



Evaluation

Period covered by report:
April 2020 - March 2021

Expecting Something

About Us

Starcatchers is Scotland's Arts and Early Years Organisation, specialising in creating exceptional arts and creative experiences for babies, toddlers and young children from birth to 5 years. We create beautiful live theatre, dance and music performances, and arts installations, working with artists who specialise in work for the under 5s. We deliver engagement projects across Scotland, placing artists directly into communities. We provide professional development for artists and early years practitioners to develop practice using arts and creativity with very young children.

Project background

Our Expecting Something community engagement project began 2013/14 as a pilot, working alongside the Family Nurse Partnership to engage young parents and their babies in creative arts activities, helping to support and encourage parent baby bonding, attachment and provide community connectedness.

"Some of our parents attend play groups within their communities, however the structure of those and the outcomes are different, with babies and toddlers mostly playing with close-ended toys and parents take an observational role, rather than immersing themselves in play alongside and with their little ones, as they do with us. Other services we have found, which do offer more specialised play (seeking to engage both parent and baby together) come at a cost, which the majority of our participants would be unable to afford and may not feel comfortable accessing." - Starcatchers Artist

After a successful pilot, the project continued on a long-term engagement with local communities in Wester Hailes, Edinburgh, and soon after in Lochgelly, Fife, supporting young families to engage in the arts, providing dedicated time and space for parents to spend protected time with their little ones, and build friendships and connections in their communities. A range of outcomes were agreed between the Starcatchers team and project partners, focusing on the wellbeing and confidence of participants:

- **Increase** confidence to: attend other groups, go to different places with baby
- **Build** friendships
- **Empower** parents to try new things
- **Strengthen** relationship with baby

"At Expecting Something, we make every effort to celebrate their children exactly as they are and I think it is hugely important for parents to see the positive side of their children - I think changing these attitudes will affect as far into future generations."

- Starcatchers Artist



What we expected to do

In 2020-21 we expected to deliver 80 x in-person sessions with parents/carers and babies from Wester Hailes, Edinburgh and Lochgelly, Fife.

Each area team would consist of a lead artist, assistant artist and project coordinator, along with a variety of guest artists brought in throughout the year. In Wester Hailes we would run sessions from the Performance Space inside WHALE Arts and, in Lochgelly, in the studio space of OnFife's Lochgelly Centre.

Across both areas of our Expecting Something groups, we expected to reach 150 participants.

Outcomes

Babies benefit from:

- greater socialisation and stimulation which in turns helps physical, cognitive social and emotional development.
- strengthened relationships with their parent(s) improves the early years experiences of young children.
- increased confidence, wellbeing and development through successful engagement with and participation in creative activities.

Young parents develop:

- Life Skills
- Greater emotional wellbeing
- Increased parental capacity
- Strengthened attachment
- Community Connectedness



*"I've made friends and
learned new things."*
- Expecting Something
parent

The beginning of Covid-19: delivery April - July 2020

We were unable to meet the families in person due to the pandemic. We immediately shifted to a digital delivery model, experimenting with Zoom sessions, Facebook Live and pre-recorded videos sharing creative ideas. We contacted families regularly by phone or text to continue the personal approach with each family, enabling us to respond creatively, support individual children, and continue the ethos of our in-person sessions.

"It helped a lot and gave me and my boys something to look forward to every week even zoom and Lives on Facebook I just think this group is amazing."
- Expecting Something parent

Very quickly we determined that Zoom sessions did not suit Expecting Something participants. At that time our participants were not familiar with Zoom software and for some it was a barrier. Facebook was more familiar and accessible. There was also a loss of that vital energy our face-to-face sessions achieved with parents, plus the added pressure of keeping babies on screen. We developed new strategies for ongoing engagement with the families that suited their personalities and needs more appropriately.

