

Play and Poverty in Fife

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Introduction

Section One: Methodology

The research set out to explore and understand the following objectives.

- Understand the role of play and how play is conceptualized and understood within low income households.
- Identify ways in which low income families can overcome barriers to play and share good practice.
- Identify and promote policy recommendations to support play within low income households for service providers and practitioners working with families.
- Identify support needs and barriers around play for service delivery and policy and for low income families.

Approach

Qualitative study using a three-strand approach. This research was undertaken through the Gateway project which is funded by the Big Lottery Fund to improve the future of families where the eldest child is in primary school. The partnership works in Levenmouth in the region of Fife in Scotland, an area with pockets of multiple deprivation. The Gateway provides early intervention support to individual families, family learning, and a volunteer programme. Supporting families through play is a core part of family learning work. The partnership is aware of some of the difficulties families face in supporting their children's play and as the work focuses on the first few years of school, partners are interested in understanding the impact of poverty in the home.

Stage One:

1. Stakeholder discussion of play and supporting low-income families to draw up case vignettes.

Stage Two:

2. Two focus group with children using creative mapping tools system to discuss their play needs and experiences.
3. Interviews with low income families using case vignettes

The first stage of the research, a stakeholder discussion, was undertaken with local practitioners and provided an opportunity to establish a base line of play within Fife for low-income families. The group was structured to draw out key challenges that practitioners perceived as facing as low-income families and looked to draw upon understandings of current provisions and services for play. Within this discussion, stakeholders helped draw up vignettes of scenarios facing families in low income and play. The following vignettes were used.

Scenario A: Lone Parent

Sam aged 25 has received a letter received from school to say that a family fun evening is being run in the local community centre. Sam is a lone parent and is the full time carer for three children a 1 year old baby, a 3 year old and a 6 year old.

Sam is living on a low income and is in private rented accommodation and has some debts. Sam doesn't have any family living nearby. Sam has some qualifications but has not worked since before the children were born.

Scenario B: Lone Parent

Jamie, 35 on a low income, and has a boy aged 8, girl aged 6, and a 3 year old. The oldest boy is struggling to make friends and is playing up at school. He in the process of being tested for autism. Jamie's ex partner lives nearby but is affected by the bedroom tax and has lost some of their benefit as the children stay with Jamie most of the time. Jamie's ex partner has remarried and the children have step siblings

Scenario A: Coupled Parent

Sam aged 25 has received a letter received from school to say that a family fun evening is being run in the local community centre. Sam stays at home and is the full time carer for the children, a 1 year old baby, a 3 year old and a 6 year old. Her partner is looking for work.

The family are living on a low income and are in private rented accommodation. They have some debts. They do not have any family living nearby. They have some qualifications but neither have worked since before the children were born.

Scenario B: Coupled Parent

Jamie, 35 lives and partner are on a low income, and have a boy 8, girl 6, and 3. The oldest boy is struggling to make friends and is playing up at school. He in the process of being tested for autism. The family are classed as under occupying the house and are subject to the bedroom tax.

Stage Two:

Ten semi-structured interviews were conducted with low income parent households. These interviews will draw upon the vignettes from the stakeholder discussion to provide a probing tool for discussing the sensitive issues of low income. Interviews were stratified across two parent and lone parent households.

Stage Three:

Two focus groups with children aged which will use interactive mapping tools to understand play space within Levenmouth and within the home environments of children. This will focus on understanding play in the home and in the wider environment.

Literature Review: Parents, Poverty and Play

Economic Importance of Play

Play is seen as an integral part of the early years agenda and as well as being important in the efforts by governments to focus on preventative spending. Economic modeling conducted by the Scottish Government has indicated that early year's investment and spending can reduce acute spending later on. The evidence showed that £1 invested in preventative measures can save £9 on more acute services in later life¹.

Importance of Play

Play is widely considered to be an important part of child development, in relation to building positive pathways for children and communities. Play can take various forms including structured and unstructured activities as well as across multiple environments such as indoor and outdoor play. For parents and care givers, play is also important in developing and enhancing interpersonal relationships with children.

Under the United Nations Convention for the Rights of the Child (1990) there are specific articles that are relevant to children and young peoples play, participation and the environment in which they live . The UNCRC contains Article 31 which sets out “the right of the child to rest and leisure and to engage in play and recreational activities appropriate to the age of the child and to participate fully in cultural life and arts”.² This illustrates the importance of play within a rights based context.

Play is recognised as vital in relation to cognitive development, resilience and socialisation. A range of evidence and research highlights that play is essential to healthy development from birth to adulthood. Play helps to build and contribute to children's capacity for learning and improve the development of physical, cognitive, social and emotional skills. Improved health and educational outcomes also produce economic and preventative benefits to wider society in terms of well-being and productivity. Indeed, this has been highlighted by the Chief Medical Officer, Sir Harry Burns, who states “Investing in children's play is one of the most important things we can do to improve children's health and wellbeing in Scotland.”³

In early childhood, play has been shown to influence the way the child's brain develops. Changes in neural and chemical reactions in the brain as a result of play have been shown to impact on development of physical and mental capabilities of a child.⁴

¹ Scottish Parliament (2013) ‘Official report Meeting of the Parliament Thursday 31 October 2013 Session 4’

² Articles 3,12,13,15,24 are also relevant in the context of children's access to play.

³ Scottish Government (2013) ‘Play Strategy for Scotland Our Vision’

⁴ Nderson-McNamee, J. and Bailey, S. 2010. *The Importance of Play in Childhood Development*. [e-book] Montana: Montana State University. pp. p1 -3. <http://msuextension.org/publications/HomeHealthandFamily/MT201003HR.pdf>.

Play also has an important impact on socialization. The way in which parents play with their children can have an effect on their behaviour as they develop. There is some evidence that children whose parents play with them are less likely to have behaviour problems later on.⁵

On a wider developmental level, play also impacts on the resilience of children and young people. Resilience can be defined as “the process of, capacity for, or outcome of successful adaptation despite challenging or threatening circumstances”.⁶ For children, play can be a mechanism for enhancing and building resilience as it can provide a tool for expressing of emotions and exploring and dealing with challenging circumstances such as adversity or trauma. Evidence shows that play and stress are connected: children’s capacity to engage with play is significantly reduced in situations of severe stress and diminishes their capacity to build resilience to cope with stress.⁷ Therefore play can provide an important tool for supporting children to deal with wider life difficulties such as poverty or family breakdown. For children in low income households play is of significant importance, allowing them to adapt to challenging life circumstances.

Defining Play

Play can be defined in a number of different ways. On a simplistic level play can be viewed as 'A physical or mental leisure activity that is undertaken purely for enjoyment or amusement and has no other objective.'⁸ Play can also be a tool for learning or development and can be undertaken by individuals or groups of children together. It can be planned as a fixed activity or unstructured and free. Play can take place in both the home and other contexts such as schools, nurseries and youth clubs. An understanding of the wider aspects of play is essential to ensure that there are opportunities for play and that children are not excluded from play by barriers such as lack of affordability or lack of access.

Barriers to play

The Scottish Government has recently launched a new Play Strategy and Play action plan. The strategy outlines the importance of play for children in Scotland. The strategy

⁵ Play Scotland (2011) 'Getting it right for Play The Power of Play : an evidence base'.

