



**WEE
PEOPLE,
BIG
FEELINGS
HELENSBURGH**



PROJECT REPORT

Two Years of Learning with
nurseries and Armed Forces
Families in Helensburgh



Ministry
of Defence

**THE ARMED FORCES
COVENANT FUND TRUST**
Funded by HM Government

ABOUT STARCATCHERS



Starcatchers is Scotland's Arts and Early Years organisation. We believe that our youngest children, those aged birth-to-five, should be able to fulfil their rights under the UNCRC through access to arts and creative experiences that give inspiration, joy and wonder to early childhood in Scotland. Our mission is to inspire babies, toddlers and young children by including them in high quality live performances and creative experiences that fulfil their right to access a rich arts and cultural life in Scotland regardless of where they live or their background.

The Wee People, Big Feelings approach

"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



Wee People, Big Feelings has been developed to support forces families with wee ones aged 2-5 years old



The Armed Forces Covenant Fund Trust funded Argyll and Bute Council and Starcatchers to bring Wee People, Big Feelings to nurseries in Helensburgh and the surrounding areas in 2024-2026



In 2022 Starcatchers worked with the Ministry of Defence and Scots Corner Early Learning and Childcare Centre to develop creative ideas and resources that helped wee ones develop emotional literacy skills



Wee People, Big Feelings gives little ones opportunities to develop emotional literacy skills every day – they tune into their bodies, and learn to recognise different emotions by “practicing” them through imaginative play and self expression.





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

Expressing emotions as a way to understand ourselves, communicate with others, and meet our needs is a vital part of being human. In supporting young children with their development of emotional literacy skills the expressive arts offer extra 'languages' where these expressions can be played with and made. Behind every behaviour is an emotion and 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). Emotional literacy isn't built in times of crisis however, 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.

The Ministry of Defence recognised the need for more resources that helped children and their families address the big feelings we all can have around deployment. While Wee People Big Feelings Helensburgh is a project focused on the experiences of Naval families, all young children experience many different emotional cycles throughout their early years. Additionally, forces families' experiences are each their own and for these reasons our approach was always open and inclusive.



TABLE OF CONTENTS

Executive Summary	05
Our Approach	07
Voice of the Baby	08
The Yes Space	09
Creative Sessions	
• Curiosity and wonder	10
• Identity and emotions	11
• Storytelling and relationships	12
• Embedding creative practice	14
Starcatchers' Findings	15
What Forces Children Showed Us	17
Creative Champion Journeys	18
Why This Matters for Armed Forces Families	20
Recommendations for the Early Years Sector	21
Final Reflections	22

starcatchers.org.uk

Illustrations by Pearl Kinnear
Photography credit: Brian Hartley



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Across two years, Wee People, Big Feelings has explored how creativity can support the emotional wellbeing of very young children in Armed Forces families. Through long-term artist residencies in early years settings in Helensburgh, Starcatchers worked alongside children aged 2-5 years old, practitioners and Armed Forces families to understand how creative experiences can nurture emotional literacy, strengthen relationships and create opportunities for children to communicate in ways that extend far beyond words.

From the outset, the project recognised that very young children experience the unique realities of Armed Forces life even when they do not yet have the language to describe these experiences. Wee People, Big Feelings created environments where they could express, rehearse and make sense of them through play, movement, storytelling, music, making and imagination.

Across both years, artists Pearl Kinnear and Charlotte Allan, with practitioners consistently observed children returning to themes of journeys, belonging, care, transformation and connection. In Year Two, these observations deepened further. Hidden patterns began to emerge through children's schematic play, revealing recurring themes of:

- Containment
- Rupture and repair
- Unpredictability
- Emotional holding
- Transition
- Co-regulation

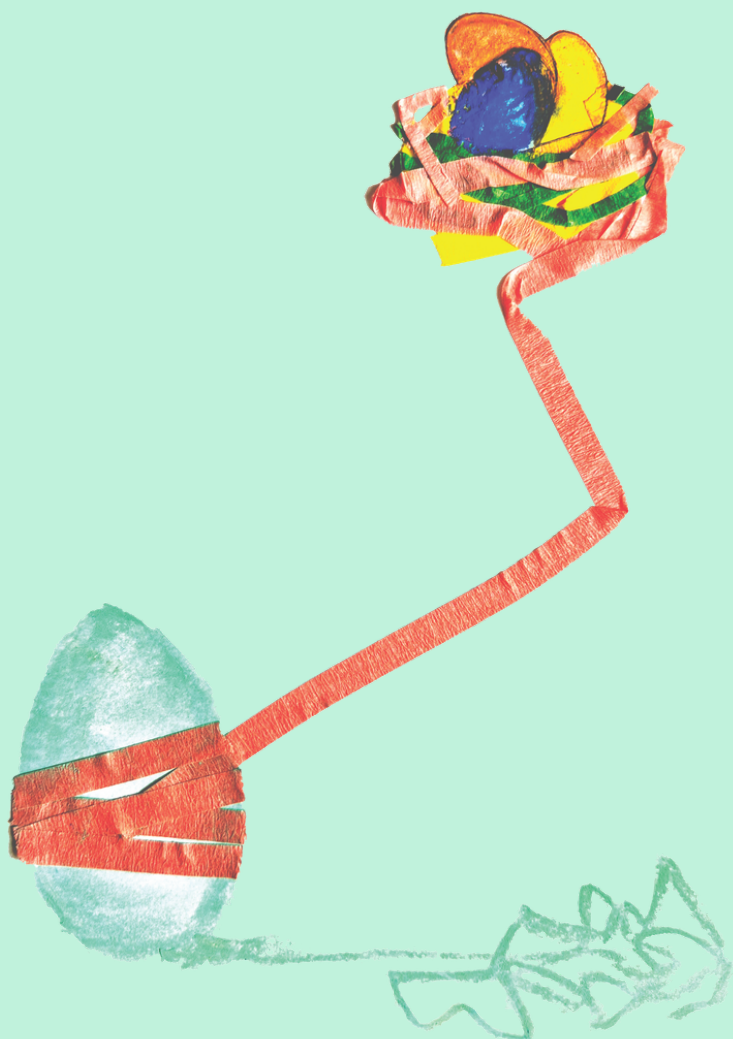
These themes closely echoed the lived experiences shared by Armed Forces families throughout the project, demonstrating how imaginative play provides children with a safe and symbolic way of exploring complex emotional experiences.