"We ran Facebook Live Stream sessions, giving examples of activities that parents could do with their babies. In addition, the project provided pre-recorded activities and delivered activity packs." - Expecting Something Project Coordinator

In early May we delivered our first Creative Packs to families, which consisted of open-ended play and sensory materials to help bring some joy to life in lockdown. Along with the parcels, we provided videos and ideas to inspire parent and baby play together, always with the materials provided. Each parcel was carefully thought out to inspire open creative play while considering the health and wellbeing of the adults. Pack contents ranged from food colouring to flowers, paint and brightly coloured wigs to a range of black and white photos printed of each family at sessions before the pandemic hit. Our parents were extremely grateful. In response to the positive feedback, we continued providing the packs, share supporting material online, and kept regular communication to consult with them on the new needs of their families as the pandemic unfolded, and how they wanted us to help best.

"Today's activity was engaging and felt almost like a normal group activity. Thanks for taking the initiative and for being there at this crazy time."

- Expecting Something parent

Personalised boxes
Online artist
activities
Art materials
Grow your own kits



"We loved the box, Jason waters his wee plants every day." - Expecting Something parent

"Thank you once again amazing work and I love the box and the photo!!! Missing u all."
- Expecting Something parent

Face to face outdoor delivery July - December 2020

In July, as restrictions began to lift, we were unable to return indoors at our regular venues, yet participants were at this point very clear in their feedback that they wanted to be back at the group in person, with concerns communicated to us regarding parent mental health and worry regarding lack of social contact for their babies and themselves.

"It has made me feel isolated and sometimes struggling with mental health no time to myself." - Expecting Something parent

"My little one's temper tantrums have become more frequent as I feel she is getting more frustrated." - Expecting Something parent

"She has been confused as to why we haven't been at group or seeing friends."
- Expecting Something parent

Considering this feedback, we reinstated in-person weekly delivery with increasing knowledge that Covid-19 transmission rate was much lower outdoors.

Our new way of delivering consisted of the following kit and training for the delivery teams:

- Gazebos
- Tarpaulins and blankets
- Hand-wash stations
- Fire-pits
- Fire Safety training
- Cooking with Fire
- Hot drinks and outdoor cooking kits



Staff liaised with other organisations such as outdoor family centres and Play Scotland throughout the year to share good practice in working this way during the pandemic.

WHALE ARTS, WESTER HAILES

Initially we met on the outdoor platform at the side of WHALE Arts for short sessions with one or two families per group time-slot, while we became accustomed to the new delivery model and managing new safety requirements. Investment from WHALE Arts in a dedicated community gardener brought about a gradual transformation of the back garden and small wooded area at the back, which we were delighted to make our permanent home in late summer. By late August we were working with up to 5 families at a time to allow for longer sessions and greater social contact, this remained well below the Scottish Government guidelines of 10 adults and allowed for a safe, manageable, relaxed space to play in. We extended our days to cater for multiple groups.

Despite the fluctuating landscape of the pandemic we really managed to settle into a good routine and build up regular attendance. Staff noticed the babies respond very positively to their new outdoor home at WHALE and the group collectively embraced the garden way of life and creative play outdoors.

"Families are delighted to be back out playing and it is wonderful to see how content the younger babies are, whilst older toddlers are fully embracing and exploring our new outdoor home."
- Expecting Something Project Coordinator

LOCHGELLY, FIFE

Due to closure of the regular venue in Lochgelly, the team experimented with popping up in local parks and on families' doorsteps for short periods of time with individual families and/or groups of 2 families per session. In August we attempted to regain some of the familiar pre-pandemic routine and returned to the now partly opened Lochgelly Centre to assess the outdoor space at the side of the building.

