

OPAL Play Policy



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1. Commitment

At KTS Academy, we are committed to ensuring that high-quality play is central to the life of our school. We undertake to refer to this Play Policy in all decisions that affect children and young people's play opportunities.

As a special school for pupils aged 3–19, we recognise play as a vital part of lifelong learning, wellbeing and happiness. We are committed to providing the strategic and operational leadership required to develop, support and sustain rich, inclusive and meaningful play opportunities for all pupils, regardless of age, ability or need.

This policy reflects our vision of *supporting lifelong learning and happiness through quality education, respect and equality for all*.

2. Rationale

At KTS Academy, we believe that all children and young people need opportunities to play that allow them to explore, manipulate, experience and influence their environment in ways that are meaningful to them.

Play is particularly important for our pupils, many of whom use play as a primary means of communication, emotional regulation, sensory exploration and social connection. Our play provision is designed to be welcoming, accessible and responsive to individual needs, irrespective of age, disability, gender, background, culture or communication style.

Research shows that a play-based curriculum can be particularly beneficial for children with complex learning difficulties. Through play, pupils can gradually tolerate challenge, uncertainty and new experiences in a supportive and low-pressure environment. Play allows them to experiment, take risks, and develop coping strategies at their own pace, which in turn enhances resilience, independence and confidence. Embedding play across the curriculum supports not only learning but also emotional regulation, social interaction, and overall wellbeing.

The OPAL Primary Programme rationale states that:

“Better, more active and creative periods of plays can mean happier and healthier children... resulting in a more positive attitude to learning, more effective classroom lessons, fewer behavioural difficulties, happier staff and a healthier attitude to life.”

This strongly aligns with KTS Academy’s mission to provide a rich and varied curriculum that goes beyond the academic, supporting lifelong success, independence and wellbeing.

3. Definition and Value of Play

Play is defined as a process that is:

- Intrinsically motivated
- Freely chosen
- Personally directed

Play has its own purpose and value. It may be solitary or social, structured or unstructured, physical, sensory, imaginative or exploratory. For some pupils, play may look very different from traditional expectations and may include repetitive, sensory or schematic play.

At KTS Academy, we believe play:

- Is essential to physical, emotional, social, sensory and cognitive development
- Supports communication, interaction and relationship-building
- Enhances self-esteem, confidence and emotional regulation
- Allows pupils to explore risk, challenge and resilience at an appropriate level
- Encourages independence, creativity and problem-solving
- Supports wellbeing and mental health
- Maintains curiosity and openness to learning across the lifespan

Play directly supports our values of A Unique Child, Positive Relationships, Enabling Environments, and Learning and Development.

4. Aims

In relation to play, KTS Academy aims to:

- Provide inclusive, stimulating and varied play environments for pupils aged 3–19
- Offer play opportunities that meet a wide range of sensory, physical, social and emotional needs
- Enable pupils to take appropriate risks using a balanced, supportive approach
- Promote positive relationships between pupils and between pupils and adults
- Support physical development, emotional wellbeing and resilience
- Encourage independence, choice-making and self-advocacy
- Foster creativity, imagination and exploration

- Support learning across the curriculum through play
- Respect pupils' individual play preferences, communication styles and developmental stages

5. Rights

KTS Academy recognises and upholds the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, including:

1. **Article 23 – Children with Disabilities**

Children with disabilities have the right to enjoy a full and decent life, and to participate in play, recreation, and cultural and artistic life on an equal basis with others.

Relevance: Ensures pupils with SEND have equitable access to play opportunities.

2. **Article 13 – Freedom of Expression**

Children have the right to express themselves freely.

Relevance: Play allows children to communicate, explore ideas, and express emotions in ways beyond words.

3. **Article 15 – Freedom of Association**

Children have the right to meet and join groups and communities.

Relevance: Play fosters social connections, teamwork, and friendships.

4. **Article 28 – Right to Education**

Education should develop each child's personality, talents, and abilities to the fullest.

Relevance: Play supports learning, creativity, problem-solving, and physical development.

5. **Article 29 – Goals of Education**

Education should develop respect for others, cultural identity, and the child's own personality.

Relevance: Play nurtures social skills, respect, empathy, and self-awareness.

We are committed to listening to pupils' voices about play in ways that are meaningful and accessible to them, including through observation, communication aids, pupil voice activities and advocacy. This reflects our commitment to respect, equality, and valuing every individual.

6. Benefit and Risk

“Play is great for children’s wellbeing and development. The goal is not to eliminate risk, but to weigh up the risks and benefits.”

