



Creative Play Annual Report

Overview:

Half Moon has worked in Tower Hamlets Early Years settings for the last fifteen years on an ad hoc basis, subject to funding. Some of the most impactful work has been through family learning sessions with pre-school children and their parents/carers. As the Headteacher at a local nursery recently said: "Many of our children present behavioural challenges deriving from, but not restricted to, limited opportunities, parental engagement, and little socialisation with other families. This directly impacts on their child's capacity to learn." *Creative Play* uses creative, sensory play to support participating children's emotional and physical development, as well as the development of their creative expression. We delivered six programmes of ten-week sessions each year in different centres (two each term) around the borough, with up to 15 families per session, giving them opportunities to meet other families from a range of different backgrounds.

Sessions are primarily drama and movement based, sometimes drawing on other artforms, including music, puppetry and visual arts. Facilitators create a strong link between ideas and materials used in sessions and everyday objects found at home, so that parents/carers can continue the learning at home. The programme uses narrative through physical play, with language repetition built into the structure and activities, as a form of pre-literacy. Formal sessions will last an hour, including free play where Facilitators interact with children and their parents/carers. This informal mingling with parents/carers elicits feedback about any anxieties and encourages them to deepen their engagement with the project and to mix with each other.

Thanks to funding from the Tower Hamlets Local Community Fund (LCF), since September 2019, Half Moon has delivered family learning sessions on a termly basis for children under 5 and their parents/carers, including those from marginalised groups, to create more positive family environments in which their children are supported to thrive. The academic year, 22/23 plus half of the Autumn term 2023. Creative Play was delivered at the following Tower Hamlets Children and Family Centres (CFCs).

Importantly, our offer promotes reaching a mix of participants from different sections of the community.

Autumn 2022: Ocean CFC – Monday mornings from 10.30am-11.30am
Collingwood CFC – Monday afternoons from 1.30pm-2.30pm

Spring 2023: Isle of Dogs CFC – Thursday mornings from 10am-11am
Meath CFC – Tuesday mornings from 10am-11am

Summer 2023: Meath CFC – Thursday afternoons from 1.30pm-2.30pm
Wapping CFC – Tuesday mornings from 10am-11am

Autumn 2023: Ocean (Shadwell Site) CFC – Monday afternoons from 2pm-3pm
Mowlem CFC – Friday mornings from 10.30am-11.30am

Across the year we delivered:

- **70 sessions**

and worked with a total of:

- **192 participants from 92 families**
 - * 62 participants from 29 families in the autumn term;
 - * 42 participants from 20 families in the spring term;
 - * 45 participants from 22 families in the summer term.
 - * 43 participants from 21 families in the autumn term.

Children and their parents/carers are selected to take part in the programme by the CFCs to support the children's development and the parents/carers' confidence in terms of playing creatively with their child and developing skills in supporting their child's language and physical development. We encouraged the centres to identify families who would benefit from this programme. Since the pandemic, we have advocated that Creative Play supports those families most negatively impacted by the effects of the lockdowns and restrictions on social and community activities.

Our aim was to work with the same ten families over the ten weeks of the programme, but some centres were keen to offer the programme for two lots of five weeks to as many families as possible. Some families did the programme over ten weeks, some just for five and if any families couldn't come for a week, the centres put in additional 'drop-in' families to ensure all spaces were filled, even if some families only got to attend one or two sessions overall. Some CFCs engaged a higher number of families through inviting a higher number of families to the 5-week model.

The sessions used drama and creative, sensory play to support participating children's emotional and physical development, as well as the development of their communication and creative expression. We aimed to support connections between parents/carers and their children whilst using everyday objects so that this connection could continue at home, building on the learning and replicating the experiences within the family. Each session was delivered by two experienced Facilitators, one Lead and one Support (accompanied by a University Placement Student wherever possible).



Planning

Weekly sessions were designed to follow the children's lead, having an informal structure that enabled the children to be fully involved in how the activities progressed. Each session was designed to include children and adults in a series of activities encouraging physical activity and exploratory play. The programme explored creative play, using narrative through physical play with lots of language repetition built into the structure and activities. The sessions included a gradual development of the sense of performance skills, with the participants becoming comfortable being a character and acting things out.