The project also transformed adult understanding. As relationships developed over time, practitioners became increasingly confident in recognising creative play as a form of communication rather than simply an activity. Behaviour that may once have been viewed as disruptive became an invitation to ask, "What is this child communicating?" Through sustained collaboration with artists, practitioners developed greater confidence in observing, listening and responding to children's ideas, creating richer opportunities for emotional connection and expression.

One of the strongest learnings from the second year was that embedding creative practice requires more than inspiring individual practitioners. Lasting cultural change depends upon protected time for reflection, collaborative planning and professional dialogue. Despite significant staffing pressures and workforce changes, practitioners remained deeply committed to the project, reinforcing the importance of Creative Champions, relationship-based learning and organisational support in sustaining creative practice beyond the residency itself.

Over two years, the artists came to describe their methodology as creating a "Yes Space", an emotionally responsive environment where children and adults alike are given permission to wonder, experiment, take creative risks and build meaning together. Within this space, adults do not simply lead experiences; they respond to children's ideas with curiosity, care and attentiveness. As one artist reflected, the work is about "your yes meeting their yes." This simple phrase has become a powerful articulation of the relational practice that sits at the heart of Wee People, Big Feelings.



This report brings together the learning from two years of artistic practice, practitioner reflection and family engagement. It demonstrates that creativity is not an additional enrichment activity but a fundamental way in which very young children understand themselves, build relationships and navigate uncertainty. For Armed Forces families, whose lives are often shaped by change and transition, these creative, relationship-based approaches offer valuable opportunities to build resilience, belonging and emotional wellbeing together.

Ultimately, the project has shown that emotional literacy is not something adults teach to children; it is something that children and adults create together through relationships, curiosity and play. By listening carefully to the voice of the baby - movement, gesture, rhythm, repetition, imagination and story - we begin to understand not only what children are communicating, but how creative practice can transform the adults who are listening.

OUR APPROACH

Starcatchers artists worked alongside very young children and practitioners at Colgrain, St Joseph's and Drumfork nurseries in Helensburgh and the surrounding area.

1. **Creative mentoring visits** delivered in each setting
2. **Twilight training sessions** that explored the theory and practice underpinning the work.
3. **Creative sessions** adopted a responsive approach, allowing sessions to evolve in response to the artistic curiosity of the young children, and the expertise of practitioners and Creative Champions.
4. **Creative Champions** over time emerged as leaders within their settings. By the end of the year, artists had moved into a more observational and reflective role, witnessing how creative approaches had become embedded in daily practice.
5. **Starcatchers' Voice of the Baby** was used to guide and support planning and reflections as detailed on the next page.
6. **The Yes Space** is a safe place for very young forces children to play and explore creatively and with meaning.



Throughout the two years of the project, the very young forces children and practitioners together with Starcatchers' Artists, explored a series of creative provocations which gradually built trust, curiosity and eventually a sense of ownership over the creativity in the sessions. The following pages share Artist reflections of surprising moments they identified during sessions. We have identified themes that emerged through the forces' children's patterns of play and creative choices:

1. Curiosity and wonder
2. Identity and emotions
3. Storytelling and relationships
4. Embedding creative practice

VOICE OF THE BABY: REFLECTIVE GUIDE

To help us record observations and reflections from the mentoring sessions included in this booklet we used the Voice of the Baby Reflective Guide. This is a framework developed by Starcatchers with researchers from the Royal Conservatoire of Scotland (RCS) and Queen Margaret University to support inclusion of the 'voice' of babies and young children through arts experiences.



The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989), or UNCRC, enshrines children's right to express their views on all matters affecting them, and to have those views given due weight (Article 12). Though the children we met in these sessions were no longer babies, a huge amount of communication happened without words, including communication around emotions. Using this framework helped us make room for the contributions of all children.

