



**WEE
PEOPLE,
BIG
FEELINGS
2022**

Foreword

In the Autumn of 2020, the manager of Scots Corner Early Learning and Childcare setting contacted me with a creative challenge. The Ministry of Defence had resources for forces families and educators to help older children process the emotional challenges of deployment, but there was a lack of resources for early years. Talking about your feelings can be useful, but what if you don't have the words to describe how you're feeling? Could we use creative experiences to help wee ones with the emotional cycle of deployment?

We were clear from the start this wasn't going to be a quick fix – you can't choreograph a dance that cures sadness, or plan one workshop that shares the gift of emotional literacy. Emotions often start in our bodies – stomachs churn, heads spin, legs are restless – long before we have the vocabulary to make sense of them. So it made sense to look at creative movement and other non-verbal forms of self expression. It was also important to recognise that emotional literacy – that is, the ability to recognise, understand, handle and express emotions, isn't built in times of crisis. It's a skill we build over time. Sometimes it's about the chance to express how we feel in the moment so we can recognise it and process it, and sometimes it's about getting the chance to “practice” lots of different feelings in a way that's safe – and creative experiences offer fantastic opportunities for both.

Wee People, Big Feelings tuned into ways wee ones express themselves and learn about the world – using bodies and faces, movement and music and stories. We listened to what they told us, both verbally and non-verbally. By taking a child-centred approach, artists and practitioners were responsive to the needs and interests of the wee ones in the setting. Every creative idea that was introduced was chosen with them in mind, and shared with an openness that ensured the wee ones could take those creative experiences and make them their own.

Projects like these are often challenging. Scots Corner was a new setting who opened their doors for the first time in February 2020, and the staff team and artists were finding their feet under ever-changing pandemic restrictions.

Choosing creative movement as the main artform stretched both physical and mental comfort zones. Running staff training over Zoom calls instead of being able to be in the same room together made it more complex to break down barriers. Changes in leadership and staff absence brought more uncertainty. It is a testament to the hard work and dedication of the Scots Corner team and the Starcatchers artists that we achieved so much in difficult circumstances.

The impact of this project was gathered through staff and family interviews, photographs and videos, artist reflective diaries, and practitioner enquiry supported by the University of Strathclyde. This participatory evaluation approach offered opportunities for everyone involved to share their thoughts and have their voice matter: this is central to producing considered and meaningful outcomes for all.

There is a joy of discovery that radiates from the photographs and videos in this report. This was the golden thread that ran through Wee People, Big Feelings – every time a wee one found a new way to express themselves, or a new kind of confidence, or a new connection, we were all reminded what the hard work was for. These are the foundations of emotional literacy that will help them navigate whatever challenges life may bring them.

By sharing the learning from this project, I hope we will be able to empower more early years settings and more families to do the same.

Heather Armstrong
Head of Early Years Development, Starcatchers



About Starcatchers

Starcatchers is Scotland's Arts and Early Years organisation. For 16 years we have pioneered the development of high quality performances and creative experiences for children from birth to five years, and their grown-ups, in communities across Scotland. Starcatchers' vision is delivered through four pillars of activity, all rooted in the arts and creativity and designed to connect with babies, toddlers, young children, parents, carers, and Early Years practitioners. Our advocacy work seeks to advance children's rights, particularly the right to engage with and participate in arts and cultural experiences from birth and, through this, amplify young children's agency and voice.

The Scottish Early Learning and Childcare Context

All of the ideas and resources that have been developed as part of the Wee People, Big Feelings project have been done so within the Scottish Early Learning and Childcare (ELC) context.

Scottish ELC takes a rights-based approach based on kindness, empathy, trust, and belief in the human dignity of each and every one of us.

"There is a balance to be struck. On the one hand, there is the knowledge and skills that we want children to develop, such as self-regulation, confidence, and curiosity. On the other hand, we know that this is best done in a child-centred way where children have permission to follow their interests and to develop at their own pace."

-Realising the Ambition, Being Me

You can read more about this approach at the [Children's Parliament](#) and [Education Scotland](#).

Project partners

Scots Corner Early Learning and Childcare Centre

Scots Corner Early Learning and Childcare Centre provides education and care to children aged 2 - 5 years and is based in Penicuik, Midlothian. The building comprises both a nursery setting for children and a community centre for families in the area. Scots Corner are registered for 34 children in any one session, with 5 of these children being 2-year-olds. The nursery currently have 44 children enrolled.

University of Strathclyde

The vision of the University of Strathclyde's Early Childhood Education Hub is to foreground Early Childhood Education in Scotland, and internationally, as something that vital for the learning, health and wellbeing of young children. As leaders in the field, the Early Childhood Education Hub collaborates with other researchers and practitioners around the world to realise high quality Early Childhood Education as a fundamental right for all children. Dr Lorna Arnott is Director of the Hub and Prof Kate Wall is affiliate member. Their combined work targets the rights of babies and young children and developing pedagogically appropriate methods to support young children's voice.



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Introduction

From March 2021 until July 2022, Starcatchers collaborated on the project *Wee People, Big Feelings* with the Ministry of Defence and Scots Corner Early Learning and Childcare Centre.

Many of the children who attend the setting have a parent, or close family member, in the armed forces which makes them susceptible to The Emotional Cycle of Deployment. Whilst there are many resources on offer for primary children and above, the Ministry of Defence recognised the lack of resources to support babies, very young children, or the people who care for them.

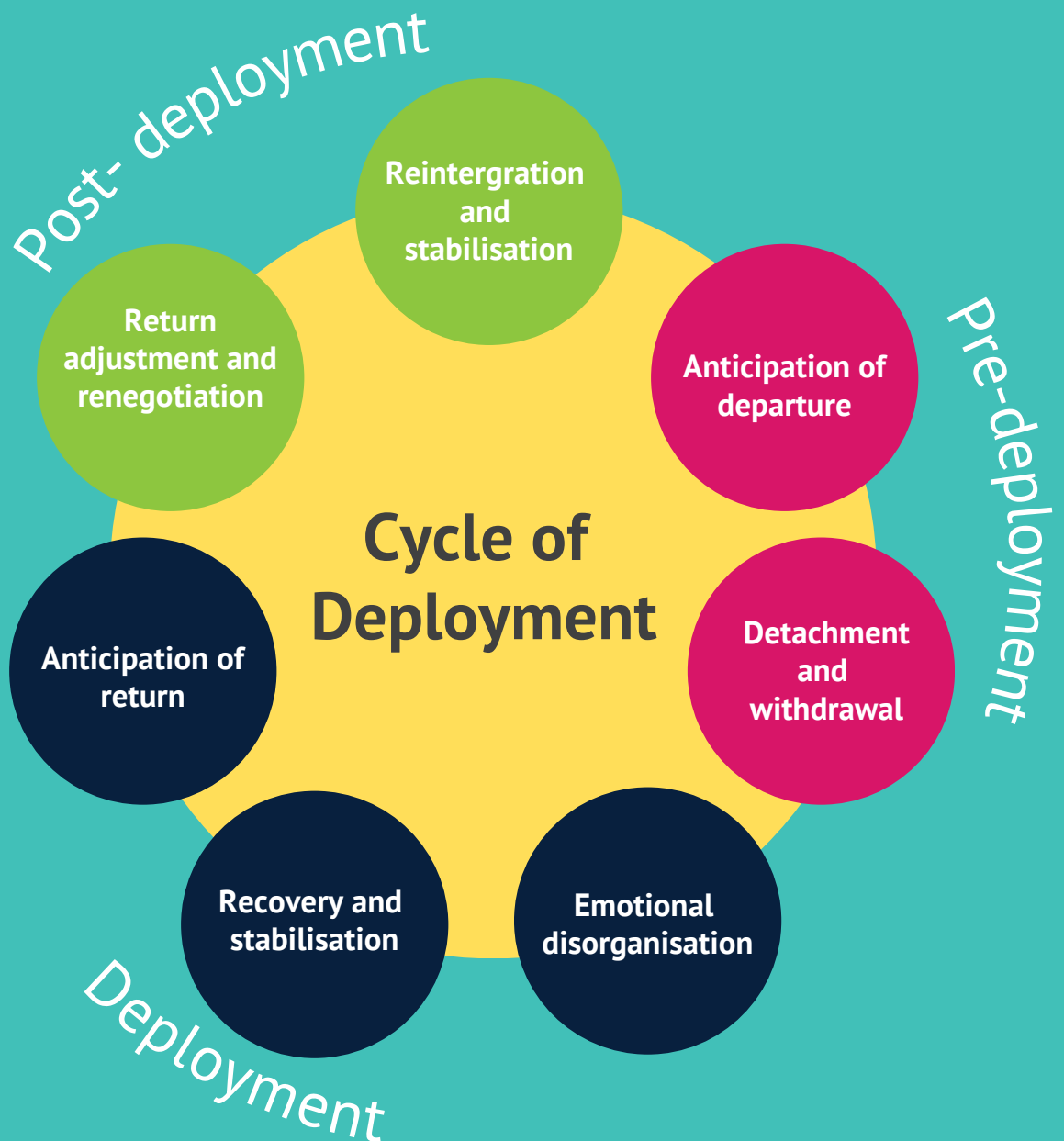
"Every forces family is different, and every deployment is different: sometimes we cope well with the transitions, and sometimes it can bring a lot of challenges. There's no one size fits all approach, it's important we develop a repertoire of techniques to support wee ones and their families" - **Early Years Practitioner and Forces Family Member**



What is Emotional Literacy?

