

Please Spread the Word

A lyrical essay by Lisette Auton



The following poem is made from words, ideas and overhearing captured on Thursday 9th November 2023 at the Creative Children Stronger Families Forum, organised by Theatre Hullabaloo with funding from The British Academy and Arts Council England, and support from our research partner – the Institute for Social Justice at York St John University.

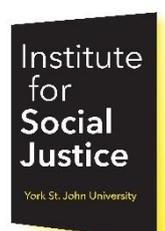
The forum discussed the power of creativity and collaboration to improve outcomes for parents, carers, and children in their early years. New research was shared, demonstrating the impact of Theatre Hullabaloo’s pioneering the Let’s Play programme - a socially prescribed Creative Play model that sits alongside a suite of creative installations, participation programmes and activities which bring the arts and play together to change lives.

Over 100 guests joined the forum representing health, arts, education, early years, policy, charity, local government, and research sectors, as well as local and national politicians, businesses, and influencers. The event was chaired by Professor Simon James (Durham University, and The Durham Commission on Creativity in Education), alongside speakers and presentations from Arts Council England, the National Academy of Social Prescribing, University College London, Northumbria University, the British Academy, York St John University and Theatre Hullabaloo.

Award winning writer, disability activist, and children’s author Lisette Auton observed the event as “poet in residence”, gathering thoughts, themes, and key messages from delegates, speakers, and participants. The pages below are a unique record of a special event.



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Bustle of backstage; lights and cameras; batteries and reserved seating.

Ali kindly leaping the spiderweb above to find me some light - poets can't write in the dark.

Buzz. Awaiting.

So long in the making.

Arts meeting people with 'proper' jobs - will we hold our own?

Blue-T shirts guiding, welcoming, making at home.

Through the double doors into the magic –

the beds play lullabies when you press the buttons.

Booked out sessions. Whole groups. Neurodivergent families in here all together;

or families explore the space on their own.

Such a high demand, huge benefit from those sessions.

Frazzled parents should come here.

That's a really good idea, actually!

Bit of a faff to get here.

Trains?

I made it, though.

Looks like there are some really interesting people here.

Big coats and scarves, space filling. Hot water plunged, cups clatter.

Excuse me so rude, just putting my stuff down, you end up with so much clobber!

Laughter, mingling. *Hello, nice to meet you.*

Oh hello! It's so good to see you, it's felt like forever!

I'm just going to the loo, I'll come back & see you!

A room full of exclamation marks.

Hubbub in the centre and a row of people by the walls, tapping their phones.

Look up! Autumn above, sways from the ceiling, rippling in time with voices.

Remember to write your thoughts on the luggage tags and hang them on the tree.

There's no spaces in the car parks - some people will be circling!

Unspoken summons - exodus to the theatre.

Message to self: see-through podium - remember to make sure your dress is pulled down, Lisette.

Faces bathed in blue and cerise.



For those of you, for whom it is the first visit to this space, welcome, this is where the magic happens!

Darlington is a relatively small town, far from London, but it is no stranger to innovation.

Innovation and collaboration transformed transport across the world.

No surprise for this event to happen here - innovation and collaboration.

A Pioneering theatre. Play on prescription. Many experts here.

Seen the joy of my own child play at the Hullabaloo.

Poor outcomes in life. Poor outcomes in equality. We need to enrich lives.

If you have the ears of policy makers – press upon them. Please spread the word.

Today's job is to illuminate you all, my hat is not coming off.

Socially prescribed creative play.

I make no apologies for keeping saying creative play.

Thanks are heartfelt. You share a mission, a common theme:

health, local authority, education, social services,

directors, policy and research, eight universities and research institutions,

arts.

Families and children, this region, this town - they matter.

Speech & language degradation. Crisis of capacity to play.

This room is an alliance - we want change.

Play. Creativity. People. Change. Co-production.

This place is a testament - imagine, dream, reshape, redesign.

Every child is, or can, be creative. Every child.

New National Centre for Children's Creativity. A priority place.

Levelling up. Enrich. Experience. Bring about real positive change.

Culture and creativity are vital to living well – a booster shot.

Social prescribing - positive difference to those taking part.

We believe. Must be seen. Fundamental. Living well.

