

Making Scotland the best place to grow up...it's child's play

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Making Scotland the best place to grow up... it's child's play

Children learn so much from play; how to share, take turns and communicate with their peers, through to self-discipline, tolerance and confidence. Encouraging unstructured play allows children to learn and develop as individuals, and this is exactly where childminders come in.

Childminders play a central role in a child's development and through play, you can encourage your minded children to socialise, be creative and imaginative - and play doesn't need to cost a thing. Play will not only stimulate a child's learning and development, it will also enhance them as a person.

The term *playwork* is used to describe an emerging professional field that offers more free play opportunities for children; giving children to have the freedom to choose how and what to play.

Childminders can be described as 'playworkers' who aim to facilitate and encourage child's play, but not control it. A playworker would supervise - but have minimal intervention - allowing children to be independent, build relationships and develop as individuals through play.

Last year was a landmark year for children's play in Scotland with the introduction of the first national Play Strategy for Scotland in June 2013. Dr John McKendrick (Board of Directors for Play Scotland and Glasgow Caledonian University) directed the first national survey of play in Scotland.

Speaking to *Childminding*, Dr McKendrick shares the results and insights gathered from his 'Professional perspectives on play in contemporary Scotland' research.

Play 'comes of age' in 2013

The Play Strategy was introduced with a strong vision statement through which the Scottish Government articulated that it wants "Scotland to be the best place to grow up. A nation which values play as a life-enhancing daily experience for all our children and young people; in their homes, nurseries, schools and communities".

Play is not only to be valued in the here-and-now; the benefits of play are also understood in laying the foundations for children's future development, leading to the bold statement in the Strategy that "children's play is crucial to Scotland's well-being".

Significantly, play is not exclusive to specialist playworkers working in a specialist playwork sector; the business of play is expected to involve a wider range of providers across a wide range of sectors. Childcare professionals are one such group and section five of the Strategy considers the role of play in childminding settings, as well as nursery and school.

The Scottish Play Barometer 2013

Against this backdrop, Play Scotland directed the first national survey of children's play in Scotland, which aimed to understand practitioners' experience of play and playwork in 2013.

The survey was sent to all of the main national and regional bodies concerned with play in Scotland. 284 responses were received in total, with 184 respondents identifying that they worked either in the playwork sector (64 responses), childcare sector (64 responses) or education sector (60 responses).

Playwork in the childcare sector

More smiles than frowns ...but less smiley than others

Respondents from the childcare sector expressed a lot of positivity – the majority of whom (71%) said playwork was “only one of the responsibilities in their job”.

The vast majority reported that their satisfaction with play had either ‘stayed the same’ or ‘increased’ in 2013, while three times as many (56%) expected play in Scotland to ‘get better’ in 2014, as opposed to getting worse (15%).

On the other hand, more childcare sector workers reported less satisfaction (and less optimism about the future), compared to those working in specialist playwork or education. Lower levels of awareness and engagement with the Play Strategy for Scotland were also reported.

In particular, those involved in play within the childcare sector are less likely to report improvement in:

- local authority spending on play
- support for those who want to develop play locally
- the amount and quality of local spaces for play
- the Scottish Government’s commitment to play

The scale of this research and the means through which the survey was distributed, mean that caution must be urged when interpreting these findings. Conclusions should be considered indicative, rather than definitive.

Nevertheless this research seems to suggest that play is not a universal experience and that those working in the childcare sector were consistently less positive and optimistic about their experiences.

As Scotland looks set to give greater prominence to play in children’s development, it is important to consider whether action needs to be taken to enhance playwork in the childcare sector.

If you’d like to read more about playwork and the overall importance of play within your childminding service, please visit the Play Scotland website at playscotland.org.

For more information about this work, please email j.mckendrick@gcu.ac.uk.