

Playful Schools:

The power of Loose Parts Play

Executive Summary

August 2020 | Play Scotland Project Report

“Investing in children’s play is one of the most important things we can do to improve children’s health and wellbeing in Scotland.”

Professor Sir Harry Burns,
Former Chief Medical Officer, Scotland



Introduction

The Playful Schools Project was a collaboration between Play Scotland and ScrapAntics CIC, funded by the Scottish Government's Wellbeing Fund. It was a pilot project to explore the potential for Loose Parts Play to promote children's mental health and wellbeing in the context of Covid-19.

Playful Schools delivered Loose Parts Play sessions across Dundee's Community Hubs during the 2020 summer break. Alongside the delivery of play sessions, we conducted research to understand a) the impact of Loose Parts Play on children's mental health and wellbeing and b) the potential barriers to provision of Loose Parts Play in the context of Covid-19.

Over the six-week delivery period, Playful Schools provided 1160 play opportunities. Due to the fluctuation in numbers of children attending the Hubs each day, there was a large variation in numbers with between 5 and 30 children per session. Across the eight Hubs we provided play opportunities for an average of 216 children per week.

There was a large age range among the children participating in the sessions, with children from the age of 4 years old to 14 years old choosing to take part. In the vast majority of sessions, children were not divided by age and there was therefore a mix of age groups playing in each session. In a few sessions, children were separated by age groups with younger (4-10) and older (11-14) children playing in separate sessions.

Playful Schools has demonstrated that:

- **Outdoor, free play is crucial to children's mental health and wellbeing**
- **Children want to play and make full use of any free play opportunities offered**
- **Loose Parts Play supports children to continue to achieve developmental milestones**
- **Provision of free play opportunities within the context of Covid-19 is entirely feasible.**



Marguerite Hunter Blair
CEO Play Scotland

Executive Summary

Supporting children's play in the context of Covid-19

Why we need to support children's play within Covid-19

Playful Schools clearly demonstrated the positive impact of outdoor, child-led play on children attending the Community Hubs. This was recognised by the children, the Hub staff and by the playworkers. Due to both Covid-19 restrictions and issues of staffing, children were spending most of their days in the Hubs inside classrooms. For many of the children, they had been attending the Hubs throughout lockdown while their friends had been at home and this was continuing for what would usually have been their summer break. The children were not necessarily in their own school or with their own friends. The daily routine within the Hubs was inconsistent each day due to the work patterns of caregivers and the changing staff teams. Society asked a lot of these children, and comments throughout the project indicated that they felt that pressure:

"Yesterday... a lot of the children were saying 'I'm sick of being in school, I've had enough'. In that group I could tell they were feeling a bit fed up and emotional. They all loved the loose parts and got really into it but at the start... the children were feeling a bit down."

Loose Parts Play clearly helped the children to navigate this complexity and process the demands of being in unfamiliar and inconsistent environments. This includes children simply being able to exercise and 'blow off some steam' by being outdoors, to being able to use the play to interact socially and to build friendships, or having the freedom to choose how to use their time:

"I definitely think it's impacted them. They're more confident and they built relationships through play with other children and had more freedom, going outside, getting exercise and fresh air. And even they see the value in that. Even the children will say 'I need to go outside.'"

"When we asked for feedback... we asked what their favourite bit of loose parts was and they all said being able to do whatever you want."

The freedom to choose to use the time as they wished was identified by playworkers as crucial. It meant that some children chose to play on their own, sometimes using the time to simply lie on the grass and feel the heat of the sun or swing in a home-made hammock. It meant that children could create their own sense of security through building a den and then relaxing inside it. For some children it meant using their energy to lift heavy resources, or to make noise, or to roll inside a barrel. What the research has clearly demonstrated is that the freedom to use the Loose Parts Play in any way they wished enabled children to process, connect and relax. Crucially however, what the research also demonstrates is that supporting children to engage in free play also supported their continued social, emotional, cognitive and physical development even within the complexities of the Covid-19 landscape.

The outcomes of supporting children's play in Covid-19

Playful Schools demonstrated that child-led free play not only supported children's mental health and wellbeing, it also enabled children to continue to develop social, emotional, physical and cognitive skills. This included children forming new friendships and developing their own support networks, improvements in their communication, ranging from the increased listening skills through to negotiation and conflict resolution, and improvements in their fine and gross motor skills. Across all groups, playworkers reported an increased sense of bravery to engage in new or challenging activities and increased levels of collaborative and inclusive play. The children developed individually, for example learning to skip or balance, and they developed collectively through the negotiation and problem-solving inherent in large group play.

