

PLAY

TE UPOKO O TE IKA A MĀUI GREATER WELLINGTON REGION

Perceptions and experiences of play
from sector stakeholders, whānau and
tamariki in Greater Wellington

Ka mua, ka muri

Walking backwards into the future

This report explores findings from a study conducted in Te Upoko o Te Ika a Māui (Greater Wellington region) by Sport New Zealand Ihi Aotearoa, and supported by Nuku Ora, the Regional Play Network, and Innovation Unit.

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www.innovationunit.org

Thank you to the generous sector and community leaders, parents, tamariki, and their wider whānau, across Te Upoko o Te Ika a Māui who shared their thoughts, ideas and experiences for this kaupapa. Your experiences will help us understand what it will take to give more children quality play experiences in Aotearoa New Zealand.

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Drawings throughout this report are by tamariki and adults from Te Upoko o Te Ika a Māui.

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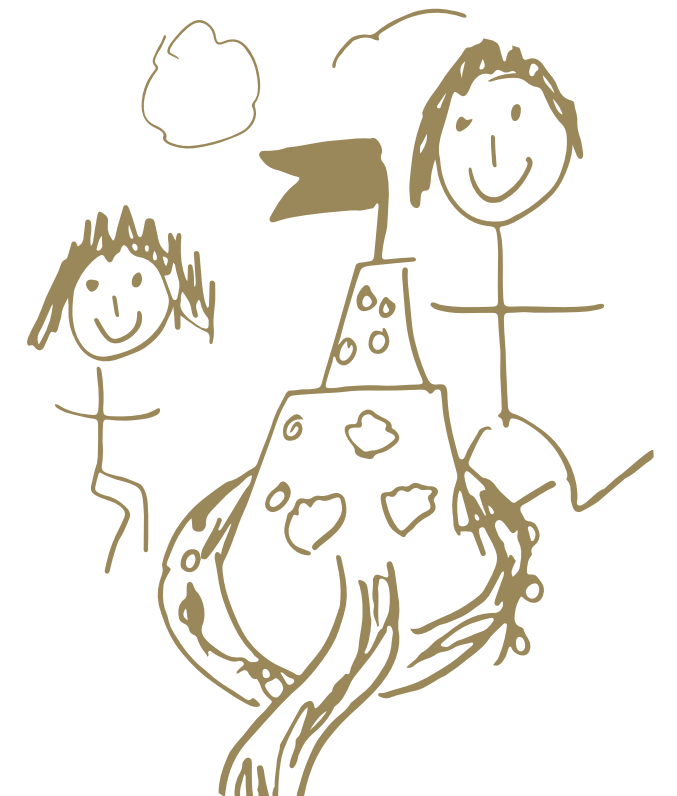
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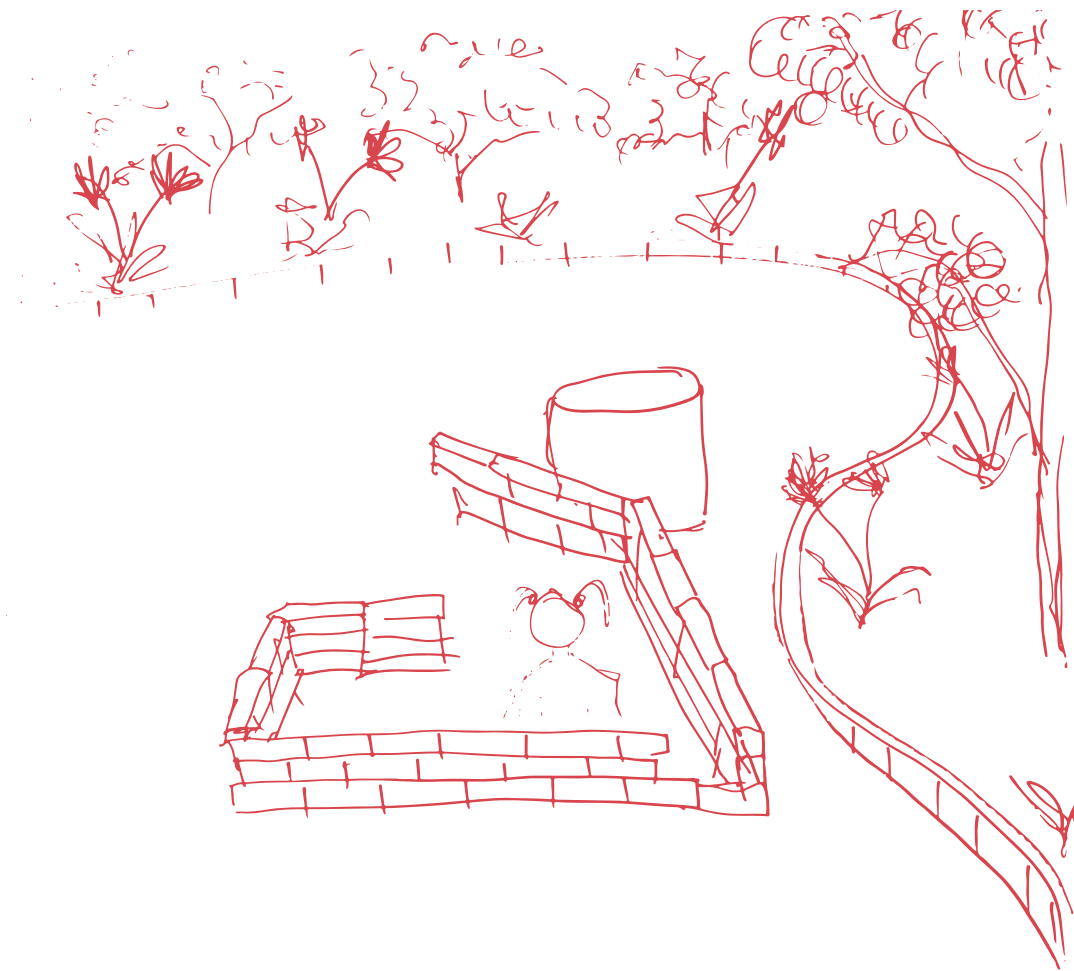
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Why Play?



