

SPORT NEW ZEALAND IHI AOTEAROA

Value of Play

Play is more than just having fun. It's essential for all tamariki.

Play is a fundamental part of healthy development. It helps tamariki be active, learn, build confidence, develop relationships and connect with who they are and where they belong. It contributes to healthier lives, stronger communities and better outcomes across health, education and wellbeing.

4 key findings from the evidence

1.

Health and wellbeing

Play keeps tamariki physically active and healthy while supporting confidence, resilience and mental wellbeing.

2.

Learning and development

Play supports learning and development, helping tamariki stay engaged in learning while strengthening cognitive skills and academic achievement.

3.

Social connection and belonging

Play strengthens friendships, trust, empathy, belonging and community connection.

4.

Cultural identity

Play helps tamariki connect with culture, language, community and place. Tākaro Māori, storytelling, waiata and haka can help share language, history and cultural knowledge between generations.

Tamariki lead play. Adults make it possible.

While play is child-led, opportunities for tamariki to play are influenced by adult decisions about:

Time · Space · Access · Planning · Funding · Policy

Why this matters

When play is valued and enabled, the benefits extend beyond tamariki to whānau, schools and kura, communities and public services.

Play is a practical, low-cost tool for achieving shared goals across health, education, local government, community and recreation sectors.

Introduction

Play is about more than just fun for tamariki. It is fundamental to healthy development and contributes to stronger physical health, improved mental wellbeing, better learning and more connected communities. When tamariki have everyday opportunities for active play at home, at school and in their neighbourhoods, they build the skills, confidence, relationships and resilience that support them for life, while laying the foundations for a lifelong connection to movement, recreation and sport.

Tamariki have a right to play

Article 31 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child affirms this right. Aotearoa New Zealand ratified the Convention in 1993. National guidance also recognises that play helps children be active and supports their social, emotional and cognitive development. Sport New Zealand Ihi Aotearoa (Sport NZ) supports New Zealanders to be active through 4 approaches: play, physical education, active recreation and sport.

Who this document is for

While play is child-led, the conditions that make it possible, such as time, space and access, are influenced by adult decisions in policy, planning, funding, programme design and everyday practice.

This document is for people who influence decisions, planning and investment across health, education, local government, urban design and community sectors. It summarises evidence about the value of play to inform planning, policy and investment decisions affecting tamariki aged 5 to 12.

The document looks at the role of play for tamariki aged 5 to 12 as this age group is a key focus of Sport NZ's strategy. However, play and its benefits are important throughout life.

The following section summarises evidence from Aotearoa and overseas about the wider benefits of play.

Key findings

- Play keeps tamariki physically active and healthy, while also supporting their mental and emotional wellbeing.
- Play supports learning and development, with evidence showing improved classroom engagement, cognitive function and academic achievement.
- Play builds social connection and belonging, strengthening children's emotional intelligence, peer relationships and community ties across generations.
- Outdoor and culturally responsive play strengthens children's identity and belonging by connecting them with their land, culture and community.

A note on the strength of evidence

All evidence cited comes from peer-reviewed research. We have prioritised systematic reviews, which bring together findings from multiple studies and generally provide strong evidence. Other research is included to provide context and highlight specific findings.



Health and wellbeing

Play keeps tamariki physically active and healthy, while also supporting their mental and emotional wellbeing.

Systematic reviews consistently find that play benefits children's physical health.

> Studies consistently link play with more physical activity, improved movement skills and less time spent sitting.[1, 2]

Risky outdoor play, such as climbing, exploring unfamiliar areas and rough-and-tumble play, is also linked with higher levels of physical activity. There is no evidence that allowing children to take controlled risks in play leads to increased serious injuries.[3]

Play is also associated with healthier sleep and maintaining a healthy weight.[4, 5]

Play also offers substantial mental health benefits for children and young people.[4]

> Unstructured, child-led play can support coping skills, self-regulation, resilience and confidence, and help reduce stress.[6, 4]

Risky play further supports the development of confidence, resilience, problem-solving and risk management skills.[5] Several studies found that these mental health benefits may be greater for children from lower socioeconomic backgrounds. This suggests play could help reduce health inequities.[7, 8]



To experience these benefits, children need equitable access to safe, inclusive and welcoming play opportunities. Disabled children and children experiencing social or economic disadvantage are more likely to face barriers.

The findings suggest that supporting play could be an affordable public health approach that increases physical activity while also supporting mental health.

1 James et al., 2025;
2 Whitebread et al., 2017
3 Brussoni et al., 2015
4 de Lannoy et al., 2025
5 Lee et al., 2025
6 Ahmed et al., 2023
7 Dodd et al., 2023
8 Badura et al., 2015



Learning and development (education)

Play supports learning and development, with evidence showing improved classroom engagement, cognitive function and academic achievement.

