# PLAY IN & AROUND THE HOME:
# PLAY & POVERTY IN FIFE

Fiona McHardy
in partnership with Fife Gingerbread

the POVERTY ALLIANCE

FifeGingerbread

# Play In & Around The Home: Play & Poverty in Fife

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The Poverty Alliance is a network of community, voluntary and statutory and other organisations whose vision of a sustainable Scotland is based on social and economic justice, with dignity for all, where poverty and inequalities are not tolerated and are challenged.

Our aim is to combat poverty by working with others to empower individuals and communities to affect change in the distribution of power and resources.

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# Executive Summary

Play is a fundamental need and is critical to the development and wellbeing of children and young people. The importance of play in enshrined in legislation United Nations Convention on the Rights of a Child (1990) and is recognised at a National Policy level within Scotland through the National Play Strategy[1] and the National Play Action Plan[2].

This report provides original evidence, using qualitative fieldwork with practitioners, parents and children within Fife on the relationship between poverty and children's play.

The project employed a methodology using case vignettes to explore themes with children and parents. 8 Semi structured interviews were conducted with low income parent households. Two focus groups were children aged 5-6, 7-8

- 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.

The key findings from the research:

**Views of practitioners**

- Practitioners reported that play provides multiple benefits for children and families.
- There was a wider recognition amongst services of the value of play but challenges in supporting families experiencing disadvantage and difficult life circumstances. The economic context was highlighted as placing additional pressures on low income families.
- It was recognised by practitioners that consumer pressures place challenges on parents in terms of expectations around play.
- Supporting gender neutral play was also key challenges for practitioners.
- Practitioners highlighted that 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.

**Views of children**

- Play largely took place in and around the home.
- Play was viewed as integral to their lives by children for their wellbeing and happiness
- Children from both age groups identified regular play as part of their day.
- Play activities included active play, creative play and unstructured play.
- 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.

1 Scottish Government (2013) 'Play Strategy for Scotland Our Vision' http://www.gov.scot/Publications/2013/06/5675

2 Scottish Government (2013) 'Play Strategy For Scotland Our Action Plan' http://www.gov.scot/Publications/2013/10/9424

- Spatial characteristics and other factors such as age and gender and parent or caregiver choices shaped the environments and activities children engaged with.
- Children in both clusters discussed play taking place predominantly in home environments including the home space of school friends and family.
- 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 as being important for alone time.
- 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.
- Household structure and routine also shaped play for example periods of more restricted quieter play activities.
- Two Case vignettes were used in discussions explore the impacts of play and poverty. Discussion indicated that children were able to anticipate negative emotional experiences created by the scenarios of being unable to take a toy to the birthday party and a broken toy in a busy household.
- Children were able to identify mitigating actions in the birthday party vignette scenarios as well as the importance of peer friendships.

  The broken toys vignette indicated the emotional connection children gave to individual toys and the distress that this may cause within a busy household.

**Views of caregivers**

- 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.
- 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.

**Conclusions & Recommendations**

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

Children highlighted the benefits and meanings of play to their lives including social, connection and other key factors that contribute to a child's wellbeing. The need for play was critical to their lives.

Children understood the emotional impact of low income and play and highlighted that were able to anticipate negative emotional experiences of living in stressful situations.

The research has also illustrated evidence on the opportunity to support play in and around the home. Critically this research has raised key questions about the often hidden barriers families face in regards to play. Practitioners reported that families are experiencing increased pressure and for families who have more chaotic backgrounds more work is need to promote play activities in a holistic way recognising barriers such as low confidence and stressful household circumstances.

For families in difficult circumstances a number of key structural issues issue have been raised by this research. Barriers to supporting play included safety in the community, cost of leisure activities, transport or the quality of play space within the home.

In addition more hidden responsibilities that households face such as providing a caring role are often going unrecognised as a barrier to supporting children with play. This will require a more integrated holistic approach in order to provide effective play for all families affected by low income.

# Introduction

Play is a fundamental need for children and young people. The importance of play is enshrined in United Nations Convention on the Rights of a Child (1990) in Article 31 (Leisure, play and culture):

*"Children have the right to relax and play, and to join in a wide range of cultural, artistic and other recreational activities."*[3]

It has been long understood that play is a critical part of children's physical and mental development and wellbeing. It is also known that patterns of poverty and disadvantage will have an impact on the opportunities that children have with regards to play.

Evidence from the recent 'Surviving Poverty: the Impact of Lone Parenthood' (2013)[4] 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 life on a low income. The research also highlighted pressures put on family relationships when children had to miss out on extra-curricular activities due to low income.

