



# The Outdoor Play and Learning (OPAL) Primary Programme

Supporting school improvement through better play and playtimes







## What do people say about OPAL?

### Ofsted

"The school's work to promote pupils' personal development and welfare is outstanding. The playground is a hive of activities and no one is left out. Pupils support one another when someone is hurt and the high level of integration cuts across age group and ethnicity. Pupils are extremely proud of their OPAL (outdoor play and learning), which they contributed to developing. They see OPAL as an integral part of their school, a development that was justly given a platinum award for inventiveness."

**Kender Primary Ofsted (2016)**

### Headteacher

"We have a strategy and a plan. OPAL has provided our children with really high-quality play and they love it. Teachers love it because they are getting 10-15 minutes more teaching time a day. The TA's love it because their working conditions have far improved. We have had numerous comments from parents saying "Thank you...my child enjoys playtimes so much more now."

**Dan Rodeck, Head Filton Avenue Primary, Bristol (2020)**

### APPG parliamentary report

**Recommendations** "Training in play to become a part of standard teacher training, including a baseline gap assessment tool such as that provided by OPAL."

**All Party Parliamentary Group on Fit and Healthy Childhood (2015)**

*I have been in education for 15 years, and by a long way this is the most successful and rewarding project I have ever been involved with.*  
**Andrew Lynham, Headteacher, Bailey's Court Primary School, Bristol**



## The OPAL Primary Programme...

Children in British primary schools spend 20% – or 1.4 years – of their school attendance in play, yet many schools have no strategic or values-based approach to play across all ages.

The Outdoor Play and Learning (OPAL) Primary Programme is a mentor-supported school improvement programme. It addresses all of the areas schools must plan for if they want to strategically and sustainably improve the quality of their play opportunities.

The OPAL Primary Programme is the only programme of its kind that has been independently proven to sustainably improve the quality of play in British primary schools.

Research shows that play contributes to children's physical and emotional health, wellbeing, approach to learning and enjoyment of school. Given the importance of play in children's lives and current concerns about children's health and opportunity to access time and space to initiate their own play outdoors, there are considerable benefits for children, parents, schools, and the wider community from participating in OPAL's programme. The OPAL Primary Programme supports schools in developing a cultural shift in thinking about and supporting children's play. Its success comes from a series of interrelated actions undertaken with the specialist support from the 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 and – at best – spectacular and show progress even in more challenging school environments.

*Children attend primary school for seven years. Of those seven years, around 1.4 years will be spent outside actively playing, making 'playtime' by far the most dominant element within the curriculum. Unlike sport and PE lessons, children's active play can claim 100% engagement, provided it is delivered with the right expertise, consistency and understanding of children's social, emotional and environmental needs.*





## What is OPAL?

Outdoor Play and Learning (OPAL) is a community interest company (CIC) dedicated to providing services to schools and organisations in England and Wales to improve the quality of play opportunities for all children. OPAL staff have expertise in teaching, school improvement, landscape design, project management, play and strategic planning.

The OPAL Primary Programme offers schools a structured process, with mentored support provided for up to two years and many resources, to enable schools to permanently change both their environment and their culture to enable provision of amazing playtimes every day.

To date, OPAL has run programmes in over 1000 schools throughout the whole UK and has recently expanded to Spain, France, Poland, Canada, Malaysia, New Zealand and Australia.

## Q: What are the benefits of the OPAL Primary Programme?

### More teaching time

Most schools report 10 minutes more teaching time per teacher with happier, more creative, and well exercised children who settle to classes much more quickly.

### Improved behaviour

OPAL schools report an 80% reduction in the use of behaviour policies and a 90% reduction in senior leadership time being spent resolving playtime issues.

### Faster core skills development

Children at OPAL schools rapidly develop creativity, imagination, cooperation, resilience, stamina and confidence.

### Inclusion

OPAL's approach makes play better for every child, every day... no exceptions!

### Happiness and wellbeing

Play is a human need and a human right. Children and staff at OPAL schools report feeling less stressed, happier, and more excited about school.



## Q: Is it right for my school?

**The programme works in all kinds of schools regardless of the amount or quality of outside space available. OPAL has clients in central London and in tiny rural villages. It has worked well in special schools and pupil referral units.**

The OPAL Primary Programme was developed in response to demand from schools for help in resolving issues at playtime (including boredom), high levels of accidents and playground incidents, lack of respect for supervisors and a constant stream of low-level behaviour problems, as well as a desire to improve the quality of children's play experiences in school, and a desire by school leaders to pursue excellence in all areas of schools' performance.

