

Starcatchers' Play and Explore

Report 2022-2023



**STARCATCHERS**

Fife
Gingerbread



Contents

2

Introduction

4

Background

5

Play and Explore

11

What difference does
Play and Explore make

14

Conclusion



01 Introduction

About Starcatchers

Starcatchers is Scotland's Arts and Early Years organisation. For more than 16 years we have pioneered the development of high-quality performances and creative experiences for children from birth to 5 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 to engage with and participate in arts and cultural experiences from birth and, through this, amplify young children's agency and voice.

About Starcatchers Play and Explore

Supported by Creative Scotland's Cultural Recovery Fund, Starcatchers Play and Explore was an artist-led (or artist-facilitated) creative play-based group for young families with babies under two which took place weekly in two locations across Fife, Cowdenbeath and Dunfermline, between April 2022 and March 2023. 66 sessions took place over this time involving 24 families.

About Fife Gingerbread

Fife Gingerbread is a well-established voluntary sector organisation that provides information, advice and support to lone parents and families in need all over Fife and has been Starcatchers' primary delivery partner throughout the organisation's time in the area. Starcatchers' creative programmes support the family work of Fife Gingerbread, allowing participants a more holistic support experience, encompassing not only social and psychological support, but emotional support and an outlet for relaxation, family bonding and self-expression. Over the last four years Fife Gingerbread and Starcatchers have established a strong professional relationship which has underpinned the community focus of Starcatchers' activity.

Starcatchers Play and Explore programme outcomes:

Outcome 1:

Parents and carers with perinatal mental health issues feel less isolated and better able to seek support from family, friends and their community

Outcome 2:

Parents and carers feel better able to meet the needs of their infants and children (physical, social, emotional and cognitive)

Outcome 3:

Parents and carers are better able to maintain a warm and secure relationship with their infant

Financial Summary:



Project staff: £14,800



Guest Artists: £9,100

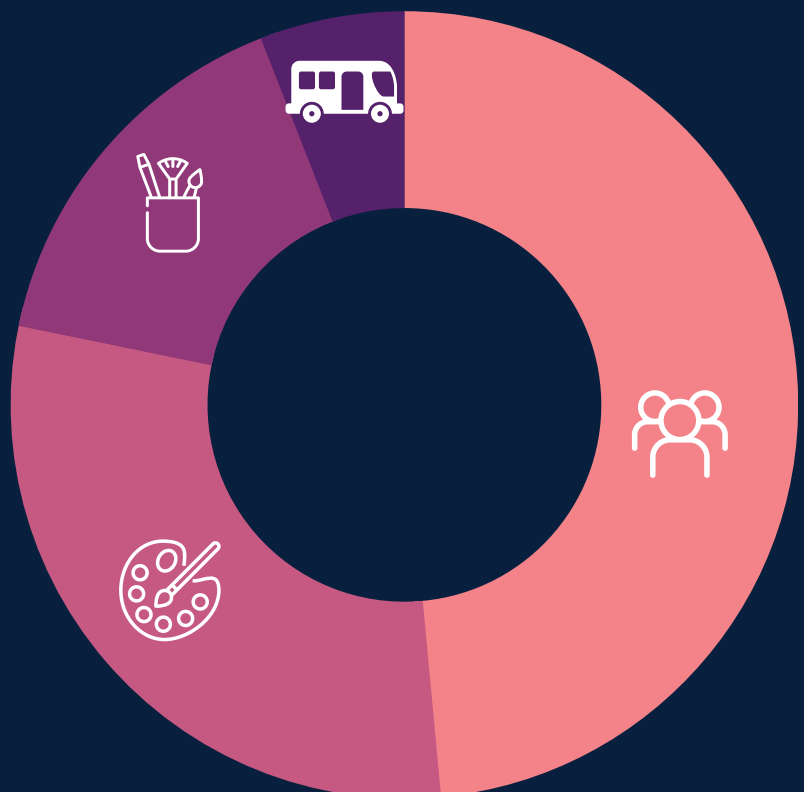


Materials: £4,900



Travel: £1,700

It cost **£30,500** to run the programme



02 Background

Starcatchers in Fife

Play and Explore is the latest programme of work in Starcatchers' consistent delivery in the Fife area, following directly on from projects Where We Are (2021-22) and Expecting Something Lochgelly (2017-20). The consistency of Starcatchers' activity has ensured that strong interpersonal and organisational relationships are at the core of our work in Fife, exhibiting genuine commitment to and investment in the participants of Play and Explore.

Starcatchers' activity in Fife began in 2017, with the company bringing successful, long-running programme Expecting Something to the area in and around Lochgelly, providing artist-led creative play activities for young parents under 25, with babies under 2 years old. Read the report on Expecting Something Lochgelly [here](#).