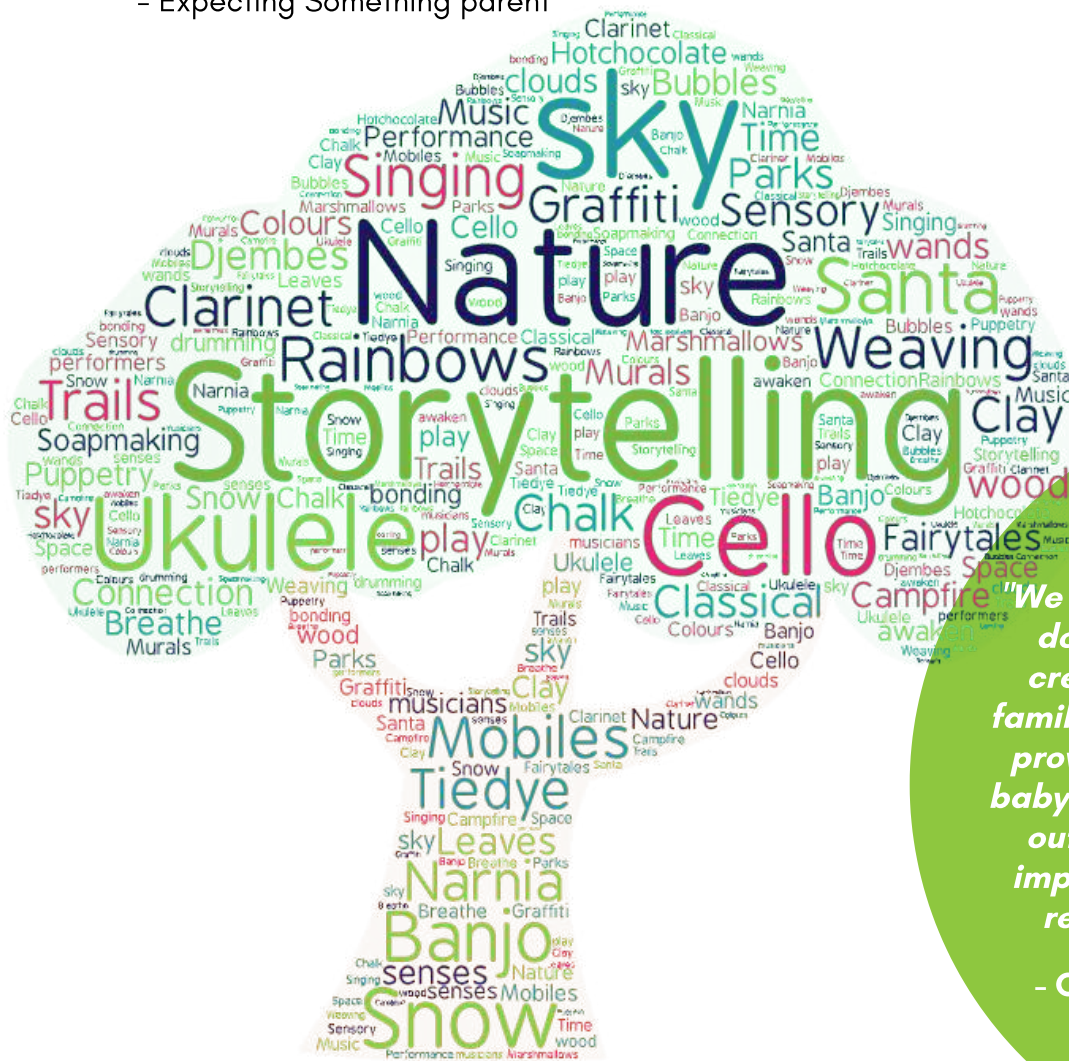
With the help of some ONFife staff, we attempted to transform the small fenced off area with local community gardening volunteers offering to help bring some green to the garden, and centre staff clearing up the area as much as they could. A run of poor weather and lack of shelter however saw numbers dwindle and parents lacking confidence to attend.

In September we decided to move to nearby beauty spot, Lochore Meadows, where we would be sheltered in the woodland with access to natural materials. By late October there was an influx of new families, with wider reach achieved by our online engagement and increased referrals from social work and partner organisations.

"He absolutely loved it every week and didn't want to leave." - Expecting Something parent

Demand for the group in Fife grew rapidly. In November we doubled the number of sessions we could offer and recruited more artists to ensure we could meet the demand, all while staying safely within our strict Covid guidelines and manageable set up. The families were grateful for the change in outdoor space and new parents joined us each week, grateful for the variety of activity on offer and happy to be out engaging and playing with others.

