

# KEY ISSUES PAPER 3



## 'Free' Play at School: Early Adolescent Participation in Self-Chosen Activities <sup>1</sup>

### The Decline of Play on Transition to High School

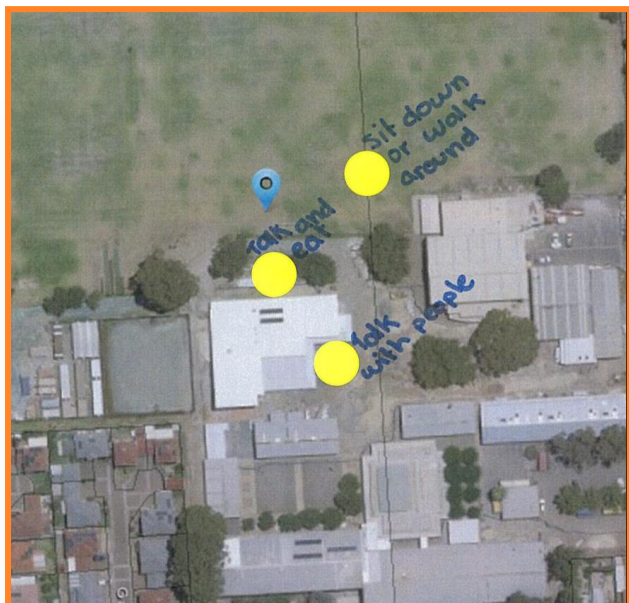
#### INTRODUCTION

Following on from the release of the Commissioner for Children and Young People's report, 'Press Play', it is clear that we need to reconceptualise the way we think about play and know more about how to promote opportunities for play by older children (Connolly, 2020). In South Australia particularly, the line between primary and secondary school has shifted with the change of year seven from primary to secondary school at the start of 2022.

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This Key Issues paper presents some of the initial observations from the Play in Early Adolescence Project.



## IMPORTANCE OF PLAY

Play is conceptually and developmentally valued and recognised as key to children’s wellbeing and part of a healthy and complete childhood (Miller & Almon, 2009). Well before the United Nations High Commission for Human Rights cited play as a basic right of every child, philosophers and psychologists, such as Plato, Piaget, and Friedrich Froebel, wrote about the importance of play in healthy child development (Milteer, Ginsburg, & Mulligan, 2012, p. 204). Children themselves have positive attitudes about play (Fisher, 2009), and often identify it as the activity they enjoy most at school as well as at home (Sahlberg & Doyle, 2019).

Current research literature is convincing regarding the power of play for all children. Benefits of play include cognitive development, social and emotional health, physical health, improvements to attention, coping, memory, solving problems, dealing with trauma, planning and decision-making skills, motivation to learn, building friendships, social skills and attitudes on sharing, turn-taking, self-restraint, working in groups and getting along with others, creativity and divergent thinking, healthy

brain development, emotional stability and resiliency, empathy, feelings of well-being, motor skills, early literacy and language development, self-regulation, science and mathematics learning, and improvements in executive function (Connolly, 2020; Milteer et al., 2012; Sahlberg & Doyle, 2019).

Research with teachers of young children show that they value play and its link with children's educational outcomes, yet despite its recognised benefits across childhood, some authors suggest that free play at school is under threat (Jay & Knaus, 2018) and in decline (Milteer and colleagues, 2012) as teachers feel the top downward pressures put on their time as a result of prescriptive national learning outcomes (Theobald et al., 2015).

As discussed in key Issues paper 1, there is a lack of research exploring play and its benefits for middle-to-upper primary and especially secondary students (Parker & Thomsen, 2019), while other research has shown that free play declines linearly with age (Olds, 2009). Moreover, some authors suggest that children's play is impacted by the increasing use of digital devices.

