

**Creative**

**Children**

**Stronger**

**Families**

Thursday 9 November 2023



# Welcome to the Creative Children, Stronger Families forum

**It is a pleasure to host you at The Hullabaloo. There are only a handful of dedicated children's theatres in the UK, and we are proud to open ours to experts from health, education, local government, arts, and research sectors. Today our venue is bursting with people who care as much about children and families as we do. We could not be more delighted.**



Make yourself at home in our café and theatre. Feel free to imagine and dream in our Creative Play space. If we could only ask one thing of you today, that would be - to dream.

Imagine a future where every child has access to fantastic creative play. A world where they engage creatively with their grown-ups in supportive joy-filled environments. A place where relationships thrive, learning is accelerated, and positive mental wellbeing flourishes. Perhaps it is not so far away.

You are about to hear the story of Let's Play; Theatre Hullabaloo's socially prescribed creative play model. This sits alongside our free Creative Play facility at this venue, a year-round programme of child-centred theatre performances and participation activities, specialised Baby Play Packs, a popular summer festival, and a range of projects with Cultural Education Partnerships, schools, and nurseries.

Underpinning all of that are a set of core principles I am sure everyone here today shares; accessibility, inclusion, a focus on tangible positive impacts, and a commitment

to giving children the best offer possible. Especially those in the early years because we know how important the first 1,001 days of their lives are to shaping healthy, happy, successful futures.

We also know life is tough for many families right now. In the wake of the Covid-19 pandemic and the midst of a cost-of-living crisis, child poverty is rising, speech and language skills are suffering, school readiness is deteriorating, and parental mental health is under pressure. Theatre Hullabaloo understands it cannot be the answer to all these challenges. But we can do something. We must.

Let's Play is a way of using creative assets to bring joy in tough times, to build family capacity and parental confidence, support child development, and address perinatal mental health. It is the only programme of its kind in the UK and is the focus of insightful research.

We have some learning to share and are excited to hear what you think, not only about creative play and social prescribing but about the role of creativity in children's life chances. We haven't invited you here just to listen.

Today is the start of a shared conversation. One that can help build a National Centre for Children's Creativity, with the mission of

enriching all children's lives and improving family outcomes. Judging by the overwhelming interest in today's forum, it's a mission a lot of people want to be part of.

Not least our colleagues at Arts Council England, Tees Valley Combined Authority, Darlington Borough Council, York St John University, the British Academy and Tees, Esk and Wear Valleys NHS Foundation Trust. All of whom have made key contributions to Let's Play and today's event.

Creativity is the essence of humanity. It shaped the world we live in, and it will help us overcome the challenges we face in the future. Play is the engine of learning and the joyous

instigator of family connection. We can't wait to bring both together with you today and start talking about how we use both to make the biggest difference we can.

Creative Children, Stronger Families - it is a dream we can make come true. I look forward to talking with you.



**Ben Dickenson**  
Chief Executive Officer,  
Theatre Hullabaloo



# Let's Play

Miranda Thain



## Why play? Why us? Why now?

Play opens the imagination, develops the brain, helps us lay the foundations for positive relationships and makes us feel happy. It is the way that young children make sense of the world around them.

whenever we are open, empowering parents to discover and imagine alongside their child. Since opening The Hullabaloo almost 6 years ago, more than 100,000 people have come to play.

**“Play is our brain’s favourite way of learning.”**

**Diane Ackerman**

Central to the work of Theatre Hullabaloo is a belief that creative activities experienced together can support children and their families to be the best they can be for each other. At the heart of The Hullabaloo is our Creative Play facility which houses themed art installations; beautiful child-centred spaces that are free for people to play in

In addition to the semi-structured play invitation of our spaces, there was a clear need post-Covid-19 pandemic for artist-led play programmes that recognised the value of creative play from the start of life to support parental wellbeing, encourage positive engagements and to support vulnerable families to build stronger social networks in the first 1,001 critical days.



## The story of Let's Play

Let's Play is a short programme of creative play groups for parents and carers with their children, including music, movement and free play, and is designed for families with 0-24 month babies and 25-48 month pre-schoolers.

The programme grew from commissioned work by Theatre Hullabaloo to create Hullabaloo Baby Play Packs for 0-12 month olds (and subsequently 0-24 months and 3-5 years) in partnership with Family Hubs. This project was initially a response to concerns about social isolation for new parents and rising levels of Post Natal Depression during Covid-19 lockdowns.

Through the pandemic, the original Play Pack programme was evaluated by the Institute for Social Justice

who began a journey with Theatre Hullabaloo to build a solid evidence base for the integral value of creativity for families with very young children, noting positive impacts on parental confidence and wellbeing.

