



# EVALUATION REPORT

## PAUSE TO PLAY

**March 2023**

Photo: Parent and Child painting together at a table. Photographer name: Ruth McDonald

Save the Children Fund is a registered company limited by guarantee (Company No. 178159).

Registered Charity in England & Wales (No. 213890), Scotland (SC039570)

and Isle of Man (No. 199). 1 St John's Lane, London, EC1M 4AR



**Save the  
Children**  
Achub y Plant

## **March 2023**

Written by Dr Stefanie Keir

With thanks to all the families who took part in the project, especially those who shared their insight in interviews. Many thanks to the partners who implemented the project locally: Cardiff Parenting Services – Parent Plus Psychology Led Service, Home Start Cymru (Cardiff Locality Team), Action in Caerau & Ely (ACE) and Oasis Cardiff.

Thanks also to NESTA Cymru for their support with and insight in developing the evaluation approach and methodology.

# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<b>1. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY</b>	<b>ERROR! BOOKMARK NOT DEFINED.</b>
KEY FINDINGS	ERROR! BOOKMARK NOT DEFINED.
<b>2. INTRODUCTION</b>	<b>12</b>
2.1 WHAT DOES EXISTING EVIDENCE TELL US ABOUT THE IMPACT OF POVERTY ON CHILDREN'S OUTCOMES?	12
2.2 PROJECT BACKGROUND	16
2.2.1 THE PAUSE TO PLAY PROJECT OFFER	18
2.3 HOW DID THE DIFFERENT DELIVERY PARTNERS OPERATIONALISE PAUSE TO PLAY?	20
2.3.1 WHO WERE THE LOCAL DELIVERY PARTNERS?	20
<b>3. EVALUATION METHODOLOGY</b>	<b>24</b>
<b>4. ANALYSIS</b>	<b>27</b>
4.1. WHO PARTICIPATED?	27
4.1.1. WHAT DID FAMILIES SPEND THE GRANT ON?	29
4.2. PERCEIVED IMPACT ON PARENTS' STRESS LEVELS AND PARENTS' ABILITY TO SUPPORT THEIR CHILDREN'S LEARNING AND DEVELOPMENT	31
4.2.1. WHAT DID PARENTS STRUGGLE WITH AT THE START OF THE PROJECT?	31
4.2.2. WHAT WAS THE IMPACT OF PAUSE TO PLAY ON PARENTS?	35
4.2.3 WHAT WAS THE IMPACT ON CHILDREN AND THEIR EARLY LEARNING AND PLAY?	43
4.3. PERCEIVED IMPACT ON PARENT PARTICIPATION IN ADDITIONAL ACTIVITIES DESIGNED TO SUPPORT CHILDREN'S LEARNING AND DEVELOPMENT	45
4.3.1. WHAT WAS THE IMPACT ON PARENTS' ACTIVITIES THAT SUPPORT CHILDREN'S EARLY LEARNING?	45
4.3.2. WHAT WAS THE IMPACT ON PARENT-PRACTITIONER RELATIONSHIPS?	49
4.3.3. WHAT WAS THE IMPACT ON PARENTS' ENGAGEMENT WITH SERVICES IN GENERAL?	52
4.4. WHAT CHARACTERISTICS OF PARENT AND FAMILY SUPPORT AND ACTIVITIES ARE PERCEIVED TO BE MORE EFFECTIVE IN ENABLING PARENTS TO SUPPORT CHILDREN'S LEARNING AND DEVELOPMENT?	53
4.4.1. WHAT CHARACTERISTICS OF FAMILY SUPPORT AND ACTIVITIES ENABLED PARENTS TO SUPPORT CHILDREN'S LEARNING AND DEVELOPMENT?	54
4.4.2. WHAT WERE THE CHALLENGES, BARRIERS OR LIMITATION TO FAMILY SUPPORT AND ACTIVITIES THAT AIMED TO SUPPORT CHILDREN'S LEARNING AND DEVELOPMENT?	60
4.4.3. WHAT WOULD DELIVERY PARTNERS DO DIFFERENTLY?	64
<b>5. CONCLUSION</b>	<b>66</b>

# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Pause to Play tested the difference that can be made if we **alleviate an immediate financial crisis** in a family home, then **provide a period of sustained support for families around their child's early learning**.

We worked with four local delivery partners in one local community, Cardiff, to test if receiving a grant to relieve the financial stress in the home, coupled with a set of age-appropriate educational play resources and a supported intervention with a family practitioner, would make a difference to a parent's ability to support their children's early development.

We evaluated the impact on parents' perceived stress levels, parents' perceived engagement with activities that support their children's early learning and play, parents' access to services, observed impact on children, and the impact of engagement between families and local delivery partners.

The project was developed by Save the Children Cymru in partnership with local partners. It aimed to provide a degree of flexibility for local delivery partners which allowed the testing of different methods of implementation and also to dovetail into their specific ways of working and the needs of different family types.

The evaluation co-designed with NESTA included:

- An engagement form which provided socio-demographic data and information on the impact of financial pressures and reasons for participation
- Mixed method pre and post intervention survey completed by parents (with a focus on parental stress levels, features of the home learning environment, engagement with services)
- Qualitative parent interviews
- Qualitative practitioner interviews

**The evaluation seeks to answer the following overarching questions:**

1. For parents/ carers living in poverty in Wales, what is the perceived effect that receiving small one-off financial grants with stage-appropriate learning resources, as well as additional support from partners, makes to:
  - stress levels
  - ability to support their children's learning and development?
2. What is the perceived effect that receiving a grant plus the additional support offered in the intervention makes to parent/ carer participation in additional engagement activities which have been designed to support their children's learning and development?
3. What features of parent/carers and family engagement activities and support are perceived to be more effective in enabling parents/ carers to support children's learning and development?

The Pause to Play project was delivered through four local partners in Summer 2022: Home Start Cymru, Cardiff Locality Team; Oasis Cardiff, ACE-Action in Caerau and Ely; and Cardiff Parenting Services-Parents Plus Psychology Led Service.

The value of the grant, the provision of play resources, and support for parents to enhance their children's play, learning and development were fixed features:

**Grant of £350****Play Resources to a  
value of £50****Support for  
parents with early  
learning and play**



Some delivery partners used the grant to purchase items for families, while others issued vouchers. Vouchers were either provided as a one-off payment or in weekly instalments. Play resources were at times linked to the support activity and handed out so that the activity could be replicated at home; others discussed with parents which play items were needed; or parents chose from a toy catalogue without a discussion of how play resources may support early learning. Delivery partners were also free to design the parent support activity in a way that suited their way of working. The activities ranged from group-based work to one-to-one home visits. Different partners engaged different demographics, with the common criteria that families recruited to the project were experiencing financial hardship.

28 parents took part in the pilot across four different community-based organisations. At the start of the project, participating families were experiencing significant, and at times overwhelming, financial pressures which had a direct impact on their ability to give their children childhood experiences they would like.

All bar one family struggled to afford essentials of family life or activities which would support children's early learning and development. A staggering 85% of parents were unable to afford three or more of seven basic family necessities such as household bills, food, clothing, or inviting their child's friend over for a play. Families were struggling with their physical and mental health, trauma, the stigma of poverty, the cost of essentials, and housing.



## Key Findings

### Effect on family stress levels:

- Pause to Play significantly reduced parental stress levels as reported by parents and practitioners.
- Where immediate needs are overwhelming and multi-faceted, these cannot be fully remedied with a singular financial boost. Systemic shortcomings of the social security system need to be addressed through consistent better financial support for families.
- Where specific immediate and urgent needs were addressed promptly and effectively, a combination of financial support and support with early learning and play had a consistent and wide-reaching impact on the home learning environment, some of which was sustained beyond the lifetime of the project.

### Effect on parental ability to support children's learning and development:

- Pause to Play increased the frequency with which parents and children engaged in a wide range of activities that support early learning and development.

### Effect on participation in activities that support children's learning and development:

- Pause to Play engaged a diverse range of families, including parents who experienced in work poverty, asylum seeking families, large families and families who experienced insecure housing. Different ethnic backgrounds, families affected by disabilities, and family types were well represented.
- The financial support through the grant was a significant incentive for participation in the support offer. Depending on the set up and delivery approach of local partners, the grant engaged parents that may otherwise not have engaged .The grant particularly helped to engage parents in the play support offer.

- The project removed barriers to engagement in services, and increased the likelihood of parents engaging with additional services.
- Pause to Play supported better awareness of community resources and services available to families, and helped overcome access barriers. This suggests a potential for sustained impact for children's early learning.
- Parents and children enjoyed taking part in Pause to Play. Parents enjoyed learning about child development and community resources, as well as the social aspect of the project. This helped build relational health and social capital, while building trust in services in general.

**Features that are more effective to enable parents to support children's learning and development:**

- The grant was the most valued element of Pause to Play by both parents and practitioners. This is reflective of the precarious financial situation that many families find themselves in. Financial security is a key component of creating a positive home learning environment.
- Engagement of diverse families relied on existing, and well-established local partnerships that had been developed over time; where partners were trusted and involved in developing local implementation. It demonstrated that where local systems work well together, it is easier for families to access the support they need.
- Where gifted play resources were directly connected to the support offer, and where they enabled parents to gain an enhanced understanding of why play is important and how it supports early learning, the impact on the home learning environment was greater.



It would be interesting to explore if different lengths of interventions could have a different and potentially more sustained impact on the home learning environment. Similarly, further research could establish if group-based intervention, one-to-one interventions, or a combination of the two have differ in impact. Revisiting families and project partners in the medium term could yield insights into whether the project has had sustained impact on the home learning environment of participating families, as well as whether there has been a sustained change of practice amongst delivery partners in supporting parents with their children's early learning and play. This would allow us to get a better understanding how community-based organisations can sustainably resource effective interventions that impact on the home learning environment, and what systemic changes would be required to ensure such sustainable resourcing. There is still a need for a more detailed and in-depth insight of what practices and approaches are effective, affordable and can be replicated and adapted in different community contexts.

- A strength-based approach where parents' existing skills were valued was particularly successful in increasing parental confidence and capabilities to support children's learning and development.

### **Challenges:**

- The project may have benefited from longer engagement periods with families.
- There is insufficient evidence to make conclusions in relation to the most impactful method of implementation.
- The administrative burden of processing grants was onerous for small community-based organisations and some financial systems were not set up to facilitate the receipt and issue of grants. The existing platform managed by Save the Children was preferred.

Pause to Play didn't allow a reliable comparison of the effectiveness of different delivery mechanisms. Where play resources were aligned with information on play types and child development, through a strength-based approach and with an element of modelling, greater impact was achieved. Further research could consolidate this assumption.

Further research could also explore how to effectively ensure that parents have the necessary capabilities, motivations and opportunities to engage in and continue with every-day and low-cost qualitative interactions and activities with their child beyond the duration of a time limited intervention. It would also be of interest to explore how systems that support parents in their role as their children's first and most important educators value the parental role and the importance of quality parent child interactions as a buffer to reduce the impact of poverty on children's early learning. Research could further explore how specific types of play increase speech, language, communication, and social and emotional development outcomes in children.



## Further research and future development

Pause to Play didn't allow a reliable comparison of the effectiveness of different delivery mechanisms. Where play resources were aligned with information on play types and child development, through a strength-based approach and with an element of modelling, greater impact was achieved. Further research could consolidate this finding.

