



How to Evaluate Play Provision: a guide

The Play Evaluation Toolkit

Contents

1. About evaluating play-related interventions.....	3
1.1. <i>The challenges of evaluating play-related interventions</i>	4
2. The play evaluation cycle.....	5
3. The evaluation stages	5
3.1. <i>Audit</i>	5
3.2. <i>Outcomes development or selection</i>	6
3.3. <i>Tool design (surveys, assessments, etc)</i>	7
3.4. <i>Evaluation design</i>	8
3.5. <i>Sampling</i>	9
3.6. <i>Data collection</i>	10
3.7. <i>Analysis</i>	11
3.8. <i>Reporting</i>	13
Appendix 1 – A Play-Related Outcomes Framework.....	15
About Community Impact	16

How to cite this guide: Community Impact (2026) How to Evaluate Play Provision: A guide: The play evaluation toolkit

Copyright © 2026 Community Impact. All original written content, framework design, analytical text, outcome structures, and indicator systems contained in this publication are the intellectual property of Community Impact. This publication may not be reproduced, distributed, adapted, or used for commercial purposes without prior written permission from Community Impact. The cover image used in this publication was created using licensed Canva content and remains subject to Canva’s Content License Agreement and the rights of the original creators where applicable.

1. About evaluating play-related interventions

The aim of this guide is to support charities delivering play-related interventions to plan and carry out evaluations of their work. It is written for organisations that provide toys and games, create spaces and opportunities for play, run play activities, or provide toys and games for children and families to use at home. The guide explains the main stages involved in evaluating play provision, beginning with reviewing the information already held and the outcomes it wants to examine. It then moves through tool development, evaluation design, sampling, data collection, and analysis and reporting. Each stage builds on the one before it, so that decisions about what to measure and how to measure it are connected to the way the intervention is delivered in the different settings play takes place in.

Evaluating play-related interventions presents a particular challenge because play can take different forms and can be provided in very different settings. A play-related intervention might involve giving a child a toy or game to take home, making toys and materials available within a community space, providing open or freely chosen play, or running more structured play activities. Children may also take part just once, occasionally or regularly over a sustained period, while the resulting play may be directly observed by practitioners or take place elsewhere, particularly in the home.

These differences affect what play-related activity an organisation can feasibly measure and how. This guide is intended to support organisations to address some of the particular challenges involved in evaluating play-related interventions, including distinguishing the provision of toys and games from the play that follows; selecting outcomes that fit different types of play; deciding when observation, child self-report, parent or carer report, or practitioner evidence is most appropriate; and designing data collection around patterns of play that may be regular, intermittent or take place away from the organisation.

1.1. The challenges of evaluating play-related interventions

Play is a complex activity rather than a single, standardised intervention, and children can experience it in very different ways. The same toy, game or material may support exploratory, constructive, imaginative, social or other forms of play, while children may move between several play-types within the same play experience. Who they play with also matters – the same activity may take place alone, with other children, with a parent or carer, or with another adult, creating different opportunities for interaction, communication and shared activity.

This variation in the structure and aims of play inform which outcomes are relevant to the form of play. Different forms of play provide different opportunities for child development, while the same activity can create different experiences depending on whether children play alone, with peers, with parents or carers, or with another adult. Outcome selection therefore needs to reflect both the *type* of play an intervention enables and the *way* that play is experienced, rather than assuming that the same set of outcomes will be equally relevant across all forms of provision.

The structure of the play-related intervention is equally important. Provision may be one-off or ad hoc, open access with variable attendance, regular and ongoing, organised as a fixed programme with a defined start and end, provided for use at home, or combine centre-based and take-home play. Programme structure therefore affects how much exposure children have to play, whether practitioners can observe it, whether the same children can be followed over time, and when outcome data can realistically be collected.

