From policy and theory into practice: provision for play
Chapter 2 reviewed the literature on understandings of contemporary childhood and how these are reflected in policy, Chapter 3 considered what the literature says about the benefits of playing for children’s development and well-being and Chapter 4 looked at the literature on children’s play patterns. We move on now to see how these aspects are translated into practice. Inevitably, there will be some overlap of material, but the focus in this section is on the practice of making provision for children’s play rather than policy or theory.

Gathering the evidence on play provision

This section reviews the literature pertaining to public provision for children’s play. The authors acknowledge that there is much good practice that goes on quietly in local neighbourhoods which is perhaps published in local newsletters and on websites. The scope of this literature review has not allowed for any gathering and analysis of these data, and has focused on larger scale external evaluations and academic evaluation research as well as nationally published literature. We acknowledge that this makes for a gap in the representation of provision for children’s play and recommend that research be undertaken on examples of local good practice.

There is a dearth of peer-reviewed academic writing on play provision and playwork and a parallel paucity of longitudinal evaluation and research into playwork practice and other aspects of play provision. Most academic studies and national evaluations are concerned with the wider aspects of children’s services and, as such, focus on specific topics such as education, neighbourhood renewal or crime prevention. Any reference to play within these studies largely takes an instrumental view of how play helps to meet these policy aims, and will therefore be underpinned by a particular instrumental view of play rather than the understandings that can be drawn from the theories reviewed in Chapter 3. Most of the nationally published literature on play provision falls broadly into four categories: theorising; practical guidance; research into practice; and published evaluation reports. In this section we have drawn to some extent on the theorising and guidance to inform the discussion, but have focused largely on the research and evaluation.

In the current climate of evidence-based policy, the place of evaluation of practice remains contested. Roberts and Petticrew (2006) query whether policy is evidence-based, evidence-informed or evidence-aware. They also question what counts as evidence: is it research-based evidence or can ‘consultations, anecdotes, observations, informal knowledge’ (Roberts and Petticrew 2006: 20) play a part? They argue the case for a stronger role for research-based evidence, whilst not ignoring the voices of children and young people and other sources of evidence, highlighting the need to distinguish ‘sound research from sound-bite research’ (Roberts and Petticrew 2006: 22). Early intervention policies for children should be well evaluated in order to maximise benefit and minimise harm. Roberts and Petticrew cite the Sure Start programme as one which took account of evidence from the research and which was also extensively evaluated both locally and nationally, although they do point out the difficulties of highlighting problems and less successful aspects of programmes within evaluation reports in a way that ensures that they are heard and acted upon.

The use of evaluation reports in this literature review has presented some challenges. As Taylor and Balloch (2005: 1) assert, ‘evaluation research should be understood as inherently political’. This is not to undermine its usefulness in informing policy, rather to place it realistically within
context. Most evaluation research is commissioned with the task of determining how far the project or projects have met the stated objectives as agreed with funding agencies. In the case of public funding, these will be heavily linked to social policy aims, objectives and targets. Such a framework determines the design and the focus of the evaluation, and evaluators are always mindful of the commissioners’ need to show the success of the projects in these terms. Independent academic research allows for rather more freedom of focus and conclusion (and indeed frequently provides useful critiques of policies and their implementation). Both, however, are subject to what Oakley (2000, cited in Taylor and Balloch 2005) calls ‘paradigm wars’. One example pertinent to this section is the tension between what is often termed a ‘positivist’ and a ‘constructionist’ approach. As Robson (2002: 16) asks:

When carrying out real world research involving people, can we, or should we, be scientific? This question raises a wide set of issues. What does ‘being scientific’ mean?

Robson (2002: 19) suggests that the ‘standard view’ of science is a positivist one, where the underlying principle is that an understanding of social phenomena is advanced through the development and testing of theories. A positivist adopts the natural science methodologies by explaining social life in the same way as natural scientists explain natural phenomena. A positivist produces ‘laws’ of human behaviour and attempts to generalise from the observations to the population at large. Thus a positivist explains behaviour as ‘cause and effect’ and data are collected to explain that cause and effect. Positivism is based on the premise that there are undisputed ‘facts’ to be gathered about the social world.

Constructionists, on the other hand, highlight the difficulty of objectivity and of cause and effect in studying social life. Researchers are themselves attempting to make meaning of what they see, and inevitably they will interpret according to their particular worldview. People do not merely react to things in a predictable manner; they act on the world around them in their own attempts to make meaning of their lives.

‘Issues of timing and investment in valid and reliable evaluation have raised questions in the research community about “policy-based evidence” rather than “evidence-based policy”.’
Evaluation of provision for play

These paradigm wars, together with the political nature of evaluation, raise questions for both evidence-based and outcomes-focused policy making, two key strands of the *Modernising Government* White Paper (Cabinet Office 1999; Bullock and others 2001). France and Utting (2005) stress the need for evaluation to be longitudinal, and even then it is difficult to attribute cause and effect, either to the programme as a whole or to components of it, and the issue of comparison with similar causes and effects arises. Issues of timing and investment in valid and reliable evaluation have raised questions in the research community about ‘policy-based evidence’ rather than ‘evidence-based policy’ (France and Utting 2005). Mcneish and Gill (2006: 6) echo these concerns, highlighting the need for closer collaboration between researchers, policy-makers and practitioners to address the evidential needs of complex problems and interventions. However, Prout (2002) points to specific influences that the ESRC Children 5-16 Programme had on policy development, whilst recognising that such direct and immediate links are rare and that the contribution of academic research is to the general discussion in which many participate.

**Theoretical frameworks**


This involves identifying short term changes which may indicate that the change programme is headed in the right direction and, in the absence of any comparative study groups, attempts to overcome the problems of attribution (in other words, how any change might be attributed to the intervention). Such an approach requires explicit articulation of how short-term changes can be linked to the long-term aims of the programme.

It is worth highlighting here the methodology employed by Creegan and others (2004) in their evaluation of the Tower Hamlets Community Play Programme. In common with the Better Play programme (see ‘supervised play provision and playwork’ below for an explanation of this and the Best Play objectives), this evaluation research drew on the *Best Play* (NPFA and others 2000) objectives, which acknowledge the intrinsic value of play and the characteristics of free play. The research placed a strong emphasis on the participative development of the evaluation framework with the projects being evaluated; in this way the evaluation process itself became developmental and formative as well as summative. Ten evaluation objectives were agreed upon and grouped into three categories (play provision, service delivery and children’s well-being), with indicators being developed for each objective. The detail of the indicators reveals a stronger focus on organised activities rather than spontaneous play, although this is included, and the evaluation objective of children’s ability to exercise choice has more indicators referring to choice between activities and involvement in planning than on flexible and spontaneous use of the environment and its resources.

Many features of the lives of children are shaped by social policy and their futures are central to its concerns. (Fawcett and others 2004: 17)

Play provision is inextricably linked to social policy in the sense that it is a service or forms a part of a service. Banting (1979, cited in Levin 1997) suggests that services are one of the
three key mechanisms for implementing policy, the other two being income transfers (funding streams) and regulation (including monitoring and inspection). Whilst this conceptualisation is rather limited in its scope, neglecting broader influences such as social structures and power relations, it does provide a useful framework for analysis. However, as we have seen throughout this review, there is no overall coherent conception of children's play within social policy. This leads to a plurality of justifications for spending public money on play provision, with a parallel variance in how such services are monitored, evaluated and regulated. In addition, the risk and protection focused paradigm for policy discussed in Chapter 2 draws heavily from evidence of both effectiveness and cost-effectiveness of interventions, and is itself subject to 'stringent monitoring and, in many cases, large-scale national evaluations' (France and Utting 2005: 83).

Government initiatives such as Sure Start, the Children's Fund, On Track and New Deal for Communities have all been subject to this level of evaluation. However, long term evaluation is not always cotenurous with party political drivers, and some programmes found themselves changing tack midway, thus causing confusion for the evaluation process (France and Utting 2005); similarly, local politics have a part to play particularly regarding the success or otherwise of partnership working where values and principles have to be renegotiated between agencies and sectors.

An outcomes focus

Mayall and Hood (2001) note the increasing scholarisation of children's lives in the UK, linking this with increased supervision, decreased self-determination and a particular understanding of learning. They highlight the:

> tension between the classic view that play – with its own rules, goals and activities – constitutes valuable use of time, as an enjoyable activity outside the normal constraints and concerns of daily life ..., and, play as understood in the developmental paradigm, as a means of learning about the social order. (Mayall and Hood 2001: 78-79)

An approach to play provision which privileges the intrinsic value of playing is likely to fare poorly in an evidence-based, outcomes-focused policy and audit culture unless it can be fully understood. As we have seen, play's diversity and the difficulty in attributing direct and specific outcomes do not fit neatly within the compartmentalisation of the five Every Child Matters outcomes, particularly when the theme of enjoyment is conflated with, or rather subsumed under, achievement.

Hood (2004: 25) raises the difficulty of compartmentalisation in her discussion of the health outcome when she says:

> strategies to improve child health must adopt a broad approach which recognises that children's health is affected not only by the more traditional areas of health concern (usually physical health and social care services) but also by restricted activity, traffic danger, lack of access to appropriate play spaces, and by education policies which emphasise achievement at the expense of enjoyment.

Powell and Wellard (2008: 27) highlight the inconsistent understandings of play in their analysis of government documents that have an impact on children's play:

> The approach to delivering activities and descriptions of play appeared to rely upon the relevant departments' constructions of play (and childhoods) and their key policy drivers. For most this construction appeared to be instrumental, and so play was described as a vehicle for various outcomes. This was also the case for a range of activities (whether 'positive', 'enhancing' or 'enjoyable'). Few references stated or implied that provision for play opportunities would be made to fulfil children's right to play and / or that play means that the player has chosen and has power over the activity.

However, Clarke (2005: 31) suggests that 'even without headlining tightly defined positive outcomes, leisure and play for their own sake are important areas for children to express
themselves and experience self-determination'. Very little of the evaluation literature that
discusses play provision has drawn on the more recent theorising on play described in
Chapters 3 and 4.

The New Economics Foundation's (2000) Prove it! approach to evaluation involves local people
both in identifying indicators and in evaluating whether projects have met these indicators.
It was developed specifically to measure the social, economic and environmental benefits of
the Groundworks and Barclays SiteSavers projects, which aimed to transform derelict land
into community leisure and recreation facilities, often including play areas. The approach
to evaluation showed that the projects have had a measurable impact on local involvement,
interaction, social capital and community safety.

The examples above can be characterised as approaches to (broadly) external evaluation of the
effectiveness of interventions. Evaluation is closely linked to the planning process, particularly
through audits of the quantity and quality of existing provision. Some of the tools that have
been developed recently for this are discussed in the next section.

Planning for play

Making the Case for Play (Cole-Hamilton and Gill 2002) highlighted a lack of planning and
strategic support for children's play at local authority level, and found that 'strategic
development for play in England is inconsistent and frequently non-existent' (Cole-Hamilton and
Gill 2002: 34), leading to the key recommendation that 'every local authority works with local
partners to develop and promote a corporate play strategy' (Cole-Hamilton and Gill 2002: 48).
Two years later, the report of the play review (DCMS 2004) recommended that the Big Lottery
Fund's play programme should require local authorities to take a lead in planning for play.

PLAYLINK (2002: 13) warned against the dangers of too narrow a focus in planning for play:

> It is important that local authorities avoid the temptation to bracket off children's
> play into one or more forms of provision, or to represent play simply through a parks
> or playgrounds service-based approach.

There is some difficulty in adults planning for children's play, given the distance between adults'
and children's perceptions of what makes a space a good play place, as Kylin (2003) notes:

> Adults, planners not excepted, describe and plan ... environments through an adult
> and professional perspective using cognitive and physical classifications. However,
> children mostly describe the same environment in terms of activity and meaning.

Given this, Kylin questions whether it is indeed possible to plan for children's play, since this
requires more than just location, design and contents. Thompson and Philo (2004) and Ross
(2004) talk of children using a range of places for their play, including those that incur adult
disapproval or are away from the gaze of adults. Any planning for play needs to be informed by
a recognition of this.

The Children's Play Council (CPC 2006a) produced guidance for local authorities and play
partnerships in drawing up play strategies as the basis for portfolio bids to the Big Lottery
Fund's Children's Play programme. The guidance encourages a holistic and partnership
approach based on an assessment of need through audits and reference to children's own
preferences. The Children's Play Information Service (CPIS 2007: 2) announced that, after the
closing date for final applications to the Children's Play programme in September 2007, 'nearly
all of the 355 local authorities in England now has a play strategy in their area, compared to
less than 100 before the Big Lottery Fund's Children's Play programme was launched last year'.

The timing and scope of this review has not allowed for any scrutiny of play strategies
(expected to be the focus of a separate review). Powell and Wellard (2008) included some
analysis of Children and Young People's Plans (CYPPs) in their impact assessment of policies
on children's play. They found an inconsistency across the plans in terms of whether play was
included or not, how play was understood and also how it helped to meet the five Every Child Matters outcomes. Payne and others (2006) undertook an analysis of 31 CYPPs to inform this report, cross-referencing this with the NFER (Lord and others 2006) analysis of 75 plans. They found that, whilst many of the plans acknowledged the importance of play and recreation in children's lives, there was wide variation in how play was interpreted, with sport, and structured and supervised activities predominating, and with little in the way of specific action plans, hard targets and measures to evaluate success in increasing access to opportunities to play. This focus on structured and supervised activities is at odds with the research on the benefits of play outlined in Chapter 3, which arise from flexibility and self- or peer-directed free play.

Non-statutory guidance on CYPPs (DfES 2005b) lists play and leisure services among the services to be included and also includes a paragraph on including housing authorities, specifically referring to ‘the provision of quality open spaces for play and recreation, the safety of local streets and neighbourhood spaces’ (DFES 2005b: 22). The guidance includes reference to play strategies in the list of plans linking to the CYPP. Consultation with children and young people, as a requirement of the development of CYPPs, varied. Approximately half of the plans reviewed by Payne and others (2006) included quotations from children and young people, and a considerable proportion of these related to play and informal recreation and issues of safety in relation to this. Payne and others note that this reflects other consultations with children and young people, specifically those carried out for the Youth Matters Green Paper, where issues of play and recreation consistently appeared as a top priority. They note the difficulty of assessing how far the views of children and young people, which tend to relate to specific wants, are translated into more general strategic policy documents.

Beyond consultation, the authors note the difficulty in judging how local authorities had assessed the local need for play and recreation. (For an exception, see Armstrong and others’ (2005) evaluation of play provision and play needs in Redbridge below.) The authors found that only half of plans made any specific reference to play or informal recreation strategies, and several of these were described as ‘in development’ and several were limited in scope. Of the 31 plans, 22 made direct reference to Youth Matters, and the authors comment that this agenda places a duty on local authorities with budgets attached; 23 plans made specific reference to play and informal recreation as a specific objective or priority. Many plans make specific reference to access to play opportunities for marginalised or vulnerable groups of children. However, Contact a Family and others’ (2006) analysis of 20 CYPPs found that plans for disabled children were ‘vague’ and had not involved disabled children and young people in the development of the plans. Finally, the report notes that, despite aspirational aims to improve access to play opportunities, there is little in the way of tangible targets or measures.

Cole-Hamilton (2006: 9) found ‘widespread agreement in the play sector that if children are to have access to play provision in their own neighbourhoods and free of charge, these must be funded, at least in part, from both central and local government funds.’ The planning process, therefore, needs to link to national and local policy priorities. Strong and Prosperous Communities: The Local Government White Paper (Communities and Local Government 2006) sets out changes to the local government planning process, with more emphasis on neighbourhoods and area-based planning. Local authorities will be required to develop Local Area Agreements (LAAs) based on four themes: children and young people; healthier communities and older people; economic development and the environment; and safer and stronger communities. There will be around 35 priorities with a single set of approximately 200 outcome-based indicators based on national priorities, a significant reduction in the current number of indicators. These outcome-based indicators will be informed by the Comprehensive Spending Review. They will be tied in to a new system of monitoring and assessment, a Comprehensive Area Assessment (CAA), which will replace the current Comprehensive Performance Assessment (CPA) (Communities and Local Government 2006).

Davis (2006a) gives guidance on how play can be incorporated into Local Area Agreements, citing evidence for how provision for play can help local authorities to meet the two themes of children and young people (linking to the five outcomes of the Every Child Matters agenda).
and safer and stronger communities. An informal Children’s Play Council survey (PlayToday 2007) found that local authority attitudes to planning for play had improved from the position reported in *Making the Case for Play* (Cole-Hamilton and others 2002), with one third of second round Local Area Agreements including indicators for improvements to play provision, parks and open spaces.

However, Hallsworth and Sutton’s (2004) impact assessment of the changes in funding for holiday playscheme provision in a London borough found that the local authority’s grant aid to community-run holiday playschemes had gradually declined to just over half over a five year period, and the authors found that children who could no longer access play provision of this nature were disproportionately from families newly arrived in the UK, Black and minority ethnic families or families where adults were unemployed. In addition, the social capital benefits of community provision were lost. They cite six shifts that have reshaped playscheme provision over the last decade, which are listed below. Some of these will be particular to the borough, but others may be applicable to other local authorities.

- The movement from open-access play to childcare.
- A movement from nominally charged-for universal services towards a market led model relying on parental fees to meet costs.
- A move from Council subsidising services towards government tax credits subsidising parents.
- A movement away from embedded community provision.
- The professionalisation of service delivery and service providers.
- A movement from universally available local services towards individually targeted provision. (Hallsworth and Sutton 2004: 5)

‘… from the age of about eight years, children were critical of their environment, with ideas on how to improve it, voicing a desire for places to play where they felt safe …’
Audit and assessment of need

Two key aspects of the planning process are highlighted in guidance on planning (for example Children’s Play Council 2006a; Phillips 2006; PPG 17; DfES 2005b), namely the importance of an audit of existing provision and an assessment of need. There is emphasis on these being qualitative as well as quantitative and on the importance of involving children and young people in the planning process (see the section on ‘participation and consultation’ below). A number of tools have been developed, or are in the process of being developed, to help with audits and these tend to include some kind of performance indicators.

CABE Space (2007) has developed spaceshaper, a process of gathering people’s perceptions about a space across eight themes: access, use, other people, maintenance, environment, design and appearance, community, and you. Individuals complete a questionnaire, the responses are collated electronically and then there is facilitated dialogue using the results. The process aims to work with the differences in people’s subjective ideas about public space rather than attempting to provide an objective assessment of the quality of the space.

Play England will be publishing local play indicators in autumn 2008 intended to assess a local authority’s performance in terms of its support for children’s and young people’s play, either in their local neighbourhoods or in supervised settings. The indicators are:

intended to capture the range, extent and quality of play provision and play opportunities across an area, and be practicable as both management tools and upward drivers of performance for the local authority and its partners in the delivery of ‘the play offer’. (Play England, 2008)

The indicators aim to measure both quantitative (for example the time spent playing outside) and qualitative (satisfaction) aspects. There has been some concern voiced (for example PLAYLINK 2007) regarding the focus on objective measuring rather than recognising that assessing quality is necessarily a subjective process. The use of fixed scoring systems implies objective, quantitative measurements, whereas the extent to which a space is ‘playable’ will depend on a number of variables, including social, cultural and temporal contexts. One example given is the presence of dogs, a factor that could make spaces more or less playable depending on each situation.

Armstrong and others (2005) carried out a major research project on existing play provision and play needs of children and young people in the London Borough of Redbridge, which gathered views of over 750 children and young people, 250 parents and 28 key staff, as a part of the Children’s Fund requirement to gather views on services and to meet the borough’s Children’s Fund objective of improving access to better play and recreation opportunities. The research found that children valued and made use of a wide range of opportunities for playing, and most preferred to play outdoors but for some this was restricted by their parents, by fears or by having nothing to do outdoors. Muslim girls were most likely to play indoors. However, there were significant gaps in opportunities for play. There were needs: to increase the quantity and quality of outdoor play opportunities, particularly close to home, catering for a range of ages and needs; for organised provision run by playworkers, including adventure playgrounds, and also opportunities for less structured and supervised play; to improve access to play provision for particular marginalised groups, especially disabled children. Fears of bullying, racism, gangs and crime plus negative attitudes of adults towards children playing were key restricting factors. Play staff felt there was a lack of understanding about play and playwork and, as with other research, the tendency to conflate play with childcare, respite care or education was noted, as was the feeling among professionals that play was not valued by parents.

Camina (2004) carried out a Home Office commissioned study of four On Track areas. The study aimed to ‘enhance understanding of deprived, high crime communities by exploring the perceptions of the local area of different groups living and working in the community: children,

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5 A term believed to be brought into current usage by Tim Gill, and used in David Lammy MP’s (2007) article on the need to create playable cities (drawing on the work of the French philosopher Henri Lefebvre’s concept of the ludic city).
parents, residents, local politicians and leaders, professionals and service providers.’ (Camina 2004: iv). Whilst recognising the diversity of communities across factors such as income, gender and ethnicity, the research found that children were generally positive about their areas but aware of its bad reputation, which was often exacerbated by the media and by professionals working in the locality. From the age of about eight years, children were critical of their environment, with ideas on how to improve it, voicing a desire to have more places to play where they felt safe, possibly through some form of supervision. Children consistently asked for more places to play and things to do. Camina (2004: 22) notes that ‘adults tend to forget just how important play spaces are to children’ and observes that ‘children’s views are not accorded due weight in this democratic process’ (Camina 2004: 43). Many playgrounds had closed, often because of health and safety concerns, and older people often did not want play areas reinstated. Local authorities were concerned about maintenance costs in the face of repeated vandalism, and Camina suggests this points to a need to take a holistic approach. Young people hanging out on the streets were seen as a problem, and the most often cited solution was to provide somewhere to go, something to do; however, in this research, though there were youth clubs available, they were seen as ‘not cool’, and young people preferred to hang out in places where they were in control. Camina (2004: 44) comments: ‘There is a need to start from the perspective of the teenagers, to treat them as experts in their own lives, enable them to articulate their need and respond to them.’

**Participation and consultation**

A key focus of the Redbridge research (Armstrong and others 2005) and the On Track area study (Camina 2004) was hearing the voices of children and young people themselves. Armstrong and others used a number of methods to gather children’s views, and the report recommended that these methods could be replicated elsewhere and that Redbridge Borough should continue to keep children ‘in the loop’ when reviewing its play services.

Chawla and Johnson (2004] identify the United Nations’ adoption of the Convention on the Rights of the Child in 1989 as the watershed for children’s participation. Cockburn (2005) notes that the commitment to listen to children and young people is a part of New Labour’s social inclusion agenda. In 2001, the Children and Young People’s Unit carried out a major consultation on a proposed strategy for children and young people (CYPU 2001a). In the same year they also published a document entitled *Learning to Listen: Core Principles for the Involvement of Children and Young People*, which gives advice to government departments on the participation of children and young people in the design and delivery of policies and services. This document also asks government departments to draw up action plans for involving children and young people in their work.

The Office of the Deputy Prime Minister (now the department for Communities and Local Government) published its action plan in July 2003, and this in turn encouraged local authorities to involve children and young people in the development and evaluation of Community Strategies, Local Strategic Partnerships, Best Value reviews and other aspects of local democracy. The action plan also included an endorsement of the National Youth Agency’s *Hear by Right: Standards for the active involvement of children and young people* [Wade and Badham 2001].

