



**WEE  
PEOPLE,  
BIG  
FEELINGS**

# **A PRACTICAL GUIDE**

## **for Early Years Practitioners**





## 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.

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**



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# ABOUT STARCATCHERS

Starcatchers is Scotland's Arts and Early Years organisation. We believe in the transformational power of the arts to inspire Scotland's youngest children and the adults who care for them. We deliver this vision through four pillars of activity rooted in creativity and designed to connect with our youngest citizens, their parents and carers, and Early Years practitioners in communities across Scotland.

## The Scottish Early Learning and Childcare Context

All of the ideas in this resource have been developed for 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 here:**

*Realising the Ambition*



*Rights-based approach*



# PARTNERS

## Scots Corner Early Learning and Childcare Centre

Scots Corner Early Learning and Childcare Centre is based in Midlothian, Scotland. The building comprises both a nursery setting for children age 2-5 and a community centre for families in the area. Roughly 30 families use the nursery setting.

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 (see page 7). Starcatchers worked closely with the staff, the wee ones and their families to develop the ideas in this resource.

## 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 is 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 an affiliate member. Their combined work targets the rights of babies and young children and developing pedagogically appropriate methods to support young children's voice.

Throughout the project, the University of Strathclyde supported the Scots Corner practitioners to develop and implement professional enquiries, to examine and reflect on the impact **Wee People, Big Feelings** had on the children.

To find out more about the evaluation of the project, the complete **Wee People, Big Feelings** project report can be found here.



## Skye Reynolds | Artist-in-residence

Skye Reynolds is a dance artist, performance maker and educator with over 20 years experience working across professional and community arts settings. Her work is experimental and collaborative with a focus on movement, spoken word and improvisation.

Skye is a certified Infant Developmental Movement Educator with Body-Mind Centering and has worked extensively in early years environments including as an Artist in Residence with Scottish Early Learning settings. She is an Associate Artist with Starcatchers and created Dance & Play as the first movement class specifically for 0-3yrs at Dance Base, Scotland's National Centre for Dance. Skye has since evolved this work into professional training delivered Scotland-wide for practitioners in the Early Years sector.

Moving Matters: Play, Create, Imagine was an artist residency hosted by Hillend Children's Centre, an integrated nursery in Greenock, together with Starcatchers. The project involved mentoring, dialogue and discovery as well as creative movement research and development in collaboration with staff and children, over a 6 month period from 2015 – 2016.

Skye has worked extensively with young people and was an Early Years Specialist with the national dance project Little Big Dance 2019-2021 created by South East Dance in partnership with DanceEast, Take Art and Yorkshire Dance. She was Dance Artist in Residence with Imagine, North Edinburgh Arts and Dance Base 2011- 2013 and attended the Fresh Tracks Europe network for youth choreographers at Tanzhaus Dusseldorf in 2012.

Her teaching projects are accessible and inclusive, spanning a variety of organisations which include: Paris Summer Academy, The University of Edinburgh/ Royal Botanic Garden Edinburgh, Beacon Arts, Youth Music Theatre UK, Performance Captain Commonwealth Games, Scottish Youth Dance, Luminate, War Child, and The Scottish School of Contemporary Dance. Skye graduated as a Feldenkrais practitioner in 2022.

Other performance projects & collaborations include: Curious Seed, Janis Claxton Dance (UK & China), Lyra Theatre, Khamlane Halsackda (Sweden), Jo Fong, Ian Spink, Tess Letham, Stillmotion, Susan Worsfold, Derevo (UK & Germany), National Theatre of Scotland, Fadj Festival (Iran), What Moves You? & Something Smashing.





# 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.

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

## A bit about the project

A year long artist  
residency, 1-2  
days a week



Practitioner  
Enquiries



Creative Skills  
training sessions  
for staff



Creative Family  
Play Days

Family Activity  
packs distributed

Wee Inspirations  
ideas shared



A series of films  
created and  
shared

Play Kits  
developed

Listen to our  
Podcast here



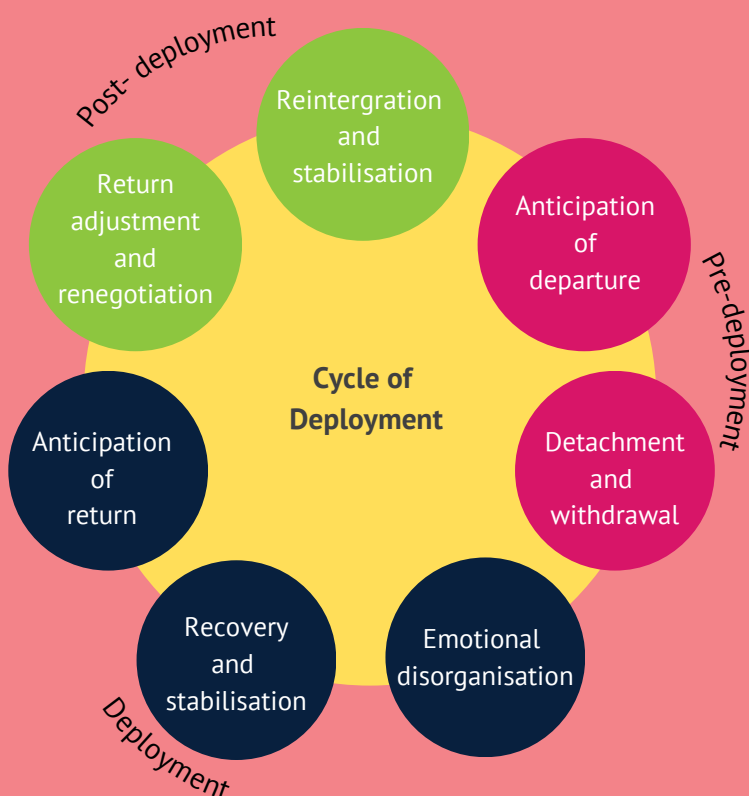
# WHAT IS EMOTIONAL LITERACY?

***Emotional literacy** is the ability to recognise, understand, handle and express emotions (Sharp 2001)*

## Important Things to Remember:

- ▶ **Every family and every deployment is different** – the emotional cycle of deployment can be a useful starting point, but there is no one way to feel
- ▶ While this project focused on forces families and the emotional cycle of deployment, remember that **ALL children go through transitions**
- ▶ **Emotional literacy isn't built in times of crisis, it's a skill we build over time**, often through play and creative experiences where we can express ourselves in the moment AND “practice” lots of different feelings
- ▶ **Emotional literacy doesn't have to be words!** There are lots of non-verbal ways we express ourselves and understand each other
- ▶ **None of this is a magic wand or a quick fix** - the part of our brain that regulates our thoughts, actions and emotions doesn't fully mature until we're 25!

