

# Wild play

## Endangered Activity?

Play (Tākaro) is a vital part of [children's development](#), and the right to play is in [legislation](#). But do children get enough opportunities to play in ways adults consider 'risky'? And what are the benefits?

This second in our Play series (click [here](#) for our first Insights) explores wild play.

Play is spontaneity, freedom and fun. We get so involved we lose sense of time and place. We learn, connect and grow through play.

[Play is defined](#) as activity that is:

- engaging with high levels of involvement, engrossment and intrinsic motivation
- [imaginative](#), creative, and non-literal
- voluntary or freely chosen, personally directed (often [child-initiated](#)) and free from externally imposed rules
- fluid and [active](#) but also guided by mental rules and high levels of communication about communication which give it structure
- process-driven rather than product-driven, with no [extrinsic goals](#).

### Benefits of Play

***There are also immediate benefits [for children] from spending time in nature, such as higher positive affect, increased energy, and less anger ...time outdoors may also promote pro-social behaviours.***<sup>2</sup>



Figure 1 Source: nzherald.org.nz

[The benefits of play](#) include:

- **Wellbeing**, both physical and mental health
- **Academic and cognitive benefits** – play supports exploratory skills and discovery, the use of abstract thought and symbols, communication and oral language skills, verbal intelligence, imagination and creativity
- **Social and emotional** benefits include social skills, and the ability to build resilience
- **Physical benefits** – large and small body muscle development, motor skills; the physicality of play impacts on cognitive function, behavioural and cognitive control.

### Wild play

***Children's entitlement to space and time for outdoor play is a matter of values, not just evidence. It is one example of what has been called spatial justice, or "the fair and equitable distribution in space of socially valued resources and the opportunities to use them"***<sup>3</sup>[[Tim Gill, rethinkingchildhood.com](#)]

Around 85% of NZ's population lives in urban centres so local access to [natural neighbourhoods](#) is vital, in particular for children from lower income families. As well as anxiety about the impact of the digital age there are other stealth threats to [free outdoor play](#).

An intense focus on ‘safety’ in children’s environments [influences attitudes](#) to perceived risk in play spaces. Imposing too many restrictions on children’s wild play may hinder their development. We should be talking about keeping children “as safe as necessary” not “as safe as possible” say [researchers](#).

Play spaces such as [the Land](#) in Wales allow children to experiment with ‘risky’ play, with a playworker on site. Encouraging managed risk-taking in early childhood is discussed [here](#).

## Facilitating Play

People: [parents](#), [teachers](#), caregivers, siblings can facilitate play. [Playworkers](#) provide passive oversight and support where necessary.

**Attitudes** and valuing play impact on children’s access to opportunities:

- The weighing of [benefits of play](#) vs perceived risks
- [Community tolerance](#) of children playing is vital
- [Playtime at school](#) is freely chosen and therefore valuable
- [Parental attitudes](#) to nature and outdoor play



Figure 2 T. Atkinson, Wellington.

Environments impact on play:

- [design](#) of the built environment, [eg] streetscape, playgrounds & parks
- the existence and [accessibility](#) of natural environments including water, bushland and open space.
- [Mara Hūpāra](#), developed with guidance from [Harko Brown](#), incorporates traditional Māori play elements

To read our Insights Report on active streets click [here](#).

## Principles in action

| Principle                   | Action  |
|-----------------------------|---|
| Value unstructured play     | Provide & promote play resources  |
| Balanced perception of risk | Influence play providers – including parents                                  |
| Child-friendly communities  | Activity-friendly <a href="#">streets</a><br><a href="#">Wild play places</a> |
| Urban design                | <a href="#">Urban Ngahere Strategy</a> - an urban forest for Auckland         |
| Equity of access            | <a href="#">Promote discussion</a> on play equity                             |

## Reference and Further Resources

Green Pavlova Play webinars are available online from June 23. Check [here](#) for details.

[The Education Hub](#)

Early Childhood Play Ideas: [the Complete Collection](#)  
[Risky Play: Why Children Love It and Need It](#)

Sport NZ [Principles of Play](#)  
[International Play Association](#)

1 Li, Deal, Zhou, Slavenas, & Sullivan, 2018; Roe & Aspinall, 2011 in Dopko, R. L., Capaldi, C. A., & Zelenski, J. M. (2019). The psychological and social benefits of a nature experience for children: A preliminary investigation. *Journal of Environmental Psychology*, 63, 134-138.

2 O'Brien and Murray (2017) in Dopko, R. L., Capaldi, C. A., & Zelenski, J. M. (2019). *Ibid*

3 Soja, E. (2009) The city and spatial justice. *Spatial justice*, n° 01 September 2009, <http://www.jssj.org/>

<sup>1</sup> [Li, Deal, Zhou, Slavenas, & Sullivan, 2018](#); [Roe & Aspinall, 2011](#) in Dopko, R. L., Capaldi, C. A., & Zelenski, J. M. (2019). The psychological and social benefits of a nature experience for children: A preliminary investigation. *Journal of Environmental Psychology*, 63, 134-138.

<sup>2</sup> O'Brien and Murray (2017) in Dopko, R. L., Capaldi, C. A., & Zelenski, J. M. (2019). *Ibid*  
<sup>3</sup> Soja, E. (2009) The city and spatial justice. *Spatial justice*, n° 01  
September 2009  
<http://www.jssj.org/>