2. The play evaluation cycle

Evaluations of social interventions like play programmes move through eight principle stages. The amount of work required at each stage will however depend on how developed an organisation's existing evaluation infrastructure is. For instance, an organisation with an outcomes framework, established data-collection tools and monitoring systems may already have some of the foundations in place, while an organisation with little existing evaluation activity may need to work through each stage in full. This guide assumes limited evaluation capacity.

3. The evaluation stages

The stages below assume that an organisation is starting from scratch and has access to the Play Outcomes Framework (*'A Play-Related Outcomes Framework'*) and the Play Tool Guide (*'Collecting Play-Related Impact Data: a guide'*). These guides provide the outcome structure and practical measurement resources needed to support the development of the evaluation. The eight stages are:

- Audit
- Outcomes development
- Tool design/selection
- Evaluation design
- Sampling
- Data collection
- Analysis
- Reporting

3.1. Audit

The audit stage establishes what data the organisation already has in relation to its play-related provision as well as what information is currently being collected. This includes the number of toys, games, materials, spaces or activities provided; the

numbers of children who use them; who the children and families are; how frequently they take part in the programme or service; and whether play happens within the service, at home or across both settings. It will also identify the main forms of play taking place and, where relevant, whether children usually play alone, with peers, with parents or carers, or with another adult. Bringing these sources together shows what data is already being consistently recorded, what can be used without collecting anything new, and where gaps remain. The audit therefore provides the practical foundation for the evaluation. An organisation may already have good information about how many toys it distributes or how many children attend a play setting, but much less information about what play actually takes place or what changes are observed. Identifying gaps early means that the later stages can build on existing processes.

3.2. Outcomes development or selection

This stage involves selecting the outcomes that are relevant to a play-related programme and defining the areas of change the programme aims to deliver. A play related outcomes framework is provided as part of this play evaluation toolkit. Not all play-related outcomes are equally relevant to all forms of play. A programme centred on constructive play, for example, may provide opportunities for problem-solving and creativity, while play involving other children or adults may also create opportunities for communication, cooperation and social interaction. An organisation therefore needs to identify the main forms of play within its provision, and who children usually play with, before deciding which outcomes are relevant to measure. The Play Outcomes Framework provides seven outcome areas that an organisation can pick from: social interaction and competence; self-regulation; cognitive development and problem-solving; communication and language; creativity and imagination; physical and motor development; and emotional wellbeing. An organisation does not need to measure all seven, and should select those that have a clear relationship to the play it provides and to the aims of the programme. Each outcome in the framework is linked to a set of indicators describing the behaviours, abilities or changes that would be

expected to happen if the outcome is being met. These indicators turn what are fairly broad impact areas into statements that can be observed and also inform the questions that can be asked in surveys. By the end of this stage, the organisation should have a defined set of outcomes and indicators that reflects the play taking place and gives the evaluation something clear to measure. The play outcomes framework provided below in Appendix 1.

3.3. Tool design (surveys, assessments, etc)

Once outcomes and indicators have been selected for a programme evaluation, the organisation needs to decide how evidence against them will be collected. Existing questionnaires, feedback forms, observation records and case-management fields can first be reviewed against the selected outcomes to establish whether they already provide the data needed. However, organisations can also design their own questionnaires using the indicators in the outcomes framework. This is a valid methodological process and works by translating each indicator into a survey question. For example, the Play Outcomes Framework includes the indicator, *'The child can wait and take turns during shared play'*, this could become the parent/carer question, *'To what extent does your child wait and take turns during shared play?'*, with responses recorded on an appropriate rating scale (e.g. 1-7, with 1 being Not at all, and 7 All the time). Alternatively, where the evaluation needs a behavioural count, the question could ask how many times the parent or carer observed the child waiting or taking turns during a defined period of play. The form of the question, whether a rating scale, a yes/no response, an open question or a behavioural count, is a survey-design decision. Whatever the level of measure used each question should be written against the indicator so that the resulting data can be traced directly back to the outcome being measured (technically this preserves what evaluators call 'internal validity' and is a useful quality assurance measure when considering data quality).

