

Baby PLAYGROUND



The impact of Playground 2021-22

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Acknowledgment
Baby Playground title design by Nicola Barker, Playground Lead Artist

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KEY FINDINGS

Parents/Carers/Babies

- Feedback from Parents/Carers was hugely positive – 95.4% would recommend Playground to other families.

Following participation in Playground:

- Parents/Carers reported engaging in creative play more often with their baby at home.
- Parents/carers reported an increase in the use of techniques (such as mirroring) inspired by Playground.
- Parents/Carers reported an increase in the intention to engage in arts events for babies in the future.
- Parents/Carers reported an increased sense of community and support. This was particularly relevant for first time parents/carers.

Artists

- Increased knowledge and confidence in working with babies aged 0 – 24 months and their families.
- Development of artistic practice was a common theme and many were inspired by their fellow artists.
- Development of an artistic network with mentors and other artists from outside the project.

Libraries and library Staff

- Increased use of library/uptake of library services by playground families.
- Increased confidence of library staff to be involved in creative play sessions for babies aged 0 -24 months.



Foreword

By Sarah Bedingfield and Lucy Keeley, KCC Playground Leads.

Kent County Council is committed to Article 31 of the United Nations Rights of the Child, which states that all children have the right to access high quality cultural activity. It is widely recognised that the first five years are particularly important for the development of the child's brain, and that the first three years are the most critical in having lasting impact on a child's ability to learn and succeed in school and life. It is therefore hard to understand how the 0-2s are so undervalued and why the emphasis in terms of early years learning is most often on age 3+. To begin to address this Playground empowers the creativity of very young children and their families, and develops artists working alongside library staff, equipping them with specialist skills and understanding of early childhood development.

Kent Libraries, Registration and Archives and Kent County Council's Culture and Creative Economy Service have been working in partnership since 2017. Our aspiration to develop and expand Playground grew following a successful Arts Council England (ACE) funded pilot for 0–5-year-olds in 2019, delivered in partnership with the University of Kent. It was an introduction to the arts for many local families taking place in four areas of high deprivation where communities may not have perceived that creative activity is relevant to them.

The focus of this phase of Playground has been on children aged 0-24 months from a wide and diverse range of backgrounds, particularly families with babies born during lockdown who have been significantly affected by the pandemic with no or limited social contact other than with their immediate families. Playground immerses them and those who care for them in creative activity that is deeply engaging, transformative and of the highest quality.



Acknowledgements

We would like to extend our thanks to all parents, carers and babies who attended Playground sessions – it simply wouldn't have been the same without you.



We would also like to thank all the staff at the following libraries and children's centres:

Edenbridge Library

Sherwood Library

Newington Library

Folkestone Library

Rusthall Library

Dover Library

Sturry Library

Ashford Library

Sheerness Library

Gravesend Library



Cliftonville Library

Snodland Library

Seashells Children's Centre - Sheerness

Sunflowers Children's Centre - Dover

Caterpillars Children's Centre - Cheriton

Millmead Children's Centre - Cliftonville

Riverside Children's Centre – Gravesend

Edenbridge Children's Centre



Particular thanks go to the library staff who took the time to complete the evaluation questionnaires and/or be interviewed for the evaluation.

Thanks also go to the Playground Team for providing photos, and to Nicola for all Playground illustrations included in the evaluation report.



Section 1: INTRODUCTION

What is Playground?

*“Our aim is to create a safe space where we all take part, babies, artists, carers and librarians - baby world - a model of rich inclusion, where both babies and artists experience sounds, see objects and movement and make something happen together.”
(Nicola – Lead Artist).*

Playground is a Kent wide project run by Kent County Council in partnership with the University of Kent and Artswork, and aims to bring high quality creative arts to young children and babies between the ages of 0 – 24 months.

Playground was inspired by creative and arts-based work in Scandinavia, by Starcatchers (Scotland’s National Arts and Early Years organisation specialising in creative work with 0–5-year-olds), and by the work of Anna Newell. It builds on a highly successful pilot project that took place in Kent in 2018-2019, and this second phase is supported by Kent County Council’s Children and Young People Programme – Reconnect. The Reconnect programme recognises, and aims to address, the negative impact that Covid-19 has had on children and young people.

Within this second phase of the project, Playground recognises that the first years of life (0-24 months) are the most critical and have a lasting impact on a child’s life both in terms of their ability to learn but also succeed in school and later life. Playground aims to inspire young children and their families living in some of the most deprived areas of Kent by immersing them in creative play and activities that are not only deeply engaging, but inspire curiosity, are positive for social and cognitive development, and ultimately fun. The project aims to help families develop new skills, approaches and confidence in creative play.

Kent County Council are committed in their cultural strategy to ensure that all children in the county have equal access to high quality creativity from an early age. Whilst libraires are not typically perceived as hubs for arts or cultural activity they already provide a safe space for children and families to access groups such as Baby Rhyme Time, and have the potential to become community-based centres for high quality arts-based programmes that are accessible to all.

In the Playground project, two lead artists, nine session artists and five students from Rose Bruford College were selected to develop and deliver creative sessions to babies aged 0–24 months and their families in 12 libraries and 6 children’s centres. Artists were mentored by highly experienced artists and professionals to develop their knowledge, understanding, creative skills and confidence in working with babies aged 0-24 months and their families.

Working alongside libraries and children’s centre staff, the artists aimed to empower parents and carers of very young children with the confidence and enthusiasm for sustained creative engagement with their children. Many of the libraires and children’s centres involved in this phase of the project were located in the top 10% most deprived areas in Kent, and the project has tried to ensure countywide coverage with a particular focus on communities where there is a clear need for the programme

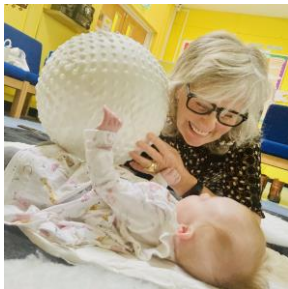
Who is Playground?

Playground is collaborative by its very nature and the team, as outlined below, is a diverse ensemble of artists, academics and other professionals. However, Playground is more than these people, Playground is a wonderful and innovative baby world which would not have been possible without the babies and their families.

Artists:

Lead Artists:

Nicola Flower



Nicola is a visual artist who uses drawing and objects to explore and connect with the human condition. She chooses to work creatively alongside groups of people who have a direct input into her projects.

Jeremy Harrison

Jeremy is an artist, researcher and teacher. Jeremy creates work where audience and performer meet, where story and song intertwine and where music is not only heard, but seen and felt.



Session Artists:

Casey Bee – Casey is a multi-disciplinary artist who works mainly with found objects and camera less photography within community and participatory art settings.

Stasha Dukic – Stasha is an actress, theatre practitioner and director of TYA (Theatre for Young Audiences). Her practice is based on games, puppets/object manipulation and storytelling.

Megan Garrett-Jones - Megan is a performance-maker and youth arts facilitator committed to the joyful possibilities of creativity - whether it's babies on the playground mat or cabaret/spoken word/theatre audiences.

Grace Hann – Grace is a former professional contemporary dancer for whom dance and creative movement have provided a vehicle for self-expression. Her practice involves promoting and allowing others the opportunity to reconnect with the joy and freedom of movement, something she believes is intrinsic to the human condition.

Meire Machado - Meire comes to Playground with 20 years' experience engaging visitors and participants in arts organisations. She has been a core member of Moving Memory Dance Theatre since 2020. She is interested in sensory play by creating objects to enchant and stimulate curiosity.

Kenny Mangena – Kenny is an all-round musician who plays lead, rhythm, bass guitar and sings. He is involved in singing, dancing and drumming workshops and has worked in schools, colleges and university settings. He has also worked with asylum seekers using music and as part of 'Outside Music Box'.

Lucky Mayo – Lucky is an arts practitioner, singer songwriter, and arts in development education worker from Zimbabwe. He has worked in over 49 countries around the world at festivals, arts centres, community centres and schools, and has worked in both the criminal justice system and corporate sector.

Dexter Newman – Dexter is an actor, musician and drama practitioner who works mainly within the theatre for young audiences sector.

Natalie Thomas – Natalie is a multi-disciplinary artist working predominantly with words and music.

Rose Bruford Arts Students:

A number of Rose Bruford College MA Theatre for Young Audiences students were also involved in Playground:

Charlotte Hannan

Rosa Higgs

Emanuel Mendes Da Silva

Lois Savill

Elison Tan

Playground Mentors:

Anna Newell:

Anna is one of Ireland's leading theatre makers for young audiences, creating unique theatre adventures for babies, early years and children/young people with complex needs.

Starcatchers:

Led by Rhona Matheson, Chief Executive, Starcatchers has provided ongoing mentoring of the artists involved in Playground. What began as an experiment in Muirhouse in October 2006 exploring performances for babies aged 0-3, a previously un-catered for audience, has gone through many different phases to emerge as an organisation that works in communities across Scotland using the arts to transform and enrich the lives of Scotland's under 5s. "10 years ago, people questioned what the point of theatre and creativity for babies was; now, people question why there isn't more."

Other mentors of the Starcatchers team include:

Heather Armstrong, Head of Early Years Development
Kerry Cleland, Creative Babies Co-ordinator

Siri Dybwik and Nils Christian Fossdal Dybwik Dans and University of Stavanger (Norway):

Siri provides mentoring to the Playground artists based on her academic research around the engagement of very young children and dance. She is the founder and Artistic Director of Dybwikdans, a Norwegian Dance company dedicated to creating work for young children. Nils Christian Fossdal is an actor musician performing with Dybwikdans and also an academic in the Department of Kindergarten Teacher Education at the University of Stavanger.

Playground Leadership Team:

Liz Moran - Playground Creative Director:

The creative development of Playground has been led by Liz Moran previously Director of Arts & Culture at University of Kent securing NPO status for Gulbenkian as well as leading ART31 & bOing! She has significant experience in work with, for & by young people as well as access to national and international partners.

Lucy Keeley - Playground Lead, Kent County Council's Culture & Creative Economy Service (CCES):

Lucy has extensive experience of working with individual artists and a wide range of cultural organisations, supporting the strategic development of the creative sector in Kent. Lucy works closely with Creative Kent & Medway and in 2017/18 led the development of the current 10-year Kent Cultural Strategy, which sets out the shared ambition of all the creative partners in Kent. Lucy is lead for CCES work with children and young people.

Sarah Bedingfield – Playground Lead, Kent County Council's Libraries, Registration & Archives (LRA):

Sarah manages 3 teams within LRA and has a strong track record in project development for the library service championing creative and cultural activity within libraries. She has developed strong

relationships and collaboration with a range of cultural organisations. She leads for Equality and Diversity for LRA.

Playground Project Team:

Michael Fearne – Service Development Officer, Kent County Council’s Libraries, Registration and Archives.

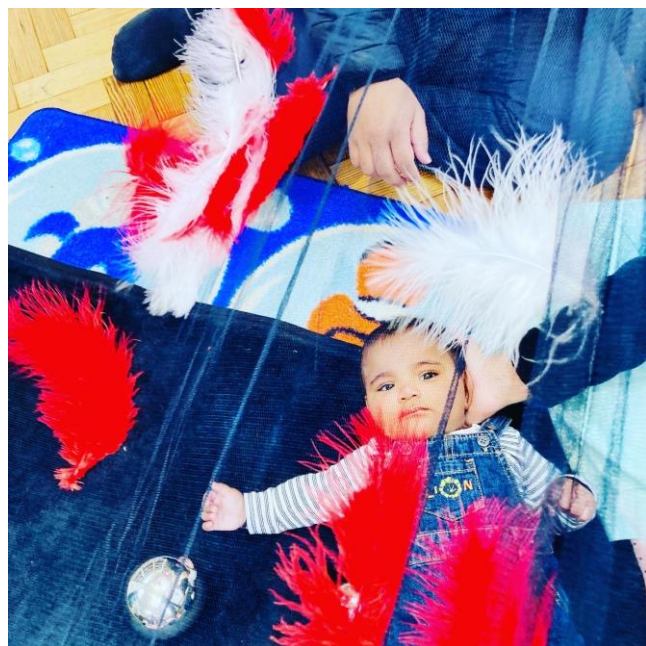
Chris Duncan, Spark Films - Playground Documentary Film Maker

Katie Goodbun – Postgraduate researcher in the School of Psychology at the University of Kent.

Rozenn Gladwell, Marketing & Engagement Officer, Kent County Council (October 21-March 22)

Clare Seddon, Marketing & Engagement Officer, Kent County Council (October 21-March 22)

Toni Ojo, Creative Project Assistant, Kent County Council – Kickstart placement (October 21-January 22)



Why Playground?

“Science tells us that a child’s experiences from conception through their first five years will go on to shape their next 50. It tells us that the kind of children we raise today, will reflect the kind of world we will live in tomorrow. It tells us that investing in the start of life is not an indulgence, but economically, socially and psychologically vital to a prosperous society.”

- Jason Knauf, CEO of the Royal Foundation, (Ipsos Mori, 2020)

The First 1001 Days

It is well established that the first 1001 days of life are crucial for the developing brain of a child (HM Government, 2021; 1001 Critical days Manifesto; NSPCC). An accumulation of national and international research culminating in the 1001 Critical Days movement has provided evidence that the development of a baby’s brain throughout pregnancy and the first two years of life provide a unique period of rapid brain development, strongly shaped by a child’s environment and experiences.

Brain development begins in the womb and can be influenced by maternal wellbeing as well as maternal mental and physical health. However, once born, sensitive and responsive interactions and positive relationships with caregivers are vital in a baby’s early brain development. From birth to 18 months of age connections inside the brain are created at a staggering rate of one million per second, providing a once in a lifetime opportunity for development (Harvard centre). After the age of two some of these connections are pruned to allow the brain circuits to become more efficient – those connections that are used more often are strengthened whereas those that are not used so often are stripped away. This period of life is vital in enabling babies to achieve the best start in life and represents a time when we as individuals are particularly susceptible to positive or negative experiences.

Exposure to adversity or negative events during these first years of life can have long-term adverse implications for a child (Center on the Developing Child; Moore et al., 2017), and whilst what happens in these first 1001 days does not solely determine a child’s developmental path, these experiences shape the development of the brain laying the foundation for what is to come. Positive early experiences influence a child’s ability to take advantage of further developmental opportunities, whilst in contrast negative experiences or trauma can impair a child’s early development, and have a negative knock-on effect later in life.

“Some of the most important experiences that will shape the architecture of a baby’s brain come from their interaction with significant adults in their lives. Babies naturally reach out for interaction through babbling, facial expressions and movements. The adults caring for them respond in kind with sounds and gestures. This back-and-forth process, known as ‘serve and return’, plays a vital role in developing wiring of the brain.”

Center on the Developing Child, Harvard University.

Babies are entirely dependent on their primary caregivers during the first years of life, and a responsive caregiver is crucial for many aspects of a baby’s development. Of particular importance to a baby’s development are ‘serve and return interactions’ with caregivers - these are interactions where the baby’s behaviour communicates something and this communication is given an appropriate response from the caregiver. For example, a caregiver might cuddle a baby when it cries, respond to baby’s babbling with language or look at an object a baby is pointing to. These ideas are reinforced in the NSPCC ‘Look, Say, Sing, Play’ campaign, which encourages parents to interact with their baby during everyday tasks at home such as meal and bath times, explaining how these interactions help their baby’s brain develop (NSPCC, 2019). Responsive interactions such as these help the baby’s brain to make new neural connections and develop both cognitively and emotionally. A baby develops best when they have at least one stable and committed relationship with an adult caregiver, and forming a secure attachment with this adult provides the scaffolding for a baby’s early development (HM Government, 2021).

Parent-Baby Attachment

Attachment theory is a well-supported concept in development psychology and refers to the bonds and relationships between humans, and in particular between a parent/carer and their child (Ainsworth & Bell, 1970; Bowlby, 1951, 1973, 1988). The primary means through which a child develops secure attachment is via an available and consistent caregiver who is responsive to their child’s needs. For a child, this consistent, positive, social and emotional interaction with a caregiver, together with shared experiences, is crucial in the development and maintenance of a secure attachment (Lamb, 2003), and if established in the first few years of life it can provide the foundation to last a lifetime (Haiman, 2012).

A secure attachment with a primary caregiver lays the foundation for future behaviour. It enables children to develop a sense of trust, meaningful relationships with others, a sense of security in exploring the world and a sense of self confidence and self-esteem (Coleman, 2003; Lieberman, Doyle & Markewicz, 1999). A secure attachment is crucial to healthy social and emotional well-being; however, the opposite can be the case for children who do not develop a secure attachment (Wong, West & Cusick, 2002) The failure to form a secure attachment can have a negative impact not only on other periods of child development and educational performance, but also later in life (Blum & Libbey, 2004; Young et al, 2019).

In the very early stages of a baby’s life, responses to their non-verbal cues are crucial to developing a secure attachment. For example, using eye contact, facial expressions and touch with a baby can help give them a sense of comfort and safety. Mimicking and mirroring facial expressions and early language or babbling can also help develop secure attachment (Frothingham, 2019). These are primarily non-formal interactions and often achieved best through play. However, there are many

circumstances such as parental mental health issues, poverty and deprivation, and abuse and trauma, which can impair these interactions or prevent them from occurring, and this can lead to children forming insecure attachments.

Deprivation and babies

Growing up in an area of deprivation is known to have a negative impact on children's cognitive and behavioural development (McCulloch, 2006). Children living in adverse conditions such as poverty or deprivation can experience psychological changes in their brain development which can negatively impact their social skills, self-control behaviours and educational performance (Wilkinson, 2016). As outlined above, a secure attachment is vital to the healthy development of a child, however a caregiver's ability to form a secure attachment has been shown to be negatively affected by living in poverty (Diener, Nievar & Wright, 2003; Richaud, 2006). Not only can deprivation lead to a lack of play materials in the home (Casady et al., 2001), but the psychological stress of living in poverty can negatively affect a caregiver's ability to form a secure attachment with their child. Poverty has also been shown to affect physiological systems that respond to stress as early as seven months of age (Blair et al, 2013; Brown et al 2017), and mothers in deprived areas tend to engage in fewer activities with their children (Lawson & Mace, 2009; Desforges & Abouchaar, 2003). Given the evidence it is therefore essential to address these issues early.

In 2020/2021 13.8% of children under 16 in Kent were living in absolute low-income families – 30% of these children were under the age of 4 years old. 16.9% of children under 16 in Kent were living in relative low-income families (Kent Analytics). It is important that we invest in all children in their earliest years, however it is particularly vital that we invest in those children whose early lives may be negatively impacted by deprivation.

The benefits of arts and creativity on health and wellbeing

Arts and creative based interventions have been tried and tested amongst many populations, and have been shown to have multiple health and well-being benefits (e.g., Fancourt & Finn, 2019; Gillam, 2018; Gordon-Nesbitt, 2017), however such research is not commonly found with babies aged 0-24 months. In terms of a child's development, a host of studies have found positive effects of engaging in arts for school aged children and young people. Participating in arts activities have been found to enhance emotional well-being (Creedon, 2011), have a positive effect on self confidence and self-esteem, relationship building and a sense of belonging. Furthermore, all of these effects have been found to help develop resilience and mental wellbeing in children and young people (Zarobe & Bungay, 2017). Arts activities have also been demonstrated to be particularly beneficial in reducing the negative influences on a child from a disadvantaged home environment (Brown et al, 2017).

The right of the child to arts and cultural activities



United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child:

Article 31 of the UNCRC formally enshrines the child's right to play and the right to engage in other recreational activities, including participation in cultural activities and the arts.

The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child recognises, amongst many other issues, the right of the child to take part in cultural and creative activities. It deems anyone under the age of 18 a child, and therefore babies, right from birth, have the right to access cultural and creative activities. Despite this being enshrined in UN documentation very little evidence exists on the role that art and creativity can have on the developing brain of a baby, and arts for younger children have historically been overlooked in favour of an emphasis on school readiness and potential for educational achievement. Some international research exists which looks at the effects of arts on pre-school children, and often with vulnerable or at-risk children, but there is little evidence which involves 0–2-year-olds. Theatrical experiences at a pre-school age have been found to improve pretend play and cooperation amongst children (Rowe et al., 2018); arts integrated approaches to teaching have been shown to lead to improved literacy and school readiness of pre-school aged children (Phillips et al., 2010); and participating in weekly dance workshops supports at-risk pre-schoolers' abilities to integrate, strengthen their self-identity, support social-emotional skills and helps them to establish meaningful relationships with peers (Rajan & Aker, 2020).

