

Providing access and encouragement to play and engage in arts and leisure activities can promote the health and well-being of looked after children and young people. It can provide a range of opportunities to promote self-confidence, self-esteem, social interaction, reduce isolation and enhance personal coping skills.

## Healthy Care

This briefing is for all who are involved in Healthy Care Partnerships and:

- describes what is meant by play and creativity and its contribution to children and young people's healthy development
- discusses why play and creativity is important for looked after children and young people and how it promotes their social inclusion and emotional well-being
- explains how play and creativity can support children and young people's participation in healthy care partnerships and multi-agency groups
- provides examples of how healthy care can promote play and creative activities for looked after children and young people
- offers signposts to resources and further information.

The Healthy Care Programme, funded by the Department for Education and Skills, is a practical means of improving the health of looked after children and young people in line with the Department of Health guidance *Promoting the Health of Looked After Children* (2002). Through partnership working, policy development, and with the participation of looked after children and young people, it will ensure that services are child-focused, provide a healthy care environment and support the National Healthy Care Standard.

The National Healthy Care Standard is based on a child's entitlement to:

- appreciation, love, respect and consistency
- a safe, protective and healthy care environment
- opportunities to develop personal and social skills to care for their health and well-being now and in the future
- effective healthcare, assessment, treatment and support.

# Play and creativity

The National Healthy Care Standard states that:

*A child needs to have opportunities to develop personal and social skills, talents and abilities and to spend time in freely chosen play, cultural and leisure activities.*

Play and creativity contributes to health and well-being:

*All children and young people need the chance to play if they are to develop to their full potential – this includes their physical competence and their emotional, social, moral and intellectual growth.*

(National Playing Fields Association and others 2000)

## What we know about play

Children and young people of all ages have a natural, basic impulse to play. Play is when children and young people are doing what they want, in their own way and for their own reasons. When children play they are learning, practising skills, creating, exploring and experimenting.

Play and unstructured free-time activity enable children and young people to bring together their ideas, feelings, relationships and physical experiences. Such activity allows them to use what they already know, so as to learn and understand more about the world they live in and the relationships around them. By the time they are teenagers, young people no longer use the term 'play' but their unstructured free-time pursuits continue to be an important part of their daily lives and development. Children and young people need opportunities to play every day.

## Physical and outdoor play

There is increasing concern about rising rates of childhood obesity and this is partly linked to a lack of physical activity. Children and young people's opportunity to play freely in their local neighbourhoods has declined, largely because of the concerns of parents and carers about safety and a lack of places to play. Another factor is that sedentary occupations such as watching TV and playing computer games are more popular. What's more, a growing number of children and young people do not even walk to school.

A review and analysis of over 100 consultations with children and young people across the country revealed that they are repeatedly requesting more opportunities to play, especially physical and outdoor play (Children's Play Council 2002).

The Department of Health (2004) has issued guidance about recommended levels of physical activity for children and young people in order to maintain health: 'All young people, aged 5 to 18 years, should take part in at least one hour of moderately intense physical activity each day.'

Research has identified that playing (unstructured ball games and general outdoor play) is one of the most effective ways of ensuring children get the physical activity they need (Mackett 2004).

Further information about recommendations for children and young people's levels of physical activity can be found in the NCB's *Healthy Care Briefing* on 'Healthy eating and physical activity' (see 'Useful resources').

### What we know about creative activities

Creative activities cover a whole range of arts such as dance, drama, music and song, sculpture, model-making, pottery, writing and literature, drawing, painting, and activities such as photography, video and digital media.

Involvement and interest with creative arts can be active – the child or young person is engaged in creating or making something or expressing ideas, thoughts, perceptions and feelings. It can also be passive: watching, viewing, listening and reading can all provide satisfaction, enjoyment and stimulation, and encourage imagination.

Children and young people gain enjoyment and satisfaction from producing their own artwork and can feel proud of their achievement and ability to create something that is uniquely theirs. Childhood play activities can also lead to an interest in more structured creative arts in young adulthood.

Cultural activities can help children and young people to learn about, enjoy and understand their cultural, racial or religious heritage. Such activities also promote awareness of cultural diversity for everyone, and promote social inclusion.

Children and young people with disabilities, especially those who have limited means of communicating or interacting with others, often find creative arts a liberating and enriching experience.

Play and creative activities, including sports and other leisure activities, can take place:

- in the home/residential care setting
- in the local community (parks, adventure playgrounds, playing fields, swimming pools and so on)
- as part of organised activities (such as after-school groups, dance classes, play schemes, football teams, Brownies and Cubs)
- as part of a special visit, for example to an art gallery, theatre, wildlife park or museum.

