



Policy brief
March 2018



Recreation

Why is recreation important?

The Commissioner for Children and Young People has undertaken a number of consultations in which children and young people have shared their views on what is important to their wellbeing.¹ Recreation is consistently raised as an important contributor to wellbeing – both as a way to keep fit and healthy but also to improve mental health.

The right to play is enshrined in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (Article 31), which states that every child has the “right to rest and leisure, to engage in play and recreational activities appropriate to the age of the child and to participate freely in cultural life and the arts”. It also states that the rights of children to participate fully in these activities should be respected and promoted by governments.²

There is extensive evidence³ that shows the benefits of participating in a range of leisure activities and the importance of play in a child’s social, emotional, intellectual and physical development.⁴

Play, both structured and unstructured, aids the development of creativity, confidence and imagination, as well as the ability to deal with stress and anxiety, to make new friends and develop social networks. Research also suggests that unstructured play in particular is significant in terms of brain development; facilitating the ability to make decisions, self-regulate, and develop a sense of autonomy and independence.⁵

To promote positive health and wellbeing, these opportunities should be made available to all children and young people irrespective of socio-economic status, geographical location, age or gender.

What do children and young people say about recreation?

In 2017, to celebrate the office’s 10 year anniversary, the Commissioner undertook a consultation with over 4,000 Year 4 students from across Western Australia. The theme of recreation⁶ was raised in nearly 30 per cent of all student responses.

For the purposes of this policy brief, the term recreation includes both structured and unstructured activities such as:

- playing team sport (either at school or in a club)
- physical activities such as riding, fishing, camping, swimming and dancing
- arts-based activities such as reading, drawing and cooking
- technology, namely for gaming and accessing social media
- spending time having fun with friends, family or pets, where a specific activity is not always planned.

For some Aboriginal children and young people, going to the bush to hunt and camp is also an important recreational activity because it allows them to spend time with family, reconnect with their culture and practise traditional activities.

Children and young people have told the Commissioner they enjoy participating in a range of both structured and unstructured recreational activities, many of which take place outdoors. The environment and natural surroundings have a big impact on what activities children and young people pursue and many enjoy the freedom in WA to explore and be active, particularly as they get older and can do-so unsupervised.

"The age of 10 means going to the pool on my own, playing at friends' houses, rocking my bike at the skate park and meditating."

"I like to go down the bush or go yabby-catching or tadpoling or something."

"I like dirt bike riding, soccer, music, skateboarding. I like living in Kwinana because we have the adventure playground and the new skate park."

"[I'm happy] when my cats and chooks and me do stuff."

"I love to go for picnics at parks because there is no rubbish around and there's lots of lovely playing equipment. I love WA."

While the majority spoke very positively about the many opportunities they had for recreational activities, some wanted more play spaces or commented that their local spaces did not feel safe, which is detrimental to their healthy growth and development. This is particularly relevant in regional and remote communities where community facilities can be inadequate.

"...There's this park in Wellard that I love going to but I don't go there anymore because there are some teenagers that keep trashing the park..."

Many children and young people who have participated in the Commissioner's consultations identified sport, exercise and fitness as among the things that mattered most to them. They also discussed some of the barriers to getting involved in sporting activities that happened outside of school, including transportation, financial costs, inadequate facilities and equipment, a lack of role models, geographic isolation, parental restrictions and study. There were some suggestions to combat this, such as a greater number of sports facilities or improved facilities, increased funding for clubs and more scholarships.

"Sport is really important to me because it's fun and you bond with your teammates more."

"I love gymnastics because it is so fun and you always have an awesome time there."

"The thing I love in life is sport. In Esperance you get to play most of the sports. I wish everyone had the opportunity to play sport like I do."

Many children and young people spent their recreation time with friends and family, participating in a range of leisure activities or simply enjoying time together with nothing structured planned. Unstructured leisure time is important for mental health and wellbeing, as it fosters independence and a sense of imagination and spontaneity.⁷ Many children spoke about the positive effect of having fun with their friends and family, saying they felt happy when special people around them were having fun too.

