Play and creative approaches contribute to the emotional and social development and well-being of all children and young people, including those with disabilities. In this briefing we offer a definition of play and creativity and then map the territory, offering some ideas and examples of different approaches.

Play, creativity and emotional and social development

Play and creative approaches engage us intellectually, socially, spiritually and emotionally, providing opportunities to develop personal and social skills; develop self-esteem; try out new roles; and develop a sense of risk and boundaries (Play Safety Forum 2002). They help us to understand cultural differences and to express ideas and feelings. In addition, they develop the capacity for original ideas and actions. Hence, play and creativity contribute to the five national outcomes for children set out in Every child matters (2003a).

What are we talking about?
Play is most often associated with little children and less often with young people. If we consider play and creativity as children and young people’s work – part of their efforts to make sense of themselves and their place in the world – we can see that it is expressed differently at various stages of children’s development, across cultures, and depending on individual skills, experiences and opportunities.

The different types of play sit along a spectrum, from free play through to play therapy. In Getting serious about play, free play is defined as what children and young people do ‘when they follow their own ideas and interests, in their own way and for their own reasons’ (DCMS 2004). Further along the spectrum is organised and structured play, where children and young people are encouraged to learn new skills or to understand different concepts and ideas. Further along still are activities that may help to improve motor neurone coordination. Finally comes play therapy, which is perhaps most famously explored through books such as Dibs: In search of self (Axline 1966).

Creative approaches, too, span the full range of the arts, such as physical dance and theatre, drama, sculpture, textiles and drawing. In All our futures (QCA 2000) creativity is defined as multi-dimensional, which involves ‘using imagination, pursuing purposes, being original and judging value’. It goes on to emphasise that creative energies and expression can be nurtured and developed in everyone.

Unlocking creativity is perhaps one of the most important tools we have for creating an integrated and inclusive society and for unleashing our own potential and the potential of those we work with.

Why is play and creativity important?
Play and creativity is every child and young person’s entitlement and right. Opportunities for play and creativity are an integral feature of healthy settings. The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child recognises children’s rights ‘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’.

In addition, research and evidence from practice shows that play and creative approaches:
- help to build resilience and nurture imagination and resourcefulness
- promote awareness of local cultures and cultural diversity, promote inclusion and create cohesive communities
- develop boundaries and awareness of risk, and develop life skills including decision making
- foster opportunities to identify and develop interests and skills
- make learning concrete for all children and young people including those with special educational needs
- promote team work and group building
- contribute to learning and can be used to assess progress
- counter popular myths; through the use of media including videos we are able to explore stories, misconceptions, beliefs and values
- promote physical activity which helps to prevent obesity
- can be used by trained therapists in therapeutic work with children and young people.

Increasing concerns about litigation and the need to safeguard children has encouraged some authorities to limit the number of opportunities for challenge and adventure. This is not helpful – particularly when children and young people are leading increasingly sedentary lives. Concerns with welfare must be balanced against a need for children and young people to experience challenge and risk as part of their development.
These play and creative approaches have been used successfully across a range of settings, in one-to-one and group work, to promote children and young people’s emotional and social development and offer pointers for further investigation.

**Creative teaching and learning methods**

Creative approaches have long been used in youth and community settings and are increasingly being recognised as a key strategy for raising standards in schools. Both the KS3 Strategy (DfES2002) and the Primary Strategy (DFES 2003) promote creative teaching and learning methods that will motivate and engage pupils and require their active participation.

Children and young people gain from approaches that start from their own experience, and involve everyone through active participation. They include:

**Circle Time**

An inclusive approach to discussing personal, social and emotional issues. Circle time games create a sense of togetherness and fun, and a safe environment to model social situations and discuss feelings and relationships.

**Drama techniques**

Engage children and young people in active learning. Includes role-play, hot seating, forum theatre, freeze-framing. Interactive drama techniques can be used as effective lesson starters, for teamwork and group building or to enable teachers or youth workers to assess learning.

**Theatre in Education (TIE)**

Uses performance and drama workshops to explore social issues, emotional situations and dilemmas. Encourages participants to get imaginatively involved with the issues and characters; helps them to understand motives and consequences through empathy and identification.

There are TIE companies that specialise in health issues. It opened my eyes is a new good practice guide to commissioning and managing TIE to deliver sex and relationship education (HDA 2003).

