



Let's Play Together: Play And Inclusion

Evaluation Of Better Play Round Three

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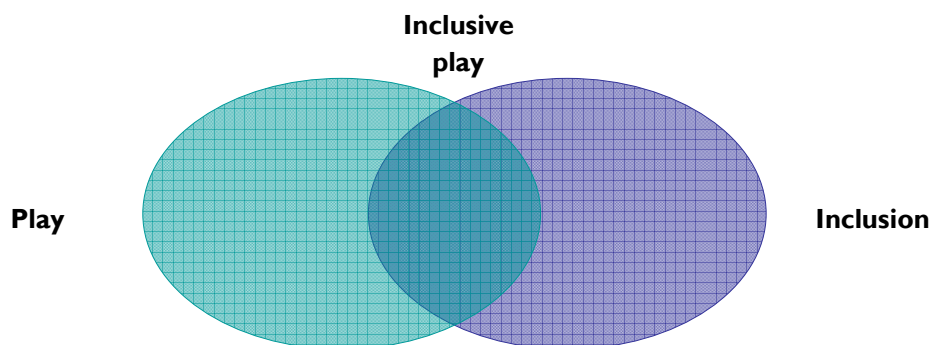
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1. Introduction

Inclusive play stresses the importance of including all children, disabled children as well as non-disabled children, by fostering an environment where diversity is respected and valued. At its best, inclusion enables all children - of all abilities, ethnic backgrounds ages and other differences - to play together.

However, as this evaluation shows many barriers must be overcome in order for play providers to offer equal access to all children. While some barriers are practical or environmental, such as physical access and lack of adequate transport, others are attitudinal or social in nature. Projects involved in this evaluation also found that short term funding and difficulties recruiting skilled staff were significant hindrances to inclusion.

Inclusive play is not merely about inclusion. Equally important is the provision of high quality play opportunities to children regardless of their needs and abilities. While children won't always be able to participate in *all* available activities, an inclusive project should offer *all* children a real choice of play activities.



Based on the evaluation findings, this model illustrates the different relationship projects had with play and inclusion. Some projects were inclusive – in terms of having children with different abilities playing in the same space – but did not offer enough accessible play opportunities for all children to have a real choice. Other projects did not have disabled and non-disabled children attending the same play sessions, but did nevertheless offer high quality play opportunities to children attending. In the middle, a number of projects were able to be both inclusive of all children and offer stimulating play.

The report is divided into two sections. The first section (chapter 3 and 4) focuses on the overall evaluation of 94 play projects funded by the Better Play Programme's Third Round. The second section (Chapter 5, 6 and 7) addresses the inclusive journey and reports on the research findings from a 'closer look' evaluation of eight Better Play funded projects.

1.1 The Better Play programme

Barnardo's and the Children's Play Council were working together in partnership to deliver Better Play, a four-year £10.8 million grants programme funded by the New Opportunities Fund (NOF) with proceeds from the national lottery. The partnership was one of eleven award partners chosen by the NOF to deliver its £125 million 'Green Spaces and Sustainable Communities' Environment Initiative.

The Better Play Programme funded 225 play projects for school aged children across England during 2001-2005 and consisted of three annual rounds of grants. In the first round it funded organisations interested in delivering play services and developing local play policies and strategies. In the second round the programme funded play projects promoting good practice. Following a review of the funded projects at the end of the second round, it was revealed that there were very few inclusive play projects supporting disabled and non-disabled children to play together. The Better Play partnership in consultation with the Big Lottery Fund (formed from the merger of NOF and the Community Fund) agreed that the final round of funding should redress this imbalance. Consequently, the funding was dedicated to promoting inclusive play, by allocating funds both to mainstream services becoming inclusive of disabled children and to specialist services working towards becoming inclusive of all children.

The primary aim of the programme was that by the end of the funded year more disabled and non-disabled children would be sharing play provision and playing together.

1.2 Objectives of the evaluation

The evaluation was expected to cover:

- A description of the differing ways in which funded projects are supporting and approaching the development of inclusive provision
- Identification and discussion of key factors affecting the successful inclusion of disabled and non-disabled children in the same provision
- The extent to which more disabled and non-disabled children are playing together as a result of the funding, looking at both numbers and quality of play

2. Children's Inclusive Play

2.1 Defining play

Children's play is easy to recognise, but notoriously difficult to define. Play deals with feelings as varied as curiosity, pleasure, seriousness and creativity. Play can be physical or intellectual, social or solitary, but 'in retrospect it is always remembered as fun' (Rennie 2003: 22). The literature on play highlights that play has a fundamental impact on children's healthy growth and development, as it allows them to discover, explore and test their environment and make sense of it. Playful behaviour promotes learning and concentration, in addition to encouraging the development of social skills and an ability to manage risk.