There are five areas described in the Reflective Guide which we used to guide our reflections:

1. **Curating the Space** – How did space and its use influence the experiences?
2. **Building Sensitive, Informed Relationships** – What roles did relationships play and how?
3. **Navigating Identity** – When did our various identities impact behaviour and outcomes?
4. **Respecting and Validating Complex Communication of Babies** – What kinds of communication could we observe?
5. **Making Time** – When was time and timing important?

More on the Voice of the Baby work, and how the guide can be used to support artistic practice is available through the Starcatchers website.

THE YES SPACE

Over the two years of Wee People, Big Feelings, one idea surfaced again and again through conversations between artists, practitioners and children. We came to describe it as creating a "Yes Space."

A Yes Space is a space where children are invited to wonder, experiment and communicate without fear of getting things wrong. Equally, it is a space where practitioners give themselves permission to follow children's ideas, to slow down, to notice, and to trust that meaningful learning often emerges through process rather than predetermined outcomes.

The abundance of materials played an important role in creating this atmosphere. Tape was available in generous quantities rather than carefully rationed. Long strips of folded paper became enormous roads stretching across the nursery floor. Fabric became rivers, boats and hiding places. Puppets, musical instruments and loose parts became invitations into shared stories rather than resources with prescribed uses. These materials were valuable not because they produced beautiful outcomes, but because they offered endless opportunities for transformation. They invited children to ask, "What else could this become?"

As the project developed, the artists became increasingly aware that the most important resource was not the tape, the paper or the puppets, but the permission to use them freely. The creative experiences demonstrated that when children are trusted with open-ended possibilities, they repeatedly surprise adults with their ingenuity, empathy and emotional understanding.

The Yes Space also challenged common misconceptions around emotionally responsive practice. Throughout the project, the artists reflected on the distinction between being gentle and being permissive. Boundaries remained important, but rather than directing children's play towards fixed outcomes, adults worked alongside them, responding to ideas, emotions and moments of curiosity.

One artist described this simply as:

"Your yes meeting their yes."



CURIOSITY AND WONDER

The first phase of the project focused on creating spaces of possibility. Through light, colour, texture and transformation, children were encouraged to investigate materials and explore their environment with openness and excitement. Sessions celebrated experimentation and established a culture of "yes", where children could express themselves without fear of getting things wrong.

Surprises

The excitement of a change in environment and different adults in the room does heighten emotions and some children look for big movement play, for one child with English as an additional language, their shout of excitement was the first vocalisation made since recently joining the nursery.

Boundaries created for one little boy where not always anticipated immediately by the other children but once pointed out they adapted and there was a consciousness in the room for everybody to facilitate that calm space for that one little boy. His example led to other children making beds in the snow blankets for their friends.

In the nursery setting with our U.V. interactive session the children extended their search beyond what we brought and looked for things it reacted with, like elements of clothing, their teeth. Anything that is white will turn purple in Ultra Violet light, but lots of other everyday things react too, especially children's toys, some books too. Post it notes are usually fluoro colours, and there are a wealth of U.V. reactionary colours in kids' clothing, shoes, and always worth using it as an excuse to check out the natural world.

"One of my favourites is blackened bits on bananas. There is usually an U.V. aura when you shine a light on it." **Starcatchers Artist**



We wanted to create a 'yes' space where children can explore and express themselves without judgement.

IDENTITY AND EMOTIONS

As relationships developed, activities increasingly invited children to connect creative experiences with emotions. Colour, role play, movement and sensory materials became tools for exploring feelings and communicating needs. Children were encouraged to develop their own interpretations and to recognise that there is no single "correct" way to experience or express emotion.

Surprises

In one setting the riot of colour was met with very high energy, such as throwing fabric and streamers into the air. Charlotte incorporated the fabric into big movement imaginative play; she became a fish caught and brought onto a boat and eaten whilst being able to manage tugging and wrapping safely. This then developed into a more focused activity of wrapping her up and staff supported the children in respecting boundaries, we collaborated in explaining the need for a boundary (that would be sore on her neck) and redirecting action (put it on my arm). Introducing conversation around feelings, a child who had recently been enthusiastically 'eating' Fish-Charlotte asked "are you comfy?" whilst fetching her cushions. The imaginative role-play made space for big feelings and actions within a safe construct. We noticed how personal boundaries and necessary rules often led to conversations around emotions, for both children and adults. The hoops also offered literal boundaries as the children used them as doorways or portals, stepping through them into new imaginary spaces or becoming a superhero.

Outwith the outline of possible outcomes we got the chance to welcome children who do not normally interact with more linear art activities. One child discovered in crossing over the paper that the chalk dust took on the pattern of the sole of her shoe and she repeated the action creating a patterned area at the top end of the paper. Another boy spent quite a bit of time using crepe paper rolls rolling it out in a line to the corner of the room where he piled the remaining paper into a nest structure and then put some of the egg shaped chalks in it. He was fully focused on the process of creating the safe space and one of the practitioners commented on how neither of these children usually respond to the visual art activities.



We wanted to make sure that children didn't feel there was a 'correct' assignment of colour to feeling, and that individual interpretations were welcome.

