confusion or a clash of professional traditions. The open responses do not sort neatly by sector or pedagogical approach. They do, however, share a common approach: that the adult's most important contribution to play may be knowing when not to act. The question then, of what skilled adult presence requires, runs through the chapters that follow.

Play has changed, but what has changed is the space for it, not play itself

82% of respondents said play has changed over time. Almost all of them meant it has been squeezed, not that it has evolved. The conditions professionals work within inhibit play rather than enable it. Policy makers and school leaders have positioned play as secondary and that the will to prioritise and protect it has faded.

Play hasn't changed but how it is prioritised as a pedagogical strategy has changed. Play features as being less important in government policy despite increasing empirical evidence of the importance of play in supporting children's holistic development.

Director, Early Childhood, 52 years' experience

I don't think play itself has changed but I think the opportunities children have to engage with it have.

Early Years Lecturer, 23 years' experience

Children have always been able to play; the change has been in how the adults value and respond to it. E.g. standing back and observing, not 'interfering', using sustained shared thinking to support children further.

Manager, 31 years' experience

Introduction of formal learning within the EYFS I.e. phonics with less time for children to play within provision both indoors and outdoors.

EYFS Leader, 30 years experience

Play and the right of children are being squashed by people who use the curriculum as an excuse to stop play. There is a total lack of understanding for play among school leaders. I now work for a private setting that embraces self-directed play as a core value.

Lead Facilitator, 17 years experience

Across the responses, the profession has reached broad agreement on what play is for: child-led, intrinsically motivated, and best supported by adults who understand it rather than direct it. That consensus is not a formal definition- but it is a starting point, and one the profession has not yet formally owned

Conclusion

This chapter reveals a profession with a strong and coherent understanding of what play is for. Across roles, settings and regions, there is broad agreement that play is central to children's social and emotional development, shaped by context, and rooted in children's spontaneity and agency. Professional knowledge of play is not primarily inherited from curriculum documents or policy frameworks, but from lived encounters with children themselves.

Yet while the purpose of play appears relatively settled, its enactment remains less certain. The role of the adult continues to divide opinion, not in whether adults' matter, but in how their presence should be understood. For some, skilled adults extend, scaffold and deepen play; for others, the most knowledgeable act is restraint, creating the conditions for play without interrupting it.

What emerges is not a profession confused about play, but one negotiating the pressures that surround it. The strongest message is that play itself has not changed. What has changed are the conditions in which it can exist: the space, time and permission afforded to it. If play is increasingly under pressure, then understanding how those pressures are experienced in practice becomes essential. It is to those tensions, contradictions and constraints that the next chapter now turns.



Chapter 4: What Successful Play Looks Like

Definition

Successful play is recognisable through the child, not through the adult, and not through the curriculum.

What makes play succeed



Figure 4: What makes play succeed

When asked to rate the conditions for successful play, practitioners put adult understanding first and adult involvement and facilitation last. The difference in prioritisation of these two aspects warrants further consideration. Importance is also given to the availability of time and space for play, as well as allowing children autonomy in choosing to play.

Condition	% rating most important
Adult's understanding and valuing of play	81%
Availability of time and space for play	77%
Child autonomy in choosing to play	74%
Children's age and stage of development	44%
Variety of resources and materials	40%
Integration into planned learning objectives	28%
Adult involvement and facilitation	25%

Table 3: Most important conditions for successful play

According to participant responses, child engagement, creativity, and social development are the top three markers of a successful play experience. Alignment with educational goals and curriculum ranks last, at less than half the rate of child engagement. See Table 7 for full breakdown.

Element	% rating most important
Child engagement and enthusiasm	77%
Accessibility and inclusivity of play opportunities	76%
Opportunity for creativity and exploration	71%
Support for social and emotional development	67%
Alignment with educational goals and curriculum	31%

Table 4: Key elements of a successful play experience

What successful play looks like in practice

When practitioners described specific examples of successful play, the adult is always present (as logically they would need to be to have observed play) but they consciously decide to let children lead, step back and observe. Across the examples that follow, one pattern recurs that a rating scale cannot capture: the duration. Participants repeatedly described successful play not as an episode but as a process, children returning to an idea over days or weeks, developing it, extending it, sharing it, abandoning it and returning. The café that ran for weeks, the Lego helicopter refined across daily sessions, the lunar landscape that became a waterway system within a single afternoon: these accounts share a logic of sustained, uninterrupted time that practitioners protect rather than manage. The following quotes provide some insight to the richness of play experienced by the professionals.

A child led play moment where a child created a lunar landscape in the sand pit, got other children and a playworker to join them on their planet. They directed the roles that others had, created the story, to which we were all a part of. At an appropriate moment the playworker withdrew, following a cue from the child. The rest of the group continued on their new world, sometimes disagreeing, learning to negotiate and compromise, until eventually the moment was over. The children dispersed and the lunar landscape became a waterway system for toy cars and boats. The activity had lasted around 45 mins.

Director (Playwork), 30+ years experience

We had some cardboard boxes and paint. The children covered the boxes in paint. One became a house, one a tunnel, one a castle. That afternoon it all changed and the boxes became trains, boats and cars.

EY Teaching Assistant, 27 years experience

The children spontaneously set up a hairdressers salon outside in the nursery garden using crates and musical instruments. They used available resources creatively such as a colourful xylophone to be the hair dye and beaters to apply the “dye”. It was successful because other children joined in and adults joined in too. Furthermore while I could have got out the hairdressing heads to develop the play I decided immediately not to. This play was returned to again and again by many different children and developed into many different directions.