Participation of children and young people has been given the status of a discrete section on the Every Child Matters website, and is a requirement in the development of Children and Young People’s Plans and other areas of policy development [DFES 2005b]. In 2003, the Department for Education and Skills published its handbook *Building a Culture of Participation: involving children and young people in policy, service planning, delivery and evaluation* [DFES 2003d]. It talks of a ‘growing shift in UK policy requiring children and young people’s participation in decisions’ (Kirby and others 2003: 9). The government’s views on children’s participation are further embedded in policy with the Children Act 2004 and the establishment of a Children’s Commissioner for England. The Act states that the Commissioner ‘has the function of promoting awareness of the views and interests of children in England’ [Children Act 2004, Chapter 31. Part 1: 2:1].
Kirby and Bryson suggested in 2002 that more attention needed to be paid to evaluating and researching the effectiveness of participatory approaches across a number of themes, including: how children's and young people's views are used in final decision-making about policies and services; the benefits for the children, young people and adults involved; which children and young people become involved in participation and which do not; and children's and young people's competence in influencing policy-making and service delivery (Kirby and Bryson 2002).

When asked about their lives, children and young people consistently put play as a top priority and asked for more opportunities to play (for example CYPU 2002; Camina 2004; Elsley 2004 below; The Children's Society 2006) but these views are not always acted upon. This is reflected in the government's third report to the United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child, as described in Chapter 2, where the report notes that, when asked about their lives, children say they want more opportunities to play, yet the report includes one paragraph on play in England in the main body, which refers to the UCLMS publication of *Time for Play* and its support for national organisations (UK Government 2007).

A number of benefits arise from authentic and effective children's and young people's participation. Kirby and others (2003) found that acting on children's and young people's views brings benefits for services, for children's and young people's sense of citizenship and social inclusion, and in terms of personal development. Davies (2006) describes young people's participation, when carried out effectively, as a win-win situation with benefits for young people and adults alike. These include greater confidence, self-esteem and knowledge, forging of positive intergenerational relationships and challenging of stereotypes.

The Hear By Right project has developed a 'what's changed?' tool for reporting on the impact of consultation and participation, stating on the website that 'the success of participation activity must be measured by the changes that have resulted on specific issues and concerns raised by children and young people' (www.nya.org.uk).

Despite this, the 4Children Buzz Survey (4Children 2006: 4) found that

*Less than half the children (45 per cent) feel that adults listen to their opinions and views about what they want. 76 per cent think that it would make their lives better if they were treated with respect and 75 per cent if they were listened to as well. Children are still looking for more recognition and to be heard.*

Elsley (2004) found that the majority of young people in her research felt that adults who were close to them did listen to them, but they unanimously said that outside their personal networks, adults did not listen to them. One respondent spoke of how she had talked several times of the need for more play facilities, complaining that the authorities often said they would provide more but then did not. Elsley cites research (Chawla and Malone 2003; DTLR
2002) which highlights the low priority given to children’s and young people’s stated leisure needs in regeneration plans. This is echoed by Camina (2004), who reports that adults give a low priority to children’s requests for more places to play. Badham (2004) suggests that participation is not politically neutral. Whilst the rhetoric is of empowerment, such empowerment is only tolerated if it is expressed in ways acceptable to adults. Adults’ attitudes to the authentic participation of children are subject to ambiguity towards children as being on the one hand separate from adults in spaces specially designed for children due to their need for protection and socialisation, and on the other as autonomous beings with rights to participation, expressing the tension between the dependent and the autonomous child (Jans 2004; Cockburn 2005). However, such ambivalence need not necessarily be problematic: children have themselves stated that they want to be both looked after and allowed some independence (Jans 2004; Madge 2006).

Much of the time, participation is about encouraging children and young people to engage in some form of democratic process, and is often underpinned in social policy by the stated desire of the government to encourage young people to take part in democratic political and civic life [CYPU 2001b]. Cockburn (2005) suggests that, in reality, participation is often little more than a form of consumer survey, seeking children’s and young people’s views on services that they use, as Clark and Percy-Smith (2006) suggest, to give the illusion of children having a voice and to meet the requirements of social policy initiatives. Kelley (2006: 39-40) puts it more starkly:

When we consult with children and young people, or indeed with any stakeholders, we are rarely participating in an open process of knowledge formation. Typically, we are seeking a response to or endorsement of an idea that already exists, one that we may be to a greater or lesser extent committed to.

Kelley’s criticism is illustrated through the consultation process on Every Child Matters, which was dependent on children and young people firstly coming into contact with the opportunity to respond, and secondly being willing and able to read the paperwork. Opinions were sought on proposals and questions were phrased in a way which made any open discussion difficult and which required some in-depth knowledge of systems and procedures in order to give an informed response. Badham (2004) recognises the tension between this and genuinely devolving power to children and young people. Jans (2004) refers to this form of participation (for example, youth parliament, school councils, children’s committees) as ‘system participation’: a model of democracy that has been transferred to children but with limited effectiveness because of the lack of political rights that children hold. Cockburn (2005: 114) states that membership of school councils ‘tends to be by the usual selected students who are close in belief and attitudes to teachers’. Middleton (2006), writing of her experience as a member of several youth participation groups including the DFES Children and Youth Board, says that despite feelings on the part of some youth participants that the process lacks commitment and can be tokenistic, her overall view is that the trend should continue, with more emphasis on the quality of the participation methods and more involvement from children and young people themselves in designing the processes of participation, and she also calls on more young people to participate. Kelley (2006) suggests that it is worthwhile engaging children and young people in system participation, but that the discussion needs to begin earlier and be open and emergent, based on ‘open knowledge’ systems, which may yield a more authentic picture of children’s views.

As an alternative to this systems model of participation, Jans (2004) proposes a life-world model. Key components of children’s lives are being playful and making meaning of their worlds; these form the basis of their interactions with, and influences upon, their environments. Autonomy, power and control are key characteristics of free play, together with the necessity for cooperation in order to keep the play going. Jans suggests that children’s playfulness is a ‘child-sized’ form of citizenship, it is children’s way of engaging with their worlds and, for true participation of children, this needs to be recognised. Skivenes and Strandbu (2006: 13) make a useful distinction between ‘child participation’ and ‘child perspective’, commenting that there is a need for a clear understanding of what is meant by this in order to avoid what they term the
Play for a Change

‘benevolent child saver discourse’ and recognise instead that ‘children are seen as individuals, with opinions, interests, and viewpoints that they should be able to express’ (Skivenes and Strandbu 2006: 12). This should involve recognising children as members of society in their own right, whilst accepting that special attention needs to be paid to their specific worldview and life experiences and also to understanding what children are communicating. This requires looking beyond the words spoken by children in order to try and understand the meanings of children’s communicative attempts to express the world as they see it. Viewed in this manner, children’s participation becomes much more than adults asking questions and recording children’s answers.

When consulting children about play, a number of potential obstacles can be summarised and applied from the literature: our tendency to try and apply adult rationality as the benchmark of assessing competence (Archard 2004); our desire to maintain our power as adults (Badham 2004); the confusion of a civic engagement agenda with one of authentic participation (Badham 2004; Jans 2004); our lack of understanding of what children are saying because we are hearing it through adult ears (Skivenes and Strandbu 2006).

A number of playful ways of involving children in sharing their ideas about their play spaces have been developed. Devonplay’s Playing for Real™ (Wood and Korndorfer 2005) involves a range of participatory techniques, particularly building models. Halden and Anastasiou (2007) describe the mixture of playful model building and parliamentary democracy that led to designs for adventure playgrounds where the children were involved in the fundraising, designing and building, using the company Design + Build Play. Clark and Moss (2004) have developed the Mosaic approach which combines traditional observation and interviewing with a range of child-centred participatory methods such as use of cameras, map-making and child-led tours. From their pilot study involving three and four-year-olds in the process of changing their outdoor play space, Clark and Moss (2004: 1) identified three key elements to the success of this approach: ‘the time and patience required to gather young children’s perspectives, the value of group work, and the importance of making children’s perspectives visible to adults with the power to bring about change’.

Burke (2005) also shows how it is possible to use visual techniques as an approach to developing an understanding of how children view their environments, which reflects children’s own perspectives and allows for ‘children’s specific ways of seeing to be evidenced’ (Burke 2005: 28) and that ‘recognises that young people are experts in their own worlds’ (Burke 2005: 30). The technique used by Burke and colleagues was to engage children (aged between seven and 11 years) as researchers rather than objects or subjects of research, giving them the autonomy to record their own lived experiences. Children were given cameras, were comprehensively briefed and asked to record where they played over the period of a week. The pictures were used in conjunction with conversations about their significance. Burke draws three key conclusions from the research. Firstly, children are capable of collecting and describing data that reveal their own lived experiences. Secondly, visual methods can engage children in talking about the meanings they attach to places and experiences. Thirdly, Burke (2005: 50) draws an interesting conclusion about the perception adults have of contemporary children’s play:

… this project presents a picture of urban childhood in the 21st century at odds with conventional adult popular opinion. In spite of enormous barriers posed by the adult-centred built environment, children will play in ways that resemble features of play known to past generations in the UK and to contemporaries in urban environments across the globe. This work challenges the popular opinion, voiced so often by parents, grandparents, teachers and other adults concerned about the condition of modern childhood, that ‘children do not play like they used to’.

This would appear to present a picture of children’s play patterns which is at odds with other forms of evidence (for example, Lacey 2007a; Lacey 2007b) that show a decline in children
playing out. It is of course perfectly possible that children’s outdoor play has declined but perhaps not to the extent or in the way that adults perceive it to have done. Details of children’s play patterns are addressed in Chapter 4; the purpose of including this example here is that when children are given ways of researching their own lives, the results will often present a picture different from that expected by the adults (or from a picture derived from merely asking questions).

However, even these participative, child-led and playful ways of involving children can at times, whilst well intentioned, still be tokenistic. MacIntyre (2007: 27) offers a personal reflection ‘of one playworker on how easy it is, despite the best of intentions, to get caught up in the heady world of adult agendas such as consultation, participation, targets and outputs’. Working with children to design and build playgrounds had seemed like a highly participatory and democratic process respecting children’s right to have a say. Yet there were a number of contradictions between this approach and the principles of playwork. Asking children what they wanted had, at times, led to simplistic responses and the creation of facilities that the children ended up not using, preferring to play in more flexible ways elsewhere. MacIntyre suggests that playworkers need to understand about play and be able to talk about what is happening in the playground as well as asking children. Focusing on the end product of the creation of a playground could ride roughshod over the process of playing, and create fixed aspects of the environment over which children had little control once they were complete. Sometimes, the focus on fun and the pressure for fast results did not allow time for the development of a range of ideas. MacIntyre suggests that playworkers should use Hughes’ (1996b) model of IMEE: using Intuition, Memories of our own playing, Experience of what works with children and Evidence from the research and literature to inform planning for play.

The themes of engagement and antisocial behaviour are addressed by Brothwell (2006), in her report of a project looking into the validity of youth shelters as a form of intervention. There was evidence to show that spaces for young people to congregate did have some value, although this was dependent on both social context and where the shelters were sited. The project then worked with groups of young people to design and construct youth spaces (a term that was felt to have more value than ‘youth shelters’). The underpinning philosophy was of engagement in the creative process across a range of young people and professionals (architects, artists, youth workers and others) and of ‘“designing in” creativity to public space rather than … “designing out” crime’ (Brothwell 2006: 26). The emphasis on creativity helped to generate a different relationship between the professional adults and the young people, one that was not always comfortable:

Their creative dialogues were unrehearsed, allowing for the unexpected, and challenged perceptions of normality. They embroiled young people in a new pattern of ‘anarchic’ behaviour, not as perpetrators, but as creative co-conspirators.

(Brothwell 2006: 26)

CABE Space (2004) also found benefits in involving young people in the design and care of public space. Through 14 case studies of involving children and young people in projects including public parks, adventure playgrounds, skate parks, gardens, wild space and ‘slack space’, CABE Space highlights the involvement of children and young people in public space as a right and as a benefit, both for children and young people themselves and for the wider community. Engaging children and young people in decision-making about public space helps to develop respect for different members of the community and for the opinions of others. It leads to ‘buy-in’, as young people have useful knowledge about how space is and could be used. The research showed that children and young people can be both keen and competent, that they ‘can understand and discuss complex issues. They are capable of judging risks, taking decisions and making things happen. They are often concerned about local issues and the needs of other people, and are keen to do something to make a difference’ (CABE Space 2004: 36). The skills and confidence gained in involvement in this process also help children and young people in other areas of public life.
Providing opportunities for play

Children play anywhere and everywhere, and public provision for children to play includes removing barriers to playing in public spaces, supporting play in children’s services such as schools and hospitals, and unsupervised and supervised dedicated play settings. In their development of play indicators, Play England (2008) devised a framework for classifying play opportunities for children along two axes: unsupervised/supervised and dedicated/undedicated spaces for play. It needs to be recognised that these are not absolute categories: what constitutes supervision can range from no supervision at all, to informal supervision (for example, local houses overlooking a play area) to supervision by children’s carers through to supervision by professional staff, all of these varying at different times of the day, week or year. Such levels of supervision can exist in places that are both dedicated to children’s play or part of the general environment; spaces can have different uses at different times of the day or year. However, despite these blurred boundaries, this matrix provides a useful way of grouping the evidence from the literature on play provision.

(Largely) unsupervised places for play

*Getting Serious About Play* (DCMS 2004: 10) states that:

most play does not take place on sites formally designated as play spaces … The visible presence of children and young people making harmless and inoffensive use of public spaces is a sign of a healthy community.

Playing in the street

For many years the street was the place where children played, and many children still play in the street today, although it is almost certain that the numbers have declined (Gill 2007a). Research by The Children’s Society and the Children’s Play Council has shown that two thirds of children still like to play out on a daily basis with their friends, yet 80 per cent of children aged 7 to 16 have been told off for playing out, 50 per cent shouted at and 25 per cent of young people aged 11 to 16 have been threatened with violence. Nearly a third of children aged 7- to 11-years said that being told off stops them playing out (PlayToday 2003). More recently, further research as a part of the Good Childhood Inquiry found that ‘children’s freedom to play out with their friends is being curtailed by adult anxiety about the modern world’ (The Children’s Society 2007a). Research for Playday 2007 *Our Streets Too!* on street play found that ‘71 per cent of adults report to have played in the street or area near their home everyday when they were a child. This compares to only 21 per cent of children today’ (Lacey 2007b). Whilst there is plenty of evidence to show a decline in children playing out in the street (outlined in Chapter 4), such a steep decline in numbers playing out is in contrast to ethnographic research using participatory methods that record children’s lived experiences of playing out (for example, Ross 2004; Thompson and Philo 2004; Armitage 2004; Burke 2005). The discrepancy may be explained both by the different methods used to capture data (for example between what children and adults say happens and what actually happens) and also to the complexity of the nature of playing out.

The decline in street play can be attributed to a number of factors; Gill (2007) highlights two: the dominance of the car (both moving and parked) and adult permission and tolerance. The idea of home zones, developed from the Dutch ‘woonerf’ model, has been gaining in popularity for the last 10 years. It is based on the idea of the street as a social space, where ‘design and other measures come together to create streetspace where social uses are primary and car uses secondary’ (Gill 2007a: 8). As a result of the Children’s Play Council and Transport 2000 campaign for home zones, together with legislation placing home zones on a legal footing and £30 million of government money through the Home Zones Challenge launched in 2001, it is estimated there are now approximately 100 completed schemes in the UK (Gill 2007a).

Research from home zones both in Northern Europe and in the UK has found the following benefits (Biddulph 2001): increased social activity; wider ranging activity and children’s play;
more efficient use of carriageway space; a more attractive and visually diverse street scene; increasing levels of communication between drivers and pedestrians; reduced driving speeds; greater levels of safety.

The Home Zones Challenge Fund approved 61 applications across 57 local authorities (DfT 2005a). The final report (DfT 2005a) includes key lessons learned about the process, including the importance of building on what already exists, and ensuring maximum participation (not just consultation) from the wider community in scheme development. Gill's (2007) evaluation of the London Play Home Zones project found that the development process can be very slow: so slow, in fact, that the length of the project was not sufficient to establish Home Zones in all the chosen areas.

The Challenge schemes are showing clear improvements in many of the social, crime and health aspects of residential areas that can provide incentives for other agencies to contribute to their development. (DfT 2005a: 24)

The Home Zones Challenge found that the main outcome of the successful home zones was a stronger community, that there was much more activity on the street and that people felt happier with their environment. Children were able to play in the street, whether formal play equipment was introduced or not, although there were some examples of where this caused tension, particularly as in some places there was a perception that the home zones attracted teenagers. Other benefits include a significant lowering of traffic speed and a reduction in crime. Longer-term benefits from these schemes have yet to be seen.

Gill (2007) asserts that home zones make a real difference to children’s lives, although, as the DfT report also states, there will always be a minority of people who find children playing a nuisance. Sometimes this will have an effect on the final design and effectiveness of a home zone. In addition, ‘retrofit’ schemes (that is, adaptation of existing streets as opposed to new build) is very expensive, and although the government supports the concept, there is currently no further targeted funding for their development. The balance of cost, either for national or local government, against the numbers of people benefiting can appear unjustifiably high, especially as in some places the development of a home zone has added to prices of privately owned properties. Given this, the transport charity Sustrans has launched a ‘DIY streets’ project with funding from the Esme Fairbairn Foundation to pilot much cheaper ways of redesigning streets in order to prioritise social over car use.

‘... for many years the street was the place where children played, and many children still play in the street today, although it is almost certain that the numbers have declined.’
The relationship between deprivation and child pedestrian accidents has been shown (Grayling and others 2002): children from poorer families are four times more likely to be injured or killed on the roads than their better off peers. The same holds for children in rural areas from lower socio-economic groups (Christie and others 2002). There is evidence to show that the decrease in child pedestrian injuries and fatalities since 2000 is more likely to be due to ‘withdrawing children from the … danger’ rather than ‘withdrawing danger from children’ (Hillman 2006: 64). In other words, parents who own cars now chauffeur their children to school and to out of school activities, increasing road traffic volume in urban areas and placing poorer children at greater risk. In 2005 around 80 per cent of the average distance travelled by a child was by car; 10 per cent by bus, five per cent on foot and only one per cent by pedal cycle (DFT 2007). In urban areas at peak times, one in four cars is on the ‘school run’ (DFT 2005b). Grayling and others (2002) also suggest that the child pedestrian accident rate is disproportionately higher for children in deprived areas because they more often use the street as a playspace, not having access to gardens or safe play areas. They report that traffic calmed 20mph areas are very effective and have reduced child pedestrian accidents by 70 per cent.

Research by the DFT on attitudes to streetscapes and street use (DFT 2005c: 1) found that if streets could be redesigned, ‘the three activities that most respondents thought should have priority were parking for residents, children playing and walking’.

Wheway (2007) also argues for a prioritising of children as users of residential streets. His research has shown that where traffic speeds are low, children play out. He suggests that the current strategies for tackling child obesity are based on a medical model, seeing the problem within the child and attempting to change children's behaviour: ‘Obesity in children is not a disease, yet the government, doctors, drug companies and many therapists are treating it as if it is’ (Wheway 2007: 26). An alternative environmental approach, through considering speed of traffic and street design, would be more in tune with children's desires to play out more and so regulate their own physical activity levels.

Appleyard (2005) reports on a project in California where cognitive mapping (Lynch 1980; Appleyard 1981) was used to assess children's connections to their local environment. Children were mostly chauffeured to school and could identify few local features and expressed dislike and fear of their neighbourhoods. Following the introduction of new walkways and stop signs, the studies were repeated and the children's stories and pictures showed richer and more positive connections with and detailed knowledge about their neighbourhoods and communities.

Alton and others (2007) also found that children's perceptions of their environments differed according to whether they were 'high' (42 per cent of the sample of 9- to 11-year-olds in Birmingham) or 'low' (58 per cent) walkers. High walkers were more likely to perceive traffic as dangerous but were less likely to be worried about strangers and less likely to report a lack of parks or sports grounds to play in nearby. The research also found that children from ethnic minority backgrounds generally, and specifically Asian children, were less likely to walk than white children.

CABE Space (2004: 8) highlights how important public space generally is for children and young people:

Parks, street corners, playgrounds, football pitches, pavements and open patches of grass and trees provide space for children to meet and play, to establish a world for themselves independent of their parents and to explore the natural and built environment around them and the people who live in it … It is not only parks and playgrounds that are important … Public space links together the space outside the front door with the playground around the corner or their friend's house across the road … These issues need to be considered at all stages of development.

Reay and Lucey (2000: 410) note that experience of public space is 'structured in all sorts of ways by broader social power relations, which include race, class and age as well as gender'.

In his consideration of the public policy implications for children's use of public space (streets and the wider public realm), the Rt Hon David Lammy MP (2007) identifies four benefits:
1. Being able to play freely and spontaneously in public spaces is what children want to be able to do. Creating playable public spaces is a highly effective way of increasing physical activity as a way of counteracting the rise of childhood obesity.

2. Playing out helps to create an ‘encounter culture’ where members of the community meet each other, with benefits for citizenship and community cohesion.

3. Contact with the natural outdoor environment has health benefits for children and also helps to develop respect for and an interest in the environment.

4. The enjoyment of playing out is of value in its own right.

Several local authorities run street play projects in school holidays where teams of playworkers organise street games sessions in residential areas; however, given the timing and scope of this review, direct contact with local authorities was not possible and so little documentary evidence was available. These projects often run in tandem with play sessions in parks and other public areas; the section below considers the work of these play rangers.

**Playing in play areas, parks and other public places**

Woolley (2006) notes that, following a period of neglect, there has been a revival of public policy interest in the importance and benefits of public open spaces in the last decade. Academic research on children’s use of open space has been increasing in the last 40 years and is covered in Chapter 4. Kelley (2006) lists key documents that have informed policy-makers on children’s use of open public space for their play (for example NPFA and others 2000; Cole-Hamilton and Gill 2002; Warpole 2003; Thomas and Thompson 2004), saying that these have helped to highlight the benefits of play for children and society and the importance of children being able to use public open space for their play and informal recreation. Woolley (2006: 49) sees this as cause for optimism, particularly in the light of funding for play provision through the Big Lottery Fund, and states:

> If such research and funding is used wisely and creatively there is the opportunity during the forthcoming years to provide exciting and challenging play opportunities for children and young people in our open spaces.

Much of the evaluation literature on play areas is concerned with the process of making improvements through neighbourhood initiatives. There is little on the use of these areas following improvements.

