The Yard Effect
An overlooked lever for sustainable, inclusive schools



IPPN Annual Principals' Conference 2026

Dr Michelle Bergin | University of Limerick

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Why do we need more play friendly schoolyards?

How do we create sufficient conditions for play in our schoolyards?

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Noticing how play happens.



Can you remember play for the sake of play?



When did you last notice play?





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Play is a (forgotten) right (Lott, 2025)

Global decline in outdoor play |

- Children spend less time playing outside and in nature than previous generations (-30%), and at later stages (2 years older) (Shaw et al., 2015; Clements, 2004; Dodd et al., 2021).

Key barriers to play |

- Parental safety fears, less adult support and value, weakening social networks, reduced independent mobility, fewer safe and natural spaces, more schoolwork and digital devices (UNCRC, 2013).



Shrinking Childhoods | Irish Data

- 87% of young people do not meet physical activity guidelines alongside rising rates of obesity, anxiety, and depression (Carlin et al., 2024; Luney et al., 2025).
- Nearly half of Irish children (49%) report not having enough time for play; 52% want more local play spaces (PlayBoard NI, 2024; DCEDIY, 2024).
- Ireland ranks 12th of 16 countries in children's independent mobility (Shaw et al., 2015).
- Irish parents report restricting independent bus use (66%), out-of-sight play (59 %) play with tools (63 %) and play near water (63%) (Armstrong et al., 2025).



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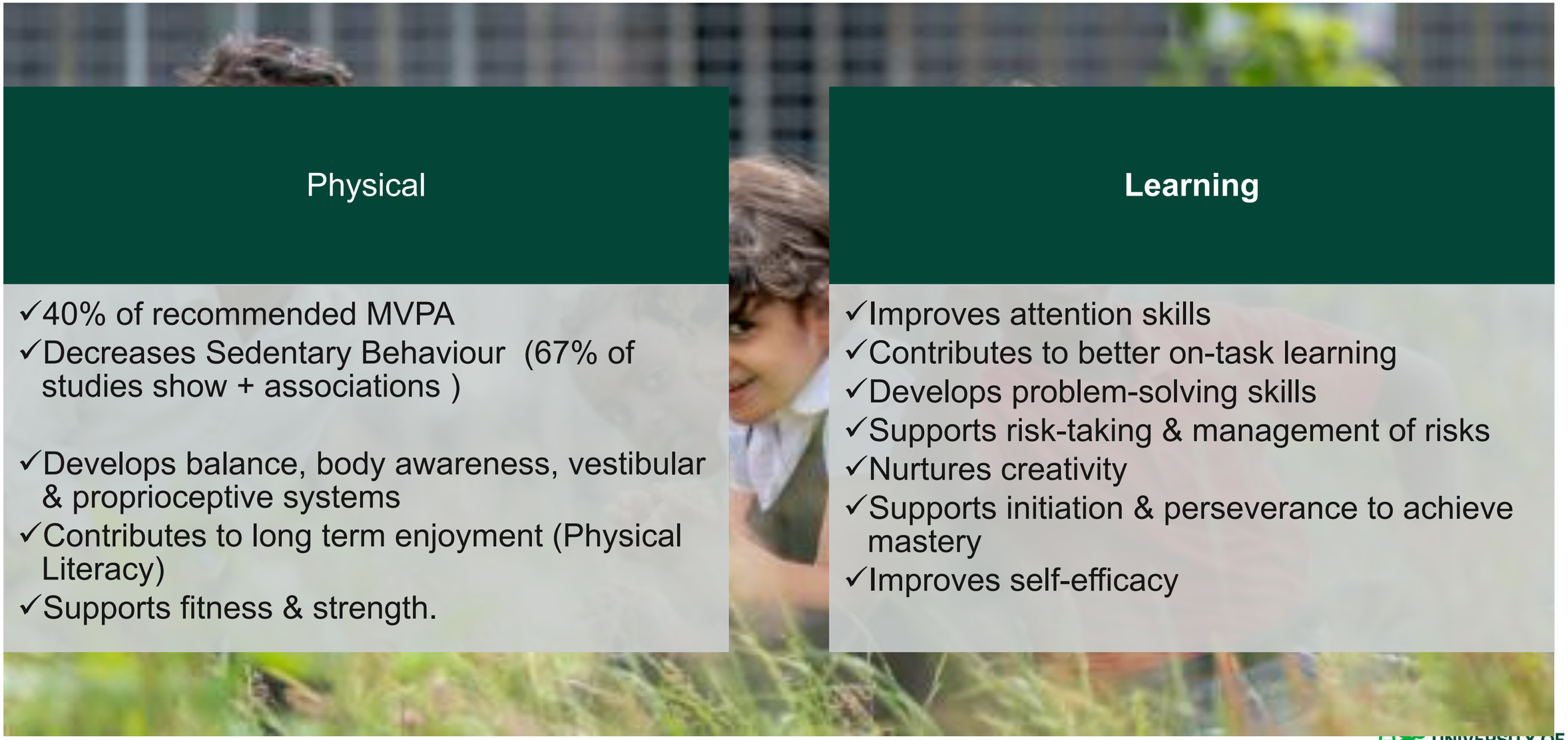
Benefits of Outdoor play | Evidence



Physical

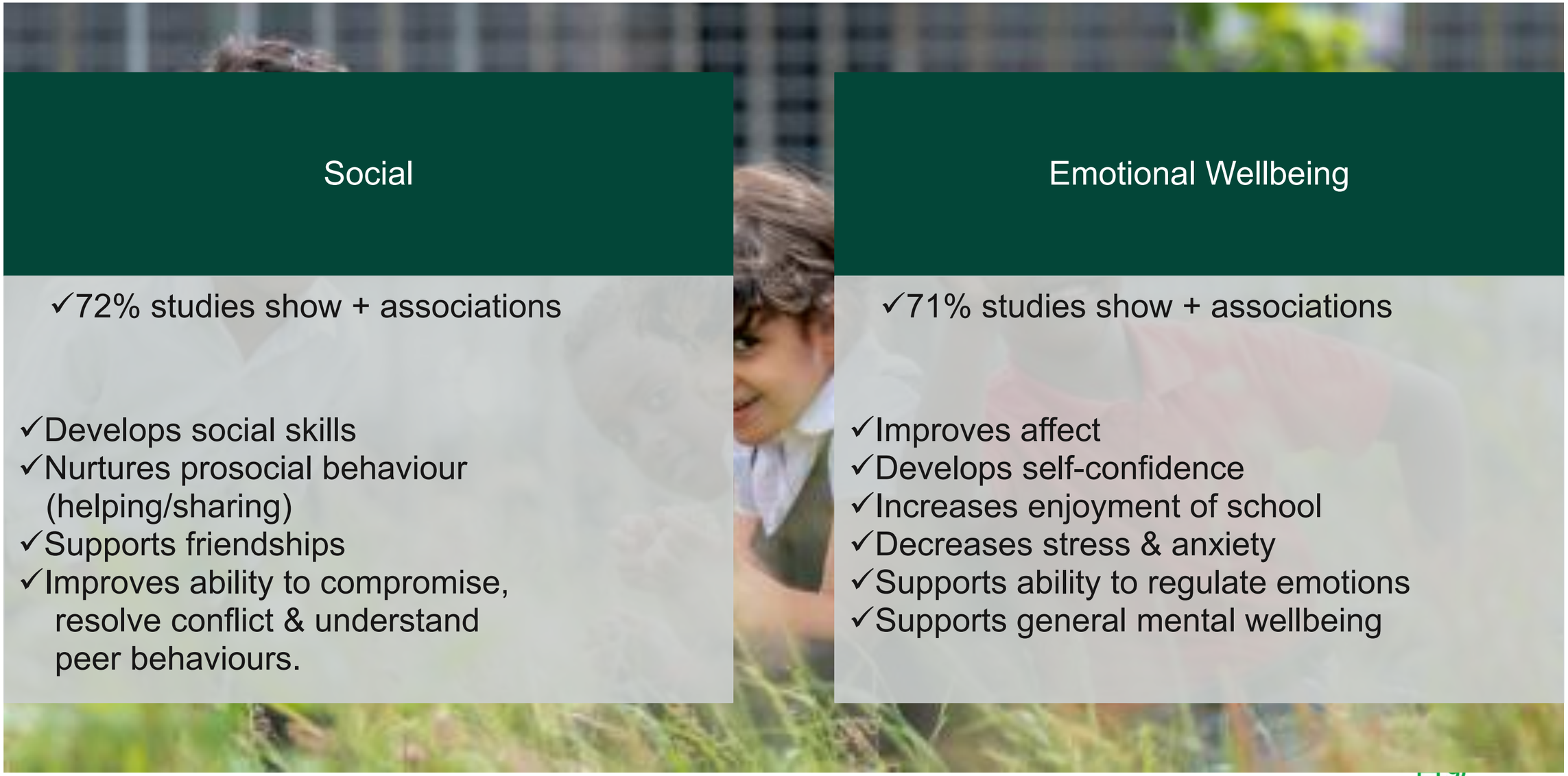
- ✓40% of recommended MVPA
- ✓Decreases Sedentary Behaviour (67% of studies show + associations)
- ✓Develops balance, body awareness, vestibular & proprioceptive systems
- ✓Contributes to long term enjoyment (Physical Literacy)
- ✓Supports fitness & strength.

