



***Lets Talk About...* Podcast Transcript**
Episode 2: Why the arts?

Featuring Children 1st Chief Executive, Mary Glasgow

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Rhona Matheson 0:09

Welcome to Starcatchers brand new podcast series, Let's Talk About... a podcast celebrating Starcatchers 15th birthday in 2021, I'm Rhona Matheson Starcatchers Chief Executive, and I'll be joined by friends and colleagues from across the arts, education and third sectors of Scotland to talk about a range of topics from baby theatre and children's rights to being an advocate and why the arts. Let's Talk About...Why the Arts? Mary Glasgow, Chief Executive of Children 1st joins me today to talk about partnership working in the third sector and putting children first

I'm delighted to be speaking with Mary Glasgow who's the Chief Executive of Children 1st, one of Scotland's biggest children's organisations working with families and young children. But actually, Mary I should let you introduce who you are and the organisation.

Mary Glasgow 1:12

Right. So yeah, Mary Glasgow, Chief Exec of Children 1st. Children 1st is Scotland's national children's charity, and I guess our primary function is to support families overcome all of the challenges that they face, whether their financial, practical or emotional, so that they can stay together, so that children can stay at home with their own family safely, and be in their own communities. So we're really interested in prevention, protection and recovery, essentially getting children where they should be with their own families, making sure they're safe when they are there, and helping children and parents and carers and whole families to recover from some of the traumas that families end up experiencing.

Rhona Matheson 1:54

Brilliant, and I suppose for some people listening, they might be kind of going, why are you having a conversation with Mary Glasgow? So, I suppose I wanted to have a conversation with you for lots of different reasons. I remember when I was first introduced to you, about seven or eight years ago, I think. And it was that sort of sense of here are people from these organisations working with children and families, and maybe you should have a conversation and see what what might come from that. And, you know, from my perspective, a big part of our work is about working in communities with children and their parents and carers, and how we can use the arts as that vehicle that can inspire and transform and support relationships, as well as young children's imaginations, but also parents and carers imaginations as well, I think that's another aspect that has really come to the fore, as we've gone through this process. And we are really, really fortunate actually, that you joined our board for a while. So you've got a bit of insider knowledge into who we are and what we do. But as this as part of our 15th birthday celebration, it felt it was really important to bring people into the conversation who've got that bit of history, but also have this professional experience and within the third sector and working with children and families. So that's really why I wanted to kind of talk to you and I suppose get a sense from you about why the kind of work that we are delivering fits and complements the kinds of work that you and other similar organisations are doing. What do you think?

Mary Glasgow 3:36

Yeah, I mean, it makes perfect sense to me that we would come to organisations like yours, because at the core of our purpose is to strengthen family relationships. And the children and families that we support most often are not always viewed as families with resources or skills or talents. They're often in the system that we've designed to keep children safe viewed as a problem or as a risk. But we know from our work, we know from our relationships with those children and those families, that the problem isn't a lack of talent. It's not a lack of creativity. It's not lack of desire or enthusiasm or any of those things. It's a lack of opportunity. And I guess, because we take a really strong approach on let's look for what's working well in a family and let's look at what could make things better. It just naturally occurs to us that like the rest of us arts, creativity, opportunity, like that strengthen relationships in really organic and natural and powerful ways. A shared experience between a child, a baby and a parent, even when life is tough, and relationships are fractured, or even at times dangerous. A shared positive experience can be the spark of connection that can give us something to build on that's positive. So when parents are overwhelmed and really struggling, or when people are really in the midst of chronic addiction to try and cope with whatever's going on, they find it hard to look for stuff that they do well. And when we introduce families to Starcatchers or organisations like yours, and we've got evidence, we can say, look at that bit there, look what happened when you got into that space with your child and your partner or whoever and your community. Look at how brilliant you were, look at the eye contact, look at how your child look to you with pleasure, because they were loving being with you. And you can take those moments as real catalysts to see more of that, how can we help you create more of those moments. This is some of the language that you at Starcatchers used, but it's very much at the heart of what we do. We have to talk about some of the really difficult, painful, frightening, challenging things that go on in children's lives and within their own families. But the best way we found to change that, is to move it to something that's safer, more positive, more connected, is to look for moments that both the child and the parent have experienced together that we can give them opportunities to capture, and then say let's do more of that. So going to a session with Starcatchers where they're engaged in making something beautiful, being together in a moment that's not about what's wrong, just about being with each other. It helps them and it helps us to say there's something really good here at the core of this relationship, let's do more of it. But also on a bigger level, it's a rights issue for me, the children we support just do not get the same opportunities as other children in the country. And they're no less talented or gifted. So it's also a spark for children around building resilience, around building strength, around making sure that those young people have access to opportunities that allow them to develop their own creative interest and skills and talents in a way they wouldn't normally. So for us, we can bring in partnership with organisations like Starcatchers, we can bring some of the families that nobody ever thinks of. By coming together, we can facilitate them getting the best out of the relationship with Starcatchers, because we're attending some of the stuff that might be going on in the background that's getting in the way. So we'll be busy sorting out housing problems, sorting out financial problems, talking, navigate our way through child protection systems, with families focusing on keeping children safe. We're managing all of that risk, so that what you're able to do is really just concentrate on the relationships, on the building connection, on the creative experience. And then it loops back to us. And we say, so there's all this stuff going on over here. But wow! Watch that! And we've seen it just beautifully operate in so many different levels, particularly in the kinship care work where overburdened, underpressure kinship carers, parents, you know, grandparents, aunts, uncles, who have already raised children and are back to where they thought they might never be. They can sometimes feel resentful and worn out that's not nice for children. Creating peer support and opportunity for them to express that in a safe way, but then find the joy in the relationship with the child they're caring for through the project has just been incredible I think. And it's made children safer, and it's made children happier, and it's made relationships stronger. So that's why it really matters to us. And you're such a great partner for Children 1st.