<http://www.playscotland.org/wp-content/uploads/assets/Power-of-Play.pdf>

⁶ Action for Children (2007) 'Literature Review Resilience in Children and Young People'

http://www.actionforchildren.org.uk/media/145693/resilience_in_children_in_young_people.pdf

⁷ Bernard Van Leer foundation (2010) 'Children’s rights to play: an examination of the importance of play in the lives of children world wide'.

⁸ Play Therapy UK (2007) '*Defintion of Play*'. Online url

<http://www.playtherapy.org.uk/AboutPlayTherapy/PlayDefinition1.ht>

recognises that play can present financial challenges to parents on low incomes, particularly in relation to the increased importance and focus on structured play opportunities (dance classes, music lessons, drama, etc). It also highlights consumer pressures placed on families to purchase expensive toys and activities for children⁹.

The Strategy also recognises the importance of 'free play opportunities' as beneficial to parents as well as the importance of activities that do not cost a lot of money. Schemes such as PlayTalkRead have been included¹⁰ as evidence of positive effects on Scotland's communities.

The strategy acknowledges the challenges that households can face such as long term health conditions, physical or learning disabilities, unemployment or bereavement and changing family circumstances such as lone parenthood. Such changing circumstances also put households at a higher risk of poverty.

Evidence from the recent 'Surviving Poverty: the Impact of Lone Parenthood' (2013) research conducted in Fife found that 82.5 % of lone parents surveyed indicated that cutting back on social and leisure activities was one of the key coping mechanisms adopted to deal with reductions in income. The research also highlighted pressures put on family relationships when children had to miss out on extra curricular activities due to low income. The research also highlighted that even for low cost activities, such as a child having a friend round after school to play, presented hidden costs to parents such as finding money for snacks for additional children.

This research was conducted during 2012, and financial pressures for low-income families are likely to increase. Recent welfare changes such as the 'bedroom tax' will have placed additional pressures on low income parents. Figures for Levenmouth as a whole have illustrated that almost half of all council tenants are in rent arrears.¹¹

Previous work carried out by the Poverty Alliance as part of the *Bridging the Policy Gap* project highlighted the importance of adequate play resources that were accessible and inclusive.¹² Parents taking part in the project noted that even small fees could prevent some children from taking part in play activities. Earlier research by Save the Children showed similar findings.¹³ It also showed that, in poorer neighbourhoods, other barriers exist including fears about child safety and poor quality of open space and public parks provision. This is supported by figures from the 2012 Scottish Household Survey which indicates that there are marked differences in feelings of safety in areas of high

⁹ Scottish Government (2013) *'Play strategy for Scotland :Our Vision'*

¹⁰ Scottish Government (2013) *'Play strategy for Scotland :Our Vision'*

¹¹ The Courier (2103) *'Levenmouth tenants Rent arrears a ticking time bomb'*

<http://www.thecourier.co.uk/news/local/fife/levenmouth-tenants-rent-arrears-ticking-time-bomb-1.97542>

¹² S. Mackenzie (2008) *Report of the Swansea Peer Review: The Children's Play Strategy for Swansea*, Glasgow: Poverty Alliance

¹³ Wager, F., Bailey, N., Day, R., Hamilton, D., Hill, M., and King, C. (2007) *Serving children? The impact of poverty on children's experiences of services*. Edinburgh: Save the Children.

deprivation. Those in the least deprived areas of Scotland are more likely to say it is safer for children to travel on their own to play areas than those in the 15% most deprived areas of Scotland¹⁴.

The research also highlighted differences of opinion on when children should be allowed to play in different areas unsupervised. Parents who stayed in the 15% most deprived areas, believed children should be slightly older before being allowed to play unsupervised as illustrated in the table below.

| Households containing children aged 6 to 12 | 15% most deprived | Rest of Scotland | Scotland |
|---|-------------------|------------------|------------|
| Playground | 9.8 | 9.2 | 9.3 |
| Park | 10.3 | 9.4 | 9.6 |
| Football or other games pitch | 10.2 | 9.4 | 9.5 |
| Field or other open space | 10.6 | 9.2 | 9.4 |
| School playground | * | 9.3 | 9.4 |
| Natural environment / wooded * | * | 10.3 | 10.5 |
| Street/Road | 9.1 | 8.5 | 8.6 |
| <i>Base (minimum)</i> | <i>40</i> | <i>380</i> | <i>660</i> |

Play can present particular challenges for low income families at specific times of the year for example during the school holidays when parents may be facing additional pressures on their income as a result of losing free school meals¹⁵ and when saving for new school year uniforms¹⁶.

Different family types may also face different pressures and challenges in regards to play. For example lone parent families are more likely to be affected by time constraints or 'time poverty' within the household.¹⁷ This is in contrast to the experience of two parent households where roles can be shared.

Families with children with disabilities may also face particular challenges. Research by the National Children's Bureau highlighted that families with disabled children are more likely to live in poverty and experience social exclusion, and that this exclusion becomes

¹⁴ Scottish Household Survey (2012) 'Chapter 7 Education and Young People'
<http://www.scotland.gov.uk/Resource/0043/00432400.pdf>

¹⁵ Barnardos (2004) 'Food Poverty in the School Holidays' <http://www.barnardos.org.uk/foodpovertyreportv3.qxd-2.pdf>

¹⁶ Barnardos (2009) 'Below the breadline : a year in the life of families in poverty'
http://www.barnardos.org.uk/11325_breadline_report_final.pdf

¹⁷ Gingerbread (2009) 'Theres only one of me' http://www.gingerbread.org.uk/file_download.aspx?id=7347.

all the more apparent as disabled young people grow up and want to take part in the same sort of activities as their non-disabled peers.¹⁸ Pressures on disabled families are likely to increase with changes such as Universal Credit. Research by The Children's Society 2012 highlighted problems particularly for families receiving the mid rate care component of Disability Living Allowance (DLA) which would place further pressures on household budgets.

On a wider level, children in persistently poor families were seen to have worse outcomes than those children in temporary poor households. For example, children in poverty were more likely to have accidents or injuries, and suffer from social, emotional and behavioural difficulties the longer they had been poor¹⁹.

Access to Play Space

The world health organisation recommends at least one hour of daily physical activity for children aged 5–17.²⁰ Access to green space is also vital, evidence has shown that contact with nature has been found to restore children's ability to concentrate, which is the basis for improved cognition and psychological well-being²¹.

Recent figures from Growing up in Scotland illustrated that 88% of parents of children aged less than five reported having access to a park or a play area locally and 40% -50% of households reported having access to a park or play area locally²².

Play and Physical activity

The relationship between play and physical activity has taken increased importance within health policy. Despite this there are still significant challenges in relation to the level of activity that children take. Figures show that 57 % of Scottish children were required to play outdoors for at least thirty minutes for at least five times in the last week.²³

Play and Risk

Recent evidence has illustrated that within western societies attitudes towards risk and safety are currently impeding on children's unsupervised play. Evidence indicates that over supervision and over scheduling of children's times are examples of this.

