Voľnobeh, NGO, Slovakia
Maryna Savchuk
info@volnobeh.sk
+421 940 396 247

Embedding Child Agency in Curriculum: Advancing the Right to Free Play

Definition of Free Play and International Recognition

Free play is internationally understood as spontaneous, child-initiated, and intrinsically motivated activity that children choose and control themselves, without adult direction or predefined outcomes. According to General Comment No. 17 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, play includes "child-initiated, controlled and structured behaviour that is optional, driven by internal motivations and not a means to an end" (Committee on the Rights of the Child, 2013). UNICEF similarly explains that in free play, children "can choose everything – they have the freedom to select their play materials, interest area and even the plot" (UNICEF, 2025). The International Play Association highlights that play is "instinctive, voluntary, and spontaneous" and fundamental alongside basic needs such as nutrition and education (IPA Declaration). UNESCO emphasises that play must be recognised as a core part of childhood development and integrated with broader curriculum goals, including physical, social, and cognitive growth. It links play to the right to leisure and cultural life protected under Article 31 of the UNCRC, framing play as a fundamental child right (IPA World, 2026).

International human rights frameworks therefore do not treat play as optional recreation. The UNCRC recognises "the right of the child to rest and leisure, to engage in play and recreational activities … and to participate freely in cultural life and the arts" (Article 31, General Comment No. 17). That commentary stresses that environments enabling play are essential for creativity, motivation, and skills development (CRC General Comment No. 17, 2013). This multilayered recognition positions free play as a non-negotiable aspect of childhood experience, not merely an add-on.

Trends: Decline in Free Play and Time Use

Research documents a significant decline in children's free play opportunities over recent decades. Longitudinal studies in multiple countries show that children have lost roughly 12 hours per week of free time since the early 1980s, largely due to increased schooling pressures, scheduled extracurriculars, and adult supervision patterns (Ginsburg et al., 2007). UNESCO notes reduced outdoor and independent play globally as urbanisation, screen time, and safety concerns constrain mobility and playtime (Christian, H. UNESCO, 2022). Save the Children reports that 1 in 3 children and young people do not have time to

play, with inequalities especially pronounced among urban and disadvantaged children (Save the Children International, 2026).
OECD data show that 15-year-olds in OECD countries spend an average of 2 hours and 40 minutes per day on digital leisure, displacing unstructured offline activities like play (OECD, 2025). As a result, many children lack sustained periods of free, child-directed activity - a loss increasingly recognised as a neglected human rights concern (IPA World; CRC General Comment).

Reevaluating Common Barriers to Children's Outdoor Play: Evidence-Based Insights

Safety Concerns and Parental Anxiety

Parental fear and risk aversion are frequently cited reasons children spend less time outdoors. Urban parents often restrict children's independent mobility due to traffic hazards, stranger danger, or perceived neighborhood risks. UNESCO (Christian, H. 2022) notes that "children's outdoor play is often limited by heightened parental concerns for safety, even when actual risk levels are low" (p. 4). A UK study found that less than 20% of children are allowed to walk to school unaccompanied, and only 10% have unsupervised access to outdoor play spaces (House of Commons Library, 2021, p. 12). Similar trends are reported across OECD countries, where perceived safety concerns are among the leading factors limiting outdoor activity (OECD, 2025, p. 32). Parental anxiety also correlates with lower independent mobility: children whose parents consider the neighborhood unsafe engage in 60–70% less outdoor play than peers in safer environments (Egan & Pope, 2024). The International Play Association notes that such restrictions, though well-intentioned, compromise children's autonomy and developmental opportunities (IPA).
However, empirical data suggest that these fears often exceed actual risk. Longitudinal data indicate that child abduction and serious injury rates have remained stable in recent decades (Christian, 2022). Wilkie et al. (2018) found no significant correlation between parental fear of neighborhood crime and children's overall outdoor play; outcomes varied depending on context and child characteristics. Thus, while safety concerns influence decisions, they are not deterministic barriers to outdoor activity (IPA; Egan & Pope, 2024).

Overscheduled Lives and Curricular Demands

Modern schooling and structured extracurricular programs further reduce free outdoor time. OECD (2025) reports that 15-year-olds in developed countries spend an average of 2 hours and 40 minutes per day on digital leisure, displacing opportunities for outdoor play (p. 21). Simultaneously, heavy curricular demands leave children with little unstructured time: in the U.K., the average homework load for children aged 10–15 exceeds 5 hours per week, reducing leisure and outdoor activity (House of Commons Library, 2021). UNESCO (Christian, H. 2022) emphasizes that "schools' focus on academic outcomes often marginalizes play, with recess periods shortened or eliminated

in favor of testing preparation" (p. 7). Save the Children International (2026) adds that organized after-school commitments, including private tutoring and clubs, compete with time children could spend outdoors, contributing to chronic overscheduling.