Rhona Matheson 8:06

That's brilliant! I mean, we are really fortunate a couple of years ago to get the resource, the funding from government to pilot this kinship care work, because we'd never done that kind of work before, we've always done a kind of embedded work in communities. And working in partnership is always really key because we're not family support. You know, we're bringing professional artists into these spaces. They're not social workers. They're not family support workers, you know, mental health specialists, but they have a way of connecting and bringing these creative experiences to life that respond to the needs of the children and the parents, and the carers in those contexts. And there's lots of peer learning that we get from the conversations that we have with the children 1st staff. And it's been really brilliant to just understand how that has developed over the last few years. And that pilot project, Creative Kin, and there's lots of information on our website, films and reports from the pilot project, but it's restarted in the middle of the pandemic, you know, that was a really eye opening initiative for us. Because we had to rethink lots of ways of how we do things because of the needs of those families. And we were also working in communities where we hadn't worked before. So you know, it's about building the foundations through the Children 1st staff, and that allows us to then have that access and then build the relationships with those families. And you could see the difference that that regular connection could make for some of those families who felt that they were able to come consistently and participate. For me as a total observer in it all being able to understand some of the challenges the real experience that there was families were dealing with. But what I remember from that pilot was seeing one or two of those families who had been there at the beginning, and actually that there were really positive changes that had taken place for those families. So some of that, I hope is attributed to the work that the artists were delivering in that project, as well as the other support that they were getting. But what has been really exciting over the last year in the midst of pandemic is how do you deliver face to face engagement work with families and communities? And just in March last year, I think we'd signed off on securing three years of funding for Creative Kin, in Ayrshire all over again. And then we had put all of that on pause. So how has the pandemic impacted in your approach to that face to face work?

Mary Glasgow 10:47

We like everybody were taken by surprise, you know, it was not in the strategic plan that we would be coping with that pandemic. Biggest thing for us was, how are we still there for the children in Scotland that need us the most, for children who live in situations that are already incredibly challenging. We already work with those kids who are living in poverty. Families where there's domestic abuse, where there's drug and alcohol use, where there's chronic mental health problems, where there's intergenerational trauma, that means that relationships are chronically fractured often. So we were really frightened, to be honest. But we just do what we always do, you step up don't you? And our teams just knew immediately what families would need to first and foremost was going to be practical support. So the first thing we did once we got everybody working at home and got everybody on the laptops and all the planning done, which we literally did, within two weeks, we moved to home, home-working. So we always say we don't give services for Children 1st, we're in relationship with the people we support, the families we get alongside, and our teams know our families really, really well, and so the communication didn't stop, it wasn't like work stopped, and then we started again or anything.