It would be valuable to explore how to effectively ensure that parents have the necessary capabilities, motivations, and opportunities to engage in and continue with every-day and low-cost qualitative interactions and activities with their child beyond the duration of a time limited intervention. How can systems that support parents in their role as their children's first and most important educators value the parental role and the importance of quality parent child interactions? Which delivery methods work best across different groups of families? Research could also further explore how specific types of play increase speech, language, communication, as well as social and emotional development outcomes in children.

It would be interesting to explore if different lengths of interventions could have a different and potentially more sustained impact on the home learning environment. Similarly, further research could establish if group-based intervention, one-to-one interventions, or a combination of the two have differing impact. Revisiting families and project partners in the medium term could yield insights into whether the project has had sustained impact on the home learning environment of participating families, as well as whether there has been a sustained change of practice amongst delivery partners in supporting parents with their children's early learning and play. This would allow us to get a better understanding of how community-based organisations can sustainably resource effective interventions that impact on the home learning environment, and what systemic changes would be required to ensure such sustainable resourcing. There is still a need for a more detailed and in-depth insight of what practices and approaches are effective, affordable, and can be replicated and adapted in different community contexts.



# 1. INTRODUCTION

## 2.1 WHAT DOES EXISTING EVIDENCE TELL US ABOUT THE IMPACT OF POVERTY ON CHILDREN'S OUTCOMES?

There is considerable evidence from education, health, justice and economic experts that a good foundation in the early years makes a difference through adolescence and adulthood and even gives the next generation a better start.<sup>1</sup> The Marmot Review emphasised the importance of giving every child the best start in life to reduce (health) inequalities across the life course.<sup>2</sup> The foundations for virtually every aspect of human development – physical, intellectual and emotional – are set during pregnancy and early childhood, particularly up to a child's second birthday. What happens during these early years has lifelong effects on many aspects of health and wellbeing, educational achievement, and economic status.<sup>3</sup> While development starts in the womb,<sup>4</sup> growth of mental and physical abilities progress at an astounding rate with a very high proportion of learning taking place from birth to age six.<sup>5</sup>

Evidence from neuroscience has shown that the early years are a time when a child's brain grows and changes rapidly. Early experiences have a decisive impact on how the brain gets built. These are driven by a mix of their experiences, environments and genes. Children will continue to develop throughout childhood and into adulthood, but in the early years their brains are particularly sensitive. In the first two years the brain shows a remarkable capacity to absorb and adapt to its surroundings, growing to about 83% of its adult size on average by age two,<sup>6</sup> and forming connections twice as fast in a child's brain as an adult's.<sup>7</sup> These connections create the networks that help transmit information across the brain and help form their development.

<sup>1</sup> <http://www.eif.org.uk/how-do-we-know-early-intervention-works/> (accessed February 2023).

<sup>2</sup> Marmot, M., Goldblatt, P., Allen, J. et al. (2010) Fair Society, Healthy Lives: Strategic review of health inequalities in England post-2010. The Marmot Review.

<sup>3</sup> <https://parentinfantfoundation.org.uk/1001-days/> (accessed February 2023).

<sup>4</sup> Posner (2013) Learning-induced neural plasticity of speech processing before birth. University of Oregon.

<sup>5</sup> Finnegan, J (2016) Lighting up young brains. Save the Children.

<sup>6</sup> Knickmeyer RC, Gouttard S, Kang C, Evans D, Wilber K, Smith JK, Hamer RM, Lin W, Gerig G, Gilmore JH (2008). A structural MRI study of human brain development from birth to 2 years. *J Neurosci.* 2008 Nov 19; 28(47):12176-82.

<sup>7</sup> Stiles J, Jernigan TL (2010). The basics of brain development. *Neuropsychol Rev.* 2010 Dec;20(4):327-48.

However, poverty oppresses early learning and development by putting tremendous pressure on parents, making it harder for them to provide quality parental support and resources needed to maximise children's ability to play and learn. This leads to an early learning gap caused directly and indirectly by poverty. One in four children (25%) in Wales from the most disadvantaged backgrounds were not achieving the expected level in language, literacy and communication skills at age seven when assessed in English, compared to under one in ten (10%) children from more advantaged backgrounds. Statistics were similar when assessed in Welsh: 22% from the most disadvantaged backgrounds were not achieving the expected level in language, literacy and communication skills at age seven compared to 8% of children from more advantaged backgrounds.<sup>8</sup> This early learning gap that has long lasting impact on children's outcomes.

There are multiple direct and indirect causes for the early learning gap. Without money for play resources, transport or activities, parents may not be able to provide the physical environment, resources or activities that promote optimal child development (e.g. housing, furniture, play materials, variety of experiences out of the home/in the community) due to the cost of providing this.<sup>9</sup> They may also struggle to access services and support because of the cost involved. Indirectly, poverty causes stress which can become toxic stress for families, impact on parental mental health and cause conflict between parents which can affect the care and attunement of parents to their child.<sup>10</sup> Multiple demands on the parent may oppress their ability to provide consistently positive interactions and engagement with their child. The pandemic has interrupted many social networks, putting additional stress on parents and causing isolation and loneliness.<sup>11</sup>

There is also a link between parental education level and the early learning gap. While parents with lower education levels are at higher risk of experiencing poverty,<sup>12</sup> some may also find it more difficult to provide a wide range and complexity of language exposure for their children.

---

<sup>8</sup> Save the Children (2015) Ready to Read Wales.

<sup>9</sup> JRF (2013) *Does money affect children's outcomes?* <https://www.jrf.org.uk/report/does-money-affect-children%E2%80%99s-outcomes> (accessed Dec 2022).

<sup>10</sup> Nuffield Foundation: Time for Parents (2022) <https://www.nuffieldfoundation.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/05/Time-for-parents-Nuffield-Foundation.pdf> (accessed Feb 2023).

<sup>11</sup> Ipsos Mori, The Royal Foundation (2020), State of the Nation: Understanding Attitudes to the Early Years. [https://royalfoundation.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/Ipsos-MORI-SQN\\_report\\_FINAL\\_V2.4.pdf](https://royalfoundation.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/Ipsos-MORI-SQN_report_FINAL_V2.4.pdf) (accessed Feb 2023)

<sup>12</sup> <https://cpag.org.uk/child-poverty/who-risk-poverty> (accessed March 2023).

Family makeup can have an impact too: single parents may have to deal with more demands on their time which may increase stress levels. This in turn might impact on the time available to spend with their children. Similarly, larger families might have less time to spend on each child.

As the early learning gap is caused by poverty and its impact on family life and stress, reducing poverty particularly in families with the youngest children is likely to have the most profound impact on children's outcomes. Supporting parental engagement in children's early learning and play is another key lever for change. Parental engagement refers to parents playing an active role in their children's learning: by supporting and stimulating their child's thinking and learning in any context or place – at home, in settings or in the wider community. This includes everyday playful experiences and activities, alongside providing emotional support (co-regulation) and encouragement (scaffolding). Where parents provide a nurturing, responsive and language-rich environment at home with lot of serve and return conversations (where parent and child take turns in interactions), children do better, regardless of family income.

**Parental engagement in children's play, development and learning has the most significant impact on children's outcomes and is more important than maternal education levels or family income. It therefore matters more what a parent does with their child than who they are.<sup>13</sup>**

Intensive home visiting by professionals,<sup>14</sup> effective parental engagement programmes,<sup>15</sup> and a behaviour change approach to support parents to engage in their children's learning<sup>16</sup> are best placed to have a positive influence on the home learning environment and parental engagement.

Chapter 3 gives an overview of who took part in Pause to Play and how the project was implemented in each setting. It also gives an overview of the sociodemographic data of participating families and analyses the main stress factors experienced by families. This is

---

<sup>13</sup> Sylva, K., Melhuish, E.C., Sammons, P., Siraj, I. and Taggart, B. (2004). The Effective Provision of Pre-School Education (EPPE) Project: Technical Paper 12 - The Final Report: Effective Pre-School Education. London: DfES / Institute of Education, University of London.

<sup>14</sup> Evaluation of the Family Nurse Partnership programme: <https://fundingawards.nihr.ac.uk/award/11/3002/11#/> (accessed Feb 2023).

<sup>15</sup> Such as Save the Children's Families Connect programme: <https://www.savethechildren.org.uk/content/dam/gb/reports/families-connect/supporting-parents-early-learning-March.pdf> (accessed Feb 2023).

<sup>16</sup> Such as Stoke Speaks Out: <https://www.stokespeaks.org/>.



followed by chapter 4 which gives an overview of the methodology for evaluating Pause to Play.

Chapter 5 analyses the quantitative and qualitative evaluation data. Chapter 5.1 looks at the impact of the project on parental stress levels and parents' ability to support their children's learning and development. To understand the impact of the project, this chapter also explores in depth parental stressors at the start of the project before exploring the impact the grant, play resources and support with early learning and play has had on parents and children. Chapter 5.2 explores the impact of the project on parent participation and engagement in additional activities designed to support children's learning and development. This includes both impact on engagement between practitioners/services and parents, and the impact on the home learning environment as measured through frequency with which parents take part in activities that support early learning. Chapter 5.3 explores the characteristics that are perceived to enable parents to support their children's early learning and play, while chapter 5.4 looks at the challenges and barriers for this.



## 2.2 PROJECT BACKGROUND

Save the Children Cymru works tirelessly towards ending child poverty and narrowing the learning gap between children experiencing poverty and their more affluent classmates. We work in partnership and put the voices of families at the centre of our work. We evaluate our work to ensure learning can be replicated and influence policy and practice.

Evidence tells us that the strength of the home learning environment is based on the quality of parental engagement with the child's attention, interests and early learning, and the objects and experiences in it. Parents are by far the most important influence in a child's early learning and development, and they should be valued, respected, and supported in carrying out this most important work.

The closure of schools from March 2020 during the lockdown months curbed the home learning environment and the range of activities and experiences that parents could engage with. Teachers are reporting that more children than ever are starting school with delays in speech and language as well as social and emotional issues. Health Visitors too have identified that many children are missing out on the best start in life due to the fallout of the pandemic, the rising cost of living, and multiple stressors weighing heavy on families, compounded by pressures on health visiting capacity to meet the rising need.<sup>17</sup> The youngest children lost out on opportunities to socialise, take part in activities or trips. There are indications that the attainment gap is widening as a result of the pandemic. A focus on children's early learning and development in the earliest years, and from birth, is now crucial to reverse this trend and ensure every child has the best start in life.

As a further result of the pandemic, more families experience financial hardship. Many people have lost their jobs or found themselves overwhelmed by debt – more families than ever are having to claim benefits and rely on food banks. It's hard to give children the

---

<sup>17</sup> <https://ihv.org.uk/news-and-views/news/health-visitor-survey-finds-that-more-babies-and-young-children-are-missing-out-on-the-governments-promise-of-the-best-start-in-life/> (accessed March 2023).

attention they need when there are so many other stresses to deal with and consequently children are missing out on those important early learning opportunities.

We know from evidence that providing resources alone will have limited impact unless they are combined with ongoing support for families that builds parental confidence, knowledge, and skills to support their child's early learning at home. This background is the basis of the project that has been developed in Cardiff.