Arts and creativity for babies

Whilst research into the effects of the arts and babies has been overlooked, many more arts-based productions are now being created for very young audiences. In Europe a surge in interest for arts for the very young (0-3 years) has been seen over the last 20 years. Projects for the very young have been created in Scandinavia (Klanfugl -Kunst for De Aller Minste and Dybwik Dans), Portugal (Bebé babá) and Scotland (Starcatchers) as well as pioneering work from Italy (La Baracca–Testoni Ragazzi) and the UK based Oily Cart. Whilst an assumption exists that very young babies cannot engage in arts performance, studies have found that babies can be highly engaged in performances via visual gaze (Barbosa et al., 2021), and many productions are now making use of science, and are tailoring their productions according to the developmental milestones of babies and young children (Fletcher-Watson et al., 2014). In spite of the rise in the number of performance related art productions for 0 - 24-month-old children in the UK in recent years, there still remains a lack of participatory arts and creative based sessions for this age group.

Some of the most inspirational work in this area is currently being delivered by Starcatchers – Scotland's Arts and Early Years Organisation. Starcatchers aim to inspire babies and young children by immersing them in high quality live performances and creative experiences, fulfilling their right to access the arts from birth, no matter where they live or their background. They provide a range of experiences from theatre performances to creative participatory sessions, and more recently inspiration for home activities during the Covid-19 pandemic. Evaluative work by Starcatchers has revealed that engagement in creative projects increases desire to access other arts activities, increases self-confidence, self-esteem and wellbeing in both parents and children, positively influences babies' development and increases parent's capacity to nurture their children. The shared experience of being involved in creative arts has also been shown to improve parental-baby relationships (Starcatchers 2014). Arts Council England have also been pivotal in paving the way for supporting projects such as Playground.

A more recent report, based on a longitudinal creative participatory project in Leicester, has also shed light on the positive effects of being involved in community arts projects on the families involved (Talent 25). The Covid-19 pandemic has had a negative effect on many parents and families, with reports of parental loneliness and loss of social connections having a negative impact on their emotional wellbeing (HM Government, 2021). One of the key findings from the Talent-25 report was that in spite of the challenges of lockdown many caregivers who had taken part in creative sessions pre-pandemic, found that they were using what they had learnt in sessions to keep their

babies active and engaged. The programme had not only given parents and carers ideas of how to keep their children engaged and entertained, but also provided them with skills and an appreciation of the importance of engaging with their baby.

Whilst some areas are beginning to see creative workshops for babies aged 0–24 months and their families, these are few and far between and often reliant on one-off grants, rather than forming part of a long-term strategy. This is where Playground enters and aims to fill this gap in Kent. As the evidence discussed above suggests the first 1001 days of a baby’s life are crucial developmentally and arts and creativity have a fundamental role in supporting this development. Playground seeks to use creativity and art to support early development in deprived areas of Kent, and lay the foundation for lifelong health and wellbeing. It aims to support families via free, artist led creative sessions, and inspire and empower those families to engage in more creative play at home.

“Governments who want to be led by science must invest in babies’ emotional wellbeing and development in the first 1001 days, giving every child a strong foundation in the earliest years of life”

- The first 1001 days: An age of Opportunity.

Artists and babies aged between 0-24 months

Research into the benefits of the creative arts on very young babies is beginning to flourish, however there is virtually no research to date on the experiences of the artists involved - those working with very young children. Not only is this a wasted opportunity to understand how the artist fits into this process and how it affects their practice, but moreover underlines how undervalued this area of work is within the arts and society more generally. The term artist is incredibly broad, however the majority of artists from all disciplines work with adults reflecting where the priorities of funders lie, and very few are trained to work with very young babies.

Only one project to the best of our knowledge has looked at the effect on those involved when working creatively with babies (Newell, 2019). The ‘Connect’ project by Anna Newell was a ground-breaking piece of work which brought together teenagers and babies exploring play, connections and empathy. Whilst not ‘artists’ in the formal sense, the impact on the teenagers was profound and transformative, providing them with a sense of calm and increasing their confidence to explore more areas of performance.

The current Playground project aims to work with a group of artists to develop new skills, knowledge and confidence in working with the very young, and the evaluation aims to be one of the first to follow the journey of the artists, and map the impact of the project on their practice.

Playground Aims:

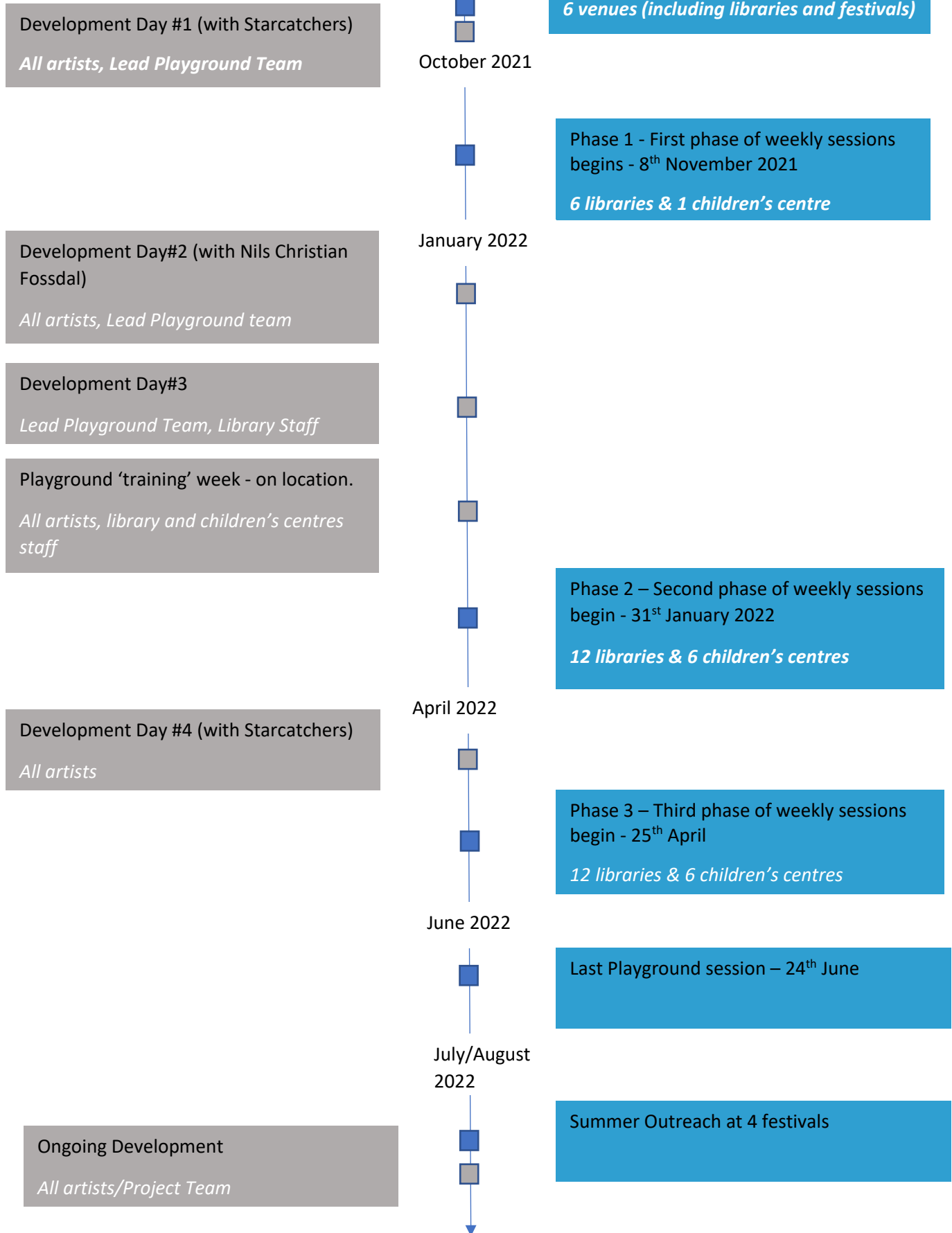
Playground is an ambitious project with a number of separate aims. These are as follows:

PLAYGROUND AIMS:

- To engage and work with a diverse range of young children and their families in disadvantaged areas to overcome barriers to access high quality art & culture
- To develop the skills & confidence of artists & practitioners in Kent to increase creative work with, by & for early years. In particular to develop a more diverse range of artists working in this field
- To develop the skills & confidence of library staff to provide a strong legacy to ensure creativity is embedded in their future engagement with children and families.
- To promote and evidence the positive impact of creativity, to promote and evidence that interactive creative play is vital for the healthy development & building mental resilience of young children. All of which can equip young children with the confidence and social skills for school and life
- To engage families with their children's experiences and learning, strengthening communication, child development and parent-child bonding
- To encourage use and awareness of libraries
- To develop local, national and international partnerships for future collaboration and longer-term strategic development of the Playground Project
- To position Kent as a recognised pioneer and leader in Early Years Learning and Education

The word 'PLAYGROUND' is written in a large, bold, black, handwritten font. The letters are thick and expressive, with some overlapping and a slightly irregular, artistic feel. The 'P' is particularly large and prominent. The background is white with some faint, light grey smudges or shadows around the letters, giving it a sense of being a physical drawing or a scan of a hand-drawn word.

Playground Timeline:



Playground: In Numbers

12 libraries and **6** children's centres in Kent were involved in the project

Summer Outreach 2021 was delivered in **6** venues by **19** artists. It was attended by **362** adults and **546** children.

311 Playground sessions were delivered across **26** weeks



A total of **11** artists regularly delivered the Playground sessions



In total there were **1665** visits by adults

The majority of babies were aged between **3** and **15** months

The youngest Playground attendee was just **7 days** old!

In total there were **1537** visits by children aged 0-2 years

Section 2: The Evaluation

What did we measure?

As outlined in the previous section the arts, and in particular creativity, are becoming increasingly considered as important to the under twos, as well as having the potential to support and improve health and wellbeing across the lifespan (Fancourt & Finn, 2019). However, for arts and creativity to be considered as part of an overall national strategy available to children, robust evidence of their value is critical.

In order to improve attitudes and access to early years arts-based interventions there is a need to ensure they are developed in accordance to the best available evidence. Whilst assessing the impact on babies and young children within the first 1001 days is not always straight forward, drawing on a several different forms from different sources (a mixed methodology) can be valuable.

There is little current work available which assesses the impact of creative, arts-based programmes on babies aged between 0 and 24 months, their parents/carers, or the artists providing the sessions. As such, the approach taken in the current evaluation is exploratory in nature. It aims to build on the evidence provided by the Playground Pilot evaluation (Keemink & Bosin, 2019), by expanding both its methods and depth of insight.

Aims of the evaluation:

1. Process evaluation – aimed to follow the project from start to finish with a view to evaluating the development of the project and those involved (e.g., the artists and library staff).
2. Impact evaluation – aimed to evaluate the impact of the project on four groups involved (i.e., the babies, the parents/carers, the artists and the library staff).

Types of evaluation methods used:

To ensure that the evaluation provides as much data and evidence as possible a number of types of evaluation were used:

1. *Quantitative* – capture measurable outcomes (e.g., numbers of people involved). Questionnaires and surveys were also used to ask specific questions about quantifiable outcomes (e.g., a question may ask something like ‘how many times per week do you engage in one-to-one play with your child?’).
2. *Qualitative* – provides richer and more detailed information. Formal interviews using structured pre-determined questions were used towards the end of the project with library staff and artists. Informal interviews were used throughout the project to capture feedback from parents/carers and library staff. Informal interviews are a form of participatory action research in which questions, and therefore themes, are not predetermined by the evaluator but are allowed to develop organically through dialogue. Weekly reflections from artists also provided a rich source of information.

How did we measure it?

Data collection approach:

The information below shows the exact methods used to gain evidence of process and impact on each of the four evaluation groups. All questionnaires used can be found in the appendices.

1. Babies:
 - Observations by artists, the evaluator and library staff
 - Informal interviews – feedback from parents and carers
 - Questionnaire – sent to all parent/carers who had attended at least one Playground session and provided a contact email address. (See Appendix A).

2. Parents/carers
 - Observations by artists, the evaluator and library staff
 - Informal interviews – feedback from parents and carers
 - Questionnaire – sent to all parent/carers who had attended at least one Playground session and provided a contact email address. (See Appendix A).

3. Artists
 - Initial questionnaire sent to all artists before delivery of Playground sessions (See Appendix B)
 - Reflective log – weekly reflective log during delivery of the Playground sessions.
 - Summary reflective pieces – produced at the end of each ‘phase’.
 - Structured interviews towards the end of the programme

4. Libraries/Library staff
 - Pre-Playground questionnaire (See appendix C)
 - Post-Playground questionnaire (See Appendix D)
 - Informal interviews/feedback documents
 - Structured interviews towards the end of the programme.

How did we analyse the data?

Analysis of quantitative data:

i) Parent/Carer questionnaire – May 2022

Towards the end of the project (May 2022) a questionnaire was sent to all parents/carers who had attended at least one Playground session and had provided us with a contact email address. They were sent a link for a questionnaire and given 25 days to complete it. The questionnaire was sent to 221 parent/carer email addresses and 65 responses were received before the deadline (29.4% response rate). A quantitative analysis of the responses based on these 65 responses was conducted and is reported in the sections below. Please note that the analysis is based only on those 65 parents/carers responses who chose to, or were able to, complete the questionnaire online.

ii) Library/Children's centre Staff questionnaire – January and May 2022

At two time points a questionnaire was made available to all staff based in a library or children's centre where Playground sessions were taking place. These questionnaires were sent out before phase 2 and again towards the end of phase 3, and were designed to evaluate impact on library and children's centre staff. At both time points 20 individuals completed the surveys, however only six responses were able to be linked (i.e., only 6 staff members responded to both questionnaires). As such, average scores on item scales for before and after the Playground sessions are based on different samples of staff and only tentative conclusions can be drawn from them about the impact on staff.

Analysis of qualitative data – thematic analysis:

Thematic analysis is a method of analysing qualitative data whereby the researcher closely examines the text (e.g., interview transcripts) to identify common themes, or ideas and patterns of meaning that emerge repeatedly. Thematic analysis is particularly appropriate for examining data which is exploratory in nature or when the researcher has no fixed or pre-determined themes that they are looking for, rather it allows themes to emerge.

In the case of the current evaluation, thematic analysis was used to analyse the data provided by the informal and formal interviews, reflective logs and open-ended questions from questionnaires.

Evaluation Outcomes

The following section outlines the evaluation outcomes for each group involved: babies, parents and carers, artists and library staff.

The evaluation was conducted for each group separately and the sections are split into the four groups for ease of reading; however, it should be noted that there is considerable overlap in the outcomes for some of the groups. Impact on babies and impact on parents/carers are informed by data from parents/carers, artists and library staff. Impact on libraries and library staff are informed by the library staff and artists, and the impact on artists is informed by artists' reflections only.

Please note all quotes are included verbatim – they are written using the words that were originally used, and all quotes solely represent the individual's view or experience.

Babies (0 - 24 months)

Interaction with peers and other adults is key to encouraging the socialisation of babies and young children (Murray, 2014). However, many factors can make this process more difficult for families. Being a stay-at-home parent can make it challenging to enable sufficient interaction with other children and unfamiliar adults, and research suggests that economic deprivation can have a significant negative impact on social isolation and the socialisation of children (Gallie, Paugam & Jacobs, 2003). Both of these factors have been further impacted by the recent Covid-19 pandemic and resulting lockdowns in the U.K, isolating families and children further.

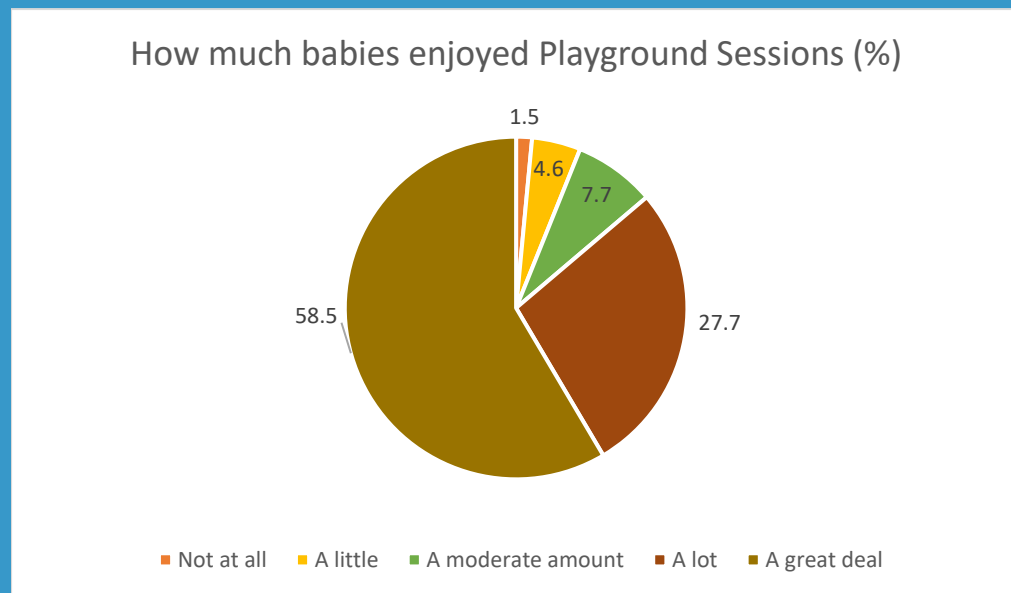
Many of the babies who attended Playground 2021-2022 were born during the pandemic and these families were isolated from friends and extended families during the lockdown periods. Many of the babies would have had little opportunity to interact with adults beyond parents, and many had not had the opportunity to interact with peers – this was particularly problematic for first time parents or babies who had no other siblings living at home. Recent research suggests that by the age of 6 months the average number of people who had kissed a baby was 3 (including parents) and by 12 months of age a quarter of babies had never met a baby of a similar age (Sledge et al., 2022).

When examining the experiences of pre-verbal children researchers rely heavily on parental contributions. This section contains an evaluation of the general impact Playground has had on the babies who attended and is based on information given to us via informal interviews with parents and carers. After the sessions many parents/carers were interviewed by one of the lead artists; parents and carers were asked open-ended questions and were given the opportunity to provide honest feedback on how their children had experienced the Playground sessions. Further insight into the impact of the project on the babies is also provided by the feedback in the parent/carer questionnaire, and from the observations of library staff and the artists.

The following analysis outlines some general observations about the babies involved in the Playground project and a more in-depth analysis on the impact of the project on the babies.

General observations – Babies and Playground:

When asked in the parents and carers questionnaire how much their baby/the baby they were caring for had enjoyed the Playground sessions the responses were overwhelmingly positive. **86.2%** believed their baby had either enjoyed the sessions ‘a lot’ or ‘a great deal.’ The breakdown of responses for baby enjoyment of the sessions is displayed as a percentage in the chart below



“My baby absolutely loves these sessions - she is enthralled by the activities and sounds and the interaction. Such a refreshing change from the usual playground and nursery rhyme songs. A wonderful idea with fantastic facilitators who really connect and inspire the babies!” (Parent/Carer)

One of the most common observations of the babies by the artists and library staff was how open and engaged the babies were from the very beginning of the Playground sessions. On the whole the babies connected with Playground immediately, they understood Playground and were totally focussed on the world the artists were offering. The babies were open to the offerings from artists from the start and as one artist reflected babies are:

“...natural artists who come with no expectations” (Jeremy, Lead artist).

“In drama we learn to create and be curious through our bodies. A lot of this is un-remembering habits developed while growing up, and then opening up to a world of imaginative, joyful and functional possibilities. Babies do this so naturally it is truly beautiful to watch..... Babies are naturally interdisciplinary!” (Megan – Session Artist).

Library staff, in particular, commented on how much the babies loved the sessions; the babies were transfixed, animated and engaged and as one staff member commented ‘lapping it up’. The staff members were fascinated to watch the babies, how they moved with the music, engaged in the interactions and reacted to the artists. They were regularly surprised at how even the youngest babies joined in and responded to the sessions.