How might we create more quality play* experiences, and lay the foundations for a life-long love of being active?

Play is a vital part of children's physical and cognitive development. It helps them build the skills, competencies, and attitudes they need to be active for life, including: fundamental movement skills, social and emotional connections, resilience, independence, and leadership.

However, play is changing. Social, environmental, technological, and economic trends mean opportunities for play look and feel different for tamariki. 'Play deprivation' is becoming an increasing international concern whilst at the same time, new opportunities are emerging (1).

What we do know is that children have the time, place, and permission to play in their communities when:

- play is widely understood to be a crucial part of physical, cognitive, social/emotional, and spiritual development for young people;
- adults understand their role in enabling play, and everyone shares responsibility for supporting play; and
- young people have access to varied playful experiences within their local environments, including risk-taking, challenge, and the opportunity to be active (2).

The Power of Play process seeks to hear and elevate the voices of those closest to play in Aotearoa - and consider the current barriers and enablers in our local play environments. How might those voices help us enable more tamariki to access quality play opportunities across Te Upoko o Te Ika a Māui?

1 - Play Wales / Chwarae Cymru. Play deprivation. Retrieved from <https://www.playwales.org.uk/eng/playdeprivation> (4 March 2022).

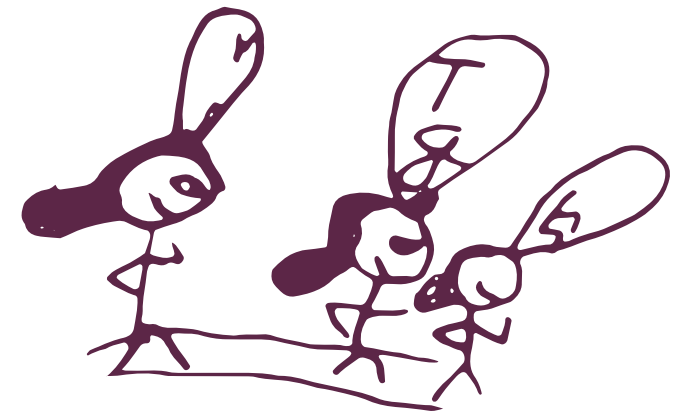
2 - International Play Association. IPA Declaration on the Importance of Play. 2014. Retrieved from <https://ipaworld.org/ipa-declaration-on-the-importance-of-play/> (4 March 2022).

Executive Summary

The Power of Play process generated six key insights:

1. Children are our enduring innovators
2. Nature hasn't changed, we have
3. It's important to reclaim mātauranga Māori in play
4. Safety has become structure
5. Resources have never been more precious
6. Technology is here to stay

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Some barriers and enablers to play in the region were also identified.

Key inhibitors:

- Socio-economic inequalities
- Inadequate urban planning
- Rules, regulations, and risk
- Low levels of community connection
- Misconceptions about play
- Technology as a rival to play

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Key supporting factors:

- Access to outdoor spaces
- Play champions
- Adequate resources and funding
- Co-creation with whānau and tamariki

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Aspirations for play in the future is that it should:

- Be guided by young imaginations
- Be interwoven with the natural environment
- Be child-centric and child-led
- Be inclusive of technology
- Better reflect Aotearoa's bicultural context

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STATE OF PLAY

What play looks like in the Te Upoko o Te Ika a
Māui region today and what is unique about play
in this region

Insight One:

Children are our enduring innovators

Supporting findings from other regions, participants highlighted a deep connection to the free-spiritedness of childhood. Wherever they grew up, and in whatever environment, creativity whilst at 'play' was a constant feature of conversation.

We lived in Hokowhitu when I was young, back then it wasn't a beautiful river – it was wild and weed infested but we went down to the river unsupervised and it was awesome!

Community Stakeholder, Hutt Valley

I remember our day to day play was all about imagining things that came out of playing barbies and action figures with my sister, but also Lego and just building stuff out of mud!

Parent,
Wellington Central

We could just go from 8am-6pm completely unsupervised and never had to account for anything. We were freeeee!

Community Stakeholder,
Hutt Valley

Insight Two:

Nature, hasn't changed, we have

Gratitude for access to green spaces was a frequent refrain. Gardens, farms, lifestyle blocks and wild places - and the bounty of play opportunities they offer was a constant reference point. Whether it was the farmland and forests of the Wairarapa, the abundant coastline of the Kāpiti district, the easy river access of the Hutt Valley or Wellington City's Town Belt, the importance of nature connection was prominent in all our Power of Play conversations.