"Just like chilling with friends and stuff, play music if you've got some, that's always fun... I play in bands or watch other bands play... I love playing."

"Chilling being with friends at the beach, listening to music, playing in bands."

"I reckon things that make me happy are going to my friends' birthday parties and especially doing things I like, like going bowling."

"Just being with friends or family...seeing happiness, seeing other people happy, you can feel happy as well."

What does the research say about recreation?

Research identifies that children and young people enjoy participating in a range of both structured and unstructured recreational activities in a range of settings, and that there are numerous benefits of being able to participate in both. There is also extensive evidence both locally and internationally that links exposure and connection to urban greenspace and the natural environment to significantly better physical and emotional health.⁸ Studies have shown that time spent outdoors in greenspace is associated with higher levels of physical activity in preschool-aged children; improved motor skills for kindergarten-aged children; and milder symptoms in children diagnosed with ADHD. Evidence also suggests that children's learning outcomes and behaviour at school is better if they have sufficient time for recess, access to school gardens and opportunities to learn outdoors.⁹ More specific ways in which children and young people engage in recreational opportunities are discussed in this section of the policy brief.

A large proportion of children and young people in WA participate in some form of recreational activity. A recent evaluation of community playgroups, conducted by the Telethon Kids Institute, estimated that of the 32,158 children in the 2012 Australian Early Development Census (AEDC) cohort, 40 per cent attended playgroups prior to attending school.¹⁰

The evaluation examined the role of playgroups in the lives of Australian families and how they might impact on early childhood development. It found that playgroups provided a valuable opportunity not only for parents to develop social networks and parenting skills, but also for

children to regularly engage with other children of similar ages and developmental stages in an unstructured way, developing important physical, emotional, social and language skills.

The 2016 Mission Australia survey¹¹ heard from almost 1,200 Western Australian young people aged 15 to 19. Of these, almost 68 per cent were involved in sport as a participant, 60 per cent in sport as a spectator, and almost 50 per cent in arts/culture/music activities. Around 30 per cent were involved in a youth group or club, 22 per cent in a religious group, and 21 per cent in an environmental group.

Research also highlights that some children and young people face barriers that limit their ability to be involved in recreational activities and play opportunities. Some studies suggest that parental perceptions and concerns around safety have a part to play in the decline of many children playing independently, with other studies finding that today's children have less free time (and spend a greater proportion of that time in structured activities) than children growing up thirty years ago.¹²

Other significant barriers imposed at a societal level include cost and lack of transport. These are big inhibitors for vulnerable groups, particularly those living in regional and remote or low socio-economic areas, children from a culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) background, Aboriginal children and young people, and children and young people with disability.¹³ Even playgroups, which are one of the most affordable regular activities that parents can undertake, pose challenges for those who cannot afford membership fees or access transport – particularly in regional areas. Many parents also felt that they might not 'fit in' with existing members once the playgroup was established.¹⁴

Play – structured and unstructured

Children and young people need time and space for play – whether it is structured or unstructured. As well as being enshrined in the United Nations' Convention on the Rights of the Child¹⁵, there is a significant body of research^{16 17 18 19 20} that recognises the benefits of being able to talk, play, interact and read, particularly for young children, who can reap significant developmental benefits through improved academic achievement and social and emotional capacities. Unstructured play is considered particularly beneficial to young children, and occurs when play is not planned and children are free to use their imagination and creativity.²¹ It is frequently described as something 'children do when they are not being told what to do by adults.'²²

The Raising Children Network discusses the importance of structured and unstructured play in all developmental stages, from birth to teens, and outlines the social, emotional and physical benefits of encouraging and supporting play opportunities. The Australian Research Alliance for Children and Youth similarly advocates for improved play opportunities for children and young people.

Nature or outdoors play is considered fundamental to a healthy childhood and general wellbeing. *Design for Play*, a guide produced by Play England in association with the Free Play Network, explains how good play spaces can give children and young people the freedom to play creatively, while allowing them to experience risk, challenge and excitement.²³

In 2010, after growing concern about the lack of unstructured play and the detrimental impact this was having on wellbeing, Nature Play WA Inc was formally launched. Nature Play WA

aims to elevate the value of unstructured play outdoors (also known as 'nature play') across the state through advocacy and facilitating more opportunities for families to take part in nature play.

