



EVIDENCE BRIEF – Parents, Play and Emotional Wellbeing

PEDAL: the centre for research on Play in Education, Development and Learning is the world's first research centre focussed on children's play. We are a team of researchers from a range of disciplines, including education, psychology and child development based in the University of Cambridge's Faculty of Education. With funding from the LEGO Foundation, we conduct high-quality academic research to understand play and how it supports children's education, development and learning. Our research is independent, peer-reviewed and rigorous. The insights it generates can inform effective evidence-based policy and practice – unlocking a source of knowledge and inspiration that will improve children's lives around the world.

The UK Government has recently recognised the impact that parents playing, talking to and reading to their children has on early language development. This is fantastic. But the benefits of play are much wider: it contributes to cognitive, motor, emotional and social development. Play should be thought of as a vehicle to improve a wide range of outcomes for children, as well as an important part of a happy childhood.

This evidence brief describes what we know about how early play between children and their parents contributes to emotional development and mental health. It also explains why and how policy makers might use this information in their work.

Emotional development, wellbeing and mental health

As parents, practitioners and policy makers, we want our babies, children and young people to be happy and healthy. Emotional wellbeing and development are key to this. They describe our children's emotional health now, and the skills and capacities they are developing for the future.

Children's emotional development describes their growing capacities to:

- **experience and express emotions;**
- **cope with and manage feelings;**
- **regulate expressions of emotion and behaviour (also known as self-regulation), and**
- **establish and sustain positive relationships.**

These skills develop through childhood and beyond. They are not fixed, but are shaped by the experiences we have.ⁱ

Emotional development makes an important contribution to many of the outcomes currently concerning policy makers. For example, better self-regulation is strongly associated with positive mental health; good physical health and health behaviours; and socio-economic and labour market outcomes.ⁱⁱ

A wealth of evidence shows that policy makers should consider children's emotional development alongside their academic skills such as literacy and numeracy. In fact, research suggests that emotional development has a greater impact than academic skills on adult outcomes such as mental health, physical health (such as obesity, smoking and drinking), and a similar impact on outcomes such as income and employment.ⁱⁱ

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There is now perceived to be a ‘mental health crisis’ⁱⁱⁱ amongst children and young people in the UK. Rather than focussing only on treating these problems, we must also look to prevent mental health problems before they emerge. Early emotional development is the creation of capacities that support good mental health and prevent mental illness throughout life.ⁱ

Children in low-income households tend to have worse emotional health and development than their peers, and these differences are evident by 3 years old (and probably earlier). Acting early to support emotional development must therefore be part of any strategy to support social mobility.ⁱⁱ

Play

Play takes many forms and can be hard to define, although most people can recognise it when they see it. One common characteristic of most playful experiences is that they are engaging and fun. The overall experience of play is a happy one.

We know that play is a universal and fundamental part of childhood, right from the start. Children from every culture, economic background and community engage in play, although it might look different in different places. Play is a way for children to make sense of the world, express and expand their understanding. It is often socially interactive; as children play with their peers or parents.

Play is fun, low cost and accessible. It isn’t just about being in a playground or sitting down with toys. Everyday interactions can also be playful. High quality play can happen during every-day routines, such as changing nappies, feeding and bath time.

When parents are playful in their interactions with their children, it means they are acting in a joyful, engaging, spontaneous and creative way.^{iv, v}

Early parent-child interactions and emotional development

The first years of life are particularly important for children’s development (although obviously children continue to

develop, and play continues to matter, beyond this point). During pregnancy and the early years, the brain develops more quickly, and is more adaptable than at any other time in a child’s life. In this period, millions of neural connections are made and pruned, shaping the architecture of the child’s brain and laying the foundations for later development.

The experiences and relationships that a child has in this period, alongside health and nutrition, have a huge impact on brain development. Parents (and other caregivers) are incredibly important: they shape the child’s environment and experiences. The way that parents interact with their children influences all aspects of their development, particularly their emotional development. Healthy brain development depends upon babies having a secure, responsive relationship with their parents or caregivers.

Parents, play and emotional development

Play provides an opportunity for parents and their babies and toddlers to interact together in a positive way. It is an important part of the parent-child relationship. Play provides an opportunity for parents and their young children to enjoy each other (and to see that they, themselves, are enjoyed). Playful interactions help parents and children to develop a closer and more positive relationship.^{v, vi}

Play is low cost, accessible, rewarding and motivating, so is a wonderful way for parents and children to spend time together and develop their relationship (and research shows us that when children are enjoying their play, they seem to benefit from it more^{vi, i}).

