

# Play in the face of adversity.

## The importance of protecting children seeking asylum's right to play.

The Centre for Research on Play in Education, Development and Learning (PEDAL) is part of the Faculty of Education at the University of Cambridge. We conduct world-leading research on childhood and mobilise knowledge to help to improve children's lives and life chances.

This paper has been written for the Children and Young People's Commissioner in Scotland, who asked us to consider the importance of play for children seeking asylum, particularly those living in hotel accommodation in Scotland. The paper discusses why we should promote and protect the right to play, the value of play for children in the asylum system, and the barriers to play faced by these children. It also contains some illustrative examples of interventions that can promote and protect children's right to play, and to use play to overcome the impact of adversity and trauma.

## Summary

More than 16,000 babies, children and young people claimed asylum in the UK last year. Of these, many live in hotel accommodation for weeks or months while they wait for their claim to be processed and to be moved to longer-term housing.

Each of these children is a unique individual with their own story, culture, strengths and needs. They are all likely to have experienced a number of challenges. Many will:

- have experienced trauma in their home country as a result of the events or circumstances that led to them seeking refuge,
- face challenges associated with seeking asylum in a new country and trying to adapt and integrate into a new community and culture, and
- experience periods of uncertainty, and time spent in poor quality and transient accommodation as a result of the support offered to them by the UK asylum system.

This paper discusses the experiences and needs of babies, children and young people in families seeking asylum and living in hotel accommodation in the UK – particularly in Scotland. It focuses specifically on their right to play, why it matters and why it is under threat.

Play is universal, ubiquitous, and yet notably hard to define. The UN Committee on the Rights of the Child describes children's play as, "*...any behaviour, activity or process initiated, controlled and structured by children themselves; it takes place whenever and wherever opportunities arise. Caregivers may contribute to the creation of environments in which play takes place, but play itself is non-compulsory, driven by intrinsic motivation and undertaken for its own sake, rather than as a means to an end...*".

There are several types of play and play will also look different in different places. Culture informs play, and thus it is imperative to be culturally sensitive in considering what play means for children in the asylum system. Different cultures have distinct songs, rhymes, toys and styles of play. Cultural views about children, childhood, gender and play; religious and social beliefs, and attitudes towards risk will

all influence the prevalence and nature of play in different communities. Nonetheless, play is universal in its ability to scaffold the development of children and provide a therapeutic outlet for children to both learn about the world and express themselves.

There are two reasons why we should protect and promote play for all children:

- **Play is a basic right, a fundamental part of childhood** which is part of children being well and thriving as citizens and members of communities.
- **Play makes an important contribution to children's development**, helping children to thrive during infancy, childhood and adolescence and to become happier, healthier adults who can make positive contributions to society and the economy.

Alongside the universal benefits of play, play can have specific benefits for children who have experienced adversity, such as those seeking asylum. Play can help children to overcome trauma and can provide some normality in a constantly changing world. Play can both support integration into new communities and maintain links with children's culture and place of origin.

Play is resilient. Children – including many children who have endured immense trauma and are living in adverse circumstances – seek opportunities to play and will find new and different ways to play in the face of such barriers and challenges.

Play is limited when children's basic needs are not met. The Nurturing Care Framework<sup>1</sup> sets out the basic principles of what children need: good health; adequate nutrition; responsive caregiving; safety and security, and opportunities for learning.

Even if children's basic needs are met, other barriers can reduce their resources, opportunities and freedom to play. These can include the lack of space or toys, lack of permission or time or psychological barriers which make it harder for children to feel safe, confident and comfortable to play.

Many children across the UK of different ages report barriers that prevent them from playing as much as they would like to. Alongside these common challenges, children seeking asylum experience a constellation of additional challenges that inhibit their ability to play. These include poor mental health resulting from experiencing trauma and displacement; separation from loved ones; the lack of space and resources in hotel accommodation; moving regularly; having limited access to educational settings, and cultural and linguistic barriers. Play can help to mitigate the impact of this adversity on children's development and outcomes. Conversely play deprivation is likely to further exacerbate the harms caused to children by their experiences of migration and seeking asylum and will impair their recovery from traumatic experiences.

Policy makers and practitioners can protect and promote children's right to play by:

1. **Ensuring children's basic needs are met.** This includes ensuring that parents and children have access to health services, education, nutritious and suitable food, and safe, suitable and comfortable places to live.
2. **Creating the conditions to play.** Ensuring children have sufficient, appropriate and safe space to play inside and outside, and that they can feel comfortable doing so. Working with families to provide age-appropriate and culturally sensitive spaces and resources that meet children's needs.
3. **Actively supporting play.** Ensuring children can access activities and programmes that support and facilitate play, led by skilled adults.

# Full Report

## Context: Children seeking asylum in the UK

More than 16,000 babies, children and young people claimed asylum in the UK last year<sup>2</sup>. Of these, just over 5000 were unaccompanied young people and the rest came to this country with family members or caregivers. These children and their families have left their country of origin, often fleeing war, violence, conflict or persecution, and are seeking safety in the UK.

Each child seeking asylum in the UK is a unique individual with their own story. They will have come from different places; experienced different levels of trauma, loss and challenge, and have different levels of support to buffer the impact of this stress. They are from different cultures and speak different languages<sup>a</sup>. They will differ in their developmental stage, their personality, preferences and needs. Some will want to assimilate into UK communities and create a new life here. Others simply need temporary sanctuary until it is safe and feasible for them to return home. Whatever their story and their individual needs, they are all now in the position of seeking asylum in the UK and our Government has, according to international conventions, obligations to offer them and their families protection and to protect their rights, including rights to housing, healthcare and education, so they can lead a dignified and independent life<sup>3</sup>.

