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GIE CONVERSATION KICKER # 1

An hour of **play**

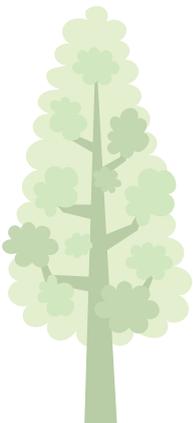
Plato once said that you learn more about a person in an hour of play than in a lifetime of conversation. In this brief, we argue that he was right. We also explain what play is, how we benefit from having more of it every day, what Australians think about it, and what can we do as practitioners to get our children, and all of us, to play more in and out of school. We advocate for this to be a shared commitment and that both parents and schools own their responsibility to achieve this 'golden hour of play'.

What do we mean by **play**?



It is difficult to give one universal definition to play, because play is diverse, and reflects societal and cultural contexts surrounding a child.¹ Play is one of those things in life, just like true love, that you recognise when you see it but cannot quite find precise words to define it. Many people think that play is opposite to work, study or something else that have formal purpose or goals. They say that you play when real work is done and there is some spare time left. In this short essay, we strongly challenge these common perceptions.

All experts of childhood development today agree that play is so natural to children's lives that it should actually be part of how childhood is defined. Play is fundamental to child development and it is universally accepted that children learn best through play, about themselves and the world around them, so we believe that there is no logic to separating play and learning.² Through play, children learn and develop in a complete sense across a breadth of skills.³ Research evidence is rich and convincing: The more children play, the healthier, happier and better lives they will have.



¹ Dockett, S., & Fleer, M. (1999). *Play and pedagogy in early childhood: Bending the rules*. Sydney: Harcourt Brace.

² Danniels, E., & Pyle, A. (2018). *Defining play-based learning*. In R. E. Tremblay, M. Boivin, & R. D. Peters (Eds.), *Encyclopedia of Early Childhood Development*. Retrieved from www.child-encyclopedia.com

³ Parker, R. & Stjerne Thomsen, B. (2019, March). *Learning through play at school: A study of playful integrated pedagogies that foster children's holistic skills development in the primary school classroom*. White Paper for The LEGO Foundation.

Benefits of play?



Current literature is convincing about the power of play for benefiting children across a gamut of outcomes. Across the world, research studies, experiments and observations of real-life school experiences around the world have found that play offers numerous benefits for children.

Benefits include, but are not limited to, improved cognitive development, higher order thinking abilities such as problem solving, social and emotional wellbeing, physical health, motivation to learn, building friendships, school readiness, self-regulation, skills in group work and getting along with others, creativity, critical and divergent thinking, healthy brain development, empathy, gross and fine motor skills, foundational literacy and communication competencies, imagination, science and mathematical skills, and improvements in self-regulation and executive function.⁴

In a rapidly changing and uncertain future, the importance of developing social and emotional skills is becoming more evident and researchers are becoming more aware of the relationship between play and the development of these capabilities. Hesterman (2019) reported on the current state of play in Western Australian schools and teachers in her study acknowledged that:

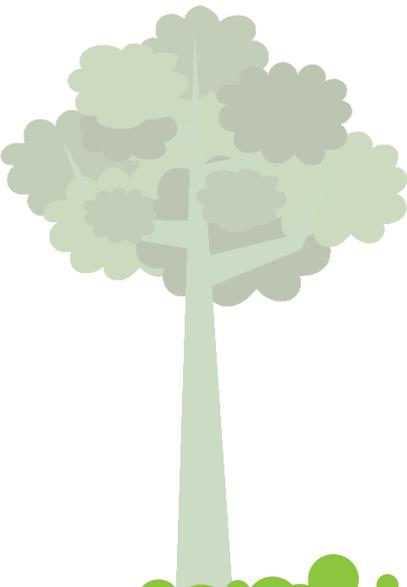
Children learn how to socialise and get along with other children by learning rules and expectations of what is expected of them during play-based learning. It allows them time to explore and learn different skills.⁵

Further, when looking at the schedules of six-year old children, psychologists have found that children who had the freedom to choose how they spend their time, had better self-directed executive functioning than those children who spent more time having experiences where adults impose structure or criteria.⁶

