

Calvinball 2019 : Sharing the play



In June 2019 we took our outdoor, interactive theatre performance *Calvinball* to 21 groups in West and Central Scotland. The performances, for under fives and their adults, were free at point of access and we targeted groups of families with barriers to accessing the arts. *Calvinball* is a play about play, and is designed to encourage adults to join in open creative interactions with their children. In August and September we were able to return to 12 of the original groups with a follow-up art workshop. A total of 1004 people engaged with our work over the course of this project.

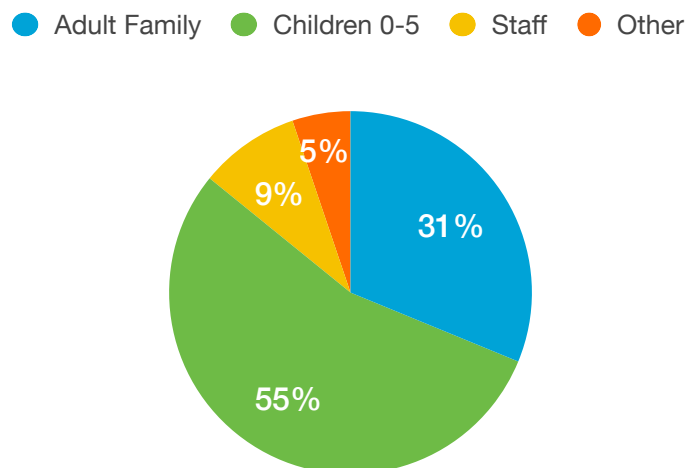
This evaluation, written by Charlotte Allan, is based on data gathered in the following ways.

- Observing engagement during the performance (as one of the performers) and workshops (as co-deliverer).
- Gathering verbal feedback at the workshops from adults who had attended both.
- An online questionnaire given to the group organisers.

Who we met (those we met twice in bold)

- **BRAG, Hamilton** - Community action group in area of multiple deprivation
- Erskine Community Nursery - SCIO nursery
- **Craiglea Care Home**, Renfrew - Dementia care home residents and their nursery buddies
- **Village Storytelling Centre**, Pollok - arts engagement in area of multiple deprivation
- **ARC** and Spotty Zebras, Ayr - Groups for home school children and children with additional support needs
- **Indigo Childcare**, Garrowhill and **Castlemilk** - nurseries in areas of multiple deprivation
- **Moray Nursery Class**, Grangemouth- nursery with high percentage additional support needs and poverty
- Linnvale Nursery, Clydebank - nursery in area of multiple deprivation
- Robin House Children's Hospice, Balloch - children with a variety of additional needs
- **Toddle Tots CIC** and Corseford School, Linwood - Outdoor toddler group and school for children with complex needs
- **Barlinnie Fathers Programme**, HMP Barlinnie - Family contact time as part of programme teaching prisoners about interacting with their young children.
- **Little Angels**, Pollok - Toddler group for families in area of multiple deprivation
- Mearns Nursery, Newton Mearns - Nursery class which includes children with disabilities
- Butterfly Nursery, Arden - nursery in area of multiple deprivation
- **Forgewood Family Learning Centre**, Motherwell - Family centre with many refugee families attending, in area of high deprivation
- Raploch Nursery, Stirling - nursery in area of multiple deprivation
- Forth Valley Twins and Multiples, Dunblane - Toddler group for families with multiples
- Kippen Playgroup - rurally isolated toddler group
- **The Phoenix, Dumbarton** - community group in area of multiple deprivation

872 people attended the performances and 220 the art workshops (of whom 132 had also been to the show). Of these 1004 people 548 were children up to age five, 313 were adult family accompanying them and 90 were staff. The category 'other' includes dementia care home residents (27), some older children and prison guards.



“The timings were perfect, the kids had a ball and it managed to stay dry for us. [The performers] even managed to get some of Barlinnie’s toughest to get up and dance!! Amazing :0”.