Nursery Teacher, 25 years experience

A role play cafe, open ended resources for food, pictures of food, clip boards, menu's for supporting mark making, tills, telephones, play cooker all outside table, chairs, tablecloth/ cutlery and flowers in a cup provided. Children used what and how they wanted. Huge engagement only occasional adult intervention for supporting mark making or when children invited then into the play eg bringing the adult a meal and then talking about healthy meals. Children reflected on cafes they had visited, how they set the table at home, who cooks etc. Ran for weeks totally child initiated

Manager, 31 years experience

A group of boys often visit the lego area...they play well and there's lots of discussion between them about what they are making. The models they produce have got more and more intricate over time. They discovered a spinning piece and over a number of weeks explored how it could be used. They came up with innovative ways to use it and were excited to share what they created with their peers and staff. One very quiet boy observed all this and then began to play in the area regularly. He made very realistic representations of helicopters ..each day the helicopter looked more and more realistic with spinning blades...he came to show me and told me lots about helicopters. I hadn't known he had this knowledge or interest before. Finally, he made a 'Chinook' style helicopter...he'd had to create an additional spinning element for the double blades. He was very proud and the other boys praised him and enjoyed playing together creating a story with the helicopter having a main part along with the lego men and their own models. This play was successful as it encouraged independence, development of many skills, reflection and evaluation of work, lots of social skills, oral storytelling and perseverance. Engagement was very good and the way it developed over days and weeks is important here...the resources remaining available over a long time is important for this kind of play.

EYFS Lead, 25 years experience

A 9 year old girl, a regular attendee of the adventure playground, came up to me very frustrated and told me she needed to break something. Supervised tool use is a regular practice. I provided her with a hammer (which she had used before) and several breeze blocks. I stayed nearby as she smashed up the breeze blocks. She poured all her anger into the smashing. She yelled as she brought the hammer down. She talked to me about what had made her so angry- an issue with her brothers at home. Other children wanted to smash blocks too. I provided them with hammers, blocks and guidance. After a while the children, including the original girl, started to get curious about the rubble they had made. Started seeing shapes in it. Started using the claw of the hammer, sticks and rocks to chip away and carve the rubble. I provided them with small files and nails to help. They carved their names, some faces, hearts. Some took the rubble creations away to paint them. The original girl spent the rest of the afternoon making marks and shapes in the rubble she had created. And when she had had enough, she went off and played something else. This was important because she was able to follow the play frame all the way through to completion, expressing and playing out the things she needed to in a way that made sense to her.

Play Development Manager, 17 years experience

Oh my goodness, I am lucky enough to have successful play in my role every day, this week for example, the new cohort for this year had their first Forest School sessions this week, and our base camp has a huge majestic old horse chestnut tree, which has had a mast year, so we arrived at the woods to find a carpet of shiny brown treasure across the forest floor...any plans of what I thought may have happened in the day went out the window as the children spent the whole day with the conkers, collecting, throwing, moving, making conker angels, making pictures and much much more, no adult involvement other than wow faces when brought a new biggest or shiniest conker to admire!

Deputy Manager/Forest School Lead, 5 years experience

The adult's real role: watching is working

The most important professional skill in these accounts is knowing how to act. To do this however, one must first stop, look and actively listen to what is in front of them. Observation is not passivity but how practitioners are present and pedagogically support children to master their play. This can happen in many ways, but professionals must have the depth of understanding and knowledge of this, as suggested in the quotes below. This third position of being present, attentive, and deliberately non-directive, is the one that the profession's best accounts return to repeatedly. It is also the hardest to capture on a rating scale, and the hardest to teach. Chapter 5 addresses what happens when practitioners' knowledge and experience fall short of this.

Children used a variety of loose parts to build an obstacle course which included planks down from a bench. My TA wanted to intervene, but I made her stand back. The children managed the course and became aware that sometimes the plank moved; they independently took turns to check before the next person came down and warned others new to the game. Over time they extended and improved their course and then we introduced timers and a board to record.

Early Communication Support Worker, 25 years experience

A group of children were in the water tray. All children aged between 3 - 4 mixed lived experiences. One child was pouring and filling, one using the pipettes to fill a jug and one using a teaspoon. Practitioner comes to the tray and watches for a while. 'I wonder what is the best way to fill this bucket to empty the tray later? What would I could use?' and steps back. The children then engaged in lots of discussion about how best to fill the bucket for emptying the tray. All children were involved in talking about fast/slow/full/empty etc. The practitioner thanked them for their ideas and at the end of the session asked if they would like to help empty the tray to test their ideas. All children were engaged and involved through choice - sometimes these suggestions really hit it off and other times the children are interested in their own activities without your involvement!

Headteacher, 13 years experience

By observing children taking part in uninterrupted play will give us all the information we need to understand where that child is developmentally. Children need the freedom to explore the world in their own time.

Early Years Consultant, 33 years experience

Play has to be intrinsically motivated, this is why the children who have always had their "play" task handed to them struggles to work out how to actually play. Just give a group of children time, and play will happen, I don't care on age groups, where, or what resources (yes these things can all be adjusted to encourage play) but if you leave children alone, they may get bored, but that is when the magic happens and play starts.

