

Viewpoint

PRESERVING THE 'RIGHT TO PLAY'- STORIES OF LOST PLAYGROUNDS

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ABSTRACT

Play, an essential element of childhood is characterized by freedom, creativity, and spontaneity. It offers children a self-directed space for exploration, inquiry, and enjoyment. Beyond recreation, play fosters cognitive, emotional, and social development through theoretical underpinnings like Piaget's cognitive development theory, Vygotsky's sociocultural approach, and Freud's psychodynamic lens.

Developmentally, play evolves through stages, from solitary to cooperative interactions, as described by Mildred Parten. Ethological studies reveal that play contributes to social hierarchies and adaptive skills even in the animal kingdom. However, modern urbanization, digital entertainment, and structured activities have eroded unstructured outdoor play opportunities. Legislative efforts, such as the UNCRC's Article 31, affirm children's right to play, yet implementation varies globally. Case studies from Wales, India, and Scandinavia highlight innovative solutions to reclaim play, including mobile play hubs, community-driven spaces, and play-centric policies.

Play's role extends beyond individual development to shaping societal values. Structural and policy changes, such as inclusive urban planning and international advocacy, combined with attitudinal shifts prioritizing unstructured play, are imperative. Recognizing play as a fundamental right is essential to nurturing creativity, critical thinking, and well-being, ensuring children grow into well-rounded individuals.

Keywords: UNCRC Article 31, Right to Play, Child development

"Child, I have forgotten the art of being absorbed in sticks and mud pies.

I seek out costly playthings and gather lumps of gold and silver.

*With whatever you find you create your glad games,
I spend both my time and my strength over things I never can obtain."*

– "Playthings" by Rabindranath Tagore

Introduction to Play and its Theoretical Underpinnings

Play is the essentiality of childhood, and is characterized by freedom, creativity, and spontaneity. Defined as a process that is freely chosen, personally directed, and intrinsically motivated, play allows children to control their activities, content, and intent based on their own instincts and interests. Play is a self-directed

pursuit that children undertake for their own enjoyment and purposes.¹

Far from being mere recreation, play is also critical for the holistic development of a child. When examined through the lens of Piaget's cognitive development theory, play fosters cognitive growth through imaginative scenarios, problem-solving, and critical thinking. Exploration in free play in a Piagetian model can aid a child in understanding the adaptive significance of an object.² Vygotsky's astute observations on private speech through self-dialogue in play gave valuable insights into how children build on their executive functions. Self-directed speech during play is a cognitive scaffold that helps children plan, organise and regulate their thoughts and emotions.

Access the article online:

<https://kjponline.com/index.php/kjp/article/view/489>

doi:10.30834/KJP.37.2.2024.489

Received on: 14/12/2024 Accepted on: 15/01/2025

Web Published:15/01/2025

Please cite the article as Rachna G, Priya M, Sujitha T, Swetha

MC, Jiju J. Preserving the 'Right to Play'- Stories of Lost

Playgrounds. Kerala Journal of Psychiatry 2024; 37(2): 146-

151.

Socially, play helps children establish relationships, develop communication skills, and understand social norms. They are in essence pushing the boundaries of Vygotsky's Zone of Proximal Development.³

Play in a Freudian psychodynamic sense is cathartic and regulating as it provides a safe space to relieve emotions, tolerate frustrations, and build resilience.⁴ When examined through the theoretical frameworks of Piaget, Vygotsky or Freud it can be concluded that play is an essential element of childhood, rather than an optional luxury.

Driven by curiosity, free play offers children a haven for exploration and inquiry, nurturing their natural critical thinking and cognitive abilities. From simple unoccupied movements in infancy to complex cooperative games, play evolves through various developmental stages, each contributing uniquely to a child's growth. According to Mildred Parten's stages of play (1932), these stages range from unoccupied, solitary and parallel play to associative and cooperative play, where advanced interactions foster teamwork and shared goals.⁵

Studies in ethology have shown that in the animal kingdom, rough-and-tumble play serves a purpose, such as establishing social hierarchies and maintaining social order. This form of play seen in primates had evolutionary gains as it helped species develop competence in establishing social skills essential for community living.⁶

In an era focused on human rights, the essentials of survival and education have seen significant global progress. Yet, the "right to play" remains overlooked, despite its critical role in physical, emotional, and cognitive development. The attitude to dismiss play as leisure or non-essential must change—play is fundamental to a child's growth and well-being.

Historical Context and the Evolution of Play Legislation

Play has always been central to human culture and development, with its roots deeply embedded in our history. Archaeological evidence, including ancient toys, game artifacts, and even cave paintings of children at play, underscores its universal importance.⁷ These findings demonstrate that play has long served as a vital component of childhood, promoting physical development, social interaction, and creativity across generations. Early humans likely engaged in rough-and-tumble games that not only entertained but also helped develop survival skills and social bonds critical to group dynamics.⁶

However, the modern world has brought significant challenges to the tradition of free play. Urbanization and industrialization have transformed landscapes, reducing open, natural spaces where children once played freely. The advent of motorized vehicles further restricted access to safe outdoor areas, as streets and open lots became increasingly unsafe. Parental concerns about risks such as abduction, abuse, and accidents in public spaces have led to heightened supervision, restricting children's ability to engage in unstructured, imaginative play.

