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# Value of Play Report



The LEGO Foundation



## Introduction

# The Real Play Coalition

**Play is the 'rocket fuel' of child development. Driven by natural curiosity and an urge to explore and discover, play helps children master control of their bodies, activates their imagination and develops the cognitive, emotional and social intelligences that will define them as adults. Whether alone or with others, outdoors or in the digital worlds, play helps children make the most of the unique developmental opportunities that come with childhood and beyond into adulthood. For example, to host a tea party with imaginary friends is to practice original thinking. Or to construct a make-believe castle outdoors is to develop spatial visualization skills, an important basis for maths.**

Yet play is increasingly under threat. Despite its vital importance in a person's early developmental journey, children's time and space for play is squeezed. Lives are increasingly pressured and over-scheduled as rapid urbanisation and disruptive technologies reshape the way we live and work. Homes are becoming multi-tasking spaces as parents and children struggle to find quality family time in their busy lives. Schools are now more pressured and less playful experiences, as their focus shifts towards testing and examination. A decline in the number of community play spaces coupled with parental safety concerns is reducing opportunities for outdoor play too. These play barriers have far-reaching implications: fewer play-moments every day means fewer opportunities to develop the range of skills children need to thrive in the dynamic, challenging economies of tomorrow.

The Value of Play report is an urgent response to the play crisis. Aimed at policymakers, educators and those shaping the global development agenda, the report explores the scale of the current play deficit, the impact of missed play moments on children's lives and the reasons behind the ongoing decline in play. It highlights how low-play and play-poverty are fuelling inequality and are behind a looming skills crisis.

The Real Play Coalition (RPC) - IKEA, the LEGO Foundation, National Geographic and Unilever – came together in 2018 with a shared vision: to promote play-based opportunities that develop a breadth of skills for optimal child development.

Even before we joined forces, each organisation independently commissioned research across more than 100 countries to assess the impact of play on children, families, communities and society. This gave us a clearer picture of the issues around low-play lives. Although the findings have not always made comfortable reading, one theme has remained constant: children and families want more play in their lives.

From this simple, evidence-based perspective comes the RPC's mission: we want to change perceptions around the value of play, mobilise decision makers, influence behaviour change and eliminate the play deficit for children. With networks spanning the globe and a presence in many people's daily lives, the RPC's members have a responsibility to help tackle the issues and reclaim play as a way to happiness, connection, escape, learning, self-expression and discovery throughout life.

This mission is urgent. We know that to survive, thrive and meet the challenges of tomorrow, children need more play today. The skills they will need, the people they will become and the kind of world they will make together depend on it.

So: Let's Play.

**Jesper Brodin, CEO, Ingka Group\***  
**Kees Kruythoff, President, Home Care, Unilever**  
**John Goodwin, CEO of The LEGO Foundation**  
**Gary Knell, Chairman of National Geographic Partners**

\*Ingka Group is the largest retailer in the IKEA franchise system.

## Play – a silent emergency

Play is increasingly being recognised as the engine of optimal child development, future happiness and achievement. Children today have less time for play of all kinds than previous generations and are missing out on vital developmental opportunities as a result. Neuroscientists, social psychologists and business leaders alike highlight creativity, flexibility, resilience and highly developed socio-emotional and pro-social skills as essential attributes for survival and success in the economies of tomorrow. Most parents also recognise that play has a vital role in helping children to be happy, to express themselves and acquire the skills that will determine their ability to thrive later in life.

**95%** | of parents agree that play empowers skills development (NG)

**96%** | of parents believe play can be educational for child development (IKEA).

**98%** | of parents say they believe play helps children reach their full potential (DiG)

Yet, despite the evidence, play is still undervalued, under-prioritised and unrecognised in children's lives. We are in the midst of a silent play emergency.