Deputy Manager/Forest School Lead, 5 years experience

I have come into early years from an unusual direction and am now a big play advocate. In my relatively short time, I have seen play change within the setting as professionals learn more about the play cycle and our role around that as professionals. It is wonderful when I see staff "click" with the realisation that if you stand back and let the play happen it is so much more worthwhile, and the amount of learning experienced grows exponentially when the children learn to play.

Deputy Manager/Forest School Lead, 5 years experience

Conclusion

This chapter moves the conversation from what play is to what successful play looks like in practice. The findings suggest that successful play is recognised less by adult action or curriculum alignment, and more by the child's engagement, autonomy, creativity and emotional investment. Practitioners placed the highest value on adults understanding play, rather than directing it, reinforcing the distinction between professional knowledge and professional interference. Across the examples shared, successful play was marked by duration, return, adaptation and deep involvement over time. What emerges is a clear professional picture: play succeeds when children are afforded time, space and freedom, and when adults are skilled enough to know when to watch, when to wait, and when to respond. This reinforces the idea that play is not best measured through outcomes alone, but through the quality of children's experience within it.



Chapter 5: The Challenges Facing Play

Definition
The barriers practitioners report and the barriers they name are not the same.

The scale data in this chapter does not point to a dominant barrier. Curriculum pressure is rated most frequently by those who encounter it, but resource constraints are felt more broadly, with more professionals experiencing this at least sometimes overall. Professional knowledge and confidence are rated the least frequent barriers of all but then named most often by professionals as a barrier in the open responses.

Barrier	Never	Sometimes	Frequently
Lack of time due to curriculum demands	29%	30%	41%
Limited resources or funding	13%	56%	31%
Health and safety regulations	24%	46%	30%
Having the time to play	26%	47%	27%
Pressure from parents/carers	30%	47%	23%
Professional understanding, knowledge and confidence	44%	42%	14%

Table 5: Extent to which factors act as barriers to play

The scale items and responses in Table 5 indicate the professionals' first-hand experience of barriers. The insight questions in the survey allow further articulation of challenges and barriers in the participants' own words. When coded and themed, these responses most frequently related to colleagues, the workforce and the profession. Both the scale data and the open responses in this case capture the nuance of the lived experience of the professionals.

The insight responses revealed that the knowledge gap takes a particular form. It was captured in two of the study's central themes: the workforce as both a source of tension and solution, and the contested role of the adult. Practitioners describe colleagues who are uncertain about what their role in play should be, whether to direct, to step back, or to stay present without intervening.

New qualifications, especially online, where staff have very limited understanding of child development and the subtleness of play vs being busy.

Headteacher, 25 years experience

Knowledge of how children learn and benefit from play is at it's lowest. The current qualifications in childcare seem to have gaps when it comes to the importance of play

Education Advisor, 42 years experience

Teaching the difference between adult and child led play. Adults often 'interfere' with children's play to be seen to be 'doing' something without the knowledge that their connected presence is the 'doing'. Working on the language adults use that inspire children to continue to play without direction e.g. No, stop and don't!

Wellbeing and Early Help Specialist, 35 years experience

Curriculum pressure: what does it do to play?

The following responses sit within the study's confirmed theme of systemic and structural barriers: policy, curriculum, and accountability. They offer direct critique of policy in practice and capture what professionals perceive as the impact of curriculum pressure on the children they work with.

Government pressures to be "KS1 ready", lack of understanding of play, push on assessments and data, RBA

Director of Education, 15 years experience

The notion of school readiness has leaked its way into the minds of parents who feel that a child should be learning to write their name or learning phonics at the age of 3/4. It becomes a real challenge trying to shift this misconception that 'play' is just frivolous and doesn't do anything to support the readiness for school.

Nursery Manager, 6 years experience

The biggest challenge for me comes at the end of their journey with us and they have to move into school, we have the children vibrant for life, inquisitive, curious, explorers who question everything, and then send them to have to sit still, and be taught what someone else has decreed they are ready to learn at that moment...having that drive and lust for life slowly eroded to sit in the mundane humdrum mediocrity of the 'modern' education system.

Deputy Manager/Forest School Lead, 5 years experience

Across the open-text responses, participants not only locate curriculum pressures within the early years phase but also in the transition of what comes after. Children who have been supported with play in practice progress to environments where that practice has no mandate, no inspection recognition and no structural protection. This age boundary is where play-based provision most visibly ends and it is one place where professionals suggest reform is required.

Why training alone cannot solve the knowledge gap

Participants raised significant concerns about the preparation of new practitioners entering the workforce, particularly where qualifications are experienced as rushed or overly compliance driven. However, the findings suggest that knowledge of play cannot be secured through training alone. Professional understanding develops over time, through observation, reflection and repeated encounters with children in practice.

A recurring tension emerges here: practitioners can be trained, but if they leave the sector before that knowledge is embedded and transformed into practice wisdom, the workforce remains in a constant cycle of renewal rather than consolidation. Staff retention therefore becomes central to the play debate. The workforce is positioned not only as part of the solution to strengthening play in practice, but also as part of the structural challenge when instability, turnover and poor conditions disrupt the accumulation of expertise. The following practitioner accounts offer further insight.

Underfunding and particularly its impact on there not being proper jobs. Many zero hour contracts = people just passing through. Perpetual loss of experience and knowledge. Hard to stay in the sector even if you are passionate about it because there are so few proper jobs.

