



Unlocking The Power of Play!

In Tower Hamlets



institute of
imagination



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The
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The Power of Play



All children have the right to play. But for many children, especially those living in poverty or with additional needs, there are significant barriers to accessing play opportunities.

That's why a group of organisations that focus on children's education, rights and wellbeing have been brought together by the LEGO Group as part of its mission to be a global force for learning through play. The Power of Play consortium is enhancing access to play and changing attitudes towards playful learning in Tower Hamlets, London. It offers a blend of home, school, and community play opportunities for underserved children and their families.

Enabling children to flourish is an essential part of building a thriving society. It is also a crucial element of the UK government's Opportunity Mission, which includes setting every child up for the best start in life and ensuring all children can thrive at school. Play is critical to these ambitions. We know it in our own lives. When we're free to be playful, we're free to learn. That's never truer than for children.

Scientific research shows play is crucial for children's creative, cognitive, social and emotional development.¹ Play – including playful, positive interactions with parents – can set children on a path to success in school and later life.

That is the Power of Play.



It is becoming increasingly clear through research on the brain that childhood needs play. Play acts as a forward feed mechanism into courageous, creative, rigorous thinking in adulthood.

Renowned expert in early childhood education
Professor Tina Bruce
(various sources)

Children’s play is under threat from a number of factors that can be distilled into a trio of challenges:

Poverty

Growing up in poverty constitutes a significant barrier to play. The financial stresses on parents and caregivers make it more difficult for them to enjoy playful interactions with their children. Lack of space, time or money for playful experiences mean opportunities to play and learn are harder to come by.



Rising tide of poverty
4.5 million children are living in poverty in the UK – 31% of all the country’s children.² This is a rise of 200,000 from 4.3 million last year.

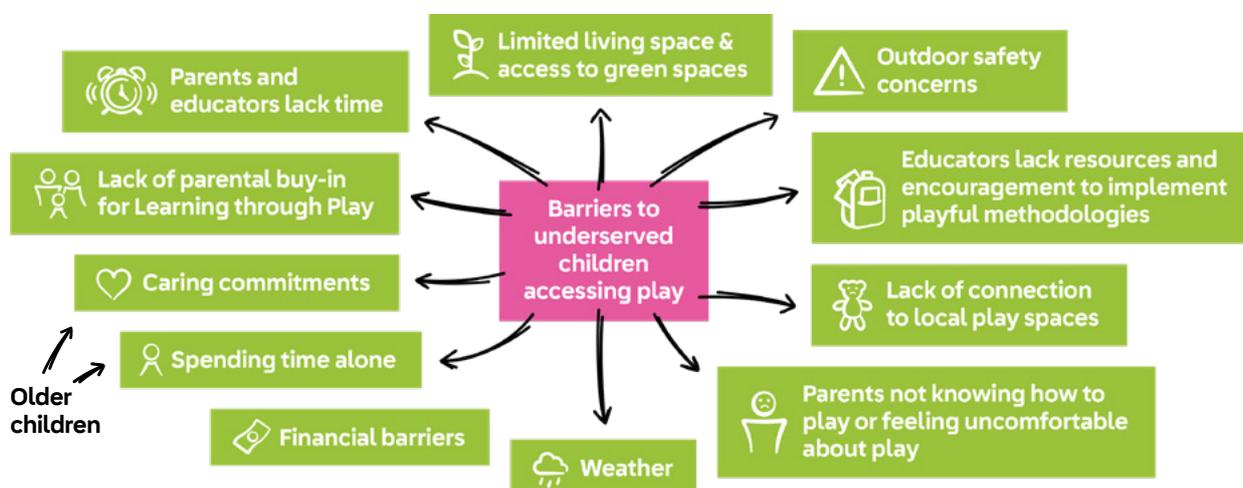
Photo: John Owens / Save the Children

Culture

Play has been devalued in our society – being seen as trivial and less important than formal education. One reason parents and caregivers tend to spend less time playing with their children is because they often don’t realise how important play is.

Accessibility

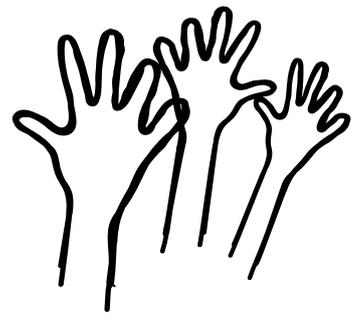
Spaces to play are not available to all, with many communities lacking safe, publicly accessible indoor or outdoor play areas. In particular, children with special educational needs and disabilities are often shut out of opportunities for play by a lack of accessibility and inclusion.