Learning

- ✓Improves attention skills
- ✓Contributes to better on-task learning
- ✓Develops problem-solving skills
- ✓Supports risk-taking & management of risks
- ✓Nurtures creativity
- ✓Supports initiation & perseverance to achieve mastery
- ✓Improves self-efficacy

Hyndman and Wyver 2021; Johnstone et al, 2025; Russell et al., 2021; Tremblay et al. 2022

Benefits of Outdoor play



Social

✓72% studies show + associations

✓Develops social skills
✓Nurtures prosocial behaviour (helping/sharing)
✓Supports friendships
✓Improves ability to compromise, resolve conflict & understand peer behaviours.

Emotional Wellbeing

✓71% studies show + associations

✓Improves affect
✓Develops self-confidence
✓Increases enjoyment of school
✓Decreases stress & anxiety
✓Supports ability to regulate emotions
✓Supports general mental wellbeing

Hyndman and Wyver 2021; Johnstone et al, 2025; Ramsden et al., 2026; Russell et al., 2021; Tremblay et al. 2022

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Right to play & schools

What are our duties & responsibilities?



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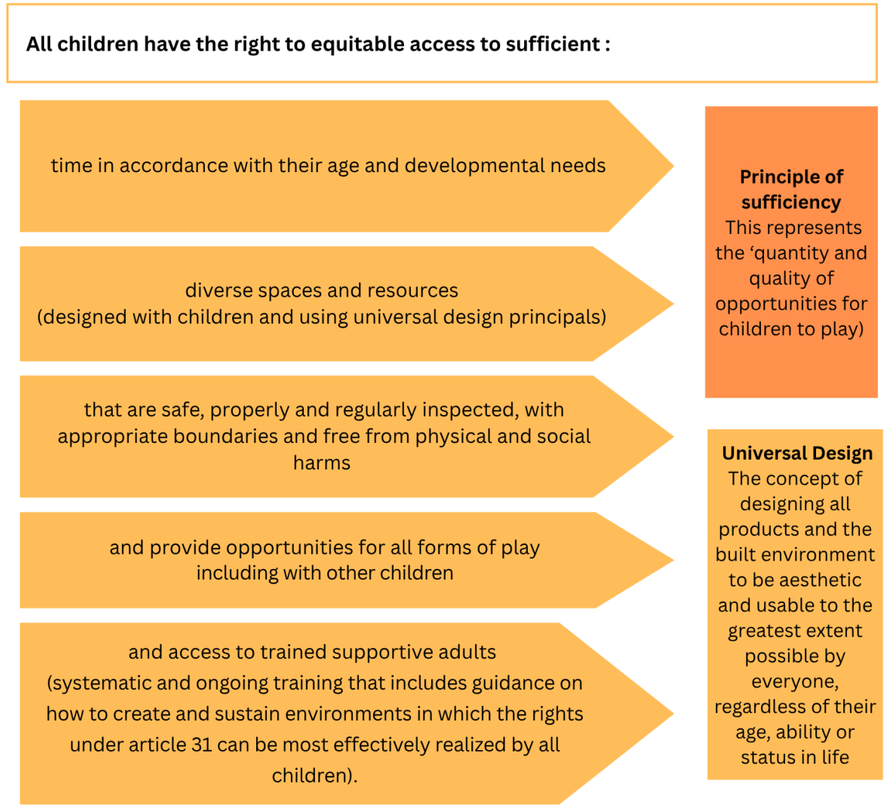
Article 31 | Schools as Duty Bearers

Educational environments should play **a major role** in fulfilling Article 31

Where investment is made, it is in the provision of structured and organized activities but equally important is the need **to create time and space for children** to engage in spontaneous play"

(United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child, 2013, p 3)



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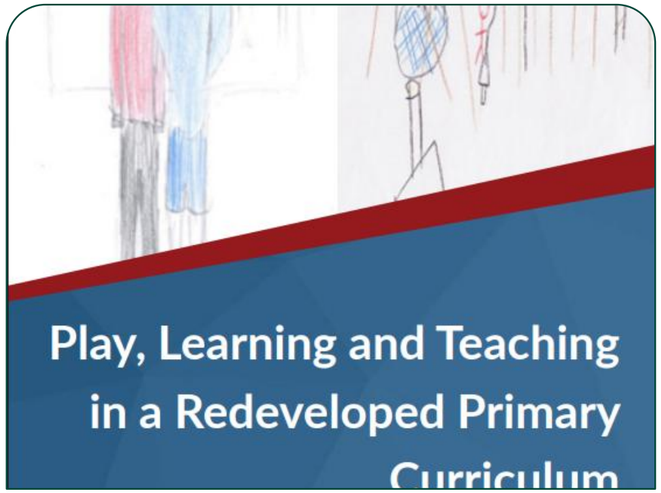
Policies | Playful Inclusive Child Centred Learning

Explicitly supported in **policy and pedagogy |** Embedded Across Curriculum



Playful Learning



Outdoor Learning



Breaktime

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Aligned with Curriculum Outcomes

Wellbeing

- ✓Develops **fundamental movement skills**
- ✓Participates confidently in **enjoyable physical activity**
- ✓Builds and maintains **positive relationships** with others

Social & Environmental Education

- ✓Explores and investigates the **local environment**
- ✓Observes, questions, predicts and investigates **natural phenomena**
- ✓Develops curiosity and respect for **living things**

Language

- ✓Uses language for a range of purposes
- ✓Acquires and uses new vocabulary **linked to experience**
- ✓Creates oral, written or multimodal texts inspired by **personal experience**

Maths

- ✓Uses mathematical language related to shape, space, measure and number
- ✓Applies mathematical thinking to **real-life problem situations**

Arts

- ✓**Explores roles, situations and emotions** through dramatic activity
- ✓Explores texture, form and pattern using **a variety of materials**
- ✓Explores sound and silence using voice, body and **environment**



Green-Schools

ACTIVE SCHOOL
MORE SCHOOLS, MORE ACTIVE, MORE OFTEN

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Unrealized potential



Bikomeye et al., 2021; Fernandes et al, 2023; Johnstone et al., 2025 ; Ly & Vella-Brodrick, 2024 ; Russell et al., 2021

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Breaktimes | Already Mandatory

SPACE

- A typical 16- classroom school should have an outdoor yard of 1170 m2 (including a 585 m 2 ball court) and a junior soft play area of 430 m2.

TIME

- An interval for recreation of one half-hour should be allowed', and 'In all schools, a five-minute break should be allowed at an intermediate time in the forenoon and again in the afternoon"

PERMISSION

Principals' duty to organise supervision that takes 'all reasonable precautions to ensure pupils' safety' during breaktimes- emphasising protection and pay-related issues.

Circular 18/03 |Rules for National Schools (1965) | Primary Circular 11/95 'Time in School' (1995)
Primary School Design Guidelines (TGD- 022, 2013; TGD-020, 2017)

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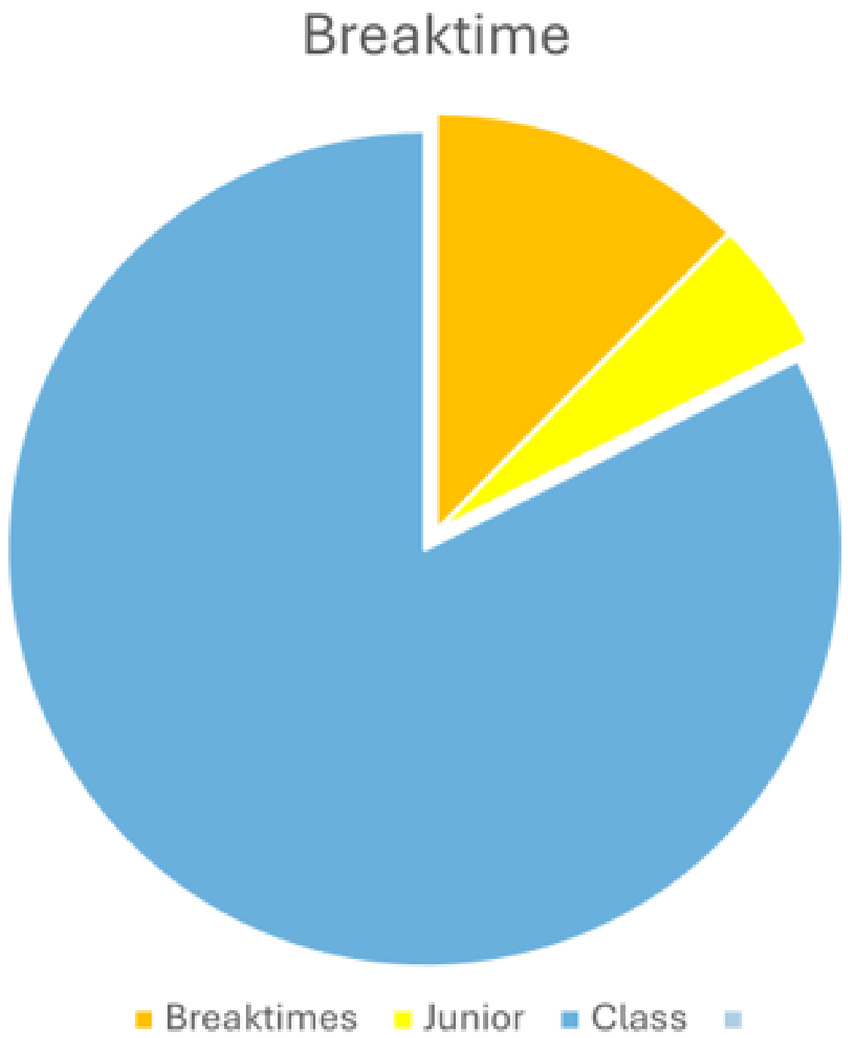
It **makes sense** for schools to consider how the significant financial, temporal and spatial **resources already invested** in playtimes might **be best used** to create conditions for children to realise their right to play (Russell, 2021)



