The Rowans Primary
Play Policy

Policy Written/Reviewed by	Amy Deacon
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Approval by Play Governors	September 2026

Commitment

The Rowans Primary is committed to providing every child with high-quality, inclusive and enjoyable play. We will use this Play Policy to guide decisions about children's play and ensure that all pupils have opportunities to play in a safe, supportive environment.

As an SEMH provision, we recognise that play is an important part of our pupils' development. It provides opportunities to build confidence, develop relationships, practise emotional regulation, make choices, develop independence and experience success.

Play is not simply a break from learning; it is a valuable opportunity for children to practise our school values of **Kindness, Resilience and Commitment** in real-life situations.

Rationale

At The Rowans Primary, we believe that all children need opportunities to play, explore, create and make choices within their environment. Play should be welcoming, inclusive and accessible to every child, regardless of their individual needs or abilities.

The OPAL Primary Programme rationale is that *"… better, more active and creative playtimes can mean happier and healthier children, and having happier, healthier, more active children usually results in a more positive attitude to learning in school, with more effective classroom lessons, less staff time spent resolving unnecessary behavioural problems, fewer playtime accidents, happier staff and a healthier attitude to life."*

At The Rowans, we align with the OPAL rationale that creative playtimes lead to happier, healthier children. By investing in play, we aim to see:

- **Kindness:** Improved social interactions and peer support.
- **Resilience:** Children learning to cope with a wide range of emotions, including frustration and fear.
- **Commitment:** A healthier attitude to life and a more positive engagement with school learning.

Definition and Value of Play

Play is a process that is **freely chosen, child-led and enjoyable**. It has value in its own right and allows children to explore, create, make choices and learn at their own pace.

At The Rowans Primary, we recognise that for children with SEN and SEMH needs, play is much more than "free time". It is an important part of **development, emotional regulation, wellbeing and learning** and is central to our inclusive approach and the principles of the **OPAL Primary Programme**.

Through our OPAL approach, we provide a **rich, varied and engaging play environment** where children have the freedom to choose how, where and with whom they play. We recognise that children learn through play and that giving them opportunities to explore, create, problem-solve and take appropriate risks helps them to develop important life skills.

Through high-quality OPAL play opportunities, we support our pupils to:

- **Develop communication and social skills** through interaction, role-play, cooperation and negotiation.
- **Build confidence and self-esteem** by experiencing success, belonging and positive relationships.
- **Develop emotional regulation** through safe opportunities to express feelings, manage challenges and reduce stress.
- **Build positive relationships** with peers and adults through meaningful, low-pressure experiences.
- **Develop independence and choice** by allowing children to lead their own play and make decisions.
- **Develop resilience** by solving problems, managing challenges and taking appropriate risks.
- **Explore creativity and imagination** through open-ended and imaginative play.
- **Develop sensory and physical skills** through a range of active, creative and sensory experiences.
- **Improve engagement and readiness to learn** by supporting wellbeing, motivation and focus.

Our OPAL approach recognises that **children need time, space and freedom to play**. Adults support and facilitate play without unnecessarily directing it, helping children to develop their confidence, independence and ability to manage social situations and challenges.

We recognise that every child is different and may engage with play in different ways. Through OPAL, we aim to create a **safe, inclusive and stimulating play environment where every child can play, belong, develop and thrive**.

Article 31 – The Right to Play
We recognise that play is a fundamental right and a critical component of development. Many of our pupils rely on play as a primary means of:

- **Emotional regulation**, using play to process feelings, reduce anxiety, and feel safe.
- **Communication**, particularly where verbal language may be a barrier, allowing expression through action, gesture, and imagination.
- **Social connection**, enabling the development of relationships in a supportive, low-pressure environment.
- **Sensory regulation**, through access to varied play experiences that meet individual sensory needs.
- **Building confidence and self-esteem**, by experiencing success in self-directed, meaningful activities.

We therefore ensure that play opportunities are inclusive, accessible, and responsive to individual needs, recognising that some pupils may require adapted environments, additional support, or alternative ways to engage.

Article 12 – The Right to Be Listened To
We recognise that all children have the right to express their views and have them taken

seriously. At The Rowans, we understand that children communicate in different ways. For some of our pupils, their views may be expressed through words, behaviour, body language, play choices or actions.

Our OPAL approach provides children with meaningful opportunities to have a voice and influence their play. We will:

- Provide different ways for children to share their views, including observation, visual supports, conversations and play choices.
- Recognise behaviour as a form of communication and respond with curiosity, patience and understanding.
- Involve children in developing and improving their play environment, taking account of their interests, needs and sense of safety.
- Build trusting relationships so children feel safe, valued and confident to express themselves.
- Ensure that all children, including those who are quieter or less confident, have opportunities for their voices to be heard.

Through OPAL, we value what children tell us about their play. Listening to children helps us create a play environment where everyone feels included, has choice and can belong.

Benefit and Risk

"Play is great for children's wellbeing and development. When planning and providing play opportunities, the goal is not to eliminate risk, but to weigh up the risks and benefits. No child will learn about risk if they are wrapped in cotton wool."

