

# Playful Schools:

## The power of Loose Parts Play

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:

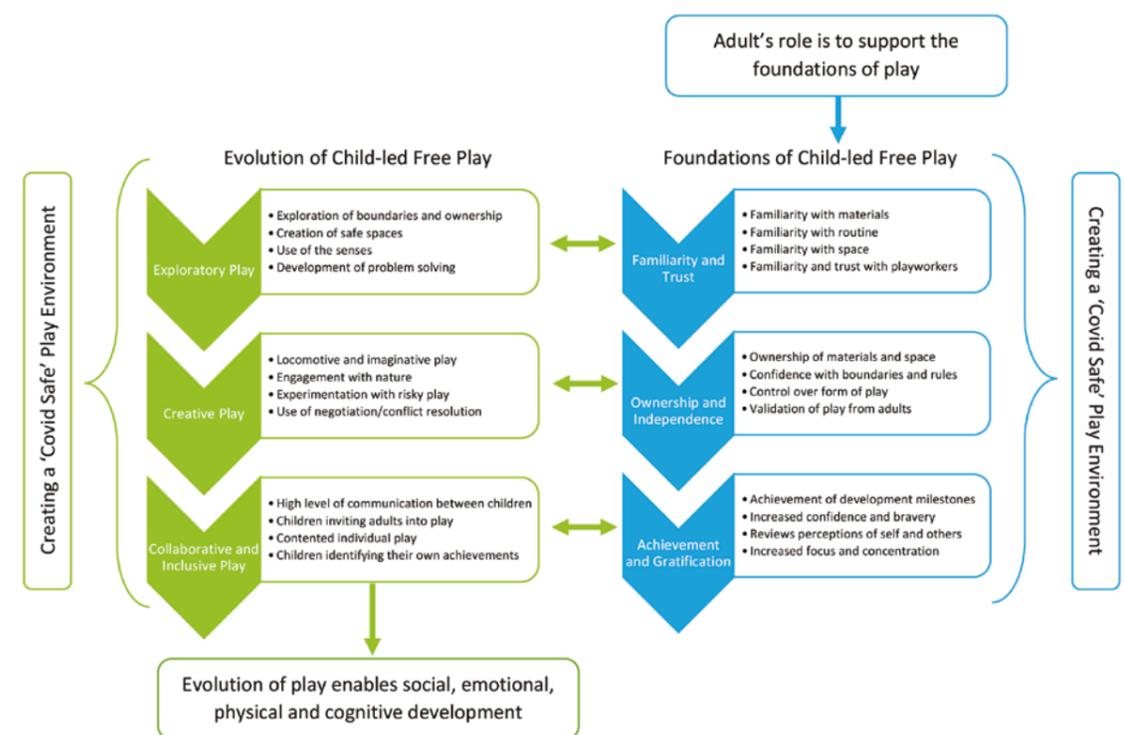
- Ensuring availability of, and necessary storage for, one complete set of loose parts resources per setting (i.e. resources should not be used in multiple settings)
- Building at least one hour into staff time for cleaning after every play activity
- Minimising the use of resources with porous surfaces (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](http://www.playscotland.org/coronavirus-play-scotland)



# Playful Schools - Full Report

## Section 1: Background

### Project Aims

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 all eight of Dundee's Community Hubs during the 2020 summer break. Alongside the delivery of the 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. There are obvious challenges to delivering play sessions during Covid-19. The project therefore also provided an opportunity to explore the potential ways in which Loose Parts Play can be adapted to facilitate children's play and provide opportunities for play and socialisation within this complex context.

### Project Context

Covid-19 has increased stress for children as a result of changes of routines, increased pressures within the family home, increased perceptions of and sensitivity to risk and limited opportunities for socialisation. In April 2020 Play Scotland undertook a survey of play and childcare settings in Scotland in which they identified that the impact of Covid-19 on children and families' mental

health and wellbeing was a major concern. The survey highlighted the impact of the current restrictions on children's indoors and outdoors play and the lack of structure in children's lives, raised concerns that children's social needs were not being met and pointed to the potential negative impact on school transitions.

The survey highlighted the need to pay particular attention to children's social and emotional wellbeing in Covid-19 recovery plans. Other research has also provided initial evidence that the lockdown has created a play deficit for Scotland's children with 50% of primary school children now feeling lonely (Cartwright-Hatton et al, 2020). It is therefore expected that emotional, behavioural and psychological challenges within the school environment will increase as children begin returning to school. Loose Parts Play has been proven to reduce challenging behaviours and increase concentration and cognitive abilities. We want to understand the potential of Loose Parts Play to address some of the challenges facing schools and support children in the transition back to a formal learning environment. This project was designed to both address this play deficit through the direct provision of play opportunities, and understand the impact of Loose Parts Play on children's mental health and wellbeing in the context of Covid-19.

### Project Outcomes

This was a pilot project designed to inform the national strategy for supporting children's mental health and wellbeing during and after Covid-19. As well as the delivery of the Loose Parts Play sessions, by embedding action research within the delivery of the work we have been able to gather data about the way in which children have been navigating the new Covid-19 landscape and the role of child-led, outdoor play in children's learning, development and recovery. Alongside this final project report we have developed a Playful Schools toolkit to provide the evidence on the impact of play and propose models for how to continue to offer Loose Parts Play within the context of Covid-19.

### Definitions and Theoretical Foundations

#### The Right to Play

Play is a fundamental right of childhood and is central to children and young people's wellbeing and development. Play is a fundamental and vital dimension of the pleasure of childhood, as well as an essential component of physical, social, cognitive, emotional and spiritual development. The National Play Strategy for Scotland (Scottish Government, 2013) recognises play as essential to healthy development from birth to adulthood. Scotland's Former Chief Medical Officer, Professor Sir Harry Burns asserted that investing in children's play is one of the most important things we can do to improve children's health and wellbeing in Scotland. At a national level, it is therefore recognised that children must be able to play freely and safely while learning to manage risks and make choices about where, how and when they play according to their age, ability and preference.

Children's right to play is embedded in Article 31 of the United Nations Convention of the Rights of the Child (UNCRC). When they play, children drive their own development. We know that play has a critical role in building:

- the structures of the brain
- stronger, healthy bodies
- resilience – children's ability to cope with stress, challenges and setbacks
- skills such as creativity, problem-solving and critical thinking
- children's sense of identity
- close family relationships
- strong connections within communities.

Children need time, permission and space to play. They need opportunities to experience risk and develop resilience through play. Play is a powerful builder of happy, healthy, capable children. In short, play builds children (Children's Play Policy Forum, 2019).

#### Loose Parts Play

Loose parts resources are everyday objects that can be used in an endless variety of ways. Playing with loose parts requires imagination, making it an inherently creative activity. The term 'loose parts' first emerged during the 1970s after the publication of Nicholson's (1971) article 'The Theory of Loose Parts: How Not to Cheat Children'. Nicholson argued that we are all born creative but that education and culture restricts the natural urge to invent, explore and discover. In contrast, loose parts or the 'variables' in life such as materials, shapes, smells, fluids, sounds, motions, fire and plants, enable children to 'play, experiment, discover, invent and have fun.'

**"In any environment, both the degree of inventiveness and creativity, and the possibility of discovery, are directly proportional to the number and kind of variables in it." (Nicholson, 1971: 30)**

The aim of Loose Parts Play is simply to increase the range of objects children have to play with, providing a space for them to explore everyday items and use their natural creative instincts to discover new ways to play. Loose parts are not toys, but rather objects with endless possibilities. Each object will be viewed in a unique way by each child – it will be interpreted or understood differently depending on the ‘affordances’ given to it by each child in a particular moment. ‘Affordance Theory’ (1979) was developed by an American psychologist James J. Gibson and suggests that environments and objects within them have values and meanings that are unique to the person perceiving them. For example, a brick wall may be built to make a clear boundary between a pavement and a garden but for many children it would offer something to sit on, walk along, balance on, hide behind or jump off.

A car tyre in a Loose Parts Play session may represent the wheel of a taxi, or a base for a den, a mode by which to roll down a hill, or part of an obstacle course. The key is that any object can be interpreted in a limitless number of ways depending on the symbolic world created by the person playing with it. This is the aim of Loose Parts Play – to provide a wide variety of objects that children do not usually interact with and allow them to create, interpret, and understand these objects in any way they wish.

More recently, Loose Parts Play is described by Casey and Robertson (2019) in the ‘Loose Parts Play Toolkit’ as an activity that creates a richer environment for children, allowing them to do what they need to do, to follow their interests and go where their curiosity takes them. They describe environments full of loose parts as blurring of distinctions between learning and playing, allowing children to experiment, enjoy and find things out for themselves.

### The Role of the Adult in Loose Parts Play

Loose Parts Play is generally a free play activity. Free play means that play should be ‘freely chosen’. In other words, it should be spontaneous and unpredictable. It should be performed for no external goal or reward but rather something that the child chooses to engage with for no motivation other than the enjoyment of play. However free play does not mean that the adult has no role. As the play and learning expert Tina Bruce (2005) highlights child-led play can be initiated by a child or an adult and adults can work in partnership with the child or children in their play. The crucial – and very challenging – balance to find is ensuring that the child remains in control of the activity. Playwork is a distinct area of work with children and young people and facilitating play requires distinct skills. The Playwork Principles, developed by the Playwork Principles Scrutiny Group in 2005, were developed to provide a professional and ethical framework for playwork, including the role of the adult in facilitating play, and as such are worth referring to in full:

### The Playwork Principles

The Playwork Principles describe what is unique about play and playwork, and provide the playwork perspective for working with children and young people. They are based on the recognition that children and young people’s capacity for positive development will be enhanced if given access to the broadest range of environments and play opportunities.

- 1. All children and young people need to play. The impulse to play is innate. Play is a biological, psychological and social necessity, and is fundamental to the healthy development and wellbeing of individuals and communities.**
- 2. Play is a process that is freely chosen, personally directed and intrinsically motivated. That is, children and young people determine and control the content and intent of their play, by following their own instincts, ideas and interests, in their own way for their own reasons.**
- 3. The prime focus and essence of playwork is to support and facilitate the play process and this should inform the development of play policy, strategy, training and education.**
- 4. For playworkers, the play process takes precedence and playworkers act as advocates for play when engaging with adult led agendas.**
- 5. The role of the playworker is to support all children and young people in the creation of a space in which they can play.**
- 6. The playworker’s response to children and young people playing is based on a sound up to date knowledge of the play process, and reflective practice.**
- 7. Playworkers recognise their own impact on the play space and also the impact of children and young people’s play on the playworker.**
- 8. Playworkers choose an intervention style that enables children and young people to extend their play. All playworker intervention must balance risk with the developmental benefit and wellbeing of children.**

## Section 2: Project Delivery

### Project Overview

The benefits of outdoor play are widely recognised and there is a growing recognition that children’s access to outdoor play opportunities will be crucial to children’s recovery from lockdown (Cartwright-Hatton, Dodd and Lester, 2020). Child development experts are predicting a mental health crisis as a result of the ‘play deficit’ in children’s lives (Cartwright-Hatton et al, 2020) that will further deepen social, racial and economic inequalities. The Playful Schools project was designed specifically to understand how we could minimise the ‘collateral damage’ inflicted on children as a result of the imposed social isolation (Play Safety Forum, 2020) and continue to ensure children have access to child-led socialisation through outdoor play opportunities.

Playful Schools was delivered from 29th June to 4th August 2020 during the six-week period that Scottish schools would usually have been closed for the summer holidays. Restrictions on social distancing changed significantly during the delivery period, reflecting the key stages in the Scottish Government’s ‘Routemap through and out of the crisis’ (Scottish Government, 2020). The key change was on 10th July 2020 when restrictions on children 11 and under were eased, enabling children to not have to socially distance from other children and adults outdoors.