The Creative Champions brought artistic offers into the play, placing themselves as available to adorn or be changed through creating costume. There was a skirt made from hoop and tape and another hoop which became a boat. The colours enabled imaginative role-play such as a child who had covered themselves in green of many kinds and said, "I want to be a green monster and scare my mum – she won't even smell me coming".



STORYTELLING AND RELATIONSHIPS

Stories emerged as powerful vehicles for emotional exploration. Through characters, puppets, costumes and collaborative adventures, children rehearsed experiences of care, separation, belonging, fear and joy. Imaginative framing enabled children to encounter big feelings within safe and playful contexts.



Surprises

The Creative Champions rose to the challenge of taking ownership of a storytelling box and we had four completely unique stories which developed into interaction and play with the resources in different ways. Pearl and Charlotte were able to support children who wanted engage differently to the large group surrounding the storyteller. One child took an idea from the story (a tiny frightened pompom hedgehog) and decided to build a fort using blocks and other objects around the hedgehog to protect them. When other children came in later and found this fort Pearl was able to give the story behind it as they dismantled it, inviting them to build their own version after they had taken it apart. Here a story idea with an object led on to different forms of creative play, rippling on to other children who hadn't been present for the initial story. A lot of care was expressed towards the pompom creatures and people that were created, some children made gifts for their friends and another created a pompom version of each family member. Where do stories start and end for children? Costume building and the hula hoop as a way to travel stayed on the menu. One child wanted a specific colour of cellophane to create his costume. We thought we had run out but found more towards the end so made sure to leave a piece big enough for him to re visit after lunch. The travelling hula hoop took us outside this time, where speed and strength became a part of the play. The superhero component was strong tying in with elements of play where children were saving other children or being their parents. Amongst this I noticed one child sitting within earshot and processing colour and pattern by organising coloured pens on the table.



The Creative Champions reflected afterwards on how engaged the children were in the story, the mission, and the characters. They described a child who 'wouldn't usually join in' being very involved, a quiet child who was more vocal, and one who normally avoids any kind of dirt or mess getting stuck into playing with the Holi powder. This led to a conversation on motivation, and emotional engagement, being heightened by the imaginative framing. The children were welcoming and kind towards Grandma, helping her with her bag, her glasses, and holding her hand. Some also wanted to talk about their own grandparents. Not every day at nursery could be as special as this, and its unusual nature heightened the impact. One child combined mark-making, embodied, and verbal communication of emotion when they drew a heart on the ground with chalk then jumped over it declaring, "*I love this day!*" At the other setting landscape was built from lengths of material, wrapping paper and other familiar things from the Nursery. Big pieces of rip stop nylon became a wrapping for children and then turned into a boat to traverse the gym hall, more children got into the boat and we all shouted heave as we pulled the material and children on their journey. Exhausted at the other side the children became the carers as we were exhausted from the tiring journey.



The emotion face stickers were a fun opportunity to play with making faces and expressing feelings. Wearing them as 'buttons' which activated different emotions or used to make puppet characters. Some children put a lot of quiet time and focus into detailed puppets, non-verbal communication was included, as well as conversations about people, feelings and characteristics. An example of exploring relationship through scrap puppetry was when a child asked Charlotte to be the 'daddy' for the puppet monster they had created. This led to a repeated story of the wee one going away with the 'baby' monster and Daddy having to find them, with lots of happiness and hugs when he did. Other children joined in, taking up the two characters with their own quickly created monster puppets. Another child who had been hurt and needed comforting, initially calling for her mum, was able to move through her experience through the play, going from tightly hugging a puppet monster (and the adult puppeting it) to eventually enjoying a playful game where she was 'the baby' wrapped up and given to a Creative Champion. In this later game she was still in receipt of care and hugs, but also giggling and taking an active role in the story being played out. An example of how creative play allows for a variety of ways 'in' to an emotional experience.

THE LITTLE MOMENTS

Embedding creativity in everyday practice

Over two years, Wee People, Big Feelings moved beyond exploring how artists work with forces children towards understanding how creative practice becomes embedded within everyday nursery life. One of the most significant findings was that embedding creativity is not primarily about resources. It is about relationships. Children do not remember whether the tape was expensive or whether the puppet was professionally made. They remember being listened to and feeling safe enough to explore. And crucially, having adults who respond to their ideas. Artists also reflected on the importance of ensuring that creativity did not become associated only with Starcatchers' visits. One question surfaced repeatedly throughout Year Two: How do children experience this same sense of possibility every day? This prompted new thinking about legacy. Rather than leaving activity plans, the artists began imagining creative inheritances that could continue generating stories long after the residency had ended. Puppets, musical instruments, recordable buttons and story bags filled with open-ended provocations were selected not as finished resources but as invitations to future creativity. Equally important was the recognition that practitioners themselves are the project's most valuable legacy.

