

ABSS

Children's Research

TrustLinks

A Better Start
Southend our children
our community
our future

 **COMMUNITY
FUND**



Children's Research

Background

The ABSS REI Team conducted a novel research project which explored how the ABSS programme had directly impacted the children who participated in ABSS projects and services from May – August 2024. The project utilised a Mosaic methodological approach (Clark and Moss, 2011), which empowers young children to express their perspective versus more formulaic, research methods typically utilised with older children and adults.

The Mosaic approach is an example of Participatory Action Research (PAR), which aligned with the aim to do work *with* children rather than *on* children. The research project was designed to feel like an extension of play, meeting both the ethical desire to not place children in typical research settings, and fully achieve the collaborative approach of PAR, where researcher and child meet at common ground within the research setting. Special care was taken to uphold the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) through Article 31, where every child has the right to play, and Article 5, which recognises a child's increasing or evolving capacity to make their own choices (Convention on the rights of the Child, 1989).

Setting

In Westcliff there is a community garden managed by local independent charity, TrustLinks, which gave access to a large outside area where children could play freely, but also actively relocate to other areas if they felt distressed. The ABSS REI Team attended the community garden during scheduled sessions of Families Growing Together, a commissioned ABSS project, which had established good levels of engagement with a consistent number of families. Staff at TrustLinks acted as research facilitators through coordination between the parents/carers and the ABSS REI Team.

The aims of the research project were:

- To explore the impact of the ABSS programme on the children who have participated in projects.
- To provide children aged 0-4 with an opportunity to share their perspectives of the ABSS programme.

Methodology

The Mosaic approach was utilised as a qualitative, multi-method framework designed to gather and interpret the views of young children. It recognises children as active participants in their own lives and values their voices in research and decision-making processes (Clark and Moss, 2011). This approach favours more creative and participatory techniques as opposed to traditional research methods to capture the complexity of children's experiences. The multi-method approach employs several qualitative techniques, known as tiles, which combine to make a mosaic of the ways in which children view and experience the world.

In this project, tiles consisted of the following methods being undertaken, and data collected in the form of:

- Snapshot observations: Children were observed for ten to fifteen minutes taking notes of interactions with each other, staff, parents, researchers, or with the environment.
- 'Talking Tins': Devices which, once pressed, can record up to 20 seconds of audio.
- Photography.

- Drawing.
- Arts and crafts.

The TACT (Trustworthiness, Auditability, Credibility and Transferability) framework outlined by Daniel, Asil and Carr (2024) was used to ensure rigour throughout the project, and participant recruitment and ethical considerations were managed according to methods detailed by Flewitt (2005). Before undertaking research, it became vital to meet with the TrustLinks site managers in order to detail the research brief, and learn from staff expertise e.g. what the children at the site liked to do, busy periods of the day etc. Time was also spent with the families in a non-research capacity over a number of weeks to build trust and familiarity, and to ascertain if they agreed to participate.