The definition of play used for this evaluation is that of Bob Hughes and Frank King as described in 'Best Play: what play provision should do for children' (2000), namely that '*play is freely chosen, personally directed, intrinsically motivated behaviour that actively engages the child*' (ibid: 6).

2.2 Importance of play

The playwork definition of play as intrinsically motivated and freely chosen often stands in stark contrast with the reality of children's lives, where adult agendas often affect and direct children's play opportunities (Brown and Cheesman, 2003). Parents and other adults are often overly concerned with issues such as safety and educational learning, to the extent where free play opportunities are limited. While this is the case for all children, it is of special concern for disabled children, as the majority of play provision is inaccessible or unable to meet disabled children's needs. However, children will play wherever and whenever they can, regardless of constraints imposed by adults, but their play experiences can be greatly enhanced or encouraged by providing appropriate social and physical environments.

Playing, furthermore, allows children to make mistakes and learn through trial and errors, which again helps them to recognise their limitations, as well as to discover their abilities. If play becomes too safe, it is not only predictable and boring, it also limits children's practical experiences of risk management, and hence their ability to recognise and deal with risky situations.

While stimulating play opportunities can benefit children, an absence of such opportunities may also result in negative consequences for the affected child. A continuing lack of sensory stimulation is sometimes referred to as play deprivation (Hughes, 2003). Although the literature about play deprivation is limited, it has been suggested that play deprived children show symptoms of withdrawal, impaired concentration, anti-social or aggressive behaviour and poor social skills (Best Play, 2000; Hughes, 2003; Rennie, 2003).

2.3 The Social Model of disability

Disability has tended to be viewed as a problem attached to an individual arising from a condition or impairment that is defined in medical terms. In this medical model of disability the focus is

on the physical, sensory or intellectual impairment of person, which then tends to be equated with the person as a problem. This has in the past and to a large extent still does result in the exclusion of disabled people from mainstream economic and social activity.

Disabled people and their allies in the disability equality movement have attempted to redefine disability in a social rather than medical model.

In this social model of disability, the barriers that a person experiences to enjoying and participating in the life of their community are not intrinsic to any medical or other condition or impairment but arise from disabling attitudes and environments.

Impairment is what we have. Disability is what we experience (John and Whewey, 2004)

In many cases it is the barriers in everyday life that cause the disability. For instance, wheelchair users may be denied opportunities because the places they wish to go are inaccessible, or learning disabled people may fail at tasks they have the potential to perform because they do not get the right training. People with sensory impairments are excluded from all manner of 'normal' activities because communications are inaccessible to them.

The social model of disability, then, is that society's failure or unwillingness to provide for the full range of human needs and experiences - developing services and environments that cater for a narrow 'mainstream' range of abilities and differences - excludes, or disables, people that do not fit this narrowly defined norm. Anti-discriminatory measures aiming for full inclusion, if they are premised on the social model, will therefore aim to identify and tackle the disabling barriers that prevent people with impairments from leading normal lives. Impairments – the functional limitations of someone's mind or body – is, hence, separated from disability, which is caused by prejudice and unequal access to education, employment, housing, transport and leisure activities.

For the purpose of this evaluation we have adopted Kidsactive's broad definition of disabled children as referring to 'children with physical impairments, visual and hearing impairments, moderate and severe learning difficulties, communication difficulties as well as emotional and behavioural difficulties' with the implication that many of these children are routinely excluded from 'mainstream' provision unless specific measures to remove disabling barriers are implemented and reviewed (Kidsactive, 2000: 6).

2.4 Inclusion

Inclusion is the process of conceiving, designing, planning and maintaining of all parts of the physical and cultural community to cater for the widest spectrum of ability and need. Because of the historical and cultural prevalence of the medical model, achieving inclusion involves changing the attitudes of both organisations and individuals, as much as the adaptation of buildings and facilities. This is an on-going process where the overall aim is to embrace diversity, rather than simply to tolerate differences.

The Disability Discrimination Act (DDA) 1995 laid down rights for disabled people to have the same access to 'goods and services' as other member of the public. From October 2004 the DDA also required schools and service providers to make 'reasonable adjustments' to overcome barriers and to ensure that disabled children and young people are not disadvantaged.