Impact on babies

Beyond general observations the analysis looking at the impact on babies revealed five main themes:

- Covid 19 pandemic
- Encouraging Interaction
- Attention Span
- Social/cognitive Development
- Baby-led

i) Covid-19 Pandemic:

“Great resource for babies who have been so held back in socialising during lockdown.”
(Parent/Carer).

A number of parents/carers spoke about the impact they believed the covid-19 pandemic and resulting lockdowns had had on their families. They felt that their babies had missed out on a lot of opportunities for interaction during the pandemic and many were worried that as a result their babies would not cope socially.

“Everything was closed and he doesn’t meet any children for about seven or eight months or about one year and he needs very much to go in this session.....it’s very helpful for him.”
(Parent/Carer).

“It was nice to see my little one mingling with others obviously because of the lockdown I’ve been worried that she wouldn’t cope well with other babies.” (Parent/Carer).

Other concerns included parents worrying that as a result of the lockdowns their babies would be shy.

“When trying to get him to engage with other people, it’s a bit of a struggle. He’s such an engaging child except for with strangers because of being a lockdown baby.” (Parent/Carer).

Parents/carers believed that people were still wary of attending groups with their children since the pandemic and that many people had simply got out of the habit. However, parents/carers who attended the sessions were overwhelmingly positive about the affect it was having on both themselves and their babies. They regularly commented on how nice it was to get out and meet other people, how good the sessions were for their baby's language and socialisation, how such small things excited the babies, and how positive the interaction between the babies and people they didn't previously know was.

"It's nice for them to get involved and share it with other kids as well..... Once lockdown lifted, trying to get him involved with other people he doesn't know.... As soon as I saw this come up, it's nice to get out and do something." (Parent/Carer).

For parents/carers many of the usual developmental phases in a baby's life, such as developing boundaries had been restricted by the Covid-19 lockdowns, and parents/carers were unused to being in a public setting with their baby. One member of the library staff helping with Playground observed that the sessions were not only helping to increase the confidence of the babies and to give them agency, but also served to increase the confidence of parents/carers.

"If the child wanders off, they can just go, nobody's chasing them, nobody's running after them, so it's actually..... I think maybe it's giving the parents confidence. They're not.... maybe they would have shouted at them in another setting, but they are learning actually, I don't have to, my child's fine, he can do that, he can go off, and go look at something and get distracted but they come back. With lockdown a lot of these children were with their mums all the time, and they weren't able to go out and explore but they are now realising 'I can go there' and 'I can do this.' And mums are thinking 'actually they've never done that before,' and 'it's safe, and they're happy, then I'm happy,' and it's lovely." (Library staff member).

ii) *Encouraging Interaction:*



Encouraging interaction between the babies and their carers, as well as with other children and adults they didn't know was important to the those attending the Playground sessions. One parent

who attended from when their baby was just seven weeks old believed it was important for babies to socialise with other babies even from a very young age and was pleased to be given the opportunity to attend the group. Parents/carers commented on the importance for their babies to interact with artists, people from diverse backgrounds as well as with the parents themselves.

“I just think you allow them to interact and I think that’s very important. And not only just between them, but also between parent and child.” (Parent/Carer).

As time went on and as babies’ attendance became more regular parents and carers began to comment on the developing interactions between the children. This peer interaction is an important part of their socialisation, in particular for aspects such as emotional regulation, communication and sharing.

“It’s been really nice to actually watch the other children as well. You often see your own children, but also watching the children interact together and corresponding with each other really, and expressing themselves in their own way.” (Parent/Carer).

“For those children coming up to two, it might be their first experience of other children... some of the older children, the ones just starting to toddle, are going over to others and they are actually sharing things.” (Library Staff Member).

Parents and carers often referred to the sessions as relaxing and calming and quite different from other groups they had been to – and this was one of the reasons that they believed encouraged such a high level of interaction.

“So, we went to a group yesterday that was very full on, in terms of music and sounds and things like that, and dressing up, but she much prefers today’s group. She quite often clings to me and isn’t quite sure of things, but in today’s group she is a lot more active with everybody who was joining in and stuff like that and what’s going on and not looking at me as much as when we go to a group on a Thursday.” (Parent/Carer).



iii) Attention Span:

Parents, carers and library staff reported being surprised that the artists or the sessions could hold the attention of very young babies for so long. They often underestimated the babies' abilities to concentrate, focus and engage and commented that the babies interacted better than they thought they would.

"...this gives you that other interaction back as well which I found, yeah, something that I never thought possible with such a young baby." (Parent/Carer).



The parents/carers were often surprised that the babies got so much enjoyment out of very simple movements or objects and this was closely linked to simplicity of the resources used by the Playground artists (this is discussed in more detail in the next section). Many parents also linked the unexpected attention of their babies to the calming/relaxing/engaging nature of the sessions and that other groups lose the babies attention from being over-stimulating.

"When I heard about Playground, I just couldn't imagine how on earth as a mother of three you could keep the attention of new born babies. I just couldn't imagine what sort of entertainment or music we would be listening to.And there's not a murmur out of the babies, so they're obviously listening and appreciating it all. And it's quite mesmerising.... it's just astonishing." (Library Staff Member).

In addition to holding the babies' attention, the relaxed feel of the sessions allowed the babies to give their attention in their own way - to the objects, movement or people that they wanted to. Just because they might not seem to be interacting with something did not mean they weren't interested in it or learning from it.

"It was very interesting to see children in some way participate in what you are doing. Even if they are not actively doing what you are doing, they're watching and actually gaining something from it." (Library Staff Member).

iv) Social/Cognitive Development

When asked in the parents and carers questionnaire whether they thought Playground had helped with their baby's development in any way **69.2%** agreed that it had helped with their baby's development.

"My daughter and I love the sessions. They are perfect length and I've really seen her grow in terms of how she accesses the sessions in the 4 months we've been attending." (Parent/Carer).

"I feel these sessions are essential in early development of children and how they engage with the world around them." (Library Staff Member).

As the section on encouraging interaction reveals, the data supports the notion that creative play with 0–2-year-olds supports babies' social development. Parents/carers commented that their babies were developing greater confidence over the weeks and becoming more involved in the sessions.

"I found it interesting as it is the second time that I have come with my daughter. She was more involved this time and she is more doing and accepting this time." (Parent/Carer).

"It's building their confidence and so they'll actually be able to socialise with other children their age and of similar ages." (Library Staff Member)

"It encourages the babies to interact with the world being presented to them, this is clearly seen in those who regularly attend. You can see their growing confidence, their joy in what the sessions give them." (Library Staff Member)

Some of the babies were naturally shyer than others at the beginning of their Playground journey, however, with time and regularly attending, the children began, at their own pace, to interact with artists and engage in creative play.

"An ambulant child who was shy (actually terrified) when he first started coming now comes in smiling and spends the session making up games with the materials and exploring the surrounds." (Megan – Session Artist).

"The project is also positively impacting the confidence of the babies. One baby who for weeks has mostly sat on her Nana's lap with the artists taking objects to her, is now spending most of the sessions on the floor and choosing what interests her. Other babies are also beginning to move away from their caregiver for the first time." (Grace – Session Artist).

Parents and carers appreciated the exposure to different sounds and textures within the sessions – new sensory experiences for their babies - and gained ideas and inspiration about what else they could do at home. When asked about why she was bringing her baby back to the sessions one parent/carer replied:

"I think just for her development and social skills. Being at home with me or with grandparents all day you tend to do the same things or you sing the same things, do the same things. Development wise it's nice to have almost a bit of a helping hand to see what you can create, and what she can do, what she's tending to try out.... here she's trying different things, different patterns. It's nice to see her develop in that way." (Parent/Carer).

Many parents believed that the sessions were making a meaningful impact on their baby's development, for example through new skills such as waving and clapping, and referred to their babies as thriving and going through a 'massive developmental shift.'

"I've just noticed over the past week that she's been waving and using her hands a lot more and I don't know if that's like a coincidence of us focusing on the hands in the past few weeks. But I've seen her come along in leaps and bounds." (Parent/Carer)

"It's interesting to see how the children change over the weeks as well. Like so, she was only I think sort of seven weeks when she first started coming and so that kind of development over time how she's engaging with the activities and the music and that sort of thing is really different now to what it was like right at the beginning.....now she is actually engaging with the materials more and touching and feeling and much more kind of expressions I guess, much more expressions on her face and that sort of thing than there were at the beginning." (Parent/Carer).

"In those two weeks how much she's now following everything, kind of fixated on the artists and music and just a massive developmental change, yeah it's fantastic." (Parent/Carer)

Observations about the developmental impact on the babies were not confined to what happened within the sessions. During an interview with a lead artist one parent revealed that the experience from the sessions had helped to improve her baby's relationship with a grandparent. During a session one of the artists had offered up a drum to the baby during an interaction. After the session, and away from the library, the baby then had a shared experience of playing a bongo drum with a grandparent. The parent believed this was an important step in their relationship.

"That was a really important development for them that I think came from an indirect sharing of an experience rather than me saying can you please not be so intense. So, there's something there that is really powerful I think about taking it out of this space and into your life. It was great for him." (Parent/Carer).

v) *Baby led:*

Whilst all parent/baby groups help babies and children develop interaction and social skills the parents and carers who attended Playground particularly valued that the sessions were focused on the babies and not on the parents. They believed that the babies got far more out of these sessions because they were baby led and interactive.

Parents and carers often picked up on the fact that the sessions were baby-led and this was at odds with many of the other groups they attended or had attended in the past. The sessions were considered to be 'all about the babies' and being down on the mat or the floor in the libraries and children's centres aided this.

"...this is on their level and it's nice to see her kind of natural instinct of what she's going to do rather than me telling her or showing her what to do." (Parent/Carer)

Parents and carers found that being baby led enabled them to respond more to their child and kept both parent/carer and the baby engaged.

"I think what I like about it is that it is more for the child.....It's how they interact with you and you are led with them." (Parent/Carer).

It was viewed as much more enjoyable for the babies when they could lead the session, and this was considered perhaps one of the reasons why the sessions held the attention of very young children so successfully.

“....it was good to sort of, lead from them as normally I’m the one doing stuff to engage her, but actually she was more interested when we did it like that so it was quite good to see her reaction.” (Parent/Carer).

“...it is so nice that it is so different every time and is led by babies and what they want to do and not like – this is what we do, this is what we are going to do! So it becomes more enjoyable for them and actually what they are wanting to do at the time.” (Parent/Carer).

The artists and library staff also reflected on the sessions being baby led and whilst many of their comments echoed the sentiments of the parents/carers they also commented on how being baby led helped support co-creation, how it supported the agency of babies, and how it dictated the pace of the session.

Artists were responsive to the sounds and actions of the babies, through mirroring, copying and reacting to them, and as such the artists creativity was prompted by the babies. This was a circular process which then enabled the parents/carers to be more involved. One artist commented that the babies gave back way more than expected and the process became truly co-creative. When speaking about co-creation with the babies, one artist commented that:

“It is becoming indistinguishable who is the true creative driver in the process.” (Jeremy – Lead Artist).

Being baby led allowed the babies to have true agency. One artist commented that each baby engaged in their own way, and this was an opinion echoed by the others. Due to the non-formulaic structure of the sessions, the organic nature enabled babies to dictate their own role in the process. In particular the older, more ambient children, would often dip in and out of the session:

“...the session is a true picture of the agency these babies have”. (Casey- session artist).

“At the centre of our 'bubble' are the tiny babies where there is activity and focus, around the edges are the moving babies who choose to drop in and out the session, unconsciously absorbing everything that is going on.” (Nicola – Lead Artist).

Being baby led was closely related to the parent/carers appreciation and wonder at the sessions being non-verbal. This was thought to allow the parents/carers to really engage with what the baby is noticing, and to notice and react to what is important to the baby in that moment - this is discussed further in the next section.



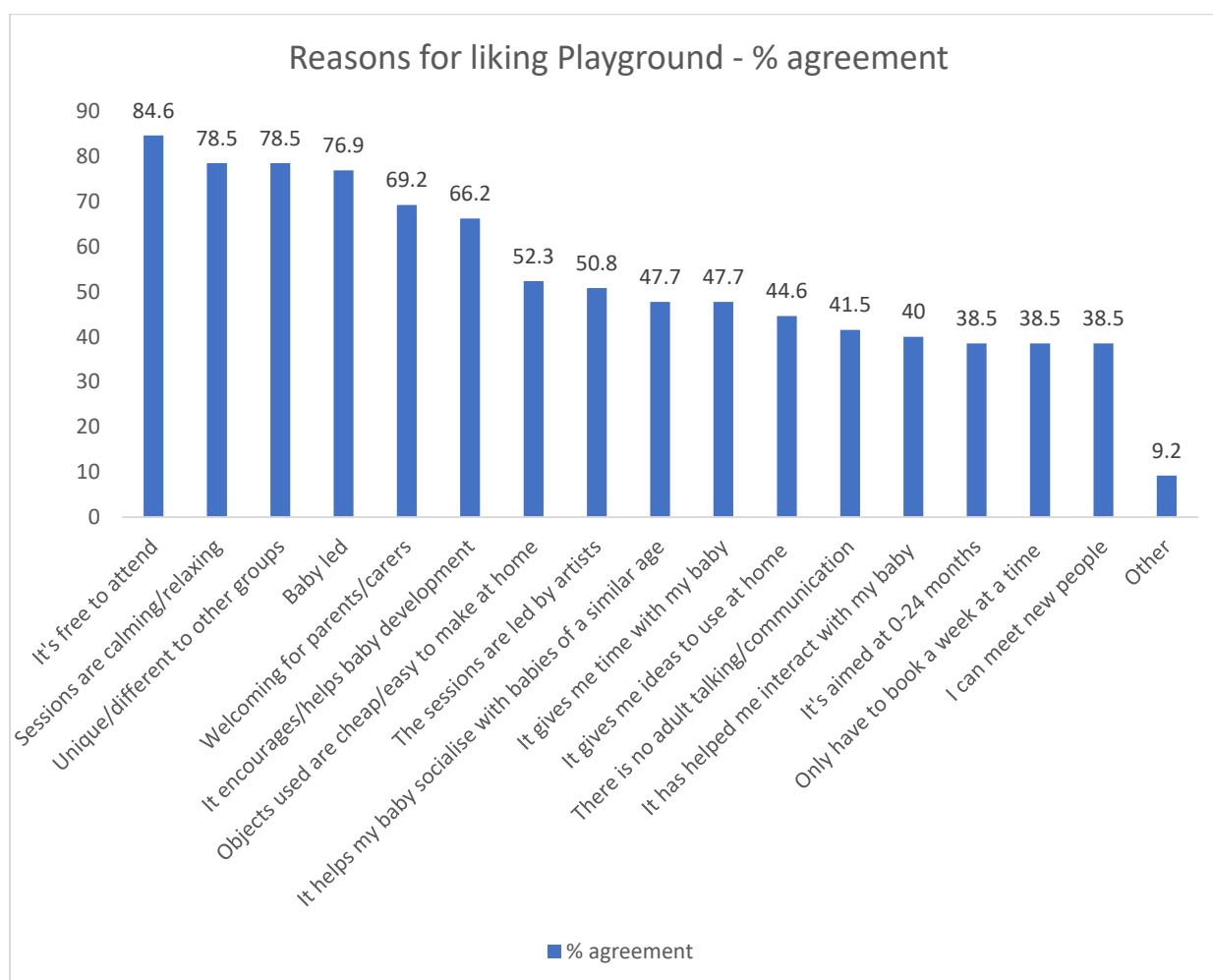
Parents/Carers

Although the impact of the Playground project on parents and carers was not directly measured before and after the project, they spoke about the effect it was having upon them during the informal interviews with the lead artists, and this was supported by data from the questionnaire. Observations by the artists, library staff and the researcher also formed part of the evaluation of impact upon the parents/carers.

It should be noted that many of the aspects covered in this section overlap with the information presented in the previous section - impact upon babies. None of the themes that emerged from the analysis exist in isolation but are simply separated out in this report for purposes of clarity.

Reasons for liking Playground

In the questionnaire, distributed in May 2022, parents and carers were asked to identify reasons they liked Playground. They were given 16 different reasons they could choose to agree with, as well as an opportunity to provide their own reason for liking Playground. The graph below shows the most commonly cited reasons for liking Playground – each bar represents the percentage of parents who cited each reason.



The reasons parents and carers liked the Playground sessions were varied, however many of the reasons such as the sessions being welcoming, calming/relaxing, encouraging baby development and giving parents and carers ideas to use at home, are also supported by the qualitative evidence provided in the informal interviews.

Whilst some parents indicated that they liked the sessions so much they said they would be willing to pay for them, this was not an option for all families, and particularly in deprived areas. In a time when the cost-of-living crisis does not leave families with 'spare' money to pay for baby activities, it is no wonder that the free nature of Playground was welcomed by so many. Being free of charge enables families who would not otherwise be able to afford it, to participate in creative play initiatives with their children and it is recognised that any charge attached to the sessions would exclude those families who need them the most.

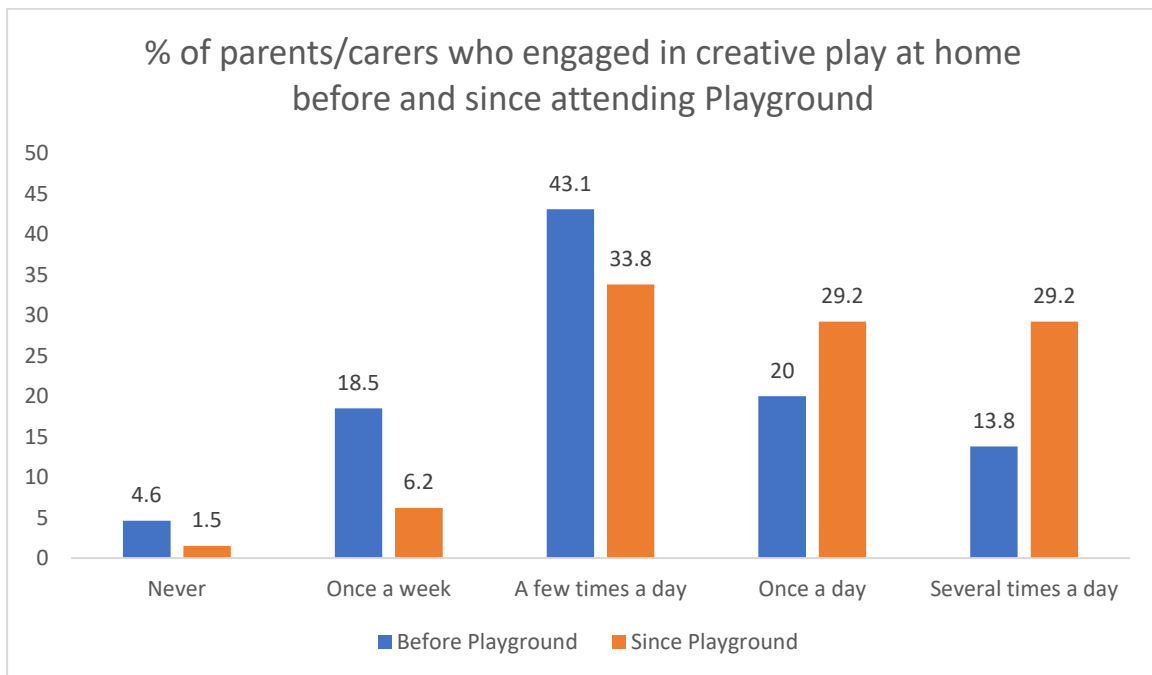
"I have really enjoyed the calming environment, the no judgement and appreciate that these sessions are free. I am on statutory maternity pay so I appreciate it. I can see my child enjoying these sessions and she is extremely relaxed afterwards." (Parent/Carer).



Greater engagement in creative play at home

One of the project aims was to engage parents/carers with their children's experiences - and thereby encourage and inspire families to engage in more creative play at home. In the questionnaire, parents and carers were asked about the time they spent engaging in creative play with their baby both before and after attending Playground sessions. Results were overwhelmingly positive, with a

clear increase in the frequency of engagement of creative play at home. The following graph shows this change:



Before attending Playground almost, a quarter of the parents/carers (23.1%) reported that they either never engaged in creative play, or only engaged once a week. Post Playground however, this had reduced to 7.7%. In contrast, the numbers of parents and carers engaging in creative play at home at least once a day, or even several times a day, had increased from 33.8% to 58.4%.

