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Playing through crisis: lessons from COVID-19 on play as a fundamental right of the child

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ABSTRACT

In its COVID-19 Statement of April 2020, the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child recommended that States Parties explore alternative and creative solutions for children to enjoy their rights to rest, leisure, recreation, and cultural and artistic activities – rights, which along with the right to play, are encompassed in Article 31 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC). This paper reflects on play in times of crisis, giving particular focus to the experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic. Three narratives of play and crisis are introduced – play in crisis; the threat to play in times of crisis; and play as a remedy to crisis. Progressive responses to support play during COVID-19 are appraised. Against a backdrop of innovation and a stimulus to research in play, concerns persist that children's right to play is not foregrounded, and that the 'everydayness of play' is not adequately facilitated.

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Introduction: three narratives of crisis and play

The right to rest, recreation, play and cultural activities – asserted within Article 31 in the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) – is more than just the articulation of another children's right (Figure 1). To paraphrase the title of Robin Moore's seminal text, the articulation of this right is uniquely important as play is widely considered to be childhood's domain.¹ Lothar Krappmann would agree: when writing as a member of the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child, he asserted that, 'it is the bundle of rights under article 31, which very much determines whether children can recognise themselves as active subjects'.² Play is of fundamental importance to the child, children and childhood.

The distinct nature of play within the context of Article 31 of the UNCRC (which addresses rest, leisure, play, cultural life and the arts) is set out within the legal analysis provided by the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child in *General Comment No. 17*³, in which it is explained that play is,

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Article 31 of the UNCRC

1. States Parties recognize the right of the child to rest and leisure, to engage in play and recreational activities appropriate to the age of the child and to participate freely in cultural life and the arts.
2. States Parties shall respect and promote the right of the child to participate fully in cultural and artistic life and shall encourage the provision of appropriate and equal opportunities for cultural, artistic, recreational and leisure activity.

Figure 1. Article 31 of the UNCRC.

Factors for an Optimum Environment (General Comment No. 17)

- Freedom from stress
- Freedom from social exclusion, prejudice, or discrimination
- An environment secure from social harm or violence
- An environment sufficiently free from waste, pollution, traffic, and other physical hazards to allow them to circulate freely and safely within their local neighbourhood
- Availability of rest appropriate to their age and development
- Availability of leisure time, free from other demands
- Accessible space and time for play, free from adult control and management
- Space and opportunities to play outdoors unaccompanied in a diverse and challenging physical environment, with easy access to supportive adults, when necessary
- Opportunities to experience, interact with and play in natural environments and the animal world
- Opportunities to invest in their own space and time to create and transform their world, using their imagination and languages
- Opportunities to explore and understand the cultural and artistic heritage of their community, participate in, create, and shape it
- Opportunities to participate with other children in games, sports and other recreational activities, supported, where necessary, by trained facilitators or coaches
- Recognition by parents, teachers, and society of the value and legitimacy of the rights provided for in article 31.

Figure 2. Factors for an Optimum Environment (General Comment No. 17).

... 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. Play involves the exercise of autonomy, physical, mental or emotional activity, and has the potential to take infinite forms, either in groups or alone. These forms will change and be adapted throughout the course of childhood. The key characteristics of play are fun, uncertainty, challenge, flexibility and non-productivity. Together, these factors contribute to the enjoyment it produces and the consequent incentive to continue to play. While play is often considered non-essential, the Committee reaffirms that it is a fundamental and vital dimension of the pleasure of childhood, as well as an essential component of physical, social, cognitive, emotional and spiritual development.

However, despite this wholeheartedly positive affirmation, play is often compromised by others' misconceptions. It is commonly misunderstood to be the exclusive preserve of young children, which it is not.⁴ It is deemed less important than formal education in promoting children's development, despite abundant evidence to the contrary.⁵ It is an activity that tends to be associated with specific times⁶ and places⁷, although some argue that it is omnipresent with universal appeal and potential.⁸ It tends to be viewed as a financial burden,⁹ rather than have its economic potential acknowledged.¹⁰ And although many professionals understand that it is a fundamental right of every child,¹¹ it can be withheld by professionals and the child's significant adults as punishment for misdemeanours.¹²

Play also tends only to be associated with good times, fun and positivity. Although it is not our intention to traduce play or add to the complexity surrounding its understanding, we contend that play should also be considered in relation to crisis. More precisely, we describe three narratives of crisis and play. First, our understanding of everyday play is increasingly troubled (play itself is viewed as being in crisis). Second, play is threatened in times of crisis. These crises *for* play render it more difficult to realise this fundamental right. In contrast, we also find evidence of a third positioning: play as remedy to crisis, which can be evidenced during the recent COVID-19 crisis (as well as other contemporary crises). Although central to our argument, our treatment of the crises *for* play is less extensive than our analysis of play as a remedy to crisis, which is the primary focus of this paper. We appraise the tools that promote a rights-based case for play, before concluding on children's play, rights, and crisis.