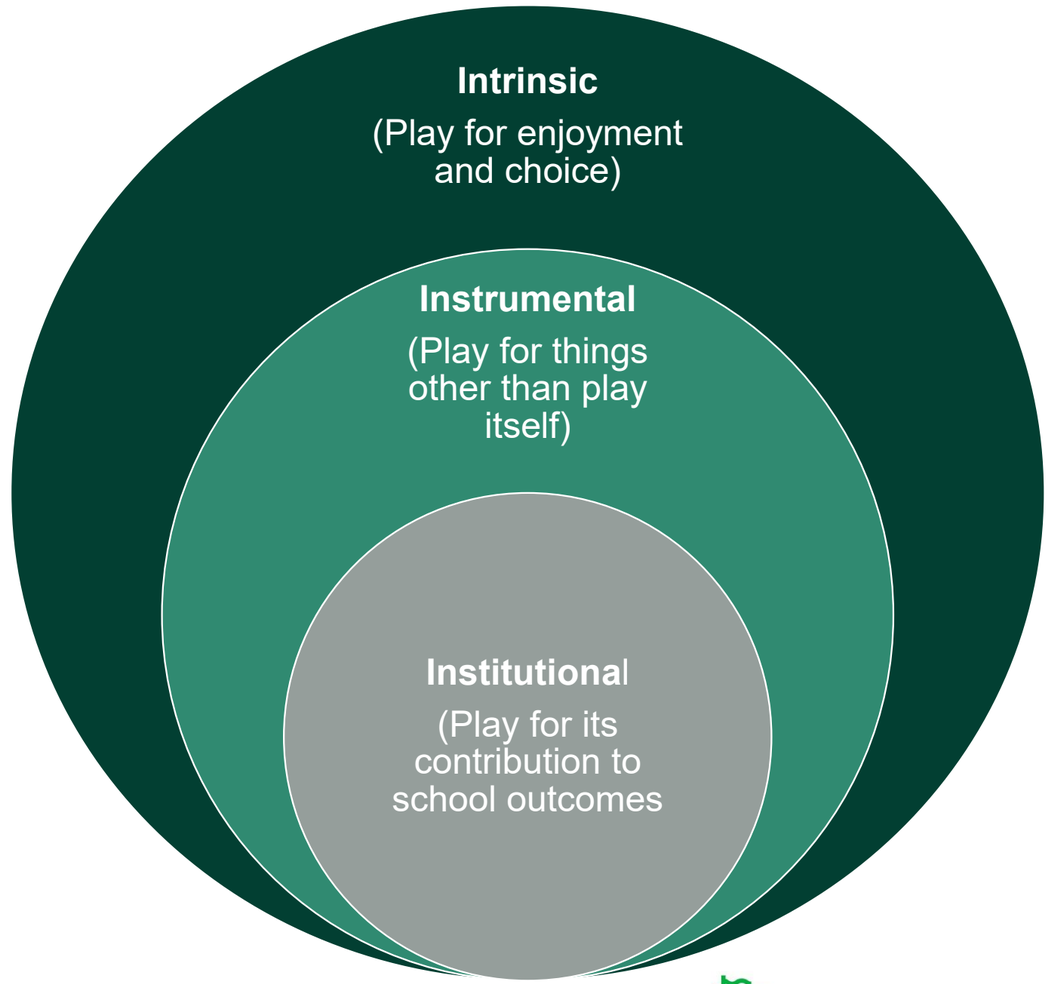


“It may be that breaktimes are **one of the few remaining opportunities** that children have for **sustained interaction** with each other on their own terms”
(Blatchford & Baines, 2019, p12)

Individual & Whole School Benefits of Play

Russell, 2021 using Holden's (2006) Cultural Values Framework

First realise the **intrinsic value** of playtimes, then the instrumental and institutional values **will follow**



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What are the current conditions



The “Typical” Irish Schoolyard?



If we visited your breaktime today;

How would the space look and feel?

How much time do children have to play freely?

What play options would we see?

Time

First Break
Average | **00:14**

Second Break
Average | **00:26**

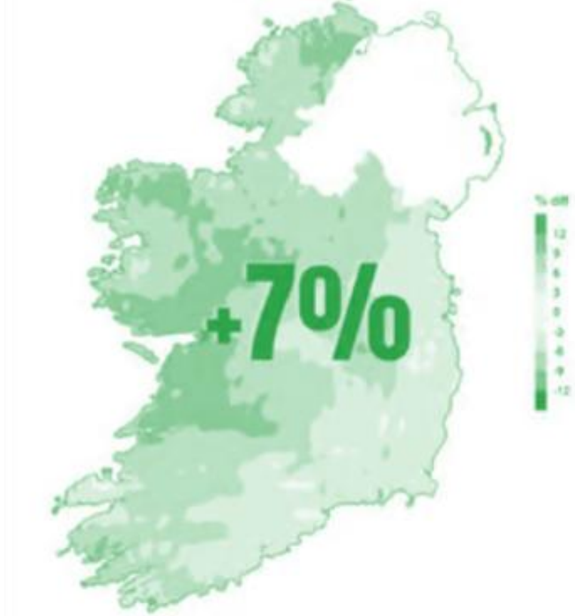
Total Breaktime
Average | **00:41**

> 40 minutes without lunch

49 % of schools

Primary Influence on Outdoor Time

Weather	Curriculum
62 %	20%
22 % of schools have no outdoor space on rainy days.	



Minimum **199 days annual rainfall**
(Met Eireann, 2026)

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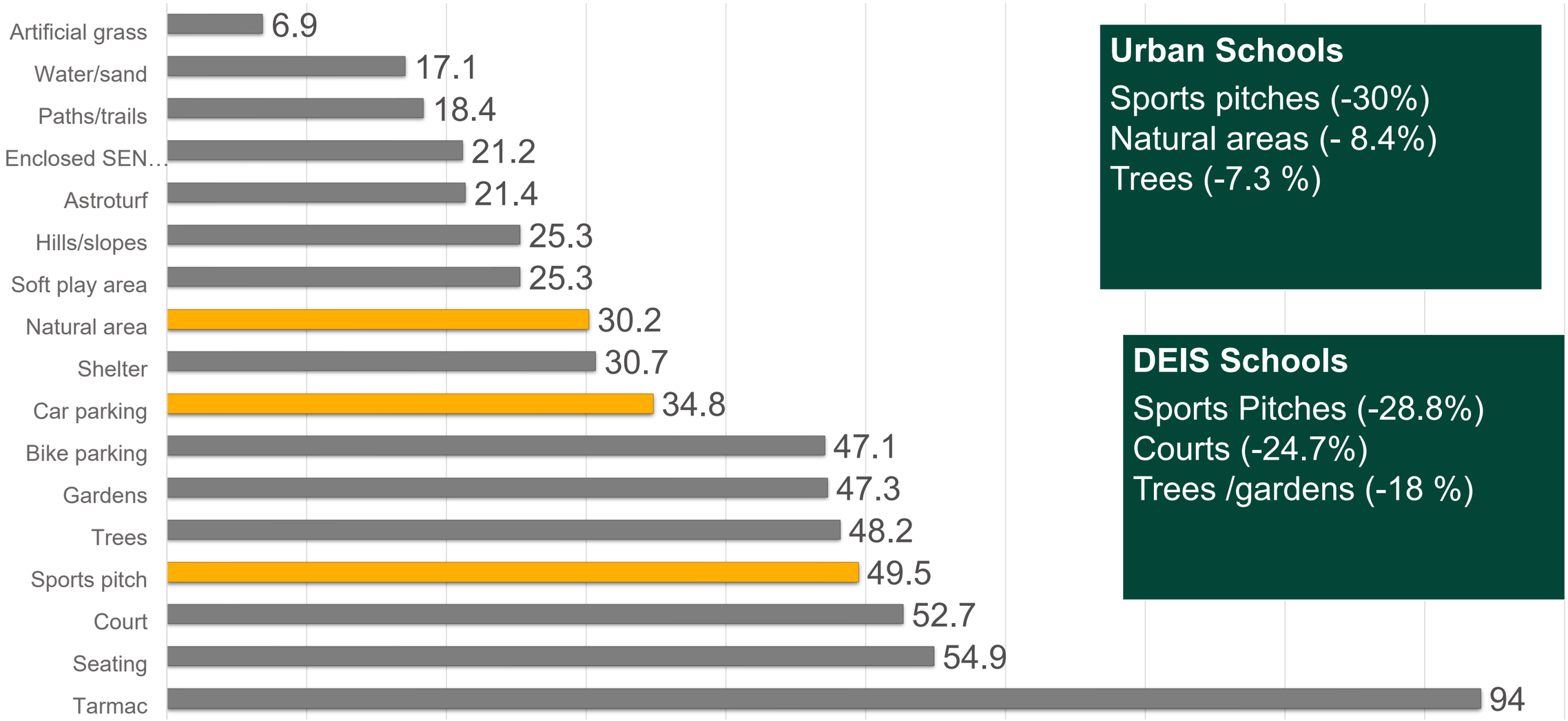
Space | Paving Paradise



Urban Schools

Sports pitches (-30%)
Natural areas (- 8.4%)
Trees (-7.3 %)