Play provides the opportunity for a range of emotional learning and development.

- **Social interaction happens through play, developing children’s communication skills and understanding of others.**
- **Through pretend play, children can see the world through different perspectives and can get a chance to discuss feelings and emotions.**
- **During play, adults respond to children’s cues and communication. This involves having the “serve and**

return” or to-and-fro interactions that science tells us are important for development.

- **Play encourages and maintains positive emotion. There is now good evidence that the degree to which an individual regularly experiences positive emotions predicts their later mental and physical health, job satisfaction, and the quality of their interpersonal relationships.**^{vi, i, i}

Researchers suggest that parental playfulness promotes children’s emotional regulation because parents can bring fun, humour and creativity into more stressful or distressing situations, thus relieving children’s negative emotions and enhancing positive ones. In addition, children can learn through observation as parents model ways to relieve their own negative emotions through playfulness.^v

Some findings from the research

- Studies have shown parental playfulness is an important source of variation in the vocabulary and emotional regulation for children growing up in low-income families. The children of mothers in low-income families who were more playful at 24 months had higher emotional regulation skills at pre-school than the children of than mothers who were less playful.^{ix}
- In a study of children aged 2-8 years old, parental playfulness was positively associated with children’s ability to regulate their emotions.^v
- Paternal rough-and-tumble play predicts good behavioural regulation. It is suggested that this is because it excites children and pushes boundaries, where fathers help them regulate their emotion.^{x, xi}
- More active play in fathers has been linked to socio-emotional development including social competence, emotional development and ability to self-regulate.^{xii, xiii}
- A study in Israel gave an intervention to promote playfulness to mothers and their toddlers living under the chronic stress of recurrent missiles attacks. The results suggested that parental playfulness made a significant contribution to the children’s and parents’ ability to regulate their emotions when faced with stressful events.^{xiv}

Obviously parental playfulness is not the only factor that has an impact on children’s emotional development. A number of factors are important including stressors affecting the family, such as poverty, family stress and parental mental health problems including depression and anxiety. Children in families affected by these issues might benefit most from early play, but they may also be the children who experience fewer and lower quality play opportunities.

Factors that affect early play

A range of factors affect the quality and quantity of play between parents and their children, and parental playfulness. Policy makers who are interested in promoting play in order to support child development might want to think about how to address some of these factors, and how public policies and services might encourage play in families who typically play less.

As one might expect, parental beliefs about play and the value of play can affect the frequency of play in the home.^{xv} There are also suggestions that contextual factors such as income and education affect how playful parents are with their children, although the evidence is not consistent.^{ix} Research does also show that too many toys actually also reduces the frequency and quality of toddlers’ play.^{xvi} Even though there are many similarities in the way that mothers and fathers interact with their children, there are some differences. For example, father-child interactions tend to be more physical and stimulating.^{xvii} These different qualities might mean that play with different parents has different impacts on early development.^{ix}

When parents have low mood and depression, it affects the quality, quantity and variety of their play with their babies.^{xviii} For example, studies of fathers with their three-month-old babies have found that fathers with depression are more withdrawn in their interactions during play.^{xix, xx, ^{xxi} Fathers’ withdrawal at three months has also be found to be associated with poorer cognitive development and externalising behaviour problems in older children.^{xxii}}

Key messages for Policy Makers

- **Early emotional development has a role in improving child and adult outcomes, and tackling inequalities.**
- **Supporting families in the early years is incredibly important to give children the best start in life. This is an ideal moment for prevention and early intervention.**
- **Interventions that support early interactions, relationships and play can have widespread and long-term impacts on children’s wellbeing and development.**
- **Play is an important part of childhood and every child has a right to play.**
- **Play is also low-cost, engaging and easily accessible activity that can motivate parents and support child development. It is an important part of how children learn, develop language, social relationships, cognitive and emotional skills.**
- **Many government departments and policies have a role in promoting and enabling play and harnessing the broad benefits it generates for children, families and communities.**
- **Universal and targeted services such as midwives, health visitors, children’s centres, childcare settings, pre-schools and others can model, encourage and support early play.**

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