Play Development Manager, 17 years experience

Government funding increases so that staff feel valued as professionals. This then means more people choosing the profession that equates to full staffed nurseries with low staff turnover.

Deputy Nursery Manager, 27 years experience

The staff I work with don't understand the importance of play as it's not what they've learnt through their training so it's changing their mindset.

EY Area Manager, 20 years experience

When the adult support of play is less skilled than it could be

The professionals in this study describe a spectrum of adult involvement: from approaches that constrain play to approaches that extend it. Such responses sit within the study's confirmed theme of the contested adult role and contribute to the chapter's earlier discussion of workforce knowledge. This knowledge gap also produces challenges.

As someone who oversees play, it is difficult to keep standards of play in line with what I expect as not all practitioners have had the same training and understanding as myself so play can slip into over-directed or not directed at all and children left to play in superficial play.

Director of Education, 15 years experience

I have many staff who do not have the skills, experience or knowledge to value play. This can lead to play being more structured or too free. Generally, the role of the adult is either to organise or watch play. I want to develop their skills as facilitators of play.

Headteacher, 18 years experience

As an EYFS/KS1 class it is hard to get a good balance. While the adults in the class are fantastic, I have barely any time to train them in EYFS understanding and how to observe etc so it's easier to just give them a specific activity to do. This often means play is completely child initiated (not necessarily a bad thing) but it's not giving me enough understanding of the child and language isn't then being modelled etc.

Teacher, 12 years experience

When the challenges are mitigated for

Although most participants described significant challenges, six offered a notably different account. These responses are not uniform in what they reveal. For those in specialist or autonomous roles, the responses sit within the study's confirmed theme of play as right, as identity, and as professional conviction, the absence of challenge reflects the nature of the role rather than the culture of a setting. For those working in mainstream or mainstream-adjacent settings, however, the picture connects to a different theme: the workforce as both a source of tension and solution. Here, leadership has actively built and protected a play culture, and external pressure has not displaced it at the point of practice.

We are a play centre. Our mission is to enable children to play freely. Everything else from policy to curriculum is aimed at facilitating this. Believe in what you deliver and fight for it. For the children. Overcome the challenges. Play can always be the centre of education.

Deputy Manager, 15 years experience

My setting has a strong play based philosophy and play is of prime importance. It is supported by management and parents and therefore there are no big challenges currently. Pressures from government in the future could be a pressure.

Outdoor Education Lead, 34 years experience

No challenge in current role. When teaching: leaders' understanding of importance of play on language development.

Early Communication Support Worker, 25 years experience

No real challenge in my role it's about enabling play.

Music therapist, 35 years experience

What emerges here is the impact of limited professional knowledge, confidence and conditions. Where adult understanding of play is underdeveloped, practitioners can fall into one of two unhelpful positions: over-directing play in ways that reduce children's agency or withdrawing without the professional judgement to recognise when intervention might deepen or sustain the play. Both create limitations, and both reflect the same underlying issue, a workforce still grappling with what skilled play facilitation requires.

Yet the contrasting examples also show that these tensions are not inevitable. Where play is protected by strong leadership, shared philosophy and professional trust, practitioners describe fewer barriers and greater confidence in maintaining play as central. This suggests that the challenge is not play itself, but the systems, cultures and workforce conditions that shape how play is understood and enacted. The question, then, is not whether practitioners value play, the findings suggest they overwhelmingly do, but whether the structures around them allow that knowledge to become practice.



Chapter 6: Patterns Across the Study

Seven themes. One argument: the profession's knowledge of play is settled. The surrounding conditions for practising it are not.

Table 6 below shows the seven themes identified across the open text responses in this study, how often they surfaced, how widely they were held, and which research questions they crossed. **Theme 1 (Child agency and intrinsic motivation)** accounts for more than a quarter of all 1,010 coded appearances and reaches 94% of participants.

The professionals contribute to a consensus here regarding what play is. **Theme 2 (Material and physical conditions)** and **Theme 3 (The workforce as a source of tension and solution)** span all four research questions. Both concern the conditions under which play happens, not professionals' beliefs about what play is.

This persistence across the study suggests that the conditions needed for successful play are under pressure more often than not. **Theme 7 (Play as right, identity, conviction)**, although narrowest in reach, is foundational in terms of what the other themes explore.



#	Theme	Total code appearances	Participants reached	RQ spread
1	Child agency and intrinsic motivation	288	83/88 (94%)	RQ1, RQ2
2	Material and physical conditions	163	65/88 (74%)	All four RQs
3	The workforce as a source of tension and solution	162	74/88 (84%)	All four RQs
4	The contested adult role	127	61/88 (69%)	RQ1, RQ2, RQ3
5	Misunderstanding as systemic challenge	102	54/88 (61%)	RQ1, RQ3, RQ4
6	Systemic and structural barriers	87	54/88 (61%)	RQ1, RQ3
7	Play as right, identity, conviction	81	51/88 (58%)	RQ1, RQ3, RQ4

Table 6: Seven confirmed themes: appearances, reach and RQ spread

The structural finding: two themes that run through everything

Theme 2 (Material and physical conditions) and **Theme 3 (The workforce as a source of tension and solution)** cross all four research questions. In **Theme 2** participants describe settings where space is insufficient, resources are underfunded, and the physical conditions that play requires remain under-resourced:

We are always wanting to improve the learning environment and lack of funding/amount of budget hinders what we are able to do. Lack of space to expand our environments also hinders this.