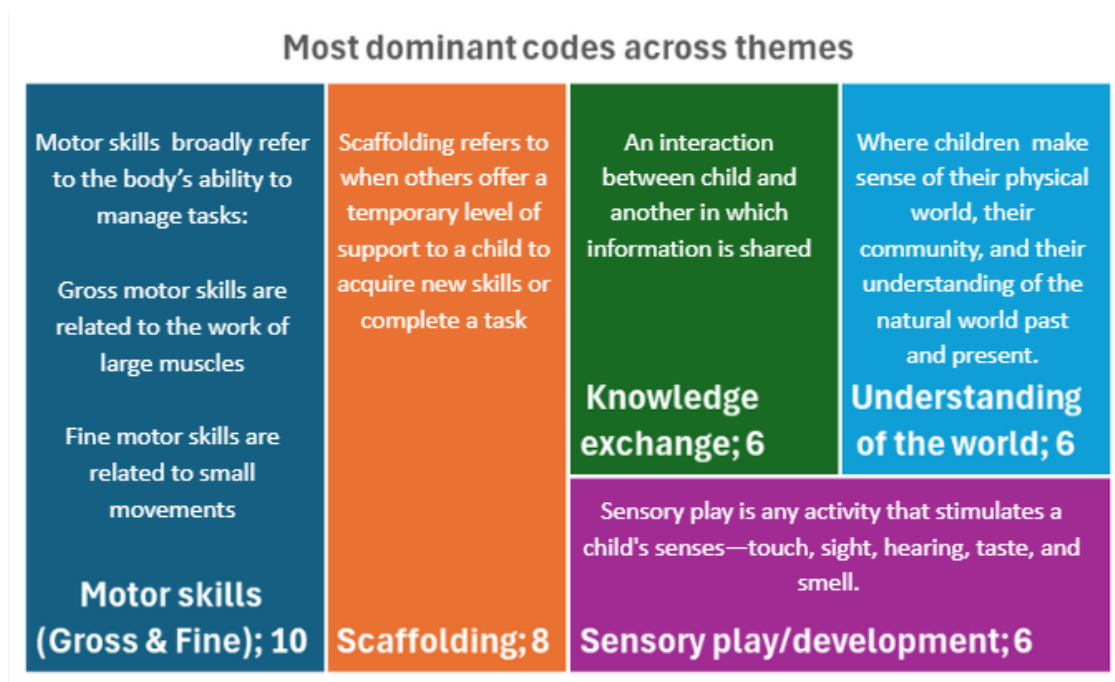
Children were asked to sign participation consent forms, either giving consent/assent or declining to participate. Stickers were handed to children to differentiate children who had consented/assented or declined so that all could join in the activities, but only consented/assented data was maintained. Parents/carers were consulted on each occasion to consent for their child's faces to be recorded in photography. All data was anonymised as far as possible.

Results and Discussion

Findings from the research sessions were discussed collaboratively with the ABSS REI team during workshops designed for collective thematising and coding. Data analysis was informed by both the Mosaic approach and Braun and Clarke's six stage thematic analysis framework (Braun and Clarke, 2021), to which the analysis identified five dominant themes:

- The Gardener
- Spaces and Objects of Play
- Exploration
- Social Interaction
- Parent/Carer & Child Interaction

Below you will find an infographic detailing the most common codes across all of the themes.



The Gardener

The Gardener (G) engaged with the children in the natural world/environment.

This theme demonstrated how members of staff/volunteers were indispensable when considering the impact that the ABSS programme has on children. Caring, knowledgeable staff/volunteers were valued by the children, as they consistently showed positive engagement with the Gardener, through voluntary interaction like asking questions about the chickens or engaging in structured play like the hose game outlined below.

Children engaged differently with the Gardener versus regular staff. Both were integral to the child's development, but via contrasting roles. Staff provided a cornerstone of safety and validation, acting to evolve children's capacities by allowing free reign to explore the environment in their own way and at their own pace. The Gardener's role however was more subtle, acting as a facilitator for the natural environment of the site, sparking intrigue for the children. The Gardener was the knowledge hub for all things relating to the scenery; the first person to be asked questions surrounding the plants, trees and chickens. They offered vital reassurance, also acting in a way to confer respect for the natural world to the children, that it was something to cohabitate with rather than dominate and subject.

Codes that persistently arose involved scaffolding, knowledge sharing (with the Gardener sharing information about the environment), and the Gardener acting as a facilitator for adult-child and child-child interactions. There was also a persistent code of reassurance/validation – which is tangential to the scaffolding – as the Gardener would reassure children (and even adults) that certain activities and experiences were okay, and engage with children in 'games', validating their solitary play and even transforming it into communal play.

Below you will find selected tiles that composed the theme.



Child C approached the **gardener** and asked to have a turn using the hose. He smiled as he watered the plants (and the gardener!) Child C joked with the gardener, by folding over the hose to stop the water flow and then straightening it out again so the water supply returned. He did this a couple of times and both he and the gardener laughed at this. Child C then took over the hose again and after a short while, he laid down the hose and said to the gardener, "It's your turn."

A couple of acorns fell from the tree onto the path. Child F said in a surprised voice, "Oh! What was that!" The **gardener** and another child came by and added acorns to the wheelbarrow and then picked some others from the floor and handed them to Child F for him to place in the wheelbarrow.

