

TODAY MUSEUM:PLAY

COVID RECOVERY - WHAT DO CHILDREN WANT?





About Starcatchers

Starcatchers is Scotland's arts and early years organisation. We have been pioneering arts and creative experiences for and with Scotland's youngest children and their parents and carers since 2006. The aim of our work is to enable young children to engage with and participate in high quality arts experiences that respond to their needs and interests. Our approach lends itself to consultation activity, where artists co-produce with the children and families we work with. Starcatchers' associate artists are experts in devising artistic stimulus, which provoke imagination and creativity, while children are experts in their own needs and interests www.starcatchers.org.uk.

About The Today Museum

The Today Museum is an initiative run by a collective of artists in the East End of Glasgow led by visual artist Rebecca Fraser and photographer Ashleigh Shula. This initiative is designed to draw out reflections and perspectives from groups and individuals in the community – to explore what is important to them, their families and their communities. The artists document these sessions creating a digital archive of social stories which are hosted on the Today Museum website www.todaymuseumparkhead.com.

Rebecca Fraser has extensive experience working with early years aged children and has previously been involved in a number of Starcatchers projects. For The Today Museum:PLAY project, Rebecca invited artist Matt Addicott to join the team. Matt, a Starcatchers Associate Artist, theatre maker and facilitator was involved in the delivery of the School Aged Childcare consultation project in 2019 and worked alongside Rebecca in the East End of Glasgow in 2020 on another consultation project that looked at the impact of COVID-19 on children's creativity.



INTRODUCTION

Context

We know that COVID-19 has had a significant impact on the lives of children in Scotland: closure of nursery and childcare settings, limited physical contact with friends and wider family, limited opportunities to play or participate in activities and for some, loss of family members due to the virus.

As we approach the lifting of restrictions and plan for societal recovery, it is essential to understand children's needs and priorities.

In April 2021, Starcatchers was asked by Scottish Government to undertake a creative consultation project with young children and their families in the East End of Glasgow to explore and understand what is important to children as COVID restrictions begin to lift.

APPROACH



Starcatchers approached artists Matt Addicott and Rebecca Fraser who had previously led on creative consultation work with young children with Starcatchers over the last 2 years.

Matt and Rebecca's approach was informed by their experiences delivering previous Starcatchers' consultations for Scottish Government and Creative Scotland. In 2020, Rebecca and Matt along with filmmaker Geraldine Heaney were invited to consult with children aged 0-5 years and their families, exploring their relationship with art and creativity during lockdown. This research formed part of UNCON, a biennial event that seeks to provide a platform for children and young people's voices and celebrates their artistic and creative capacities.

The artists adopted an open, curious and enquiry-based methodology. Starcatchers' approach involves avoiding consultations that have a predetermined 'adult led' question. Instead, the artists join the children in shared activities. By focusing less on verbal questions and answers, Starcatchers artists find alternative ways to listen through the languages of play, including watching, tracking, mirroring, moving, vocalising and experimenting. This reflexive approach is central to how get the best results from consulting with pre- and non-verbal children, and those in their Early Years and for whom language is still in development.



TODAY MUSEUM:PLAY

From late April to mid-May 2021, using the format developed by the Today Museum, artists Ashleigh Shula, Rebecca Fraser and Matt Addicott visited twenty-five children from ten families across the East End of Glasgow as the city emerged from lockdown. The team were invited to listen to young children and consider the importance of play, not only for children's personal recovery from the social isolation and removal of services of the past year, but also for the communities in which they live.



Our approach to this consultation was child-led, providing opportunities to play freely without agenda and for adults to learn through observation, listening and playing. The only formal verbal element was an invitation at the end of each session for families to explore a bag of pre-prepared words. These words featured adjectives like 'brave, wild, cosy, careful', nouns like 'risk, fun, paint, toy' and verbs 'love, care, wonder, pretend'. The artists listened to the families as they explored the 48 words, capturing what resonated to them as significant and important.

Motivated by a desire to provide children with time and space in which to play and express themselves, the artists consultation built in time to listen to their play and reflect on some of the common themes and qualities observed. Initially the focus was preoccupied by a desire to learn more about what was absent and had been missing during a year spent in lockdown. As the consultation progressed, the evidence grew that much of what children want and need is present in play. The secondary focus then turned to trying to name some of the qualities observed as the children we met interacted with us, the materials we provided and their surroundings.

The artists created relaxed, informal spaces for open-ended play. Appointments were made to meet each family outdoors and spend time together either in their garden at home or walk together to a local park or playground. Sessions were planned to last forty-five minutes though many of encounters ran longer as it remains hard to stop playing when you are having fun.