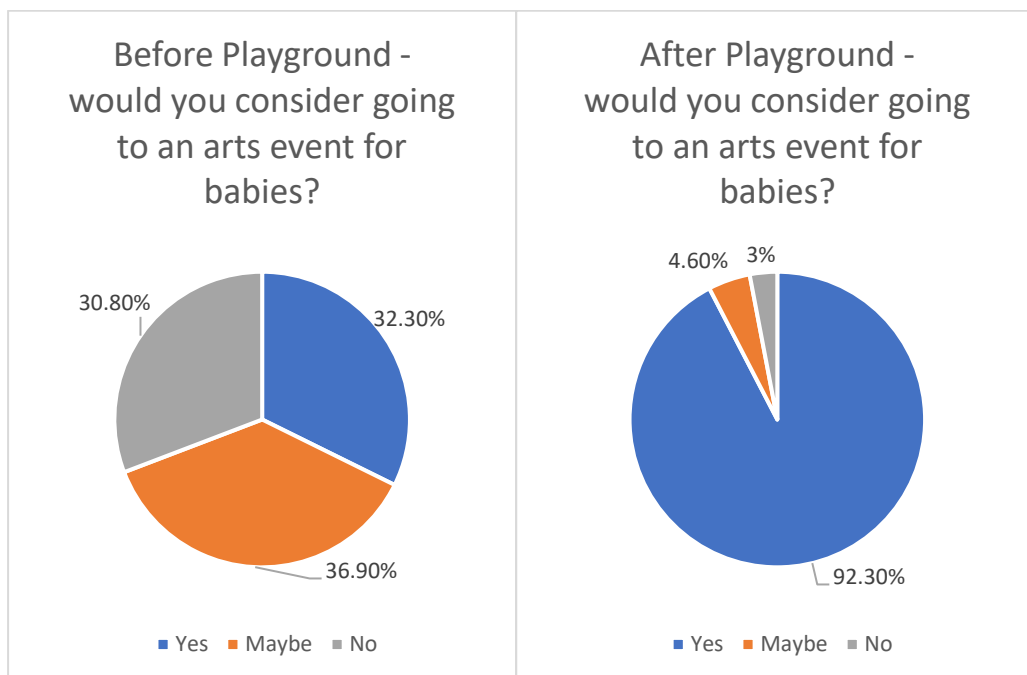
As outlined earlier in the report, creative play is crucial for babies and children, and can help them develop emotionally, cognitively, socially and physically (The Little Gym, 2017). Regular exposure to creative play furthers this development and therefore the increase in the numbers of parents and carers regularly interacting with their babies at home is an important and very welcome result from the current evaluation.

Access and attitudes to arts and creativity

Many families with young children, particularly in deprived areas, do not consider arts and creativity to be something that is relevant or accessible to them. One of the aims of the projects was to bring art to families who might otherwise not be able to access it, and to begin to erode some of the misconceptions about art and its relevance to babies and their families, and instead promote it as a facilitating baby development.

Before attending Playground 86.2% of parents and carers said that they did not know that arts events specifically for babies existed and only 15.4% said they had been to an arts event for babies. Before Playground only 32.3% of them said that they would consider going to an arts event for babies., however after attending Playground sessions many more families indicated that they would be willing to go to an arts event for babies in the future - 92.3% saying they would either 'probably

go' or definitely go'. The following charts show the shift in attitude towards accessing art designed specifically for babies.

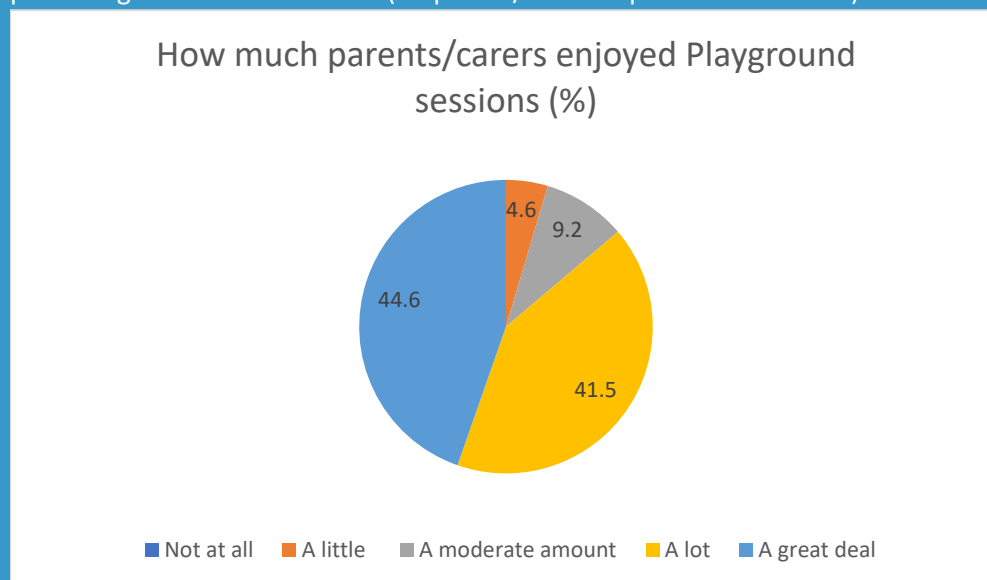


Further analysis of the data on parents and carers revealed nine main themes. These were as follows:

- Nature of the session
- Non-verbal
- Permission to play
- Time to connect
- Learning new things
- Resources
- Artists
- Community
- Library service

i. *Nature of the sessions:*

When asked in the parents and carers questionnaire how much they had enjoyed the Playground sessions the majority of parents and carers responded that they had enjoyed them either 'A lot' or 'A great deal'. The proportion of parents and carers who responded to how much they enjoyed the sessions are shown as percentages in the chart below (no parent/carer responded 'Not at all'):



"It is absolutely brilliant; I really look forward to the sessions and make a special effort to make myself and baby available. I've never seen my little boy so happy. The artists are fantastic, so welcoming and kind and excellent at what they do. When the sessions finish, we will really miss them. They have been invaluable. I was even planning my return to work around the days they playground is run as I know how beneficial it is for my little one." (Parent/Carer)

The parents and carers who attended the Playground sessions were overwhelming positive about the welcoming nature of the sessions. Although many were anxious at first, not knowing what to expect, the sessions were spoken about as welcoming, relaxed, at ease, and comfortable.

"I had no idea what to expect so I asked dad to come with me too, just...I didn't know what to expect but it was lovely, I just felt so comfortable, it was really easy, there was no pressure..." (Parent/Carer).

Parents and carers liked that there were no expectations of them or their babies, that both were given time to join in and interact at their pace, and that the non-formulaic or experimental approach meant that there was no prescribed welcome song or other regular structure that can make people feel uncomfortable if they are unsure of how to join in.

“What I like about the start of the session is when you start saying this what we are doing and you don’t have to join in and it invites us to do what we are most comfortable with, and I think that is important, and I really enjoy it. It takes us both a while to settle in to a group in any new environment.” (Parent/Carer).

“...everyone know the actions to wheels on the bus, everybody knows the actions to twinkle twinkle little star, but no one really knows what’s going to happen here, so it’s like unwrapping a big mystery and a big surprise, that is just going to explode and that’s what happens every session, it’s this wonder and imagination that you can see just sparking , and it’s not just about the babies, it’s about the parent and the carer that’s there as well, and that realisation that they could do so much more with so much less at home.” (Casey – Session Artist).

One father who attended commented that it felt very inclusive, and that because it was so baby focused, he did not feel left out as can happen in other groups where the focus is on the adults in the room. When talking about the sessions and the freedom to ‘let go’ and interact with their baby, one parent/carer commented that:

“You have to be in a safe space to do that, I think. That is one of the things that I enjoy about this group, that there is space to be able to do that.” (Parent/Carer).

By making the sessions so easy and welcoming the artists also encouraged the parents/carers to stay at the end and chat or get to know each other if they wanted to. Many parents and carers valued and embraced this opportunity, and connections within groups were visibly being made. Parents and carers valued the time to interact with and to support one another, and this was particularly evident for first time parents/carers whose experience of lockdown had left them feeling isolated and unsupported.

As well as being very welcoming and inclusive, the parents/carers were hugely appreciative of the calming and relaxed nature of the sessions. The sessions were commonly referred to as calming, relaxing, soothing, unique and the best group around!

“This is honestly one of the best groups I have been to. It’s the reaction of the children that I think, for me, it is all about them and how they are acting and to see a group of very young babies lying there and interacting. Well done!” (Parent/carer).

“A child that came in quite distressed, was calmed as the session got underway and was smiling as it left the library. I got the impression that the mother was similarly calmed!” (Library Staff Member).

Other groups that parents/carers had attended, and in particular sensory groups, were often spoken about as over stimulating and ‘too much’; Playground by contrast was calm and engaging for the babies and enabled the parents to react and interact with their children. This view was echoed by a staff member, with many years of experience in sensory play and child development, at one of the children’s centres offering Playground.

“I think for so many years we have had sensory things that are just too bright, there’s too much going on, you get mind boggled with it all whereas this is just...This going back to basics how it should be. It should be visual, it should be tracking, it should be about sound and just softness, being peaceful and relaxed rather than lots of lights and things happening around.” (Children’s centre staff member).

Parents and carers commented that there is a lack of groups offering what Playground is offering and moreover how much they came to value the sessions.

“There’s a massive lack of this kind of thing in the local area...I think we are crying out for this.” (Parent/carer).

The welcoming and relaxed nature of the sessions enabled the parents and carers to feel relaxed and in turn this appeared to help their babies too.

“He will not be calm if I’m not. He won’t relax and enjoy and settle into it if I’m on edge.” (Parent/Carer).

“If the baby thinks that ‘if the closest person in my life is loving this, then this has got to be good!’” (Parent/Carer).

Parents and carers were noticing that their babies seemed calm at the sessions with many of them, together with library staff, commenting that the babies don’t seem to cry. Often parents/carers would comment that their baby had been grizzly at home, or upset on the journey to the session but once they were in the session they quickly calmed.

“... every five minutes you have to get a new toy out otherwise she gets a little bit grizzly. Then I come here and it’s lovely and peaceful.” (Parent/Carer).

“Yeah, in the car she’s just screaming all the way here and then she’ll just calm down.” (Parent/Carer).

Feedback from parents and carers such as ‘I totally zoned out’, supported the notion of the sessions as relaxing for both parents/carers and babies, however they were also engaging for both age groups. The sessions were referred to as both therapeutic and also as having something for everyone.

“I like that it is not too much for them, so it’s not over stimulating but he’s absolutely engaged with it. He is completely still sometimes and I find it quite relaxing as well. It’s something we both enjoy.” (Parent/Carer).

“It was very therapeutic for me as well and I come away very lifted by the whole session.” (Parent/Carer).

The calm and soothing nature of the sessions was underpinned by comments about the music accompanying Playground. Many parents and carers commented on how much both they and their babies enjoyed the musical side of Playground and this reaffirmed how integral it was to the sessions, as highlighted in the artists reflections.

Parents and carers commented that the music both helped to relax the babies into the groups and was noticed by the babies, often stimulating their curiosity. Parents and carers also spoke about how they had now been using music at home to calm their babies. For example:

“I think music is really important, she particularly loves music. But you’ll notice that when the music goes, she turns her head, so it’s very stimulating. I mean we play music quite a lot in the evenings now to get her to go to sleep and we noticed a massive difference between how chilled she is if we’ve got music on at night, versus the telly.” (Parent/Carer).

Whilst many other groups that people had attended incorporated music through songs or nursery rhymes, the music included in playground was thought to be very unique.

“The music aspect is what’s my favourite because I’m into music myself so I enjoy that. I think the fact that you don’t find this anywhere else, you’ve got baby groups where they can play but nothing which incorporates the sound like this does. You can’t find anything else like it anywhere else. It’s been brilliant, the babies love it.” (Parent/Carer).



ii. *Non-Verbal:*

The majority of parents/carers had not experienced groups that were primarily non-verbal. Whilst this was initially uncomfortable for some of the adults, the response to the non-verbal nature of the sessions was hugely positive and a surprise to many.

Being non-verbal was also connected to the sessions being baby led. Parents/carers commented that it allowed them to listen to their babies, and enable them to notice and react to what they are seeing and doing in a way that is impossible in a noisy world.

“We’re so fast in our lives going around our house...doing stuff and going out...and it actually makes you stop and notice what the baby notices, which is even like tiny hand movements that you were doing with the ribbons, it was brilliant. Really fantastic.” (Parent/Carer).

“And it was really nice to listen to the babies and not be talking to them all the time. Because we do tend to talk to them a lot. But actually.... just listening and reacting was a really nice, new experience.” (Parent/Carer).

“You think you are meant to be talking to the baby all the time, but of course it doesn’t give them the little gap so that they can say something. Or you can even mirror what they’re saying in their language.” (Parent/Carer).

Other positive aspects of the sessions that emerged from the sessions being non-verbal were that parents/carers found that being non-directive enabled them to engage and explore more naturally, providing a real sensory experience. Parents spoke about being mindful and present in the moment, paralleling some of the reflections of artists’ experiences within the sessions. When commenting on the non-verbal aspect parents and carers commented that:

“I find that quite refreshing actually. You don’t have to.....You’re being quite mindful, being really present.” (Parent/Carer)

“It’s quite nice. I think you are just really present in the activity and you just remove the adult communication, you’re still communicating. Because we all look around....and we’re always smiling.” (Parent/Carer)

The parents and babies were also appreciative of hearing the babies’ own voices. Parents/carers commented that their babies enjoyed other people reacting to their sounds or voice – it gave them agency.

“I liked following the babies’ language, and no adult language.” (Parent/Carer)

“I think it was the noises and like people reacting to his sounds, I think he quite enjoys seeing other people’s reaction to doing things.” (Parent/Carer)

This increased engagement encouraged by the non-verbal nature of the sessions also enabled greater connections to be made between parents/carers and their babies. Being non-verbal allowed for greater eye-contact, mirroring, and as one parent put it ‘going into a deeper space with your baby’.

“I think I communicate a lot more with language, so I really liked that the session was wordless, because it...it’s like going into a deeper space with your baby, and connecting with them on their kind of non-conceptual level, which is what art I think is about, so yeah, I really like that it was created by artists.” (Parent/Carer).



iii. *Permission to play:*

In contrast to the babies, the artists and library staff observations of the parents/carers who came to the sessions were that many of them were inhibited at first. Not knowing what to expect made many of them uncomfortable.

With time however, and a sense of what the sessions were about, many of the parents/carers were empowered to lose some of their inhibitions, although there was a sense that they had to overcome their self-awareness in order to engage with their baby. For some, this was easier than others, and persistence was often invaluable – it inevitably took some parents/cares longer to ‘get it’ than others. The relaxed nature of the sessions, the welcoming atmosphere and the acceptance that different levels of participation were accepted enabled many parents/carers to become more comfortable with the notion of creative play and to engage with their child.

Many of the artists commented on the difference in the parents/carers with time. The intention of the parent/carer to engage increased with the regularity of attending the Playground sessions, and may have been underpinned by their increased comfort and security within the group. One of the artists commented that with time, the parents/carers were coming in to the sessions eager to get stuck in, and ‘choosing’ to play.

“I’ve noticed the parents and carers are themselves coming into the session eager to get stuck into playing.” (Grace – Session Artist)

“The participants that have been coming regularly are beginning to find new ways (and in some cases even more adventurous ways) of playing with the objects that they have most likely seen more than once before. I think this indicates there is a level of creativity developing in the participants and therefore demonstrates the impact the wider project is having. They are also choosing to get more involved with play.” (Grace – Session Artist)

This inevitably had a positive effect on the interaction the parents/carers were having with their babies – the more the adults interacted, the more settled the babies became, and the greater the opportunity for connection through play.

With time, and as the confidence of both artists and parents/carers grew, the artists also noted their increased interaction with parents to create, and that importantly this took nothing away from the interaction the parent/carer had with their baby. In some cases, artists commented that it was not only babies taking the lead but also parents/carers who were starting to lead sections – whether this was their intention to or not was unclear.

The observations that given time parents and carers became more willing to ‘get stuck in’ and engage with the programme was confirmed by the information provided by the parents/carers themselves in the informal interviews. The sessions were found to be engaging not only for babies but also for parents and carers, and as such they reported wanting to join in.

“It is really engaging because normally I would stand and watch, but it was really engaging and I wanted to join in.” (Parent/Carer)

For many it provided an opportunity to let go of the normal constraints of everyday life, and the role people feel they need to play as adults. For some parents and carers, a contrast existed between needing to appear serious as an adult and the desire to play with their child – Playground gave them this permission to play.

“When I’m at work I’m a GP.... I’m very conscious of appearing sensible and knowledgeable and then I come to these groups and it’s all about letting that go and remembering how to play and how to be...be a kid again.... Which I sort of lost for a few years.” (Parent/Carer).

Parents and carers spoke about the play being very organic and the need be silly with their children.

“I absolutely loved it. It was our first time since the whole pandemic.... We love the whole freedom and we love the whole entertainment.... We loved being silly with each other. I was throwing things to him and he was throwing them back – he loved it! It was really relaxing and chilled and you can see on his face that he is so happy.” (Parent/Carer)



iv. *Time to connect:*

As alluded to in the section on the non-verbal nature of the sessions, connecting with their babies was hugely impactful on parents and carers. The Playground sessions encouraged the parents and carers to think carefully about the time they spent with their babies. Whilst many commented on how busy lives provided little time for one-to-one interaction, parents and carers began to reassess how they might spend their time with their baby – this was a new thought for some.

“But that sense of time, time to relax with baby. When we’re at home, we’re so busy doing things that to make some time to just be relaxing with your baby and enjoying touch with your baby – I don’t think I’d really thought to do much of that.” (Parent/Carer).

Parents and carers were hugely appreciative of the time they got to spend interacting with their baby in a Playground session – with many calling it time to interact, special time, time and space to explore, and even a connection time for a family.



“I just get lost in play with her, which is what’s really nice. Enjoying special time engaging with her. I just lose myself with her, there’s no distractions.” (Parent/Carer).

“I think when we’re at home I’m always thinking about the next thing to do so we don’t usually have the time and space to explore, and it was just so nice to just have the time.” (Parent/Carer).

These very powerful emotions at times led some to tears.

“And it just brought tears to my eyes, it made me cry. And it was beautiful, it was just a lovely, lovely thing. It was lovely, it was a very special moment.” (Parent/Carer)

In a similar vein to the feedback on being non-verbal, parents and carers also commented on how the sessions enabled them to take the time to see things from the baby’s perspective, for many it provided space to use their imagination and reconnect with their child.

“I think anything that gets parents actually looking at their children and connecting with them and seeing the different things you can do.... I think for some parents it’s remembering that.... things like a bottle with bits of paper in it, it doesn’t have to be expensive, it doesn’t have to be going out and spending all the money on flashy toys and things, it’s using your imagination and reconnecting.” (Parent/Carer).

For many the Playground sessions allowed them time to connect with their baby, but also inspired them to think about ways they could interact with their baby at home and gave them new ideas about the types of activity and resources they could use.

“The session was really great, just for getting some other ideas about what we can do with him to interact really.” (Parent/Carer).

v. *Learning new things:*

When asked in the parents and carers questionnaire whether they had tried recreating any elements of Playground at home (e.g., using music, mirroring etc.) a huge **78.5%** reported that they had used some Playground inspired techniques at home.

This included mirroring, increased use of textures in play, hand clapping, using music, copying their baby’s sounds and the ‘I am’ game.



One of the aims of the Playground project was to encourage and inspire parents and carers to interact and play creatively with their babies at home. As previous sections have shown parents and carers enjoyed copying and mirroring their babies, reacting to their sounds, letting go and allowing themselves to play. This did not just occur within sessions but, as the interviews with parents and carers confirm, was also spilling over into more play in the home environment.