## The Emotional Cycle of Deployment



*“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, its important we develop a repertoire of techniques to support wee ones and their families.”*

**Early Years Practitioner and Forces Family member**

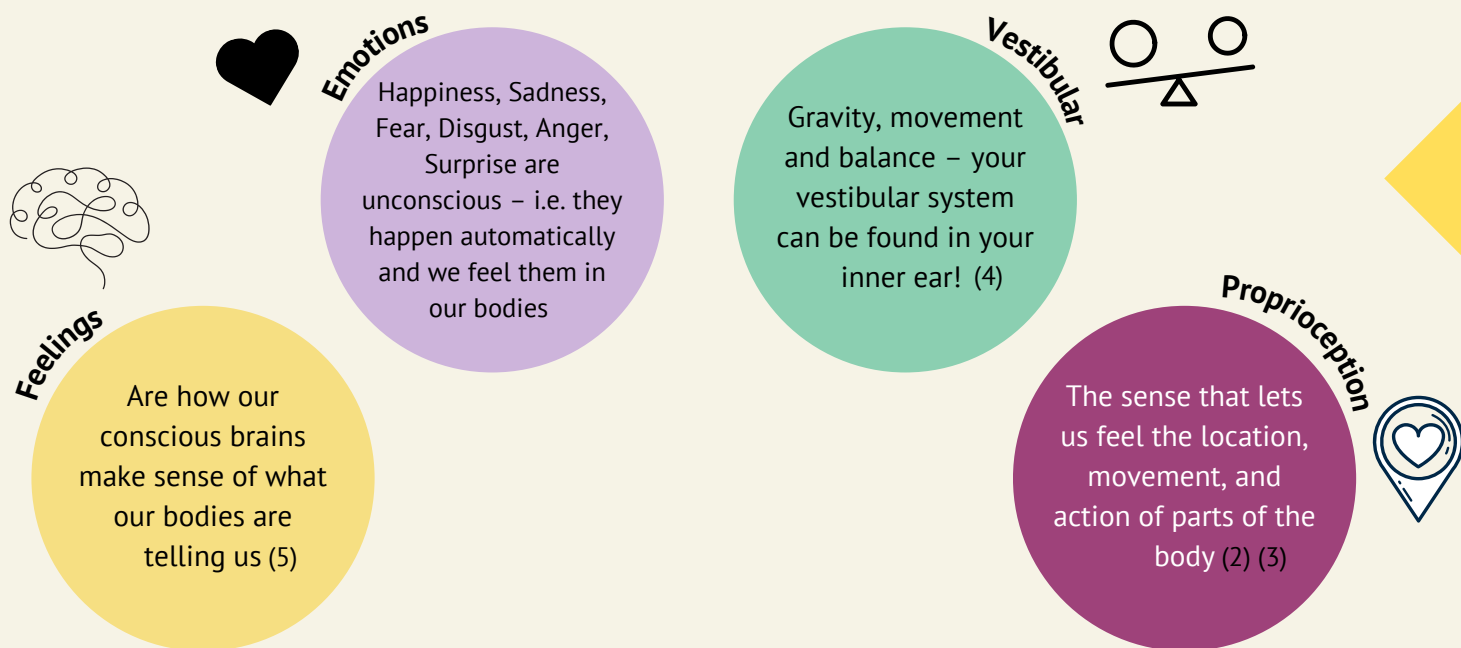


# A BIT ABOUT BRAINS, BODIES AND EMOTIONS

## Did you know...

...90% of the connections in our brains are developed **in the first three years.** (1)

We now believe we have at least **seven** senses: As well as sight, touch, taste, hearing and smell, there is **vestibular** and **proprioception**.



## Behind every behaviour is an emotion

As we get better at helping children identify how they feel, we can give them chances to express their emotions appropriately (e.g. without hurting themselves or others) (6)

## Children don't always have the words to tell us how they feel

Movement, music, art and drama/pretend play all give them opportunities to express themselves without needing words

## We need to express our emotions, or our brains can often go into a fight-or-flight state:

increasing heart rate, slows digestive function and makes us feel anxious or depressed

### References

(1) Pre-Birth to Three, LTS, pg 16

(2) [https://cchp.nhs.uk/sites/default/files/Proprioception\\_HK\\_V1b.pdf](https://cchp.nhs.uk/sites/default/files/Proprioception_HK_V1b.pdf)

(3) [https://cchp.nhs.uk/sites/default/files/The%20Vestibular%20System\\_handout\\_V1.pdf](https://cchp.nhs.uk/sites/default/files/The%20Vestibular%20System_handout_V1.pdf)

(4) Realising the Ambition pg 24

(5) <https://www.mind.org.uk/for-young-people/introduction-to-mental-health/understanding-my-feelings/#:~:text=They%20mean%20slightly%20different%20things,and%20give%20meaning%20to%20them>

(6) <https://www.children1st.org.uk/help-for-families/parentline-scotland/guidance-advice/behaviour-and-feelings/>

# CREATIVE IDEAS FOR BUILDING EMOTIONAL LITERACY

The ideas in this section were developed by Starcatchers artist-in-residence Skye Reynolds, the wee ones and the staff team at Scots Corner. During **Wee People, Big Feelings** they recognised that moving and imagining together helped wee ones develop emotional literacy skills, like tuning into their own bodies and safely expressing strong or overwhelming feelings.

These ideas were shared with families in the Autumn of 2021 using videos and home activity packs – any materials needed are on each card, and there's a QR code to link to each video.

The Starcatchers' Wee Inspirations format, which was developed during the Covid-19 pandemic, breaks down creative provocations that can be shared with families, and/or used within early years settings as a starting point for new, creative practice.



## Welcome to Wee Inspirations

Here's how to use our **Wee Inspirations idea cards**, and a summary of what each of our headings mean.

### THE BASIC IDEA

Embrace silliness. Embrace imperfection. These are fun, creative ideas to engage your wee ones without a lot of kit, stress or the need to 'achieve' anything. For our Wee People, Big Feelings project, we're focusing on ideas that can help build emotional literacy and wellbeing together.

### OVER TO YOU, WEE ONE

This is where the children take over. Giving them the chance to shape how ideas develop and grow helps them feel safe and valued, and gives them a voice and helps them realise their rights.

### CHEEKY BONUSES

Here we list some of the emotional and social benefits of the idea, whether it's self-expression, bonding, concepts like consent and boundaries, or even just having a chat about how you feel!

### VARIATIONS

Lots of our ideas can be adapted for children of different ages and abilities, and to whatever space you have.

### AND REMEMBER...

It's okay if things don't go to plan. If you and your wee ones aren't having fun, ditch it, have a cuddle and try something else another day.

## TUMMY TUMBLES

**You will need:** A clear space, pillows/blankets

### THE BASIC IDEA

Rough and tumble is full of rich learning opportunities, and creating a specific space for it can help create boundaries and let wee ones clearly show when they want to be involved.

### OVER TO YOU, WEE ONE

Clear a space of any furniture or breakables(!) and use pillows or a blanket to create a soft floor. Introduce words like “I need space” so you can both tell each other when to stop or back off. You can start with rolling, tickling, or balancing their weight on yours.