A large, bright blue suitcase with the word PLAY emblazoned on the front was wheeled to each meeting. Inside, the case was full of chalk, paints, brushes, ribbons, paper and plenty more besides with materials replenished for each new session. Many of the materials were present at every session and consideration was given to the specific ages of children, with some objects and activities changed accordingly. A parachute was also brought along with an invitation for those attending to bring their favourite toy. Sessions began with everyone sitting in a circle around the parachute to share their names with the artists and some information about favourite toys. The children were then invited to open and explore the contents of the PLAY case.





Considerations

The creative team did not have a particularly long timescale for the delivery of the work. This meant that recruitment of consultation participants was gathered largely from existing groups and networks familiar to the artists. A longer lead in time could have provided an opportunity to identify and connect with a wider cross-section of families from across Glasgow.

At the same time, the nature of this work means that having already established relationships with the children and families allowed for the work to take place quickly and freely as trust was already in place.

The artists have over thirty years of arts practice between them with a focus on creative engagement with very young children and their parents and carers. This makes them very well placed to make the observations and reflections outlined in this report. At the same time, they would have benefitted from input from a specialist in play research or child development to enhance their approach to the work.

As a delivery team of artists, they were also mindful of being majority white, able-bodied, cisgender, heterosexual English-speaking individuals and the inherent bias this creates should be considered when reading this report.

SUMMARY OF ACTIVITY



Ten PLAY sessions were delivered with families based in Tollcross, Parkhead, Dalmarnock and Mount Vernon in Glasgow. During these sessions the artists met with, observed and listened to 25 children, the youngest aged 22 months and the eldest 12 years old.

What follows is a summary of observations as the children engaged and played with what they found. These observations are grouped and shared under eight thematic headings.

FREEDOM

NATURE

CELEBRATION AND WONDER

CREATIVITY

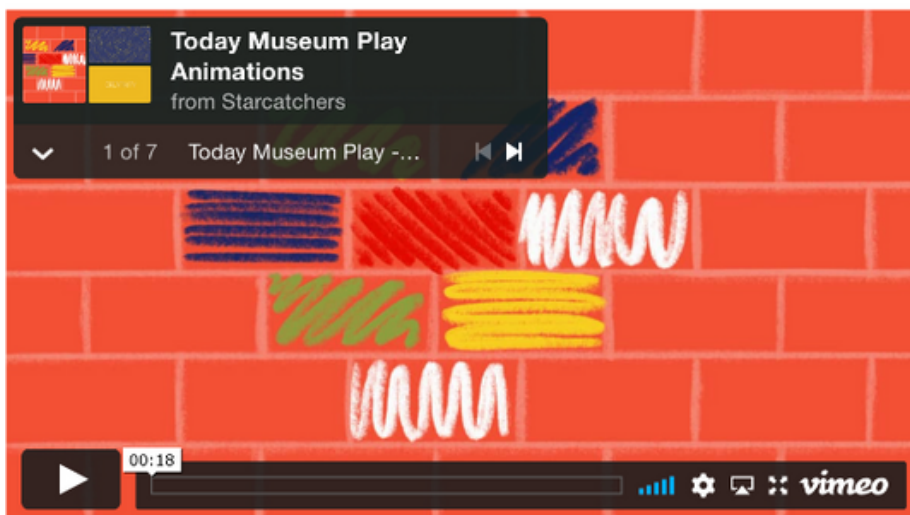
NURTURE

CONFIDENCE

MOVEMENT

LEARNING

Seven of these themes, along with short audio clips and photographs, were passed onto illustrator and animator Ella Mclean who responded by turning these encounters into beautiful, short, animated films.



361 views
of the videos
(and counting!)

"I have actual tears in my eyes! This is so amazing... the way it champions children's voices and doesn't squish them into questionnaires!" Debbie, mum of Micah and Finlay

"I particularly appreciate you making sure children's voices are heard who don't even have the words to be able to express their own feelings." Shelley, mum of John and Lydia

These eight key themes were identified through the following methods:

- Artist observation
- Photographic evidence
- Audio from sessions
- Parental observation
- Conversation and questioning
- Exploration of pre-prepared words
- Playing with and the observations of connections to favourite toys brought to the sessions.

Each heading refers to a quality, behaviour or integral element that emerged while playing, and was observed and written up by the artists with accompanying evidence from photography and audio footage. The frequency with which these eight themes were revisited by the children throughout the consultation suggested each to be vital to understanding what children might need and want moving forward.



FREEDOM: Learning safe boundaries by taking risks

**S: “[Laughter] I was about to tell him to stop,
[laughter], but he did.”**

During our play session with John, he found a minibeast kit designed to help children to explore their outdoor surroundings and identify insects. It was a sunny day and John began to use the kit and the magnifying glass it contained to focus beams of light onto a small patch of dry grass in front of him. As the grass began to smoke and ignite, the visiting artists who had not met John before exchanged glances with his mum – seeking to discern whether this was behaviour she was supportive of. Shelley went on to explain that it was far from the first time that John had experimented with light and fire and this way and she was very calm about the way in which he was exploring and playing. When John was particularly successful releasing a large puff of smoke with a very bright pin-spot of white light, he himself looked to his Mum and knew that the boundary for this particular game had been found.