"I think it has helped some parents and guardians see what they CAN do with their children, at home and in the session, as opposed to what they thought they COULDN'T do. Playground

offers those, especially in deprived areas, things that they wouldn't normally have access to, while also showing them what's possible at home to help stimulate and bond with their baby." (Library Staff Member).

Many of the things that parents and carers learnt at Playground mirrored the things learnt by the artists. Parents and carers spoke about learning to slow down, and not constantly moving on to the next thing. Giving babies time to explore and allowing play to elongate as far as possible.

"...sometimes if you try something and you see that he doesn't love it immediately you kind of move on to the next thing. But actually, they need to be exposed to and given enough time to see whether they like it or not, and I mean he didn't like it at first but I think he was just fascinated by the paper." (Parent/Carer).

Just as they had revealed their surprise at the levels of concentration and attention that babies could display, many parents and carers again were surprised to find how their babies reacted to slowing down. One parent when speaking about her daughter who she remarked generally need a lot of stimulation commented that:

"...she gets bored really easily and it was nice to see her relaxing and taking it all in." (Parent/Carer).

The feedback from parents and carers revealed that they found it challenging to constantly think of new ideas to keep their baby entertained at home and that they had taken away elements of the playground sessions and used them at home with their babies. For example, they reported trying out baby massage, the use of rhythm, using a feather to settle their baby, recreating music and sounds at home, and even musical statues using the 'stop' technique introduced later in the programme.

"I like the simplicity of it. Because, like, all of the other toys at home are all dancing, lights and noise and everything, and you never take the time to think a piece of tissue paper will keep her entertained for 15 minutes. You're always thinking onto the next thing but it is nice just to take time with things that are so simple and can be replicated really easily at home for very little money. I can't play the guitar but we can listen to music and yeah, just things floating down on her face she loves. It's nice to see which bits are her favourite, she loves things coming down on her like the sheet, the feathers today you could tell she loves that. She's got her favourites that I try to replicate at home now." (Parent/Carer).



Many parents and carers also marvelled at the simplicity of the resources being used in the sessions, and spoke about attempting to re-create them at home. This is covered in more detail below

vi. Resources:

When asked in the parents and carers questionnaire whether they had tried re-creating any of the objects at home

53.8% indicated that they had.

Impressively **56.9%** of parents and carers also reported that they had been inspired to try making new objects at home (things that weren't used in a Playground session).

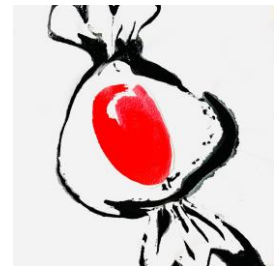
Many parents and carers were amazed by how simple the resources were for Playground but how engaging they were for their children. The resources were all 'home-made' and followed the black and white theme of Playground – black and white provide contrast and help a baby's optic nerve develop (Tiny Love, 2022) as well as strengthening cognitive abilities and gross motor skills (The Tot, 2022).

Toward the latter stages of Playground, the colour red was also introduced. All

resources were made from everyday objects, or cheap and easily accessible materials.

Parents and carers loved that the resources were simple, accessible, affordable and easy to recreate at home. The resources were a complete contrast to the barrage of brightly coloured, expensive and generally plastic toys available for babies and young children, and which parents/carers felt a pressure to buy. They discovered that materials and resources that babies were curious about and enjoyed exploring did not need to be expensive and flashy, and for many families spending a lot of money on toys was simply not an option.

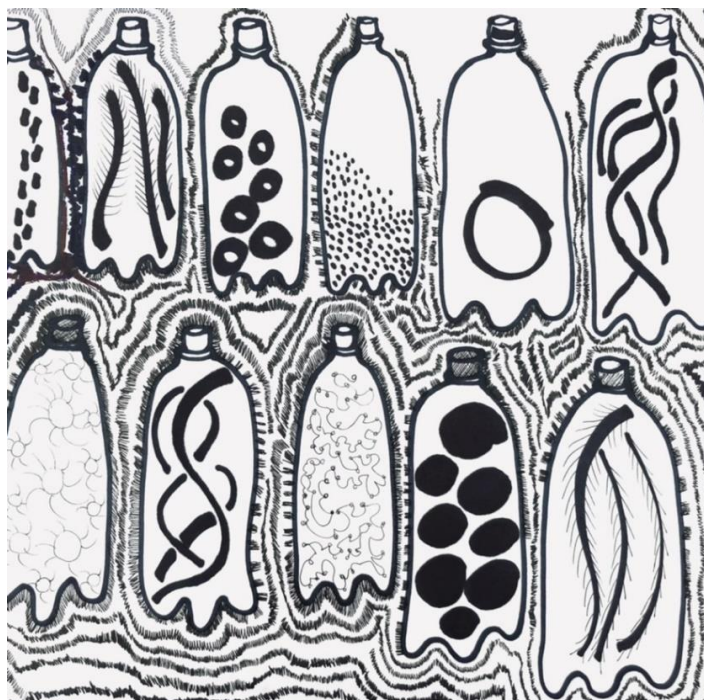
Parents/ carers often remarked to the artists about how they were beginning to recreate some of the objects or sequences at home with their child. Empowering parents/carers to play creatively with their babies at home was one of the original aims of the project and to hear such comments was affirmative of the success of the project for artists.



"In Folkestone, I started a game with a very shy little boy by putting "leaves" on his head and on my head. He played with his mum like that for a bit and then put the leaves on my head for a long time. This week, his mum said that he's been putting socks on her head when they are playing together!!" (Meire – Session Artist)

Parents and carers commented that they had made things at home inspired by the resources they had come across during a Playground session – foil in an old bottle for example or making shakers from things around the house.

“Coming from baby sensory and feeling like, oh my gosh I could never afford to buy all these million props because every week she’s got teddy bears and so much stuff that I’m like – to recreate that at home would be quite hard. Whereas all this is stuff you can recreate quite easily.” (Parent/Carer).



Parents and carers had also considered why the objects and resources aroused so much curiosity and engagement for the babies.

“I think they really like the things you could make at home because they are things that they sort of know, but they are a bit different, so like the bottles, you see bottles all the time but they don’t normally have things in it so it makes it more interesting I think.” (Parent/Carer).

The silver foil blanket was a big hit amongst Playground babies, and many parents and carers reported that they had bought one very cheaply for their baby to play with at home.



“So, since that session a couple of weeks ago where you had the silver foil and the feathers, so she absolutely loves having that at home, so I went to buy her one, and yeah literally if she’s feeling a bit low or a little bit sad, I just put her on there. She loves the crinkling sound, loves rolling around on it, yeah, so thank you very much” (Parent/Carer).

One parent even cut up little foil squares from a larger blanket, and distributed them at a Playground session to other parents/cares and babies so that they could always have a piece with them for their baby to play with ‘on the move’. This is a great example of the bonds and community Playground has created amongst parents and carers, something discussed in more detail later in the report.

Creating resources at home was also thought to be important by some for environmental reasons. It was noted how much waste there is with items for babies, particularly when it comes to plastic waste and the number of toys that babies are bought not just by their parents/carers but by extended families and friends. Reusing household objects and creating toys for their babies from natural materials was thought to be important in lessening waste.

vii. Artists:

The positive relationships that were built between parents/carers and the artists were clear to see, and the positive feedback they gave mirrored the reflections on trust as expressed by the artists. The relationships they built were based on mutual trust and respect and the parents/carers expressed admiration that artists were so tuned in to what the babies wanted.



Several parents and carers expressed how professional the sessions were and how it was so good it must have been research based. Other comments included the high quality of the artists engagement and the parents/carers were inspired by how the artists were prepared to be their 'free child'.

"It's your enthusiasm. It definitely isn't static, it evolves – you go with the child, which is the most important thing." (Parent/carer).

viii. Community:

When asked in the parents and carers questionnaire whether they had made any new friends or connections at the Playground sessions, **40%** responded that they definitely had, whilst a further **23.1%** felt that they may have made new connections.

As well as increasing the engagement of parents/carers and their babies during sessions and at home, the artists and library staff also noticed the benefits the parents/carers were experiencing in terms of support from each other.

During the second phase of the project (February – April) it was commonly noted that parents/carers were beginning to interact not only with their own babies, but also with other babies attending the sessions. This progression highlighted the increased comfort parents/carers had not only with the content, but also the space and each other. Strong communities were beginning to be formed.

“There is a magic happening within the groups. The carers are often able to hold the space themselves now with minimal input from us. It’s very beautiful and delicate work. They are also playing more and more with one another’s babies. A stand-out moment for me was watching a grandmother become a climbing frame for about three different babies. She was delighted and playing with all the children in really different ways, and they just felt safe and happy to play with her and one another.” (Natalie – Session Artist)

The artists noticed that the parents/carers, many of whom didn’t know anyone before coming to the sessions, were beginning to make friends/contacts with other adults, often swapping phone numbers or arranging to meet outside of the session. For many parents/carers the Covid-19 pandemic and resulting lockdowns had made developing support networks and friends with babies very difficult and for some the Playground sessions were the first opportunity to meet other adults with babies of similar ages.

“I think we have been noticing that friendships have been developing in the sessions as well. Mums are now meeting for coffee before they come here, or actually staying around for a chat afterwards, or they’ll go out together. They are coming to Playground but they are also planning other things outside that they can do together.” (Library Staff Member).

“...at XXX we have a very young Mum who has bought her baby since he was 6 weeks old, she is very quiet but consistently comes every week, well this week for the first time she went over and spoke to a couple of Mum’s it was so good to see.” (Nicola – Lead Artist).

Being encouraged by the artists in their pre session introduction to ‘stay and chat’ afterwards and not feel that they had to rush off, may have enabled these connections between the adults to feel more possible.

“It’s a community of carers gelling together. Carers are bonding and Playground communities are building. At many sessions the carers and babies are still on the rug an hour later.” (Nicola – Lead Artist).

“... some of the mums seem more confident ... new parents need friends and support; I feel that the group offers both.” (Library Staff Member).

The shared experience of the parents and carers in the sessions also helped to strengthen the artists perception of a supportive carer community forming as a result of Playground.

“...this XXXX session was emotional...10 babies, and everyone got up and danced together when Natalie drummed. It was incredible. There is a real sense of community and support here. And the mums are from all over the globe!” (Casey – Session Artist).

Highlighting these growing carer connections further is the reaction of a group of mums when they found out that the Playground Project was taking a 4 – week break over the easter period.

“A group of Mum's at Edenbridge library have decided to get together over our Easter break and organise their own Playground sessions at home with their teenage children in charge of the net and feathers!” (Nicola – Lead Artist).



ix. *Library Service:*

When asked in the parents and carers questionnaire whether attending Playground sessions had encouraged them to use any other library services, **36.9%** of parents and carers indicated that they had registered their baby for a library card and borrowed books, and nearly half (**49.2%**) had attended other sessions at the library such as Baby Rhyme Time.

For many adults, using their local library is not something they do regularly and particularly not before they have or care for children. This is an issue that has been hampered further by the closing of libraries through lockdown, and the reluctance of some to rush back to using them after lockdown restrictions were lifted.

The parents/carers who attended Playground however, reported very positive feelings about the library service referring to it as a 'family friendly neutral space' and how attending Playground had helped them to re-discover it.

"I've never come here and I've lived here years. But until a friend told me about this group here, and then you come and you think oh this is nice and you get to see other things."
(Parent/Carer).

The adults felt it was good for their children to get used to different surroundings and environments and that attending groups was a good way to help younger visitors develop a love for the library. They reported also joining other groups at the library since attending playground, and that Playground had helped connect them to the library. Parents and carers reported using the library outside of Playground sessions, and many commented that they were now borrowing books for their children.

"And it's nice that there's some books because I do think people forget about the library. Because you can spend a fortune on books can't you? And actually, even already I've been reading her books and I find that I'm quite bored of the same books. I read it and I was like I want a whole new stash of books and it makes much more sense to get them from the library than spend a fortune and have nowhere to store them." (Parent/Carer).



Artists

"I have long been drawn towards co-creation models. Participatory practice that engages audience, but that is not pulled away from bigger artistic goals. I want to make interesting, engaging and original work. The assumption can be that this cannot be done if you let untrained, non-professional voices into the process. But this is clearly wrong. The babies and the adults are all makers and creators in their own right. What we offer; what I offer, is a framework for their creativity. I have the skills to extend and develop the ideas offered into places that they would not necessarily take it. Into a shape that is satisfying - into music. The sounds they make become melodies that need catching and extending. The movements they initiate become rhythms and lyrics. This is contemporary community practice. It has big artistic ambition, but grows out of the everydayness of life. We sit around the rug and figure out what needs to happen next; what we want to do, and it's beautiful, meaningful and rewarding for all concerned." (Jeremy – Lead Artist).

Evaluative research into the experiences of artists working with babies aged 0 – 24 months is relatively sparse. Therefore, it was the intention of this evaluation to follow the creative journey of the artists. This section represents perhaps the most consistent in terms of the timeline of the project. Evaluation began before the artists became involved in live Playground sessions, and continued through all phases of the project.

The following analysis is split into three sections:

- i) Analysis of pre session concerns/anxieties/expectations
- ii) Analysis of artists' reflections over the course of all phases of Playground delivery
- iii) Lead Artists reflections

i) Pre session anxieties/expectations/what is success?

Before the sessions began artists were asked to respond to three questions (see appendix B):

- What are your anxieties/concerns (if any) about working on this project? (*Anxieties*)
- What do you think would define whether the project is a success or not? (*Success*)
- What do you expect to gain in terms of personal development and/or artistic development as a result of being involved in this project? (*Expectations*)

As highlighted in the section 'Why Playground?', working with children aged between 0 and 24 months in a creative way is relatively unusual for most artists. The artists involved in this project were no exception; the majority of them had never worked with this age group before and some had never worked with children of any age in the past. At the beginning of the project both expectations and anxieties were high for the artists.

Anxieties:

A number of the anxieties that the artists held centered around being too 'high-brow' or 'arty-farty', and being mis-trusted by the parents and carers. Whilst one aim of the project was to bring art to families who might not otherwise experience it, artists voiced concerns that the parents/carers might not trust them to help them to make connections with their babies. Concerns were raised that sessions would not be considered successful if this lack of trust meant that they failed to impact upon connections, failed to convince parents/carers of the impact on their baby or failed to convince them about the wonder of art.

There were also anxieties amongst some of the artists about being out of their comfort zone professionally, not-being sufficiently self-aware and not be able to communicate with the babies. Given the range of artistic backgrounds some artists were also concerned that they may not have ideas to bring to the project or simply that they would not be good enough.

Success:

The way in which artists felt they would consider the project a success, were closely linked to both the aims of the project as well as some of their anxieties around trust between artists and parents/carers. In practical terms artists suggested that the project would be a success if parents/carers returned with their babies to sessions, if numbers increased and people recommended it to others, but also if parents actively engaged with the creative play ideas in the sessions and felt inspired to recreate elements/ideas at home.

Artists also indicated that they would consider the project a success if it managed to bring art to babies who might not otherwise have access to it – one of the Playground aims. Beyond this however, artists also felt that success would be linked to inspiring parents and carers, opening up a world of creativity and art for them and their families, and a greater understanding, more widely in society, of the importance of projects such as Playground.

Success of the project was also closely linked to personal and professional ambitions. Some of the artists voiced the view that the project could be considered a success if they came away with a broader understanding of how their practice can inspire families. Success was linked to artists developing a sense that their work is important and valued, further development of their own creative practices with babies, and greater inclusion of projects such as Playground in community life.

Expectations:

Expectations of personal and artistic development were wide ranging and reflected the diverse backgrounds and experience of the artists involved in the project. Many of the expectations centered around gaining experience working with children aged between 0 and 24 months; gaining ideas about what works with this age group, how to weave babies' reactions into art, how to include their artistic practice into the project and how this age group would influence the artist's own practice. The artists' expectations also included the notion of risk – to develop their practice so that they could push boundaries whilst keeping their work accessible - how to take artistic risks without alienating babies and their families.

Co-creation was also raised as a potential expectation. Artists spoke about aims to make their work embedded in the community, not only creating spaces for babies and their families to connect and engage with each other and art, but also creating collaboratively:

“Being informed by it and adding to it” (Megan – Session Artist)

Hopes of the opportunity for collaboration with each other were also expressed. One of the lead artists also expressed the expectation of nurturing the sessional artists in order to produce a larger pool of artists able to work with this age group both in Kent, and nationally.

As the project evolved, the artists’ reflections revealed that many of their anxieties and concerns were allayed or reduced, and expectations were met. This can be seen clearly in the next section which outlines a number of themes that emerged from the artists’ reflections over the course of the project.

ii) Artists’ reflections across the course of the Playground Project

Artists were encouraged to reflect on their practice and the potential impact it was having after each session they delivered. They were also prompted to reflect at two specific time points across the project – these time points coincided with breaks in the delivery of the sessions.

Thematic analysis of the artists’ reflections revealed six main themes:

- The babies
- Trust
- Music
- Development of practice within Playground Sessions
- Collaboration
- Development of artistic practice

Each of these themes may contain sub-sections, and it should be noted that whilst each theme is reported separately here, there is considerable overlap between each theme – as in previous sections no one theme exists in isolation.

i) The babies

The Playground sessions became known amongst artists as being a ‘baby world’. They spoke about how they ‘sank down’ into the babies’ worlds during the sessions, working with them to co-create something unique and special each and every time. The artists noted that the interactions with babies helped to slow themselves down, be present in the moment and create a place where the outside world blurs.

“When I am doing a session, I stop being in the outside world and the micro becomes macro. The time is not linear anymore. The sounds of the library stop to be audible. We go into this shared experience that lives on multiple levels”.
(Stasha, Session Artist).



The shared experiences and moments were not only experienced between parents/carers and their babies, but also between artists and babies. The moments of connections made with the babies were recalled as very rewarding for the artists.

The artists were keen to ensure that the sessions provided shared experiences for parents/carers and babies, however it was not a simple one-way interaction. As with the babies, the parents also inspired the creativity of the artists:

“We give them something they didn’t know they needed – they give us purpose and focus for our work”. (Jeremy – Lead Artist).



ii) Trust

Many of the artists referred to the project as a journey of trust. This journey of trust was multi-layered and refers to the developing trust relationships between the artists, between artists and parents/carers, and between the artists and babies.

The majority of the artists were unknown to each other before the project began and yet they were faced with working on a brand-new project with a range of people they didn’t know and who were from a variety of artistic backgrounds. The trust that has been built between them is something that they truly value and has enabled them to connect in a very natural way. They support and inspire one another.

“I trust the group and feel connected to my fellow artists in a very natural way.” (Natalie – Session Artist).

The trust the artists have developed with each other is closely linked to the increasing collaborative nature of the sessions, their development as interdisciplinary artists, and support outside of the sessions.

“The artists are noticing not only what happens for themselves during the sessions but also what they may have seen another artist do. It is nice to feel as though we are each other’s ‘outside eye’. Sometimes what seems insignificant to us can be noteworthy to another artist because

everybody views and appreciates things in a different way. That is one of the many reasons I am enjoying working alongside such a wonderful mix of artists". (Grace – Session Artist).

The artists also commented that their trust in their own abilities had also increased across the project – this is linked closely to their artistic and personal development and is discussed later in this section.

Just as parents/carers began to feel more comfortable in the space with time, so the relationships between artists and parents became more trusting. Trust between parents/carers and artists gave rise to increased interaction in general, but as previously mentioned in an earlier section, increased

"There is a space between the artist and baby that grows over time, the artist shares something in that space and it is received by the baby who then returns it with new meaning" – Joanna Grace.

interaction to co-create. The trust parents/carers placed in the artists also enabled them to discuss potentially sensitive subjects with the artists – building the relationship further.

"I have noticed how the babies are really socialising, the groups have become very stable, with the carer's feeling safe and trusting the sessions." (Nicola – Lead artist).

The openness of the babies to the playground experience allowed trust between babies and artists to develop, and this was a two-way process. The babies' openness to experience empowered the artists to trust the babies – giving the babies more space led to a better experience for all, and on the flip side responsiveness to the babies by artists fostered the babies' trust in artists.

"Me mirroring them, has shown itself to be a way for them to start trusting me and even sometimes allow them to leave their 'safe space', their guardian, parent and choose to come closer or engage more in everything we are doing." (Stasha – Session Artist).