In Wales, Save the Children's Early Years Grant offer has provided families with children under six years access to material grants since 2013. These support their immediate needs, alleviating some of the financial pressures and challenges of living in poverty. Community-based referral partner organisations identify families who experience a financial crisis and apply on their behalf for essential household items, and/or retail vouchers, coupled with educational and age-appropriate play packs that encourage parents and children to play together to support children's early learning and development, and with an intention to ensure integration of these in the home. **Pause to Play** builds on the Early Years Grants: It piloted a more direct and flexible delivery mechanism. It also aimed to ensure that the play resources had a greater and more sustainable impact on the home learning environment by providing additional support that encouraged, enhanced and enabled play opportunities while also strengthening parents' understanding of the importance of play and early learning.

Cardiff is one of the local authorities with the highest child poverty rates in Wales, with over a third (36%) of children living below the poverty line. We know that poverty places significant and chronic stress on families. The family stress model of poverty relates to how family stress impacts on child development and outcomes. Inadequate income means parents struggle to pay for food, housing, clothing, transport, and activities. This can lead to pressures resulting from juggling finances and financial uncertainty, but also isolation and exclusion because families cannot afford to take part in activities. Families may also experience feelings of being different and being less worthwhile. This existential stress can oppress the ability of parents to engage with their children, or it can negatively impact on the quality of parent child relationship as well as cause family conflict. This in turn can

impact on a child's social and emotional development.<sup>18</sup> Children may also directly miss out on opportunities that provide enriching new experiences and support their lifelong development, such as playing with friends, being involved in hobbies, formal activities or going on holidays. Long term, there is a well evidenced link between family poverty and poorer school performance, which makes it more difficult for children to escape the cycle of poverty.<sup>19</sup>

Children do best when they have a stable, happy, supportive and enriched home environment, but that isn't easy when parents are struggling to provide the next meal, keep their homes warm or may be worried about where their children are going to sleep. When parents are less stressed and have the knowledge, skills, and confidence to provide the kind of relationships and experiences that children need in the early years, this has a tremendous potential to reduce the way in which poverty diminishes children's life chances.

### **2.2.1 The Pause to Play Project Offer**

The Pause to Play project evaluates the difference that can be made if we alleviate an immediate financial crisis in a family home, then provide a period of sustained support for families which enhances parents' capabilities to provide quality interactions, experiences and activities with their babies and young children. Save the Children Cymru worked with four organisations in Cardiff to test if receiving a grant to relieve the financial stress in the home, coupled with a set of age-appropriate play resources and a supported intervention with a family practitioner, would make a difference to a parent's ability to support their children's early development. Each family received a grant of £400, either through vouchers or purchasing items the family identified. The grant was made up of £350 plus £50 worth of educational resources. Unlike the Early Years Grant scheme, the grant was transferred directly to local delivery partners to provide additional flexibility in how the money was distributed to families. Similarly, instead of using off the shelf play packs, the allocated funding for play resources provided more flexibility and choice. The grant was

---

<sup>18</sup> <https://www.eif.org.uk/files/pdf/cg-rpc-2-2-family-stress-model.pdf> (accessed 21/2/2023). Conger et al.: Family Stress Model, 2002.

<sup>19</sup> <https://www.humiliationstudies.org/documents/AhmedPovertyFamilyStressParenting.pdf> (accessed Feb 2023).

accompanied by a programme to support parents with their child's early learning and development through play.

**Project proposal  
designed with local  
partners**

**Evaluation  
framework  
developed with  
NESTA Cymru**

**Project delivered  
with local partners in  
summer 2022**



## 2.3 HOW DID THE DIFFERENT DELIVERY PARTNERS OPERATIONALISE PAUSE TO PLAY?

The Pause to Play project started in February 2022. Some elements of the project were set, but local delivery partners had some degree of flexibility in implementation which ensured it would fit into their existing ways of working: The value of the grant, the provision of play resources, and support for parents to enhance their children's play, learning and development were fixed features. Some delivery partners used the grant to purchase items for families, while others issued vouchers. Vouches were either provided as a one-off payment or in weekly instalments. Play resources were at times linked to the support activity and handed out so that the activity could be replicated at home; others discussed with parents which play items were needed; or parents chose from a toy catalogue without a discussion of how play resources may support early learning. Delivery partners were also free to design the parent support activity in a way that suited their way of working. The activities ranged from group-based work to one-to-one home visits. Different partners engaged different demographics, with the common criteria that families recruited to the project were experiencing financial hardship.

### 2.3.1 Who were the local delivery partners?

#### Home Start Cymru, Cardiff Locality Team

Home Start Cymru is an organisation committed to promoting the welfare of families with young children. Home Start Cymru offers friendship, emotional support and practical advice in the homes of families who are having difficulties managing parenting for a variety of different reasons. These could be poor mental health, managing children's challenging behaviour, disability, domestic abuse, isolation or low self-esteem. They work with families with young children across all areas of Cardiff and across a diverse range of communities. Referrals are received from a number of routes such as through Health Care Professional, Social care and through the Early Help Team. Home Start provides practical and emotional support to families with a young child. Support is based on the family's needs at the time.



For Pause to Play, the staff identified families who would benefit from financial support and worked with **five families for six weeks on a one-to-one basis in the family home.**

Families identified items that they needed to be purchased through the project with support from staff, which also included play resources. During visits, staff modelled play and engagement with young children with resources families may already have within the home or with the new play resources. Families also chose how to receive the grant either through staff purchasing specific items that were needed in the home, or by way of supermarket vouchers.

### Oasis Cardiff

Oasis Cardiff support refugees and asylum seekers living in Cardiff and South Wales. By helping to build language, cultural, and job-related skills, they hope to see families and individuals fully integrated into life in their communities, gaining full independence and building a future for themselves in the UK. They provide a drop in as well as a one-to-one support service for practical information. They also signpost to other agency and generally help asylum seekers and refugees navigate life in the UK and reduce isolation and stress.

Families were invited who had to survive on very minimal financial support which makes it difficult to provide educational resources and toys for their children. Oasis also reached out to families who were at risk of becoming isolated, and where a more structured programme could be beneficial. Staff supported **six parents** to choose play resources tailored to their children's needs. **Vouchers were given in weeks 2 and 6 of the six-week intervention.** Oasis provided practical assistance with spending the vouchers. Play resources were discussed with parents **during group sessions which modelled, demonstrated and encouraged play**, while 1-1 casework ensured a reduction in stressors affecting each family and appropriate referral to other organisations where needed. Play sessions took place at different locations and included information on other play opportunities in the community.

### ACE- Action in Caerau and Ely

ACE is a community development charity owned and run by the residents of Ely and Caerau in West Cardiff. ACE was set up to develop and deliver a range of different projects and activities to regenerate and improve the communities of Ely and Caerau. It aims to bring the community together, support community groups, manage and develop local projects and find ways of regenerating the local community, using an asset-based approach. ACE supports working families on low income who have less access to support than families who are out of work, but may still be struggling financially or benefit from other forms of support.

The team selected families who were already accessing their pantry provision and thus were experiencing food poverty. Some families were referred by schools who ACE already had a relationship with. **ACE reached out to 8 families** with one family dropping out after the first session. The families had no previous ongoing engagement with ACE, so that Pause to Play enabled them to engage families they had not worked with before.

**Vouchers were given in weekly instalments. The practitioner developed 6 weekly themed sessions on different types of play, taking into account the interests and preferences of children and families.** The first session gave an opportunity to get to know all families and understand what kind of play activities each child enjoyed so that the sessions could be tailored to the interest of children. Families designed and created a canvas bag to receive the weekly play resources. Play resources were low cost, open ended and the sessions collated ideas of how they could be used. The themed sessions covered outdoor play, cooking, fine motor skills, and imaginary play. In each session, relevant play resources were provided and placed into a canvas bag so that activities could be replicated at home. Parents were encouraged to share, adapt and extend play ideas, which encouraged peer learning and valued parents' ideas. Sessions took place in different centres and locations were used to increase local knowledge and encourage engagement beyond the project.

## Cardiff Parenting Services – Parents Plus Psychology Led Service

Cardiff Parenting Services work in partnership with families to improve parenting confidence and skills, strengthen relationships, help parents feel more able to support their child's development, and nurture wellbeing and resilience. Parent Plus is a psychology led service which offers personalised psychology-informed interventions in the home and community to families and children across Cardiff up to the age of 4 years 11 months. Families are referred to the service because of attachment and relational, or behavioural and/or developmental concerns. Parent Plus work with a family over a period of 10-12 weeks and agree on targets of change, related to the three overlapping areas above, with the family.

For Pause to Play, Parent Plus were able to support **ten families** who they identified as having financial difficulties or were at the brink of debt, and where these financial struggles were a barrier to the parent-child interaction and relationship. **Parents Plus delivered weekly one-to-one parenting support to families** recruited to the project through these personalised psychology-informed parenting interventions, within the home or community venue. During the first visit to the family (Initial Assessment Visit), a Specialist Educational Psychologist and Parenting Practitioner got to know the family to develop an understanding of the family and what changes they wanted to work on. After this visit, the Educational Psychologist and Parenting Practitioner worked together to formulate the bespoke piece of work that was unique to the family's strengths and needs. Weekly visits were carried out, each lasting approximately one hour. The piece of work continued to be clinically supervised by the Educational Psychologist. At the end of the intervention, a record of involvement was written up and given to the family.



## 2. EVALUATION METHODOLOGY



In February 2022, NESTA Cymru and Save the Children Cymru led a process with delivery partners in Cardiff to develop the project and its evaluation. The evaluation plan was developed by NESTA Cymru with some subsequent amendments made by Save the Children Cymru, before reviewing these with local partners. The finalised evaluation plan was shared with partners with clear guidance to ensure validity.

Grants and supporting engagement with parents took place during the summer of 2022, with post intervention elements taking place from September.

The evaluation sought to answer the following overarching questions:

**1. For parents/carers living in poverty in Wales, what is the perceived effect that receiving small one-off financial grants with stage-appropriate learning resources, as well as additional support from partners, makes to:**

- stress levels
- ability to support their children's learning and development?

**2. What is the perceived effect that receiving a grant plus the additional support offered in the intervention makes to parent/ carer participation in additional engagement activities which have been designed to support their children's learning and development?**

**3. What features of parent/carers and family engagement activities and support are perceived to be more effective in enabling parents/ carers to support children's learning and development?**

The following instruments to measure changes were used:

- Engagement form which provided socio-demographic data and information on the impact of financial pressures and reasons for participation
- Mixed method pre and post intervention survey completed by parents (parental stress levels, home learning environment, engagement with services)

- Qualitative parent interviews
- Qualitative practitioner interviews

The pre and post intervention survey was completed by parents with support from delivery partner staff. There is a potential for bias as the questionnaire was completed with practitioners' help who would have an interest in the success of the project, although they were briefed in how to mitigate against such bias.

28 parents completed pre intervention questionnaires. Of these, 25 parents also completed post intervention questionnaires. This number is high enough to have relative confidence on the validity of the findings in respect of participating families. The numbers do not allow for external validity and generalising the findings to population levels. An attempt has been made to provide different ways of analysing the existing data to ensure trends are consistent, and to interrogate responses that did not follow the overall trend.