Our departure for engagement is the independent Children's Rights Impact Assessment (CRIA) in Scotland,¹³ which drew on emerging evidence, and was undertaken in Scotland in May and June 2020. Published by the Children and Young People's Commissioner, Scotland and undertaken by the Observatory of Children's Human Rights Scotland, the independent CRIA analysed the impact on the human rights of children and young people in Scotland of the emergency laws and policies passed during the COVID-19 pandemic. The independent CRIA is framed by the eleven recommendations made by the United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child in their statement of 8 April 2020, which warned of the 'grave physical, emotional and psychological effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on children, particularly those in situations of vulnerability'. The second of these recommendations highlighted the need to 'explore alternative and creative solutions for children to enjoy their rights to rest, leisure, recreation and cultural and artistic activities'.¹⁴

The issues we consider are of significance beyond Scotland and the immediate time-frame in which the CRIA took place, and we also draw on research and evidence from further afield. We consider the impact of the COVID-19 crisis on the integrity of play and appraise the potential of play-based interventions to mitigate harm in the present and longer-term. This offers an opportunity to reaffirm and strengthen the status of play as a fundamental and inalienable human right.

Recognition of children's right to play

The path to recognition for the right to play was not straightforward. A right to rest and leisure but not play was laid down in Article 24 of the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* (UDHR) in 1948.¹⁵ The right to play first emerged in the *Declaration of the Rights of the Child* (DRC) in 1959,¹⁶ Article 7 of which states,

The child shall have full opportunity for play and recreation, which should be directed to the same purposes as education; society and the public authorities shall endeavour to promote the enjoyment of this right.

Twenty years later, the International Year of the Child (1979) prompted the *IPA Declaration of the Child's Right to Play*,¹⁷ in which the International Play Association appealed 'to all countries and organizations to take action to counteract the alarming trends which jeopardise children's healthy development and to give high priority to long term programmes designed to ensure for all time: the child's right to play.' Hodgkin and Newell¹⁸ have argued that it was this advocacy of civil society organisations and groups that ensured that children's specific right to play was later included in the UNCRC, alongside the rights to rest and leisure.

Children's right to play as asserted in Article 31 of the UNCRC¹⁹ is now more than three decades old and should be widely understood and well established in practice. However, actions and policy were insufficient to realise children's right to play²⁰ with the International Play Association, remarking that Article 31 was, 'one of the least known, least understood and least recognised rights of children, and therefore one of the most consistently ignored, disdained and violated rights in the world today'.²¹ Fronczek²² referred to it as the 'forgotten right', a view re-affirmed by Doek,²³ who served as the Chair of the Committee on the Rights of the Child from 2001 to 2007,

Despite this international consensus on the importance of the right to engage in play, the attention given to the implementation of these rights in the reports States Parties submitted to the CRC Committee is very limited and often completely lacking. The same often applies for the reports submitted by Non-Governmental Organizations (NGO's) and UN agencies.

A movement emerged to seek greater recognition for the right to play, with Davie and Lundy,²⁴ calling for a greater lead from the Committee on the Rights of the Child to ensure more robust implementation of Article 31. This pressure contributed to the UN Committee publishing *General Comment No. 17 (2013) on the Right of the Child to Rest, Leisure, Play, Recreational Activities, Cultural Life, and the Arts (art. 31)*, reasserting the importance of Article 31 which it described as fundamental to the quality of childhood, to children's entitlement to optimum development, to the promotion of resilience and to the realisation of other rights.