It literally moved in a way that I can hardly believe looking back, I recently reviewed all the daily emails and then the weekly emails that have been sent at the staff about the situation that we're we're in because we would all also at risk we are we're all also homeschooling, we would all also adjusting to all sorts of worrying and scary new things. But when I look back, the reality is we just didn't stop, we just immediately moved to be there. So the first thing we did was made sure that the children and families that we supported, who were going to be most disadvantaged about this, no question had all the practical things they needed. So we've had loads of stuff like shopping, we've got money to families, whether we're struggling, we advocated around evictions, around employability support, around benefits. We made sure that we lobbied and pushed Scottish Government and worked with them really closely, making sure that all the children had devices so they could access home learning because they just didn't. And that's some ethology that goes around that all kids are permanently attached to an iPad or a phone. No, they're not! They really are not. And that was a huge issue for us. And worry for us that our children would miss out. You know, already disadvantaged, already struggling in all sorts of ways that they will completely miss out on education. That our families and parents already under pressure would also buckle under the concern of a multitude of worries about health, about education, about money, but all of those things. So really fast, really agile being where we needed to be, our mantra to our teams was do what you can, when you can, so that meant that some people who were homeschooling or had babies home from a nursery, or were working in the evenings. And we quickly heard from families, actually, I love that as much better for me to get a really good session with my support person at night over a cup of tea. And actually, you can see my living room, but I can see yours. This feels like a much better human connection. It feels like a deeper relationship. But we were out and about, you know, our teams were safely and carefully dropping off equipment, food, money, gardens, picking up medication for people, making sure all sorts of things were going on around devices. It was challenging, frightening, exhausting, amazing, incredible to watch, to be honest. It didn't feel like Children 1st stepped back. It felt like we stepped up and we stepped in. You know, it's not easy, folk worked on Saturdays because they couldn't work during the week with kids at home all day. They did walks with families, they met children in their gardens, you know, at a distance with masks on to hear what was really going on. We developed creative ways of parents letting us know, women in particular, if there was domestic abuse, and they needed to be helped quickly to get to safety. So we had drive-bys, where we would look for the card in the window that said I'm not okay. And then we would take things from there. We were hugely worried about domestic abuse. This has been very well reported. It was we also saw really really horrible escalations and abusive and controlling behaviours of women and children in particular. So it was all of those things, but as you know, it pushes you to be your most creative when you're under the most pressure and that's what happened. Became incredibly creative, and you'll know from the North Ayrshire team that our shop front there just became a means of communication and comfort. It changed with the seasons; it was Christmas Eve, we celebrated Easter, it celebrated all the big celebrations for the community that came up. We just gave loads of messages of love and kindness and support as well as practical help to communities all over Scotland, we created packs for children and families to keep them busy, we fundraised in new ways that we've never tried before, crowdfunders to get bikes to kids so they could get physical exercise because they needed to be outdoors more than indoors, we thought about campaigns that were more relevant in a different way, we've included and got alongside children and families so that their voices were at the heart of the feedback that were given to government about what was needed. So yeah, I mean, I could go on and on and on.

It was just incredible, and exhausting. And we learnt loads, interestingly one of the things we learned was that when the system backs off a little bit, some of the families we support are surrounded by nurses, health visitors, social workers, schools, everybody's involved. And some of those families said, actually, it was great that there was a bit of space for the first wee while, we could breathe, we could think and then they could choose the relationships that really kept things going. Most often, they chose to continue their relationship with us. And we were able to do some really deep dives into what was really going on in families where we might not have always known that before. When you're on our doorstep at all times of the day. When you're on a zoom call on a Saturday night and you're looking at people's houses you can see and observe and talk about a lot of what's going that at other times can be hidden. So you can see wee so and so's looking a wee bit worried, is there something we can help with? And our approach is to always do that where the person feels in control. And it's an offer, not a demand, families took those offers up for support. And I think we did that really effectively. We learnt loads about what we would do better. So it constantly changed and evolved. We didn't get it right all the time. We're constantly revisited that we constantly balanced the safety of the people we support, or need for support and the safety and well being of our teams and managing all of that in amongst actually delivering support and relationships was was incredibly complex. And it evolved like most folks over time.