DEIS Schools

Sports Pitches (-28.8%)
Courts (-24.7%)
Trees /gardens (-18 %)

% of schools reporting area types

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Hard, Empty , Restricted & Diminishing Spaces

70 % of schools report **no natural areas**

(70 % in Green Schools)

72 % report **losing grounds** (5 years)

70 % report **no materials or resources** other than balls & fixed sport equipment

86 % of schools report **no training / CPD**

78 % of schools report a **lack of funding**

47 % of schools report **overcrowding**



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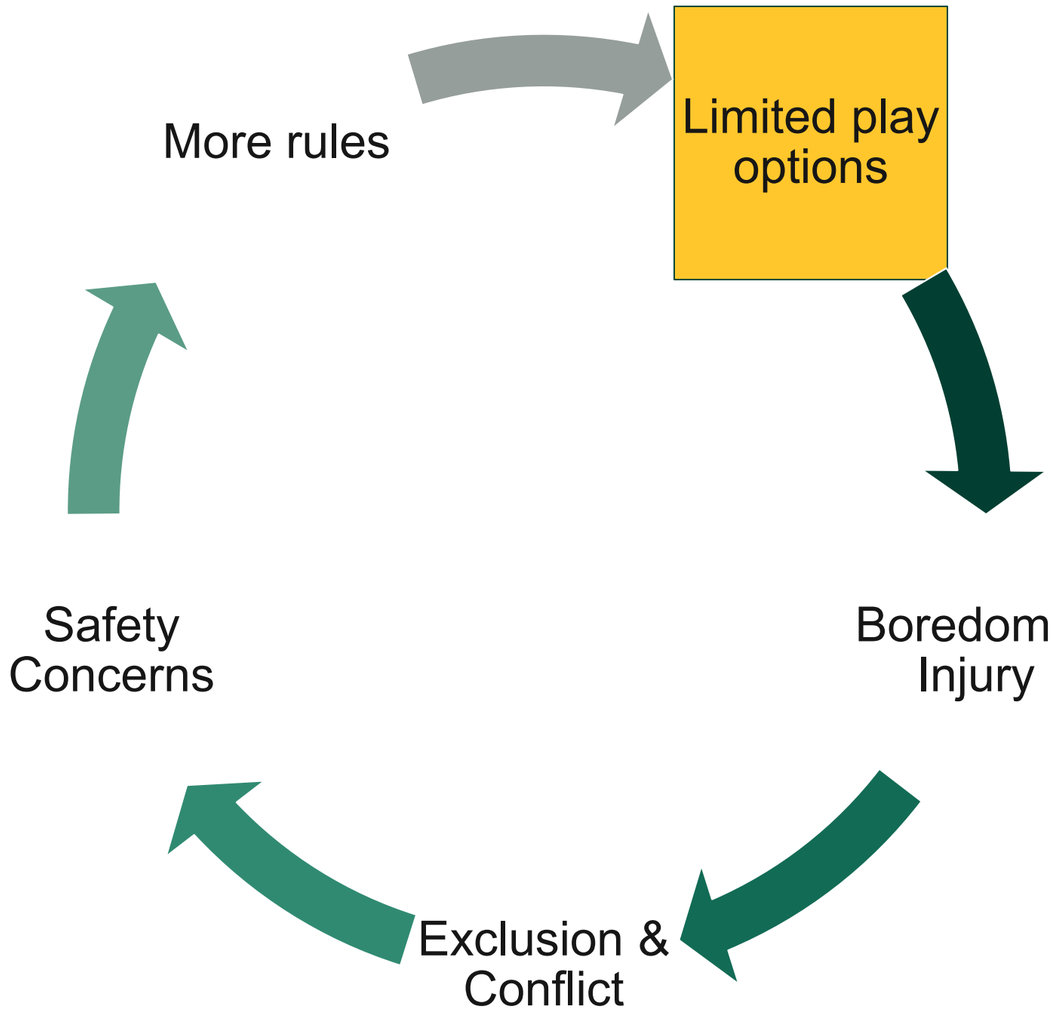
The Vicious Cycle





School Priorities

- ❑ Increase ***Funding*** (88%)
- ❑ Access to Play Space ***Design*** (83%)
- ❑ Staff ***Training*** (80 %)
- ❑ Improve ***Culture*** of Play (77%)
- ❑ ***Caretaker*** (76%)
- ❑ Inclusion in ***Curriculum*** (72%)



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What are sufficient conditions?









Space, Time & Acceptance

Adequate, safe and diverse spaces (physical and mental) with multifunctional equipment, natural elements and freedoms to choose play options

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Creating Healthy, Inclusive, Sustainable Schoolyards



- ✓ Enforceable standards
- ✓ Sustainable design guidance
- ✓ Involvement of children
- ✓ Dedicated funding
- ✓ Rights-based training

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CAPS (Children's Access to Play in Schools)

EU Erasmus Funded Programme

- UK
- Czech Republic
- Hungary
- Austria
- Poland
- Slovakia

Drawing on the experience of the UK-based OPAL programme (Outdoor Play and Learning) to create Play Friendly School Quality Criterion



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Play Friendly School QUALITY CRITERION

1	2	3	4	5
THE SCHOOL HAS A LEADERSHIP STRUCTURE THAT SUPPORTS CHILDREN'S PLAY	THE SCHOOL HAS A WRITTEN STATEMENT ON HOW IT SUPPORTS PLAY	CHILDREN HAVE SUFFICIENT TIME FOR PLAY	CHILDREN HAVE SUFFICIENT SPACE FOR PLAYING	THE SCHOOL CULTURE SUPPORTS CHILDREN'S PLAY

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Getting Started or Working Towards

Space

Our school promotes a **wide range of play types,** including risk taking.

Our school has **different types of outdoor spaces**

Our school has a for playing. **wide range of fixed and replenishable materials**

Our school allows **all children to access and adapt** spaces.

We make outdoor space available for **playing in all weathers** through design and the availability of outdoor wear

Children can be **physically active** in a variety of ways

Time

Our school makes **sufficient (minimum requirements = 40 mins) time** available for children's self-organised play with no other demands.

Our school makes time for playful **outdoor learning**.

Our school **always honours and never removes breaktimes.**

Our school **pays attention** to moments of playfulness throughout the school day

Culture

Our staff work sensitively to support **rather than unnecessarily constrain play**

Our parents/carers are supported to **develop knowledge on the importance of play**

Our staff are supported to develop knowledge of play through **training and professional development.**

In our school there is an **overall playful feel** at play times

Leadership & Policy

Our school has someone responsible for **leading on plans and actions** to improve and sustain the quality of children's play at school

Our school has a **written statement on supporting play**

Our school **involved the whole school community** in this statement

Our school's statement shows how we will make spaces and times for play **accessible to all children and in all weathers**

Our statement clearly outlines how we **balance risk and benefit**

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CAPS Rapid Audit



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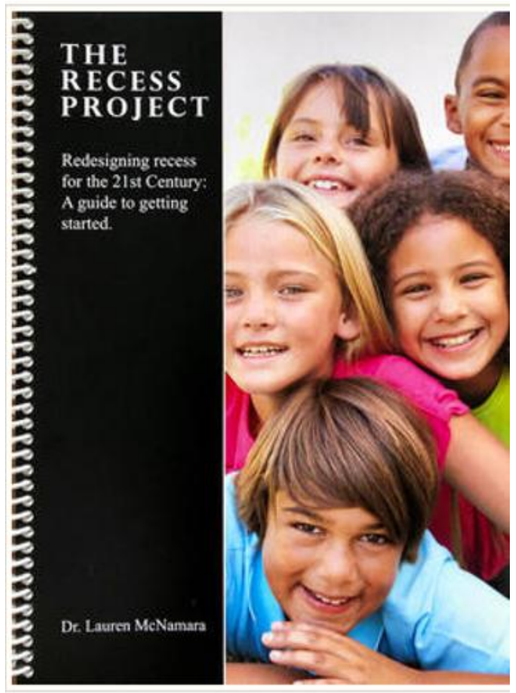
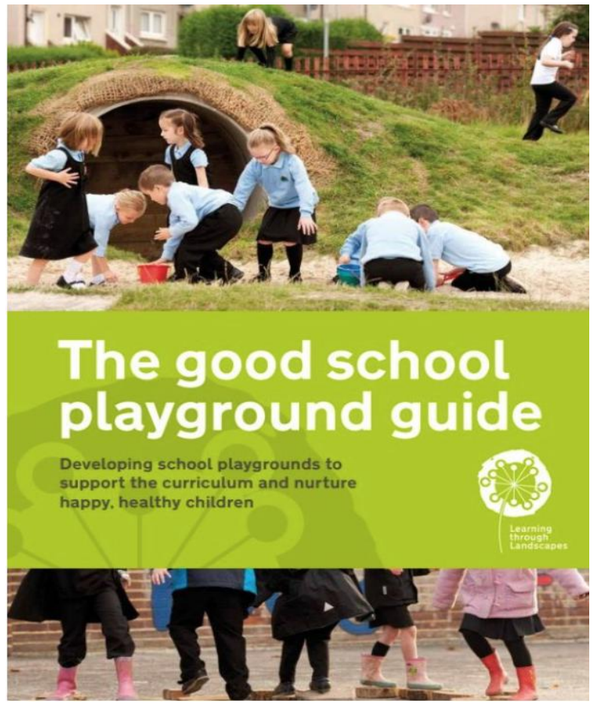
Creating play friendly schoolyards









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The OPAL Programme

Schools consistently report:

- Increased enjoyment of breaktimes
- Reduced incidents and easier supervision
- Greater variety of play behaviours, self-initiated play and use of space and materials
- Quicker settling into class after break and better attention and on-task behaviour in class
- Positive parent and teacher attitudes to play

30+

Most schools report 10 minutes a day, or 30 hours a year, more teaching time per teacher due to the disappearance of post-playtime disputes and frustrations.