Emotional literacy is the ability to express emotions and feelings, either through speech or other forms of communication. As we grow up, we learn to identify different feelings. This ability ties into other elements of our social development including empathy, forming and maintaining relationships, and finding ways to manage stress.

Emotional Cycle of Deployment



Wee People Big Feelings project goals:



1) to use creative and expressive arts experiences with the children in the setting to help them develop skills in emotional literacy including, but not limited to, identifying and processing emotions, empathy and self-regulation.

2) to support the staff at Scot's Corner Early Learning and Childcare Centre to develop their practice, enabling them to deliver tailored support that offered the children they worked with opportunities to be creative, expressive themselves and develop skills in emotional literacy.

3) to capture the learning from these experiences in resources that could support other settings and families experiencing the Emotional Cycle of Deployment



How we achieved these:

1) Artist-in-residence embedded in Scot's Corner 1-2 days per week who delivered tailored movement and storytelling sessions with children and staff

2) Creative Skills Professional Learning sessions for setting staff facilitated by artists, which focused on the importance of creativity in early years as well as adaptable experiences in art-forms including visual art, music, storytelling and creative movement

3) Family Activity packs including arts materials and printed resources for families to explore at home, facilitating opportunities to develop emotional literacy and bonding together

4) Online resources for the setting and families, including videos, downloadable idea cards and activity packs

5) Creative Family Play Days facilitated by artists for children and family members from the setting, as well as from the wider armed-forces family community in the area

6) Creation of Play Kits that include a variety of resources and can be borrowed / loaned out to families



Project Timeline

March '21

INPUT

ARTIST-IN-RESIDENCE
SKYE REYNOLDS

RESOURCES

JANUARY - AUGUST '21
TRAINING

OCTOBER '21
MUSIC MINI-RESIDENCY
WITH DAVID TROUTON

NOVEMBER '21
TRAINING

SEPTEMBER '21
VIDEOS AND *WEE*
INSPIRATIONS LAUNCHED

NOVEMBER '21
CREATIVITY PACKS
SENT OUT

DECEMBER '21
GINGERBREAD MAN VIDEOS
AND RESOURCES
LAUNCHED

FEBRUARY '22
TRAINING

FEBRUARY - JULY '22
DRAMA MINI-RESIDENCY
AND FAMILY FUN SESSIONS
WITH AMY HALL-GIBSON

FEBRUARY '22
PODCAST LAUNCH

MARCH '22
PATHWAYS TO PLAY
VIDEOS LAUNCHED

July '22



Artist Residency

The Artist-in-residence model supports development over a period of time, actively seeking creative and collaborative opportunities with the setting to explore new ideas.

The artist-in-residence at Scots Corner was **Skye Reynolds**; a movement and dance artist who leads Starcatchers' Creative Skills sessions in movement. Her focus on working with children is play-based and child-led, using developmental movement patterns, schemas and loose parts to help children express themselves and self-regulate. Month long residencies with Musician Dave Trouton and Drama Artist Amy Hall Gibson also took place.

Skye was based in the nursery 1-2 days a week during the project, working directly with the children to observe them play, and develop creative experiences that would help them use their movement to communicate, express themselves or process their feelings.

Skye was embedded alongside the nursery staff so that they could learn from one another, enhance the setting's current practice, and so that she could use her work from this project to develop resources that would ensure the learning from this project would be transferrable to other early years settings.



Case Studies

The following case studies are taken from Skye Reynolds' reflective diary and show an insight into the emotional development her input offered the children.

Case Study #1: Sahmed

“After we went into the hall, we took out a parachute. The children sat, or lay, on it and we pulled it so they could glide around the hall. We could see most of them were relaxing, and asking for multiple turns being pulled. Sahmed doesn't normally engage with movement sessions and prefers to stay close to his key worker and watch.*

The children felt really engaged with each other, dancing together and watching each other's movements. Towards the end of the session, Sahmed put his favourite stuffed toy on the parachute to get carried around like the other children had been. His keyworker commented that this was a big sign of trust for him.

In the next session, he asked to slide on the parachute and fully engaged with rolling around on the floor with the other children. Since then, he's joined in with movement sessions – including choosing music, and dancing with the other children.”

(From Skye Reynolds' Reflective Diary, April 2021)

Case Study #2: Cameron

“One of the children, Cameron, was initially cautious when we began the session, but as it went on he became more confident and happy. He was smiling and giggling out loud when playing tunnels. Myself and the staff all recognised the shift – when Cameron had first joined nursery he was quite distressed and often cried.

Through spending time with him in the cosy room, I noticed when Cameron was in there for the movement sessions he sometimes wouldn't cry, and would instead watch the movement avidly, with real interest.

Now, he is well-integrated into the nursery and a lot happier. It was so lovely to observe his engagement over the course of the year in these sessions.”

(From Skye Reynolds' Reflective Diary, March 2022)



Staff development

Creative Skills Professional Learning Sessions

Scots Corner staff also took part in **Creative Skills**, Starcatchers' professional development programme for the early years workforce. They received seven sessions facilitated by artists that shared ideas and inspiration for using creative movement, visual art, music and drama, puppetry and storytelling with the children in the setting in a way that would help them develop skills in emotional literacy and wellbeing.

The training also focused on the theory behind the importance of creativity in early years, as well as improving practitioners' creative confidence – helping them feel emboldened in their practice, and linking the expressive arts with key Scottish early years educational policy.

“The staff have revisited their Visions, Values and Aims to reflect the work they’ve been doing, and cement what they’ve learned as part of their practice with the children.”

- From meeting minutes with Scot's Corner Staff, October 2021

Practitioner Enquiry

Throughout the project, the University of Strathclyde supported practitioners to develop and implement professional enquiries. The choice of topic was the practitioner's, but the University team played the role of critical friend, encouraging, honing and refining the process in line with the individual or team's practice and learners' needs. The practitioners' focuses were influenced by the artist residencies, as well as the Creative Skills professional learning sessions.

It was important for all practitioners to examine and reflect on the impact these creative approaches had on the children, ensuring legacy and embedding learning.

Below is a summary of the learning take-aways from six case study enquiries. There is a further summary in this section of three of the case studies, with full enquiries shared in the University of Strathclyde's report in Appendix 1.

Case Study 1: Story reading to facilitate expression of feelings (Lindsey)

Take-aways:

- 1) The importance of normalising talking about emotions
- 2) Everyone has feelings

Case Study 2: Rough and Tumble (Jennifer, Chelsea and John)

Take-aways:

- 1) Physical play was an avenue for expression, an 'outlet' for coping and a de-escalation technique
- 2) Children were emotionally mature enough to recognise others' needs and desires and only engaged with staff who enjoyed rough and tumble

Case Study 3: Transitional objects (Louise)

Take away: Transitional objects provided comfort but also facilitated conversations with children about emotions and the home/nursery connection

Case Study 4 - Music as an emotional regulation tool (Jess)

Take away: Familiar and regular sounds and music supported structured regulation, was calming and supported engagement

Case Study 5: Physical Play with Objects and Movement (Harriet)

Take away: Physical objects rather than movement become the outlet to channel expression

Case Study 6: The role of props and loose parts play in facilitating engagement with movement (Skye: artist in residence)

Take away: Props have different power when used in different ways

Practitioner Enquiry #1: Lindsey

Lindsey chose her focus after participating in the Creative Skills Professional Learning sessions in particular, storytelling and character expression. She was interested in how by going beyond what she would normally do when reading a story (author, illustrator, title, pictures etc.) to focus on how characters looked or felt, might impact on children's emotional literacy.

Lindsey filmed two iterations of storytelling: one where there was no interaction, and one with full interaction (including different voices, facial expression, non-verbal cues etc.) and made observations of how they children reacted and how their behaviour and language developed over time.

