

# KEY ISSUES PAPER 4



## The Barriers to Early Adolescent Play at School: <sup>1</sup>

### INTRODUCTION

This Key Issues paper presents an overview of the initial findings of some of the qualitative data collected in the Play in Early Adolescence Project.

The qualitative aspect of the study took place after the quantitative capture of play behaviours had occurred and had been finalised (see Key Issues 3 for a discussion of the observational data).

Researchers on the Early Adolescence Play Project conducted a number of individual interviews with school leaders/teachers in primary school and high school. The school leaders were interviewed regarding their perspectives on Year 7 and Year 8 play, what the challenges were and what worked well. Interviews were recorded and transcripts analysed. Themes were identified and categorised.

Focus group discussions with students in Year 7 and 8 were conducted which aimed to explore children's views, perceptions, ideas, and thoughts about what they do in their free time at

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recess/lunchtime at school, what they thought about transition to high school and what, if anything they would like to be different. Specifically, children were asked:

### Free time at School

- What would you like to do/play during break times?
- Why do you/don't you engage in these activities?
- If you could change one thing about break times/play – what would it be and why?

### Looking forward

- What do you think you will enjoy playing/doing at high school?
- What are you expecting to do in your recess/lunch at high school?
- What can you do now that you don't think you will be able to do at high school?

### Looking back

- What did you enjoy playing/doing at break time in Primary school?
- What did you expect to do in your recess/lunch at high school?
- What could you do in primary school that you can't do now?



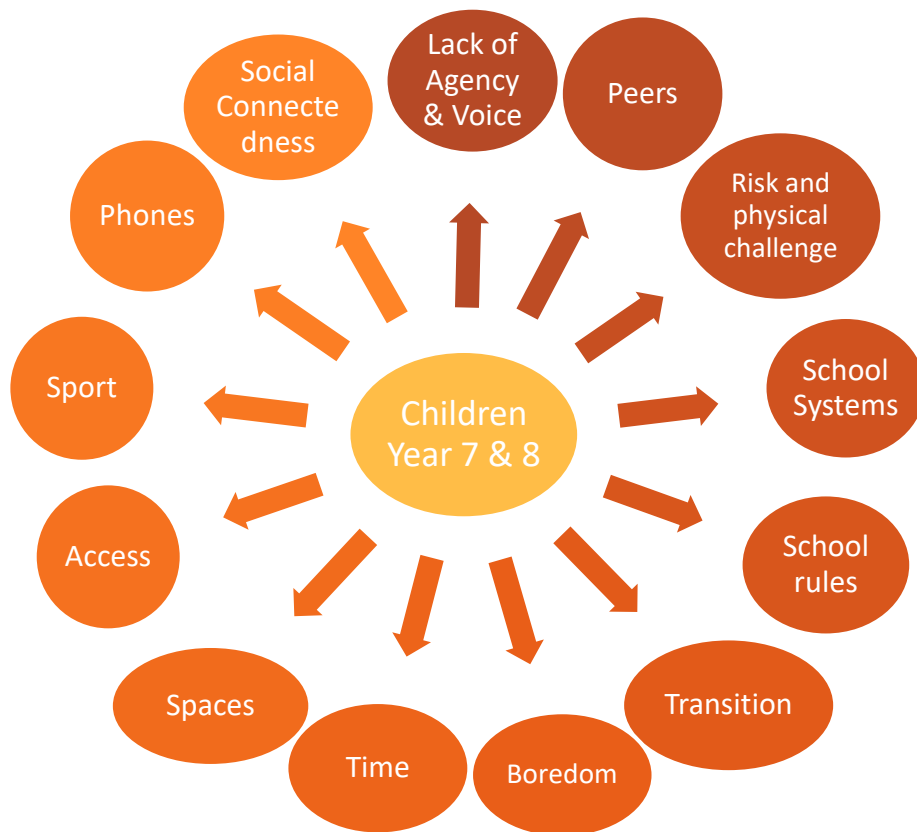
Figure 1: Analysis of the school leader/schoolteacher interviews



It is important to note that these themes are interconnected and overlap but are separated here for the purpose of this report.

Moreover, whilst subthemes were identified within the above themes in Figure 1, and there were differences between teachers/leaders within the different schools involved in the study. This Key Issues paper provides a synthesis of the main barriers to play across Primary and High School contexts.

Figure 2: Analysis of the Year 7 and Year 8 Children’s Focus Group Discussions



Whilst the thematic analysis of the children’s perspectives revealed similar themes to those from the teachers/leaders, additional themes emerged from the children’s data including a lack of voice/agency, a lack of time and barriers associated with systems and rules within school.