### CHEEKY BONUSES

- Social skills – consent, boundaries
- Exploring their position in physical space
- Learning about their bodies – their own strength, and how they can express themselves safely
- Builds trust and bonding

### VARIATIONS

- If space is tight, or you have lots of breakables, create a clearly defined “safe” space outside instead
- Think about how you wind down, slow down movements and ease into something more gentle and calm.

### AND REMEMBER...

Physical play isn't just for Dads! The trust and communication you can build when exploring big, physical movements together is amazing, and often develops afterwards into gentler play.



## BIG DRAWING, BIG CHATS

**You will need:** A roll of paper, pens, pencils or crayons

### THE BASIC IDEA

Big paper is great for wee ones – they can still engage with mark-making while using their whole bodies! Old wallpaper or parcel paper works well, on the floor or stuck to the wall.

### OVER TO YOU, WEE ONE

After a walk, or having gone on an imaginary journey together, unroll the paper, lie on your tummy and draw as you chat. Where did you go? What did you see? How did it make you feel? Don't put any pressure on your wee one to draw – they'll join in when they're ready.

### CHEEKY BONUSES

- Mark-making builds the foundation of literacy and writing skills
- Great way to reflect on memories together and learn what your wee one especially enjoyed about a trip/walk/game

### VARIATIONS

- Draw a map of the places you've been together – maybe you can follow that map and go back there again
- Make deliberate mistakes while you're drawing and let your wee one “correct” you – it can be great motivation for getting them more involved

### AND REMEMBER...

Sometimes this is about the drawing, sometimes it's about the chats. When you're creating something together, wee ones may open up and share new thoughts and ideas – it's less pressure than a face to face “what did you do today” chat.





## TAPE SHAPES

**You will need:** Tape or chalk, space with a hard floor

### THE BASIC IDEA

Tape on a hard floor is great for creating boundaries and different spaces. Let your wee one be in charge with where the tape goes, helping them with sticking it down.

### OVER TO YOU, WEE ONE

Together you can create different spaces that help you move in different ways – maybe you're birds in a nest, or you could be bears getting ready to hibernate. Or try making paths and walk along the tape like a tightrope.

### CHEEKY BONUSES

- Great for wee ones who love wrapping things up or creating boundaries to put things in
- Easy way to create their own safe space
- Combines fine motor (small movements) with gross motor (big movements)

### VARIATIONS

- If you don't have tape, try taking some chalk outside, or find sticks to make a path
- Combine this with den building for an extra level of comfort – create a boundary for a calm space and use blankets/furniture to build a hideaway in it

### AND REMEMBER...

This idea is all about helping wee ones create their own space. They may want lots of attention, or just a space to be alone for a wee bit. When you undo the tape remind them they can make that space any time they need it.



## ON THEIR LEVEL

**You will need:** A clear space, no shoes!

### THE BASIC IDEA

Get down on their level! Clear a space and get down on the floor: crawl, travel and move across the floor. Top tip: taking your shoes off together helps their mobility and gets you ready to play!

### OVER TO YOU, WEE ONE

Try mirroring what your wee one does – it lets them be in the lead, and is a great way to get in sync with them without having to jump straight into conversation or suggesting ideas.

### CHEEKY BONUSES

- A great way to connect and have fun together
- Developing listening skills
- Building understanding of what our bodies can and can't do – great for talking about boundaries

### VARIATIONS

- Use your imagination! Maybe you're creeping through a forest or swimming through the sea.
- Take turns to suggest what creatures you find – can you show your best impression of a fish? Or a tiger?

### AND REMEMBER...

Follow their energy – if they're high energy, you can use faster movements, crawl around or use some rough and tumble. If you feel they need to wind down, use soft music and slower movements. A great way to wrap up play is to suggest you go to "sleep" and pretend together. When your ready to "wake up", you're ready for something new!



## BOX BURROWS

**You will need:** Cardboard boxes, sticky tape. Optional: Pens/pencils/chalk

### THE BASIC IDEA

Use a big cardboard box, with both ends open, to make a tunnel. Tape, coloured pens or chalk, more boxes or some fabric would be handy extras for extending or decorating inside or out.

### OVER TO YOU, WEE ONE

If your wee one needs an invitation to play, peek through one end and wonder aloud “What’s this?” or “I wonder how we could get through?” and see what inspires them.

### CHEEKY BONUSES

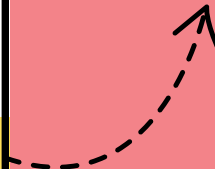
- Exploring different ways of moving helps wee one’s develop their sense of balance
- Tuning into our bodies so we know how they feel and what they can do

### VARIATIONS

- If you don’t have any boxes, make tunnels with the world around you, with your furniture or each other – watch our Tunnels video for tips!
- You can make your tunnel a portal into another world by asking “I wonder” questions like “I wonder where this will take us?”

### AND REMEMBER...

It’s not about getting through a tunnel perfectly or gracefully! Some wee ones love crawling or slithering again and again, others crawl inside and love to draw there. When a wee one explores a tunnel, they’re doing lots of problem-solving. Watching you trying different solutions is great for them – you’re a great role model.



## KIDS IN BLANKETS

**You will need:** A space blanket, tinfoil

### THE BASIC IDEA

Space blankets are a cheap resource, but are great for inspiring movement – just listen to how they crinkle, explore the way they feel and watch the way light reflects off them!

### OVER TO YOU, WEE ONE

Experiment with different ways of using them on your bodies: wrapping in them is warm, but they could also be a cape or a costume. You can also move with them – flap and float, lay flat and crinkle them up with your bodies – let your wee one take the lead!

### CHEEKY BONUSES

- Engaging lots of senses (touch, hearing, sight) at once creates really rich learning opportunities
- Imagination is great for problem-solving

### VARIATIONS

- Create characters who wear elaborate costumes!
- If you don’t have a space blanket, explore scarves – they’re great for getting wee ones to move, can wrap things/people, become capes or costumes.
- For smaller scale play, tin foil is also great. It can promote fine motor skills through scrunching.

### AND REMEMBER...

Some wee ones aren’t going to jump straight into running around or getting really physical. Let them explore new materials and get used to them – sometimes they just need time getting to know a new object before they feel confident with it.



## HAPPY STANDS

**You will need:** A clear space, a wall or some furniture

### THE BASIC IDEA

You might think you can't do a handstand – but we're here to help! Try putting your hands on the floor and "walking" your feet up the wall or furniture. Or play wheelbarrows, where you hold your wee ones legs and they walk on their hands.

### OVER TO YOU, WEE ONE

If you sense your wee one is frustrated, find something else for them to push off – the floor, the wall or the sofa. Start with small pushes and build up until you're upside down.

### CHEEKY BONUSES

- Helps wee ones direct the same impulse that makes them want to push things or other people
- Good for processing stress and frustration
- Playing with being upside down is good for developing balance and perspective

### VARIATIONS

- Work together to try and build different shapes with your body: try letters for older children, or circles/squares/triangles for younger children
- A handstand can also be a tunnel! Prop your legs on a wall, your hands on the floor and see if your wee one can get through the gap!

