

# Why does free play matter in a digital world?

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Imagine school break time. Released from lessons, the children rush outside. They run, jump, shriek. There's talking, laughter, whispered secrets. They group and regroup freely. Sudden bursts of activity are mysterious to outsiders. Benches become castles, corners are "home," borders are chalked on the tarmac. The rules of the game are created and broken at will. It can be emotional, intense, absorbing, unpredictable.

In the unpromising space of grey tarmac and wire fences, and in the limited times allowed to them, children create their own worlds of meaning and belonging. Some children are excluded. Some seek a quiet spot to themselves. What looks to adult onlookers like fighting is mostly play-fighting, though occasionally, the teacher on duty must step in. A swirl of sound rises from the playground, instantly recognisable to passers-by, resonant across the generations. This is free play.

Where are these opportunities in digital environments? Do the conditions that facilitate free play in the playground occur in similar or distinctive forms online? How can we design digital opportunities for children to group and regroup as they choose, creating and breaking rules, with bursts of activity and swirls of sound, enabling creative worlds of meaning, risk-taking and belonging? Where is the good practice we can learn from, and what challenges exist?



*Image credit: Image by Michael Gaida from Pixabay*

Play is a vital way that children enjoy and express themselves, develop and learn, build relationships and participate in the world. When we tell people that the Digital Futures Commission began its work focusing on play, their eyes light up, suggesting widespread recognition of the value of play in childhood. Yet this recognition cuts little ice when setting the policy priorities that shape children's lives in education, social care, urban planning and now, the design and management of the digital environment.

"Hide and seek – that game has just been around for so long, and children still love it. You can do it anywhere and just explore. Part of being playful is just being free and not having to be serious, I think." (Girl, 15)

"When you're playing, you kind of have a more creative side open up to you, and you have a goal that you're trying to do at the same time." (Boy, 13 years old)

In developing our vision for children's play, we hope to change the narrative that shapes children's opportunities by inviting new imaginaries among digital providers, policymakers, professionals who work with children and the public. This is not to be idealistic: our vision is evidence-based, balanced, practical and, above all, responsive to the views of children and young people. For they want and deserve better opportunities to play in a digital world.

Our report, A Panorama of Play, reviewed this literature from multiple perspectives and through history (Cowan, 2020). It identified a rich debate over why play matters, encompassing:

- Play as necessary for child development
- Play as a spontaneous mode of self-directed learning
- Play as an effective means of teaching and guidance
- Play as therapeutic
- Play as a contribution to and enactment of wellbeing
- Play as a child's right

As children spend more time playing online, it is imperative to ask what this means for the quality of their play. Can they play freely in digital contexts? What do they especially enjoy about playing online and what frustrates them? Can the digital environment be better designed to enhance and not undermine children's free play?

Playful by Design takes a child-led approach. Two literature reviews, extensive expert consultation and consultation with parents and carers underlines the findings from workshops with children and a national survey of 6–17-year-olds.

Our new report is underpinned by three assertions:

- Children have a right to play. The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) defines play as “any behaviour, activity or process initiated, controlled and structured by children themselves.”
- Children want and need to be active participants in the digital world.
- The digital world can and should be designed to support children's agency and free play.

Experts and children consulted for this report agree that while, of course, forms of play vary widely, as do children's interests and preferences, a concerted effort is needed to commit to enhancing the core qualities of children's free play and to reduce the inhibitors, now that the digital environment is so central to children's lives.

Playful by Design does not call for a nostalgic return to pre-digital days, nor do we wish to wrap children in cotton wool so nothing risky or immersive or unexpected can occur. But to claim the label “Playful by Design” products should:

- Prioritise digital features that are inclusive and welcoming to all, reducing hateful communication and forms of exclusion and reflecting multiple identities.
- Provide and enhance features that offer easy-to-use pathways, flexibility and variety as these support children's agency and their imaginative, stimulating and open-ended play.
- Reduce compulsive features designed to prolong user engagement or cultivate dependency on games, apps or platforms, so children's immersive play is intrinsically motivated and freely chosen.
- Ensure children's play in online spaces is safe including by giving them control over who can contact them and

supplying help when needed.

- Recognise that a degree of risk-taking important in children's play and that the burden should not fall on them always to be cautious or anxious.
- Respect the needs of children of different ages by providing age-appropriate opportunities for play, while also allowing for safe intergenerational play.
- Prioritise creative resources and imaginative, open-ended play over predetermined pathways built on popularity metrics or driven by advertising or other commercial pressures.

These high-level principles of "Playful by Design" set out design objectives, based on what children require to fully and freely enjoy play with digital products and services. We invite designers of digital products and services to work out the means to facilitate children to exercise their agency, grow and develop through play, which also involves pushing boundaries within safe parameters, taking into consideration the interplay across relevant stakeholders and the technical requirements and contexts of use specific to particular products and services.

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Originally posted on <https://digitalfuturescommission.org.uk/> on November 15, 2021 .