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Reason, Matthew ORCID logoORCID:
<https://orcid.org/0000-0003-0536-4236>, Gibson, Joanne ORCID
logoORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-4956-5120>, Wilson, Harriet
and Noret, Nathalie ORCID logoORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-4393-1887> (2021) Theatre Hullabaloo Baby Play Pack
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THEATRE

Hullabaloo



BABY PLAY PACK EVALUATION

Jo Gibson, Harriet Wilson, Nathalie Noret & Matthew Reason
Institute for Social Justice, York St John University
July 2021



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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

**'IT'S SUCH A LOVELY
PACK AND WE USE IT
MOST DAYS'**

(Stephanie, parent of a 1 month old,
June 2021).

This evaluation was commissioned by Theatre Hullabaloo to consider the impact of the Hullabaloo Baby Play Pack Programme on the experience of new parents and their babies during the Covid-19 pandemic. The evaluation used a quantitative survey (N=189), conducted before and after the distribution of the play pack, alongside qualitative interviews with parents (N=10) and health and culture sector professionals (N=7).

Key findings:

- ★ The majority of families (86%) reported that they played with the pack *'often'* or *'all the time'*.
- ★ Over 80% of participants reported that the pack helped them engage with their baby.
- ★ Parents felt that the pack contents are well-suited for interaction and play with 0-12 month babies and that they encouraged many different ways of playing.
- ★ After receiving the pack families read significantly more often to their baby (an increase from 75% to 95%) and enjoyed reading more (an increase from 80% to 93%).
- ★ Participation in the Baby Play Pack Programme increased family hub registrations – 67% of families that received a pack registered with family hubs.
- ★ Families reported feelings and experiences of isolation connected to having a baby during the pandemic. For some, receiving the Baby Play Pack during this time made them feel *'thought about as lockdown parents.'*
- ★ Health professionals involved in the programme reported the Baby Play Packs positively impacted relationships between 1) health, education and culture sectors, and 2) families and services.
- ★ There are some early indications that the Hullabaloo Baby Play Pack Programme supports or affirms parental confidence in play and decreases anxiety around interaction. Families reported that the pack helped them to *'know what to do'*, understand *'what was classed as play'* and play from early on.

ABOUT THE HULLABALOO BABY PLAY PACK:

A creative play pack for parents of babies under 12 months old.

Accompanied by a 'playbook' and set of short films that together model good play practice and encourage families to read, sing, play and bond with their babies.

Between August 2020 - April 2021, over 3,000 free packs distributed to families across Tees Valley.



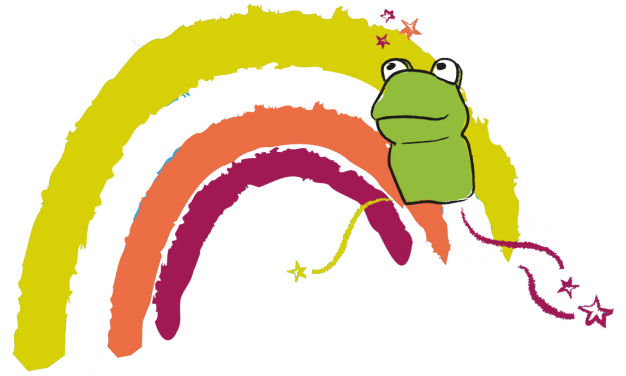
Insights:

This report will develop the following key insights from the Baby Play Pack Evaluation:

- ★ **Supporting Parental Confidence in Play**—The pack served as a positive reminder and affirmation of the importance of parent/child interaction.
- ★ **Play Supports Reading**—The pack provided an alternative way into reading through engagement and play.
- ★ **Engagement with Support Services**—The pack provided a pathway for meaningful contact between parents and support services.
- ★ **First 1,001 Days**—The pack promotes the ongoing developmental benefits of play for babies negatively impacted by Covid-19 in their vital first 1,001 days.

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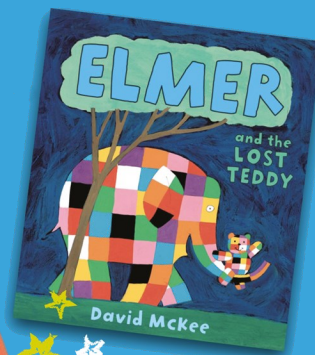


‘WHEN YOU MAKE A PLAY OFFER TO CHILDREN, THEY SEIZE IT’

(Miranda Thain, Theatre Hullabaloo Chief Executive and Artistic Producer).