-80%

OPAL schools report up to 80% decreases in use of behaviour policies and 90% drops in senior leadership time spent in resolving playtime issues.

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Important Learnings

- School leadership, written policies & culture change important
- Most improvements were achieved at little cost.
- Pump prime existing capacities
- All weather routes & clothing
- Scrap/loose materials
- Involve parents and community
- Challenge risk-averse culture



Teachers perspectives on CPD needs

Knowledge

Confidence

Community

Content	Active Learning	Coherence	Duration	Collective
Evidence-Based Play Knowledge	• Hands on Learning • Play Audits & Co-design	• Aligned with policies, curriculum & integrated into school improvement plans	• From one-off workshops to Sustained Support	• Whole School Teams & Cross School Regional Networks

Global perspectives (135 teachers across 25 countries), Hyndman, 2026

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Creating conditions for play

Experiences

Elements

Loebach, 2026

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Affordances

Let go of the idea of creating opportunities for one single type of play- purpose is predetermined (Follett, 2017)

More play value when features are open to adaptation, change and interpretation.

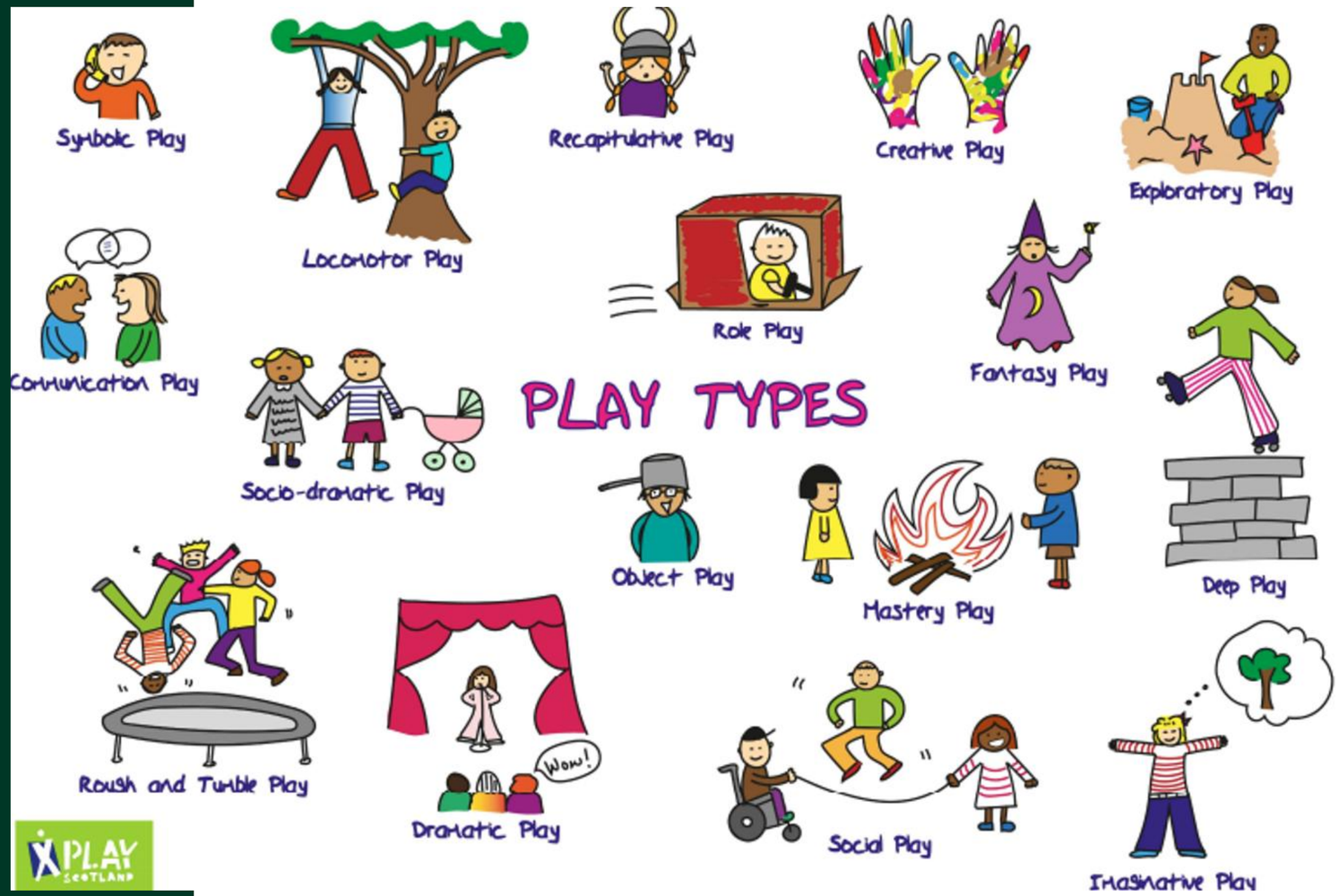




Gibson , 1979; Kyatta, 2012

Play Types

Hughes Taxonomy of Play Types used to describe the different behaviours observed when children are playing.



PLAY SCOTLAND

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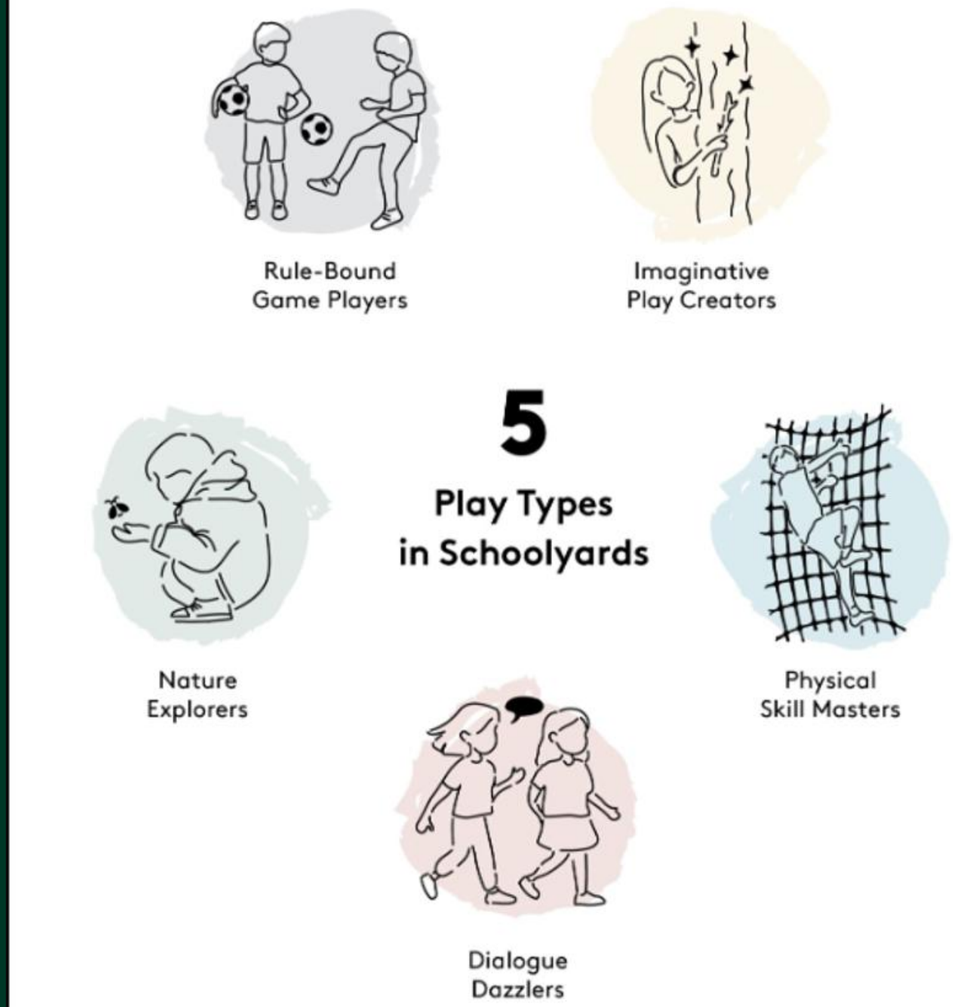
Play Types

Lousen et al (2024) developed 5 schoolyard play types and recommend creating schoolyards that incorporate:

- open areas,
- sports facilities,
- loose parts,
- open-ended structures,
- a great variety of playground equipment,
- nature-based areas,
- and secluded spaces.



