

Outdoor Play and Learning (OPAL) Policy



Date October 2025

Leader Miss McEvoy

Aims and objectives

This policy is designed to manage the outdoor play at St Matthews's Catholic Primary school. It is also designed to implement the OPAL scheme (Outdoor play and learning).

In relation to play times at St Matthews Catholic Primary School we aim to

- To provide play opportunities that reflect Gospel values: love, compassion, respect, and forgiveness.
- To create an inclusive and caring environment where every child can flourish.
- To promote active, imaginative, and cooperative play as essential to learning and well-being.
- To support children in becoming confident, resilient, and joyful learners through guided and free play.

Mission and Vision

Love, Learn and Shine together with Jesus.

To do this we will nurture each child's development, creativity and well-being. Through play we honour our commitment to **love, learn, and shine through Jesus Christ**, fostering joy, inclusion, and kindness in all that we do.

Introduction

At St Matthews Catholic Primary School we recognise that play is an essential part of a happy and healthy childhood. We aim to provide high quality, enjoyable play experiences for all children across school. We will do this by providing carefully considered outdoor spaces, play structures and resources that offer a rich choice of accessible play experiences for every child. We *'love learn and shine through Jesus Christ'* and this play policy in all decisions that affect our children's play. We are committed to providing the strategic and operational leadership needed to provide and maintain quality play provision for all our children.

The HSE supports the provision of diverse play environments, recognising that well-managed spaces may involve some degree of risk and occasional danger and that that safety concerns should not create restrictive environments that limit challenge, preventing children from expanding their learning and abilities (HSE, 2012, p.1). This policy provides a framework for supporting play and making decisions about the associated risks.

Rationale

Research shows that children spend up to 20% or 1.4 years of their time in primary school at play. Like other core parts of the curriculum, this time needs to be coherent and planned for. At *St Matthews Catholic Primary School*, we believe that play is not separate from learning—it is learning. In line with our mission to *"Love, learn and shine through Jesus Christ,"* we recognise that a rich play environment nurtures the whole child: physically, socially, emotionally, spiritually, and intellectually.

While curriculum-based learning in books is essential for developing literacy, numeracy, and subject knowledge, play offers equally vital learning experiences. Through play, children develop communication, empathy, problem-solving, and imagination—skills that underpin academic success and lifelong resilience. Play encourages children to explore, take initiative, and learn from their mistakes, mirroring the same growth mindset we aim to instil in the classroom.

In today's world, free, imaginative, and spontaneous play is in noticeable decline. Screen time, structured schedules, and a focus on academic performance have reduced opportunities for child-led play. Unlike past generations, many children now have fewer chances to explore, pretend, build, and role-play without adult direction. These missed opportunities limit the development of creativity, confidence, and emotional regulation.

With more parents working full-time and increased demands on family schedules, children have less unstructured time and fewer chances to play freely at home. Many children now go from school to childcare or after-school clubs with limited access to outdoor or imaginative play. This makes the role of school-based play even more critical. If children cannot access rich play outside school, it becomes our moral and developmental responsibility to provide it during the school day.

What is play and why is it important?

Through play, children explore, express, and refine their capacities to navigate the world and their place in it. Play supports children's physical, emotional, and social health, but this relies on adults creating supportive conditions (Russell et al., 2024). The intrinsic value of play lies in its freedom and autonomy, making it profoundly important in ways that structured activities cannot replicate.

The HSE recognizes that play is vital for children, providing opportunities to explore abilities, learn, and develop while engaging with real-world risks. Play is not risk-free, but it helps children develop risk awareness and prepare for their future lives (HSE, 2012, p.1).

The United Nations Committee defines play in their Rights of the Child report as:

“any behaviour, activity or process initiated, controlled and structured by children themselves; it takes place whenever and wherever opportunities arise. Caregivers may contribute to the creation of environments in which play takes place, but play itself is non-compulsory, driven by intrinsic motivation and undertaken for its own sake, rather than as a means to an end”.

