

A photograph of two children playing on a tree branch. A girl with blonde hair in a ponytail, wearing a red school uniform, is hanging from a thick branch with both hands. A boy in a blue jacket and glasses is also hanging from the same branch, leaning back. The background is a dense thicket of green foliage and a black metal fence.

Ten tips

for improving  
active play  
at your school

Outdoor Play and Learning (OPAL) CIC

*Supporting school improvement through play*

[www.outdoorplayandlearning.org.uk](http://www.outdoorplayandlearning.org.uk)



## Welcome!

This book has been put together by Outdoor Play and Learning (OPAL) CIC, the UK's leading organisation dedicated to helping schools transform their entire culture of play. The OPAL Primary Programme helps schools to review every aspect of the planning and delivery of play so that every child has an amazing playtime every day –

**no exceptions.**

British children attend primary school for seven years. Of those seven years, around 1.4 (20%) will be spent outside actively playing, making 'playtime' on par with literacy and maths when it comes to dominance in the curriculum. We think this means that schools should have a strategic approach to playtime, based on sound policy, planning, reflection and resourcing.

These tips will help you to get things moving. If you need more help, that's what we are here for.



Find out more at

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## Why play?

According to Sport England's 2018/19/20 Active Lives survey **play is the main way that children participate in physical activity** and there is a direct relationship between levels of physical activity and mental wellbeing.<sup>1</sup> Mackett and Paskins (2008) also found that most children spend more time in moderate to vigorous physical activity (MVPA) during play than they do in sport and physical education.

Research shows that primary school age children's play is typically physically active. The quantity and quality of children's opportunities to play are directly linked to increases in physical activity levels and to the reduction of obesity and are accompanied by a health improving heart rate.<sup>2</sup>

Primary school age children's play also consists of features such as inquisitiveness, flexibility, uncertainty and unpredictability. These are aligned with the maintenance of physical activity but also what scientists call 'whole system activation'; While playing is good for activity levels, it is also good for the whole brain-body system. Playing supports creativity and an openness to learning, self-regulation, flexible thinking, memory and recall, comprehension, prediction and evaluation, problem solving, and the maintenance and development of relationships.

### References

<sup>1</sup> [www.sportengland.org/know-your-audience/data/active-lives](http://www.sportengland.org/know-your-audience/data/active-lives)

<sup>2</sup> [www.bhf.org.uk/how-you-can-help/events/schools-events/primary-school-children-get-less-active-with-age](http://www.bhf.org.uk/how-you-can-help/events/schools-events/primary-school-children-get-less-active-with-age)

**Playing is good for children and, importantly, it's lots of fun too.**

**So, the question is, how can adults make sure all children experience high quality opportunities for active play at school?**

This booklet summarises the **top ten tips** to make your school's playtimes full of high intensity activity, self-starting games and lots and lots of laughter.

# Ten tips

## for active play at school!



### 1 Permission

#### Stop saying stop. Start saying ‘What if...’

Children tell us that they can't do what they would like to do at playtimes.

When adults relax the unnecessary constraining practices often found at playtimes, good things happen. When children are allowed to take the lead, their play becomes more involved, play narratives are extended, and children become more immersed in their play.

Contrary to what you might think, playground incidents and behavioural problems reduce when children have greater freedom, more space and things to play with.

### 2 Space

#### Use all of what you've got

**Do you use your field in the summer term only? If so, why?** Space is an incredibly valuable commodity and every bit of space should be valued and accessed as much as possible.

It is rare that we encounter primary schools that already use their whole site all of the time. So start using all of the outdoor space you have, every day. And if that means you need to encourage parents to send children to school dressed for muddy play, then make that happen.





### 3 Time

## Make more time to play

According to an OPAL survey, over 50% of schools have reduced playtime since March 2020.

We know that there is currently a huge focus on 'catching up'. But before diving into learning, children need to feel safe, secure and re-establish relationships with peers, their environment and their teachers. Playtime gives them the chance to do all these things. What's more, good quality play opportunities will actually consolidate their learning and compliment curricular outcomes, as well as compensating children for much of the social and developmental opportunities that they have lost over the course of the pandemic.

**Try to ensure that all children have long periods of uninterrupted playing.**



## 4 Loose parts

### Give children lots of stuff to play with!

Loose parts can be anything from tyres and tarpaulin to old clothes and conkers ... the most important thing is that their use isn't determined by adults.

The amount of creativity and innovation children can experience is directly related to the number and variety of variables in their environment, so lots of loose parts means increased quality of opportunities to play.