Where We Are was a new creative initiative established in Spring 2021 by Starcatchers, Imagine and Lyra, encompassing a travelling ensemble, creative play, and participatory performance making, all co-designed with children and young people across Edinburgh, Glasgow, and Fife. Starcatchers' strand of Where We Are furthered the positive impact of Expecting Something whilst responding to the very particular issues of social/geographical isolation and poor mental health that were prevalent during periods of Coronavirus lockdown.

Starcatchers Play and Explore therefore had a solid foundation of trust and excellence to build on when it began in the Spring of 2022.





03 Play and Explore

What we delivered

66

sessions delivered over 33 weeks

3

Artists

23

babies
(10 Cowdenbeath,
13 Dunfermline)

24

families
(11 Cowdenbeath,
13 Dunfermline)

Artistic team

Lead Artist | Roz McAndrew

Roz is an actor and facilitator based in Edinburgh. She is passionate about working with children and families who might not traditionally engage in the arts, as well as creating accessible work for early years audiences and children with additional complex needs.

Working with Starcatchers since June 2021, Roz was an assistant artist on *Where We Are*, and as such had already developed a familiarity with Fife and the needs of young families in the area before stepping up as Lead Artist on *Play and Explore*. Roz has cultivated strong positive relationships with the *Play and Explore* participants, and in Autumn 2022, won Fife Gingerbread's award for 'Trust', nominated by participants.



In nominating Roz, a participant said Roz *“has gone above and beyond, and she’s emotionally involved in the situation. She makes me feel like her help and advice comes from a place of love and honesty. She’s wiped my tears and my son’s snot and she’s hyped me up on my small victories that usually go unseen. I look forward to each play session knowing she will be there, ready, in any form I need her whether that be a laugh or an offload. She reminds me of sunflowers, honey and all things yellow truly a great person. We love her.”*



Assistant Artist | Laura Dryburgh

Roz has been assisted by artist Laura Dryburgh throughout the duration of the project. Laura is a Fife-based artist who loves supporting children and families through group work and play as well as engaging little ones in the arts. Laura runs her own business ‘The Bairns Group’, alongside facilitating other groups for parents and babies in the area and visiting care homes with babies to focus on inter-generational practice. Laura is a valuable local connection for the Play and Explore group.

Assistant Artist | Madeleine Wood

Roz and Laura have also been assisted by artist Madeleine Wood. Madeleine is a visual artist who studied painting at Edinburgh College of Art. Her practice is rooted in drawing, seeing it as another form of thinking and a great way to play, explore and process emotions. She strongly believes that artistic play encourages openness, inclusivity, and sparks connections as well as to positively engage and enrich lives, especially for little ones and their parents.



This core team has been supported by various visiting artists, who have brought different experiences and activities to the Fife group. Introducing different artists and art-forms – especially including local artists – has allowed participants to experiment with their own creativity, try new things, grow in confidence, and has helped to remove barriers to further creative experience



What our sessions look like

Play-focused and pressure-free

Play and Explore sessions are hour-long creative play sessions, facilitated by artists. Play is free-flow and unstructured, featuring a number of different materials and activities that babies can use as they like – although artists might give suggestions and encourage exploration. Families can drop in and out as they please. The emphasis is on exploration and creativity, and much of the materials used are easily found at home. Using non-specialist materials encourages families to view creativity as something they can easily take part in. There is a high baby to adult ratio, ensuring play is safe and supervised. Adults feel at ease either joining their babies playing, or allowing the artists to supervise while they enjoy rest and social time over a snack (supplied). Play and Explore provides a pressure-free environment. There is no right or wrong way to play.

Responsive to needs of babies and carers

Sessions are children's rights-based and baby-led, with artists responding to the interests and needs of the wee ones and their families as impetus for session content. An example of this was the 'Splat' session, which facilitated one little girl's passion for paint. Baby-led sessions ensure that session content is enjoyable and appropriate for babies taking part, but also embed from the youngest age that children have opinions and preferences and the right to express these and have them considered. This rights-based approach is central to all Starcatchers' work and enshrines Article 12 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child. Rights-based sessions challenge the idea of children's rights being a threat towards adults' autonomy, and models compassion and cooperation between adults and babies.

Alongside themes based around different activities, colours etc, sessions also reference important days in the yearly calendar: Hallowe'en, Lunar new year, Mother's Day, circumventing any barriers to understanding and encouraging group participation.



These sessions are often the most popular, encouraging family bonding over a shared celebration and allowing an easy hook for participants to invite further friends/families to join the group.