At St Matthews Catholic Primary School we aim to ensure our play environments and staff practices focus on nurturing these unique features of play and creating the conditions that support them:

- **Personal Control** – Children decide their actions, fostering engagement, confidence, and resilience.
- **Intrinsic Motivation** – Play is driven by joy and curiosity, not outcomes or achievements.
- **Relational** – Play helps children develop social bonds, cooperation, and empathy.
- **Emotional Resonance** – Play provides a space to explore emotions and process experiences.
- **Flexibility & Variability** – Play is ever-changing, helping children adapt and learn.
- **Pretence** – Children use imagination and role-play, creating safe enough scenarios for learning.
- **Uncertainty & Risk** – Children seek challenge and controlled risk, developing resilience and risk perception.

Benefit and risk

While safety is important, the over-removal of risk has had unintended consequences. Children are often kept from climbing, running, or using loose parts for fear of accidents. In doing so, we limit their natural need to test boundaries, build strength, and learn risk management.

At *St Matthews*, we believe in a **balanced approach to risk**—one where we ask the children is this ‘safe enough,’ one that encourages children to try new things, fall down, get up, and try again. These lessons as well as life skills, remind children that courage and resilience are part of their growth.

Risk, refers to the uncertain outcomes of a situation and is often associated with negative consequences. However, risk can also bring positive benefits. Many research studies have found that the social, physical and mental benefits to children of managed risks are vast. Children become more resilient, adaptable and are keen to try new experiences.

Risk and challenge are not limited to physical risk – it includes the uncertainties involved in making new friends, playing with children from different backgrounds and building emotional resilience through trying out new experiences with the possibility of failure.

‘Without opportunities to take acceptable levels of risk, children’s development is inhibited, undermining their capability to deal with the wider unsupervised world’. (DCFS)

Our role as play providers is to facilitate the maximum amount of enriching opportunities for children to encounter. They need to learn to manage risk for themselves in an environment that is as safe as it needs to be, rather than completely devoid of risk. The benefit to children of challenging play opportunities should be balanced with any potential risk when carrying out risk assessments. We will adopt a risk-benefit approach and use dynamic risk assessments (Appendix 2) to manage our duty of care to protect and provide for children's needs.

‘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.’

Staffing and Supervision

At St Matthew Catholic Primary school, we know that children need time, space, and permission to play, and this is supported by adults who are sensitive to their needs. Adults’ role in children’s play is to support, rather than direct it.

Our play environment is enhanced by the active engagement of staff and volunteers, who respond to and facilitate children's play. This includes:

- **Spontaneous play interactions,**
- **Planned play opportunities,**
- **Incorporating playful approaches into structured activities.**

Staff are encouraged to use **a range of supervision styles**, including:

- **Ranging Supervision** – Staff remain mobile, moving through the setting, observing play, and maintaining awareness of children's activities.

- **Remote Supervision** – Staff observe from a distance, ensuring they remain close enough to read body language, facial expressions, and vocal cues.
- **Direct Supervision** – Staff actively engage in play when necessary to enhance the experience or ensure safety.

St Matthews staff will remain open to playful moments and encourage creative, child-led experiences. Staff should feel confident in ensuring uncertainty and challenge remain part of the play experience and that adult tendencies toward order and risk avoidance do not limit play possibilities. Our Staff will, facilitate, scaffold, model and support children's play. Our goal is to ensure children have control over their play, creativity and social interaction, can experience adventures, be boisterous or calm, play games, make art, or be performers, dancers or singers in a show.

Equality and diversity

At St Matthews Catholic Primary School we are a recognised 'IQM inclusive school' 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. At our school there is a space for all forms of play, for all children.

Key Roles and Responsibilities

This is the team working directly with OPAL to ensure policy is in place and develop play and outdoor learning at St Matthews Catholic Primary School. It consists of:

The head teacher- Mrs Sime

Play curricular lead- Miss McEvoy

Play coordinator- Miss Black/ Mr Kennedy

Play governor – Mrs Murphy/ Mr Doyle

Parent play champion- Mrs Hogg

Site manager- Mr Kennedy

OPAL working group

Mrs P Balfour

Mr A Barlow

Mrs L Coleman

Mrs S Jones

Miss J Finnin

Miss L Westwater

Mr T Mitchell

Mrs S Griffiths

Ms A Hart

Miss E Clarke

