



# St John's Church of England Primary School

## OPAL (Outdoor Play and Learning) Policy

|                     |                 |
|---------------------|-----------------|
| Date Approved:      | Spring 2026     |
| Headteacher:        | Miss Anna Pyatt |
| Chair of Governors: | Ms Joanna Conn  |
| Review Date:        | Spring 2029     |

## **Aims**

This policy sets out Watford St John's commitment to ensuring quality play opportunities are available to all children. We believe that play is essential for physical, emotional, social, spiritual and intellectual development. Our school mission of 'Growing together in love and respect' and our school values will be at the heart of decision making in creating a better playtime experience for our children.

The school acknowledges the *UN Charter on the Rights of the Child*, especially *Article 31*, and supports the child's right to play. We believe play provision should be:

Welcoming and accessible to every child, irrespective of gender, sexual orientation, economic or social circumstances, ethnic or cultural background or origin, or individual abilities.

The OPAL program rationale is that ..."better, more active and creative play times can mean happier and healthier children, and having happier, healthier, more active children usually results in a more positive attitude to learning in school, with more effective classroom lessons, less staff time spent resolving unnecessary behavioural incidents. fewer playtime accidents, happier staff and a healthier attitude to life".

Watford St John's aims to address the provision of improved play opportunities:

- To ensure play settings provide a varied, challenging and stimulating environment.
- To allow children to take risks and use a common-sense approach to these risks and their benefits.
- To provide opportunities for children to develop their relationships with each other.
- To enable children to develop respect for their surroundings and each other.
- To aid children's physical, emotional, social, spiritual and intellectual development.
- To provide a range of environments which will encourage children to explore and play imaginatively.
- To provide a range of environments which will support children's learning across the curriculum and learning about the world around them.
- To promote independence and team work within children.
- To build emotional and physical resilience.

## **Rationale**

Children spend 1.4 years of their primary school attendance in playtimes. Better play means happier children. Happier children mean fewer behavior problems, a more positive attitude to school, more effective learning, core skills development together with less staff time spent resolving problems, fewer accidents and a happier school.

## **Right to play**

*Respecting Rights* The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child makes clear that 'all children have a right to relax and play and to join in a wide range of activities (Article 31)'.

At Watford St John's, we promote these rights as a central focus in all we do. Through our belief in children's rights, we aim to provide a secure, caring environment where all children are happy, intrinsically motivated, relaxed and able to reach their potential.

- Children have the right to be happy. Therefore, to respect this right the children must follow instructions, use equipment without hurting others and have fun.
- Adults respect this right by providing opportunities for creative, exciting play, use conflict resolution and emotion coaching in line with our behaviour policy, to support all children.
- Children have the right to be safe. Therefore, to respect this right, children must follow instructions, use equipment without hurting others, assess risk and tidy equipment away.
- Adults respect this right by assessing risk daily, encouraging children to assess risk also and helping children to tidy up.
- Children have the right to play and relax. Therefore, to respect this right the children must follow instructions, use equipment without hurting others and help others who need it.
- Adults respect this right by developing new opportunities for play, listening to children's ideas about play and supporting children who have additional needs to access play.

## **The Benefits of Play**

'Play is defined as any freely chosen activity which a child finds satisfying and creative.'

We believe that:

- Play is critical to children's health and wellbeing, and essential for their physical, emotional, social, spiritual and intellectual development.
- Play enables children to explore the physical and social environment, different concepts and different ideas.
- Play enhances children's self-esteem and their understanding of others through freely chosen social interactions, within peer groups, with individuals, and within groups of different ages, abilities, interests, genders, ethnicities and cultures.
- Play requires ongoing communication and negotiation skills, enabling children to develop a balance between their right to act freely and their responsibilities to others.
- Play enables children to experience a wide range of emotions and develop their ability to cope with these, including sadness and happiness, rejection and acceptance, frustration and achievement, boredom and fascination, fear and confidence.
- Play encourages self-confidence and the ability to make choices, problem solve and to be creative.
- Play maintains children's openness to learning, develops their capabilities and allows them to push the boundaries of what they can achieve.
- Our Play is inclusive for all pupils as each pupil can push their own boundaries from their own starting point

