

St James' CE Primary School

Outdoor Play And Learning (OPAL) Policy



"For with God nothing shall be impossible"
Luke 1:37

Commitment

St James' CE Primary School will refer to this play policy in all decisions that affect children's play. Our school is committed to providing the strategic and operational leadership needed to provide and maintain quality play provision for all of our children.

Rationale

St James' CE Primary School believes that all children need opportunities to play that allow them to explore, manipulate, experience and affect their environment. We believe play provision should be welcoming and accessible to every child, irrespective of gender, sexual orientation, economic or social circumstances, ethnic or cultural background or origin, or individual abilities.

The OPAL Primary Programme rationale is that "... better, more active and creative playtimes can mean happier and healthier children, and having happier, healthier, more active children usually results in a more positive attitude to learning in school, with more effective classroom lessons, less staff time spent resolving unnecessary behavioural problems, fewer playtime accidents, happier staff and a healthier attitude to life."

The OPAL policy aligns well with St James CE Primary School values by promoting inclusion, respect, creativity, and enjoyment in learning. Through high-quality outdoor play, children are encouraged to develop independence, resilience, and teamwork, reflecting the school's commitment to nurturing the whole child within a caring Christian environment. OPAL supports pupils in making safe choices, valuing others, and embracing opportunities for exploration, which mirrors the school's focus on developing confident, compassionate learners who thrive both socially and academically.

Definition and value of play

Play is defined as a process that is intrinsically motivated, directed by the child and freely chosen by the child. Play has its own value and provides its own purpose. It may or may not involve equipment or other people.

We believe play has many benefits, including:

- Play is critical to children's health and wellbeing, and essential for their physical, emotional, social, spiritual and intellectual development.
- Play enables children to explore the physical and social environment, as well as different concepts and ideas.
- Play enhances children's self-esteem and their understanding of others through freely chosen social interactions, within peer groups, with individuals, and within groups of different ages, abilities, interests, genders, ethnicities and cultures.
- Play requires ongoing communication and negotiation skills, enabling children to develop a balance between their right to act freely and their responsibilities to others.
- Play enables children to experience a wide range of emotions and develop their ability to cope with these, including sadness and happiness, rejection and acceptance, frustration and achievement, boredom and fascination, fear and confidence.
- Play encourages self-confidence and the ability to make choices, problem solve and to be creative.
- Play maintains children's openness to learning, develops their capabilities and allows them to push the boundaries of what they can achieve.

Through OPAL, our staff aim to ensure children have access to high-quality play experiences that support happiness, creativity, resilience, social skills, and imagination. We want children to develop their emotional wellbeing through play, helping them to reduce stress, build friendships, and experience freedom in their learning.

We provide a rich outdoor, nature-based environment that includes grassland, woodland areas, a pond, mud kitchens, digging areas, sand pits, water play, scooter tracks, as well as music and art spaces. There is a strong emphasis on open-ended and sensory play, using natural and recycled materials such as pallets, tyres, ropes, cardboard boxes, pipes, and tarpaulins.

Our role as staff is to be supportive but not intrusive. We supervise to ensure safety, observe children's play, and offer encouragement when appropriate, while allowing children the freedom to explore, collaborate, and lead their own play experiences.

At St James' CE Primary School, the OPAL programme builds upon our commitment to inclusion, wellbeing and personal development. Through high-quality outdoor play, all pupils, including those with SEND, have opportunities to develop independence, resilience, communication and social skills in an inclusive environment. OPAL is also timetabled for our Unit provisions to ensure all pupils benefit from purposeful play experiences tailored to their needs. To further promote a love of reading, pupils have access to our Reading Shed during lunchtimes, providing a calm and inviting space where they can enjoy books for pleasure alongside active play opportunities.

Aims

In relation to play our school aims to:

- *Ensure play settings provide a varied, challenging and stimulating environment.*
- *Allow children to take risks and use a common-sense approach to the management of these risks and their benefits.*
- *Provide opportunities for children to develop their relationships with each other.*
- *Enable children to develop respect for their surroundings and each other.*
- *Aid children's physical, emotional, social, spiritual and intellectual development.*
- *Provide a range of environments that will encourage children to explore and play imaginatively.*
- *Provide a range of environments that will support children's learning across the curriculum and learning about the world around them.*
- *Promote independence and teamwork within children.*
- *Build emotional and physical resilience.*

Rights

Our school recognises the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, including Article 31, which protects the right to play, recreation and leisure, and Article 12, which ensures children have the right to be listened to on matters important to them. We take these rights seriously by actively valuing and responding to children's views about their play and experiences. These principles are closely reflected in our Christian Values of friendship, trust, thankfulness, respect, forgiveness, hope and courage, which shape our whole school life. Together, these values and rights reinforce one another, guiding how we listen to, support and care for every child, and ensuring they are lived out consistently in all aspects of our school community.

Benefit and risk

'Play is great for children's wellbeing and development. When planning and providing play opportunities, the goal is not to eliminate risk, but to weigh up the risks and benefits. No child will learn about risk if they are wrapped in cotton wool.'

Managing Risk in Play Provision: An Implementation Guide (Play Safety Forum, 2012)

The school will use the Health and Safety Executive guidance document *Children's Play and Leisure – Promoting a Balanced Approach* (September 2012) as the principal value statement informing its approach to managing risk in play. In doing so, the school will adopt a risk-benefit approach as detailed in *Managing Risk in Play Provision: An Implementation Guide* (Play Safety Forum, 2012).

Risk-taking is an essential feature of play provision and of all environments in which children legitimately spend time at play. Play provision aims to offer children the chance to encounter acceptable risks as part of a stimulating, challenging and managed play environment. As outlined in the play sector publication 'Best Play', play provision should aim to *'manage the balance between the need to offer risk and the need to keep children and young people safe from harm'*.