The objectives of *General Comment No. 17* were to: (i) enhance understanding of the importance of Article 31; (ii) promote respect for the rights articulated under Article 31; and (iii) outline the obligations of agents (including governments) under the UNCRC. It was described by Brooker and Woodhead²⁵ as perhaps ‘the most urgent contribution to this complex field’. Nevertheless, as we approach one decade further on, there is evidence that further advocacy and leadership is required to make progress on implementation. Janot and Rico’s²⁶ analysis of reports submitted by European Union member countries to the UN Committee and the final recommendations (concluding observations) by the Committee to each State Party, found that only seven of the of 19 European Union States Parties to report in the study period even mentioned children’s right to play. Of the 23 States Parties receiving recommendations from the UN Committee, only six received recommendations related to the right to play.²⁷

Thus, children’s right to play – while acknowledged – was not being sufficiently realised in practice. This is the context against which to set the restrictions imposed on play as part of the process to manage public health during the COVID-19 crisis.

Everyday play in crisis

Paradoxically, the strengthening of proclamations of children’s right to play has coincided with a growing sense of everyday play in crisis. In *General Comment No. 17* concern was expressed over access to play for some groups of children, including girls, poor children, disabled children, indigenous children, and children belonging to minorities. Ordinary, everyday opportunities to play, in and around the spaces children inhabit daily, at home, on the street, in school and in the wider community, have been threatened, despite acknowledgement of their value,²⁸ and despite interventions to try and recover time-spaces for play.²⁹

In many ways, twentieth century progress has had unintended and adverse consequences for everyday play. In the UK for example, mid-late twentieth century area regeneration improved housing amenity, replacing overcrowded homes in densely populated neighbourhoods with better equipped and more spacious housing set in estates with public space and amenity. Although public spaces afforded potential to support play, through time more liveable domestic spaces have facilitated more private lives, inadvertently reducing play in the public realm.³⁰ Higher levels of car ownership offer freedom and flexibility, but at the high cost of play affordance on urban streets.³¹ Societal expectations of childhood have also changed: previously understood as being a time before work, it now tends to be viewed as a time for intensive preparation and positioning for the world of work, with an increased focus on concerted cultivation and formal education.³² Time previously given over to incidental and everyday play becomes a resource to be used more gainfully. There has been a growing aversion to risk,³³ with once familiar and celebrated forms of play being recast as dangers from which children must be protected.³⁴ Technology- and equipment- rich play has provided further incentive to induce children’s withdrawal from public space into the domestic realm.³⁵ There has also been a shift away from incidental play to play as an event, with children increasingly being accompanied by adults to ‘play dates’ or commercial centres which sell play experiences.³⁶ The net result of these inter-related changes is growing concern among advocates of play over the lack of

outdoor play,³⁷ independent mobility of children to access play,³⁸ active play³⁹ and social interaction through play.⁴⁰

Observations on other pre-pandemic developments signposted some of the challenges that could have been predicted at the outset of the COVID-19 pandemic. Without statutory obligation, many local authorities in the UK disinvested from play when adjusting to the adverse financial settlement of Austerity that was initiated in 2010,⁴¹ decision-making that was fuelled by a lack of understanding of play and its value. More positively, there is growing recognition that play may be one solution to some of the problems that contemporary living presents in advanced economies, with the instrumental benefits of play promoted, for example, within education,⁴² physical health (to tackle obesity),⁴³ mental health,⁴⁴ and urban planning and design.⁴⁵ In effect, these campaigns and initiatives seek to recover the ‘everydayness’ of play in children’s lives. However, from a children’s rights perspective, it is also important to look beyond the instrumental value of play: play matters simply because children enjoy it, a point made in *General Comment No. 17* which acknowledges that as well as being an essential component of physical, social, cognitive, emotional and spiritual development for children, play is ‘a fundamental and vital dimension of the pleasure of childhood’.

Reflecting on play in crisis situations

In times of crisis – natural disasters, manufactured disasters, and complex emergencies – children’s right to play is threatened. The barriers to everyday play are exacerbated, and the enablers of play are jeopardised, as access to space, time and permission for play is impeded. However, children’s basic developmental, health and wellbeing needs do not disappear during crisis. The importance of enjoying childhood remains. Perhaps more than ever, children still need to move, use their imaginations, laugh, interact, and experience what Lester and Russell refer to as the ‘everyday magic’ of play.⁴⁶

Arguably, the greatest global threat to play is in the challenges presented by the scale of forced displacement. Children are over-represented among the 82.4 million people who were forcibly displaced from home in 2020 (42% of whom are children, far in excess of their 30% share of the world’s population).⁴⁷ The challenges that present in sustaining play in transit, and in temporary accommodation, are significant.⁴⁸ Although the focus of this paper is on the challenges to play that present in the unique circumstances of the global COVID-19 pandemic, there is learning to be gleaned from previous work that has considered play in the midst of humanitarian crisis.