¹⁸ National Children's Bureau (nd) '*Inclusive Play Factsheet*'

¹⁹ Barnes, M., Chanfreau, J., Tomaszewski, W., (2010) '*Growing up in Scotland: The Circumstances of Persistently Poor Children*' <http://www.scotland.gov.uk/Publications/2010/04/26095519/0>

²⁰ United Nations (2012) '*The state of the nations children*'

http://www.unicef.org/sowc2012/pdfs/SOWC%202012-Main%20Report_EN_13Mar2012.pdf

²¹ *ibid*

²² Growing up in Scotland cited in University of Strathclyde et al (2013) '*Childs Play 2013 Active Healthy Kids Scotland Report Card*'

²³ Scottish Health survey cited in University of Strathclyde et al (2013) '*Childs Play 2013 Active Healthy Kids Scotland Report Card*'

Play deprivation

Play deprivation is another aspect of child poverty. Play deprivation refers to the notion that not playing may deprive children of experiences that are regarded as developmentally essential and result in those affected being both biologically and socially disabled²⁴.

McKendrick argues that play features in several child deprivation indicators and can be described as play affordances “i.e. situations which afford the opportunity for children to experience play in a range of settings. The play affordance indicators are having sufficient bedroom space according to child and gender, celebrating special occasions such as birthdays, holidays away from other family members, having friends visit home and school trips; going swimming regularly, having a hobby or leisure activity and owning leisure equipment such as bicycles.²⁵

Policy Context and Play

There has been a heightened focus on within policy on children and young people. The recent Children and Young People (Scotland) bill, the National Parenting Strategy, the Early Years Framework and ‘Getting it Right for Every Child’ framework and the Child Poverty Strategy and the Curriculum for Excellence. All of these focus on the importance of achieving positive outcomes for Children and Young People across Scotland.

Within the National Parenting Strategy there are clear messages on the importance of supporting parents to be effective caregivers. It had a clear focus on play and the barriers that parents and care givers face. It highlights that parents, would like more information, along with affordable opportunities for play for children and young people of all ages²⁶. The strategy outlined a number of actions including Play Talk Read campaign, and investing in the Go2Play investing in charities to provide free play in local communities for 5- 13 year olds, with many projects focused on outdoor play. Parents are encouraged to volunteer which can further increase confidence, health and employability²⁷.

The Early Years Framework, published in 2010, focuses on pre birth to 8 years old emphasise the importance of multi agency working across sectors. There is a focus on preventative change through the Early Years Change fund. We have also seen a focus on prevention through ‘Getting it Right for Every Child’ (GIFREC) which implements an

²⁴ Play Wales (2013) ‘*Play Deprivation Facts and Indicators*’
<http://www.playwales.org.uk/login/uploaded/documents/INFORMATION%20SHEETS/play%20deprivation.pdf>

²⁵ McKendrick (2013) ‘*Poverty and Play: Issues and Indicators*’

²⁶ Scottish Government (2012) ‘*National Parenting Strategy*’ P20

²⁷ Scottish Government (2012) ‘*National Parenting Strategy*’ P22

approach focused on how practitioners across all services for children and adults meet the needs of children and young people, working together where necessary to ensure they reach their full potential. It promotes a shared approach and accountability that:

- builds solutions with and around children, young people and families
- enables children and young people to get the help they need when they need it
- supports a positive shift in culture, systems and practice
- involves working better together to improve life chances for children, young people and families

The recent annual report on the Child Poverty strategy illustrates the progress that has been made in tackling poverty. This again emphasises the importance of prevention and early years. This report highlights that children living in households with certain characteristics are more than likely to live in low income and material deprivation.

These include:

- living in a large family.
- living in a lone parent household
- having disabled family members particular where there is family members in no receipt of disability benefits.
- living in a household headed by some ethnic minorities²⁸.

The strategy focuses on a number of key measures and objectives including reducing children's deprivation²⁹.

Overall, this review has illustrated that play is fundamental to the wellbeing of children and young people and their families. The relationship between play and socio economic status is complex but it's clear that there are barriers and challenges that must be understood and tackled in order to support children and family needs around play and to reduce the negative impacts of poverty.

²⁸ Scottish Government (2013) *'Annual Report for the Child Poverty Strategy for Scotland'* p7

²⁹ Scottish Government (2013) *'Annual Report for the Child Poverty Strategy for Scotland'* p10

Research Findings: Supporting Play in and around the home - the view of practitioners

This chapter will outline the key research findings. This research illustrated a number of areas that impacted on play in and around the home.

A stakeholder discussion was held with practitioners, these were drawn from across services working with children and young people. They were asked to reflect on the relationship between poverty and play. This discussion highlighted a number of issues.

Summary

- Play provides multiple benefits for children and families. Increased recognition of the value of play across families but challenges and barriers were highlighted by practitioners supporting play in families experiencing disadvantage and difficult life circumstances.
- Consumer pressures place challenges on parents in terms of expectations around play.
- Supporting play requires a holistic approach looking at needs of families as a whole. Recognition of financial barriers and impacts are critical to understanding household dynamics and how this may in turn impact on play.

Play and Society

Stakeholders emphasised the importance of play and its benefits for children, parents or caregivers and communities as a whole. It was seen a crucial way of the promotion of child development.

Play was seen as an important tool for learning and for social and emotional well being for children and for promoting positive relationship both with other children and with parents or care givers. Stakeholders discussed the need for children to get exposed to different types of play activity such as free play and outdoor play.

It was highlighted there has been a positive shift in the value that services working with children attach to the importance to play and the recognition of this within policy and practice. However despite this there were challenges for practitioners within the current context: pressures arising from unemployment meant that was difficult to prioritise play in some households. These pressures were perceived to have increased in recent years as a result of austerity and the wider economic downturn.

Recent findings from UNICEF (2013) on child well-being indicated that the UK was ranked 16 out of 25 countries in terms of ranking on aspects of well-being. The UK had

risen up overall but had been criticised for its policies impacting on children in families affected by poverty.³⁰

Other research conducted by the Family and Parenting Institute (2012) discussed the impacts of 'austerity' on budgets for leisure and participation. Families reported the increased importance of leisure activities in the home.³¹

Gender and Play

The impact of gender on play in and around the home was key theme to emerge. Gender refers to the socially constructed roles, behaviours, activities, and attributes that a given society considers appropriate for men and women.³²

Research suggests that from an early age children's understanding of gender is influenced by their experiences with their family, culture and lifestyle, as well as by the broader community, child care environments and the media.³³ This can often be a key factor in shaping the play experiences that children have.

Stakeholders discussed issues around gender roles and play. Gender roles as portrayed in the media and wider society were felt to influence play within the home. Play was not always gender neutral and stakeholders spoke of parents and caregivers encouraging play reflecting traditional gender roles with boys being taking in active roles and girls taking part in play that for example mimicked caring roles. Practitioners discussed that supporting parents and caregivers to be able to facilitate gender-neutral play was required.

The issues of gender and play has gained wider prominence, with a recent campaign to 'Let Toys be Toys' which has seen an increasing number of manufacturers focused on changing the marketing of toys. This subject of gender segregation and children's toys was debated within Westminster as part of a wider debate on the potential impact of play on gender roles and career choices across gender roles³⁴.