At the end of March 2023, there were 112,294 individuals of all ages in receipt of asylum support in the UK. 42% (47,163) of these people were in hotel accommodation and 54% were in other accommodation such as dispersal centres<sup>4</sup>. Families can be held in hotels for months, and sometimes years, while their asylum claim is being processed. At the end of 2022, over 68% of asylum applicants and dependents had been waiting for 6 months or more for an initial decision on their asylum claim<sup>5</sup>. Families with children are supposed to be prioritised for dispersal to longer-term housing, but in research by Refugee Action, 95% of families surveyed were held in a hotel for over 6 weeks, 58% were held for over 6 months, over a quarter (27%) had been held for over a year.<sup>6</sup> Many of these families are living together in very small hotel rooms and only have access to a low income: asylum support is £9.50 per week for people living in hotels.

Children seeking asylum in the UK face a number of different challenges. Many of the children will:

- have experienced trauma in their home country as a result of the events or circumstances that led to them seeking refuge (for example war, persecution or natural disaster);
- face challenges associated with seeking asylum in a new country and trying to adapt and integrate into a new community, and
- experience periods of uncertainty, and time spent in poor and transient accommodation as a result of the support offered to them by the UK asylum system.

This paper discusses the experiences and needs of babies, children and young people in families seeking asylum and living in hotel accommodation in the UK – particularly in Scotland. It focuses specifically on their right to play, why it matters and why it is under threat.

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<sup>a</sup> The top ten nationalities of all UK asylum seekers are Albania, Afghanistan, Iran, Iraq, Bangladesh, Syria, Sudan, Eritrea and Pakistan.

## Understanding Play

*"Children's play is any behaviour, activity or process initiated, controlled and structured by children themselves; it takes place whenever and wherever opportunities arise. Caregivers may contribute to the creation of environments in which play takes place, but play itself is non-compulsory, driven by intrinsic motivation and undertaken for its own sake, rather than as a means to an end. Play involves the exercise of autonomy, physical, mental or emotional activity, and has the potential to take infinite forms, either in groups or alone. These forms will change and be adapted throughout the course of childhood. The key characteristics of play are fun, uncertainty, challenge, flexibility and non-productivity."*

United Nations Committee on the Right of the Child<sup>7</sup>

Play is ubiquitous among humans of all ages around the world and has been widely recognised as an important element of childhood for thousands of years<sup>8</sup>. However, despite its widespread occurrence and value, play is difficult to define.

Play is multi-faceted and describes a range of different activities ranging from free-play (where children have the freedom to explore, discover, choose and create their own play activities) to play that is more structured or guided, such as games with rules that might take place in a classroom or organised setting. Play can take place wherever children are - home, school, outdoor space, or online. It can be solitary or social. It can be autonomous and independent or assisted and guided by others. Through all its forms, play is a way for children to feel a sense of purpose, control, and a much-needed release. This is especially pertinent for children in the asylum system who have experienced trauma and are at increased risk for the development of mental health problems.

Research has identified five main types of play<sup>9</sup>.

- **Physical play** includes active play (eg. skipping, ball play, climbing), rough and tumble, adventurous and risky play, and fine motor practice.
- **Play with objects** starts with babies shaking, throwing or putting objects in their mouths and progresses to building, making and constructing in older children.
- **Symbolic play** involves play with symbolic systems such as language, music or visual media, such as playing with rhymes and puns.
- **Pretend play** involves pretending to do everyday activities or creating imaginary worlds. It can include play with dolls, teddies or objects, and longer pretend play games with adults and/or peers.
- **Games with rules** can mean rules that children invent on their own or with peers, or games with existing rules, such as hide-and-seek or board, card and electronic games.

These five types of play are not mutually exclusive – for example, pretend play can also involve play with objects.

Play can be an activity in itself and it can also be a characteristic of other activities. Learning in schools, for example, might be more or less playful. The Lego Foundation has identified five characteristics of playful experiences: they are experienced as joyful; actively engaging; helpful in finding meaning; iterative (involving experimentation) and socially interactive<sup>10</sup>.

For an activity to be defined as play, it must be freely chosen, personally directed and intrinsically motivated by the child themselves<sup>11</sup>. The child's experience is critical. The same activity might, or might not be play, depending on the context and motivations behind it and how it is understood and

experienced by the child. A child skipping and singing of their own volition, and finding joy in doing so, is playing. A child told to skip and sing by an adult and finding the experience difficult, is not.

Human beings of all ages can play, and play is part of childhood from birth to adolescence and beyond. Even before they have the motor skills to initiate their own play, very small babies will experience play through playful interactions with parents and caregivers. The nature of play will change as children develop and grow. Towards the end of childhood, in adolescence, peer relationships have a particular importance, and play will support recreation and social connection.

Children have a natural capacity to play and will generally find ways to play themselves if given the opportunity to do so<sup>12</sup>. Adults can support play by creating the context – providing opportunities, resources and freedoms – that enable children to engage in the forms of play that they chose and value. Adults can also encourage and facilitate children's play and expand their repertoire by scaffolding play or teaching new games. Adults can also be children's playmates and participants in play. To do this effectively, adults need to be attuned and responsive to a child's needs and interests, supporting the child to play and explore on their own terms. The UNCRC Committee's comment on the right to play describes adults' roles with respect to children's play:

*"Both play and recreation can take place when children are on their own, together with their peers or with supportive adults. Children's development can be supported by loving and caring adults as they relate to children through play. Participation with children in play provides adults with unique insights and understanding into the child's perspectives. It builds respect between generations, contributes to effective understanding and communication between children and adults and affords opportunities to provide guidance and stimulus. Children benefit from recreational activities involving adults, including voluntary participation in organized sports, games and other recreational activities. However, the benefits are diminished, particularly in the development of creativity, leadership and team spirit if control by adults is so pervasive that it undermines the child's own efforts to organize and conduct his or her play activities<sup>13</sup>."*

The extent to which play is permitted, supported and/or cultivated by adults, and adults' expectations and attitudes towards playing with children vary significantly between cultures<sup>14,15</sup>.

