CORA Cork Open Research Archive
Cartlann Taighde Oscailte Chorcaí

Title	What barriers to play do children with disabilities face?
Authors	Lynch, Helen;Moore, Alice
Publication date	2018-10-26
Original Citation	Lynch, H. and Moore, A. (2018) 'What barriers to play do children with disabilities face?' in Encarnação, P., Ray-Kaeser, S. and Bianquin, N. (eds), Guidelines for supporting children with disabilities' play: Methodologies, tools and contexts, China: De Gruyter, pp. 28-41. isbn: 978-3-11-061344-5
Type of publication	Book chapter
Link to publisher's version	https://doi.org/10.1515/9783110613445-007 - 10.1515/9783110613445-007
Rights	© 2018 Authors. This work is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 3.0 License. - https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/3.0/
Download date	2026-11-01 19:35:59
Item downloaded from	https://hdl.handle.net/10468/13537

UCC
University College Cork, Ireland
Coláiste na hOllscoile Corcaigh

3

What barriers to play do children with disabilities face?

Helen Lynch and Alice Moore

When your child has a disability, his or her play opportunities may be impacted: their play may be experienced as more limiting. In fact, research shows that children with disabilities can experience more restrictions, fewer opportunities, less access, and less range of ability for play compared to other children. In recent research, this has been attributed to significant problems in the environment: the PHYSICAL, SOCIO-CULTURAL, and POLITICAL environment. Many people view this as an interdependent issue: we cannot look at one aspect alone but need to address this problem from each perspective. Most importantly, we need to start with the child, and the rights of the child to play.

This chapter begins with presenting an overview of play in relation to the rights of the child. First, the context is set by examining the concept of children as rights holders, and the importance of play as a right for all children through an overview of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC). Barriers to play will then be outlined in contrast to this, and an overview will be presented of some more recent developments in relation to making progress on implementing the child's right to play for all children.



Lara, 16 years old, Croatia



Miljan, 16 years old, Croatia

Key policies

1. United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC), 1989
2. United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD), 2007
3. General Comments No. 9, 2006 and No. 17, 2013
4. International Play Association Play for Children with Disabilities, 2015
5. LUDI Position Statement on Play and the Rights of Children with Disabilities, 2017

Is play a right? The UNCRC

When the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child was first published, it represented an international recognition and commitment to protecting and promoting children's rights to lead rich and fulfilled lives. The UNCRC was published in 1989 and was written for all children across the world. It consists of 54 articles, targeting human, social and economic rights, frequently grouped into three main areas: the three P's of Protection, Participation, and Provision. Of most relevance to this chapter is Article 31: the right to play.

Article 31 of the UNCRC

That every child has the right to rest and leisure, to engage in play and recreational activities appropriate to the age of the child and to participate freely in cultural life and the arts. That member governments shall respect and promote the right of the child to participate fully in cultural and artistic life and shall encourage the provision of appropriate and equal opportunities for cultural, artistic, recreational and leisure activity.

The right to play and leisure was included in the UNCRC because of the fundamental place that play holds in relation to childhood: play is central to how a child par-

ticipates in the world; it underpins healthy development, well-being, quality of life, socio-cultural participation, resilience, and creativity. This in turn means that the right to play is **interdependent** on the right to health and the right to education: a rights-based approach to health, education or social inclusion therefore needs to include the right to play.

In the UNCRC, there are four other articles that are often called cross-cutting or general principles:

- Article 2 on non-discrimination;
- Article 3 on best interests of the child;
- Article 6 on right to life, survival, and development;
- Article 12 on right to be heard.

Each of these four principles are relevant to ensuring the right conditions for play are provided for every child, and particularly for children with disabilities.

A fundamental issue that is at the foundation of the convention is that of children as rights-holders. Although all member states of the United Nations (UN) have signed the UNCRC, the implementation differs in respect of this issue. For example, in a review of the UNCRC and its implementation, researchers found that analysing the perspective of children as rights-holders was a crucial aspect: countries (such as Belgium, Norway and Spain) who had incorporated the UNCRC had a culture of respect for children's rights and viewed children as rights-holders. This reflects the changing nature of society in many developed countries: children are viewed as having a voice, and of being experts on their own lives. This position has led to a whole movement across Europe to promote children's participation (an implementation of Article 12, UNCRC). For example, in 2016 the Council of Europe published a toolkit to examine children's participation in Europe, while in Ireland the government established a participation hub to progress this agenda for children's rights nationally.