Headteacher, 13 years experience

The biggest challenge to supporting play in my role is space and resource constraints. This can manifest in several ways such as limited physical space for play areas or programming, insufficient funding for play-based materials and activities and difficulty adapting to changing needs and interests of the community. These constraints can limit the scope and creativity of play opportunities, making it challenging to provide engaging and inclusive experiences for children.

Children's Librarian, 7 years experience

Theme 3 (The workforce as a source of tension and solution) traces the same pressure through the workforce itself. Participants return to the concerns already covered in Chapter 5: that the workforce lacks the knowledge play requires, that structural underfunding is driving experienced practitioners out of the sector, and that what is needed is investment in qualifications, pay, and professional status:

If we have illness supply staff have not got the understanding of learning in play they want to just watch and intervene in conflict, they do not have the understanding to develop the children's learning through play

Headteacher, 25 years experience

Low pay creates low incentive for higher learning. High staff turnover and staff absence. Low image from external sources - "hair and care"

Trainer/ Assessor, 20 years experience

By raising the value of play and of early practitioners

Early Years Tutor, 29 years experience

Misunderstanding of play

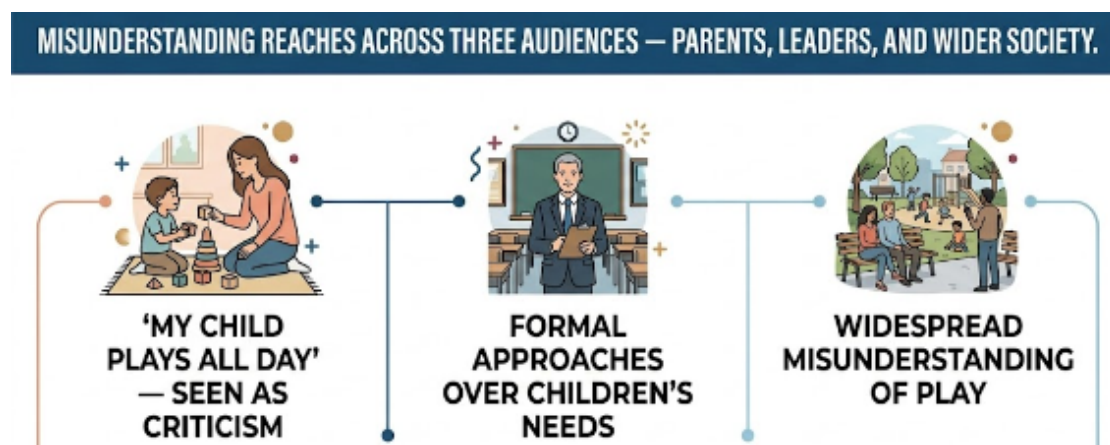


Figure 5: Who misunderstands play?

Theme 5 (Misunderstanding as systemic challenge) was mentioned by 54 of 88 participants, and identified misunderstanding by parents, leaders, and wider society as a persistent barrier. Across the responses, promoting play's value appears as a professional burden that sits alongside and competes with the work of practising it.

It's not valued as a way of learning by parents and some in leadership, "my child plays all day" is seen as a bad thing.

Early Years Tutor, 29 years experience

The biggest challenge is subject leaders lacking understanding of early years and the true value of play. They often push formal approaches that suit their CVs, not the children's needs. This undermines child-led learning, limits creativity, and ignores how play builds strong foundations for thinking, communication, and lifelong learning.

Head of Early Years, 24 years experience

An agreed upon definition of play that highlights exactly what it is. That it is important and a fundamental right. I see early years professionals disagreeing on Play. On what it means, how it is perceived.

Deputy Manager, 15 years experience

Continues to be a lot of misunderstanding in wider society about what play is and its importance.

Play Development Manager, 17 years experience

Play as a right, not as strategy

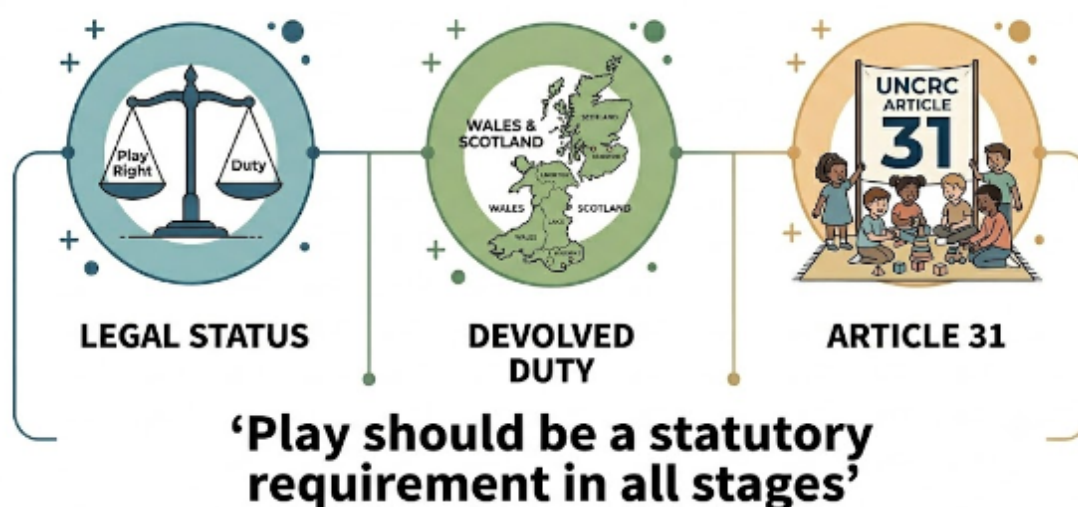


Figure 6: Play as a statutory requirement

Theme 7 (Play as right, identity, conviction), the narrowest in reach at 51 of 88 participants, goes further than describing what play is or what prevents it. These participants name play as something children are owed and is their right.