Surprises

Pearl and Charlotte did not find it easy to observe activity as the children immediately wanted to play. Sharing of resources was a common source of conflict, and in some cases we were the resource being fought over. Boundaries, patience, listening, and sharing all came into play. With their longer, and more established relationships, the practitioners could manage these dynamics effectively. Through the process of extended play we saw how relationships between children could be difficult, find resolution, then become difficult again, all as part of a longer, ongoing journey. Unlike some of the more structured sessions the stories that were created with children had time to be repeated, changed, or tail off without resolution. The knowledge practitioners have of the children they work with extends and deepens how they are able to engage with them creatively from a position of care. One practitioner commented on how enjoyable it was to see a child, who had recently had some very challenging experiences, entering joyfully into the playful interaction they had initiated with 'belly laughs'. The Champions lived up to their titles (without shouting about it), demonstrating through their practice creative and open-ended play, and making space for the children's expression. It is these little moments of connection and discovery that hold the most meaning, as they build skills in a safe environment that will serve the children well as they grow.

It is easy to see how something messy can be perceived as destructive or nonsensical but there is always a sense to these actions and we got to chat with a champion working with under twos taking small opportunities to notice the process in the small things. Digging, piling dirt on a doll, then on their head repeated over and over with toy digger in hand. We talked about creative flow as we had mentioned it in Creative Skills sessions. The freedom to move through a process whether it is fruitful or not can be frustrating for adults but incredibly productive for children. Seeing the creativity, accepting the process is what the champions and other nursery practitioners demonstrated so well in this session. The ability to see how they themselves are the creative catalyst in the mix.

STARCATCHERS' FINDINGS



"The imaginative role-play made space for big feelings and actions within a safe construct."

Emotional literacy is developed through play

One of the clearest findings was that emotional literacy is not taught through instruction alone. Children explored feelings through movement, role play, sensory experiences, stories, mark-making and imaginative play. These opportunities allowed emotions to be practised, revisited and expressed within relationships that felt safe and supportive.

"Where do stories start and end for children?"

Relationships underpin emotional wellbeing

Forces children demonstrated empathy, care and an increasing awareness of one another's needs. They comforted friends, respected boundaries, nurtured characters and revisited conflicts as part of the normal ebb and flow of relationships. These everyday moments highlighted the importance of connection in supporting emotional resilience.

"The knowledge practitioners have of the children they work with extends and deepens how they are able to engage with them creatively from a position of care." **Starcatchers Artist**

Creativity creates multiple pathways for inclusion

Practitioners observed significant engagement from children who would not typically participate in more structured activities. Children with different communication styles, interests and support needs found their own ways into the experiences, demonstrating the inclusive potential of open-ended creative practice.

"The superhero component was strong tying in with elements of play where children were saving other children or being their parents." **Starcatchers Artist**

"Outwith the outline of possible outcomes we got the chance to welcome children who do not normally interact with more linear art activities." **Practitioner**

Children communicate in many different ways

The project reinforced the importance of recognising the many forms communication can take in early childhood. Gesture, movement, repetition, silence, role play and creative expression all provided valuable insights into children's experiences. The Voice of the Baby framework supported adults to notice and respond to these complex forms of communication.

Open-ended materials encourage agency and imagination

Children repeatedly transformed simple materials into entirely new worlds. Hoops became portals and boats, cardboard became dens and landscapes, and scraps of paper became costumes and creatures. The project demonstrated that meaningful creative experiences do not require expensive resources but rather time, trust and permission to explore.

"This connected our mark-making to dreams and the imagination, and also conversations around fear and comfort." **Starcatchers Artist**

Sustained mentoring builds confidence

Practitioners increasingly moved from participating alongside artists to leading creative experiences themselves. This gradual transfer of ownership enabled Creative Champions to develop confidence and recognise the creative possibilities already present within their everyday practice.

Small moments have profound significance

Some of the most meaningful outcomes emerged through ordinary interactions: children caring for each other, moments of shared laughter, stories repeated over time and playful exchanges between adults and children. These moments, though easily overlooked, revealed the depth of connection, trust and emotional learning taking place.

Imagination supports resilience

Stories, characters and role play allowed children to engage with big emotions from a place of safety. Through monsters, superheroes, journeys and puppets, children explored themes of care, separation, fear and belonging. Imagination provided a protective framework within which emotions could be encountered and understood.

"The ability to see how they themselves are the creative catalyst in the mix." **Starcatchers Artist**

Creativity changes how adults interpret children's behaviour

One of the most significant findings across two years was a shift in adult perception. Practitioners increasingly asked, "What might this behaviour be communicating?" This shift transformed everyday interactions. Children's schematic play, repetition, movement and experimentation became recognised as meaningful forms of communication rather than behaviours requiring correction. The project demonstrated that creativity does not simply provide opportunities for emotional expression. It changes the lens through which adults understand children.

Artists noticed practitioners becoming increasingly curious about children's behaviour rather than seeking to manage or redirect it. Moments that may previously have been interpreted as disruption became opportunities for reflection and enquiry. One particularly memorable moment involved a child tearing apart a large collaborative paper road. A practitioner understandably worried about wasted resources and the disruption to the activity. Rather than stopping the child, the artist encouraged everyone to pause and consider what was emerging. Together, the child and practitioner transformed the ripped paper into spikes and new sculptural forms.