Barraclough and others (2004), in their evaluation of delivering improvements to play spaces in New Deal for Communities areas, found that poor public space, and lack of play space in particular, was a prominent issue for residents:

> The state of play spaces in many NDC areas is characterised by conditions such as poor maintenance, inadequate safety standards, poor provision for a range of different needs, inappropriate locations and problems associated with antisocial behaviour and crime. (Barraclough and others 2004: 1)

Although their study was small scale (eight NDC areas, with an in-depth case study of two areas), a number of generalisations were drawn in terms of the success or otherwise of play area improvement schemes. These included a recognition of the need for well-designed and well-maintained play spaces for a range of children and young people (including provision for disabled children); consultation needed to be specific rather than abstract, and to employ a range of approaches in order to engage a range of stakeholders, including older people; the relationship between engendering a sense of ‘ownership’ and lower levels of vandalism was unclear; a number of measures can be taken against antisocial behaviour including ‘target hardening’ (for example, locking gates in the evening to deter older children and young people from certain spaces), good maintenance to avoid further vandalism, appropriate location, robust equipment and use of neighbourhood wardens and community policing.
Similar themes emerged from Kapasi’s (2006a) report of work with five community groups to pilot a guide and set of resources (the Neighbourhood Play Toolkit) to support the improvement of public neighbourhood play spaces and services for children and young people. A further aim of this project was to develop local community capacity and cohesion that could continue beyond the life of the project. Kapasi also reports the importance of taking a structured and flexible approach that can both stay focused and respond to unexpected events; the necessity of involving all stakeholders from the start; the need to keep consultations real and the benefits of having ‘quick hit’ results (for example, minor improvements, trips, play sessions) to maintain interest and morale. The project succeeded in terms of achieving ‘new play areas, playschemes for older children, mobile play opportunities and funding for a new community centre’ as well as other benefits: ‘increased confidence in the individuals and groups who took part; greater cohesion in communities; less conflict, particularly between different generations; increased skills and knowledge in the groups; more partnerships between agencies’ (Kapasi 2006: 22), although the report does not specify how these concepts were defined or measured. The report also notes that having a proactive approach and asking the question ‘How can we increase play opportunities for children?’ allowed groups to place children and their well-being at the centre of the process, rather than responding to children as being a nuisance or antisocial.

Children’s access to the natural environment has been shown to have a number of benefits that are outlined in Chapters 3 and 4, although what constitutes ‘natural’ is open to question (Lester and Maudsley 2006). A growing awareness of the importance of access to the natural environment for children and young people is reflected in a number of projects. Ward Thompson and others (2006), in their report for Natural England, carried out an analysis of over 70 self-evaluated projects working with young people in wild places in both urban and rural contexts. Whilst noting the lack of robust evaluation of the benefits of these projects, most of which offered structured activities, the report notes that project managers identified a number of benefits, including personal development (for example increased self-confidence and independence), skill acquisition, development of social skills and team building, widening of horizons, environmental awareness, social tolerance and changes in behaviour.

As described in Chapter 4, Milligan and Bingley (2004) found young adults’ ideas about woodlands varied from being spaces for adventure and refuge to places of fear. Young people sought safe outdoor places to relieve stress, and said that visiting woodlands can have therapeutic benefits, although use of woodland as a place of refuge in times of stress was dependent upon, inter alia, positive childhood play experiences in woodland. The report suggests

‘Being able to play freely and spontaneously in public spaces is what children want to be able to do.’
that there is a role for adults in creating spaces to play in woodland where children feel safe. A number of projects that facilitate children's access to woodland are emerging, including the Growing Adventure project, the Woodland Playcentre and Forest Schools, with more projects focusing generally on children's play in the natural outdoor environment (such as Wild About Play, Wildplay, Wildwise); these vary regarding the focus on free play or environmental education.

Gill (2006) reports that the Forestry Commission supports children's play in a number of ways, for example through providing play spaces, trails and activities for children and families, as well as the opportunity for free play in woodland. The Forestry Commission's Growing Adventure project sought to offer 'ladders of engagement' providing graduated opportunities to stimulate and extend young visitors' self-directed interactions with woodlands' (Gill 2007a: 4) through focusing on three areas: nature play spaces; environmental play programmes; and independent play in woodlands. Recognising that not all children would be comfortable, or allowed, to play independently in woodlands, the Growing Adventure project sees more specific play provision such as play areas and supervised activities and playschemes as a stepping stone towards a culture that accepts children's independent playing in woodland.

Forest Schools have developed in Britain from a Scandinavian idea that sees contact with the natural environment as important from an early age. It is an educational approach aimed at whole child developmental and educational outcomes. The English network for Forest School describes it as 'an inspirational process that offers children, young people and adults regular opportunities to achieve, and develop confidence and self-esteem through hands-on learning experiences in a woodland environment' (Murray and O'Brien 2005: 11). The approach emphasises the importance of freedom to explore using multiple senses and so play features significantly, despite the educational underpinnings. As children become more familiar and confident with the woodland environment, they are supported in leading their own play and activities. The evaluation of Forest School across three counties of England (Murray and O'Brien 2005) found that the freedom, time and space to experiment in and play with the woodland environment contributed to a number of positive outcomes, including improved confidence, language and communication, motivation and concentration, knowledge and understanding, and new perspectives for both teachers and pupils.

The Wild About Play project in the south west of England was funded by the Better Play programme and ran from 2002-2005, aiming to support, develop and promote opportunities for children to play freely in and around wild spaces. The project carried out research into the children's experiences of and aspirations for environmental play, and also the experiences of adults working to support this. Findings from the children's survey showed that playing in woodland, fields, rivers or hills is relatively uncommon, with nearly three quarters of children saying they had never made or cooked on a fire and fewer than half saying they had built dens or climbed trees (Maudsley 2005). The survey of playworkers, and the work of the network itself, showed a genuine enthusiasm for working outdoors with children, with barriers being lack of access to wild places, health and safety concerns and lack of confidence; enablers were identified as training, information and support both for those working to support playing in wild places and for others such as parents, managers and funders. Maudsley (2005) highlights some examples of good practice across the south west of England, including the Wild and Away annual conference for playworkers.

Play rangers

Much of the time, play in parks and local play areas is unsupervised, other than by parents and carers, and informal levels of supervision. In the last decade there has been a growth in the number of 'detached' playworkers whose main aim is to support children in accessing their local parks and other open spaces, where fear of older children or other adults using the park, lack of parental permission, lack of will or other factors, have prevented this access. Both parents and children express high levels of fear of bullying in public parks and playgrounds (Bath and North East Somerset Council 2006). One example of such a service is the Community Play Ranger service in Bath and North East Somerset, whose main aims are defined as 'to encourage children to play outside and make more use of parks and open spaces all year round; to reduce
children's fears of bullying; and to help children to feel that they have someone to listen to their needs and turn to for advice’ (Rees-Jones 2007: 6). These aims draw directly from the top issues highlighted by children in a consultation carried out in 2002 by the local Children’s Fund Board to find out what made children happy and what would improve their lives. Follett [2007] outlines the key philosophy behind the Community Play Rangers as being to work with communities to facilitate children’s access to public open spaces, using both community work and playwork skills. Working all year round allows for more stable relationships to be built between playworkers and children than could take place within temporary playschemes and, in addition, the scheme responds to children's stated desire to play outside. The project began with funding from Better Play, grew with funding from the Children's Fund, and a discrete training course for Community Play Rangers is currently being developed by Playwork Partnerships (based at the University of Gloucestershire) and Wansdyke Play Association, the current managers of the Community Play Ranger Service in Bath and North East Somerset (Follett 2007).

Those responsible for public provision for play need to recognise children's desire and need to play anywhere and with everything (Ward 1978) and think beyond 'places for children' to 'children's places' (Rasmussen 2004). This may be little more than a question of attitude, as the case of the staff and management at Somerset House in London shows. As described in Melville (2004), 55 water jets (the Edmond J Saffra Fountain) were installed in the courtyard of these 18th century buildings. The jets rise and fall in computer-controlled patterns. The original intention was aesthetic but it has proved irresistible to children, young people and adults as a place to play. Melville (2004) says, 'Management is meticulous but unobtrusive ... though children's free play in the water was an unintended consequence of installing the fountains, the Trustees now actively support it.'

This section has considered public provision for children's play in public places, both in dedicated play places and in parts of the general environment. As described in Chapter Four, children and young people use their local environments in a number of different ways, playing in both designated and general places, with varying levels of adult approval or disapproval. Melville (2004: 2) decrives the tendency 'to circumscribe [children's] outdoor play with monotonously conceived, fenced "reservations" that are held to be safe. These reservations are to be found the length and breadth of the land, sad monuments to a widespread misunderstanding of what children want and need.' Gill (2007b) suggests that overprotection of children and the reframing of childhood and youthful boisterousness as antisocial or dangerous behaviour is harmful for children and presents obstacles to the development of resilience. He recognises that the culture of risk aversion is strong and well embedded, and that the move from a philosophy of protection towards a philosophy of resilience is not a simple one:

Opening up the public realm for children requires strong leadership and a willingness to overcome other imperatives and confront powerful opposing interests. (Gill 2007b: 82)

**Supervised play provision and playwork**

Some 132,730 people are employed in the playwork sector in the UK (SkillsActive 2006a) across a number of roles (for example, face-to-face playwork, management, development, training) and a number of settings (breakfast clubs, after school clubs, holiday playschemes, play centres, adventure playgrounds, play buses, parks and open spaces, prisons, community and religious centres, family centres and more) (SkillsActive 2005; SkillsActive 2006b). The role of the playworker is generally accepted as facilitating play for children and young people aged 4- to 16-years-old in their out of school time (SkillsActive 2006a). What this means in practice is the subject of some debate within the sector, and varies depending on setting, although there are National Occupational Standards for playwork that are underpinned by a set of Playwork Principles (Playwork Principles Scrutiny Group 2005). These Principles replace the Assumptions and Values drawn up in the early 1990s to accompany the first set of National Occupational Standards. They are informed by a number of publications including *Best Play* (NPFA and others 2000) and *First Claim* (Play Wales 2001), based on Hughes’ (2001) model of evolutionary
playwork. The underpinning principle is that play that is freely chosen, intrinsically motivated and personally directed is of evolutionary significance and essential to children's well-being and healthy development. Given this, the role of the playworker is one of creating a physical and social environment where children can play freely rather than organising and directing activities aimed at particular instrumental ends.

This presents a number of tensions for playworkers, parallel to but distinct from the debate about play in early years settings (see below), particularly around the extent to which playworkers intervene in or direct children's play. The evaluation literature on playwork practice is often framed by the need to show how supervised play provision contributes towards social policy agendas (for example Manwaring and Taylor 2006), and ‘Planning for Play’ (Children's Play Council 2006a) contains a section on how children's free play contributes towards the five outcomes of being healthy, staying safe, enjoying and achieving, making a positive contribution and achieving economic well-being (DFES 2004). Conway (2003: 103) suggests that playwork itself is an intervention aimed at compensating for the loss of play space in the general environment (through traffic, fear, agribusiness and other factors), yet is subject to being channelled into producing ‘educational, social and ultimately economic outcomes in the wider interests of a complex and fast-moving society’. He recognises the difficulty of playwork trying to ‘square the circle’ of recognising play as being freely chosen and personally directed when the playwork offer is only available in designated spaces and designated times, and of the tendency of playworkers to see the equipment and the activities as the core of their work, rather than the playing of children. The core of professional practice should be ‘the symbiotic relationship between [children’s] play and the playwork culture, in which children’s play shapes and drives the playwork response’ (Conway 2003: 113).

Yet, as Russell (2006: 6) states:

> Supporting children's play is not straightforward. Our ... tendency as adults is to protect, teach or socialise, and this construct of adult-child relations is deeply embedded in the current social policies relating to children and young people. In addition, children's play can elicit powerful feelings in us for a variety of reasons, which may in turn lead us to curb those play expressions that make us uncomfortable or anxious.

This can lead to a gap between theorising about playwork and the evidence base for these theories in practice, although there are signs that this is changing with some small-scale accounts of application emerging (see Russell 2006; Smith and Willans 2007; Hughes 2007 below and F Brown 2007). However, there is a need for more rigorous research into the relation between playwork theory and practice. Given this gap, it would seem appropriate to include in this section of the literature review, a brief overview of current theorising on playwork.

Three models of playwork are presented under the heading of ‘theories of playwork’ in Brown (2003): Brown’s ‘Compound Flexibility: the role of playwork in child development’; Hughes’ ‘Play deprivation, play bias and playwork practice’; and Sturrock’s ‘Towards a psycholudic definition of playwork’. Both Brown and Hughes take the line that playwork is a compensatory activity: opportunities for free play in the general environment are so restricted as to present a threat to children's healthy development, and sensitive playwork can help compensate for this lack. Brown’s model of compound flexibility describes a virtuous circle (or, more accurately a spiral) of flexibility in the environment, stimulating opportunities for play and experimentation, leading to development of self-confidence and self-acceptance which, in turn, develops the child’s adaptability and flexibility to respond to flexibility in the environment and so on. Play is a crucial element in this process. Playwork, therefore, should aim to create environments that are flexible enough to support this spiral of compound flexibility. Interventions are justified if they are at the request of the children: ‘the first rule of playwork is to work to the child's agenda’ (Brown 2003: 80). Drawing on previous research into play value, and the use of this research in therapeutic work with children in a Romanian orphanage (Webb and Brown 2003), Brown suggests 11 headings for assessing the play value of any setting: freedom; flexibility;
socialisation and social interaction; physical activity; intellectual stimulation; creativity and problem solving; emotional equilibrium; self-discovery; ethical stance; adult-child relationships; and general appeal.

Hughes [2003] suggests that playworkers can offer compensatory play experiences for children who experience play deprivation and play bias (a narrow band of play experiences resulting in a deprivation of other experiences). Such children may well display challenging behaviour, be withdrawn or engage in fantasy driven behaviour. Hughes proposes that a playwork response to this would be to offer play experiences that could balance the deficit, rather than more traditional behaviour management approaches. Hughes’ ideas on evolutionary playwork (described in detail in Hughes 2001) are drawn from a belief that play is an evolutionary mechanism and that playwork based on ideas of socialisation and induction into adult society can be counterproductive and may be unethical. The ideal context for the expression of the child’s biological drive to play is in adult-free environments; since these are increasingly restricted, evolutionary playwork seeks to support the play drive and to privilege this over societal agendas.

Sturrock (2003) also suggests that playwork can be healing, and draws on psychoanalytic theories to develop a particular understanding of the child at play and the playworker in service to the playing child. Children’s playing can be seen as a form of free association, an expression of latent material. Successful playing out of internal fantasies can help prevent the development of neuroses. Playworkers should develop an appreciation of the impact that children’s playing has on them, particularly in terms of their own unplayed out material. In understanding the deep symbolism of playing in this way, playworkers can engage with children to support the expression of this material, a process that can ultimately be healing [Sturrock and Else 2005]. Earlier work by Sturrock and Else [1998] introduced the notion that play takes the form of a cycle with six component parts and that the enjoyment children derive from playing out the full cycle is crucial to healthy development. The cycle takes place both in the internal world (the mind) and the external world of the child. The starting point they term the ‘metalude’, and this is the moment of imagination or daydreaming in the child’s mind which results in their issuing a ‘play cue’. This cue can be verbal or non-verbal and is an invitation to another child or adult, or to an object or the environment. Play cues are issued with the expectation of some kind of response: if a positive ‘return’ is made (either in terms of a person joining in the play or in terms of sufficient flexibility or interest from an object or the environment) then a ‘play frame’ is created. The play frame forms a boundary that separates what takes place within (play) from what is outside, and can be created by physical boundaries, rules, rituals and narratives as well as play faces and body language (metacommunication) which tells the players that this is play and not for real. Once the cue and return have been established within the play frame, then ‘play flow’ takes place; this is where the players become engrossed in the content, narratives, themes or exchanges of the play frame. Sturrock and Else term the sixth and final element of the play cycle ‘play annihilation’, and this refers to the moment when the players decide to bring the cycle to an end. Often this moment is misunderstood by adults who may see it as destructive and attempt to maintain the playing. Sturrock and Else go on to explore how the playworker can support children in their play cycles and they identify four levels of intervention whose sole purpose is to maintain play frames as long as the players desire them to be maintained.

Sturrock and others (2004) acknowledge the tensions faced by playworkers both from their own values and beliefs and also from the expectations of other adults (for example funders, managers, parents) on what their role should be with respect to caring for children. There are times when intervention is necessary, either to prevent serious harm or injury or to support the play. Given this, they propose that playworkers find themselves operating on a continuum of responses to children ranging from, at one extreme a ‘didactic’ response which seeks to teach and direct, through to a ‘chaotic’ response, which is either negligent or privileges the play desires of the playworker over those of the children. Poised dynamically between these two extremes is a ‘ludocentric’ response: one that aims to support children’s playing. These responses are behavioural; running in parallel to this behavioural continuum is an internal emotional continuum of responses.
Aspects of the work of Hughes and Sturrock and Else were applied in a study of how playworkers could work with children with challenging behaviour in two mainstream play settings (Russell 2006). In an action research project playworkers drew on a range of theories of children’s play, specifically theories relating to power and identity (Sutton-Smith 1997), the therapeutic value of play (Sturrock and Else 1998) and emotional health (Sutton-Smith 2003), to explore the relationship between playing, behaviour and the role of the playworker. The playworkers used tools drawn from playwork theories (play types and play narratives: Hughes 2002; play cues and play frames: Sturrock and Else 1998) to draw up play profiles of seven children displaying challenging behaviour. In facilitated group meetings, this information was used to develop a discrete playwork analysis of the children’s play and non-play behaviour, and to explore ways in which playworkers could support the play of these children rather than manage the behaviour. The playworkers reported that this allowed them to understand the behaviour that had been considered challenging in a new way, as part of a more holistic understanding of how each child plays. They then worked to develop ways of helping children to establish and maintain play frames where the desired narratives could be expressed in ways that did not disrupt the playing of others or threaten safety. Overwhelmingly, the playworkers felt more relaxed about the behaviour and, as a result, more able to respond ‘ludocentrically’. This, in turn, had a positive impact on the general, playful atmosphere of the setting.

Similar tools were used in a case study described by Smith and Willans (2007). Layla, a 10-year-old girl with Athetoid Cerebral Palsy and dysarthia, was perceived by staff and other children as naughty and spiteful. Using concepts such as play cues and play types, together with an understanding of modes of communication, playworkers were able to understand how Layla wanted to play and to respond to this, and through this to find ways of reducing her spitefulness that could be understood as frustration at not being able to play in the way she wanted.

Hughes (2007) reports on a project with Islington Play Association exploring how far environmental modification to adventure playgrounds can lead to an increase in locomotor play. ‘Dead space’ on the playground sites was identified, and instruments developed to measure its use for locomotor play through video recordings. New play structures were designed and built, with the intensity of locomotor play being measured post-modification in the same way as prior to modification. At the time the report was written, the project was ongoing, but early indications showed an increase in locomotor play of between 30 and 50 per cent, although it is recognised that novelty plays a key role in use and therefore may not be sustained over time.

*Best Play: What play provision should do for children* (NPFA and others 2000) has proved to be a key publication in terms of balancing the need to show both the instrumental and intrinsic value...
of play provision. The seven objectives for play provision articulate the importance of choice and control, and acknowledge that children's play can sometimes be challenging and risky. The first four objectives can be more easily assessed than can the last three, which tend more towards outcomes than objectives (NPFA and others 2000: 8):

1. The provision extends the choice and control that children have over their play, the freedom they enjoy and the satisfaction they gain from it.
2. The provision recognises the child's need to test boundaries and responds positively to that need.
3. The provision manages the balance between the need to offer risk and the need to keep children safe from harm.
4. The provision maximises the range of play opportunities.
5. The provision fosters independence and self-esteem.
6. The provision fosters children's respect for others and offers opportunities for social interaction.
7. The provision fosters the child's well-being, healthy growth and development, knowledge and understanding, creativity and capacity to learn.

These objectives, together with the values of playwork from the same publication, and the quality areas listed in Quality in Play (Conway and Farley 2001), a quality assurance scheme for play settings, have provided the theoretical underpinning for a collection of stories about playwork in practice (Head 2001). The introduction states (Head 2001: 3) that 'the stories show the reasoning, beliefs, commitment and imagination that underpin the development of the play environment and the people within it.' The stories show the micro-detail of supporting play, which is sometimes lost in the grand theories, definitions and focus on outcomes.

The Better Play Programme, a four-year, £10.8 million programme delivered by Barnardo's and the Children's Play Council in partnership with the New Opportunities Fund, funded 225 projects over three rounds. The programme aimed to encourage communities to take part in providing play opportunities for children to play safely within their neighbourhoods, particularly those from disadvantaged areas. The evaluation of the programme (Youlden and Harrison 2006) was carried out against both the programme aims and the seven Best Play objectives (NPFA and others 2000). Although the evaluation found that the case study projects met the Best Play objectives, there were some provisos and recognition that the objectives are open to interpretation. For example, not all of the six case study projects worked to a definition of play as being freely chosen, personally directed and intrinsically motivated; in these projects freedom of choice was understood as choice between activities rather than self direction. Youlden and Harrison identified four levels of choice within these two points, and concluded that even in the projects where playful activities were mainly adult-led, the children enjoyed themselves, but in the projects where children's play was freely chosen, the children were more effectively supported in developing independence and the children themselves felt respected and valued. They found that the quality and experience of staff were important factors in the effectiveness of projects and that:

the presence of skilled and experienced playworkers enhanced the range of choices children had and children were able to exert control [developed over time in many of the projects] through opportunities to state their preferences either through group consultation or through one-to-one communication with playworkers.
(Youlden and Harrison 2006: 6)

Youlden and Harrison also developed a tool for evaluating how far projects had met the Best Play (NPFA and others 2000) objective five ('The project fosters independence and self esteem'), based on an adaptation of the Rosenberg (1965) Self-esteem Scale and parent questionnaires. This, together with their evaluation of the degree of choice and personal direction within each
of the projects evaluated, contributed to the reliability of the findings, although the authors caution that the limitations of methods and data reduce the validity of any claims for cause and effect in terms of longer term benefit. Notwithstanding these limitations, the report found that although the six projects evaluated varied across four levels of choice and control (ranging from free play to adult controlled activities in which children were expected to participate), levels of satisfaction and development of independence and self-esteem were high, including in the projects catering for specific groups of children (for example, Traveller children, disabled children from Asian communities, and those affected by mental health issues or violence).

Creegan and others’ (2004) evaluation of the community play programme in Tower Hamlets devised a detailed framework of indicators and gathered data from children and young people, staff and parents, using a number of methods. Again, the Best Play objectives, together with programme objectives, formed the framework for the indicators. The evaluation showed a high level of enthusiasm and enjoyment on the part of the children. Variety was important in sustaining this, and the space available had a big influence on what took place within it. The level of ‘free play’ (children directing their own spontaneous play) varied both among and within projects, and there was a sense of more structured projects moving towards more free play over the time of the project. The playworkers talked about a range of ways in which children tested physical, social and behavioural boundaries. Boundaries were in place in all projects in the form of both formal and informal rules, with varying degrees of understanding about how strictly these would be enforced. Risk was accepted as an important aspect of playing that could not be factored out but which needed to be assessed and managed within this understanding. Playworkers were concerned about the compensation culture, but parents generally understood about risk and their confidence was linked to their trust in the playworkers. Both parents and playworkers felt that children were safer at the project than on the street. Creegan and others were able to gather some data and draw some positive conclusions regarding concepts such as confidence, well-being and respect for others; however, these are presented in a tentative and cautionary manner, with the recommendation that long-term evaluation with multiple and measurable indicators needs to be carried out.