## **Benefit and Risk**

'Play is great for children's well-being 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.' (Managing Risk in Play Provision: Implementation guide is published for Play England 2012)

The school will use the Health and Safety Executive guidance document 'Children's Play and Leisure – Promoting a Balanced Approach' (September 2012) as the principal value statement informing its approach to managing risk in play. It will adopt a benefits/risk approach as detailed in 'Managing Risk in Play Provision' Implementation Guide. Managing Risk in Play Provision Risk-taking is an essential feature of play provision, and of all environments in which children and young people legitimately spend time at play.

Play provision aims to offer children and young people the chance to encounter acceptable risks as part of a stimulating, challenging and controlled learning environment. In the words of the play sector publication Best Play, play provision should aim to 'manage the balance between the need to offer risk and the need to keep children and Young people safe from harm'.

In addition to standard risk/benefit assessments the school will practise dynamic risk management with children encouraging them to identify and manage risks in an environment where adults are present to support them.

## **Risk assessment and play**

An essential element of exploration within the medium of play is the opportunity for children to experience freely chosen activities, where they can take acceptable risks and challenge themselves beyond their existing capabilities. Allowing children to take acceptable risk develops their ability to judge risk independently and learn new skills. 'All children both need and want to take risks in order to explore limits, venture into new experiences and develop their capacities from a very young age and from their earliest play experiences. Children would never learn to walk, climb stairs or ride a bicycle unless they were strongly motivated to respond to challenges involving a risk of injury.' (Play England).

Carefully considered and comprehensive risk assessments of all play provision within the school should be reviewed on an annual basis, or whenever significant change or development in play provision/equipment or child circumstances takes place.

To manage the levels of risk we will follow the following guidelines:

- recognise the need for professional judgement in setting the balance between safety and goals;
- ensure risks are as apparent as possible to staff and children;
- design spaces where the risks of hazards are clearly apparent;
- ensure risks that children may not appreciate are controlled and managed;

- provide staff with training to supervise play setting.

### **Supervision**

Except for new children in reception, the school does not believe direct supervision of playtime is possible or beneficial. Supervision will take remote and ranging models, so that children can quickly find an adult, and adults can patrol the playground to gain an awareness of the kinds of play and levels of risk likely to be emerging. We will ensure that the numbers of staff available and patrolling the play area to support play are assessed and are suitable for the number of children at play.

### **The Adults' Role in Play**

The school will help children maximise the benefits they can gain from play by the provision of trained staff who are informed by and work in accordance with the Playwork Principles. Staff will use and refer to these principles when appropriate interventions are needed, and ultimately will strive to facilitate an environment which nurtures children's self-directed play. The staff's core function is to create an environment which will stimulate children's play and maximise their opportunities for a wide range of play experiences. Eagle Play Mentors are a channel of access to new materials and tools and they can act as a stimulus to children to explore and learn. They are also available to participate in the play if invited. Playground rules will be kept to the minimum required to maintain safety and all playground rules will be agreed by the Play working party.

### **Environment**

We believe that a rich play setting should ensure that all children have access to stimulating environments that are free from unacceptable/unnecessary risks and thereby offer children the opportunity to explore for themselves through their freely chosen play.

To manage risks, our caretaker performs regular Health & Safety checks of the play areas. The Opal working party and all playtime supervision staff will check for dangers/risks when outside with the children. The children will be made aware of possible risks and helped to manage those via staff alerting them, for example slippery or wet surfaces. The play area will be separated into zones to maintain a risk/benefit management system creating quiet areas as well as areas for physical play.

### **The governing body**

The governors will review this policy and make sure that it:

- Is appropriate for our schools' context
- Is implemented safely and effectively across the school
- Takes into account the views of parents, carers and pupils

**Love, Respect, Value**