



Benefits of Play

Summary of findings from literature review

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Introduction



- This presentation provides a summary of the key benefits of play identified through a literature review carried out by the Policy and Insight Team.
- Each slide includes a note of the relevant page numbers of the literature review, where full references can be found.
- The literature review is structured under the following themes, but it is important to note that benefits of play are interlinked and permeated through all the themes listed:
 - [Physical wellbeing](#)
 - [Mental wellbeing and happiness](#)
 - [Social and communities](#)
 - [Creativity and innovation](#)
 - [Resilience](#)
 - [Lifelong learning and self-regulation](#)

Introduction



Over 45 sources were reviewed for this work. Whilst the vast majority were from academic sources, a small number were from commercial sources or charities with a vested interest in the promotion of play, such as The Lego Foundation.

For the literature review prepared by the Policy and Insight team, the following definitions were used:

- **Play:** “A state of mind that one has when absorbed in an activity that provides enjoyment and a suspension of sense of time”

Brown and Vaughan, 2009

- **Playfulness:** “The predisposition to frame (or reframe) a situation in such a way as to provide oneself (and possibly others) with amusement, humour and/or entertainment”.

Barnett, 2007



“The urge to play is nature’s way of helping us make sense of the world and our place in it. Through play we learn how our minds and bodies work and discover how others think and feel. Through play we come to know what it means to belong, to be loved and feel happiness.”

Lego Foundation 2018

Physical Wellbeing Children and Young People



- Play is critical for children's physical development.
- Through play in the early years, children learn how to control their bodies, communication and basic emotional responses.
- As children continue to use and develop their physical skills through play, their spatial awareness and understanding also develops, nurturing their confidence and interactions with their local environment.
- Play allows children to explore, stress and refine their motor skills through whole body movements and activities which release endorphins, improving our mood, regardless of age.

Physical Wellbeing Adults



- Looking at the use of play outdoors, research has found a link between time spent playing or exercising outdoors and reduction in the symptoms of stress in adults.
- Play outdoors specifically provides opportunities for players of all abilities and disabilities to support development of their motor skills and sensory systems.
- Research into adults with long term physical health conditions, such as diabetes, who played every day highlighted a marked improvement in their wellbeing, mood, how supported they felt and feeling more comfortable sharing with close friends/partners how their condition was affecting them.

Mental Wellbeing and Happiness



Research carried out with over 9,000 parents across nine countries found parents' views on the importance and benefits of play to children's mental health and wellbeing:

Lego Foundation (2018)



Parents recognise how play can help children develop a number of different and important skills



95%

Problem-solving



96%

Working or collaborating with others



96%

Socialising with others



94%

Being able to question and make up their own minds



95%

Curiosity



96%

Communication



96%

Creativity



93%

Emotional Intelligence (e.g. empathy)



95%

Confidence



94%

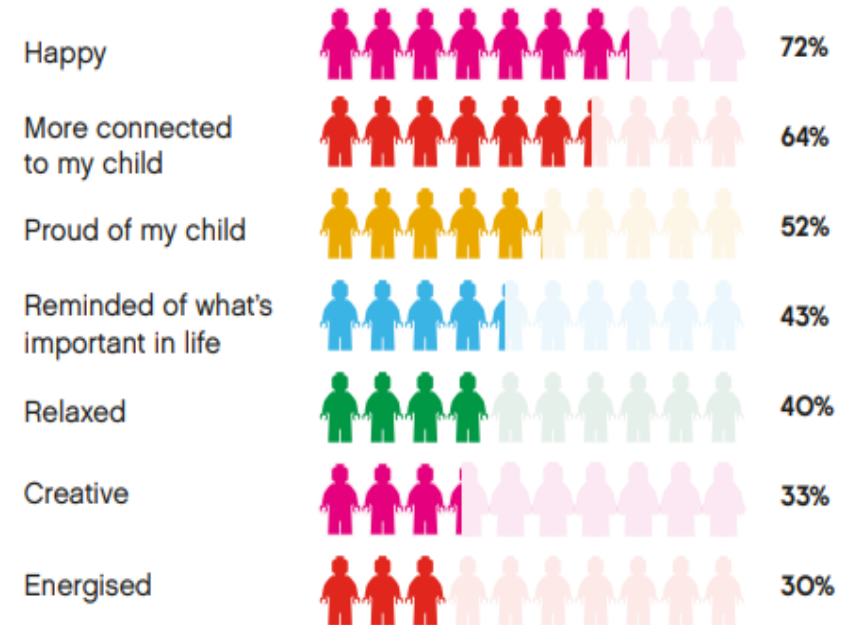
To learn from mistakes

Mental Wellbeing and Happiness



The Lego Foundation's Play Well report noted parents' feelings as they played with their children:

The emotions parents say they feel when playing with their child



Mental Wellbeing and Happiness



- Play activates pathways within the brain that release endorphins which relieves symptoms of stress within our bodies, and helps make us feel happier.
- Research identified play between children and parents as essential to children's wellbeing, happiness and developing academic, creative and social skills.
- Play through video, board or puzzle games (in moderation), can ease anxiety in both children and adults.

Mental Wellbeing and Happiness



- Research strongly supports the link between play / playfulness and a players' satisfaction with their life.
- Playing with multiple partners provides more experiences for children to test social skills and manage emotions, handle impulses and maintain focus under pressure.
- Adults who engage in play / playfulness benefit from improved:
 - Stress relief
 - Mood
 - Ability to engage with new points of view
 - Sense of hope / optimism
 - Creativity and problem solving
 - Appreciation of beauty
 - Social skills
 - Coping skills

Social and Communities



“Taking a pause for play does a lot more than take your mind off the problem. When you play, you engage the creative side of your brain and silence your “inner editor”, that psychological barrier that censors your thoughts and ideas. This can often help you see the problem in a new light and think up fresh, creative solutions.”

Robinson et al 2024

Social and Communities

Social groups, including families



- When groups of people play together, all parties report feeling happier, refreshed, less stressed and connected to each other.
- Playing with others enables players to build trust, empathy and tolerance of others.
- Playing in groups of mixed abilities and disabilities can help demonstrate the positive effects of inclusion and removal of stigmas based on stereotypes.
- Learning through play can enable children in poverty or disadvantage to progress faster in their learning, than peers in more advantageous situations.

Social and Communities

Workplace groups



- A playful mindset is key to maintaining group morale, productivity, loyalty, optimism and resilience.
- Co-workers playing together provides enjoyable experiences that release stress whilst improving relationships and problem-solving.
- Taking a break from work to play can improve our thinking, problem-solving and insight.

Creativity and Innovation



“Creativity is how we tell the world about ourselves...But it’s also how we draw connections, make sense of abstract ideas and test things out.”