"I have attended many baby groups since my little boy was born and Expecting Something has been my favourite, the way they care and interest in you and your little one and have so much fun whilst learning is absolutely amazing and I am very thankful to have come along."
- Expecting Something parent



"We have continued to do what we do - which is provide bespoke creative experiences for young families every week, promoting and providing a space for parent and baby bonding. We have just taken it outdoors and I believe we have improved our service despite the restrictions of the pandemic"

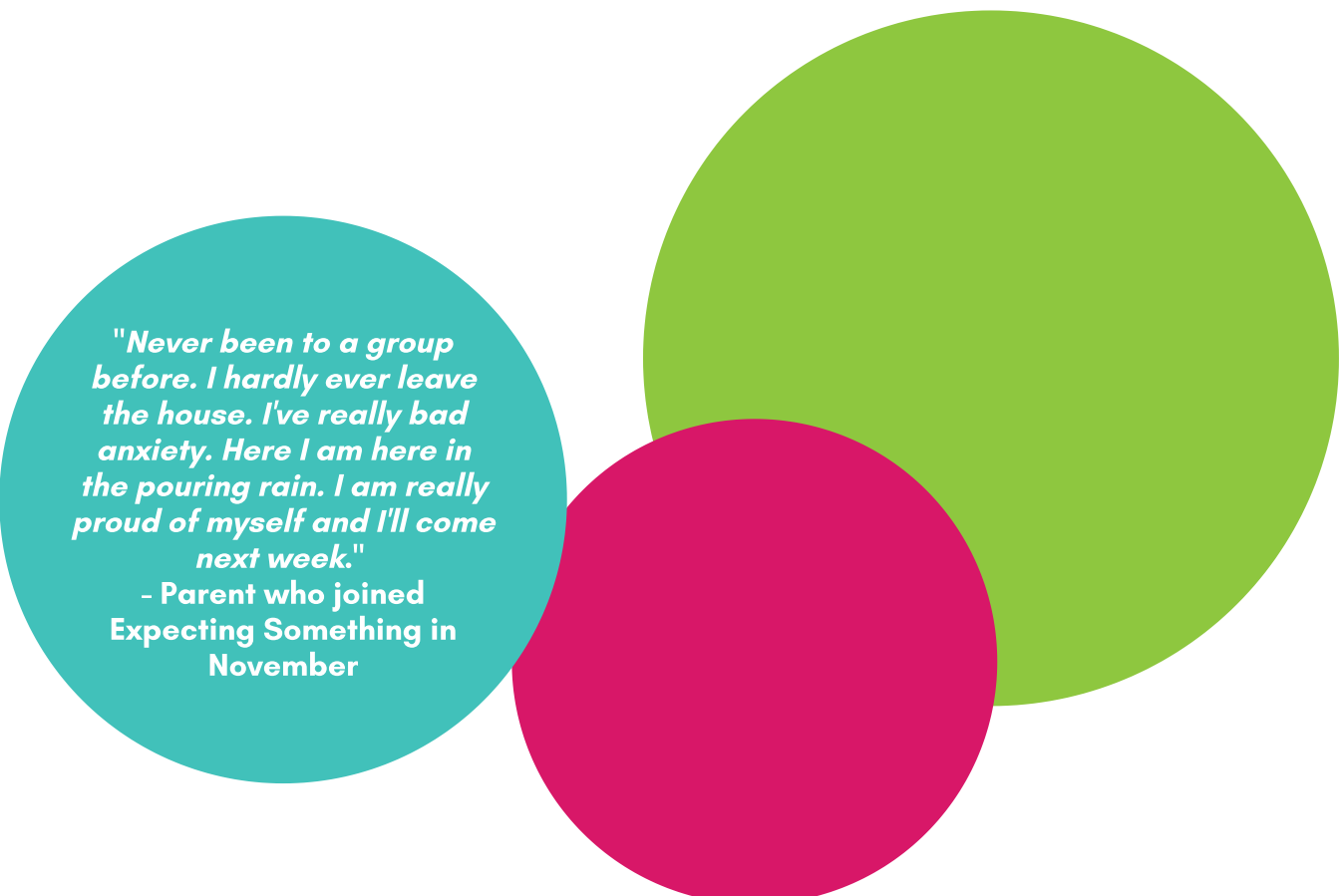
- Creative Babies Coordinator

Case study - Jenny, Gordon, Max & Amelia

Jenny and Gordon are young parents to Max (2) and Amelia (5 months) and live just outside the Lochgelly area. They were both teen parents when they had Max. Neither of the parents had attended a group with either of their children before but decided to come along to the Expecting Something group at Lochore Meadows after a close and trusted friend recommended it. The friend put them in touch with the project coordinator who was able to make sure the family were placed in a session at a time that suited them and to chat about where they should meet and what to expect.

At the first session Jenny was clearly anxious and reluctant to engage, Gordon, however, was keen to explore the variety of activities with the children and played an active role. Following the session, the project coordinator got in touch with the family who said they enjoyed the session and would be keen to return. The following week when the activity theme was launched and session slots opened, the coordinator contacted the family who booked another time to come along. This week the weather was very wet and windy with the project team fully expecting a low or even zero attendance. Jenny and Gordon however, made their way through the woods with the buggies in pelting rain. They had decided that they really needed out of the flat no matter what the weather and once again Gordon took the children and explored the activities set up by the artists. Jenny spent time by the fire drinking hot chocolate and talking with the project coordinator. Jenny explained that Gordon tried often to encourage her out of the house but she was usually reluctant to leave and felt too anxious to do so. The proximity of the session location in the woodland had been a major factor in Jenny being able to take the step to attend and for Gordon to feel comfortable about coming with her.