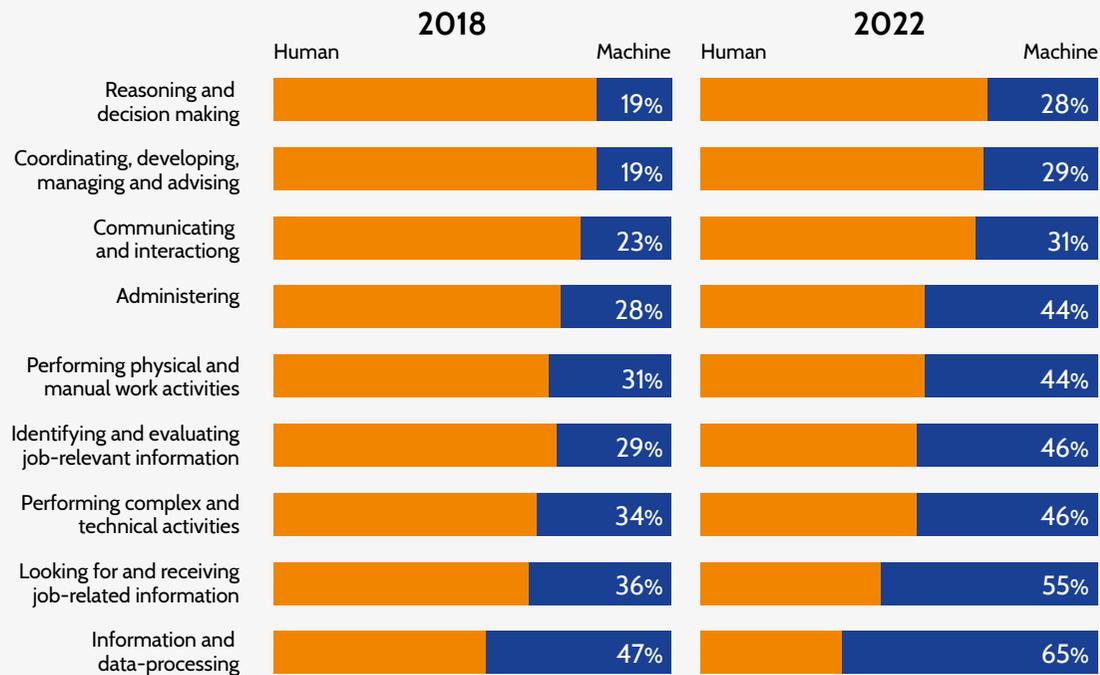
# The erosion of play

As we transition into what the World Economic Forum calls 'The Fourth Industrial Revolution', the world is experiencing disruption, turbulence, social and ecological challenges on a scale not seen since the dawn of the machine age in the 18th century. Traditional roles and jobs are being displaced by machine intelligence. Anxiety is growing as to the kind of jobs that will be available in a highly automated, disrupted world - and the creative human skills that will become essential in these automated, AI-powered economies.

As we experience the effects of the ongoing technology revolution on how we work and live, children are finding new ways to play that weave together their digital and physical play-worlds in increasingly innovative ways. Modern play has become a multi-dimensional, multi-layered experience, where narratives and characters flow easily between different play-spaces. From virtual, online and augmented life-worlds into the physical domain and back again, play has become a seamless set of interlinked experiences and opportunities for learning and pleasure.

Yet, while children's play is undoubtedly becoming a more sophisticated and multi-layered experience, less time is spent on play than in previous generations. Whether at home, in the community, at school or across virtual spaces, children spend less time playing than their parents did.

Figure 1: Ratio of human-machine working hours, 2018 vs. 2022 (projected)



Source: "The Future of Jobs Report 2018." World Economic Forum, 2018

- > In the United Kingdom, time playing outside has declined by 50% in a generation
- > In the United States, from 1981 to 1997, children's playtime decreased by 25%. In 2018, parents of 6-11-year-olds reported that they were playing with their children less than 5 minutes per day.
- > Because of increased academic pressure, preschool programmes have more didactic components than they did 20 years ago

# Whatever happened to playtime?



These changes in the way children are choosing to play can be seen not just as a sign of changing play preferences, but as a response to the more fundamental barriers of time and space in their lives. Research conducted by the Real Play Coalition partners found children and families want more play in their lives, but find it increasingly hard to make time for it. Children are often too busy for unscheduled forms of play.