#### **Case study: Play for young people seeking asylum**

Skateisan is an award-winning non-profit organization which empowers children through combining skateboarding with creative, arts-based education. Skateisan runs skate schools for children and young people around the world, offering a number of programmes that *"combine life-skills with fun, freedom and creativity to help create leaders for a better world."*<sup>16</sup>

Skateisan was founded in Afghanistan and had several established programmes there which were closed when the government fell, and staff and students fled the country and became refugees. Now the programmes are running in refugee camps and resettlement locations in Belgium, Berlin and New York. This helps Afghan children who had fled their country and is also enabling staff members to start to build new lives in their adopted homes.

#### **There are cultural differences in play**

Play looks different in different places. Children from different cultures have their own games, songs, rhymes, toys and styles of play. Whilst play appears in all societies, there are variations in the prevalence and nature of different types of play in different communities and places<sup>17</sup>. For example, in some cultures, pretend play might resemble role play and be closer to real life, whereas in others there might be more imaginary and symbolic play.

More fundamentally, the role and place of children in society, the meaning of play and the value placed on it vary hugely between cultures. Different types of play are more prevalent in different cultures because of attitudes to childhood and play, gender values, religious beliefs, social structures, attitudes to risk, and different economic and social circumstances<sup>18</sup>. Families from different cultures will have different perspectives, for example, on the value of some of the issues discussed in this paper, such as children's choice and autonomy.

Concerns have been raised about the colonisation and romanticisation of children's play by adult advocates, and the minority-world<sup>b</sup> perspectives that have shaped much research into childhood and play<sup>19</sup>. In thinking about the play of children coming to the UK from different countries and cultures, we must be careful not to impose our own views and ideals about play, but rather be curious about how children and families define and value play. It is important to recognise that children seeking asylum and their families might have different conceptions of play, and may also value different aspects of childhood, wellbeing and development. Their views and values should help to shape how play is protected and promoted. Strategies to support play for children seeking asylum in Scotland therefore need to consider how to balance respect for cultural traditions from children's country of origin, with efforts to help children become comfortable playing with their Scottish peers in ways which will help them to make friends and settle into communities and educational settings.

Children's individual experiences can also influence what play looks like to them and how they value play. Children processing complex circumstances – such as those fleeing trauma – might play differently and need a different pace and nature of play to their peers. They might, for example, need more solitary play. The right to play exists alongside the right to rest, which should also be protected and promoted. Play is freely chosen, and we must also respect children's right to choose not to play.

## The value of play

*"To a child play is about having fun. To society, it's so much more"* Scottish Government<sup>20</sup>

*"While play is often considered non-essential... it is a fundamental and vital dimension of the pleasure of childhood, as well as an essential component of physical, social, cognitive, emotional and spiritual development."* United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child<sup>21</sup>

There are two reasons why we should protect and promote play.

- First, **play is a basic right, a fundamental part of childhood** which is part of children being well and thriving as citizens and members of communities.
- Second, **play is essential to children's development**, helping children to thrive during infancy, childhood and adolescence and to become happier, healthier adults who can make a positive contributions to society and the economy.

## All children have a right to play

Article 31 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) states that every child has the right to rest and leisure, to engage in play and recreational activities appropriate to the age of the child, and to participate freely in cultural life and the arts. Article 22 of the UNCRC states that this right (and all others in the convention) must be upheld for refugee children.

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<sup>b</sup> Minority-world refers to wealthier regions of the globe, which constitute a small percentage of the world population. These countries have also been known as "developed", "global north" or "western".

The Scottish Government has committed to implementing the UNCRC and incorporating it into Scots law. The Government has also made specific commitments to support children's play. The 2013 Play Strategy states *"We want 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, school and communities."*

The Inclusive Play review that followed the Play Strategy in Scotland was clear that *"provision for play, play environments and support to play opportunities in whatever form (infrastructure, training, advice, campaigns, service provision, policies) should locate non-discrimination, equality of opportunity and participation as standing principles in every action, programme or measure."*<sup>22</sup>

Article 12 of the UNCRC states children and young people have the right to be heard and influence decisions on matters that affect them. This is pertinent when making decisions about how to protect and promote play – the views and voices of babies, children and young people are critically important in understanding what play looks like to them, and how it can be supported and enabled by the adults in their lives.

### **Play is part of healthy and content childhood**

Childhood matters, and play is a central part of a healthy and contented childhood. Play enables children to enjoy time alone or with others. The United Nations describes play, leisure and rest as *"a form of participation in everyday life and ...of intrinsic value to the child, purely in terms of the enjoyment and pleasure they afford."*<sup>23</sup>

Play also supports wellbeing in childhood beyond the moment of playing<sup>24</sup> and creates capabilities that support health and wellbeing throughout the lifecourse<sup>25</sup>.

### **Play supports many aspects of development**

*"Play and recreation are essential to the health and well-being of children and promote the development of creativity, imagination, self-confidence, self-efficacy, as well as physical, social, cognitive and emotional strength and skills. They contribute to all aspects of learning..."* United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child<sup>26</sup>

A range of anthropological, sociological, psychological and educational research has established the value of play for learning and development<sup>27, 28</sup>. Some key themes from this research are summarised in the table on the next page. Different types of play have different developmental purposes, although they all support a range of skills and understanding<sup>29</sup>.

Children's playfulness is strongly related to a range of linguistic, regulation and social capacities. However, the relationship between play and these capacities is complex, with capacities supporting children's ability to play, as well as play influencing development in important ways<sup>30</sup>.

It should be acknowledged that much academic research on the impact of play on children's development comes from minority-world contexts, and some age ranges, types of play and aspects of child development have been researched more than others. It is also important to note that not all forms of play are positive. Play (and access to play) can sometimes reproduce and perpetuate power inequalities, be addictive, dangerous or harmful in other ways<sup>31</sup>.