Her key observation was that interactive storytelling led the children to develop their language around emotions including talking about expressions – how they looked and what they felt like. Children as young as 2 years-old were able to copy the emotions she expressed whilst reading. The older children also developed their language around empathy, being able to describe what a character was feeling and why.

Lindsey also observed that talking about emotions became normalised, for example when one boy in the nursery hit another child, he told a practitioner his anger “feels like I have explosions in my tummy”.

Lindsey also noticed the children also spoke about their feelings with each other more both in role play scenarios and during the day more generally, for example: “I am not happy at you”.

Lindsey's conclusions from this inquiry were:

- interactive storytelling should be a daily practice with the children in the setting;
- all the staff need to develop their confidence and skills in this form of storytelling;
- the staff are key role models to the children in terms of speaking about and demonstrating their emotions

Her proposed next steps were to expand her storytelling practice so it could be used with families to help them build these connections at home.

Lindsey's practitioner inquiry highlights how art-forms, such as storytelling, can offer children a separate safe space to explore emotions through play, and talk about them through characters and scenarios. This offers a safe training ground to develop their vocabulary, ability to imagine and predict how others feel, and learn about how different emotions look and feel. The skills the children developed through these experiences helped them communicate their feelings and needs with the setting staff.

Lindsey's further plans to continue this with families shows the legacy of this project – that staff at the setting were given the skills to plan adaptive experiences that could be used both in the setting and at home – creating consistency for the children.

Practitioner Enquiry #2: Chelsea and John

Chelsea and John focused on the impact of using rough and tumble play in response to the Artist Residency with Skye Reynolds. They wanted to work with a specific child who demonstrated a lot of anger and aggressive behaviour including: “furious anger and frustration, [...] crying inconsolably and lashing out”. Practitioners had previously attempted self-regulation behaviours including physical contact (cuddling, tickling, chasing, roleplaying), but these were not always successful: “[this] sometimes escalated his emotions and he lashed out, destroying the environment”.

Chelsea and John focused specifically on how rough and tumble can help children self-regulate and develop emotional language. With support from Skye Reynolds, they created an outdoor space for rough and tumble that helped children choose to join, or not, and ensure this form of play was safe.

Through using this form of play, they noticed some key differences in the children in the setting, including:

- after this form of play, some of the children were more able to express how they felt;
- children developed skills in assessing risk and negotiating boundaries;
- children developed an understanding of thinking about how others felt, and how their actions would impact other people;
- children and staff had a stronger relationship of trust;
- staff and children had a better vocabulary of language to communicate consent and boundaries.

In a meeting with Starcatchers in January 2022, staff mentioned the success of the outdoor rough and tumble area, with children self-identifying when they needed to engage with rough and tumble to help them process things. One staff member mentioned they had a non-verbal cue of “tapping a member of staff on the elbow” to non-verbally show they wanted to initiate this form of play. This demonstrates skill in terms of children being able to identify their own emotional needs, recognise a self and healthy method of expressing them, and communicating that need to practitioners.

This practitioner inquiry also demonstrates how a playful approach to movement enabled some children to de-escalate or regulate their emotions, and offered them an outlet for overwhelming emotions. This form of play helped the staff and children to bond, as well as develop emotional literacy skills including identifying and naming emotions, communicating boundaries and empathy, building stronger relationships.

It’s worth also noting, especially in relation to rough and tumble, that many of the parents who were deployed were the children’s fathers – who are more likely to engage in this form of physical play. As part of his inquiry, John noticed some children missed this form of play at home and specifically sought him out to lead it.

The Wee People, Big Feelings project not only helped the practitioners develop confidence in offering that form of play, and so helped children who had missed it as a form of expression, but also offered it to the young girls – who are least likely to be engaged in this form of play. In January 2022, notes from a meeting between Starcatchers and Scot’s Corner mention how beneficial this had been for some of the specific girls in the setting.

Practitioner Enquiry #3: Louise

Louise reflected on her own practice through the use of transitional objects and how they provided comfort as well as facilitating conversations with children about emotions and the home/nursery connection.

Louise's study focused on the potential of transitional objects to ease transitions and feelings of absence. She developed a deployment doll or Teddy with the absent parent's face on, to personalise, which helped many children cope with the deployment cycle, something she had done for her own daughter when Dad was absent. The doll/teddy was portable and could be taken home and to different areas in a setting enabling conversations to be instigated by the child when and where appropriate. It recognised how an object that resembled a member of their family could help a child make the connection with what they were missing.

Another transitional object that Louise focused on and worked to develop through this process was the idea of a memory book for each child. This included art work, pictures of home and family and was very much owned and developed by the individual child scaffolded by staff but very sensitive to each individual's needs, family and interests. This was used to enable staff to have conversations with children about absence.

Louise found that this transitioned into the home to support similar conversations with the parent/carer and siblings.

- This had power in facilitating a more consistent dialogue for the child across nursery/ home boundaries around the emotions of absence and missing an individual or individuals, as well as the process and experience of departure and arrival.
- It also took some pressure off the family members left behind.

Louise was keen to recognise there are variants that need to be considered such as

- One size does not fit all.
- The doll might not work every time.
- Some children might find it useful during one deployment, but not the next.
- Other children might not find it useful at all.

Louise highlighted that sometimes it was not so much the child needing support, but the parent, and the power of these objects for facilitating dialogue into the home settings was important to acknowledge.

The impact of these transitional objects was easier to see in an older child because they could verbalise their feelings: why has he been delayed – that makes me angry? Whereas younger children needed to be observed in regard their behaviours: A 2 and a half year old refused to speak to Dad on Facetime – said would only speak if he was on the sofa.

Louise was also keen to point out that she felt the COVID pandemic, and the resulting isolation of many families, had exacerbated the need and the relevancy of this kind of work.



Engaging families

Activity packs

Part of the project involved gifting activity packs to the families, featuring idea cards and resources chosen based on Skye's delivery with the children.

In November 2021, families were gifted a pack containing chalk, paper, pens, space blankets, tape and a printed booklet of ideas on how to use these materials. The ideas were designed to engage the family in creative experiences they could do together, whilst also focusing on self-expression, talking about feelings, and bonding.

The resources were chosen so they would be low-cost should families want to replace them. Alongside these resources was a suite of videos that families could access online that showed Skye and the children engaging with some of the materials in the setting, so families could gain more inspiration of ways to play together, and see what their children had been doing in the setting space.

This was especially beneficial, as most of the delivery took place during COVID-19 lockdown measures, meaning families could not go into or access the nursery space in the same way.

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"The packs of materials gave children ownership and let them be the experts in what they'd been up to in the setting. It helped them start a conversation about what they'd been doing in the nursery and encouraged the families at home to try experiences with them."

- From meeting minutes with Scot's Corner Staff, January 2022

"The packs before Christmas were a total God send – it was a really tough Christmas for a lot of families between COVID and deployment, and it meant there were lots of ideas to play with straight away without having to plan or go out to the shops to buy something."

- From meeting minutes with Scot's Corner Staff, January 2022

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Online resources

Throughout the project, Starcatchers created online resources which families, or other early learning professionals, could access to try out ideas at home or in their setting.

These resources are accessible for free through the Starcatchers website and share the learning from the Wee People, Big Feelings project in a way that is easy to understand and can be used by other settings or families experiencing The Emotional Cycle of Deployment. The ideas are designed to require minimal resources or set-up. They also encourage regular opportunities to explore emotions and feelings with children, instead of being used in moments of crisis.

September 2021 - Wee Inspirations videos

In September 2021, seven videos were filmed in the setting that explored using movement to express strong or overwhelming feelings. These were also supported by tie-in downloadable cards.

The videos featured Skye Reynolds demonstrating physical ways to express emotions including:

- using physical play to release energy in a fun and engaging way

- using handstands to redirect the urge to push or shove whilst finding balance
- using low-level play to be on the same level as children, making communicating via eye contact or body language and non-verbal cues easier
- how to take risks and communicate boundaries and consent during facilitated rough and tumble play – including using hand signals and verbalising “I’ve had enough” or “I want to stop”
- making enclosures safe spaces or barriers using boxes, tape and chalk – enabling children to create and communicate when they needed to feel safe or need time by themselves when overwhelmed
- using drawing to create a safe environment for expression and to talk about feelings without being too direct
- using imaginative play as a way to communicate and engage in escapism.

All of these ideas were informed by Skye Reynolds’ learning from the project and included fun and engaging activities that promoted children taking the lead and parental bonding.

December 2021 - The Gingerbread Man

In December, Starcatchers released one longer video on supporting children with creative delivery during Christmas, which was a stressful time for a lot of the families due to COVID-19 and deployment.

This was led by the children, who picked the story The Gingerbread Man to explore, and the staff developed creative ideas including sensory play, drawing gingerbread men puppets, holding “character races” where they ran a race in character, and cooking gingerbread men with different expressions to explore emotional literacy.