Although research shows that opportunities for recreation are linked to better physical and mental health for children and young people, it also suggests that over-filling children's days with structured activities may not provide the same benefits that independent play can achieve.

Structured activities are often instructor-led and include such things as swimming lessons/water familiarisation classes for toddlers and pre-schoolers, dancing or singing classes, modified sports, puzzles, board games, or storytelling groups.²⁴ While structured activities are important and facilitate crucial skill-development and learning opportunities, deprivation of independent unstructured play ('play deprivation') has been associated with physical and mental health problems, poor self-regulation, poor socialisation and low school achievement.²⁵

The WA Department of Local Government, Sport and Cultural Industries (the Department) recognises the benefits of both structured and unstructured play and promotes physical activity in all forms for its many social and emotional benefits.²⁶ The Department supports a range of initiatives across WA that promote organised sport, but also unstructured physical activity and access to natural spaces and child-friendly built environments.

A welcome initiative to facilitate more children taking part in structured sporting activities is the Department's KidSport program, which enables eligible children aged 5–18 years to take part in community sport and recreation by offering assistance of up to \$150 per year towards club fees.²⁷ The Department also funds a Youth Engagement Scheme, assisting organisations to target disengaged children and young people aged 8–18 years in a range of sport and recreation activities.²⁸

However, more needs to be done to ensure Aboriginal children and young people, children and young people living in regional and remote areas and those from low socio-economic backgrounds are able to participate in these recreational activities. As well as State and Commonwealth government-funded programs, local councils play an important role in ensuring that, in addition to organised sport, a variety of recreational opportunities are made available to all children and young people within their communities.

Organised sport

Research shows that organised sport is an important way for children and young people to keep fit and healthy, learn new skills and socialise with peers, as well as being known to improve self-esteem and cognitive function and protect against mental health problems.²⁹

Encouragingly, the most recent figures from the Australian Bureau of Statistics show that sport is highly prevalent in children's lives, with nearly 190,000 5–14 year-olds in WA, or approximately 64 per cent, participating in some form of organised sport.³⁰

A similar proportion of 15–19 year old Western Australians who participated in the Mission Australia survey reported that they were involved in sport as either a participant (68%), or spectator (60%).³¹

For girls, the most popular sports were swimming/diving, netball and gymnastics, while for boys they were outdoor soccer, swimming/diving and Australian Rules football.³²

Places and spaces

The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child states that all children and young people have the right to live in a clean, safe environment and that governments have a responsibility to create an environment where children and young people can grow and reach their full potential.³³ This includes both the built and natural environments.

The Commissioner and others' research highlights the importance of being able to interact with the built environment and demonstrates that the built environment can positively affect the health and wellbeing of children and young people.³⁴ Physical surroundings shape how children and young people make lifestyle choices, interact with their community and view the world. By engaging them in the planning of our built environment, we can create places and spaces in our neighbourhoods that are engaging, fun, safe and accessible.³⁵

The importance of creating child-friendly built environments is becoming widely recognised. UNICEF's Child Friendly Cities initiative has developed a framework for implementing UN Convention principles into the creation of built environments at a local level.³⁶

Locally, the University of Western Australia's Centre for the Built Environment and Health, in collaboration with various schools from the public, Catholic and independent sectors has produced a guide for WA schools to assist in the building of play spaces that support the developmental needs of students and complement their learning outcomes. The Play Space Guide³⁷ is based on current research and best practice principles in designing outdoor play spaces in WA schools. It features many examples of WA schools that have incorporated the principles into their own playground designs.

While many local councils and new housing developments are incorporating principles of nature play into their recreational spaces, many of which also have inclusive play equipment for children with disability, there is a growing concern regarding the decrease in urban bushland and the impact this may be having on the mental health and wellbeing of children and young people.