The small group numbers and staff ratio really allowed the team to connect with this young family and work at a pace that suited their needs. Jenny told the staff that she was really happy to be able to tell her social care worker that she had been able to attend a baby group on more than one occasion. Jenny began to gain confidence and although was not fully active in playing with the babies at the last in person session, she began to walk around the activities with her family and watch on.



"Never been to a group before. I hardly ever leave the house. I've really bad anxiety. Here I am here in the pouring rain. I am really proud of myself and I'll come next week."

- Parent who joined Expecting Something in November

Cozy Skillz Jan - March 2021

The rise in cases and new variants of Covid-19 at the very beginning of 2021 brought about another lockdown and although, this time, the Scottish Government guidelines stated we could still deliver outdoors, we decided we would pause face to face engagement and help to promote the 'Stay At Home' message. We were in regular contact with participants and the requests for the upbeat style of delivery from earlier lockdowns was this time not so strong, we sensed the families need for cosiness, company and emotional support.

We had an idea to follow a suggestion of one of the participants who in the Autumn had sat around the fire with banjo player Jed, and asked if we could all learn ukulele. She said she would like to be the kind of mum who could play and sing to her babies. It felt like this was the right time to seize the opportunity and make that happen. We decided that this lockdown would be about up-skilling the parents and also spending time together as a group in the evenings when the babies were asleep. Every family had a ukulele and tuner delivered to them and we brought in a professional musician from Tinderbox Collective to work with us each week. For 10 weeks parents learned a variety of chords which enabled them to play numerous songs - from their babies' favourite nursery rhymes to classic chart hits and, in the final weeks, they wrote a song together using their ukulele skills, percussion from around their homes and hilarious lyrics created in a zoom chat box. For some parents it was a chance to learn a new skill; for many, it was a supportive space to chat and come together with other mums in the community.



Online new parent support group

Along with Cozy Skillz we also continued to deliver creative play packs and provide play ideas online. For new parents in South West Edinburgh who we had not yet met or those who did not wish to meet in the evenings, we teamed up with the Edinburgh Council Community and Families 'Young Mums' team to provide an online space in the afternoon once a week as a space to connect, provide creative play ideas and refer to other partner organisations.