## HOW PLAY SUPPORTS DEVELOPMENT

### Making sense of the world

Play allows children to **make sense of the world**, to practice skills and to rehearse or replay experiences from their lives. It can support **understanding, processing and meaning-making**. Play also facilitates the development of representational abilities that will enable children to think through ideas<sup>32</sup>.

### Social development

Playfulness supports children's **formation and maintenance of relationships with adults and friendships with peers**, and these relationships are important in supporting social and emotional development<sup>33,34,35,36</sup>.

Play can support the development of a range of **social competencies**, such as theory of mind, empathy skills, recognition of others' emotions, the ability to share, and the ability to negotiate conflict<sup>37,38,39</sup>.

In pretend play, children have to navigate rules and expectations created in the game and cooperate with others. Games with rules can help children to understand rules, and to develop a range of social skills related to sharing, turn taking and understanding other's perspective<sup>40</sup>.

### Emotional Development

Play can support **children's wellbeing** by providing a means of relaxing and decreasing stress and anxiety. Play also supports the **development of emotional regulation**, which is important for development and mental health<sup>41,42</sup>.

Playing can also involve experiencing and overcoming emotions such as fear, anger and surprise in non-stressful situations. It is thought that this helps children to develop the capacity to respond flexibly and to deal with emotions, contributing to healthy stress response systems<sup>43,44</sup>.

### Language development

Play can **support language development** because it involves both speech with playmates and private speech as children represent the world in different ways, and create and navigate rules and conventions.

Children can also play with language, such as making up words, puns or rhymes, which supports phonological awareness and literacy skills<sup>45</sup>

### Executive Function

In play, children can set and work towards goals, **developing a range of cognitive skills and strategies** such as attention and focus, self-control, perseverance, problem-solving and reflection<sup>46,47</sup>. Object play, such as construction, can involve problem-solving and is associated with the development of perseverance and a positive attitude towards challenge<sup>48</sup>.

### Creativity

Play, particularly imaginative pretend play, is a good reflection of **children's creativity<sup>49</sup> and predicts later capacities linked to creativity**, such as divergent thinking<sup>50,51</sup>. Children practice their creativity skills within play. For example, pretend play enables them to imagine new worlds; create scenarios and characters and decide how a story plays out.

### Motor skills and physical health

Play supports a range of **physical skills**. Active play – such as running, playing in playgrounds, climbing and jumping is an important way for young children to be **physically active and contributes to their physical health<sup>52,53</sup>**. Active also play supports the development of coordination, strength and endurance<sup>54</sup>.

Fine-motor play helps children to deliver fine-motor skills, concentration and perseverance<sup>55</sup>.



Play can also support the development of relationships between babies, children and young people and their parents or caregivers, which are so vital for many aspects of child development. Playing with children also helps adult caregivers to experience joy, reduce stress, to see the world from their child's perspective, to observe and respond to their children, and to appreciate their child's sense of humour and individuality<sup>56</sup>.

### **Play is particularly important for children seeking asylum**

Alongside the universal benefits of play. Play can have specific benefits for children seeking asylum because it helps them to overcome challenges associated with experiencing the trauma which led to them seeking refuge; those associated with being in a new country as an asylum seeker, and those associated with being in poor and transient accommodation.

### **Play can help to restore some normality into children's lives**

Play can be a constant in the rapidly changing environments that children seeking asylum experience, offering them a sense of autonomy and control in otherwise inconsistent or alarming circumstances. If play has been disrupted, children can benefit from it being reestablished in order to create a sense of normality, security, of purpose and meaning<sup>57</sup>.

### **Play helps children to overcome trauma**

*"When children are scared, when they do not understand what is happening to them, when they are unhappy and withdrawn, play can hold restorative powers. It is therefore essential that play be preserved, protected and supported, especially in stressful environments."<sup>58</sup>*

Bernard Von Leer Foundation

Children in the asylum system are likely to have experienced many forms of stress and trauma. A study in America estimated that between 50 and 90% of refugee children have PTSD symptoms<sup>59</sup>. Play can help to repair the damage of stress and trauma on children's health and wellbeing, reducing the risk of longer-term mental health problems. Conversely, play deprivation is likely to further exacerbate the harms done to children and will impair their recovery from traumatic experiences.

Play can help children to cope with and make sense of stressful events, to process their experiences and cope with adversity. This can happen through children's own free-play, and can also be facilitated and supported by adults in a therapeutic relationship.

Psychoanalytic theorists have described how play is a means for children to act out and work through unpleasant experiences and to release emotional tensions in a safe, progressive and non-damaging way<sup>60</sup>. Children sometimes spontaneously engage in socio-dramatic pretend play relating to traumatic experiences<sup>61</sup> and their play might replicate but modify these stressful events, for example to give them more power in a situation or make a negative event less stressful<sup>62</sup>. This can enable the child to feel more in control, more integrated and more confident in their ability to understand their experiences. Young children who have experienced separation from wider family and support networks might represent events or objects within the family or community left behind in their play<sup>63</sup>.

Whilst the opportunity for free-play is valuable, children who have experienced trauma can also benefit from play that is facilitated by adults, particularly those who are warm, sensitive and attuned to children's needs. Regular, well-facilitated groups that provide children with safe spaces and materials to play can provide helpful new routines and a 'safe space' in which to establish relationships with sympathetic and supportive adults all help children to recover from trauma and distress<sup>64,65</sup>.

Facilitated play opportunities should be tailored to children's developmental needs. Babies and young children will require play spaces in which their parents and caregivers also feel safe, supported and comfortable to play with them.

#### **Case Study: The Magpie Project – Therapeutic play for parents, babies and young children.**

The Magpie Project is a charity that supports mums and preschool children living in temporary or insecure accommodation in London.

A multi-disciplinary team of skilled professionals offer a range of play, art and music activities for families. Families accessing the service are struggling to meet basic needs, and so can find it hard to create opportunities to play. There might also be psychological barriers to play, for example, play can be messy which is hard for those who are trying to keep control in small accommodation, and in times of uncertainty.