Let's Play is modelled as a socially-prescribed programme because this enables us to engage with families who are seeking help or who are already supported by health services or other professionals.

Whilst deliberately not a therapeutic intervention, it underscores the holistic benefits for families that we can evidence in the research. Creativity has a core part to play in the positive experiences of early childhood. This partnered approach enables us to reach those who will benefit most.



## A suite of creative play interventions

### • Let's Play

Creative play packs for a range of ages.

### • Creative play installations

These creative play interventions are integral in our quest to make creative play available to all children.

They are core features of the Theatre Hullabaloo offer and are soon to become resident at Family Hubs in other parts of Tees Valley.

Together they form a suite of play interventions, and through our research partnerships, we are able to demonstrate their positive outcomes for young children and their families.



## Let's Play: A Creative Case Study

**D is a mother of two who attended all five of Theatre Hullabaloo's socially prescribed Let's Play sessions.**

D had just moved in August. Growing up in Hong Kong and living in big cities all of her life, she was trepidatious about moving to Darlington. It is a smaller city, and one where she had no social ties. She cannot drive, money is tight, and her 9-year-old son is autistic, so things felt very overwhelming.

D first came to The Hullabaloo with her 3-year-old for their Wow Said the Owl exhibit and continued to come to the creative play space every once in a while. This is how one of the Hullabaloo Hosts was able to identify her as a filtered referral for the sessions. There were two things that made the session appealing according to D. These were the ability to go to the sessions for free, and the structure of connecting with other parents.

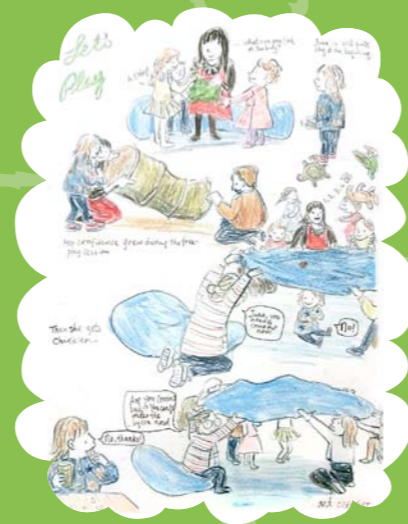
Feeling socially isolated before attending the sessions, D actively engaged and talked with the other parents explaining, "It is hard to just talk to other parents at soft play." She reported that connecting with people in the sessions was easier and that after the programme finished she now meets up with mums that came to the sessions regularly. She has also found a network of other parents with autistic children which she has found helpful for her mental health.

D is not the only one who has benefited from the Let's Play programme, her daughter J has also "come out of her shell". The first time J came to Let's Play she refused to engage. D was hesitant to return, but decided to give it one more try and she was glad she did as J started being more attentive and engaging. She opened up more and more and now she's pretending to play guitar at her own imaginary concerts at home. D reports she also is more into reading as well. She attributes these developments to Let's Play.

Both D and J's mental health and wellbeing have been positively impacted by Let's Play. The programme has improved D's social network and helped pull her out of

social isolation. She has been able to speak with parents going through the same thing and talk about parenting strategies with others giving her a support system in and outside of the programme. She's also been able to do this because it is free. J has been supported in her play and development through the programme according to D and is now able to engage with other children of the same age.

D is a talented amateur artist and has enjoyed documenting her and her daughter's experiences of the programme in her illustrations:-



Case Study interview conducted by Dr Paige Davis, April 2023

## Support play in family homes - Baby Play Packs

During the Covid-19 pandemic Theatre Hullabaloo was commissioned to create Baby Play Packs for children aged 0-12 month, distributing 1,000s of them across the Tees Valley during lockdown. Initially a response to the social isolation experienced by new parents, and rising levels of Post Natal Depression, we quickly learned that the Play Packs had a life beyond the pandemic.

Evaluations by the Institute for Social Justice at York St John University showed strong evidence of the positive impacts of Play Packs on children and their carers. Providing resources, tools and guides that stimulate creativity for families with very young children improves parental confidence and the wellbeing of the whole family.

This is why we have kept our Play Pack programme going, and expanded it to design packs for 0-24 months and 3-5 years, working in partnership with Family Hubs.