In a 2019 poll of Australian adults, 92 percent agreed that smartphones and social media reduce the daily physical activity and outdoor play time of kids (Gonski Institute for Education, 2020). Further research on the impact of device use on play in schools is needed. Some authors have suggested that digital devices minimize, or even displace, the opportunities that children have for socialising and hands-on, creative, unstructured play outdoors (Yu & Baxter, 2015) whilst others have suggested that digital devices alter or 'reimagine' what play is and focus on the possibilities of digital play.

## MIDDLE YEARS

The 'middle' years of schooling (between the ages of 8 – 14) are a critical time in child development. Some researchers have suggested that if we want to maintain momentum from initiatives to foster development in early years, and intervene to prevent problems and set future, positive life courses, this time represents an important second chance (Bartos, 2017).

However, we know little about the needs of this group of children and it has long been considered a latent, or quiet, developmental stage. Seminal research recognises that there is a lack of support in the education system to meet the needs of these young people (Mundy, 2020). Middle school systems are popular internationally, designed specifically to meet the bespoke needs of this cohort of

children and to act as a bridge between the vastly different contexts of generalist primary and more specialised secondary schools.

## TRANSITION TO SECONDARY SCHOOL

There is increasing attention being put into the transition from primary to high school and on maintaining student wellbeing and engagement (Wyatt, 2018). In the report 'Leading the way' by South Australia's Department of Education, a number of observations were made about the students who participated in the pilot study. These included: the needs of students in Year 7 and 8 are different, that Year 7/8 teachers were surprised that students this age still enjoyed playing games and running around and outdoor play spaces in secondary schools are inadequate for Year 7 play, and more recreational spaces and equipment might be needed to nurture social interactions.

High school transition is a time of great change for young people and strong social connections and peer relationships, often developed through play, act as a protective factor (Benner, Boyle, & Bakhtiari, 2017). Conversely, it is also important to note that bullying often peaks in this middle phase of childhood and transition from primary to secondary school can be a difficult time for students particularly as it occurs at the same time as the student is starting to go through puberty and experience developmental changes. As discussed in Key Issues paper 2, peers become increasingly important in adolescence and as such friendships, peers and peer group membership are pivotal to children's wellbeing within the first year at high school.

Friendships are commonly developed in the context of play at school and that connection with peers can support students' wellbeing. Breaktimes at school are the occasions where children get to play and 'hang out' with each other. Yet the research that looks at break times in school has tended to focus only on physical activity rather than the broader notion of play and there is a lack of research investigating adolescent play or adolescent preferences (Massey, Neilson, & Salas, 2020; Mroz & Woolner, 2020).

## BREAK TIMES

Breaks at school are an opportunity for children to explore, refresh, be physically active, and engage with peers outdoors. The role of play in school breaks is a significant part of the school day, and supports a child's education and wellbeing outcomes. Despite offering a number of benefits, the quality of play in Australian school break times has not been deeply explored (D'Agostino & Illingworth, n. d.). In particular, the play of older children, with changing interests, is poorly understood. The quality of the environments available to students differs between schools, and factors such as the safety and structure of the physical environment, student socialisation and engagement in play, and support offered by teachers all impact on the experience (Massey, Ku, & Stellino, 2018).

In the Play in Early Adolescence project, play interactions were observed using an established scale to help researchers understand the environment that children have available to them during school break times and how this either facilitates or hinders opportunities for play is a critical understanding. Furthermore, observations focused on how children's interactions develop and take place and the typologies of play that exist amongst cohorts of year 7 and 8 students (Loebach & Cox, 2020).

Observing and understanding children's preferences for play and the activities they undertake when they have free choice of their time, as well as how these are accommodated for in a school environment, provided rich insight into adolescents at a time of considerable change in their lives.

## **DECLINE IN PLAY ON TRANSITION**

As part of the Play in Early Adolescence project, an observational study was conducted comparing the play of children in the last year of primary school with the first year of high school (Kennedy-Behr & Webb-Williams, manuscript in preparation). 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 enables 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.

Using a standardized observation tool play behaviours were recorded during recess times and lunch times at Primary school and High School (see Figure 1 below).

