



What is OPAL?

OPAL is an award-winning mentor supported school improvement programme that addresses all the areas that schools must plan for if they want to strategically and sustainably improve the quality of their play opportunities. OPAL is the only programme of its kind that has been independently proven to sustainably improve the quality of play in British primary schools. Its success comes from a series of interrelated actions undertaken with the specialist support from an OPAL mentor.

This embeds play into school's policies and practices and establishes clear guiding principles and strategies for initiating changes at playtimes. The results can be transformational in even the more challenging school environments.

Why are we following the OPAL programme?

One reason we are carrying out this programme is that childhood has changed and many children no longer get their play needs met out of school.

- Average screen time per day is six hours.
- Average outdoor play time per week is five hours.
- Percentage of UK children who only play outdoors with other children at school is 56%.

There are many proven benefits for schools which carry out the OPAL Programme. They usually include: more enjoyment of school, less teaching time lost to disputes between children, less accidents and greatly improved behaviour.

The benefits of play

Children learn through their play

Children learn and develop:

- cognitive skills – like maths and problem solving in a pretend grocery store
- physical abilities – like fundamental skills, balancing and travelling on the playground
- fitness – expending more energy and effort as they explore and engage in active play
- new vocabulary – like the words they need to play with toy dinosaurs
- social skills – like playing together in a pretend car wash
- literacy skills – like creating a menu for a pretend restaurant

Play is healthy

Play helps children grow strong and healthy. It also counteracts obesity issues facing many children today

Play reduces stress

Play helps your children grow emotionally. It is joyful and provides an outlet for anxiety and stress

Play and learning go hand-in-hand

They are not separate activities. They are intertwined. Think about them as a science lecture with a lab. Play is the child's lab.

Play outside

Remember your own outdoor experiences of building forts, playing on the beach, sledding in the winter, or playing with other children in the neighbourhood. Make sure your children create outdoor memories too.

Play is a child's context for learning

Children practice and reinforce their learning in multiple areas during play. It gives them a place and a time for learning that cannot be achieved through completing a worksheet. For example, when playing in the 'mud kitchen', children write and draw menus, set prices, take orders, and create the 'food'. Play provides rich learning opportunities and leads to children's success and self-esteem.

How can parents help?

Play is not messing about but is the process that enables children to learn all of the things that cannot be taught, while also feeling like it is fun. There are certain things children need to have in order to be able to play.

These include:

- Having clothes that you can play in
- Having things to play with
- Having a certain amount of freedom

As the school improves play opportunities for your children, you may find the school is asking you for resources and is making changes about how the children use the school grounds. They may use more of the grounds, for more of the year. Your children may get a bit messier, be exposed to more challenges and have greater freedoms to play where, with whom and how they like. The experiences the school is fostering are essential for children's physical and mental well-being and health and in line with all current good practice advice on health and safety, well-being and development.

If you would like to learn more about the OPAL Primary Programme, please have a look at the OPAL website www.outdoorplayandlearning.org.uk where you will find lots of useful information and several videos about the programme. Here is a quick link to one of them: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cm7IfAEsjqI&t=2s>