Community involvement in play provision was also the focus of the Equipe-funded Cornwall Neighbourhoods for Change (CN4C) Playschemes on Social Housing Estates project (Pearce 2006). The philosophy here was to work in partnership with others to engage communities in local play provision. Initially this meant working with local tenants and residents associations to put on one-day play promotion events and then supporting interested local parents, volunteers and professionals through development work and training to develop playschemes and other play provision. The evaluation found that running the one-day events over three years was successful in brokering sustainable local partnerships, enabling some continuation of community-based play provision in areas of social housing beyond the life of the project.

Hunt and Kapasi (2005) also highlight the reciprocal relationships that can be fostered through involving people in local communities in developing or improving play provision in their areas, and suggest that effective support for this can have long term benefits both for children’s play provision and for community cohesion.

In Franklin’s (2002: 32) study of children, staff and parents at adventure playgrounds across Lambeth, Southwark and Lewisham, most senior playworkers interviewed said that their role involved ‘making sure they created a safe environment with stimulating activities.’ Yet the meanings of the words ‘safe’ and ‘activity’ are contextually specific here. The children said that ‘chatting and hanging around’ was the most popular activity, closely followed by off-site activities and using the play structures. Activities that might be perceived as more specific, if not structured, such as formal sports and arts and crafts, scored the lowest. In this sense, the term ‘activity’ is understood by the young people as covering everything you do, rather than something that has to be planned or structured; however, creating an environment where children can mix structured and unstructured activities still has to be planned. In terms of safety, it was recognised that risk taking is an inherent part of playing and that the playworkers had a complex responsibility in making judgements regarding the design of the
structures and the physical environment generally, and also in terms of the expectations of how young people behaved within the playground (the culture of the settings). For example, playworkers felt that many accidents occurred during children's first visit to the site, when they were unfamiliar with both the structures and the accepted ways of using them. The survey found that, generally speaking, the adventure playgrounds 'managed the balance between the need to offer risk and the need to keep children safe from harm' and that 'accidents, particularly serious accidents, were rare', although the need for greater consistency in recording accidents was noted (Franklin 2002: 36).

Manwaring (2006) gathered the views of children and young people aged 4 to 16 years who used supervised play provision (after school clubs, adventure playgrounds and holiday playschemes). Though urging caution due to an inevitable adult interpretation of children's own views, she extracts a number of key themes from the focus groups. In terms of what children want from a play setting, Manwaring (2006: 6) summarises the most important factors as:

freedom, choice and control over what they chose to do, space to do their own thing and access to the outdoors, a variety of toys, equipment, trips and things to do, friendships with other children and their relationships with staff. In discussion, all the children across the different play settings agreed that they wanted freedom and choice and ultimately to play and have fun.

The Venture, an adventure playground in Wrexham set up in 1978, has managed to respond to social policy initiatives and still retain the central ethos of its core purpose as an adventure playground. Brown (2007) describes how the playground has, over its 30 years, received funding to run specific projects (for example, Intermediate Treatment, a mentoring programme, sports funding for a multi-use games area) alongside the core work of the adventure playground, including in their project funding bid a sum of money to pay towards the core. Such an approach works because of other factors, for example, the involvement of staff in local politics (as councillors and chairs of key committees), genuine involvement of children, and being rooted firmly in the local community. The Venture works with an explicit core philosophy:

‘The children said that “chatting and hanging around” was the most popular activity, closely followed by off-site activities and using play structures.’
Give children a safe, staffed, open access play environment and they will not be able to resist the temptation to play. It is assumed at The Venture that children are biologically predisposed to playing, and once they start, their whole life is affected. The most fundamental lesson from practice is that play works.

For the staff at The Venture, play is the base from which their relationship with the child and the community starts. Even today, when the project has become multifaceted, play is still the core activity … Justifying this to external funding agencies can sometimes create problems, and it is tempting to take refuge in simplistic justifications such as crime reduction, social inclusion, educational attainment, etc. However that would undervalue something the staff regard as the focus of their work. [F Brown 2007: 24–25]

Brown [2007: 25] lists a number of values and principles underpinning the work of The Venture, including a fundamental child-centred approach which includes enabling children to create their own play space; being non-judgemental and non-stigmatising; avoiding ‘adulteration’ of play; working with and not giving up on the most challenging children and young people; employing home grown staff; community involvement; and reflective practice.

Out of school care

A recent survey of the playwork sector found that most respondents worked in settings ‘either based on school premises or connected with schools in some way’ [SkillsActive 2006b: 12], although the open-ended nature of responses made it difficult to give a precise figure. The assumption here is that these settings are childcare settings; the unprecedented growth in out of school childcare [Barker and others 2002] has taken place alongside a reduction in open access play provision [Head and Melville 2001; Hallsworth and Sutton 2004; Play England 2006]. Barker and others (2003: 8) note that ‘schools are becoming increasingly significant sites for the location of after school clubs’. Their research shows that relationships between out of school clubs and the school in which they are sited vary, with some clubs having separate accommodation, philosophy, staff and administration (and one where children changed out of their uniform) to others being fully integrated into the school, with curriculum-based activities and sometimes with children calling staff by their surname. This has an impact on the ethos of the club and particularly on children's relationship with staff. Where the out of school club had a different philosophy to the school, playworkers saw this as positive, as a break from the demands of academic achievement and a chance for free play. Some children found the switch from school to out of school difficult, particularly if some of the staff worked both in school and in the out of school club. Barker and others’ assessment of the impact of out of school care is based on the social, educational and economic benefits and on barriers to accessing services. The impact was found to be generally positive (yet sounding a note of caution on the difficulties of attributing impact to the out of school club as distinct from other aspects of children's lives). Although it is acknowledged that children do play in out of school clubs, and that many value their out of school clubs because of this, no judgement is made in this report between the relative value of clubs that support free play and those that continue the school curriculum and a more formal academic ethos.

Earlier research by Smith and Barker (2000) highlights the role of out of school care in the increasing institutionalisation of childhood, and considers the power relations between playworkers and children in the negotiations of children's use of space and time within out of school clubs, finding that the wider school context has an influence on this. Although most children saw the out of school club as a place to play, most of the activities offered were planned and organised by the playworkers. Despite this, the research showed that the children found numerous ways to contest ‘both the activities provided by adult staff and also adults’ control over the way space was used and structured’ [Smith and Barker 2000: 248]. Examples given were the ways in which children would adapt planned activities for their own play, and also the popularity of dens as adult-free spaces. Playworkers' responses to this were dependent on the age and gender of the children: the efforts of younger children and girls to control their own play were generally seen as innocent, playful, or as examples of playing nicely, whereas similar attempts by older boys 'were treated as a hostile attempt to subvert the workings
of the club’ (Smith and Barker 2000: 249). Playworkers also found themselves imposing the boundaries for behaviour that were expected of the school as a wider institution, even if these did not match their own understandings of the role of playwork. In some cases, teachers would carry out both covert and overt supervision of the playworkers and at times would take charge if they felt the playworkers were not controlling the behaviour of the children adequately.

Similar issues of control of space and time in out of school care are discussed by Mayall and Hood (2001) through the lens of children's participation rights. In their case study out of school club, children and young people were involved in its development and in determining the ethos and activities of the service. Mayall and Hood emphasise the importance of the informality of the service, and suggest that youth workers and playworkers are better placed to work with children in this kind of setting than teachers. They note that the service also catered for drop-in use, as well as formally arranged childcare, and that the level of drop-in use showed that the service offered something that children chose to use.

The research on children's own views on out of school care consistently shows that they value being able to socialise with friends and having control and direction over their own playing, they want to be able to play outside, they want staff that are caring, friendly, helpful and playful, and they want to be treated with respect and to have a say about how the club is run (Mooney and Blackburn 2003).

Smith and Barker (2004: 3) cite international research sources that show the following possible benefits of out of school care as being:

- the opportunity to play and make new friends in a safe environment,
- development of social skills and social competence, improved self-confidence,
- improved mental health outcomes, a reduction in problem behaviour in school,
- more positive relationships with schools and possible benefits in terms of raised educational attainment.

Yet they stress that the difficulties of showing any direct causality between these outcomes and out of school care itself in isolation from other aspects of children's lives. Their own small-scale qualitative research backs up the previous research in that it found that good quality out of school childcare ‘provides a safe, dedicated and well-equipped space for children's free play’ (Smith and Barker 2003: 7). Being with friends and making new friends was seen as important by children, and adults felt that this opportunity helped children to develop self-confidence and social skills.

The impact of out of school care on the economic status of families is clearer. The government's expansion of childcare is a key element of the commitment to eliminating child poverty. Smith and Barker (2004: 2) elaborate:

In order to measure the success of this policy the government has set a number of key targets, including a 70 per cent employment rate for lone parents, a 12 per cent reduction in the number of children living in what are termed 'workless' households by 2006.

As a part of this strategy, funding was made available from the New Opportunities Fund for out of school clubs in the top 20 per cent most deprived wards in England (New Opportunities Fund 1999, cited in Smith and Barker 2004). Using a questionnaire with parents, interviews with playworkers and a range of child-centred qualitative methods with children across six case study clubs, the research found quality provision can have a positive impact, both economically and socially and also in terms of providing opportunities for playing that would not otherwise be available. The greatest potential was for benefiting children and families at risk of social exclusion; however, since provision is not universal, and since access is dependent upon parents’ ability to pay, it is therefore not inclusive. The study found that those least likely to access the clubs were those living in deprivation and those from minority ethnic families generally, and, in these case studies, from Somali and Bangladeshi families in particular. For the children from
minority ethnic families, barriers were cultural as well as economic. Playworkers spoke of the concern at having to survive purely on fees, since this excluded families who could not afford the fees and did not qualify for tax credits. The research sample was small and only involved families already using out of school care.

Play in schools

Some aspects of the literature review on play in schools can be found in Chapter 3, under the ‘play and learning’ heading, particularly literature on the relationship between play and learning. Sources included in this section pertain more to issues of policy implementation, service provision and professional practice.

Extended schools

Childcare is part of the core offer of the government’s extended schools programme and the importance of children being able to play in these services is explicitly acknowledged (DfES 2005c). However, concerns have been expressed that the extended schools agenda has too heavy an educational focus (Barnardo’s 2006). It is recognised that extra curricular activities such as study support, sport or music tuition can benefit some children, but those who have negative attitudes towards school, dislike teachers, or whose home life is not supportive of study are unlikely to engage with study support (Education Extra 2003, cited in Barnardo’s 2006). Barnardo’s small-scale research compared qualitative data from out of school care in rural, suburban and urban settings in Denmark and England. Although schools had many resources that were underused out of school time, shared use presented a number of challenges. Independent facilities helped children to view the out of school care scheme as separate from school and freed the service [both staff and children] from school norms and culture, making for a more play-friendly space. Children in Denmark had more access to challenging outdoor play spaces than their counterparts in England. The research also found that:

> good play opportunities in English schools often relied on one highly motivated, very energetic personality … with a background in playwork. Where no such ‘personality’ was present, after school clubs tended to be less play focused and more controlled or ‘school like’, with fewer choices and fewer opportunities for children to control their play and activities. [Barnardo’s 2006: 5]

The research concludes that if extended schools want to engage those who are alienated from mainstream school culture, more thought needs to be given to making extended school opportunities culturally distinct from the core school day.

Davis (2007) cites the Rt Hon Beverley Hughes MP, Minister for Children, Young People and Families, as emphasising the importance of play within this agenda:

> … particularly but not exclusively for young children, play is a very important part of the concept of extended activities in schools. Indeed, the prospectus that we published made it clear that we want play to be an important aspect. Children should not just have study support and curriculum-focused activities at the end of the day; we want them to relax and unwind in a secure and stimulating environment. [Hansard, 27 April 2006]

Ofsted (2006, cited in Davis 2007) has recognised the importance of quality play provision within the extended schools agenda, of working with the play sector and employing qualified playworkers.

Pace (2006) carried out research with local authorities and key support organisations (4Children, ContinYou and the Training and Development Agency) across the south west of England, to make an early assessment of the potential for schools and partners to employ and train playworkers for appropriate extended school services such as out of school childcare. The findings include a shortage of playwork-qualified playworkers and possible recruitment difficulties, a need for transitional qualifications between early years and playwork, unclear funding sources for playwork training if outside of the Transformation Fund and unclear financial sustainability for out of school clubs.
Playtime and school playgrounds

Section 6 (1) of the Education and Inspections Act 2006 requires local authorities to ensure that primary and secondary education includes facilities for ‘recreation and social and physical training’ of children under 13 years of age. Concerns have been expressed for some time now regarding the tendency of schools to reduce children’s time for free play in school playgrounds both during morning and afternoon breaks and at lunch time. Armitage (2005) estimates that playtimes and lunchtimes in primary schools in England and Wales have been reduced by as much as a half since 1971; surveys carried out in 1995 (Blatchford 1998) and again in 2006 (Blatchford and Baines 2006) show a continuing reduction in time for breaks and, in the 2006 survey, the virtual disappearance of an afternoon break at Key Stage 2 and secondary levels.

In their survey of children and adults for the Good Childhood Inquiry, The Children’s Society (2007b) found that both children and adults felt that time to play with friends was important within the school day, and adults felt that there should be more time and less anxiety about children playing at school. Similar findings were also reported from the Primary Review (2007).

Research shows there are many benefits to playtime. Scott and Panksepp (2003) note from their study of children’s rough and tumble play behaviours that after a period of high energy activity, the children appear to reach a point of satiety and this may be a precursor to other forms of social interaction. They also comment that, as this point is reached, the brain/mind may become more receptive for participating in less vigorous social and learning opportunities, and perhaps ‘additional access to R&T play in young children at the beginning of a school day may have beneficial effects on behavioural inhibition and the ability of children to attend to lessons later in the day’ (Scott and Panksepp 2003: 549).

A US study by Holmes and others (2006) into the relationship between school recess time and four-year-old children’s attention in the classroom concludes that post-recess attention was greater following sustained outdoor play periods. Their findings support and parallel empirical findings with primary school children on the role of recess in children’s cognitive performance, and the conclusion of the research suggests that it ‘seems reasonable that outdoor recess breaks rejuvenate young children and help them attend to classroom tasks’. In making recommendations for policy, the authors suggest that brief, 20-minute periods of recess throughout the day are likely to provide the optimum benefit for maintaining classroom attention. Further support for Holmes and others (2006) is suggested by the findings of an international study of educational systems, which rank the Finnish schools as the world’s best,
based on students’ test performance. Among several distinctive features of these schools is the requirement for a 15-minute recess every hour with play opportunities (Alvarez 2005).

Pellegrini and Bohn (2005) establish a clear and positive correlation between playtime and cognitive performance and adjustment to school. They suggest a ‘cognitive immaturity hypothesis’ to explain how children’s tendency to believe themselves more able than they are (a belief that provides the motivation for learning) can become diminished during formal learning activity, and children’s ability to maintain a focus on structured learning tasks is subject to ‘interference’. Breaks during structured tasks can reduce cognitive interference and subsequently maximise learning achievements. Playtime enables children to regain a sense of control and mastery through their own self-directed and fantasy play, thus returning to school work with increased attention following a break for unstructured play with peers. This bears a similarity with Kaplan and Kaplan’s (2005) restoration theory in which their extensive research indicates that recovery from directed attention fatigue calls for different type of attention which requires no effort to sustain, namely activities that promote fascination and intriguing and meaningful action. Pellegrini and Bohn note that reduction of cognitive interference may require a substantial change in activity or stimulus materials before any benefits arise. Given this, instructional regimes or physical education programmes would not have the benefits associated with unstructured play opportunities.

Pellegrini and Bohn (2005) also highlight the importance of social exchanges between peers at playtime in making contributions to cognitive performance and a more general adjustment to school life. The qualities associated with establishing and maintaining successful peer relationships in play may buffer children from the stresses of early schooling. Longitudinal research carried out by Pellegrini and others (2004) demonstrates the importance of game playing in the playground in achieving and maintaining social competence with peers and adjusting to early schooling experiences.

Smith (2007) explores the key features valued by children in their school playgrounds. She notes that if the purpose of playtime is to provide an alternative to the teacher-directed regime of the classroom, children need to be self-determining in their activity, social contact and physical exercise; the play needs to stem from the children themselves and be under their control and for themselves. Any intervention by adults is counterproductive.

In the UK there is a tendency to restrict playtimes and to manage what time remains more directly, due to negative perceptions of playground behaviour (Blatchford 1998; Blatchford and Baines 2006). These perceptions include the rise in bullying and fighting in playgrounds, the potential for violent and racist incidents and general concern over behaviour in the playground that can spill over into school time (but see Smith and others 2002; and Armitage 2005 below). More recently, the notion that play is a distraction from the real work of schools has been expressed, most notably in the planned absence of a playground and time for play in the new Thomas Deacon City Academy (Hackett 2007), with the more familiar concerns over lack of control, bullying and truancy also being expressed. Adults also mourn the decline of children’s traditional games, citing this as the reason for a decrease in co-operation and an increase in aggression, although this is disputed by Bishop and Curtis (2001: 181): ‘detailed and extensive first hand ethnographic studies … have found a flourishing play culture despite dire warnings to the contrary’. However, a romantic notion of these games is unrealistic, and children are also just as likely as adults to be cruel and shocking in their play (Sutton-Smith 1997). Armitage (2005) cites evidence to show that adult concern over loss of traditional playground games and the rise in bullying and aggression is not a modern phenomenon but has been voiced for well over 100 years, with the cause being first school, then radio and cinema, and, more recently, television and computer games. He suggests that adults have a limited understanding of what actually takes place, and perceive playgrounds and play time as being ‘anarchistic, difficult to control and a place of negative learning experience’ (Armitage 2005: 538). Armitage illustrates how the architecture of playgrounds influences play in subtle ways, and how children are
capable of self-organising so that specific areas of the space are allocated to particular forms of play. Adult observations that football dominates playgrounds pushing other forms of play to the boundaries may be only one way of seeing the self organisation of space and play forms.

Other studies have expressed the potential of the school playground to compensate for children's dwindling opportunity to play outdoors. Factor (2004) asserts that the school playground is more central to children's play lives than the street, park or adventure playground. It has assumed the role of a principal social centre for children's play cultures. Wilson (2001: 3) claims that for most young children the first public space that they encounter and develop intimate knowledge about is the school playground. However Thomas and Thompson (2004: 32) note that, although 63 per cent of the educational site is out of doors, it is estimated that school grounds are used to only 30 per cent of their potential.

Thomson (2005) researched the way that adults control both the playground space itself and movement in that space. Although the general perception is that the school playground is not an adult space, ultimately the design of the space and the rules as to what can happen within it are controlled by adults. Adults speak of this control in terms of the benefits for children, either in relation to the range of opportunities available, or to their health and safety. Thomson found three kinds of adult-controlled spaces within playgrounds: places that were out of bounds or off limits (such as school fields or areas designated for specific ages); privileged spaces (such as gardens and specially equipped areas, often place that the children had helped to raise funds for, design and build) and prescriptive spaces (designated for specific activities). Children were usually aware of the rules, although sometimes these were arbitrary and inconsistent. Often children would monitor the actions of others and remind their peers of the rules. Just as frequently, however, children resisted the rules and renegotiated territories within the playground, sometimes covertly, sometimes through ploys such as wayward balls that needed retrieving, and sometimes in direct and playful opposition. For example, at one school children would 'take great delight in taunting the supervisors by jumping on and off the edge of the field, or walking with one foot on the grass and one foot on the tarmacadam' (Thomson 2005: 75-76).

Smith and others (2002) also draw attention to the role that adult perception plays in understanding playground behaviour; particularly with reference to children's rough and tumble play. They cite research (Schäffer and Smith 1996) which found that playfighting occupies about 10 per cent of playground time, whereas real fighting is much less frequent, occupying about one per cent of playground time. However, teachers and playground supervisors tend to view playfighting negatively, overestimating the proportion that is real fighting. Pellegrini (2002: 223) suggests that perhaps one of the key reasons for adults not tolerating playfighting is that 'until rather recently, developmental psychologists have confused and conflated play fighting with aggression'. However, behavioural studies of animal and human young have shown that they are separate and that the key role of play fighting, in early and middle childhood and predominantly amongst boys, is in social competence and co-operative interaction rather than dominance. In adolescence there is a shift into its purpose in establishing and maintaining social dominance (Pellegrini 2002), together with the benefits for brain connectivity and chemistry outlined in Chapter 3. Teachers' concern with playfighting is that they feel it is likely to end up as a real fight. Yet Smith and others (2002: 187) state that observational research shows that 'for most children, only around one per cent of play fights turn into real fights.' However, children who are frequently rejected by social groups often have difficulty understanding the play signals accompanying play fighting and confuse the playful with the real; for this group of children, about a quarter of play fighting episodes turned into real fighting. In adolescence, the incidence of play fighting turning into real fighting is also increased (Smith and others 2002).

Blatchford (1998) acknowledges that some children are left out of group games, are not successful in finding play partners and can be subject to bullying and aggression. He suggests that the extremes of intervention and control on the one hand and non-intervention and respect for independence on the other both have their difficulties, and points to ways in which the physical environment can be adjusted and whole school approaches to behaviour
can be introduced to reduce some of the more aggressive playground behaviours. Visser and Greenwood (2005) highlight the inadequacy of playground space and design and the withdrawal of government regulations for space and design of school playgrounds. They echo Blatchford’s dilemma regarding how far adults should intervene. Their research was into the effects of a moderately interventionist approach which sought to change the playground ethos through the introduction of games requiring structured rules and turn taking, and they found that teachers perceived a significant improvement; there was a reduction in minor disputes but little change in severe disputes. The promotion of playground games by adults has become popular within primary schools and is supported by the government through the Healthy Schools agenda and also through Playground Fun (www.playgroundfun.org.uk), a website sponsored by the Department for Culture, Media and Sport’s Culture Online initiative.

The Positive Playgrounds project in Northern Ireland (PlayBoard 2007, cited in Davis 2007) worked with lunchtime supervisors, teachers and children to enhance and support children’s play. The project found that there was an increase in children’s participation in playing and in activity levels; that bullying was reduced; and that attention in class increased.

Learning Through Landscapes (2006: 3) found that in a national survey of school grounds that had been redesigned, 73 per cent of schools who had improved their grounds reported that this had improved behaviour; 84 per cent that it had improved social interaction; and 64 per cent that it had reduced playtime incidents of bullying. Common problems with school playgrounds were found to be too little space; domination of large, uniform, open spaces by groups of older boys (usually for football); and boring environments. Involving the whole school in the design of playgrounds, finding out key trouble spots for bullying, and finding out what children want to do (rather than what equipment they want) can help in effective playground design. Key features should be allowing for a range of active, imaginative, social and quiet space, as well as walkways that do not conflict with bigger games.

There is a renewed interest in school playgrounds, brought about through a number of initiatives including the Growing Schools programme, launched in 2001, the government’s Learning Outside the Classroom (DFES 2006c), the Extended Schools agenda and the Building Schools for the Future programme, launched in 2005, which aims to rebuild or renew every secondary school over the next 50 years. In addition, Schools for the Future, Designing School Grounds (DFES 2006e, cited in Davis 2007) promotes the importance of play and physical activity both in the formal and informal curriculum:

Schools should provide ‘a variety of active play opportunity’ and define the space for active play, using ‘active features’ such as traversing walls, playground markings, fixed play equipment, temporary play equipment, ball walls, balancing beams, fitness trails, logs and stepping stones. (Davis 2007: 7)

Coombes (2006) reports on a number of schools working with other organisations to develop ‘natural, sustainable and fun play areas’.

