



# 2022 Playful Gardens Report

Playful Gardens was a monthly inclusive family day held within the Dundee Botanic gardens in 2022. It's key aims were to offer relaxed outdoor opportunities to play creatively together and access support, for families who may face additional challenges in other environments.

# Playful Gardens

To be able to share the experience and visit to this wonderful place with my whole family and to feel each of us gained something special. We love the Botanics so thanks for the experience – parent

## The project team



The project was developed by CAMHS and Art at the Start at University of Dundee, along with partners at Dundee Botanic Gardens, Dundee Contemporary Arts, Barnardo's families team, Scrapantics, and Nurture Steps. We wanted to work together to pilot and develop monthly outdoor play days for families who might find it hard to access play in other environments, and who need a more relaxed, child-centred, and less restricted environment to support them to play together. We all came from a position of meeting the needs of families and following the children's lead.

## Impact Snapshot

6

inclusive Family Play Days in Dundee Botanic Gardens

15

organisations coming together to support

more than

1000

opportunities for families to play together outside.





## Why it was needed

Play is crucial for children's wellbeing but not all families have equal opportunities to be playful together. Families across the city can struggle to find play opportunities that meet their needs; they may have children who struggle to concentrate or stay still, they may have neurodiversity such as ADHD or autism, or they may have special educational needs. We also know that Dundee has very long waiting lists for extra support from CAMHS so this offered a way to help families access some informal support. We know that families can feel self-conscious and judged about their children's behaviour in some environments, or they may hold a lot of anxiety about how they will manage. This is especially true in environments which pose a lot of restrictions or are very structured.

We aimed to create an environment where families felt they could let go of some of those worries and enjoy their time together, providing enriching playful opportunities for the children and the chance to interact positively as a family.

We loved this! A great balance of organised activity and freedom to explore. My eldest said 'I feel really welcome here'- parent



## Funding Summary

£4860

Funding from Tay Radio  
Cash for Kids and  
Festival of the Future

£5192

Contributed in kind by  
participating  
organisations

72

Days of time  
volunteered

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## What was delivered?

We ran 6 free monthly inclusive play days with a range of activities spread throughout the beautiful environment of the garden.

- Scrap Antics delivered loose parts play
  - Art at the Start offered creative, messy play
  - DCA offered structured art making like print making, clay and watercolours
  - CAMHS offered sensory play or forest school
  - Barnardo's volunteers organized outdoor games.
- We also provided snacks for families, and had more informal areas such as music making, activity prompts and treasure hunts that were self led.



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We invited support organisations and were joined on different months by Dundee ADHD support and by Perth Autism Support, running stalls to share information with families. As we developed, we were able to bring in other activity providers, so over the months we were joined by DJCAD architecture 3-d printing and running design games, the Darcy Thomson Natural History Museum with craft and activities linked to their collections, Peace Begins with Me offering mindfulness and yoga, Sound Play studios offering electronic sound experimenting, and Dundee Science Centre offering science activities.



[Playful Gardens offered us] art and games in a lovely safe setting, with friendly workers. We came to several of the days and liked recognising some people and having a few new things. My youngest loves the loose parts and my older two liked the art, all enjoyed the drums and other instruments, and seeing the printer making them a lightning shape to keep - parent

# Reaching Families

We targeted families through the CAMHS Facebook group, and later by directly emailing families on their waiting list. We also advertised to families who work with Barnardo's and to Kingspark school. We gave these families a week of priority booking before opening the sessions to the public.

The ethos of the sessions was to be inclusive to everyone who felt they would benefit.

Before each session we posted maps as it helps some children to know in advance what to expect, and we gave these out on the day along with play ideas, so families could explore and choose the activities to access.



- The play opportunities offered enjoyment, creativity, increased confidence, skills development, control, autonomy and choice.
- The activities were immersive in the garden space and have no right or wrong way to play.
- These kinds of child led activities often resulted in more positive play together and allowed the parents to really enjoy their children



## Supporting Families



Sessions proved extremely popular. We had 80 children at our first session and we gauged we could increase our capacity, so subsequent months had over 180 families at each session.

Altogether, we offered over 1000 opportunities for families to play together outside.

We recorded feedback on the days as well as surveying families' views after the events.

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## Adapting

The project was designed as a 'learning journey', scoping out what was possible and gathering feedback from families. As a result, we made some adaptations based on the responses from feedback as we went along.

Some adaptations were simple. For example, a family with an older teenager suggested that our musical instruments needed improved, so we created giant recycled xylophones to hang in the trees, and brought in large drum kits, guitars, barrel drums and rain sticks. This area then proved extremely popular.

Some required more reorganization. Families fed back to CAMHS staff that some of their young people would benefit from a quieter start to the session and so we added an extra hour to the format so we could offer a reduced number of bookable spaces for a gentle beginning.

