

# Play Matters!

A research project in conjunction with Oxfordshire Play Association



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Funded by: Oxford University's Public and Community Engagement with Research



# Evidence base

## What we did

We interviewed parents at three play events run by Oxfordshire Play Association (OPA) in different locations around Oxfordshire. Eleven parents were interviewed in **Banbury**, nine in **Abingdon** and six in **Blackbird Leys** (Oxford). These areas were chosen as they sit in electoral wards which appear in the lowest 20% of areas using the indices of multiple deprivation.

Ethical approval was granted by a subcommittee of the University of Oxford Central University Research Ethics Committee (Ethics reference: R86029/RE001).

The questions focused on factors which both helped parents to support their children in play and the barriers to that support. We also asked about current facilities and parental perception of the value of play sessions in general (which may include those provided by OPA). Interviews were conducted by a researcher trained in interview methods and analysed by a Professor in Psychology.



Interviews varied in length between 3:50 minutes and 18:29 minutes and were predominantly conducted with mothers. The children of the parents were varied in age, but the majority were pre-school or primary aged children, for this project we had pre-specified we would speak to parents of children aged between 3 and 11 years and all of those who took part had at least one child in that age range.

# Findings

Parent comments fell into three main themes which were equally represented across the three areas. Each of these themes, along with the sub-themes are described below alongside some indicative quotes.

<b>Facilitators and barriers to supporting children in play</b>	<b>Reflections of current facilities and wishes for new ones</b>	<b>What parents value about play sessions</b>
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## Facilitators and Barriers

Parents outlined four different factors which can act as facilitators or barriers to play.

### Access

Eleven parents raised the need for easy to access facilities, such as parks or community centres. This included being able to walk to a playground or park and so they appreciated having these facilities close to home, or ensuring there is parking close by or space to leave a cycle or buggy securely. Some parents spoke about their local facilities having these features which supported them to visit with their children, while other parents raised it as a barrier.

*“more facilities for them to be able to you know, maybe, stay local and do stuff rather than, you know, go into Stratford to where there is the little water park and the little sand park and stuff like that, some more local I'd say.”*

*“somewhere to park the buggy so you don't have to leave it out in the rain or worry about getting it nicked, I cycle sometimes if I've only got one child I will cycle with them on the back of the bike. So again somewhere where I could potentially park a bike”*

*“yeah, there's lots of parks around here. And there's some lovely little walks just down the alley, there's a little pond and so that there's a few little walks to do around here, but I drive so it's a little bit easy for me.”*

Seven parents indicated that time was a barrier to supporting their children in play and one said that if everything was closer to home, time wouldn't be such an issue:

*“It would be more efficient, wouldn't it if everything was close.....closer, then you have, you'd be able to fit more time in because you're not traveling or worrying about you know, when you get there where you are going to park and that takes time and everything like that.”*

## Cost

Cost was raised by 17 parents as a barrier to play. Many parents were not necessarily looking for free activities but indicated that the cost of activities could be a limit to play opportunities, especially for larger families

*"I'm happy to pay for stuff but as long as it doesn't cost the earth. So like this [talking about the OPA event] which is all free today, but if they said, please donate something, I'm more than happy to donate. Or if they said like, it costs a couple of pounds per child that's not going to break the bank. It is when it starts sort of like being like, you know, £10 per child that has probably broken the bank when you've got more than one child."*

Parents also said that the cost to them was not just limited to accessing an activity but also travel and food.

*"Money, especially now money is a huge thing, especially for things that are not on our doorstep. So you know, that's more expense getting there and stuff. So money is a factor of things that you do with your kids or the extent of things that you can do with your kids"*

Most parents also listed activities they did with their children which had no associated costs such as playing in the garden, local green spaces or at home

*"We like to do arts and crafts and outside play with water and chalk. We like to do painting and sand and water play in the summer, colouring and board games"*

*"Yeah, obviously financial as a big part to play. But obviously, I suppose I am a bit lucky because I do work, so I do have that little bit set aside for days out for trips, but obviously, I can't do it all the time. I can't afford to take them out all the time. So I try to use as much outdoor facilities as possible, like taking the bikes out to the skate park"*

Two parents indicated that idea for this type of 'play at home' activity were really helpful in supporting their child in play.

*"If there's things that sort of come with instructions or if we google how to like make things such as like when we've made playdough and stuff, it's helpful with guides on, on stuff"*

## Suitability of activities

Seven parents spoke about the difficulties of popular events, groups or sessions not having the capacity for everyone in the local area.