We Are Futures for the LEGO Group (2023), “Challenges faced in underserved communities – London and Slough Needs Analysis”



Unleashing the Power of Play



This award-winning programme³ was created and convened by the LEGO Group, supported by the LEGO Foundation. It has brought together a consortium of expert organisations that focus on children's education, rights and wellbeing to promote long-term locally led change.

Launched in 2024, the Power of Play focuses on improving children's holistic skills and wellbeing by increasing their opportunities to learn through play. It also aims to increase the confidence of caregivers and educators in facilitating playful learning practices so they become a more established part of children's daily life.

We are unleashing the Power of Play through three main components.

Engaging children in play-based learning:

providing moments, places, groups and activities where all children can play and learn together.

Boosting caregivers' confidence:

showing parents and caregivers the crucial role they can play in their children's development – giving them the tools and skills they need to nurture a playful environment at home and asking them to help us design opportunities for play in the community.

Working with schools and the wider community:

learning through play isn't something that should happen in isolation, but more holistically across a child's life and education - so we're working with schools, teachers and local organisations in Tower Hamlets to make sure it does.



Over the pages that follow, you'll see the difference the Power of Play has already made in its first year and meet some of the children and families our work is supporting.

The programme in numbers*

14,621

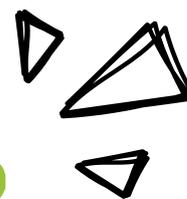
Children (0 to 13)

6,275

Caregivers

86

Schools



6

Community organisations

164

Teachers and practitioners

21,152

Total engagement



* Figures up to the end of March 2025



Photo: Kate Stanworth / Save the Children



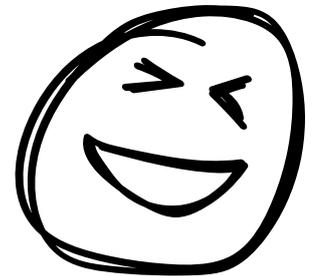
It's made me reflect on the importance of play. Watching her play has inspired me to make more time for play.

Parent, St Luke's, Save the Children community partner



Photo: Jonathan Hyams / Save the Children

The Difference Play is Making



Each member of the Power of Play consortium has unique and complementary strengths. We've come together with parents, caregivers, children and members of the community to design a rich range of innovative opportunities for play – from pop-up play-labs in the park to play-based apps. These physical and virtual play spaces are giving children in one of the country's poorest communities – including those with special needs – opportunities to play and learn they might not otherwise get.

The programme is also helping parents and caregivers develop the skills and confidence to help their children learn through play, forming stronger family bonds, as well as connections with other parents in the community.

We're already seeing positive results of all this work in children's emotional, social and physical development.



IN THE COMMUNITY

LEGO clubs

from Ambition, Aspire, Achieve

Focused on those most in need of support, including young people with disabilities and/or additional needs, Ambition Aspire Achieve is delivering a wide range of activities, projects and services via a growing outreach programme delivered across local schools and neighbourhoods in Newham and Tower Hamlets.

The sessions have offered a vibrant space for children to get creative and collaborate, making new friends, building their confidence and problem-solving skills, all using LEGO® play as the starting point.

Karen Heather, Lead Playworker, Ambition Aspire Achieve

Activities



Pop-up holiday
playschemes in
local green spaces



Therapeutic play
for children with
special educational
needs and disabilities



Weekly after-
school LEGO clubs



Photo: Jonathan Hyams / on behalf of Ambition Aspire Achieve

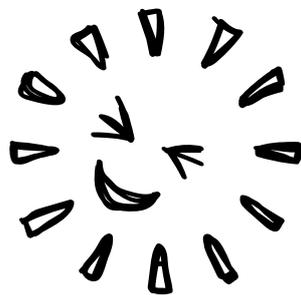
Results

285 children - 31% of them with special educational needs and disabilities - have attended the LEGO clubs and:



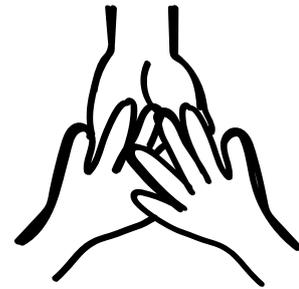
82%

demonstrated improved learning/abilities



75%

showed improved confidence and/or personal wellbeing



82%

had improved relationships with peers

Case study: George* who attended weekly after-school LEGO clubs

George is undergoing assessment for ADHD. When he first joined the group he was inattentive, hyperactive and impulsive, often having bouts of disruptive behaviour. He did not like to share or engage and would often sit by himself in the corner without making eye contact with others.