From the 1950s onward, a steady decline in outdoor and free play has been observed, a trend that accelerated in the late 1990s. This reduction is attributed to a combination of factors, including shrinking recreational areas, increased academic pressures, and the rise of digital entertainment. The lack of access to safe and welcoming play environments has had profound implications for children's physical, emotional, and social well-being.⁸ Overly structured activities and constant adult monitoring have further stifled the creativity and independence that are hallmarks of traditional play.

Countries around the world have approached this issue in various ways. In Norway, the cultural

importance of play is reflected in the preservation efforts of institutions like the Stavanger Museum, which houses over 6,000 toys in its collection. This serves as a testament to the Scandinavian commitment to valuing and understanding the role of play in childhood development. Similarly, in the United Kingdom, the National Institute for Health and Care Excellence (NICE) published a landmark review in 2008 advocating for environments conducive to physical activity and play. Recommendations included creating accessible public spaces, safe playgrounds, and child-friendly routes to encourage more outdoor activity.

In India, the challenges are unique due to rapid urbanization and high population density. Despite these hurdles, there have been efforts to safeguard children's right to play. A pivotal moment came in 2011 when the Delhi High Court issued a landmark ruling affirming children's right to play in public parks.⁹ 'Don't be a selfish giant' is how the Delhi High court reprimanded the RWAs. This ruling directly challenged the exclusionary practices of Resident Welfare Associations (RWAs), which often barred children from using these shared spaces. The judgment was a significant step toward recognizing the importance of play in children's lives and addressing the systemic denial of access to recreational areas. However, the implementation of this ruling has been inconsistent. Public parks and open spaces continue to decline, and children are frequently viewed as nuisances in residential areas, often being driven out of potential play zones.⁹

As a result of these barriers, many children have turned to virtual spaces for recreation, seeking solace in online games and digital platforms. While these alternatives offer some benefits, such as fostering strategic thinking and collaboration, they cannot replicate the physical, social, and cognitive benefits of outdoor play. The reliance on digital play also raises concerns about screen time, sedentary lifestyles, and the erosion of traditional social interactions.¹⁰

This global decline in play highlights an urgent need for legislative and community action. Article 31 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) explicitly recognizes the right of children to engage in play, leisure, and recreational activities appropriate to their age. As signatories to the UNCRC, countries like India bear the responsibility to create policies and frameworks that uphold this right.¹¹ This includes ensuring that urban planning prioritizes the development and maintenance of accessible, safe, and child-friendly play areas.

Efforts to revitalize play must also involve a cultural shift. Society needs to recognize play not as a frivolous activity but as an essential aspect of childhood that contributes to holistic development. Parents, educators, and policymakers must work together to challenge the norms and restrictions that limit play opportunities. Whether by expanding public spaces, enforcing regulations that protect children's access to recreation, or fostering community awareness, the importance of play must be reaffirmed.

Challenges to the Right to Play

The barriers to play are both structural and attitudinal. Structurally, the lack of open spaces and safe playgrounds in urban areas limits opportunities for free play. Schools often reduce playtime to accommodate academic demands, and public playgrounds are increasingly colonized by adults or commercialized for other purposes.

Attitudinally, excessive parental scrutiny restricts children's autonomy in play. Concerns about safety, coupled with competitive parenting, have led to a shift toward structured activities, leaving little room for unstructured play. This over-regulation stifles the creativity and freedom that are the hallmarks of true play.

Moreover, the digital age has introduced virtual playgrounds, where children engage in online games rather than physical activities. While these games can provide cognitive stimulation, they

often lack the social and emotional benefits of real-world play. Additionally, parental conflicts over screen time create a paradox, as children turn to virtual spaces when deprived of physical play areas.