There were two versions of the video: one for families which included all the children, so they could enjoy it at home together, and one which contained only children with external photo consent, so it could be shared with other settings.

Alongside the video, Starcatchers also released seven idea cards that focused creative ideas for Christmas without the need for too many resources or set-up.

Starcatchers also released a blog on our Agony Artist collection for early learning professionals about how to ensure creative ideas at Christmas are developmentally appropriate and as stress-free as possible for both children and staff.

The longer-term plan for this video resource is that it can help settings move away from high-stress Christmas ideas, which are not always age-appropriate, and towards a more emotionally informed play-based approach.

"Christmas can be a stressful time of year in lots of ways, and some of the more traditional festive activities, like nativity performances, step-by-step craft activities and rote learning songs, can add to the stress. These kinds of activities aren't always age and stage appropriate and can be difficult to deliver in a child-centred way, so the idea of a build up to Christmas that centres feelings and wellbeing feels like a welcome change."

-From '[How do I celebrate emotional literacy and well-being at Christmas?](#)'

February 2022 - Creative Skills Podcast

In February, Starcatchers released an episode of the *Creative Skills Podcast* which focused on using the expressive arts to support children's wellbeing and emotional literacy skills. The episode shared ideas that practitioners could use in settings to explore emotions with the children they worked with. The podcast was accompanied by a reflective practice worksheet that early years staff could use to reflect on their practice or structure a meeting with staff.

March 2022 - Pathways into Play videos

As the project progressed and staff and artists began to see the positive impact creative movement was making on the children's emotional literacy, it was important to create resources that could enable other early years settings and families to be able to offer similar experiences.

Skye had inspiring conversations with movement practitioner & educator Jasmine Pasch around rough and tumble play, and how best to share the importance of vigorous, 'risky' play (or big, vigorous play/ or movement) with early years practitioners and families. She spent two creative days with dance artist & educator Katy Hewison exploring how improvisation and touch open valuable pathways into non-verbal communication in early years environments.

Then, working collaboratively with the staff and wee ones at Scots Corner, together with filmmaker Ben Winger, dance artist Aya Kobayashi and her daughter Hana, and Esther Huss, Skye created the Pathways Into Play videos. Each video shares a different aspect of creative movement practice, with clear visual examples of the types and quality of movement and engagement:

Making An Offer – making a clear physical offer can really expand your play. Some offers might not be taken – that’s OK, it’s an offer, not an instruction. Be curious! Making and accepting offers can be the best way to play.

Mirroring - a great way to establish connection, mirroring shows you are listening and enables the wee one you’re engaging with to direct the play. Sense how you can match the quality, rhythm or emotion of their movement.

Rhythm – we can use the natural rhythms in our bodies, music and our environment to initiate and sustain play. Rhythm can create a playful structure that’s easy to engage with and can help wee ones feel comfortable.

Space – sometimes a child might want their own space. Keep open and active and playful – leave space free from expectation so your wee one can make choices in their own time and way.

Starting Positions – Moving together doesn’t have to be planned, often it’s about responding to your partner. If you ever feel unsure about where to begin, this video shares some useful positions for initiating movement with wee ones.

Touch and Weight – Being tactile is a great way to connect without words. Experiment with different qualities of touch - by using a listening touch, we can build trust and confidence through play, developing healthy boundaries plus balance and co-ordination.

“It’s beautiful to see the Scots Corner staff, children and families in these videos, they’re exploring so many different ways to move together and the quality of their interactions is great. Wee People, Big Feelings has shown that creative movement sessions come in all shapes and sizes, they’re about children’s self-expression rather than following instructions – these videos are full of real-life examples of how we can use non-verbal communication and move our own bodies to connect with wee ones.”

-Skye Reynolds



Creative family play days

From February to July 2022, Starcatchers also ran Creative Family Play Days in the setting on Friday afternoons, allowing families to stay after the setting closure and engage in artist-facilitated creative sessions. These included making hobby horses with different emotions, using boxes and tunnel building to explore movement, creating paper puppets, and using the outdoor space for campfires and storytelling.

These experiences offered free time, space and activities for families to bond and have fun together. It also allowed the artists to share some of the learning from the project directly with the families, so that they could use the ideas at home. These sessions also offered families a space to connect with other families in the area in similar circumstances.

The Play Kits were developed with the families during these sessions as it was important to have their input and collaborate with everyone to create engaging fun and supportive resources accessible to families.

Creative Play Kit Lending Library

Following the success of the home activity packs and the creative family play days, Starcatchers, the Army Welfare Service and the Scots Corner team worked together to develop a lending library of Creative Play Kits that would remain at Scots Corner for families to access once the project was finished. Each pack contains accessible open-ended materials such as musical instruments, lycra and scarves, along with themed booklets that share creative ideas from the project. The Play Kits can be used within early years settings as play provocations and with families borrowing the kits to play at home.

In July 2022 Scots Corner families tested the Creative Play Kits – it was important that the kits met the needs and interests of the wee ones, and were easy for adults to understand. Mirroring the ethos of *Wee People, Big Feelings*, the open-ended nature of the materials means they can be used in a variety of creative ways. The ideas are designed to be flexible, child-centred and to help develop emotional literacy.

The Play Kits may support wee ones to develop their emotional literacy and help families navigate the Emotional Cycle of Deployment in a variety of ways:

- Wee ones have opportunities and support to express themselves in developing emotional literacy both at home and within their early years setting
- Families have opportunities to bond and understand each other better through play
- Links between early years setting and forces families are strengthened
- Wee ones have opportunities to lead play and take on the role of expert when sharing familiar ideas at home
- Pre deployment, families can explore imagination together and express feelings they are experiencing in a safe, nurturing and creative way
- During deployment, families remaining at home can continue to engage in movement and physical play
- Post-deployment, revisiting creative ideas can be a great way to reconnect
- Through every transition, wee ones will have opportunities to express the way they feel, be listened to and have their feelings valued

The booklets included in the Play Kits and a list of materials are freely available to download on the Starcatchers website, to enable other early years settings to create their own lending library – links can be found in appendix 2.



"These sessions have supported my child's mobility and confidence, there has been a huge difference and it's been noted by others. It helps that we can continue the play at home and it's increased my confidence as a parent in supporting my child."

(Parent, July 2022)

"These sessions are so helpful. My partner has been away, so normally we don't have much to do on a Friday afternoon. Now, we look forward to this all week and he can't wait to tell his dad about what he's been up to."

(Parent, March 2022)

"It's made Robert a lot more open...He used to cry every day going in, like we'd go in and it'd take twenty minutes for him to settle. Now he just came straight in and cuddled Amy [Hall Gibson]. They're so patient with him and stuff so I feel like it really helped him. I feel like it's really helped his confidence more than anything else."

(Parent, July 2022)

"I've worked in early years for 20 years, and I've never seen things like this before."

(Staff Member, February 2022)

"I was a wee bit anxious when I first walked in, not knowing what to expect, but everybody was very friendly, welcoming and Meredith has come on leaps and bounds, like she really has, in the social aspects [...] We had outdoor play with all the music and that was good fun. And again, they brought out all these instruments and stuff, and I'm not musical at all. So it was good to see Mered doing different things that she'd never do before."

(Parent, July 2022)



Conclusion and Learning

1) Wee People, Big Feelings used creative and expressive arts experiences with the children in the setting to help them develop skills in emotional literacy including, but not limited to, identifying and processing emotions, empathy and self-regulation.

The project offered multiple opportunities for the children, families and staff at Scots Corner Early Learning and Childcare Centre to use expressive arts as a way to develop emotional literacy skills. The feedback from these offers has been incredibly positive, with staff and parents noting the change to the children, and staff reflecting on how they feel more equipped to adapt to the needs of the children they work with.

Skye's work demonstrates the positive impact of movement, physical play and non-verbal communication in developing emotional literacy skills. Children were given space to process emotions and burn off energy, as well as opportunities to use imaginative play to "practice" a wide variety of emotions. Being able to demonstrate safe and engaging rough and tumble, and creating a dedicated space for this play, meant children could engage physically when feeling frustrated, anxious or upset – allowing them to regulate their emotions in a safe way with a responsive practitioner. These experiences offered children both verbal and non-verbal ways to express how they felt in the moment, and the skills to identify their needs in the long run.

More broadly, the project has highlighted the benefit of a creative approach. Every element of the project offered children opportunities to express themselves, play, make decisions and connect with each other in a space where it was not possible to get it “wrong”. By allowing wee ones to choose how and when to engage, emotional literacy skills were being developed in ways that were right for each child.