*"An indoor setting is great, especially during the winter. I think that's one of the huge issues and it being sort of regular. Like with the playgroups that are available at the Sunshine Centre for example. They get booked up really quickly because there's just not enough room, space. I guess the frequency, but I guess then you also need to have the people in place to do that."*

One parent also raised issues of not having events or spaces which were appropriate for their child's needs and the difficulty of finding out about events ahead of time

*"So I don't know, will this suit my child because of being neurodiverse? How loud is this going to be? What sort of rooms, is it gonna be really echoey? How many children are going to be there? Will they understand that she's neurodiverse and be able to support her in that way?"*

Parents of multiple children (10 parents) spoke about the difficulty of finding activities which suited all their children, or that all their children could attend given the range of ages. This was not just for organised events, but also about the suitability of play equipment in playgrounds

*"I mean, a lot of the newer parks are more equipped for all ages. So they have I don't know if you've seen but some have the bouncy castle built into the ground? Trampoline sorry. Zip wires, that kind of thing. Yeah, I suppose. Just a bit more for all different ages."*

*"Say both age ranges, and so my son bless him ends up being the tagalong sidekick and kind of comes along but gets frustrated when he can't join in necessarily in the same way that she can. Equally she gets to a point where if she's doing something with him is a bit younger. She gets a bit frustrated. So, then I kind of I find myself I'm in that position where I'm kind of in limbo state where I need something for both of them. But I'm like, Oh, well, it's too young for you too old for you. So, let's not bother."*

*"Having a wide variety of activities that are based around their age ranges as well, because some parks seem to have a younger focus, a mix, they might go for ones that have space to explore. So maybe like a mound or a tunnel or a bush maze. So they're particularly like a park or can I give examples. So there's a park at Harwell, that's got some tunnels in it going through a mound and is from a parent's point of view can't always see the children. But it's good for them to explore. And it's still contained within a fenced area. So you know, they're safe, yet they've got that sort of sense of freedom. ....[section removed for brevity]..... They do like a mix of equipment, though that's there like a zip wire or something. But finding one that maybe hasn't been vandalized also is important"*

*"My oldest is almost 13. And I think very much since such at the ages sort of eight really it feels like suddenly there's nothing you know, it's it's very like gripping at straws of like, oh, there is a there's something going on here. There's something going on there. But it seems to be sort of one group doing various things rather than there's lots of different groups that can do across the board a lot of things and it's just a shame there isn't more"*

## **Knowing what is on**

Parents also spoke about challenges with knowing what was going on in their local area. Many indicated that they only heard about events through other parents and that disseminating information through a number of channels might help with this.

*"Schools would be an ideal way to communicate. I mean, for example, an email from a school here would reach over 400 grownups, adults, families."*

*“Proper signposting like now [referring to the event they are currently attending], because it's a school event, which was advertised through the school”*

*“I think it's knowing what else is around for them to do.”*

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# Reflections on current facilities and wishes for the future

This theme can be further broken down into two sections, comments regarding the current facilities and comments focusing on what facilities would really help to support their children.

## Current facilities

Eight parents spoke about current facilities near them, mainly focusing on play parks with the majority of comments indicating that parents didn't feel they were suitable. The lack of suitability was due to a number of factors such as the facilities being run-down, not having toilets nearby, not being clean enough or issues of anti-social behaviour.

*“It's disappointing when you go to the likes of the Abbey that they've spent so much money on a new play area and equipment, the toilets are appalling. And their only refreshment is the ice cream man, when he's there, and that you have an outdoor swimming pool area that is covered in goose poo, and access to a cafe slash area that is, you know, even if they just opened up and did coffee, I'm sure even during the some of the winter weekends that'd make money because all the other coffee shops in town, make money during the winter, so and we still want to get the kids out and play. So if I knew as a parent, or somewhere we could get maybe a hot drink and comfortably be able to go to the toilet, it might encourage you to stay out longer as well.”*

*“Like, there'll be some antisocial behaviour, but yeah, mostly.....maybe like, if there was like, maybe CCTV cameras or like PCSOs that regularly came through and just checks that everything was all right, for the smaller children to use”*

*“Just like parks that are free, but just they're so rundown round. We need some more newer ones.”*

## I wish we had.....

Parents also spoke about facilities that they would like to see nearby, in some cases this focused on different types of play areas but also on events that they would like.