Five sessions are repeated from the first half of term to the second to enable children and parents/carers to build skills and feel confident and braver to experiment more when the session happens a second time around.



The Creative Play sessions have been drama and movement based, using an imaginative journey to a different setting each week to build the children's imagination (London, a magical forest, the desert and outer space). For example, in the Magical Forest session, tutors lead the participants to explore trees and falling leaves, meet different forest animals, climb through spider's webs, find the magical castle over the steppingstones, meet a witch, retrieve the magical eggs, and dance with butterflies.

Importantly, the sessions were also designed to encourage socialisation between families, whereby children and parents can spend quality time together and build their confidence whilst playing and engaging. Creative approaches to challenging behaviour are also offered within the delivery to empower parents and carers with new techniques to set boundaries for their children in the home.

"The sessions were great, planned very well for this age group, very engaging. It was great for sense of community and belonging, and fantastic for the development of my child."

Intended Project Outcomes:

Using creative, sensory play to support participating children’s emotional and physical development, as well as the development of their communication skills and creative expression.

In planning, tutors consider that we must allow young children to explore using their bodies, voices, and imaginations, encouraging them to feel confident with creative movement, which ultimately impacts their physical development. Physical movement and imaginative play has become a high priority for children and their families, especially since the Covid-19 pandemic. Emotional development is also key to planning stages. Early childhood developmental milestones are considered alongside the importance of positive connections with caregivers for example.

- All sessions are practical and engaged the children’s physicality in different ways: fine motor skills, using their whole bodies, operation on different levels, moving around the whole space.
- Sessions encouraged independent thinking around participants’ own creativity and using their imaginations. They had to imagine different settings and scenarios. The sessions used a lot of repetition, for example repeating phrases, and conversational style games between parents/carers and children.
- Communication was also developed non-verbally. Facilitators used different facial expressions and tone in voice to say hello which all the children copied. When playing with soft play balls at the start of the sessions, the facilitators signed the colours and invited everyone to copy, which they really enjoyed.
- The practitioners modelled things and the parents/carers and children could copy and extend and explore themselves, directly impacting on creative expression and positive engagement.

Calm sensory activities were delivered alongside higher energy and more imaginative activities. This inclusive approach meant that everyone could engage in some part of the session and as they went on and participating families became more familiar with the structure, they were able to participate more, developing their skills. The repetitive structure increased confidence in all participants and allowed the children and family members to lead parts of the session they were familiar with.



Supporting parents/carers to connect with their children and feel confident to play creatively together.

Before the programme started

"My daughter is very shy to talk to others, so she needs to build more confidence."

At the end of the programme

"This has made us both so much more confident to be able to meet other parents. The Half Moon team are amazing!"

On occasion, we found that some parents/carers were hesitant to join in, Half Moon staff explained that the big people in the room could model active behaviour for their children. The structure of the sessions meant that the practitioners led by example and encouraged the parents/carers to lead by example too. Free play at the start of every session permits a soft start and enables the children to immediately engage in the activities and requires the parents/carers to work with their little person collaboratively, reminding them that they were there to play and not just be an adult observer. This active engagement allowed really nice moments of connection through play. Gradually the parents/carers' confidence grew, and they were able to contribute more each week. The children seeing their parents/carers fully involve themselves in the session meant that they got more confident as well.

- The sessions created an environment that was open, and the practitioners did that through checking in with individuals throughout the sessions. People felt comfortable talking about their mental wellbeing during the sessions.
- Parent/carers felt comfortable asking the Half Moon practitioners for advice, as well as asking one another for advice or support on what to do with their child.
- The sessions encouraged parents/carers to know that there is no right way of doing things and they shouldn't be afraid of trying new things. The sessions encouraged an open conversational relationship with the adults, that promoted non-judgemental support. This year we have supported individual families outside of session time by signposting appropriate services for example.

Through learning new games, using imagination and singing in a supported environment, parents/carers could focus on playing with their child, without distractions, including from other siblings. This meant they could build on the connection with their child and learn new ways to support them, by observing how the facilitators were working with them.

Creating a strong link between ideas and materials used in sessions and everyday objects found at home, so that parents/carers can continue the learning and replicate the experiences at home.