### AND REMEMBER...

It's not about having the perfect handstand. Even if your balance isn't the best, playing together can help start a conversation about feelings that make them want to push. Helping wee ones redirect those feelings means they aren't denied them, can process them and self-regulate.



## FEEDBACK FROM SCOTS CORNER FAMILIES AND STAFF

*"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."*

*"Parents have fed back that there's been a lot less negative behaviour at home because children get that space to engage in rough and tumble or self-expression at nursery."*

*"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."*



# PATHWAYS INTO PLAY

Skye had inspiring conversations with movement practitioner and 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. Skye spent two creative days with dance artist and 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, 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**



# **BIG MOVEMENT PLAY**



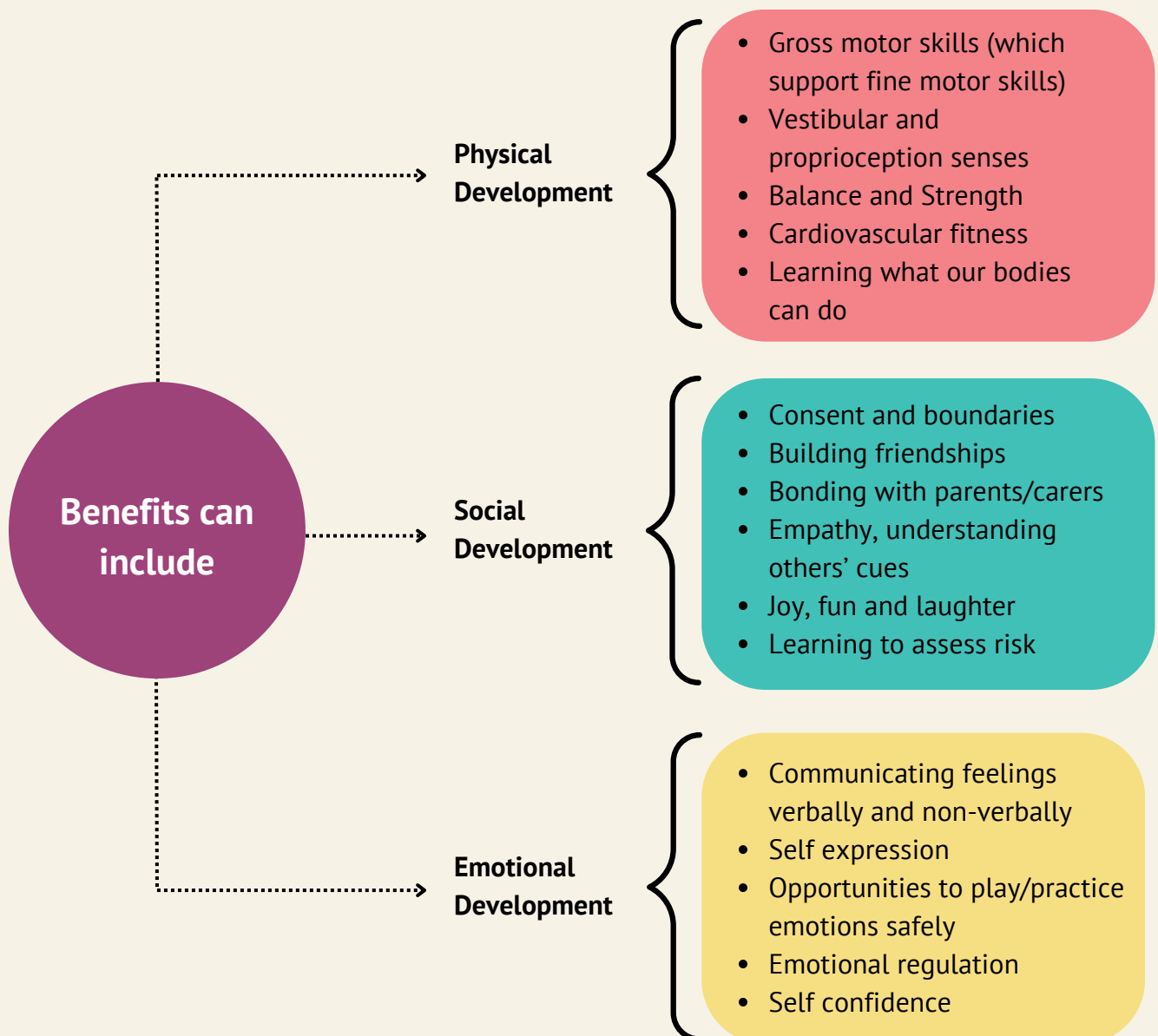
**aka Rough  
& Tumble**





**Big movement play**, also known as “rough and tumble” ISN’T about aggression or being rough with each other – it’s high energy, physical play that can include:

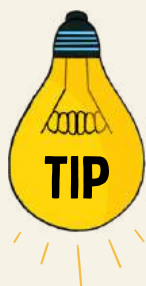
- ▶ Physical contact games
- ▶ Wrestling
- ▶ Playful pushing/ shoving/ jostling
- ▶ Chasing
- ▶ Rolling
- ▶ Low level play, e.g. on the floor
- ▶ Climbing



***"The development of movement and coordination for a child is linked to communication and cognitive development."***

Realising the Ambition: Being Me, page 24

# A SHARED UNDERSTANDING OF BIG MOVEMENT PLAY AND RELATIONSHIPS



If you're planning to develop big movement play in your setting, it's important your staff team have a shared understanding of what positive, big movement play interactions can look like. The Pathways into Play films (page 14) can be a good resource to watch together to start a conversation about both the benefits and risks of this kind of play.

*Try watching each **Pathways to Play** film twice: once to watch all the different ways people are moving together, and a second time to really concentrate on facial expressions and relationships.*

Many early years practitioners can have questions or concerns about big movement play; firstly it's important to establish how we tell the difference between big movement play and aggression: here, **Jasmine Pasch** outlines the differences using the following descriptions:

## Big Movement Play

*"Positive and neutral facial expressions are more typical of rough and tumble play..."*

*"Children are free to choose to participate in rough and tumble play..."*

*"Children tend not to use full force in rough and tumble play..."*

*"Children are more likely to alternate roles, for example chaser and chased..."*

*"Children tend to stay together after a bout of play fighting..."*

## Aggression

*"...while negative facial expressions characterise aggression."*

*"...but they are often forced or challenged to participate in aggression."*

*"...whereas full force is seen in aggression."*

*"...whereas aggression generally involves unilateral roles."*

*"...while they often separate following aggression."*

Once practitioners understand the difference, they can help wee ones understand the difference too. Rather than a "no fighting" blanket ban, young children learn how to read and understand the facial expressions and body language of their playmates, and develop a practical understanding of consent.

# CONSENT AND BOUNDARIES

## One of the best ways for staff to read the dynamics of big movement play is to get involved...

...so it's worth considering your own boundaries – they don't need to be same as your colleagues, but it's useful to discuss them to make sure you have a shared understanding of each others' personal boundaries. You may have your own past injury or limits to your movement, and **it's fine to be clear about what you can and can't do.**

Talking about your personal limits with children is a good way to introduce the importance of boundaries and consent and for you to be a great play role model, whilst also drawing attention to what you will and will not be able to do.