Six parents and four practitioners from all four participating projects were interviewed with a particular focus on exploring which features of the engagement activities and support interventions were most effective. Case studies originate from these in-depth interviews with parents. Parent interviews were conducted in person by the same Save the Children Cymru staff for all parent interviews, with a member of staff of the partner organisation present. This reduced the potential for bias that could result from parents attempting to please the practitioner who supported them. There was still potential for positive bias due to the stake that Save the Children Cymru has in the success of the project.

Interviews with practitioners focused on their views on the impact of Pause to Play and the features that they perceived to be most or least effective. These were conducted through video call by Save the Children staff who did not have direct involvement or a direct relationship with partner organisations, to reduce the likelihood of bias. However, a positive bias is still possible due to the stake that delivery partners may have in the success of the project, and to sustain an ongoing relationship with Save the Children.

All interviews followed the same interview schedule.

The research design was reviewed by Save the Children's ethics committee and obtained its approval.





*Participating mother and child  
Photographer: Ruth McDonald*



## 4. ANALYSIS



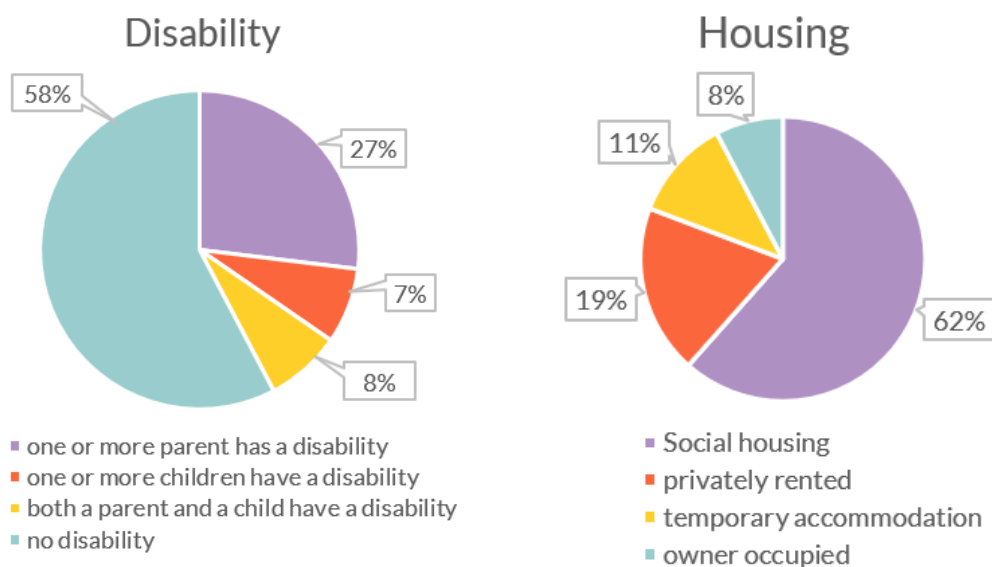
Due to the difference in implementation as well as the specific situation that some parents found themselves in at the start of the project, there is some scope for variation in evaluation results across organisations and individuals.

### 4.1 WHO PARTICIPATED?

In total, 28 parents took part in Pause to Play across four different community-based organisations. ACE engaged seven, Home Start five, Oasis six, and Parent Plus ten parents.

The sociodemographic data highlights that the project reached a wide range of demographics which is in line with the evidence that some family types are at greater risk of experiencing poverty.

42% of participating families had at least one person with a disability in their household, 34% of families had at least one parent with a disability, and 15% of families had at least one child with a disability.



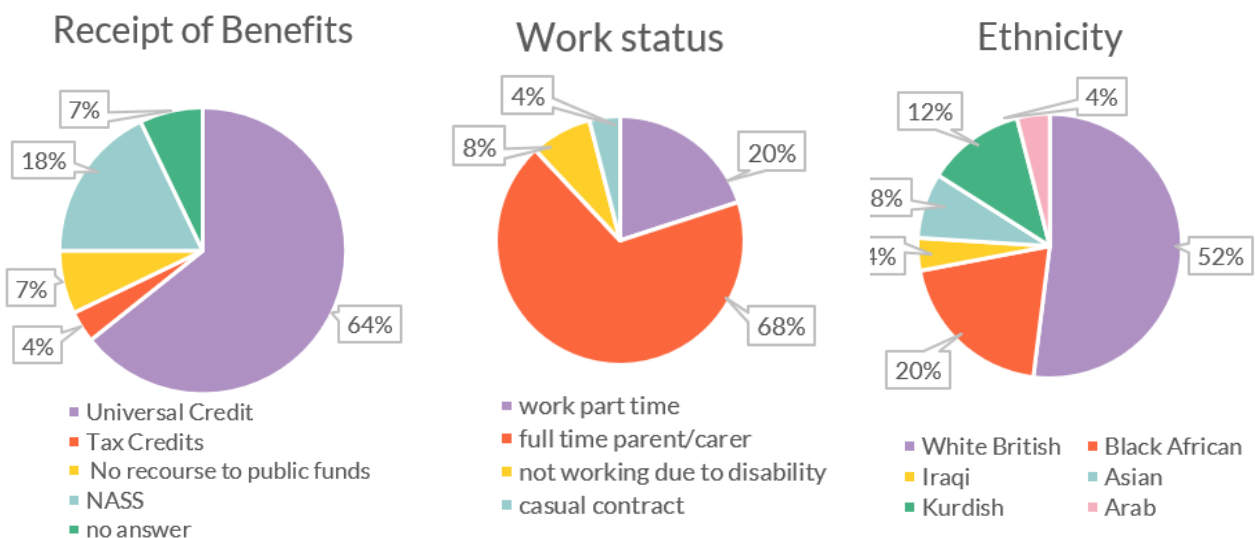
Almost two thirds of participating families lived in social housing (62%), 19% rented privately and 11% were in temporary accommodation, while 8% lived in owner-occupied housing.

Out of the 28 participants, 25 were mothers and three were fathers. 18 participants were the head of a single parent household, with 8 participants being part of a two-parent household. Families had between one and seven children. 85% of participating families had three or more children, which indicates that family size has a disproportionate effect on experiencing financial difficulties.

Over two thirds of participating families were in receipt of Universal Credit, with an additional 4% in receipt of tax credits. 19% of families were in receipt of National Asylum Seeker Support (NASS), and 8% had no recourse to public funds (NRPF).

The majority of participants were full time parents or carers (68%), another quarter of participants worked part time and a small number were unable to work due to disability. However, this data only captures the situation of the parent who completed the questionnaire.

The majority of participants were of White ethnicity with an above average representation of other ethnicities. This is partly due to BAME families being at greater risk of experiencing poverty,<sup>20</sup> but also because one delivery partner works exclusively with asylum seeking and refugee families.



<sup>20</sup> See CPAG: 46% of children in minority ethnic families experience poverty compared to 26% of children in White families. <https://cpag.org.uk/child-poverty/who-risk-poverty> (accessed February 2023).

#### 4.1.1 What did families spend the grant on?

Parents reported that they spent the grant mainly on food and in supermarkets that provided a choice of food, other essentials, and clothing. Many spent it on warm winter clothing for their children. Some parents also used it to cover the cost of Christmas presents for their children, or to improve their children's home environment. Items such as a table for play activities or children's bedding were also purchased, as were school uniforms and supplies.

Parents noted that the supermarket vouchers gave them more **choice** compared to foodbanks, whilst also enabling them to buy fresh produce and give their children some food choices too.

***"It's not just tinned stuff and that, like that's all you got off the foodbank [...] I need fresh stuff and nappies and things."  
(Parent)***

Practitioners also noted that the vouchers were useful because they provided **flexibility** and met real and different needs of individual families.

***"The parents have really appreciated being able to choose based on that situation and it was quite different for each family. So I think that was an advantage."  
(Practitioner)***

Practitioners also reflected how parents felt **trusted** by being given vouchers. They were able to budget according to their own needs. The voucher system was valued by practitioners and parents alike as it provided specific additionality to their income:

***"One of my family said was it was nice to have the vouchers because if it is cash, it tends to get swallowed up into their banks or into the overdrafts."  
(Practitioner)***

***"If it was just money, then it would probably go into my account. And then it probably gets spent on like gas or electric bills or something. If it's vouchers, I think it's nice because then it makes you actually spend it on the things for [the children] that they need."***  
***(Parent)***

The financial aspect of **Pause to Play** was most important to both parents and practitioners. It is apparent from the spending choices that the grant met immediate needs and gaps that were causing significant stress levels which will be explored in more detail. There is no clear evidence whether a 'one of' payment or instalments were preferred. However, instalments seemed to increase a dependency on this additional income.

The grant element for play resources was appreciated. Parents valued that they and their children had a choice when selecting them. One delivery partner purchased low-cost resources for each support session which was gifted with a surprise element and was aligned with children's preferences.

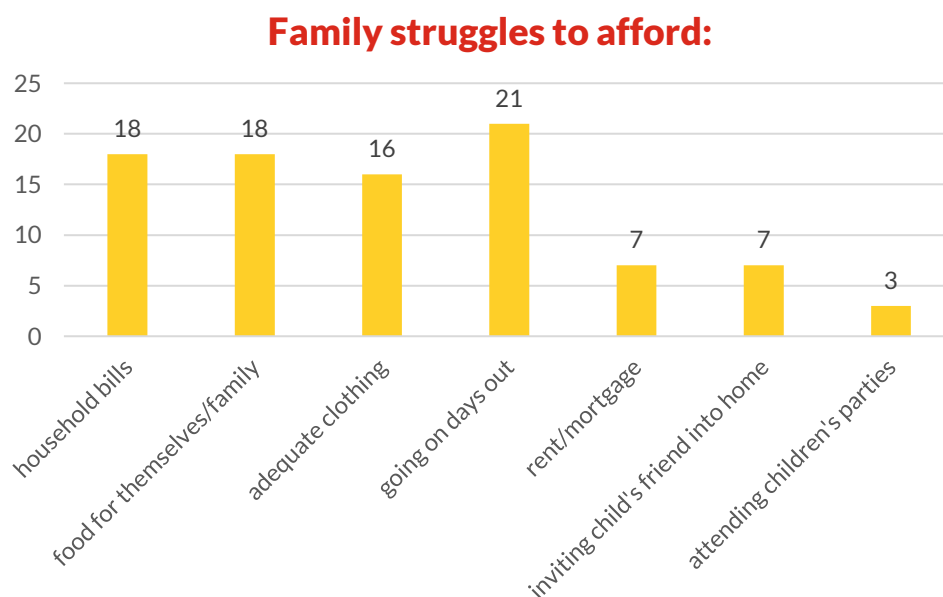


## 4.2 PERCEIVED IMPACT ON PARENTS' STRESS LEVELS AND PARENTS' ABILITY TO SUPPORT THEIR CHILDREN'S LEARNING AND DEVELOPMENT

### 4.2.1 What did parents struggle with at the start of the project?

To understand the impact of the Pause to Play project fully, it is essential to look at the individual situations that families were in when they engaged with the project. The quantitative data of the engagement form demonstrates that families were experiencing significant, and at times overwhelming, financial pressures which had a direct impact on their ability to give their children normal childhood experiences.

All bar one family struggled to afford the basic necessities of family life including activities which would support children's early learning and development. Out of 25 families who answered this question, 21 struggled to take their child on days out, 18 struggled with household bills or food for the family, 16 struggled to provide adequate clothing, and seven could not afford to invite a child's friend over for a play. A staggering 85% of parents struggled to afford three or more of these basic family necessities.



