



The Future of Play in Western Australia

*Key Stakeholder Community Consultation Report:
Exploring the Drivers, Enablers and Barriers to Play*

&

Priorities for a WA Play Strategy

August 2026





FOREWORD

The Play Matters Collective (PMC) is committed to advancing a shared vision for play across Western Australia (WA) to ensure that every child has the time, space, freedom, and opportunity to play. The PMC advocates for the promotion and protection of children's right to play through the development and implementation of a government-led *WA Play Strategy*. The PMC gratefully acknowledges the ongoing support of the Commissioner for Children and Young People, Dr Jacqueline McGowan-Jones, Patron of the PMC Collective (2024-).

On 11 June 2025, during the PMC's International Day of Play event, the Hon. Minister Sabine Winton announced that the Western Australian Government would develop a WA Play Strategy, marking a significant milestone following more than a decade of advocacy by children, families, educators, and community organisations. In 2026, at the same annual event, Minister Winton announced that the Office of Early Childhood would lead the Strategy's development, supported by a *WA Play Strategy Advisory Committee* of twelve experts in early childhood, play, health, education, and child development.

To complement the Advisory Committee's work, the PMC convened a WA Play Strategy Roundtable Community Consultation on 20 August 2026. Hosted by the Australian Institute of Management WA (AIM WA) and facilitated by Dr Shaun Ridley, the consultation brought together twenty representative organisations from government, education, health, academia, local government, community organisations, and the care sector. Answering four key questions, participants identified priorities and proposed practical actions to ensure every child can thrive through play in WA. Discussions reaffirmed play as fundamental to children's health, wellbeing, learning, development, creativity, and social connection, while highlighting the need for a coordinated, whole-of-government approach to strengthen community awareness, support families, inform policy, and protect children's right to play.

This report summarises the key themes from the consultation to help inform the State government's development of a WA Play Strategy. The PMC sincerely thanks all participants for their expertise and commitment to creating a future where play is recognised as an essential foundation for healthy childhoods, thriving communities, and lifelong wellbeing.

Acknowledged and Submitted by:
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Chairperson Play Matters Collective

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'S. Hesterman'.

Date: 27 August 2026

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1..0 FIRST QUESTION:

IF 'A PLAY STRATEGY' IS THE ANSWER...WHAT IS THE QUESTION?

This focus question explored the fundamental questions that a WA Play Strategy is intended to address. Discussions centred on changing attitudes towards play, protecting children's rights, supporting children's development, mobilising communities, and influencing policy and decision-making.

1.1 Changing Attitudes Towards Play

Participants reflected on the need to transform community perceptions of play and strengthen public understanding of its importance to children's lives. Key questions included:

- How do we change attitudes towards play?
- How do we raise awareness of the critical importance of play?
- How do we help society understand that children need play just as much as they need food, sleep, and connection?
- How do we value childhood in a rapidly changing world?

1.2 Protecting Children's Right to Play

Participants identified the need to strengthen and safeguard children's access to play opportunities through policy, practice and community support. Questions included:

- How do we ensure children have the time, space, and permission they need to play?
- How do we give children full permission to play in the ways they choose?
- How do we safeguard every child's right to play?
- How can we integrate play back into all aspects of children's lives and ensure they have equitable access to play opportunities?

Key messages:

- *Avoid the 'risk averse' adult mindset influencing play*
- *If we don't make this a law ... then we can talk about the rights of children, all day ... but nothing will change.*
- *There is a sense that childhood, as we traditionally understand it, is disappearing.*

1.3 Supporting Children's Development

Discussions highlighted the role of play in healthy development (mind and body) and the need for a coordinated approach across systems and settings. Participants considered:

- How can we support children's healthy development through play?
- What is currently missing from the environments, policies, and practices that support children and young people to play?

- How do we fill the gap of a unified, state-wide vision that protects play in everyday life and learning environments?