Magpie provides space and support for mothers and children to play. Trained early years specialists offer stay-and-play activities for children and families, which understands children's needs and supports their development, and helps mums to relax and play with their children. Activities involve indoor and outdoor play, including messy play and crafts.

The charity also supports families to meet essential needs by providing access to baby-, clothes- and food-banks and connecting them with other local services such as housing and health visiting.

#### **Case Study: Play for Progress – therapeutic play and recreation for young people**

Play for Progress is a Croydon-based charity that supports unaccompanied young people ages 15-25 seeking asylum through trauma-informed creative engagement in the arts. The charity taps into the healing power of music, the arts and play and creative to build healthy and resilient relationships that support and amplify the voices of unaccompanied young people seeking asylum.

The charity offers two strands of work.

Creative Programmes are group drop-in settings open to any young person seeking asylum. Most activities take place after school during term time they include weekly music and wellbeing classes, homework club, half term projects, cultural trips, performances and exhibitions.

Once a young person has engaged in a group setting and begun to form trusted relationships, they can access the Support Services which include bespoke 1-1 sessions with specialists in any of our five departments: Education, Therapy, Casework, Music and Art.

Most young people who use the service have endured complex, often traumatic, journeys to the UK. Complex Post Traumatic Stress Disorder, anxiety, chronic stress, sleep disorders, daily mental health concerns, language barriers, lack of access or experience of education are typical challenges facing these young people.

The charity's approach is trauma-informed. All staff are regularly trained and updated with new trauma science and work in a highly creative and collaborative way to be highly responsive to young people's needs. All the services are as drop-ins, with no enrolment requirements, no cut-off ages, and no limit to the number of sessions a young person is able to access.

### **Play can have a therapeutic role**

For some children, well-facilitated play and routine will not be sufficient, and culturally sensitive mental health interventions will be needed to help them to recover from the trauma they have experienced.

Research suggests that children seeking asylum can be unlikely to access mental health support; either due to families' cultural norms and expectations, the wider stresses faced by parents, or a lack of access to services. If children's PTSD symptoms are not identified and treated early, they can have a range of impacts on their cognitive and academic performance and relationships<sup>66</sup>.

Play Therapy can be a helpful form of therapy for children in the asylum system because it treats trauma through helping children to communicate and express inner conflicts and feelings in non-verbal ways, through play. A randomised controlled trial showed that child-centred play therapy was effective in reducing trauma symptoms amongst traumatised refugee children aged 6 to 13 in America<sup>67</sup>. Play Therapists must be culturally sensitive if they are going to use Play Therapy effectively with children seeking asylum, and many therapists will be skilled in addressing cultural considerations, and allowing for cultural adaptations<sup>68</sup>.

#### **Case study: Sandplay – an example of play therapy**

Sandplay therapy is a non-verbal, expressive form of Play Therapy. Supported by a play therapist, a child can use a sand box, toy figures and other objects to represent their thoughts, struggles and concerns. Sandplay can help children to express their emotions and reduce the psychological distress that might result from discussing traumatic events or experiences.

Sandplay can be used to help children to represent and make sense of difficult events and to discuss and work through emotions in a way that is not, itself, emotionally charged. Sandplay can also inform all the adults in a child's life, including parents, educators and counsellors – about the child's beliefs and struggles. It offers a developmentally appropriate outlet through which the child can better express their trauma and their needs.

### **Play can support integration and learning about culture and language**

Play can cross cultural and linguistic divides and provide a common ground for children despite different backgrounds, experiences and languages. It can therefore help children migrating into the UK to integrate into their new communities. Playing with English-speaking peers can support the development of migrant children's English language skills in a supportive context and also help them to learn social norms, which supports further integration<sup>69</sup>.

### **Play helps children to participate meaningfully in their new community**

Play enables children to socialise and make friends, and to deploy, practice and learn key social skills, even in the absence of shared language<sup>70,71</sup>. Play is one way in which children communicate their knowledge, interests and skills. It allows them to participate meaningfully in classroom or community, and to show their strengths and what they bring as individuals. In a new and unfamiliar environment, play can help children to be themselves, to exercise choice, and to relax. It can foster sense of belonging, support the development of positive connections, and help to increase confidence<sup>72</sup>.

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<sup>69</sup> In a paper about culturally responsive Play Therapy, Killian et al write that "Providing children with toys that match their cultural identity as well as toys from the host culture could provide these children with the opportunity to use both sets of toys in a symbolic way to work through competing cultural expectations and help them with the acculturation processes."

## Play provides links to culture and communities left behind

Play also provides a means through which children can maintain a connection to the family, community and culture that they may have left behind. Children reproduce and transmit culture through their own imaginative play, and traditional songs, dance and games.

### Case Study: Brac Humanitarian Play Lab

BRAC, one of the largest non-governmental organizations in the world, operates an initiative called Humanitarian Play Labs for children in a number of countries around the world. Some of these Play Labs work with children aged 0-6 in the Rohingya refugee camps in Bangladesh. The intervention combines play-based learning with psychosocial support to promote positive developmental outcomes for children in crisis settings. The play lab includes a centre-based model for children ages 2-6, a home-based model for children ages 2-4, and a home-based group model for children ages 0-2 and their mothers.

The play lab is designed by the BRAC team together with refugee women, children and young people, using a community-based participatory approach that promotes a sense of pride and belonging among those living in a displaced community. The model strongly emphasizes the importance indigenous cultural practices play in healing and learning. Young women from the community are hired and trained as Play Leaders. Parents and community members collaborate with the Play Leaders to build toys and decorations using low-cost, recycled materials. The design incorporates memories of home of the Rohingya children, for example, including with motifs and paintings significant to Rohingya culture. BRAC's curriculum team has been collecting and documenting elements of the Rohingya culture since the labs began in 2017, including kabbiyas (folk rhymes), kissas (stories), art motifs, and various physical activities, around which they design the curriculum.