However, inclusion means more than providing physical access to buildings and facilities, important as this is. To be inclusive, both organisations and the people in them need to change and develop. The terms 'integration' and 'inclusion' are often used interchangeably, but they have different meanings. When a child is integrated, there may be specialist support available, but the child has to fit in with the existing system. An inclusive system sees diversity as positive and is responsive to this, rather than trying to make everyone fit a pre-determined structure. Consequently, inclusion means offering services tailored to individual needs, which provide children and young people with a real choice and that enable them to participate fully in life.

The Better Play Programme adopted Alison John's definition of inclusion:

Provision that is open and accessible to all, and takes positive action in removing disabled barriers so that disabled and non-disabled children can participate (Better Play application guidance notes)

3. Evaluation strategy and methods

The evaluation of the third round of the Better Play Programme covered two different aspects; an overall evaluation of 94 Better Play projects and a 'closer look' evaluation of eight case study projects. The research methods and tools therefore varied accordingly.

3.1 An overall evaluation of all third round projects

The overall evaluation consisted of two postal questionnaires sent to all 94 project funded through the third round of the Better Play Programme. The first baseline questionnaire was distributed at the beginning of the funding period, focused on the level of input in areas such as policies, staff training, involvement of children and parents in decisions making process. It also sought data on the number of existing and new disabled and non-disabled children that projects aimed to attract.

The second follow-up questionnaire focused more closely on the extent to which the projects had succeed in providing inclusive play opportunities for both disabled and non-disabled children, and lessons learnt during the process.

As the completion of the baseline questionnaire was a requirement of projects' funding, it received a 100 per cent response rate. The follow-up questionnaire was distributed towards the end of the funding period and hence the evaluators were unable to use the 'carrot and stick' method to encourage projects returned the questionnaire. Nevertheless, 67 projects returned the questionnaire, ensuring an impressive 71 per cent response rate.

3.2 A 'closer look' evaluation of eight case study projects

Eight projects were selected from the 94 funded projects. The selection was done to ensure that all regional areas of England were represented and to ensure an even spread of mainstream projects seeking to become inclusive of disabled children and specialist projects for disabled children seeking to become inclusive of all children. Selected projects were contacted and offered an opportunity to opt out. While none of the projects declined to part take in the evaluation, project responses varied from excitement to slight caution.

Project visits were undertaken with all eight projects. The evaluators attended play sessions at each project on between two and four occasions. The number of visits varied depending on how many sessions the project offered and on the number of venues it operated from. During these visits the evaluators sought the views of as many stakeholders involved with the play project as possible. Interviews and informal communications were conducted with project coordinators and managers, playworkers, support workers and volunteers, as well as parents and children.

The evaluation also sought to involve the projects in the data gathering process, by providing a toolkit of methods, like diaries and cameras (see appendix A for details). This required the cooperation and involvement of project staff and was done in order to enable data to be collected throughout the evaluation period when the evaluators were not present. The extent to which

these methods were adopted and used differed between projects. The majority of projects, for example, used the diary method. However, the friendship circles, as a method of collecting information, were deemed unworkable by most projects.

During project visits, participant observation formed an important tool and was the only method that was used at all play projects. The purpose of participant observation and the detailed field notes that this generated was to gather data about aspects of inclusive play that would otherwise be difficult to explore. In addition to participant observation, a variety of methods were used to gain children's views about the play projects and their experiences. Several research games and exercises were designed with the aim of enabling children to express their feelings about the play project and their experiences, with minimal of disruption to their playing time (see appendix A for an outline of these methods). Children were not obliged to participate in these evaluation games and the evaluators were flexible and prepared to cancel evaluation activities if, for example, the children preferred to play outside, rather than draw inside.

While visiting projects when children were there and playing, it was essential to gain an understanding of the atmosphere of the play setting and the issues relating to inclusive play. It should be emphasised that the findings outlined in this report are based on 'snap shots' of the play projects, rather than a comprehensive knowledge of their work. The findings are primarily based on observation of the particular sessions attended and the views of the children at those sessions.

Due to the limited time available at each project it was not always possible to gain the views of disabled children and young people directly, especially those who had complex communication impairments. Where this was the case, the evaluators sought the views of those who knew the child, such as parents, playworkers and support workers and asked them how they knew whether a child was happy or not happy at play. Such views, together with observation notes allowed a triangulation of data, in order to gain insight into what disabled children thought about their play project.