### Play and creativity for looked after children and young people

Therapists who work with children and young people who have experienced abuse, neglect and other trauma, stress the importance of engaging them in repetitive, nurturing, consistent and predictable experiences (Perry and others 2000). The play and creative activities that the majority of children experience on a regular basis in a family home (drawing at the kitchen table; running about in the garden or park; playing with cars, dolls or bricks; singing a nursery rhyme; making a cake with an adult; playing with a ball; looking after a pet; being read a favourite bedtime story; and so on) are essential to their healthy development. Therapists believe that these safe, repetitive, patterned experiences help the brain to develop and the child to make sense of the world. Perry goes on to describe how learning is driven by children and young people taking pleasure in play (see 'How learning is driven by play').

#### How learning is driven by play

Play often stems from curiosity:  
Curiosity leads to exploration  
Exploration leads to discovery  
Discovery leads to pleasure  
Pleasure leads to repetition  
Repetition leads to mastery  
Mastery leads to new skills  
New skills lead to confidence  
Confidence leads to increased self-esteem  
Self-esteem leads to a sense of security  
Security leads to more learning

Although play comes naturally to children and young people, they need stimulation, resources and sometimes encouragement to develop their play. Looked after children and young people may not have had the opportunity to play due to abuse or neglect in their past, difficult and damaging relationships with parents or carers, illness or disability. It is known that a lack of opportunities to play and interact with others can have serious negative effects on a child or young person's social and emotional development (Brown 2003, Bruner and others 1985).

For some children and young people, play therapy can help them both learn to play and learn to live with some of their difficulties (Bruce and Meggitt 1996).

Skilled play and art therapists are trained to deal with the situations and emotions they are likely to encounter in work with children and young people. For most looked after children and young people, access to play therapy is limited and will only be offered for a period of time. For the rest of the child or young person's daily life they will be at home with foster carers or in a residential children's home. The opportunity to play and engage in creative activities must be encouraged and supported by the child or young person's main carers. This is not therapy – it is the everyday experience of meeting the needs of children and young people growing up.

A research programme in Canada (Wright and others 2004) has shown that involvement in arts activities can have a positive impact on children and young people by improving interpersonal skills, conflict-resolution and problem-solving skills. The research also showed that levels of emotional problems were lowered for children and young people who had completed the programme.

Involvement in play, creative activities, sports and other leisure activities is important for looked after children and young people because it provides opportunities for them to meet and interact with others and to develop friendships. This can counteract the exclusion that looked after children and young people can experience and provides valuable experience in developing social relationships and communication skills. In addition, it provides access to new adult role models. It has been argued that the development of social skills can be crucial in determining whether a child or young person flourishes socially and educationally (Goleman 1996).

#### Creative arts and play can:

- enhance the self-esteem and resilience of looked after children and young people
- promote social inclusion
- improve sensory awareness
- help to counteract the consequences of childhood abuse and neglect.

(Chambers 2004)

## Participation and involvement

The National Healthy Care Standard requires that looked after children and young people are consulted and involved in the development of their healthy care.

Healthy Care Partnerships have used activities such as photography, visual art, poetry and cooking to involve a wide group of children and young people and find out what healthy care means to them. Different ways of communicating can help those who are very young, not articulate, shy or unconfident to express their ideas. Doing something with a group of other children and young people, like making a collage, can allow children and young people to feel safe and comfortable enough to say what they think and feel.

Healthy Care Partnerships found this helped them to identify what is most important to children and young people. Some of the learning from this work is described in two papers on 'Learning from the Standard' (see 'Useful resources').

## How Healthy Care can promote play and creative activities

A healthy care environment provides a sound base for the promotion of children and young people's involvement in play, creative arts, sports and other leisure activities because, for children and young people, it:

- provides supportive personal relationships
- strengthens their sense of self
- stimulates their curiosity and desire to learn about the people and world around them
- provides opportunities to exercise choice and learn about responsibility
- is free from fear or violence
- offers a safe living environment
- promotes and protects their physical and mental health.

Healthy Care Partnerships can promote and protect the play and creative activities of looked after children and young people by ensuring that these are included in Healthy Care audits and Healthy Care action plans. This will include training and professional development for carers and residential social workers to support them in providing a healthy care environment and understanding the importance of their role.

## The National Healthy Care Standard

### A child or young person living in a healthy care environment is entitled to:

1. feel safe, protected and valued in a strong, sustained and committed relationship with at least one carer;
2. live in a caring, healthy and learning environment;
3. feel respected and supported in his/her cultural beliefs and personal identity;
4. have access to effective healthcare, assessment, treatment and support;
5. have opportunities to develop personal and social skills, talents and abilities and to spend time in freely chosen play, cultural and leisure activities; and
6. be prepared for leaving care by being supported to care and provide for him/herself in the future.