The Playful Schools project clearly demonstrated that Loose Parts Play supported the full range of children's development. Despite children in the Community Hubs being on the frontline during the national lockdown, the research has provided evidence of the numerous ways in which Loose Parts Play supported their mental health and wellbeing. Furthermore, engaging in Loose Parts Play provided opportunities for them to continue to meet key social, emotional, physical and cognitive developmental milestones.

Loose Parts Play supports children's social and emotional development:

- Improved listening skills
- Stronger communication skills
- Improved negotiation skills
- Ability to independently resolve conflicts
- Increased recognition of other people's needs, including ability to comfort self and others
- Increased emotional regulation, including frustration and disappointment
- Increased sense of bravery and self confidence
- Ability to review perceptions of self and others
- Increased resilience in perceived failures.

"Yes, at every school [children have changed]. Lots of kids being more independent, not asking for help. Just their attitude and the way they're sorting out problems between their peers. You know, they want to use something and the others have got it and finding a way round it rather than kicking up a fuss. They've been 'Right okay, maybe I can trade you something'."

[talking about two brothers who had an argument about not wanting to share a loose part the previous week] "So last week when the same thing happened, he got in a huff, kicked off and was trying to hit him [his brother] with a pole. But this week... I went over and asked him what was wrong and he said he wanted that, and I said 'Well, they're using it so what else can we use?' and he just immediately went 'Well, I want to build this, so I can use this, this and this' and went and picked it all up. Last week he couldn't even comprehend that he can build things with other things and this week he was like 'Hmm, the tyre will do the job, let's get the tyre'. So that was nice and I was a bit 'Ach, I'm so proud of you.' "

"It's been a natural progression for the children. It's not been us pushing them to do anything, it's just letting them know that we're here for them if they need the support but letting them work it out for themselves. And you can tell that they're so much more confident."

"At [name of Hub] they've been a lot braver. And saying things like 'If it wasn't for you, I wouldn't be able to do this.'"

"... seeing them get brave and... being proud of themselves for doing things, like building things. Coming out the first week not really quite sure, being quite babyish in the way they went about it, and in the last week they're throwing themselves off structures that they've built, being so happy."

"At [name of Hub] we had the biggest group of kids I've ever seen play together. They set up like a wedding venue, they tied loads of fabric everywhere and it also had a big structure that you could walk through. But they all played together."

Loose Parts Play supports children's physical development:

- Ensures access to outdoor physical exercise
- Increased balance and coordination e.g. walking along a plank of wood
- Increased locomotive skills e.g. skipping, running
- Increased hand-eye coordination e.g. throwing, catching
- Improved fine motor skills e.g. tying a knot.

"I haven't exercised since the start of lockdown."

"She was the little girl who couldn't skip and now she's up to 30 skips... she's really come on leaps and bounds."

"... one kid had a hula hoop and a ball and was just trying to throw the ball through the hula hoop."

"They're far more confident with mechanisms now, like tying things, or trying to balance things. The things they were making were much more complex."

"... in the first week she was climbing up a plank that was this far off the ground [indicating about 30 centimetres], and she was like 'Someone needs to hold my hand' and freaking out. And this week she was probably about my height and throwing herself off totally independently onto these mats and just having such a laugh when she was doing it, completely without our support."

Loose Parts Play supports children's cognitive development:

- Increased focus and attention
- Increased imagination and creativity
- Improved ability to problem-solve
- Ability to learn from mistakes
- Ability to plan, execute and revise a project.

“He was getting annoyed because the things he was changing weren't really going to change the things [that weren't] working, but he gradually worked it out [by] working with other kids and taking on ideas. It was good. They kept improving on it, it's not like it was done and they left. We turned around and it had grown about 8 foot!”

“It was like at [name of Hub] last week, they would see four tyres and they'd be like, 'Right I'm going to make a car'. [But] this week they were using tyres for different things. Not just like 'What are they normally used for, let's try to build that', they were using tyres for different functions. Maybe it's a base for something that they can then built up on top of rather than trying to build [whatever] they would normally be used for.”

“We were talking about how much [name]'s play had changed over the course of the summer... He was more confident to have more imaginative play... he was a lot more relaxed than he was at the beginning of the project.”

“I think you watch the kids problem solve. Like when they build the marble runs and they don't work, it doesn't connect or it doesn't run, you can just help them to problem solve and work out how to fix it but always using their ideas.”

“They seem quite resilient with their failures. They'd built a ship at [name of Hub] and the mast kept falling down and they were just giggling and going 'Ach, jeezy peeps, there it goes again!' They weren't overly frustrated or upset by their failures.”