- Facilitators created a strong link between ideas and materials used in sessions and everyday objects found at home, so that parents/carers can continue the learning at home.

- We ensured the resources used in the sessions were everyday objects, such as using masking tape as a tightrope and cutting out leaves from green paper. The same resources were often repeated in different sessions, highlighting that simple objects can be used in a variety of ways to create multiple imaginary worlds.

The practitioners learned all the parents/carers' names and helped them to feel comfortable in the space. They didn't allow anyone to sit back and watch their child interact with others, to ensure they became comfortable with playing in this way and to encourage them to use the ideas, games and new ways of playing at home. The practitioners ensured they tailored all activities to the individuals' needs and took into account siblings and other distractions which they might have at home. Parents/carers shared how they were inspired to use materials they already had at home, such as bedsheets and items of clothing to replicate the experience.



Importantly, the sessions were designed to encourage socialisation between families, whereby children and parents can spend quality time together and build their confidence whilst playing and engaging. Creative approaches to challenging behaviour are also offered within the delivery to empower parents and carers with new techniques to set boundaries for their children in the home.

Meeting the Intended Project Outcomes:

By the end of the programme we expected:

- Parents/carers to show a stronger connection with their child;
- Parents/carers to feel more confident communicating with their child;
- Parents/carers to improve their knowledge in supporting their child's development.

Through the programme we aimed to:

- Help the participating parents/carers and children build their resilience;
- Make a difference to the parent/carer and child relationship;
- Build confidence and social well-being in parents/carers and children;
- Improve children's language development through conversations;
- Build relationships between families.

Parents/carers told us that they were taking part in the programme for a variety of different reasons:

- *I would like to see my daughter play/ learn*
- *Expand my child's communication*
- *My daughter is very shy to talk to others so she needs to build more confidence*
- *Allow my child to interact with others (children and adults)*
- *I want to enjoy seeing my child have fun and enjoy it together*
- *I want to help my child make friends*
- *I want her to socialise with children and use different senses to play*
- *I want to learn things I can do at home*
- *I'd love to learn how to support his vocal/ talking development from an early age*
- *explore new ways of playing, be taught by experts who have experience, build my child's confidence*
- *she loves interacting with adults and kids, I'm open to learning new techniques to help her develop*
- *she is very shy and cautious, I'd like one to one time, I'd like to feel secure and confident in what I do with her*

By the end of the programme, 87% of parents said that the sessions had helped them to connect with their child; 73% of parents said they felt happy as a result of the sessions and 53% said they felt more confident in their parenting skills. 87% of parents told us that they had learnt new ways to support their baby/child.

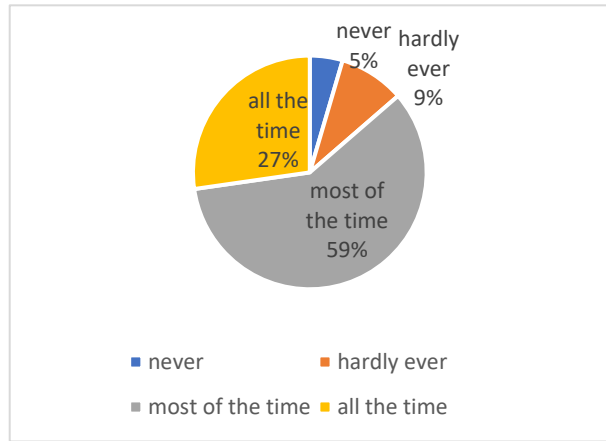
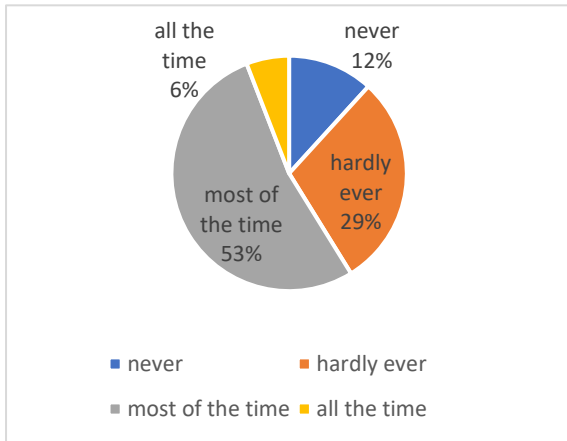
Evaluation