Parent & baby support group
South West Edinburgh

An informal space for new parents to get the support they need post-birth, with creative play ideas to enjoy with your newborn.

Parenting support from the Young Mums team at Gate 55

Meet up Mondays, 2pm (online for 1hr)

Creative Play with Starcatchers Expecting Something

Connect with other new parents in the community

For more information and how to join:

Kerry
expectingsomething@starcatchers.org.uk
07723541628

Claire
claire.mcgeary@ea.edin.sch.uk
07719420421

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"Increasingly, new mothers no longer have access to extensive social systems and a growing body of research has shown that social support is necessary in promoting maternal confidence and optimizing parenting skills"

– P O'Connor
Supporting mothers:
Community, Work and Family

What difference Expecting Something made

Improved attachment and greater parental capacity

Each week families play, learn and discover together. Attending a group like Expecting Something helps families to develop strengthened relationships, improving parental capacity and in turn improving attachment. For many people, early parenthood is a testing and difficult time and the pandemic only exacerbated that—removing many strands of support and cruelly taking away so many of the elements put in place to make these early years of parenting a little easier. By being creative, flexible and quick to respond we were able to put our service back out there, responding to the needs of the families we work with and providing much needed stimulating environments for the babies. We provided a new creative space each week for parents to explore along with their babies – finding out their likes and dislikes, and strengthening their ability to read cues and respond in a positive way to their babies' needs. The team of artists work to create an atmosphere that helps adults find their way back into play, in order to connect and read their babies on a deeper level, as well as finding a more relaxed state of mind – improving the wellbeing of both parent and child.

Reduction in isolation: friendships and connections in the community

Primarily, Expecting Something focuses on the relationship between parent and baby, however we also provide a shared space to meet new friends, share parenting stories and gain peer support. Most of our parents have had concerns regarding their babies' lack of socialisation and were relieved to come back to or join a group with other children of similar ages. Although this year we were not able to take families to other cultural activities in their area and further afield, we were able to use our strengthened online presence to connect with families outside of regular session times and build more community connectedness. We also encouraged partnering for buggy walks and found new ways to signpost to other services.

Confidence in play and parenting skills

Artists and coordinator created content which suited the whole group but also with consideration for each baby/toddler, taking into account their personality, cognitive stage and ability. Activities were tailored to the individual child with knowledge subtly and practically shared with parents. Sessions were created not only to promote parent-child engagement but also to allow time and opportunity for artists to model positive behaviour. We observed parents learning from artists and other participants in the group, and, over time, gaining a greater understanding and confidence of their child's capabilities and the outdoor setting helped to achieve this on a greater scale.

"I love the location in the wood with all the nature."

- Expecting Something parent



"loved interacting with those of a similar age, [he's] an only child around adults 95% of the time."

- Expecting Something parent



Early in life, social connections make neural connections. The brain's architecture is partially shaped by early interactions with others. Positive, responsive interactions between birth and three years of age (the most active period for establishing neural connections) can provide a strong foundation for connections that form later. The absence of responsive caregiving – or if responses are unreliable or inappropriate – alters the development of the brain's architecture and impairs learning and behaviour." – Developing Child, Harvard Edu, 2019

Partners

We worked closer with partners in both areas and found strength in supporting, connecting and working together. In Wester Hailes, the **Go Beyond** platform was developed to host partners and organisations working in the South West of Edinburgh, providing a space to share practice and service information. This brought about new connections with healthcare staff and resulted in a number of new referrals for the group in Wester Hailes plus knowledge of more service providers to refer to. In Fife our partnership with **Fife Gingerbread** strengthened and we provided additional dedicated sessions for the Teen Parent Project families they work with. Support workers attended along with parents each week and became part of the team. Links were also made with HomeStart to offer local families who were reluctant to engage online a chance to engage in activity outdoors.