This exchange was interesting and invited us, as a team of artists, to consider how we might support such conditions to arise as we move forward. If John’s mum had not been present it is likely that we would have shut his exploration and play down sooner but also recognised that finding ways to support and encourage free play, risk-taking and experimentation feels important.

CELEBRATION + WONDER: Sharing in the feelings of amazement caused by something beautiful, remarkable or unfamiliar

[E is looking intently at the parachute as it rises and falls in her garden]

E: *What's happened?*

Matt: *What has happened?*

Woah!

Woah, there you go!

E: *What is it?!*

Mummy: *That is so cool, it's like magical isn't it! And I wonder if you make a wish, [H], you like making wishes don't you?"*

H: *I wish that everywhere was candy!*

Mummy: *Oh that's a good wish!*

H: *You haven't tried candy before.*

R: *Candy floss you mean.*

H: *Candy floss! Once my friend gave me it and I took a little bit and it tasted like fluff. Like carpet fluff."*

[Hushed whisper]

Matt: *OK, what's happening now?*

R: *So, take three of them and put them like...through there and...*

One there

And one here

And take those two

Matt: *OK*

R: *And there*

Around there

Matt: *Where?*

Here?

Like this?

[As other children enter the garden]

R: *Welcome!*

Before you come on here, you need to find all of these things! It's a hunt!



CONFIDENCE: the feeling or belief that one can have faith in or rely on someone or something

R: *I can reach up too! Here!*

Rebecca: *You're very brave. Do you think you're going to fall off the seat?*

R + H: *No!*

R: *Maybe or maybe not.*

H: *No I promise not.*

R: *Those ones are a bit wobbly.*

H: *A wee bit wobbly! I might fall off. We're ALL brave!*

F: *We went there not that long ago too.*

M: *There's quite a very hard bit, I climbed on.*

Matt: *Did you?*

M: *Yeah, and there was lots of stones.*

Rebecca: *Lots of stones!*

M: *Yeah!*

F: *I like it!*

M: *I like to go up there and throw stones. There's a bit you slide, go wheeeee! And then you can climb up.*

F: *I did a very big thing.*

From 5-year-old Finlay talking with 3 year old Micah about their adventures; 22 month old Quincy scaling the heights of the big hill at Cuningar Loop or two-year-old Marley's satisfaction to have successfully completed the construction of her very own butterfly house; the confidence we can glean from play was evident during our encounters. Whether it be the reaction from displaying a completed painting or the impressed gasp of a peer that greets a particular statement or action; play feels limitless as a means by which to build emotional resilience and self-confidence.

During a recent training session on Emotional Resilience that Matt attended, the facilitator mentioned the line of thinking that negative experiences like bullying at school can help build stores of resilience before strongly discrediting such an approach. Instead, they insisted, the best route to building personal confidence and the resilience required to tackle whatever life has to throw at us comes from being part of positive and encouraging environments in which our contributions are 'heard, welcomed and celebrated'.



LEARNING: the acquisition of knowledge or skills through study, experience, being taught or play

[Upset cries from E]

Ashleigh: *You can share together look!*

S's father: *They've only met each other about three weeks ago so they're still getting used to each other.*

[E's crying calms]

Ashleigh: *Aww, sharing is hard.*

[O has just made an addition to G-E's painting of the earth and G-E is unimpressed]

Matt: *It's a collaboration...*

G-E: *One I don't accept!*

During our meeting with three-year-old Saad and Eshal, there was a moment when, despite having a case full of materials and objects, both children wanted to use the same small set of paints and brushes. Their grip on the materials held tight, neither refusing to budge and it wasn't long before Saad started to cry.

Surrounded by family members, Saad was quickly soothed and comforted and it was not long before he was deeply engaged in another activity. His father was keen to explain that Saad had only arrived in Glasgow a few weeks before our session, does not currently speak English or share a common language with his cousin Eshal.

The exchange felt familiar however and a good reminder of how play can create a positive space for difficult emotions to be explored, for sharing, empathy and understanding to develop. It was also a reminder that, for many children, such spaces have been harder to access in lockdown – opportunities to meet, connect and negotiate space with strangers reduced.

MOVEMENT: keeps us healthy and gives us a sense of achievement

Matt: *When it's playtime or lunchtime, what do you do then?*

B: *I play the most, I practise my Karate skills. Sometimes alone and sometimes with other people."*

Although our sessions began with everyone seated, engaging in quiet, reflective activity - it did not take long before we were running, jumping, hopping, climbing, sliding, chasing and dancing. The physical benefits from exercise are clear and being active keeps us healthy and can help foster positive mental health and well-being. So much learning and play was physical and movement-based during our brief time with each family - so much so that it feels important for us to consider how we might, despite ongoing social distancing and other protective measures, continue to create safe spaces that allow children to physically interact with one another and explore the world around them.