Many of the Rohingya children and their families suffer from trauma, stress and anxiety. Mental health and psychosocial wellbeing are therefore critical components of the Play Lab model which has a four-tier referral pathway to connect families to psychosocial support and counselling.

More than 40,000 Rohingya children have played and learned at the 250 BRAC play labs since 2017.

## Barriers to play

Play emerges when children's basic needs are met<sup>73</sup>. When they are not met, children are less likely to be able to play and to secure the benefits afforded by play. The Nurturing Care Framework<sup>74</sup> sets out the basic principles of what children need to survive and thrive, and although written for early childhood much of it applies to older children, too. There are five components of nurturing care that children need: good health; adequate nutrition; responsive caregiving; safety and security, and opportunities for learning. These five components of nurturing care are helpful to think about as the conditions that children need for beneficial play to emerge.

It is widely recognised that experiences prior to, during migration and post migration can adversely impact the physical and emotional health and wellbeing of children seeking asylum<sup>75,76</sup>. Children may arrive in the UK in poor health due to the difficult situations they have experienced, and then experience a further lack of healthy food and cooking facilities in hotels. Malnutrition is particularly prevalent amongst children seeking asylum and can mean that children do not have the energy to play as much as they would like to<sup>77</sup>.

Once children's basic needs are met, other barriers might reduce their resources, opportunities and freedom to play. These could include the lack of space or toys, lack of permission or time or psychological barriers which make it harder for children to feel safe, confident and comfortable to play. Babies' and young children's play can also be inhibited if their parents and caregivers are not able to play with them.

### Case Study: Creating the conditions for play

Save the Children's STOP framework<sup>78</sup> describes the key principles of good early years practice to support children affected by conflict, in emergency situations, and who have sought refuge.

**S Space and structure** are vital to any early years programme. For a child affected by an emergency, getting to know the predictable routine of the early years setting can serve as an antidote to the chaos they may have experienced. For families living in temporary housing, conditions may be cramped, and children also benefit from the physical space of an alternative open, safe, and better-suited-for-play.

**T Trust, time and talking** Trust is often the primary casualty of emergencies. Time is needed to re-establish trusting relationships with key caregiver(s) through talking, play and creative activities. By creating a place of safety, it is possible to explore a child's feelings and to begin to explain and give meaning to events.

**O Opportunities to play** are some of the defining features of childhood. These can range from organised group activities such as games, dancing and singing, to explorative play with a wide range of materials.

**P Partnership with parents** is vital. Parents will themselves need support and opportunities to talk, or just to sit and feel safe. It is vital to welcome carers and let them participate as little or as much as they choose. ECD provides an opportunity to support carers' ability to care.

## Play is resilient

Children can play anywhere and everywhere and will play even when they do not have designated times and spaces for playing or encouragement from adults, as long as they have some resources, opportunities and freedom to play<sup>79</sup>. Children – including refugee children who have endured immense trauma, and those whose resources and freedoms are limited – seek opportunities to play and will find new and different ways to play in the face of barriers and challenges<sup>80,81</sup>.

Barriers to play, therefore, rarely prevent children from playing altogether. They are more likely to constrain children's ability to play in particular ways – from ways they want to, or ways that develop particular experiences and capabilities. We must also be cautious to distinguish adult, and/or minority-world views about the ways in which we think children *should* be playing, which might be different from the ways that children are playing, and the ways in which children themselves want to play.

## Many children in the UK face some barriers to play

Many children across the UK report barriers that prevent them from playing as much as they would like to. A consultation by the Children's commissioner in Wales, for example, found that despite living in a range of different circumstances and having different needs, children reported a number of common barriers to play including time, money, transport, confidence, lack of provision, not enough information about what is going on, and a lack of permission from families (largely due to concerns about safety)<sup>82</sup>.

Across the UK, including in Scotland today, children are less likely to play outdoors because of fear of traffic, concerns about personal safety, erosion of community networks or the weather<sup>83,84,85</sup>.

Some advocates have described both "spatial injustice" and "social injustice" as inhibiting children's play abilities. Children do not have fair and equitable access to spaces where they can play and the resources that enable play either due to the absence of these spaces, their distribution, or the rules or conventions that govern their use.

Alongside these wider challenges, children seeking asylum experience a constellation of additional challenges that might make it harder for them to play resulting from having experienced trauma and displacement, being in hotel accommodation, moving regularly and having limited access to educational settings. **Play deprivation is likely to further exacerbate the harms caused to children by their experiences of migration and seeking asylum, and will impair their recovery from traumatic experiences.**

### Stress can impair children's ability to play

Children's own stress and that of their caregivers can impact how, and how much, they play. This is particularly pertinent to children seeking asylum whose past experiences, and current situation is likely to be stressful.

The evidence suggests that experiencing psychological trauma<sup>d</sup>, especially in the absence of supportive relationships, can inhibit children's motivation and ability to play in significant ways, which indicate that they need therapeutic support<sup>86</sup>.

Even if children have not experienced significant trauma and toxic stress<sup>e</sup>, they may be less comfortable to play if they currently lack a sense of safety, comfort and belonging – as many may experience within hotel accommodation and new communities.

Parental stress can make it harder for parents to provide the sensitive, responsive, nurturing care that children need to thrive, and can inhibit the development of positive, playful parent-child relationships.

*"Staying in the hotel has affected my mom badly, she is always sad, she is always crying and I am so worried, mum is not the same she is always crying and never happy and this makes me feel down and sad."* Quote from an asylum-seeking child housed in a hotel in Glasgow from Migrants Organising for Rights and Empowerment (MORE) submission to the Children's Commissioner.

