



THEATRE

Hullabaloo

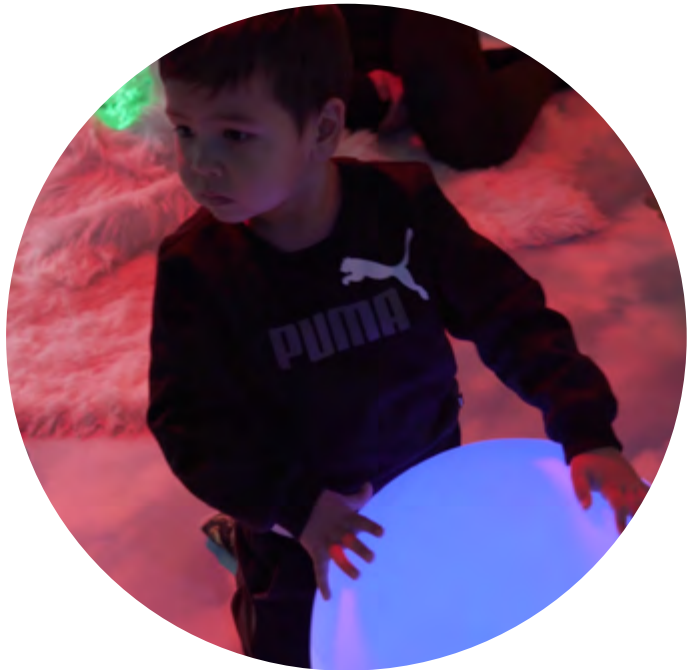
and the importance of early years play



Intro

As part of Culture Bridge North East's (CBNE) Creative Classrooms Let's Play programme we visited Theatre Hullabaloo, where we spoke to Miranda Thain, Chief Executive & Artistic Producer and Helen Dummett, Executive Head Teacher at Borough Road Nursery School about how they have worked with the local community to create creative sensory play spaces and joyful, affirming experiences that lay a foundation for learning in a child's first 1001 days of life.





Can you tell us a little bit about Theatre Hullabaloo?

Theatre Hullabaloo believes creativity should be part of everybody's childhood. Our base, The Hullabaloo in Darlington, is the only purpose-built theatre for children and families north of London.

We run a busy programme of world-class theatre, creative play and activities for families to enjoy together, with particular focus on early years. Our belief is that play has a crucial role in laying foundations for healthy and happy relationships for babies and toddlers in later life.

What is the impact of early learning play?

Play is young children's way of learning about the world around them. The skills they acquire through play help them gain a greater understanding of their own emotional world and enables them to create stronger bonds with the grown-ups in their lives.

Child-led creative play helps children to understand their independent impact on the world and is a key part of beginning to form more complex ideas like 'this makes me happy or fulfilled'.

For young babies, healthy brain development is stimulated through touch, taste, sight, sound and smell as they investigate the world through play.

How do you work with nurseries and schools?

We have excellent relationships with some of our local schools and nurseries and we're really lucky to have Borough Road Nursery and Darlington College Nursery close by. We regularly have nursery children popping in to tell us whether something is fun enough!

Our mantra is 'Follow the Fascination', so we often just play with ideas and let the children lead us to the interesting kernel. Our best ideas for shows and creative play installations come from conversations with children. Lullabub, for example, was developed with babies in the rehearsal room, observing what fascinated them at various developmental stages.

Play in the early years

Are there techniques that you can share with practitioners on how they can play and connect with babies and toddlers up to 5 years old?

A child-centred collaborative approach is particularly relevant for pre-verbal children.

Don't assume you know what will engage a child on a particular day. Make them an offer and 'follow their fascination' by scaffolding their play, rather than dictating its direction. Constantly communicate and connect with the child throughout, but don't fill the space with words. Young children are particularly adept at reading emotional responses - too many words can clog up the fun.

Remember all children are individuals. There are lots of synergies across developmental stages, but all children develop at a different pace, so offer a variety of play options.



How does early learning play prepare children for school?

