



Centre for Young Lives – The Play Commission

Place2Be evidence: Improving mental health through play

1. Place2Be's clinical approach: using play to improve children's mental health

Place2Be is a leading children's mental health charity and has 30 years' experience providing school-based mental health support, based on robust evaluation and evidence, promoting a whole-school approach to mental health. This involves a range of mental health interventions including counselling and CBT-informed therapy to support pupils, mental health training for staff and coaching for parents. Our counsellors support children and families to build their understanding around wellbeing through play and creativity.

Place2Be also plays a key role in developing the child mental health workforce. Every year we train and support hundreds of new or prospective child counsellors through qualification programmes and clinical placements. Our modules include play-based therapeutic approaches to working with children; which is not included as standard in counselling qualifications from other providers.

Play is an integral part of Place2Be's therapeutic approach to supporting the mental health of children within a whole school approach. Our therapeutic approach states that:

- children and young people instinctively play to understand their worlds
- the child or young person's identity and sense of self is formed by developing and telling their own story, often through creative mediums
- play is the language of young children and a vital part of the capacity to regulate, relate and reflect
- a counsellor must be able to join creatively and playfully with a child or young person and hear their story - which is often told through children's chosen mediums of play, such as paint, clay, small world figures, and puppets.

Play is one of three core principles in Place2Be's clinical delivery model, alongside self-awareness and relationships, which are all used by Place2Be's counsellors to support children. This helps children to find their place, be curious and learn, build emotional resilience and promote positive wellbeing.

Evidence shows that this model is effective:

- Research has demonstrated the longer-term effectiveness of Place2Be's play based counselling in UK primary schools to improve children's mental health.¹
- [After one-to-one counselling from Place2Be](#), **91% of children age 11-18 and 78% of those age 4-11 had an improvement** reported in their mental health by one or more measure.²

2. What are the benefits of play for children's mental health?

Play and development

¹ Finning, K. et al., "[Longer-term effects of school-based counselling in UK primary schools.](#)" (2022)

² Please note the paper linked includes figures for 2022/23. The statistics cited here are for 2023/24.



- Through play, children learn about themselves, their relationships and the world around them. Play ensures children can share and develop new ideas and benefits their brains and bodies.
- Playful interactions and the learning from them shapes the connections in babies' growing brains and bodies. Harvard's Center for the Developing Child calls these interactions "serve and return."
- Playful interactions support speech and language, social development, and develops executive functions.³
- [Place2Be offers structured parenting support](#) for parent/carers of primary aged children, teaching how to engage with their children and interact with them, with play and mutual enjoyment as a key component.

Play and relationships

- Play gives children connection to caregivers, family, peers and trusted adults, and teaches them to strengthen their capacity for empathy, care, and love.
- Playful interactions give children the opportunity to learn social skills, sharing and cooperation, as well as play at social roles which contributes to a growing sense of belonging.
- It is important that children have opportunities for play in school, where they can continue developing these social skills in a safe environment with some adult facilitation.

Play and communication

- Play is a tool that children use to communicate their emotions, thoughts, ideas and beliefs. Even young children use play to communicate worries, overwhelming feelings, traumatic experiences or mental health challenges.
- Place2Be teaches adults, including parents and school staff, to understand play-based communication, to hear the feelings and themes that are being communicated, and know how to respond positively. Place2Be's family-oriented interventions e.g. parenting training, are particularly beneficial for children who are displaying conduct difficulties.

Play and mental health

- Play enables children to experience new feelings and emotions, and teaches them how to understand and cope with these. This supports children to build resilience and transition from co-regulation to self-regulation.⁴
- Through play, children are given an outlet to express their feelings, cope with stress and develop a sense of mastery over their environment. These experiences are essential for building self-esteem and emotional resilience. This can provide much-needed protective factors against mental ill health.
- However, play is not only a building block of mental health, but also a marker of it: research has shown that a child's difficulty playing is often an indicator of struggles in their mental health, and children who have experienced adverse childhood experiences may display post-traumatic play.⁵ This shows the importance of guided play led by an expert child counsellor.

³ Panskepp, J., "[Can PLAY diminish ADHD and facilitate the construction of the social brain?](#)" (2022)

⁴ Berk, L. et al., "[Make-believe play: Wellspring for the development of self-regulation](#)" (2006)

⁵ D'Elia D. et al., "[Post-Traumatic Play in Child Victims of Adverse Childhood Experiences](#)" (2022)



3. Recommendations

Promoting play as a tool for learning and development

The upcoming review of the national curriculum should embed opportunities for both guided and self-play, particularly for primary-aged pupils. This review should be carried out through a mental health lens and align with the Government's eight principles of a whole school approach.

School staff should receive training in children's mental health, in initial teacher training and continuous professional development (CPD). This training should equip them with the understanding of how children use play to communicate. School senior mental health leads can embed the learnings of this training and ensure their school is providing opportunities for play both in and outside of the classroom.

Promoting play to build and strengthen relationships

Children's opportunities to play can be inhibited by wider social disadvantages. Experience of poverty can make children at higher risk of an adverse childhood experience, which affects their ability to play.⁶ Families living in poverty and financial hardship [may not have the opportunity](#) for quality family time and therefore cannot play with their child. To overcome these barriers we need Government investment in welfare provision to alleviate child poverty.

We also recommend an expansion in parenting programmes, helping parents develop the confidence, skills and tools to strengthen bonds and play together. This requires family practitioners, more Family Hubs, and community services. These services should collaborate, with schools, communities and health working together to give every child the best opportunity to thrive.

For further information please contact Place2Be's Policy and Public Affairs Manager, Angel Strachan at policy@place2be.org.uk

⁶ Lacey, R. E., Howe, L. D., Kelly-Irving, M., Bartley, M., & Kelly, Y., "[The Clustering of Adverse Childhood Experiences in the Avon Longitudinal Study of Parents and Children](#)" (2022)