Play and Consumerism

Practitioners highlighted the commercialisation of play. It was argued that parents and caregivers were subject to wider pressures from the society they lived in. It was perceived that play had become more commodified and parents and caregivers were

³⁰ UNICEF (2013) *'Report Card 2011 Child Well Being in Rich Countries'*

³¹ Family and Parent Institute (2012) *'Understanding Families in an age of austerity'*

³² World Health Organisation (nd) *'What do we mean by sex and gender?'*

³³ Putting Children First, the magazine of the National Childcare Accreditation Council (NCAC) Issue 31 September 2009 (Pages 14 – 16)

³⁴ Hansard 5th February 2014 ; Column 137WH *'Children's Toys and Gender Specific Marketing'*

http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201314/cmhansrd/cm140205/halltext/140205h0002.htm#140205h0002.htm_snew49

influenced by a commercialised and consumerist approach to play. Television and media generally was seen as contributing to pressure on parents and caregivers.

Commercialisation of childhood has been a growing area of research over the last few years. A recent review of evidence conducted by the Department of Education within England cited evidence on the market for goods and services for children is estimated to be in the region of £100 billion a year if childcare and education is included. They argued there is some evidence that children's influence on family spending is increasing, as well as their own spending power.³⁵ This had consequences in advertising and so on being targeted at children and parents as business try and influence household spending.

The role and influence of commercialisation can have other more hidden impacts such as stigma, of social status and social identity. Consumer goods such as technology and branded goods can play a part in reinforcing social divisions between the 'have' or 'have nots'. At specific points in a child's life course such as secondary school this is often of increased importance³⁶. Use of symbolism of brands is of a higher importance amongst those from deprived neighbourhoods and in particular in areas of mixed income³⁷.

Related to wider issues around spending on play, practitioner's spoke of seasonal pressures such as religious holidays and birthday were occasions where parents could often feel pressure to provide expensive consumer goods for their children.

Practitioners spoke that for families on low incomes the pressures was often more difficult as parents would worry about their children being left out or bullied for not having the similar toys and games as other children. This is supported by wider research conducted by Ridge (2002) which discussed income related bullying³⁸.

Research by the Children's Society found that 14% of them had experienced some form of bullying as a result of living in a low income³⁹. It was argued that buying second hand goods and toys passed across families from older to younger siblings was not what children wanted and that parents and care givers were under pressure to buy new toys.

Stakeholders discussed wider sustainability and environmental issues in relation to consumer culture and the commercialisation of childhood. Practitioners felt that more could be implemented to encourage and promote a culture that was less throw away and promoted recycling of toys and games. However, it was clear that this would need to be promoted in an inclusive manner to promote this happening across society as a

³⁵ (DCSF/DCMS, 2009) cited in Bailey R (2011) Department for Education 'Letting Children be Children Report of an Independent Review of the Commercialisation and Sexualisation of Childhood'

³⁶ IPSOS Mori (2011) '*Children's Wellbeing in the UK, Sweden and Spain: The Role of Inequality*' page 71

³⁷ IPSOS Mori (2011) '*Children's Wellbeing in the UK, Sweden and Spain: The Role of Inequality*' page 71

³⁸ Ridge, T (2002) '*Childhood Poverty and Social Exclusion; From a Child's Perspective*', Bristol, The Policy Press.

³⁹ The Children's Society (2013) 'Through Young Eyes the Children's Commission on Poverty'

whole and for this not to be seen as targeted simply at families experiencing socio economic deprivation.

Supporting Play

Support and provision for play was viewed as critical in nurturing children's development and to creating effective communities. By supporting parents and caregivers and children in play, practitioners spoke of the difference this would make to the lives of households and the wider community in terms of outcomes such as resilience and employability within families.

For stakeholders the opportunity and importance of support families with play at home as given a greater policy focus . The National Parenting Strategy indicates that early learning experiences at home are crucial for experiences for nursery, school and beyond⁴⁰. In practice though on the ground it was often still challenging to support in practice in particular to build capacity within more chaotic families.

Practitioners spoke of the variety of support needs and circumstances households faced. Parents and caregivers within difficult household circumstances such as poverty or relationship breakdown may use play as a way to 'compensate' or a tool to help children deal with the difficulties within a household. Stakeholders also contrasted this with some households where play may be neglected as stress and energy are devoted to other matters. For some parents the limited support they were receiving for their issue meant that play within the household was not a priority as they tried to cope with financial pressures. Play was often pressurised in particular where households may be dealing with additional responsibilities such as caring.

Research on relationships and poverty have indicated that parents and caregivers perceive that poverty affects their family relationships⁴¹. A review conducted by Walker and Griggs (2008) found that living on a low income makes good family functioning more difficult and can affect the quality of parent-child relationships.⁴² Research has shown that poverty can also impact in other ways in wider relationships within the community and social networks. For example people on low incomes were less likely to join local groups and clubs and attending events. People were also less likely to entertain friends at home which again restricted the development of relationships.⁴³

Practitioners discussed parents or caregivers being unsure of what play was appropriate for children and their understanding of the value or importance of play. This was more prevalent in families where the parents themselves had not had positive parenting

⁴⁰ Scottish Government (2012) *'National Parenting Strategy Making a Positive Difference to Children and Young People through Parenting'*.

⁴¹ Walker and Griggs (2008) *'The costs of child poverty for individuals and society'* Joseph Rowntree Foundation : York

⁴² Walker and Griggs (2008) *'The costs of child poverty for individuals and society'* Joseph Rowntree Foundation : York

⁴³ Walker and Griggs (2008) *'The costs of child poverty for individuals and society'* Joseph Rowntree Foundation : York

experiences, been in institutional care or where parents suffered from low confidence and self-esteem.

Service providers discussed the problems in engaging parents and care givers for support on these issues. This was perceived to be a barrier facing practitioners reaching those in need. Research on support projects for families has illustrated that this is a common challenge. Evidence from Growing Up in Scotland some parents are reluctant to ask for help and/or are unclear who to go to for support.

In addition other factors such as understanding of support needs may play a factor. Norms and values around play often took a prolonged period of work and engagement and trust building to achieve. Findings by Mourtney (2013) indicated that often what families define as problems and need may not align with that of wider service providers and practitioners view of the household.

Practitioners spoke of the importance within parenting support programmes that parents and care givers did not feel discouraged or '*bad parents*' for not having previously engaged in an activity within their own childhood experience or having the capacity and confidence to engage in play activities with children .

Perceptions of what constituted good play were also a factor, it was argued there was a perception that play should be focused around playing with games and toys and taking part in expensive day activities and outings. This was driven by messages from toy producers and the media as well as pressure from other parents. Again wider research found that parents in the UK are more focused on this consumption in comparison to other European countries such as Spain and Sweden.⁴⁴

Practitioners spoke that there was less understanding by parents and caregivers of the benefits of 'imaginative' play and encouraging play activities with other materials such as household refuse e.g. empty cereal boxes as opposed to expensive toys. Educating parents on the importance of play as a concept was emphasised.

Where play could actually take place was seen as critical. Stakeholders outlined challenges for families who may have limited furniture or quality space for children to engage in play activities. For example owning a table where children could engage in creative activities such as drawing or painting. Having adequate space was therefore viewed as important, and this factor was reinforced by deprivation.

Outdoor activities were perceived to be problematic in areas with high crimes rates or where there was much anti-social behaviour. Outdoor space and free safe space for children to play was also viewed as more problematic in today's society than it had been previously. Such views are supported by wider research. Evidence has illustrated as

⁴⁴ IPSOS Mori (2011) '*Children's Wellbeing in the UK, Sweden and Spain: The Role of Inequality*' page

parental fears have increased this has led to a decrease in the time spent outside by children.⁴⁵

Overall practitioners argued that the key to good play for children was supporting families to be able to engage in positive play experiences. Family learning was viewed as a critical tool that could be used to work holistically with the family to promote play within the household and in the surrounding community.