1.4 Mobilising Communities

Participants explored how families and communities can become active partners in supporting play:

- How do we involve parents, families, and communities in raising awareness about the importance of play?
- How do we honour children as the experts of play?
- How do we make time for play, even when it gets messy?

1.5 Influencing Policy and Decision-Making

Participants recognised the importance of advocacy and policy leadership to drive change. Key questions included:

- What actionable framework can guide decision-makers, local councils, educators, and communities?
- How do we advocate effectively for play?
- How do we communicate the right messages to decision-makers about where play-related decisions are made?
- What levers are needed to elevate play's importance within government?
- How do we elevate play with the Premier and Cabinet?
- What is the top advocacy priority for play in Western Australia?
- What strategic roadmap will increase and sustain play opportunities across the state?

1.6 The Big Question

The overarching question emerging from this discussion was:

How do we strategically drive action so that every child in Western Australia has the time, space, freedom, and support to play?

2.0 SECOND QUESTION: WHAT ARE THE TOP HALF DOZEN THINGS WE MUST GET RIGHT FOR THE PLAY STRATEGY TO SUCCEED?

Participants identified six critical success factors necessary for the successful development, implementation and sustainability of a WA Play Strategy.

2.1 Establish a Shared Definition of Play

Participants expressed the need for a common understanding of play across sectors and communities. Key considerations included:

- Clearly articulate what play is and what it looks like- in all its forms [genres].
- Develop simple, consistent language that everyone can understand.
- Create a common understanding across government, education, health, community organisations, and families.

Key Messages

- *If we cannot define play, we cannot protect it. Defining play is a complex issue.*
- *From a child's perspective, the definition of play may simply be "fun."*
- *We need early support for families to understand what play means.*

2.2 Make the Case with Evidence

Participants highlighted the need to underpin the strategy with robust evidence and reliable data.

Key considerations included:

- Building a strong evidence base from research and practice.
- Collecting meaningful data and identifying what should be measured.
- Showcasing exemplars of best practice across Western Australia and beyond.
- Presenting research in accessible ways for communities and decision-makers.

Key Messages

- *Evidence turns play from a "nice to have" into a policy priority.*
- *Children need to be actively considered and included throughout the process.*
- *Use simple shared language to communicate powerful message; for example, Slip-Slop Slap' public health campaign promoting sun protection.*
- *Make research 'digestible' to inform communities.*

2.3 Create a Community Movement

Participants stressed that success depends on broad community ownership and support.

Discussion focused on:

- Raising awareness of the value of play.
- Promoting a clear and memorable public message.
- Supporting parents and caregivers from the earliest years.
- Helping adults understand the importance of both free play and guided play.

Key Message

- *Play succeeds when communities value it, not just professionals.*

2.4 Protect Play Through Policy

Participants identified policy alignment and legislative support as critical enablers.

Priorities included:

- Ensuring play is recognised across local, state, and federal policies.
- Aligning the strategy with existing frameworks, curricula, and government priorities.
- Establishing benchmarks, standards, and accountability measures.
- Considering legislative protections that uphold children's right to play.

Key Messages

- *What gets protected gets prioritised.*
- *Legislative mandate: ensure play is legally protected not just aspirational.*
- *Need regulations and benchmarks to ensure sufficient access to quality play.*

2.5 Put Children at the Centre

Participants consistently reinforced that children's perspectives must be central to the strategy.

Non-Negotiables

- ◆ Children's voices
- ◆ Evidence-based action
- ◆ Cultural responsiveness
- ◆ Equity and inclusion

◆ Genuine participation

Participants emphasised that children should not simply be beneficiaries of the strategy.

“They [children] must help shape it.”

Key Message

- *What gets protected gets prioritised.*

2.6 Focus on Implementation

Participants noted the importance of moving beyond aspirations to practical action.