"Teen continued to engage really well. Once restrictions lifted she was really keen to attend the local group at Lochore Meadows. She completely embraced this with her baby (regardless of the weather). She grew in confidence, met new people, enjoyed the aspect of being outside in the fresh air. She previously had little motivation to take her anti-depressant medication on a regular basis which impacted greatly on her mental health but this was another change we saw." – Fife Gingerbread Support Worker



Fathers

Although the group is not exclusive to mums, the Expecting Something sessions have up until this year only been attended by mothers, apart from on a few rare occasions. Moving location to Lochore Meadows from October 2020 has seen an increase in interest from Dads and partners, with multiple sessions regularly attended by five Dads who were keen to get involved in the activities and engage in play with their babies. We consider the outdoor woodland setting to have been key in attracting Dads and making them feel comfortable taking part.

Group numbers

Covid guidelines and restrictions dictated that we should work in smaller groups to keep safe and to allow adults to socially distance. This caused teething problems when making sure we could accommodate numbers and to allow us to group parents with existing friendships together when requested. The overall response from parents to having smaller groups though has been hugely positive, and staff have enjoyed the chance to focus on individuals and get to know families better.

"Loved small numbers as didn't feel too busy or overwhelming." – Parent, Lochgelly



Loose Parts Play

Providing households with open-ended materials and those that require parental input has felt like a really positive step, supporting imagination and creativity outwith session delivery. We hope to continue this throughout the next year as a standard part of what we do, along with gifting a ukulele after registration and continuing to encourage parental instrument play and singing to their babies.

"Direct contact with nature has direct benefits for children's physical, mental and emotional health. Free play opportunities in natural settings offer possibilities for restoration, and hence, well-being."

- Stuart Lester and Martin Maudsley, Play, naturally: A review of children's natural play

"[it's made] a huge difference, it allowed me to get out and engage with other mums who felt down or lonely during the pandemic, it brought a smile to my face every week just getting that freedom through playing and learn with my little boy."
- Expecting Something parent

Connection to nature

We have seen that we can be out playing and happy in all weathers. Parents have learned that their babies are both content with and stimulated by what nature provides, and that we can continue to do so all year around if we have the right clothes. We have learned to sit among the bugs, to embrace the fresh air, and find moments of normality in amongst a global pandemic.



"When we are outside the children are so busy, there is endless curiosity and exploration, and you can take up as much room as you like outside - roaming in big physical and expressive ways - kids who can walk have much more agency outside. They know what they are doing, they take our ideas, or they make their own. There is almost no crying, young babies are so calm and often full of wonder in our environment."

- Lead Artist Katy Wilson



Summary and Statistics

As of mid March 2021 we restarted face to face engagement once more in the community, easing in with a series called Secret Spaces – a treasure hunt style walking challenge to encourage parents to get out walking with their babies, 'finding' us to engage in an activity set up in various green spaces in the local area.

It has been a year of challenges, adjusting continually and responding in ways that we never knew we could. Many positives have emerged from this tough situation, we now have stronger links in the community, a renewed energy to promote the importance of play and a stronger ability to listen to the needs of our participants. Through our research as an organisation and team of socially motivated artists we have helped to bring experiences to babies at the most crucial stage of brain development, build a community of parents who support one another and advocate for the babies we work with.

"Play is the highest expression of human development in childhood, for it alone is the free expression of a child's soul" - Froebel

"Today's activity was engaging and felt almost like a normal group activity. Thanks for taking the initiative and for being there at this crazy time."