**92%** of children say they want more play in their lives

**93%** of children say that play makes them feel happier

**1 in 5** children say they are 'too busy' to play



Perhaps the most worrying indicator for the emerging crisis is the significant number of children who have little or no time for play in their lives.

**10%** of children say they have less than two hours of play per week

**8%** of children say they have no play in their lives



Active outdoor play in particular is struggling to find a place in the lives of children today.

**56%** of children have less than one hour of outdoor play each day

**20%** of children get less than one hour of free play per week

**1 in 10** children get no outdoor play



Parents too are increasingly time-poor. Many report that busy work-lives, the ever-present distractions of technology, anxieties and stress are decreasing the time available for quality family play. It is hard to achieve a playful mind-set when thinking about work and distractions around the home. Many children also feel that play is not a priority for their parents.

**81%** of children 'wish' their parents would play with them more

**49%** of parents say they do not have enough time to play with their children

**30%** of families spend less than five hours playing together each week



Both parents and children understand that play can help them develop vital soft skills and intelligences - and makes learning more effective and fun, whether it's inside or outside the classroom.

**83%** of children say they learn better when it feels like play

**95%** of parents believe play has a positive impact on the development of important pro-social skills such as empathy

**82%** of parents believe that children who play more will be more successful in higher education and at work later in life

A young child with dark hair is smiling broadly, surrounded by a vast sea of colorful plastic balls in shades of red, blue, yellow, green, purple, and orange. The child is positioned in the center-right of the frame, looking directly at the camera. The background is a dense field of these balls, creating a vibrant and playful atmosphere.

## Playtime and the wider society

The way we play at home, in school and the community are all affected by the wider structural shifts of how we live. The research commissioned independently by RPC members has identified a few key areas that need to be addressed if we want to tackle the play deficit in children's lives.

- › Over-scheduled lives
- › Access to play spaces
- › Parental safety concerns
- › Parental distractions
- › Low-play schooling

## The over-scheduling epidemic at home

The time available for play at home, in school and beyond is becoming scarce. The need for highly diarised childcare and extra-curricular after-school clubs has resulted in children's lives becoming increasingly organised, time-bound and task focused. For many children around the world, play time has become a set of highly structured activities rather than an experience they have chosen and directed themselves.

**47%** | of children's time is now focused on structured activities

**27%** | of children's free time is spent on unstructured play

## Disappearing community spaces

The latest UNICEF Urban Population Report estimates that by 2050, over 70% of the world's 9 billion inhabitants will live in cities. Rapid urbanisation across both the developed and developing world is placing a premium on accessible 'green space'. These community spaces, family-friendly parks and play areas are often the first casualties of urban development programmes as cities expand to accommodate the rapid influx of new people. Play spaces are being steadily encroached upon by urban planners and councils, for whom play is a less urgent or visible social problem than providing housing, roads and communications infrastructure. This sacrifice of long-term societal benefit in favour of immediate and visible returns is a false economy.



## A changemaker mayor

Erion Veliaj, the Mayor of Tirana in Albania, inherited a run-down and down-at-heel cityscape overrun by cars, buses and trucks. The city's open spaces were desolate and overgrown, and the parks and civic spaces had become uninviting and inaccessible 'no-go' zones for children and families. Despite having no government funds for redevelopment, Veliaj set about reimagining the city's open spaces, kindergartens, playgrounds and streets. Calling on the goodwill of local tradespeople, schools, builders and sponsors, his vision of a safe, accessible and welcoming city, alive with the sounds of children playing, started to take shape.

State-run kindergartens were modernised, city parks were revived and zoning laws were passed, making congested city streets car-free each weekend. A large, temporary 'play forest' was created in downtown Tirana each Sunday, allowing children to ride bikes and follow tree-lined trails without fear of being run down. It kickstarted a green revolution that is transforming the feel of the city. "By putting children first, we create the best revolutions our cities have ever seen" said Veliaj. "Children are not only finding places to play but driving a revolution in sustainability and social change."