At the same time, we heard fears about the impact of increased housing density, the dominance of the car, and lack of funding for maintaining our outdoor spaces. Continuing to be purposeful about how we care for and access natural spaces must be at the heart of the way we think about play far into the future.

My favourite place to play is my school field because of all the nature, there's grass, trees, and big pine cone trees, I like how wrinkly the trees are!

Tamaiti, 8, Kāpiti

Play gets better when you get more play time! I just love running around. It's so much fun! I love playing at Kārori Park or at school because the grounds are just so BIG!

Tamaiti, 10,
Wellington Central

We had a gulley with a stream at the bottom, so we'd grab vines and swing across the stream. It was completely WILD!

Sector Stakeholder, Wairarapa

Insight Three:

Reclaiming mātauranga Māori in our play

Our Wellington Central Play Huddle conversation in particular highlighted the need for more experts and skilled practitioners of taonga tākaro to lead the way to incorporate appropriate tikanga into these spaces. As a bicultural nation this would also create opportunities for allowing Māori play to be a powerful tool to learn about Te Ao Māori (and te reo Māori) through play.

We need more space for taonga tākaro, more skilled practitioners, more awareness and funding for Māori games but in the meantime, I teach my tamariki and moko taonga tākaro, mātauranga, tikanga and te reo Māori as much as possible.

Sector Stakeholder, Digital Huddle

Institutional racism, impacts of colonisation, racist people, lack of funding and resources, lack of space to play, lack of knowledge around tākaro, these ALL affect us and how our tamariki play.

Sector Stakeholder, Digital Huddle

I wish there was more funding to develop more tākaro research practitioners and mātauranga Māori was prioritised over pākehā ideas, then let's see how we go.

Sector Stakeholder, Digital Huddle

Kai is a massive connector for us – getting older and younger kids to engage with each other and it's a place where they can break bread and talk.

Community Stakeholder, Wellington

Insight Four:

Safety has become structure

Participant discussions noted a tension between the high value of play in free and unstructured environments and the challenges of ensuring the safety of our tamariki. A marked increase in play taking part in more supervised environments - or 'play' being understood as organised activities - was frequently noted. This shift has implications for equity of access, where activities require payment or transport - as well as our children's sense of independence.

Life is soooo manicured and there's this deep anxiety in my daughter. My family, and many other families seem to inhibit children from becoming active independent, self- actualising individuals.

Parent, Wellington Central

Back then a fence was something fun to be jumped over, today a fence is a clear boundary. How can we encourage children to have more freedom in their choices when there are so many restrictions?

Community Stakeholder, Wairarapa

Parents feel it is their responsibility to work through their children's boredom – and the answer becomes structured play which is the opposite of free play!

Sector Stakeholder, Wairarapa

Insight Five:

Resources have never been more precious

Whilst financial resources were frequently referenced, there were also some important reflections on the importance of non-monetary resources - such as time and energy - in enabling access to play.

Our conversations suggested time and creative energy are at an all-time low for caregivers. Economic circumstances often mean parents are time-poor, and concerned that children should be engaging in ‘active learning’ and structured activities rather than simply playing. Whilst physical resources - such as quality playgrounds, sports equipment, and programmes for neuro-diverse children are critical - without the time and engagement of caregivers, much of their potential is lost.

Just to survive, ALL parents work now and that impacts the kids opportunities to do things. My kids don't cook, I come from work and rush into things. I'm anti-NCEA, so much work, work, and more work to get tiny credits that create ongoing anxiety.

Parent, Hutt City

Over the last ten years, the environment has changed so much and the cost of living has skyrocketed. I just don't know that many home makers anymore.

Parent, Wairarapa

Our children have really busy days... Like we do! When we all finally get home, we feed them, wash them, and get them in bed!

Parent, Central Wellington

Insight Six:

Technology is here to stay

Technology and its growing presence in children’s lives was a key topic of conversation. Opportunities for integrating technology into real world movement and play were discussed, alongside some of the challenges of play mediated via a screen. If technology is here to stay, the question becomes what is its role as an enabler of - and not a barrier to - play?

Technology is here so how can it have a more active and integrated role because our kids are currently getting their dopamine from technology rather than endorphins from the outdoors.

Community Stakeholder, Digital Huddle

With technology I feel we need to understand better its relationship to an increase in chronic health conditions, increase in mental health and increase in teenage and adult suicide. How can play be a focus with so much competing against it?

Community Stakeholder, Digital Huddle

Technology has been actively brought into learning – like YouTube for gymnastics. Formal instructions have now been dampened down and children are left to learn through their own pathways.

Sector Stakeholder, Wairarapa

How has play changed over time?

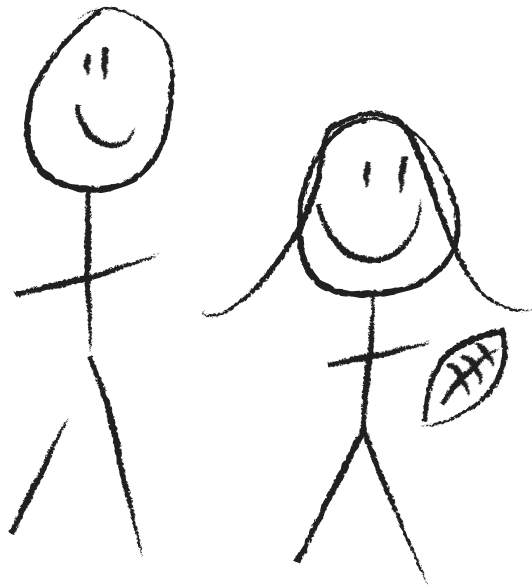
These insights emerged in part from conversations about how play has changed over time. This section outlines what sector stakeholders, whānau and tamariki say play used to look like, how it has changed over time and what has stayed the same.