Rhona Matheson 17:16

That's an incredibly powerful story that you've just shared, actually, Mary, and I think it is one of the examples of how organisations and the third sector really stepped up over the last 18 months. And you know, some of the challenges we faced because we were sort of similar, but on a very different scale. We shut the office on the 13th of March because I could see it coming. And I was like I'm not going to start asking people to keep getting on public transport to come to an office. But knowing that we lost our production work for the last year and a bit and we've got a new hip hop show for little ones that will be happening next week, a dance performance that we were able to commission that's the first live performance that we'll have done in months, which is fantastic. We flipped lots of stuff online. But the fundamentally bit that we were most concerned about were the families that we were connected with in our engagement work, particularly, are Expecting Something programme, which works with young parents who are under 25, and have got babies under two, and these are young families who are already isolated. And that was just escalated, and we weren't able to kind of be there. It was incredible to watch the team respond to that. And initially, it was very much about how do we flip some of that stuff online, we immediately started doing creative care parcels that people were then sent to people dropped on their doorsteps or delivered. But then we realised that actually zoom and babies doesn't work.

And we didn't want to be putting the babies in front of a screen. It's not that the babies needed to do things. But I think there was a sense from the parents that they needed to be kind of holding their babies in front of the screen whilst there was stuff going on. And so Kerry's the coordinator for that work and the artist just took the guidance and they were forensic in interrogating the guidance. So as soon as we could, so July last year, we started doing face to face work in public parks in Edinburgh and in Fife, the gardens at Whale, so that we could have socially distanced creative experiences. It was organised to the enth degree because we absolutely had to but it was we're still doing the kind of creative care parcels we were still doing little bits of online stuff.

We developed that whole kind of Wee Inspirations programme, which is still going quite strong. And it's brilliant! It's available to everyone and anyone online, but we were able to get some emergency funding because we knew that there were loads of families who weren't able to access that stuff online and wouldn't have the crayons or the chalk or the paper at home. So we were really championing a kind of low, no cost approach to the Wee Inspirations. We knew that for some families even that was not going to work. Sending out 2000 of those parcels to families in five different local authority areas was a real operation, because then we came up with idea, we went ach! 2000 packs, that's fine. And then realised that there were 16 items in every one of those packs, the office that we used to have became that packing factory of 32,000 things and a team of people who freelance, production staff, who were able to then have some paid work and pull all this together and share that out. So whilst we knew there were things that we absolutely couldn't do, we couldn't be indoors. And we didn't want to be trying to do things indoors anyway, because actually, one of the real positives about this has been how we've all engaged with outdoors and the environment that we're in, whether it's urban or rural, you know, finding the parks and the public spaces in our communities. We've made a real commitment to continue to do that. So we are working outdoors for the foreseeable with the engagement work. And you know, you've got forest kindergartens and outdoor nurseries. So we just need to make sure that the artists have got are warm enough, but also that we're providing the wet and cold weather kit for the babies and the parents. And our observations are quite often that the babies come and they're prepared for the weather. But actually, the parents don't necessarily have a waterproof jacket and wellies. So, it, for us to think about, it's instead of buying craft materials, we're buying puddle suits, and wellies. Although we know that for some young parents, it's not very fashionable, but actually for an hour, and it'll keep you dry. So I suppose my sense of it has been that the organisations and the third sector, a lot of them have had to step up because other services had their hands tied and weren't able to respond. So we had to and I firmly kind of talk about Starcatchers as being within the third sector, as much as we are an arts organisation, we absolutely have this foot in the third sector and kind of have those relationships because when we are working with communities, it is about the partnerships with other third sector organisations. And that brings the richness and the understanding to our work and enables those organisations because we've never been having this conversation. If we just kind of gone, we're gonna do our work in communities, and we're gonna do it in isolation. Well, for one thing, we wouldn't have families to work with, and we would also be coming across loads of challenges, because we don't have the skills to be having the eye and the understanding around what else is happening in those families lives, it becomes this really beautiful marriage of approaches. The fundamentally is providing these really positive shared experiences for those families. And I think what I really want to see is how we can have a consistent long term approach to this work in these communities so that in five or 10 years time, we've got longitudinal evidence of the impact not just on those families, but actually the kind of ripples that it creates within those communities.