2) The staff at Scot’s Corner Early Learning and Childcare Centre were supported to develop their practice, enabling them to deliver tailored support that offered the children they worked with opportunities to be creative, expressive themselves and develop skills in emotional literacy.

It is clear the impact the artists had on the staff; working with artists inspired their own practitioner enquiry, where staff could take a targeted approach across different art-forms including music, movement and storytelling. This project has offered the Scots Corner team the skills, confidence and inspiration to continue to offer adaptive, child-led creative experiences that help children process their emotions and develop life-long skills in emotional literacy.

3) The learning from these experiences are captured in resources that can support other settings and forces families experiencing the Emotional Cycle of Deployment

This project has highlighted the need for support specifically for early years children living with parents in the armed forces, and processing The Emotional Cycle of Deployment. Prior to this project, there were very few resources that practitioners or families with very young children could access. It is clear this project had a beneficial impact on the children and family it worked with, and a wide variety of resources have been created so other early years settings and forces families can recreate these experiences. Alongside this report, six Wee Inspirations ideas cards, 14 videos, two podcasts and five play kits are freely available on the Starcatchers website, see appendix 3 for more details.

You can find further resources from this project in Appendix 3.

Appendix 1

Wee People, Big Feelings: Starcatchers/Scots Corner Main Findings

Lorna Arnott and Kate Wall (University of Strathclyde, UK) with the staff team at Scots Corner Early Learning and Childcare Centre

Project Report - September 2022

Introduction

Throughout this project practitioners investigated the supporting of very young children's emotional regulation through varied types of play, arts and movement. The overarching context was to understand how these approaches could support young children experiencing episodes of parental deployment as part of their Military family life. Yet as the project expanded, it became clear that the systems being used were beneficial to all children experiencing transitions to varying degrees, not just military families.

In this context, the work resides in an exploration of children's emotion regulation exhibited through observable behaviours and actions, talk or physical expression. It's helpful to view this approach related to emotional self-regulation:

“...ability to adapt (i.e. lability and flexibility) and respond to various situations appropriately, and included the capacity to control one's emotions in order to engage effectively with one's environment.” (Séguin & MacDonald, 2017, p. 2)

Various pedagogical approaches, grounded in artistic expression or play were devised to support children under 3 years old in developing emotional self-regulation which becomes significant because we know that children's social competence and socio-emotional self-regulation development are grounded in early learning experiences and shaped by their interactions with the environment, peers and adults in their lives . We also know that children are supported in this development through scaffolding (Florez, 2011) and through explicit teaching of inhibitory control (Skibbe et al., 2011). As such it seems important to understand the role of the preschool context in shaping children's negotiation and self-regulation approaches as children need to interpret information from the environment and apply this information to regulate thoughts, emotions and behaviours (Florez, 2011).

Well established discussions of emotion regulation for young children remained significant throughout this project. For example, we know how relationships between adults and children significantly impact on children's emotional development.

Zeedyk (2006), for example, describes this delicate relationship as ‘intimate’ and while the discussions in place in this study do not relate to the mother-child intersubjective relationship described in this paper; we see those levels of intimacy and intersubjectivity emerging between adults and children, particularly as children gravitated towards specific adults for support they needed (as is the case with making conscious decisions about which adults to engage with in rough and tumble play).

The representation of this connection linked to a ‘dance’ by Zeedyk could be interpreted in this process as part of to the physical engagement in rough and tumble play where both adults and children understand the narrative of the play and as children move through patterns of interactions which ultimate lead to climax and de-escalation of strong emotional responses can be seen.

In other cases, knowledge of the benefits of transitional objects as emotional support systems were also evident in this project. We know for example that transitional objects can help with the movement between home and school (Woodhouse, 2019) or with children’s experience of moving between homes after a family divorce (Garber, 2019). As part of this project children used deployment dolls (dolls with the deployed parents’ images printed on the front) as well as picture books of key memories and spaces to support children to cope with separation or create an connection to a familiar and comfortable place in their lives.

Returning to the literature on self-regulation in early childhood as well as knowledge of music therapy, sound and music became vital to help some children de-escalate strong emotions, or to foster engagement within a task. In this project, one particular child responded positively to music stimulus, and this helped to achieve what Williams (2018: 92) describes:

“Listening to pleasant and familiar music and active music making stimulates desired neural activation patterns implicated in emotional regulation and may help support optimal levels of arousal (Moore 2013). Importantly, Zachariou and Whitebread (2015) have reported that group music play in preschool appears to motivate children with typically lower levels of emotional regulation to demonstrate and practice emotional regulation skills during structured music time.”

Practitioner enquiry

Over the period of a year (March 2021 – February March 2022) the University team worked with staff at Scots Corner Early Learning and Childcare Centre to develop and implement practitioner enquiry projects into topics that were believed had appropriate fit with the intention of the wider project.

The choice of topic was theirs, but the university team played the role of a critical friend, encouraging, honing and refining the process in line with the individual or team's practice and learner need. The support offered was structured around four increasingly discussion orientated sessions, run either as a group or individually, with the following aims:

- Introduction to practitioner enquiry
- Refining and defining research questions
- Thinking about pedagogically appropriate evidence (Wall, 2019)
- Interpreting and concluding enquiry

The process aligned with that described in Wall et al. (2021).

At the end of the process each individual or team were interviewed with the aim of generating reflections on what had been learned and what next steps might be. As research was undertaken during the COVID-19 pandemic with varied restrictions in place throughout, all input was undertaken via online video conferencing apps.

Through the remainder of this report, we present each enquiry as a case study providing the original intent and key take-aways that arose. We then take conclusions from across the project.

Case studies

Case Study #1: Story reading to facilitate expression of feelings (Lindsey)

Take-aways:

- 1) The importance of normalising talking about emotions
- 2) Everyone has feelings

Lindsey chose her topic after a workshop on storytelling and character expression run by Starcatchers. She was interested in how by going beyond what she would normally do when reading a story (author, illustrator, title, pictures etc.) to focus on how characters looked or felt, might impact on children's emotional literacy. Her research question was:

Does adult interactions whilst reading a story help/support children's understanding of emotion?

She proposed an enquiry whereby she would video storytelling with no interaction (which felt very alien to her), with minimum interaction, and with full interaction using different voices and lots of facial expression. She also made observations of the children after the different storytelling scenarios and as a result was able to explore impact on children's language and behaviour over time. Through this process she was able to notice how the different levels of engagement with the story, never mind emotions, enabled confidence in even young children to talk about feelings.

As talk about expressions developed (what it felt like, what it looked like and what it means) and spread out into different areas of practice (see photo below) children were able to copy facial expressions, including some of the 2 year olds. The older children began to be able to confidently talk about the reasons why a character might feel that way or why they would have that feeling themselves:

"I was scared in my room because the light was out and I thought there was a monster, but it was just my toys."

"I get excited cos I was going on holiday."

Over time, however, it was possible to see the children normalising the language of emotions, use it to think about themselves and as a result, Lindsey observed that it seemed to normalise talking about emotions within the setting and across different kinds of events. For example: a boy hit another child; in conversation with practitioner he said when he's mad 'it feels like I have explosions inside my tummy'. These kinds of interactions with children's meant staff could better understand how angry is different to mad from child's perspective. When a practitioner said you looked angry there, he said no I wasn't angry I was mad. There is a need to understand how practitioners can scaffold these reflections from children.

The children's confidence in voicing their feelings increased, although Lindsey reflects that this could have been them maturing a little as this was mainly in the older four years olds preparing for transition to school. But the evidence of children expressing themselves using the language in role play with each other, "*I am not happy at you*", "*what a clever girl, now I am happy*", combined with appropriate facial expressions, was felt to be a useful step forward across the children.

Lindsey felt this enquiry had made her more aware of the things she could have been missing out – the missed opportunities of reading a story to the children - something done every day in the setting, but never taken as far as might have been possible. She sees the need to develop this capacity across staff and develop a consistent approach across staff when reading stories – build confidence in all staff to read in a way that fully characterises the characters in the story. The comparison with the first round of reading which was not animated demonstrated the need for animation because children didn't engage. Story telling is a not a time-filler, it's a learning moment focused on normalising talk about emotions.

An important finding was the power of practitioners modelling their own emotions to children, showing that we're just normal people too. This built empathy with others. The next steps were to develop and share story reading practices with families to help build connections in the emotional language used across different parts of children's lives with the hope of seeing different individuals in the community as equal, inclusive and just like each other in having feelings that might be more (or less) well expressed.