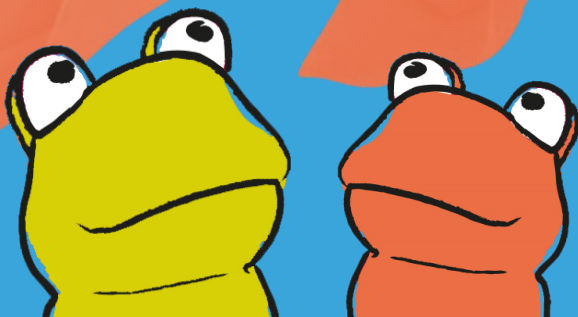
ABOUT THE PACK

The Hullabaloo Baby Play Packs were created in response to the pandemic. The closure of The Hullabaloo due to lockdown restrictions, meant that families could not access their creative play opportunities. By developing the play packs and gifting them to families at home, Theatre Hullabaloo sought to *‘make sure that the message about the importance of play, and the opportunities for parents to extend how they interact with their baby continued’* (Miranda Thain, June 2021).



WHAT'S IN THE PACK?

- **Hullabaloo Baby Playbook** with suggested activities, words to songs and ideas about how parents can extend their play with baby using things they have at home.
- A **shaker** for parent and baby to make music together.
- A **board book**: Elmer and the Lost Teddy by David McKee for parent and baby to snuggle up and enjoy a story.
- A **colourful scarf** for hours of sensory play & peek-a-boo fun.
- **Two finger puppets** so parents can start to make their own stories for baby.
- A **bell** for music making and attracting baby's attention.



THE IMPORTANCE OF PLAY



Play is recognised by the United Nations as every child's right (OHCHR, 1989). "Play is a child's work. [It] is important for children's development and for children to bond" (Anderson-McNamee & Bailey 2010, 1). This starts early on. From day one, babies respond to eye contact and can recognise the voices they hear most often. Through play children learn and develop language, social skills, motor skills and more. It can support their health and wellbeing and can empower children to thrive in the 21st century. However, "opportunities for play, especially free play, have become increasingly compromised, colonised and denied" (Murray, 2018, 335). At the same time, there is growing knowledge that for children from more disadvantaged backgrounds, Covid-19 has had significantly negative impact (Education Policy Institute, 2020; United Nations, 2020), particularly on reading and readiness for reception (Pascal, et al. 2020). In this context, children's right to play, and the importance of play with its associated benefits, is all the more pertinent.

'Play is the brain's favourite way of learning'

(Diane Ackerman, *Deep Play*, 1999).

METHODOLOGY

Theatre Hullabaloo commissioned York St John University's Institute for Social Justice to research the impacts of the Baby Play Pack on families. The evaluation used a combination of quantitative and qualitative methodologies to produce both tangible evidence and evocative stories of impact within a short timeframe.

189 parent/carers took part in quantitative surveys before receiving the pack and after.

Alongside this, 10 parent/carers and their babies took part in qualitative interviews in the form of "baby play chats".

Interviews were also held with 7 of the health and culture sector professionals that worked on the project.



WHAT IS A BABY PLAY CHAT?

It's a short online session where families play with the pack and share their experience of it. At the same time, researcher Jo and her toddler played with the pack. Think of it as a play date interview. The baby play chats took place by video call. A telephone interview alternative was made available.



The Baby Play Packs were distributed through family hub services in Tees Valley. Alongside this, some were given through neonatal children's physiotherapy, women's refuge and perinatal mental health services in the region. The research for this report was conducted with families and professionals in Middlesbrough and Redcar and Cleveland.

All families eligible to receive a pack were telephoned by family hub services prior to receiving it. During this call parents were invited to opt in to the two-part quantitative survey. In addition, qualitative baby play chats were advertised through Theatre Hullabaloo's social media and family hub New Parent Virtual Groups. In this report we include direct quotations from parents. Names have been changed to ensure anonymity.



PLAYING WITH THE PACK

Overall, engagement with the Hullabaloo Baby Play Pack was positive, see table 1. Most individuals used the pack often (N=86, 45.3%) or all of the time (N=79, 41%). A small number of individuals (N=21, 11.1%) used the pack 'a bit', however there were no respondents who did not use the pack.