- Expecting Something parent

**124
face-to-face
sessions
outdoors**

**10 Cozy
Skillz
sessions**

**61
online
activities**

**100 parents
in the
private
Facebook
Group**

**7
creative
play
parcels**

**155
Participants**



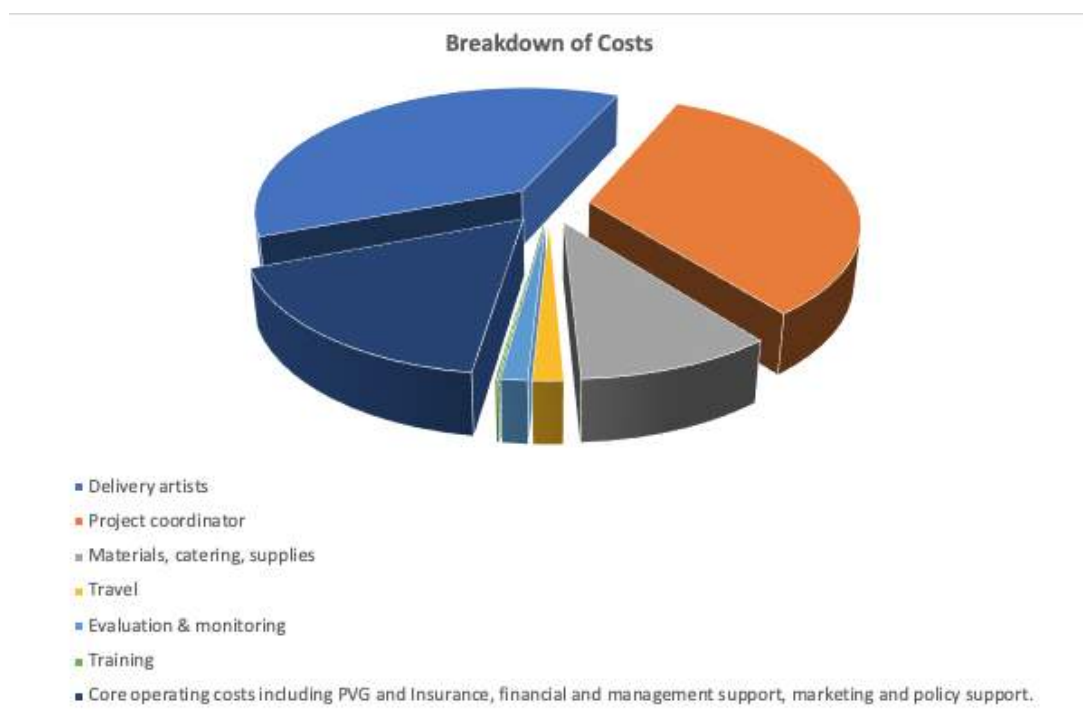
Looking ahead

Starcatchers has recently published new Strategic Priorities, available to read in full on our website: Excellence, Access, Advocacy and Sustainability. These priorities are underpinned in our Business Plan by a commitment to two actions for change: to the environment and to diversity, recognising that placing the Child's Voice at the heart of everything we do means looking after things that are central to children's wellbeing, and to their rights.

Starcatchers pledges to continue to offer innovative, beautiful, collaborative arts and creative experiences that young children share with their adults. Engaging with and participating in these activities fosters the understanding that very young children are creative agents with their own capabilities and voices. This includes securing future resource to run Expecting Something to support families with their recovery from the pandemic, and for as long as evidence proves this project is achieving positive outcomes for the youngest in society.

Expenditure

It cost £60,869 to deliver the Expecting Something activity in this report, 13% of the organisation's total expenditure for 2020/21. The chart below shows that majority of costs are tied up in staffing: our most valuable resources are the highly-skilled, trusted individuals who work within these communities and achieve positive outcomes for families. Our Income Generation Strategy and Business Plan prioritises securing resource to support these crucial roles into the future as these are directly linked to achieving positive outcomes for children. Expecting Something was one of our portfolio of Community Engagement projects; details of our other work can be found on our website.



Contact details

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WHALEARTS



THANK
YOU FOR
YOUR
SUPPORT



WILLIAM GRANT
FOUNDATION



Warburton's



Ironmonger's
Foundation

With additional thanks to funders who acted swiftly in unprecedented circumstances to provide Covid-related grants in 2020/21:

BBC Children in Need Booster

Cattanach

Corra Foundation Community Wellbeing Fund

National Emergencies Trust: Response, Recovery & Resilience Fund

The Robertson Trust

Warburton's Family Matters