CREATIVITY: the use of imagination or original ideas to create something

M: *Mix it in, mix it in. Mm purple! My favourite colour! Purple for me. I'm finished!*

Matt: *What are they?*

O: *Stars*

Matt: *Yeah, and their names?*

O: *Jason, Kyle*

Rebecca: *Jason!*

Matt: *Good -*

O: *Phillip, Elizabeth, Karl, Karl the First, Karl the Wise and Karl's cousin...*

Matt: *Fantastic!*

Without instruction, colours were mixed to form new tones and shades, grass was painted, games invented and history rewritten. The boundaries of many of the themes we have identified are blurred and creativity permeates many but the unspoken potency of being invited to react and respond to materials and stimulus however the children saw fit was an ever present. From John firing paint covered sponges against paper with a catapult to Oliver enjoying the reaction that his renaming of the stars received - the results produced by creative actions feel infinite in range and possibility.

NURTURE: We grow where we are loved

Matt: Can I ask you a very tricky question?"

O: Mmm-hmm.

Matt: What's the most important thing in the world?

O: FAMILY!

Matt: Why is family important to you

O: Because without them, I wouldn't exist.

Q: Here!

O'er here mummy!

O'er here mummy!

O'er here mummy!

O'er here mummy!

O'er here mummy!

O'er here mummy!

O'er here mummy!

O'er here mummy!

Mummy: Hello Quincy!

Are you up high?

Q: Yeah

M: Mummy, look a butterfly house!

Can we build it Mummy please?

G: Can we build it? Yes of course we can!

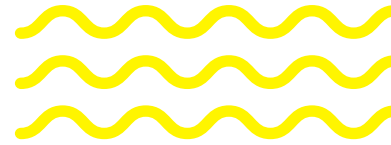
M: Yaaaaaay!

M: Can we go camping?
Mummy: You're going camping with Daddy aren't you?
Rebecca: Marley do you like camping?
M: Yes
Rebecca: What's your favourite bit?
M: [being] with Daddy, Kaci and me!
Mummy: Spending time with Daddy, Kaci and you.
Rebecca: Nice to have quality time isn't it?
M: Yeah!
Mummy: What else do we like doing?
K: Nothing!
[laughs]

Although the children we met were undeniably the focus of our attention, the presence and influence of the adults around them was something we all observed and commented on frequently during the project. From 2-year-old Marley excitedly turning to her mum to see whether they could construct the butterfly house together or 22 month old Quincy being encouraged and supported to climb higher up the hill; the presence of adults in our play sessions and the support, love and encouragement that they offered the children in their care felt significant in helping them to recover from moments of surprise and take risks with confidence. As we move forward, finding ways to ensure our children and their development is built on foundations of care, love and support feels as vital as ever.



Summary



K: I think the most important thing is to go to fun places like bouncy castles and arcades, even though everything not fully opened up yet, it's still important to have fun. That's the most important and intelligent thing that I can think of.

Matt: Why do you think it's more important now more than ever before?

K: Because of COVID-19, it started last year, in like March. In January we didn't even know it was gonna happen and after the bells it was like 'you have stay at home and all that' and we just got kinda bored about it and had to home school and some people just hated it.

It wasn't like a good treatment, it was bad but then when it reopened it still wasn't quite right but now, it's 2021, it's a new year, it's a fresh start, it's more encouraging to get stuff done.

Through open, creative play sessions with twenty-five children we observed and listened to some of their explicit wants and implicit needs. That play provides opportunities for children to learn, share, experience wonder, connect with nature and develop self-confidence will not come as a surprise. What may well be less familiar however, is just how we all set about rebuilding and reinforcing the networks of support and programmes of activity that can provide for those wants and needs as we move forward.

Ashleigh, Ella, Matt and Rebecca would like to thank the Scottish Government, Starcatchers, Platform and most importantly the families that participated in these sessions for their open, honest and playful contribution.

After six months in lockdown, it was a privilege and joy to meet and play with everyone that took part and feel it only right to leave the last word to 9 year old Oliver who perfectly summed up our feelings about the opportunity to meet and play with families across the east end of Glasgow when, during our meeting with him he said...

O: I'd love to do this everyday

View the final animation by Ella Mclean:

Link <https://vimeo.com/559919221>

Password PLAY2021



With thanks

Today Museum:Play was commissioned by the Scottish Government and delivered in collaboration with Today Museum Parkhead, Starcatchers and Platform, with animator Ella Mclean.

All the images from the project were captured by photographer, Ashleigh Shula.

We would like to thank the children and their families who participated in the project and gave of their time and energy so generously.