## Parent changemaker

Finding safe, open play places in crowded cities is getting harder. Increased road traffic, the lack of accessible play parks and parent's increased safety fears, prevent many children from getting out in the open.

Bristol's Playing Out road closure scheme, initiated by a local parent seeking safer play spaces for her children, has successfully helped reclaim streets right across the city, turning them into play spaces at weekends and on summer evenings. While a small, but vocal, number of motorists and local residents complained that the council-approved scheme was a costly inconvenience to taxpayers, research by the University of Bristol has concluded that it has not only significant pro-social benefits for the community, but also direct health and wellbeing benefits for children.

The study also revealed that safer, car-free outdoor play spaces, close to home, mean parents are much more likely to allow their children to play outside unsupervised. The Bristol study further recommended that the scheme should be rolled out to streets and estates in more socially deprived areas of the city, plus in other cities in the UK, so that the benefits can be shared more equitably amongst children and families everywhere.

## Safety fears in the community

Worries about child safety beyond the home and in the community compound the problem. Awareness of 'Stranger Danger', pollution, road traffic, exposure to drugs and anti-social behaviour, bullying and concerns about the hidden dangers within the physical environment itself all have an effect on the number of outdoor play opportunities children are allowed.

- 20% of children worry that they will hurt themselves when they play outside
- 22% of children aged 7-12 years are not allowed to play outside on their own
- 40% of parents worry that their children may be in danger from road traffic
- 51% of parents say they would like their children to be able to play outside, but are too worried about their safety

Play is increasingly becoming an indoor activity, with parents often attributing their preference to stay inside to the unpredictability of the weather and a lack of free time to supervise 'destination play' for their children. Outdoor play, even in cities, can often involve a journey away from home and, as a result, demands larger amounts of time within the highly diarised and over-scheduled lives of many families.

- 40% of parents say the lack of accessible and available play spaces limits the amount of outdoor play their children get
- 48% of parents say lack of parental time to supervise their children affects the amount of outdoor play they get

## Low-play in schools

A well-intentioned focus on exams, testing and academic attainment in schools puts pressure and anxiety on children and reduces their time to learn through play. Many parents wish for 'secure', high-status employment for their children and want them to enter further and higher education where possible. This can in turn support pedagogical approaches that prioritise 'testable' forms of learning, rather than student-centred learning. While increasing numbers of teachers and educators recognise the potential of play to transform a child's educational outcomes, there is still a reluctance to prioritise play within the school curriculum.

- 92% of children say they learn better when it is made playful
- 76% of parents rank playful learning as their number one educational technique - above traditional teaching, reading and online learning

# Towards a better understanding of play

The Real Play Coalition believes play is best understood as a set of feelings, actions and experiences that children enjoy. Play supports cognitive, social and emotional, physical and creative development. Our research shows that deep learning and higher order skills development are enhanced by play that is:

- › **Joyful** – The point of play is positivity, pleasure, curiosity
- › **Builds on everyday meaning** – Play that builds on a child's own sense of meaning, knowledge and experience helps them grow and learn
- › **Active and engaged** – Active, minds-on thinking that spurs imagination and problem-solving, aids cognitive development and enhances creativity
- › **Iterative** – Play that encourages active experimentation in a risk-free way, building on cause and effect and experiential learning processes, aids learning across all facets of a child's life
- › **Social** – Social interaction in play allows children to collaborate, communicate their thoughts and feelings, and understand other perspectives as they develop skills that will last them a life time



## A child changemaker

When seven-year-old Navya Singh arrived at her local play park and found bulldozers at work and the gates padlocked shut, she knew she had to act fast. More than just a place to run around playing hide and seek in, her daily trips to the tree-lined park in the crowded Rohini district of west Delhi, was a lifeline, her refuge from the relentless, frenetic buzz of the city.