Information was gathered from:

- Children attending 23 play sessions that researchers visited and those who took part in other methods facilitated by staff at the play projects¹
- 118 parents (102 completed the parents' questionnaire, while 16 were interviewed either face to face or on the telephone)
- Coordinators at all eight projects
- Playworkers and support workers at all eight projects
- Eight volunteers at three projects

¹ Because of the flexible nature of the evaluation games, in contrast to interviews and focus groups, the evaluators are unable to account precisely for the number of children who took part in the evaluation.

3.3 The outcome Indicator Framework

'Best Play: What play provision should do for children' (National Playing Fields Association, 2000) recommends an outcome focused approach to evaluating play using qualitative judgements. During a previous evaluation of ten community play projects in the London Borough of Tower Hamlets (Creagan et al, 2004), we developed this approach by devising a framework of outcome indicators in relation to ten core objectives. The objectives fell into three main categories; play provision, service delivery and children's well being.

Play Provision Objective 1	To maximise the range of play opportunities available to children
Play Provision Objective 2	To enable children to exercise choice and control over their play
Play Provision Objective 3	To enable children to test boundaries
Play Provision Objective 4	To achieve an appropriate balance between risk and safety
Service Delivery Objective 1	To promote and provide services to both new and existing users
Service Delivery Objective 2	To promote services which recognise diversity
Service Delivery Objective 3	To actively involve children and parents in service planning and delivery
Children's Well Being Objective 1	To enable children to feel more confident and independent
Children's Well Being Objective 2	To enable children to have increased respect for others
Children's Well Being Objective 3	To enable the promotion of children's growth and development

For each objective we drew up input, output and outcome indicators. During this evaluation of the Better Play Programme we reviewed and refined our earlier framework. The revised framework is based on the following ten core objectives.

Figure 1 shows the three of the core objectives contained in the revised framework with examples of input, output and outcome indicators. This evaluation focused on four key themes, which in turn broadly related to particular core objectives:

- Children's enjoyment of play – Play Provision Objective 1
- Choice and control – Play Provision Objective 2
- Balancing risk and safety – Play Provision Objectives 3 and 4
- Playing together – Service Delivery Objective 2 and Children's Well Being Objective 2

Using the outcome indicator framework enabled the researchers to devise a coding framework based on outcomes for children which was used during the data analysis phase of the evaluation.

Figure 1: Examples of input, output and outcome indicators

Core objective	Input indicator	Output indicator	Outcome indicator
Play Provision Objective 1: To maximise the range of play opportunities available to children	Appropriate staffing levels e.g. in relation to the play environment, the use of play equipment, health and safety, children's needs, working with parents and carers	The extent to which children display different play types	Children are motivated and enthusiastic about play opportunities
Service Delivery Objective 2: To promote and provide inclusive services which recognise diversity	Staff training and development e.g. on equality/diversity issues/augmentative communication/promoting and understanding diversity	Diverse range of children by age, gender, ethnicity and ability attend	Disabled/non-disabled children play together
Children's Well-being Objective 1: Children feel more confident and independent	Effective deployment and supervision of staff e.g. in relation to relation to levels and styles of intervention with children	Play workers enable children to express themselves	Children discuss things, negotiate and exchange ideas with adults

4. Where it all started: An overview of the Better Play round three projects

A total of 94 projects completed the baseline questionnaire, representing 100 per cent of all projects funded in round three of Better Play.

4.1 Play provision

Projects were asked what three main differences they hoped to make to children's lives through their play provision. Their responses fell into eight main categories as shown in Table I below. These categories were developed by the researchers on the basis of an analysis of the range of responses given. The relationship between each category and the core objectives in the outcome indicator framework is shown in brackets. The most frequently cited difference (54 per cent of projects) was fostering children's independence and self-confidence (projects used a mixture of these terms), followed by providing opportunities for disabled and non-disabled children to play together (32 per cent of projects).