These findings demonstrate the power in creative experiences in providing opportunities for forces children to develop emotional literacy, strengthen relationships and build skills that will support them throughout periods of unpredictability. For Armed Forces families, whose lives may include periods of separation, transition and uncertainty, these opportunities for connection and expression are significant.



"Emotional literacy isn't built in times of crisis however, 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."

Starcatchers Artist

WHAT FORCES CHILDREN SHOWED US

The forces children consistently demonstrated their capacity for empathy, imagination and emotional expression. By paying close attention to their actions, gestures, stories and interactions, we gained valuable insight into how young children make sense of their world and the people around them.

Children care deeply for others

Across the project, children repeatedly showed kindness and compassion. They created beds and calm spaces for friends, protected vulnerable characters, offered comfort and helped one another navigate moments of difficulty. During one story adventure, children cared for Grandma, helping her carry her belongings and guiding her safely. Puppet characters and imaginary creatures were nurtured, wrapped up and looked after, with many stories centring around reunions, belonging and connection. These moments revealed that empathy is not something children simply learn about; it is something they practice through relationships and play.

Children communicate in many ways

Not all communication happened through words. Some children expressed themselves through movement, repetition, mark-making or sensory exploration. Others communicated through stories, role play and gesture. One child who had recently joined nursery and had English as an additional language vocalised with excitement during one of the sessions. Another child, who would not usually engage in visual art activities, became deeply absorbed in creating patterns using chalk and exploring materials in their own way. The project reinforced the importance of adults recognising and valuing multiple forms of communication.

Children return to themes that matter to them

Superheroes, monsters, journeys, hiding, home, family, caring and rescue appeared repeatedly throughout the year. Children revisited ideas through different materials and stories, often developing narratives over time. Many stories focused on looking after others, finding someone who had gone away, or helping characters return home. Rather than moving quickly from one activity to the next, children showed us the importance of repetition and revisiting experiences as part of emotional understanding.

Children flourish when there is no right answer

Open-ended materials and invitations allowed children to find their own ways into play. Children transformed hoops into boats, mirrors, doorways and portals. Streamers became pathways and costumes. Chalk became maps and messages. Scrap materials became puppets and companions. Given time, freedom and trusting relationships, children repeatedly surprised us with their creativity and ingenuity.