Case Study example: Impact of the UNCRC - Development of a National Policy for Play, Ireland

Ireland became one of the first countries in Europe to produce a detailed national policy on play. In March 2004, the Government of Ireland produced 'Ready, Steady, Play! A National Play Policy' to honour commitments made in the UNCRC, which Ireland ratified in 1992. The policy illustrated the Government's recognition of the importance of play, and a commitment to making sure that equitable and inclusive play is facilitated for all children, particularly children who are marginalised, disadvantaged or who have a disability. The policy was implemented in Ireland in 2004 and is currently being reviewed.

What happened since 1989

Since 1989, the international community of States (countries) adopted this UNCRC convention formally so that now (in 2018) almost all United Nations member states have ratified it. In a UNICEF review (2012) of the implementation of the UNCRC, examples of good practice were presented that included the use of non-legal measures such as the development of national strategies for children and establishing detailed data sets on children's lives. However, the majority of countries had not developed legal measures that would give more robust commitment to implementation. This report acknowledged the challenges of implementing the UNCRC and the wide variety of different approaches across European countries in doing so. Although the review did not target play rights specifically, it highlights the difficulties in implementing international policy at national context.

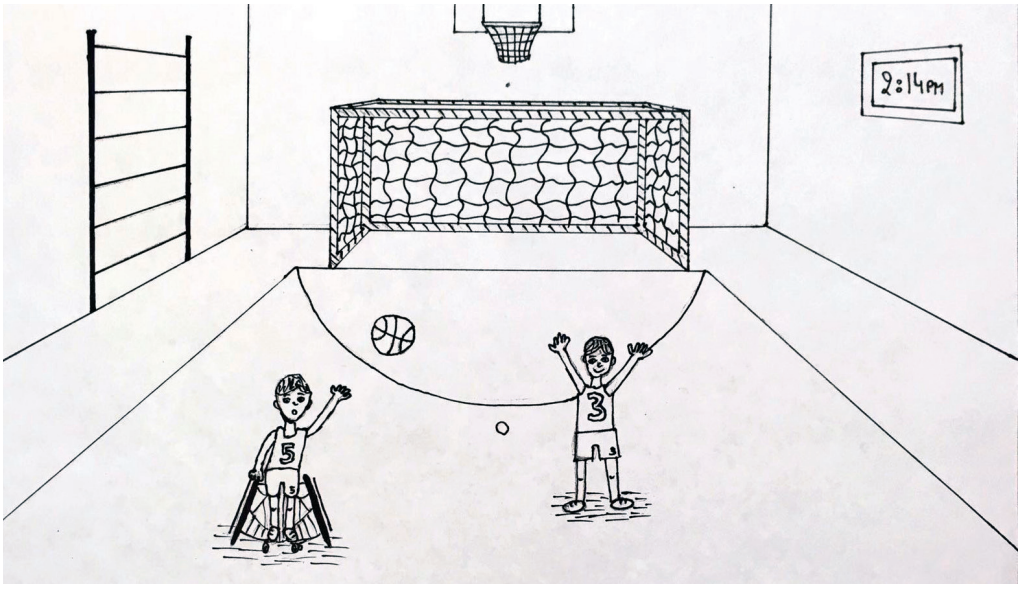
Therefore, it is important to explore and understand the barriers that exist to providing for play, in order to consider what we can do to progress the play agenda for children with disabilities and ensure their rights to play are taken seriously.

Barriers to play: lack of political commitment to implementing the right to play

The political environment is closely linked to the economic environment, as national funding typically follows legislation and policies to support government initiatives.

- Despite the ratification of the UNCRC across Europe and beyond, to date, few countries have developed national plans in relation to play, and few have guidelines on providing play for all children including those with disabilities. In an online survey of 16 European countries in 2017, it was found that play policies had been developed only in two countries: in Ireland and in the UK (in the four regions: Northern Ireland, Wales, Scotland, and England).

- In a scoping review of evidence on usability and accessibility of playgrounds, researchers found that few national guidelines exist to inform design of inclusive playgrounds. This leads to national provision of playgrounds that are not designed for children of varied abilities, resulting in exclusion and inequality.



Myrthe, 15 years old, the Netherlands

- In a study in Sweden with municipal play providers, researchers found that there was a significant lack of knowledge about the play needs of children with disabilities, when designing or planning for developing playspaces in local communities.

- Although few studies have analysed why these problems arise in implementing the UNCRC, one study has reported some data to throw some light onto the issue. In a review of the implementation of Article 31 in the UK, researchers found that there was a lack of a rights-based perspective in implementation strategies being adopted, and argued that greater leadership was needed from the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child, such as to provide robust monitoring. Problems identified included the overly broad terms of the article leaving states unclear as to how to interpret play and play needs adequately.

Overall, it seems that when play is not taken seriously in national policy, play is poorly funded locally. This is an example of how the political, socio-cultural, and physical environments are closely interdependent.