(Play Safety Forum, 2012)

KTS Academy adopts a risk-benefit approach to play, informed by:

- *Children’s Play and Leisure – Promoting a Balanced Approach* (HSE, 2012)
- *Managing Risk in Play Provision* (Play Safety Forum, 2012)

We recognise that experiencing risk and challenge is essential for learning, resilience, and independence, particularly for pupils with SEND who may otherwise have limited opportunities to develop these skills.

In addition to formal risk-benefit assessments, staff will use dynamic risk management, supporting pupils to understand and manage risk at a level appropriate to their needs, abilities, and development.

For some pupils, specific activities or equipment may present unique risks due to climbing, pica, or other developmental conditions or diagnosed health needs. In these cases, individual risk assessments and health and safety audits will be completed to ensure play remains safe and supportive while still allowing the child to engage meaningfully.

The full HSE Managing Risk Statement is included as an appendix to this policy.

7. Supervision

KTS Academy ensures appropriate supervision during periods of plays.

We use OPAL’s three supervision models:

- Direct supervision (where required for safety or specific needs)
- Ranging supervision
- Remote supervision

Supervision approaches are adapted according to:

- Age and developmental stage
- Individual needs and EHCP requirements
- Familiarity with the environment
- Type of play taking place

Staffing structures and ratios must always be adhered to. Pupils requiring 1:1 support will continue to receive this during periods of play, and additional supervision will be provided as necessary for safety, developmental support, or specific medical needs.

Many of our pupils benefit from modelling and guidance during outdoor play to engage safely with equipment, explore play opportunities, and develop skills. Even when encouraging independence and choice, staff remain actively present to scaffold play, demonstrate safe behaviours, and support social interaction, ensuring pupils can participate meaningfully while remaining safe and supported.

Our aim is to ensure pupils feel safe, supported, and empowered, while still experiencing the benefits of freely chosen play.

8. The Adult's Role in Play

Adults at KTS Academy support play in line with the Playwork Principles (OPAL). Staff are trained to understand when to:

- Observe
- Facilitate
- Support
- Intervene appropriately

The adult's role is to:

- Create enabling environments that invite play and encourage exploration
- Provide materials and resources that stimulate curiosity and creativity
- Support emotional regulation, communication, and social interaction
- Respect pupils' choices and autonomy, adapting to individual needs and abilities
- Model behaviours, skills and safe interactions, demonstrating how to use equipment, resources or social strategies
- Join in play when invited, without directing or controlling it
- Make play engaging and exciting, introducing novel ideas, challenges, or stimuli to enrich learning opportunities

For pupils with complex needs, modelling and guided participation are essential. Staff provide demonstrations, scaffolding, and encouragement, helping children engage safely and meaningfully while fostering confidence, independence, and positive relationships.

Every play interaction is considered a learning opportunity. Through play, pupils develop social, emotional, cognitive, and physical skills in a low-pressure, enjoyable environment. This approach ensures that our play-based curriculum supports lifelong learning, resilience, and happiness for every pupil.

9. Equality and Diversity

KTS Academy is committed to ensuring that play provision is inclusive and accessible for all pupils, regardless of disability, age, gender, background or need.

Our play offer reflects:

- Individual EHCP outcomes
- Sensory and physical accessibility
- Cultural respect and diversity
- Communication needs

This policy aligns with our Equality and Diversity Policy and our value of celebrating A Unique Child.

10. Environment

We believe that high-quality play requires rich, flexible, and responsive environments.

At KTS Academy we will:

- Continually develop and adapt indoor and outdoor play spaces to meet the needs of all pupils
- Provide a wide range of loose parts and open-ended resources to encourage creativity, exploration, and problem-solving
- Ensure environments support sensory regulation, communication, creativity, and engagement
- Balance safety with challenge and excitement, allowing pupils to take manageable risks
- Use *Best Play* guidance to inform development and best practice

A rich play environment supports safeguarding, confidence, teamwork, emotional wellbeing, self-advocacy, and a lifelong enjoyment of learning and the outdoors, while ensuring that play remains a central component of our curriculum and learning ethos.

This policy is a living document, developed with input from staff, pupils, families and governors, and will be reviewed annually to ensure it continues to meet the needs of our school community

Appendix 1: HSE Managing Risk Statement

- Play should involve challenge, exploration and real-world learning.
- Our role is to manage *real* risks, not remove every minor or trivial one.
- Sensible judgement matters more than excessive paperwork.
- Children need opportunities to test themselves, problem-solve and build resilience.

This aligns strongly with our OPAL approach, where rich, varied and sometimes adventurous play is encouraged. When planning or supervising outdoor play, staff keep this balanced perspective in mind. We aim to avoid creating overly sterile environments and instead focus on enabling high-quality play that supports children's growth.