Thus, in looking across the teachers/leaders interviews as highlighted in Figure 1 together with the Year 7/8 children’s focus groups, as per Figure 2, we report here the following Key Issues in relation to the barriers to play at school:

- (1) Peer influence
- (2) Environment
- (3) Transition to high school
- (4) Knowledge, understanding and attitudes
- (5) School rules, systems, and time
- (6) Agency and Voice

### Inequality of Power

The data provided evidence that peers have a significant influence on other children's involvement in school and participation in play. Teachers discussed intimidation for younger cohorts of students and how the older students had power over participation of play activities that children in the younger level groups could engage in.

### Intimidation

Teachers and children mentioned the intimidation at high school. For example, one school leader discussed how Year 10 students played basketball and how "it is pretty intimidating" for younger year 8 students to get involved. As discussed in Key Issues 3, researchers have found that active peers can encourage physical activity. Within our data we also find that peers can discourage play. Not just through power differences as mentioned above, but also through name calling and fear of ridicule from same aged children in the same peer level.

They get called nerds and weirdos

### Fitting in

The key viewpoint that resonated throughout the data from the Year 7 & 8 children was that they wanted to fit in and be the same as the other children. This drive for 'sameness' and not wanting to stand out was a limiting factor to children's engagement in their preferred activities during their break times at high school. Whilst Year 7 children at primary school said that they could be themselves in the primary school, Year 8 children talked about not being themselves, about not doing what they wanted and covering/hiding their play activity or 'hanging out' preferences to others. They expected this to change when they went to high school.

I don't want to stand out

### Social connectedness

Friends and peer groups were seen by children as barriers and enablers of play. The importance of social contact came through strongly from both Year 7 and Year 8. Students spoke of wanting space to be with their friends.

## Social Comparison

Children frequently talked about themselves in relation to other students. Comparing themselves in relation to peers in their year level with the dominant view being that they needed to change any involvement in activities that were at odds to what others were doing. This was most apparent in year 8 in high school where children talked about stopping activities such as a 'chasey' or sport to be like 'everyone'. Sitting in small in groups chatting was identified by children and teachers as the dominant activity at break time in high school.

I know a lot of the Year 8s here would play chasey, but there are older kids watching, and that makes them feel uncomfortable

## Dominant Peer Groups

Peer culture and attitudes of dominant peer group members influenced the type of activities children choose to do in their breaks. Individuality and self were disregarded in favour of how well children compared to the group.

## BARRIERS THEME 2: ENVIRONMENT

The data demonstrates that the physical and natural environment including weather, available space, equipment, and construction are all factors that posed as a significant barrier to play.

## Separate Safe Spaces

Having acknowledged the intimidation that younger children face on transition to high school, there was some evidence that separate spaces were being adopted by school leaders. Whether this separate 'safe place' for children was welcomed or used by students was not clear but there was enthusiasm from the teachers about having such a space.

They've got a space now and it's theirs and they've got people around them that are supporting that.

### All Weather Access to Play Spaces

Weather was identified by teachers and students, expressing how there was nowhere to go when the weather was bad. There was acknowledgment of the environmental impact, all schools talked about a lack of alternative play spaces for cold/wet weather, with some of the leaders mentioning classrooms being utilised for shelter, or the gyms. The lack of preparation or access to alternative spaces for bad weather led to a reduction in active play.

..It's cold, it's horrible"  
and our ovals are  
saturated

Yesterday, it was raining... Yeah but  
we just had to stay under whatever  
shelter there was.

### Facilities

Students identified the environment as both an enabler and barrier to play. Some schools provided facilities that gave students options for their break time such as basketball rings or access to the gymnasium whilst others provided little to no play opportunities or provision.

The gym is open in winter,  
to be honest it was shut  
all of term one.

### Provision & Access to Play Equipment

Lack of equipment or poor management of access to equipment was a major barrier to play at school.

In a number of schools, the system of borrowing and returning equipment meant that children couldn't access the equipment (see school rules below). In other schools, the lack of provision for play was identified not just through the lack of play spaces/playgrounds but through the lack of even the very basic play equipment such as balls. Unused table tennis tables because of a lack of bats and balls, ovals full of children sitting still because of a lack of footballs or soccer balls were just some of the examples provided by children.

We are talking about making  
handball courts, we haven't  
been able to provide an  
alternative space for that type  
of play



## Buildings

All the schools visited were undergoing major construction works at the time of our study which reduced the amount of available space for students to use and significantly limited the play in some schools.