Strong evidence links physical activity, including unstructured play at break times and indoor play, with improvements in classroom engagement, learning behaviours and academic outcomes.

> Research shows that incorporating movement into the school day can improve children's attention, memory and ability to move between activities.

Play and movement have also been shown to support young people to remain engaged in class and are linked with improved achievement in areas such as maths and reading.[9, 10, 11]

Inclusive play environments can support engagement and learning for tamariki with diverse needs and abilities, creating more opportunities for all tamariki to participate, interact and learn in ways that work for them.

Research from Aotearoa and overseas shows that including culturally grounded play in the curriculum, through language, games and traditional practices, can strengthen cultural identity, pride and belonging. Weaving cultural practices into play opportunities and spaces also shows potential for promoting cross-cultural understanding among students and enhancing peer relationships.[12, 13]

Together, this evidence shows that play can support learning. It highlights the value of including play and physical activity across the school day to promote health and learning side by side.

9 Ardelean et al., 2021
10 Cankaya et al., 2025
11 Donnelly et al., 2016
12 Ekeh., 2024
13 Xu et al., 2024

Social connection and belonging

Play builds social connection and belonging, strengthening children's emotional intelligence, peer relationships and community ties across generations.

Reviews link play with better social health outcomes, including improved social skills, trust, empathy, community engagement, peer interaction and reduced social anxiety among children and adolescents.[4, 6, 14]

Even forms of play that adults sometimes worry about, like rough-and-tumble or risky play, have social benefits. In supportive environments, risky play can help children test boundaries and develop social skills, leadership and positive interactions with others.[3, 5]

Beyond individual friendships, play can strengthen family and community bonds. When children play in public spaces such as local parks, playgrounds, cul-de-sacs and school yards, it can promote intergenerational connections and a shared sense of belonging by bringing families and neighbours together.[15, 5] When play spaces are designed so everyone can access and enjoy them, with features such as smooth surfaces, ramps, adaptive swings and quiet areas, disabled children can be more physically active and engage more with their peers. Their families can also feel more welcome and less isolated.[16]

> Play can bring families and neighbours together and strengthen a shared sense of belonging.

These foundational social skills and connections, enhanced by play, can support positive relationships throughout life and contribute to stronger communities.

Cultural wellbeing and identity

Outdoor and culturally responsive play strengthens children's identity and belonging by connecting them with their land, culture and community.

> Play is one of the ways tamariki learn who they are and where they belong.

A growing body of research shows that the benefits of outdoor play extend beyond the individual. For Māori communities and many cultures around the world, play is closely connected with tradition, land, identity and responsibility.[5] Outdoor play can help children connect with their land, culture and community, while learning the values of their culture and identity.[5, 13, 17] Traditional forms of play, like storytelling, waiata, haka and games passed down through generations, carry language, history and cultural knowledge. Taking part in these activities can strengthen children's cultural identity and wellbeing.

The benefits of culturally responsive play can also extend to families and communities. Communities that see their culture reflected in playgrounds, parks and programmes feel a greater sense of ownership and connection to those places.

14 Yogman et al., 2018
15 Ginsburg et al., 2007
16 Moore et al., 2022
17 Gerlach et al., 2014

Turning evidence into action

Across the evidence, the message is consistent: when we protect and enable play, we support much more than children having fun. Play strengthens physical health and movement skills, supports mental and emotional wellbeing, improves the conditions for learning, and builds social connection, belonging and cultural identity. These benefits are connected and contribute to outcomes that matter to whānau, schools, communities and public services.

> Together, the evidence suggests that supporting play can be a practical, low-cost way for different sectors to work towards shared goals.

It also supports greater collaboration across policy, planning, funding and everyday practice to make more time, space and permission for play. Councils, schools, health providers, community organisations and the sport and recreation system each shape the environments children grow up in. Working together across these settings can reduce barriers and help ensure more tamariki have access to quality play every day.

Across Aotearoa, partnerships between councils, schools, community organisations, funders and play advocates are helping create more time, space and opportunities for tamariki to play.

There are already many examples of what this looks like in practice:

Ōtautahi Play Streets project:

Sport Canterbury, Christchurch City Council and Sport NZ worked together to strengthen neighbourhood connections and encourage outdoor play.

Palmerston North play libraries

Sport Manawatū, Tū Manawa funding and Palmerston North City Council partnered to improve access to play equipment.

Puketāpapa Play Project

Sport Auckland, AUT and 11 primary schools collaborated to support unstructured play.

Pukutākaro at Epuni School

Hutt City Council's Active in the Hutt programme supported tamariki-led play opportunities at school.

Nature Club, Dunedin

Supported by a Sport Otago Play Lead and Tū Manawa funding, nature-based play opportunities have been developed in Dunedin.

Explore more stories and examples on Sport NZ's play initiatives webpage.



References

View the full reference list.