



A Report on the

# State of Play in WA

COMPILED BY THE PLAY MATTERS COLLECTIVE, FEBRUARY 2025  
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# Preamble

Across Western Australia there is a groundswell of concern building over the demise of play in children's lives. It clearly resonates with people's core sensibilities that play is central to children and youth healthy development. In the field of education, international and national research comprehensively and conclusively shows that play has far-reaching benefits, including inspiring creativity, fostering resilience and self-regulation, supporting learning and positive life outcomes, and nurturing personal identity and well-being.

To this end, the Play Matters Collective (PMC), an affiliation of organisations and individuals dedicated to ensuring that young people's right to play is supported across all levels of the Western Australian (WA) community, is consulting with the Commissioner for Children and Young People, the WA government and key stakeholder community organisations to drive an agenda that leverages support for a WA Play Strategy.

Serving as a networking body and reference group for the play sector, the PMC calls on the government to lead a WA Play Strategy that delivers and safeguards sufficiency to rich play opportunities and well-resourced environments. Furthermore, the PMC recognises that Play is not just for children; adults also need to make space for play in their lives. Whether through our work or the way we engage with the world, play is a core part of our being—it underpins our shared humanity.

2024 Play Matters Collective Play Summit Committee members:  
Amy Cox, Daniel Burton, Jayne Kaiko, Jonathan Neen, Marcelle Saratsis,  
Marie Martin, Sandra Hesterman, Seb Della Maddalena



# Moving forward: Standing up for the Right to Play

**A call to action.** As we continue our work in our respective organisations, schools, early learning centres, youth engagement spaces, and local communities, we must remain steadfast in advocating for play at every level—whether through policy development, curriculum design, community programs, media and public awareness. We call on the WA government to take the lead in ensuring that play remains a priority in the lives of all children and young people.

As outlined in Article 31 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, play is a right - and an innate need that must be satisfied, and it is up to us to ensure that its provision is realised - particularly for those who may otherwise experience challenges, barriers or be denied sufficient opportunities.

**Community engagement.** In 2024, with the support of generous sponsors, the PMC hosted a Play Summit framed with the premise that: Play Matters to everyone - from the youngest child to the oldest adult. The Summit discussed how we play, why we play and why we must protect these vital experiences founded on academic research, sharing program showcases, and listening to children and youth personal stories on play matters. There was a resounding conclusion - Play is fundamental.

The following Report on the State of Play in WA offers insights into the commitment and impact of the Play Matters Collective, made possible through the patronage of the Commissioner for Children and Young People, Jacqueline McGowan-Jones, The Honourable Sabine Winton MLA Minister for Early Childhood Education and key community stakeholders.

# Play Summit Overview

The following report is compiled from the three sessions of the Play Matters Collective Play Summit, held at the Town of Cambridge Boulevard Centre 14th September 2024. The 250 Summit attendees included children, youth, parents/carers, educators and members of the wider community. The Summit organisation was led by Marcelle Saratsis (PMC Committee Member).

## Session 1: Discovering Children's Identity

After introductions by Dr Sandra Hesterman, Director Early Childhood Education at Murdoch University and Chair of the Play Matters Collective and an Acknowledgement of Country by the Commissioner for Children and Young People, Jacqueline McGowan-Jones, the Minister for Early Childhood Education, Sabine Winton reflected on her own teaching experiences with a focus on the importance of child-centred playful learning. The session proceeded to introduce a panel of eight informed and articulate children and young people who gave firsthand accounts on their experience of play in WA. This interactive informative conversation was followed by an audience Q & A session both skillfully facilitated by PMC committee members Jayne Kaiko and Daniel Burton.



Introduction by Dr Sandra Hesterman, Director Early Childhood Education, Murdoch University



Welcome by Jacqueline McGowan-Jones, Commissioner for Children and Young People



Address by Sabine Winton, Minister for Early Childhood Education; Child Protection; Prevention of Family and Domestic Violence; Community Services



Attendance at the initial plenary session at The Boulevard Conference Centre



Panel of Play Experts L-R: Alice, Zoya, Hudson, Molly, Arlo, Rahni, Cooper and Magicia

## Session 2: World Café "Faces of Play"

The second session provided attendees with an opportunity to explore and discuss the different faces of play in WA by means of a World Café format. The session was overseen by Dr Marie Martin, Director of Facilitating Conversations and a PMC committee member. Thought-provoking group conversations were facilitated by nine community play advocates: The PMC committee is very appreciative of the generosity of the nine facilitators who shared their expertise in different play genres.