Use this QR code to find out more about our Baby Play Packs, watch videos and read the research report: [theatrehullabaloo.org.uk/free-shows/baby-play-packs](https://theatrehullabaloo.org.uk/free-shows/baby-play-packs)



# Creative play and you -

# takeaway messages for forum delegates.

## Commissioners

Let's Play is a socially prescribed creative play model for children under 4 and their carers, usually delivered over a period of 5-12 weeks. Let's Play:

1. is artist-led, using specially trained family and child arts practitioners
2. supports child development and learning, improves speech and language, reduces post-natal depression, up-skills parents and strengthens family relationships
3. is a low-cost high-value intervention
4. brings a safe, joyous, pedagogically grounded parent-child experience to a range of settings
5. can engage families who might be resistant to other offers
6. generates deeper impacts as part of a suite of creative play offers, including Baby Play Packs and Creative Play installations

Want to develop creative play in your service, organisation, or venue? We're keen to help.

Email [bendickenson@theatrehullabaloo.org.uk](mailto:bendickenson@theatrehullabaloo.org.uk)

## Arts organisations and artists

Access to culture is a right for all children. It is a key focus of Arts Council England's Lets Create strategy. However, specialist offers for children in their early years are rare. We can change that by:

1. providing spaces for creative play installations and Let's Play offers in venues
2. exploring how principles and practices of creative play apply in your setting or art form
3. collaborating with specialists to develop high quality creative programmes for under 4s
4. supporting artists to grow skills and safe practices for working with young children and families

**Creative play will inspire children and their carers to engage with culture, and can improve their learning, family relationships and health. We are keen to talk to anyone who is interested in growing this work.**

Email [mirandathain@theatrehullabaloo.org.uk](mailto:mirandathain@theatrehullabaloo.org.uk)

## Academic

There is a need to build a stronger evidence base around social prescription in general and social prescription for families of 0-3-year olds in specific.

The studies that Dr. Davis has run bring up as many questions as they answer. These studies have focused on adult participants and stakeholders.

The next step in the research will be to examine dyadic interactions between carers and children as well as looking at children's development.

Cost analyses are also paramount for this type of programme.

**If you are an academic that would be interested in being involved further with social prescription in the first 1,001 days, please contact Dr. Davis at [pscpda@leeds.ac.uk](mailto:pscpda@leeds.ac.uk)**

## Policy makers


Evidence is emerging that socially prescribed creative play has positive impacts on learning, development, and mental wellbeing among children in their early years and their carers.

In a period when postnatal depression is rising, school readiness is decreasing and increasing numbers of children struggle with speech and language, creative play offers a potential solution. It can engage families resistant to other interventions and generate positive outcomes that reverse worrying developmental and health trends.

Making creative play a more prominent feature in health, education, place-based and cultural policy could help transform children's lives and strengthen families.

**To discuss this further contact [bendickenson@theatrehullabaloo.org.uk](mailto:bendickenson@theatrehullabaloo.org.uk)**





# Let's Play Research

Dr Paige Davis

## Calm and trust, child development and parenting skills

My British Academy Innovation Fellowship has enabled us to learn about how participants and stakeholders are impacted by involvement in a creative play on prescription programme, specifically Let's Play which has been designed and tested by Theatre Hullabaloo.

We've been particularly interested in how it has acted as an intervention after Covid-19. The research began with an evaluation entitled; *My favourite part was learning different ways to play: Evaluating a socially prescribed play programme* which is now under review in an internationally recognised journal.

The main findings of this evaluation indicated that there were key differences between this socially

**"Play is the highest form of research."**  
**Albert Einstein**

prescribed artist-led creative play programme and other play groups. Two of these differences were a feeling of calm and a trusting environment.

Because of the trusting and calm atmosphere parents were receptive to learning about their child's development as well as having practical parenting skills modelled. One of the skills that was especially useful for both parents and children was positive engagement through creative play.

## Impact on postnatal depression

The second study that was undertaken examined wellbeing benefits parents engaging in the play on prescription programme might be gaining. Using the knowledge from the evaluation, and literature on intervention, a questionnaire was developed looking at birth trauma, postnatal depression and reflective functioning.

Through paired tests, preliminary results show the reflective functioning area of certainty significantly improves and postnatal depression scores significantly decrease through the 5-week socially prescribed creative play intervention. There is no change in birth trauma report.

Through regression modelling, we have found that parent report of birth trauma predicts postnatal depression scores at baseline and after 5 weeks in the creative play programme.



## Getting it right, impacting transitions, stakeholder support

The final piece of research conducted was an investigation into how stakeholders perceive socially prescribed creative play intervention.

I was able to interview 12 stakeholders about the creative play offer. These stakeholders were quite diverse when it came to what they were interested in and how much power they held in their position. Our sample ranged from MPs to GPs and Health Visitors.