Learning to play well is an important skill for children to develop. Play develops language, the imagination and the scope for sharing your ideas and involving others.

It encourages independence and autonomy and the opportunities to 'test out' how to understand some of the trickier relational issues that children face when they first go to school.

Play is also fun, and being able to include others in games and adventures is important for building age appropriate social skills and friendships.



How do you create different environments that allow you to put play at the heart of everything?

Like all of our work, The Hullabaloo was designed and developed with children's contributions. Our eight-year-old consultant architects wanted free spaces to play, and that idea grew into the Gillian Dickinson Creative Play Space, right at the heart of the building.

The interactions children have while exploring our spaces - be it light projections or a set of story stones - are chosen because children will know the best ways to play with them. Grown-ups are definitely not the experts here!

It's also important that the installations are created with care, because we believe everyone should have beautiful, stimulating and special places to play.

Can you explain the idea behind Zen Garden? Your current creative play space

It's a new, meditative play space for children and their grown-ups which celebrates the natural world and its seasons. Zen Garden creates an environment that evokes feelings of tranquility, calmness and peace, combining digital interactive elements with physical ones like water and sand. The musical elements harmonise with each other within an ambient soundscape that helps children to focus on calm, contemplative and purposeful activities.

How do you come up with and develop new themes for the sensory space at The Hullabaloo?

As with all Theatre Hullabaloo's work, the best ideas come from children. Our artists spend time in nursery and school settings or talking to the families who visit us for inspiration. So far we've been in an Enchanted Forest, the ocean, stars and now Dreamland.

Once we have a theme, we work with the children to understand what elements might make up that world.

My favourite idea that came directly from a child was that we should have a fairy pond in the Enchanted Forest where you could write fairies' names with light. Our creative team rises to the challenge of realising children's imaginative ideas and making the magic happen!

How long does it take to create a new sensory space from idea to build?

From the initial idea, which can either come from an artist or children, it takes around 18 months to two years. But, unlike a show, we have much more time and creative freedom to make changes and learn from observing children and families in the space once it's open. We also offer bookable sessions for neurodiverse children and their families who might find it more challenging to come to The Hullabaloo when it's busy during our core hours. These sessions really help us to understand what adaptations we need to make to ensure it's the best possible play experience for everyone.



How do you use pre-verbal creative collaboration to research and develop your play spaces and theatre work?

Working with pre-verbal children is all about observation - we offer stimulus and observe how the children respond, then follow their fascination.

Every individual is different, so we test our assumptions with children at different developmental stages, in different combinations with peers and carers, so the learning never stops.

From developing a new creative play idea, through to its installation and all the play that might happen during its time at The Hullabaloo, we continue to adapt the experience as we learn from the way different children play in the space every day.

In the Zen Garden, for example, when a child sees an image of themselves projected within the digital elements, it helps them develop cause and effect skills through play. We have added both musical and visual creative elements to this installation that encourage the children to move within it. These activities are based on free creative open ended play rather than a task to be completed.

Also, the pre-verbal collaboration is not limited to between adults and children - if there is more than one child within each digital scene then they have to negotiate or collaborate with each other to achieve the best creative outcome.



How did you use the feedback from the research and development sessions in the Zen Garden to adapt the concept, space or how children interact with the setting?

We tested the narrative of the digital elements, to understand whether it was pitched right, whether it held their attention and if they recognised themselves. The aim was to see how the children explored and played within each of the digital scenes and to use these observations to see if there was something that needed to be revised.

We also tested the ambient soundscape that was playing throughout the session and how the digital musical elements related to each other during actual use.

As these sessions had more children participating than would potentially be in the Creative Play Space at one time, we were able to see if the digital elements worked technically and were also robust enough to cope with the demands on the space.

Visiting Info:

The Hullabaloo is open Monday to Saturday, 10am-2pm. The Creative Play space is free and families can drop-in during usual opening hours, however nurseries and large groups are asked to book in advance.