4 Healey, A., & Mendelsohn, A. (2019, January). Selecting appropriate toys for young children in the digital era. *Pediatrics*, 143(1). Retrieved from <https://pediatrics.aappublications.org/content/pediatrics/early/2018/11/29/peds.2018-3348.full.pdf>; Jay, J. A., & Knaus, M. (2018). Embedding play-based learning into junior primary (year 1 and 2) curriculum in WA. *Australian Journal of Teacher Education*, 43(1), 112-126. Retrieved from <https://ro.ecu.edu.au/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=3692&context=ajte>; Sahlberg, P. & Doyle, W. (2019). *Let the children play: How more play can save schools and help children thrive*. New York: Oxford University Press. Sahlberg, P. & Doyle, W. (2019). *Let the children play: How more play can save schools and help children thrive*. New York: Oxford University Press; Mansfield, A. (2018). *Child's play- Should we prescribe freedom?* *Enterprise Magazine*. Retrieved from <https://www.unisa.edu.au/Enterprise-Magazine-Home/issue-2-2018/childs-play---should-we-prescribe-freedom/>

5 Hesterman, S. (2019). *A report on the state of Play-Based Learning in western Australian schools*. Report authorised by The State Schools Teachers' Union of WA.

6 Barker, J. E., Semenov, A. D., Michaelson, L., Provan, L. S., Snyder, H. R., & Munakata, Y. (2014). Less-structured time in children's daily lives predicts self-directed executive functioning. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 5. Retrieved from <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC4060299/>



A large body of accumulated evidence demonstrates that the development of social and emotional skills relates to improved life outcomes and they have been referred to as a key component of 21st century skills. Internationally, the OECD (2018) acknowledges that to be successful into the future:

Future-ready students will need both broad and specialised knowledge. Disciplinary knowledge will continue to be important, as the raw material from which new knowledge is developed, together with the capacity to think across the boundaries of disciplines and 'connect the dots'... students will need to apply their knowledge in unknown and evolving circumstances. For this, they will need a broad range of skills, including cognitive and meta-cognitive skills (e.g. critical thinking, creative thinking, learning to learn and self-regulation); social and emotional skills (e.g. empathy, self-efficacy and collaboration); and practical and physical skills (e.g. using new information and communication technology devices).⁷

Children's doctors also emphasise the importance of childhood play, not only for their health. In 2018, the American Academy of Paediatrics insisted that:

Play is fundamentally important for learning 21st century skills, such as problem solving, collaboration, and creativity, which require the executive functioning skills that are critical for adult success. Play helps to build the skills required for our changing world; and play provides a singular opportunity to build the executive functioning that underlies adaptive behaviours at home; improve language and math skills in school; build the safe, stable, and nurturing relationships that buffer against toxic stress; and build social-emotional resilience.⁸

Play offers opportunities for children to develop each of these essential skills, while the evidence is clear, how is play valued in wider Australian society?

⁷ OECD. (2018). *The future of education and skills: Education 2030*. Retrieved from [https://www.oecd.org/education/2030/E2030%20Position%20Paper%20\(05.04.2018\).pdf](https://www.oecd.org/education/2030/E2030%20Position%20Paper%20(05.04.2018).pdf)

⁸ Yogman, M., Garner, A., Hutchinson, J., Hirsh-Pasek, K., & Michnick Golinkoff, R. (2018). *The power of play: A pediatric role in enhancing development in young children*. *Pediatrics*, 142(3). DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1542/peds.2018-2058>



Current views on play?



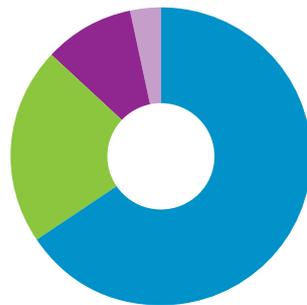
In 2019, we conducted an automated phone poll survey of 1612 Australian adults in different parts of the country to better understand parents' perceptions of play.

Participants were selected at random from the community and responded voluntarily, and responses were disaggregated by gender, age categories and educational attainment. We did not seek a representative sample so caution should be taken when generalising these findings, yet the results are compelling and extend the current literature base. Survey respondents answered a series of multiple-choice questions, aimed at ascertaining their perspectives on play in schools, access to play and the place that media use has in the lives of children.