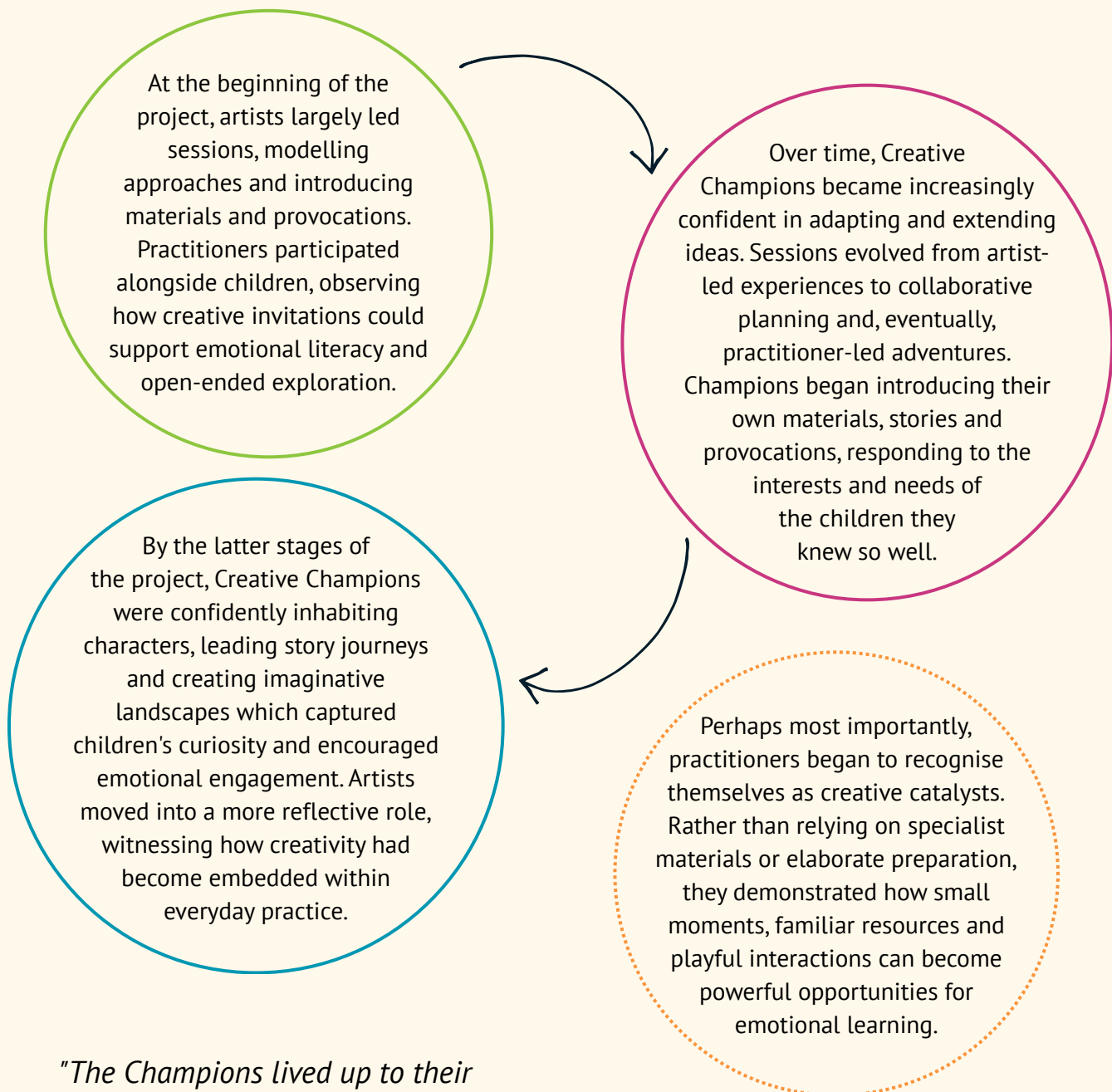
Joy matters

Some of the strongest memories are moments of shared laughter, delight and wonder. One child drew a heart on the ground and declared, "I love this day." Another group spent time creating snow beds for friends. There were belly laughs, imaginary journeys and endless invitations for adults to join in. These moments remind us that joy itself is important. Feeling safe, connected and playful creates the conditions in which emotional literacy and resilience can flourish.

*"One child took an idea from the story (a tiny frightened pompom hedgehog) and decided to build a fort...to protect them." **Starcatchers Artist***

CREATIVE CHAMPION JOURNEYS

One of the central aims of Wee People, Big Feelings Helensburgh was to build confidence and capacity within the early years workforce. The Creative Champion model enabled practitioners to work alongside Starcatchers artists over an extended period, creating opportunities for shared reflection, experimentation and professional growth.



"The Champions lived up to their titles (without shouting about it), demonstrating through their practice creative and open-ended play, and making space for the children's expression." **Starcatchers Artist**

Year One highlighted the importance of sustained support and relationship-based professional development. Confidence did not emerge from a single training session but through repeated opportunities to observe, experiment, reflect and play alongside children. The Creative Champion model has demonstrated the potential for lasting change, building confidence that will continue to influence practice long after the project itself has ended.

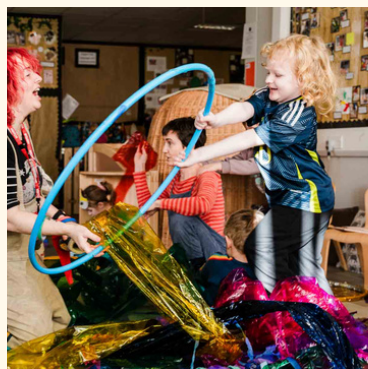
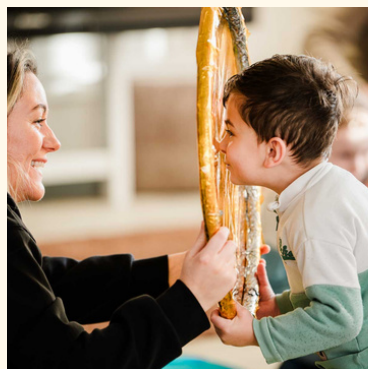
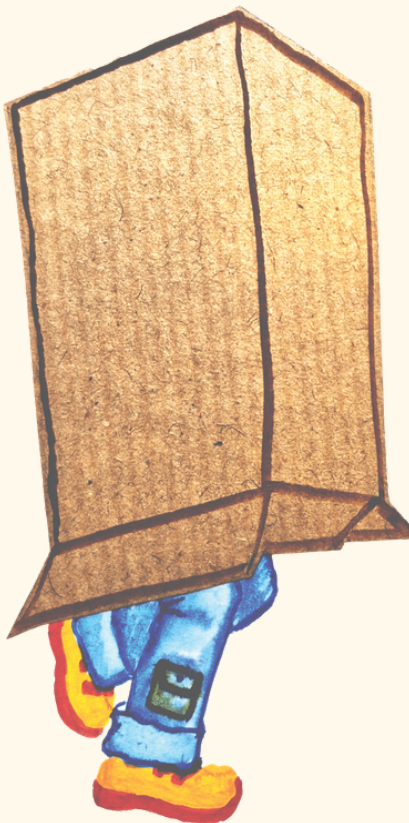
In year 2 staffing changes, room ratios, changing leadership and workforce turnover meant practitioners had fewer opportunities for shared planning than in Year One. Twilight sessions, which had been central to the first year of the project, were no longer possible. Instead, reflection often happened in small conversations between sessions or while responding to children's play.

Despite these challenges, practitioners remained deeply committed to the work. Artists reflected on the generosity with which staff continued to engage while balancing the realities of a busy nursery.

One artist noted:

"Working in a large nursery with tight ratios, high numbers and constant movement brought challenges, and the practitioners remained incredibly engaged despite significant pressures."

Embedding creativity is about creating the organisational conditions that allow reflective practice to flourish. Creative Champions became even more important within this context. They provided continuity through staffing changes, modelled creative confidence for colleagues and helped sustain the relational ethos of the project. The project has shown that lasting culture change requires ongoing investment in people as much as programmes.