Ridgers and others (2005a) researched into children’s physical activity during playtime in school playgrounds. Using a uniaxial accelerometer, they measured the moderate, high and very high intensity physical activity of 116 boys and 112 girls aged between 6 and 10 years during the breaks in one day. Calculating the results, they conclude that playtime can contribute to 28 minutes of boys’ recommended 60 minutes of moderate to vigorous physical activity a day and 21.5 minutes for girls. They recommend that interventions be considered to increase levels of physical activity. Ridgers and others (2005b) report on the Liverpool Sporting Playgrounds Project, part of a DFES and Nike partnership to invest £10 million into the development of sporting playgrounds across 600 primary schools in England. More than half of the schools involved did this through the Zoneparc playground (DFES 2006d). Playgrounds are zoned into red, blue and yellow areas designed to support particular activities: sport, activities and games, and chill-out zones respectively. Monitoring, observation and interviews with children generated data not only on the physical activity of the children but also on social behaviour; the range of playing, and attitudes towards their play. Data were gathered on activity levels for the
baseline, after six weeks, and then after six and 12 months. Variables notwithstanding, there
was found to be a significant increase in physical activity, but for most children there was a fall
off after about six months. Further research will look into ways of sustaining activity levels and also at the relationship between physical activity levels and play behaviours (Ridgers 2007).

There is a danger that redesigning playgrounds may unwittingly remove props for children’s
games that have been used for generations of children. Factor (2004) suggests that
redesigning and landscaping of school playgrounds needs to be sensitive to the special places
in playgrounds. She uses the concept of ‘playlines’, drawn from the Aboriginal concept of story
and songlines: invisible traces that mark out historically significant places. Children have similar
folklore and special places that have been used for generations of children in particular games
and play forms, including in school playgrounds:

Features of the playground never intended for play may be selected and stubbornly retained for a particular game, despite teachers’ disapproval. Children were not supposed to play near school entrances, but metal poles supporting a covered walkway between buildings at Woodlands were both a meeting place and a site for swinging, hoppy and chasey games. (Factor 2004: 147)

Concerns for safety and litigation, together with fashions in the kinds of playing that adults find acceptable, have taken their toll on the resources available to children for their play in playgrounds. Armitage (2005) also identifies special elements of school playgrounds that have served particular functions in children’s games for generations, for example the long black pipe used as a counting spot for chase games, that can often be unwittingly removed by adults in the name of playground improvements.

The National Union of Teachers (NUT 2007a; NUT 2007b) has published two documents under the heading Time to Play: a play policy and guidelines for implementation. The policy, which was developed following a debate at the NUT 2006 conference, recommends a review of the National

‘Concerns for safety and litigation, together with fashions in the kinds of playing that adults find acceptable, have taken their toll on the resources available to children for their play …’
Curriculum, in line with trends in Wales and Scotland, to incorporate play based approaches to learning and assessment. The policy also recommends that an audit of facilities for play, both inside school buildings and in school grounds, should be undertaken to inform the Building Schools for the Future initiative; that opportunities for informal play at breaks and lunch time should be enhanced; that local authorities should develop cross-departmental play policies; and that the government should fund an initiative to encourage imaginative play in education. With reference to the development of local play policies, the NUT (2007a: 14) recommends:

In order for such policies to be effective, clearly designated and ring-fenced funding must be allocated by local authorities for the provision of qualified and skilled play advisers to work with schools and other educational and youth service settings to develop excellent play provision for all children and young people.

Play and creativity in the classroom

In 2000, the review of the National Curriculum emphasised the importance of creativity. The Qualifications and Curriculum Authority (QCA) was charged with investigating how schools could promote and support children’s creativity. They carried out research abroad and at home into ways of nurturing creativity in the classroom, and have created a website for shared ideas and support for teachers [http://www.ncaction.org.uk/creativity/].

Creative Partnerships was set up in 2002 with funding from the DCMS and DFES and managed by Arts Council England. It aims to build partnerships between those in the creative industries and schools in disadvantaged areas to develop children’s creativity and schools’ approaches to creativity and partnership working. A survey of headteachers (Mackey and Ullman 2006) found that generally the involvement of Creative Partnerships in schools had improved pupils’ confidence, communication skills, motivation and enjoyment of school and that it had helped teachers take a more creative approach to teaching.

Banaji and Burn (2006), in their review of the literature on creativity for Creative Partnerships, identified nine rhetorics (a term they use to describe discursive frameworks) of creativity including the creative genius (only a few talented people are truly creative), democratic and political creativity (creativity is present in popular culture and the cultures of resistance) and creativity as an economic imperative (innovation, risk and flexibility of thought and action are necessary to compete in the contemporary global economy). One of these rhetorics is play and creativity, a pedagogic focus highlighting the connections between play, creativity and learning. Although some aspects of this rhetoric draw on the recent research in the cognitive sciences as explored in Chapter 3, it is predominantly based in ideas of divergent thinking, and of childhood pretend play as the precursor to adult creativity and problem-solving. As well as these individual benefits, there are also social links between play and creativity. Symbolic play involves a process of developing shared meaning-making with others.

There are some questions, however, regarding the parallels of play and creativity. The first is that definitions of creativity usually involve a product: something that is created, whereas end product is not a necessary part of playing, as the emphasis is on process rather than product. The second is that creativity necessarily involves novel combinations, whereas some aspects of children’s play cultures such as traditional games, emphasise continuity and repetition (Banaji and Burn 2006).

Howard and others’ (2006) research on the importance of appreciating what children actually value in their play experiences in the classroom as a prerequisite for developing appropriate play and learning experiences for children is described in Chapter 3. This research also indicates that the role of the teacher is crucial. A key value attributed to children’s perception of play in the classroom is the absence of the teacher from the activity. The involvement of the teacher in children’s classroom play ‘reduces the likelihood that children will perceive the activity as play’ (Howard and others 2006: 392). This matches research by Gmitrova and Gmitrov (2004) who note the beneficial effects of engaging in pretend play in their study of children aged between 4- and 6-years-old, but the benefits are far greater when children are allowed to develop their own pretend play rather than participate in adult designed situations.
Cremin and others (2006) researched pedagogical approaches to supporting creativity in the early years in the UK, placing this within the broad policy context of fostering creativity in the curriculum. ‘Possibility thinking’ (imagining what might be) is at the core of creative learning. Characteristics of possibility thinking are defined as: posing questions, play, immersion and making connections, being imaginative, innovation, risk taking and self-determination. The parallels with the characteristics of play generally are of note here. In their research with three early years settings (an early childhood centre, and infants school and a junior school) they explored key elements of teachers’ strategies for supporting creativity and possibility thinking. The results can be grouped into three elements: standing back (as a time for non-intervention and also of observation and noticing), profiling learner agency (supporting the children to take control of the activities, but also framing challenges) and creating time and space (not rushing or having a fixed end time, and making a wide range of resources available). Teachers would set up contexts and take the lead from the children, who showed high levels of self-organisation and engagement. Teachers would be available to support and extend, whilst not taking over.

There is currently a strong and perhaps at times confusing debate about the relationship between play, creativity and learning in the formal educational system. The UK government’s ‘cultural turn’ (Buckingham and Jones 2001) reframed the promotion of creativity, which had been the central concern of the report of the National Advisory Committee on Creative and Cultural Education (NACCE 1999). This report clearly outlines the importance of developing ‘human resources’ based on creativity, adaptability and better powers of communication. This entailed reviewing some of the basic assumptions that underpin the educational system. The report argues that new approaches are needed ‘based on broader conceptions of young people’s abilities, of how to promote their motivation and self-esteem, and of the skills and aptitudes they need’ (NACCE 1999: 9). At the heart of this shift lies creative and cultural education.

This has been further developed through Excellence and Enjoyment (DFES 2003c), yet alongside these announcements increasing emphasis on skills testing, targets and league tables appears to have constrained a more creative and innovative approach to education (Morgan and Kennewell 2006). However there are some signs that the rigidity associated with the national curriculum in England is also being relaxed. In the Excellence and Enjoyment strategy for primary schools there is recognition that ‘primary education is about children experiencing the joy of discovery, solving problems, being creative in writing, art, music, developing their self-confidence as learners and maturing socially and emotionally’ (Morgan and Kennewell, 2006: 308). Hartley (2006) questions the rhetoric of the Excellence and Enjoyment focus, stating that there is a fundamental contradiction between the two themes. Hartley notes the resurgence of ‘creativity’ in the educational policy discourse. From its maligned position in education following the 1960s, creativity is now seen as a primary force through which the country will be able to maintain a competitive economic advantage. The key emphasis throughout the policy is the notion of creativity for future employability. Hartley also comments on the inclusion of enjoyment, noting that enjoyment is an emotion which appears to be grafted on to the discourse of standards and performance. This leads to a highly controlled curriculum in which the emphasis is on ‘personalised standardisation: a personalised pick-and-mix of pedagogy and curriculum, but only from the standard menu, which is drawn up by the government’ (Hartley 2006:13).

Thompson and others’ (2006) report from a research project designed to explore the policy issues expressed in Excellence and Enjoyment notes a general change in attitudes to creativity within the school during the period of the project. Working with Creative Partnerships, the initial response from teaching staff in the primary school used in the research project was that their main priority lay with teaching the ‘3Rs’; the ‘arts’ were seen as marginal to classroom activity, although the teachers were reassured that there was an artist in residence within the school. The report highlights that the relationship between the school and visiting artists working with the children on a theme of identity and self-expression was restricted by the framing of this work as a ‘project’ with limited time/funding:

A pedagogy, in which children’s inherent competence and potential were taken as starting points, was continually compromised by the pressures of producing skills and
outputs. In addition, the project outcomes were not formally and rigorously assessed; they thus had little impact on the children's ongoing learning or the teaching that supported it. Products/performances were judged on their benefits for the school (assumed to be the same as for the child); they did not contribute to a formative understanding of the child's individual learning. (Thompson and others 2006: 6)

Witte-Townsend and Hill (2006), using narrative analysis based research, comment that an educational climate that supports teachers and children in the creative act of meaning making is a natural and important feature of classroom practice. However, they feel that the 'current prescriptive standards-conscious, numbers-driven practice that subjects young children to standardised testing also tends to insist that teachers follow only a few approved teaching methods and programmes' (Witte-Townsend and Hill 2006: 374). This inevitably constrains and limits teaching approaches to supporting creativity in the classroom through teachers being required to focus on pre-scripted materials that sit within very narrow guidelines.

Trageton (2005) reviews the changes to primary school education in Norway through the lowering of school entry age from seven years to six years, and the introduction of a national curriculum (1997). A key theme in the curriculum is the importance of children's free play for the entire primary school period. We can see a parallel here with much of the discourse about play and creativity expressed in other European countries (for example Lofdahl 2005). The educational policy changes in Norway are embedded in notions of the importance of both 'free play' and teacher designed structured play activities. Alongside this, staff are required to apply 'playful teaching' strategies. Within the revised curriculum, play is featured as a specific 'subject' to be included in daily teaching programmes.

The Primary Review

This independent review, supported by the Esmé Fairbairn Foundation and based at Cambridge University Faculty of Education, was launched in October 2006 and will run for two years. The review has three perspectives (children, the world in which they are growing up, and the education which mediates that world and prepares them for it) and 10 themes (six core themes of purposes and values; learning and teaching; curriculum and assessment; quality and standards; diversity and inclusion; settings and professionals; and four contingent themes of parenting, caring and education; beyond the school; structures and phases; and funding and governance). At the time of writing, the review is collecting evidence from academic research and from stakeholders.

Play England (Davis 2007) submitted evidence to the review which outlines the child's right to play and the importance of play in children's lives as well as the benefits of providing opportunities for play within schools, both within the core school day and the extended schools agenda. Davis cites research evidence showing how access to opportunities for playing can contribute towards all areas of school life and themes of the review. The response makes seven recommendations, including ensuring that play is considered in the Building Schools for the Future programme; that children can play out as much as possible; that play is integral to the extended services, including support for teams of playworkers to open up parks for children's free play as a part of extended services; and ensuring long-term revenue for play projects that offer children outdoor and physical play opportunities.

The first interim report, Community Soundings (Primary Review 2007) found widespread anxiety about pressures on children from testing and targets at school as well as from commercially-driven values in society generally. Children expressed concerns about the lack of safe play areas in their localities. Teachers felt that the curriculum was overstructured, rigid and overprescribed and that there was not enough time for play and creativity, and parents felt that at the start of primary schooling at least, there should be more time for play.

Play in early years settings

Some aspects of the literature review on play in early years settings can be found in Chapter 3 under the 'play and learning' heading, particularly literature on the relationship between play and learning. Sources included in this section pertain more to issues of policy implementation, service provision and professional practice.
Play England has published a literature review of free play in early childhood (Santer and others 2007). This section draws from and builds on this publication rather than replicating it. Santer and others highlight the lack of a coherent and well-defined understanding of play within current government legislation as well as a discrepancy between the ideology of the importance of play in the early years and actual practice, ‘rhetoric and reality’ (Santer and others 2007: 71), which is constrained by an emphasis on curriculum, attainment targets and testing. The focus of research and discussion on play in early years provision is predominantly on its relationship to learning and development, although within this there is an acknowledgement of the benefits for children’s social relationships and well-being in the here and now (for example Corsaro 2003). Santer and others outline recent government initiatives concerning provision for early childhood, including the introduction of the Foundation Stage (three- to five-years) in 2000, together with curriculum guidance; the National Standards for Daycare and Childminding in 2001; the Birth to Three Matters Framework in 2003; as well as initiatives such as Early Excellence Centres (1997-2006), Sure Start (1999-2006), the Neighbourhood Nursery Initiative (2000-2006) and the current Children’s Centres. Most recent is the introduction of the Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS), which sets standards for the learning, development and care of children from birth to five years and will become mandatory in all schools and Ofsted registered settings catering for children under five (DFES 2007). The EYFS principles are grouped into four interrelated themes: a unique child, positive relationships, enabling environments, and learning and development (DFES 2007: 8). ‘Play and exploration’ sits under the theme of learning and development.

Santer and others (2007) summarise the literature on the role of play in children’s development. If children’s playing is allowed to develop, it becomes more complex and demanding cognitively and socially. Play is of particular benefit in emotional and cognitive development. A number of themes in play are explored: gender; children’s own voices; cultural attitudes towards children and play; inclusion; play in children who are stressed, abused or ill; disabled children. Finally, the literature on the role of the adult in children’s play is examined in terms of sensitivity and attachment; observation; interaction with children at play and creating an environment where children can play. Whilst free play does contribute to children’s learning and development, the review also states that this is not the only way that children learn: there is also a place for adult-directed teaching activities in settings that have learning as a focus. Children also learn from those around them and from experiences that may not be play. The literature review highlights the tensions between different perspectives on play, both in academic research and in different areas of practice, as well as in differences of interpretation into early years practice. The review ends with a number of areas for consideration, including training early years staff in the benefits and support of free play; using practitioners as researchers; comparative studies of free play and adult-initiated play; and the need for a clearer understanding of terms used and the development of a coherent inter-professional approach to play.

Adams and others (2004) identify that, despite the recognition of the importance of play in the Foundation Stage, the pressures of the outcomes focus, the construct of children within the guidance, and a lack of strong understanding of the theoretical links between play and learning have led to a tension in practice between supporting (and justifying) children’s play and teaching to curriculum outcomes. Rogers (2005), developing the concerns within the Adams and others report, found that pressure to meet curriculum targets meant that opportunities for pretend play, particularly outdoors, were limited in reception classes. Rogers noted gender differences: although both boys and girls liked to play and draw around similar themes (for example, castles), girls’ play was mostly of domestic and nurturing roles, and the pictures were ‘pretty’, whereas boys played superhero and action roles and their drawing tended towards the more gory, despite teacher attempts to ‘de-gender’ play. Rogers emphasised that it was important to allow sustained periods of play without adult intervention so that complex themes and narratives can develop fully. The research identifies the need for teachers to develop a style of intervention that ‘extends and rejuvenates play, rather than constrains and frustrates it’ (Rogers 2005: 25).

Pramling Samuelsson and Johanssen (2006) suggest that the tendency to separate out play and learning is problematic for early years practice. Their study of playful interactions
between teachers and children suggests that playing and learning are interconnected and interdependent. Although the theorising implies discrete characteristics of play and learning, many are experienced as in common, including ‘joy, creativity, creation of meaning and possibilities to control and form goals’ (Pramling Samuelsson and Johanssen 2006: 54). Teachers play a key role in their support for play, from helping to set the scene and create material and physical frames for the play, through to sensitive participation in the play. Much of this is through playful interactions that signal a respect for children’s own playing.

Given the evidence of the value of play as a support for learning, the teacher must have an understanding of the play process and be confident in play as a teaching and learning medium:

Rather than planning activities that look like play, identifying the cues used by children when making categorizations enables us to plan activities that are likely to encourage a playful approach. Knowledge of these cues facilitates research into the developmental potential of play that could help to elevate its status as a medium for learning. (Howard and others 2006: 392)

Pramling Samuelsson and Johansson (2006) agree with Howard and others about the sensitive nature of teaching and supporting children’s play. They discuss the didactic aspects associated with the relationship between play and learning, and acknowledge that the influence of the teachers and the classroom environment can either promote or inhibit the integration between play and learning. In their review of early years education in Sweden, they note that play and learning may be different phenomena but that there may in fact be common attributes. Their research notes the potential benefits from teachers’ ‘genuine’ participation in children’s play within the classroom, as a positive message that play is important and valued and as a way of forming close and playful relationships with children. They illustrate this process in action through observation of child–teacher playful interactions and the reciprocal sense of joy and meaning making from these experiences. In developing this, the authors note the ways in which the intonations and gestures of the teachers maintain and value children’s playful experiences. Similarly, Witte-Townsend and Hill (2006) note that becoming aware of and accepting children’s invitations to engage in play enables teachers to move towards

‘... rather than planning activities that look like play, identifying the cues used by children ... enables us to plan activities that are likely to encourage a playful approach.’
a pedagogical approach that allows for shifting frames and references to provide new opportunities for meaning making. They tellingly note:

Children's light-ness of body and being and the sparkle of light in their eyes flourishes in classrooms where structure is generated for the sake of supporting meaningful engagement; depth emerges in relation to the opportunities an environment provides for engagement in an ongoing flow of life. When children ask questions like 'What would happen if ...?', they remind us that while we respond to the current pressure to have them produce ever higher test scores, we must not abandon the spark of light in their eyes or the way that lightness moves through their bodies. (Witte-Townsend and Hill 2006: 375)

However, this may present a problem for teachers who feel under pressure from parents to show that children are acquiring basic skills through didactic teaching methods (Howard and others 2006).

Farne (2005: 173), exploring the relationship between play and learning, notes that an appreciation of children's play suggests that the more natural and unstructured the environment is, the 'richer children's play is as an educational activity'. From this, the teacher is not someone who makes a child play but the one who offers an environment, time, and resources that are largely free from adult intentions to enable children to apply their own active imaginations. But, as Farne notes, the idea of children playing in an unstructured manner in a classroom causes great concern; it implies a sense of 'emptiness' that needs to be filled. Yet to the child, this openness represents a space which offers possibilities.

Released from all adult planning aimed at developing some specific playing opportunities, as well as managing them and controlling its outcomes, play expresses its most authentic educational dimension precisely when children can escape adult supervision and manage their own games following criteria based on freedom and negotiations established and shared within their own group. (Farne 2005: 176)

In looking at the use of play in the classroom, Farne suggests that play is the only field of experience in which children have the opportunity to be themselves and act accordingly, to make decisions and deal with uncertainty which may lead to conflict, controversial outcomes, interruptions and sudden shifts in action and emotion. Thus, it is not simply a matter of teachers using play in an instrumental form to meet some specific learning outcome but is more a matter of play being a 'category' or style; learning in the classroom becomes playful exploration, curiosity.

Guss (2005) comments that the drama performances of children's pretend play are not meant as a communication with anyone outside the child-cultural arena. Given this, Guss suggests that teachers study more closely what children perform when they are on their own. Given systematic aesthetic nourishment and models, and without direct adult intervention, some children can accomplish complex action and reflection.

David (2003), in a review of the research on approaches to teaching in early childhood, notes the shift from understanding child development theories as objective and universal, to an appreciation of socially constructed understandings of childhood that change over time and culture, and which therefore influence pedagogical theories and practice. She summarises studies of research into pedagogy at Foundation Stage and Key Stage 1, with the key findings relating to play being (David 2003: 8):

- Practitioners generally stressed their belief that play should be given a high priority but they have found this difficult to achieve in practice.
- Practitioners working at the Foundation Stage tended to lack the confidence, knowledge and training to teach aspects like literacy through play and they have been influenced by their fear of the assumed expectations of Ofsted inspectors.
- Adults enhanced children's learning through play when they helped them develop strategies for resolution of conflict.
• The most effective settings provided both teacher-initiated group work and freely chosen yet potentially instructive play activities.

• Settings rated as excellent tended to achieve an equal balance between adult-led and child-initiated interactions and activities.

• Children's learning and behaviour was enhanced in settings where practitioners modeled appropriate language, values and practices, praised encouraged and questioned, and where adults interacted verbally with children and encouraged socio-dramatic play.

David (2003) highlights the problematic nature of the relationship between play and learning in the early years, questioning some assumptions that learning will occur automatically through play. Citing the research of the Froebel Block Play Research Group (Gura 1992), she lists a number of conditions necessary to support high quality play, including: adult involvement; sharing the initiative between children and adults; enabling children to be playful and creative, and to take risks; creating an environment that maximises opportunities for learning; and observing and keeping records that can inform practice.

As they grow, children develop understandings of other children as intentional agents, and they begin to plan their play to take account of other children's intentions and needs in order to keep the playing going (Broadhead 2001). This raises the question of how adults support this peer process, which is often spontaneous and immediate. Effective interventions may be direct, such as participating in the play or designing tasks, and sometimes indirect, for example leaving play to develop and making flexible resources available to support this (as described in the Reggio Emilia approach, for example Abbott and Nutbrown 2001).

Walsh and others (2006) in their comparative study of early years education in Northern Ireland note that policy-makers have different views about how young children learn. Basically there is a divide between those who advocate a play-based approach until around the mid-primary school years and others who advocate a more formal approach, based on fostering academic skills from the outset of a child's education. Their research suggests that the traditional teacher-led curriculum, developed largely in response to concerns about standards and educational progress and achievement, does little to activate children's thinking and multiple skill acquisition. The more play-based, 'enriched curriculum' offered children a higher-quality learning experience than that of the more traditional Year 1 curriculum.

In their evaluation of the quality of early learning, play and childcare services in Sure Start Local Programmes, Anning and others (2005: 17) note that 'early childhood services are dominated by professional, white, middle class constructs of play. Parents' play with their children reflects the norms of the home culture, and parents tend to view playing as recreational and may not subscribe to the educational value of play. This raises particular issues for working with parents within Sure Start Local Programmes, and the authors note that there is a paucity of previous research into these interrelationships that might inform any evaluation.