The impact of such financial strain is significant: Parent interviews gave a deeper insight into this.

While individual circumstances were unique, there are a few common threads that affected several families. Both physical and mental **health** impact directly on family finances. In turn, financial stress impacts negatively on mental and physical health:

***"The flat was so damp, and my kid was really getting ill [...] my old one was in a hospital with bronchiolitis, and then the little one [got it]."***  
(Parent)

***"I was off from work because of the mental condition of my missus, we've been going through a bit of difficult time since the baby was born."***  
(Parent)

***"I've just increased doing an extra day at work now, which is killing my body. But financially, I have to."***  
(Parent)

Some families had experienced **trauma** which particularly affected their mental health:

***"Imagine you're in home now and everything is good. Suddenly everything's changed. You went to another country, [...] you don't have money, you don't have the home. You don't have anyone and you're skilled [...] like any other person. [...] I went to the GP because I lose my hair from my face because of a lot of stress and despair that I cannot sleep with an anxiety."***  
(Parent)

For others, the **stigma** and shame that poverty brings has a significant impact on stress levels:

***"When I had to use the food bank for the first time, I was crying my eyes out because I was so embarrassed. [...] I've always been independent, bought my own house. [...] It just knocked my pride big time. [...] I just can't believe it; it's not as if I sit on my bum, I work! I've worked hard! And I have to go to a foodbank [...] it's awful!"***  
(Parent)



For many, the **cost of essential items** is unaffordable. This extends to paying an existing mortgage where mortgage rates have gone up, transport to get to college or attend to the medical needs of a child, and food:

***"We had [child health appointment]. And we had to get an Uber [...]. And it was £14 there and back so on one day, I spent £28 just to take him [back] to school for an hour."  
(Parent)***

***A lot of time I tried to go by walking which is one hour or by bike sometimes."  
(Parent)***

***"I didn't come last two weeks because I couldn't pay five pounds."  
(Parent)***

The cost of **childcare** also contributes to essential not being affordable. Not having access to affordable childcare is a particular barrier for mothers who would like to increase their family income through work but can't afford to:

***"Childcare cripples me. [All my money] goes on childcare."  
(Parent)***

Access to affordable nursery care is also not guaranteed and a "postcode lottery" which makes planning for a return to work particularly difficult.

**Housing** is another cause for stress with a direct impact on health and ability to support children's early learning. Temporary accommodation in hotel rooms without facilities, damp housing, and overcrowding is experienced by many families.

***"We lived it in small room in hotel for four month and have just one room without any facilities without any cooking without any toilet anything's nothing. Everything was outside."  
(Parent)***

***"We were living in a one-bedroom flat that was very damp."  
(Parent)***

The insecurity of temporary housing leads to a significant degree of uncertainty and keeps families in limbo, at times even out of work. The way social housing is allocated may also lead to either overcrowding (living with parents) or temporary accommodation (if presenting as homeless to be housed) with no choice to ensure continuity of schooling for children:

***"We don't know where we're gonna go next. We're gonna change the school in a while; we didn't change the school from the old area to this one [...] we don't know how long it's gonna take about a year or maybe two years."***  
(Parent)

***"We moved in with my mum and it was my mum and dad and sister who lived there already. We were all in one bedroom. I was like, I need to find somewhere. The council wouldn't put us in a house unless I'd go into a hostel, which I didn't fancy doing."***  
(Parent)

Refugee families in particular noted that they **weren't allowed to work** and that the resulting restriction on their income leads to isolation and a feeling of not being able to provide for their family. This imposed curbing of self-efficacy has a severe impact on mental health for already traumatised families.

***"It's very hard when you cannot you're not allowed to work and you don't have any income [...] I cannot buy the credit for my mobile. So now I cannot even call. [...] You cannot buy the food that [the children] want. [...] And our suffering. Depression and anxiety is all the time [...], I felt I was letting down my family. I was the man working out there and I did whatever I can to improve the situation, but I failed. So that's probably why she [his child] fell ill."***  
(Parent)

Challenging child behaviour and the demands of multiples were further cited as causing significant stress and having a negative impact on being able to play and spend time with one's child:

This is felt particularly by larger families, who were overrepresented in the Pause to Play project.

***You're constantly just trying to catch up on just the basic things like the feeding and changing [...]. So you feel like just when you're gonna sit down and try and play with them, then someone needs a nappy change."***  
(Parent)



Participating child  
Photographer: Ruth McDonald

### 4.2.2 What was the impact of Pause to Play on parents?

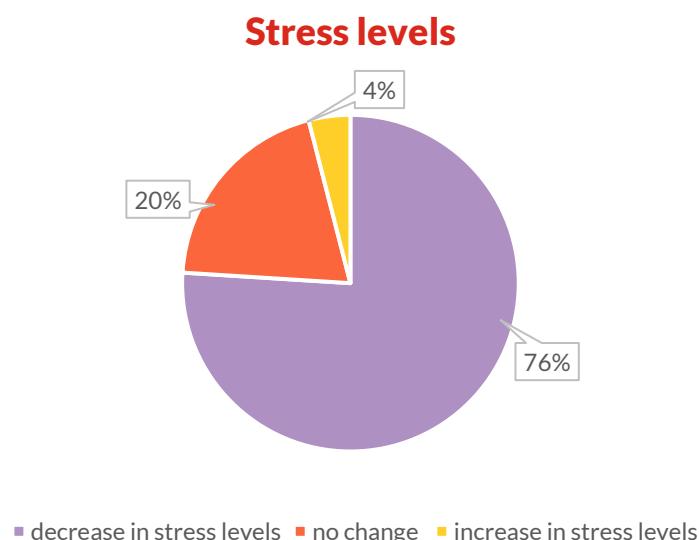
In the qualitative interviews, parents shared their determination to do the best they could for their children, despite the difficult circumstances they experienced. However, parents are all too aware that their circumstances make this difficult, and, being all too aware of this, further adds to parental stress levels.

This section explores what impact the project had on parental stress levels, parental confidence and how it facilitated a reduction in isolation and an increase of connectedness/relational health.

***"We are trying to do whatever we can for our children. [...] I just always want her to know that her mum always tried her best and [...] her hardest so she doesn't go without."  
(Parent)***

#### What was the impact on parental stress levels?

Differences in stress levels were quantitatively measured through the pre and post questionnaires, section 1 questions, as well as qualitatively in parent and practitioner interviews. The questionnaire specifically measured perceived stress levels. 76% of participants (n=25) had a decrease in stress levels, with 20% recording no change and one participant (=4%) experiencing an increase of stress level. The qualitative response from the parent who reported an increased stress level indicates that their answers relate to their experiences at the start of the project rather than current stress level, potentially due to language/translation issues. For one of the parents who did not record a reduction in stress levels, this is explained by a change of circumstances outside of the project's control.



Qualitative information shows that the grant itself made a difference to stress level, as it alleviated financial pressures at stressful times.

***The vouchers were very helpful, I could buy things that I could never have bought for my children, in particularly new clothes.”  
(Parent)***

***“I feel much better now that I have been able to furnish my home and [child] has a nice bedroom.”  
(Parent)***

***“Life seems a little easier now the children have toys and I have a freezer to cook.”  
(Parent)***

However, there is also a recognition that a time limited grant can only provide temporary relief from precarious financial circumstances, and that some stressors cannot be solved with money.

There was some concern that where the grant was given as regular weekly payments, it created a slight **reliance** on additional income. One parent noted that she is “missing the money” now that the project has finished. However, all delivery partners tried to mitigate against this by having a clear exit strategy and reminding parents of the time limited nature of the support.

The biggest average improvement by individual question was recorded on general stress levels (“How often have you felt stressed?”) and a sense of self efficacy (“How often have you felt that things were going your way?”). The lowest average change was recorded in relation to being able to spend quality time with their child. However, the pre intervention survey scores were higher than for other questions in this section, with the average score being the highest overall within this section of the post survey.

In the interviews, parents explained how both the grant and the support reduced their stress levels. Support that addressed specific individual needs in a holistic way was seen as particularly helpful:

***"When I first arrived, I was eight months pregnant. When I came, I was quite depressed. Mentally I was not well, I was quite upset. And if it wasn't for Oasis, I don't know where I would have been - they have done quite a lot in terms of supporting me, mentally in addition to this, they have helped me to apply for so much stuff for the newborn baby because I did not have anything."  
(Parent)***

What was the impact on parental social capital, connectedness, confidence and self-efficacy?

Impact on connectedness of families is particularly relevant as it builds relational health through social capital which can counteract the impact of poverty. This encompasses both peer support opportunities, being aware of and using local opportunities but also feeling more confident to navigate the system. This can help break down existing barriers of access for a sustained change.

Parents clearly valued the social aspect of the project and that it connected them to both other parents and activities and support available locally. It made it more likely for them to access places and engage with services support offers.

***"Just being able to, like, get out? And, you know, see other people as well? I don't really get a chance to get out."  
(Parent)***

***"I am mingling with other mothers and other parents who are displaced which is a great thing to do."  
(Parent)***

This reduced isolation can positively impact on stress levels and parental mental health. The project enabled parents to connect to others in similar situations to themselves, which can become a source of ongoing peer support sustained beyond the timeline of the project. There are indications that this was particularly helpful where parents with similar experiences (such as displacement, in work poverty, awaiting diagnosis for their child) came together.

The project developed local knowledge and confidence in accessing places and services that were not previously used. One parent described how she was now aware of the support available locally which she was now able to access as and when needed:

***"Because of [it], we know the new place. [Before], I didn't know that there is a playground [...] I didn't realize that there was that much help available."  
(Parent)***

One parent developed a deep interest in child development and accessed an adult learning course on the subject, while another parent was supported to sign up for a college course. Parents had an increased awareness of opportunities and were more likely to take these up.

Practitioners and parents reported an increase in parenting confidence. This was particularly felt where practitioners used a strength-based approach that built on existing positive parent-child interactions:

***"I used to feel like, oh, I should be doing more [...]. But when we've done the work with [support worker]. [...]it made me feel much more confident and better in my parenting."  
(Parent)***

With this increased confidence, a parent explained how they feel calmer and more reflective, so that they now enjoy playing with their child more and are better able to see things from the perspective of their child. She now feels that "I'm actually doing okay" as a parent.





*Participating mother and child  
Photographer: Ruth McDonald*

## Case Study:

Mya\* (name changed) is a young single parent to two children aged four and two. Her older child has autistic spectrum condition. The younger daughter is currently awaiting assessment with suspected ASC or ADHD and language delay. Mya is in receipt of Universal Credit and Disability Living Allowance. Due to caring for her children, she can only consider returning to work once both children are in full-time education.

Mya and her two children live in a privately rented property. Previously, she had to stay with her parents and sister and had to manage in one bedroom with the two children. She was unable to apply for council housing unless she made herself homeless and stayed in a hostel which she didn't want to do with two young children. This is why she chose a private let.

Her children's medical needs require attending a lot of appointments with costly and time-consuming travel. She's hoping to learn to drive to reduce her transport costs. She attends a peer support group for parents who are awaiting a diagnosis or whose children have a global delay: the 'one group' and has also attended the EPATs group.