⁴⁵ Munoz, S (2009) *Children in the outdoors a literature review* Sustainable Development Research Centre

Research Findings: Children's Views On Play

Two focus groups were held with each age group, one with children aged between five and six years old, and another with children aged between seven and eight year olds. These explored children's play experiences in and around the home.

Summary

- Play largely took place in and around the home. It was viewed as integral to their lives by children and children identified regular play as part of their day. Children would often spread play across the day with different play patterns at the weekend and during periods such as when there were holidays where there would be more opportunities to participate in play.
- Spatial characteristics and other factors such as age shaped the environments and activities children engaged within.
- Play largely took place in around the home. There was limited discussion of taking part in regular extracurricular activities. In addition only limited discussion was given to play at school.
- Social connection through play was critical it provided emotional connection to peers and parents and other significant individuals in their life. Individual play however was emphasised by children in larger households.
- Types of play activities were discussed with active play through team sports and games being preferred. Other strong themes emerged around outdoor play and technology and play.
- Vignettes used to explore the impacts of play and poverty indicated that children were able to anticipate negative emotional experiences created by the scenarios.

Importance of Play

Children in the focus groups emphasised the importance of play in their lives. All the children described play as contributing to their happiness.

It was viewed as vital part of their lives and all children discussed it being a regular part of their lives. Play was seen as integral to their day with most children discussing play taking part on a daily basis. Children discussed participating in different types of play activities. This included active play particularly in outdoor space, creative play and imaginative play and unstructured play.

A review of literature conducted by Gleave & Cole Hamilton (2012) highlighted the importance of play for children and the benefits to children's happiness levels and overall wellbeing⁴⁶.

⁴⁶ Gleave, J , Cole Hamilton, I . (2012) 'A World without Play : a Literature Review' Play England

Motivations for play included having fun, being with others and as a way to spend time. Analysis indicated that children would often spread play across the day with different play patterns at the weekend and during periods such as when there were holidays where there would be more opportunities to participate in play.

Gleave discusses that currently within research there is still a lack of evidence exploring the time spent playing within the UK.⁴⁷ Evidence from the USA indicates that children have significantly less time for free play than in previous years⁴⁸.

The relationship between children's play and time has become more complex. Gleave (2009) discusses how constraints on children's time will be dependent on children's age, gender and ethnicity amongst other social factors. There is a lack of evidence on the impact of time and poverty on children's play experience and this is an area that would benefit from further research. It is interesting to note that research on parental experiences has shown that time poverty is often a key issue impacting on parents living low income households⁴⁹. Evidence within a study conducted by Burchardt (2008) indicated that the combination of time poverty and income poverty is relatively rare for adults of working age, children are concentrated in these households. This may have implications for children's play experiences although further work is needed to explore this⁵⁰.

Other broader relationships between time and play have also been subject to pressures. In particular the relationship between free play and structured play has seen shifts. Singer et al (2009) discuss the changing context surrounding children's participation in spontaneous activities and play. Singer et al (2009) argues that a combination of factors including technological changes, competition for children's time from organized sports and after-school clubs; parental fears about children's safety; lack of awareness about the benefits of unstructured activity and play; availability of quality play spaces near children's homes; and the reduction in play time at school.⁵¹ All of these factors contribute to increased pressure on children's play and development.

The relationship between time for children and play is of increasing importance and widely recognised in research. Play has a number of benefits for children including teaching about choice, control, decision making, interactions with others and many other skills and developmental processes⁵².

Experiences of Play

Through the research project we sought to understand children's experiences and views on play. Children were asked to discuss play activity, in terms of where they

⁴⁷ Gleave (2009) 'Childrens Time to Play : a literature review'

⁴⁸ Gleave (2009) 'Childrens Time to Play : a literature review'

⁴⁹ Burchardt, T (2008) 'Time and Income Poverty' Joseph Rowntree Foundation: York

⁵⁰ Burchardt, T (2008) 'Time and Income Poverty' Joseph Rowntree Foundation: York

⁵¹ Gleave (2009) 'Childrens Time to Play : a literature review'

⁵² Gleave, J, Cole Hamilton, I. (2012) 'A World without Play : a Literature Review' Play England

participated in play, what type of play they engaged in and what the choices and motivations for different types of play were. In addition, they were asked to discuss who they engaged with in play activities.

Spatial issues and other issues and characteristics such as age shaped where children played.

Where play took place varied across the discussion. For younger children play took place in supervised context for example within the home or garden but for some of the older children they were able to engage in play in spaces nearby to their homes although this was not discussed across all of older children. Children discussed parents and caregivers making decisions about where they 'were allowed' to play.

Various models of children's play contexts have been developed. One model that gained prominence was one that discussed children's lives been set within through three spheres: homes, schools and recreational institutions⁵³.

Findings from the research indicated that play patterns of children could be largely understood within this model. Analysis of the focus groups of the time spent within these play spaces indicated a greater proportion of time spent playing within the 'home' sphere this included the 'home' space of school friends as well as that of nearby support networks such as family.

Within the focus group only one child discussed taking part in fixed regular extracurricular recreational activities and this was a child from the older age category focus group. This was participating in active play activities in the form of sports and was the only regular formalised structured play highlighted across the groups. Whilst it was unclear why the other children didn't take part, this was an important point in reflection of wider research on the issues of access to activities.

Recent research by Save the Children indicated that children often missed out on things due to their families experiencing poverty. Their results showed that less than 30% of low income parents say their children don't miss out on anything in comparison to 69% of better off parents. The impact of this was children missing out on experiences such as holidays and school trips.

Research findings from work carried out in lone parent families within Fife (McHardy et al, 2013)⁵⁴ indicated that many families struggled to find money for leisure and recreational activities and these were often an area for cutting back on household expenditure.

⁵³ Rasmussen, K (2004) ' *Places for children – children's places*'

⁵⁴ McHardy , F. and Fife Gingerbread Community Researchers (2013) '*Surviving Poverty the Impact of Lone Parenthood.*', Poverty Alliance : Glasgow

In terms of timings and frequency of play children indicated this being a predominately after school activity and during weekends and holidays. Only one child mentioned play before school. Holidays were viewed as a positive as there was more time to play.

Some references were made to play taking place with a school environment although this was restricted to discussing play in the playground. Children did not appear to place a great focus on play time at school placing more emphasis on play time outside school. This is perhaps a reflection of the evidence compiled by Blatchford and Baines (2006) which showed a reduction in play time offered within school environments⁵⁵. This reduction is down a myriad of reasons such as pressure on curriculum time⁵⁶ and the perceived changes in children's behaviour at break time⁵⁷.

Connection and Play

Connection through play was very important, children discussed play interaction with multiple groups including siblings, cousins, family members such as grandparents and neighbours. Children also spoke about playing with animals. Connection through play was seen as important to children in terms of it provide social contact with people they deemed important in their lives such as their friends and parents. It was time that was valued and prioritised by children in their lives.