Commitment. Connection. DNA.

Partnership. Place. Practitioners. Play.

Reflect the community we're a part of; weave, shift, integral, focus.

What good looks like. Rainbows in windows. In the DNA of us all.

One hundred thousand people have played in our creative installation space.

Value. Play. First one thousand and one days.

Parent and child. Let's play.

Warm & welcoming. Meet, bond, be

together. Structured and free.

Imagination - sensory, sand, bubbles.

Artist led. Extension. Extra. Ingredients.

A scientist that looks at imagination.

I really believed!

Anecdotal. Research. Shine. Measure. Show.

Social prescribers and stakeholders.

Trust and calm; not the playgroup.

Confidence & development. Friendship. Need.

Quantitative. Gather the data. Significantly for the better.

Observable. Reported. Clear.

A relief to talk to others. Lonely for many years. Build connections.

Interacting. Scared of people. Giving hugs.

He couldn't get enough of Angela! For him, it showed him he could trust people.

Bowled over.

We need 12 weeks.

Creating in early years absolutely central to agenda.

Accepted. An offer. Vital.

Play is the most important thing to do.

Every child needs socially prescribed play.

Follow the fascination! Child is the expert.

Holding space. Social orientation.

Does your baby cry as much as mine?

Stakeholders. Agendas. Power.

Themes derived. Mistrust.

I'm a bad parent. You'll take my child.

Quantifiability. Complex families. Waiting lists.

Isolation and lack of peer support.

Parents are consistently trying to reapply. We don't have the space.

Just start to get comfy - weeks three and five - we need them to continue.

We need more time.

We have so much more to learn! I see opportunities.

No other group is like this, I never feel like this, my kid does things others don't.

Acceptance.

Commonplace. Resourced . Available.

Clear creative offer from birth.

This is where we begin to look to you. To share this message. #CreativeChildrenStrongerFamilies

Nice to meet you.

Can I squeeze past?

Of course.

Shall I tell you what I loved?

Strings swell. Exit.

Programmes on knees. Making notes. Coats over chairs, holding space.

Investigating the creativity play packs.

In the video, I don't know if you noticed, lots of the children coming up to Bridie, interacting.

Responding. Parents and carers can mirror that.

Brief non-scientific, Lisette-style spying research - people favour threes, stand in triangles.

We're way down the queue, I hope there'll still be tea.

Autumn sun pours through the doors.

Reconnecting people; we often see that; it was quite early on, support more complex; support those children and families; moving forwards; if you're happy to leave you contact details.

Word soup.

Every day heath. Support & prevent. Five pillars.

Get away from arts and culture as 'nice to have' - it really is essential.

Creativity is the heart of this intervention.

Not an add on.

Creativity is about the imagination, new discoveries;

the way that children learn about the world.

Expansive:

Play reduced. Skills based. Outcomes.

Misses the opportunity.

The development of a whole human being.

The crayon that we offer to the child.

Their impact, mark on the world. Self-expression.

An oboe plays. A young child, curled in, closed body, opens up: expansive.

Covid impact: Bleak.

Stories & meaning making.

I'm the person that keeps retiring from things.

Collaboration - easy to say, much more difficult to do.

We are not doing enough to invest in our children, who are our future.

What is the story of these kids?

Creative ways in which children can express themselves.

Improve: education, emotion, behaviour, development, expression.

Demands. Targets. Deadlines: damaging.

How do you evaluate play?

Multi-faceted. Imaginary companions. *Mummy, come here! I want to show you this!*

Vocabulary. Internal dialogue. Words in thought. Self-talk.

Children more.

Caution: environment & skills are essential.

Disseminate. Signpost. Scaling up or spreading?

Locate in place. Local assets. Maintain principles.

Poverty and mental health; says it all.

High cost interventions later on.

Do you find the people, or do they come to you?

Families do not expect to have their needs met.

Build a more robust structure - creativity on the menu.

Potential & power in the room. Call to action.

A non-judgemental space. A cup of tea.

Trust. Empowerment. Choice. Safety.

A Trauma informed space.

Kindness runs through the DNA of Theatre Hullabaloo and the work that you do.

Welcomes families in all their forms.

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