How to support children's play in the context of Covid-19

The key learning from the Playful Schools project has been that even within the complexities presented by Covid-19, children need to play. The research identified a clear relationship between the way children engaged with play, the contextual factors that supported their play, and their social, emotional, physical and cognitive development. As children's confidence in the context surrounding their play grew, the play evolved and the children were then able to meet key development milestones. This process is illustrated in our Model of Loose Parts Play. This means that the responsibility of the playworker is to support the contextual factors that enable children to play - we have called these contextual factors the 'Foundations of Child-led Free Play': establishing familiarity and trust, encouraging ownership and independence, and recognition of achievement.

Interestingly, the data did not provide any evidence of a direct impact of Covid-19 on children's play. For example, playworkers were surprised by how comfortable children were to touch the loose parts resources, showing no nervousness or cautiousness about germs or risks of infection. The children actively sought touch, both from each other and from playworkers.

They were keen to regularly sanitise their hands but playworkers felt this was more to do with novelty of asking playworkers for a spray from their bottle of sanitiser rather than concerns around cleanliness. While this indicates that children remain keen to engage in play, it also demonstrates the level of responsibility upon the adult facilitating the play to ensure a 'Covid safe' play environment for children.

Our responsibility is to ensure children continue to play. We can achieve this by:

a) Ensuring the 'Foundations of child-led free play' through:

- Facilitating familiarity and trust
- Encouraging ownership and independence
- Recognising achievement and reinforcing gratification.

b) Ensuring 'Covid safe' Loose Parts Play through:

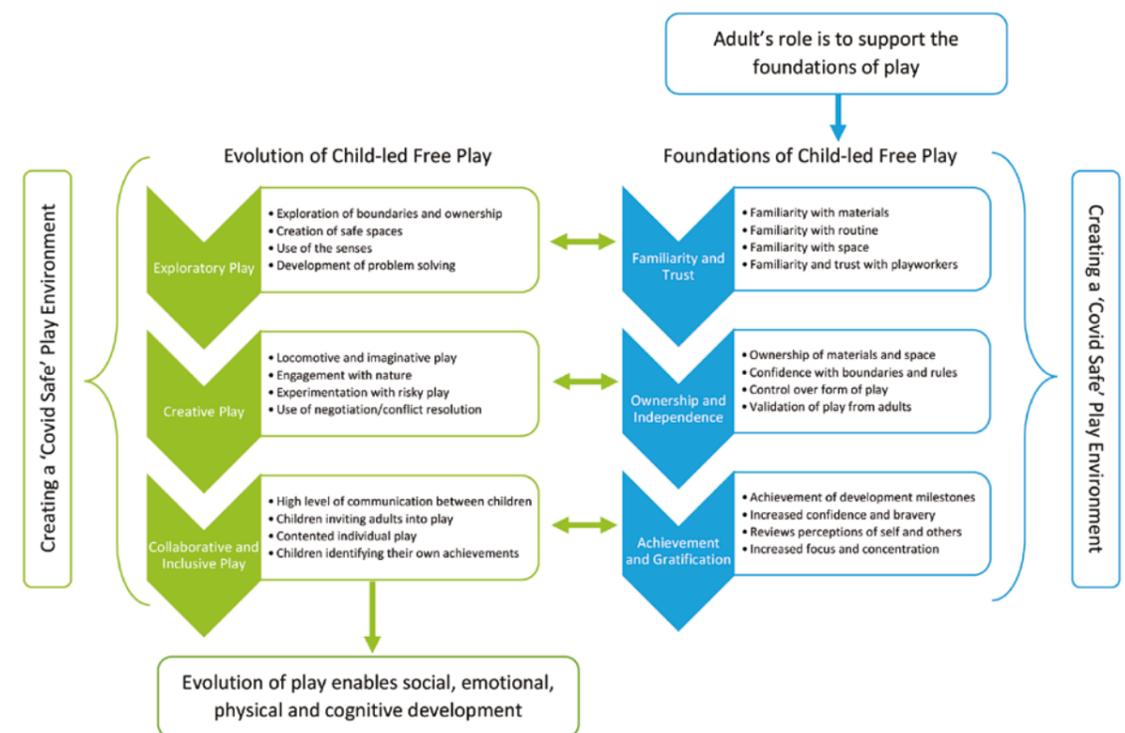
- Ensuring availability of, and necessary storage for, one complete set of loose parts resources per setting (i.e. resources should not be used in multiple settings)
- Building at least one hour into staff time for cleaning after every play activity
- Minimising the use of resources with porous surfaces (i.e. carpets, foam)
- Creating a 'rota' of soft-porous loose parts resources (if used) to ensure 72 hours quarantine between use
- Playworkers carrying their own PPE at all times, including hand sanitiser, mask and gloves

- Playworkers wearing masks when it is not possible to maintain the 2-metre distance
- Ensuring children wash hands before and after every play session
- Ensuring children and playworkers hand sanitise at least every 20 minutes during play.