With urban migration at record levels around the world and land at a premium, green spaces, play parks and

civic spaces have become increasingly vulnerable to developers looking to meet the housing needs of a growing city. In a bid to save her park, Navya wrote a two-page open letter to Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi and, with a little help from her dad, she also filed a petition in the local courthouse to have the park protected. After reading her heartfelt plea, Delhi's High Court judges ordered the immediate reopening of the park and recommended a full review of the city's 14,000 other parks and outdoor spaces.

# Play is the rocket fuel for skills development

A childhood rich in play is vital to developing the creative, problem-solving, social and empathetic intelligences needed to succeed in primary, secondary and post compulsory education and beyond. Self-expression, collaboration, risk-taking, resilience, innovation and exploration are essential skills for the future.

Play is the rocket fuel of brain development. According to the American Academy of Pediatrics, play leads to changes at the molecular (epigenetic), cellular (neuronal connectivity), and behavioural levels (socioemotional and executive functioning skills) and promotes learning, our ability to adapt and problem solve, and drives our social skills and positive behaviours.

Play is not uniquely human. In the animal kingdom, play can be observed across a wide spectrum of species, from lizards and honey bees to monkeys. Social play is more common in animals with a large neocortex - the part of our human brains that manages spatial reasoning, conscious thought and language, for example. Among animals we know that play to escape is well rooted: skills learned through rough-and-tumble play literally build skills to escape from predators. For humans, this concept of escape is linked to our ability to unwind and repair through play, where we can be temporarily protected from 'real life

consequences'. Play helps adults and children to regulate their stress levels, or potential feelings of stress, by building moments of mutual joy and shared communication and connectedness. When groups of young children anxious about entering preschool were randomly selected for playing with toys or friends for 15 minutes, or listening to a teacher reading a story instead, the play group showed a two-fold decrease in anxiety.

Play prepares us for the future, by helping us figure out life's complicated rules of what we can and cannot do, including within our family. Play and learning are intertwined as children build skills, including learning to learn, that then facilitate future learning and skills development across a broad spectrum. Just as a baby's first few words soon help them build early sentences, and later more complex language skills, we also see that early skills learned through play lay the foundation for more complex skills development later in life.

We know: play is a vehicle that curious children use to help them learn. Maintaining a useful balance between styles of play including guided play and unstructured play is important for holistic child development.



Source: IKEA. "The Play Report 2015: Say yes to play!" IKEA, 2015



Source: LEGO Group. "Play Well Report 2018:" LEGO Group, 2018.

# The power of PLAY

Play is the rocket fuel for skills development – at home, in the community and at school. Read on to find out more...



[www.realplaycoalition.com](http://www.realplaycoalition.com)

SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT GOALS



The LEGO Foundation

## COMMUNITY COUNTS!



In the UK, children living in deprived areas are nine times less likely than those living in affluent areas to have access to green space and places to play.

Pavements, walls and bus stops in Belmont, West Philadelphia, USA, have had puzzles and games built into them, so kids and adults can engage together in ways that benefit communication, collaboration and the development of spatial skills.



The High Court in Delhi, India, has observed that parks enable kids to learn key skills through play.

Bristol City Council in the UK allows residential roads in the city to be closed and turned into traffic-free temporary Play Streets. Parents report 88% of kids playing out have improved social skills.



## PLAY STARTS AT HOME!



A study showed that children from disadvantaged backgrounds were, in some countries, more than 20% less likely to regularly play with building blocks than children from socio-economically advantaged homes.

An Oxford University study of 302 families in East London, UK, found that kids who played with their parents, supported by a parenting app, had better concentration and determination, and were able to make their own decisions.



Researchers in South Africa found that children who play at home are a third more likely to have higher 'executive function' (time management, organisation, focus, multi-tasking skills).

A study found that adults in Jamaica who had received early childhood 'play intervention' earned 25% more than their peers who had not.



## SCHOOL'S IN!

A review of early-learning development standards across 37 countries found that only a third of countries had the concept of playful learning well integrated.

A German study of kindergartens reported that children who learned through play were more advanced in reading, maths and social skills. It also found they were more creative.



