



PLAY

Opportunities for play make children happy, enhance mental health and develop better young soccer players.



'Children are designed, by natural selection, to play. Wherever children are free to play, they do' (Gray 2011)

Children are hard-wired to seek playful activities. The role of such experiences in sport is crucial, with the freedom to experiment with different movements and solutions vital in the promotion of creativity. Of even greater significance are the numerous other developmental functions that opportunities for play can promote, such as enhanced intrinsic motivation, feelings of autonomy, decision-making, problem-solving, self-control and regulation of emotions. **Most importantly, play makes children happy and allows them to make friends, bedrocks of a healthy childhood.**

THE ROLE OF PLAY IN DEVELOPMENT

"Football is a game; I'm trying to have fun on the pitch, always, just to play. That's why I do it. The day I stop having fun is the day I retire... I never want to lose that spark, that passion" (Lionel Messi)



Research has also highlighted the role of play in the development of young soccer players, with the exploration afforded by playful activities promoting self-determination, autonomy, self-organisation and creativity. **South American-type cultures** - traditionally

emphasising less structure and adult involvement - provide an illuminating example of this, with the world's top players throughout history - such as Pele, Maradona, Ronaldo (Brazil), Ronaldinho, Messi, Ronaldo (Portugal), Neymar - remaining almost universally products of these free play environments.

HOW DOES C.A.R.D.S PROMOTE OPPORTUNITIES FOR PLAY?

Research has shown that within the range of childhood sporting learning experience, active participation in playful activities represents a crucial tenet of a child's developmental journey. At C.A.R.D.S, we incorporate **four play-based components** to our program.

Free Play

The sense of fun and exploration that **unstructured play** engenders develops children's confidence and encourages them to express themselves creatively in both sport and life. We provide these opportunities in our programs, such as free play prior to the start - or to conclude - training, 'free play nights' and self-directed (player) tournaments.

Deliberate Play

Deliberate play is highly engaging and motivating for young players, though differs from free play in that its application is slightly guided by the coach, to help improve the skills of players. We believe that fun activities and games featuring simple constraints can provide children with autonomy to explore their learning environments. We look for these environments to *'encourage adaptive skill, creativity and improvisation and role-playing... where enjoyment is the main participant motive'* (Araújo et al. 2010).

Multi-sports

Accruing games experience in different sports can serve as an ideal medium for **creativity**, whilst also often promoting an enhanced appreciation for sport. At C.A.R.D.S, we base our program's incorporation of multi-sports into two main areas:

We use **different invasion games** to help players learn tactical strategies and transfer these to soccer (i.e., starting an activity by playing handball). We also use **adapted games** that allow children to play more than one different sport simultaneously (i.e., football mixed with rugby). These varied sports contexts can provide unpredictable situations and

stimuli for players to adapt to, promoting creativity and enabling transfer of learning from one game to another.

Physical Literacy

The World Health Organisation (WHO) recently identified that 1.4 billion adults worldwide are failing to meet recommended amounts of physical activity, highlighting the need for **physical literacy** to be prioritised in youth sport and physical education.

The concept of physical literacy has traditionally focused on the development of fundamental movement skills, yet we subscribe to a more holistic approach that promotes physical literacy as an ***embodiment of mind and body***. This affords children...

'...the motivation, confidence, physical competence, knowledge and understanding to value and engage in physical activity for life' (Whitehead 2016)

At C.A.R.D.S, we incorporate physical literacy through the deliberate design of movement variability into all elements of our program, particularly at the younger ages. We also look to develop fundamental movement skills and fundamental game skills as *complementary pairs* wherever possible, often through small-sided games.

We also utilise a play-based approach to physical literacy - **Boing Kids** - that is being widely introduced in schools across the UK. This forms an important part of our C.A.R.D.S programs, whilst we also offer the **Boing** curriculum as a standalone school program. This approach is explained in more detail below.

BOING KIDS



'Children need time to play freely, to wonder and wander in the environment, to engage the world in their own imaginative ways' (Kentel & Dobson 2007)

Boing (www.boingkids.co.uk) represents a play-based approach to physical literacy, based upon a **constraints-led approach**. Rather than developing physical literacy through traditional sports games, it aims to provide a more varied experience to cater for a wider range of learners, ensuring a more holistic development journey for all children. Its purpose - in the words of its creators - is as follows:

The aim of our play curriculum is clear; to develop fluent movers, confident and creative young people who have a deep understanding and awareness of how they interact with the environment around them... We do this through play-games, games that are focused on the problem-solving, child-centred play and learning' (Roberts et al. 2019)

The 150 fun, non-sporting games that make up the **Boing** curriculum (www.boingkids.co.uk) create environments that implicitly offer opportunities for action for each learner, aligned to a specific developmental focus. Many of these focuses promote the C.A.R.D.S key skills, supporting its application within our programs.