The project delivered 1160 play opportunities over the summer holiday period. This was formed of 44 Loose Parts Play sessions, ranging between 45 minutes to 3 hours in length, across the eight newly formed Community Hubs in Dundee. The Community Hubs were attended by children of key workers, resulting in a fluctuation in numbers of children attending each day depending of their caregiver’s work patterns. The Hubs were managed and staffed on a rotational

basis by people drawn from both the Children and Families team and the Community Learning and Development team in Dundee City Council. We provided one 3-hour Loose Parts Play session per week (which was sometimes split into one, two or three shorter play sessions) in each Hub for the duration of the summer break.

### Project Preparation

Due to the nature of the funding, the project preparation had to be done in a very short timeframe, and because of restrictions any training and meetings had to be done virtually. Fortunately, the playworkers were already well experienced in this type of work. The workers received training in Loose Parts Play, Child Protection and Safeguarding, Risk Benefit Assessment, guidance on working with Covid-19 restrictions and a basic introduction to action research.

Staff were provided with extensive risk benefit assessments and cleaning routines at the start of the project. A member of the coordinating team met with staff weekly throughout the project period to provide support and ensure unforeseen challenges were addressed.

To ensure that children were not exposed to Covid-19, the following systems were put in place:

- Loose Parts Play resources were only used in one Community Hub for the duration of the project
- All Loose Parts Play resources were used once a week and stored between sessions to prevent cross-infection between groups of children
- All playworkers carried their own PPE at all times, including hand sanitiser, which they used regularly throughout every play session
- Playworkers only worked in one Community Hub each day and wore a fresh set of clothes each day

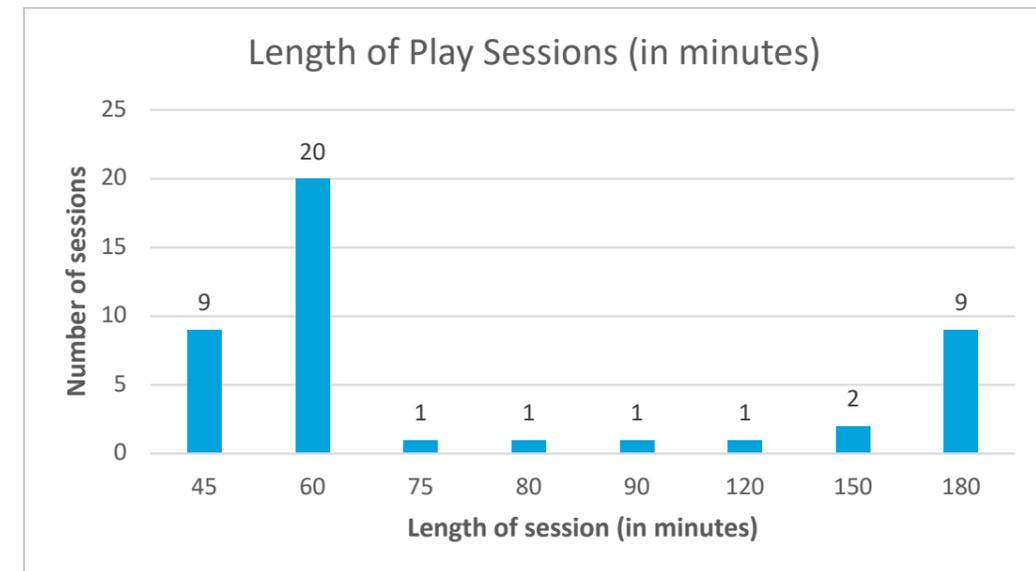
- Playworkers were allocated dedicated cleaning time before, during and after every play session to ensure thorough disinfection of all resources
- If social distancing could not be maintained, for example due to the need to administer first aid, playworkers used gloves and a facemask
- Social distancing between adults was maintained at all times, including transport to and from sessions.

### Description of Loose Parts Play Sessions

Play sessions were designed to be flexible to meet the range of requirements in each Community Hub. In Hubs where there were a smaller number of children, sessions were often designed to follow a drop-in or open format in which children could choose how long they took part. This occurred in two Hubs and sessions were between 2.5 and 3 hours (150 or 180 minutes) in length. The majority of children, including the younger children, chose to participate for the full length of the session.

In Hubs with a larger number of children, the majority of sessions were divided into shorter 45-minute or 60-minute sessions. All children were free to choose to participate in the sessions and were able to withdraw from the sessions at any point. Again, we found that nearly all children chose to make use of the full time available and often expressed sadness when the sessions ended.

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. While this was in response to requirements in the Community Hubs rather than a decision made by the delivery team, it provided valuable insights into the impact of mixed age groups on play.

There was a large range of Loose Parts Play resources available in each Community Hub, including large items such as drainpipes, barrels and pallets, smaller items such as golf balls and steering wheels, and items useful for imaginative and creative play, such as telephones, computer keyboards and chairs. There were also items that enabled mobility, such as chairs on caster wheels, and softer items such as fabric and carpet squares. A full Loose Parts Play resource list is provided in *Playful Schools: a toolkit for delivering Loose Parts Play in Covid-19*.

In relation to facilitation, play sessions were facilitated by either two or three playworkers depending on the number of children attending each Hub. In the vast majority of sessions Hub staff were also present during the sessions. The presence of other adults did at times heavily influence the children's play and this is discussed later in this report.

### Description of Research Process

Playful Schools was planned and delivered as an action research project designed specifically to:

1. Understand the potential impact of Loose Parts Play sessions on children's mental health and wellbeing
2. Understand the ways in which Loose Parts Play can be designed flexibly to provide play opportunities within the context of Covid-19.

Action research has four main characteristics (adapted from McNiff and Whitehead, 2009): taking action, doing research, telling the 'story' and sharing findings, and critically reflecting on our practice. In this project, the playworkers worked with an experienced researcher to collect data during and after each play session. All seven Playful Schools staff participated in the research. Data was collected in three ways:

- 1. Daily observation questionnaires – one questionnaire was completed by each playwork team after every play session (44 questionnaires in total)**
- 2. Weekly group interviews – the project had two playwork teams and each team attended one group interview each week to capture key observations (10 interviews in total, between 1 hour to 1.5 hours in duration)**
- 3. Children's evaluation – we devised a simple 'sticks and stones' activity to try to capture children's perceptions at the start and end of each play session (20 evaluations were completed in total – the evaluation was optional and children often chose not to complete this task).**

Data was analysed by the project researcher, Dr Victoria Jupp Kina. The quantitative data within the daily questionnaires were entered into excel and analysed using basic descriptive statistics functions. The group interviews were partially transcribed and analysed using thematic analysis. The qualitative data within the questionnaires were analysed in full alongside the interview data.

## Section 3: Key Learning

### 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.

### The Importance of free play in 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. Loose Parts Play clearly helped the children to navigate the complex landscape within the Community Hubs 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 interact socially and to build friendships, or having the freedom to choose how to use their time. What Playful Schools has highlighted is that the freedom to use the Loose Parts Play sessions 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.

**Key Learning:** Loose Parts Play supported children's mental health and wellbeing alongside enabling continued achievement of developmental milestones.

### How to support children's free play in Covid-19

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'.

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.

**Key learning:** Playworkers have a dual responsibility within the context of Covid-19. In this context, facilitation of child-led free play requires playworkers to ensure two parallel processes:

- a) supporting the 'Foundations of child-led free play'; and,**
- b) ensuring the 'Conditions for 'Covid safe' Loose Parts Play.'**

### How to create the 'Foundations of child-led free play':

Supporting Loose Parts Play requires sensitive practice that recognises children's play processes and resists the urge to step in too soon or too frequently. Knowing when to step back – and when to step 'in' – is a constantly shifting judgement call. It depends on each child, on the energy of a group of children in a particular moment, on what happened five minutes ago, on what happened two hours ago, or what happened last week. The reasons for deciding on how to facilitate in a particular moment are based on principles rather than defined rules. The research has provided some clarity to the principles underpinning the adult's role in supporting child-led free play through highlighting that the focus of the adult facilitating Loose Parts Play should not be on the play, but rather on ensuring three key contextual factors that influence the evolution of children's 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.

**Key learning:** The role of the adult is to ensure the foundations of child-led free play. This means that the adult's role is to:

- Facilitate familiarity and trust;
- Encourage ownership and independence;
- Recognise achievement and reinforce gratification.

## How to Ensure 'Covid-safe' Loose Parts Play

### Cleaning of Loose Parts Play resources

In this project cleaning of the resources proved to be relatively unproblematic, although this process was time consuming for staff. The average time required for a full deep clean at end of every session was 57 minutes and this remained consistent throughout the delivery period. When cleaning between shorter play sessions was required, for example if a different group of children would be using the resources, this required at least 30 minutes and staff noted that this did at times feel too pressured.

**Key learning:** The time required for cleaning should be taken into consideration in any calculation of staff costs and calculated as follows:

- One hour – pre-session set up and check of equipment
- 45 minutes – mid-session cleaning (if working with different groups of children)
- One hour – end-of-session deep clean

### Impact of social distancing

Across all play sessions playworkers reported that it was not possible to consistently maintain social distancing with children. This was generally due to five reasons:

1. **Provision of physical support for younger children (e.g. holding hands to walk over bridges/get in or out of barrels)**
2. **Assisting children to move large and/or heavy items**
3. **Provision of basic first aid or comfort**
4. **Younger children seeking touch or adult interaction (e.g. holding hands or asking adults to tie their shoelaces)**
5. **Children inviting adults to engage with their play (e.g. inviting an adult into their den).**

There is an ongoing discussion regarding how to find a healthy balance between exposing children to risk of infection and the 'collateral damage' to children's health and wellbeing as a result of social distancing. Part of the aim of Playful Schools was to understand if it was possible to facilitate child-led free play within the restrictions placed upon society as a result of Covid-19.

The easing of restrictions on younger children's social distancing in the third week of the project has influenced our ability to provide a conclusive answer to whether it is possible to maintain social distancing while facilitating children's play. Based on playworker observations the general answer is that this is neither possible nor beneficial to younger children.

The slight paradox of child-led free play is that while it requires adults to step back from their traditional roles as 'play leaders', the very nature of the play requires them to remain physically and emotionally available to children. Crucial stages in the evolution of children's play require the building of trust and adults are only able to do this through being physically available to children. What this project has demonstrated however is that in relation to the balance of risks and benefits of children engaging in play within the context of Covid-19, the consistent identification of quite profound changes in children's development, across all eight of the Community Hubs, provide evidence that the benefits of this activity far outweigh potential risks.

**Key learning:** While it is not possible to playworkers to consistently maintain social distancing from children when facilitating Loose Parts Play, the benefits of child-led free play outweigh the risks of infection when precautions are taken.

## Section 4: Analysis and Discussion

### The Model of Loose Parts Play: illustrating the relationship between play and development

Observations from playworkers clearly showed that the way in which children engaged with the loose parts resources changed both during each session and over the six-week project period. The analysis revealed that play evolved in three broad stages: initially the children engaged in various forms of exploratory play, before play gradually becoming more creative with children taking control over both the location and structure of their play. At this point observations from playworkers indicated that play became more collaborative and relaxed with a high level of interaction between children and very little involvement from adults. This broad sequential pattern was identified both within one single play session, with play becoming calmer and more contented as sessions progressed, and across the six-week project with play in the latter half of the project becoming noticeably more creative, collaborative and inclusive, and with less adult intervention needed.