And I know that we haven't got it right all the time. And I think about we have this relationship in Wester Hailes, where we've been working there for seven years, but lots of people in that community wouldn't know the name of the organisation. And they wouldn't know my face, or some of the other core team's faces that some of them will know Katy, who's the lead artist, and Kerry, who's our coordinator, because they are there all the time, and we've just made this move to have the space at Whale Arts to go right we're going to look at what could happen if we are really embedding ourselves in this community. There's something exciting, we're having conversations with the children 1st team in Edinburgh about how we can develop our relationship and offer in and around that community, which is really exciting. But we're also having this long term conversation with North and South Ayrshire because we've been able to do a little bit of work as well as restarting that Creative Kin work in September, with a new team leading on that who've done amazing things in a really short space of time. We've also been able to work with the team in South Ayrshire on a little pilot project and that artist Corrie, I mean he rose to the challenge. He was coming in thinking that he was going to be doing something face to face but outdoors but actually he had to do stuff online with creative play parcels and a couple of one off family days. But one of the family days was in April or the beginning of May, when it was absolutely torrential rain. And so it was hopeless, and it was rescheduled. But that sort of sense of he's building up to actually get to meet these families face to face for the first time. But then that happens. We're also about to restart some work, so that Creative Kin project originally was split across Moray and North Ayrshire but we've got a little bit of funding from Creative Scotland, and we've got another bid that we will hear about soon that would extend this work but the artist Heather Fulton who did the Creative Kin work. We've got support there for her to do some work over the next year with families in and around Elgin and it's reconnected her with the Children 1st team up there so it feels like there's a kind of strategic overarching bigger picture relationship that we can have. We've also got the Silivri grassroot community focus work that's taking place and that feels really exciting. I think as we come out of this pandemic just feels like this kind of work becomes increasingly important. My concern is around, we don't know what the impact of this is going to be on those babies that have been born in the last year and the one, two, three year olds for quite a few years. So how can we create the conditions and provide the kind of rich experiences that can maybe mitigate against some of the negative impacts of what's happened over the last few years?

Mary Glasgow 25:20

I think it's right, though isn't it? It's more than just a local delivery arrangement. It's a national partnership. What drives us as human is what I'm interested in and if you drill down into all of us, regardless of the challenges and difficulties we've got, there is a spirit in everybody, I think, to be creative, to connect, to find the joy in things that are artistic in whatever way there is. And I think for us where we'd like to get to in the partnership would be that within all of our teams, where the core business, if you like is making sure that children can be safe at home, we'd love to offer by right access and opportunity and a bridge into community arts and connection and creativity right across the life course really, for me, talking to parents about how they need to do better, putting them through processes about how they need to stop doing things that are harmful is one thing that encouraging people to heal through expressing themselves, what they found it hard often to articulate is what's going to save us all actually beyond the pandemic saying it out loud, already makes it feel a wee bit better, you're sharing that worry, you're getting it out your head and into the ears of other people that in itself is helpful. The next biggest help is if you can find ways that suit you that are safe for you to work through and process some of those feelings. And for so many children and young people in particular, it's through creative expression.