Finding 1: Play helps children to learn the skills they need for the future

Our research shows that 93 per cent of Australians agree that play helps children to build the skills they need for the future, and a further 72 per cent believe that schools should encourage more play in the first few years than currently. Yet despite the demonstrated importance of play to children's wellbeing, and the clear value placed upon it in wider society, children's access to play as part of learning and as an educational tool is ever more constrained and regulated by policy agendas and a narrowing of the curriculum.⁹

Finding 2: Children spend less time playing than before



In response to the statement, "I think children today spend less time playing compared to when I was their age", it can be noted that our poll found that 85 per cent of Australians agreed with this, across all age categories. Figure 1 affirms this.

Figure 1: Proportion of agreement to the statement "I think children today spend less time playing compared to when I was their age".

● Strongly Agree ● Agree ● Disagree ● Strongly disagree

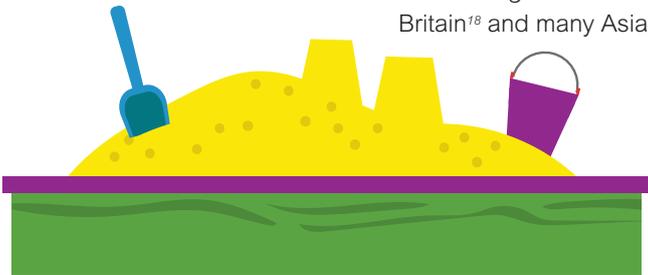
⁹ See for example: J. A., & Knaus, M. (2018). Embedding play-based learning into junior primary (year 1 and 2) curriculum in WA. *Australian Journal of Teacher Education*, 43(1), 112-126. Retrieved from <https://ro.ecu.edu.au/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=3692&context=ajte>; Sahlberg, P. & Doyle, W. (2019). *Let the children play: How more play can save schools and help children thrive*. New York: Oxford University Press

International evidence also supports this view that children don't play today as much they used to do earlier. Dent,¹⁰ Gray,¹¹ and Sahlberg and Doyle¹² have noted the decline in children's freedom to play in the last 60 years. Gray reflects on his childhood play experiences, saying that:

When I was a child in the 1950s my friends and I played in mixed-aged neighbourhood groups almost every day after school until dark. We played all weekend and all summer long. We had time to explore in all sorts of ways, and also time to be bored and figure out how to overcome boredom, time to get into trouble and find our way out of it, time to day dream, time to immerse ourselves in hobbies, and time to read comics. What I learned through my play has been far more valuable to my adult life than what I learnt in school.

This is true for play in general and especially outdoor play.¹³ Play periods are increasingly under threat in schools. Most recently, a primary school in Western Australia has replaced the recess break with "15 minutes of instructional play" instead.¹⁴ A frightening concept to anyone that recognises what play offers to a child.

There are number of reasons that opportunities for play are becoming extinct, or even endangered, around the world. Such a decline is often prompted by parental fears, long school days, and crowded extracurricular schedules. School education is more demanding of children today, parents are more concerned about their children's safety, and homes are much more hectic places with both longer-working parent(s) and homework-busy children. And most members of families have their own digital devices to 'play' with.¹⁵ Our survey shows that 85 percent of adults think that children today spend less time playing compared to when they were at that same age. In addition, the vast majority of parents, over 80 per cent according to our data, believe that today children are under pressure to grow up too quickly. This can lead to a whole range of problems when children experience this pressure, including higher rates of mental illness, self-esteem problems and sleep issues.¹⁶ This finding is similar to those identified in other countries, such as in the United States,¹⁷ Britain¹⁸ and many Asian countries.¹⁹