From reading past literature on social prescription, we knew that these offers were particularly effective at transitional times in the lifespan when community and social support are paramount. However, this transition has been largely neglected thus far.

The findings from the thematic analysis performed on the transcripts of conversation brought to our awareness a few different nuanced ideas. The first is that social prescribing is a new offer, especially for families with very young children in the first 1,001 days. This puts anyone that is developing a socially prescribed creative play programme in a position of sensitivity.

These offers need to get the structure and content correct the

first time, so that the presentation and meaning of this type of social prescription for these families is normalised and encouraged in the future.

The stakeholders believe unanimously that if we are able to deliver a creative programme that is beneficial to parents and children, it will impact families and more broadly the NHS. The issue stakeholders see is that the beneficial change may not be fully quantifiable and the systems in place would need to understand this and trust more qualitative data.

Finally, families that are service users do not always trust the systems in place and they have very complex needs, especially after Covid-19. These complex needs have been exacerbated by having inhibitions or no knowledge of how to play with their young children as well as lack of peer support. Stakeholders believe that social prescription of creative play could be one way forward in a suite of different provisions.

It should be noted that many of the stakeholders did not speak about the first 1,001 days, but focused more on older children. This would be an interesting topic to look into in terms of social prescribing.



## Benefits to the health system

Grounded in this British Academy research on a whole, we propose a pathway around the social prescription of artist-led creative play. In practice, we have found that programmes of this type can respond relatively rapidly to need.

Furthermore, the beginnings of an evidence base suggest positive outcomes for the whole family at a time of vulnerability. Thus, the inclusion of creative play as part of a generally accepted intervention for this client group has the potential to influence the ways we support families with young children and has benefits for the NHS.

To that end we have used these research projects to formulate a guide for those organisations that might be interested in developing their own socially prescribed creative play programme. We are of the opinion that this guide will help others to launch effective and beneficial offers.

# Speakers



**Lisette Auton**  
Poet in residence for the  
CCSF Forum

Lisette Auton works with words in all their forms: as an author and playwright, a film and theatre maker, a performer and spoken word artist, solo, with collaborators, and alongside wonderful humans as a creative practitioner and mentor. Disabled, neurodivergent and northern, some say she's a word artist, she says she does stuff with words. Kindness, place, belonging, and creative access are at the heart of all her work.

Her debut middle grade novel *The Secret Of Haven Point* was published by Puffin in 2022, *The Stickleback Catchers* followed in 2023, with *Lights Up* forthcoming in 2024. She is an award-winning poet; honours include winning The Journal Culture Award 2021 for Performance of the Year for Writing *The Missing - A River Cycle* commissioned by Durham Book Festival.

[lisetteauton.co.uk](http://lisetteauton.co.uk)



**Dr Tola Dabiri**  
National Lead for Arts & Culture,  
National Academy for Social  
Prescribing

Tola has worked across the cultural sector since 1995, beginning her career in public libraries and archives. She has also worked at the Museums Libraries and Archives Council and The National Archives, and the UK Centre for Carnival Arts.

She has developed and managed successful projects including *Carnival in a Box* ([carnivalinbox.co.uk](http://carnivalinbox.co.uk)), *Fundraising for Archives for The National Archives*, and UKCCA's HLF funded *Carnival Archive Project*, ([carnivalarchives.org.uk](http://carnivalarchives.org.uk)).

Tola was awarded a PhD from Leeds Beckett University, for her research looking at orality and the intangible cultural heritage of British Caribbean Carnival. Tola is also a consultant in the cultural sector, specialising in project management, equality and inclusion, and fundraising.



**Dr Paige Davis**  
British Academy Innovation  
Fellowship Holder

Dr. Davis received her MSc and PhD in Developmental Psychology at Durham University in 2011. Since then, her research has revolved around imagination and imaginary companions.

She has published in peer reviewed journals, as well as for general audiences about the topic of imaginary play and imaginary companions. In 2020 she published a book chapter in the *Cambridge Handbook of Imagination*.

Becoming a parent with her second son sparked an interest in a new research area, parenthood and creativity. This eventually led to a collaboration with Theatre Hullabaloo in the first evaluation of *Play on Prescription*.

Becoming very invested in the programme Paige and Miranda applied for the British Academy Innovation Fellowship and were successful in the bid which has resulted in the current forum you are now attending and the three pieces of research we are discussing.