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<th>Simulations</th>
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<td>Involves children and young people in extended scenarios in which they act out roles.</td>
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<td>Are particularly effective for exploring political, environmental or global issues. Can help pupils to use their imagination to appreciate different perspectives and understand the impact of policies on people’s lives.</td>
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<td>Oxfam and Save the Children produce many simulation resources.</td>
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<th>Draw and write</th>
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<td>Used as a creative means of finding out what children and young people know about a range of issues from drugs to feeling good about themselves and participation.</td>
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<td>Drawing encourages children to tap into their immediate thoughts and reactions and allows those who can’t or don’t like writing to express their views.</td>
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<td>Examples of draw and write activities can be found in the Health for Life resources.</td>
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<th>Children’s fiction</th>
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<td>Many stories and novels show characters in familiar situations facing dilemmas and experiencing a range of emotions. The use of puppets, soft toys and other props can help bring stories to life. Discussing fiction provides a safe and engaging way of talking about sensitive issues. It allows workers to distance an issue while encouraging empathy and enjoyment.</td>
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<td>Hand in hand is a guide to using children’s stories in promoting emotional development (Hunter et al 1998).</td>
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<th>Creative thinking skills</th>
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<td>Thinking skills enable children and young people to reason, question, predict, think independently and develop their capacity for reflection and judgement.</td>
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<td>Creative thinking skills can help children and young people understand their own capabilities and qualities as an active learner. They are also valued by employers who need people who can think and act flexibly and creatively.</td>
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<td>Philosophy for Children is an approach which advocates setting up a ‘community of enquiry’ as an interactive method of discussion. Teaching Thinking is a magazine about thinking skills for all involved in education.</td>
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<th>Arts and the media</th>
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<td>Participation in artistic and media-based activities has a positive effect on children and young people’s emotional and social development by increasing self-confidence and self-esteem, fostering cooperation, experiencing other cultures and expressing emotions. Arts activities can also be used effectively to help children express their views as part of a consultation exercise or to demonstrate their learning. They are particularly effective when working with vulnerable children and young people.</td>
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<th>Visual arts</th>
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<td>Includes painting, drawing, sculpture, model making, cartooning, collage, printing, textiles and poster making.</td>
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<td>Are particularly important as they enable children and young people to express their feelings and views without words. Taking part in a community arts project contributes to a sense of belonging and regeneration in the local area. Displaying young people’s work shows them that they are valued.</td>
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<th>Performance arts</th>
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<tr>
<td>Includes drama, singing, music, dance and story-telling. Taking part in a performance is often a memorable part of a child’s experience and develops concentration, cooperation and a shared sense of achievement. It also provides an opportunity to engage parents and carers. Music-making enables children to express themselves on their own or in a group and popular music forms such as rap relate to their own interests and culture. Music is also used to create calm learning environments. Many orchestras, music groups and theatre and dance companies have community outreach programmes and work in schools and community groups.</td>
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<th>Electronic media</th>
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<td>Includes video, photography, film, filmmaking and CD ROMS.</td>
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| Have an immediate appeal and relevance to many children and young people. Photography and video are excellent means of encouraging them to reflect on
School play and break times
Taking a proactive approach to playtimes can reduce bullying and conflict, and encourage cooperative and constructive play. It also provides opportunities for pupils to take on responsibilities within the school.
Recent research shows that playtimes make up a significant contribution to children’s daily physical activity. Methods of ensuring that playtimes are enjoyable for all and fit in with the ethos of the school include: training for midday supervisors and/or older primary pupils to lead traditional group games; buddy or playground friend schemes; providing play equipment and establishing quiet areas and seating.
Learning through Landscapes’ Grounds for Improvement scheme helps schools to develop their playgrounds.

Play spaces
Involves playgrounds in schools and the community, parks, leisure facilities, adventure playgrounds, skateparks and youth shelters.
Activities for young people’ was ranked by adults as the single most requested improvement in local services in a Mori Poll in 2003. Play facilities provide a focus for community activity and give young people a safe space to be physically active, particularly those with little play space at home. Developing ideas for play spaces gives young people the opportunity to participate in issues that they care about.
Getting serious about play is a report calling for improved facilities for play. The Pinc Project gives a range of imaginative ideas for transforming play spaces as inclusive environments.

Organised play activities and clubs
Includes breakfast clubs, after-school clubs, holiday play schemes, statutory and voluntary youth provision.
Provides a good opportunity for a range of creative and play activities. Learning Mentors in Excellence in Cities areas use them effectively to engage disaffected pupils. Every child matters (DFES 2003a) visualises play, sport and creative activities as part of the Extended Schools Initiative. The impact of play and creative activities on reducing youth offending is recognised by The Positive Activities for Young People scheme, funded by the Home Office, DCMS and DFES, which provides holiday activities for targeted young people.
ContinYou and 4 Children can provide information and advice about out of school activities. Transforming Youth Work is a government programme to enhance youth work facilities across the country.