The role of time in developing these relationships of trust is echoed in a comment made by one of the session artists when reflecting on the parents/carers at one of the children's centres. She remarked on how an element of trust in the artists was evident right from the very first session – the families attending at the children's centres were primarily ones who already had an established relationship with the centre via other groups that ran there, and this established relationship was clearly one already grounded in trust. The trust relationships that developed with families who attended via library settings could sometimes take a little longer to establish.

iii) *Music*

In the first phase of Playground (November – December) lead artist Jeremy was present for every session and therefore each session was accompanied by live music. In phase two (February – April) however, the Playground sessions were too numerous for him to attend every session and Jeremy recorded 'backing tracks' for the other artists to use in his absence. This change in the structure in the sessions meant that in the following weeks many artists reflected on the role music played in Playground.

The live music in a session was responsive to the situation providing a force for enabling, extending or slowing things down. Although expressed in many different ways it was agreed that the music provided a shape, structure or frame that held the session and shared space together. It was referred to as an 'invisible thread' and an 'invisible web covering the experience.'

"For me the music is the holding device. The music and the artists responses to the babies. The music is starting to be characterised by a sort of long-form structure. The loops layer as the babies move into new modes. The loops become a record of how the experience is being shaped by them but it also offers a shape..... The music in this way reflects the waves of engagement that characterise the way the babies are responding to the session." (Jeremy – Lead Artist)

"The music hangs like a 'bubble' over the rug, holding the space and creating an atmosphere of textures and expectation. This atmosphere has a gentle impact on the whole of the library space and all the visitors." (Nicola – Lead Artist).

The live music was commented on as the 'magical element', something that connects us, brings people together and part of the physical experience. The music did not only serve to slow or calm the sessions, but could also make them 'pop'.

"The paper rave at Dover was a great example of this. It just took off - the floor filled with babies just doing their thing with paper. Like a crowded dance floor or festival crowd: a sense of togetherness, but also deeply individualised experiences." (Jeremy – Lead Artist).

The presence of music in the sessions was seen as evocative for exploration – both by the parents/carers and babies, but also by the artists, and together with the black and white 'look' of Playground the music was considered to be an element which gave Playground its identity.

For those artists who began phase two with no live music their reflections provided a stark contrast. Although the music was still a positive element, initially artists felt torn between being engaged with the babies and having to come out of the session to change tracks or alter the music. For some artists this meant a break to the flow of the sessions and proved to be a responsibility.

"The recorded music can sometimes be a struggle as one of us has to leave the mat and change/control the music but it's still great to have the recordings as a guide." (Meire – Session Artist).

"In the early weeks of this phase it was mostly about getting used to being DJ and implementing the backing tracks and noticing what that did to my practice. I felt a huge responsibility to get the music right to ensure we maintained the arc over the space. If I couldn't trust that we were holding the space, I felt a pull towards trying to rectify that in any way I could, which took me a little away from my practice. It is not necessarily a bad thing as I was still



learning new ways of dealing with challenges in an improvised manner. Whilst coming in and out of the session to attend to the backing tracks was challenging, it did not negatively impact my involvement, just altered it from time to time.” (Grace – Session Artist).

However, with time and an exploratory approach, the artists adapted to the new musical approach in the sessions, at times not needing the backing tracks to hold the space.

“This actually got easier when I realised, we could actually hold the session competently without the use of the backing tracks. I think both as a collective and individually we soon relaxed enough to notice that silence between backing tracks or live music (and at times really long silences), was actually a beautiful and useful addition to the session. They began to echo the silence at the beginning of the session, acting like a recurring motif. It gave space for the introduction of a new object or idea.” (Grace – Session artist)

This lack of live music also allowed other artists to develop their musical skills, and by the end of the project there were four session artists, in addition to Jeremy, regularly playing live music during Playground sessions.

Drumming is really powerful and exciting for me – it’s a way to play with tempo, dynamics, repetition and language – and very good for the older ones.” (Natalie – Session Artist).

iv) *Development of practice within Playground sessions*

Learning to adapt

From the outset the artists reflected how quickly they learnt to adapt to the situation and be more flexible within sessions. The artists quickly began to understand that they adapted each session according to the babies who attended, learning that there are different ways to be responsive and that they could let the babies take the lead according to ages and abilities. This flexibility in approach was new for many of the artists and meant that no two sessions were ever the same – each session was a totally unique experience co-created with the parents/carers and babies.



Learning to slow down.

Needing to slow the sessions down was voiced by many of the artists and became a running theme across the project. The general impulse was to do too much or go too fast but the artists quickly realised the need to slow down. One of the artists explained that although it might take longer to engage a baby with an object, compared to an ordinary exchange, once you have them interested, they will engage for far longer than expected, and the artists would often speak about how long they could hold a section of the session for before the babies lost interest. As was commonly commented, less is more and artists learnt that they needed to do only enough to maintain the flow. Slowing

down, or offering less, was more difficult for some artists than others, and was something that was revisited both in development days and reflections at various time points across the project.

“We (the artists and carers) become much closer to the baby’s world (and each other), we explore how deep within this connection we can we go and how long we can extend these exchanges. I have learnt that it always takes a little longer than I expect to engage a baby with an idea, but once they are with you the experience can be extended for a long time.” (Nicola – Lead Artist).



Confidence

Growing confidence was a common theme for all artists - confidence in the project, confidence in spontaneity, but primarily confidence in themselves as Playground artists.

Numerous artists reflected that the project had given them confidence in themselves as an artist, and moreover as an interdisciplinary artist – something they may not have considered themselves before. Artists’ whose background may have been dance or visual arts became more confident to make sounds and sing, whereas others for example began to develop confidence in their abilities as a musician or with movement. They also reported increased confidence to experiment in sessions and to experiment artistically with materials and objects, sometimes making their own rather than always relying on those provided by the lead artists.

“I have been singing more as a result of working with Lucky who regularly takes inspiration from something he sees and turns it into song. I have been playing around with rhythm. I have also been inspired by Megan’s drama skills. All of these ideas enhance my own skill set and can complement what I do in the sessions.” (Grace – Session Artist).

As indicated in the previous section they became more confident to wait and be led by the babies, with time and experience they were more confident to do less in the session – as one artist reflected ‘learning when to hold, deepen, and elongate.’

Becoming more confident in their practice together with the experimental nature of the sessions supported artists' growing confidence in the spontaneous elements of their practice. By being responsive in baby led sessions spontaneity was allowed to flourish and it was considered important to be open to impromptu actions. Following an unplanned game involving some netting and paper crumpled into a ball one artist reflected:

"During the project I have been anxious to have some activities/games planned but moments like this show that it is more important to be open to spontaneity and impromptu interactions with open ended materials." (Megan – Session Artist).

The artists also developed greater confidence to express ideas within the group, helping to bring the group together collaboratively, and in Playground itself. Even when people were missing because of illness or on occasions when some of the materials were not available there was enough confidence in 'Playground' that the artists had created for it not to matter.

"Even though XXX was away (illness) and we didn't have our black mat, I felt confident enough in Playground not to worry!" (Megan – Session Artist).

"I stepped in at XXX Library this week and was very struck by how I confidently slotted in as if any Playground Artist can now turn up at a session and totally understands the model and approach." (Nicola, Lead Artist).



Co-creating rather than performing

For many of the artists, and particularly if Playground was new to a venue or parents/carers were passive, the reflections revealed that the sessions felt more like a performance rather than participatory, with parents/carers preferring to observe the artists than engage.

"A very performance-dominant session today. Whilst that has its place, I think it is in part, linked to the lack of engagement. The artists positioned in front of the parents and carers forges an expectation that we, the artists, are there to entertain. We had eight babies on laps (seven of those were new and most were very young). In the presence of predominantly younger babies, it's possible that I fall into the role of performer because there is less initiation from them." (Grace – Session Artist).

As co-creation was an aim of the project this was a stumbling block for some artists for quite some time, and they questioned how they could get parents/carers to interact more.



“I am becoming increasingly interested in how I can interact with the parents and carers as much as I do with the babies, so they feel part of the co-creation as opposed to observing their baby from the periphery.” (Grace – Session Artist).

Passive parents meant that the sessions could at times become like a performance rather than participatory and this, particularly at the outset of the project, caused discomfort for many of the artists.

“I began with something parents and older babies might relate to – a narrative idea. We, the artists, were given a stimulus of ‘hands’ as a way to get started. I developed that into a spider and those spider hands went on a journey of their own until they ended up in a ‘tickle’ frenzy causing my body to react and move in a rather animated way. While it was quite fun, it would have been more fun if the parents and carers had joined in too! Unfortunately, only a few got out their wiggly fingers in readiness to participate. I’m used to working with other dancers, whose openness is almost taken for granted and whose willingness to throw themselves into an improvisation is really a requirement. Now, I find myself in a new and exciting community setting, working with babies, parents and carers of which most of the parents and carers (as I later found out) felt too inhibited to join in with such activities, especially on day one! But the problem was, I still wanted this to be participatory. After all, the aim of the Playground project is to empower parents and carers to engage in creative activity with their babies. While the babies were able to connect from the moment they entered the room, most of the parents were not ready to participate in quite the way I had envisioned.” (Grace – Session Artist)

As time went on the artists discovered that offering artistic suggestions rather than ‘teaching’, enabled parents and carers to create their own play with their baby rather than simply copying what the artists were doing. For some, particularly those from a more performance background, this was a turning point in their artistic practice, and enabled them to understand more fully the beauty and value of moving away from performance and towards co-creation.



v) *Collaboration*

Collaboration as a theme was reflected on by many of the artists over the course of the project and often linked to the increasing interdisciplinarity felt by the artists. Although an initial anxiety existed around how they would work with artists from different artistic backgrounds on the project, they quickly formed a strong team and the different mediums merged and bonded. As one artist commented there was an openness, generosity and flexibility about the artists and their practice in this project.

The mix of different artistic backgrounds was considered to allow for experimentation, enabled the artists to learn from each other and empowered them to ‘have a go’ at things outside of their usual practice (e.g., music, movement and singing). There was a sense of collective development, finding ways to work together, grow together and respond to each other. The potential for working interdisciplinary and collaboratively on new ideas was an exciting prospect for all and for many of the artists not something they had experienced before, or imagined possible for themselves before the project.

As referred to many times in the report co-creation was at the heart of this project and the reflections on collaboration were not only confined to the realm of artists, but also referred to collaboration with babies and parents/carers too. The art or artists were referred to as a community which was open for others to join – overwhelmingly the project reflected the importance of human relationships and of art as a way of communication and sharing.

“.....my memory of the experience each day, and the way it feels at the time, is that we are making the most amazing interdisciplinary work. The best, most meaningful art – together.” (Jeremy, Lead Artist).

vi) *Development of artistic practice*

Stemming from the Playground experience and the increased interdisciplinary work being created, the artists, almost without exception, reflected on the development of their own artistic practice.

Some of the artistic development occurred within sessions and is linked to previous section. For example, being confident to experiment, using sound and movement, learning patience and accepting that in some situations less is more. Artists also began to recognise the tiniest actions and intense engagement of the babies, as well as developing confidence to mirror them. They discarded the self-imposed pressure to be constantly innovative and learnt to be more watchful and responsive.

“I really trusted this time. I trusted my own ability, that of the other artists, the space, the parents, and carers. I took time to step back and take it all in. I allowed myself to get drawn back into the space by something that interested me. I was more sensitive to my surroundings.” (Grace – Session Artist).



In addition to the development within sessions, the artists overwhelmingly reflected that they felt more inspired in an artistic sense since joining the Playground project. Artists talked about feeling invigorated, recharged and stimulated to think about their own artistic practice. One artist spoke about being inspired by the babies and how playing creatively at their level had enabled her to keep exploring and discovering new things and perspectives. One visual artist reflected that they were approaching objects in a new way, exploring the sound and noise that they made. Being involved in the project had a huge knock-on effect on the artists' practice and output outside of the sessions. They reported being more creative, more inspired and more experimental at home as a result of being involved in the project, experimenting with making objects for babies, creating poetry, music and songs.

In a similar way to the reflections about music and its role in Playground, there was also a great deal of thought given to the objects being created and used within the sessions. For one of the less experienced artists, they spoke about Playground as a journey to produce 'art'. Contrary to their initial expectations, they found that they greatly enjoyed the sensory elements of the sessions and felt inspired to create their own objects for the project. Objects often became a central focus for the sessions, and even established visual artists commented on how they were beginning to explore the sound and noise from objects, in a way they hadn't previously. One artist commented that they had let go of assumptions they held about objects and were feeling re-inspired by them; inspired by the babies they were approaching and perceiving the objects from new angles, as if they hadn't ever seen them before.

Many things are viewed by adults as 'rubbish', however through the eyes of a baby they can be a wonderful object, and with curiosity babies often marvel at things that people would otherwise discard. Just as parents/carers found that they were inspired to and could create their own objects at home, artists were increasingly commenting over the course of the project on how they were now

seeing the potential in every object they came across. Even the simplest of objects, such as a feather, had huge potential in allowing the connection between the carer and baby to be made. However, objects are not simply enough in themselves, and it is the way in which artists offer them up that was the important factor in empowering the interaction or exchange. In one of the sessions some left over fur fabric had been placed inside an old lemonade bottle:

“They make the tiniest sound, and it’s that tiny little thing that happens between the person who’s offering it up to the baby and the wonder that the baby gets from it that is extraordinary.”
(Nicola – Lead Artist).

Reflections also touched upon ideas around the process of creativity. Artists felt that they were taking more time to be creative, were learning to be more playful as well as finding joy in playfulness and developing the discipline to create a new experience every time. The training sessions provided by lead artists as well as outside mentors, such as Starcatchers, were invaluable to the artists and the exchange of knowledge between artists provided them with both support and the inspiration to develop their own practice. Some of the artists were self-conscious about presenting their ideas to the others at the beginning of the project but soon shed these worries when their ideas were accepted and supported by the group.



“It is ALWAYS AMAZING to see the Artists from other disciplines engage with what I make.”
(Nicola – Lead Artist. Capital letters are artists own emphasis).

Some even spoke about how emotional they became when the other artists accepted and ran with their ideas; for the artists this was a ‘moment’ that inspired and supported each individual whilst empowering the collaboration.

Many of the artists spoke about how Playground had given them not only the opportunity to work with 0–2-year-olds, but also the chance to understand what it is to work with this age group. Even more established artists reflected that they now had a deeper understanding of their practice in regards to babies, and to some extent with adults too. One artist spoke about Playground as a transformative learning journey – and that they had emerged with the knowledge and confidence that they can work with this age group, dispelling doubts they may have had at the start of the project. Some artists spoke about how they had developed a deeper appreciation of babies’ joy, cleverness and creativity – aspects undervalued or underestimated by wider society in this age group. They also began to understand the importance of play and creativity in babies, and that what looks like play and repetition is all part of the critical learning and development processes at this young age.

For some of less established artists in the group working on the Playground project made them more confident in themselves as artists and in their artistic practice. A number of them reflected upon now feeling like a ‘legitimate artist’ or finally feeling as though they could call themselves an artist – feelings that had been missing previously. More established artists found that they were becoming

more multidisciplinary and were no longer able to define their practice as clearly as they once had. The involvement in the project with its focus on creativity and experimentation also helped to remind them that being an artist was central to who they were.

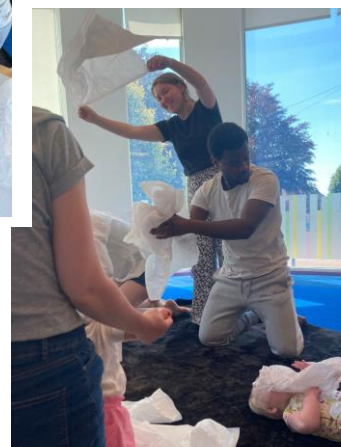
“As a visual artist my work with Playground is the most meaningful and extraordinary, it takes my practice back to the very beginning of its purest form.” (Nicola – Lead Artist).

Playground: Rose Bruford College collaboration:

Playground Lead Artist Jeremy Harrison is Head of the Theatre for Young Audiences (TYA) Centre at Rose Bruford College, one of the UKs leading drama schools. He also has written and leads their unique TYA Masters programme (<https://www.bruford.ac.uk/learn/postgraduate-courses/theatre-for-young-audiences/>)

As outlined in the section on ‘Who is Playground’ five students from the MA TYA programme at Rose Bruford College have been involved in the Playground project: Ellison Tan, Lois Savill, Rosa Higgs, Emanuel Mendes da Silva and Charlotte Hannan. All five joined the Autumn phase of the project as sessional artists, attending the training and artist development days and then went on to deliver sessions alongside the professional team. Emanuel and Charlotte then re-joined the project in June for the final week. In addition, two graduates from Rose Bruford College’s MA courses are sessional artists on the project: Stasha Dukic and Dexter Newman.

As highlighted in the reflection on the next page this partnership with a drama school in the higher education sector, has enabled young and emerging artists to develop skills in early years arts provision and be part of a ‘real-world’ professional development opportunity whilst studying. The relationship between Playground and the TYA Centre has also facilitated the documentation and dissemination of approaches and training methods developed on the project, with much of the learning from this phase of Playground becoming embedded in teaching practices on the TYA courses and modules at the college, deepening and extending impact and building capacity for future expansion of the work.



Reflection from Rose Bruford student - Emanuel Mendes da Silva:

I joined the Playground project when I just started my MA course at Rose Bruford (Theatre For young Audiences). It felt that I was thrown in the deep end, already being treated as a professional, when I didn't feel like it yet. The wonderful company created for Playground were extremely supportive of me as the newcomer and giving the ability to see how I can evolve. The perfect example of this is at the beginning of the project, if a baby would cry while I was with them, I would internally feel like the baby fears me, but as the project went on, I realised that it is not personal (which came from observing the other practitioner), and that the babies react different to me than they do with everyone else. This caused me to develop a new way of interacting with the babies, which was to get down to their level to see how they view the world and using eye contact (mainly due to the babies always looking at my face non-stop). I loved this form that I developed as it made it easy for me to pass this along to the carers of the babies which was so magical.

iii) Lead Artists reflections



The role of the lead artists was crucial and complex. They were expected to lead the project artistically, nurture and mentor the session artists as well as actively participate in the Playground sessions in libraries and children's centres. In Phase 1 both lead artists attended every session whilst developing the project. In phase 2 however the lead artists were attending sessions in different locations, and due to the number of centres involved some sessions were run by session artists. As the evaluation has demonstrated Playground became an organically rich and supportive team, and the artists

felt both included and nurtured. The two lead artists came from different artistic backgrounds and had varying experiences of leadership. As such one found this role more challenging at times, and was mindful of the balance that needed to be created between guiding the session artists whilst enabling and empowering them to shape Playground. On the whole it was a positive experience, and a role that was pivotal to the project, and rewarding in turn. A reflection on the role of lead artist is provided by Nicola and Jeremy in their own words on the following pages.



Reflections on Role of Lead Artist -Jeremy

Being a Lead Artist on Playground has been a privilege and one that has fed and deepened my own artistic practice. It feels important, however, to acknowledge the collaborative nature of the role. There are two Lead Artists on the project, and so the first layer of collaboration was between myself and Nicola. We were so well matched. Each coming from a different artistic discipline and yet, from our first meeting, finding a strong point of connection. Both of us wanted to create something that was adventurous and bold in its artistic ambition; that both honored the perspective of the babies yet challenged and inspired the artists involved. Both of us wanted to work outside of linear narratives or overt story-telling and in ways that limited word-based communication, exploring instead the non-verbal and, for me, musical ways in which babies can lead conversations and engagements. This fundamental collaborative starting point was hugely important and informed the whole ethos and aesthetic of the project.

The second layer of collaboration was between us and the sessional artists. It was important to create a space that felt held and scaffolded and yet was open enough to be shaped and extended by the artists working alongside us. The Guiding Principles document became a way of both offering such a structure and capturing the journey. The principles were revisited and updated throughout the process, augmented by the experience of delivering Playground sessions as a team and by the regular artist development days, that framed the three phases of the year.