The kids can't access it at the moment because of the building work

The school leaders highlighted these as barriers but did not have any suggestions on how to tackle this barrier whilst the construction continues. Despite being a barrier to play in the short term, the long-term impact is unclear.

We had an outdoor basketball court, ..it's actually now a building compound

## Structured Play Activities

Structured play activities at break times were promoted by one primary school as a way to promote play with different ages and genders. Whilst this involved an investment in manpower to supervise, there appeared to be benefits of this approach. One of the important things to note about this initiative was that children were able to engage with the activities or not. Thus, they still had the freedom of choice which is important for activities to be called play.

## BARRIERS THEME 3: TRANSITION TO HIGH SCHOOL

Transition to high school appeared to be strongly associated with a decline in numerous activities. We know from previous research that physical activity and outdoor park use declines with the transition into adolescence, however our data reveals more of an impact of the physical school environment rather than the developmental stage of the early adolescents.

They will more likely feel intimidated and be pushed out by older people in high school

## Adjustment

Primary school was viewed by children as a safe place with strong relationships with teachers, teachers knowing each child individually and 'getting them'. In contrast high school was viewed as being impersonal with large numbers of students and

I just slowly got used to it and it's fine now I suppose



lots of different teachers who 'don't know you'. Teachers/school leaders discussed children getting 'used to it', 'getting by' and 'fitting in'. Children were expected to adjust to high school.

### **Relationships**

Whilst some high school teacher/leaders discussed altering school spaces for Year 7 children as a cohort when they transition to high school, there was no conversations with regard getting to know individual children, building relationships, or understanding how different children tick which was evident in primary school.

### **Peer Groups**

The peer influence appeared more apparent to parents and teachers on transition from primary school to high school. Teachers mentioned that parents observed changes in their children not long after they had moved to high school. Indeed, the school leaders across both primary and high schools were clearly aware of the importance of peers for their students but not necessarily aware of how the structures, systems and school rules at break times contributed to this. There seemed to be more concern about risk management and policing rather than promoting social interaction.

It took them time to transition

### **Fear and Expectations**

The Year 8 students spoke of being really worried about the transition to high school at first but that this fear soon disappeared. They talked about how their break time activities changed because they didn't want to stand out.

I was so scared to go to high school. I was petrified.

### **Digital Technology**

High schools in South Australia permit mobile devices to be brought to school, in contrast to Primary School where phones are banned. Many students in Year 7 at primary school discussed with excitement being able to use a mobile phone on transition to high school with some students commenting that Year 8 at high school would see them get their first phone.

When they looked around at their mates, their mates were on mobile devices, sitting around in small groups.

Teachers' knowledge, understanding and attitudes about play and the value of play contributes significantly to the lack of play within high schools. Within primary school it wasn't an issue, teachers thought of play as a natural behaviour and pastime for children and an essential part of their development.

### **Lack of Understanding of Play**

High school leaders were quick to acknowledge they don't know what play is and what they should be providing to promote play for early adolescent teenagers. Teachers said they wanted to know what play was defined as for this year level and what the value and benefits of play was for children at high school.

From a school's perspective we, we sit there and go our collective vision or understanding of what literacy looks like in the school. What numeracy looks like at school. **But we actually don't get down the stages of what does play look like.**

### **Value of Active Play and Sport**

Attitudes and perspective of individual teachers as well as the leadership group were identified as making a big difference as to what was available at the school and what kind of activities students engaged in. Active play akin to sport was valued and acknowledged as something young teenagers want to participate in and something high school needs to promote. As one leader said "I might walk in and go, that's not active. All right, so that's not play". This misconception of what constitutes play limits the provision of other types of play such as sociodramatic play, construction play, games etc.

Most teachers would go, "Play is out kicking a football, netball, or something like that." It's not the other versions of it.

### **Lack of Accessible Educational Research**

Leaders were firm that they needed educational research on play in high schools to provide them with an evidence base on which to build their practice. Teachers were not averse to trying new approaches to support children but wanted to know what works rather than take experimental approaches with no idea of the outcome.

All organisations or institutions with a large number of members need rules and regulations to enable them to function and schools are no different. However, it appeared that some of the policies and organisational structures in both the primary schools and high schools were blocking the very activities the schools were trying to promote.