WHY THIS MATTERS FOR ARMED FORCES FAMILIES

Young children often experience change before they have the language to explain how they feel. Moves, deployments, altered routines and periods of separation can bring uncertainty and a wide range of emotions. Creative play offers children ways to express and rehearse these feelings long before they are able to articulate them fully.

Forces children repeatedly explored themes of care, belonging, journeys and reunion. Stories about finding missing characters, protecting vulnerable creatures and travelling together emerged naturally from their play. These narratives suggest that imaginative play provides children with opportunities to process experiences symbolically and safely.

The project also highlighted the importance of everyday relationships. Emotional resilience is not built solely during times of challenge but through ordinary moments of connection, laughter and shared experiences. Creative approaches create opportunities for these moments to happen, strengthening relationships between children and the adults who care for them.

Importantly, the resources and approaches used throughout the project were simple, accessible and adaptable. They relied not on specialist equipment, but on curiosity, conversation and shared play. This means that many of the approaches explored through Wee People, Big Feelings can travel with families and practitioners, offering continuity and opportunities for emotional expression wherever children find themselves.

As Armed Forces families navigate periods of change and uncertainty, creative play can provide a powerful means of maintaining connection and supporting wellbeing.

wee

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR THE EARLY YEARS SECTOR

"Seeing the creativity, accepting the process is what the champions and other nursery practitioners demonstrated so well in this session." **Starcatchers Artist**

1. Invest in sustained relationships rather than one-off interventions

Confidence and meaningful change develop over time. Practitioners benefited from repeated opportunities to observe, experiment, reflect and revisit ideas alongside artists and colleagues. Relationship-based professional development creates the conditions for lasting change.

2. Recognise that emotional literacy is built through play

Young children do not learn about emotions solely through direct instruction. Imaginative play, storytelling, movement, mark-making and sensory experiences provide rich opportunities for children to explore and rehearse feelings within safe and supportive relationships.

3. Value all forms of communication

Children communicate in many ways. Paying attention to gesture, movement, repetition, silence and creative expression allows adults to better understand children's experiences and ensure that all children are included and heard.

4. Trust children's ideas and interests

Open-ended experiences invite curiosity, agency and ownership. When children are given permission to explore without fear of getting things wrong, they frequently reveal unexpected creativity, empathy and insight.

5. Use simple materials creatively

High-quality creative experiences do not depend on expensive resources. Everyday materials such as cardboard, paper, fabric, chalk and loose parts can provide endless possibilities when accompanied by time, curiosity and responsive adults.

6. Recognise relationships as the foundation of resilience

Emotional wellbeing is built through everyday experiences of connection, care and belonging. Small moments of shared joy, comfort and understanding are not incidental outcomes; they are fundamental to children's development.

7. Make space for joy and wonder

Laughter, delight and curiosity are powerful indicators of wellbeing. Creating environments where children experience joy and wonder supports emotional security and lays the foundations for learning and resilience.

8. See practitioners as creative catalysts

Creativity is not something delivered by specialists alone. Practitioners, parents and carers all have the capacity to nurture children's imagination and emotional development through playful interactions and responsive relationships.

9. Celebrate process as much as outcomes

Children's learning is often found within the journey rather than the finished product. Slowing down, noticing and valuing the process of play allows adults to recognise the rich emotional and creative learning taking place.

10. Listen with curiosity

Perhaps the most important learning from Year One is the importance of listening with openness and curiosity. Children do not always communicate in ways adults expect, nor do they always need adults to provide solutions. By creating spaces where children feel safe, respected and valued, we allow them to show us what matters to them.

FINAL REFLECTION

Over two years, Wee People, Big Feelings has become an exploration of how very young forces children make sense of themselves and the world around them. Again and again, children reminded us that emotions are rarely expressed in straightforward ways. They are wrapped into stories about monsters, superheroes, journeys, nests, boats, wrapping, hiding, paper roads and puppets. They appear through movement, repetition, rhythm, silence, laughter and care for others. Long before children can explain what they are feeling, they are already communicating it. Our role as adults is to remain curious.

Across two years, practitioners increasingly described themselves as slowing down, noticing more and trusting children's ideas. Artists became less concerned with leading creative experiences and more interested in creating the conditions where creativity could emerge naturally. For Armed Forces families, whose lives may include deployment, transition, uncertainty and reunion, this matters deeply. Creative play cannot remove those experiences, but it can offer children somewhere safe to rehearse them, revisit them and make sense of them alongside trusted adults.

The lasting legacy of Wee People, Big Feelings is that it is a way of working that values curiosity over certainty and the process over outcomes. The project has shown that for many young forces children, it is one of the primary ways they come to know themselves, understand others and discover that whatever they are feeling can be held safely within relationships.





info@starcatchers.org.uk
for more information

STARCATCHERS.ORG.UK



@starcatchersuk

Registered and mailing address:
Whale Arts Agency, 30 Westburn Grove,
Edinburgh EH14 2SA



Starcatchers Productions is a limited company,
registered in Scotland (SC392561),
and a Scottish-registered charity (SC042222).



**Ministry
of Defence**