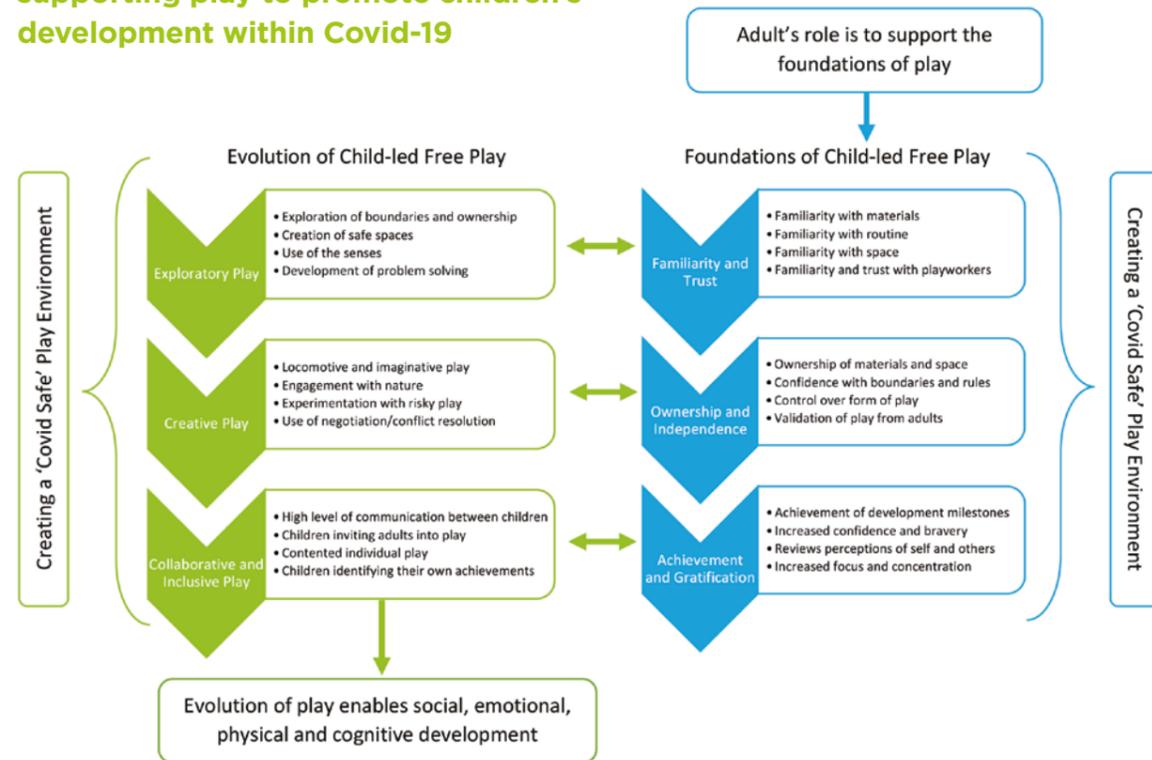
The three stages in the evolution of play related strongly to key stages in children's development. The analysis provided clear indications that the evolution of children's play was related to three key stages: familiarity and trust, ownership and independence, and achievement and gratification. What came through clearly from the analysis was that achievement of social, emotional, physical and cognitive development milestones, for example increased physical coordination or increased focus and concentration, required the foundation built by familiarity, trust, ownership and independence.

The evidence from this project identifies that even within the complexities presented by Covid-19, children need to play. They need it for their own development but they also need it to emotionally and cognitively process what is happening around them. The fact that play consistently became more calm, focused and imaginative both during the sessions and over the six-week delivery period provides a clear message that children need play to be able to engage with both their own learning and to positively connect with the people around them.

Observations from Playful Schools staff provide clear evidence that Loose Parts Play supports children's mental health and wellbeing. Through being supported to become familiar with both their surroundings and build trust with the playworkers, children were able to increase their sense of ownership and independence which in turn enabled them to continue to achieve their social, emotional, physical and cognitive milestones. What this research has demonstrated therefore is that we have a responsibility to ensure that children continue to be supported to play freely even within the complexities of Covid-19.

This however raises the question of how to support play within this context. What the research has demonstrated is that to support children to continue to play, playworkers – and any other adults facilitating children's play – have a dual responsibility to a) ensure children continue to have access to the conditions that enable child-led free play and b) ensure that this play environment is 'Covid safe.'

**Model of Loose Parts Play: supporting play to promote children’s development within Covid-19**



The Model of Loose Parts Play illustrates the relationship between the foundations of child-led free play and the way that children’s play develops over time. While this is a symbiotic relationship – for example, exploratory play enables the development of familiarity and trust, but familiarity and trust also facilitates exploratory play – the focus of the playworker’s role should be on supporting the foundations of play. In essence, the play will evolve if the foundations of free play are established. However, within the context of Covid-19, the playworker is required to also ensure a ‘Covid safe’ play environment. The research has shown that this is entirely possible by adopting the following basic framework:

**A Framework for ‘Covid safe’ Loose Parts Play:**

- Ensure 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)
- Build at least one hour into staff time for post-session cleaning after every play activity
- Minimise 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 carry their own PPE at all times, including hand sanitiser, mask and gloves
- Playworkers wear masks when it is not possible to maintain the 2-metre distance
- Ensure children wash hands before and after every play session
- Ensure children and playworkers hand sanitise at least every 20 minutes during play.

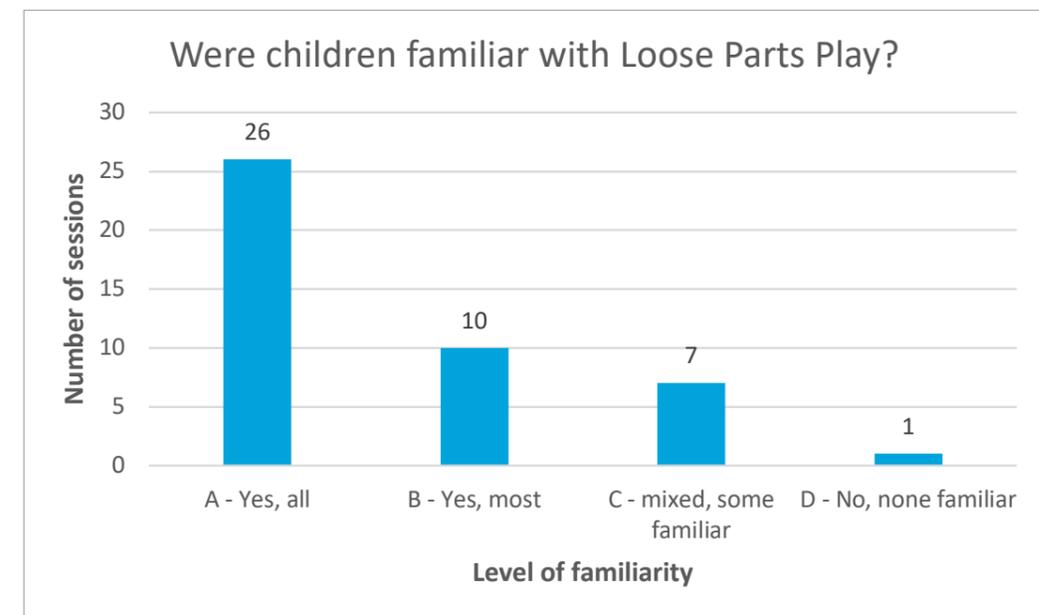
**The Three Stages in the ‘Evolution of Play’**

**Exploratory play:** Each session tended to start in the same way, with children running out of the school building or across the playground to explore both resources and spaces. During the first week, playworkers observed that most children worked together in smaller groups to build one structure and then utilised this newly created space in various ways as their play evolved:

“They played with things for a long time. You know, once they’d made a construction, they didn’t abandon it. They used it for lengthy periods of time. So shelters they’d built, they’d hover around and maybe add bits and pieces. But once it was built, they’d actually play in it. So once they’d built something they’d turn it into a shop, or they’d turn it into... there was a golf run at one point. And they would stay with it. They would stay with what they’d built.”

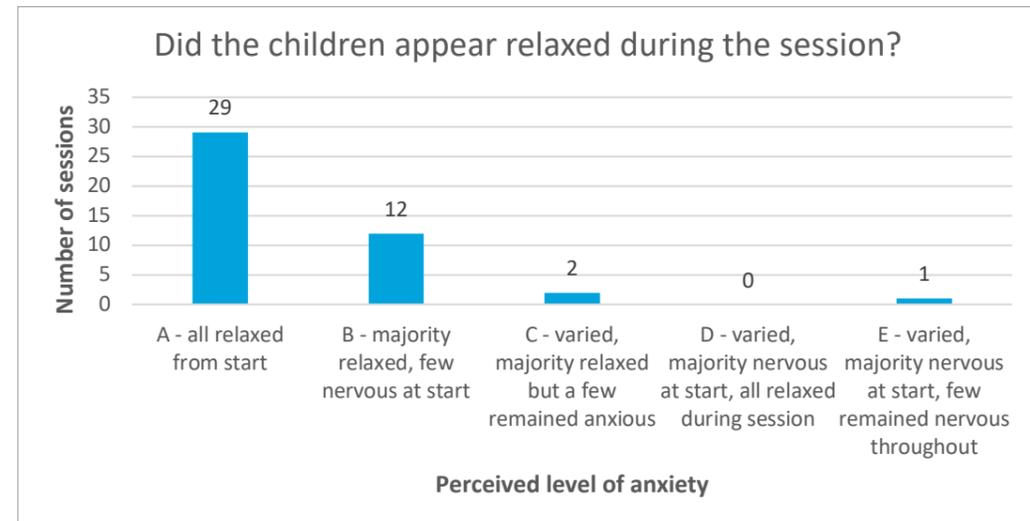
The first few sessions in all of the Community Hubs had similar patterns of behaviour, with the majority of children being extremely excited by the prospect of playing with unusual resources but a few showing some trepidation and uncertainty about both how to engage with the resources and the possibility of completely free play. Due to the nature of the Community Hubs, whereby they were being attended by children from a range of schools, it was clear to the playworkers that some children had experienced Loose Parts Play previously while for others it was completely new.

During the first two weeks of the project, playworkers reported that in all but one of the sessions there were children who had never experienced a Loose Parts Play session previously. Of the 25 sessions where staff reported that all children were familiar with Loose Parts Play, 24 occurred in the last three weeks of the project, indicating the consistency of children attending the sessions.



During the first couple of weeks of delivery, while children were still getting used to the process of Loose Parts Play, playworkers reported that some children required reassurance in order to fully engage with their play. All the sessions where playworkers

assessed some children as remaining anxious throughout occurred within the first two weeks of the project, and in all play sessions from the third week onwards children were seen to either be relaxed from the outset or to visibly relax as the session progressed.



The context of the Community Hubs meant that children were often in unfamiliar environments, as many did not attend the school where the Hub was located and many of the children were not attending the Hubs with their friends. Alongside this, many of the children's caregivers worked shifts which meant many children attended irregular hours. The combination of lack of familiarity and lack of a regular, predictable routine was highlighted by the playworkers as being particularly challenging and demonstrated the complex environment that children were navigating during this period. This meant that playworkers noticed that during the first one or two play sessions, some children required some initial reassurance but that once this happened, nearly all the children fully engaged with the possibility of free play:

**“At the start of that session we asked all the children how they were feeling before we started and we got a lot of answers back, one said that she was scared, and a couple were just a bit reluctant, you know, they were a bit edgy. But once they started, we just reassured and said all you're here to do is play, have a good time, enjoy yourself. And once that validation happened, they just went for it. So there was trepidation at the start of that session.”**

During the first two weeks of delivery playworkers reported that children who were unfamiliar with Loose Parts Play repeatedly checked in with them to ask what they were allowed to do and for confirmation of the 'rules' of the session. This contrasted with children who had experienced loose parts sessions previously, who tended to engage completely independently and appeared to understand that this was their time to play in

whatever form they wanted without the need to seek adult approval. As many children were attending Hubs located in schools that they did not usually attend, another key aspect to the Loose Parts Play sessions was that children were free to explore both the resources and the physical environment around them.