On one level, it might be argued that children need very little in the way of material resources to play, and as Ward⁴⁹ demonstrated in his seminal studies of play in the UK, children’s play can appear anywhere and everywhere. In theory, there may appear to be no reason why play cannot flourish amidst crises. However, Lester and Russell⁵⁰ are among those who emphasise that the conditions which facilitate play extend beyond material resource. Although the potential exists to play in times of crisis, the necessary conditions are not always present to facilitate it. *General Comment No. 17* specifies thirteen *factors for an optimum environment* (for the realisation of Article 31), providing both a reference point to assess prevailing conditions and a signposting to areas which should be considered to uphold children’s right to play in times of crisis, and beyond (Figure 2). These could be reduced to a necessity for space (where they feel relaxed and safe enough to play), time

(which is free of other demands), *some* resources (materials, things to play with) and permission (an atmosphere of at least tolerance for play or absence of severe restrictions). Rather than requiring a specific designated location, a play space is created through children's shifting and dynamic interactions with each other and the materials and symbols present in any space; children's performance of play both takes and makes place.⁵¹

Reviews⁵² have drawn from exemplar case studies⁵³ to impart understandings of play amid crises. While crisis alters the conditions for play, it might be argued that crisis situations also create demand and heighten the importance of play. Cohen et al.⁵⁴ have argued that playfulness can bolster resilience and provide a sense of normality for children in and after crisis situations, while Tonkin and Whitaker have argued that play and playfulness can mitigate the impact of COVID-19.⁵⁵ Play is also spontaneous and adaptive to circumstance. Others have observed⁵⁶ the emergence of what is known as post-traumatic play – that with a serious, driven, and morbid quality – through which children play to work out their understanding of adverse life experiences, including violence to which they have been exposed. Such play can be characterised by repetitive unresolved themes, increased aggressiveness and/or withdrawal, fantasies linked with rescue or revenge, reduced symbolisation, and concrete thinking.⁵⁷ Engagement in play⁵⁸ and psychosocial sports and play programmes⁵⁹ indicate the benefits for social wellbeing and psychological health, and children's ability to recover from adversity and enable them to come to terms with life experiences.⁶⁰

Thus, although play is challenged by crisis, play persists, albeit taking forms that reflect the particularities of the life situations and life experiences that children have encountered.

Play in the COVID-19 crisis

In theory, the public health responses to the COVID-19 pandemic could have favoured play in the sense that more leisure time (defined as free or unobligated time that does not involve formal education, work, or home responsibilities) was available for some to relax, have fun and pursue hobbies. However, childhood is not experienced in the same way by all children. For young carers⁶¹ and many girls,⁶² the domestic realm is associated with family and caring responsibilities. Vulnerable children⁶³ – those who lack oversight from caring adults – may rely more on dedicated times and spaces for play outside the home. And the specialist support and facilities for play that are provided by professionals working with disabled children⁶⁴ and pre-school children⁶⁵ may be a more significant loss than what is gained in opportunities within the home.

Public health responses to COVID-19 take different forms, each of which impacts on play (Table 1). First, there is quarantine, in which those with the virus physically isolate to recover and to protect others from infection. Given the dependent status of children, isolation may have resulted from the infection of their parents or carers, in addition to self-infection. Second, there is lockdown, in which public interaction is limited to essential exercise or granted only to those with 'key worker' status. As with quarantine, children may have been physically well, but prevented from outdoor play during this period. Third, there is the spectrum of conditions post-lockdown under which restrictions are eased, and public health protection measures remain in place. Finally, there is the total removal of restrictions and public health protective measures. Although this final

Table 1. COVID-19 public health management: overview of impact on children's play.

	Space	Time	Resources	Permissions
Quarantine	Loss of access to everyday environments. Heightened significance of the bedroom.	More time for play.	Loss of people to play with in-person. Heightened significance of electronic play and play based on commercial products.	Space for play highly restricted.
Lockdown	Highly constrained access to everyday environments. Heightened significance of the homespace (including spaces beyond the bedroom).	More time for play.	Loss of people to play with in-person. Heightened significance of electronic play and play based on commercial products.	Space for play restricted.
Relaxation	Access to some everyday environments under public health restrictions. Continued restrictions on commercial indoor play environments.	Return to pre-pandemic time-spaces for play. Additional pressures on time for play given the perceived need to 'catch up' with education loss.	Return to wider array of resources for play.	Restrictions are eased, but public concern persists over interaction in public space.
Unrestricted	Unrestricted access to everyday environments	Return to pre-pandemic time-spaces for play. In the early period, there may still be additional pressures on time for play, given the perceived need to 'catch up' with education loss.	Full access to array of resources for play.	Restrictions gradually return to pre-pandemic character.

example is 'post-virus', the legacy of COVID-19 times – expressed in a wariness of public interaction – might be expected to persist for the early part of this period.