Play 'back then'

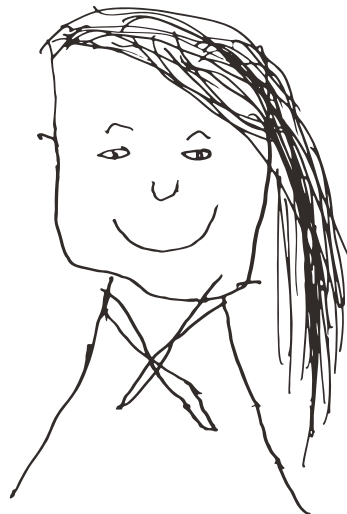
The stakeholders and parents we spoke with across the four Huddles shared an overwhelming sense of nostalgia for the ‘good old days’. They remember that play from their childhood was about:

- **Whānau and community**
Whether it was siblings and wider family, neighbours or friends there was a recurring theme around a sense of delight and confidence knowing that trust was high and the community connected.
- **Connecting with the natural world**
Living on a farm, holidays at the beach, long uninterrupted days and connecting to nature was a highlight for many as they thrived on opportunities to connect to the whenua.
- **Freedom and creativity**
Playing in the local rivers, sand-dunes, mud, and being left to one’s ‘own devices’ nurtured a sense of making the most of what was available. The opportunities to make memories without any directives, engage in rough and risky play and be accountable all created a sense of a world without boundaries.

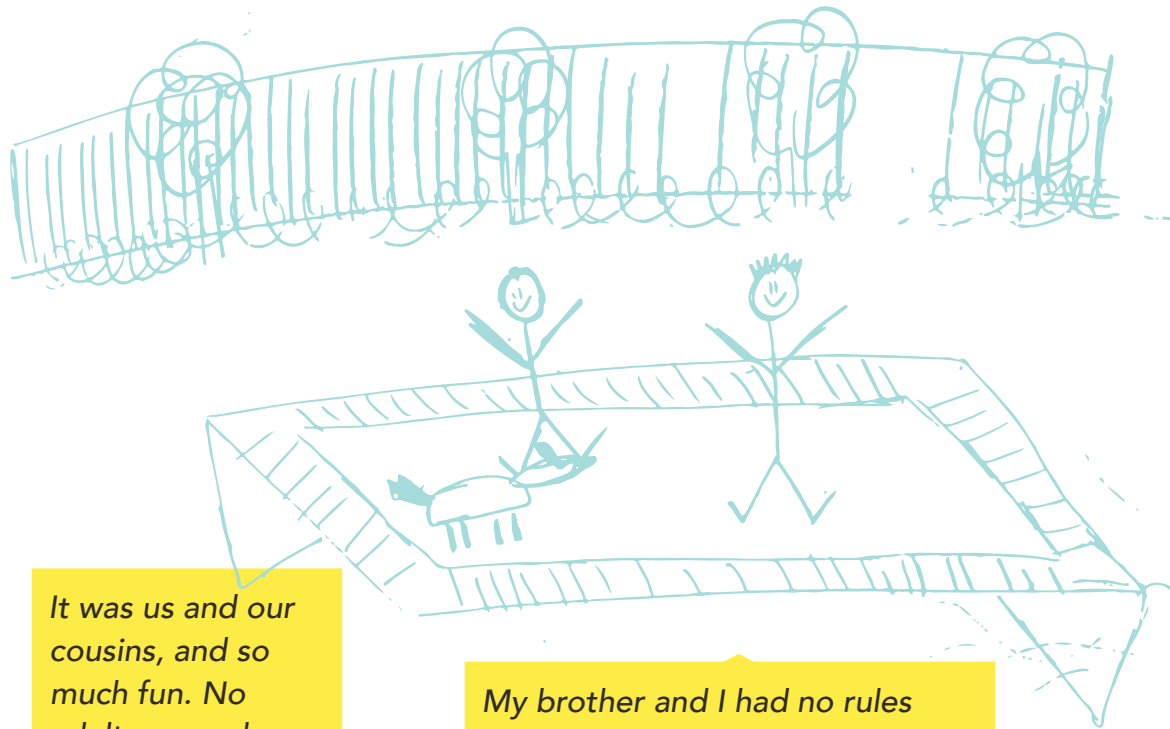
** All these quotes are from Community Sector Stakeholders across the four regional huddles



It felt like we had only just started when we were being yelled at to come for dinner. There was a sense that time just slipped past because we were having so much fun.