Lego Foundation 2024

Creativity and Innovation

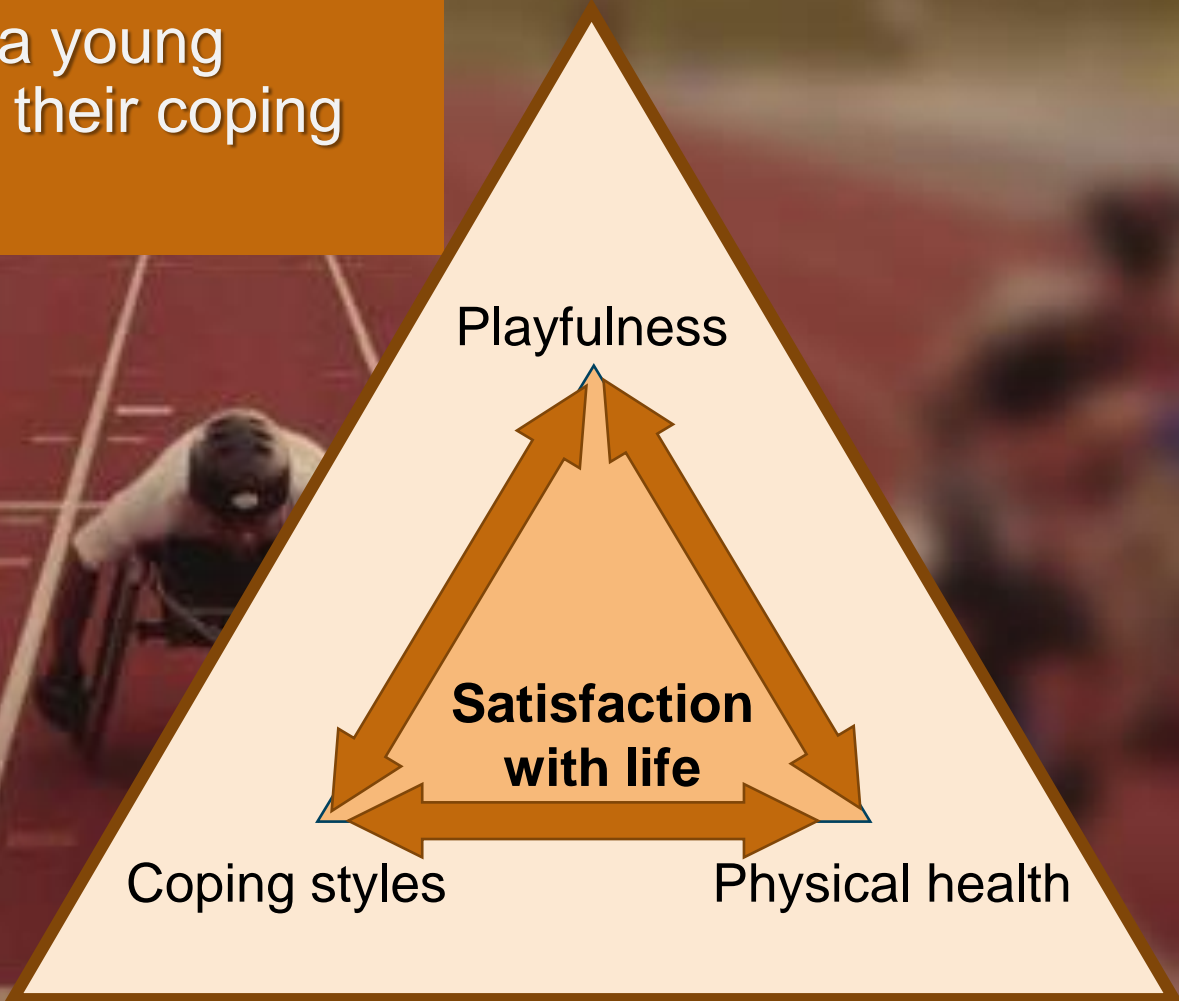
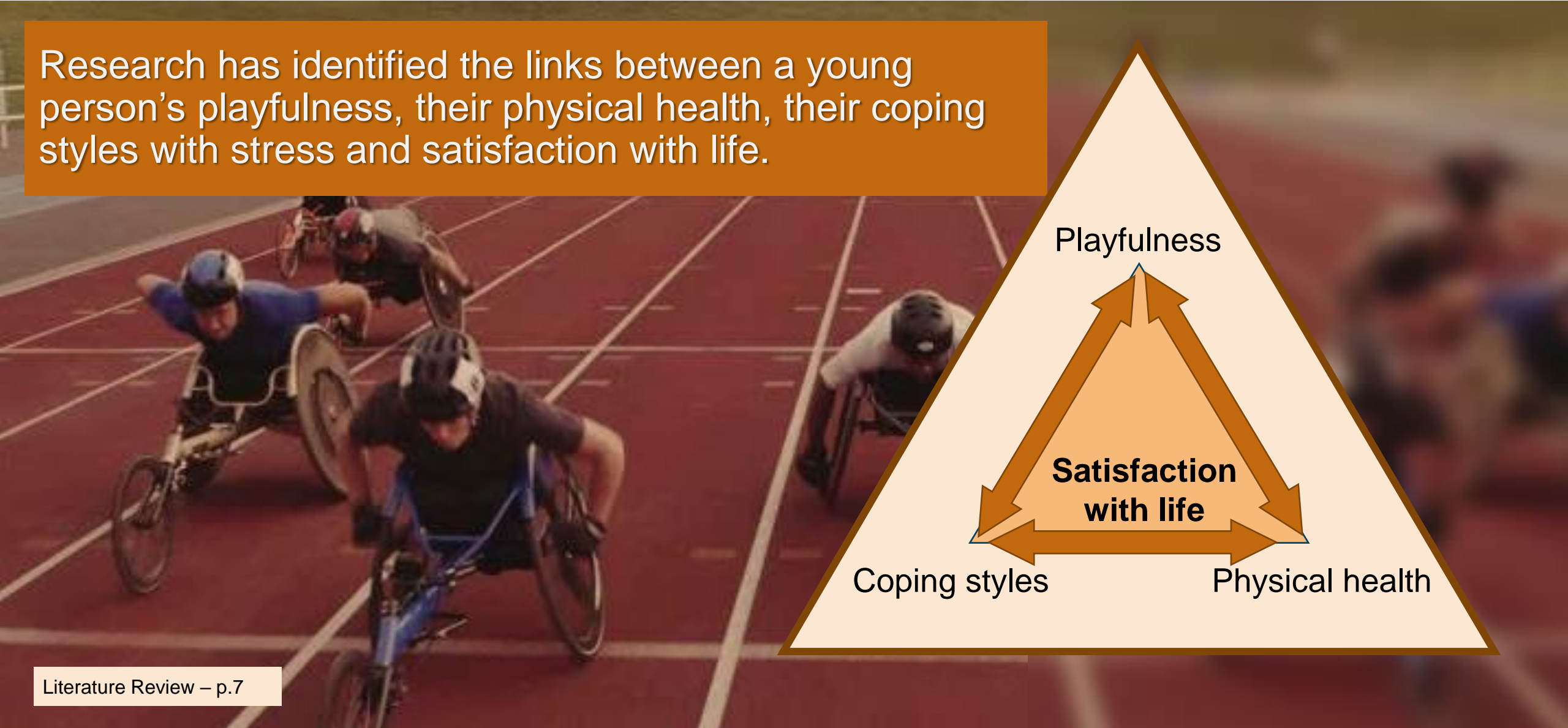