Family Contact Liaison Officer HMP Barlinnie

Successes

We delivered the planned project to time and budget; both the performances and workshops were well received by all the groups with positive comments from parents, staff, organisers and children.

We aimed to encourage play and positive communication within families and we were able to observe situations where people visibly overcame initial wariness; for example a parent who at first refused Rhubarb’s gift of a ribbon saying “oh no I won’t be joining in”, who by the end was playing with our props and her child - initiating and building on physical offers of play, laughing together and being daft. This kind of response supports our belief that it is worth putting in the efforts needed to make the adults feel comfortable, that they know they are not being put on the spot and that their involvement is voluntary. At the art workshops I had the opportunity to talk in more depth with parents about their thoughts on the show and also play in general, and what they find helpful in supporting play with their children.

“A really positive experience for all. Very gifted workers with a lovely natural approach.”

-Group leader



When asked what they thought their group got out of the visit, group leaders replied with comments such as:

- **“Real sense of community”,**
- **“amazing parental involvement”**
- **“fun, laughter, camaraderie”,**
- **“Children and parents/carers playing together. Also giving parents and carers ideas they can replicate at home. Encourages and supports parental engagement within the nursery while also reducing social isolation for some of our children and families”.**

Direct feedback from parents and carers backed this up with comments on how the show encouraged them to play imaginatively with objects 'making things other things' and interest in using the art materials again which we brought to the workshop. This playfulness is where the wellbeing impact of our project is rooted. One parent put it this way **“Being playful like you are, with my kids, is something I try and be but I’ve found it hard, there were some things going on in my life and I’ve had depression. And watching you do it was really encouraging”.**

After one of our art workshops the organiser told us how well we had integrated one of the adults there into the activity and play. She was a parent of school age children who no longer attended the group, and was described by the organiser as “an ex-user and quite vulnerable”. The organiser felt it was a credit to us that she felt comfortable and able to join in the activity. That we meet everyone as individual people is usually most obvious (and a bit radical) when applied to babies but also applies to adults who are marginalised for whatever reason - and whether we know that in advance or not. This approach is an attitude we take throughout and as well as unexpected outcomes like the one just described, offers an atmosphere of inclusion and kindness that supports the risk taking that underpins creativity.

“Amazing. The use of objects being other things was great, we do that at home now. And we had to get him a ukulele, he was trying to take it into bed last night”

-Parent



This project gave us the opportunity to perform at a dementia care home to residents and their nursery ‘buddies’. We were inspired and encouraged by the experience; residents enjoyed watching the children as well as us and we were able to engage in non-verbal play with residents and children together. A care worker commented with pleasure that a resident, a man with little mobility and communication, was saying “I’m happy”.

Performing outside was a choice made to encourage adult engagement in the play, and being accessible to children who ‘won’t sit’. It also has additional benefits of promoting outdoor play and allowing for larger audience capacities. By asking for an outdoor space we encouraged the groups who were normally indoors to access outside areas, in one case creating a new connection (between a community nursery and nearby church) that they expected to be the beginning of an ongoing relationship. Nurseries in particular reported to us that children were noticeably focussed, both in the performance and during the art workshop.

During the latter part of the art workshop I would play the ukulele and jam with the families and their newly made shakers. This was an interesting and varied part of the engagement and gave opportunities to meet people in a creative space - usually non-verbal. I was able to include children with disabilities, children who “don’t normally join in” and assertive verbal children as there was no external structure to constrain us. When we had the chance to play outside the mud sang too and a parent pointing out the burn was “dancing”. On one occasion I was playing musically with a mother and her toddler who after a while of non-verbal to and fro with sound and movement snuggled into her mum and said “I love you” - a spontaneous communication of affection that popped out of sharing a creative moment.

It is our highest aim and delight to be creating the conditions for creativity, connection and love.