The lockdown which came into force in the UK in March 2020 brought about a significant and sudden change in conditions for children and young people to play, which may have been traumatic in themselves.⁶⁶ It impinged on children's right to play, curtailing those coping mechanisms that are derived through play and the removing the senses of autonomy and freedom that are associated with it. The public health imperative, while of paramount importance, does not preclude us from asking how measures to contain the spread of COVID-19 impacted on children's ability to exercise their rights under Article 31, and to ask what could reasonably be done about that.

In its COVID-19 Statement of April 2020, the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child drew attention to the fact that, 'many children are gravely affected physically, emotionally and psychologically, especially in countries that have declared states of emergencies and mandatory lockdowns'.⁶⁷ The statement explicitly recognised children and young people's Article 31 rights, highlighted in their second recommendation, which called on States to explore alternative and creative solutions for children to enjoy their rights to rest, leisure, recreation and cultural and artistic activities.

The Scottish Government's initial response to the UN⁶⁸ relied heavily on digital and online solutions. Undoubtedly, COVID-19 provided a stimulus to extend the range of online opportunities for play, created for and with children and young people. These developments benefitted many, will have strengthened the prospects for digital play after lockdown, and have contributed to the blurring of boundaries across digital and non-digital play.⁶⁹ For some children, digital platforms enable their rights under Article 31 to be realised. At the same time, it must be acknowledged that digital play is not equally accessible to all, notably, children from low-income families, disabled children, children with additional support needs, and refugee and migrant children.⁷⁰ It is also important to take a rounded perspective. Prior to the pre-COVID-19 pandemic, children and young people were encouraged to seek a healthy balance in daily screen time and were warned of the risks of spending too much time online and on screens;⁷¹ yet in the COVID-19 times, children and young people were positively encouraged to spend increasing amount of time online for education⁷² as well as for play.

Evidence accumulated from civil society in Scotland that demonstrated adverse impact on play for children and young people. Surveys⁷³ and research over the following months would demonstrate how this would particularly affect children living in poverty, in inadequate housing, and those with little access to physical space or to online communities. The impact on 10 to 17-year-olds in Scotland was summarised well by Public Health Scotland, which noted, 'whether positive or negative, it is likely that these impacts will not be equally distributed and may widen existing inequalities'.⁷⁴ Children and young people living in a home without adequate indoor space, a garden, access to outside space, or safe open space nearby would have found it particularly difficult to meet needs for physically activity play.

As the pandemic has progressed, the evidence base on play accumulated, albeit largely from advanced economies. A wide range of aspects of play have been considered including indoor play,⁷⁵ digital play and hybrid online-offline play,⁷⁶ access to outdoor play and impact of regulations on play,⁷⁷ development of a child lockdown Index (comparison across nations of weeks of restricted access to play space),⁷⁸ parents' attitudes to play,⁷⁹ experience of play in adventure playgrounds,⁸⁰ speculations on how particular play time-spaces might be central to recovery,⁸¹ and return to play after infection.⁸² Some positive experiences have been reported such as online play helped prepare young people to re-engage when restrictions were being eased,⁸³ families were discovering new play opportunities,⁸⁴ teachers in early education were imparting advice on play strategies to parents,⁸⁵ streets were being used more extensively as a playspace,⁸⁶ and the potential for streets to be used more intensively to promote child health,⁸⁷ led to many reporting children had more imaginative play.⁸⁸ However, more typically, research has identified pressures on play including less time spent outdoors,⁸⁹ reduced opportunities for co-operative play,⁹⁰ laments of the loss of play with friends or non-resident family members,⁹¹ reduction in attendees at adventure playgrounds,⁹² reduction in young people meeting physical activity guidelines,⁹³ and heightened parental stress for those managing play with young children in the home.⁹⁴

Understanding the impact of COVID-19 restrictions on children and young people's experience of play has also been enhanced by wider studies on children's pandemic experiences. Concerns have been expressed over social isolation and loneliness among children and young people as the peer interaction which occurs through play decreases, with evidence suggesting an increase of approximately 50% in loneliness compared to pre-pandemic levels.⁹⁵ Worryingly, in the COVID-19 context, it is the duration of

loneliness, rather than its intensity, which is most strongly related to poor outcomes. Although the British Psychological Society⁹⁶ reported that some children may have coped well during the school closures, they stressed that others may have experienced considerable trauma, loss, and hardship. It is observed that restrictions on social, leisure and learning opportunities may have increased children's sense of powerlessness and for some this will have been an isolating and unpleasant experience.