Table 1: Hoped for differences to children's lives

Type of difference	Number of projects	Percentage of projects
Fostering independence, self esteem and self-confidence (Children's Well Being Objective 1)	51	54%
Providing opportunities for disabled and non-disabled children to play together and develop relationships (Service Delivery Objective 1/Children's Well Being Objective 2)	30	32%
Providing opportunities for creative, stimulating and age appropriate play (Play Provision Objective 1)	28	30%
Promoting opportunities for social interaction and fostering communication skills (Children's Well Being Objectives 1, 2 and 3)	19	20%
Enabling children to exercise choice and control over play (Play Provision Objective 2)	14	15%
Developing children's personal skills, knowledge and understanding (Children's Well Being Objective 3)	9	9%
Enabling children to test boundaries (Play Provision Objective 2)	7	7%
Fostering emotional and physical well-being (Children's Well Being Objective 3)	7	7%
Source: Baseline questionnaire		

4.2 Inclusion

Projects were asked which of the following statements most accurately described the service they provided:

- Mainstream play service working towards becoming inclusive of disabled children
- Play service primarily for disabled children working towards becoming inclusive of all children

Forty projects (42 per cent) said that they described their service as mainstream, whilst 19 projects (20 per cent) said that their service was primarily aimed at disabled children. Thirty five projects (37 per cent) chose to define the service they provided differently. Of these 13 projects described themselves as inclusive, while a further seven stated that they were working towards or promoting inclusion. The remainder included a variety of umbrella and partnership arrangements that focused on developing 'integration' and supporting disabled children in mainstream provision.

Projects were asked whether they had previously experienced difficulties in providing inclusive play services. Fifty three projects (56 per cent) said they had, whilst 28 projects (29 per cent) said they had not. Five projects (5 per cent) said they did not know. Amongst those projects that had experienced difficulties, the difficulties cited fell into five main categories, as shown in Table 2 below.

Type of difficulty	Number of projects	Percentage of projects
Resources (financial and staffing)	28	29%
Emotional/attitudinal barriers	16	17%
Physical access/unsuitable space	13	14%
Lack of knowledge/staff training	10	11%
Parental issues	6	6%
Source: Baseline questionnaire		

Projects provided details of how they had addressed or intended to address these difficulties. The most common solutions identified were training provision (20 projects/21 per cent), staff interventions and support (12 projects/13 per cent), attempting to obtain funding (11 projects/12

per cent), recruitment of staff and volunteers (11 projects/12 per cent) and developing links with other providers/outreach work (11 projects/12 per cent).

4.3 Promotion and outreach

We asked projects whether they had produced or were intending to produce promotional material to advertise their play provision. Seventy six projects (80 per cent) said that they were. Table 3 shows which audiences projects identified as the target for this material.

Type of audience	Number of projects	Percentage of projects
Parents/carers of disabled children	76	80%
Disabled children	74	78%
Parents/carers of non-disabled children	62	65%
Non-disabled children	61	64%
Community organisations	60	63%
Statutory services	59	62%
Volunteers	56	59%
Disability organisations	54	57%

Source: Baseline questionnaire

Thirty six projects (38 per cent) indicated that promotional material would be provided in minority languages or using alternative methods of communication. Of these, 16 projects (17 per cent) said that material would be provided in minority languages, while 12 projects (13 per cent) said that it would be produced using large print.

In terms of outreach to attract children to come and play, 71 projects (75 per cent) said they had or were intending to undertake outreach work. Table 4 shows which type of organisations projects intended to target. We also asked projects whether they were intending to target specific groups of children. Twenty projects (21 per cent) said they would be targeting disabled children, whilst 11 (12 per cent) said they would be targeting children in specific areas including disadvantaged areas. Seventy eight projects said they had or were intending to recruit staff and volunteers who reflected the ethnicity, gender and ability of their users.

Type of organisation	Number of projects	Percentage of projects
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Community organisations	55	58%
Special needs schools	52	55%
Local mainstream schools	50	53%
Disability organisations	47	49%
Faith groups	14	15%
Source: Baseline questionnaire		

Ninety projects (95 per cent) said that they had or were intending to develop links with other service providers for children. Table 5 shows what type of organisations projects had, or were, intending to develop links with. Projects that said they provided services primarily for disabled children were marginally less likely to cite schools and local authorities than mainstream service providers. However, the most striking difference was in relation to Sure Start. While 23 out of the 40 projects who described themselves as mainstream said they had or would be developing links with Sure Start, only two out of the 19 projects who described themselves as providing services primarily for disabled children said they had or would be.

Table 5: Developing links with other organisations		
Type of organisation	Number of projects	Percentage of projects
Local authorities	45	47%
Existing networks	21	22%
Play associations/services	17	18%
Sure Start	17	18%
Disability organisations/Special schools	16	17%
Schools	16	17%
Similar organisations	13	14%
Community groups	12	13%
Youth groups	10	11%
Parent support groups	3	3%
Source: Baseline questionnaire		

Twenty four projects (25 per cent) highlighted that they intended to develop links via partnership working, whilst 17 projects said they intended to visit or met with other organisations. Other ways of developing links cited by projects included contact via newsletters or leaflets and holding activities or events.