But if there's not the mechanism that's easily accessible to support that, then I think that's why we've got so many children and young people in the circumstances that they're in you know, we talk about a pandemic, but we've also got an epidemic of distressed, anxious children and families and now adults on top of that, we've experienced a collective trauma and there needs to be a collective healing. You know, as much as this has been a horrible time, it's also attended to reframe, and to rethink. And I think we need to stop siloing people in their group, you know, there's the addicts over the year, there's the chair protection people over there, and there's the children with mental health problems over there. But essentially, humans in human relationship, in family systems, whatever they look like, in communities, in cities, and in a country that's relatively small, and we should all be thinking about putting up the heart of our recovery, all of the elements that we need to survive its core basic needs, we need food, we need shelter, we need resources. But we also need connection, safety, and an opportunity to express what we feel, and the potentially terrible thing that will happen as we come out of the pandemic is that we'll spend the money on all the wrong things, you know, so our challenge is constantly we don't need more clinicians to diagnose more children or more adults with difficulties or disorders or conditions that we're not actually going to do anything about because we can't afford it. We don't have enough specialists, a small number of people will need that specialist support. But as a country in order to collectively heal and recover the things we can do. And as you talked about that access to the outdoors, building people's love of the outdoors can be healing in itself, making sure people can express and talk about what it felt like, which is why we sent in 1000s upon 1000s of mini kit bags to children and families right across Scotland so that children could be encouraged with their families to identify creatively. What does this feel like right now in this moment? And you know, share that with me, children been able to pick a colour and go, I feel like that today. They don't need to say anything heavy, but you can get a sense of what's going on. So, I think it's got to be for children first and for the country, I mean it's got to be now when I look at new modules that we're tasting or developing, I'm always saying so where's the creative expression for healing so in big projects that we've got going on just now which is the child's house for healing, where we're going to teach child victims and witnesses and transform that system so that they get all the support they need from social work, police health and the court system under one roof. The major part of that the golden thread through the whole thing is recovering from the trauma they've experienced from the minute they step into the space. So that brings out a whole heap of creativity, about design about how the place flows about how you do trauma sensitive designer recovery work from the minute you get into relationship with that child. What does recovery look like? You know, we're thinking right now with architects about really specialists creative design of spaces for children who've experienced some of the most imaginable trauma, but I think there's going to be a lot to learn for schools, for community centres, for nurseries for health settings. We just need to be much better at knowing that space is important. We need to create places that don't feel overwhelming. I do feel optimistic about the opportunities to exploit the Creative Arts Culture creativity, the outdoors as a much better evidence based approach to healing and recovery. We've talked before and haven't we about what we'd really love to test would be a whole community approach to recovery built around creative arts and creativity. I'd love to do that. And now, why would an organisation like children question want to be involved in that? We wouldn't necessarily be the delivery mechanism. But you're doing all those other things that make sure that that could be at the centre of it. And that folk had enough food, kids had enough devices, people were safe, there was relationships there that could support that. I think we need to dream back and set ambitions that are way beyond us post pandemic recovery. And we've got to be huge advocates for creativity. Because at the end of the day, what kept us all going art, outdoors, thinking, talking, reading, poetry. You know, those were the things that really kept most of us sane through that process. So we've got to learn that.

Rhona Matheson 30:51

Yeah, one of my biggest concerns is that things are opening up, and people are just going back to how they used to, all this talk about we're going to do things differently. There's a reverting to forum. And that's the one thing that I've said throughout is that we can't revert to forum, we've learned so much from the last 18 months, it hasn't always been easy. It's been easier for us as an organisation than for a lot of other people. And I don't take that for granted. But we also know that the conversations that have been happening in the arts sector in particular, but also in terms of working with children and families, but actually we can do things differently to how can we embed that and I think the approach that you talked about, and the learning that you took from the adaptation that you undertook is really exciting. And actually how do you hold on to those things without other services feeling uncomfortable or threatened or going you can't be doing walks in the park or Saturday morning zoom, because that has to be done this week, they will actually we've we can see that it can be something else. And I think this kind of combination of skills and opportunities, when the Scottish Government's looking at the well being economy as being something that's a touchstone of future development, where we're putting the planet and people first, well, actually, let's do that. But actually, can we put the children first.

Mary Glasgow 32:08

I mean, we say that constantly. And I love the fact we're called Children First, I could not think of a better name, but an organisation that champions the rights of children, and we constantly see as well, if you get a right for children, it will be right for everybody. If you build a society, if you build a city, if you build a community around children, it will work for everybody because it will be safe, it will be fun. It will be designed intuitively around the way they curiously explore that environment. What's not to like about that? Those organisations like yours, like mine, we have got to really push hard, I think. We're going to have to campaign like we've never campaigned before we're going to have to hold people to account we're going to have to challenge ourselves, do way better. I mean, certainly in terms of how we champion the rights of even more marginalised and excluded groups, for example, we need to think about how we as organisations reach into those communities in a much more effective way than we ever have to amplify and demand that things are different, like you are do fear, a lot of fancy talk and not a huge amount of change. But let's be hardwired for optimism, and let's just keep showing a better way to do things. So that's why I think it would be dreadful. For example, if we didn't take forward into new design work that we're doing to taste new approaches, if we just said all the budget doesn't allow for any creativity, it's not an add on, it's not going to be a wee extra that will go come on, we'll fundraise five grand to add on some opportunities for the creative arts, what you want to do is really build it in from the beginning and go this is the mechanism this is the thing that will help improve relationships, keep children safe, help recovery from trauma. To me, it's like the movement that we've seen when we've all been talking about relationships are the thing. That's right and relationships where there are shared experiences that are creative and connected, is the next extension of that. Think that's where we need to go and we really need to push. The system has been proven not to work. I don't know who it works for. It certainly doesn't work for children, it certainly doesn't work for the children that we support. And I keep saying to folk, well what we've been doing has not worked, so let's take some risks and try something new. But there's a heck of a lot of resistance, because for a lot of people and I was talking about this in a great panel discussion the Robertson Trust hosted. The failed shift to prevention really and why we hadn't achieved that in 10 years. And the conclusion was basically it's because folk don't want to give up what they've got. It's about power. And it's about how we view each other and we very much look at the children and families that organisations like mine support and we go, How many labels could we put on you?

