



Kingsway Primary School Outdoor Play and Learning (OPAL) Framework

1. Introduction and Purpose

At Kingsway, we believe that play is essential to children's wellbeing, learning and healthy development. Play enriches learning, supports emotional regulation, builds social and physical skills, and strengthens relationships across the school community. Play is not a "break from learning" - it is an integral part of how children make sense of the world.

This policy sets out our commitment to providing high-quality outdoor play opportunities through OPAL, ensuring that playtime is *safe, inclusive, enriching and aligned with our core values*:

- **We care about togetherness:** play builds community, cooperation and shared joy.
- **We thrive on difference:** all children have equitable access to play regardless of ability or background.
- **We are passionate about learning:** play enhances curiosity, creativity and critical thinking.
- **We are inspired to grow:** children learn resilience, independence and confidence through play.

This policy supports our whole-school behaviour and relational practice and outlines how we ensure play is meaningful and developmentally valuable for all learners.

2. What is OPAL?

OPAL (Outdoor Play and Learning) is a structured approach to improving play through whole-school culture change, better play spaces, richer equipment and play provision, and staff understanding of playwork principles. It supports happier playtimes, higher levels of physical activity, and improved wellbeing for every child.

Since beginning our OPAL journey, we are committed to developing a play culture that values every child's right to engaging, joyful outdoor play.

3. Importance of Play — Evidence and Rationale

Research and evaluation consistently show that high-quality play:

- **Improves wellbeing and joy** — children in OPAL settings self-report greater happiness and mental health benefits.

- **Supports social and emotional development**, including self-regulation and collaboration.
- **Encourages physical activity** for all children, not just the already sporty.
- **Builds confidence, resilience and creativity** — play is a “laboratory of life” where children practise real-world skills.
- **Transform school culture**, improving behaviour and relationships across age groups.

OPAL research shows positive shifts in behaviour, equity of engagement at playtimes, and stronger links between play and curriculum learning.

Play contributes to the development of executive functions — such as self-regulation, planning and adaptability — which underpin academic and lifelong learning.

4. Scope and Principles

This policy applies to **all pupils and staff** during playtimes and outdoor play-related learning. We uphold these guiding principles:

4.1 Play is a Child-Led, Child-Centred Experience

Children make choices, explore challenges, and decide how to play. Staff *facilitate, observe* and *support*, rather than *direct*, play experiences.

4.2 Inclusive and Accessible

All children, including those with additional needs or from diverse backgrounds, have opportunities to participate fully.

4.3 Play is Valued and Visible

Play is celebrated within the school community and referenced in assemblies, behaviour discussions and learning conversations.

4.4 Balanced Risk – Risk-Benefit Approach

We adopt a risk-benefit approach that recognises both the potential risks and the benefits of play activities. This means staff will identify real risks and minimise them where necessary but also ensure that children have access to challenging, developmentally-appropriate play. Accidents and “risky play” are understood as part of healthy development, learning risk management and resilience.

5. Health, Safety and Legal Framework

Our play provision aligns with relevant statutory guidance and legal responsibilities:

5.1 Health and Safety at Work etc. Act 1974

Under this Act, we have a duty to ensure health and safety “so far as is reasonably practicable”. This applies to play provision and grounds.

5.2 Risk Assessment and Management

Our approach uses risk-benefit assessment (RBA) rather than avoidance of all risk. This method balances the benefits of play challenges with appropriate controls — controlling real risks while allowing developmental opportunities.

5.3 HSE Play Safety Principles

We adopt the principles set out by the Health and Safety Executive (HSE) and Play Safety Forum, which state that play is essential for children's development and that fear of liability should not unnecessarily restrict play opportunities.

5.4 Reporting and Monitoring

Significant incidents or dangerous occurrences will be reported in line with RIDDOR requirements and local authority policies (as applicable).

6. Roles and Responsibilities

6.1 Leadership

The Headteacher and SLT will ensure play is a strategic priority, resourced appropriately, and embedded into whole-school planning.

6.2 Staff

All staff - teaching, support and lunchtime supervisors - are trained in the OPAL approach, playwork principles, and the risk-benefit model.

6.3 Children

Children are encouraged to contribute to planning play spaces, reflect on play quality, and co-construct boundaries that support safe play.

6.4 Parents and Governors

Our community is regularly informed about our play ethos and invited to engage with play improvement plans.

7. Monitoring, Review and Continuous Improvement

We will review this framework every 2 years to reflect evolving evidence, changes in play provision, and our progress on the OPAL journey. Feedback from children, staff and parents will inform improvements.

8. Framework Approval

This framework was shared with the Governing Board of Kingsway Primary School on 7th July 2026 will be reviewed in July 2028.

Appendix A: Risk–Benefit Assessment (RBA) and Behaviour Alignment

1. Play, Risk and a Relational Behaviour Approach

At **Kingsway Primary School**, playtime is a **key relational space**, not a break from our behaviour expectations or ethos. Our OPAL approach is fully aligned with our **relational behaviour policy**, recognising that:

- Behaviour is communication
- Relationships are the foundation for regulation and learning
- Children need opportunities to practise social skills, not just be told about them
- Adults hold responsibility for creating environments where children can succeed

Play provides a **real-world context** in which children learn to:

- manage emotions
- negotiate conflict
- assess and manage risk
- repair relationships
- build empathy and self-control

Rather than reducing behaviour incidents, OPAL seeks to **increase children’s capacity** to manage themselves and others through rich, meaningful play experiences.