4.4 Written policies and procedures

Projects were asked whether they had policies or procedures in place in 19 different areas. Table 6 summarises the responses received. Other policies and procedures that projects have in place included medication, confidentiality, challenging behaviour and complaints. Most projects monitored and reviewed their policies and procedures annually.

Type of policy/procedure	Percentage of projects		
	In place	Being developed	Not in place
Child protection	88%	3%	2%
Staff equal opportunities	88%	4%	1%
Health and safety	87%	5%	3%
Accident	84%	6%	1%
First aid	81%	7%	3%
Risk assessment	76%	13%	2%
Smoking	71%	13%	5%
Risk management	60%	20%	6%
Children's behaviour	58%	21%	10%
User diversity and equality	54%	14%	19%
Food handling/hygiene	54%	10%	20%
Volunteer	52%	20%	13%
Adult behaviour	51%	22%	13%
Alcohol and drugs	48%	13%	24%
Bullying	45%	20%	19%
Dealing with new/existing users	40%	20%	22%
Children's involvement	32%	36%	16%
Healthy eating	19%	17%	42%
Parent's involvement	26%	30%	26%
Source: Baseline questionnaire			

Fifty one projects (54 per cent) said that they had developed policies in consultation with children. The most common method of consultation was via committees or steering groups (34 projects/36 per cent).

4.5 Children's and parent's involvement

When asked whether parents/carers were represented on their management committee, 55 projects (58 per cent) said that they were, while 70 projects (74 per cent) highlighted that parents/carers were encouraged to become volunteers. Forty three projects (45 per cent) said that parents/carers were involved in staff recruitment, but only 12 projects (13 per cent) said that children were involved.

Although only 14 projects (15 per cent) had children's committee/steering groups in place, 79 projects (83 per cent) said that they regularly involved children in the planning and delivery of services. The most common methods of involving children were discussion groups or meetings (26 per cent), evaluation (17 per cent), forms or suggestion boxes (14 per cent) and via a committee/steering group (15 per cent). Sixteen per cent of projects said that children's involvement in planning was conducted on an informal basis.

4.6 Staff training

The projects were asked whether staff and volunteers had received training in a range of areas. Table 7 summarises the responses received. Other forms of training were provided, including lifting and handling (15 per cent), managing challenging behaviour (13 per cent), medication/special needs (12 per cent) and communication skills with disabled children (11 per cent).

Type of training	Percentage of projects			
	All staff	Selected staff	None provided	Volunteers
Child protection	84%	6%	4%	50%
Health and safety	74%	17%	2%	48%
Disability issues	74%	14%	2%	49%
Diversity and equality	67%	15%	12%	39%
Play work	62%	20%	6%	43%
First aid	60%	29%	1%	32%
Listening to and involving children	59%	16%	12%	40%
Risk management	58%	32%	2%	30%
Stimulating, challenging and age appropriate play opportunities	58%	19%	9%	43%
Children's choice and control	56%	17%	16%	40%
Encouraging children to test boundaries	55%	14%	21%	33%

Source: Baseline questionnaire

Summary of key findings:

- The objectives most commonly identified by projects as those they were trying to achieve were: improving children's confidence, children playing together and maximising play provision.
- More than half (56 per cent) of the projects reported experiencing previous difficulties in providing inclusive play. A variety of difficulties were highlighted, including resources (financial, physical access, staffing) and attitudes.
- Most projects had a range of appropriate policies in place. This was particularly the case for policies and procedures that are statutory requirements, such as those concerned with child protection and health and safety. Fewer projects had policies in place concerning parent's or children's involvement.
- Despite this, projects described a high level of involvement, e.g. through the involvement of parents as volunteers, or the involvement of children in planning and undertaking activities on a day to day basis.
- Projects were more likely to have policies in place in order to promote staff equal opportunities, than to address user diversity and equality.
- Many staff and volunteers were trained, or were being offered training, during the funding period. Levels of training were higher for traditional or statutory issues such as child protection, than in play skills or facilitating children's participation.