Barriers to play: different values and attitudes in the socio-cultural environment

The socio-cultural environment for play includes family and community contexts, among others.

- **Social attitudes can be a factor:** there are currently some strong opinions and debates about what is considered as 'acceptable play' in communities. These issues have emerged from experiences of families feeling unwelcome in public places. Some studies have shown that this results in a feeling of stigma, of feeling ostracised, of not belonging in public. For example, in one study involving families of children with autism spectrum disorders, parents felt judged by others when their children were out playing in public playgrounds. Parents reported that they seek to ensure their child plays 'appropriately', so that they are accepted as good play partners by their friends. Therefore, for some families, the issue of what play is acceptable or appropriate is a big issue.

- Other socio-cultural studies with parents have identified that parents struggle with managing the child's identity in varied social settings due to social attitudes, where disability is viewed as a tragedy.

- **Health and education contexts** where play is not valued: it is a sad reflection of our societies if we forget about the importance of play. As a therapist, I regret the times I did not remember to build in authentic play goals together with the families I used to work with. 'Authentic play goals' refers to the fact that in many cases, therapists actually use play to build skills, e.g. to teach the child fine-motor skills or to improve manipulation. In a study of therapists in Ireland, Sweden, and Switzerland, for example, researchers found that the majority used play in this way. Few therapists thought of enabling play in families as an aim for its own value: for fun, for well-being, for family relationships. Family life is sustained when family members can develop and enjoy activities such as play together.

- **Family values and attitudes** are also a contributing factor: for example, when a child has a disability, many families are challenged to provide significant time to practice skills, follow up on education, rehabilitation or therapy schedules, and time is limited for play. It may be that parents feel guilty about not working with the child when they have time, yet all families need playtime.

Among play researchers in recent years, there is a growing realisation that there is a lack of knowledge about play for the sake of play, among many adults who care for children. Therefore, enabling play for children with disabilities is a complex issue, which warrants attention to knowledge, awareness, attitudes, and beliefs.

Barriers to play: physical environment

While significant barriers in the social and political environment have been presented, there are equally significant barriers in the physical environment to consider. Indeed, some studies have shown that if barriers in the physical environment are tackled, then social barriers can be more easily addressed.

- Studies have identified that the lack of physical access is a main barrier to participation of children with disabilities in community activities in many countries. Physical access refers to many design issues such as having pathways,

entrances, and facilities designed for children of all abilities, so that a child who uses a wheelchair, for example, can access the swimming pool or enter the playground and use the equipment there. In one study of 57 playgrounds in the USA, researchers found that only 5% of routes and pathways met the standards set out by legislation for accessibility.

- Few studies have explored the physical environmental needs of children with other needs such as sensory or cognitive impairments. Therefore, a further barrier exists in relation to our lack of data on children with different needs.

- Where no or few guidelines exist for guiding local authorities on how best to provide for inclusive playspaces, many children with disabilities are excluded from playing with their friends. In a number of studies in Sweden, researchers found that children of varied abilities valued playgrounds as a place for play, but did not find playgrounds to be inclusive, or equitable places for play.

- Although the UNCRC establishes the need for children to be involved in matters that affect them such as in developing playspaces, no research has been published to date on children with disability and their engagement in designing for play.

So, with these barriers in mind, what else has been developed internationally in relation to addressing the rights to play for children with disability? The next section presents a brief introduction to key documents that guide us into the next phase of enabling play as an issue of rights.



Eduardo, 7 years old, Italy

Strengthening the policy context: Play for Children with Disabilities - General Comment No. 9, 2006

When the UN adopts conventions and when states ratify them, there follows phases of implementation and review. Consequently, the UN works on what are called General Comments, to help strengthen the understanding of articles to support the interpretation of provisions within each convention. For example, since the UNCRC was ratified, there have been 21 general comments to date (2017).

In 2006, a General Comment on the Rights of Children with Disabilities was drafted and adopted:

- It specified in relation to Article 31 that children with disabilities have a right to access recreation activities appropriate to their age, and capability, including mental and psychological ability;

- That children with disabilities should be provided with equal opportunities, places, and time to play with each other (children with and without disabilities).

Strengthening the policy context: Play for Children with Disabilities - the UNCRPD, 2008

It is of note that every convention developed by the United Nations is intended to be used in conjunction with or complimentary to existing legislation and conventions. This is the case with Article 31 from the UNCRC, which needs also to be viewed in conjunction with the second significant convention: the Convention on the Rights of People with Disability (UNCRPD), which was developed by the United Nations and came into force in 2008. Although not aimed specifically at children, it contains articles that refer directly to children with disabilities, e.g.:

- Article 7 - States Parties shall take all necessary measures to ensure the full enjoyment by children with disabilities of all human rights and fundamental freedoms on an equal basis with other children;

- Article 26 - Support participation and inclusion in the community and all aspects of society, are voluntary, and are available to persons with disabilities as close as possible to their own communities, including in rural areas;

- Article 30 - To ensure that children with disabilities have equal access with other children to participation in play, recreation and leisure and sporting activities, including those activities in the school system.