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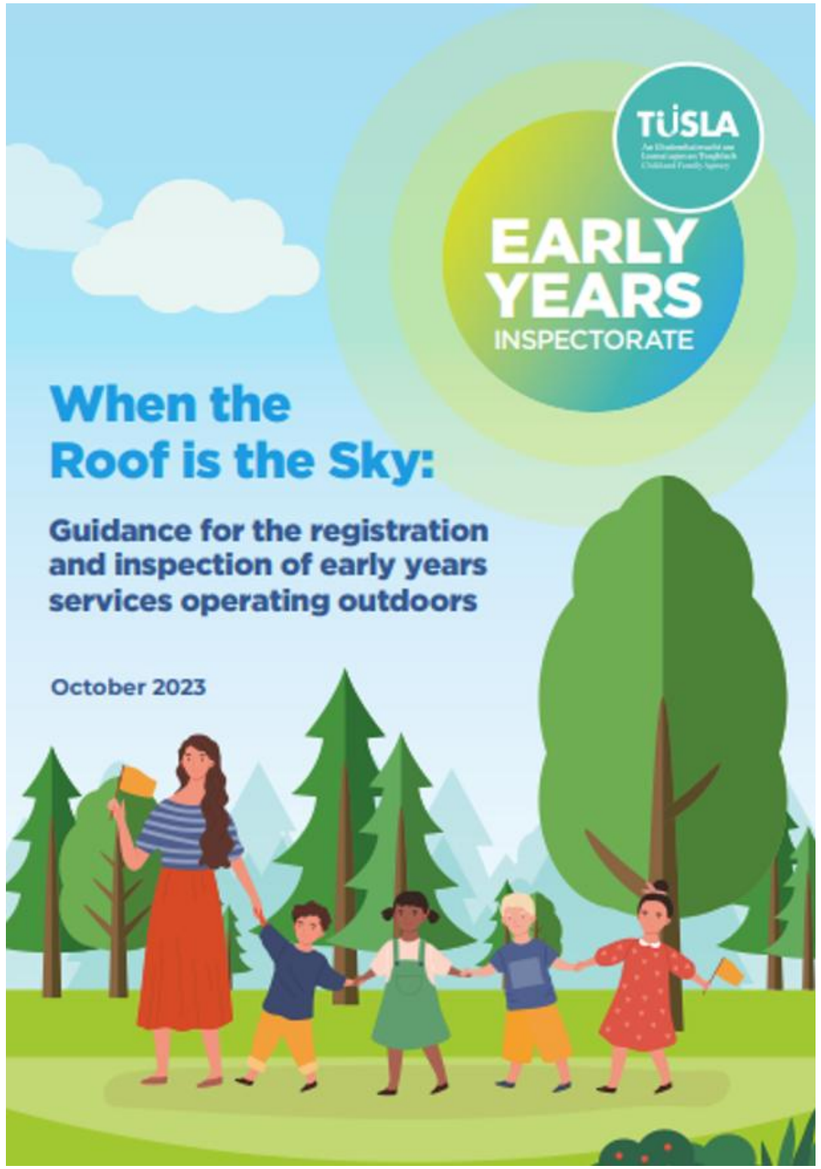
Risky play

1. Play with heights
2. Play with speed
3. Rough and tumble play
4. Play with dangerous tools
5. Play with dangerous elements/locations
6. Play where children are out of sight
7. Vicarious play when children are watching other children engage in thrilling play activities.

Sandseter (2021)



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Opportunities to..

- Move
- Challenge & Risk
- Modify & Manipulate
- Play Alone & With Familiar Peers
- Play with identity
- Stimulate all Senses
- Experience range of feelings

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What do children want?

Range of challenges | More intense & novel, easy to complex

Uninterrupted play | Space & permission for play

Independence | Possibilities to play unseen

Clear Boundaries | Understandable rules

Fun

Belonging | Familiar, Safe, Influence

Social Choice | With & Without Supportive Peers and Adults

Accessible, Familiar, Beautiful Natural Spaces

Morgenthaler et al., 2023

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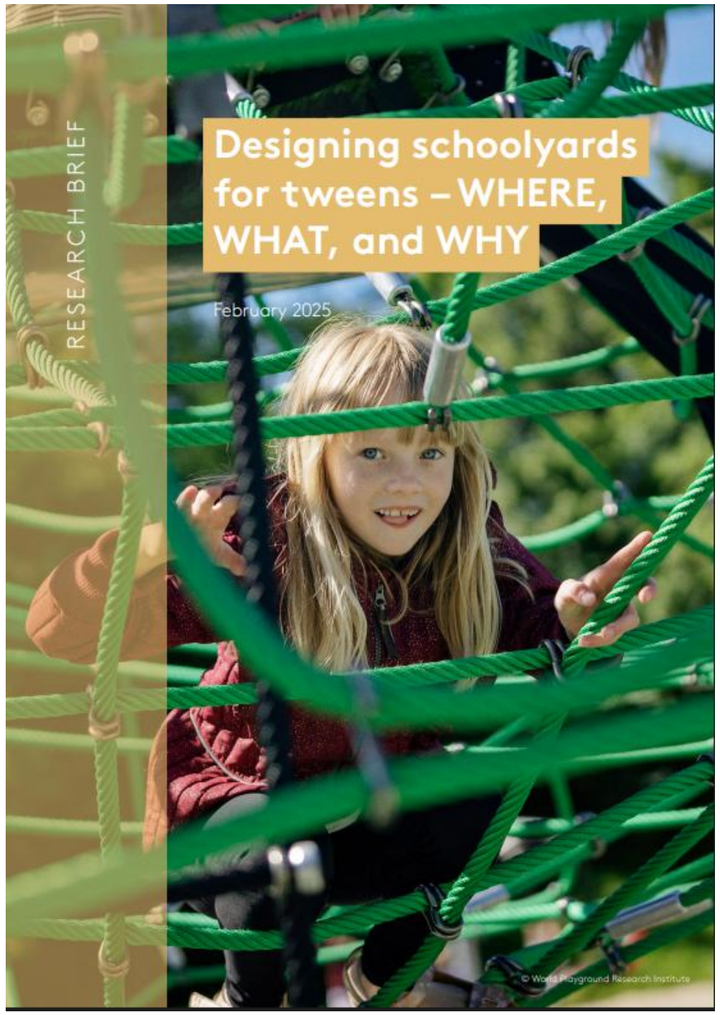
Tweens Play









Amholt et al, 2024 | World Playground Institute

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Key elements of a rich play environment



- ✓ open areas with physical diversity
- ✓ nature-based areas
- ✓ sports facilities
- ✓ secluded spaces (spaces to hide & look out)
- ✓ a great variety of materials & loose parts
- ✓ open-ended structures

(Lousen et al, 2024; Play Wales, 2026; Russell, 2021)

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Inclusive Play Spaces

Inclusive design is best understood as a **layered process**: start with accessibility, add diverse play possibilities, then allow children to shape and create new opportunities continuously



Casey & Harbottle (2018), UK Play Safety Forum & Children's Play Policy Forum (2023)

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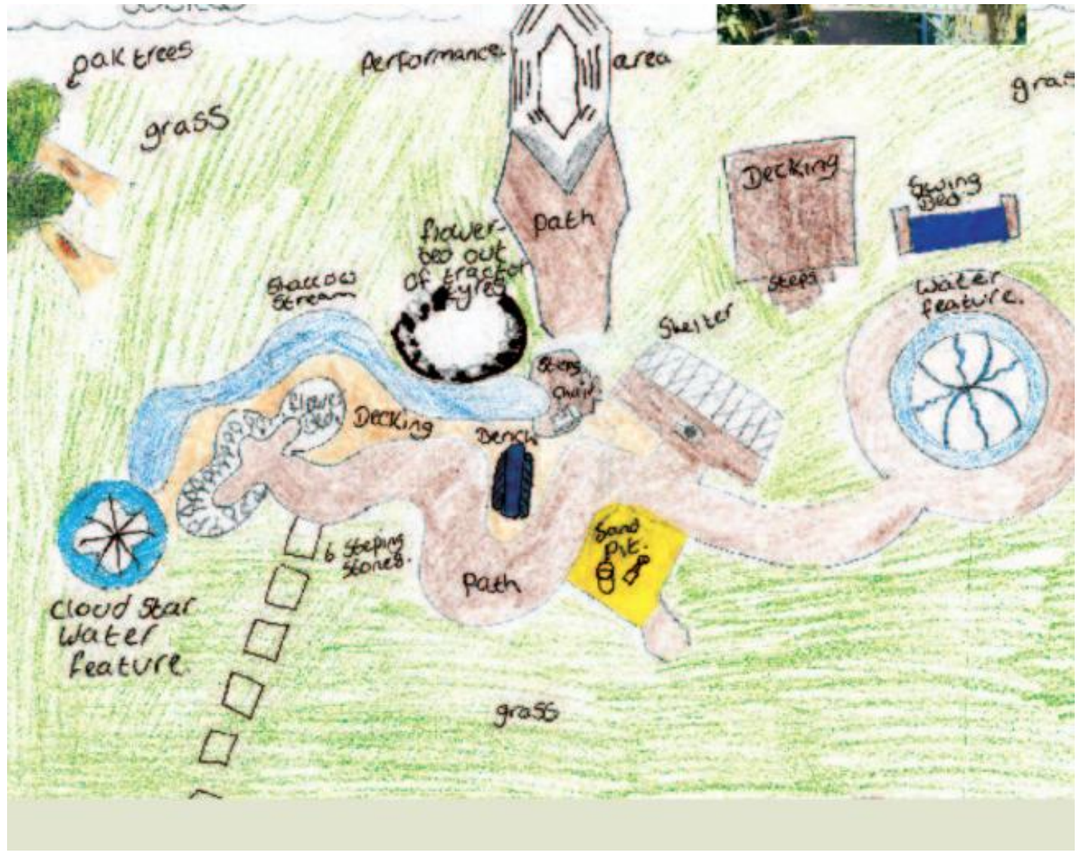
Zoning





Recesslab.org

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Evaluating spaces for outdoor play

Play Space Audit

Assessing Play Value with Children

Tool 9: Play value assessment

Use this tool to determine to what extent the setting is offering access to a rich play environment and what factors impact on it.