Teaching children phrases like...

*"I need space"*

and

*"that's enough"*

...can be really useful, but it's also good to pair these with non-verbal signs, such as tapping out, or showing a stop sign with your hand - you can see the signals that Skye and the Scots Corner team developed in our video "Tummy Tumbles" (page 10).



**Young children were quick to understand boundaries during the project, and which members of staff (and which children) were best to approach for different kinds of play.**



# THINK ABOUT AGES AND STAGES

It can be useful to think about Big Movement Play as cooperative play – that is, **when the child has interest in both the activity and the other children involved**. If a child is mostly still engaging in parallel play in other areas of the setting, they will likely require more support to engage in big movement play safely with others.

This is another great reason for adults to engage in big movement play – it can be really beneficial learning cues from a playmate who is already skilled at sharing their boundaries both verbally and non-verbally.

You can also introduce props or loose parts such as boxes, lycra and scarves as they provide opportunities for wee ones to engage in parallel play while still exploring big, vigorous movement.



# REMEMBER SCHEMAS

Schemas are patterns of behaviour that appear in the way babies and young children play - its how they learn about the world.

If you try and stop wee ones exploring a schema, it's likely to lead to a lot of frustration because that fascination, that urge, is still there.

Thinking about movement as schemas is particularly useful for actions like pushing – if a child has a strong urge to push, think about handstands, drumming, partners leaning in palm to palm - anything that lets them explore that physical sensation without hurting others.

Starcatchers has a great resource about schemas if you want to know more.



# WHERE AND WHEN

Whether you're thinking about integrating Big Movement Play opportunities into free flow play, or you want to offer a more curated approach, **it's important to establish verbal and non-verbal cues to let wee ones know when it's safe to engage in more vigorous movement and when it isn't** – defining a space, clearing all clutter and asking everyone to take their shoes off can be great ways to do this.

**BIG MOVEMENT PLAY  
CAN HAPPEN IN A  
VARIETY OF SPACES –  
HERE ARE SOME  
THINGS TO CONSIDER:**



## Open-plan spaces

- Soft mats, rugs, cushions or other apparatus can be introduced as non-verbal cues to show where and when this kind of play can happen (and be packed away when the play needs to end)
- Open spaces make it easier for wee ones to watch what's happening and understand “the rules” from the sidelines, which can give them the confidence to join in when they're ready
- Introducing movement into open plan spaces means you can be more responsive to needs – Scots Corner were able to introduce movement whenever they saw children becoming agitated etc, didn't need to wait for an allotted slot or room booking
- At Scots Corner wee ones also learned to “ask” verbally or physically for the soft mats if they wanted to engage in big movement play.

## Smaller spaces

- Smaller spaces bring us closer together physically, which makes non-verbal communication like movement, touch and tone of voice easier to pick up on
- Clear a space of any distractions, including anything that could be broken or knocked over, so wee ones can focus on movement
- If some things need to remain in the room, like pieces of furniture, they'll become a natural focus – think about how they can be safely incorporated into play, or “decommissioned”
- When exploring movement with a group of children in a small “chill out” room, wee ones didn't bump into each other as expected – being closer together made them more aware of each other.



## Large spaces

- When wee ones enter large spaces like school halls they often want to run and shout – this is them making sense of their world by “measuring” the space using their bodies and their voices
- When adults enter large spaces, they may feel like they need to use a louder voice to facilitate sessions, which makes it harder to control the tone of voice you use – think about using non-verbal communication as much as possible
- Non-verbal communication needs to be bigger to be seen across a large space – more exaggerated facial expressions and movements, etc.
- Adults taking an active role and modelling different kinds of movement can provide inspiration and engage wee ones without the need for specific verbal instructions
- Large spaces may benefit from set ups that focus movement to a particular area. Skye used:
  - Large pieces of lycra to focus pulling (**QR Code 1**)
  - Cardboard boxes to encourage crawling (**QR code 2**)
  - Soft mats in a long line to direct energy – used to run, tumble, skip, race
  - Big rolls of paper for gathering to draw and chat towards the end of sessions

QR code 1



QR code 2



## ENDING SESSIONS

Skye and the Scots Corner team developed fun rituals that let the children know the big movement play was coming to an end. **A popular activity involved the children sitting on the soft mats as they were dragged across a shiny floor.**



# HERE ARE SOME THINGS TO THINK ABOUT WHEN PLANNING TIME FOR BIG MOVEMENT PLAY



Where possible, the length of the session should be determined by the wee ones – they need to complete their emotional journey

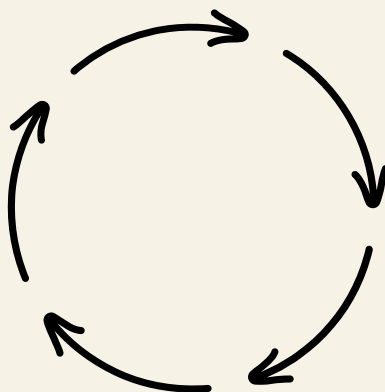
Big, vigorous movements will transition into calmness and emotional regulation once children have had the opportunity to explore their movement fully – not all children will reach this point at the same pace



Similarly, movement may segue into drawing, chatting or imaginative play once the basic movement needs of the children are met



Ask for physical expressions of feedback – SHOW us how that made you feel



If the session does have to end before children are ready, transition rituals become particularly important

Lying with your heads in a circle humming, songs and tapping/massage circles are all good ways to come back together as a group and close a movement session

Can you protect this time and offer movement experiences regularly? Repeating these experiences gives children the opportunity to grow their confidence and agency

Remember to support all emotions – particularly if a session has had to end before a child has regulated. They may become upset and need help to coregulate



# BARRIERS TO PARTICIPATION

It's worth noting that not all children will engage with big movement play in the same ways. They may have an additional support need that involves sensory seeking or sensory avoidance, or limitations on their mobility, and adaptations that help meet these needs should be considered.

Equally, children may simply not enjoy it and it's important we respect their boundaries; always frame it as an offer or invitation and not an instruction.



It is also worth highlighting how big movement play, or rough and tumble, is traditionally seen. **Culturally accepted gender norms mean that big, vigorous movements are a form of play that girls are less likely to be offered, at home or in settings, and there are fewer female role models who engage in this kind of activity.** This can mean girls absorb the idea that it isn't "for them".

Outwith settings, girls aren't offered big movement play as much, sometimes not at all. This means that any offer you do make in your setting may be the only space or time that they get to engage in this form of play - and its benefits.

Similarly, on average Mums are less likely to engage in physical play than Dads\* – so if Dad is the parent away on deployment, opportunities for big movement play may be reduced for children during those times.

Prioritising big movement play within your setting, and sharing resources that inspire more big movement play at home, can help redress the balance.



## Some points to consider are:



1

How do you take additional support needs into account when planning big movement play opportunities?