Managing Risk in Play Provision: An Implementation Guide (2012)

To build resilience, our play provision offers children the chance to encounter acceptable risks within a managed environment. For our pupils carefully managed risk in play is essential for developing confidence, emotional regulation, and resilience. Without opportunities to experience challenges, these pupils may miss out on important learning around problem-solving, independence, and managing emotions in real situations.

In addition to formal risk-benefit assessments, we use dynamic risk management during play. This means adults support children in the moment to recognise, assess, and respond to risks. Pupils are encouraged to think for themselves while knowing that skilled adults are present to guide and support them when needed.

We recognise that some pupils may require additional support to engage safely in risk-taking play. This may include clearer boundaries, visual supports, adult modelling, or adapted environments to ensure they can participate fully and safely.

Through this approach, children are given the opportunity to explore challenges, make decisions, and learn from experience. This is particularly important for our pupils, who may need structured opportunities to practise emotional regulation, coping strategies, and social interaction in real-life contexts.

Play also provides opportunities for our pupils to develop teamwork, communication, and problem-solving skills. Activities such as building, negotiating rules, or collaborative games allow them to learn from peers in a natural and engaging way.

In line with the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, particularly Articles 12 and 31, we ensure that pupils' voices are heard and that they have the right to play. For pupils at The Rowans Primary, we recognise that communication may take many forms, including behaviour, action, and play choices, all of which are valued and understood.

Through our OPAL approach, we aim to create a play environment where all children can safely experience challenges, build resilience, develop independence, and grow in confidence, while being supported to thrive socially, emotionally, and physically.

Supervision Styles

The law requires that children in school are appropriately supervised, although there are no set staff-to-pupil ratios for primary school playtimes. At The Rowans Primary, our approach to supervision is carefully planned around the needs of our pupils and the nature of our specialist SEMH provision. We recognise that our pupils may require different levels of adult support to access play safely, positively and successfully.

Our outdoor play environment is organised into designated play zones, providing pupils with a range of opportunities for physical, social, imaginative, creative and exploratory play. Each play zone has a maximum of 8 children at one time, with one member of staff allocated to each zone. In addition, a floating member of staff is available across the outdoor environment. This provides a consistent adult presence within each zone while allowing staff to respond flexibly to emerging needs, support individual pupils and provide additional supervision where required.

We recognise OPAL's three models of supervision: Direct, Remote and Ranging. The level and type of supervision is flexible and responsive to individual pupil needs, as identified through their EHCP, SEN Support Plan, risk assessment and professional judgement. Supervision is not based solely on a pupil's diagnosis or label; staff consider the individual child, their current presentation, the activity, the environment and any potential risks.

For pupils with SEN and SEMH needs, supervision goes beyond physical safety and includes emotional co-regulation, relationship-building, communication and supporting positive social interactions. Adults provide a calm, consistent and reassuring presence, helping pupils to manage emotions, resolve conflict, navigate relationships and engage positively with their peers.

Together, these approaches ensure pupils can develop increasing independence in play while still receiving appropriate levels of support, enabling them to feel safe, regulated, and fully included.

The Adult's Role in Play

At The Rowans Primary, our staff help create a safe, welcoming and exciting environment where children can enjoy playing, exploring and learning outdoors. Through OPAL (Outdoor Play and Learning), we believe play is important for every child. It gives children opportunities to make choices, try new things, be creative, build friendships, solve problems and develop confidence and resilience.

Staff provide a range of activities, resources and experiences, including physical, imaginative, creative and social play, while also giving children space to follow their own interests. Resources and adult support are adapted to meet the individual needs of our SEN and SEMH pupils, helping them to take part in play with confidence.

Adults balance support with independence. They are there when children need help with communication, emotions, friendships or problem-solving, but will step back when children are safely engaged in their own play. Staff may join in when invited, following the child's lead and using play as an opportunity to build positive relationships, trust and confidence.

A key part of OPAL at The Rowans is helping children become increasingly confident and independent. We encourage children to make choices, explore, solve problems and develop their own ideas, while providing support when needed.

We believe there is no single right way to play. Our aim is for every child to feel safe, included and confident, with the time, space, resources and support they need to enjoy play in their own way.

Equality and Diversity

At The Rowans Primary, we want every child to feel welcome, included and able to enjoy play. Through OPAL, we make sure all children have opportunities to take part in a wide range of play experiences, whatever their individual needs, abilities or background. We recognise that children may enjoy and access play in different ways. We adapt our environment, resources and adult support to help remove barriers and enable everyone to join in. Play gives children opportunities to build friendships, develop confidence, support their wellbeing and feel a strong sense of belonging. We celebrate differences, encourage kindness and respect, and support children to play together in positive and inclusive ways. There is no single right way to play – every child should have the time, space and support to enjoy play in a way that works for them.

Environment

At The Rowans Primary, we are continually developing our outdoor spaces to create a safe, exciting and welcoming environment where children can play, explore and have fun. Our play areas give children opportunities to be active, use their imagination, make choices, build friendships and develop independence. We support children to take appropriate risks and try new things, while making sure they are safe and supported. We want our outdoor spaces to be inclusive and accessible to all children, with resources and areas that encourage creativity, teamwork, communication and confidence. We also encourage children to care for

and respect their environment. Our aim is for every child to enjoy being outdoors, feel a sense of belonging and develop positive experiences and memories through play.

Review Date: This policy is a living document and will be reviewed annually. Next review September 2027.