The choice of tool depends on how the play-related provision is delivered. In a centre or community setting, practitioners may be able to directly observe children playing and record changes in behaviour or interaction themselves. Where toys or games are taken home, the organisation may need to rely more on parents or carers because staff do not see the play that follows. The age of the child also matters, because younger children may be less able to complete formal questionnaires or describe developmental change in their own words.

The Play Tool Guide provides a set of template surveys that can be used in these different circumstances (a parent/carer questionnaire; a practitioner observation tool; and end-of-session feedback form; and a play-experience monitoring form). The purpose of this stage is to make sure that each selected outcome is matched to a realistic source of evidence and that the organisation is not collecting information that it does not need.

3.4. Evaluation design

Evaluation design brings outcomes, tools and structure of the play-related provision into a single plan for collecting impact data. It sets out what information will be collected (evaluation questions), who will provide it (the sample), when it will be collected (scheduling) and how the different sources of evidence will be used together (analysis and reporting).

An evaluation design will vary according to the way children participate. A fixed programme with a set beginning and end may allow outcome data to be collected at the start and end of the programme, usually through pre- and post-intervention questionnaires completed by parents, carers or practitioners. Regular ongoing provision may be better suited to collecting the same information at planned intervals, while open-access play may involve children attending too irregularly for a conventional pre- and post- approach. One-off or ad hoc play is different again,

because the available evidence is more likely to concern the immediate play experience and observable behaviour rather than developmental change over time. Play-related provision is often multi-faceted, so an evaluation may need to be divided into separate strands according to where and how play takes place. For example, a charity might provide toys for families to use at home, run a weekly play space and operate a Saturday club combining structured indoor play with a play worker and freer outdoor play. Rather than treating these as a single intervention, the evaluation could separate them into three strands: observed play where a play worker can record behaviour and outcomes directly; free play where observation and lighter-touch recording may be more appropriate; and off-site home play where evidence has to come from parents or carers after the toy has been used. Feedback on whether families liked the toys or were satisfied with the service can also be collected, but this is service feedback rather than evidence of developmental change. A toy library whose provision takes place entirely in the home would require only the off-site strand, with parents or carers reporting on the play that followed. In both cases, the evaluation design should reflect the play that the organisation actually provides rather than assume a clinical, therapeutic or other purpose that is not part of the intervention.

3.5. Sampling

Sampling is where the organisation decides who will take part in the evaluation. The sample is usually determined by the number of children or families available, meaning how many families or children are accessing the service over time, and partly by the number of responses that can feasibly be collected (this is itself influenced by the structure and setting of the play provision). The method used is important to the sample selected too- quantitative methods (surveys for example) generally require a larger volume of participants so that patterns in the data can be observed, whilst qualitative methods (such as interviews, focus groups or case reviews) can work with fewer participants because each contribution provides more detailed information.

The structure of the play provision affects both of these factors. A fixed play-related programme may provide a clearly defined group of children who can be followed from the beginning to the end of provision, making it possible to collect repeated outcome data from the same participants. Regular ongoing provision (like a weekly play session) may offer similar opportunities where attendance is consistent. In contrast, an open-access play centre may work with a large number of children over, say an eight-week period, but see individual children only intermittently. Here, the number of children using the service may be high, but the volume of comparable responses from children with sufficient exposure to the provision may be low. In these circumstances, observation, parent or carer feedback, interviews or other qualitative methods may provide more usable evidence than a survey.

Take-home provision presents a particular issue because the number of toys or games distributed does not determine the evaluation sample. The useful sample depends on how many families can be contacted *after* the child has had sufficient opportunity to play and how many provide usable responses. Sampling therefore needs to reflect both the population available to the evaluation and the volume of evidence that can realistically be generated from it.