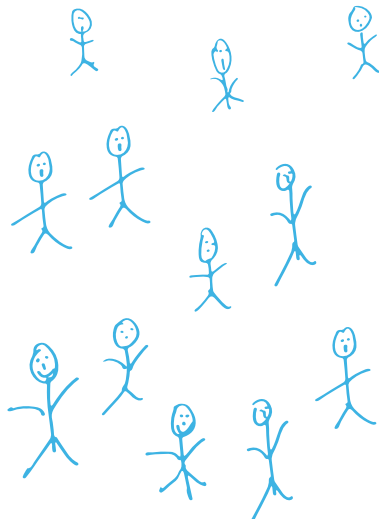


We grew up on a dairy farm and we’d use the fallen trees to create trenches to play at going to war. Often we were locked out of the house for the whole day so we just made the most of it - there was hardly an adult to be seen and that was fine with us.



It was us and our cousins, and so much fun. No adults around.

My brother and I had no rules once we were out of the house, often we had accidents but we just cleaned ourselves up. We didn’t have a care in the world.



I remember the feeling of lying on wet grass and the sun coming out, the smell of the Earth, sounds of running water, food smells coming from the house. It was a different world.

I loved playing out in the rain, jumping in puddles. There wasn’t an adult in sight.



There were these massive gum trees (or at least they felt massive back then) and we used to love climbing them - but no one ever fell out or got hurt. We all looked after each other.

We’d dress up and pretend to play, make home videos and we loved being in the water. I practiced being a mermaid.



How has play stayed the same?

Stakeholders and parents expressed that much has stayed the same when it comes to play - including the innate need to play, its benefits and how, where and why children want to play.

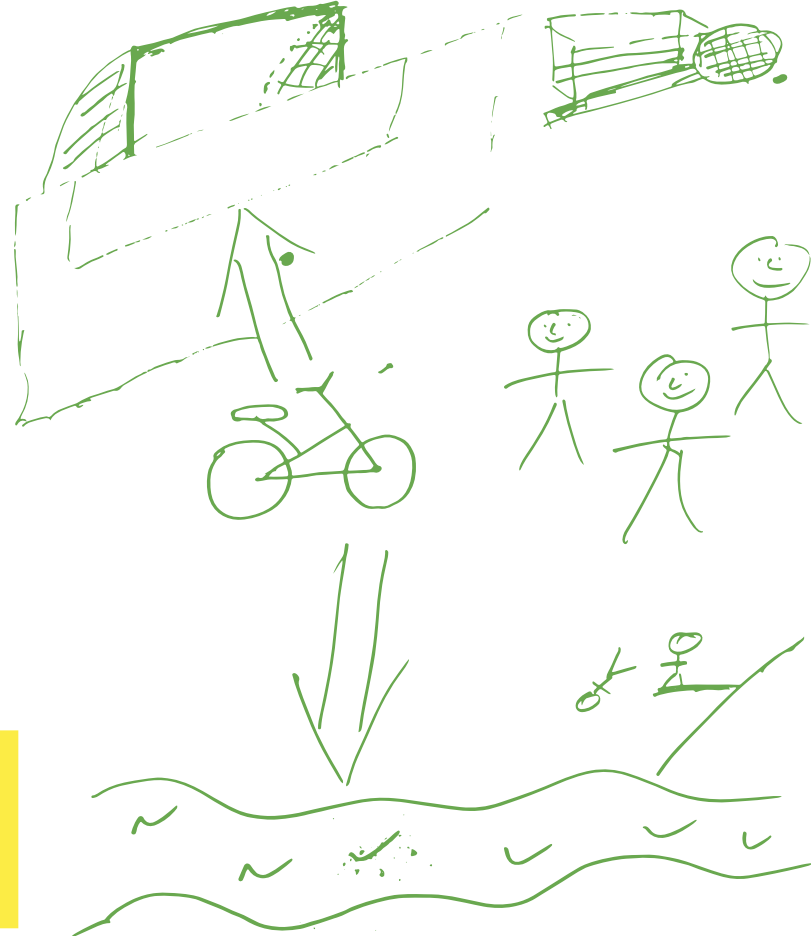
- **Whānau and community**
Play still centres around family and friends, and this is integral to developing a sense of belonging. Relationships, especially familial bonds and close friendships, are foundational, regardless of the resources available.
- **Connecting with the natural world**
The value of green space - and connections to land, sea and surrounding ecosystems - continue to play a vital role in supporting children's play. While its importance has not dimmed, an increasing concern is regulation of access and exclusion.
- **Freedom and creativity**
The child-like desire to explore, experiment, and revel in curiosity has not disappeared. Imagination and creativity continue to be a huge part of a child's experience - and that is important to keep nurturing.



When there's not a lot of adult intervention, kids just have fun.



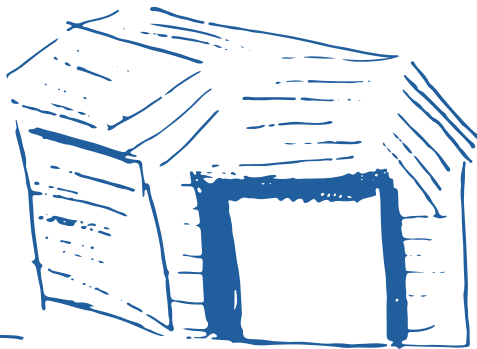
PLAY is important... for children, but really important for adults as well... For mental health, but also to collaborate and to be part of the community.



Kids still play if we give them the opportunity - siblings, cousins and community that's what makes play fun.



Kids still have urges to climb, jump, run - that's where connecting to nature comes in.