Case Study #2a and #2b: Rough and Tumble (Jennifer & Chelsea and John)

Take-aways:

- 1) Physical play was an avenue for expression, an 'outlet' for coping and a de-escalation technique**
- 2) Children were emotionally mature enough to recognise others' needs and desires and only engaged with staff who enjoyed rough and tumble**

Two enquiry projects targeted the impact of rough and tumble on children's emotional literacy. The first focused on the perspectives of staff and children was the focus of the second. Rough and tumble was a key input from Starcatchers programme of capacity building through the input of Skye Reynolds, artist in residence, with regular sessions with children and staff in the setting.

Staff team 2a: Staff perceptions of rough and tumble (Janine)

Janine had observed over the years that not all practitioners were confident with rough and tumble play, but having watched some of the practice instigated through the sessions with Skye and how some staff were able to inhabit and enjoy a safe space for rough and tumble with the children, she became interested in how different staff viewed this type of play and what were the affordances and constraints of leading it with the children. Her enquiry took an observer stance whereby she explored and 'noticed' rough and tumble play incidents across different staff and children's groups.

Janine's first observation was that children find the practitioners who are happy with rough and tumble when this is what the need to support their emotional needs. Indeed, they were increasingly confident as instigators of this kind of play and increasingly approached the staff who were happy to be involved. This was not an explicit communication but a general awareness building across the setting around who, when and where was appropriate for rough and tumble.

Her second observation was that rough and tumble was an 'outlet' for many children helping them to cope with external stresses like parents being deployed. She suggested that if more staff became confident in this type of play, then it would enable more children's needs to be met as staff would be better able to read the signs from children and enact the kind of activity that was needed. Janine noted that children who might need some rough and tumble play present differently in any

moment and so it was a matter of knowing what was right for each child, they could be feeling sensitive, needing adult attention, or not coping as they normally would. There was a need to read the situation. As rough and tumble play has become embedded in the setting then these moments of boisterous, silly, bursts of energy have provided an outlet that meant the children could self-regulate better and return to normal quicker.

In regards next steps, Janine was keen to note that every deployment is different to family members and the children. In addition, different stages of the deployment cycle can vary in how they are experienced – there is no recipe to follow and repeat tours might impact on an individual differently. There is a need for staff to be more tuned into that. However, as children become better at instigating when they need in regard rough and tumble, they can take more ownership of the necessary self-regulation process. This will be facilitated by practitioners becoming better at interpreting emotional cues, offering understanding and opportunities to self-regulate in different ways. Rough and tumble is an important offering for this age group in supporting this process.



Watch this clip

Staff team 2b: Children’s emotional understanding of rough and tumble (Carol Ann and John)

Chelsea chose to start the research on how tactile rough & tumble play supported a child who was often very angry and aggressive when things didn’t go his way. He would get to a point of furious anger/frustration, his emotion then quickly subsided to crying inconsolably and lashing out. Various self-regulation techniques were used by adults to support the child: nurturing (“do you want a cuddle”), this would work somewhat but it took time for him to calm down; or leaving the child alone for a while, but this sometimes escalated his emotions and he lashed out destroying the

environment. I tried tickling and chasing techniques, and this supported him to self-regulate and return to his play very quickly. The child mostly participated in action hero role play when at the centre. The child's dad is a soldier and worked away Monday-Friday and had several spells of going on exercise and deployment.

John then chose to get involved with this research due to often being involved in the 'rough and tumble' type play that Carole was examining. This may perhaps be due to some of the children at the centre having fathers that are/were away on deployment for a long period of time and/or being the only male member of staff within the nursery environment. For example, it was noted: a child whose dad was regularly physical in his interactions went on deployment and as a result the boy came to nursery expecting a squeeze. At this stage the enquiry opened up to be about rough and tumble tactile play across the setting leading to the question:

·How does rough & tumble play support children to self-regulate and develop emotional language & response?

This type of play was observed to allow for children to express their emotions in different ways. We saw different emotions – joy, anger and fear. Some were playfully but other were serious. Some children wanted to hurt.

After periods of intense, physical play, some of the children were more capable of expressing how they felt. It also allowed them to risk assess and negotiate boundaries in different ways. The importance of getting down on the children's level and getting involved with all aspects of play was noted. It felt like not all children would be exposed to or allowed to participate in this type of play at home or in other areas of the centre. But it seemed that 'rough and tumble' was a very beneficial and overlooked area of play, which could open up conversations on numerous different topics.

Play normally escalated from action hero role play to rough and tumble. Observations suggested that when the group of children initiated physical play they become fully immersed in the moment. John, Skye and Chelsea supported this play by offering spaces indoors & out for the group of children to explore rough & tumble play. This play started off with only a few children wanting to revisit and join in. Adults supported children to play safely using consistent language such as "*stop we are playing not hurting each other*", "*stop*", or "*Child X doesn't like that*" they identified children's emotions in the moment and encouraged children to think about how their actions affected others. Adults encouraged children to talk about how they were feeling and they named the emotion the child is showing (complementing the work of Lindsey).

We were able to see several types of emotional response in the children's rough and tumble play to each and they appear fine to be pushed over and grabbed. If any of these actions happen out with the boundaries of this play, children become unable to regulate and request help from an adult. Adults were able to take a step back and intervene only when play become unsafe or if a child becomes distressed. Adults are often invited into rough and tumble play, the children that take part in this type of play know which adults are open to it and will accept if an adult is unable to get involved due to something like an injury.

The next steps of this project will be to see if the children can support themselves and each other when they do become hurt or upset. This will be the beginning of supporting the children to develop empathy for each other when involved in rough and tumble physical play and to own its potential as a de-escalation technique. The trust element of this was impactful and so how can children build trust in each other (and staff) that rough and tumble play is a safe thing to engage in. Staff can see that a shared language of emotions will be really important in enabling this to happen.

There is also a need to rethink the structure of the play sessions. Structured sessions were helpful, but too much structure and discrete sessions in the hall could be inhibiting. A more organic approach could facilitate staff and children to have more agency around this type of play. There is now the confidence to explore rough and tumble in more naturalistic ways that fit into normal setting routines and activity. Similarly, the initial sessions have developed the language and knowledge for staff to then model with children, and now ownership of this process needs to be incorporated into normal practice drawing attention to emotions and modelling how expressions helps you understand the feelings and how others feel.



Case #3: Transitional objects (Louise)

Take-away:

1) Transitional objects provided comfort but also facilitate conversations with children about emotions and the home/nursery connection

Louise's husband is in the Army and she has a 6 year old daughter who has experienced the deployment cycle first hand. The focus of this enquiry and the decisions made within it were therefore influenced by that experience. In particular, the parental experience was significant when thinking about how to help the children in their own deployment cycle experience:

'I've just done what I do' – draw on the experiences I would do with my own children, talk to them the same way I would speak to my own daughter.

Louise's study focused on the potential of transitional objects to ease transitions and feelings of absence. She developed a deployment doll or teddy with the missing parent's face on, to personalise, which helped many children cope with the deployment cycle, something she had done for her own daughter when Dad was absent. The doll/teddy was portable and could be taken home and to different areas in a setting enabling conversations to be instigated by the child when and where appropriate. It recognised how an object that resembled a member of their family could help a child make the connection with what they were missing.

It was interesting that some dads didn't want the children to have a doll, with concerns about the extent an object like this could represent them. However it was helpful to a lot of the children and anecdotally it was also found to be helpful to a mother and those left behind at home.

The impact of these transitional objects was easier to see in an older child because they could verbalise their feelings: why has he been delayed – that makes me angry? Whereas younger children needed to be observed in regard their behaviours: A 2 and a half year old refused to speak to Dad on Facetime – said would only speak if he was on the sofa.

Another transitional object that Louise focused on and worked to develop was the idea of a memory book for each child. This included art work, pictures of home and family and was very much owned and developed by the individual child scaffolded by staff but very sensitive to each individual's needs, family and interests.

This was used to enable staff to have conversations with children about absence: some children wanted to go through their books everyday.

It also transitioned into the home to support similar conversations with the parent/carer and siblings. This had power in facilitating a more consistent dialogue for the child across nursery/ home boundaries around the emotions of absence and missing an individual or individuals, as well as the process and experience of departure and arrival. It also took a bit of the load off the family members left behind. In regards taking this forward, Louise was keen to recognise that one size does not fit all. The doll might not work every time. Some children might find it useful during one deployment, but not the next. Other children might not find it useful at all. However, building a repertoire of techniques and objects as starting points was important as the conversations were essential. She was also keen to point out that sometimes it was not so much the child needing support, but the parent, and the power of these objects for facilitating dialogue into the home settings was important to acknowledge. Louise was also keen to point out that she felt the COVID-pandemic, and the resulting isolation of many families, had exacerbated the need and the relevancy of this kind of work.