- 10 Dent, M. (2019, January 30). *Why we must prioritise play for today's children and why we need to do it now.* [Blog post]. Retrieved from <https://www.maggiedent.com/blog/why-we-must-prioritise-play-for-todays-children-now/>
- 11 Gray, P. (2014, April 7). *Risky play: Why children love it and need it.* *Psychology Today.* Retrieved from <https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/freedom-learn/201404/risky-play-why-children-love-it-and-need-it>
- 12 Sahlberg, P. & Doyle, W. (2019). *Let the children play: How more play can save schools and help children thrive.* New York: Oxford University Press.
- 13 Dowdell, K., Gray, T., & Malone, K. (2011). *Nature and its influence on children's outdoor play.* *Australian Journal of Outdoor Education*, 15(2), 24-35; Mansfield, A. (2018). *Child's play- Should we prescribe freedom?* *Enterprise Magazine.* Retrieved from <https://www.unisa.edu.au/Enterprise-Magazine-Home/issue-2-2018/childs-play---should-we-prescribe-freedom/>
- 14 Carmody, R (2019, November 21). *Clarkson Primary School in Perth abolishes free play at recess in favour of 'instructional' sessions.* Retrieved from <https://amp.abc.net.au/article/11718014>
- 15 Hyndman, B. (2019, May 24). *Let them play! Kids need freedom from play restrictions to develop.* Retrieved from <https://theconversation.com/let-them-play-kids-need-freedom-from-play-restrictions-to-develop-117586>
- 16 Morin, A. (2019, September 2). *The dangers of putting too much pressure on kids.* Retrieved from <https://www.verywellfamily.com/the-dangers-of-putting-too-much-pressure-on-kids-1094823>
- 17 Sweat, R. (2004). *Whatever happened to childhood?* Retrieved from <https://www.vision.org/whatever-happened-childhood-1137>
- 18 Department of Education. (2011, April 11). *Almost 9 out of 10 parents think children are being forced to grow up too quickly.* Retrieved from <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/almost-9-out-of-10-parents-think-children-are-being-forced-to-grow-up-too-quickly>
- 19 Yang, J. (2015, July 2). *Do Asian students face too much academic pressure?* Retrieved from <https://edition.cnn.com/2015/07/02/opinions/yang-genius-girl/index.html>

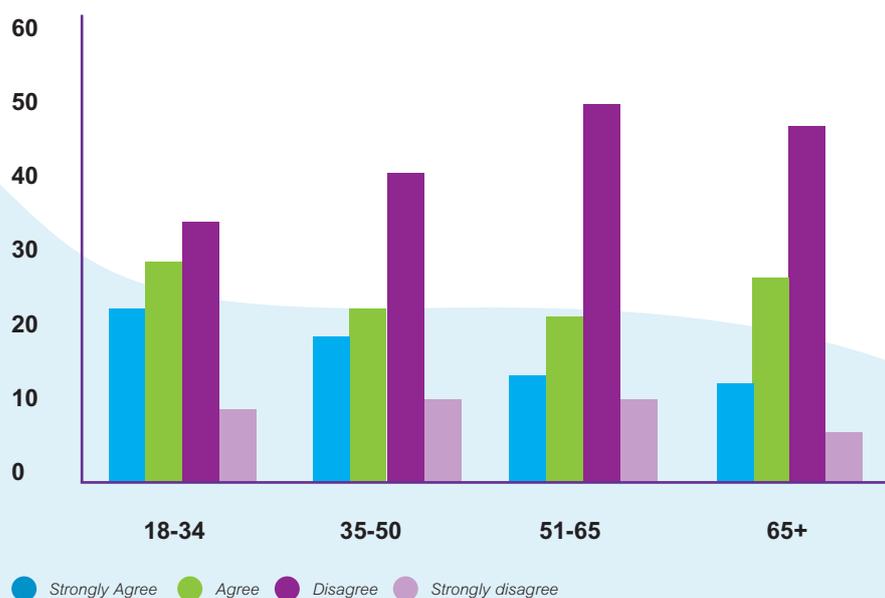
Finding 3: Digital devices take the time children should have to play

Earlier this year the Royal Children's Hospital Child Health Poll in Melbourne revealed that 94 per cent of teenagers, 36 per cent of primary children, and 36 per cent of pre-schoolers have their own screen-based device. According to our data, 92 per cent of parents believe that access to smartphones has reduced the time children have for daily physical activity and free outdoor play. To date, causal research has not been undertaken in this space, but it is a common-sense relationship. Healey and Mendelsohn do note a shift in parental and wider societal perceptions of play, and they suggest that the marketing of digital media-based virtual 'toys' is potentially misleading to parents, who may believe they have additional educational benefits. With the rise of electronic gaming platforms, for some children, it is possible that play is done on digital devices and there is a real confusion about the potential harm.²⁰ Digital media exposure takes time away that children otherwise might use for hands-on, creative, unstructured play outdoors which is always the most beneficial kind of play.

Finding 4: Play is important for children, but time in school should spend on studying

A juxtaposition exists though, because most respondents disagreed with the statement that children should have more breaks at school, indicating that societal perceptions need shifting if we are to successfully implement change. The greatest level of agreement to the statement, "I think children should have more break time at school every day" came from those in the 18-34 year age bracket, indicating that times are changing and the problem is potentially a generational one, at least in part. The following chart shows the breakdown of responses by age category.