She spent the grant on food, clothes and Christmas shopping so that she could afford the energy price hike in winter. Mya uses a budget book to keep on top of her finances. She can quantify how much general living costs have increased: her fortnightly food shop has gone up from £80 to £140 and her energy bill from £160 to £240.

At the start of the project, she struggled with her son's behaviour: "He was kicking and the way he was communicating was getting a bit physical. And I was getting worried that I couldn't handle it." Her interaction with her children was video recorded and reviewed. She found it how positive interactions that she already engaged in were identified: "Sometimes I would not play with them. But I would take a little thing and sit down, in the same room with them, but not being interactive with them and I used to feel like I should be doing more."

Dealing with challenging behaviour is less stressful for her now. Instead of doubting herself, she is better able to accept challenging behaviour as communication, and not let it overwhelm her. The peer support group for parents in a similar situation to her also helped her realise that she was not alone and that her experiences were valid and normal. She appreciated the informal nature of Parent Plus. "It was almost like having a friend over for a cuppa and having a bit of a rant or a chat. And they come up with ideas that could help." She felt that this approach was different to other services which can feel more formal. At Parents Plus, she felt that they explored ideas together.

Mya feels more confident playing with her children after taking part in Pause to Play. "It made me feel much more confident and better in my parenting then. [...] It's because of that confidence it's easier to deal with certain behaviours." She delights in watching her children play: "It's quite amusing seeing where her mind goes and what she would do with the things she was playing with [...] She'd make her own little game out of it and I would be like, that's really funny. And then I'd go along with it and see how she would react." She also feels that she is a calmer parent now:

"There's less challenging behaviour because I'm dealing with it the way I should be. Now that I'm confident with it, [...] the behaviour is easier to deal with in my mind and then [...] it goes down quicker. [...] I feel a lot more calm with his behaviours that seem challenging because I know they're not doing it on purpose or to annoy me. I can take a breather, if I need to, and I know they're doing this for a reason so I can try and figure out the reason."

She feels that many parents may be in a similar position and could benefit from the support she's received:

**"Where they're feeling like 'I might not be doing enough' or 'I haven't got the money to get this certain thing that would really help the child.' If they'd [taken part in Pause to Play] I think it would open their eyes a bit. They'd think [they're] actually doing ok."**

She realised that good parenting is not about buying expensive toys for children, but that simple every-day interactions can effectively support their development.



### 4.2.3 What was the impact on children and their early learning and play?

The interviews also yielded qualitative information on the impact of the project on children's early learning, as evidenced through changes to social and emotional development and play. This section looks at directly reported impact on children, while the following section explores changes to the home learning environment more generally.

Parents valued the **social connections** they and their children were able to make, particularly because this space had been curbed significantly during the pandemic. Where group-based interventions took place, they saw a positive impact on their children in relation to interacting with other children and adults:

***"My daughter feels very happy when she's here. She has benefited quite a lot from coming here, in terms of socialising with other babies. She used to be quite bored [...] but now [...] she's very happy when we're done with the time that she's spending here."***  
(Parent)

***"I started bringing our daughter here basically to spend some time with other kids, other children of her age [...] she wanted to join the rest of the children that's how happy she was."***  
(Parent)

For a parent of multiples, the support provided practical help which enabled her children to take part in activities that on her own she would not have been able to attend with them.

Another parent noted that the relationship between her children improved thanks to the support sessions offered: "They'll [now] play together, which is not usual."

***"We've been going to it's like a gym top session [...] because I wouldn't be able to do it on my own [...] it's been amazing it made a massive difference, and they really enjoy it."***  
(Parent)

Practitioners echoed this and found that particularly children's social development had improved due to the experience of playing with other children:

***"He knows how to play now because when her child first came, I think because of COVID, he hadn't had just much interaction with other children [...]. And then I remember in the last session [...] she said, look, he's playing [He was] concentrating for way longer than we've ever seen before."  
(Practitioner)***

Another practitioner observed that the relationship between parent and child had improved through the provision of play resources that both liked, and that they now enjoy time spending more time together:

***"It really built the relationship [with] Dad because he wanted to be part of what dad was doing. But given him his own [...] gardening set, it really built the bond and relationship."  
(Practitioner)***



## 4.3 PERCEIVED IMPACT ON PARENT PARTICIPATION IN ADDITIONAL ACTIVITIES DESIGNED TO SUPPORT CHILDREN'S LEARNING AND DEVELOPMENT

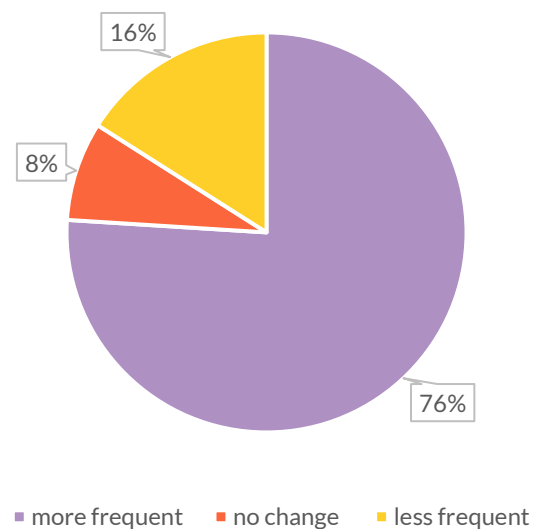
Pause to Play aimed to increase the frequency and range of activities that parents engage in with their children which supports children's early learning and development. This includes reading with a child, singing, playing with letters and numbers, painting and drawing, but also taking children on visits to friends, family, libraries or museums. The change in frequency was measured quantitatively through the pre and post surveys, and qualitatively in interviews.

### 4.3.1 What was the impact on parents' activities that support children's early learning?

The quantitative data indicates that over three quarters (75%) of participating parents are engaged in more activities that support their child's learning after the project than they were before.

Some parents reported no change or doing activities with their child less frequently. For the four parents who reported a decrease in frequency, three had a surprisingly high score in the pre survey and one indicates a non-significant change.

**Activities that support early learning**



All three parents with an unusually high baseline score were new to the country and their score may have been influenced by language barriers or not yet having the trust to complete the survey truthfully in the presence of supporting practitioners/translators.



The biggest average increase in frequency of parent-child activities that support early learning were reading and sharing stories, doing craft activities together, visiting museums and libraries, and visiting relatives and friends. The lowest average increase was recorded for playing with numbers or shapes, using the computer/tablet together, and playing indoor games together. However, while the average increase in frequency was lower, it was still present across all questions.

This was supported by qualitative interviews. While some practitioners were cautious because they felt it was difficult to judge changes that occur outside of the support setting, and were reluctant to ask parents directly, they also noted some positive changes that they observed:

***"I do know one of the families where I previously had not really seen the parent ever play with the child and most of the time the child would just like be sitting on their phone. In the sessions the parent really started to play with the child, and I think they both seemed to really enjoy that. My hope is that those experiences then encourage them to do that more at home as well."***  
***(Practitioner)***

Another practitioner noted that there was a "shift in mindset with regards to the play resources." She felt that there was a realisation that toys didn't have to be expensive items, but play could happen with everyday items that were readily available in the home, and a deeper understanding of the value of different types of play. Another practitioner noted that a child was now more interested in play, which delighted the parent and led to a virtuous cycle of more play activities.

***"He knows how to play now because when her child first came, because of COVID, he hadn't had much interaction with other children. [...] [I was] trying to model different things. In the last session we were sitting there, and she said, look, he's playing [...], he was concentrating for way longer than we've ever seen before."***  
***(Practitioner)***



Almost all practitioners felt that the reduction of stress thanks to the combination of financial support and practical/emotional support that Pause to Play offered created a space where parents were more able to be available for and enjoy interacting with their children:

***"It's alleviated her worries to be able to sit and smile and interact with her children because that little bit of money has taken the pressure off, and even if that is only for a week."  
(Practitioner)***

***"[It gave the opportunity] to be able to think of something other rather than worrying. And that's the children and play."  
(Practitioner)***

***"They couldn't just be with their child at that particular point because they had lots of other stuff going on in the background. So I definitely think that [the grant] relieved that. The moment she had the grant, you could see the sheer relief."  
(Practitioner)***

One parent reported that the signposting to other family activities through Pause to Play was instrumental for taking part in family activities during the summer:

***"I don't think we would've done a day out that big if it wasn't for [the project] telling us about it."  
(Parent)***

Parents noted that they have now more ideas how to play with their child and that they now play more. During the project, parents valued that they had special and unusual opportunities for play and experiences that their children enjoyed: “They love it for the first time they saw snake” and they valued the effort or delivery partners to provide rich play opportunities through the project:

***“Not all play groups have stations with all different arts and crafts, that was nice.”  
(Parent)***



## Case Study

Siân\* (name changed) is a single parent with one child. She works in the NHS as a healthcare assistant after a career change from being a childcare worker. Her two year old daughter attends a childminder for childcare. She was born just at the start of lockdown and Siân had to deal with a traumatic birth on her own, isolation due to lockdown and attending university virtually. All of this took a toll on her mental health. On top of this came her financial difficulties. “Every way I turned I hit a brick wall”

She has had to increase her hours by an extra day due to the increase in the cost of living. Her mortgage payments have increased with the higher interest rates. She feels she didn’t have a choice but to increase her working hours although the financial gain is minimal: “[the extra day at work] is killing my body. But financially I have to, even though I’m going to be taxed and money taken off [for the childminder] – **Childcare cripples me.**”

Siân is keen for her daughter to spend time with other children but she also needs childcare to accommodate her working hours. She hopes for her daughter to attend nursery soon which would reduce the cost of childcare. However, in spite of having applied for her daughter to access a Welsh nursery nearby, she was unsuccessful. She has now applied to a different school but expects having to apply every term in the hope that she gets a place in nursery. Once her daughter is at school, Siân hopes to further her career as she aims to become a midwife.

Siân shared how embarrassing it was for her when she had to use a food bank for the first time:

“When I had to use the food bank for the first time, I was crying my eyes out because I was so embarrassed. [...] I’ve always been independent, bought my own house. It just knocked my pride big time, it really affected me. It’s not as if I sit on my bum – I work! I’ve worked hard! And I have to go to a food bank!”

The grant helped her with her financial situation and she spent it all on food. It meant she didn’t have to rely on tinned food from the foodbank but was able to buy fresh food and nappies for her daughter. “It came at the right time that I needed it”

The play resources came in useful as well – because of her background in childcare, Siân is very knowledgeable and confident about supporting early learning and play but the resources helped her afford varied play opportunities for her daughter and be a little bit more creative. She also valued the project because it offered more than normal play groups: “it wasn’t just a play group, it was like having a little gift bag. [...] Not all play groups have stations with all different arts and crafts, that was nice.” She also enjoyed meeting people from the community and finding out about other activities for children in the community, and support for herself. “They do more than I ever thought they did,” and “you’re never judged.”

Now that the project is over, she misses the extra money as well as the opportunity to take her daughter to the group which they both enjoyed very much. It being the only group offered on a day that she didn't work, she now doesn't have a play group she can attend. Above all, "I always want her to know that her mum always tried her best and hardest so she doesn't go without."



### 4.3.2 What was the impact on parent-practitioner relationships?

Practitioners reported that the project encouraged **more regular engagement** where this was not currently the norm. It thus led to a deeper and more sustained relationship between parents and practitioners in some settings.