**Play provision for all children: a closer look at particular groups and particular circumstances**

It is useful to open this section with a note on terminology. As Kapasi (2002: 7) says, 'Language is a constant constraint when researching and writing about marginalised or minority groups.' The terms used to describe specific groups of children change over time and depending on the political stance taken by writers. In this section, the terms used are those that have been employed by the writers of the original research; in general sections, terminology reflects current usage in national policy documents.

Whilst broad generalisations can be made about childhood and the benefits of play, public provision for play needs to pay particular attention to specific groups of children and those living in specific circumstances. Childhood is not a singular, universal phenomenon experienced in the same way by
all children. Age is only one mode of diversity or social division. Children are also boys or girls, they belong to a vast range of cultural and ethnic groups, they are born into a particular social class and lifestyle, and they may or may not be disabled in a variety of ways. Children may live in stable family homes, or with domestic violence, or in the care of the local authority. They may be socially or economically deprived, they may be in hospital or they may be newly arrived in this country as asylum seekers or refugees. None of these categories is either singly or statically experienced by children (Morrow and Connolly 2006), and although some generalisation can be made, children's own experiences of these social categories vary according to context. The very act of categorising in this manner runs the risk of generalising and stereotyping. The difficulty for those involved in working with children and young people is in recognising just how complex and diverse categories can be, to recognise the importance of children's own experiences of them and to acknowledge children's own competence in navigating them through their social relations as children. Failure to recognise these factors may mean that interventions intended to reduce the negative aspects of discrimination and stereotyping may indeed serve to further entrench attitudes and identities (Holland 2003; Bhavnani and others 2005; Brooker 2006; Morrow and Connolly 2006).

Anti-discriminatory methods of working, together with equal opportunities policies, have been a core aspect of working with children and young people for several decades, yet, as Brooker (2006: 118) states:

> Utopian beliefs that, in modern democracies, all children have equal life–chances, regardless of their social and cultural background and identity, have not been borne out by research evidence to date, although such beliefs persist as an underpinning strand of early childhood ideology.

Much of the practice research and evaluation of services for specific groups of children focuses on issues of access (both to and within provision or public space) and on the particular issues faced by these children. Exceptions to this (for example Ludvigsen and others 2005) also consider the quality of the play experiences of children attending projects. If the literature on play provision generally focuses on the instrumental rather than the intrinsic value of play (Powell and Wellard 2008), this focus is even stronger in the literature on services for specific groups of children.

It needs to be stated again that the authors are aware of much local provision for particular groups of children in particular circumstances, yet the scope and timing of the review has not allowed for the collection of local data.

This section reviews the literature and ends with a comment on its focus and its relation to the recent literature on play.

**Social exclusion**

'Social exclusion' is a relatively new term in contemporary UK social policy, although it has a longer history in Europe (Byrne 2005; Hobcraft 2007). The current Labour government has placed the concept at the heart of its approach to social welfare and social order, establishing a Social Exclusion Unit in 1997, which has since been replaced by a Social Exclusion Task Force. The concept of social exclusion includes, but is wider than, poverty and class, and generally recognises the dynamic and multidimensional nature of exclusion from social, economic, cultural and political systems (Byrne 2005). Buchanan and others (2004) note that the definitions of social exclusion usually relate to adults and particularly to those of working age; social exclusion from a child's perspective is likely to involve exclusion from 'the norms and customs of children's society' and to be experienced as feeling different and not being able to join in social and other activities (Ridge 2002, cited in Buchanan and others 2004: 19). Minority ethnic and disabled children are disproportionately likely to live in deprived areas and be socially excluded (Buchanan and others 2004).

The concepts of risk and protective factors and prevention in social policy discussed in Chapter 2 can be seen in initiatives such as Sure Start, On Track and the Children's Fund, which are targeted at children and families 'at risk' of social exclusion. Buchanan and others (2004) highlight the role of such initiatives in supporting the development of resilience as a protective
factor, particularly through helping to build strong social networks, managed exposure to risk and acute [rather than chronic] stressors, and the opportunity to experience control, agency and mastery. Drawing on the evidence presented in Chapter 3, we may assume that these are aspects that can be effectively addressed through play provision.

The Children’s Fund, launched in 2000, is a national preventative programme aimed at addressing risk and protective factors for children aged between 5 and 13 years and their families considered to be ‘most at risk of social exclusion through poverty and disadvantage’ (CYPU 2001, cited in Edwards and others 2006: iv). The programme was due to end in 2008, but in July 2007 the government announced that it would be extended until 2011.

The National Evaluation of the Children’s Fund ran from January 2003 to March 2006. It found considerable diversity in the methods used by Children’s Fund partnerships to identify which children and families should be targeted and also in the design of services to meet identified needs for this ‘historically neglected age-group’ (Edwards and others 2006: xvi). Some focused on particular groups of children (for example, young carers or Gypsy and Traveller children), others on particular problems (such as behaviour) and others on geographic areas with high deprivation. The evaluation report highlights the significant place of play provision within preventative services [Edwards and others 2006: 103]:

- single services directly aimed at children in the initiative can be broadly categorised as follows: providing safe spaces through club provision, play or specialist activities; individual help through, for example, mentoring, counselling or therapeutic play; and enhancing local resources such as play areas.

The analysis of services provided through the Children’s Fund shows ‘club provision or playschemes’ as the most numerous; however, ‘club provision’ included activity and homework clubs, so the proportion of these services that offered opportunities to play is unclear. The analysis of the benefits of these services focused on the value of safe space, with staff highlighting the need to be flexible and responsive, and parents highlighting the value of children being away from undesirable influences, developing skills and broadening horizons; children saw them as places to have fun and make friends across age ranges. Whilst play provision features frequently in the services discussed in the report, there is little discussion on how playing itself could contribute to developing resilience within these services.

The evaluation found that most projects focused on interventions at individual child and family level and did not address risk or protective factors at community or structural level, thereby focusing ‘attention on individual children rather than on the processes by which they came to be excluded’ (Barnes and Morris 2007: 194). Such a focus limited the opportunity to develop networks and social capital as key aspects of resilience, an approach that required recognition of children as social actors rather than individual socialisation projects. Edwards and others (2006: 103) note that parents ‘located risk of exclusion in the social conditions of their children's development and often outside the family. These conditions included … poor local play and leisure facilities.’ In this sense, play provision is seen as a universal rather than a targeted service, and one that is rooted in the community rather than working on the perceived deficits of individual children.

**Inclusion and access: disabled children and young people**

Ludvigsen and others (2005: 9) define inclusion as

- the process of conceiving, designing, planning and maintaining of all parts of the physical and cultural community to cater for the widest spectrum of ability and need.

Ward and others (2004: 5) offer this definition:

- Inclusion involves adaptation of all parts of the community – both people’s attitudes and the physical environment – to cater for a wide spectrum of ability and need. This must be an ongoing process whose overall aim is to embrace diversity rather than simply tolerate differences.
The term is generally used to refer to the inclusion of disabled children into mainstream settings, or, less often, of non-disabled children into specialist provision for disabled children, rather than the inclusion of other groups of children likely to be excluded from provision because of their ethnicity, gender or other circumstance. However, disabled children and young people do not form a homogeneous group with uniform experiences, likes and dislikes. Not only is there an infinite variety and combination of impairments of physical, sensory and cognitive functioning, but disability is also experienced across gender, class, ethnicity, sexual orientation and so on.

McIntyre and Casey (2007: 2) found, in their review of the literature on inclusion for disabled children, that ‘a sense of inclusion is more dependent on friendships and fun than simply being in the same location as others’, and that inclusion not only meant removing barriers to participation but also promoting this sense of inclusion.

In almost all cases, the research reviewed in this section, and particularly that evaluating projects, states a commitment to practice founded on the social model of disability. This model sees the ways that society is arranged as being what disables people with impairments, rather than the individual or medical model, which sees the ‘problem’ of disability arising from the impairment (Oliver 1990). In addition, much of the research findings also take into account the views of disabled children and young people themselves, using a variety of methods to gather this data.

Sharma (2002: 5) reports that, despite the government’s move to eradicate child poverty, ‘many of Britain’s 360,000 disabled children and young people and their families still live in poverty and are socially excluded from their communities.’ Being able to access local play provision and other leisure facilities is an important aspect of participating in the local community (Clarke 2005).

The Disability Discrimination Act (DDA) 1995 requires service providers to make reasonable adjustments to their policy, practice and procedures and (since 2004) to make physical adjustments to their premises, in order to make their services accessible to disabled people; this includes play providers. The revised Act (2005) also requires public bodies and local authorities to promote disability equality.

The Audit Commission (2003) found a national shortage of play and leisure provision for disabled children and young people (both inclusive and specialist) across the public, private and voluntary sectors, although early indications of the impact of the DDA are that physical alterations to buildings are being made or planned, and disability awareness and inclusion training is being organised for staff. Sharma and Dowling (2004) report that approximately 10 per cent of families with a disabled child care for more than one disabled child, which brings particular demands on accessing appropriate play provision for each child. In addition, siblings of disabled children are often not eligible to use the specialist services, adding to organisational difficulties and preventing families from playing together. Petrie and others (2002, cited in Sharma and Dowling 2004) highlight the importance of reliable funding, good information for families and the importance of a policy basis for inclusion.

More recently four organisations working with disabled children and their families (Contact a Family, the Council for Disabled Children, Mencap and the Special Education Consortium) have established Every Disabled Child Matters (EDCM) as a campaigning group to advocate for disabled children, young people and their families within policy. The government announced in May 2007 that £340 million of new money would be committed to improve services for disabled children and their families over a three year period, as a part of the Comprehensive Spending Review, to include short breaks, increased access to childcare and participation (HM Treasury and DfES 2007b).

Barriers to access (and, therefore guidance for good practice) are identified as practical or environmental (such as physical access or transport to facilities), and attitudinal or social (Ludvigsen and others 2005). The importance of training for staff, in terms of disability awareness, meeting individual needs, and confidence building is seen as crucial for supervised provision (John and Wheway 2004; Ludvigsen and others 2005; Wilson and Gray 2006).

Round Three of the Better Play Programme, funded by the former New Opportunities Fund, focused on projects aiming to increase inclusive play provision. In their evaluation of this
programme, Ludvigsen and others (2005) found a number of different interpretations of the concept of inclusion and, as a result, the adoption of different approaches. The evaluation found that projects fell largely into one of two approaches: offering provision for disabled and non-disabled children to play together, and offering separate provision, usually at separate times, for disabled and non-disabled children. Those that developed shared provision used a number of approaches, including working in partnership with other organisations, support workers working with specific children, setting up new sessions and developing inclusive play ranger services in parks. In a closer analysis of eight projects, the evaluation found that most children enjoyed the opportunities. All projects offered some choice and control but this did vary depending on the structure of sessions, the play environment and staff approaches to intervention. Those projects whose staff members were from an educational background tended to offer more structured activities whereas those staffed by playworkers offered more opportunity for free play. Projects that had additional resources specifically (although not exclusively) for disabled children were able to offer more choice. All projects were aware of health and safety issues and worked to minimise hazards and prevent accidents. Attitudes to risk-taking varied; sensitivity was needed with respect to the concerns of parents of disabled children, and it was important to build trust. Playworkers were more supportive of risk-taking and challenge than educational staff. Playing with friends was very important for children and the extent to which disabled and non-disabled children played together varied; the more flexible the projects were, the more likely it was that children would play together.

Ward and others (2004) report on work to develop inclusive provision in the north west of England and identified a number of determinants of success, including: supporting a shift in attitudes and assumptions on the part of staff, volunteers and parents; finding out what play and leisure opportunities exist, and discussing how inclusive they could become; meeting individual needs; addressing practical issues such as transport and change to routines; staff and volunteer resources both behind the scenes and face-to-face; acknowledging that change can take a long time; effective risk management and developing trust with children and families; and celebrating successes.

The extent to which disabled children were able to participate in playing in the school playground was the focus of Woolley and others’ (2006a; 2006b) research into six primary schools across Yorkshire. Good practice and barriers were grouped under three headings: organisational, social and physical. Whilst identifying some barriers (for example, reduction in time for play in the school day – an aspect that affected all children; timing of care routines in some schools, but not all, meant that disabled children went out into the playground later than non-disabled children and after some games had started; lack of systematic auditing of the playgrounds for physical access; some level of over-protectiveness on the part of adults), the research generally found much to highlight as good practice, particularly regarding a recognition of the disabled children’s own agency and skill in joining in and leading games, and the social benefit gained through use of their specialist equipment as play props. In some schools, support staff were well trained, valued and committed, this being reflected in their length of service and the relationships built up with children.

John and Wheway (2004: 11), in their study of disabled children’s access to and use of outdoor playgrounds, note that whilst there is support for the principle of inclusion, many feel anxious about their own abilities to cope. Their research into disabled children’s use of outdoor play spaces shows that this is less to do with the physical accessibility or suitability of equipment than with ‘the attitudes of other children, the fears of the disabled children’s parents and the belief of what is appropriate parenting’. They stress that any strategy for inclusion should consider this social aspect and not only the physical adjustments; it is impossible to make one playground accessible for all children given the range of impairments, needs and likes. Well-intentioned legislation and regulation requirements often disable rather than enable access to play provision. One of these is the tendency to be over-protective. The occasional bump and getting dirty should be seen as a normal part of playing, as much for disabled as for non-disabled children. Health and safety legislation is referred to as ‘the polite discrimination’, since it has been evoked to justify restrictions to play opportunities (John and Wheway 2004).
Dunn and others (2004), in their report on the research that underpinned the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister’s (2003) *Developing Accessible Play Space: A good practice guide*, found that enabling disabled children and young people to play in the same public spaces with their siblings and other disabled and non-disabled children and young people has wider benefits for social inclusion, community building and networking. Design of the space is important, as is an understanding of what disabled children and young people want.

McIntyre and Casey (2007) report on two action research projects on inclusive play in supervised settings that extend the concept of inclusion beyond a focus on the provision itself to an emphasis on the importance of friendships and a sense of inclusion across a network of contexts and settings. Drawing on the theorising on play and playwork, the projects developed models of support for play (rather than access), through effective use of the environment, sensitive and responsive playworker involvement in play and observation-based reflections.

Smith and Willans (2007) also report on using playwork approaches, specifically identifying preferred play types (Hughes 2002) and understanding play cues (Sturrock and Else 1998) to support the playing of one disabled child whose behaviour had been interpreted as naughty and difficult. Once playworkers used these tools to understand how the child wanted to play, they could then respond in a play-centred way and thus reduce the difficult behaviour born out of frustration.

**Ethnicity and racism**

There is a strong tradition of anti-racist, anti-bias and multi-cultural practice amongst those working with children and young people, dating back to the early 1980s (Derman-Sparks 1989; Conway and others 2004; Brooker 2006) and continuing with explicit references in official standards documentation (for example DFES 2003a). The intention within these approaches is to challenge discrimination and stereotypes both directly and through offering a wide range of experiences intended to broaden understanding of other cultures. However, Mathers and others (2007) found in their study of the quality of childcare provision that the settings in their study were barely reaching minimal standards in the provision of resources and activities aimed at promoting awareness and understanding of racial and cultural diversity, and that many settings had not improved in this area since the previous assessment a decade before.

Smith and Barker (2000), in their research of children’s experiences in more than 400 out of school clubs, found that children’s ethnicity had a significant impact on their experiences at the clubs. At one club, where the majority of children were African-Caribbean, which had an abundance of African-Caribbean resources and promoted African-Caribbean cultures, the children spoke positively about this and had developed their own games and activities with the resources. However, in other clubs that were predominantly white and where the workers were also predominantly white, the researchers found that ethnic diversity was largely ignored, or treated as something exotic and foreign, for example:

> … well meaning but tokenistic attempts at serving food from around the world. These attempts were mostly done without context and children often constructed such activities as ‘bizarre’. For children from ethnic minority groups the opportunity to contest such representations was limited by the fact that adult playworkers retained control over the food provided, the posters put on the walls and the resources bought for the clubs. Moreover, for a minority of children attending such clubs, the feeling that they as Black or Asian children were ‘out of place’ in these environments was exacerbated by these processes.

In such settings, attempts at increasing understanding and awareness may well serve to perpetuate stereotypes and exacerbate differences. The appropriateness of multicultural educational approaches in settings that aim to support free play has been questioned, in terms of its potential to direct children’s play towards adult-determined ends (Hughes 2001), the potential for many adults’ Eurocentric perspectives and values to ride roughshod over other cultural play expressions (Sturrock and Else 1998), and finally in terms of its effectiveness (Holland 2003; Connolly 2006; Brooker 2006). There is a need for more research into these issues.
Connolly (2006) shows how the identities of boys in primary schools were inextricably linked to their class and ethnicity and that practices within the school sometimes served to perpetuate stereotypes rather than challenge them (for example by seeing football as a way of engaging potentially disaffected Black boys in the life of the school).

Kapasi (2002), in her study of access to play provision by Black and minority children in London, found that the majority of users of play provision were white children and Black British children, although there are no data showing how this relates to the local population. Use of mainstream play provision by Asian and other minority children was limited, even when there was a large Asian population in the local area. Interviews with children, families and staff showed that:

> minority children preferred to attend community-led schemes where they felt at ease … The statistics showed that community-led schemes reached the most marginalised groups of children whilst mainstream providers consistently failed to do so. Yet these schemes seemed to remain under-funded, unrecognized and unsupported. (Kapasi 2002: 40)

Those children that did attend mainstream provision were most comfortable where they were in large numbers and had been attending over a long period of time; even so, children tended to play within cultural groups at the setting, rarely mixing, playing ‘in parallel’. The report also found that, where projects employed Black or minority senior playworkers, they were more likely to attract Black and minority children. Kapasi (2002: 41) concludes that ‘there was a lack of debate on the nature, manifestation and impact of institutional racism in mainstream provision.’

A later survey (Kapasi 2006b) focused on the employment of Black and minority playworkers and found varied levels of understanding about issues pertaining to ethnicity and racism among playworkers and play service managers, and varied levels of support for Black and minority playworkers, both in their current roles and for professional development. Most striking was a lack of engagement in any debate about the issues, and Kapasi (2006b: 26–27) concludes:

> It would appear that the more diverse London and the rest of the United Kingdom becomes, debates around race and racism are easier to avoid under concepts of ‘diversity’, ‘culture’, ‘ethnicity’ and ‘inclusion’. Whilst identity continues to be a growing agenda in our society, all children on playgrounds and playcentres are also being affected by racist stereotyping, lack of role models and institutional racism.

Smith and Barker (2004) draw some of the same conclusions from their research into out of school clubs. Noting that out of school childcare is a key element of the government’s aim to eradicate child poverty, they highlighted that some minority ethnic groups, particularly Somali and Bangladeshi families, although living within the community and using the school, did not attend the out of school club. They give two reasons for this, one being financial (many of the Somalis were refugees and, as such, not able to work, thus unable to afford or qualify for the childcare places), and the other cultural. The 2001 Childcare Workforce Survey (SQW and NOP 2002, cited in Smith and Barker 2004) showed that only 28 per cent of clubs across the UK employ minority ethnic staff. SkillsActive (2006b: 10), in their national survey of the playwork workforce, report that ‘5.3% of respondents indicated an ethnic origin other than white compared to 7% in the working population as a whole’. This figure rose to 12 per cent for holiday staff. In Smith and Barker’s survey, half of the clubs employed staff from minority ethnic groups, encouraged playing together and undertook multicultural activities such as celebrating festivals, which were highly valued by children and parents. However, two of the clubs studied displayed a tokenistic attitude towards multiculturalism, despite having equal opportunities policies, and one club considered the issue irrelevant since only white children attended the club. Smith and Barker (2004: 14) conclude:

> Although this is a small sample, it raises serious doubts in many cases about the ability of the service to offer an inclusive environment attractive to families from minority ethnic groups.
Creegan and others (2004), in their evaluation of 10 Children’s Fund projects in Tower Hamlets, found that inclusion and diversity varied depending on the local and cultural contexts. Some projects were used almost exclusively by particular groups such as Bengali or Somali children, while others were more mixed; in the mixed settings they observed the same playing in parallel reported by Kapasi (2002). Employing Bengali staff to attract Bengali children was effective, although this varied in terms of the gender both of the staff and the children, and how far this was supported by families. Playworkers sometimes reported ethnic tension between groups within projects and felt that although they could work to reduce this, such tensions continued outside of the project.

One of the indicators for Creegan and others’ evaluation research was the extent to which children played together. At the majority of projects they found children of different ethnic groups playing together; although situations were observed where children played in small groups within the overall project that were not ethnically diverse, this was similar to Kapasi’s (2002) finding of children playing ‘in parallel’. Encouraging children of different ethnic groups to play together was seen as a positive step. The polarisation of communities was highlighted in research by the Community Cohesion Research Team following racial disturbances in Burnley and Oldham (Cantle 2001: 9):

Separate educational arrangements, community and voluntary bodies, employment, places of worship, language, social and cultural networks, means that many communities operate on the basis of a series of parallel lives. These lives often do not seem to touch at any point, let alone overlap and promote any meaningful interchanges.

Yet a Home Office survey (Farmer 2005) found that nationally 64 per cent of children and young people surveyed had friends who were of a difference race or colour to them. Cantle (2001) notes that many of the well-intentioned projects and initiatives aimed at meeting the needs of different communities often served to institutionalise the very problems they were trying to solve, and to engender feelings of division and unfairness between groups. Projects that were working to break down divisions and build community cohesion were battling ‘against the odds and with very limited and fragile resources … clinging on to the margins of anything that resembled a longer term strategy’ (Cantle 2001: 9). The report concluded that there should be a proactive attempt to ‘promote cross-cultural contact, … foster understanding and respect … [developing] a programme of myth-busting’ (Cantle 2001: 11). Bhavnani and others (2005) found little evidence of the effectiveness of cohesion approaches. Bruegel (2006), however, in her research on friendships of primary school children and social capital, found that daily contact across ethnic and religious boundaries was the most effective way of breaking down barriers between communities rather than formal twinning or sporting arrangements between separate schools.

Maan (2005) recommends that community-led provision can play a part in the overall provision for play and that valuable lessons can be learned. She highlights the need to employ and support staff from Black and minority groups and also male playworkers. Play is valued differently in different communities and this needs to be addressed sensitively, recognising that some communities may have differing priorities that need addressing first.

Morris and others (2006) place their evaluation of preventative services to Black and minority ethnic children through the Children’s Fund within the context of the Race Relations (Amendment) Act 2000, which places a duty on public bodies, amongst other things, to carry out a ‘race equality audit of organisational systems, structures and practices’ (Morris and others 2006: 10). However, evidence from the Audit Commission (2004) suggests that progress in implementing the Race Relations (Amendment) Act 2000 is slow. This evaluation focused on two case study areas and in both the emphasis was on addressing the link between the practices of mainstream education and poor educational outcome for this group of children and young people. Generally this was through supplementary informal educational activities delivered by community members, and in one case study this included after school clubs and holiday playschemes. The intention here was to develop shared cultural knowledge
‘... although most organisations have equality and diversity policies and documentation, there is little research into evidence of what works.’

and increased self-esteem and confidence through culturally sensitive trips, activities and structured play. Practices that were seen as helpful included the flexibility of staff and their ability to engage with children and young people, and the importance of staff belonging to the same cultural group as the children and young people themselves. Although the key stated aim of these projects was to enhance learning, the children and young people themselves talked about their experiences as being fun, and of the value they placed on making friends with others in their community across generations. However, the report also notes that the focus of these services was more on change for the children and young people themselves rather than change within mainstream services, particularly education.