Whilst Scotland has a Child Poverty Strategy[5], it is questionable whether the issue of play receives adequate attention. Similarly, the Play Strategy[6], which is undoubtedly one of the clearest expressions of the importance of play in child development, arguably does not fully recognize the on-going impact of poverty in play.

This report seeks to explore some of the relationships and dimensions between poverty and play and to understand how poverty shapes play experiences. In doing so, it aims to provide recommendations for policy makers and practitioners for the integration and recognition of play in anti-poverty strategies and policy making. In addition, we hope to highlight how low income families can be better supported to have positive play experiences.

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

4 McHardy, F et al (2013) 'Surviving Poverty the Impact of Lone parenthood' http://povertyalliance.org/userfiles/files/EPIC/Reports/EPIC_Research_Surviving_Poverty2013.pdf

5 Scottish Government ( 2014) 'Child Poverty Strategy for Scotland' www.gov.scot/Resource/Doc/344949/0114783.pdf

6 Scottish Government (2013) 'Play Strategy for Scotland Our Vision' http://www.gov.scot/Publications/2013/06/5675

# Section 1: Methodology

The research set out to explore and understand the following:

- The role of play and how play is conceptualized and understood within low income households.
- How low income families can overcome barriers to play.
- What policy changes are required to support play in low income households for service providers and practitioners working with families.
- What support needs and barriers exist for play for service delivery and policy and for low income families.

This research was undertaken through the Gateway project in Fife 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 Fife in Scotland, an area with pockets of multiple deprivation. The Gateway provides early intervention support to individual families, family learning, and volunteer programmes.

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, the partners were interested in understanding the impact of poverty in the home.

The research was a qualitative study involving two strands.

**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 was a stakeholder discussion undertaken with local practitioners and provided an opportunity to establish a baseline understanding of key play issues in Fife for low-income families. The group was structured to draw out the main challenges participants perceived as facing low-income families and looked to draw upon understandings of 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 is 35 and lives on a low income, and has a boy (8) and two girls aged six and three year olds.

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 one-year-old baby, a three year old and a six 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 don't have any family living nearby. They have some qualifications but neither has worked since before the children were born.

### Scenario B: Coupled Parent

Jamie, 35, and his partner are on a low income, and have a boy 8, girl 6, and 3 year old. The oldest boy is struggling to make friends and is playing up at school. He is 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 5-6 and 7-8 used participatory mapping tools to understand play space in Levenmouth and in the home environments of children. Children were asked to use drawings and charts and vignettes to understand their play experiences.

**Ethics**

The research was conducted in line with Social Research Association's ethical guidelines. Careful consideration was given to the work and a steering group was set up to oversee the project. In addition to a number of support strands were laid across the project within the design and the practice. For example materials for working with children were drawn up in conjunction with support workers to ensure they would be age and skill level appropriate. Support was also offered to all taking part in the research.

# Section 2: Literature Review: Parents, Poverty and Play

**Importance of Play**

Play is widely considered to be an important part of childhood and 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 different environments, for example 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 people's play, participation and the environment in which they live and their health and wellbeing including 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".[7] 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."[8]

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.[9]

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.[10]

On a wider developmental level play also impacts on resilience levels within children and young people. Resilience can be defined as "the process of, capacity for or outcome of successful adaptation despite challenging or threatening circumstances".[11]

For children, play can provide 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 have a clear relationship in that children's capacity to engage with play is significantly diminished in situations of severe stress and diminishing their capacity to build resilience to cope with stress.[12]

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

8 Scottish Government (2013) 'Play Strategy for Scotland Our Vision' http://www.gov.scot/Publications/2013/06/5675

9 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

10 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

11 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

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

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 for children adapting to challenging life circumstances and for the services supporting low income families.

**Defining Play**

Play is a emotive word which means different things to different people. Play Scotland define play as:

*"Children's play may or may not involve equipment or have an end product. Children play on their own and with others. Their play may be boisterous and energetic or quiet and contemplative, light-hearted or very serious."*[13]

Play can 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 play 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 launched a Play Strategy[14] and Play action plan[15] in 2013. The strategy outlines the importance of play for children in Scotland and recognises that play can present financial challenges to parents on low incomes. This is particularly in relation to the increased importance 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 children.[16]

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 included[17] as evidence of positive effects on Scotland's communities. The strategy acknowledges the challenges that some households can face from issues such as living with a long term health condition, with physical or learning disabilities, unemployment or bereavement and changing family circumstances. Such changing circumstances also put households at a higher risk of poverty.