We have undertaken various methods to effectively evaluate this project, including:

- Pre- and post-project questionnaires for family members
- Tracking of individual children and their family member
- Reflection circle at end of each session
- Weekly evaluation notes by tutors
- End of term evaluation with tutors

Examples of Pre and Post questionnaire results:

My baby/child and I spend time with other people together

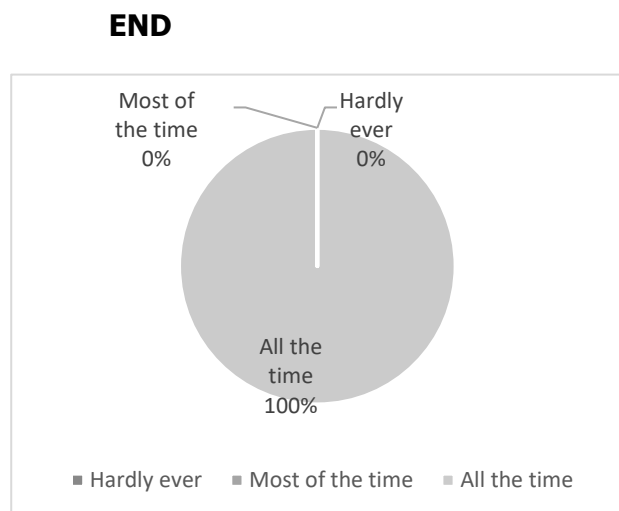
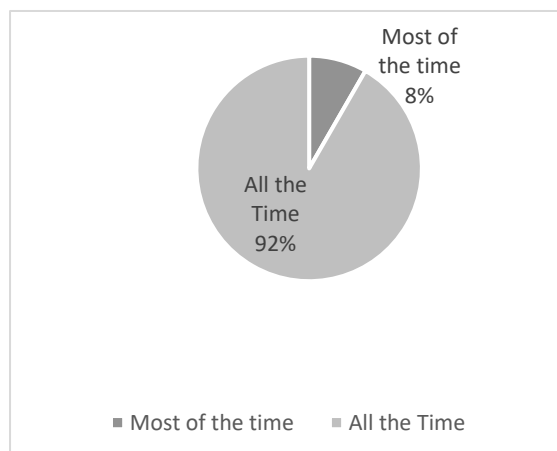


At the start of the programme 6% of parent/carers felt they and their baby definitely spent time with other people, this increased to 27% by the end of the programme. Importantly, at the start, 41% shared they hardly ever or never spent time with others, this number decreased to 14%

Parent / Carer feedback includes:

- *X is extremely imaginative and playful, and we try to let her lead the play. She loves pretend and physical play, so these sessions really encourage that and help her foster her happiness. It has been amazing to be a part of these sessions! We have met so many people!*
- *Since my son has begun coming to the Half Moon sessions, I have noticed a massive change in his confidence and his personality in a very positive way. This helps with meeting new people.*