2

How do girls currently engage in movement in your setting?

3

Can you offer movement opportunities that meet the needs of children who face barriers to participation?

Remember, it's OK to plan experiences for specific groups of children within child centred practice. It's about getting it right for every child with the right support and at the right time.

4

How can you extend the offer? For example, if they don't like wrestling, can you offer more spaces for chasing, rolling or climbing?

5

Start with the interests of the child: there are hundreds of ways to move together, including using dancing along to music, or physically acting out a story.

6

Do children have opportunities to watch movement experiences before deciding if they want to join in?



# EXPERIENCES/OUTCOMES

## Curriculum for Excellence: Health and Wellbeing

I am aware of and able to express my feelings and am developing the ability to talk about them. HWB 0-01a

I know that we all experience a variety of thoughts and emotions that affect how we feel and behave and I am learning ways of managing them. HWB 0-02a

I understand that my feelings and reactions can change depending upon what is happening within and around me. This helps me to understand my own behaviour and the way others behave. HWB 0-04a

As I explore the rights to which I and others are entitled, I am able to exercise these rights appropriately and accept the responsibilities that go with them. I show respect for the rights of others. HWB 0-09a

I am learning how to move my body well, exploring how to manage and control it and finding out how to use and share the space. HWB 0-21a

I am aware of my own and others' needs and feelings [...] I recognise the need to follow rules. HWB 0-23a

I can describe how I feel after taking part in energetic activities HWB 0-27a

## Realising the Ambition: Being Me

Wellbeing – my self, social, emotional and communication development

*"Even as I grow, my emotions are often expressed through impulsive actions and gestures. I need you to help me identify other ways to regulate my emotions...ways that respect my individual physical and emotional need."*

My movement and coordination development  
*"Notice how my movements express my feelings and emotions."*

Promoting my confidence, creativity and curiosity  
*"Listen with your eyes. Know that my expressions and movements are a fundamental part of my 'voice'. They articulate my confidence, creativity and curiosity."*

*"Young children need to have a lot of movement and coordination skills to self-regulate their emotions." (Pg32)*

4.1 The importance of play  
*"Through play a child develops their cognitive, social, emotional and physical capacities."*

6.4 Playful Literacy  
*"Spoken language development forms only part of this social and emotional communication."*

## Quality framework for early learning and childcare 2022: Care Inspectorate

- Children are empowered to be fully involved in their play and learning through the skilled interactions and actions of staff
- Links to the Healthy and Social Care Standards: 1.29 I am supported to be emotionally resilient, have a strong sense of my own identity and wellbeing, and address any experiences of trauma or neglect.

# WORKING TOGETHER: FAMILIES AND EARLY YEARS SETTINGS

Scots Corner Early Learning and Childcare Centre is based in the same building as the Army Welfare Service, and around half of the families they work with are forces families. This section shares some of the ways Scots Corner meets the needs of forces families.

## Things for Early Years Settings to think about:

**Q** *Do we know if we have any forces families?*

It's important to note that not all forces families will automatically tell you they're a forces family – they may not want to share that information, or they might think it's not relevant. Sometimes it's just as simple as asking, and letting them know you have ways to support them.

**Q** *Do we know when parents are away on deployment?*

It can be helpful to know when a deployment is scheduled so settings and families are on the same page. It's normal for transitions to spark big emotions in wee ones, and settings can be more responsive to their needs if they understand where they might be on the emotional cycle of deployment (see page 7).

**Forces Children's Education** have a Notification of Parental Deployment form to help communication between families and schools – the original form can be found at [www.forceschildrenseducation.scot](http://www.forceschildrenseducation.scot). Starcatchers is working on an early years version of the form, which will be available on our website [www.starcatchers.org.uk](http://www.starcatchers.org.uk) in early 2024. Where possible, fill this form out together over a chat and a cuppa – use it as a prompt to help communication between settings and families, not as a substitute.

# How do we help wee ones with transitions?

## Deployment Dolls

**Scots Corner uses deployment dolls** – dolls or teddies with the deployed parent's face printed on fabric. The doll is portable and can be taken home and to different areas around the setting. As well as helping the wee one feel connected to the parent they are missing, it can spark conversations around the emotions of missing someone, both in the setting and at home.

## Memory Books

**Scots Corner also helps each child create their own memory book** – it can contain artwork, pictures of home and family, anything the wee ones wants to include. Staff are very sensitive to each individual's needs, families and interests, and each memory book is very much owned and developed by the wee one. Like deployment dolls, having a physical memory book is a great way to spark connection – long before wee ones develop the vocabulary to say how they feel, they can pick up a book, point at pictures and instigate the interaction they need.

## Remember

**It's important to note one size does not fit all** – some families might find deployment dolls or memory books useful for one deployment, but not the next. Some wee ones will choose their own transitional object, like an item of clothing or a special gift. It's the conversations they spark between the setting and the family are what's important – think about how they may fit into your child-centred practice rather than seeing transitional objects as a must have for every forces family.



# How do we help parents feel connected?

On some deployments deployed parents can receive video calls, phone calls, emails or letters – but sometimes none of those things are possible. Think about the ways your setting usually communicates with families and ask if they work for this deployment (there's a prompt question on the deployment form at the back of this resource).

Involving parents in creating transitional objects like memory books can help them feel connected before deployment, and reconnect post-deployment when their wee one can share their news.

## Play Kits

During **Wee People, Big Feelings** we developed Play Kits: they consist of a bag with a booklet of creative play ideas and the materials needed – you can see them on the Starcatchers website. Settings can introduce the Play Kits during family play sessions, and families can borrow the Play Kits to take home before, during and after deployment.

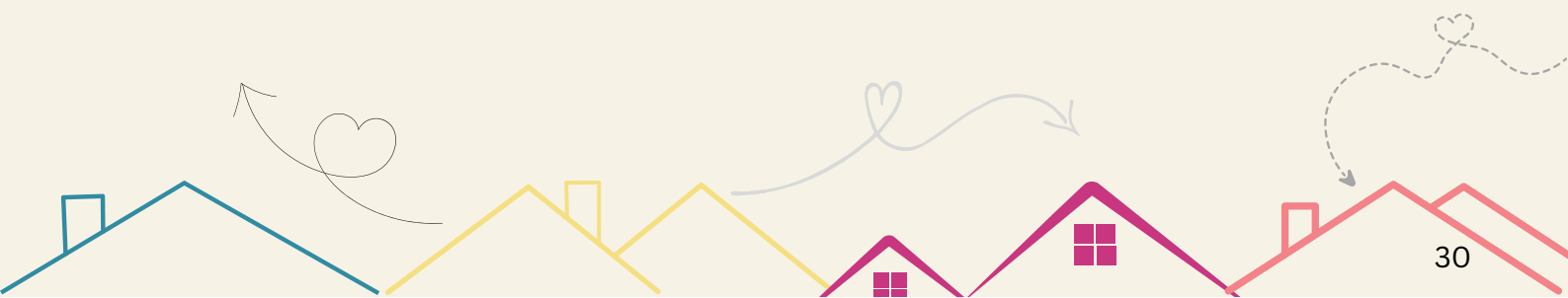
Play Kits can be a lovely way to spark moving and playing together, helping the absent parent connect with their wee one before deployment and again when they come home. They can also be used to take the pressure off the parent staying at home – if wee ones are familiar with the materials and ideas in the Play Kits from their setting, they become the expert and can lead the play. Play Kits can be a great way of connecting families, and connecting families and settings.