### Examples from Healthy Care Partnerships of action to promote play and creativity

#### Policy

- Ensuring local policies relating to play, arts, culture and education specifically include looked after children and young people (for example the local cultural strategy).
- Looked after children have access to play therapy services if required.
- A regional group has been established to focus on looked after children and young people and creativity. The group ensures strategic development, provides networking opportunities and shares learning across the region.
- A DfES funded pilot project - Out of School Hours Learning - will identify what works in encouraging looked after children to get involved in out-of-school activities.

#### Partnership

- A leisure and fun coordinator has been appointed to support and encourage looked after children and young people to engage in leisure activities of their choice and support foster carers to make this happen.
- A youth worker and a Connexions advisor for looked after young people both encourage and support young people to use mainstream leisure and youth provision.
- A weekly leisure club for looked after children and young people has been organised by a partnership of education, social services, leisure and community services plus the local museums and arts services and many others. Looked after young people are supported to join mainstream provision but also remain in contact with the club.

#### Practice

- A drama project for looked after young people is promoting well-being by helping children express themselves, this is leading to increased confidence and stronger communication skills. Some young people have developed their interests further by joining mainstream activities.
- Permission for looked after children and young people to attend outings and visits is arranged at the beginning of a placement for all visits so that this does not stop children participating in school or other leisure activities.
- A music project for looked after young people ended with a public performance. The young people developed skills in lyric writing, rapping, music mixing, video and other production skills, learned to work together, and gained confidence and pride in their abilities and achievements.

#### Participation

- Care plans for children include information about their interests and leisure time preferences. The children and young people are involved in updating this regularly.
- 'Make it happen' - a range of creative activities were organised for looked after children who were considered to be most vulnerable and needing extra support. Professional assistants worked with artists and sports workers to help the children get the most out of it.
- A 'Quiz' is used to audit the leisure and fun needs of all looked after children and young people aged 5 to 13. Individual plans are devised from the results. A regular evening activity session is provided for children who want to attend, where they can meet and play with siblings.
- *Carers Can!* (a magazine for foster and residential carers) includes play and creative activities that have been tried and tested by carers. The activities are suitable for the whole family and for groups of children and young people.

## National Policy

The National Healthy Care Standard contributes to the achievement of:

- **The five outcomes for children and young people described in Every Child Matters**  
The outcomes are to: be healthy; stay safe; enjoy and achieve; make a positive contribution; and achieve economic well-being.
- **The National Service Framework for Children, Young People and Maternity Services**  
Standard 1 of the framework refers to the need to promote healthy lifestyles, including healthy eating and active lives. Standard 7 refers to the need for services to promote social inclusion for disabled children and young people and those with complex needs.
- **Choosing Health: Making healthy choices easier**  
The public health White Paper notes the need to improve the self-esteem, social skills and emotional well-being of looked after children and young people. It also introduces a range of measures to tackle obesity such as increasing children and young people's levels of physical activity and encouraging more involvement in sports activities.
- **The Children Act (2004)**  
The Act requires children's services authorities to provide services aimed at improving children and young people's well-being through opportunities for recreation, including play (Section 6(2)).

## Useful websites

### [www.ncb.org.uk/healthcare](http://www.ncb.org.uk/healthcare)

Information about the National Healthy Care Standard, including briefings on key topics and resources.

### [www.artscouncil.org.uk](http://www.artscouncil.org.uk)

Information about National Lottery arts projects and funding for individuals.

### [www.bild.org.uk](http://www.bild.org.uk)

British Institute of Learning Disabilities offers training and information on a range of issues, including involvement in arts and leisure.

### [www.capt.org.uk](http://www.capt.org.uk)

Resources about preventing accidents to children and safety quizzes for children.

### [www.kidsactive.org.uk](http://www.kidsactive.org.uk)

Promotes inclusive play and runs adventure play-grounds for disabled children.

### [www.natll.org](http://www.natll.org)

Information from the National Association of Toy and Leisure Libraries.

### [www.ncb.org.uk/cpc](http://www.ncb.org.uk/cpc)

The Children's Play Council promotes children's play and publishes a free bi-monthly journal *Playtoday*.

### [www.ncb.org.uk/library/cpis](http://www.ncb.org.uk/library/cpis)

Resources from The Children's Play Information Service.

### [www.nya.org.uk](http://www.nya.org.uk)

Resources and publications about youth provision.

### [www.phabengland.org.uk](http://www.phabengland.org.uk)

Clubs and activities for disabled and non-disabled children, young people and adults, plus newsletters.