Link to website >> <https://www.theatrehullabaloo.org.uk/free-shows/zen-garden/>



Play in the early years

Can you tell us a little bit about Borough Road Nursery School?

Our school mantra is: Every child is unique. Every moment is precious. Every day is different. We're a child-led setting where we really think about children's ideas and respond to that; it's all about learning from each other.

We want to ensure that our children have quality experiences, and for us it's all about creativity, imagination, and capturing those precious moments.

Our children are given the best possible start to their education career in a setting that stimulates and captivates them - physically, socially, emotionally and intellectually.

Why did you choose a venue like The Hullabaloo for the children to visit?

Our aim is for children to be able to think for themselves and have that creativity, imagination, resilience and well-being that comes from being part of a group, which they get from visiting places like this.

We don't want our parents to feel their children can't have these kinds of experiences because of their economic situation, so it's great that we can offer it for free.

What do you feel the children gain from their visits to The Hullabaloo?

It's a very sensory experience for them. One girl particularly blossomed in the research and development session. She enjoyed the whole experience as she was able to relax. She liked the lights, movement, actions and sense of well-being. In that session she was able to do everything her peers were doing around her, which she can't always do because of her mobility.

The yoga involved a lot of simple straightforward movement and actions, so even a non-verbal child or one who's struggling to process information can join in.

These are all enriching activities for the children that we can build upon.



Helen Dummett, Executive Head Teacher
at Borough Road Nursery School



What do the staff learn from these cultural visits & experiences?

I'd like to think it's about seeing the excitement and enjoyment the children gain from interacting with this experience.

Some of the children were a bit overwhelmed and anxious and unsure about what was expected of them as they went into the room. But as adults we appreciate seeing them suddenly become involved, relax and start to enjoy it.

As educators we can reflect on this opportunity and use it as an experience for us to learn things as well. It's something new and different and I hope we'll take some of that learning back with us into the nursery setting.

Overall why do you think experiences like this are so important?

Theatre Hullabaloo helps many of our children build confidence, as they feel safe and secure in this space. Many of our three and four-year-olds have not had these types of experiences before, either because their parents don't have the means to take them places or feel anxious about doing it.

That's why it is so important for us as an early years centre to arrange experiences like this.

Work within the community

How did Theatre Hullabaloo support parents in the local community with children who were 0-3 years old during the pandemic?

During Covid lockdowns, we were particularly concerned that new babies and their parents and carers were not able to access the range of play opportunities and classes that normally support families to sing, play and bond with their little ones.

Post natal depression rates rose significantly as people were socially-isolated, received less support from services, and had less contact with other new parents.

Knowing the value of play from the start for both babies and their grown-ups, we developed Hullabaloo Baby Play Packs, with support from Tees Valley Combined Authority. These packs were filled with creative props - from rainbow shakers to finger puppets, songsheets to scarves - and were designed to bring creative play into new babies' homes.

Giving new parents tools to engage creatively with their babies helps to develop skills such as co-ordination, speech and rhythm, as well as creating stronger attachments between a child and their carers.

More than 3,000 packs were delivered to families across Tees Valley, supported by weekly bitesize digital sessions from artists and early years specialists. These sessions, which offered inspiration about how to use the packs to play peek-a-boo, sing lullabies, move to the music etc., are also downloadable from www.theatrehullabaloo.org.uk

What additional work or research has come out of the work that you did during COVID?

We commissioned a piece of research from the Institute of Social Justice at York St John University which looked at the impact of the packs on the families who received them. On the back of that research, Theatre Hullabaloo is about to embark on a new socially prescribed approach to creative play.

Play on Prescription, funded by Tees Esk and Wear Valley NHS Trust, is a new pilot programme to look at how a combination of play packs and play opportunities at The Hullabaloo can support local families.

In addition to the creative play space, The Hullabaloo offers a wide range of specialist performances and events for children from birth to 10 years. If you want to find out more about Theatre Hullabaloo or arrange a visit to The Hullabaloo please visit their website here.

<https://www.theatrehullabaloo.org.uk/for-schools>