The programme was conceived and developed by Michael Follett (more than 10 years ago) while working as a school improvement advisor within South Gloucestershire Council's Learning and School Effectiveness team, building on his experience as a playworker, teacher and play strategy officer.

Testing of the programme (over several years) in around 70% of South Gloucestershire's primary schools provided the evidence that the only effective and sustainable way to improve play for the majority of the children is through long-term cultural change within schools. As a result, each segment of the OPAL programme has been developed to meet a different stage in the journey of this culture change.

## Q: What does the OPAL Programme involve?

**The OPAL programme comprises eight mentor-supported, structured sessions, spread over 18-24 months.**

These sessions are:

- Introduction and audit meeting;
- Development meeting 1;
- Development meeting 2;
- Development meeting 3;
- INSET on play;
- Grounds master planning workshop;
- Parents meeting;
- Award audit and final plan meeting;
- Certificate presentation.

The process starts with a structured audit carried out by the mentor and the school together. The audit covers 18 critical cultural and environmental conditions which affect the quality of children's play. This is followed by an INSET day which informs the whole-school community of the programme and brings together their agreed values and principles to form a play policy.

OPAL uses a development tool which allows the school and the mentors to work out a detailed play policy, strategy and action plan individually tailored to the specific needs of the school. This is followed by development meetings, and email/phone support, held throughout the year, to support the school in embedding their plans and implementing them.

Meetings are also held to inform parents of the changes the school will undertake to improve play and to form a long-term plan on how to improve school grounds to increase play opportunities. The final meeting in the programme is the OPAL award audit, where progress is mapped, award status of silver, gold or platinum is agreed and the next development phase is planned.

The OPAL Primary Programme requires 100% dedication from the headteacher and governors to see the programme through and make it permanently sustained within the culture of the school. Experience has shown that the programme will inevitably fail without the ongoing commitment of the headteacher, the senior leadership, and the play working group.

## Q: Has it been independently verified?

An independent evaluation of OPAL was commissioned by Play England and carried out by academics Drs Wendy Russell and Stuart Lester from Gloucester University and Dr Owain Jones from the University of West of England in 2011. This demonstrated the effectiveness of OPAL and established the benefits for schools from participating in the OPAL Primary Programme.

The report 'Supporting School Improvement Through Play' can be downloaded for free from, [here](#).

In 2015, a report on play by the All Party Parliamentary Group (APPG), on childhood, cited OPAL four times as good practice and in 2018 OPAL won first place in the European Schools Moving Together Awards. In addition, in 2018 and 2020, Ryerson University in Toronto published research showing how OPAL improved happiness and wellbeing in Canadian school children. In 2020, Sport England awarded us £250,000 to enable us to expand our reach to many more schools.

## Q: What about money?

Schools can use the Sports and Pupil Premiums. Small schools may split payment over two financial years. Please check the OPAL website for the programme cost. Changes produced by OPAL are not exclusively reliant on large capital investment and instead encourage creativity and responsiveness to local conditions and needs. OPAL mentors can enable schools to ensure maximum long-term play value from any investments in play. Cost per child is minimal as the programme impacts every child in the school.





## Q: What about Ofsted and health and safety?

The OPAL Primary Programme has been shown to support behavioural and inclusion improvements as well as more general wellbeing. Many of the highest Platinum Award level OPAL schools are also Ofsted Outstanding rated schools. OPAL helps schools deliver a clear vision, and planned approach for a better childhood and future for all children in line with the 2023 Ofsted inspection framework.

*"I'm not sure some of our parents will be comfortable with their children being exposed to risky experiences."* Ultimately, the headteacher has to decide whether their school exists to provide a fully rounded education, and to make sure every child gains the developmental experiences that everyone needs but isn't getting from home life anymore. OPAL mentors have excellent knowledge of current Health and Safety Executive guidance on children's play, and they empower schools to use this advice to support a risk-benefit approach to health and safety.

## Q: Why do we need to teach children to play?

We don't! The programme works because it is targeted predominantly at the adult staff at the school and focuses on values, strategy, planning, staffing, design and resourcing, not directly at the children, though there is always an element of interaction throughout the programme.

OPAL is founded on the principles and values of playwork, where the role of the adults is to understand, celebrate, resource, nurture and support the play process.

OPAL will support your school to create a play team of support staff who will apply the playwork principles to the oversight of play.

## How do I get in touch?

**OPAL has helped make play better in hundreds of primary schools and early years settings. Our experienced team of OPAL Mentors will be able to help you create happier playtimes, design better play spaces and enable staff to support wonderful play.**

If you would like more information, would like a virtual introductory meeting or want us to come out and talk to you then please contact us via our website.

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