We had feedback that a more accessible toilet would help increase accessibility and we were lucky that the Festival of the Future was able to fund a special 'changing places' bus from PAMIS for our last session of the year to make that more accessible to those with complex physical needs



## Barriers families face

In feedback families told us about barriers they usually face in accessing play together. They worried about the suitability of venues, how staff might manage, whether their children would become overwhelmed. There were also barriers around the costs of entry and the difficulties of meeting the needs of several children.

It's hard to all go somewhere together because of our youngest's behaviour issues. You never know how he'll manage or what folk will say - parent

We don't always know what will suit our childrens' needs or if staff will be understanding - parent



It was positive to hear from families that some of the usual barriers to accessing play were addressed in the design of Playful Gardens.



no one judging or blaming us while my child enjoyed themselves, a nice mixture of people, positive and welcoming workers - parent

It was good for both ages and needs of our two boys. It was free and we could park so didn't need to risk a bus meltdown - parent

I think the playful garden is a fantastic idea. I have three daughters and my littlest son has additional support needs. We find it hard to do things as a family as he struggles with indoor things and people so being outside was amazing for him, he took part and seemed genuinely happy 😊 - parent



# What Families Valued

- Families said that they had appreciated the non-judgmental atmosphere and that they felt welcomed by staff.
- In particular, some children found it reassuring to know who staff were with our green shirts and to have a map in advance to know what to expect.
- Being a series of events helped children grow in confidence.
- Parents told us they had not seen their children as engaged in an activity before, or for such a long time
- Parents noticed their children were calmer than usual.

We loved it - thank you! This being our second visit was good as he was clear that he wanted to go to the music, DCA and Scrapantics when we arrived. Having the core regular things is great so it feels familiar, we spent 3 hours and loved it all. And the sunshine was great too! Nice touch to have the juice and snacks. This is a great model - safe enclosed space, being in nature and being outside, open-ended play, optional to take part, friendly support staff (t-shirts are good for recognising) - parent



- Families said they had enjoyed the opportunity for family time together and that they were planning to replicate particular activities at home. Staff we were able to demonstrate some ways to play with children which are about letting children direct the play and be creative, so they had ideas to take away to their home environment.
- Families appreciated having a range of activities, so that the children could orientate towards an activity that suited their mood for that day and time

My kids were free to move and experience new things without being judged for being messy or noisy as they were just being curious and everyone there understands that - parent





- Families who had other siblings were able to have a space to all play together, as the open-ended play and art opportunities were adaptable and personalized, so there were no age restrictions and all children in the family will be able to take part.



The opportunity to visit with all three children and find different activities fit them to try. It can be challenging to find one particular thing they agree on so the variety was amazing - parent

Some relaxed fun together doing arts crafts and building, suitable for both our children (one who struggles and one who doesn't but often misses out) - parent

- The organisations taking part also fed back that they had observed the benefits for families, and for them as workers in being able to engage them in this context.
- Staff noticed that parents were able to observe and reflect as they watched their children play, notice what they are able do, and get ideas from staff.
- Staff saw a shift over the sessions in how involved parents became in the play.

As facilitators, we had the time and space to give people the support that they needed , so that everyone seemed happy with their efforts. It was a joy to be outside and seemed more relaxing for everyone than many indoor sessions, where there is less space. The sensory experience of being in the garden was very inspiring and motivating and seemed to be reflected in the art work. The outdoor space and the large range of activities on offer seemed empowering for the children.  
- visiting organisation



We were helping parents to enjoy and understand their children. We could see them come in quite tense and come out without that - facilitator



# The Benefit of Outdoor Space

- Families and the organisations who joined us all fed back that the outdoor space was important in offering a relaxed, calm and beautiful environment.
- We know that the outdoor environment can support wellbeing and may also be free of some of the things which can cause distress or challenging behaviour indoors such as sudden noises, lighting, or lots of rules.

My child was relaxed and liked the atmosphere and I did not feel my usual worries that he was too loud or might not manage and the outdoors helped that. It also felt a safe outdoor space as opposed to a park he may run out of, or a wilder space which wasn't as accessible - parent



- It was more possible to move around freely and there were less imposed restrictions.
- The outdoor space prevented some children from being overwhelmed where usually an activity or that number of other people would be challenging.
- Staff running the activities also noticed that the atmosphere was calmer than usual and put this down to the garden setting.

My kids were calmer and so was I. They love feeling the freedom to run everywhere - parent



Thank you for a brilliant day! [my child] absolutely loved it and now wants to go every week 😊👍 She even commented on "how nice" everyone was and I couldn't agree more. Would love this to be a more regular event. Well done to all involved 😊 - parent





# Thank you

Thank you to all the organisations and volunteers who joined us. Thank you to Tay Radio Cash for Kids and University of Dundee Festival of the Future whose funding made it possible. And most of all thank you to all the families who joined us and shared your experiences