Children spoke of individual play activities but play with others was placed with heightened importance and value across the focus group discussions. Interactions with others through play provided an opportunity for peer interaction and the importance of friendships through play was a core theme to emerge. Friendships were often defined by play interactions. It also provide a space to have 'fun' and this was of importance to continuing friendships. Children spoke of positive emotions being experienced when playing with peers and others they defined of emotional importance to them in their lives such as parents.

Feelings of attachment were expressed through who children chose to play with. Some discussion was raised about playing with different groups of people if circumstances created this, for example within groups away from preferred peers at school.

Wider research has shown that play benefits children within their cognitive and emotional development. Play provides a means for children to express and understand their emotions and the world around them. It provides a context "for calibrating or mediating for emotions , motor systems , stress responses and attachments systems" (Spinka et al 2001, Burghardt 2005, Pellis and Pellis 2009) .

⁵⁵ Blatchford and Baines (2006) cited in 'No 15 The Benefits of School Playtime'

⁵⁶ Pellengrini and Blatchford (2002) cited in ' No 15 The Benefits of School Playtime'

⁵⁷ Blatchford (2002) cited in ' No 15 The Benefits of School Playtime'

Play was also seen as important for a child to be alone. Some spoke of this being valuable time for them as opposed to being with other siblings. This offered children an opportunity to explore their own choices and experiences. Again, this is reflective of wider research studies.

However, whilst we were unable to draw out in the size of this study the impact of play within larger households this indicates important questions when we reflect on the risk of poverty being more acute within larger households in Scotland. The quotes below illustrate the recognition of 'alone time':

"Gives you time away from brothers and sisters"

"I play with my friends. Sometimes I feel like staying in with my toys"

Types of Play Activities

The nature and type of play activities children engaged in were also discussed within the focus groups. Team games and peer play activities were discussed first within the focus groups and appeared to be take higher priority in terms of the play activities children preferred to engage in. Active play ranked highly.

Some children across both groups discussed the competitive nature of play with others for example through playing against others using computer games.

"Because I have got my pals to play with me"

Competition in play also emerged in other ways. Children discussed team games such as football or tag as preferable forms of active physical play. Physical play ranked highly with across both groups and is something that is promoted in terms of children's health and well-being. Children discussed the importance of active play being a way that children could engage in being healthy. This indicated that public health messages around active life styles were reaching the children and were a benefit they could identify from play.

"So you can get more exercise instead of being lazy"

Also linked with active play was play outside. Outdoor play was viewed as critical to children. All discussed playing in outdoor space. Some referred to playing in garden space and others made reference to street space. Toys that encouraged outdoor play and movement were popular such as a football or a bike.

"On my scooter and my bike outside"

Research conducted by (Moore and Cosco 2009) have found that exposure to nature and outside environments have benefits to child development⁵⁸.

Evidence from the focus groups on environments where play took place, indicated that spatial limits to play seemed to be confined to in and around the home. There was little reference to visiting other places for play other than homes of other family members. Some children discussed visiting nearby parks but this was not something raised by all children within the focus groups.

Role play was another key type of play that emerged from the discussions although this had gendered dimensions with girls discussing this more than boys within the groups. Girls emphasised playing with dolls as a regular activity and this was subject to some discussion by boys within the groups for example playing with action figures.

Creative play was discussed less than other forms of play. The children identified little imaginative and creative play aside from arts based play, although one child did make reference to imaginative play in the form of imaginary friend. It was unclear what constrained creative play, whether it was a matter of personal preference or if other factors shaping choices.

Technology and play was another strong theme to emerge in the types of play activities children engaged with. Almost of all of the children discussed technology and play. There were gendered dimensions to responses with boys placing more emphasis on this than girls. Technology was used during times where parents and care givers were engaged with other tasks such as making dinner.

“When my mum is in the kitchen I play the X Box”

“I like to play with my IPod. I have music and games on it”

In the UK there has been a significant rise in ICT and technology-based play as we have an increasingly connected digital world. This can be in the form of computer consoles, mobile devices and tablets, PC's smart phones and so on. Research by the Children's Technology review found that there were 40'000 children's based games on iTunes⁵⁹.

Some children discussed playing with computer games that were legally categorised as for older children or adults. There has been much debate on the impact of this on children's development.

⁵⁸ Moore and Cosco (2009) cited in Gleave, J, Cole Hamilton, I . (2012) 'A World without Play: a Literature Review' Play England

⁵⁹ Guardian (2013) 'Are Children consuming too much digital technology'

<http://www.theguardian.com/sustainable-business/children-consuming-too-much-digital-technology>

Interestingly although 'play with technology' was seen as important to children they also seem to identify the importance of play time away from technology.

"You get to go outside and get some fresh air, and you are not on your telly, Xbox or computers"

Structure and Play

Household routine shaped the structure, timing and spatial context of play. For example when meals were being prepared was often a time for more reserved and restricted play activities such as listening to music or playing a computer game.

Play was also restricted or withdrawn as a behavioural management tool. Children discussed 'being grounded' or prohibited from joining in activities as a result of misbehaving.

Understanding Poverty and Play

As part of the research, vignettes were used to draw out the thoughts and views of the children. These were used as scenarios to explore views on income and play in a sensitive and inclusive manner. One focused on a play activity where there was a potential cost attached in the form of attending a birthday party. Another discussed the challenges of play in an overcrowded household. These poverty issues have emerged from evidence from low income households and vignettes were chosen to allow the 'lived experiences' of poverty to be reflected.⁶⁰

Children were asked to discuss the vignette where 'Sam the Cat' was going to attend a friend's birthday party but would be attending without a present. The children perceived that 'Sam' would be upset at being turning up without a present. They discussed bringing one of their own toys to the party as a substitute gift or 'making' their own gift. On being asked on the reactions of others if they turned up without a present they responded that it was better to attend the party without a present as their friends would prefer to see them.

This finding indicated that the presumed 'social pressure' of attending the party without a present was not an issue for the children taking part in this discussion. They could identify ways of managing this situation and placed emphasis on the values of friendship as being more critical than consumption within this scenario.

Another vignette explored the impact of play within the home. In this vignette 'Gerry the giraffe's' favourite toy had been broken in the bedroom he shared with siblings. The

⁶⁰ Community Engagement Work with low income families conducted by Poverty Alliance 2013.

parent in the house had been stressed as they were unable to take the time to deal with the child's reaction of the broken toy.

This scenario promoted stronger reactions from the children in terms of the emotional connections of the toy. The children discussed that loss of the favourite toy would be distressing and they felt strongly that this not being acknowledged by the parent would have the impact of further distress. The lack of acknowledgement of the situation was viewed as more important emotionally than the loss of the toys itself.

Overall the vignettes indicated that children were aware of the emotional impacts and experiences that the scenarios would create for children and indicated that although it may not be understood as poverty within the eyes of the children they understood the emotional consequences of this.

Research findings: Parents and Care Givers Views on Play

Summary

- Parents and caregivers emphasised the importance of play within the household however recognised that number of issues impacted on play including space within the home , safety of the community around them and income.
- Quality of space was a key issue, particularly for those with larger families and strategies were described such as children playing in separate rooms to maximise space.

Lack of income placed high stress on families. Dealing with this placed pressure on parents and caregivers within their day to day lives and also limited the play opportunities they were able to provide for children particularly extra-curricular activities.