Play should be a statutory requirement in all stages, not just 30 mins playtime in a bare playground but rich play afforded the time it requires. This is fundamental to supporting children's self regulation, problem solving, conflict resolution, core body strength to allow comfortable sitting and pencil control.

Outdoor Education Lead, 34 years experience

Theme 4 (The contested adult role) was identified across 127 coded appearances and reached 61 of the 88 participants (69%). It crossed three research questions (RQ1, RQ2 and RQ3), making it one of the most widely shared themes in the study. Its significance lies not simply in what participants said adults should do during play, but in the tensions they identified around adult involvement.

Across the data, participants did not describe the adult as absent from play. Nor did they position effective practice as a choice between child-led play and adult teaching. Instead, their responses point towards a more complex and professionally demanding role: adults observing carefully, knowing children well, recognising when learning is emerging, creating enabling conditions, and making judgements about when intervention might extend play and when it might interrupt it.

This matters because the data complicates any simplistic understanding of play as children being left entirely to their own devices. Participants recognised that adults have an important pedagogical role, but that this role requires sensitivity. Adult involvement can enrich children's play through thoughtful interactions, modelling, questioning, resourcing and the introduction of new possibilities. However, intervention can also alter the direction, ownership and purpose of play. The professional judgement lies in recognising the difference.

Theme 4 therefore reveals an important tension within the study. Participants strongly value children's agency and intrinsic motivation, yet they also recognise their own responsibility for teaching, supporting development and creating rich learning experiences. These positions are not necessarily contradictory. Rather, they demonstrate the complexity of play pedagogy, where adult intentionality and children's agency must continually be negotiated.

This also connects Theme 4 directly to the workforce findings in Theme 3. Knowing how and when to participate in children's play is not an instinctive or low-skilled practice. It depends upon knowledge of child development, curriculum, play, relationships and individual children, alongside the professional confidence to make decisions in the moment. Where practitioners lack appropriate training, experience, time or professional autonomy, this responsive adult role becomes considerably more difficult to sustain.

The contested adult role therefore sits at the centre of the study's distinction between knowing and doing. The data suggests that professionals broadly recognise the importance of protecting children's ownership of play while also understanding that adults have pedagogical responsibilities within it. What remains less settled is how this balance can be enacted consistently within systems that may privilege visible adult direction, predetermined outcomes and easily evidenced learning.

Theme 4 consequently raises a question that extends beyond individual practitioner technique: what conditions enable adults to exercise the professional judgement that play pedagogy requires? If high-quality play depends upon adults being able to notice, interpret, respond and sometimes deliberately refrain from intervening, then workforce knowledge, professional trust and pedagogical autonomy become conditions of play itself.

Play as a statutory duty as it is in Wales and Scotland via Play Sufficiency model. Funding to set up more quality play opportunities for children. Child-friendly town/city initiatives I.e. children considered at all levels of planning, development and resourcing.

Play Development Manager, 17 years experience

Children are controlled and their civil liberties where freedom , expression and autonomy are concerned are being eroded. It is our job as educators (especially in the early years where I work) to facilitate and protect their right to play. To be free to learn.

Deputy Manager, 15 years experience

Play is paramount to everything the child is. It is a safe space to explore and make sense of the world around them and it is disappearing fast.

Head of Early Years, 30 years experience

Keep up the good work, there has to be change, there has to be..... right?"

Deputy Manager/Forest School Lead, 5 years experience

The final quote by the Deputy Manager/Forest School Lead is the only insight provided where professional conviction sits alongside uncertainty about whether change is possible. This may be the most honest articulation of the gap this study has traced throughout, that is, the gap between what this professional community knows about play, and what the policy environment currently permits.

The central argument

The data in this study has made visible a distinction between knowing and doing. The professionals in this study do not lack a settled understanding of what play is for. What they lack are the structural conditions in which that understanding can be enacted consistently. Less settled practice is not a professional failure. It is evidence of what happens when professional knowledge outpaces the systems built to support it. The recommendations that follow address that gap directly.

The recommendations that follow do not address this gap abstractly. They name specific structural decisions about the curriculum, the workforce, and public understanding that the data point toward.



Chapter 7: Recommendations

Three commitments. Each derives directly from the study's findings.

The profession has a settled understanding of what play is for. The conditions for practising it consistently are not settled. Curriculum pressure was the most frequently cited structural barrier. Professional knowledge ranks last as a personal barrier on the scale instrument but first as a collective challenge in open-text responses. 54 of 88 participants identified misunderstanding by parents, leaders, and wider society as a persistent barrier- one that adds to the professional burden of enacting play. The three commitments that follow address each in turn.

Commitment 1: Sustained investment in professional knowledge and culture for those working with children.

Primary audience: central government and sector leadership bodies.