Sessions also take account of carer's needs, making sure all feel welcome and included. An example of this is adjustments made for a participant with a physical disability at the Cowdenbeath group. To make sessions more enjoyable and accessible for her, and to enable unobstructed playtime with her baby, the team adjusted the play space by providing additional seats and benches, and elevated particular activities so they were easily reachable -- always done in consultation with the participant so that she didn't feel singled out. This has also helped the artists develop their practice in terms of creating play sessions that were comfortable and accessible for all.



Play and Explore sessions have also been responsive to the needs of participant families as regards location. Recognising the health benefits of outdoor play and addressing issues with busy indoor spaces post-pandemic, Play and Explore Dunfermline offered outdoor sessions at Pittencrieff Park. These sessions were hugely successful, popular with adults and babies, whose early lives had been indoor-based as a result of the pandemic.

"It was great fun I loved it, and everyone's so welcoming, you're all such a good group. You're so chilled out."

Participant

Out and about in Fife

In addition to regular group sessions, Play and Explore has facilitated local outings and visits around the Fife area and further afield. These visits have helped remove barriers to access for participants, facilitating confidence and a sense of ownership over places in their local community. Particularly following lockdown restrictions, many participants felt unable or unsure about returning to public spaces—Play and Explore has allowed them to do this in a safe and comfortable way. Visiting has also helped reduce participant anxieties around using public transport, particularly with children, increasing their geographic mobility and promoting sustainable methods of transportation.



*'Aww thank you
I've never had this before, I'm
so grateful for
everything you do for
me and F.'*

Participant, after trip to
Santa's Grotto at Dobbie's
Garden Centre

Who we engaged with

The families attending Play and Explore consist of both families who have engaged with previous Starcatchers activity in the area - some of whom now have new babies - and new families. New families have joined the group approx. every five weeks, in Cowdenbeath, and every 4 weeks in Dunfermline sessions. Across both groups, the average age of parents is 22, with most families bringing one child under the age of two.

Cowdenbeath

The Cowdenbeath venue (Cairns Hall) is a small, multi-purpose hall, well-placed for public transport and many participants can walk to the group from their homes. This group is play-based, very focused around the need to give babies and carers a space to enjoy creative time together. This group is more socially-connected, so there is less emphasis here on creating bonds that persist outside the group; but the atmosphere for babies and carers is relaxed, friendly and full of fun, with lots of interactions between adults and between carers and their babies.

Dunfermline

The Dunfermline group is correspondingly larger, being situated in a larger town. This group is very engaged in recommending the group to their peers, with most of the members of the group having a connection to the group via another member before joining. Being situated in Pittencrief Park, which is very central and well-served by public transport, also helps group attendance. During Summer and Autumn '22, the group benefitted from being outside in a public space, offering a 'shop window' of sorts for the group, where interested families could observe, drop in and ask questions before committing to





04 What difference does Play and Explore make?

In our evaluation, carers reported Play and Explore having a hugely positive impact on their lives in a number of ways.

How our participants feel

Play and Explore participants report a huge number of positive benefits in attending the group, both for themselves and their babies. Most commonly, participants report a gain to their own confidence, bolstered by the per-to-peer support from the other families attending the group and the trusting, relationships fostered by the artist team. Many have developed socially, developing friendships in the group that are now essential support networks beyond sessions, giving young carers a vital link to peers with similar lived experience. Carers also report the relationships with their wee ones have improved, and they enjoy the space and time to relax and be creative in the free-flowing, non-judgemental setting of Play and Explore.

Tackling isolation

The regular sessions and supportive, low-fuss ethos of Play and Explore sessions provide a safe and welcoming space for families. This is especially beneficial to the young parents who may have felt isolated or unsupported in their community.

Case study 1

J and her child have been attending group for 6 months. J's partner also attends group each week and each week they come as a unit. When they first started coming, there was slight hesitation as it was a different set up to groups they've attended in the past. From the start we encouraged mum and dad to let their wee one (and themselves) be free in the space, climb over cardboard boxes, explore different wet and dry textures with hands, feet and mouths. Over the past 6 months I've observed the growth in confidence, not only for T, but also for mum and dad and how they really engage in shared play together.

Mum said: **"We love coming here, T loves it, we love it!"**

Creativity at home

Play and Explore activities are designed to be low fuss, using materials that are easily found at home. This is a great way to encourage families to take what they've seen or enjoyed at group home to continue playing with their wee ones, making sure that the creative fun that happens at Play and Explore can be replicated at home, continuing the group's impact into daily life.

Case Study 2

R and E have been coming to sessions since E was 4 weeks old. Both have been an integral part of group and has helped shape how sessions are delivered and provide the right experience for families who attend. Both R & E's confidence has grown each week and it's been fascinating to watch E's engagement in particular play schemas change and develop over the course of the year. R has also been taking inspiration from group home with her and asking about some materials we use that she can source at home for extended play with E. R encouraged her sister to come along to group with her two wee ones and both families have consistently attended every week and gain a lot from the sessions, particularly between them and other mums and finding support in their peers.