### Break Times

One of the key barriers to play was lack of time. Children felt the breaks were not long enough to eat and spend time with their friends. The importance of this was underscored by comments around high school being socially isolating and boring. Break time and spending time with friends was seen as the most important part of the day and contributed to a sense of belonging. The importance of break times for children was at odds to the high school teachers who appeared to view break times as worthless periods of time simply in the school timetable for children to eat.

break time should be longer

315 minutes of learning a day and we only get 60 minutes of break

### School Structures

A number of school structures such as the position of lockers block opportunities for play. Some children talked about the distance from the lockers to the play spaces/ovals which meant that by the time they got to the play space recess/break time was over.

The House system which means children can't be with their friends was consistently identified as a barrier by children. In contrast, sport was one the most commonly identified facilitator of play that gave children opportunities to play in a way that is socially acceptable.

You're gonna take five minutes to go to your locker, so you basically only get 10 minutes.

### **Inconsistent school rules that limit play**

Our data revealed that in many schools, rules discouraged the very activities that the school leaders were trying to encourage. For example, schools encourage cross age interaction through the 'buddy system' where younger children are matched with older children. The teacher decides who is matched with who and set up times within the school day that children come together to do activities together such as reading, craft and play.

Even if your  
buddy is down  
there they won't  
let you go

### **Allowances for Sport**

Engagement in sport legitimized play and encouraged teachers to turn a blind eye to rough play and minor school rule infringements.

They're supposed  
to be on the oval  
playing sport.  
That's okay

## **BARRIERS THEME 6: LACK AGENCY AND VOICE**

### **Involving Children in Decision Making**

Some of the schools discussed asking children for their opinions and being open to supporting child-initiated clubs and activities. Children mentioned these and were clearly interested in sharing their opinion however there were a number of issues that were neglected by school leadership. For example, if children take the time to participate, giving up their free time at break time or after school, and then there is an expectation and an obligation that teachers should include children in the outcomes. Unfortunately, this was not always upheld.

Teachers just like to  
whip out new things all  
the time

### **Lack of Voice: Asking but not listening**

Throughout the focus groups it became apparent that the students perceived they did not have much say in what happened at school. Teachers in the study discussed asking students about break times. Whilst this appeared a good initiative the teacher and leaders were dismissive of the opinions offered. Sadly, at times leadership laughed at the opinions offered by

High school teachers  
don't care

children and alternative opinions/votes actioned. Whether the children were told why their option was dismissed is not known, but regardless the disregard for student opinions and lack of accountability to let them know was apparent.

### Freedom and Risk

It was evident that children wanted more freedom during their break times at school. The out of bounds places where children were not allowed to go were frequently identified by children as the spaces where they wanted to play and where play would be more attractive. Unpacking this showed us that risk, physical challenge and being out of sight of adults was enticing and appealing for children.

Thus, freedom and enjoyment were keys to engagement in play. Removing all risks was demotivating and associated with a decline in play. Activities such as skate boarding, bike riding etc and more opportunities to engage in sport were discussed by leaders as possible initiatives at high school.

High school is boring, the teachers don't let you do anything

We discourage rough play.

They interact on the oval with others and that's actively discouraged because obviously it's dangerous.

## CONCLUSION

Schools want to do their best for children, but they lack the evidence base on which to base their practices and policies. They need hard evidence to convince parents and teachers of the importance of play and value of investment in and focus on play within school.

Free time during break times at school for students is not free. Children are bound by rules and school structures that are risk adverse, lacking in resources and trained staff.

In Key Issues 5 we explore the policy and practice recommendations from the study and focus on the enablers of play and the ways to combat the barriers identified here.

# PLAY IN EARLY ADOLESCENCE PROJECT OVERVIEW

The Play in Early Adolescence Project investigates play at school for children aged 11 to 13 years. The rationale for this study is grounded in the well accepted view that play is important to children of all ages, but that it declines as children move through the years of schooling. A comparison of how children in their last year of primary school and in the first year of high school interact, socialise and spend their break times will enable clearer understandings to be developed about what children need in this transitioning year, what they struggle with, and how schools can better meet their needs for play in the day. The study aims to investigate:

- How does the play of children in the last year of primary school compare with the first year of high school?
- What are the barriers and enablers to play for young adolescents at school?
- What is available in schools to support and facilitate opportunities for play?
- What are the implications for transition to high school?

The expected outcome of this research is to generate new insights into play for the 11 to 13 age range, an age typically neglected by research. It will provide evidence which demonstrates the contextual impact on play and how the environment limits, promotes or alters play opportunities.

For further information see: [playresearch.com.au](http://playresearch.com.au)