In addition to standard risk-benefit assessments the school will practice dynamic risk management with children, encouraging them to identify and manage risks in an environment where adults are present to support them.

At St James School, we believe children should have opportunities to experience appropriate risk and challenge because these experiences are essential for developing confidence, resilience and independence. When children step outside their comfort zones in a safe and supported environment, they learn to trust themselves and others, build friendships through shared experiences, and show courage when facing something new or difficult. Our Christian values of friendship, trust, thankfulness, respect, forgiveness, hope and courage underpin this approach: courage helps children take on new challenges, trust and friendship ensure they feel secure and supported, respect and forgiveness help them work through difficulties together, and hope encourages them to keep going even when things feel hard. We are thankful for every opportunity children have to grow through challenge, as we know these experiences help them flourish both now and in the future..

Supervision

The law requires that children in school have supervision but for primary school playtimes there are no stated ratios. During the school day there should be one or more adults present outdoors. The school recognises OPAL's three models of supervision: Direct, Remote and Ranging. Except for new children in reception, whose skills and orientation in the school environment need to be assessed, the school does not believe direct supervision is possible or beneficial. Supervisors will use ranging and remote supervision models, so that children can quickly find an adult and adults can patrol large sites to gain an awareness of the kinds of play and levels of risk likely to be emerging. On our site there would always be: Play Co-ordinator, OPAL playteam – 1 sport coach as well as 4 Teaching assistants. The Curricular lead for OPAL would also be available to support.

The adult's role in play

The school will help children maximise the benefits they can gain from play by the provision of trained staff who are informed by and work in accordance with the Playwork Principles. Staff will use and refer to these principles when appropriate interventions are needed, and ultimately will strive for facilitating an environment that nurtures children's self-directed play.

The playworker's core function is to create an environment that will stimulate children's play and maximise their opportunities for a wide range of play experiences. A skilled and experienced playworker is capable of enriching the child's play experience both in terms of the design and resources of the physical environment and in terms of the attitudes and culture fostered within the play setting. Playworkers are a channel of access to new materials and tools and they can act as a stimulus to children to explore and learn. They are also available to participate in the play if invited.

Equality and diversity

Through providing a rich play offer meeting every child's needs we will ensure all children, regardless of age, gender, race, disability or other special needs, can develop and thrive, build strong relationships and enjoy school. Our approach to play will be fully inclusive whilst also understanding that children have their own individual needs that must be considered.

Environment

We believe that a rich play setting should ensure that all children have access to stimulating environments that are free from unacceptable or unnecessary risks and thereby offer children the opportunity to explore for themselves through their freely chosen play.

We will strive to continually improve the quality and diversity of our school's grounds to enhance play. We will use the document 'Best Play' to guide us on what a quality play environment should contain.

Best Play Guide

A rich play environment strengthens safeguarding by providing safe, well-supervised opportunities for children to explore and take part in meaningful experiences. It helps them build confidence in working as a

team and in expressing and standing up for their own rights. It also supports the development of important social and emotional skills, enabling children to form positive relationships, manage feelings and cooperate with others. In addition, it nurtures a love of the outdoors, laying the foundations for a lifelong appreciation of nature and a sense of responsibility for caring for the environment.

Appendix 1:

OPAL Play Charter – Designed by the children of ST James’



Appendix 2:

OPAL phases

Designed by the OPAL playteam

PLAY TODAY THRIVE TOMORROW!

OUR 6 PHASE JOURNEY TO AMAZING PLAY!

AT ST JAMES' CE PRIMARY, WIGAN

Building a world of play, creativity and adventure together!

PHASE 1 - LET'S EXPLORE & PLAY!

- Chalk drawing
- Digging
- Skipping ropes
- Dressing up
- Water play
- LEGO building
- Bikes
- Tyre balancing
- Sand play
- Mud kitchen
- Reading corner
- Dolls & soft toys
- Cardboard den building
- Digging zone
- Performance stage

PHASE 2 - BUILD CONFIDENCE

- Buddy benches
- Art tiles
- Pebble designs
- Cargo net traverse
- Balancing circuit
- Quiet social spaces
- Crate building
- Small construction materials
- Tyre hill
- Tree swing

PHASE 3 - NATURE ADVENTURES

- Natural den building
- Forest area
- Rope traversing
- Pallets & wood for construction

GET CLOSER TO NATURE AND LET ADVENTURE LEAD THE WAY!

PHASE 4 - BIG OUTDOOR ADVENTURES

- Large construction projects
- Tree climbing
- Hammocks
- Pond dipping
- Minibeast zone
- Dens with posts & branches
- Hay bale play

BIGGER PLAY, BIGGER CHALLENGES, BIGGER MEMORIES!

PHASE 5 - CREATE & DISCOVER

- Tractor tyre tunnel
- Hill slide
- Workbench building area

BUILD, IMAGINE, DISCOVER!
YOUR IDEAS, OUR PLAYGROUND!

PHASE 6 - CHALLENGE YOURSELF!

Monkey bars

DARE.
CLIMB.
ACHIEVE!

ONE SCHOOL. ONE COMMUNITY. ENDLESS POSSIBILITIES.
TOGETHER, WE CAN BUILD AN EXTRAORDINARY PLAY SPACE
FOR EVERY CHILD AT ST JAMES' CE PRIMARY, WIGAN.

SUPPORT OPAL
SUPPORT PLAY
SUPPORT OUR CHILDREN!

Appendix 3:

HSE Managing Risk Statement

[HSE Managing Risk Statement](#)