Evidence from the recent 'Surviving Poverty: the Impact of Lone Parenthood' (2013)[18] 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 extracurricular 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 study was conducted during 2012, and financial pressures for low-income families are likely to increase. Recent welfare changes will have placed additional pressures on low income parents.

13 Play Scotland (nd) 'What is play' http://www.playscotland.org/what-is-play-playwork/what-is-play/

14 Scottish Government (2013) 'Play Strategy For Scotland: Our Vision' http://www.gov.scot/Publications/2013/06/5675

15 Scottish Government (2013) 'Play Strategy For Scotland: Our Action Plan' http://www.gov.scot/Publications/2013/10/9424

16 Scottish Government (2013) 'Play Strategy For Scotland: Our Vision' http://www.gov.scot/Publications/2013/06/5675

17 ibid

18 McHardy, F et al (2013) 'Surviving Poverty the Impact of Lone parenthood' http://povertyalliance.org/userfiles/files/EPIC/Reports/EPIC_Research_Surviving_Poverty2013.pdf

Figures for Levenmouth as a whole have illustrated that almost half of all council tenants are in rent arrears.[19]

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.[20]

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.[21] 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 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 Scotland.[22]

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 Table 1.

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 meals[23] and when saving for new school year uniforms.[24]

**Table 1: Age Children Should Be Allowed To Play Unsupervised**

| 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 |
| Base (minimum) | 40 | 380 | 660 |

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'.[25] 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 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.[26] Research by The Children's Society 2012 highlighted problems particularly for families receiving the mid-rate care component of Disability Living Allowance (DLA) that 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 poor.

19 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

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

21 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.

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

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

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

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

26 National Children's Bureau (nd) 'Inclusive Play Factsheet'

## Access to Play Space

The World Health Organisation recommends at least one hour of daily physical activity for children aged 5-17.[27] 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-being.[28]

Recent figures from Growing Up in Scotland illustrated that 88% of parents of children aged less than five year olds 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 locally.[29]

## Play and Physical Activity

The relationship between play and physical activity has taken increased importance within health policy. Despite this there are still huge challenges with the level of activity children are undertaking.

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.[30]

## 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 disabled.[31]

McKendrick argues that plays 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.[31]

27 United Nations (2012) 'The state of the nations children' http://www.unicef.org/sowc2012/pdfs/SOWC%202012-Main%20Report_EN_13Mar2012.pdf

28 ibid

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

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

31 Play Wales ( 2013) 'Play Deprivation Facts and Indicators' http://www.playwales.org.uk/login/uploaded/documents/INFORMATION%20SHEETS/play%20deprivation.pdf

32 McKendrick (2013) 'Play and Poverty Indicators and issues' IP -DIP Magazine for Professionals and Play. Issue 6 : I- IV (Pull out paper) . (ISSN 1753- 0870X).

# Policy Context

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, the Getting it Right for Every Child framework, the Child Poverty Strategy and the Curriculum for Excellence all provide an opportunity to focus on the importance of achieving positive outcomes for children and young people across Scotland. Economic modeling work conducted by the Scottish Government has indicated that early year's investment and spending can reduce 'acute' spending later. The evidence showed that £1 invested in preventative measures can save £9 on more acute services in later life.[33]

The National Parenting Strategy has clear messages on the importance of supporting parents to be effective caregivers. It has a focus on play and the barriers that parents and caregivers face. It highlights that parents, would like more information, along with affordable opportunities for play for children and young people of all ages.[34]

The strategy outlined a number of actions including Play Talk Read campaign, and investing in the Go2Play, support for voluntary organisations 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 employability.[35]

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.

The Getting it Right for Every Child (GIFREC) approach seeks to implement a preventative 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 outlines 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 member's particular where there is family members in no receipt of disability benefits.
- Living in a household headed by some ethnic minorities.[36]

The strategy focuses on a number of key measures and objectives including reducing children's deprivation.[37]

33 Scottish Parliament (2013) 'Official Report Meeting of the Scottish Parliament'. http://www.scottish.parliament.uk/parliamentarybusiness/28862.aspx?r=9350#.VPit-U1yZD8

34 Scottish Government (2012) ' National Parenting Strategy' P20

35 Scottish Government (2012) ' National Parenting Strategy' P22

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

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

# Section 3: Research Findings

**Supporting Play In and Around the Home: The View of Practitioners**

This section will outline the key research findings from the research. This research illustrated a number of areas that impacted on play in and around the home. A stakeholder discussion was held with practitioners who were asked to reflect on the relationship between poverty and play. This discussion highlighted a number of issues.