2. How OPAL Play Supports Our Behaviour Policy

Togetherness

Play encourages shared experiences, collaboration and community identity. Mixed-age, open-ended play reduces exclusion and promotes belonging.

Behaviour alignment:

- Adults prioritise connection over control
- Conflict is seen as an opportunity for coaching and repair
- Children are supported to re-join play, not removed from it

Thriving on Difference

Play allows children to express individuality, culture, interests and strengths in ways the classroom cannot always provide.

Behaviour alignment:

- Differences in communication, regulation and play styles are accepted
- Adjustments are made to the environment rather than expecting children to “fit”

- SEND and neurodivergent children are supported through flexible provision

Passionate About Learning

Play is a powerful learning driver, supporting executive function, language development and problem-solving.

Behaviour alignment:

- Play is recognised as learning, not a reward
- Behaviour support focuses on skill-building rather than compliance
- Children learn cause, effect, consequence and responsibility through experience

Inspired to Grow

Risk, challenge and uncertainty help children build resilience and confidence.

Behaviour alignment:

- Mistakes are treated as learning opportunities
- Children are supported to reflect, repair and try again
- Adults model calm responses and emotional regulation

3. Why Risk–Benefit Assessment Supports Relational Practice

Traditional risk assessments focus on **eliminating risk**.

Risk–Benefit Assessments focus on **balancing safety with development**.

This mirrors our behaviour approach:

Relational Approach to Behaviour Policy	OPAL Risk Benefit Assessment
Regulation before consequence	Reflection before restriction
Adults guide, not punish	Adults scaffold, not control
Behaviour is communication	Risk-taking is learning
Repair relationships	Restore play

Using RBAs allows staff to:

- respond proportionately
- avoid blanket bans
- keep children included in play
- reduce escalations caused by unnecessary restrictions

This approach is supported by the **Health and Safety Executive**, which states that children *need* risk in play and that play provision should not be restricted through fear of liability.

4. Expanded Research Base: Why Play Matters

4.1 Play and Emotional Regulation

Research shows that play:

- supports the development of **self-regulation and emotional control**
- reduces stress and anxiety
- provides a safe outlet for big feelings

Key research describes play as essential for brain development and emotional wellbeing, particularly in supporting children to cope with stress and trauma.

Unstructured play has been shown to reduce cortisol (stress hormone) levels and improve mood and behaviour across the school day.

4.2 Play and Behaviour

Studies from OPAL schools consistently show:

- reductions in playground behaviour incidents
- fewer exclusions from play
- improved peer relationships
- calmer transitions back into class

This is because play:

- allows children to practise social rules in real contexts
- reduces frustration caused by boredom or lack of agency
- increases feelings of autonomy and competence

Children who feel **successful and trusted at play** are more likely to demonstrate positive behaviour across school.

4.3 Play and Learning

Neuroscience research shows that play:

- strengthens executive function (working memory, impulse control, flexible thinking)
- supports language development through talk, negotiation and storytelling
- improves concentration and engagement in formal learning

The **EEF** and **Development Matters** both recognise play as foundational to learning, particularly for younger children and those with additional needs.

4.4 Play, Risk and Resilience

Risky play (such as climbing, building, balancing and tool use):

- builds confidence and independence
- teaches children to assess danger realistically
- reduces risk-taking behaviours later in life

Children who are allowed to experience *managed* risk develop stronger judgement and are **less likely to take unsafe risks** in unsupervised contexts.

5. Risk–Benefit Assessment Template (Behaviour-Aligned)

(This replaces traditional risk assessments for play)

1. Play Activity / Feature:

2. Description of the Play Opportunity:

3. Developmental and Behavioural Benefits:

- ☐ Emotional regulation
- ☐ Social problem-solving
- ☐ Confidence and resilience
- ☐ Cooperation and communication
- ☐ Sense of belonging
- ☐ Independence and agency

4. Identified Hazards:

(Realistic and proportionate)

5. Risk Management (Without Removing Play):

- ☐ Adult presence and observation
- ☐ Clear shared expectations
- ☐ Relational reminders
- ☐ Teaching safe use through modelling
- ☐ Environmental adjustments

6. Adult Response Strategy:

How will adults respond if:

- emotions escalate

- conflict occurs
- risk increases

Adults prioritise calm, connection and coaching. Play is paused only when necessary and children are supported to re-enter play following repair.

7. Inclusion and Regulation Support:

- ☐ Sensory adjustments
- ☐ Flexible expectations
- ☐ Supported peer interaction
- ☐ Regulation support strategies

8. Review and Reflection:

- Date -
- Reviewed by -
- What worked well -
- What could be improved -

6. What This Looks Like in Practice:

- Staff **observe before intervening**
- Language focuses on **support and curiosity**, not blame
- Children are guided to **reflect and repair**, not excluded
- Play is stopped only when **risk outweighs benefit**
- Behaviour at playtime is addressed relationally, not punitively

Closing Statement

Our OPAL approach and Risk–Benefit Assessments are not separate from our behaviour policy; they are a **living expression of it**. By trusting children, supporting relationships and valuing play, we create a school where children feel safe, capable and inspired to grow.