This freedom to fully explore the environment – and everything within it – was often new to the children as in the vast majority of the Hubs there were areas or pieces of equipment that had been demarcated as being 'off limits.' As described by one of the playworkers, allowing children the freedom to explore their full environment and reach their own decision about engaging with the loose parts resources was an essential part of the process of building trust:

**“I'm just reflecting back on the equipment that the children wouldn't usually be allowed to access. So we knew quite quickly [that they weren't usually allowed on the equipment], judging by the way they gravitated towards it... But we made a collective decision just to let that play out because the novelty of it wore off quite quickly and they got right back into loose parts right after that. Because there was actually a lot more going on with our stuff, with loose parts, than there was with gym equipment... It was almost like they needed to get that out of their system and then they were ready to go again [play with loose parts].”**

The concept of child-led, free play was completely new for some children. The notion of not having rules was both new and exciting, and crucial to the development of creativity:

**“On that very first session... a little boy came up to me and he was so excited that there was no restrictions and he, you know, just played independently and he was like ‘What, we can do anything? Anything we like?!’ and he was so excited. And I was like, ‘Yeah, just as long as you're playing safely’. I think that was really nice, I think if kids are new to loose parts that's a very strange concept but it's definitely exciting for the children to just use their inspiration and do whatever they like.”**

**“The kids that aren't used to it still come to you and ask ‘Can I do this?’ and you're like ‘Yeah, do what you want’. They're asking permission to do it before they do it, whereas the kids that have done it before are like ‘I know it's alright, I can do what I want’, you know, they just bash on. Like there was a wee boy with a keyboard and he was like ‘Can I break this, can I open it up?’ and we were like ‘Yeah, open it up’ and he was ‘Really? Can I actually?’ and we were ‘Yeah, honestly it's fine, open it up’. And when he opened it up, he was like ‘I didn't know that this is what a keyboard looked like inside!’ And then he was like ‘Where's the mouse...? I'm going to open the mouse up!’”**

***The power of Loose Parts Play is that it enables gradual, natural growth:***

***“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 totally tell that they're so much more confident.”***

Alongside the sense of freedom created by not enforcing rules, paradoxically the lack of boundaries could create anxiety for some children. However, across all sessions a common pattern of behaviour emerged in which children facilitated their own security through the creation of a base from which they would then engage in more creative and/or collaborative play. Observations from staff identified that the first thing children would do in a play session was create some form of base, or safe space.

This happened consistently across all play sessions, with children creating some form of space – be that a den, an enclosed space in the playground or simply by wrapping themselves in a large piece of fabric – before beginning to widen their play to include people outside of their immediate friendship groups. This safe ‘base’ or moment to relax appears to be crucial to enable children to gain the confidence they need to then explore new ideas, build new relationships or challenge themselves to engage in new activities. Essentially, the consistent way in which children utilised this initial base provides a strong indication that not only are children able to find ways to provide themselves with a sense of security, but that this is an essential stage in their social, emotional, physical and cognitive development:

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### ***The power of Loose Parts Play is that it provides space for all types of play:***

***“There was one kid just lying down enjoying the sun, watching all the kids, totally part of it, but completely doing his own thing. But just loved watching everybody do their stuff. That’s just what he enjoyed. I think we’re just helping kids find their way and I think that’s so important.”***

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**“I think the norm is for children to play in smaller groups but I think as the weeks have gone on they choose their loose parts and build their space to play around and once they’ve got that base almost they go out and play with other children... so normally the children will integrate once they have built their bases and they know where their pals are, then they will go round and mix and trade bits or ask what other kids are doing...”**

**“... when they are putting the objects around them it’s almost like they are making these bases of safety within quite big expanses... once they’ve got that base, they feel more secure in going out from it, finding the people they need or the objects they need. It feels a bit like a security blanket to me.”**

**“When we first brought out the fabric, I didn’t think the kids would like it. But every single time they love the fabric. Just sitting on the floor and wrapping it around themselves, just on the floor. I’ll ask what are you doing and they’ll be like ‘Just chillin’. So that’s another sensory environment, just wrapping yourself up and being on your own for 10 minutes because they’re with people all day.”**

This also highlights the role of the senses in the evolution of children’s play. The children often engaged with the loose parts resources in ways that enabled them to gain an understanding of the varying potential of each item – how loud it is when dropped or banged against something else, how heavy something is to move, how easy it is to balance at different angles, or how comfortable something is. Through allowing children the space to explore the items independently and decide for themselves whether it is possible to move something, or lift something, or push something, they are moving beyond immediate play to the exploration of the properties and potential of each resource.

This was observed by the playworkers, who identified that as children became more familiar with the resources they began to look beyond their literal uses – for example using tyres to make a car or taxi – and engage more creatively with the loose parts resources. As their familiarity increased, so did their level of imaginary play.

This familiarity was also fundamental to their ability to problem solve. Playworkers identified how children who in the first one or two sessions would become upset or angry if someone else was playing with an item that they felt that they needed, often requiring adult intervention to resolve the ensuing argument over ownership, in later sessions the same children were able to think round the problem and independently find alternative solutions:

**[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.”**

**“... 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’.”**

### **Creative play**

The familiarity with resources enabled children to expand the range of ways that they engaged with play. From the second week onwards, children were often overheard before the start of each session planning with each other which resources to grab. This not only provides an indication that they were engaged with the play even before the start of the play sessions but also shows the initial processes in taking ownership of their play. Playworkers observed that the way children utilised the loose parts resources followed a pattern, with most initial sessions featuring children making quite literal structures, like building dens, obstacle courses or large ‘marble’ runs.

The following weeks, they would embed their learning through building similar structures but identifying how they could be improved, or independently resolving problems they had previously encountered. The children appeared to use these structures as mechanisms through which they experimented with the resources and gathered important information like weight, density and length. As children became more familiar with both the loose parts and their physical environment, the nature of the play became more imaginative and the children utilised the available space differently. Observations indicate that children tended to gravitate towards either natural environments, if available, or spaces that were either slightly hidden from view or further away:

**“There was a lot more locomotive play, they were dragging things away, they were making separate play frames. They were just building different little areas... they were using all the space as opposed to just this one area. I don’t know about the others but I interpreted that as growing confidence, as taking more ownership over it. They weren’t looking for approval, they weren’t looking to the adults... there were bits where it felt as if we weren’t even there and that’s great.”**

“I think that was a running theme at all the schools, that the children were more confident in using loose parts. And [name of playworker] last week said children were going towards nature and I think that also happened as well. Like dragging the loose parts off the tarmac and onto the grass.”

“At [name of Community Hub] on Monday there was a grassy path behind the playground that they are not allowed to go on, usually, and they took quite a lot of the loose parts up there and played up there for quite a while. Both groups did that, didn't they?”

This movement away from the central space and towards nature appears to have developed alongside a new understanding of their immediate environment, including the potential of other objects that were not part of the loose parts resources. Playworkers observed children gain more confidence to incorporate benches, rubbish bins, hills and fences into their play, using these as extra resources within their imaginary play. They appeared to be taking ownership not only of the loose parts resources and their play space but also of the objects within it:

“I thought that was really interesting when they did that because they saw things that weren't conventional toys but using their imagination with the loose parts and could see other things with potential in the playground like fencing or bins.”

Playworkers identified that central to being able to see the potential in other objects is that loose parts resources require imagination. They are not typical items that children come into contact with. None of the loose parts resources provide a narrative to the play in the way a typical toy would – for example, the way a toy kitchen would automatically limit the imaginative process. It means that from the outset of the children's play, everything is creative:

“I think the fact that none of it is toys, so everything is creative. It's all coming from them and they're making whatever they are wanting to do or playing with whatever they want to play with, but it's not an actual toy. Even if they are making general things like cars or houses, things like that, they're using all these random things. And when you speak to them about it you realise how well thought out and how imaginative what they've made actually is.”

Alongside the increased creative engagement with objects within their immediate environment, children's ability to assess risk and understand their own limits also deepened in later play sessions. The sensory information gathered through their initial exploratory play enabled the children to develop a familiarity with the physical components of the different resources. This meant that children began to demonstrate that they knew when they would need help to move an object, or knew when something would be risky. From very early on in the sessions, children were consistently observed to be recognising when they would need help to lift a heavy or large item, and often they chose to ask other children for help rather than adults.

What became clear through the observations was that when adults stepped back, children no longer automatically looked towards the adults to provide solutions and this facilitated a sense of independence and achievement. Playworkers reported numerous examples of children engaging in their own risk assessments and changing their play make it less risky, for example by identifying when a structure felt too high or when it needed a stronger base to prevent it from falling over. This level of learning happened quickly – usually in the period of one or two play sessions – and meant that playworkers often commented that they had quickly become 'spare parts' themselves:

“We walk about more just watching them rather than having to intervene in arguments. Or like people aren't coming to us and asking can you help lift this, it's kind of like 'We know that that's heavy, so it'll take two or three of us to lift it' and they're doing it by themselves. It's been a lot more chilled out. To be honest this week I've felt a bit like a spare part just walking about.”

“If they're putting one of the pallets on its side, you know, we're aware that it's wobbly and they're kind of like 'I'm going to go and get something heavy to prop this up'... they're aware that they need to get something heavy, they're far more aware of the potential of the materials and what they could do, that they don't have to use it for the purpose that it was made for. 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.”

“I think they've enjoyed quite dangerous play. Taking risks. They all said sometimes it wasn't safe but we're having fun and we could change it so it felt safer... They're doing their own risk assessments.”

The increased communication between children also appeared to positively influence the level of negotiation and create space for conflict resolution. Play staff observed children finding ways to resolve arguments, for example through setting up a trading market to exchange items to solve issues over ownership. What clearly came through in the playworkers' observations was the relationship between children's ability to negotiate and their ability to think creatively about how resources could be used or adapted to meet their requirements:

“It's like instead of having an argument with someone about the massive piece of tarp being the one thing you could use as the roof, it would be 'I'm going to gather up the three different pieces of material and I'm going to find a way of putting these round this.' So instead of just going for the easy fix, they are realising they could go to an alternative... or negotiation, there was a bit more negotiation, I feel.”

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***The power of Loose Parts Play is that it lets children see their own progress:***

***“Just seeing the kids progress... seeing them get brave and seeing them 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. Just seeing the positive impact it's had on them is my favourite thing about it. Just allowing them to have the freedom and just stepping back as an adult.”***

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Playworkers also noted how the mood at the start of sessions was often influenced by incidents that might have happened earlier in the day, before the start of the play session, and highlighted how play usually became calmer and more focused as sessions progressed. The play sessions themselves also provided children with a means by which to re-engage socially with their peers after a disagreement or conflict, enabling them to leave the negative emotions behind and moving forward positively with their play:

**“On Tuesday’s session... there was a couple of little boys where there was an incident where one of them got hurt, but it turned out they were actually brothers as well, but we kind of resolved the situation by getting them to work together as a team... and by the end of it they were cuddling and best pals again. So, we were using the play to, not make them make up, but to take their mind off the fact that they’d fallen out, that they’d had a bit of an argument and using the play to get them back into a better place.”**

### **Collaborative and Inclusive Play:**

Playworkers consistently reported that a key feature of sessions was the level of communication between children – initially through exclamations like “I’ve got an idea!” or “Can you help me with this?” but then as relationships between the children developed the communication evolved to also include collaborative play and negotiation. Playworkers often overheard comments like:

**“Seeing as you’re making a den can I make a garden for it?”**

**“Let’s all build a big house together!”**

**“Why don’t we have turns about? You can have the toaster if we can come to your café”**

As sessions progressed it was clear that children were thinking about and planning what they would do prior to the start of sessions, developing more elaborate plans for how they could improve their structures or scenarios from the previous week. As children gained familiarity with the resources, playworkers observed children’s understanding of techniques and processes deepening. It was clear that the children were learning from the previous week’s experiences and often no longer required adult intervention to solve problems, like for example how to tie a knot in a rope to secure their structures. It was clear to playworkers that the children had been thinking and collectively talking about how to solve problems they had encountered the previous week prior to the play sessions, indicating that their level of engagement with play was having a direct influence over their level of engagement with their own learning.