**Summary**

- Practitioners reported that play provides multiple benefits for children and families. There was a wider recognition amongst services of the value of play but challenges in supporting families experiencing disadvantage and difficult life circumstances. The economic context was highlighted as placing additional pressures on low income families.
- It was recognised by practitioners that consumer pressures place challenges on parents in terms of expectations around play.
- Supporting gender neutral play was also key challenges for practitioners.
- Practitioners highlighted that 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 in policy and practice. However, despite this there were challenges for practitioners in the current context as wider societal pressures impacted on families, such as lack of employment, leading to challenges as to how play was prioritised within difficult household circumstances. These pressures were perceived to have increased within the last few years in light of austerity and the wider economic downturn.

Wider research supports that the economic climate within the UK is having an impact on families and children. Recent findings from the UNICEF report (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.[38]

This was also supported by research by the Family and Parenting Institute in 2013. This study showed that families experienced an 'austerity effect' on their budgets. This had resulted in the reduction in leisure and participation budgets. This had resulted in more play activities being conducted at home.[39]

38 Unicef (2013) 'Report Card 11: Child Wellbeing in Rich Countries http://www.unicef.org.uk/Latest/Publications/Report-Card-11-Child-well-being-in-rich-countries/

39 Family and Parenting Institute ( 2013) 'Family Matters Understanding Family in the Age of Austerity' http://www.familyandchildcaretrust.org/families-in-the-age-of-austerity

Research conducted by JRF (2014) recognised the importance of income for leisure. Work conducted on Minimum Income Standards outlined the importance of being able to pursue interests and activities.[40]

**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.[41]

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, childcare environments and the media.[42] This can often be a key factor in shaping the play experiences that children have.

Stakeholders discussed challenges around gender roles and play. The portrayal of gender 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 encouraged to take part in play that is more active and girls being encouraged to take part in play for example mimicking caring role. 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.

The subject of gender segregation and children's toys was debated at Westminster as part of a wider debate on the potential impact of play on gender roles and career choices across gender roles.[43] Zero tolerance discuses that by making specific toys and games gender specific, these limits play skills that children learn. They discuss that by marketing action and construction toys mainly at boys we deny boys the chance to learn social skills and girls to learn spatial and problem solving skills.[44]

**Play and Consumerism**

Practitioners highlighted the commercialisation of play. Parents and caregivers were subject to wider pressures from the society, and that play had become more commodified and parents were influenced by consumerist approaches to play. It was argued that television and media contributed heavily to pressure on parents.

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 in 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.[45] 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 less obvious impacts such as stigma and present lines of social status and social identity.

40 Davis , A., Hirsch, D., Padley., M(2014) 'A minimum income standard for the UK' http://www.jrf.org.uk/publications/minimum-income-standard-2014 Joseph Rowntree Foundation :York

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

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

43 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_spnew49

44 Zero Tolerance (2013) 'Just like a child . Respect Gender Equality in the Early Years , a Guide for Professionals' http://www.zerotolerance.org.uk/Projects/EarlyYears

45 (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'

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 importance.[46] Use of symbolism of brands is of a higher importance amongst those from deprived neighbourhoods and in particular in areas of mixed income.[47]

Related to wider issues around spending on play, practitioners spoke of seasonal pressures such as religious holidays and birthday. These were occasions were parents could often feel pressure to be providing expensive consumer goods to be given to children.

Practitioners spoke of the concern that parents expressed about their children being left out or bullied for not having the similar as other children. This is supported by wider research conducted by Ridge (2002), which discussed income related bullying.[48] Research by the Children's Society (2013) in a survey of 2000 children and 14% of them had experienced some form of bullying as a result of living in a low income.[49]

It was argued that buying second hand goods and toys passed across families from older to younger siblings wasn't often seen as unpopular 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 done to encourage and promote a culture that was less throw away and promoted recycling of toys and games. However, it was expressed that this would need to be promoted in an inclusive manner to promote this happening across society as a 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. Better support for parents and caregivers and children in play activities was felt to have a wider impact in areas such as helping to develop resilience and supporting employability. For stakeholders the opportunity to support families with play, as recognised in the National Parenting Strategy, indicates that early learning experiences at home are crucial for experiences for nursery, school and beyond.[50] Despite this recognition they felt that it was still often challenging to support play in practice, particularly in those families facing multiple difficulties.

One stakeholder described the challenges of this for example parents expressing reluctance to try new activities due to their own play experiences in childhood.