Spaces & Objects of Play

This theme related to the objects and spaces that enabled play. This could be in the form of play apparatuses, natural resources such as acorns, leaves, seeds, and spaces of play such as the greenhouse, sandpit, chicken coop, and circle tree where children congregated to play.

Through the children picking out play apparatuses, relating to the environment in a playful manner, they are indirectly, or directly in certain circumstances, demonstrating what they like about the ABSS programme from their perspective. It also illustrates the benefit the ABSS programme has had in commissioning outdoor spaces for parents and children, as it allows children to develop in natural spaces they may not otherwise have been exposed to.

Codes for this theme were delineated through the channel of play, and clustered around play apparatus e.g. wheelbarrow, scooter, hose pipe and tuff trays, natural resources, e.g. acorns, chickens, sand and leaves, and spaces where children congregated facilitated play e.g. the greenhouse, chalk wall and sandpit.

Below you will find selected tiles that composed the theme.

[I like my blankey, I like playing cars](#)

B3 was applying some **golden glitter** to their paper plate, and after they had applied it, told their parent and us that 'this was goldilocks with her golden hair.

Child 4 has found a small **purple pot** and poured water from water bottle and a dead **leaf**. Has gone to look at the tree further away. Poured excess water onto the **tree**. Taking **seeds** and adding to the water pot, has taken back to the **pea planter**. Starts to prepare a shop with friends to sell the seeds.

Exploration

This theme considers exploration, learning and growth. ABSS provided a space in which children could explore, learn and grow, by exposing them to a diverse range of environments and situations which positively affected their developmental path, such as arts and crafts or playing in the sandpit enhancing gross and fine motor skills. Besides positive engagement with, and exploration of, the natural environment, this theme also encompassed the exploration of language, in terms of attention, understanding and speaking, and being imaginative and expressive.

For listening, attention and understanding the most prominent codes were knowledge exchange, language development and sustained attention. For understanding of the world, it was discovery play, curiosity, sensory play and scientific inquiry, and for being imaginative and expressive the codes were mark making and imaginative play. There was extensive cross pollination between these clusters of codes for some of the tiles associated with this theme, as children exhibited a variety of ideas or concepts across the medium in question. Through exploration within the setting of the site, children exhibited a nuanced understanding of the world which they used to express their own creativity and partake in communal play using their ability to listen and be attentive, amongst other examples. It can be suggested that through the use of exploration, children within this space may have been able to positively engage in activities that promoted their level of school readiness.

Below you will find selected tiles that composed the theme.

Girl A played in the water tuff tray for approximately 10 minutes. She was scooping water and shells into a net/scoop. During this time she spoke to the FGT Staff who were stationed at the tuff tray. A boy joined the tray activity. Initially she just watched as he spoke to the FGT Staff about the type of fish in the tray, but then Girl AA joined in and named a whale. She then had a brief conversation with the boy regarding the sunny part of the garden.

Child K was focused on filling a small wheelbarrow with sand from the sandpit for about 10 minutes, occasionally interacting with their parent, who was sitting on the side of the sandpit. Child K then found an acorn on the ground and buried it in the sand in the wheelbarrow. They repeated this several times.

*I've got some acorns,
Eating figs*

Social Interaction

Social interaction is referred to as the interaction between children and others who are not related, to which cases of emotional development were recorded: showings of affection, teamwork, and communal play. This illustrated that at ABSS sites, children felt comfortable bonding with each other, with staff and with researchers. Children interacting with other children at a young age is integral to wider social and emotional development, particularly at a pre-school age by exposing them to wider socialisation before school. By providing a space in which children can play and grow together, ABSS worked to ensure that children who participated get the possible start through socialisation and emotional development.

The community garden provided a space where children could socially interact and bond. Children showed independence, feeling comfortable to play on their own or with others without a parent/carer immediately in their view. The eagerness with which they play independently or away from their parents may show a positive perspective on the space and, by virtue, the ABSS programme.

The codes underlying this theme help to illustrate the varied ways in which children connected with each other, the staff and researchers. A cluster of codes, including mutual dialogue, empathy, negotiation, exchange and scaffolding, stem from observations (Are you having a good time? Asking about scooters, researcher asking about acorns) which all speak to emotional development. This further enforces the view that those within the site positively interacted with each other in an emotional way.