- Appearance of the home was also an issue and was a barrier in having other children to play in the home.
- Adequacy of play spaces in the community was a key concern particular as families expressed with families suffering play constraints and other factors.
- Type of housing also played a factor in play. Those in private rented accommodation expressed fears about play damaging property and the potential costs and implications of this.
- Anti-social behaviour had negative impacts on children's play experiences.
- Structured play activities were a barrier and parents spoke of issue around hidden costs of community events that would pressures on household budgets. This impacted disproportionately on households with children with disabilities who were denied access to specialist play facilities.
- Overall a core theme emerged of the importance of support for families dealing with complex issues. Parents and caregivers discussed that issues such as managing on a low income, dealing with caring responsibilities, dealing with low confidence were often complex and draining and families needed ongoing support to enable them to deal with these issues and support effective play for their children. This was critical to those without support networks.

Importance of play

Across the study parents and caregivers recognised and highlighted that play for children was important. All of those within the study discussed regular play time and interaction with the children. Parents and caregivers indicated that more time was spent by the children playing than the children in this study suggested, although this may be linked to the understandings and meanings adults and children attribute to what is meant by play.

Nonetheless, scheduled play time was discussed across all interviews. It was viewed as integral to family life and to ensuring children's well being.

Parents and caregivers spoke of their enjoyment and happiness at seeing their children at play. Play was understood in terms of wellbeing for the family. Play Wales (2012) discuss that play should be understood in terms of not only the benefits to the child but also to families and communities⁶¹.

Across the research a number of issues impacted on play and what play parents could support. Parents discussed a cross section of issues that impacted on play in and around the home including low income, household dynamics, physical and mental health, spatial constraints and many other factors. The degree and interaction of these factors varied across households included in this study but core themes emerged of critical factors that were required for effective conditions and opportunities for play for children.

Type of Play Activities

Parents and care givers spoke of children in the household engaging in a range of different types of play activities including that creative play, free play activities, prescribed play activities, and outdoor play.

There is debate about what conditions are required for play and how these can be supported. Play Wales (2012) emphasises that children will play within in basic and barren environments however a rich play setting would offer an environment where socialising, creativity, resourcefulness and challenges could be explored and play that allowed children to play on their own terms⁶².

Parents described children being the main directors of what play was engaged in within the household. Parents took a more active role on in managing play activities as specific times. For example points were raised on less active play at specific points in the day such as before bedtimes, where less active physical play was encouraged.

Several issues emerged on restrictions on play activities. For example spatial context had a clear impact such as the suitability of the home as a play space.

Spatial context and Play

Interview participants were asked about play in and around their home. Participants were from a range of types of tenure, including private rented as well as housing associations. Several issues with suitability in accommodation were highlighted

⁶¹ Play Wales (2012) '*Play : health and wellbeing*'

⁶² Play Wales (2012) '*Play: Health and Wellbeing*'

including issues with quality of housing, suitability of housing for family needs and security and safety of the housing location.

The suitability of accommodation as a space for raising and supporting children's play was widely discussed. Some participants discussed issues in terms of physical space within the household as being small and difficult as children grew and required more space to play.

"There's just not enough space"

This was a particular issue for those with larger families. For some there were difficulties in changing this situation as moving accommodation was not an option or would be a long term option.

"They don't class not having enough space as a need for a new house".

Space also had important interactions with sibling relationships; those in living spaces that were smaller reported greater arguments and pressures on the household. This was particularly an issue in regards to play which resulted often in a 'mess' being made which was more problematic in small space where living space was more pressurised and subject to heavy use.

Participants described siblings playing in separate rooms in the house to make more effective use of space rather than playing in the same room. This finding indicates we need to consider the impact that space has on sibling relationships and play experiences.

Research has shown that lack of space and in particular living in overcrowded conditions can pose difficulties for families not only for play activities but also for example for children to have space to do homework⁶³.

Appearance or furnishing of the house was also highlighted. This was viewed as a barrier for other children visiting to play with children in the home and playing due to fears of being judged for the quality of accommodation on offer. One interviewee described having issues furnishing their property as a result of moving and a relationship breakdown. They viewed their unfurnished home as an unsuitable place for a child to engage in play. They discussed their child engaging in play activities out with this space. This resulted in actions such as using local nearby green space and taking them to nearby friends and family to engage in play.

"We just had to try and get out"

⁶³ Save the Children (2012) 'No space at home ;overcrowding in London'
<http://www.4in10.org.uk/no-space-at-home>

Some participants highlighted problems with dampness within accommodation which had resulted in them being unable to use spaces within their home at all for children's play. This had implications in terms of toys being ruined or damaged.

One participant highlights the impact of damage caused by dampness.

"clothes and bedding and school jerseys and everything and part of her toys and everything as well so a lot"

Tenure of accommodation was also an issue for those in a private rented accommodation; fears were discussed about potential damage to the property as result of play or accidental damaging occurring during play. Fears of cost implication of repairs and other potential difficulties such as the implications to the relationship with housing landlord were key factors.

One participant discussed moving to a housing association property that was smaller than what they had been in but was able to be more relaxed about child plays activities within this space than they had been renting from a private landlord.

Outwith the home, issues emerged on the quality and safety of the space in the surrounding area. Many families reported issues of crime and anti-social behaviour within their local neighbourhoods. For female headed lone parent families this was particularly problematic as they perceived higher rates of risk at night and as result would limit their lives and that of their children by avoiding going out in their local community to avoid any potential risks such as coming into contact with negative behaviour.

Risk in communities and the play children engage in continue to dominate debate within society. Attitudes to risk in childhood are complex and are subject to processes of assessment and management of risk⁶⁴. The importance of feeling safe within a community emerged as a key theme within the research.

For some families interviewed within this study they were frightened to let their children out within the area due to the behaviour of neighbours and reported the increased stress within the household as this limited children's play.

As one parent described having anti-social neighbours and the impact on the life:

"Me and the bairn would be woken up at 5am in the morning and then we would fall back asleep and she would sleep in for nursery and I thought I just need to get out of here, eh."

Another spoke of the adequacy of lighting and the impact of seasonal pressures.

⁶⁴ Risk Commission (2007) 'Risk and childhood'

“Although outside in winter is far too dark and dangerous, it is not massively well lit”

Evidence emerged that parents and caregivers felt that more was needed to deal with community safety issues within their community as they identified this limited their children’s lives and play experiences. Gardner and Wallace (2000) highlight the importance of play for building family relationships. Armitage (2004) emphasise the importance of children having unsupervised time and developing their independence⁶⁵.

Income adequacy

Income adequacy when living on a low income raised many key challenges for parents in terms of daily living experiences and supporting play. A myriad of issues were highlighted this included the issues with debt, caring responsibilities, levels of surrounding support, conditionality and other issues.

Families involved in the study reported problems with making low levels of income stretch. The pressures faced were related to ages of children, seasonal pressures such as school holidays and other issues such as the impact of disability.

Income and play had a complex but interlinked relationship. A key period of additional challenge was the school holidays where children had additional play time and how that would impact on the household in terms of additional costs.

It was highlighted that there was pressure on families to find additional money within household budgets during holiday periods to ensure that their children were taking part in regular and fun activities. Families described feeling the need to ensure that their child was taking part in similar activities to other children and weren’t missing out. Parents placed a strong emphasis on structured play activities or trips to different play and learning experiences such as visiting places where children could see animals.