Over time, with intensive one-to-one support, he became used to the other children around him. He was introduced to small group activities, improving his interactions with others. New strategies and boundaries were put in place and George started to form stronger bonds with his peers.

His mum shared the very positive effect the play sessions have had on George. She feels the LEGO club has been a real game-changer for him. He has developed better social and communication skills with others, his behaviour at home and at school has improved, and his cognitive abilities are progressing.

 IN THE COMMUNITY

Co-design workshops and play labs

from Save the Children UK



Activities

Save the Children supported three community-based organisations – Artburst, St Luke’s Millwall and Rich Mix – to promote opportunities for play. They ran workshops with local children, parents and caregivers to co-create opportunities for learning through play that reflect families’ needs.

The result was a set of ‘play labs’ – places where children can explore freely, guided by their own interests – from imaginative play to activities that develop fine-motor skills.

The three organisations also encouraged parents and caregivers to engage in activities with their children. This helped them recognise the value of play in their children’s development, as well as improving their own confidence to engage in play.

Results

322 children have attended the play labs and have experienced:



greater curiosity-driven exploration



improved sharing and collaboration



enhanced emotional regulation



improved social skills



greater independence

Case study: Tamara's* experience of learning through play sessions at Rich Mix

Limited space at home meant Tamara hadn't considered structured play opportunities before joining the Power of Play programme.

At the sessions, she saw her daughter eagerly engage with a range of activities, particularly the play kitchen, arts and crafts, and LEGO building.

At first, her little girl was shy, quietly focusing on solo play, but week by week, she grew more confident. She began proudly showing Tamara what she was making and even inviting her to join in. As time went on, her daughter started interacting with other children, learning how to share toys and collaborate – new skills for her as an only child.

Tamara has noticed remarkable changes in her daughter. She has become more sociable, imaginative and independent, reassuring Tamara that she'll adjust well to the school environment.

Tamara now encourages similar creative play at home and sees play as an essential part of her daughter's growth.

Fun fact

At St Luke's, parents with previous experience in child-led activities helped run the play labs, enhancing their skills and confidence, and helping create sustainable, community-driven impact.



Photo: Jonathan Hyams / Save the Children

It is great knowing that organisations care about what we want. I've never been asked in this way.

Parent on the co-design approach led by St Luke's, a Save the Children community partner

Most of the participating parents and carers engage with their child through play and it has been a joy watching them join in the exploration. The learning is there for the adults as well as the children, as the children encourage the adults to experiment and play in new ways.

Save the Children community partner



I feel very good when I come here because this place is very fun for my kids and for me. I really enjoy the sessions, especially LEGO, clay and baking. I like doing different things that I couldn't do before. We feel better when we come home and my child loves it.

Parent, St Luke's, Save the Children community partner



Playful learning at scale

from Young V&A



Photo: V&A

Young V&A children's museum is a vibrant, playful space in the heart of Tower Hamlets, designed for and with children. It encourages creativity, imagination and play, and is used regularly by local families and schools, as well as museum visitors. The play activity offered in the museum draws inspiration from its collections and exhibits.

Activities

184 informal drop-in activity sessions – including monthly inclusive play sessions for children with SEND, facilitated by three dedicated Play Champions who support and deliver play activity.

34 workshops and semi-structured play sessions for local schools.



Targeted workshops for communities facing barriers to accessing the museum.

The initiative has highlighted the scale of demand for free, facilitated learning through play, particularly among local schools.

12,850

instances of engagement with the Young V&A learning through play activities



Photo: Sandra Ebert / V&A

Case study: After-school activity at the Young V&A

'Play after School' is a distinctive new offering at Young V&A, a museum of creativity for children from birth to age 14.

The regular after-school sessions in the museum's Imagine Gallery are designed to get children active and moving after a day at school. The sessions help the children direct their energy in a playful way.

They can use 'story bags' filled with objects inspired by the museum to formulate and then perform a story. Or they can enter an immersive playscape, with a backdrop and music to help them engage with physical theatre storytelling. The emphasis here is on using their bodies and developing new ways of communicating narratives (for example, using sound and movement to represent characters inspired by works of art in the museum).

The reaction from the children has been very positive. They say The Stage encourages them to be performative and take playing seriously.

Results

The sessions at the Young V&A museum promote a high level of confidence in caregivers and educators in helping their children learn through play:



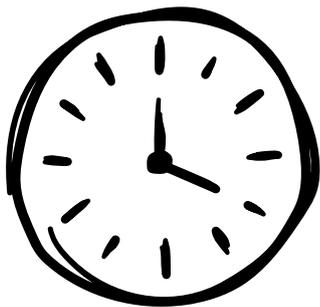
94.6%

agreed or agreed strongly that they understood the value of learning through play after engaging in the play sessions at the museum



93.5%

agreed or agreed strongly that they felt comfortable about using play to support their child's learning.