We still have access to beaches, farms, forests, parks, open spaces - it's still important to how we play, nature hasn't changed but there are lots more rules and regulations.



Kids are creative and they want to be creative, it's adults and our fears that get in the way.



** All these quotes are from Community Sector Stakeholders across the four regional huddles

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Barriers:

What helps, or gets in the way of, stakeholders and families enabling high quality play experiences for tamariki? In our conversations, six key barriers surfaced:

- Socio-economic disparities
- Inadequate urban planning
- Rules, regulations and risk
- Low levels of community connection
- Misconceptions about play
- Technology as a rival to play.

Socio-economic disparities

‘The rich get richer and the poor get poorer’ was a recurring concern amongst participants as they commented on how affluent areas continue to get the ‘fancy equipment’ and the ‘clean green spaces’, whereas less privileged areas remain underserved. This contributes to a lack of confidence in outdoor play and increasing inequality of access for all our tamariki.

How might we ensure greater equity for different neighbourhoods within the Greater Wellington region?

Inadequate urban planning

Participants were passionate about the need for better urban planning in enabling better play environments for all. Prioritising community and pedestrian friendly spaces over cars and catering to children’s needs alongside those of the ‘productive tax payer’ were highlighted. Design centred on transport and commutes has had detrimental effects, by both compromising green spaces and creating segregation of play into ‘designated’ locations.

How might we support better urban planning to respond to our children’s needs?

Rules, regulations and risk

Rules and regulations around the design of play-centric spaces were firmly outlined as an inhibitor to play. Health and safety requirements may keep children safe, but they can also make free play harder. There is an inherent tension here with the known value of risk and risky play for children as they grow and learn.

How might we create environments that offer the ‘right’ amount of risk for our tamariki?



Image by Dianna Thomson

Low levels of community connection

We live in a world where many parents are stressed and nervous. In many households, parents are working, life is highly structured and there is a sense of daily pressure. The growing absence of the ‘village’ to care for the child is creating a sense of parental exhaustion and discouragement.

How might we do more to support each other in enabling our children to play?

Misconceptions about play

A shared understanding of the power of play and its benefits remains difficult to access. Many of our play specialists highlighted that it can be hard to communicate to many parents and teachers why play is important, especially where there is no clear link to productivity.

How might we grow a shared understanding of the power of play amongst all those who engage with our young people?

Technology as a rival to play

Never before has the need to find a balance between screen time and other activities been so great. Whilst technology can be a valuable portal for learning and exploration, it also presents many challenges for those of us concerned with enabling real-world play. These include the addictive nature of gaming and social media, incessant marketing of ‘toys’ and reduced connection to whānau and community.

How might we enable families to find ways to use technology well, when it comes to play?

Enablers:

- Four key enablers to play emerged in our discussions:
- Access to outdoor spaces
 - Play champions
 - Adequate resources and funding
 - Fresh perspectives.



Access to outdoor spaces

‘Discussions in all the Huddles turned to the inherent value in having places to play outdoors. These do not need to be formal, curated or manicured - but simply accessible and inviting. Opportunities to explore, experiment and have adventures are much needed in today’s world. There were vibrant discussions around possibilities for designing better park spaces and places to ‘play on the way’ - on streets and cycleways.

How might we get better at seeing from a ‘play’ perspective when we are designing the places that we live and work?

Play champions

Our conversations suggest that adults who ‘champion’ play make a huge difference in enabling good play outcomes for tamariki. This concept of championing play speaks both to those in positions of influence, and to those who work directly with children in their day-to-day roles. In addition to these formal roles focused on play, it is also important to empower parents, caregivers, teachers, volunteers and other advocates to enable meaningful shifts around play. Those who actively champion play for its own sake represent a powerful network of advocacy across sectors and communities.

How might we empower these ‘local experts’ to deliver the change they want to see when it comes to promoting accessible, inclusive play throughout our region?



Adequate resources & funding

One obvious enabler is the provision of both physical and financial resources. The Tū Manawa Active Aotearoa fund was frequently referenced, as well as resources like *Sports Banks, play equipment and free public activity programmes. In all the Huddles - and particularly the Wairarapa Huddle - it was noted that more resources will always be helpful in supporting and encouraging play in the region.

How could such resources activate meaningful change and enliven hidden potential?

Fresh perspectives: co-creation with whānau and tamariki

Each of our Huddle discussions reinforced that those who are in leadership roles for activating play must be embedded in the communities that they serve. Meaningful consultations and opportunities to co-create with whānau and tamariki will be essential for transforming the state of play.

How might we enable and support this participatory approach across the region?

Future of play: Recommendations, Questions and Opportunities

Recommendations

Asking our participants about their hopes and aspirations for the future of play, we heard the following recommendations:

Let imagination be our guide by...

- Creating child-led and child-centred play experiences
- Facilitating environments where risky play can foster confidence and learning
- Developing places everywhere for all children to explore and experiment.

Explore how community can re-shape experiences by...