Key priorities included:

- Strengthening educator preparation and professional learning.
- Reviewing and enhancing Early Childhood Education qualifications.
- Modelling and demonstrating effective play practices.
- Securing long-term funding commitments.
- Moving beyond strategy development to tangible action.

Key Messages

- *A strategy only matters if it changes children's everyday experiences.*
- *Consider whether children feel that they belong, are heard and are valued members of their communities.*

2.7 Closing Challenge

Participants reflected on the responsibilities of governments, institutions and communities in supporting children's right to play.

If every child has a right to play, then every decision-maker has a responsibility to protect it.

The discussion highlighted that the central question is no longer:

"Why do children need play?"

The evidence already answers that question.

Instead, participants challenged stakeholders to consider:

"What are we prepared to do to ensure every child can play?"

3.0 THIRD QUESTION: WHAT FIVE QUESTIONS WOULD YOU ASK IN FIVE YEARS TIME TO DETERMINE IF THE PLAY STRATEGY HAD BEEN A SUCCESS?

Participants identified a series of evaluation questions and indicators that could be used to assess the impact of the Play Strategy over its first five years.

3.1 Has Play Become a Government Priority?

Evaluation questions included:

- Has dedicated funding been committed to play initiatives?
- What level of investment can be directly attributed to the Strategy?
- Has legislation, regulation, or policy changed to protect and promote play?
- Is there bipartisan political support for play across election cycles and party platforms?

Success Indicator

Play is embedded in policy, funding, and decision-making across government.

3.2 Are More Children Playing More Often?

Evaluation questions included:

- Has children's self-reported level of play increased since 2026?
- Can we observe more children playing in local communities and public spaces?
- Have impact assessments demonstrated increased opportunities for play?
- Has access to play improved for all children?

Success Indicator

Children report and experience more time, freedom, and opportunity to play.

3.3 Has Community Understanding of Play Changed?

Evaluation questions included:

- Do parents and caregivers better understand children's right to play?
- Has public awareness of the value of play increased?
- Are caregivers receiving clear and consistent messages about the importance of play?
- Do community perception indicators show positive change?

Success Indicator

Play is recognised as essential to children's wellbeing and development.

Key Message

- *Honouring children as “experts of play”, listening to their perspectives (that includes screentime / digital play).*

3.4 Has Play Been Embedded Across Systems?

Evaluation questions included:

- Has the Play Strategy been implemented across Western Australia?
- Have other government policies been influenced by or aligned with the Strategy?
- Are government portfolios considering play when developing policy?
- Are pre-service teachers experiencing play-based approaches during their practicums?

Success Indicator

Play is considered across education, health, planning, recreation and community policy.

Key Messages

- *Play-based learning is disappearing in schools.*
- *Are parents aware that children have a right to play?*
- *Does the strategy -funding and legislation -have bipartisan support?*

3.5 Are Children Thriving?

Evaluation questions included:

- Have indicators of children's health and wellbeing improved?
- Have AEDC outcomes shown positive change?
- Have resilience, wellbeing and social connectedness increased?
- Do children report positive experiences of play and belonging?

Success Indicator

Children are healthier, happier, more connected, and better supported through play.

3.6 Five years from now: what would success look like?

Participants agreed that success should not be measured by the production of a strategy document, but by the impact the strategy has on children's lives.

Success would be evidenced through:

- ◆ Government commitment
- ◆ More play
- ◆ Community understanding
- ◆ System-wide implementation
- ◆ Improved child wellbeing

3.7 Concluding Reflection

Instead of measuring whether we produced a strategy, we measure whether we changed children's lives.

4.0 **FOURTH QUESTION: WHAT HEADLINE WOULD YOU LIKE TO READ ON 7TH AUGUST 2031?**

As part of the consultation process, participants were invited to imagine a future in which the WA Play Strategy had achieved its intended outcomes. They were asked:

What Headline Would You Like to Read on 7th August 2031?



The fourth vision headline generated by participants reflected aspirations for significant social, educational and wellbeing outcomes.