Drivers: workforce retention and training

81% rated adult understanding as the single most important condition for successful play. The same study found workforce knowledge to be the sector's most named collective challenge.

Practitioners in this sample are highly experienced and largely confident in their own understanding. When they name a knowledge problem, they locate it in the workforce around them, for example in supply staff, in newly qualified practitioners and in colleagues who have not had access to the sustained professional learning that turns knowledge into practice. Confidence in the self, but concern about the collective coexists in the data. The structural issue underneath this is retention.

Training that reaches practitioners who then leave the sector before the knowledge consolidates does not accumulate. It disappears with the person who held it and is compounded by an absence of professional infrastructure. Three actions follow:

1. Pay and contractual stability need addressing as prerequisites for knowledge retention.
2. Play pedagogy, including the contested adult role question, needs embedding in CPD frameworks that reach practitioners both in post and qualifying.
3. Professional learning communities at local level, where shared understanding of what facilitation looks like can develop across settings, but need sustained investment.

Commitment 2: Reform the structural conditions.

Primary audience: the Department for Education.

Drivers: Inspection and curriculum guidance

41% of practitioners identify curriculum demands as a frequent barrier, describing them as a daily constraint on what they can do, regardless of what they know.

The transition from EYFS into Key Stage 1 is where play practice and policy currently end. Whilst challenges exist across the early years phase relating to curriculum pressure, resource constraints, and workforce knowledge gaps, Chapter 5, highlighted concerns regarding what comes next. Some practitioners describe play provision losing its mandate entirely and children arriving in Year 1 where child-led practice has no entitlement, no curriculum protection, and no guarantee of inspection recognition. The Wales and Scotland Play Sufficiency frameworks are named directly in the data as evidence that statutory protection for play is achievable within UK jurisdictions. These are not aspirational comparisons to Scandinavian systems. They are existing policy architecture, in the same jurisdiction, providing the model.

Three actions follow.

1. Assessment measures that reduce play to a compliance activity, including the Good Level of Development and the Baseline Assessment, need removing or substantially revising.
2. The right to play needs extending beyond the EYFS boundary into Key Stage 1, with clear guidance.
3. Ofsted frameworks need to recognise child-led practice, alongside practitioners' depth of knowledge and understanding, as evidence of quality, not as an absence of structure.

Commitment 3: Build shared understanding beyond the profession

Primary audience: Higher education, Training and education providers, local authority parent engagement leads, and professional body leadership.

Drivers: what is taught about play before professionals enter settings, and what is communicated to families once children arrive.

54 of 88 participants named misunderstanding by parents, school leaders, or wider society, as a barrier. This adds to the professional burden of enacting play.

The misunderstanding is not only external. This study found that 83% of respondents agreed play is child-led and spontaneous, while 69% also accepted that it can include structured learning activities. The profession holds more than one definition simultaneously. If the professional community cannot produce a shared account of what it is arguing for, its advocacy rests on contested ground. Three actions therefore follow.

1. The evidence base for play pedagogy, including the professional debate about the adult role, needs embedding in all early years and education related programmes, so that newly qualified practitioners are equipped to articulate why play matters.
2. Accessible, locally tailored materials for families need developing in partnership with settings, rather than handed down from national bodies.
3. Definitional clarity needs treating as a sector-level strategic priority, the misunderstanding is partly internal, and the profession cannot advocate clearly for what it has not defined clearly.

Further research

This study identifies what the profession believes about play. It cannot establish with certainty what children themselves experience within the play spaces adults create, protect or constrain. Every finding in this report is mediated through professional interpretation: what play is for, what successful play looks like, and what threatens it. This is both a strength and a limitation. It gives access to deep professional knowledge but leaves unexamined the child's own account of play as lived experience.

Future research must therefore move beyond adult perception and centre children as knowledge holders. This should not be treated as a supplementary strand, but as a methodological priority, using participatory and child-centred approaches capable of capturing children's meanings, intentions and feelings within play. Such work would deepen understanding of play not simply as an educational process, but as an experience of agency, belonging and identity.

The findings also raise further questions about difference and inclusion. While this study reveals broad professional consensus, it does not adequately explore how play is experienced and understood in relation to neurodivergence, disability, trauma, or cultural variation. These are not marginal concerns. They sit at the centre of what equitable play practice requires. Further inquiry is needed to examine whether dominant professional narratives of play are sufficiently expansive to include the full diversity of childhood experience.

Finally, the workforce itself warrants closer study. The recurring tension between training, retention and practice wisdom suggests that understanding play is not only a pedagogical issue but a structural one. Future research should explore how professional knowledge of play develops over time, how it is sustained, and what is lost when workforce instability disrupts that process.

Conclusion

This report began with a simple question: what do professionals working with children aged 0–8 understand about play, and what do their experiences reveal about the current state of practice?

The findings present a clear and compelling picture. Professionals are not divided about the value of play. Across roles, sectors and phases of education, participants consistently described play as central to children's learning, development, wellbeing, relationships and identity. Observation, responsiveness and respect for children's agency emerged as defining features of high-quality practice. The question of whether play matters has, in many respects, already been answered.

At the same time, the study reveals a much less settled picture of practice. Curriculum pressures, accountability measures, workforce instability and varying levels of professional knowledge continue to shape what is possible in everyday settings. The findings suggest that many professionals know what they believe children need but do not always feel able to enact that understanding consistently.