*“So I don't know, just say like, in an evening after school, when they did like activities here and calm, and they could like, you know, play game of football together or just play game of basketball, just like just a general get to know each other to like, because obviously, they know each other in their classes*

*would be nice if they knew children from the area as well. So maybe something like that would be quite nice to do”*

*“I mean, whether that's moving into the realms of a youth club or what I don't know, but somewhere that is more constructive for sort of preteen teen girls as well, that don't just want to be on the park”*

*“If there is a leisure center, that could open over the weekend, or during the week for free, where you can bring your children and there's games and stuff like community area, community room is open on weekends fully”*

*“This is perfect [event organised by OPA]. It would be nice to have one of these once a month that we could go to I know they do they do one at South Park as well once a year, and I don't even know what that's called. But it's lovely for them to be able to play in a safe environment where we're all interacting with them”*

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## What parents need for themselves

We also asked parents what they would like to see for themselves at organised events. Unanimously, parents said they didn't need anything organised for them while their children played. Rather they highlighted the pleasure they got from watching their children play and from connecting with the local community and other parents.

*“Like what this place is doing here today [event organised by OPA]. You know, like a community event. You know, you don't have to book everyone's welcome could just turn up, come when you want to leave when you want and you just, you meet people doing this kind of stuff”*

*“Me? It's quite nice to socialize with mums of children of the similar age. So that, you know, how is your child getting on? Is your child doing this, my child's doing that”*

*“When we just go outside to the park or something like that we just love chatting with other parents looking for the children how they play and encourage them if they need”*



# Recommendations

Based on these interviews we are making seven recommendations:

**Proximity:** Ensure facilities are close to where people live, ideally within walking distance. More smaller playgrounds are better than fewer bigger ones.

**Free activities:** Offer free or 'pay what you can' activities where possible.

**Variety:** Provide facilities and activities that cater for different ages of children and their differing ability and interests, that take place at the same venue and at the same time.

**Communication:** Advertise events, activities and facilities widely including through schools.

**Facilities:** Equip play spaces with clean, family friendly toilets, and ideally somewhere to buy a hot drink.

**Social spaces:** Plan social spaces, that give parents the opportunity to meet and socialise, while their children play. It's a chance for people to get to know others in their local area.

**Free opportunities:** Think creatively about providing free opportunities for play, that don't need to be structured e.g. a woodland space that allows children to build dens, get muddy and discover nature without a cost





# Who we are



**Martin Gillett:** After 23 years spent working in the commercial sector in customer service and sales, Martin has been the Manager of the Oxfordshire Play Association since 2009. He is married and the father of 3 boys and so is well aware of the positive impact Play can have on the Physical and Mental Wellbeing of Children & Young People. He has been employed by OPA for 15 years now and loves working within the Charitable sector. He is particularly proud of the way OPA works in partnership with others right across Oxfordshire for the benefit of all.



**Polly Kerr** is Patient and Public Involvement Manager for the Nuffield Department of Primary Care at the University of Oxford. She cares deeply about ensuring research addresses the things that are important and relevant to all communities, and that it is carried out in an accessible, inclusive manner. She has a background in editorial work and science communication and is mother to a young son, so being able to bring all of these interests together to help facilitate this project has been a pleasure



**Dr. Juliet Carpenter** is Director of Research and Senior Research Fellow at the University of Oxford, in the Global Centre on Healthcare and Urbanisation (GCHU). She works at the interface of debates within urban planning, geography, political science and urban sociology. Her principal research interests include urban regeneration, community engagement in urban planning, the concept of co-creation, and broad notions of urban social sustainability.



**Professor Kate Wilmut** is a Professor of psychology and a co-director of the Centre for Psychological Research at Oxford Brookes University. Her research interests lie in motor skill learning and development with a specific focus on children and adults with Dyspraxia / Developmental Coordination Disorder (DCD). She is particularly passionate about ensuring that opportunities for motor skill learning, such as Physical Education and Cycle training for children are inclusive and welcoming for all.



**Dr. Mina Samangooei** is an architect & Senior Lecturer in Architecture at Oxford Brookes University. Mina's research focuses on the role that nature integration & food production in & on buildings plays for urban futures. Her extensive range of experience includes residential, healthcare & ecclesiastical buildings. Mina is passionate about inspiring & working with people & communities to understand the need for future-proofing their projects. She has worked closely with co-housing & community led housing groups, thriving in her role as designer & design facilitator. Ecological & Passivhaus design & retrofit, using a holistic approach is one of her main strengths.



**Dr. Mohammad Seddighi** is an Associate Lecturer in the School of Built Environment at Oxford Brookes University. He has a background in research, teaching, and architectural practice and holds a PhD in Urban Design from Oxford Brookes. He specialises in rehabilitating historic cities and previously worked as an Architectural Designer at the Ministry of Housing & Roads in Iran. His innovative work has been recognised through numerous awards and publications. He is passionate about research, design and innovation in technology and urban regeneration.

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# For further information

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