An example of social and emotional development was recorded in a mutual dialogue, negotiation and exchange observation. One child and her friend were approached by two other children who asked if they could borrow their own, personal scooters to which they agreed. This reflects a level of emotional development, as this type of exchange with no reciprocity might generally be expected at a later stage in the child's life.

These tiles collectively focus on the ways in which children exhibited social and emotional behaviour which will benefit them immensely when they eventually start at school. However, there are ways in which social bonding and interaction positively help other aspects of a child's development, such as in language and cognitive enhancement. This other cluster of codes is exhibited in memory recall, cognitive engagement and echoic behaviour, as demonstrated in the Talking Tins audio recordings.

Below you will find selected tiles that composed the theme.

Love you, Twinkle Twinkle, Now I know my ABCs

A2 started dancing and as they did, two others began to join in. A2 went on to ask the other child (who they lead around the site as it was their first week) **if they were having fun.**

Two boys approached Girl AA and her friend while they were playing in the tuff tray. They played alongside each other for a minute or so and then one of the boys asked if he and his friend/brother could borrow her and her brother's scooters. Girl AA agreed.

AM was with their sibling F, who had previously used the talking tins, smiling and asked if they could use the talking tin. As the researcher was helping F, AM asked if they could hold the buttons, which they did. AM encouraged their sibling F to speak into the tin, when they did they both laughed.

Parent/Carer + Child Connection

This theme relates to the way in which parents/carers and children, perhaps owing to the environment, were seen to connect with each other in healthy and positive ways. This falls within one of the stated aims of the Families Growing Together ABSS project, which was to help parents/carers feel more connected to, and have more fun, with their children. The positive role that the ABSS programme had on children is evidenced through this channel of increased connectedness. The varied ways in which the children demonstrate this connection shows a healthy bond with their parents/carers too.

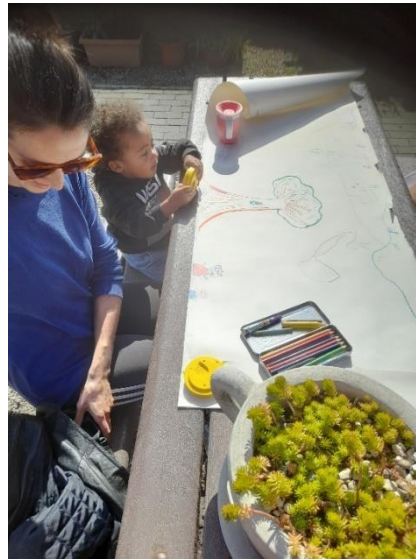
The codes underlying this theme broadly fall into four clusters. The first includes interest and play, such as shared interest, desire to participate, sustained attention and play: whether symbolic, repetitive, shared and roleplay. These highlight the varied ways in which children and parents/carers engage with one another in games, as well as the eagerness and mutual enthusiasm about topics or themes brought up. The second cluster of codes (motor skills, physical development, language development/scaffolding echoic behaviour) consider how the connection between child and parent/carers facilitate physical and language development with the addition of motor development. The third cluster considers how children feel comfortable evolving their capacities through secure attachment, independence and autonomy, where they exhibit healthy non-dependence on their parent/carers at the site. The final cluster relates to positive affirmations, though we cannot be sure of their intent, from child and parent/carers through words of affection and physical touch.

Collectively these illustrate the varied ways in which the parent/child bond is strengthened at the space through varied means. This bonding has important secondary effects, as through mutual connection children develop understanding of the world, key motor and language development. The space also promotes secure attachment by virtue of its enclosed nature. Parent and child alike do not have to worry about losing each other, and the familial nature of the individuals at the site mean children are only footsteps away from a supportive adult. This is perhaps the biggest takeaway related to the second aim of their voice – as children show their appreciation for this autonomy by seizing it continuously.

Below you will find selected tiles that composed the theme.

Pronto Pronto, I love my mum

#2 Then drew a snail and a river in blue across the paper. They added their sibling and themselves in the sea. Both were smiling. #2 then gave their parent a cuddle while they were both sitting on the bench and said 'I love you' to them. They cuddled for about a minute.