Figure 2: Percentages by age to the statement "I think children should have more break time at school every day".



²⁰ Healey, A., & Mendelsohn, A. (2019, January). Selecting appropriate toys for young children in the digital era. *Pediatrics*, 143(1). Retrieved from <https://pediatrics.aappublications.org/content/pediatrics/early/2018/11/29/peds.2018-3348.full.pdf>

What can we do?



Clearly, despite a recognition of the importance of play and some understanding of its role in supporting learning, there is a disconnect evident between policy and current practice.²¹

However, while all the accumulated evidence suggests that children in the modern world have starkly less opportunity for play than they once did in generations past, it need not be this way going forward. For policy architects in schools and early childhood settings, a systemic solution is required. Parents must also own the responsibility for implementing this shift.

To start, we strongly advocate for a programmatic change to enable children's unstructured outdoor play for at least one hour a day at school. Only very few schools in Australia currently meet this goal. While it is noted that tensions exist to meet the multiple and pressing priorities, any obstacles that get in the way of this mandate must be removed and it must be the ultimate priority for education systems. This must be reflected in funding, programming, resourcing and staff training.

A strong, uniform statement from Paediatricians in Australia promoting the essential need for children to have opportunities for unstructured play and the associated developmental benefits would likely speak volumes, especially to parents. We recently approached Paediatricians in Australia to find out their views on this issue, and Dr Johanna Thomson from Sydney Children's Hospital provided the following statement:

The early years of a child's life are critical for brain development and lay the foundations for health, learning and productivity during childhood, adolescence and into adult years. To reach their developmental potential, children need to receive adequate nutrition, stimulation and a safe, nurturing environment – they need to 'Eat, Play, Love...'

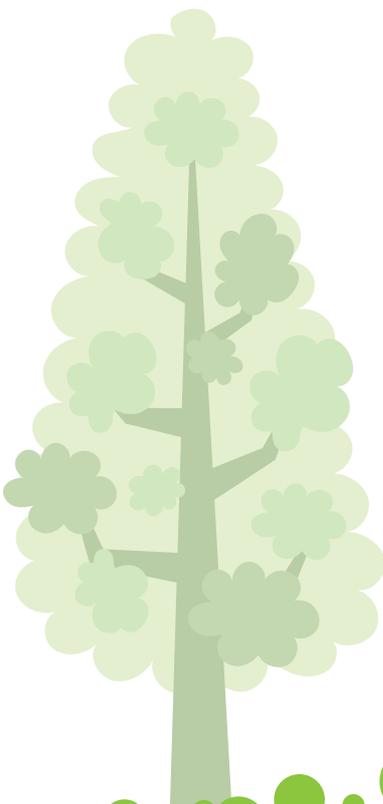
Children learn through play. Unstructured play allows children to creatively explore their environment, develop problem solving skills, promotes skills in language and negotiation through interaction with other children, helps regulate emotions and enhances physical health. So crucial is play in a child's development that some paediatricians have even started prescribing play for children of all ages.

In our modern busy world, with the pressures of performance and the influence of technology, it is tempting to see play as frivolous or optional. But play is fundamental for optimal child development and the acquisition of skills required to navigate the world in later life. It is our responsibility, as parents and caregivers, to create stimulating and nurturing environments for our children and ensure they are provided opportunities to play every day.²²

We now present a few potential solutions that can be easily followed by parents and schools.

²¹ Parker, R. & Stjerne Thomsen, B. (2019, March). *Learning through play at school: A study of playful integrated pedagogies that foster children's holistic skills development in the primary school classroom. White Paper for The LEGO Foundation.*

²² Dr Johanna Thomson, Academic Medicine Fellow, Sydney Children's Hospital; Lecturer, University of New South Wales.



Solution 1: Schools to allow at least an hour unstructured time to play at school every day

At the school level, principals and teachers can lead the change by making time for free outdoor play through flexible learning schedules and adequate break times. They would do well to look for opportunities to build in time for unstructured play, as well as learning through play and endorse this as a school-wide strategy. They are also well placed to monitor and evaluate the impacts of play on children and parents. Finally, schools can consult widely with their school communities and use their position to influence change and inform society that play is not an extra, but an essential in the school day.