Two 'Deployment Dolls'

Case #4 - Music as an emotional regulation tool (Jess)

1) Take-away: Familiar and regular sounds and music supported structured regulation, was calming and supported engagement

Jess undertook a case study of one child for her enquiry. C was struggling generally with settling into nursery, drop off and other transitions through the nursery day were particularly challenging, leading to frequent long periods of distressed behaviour. Jess had noticed however that when stimulated by different sounds (for example waves crashing) or music, especially those with a high pitch, were used the process of emotional regulation was better facilitated. The *Peppa Pig* theme music was particularly effective, but other types of music had potential. So, Jess was interested in whether the setting could develop and adapt activities to support this capacity in the child. Her question therefore was:

Does music have an impact on C emotional self regulation supporting her to be more engaged in nursery?

With the parents involved funding was found to carry out a 12 week block of sessions with a music therapist (the child was involved alongside a group of children, something she would often struggle with). This enquiry focused on using video and practitioner observations to explore any impact:

As soon as we entered the hall C attention was drawn to the instrument being played. She sat very quietly watching and listening, emotionally appearing calm and relaxed. As a result of her being calm she was able to join in with the other children moving around the hall without getting upset. A different musical instrument was played and again C appeared interested in it, watching quietly but this time feel asleep whilst it was being played.

Extending the use of the musical stimulus to beyond these sessions with a music therapist, it was found that a 10 minute compilation of *Peppa Pig* audio and visual content was useful in scaffolding C's transitions within the nursery. In addition, when the music teacher played the *Peppa Pig* theme on his instruments C could be seen in the videos engaging with interest and responding to different types of prompt, for example putting her hands on the instrument or reacting verbally or with her own instrument.

Staff are trying to scaffold the move away from visual and audio and to other musical stimuli beyond Peppa Pig, but this has been a bit stop and start. For example, the *Peppa Pig* theme has scaffolded more trips into the outdoor learning area, something that was very difficult previously, but there has been a need to revert back to the visual to help with her eating because that's how she eats everywhere and wouldn't eat in nursery without it. But the successes were still useful to document:

Timing of session was just before lunch time, session impacted positively as the child began to join others at the table for lunch and trying some foods.

At the end of the enquiry, Jess observed that C was much calmer, stayed longer in the setting and was generally more engaged with the environment and people within it.

There was still limited communication, but her stress levels were reduced. At the start of the project, she didn't want close interaction with others, but now she indicates she wants that. It is obvious that the musical bridges that have been used have helped her feel more secure and this has been the result of persistence and consistency.



Case #5: Physical Play with Objects and Movement (Harriet)

1) Take away: Physical objects rather than movement become the outlet to channel expression

Harriet was interested in exploring the benefits of physical play with objects such as hoola hoops and bean bags. Physical education sessions were undertaken with a large group of children, but after the first session her enquiry focus on one child, J, who she'd observed engaging very differently in these session when compared to other times of the day:

"J showed high well-being and engagement which was not always seen in the playroom setting throughout the day."

In her enquiry Harriet took detailed practitioner notes of each session and used Leuven scale observations to compare emotional well-being and involvement in the playroom and during the activity sessions with physical objects.

In particular, she had noticed that J, who was non-verbal, would display physical emotion (upset and distressed) in the playroom, with an attachment to the window, but this was largely absent during that first play session. She wanted to explore this more over time.

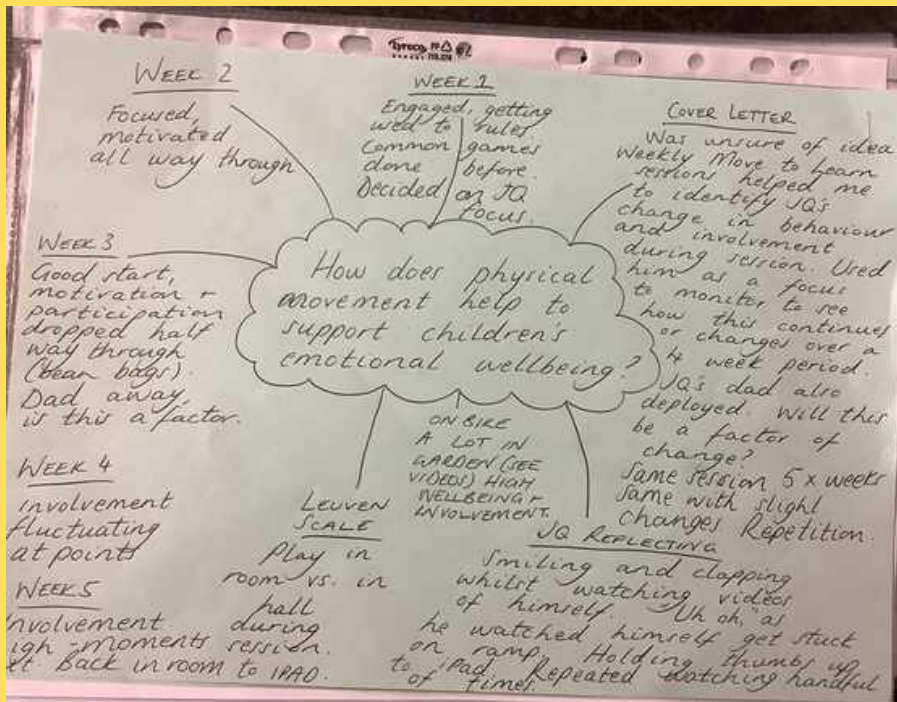
"From this first session I have chosen to focus on J, as an individual child, during the next 5 weeks to explore if physical movement can help to support his emotional well-being. I feel focusing on J and seeing if these sessions help to build his overall well-being will be beneficial for him."

The six sessions implemented were characterised by physical movement with resources and equipment – a session plan can be seen below. The equipment fostered engagement rather than just physical movement and this structured environment and process gave J the chance to notice other children and become mindful of their needs.

The resources and their usage became an expected and predictable routine through which emotions could be channelled appropriately. In addition, the games supported modelling of behaviours such as turn taking and following instructions. This contrasted with how resources were used by J in the playroom, where for

example he was observed walking around with playdough, but not with the intent to model or create. He was not using them for intended purpose. In the physical play sessions, the equipment was much more likely to be used appropriately and in line with other children and the instructions given:

"J's participating throughout the session was not consistent but he was still able to benefit from the session, following the instructions and exploring physical movement throughout."



Harriet's 6-week session plan

As each session was predominantly the same over the 6 weeks, then it became a routine and experience that was expected. Over time, J showed he could mimic other children and staff within this safe and predictable environment. It was also noticed that J was happier and more motivated when engaged with physical play and its associated challenge and this was even more so when his Dad returned from deployment:

"...we revisited the session, and J took part. At this point his Dad was home, no longer deployed. J had great participation throughout, showing confidence and understanding throughout. He was able to carry out the games and activities successfully, following instructions and waiting his turn. A member of staff who had not seen J in the hall commented on how well he was focused. She mentioned that his play was very different when being physical, in the hall, to in the playroom."

Harriet suggested that the physical play was a key avenue J to express himself as he didn't engage in role play etc. The sessions facilitated J to start indicating his needs with physical play (starts to try to build a ramp etc.):

"The physical sessions in the hall allowed J to work on his problem solving, communication, listening and concentration skills. During continuous observations over a 5 week period I have noticed that J's well-being and physical well-being is better when in the hall, partaking in physical activity."

The Leuven Scale observations backed these observations up with wellbeing observations moving from moderate to high, and involvement moving from low to high. These were significant improvements for J and Harriet has learned a lot about the power of these detailed observations to unlock the challenges of the child struggling with normal playroom activities.

The next steps for Harriet and J are to explore how they can take the learning from the hall and the physical play back into the playroom. There is already some evidence that the learning is being transferred into the physical environment of the nursery garden. The duration of the input has meant practitioners involved have become better able to read the scenario and understand the children's perspective and their learning progression over time. This needs to be shared more widely to open further opportunities to other children in the setting as well as to ensure more opportunities to use resources in such a way to structure different types spaces and play to facilitate expression.

Scots Corner Move to Learn

Session: THURSDAY PM Date: W/B 21/10/21 - 18/11/21

Staff Members: LAURIE + OTHER MEMBER OF STAFF

Session Plan:

- STOP, GO GAME - WARM UP
- THROWING BALLS / BEANBAGS THROUGH THE HOOP
- HOOLA HOOP RACES
- COOL DOWN + REFLECTION.

Proposed Learning

- TURN TAKING
- FOLLOWING INSTRUCTIONS
- HAND EYE COORDINATION
- SIMPLE BALL SKILLS.