3.6. Data collection

Data collection is the point at which the evaluation begins generating evidence. The organisation uses the tools selected during the earlier stages to collect three related kinds of information: routine monitoring data about what was provided and who took part; information about the play experience itself; and evidence against the selected play outcomes. The Play Tool Guide provides sample forms for collecting each of these types of information, however, providers can use the guide to write bespoke surveys too if needed:

- Parent/carer outcome questionnaire: for play that happens at home or where parents/carers are best placed to observe change.
- Practitioner observation and outcome-recording tool: for play that can be observed directly within a service.
- End-of-session feedback tool: for one-off, ad hoc or short provision where immediate experience is more appropriate to capture than developmental change.
- Play-experience recording tool: for recording what type of play occurred, who the child played with and how they engaged.
- Monitoring tool: for routine information such as reach, attendance, frequency of participation and toys, games or play opportunities provided.

These tools do not all need to be used in every evaluation. A charity distributing toys for children to use at home, for example, might use routine monitoring to record what was provided and a parent/carer questionnaire after the child has had time to play with it. An open-access play setting might rely more heavily on attendance monitoring, practitioner observation and play-experience records. A fixed programme with regular participation may use the same parent/carer or practitioner outcome questions near the beginning and end of provision, supported by monitoring throughout.

3.7. Analysis

Analysis should bring together the different sources of evidence collected through the evaluation of play-related interventions rather than treating each source separately. Monitoring data can be used to describe what was delivered, how many children took part, how often they participated, the forms of play involved and any important differences between settings or delivery models. Outcome data from surveys or interviews can then be used to examine any change observed against the outcomes and indicators used for the programme.

Where children have been measured or observed at more than one point, the results can be compared to show the change observed. For instance, where parents have provided pre- and post-intervention data, the scores at each stage can be compared and the difference reported. If, for example, a question asks, *'To what extent does your child wait and take turns during shared play?'* on a scale from 1 to 7, and the score for a child is 3 at the start and 6 at the end, this represents a three-point increase on the scale.

Across a larger sample, the individual scores can be combined to describe the overall pattern of change. For example, if pre- and post-intervention data are available for 20 children, the organisation can calculate the average score at each point. If the average score increases from, say a score of 3, at the start to 5 at the end, this represents an average increase of two points on the seven-point scale. The organisation can then report the proportion of children whose scores increased: if 15 of the 20 children recorded a higher score at the end, it can report that 75% showed an increase on that indicator. The remaining results can similarly be reported as the percentage showing no change or a decrease. This structured outcome data can then be brought together with observations, practitioner records and parent or carer reports to assess whether the different sources show a consistent pattern and to help explain differences between children, forms of play or settings.

Where relevant, organisations can also examine harder outcomes that may follow from developmental change. These report the wider consequences of play-provision. For example, improved self-regulation may occur alongside fewer behavioural incidents at school, or improved communication and language alongside greater participation or attainment. The accompanying Play Outcomes Framework provides further guidance on distinguishing developmental and harder outcomes.

Data analysis should remain within what the play evaluation design allows a play provider to claim. Change over time will show that an outcome changed while the child was receiving the provision. It does not by itself show that play caused the change. Similarly, relationships between participation, developmental outcomes and harder outcomes should be reported as associations rather than causation for the types of mixed-methods design described here, and most likely to be used.

3.8. Reporting

The evaluation report brings together the different parts of the evaluation by describing what the organisation provided, what play children experienced and what outcomes were observed. The findings should be presented alongside information about participation and delivery, because outcome data are often difficult to interpret without knowing how much play children experienced and the form that play took. Data such as session frequency and length, the overall duration of a programme and how often a child attended should therefore not be omitted. This type of information (on exposure, dose and intensity) is important because it helps show whether any change observed can be associated with the amount of play provision a child received. When combined with demographic data, it can also provide useful information about which children show stronger outcomes, under what conditions and from which forms of provision.