Seeking asylum and experiencing the UK asylum system, with worries about future security, money, food and housing is incredibly stressful for adults. Many studies show a relationship between living in temporary accommodation and/or moving frequently and poor parental mental health, for example research with families living in temporary accommodation in London found that *"Poor parental mental health was also a dominant theme discussed by professionals, which was perceived to be caused by a plethora of interacting factors, including homelessness status or transientness, poor quality temporary*

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<sup>d</sup> Children can experience psychological trauma when their environments are repeatedly harmful or threatening to them or to their parent or caregiver. Many of the experiences involved in leaving a country and seeking asylum may be traumatic. A nurturing relationship can make a child more resilient to negative events, and without a nurturing relationship to support them, young children experience negative events as more traumatic.

<sup>e</sup> Toxic stress refers to prolonged activation of the body's stress response systems due to chronic or traumatic experiences in the absence of caring, stable relationships with adults. When this form of stress occurs during the childhood, it can have lasting negative impacts on brain architecture and other developing organ systems.

*accommodation, no social network and many competing priorities, which then affected the child(ren)'s health and wellbeing"<sup>87</sup>.*

Parental stress will have a particular impact on very young children, who are more dependent on early parent interactions, and on those older children who are yet to develop other relationships with peers and other trusting adults. In considering how to support play, we must therefore not only consider children's needs but also the needs of their parents and caregivers who facilitate and enable their play.

#### **Case study: Psychotherapy-informed play groups in hostels.**

Families living in homeless hostels often find it difficult for them to engage in parenting or psychological services, because of issues such as language difficulties, cultural issues, and the fear of stigmatization and child protection proceedings. Therefore, a team from Anna Freud Centre with expertise in parent–infant psychotherapy collaborated health visiting services to deliver a specially designed baby clinic and play group for families in a homeless hostel in London<sup>88</sup>.

The baby clinic was facilitated by a multi-disciplinary team including a specialist health visitor, parent–infant psychotherapist, and other health practitioners. The clinic was held in a large communal room of the hostel. Like conventional baby clinics, the health visitor provided a full range of medical care including weighing, immunizations, discussion of concerns, and practical advice. The clinic was set out to be conducive to face-to-face interactions with babies, with low seating around mats on the floor. Parents and babies were welcomed by a member of the team and encouraged to sit and play by the mats. Discussions with the health visitor and other team members took place wherever the family was situated to maintain minimal disruption to the parent, infant, and group.

The parent–infant psychotherapist and clinic team encouraged parents to stay at the clinic to play with their babies and to connect with other families. Through this informal setting, the multidisciplinary team could also observe parents and babies in action to better understand their needs and to offer appropriate help.

An evaluation of the group found that of mental and motor development of infants in the intervention hostel were significantly improved over time in relation to infants in the comparison hostels.

### **Instability can impact play**

Children seeking asylum have already experienced ruptures in important peer and community relationships and educational experiences as a result of leaving their homes, and sometimes passing through a number of places on their way to the UK. The instability that they can then experience because of the asylum system, including the use of temporary accommodation, can then lead to further disruptions in relationships and access to services, which undermine children's ability to play.

Children in the asylum system can face delays and challenges in accessing early education or schools and can be forced to change settings<sup>89, 90</sup>. This impacts play because schools and early years settings provide opportunities for children to play freely with peers and to engage in play under the guidance of skilled educators. In order to be comfortable to play, children need not only access to peer groups and educational settings, but the time and stability to feel safe and to build trusting relationships in these spaces, something that also might be harder for children who have experienced stress and trauma.

## Children in hotels lack indoor and outdoor spaces to play

For children in the UK, the reduction of playing in public and outdoor spaces means that playing at home – in bedrooms and gardens – is increasingly significant<sup>91</sup>. Children seeking asylum and living in hotels often do not have these spaces where they are able to play. Rooms are small and cramped with no space; communal areas lack clean, safe places to play, and there is no dedicated space or play equipment for children. A report into the experiences of families seeking asylum and housed in a hotel in Glasgow, and inspections of similar settings raise issues about the lack of space in rooms, the lack of communal space and opportunities for children and families to socialise and dirty carpets that make it harder for young children to play on the floor<sup>92,93</sup>. These constraints on play lead to children being bored, anxious and distressed, and increase stress on parents.

*"There were no activities for children... we were stuck in one place and was unable to play it was horrible..."*

*"I wake up and I can't play or do anything, I'm so bored."*

*"There are no activities for children in the hotel."*

Quotes from asylum-seeking children housed in a hotel in Glasgow from Migrants Organising for Rights and Empowerment (MORE) submission to the Children's Commissioner.

*"A room to the rear of the property was billed as a 'family room' with a printed notice taped to the wall inviting parents to play here and socialise. However, the door to the room was locked...Inside, the room was crowded with furniture..."*

*"The rooms contained few facilities for storage. Where residents had recently moved in, suitcases of clothes took up all of the available floor space, blocking access around the bed. Where residents had lived in their room for several months belongings were piled in corners, between beds and walls, and in precarious stacks above the hanging rail. Everywhere was cramped with little room to move around."*

Description of a guesthouse in Glasgow in a report for the Children's Commissioner<sup>94</sup>

Toys and resources are not essential for play, but they do support it, especially when they are open, flexible, and provide children with opportunities for creativity, for social interaction and for authorship and for deep engagement<sup>95</sup>. Children in hotels who lack toys, games and other materials therefore have less autonomy and opportunity to play and may find that certain types of play are not possible for them.

Hotel accommodation often also lacks outdoor space, making it harder for children to engage in sport, outdoor and active play, and play that engages with nature. This can be further exacerbated by children not having suitable warm and waterproof shoes and coats. Children in hotels can therefore miss out on the fun and freedom of outdoor play and the specific developmental benefits it brings<sup>96</sup>.

Analysis of changes in how children in the UK play, has found that there is less outdoor and free-play now than in the past, but there has been a growth in out-of-school organised activities<sup>97</sup> and many new opportunities for digital play. These may not be types of play children seeking asylum are used to and may not be accessible to them due to financial and logistical issues such as meeting costs of out-of-school activities, and lacking the devices, connectivity and data for online play.