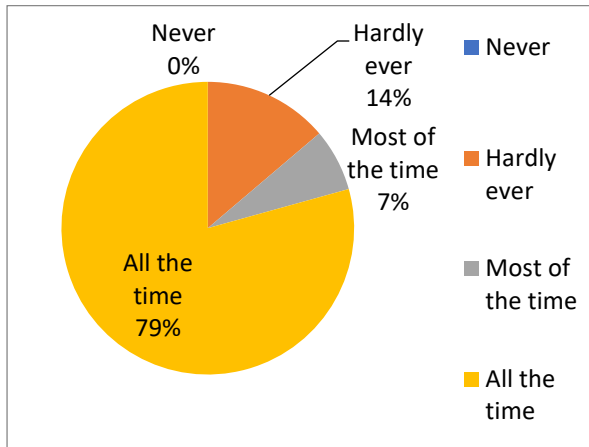
My baby/child and I talk together



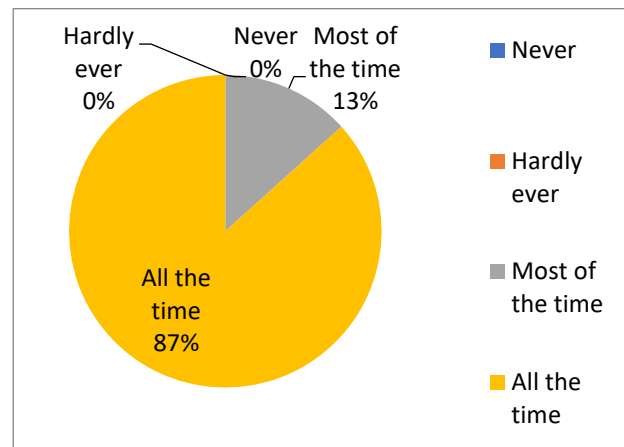
By the end of the programme, 100% of parent/carers said they talk together with their baby/child.

My baby/child and I sing together

START

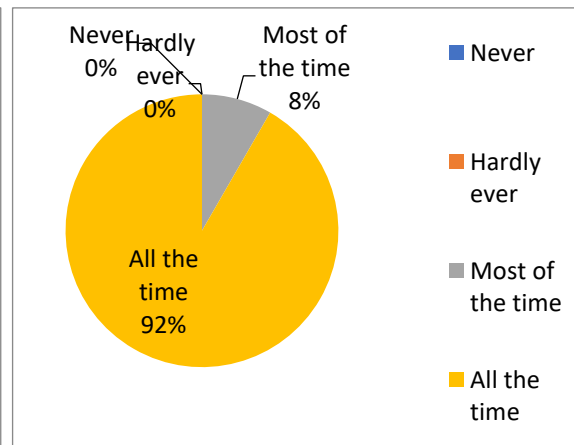
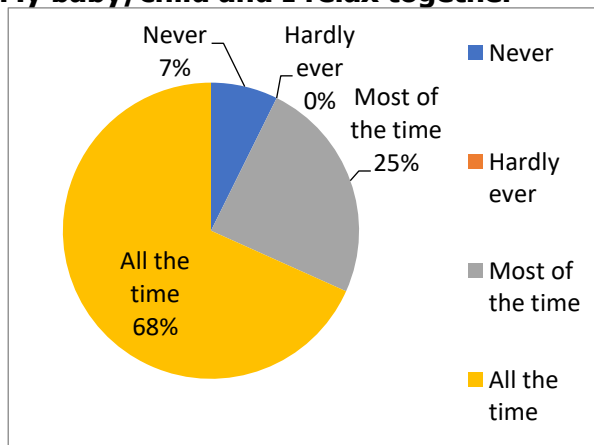


END



At the start of the programme, 14% of parent/carers said they hardly ever sing with their baby/child, this completely disappeared by the end of the programme.

My baby/child and I relax together



At the start of programme 68% of parent/carers said that relaxed with their baby/child, this increased to 92% feeling this way by the end of the programme.

Feedback from Parents/Carers:

- X has really loved the play leaders and joined in actively with all the games. It is her favourite thing to do every week.
- The sessions were great, planned very well for this age group, very engaging. Even though I've been in theatre and have run creative play and storytelling sessions I have learned new ways of playing and supporting early years development. It was great for sense of community and belonging, and my child has benefitted from coming, immensely.
- Magical freedom to just be in a space with simple resources but opened up my imagination and helped me see the world from my little one's perspective and made me remember the games I played as a child and how much I loved to play and use my imagination. Felt rejuvenated and inspired.

- You guys are doing an amazing job, thank you!
- The Half Moon team have been wonderful, X and I have looked forward to creative play each week and I will miss it very much. They are a great team and have provided X with great practice to be patient, do good listening and to use her imagination in play, which she continues to enjoy at home. Thank you!
- I loved seeing how much X enjoyed the sessions and was able to take part in all of them even in the abstract moments and having fun. I'm so pleased he used and developed his creativity in the sessions.
- I find the teachers amazing with the parents and children. We will miss coming here and I found it very good with meeting people and making friends.