However, empirical studies indicate that structured activity participation does not necessarily preclude outdoor play. For example, a Canadian county survey (2025) found a positive association between involvement in organized physical activities and independent outdoor play, highlighting that participation in structured routines may coexist with substantial free play, particularly when supported by parental modelling and facilitative community environments (BMC Public Health, 2025). Thus, while time pressures may influence opportunities, they do not uniformly constrain outdoor activity.

Urban Design and Access Limitations

The physical environment strongly affects outdoor play opportunities. Urbanization, limited green spaces, and unsafe street design discourage children from playing outside. Research in England shows that 25% of children live in households with no access to private gardens, and many neighborhoods lack safe parks or play areas (House of Commons Library, 2021). In a study of urban residential environments, children in neighbourhoods assessed as "really good" (safe, accessible, and engaging) spent an average of 108 minutes per day playing outdoors unsupervised, whereas those in "really bad" environments averaged only 16 minutes per day - reflecting dramatic differences in outdoor play linked to the quality of activity areas, traffic conditions, and street design (World Playground Research Institute, 2024). UNESCO (Christian, H. 2022) notes that "the design of urban environments can either facilitate or restrict children's freedom to explore and play outdoors" (p. 5). These findings highlight the need for inclusive urban planning and safe, accessible public spaces as part of children's rights to play.

Urban infrastructure is frequently cited as a structural barrier to outdoor play. Limited green space, high traffic density, and unsafe streets are assumed to reduce children's outdoor activity. Yet, interventions demonstrate that these environmental constraints are modifiable. Initiatives such as the "Playing Out" scheme in the United Kingdom, which temporarily converts streets into safe play spaces, have successfully increased outdoor play among urban children despite dense development (Playing Out, 2026). Additionally, qualitative studies indicate that families often develop adaptive strategies to promote outdoor activity even in constrained urban environments (Martin A. and others, 2023). These findings suggest that environmental barriers are context-dependent and amenable to policy interventions, rather than absolute determinants of outdoor play.

Cultural attitudes and social policies also shape children's free activity. Signs such as "no ball games" in neighborhoods, combined with adult perceptions that outdoor play is risky or frivolous, create an anti-play culture (The Times,

2023). Social norms that equate supervised, structured activity with “good parenting” discourage parents from allowing unsupervised outdoor play (IPA). UNESCO (Christian, H. 2022) observes that “cultural expectations around safety, behavior, and productivity influence both parental choices and institutional policies, indirectly reducing time children spend outside” (p. 6).
By embedding free play into the school day, education systems create regular, structured opportunities for unstructured activity, which supports developmental outcomes while counteracting constraints from urban design limitations. Schools can become hubs of play innovation, offering varied, child-centred outdoor spaces that complement broader urban planning efforts to prioritise children’s rights to play.

Technology and Screen Time
Finally, the proliferation of digital devices competes with free play. Children increasingly spend leisure hours on tablets, smartphones, or gaming consoles, often indoors. Lourenço, A. and others (2021) report that screen time for children aged 6–12 increased by 75% over the past decade, correlating with a significant reduction in active outdoor play (p. 5). OECD (2025) adds that “excessive use of digital leisure substitutes natural outdoor experiences, contributing to physical inactivity and social isolation” (p. 33). While technology provides benefits, unchecked screen exposure displaces vital play experiences that support creativity, social learning, and emotional regulation (UNCRC, 2013).
Importantly, not all digital or screen-based activities qualify as free play. Free play requires child-led, intrinsically motivated, and minimally structured environments, whereas many digital experiences are goal-oriented, externally guided, or constrained by software design. Children still need spaces - both physical and social - where they can experiment, explore, and direct their own play without predetermined rules, outcomes, or adult-imposed structures. Digital play alone cannot fully replace these developmental opportunities.

Research on Benefits of Free Play
A growing body of research confirms that free play contributes significantly to cognitive, emotional, social and self-regulatory development.

- *Cognitive Development:* Free play promotes executive functions, problem-solving, and creativity. Cheng, D. P.-W. and others (2025) report that children engaging in at least 60 minutes of daily free play show significant improvements in working memory, attention regulation, and flexible thinking compared to peers with minimal free play. Scientific reviews demonstrate that play supports essential brain development mechanisms, fostering neural connections linked to creativity, problem-solving, and adaptive behaviour (Play Note review). Research also links sustained play engagement with improved

classroom concentration and emotional regulation following outdoor play periods (UNESCO, Christian, H. 2022).