In virtually all the sessions, staff described the children’s energy at the start of the session as excited and playful. For almost three quarters of the sessions (30) the energy was also described as curious and inquisitive. In over half of the sessions playworkers described the energy as boisterous, while the energy at the start of a few sessions (6) was described as either aggressive, argumentative or agitated. It is important to note however that even when energy was agitated, staff from the Community Hubs consistently reported that all the children chose to take part in the loose parts sessions, irrespective of their mood. Playworkers noted that the energy generally became calmer as sessions progressed and it was important to allow the children the space to work through their energy and find their own rhythms:

**“I think they get more calm as the sessions go on. They all come out all guns blazing, running in and trying to grab as much stuff as they can before someone else grabs it but then as it goes on they realise maybe they need a hand or something someone else is doing looks pretty cool and they want to be involved in it, so I think it gets more calm and the teamwork probably progresses as the session goes on.”**

As sessions progressed children were less and less reliant on adult intervention and playworkers reported that their roles changed as children’s confidence grew, with playworkers regularly referring in later weeks to children using them as ‘resources’ rather than as problem solvers. They would be invited into children’s play environments to either be useful, for example to help pull a tarpaulin over a high structure, or as playmates.

Children would show the workers what they had made, explaining their thinking and indicating pride in their achievements. Playworkers also indicated that they felt part of their interaction with children when they were invited into their play environments was a form validation of children’s play in which children were seeking affirmation of their achievements:

**“I think a lot of them have become quite independent, more confident in their practical skills. We’ve seen it in a lot of the schools, kids being a lot more vocal in the things they want to do and not having the practical skills to do it, so this has given them a lot of time, they got used to it. It’s good having the same loose parts because they get used to the materials as the weeks went on, so they gained quite a bit of confidence in the problem solving. And if they are having problems with something, we’d speak with them, talk them through it and then the next week when they come out, they’re like ‘Right, we know what we’re doing’ and they just get on with it themselves.”**

**“I asked him what his name was and he ignored me and then I turned around and he’d just built this whole contraption and I was like ‘This is so cool! Do you want to tell me what’s going on?’ And he was like ‘This is my computer, I’ve got a rocket in the back, I’ve got some water here...’ and he was lifting up these bits and it was so well thought out. I was like you have created this in 5 minutes, how did you do that?”**

Playworkers observed very noticeable changes in some children's behaviour over the six-week project period, including children with identified additional support needs. One of the playwork teams highlighted a significant change for one child, who in the first week of the project had been very vocal about people 'stealing' from him. By the second week he was using play to remove himself whenever there was a confrontation by building something away from the situation. Another child, a boy of around 6-7 years of age, who also has some behavioural needs and had previously been in conflicts with his peers, was also observed to be engaging far more constructively with his peers from the second week onwards, communicating with everyone calmly and playing constructively in all the children's team games.

The possibility of utilising the loose parts resources to work through emotions appeared to be valuable, providing children with positive spaces to express the full range of their emotions. For example, during one session a child was observed to repeatedly remove himself from play to angrily kick hard objects before returning to play with his peers. Despite obviously having something he was needing to work through, he was able to find a way to express this physically that did not disrupt his relationship with his peers and enabled him to still engage in group play.

The freedom to choose how to play was consistently highlighted as being central to children's creative process. In 34 of the 44 play sessions there was no consistency in group size, and playworkers observed a natural flow within sessions as children moved between individual play and playing with their peers, or moving between different groups. This flow enabled children with varying needs and abilities to choose their own engagement with play, facilitating inclusive play for children with particular barriers, including children with English as a second language. The following case study highlights the way that Loose Parts Play enables children to find their own methods of communication that can challenge adult assumptions, and facilitates child-led inclusive play.

## Case study:

### Inclusion and Loose Parts Play: Observations of one boy's development over three play sessions

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#### Session One

T appeared very agitated and presented as aloof and disengaged. He was unable to engage with the brief introduction and headed straight to a computer keyboard. He was swiftly followed by one of the Hub staff. Without looking at or to any of the staff he picked up the keyboard and started to smash it off the ground. Looking at his facial expressions he did not present as angry and I could see that he was trying to do something else with the keyboard rather than break it. A member of the Hub staff intervened at this point and told him to join in with what all the other boys and girls were doing. He nudged her out of the way and concentrated on the keyboard. A short while later, once T was alone, I knelt down on the ground and spoke to T and asked him to show me what he was doing.

It immediately became clear that English is not his first language, so I drew with my finger in the air and pointed to a grassy area where he could take the keyboard off to. He smiled and headed in that direction. When there he placed the keyboard on the ground and used a stick to remove the letters. He then put the letters in an ABC order and then put them in a cup. T then started to approach the other children, giving them letters from the cup and some fantasy play ensued after this with T running up to the groups giving them letters and they would give him loose parts back. He looked happy, content and was involved in play on his own terms.

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#### Session Two

T came out of the main building escorted by two members of Hub staff. He ran off to the grassy area where he had been during session one. He was looking towards the other children from this view point with the staff members on either side. Like the previous week, he looked completely disengaged from what they were saying. I asked the staff members what kind of day he had, and one said 'terrible' as they felt he had been disrupting everyone by not sitting still and not doing what was asked of him. At this point it became clear that no-one knew what T's first language was. While this was taking place, T had headed off towards the cup of letters he had played with the week before. He also got a suitcase which he filled with material.

Another very quiet child asked if he could join in with T and they headed off together to the grassy area and made a complex game of airports where they were flying a plane made from wood and landing in the grass. I could see that his play had extended and became more symbolic, he became more confident at approaching areas and lifting up loose parts to add to his airport. The two boys were giggling and communicating with a mix of gestures, pointing and watching each other's faces. I heard T say the first words I had heard him speak: he pointed to the wood and pointed to himself and also pointed to the other child and said 'me too aeroplane.'

### Session Three

T came out of the building, waved at me and headed off to the loose parts. He was followed again by one of the same members of staff from week two. He appeared excited and presented as being a lot more focused than the previous two sessions. He was quick to get the suitcase, material and was followed by the child who joined him at the last session. The staff member followed and kept reminding T to 'be careful and don't slip'. T appeared to be frustrated at this intervention. He took the suitcase and played a game where he was packing, going along a small hill and going on holiday. Staff members were also concerned about boundaries, so to prevent further disruption, I took some rope and tied a small boundary and gestured to T the areas that he could stay in as there was a main road further up the hill. He gave me a thumbs up and then got involved in lots of play, occasionally shouting down the small hill to the other children, waving and shouting 'hello'. Some other children had constructed a stage and were performing a show. They gestured to T that he could join in. He ran down the hill with his suitcase and became part of an audience, clapping and giggling. A member of staff remarked that it has been the first time she has seen him join in with anything, and that at break time he is usually accompanied by a member of staff.

Playworkers consistently highlighted Loose Parts Play as a mechanism for inclusive play. In six of the eight Community Hubs, groups were mixed across the full age range - with children from 4 years to 14 years old playing in the same sessions. What was interesting in the observations of the playworkers was the positive influence of the younger, primary age children on the behaviour of the older children who would usually only be with other children of senior school age. The observations indicate that the mixing of the age groups had two key influences: first, it gave older children an 'out' that meant they could engage in play that could be interpreted as being childish or silly; and, second it gave them a 'role' or purpose that meant they still engaged in the play but through the facilitative role of helping or teaching the younger children.

The playworkers noticed that the younger children tended to engage fully in the play, without any self-consciousness or concern for how this play may be viewed:

**"But then the younger kids, I thought they mixed a little more and also weren't as shy to be themselves, or kind of like fit in with what other kids were doing. They didn't really have that insecurity. They were just like 'this is what I want to do, you guys can come join me if you want.'"**

This appeared to have a positive impact on the older children too:

**"I think people are probably a lot more competitive with people their own age, or feel like they need to be like, 'Oh, I can do that because he can do that' whereas when you're around younger children you want to be more caring and make sure the younger ones are alright, so that competitiveness goes out the window and people are probably more silly."**

**"I think it gives the older ones an out. If they've got a little one to look after they can do that type of play without risking not looking cool."**

The idea of the mixed groups giving older children an 'out' is important. The presence of the younger children appeared to give permission to older children to play with less inhibitions, to just 'be silly' and to have the confidence to break away from expectations of their peers:

**"I think it's about expectations of age. Some kids are told 'You're too old to be playing with that' or 'You're 11 now, stop being silly' but this gives them a bit of an out where they can just go for it."**

**"There were a group of older girls [12-13] on Monday just hanging about in the corner on top of a ping pong table and they were like 'We're fine here, we might just go inside' and I was 'That's fine, you can do what you want. If you want to go inside that's fine, just let your teacher know.' And then right towards the end a couple of them came over and while before they were acting really cool and smooth, when they came over they were just being ridiculous and childish and playful and were just having fun and being silly. And the difference in how they were trying to present themselves to me when I spoke to them in the corner compared to how silly they were being when they were playing was quite incredible."**

The mixing of the age groups also appeared to provide older children with a role, either as a leader or facilitator of play:

**"I do feel like the older kids are taking comfort in what's going on and like 'Right, well if I'm here I may as well join in' but they're also taking a role. Instead of being like 'I'm not playing with all these kids' they're like 'Okay, well I'll help them'. So they're justifying their play to themselves by saying that they're helping the younger ones but actually they're really enjoying themselves too."**

**"There was an older boy and he was giving the younger kids a turn on a tyre that he'd made with a bit of rope that he was dragging all over the playground and he was encouraging them, you know, 'C'mon, c'mon your turn next'. That was lovely."**

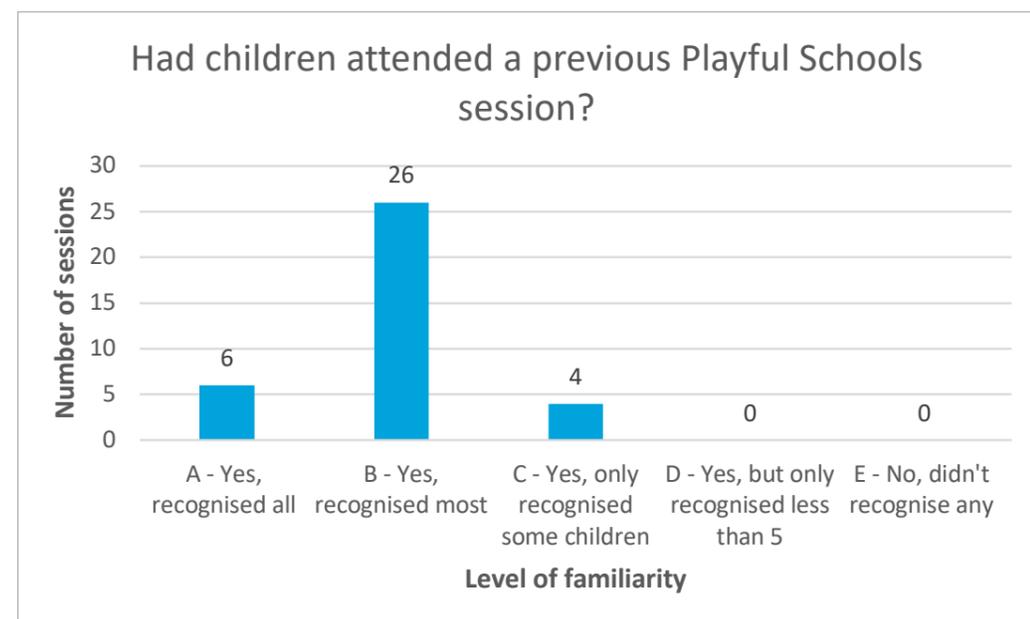
This has important implications for the role of play in children's emotional and social development. It provides initial insights into the potential of Loose Parts Play to support children in their transition across the stages of childhood, and in particular their transition between primary and secondary school. While Loose Parts Play is known as a tool that can be used across all age ranges, the way in which the children engaged with the play sessions in this project, even when mixed across such a wide age range, provides some initial evidence of the benefits to emotional and social development, as well as the potential learning, in bringing children across the full primary and secondary age range together for child-led free play.