Table 1: How often do you use the pack with your baby?

	All the time	Often	A bit	A Little Less	Much Less
Total	79 (41%)	86 (45.3%)	21 (11.1%)	0	0
Middlesbrough	36 (35.3%)	51 (50%)	13 (12.7%)	0	0
Redcar & Cleveland	43 (48.9%)	35 (39.8%)	8 (9.1%)	0	0

Some families talked about using the pack as part of their daily routine. Others said they played with it both in the home and 'out and about'.

'Well this [egg shaker] is a lifesaver. Particularly when he was tiny. If we were out and about it was the only thing that'd settle him'

(Emma, parent of a 9 month old, May 2021).



Both parents and health professionals said that the pack contents were highly suitable for play with babies 12 months and under. For one parent, who had recently experienced postnatal depression, having things that they could hold and move around whilst playing with baby, positively impacted their confidence. When asked 'How confident would you say you are with playing?' this parent said:

'I was always a bit worried that like, that she didn't want to play with me ... I was always like - ah she'd rather play with something other than playing with me. But then since having like things that I can hold and move around, I realise she just, anything that's like new and interesting really'

(Lacie, parent of a 5 month old, June 2021).

Lacie and her baby enjoyed playing with the finger puppets together: *'I bought some more of these [...] I found that she loved when my hand was full of them'*.

Another parent said that the pack contents helped their baby towards their milestones: *'He is really, really close to rolling over. And these have helped him'* (Lauren, parent of a 4 month old, June 2021).



SUPPORTING PARENTAL CONFIDENCE IN PLAY

The parent survey included questions on aspects of parenthood related to parent's perceptions of their own confidence and feelings of anxiety when playing and interacting with baby. These included questions related to feeling anxious, parental perceptions of their own parental expertise, and their communication with their baby.

Significant relationships were found between more frequent use of the Baby Play Pack and more positive parental feelings of

- 1) communicating well with their baby,
- 2) doing a good job parenting and
- 3) better understanding when their baby is interested in something.

Becoming attuned to your baby—tuning into their needs, understanding their thoughts and responding to them—is foundational to bonding and attachment.



Whether parents self-identified as confident or less confident, they reported playing with the pack. Those more confident with play discussed ways in which the pack enhanced their play, particularly in the context of lockdown.

For those that felt less confident the pack was a valued resource for play ideas and to know whether they are doing the 'right' thing. This suggests the pack is useful and engaged with no matter what the parents' sense of confidence.

These results suggest that there are some early indications that the Hullabaloo Baby Play Pack Programme supports parental confidence in play communication. Such findings are supported by the qualitative data where families reported that the pack helped them to 'know what to do', understand 'what was classed as play' and play from early on.

"[The pack] was lovely because [...] like family centres were all closed. All the support centres were closed. So the pack was a real welcome addition, something positive that we could do together"

(Annie, parent of a 12 month old, June 2021).

The book with like the things to do was actually really helpful because if I've got all the stuff, and then I didn't like [have it], I probably would have just thought, ah I don't know what to do with half of them'

(Lacie, parent of a 5 month old, June 2021).

'Do you know what's good, if you're stuck with what to do, the baby playbook, it gives you all the ideas of what to do. And I think that's actually one of the most useful things in the pack'

(Lauren, parent of a 4 month old, June 2021).



PLAY SUPPORTS READING

After receiving the pack families read significantly more often to their baby (an increase from 75% to 95%) and enjoyed reading more (an increase from 80% to 93%).

Table 4: *How often do you read to your baby?*

		Very Often	Often	A bit	Rarely	Not at all
Total	Pre-pack	55 (28.9%)	48 (25.3%)	42 (22.1%)	20 (10.5%)	18 (9.5%)
	Post-pack	91 (47.9%)	60 (31.6%)	32 (16.8%)	4 (2.1%)	1 (5%)

Each pack included a copy of Elmer and the Lost Teddy. Reading can be considered a form of play, as parent and child interact through an imaginary world. This book was chosen by Theatre Hullabaloo to support and promote the introduction of narrative play. The book was well received by families, and for some extremely impactful. Here is what some families said:

'It's one of his favourite bedtime stories actually [...] We're really happy to have Elmer in in the pack'

(Emma, parent of a 9 month old, May 2021).