*"Parents say 'I'm not doing that' as they have never experienced play in that way."*

Practitioners spoke of the variety of support needs and circumstances households faced. Parents and caregivers in households where there were difficult circumstances, such as low income or relationship breakdown, may use play as a way to 'compensate' or a tool to help children deal with these circumstances.

They also contrasted this with in some households play may be neglected as stress and energy are devoted to other matters.

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

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

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

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

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

*"Play is undervalued when life is quite pressured."*

For some parents the limited support they were receiving for the problems they faced meant that play was not a priority, particularly when living on a limited income.

Play was often pressurised in particular where households may be dealing with additional responsibilities such as caring.

Research on relationships and poverty has indicated that parents and caregivers perceive that poverty affects their family relationships.[51] 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.[52] Research has shown that poverty can also impact in other ways in wider relationships within the community and social networks. For example, financial restrictions can mean not joining local groups and clubs, not taking part in community events, and not entertaining at home.[53]

Lack of knowledge on the part of parents regarding aspects of play was also highlighted. 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 experiences, been in institutional care or where parents suffered from low confidence and self-esteem.

Service providers discussed the problems in engaging parents and caregivers for support on these issues. This was seen as a barrier for 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 (2011) showed that some parents are reluctant to ask for help or are unclear who to go to for support on parenting.[54] 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 (2012) indicated that often what families define as problems and what they need may not always align with that of wider service providers and practitioners view.[55]

Practitioners spoke of the importance in parenting support programmes that parents and caregivers did not feel discouraged or 'bad parents' for not having previously engaged in an activity. Instead programmes should focus on build parents confidence to be able to engage in play activities with their 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 seen as being driven by toy manufacturers and the media as well as pressure from other parents. Again wider research found that parents in the UK are more focused on this type of consumption when compared to other European countries such as Spain and Sweden.[56]

Some practitioners felt that there was less understanding by parents and caregivers of the benefits of imaginative play and encouraging play activities with other materials. Parents were reluctant to make use of materials such empty cereal boxes as part of play activities with their children. As one participant said:

*"Play does not need to be about buying stuff."*

51 Walker and Griggs (2008) 'The costs of child poverty for individuals and society' Joseph Rowntree Foundation: York
52 ibid
53 ibid

54 Growing Up in Scotland (2011) Parenting Policy briefing – Parenting – Children & Families Analysis – June 2011
55 Mourtney , K ( 2012) 'Parenting and Support' http://aboutfamilies.org.uk/topics/topic-4-parenting-and-support/
56 IPSOS Mori (2011) 'Children's Wellbeing in the UK, Sweden and Spain: The Role of Inequality'

Where play could happen was seen as a critical issue. Practitioners 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.

The quality of the space for play has been documented as vital to the type of play in which children takes part.

A child's ability to play is impacted on by multiple environmental factors such as deprivation. Evidence from Growing up in Scotland on home environments within Early Years illustrated a relationship between deprivation and how children were playing at home. By the age of 22 months they found that children from less advantaged areas took part in in activities such as playing outdoors and drawing and painting less often than children from more advantaged backgrounds.[57]

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 that as parental fears have increased this has led to a decrease in the time spent outside by children.[58] Transport changes have also had a key role to play in terms of street safety in accessing nearby spaces.[59]

Overall practitioners argued that key to good play for children was supporting families to be to engaged in positive play experiences. Family learning was a 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.

57 Growing up in Scotland (2012) 'What do we know about Play – Briefing for Play Scotland'

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

59 National Children's Bureau (2012 ) 'Environmental inequalities and their impact on the health outcomes of children and young people'

**Play In & Around The Home: the Views' of Children**

Focus groups were held with children aged between 5 and 6 and 7 and 8. These explored children's play experiences in and around the home.

**Summary**

- Play largely took place in and around the home. Play was viewed as integral to their lives for their wellbeing and happiness. Children from both age groups identified regular play as part of their day.
- Play activities included active, creative and unstructured play.
- Children would often spread play across the day with different play patterns at the weekend and during holidays where there would be more opportunities to participate in play.
- Issues related to place and other factors such as age and gender and parent or caregiver choices shaped the environments and activities children engaged with.
- 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 as being important for alone time.
- 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.
- Household structure and routine also shaped play for example periods of more restricted quieter play activities.