## The three stages in the 'Foundations of Free Play'

### Familiarity and trust

The Playful Schools project provided weekly Loose Parts Play sessions across all of the eight Community Hubs in Dundee. Sessions were always held at the same time and day each week and sessions were facilitated by at least two of the same playworkers each week to ensure consistency. This consistency proved to be crucial. The Community Hubs were open from 8am to 6pm each day and, due to the long hours, there were often staff changeovers at different points during the day. During the summer break Hubs were generally staffed by a mixture of teaching staff from various schools, council community workers, support workers and volunteers. Due to the weekly rota there was a different staff team in each Hub every week, meaning that most weeks the majority of Hub staff did not know most of the children. While this was because of the demands placed on Hubs due to the pandemic, it resulted in children needing to find a way to navigate a complex, unfamiliar and constantly changing environment.

While Playful Schools was a short six-week programme, the familiarity and routine of the weekly Loose Parts Play sessions proved to be crucial for the children's development. Playworkers reported that children would often be waiting for them to set up each week, running across the playground to offer to help get the resources out of the storage container. In the vast majority of sessions from the second week onwards the playworkers recognised either all or most of the children in the sessions, and at the end of play sessions children would often seek confirmation from the playworkers that they would be returning the following week. Playworkers observed children making comments like 'I knew it would be a good day because I knew you were coming' and saying that they had told their caregivers that they didn't want to wear their nice clothes today as they knew that they'd be playing outside.



This simple comment about deciding what to wear highlights the importance of routine in enabling children to engage fully in their play. Children were aware that immersing themselves in the play would also mean getting dirty, so the routine enabled them to make a simple decision about what to wear. During the first week, playworkers noted that children were often overheard saying that they did not want to get their clothes or trainers dirty but that these comments rarely happened in later sessions. It was one very simple way that children were able to make a decision to positively influence their own enjoyment.

For some children, the routine and being able to build relationships with the playworkers each week created a space where they could simply play. The following example highlights the complex issues that some children feel when making a decision about how to engage with play, and how familiarity with the routine and trust in the playworkers enabled this one child to relax and give herself permission to play:

“[There was] a wee girl who in the first week just sat on a bench and watched, so there was quite a lot of things going on for her. On the second week, on the second session, she came to me with a skipping rope and she was like ‘Could you help me with this?’ and we all just started to do skipping games... she was singing songs and she was playing stuff and she said ‘It’s really good’.

So I said ‘You know, you didn’t join in much last time’ and she said ‘Well, I’ve got to look after my wee sister a lot.’ So I think she was just casing it all and working out if her wee sister was okay, firstly. And then secondly, she said that she really enjoyed the play with no adults there. And I said ‘Why?’ and she said ‘Well it’s okay when they’re being silly and having a laugh but when they’re being bossy it’s not good. But this is good because everyone is being silly and having a laugh.’”

This comment raises a number of issues. It points to the role of safety and security in facilitating free play, which for this young girl involved ensuring that the environment was familiar enough to trust that her younger sister was going to be safe. It also points to sometimes complex decisions that are involved in children deciding to play, and how adults can unknowingly influence a child’s decision to fully engage with their play.

The process of familiarisation involved children being able to get used to the loose parts resources. Observations from playworkers highlighted the importance of routine in relation to children being able to play with the same resources each week. This appears to have been crucial to the evolution of children’s play and their growing sense of independence:

“I think a lot of them have become quite independent, more confident in their practical skills. We’ve seen it in a lot of the schools, kids being a lot more vocal in the things they want to do and not having the practical skills to do it, so this has given them a lot of time, they got used to it. It’s good having the same loose parts because they get used to the materials as the weeks went on, so they gained quite a bit of confidence in the problem solving. And if they are having problems with something, we’d speak with them, talk them through it and then the next week when they come out, they’re like ‘Right, we know what we’re doing’ and they just get on with it themselves.”

The growing sense of familiarity also facilitated the building of relationships among the groups. Due to the nature of the Community Hubs, children often did not know one another and children were often not with their known friendship groups. Across all sessions playworkers consistently observed children building relationships through their play.

This happened irrespective of the length of the play session – playworkers reported that they observed friendships developing in both shorter 45-minute sessions and longer open or ‘drop-in’ sessions. The nature of play meant that children needed to communicate with one another to ask for help to move heavier resources, or to negotiate with other children to share resources, and this facilitated the building of relationships across different age groups and gender:

“On Tuesday I don’t think they knew each other that well, cos I’d overheard a boy asking a wee girl for a hand to lift something and him asking her ‘Oh, so what’s your name?’ and they were like ‘My name’s this, my name’s this’... and then they just started lifting this plank of wood and then they worked together nearly the whole session. I thought that was really nice as they didn’t know each other but they just got on with it.”

“And a lovely comment that I overheard, a 14-year old boy told a 12-year old girl: ‘I ken you’re worried about starting the big school but you’re going to be at my school and you know me now so you’re going to be okay.’ And they hadn’t been at primary school with each other, so they’d bonded at these sessions and they’re going on to high school together. He’s going to be a year above her but he’s like ‘I’ll look out for you’.... That was lovely to see. Children supporting each other.”

“Social interaction is really important as well. Children helping each other. Because the children are normally in different classes and they don’t get all the kids out at once, so friends don’t get to see each other if they are in different classes.”

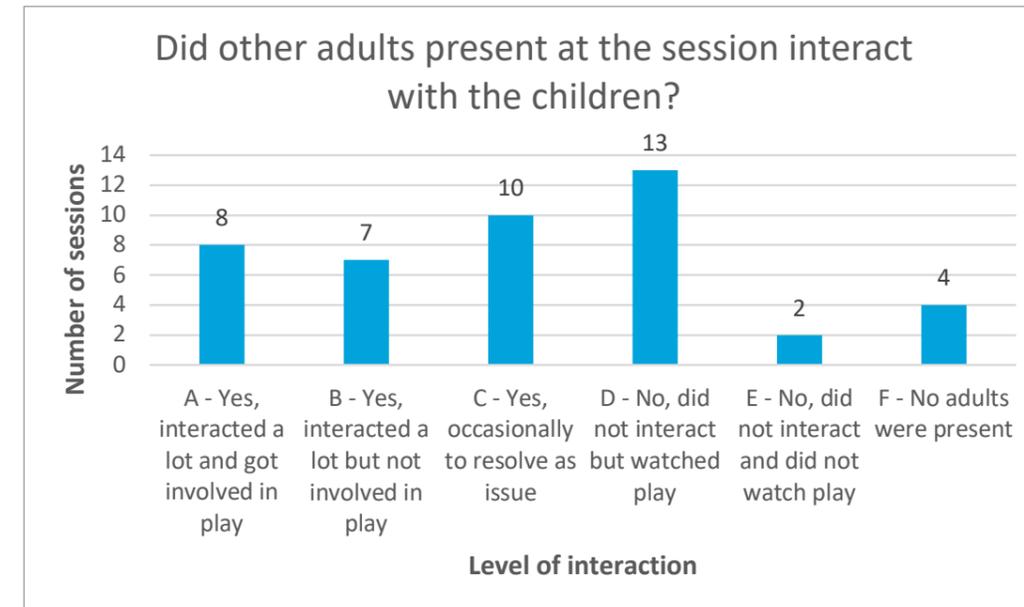
***The power of Loose Parts Play is that it builds relationships:***

***“And a lovely comment that I overheard, a 14-year old boy told a 12-year old girl: ‘I ken you’re worried about starting the big school but you’re going to be at my school and you know me now so you’re going to be okay.’ And they hadn’t been at primary school with each other, so they’d bonded at these sessions and they’re going on to high school together. He’s going to be a year above her but he’s like ‘I’ll look out for you’.... That was lovely to see. Children supporting each other.”***

**Ownership and independence**

Hub staff tended to be present during the play sessions throughout the six-week project. Playworker reports highlighted that during the first two weeks, there was a tendency amongst Hub staff to intervene in children’s play.

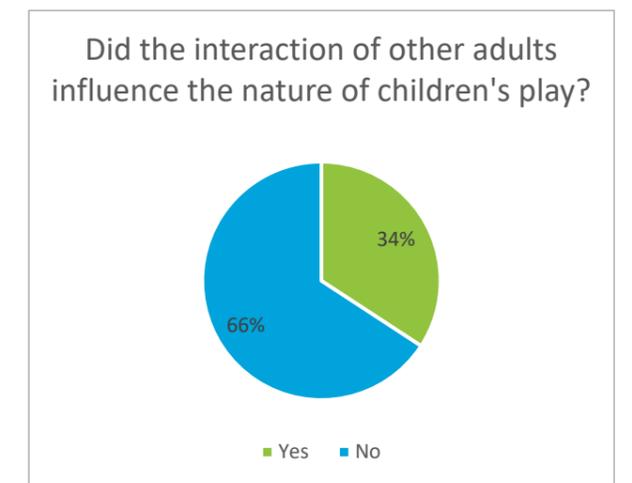
However, in the later sessions their interactions with children during play decreased with eleven of the thirteen reports of adults watching but not interacting with children during play occurring from the third week onwards.



This was a significant change from earlier weeks, when playworkers frequently reported that the Hub staff would step in to stop or change play much earlier:

“I noticed that if the teachers didn’t get involved in the play but were observing they were quicker to tell children to stop doing something, because they considered it dangerous, before we would... One day there were kids playing in puddles but it was raining and they were already soggy so I didn’t think it was a big deal. I think some teachers might see risk differently to how we would and the teachers would have a more nervous approach to kids doing things and be like ‘don’t carry that’ or tell children not to do things before we would.”

However, as the sessions continued, it was noticeable that the level of adult interventions became much less frequent and it appeared that the Hub staff gradually became more comfortable with this approach to child-led play.



Playworkers regularly observed the ways in which adults, often unwittingly, influenced the nature of children's play. The influencing of play appeared to be for four main reasons:

1. **Perceptions of risk – this resulted in Hub staff stepping in to stop children from doing something earlier than playworkers would have done**
2. **Behaviour management – there were numerous examples throughout the project of staff insisting on children adhering to specific rules or expectations of behaviour**
3. **Problem solving and creating 'purpose' – adults were regularly observed stepping in to create structure to the play or provide solutions to issues the children were encountering**
4. **Co-opting play – playworkers regularly observed Hub staff using the play as a means by which to try to build their relationships with children through 'getting involved' in children's play, irrespective of whether the children wished for them to be involved.**

All of these reasons for intervening in children's play had the same consequence – the prevention of the development of children's play. Blocking the children's free exploration of the resources and the environment, and through the mixed messages as a result of occasionally enforcing school rules, negatively impacted on the development of familiarity, which in turn prevented the children from developing a sense of ownership and independence.

By stepping in to stop play that is being perceived as 'risky', children are not able to experience the physical and emotional sensations required to know whether or not something is 'safe'.