Research carried out for the UK government found that play-based learning improves the academic and emotional development of early years children.

Australian researchers reported that young children studying at schools with a play-based curriculum had improved language and grammar skills.



# The need to understand the play gap

There is a growing awareness that the world is changing and that we must learn to adapt to the changing nature of work and life in the 21st Century. The technological advances reframing our lives present huge organisational challenges for families, businesses, governments and society alike. Policymakers and business leaders are calling for a workforce that has the emotional, cognitive and creative attributes needed to cope in the dynamic economies of the near future.

- The OECD report that soft skills and intelligences (creativity, innovation, resilience, problem-solving) are now essential attributes in the global jobs market
- 21st Century skillsets were mentioned in 40% of the mission statements published by Education Ministries around the globe.

The uncertainty, risk and structural shifts in the labour market drive anxiety amongst parents, who want to 'future-proof' their children.

The shrinking number of play moments in children's lives and the increased time pressures on both parents and children have a disproportionate impact on the disadvantaged. Low-play lives and

play-poverty are seen across all strata of society and socio-economic bandings. However, there is a Play Gap - a gap in play experiences between and within countries by gender and socio-economic factors. The Real Play Coalition will explore the Play Gap more deeply to contribute to making play a reality for all children. A preliminary finding of the 2019 Play Gap report, based on an analysis of 40 countries, shows that in some countries children from disadvantaged backgrounds are more than 20 percentage points less likely to regularly play with blocks than children from socio-economically advantaged homes. Playing with blocks has demonstrated links to language, motor and early math skills. A breadth of play types supports development of a breadth of skill. That's why there is reason to be hopeful that closing the 'Play Gap' provides an important entry point to closing a future skills gap. We know that children and parents from the most disadvantaged backgrounds in society would have the most to gain from play initiatives, but often are least able to access them.

'Play Gap' analysis will enable a deeper understanding of low-play experiences and their links with the skills crisis.

## A policy changemaker

Marie Louise Samuels, Director of Early Childhood Development at the Department of Basic Education, South Africa, wrote "play and language development are knitted together and facilitate the development of vocabulary and expression that leads to forming concepts needed for future formal learning". Though the evidence that play supports better learning is compelling, enabling more playful classrooms can be surprisingly difficult.

In 2017, in partnership with UNICEF and The LEGO Foundation, Department of Basic Education; Cotlands developed an online course for all pre-school practitioners and primary school teachers, which was designed to help make children's learning more playful and rewarding. Powerful Learning Around You (P.L.A.Y.) will be now part of every South African primary school teacher's professional development. In the two years it has been running, 42,000 kindergarten teachers pre-school practitioners and over 100,000 of the country's primary educators have taken the course, transforming the way teaching happens in schools. While the teachers are seeing visible benefits through higher achievement and happier, more motivated classrooms, kids themselves say that school has become a less stressful and a generally more enjoyable place to be.

# Pathway to tackle the play gap

With the Play Gap Report 2019, we will highlight the silent play emergency in children's lives, provide a clearer understanding of the issues and provide the strategic recommendations that will empower key stakeholders, partners, parents, policy makers and children to work together over the coming years.

To help focus stakeholders we have identified four important energies that are driving our current work:

- Urgent action is needed take the 'silent' out of the 'silent play emergency'. By making the issues around play global talking points, driving awareness and promoting the benefits of play across all sectors of society, we ensure that the transformational benefits of play are seen as part of every child's common birth right.
- Developing evidence-based 'play-indicators' to help measure the impact of play on children's development and life-chances is essential. It begins with a baseline measure of the size and scale of the current 'Play Gap' and its impact on skills development, individual outcomes and society more widely. Commissioning detailed research in areas where the evidence base is currently limited, such as gender and socio-economic background, will further help the RPC, governments, partners and stakeholders to explore the issue of deprivation and the social inequality around low-play in actionable ways. Clearer benchmarks will also ensure the RPC can measure the impact of its own initiatives aimed at tackling the effects of low play.
- The Real Play Coalition's convening power includes raising the space for and championing innovative practices and ways that people reclaim playful moments in children's lives - at home, in the classroom and within local and online communities around the world.
- We must also ensure that the RPC's current programmes continue - promoting play, and advising policy makers, educators, parents and children. This involves ensuring play is pushed up the political and social agenda and that opportunities and initiatives for helping children and families to find more playful moments are supported and amplified wherever possible.