80 people participated in the World Café



Facilitated by Dr Marie Martin,  
*Facilitating Conversations*



Daniel Burton:  
Opportunities for risk IN  
play versus risky play



Cath Fitzhardinge: Play is  
universal... but is play  
universally accessible?



Mandi Winnett:  
Nature Play in  
Schools



Jayne Kaiko: Three and  
Four year old Children's  
Perspective on Play



Jonathan Neen:  
Mapping Play  
Sufficiency



Jasmine Reed: Cultural  
Exploration through Play



Denise Ansingh: Loose parts  
play as a springboard for  
exploring identity through  
storytelling



Kiah Hammersly-Rule:  
Schema Play



Kristy Howson: PLAY as a  
necessary and expected part  
of early childhood education  
all the way through to (and  
beyond) Year 2



### Session 3: Networking

The final session of the Summit began with participants eager to network, review the collective records of conversations from the World Café, and talk about their experiences of play in WA.

We were honoured to welcome Marketa Reeves, Senior Project Manager at UWA's School of Population and Global Health, Population and Health. Marketa provided a comprehensive overview of the Australian Child and Youth Wellbeing Atlas, a free online resource that maps data on children and young people aged 0 to 24 across Australia, enabling visualisation, analysis, and monitoring of their health and wellbeing via this valuable metrics tool.

Final words were delivered by Daniel Burton, Director of Educated by Nature and Chair of the Play Matters Collective Dr Sandra Hesterman.



40 people attended the networking session



Guest speaker: Marketa Reeves, UWA "An Overview of the Australian Child and Youth Wellbeing Atlas"

# Summit Findings on the State of Play in WA

## Play Experiences

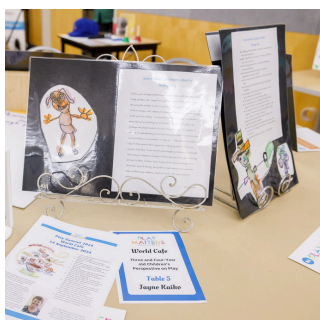
Children and adults reflected that the best experiences of play were times when people were able to play in their own space and own time, roaming freely but close to family, interacting with animals and 'on country'.

Adults remembered a time when **swings, monkey bars and steep slides** dominated playgrounds. **Schools were accessible after hours** and children played on verandas, ovals and playgrounds. The **Gould League**, run by inspired teachers, prompted study of nature. **Bushland** offered possibilities for rock scrambling, climbing trees, building cubbies, digging tunnels, and riding bikes. **Roads** provided flat ground for bike riding, roller skating and playing cricket. Children gathered at **neighbours' houses** after school. Basketball hoops, trampolines, swimming pools, cubby houses and forts were accessible in **back or front yards**. Families **camped**, picking fruit. Dancing and karaoke were enjoyed at **gatherings of families and friends**. Many adults wish for the conditions for the play they had as children to return, but most accept that times have changed.

## Play Perspectives

Defining play is challenging. As Dr. Peter Gray, Boston College, Boston, MA, USA has written in Scholarpedia, "play is not neatly defined in terms of any single characteristic; instead, it involves a constellation of characteristics, which have to do with the motives or mental framework underlying the observed behaviour."

Children, young people and adults participating in the Play Summit shared the following perspectives of play:



- **Play is something you enjoy and are not told to do.**
- **Play is how you grow**, experience and try new things.
- In play, **we use our imagination**, more than following rules.
- Play is when you come up with an idea and you can **make the idea come to life**
- **Play is a right** and needs to be protected. We - children, young people and adults - should all have the time to play.
- Play **looks different** for different people.
- **Play helps us make sense of the world**, connect with family and place and provides a safe escape/outlet from day-to-day life.
- **Play helps us to BE** in a world telling us to DO.
- Without play I am nothing...

Play develops **children's identity**. Children learn who they are in relation to others, the activities they attempt, their ability to master challenges. Play helps us to develop well rounded individuals who can be self-sufficient but also part of a team. It allows us to discover and learn in our own ways. Adults and teens need to play too. Identity evolves and play supports this evolution.

**Play requires skills** and children build these skills as they play. In play, children learn to regulate their emotions as they wait, negotiate rules and try to understand other people's perspectives. For advocates, play is **valued** as children's work. Play is a pedagogy that needs to be supported by educators, teachers, administrators, local councillors and bureaucrats.