Stepping in to stop 'risky' play, while reassuring for the adult, does not facilitate children's ability to assess risk independently, the consequence of which is to block this key stage in their development. As noted earlier in relation to the development of creative play, when children are given the space to understand why something may be risky, they gain the necessary knowledge to make their own assessments of risk and make changes to ensure the safety of their own play.

Similarly, the management of behaviour through insisting on adherence to rules irrespective of whether these are logical or required may provide a reassuring feeling of consistency for the adult, but it could block the possibility of ownership of space for children. For example, playworkers would frequently observe children kicking their shoes off when inside their dens which they interpreted as children relaxing into their play. When told that they needed to keep their shoes on, playworkers reported that they would get inquisitive looks from children:

**"You can tell the difference in the kids play when the teachers are watching or getting involved. Simple things like telling them to put their shoes on, and they look at us like 'Why do I have to put my shoes on?' It's just wee things like that."**

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***The power of Loose Parts Play is that it enables children to take control:***

***"This child was in full immersion play and was able to have an out by just carrying on [playing]."***

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There were numerous incidences where playworkers noted that Hub staff became involved in children's play to provide a form of structure to the play rather than just letting the children do whatever they wished, irrespective of whether this appeared to have direct 'purpose':

**"There's some teachers that if you're standing observing but not getting involved in their play and they haven't heard of [loose parts], or they're not sure what we're doing, I think they think 'Why are they [playworkers] not getting involved?' So then they step in... like 'Hey kids, why don't you do this?' and give them like an activity to do... They give them something to do, like a project or something."**

This points to the different ways that the play can be understood or conceptualised. The evolution of children's play appeared to rely on children being able to do whatever they wanted, be that individual imaginary play, group builds, or just running around the space. The 'purpose' of the play was not always immediately clear, but this did not mean it was not fundamental to the evolution or process of play. Being able to use the space and resources however they wished was part of children developing their sense of ownership over the space and stepping in to provide an adult-defined purpose – based on an adult logic – blocks this process.

The idea of enabling the process of play to evolve was also directly connected to allowing children to have the space to problem solve. It meant resisting the urge to provide answers or to achieve a desired 'best outcome':

**"All I would say to teachers is to step back and wait to see if a child wants [them] to get involved or if they're a bit unsure of what to do... there's lots of examples of kids making marble runs and then teachers coming over and being like 'No, you need to do this to make it work, or go get that plank there and it'll work better' and giving kids all the answers. Because I think teachers want kids to get the best result for their marble run rather than maybe if their marble run is slightly less effective but the kids learn more if they figure it out by themselves."**

Playworkers observed incidences, particularly during the first couple of weeks of the project, where adults were co-opting the children's play for their own purpose. This included Hub staff utilising play to build a relationship with children. Interestingly however in some circumstances the play provided children with a means by which to take control of these situations. Playworkers observed instances throughout the six-week period when children decided whether or not to engage with the adult, often simply by either moving their play elsewhere or to absorbing themselves with a task and ignoring the adult's intervention. However, there were also instances when an adult's desire to get involved in the play was observed to completely block a child's creative process. The often well-meaning intrusion into the child's play world meant they could be left without any ownership over their play, resulting in them abandoning the creative process entirely:

**"The teachers that day were so involved in the kids play. Moving what they'd built around or telling them what it was that they'd built..."**

**... It's like, a child does a painting and an adult comes along and immediately says 'Oh, that's a nice house, that's a nice lady that you've drawn' and it's not that. So yeah, it's resisting that urge to just, to stop naming stuff. You can see the frustration for the child because they're disappointed when an adult does that.**

**And they usually just stop playing with that and move onto something else. And that was actually what happened, wasn't it?"**

Observations from playworkers consistently highlight 'stepping back' as crucial to the evolution of play. Stepping back enables increased collaboration between children. A clear example of the relationship between 'stepping back' and children's collaborative play was when playworkers observed a group of children having difficulties in securing a roof onto their structure. They were working for a long time trying to find a solution but despite their efforts, the roof kept falling down. Another child then walked across the playground, dropped something heavy on the roof and walked off. He had seen the other group having problems, thought of a way to fix it and provided the solution without any expectation or reward. The only reason this occurred was because the situation had been allowed to evolve without adult involvement.

Stepping back from children's play also increases children's ability to show the full breadth of their personalities. Playworkers pointed to noticeable differences in the 'presence' of some children when they were fully able to take ownership over their play free from adult intervention. The way in which this manifested varied, from adults often unknowingly dominating play, to controlling children's play to the extent that occasionally children were literally made to be invisible through being sent inside the school building due to what was judged to be unwanted behaviours. Unwanted behaviours ranged from aggressive behaviour, bad language or sometimes a child being perceived as not behaving in expected ways, for example through choosing to play on their own rather than with a group.

In every play session playworkers observed some children choosing to engage in individual play. Sometimes this was for the whole session and sometimes the child would move between individual and group play. All observations of this form of individual play highlighted the child's level of engagement with their play, even if externally they appeared to be 'doing nothing':

**"She sat by herself [on a hammock], honestly for about 20 minutes, just swinging, and so happy. I went off and did something else and I looked over and she was still by herself, quite happy, in a bit of a daydream and I went over to chat to her. So I sat on the ground next to her and was chatting away and honestly she was so happy in her own wee world that I felt like 'I'm actually probably interrupting your happiness so I might leave you to it'. She was so happy all session just sitting on this hammock having a wee chill."**

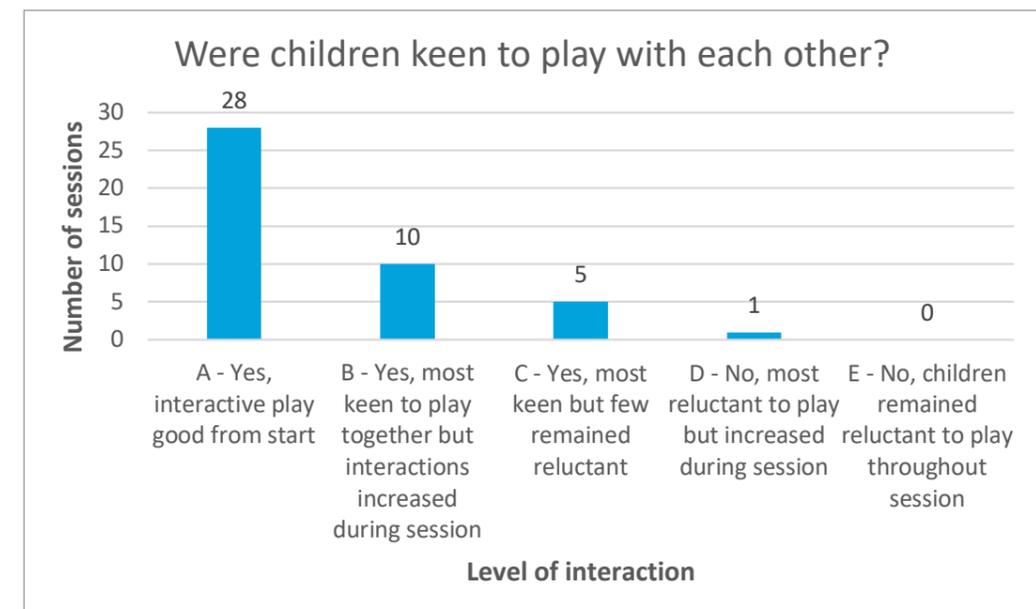
**"There was one boy, in his semi-detached house, and he was just lying on a tarp, and he was just chilled out. And I just went up to him and I was like 'Y'alright, what are you up to?' and he was 'Nothing, I'm just playing'... He wasn't doing anything but, in his mind, he was playing."**

**"There was one boy walking around with a stick, what was his name? Mr Frankles I think. He was a character, but he was just walking around with a stick and a thing wrapped around his head. So he was telling us about his character and who he'd been. I think it gives kids validation of their play, as well."**

This points to the influence of the adult role and how expectations of behaviour could either actively block or support individual development. If adults are not sensitive in their interventions - or non-interventions - then they can change the course of play and therefore change or limit any learning that might come from it.

A common feature throughout the six-week project period was the level of interactive play between children. Play staff reported that children were nearly always keen to play with one another, with interactive play being assessed as good in nearly 85% of sessions. In the five sessions assessed as having a few children reluctant to play with others, the staff contextualised this by highlighting that these children were content in their individual play. Only one session in the first week was assessed

by playworkers as children being reluctant to play with one another. The children in this particular Hub were not keen to share the loose parts and there was a higher than usual level of anxiety around the prospect of free play. The following week the playworkers utilised a structured game to start the session to support the familiarisation process and from this point onwards collaborative play for this group evolved naturally.



Crucially, the level of interactive play was high irrespective of whether the session included children with additional support needs or for who interaction with peers could sometimes be challenging. Analysis of the playworkers' observations points to the connection between inclusive play and the adult role, with playworkers reporting some profound changes in the way children presented over the six weeks:

**"This week the teachers took more of a step back. I don't know, I don't see the same teachers each week but maybe there's been feedback from other teachers and I think that's had a massive impact on the children's play."**

**To the point where I was bracing myself for a really hectic shift and for the kids to be like wild for an hour but then we went in and it was much calmer when the adults [stood back]... And I think, the children I'd struggled with and who I thought would definitely need one on one attention just played much more on their own and would just come up and talk to you like you were a friend, not like you were an authority figure. I was surprised, I didn't think that having the teachers there would change the dynamic as much as it did."**

Understanding the reasons for these changes is complex. It is not possible to provide conclusive evidence as to why children's engagement with play changed as sessions progressed, however play staff have pointed to a number of possible reasons, including the role of familiarity, time, freedom, and non-directional facilitation of play:

**“There's been a couple [of sessions] where I've realised that specific children were getting a real benefit from what's been going on... Our second session when we were at [name of Hub], there was a wee boy who, they all came out and they were like quite boisterous, and he was getting a wee bit wound up... but he asked if he could stay out over the break while we were cleaning and [name of worker] asked him 'What do you think would make the loudest noise if you were to knock it over?' so he was like testing materials, picking things up and dropping them. And he made a really big sculpture and then knocked it down to see if it would make the loudest noise but he really calmed down having that half hour to himself to just get used to it. And in the second session he was just brilliant and he made this giant marble run. So that really stood out because I feel like his attitude totally changed as the day went on. And even when we got really torrential rain and everyone ran inside, he was like 'Please, can I stay out? Can I help you tidy up?'”**

“I think when you give kids enough time to really invest in something. You know, he came in, had this idea, played about with things and then used that information to make this idea and plan in his head. He was like 'Can I do this? Do I have the time?' and we were 'Yes, absolutely you have the time' and that's what opened that door, I would say... I think the time definitely helped him.”