Think about what you have already that could be used for play, rather than thrown away or kept at the back of the PTA shed. Loose parts come in many shapes and sizes, so think big and small. Children will need bigger things to build structures with and smaller things to manipulate, transport and transform in their pretend play. This can include tyres, cardboard boxes, carpet tubes, wheels, material, plastics, wood, pallets, natural elements - anything that isn't by its nature unreasonably hazardous or dangerous. Children are inventive and these open-ended resources, that are often free and of little monetary value, are wonderful resources for their play.



## 5 Dens, forts and hideaways

### Help children find and make special places

Think about the kinds of materials that children can use to build personal spaces. Children will bring these things together to turn spaces into social spaces in which they will play with the other loose parts. Children are good at seeking out den spaces. Let them play in the small places they are naturally drawn to, like in bushes and under tables – these are very important for their play.

#### Check out this film

Check out this film for den making tips for children:

[youtube.com/watch?v=jnqhjzUW93A](https://youtube.com/watch?v=jnqhjzUW93A)



## 6 Sand pits and digging areas

### Let children change their environment

Can you use some of your space to create a big sand pit and/or digging area?

So lots of children can play at the same time, the bigger you can make these spaces the better. Sand and earth are adaptable for small world play and loved by almost all children. These are really cost-effective ways to change up your space and increase physical activity levels while hugely improving opportunities for play.

## 7 Risk-benefit assessment

### Don't make things as safe as possible, make them as safe as necessary

We can't and shouldn't eliminate all risk as, when we do, we inevitably curtail children's physical activity.

To encourage physically active play, children need to explore, experiment and create adventures. Assess the real risk posed by an opportunity and weigh that up against all the potential benefits. If the benefits are comparable or outweigh the risk, it's reasonable to let children carry on as they are, always keeping a watchful and supportive degree of oversight.

Read the Health and Safety Executive's (HSE) statement on the importance of risk in children's play:

[www.hse.gov.uk/entertainment/childs-play-statement.htm](http://www.hse.gov.uk/entertainment/childs-play-statement.htm)



## 8 Rough and tumble play

### Support children to build strong attachments and develop social skills

**Tag, chase and other forms of boisterous physical play with friends is a good thing.**

This sort of play is incredibly beneficial for physical activity levels, but even more important as a means of building stronger attachments and developing social skills and self-regulation.

Rough and tumble play is often discouraged in schools, to the detriment of the whole school community.

Despite initial impressions, rough and tumble or 'play fighting' is very different to real fighting. It is characterised by pretence and turn taking and is most often accompanied by smiles and laughter. The intention is to have fun with friends, not to cause pain.



## 9 Games

### Bring the community together playfully

Skipping, hide and seek, 'blocky' and other organised games are great to have up your sleeve when children want some direction or support in their play.

Adults can initiate games and encourage inclusion, regulating interactions and helping those less confident to play with others and then – when appropriate – step back and let the children take over. Playful games are a great way of softening the boundaries between adults and children too – having fun together can do wonders for the whole school community. Parachute games are brilliant. If you don't already have a games parachute, it's a great investment.

### Here are 17 ideas for parachute games:

[www.momjunction.com/articles/parachute-games-for-kids\\_00377165/](http://www.momjunction.com/articles/parachute-games-for-kids_00377165/)

Once you've tried those you can make up your own or use it as a superhero cape or make it into a colourful den.

This is a website with  
**101 playground games:**  
[www.theresehoyle.com/product/101-playground-games/](http://www.theresehoyle.com/product/101-playground-games/)



A photograph of two children dancing in a grassy park. In the foreground, a young girl with blonde hair, wearing an orange t-shirt and blue jeans, is smiling and dancing. Behind her, a young girl with dark hair, wearing a white t-shirt and dark leggings, is also dancing with her arms raised. The background shows lush green trees and a clear sky.

## 10 Playground disco

### Help them sing and dance!

Unleash the power of music on your playground. Children can't resist moving to great tunes. Release your inner DJ and find out what tunes work best. The Macarena and Gangnam Style are two big favourites.

A playground that feels like a party is a wonderful place. You can help encourage dancing and performance by creating a stage area, hanging up a curtain, providing musical instruments or a music player and some dressing-up clothes.

**We love to see how schools are making playtime a key part of their school day.**

Check out our Twitter feed for inspiration and share your own playtimes tagging @OPAL\_CIC.

If you're ready to start your OPAL journey, get in touch today:

[www.outdoorplayandlearning.org.uk](http://www.outdoorplayandlearning.org.uk)



## About OPAL

OPAL is the UK's leading not-for-profit organisation working with primary schools to transform children's play through the OPAL Primary Programme. Hundreds of schools and tens of thousands of children are benefiting from the changes OPAL helps schools to make.



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