Challenges

We knew that it might prove difficult to see all the groups that we wanted to in the time frame necessitated by having a show on tour. We were unable to visit most of the groups we had met during our previous funded tour of *Head in the Clouds* in 2017 which was a disappointment to us and them but was always a case of logistics, usually timing though appropriate performance space was also an issue. Our producer, Janis, was able to find ample groups to fill the two weeks however and we made some great new connections. It wasn't simple arranging the follow-up art workshops in August/September as many groups stopped for the summer, and scheduling issues again got in our way.

Being outdoors was well planned for, we only had to use our back up indoor option at two venues and both worked fine. The rest of the time the rain stayed off and we didn't encounter any problems though our only feedback suggestion offered was to provide more seating for adults (we had tarps for the grass and a few chairs).

By visiting existing groups we were relying on them to bring the audience. Where this was an institution that was simple enough but where it was a community group and there was an element of publicity needed and the only resources we could offer were pictures and information and online sharing. On the whole turnout was very good, the exceptions being a group in Bathgate where it started raining and nobody came, and our follow up art workshop in Hamilton, again the weather to blame. At Robin House Hospice we only had one child at the performance but the show was a lot of fun with staff joining in well, it is an element of the hospice setting that when organising a date in advance there's not a way of knowing who will be there so it was always going to be a matter of chance. We were still able to offer something playful and entertaining for the hospice staff there that day.

At nursery settings the attendance of parents and carers was mostly good. Nursery staff reported the difficulty of getting parents in to engage with activities and were happy that we were offering something enticing. Only one setting didn't get any parents at all, something that they said was typical for them, but nonetheless disappointing for us as our aim was to meet with families. We felt that parents were more slow to engage with us in nursery settings and we needed to encourage them to sit and to play with their children as they might otherwise choose to stand apart and observe from a distance.

Gathering feedback from an early years performance is tricky. Parents and carers may be unable to fill in a form and many audience members are pre-verbal. In this project we did not have an additional person to gather information from audience members. Returning after a few months with the art workshop was an opportunity to gather detailed feedback from families and we did get some good insights and observations on how seeing the show had fed into their lives at home. It was also interesting to notice how young children, who could not articulate their memory of the show, still played with me with greater confidence. Less written feedback from group leaders was gathered on the show than might have been the case had we sought it sooner rather than later.



Recommendations

Having a follow-up art workshop worked well as a way of enhancing the impact of the work and enabling more detailed evaluation. However, it was limited by scheduling difficulties that arose mainly from the timing constraints necessitated by mounting outdoor theatre in Scotland. For a similar project I would recommend organising the show and workshop schedule in a more connected way, without a gap that spans the summer holidays.

We hope to build on our success in the care home setting with an intergenerational project that links more nurseries and care homes.

“you are great, I’d have you at his next party.”

Mum of toddler at HMP Barlinnie

“It was good you just let them do what they needed to do”

Mum at Pollock Baby & Toddler Group (on if the performance was suitable for wee ones)

“It was great, and they talked about it afterwards”

Nursery staff member (on the show)

**The performance was fantastic, the kids had a great time
and the attending adults were hugely complimentary!**

Staff member at Community Nursery

Who funded us

Foundation Scotland supported us with £1503 towards the cost of the Producer and Artistic Director working on the project. We received £4000 from the Robertson Trust, which was conditional on being matched by other funders. This condition was met by grants from the Maple Trust (£2500) and Souter (£2000). The Lynne Foundation contributed £500 towards the companion visual art workshops. Our total project income was £10503

How the money was spent

The fees paid to people working on and delivering the project formed the bulk of expenditure and came to £8365.40

- Producer, 2 weeks £966
- Artistic Director, 1 week £483
- 3 Performers for 3 weeks £4347
- Director, portion of 1 week £317.40
- Diverse Audience specialist, 1 day £200
- Baby Sign specialist, 1/2 day £120
- Visual Artist (design and delivery), 2 weeks £966
- Participatory Artist (delivery and evaluation), 2 weeks £966

A total of £325.32 was spent on materials

Travel costs came to £395.70

Insurance £369.97

Admin costs, for administrative support and general running of the company were budgeted at 10% of the project costs - £1050.30

This brings our total expenditure to £10506.69