'I found the book very helpful and he loved me reading it to him and he loved the colours'

(Survey participant, parent of a 4 month old).

'I didn't know to read books, we now read everyday'

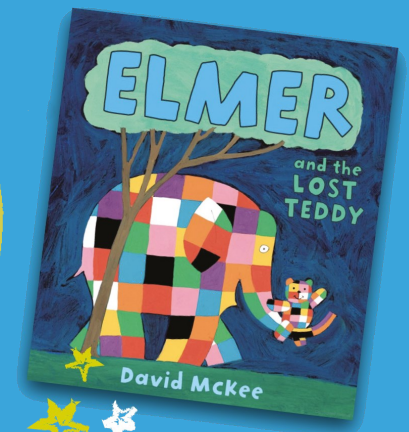
(Survey participant, parent of a 3 month old).

'I think I enjoyed the book more than baby like [...] I love it. I think it's because like obviously I read Elmer when I was younger [...] it's nostalgia for me'

(Lacie, parent of a 5 month old June 2021).

'My little girl [baby's older sibling] likes, obviously sitting and listening to that as well. So it's nice for them to do something together'

(Stephanie, parent of a 1 month old, June 2021).



Some parents commented that they felt the book was perhaps better suited to older children, although the pack still encouraged them to use and read the book with both babies and older siblings. Research suggests that the sheer number of words a parent speaks to their infant relates to future vocabulary (Colker, 2014).

COVID RECOVERY – A WIDENING GAP

Several studies are beginning to report negative impacts of Covid-19 on early years language development. For example, the practice of mask wearing, social distancing and virtual meeting can impede communication skills and speech development in children (Charney, et al. 2020). And some early years providers have “identified that children were now less likely to start a conversation or comment on things during play” (GOV.UK, 2020). The problem is more acute for those most deprived (Crew, 2020).



Reading with baby from early on introduces them to new words, familiarises them with patterns of speech and language, helps them learn about the world around them and can nurture bonding between parent and child as they spend time together. As a free resource, which supported increased reading and enjoyment of reading, the pack offers a valuable contribution to language development.

The Baby Play Pack evaluation reveals significant increases in families reading to, and enjoying reading to, their babies. This might simply have been due to the novelty of the book. However, it is also worth considering whether providing a reading book within a creative play context might prompt different kinds of engagement and more active reading. We'd suggest that supporting reading through creative play enhances reading engagement and enjoyment.

The Baby Play Pack provided parents with an alternative way into reading, through engagement and play.

FEELING THOUGHT ABOUT AS LOCKDOWN PARENTS

'I feel like they were one organisation that actually thought about lockdown parents'

(Annie, parent of a 12 month old, June 2021).

'It was nice just to have something to say look we know it's hard, here's something for you'

(Emma, parent of a 9 month old, May 2021).

During the baby play chats several parents reported feelings and experiences of isolation and loneliness connected to having a baby during the pandemic. They talked about not being able to share their pregnancy with others, the closure of antenatal classes, baby groups and other in-person support groups, and not being able to introduce baby to extended family or family living abroad. For some, receiving the Baby Play Pack during this time made them feel *'thought about as lockdown parents.'*



Loading the van with play packs: Theatre Hullabaloo



ENGAGEMENT WITH SUPPORT SERVICES

The Baby Play Pack Programme involved multi-agency working between Theatre Hullabaloo, Creative Darlington, Family Hubs and Health Services in Tees Valley. Those involved reported that the Baby Play Packs positively impacted relationships between 1) health, education and culture sectors, and 2) families and services. For Graeme Nicholson, Health Improvement Specialist for Public Health South Tees, this was an important impact;

'The biggest impact for me has been the relationships I've built with professionals in our early years services. Developing the baby play pack project locally helped us to build really good relationships amongst local professionals whilst adding a much needed creative play workstream to our local health and social care offer for families' (April, 2021).

For Graeme, good relationships between sectors strengthened 'relational practice' whereby professionals work in collaboration with families to empower them to 'get real big benefits' through their relationships with services. Significantly, a 'relational approach' is outlined as a core principle in designing a 'Start for Life offer' in the government's 2021, The Best Start for Life: A Vision for the 1,001 Critical Days Report.

FAMILY HUB REGISTRATIONS

Family hub managers said that the Baby Play Pack programme was crucial in facilitating their relationship with families. It was through participation in the programme that they could contact *all* families, rather than only contacting some through targeted services.

