

Every Child's Play Matters

The new Secretary of State for Children, Schools and Families, Ed Balls, on July 18 gave his first major public speech on Every Child Matters at an event hosted by the National Children's Bureau.

The importance of play was mentioned in his opening sentences as was the announcement that both the Department For Children, Schools And Families and Department For Culture, Media And Sport would share responsibility. Addressing the audience he acknowledged that, '...play – one of your recent campaigning priorities - is a central part of any happy childhood and essential to learning and development ...'.

The event saw the launch of a major consultation 'Staying Safe', and in his introduction he emphasised that 'We cannot wrap children in cotton wool – this is not protecting children. It denies them vital opportunities to learn and develop. It stunts their independence and will impede on their abilities to navigate risks for themselves as they grow up.'

This is a very positive message for the play sector, especially as the document's introduction states that 'Through playing and doing positive activities, children and young people can learn to understand better the opportunities and challenges in the world around them, and how to stay safe.' The play sector needs to respond en masse to this consultation to ensure the positive impact of risk and play are fed into mainstream policy decisions.

Play was mentioned a number of times in the speech, but no commitments in terms of policy or funding were announced. 'Quality Training, Quality Play', SkillsActive's UK Playwork Strategy calls for government to recognise playwork as a profession, and Chris Martin, SkillsActive Policy Programme Manager proposed that the time was now ripe for a government play policy and strategy, and asked if there were any plans for these. This question was warmly received by delegates but unfortunately the Secretary was ushered away to the House for a vote before giving a reply to this and many other questions.

Much of the speech and many of the questions centred on education, schools, and poverty, although disabled children, access to services, obesity and the family were also featured. The Secretary did seem a little unsure that playing outside in the rain was sensible at school break times, but came across as realistic and committed to the children's agenda. He also declared that he was excited about the children's play agenda, which is the most positive utterance on play from a Secretary of State since Chris Smith promised the sector £200m. SkillsActive looks forward to working with the both departments to professionalise and upskill the playwork workforce.

For further information see:

<http://www.skillsactive.com/resources/news/every-child-matters-a-straightforward-but-ambitious-mission>

Staying Safe consultation:

<http://www.dfes.gov.uk/consultations/>