## Importance of Play

Children participating in the focus groups emphasised the importance of play in their lives. All the children described play as contributing to their happiness and viewed it as a vital and regular part of their lives. Play was seen as integral to their day, with all children taking part on a daily basis. Children discussed participating in different types of play activities, including active play particularly in outdoor space, creative 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 and overall wellbeing.[60]

Motivations for play amongst the 5-6 year old age cluster and 7- 8 years old age cluster included having fun, being with others and as a way to spend time. In terms of when play took place 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 highlights that currently within the research there is still a lack of evidence exploring the time children spent playing in the UK.[61] Evidence from the USA indicates that children have significantly less time for free play than in previous years.[62] The relationship between children play and time has become more complex. Gleave (2009) discusses how constraints on children's time has will be dependent on children's age, gender and ethnicity amongst other social factors.

One key evidence gap is the lack on the impact of time and poverty on children's play experience. 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 households.[63] Evidence within a study conducted by Burchardatt (2008) indicated that there are a proportion of children who are living in households that are income poor and time poor.[64] This may have implications for children's play experiences in relation to how play can be supported in the home.

The relationship between free play and structured play has seen change in recent years. Singer et al (2009) discuss the changing context surrounding children's participation in spontaneous activities and structured play. Singer et al (2009) identifies a combination of factors that have changed this balance between including technological changes, competition for children's time from organized sports and after-school clubs, parental fears about children's safety. They also saw a lack of awareness about the benefits of unstructured activity and play as well as the availability of quality play spaces near children's homes and the reduction in play time at school.[65]

## 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 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 characteristics such as age shaped where children played. For younger children (5-6) play took place in supervised context for example in the home or garden but for some of the older children (7-8) they were able to engage in play in spaces nearby to their homes.

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

61 Gleave (2009) ' Children's Time to Play: a literature review'

62 Gleave (2009) ' Children's Time to Play: a literature review'

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

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

65 Singer at al (2009) cited in Gleave (2009) ' Children's Time to Play: a literature review' Play England

Children in both clusters 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 by Rasmussen discussed children's lives been set within through three spheres: homes, schools and recreational institutions.[66]

Another model developed by Van Vliet (1983) discusses the fourth environment that looks at spaces beyond school, home and playground.[67]

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

Only one child discussed taking part in fixed regular extracurricular recreational activities (after school sports) and this was a child from the older age category focus group. Whilst it was unclear why the other children did not 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' due to their families experiencing poverty. The 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[68] indicated that many families struggled to find money for leisure activities and these were often an area for cutting back on household expenditure.

66 Rasmussen, K (2004) ' Places for children – children's places'
67 Vilet, V.W. (1983) 'Environment and Behaviour, Vol 15 No 5 1983 567-588
68 McHardy, F. et al (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, as well as during weekends and holidays. Only one child in the younger cluster mentioned play before school. Holidays were viewed as a positive by both clusters as there was more time to play.

Some references were made to play taking place in the school environment across both clusters, although this was restricted to discussing play in the playground. Children did not appear to place a great focus on playtime at school, placing more emphasis on play out with school. This is perhaps a reflection of the evidence compiled by Blatchford and Baines (2006) which showed a reduction in playtime offered within school environments.[69] This reduction is down a range of reasons such as pressure on curriculum time[70] and the perceived changes in children's behaviour at break time.[71]

**Connection and Play**

Connection through play was very important, with children in both clusters discussing 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 provided 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.

69 Blatchford and Baines (2006) cited in 'No 15 The Benefits of School Playtime' http://www.ncb.org.uk/media/124800/factsheet15_benefits_playtime_cpis_011210.pdf.
70 Pellengrini and Blatchford ( 2002) cited in ' No 15
71 The Benefits of School Playtime' http://www.ncb.org.uk/media/124800/factsheet15_benefits_playtime_cpis_011210.pdf
71 Blatchford (2002) cited in ' No 15 The Benefits of School Playtime'http://www.ncb.org.uk/media/124800/factsheet15_benefits_playtime_cpis_011210.pdf

Interactions with others through play provided an opportunity for peer interaction and the importance of friendships through place was a core theme to emerge. Friendships were often defined by play interactions. It also provides a space to have 'fun' and this was of importance to continuing friendships.

Children across both clusters 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 although 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 within the older cluster.

Wider research has shown that play benefits children in 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 attachment systems" (Spinka et al 2001, Burchardt 2005, Pellis and Pellis 2009).

Play was also seen as important for personal time for a child. Some in the older cluster 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. 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"*

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 and the potential constraints/risks against alone time for children in circumstances such as overcrowded accommodation. Figures show that 23% of families with children in social housing are living in overcrowded conditions.[72]

**Types of Play Activities**

The nature and type of play activities children engaged in were also discussed in the focus groups. Team games and peer play activities were discussed across both age groups clusters and appeared to be taking higher priority in terms of the play activities children preferred. 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. Competition in play also emerged in other ways. Children discussed team games and sport such as football or tag as preferable forms of active physical play. Physical play ranked highly with across both groups. Children also discussed the importance of active play being a way that children could be healthy. This indicated that public health messages around active life styles were reaching the children and were a benefit they could identify from play.