67% OF PARENTS THAT RECEIVED A BABY PLAY PACK SIGNED UP TO A CHILDREN'S CENTRE OR FAMILY HUB.



'The biggest thing for us is being able to access those parents that we lost for a number of months. [...] It's just allowed us to sort of re-establish those communications with new mums'

(Family Hub & Partnerships Manager, April 2021).

'If it wasn't for the Hullabaloo project, we would never have got the family details. And they would never have been given the opportunity for our staff to have meaningful contact [and to] share information'

(Jo Tickle, School Readiness Assistant Team Manager, April 2021).

MEANINGFUL CONTACT

Health and cultural professionals viewed the Baby Play Pack Programme as a tangible means to initiate meaningful contact with families:

'The expertise and early years experience of the staff [enabled them] to have those meaningful conversations that are more impactful on the gift' (Jo Tickle, April 2021).

This meaningful contact, began with a phone call to families to offer them the pack. Following this families could opt into more contact with follow-up phone calls and access to family hub services. For some families, the phone calls supported them to reflect on their play with baby. Meaningful exchange is supported by the skill of the caller. For Valerie Evans, a family hub assistant that made calls to families, conversations often went deeper and provided more scope to support parents on their terms, when she 'related' to the parent.

'GIFTING ALONE, MEANS NOTHING'

(Jo Tickle, April 2021).

CONCLUSIONS



There were high levels of engagement with the Baby Play Pack and statistically significant data that evidenced parents reading more to their baby and enjoying reading more. Parents shared stories of how they played with the pack 'everyday', in the home and 'out and about', which is testimony to the pack's suitability for play with babies 12 months and under, the multi-functionality of the pack contents and the many ways of play.

The Baby Play Packs also positively impacted relationships. Family hub registrations increased and health professionals reported that their participation in the programme helped strengthen relational practice.

A significant positive correlation was found between how often parents used the pack with their baby and how positively they see: themselves as parents; their communication with their baby; and any feelings of anxiety or confidence relating to play. This presents some early indications that the Baby Play Pack supports or affirms parental confidence in play and decreases anxiety around interaction. Whilst, a degree of caution may be needed, for example parents who already played and engaged with their baby may have used the pack more, this correlation—alongside the stories shared through the baby play chats—suggests a narrative of positive reinforcement.

In a virtuous circle, the pack provides a valuable tool in supporting engagement and understanding the value of play. This combined with the figures of impact on reading provide a strong argument for the role of the pack in supporting the first 1001 days and school readiness, particularly given the knowledge that is growing about how for children from more disadvantaged backgrounds, Covid-19 has had significantly negative impacts.

'I'll just say I think it's brilliant. There's all different ranges of like textures and sounds and colours. And I think honestly, I think it's brilliant!'

(Lauren, parent of a 4 month old, June 2020).

'We're really pleased to have had the opportunity to work with them, because I think it's benefitted us in lots and lots of ways'

(Family Hub & Partnerships Manager, April 2020).

RECOMMENDATIONS

Supporting Parental Confidence in Play

Future developments of the programme should continue to research the impact of the Baby Play Pack on improved parental confidence in play and connection to parent/child bonding and parental wellbeing.

Play Supports Reading

The significant reported increases in reading and enjoyment of reading require further research. In particular, we recommend research on the impact of gifting books within a play intervention and whether this offers an alternative way into reading for parents.

Engagement with Support Services

Health and cultural professionals viewed the Baby Play Pack as a tangible means to initiate meaningful contact with families. Time, resource and caller training is recommended to ensure that contact remains meaningful and caring, not rushed and tokenistic.

First 1,001 Days

Covid-19 has negatively impacted some children's language development and school readiness. The Baby Play Pack offers a way of supporting Covid-19 recovery in baby's vital first 1,001 days.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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Photo credits - Page 1, Rich Kenworthy; Page 9, Theatre Hullabaloo. **Illustration credit** - Matt Sayle.

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This evaluation was conducted by The Institute for Social Justice, York St John University. The Institute for Social Justice facilitates social justice research, projects and partnerships that help to pursue and promote a fairer society.

For more information visit: www.yorksji.ac.uk/ISJ

All the data collected as part of this evaluation will be made available via York St John University's data repository.

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