

4 Accelerators to Ensure Every Child Enjoys the Right of Play

A Policy Call for Government Action on the First International Day of Play

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Data

- Nearly **400 million children under 5** — or **6 in 10** children within that age group globally — regularly endure violent discipline at home. Of them, around **330 million** are punished by physical means.
- Over half of the 66 countries that have banned the practice have enacted legislation within the past 15 years, but this still leaves **around half a billion children under the age of 5** without adequate legal protection.
- Slightly more than **1 in 4** mothers and primary caregivers indicate that physical punishment is necessary to raise and educate children properly.
- Approximately **4 in 10 children aged 2-4** years do not get enough responsive interaction or stimulation at home.
- Around **1 in 10 in children aged 2-4** misses out on activities with their caregivers that are critical to promoting cognitive, social, and emotional development.
- Around **1 in 5 children aged 2-4** years do not play with their caregivers at home.
- Roughly **1 in 8 children under age 5** do not have toys or playthings at home.



Context

Scientific advances at the inter-section of neuroscience, psychology, pedagogy and paediatrics revolutionised our understanding of how children learn, bond and navigate their way around the world. Feeling safe, loved and nurtured are three pre-requisites for healthy development from day one and throughout childhood. Play is a vital sign that children are enjoying each of these pre-requisites.

Play is a biological imperative for every child and the foundation of the cognitive, social and emotional development. Child-led exploration, adventure and collaboration experienced through play drives the 21st century skills essential for future progress and prosperity. Over the long-term play also drives social and economic progress. Much of the ingenuity, creativity and tenacity that propels our world forward, started its journey in childhood, at play.

Play is a human right enshrined in article 31 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, but it is not universally enjoyed as it should be, for **three reasons**:

Three Barriers to Play

1.

Firstly, play is **undervalued and trivialised**. Our education systems were designed in ways now understood to go against the grain of how children develop. Research shows play that is child-centred learning inspires learning, and children's motivation-to-learn, much more effectively than teacher-centred instructional learning. The world faces a global learning crisis where more than half of children are in school but not learning. In many countries, a culture of over-testing and exams is further turning children off learning and squeezing out prospects for play in curricula, teacher development and capacity.

Scientific evidence shows the play instinct starts in the womb, setting the stage for critical early cognitive and social development through interactive activities with parents in a conducive environment. Already at age three children need to be with peers and attuned teachers in early childhood education, learning through play but half of the world's three to six-year-olds have no access. Poor children are much less likely to attend quality early education than wealthier peers. This exacerbates inter-generational poverty, because children who get two years of pre-school are shown by OECD to do better in maths, language and science at age 15¹ and thus better positioned to the higher or professional qualifications for success. 95% of the estimated 53 million children with disabilities under five do not have access to early learning opportunities. Children with disabilities are 25 per cent less likely to attend early childhood education, 25 per cent less likely to receive early stimulation and responsive care and many are deprived of the assistive technologies required for learning.

2.

Opportunities for play are being squeezed out of childhood. Research shows children are enjoying much less child-led, free play outdoors than their parents did as children. [Children today are 62% less likely to play out than baby boomer grandparents.](#) A culture of 'safetyism' and a transition from play-based to smart phone-based childhoods deny normal play opportunities with potentially catastrophic consequences for mental health. Urbanisation, climate change and pollution are putting public play-spaces for children out of reach and many children around the world spend almost no time in free-play or outdoors. This is true in planned environments, poor and dense urban settings including slums and informal settlements and areas affected by conflict. Children are also at risk from toxic chemicals in toys and playgrounds.

¹ [Starting Strong 2017: Key OECD Indicators on Early Childhood Education and Care | en | OECD](#)

3.

A significant number of children are **deprived of play at home**. Play is dependent on parental/caregiver relationships providing a safe and loving attachment and a secure base from which to explore. Children growing up with inadequate playful interactions at home don't feel loved or safe and often live in survival mode which inhibits free-play. In addition, significant adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) such as physical or emotional abuse or neglect, witnessing domestic violence, parental absence or addiction also lack this secure base. A meta review of ACEs from 37 countries across all continents revealed, on average, 57% of adults reported one ACE in childhood and 13% experienced four or more². That number often overlaps with children who are exploited including 160 million children in child labour³ and the 650 million girls married before the age of 18⁴. , child soldiers, children who are trafficked, radicalised or gang recruited. Play with others helps builds the relationships, self-confidence and belonging that help us heal from trauma. Yet the children who need to heal the most, are least able to engage in playful exploration and interactions.

It is Possible to Fulfil the Right of Play for Every Child

These three barriers to play are reversible and preventable. In the long term, leaning poverty, exacerbated by Covid19, is estimated to cost around 17% of global GDP while violence⁵ and adversity in childhood is conservatively estimated to cost around 8% of global GDP⁶. For a fraction of these costs, we can transform outcomes for children. Through innovative financing and re-thinking models of early childhood education we can get every child into quality early childhood education. To ensure the best developmental outcomes for children, these models should have a comprehensive approach to play-based learning is available to every child.. We can also harness the science of play-based learning to rejuvenate pedagogy in primary and secondary school and help fight learning poverty. Science shows schools that are engaging, socially interactive, and joyful improve learning outcomes. Playful learning is thus a powerful lever to end the global learning crisis and foster holistic human development.

² [The effect of multiple adverse childhood experiences on health: a systematic review and meta-analysis \(thelancet.com\)](https://www.thelancet.com)

³ [Child labour rises to 160 million – first increase in two decades \(unicef.org\)](https://www.unicef.org)

⁴ [Child marriage - UNICEF DATA](#)

⁵ [COVID-19 pushed millions into 'learning poverty' - report | World Economic Forum \(weforum.org\)](https://www.weforum.org)

⁶ [9178.pdf \(cdn.ngo\)](#)

Extreme weather from climate change harms children's public space like schools and playgrounds and prevents playing outdoors and in nature and thus prevents them fostering environmentally friendly behavior. Protection of public play space could be central to urban planning, planning permissions, climate adaptation plans and pollution management. Finally, a WHO review of over 435 randomized control trials of parenting programmes-that share knowledge and tips with parents, including on how to play and bond, are valued by all parents including first time parents. They also significantly reduce risk of harm, improve developmental outcomes and parental mental health.

Four Accelerators of Play

International Day of Play is a moment to celebrate the universal joy and spirit of play as a global norm shared and understood across of every culture and every society. It is also a moment to recognise we are the first generation with the knowledge to finally ensure every child has the right to play fulfilled. There are many things that governments can do to ensure children enjoy the right to play. This inaugural International Day of Play we are calling on governments to prioritise four SDG-related outcomes most likely to fulfil the right to play and accelerate progress towards SDG targets:

- Universal access to evidence-based parenting programmes that promote attachment, playful parenting and buffer children from external shocks and prevent potential risks such as excessive screen time.
- Universal access to quality, inclusive early childhood education, including learning through play, for children between three and six.
- Protection of public spaces and care environments from environmental and climate change, conflict, and urbanization.
- Integration of play-based teaching and learning practices into schools and other learning environments, including innovations.