As one family described

“it’s not so much keeping up with the jones but you do feel like your child is missing out if you don’t do these things”

Families valued in particular the importance of low cost or free activities and several highlighted the importance of local support services for linking or supporting families to engage in activities and days out that they would be unable to otherwise afford or take part in.

⁶⁵ Gleave (2009) ‘Children’s Time to Play a literature review’

It was identified that it was not always easy to find such activities to take part and there were often concerns about that if a play opportunity was free that there may be additional or hidden costs which families wouldn't be able to meet.

“Someone will say it's a free night but there will be stalls and raffle tickets and various things to raise funding”.

Points were highlighted on the coping mechanism that individuals applied to minimise incurring extra costs at activities. This included trying to predict costs such as children requiring snacks.

“You don't know whether they will be giving juice away for free for the children or is it appropriate for you to take snacks in with you because you have a low income or whether again you will be scared to be looked at and bothered about being that cheap person that you know”

Confidence to be able to navigate such situations was seen as critical to if families would be able to deal with such situations. For households with low confidence there were points highlighted that they would be reluctant to engage with such activities.

Distinctions were made on the additional costs faced by families where there were disabilities present. This was particularly an issue for families affected by disability who often incurred higher costs accessing community faculties and travelling around as well as other more practical barriers such as accessibility of venues.

This has been supported by wider research which highlighted issues for families accessing leisure activities and the provision and costs of these activities often being a barrier to families taking part⁶⁶.

As one household discussed this was problematic for them to take their child to specialist play space that would support their child's disability as transport for cost were high when they were living on benefits.

Support for Play

The support for families to engage in effective play was a key point for discussion. Families within the study had been asked to discuss vignettes exploring key issue impacting on families. Two scenarios were used within the research, one exploring access to a community facility and one exploring the impact of the current welfare changes.

⁶⁶ UCLAN, Children's Commissioner (2013) “We want to help people see things our way” – A rights based analysis of disabled children experience living with a low income.

Overall a core theme emerged of the importance of support for families dealing with complex issues. Parents and caregivers discussed that issues such as managing on a low income, dealing with caring responsibilities, dealing with low confidence were often complex and draining and families needed ongoing support.

Two core themes emerged here for those with and without existing support networks. For those without family support, engaging in community activity was perceived to be more daunting and interviewees discussed and reflected upon experiences of when they had been isolated and withdrawn from community activities. Issues such as low income and worries about 'not fitting in' or being unable to afford to take part were fears that people expressed. In particular lone parents expressed fears around confidence and self-esteem to take part in such activities.

A clear message emerged that parents often perceived several barriers engaging in community activities that offered play opportunities for children. Access issues also emerged, in terms of the suitability of venue for family needs such as disability. Parents discussed hidden barriers such as routine change could be a challenge for taking children to events.

Several interviewees discussed engagement with support services such as Gateway had been critical in building up their confidence and had enabled them to participate in wider social and family learning activities which had benefited both them and their children. It had also assisted with building peer relationships with the community.

Accessing family support was also discussed. Several interviewees discussed had highlighted that word of mouth or encouraged from others had often played a role in seeking support. A fear of being judged for needing support was also highlighted.

For those with support networks nearby barriers were reduced in terms of confidence and self-esteem. Parents and caregivers discussed being more willing to engage in such activities and being able to draw upon sources of informal support

Living in areas near to families and friends provided key support when living in a low income household. Families spoke of drawing upon these support networks for play needs during the school holidays for example their homes and gardens and wider community providing different environments for children to engage in play. In addition this was also seen as important in terms of social connection with different adults and building extended family relationships for families.

For those without this they reported being more isolated and reported higher levels of stress and anxiety. This in turn placed pressure on the household. For households such as this location of support services to assist with this were of increasingly importance. Families discussed the value of receiving holistic support and the opportunities in provided in supporting quality time as a family.

Conclusions and Policy Recommendations

Overall the research indicated that the relationship between play and income was complex. The importance of play was recognised across within the study practitioners, parents and caregivers and children themselves.

Within the study many families faced challenging circumstances and practitioners supported parents and caregivers that often had complexities in their lives that impacted on the play in and around the home.

Key findings

Practitioners: key findings

- Play provides multiple benefits for children and families. Increased recognition of the value of play but challenges in supporting play in families experiencing disadvantage and difficult life circumstances.
- Consumer pressures place challenges on parents in terms of expectations around play. Supporting play requires a holistic approach looking at needs of families as a whole. Recognition of financial barriers and impacts are critical to understanding household dynamics and how this may in turn impact on play.

Children: Key findings

- Play largely took place in and around the home. Play was viewed as integral to their lives by children and children identified regular play as part of their day. Children would often spread play across the day with different play patterns at the weekend and during periods such as when there were holidays where there would be more opportunities to participate in play.
- Spatial characteristics and other factors such as age shaped the environments and activities children engaged within.
- Play largely took place in around the home. There was limited discussion of taking part in regular extracurricular activities. In addition only limited discussion was given to play at school.
- Social connection through play was critical it provided emotional connection to peers and parents and other significant individuals in their life. Individual play however was emphasised by children in larger households.
- Types of play activities were discussed with active play through team sports and games being preferred. Other strong themes emerged around outdoor play and technology and play.
- Vignettes used to explore the impacts of play and poverty indicated that children were able to anticipate negative emotional experiences created by the scenarios.

Parents and caregivers: key findings

- Parents and caregivers emphasised the importance of play within the household however recognised that number of issues impacted on play including space within the home , safety of the community around them and income.
- Quality of space was a key issue, particularly for those with larger families and strategies were described such as children playing in separate rooms to maximise space.
- Lack of income placed high stress on families. Dealing with this placed pressure on parents and caregivers within their day to day lives and also limited the play opportunities they were able to provide for children particularly extra-curricular activities.
- Appearance of the home was also an issue and was a barrier in having other children to play in the home.
- Adequacy of play spaces in the community was a key concern particular as families expressed with families suffering play constraints and other factors.
- Community safety had impacts on children’s play experiences.
- Type of housing also played a factor in play. Those in private rented accommodation expressed fears about play damaging property and the potential costs and implications of this.
- Structured play activities were a barrier and parents spoke of issue around hidden costs of community events that would pressures on household budgets. This impacted disproportionately on households with children with disabilities who were denied access to specialist play facilities.
- Overall a core theme emerged of the importance of support for families dealing with complex issues. Parents and caregivers discussed that issues such as managing on a low income , dealing with caring responsibilities , dealing with low confidence were often complex and draining and families needed ongoing support to enable them to deal with these issues and support effective play for their children. This was critical to those without support networks.

Policy Recommendations

Income

Income adequacy for families both in and out work continues to be critical and actions is needed to support families particularly those affected by welfare changes. Further work is required to remove socio economic barriers impacting on children’s play and enable families to support play.

Housing quality

Poor quality housing impacted on families and how they lived and managed their lives. Damp and overcrowded housing were particular barriers to achieving positive outcomes for children. Action is needed to ensure that homes adhere to effective standards and

provide an environment conducive to children play needs. Within planning decisions in new housing play needs should be a consideration.

Safer communities

A clear need emerged to invest in creating safer communities for households within areas of deprivation. Community safety had negative impacts on both parents and children and limited the play opportunities that families could engage in.