Against this backdrop, it is perhaps not surprising that the Commissioner for Children and Young People, Scotland felt it necessary to point out in the independent CRIA that the rights protected by Article 31 of the UNCRC are 'not optional extras, they are necessary to protect the unique and evolving nature of childhood'. The independent CRIA found that restrictions (such as limits on time outdoors and physical distancing) and closures (of playgrounds, schools, cultural and public spaces) had significant negative implications for children and young people's access to rest, leisure, recreation and cultural and artistic activities (UNCRC Article 31) and, closely associated with Article 31, freedom of expression (Article 13 CRC, Article 10 ECHR), to freedom of association and peaceful assembly (UNCRC Article 15, Article 11 ECHR), to children's right to exercise choice in what is described a form of 'everyday participation' and disabled children's fundamental freedoms enshrined in Article 7 (UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRCPD)) and right to play in UNCRPD Article 30. These restrictions, though experienced differently by children in different circumstances, overall led to significant and sudden changes for almost all children and young people, hastening a retreat from the public realm into their homes.

The balance of evidence reaffirms that children and young people's play has been curtailed and weakened in the COVID-19 crisis. Rights to play have been overlooked. It need not be so, and there are exemplars of organisations that have striven to protect and promote the right to play through the crisis.

The global project to promote the right to play in a crisis

Six months after the World Health Organisation (WHO) declared COVID-19 a global pandemic, the International Play Association sought submissions for a special award to recognise innovation that supported play during the pandemic. Projects had to be replicable and fully or partially implemented at the time of submission. Twenty-three from 14 countries were judged to have demonstrated that they protected, promoted, or improved children's right to play during COVID-19 (Table 2). Implemented in the early stages of the pandemic, some required significant agility from the organisers to adapt to changing local conditions and restrictions.

As Table 2 reports, most projects supported play at home, (using online platforms, and/or providing material resources), although some innovations created new play spaces or presented play sessions. Most were from Europe (13) or Central and East Asia (7), with four countries accounting for more than one-half of the exemplars (Scotland, India, New Zealand/Aotearoa, and Portugal). No examples were included from the Americas. A common approach was to enable adults to support children's play, acknowledging the crucial role of parents and carers in facilitating play for young children. Many

Table 2. Exemplars of Promoting Play in COVID-19 Times (International Play Association).

Project name	Host Organisation	Place / Country	Format	Scale / Population	Focus
Emergency Play Parcels	London Play	London, England	Material	2000 children	Distribute play parcels (with 52 games) – alongside food staples – to families in need.
Follow the line	Playing Peas e.V.	Nuremberg, Germany	Public space	General public	Design in public space (ramps to an underground station) to invite play and to become place of 'play culture'.
Let's Play Ireland	Dept. of Children and Youth Affairs	Ireland	Online	Parents and carers	Online campaign to promote the importance of play and to provide resources for families.
Schola Ludens	Child Support Institute	Lisbon, Portugal	School space	Children, professionals and families in 11 primary schools	Design interventions and support in schools to promote and maintain play throughout the COVID-19 pandemic.
The Success in Each Child	Municipality of Cascais	Cascais, Portugal	Online	Children and families.	Daily video to showcase a playful activity that could be undertaken in the home.
#SparkthePlay	East Lothian Play Association	East Lothian, Scotland	Online, material and play sessions	800 children	Support play at home and in the community, acting as a bridge with a storybook character to help children manage COVID-19 experiences through everyday play.
Wee Inspirations	Starcatchers	Scotland	Online & material	Families with babies and young children	Simple, low-stress, fun ideas for families to be playful and creative together. Initially online, later a creative play pack.
Playful Schools	Play Scotland and ScrapAntics CIC	Dundee, Scotland	Play sessions	Children and professionals	Pilot project to explore the potential for Loose Parts Play to promote children's mental wellbeing in the context of COVID-19.
Geronimo at the Grove	Aberdeen City Council	Aberdeen, Scotland	Play sessions	Parents and their children (0-5 years)	Creative approaches that also encouraging risk taking in play. Took place in the summer when lockdown was lifted.
BIG Porridge & Play Online	Licketyspit Theatre Company	Glasgow, Scotland	Online	Families with children (3-12 years)	Intergenerational play facilitated by Actor-Pedagogues, developing play from participants own ideas.
PlayKX	PlayKX	London, England	Online	Children, parents and playworkers.	Zoom play sessions, and Instagram and YouTube content to enable parents and playworkers to support play.
CoronaPlay Initiative	Play Wales	Wales	Online and material	Practitioners, children and parents	Develop play resources for practitioners, children and parents, supported by social media and online presence.