Case Studies: Policies and Attitudes Across Regions

Wales: A Model for Play Policies

Wales offers a compelling example of proactive policies to preserve play. The Playwork sufficiency duty and the Playworks principle was a Welsh government initiative along the lines of the UNCRC article 31. The Welsh Play Policy Implementation Plan emphasizes the importance of play as a right and allocates resources to develop accessible play spaces. Community collaboration ensures that children have opportunities to engage in unstructured, imaginative play.^{1, 12}

Taiwan: Legal and Cultural Shifts

In Taiwan, progressive court amendments and cultural advocacy have highlighted the importance of play. However, despite these legal advances, the legislative framework often remains weak, leading to limited real-world impact. The 'Playground Revolution' was a campaign by concerned mothers that helped change the public and legislative attitude towards play.¹³

Scandinavia: A Play-Centric Approach

Countries like Sweden and Norway prioritize play as part of their child-rearing philosophies. In these nations, playgrounds are meticulously designed, and schoolyards remain open to the public after hours, ensuring that children have access to safe and stimulating play environments. The emphasis on free play correlates with higher standards of education and overall child well-being.¹⁴

Stories from Low-Income Urban Neighborhoods

Urban spaces in low and middle-income countries often face significant challenges in providing safe and accessible play areas for children. Addressing these constraints demands innovative and creative approaches. Below are examples of NGOs and projects that have tackled these challenges with ingenuity:

Play on Wheels

Khoj, an NGO, repurposed pushcarts to serve as mobile play hubs equipped with toys, games, and other recreational resources. These carts were strategically positioned in narrow lanes and open urban spaces, offering children safe areas to play. This initiative was piloted in Khirkee, New Delhi, and in urban settlements in Kolkata, was well received.^{15, 16}

Old Canal, New Solution

In Fresnillo, Mexico, as part of a social housing and revitalization program, architects Alin W. Wallach and Rozana Montiel transformed an abandoned canal into a vibrant play area. Observing children using metal lids from garbage cans to slide down slopes, they retained the canal's concrete structure and redesigned it as a multi-functional space with sliding zones and seating areas. This innovative project has brought new life to a previously neglected urban feature.^{16, 17}

Ashar Macha: A Platform of Hope

In Korail, an urban settlement along the Banani River in Dhaka, Bangladesh, *Ashar Macha*-a raised platform built on bamboo stilts has become a communal hub for women and children. This initiative was designed with active input from the community, particularly children, who played a leading role in conceptualizing and negotiating the design. The platform continues to thrive as a space for gathering and recreation, with children actively participating in its maintenance.^{16, 18}

Solutions: Protecting and Promoting the Right to Play

Structural Changes

1. **Urban Planning:** Cities must prioritize the inclusion of safe and accessible play areas in urban planning. Initiatives like community parks, bike-friendly routes, and open schoolyards can provide children with ample opportunities for play.¹⁹
2. **Public-Private Collaboration:** Partnerships between governments, NGOs, and private entities can help fund and maintain playgrounds. Public spaces should be designed with input from children and communities to ensure they meet their needs.¹⁶

Policy Changes

1. **Legislation:** Governments must enforce policies that protect children's access to play areas. For instance, levying penalties on adults who misuse children's play spaces could serve as a deterrent.
2. **International Advocacy:** As a signatory to the UNCRC, India and other nations must implement Article 31 in full, recognizing play as a fundamental right. This includes ensuring access to public play spaces and integrating play into educational curricula.

Attitudinal Shifts

1. **Parental Education:** Parents must be made aware of the importance of unstructured play for their children's development. Striking a balance between safety and freedom is essential.
2. **Community Engagement:** Local communities should advocate for child-friendly spaces and policies. Involving children in the decision-making process

can foster a sense of ownership and responsibility.

Striking a Balance: Leveraging Technology with Legislation

While virtual playgrounds cannot replace physical play, they can act as valuable complements. Educational apps and interactive games that encourage physical activity and teamwork provide opportunities to bridge the gap between the digital and physical worlds.²⁰ However, parents and educators must ensure a balanced approach, maintaining a healthy mix of screen time and outdoor play.

Several countries have introduced legislation to regulate its use in response to growing concerns about technology's impact on children. For example, Australia has implemented measures restricting children's access to social media.²¹ Similarly, in India, the Ministry of Electronics and Information Technology (MeitY) has proposed draft rules under the **Digital Personal Data Protection Rules, 2025**. A notable provision mandates that children under 18 must have parental consent to create social media accounts, as outlined in the previous **Digital Personal Data Protection Act, 2023**.²²

While these measures aim to safeguard young users, they have sparked criticism over potential government overreach into personal freedoms. The ministry is also exploring additional restrictions on social media use for young adults, highlighting an ongoing effort to balance protecting digital well-being and fostering responsible technology usage. The draft rules are currently positioned for public feedback and comments.

Concluding Notes

Play is not an 'option' that needs to be contained and curtailed to a school timetable grid, but is a necessity for a child's cognitive, emotional, and physical development. It fosters creativity, resilience, and social skills, laying the foundation for lifelong learning and well-being. However,

the decline in play spaces, restrictive attitudes, and the rise of virtual playgrounds threaten this fundamental right.

To preserve the "right to play," societies must adopt a multi-pronged approach. Structural changes, such as creating more play spaces and opening schoolyards to the public, are crucial. Policy reforms, like enforcing Article 31 of the UNCRC, can provide a legal framework to protect play. Finally, attitudinal shifts—reducing parental scrutiny and promoting free play—will help restore play to its rightful place in childhood.

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