Feedback from Practitioners:

- It was lovely to build community. We saw a number of families share contact details and arrange play dates in the park for example.
- It was great to hear families share ideas about what they had developed at home. One parent did a painting with their child about the session, showing how much of the session they remembered and creatively engaged with.
- We saw huge progression in so many! We saw a few first steps...!
- We saw a clear impact of physical development. The repetition meant the sessions were accessible for all.
- Children and family members remembered the songs, would positively copy what we said, initiate some of the things and take control. They led on tidying things away and had ownership of the plan. They understood the format and structure, and we saw participants looking after each other.
- Some speech came on amazingly.
- The feedback about home activities allowed all to be reminded about what happened in the session.
- At one centre, we had a child who for the first 3 weeks they didn't vocalise anything, by the last session they were laughing, giggling and communicating with other children.
- It was great to see the joy in parent/carers faces. Looking at parents looking at their toddler and it's the first time they have seen them to do these.



Tracking

Across all of our programmes, we look for markers of progression for our participants – these are often tailored outcomes around something in the realms of confidence, creative expression and social interaction. Through conversation with those working in the early years fields where we were delivering our early years projects, including Creative Play, we were keen for the sessions to explore ways that the connection between the child and their parent could be impacted by their involvement in creative activities, as well as the parent and child's social skills and creative skills.

All tutors were involved in weekly tracking of some participants to evaluate the following:

- Social engagement
- Creative engagement
- Connection between parent/carer and child

The tutors undertake detailed tracking of two participating families which work on a scoring system of 1-10, an improvement of 1 score indicates some improvement, 2 shows clear improvement and 3 shows striking improvement.

Notes from Weekly Tracking (A Case Study): Mum A and Child B

Week 3: Social engagement – 3, creative engagement – 3, connection – 3

B is getting better at engaging with the activities and was less disruptive each week. She is very engaged with us and other children. She played a lot with another child, and they made friends. She respected other children's boundaries and made friends. She loves imaginative play and copies everything really well. She likes to stand up or sit in the middle of the circle when we do the Hello song.

A speaks to us a lot but doesn't chat to the other parents/ carers as much. She works hard to engage B with the activities and understands that she sometimes has a slower processing time and benefits from instructions needing repeating.

Week 5: social engagement – 5, creative engagement – 4, connection - 4

Week 10: social engagement – 9, creative engagement – 9, connection– 8

A continues to engage with us, and this has developed to before the sessions have started and after the final exercise. She became an extra member of the team! She also started to speak to the other parents in the room. A gave B her space but also encouraged her in the activities.

B came up to us at the start of the session and asked him what the plan for today was. She remembered the songs and sings along; she joins in with the dance warmup and the activities. Her development, engagement, speech and positive copying has been a delight to see.

A and B show striking improvements in all areas.



Conclusion:

Creative Play has been very successful and provides a structured creative social space that provides parents and children with a narrative-driven approach to play that supports them to build imaginative play which is child-led and focused on the connection between them; where parent and child can learn from and support one another. The programme is delivered by experienced creative practitioners in theatre who research, devise and prepare relevant materials for the programme. This helps to create a strong link between ideas and materials they use in their workshops and objects that can be found in the home, so that parents/carers can replicate the activities and continue learning for the children. Adults involved have shared their gratitude to the facilitators in supporting this imaginative play. The home session plans have been successful in supporting this exploration beyond the actual sessions. Creative Play aims for parents to gain the necessary knowledge and skills to extend their own creative play with their child, using everyday items and enhancing their own confidence and personal development in the process. This work is informed by the Five to Thrive (KCA, 2022) model, but simplified. The Five to Thrive model is a way of understanding how connected relationships are fundamental to human well-being and help us to build resilient communities. It focuses on talking, playing, relaxing, engaging and responding. Half Moon considers that Creative Play highlights the importance of theatre as an artistic and cultural experience for children and their family members.

The future:

The reputation that Half Moon has for delivering this work, funded by Tower Hamlets Council, means that we have successfully used the LCF grant as leverage to get additional funding to deliver the programme in CFCs, nursery schools or community spaces in Tower Hamlets and beyond. With this additional funding we are currently running the programme in Overland CFC for the whole of this academic year and in the Isle of Dogs CFC until December.