The libraries themselves also shaped and informed our work. Each had its own culture and atmosphere which required subtle differences in approach and tone. Collaboration with the staff was also fundamental to Playground. Nicola and I were keen to support their involvement, whilst appreciating the openness and welcome that we frequently found and the knowledge of place and community that they brought to the project.

There was further collaboration with mentors, from the one-off, but hugely impactful Zoom sessions with Anna Newell, Siri and Nils, to the more sustained and hands-on involvement of Starcatchers. This support was invaluable, offering an outside perspective, but also allowing Nicola and me to be part of the team during reflection and development sessions. It was this balancing of potentially damaging hierarchical relationships that was fundamental to the success of the project. Nicola and I were both leading and working alongside the sessional artists. And I am proud of the way in which as a team, we have managed to create a body of work that feels like it has truly been shaped by all.

The final, and perhaps most important, collaborative relationship has been between us and the babies and adults who attend the sessions. Our vision was to create a space that could be shaped by the needs and interests of the babies; that would foster their curiosity and creative impulses and encourage engagement between the baby and adult carer. In the end Playground is the result of this listening and responding to the gentle power of the babies. It is their vision and imagination that has led the work and I think our real skill and success as Lead Artists has been our ability to see, understand and honor this.

Reflections on Role of Lead Artist - Nicola

As Playground Lead Artist I had a vision of how the project would look but I did not anticipate the multi layered, baby led, beautiful sessions that we delivered. As Lead Artist I wore two hats, project facilitator and artist, I took the responsibility very seriously and grew into the role.

As project facilitator I empowered and supported the artists and maintained the quality and aspirations of the Playground sessions that Jeremy and I created. I enjoyed working closely with artists from a range of disciplines, helping them grow their practice with babies. I took time to communicate the project clearly with all library staff and encourage their interest and involvement, I believe artists can be ambassadors for creativity, dispelling mystery and uncertainty. I nurtured relationships with babies and carers, making sure the sessions were creatively accessible for both. Alongside the babies' enjoyment of the sessions, I also saw real long-term benefit for carers. Sometimes I knowingly took on more within these roles than was expected, I recognize these are my strengths and it was worth it for the success of the project. The project also benefitted from Jeremy and I having complimentary skills that we used to support each other.

As a visual artist I was co creating the project with Lead Artist Jeremy Harrison. From our introduction in October 2021 this has been a wonderful collaboration, Jeremy and I both saw a unique opportunity (as artists such opportunities are rare), to create work that stretched boundaries, tested resilience, introduced provocation, beautiful, daring, non-verbal, conceptual and of the highest quality for our tiny participants and their carers, 'our creative version of a baby world'. What happened next was exciting, the nine sessional artists embraced and extended the framework we created, above and beyond our expectations. Their goodwill and enthusiasm, (sometimes in difficult conditions) is testament to the extraordinary Playground team, I feel very strongly that this work must be delivered by Artists. Jeremy and I continued with this same approach with the creation of the book 'Baby Playground'.

From the beginning Playground Creative Director Liz Moran handed Jeremy and I complete creative freedom, this confidence in our creativity cannot be underestimated, throughout the project she has listened, adapted, acted and whole heartedly supported us.

As a visual artist delivering daily Playground sessions to babies, I continued to find the project incredibly inspiring, even at the end of this phase creative ideas just keep coming. Daily I reconnected with my practice, I responded to Artists' requests for particular objects, I developed ideas outside of my visual art practice including sound and movement, I used recycled, inexpensive materials and encouraged carers to make their own objects, I choose materials and an aesthetic informed by our nomadic nature. I initiated responses such as Ukraine week and a few days after her death I made huge paper 'Paula Rego inspired skirts' for the Artists to wear. This freedom to respond and react as a visual artist is very unusual, add to this a team of Artists that would run with my ideas.

I always knew as a visual artist that my work needed human interaction, Playground has given me the chance to really develop these ideas and objects with tiny humans, it has taken me back to the truest and purest form of creating, as an artist this is a rare, co-creating with babies has changed and grown my practice in ways I could not have imagined. An experienced early years worker commented that Playground sessions take things back to basics with slow, peaceful, visual and audio provocations. As co-creator/artist this was real confirmation that our very creative sessions are highly appropriate for our participants.

The detail, consistency and intensity of sessions over so many weeks has resulted in an unprecedented opportunity to experiment with action and research, so much has been learnt, adapted, reflected on and shared. As an artist working in the community, I am all too familiar with short term, outcome led projects, falling off a cliff edge when the project ends, Playground's structure, intention and quality has produced lasting experiences for babies and their carer's, the environment we offered was the teacher. Artists have gained huge knowledge working with their practice with babies and venues have been touched by extraordinary events, this is tangible legacy and I am very proud to have been a part of this project.

Summary of artists experiences:

As evidenced by the information presented above, the artists reflections describe how their pre project anxieties have been largely dispelled, their expectations have been met or exceeded, and in many cases their journeys have been creatively and artistically transformative.

In a relatively short space of time the artists have developed confidence in working with 0–24-month-old babies, recognising first-hand the importance and impact of working creatively with this age group. They have learnt to trust the babies as co-creators of creativity and learnt to trust themselves as artistic practitioners. They have established themselves as a group of artistic practitioners who are experienced at, and inspired to, work creatively with the youngest members of society.

Moving forward, the artists are relishing the opportunity to develop their practice and make further gains in confidence. Collaboration with other artists is key to this progression, and the artists are excited by the possibility of co-creating inspirational work, as well as developing their own creative practice with babies. By working collaboratively and with interdisciplinarity, it is the hope of the artists that creative work with babies can not only become commonplace, but also beautiful.

".... everyone knows the actions to wheels on the bus, everybody knows the actions to twinkle twinkle little star, but no one really knows what's going to happen here, so it's like unwrapping a big mystery and a big surprise, that is just going to explode and that's what happens every session. It's this wonder and imagination that you can see just sparking, and it's not just about the babies, it's about the parent and the carer that's there as well, and that realisation that they could do so much more with so much less at home." (Casey – Session Artist).

Libraries and Library Staff:

Library and Children's Centre staff were a vital part of the project – providing a consistent link, alongside the artists, between the parents/carers, babies and the project. Additional aims of the project included promoting awareness of libraries as community spaces, and developing the skills and confidence of library staff to ensure creativity becomes embedded in libraries future engagement with families.

In addition to formal and informal interviews conducted with library and children's centre staff, they were also given the opportunity to complete a questionnaire before phase 2 (January) and towards the end of phase 3 (May).

As with the other groups involved in this project the staff at the libraires and children's centres had some concerns and anxieties before the project but overall found it a very positive experience. Many of the anxieties revolved around practical issues and these were easily allayed once the sessions were up and running. Other concerns included how much responsibility they would be expected to take in the sessions – with many staff nervous about having to 'be creative' and being pushed outside of their comfort zone. Much to their relief, they were never asked to be actively involved in the sessions if this was uncomfortable for them, but they were encouraged to be involved in the experience.

The sessions were described by staff as gentle, relaxing, calming and generally a lovely experience. One member of staff expressed her feeling of being 'uplifted' by the sessions, and noted that this was partly due to the interactions the project was enabling between parents/carers and their babies. They also experienced the sessions as being at a low or baby level – being quiet and responsive in an otherwise noisy world - mirroring the comments of artists and parents/carers. In addition, they welcomed the opportunity to provide sessions that gave parents/carers and their babies the time to interact and connect not only with each other, but with other families and the library or children's centre.

Staff members also commented on how welcoming the sessions were, and how they believed providing sessions that asked nothing more of the parents/carers other than participating in a way that was comfortable for them, encouraged families to come back. Many comments echoed the sentiment that Playground must be doing something right because the sessions were often oversubscribed, and families returned week after week.

The sessions were considered to be very inclusive, and as such some parents/carers who might not ordinarily have joined in or returned, felt they were able to so. Of particular note were comments around parents/carers seeing how much their babies enjoyed the sessions and that this was a reason families made the effort to return. In one particular library, a couple who spoke very little English returned every week because their son was becoming more and more comfortable in the sessions, and because he enjoyed them so much. The welcoming and free nature of Playground, together with being non-verbal meant that there were fewer barriers for this family to overcome in attending.

Closer analysis of the quantitative and qualitative data, beyond that of general observations, revealed three main themes:

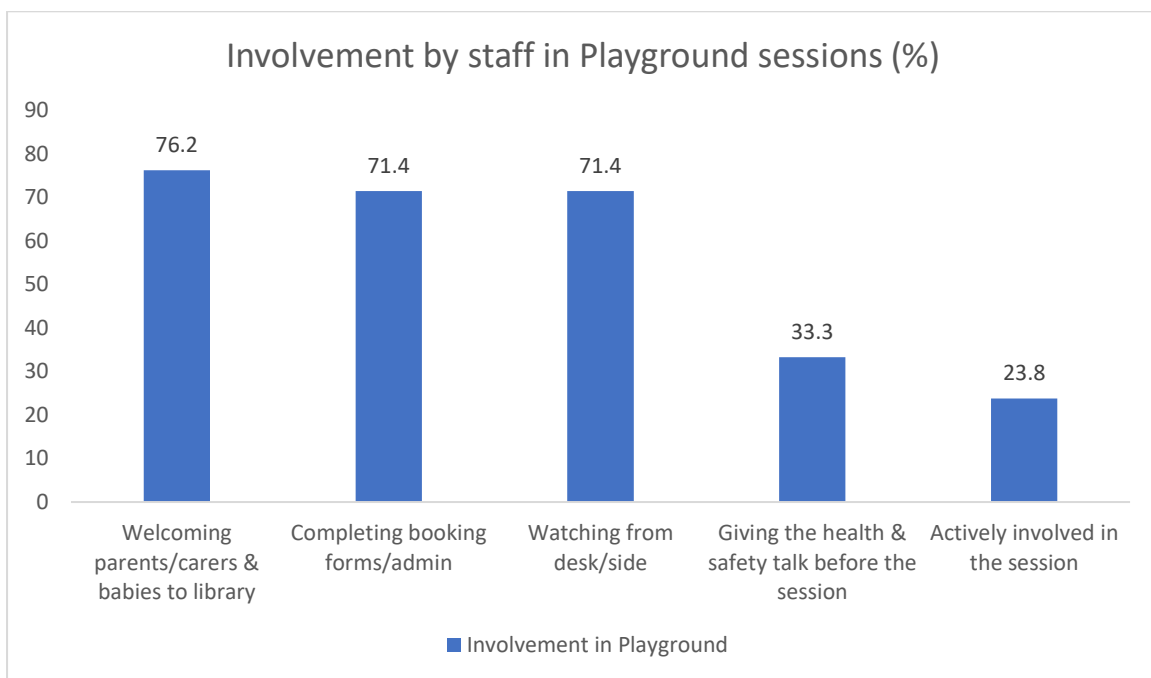
- Participation of staff
- How Playground fits with the library service
- Increased use of library facilities

i. *Participation of staff*

The level of participation of staff members in Playground sessions varied greatly for a variety of reasons. Some staff were keen to actively be involved in the sessions, whereas other preferred to welcome the parents/carers to the library or centre and observe from the side; many had other work they needed to get on with. In some of the smaller libraries which only had one member of staff, joining in the session was not an option as this would mean leaving the rest of the library unstaffed.



Of the staff who completed the questionnaire in May, only a quarter had managed to have been actively involved in one or more sessions at some point across the Playground Project. The ways in which staff had been involved in Playground are shown as a percentage in the chart below:



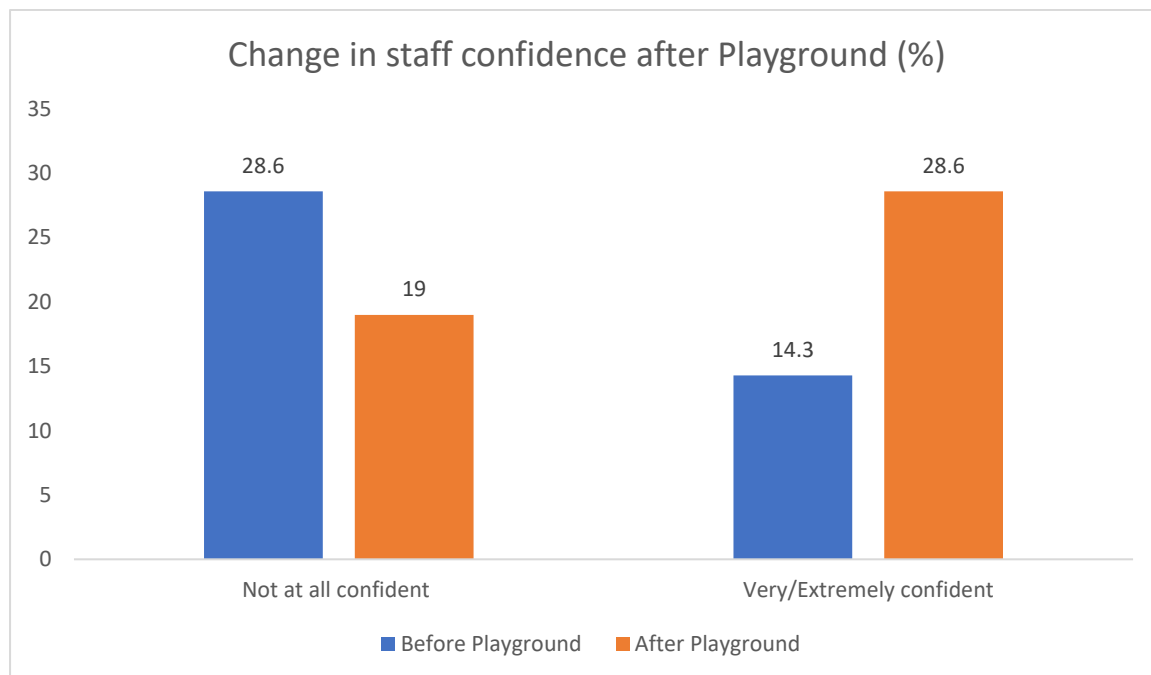
The artists reflected on how positive the involvement of the staff was during the sessions, and how it helped to build relationships with families that would continue during times when Playground was not running. The reaction of the staff who had been actively involved in the sessions was also very positive with 100% of them answering that they found being involved either 'very enjoyable' or 'extremely enjoyable'.

Data from the interviews reinforced the positivity at being involved in the sessions. Whilst a couple of members of the staff in the libraries and children's centres got 'stuck in' from the very first session, others were less comfortable, and as was the case with parents/carers took time to become more at ease with the style of creative play being offered. Although it was initially outside of their

comfort zone staff commented that the artists were easy to follow and this helped their own confidence. The staff were inspired by the bravery of the artists and one library staff member commented that although it had taken her a little while she was keen to be involved and eventually realised it didn't matter who was watching her.

Alongside an increase in confidence came the realisation for many that they couldn't do anything wrong – because the play was creative, experimental and organic, the babies responded to whatever it was they chose to do. This was a revelation for many, and provided a sense of freedom. Staff also quickly realised, just as artists had, that they didn't have to engage every baby for the whole 45-minute session for it to be a success.

The questionnaires also supported the more anecdotal evidence that staff confidence had increased. When asked about their levels of confidence on a scale of 1-5 (with 1 being not at all confident and 5 being extremely confident), average self-reported levels of confidence rose from 2.48 to 2.76 over approximately a four-month period. The graph below shows the percentage of staff at both time points who felt either not at all confident or very/extremely confident to be involved in a creative play session for babies aged between 0 and 24 months.



Participation in playground sessions was also experienced as very emotional for some staff members. They valued the permission it gave them to play, the sense of belonging that it gave them, and the provision of a safe space in which they could also express themselves creatively.

“Being able to sit down and join in was an incredible experience and not just for the children but also for myself, in being able to have and feel the freedom of expression and feeling part of the group, and comfortable enough that I could express myself in movement and sound.” (Library staff member).

Despite only a quarter of staff members reporting that they had been actively involved in sessions over the course of Playground, the experience was very positive for all staff and when asked

whether they would consider being actively involved in the future around two-thirds (66.7%) responded positively to the question.

ii. *How Playground fits with the library service*

Following the lifting of Covid-19 restrictions libraries are once again becoming active hubs for the community. They are no longer just a place to borrow books but provide many different services to the community and Playground was viewed by staff members as a very welcome addition. They observed that it fitted very well in a library setting, adding to the atmosphere and creating a 'buzz' around the building.

"I think the vibe, the buzz around the library today was absolutely lovely.....and we could hear the babies babbling an enjoying it...." (Library staff member).



Library staff regularly commented that it was important that the library offers something for all ages; sessions just for babies or sensory sessions had not previously been part of the community offering within the library service and this was felt to be an important step forward.

"I think it's a nice thing for the library to be able to do, almost feel like we can offer them something, when they come in and say what have you got for small children. Like we've got Playground now and I think that's an amazing thing for us. So, I think from that perspective we're sort of working in partnership." (Library staff member).

Being able to offer something for younger community members was not only important in terms of the library service and building a community space, but also as part of the library staff member's role. A number of staff members expressed delight in the new variation within their role and found it really enjoyable to do something community based.



"Personally, it's been a lot of fun and professionally nice for my role to be more varied and also to learn more about how very young children learn and engage with the activities we are undertaking." (Library staff member).

The feeling of the library as a centre for the community came across very strongly and staff were quite clearly internalising this and were keen to give to the community.

"I feel as if I am providing some quality to the community." (Library staff member).

iii. *Increased use of library facilities.*

Attracting families to attend the Playground sessions within the libraries was felt to have a knock-on effect on a number of different areas. Many staff felt that additional sessions were needed both for the same age group (0-24 months) because demand was so high, as well as new sessions for 2–5-year-olds.

In addition, Playground was viewed as attracting new families to the library; it provided an entry point which opened the eyes of parents and carers to the facilities and resources that libraries can provide for families.

“It actually sells the service of the whole library as a place to go to be uplifted a little bit.”
(Library staff member).

Echoing responses from parents/carers, library staff reported that Playground had increased the number of parents/carers registering their babies for library cards, numbers borrowing books as well as increased attendance at other groups. Some families were returning to the library at other times and with other children.

“They were coming into the library and I’m recognising some of them during the week as well, so they are coming back with older children.” (Library staff member.)

85% of staff said that they either ‘possibly had seen’ or ‘definitely had seen’ an increase in the number of Playground families using the library at other times (either borrowing book or attending other events/groups). This mirrors the responses from parents/carers when asked about their use of the library service since starting Playground sessions. The table below indicates the percentage of parents/carers who had been encouraged to use the library since attending a Playground session.

Has attending the Playground sessions at a library encouraged you to do any of the following:	% Who responded ‘yes’
Attend other sessions at the library (e.g., baby rhyme time)	49.2
Register baby for a library card/account	36.9
Borrow books	36.9
Use other library services	20.0

“This has been a fascinating project to be part of, it has brought more footfall to the library and some attendees have joined the library as a result of attending Playground. The babies all appear to have responded positively. I would welcome the opportunity to attend more sessions in the future.” (Library Staff Member).

“Yes, it encouraged some new people to our children’s centre, who are now attending some of our groups.” (Children’s centre Staff Member).

Section 3: CONCLUSIONS/MOVING FORWARD

“To actually see this in action, you suddenly realise that this, this absolute creative bubble is so needed. And how did we ever think that creativity and artistic play wasn't needed in such a young age in such an explicit way? Because creativity should start at this age, from this very first instant.” (Casey – Session Artist)

Conclusions:

The Playground report has detailed the impact of the project on all groups involved. The outcomes were complex, multi-faceted and overwhelmingly positive, but the success of any project must be considered against its initial aims. The following section considers whether the project has achieved the aims it set out at the beginning.

Aim 1. To engage and work with a diverse range of young children and their families in disadvantaged areas to overcome barriers to access high quality art & culture.

Playground was successful in providing sessions for babies aged 0 – 24 months in some of the most disadvantaged areas in Kent and the families who attended lived local to the library or children’s centre and many were regular attendees. Data from the parent/carer survey indicated that families were very pleased that the sessions were free, and the welcoming and non-verbal aspects of the sessions made them more accessible to families who might otherwise not have attended. All these factors improved attitudes towards art & culture and this was evidenced by higher intention to attend baby art events in the future.