**View Starcatchers' Play Kits here**



**During the pandemic, all kinds of families weren't able to be together: on the next page we share a couple of Wee Inspirations Starcatchers developed to help wee ones and their families connect:**







## THE STORY OF US

### THE BASIC IDEA

"I remember the very first day we met..." Wee ones love hearing stories about themselves, so tell them what you remember about them being younger: first cuddles, first laughs together, the first time you realised how much you love them.

### OVER TO YOU, WEE ONE

Link these stories to what your wee one is currently interested in, whether it's dancing, scribbling or bouncing – they don't need to "sit nicely" to listen, they'll still be taking it all in. Don't be surprised if they want to keep hearing the same stories again and again.

### CHEEKY BONUSES

- Helps develop a positive sense of self
- Reminds you how far you've come and how great your wee one is
- It's a great way to feel grounded if you're going through change as a family.

### VARIATIONS

Grandparents, aunties, uncles, and other adults who know them and love them will have their own memories – ask them to share their "story of us" with your wee one too. Looking at photos together can be a great way of helping you build that positive narrative and make the stories more "real".

### AND REMEMBER...

All children go through stages of needing "babied" again – it's totally normal, especially in stressful times, or if they're learning something new. Take the opportunity to share the memories you have of them and how much you love them.

## LOVE LETTERS

### THE BASIC IDEA

If your small person is missing someone: Granny, Grandpa, friends or their nursery, grab a bit of paper and declare "I'M going to write to them a love letter to say how much we miss them!"

### OVER TO YOU, WEE ONE

Lots of young children don't like being told to write or draw, but they're more likely to get involved if they think the paper is YOURS. Chat about the person they miss as you draw, keep the pressure off and see if they pick up a pen. Let it be their idea to join in.

### CHEEKY BONUSES

- Fine motor skills
- Chatting about feelings improves wellbeing
- Links mark making and self-expression

### VARIATIONS

Older children can practice writing: about their day, a story, or even just sign their name! Take the children with you when you post the letter to show them where it goes and send it on its way.

### AND REMEMBER...

Even if they don't pick up a pen, it doesn't matter, you're helping your wee one make the connection between mark making and expressing important thoughts. Plus you'll brighten someone's day with a nice letter!



# How do we mark special occasions/community traditions?

As part of **Wee People, Big Feelings** we created a festive video based around the story of the Gingerbread Man. Videos like this can be a great way to connect families to creative experiences in the setting at any time of year. If deployed parents can't watch the video while they're away, they can watch it with their wee ones when they return.

Having a video that shares what wee ones have been up to can be a great catalyst for chatting and reconnecting – or to inspire moving and playing together.



## Resources

Certain positive childhood experiences have been connected to improved mental health and connectedness in adults – and enjoying community traditions is one of them!

**Read more about this research here**



**Watch the *Gingerbread Man* film here:**



# TIPS FOR MAKING AN AWESOME VIDEO

If your film editing skills aren't the best, don't worry – a slideshow with a voiceover is also really effective.

A voiceover will give structure to your video – we used a story, but for occasions like Father's Day or Mother's Day you could use a poem.

When it comes to the images, you don't have to try and make anyone act out scenes – instead, we planned creative experiences that explored the story over the course of a few weeks, and captured images of that.



You can record a voiceover really easily on zoom, or there are loads of video editing apps available to download – if in doubt, Google some You Tube tutorials.

Try to use a voice from your setting for the voiceover; it reconnects them with the experiences being shared on the video.

Don't put any pressure on the wee ones to memorise anything, but if you're reading a story or poem regularly there may be a few who end up being able to recite it anyway – if not, a member of staff is fine.



# PLANNING CREATIVE EXPERIENCES

Once you've chosen your story or theme, you can create a mind map, adding in all the ideas you have. It can help to group them into broad categories and link creative experiences to the emotional literacy skills or outcomes you'll be looking out for.



If you're not sure if a creative experience fits into child-centred practice or supports emotional literacy, use the **Wee Inspirations** format as a sense check (see page 9).



Here are some examples of the ideas we used to create the Gingerbread Man video – we also shared these Wee Inspirations with the Scots Corner families so they could revisit them at home over the festive break.



### Imaginative Play and Drama Experiences

Getting the chance to play with and “try on” different feelings can be a great way of developing emotional literacy. Think of different ways wee ones can explore the story, the characters, and how they might be feeling at any point in the story – role play and small world play can be great for this. Check out Wee Inspirations like **Between The Lines** as inspiration and wonder aloud how different characters might be feeling – this could be a conversation, or an opportunity to “show” how characters feel using our faces or bodies.

#### Wee Inspirations:

**Small World Puppets** for imagining characters

**Scrap Box Costumes** for creating costumes

**Squishy Feelings** for exploring emotions through stress-ball puppets

**Festive Faces** for exploring different feelings



### Creative Movement Experiences

Tuning into our own bodies, how they feel and what they can do is an important part of emotional literacy that’s often overlooked. Grounding is an important part of mindfulness, but while for adults that often involves focusing on breathing, for wee ones still developing gross motor skills and impulse control, becoming more aware of your body is often about exploring all the different ways it can move.

#### Wee Inspirations:

**Character Races** for imagining how characters move

**Kids in Blankets** for fun costumes that move!

**Box Burrows** for building burrows or sets

**On Their Level** for imagining whilst moving together

All Wee Inspirations are free to read and download at [www.starcatchers.org.uk](http://www.starcatchers.org.uk).



# Developing Experiences



## Sensory Experiences

As you might expect, this is another way to tune into sensations in your body – and if the sensory experiences link to the story you're exploring, they can also be a great way to bring stories to life, deepen understanding, and spark new conversations. Often the best chats happen when you're creating and exploring together, away from the pressure of circle time or direct face to face conversations.

## Wee Inspirations:

**Sensory Faces** for exploring emotions through sensory play  
**Festive Dough** for engaging with Christmas through dough  
**Gingerbread Bakes** for baking and making together  
**Sensory Wow!** for sharing a relaxing moment and bonding



## Music Experiences

Anyone with a favourite song can tell you how emotive music can be. Listening to music, singing and exploring musical instruments give us opportunities to explore, express and chat about different feelings. Sometimes there are songs or particular pieces of music associated with certain stories, or instruments can be used to represent characters or as a soundtrack to a story, helping to highlight and amplify different emotions at different times.