(Continued)

Table 2. Continued.

Project name	Host Organisation	Place / Country	Format	Scale / Population	Focus
Apalam Chapalam	Apalam Chapalam	New Delhi, India	Online	Children aged 6–14 in low-income urban environments	Performative storytelling channel hosted on YouTube and Instagram. Collaboration across 60 NGOs.
Play in a Box	Anthill Creations Foundation	Karnataka, India	Material	1000 children	Box that gives children resources to promote curiosity and creativity. Crowdfunding aims to extend reach to 10,000.
Play2Learn Programme	Toybank	Mumbai, India	Online	49,000 'at risk' children, 2,000+ teachers, 7,000+ parents	Provides virtual Play2Learn Kits to promote children's resilience and learning.
Creative Learning Tools	Marini Widowati et al.	Indonesia	Online	Parents of children (0-6 years)	Tutorial YouTube videos on making your own play equipment or games from recycled materials or common items at home.
COVID-19 Home Play Box	Playright Children's Play Association	Hong Kong	Material	Children (early childhood, lower primary, with special needs) in deprived areas and hospitals	COVID-19 Home Play Boxes with loose parts. With guidance for parents, teachers and staff (videos and leaflets).
Weaving A Safety Net by Ourselves	Adventure Playground Network of Chiba Prefecture	Chiba, Japan	Online & play space	Local children	'Play inside house!' on a YouTube Channel. Organized a physical adventure playground in the middle of a pandemic
Play at Home Campaign	Gizem K. Önduygu et al.	Istanbul, Turkey	Online	Parents	Campaign by parents with a Play at Home Guide comprising more than 100 play ideas.
Think Playgrounds	Think Playgrounds Social Enterprise	Hanoi, Vietnam	Play space	Local children and community	Continued to protect and promote the children's right to play with small, flexible activities and local community participation.
Playgrounds: Increasing access to ECD education	Play Action International	Uganda	Play space	Children in refugee settlements	Community-built playgrounds as safe spaces in responses to increased child protection concerns due to school closures.
Auckland Association	Auckland Council PSR Lockdown Response	New Zealand	Online	Children and families	Online content via Facebook, GooseChase app to support families to be playful and active.
Poipoia! Time to Play	Municipal teams	Ōtautahi, Christchurch, New Zealand	Play space	Children (primary school age)	Co-designed with pupils to promote play on temporary school grounds.

Source: IPA *Right to Play in Times of Crisis, awards nominations booklet*, 2020, www.ipaworld.org

of the initiatives targeted younger children, although examples of those targeting teenage children were also celebrated.

The scale and reach of the projects varied. Some were highly localised, such as the adventure playground in Chiba (Japan), introduced following playworkers' observations that

children ‘desperately needed somewhere to be’. In contrast, *Apalam Chapalam*, (across India) reached more than 200,000 children through their social media channels, in a collaborative effort with 60 NGOs and 40 storytellers. Collaborative initiatives – including a coming together of community groups, foodbanks, schools and other institutions, involving storytellers, writers, artists, drama pedagogues, playworkers and play specialists – can be contrasted to others such as that in Chiba that are the work of one professional grouping.

In reflecting on play in earlier crises, Chatterjee describes how the presence of supportive adults, spaces with rich environmental affordances, and fewer restrictions on children’s time facilitated access to play. Under these conditions ‘play emerged as a living resource and not a commodified product, a resource that allowed children to regain and retain normality under the most difficult and challenging living conditions.’⁹⁷ Most of the projects (nineteen) in this IPA awards programme were implemented by third sector organisations (non-governmental and not-for-profit organisations and associations, including charities, social enterprises, voluntary and community groups); only one was implemented by a national government department and three by local government.