## Teacher changemakers

Kiran Bir Sethi's ground-breaking Riverside School in Ahmedabad has been empowering children to find creative, practical ways to change the world since 2001. As part of their learning, pupils look at finding new solutions to pressing social issues. Empowering children through play with an 'I can' mindset based on the four-stage mantra of 'feel, imagine, do, share' develops their imaginative and problem-solving skills, fosters resilience and builds social confidence as children work

through their challenges together. Tackling important social issues, ageism and loneliness through to ecological plastics contamination, through play, inquiry and solution design, has bound together a community of educators- making Design for Change a global phenomenon. "When you blur the lines between school and life you empower children to change the world and change themselves" says Bir Sethi. "Creating an 'I can' mindset, creates significant benefits in

all areas of their lives, from their academic studies to the communities they live in."

Using a simple online toolkit to help children and teachers develop their projects, Design for Change has ignited activists around the world. Across 60 countries, nearly 70,000 teachers have been instrumental in many projects, over 25,000 of which have documented stories, proving that an 'I can' attitude changes lives.

# Real Play Coalition: our vision and approach

We believe in the power of play. Fast-paced social, economic and technological change is re-defining our world. There is an urgent need to rethink how children are equipped with the skills needed to successfully navigate and thrive in a rapidly changing and complex world, environment and society.

We believe children's innate ability to play together and with the adults in their lives, is the rocket fuel they need to boost those skills and their passions in readiness for the future. It is imperative that we position play as fundamental to children's learning, development and right to thrive.

Children are at the centre of everything we do. We believe in children's innate ability to play together and with the adults in their lives, is the rocket fuel they need to boost those skills and their passions in readiness for the future. Children and researchers tell us that play lets us explore, experiment, dream and discover.

Play shows us that nothing is impossible. Fool around, there is no right or wrong. Some things work. Some things don't. From the very first peek-a-boo or tummy tickle to a journey of building self-confidence, empathy, self-control and finding solutions laterally when a teacher takes their classroom outside, play lets us as individuals and as groups explore our world and our imagination.

Let's play together. Or alone. Be what you want to be. Be what you fear to be. But be playing. Play outside, play inside, play when cooking, when bathing, when learning science or geography in school. Play in everyday moments. Play through the tough times and through the good.

We believe in play, because fostered in children and adults it transforms.

We, the members of the Real Play Coalition, want to ensure the value of play is recognised, and promote play-based opportunities that develop a breadth of skills for optimal child development.

Because play is the future.

## MISSION STATEMENT

**We believe in the power of play**

## VISION

**We will ensure the value of play is recognized and implemented by promoting play-based opportunities that develop a breadth of skills for optimal child development**

## APPROACH

**Together with children we will use our combined insights, reach and influence to create a movement which will impact the cultural perception and importance of play among parents, practitioners and system actors\***

# The Real Play Coalition: pathways to drive change



## Insight

Investing in meaningful research that increases our understanding of the positive benefits of real play, every day – highlighting the impact of play on children’s wellbeing and skill development

## Awareness

Building awareness of the criticality of play and skill development among target groups and how to integrate play into children’s lives

## Raising the space

Elevating and connecting the work of corporates, organizations and citizens to promote and ensure more play in society



## Final thoughts

Whether you are policy makers seeking ways to embed the culture of play deeper into society, parents anxious to 'future-proof' your child's life by developing their cognitive, social and entrepreneurial skills through play, educators looking for more playful ways to help children acquire and refine a breadth of skills, the Real Play Coalition extends an open invitation to join us in building a more playful planet.

[www.realplaycoalition.com](http://www.realplaycoalition.com)  
#RealPlayCoalition

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