## Wee Inspirations:

**Story Soundtracks** for making music for your story  
**Christmas Wrapping** for rapping together - festively!  
**Musical Chats** for chatting and making tunes together  
**Dough Disco** - take your festive dough for a dance



## FESTIVE PLAYDOUGH

### THE BASIC IDEA

The secret to this fragrant dough is to steep spices in hot water – cinnamon, nutmeg, cardamom, cloves and ginger are all classic gingerbread spices. Once cooled, mix the fragrant water with flour to make a smooth dough.

### OVER TO YOU, WEE ONE

Let them mix the cooled water with flour – cups, scoops and pipettes can all be used to explore how to get the texture they want it. The mixing is as much part of the experience as the finished dough, so make sure they have time and space to explore and play.

### CHEEKY BONUSES

- Engaging lots of senses (touch, smell, sight) at once is great for “grounding”, or getting in tune with our own bodies
- Having time to explore and problem solve builds confidence and resilience

### VARIATIONS

- Put on the Christmas tunes and have a Dough Disco, moving your fingers and hands along to the music! Chat about how different music makes you feel
- Chat about the different characters in The Gingerbread Man – can you build them with dough?

### AND REMEMBER...

Making dough together is a low stakes way to explore lots of the processes of mixing, kneading and shaping without having to worry about the end product. If you want to try your hand at making dough you can eat, see Gingerbread Bakes!



## GINGERBREAD BAKES

### THE BASIC IDEA

Bring The Gingerbread Man story to life by exploring the sensory joy of gingerbread and making and decorating your own ginger biscuits. Make some dough, grab some cutters and play.

### OVER TO YOU, WEE ONE

It's hard to be child led if you're worried about the end result – take the pressure off by thinking about the mixing, shaping, baking and decorating as distinct experiences rather than a step by step process to be followed. Build in time to see where their curiosity takes them... and chances to start again if they want to!

### CHEEKY BONUSES

- Engaging lots of senses (touch, smell, sight) at once is great for “grounding”, or getting in tune with our own bodies
- Real world experiences make stories more meaningful

### VARIATIONS

- Name body parts as you mould or decorate the gingerbread men – it's a great way to chat about own bodies too
- Use the cookies as puppets – give them voices, let them walk and dance, and see their personalities emerge

### AND REMEMBER...

Baking can be stressful if you're too focused on perfect results – remember this is a sensory activity, not the final of Bake Off! Be proud of whatever you create together: focus on the positives and what you've learned for next time.





## CHARACTER RACES

### THE BASIC IDEA

The best way to understand a character is to walk – or run – a mile in their shoes! Use your bodies to explore how the different characters from the story might move, sneak and run!

### OVER TO YOU, WEE ONE

Wonder aloud how the different characters move – expect lots of flat out running at first! Use your own body to show examples and ask “Is this how the fox would move?” and let the wee ones be the experts – they may show you their own version or have fun giving you advice.

### CHEEKY BONUSES

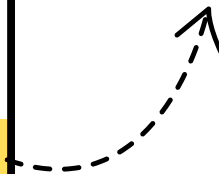
- Fun, physical way to explore stories
- Moving our bodies give us new ways to communicate and tune into each other
- Thinking about characters and moving like them is a great way to start building empathy

### VARIATIONS

- Use “Funny Face Remote” to make characters go faster, slower, and explore different feelings
- Turn the races into a game of Grandmother’s Footsteps and see who has the best character poses when they stop!

### AND REMEMBER...

Often, wee ones need to work their way through lots of high energy moves before they feel able to slow down a little and think about more subtle movements – there’s no wrong way to move, it’s all exploration.



## SENSORY FACES

### THE BASIC IDEA

Use your finger to draw faces in sand, dry rice, shaving foam, or whatever sensory material you fancy – as long as you can make a mark in it, you can make a face in it!

### OVER TO YOU, WEE ONE

Start by “modelling” the face you want to draw and chat through the different features – grumpy eyebrows, big smiley mouths etc – as you mark make. Wee ones might want to model, or draw their own faces alongside you.

### CHEEKY BONUSES

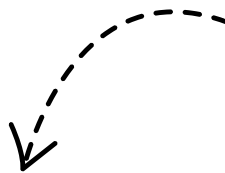
- Great for exploring mark making in a multisensory, engaging way
- Practicing facial expressions lets wee ones explore feelings and develop vocabulary to understand them

### VARIATIONS

- Introducing mirrors means children can see their own faces – and even use foam, paint or pens to trace over their own features
- Hide little laminated faces or emojis among the sensory materials to be discovered
- Can we draw the characters from the book? How do we make the cow look sad?

### AND REMEMBER...

Children need to scribble and explore before they develop the fine motor control to be able to create marks that show what they want to show. The chat and the facial expressions are just as important as any “pictures” they create.





## SMALL WORLD PUPPETS

### THE BASIC IDEA

Soft toys, pegs, sticks – anything hand sized can be used in small world play to represent characters from your story. Use voices, sound effects and movement to bring them to life.

### OVER TO YOU, WEE ONE

Keep everything in a bag or box, then introduce each object/character as they appear in the story – as soon as you’ve established who they are, ask who wants to “be” that character and hand it over so they can bring the story to life.

### CHEEKY BONUSES

- Physical and visual representations of characters make stories more relevant and engaging
- Observing and naming emotions that characters show explores the language in a safe way

### VARIATIONS

- Do your wee ones enjoy drawing characters? If so, glue their drawings to strong card and attach a stick to make shadow puppets to play with
- Wind different coloured wool around sticks or tie scraps of material onto them, chatting about the characters as you make them.

### AND REMEMBER...

Young children are usually pretty accepting of abstract ideas – but if you introduce e.g. a stick as a character and they tell you you’re wrong, it’s a great opportunity! Send them to hunt for something they think would be better, and give them the chance to share their own ideas.



## SCRAP BOX COSTUMES

### THE BASIC IDEA

Costumes can be a great way to “transform” into a character – but they don’t need to be expensive! Use different colours or textures of cloth to represent different characters in your story.

### OVER TO YOU, WEE ONE

Wonder aloud “how could we pretend to be the characters?” as you explore the cloth together. You might end up with a furry blue gingerbread man or a sparkly cow – there are no wrong answers! Try moving with the material to bring characters to life.

### CHEEKY BONUSES

- Costumes/props can give children a focus so they feel less self conscious
- Pretend play helps develop empathy and gives wee ones opportunities to “practice” different emotions in a safe way

### VARIATIONS

- How many different ways can you use one piece of cloth? Is it a blanket, a curled up cat, a river to jump over? Games like this support divergent thinking
- Take tiny scraps of your costumes and glue them onto peg dolls to make mini versions of your characters

### AND REMEMBER...

If wee ones are exploring the enveloping schema, they may need time to cover themselves with the material or wrap themselves up and their focus might not be on pretend play. Let them play the way they need to – you can find other ways to explore characters.



# THANK YOU!

We would like to thank the following people who have contributed to this project and the development of this guide. We are so grateful for your support and input.

**The team at Scots Corner, The Army Welfare Service, all the families and wee ones who joined us for this project, Diane Janczyk, Catherine Wilson Garry, Midlothian Council, The Ministry of Defence.**



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