#3 then came out of the pram and took a small green wheelbarrow which they took down the path to the secret garden. #3 then called their parent over and they played a game of 'Freeze'. The parent would shout 'FREEZE' and #3 would stop moving, smiling. Then the parent would shout 'Unfreeze'.

When brought together, these themes build a composite picture of what it means to be a child at this outdoor site, and the varied ways in which it fosters a positive developmental path. We see that friendly, knowledgeable staff propel children's capacities forward through acting as vital sources of information surrounding the natural world, as well giving them assurance and safety when developing their own autonomy. Through socialisation with other children and adults as well as an increased connectedness to their parents, children develop healthy emotional attachments and form bonds. Through the varied landscape and stimuli of the outdoor space children build sensory development, understanding of the world and have room to express their creativity. By using this space as a microcosm of ABSS as a whole – we see the inherent impact the programme has had in the channels mentioned prior. However, one of the biggest takeaways for the research was seeing the ways in which children knowingly or unknowingly voice their perspective on what it is they value about ABSS. Whether it's children audibly voicing "I like playing cars" or "eating figs", or laughing with other children as they play a game version of a tour around the site, or even enjoying solitary play with intermittent smiles toward their parent, it was clear that children value this space and the freedom and enjoyment it affords.

Conclusion and Recommendations

Overall, this work has highlighted the many ways in which the ABSS programme has impacted upon the children who have participated in ABSS projects and services, and the ways in which children have voiced their perspective on what it is they appreciate about spaces like the community garden. ABSS has incubated a space in which children can socialise with their peers and adults, strengthen familial ties, appreciate the natural world through trusted individuals like the Gardener and engagement through play, and can explore their surroundings facilitating understanding of the World, language development and physical development.

Of greatest importance is how the children themselves appreciate the freedom of the space. Whilst individuals like the Gardener and the staff at TrustLinks allowed for children to evolve their capacities, the impetus for that evolution was from the children themselves. They seize the opportunity to play independently from their parents/carers, whether in isolation or with other children, and they engage in knowledge exchange voluntarily with more knowledgeable others and scaffold peers emotionally.

Following on from this, several recommendations can be made.

The value of agency – allowing the children to direct the types of play and activities they do. Whilst spaces like TrustLinks have certain activities present at sessions, they often act as a backdrop for more naturalistic directions of play. Through the research we have seen that these activities often spur further activity – they are not central to the session but facilitate its direction. From these initial congregations, children then disperse and form smaller groups to play and interact with each other in more specific ways. This is key in letting children evolve their own capacities, as they have the chance to play, explore and grow on their own terms. It could be beneficial to do the same in other spaces for children.

The value of outdoor spaces – Through the research we have seen that children appreciate the natural, outdoor setting that TrustLinks affords. With the preponderance of families that may live in accommodation with no outdoor access, spaces such as this are vital in exposing children to natural environments.

The value of staff – They are integral to children's social and emotional development. They act as a bridge between parents/carers, children and the environment, often providing spaces for both groups to promote autonomy.

For other programmes – Conducting research such as this *with* children is crucial in understanding what children appreciate about services/projects you run or fund. It affords you the opportunity to cater to their wants and needs more accurately and gives you larger scope as to what the benefits are to the children who attend.

References

Braun, V. and Clarke, V. (2021). *Thematic analysis: a practical guide*. London: Sage Publications Ltd.

Clark, A. and Moss, P. (2011). *Listening To Young Children: The Mosaic Approach*. 2nd ed. London: National Children's Bureau.

Daniel, B.K., Asil, M. and Carr, S. (2024). 'Psychometric properties of the TACT framework—determining rigor in qualitative research.' *Frontiers in Research Metrics and Analytics* 2024 Jan 8.

doi: 10.3389/frma.2023.1276446

Flewitt, R. (2005). 'Conducting research with young children: some ethical considerations', *Early Child Development and Care*, 175(6), pp. 553–565.

<https://doi.org/10.1080/03004430500131338>

UN General Assembly (1989). *United Nations Convention on The Rights of the Child*.

Available at <https://www.unicef.org.uk/what-we-do/un-convention-child-rights/>