**The OPAL Play Project at Ladysmith Infant and Nursery School**

**What’s so important about play?**

“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” Outdoor Play and Learning: The OPAL Primary Programme.

Did you know our children spend 20% of their time at school playing?

Play is an important part of how children learn. With the right environment, resources and attitudes, play helps children to learn creativity, expand their imagination, get exercise, learn team work, try practical experiments, discover more about their bodies, find out about the planet and get along socially.

Sadly, for many reasons children’s opportunities for play during childhood have reduced over the last 20 years.

At Ladysmith Federation we recognise the critical importance of play to children’s development and learning. We want to improve playtimes and give children more opportunities for exploration, for different types of play and for safe risk-taking.

Play should be ***freely chosen, self directed and intrinsically motivated***.

Children know how to play. If we provide the right environment and materials for play, children will do the rest. Children are endlessly inventive.

**What is the OPAL Play Project?**

Ladysmith Schools Federation aims to improve the play environment for children and help them make the most of their play times.

Thanks to funding from Ladysmith’s Children, Parents, Teachers Together (CPTT), the Infant School has embarked on the Outdoor Play and Learning (OPAL) Primary Programme. This is a mentor supported school improvement programme, which addresses all of the areas the school must plan for to strategically and sustainably improve the quality of play opportunities. OPAL has successfully worked with 100s of primary schools across Britain, helping them to improve the quality of play. For more information about OPAL’s work see their website: <http://outdoorplayandlearning.org.uk/>

As part of the OPAL Play Project the Infant School has completed an audit of how the school currently supports play times. The audit considers a whole range of issues from leadership and planning, to staffing, access and inclusion, care and maintenance of the site and the value given to different play opportunities. Based on the audit of play an action plan has been developed for the Infant School.

Our key aims and actions so far include:

**Developing clear leadership and policies supporting play**

* Federation governors and Infant School leadership have designated member to lead play development
* A Ladysmith Federation Play Policy has been drafted.

**Developing access to a greater range of play opportunities**

* Freedom Fridays have been introduced, removing restrictions of where children can play. Reception and Year 1 children can now choose to explore the Year 2 playgrounds, while Year 2 can return to their favourite places in the Reception and Year 1 playgrounds. Developing this change with help from the School Council, the school hopes to eventually roll out Freedom Fridays for the rest of the week.
* The school will be working towards opening up the Forest School area for use during play times, giving children greater access to the beautiful natural areas provided here
* The school will be developing remaining playground areas to incorporate a greater diversity of play opportunities, starting with offering more loose parts to play with and working towards different surfaces, including sand!
* The barriers surrounding the balance trails will be removed over the summer holidays, allowing open access to this play equipment

**Developing play time staff capacity to support children’s play**

* All staff will have a play focused training day in September
* Mealtime assistants will take on new roles within a Play Team with support from school leadership and a new play coordinator

**Continually learning from our experiences and celebrating our successes**

* With support from a new play coordinator, the Play Team will continually learn from and develop their work to develop play
* The school will regularly update parents on the Play Project via the weekly newsletters
* The school will regularly celebrate play during assemblies

**Who is involved in the Play Project?**

The Play Project is led by the Infant Head Emma Brown with support from a steering group, which includes representation from teachers, mealtime assistants, the grounds caretaker, governors and parents.

All children in the school have been consulted to find out more about their views of play and play times. Their views and experiences are critical and will continue to provide input in developing play. Children on the School Council have been involved in further detailed discussions and will continue to play a role in giving feedback and ideas to help develop play.

**How can parents and carers be involved?**

The success of the Play Project also depends on the support or parents and carers. Please share with us your memories of play you enjoyed as a child and any ideas you have for developing play in the school in the future.

We are also seeking parent support with the following:

* Collecting loose parts for children to play with – currently we are gathering:
  + Hats, dressing-up clothes, hand bags
  + Large pieces of fabric
  + Old mobile phones, cameras, keyboards
* Make sure your child has a waterproof or warm coat and well boots
* Be dirt tolerant!
* Encourage creative play at home too

**What has parent feedback indicated so far?**

We asked parents for feedback at the CPTT Pop Up Café on June 14th in the Junior School Hall. This is what parents said:

92% of parents said **play is very important**

8% of parents said **play is not very important**

Parents’ happy memories of play included:

* My best place was to climb up the apple tree!
* Swimming
* Skipping around the playground singing "Let's go fly a kite"
* On the trampoline
* Swinging on railings
* Pretending to be puppies!
* Praying to a stick and making a den for it
* Water fights in the summer
* Doing handstands against the wall
* Rolling in the grass
* Dens & hides - lots of nature
* Building dens
* Football with air flows
* British bulldog
* Playing in the sand pit
* Making potions from petals and leaves!
* Making daisy chains on the school field
* Playing horses using skipping ropes as reins
* Crawling through long grass and making dens
* Making mud pies in the roots of a tree in the playground (using water collected in our mouths from the fountain)!
* Climbing and sitting on high (but not too high) trees!

If you would like to share your memories, opinions and ideas, please fill out the parent questionnaire and return it to the school office.