Governments are guided by the UNCRC to develop a dedicated plan, policy, or framework for Article 31 or to incorporate the right to play in an overall national plan to implement the Convention. The experience of the pandemic points to significant shortcomings in these national action plans, impacting on children of all age groups, but especially so for children in marginalised groups and communities. The independent CRIA in Scotland recognised that, despite the efforts of parents and carers, opportunities to play, to socialise with friends, and to express creativity and imagination have all been limited, and some groups of children (those who live in poverty, in inadequate housing, and with little access to physical space or to an online community) have been particularly affected. At the time of its writing, the return to school was proposed as an opportunity for children to play and rebuild relationships, with the Children and Young People’s Commissioner, Scotland urging Scottish Government and local authorities to fund and support options such as outdoor and play-based learning.⁹⁸ We would contend that realising the right to play need not wait for a return to school: as evidenced in [Table 2](#), many means are available to reach many thousands of children in local, digital, non-digital and hybrid play-space.

It is important to recognise that other new web-based resources have emerged to support play at home, some of which were implemented or adapted quickly by Government – *Let’s Play Ireland* website⁹⁹, Scotland’s *Parent Club*¹⁰⁰, and *Playful Childhoods*¹⁰¹ in Wales. A shared sense of collective purpose was also evidenced by resource sharing and translation of resources into local languages, and a concern to disseminate knowledge to parents and carers.¹⁰²

Conclusion: rethinking play, rights, and crisis

We identified three narratives of play and crisis: the sense of play in crisis, a belief that crisis curtails play, and a re-appraisal that positions play as a remedy to (some of the) problems of crisis situations.

The COVID-19 pandemic afforded an opportunity to reappraise the status of play as a fundamental right of the child through the lens of play in crisis. However, children’s right to play was curtailed as it became collateral damage when managing the threat to public

health.¹⁰³ Although those wedded to a fundamentalist view of the right to play may be critical of the curtailment of opportunity for play in public and commercial realms, many would understand the imperative of public health management.¹⁰⁴ More telling is that the staged lifting of restrictions highlighted the standing of play relative to other human rights, with the desire to facilitate return to work, children's education and adult leisure being prioritised over facilitating opportunities for children's play. Although it would be an overstatement to claim that play was totally ignored – for example, the Scottish Government supported organised outdoor play as part of its *Get Into Summer*¹⁰⁵ investment in 2021 – it was not a universal priority or concern and it has been left to stakeholders and independent analysts to assess impact of children's loss of play.¹⁰⁶ Rather than a global project, efforts to sustain the right to play were concentrated in pockets of action, some local, some national, in disparate parts of the world.

From a children's rights perspective, it is also significant that play was often placed in the orbit of adult control, even by those seeking to facilitate it in the COVID times, with a heightened focus on play in the domestic realm. This might be viewed as regressive in that the close presence of significant adults perhaps implies less autonomy and freedom within play, and of course the restriction to the domestic realm removes opportunities for play. On the other hand, the greater time spent in the home space during lockdown may have strengthened the home as a time-space for play and there may now be a stronger inclination to embrace digital play. It may also be speculated whether the stresses of parenting in lockdown have heightened awareness of the adverse impact of over-parenting, and the value for society of affording children more opportunities and earlier opportunities to exert autonomy and freedom through play.

Although there is evidence of governments intervening to support play in the COVID-19 pandemic, there remains a need for better understanding of the importance of play, and more robust and wide-ranging actions, not least to meet their obligations under Article 31 of the UNCRC. If anything, the COVID-19 crisis has highlighted the critical importance of play in children's lives. Although grassroots organisations and 'bottom-up' initiatives often provide rich opportunity that is grounded in an understanding of the wider significance of play, play is too important to be left to the vagaries and chance of what local groups and small NGOs may or may not be able to support.

There are also now many examples of promising – if not fully evidenced – practice of supporting play in crisis situations, to complement the bank of evidence that already exists on the instrumental value of play. While, sadly, the concerns expressed in the independent CRIA over the potential negative impact of COVID-19 measures on children and their right to play were subsequently borne out, the COVID-19 pandemic has also stimulated interest in understanding the nature of play in children's lives and has resulted in new insights from, and engagement with play, from many researchers across many disciplines.

In this crisis, may be the seeds of opportunity to sustain and strengthen our support for children's right to play and to work toward restoring the everydayness of play for all children, in crisis or not.

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