For some delivery partners, the project enabled them to have **deeper relationships** with families and to get to know them better. This, in turn, enables practitioners to provide support to families which is even more based on needs and can facilitate further signposting:

***"[It was good] having more time with the families, getting to know them better. And hopefully we'll then link them in with more long-term things."  
(Practitioner)***

Practitioners and parents stressed time and again how the grant alleviated immediate stress and enabled parents to think beyond the most immediate needs. One parent was able to come to the family support because she was now able to pay for transport to the centre.

***"I actually gave the mum the voucher, it was like the stress just went and then she engaged so much better with the things that we needed to do because that was just so much on her mind."  
(Practitioner)***

On occasion, the project, through the incentive of the grant but also the activities for children, engaged families who would otherwise not have engaged with the service:

***"We just had really amazing engagement from families and communities that previously weren't coming as much and I can say for definite that it was from the project."  
(Practitioner)***

The project also allowed some delivery partners to **trial a different kind of service**, where support had been mainly offered on a drop-in basis. They tested if a more structured approach would be helpful as well. While they recognised its benefits, they also found that in some cases, more structured support is not the best response to complex needs.

### .3.3 What was the impact on parents' engagement with services in general?

In the interviews, parents reported that they now had an increased knowledge of resources and activities available in the community.

***"Because of her, we know the new place. If no, I don't know that there is a playground."  
(Parent)***

***"I didn't realise that there was that much help available."  
(Parent)***

This was replicated in practitioner interviews who reported an increased awareness of local offers and an increase in engagement in the community:

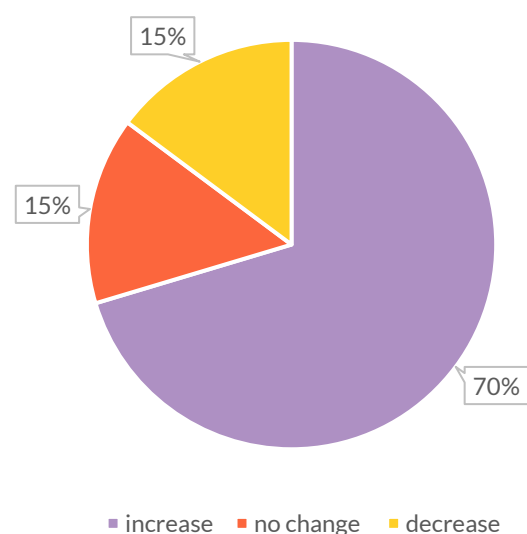
***"We talked about different places that they could go during the summer holidays, encouraging the families to kind of share their own ideas with each other."  
(Practitioner)***

***"It was really great how she would say to me, [...] I want to come, let me know about any project, anything. And in the summer when we were then doing other trips like with the wider families, she came along."  
(Practitioner)***

The quantitative data supports that there is an increased awareness, engagement with, or plan to engage with additional services that support families:

70% of families report an increase in their awareness of, or engagement with additional services. While slightly lower than the other categories, this category had the largest overall change score. Where pre and post surveys showed a decrease, this was insignificant (1 point out of a total of 40). Moreover, some of the highest individual change points were recorded in this category.

#### Participation in additional services



In the qualitative interviews, parents noted that the project has helped them access other support they weren't previously aware of and that they also had an increased awareness of what was available to families in the community:

***"When as I started coming, I was like aww they do loads of community stuff.  
And then I started finding stuff."  
(Parent)***

Practitioners explained that they were proactive in signposting to and making parents aware of other local services that families could access:

***"We talked about different places that they could go during the summer holidays,  
encouraging the families to kind of share their own ideas with each other."  
(Practitioner)***

Another practitioner explained that they had observed a renewed trust in support agencies which would make future engagement with other support more likely.





## 4.4 WHAT CHARACTERISTICS OF PARENT AND FAMILY SUPPORT AND ACTIVITIES ARE PERCEIVED TO BE MORE EFFECTIVE IN ENABLING PARENTS TO SUPPORT CHILDREN'S LEARNING AND DEVELOPMENT?

### 4.4.1 What characteristics of family support and activities enabled parents to support children's learning and development?

There was wide ranging agreement among both parents and practitioners that **the financial incentive** of the grant facilitated initial engagement with, and also helped to sustain engagement in, the activities which supported parents with their children's early learning. For some delivery partners, engagement was already in place and the project was an add-on, but for others, the project reached new families or enabled a move from ad hoc to regular engagement. For all delivery partners, the grant facilitated engagement with specific support for early learning:

*"Once [parents] were in, they realised the benefits of coming in and having like, [...] one-to-one time, [...]. They enjoyed the quality time, they enjoyed the learning packs, but without a doubt, that voucher at the end was definitely the main draw."  
(Practitioner)*

*"Vouchers made engagement easier."  
(Practitioner)*

**Having a part of the grant protected to purchase play resources played an enabling role too.** Practitioners noted that this ensured that play resources were available in the home so that the play could be replicated and sustained to truly impact on the home learning environment. The protected amount, albeit spent in different ways, allowed delivery partners to demonstrate how low-cost items can support early learning. It also supported themed play sessions and engagement in the intervention. Discussions between practitioners and parents about which play resources could be suitable for each individual child led to more general conversations around play and learning. For some delivery partners having a protected grant for toys allowed parents to choose something for their child that they could otherwise not have afforded; for others the play resources became central to the support around children's development and early learning.

***"As for the toy resources, they really helped within the intervention as well."  
(Practitioner)***

***"The play resources came from discussions. So they got to know their child's interest. I think that would help in the future when they're looking at purchasing additional equipment for their children because they've now looked at the benefits of these type of activities rather than just going and buying a load of toys."  
(Practitioner)***

Protecting part of the grant for the purchase of play resources also ensured that in financial difficulties, parents were still able to provide play resources for their children.

***"I think it's the sorts of things that maybe parents [...] wouldn't necessarily [get or] do unless you actually provide those things [...] If there's many immediate needs, like food and clothes, then toys, can fall further down in the priorities list."  
(Practitioner)***

Even if they were not the main appeal, the **children's activities** themselves presented a draw for parents. After initial engagement and because the children enjoyed the activities, parents were more likely to attend.

***"They said how much their children enjoyed coming."  
(Practitioner)***

***"Parents use their children it's almost like a mask. They'll go to things because the kids want to go and then once they're there, they're like, oh, actually, there is stuff here. [...] I get lots of people through the door, because we put events on for children."  
(Practitioner)***

Offering activities that children enjoy can support sustained engagement and also helps to overcome existing barriers to engagement.

Another enabler to sustain engagement with the project was the ability to **adapt** the offer to suit the individual needs of parents and children. A degree of personalisation was seen as crucial by practitioners, and in turn also made the activities more enjoyable for children.

***"Thank you for allowing me the flexibility to design the sessions to what suited our families because all the partners have done it differently. And that was brilliant because it meant we could tailor it to suit our families."  
(Practitioner)***

One delivery partner introduced a creative element to the support offer. Families decorated their own canvas bag, which created a sense of ownership and pride. The ritual of filling the bag every session with play resources added an element of excitement, surprise and gifting for children, which was appreciated by parents. Parents noted that children were more likely to play with the play resources if they liked them. While getting toys was appreciated "toys basically make them really happy" (parent), it was particularly helpful if the play resources were **based on interest**, if there was an element of parental **choice**, and if they were presented as a special **gift**, with an element of **surprise**:

***"Every week they had to bring the bag back for me to refill."  
(Practitioner)***

***"The children really enjoyed because they received a gift."  
(Parent)***

***"It wasn't just a play group it was like having a little gift bag."  
(Parent)***

Delivery partners echoed the importance of basing play resources on families' interests:

***"We discussed what types of things their children were interested in [...]. But we developed that further into what type of play styles they've got, what's their favourite types of play? What types of play did the parents get involved with. [...] It meant I could develop the sessions in line with what they'd already told me. So it was very personalised."  
(Practitioner)***

Parents who participated in Pause to Play reflected that for them it was important that the support was **non-judgemental** and that there were effective ways for **services to work together holistically** to address specific needs of a family. This looked different for different families, but it was particularly important for families who found themselves in the most testing circumstances.

***"There was a lot of people participated to help us to get out of the situation. So we move into this property since last year in November. So things are working well now."  
(Parent)***

***"My wife [...] she is not mentally there to sit with so many people; she's nervous. So [practitioner] was coming in the house and spending time with the kids."  
(Parent)***

For this to happen, engagement needs to be based on **trusted relationships**, and should address both **practical and emotional needs** of a family. Where this is the case, stress can be reduced, and emotional space created to support children's development and learning. Both parents and practitioners valued this:

***"[support worker] feels like a family member now. She spent a bit of time with the kids and books and storybooks, [...] [She] was helping us with a lot of other difficulties as well of going out of the way, which was really nice. [It took] a bit of the pressure off from me. She help us a lot. [...] I speak with her, and she gave me good advice as well [...]. [It] lifted a bit of weight off my shoulder."  
(Parent)***

***"As the relationship grew, she felt open and honest [to share financial struggles]."  
(Practitioner)***

***"When [families] stayed with us, you know that it was great support, and they were very appreciative of it. And then [...] they trust in other kind of agencies."  
(Practitioner)***

Relationships built on trust support families to access further support, and to talk about their worries and stresses. This sharing and empathetic listening can reduce the weight of financial burden and its impact on stress and mental health.

Parents also appreciated an **informal and relaxed approach**, which helped develop this trusted relationship. One parent pointed out that unlike other experiences or her own expectations, she didn't feel pressurised, but that her confidence was built by **focusing on her strengths as a parent**. She felt that this was empowering, confidence building and enabled her to deal with the challenges she experienced more calmly:

***"It was almost like just having a friend over for a cuppa and have a bit of a rant and a cuppa. And they come up with situations that could help. It was good."  
(Parent)***

***"[What has been most important was] [practitioner] coming over and [...] making me feel confident in what I was already doing. And it's because of that confidence it's easier to deal with certain behaviours, which before I would have still dealt with, but in a more stressful way."  
(Parent)***

It was also important for parents to have a connection with peers in a similar situation, to realise that their experiences were validated by others which helped realise what they experienced was in some way normal and that they or their parenting was not to blame for a challenging situation:

***"It made me feel like I wasn't alone."  
(Parent)***

Where group sessions took place, this shared experience was valuable also to enable a more equal sharing of ideas and discussion of play and early learning. Parents were able to contribute ideas, which led to an increase in confidence, and parents supporting parents:

***"They were all just boosted by their own ideas."  
(Practitioner)***

Practitioners further noted that being able to **model** how to play with different resources was particularly helpful. Where stages of child development were linked to types of play and developmental stage in accessible ways, it helped parents make the links between play and learning and helped them value play more.

There were also **logistical** enablers. One delivery partner made sure that participants' work rota was considered when scheduling play sessions, and there was consensus that running the support during the summer holidays, although not originally planned, had practical advantages.



*Participating mother and child  
Photographer: Ruth McDonald*



## Case Study

Arman\* (name changed) is married with two children aged five and three years. They are a Kurdish family who arrived in the UK ten months ago from Iraq. He currently volunteers as he is not allowed to work, though he used to teach French at university. "It's very hard when you're not allowed to work, and you don't have any income." While their asylum application is processed, the family survives on £38 per week. They are in limbo and don't know when their claim will be processed.