5. The journey towards inclusion: an overview of the Better Play round three experiences

A total of 67 projects completed the follow up questionnaire, representing 71 per cent of all projects funded. These included 25 projects which had previously defined themselves as mainstream and working towards inclusion, and 15 projects which had previously described themselves as primarily for disabled children, working towards inclusion.

Both the baseline questionnaire and the follow up questionnaire asked projects to provide details of the numbers of disabled children using play provision. A statistical analysis of the responses received revealed that there was a significant difference between the numbers of children using the projects at the beginning of the funding period and the end of it. The general experience therefore was of an increase in the numbers of disabled children using play provision at the projects.

An analysis of data collected at each stage also indicates that there was a wide variation in the relationships between the number of new disabled children projects said they hoped to attract and the actual number they did attract. This appeared to be partly due to the size of the projects. For the majority of projects there was a small difference between the number of new disabled children projects hoped to attract, and the actual number of new disabled children attending the projects (difference equaled plus or minus 10). Of the 50 projects that provided relevant data, 30 reported that they had attracted more than or the same number of disabled children than they had estimated.

5.1 Defining inclusion

Projects were asked how they defined inclusion. Projects used a wide variety of definitions which drew on a broad range of concepts and characteristics. Key themes included openness and accessibility, equality of opportunity, participation and a child centred focus. Choice and control, the provision of support for disabled children and interaction between disabled and non-disabled children were also commonly referred to.

Enabling play that is open and accessible was linked to participation and choice:

Inclusive play is play that is open and accessible to all children. To us it means making sure we provide activities and play opportunities that allow all children to fully participate in them and also that they have been involved in planning and choosing these activities.²

Other references to accessibility were more explicitly related to inclusion for disabled children and opportunities to interact with non-disabled children:

² The quotes which appear in this chapter are responses to open questions included in the follow up questionnaire.

Inclusive play for our project has been about giving disabled children and their families the opportunity to access and be included in regular activities that non-disabled children and their families readily access. It is about enabling disabled children to have the opportunity to mix and interact with non-disabled children.

Openness, accessibility and opportunities to participate were also linked to safety and stimulation and the removal of barriers:

A safe and stimulating play environment, open and accessible to all, which gives all children, regardless of ability or disability, the opportunity to participate.

Provision that is open and accessible to all, and takes positive steps in removing disabling barriers, so that disabled children can participate.

Choice was seen as central to inclusion, both in terms of choosing activities and choosing play mates. The concepts of choice and control were also defined in relation to exploration, risk and development, and to providing appropriate support and a safe environment:

We aim to develop our services for children and young people so that they have greater choice and control in their activities. By maximising play and learning opportunities for children and young people who have special educational needs, we aim to ensure that they are able to take risks which enable them to develop and grow.

Creating a safe and adventurous environment that provides for children a level of care and support that is appropriate for them to explore their own choices. Children with and without disabilities are then able to access this environment to explore their own play needs and those of their peers.

Definitions that focussed on interaction between children, included a range from those that referred to disabled and non-disabled children playing 'alongside' each other and having the opportunity to 'rub shoulders', to those that emphasised children playing together:

Children with and without disabilities having a good time together on an equal footing, interacting with each other and playing together.

Playing together was also referred to as something which took time and preparation to work towards and that happened when children were 'ready' to do it:

We have provided inclusive play to our young people by providing them with skills and confidence and the opportunity to inclusion. Therefore our definition has to be that inclusive play is disabled and non-disabled young people playing together when ready!

One definition suggested that creating opportunities for such interaction meant enabling children to mix with those whom they shared interests with rather than impairments:

Where children with additional needs can interact positively with peers of their own age. The interaction should be mutually beneficial. Children should be grouped together due to shared interest not shared impairments.

Definitions that referred to a child centred focus included those which stressed the needs of individual children and those that emphasised the nature of the environment:

We believe that every child and young person should have equal access to play opportunities, therefore we feel that inclusive play is about enabling all children to participate. This involves adopting a child centred approach through focusing on the needs of the individual.

Providing opportunities for disabled and non-disabled children to play together on a basis of equality in a child centred environment.

These examples illustrate the varied ways in which projects had attempted to grapple with the challenge of defining inclusion in relation to their own provision. They illustrate the complexity of defining inclusion in relation to children's play. Asking projects to define inclusion did not result in a single overarching definition emerging. It generated a range of inter-locking concepts and characteristics. Whilst the overwhelming majority of definitions used language that was consistent with the social model of disability, a small number also used language that was consistent with the medical model, such as 'special needs'.