91.4%

agreed or agreed strongly that they would make time for learning through play with their child.



School hubs and live broadcast workshops

supported by the Institute of Imagination

The Institute of Imagination is working with four primary school 'hubs' in Tower Hamlets to help them become centres of excellence in learning through play.

There are three components to the programme:

1. Hub school Days of Play and workshops.
2. Hub schoolteacher professional development.
3. Live broadcast workshops exposing over 30 schools to learning through play activities in the classroom.

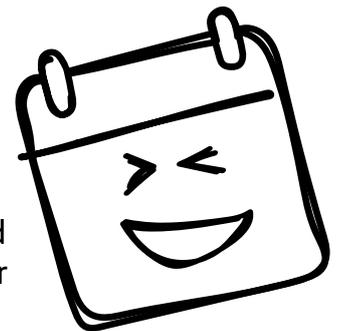
Working in the hub schools, the Institute of Imagination is developing caregiver hubs - spaces to work with parents and caregivers to build confidence in conducting learning through play activities with their children.

Activity

Days of Play

As part of this programme, the Institute of Imagination ran a series of off-timetable Days of Play at each of the four schools.

The impact stretched far beyond the days themselves. They helped schools integrate play across a child's day, into all aspects of their learning, significantly increasing the frequency of play.



Case study: Day of Play heaven

What an educator thought of one of the Institute of Imagination's Days of Play:

"What struck me most was the sheer creativity of the children – the way they used their imagination, adapted to challenges, and showed real resilience. If something didn't work, they didn't give up; they kept refining and rethinking, seeing failure as part of the process.

It was inspiring to watch them generate ideas so freely. With minimal prompting, every student created a unique design, then continuously adapted and improved it, making purposeful decisions along the way.

My class is full of energetic, lively children, and this workshop showed just how much potential they have when given the space to explore. What stood out most was how seamlessly play and learning were integrated – this wasn't just a lesson, it was hands-on problem-solving, resilience-building, and real-world application. They were having fun, but they were learning so much. That's the power of learning through play."

Results

There were large shifts in children's creative, problem-solving and physical skills.



Metric (sample 275 children)	Percentage increase
Creative-thinking skills	100%
Frequency of play	300%
Problem-solving skills	47%
Building and making skills	53%
Communication skills	30%
Staying focused	38%



[The best thing that happened today was when] we accidentally made a mistake in our building and we had to remake it, and it turned out better!

Child at a Day of Play

Activity

Educating the educators

The programme also provided teachers with in-person and online training and mentoring on learning through play – helping them integrate play into their pupils’ school day. It helped educators see the value of incorporating play into learning activities.

Of the teachers who took part, 92% were found to have increased their creative thinking skills, according to a globally recognised creativity measure, DAT.⁴



Students at a Day of Play
Photo: Institute of Imagination

The best thing was when my partner and I built something together, and it actually worked!

Child at a Day of Play

It was the funnest school day ever!!!

Child at a Day of Play



IN THE HOME

Digital parenting support and peer-to-peer groups

from EasyPeasy

EasyPeasy's app-based parenting programme empowers caregivers to transform everyday parenting moments into playful learning experiences, close the gap in school readiness, and improve early outcomes. Around 400 families in Tower Hamlets are now enrolled in the EasyPeasy programme, with 81% of those families coming from disadvantaged backgrounds.

Here's what local parents and caregivers say:

82%

now feel confident they can make a significant and positive difference in their child's life.

66%

report there is now more make-believe play and playful interaction at home.



78%

say they have gained valuable insights and practical knowledge about supporting their child's speech, language, and communication skills.

81%

share that they have developed a better understanding of how to help their child grow personally, socially and emotionally.

EasyPeasy is also supporting local Parent Champions to establish peer-to-peer community support groups known as parent meet-ups. A dozen groups have now been funded, with over 160 caregivers coming together from across the borough to share and create playful ideas and activities, build meaningful peer-to-peer relationships, and support their children's early development.



Parent meet-up
Photo: EasyPeasy



I like that it's encouraging us to play with our children, encouraging learning through play. I love messing about, I love playing with [my child], I'm very playful myself and it's nice to share that with him and help him develop at the same time. He is a very intelligent little baby, so it's definitely working!

EasyPeasy caregiver



I always find very useful tips and information articles where I can learn more about my baby and techniques to interact better with him.