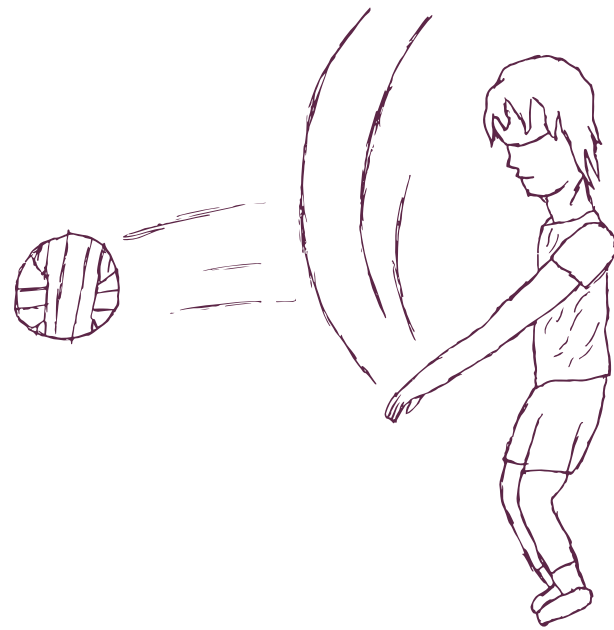
- Fostering neighbourhood connections, group activities, and street play
- Enabling inter-generational whānau play
- Supporting parents and caregivers to understand the value of play and equipping them to play well.

Allow nature to play beside you by...

- Encouraging children to become kaitiaki/protectors of green spaces
- Investing in natural material based playgrounds
- Using urban design to support and enable accessible play everywhere, including opportunities everywhere to ‘play on the way’.

Welcoming child-centric play by...

- Removing adult directives and pressures around goals and success
- Fostering happy and fun memories
- Encouraging independent and free play.



Questions

Our participants also left us with some questions:

Technology and play - how do they come together in a shared future?

- Is the future online?
- How do we work with the media and its influences to support healthy play?
- Will the generations of the future experience the joys of the past through VR?
- Can there be a balance between technology and outside play?

Indigenising our play for the future - tākaro time

- How can systemic changes in school and education systems support new ways to play and bring in Māori history?
- How can pedagogy around play as learning and essential to well-being be located within a Te Ao Māori context?
- How can we return to old ways of being and find new ways of doing things through play?

Opportunities

An analysis of the discussions suggest there are some significant opportunities to enhance, support and develop play in the Greater Wellington Region.

In the short term, these could include:

- Bringing communities and play champions together to consider next steps towards local implementation of these recommendations
- Collaboratively mapping various activities and programmes that currently exist in each area to better identify gaps in provision.

In the longer term, these could include:

- Creating content that educates the widest range of people about the power of play
- Developing play ‘trailers’ to spread the word at existing social and community events about current play activities
- Initiating pop-up play sessions to expose not only children and rangatahi but also their families to the value of play
- Working with teachers to explore ways in which play in education can be amplified, translating research into tangible actions and programmes.

Unique Aspects of Play in Te Upoko o Te Ika a Māui



Kāpiti Coast



Porirua

Wellington

Lower Hutt

Upper Hutt

Masterton

Carterton

South Wairarapa

Te Papa is so cool, the exhibitions are always changing. You could see mummies one day from Egypt and then the next time there are ancient terracotta warriors from China!

Both my sons love “route-planning” play for example, connecting tracks, roads, train tracks, hotels, etc. so we can play on the way!

We live in a diverse economic entity, more expansive than the rest of Wellington, we should be making the most of play

We can walk to 4 playgrounds from my house, and there are also so many cycle paths!

Our ngahere, our awa and the big green open spaces make this place like no other!”

It’s so awesome we have a bike park and even better that there’s free rides and bike sharing!

Let’s allow our kids to find what sparks their interest rather than constantly interfering



It’s been amazing watching the birds coming back, Zealandia has a 500 year plan and can’t wait to see what the next few years bring!

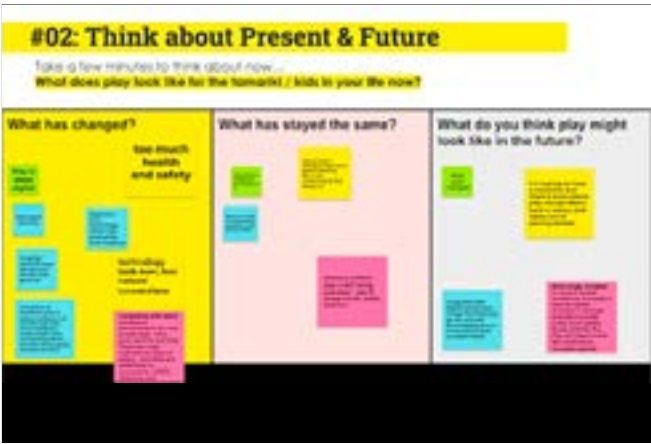
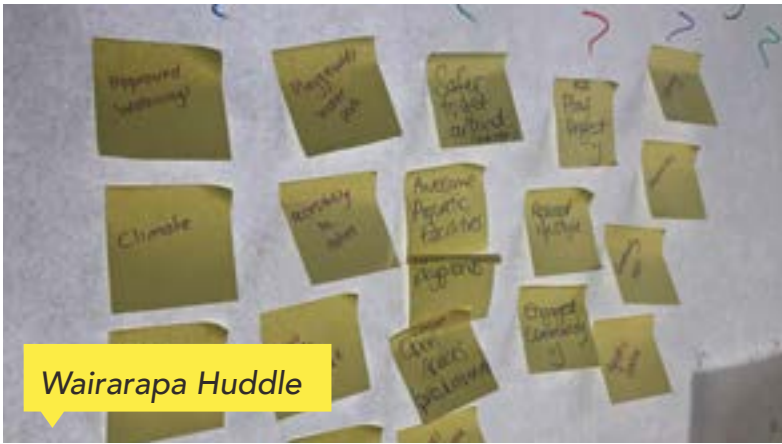
Our Process

Building on a successful collaboration exploring the state of play in Ōtautahi Christchurch, Murihiku Southland, Whanganui, Te Tairāwhiti Gisborne, and Bay of Plenty, Innovation Unit was commissioned by Sport New Zealand Ihi Aotearoa to take the Power of Play process to Te Upoko o Te Ika a Māui.