Also linked with active play was play outside. Outdoor play was viewed as critical to children. All within the study discussed playing in outdoor space. Some referred to playing in gardens 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) has found that exposure to nature and outside environments have benefits to child development.[73]

72 Shelter Scotland (2014) 'Shelter Scotland Comment on Overcrowding in Social Housing' http://scotland.shelter.org.uk/media/press_releases/press_release_folder/2014/shelter_scotland_comment_on_overcrowding_in_socia_lhousing

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

In terms of the exploration of areas out with their home, play often seemed to be confined to in and around the home. There was little reference to visiting other places for play other than other family members. Some children discussed visiting nearby parks but all children in the focus groups did not mention this.

Research conducted by Growing up in Scotland found that 62% of parents reported that their 6 year old child has the opportunity to visit green space at least once a week whilst 51% of children in the 15 % most deprived areas have the same opportunity.[74]

Role-play was another key type of play that emerged from both discussions, although this had gendered dimensions with girls raising this issue 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 in the younger cluster did refer to an 'imaginary friend'. It was unclear what constrained creative play of if it was a matter of personal preference or other factors shaping this.

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

*"When my mum is in the kitchen I play the XBox."*

*"I like to play with my iPod. I have music and games on it."*

74 Growing up in Scotland (2012) 'What do we know about Play' Briefing for Play Scotland growingupinscotland.org.uk/wp-content/.../04/GUS_PlayBriefing.pdf

There has been a continuing increase in ICT and technology based play. 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 iTunes.[75] Some children in the older cluster discussed playing with computer games that were legally categorised as for older children or adults.

Although 'play with technology' was seen as important to children they also seem to identify the importance of playtime 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 in the older cluster 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 to 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 the vignettes were chosen to allow reflection of 'lived experiences' of poverty.[76]

75 Guardian (2013) 'Are Children consuming too much digital technology' http://www.theguardian.com/sustainable-business/children-consuming-too-much-digital-technology

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

Children were asked to discuss the vignette where 'Sam the Cat' were going to attend a friend's birthday party but would be attending without a present. Children in both groups were asked about their reactions to this. Children across both clusters perceived that 'Sam' would be upset at 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 and 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 focus group discussion and children could identify ways of managing this situation. They placed greater 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. This vignette found 'Gerry the giraffes' favourite toy had been broken within the bedroom shared with siblings. Gerry's parent was unable to take the time to deal to deal with the problem of the broken toy.

This scenario promoted stronger reactions from both age categories of children in terms of the emotional connections of the toy. The children discussed that the 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 that the scenarios would create for children. Whilst not articulated by the children as a direct consequence of poverty, it was clear that the children were sensitive to issues of exclusion and disadvantage.

**Discussions Were Held With Parents & Caregivers About Play in & Around the Home**

Across the study, parents and caregivers recognised and highlighted that play for children was important. All of those within the study discussed regular playtime and interaction with the children.

**Summary**

- Parents and caregivers emphasised the importance of play in 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.
- 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.

Parents and caregivers indicated that children spent a significant amount of time playing. 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 communities.[77]

Across the research a number of issues impacted on play and what play parents could support. Parents discussed a cross section of issues 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 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.

Much debate reigns about what supports effective conditions for play. Play Wales (2012) emphasises that children will play in basic and barren environments, however a rich play setting would offer an environment where socialising, creativity, resourcefulness and challenges could be explored in ways that were on children's their own terms.[78]

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 social housing. Several issues with suitability in accommodation were highlighted including 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 thought 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 more arguments and pressures on the household. This was particularly an issue in regards to play that resulted often in a 'mess' being made. Clearly this was more problematic in small space where living space was more pressurised and subject to heavy use.

77 Play Wales (2012) 'Play: health and wellbeing' http://www.playwales.org.uk/login/uploaded/documents/INFORMATION%20SHEETS/play%20health%20and%20wellbeing.pdf

78 ibid

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 homework.[79]

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 interviewees 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."*

Some participants highlighted problems with dampness in their accommodation that had resulted in them being unable to use spaces within their home at all for 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, school jerseys and everything, and part of her toys and everything so a lot [of impact]."*

Tenure of accommodation was an issue for those within 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 of any repairs and other potential difficulties such as the implications to the relationship with housing landlord were raised.