Sports
Includes team and individual sports, as well as non-competitive activities such as yoga, dance and some martial arts.
Can promote physical activity and develop motor skills and fitness as well as teamwork, determination and self-esteem. Celebrating sporting achievements has been a traditional part of building group identity and a positive ethos in schools and youth work. Linking academic work to sport can have a positive impact on standards, as demonstrated by the Government’s Playing for Success scheme in which professional sports clubs set up Learning Support Centres.
The National Physical Education, School Sport and Club Links (PESSCIL) strategy sets out the Government’s plans to support school sport and has produced a new CD-ROM, Success for all.

Indoor games and toys
Includes board games, dressing up, card games, jigsaws, computer games and toys of all kinds.
Can help develop a range of skills such as fine motor skills and concentration, as well as conceptual skills of matching, logic and strategic thinking. Competitive games can help children learn to ‘cope with losing’. However, many toys and play activities emphasise stereotyped gender roles and some people believe that computer games stunt creativity and promote violence.
We don’t play with guns here explores some of the issues (Holland 2003).

Free play
For younger children, this will include sand and water play, natural elements, junk, construction toys, role play areas, ‘big toys’ such as bikes, carts, hoops and fixed equipment. As they grow up, free play may involve simply ‘hanging out’ with their friends, experimenting and even taking risks.
Play is vital to a child’s cognitive, social, emotional, physical, creative and linguistic development. Role-play helps young children and young people to make sense of roles they see in the adult world, whereas young people will try out different roles to get a sense of their own identity.

Making the case for play, published by the Children’s Play Council, outlines the main findings of a two year research and policy development programme.

Literature
Includes reading and writing fiction, poetry, diaries and story-telling. Reading gives insights into the lives and experiences of a wide range of people, and writing of all kinds allows people to express their own feelings and views. Story-telling is a powerful means of sharing universal myths and beliefs across cultures.
Booktrust is an organisation, which provides information about books and book-related events. The Poetry Society helps young people to express their own feelings and views.

Play
Ensuring that children and young people have opportunities for free and structured play of all kinds, including sports, helps them to develop physically and to learn about risk, challenge, teamwork, cooperation and the importance of rules. Experience of success in games and sports boosts self-esteem for those who do not experience it elsewhere. There is increasing evidence that exercise has an impact on the brain’s capacity for learning. Teaching children and young people relaxation or yoga can improve behaviour and stress. Opportunities for free play both indoors and outside have long been seen as an essential part of younger children’s development. Improving recreation opportunities for young people is also recognised as a strategy for promoting inclusion of disabled young people, for tackling youth crime (DCMS 2004) and for addressing sexual health, drugs and other public health priorities (Blake 2004).
Useful websites

4 Children www.4children.org.uk
Book Trust www.booktrust.org.uk
Children’s Play Council www.ncb.org.uk/cpc
City Learning Centres www.standards.dfes.gov.uk/sie/eic/clc
ContinYou www.continyou.org.uk
Creative Partnerships www.creative-partnerships.com
David Fulton Publishers www.davidfultonpublishers.co.uk
Groundwork www.groundwork.org.uk
Learning Through Landscapes www.ltl.org.uk
LDA www.ldalearning.com
Lucky Duck Publishing www.luckyduck.co.uk
National Physical Education, School Sport and Club links
Strategy (PESSCL) www.dfes.gov.uk
NASEN (National Association for Special Educational Needs) www.nasen.org.uk
Oxfam www.oxfam.org.uk
Philosophy for Children www.sapere.org.uk
Positive Activities for Young People www.culture.gov.uk
Positive Press www.positivepress.co.uk
Playing for Success www.dfes.gov.uk/playingforsuccess
QCA PE and School Sport (PESS) website www.qca.org.uk
QCA Creativity: Find It, Promote It website www.ncaction.org.uk/creativity
Save the Children www.savethechildren.org.uk
Sense Interactive CDs www.sensecds.com
Teaching Thinking www.teachthinking.com
The Poetry Society www.poetrysociety.org.uk
Wired for Health www.wiredforhealth.gov.uk
Youthwork press www.nya.org.uk

Useful resources

Holland, P (2003) We don’t play with guns here: War, weapons and superhero play in the early years. Open University
Saurney, F and others (2003) It opened my eyes. Health Development Agency
Williams, T, Wetton, N and Moon, A (1989) Health for life 2 – Health education in the primary school. A teacher’s guide to three key topics: the world of drugs, keeping myself safe, me and my relationships. Thomas Nelson and Sons Ltd

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Department for Education and Skills (2003a) Every child matters
Qualifications and Curriculum Authority (2000) All our futures. QCA

Vanessa Cooper and Simon Blake
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