EasyPeasy caregiver

What I really want to get out of this is to start creating a network of mums to help build stronger relationships with each other within the community, so we can have that network of support... so we can empower each other and lift each other up.

EasyPeasy caregiver



What next

Now into its second year, the Power of Play is continuing to introduce play into everyday life for more children and caregivers. However, this change in play habits needs to be self-sustaining and adaptable.

How do we make that happen?



Cross-sector collaboration – a consortium and the broader community – including businesses, community organisations and civil society - working, learning and adapting together



A whole-community approach – with co-design and community at the heart of design and delivery



Caregivers at the heart – making sure they can access, understand and adopt learning through play, and then become advocates, passing on ideas



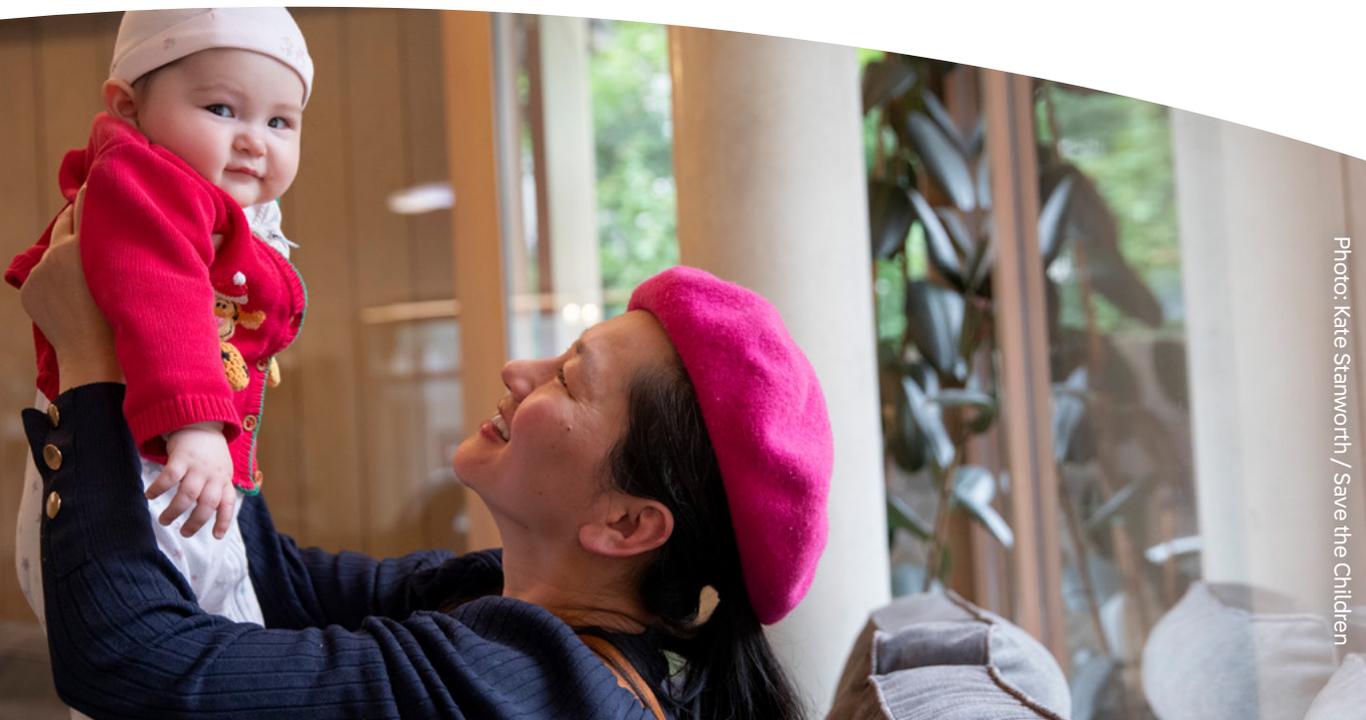
Equity in learning through play – understanding how to design and adopt better play activities for all audiences



Community-rooted hubs – schools, community organisations and safe spaces that have embedded the principles of learning through play in their everyday work.

Play is critical in ensuring every child has the best start in life - something recognised in the government's Opportunity Mission.

We want the Power of Play to be an exemplar of best practice for collective impact. It is a model we hope can be adapted and adopted by businesses, local government and community organisations across the UK to help young people learn, grow and develop essential life skills through play.



If you'd like to find out more about the Power of Play programme or the work of the consortium partners, please contact:

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[Local Community Engagement - Sustainability - LEGO.com](https://www.lego.com/en-us/local-community-engagement-sustainability)

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