Play is **messy, noisy and chaotic** and adults (and children) need to sit with these discomforts. However, **play is also in the stillness**. Listen to the children. They want to be heard.

Play is children's (and adults'!) favourite way to learn. **Play is not frivolous**. It is critical to learning. Children would like learning to be more playful and recognise that sometimes their learning is enhanced through play. Children also warn that using play strategies for learning could render the play much less fun.

Over the last few years adults have advocated for '**risky play**' in response to the perceived need for children to develop resilience.

Adults have created experiences with pre-determined outcomes, for example, providing monkey bars in playgrounds. **Risk IN play is child-led**, involving alternative uses of tools, equipment, environments and experiences, for example, climbing on top of monkey bars or hanging upside down from them. The term 'risk' makes the play seem more dangerous than it really is; the language we use can interrupt experiences. We need to assess the benefits and risks to determine the real risk.

Some play has been determined to be inappropriate, such as **play with guns and sticks, rough and tumble play**. What are the beliefs that sit behind these stances?



Research into **antifragility** demonstrates that it is riskier to NOT allow children to experience risk. Taking risks helps with proprioception, body development and the development of senses of agency and power. "In the end, after a fall, you climb the tree again.". Perceptions of play as **frivolous and unimportant reduce play opportunities** in and out of school.

Play with **loose parts** incorporates natural and found materials that have no explicit use, lack explicit connection to culture or family backgrounds and can be used by everyone. Multisensory materials that are not precious can be lost and found again, used and reused, in different ways and combinations **promoting autonomy of thought and action**, enabling explorations and the development of stories for everyone. Collections of loose parts offer invitations to play, boost autonomy of thought and action and encourage exploration of the question "who am I?"

The **cultural and socioeconomic context** is important in play. Children from low socioeconomic backgrounds often engage in play by creatively using available resources, such as furniture for building forts. Siblings play a significant role in shaping play experiences and offering support in creative play activities. Many children prefer outdoor play and are less interested in traditional toys. The natural environment is a crucial space for connection and manipulation, enhancing play experiences.



**Culture can and should be integrated into daily activities.** Regularly incorporating cultural elements into daily routines helps avoid stereotypical representations and supports genuine cultural engagement.

**Nature play in schools** connects to Indigenous knowledge and Place-based learning. Hands-on, tactile and multi-sensory learning using concrete, natural materials compounds flexibility and complexities as children explore roles and responsibilities. Using intuitive learning children create art, explore scientifically, observe and experiment.

**Schema Play** has provided support for educators and teachers to see past children's behaviours to identify their learning and development in explorations of the schemes of trajectory, containing, transferring, rotating, orientation, positioning, enclosing, constructing and transforming. This play arises naturally and spontaneously, fulfilling children's needs to make sense of the world around them, to embody knowledge and build schema. As adults 'seed' environments, providing provocations that extend play, children 'chunk' different schemes together that build the foundation for literacy and numeracy.

## Barriers to Play

In 2024, there are many barriers to play.

Some children, young people, parents and teachers feel constrained by **time**. Curriculum in schools, didactic teaching methodologies, after school activities and work pressures leave little time for play.

**Early childhood education is less valued** than education in upper primary and secondary. There is less respect for the knowledge of early childhood educators and their specific training in play. With pressures for 'real learning', measured through national testing regimes, early childhood teachers are incorporating more explicit instruction in literacy and numeracy for larger lengths of time that limit time available for play. Older children, also, are aware of the impact of testing, homework and grades on play. Deadlines and assessment requirements take the joy of learning away.

**Lack of understanding** of the value of play constrains teachers from implementing play-based learning. Sometimes it is the teachers themselves who lack understanding or the ability to help others understand, but many teachers believe principals, parents and other teachers do not value play.



**Spaces for play** in schools have been reduced as demountable buildings replace playground, oval and green spaces. Schools are often locked after school hours, reducing the play spaces available for children and families and sending families and communities the message that they are not welcome.

**Data-driven teaching methodologies and testing regimes** impact on perceptions of the value of play, as does the concept of 'work before play'. These attitudes lead to explicit teaching and the removal of play opportunities as punishment for misbehaviour.

**Curriculum is atomised** to facilitate the incorporation of key concepts and skills in children's learning, but this creates a sense of locked steps rather than the capacity to see interconnections and create conceptual, organic inquiries.

