



## Just Play Angus Council

### Executive Summary

The Just Play project has been developed in the context of the Early Years Framework and the Getting It Right For Every Child (GIRFEC) agenda, both of which are based on the principles of prevention and early intervention. Just Play aims to use play to enable vulnerable families with children up to three years of age to have improved interaction, build strong attachments and have better family relationships aiming for a reduction in offending behaviour within the family.

It targets parents and families with a history of offending behaviour, many of whom will also have experience of substance misuse issues, domestic abuse and mental ill health. The project also supports families where children are Looked After and families affected by imprisonment.

Just Play uses the whole system approach to support families through early and effective interventions for low level offences, offering support and advice to families in order to address need and change behaviour; and by providing support as part of reintegration and transition back to the community from secure care and custody, including working with families to reduce reoffending.

This project was runner up in the 2015 Safer Communities Awards Early Intervention and Education category.

### Background and Aims

The project developed due to an increase in children presenting various forms of early developmental delays including speech and language, and social and emotional challenges. National evidence and experience shows that this can often lead to early social alienation and other significant problems for children. It was recognised via key children's services that many of these children were the siblings of families who had generational contact with a range of services including Police and Social Work. It is also widely recognised that children's early experiences influence their later development - socially and biologically.

The idea for Just Play evolved from a Children & Learning Partnership meeting where multi agency partners raised concerns over the number of children presenting at pre-school establishments without the necessary life skills to enable them to reach their potential. A number of families were identified where patterns of generational crime were present and partners agencies committed to the Just Play approach to engage with families in the early years of a child's life with the aim to break this cycle.

The project targeted outcomes are:

- Parents understand the importance of and can undertake early years activities with their children
- Parents interact better with their children resulting in a strong bond and secure attachment
- Improved social skills, self-esteem and confidence for parents and their children

## **Activities**

A Multi-Agency Support & Monitoring Group took the decision to develop a play based service which would meet the individual needs of each individual family. This group consists of representatives from Social Work, Health, Police Scotland, some Angus Council departments including Housing, Leisure Services and Education. Partner agencies are key to generating referrals and these include, Barnardos, Head Teachers, Social Work services, Health Visitors, Community Mental Health Teams, Homeless Support Workers and Criminal Justice Workers. Angus Council has provided support to Just Play through management, finance, legal services, human resources and public relations. Just Play has worked collaboratively with Community Learning & Development, Leisure Services and Health Improvement Team.

Just Play facilitates flexible focussed play sessions within a Just Play venue, family home or within the local community. The focus of these sessions is to share play experiences thus building the parents confidence and capacity to play and interact with their child. The sessions are designed using a needs led approach with sessions providing flexibility and variety as required. It is not a prescriptive programme of work but is responsive to the needs and circumstances within each family.

As the project has evolved other opportunities were identified to extend and broaden the children's and families' engagement, adding value to the individual focussed play sessions. The project now operates a Drop In groups in all areas of Angus: have established a Dad's Group to highlight the importance of a father within a family and provide supervised contact opportunities for estranged fathers; , a Cooking Together Group which allows families to share a cooking experience and eat together as a group. The project also works with THRIVE a Public Social Partnership funded initiative providing support to families where a parent is serving a short term custodial sentence or currently on remand.

The evaluation has shown that of the 121 Families engaged during Cashback funding period (June 2011 to March 2014) across all areas of Angus:

- 28%of families were able to attend group sessions following a period of individually focused play sessions at Just Play
- 34 families discharged from other services eg: Child Protection Register, Social Work and the support to Families Team
- Parents have used knowledge and skills developed at Just Play to provide play and interaction in the family home

There is a tendency for parents to stay in touch with the project after their formal contact has ended. When they do so, they often report that skills learnt have assisted the children's transition into statutory services such as playgroups and nurseries.

Figures gathered from March 2012-2013 indicate that 60 families were referred to the project, 49 families engaged at some level and 37 families engaged on a regular basis.

Partner agencies are key to generating referrals and these include, Barnardos, Head Teachers, Health Visitors, Community Mental Health Teams, Homeless Support Workers and Criminal Justice Workers.

## **Impact**

The project has achieved its short and medium term targets:

- Parents understand the importance of and can undertake early year's activities with their children
- Parents interact better with their children resulting in a strong bond and secure attachment
- Improved social skills, self-esteem and confidence for parents and their children
- Increase activity options for children whose family engages with Just Play
- To enable children to make a successful transition into mainstream services
- A reduction in the level of Police involvement with families engaged with Just Play

Additional outcomes for some families included:

- An increase in physical activity within the family
- Being introduced to new foods via snack/cooking groups
- Families feeling less isolated

The project hopes that that in the longer term it will be able to evidence its contribution to reducing the risk taking behaviour of young people who have a parent with a history of offending behaviour.

### **Monitoring and Evaluation**

Just Play is supported by a Support and Monitoring Group who meet every 6 weeks and are instrumental in planning, implementation and monitoring of Just Play. The project was evaluated by Rachel Edgar of Edgar Consultancy and Training.

The evaluation highlighted the ability of Just Play to engage with vulnerable families who face complex challenges. The ability to engage with fathers is particularly significant. The other key strengths of Just Play are its flexibility and its exclusive focus on families with a history of crime or anti-social behaviour.

There is strong evidence in the case notes of parents developing greater confidence in playing with their children, understanding the benefit of this and spending more time playing with their children at home. It is common for fathers to be involved in the project even where the parents are estranged, and in two cases fathers choose to use the project for supervision.

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### **Lessons Learnt and Sustainability**

Following the initial funding period it was felt that the evaluation tools used were not capturing the progress families were making. It was acknowledged that this information was held in the practitioner's case notes but was not collated as part of the evaluation. In the current funding period, the evaluation tools have been amended to reflect monthly progress made within a family thus removing the difficulty of collating information at the time they move on from Just Play.

Gathering Police Scotland statistics in relation to families engaged with Just Play has proved difficult - due to changes within Police Scotland and with data protection.

## Resources

Funding: Just Play was previously funded by Cashback for Communities Programme who awarded £350,000 over a three year period - from June 2011 until March 2014

The project is currently funded by the National Lottery through the Big Lottery Fund. The Big Lottery have awarded Just Play £ 481,170 over a three year period 2014/2017

Angus Council has contributed throughout the time the project has been running. In the current funding period Angus Council will contribute £64,680 in kind, providing support to Just Play. This support is via Management, Finance, Legal Support, Human Resources and Public Relations.

Partners: Partner agencies include, Barnardos, Head Teachers, Health Visitors, Social Work services, Community Mental Health Teams, Homeless Support Workers and Criminal Justice Workers.

## Outcomes

National	We live our lives free from crime, disorder and danger
Justice Strategy	Reducing offending Supporting victims and witnesses Reducing the damaging impact of drugs and alcohol problems Preventing offending by young people Strengthening community engagement and resilience

## Practice Note Information

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## Contact Information

<b>Organisation:</b>	Angus Council
<b>Contact Name:</b>	Jill Waldie
<b>Position Held:</b>	Just Play Co-ordinator
<b>Telephone:</b>	01241 435018
<b>Email Address:</b>	waldiejh@angus.gov.uk
<b>Address:</b>	17 Lindsay Street ,Arbroath,DD11 1RP