- *Social Skills:* Through negotiation, role-taking, and conflict resolution, children practicing free play develop empathy and cooperation. Save the Children International (2026) notes that free play enhances social competence, enabling children to manage group dynamics and understand diverse perspectives.
- *Emotional Regulation and Mental Health:* UNESCO (Christian, H. 2022) and UNICEF (2025) document that regular free play reduces stress, anxiety, and behavioral problems while fostering resilience and self-confidence. In addition, opportunities for child-led outdoor play are associated with lower incidences of mood disorders and better overall well-being (OECD, 2025, p. 33).
- *Physical Activity and Health:* While the emphasis is not solely on exercise, outdoor free play encourages natural physical activity, which positively interacts with cognitive and socio-emotional development (UNCRC, 2013).

UNCRC General Comment No. 17 emphasises that play's developmental role spans physical, social, cognitive and emotional domains, and is central to how children spontaneously drive their own development - a key component of holistic learning (UN Committee on the Rights of the Child, 2013). Across research and policy sources, there is a consistent message: play is not superfluous leisure but a critical engine for skills that formal instruction alone cannot produce.

Free Play and Formal Education

Education systems traditionally prioritise structured curricula and testing, leaving limited space for self-chosen play. Yet evidence suggests that free play contributes to many outcomes schools aim to achieve, such as creativity, resilience, collaboration, adaptive thinking and emotional intelligence (Cheng, D. P.-W., 2025; Christian, H. UNESCO, 2022). OECD policy analysis underscores that time allocation outside formal academic schedules has direct implications for well-being and learning; balanced leisure (including active, play-oriented activities) correlates with better academic and psychological outcomes than a polarised focus on structured performance or excessive digital time (OECD, 2025). In this light, play serves both educational and human rights goals by enhancing resilience, sense of belonging, and engagement with learning environments.

Integrating free play into primary school curricula has several compelling rationales:

- Alignment with Child Development: Children aged 6–11 are in a critical period for socio-emotional and cognitive growth. Free play allows them to exercise agency, develop intrinsic motivation, and

learn self-regulation - all foundational skills for later formal learning (IPA, n.d.; UNICEF, 2025).

- Evidence-Based Learning Outcomes: Research shows that children with structured opportunities for daily free play exhibit better academic outcomes in reading and mathematics compared to peers in highly structured environments without play (Cheng, D. P.-W., 2025).
- Right-Based Framework: Article 31 of the UNCRC obliges states to provide environments conducive to play, leisure, and cultural participation (UNCRC, 2013). Incorporating free play into curricula operationalizes this international commitment.
- Equity and Inclusion: Free play provides a low-cost, universally accessible avenue for skill development. It supports inclusion by enabling children of diverse backgrounds and abilities to engage meaningfully without standardized expectations (Save the Children International, 2026).
- Counteracting Modern Barriers: Curricular integration ensures that despite safety concerns, urban constraints, or digital competition, children retain daily opportunities for self-directed, meaningful play (Christian, H. UNESCO, 2022; OECD, 2025).

Given these considerations, curricula that systematically include daily free play sessions - both outdoors and indoors - promote cognitive, social, and emotional development in ways that structured academic instruction alone cannot achieve.

Strategies to integrate free play into primary school curricula may include:

- Protected Play Periods: At least one hour per day of child-led indoor or outdoor play (UNICEF, 2025).
- Flexible Learning Spaces: Design classrooms and outdoor areas to support autonomous exploration.
- Teacher Training: Equip educators to facilitate safe yet unstructured play and recognise its developmental benefits (IPA, n.d.).
- Policy Support: Ministries should embed free play in learning standards and assessment policies, acknowledging its value alongside academic competencies (UNCRC, 2013; OECD, 2025).

These strategies operationalise free play within formal education while addressing safety, curricular pressures, and equity concerns.

Conclusion: Why Free Play Should Be in School Curricula

Free play is not a luxury or an afterthought - it is a human right under international law (UNCRC, Article 31; General Comment No. 17) and a developmentally critical activity supported by research evidence. Global trends of declining playtime and rising structured demands highlight a mismatch between children's natural development needs and current educational practices. Schools have the unique structural capacity to guarantee daily,

protected opportunities for child-directed play that align with international rights obligations and evidence-based developmental outcomes.

Integrating free play into school curricula ensures that children have regular, institutionalised space for self-chosen activity, promoting holistic growth, equity, and genuine learning agency. This approach honours children's rights and builds capacities that extend beyond academic performance to life-long well-being.

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