**“It's the freedom for them to know that that time is for them to do exactly what they want to do. We're not giving them tasks, like 'Today, we're making boats'. It's their time to do what they want.”**

Playworkers identified freedom within the sessions as being central to the evolution of children's play. While the focus of child-led play is often on the importance of enabling children to make decisions about and be in control of their play, what playworkers in the Playful Schools project identified was the subtle ways that this freedom played out. Enabling children to take control over their play meant stepping back from the expected norms – it meant not requiring the children to line up before a session, it meant letting them kick their shoes off during play, it meant older children and adults being able to be silly. What came through from the observations of staff was the collective importance of these small decisions in enabling children to create an environment that they felt comfortable in and that they felt that they could own:

**“I think the fact that we don't try to keep it structured, they literally run out the door. We don't go and collect them and make them line up and come out orderly like you would do if you were leaving a classroom to walk about a school, we're pretty much 'The doors are open, out you come, on you go'. There was one week at [name of Community Hub] where they didn't speak to us for about 5 minutes, we were just like let's leave them and see how long it takes for them to come up and say hi or can I get help, and they all just ran out and didn't even look at us.”**

**“Telling kids... here's some freedom but we're going to give you conditions [wouldn't work]. We're trying to instil community and kind conditions, not these sorts of restrictions. We're not teachers, we're not from a school. I think simple things like that really talk loudly to kids, they approach it differently then.”**

**“I think adults being silly as well is a big part. It changes the dynamic of your relationship if you join in with the play. We were playing 'jungle is on fire' yesterday. I've never played it before - it was so hectic! But one little boy was determined to get me... and I was like 'You're only chasing me!' and he was 'Yeah, cos teachers never play this so I'm gonna get you!' It changes the relationship.”**

### **Achievement and gratification**

The evolution of play through ensuring familiarity, trust, ownership, and independence appeared to be crucial to children's learning and development. Playworkers observed profound changes in children's social, emotional, physical and cognitive development, ranging from improved social skills, for example asking for permission to enter other people's spaces and increased awareness of ways to solve problems through negotiation and listening, to achieving physical milestones like climbing, balancing or skipping:

**“It's simple things like skipping, one of the wee girls wanted to skip and another one had never skipped before. She was like 'I don't know how to skip' and we were like 'We'll teach you' and this week she came running straight up to us and said 'Let's go skip, I want to show you, I've been practising.' And she was absolutely brilliant, she'd obviously been practising skipping all week.”**

Development also occurred as a result of children gaining the confidence to try new forms of play, including risky or messy play:

**“On Tuesday there was one wee girl, she comes out... and she's like 'I need your help, I need your help.' But this week she climbed into the blue barrel, which before she wouldn't have even dared go near, and climbed in it and was like 'I can roll myself.’”**

It was noticeable that most of the playworkers' observations about achievement of physical milestones focused on girls. This appeared to be a consistent difference across all Hubs, with some girls being more reluctant or unsure of the physical aspects of the play at the start of the project. Significantly, playworkers frequently highlighted increased levels of independence and bravery to girls' physical play over the project period:

**“At [name of Hub] there's a wee girl who's only in Primary 1 going into Primary 2, and she was initially quite unsure. Because [name of Hub] is a small group, they do tend to turn to us for assistance and things. And she was pretty much my shadow for the whole first session, wouldn't leave me alone, but as the weeks have gone [by], she's got more independent. This week she hardly really spoke to us and they were building quite high structures and jumping off onto the big foam mat. And in the first week she was climbing up a plank that was like, 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.”**

**“At [name of Hub] today a girl who usually wants loads of help and usually won't lift anything on her own, she built her own barbie doll house.”**

In contrast, at the start of the project boys tended to be more confident with the physicality of the play but less confident with their communication. However playworkers observed significant moments of change with communication as the project progressed:

**“At [name of Hub] there are two brothers... and normally they’re quite hyper and winding people [up], but this week they were quite calm. And during their session it started bucketing down so [names of playworkers] told them to go into the storage for a wee while and everyone was like ‘What are we going to do?’ And [name of child] was like ‘Well, let’s just play hide and seek seeing as we’re in here.’ And they were just playing hide and seek in the storage unit, hiding behind everything, and I feel that before he would have had a meltdown, which was nice... He’s always been confident in that sense, like not bothered if he hurts himself and confident to have fun but not confident in terms of interacting with other kids and just playing with them, so the fact that he came up with that by himself and was encouraging everyone else to have fun even though they were in the storage container was really good.”**

All children appeared to gain confidence through the play, be that confidence in the physical potential of their bodies, confidence in their ability to interact positively with their peers or confidence to not conform to social expectations. As children became more relaxed and collaborative in their play, observations from playworkers indicate that their confidence to engage in whatever way they wanted, and to move beyond their own expectations of themselves, increased. For some children this involved learning to work with others, for some it involved engaging with play without fear of hurting themselves, and for others it meant a combination of both:

**“There was a wee girl A at [name of Hub] being quite vocal about she wasn’t doing it, asking everyone else to do it even though she had a clear-cut idea about what she wanted to be built... And in the first week A and her pal wouldn’t let anyone into the den that they’d built, screaming at them that they couldn’t come in. And today there was [another] wee girl wondering about and she wasn’t sure what to do and A went up to her and asked her if she wanted to come into her den and if she wanted to come in and play with her. And A was talking through everything she’d done. And A was so calm today. In the second week she basically tripped over her own feet and threw herself to the ground and needed to be taken to the medical room, and today a really heavy pallet tipped onto her foot. And I saw and got the pallet off of her and she sat down, took her shoe off, took her sock off, and I was like ‘Are you okay? Can you wiggle your toes?’ and she put her sock back on, put her shoe back on, and away she went. Just getting on with it.”**

Crucially, the evolution of play enabled children to reassess themselves. It enabled them to experience themselves in a new situation, with new challenges, and to recognise their own abilities. In the last week of the project, playworkers reported children making comments like ‘I couldn’t do this before’ or ‘If it wasn’t for you, I wouldn’t be able to do this.’ This recognition of their own development, without the need for external confirmation, appeared to be significant for their own sense of achievement. For some children, this sense of achievement appeared to have a profound impact on their perceptions of themselves:

**“Today, one girl actually said ‘This is really quite intelligent this thing that I’ve made and I normally feel quite stupid.’ So she took real ownership over that.”**

Observations indicate that the freedom of the play enabled some children to find a new role that did not necessarily conform to their expected behaviours:

**“Last week there was a big change with one boy [name]. The week before he had come out raging, quite upset, him with these four other wee guys, just like little tsunamis kicking off. But last week, oh, it was amazing! He came out on his own a wee bit, but he was very much still doing his own play thing but he was so in with the kids, immediately. He was in with this bigger group but he’d taken on a role. He had my bag on and he was going round ‘Do you need pegs? Do you need string?’ He was like the gaffer, still very much doing his own thing but finding a way to do his own thing with other kids. Whereas last week his own thing was just meltdown ‘I can’t get what I want, I can’t do what I want, I can’t play with who I want, I don’t even know what I want...’ whereas this week he instantly found something of his own, a way that worked for everybody... It was great. It was very much continuing on from when he’d been a little bit more positive [at the end of the session] the week before. And for him to instantly come out like that, it’s the first time I’ve ever seen him come out and straight away be in with a group and find a way to do his own thing.”**

This freedom to find a way to navigate the play in new ways not only influenced this children’s perceptions of themselves but also challenged the perceptions of adults and enabled them to see some children in a new way:

**“And just teachers and support workers coming out and saying you know, I can’t believe that X, Y, Z has built this, they’ve been kicking off all week in the classroom and they’ve just come out and got their head down and created something, they’ve done the whole problem solving and logistics of how things work. And them coming out and saying I can’t believe**

**they’ve done that, so it just shows that taking kids out of the classroom and doing the outdoor activities with them is so beneficial and for whoever’s teaching them or looking after them to see them in a different light.”**

The role of the adult within Loose Parts Play is to facilitate children’s sense of freedom. However, facilitating freedom is more complex than ‘stepping back’, not enforcing the usual expected rules or not conforming to expected ‘adult’ behaviours. It means recognising that the role of the adult is to ensure that children feel free while also feeling safe. This usually means that the adult needs to look to the individuality of each child, providing security when needed and recognising that some children will require adult support. However, within the context of Covid-19, establishing safe play is particularly challenging. This research did not find any evidence of children being reluctant to play as a result of Covid-19 and it has clearly demonstrated that establishing safe play is entirely possible even within the restrictions of Covid-19. By following the Framework for Covid Safe Loose Parts Play, Playful Schools has demonstrated that it is entirely feasible for children to continue to play during the pandemic – indeed, the sheer multitude of ways children developed during the short six-week project means that play is not only feasible, it is absolutely crucial for children to continue to thrive. As we look towards a winter of continued restrictions, we need to ensure that children retain their freedom to play. Loose Parts Play can provide the ‘looked after freedom’ that enables children to continue to play.

In the words of one of the Playful Schools playworkers:

***Loose Parts Play can “bring a sense of freedom when you have none.”***

Project partners:



### Committed to PLAY



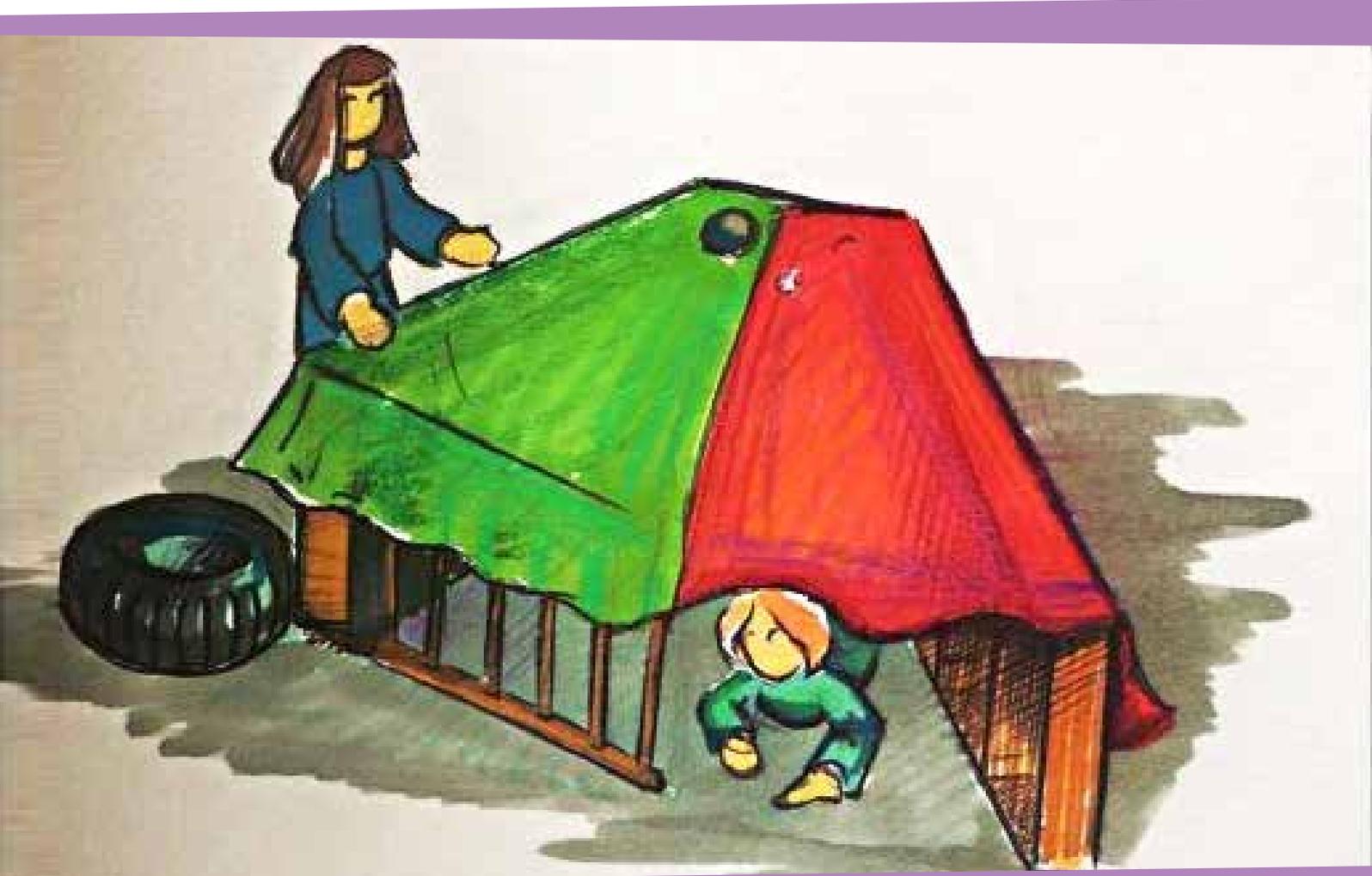
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