Evaluation:

Detailed
session
plan

Case #6: The role of props in facilitating engagement with movement (Skye: artist in residence)

1) Take-away: Props have different power when used in different ways

Skye was the artist in residence at Scots Corner throughout the duration of the project. Her input was impacted by COVID restrictions as well as staff changes during this time, but she was keen to show how her learning had developed in this setting and how it compared to previous residencies. The question she chose to explore was:

How do props influence children and staff engagement in artist in residency led movement sessions?

Through the evidence collected in detailed diary blogs after each session she was able to reflect on how different types of props (including, lycra bands, cardboard boxes, mats, tape and space blankets) facilitated the experience of movement and physical play over time. The evidence showed several ways props were helpful within the context of movement practice. These are presented with illustrative quotes from Skye's blog:

- **Facilitatory of different types of play and meaning making**

"The children show increasing familiarity & enthusiasm with the landscape of these sessions with full bodied engagement, ever improving focus, confidence and trust amongst the group and with the adults present.. All agree this is a positive sign of child led play and active learning which enables the children to respond to their needs and interests in the moment with the understanding that they need to signal for practitioner support/supervision."

- **Encouraging involvement, especially where a child or staff member felt unsure (acting as mediator into something new)**

"One boy Z in particular was delighted and he tried out all the activities [with the lycra band] and with great co-ordination - including upside down commando crawl as John and I were holding the lycra in the air. (this is the same boy who is often reluctant to take part in some of the more individual expressive movement activities that don't involve a prop, but bring in a prop like this and he becomes fully engaged - also the case when he does close contact rough n tumble/ weight sharing which he often initiates and verbally requests."

- **Connect different kinds of activity and curriculum in the nursery**

“The children had been reading a story about baby owls leaving the nest and so in this session we made a nest with furniture and tape which could be crawled through and interacted with. This led naturally to a movement session based on being birds.”

- **Connecting home and nursery**

“We wrote ‘The mummy Song’ on a big piece of paper which grew out of H saying she missed her Mummy. All 3 were singing their own songs about Mummy and I wrote it down, then they drew pictures of mummies and daddies on a very long roll of paper. N said she didn’t like her daddy – “or sometimes I do” then in the afternoon she drew a very long road and put daddy’s car on the road and made sure nothing was in it’s way. She also shaped the long paper into a hill and a tunnel – v creative and she was v pleased with herself). This evolved into a movement session with cardboard boxes.”

- **Encourage a range of communication (child-child as well as child-adult)**

“They were wrapping each other up, sliding each other around and we observed care-taking, empathy, self-regulation and there was a very lovely feeling of well-being and balance in the room at the end.”

“They love to connect physically with John and he usually comes down to the ground to be at their level. They clamber, roll about, give their weight. They are comfortable with him and John is careful and gentle with them, whilst offering some grounded weight, strength as a physical architecture for them to negotiate.”

- **Help hold attention**

“It was satisfying and encouraging to have S participate as she loves dance, and to see how she was able to self-regulate and maintain her role within the group until the very end...”

“S usually struggles with longer sessions in the hall. However she was absolutely engaged & thriving throughout this session and this seemed to support some thoughts I’d had about her preferring to be more autonomous about her participation and able to explore different types of play when she wants to, in her own timing. The way this session was set up with loose parts enabled this type of engagement, whilst still being a facilitated journey.”

- **Act as a signifier or marker for types of play to be initiated.**

“We find the children naturally want to play/ roll/ tumble on the soft matts so putting them out is a natural invitation and ‘cue’ which has now been established for such physical play in the setting”

“There are often one or 2 moments when the energy in the room rises and practitioner focus becomes more attuned to managing the space and flow of activity for safe play and we are building confidence here. As we observe more autonomy developing we could see if this session becomes more of a loose parts set up with children choosing more autonomously how they want to play with adults shifting even more towards non-verbal and facilitation role. This is also showing/ developing the levels of trust in the room.”

Different tools had different affordances and constraints in regard their use and how they were experienced by individuals, however in developing a reflective and iterative approach to the sessions, experience and successes were built on and developed over time. It was important for the children to have ownership of the play, the space, and the prop, but also that the staff felt able to innovate and challenge within the creative spaces that the props helped create. Fundamentally these props became bridging objects for staff and children, as well as parents, that supported an engagement that stretched comfort zones and facilitated greater agency.



Conclusion

Across these practitioner enquiries there are some important messages to take home.

Firstly, the value and power of staff taking a reflective and strategic stance to the issues experienced by the children in their care. Each of these case studies reflects a relatively small view on nursery practice, but the insight provided into the learning trajectories of staff and children is highly motivational and insightful. The steps to facilitating children's learning and development might seem small, but when outlined together provide a nuanced and useful picture of a setting's attempts to ensure children's needs are met effectively. The building of staff confidence and capacity for understanding that comes with the exemplification and sharing of these stories is important to note and brings learning that are of benefit to the whole nursery community.

Secondly, within the context of transitions, and in particular The Emotional Cycle of Deployment, and how they are experienced by children, families and the staff supporting them, important narratives have been established around the language of emotions (how they are expressed, heard and facilitated), the relevance of a range of tools in supporting and scaffolding emotional regulation for children, individually or as a group, and the different types of play that can act as an outlet, a self-regulatory mechanism or a form of communication for young children. Each individual project sheds light on part of the puzzle and the key take aways from each are important, but when seen as a whole we can see the importance of a shared language of emotions, normalised through conversations and play, how staff act as emotional and play role models, and how different kinds of play and tools to support that play were useful in facilitating the process of finding the right outlet for each individual (children and staff). What ever technique was tried that an approach to detailed noticing from the staff communicated with colleagues and with the children's families, helped to develop a context where children could increasingly take the lead in self-regulating their emotions.

Physical play prompted by the work of a movement specialist, Skye Reynolds, was a particularly productive area of development for staff and children. A physical outlet to emotions and a creative approach to thinking about the spaces, places and times appropriate to this type of play was impactful for many children with different

transitional challenges. In the next steps sections of the enquiries above it is possible to see how these techniques are transitioning with the children between different parts of the environment and times of the day. In regards deployment particularly, it should be seen as a family experience and so techniques that transitions with the child between home and the childcare setting were particularly powerful, not just for the child, but also for family members left behind. The role of personalised objects and stimuli in facilitating emotions-based dialogue and self-regulatory behaviours was central to the understandings that were highlighted.

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Appendix 2

Creative Play Kit Links

Imaginative Play Kit https://starcatchers.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2023/01/FINAL-WPBF-Creative-Play-Kits-2223-216-%C3%97-303mm_kit2.pdf

Movement

https://starcatchers.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2023/01/FINAL-WPBF-Creative-Play-Kits-2223-216-%C3%97-303mm_kit4.pdf

Music and The Outdoors

<https://starcatchers.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2023/01/FINAL-WPBF-Creative-Play-Kits-2223.pdf>

Messy Play

https://starcatchers.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2023/01/FINAL-WPBF-Creative-Play-Kits-2223-216-%C3%97-303mm_kit3.pdf

Schematic Play

https://starcatchers.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2023/01/FINAL-WPBF-Creative-Play-Kits-2223-216-%C3%97-303mm_kit5.pdf

Appendix 3

Links to resources created as part of the *Wee People, Big Feelings* project

Wee Inspirations: <https://starcatchers.org.uk/work/wee-people-big-feelings/>

Videos:

- Wee Inspirations videos:

Tummy Tumbles: <https://vimeo.com/650305597>

Kids in Blankets: <https://vimeo.com/639522519>

On Their Level: <https://vimeo.com/650303766>

Happy Stands: <https://vimeo.com/650298403>

Tape Shapes: <https://vimeo.com/639523828>

Box Burrows: <https://vimeo.com/639516987>

Big Drawing, Big Chats: <https://vimeo.com/639515428>

- Pathways into Play videos:

Making an Offer: <https://vimeo.com/805477379>

Mirroring: <https://vimeo.com/805478335>

Rhythm: <https://vimeo.com/805479188>

Space: <https://vimeo.com/805480672>

Starting Positions: <https://vimeo.com/805481614>

Touch and Weight: <https://vimeo.com/805483330>

Christmas 2020: The Gingerbread Man: <https://starcatchers.org.uk/wee-people-big-feelings-presents-the-gingerbread-man/>

Podcasts:

Series 1, Episode 7: Developmental Patterns and Creative Movement with Skye Reynolds: <https://starcatchers.org.uk/work/creative-skills-online-podcast/the-creative-skills-podcast-series-1/episode7/>

Series 3, Episode 1: Exploring the relationship between creativity and emotional literacy in young children: <https://starcatchers.org.uk/work/creative-skills-online-podcast/the-creative-skills-podcast-series-3/>

Recipe cards: <https://starcatchers.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2023/02/Recipe-cards-297-x-210mm.pdf>

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