**Permission** is sought by teachers to enable them to incorporate play-based learning and learning through play in their classrooms, despite the clear mandate of the Early Years Learning Framework for children to play (at least until Year 2).

**Shared spaces** can constrain play experiences when colleagues are resistant to moving resources or to them being used in different ways.



**Interruptions** prevent flow, the almost magical feeling of being immersed in what one is doing. The need for children to achieve well in schools can focus some families' after school energies on **homework, study and assignments**, leaving little time for play.

**Home trauma** can focus family energies on survival. Play in these circumstances is neither valued nor supported. Parental stress damages mental health and increases **socially unacceptable behaviours**.

**Media** provides images of children that influence their attitudes about appearance, actions and interactions. Some children are letting go of their authentic selves in their need to conform to stay in connection.

**Technology** has encouraged perfectionism, providing quick answers which reduce curiosity. Technology facilitates communication between educators and families but reduces the ability of educators to engage with children. With a device in their hands, it is easy to use an App to provide correctly sung songs or animated stories, not only limiting interactions between educators and children but models of having-a-go.

The **increasing traffic** and changes in road construction to facilitate accessibility instead of cul-de-sacs that support safety have taken away opportunities for play. Similarly, **large homes on small blocks** with little front or back yard have reduced opportunities for play at home and in the neighbourhood.

**Perceptions of risk and fear of litigation** limit the provision of challenging play spaces. There is a belief that the playground guidelines prevent the installation of swings or the use of tyres. There is fear that children are not safe to be away from home after dark.

**Fear of strangers** can limit the use of playgrounds.

Young people report that there is an **age where play is no longer seen as acceptable** by adults or young people. As young as 13, some children ridicule others for playing. Playgrounds send the message that young people should not play by having monkey bars so low to the ground that children can walk on the sand beneath while holding the bars.

Without practice, **play skills** do not develop. Adults feel that children do not know how to initiate play. **Dependency** on adults is an outcome of these constraints. Children and young people depend on adults to provide initiative and direction, to intervene in conflicts and reduce their boredom.

## PLAY can be Enabled

Play can, however, be supported, facilitated and enabled.

**Adults** enable play. Children have big emotions and can benefit from adults who care and support them to make sense of what is happening, suggest ways of responding and keep them safe. The 'serve and return' of interactions supports play.

There is a double lens (child view/adult view) across the play. It is important that adults **do not assume** they know what is happening, allow themselves to be surprised, allow materials to be used in new or unusual ways and accept the mess.

Children would like families to **join their play**. They want to see adults enjoying their lives. "I don't want to be an adult", reported one of the children in the panel.

Educators and teachers would like parents to **value play in schools**. This is more possible when parents are play partners, linking home and school, sharing home play and strengthening relationships.

**Play champions** advocate for play and play opportunities by:

- Slowing down to allow time for big, deep play
- Encouraging the development and use of green spaces
- Supporting children to search for moss and slugs
- Playing beside children
- Providing safe but challenging experiences.



Play champions include family, friends, educators, teachers, other children and other adults.

**Freedom of choice** enables play. Children's agency is enhanced when adults ask them about their interests, what they like to play with and provide time for children to discover what they like to do.

The **climate of WA** supports outdoor play, and we can take advantage of this by spending more time outside. Classroom tasks can be taken outside. Recess and lunch breaks can be extended. Wet weather is an opportunity for engagement with the environment.

**Natural spaces and time outdoors** enable play. Regular excursions to Bushland areas that are shared with families support adults to be engaged in nature, help them see the value of play, enable conversations with children and create memories.

**Friends, siblings and cousins** encourage social play. In small families, neighbours can provide these connections. Play is magical when it is done with others.

**Safe spaces** enable children (and adults) to relax, explore and discover.

**Play requires resources.** A shed of possibilities from which children and young people can choose resources that facilitate outdoor play.

**Using diverse materials** (e.g., weaving, not just paint and paper) and local artists can provide varied artistic exploration. An array of cultural resources that are familiar to children and young people can be used in playful ways. Including home languages provides quick connections and is powerful in framing children and young people's sense of themselves.

**Resources invite stories.** Educators, teachers, children, young people, families and community members have playful stories of the past, present and future to share.

**Resources can also overwhelm.** Reducing choice can enhance creativity, encouraging play within constraints. Furniture can be incorporated in cubbies and forts indoors. Branches and sticks become shelters outside.