In June 2022, four workshops, known as Play Huddles, were held across the region encompassing Wairarapa, Kāpiti, the Hutt Valley and Wellington City. The participants were stakeholders from across local council, education, health and community sectors, recruited via the networks of the Wellington region’s Regional Sports Trust, Nuku Ora. There was also the option of a digital Play Huddle to capture voices and perspectives from those unable to attend in person. Further details can be found in Appendix 1.

At each Huddle, participants were invited to reflect on their own personal experiences of play, before considering the state of play more generally, and current opportunities and challenges for play in their local area. Key points of discussions were captured by facilitators, participants and dedicated notetakers. Following the Huddles, a series of ‘deep dive’ interviews were conducted with 8-12 whānau from each of the four areas. This included a playful interactive ‘Jamboard’ activity for tamariki. A full outline of the Huddle and interview process can be found in Appendix 2.

At the end of this process, the information generated in the Huddles and interviews was combined and analysed using a Reflexive Thematic Analysis framework. Findings were synthesised into the insights summarised in this report.



References:

1. International Play Association. IPA Declaration on the Importance of Play. 2014. Retrieved from <https://ipaworld.org/ipa-declaration-on-the-importance-of-play/> (4 March 2022).

2. Play Wales / Chwarae Cymru. Play deprivation. Retrieved from <https://www.playwales.org.uk/eng/playdeprivation> (4 March 2022).



Image by Dianna Thomson

Glossary:

Definitions have been sourced from Te Aka Māori Dictionary: <https://maoridictionary.co.nz/>

Awa:	river, stream, creek, canal, gully, gorge, groove, furrow.
Kai:	food, meal.
Kaitiaki:	trustee, minder, guard, custodian, guardian, caregiver, keeper, steward.
Kaupapa:	topic, policy, matter for discussion, plan, purpose, scheme, proposal, agenda, subject, programme, theme, issue, initiative.
Mātauranga:	knowledge, wisdom, understanding, skill.
Moko:	grandchild, grandchildren (shortened form of mokopuna)
Ngahere:	bush, forest.
Pākehā:	European, New Zealander of European descent.
Tākaro:	play, wrestle, sport, game, recreational activity.
Tamaiti:	child.
Tamariki:	children.
Taonga tākaro:	play, toy.
Te Ao Māori:	the Māori World.
Te Awa Kairangi:	Hutt River.
Te reo Māori:	the Māori language.
Te Upoko o Te Ika a Māui:	greater Wellington region.
Te Whanganui a Tara:	Wellington.
Tikanga:	correct procedure, custom, habit, lore, method, manner, rule, way, code, meaning, plan, practice, convention, protocol - the customary system of values and practices that have developed over time and are deeply embedded in the social context.
Whānau:	extended family, family group, a familiar term of address to a number of people - the primary economic unit of traditional Māori society. In the modern context the term is sometimes used to include friends who may not have any kinship ties to other members.
Whenua:	land, ground, country, nation, state.

Appendix 1:

HUDDLES	LOCAL	REGIONAL	NATIONAL
Wairarapa	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Kia Hakinakina• Planalytics• Martinborough Business Association	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Sport Manawatū• Nuku Ora• Wairarapa District Health Board• Hockey Wairarapa• Reap Wairarapa• Masterton District Council• Carterton District Council• South Wairarapa	Order of St John
Kāpiti Coast	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Paekakariki Bike Library• Kāpiti Families• Seaside Skates• EnviroSchools	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Kāpiti Coast District Council• Kāpiti Coast District Council Library• Nuku Ora	Barnardos Early Learning
Wellington Central	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Linden Community Centre• Boys and Girls Institute	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Wellington City Council• Wellington City Council Nairnville Rec Centre• Nuku Ora• Cricket Wellington• Y Central• Wellington City Housing	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Emerge Aotearoa• Bonobo NZ
Hutt Valley	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Fraser Crescent School• Best NZ Football Company• Wesley Rātā Village• Common Ground	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Nuku Ora• Hut City Council• Touch Rugby• Upper Hutt City Council	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Kainga Ora

Appendix 2:

Stakeholders Mapping for Wellington Region Power of Play Report.

The Wellington Region Power of Play stakeholders were identified together by Nuku Ora and Play Champions within the five Councils represented. Local, regional and national organisations were targeted for their participation in the Huddles by Nuku Ora and the Regional Play networks.



^[2] Jamboard showing this process can be seen here https://jamboard.google.com/d/1E_RoP1Af56Zx34ge5lmZc3XtFWPDbcClv4_h5gQSTiI/viewer?f=3