4.1 NAPLAN OUTPLAYED



"A fresh perspective on education is putting creativity and play at the centre."

This headline reflects a vision in which educational success is no longer narrowly defined by testing outcomes, but by a broader understanding of children's development and wellbeing.

4.2. ZERO CHILD SUICIDES IN 2031



"A bold national goal uniting communities to protect and support every child."

Participants highlighted the importance of children's mental health, wellbeing, belonging and connection. This headline represents an aspirational commitment to ensuring that every child is supported to thrive.

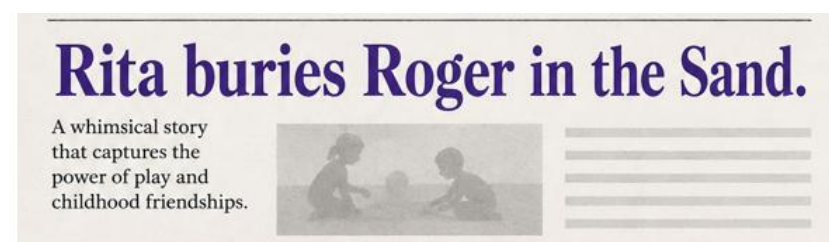
4.3 WA THE MOST PLAYFUL STATE



"A vision for Western Australia to lead the way in valuing play, joy and imagination for all."

This headline reflects a collective ambition for Western Australia to become a recognised leader in children's play; positioning play as essential infrastructure for healthy communities and childhood development.

4.4 RITA BURIES ROGER IN THE SAND



"A whimsical story that captures the power of play and childhood friendships."

The headline celebrates friendship, connection, cooperation, and shared experiences. It highlights that play is often about being with others and building relationships.

Participants noted that success would also be evident in everyday moments of childhood joy, imagination, social connection and unstructured play experiences.

4.5 Vision Reflection

The newspaper activity reveals that participants' aspirations extend far beyond increasing opportunities for play. They envision a future where:

- Play is recognised as fundamental to childhood.
- Children experience improved wellbeing and stronger social connections.
- Families and communities value play as an essential part of everyday life.
- Education systems place creativity, curiosity and play at the centre of learning.
- Government policy actively protects and promotes children's right to play.
- Western Australia becomes a recognised leader in creating playful communities.

4.6 Key Message

- *The ultimate measure of success is not whether a Play Strategy exists, but whether children's lives, opportunities, wellbeing and experiences of play have meaningfully improved by 7th August 2031.*

5.0 OVERALL CONSULTATION REFLECTION

Across all four focus areas, participants consistently articulated a vision for Western Australia in which play is recognised, protected and promoted as a fundamental part of childhood. The discussions highlighted that a successful WA Play Strategy must move beyond advocacy and aspiration to influence policy, practice, community attitudes and lived experiences.

Collectively, participants identified a clear ambition: to create a Western Australia where every child has the time, space, freedom and support to play, and where the benefits of play are embedded across families, communities, education systems and government decision-making.

The recurring message throughout the consultation was that play is not merely an activity, but a fundamental contributor to children's wellbeing, development, belonging and lifelong success.

*Representation of Western Australian Community Stakeholders
at the Play Matters Collective Roundtable Consultation:*

Association of Independent Schools of WA

Carewest

Catholic Education WA

Child Australia

City of Bayswater

City of Victoria Park

Clifton Hills Primary School

Commissioner for Children and Young People (Personnel)

Communicare

Department of Education (Statewide Services)

Department of Sports

Healthway

Ngala

OMEP Australia

Out of School Hours Care (OSHC)

Play Matters Collective

State Schools Teachers' Union

Valuing Children's Initiative

WA State Public Library (Better Beginnings Program)

West Australian Teachers of English as a Second Language

*Observers: UWA McCusker Centre for Citizenship and the Western Australian
Department of Premier and Cabinet Office of Early Childhood*