Quote from R: **"From then until now, 7 months difference! It's crazy!! Her confidence just grows and grows from the group! So glad we've been going since the very start we love it every week"**

Community connections

A successful strand of Play and Explore's activity has been the outings around the local community. These have included trips to Carnie Fruit Farm and Dobbies Garden Centre's Santa's Grotto for Christmas. These outings have a dual benefit. Firstly, they are a safe and supportive way to help participants get more familiar with and feel more ownership over the venues, resources and locations of their local community. Secondly, trips are open to extended families, older siblings and friends, helping cultivate a larger network of supportive peers around Play and Explore participants.

Artistic development in Fife

Through Where We Are and into Play and Explore, the inclusion of Fife-based artists has been important to the group, with assistant artist Laura, and visiting artists Kirstin Abraham and Callum Younger all Fife-based. Supporting local artistic talent helps with Starcatchers' understanding of the geographical area and participant demographics, helping make sure sessions are relevant to participants. Elevating local talent also encourages a greater understanding of who is an 'artist' and what 'artistic practice' is, and helps debunk the idea of the arts as a middle-class, maybe unattainable pursuit.

Case study 3

T and her child have been attending creative play sessions for over a year. Providing opinions on themes of sessions and ideas to contribute to the create plan of sessions. T has some health complications which has made her unable to attend some sessions in the past but she's in a better place now and sees group as somewhere to come and relax and have fun. She always says "we LOVE coming to group". She's also shared her personal triumphs which we also celebrate at group - She's going into make up artistry and is encouraged at group to add her artistic flare to activities.

Mum has expressed that she thinks G may be neurodiverse. It's been particularly interesting to watch G's development, particularly with interaction with other wee ones. G engages in imaginative and creative play not only with mum but with other wee ones and adults that attend group and has started communicating verbally with what he likes and wants to share within sessions.

You can see the bond between mum and G has strengthened over their time at group and they get to experience all the soft, messy, sensory activities and be free in the space together.



05 Conclusion

Our evaluation of Play and Explore consistently shows the positive impact the weekly sessions are having on the young parents and babies who attend.

Outcome 1) parents and carers with perinatal mental health issues feel less isolated

As can be seen by the case studies throughout this report, artists and participants are very aware of the positive relationships that have been cultivated via the group. Participants – adults and babies- feel consistently supported in their needs, emotional, socially and physically, which in turn supports developmental wellbeing and good mental health.

'I could come in here and cry, I've come in here and, like I have, I've come in here in all moods and Roz has been the one who puts a smile on my face.'

Participant, Cowdenbeath

Outcome 2) parents and carers feel better able to meet the needs of their infants and children (physical, social, emotional and cognitive)

Play and Explore provides a safe place and protected time for parents and their children where they can focus on exploring creative activities together, strengthening their relationship with their child and encouraging deeper bonds. The high adult to baby ratio also allows carers to take moments of relaxation for themselves, enjoying adult company safe in the knowledge that their babies are being well looked-after.

"So proud of her confidence she's coming out her wee shell no bother now, good wee group of friends she has!! Proud mummy and she loved it, she made me some art work for my fridge too' - Participant, Dunfermline

Outcome 3) Parents and carers are better able to maintain a warm and secure relationship with their infant

Among the families who attend regularly, artists have had a chance to observe the creative journey of adults and their little ones and watched them grow in confidence from week to week. Many parents discover a newfound playfulness and continually make new discoveries about their baby's capabilities and interests, as well as their own.

"(We've been coming) since E was four weeks old and she's two in May. Yeah, like we've missed the last few weeks and I'm like 'nah we need to go today' like, we've just been like had things on but I'm like 'no we're going'... It's the one thing we look forward to during the week." - Participant, Dunfermline

Play and Explore is a growing and valuable resource for communities in Cowdenbeath and Dunfermline, providing personalised and enthusiastic creative, emotional and social support for young families who often feel isolated, particularly following the long periods Coronavirus lockdown. Supporting these young families now, in the early days of their relationships with their babies, encouraging relaxation and creativity and facilitating greater bonds between individuals, and individuals with their community, will help discourage these vulnerable young people from falling back into unsociable behaviours and support good mental health and emotional wellbeing, for young parents and their babies.

Next steps

Following the success of Starcatchers Play and Explore, through support from Scottish Government CashBack for Communities and Creative Scotland's Youth Music Initiative, weekly creative play sessions will continue in Cowdenbeath and Dunfermline for young families, alongside a new music-focused group launching soon.





A huge thank you to Creative
Scotland's Recovery fund
for supporting the project



ALBA | CHRUTHACHAIL