The setting provides children the opportunity to experience	Never	Sometimes	Often	Normally	Examples or explanation
A varied outdoor landscape For example: structures, different heights/ levels, hills, mounds, slopes, trees, bushes, bridges, pits, swings, aerial runway, garden, ditches, tunnels, open and closed spaces					
Earth (and snow, clay and sand) For example: trowels, forks, spades, buckets, bowls, tubing, sections of down pipes/ guttering, sledge					
Air For example: plastic bags, polythene, balloons, inflatables, earth balls, zip wire, stuff to make kites, windsocks, planes, wind chimes, flags, banners, pumps and syringes, fan, pipes, funnels, panpipes, didgeridoo					
Fire					

Play Wales Audit Tool

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Designing your play friendly schoolyard

Find your schools on Google Maps

What experiences do we want?	What features support these?
• Exploration • Movement • Creativity • Sharing • Connection with nature	• Loose parts • Ball games • Markings • Mud kitchens

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Risky Play



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Examples

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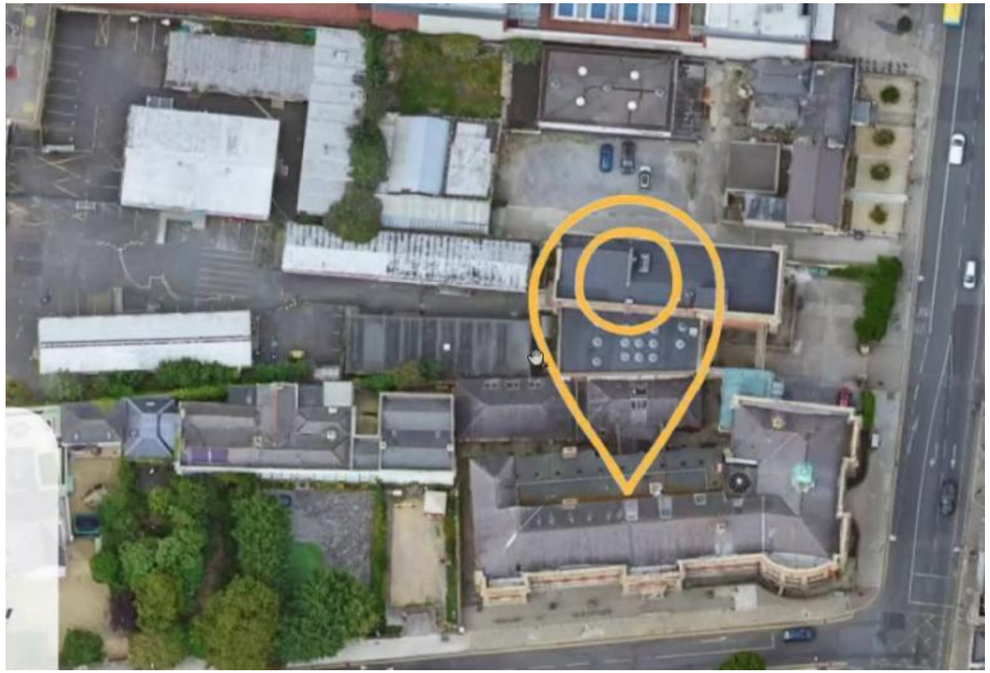
City School



Phase 1: Making the First Move



The aim is not to build a playground, but to create more ways for children to be outdoors.

Learning happens outdoors too.

Part of this is to directly & level connect our gym to the new play area.

One thing we learned from speaking to children was that not everyone wants to arrive in a space and immediately run around; some like to pause

Studio Aula | Joanne Coughlan

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Rural School | Ám Leadranach agus “Broken Things”





The lines that divide us





Rural School





Anne Brennan
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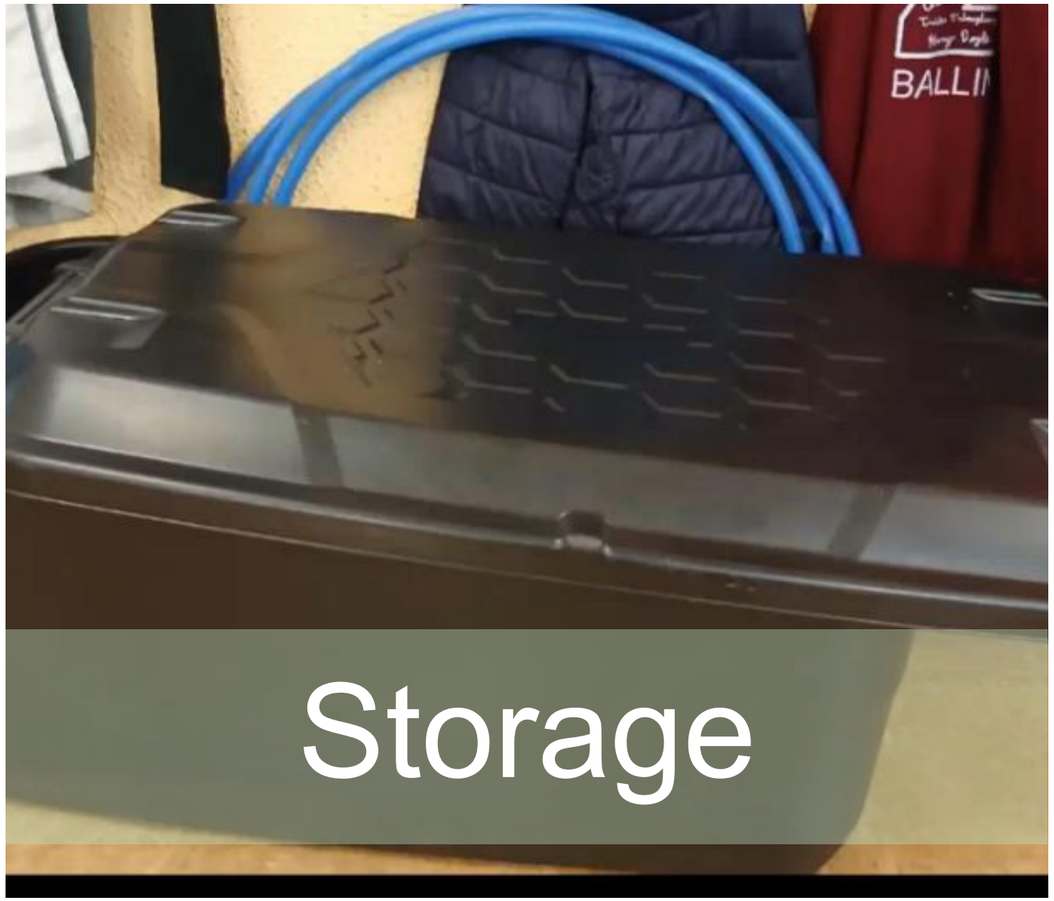
Rural School





Anne Brennan

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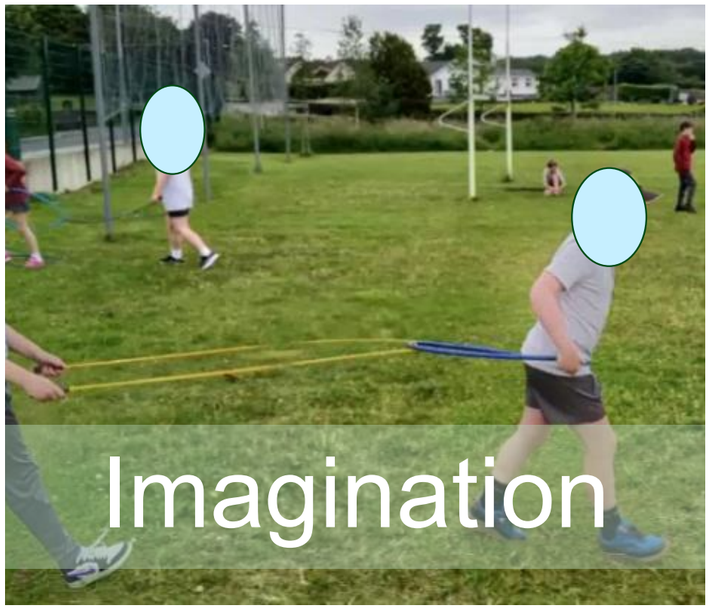
Rural School