Solution 2: Parents provide at least an hour to play every day at home (preferably outdoors)

While we are calling for a mandate for schools to commit to one hour of unstructured play for students, we have the same expectation of parents. Outdoor play opportunities provide the most authentic and meaningful play experience, encouraging children's freedom and creativity to flourish. Further, it is the ultimate antidote to counterbalance the saturation of screens that many children face.²³

Clear the schedule and match that hour at home, hence giving your child double the benefits. Play is even more beneficial when parents look for opportunities to extrapolate meaningful and relevant learning experiences.²⁴ It is acknowledged that for some parents, this can be a real challenge and it may be unreasonable to expect gains if families continue to face chronic, structural stressors, such as workforce demands and poverty.²⁵

Parental engagement within schools needs also to be promoted, so they can be part of the conversation about the state of their child's play. School-based events could also be held to inform parents about ways to engage in more appropriate play with their child. Earlier research has shown that when parents have limited involvement in their children's classrooms, their views on the appropriateness and necessity of play in children's learning, particularly in the context of schools, are ambiguous.²⁶



²³ Hyndman, B. (2019, May 24). *Let them play! Kids need freedom from play restrictions to develop*. Retrieved from <https://theconversation.com/let-them-play-kids-need-freedom-from-play-restrictions-to-develop-117586>

²⁴ Healey, A., & Mendelsohn, A. (2019, January). *Selecting appropriate toys for young children in the digital era*. *Pediatrics*, 143(1). Retrieved from <https://pediatrics.aappublications.org/content/pediatrics/early/2018/11/29/peds.2018-3348.full.pdf>

²⁵ Graham, A. (2019). *Giving parents a voice: Strategies to enhance parent capacity to support transition to school*. *Australian Educational Leader (AEL)*, 41, 52-55.

²⁶ Breathnach, H. (2013). *Parent views of play in the preparatory year in Queensland*. (Masters thesis). Queensland University of Technology. Retrieved from <http://eprints.qut.edu.au/60127/>

Solution 3: Make time for deeper conversations about play between parents and educators

Although these findings regarding the state of play in Australia resonate well with situations in many other countries, solutions to play deprivation should be locally discussed and decided. Parents have very different principles about how to educate their children. So do schools about what are the most important ways to help all students grow up healthy and happy. Therefore, the best way forward to get the previous two solutions actively serving our children is to initiate deeper and better-informed conversations in our communities and schools. Teachers and parents could spend much more time than they do now to learn about their own educational philosophies. These conversations could address some of the critical issues regarding play that we have written above.

These steps may require a rethink of current practice, but an important one in an age where we are witnessing worsening physical health and compromised learning outcomes in our young people.

The trends we are observing here are not unique to Australia and reflect global trends. Paradoxically, however, while we understand that play is beneficial and clearly valued in a broad sense, we have very little solid evidence about the state of play, and digital media, in the Australian context. Is it possible that there is a link between the increase in children's media and device usage and the decline of play? In light of the findings, and to further understand these issues, the GIE is undertaking two relevant research projects. Through Growing Up Digital Australia, we are aiming to shed further light on the digital habits of Australian students. In Fair Play, we are putting play back into the school day and developing tools to assess the quality of the play experience, and articulate the clear learning outcomes for individual children that result from more access to play.

Acknowledgements

This paper was prepared by Amy Graham and Pasi Sahlberg. The Gonski Institute for Education hosted the first Symposium on the Importance of Play on November 15, 2019, bringing together academics from around Australia that are passionately dedicated to improving the state of play for Australian children. We gratefully acknowledge their commitment and contributions to the development of conceptual understandings and ideas that are featured in this paper.

Attendees

Prof. Tony Okely; Professor Tonia Gray; Professor Marilyn Fleer; A/Prof Kate Bishop; A/Prof Jenny Jay; Dr Carmen Huser; Dr Lyndal O'Gorman; Dr Marianne Knaus; Dr Gloria Quinones Goyortua; Dr Amanda Walsh; Nicki Taylor; Jaydene Barnes; Dr Shirley Wyver; Dr Brendon Hyndman; Dr Fatemah Aminpour; Dr Amanda Lloyd; Rachel Parker; Dr Yeshe Colliver; Dr Jane Webb-Williams; Nicole Taylor; Dr Sandra Hesterman; Fiona Young; Natalia Krysiak.

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Gonski Institute for Education (2019). *Conversation Kicker #1: An Hour of Play*. Sydney: UNSW
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