Aim 2. To develop the skills & confidence of artists & practitioners in Kent to increase creative work with, by & for early years. In particular to develop a more diverse range of artists working in this field

Artists were drawn from a range of artistic backgrounds, ages, ethnicities and gender. Evidence from the artists reflections clearly demonstrated that all artists involved in the project experienced a sense of increased confidence and skill level when working with babies aged 0 – 24 months and their families. Not only did the project allow artists to build their confidence, knowledge and skills, but it also enabled them to develop their creative practice with, and for, very young children. They learnt to adapt their practice, to trust the babies’ own creativity, to respond instinctively and intuitively and to embrace play in all its forms. Many of the artists were also inspired to try new things and extend their practice. Across the eight months of the project, a truly skilled and confident group of artists who can work with very young children and their families has been established in Kent.

Aim 3. To develop the skills & confidence of library staff to provide a strong legacy to ensure creativity is embedded in their future engagement with children and families.

At the beginning of the project many of the library staff were anxious and unsure of their role in Playground. Whilst training at the beginning of phase 2 for all library staff was welcomed and allayed many of these worries, active involvement in Playground sessions remained relatively low. Whilst

this was due to a number of reasons, including staff shortages in libraries, more active engagement by library staff, and collaboration with artists, may be required to ensure creativity is embedded in libraires' future engagement with families. Playground was, however, welcomed to the libraries without question – feedback from staff was hugely positive. Playground was viewed as something the libraries wanted to offer their communities, and the willingness to be actively involved in future sessions was relatively high. This is hugely positive moving forward. However, greater time for, and attention to, building relationships with libraries as well as greater for training staff is needed to ensure a strong legacy for Playground within libraires.

Aim 4. To promote and evidence the positive impact of creativity and to promote and evidence that interactive creative play is vital for the healthy development & building mental resilience of young children. All of which can equip young children with the confidence and social skills for school and life.

The informal interviews and open-ended questions in the parent/carer questionnaire revealed that many parents/carers did not always make time to play one-to-one with their baby, have the confidence to engage in creative activities, or realise the importance of doing so. It was a surprise to parents/carers that there were cheap and affordable objects that could easily be made and that these would both engage and stimulate their child. For many parents/carers Playground opened their eyes to a world of creative play that could be easily recreated at home. The data collected demonstrated that parents/carers were recreating Playground objects at home, were inspired to create new objects/materials, and were using techniques that they had learnt during the sessions. Above all, they were noticing the effect that engaging in creative play was having on their babies in terms of enjoyment and development.



Aim 5. To engage families with their children’s experiences and learning, strengthening communication, child development and parent-child bonding

The Playground project made parents/carers more aware of their baby’s world. They learnt to mirror and mimic their babies’ movements and sounds, and were in many cases able to let go of inhibitions, and enjoyed the permission Playground gave them to play. For many parents/carers their days are extremely busy and time is precious; parents/carers commonly referenced Playground as giving them time to connect with their baby, but more importantly the realisation of how important this time is, and how they could recreate it at home. The shared experience of Playground was a revelation for many parents/carers, and was not only hugely impactful on themselves, but on artists and staff as well.

Aim 6. To encourage use and awareness of libraries

Many people, before having children, are not regular library users and for many others the library is not somewhere they would necessarily feel is accessible to them as a family. Playground encouraged families, who might otherwise not have visited, into library spaces, and the evidence suggests that this had a clear knock-on effect on the use and awareness of libraries. Many Playground families registered their babies for library accounts, book borrowing increased, and parents/carers were seen to be using other library services as well as bringing older children into the space. The welcoming, non-judgmental and safe space created by Playground, and the consistent and welcoming presence of library staff were key in achieving these aims.

Aim 7. To develop local, national and international partnerships for future collaboration and longer-term strategic development of the Playground Project

The artists gelled incredibly well together as a group and have established themselves as a local artistic network for working with this age group. Over the course of the project artist exchange meetings via zoom were also established, including both Playground artists and artistic practitioners from the U.K and internationally, all of whom work with young people. In April 2022 artists from Playground, BEAG (Cork), Starcatchers (Scotland) and The Spark Arts for Children (Leicester) met to exchange and to share practice. They are now meeting monthly to support the creation of a community of early years artists, connected through a shared commitment to excellence within their practice. In addition, the continued mentoring of the artists by Starcatchers, Anna Newell, Siri Dybwik and Nils Christian Fossdal also helps to raise the possibility for future collaboration. There is a clear need for creative projects with very young children across Kent and more nationally, and Playground has established itself as a worthy provider of a long-term investment.

Aim 8. To position Kent as a recognised pioneer and leader in Early Years Learning and Education

Positioning Kent as a leader in Early Years Education and learning is a long-term ambition of the project. Playground is already attracting national attention via local government and other organisations, and via further funding aims to continue developing its strategy and impact on children and their families in Kent.

Overall, the evidence from the Playground Evaluation clearly demonstrates that it successfully built on the pilot project, achieved its initial aims and had a positive impact on all groups involved. The feedback from parents and carers was hugely positive and underlines both the need and desire for a project such as Playground to continue in Kent. Not only was it well received but it empowered and inspired parents/carers to engage in more creative play at home, and these increased interactions

with parents and carers will support babies' cognitive, social, physical and emotional development, as well helping to establish a secure attachment in those critical 1001 first days of a baby's life. The project has also helped to establish a relationship between Playground and the library service, and enabled the development of a skilled multi-disciplinary group of artists in Kent who are confident at, and keen to work, with very young children.



Moving Forward:

Although the overall message is incredibly positive, it is important in every project to undergo a critical evaluation in order for the project to improve and move forward in the future. Based on the evidence provided by parents/carers, library staff and artists, the information below outlines some of the key areas for improvement:

- Playground sessions for older children (2-5 years)

Anecdotal evidence from some parents/carers, in particular those with babies over a year old, suggested that they found the sessions too 'young' for their children, and that there was not enough to keep them interested. Although this was initially recognised as an issue by some of the artists and library staff, they quickly grew to understand that the children did not need to be involved for the whole 45 minutes to be benefitting from it, and it was therefore not seen as a problem.

From a parent/carer point of view however, they found it both harder to engage with their child when the child was more interested in their surroundings, as well as feeling a burden or responsibility to have to keep going and 'fetching' their child back. Data from the questionnaire also suggests that there is a negative correlation, or relationship, between age of the baby and the number of sessions they attended. In simple terms, the older the child was the less sessions they attended. Whilst this could be for a variety of reasons, taken together with feedback from the parents it could suggest that parents with older children try the sessions out but don't find them as engaging as those with younger babies, and therefore do not return as often.

- More training/designated roles for library staff

Information from the pilot study as well as from phase 1 of this project was used to ensure that a week of training within libraires and children's centres was available for all staff before the phase 2 sessions began. These training sessions were led by the artists and were a 'run-through' of a Playground session. They were informal and relaxed, and feedback from the staff about the inclusion of training was positive. However, only a handful of library staff were actively involved in the Playground sessions between the beginning of February and the end of June. Some remained anxious, self-conscious and were not confident in their abilities to be creative.

The Playground ethos is based on artists providing high quality art to young children in a space that is free, safe and accessible. Whilst library staff will not be asked to run Playground sessions, their involvement helps to establish relationships with families, and ensure that creativity becomes embedded in libraries future engagement with children. Moving forward therefore, more time to establish relationships between artists and library staff and more training for staff is required to ensure the long-term success of the project. Establishing 'Playground Assistants' amongst staff in libraries across Kent may also help to promote the project within the service.

- More background information for parents/carers

A number of parents/carers voiced the desire for more background information on Playground. Whilst artists were very diligent at the beginning of each session to explain what would happen and to put parents/carers at ease, little information was provided on the rationale behind Playground and its links to child development.

A Playground book, intended as a resource for families to use at home, has been developed over the course of the project by the two lead artists and goes some way towards providing information to parents/carers. Building upon this and thinking to the future of Playground, it would also be beneficial to include some basic background information on Playground via the advertising leaflet/poster, at the beginning of the session, or ideally on any Playground website/social media outlet.

- Easier booking system

Some parents/carers indicated that they found the booking system – having to book in person at the library or by telephone, awkward at times. Many people are now used to booking appointments/activities electronically and this was a possibility that was raised by parents/carers. A website or social media presence is certainly something that would be hugely beneficial to the project moving forward, however there may be a number of issues with an electronic booking system.



Library staff were often concerned that the sessions were oversubscribed, and that some families could not get a place because all the spots had been taken, often by families who were regular attendees. Whilst this suggests more sessions are needed, it also raises an issue about accessibility. Families who are not able to access booking systems electronically, possibly those with English as a second language or those experiencing poverty may miss out on a place in this situation. In contrast, families who are not confident/able to book in person or via the telephone may prefer this type of system.

The booking system is an area that needs to be considered moving forward, and should be discussed in consultation with parents/carers and library staff.

- Reaching a diverse community

Playground was very keen to reach families who needed the most support. Locating the sessions in the most deprived areas of Kent went some way towards fulfilling this brief. However, there is still a concern that many vulnerable families who would benefit from inclusion in Playground, and who may still hold attitudes that art and culture is not for them, are not being reached. In particular Kent has a large population of refugees, and it was clear that very few families with refugee status were being reached during this phase of the project.

More links between libraries, Playground, Kent County Council and agencies that support vulnerable families in Kent are needed in order to reach a more diverse community.

- More detailed evaluation of impact on child development

Due to the lack of research in this area the evaluation was exploratory in nature. Due to the scale of the project the evaluation was wide reaching, looking at impact on babies, parents/carers, library and children's centre staff and artists, and whilst it demonstrated impact on all groups via both qualitative and quantitative methods a more robust evaluation of the impact upon baby development is needed. The evidence provided in the report is powerful and clearly demonstrates impact, however moving forward further high quality, longitudinal, and robust evidence is needed to demonstrate the direct positive impact creativity and creative play are having on the development of the youngest members of society.

The Future of Playground:

Our ambition for Playground is to be brave, daring, and different, empowering the creativity of all young children and their families in Kent and beyond, and to position Kent as a recognised pioneer and leader in Early Years Learning and Education.

We recognise the need to develop Playground further to realise our ambitions and in May 2022 Kent Libraries secured project funding from Arts Council England to build on the work detailed in this report until the end of March 2023.

This next phase will focus on working with partners in Libraries and Children's Centres in priority areas in Kent to deepen our engagement and start to explore the development of work with children aged 2-5 years and young children with complex needs. We will develop our national and international partnerships further and there will be an increased emphasis on supporting library staff

to grow their engagement with Playground to develop their creative confidence when engaging with young children & their families.

We have applied to Arts Council England for Playground to continue until at least 2026 as a National Portfolio Organisation. If successful we will work to increase our reach developing digital Playground activity as well as development opportunities for more artists and library staff. With a range of exciting partners, we will develop a National Early Years Creative Network and initiate a new international festival. The festival will celebrate the creativity of our children and their families in Kent alongside the most inspiring national & international work for young children. An International Playground Summit will bring together families and their children alongside child development academics, childcare and library staff, and artists to generate new thinking and create a shared vision and action plan to ensure all young children have access and opportunities to engage in the highest quality of creative engagement.



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Appendix A – Parent/Carer Questionnaire

Dear Parents/ Carers

As you will know from attending a Playground session, Playground aims to empower the creativity of babies and their parents/carers through artist led sessions at local libraries and children's centres. It hopes to support families in developing new skills and different approaches to creative play.

The project is continually seeking to improve and broaden its reach, and as such we are asking you for some feedback about the sessions. As families who have been involved in the sessions, your views on the Playground project are very important to us.

Please could you take 5 minutes to answer the questions below as honestly as you can. We do not ask for your name, your responses are completely anonymous, and only the research team will see the information you choose to give. Only broad trends from the feedback will be used in the Playground evaluation report, and no individual will be identifiable.

By completing the questionnaire, you are giving consent for the information to be used.

Thank you, from the Playground Team.

1. Approximately, how many Playground sessions have you attended?

- 1
- 2-5
- 6-10
- 10+

2. Approximately, how old was your baby/the baby you were caring for when you attended your first Playground session? (Please enter age in months).

3. On a scale of 1 to 5, how much did YOU enjoy the Playground sessions overall?

- 1. Not at all
- 2. A little
- 3. A moderate amount
- 4. A lot
- 5. A great deal

4. On a scale of 1 to 5, how much do you think your baby/the baby you were caring for enjoy the Playground sessions overall?

- 1. Not at all
- 2. A little
- 3. A moderate amount
- 4. A lot
- 5. A great deal

5. What is it about Playground that you like? (Please tick all that apply to you/your baby).

- Sessions are calming/relaxing
 - Welcoming for parents/carers
 - Baby led
 - Unique/different to other groups
 - Objects used are cheap/easy to make
 - It's aimed at 0-24 months
 - It gives me time with my baby/the baby I am caring for
 - It has helped me interact with my baby/the baby I am caring for
 - It's free to attend
 - There is no adult talking/communication
 - It encourages/helps baby development
 - I can meet new people
 - It gives me ideas to use at home
 - It helps my baby/the baby I am caring for to socialize with babies of a similar age
 - Only have to book a week at a time – you don't have to commit
 - The sessions are led by artists
 - Other (please indicate)
-

6. Before attending the Playground sessions approximately how often did you engage in creative play at home with your baby/the baby you are caring for?

- Never
- Once a week
- A few times a week
- Once a day
- Several times a day

7. Since attending the Playground sessions approximately how often do you engage in creative play at home with your baby/the baby you are caring for?

- Never
- Once a week
- A few times a week
- Once a day
- Several times a day

8. Have you tried re-creating any of the objects/materials from the Playground sessions at home?

- No
- Yes

9. Have you been inspired to or tried to make any new objects at home (that weren't used in a Playground session)?

No

Yes

10. Have you tried recreating any of the other elements of the Playground sessions at home? (e.g., music, copying baby sounds, mirroring baby, hand clapping etc).

No

Yes (please indicate what you have tried below)

11. Would you say that the Playground sessions have helped your baby's development in any way?

No

Yes

Not sure

12. Before attending Playground sessions did you know that there were arts events specifically for babies?

No

Yes

13. Before attending Playground sessions, would you have considered art or creativity for babies as something you would access?

- No
- Maybe
- Yes

14. Before attending Playground sessions, had you ever attended an arts event for babies (e.g., baby theatre)?

- No
- Yes

15. Do you think you would be willing to go to an arts event for babies (e.g., baby theatre) in the future?

- Definitely not
- Probably not
- Might or might not
- Probably yes
- Definitely yes

16. Have you, as a parent or carer, made any new connections/friends/contacts at the Playground sessions?

- No
- Maybe
- Yes

17. Has attending the Playground sessions at a library encouraged you to do any of the following (please tick all that apply)

- Register baby for a library card/account
- Attend other sessions at the library (e.g., baby rhyme time)
- Borrow books
- Use other library services
- N/A (I attended Playground at a children's centre)

18. Would you recommend Playground to other families?

- No
- Yes

19. Are there any changes you would like to see to Playground?

20. Is there anything you would like to tell us about your experiences of Playground?

We know you are busy so thank you so much for taking the time to give us some feedback on the Playground sessions. Your feedback is very important to us and we hope it helps to support the continuing presence of Playground at a venue near you.

Appendix B – Artists Pre Session Questions

Reflection and evaluation are key to understanding the impact that the Playground Project may have on everybody involved. Please take some time to consider the three questions below before you begin your Playground sessions and return your responses to me (xxxxxxxxxx).

Feel free to write as much or little as you feel is appropriate for you, and if you feel comfortable doing so, please put your name on your responses – this is simply for me to keep track of your answers, and names would never be shared or appear in reports/publications. Please feel free to respond using other methods, such as voice clips if you would prefer to. Thanks in advance.

What do you expect to gain in terms of personal development and/or artistic development as a result of being involved in this project?

What are your anxieties/concerns (if any) about working on this project?

What do you think would define whether the project is a success or not?

Appendix C – Library/Children’s centre staff – Pre Session- Questionnaire

As part of the Playground project, we are interested in how everyone involved can benefit from the sessions. Please consider the following questions carefully and respond as honestly and fully as you can.

We ask for your initials in order to match your responses and not for identification purposes. Only those who are part of the evaluation team will see the responses you give, and any reports produced will include broad trends only.

1. Please enter your initials below (use all initials including any middle names).

2. How long have you worked for the library service/early years service? Please enter your answer to the nearest year.

3. What is your job title?

4. What is your age?

18-29 years

30-39 years

40-49 years

50-59 years

60-69 years

5. Have you ever been involved in a session in a library/early years setting for parents/carers and children before?

Yes

No

6. Have you ever been involved in a session in a library/early years setting for parents/carers and 0-2-year-olds before?

Yes

No

7. How would you rate your experience at being involved in creative based sessions for 0-2-year-olds?

- No experience at all
- A little experience
- A moderate amount of experience
- A lot of experience
- A great deal of experience

8. How would you rate your confidence at being involved in creative based sessions for 0-2-year-olds?

- Not at all confident
- A little confident
- Moderately confident
- Very confident
- Extremely confident

9. How would you rate your knowledge in terms of what might be needed for a creative based session for 0–2-year-olds?

- Not knowledgeable at all
- Slightly knowledgeable
- Moderately knowledgeable
- Very knowledgeable
- Extremely knowledgeable

10. What do you expect to gain in terms of personal and/or professional development as a result of being involved with the Playground project?

11. What are your anxieties/concerns (if any) about being involved in the Playground sessions?

12. How would you rate your level of anxiety about being involved in the Playground sessions with 0–2-year-olds and their parents/carers?

Extremely anxious

Very anxious

Moderately anxious

A little anxious

Not at all anxious

13. What do you think would define whether the project is a success or not?

14. If you have any other comments about the Playground project, your involvement in the project, or observations from previous sessions if you were involved, please feel free to write them below.

15. Would you be happy to take part in a brief interview about Playground at some point during the project? If you are happy to do so, please indicate this by leaving your email address below. Alternatively, you can email me (Katie) on xxxxxxxxxxxx

Thank you for taking the time to answer these questions. Your responses are important to the project and we value your contribution.

Appendix D – Library/Children’s Centre Staff – Post sessions Questionnaire

As part of the Playground project, we are interested in how everyone involved can benefit from the sessions. Please consider the following questions carefully and respond as honestly and fully as you can.

We ask for your initials in order to match your responses and not for identification purposes. Only those who are part of the evaluation team will see the responses you give, and any reports produced will include broad trends only.

1. Please enter your initials below (use all initials including any middle names).

2. How have you been involved in the Playground sessions since the start of the project?
(Please tick all that apply).

- Completing booking forms/admin
- Welcoming parents/carers and babies to the library
- Giving the health and safety talk before the session
- Actively involved in the sessions (e.g., participating on the rug)
- Watching from side/desk
- Not at all involved

3. If you ticked 'Actively involved in the sessions' to question 2a - How enjoyable did you find it being actively involved in the playground sessions?

- Not at all enjoyable
- Quite enjoyable
- Moderately enjoyable
- Very enjoyable
- Extremely enjoyable

4. How would you rate your confidence at being involved in creative play sessions for 0–2-year-olds?

- Not at all confident
- A little confident
- Moderately confident
- Very confident
- Extremely confident

5. How would you rate your knowledge in terms of what might be needed for a creative play session for 0-2-year-olds?

- Not knowledgeable at all
- Slightly knowledgeable
- Moderately knowledgeable
- Very knowledgeable
- Extremely knowledgeable

6. What do you think you have gained in terms of personal and/or professional development as a result of being involved with the Playground project?

7. How do you think the Playground sessions have impacted parents/carers who have attended?

8. How do you think the Playground sessions have impacted the babies who have attended?

9. If you had any anxieties/concerns about being involved in the Playground sessions have these concerns been resolved, do they remain or do you have new concerns? Please describe below.

10. Do you feel the project was successful and why (or why not)?

11. Please think back over the time you have been involved with the Playground project. can you pick one highlight and describe it below? This does not have to have occurred during one of the sessions.

12. Would you be willing to be actively involved in Playground sessions in the future?

Yes

Maybe

No

13. Have you seen an increase in the number of Playground families using the library at other times/borrowing books etc.?

No

Maybe

Yes

14. Please leave any other comments here:

Thank you for taking the time to answer these questions. Your responses are important to the project and we value your contribution.

PLAYGROUND

you

me

us



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