Anne Brennan

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Rural School eile





Jikke Andringa

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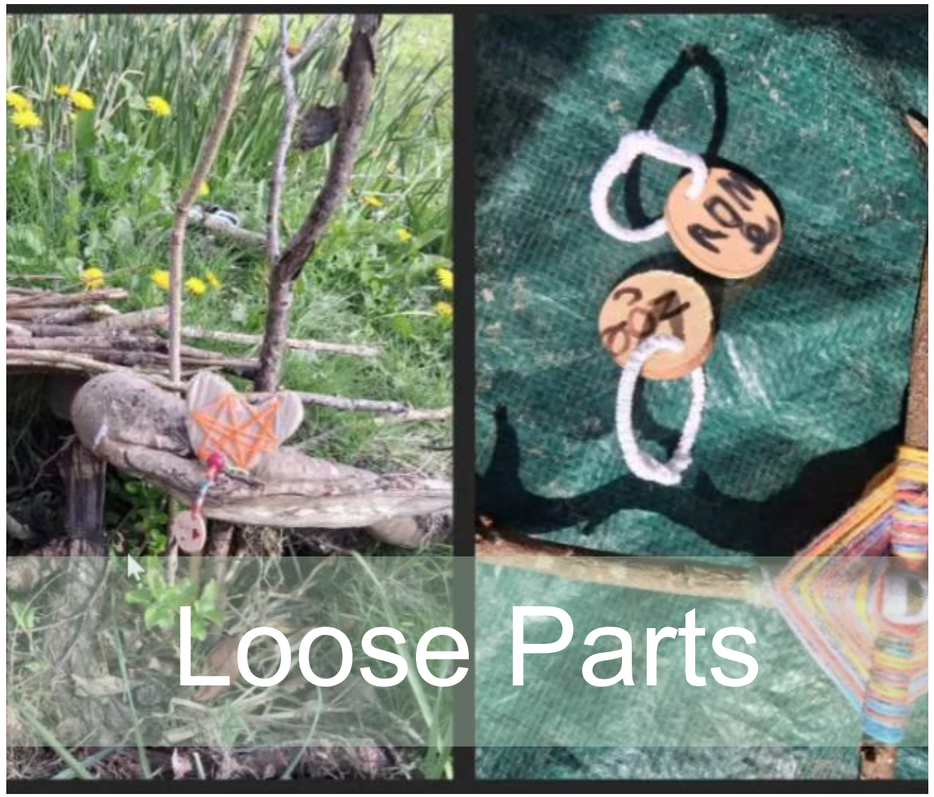



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City School | Extension







Sinead Ni Bhrádaigh

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City School | Extension



Markings



Tyres



Percentage for Art

City School | Extension


Coat Hooks


Loose Parts


Table

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City School

- ~~No~~ balls on the yard
- ~~No~~ other toys
- Each standard ~~in its own yard~~
  →free to roam
- ~~Limited~~ opportunities for quality play
- ~~Just~~ tag or talk, ball games, be in nature, chill out








SuDs, Raingardens, Swales & Permeable Surfaces

Impact on Teacher's

After 26 years in education, this project reminded me that play deserves greater attention for learning and wellbeing

- Incremental small changes make a big difference
- Just start & listen to children
- Changing teacher's vision of what the yard could be is the biggest challenge
- We need to balance the potential for great benefits with maintaining safety

The biggest frustration is why we didn't do this before, it has completely changed breaktimes, not just for the smaller ones.

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Child Participation Toolkit

- Child mapping
- Draw-and-tell
- Photovoice
- Walking interviews
- Playground observations



Last words | A principal's take



Taster Sessions Tried & Tested Loose Parts











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Play or mud kitchen

Play or mud kitchens encourage messy and unstructured pretend play. These environments help children connect with nature, supporting sensory exploration and the development of both independent and social skills. They allow for curiosity, exploration and experimentation in an open-ended way, encouraging a child's imagination to flourish.

materials

Use timber or pallets to create the kitchen structure.

Other materials may include old sinks, taps, a utensil rack, and other repurposed kitchen elements.

loose play parts

To encourage a variety of play experiences, include loose parts such as pots and pans, kitchen utensils, and containers of different sizes.

Consider incorporating a built-in storage unit for easy access to items during play time.

estimated costs

Mud kitchens can be purchased or built using upcycled materials.

Pallets can often be sourced for free from local businesses or building yards.

Ready-made kitchens are also available from various play suppliers. Search online for 'outdoor mud kitchen for schools'.

*see 'Costings note' on p.26

Design considerations
Locate your play or mud kitchen in a quiet area of your school ground, close to soil, sand and water play elements.
To avoid disturbances and potential damage to the structure, locate the kitchen away from active play areas with ball sports.
Allow for storage space within the units.

Technical considerations
If a water supply required, consider the water connection and drainage options.

Legal considerations
Permission or sign off by local authority may be required for any self-build elements.

estimated time

Design: 1–2 months.
Implementation: 1–2 weeks, depending on complexity and availability of materials.

maintenance and lifespan

Check the kitchen structure regularly for loose parts, especially if it includes doors or hinges.

With proper care, a mud kitchen can last over 5 years.

further ideas

Enhance the area by adding a painted mural or backdrop.

Include additional seating to support imaginative play, turning the space into a pretend café or restaurant.

labour and skills

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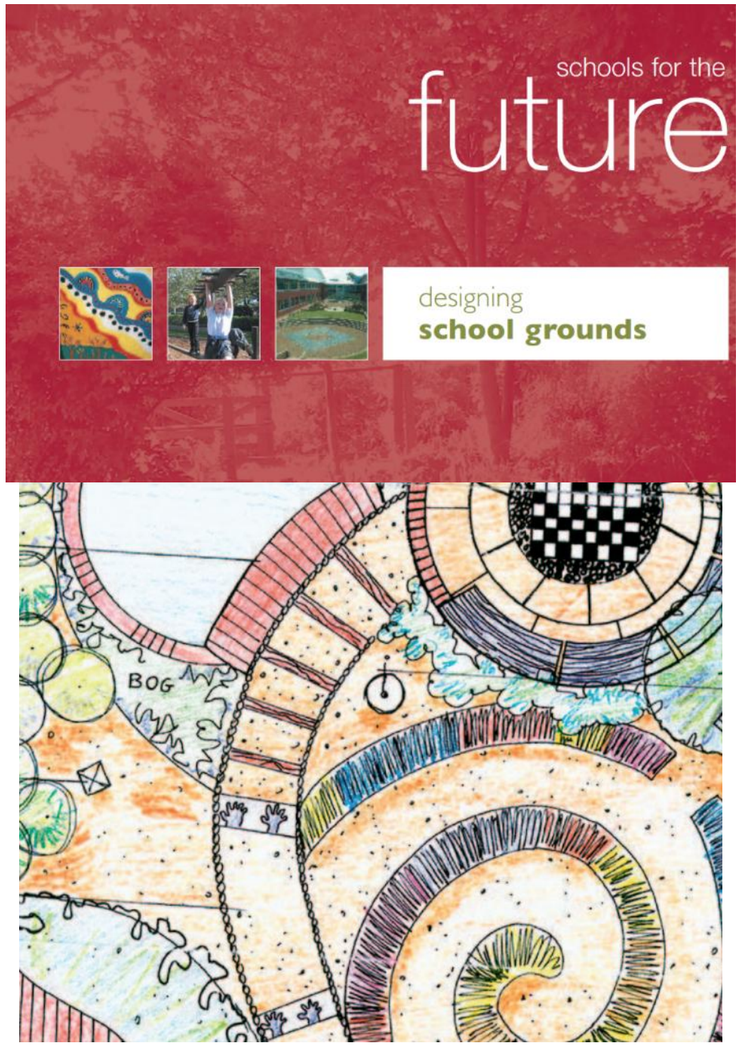
Nature Based Solutions



Our Dúlra AGREEMENT

Learning through Landscapes

Play Trees, Logs and Wooden Resources For School Grounds



Updated July 2019

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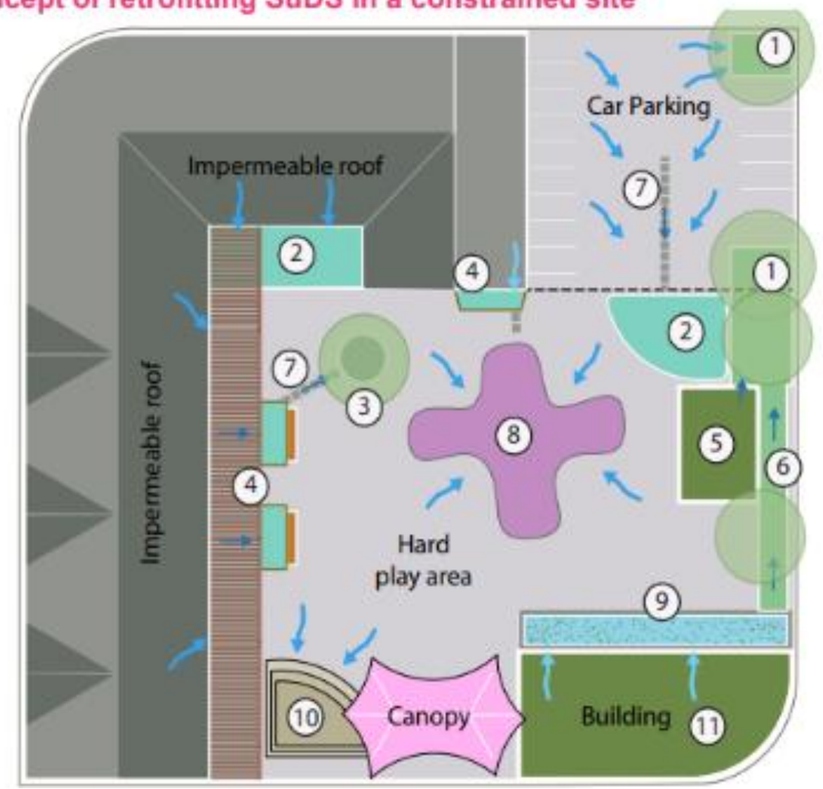
Playing in the rain



Figure 2.12 Concept of retrofitting SuDS in a constrained site



Benefit-Risk

Play-friendly School Training Guide Core Training

- A risk is the chance of an injury or harm occurring. Risks are integral to play opportunities. **Outdoor play that incorporates appropriate risky challenges is desirable.**

- A hazard is something that can cause an accident or harm to someone



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Actions and Commitment

Under €100

- Loose parts box
- Schoolyard Audit

Under €500

- Storage
- CPD training hour

Under €1,000

- Den spaces
- Seating
- Naturalised area



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Go raibh míle maith agaibh.



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