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.

Out with 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 within 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 risk.[80] The importance of feeling safe in a community emerged as a key theme within the research.

Some families in this study were frightened to let their children out in their neighbourhood due to the behaviour of neighbours. This lead to reported the increased stress in 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."*

79 Save the Children (2012) 'No space at home: overcrowding in London'

80 Madge, N., Barker J (2007) 'Risk and childhood' Royal Society of Arts, www.actoea.org.au/wp-content/uploads/.../madge-07-risk-childhood.pdf

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

*"Although outside in winter is far too dark and dangerous, it is not massively well lit."*

Overall, parents and caregivers felt that more was needed to deal with community safety issues in the places where they lived as they identified this limited their children's lives and play experiences.

**Low Income**

Living on a low income raised many key challenges for parents in terms of daily living expenses and supporting play.

A wide range of issues were highlighted, including issues with debt, caring responsibilities, levels of surrounding support, conditionality in the welfare system and other issues.

Families in the study reported problems with the issues of 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 within the households.

Income and play had a complex but interlinked relationship. A key period of additional challenge was the school holidays where children had additional playtime 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 during holiday periods to ensure that their children were talking 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 that they were not 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. Local services provided to link families to activities and days out that they would be unable to otherwise afford or take part in.

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 mechanisms that individuals applied to minimise incurring extra costs during activities. This included attempting to predict costs, such as food and refreshments.

*"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 if families are to be able to deal with such situations. For households with low confidence, it may be the case that they would be reluctant to engage with such activities.

Families affected by disability often incurred higher costs accessing community facilities and travelling as well as other more practical barriers such as accessibility of venues. This has been supported by wider research that highlighted issues for families

accessing leisure activities and the provision and costs of these activities often being a barrier to families taking part.[81] 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 had been asked to discuss a vignette 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.

A key theme emerged of the importance of support for families dealing with complex issues. Parents and caregivers discussed issues such as managing on a low income, dealing with caring responsibilities and dealing with low confidence. These were often complex interactions and could be draining for families, resulting in their need for ongoing support. In this context, their ability to effectively support their children's play activity was compromised.

This raised the question of the challenges facing families with and without existing support networks. For those without family support, engaging in community activity was perceived to be more daunting and interviewees discussed experiences of when they had been isolated and withdrawn from community activities.

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.

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.

81 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.

# Section 4: Conclusions & Policy Recommendations

Overall the research indicated that the relationship between play and low income was complex. The importance of play was recognised by all participants in the study: practitioners,parents and caregivers and children themselves.

Children in the study highlighted the benefits and meanings of play to their lives including social connections and other key factors that contribute to a child's wellbeing. The need for play was critical to their lives. Children understood the emotional impacts of low income and play, and highlighted that were able to anticipate negative emotional experiences of situations such as a pressurised household.

The research has also illustrated some of the factors that influence play in and around the home. We have seen issues related to the 'hidden barriers' families face in regards to play. Practitioners reported that families are experiencing increased pressure and for families who have more chaotic backgrounds more work is need to promote play activities in a holistic way recognising barriers such as low confidence and stressful household circumstances.

For families in difficult circumstances a number of key structural issues issue have been raised by this research. Barriers to supporting play included safety in the community, cost of leisure activities, transport or the quality of play space within the home. In addition more hidden responsibilities that households face such as providing a caring role are often going unrecognised as a barrier to supporting children with play. This will require a more integrated holistic approach in order to provide effective play for all families affected by low income.

**Policy Recommendations:**

*Income*

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. Income adequacy for families both in and out work continues to be critical and action is needed to support families particularly those affected by welfare reform changes.

Addressing low income is the responsibility of both the Scottish and UK Governments. It is incumbent on both Governments that future anti-poverty strategies recognise the impact of measures that may have an impact on low-income families' ability to support play for their children.

*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. Overcrowding needs to be a higher priority for both local authority's and registered social landlords.

*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. Community Planning Partnership should coordinate to support children's play more effectively within communities and ensuring access to quality green space.

### *Access to Community Facilities*

Local authorities must ensure leisure facilities are affordable for all. In particular to look at schemes that considers the complexities of family circumstances such as those with working parents within the household and for those with larger families.

### *Service Provision*

There is need for provision of support of families in an inclusive and non-judgemental manner to help them meeting the needs of their family including that of play. At the heart of this should be work that listens and reflects on lived experience of poverty. Understanding the lived experience will bring us insights and evidence on the impacts of poverty on all areas of life, including those that are important to the children and families.

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