### Case study: The Play Sufficiency Duty in Wales

The Welsh Government has a Play policy, recognising that *"Play is so crucially important to all children in the development of their physical, social, mental, emotional and creative skills that society should seek every opportunity to support it and create an environment that fosters it. Decision making at all levels of government should include a consideration of the impact of those decisions on children's opportunities to play."*

The Children and Families (Wales) Measure 2010 placed a duty on local authorities to assess their play provision from 2012, and secure sufficient play opportunities from 2014. There is statutory guidance for local authorities which describes what these duties entail. Local authorities are encouraged to *"work strenuously within their own structures, with partner organisations with children and their families and communities to ensure that children have access to play opportunities."*

The guidance is clear that any children should have opportunities to play of a quality that meets the enjoyment, social and developmental needs of that children. The guidance specifically requires local authorities to consider children of all ages; to consider cultural factors including ethnicity, children for whom English or Welsh is not their first language, and refugee and asylum-seeking children. It states that play opportunities should be *"appropriate to the requirements of children from diverse communities and cultures"<sup>98</sup>.*

### Cultural challenges

As noted above, play can cross language and cultural barriers and can support integration. However cultural and language differences bring challenges too and may make it harder for children seeking asylum to play with their Scottish peers and children who have come from other countries.

If their English language skills are limited, children will not be as competent in the language used in play. They may also not know the rules of games, the rhymes or songs used, or how to use particular toys. Play can model children's worlds, and thus peer play in Scotland may replicate types of family, life and work that are not reflective of these children's worlds. The stories told and acted out may not be familiar to them. Therefore, children seeking asylum may lack opportunities to play in ways that are traditional, meaningful and comfortable for them.

*"When children are healthy and happy, they might be willing to explore and discover new toys that do not really belong to their culture but that they are curious to integrate in their play. However, when the environment becomes highly stressful, this capacity might be seriously impaired, and the play activity itself might be compromised if children cannot relate to more familiar objects. A plastic medieval castle, for instance, does not make much sense in African cultures..."*

Sophie Naudeau from Tufts University writing on restorative play in refugee situations<sup>99</sup>

Parents' and children's concerns about how they are perceived might also lead to them limiting their play opportunities, especially in environments that feel hostile or where they feel they are being judged. Researchers in Australia described how mothers seeking asylum limited their children's engagement in a play space: *"Mothers grasped their children more firmly by the hand, tucked them away behind their skirts, and is desperate whispers cautioned their children not to dare to touch anything!... their levels of anxiety were patently obvious. What if their child broke a toy? What if their children inadvertently behaved in a way that would be considered inappropriate in this foreign culture?... Would this jeopardise the family's chances of being granted refugee status?..."<sup>100</sup>*

There will be a diversity of attitudes and approaches to play amongst families seeking asylum. Some families will be from cultures that are more sceptical about the value and role of play<sup>101</sup>. Therefore some children will also experience tensions between how their families support or limit their ability to play, the views of professionals and wider communities in Scotland. Families seeking temporary asylum and wanting to return home may be keener to maintain cultural norms and have different views towards play as compared to those who are seeking to stay longer.

## FINAL RECOMMENDATIONS

Play is a universal right, a core part of childhood, and critical to child development. It is therefore crucial that we take action to protect and promote play, particularly for our most vulnerable children. Depriving children seeking asylum of play, on top of the trauma they have already experienced, will further exacerbate problems in their mental and physical health, wellbeing and development.

Policy makers and practitioners can protect and promote children's right to play by securing the conditions that enable children to play, and by actively supporting play. For children in the asylum system this means they must:

### **Ensure children's basic needs are met**

1. Ensure that families' wellbeing and basic rights are supported. This includes ensuring that parents and children have access to suitable, culturally sensitive health services (including mental health support to overcome trauma); nutritious and suitable food and safe and comfortable places to live.
2. Ensure children and their families can live in safe, suitable and secure housing. This includes reducing the use of hotel accommodation for families with children, and ensuring that all accommodation where babies, children and young people live is safe and appropriate for their needs.
3. Ensure that children are quickly able to access places in education (or early education), where staff are trained to understand and support their needs, and where there are ample opportunities for free and guided play.

### **Create the conditions to play**

4. Ensure that families' private accommodation/rooms have sufficient, appropriate and safe, space for the babies, children or young people in the family to play. Requirements vary according to age: babies and young children need safe, clean floor space, whereas young people will benefit from some private space where they can play and relax independently.
5. Shape the wider environment, culture and routine in communal accommodation so that children's lives are more normalised, and they feel comfortable, welcome and able to relax.
6. Ensure that, if placed in multiple-occupancy accommodation, families (including parents and babies, children and young people) are all able to access safe and suitable communal place spaces in the buildings where they live, where they feel comfortable to play alone or with peers.
7. Ensure that children of all ages are able and supported to access community play spaces, such as playgrounds, sports pitches and other safe outdoor spaces where they can engage in active play and positively interact with nature.

8. Ensure that children of all ages have some way to access toys and resources for play in ways that are appropriate and joyful for them. Find ways to acquire or create toys that are culturally sensitive and reflect what children are used to.
9. In line with the Scottish Government's wider commitments to children's voices being heard: Ensure that insights from children are sought and their – and their families' - voices are heard so that their play needs can be understood and any barriers to play can be identified and addressed. Work in partnership with children and families to shape play resources and spaces to meet children's needs and be culturally sensitive.

### Actively support play

10. Work in partnership with organisations that support and facilitate play for babies, children and young people to ensure that children in the asylum system can access age-appropriate, culturally sensitive, and trauma-informed activities and programmes that support and facilitate play, arts, story-telling and music. Ensure these are led by adults who understand the benefits of play; trauma-informed in their practice and have the skills to develop trusting relationships and to facilitate culturally and age-appropriate play.

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