As urban areas become more densely populated and the number of new housing developments increases, it is important that young people are also welcomed into urban landscapes, particularly as they seek greater autonomy from parents and carers and undertake more recreation activities independently. Young people have the right to assemble freely in public places and be engaged in recreation and leisure activities.³⁸ They should be involved in the design of their local environment. Providing them with the facilities they want and need is an effective way to curb anti-social behaviour, far more than discriminatory practices such as the use of mosquito devices, which are known to have operated in several Australian states and territories, including WA.³⁹

The mosquito device works by emitting a high-pitched sound that only young people under the age of 25 can hear, designed in an effort to move them on from public places. It has been widely criticised not only for its infringement on human rights and those enshrined in the Convention on the Rights of the Child⁴⁰, but also for its potentially harmful effect on babies and younger children (including those with disability), who can also hear and may be particularly sensitive to the sound.⁴¹

Technology

Technology plays an increasingly significant role in the lives of children and young people and accounts for a large proportion of their leisure time.

Available data from the Australian Communications and Media Authority (ACMA) states that in June 2011, smartphones were used by less than a quarter of young people aged 14 to 17 years, increasing to 80 per cent in June 2015.⁴²

Entertainment is a central component of the digital lives of young people, with data showing that websites offering videos, movies, games or music services collectively accounted for 56 per cent of the total web browsing time of young people below the age of 18 years in Australia during the month of June 2015.⁴³

Many 10 year-olds who participated in the Commissioner's We Are 10 project also spoke about using technology as a popular recreational activity, with almost 200 students making specific reference to owning a smartphone or iPad, participating in online gaming or using social media. Many students also specifically highlighted that since turning 10, they had been given more autonomy to use their devices independently. While this independence allows children and young people to develop important skills in navigating the online world, it also increases the risk of potential harm. It is crucial that children and young people (and their parents and carers) are well-supported to have positive online experiences and stay safe in the digital world. This includes ensuring that information is easily accessible and well-promoted so that parents, children and young people know where to find assistance.

The Office of the eSafety Commissioner has many education resources for children and young people and their parents, as well as a complaints function for reporting cyberbullying or illegal content. For more information visit the website of the eSafety Commissioner at esafety.gov.au.

Children and young people with disability

Like all children and young people, those with disability have the right to play freely and participate in activities that are developmentally appropriate and relevant to their interests. Parents and carers have an important role in facilitating their child's play and recreation activities to develop important physical, social-emotional and communication skills.

Many of the barriers that restrict play opportunities for children and young people with disability are imposed at a societal level, for example through inappropriate or inflexible policies or services, inaccessible community facilities, or negative perceptions from members of the community. It is important for anybody involved in the provision of recreational facilities to consider and consult with children and young people with disability in the planning and implementation of these facilities.

Priorities for policy and program development

Policy and program development must recognise that providing opportunities for recreation, both structured and unstructured, is critical to the physical, social and emotional wellbeing of children and young people.

- Children and young people need more and varied opportunities for safe unstructured play in their local communities, including at school.^{44 45}
- Children and young people should be meaningfully involved in the planning and design of places and spaces in their local community.⁴⁶
- More needs to be done to support all children and young people and their parents, including those with disability and living in regional or remote areas, to overcome barriers to participation in playgroups, organised sport and other recreational activities.
- Reliable, accessible and well-promoted information, strategies and programs are required to support parents and carers as they navigate the technological landscape with their children.

Further information

For further information about these issues and the Commissioner's work in this and related areas, visit the website ccyp.wa.gov.au

- We Are 10
- Child Safe Organisations – various resources
- Built Environment issues paper
- Speaking out about wellbeing

Information and resources about recreation, fun and activity and play:

- Department of Local Government, Sport and Cultural Industries – Government of Western Australia dsr.wa.gov.au
- Nature Play WA natureplaywa.org.au
- Raising Children Network raisingchildren.net.au
- Play Space Guide – University of Western Australia's School of Population and Global Health sph.uwa.edu.au/research/health-promotion-research-group/childsplay/play-space-guidelines-for-wa-schools
- Office of the eSafety Commissioner esafety.gov.au

Endnotes

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