The family find it difficult to manage on this little money, buying school uniforms is very difficult. Both parents attend college but they struggle to afford the bus to get to college: "A lot of time I went by walking, which is one hour, or by bike sometimes." He also doesn't have enough money to buy credit for his mobile phone which isolates him from any contact with friends and family but is also a barrier for accessing support and completing forms.

In Iraq, Arman had been threatened by ISIS that his children will be found and killed. They lived in a small village and had to leave everything behind very suddenly "I couldn't even come back to my home to bring our clothes. [...] Imagine you're at home and everything is good. Suddenly everything's changed. You went to another country you don't have anyone, and you don't have money you don't have the home. You don't have anyone and you're skilled, you're qualified like any other person."

They were accommodated in a small room in a hotel for four months. There were no cooking facilities and the family had to use a shared toilet outside. He struggled to sleep because of the trauma that he had experienced. The stress of their situation was such that Arman struggled with anxiety which also caused hair loss: "I lose my hair from my face because of a lot of stress and despair, and I cannot sleep with anxiety."

They've accessed the community pantry for food which was free for a few weeks but now have to pay £5 which they struggle to afford. ACE were also able to help with other practical needs.

They used the grant to buy food and being able to give the children some choice for food which they aren't usually able to give. Normally, "you cannot buy the food that they want. Sometimes you are not caring about yourself it's more about the children." They also spent the grant clothes and shoes for the children. The children enjoyed receiving play resources and the experiences that they had through the project: "They love it when for the first time they saw snake." He also now knows where he can take his children to play. However, the most important aspect for the family was the financial support it provided, as much as they children enjoyed the play opportunities, because their financial situation is particularly precarious.





#### 4.4.2 What were the challenges, barriers or limitation to family support and activities that aimed to support children's learning and development?

There is a strong recognition that family finances have reached a significant state of precariousness, with some families experiencing constant pressures that allow little space and time to play with their children. One practitioner told us that a parent shared how guilty they felt about not being able to spend the time with their child that they knew would benefit them:

***“One mum said: ‘I know how to play with him. But when I've got a million things to do, it's not always easy to think like, right, what can I do with him.’ [Having] the bags there [helped to simply pick an activity], it alleviated the mum guilt, because her little boy had said to her, well, you're playing with me, and you don't have to do jobs. And she felt awful.”***  
***(Practitioner)***

The **immediate, and pressing, needs** of families experiencing poverty and low income often take precedence over being able to engage and play with their child and the support needs to be provided with great empathy to this situation to avoid adding even more pressures onto parents or to risk being perceived as patronising. Delivery partners were very aware of this and came from a position of understanding how difficult family circumstances are.

For families who were new to the country, **language** barriers made it more difficult to discuss child development, and this was also often exacerbated where families had experienced significant upheaval. This meant that child development was not on the forefront of their concerns:

***“Because we had quite a few different languages [...] it was hard to go in depth into child development just because it's out of context of where the families were at, they're coming in with immediate issues.”***  
***(Practitioner)***

This is particularly the case where the support involves multi language groups. However, another delivery partner also found that if a group had a common language, the support helped to reach out to that community or to create a peer support community locally.

Families who were accommodated in hotel rooms lacked the **space** for play resources, but families appreciated that was considered when play resources were purchased.

***"They said, 'Oh, but we don't have space to play with our child. But then they absolutely loved the little blocks. And it's a tiny box, really. And the mom and the daughter were playing and got really creative with that.'"***  
***(Practitioner)***

Parents shared that initially, a feeling of **shame** was a barrier for them to get involved in the project:

***"A part deep inside me was a bit like embarrassed that oh my God, they asked me because they know I'm struggling."***  
***(Parent)***

A **previous negative experience** of support services may also have presented a barrier for engagement for parents.

There were additional administrative barriers. The internal process for transferring money led to waiting times for some families which caused distress. Delivery partners noted that now that the system was set up, it could work more smoothly in the future. For some, this still presents an additional administrative burden. They noted that the existing website for Save the Children's Early Years Grants is easier to use.

In relation to sustainability of a project like Pause to Play, some delivery partners felt that it required significantly different and more intensive resourcing which they are not equipped for: "It took a lot of time for six families." For others, it fitted better into their normal ways of working. Another partner noted that they would lack the resourcing for a more structured approach around supporting play, and that for the asylum-seeking families they support, an unstructured approach works better.

***"I think having a more structured and more in-depth approach [to support child development and play] would be better" however, "Letting the parents bring in [what is] on their minds and giving them that space [to] talk to them about that and help them with that is important. [...] If you try and just follow a structure and ignore those immediate needs, I think you lose that trust and you lose that engagement."***  
***(Practitioner)***

Finally, delivery partners quoted that the relationship with Save the Children, which was based on mutual respect and collaboration, was felt to be an enabler in delivering Pause to Play.



#### 4.4.3 What would delivery partners do differently?

There was very little that practitioners would have done differently, as they had time at the start of the project to consider how they would adapt Pause to Play to their specific support offer and the families that they engaged. However, for a delivery partner who ran six sessions, it would have been useful to run it over a longer period to develop deeper relationships.

There was also concern that where the money was paid out in instalments, it may have led to a reliance on this additional payment, especially as it was used to cover bare essentials like food. This highlights that while early years grants are welcome and much appreciated, they are insufficient to address the root cause of the precarious financial situation families find themselves in which is caused by an insufficient safety net, low income, or a combination of the two. While delivery partners were very clear from the outset about the time limited nature of the financial support, they still felt that more frequent reminders of the end of the support would have been needed.

***"I'm just missing the money."  
(Parent)***

Overwhelmingly, delivery partners were satisfied with how they had delivered the project. For some, the administrative burden and resourcing of a more intensive and structured support offer would be in the way of sustaining a project like Pause to Play, while for others, it dovetailed well into their normal way of working.





*Participating child  
Photographer: Ruth McDonald*

## 5. CONCLUSION



The Pause to Play project set out to examine the impact of linking financial support with providing additional support for families to encourage, enhance, and enable play opportunities between parent and child. Local delivery partners in Cardiff were given flexibility on how to implement the combination of a £400 grant (which included £50 for play resources) and a programme of support with early learning and development.

The project aimed to meet parents' immediate material needs through the provision of the grant, which was hoped to facilitate engagement with local services/delivery partners. By addressing immediate needs, the project also aimed to enable parents to engage more with their children and have a sustained impact on the home learning environment as an important lever for improved outcomes for children.

The grant went some way to address parents' immediate needs. However, where the financial situation of a family was particularly precarious, this was only a short-term relief that would probably not be sustained. Relief through one-off grants is insufficient in addressing a situation where social security available to a family is inadequate to meet basic needs.

Some delivery partners felt that the grant was useful for engaging with families, or that it facilitated a more intensive engagement. It worked well as an incentive for participation in support activities for children's early learning and development. However, there were limitations to this. Some families had such acute immediate needs that, while they participated in the support offer, their focus was on more pressing priorities due to their complex circumstances. This meant that engaging with their child's development and play could only be limited. This was particularly significant for families living in temporary hotel accommodation and with insecure immigration status, and where a parent was caring for multiples or a large family.

Pause to Play was most effective in impacting on the home learning environment where family stress was relieved sufficiently to enable the parent to focus on quality interactions and activities with their child. Where this was not possible within the scope of the project, impact was understandably less pronounced and there was a risk it may even undermine

parental confidence and self-efficacy. When parents know what they “should” do to support their child’s early learning and development but are unable to, due to circumstances outside of their control, this can increase stress and parental feelings of guilt, undermining confidence.

Despite these limitations, there was convincing qualitative and quantitative evidence that, at least in the short term, parents engaged more with their children’s learning and development. Parents and practitioners reported more confidence and self-esteem to support their children’s early learning and development, and their children benefited from using the play resources. Parents spent the grant on items that directly benefited their children: this included food, clothing, bedding, and furniture. There was evidence that the project also strengthened the parent-practitioner relationship, especially where the delivery method was more intensive than the partners usual ways of working. However, resourcing and capacity limitations of delivery partners may undermine sustainability.

There was clear quantitative and qualitative evidence that parental stress levels were reduced for a significant majority of participants. Parents also reported that they play with their children more and feel better able to support their children with their early learning and development. There were some particularly encouraging case studies that demonstrated the empowerment of parents to develop confident, calm, and empathetic parenting behaviours. However there was also a reluctance to encourage qualitative feedback on how interactions, participation in activities and play had changed in the home as a result of the project. This may be due to this being considered private or because the core work of some partners prioritise other areas of impact rather than the home learning environment.

Parents also reported being more aware of community based services both to support them as parents, and to support their children’s play and early learning. They were also more likely to access these as well as public sector support available. Thus, some barriers to accessing services were reduced or even removed, which could translate to a sustainable change that will benefit families long-term.

The combination of financial and early learning support shows significant promise in impacting positively on the home learning environment and future outcomes for children. It is more successful where families are not overwhelmed by complex needs that cannot be met by a singular financial boost, and where local systems have the capacity to provide



holistic, relationship-based support with early learning and play. It is also key that early learning and play, as well as early intervention, is valued across the system: by parents, practitioners, funders, civil servants, politicians and local and national governments.

If delivered in partnership with families, community-based organisations, and with effective signposting opportunities, systemic impact can be achieved.

Pause to Play has brought to light some additional questions that future research and pilots could address. It would be worthwhile to explore how to effectively ensure that parents have the necessary capabilities, motivations, and opportunities to engage in and continue with every-day and low-cost qualitative interactions and activities with their child beyond the duration of a time limited intervention. It would also be of interest to explore how systems that support parents in their role as their children's first and most important educators value the parental role and the importance of quality parent child interactions as a buffer to reduce the impact of poverty on children's early learning. Research could further explore how specific types of play increase speech, language, communication, and social and emotional development outcomes in children.

Pause to Play didn't allow a reliable comparison of the effectiveness of different delivery mechanisms due to quantitative limitations. It appears that where play resources were aligned with information on play types and how they promote development, and where this was done through a strength-based approach which incorporated an element of modelling, this worked best. Further research could consolidate this assumption.

Similarly, different length of interventions could have the potential of sustaining the positive impact on the home learning environment. It would also be useful to explore if group-based intervention, one-to-one interventions, or a combination of the two have a more significant and sustained impact on the home learning environment. Revisiting families and project partners in the medium term could yield insights into whether the project has had sustained impact on the home learning environment of participating families, and on the practice of delivery partners in supporting parents with their children's early learning and play. It would also be valuable to explore how community-based organisations can sustainably resource effective interventions that impact on the home learning environment, and what changes would be required to ensure such sustainable resourcing.



There is still a need for a more detailed and in depth understanding of what practices and approaches are effective, affordable and can be replicated and adapted in different community contexts.



## **Save the Children Fund**

Phoenix House, 2nd Floor, 8 Cathedral Road, Cardiff. CF11 9LJ  
029 2039 6838  
[savethechildren.org.uk](http://savethechildren.org.uk)

A company limited by guarantee registered in England and Wales  
(178159)

A registered charity in England and Wales (213890), Scotland  
(SC039570) and Isle of Man (199)

© Save the Children Fund



**Save the  
Children**  
Achub y Plant