**Play requires practice and practice requires time**

## Playful Steps

The following pathways emerged from the Play Summit 2024 for all of us as we promote play in our communities.



**Be a Play Champion.** Use our passion and knowledge to promote play. Play is not defined by age or person.

**Be playful.** Play takes many forms (e.g. playing with materials, playing with ideas, playing an instrument, sports, playing outside, playing games). At the heart of play is imagination and curiosity.

Use the United Nations Rights of the Child, WA Play Strategy, the Play Strategy for the Department of Education, support from Allied Health and other resources to enable you to **be confident in standing up for play**.

Develop an '**elevator pitch**', a thirty second promotion of play. Addressing adult scepticism about the value of play can enhance the play experience. **Ask 'Why?'** when opportunities for play are challenged. Check facts.

**Recognising and incorporating Indigenous resources and traditions**, and having yarning circles, contribute to a respectful and inclusive environment.

Children are enthusiastic about **learning new languages and hearing stories**. Implementing a "greeting wall" with diverse languages and using stories as starting points can foster cultural appreciation and linguistic skills.

**Begin each day with stories**, with each person contributing and taking turns.

**Music transitions and counting in different languages** are playful ways to enhance learning. Encouraging children to share and use their languages builds confidence and fosters inclusivity.

**See play from the eyes and experience of a child**. Spend a day in a Kindy room (or another classroom or space), as a child, living a child's life. What are the benefits of play?

**Incorporate the many 'languages' of play**. Include music, drawing, painting, weaving, sewing, sculpture, dance, role play, mapping and storytelling in playful encounters. Different ways of knowing and being provide different ways of connecting people and places and build children and young people's confidence in sharing, being together and playing.

Analyse the **scope and sequence** of each learning area and identify the playful ways in which content can be delivered. **Create longer projects** incorporating different subjects that can be addressed playfully.

**Extend play to upper primary and secondary schooling** to engage children and young people in their learning.

**Review the design of outdoor learning environments**. Ensure spaces are 'safe enough'. Listen to children's voices.

**Take learning outside.**

**Create Pocket Forests.**

**Find special places** to share with others.



**Regular excursions to bushland and other natural areas** help children connect with nature and feel safe. Involving parents in these activities can highlight the value of play.

**Conduct a play audit.** What play opportunities, spaces, time and resources are we offering to children and young people?

**Vary playgrounds** so that there are different challenges for children in different places. Having places designed for play makes it easier for children and young people to play there.

**Document play,** noticing children's learning. Make this visible to children, other educators and the community.

Purchase gumboots and rain jackets and **make the most of wet weather** by exploring outside. Spare clothes will enable children to be warm and dry if their clothes get wet.

**Teachers should continuously build on their practices** and remain open to learning and empathy. Sharing personal stories and experiences helps connect with students and families.

**Bring parents into classrooms to play,** so they experience the value of play and can share their own ways of playing. Engaging families as play partners can reduce teacher workload and create a more supportive learning environment. Families offer unique play experiences and contribute to a child's development. Understanding what families offer in terms of play and integrating these experiences into the school environment can bridge gaps between home and school offerings.

Become familiar with the **Benefit /Risk Assessment** of play in the new ISO 4980 to enable you to confidently refute misinformation about risk.

Investigate the [GROW with Nature Play App](#), [International School Grounds Month Activity Guides](#) and [Oasis in Schools Project](#).

**Find play in everyday activities,** including household tasks. Invite children and young people to see the joy in these experiences.

Don't ask for permission, ask for forgiveness!



# A Pledge to Protect the Right to Play

Play is a **trillion different things**. It is how we grow, connect, and make sense of the world. And as the children and youth who attended the Summit reminded us so eloquently, **we owe it to them to make sure their right to play is protected**.

Let us take this as a pledge—to listen to children’s voices, to loosen the structures that bind them, and to stand up for their right to play. Because at the end of the day, play truly does matter!

[www.playmatterscollective.org](http://www.playmatterscollective.org)

## Conclusion

The Play Matters Collective thanks our sponsors and our session participants for their contributions to the Play Matters Summit and contribution to this State of Play in WA Report.



L-R: Marie Martin, Amy Cox, Sandra Hesterman, Marcelle Saratsis, Daniel Burton, Jonathan Neen, Jayne Kaiko

Playful notes:



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