Date	Weather	Play type code 1	Play type code 2	Play event	Location	Additional play characteristics

Figure 1: Observation Records

Play interactions were observed and different types of play and play events recorded (Figure 2)

**Figure 2 Play Type codes.**

Play type label

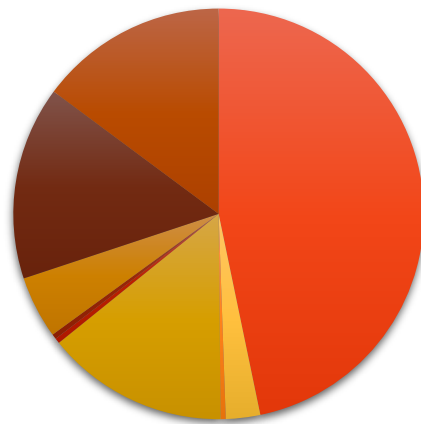
- |                    |                   |
|--------------------|-------------------|
| 1. Physical        | 6. Expressive     |
| 2. Exploratory     | 7. Restorative    |
| 3. Imaginative     | 8. Digital        |
| 4. Play with rules | 9. Non-play       |
| 5. Nature          | 10. Transitioning |

Parten's Social Scale Code

- |                |               |
|----------------|---------------|
| 1. Solitary    | 4. Onlooking  |
| 2. Parallel    | 5. Unoccupied |
| 3. Cooperative | 6. Conflict   |

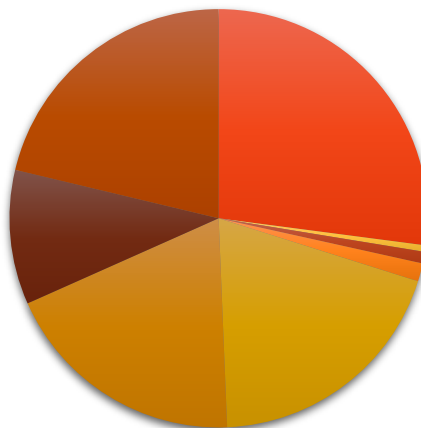
Play interactions were observed and different types of play and play events recorded.

**Figure 3: Frequencies (percentages) of types of play ( Year 7 total)**



- Physical      ■ Play with rules   ■ Exploratory   ■ Imaginative   ■ Expressive
- Nature      ■ Restorative   ■ Digital   ■ Non-play   ■ Transition

**Figure 4: Frequencies (percentages) of types of play ( Year 8 total)**



- Physical      ■ Play with rules   ■ Exploratory   ■ Imaginative   ■ Expressive
- Nature      ■ Restorative   ■ Digital   ■ Non-play   ■ Transition

As per Figure 3 and 4 observations showed that play as such did not decrease but the type of play was found to change. Physical play (e.g. running or kicking a ball), decreased significantly in high school compared to primary school while expressive play (talking, joking, laughing etc) increased.

The location of play also changed with high school students more likely to be in the library during break times than primary students (both types of schools allowed students to use these facilities).

This is consistent with the finding that physical activity decreases in the transition from primary to secondary.

There were marked differences in the way girls and boys played across both year levels with boys significantly more involved in physical play and digital (playing on phone or computer) than girls. Girls were more often involved in talking and walking around.

An increase in sedentary behaviour at break times has been found in other Australian studies such as Chaput et al (2020) but what is really interesting is that Chaput's study was in Victoria where the transition to high school occurs a year earlier than in South Australia. This possibly indicates that the decrease in active play is a result of the transition rather than of age or developmental stage.

## SUMMARY

This observational data collected as part of the Play in Early Adolescence project compared the self-chosen activities during break time of students in their last year of primary school with that of those in their first year of high school.

The key Issues identified in the observational data and discussed in this paper were the decline in play on transition to high school and the different types of play witnessed in the different schools. Please see Key Issues paper 4 for discussion of the barriers and enablers to play from students and teacher perspectives.



# 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)

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