Strengthening the policy context: Play for Children with Disabilities - General Comment No. 17, 2013

The most influential General Comment however for the rights of children to play, has been General Comment no 17 (GC17), which was adopted in 2013.

From the review process of the implementation of the UNCRC, the GC17 realised that states still had poor recognition of the right to play, resulting in poor investment, limited progress in legislation and policy, and 'invisibility of children in national and local-level planning'. They noted that when investment was made into play provision, it over-emphasised structured and organised activities rather than recognising the need to provide time and space for children. Specifically, the GC17 identified groups of children who were at risk of play deprivation more than others: these included children with disabilities. For children with disabilities the GC17 identified many barriers to play including: physical barriers - inaccessible playspaces and transport, policies that exclude participation on the grounds of safety, communication barriers, poor investment in technologies, and lack of involvement of children in designing for play.

With these concerns in mind, the CG17 went on to provide guidance on how to progress implementation of the UNCRC more effectively. Some key issues addressed include:

1. Creating a context for the realisation of Article 31 - including factors for an optimal environment;

2. Challenges to addressing the realisation of Article 31, including

- Lack of recognition of importance of play;
- Unsafe/hazardous environments;
- Resistance to children's use of public space;
- Balancing risk and safety;
- Lack of access to nature;
- Pressure for educational achievement;
- Overly structured schedules for children;
- Neglect of Article 31 in development programmes;
- Lack of investment in cultural and artistic opportunities;
- Growing role of electronic media;
- Commercialisation of play;

3. States parties obligations, covering aspects such as non-discrimination, and regulation, e.g.:

- 'public awareness of both the right to and the significance of play';
- 'establishment of safety and accessibility standards for all play and recreational facilities, toys and games equipment';
- 'all measures at local and national levels, and including planning, design, development, implementation and monitoring should be developed in collaboration with children themselves, as well as NGOs and community-based organisations';

- **Data collection and research:** 'States need to collect population-based data, disaggregated by age, sex, ethnicity and disability to gain an understanding of the extent and nature of children's engagement in play';

- **Universal Design:** 'investment in universal design is necessary with regard to play [...] consistent with obligations to promote inclusion and protect children with disabilities from discrimination';

- **Municipal planning:** local municipalities should assess provision of play and recreation facilities to guarantee equality of access by all groups of children and should include:

- **Availability of inclusive parks and playgrounds;**

    - Design of zones for free play;

    - Public safety measures to protect areas for play;

    - Access to green areas and nature for play;

    - Physical environments for play in schools designed for equal opportunity.



Rebecca, 8 years old, Italy

Case Study: The play sufficiency duty, Wales

Wales became the first country in the world to legislate for children's play by implementing a play sufficiency requirement that was informed by the UNCRC. The Children and Families (Wales) Measure 2010, Section 11 placed a statutory duty on every local authority to assess and secure sufficient play opportunities for children and young people in play areas. The play sufficiency duty came about as part of the Welsh Government's anti-poverty agenda, which recognises that children can have a poverty of experience, opportunity, and aspiration, and that this kind of poverty can affect children from all social, cultural, and economic backgrounds across Wales. Supporting improved access to play for children with disabilities was included in the second part of the play sufficiency duty. To support the introduction of this duty, the Welsh Government published Statutory Guidance and a Play Sufficiency Assessment Toolkit to support local authorities in fulfilling their duties.

Finally, more recently two key position statements have been published to further the play agenda for children with disabilities:

1. The International Play Association in 2015 published a Position Paper on the Play Rights of Disabled Children to further promote awareness and consciousness in the general public about the need to recognise this as a serious concern;

2. The LUDI COST Action produced its position statement in 2017.

Conclusion

Although play is a right enshrined in international conventions such as the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child and the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, children with disabilities still face many barriers to play. These include the lack of political commitment to implementing the right to play, different values and attitudes in the socio-cultural environment, and inaccessible physical environment.

While it is a sad fact, it seems that as a society, we need to advocate for children's play: to give children permission to play, to promote play more in families of children with disabilities, to redress the imbalances identified in these policies. The emphasis on the future child (working always to develop skills that are perhaps delayed in development) needs to shift to include looking at the child in the here-and-now. Focus on current play needs will help future resilience and well-being. It is reassuring that from our review of policy, we have strong guidance on how to do this. Through work of networking organisations such as LUDI, the future for play for children with disabilities is very hopeful.