And all labels do is just prevent you seeing the real strength of people, the families that we work with were amazing through the pandemic. Yes, things were difficult. Yes, things were impossible. But many, many, many of those families coped way better because you know what? Resilience, trauma, challenge unpredictability, feeling out of control. That's what they're living with every day, it was the rest of us that have all of those things in our life that struggled more. Coming out of the pandemic though, those are the families that have paid the highest price. And I just think we owe it to be huge champions to say this isn't just, you know, let's just not, repair the basics. This is about way more than that, the heart of a well being economy has to be support to families, like on a scale like we invest in the NHS.

Rhona Matheson 35:28

And with the incorporation of the UNCRC, there's even more fuel to the fire, but it's how agencies organisations, governments are held to account around that. And one of the conversations that we keep having is about the fact that I go into meetings where we're talking about children and young people, but we want to talk about young people. There's a shorthand that will just talk about young people, because that's easier, but it diminishes the position of children. And I don't let it go, I just keep saying it. I'm like a dog with a bone and a stuck record when I go into the same group of folk. And I'm like, can we talk about children, but when we're having conversations about the implementation of the UNCRC, and lots of consultation work taking place with children, there are groups of children who get missed from that. Our youngest children preverbal, nonverbal children, and we quite often get asked to do some of that work, or people will phone us up and say, are you doing consultation work with babies and through our community engagement work, we're constantly having consultation and engagement with pre and nonverbal children, but it's understanding what they want from us in terms of the work that we're doing. But we've done a couple of other consultations for organisations. But they end up being with four plus the one that we've done most recently for Scottish government around COVID recovery, and what children want and need, I think our youngest assessment was 22 months. That's exciting.

Mary Glasgow 36:49

I think one of the challenges that we've got, I mean, we refuse to do consultation now. Because actually, what you're doing and what we're hoping to try and do better is participation. Consultation works for governments, because they can tick a wee box, but it doesn't actually make any difference or work for the children and babies and young people that we're all working with. What you want is actual active participation, and all the decisions that affect them and all of their lives. And you know, better than me, I've never forget coming along to watch some of the productions, I think Blue Box and then also Hup. And I remember just looking at what was going on with these tiny little children and their grown ups and seeing these kids as active participants, they were not observing something, they were contributing to something the thing was working around them, I bet you every single performance was different because it was so actively linked to participation. And I think we've got to move away from this notion of consultation and to participation and also representation of all the groups of children that need to be included with the same as most organisations, we've not managed well enough to include families from marginalised excluded groups, we need to do way better on that, and that's when we move to participation and holding ourselves to account about what action that changes what action you take, in order to see what changes becomes really important. So I guess another challenge, another way that things get stronger, better and more evolved.

Rhona Matheson 38:15

But there's opportunities there. So I really want to explore a methodology for consultation with babies and pre and nonverbal children. But it's maybe a methodology to participation with those groups. Regardless, we can advocate for that approach, the challenge that we've got is that certain bodies are still going to be wanting to be talking about consultation, and have that very adult led of approach. I think the beauty of what we can offer is an approach that can enable the adults to get the information that they need. But it allows for a much more meaningful engagement with the child, but also kind of opening up an understanding of how you can have that connection with a very young child or a preverbal child or a nonverbal child. There's work there that I'm dabbling with at the moment, and I'm hoping that we will push some of that forward.

Mary Glasgow 39:09

Organisations like Starcatchers are pushing back, you can't do consultation by Tuesday with 15, six month old babies, but what we can do is film and observe and share their participation and an experience. And perhaps you might get interested in curious enough to actually observe that yourself and then see what conclusions you might draw from it.