Bhavani and others (2005) found that, although most organisations have equality and diversity policies and documentation, there is little research into evidence of what works. Tools such as ethnic monitoring can serve to entrench categories and therefore reproduce racism. Many interventions focus on local area working class racism rather than that emanating from the elite (such as politicians and the media). One of the problems in identifying success of strategies and interventions is how to measure this success. Bhavani and others suggest that, rather than measuring impact in terms of access to opportunities, the measure should be of changes in attitudes and behaviour and in everyday racism. The most success, on this measure, was found to be from educational approaches aimed at improving understanding and communication, and which are strongly led. Open and honest approaches to confronting racism can heal rifts and promote reconciliation.

Much of the thinking about racism in the 1970s and 1980s was about the structure of society: how power worked within the system. Since then, issues of ethnicity and culture have become more complex. For example, many of the children attending play settings today are likely to be two, perhaps three generations away from the big wave of immigration in the 1950s from (post) colonial countries. Cross-cultural relationships have produced children and grandchildren whose ethnic heritage is multiple. In addition, the newer arrivals to Britain, economic migrants, refugees and asylum seekers, are from a far wider range of countries and cultures, including many African countries, Eastern and Central Europe, the former Soviet Union and the Middle East. Ideas about ethnicity and about religion have become both more integrated and more separate (Mac an Ghaill 1999).

Gypsy and Traveller children

One cultural group that is often omitted from discussions on racism are the Roma Gypsy and Traveller communities. A Mori poll (cited in Lawrence 2005) found that one in three respondents admitted to feelings of prejudice against Roma Gypsies and Travellers. Children often do not have access to services such as health care and education, partly because of fear of attack and also because often services are deemed inappropriate. Yet under the Race Relations [Amendment] Act 2000 public authorities have a statutory duty to promote race equality.
Roma Gypsies and Irish Travellers are recognised as a racial group for the purposes of the Act (Lawrence 2005). Mason and Broughton (2007) emphasise that ‘Gypsy/Travellers’ do not constitute a homogeneous group with shared values and culture (as well as Roma Gypsies and Irish Travellers there are also other mobile groups such as Fairground People and New Travellers), although they tend to be grouped together for the purposes of service provision.

Hester (2004, cited in Mason and Broughton 2007) identified that Gypsy and Traveller communities are amongst the most marginalised in the United Kingdom. Mason and Broughton report on a collaborative regional project to address the lack of play and leisure services for Gypsy/Traveller children through a consortium of Children’s Fund Partnerships. The project aimed to make existing mainstream services accessible to Gypsy/Traveller children through support and training for staff, information and support to Gypsy/Traveller families to help access to service, direct support to the children and young people themselves and attempts to address discrimination within the settled community through other service providers in the area. However, a number of factors meant that a sustainable network beyond the life of the Children’s Fund did not develop. The project focused largely on meeting the immediate play and leisure needs of the children, which left little time or capacity for developing more sustainable networks and access to services. In some cases, parents’ fear and suspicion was a barrier to children accessing mainstream provision unless accompanied by project staff. Despite this, the project did succeed in supporting some mothers to access play provision with their children and to become involved in volunteering and developing further provision.

Refugee and asylum-seeking children

Refugee and asylum-seeking children arrive in the UK having fled from situations of conflict that they found so stressful as to be insupportable. Many have lost parents and have endured arduous and dangerous journeys (Hyder 2005). Although many families are interested in childcare services, as these are understood to help their children, there is a diversity of views on play. Often it is regarded as something that happens naturally without any support from adults. However, the isolation of families sometimes means that these opportunities no longer exist, and Hyder (2005) recommends that staff should be encouraged to convey the importance of play to parents, particularly as their children may benefit from the healing experience of play.

Those working in early years and play settings need to be aware of the role of play as a restorative and healing experience for young children. This is not just because play in itself is a formative experience for the child, but also because play is rooted in the experience and representation of events and objects within a family and a community. (Hyder 2005: 7)

Often, the mixture of supportive relationships, routine, and structured and free play is enough; others may need sensitive understanding of adults as they need to play out material that adults might find disturbing.

Nandy (2005) describes how policy does not always support the needs of asylum-seeking and refugee children: if immigration and asylum policies come into conflict with children’s rights, the former take precedence. This is stated explicitly in the UK government's reservation lodged regarding the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC 1989) ‘effectively creating a second class of children to whom the UNCRC does not equally apply’ (Nandy 2005: 411).

Asylum-seeking and refugee children were a specific group targeted by the Children’s Fund as being at risk of social exclusion. Beirens and others (2006) report that different services varied in their aims, which included dealing with trauma through therapeutic services, including play therapy, encouraging educational attainment and community cohesion. Therapeutic services needed to be culturally appropriate, so activity based therapies were felt to be more effective than counselling and other talking therapies. Informal after school and holiday projects provided support and space for children to make friends and play, improving their English language skills and their general emotional health and well-being accordingly. In one project, links were made between playworkers and play therapists.
Homeless children

Shelter (2006) estimates that 1.6 million children in Britain (1.4 million in England) live in bad housing (meaning they are homeless or in overcrowded or unfit accommodation). This amounts to one child in seven. These children are far more likely than those living in adequate accommodation to: miss school; leave school with no qualifications; be excluded from school; suffer from poor health, particularly respiratory and sleep problems; be depressed and have mothers who are depressed; be bullied; have nowhere to play; be in trouble with the police. The report states:

Having friends over to play and playing independently or with siblings are vital to ensure a fun and stimulating childhood and healthy development both physical and emotional. Constant moving to new housing, long journeys to school, living in problem neighbourhoods, lack of space to play and cold, damp or infested conditions deny children living in bad housing this basic right. (Shelter 2006: 40)

Shatwell (2003) paints a similar story for homeless children in Leeds, saying that children, parents and staff all recognise the need for more opportunities for the children to play. The report identifies three examples of good practice (one local, the other two elsewhere in England). One project began by offering babysitting and childcare services and grew to taking children on trips and now has one flat operating as a play flat. Women’s Aid refuges have a long history of providing children’s workers and play provision. The draft: National Standards for Domestic and Sexual Violence (Women’s Aid Federation of England 2006) make explicit reference to the need to provide activities and play opportunities for children. This is understood both as an ‘ordinary’ need for children and also because children use play to help them come to terms with their experiences of domestic violence (this is discussed in more detail in the section on children and trauma).

Gender

The issues discussed in the literature relating to gender take a slightly different stance from those regarding disability and ethnicity, which tend to be focused on access and inclusion. It should not be forgotten that the categorisation of children in this way can sometimes mask the diversity of children’s identities: both girls and boys will also have their own ethnicity and culture, family background and circumstance, experiences of disability and so on (James and Prout 1997). Furthermore, as discussed in Chapter 3, simplistic and binary categories of male/female are not borne out in real life: there are more variations within than between genders (Browne 2004; Swain 2005).

Given this variation within gender, it is still largely apparent that adults’ own expectations of and preferences for children’s behaviour are clearly gendered. The workforce in early years and playwork is overwhelmingly female (Moss 2003; Rolfe and others 2003; SkillsActive 2006) and this has implications for attitudes towards the playing of boys and girls. In discussing play in such a gendered way, there is a tension between generalising about boys’ and girls’ play preferences on the one hand and perpetuating stereotypes on the other. As Morrow (2006: 93) warns:

It is important to recognise that when talking about differences between children there is a danger of ‘essentialising’ — i.e. assuming that there are some universal characteristics that apply to all girls and all boys. Social differences do not operate in isolation, because social class, age, ethnicity, religion and location intersect to influence children’s childhoods and their gender identities.

The expression of gender identities is also contextually-specific (Connolly 2006): children will behave in different ways according to the context, their ideas of the expectations of their peers as well as of adults, their desires to situate themselves within particular understandings of what it is to be a boy or a girl. There is no single universal or simple way to understand play and gender; yet often adults’ expectations of behaviour and their perception of its acceptability are fundamentally based on stereotypical understandings of boys’ and girls’ play.

One example of this is Smith and others’ (2002) comparison of teacher and pupil perceptions of play fighting in school playgrounds. Teachers tend to have a negative view of play fighting,
seeing few benefits attached to it and expressing concern that it will turn into real fighting, which is not borne out by the research. The authors suggest that this may have something to do with the fact that most primary teachers are women and were less likely to engage in play fighting when they were children (or if they did play fight, may have forgotten what it felt like) and so may not appreciate the enjoyment derived from this way of playing.

Thomson (2005: 72) also found that midday supervisors, again mostly women, ‘intensely disliked children playing football and pointed out to them any contravention of the football pitch space in an effort to contain and constrain the players’. Similar problematising of boys’ more boisterous playing, and a corresponding positive attitude towards girls’ more sedentary and social playing, by female early years practitioners and playworkers is reported by J Brown (2007b), Holland (2003) and Smith and Barker (2000). Smith and Barker (2000; 2004) report that boys in out of school clubs, particularly those over eight years of age, are aware of this and asked for more male playworkers because they felt that female playworkers did not understand their play preferences:

Playworkers utilised adult discourses of equality of opportunity when they wanted to prevent what they saw as boys’ subversive attempts to take over space, being used by girls, for football. The boys interpreted these adult attempts to limit football in terms of unequal gendered relations in clubs, primarily because most play workers were women. As one 10-year-old boy explained: ‘They treat girls differently, and they treat boys like they are things that don’t belong here’. (Smith and Barker 2000: 326)

Whilst recognising the need for more male playworkers, Smith and Barker (2003) say that there is also a need for playworkers to be made aware of these issues through training; a similar recommendation for midday supervisors and primary school teachers is made by Smith and others (2002). Rolfe and others (2003) and Rolfe (2006) identify potential benefits of more men in childcare and playwork as including the presence of role models, modelling equality between men and women and providing a balance of experience and approach. More research is needed into why men do not enter childcare, and although the low pay and conditions may be one factor, it may not be the overriding one, since men are still in the minority in this sector in Scandinavian countries where pay and conditions are good. The suggestion is that it may be because of the low status and the perception of working with children as being ‘women’s work’, as well as the level of suspicion of men’s motives for working with children.

Browne (2004) challenges the accepted concerns about the feminisation of the workforce and the value of male staff as positive role models. She suggests these concerns have their roots in anxiety about boys’ underachievement in school, seen to be a result of ‘feminine’ approaches in schools to teaching and learning that favour girls. Such a perspective can be understood as blame, as one nursery teacher in her study said:

I think we’ve been made to feel it’s our fault because we’re female and we can’t cope with boys and therefore it would be better if there were more males in the profession. (Browne 2004: 125)

Browne cites suggestions (Mahoney and Hextall 2000; Haywood and Mac an Ghaill 2001) that the focus on tests, measurement, targets and key stages within the education system could be understood as a ‘masculine’ rationalisation of a service that is fundamentally about relationships and processes. However, the labels of ‘feminisation’ and ‘masculinisation’ perpetuate fixed and binary oppositions that are unhelpful in moving forward understandings of gender equity.

Such binary oppositions also lie at the root of Browne’s challenges to the accepted notion of the value of men as positive role models in the children’s workforce. Role modelling as a concept only has currency within an understanding of socialisation that sees children as passive recipients of adult norms and values rather than co-constructors of their own subjectivities and identities, as discussed in Chapter 3. In addition, if men are employed to be male role models, this implies that they have to conform to an ideal of what masculinity
means, or, conversely, to be a living challenge to stereotypes, both of which perpetuate fixed oppositions of what it is to be masculine or feminine.

The dominant understanding of gender in childhood is still based in a developmental psychology ages and stages approach, although this has been criticised for not acknowledging children's own agency and competence and the complexity and diversity of children's experiences of gender. More recent sociological studies have addressed this, yet there is still a tendency to generalise, and these more recent theories have not yet been incorporated into the training of those working with children (Morrow 2006). This is borne out in Holland's (2003) research into early years practitioners' responses to gun and superhero play. Although the zero tolerance approach is based in feminist and pacifist thinking, Holland maintains that it is misguided in that the assumption is that such imaginative play has a relationship to aggression in later life. More recent understandings which show that this is not the case have been slow to permeate into practice, and Holland (2003: 15-16) warns:

_ I believe our approach to gender relationships in early years settings over the past twenty years has served to harden rather than challenge stereotypical behaviour. This approach is characterised by the corrective and sometimes punitive form of response offered to active young boys in counterpoint to the celebratory response given to compliant and passive young girls playing in the home corner or at the writing table. Both of these responses should cause us equal concern ... after twenty to thirty years of concerted attempts to promote equal opportunities between boys and girls one can look around most nursery classrooms and see the same gendered grouping of play preferences: girls in the home corner, boys on the construction carpet._

Browne (2004) suggests that tolerance of superhero and war play in boys in early years settings is a part of ‘recuperative masculinity’ strategies arising from concerns about boys’ academic underachievement. She suggests that the new tolerance of this form of play rests on flawed ‘scientific’ and essentialist ideas of natural and biological differences between boys and girls and that ‘such play may contribute to the maintenance of unequal gender power relations and “traditional” forms of “masculinity”’ (Browne 2004: 121). The literature reviewed in Chapter 3 shows how many of those now working within the natural science fields recognise the interdependent relationship between biology and culture through the understanding that the brain is shaped as a result of interactions with the environment, leading to changes in behaviour and so on in a constant ‘dynamic coupling’ (Thompson and Varela 2001): the ‘embodied brain embedded in the world’. Similarly, the ethnographic studies of children’s play discussed in Chapter 4 show how children co-construct and reproduce gender identities in their play, and how difficult it is to cross gender boundaries. It may be that playing at gender in these frames allows an adaptation to the peer group that adults may understand as maladaptive and stereotypical.

Kalliala (2006) gives illustrations of common themes that exercise early years practitioners: the rough and tumble and war play of the boys and the sexualised play of girls with Barbie dolls. Whilst not banning such playing outright, the staff create strategies for easing their discomfort. With Barbie dolls, they solve the contradiction by framing an understanding of it as traditional doll play ‘independent of Barbie’s bust measurement’ (Kalliala 2006: 123), often war play can be reframed as construction play (building the scene). With rough and tumble, they set boundaries by imposing rules. Kalliala (2006: 124) acknowledges:

_ It is hard to mark off the boundary between positive and negative autonomy in children’s play. There is a permanent tension between respect for children's intimacy and secrets, on the one hand, and control and enrichment of children's activities, on the other. Children need both sensitive supervision and stimulation and freedom when they develop their inner self, not either/or but both/and._

Adults’ propensity to create understandings of playing that ease their own discomfort can also be seen in responses to children's sexual identities. The boyfriend-girlfriend play of children in
the last year of junior school has generally been understood as innocent preparation for adult roles. Renold (2006) suggests, though, that this is more to do with gender performance in the here and now, and that children feel the need to conform to the heterosexual norms of this play narrative, with both boys and girls investing much time and emotional energy on getting together, dating, dumping, go-betweens and discussions about relationships. Any deviation from this norm is greeted with social punishment including exclusion and teasing. Only tomboys and the most popular and socially successful children can challenge these hegemonies without censure. This way of understanding the playground behaviour of primary school children challenges dominant thinking that children of this age are sexual innocents who play in single gender groups.

Brooker [2006] recognises the good intent of early childhood settings to challenge discrimination and inequality faced by some children, an approach based on offering a wide range of opportunities to children which extend their home experiences and challenge some of the stereotypes that may be encountered within the family. However, her research within a Korean kindergarten and UK reception class with a high proportion of Bangladeshi children questions the effectiveness of this approach and suggests that ‘everyday life in educational settings, against the best intentions of educators, may serve to polarise children’s identities along the gendered and ethnic lines, in ways which may further constrain their continuing development’ (Brooker 2006: 117). In her observations she found that children in early childhood settings would actively reproduce a stereotypical version of their gender and ethnic identities that were far more complex, flexible and varied at home. This could have been due to the tendency to seek out other children ‘like me’ in unfamiliar contexts. Brooker suggests that in addition to this, the existence of play opportunities such as home corner, coupled with a support for children’s freedom of choice, supported this tendency towards stereotypical behaviour that did not actually exist in the home. Conversation with the children about their own understandings of their play preferences and behaviour revealed a more complex approach than did the observations alone, and Brooker suggests that practitioners need to find out more about children’s actual experiences and understandings rather than relying on adult interpretations of behaviour.

Newman and others [2006] gained an insight into the ways in which children position themselves physically in the playground in relation to their social popularity and positioning. A photography project aimed at encouraging children aged 10 to 11 years to question the ‘reality’ of photographs and to explore the stories that photographs can tell, revealed children’s understandings of and feelings about their social status within their peer group, and this is paralleled through their choices of physical positioning in the playground. Much of this was gendered: confirming earlier studies, the research found that the largest amount of central space in the playground was occupied by the dominant boys playing football. Girls and the less ‘masculine’ boys occupied the spaces round the edge. Boys not fitting the traditional masculine stereotype of football playing could negotiate socially acceptable identities through humorous rule breaking and challenging of authority. One boy, who was perceived as effeminate and was bullied because of this, found places to hide during playtime. Staff, both male and female, suggested that he was at least partially to blame for the bullying as he did not fit into the hegemonic masculine identity. Similarly, a girl who stood up to her female bully using physical force, chose to do so away from adult eyes as she knew she would have been chided for not conforming to passive female roles.

These studies present a much more diverse and constellated view of children’s active gender work through playing and raise questions for traditional approaches to anti-discriminatory practice.

**Children in public care**

Blower and others (2004), in their research on children in the care of one local authority, found that 56 per cent of the children interviewed were suffering from ‘significant psychological morbidity’, and that there was an urgent need to identify effective interventions. In a more wide-ranging survey for the Office of National Statistics, Meltzer and others (2003: 20) found that ‘among young people, aged 5 – 17 years, looked after by local authorities, 45% were assessed as
having a mental disorder: 37% had clinically significant conduct disorders; 12% were assessed as having emotional disorders – anxiety and depression – and 7% were rated as hyperactive.'

The Healthy Care Programme, developed by the National Children’s Bureau and funded by the Department for Education and Skills, is ‘a practical means of improving the health and well-being of looked after children and young people in line with the Department of Health guidance ‘Promoting the Health of Looked After Children’ [2002] and the Change for Children Programme’ [www.ncb.org.uk]. The Healthy Care Standard developed through this project recognises the importance of play, and this is further supported through the Well-being, Creativity and Play project, which aims to ‘increase awareness of the benefits of creative activities at a local level’ [Chambers 2004: 2]. Creativity and play can be particularly important for children in public care in terms of fostering resilience. Gilligan (2000: 37) describes a resilient child as ‘one who bounces back having endured adversity, who continues to function reasonably well despite continued exposure to risk’. Chambers (2004) stresses the importance of play and creativity as part of the normal day-to-day experience rather than as acute play therapy services. Whilst those in care may require the help of professional therapists, carers can do much to support children to play in a very ordinary way, and this can in itself be a part of the healing process. The role of foster carers and residential staff is crucial in developing the attachments that can support playing and healing in this way. Database searches showed no results for evidence of supporting play for children in public care, while the focus of the government’s Care Matters Green Paper (DFES 2006f) is on educational attainment.

Play in hospitals
The need for children who are visiting or staying in hospital to play is recognised in Standard 7 of the National Service Framework for Children, Young People and Maternity Services. Guidance on Standard 7 (DH 2003: 14) states:

Children visiting or staying in hospital have a basic need for play and recreation that should be met routinely in all hospital departments providing a service to children. This applies equally to the siblings of patients, and so is also a consideration for neonatal units. Play may also be used for therapeutic purposes, as part of the child’s care plan, and as a way of helping the child to: assimilate new information; adjust to and gain control over a potentially frightening environment; and prepare to cope with procedures and interventions. There is evidence that play hastens recovery, as well as reducing the need for interventions to be delivered under general anaesthesia.

Moore and Russ (2006) note that pretend play interventions with children are effective in both inpatient and outpatient settings for preventing and reducing anxiety and distress. Pretend play also has effects on reducing pain and adaptation to chronic illness.

Walker (2006) lists a number of reasons why children and young people in hospital should have the opportunity to play: as an essential ingredient of childhood and child development, the need to play continues during time in hospital; however, the unfamiliarity of the hospital context, the invasiveness of medical procedures and the sense of uncertainty regarding the outcomes of treatment are all factors likely to produce high levels of anxiety and stress at a time when children are most vulnerable because they are ill. Play can help mitigate all of these factors. The provision of play equipment sends messages that playing is welcome in the hospital, and the playing process can help in making the unfamiliar and unknown familiar and knowable. Play can also help aid physical recovery through encouraging movement, and it can also have a role in helping to heal trauma. Play specialists can help children to communicate their fears and needs as well as supporting the play process more generally. Walker draws a distinction between hospital play specialists and play therapists, whilst recognising the therapeutic benefits of play itself. Haïat and others (2003: 210) agree:

Play is one of the most powerful and most effective tools used to reduce tension, anger, frustration, conflict, and anxiety, which are accompanied by the loss of control, and self-esteem. This can be said of all children in general, and especially of those who are hospitalised.
Play in prisons

The Every Child Matters (ECM) Green Paper (DfES 2003b: 43) states that ‘seven per cent of children during their time at school experience the imprisonment of a father, while every year, approximately 150,000 children have a parent who enters custody.’ The paper cites research showing that children usually want to keep in touch with their imprisoned parents but there are many obstacles, including visiting prisons. Efforts to establish and maintain support services are largely through the voluntary sector and dependent upon individual commitment. The paper seeks suggestions on the way forward but a search revealed no explicit reference to children visiting parents in prison in subsequent ECM documents.

The need for children visiting prisons to play is increasingly acknowledged, and although several projects were funded through the Children’s Fund to develop support for children with family members in prison, a search revealed little in the way of systematic evaluation. Andrews (2005) reports on how having play facilities at prison visitor centres can help make visits easier for both children and mothers. Tamminen and Bailey (2001) use the experience of how the play facility at Wakefield Prison has a positive impact on the experiences of children visiting their fathers to develop guidelines for other prisons.

Children and trauma

Many of the groups of children considered in this section will have experienced, or still be experiencing, trauma. The healing effects of play have been recognised both in play therapy (for example Cattanach 2003) and in playwork approaches (Sturrock and Else 2005). The literature on this aspect of play is considerable and there has not been the opportunity within the scope of this review to look at it in any depth; however it is such an important aspect of playing that it needs to be included. Children who have experienced the trauma of natural disasters, terrorism or war will often play out the scenes they have witnessed (Sleek 1998; Howard 2007); this has been recognised as an element of children’s play since the earlier documentations such as Ariès (1962, cited in Adams and Moyles 2005).