Where the impact of a play-related programme differs, for instance between types of play, settings, who children played with, or the characteristics of the children taking part, these differences should also be reported. The effect of an intervention should not always be expected to be positive. Change can go in what evaluators call ‘either direction’, meaning that we should be open to outcomes being lower at the end of a programme rather than always going up. This is not poor-quality data, but is interesting to toy and play providers. It shows, for instance, that particular forms of play or settings may be associated with stronger outcomes, weaker outcomes or no

discernible difference. Any limitations in interpreting these findings should also be stated, including low follow-up, irregular attendance, small numbers or reliance on parent/carer reporting for play that took place at home. Where a funder requires common data across several organisations, the agreed outputs, outcomes and indicators should be reported consistently, while organisations can still include additional evidence that reflects the particular character of their own provision.

Appendix 1 – A Play-Related Outcomes Framework

A. Social interaction and competence	B. Self-regulation	C. Cognitive development and problem-solving	D. Communication and language	E. Creativity and imagination	F. Physical and motor development	G. Emotional wellbeing
<i>A1. The child can join and sustain play with other children</i>	<i>B1. The child can persist with play when an activity becomes difficult</i>	<i>C1. The child can work out how to achieve a goal using available objects or materials</i>	<i>D1. The child can understand words used during play</i>	<i>E1. The child can use one object to represent something else</i>	<i>F1. The child can reach for, grasp and manipulate play objects</i>	<i>G1. The child has positive mood and enjoyment during play</i>
<i>A2. The child can share toys or play materials with others</i>	<i>B2. The child can wait for something they want rather than act immediately</i>	<i>C2. The child can identify and use spatial relationships between objects</i>	<i>D2. The child can use a wider range of words to communicate</i>	<i>E2. The child can invent pretend roles or characters</i>	<i>F2. The child can coordinate hand and eye movements during play</i>	<i>G2. The child has fewer signs of anxiety or emotional distress</i>
<i>A3. The child can wait and take turns during shared play</i>	<i>B3. The child can regulate emotional reactions during play</i>	<i>C3. The child can use number and quantity concepts during play</i>	<i>D3. The child can use longer spoken utterances</i>	<i>E3. The child can create imaginary situations or narratives</i>	<i>F3. The child can balance and control their body during movement</i>	<i>G3. The child has fewer withdrawn or other internalising behaviours</i>
<i>A4. The child can negotiate roles, rules or play actions with peers</i>	<i>B4. The child can adapt their behaviour to the rules or demands of the play situation</i>	<i>C4. The child can remember information needed to complete a play task</i>	<i>D4. The child can describe and sequence events or actions</i>	<i>E4. The child can combine or transform materials in different ways</i>	<i>F4. The child can run, jump or hop with increasing control</i>	<i>G4. The child has fewer aggressive or disruptive behaviours</i>
<i>A5. The child can assert preferences or set limits appropriately during play</i>	<i>B5. The child can plan, monitor and adjust their own play actions</i>	<i>C5. The child can change their approach when an initial attempt does not work</i>	<i>D5. The child can initiate and respond to another person's shared attention</i>	<i>E5. The child can extend or change a play idea as the activity develops</i>	<i>F5. The child can throw, catch or kick objects with increasing control</i>	<i>G5. The child has greater confidence about themselves</i>

About Community Impact

Community Impact is an independent evaluation and impact consultancy working with charities, community organisations, funders and commissioners to improve how they understand, measure and use evidence to support service improvement, programme development, commissioning and organisational decision-making.

Our approach focuses on producing evaluation that is proportionate, practical and operationally useful. We support organisations to develop theories of change and outcomes frameworks, design data-collection tools and evaluation systems, undertake evaluations, analyse existing service data, and strengthen their internal evaluation capacity.

We also work with organisations to review and rationalise existing outcomes and measures, map evaluation approaches across programmes and portfolios, and develop common measurement frameworks where evidence needs to be understood or aggregated across different forms of provision.

Alongside commissioned evaluation and consultancy, Community Impact develops practical evaluation resources and toolkits that organisations can use independently. These translate evaluation methods and research evidence into approaches that can be applied within everyday service delivery, particularly where organisations have limited evaluation capacity or work in complex community settings.

www.communityimpactcic.org(<http://www.communityimpactcic.org>