- Play can build a child's confidence, problem-solving and creativity as they find their own ways to explore the world.
- Engaging in playful and creative methods enables adults to explore ideas, recognise connections and test their problem-solving.
- Creative play helps other players to feel creative and gives them permission to try new ways of playing / creating.
- Play is recognised as an essential skills for economies across the world, particular for improving productivity.

Resilience



Research has identified the links between a young person's playfulness, their physical health, their coping styles with stress and satisfaction with life.



Resilience



- Play can help children find moments of calm and control, boosting their natural resilience to unpredictable situations.
- Playing with trusted people, such as family members, can create safe opportunities for taking creative risks and keeping ourselves safe, such as by testing their artistic abilities or senses of humour.
- At around 2 years old, children start to explore the world through imagination, creativity and socialising with others. These explorations, primarily through shared play, nurture the ability and capacity to play with others.

Resilience



- Adults who engage in play regularly often see an improvement in their motivation for tasks and resilience to challenging circumstances, disappointments and loss.
- Research has identified that playing regularly increased players' energy levels and resilience to burnout during high stress situations, such as the Covid-19 pandemic.
- Play gives adults a break from work / commitments, which can recharge their mental and emotional resilience.
- Research into adults with long term physical health conditions, such as diabetes, who played regularly saw an improvement in their wellbeing and ability to cope with stress or other pressures.

Lifelong learning and self-regulation



“When learning is playful, children get so immersed in creating strategies and solving problems, they’ll want to stretch their brain cells. The joy of play gives them the incentive to develop complex reasoning skills, memory, and concentration – much more effectively than being told to sit still and reel off facts.”

Lego Foundations 2024



Lifelong learning and self-regulation



- The sense of joy that play gives, can help children enjoy the act of learning and encourage a desire to learn throughout their lives.
- Playing helps a child's capacity to concentrate on activities for extended periods of time.
- Playfulness has been shown to improve a person's curiosity, love of learning and academic abilities.
- Work-placed learning is more effective when playful thinking and activities provide low-stakes scenarios to test new understanding and skills.

Key resources for further information



- Barnett, LA. (2007). The nature of playfulness in young adults. *Personality and Individual Differences*, 43(4), 949- 958.
<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.paid.2007.02.01>
- Brown, S. and Vaughan, C. (2009) [Play: How it shapes the brain, opens the imagination, and invigorates the soul.](#)
- Good Play Guide (2023) [Supporting children with special educational needs through play.](#)
- LEGO Foundation (2018) [Play Well Report 2018](#)
- LEGO Foundation (2024) [Learning through play - Why play?](#)
- Marais, SD (2022) [The importance of Play for Adults](#)
- National Institute for Play (2024) [Play: The Basics](#)
- Neale, D (2020) [A golden age of play for adults](#)
- Proyer R. (2013) [The well-being of playful adults: Adult playfulness, subjective well-being, physical well-being, and the pursuit of enjoyable activities.](#) *European Journal of Humour Research Vol 1*
- Sense (2023) [How to play with your disabled child](#)