Rhona Matheson 39:30

Feels like that's exactly the kind of thing that we were talking about. It's that sense of having someone a sort of an artist researcher almost who can sort of be translating what's happening into a language or a resource. That means that other people can understand that approach and benefit from it in their own practice. It could be something that could be as valuable for an early years practitioner as much as it is for someone who's working in the government. So there's all sorts of things there. I'm going off on all sorts of tangents here. I think this has been such a really fascinating conversation. And I really appreciate your time and your insight in it. But just as this is our celebratory year, our fifteenth birthday, and you touched on a couple of the pieces that you saw in the last few years, what was your highlight of being on the board of Starcatchers and being around all of that stuff? Because you did two terms with us so that was like six years that we were able to benefit from your skills and experience and connection, which was fantastic. We were very sorry to leave you last year.

Mary Glasgow 40:30

Oh I got a lot more out of it probably than the board. I think it changed my perspective, a lot. It was just being around it, it was just listening to the quality conversations about the care. What always really struck me was just the care that went into the quality, the conversation, planning, thinking, effort that went into just thinking about how to give babies and young children and their families, just the best possible highest standard of experience. I just remember thinking, everything needs to be like that. That's what our organisation should be. I found it incredibly inspiring. And I found a real exemplar for rights, respect, and dignified powerful work for people and with people. It definitely was something that I took into our work with the children and families that we supported. I'm a proponent of all sorts of things personally, professionally, I'm a product of community arts, and you would never think of me as somebody who's particularly creative. And yet I know that I am because of the opportunity to think in a different way. And it really made it really touched me. And I remember coming out of Hup really crying actually. I found it incredibly moving. And I saw Blue Block Studio at the Tramway in Glasgow, and there was quite a mixed group of families in there. And I'll tell you, what really struck me was that a lot of the adults sat back, the piece invited the adults to allow their children to explore in their own way with so many of these activities for children, little babies and children is all like you've got a baby on your lap, and you're really doing it and you're really getting everything out of it.

Because it's all fantastic. Your meeting pals, and it's all about this thing, the way that it was designed, it runs through everything that you've ever talked about at Starcatchers, it's absolutely about babies leading the way, showing us. We've got a colleague, a wonderful colleague called Jonie Robbins that does the kick back work and Jonie always says babies are perfect. Children come into the world perfect.

And then what we do is we chip wee bits off them and we push them and we mould them in all sorts of ways that diminishes at times their curiosity, their natural gift, their confidence. And I think Starcatchers is just the absolute opposite of that, it creates an environment where you can just build on that perfection, and allow children to control it. Babies to be in control of their movements, their enjoyment. And I'm waffling on it because it's just so intangible. I loved it. It really impacted me it made me reflect on the work and the way that we do it about genuine, authentic, deep thinking, to give quality experiences, to little babies and children that just respected their perfection and their capacities. In a way that I've never seen done before. It was just beautiful. I can't believe you're 15 Because I remember all the celebrations for the 10th anniversary. And that seems like, like you said principle. I really miss it, I loved it. It was an absolute privilege. And it did really impact and change the way I thought about lots of things, including the way we build rights, respect and relationships with the families that we support.

Rhona Matheson 43:37

Well, thank you. Amazing to hear. And I suppose we got a huge amount from your contribution. And what I'm excited about is that actually, we got a different relationship now. And whilst you're not on the board, we still have this connection with Children First. And actually it's building and by what we can then do is bring some more of that to the organisation in a more tangible way, actually, because we can be delivering in all of these different spaces and communities and working alongside your staff and alongside the families that you work with. And I'm really excited about that.

Mary Glasgow 44:12

We need to jointly don't we design whole communities recovery community arts.

Rhona Matheson 44:17

Absolutely. That's a whole other conversation.

Mary Glasgow 44:20

That's another two hours of maybe even two weeks.

Rhona Matheson 44:23

But thank you Mary. I really appreciate that and I hope that the people listening also will get that real sense of passion and connection what you were talking about. Thank you for listening to the Let's Talk About... podcast. The music used in this episode is by Marcus Britton, Matt Elliot, Nick Padgett Tomlinson and Barney Strachan from Mixed Up by Katy Wilson. You can view the transcript of this episode at www.starcatchers.org.uk

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