The role of the adult remains an area of ongoing discussion and, rather than viewing this diversity as problematic, the study suggests that it reflects the richness and complexity of the field itself. Play has never belonged to a single tradition, framework or pedagogical approach. What matters is not absolute agreement, but a shared commitment to preserving children's agency, curiosity, joy and sense of belonging.

The title of this report reflects its central message. There is a settled purpose. Professionals understand why play matters. There is, however, a less settled practice. Until the systems surrounding children are willing to protect the time, space and relationships that play requires, the gap between principle and practice will remain.

References

- British Educational Research Association. (2024). *Ethical guidelines for educational research* (5th ed.). British Educational Research Association. <https://www.bera.ac.uk/publication/ethical-guidelines-for-educational-research-2024>
- Bradbury, A. (2013). *Understanding the assessment of young children in early childhood*. Routledge.
- Bradbury, A., & Hare, M. (2025). Play, policy and power: A report reviewing literature: Early childhood education in England (2010–2025), from https://www.early-years-reviews.com/_files/ugd/c871c5_a326f60ab8264461a68ba86e76309554.pdf
- Bradbury, A., Wright, D., Boardman, K., Thompson, P., Jarvis, P., Cowley, S., Veale, V., Wayne, D., Swailes, R., Scollan, A., Grimmer, T., & Renshaw, K. (2025) *Play Matters*. Available at: <https://www.early-years-reviews.com/play-matters>
- Colilles, S., Pascal, C., & Bertram, T. (2026). A funds of knowledge approach to explore how play-based pedagogies support mixed ethnic identity formation: listening to children's perspectives. *European Early Childhood Education Research Journal*, 1-18. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1350293X.2026.2640023>.
- Early Years Coalition. (2021). Birth to Five Matters: Non-statutory guidance for the Early Years Foundation Stage. Early Education.
- Else, P. (2014). *Making Sense of Play: Supporting Children in Their Play* (2nd ed.). Open University Press.
- Gray, P. (2013). *Free to Learn: Why Unleashing the Instinct to Play Will Make Our Children Happier, More Self-Reliant, and Better Students for Life*. Basic Books.
- King, P., & Newstead, S. (2017). *Researching Play from a Playwork Perspective*. Routledge.
- Lincoln, Y. S., & Guba, E. G. (1985). *Naturalistic inquiry*. Sage Publications.
- Lundy, L. (2007). "'Voice' is not enough: Conceptualising Article 12 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child." *British Educational Research Journal*, 33(6), 927–942. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01411920701657033>
- Meechan, D. (2026). Combining numbers and perspectives: Using a Scale, Choice and Insight (SCI) approach for online survey research. *Methodological Innovations*, 19(1), 10–20. <https://doi.org/10.1177/20597991251391462>
- Moss, P. (2023). *Indefensible: A Defence of Public Education*. UCL Press.
- Nutbrown, C. (2011). *Threads of Thinking: Young Children Learning and the Role of Early Education* (4th ed.). SAGE.
- Pellegrini, A. D. (2009). *The Role of Play in Human Development*. Oxford University Press.
- Pyle, A., DeLuca, C. and Danniels, E. (2017). A scoping review of research on play-based pedagogies in kindergarten education. *Review of Education* 5: 311–51. <https://doi.org/10.1002/rev3.3097>
- Siraj-Blatchford, I. (2009). Conceptualising progression in the pedagogy of play and sustained shared thinking in early childhood education: A Vygotskian perspective. *Educational and Child Psychology*, 26(2), 77–89. <https://doi.org/10.53842/edcp.26.2.77>
- Sproule, L. Walsh, G and McGuinness, C. (2019) More than 'just play': picking out three dimensions of a balanced early years pedagogy, *International Journal of Early Years Education*, 27:4, 409-422, DOI: 10.1080/09669760.2019.1628011
- Thompson, P. (2024) Play in Early Childhood. In Fitzgerald, D., & Maconochie, E. (eds) *Early Childhood Studies: A student's guide* (2nd ed.). London: Sage, pp.121-133.
- United Nations Children's Fund (1989) *The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child*. Available at: [UNICEF](https://www.unicef.org/).

References continued

- Whitebread, D., Basilio, M., Kuvalja, M., & Verma, M. (2017). *The importance of play: A report on the value of children's play with a series of policy recommendations*. Toy Industries of Europe.
- Wood, E. (2014). Free Choice and Free Play in Early Childhood Education: Troubling the Discourse. *International Journal of Early Years Education*, 22(1), 4–18. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09669760.2013.830562>
- Wood, E. (2020). Developing Integrated Pedagogical Approaches to Play and Learning. In P. Smith & J. Roopnarine (Eds.), *The Cambridge Handbook of Play* (2nd ed.). Cambridge University Press.
- Yogman, M., Garner, A., Hutchinson, J., Hirsh-Pasek, K., Golinkoff, R. M., Committee on Psychosocial Aspects of Child and Family Health, & Council on Communications and Media. (2018). The power of play: A pediatric role in enhancing development in young children. *Pediatrics*, 142(3), e20182058. <https://doi.org/10.1542/peds.2018-2058>
- Zosh, J. M., Hopkins, E. J., Jensen, H., Liu, C., Neale, D., Hirsh-Pasek, K., Solis, S. L., & Whitebread, D. (2022). *Learning through play: A review of the evidence*. LEGO Foundation.