### [www.rosipa.com](http://www.rosipa.com)

Offers information and resources about accident prevention, including children's play, the home and leisure settings.

### [www.show.me.uk](http://www.show.me.uk)

Provides information about museums and art galleries in England with provision and exhibitions for children and young people.

### [www.sportengland.org.uk](http://www.sportengland.org.uk)

Sport England is the main government-funded sports body in the country.

### [www.rhrn.thewhocarestrust.org.uk](http://www.rhrn.thewhocarestrust.org.uk)

The Who Cares? Trust provides resources and information for looked after children and young people.

### [www.youth.org.uk](http://www.youth.org.uk)

Promotes non-formal education programmes for and by young people, resources and publications plus links to local activities.

## Useful resources

*Keeping Arts Safe: Protection of children, young people and vulnerable adults involved in arts activities.*

Arts Council, England and NSPCC (2003)

*Let's Do It*

Image in Action (1997)

A compendium of over 80 practical activities for use with a range of young people with learning disabilities.

*Carers Can!*

National Children's Bureau (2005)

A magazine for foster carers and residential social workers that provides ideas about play and creative activities.

'Creative arts and play for looked after children', *Highlight*, 212

Chambers, H (2004)

Examines how creative activities and play can enhance children's development and promote well-being.

*Learning from the Standard: Using creative participation with children and young people*  
National Children's Bureau (2004)

Download from  
[www.ncb.org.uk/healthcare/docs.asp](http://www.ncb.org.uk/healthcare/docs.asp)

*Learning from the Standard: Using drama to consult with children and young people*  
National Children's Bureau (2004)

Download from  
[www.ncb.org.uk/healthcare/docs.asp](http://www.ncb.org.uk/healthcare/docs.asp)

'Healthy eating and physical activity', *Healthy Care Briefing*

National Children's Bureau (2005)

*What is Play?*

Lindon, J (2002) Children's Play Information Service  
This factsheet defines the meaning and importance of play for children and how adults can support children's play.

*A Better Education for Children in Care*

Office of the Deputy Prime Minister and Social Exclusion Unit (2003)

Examines the barriers that prevent children in care achieving their educational potential and highlights areas of action to improve their life chances.

### *Inspiring Inclusive Play Handbook*

Pine (2004)

Report of a project in five schools in Scotland plus a handbook with suggestions about how to make play a better experience for everyone. (Available from Scotland Yard Adventure Centre telephone: 0131 476 4506.)

*Child Protection in the Play Setting: Play action guide*

Play Action (2002)

*Side by Side: Guidelines for inclusive play*  
Scott, R (2000) Kidsactive

## References

Brown, F (ed) (2003) *Playwork: Theory and practice*. Buckingham: Open University Press.

Bruce T, and Meggitt, C (1996) *Child Care and Education*. London: Hodder & Stoughton.

Bruner, JS and others (1985) *Play: Its role in development and evolution*. London: Penguin.

Chambers, H (2004) 'Creative arts and play for looked after children', *Highlight*, 212.

Children's Play Council (2002) 'Something good and fun' in *Making the Case for Play: Gathering the evidence*. London: Children's Play Council.

Department for Education and Skills (2004). *The Children's Bill*. London: DfES.

Department of Health (2002) *Promoting the Health of Looked After Children*. London: DH.

Department of Health (2003) *On the State of the Public Health: Health Check. Chief Medical Officers Annual Report 2002*. London: DH.

Department of Health (2004). *At Least Five a Week: Evidence on the impact of physical activity and its relationship to health. Report from the Chief Medical Officer*. London: DH.

Department of Health (2004a) *Choosing Health: Making healthy choices easier*. London: TSO.

Goleman, D (1996) *Emotional Intelligence: Why it can matter more than IQ*. London: Bloomsbury.

HM Treasury (2003) *Every Child Matters*. Norwich: The Stationery Office.

Mackett, R 'Making children's lives more active'. <http://www.cts.ucl.ac.uk/research/chcaruse/> (accessed 25 Nov 2004).

National Playing Fields Association and others (2000) *Best Play: What play provision should do for children*. London: Children's Play Council.

Perry, BD and others 'Curiosity, pleasure and play: a neurodevelopmental perspective' (June 2000). <http://www.childtrauma.org/CTAMATERIALS/Curiosity.asp> (accessed 20 December 2004).

Perry, BD 'Curiosity: the fuel of development'. <http://www.teacher.scholastic.com/professional/bruceperry/curiosity.htm> (accessed 25 Nov 2004).

Wright, R and others, 'National Arts and Youth Development Programme Highlights' (2004) <http://www.mcgill.ca/naydp/symposium/> (accessed 1 December 2004).