Adams and Moyles (2005) report the difficulty that early years practitioners have in knowing how to respond to children who have witnessed major events such as the attacks on the World Trade Centre in 2001, even if these events were witnessed at a distance. Many anecdotally report an increase in war play and also in tower building and destroying in children’s play following the images of destruction seen on television screens. The sensitivities generated by differences of perspective on the reasons for and the responses to the attacks complicate the issue further. Reactions to children’s playing out of scenes can range from discomfort through to offence. Adams and Moyles explore three interrelated themes of: images of violence in the media; practitioners’ feelings and values regarding this and their emotional response to children’s representations of violence in their play; and children’s entitlement to express feelings of anger, frustration and anxiety in their playing. They suggest that talking with colleagues about these feelings may help work towards a response that supports the children in expressing these narratives rather than inhibiting them.

In their guidance on aid support for children in emergencies, developed in response to the Balkan conflict, Cuninghame and others (2001) devote a whole section to play. In it they promote the importance of ‘ordinary’ playing, both organised and spontaneous, as a part of children’s routine and a way of helping them develop resilience to the emergency situations in which they find themselves. They advise that ‘some activities may cause children to recall, and express, distressing memories (perhaps through drawings or make-believe play). This should be neither encouraged nor discouraged, but allowed and supported if initiated by the child’ (Cuninghame and others 2001: 40).

Loughry and others (2006) carried out an empirical study of the impact of structured activities among Palestinian children from the West Bank and Gaza and found that this appeared to be helpful in improving children’s emotional and behavioural well-being but not their hopefulness, and that it also helped to improve parental support. Structured activities were seen to:
provide a routine to counteract the chaos of the conflict; reduce the risks attached to children playing in unsafe ways and places; support children in expressing and playing out problems; and provide opportunities for children to develop attachments to other children and adults. In addition, parents could feel that their children were safe and could also benefit from participating alongside them.

Brown (2006b) reports on a playwork project with neglected and abused children in a paediatric hospital in Romania (Webb and Brown 2003; Brown and Webb 2005). Playworkers worked with the children to build relationships of trust and create opportunities for them to play, taking the child’s own agenda as the starting point. A specifically designed play assessment tool was used to measure how the children’s play developed. Significant improvements were observed in the children’s play and development: ‘in less than a year, these chronically abused and neglected children made the sort of progress that many experts assumed would be impossible’ (Brown and Webb 2005: 155).

Sturrock and Else (2005) suggest that therapeutic approaches to playwork can be useful in less extreme situations. Playworkers need to recognise that children have issues and emotions that they need to express symbolically, and that such expressions may also provoke strong reactions in playworkers themselves. The role of the therapeutic playworker is to understand the elements of the play cycle (comprising play cues and returns, the establishment of play frames and loop and flow, and annihilation of the frame, as described earlier in this chapter under ‘supervised play provision and playwork’) and develop a repertoire of responses aimed at supporting the cycle.

Summary and comment

The nationally published literature on play provision for particular groups of children and those
in particular circumstances shows a distance between on then one hand the assumptions underpinning practice and on the other the findings from the emerging geographies of childhood and the brain science research into play and peer friendships outlined in Chapters 3 and 4. The evaluation research shows a focus on access to provision, with less attention paid to supporting play, and with the beginnings of questioning current approaches to anti-discriminatory practice.

The starting point is the importance of recognising that all children need to play and that some children face greater barriers than others in accessing opportunities to play. Often, for children in extreme circumstances, immediate survival needs are addressed and play can sometimes be forgotten; where opportunities are created, benefits are tangible (for example Beirens and others 2006; Chambers 2004; Walker 2006; Shatwell 2003; Andrews 2005; Tamminen and Bailey 2001; Cuningham and others 2001). There is a debate as to whether separate or inclusive provision is preferable. The importance of community-led provision for particular cultural or religious groups is acknowledged (Maan 2005); at the same time there is an underpinning assertion that playing together reduces ignorance and prejudice and therefore aids community cohesion (Cantle 2001), although this remains contested (Bhavnani and others 2005). Much of the literature reviewed here shows that children from different cultural groups, or disabled and non-disabled children, often play ‘in parallel’ and that this is a cause for concern. It may be that, given the lack of agreement on the benefits of being encouraged to play together, and the research showing the importance of children’s own peer friendships (for example Booth-Laforce and others 2005; Qualter and Munn 2005), that further research in this area is warranted. In some cases, the culture of settings served to perpetuate stereotypes and entrench attitudes (Smith and Barker 2001; Holland 2003; Connolly 2006; Brooker 2006).

As the literature reviewed in Chapter 3 suggests, self- and peer-led playing can sometimes seem cruel, yet it is the creativity, flexibility, sense of control and ‘as if’ nature of play that are understood to aid development of such capacities as emotion regulation and affect synchrony. In addition, the research on resilience, risk and stress (Rutter 2006; Siviy 1998) shows that experience of mild stress or adversity has beneficial consequences for brain structure and neurochemistry, helping to develop coping strategies; Yun and others (2005) suggest that removal of mild stressors and the decrease in variety of environmental cues may have a negative impact on resistance to disease. Such research calls into question a ‘zero tolerance’ approach to bullying and other forms of teasing in children’s play, as does research showing that children tend to argue more with close friends than with others outside their friendship groups (Qualter and Munn 2005). If adults who support play constantly interrupt these forms of playing with the well-intentioned aim of encouraging pro-social behaviour and preventing discrimination, could this be as counterproductive as attitudes towards play fighting (Smith and others 2002) and war play (Holland 2003) have been suggested to be?

Yet on the other hand there is a tendency to idealise play’s intrinsic motivations and freedoms and assume that these will always be beneficial because they are somehow ‘natural’ (Sutton-Smith 1997; Browne 2004; Henricks 2006). The individualistic notion of personal control and freedom cannot relate absolutely to playing in groups: there has to be a level of negotiation and cooperation in order to agree how the play frame will progress. As Henricks (2006: 8) observes, ‘play … exhibits social structures only somewhat dissimilar from those found in other parts of life’. Lofdahl and Hagglund (2006) show how power structures are played out and how more powerful children decide the roles within the play and who can or cannot join in. In some cases it may be that the challenges and stresses for the children with lesser status may be beneficial in the ways described by Rutter (2006) and Siviy (1998) above; for others, persistent or extreme exclusion may indeed be harmful.

Browne (2004: 2) highlights that ‘many early years educators had become disheartened with their ‘equal opportunities’ strategies, not least because they felt that the strategies were simply not working’. These are challenging issues and there is a need to address them through further research.
Adult–child relations and adult involvement in play provision

Adults’ involvement in children’s play is not restricted to face-to-face work with children and young people but also includes those who develop and manage play provision and other settings where children and young people spend time as well as those who make decisions about the use of public space. However, this section focuses on the direct interface between adults and children at play.

The workforce in early years and school-age childcare services is of central importance … How good the services are depends on the people working in them. The workforce – how it is organised, how it is trained, its pay and other employment conditions, how gendered it is, how the work is understood – goes to the heart of policy … The workforce – both its structure and conditions – has been neglected for decades. There has been little new thinking and no major reforms to produce a workforce for the 21st century. (Moss 2003: 1)

Moss’ argument focuses on the gendered nature of the early years and childcare workforce and the need to reconsider work with children as ‘women’s work’. However, the sentiment can be extended to the quality of the work itself: there is a gap between the more recent theories about play, childhood, gender and ethnicity and the literature on practice. This is particularly true of playwork, less so of early years work. There are very few evaluations or studies of playwork practice that draw on recent theorising; and fewer still that employ rigorous methodologies.

The power relationships between adults and children need to be acknowledged in any professional or service-provider/client relationship. In most contexts, adult professionals are the experts; in any role of supporting play, Russell (2005) suggests that this expert/incompetent relationship becomes reversed. Adults have mostly forgotten what it feels like to play, and tend to view children’s play as a hallmark of immaturity. Although adults still carry with them the adult responsibility for children’s safety and well-being when in their care, the concept of play as child-led and very much of childhood, creates a contradiction for adults aiming to support play in any authentic way.

The literature on adult roles in supporting play within a framework of equality and anti-discriminatory practice has been reviewed in the previous section. This section looks at some of the other key contested areas of practice for those working with children and young people, namely: structure, direction and intervention; behaviour; and the importance of relationships.

Structure, direction and intervention

As we have seen throughout this report, evidence of the benefits of play, and particularly of play provision, is clouded by two areas of confusion: firstly, the lack of a consistent understanding of what is meant by play and secondly, directly following on from this, the level of direction and control by adults involved in such provision. The debates on the level and appropriateness of interventions are dependent upon the particular understanding of the purpose and function of play in any given setting, for example, whether it is valued for its own sake or whether it is a vehicle for learning, community cohesion or crime reduction.

In this section, intervention is understood as direct intervention in children’s play episodes; although it is recognised that a broader understanding of intervention also exists which includes the creation and modification of the physical and social environment within which children play (for example, Hughes 1996b; Conway 2003).

Some of the literature on adult roles in relation to children’s play in early years settings has already been discussed in the section on early years (for example, Rogers 2005; David 2003; Cremin and others 2006; Howard and others 2001).

Sandberg (2002) summarises the debates regarding teacher intervention in children’s play in Swedish preschool and after school settings, from those who claim that intervention restricts children’s ability to explore, take risks or engage in free play to those who assert that teacher
participation shows adult acceptance of play, builds relationships and extends learning. It should be noted that the term 'teacher' here is possibly a translation from the Swedish 'pedagogue', a term used to refer to those who work with children in a range of settings from a shared value base (see Petrie and others 2005 below). Sandberg notes that: 'generally studies of play are based on adults’ perspectives of a children's world which is “created” by adults' (Sandberg 2002: 18). Her research used observations of children (aged between five and nine years) at play, both with and without teacher involvement, followed by semi-structured interviews with the children to elicit their perceptions of teacher involvement in play. Her questions included ‘Who should control play?’, ‘Can teachers play?’, ‘Can teachers contribute to play?’ and ‘How should teachers take part in play?’ Generally, respondents felt that children should control their own play, and that if teachers took control, this was usually because of safety issues or because they preferred calm playing. The children thought that it was good to have teachers there to play with if there was no one else, and to call on if needed, but some of them felt teachers could not play ‘because they cannot play pretend games, they guide the play, they interfere and change the play, and they nag at children in the play.’ (Sandberg 2002: 20).

Teachers could contribute to playing through helping to resolve conflicts, keeping track of the rules, and playing roles or parts no one else wanted. There were some forms of play to which teachers did not contribute, for example, as one boy said, ‘the kissing-game’. This study shows that children's perception of teachers' involvement in play differs from adults' own perceptions: rather than the adult being a facilitator or playmate, or someone who can usefully extend play, children see them as often interfering, and useful in certain contexts only. Sandberg (2002: 21) concludes that ‘teachers should be sensitive, observant and engaged, but should not control, decide or interrupt play.’

Petrie and others (2005) explore the notion of ‘pedagogy’ as an approach to working with children and young people which is common in many European countries. Pedagogues work with children and young people in a range of settings to support their holistic development rather than focusing on one aspect of professional intervention such as education or care. Pedagogues are usually trained to degree level and spend much of their education developing reflective practice drawing on knowledge of theories and of themselves. Petrie and others’ research into models of pedagogy in five European countries found a number of common principles underpinning the work, including a focus on the child as a whole person; an understanding of relationship with children as co-constructed rather than hierarchical; an appreciation of children's rights; an emphasis on teamwork and also on practical skills such as arts, gardening, music, making meals with children; an acknowledgement of the children's social relationships with others in the group. Petrie and others (2005) suggest that the model could be usefully applied within the Every Child Matters agenda, and that training and education could be a starting place for change.

Creegan and others’ (2004) evaluation of 10 community play projects found both structured and unstructured approaches to play. Some projects offered organised and timetabled activities and games, at others there was more of an emphasis on free play, with resources and activities being freely available for the children to choose as and when they wished. The report concludes (Creegan and others 2004: 52) ‘The evidence underlines the importance of achieving a balance between free play and time, and organised activities and games, in order to secure and maintain the engagement of children’.

Feinstein and others’ (2005) research into the recreational preferences of teenagers in the 1970 Cohort Study (described in more detail in Chapter 2) cautiously found an association between attendance at unstructured youth clubs and later social exclusion, either in terms of poor educational attainment or criminality. However, although they suggest that structured activities could benefit young people at risk of social exclusion, they recognise that such activities may not appeal.

Sturrock and others (2004) highlight the centrality of play in children's lives and suggest this could form the core of a shared approach to work with children and young people. Their continuum of responses to children that has a playful (ludocentric) response positioned dynamically between a didactic response and a chaotic one is explained in the section of
the review on playwork theories. Within this framework, adult intervention is understood as behaviour intended to support children’s play frames rather than meeting any other social agenda. In parallel to the principles of the pedagogic approach described above (Petrie and others 2005), this approach also pays attention to the subjective responses of the adult to children’s play expressions, and requires a high level of self-awareness and self-knowledge.

Given the evidence outlined in Chapters 3 and 4 of this review, it should be clear that children’s own control of their playing (in groups as well as individually) is part of its essence, as are its characteristics of flexibility, unpredictability, spontaneity and imagination. It is these characteristics that make play so effective in its role in brain structure and chemistry, with the attendant benefits of resilience, emotion regulation and enjoyment as well as the foundations for social competence and cognitive functioning. Given such a pedigree, it should be beyond doubt that adults who work with children at play should do their utmost to support this process.

**Behaviour**

Jane Brown (2007b) highlights the increased attention being given to ‘problem behaviour’ both in the media and in public policy. Policies are becoming increasingly interventionist and punitive; at the same time interventions are targeted at younger children, including Sure Start (which explicitly aims to identify early problem behaviour) and On Track (which works with children between 4 and 12 years who are identified as being at risk of antisocial behaviour in later life). Brown’s small-scale study of the perceptions of staff and parents of children in preschool settings concluded that the institutionalisation of time and space through timetabling, zoning and expectations of behaviour, contributed to the perception of boys’ boisterous colonisation of space as problematic, whilst girls’ tendency to engage in quieter more sedentary activities led to the perception of their being well-behaved. Girls who did not fit this expectation were also considered to display problem behaviour. Flash points for ‘problem behaviour’ were times and spaces of transition – arriving and leaving the setting. In this way, the behaviour could be constructed as inappropriate within the limitations of the institution rather than any truly ‘child-centred’ provision that accommodated the need for boisterous, physical or superhero play.

Holland (2003) draws on social theory as well as developmental psychology theories and her own experiences to critique the 30-year-old zero tolerance approach to war, weapon and superhero play in early years settings. Recognising that the approach stemmed from feminist and pacifist concerns about male aggression (domestic, public and international), she could find little in the way of evidence to support a causal link between this kind of play and aggressive behaviours. She suggests that the discomfort is more about the needs and value base of practitioners (mostly female) than it is about supporting children. Early years practitioners were expending much time and energy imposing the ban on this kind of play seemingly to little effect, but developing quite negative relationships with (almost always) boys who persisted in this play. Holland makes connections between war, weapon and superhero play and imaginative play in general, and asks if the ban inhibits the development of imaginative play and therefore the development of skills in conflict resolution or emotional mediation. In her research, when the ban was lifted, and especially in cases where staff could support imaginative play, the weapon play would develop and incorporate other kinds of imaginative play, often girls would become involved, especially if staff joined in, and generally levels of real aggression fell. Once boys were allowed to develop this play, their play repertoires expanded and were less gender stereotypical, even border crossing. There was also concern that zero tolerance was harmful to these boys’ self-concept and therefore self-esteem, especially if they were receiving different messages at home. Imaginative play helps to develop theory of mind and the capacity to understand that each person’s mind is individual and therefore that other people experience things differently. Holland is not supportive of a straight laissez-faire approach that rests on a crude understanding of the concept of catharsis (getting it out of the system). Her thesis is that this is an entry into imaginative play and if it is blocked, this inhibits the development of imagination and all the benefits that accrue from that, particularly around deferred gratification, emotion regulation and theory of mind, leading to conflict resolution skills.

Thornton and Cox (2005) report on supporting and structuring the play of children with Autistic Spectrum Disorder (ASD) in order to reduce challenging behaviour and aid learning and
development. Working with children in a residential setting, they drew on both current theories on the suppressed potential for play in children with ASD and earlier developmental theories (for example, Bruner’s theory of scaffolding 1966; Vygotsky’s Zone of Proximal Development 1933, cited in Thornton and Cox 2005) of the role of adults in extending children’s play and learning experiences. Understanding the antecedents of displays of challenging behaviour (for example frustration and not being able to communicate desires or anxiety and not being able to meet demands) enabled the playworkers to identify ways of playing that could then be introduced at moments of stress to calm the challenging behaviour.

In an action research project with playworkers working with children identified as displaying challenging behaviour, Russell (2006) found that helping the playworkers to develop an understanding of the ways in which these children played, rather than focusing on unwanted behaviour, allowed them to develop more constructive relationships and for the children to play out narratives within a safer frame.

Millie and others (2005), in their discussion of strategies to address antisocial behaviour in the public realm (rather than in settings), identified three narratives of youth antisocial behaviour and three corresponding responses: those who understood antisocial behaviour as symptomatic of social and moral decline favoured a corrective and punitive approach to dealing with it; those who thought such behaviour was grounded in a disaffection with and disengagement from wider society, and in some cases their own families, favoured preventative approaches; those who thought that youth antisocial behaviour was part of being young (‘kids will be kids’), the age old tendency for young people to test boundaries and challenge their elders, favoured diversionary approaches. Young people themselves cited boredom and material gain as the two key motivators for antisocial behaviour (Adamson 2003).

There have been a number of government initiatives aimed at reducing antisocial behaviour amongst young people, mostly framed within the risk and prevention paradigm for social policy explained in Chapter 2. Examples include the Children’s Fund, On Track and Positive Activities for Young People. The On Track programme was aimed at children aged four to 12 who were deemed to be at risk of offending or antisocial behaviour, with a focus on minimising the risk factors and reinforcing protective factors. The national evaluation of On Track services and users (Dinos and others 2006) found that just over half of the services were described as universal and just under half as targeted, and just over half were housed within schools. Open access and drop-in after school clubs and playschemes are listed as forming a part of the

‘A play-centred relationship with children has the potential to be highly beneficial for both children and adults.’
universal service portfolio. No further details are available at the time of writing on the role that play provision had in this programme. Similarly, the Positive Activities for Young People programme was used as a funding source for play projects, yet there is no explicit reference to their role in the final evaluation report (CRG 2006). Given the recent research pointing to a relationship between playing and resilience outlined in Chapter 3, particularly regarding emotion regulation, it would seem that there is an evidence base for including provision for children to engage in free play within these programmes.

**The importance of relationships**

Gilligan (2000: 45) highlights the role that key adults have in the development of resilience in children and young people:

> Caregivers, teachers and social workers should remember that the detail of what they do with children counts. The rituals, the smiles, the interest in little things, the daily routines, the talents they nurture, the interests they stimulate, the hobbies they encourage, the friendships they support, the sibling ties they preserve make a difference.

Manwaring’s (2006) research into children’s views of playworkers found that relationships with staff varied from child to child. Some liked the playworkers to join in, for others playworkers were insignificant to their play. Children valued the informality of their relationships with playworkers and the fact that they allowed them freedom to play in their own way. Key themes emerging from the discussions showed that children wanted their playworkers to be:

- nice, kind, caring and friendly
- good cooks (food was important to many)
- joining in (although children often wanted to be free from adult interruptions, they also at times wanted the playworkers to play with them)
- fairness (particularly in terms of preventing bullying or other children interrupting play: being good at telling off was seen as a positive quality)
- good fun and playful
- helpful
- not shouting.

The evaluation of London Street Games (Neighbourhood Renewal Unit 2004), a project to encourage young people’s participation in sport, showed that the qualities of the coaches, who were working with young people in public open spaces and on estates often in informal ways to begin with, was a key pointer in the success of the project. Coaches came from similar backgrounds to the young people and gained their respect through being good at their jobs.

Furedi (2005) examines how adult-child relations are constructed. He suggests that the Criminal Records Bureau checking procedure for adults who work with children alters the relationship between staff, children and parents, as it is based on an assumption that adults in general are not to be trusted and are a potential threat to children. He cites the example of volunteer football coaches, stating that parents talk about them as if they are potential threats to their children rather than people who give up their free time to coach football. Whilst on a rational level, screening would seem justifiable if it prevents one abuser gaining access to children, the process has created a more general suspicion of adults that in turn affects how adults relate to children. Such a level of suspicion is problematic for adult-child relations. Nevertheless, Gilligan’s (2000) research into the importance of everyday caring relationships can provide a counter perspective.

Much of the literature examined in this chapter has, either explicitly or implicitly, been about the role of adults in supporting children’s play. A play-centred (ludocentric) relationship with children has the potential to be highly beneficial for both children and adults. It may be that there is a need to reconsider how adults work with children at play in the light of the research reviewed in Chapters 3 and 4.
Concluding remarks
This literature review has covered a broad span of research, policy documents, evaluation reports and academic papers on childhood and play. Current social policy is rooted in the risk-focused prevention paradigm, and the final report on the policy review on children and young people (HM Treasury and DfES 2007a), a part of the Comprehensive Spending Review, announces a new emphasis on building resilience. The emerging evidence from the brain sciences suggests that playing, as a spontaneous, flexible and goalless ‘as if’ behaviour, plays a significant role in the development of the brain’s structure and chemistry, which gives rise to emotional and physical health, well-being and resilience, as well as laying the foundations for cognitive functioning and social competence. Given this weight of evidence, we should be ensuring that children can play, whether in their bedrooms, gardens, local neighbourhoods or dedicated children’s settings.

The evidence also suggests that it is the very characteristics of personal direction, unpredictability, flexibility and so on that make play so special. So any public provision for play must recognise these characteristics and be planned, implemented and evaluated with this in mind. If the evidence for the significance of play for children’s well-being and development is accepted, then provision should be judged on the outcome of whether children can play, not on any more instrumental outcome or direct link to any of the five Every Child Matters outcomes. There is no guarantee that play provides all these benefits; we can, however, be confident that these benefits are more likely to accrue than if children cannot play.

Such an understanding of play also relies on the other disciplines from which we have drawn evidence in this review, namely the sociologies and geographies of childhood. These studies have been amassing evidence that have challenged our understanding of childhood as a period of socialisation and preparation for adulthood during which children are weak and dependent. They have shown that children are competent social actors capable of negotiating complex social landscapes, building relationships through play, testing and contesting adult authority and power in direct and subtle ways. They have also shown that children have not forgotten how to play, rather that we as adults may have forgotten how to see how they are playing, or remember what it feels like. Such an understanding of children has a number of challenges for our relationships with them, especially if we are seeking to support their play.

The evidence presented here suggests that there is a need to rethink the knowledge that adults take with them into their work with children. The evidence from practice raises questions about, for example, the effectiveness of anti-discriminatory practices and approaches to challenging behaviour; as well as if, when and how to intervene in play. The scope of timing of the review has not allowed for any consideration of the current education and training landscape; however, the issue of training has been raised in a number of the sources reviewed. Given the significance of play in the lives of children, both from their own accounts and from the brain sciences, it would seem that it should as a minimum be a part of the common core of knowledge that every adult needs when working with children.