The power of Loose Parts Play is that it is for everyone:

“I think it's something that they are all good at... They can naturally do this. They don't need to build up a skill set, they can just instantly get stuck in and be good at it.”

The full Playful Schools research report and *Playful Schools: a toolkit for delivering Loose Parts Play in Covid-19* is available at: www.playscotland.org/coronavirus-play-scotland



Project partners:



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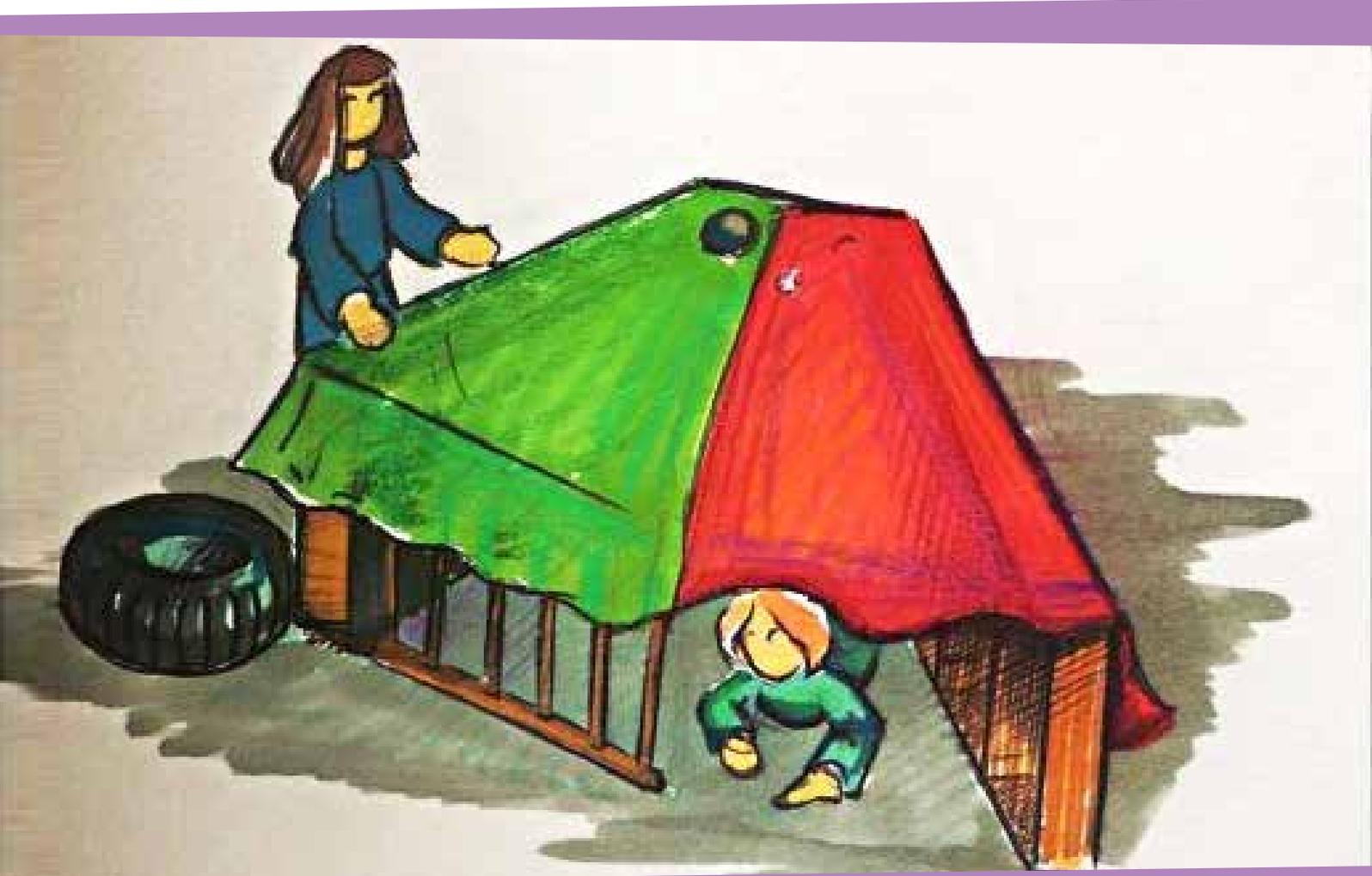
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This report was written by Dr Victoria Jupp Kina, Social Research ReImagined
Illustrations by Rhiannon Moore, Kitchimama
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www.playscotland.org
info@playscotland.org



Play Scotland
Rosebery House, Level 1,
9 Haymarket Terrace,
Edinburgh EH12 5EZ
T: 0131 313 8859



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