**Professor Chris Drinkwater CBE**  
Emeritus Professor Primary Care,  
Northumbria University

Professor Chris Drinkwater CBE, FRCGP, FFPH(Hon), FRSA was an inner city GP in Newcastle for 23 years and he is now emeritus Professor of Primary Care Development at Northumbria University. He led the establishment of HealthWORKS Newcastle as a City Challenge project in the early 1990s. From 2014 to July 2022 he chaired, *Ways to Wellness*, a charitable foundation established to deliver social prescribing at scale through a social impact bond in Newcastle.

Along the way he has been variously, President and Public Health lead for the NHS Alliance, Deputy Chair and Chair of the Philanthropy Committee for Northumberland, Tyne & Wear Community Foundation, lead for the Well Newcastle Gateshead Community Arts Project funded by Public Health England, a Director of the West End Schools Trust, and the Arts and Creativity lead for the NENC Child Health & Wellbeing Network.



**Councillor Steve Harker**

Councillor Steve Harker was elected as Leader of Darlington Borough Council in May 2023. He is a Labour Councillor representing Pierremont ward and was first elected in 1995.

He has held a range of Cabinet portfolios on Darlington Borough Council, including formerly the Education portfolio.

His father was a headteacher in Middlesbrough, and his mother also taught in Middlesbrough. Councillor Harker has been a school governor for over 20 years. He knows the importance that education - particularly early years - has in giving our future generations the best start in life.

Shortly after graduating from Durham University, Councillor Harker worked with Voluntary Service Overseas. He taught Maths and Chemistry for 2 years, in a remote school in Sierra Leone.

Councillor Harker worked in the software industry for over 30 years, supporting the day-to-day operations of the UK rail industry.



**Dr Daniel Hayes**  
Senior Research Fellow, UCL

Daniel Hayes is a Senior Research Fellow at the Social Biobehavioural Research Group at UCL.

Daniel studied his PhD at University College London and postdoctoral work at the Evidence Based Practice Unit (part of University College London and the Anna Freud National Centre for Children and Families) and Kings College London.

His work focuses on mental health and wellbeing for children and young people, with an emphasis on person-centred approaches and social, cultural and community support. His current research is exploring how best to implement social prescribing and its impact on different populations.

[tinyurl.com/UCL-SBRG](http://tinyurl.com/UCL-SBRG)





**Bridie Jackson**  
Artist involved with  
Let's Play programme

Bridie Jackson is a highly experienced music facilitator, whose creative aim is to bring an ethos of inclusivity, joy and collaboration to all of her work. She initially trained in Early Years music at Sage Gateshead back in 2010, and has worked as the musical lead on Theatre Hullabaloo's Let's Play project since January 2023.

Outside of her work as a facilitator, Bridie is a well known performer and composer, who regularly writes and produces music for North East based dance and theatre companies, mostly recently for Meta 4 Dance, Changing Relations CIC and The Customs House.

[bridiejackson.com](http://bridiejackson.com)



**Professor Simon James**  
Professor of English,  
Lead investigator for the  
Durham Commission on  
Creativity in Education

Simon J. James is Professor of Victorian Literature and former Head of English Studies at Durham University, where he has worked since 1999.

He has published research on George Gissing, money and class; H. G. Wells, culture and education; and on Victorian and Edwardian bestselling fiction. He is the research lead for the Durham Commission on Creativity and Education, which published its first report in 2019.

His current projects include work on Evelyn Waugh, Charles Dickens and memory, social music-making in schools, and young people and oracy. He is Vice-Chair of Trustees of Theatre Hullabaloo, Darlington.



**Hollie Smith-Charles**  
Director, Creative Health &  
Change, Arts Council England

Hollie has 20 years' experience of creative programming, fundraising and strategy development, gained from the arts, museums and heritage sectors, mainly in the South West. Before joining the Arts Council in November 2022, Hollie had a particular focus on place-based cultural development and multi-agency partnership working.

Her role as CEO of Gloucester Culture Trust fostered an interest in the potential of the arts to tackle social inequalities, support health and wellbeing, and enable communities to thrive. Hollie is a lapsed musician, but still loves singing in a community choir.



**Miranda Thain**  
Artistic Producer,  
Theatre Hullabaloo

Miranda Thain is Artistic Producer of Theatre Hullabaloo where she leads the artistic programme, including the development of new shows and creative play programmes and the commissioning and mentorship of artists.

Having spent the last 22 years working in theatre for young audiences, including for M6 Theatre and tutti frutti productions before joining Theatre Hullabaloo in 2007, Miranda has commissioned and produced more than 45 shows for, by and with children and young people.

She has an MA in Applied Theatre from the University of Manchester and a particular interest in the imaginative worlds of very young children and the intersection between performance and play.



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