5.2 Supporting inclusive provision

Projects were asked to provide examples of the ways in which they had supported the development of inclusive play during the period that they were funded by Better Play. The most common examples given referred to providing training and raising awareness and improving access. What characterised these examples overall was a range of measures designed to enable children to play together. The provision of training ranged from training staff and volunteers to support individual children to training on inclusive play 'techniques' for all staff:

Staff have attended training on inclusive play to ensure that they are aware of the issues around inclusion and to get practical ways in which we can be inclusive.

The examples relating to improving access included a variety of interventions such as physical adaptations, adapting games and activities, providing equipment, providing transport and providing additional support. The following examples illustrate the range cited by projects:

We have designed, built and maintained inclusive play features on our site and ensured all paths outside and our building are fully accessible, with an aim that they will be (accessible) by all children who want to.

We have adapted games so that disabled and non-disabled children can play together, such as basketball posts at different levels within a game.

Buying resources such as a tent, a parachute and other games which all children can use to socially interact with each other.

Provide transport to extend play opportunities for disabled pupils.

By providing additional staff to assist and free existing staff to be able to concentrate on the needs of the individual child to make the settling in process as natural and smooth as possible.

Other examples related to outreach and promotion, the recruitment of volunteers and developing links and partnerships.

We have planned, organised and implemented an outreach service using a play bus full of play equipment to reach children further a field who can't get to the club setting.

Provided volunteer support to allow individual children with a high level of support needs to access play equipment alongside their peers.

Working in partnership with the local authority to make sure activity programmes developed are fully inclusive, so disabled children and young people can take part in any mainstream sport or play session that is available.

Strong links have now been developed with social services and the community. Our play worker now attends multi-agency meetings.

5.3 Children playing together and making friends

Projects were asked which of the following statements best described their play provision:

- Disabled children and non-disabled children play together and interact with each other;
- Disabled children and non-disabled children play along side each other, but do not interact with each other;
- Disabled children and non-disabled children play separately (e.g. at different times or different venues) and do not interact with each other.

Sixty projects (91 per cent of those responding) said that the first statement best described their play provision. Fifty six projects (84 per cent of those responding) furthermore said that their provision had enabled disabled children to play and make friends with both disabled and non-disabled children.

In addition, projects were asked how successful their projects had been in increasing the number of disabled children and non-disabled children who play together.

Table 8: Success in increasing the number of disabled and non-disabled children who play together		
Degree of success	Number of projects	Percentage of projects
Very successful	22	34%
Successful	17	26%
Neither	11	17%
Unsuccessful	12	19%
Very unsuccessful	2	3%
Note: Missing cases=30		
Source: Follow up questionnaire		

As Table 8 shows, 39 projects (60 per cent) reported that they had more disabled and non-disabled children playing together by the end of the Better Play funding period.

5.4 Developing links

In responses to the baseline questionnaire, many projects had highlighted their intention to of make links with other local service providers. In the follow up questionnaire we therefore asked projects to clarify what links they had made during the last year. Table 9 shows their responses. Projects that said they provided services primarily for disabled children were marginally less likely to cite local authorities than mainstream service providers, as had been the case in responses to the baseline questionnaire. However, whereas the baseline questionnaire responses had suggested that projects that provided services primarily for disabled children were less likely to have developed links with Sure Start, responses to the follow up questionnaire revealed little difference with around 50 per cent of both types of project having forged links with Sure Start during the funding period.

Table 9 Links with service providers developed by projects

Type service provider	Number of projects	Percentage of projects
Other play organisations	56	83%
Local authorities	53	78%
Disability organisations	50	74%
Community centres	36	53%
Sure Start	35	52%
Schools	32	47%
Other	25	37%
Note: Missing cases=27		Source: Follow up questionnaire

Fifty eight projects (85 per cent of those responding) said that developing links had made an impact on their ability provide inclusive play. While the impacts reported were overwhelmingly positive, there were some examples of difficulties developing links, particularly in relation to the statutory sector. For example, the experience of some projects had been positive in relation to early years partnerships and schools, but for others such links had proved less productive. In one case support didn't materialise and this was seen to have prevented expectations from being met:

Without the support that we needed from the mainstream settings we couldn't provide the inclusive play setting we hoped to achieve. Our links with Early Years and the local authority helped but not enough.

Developing links with social services had also resulted in a range of experiences. In one instance, the department was said to have been 'co-operative and communicative', while another project referred to the difficulties of dealing with teams who were 'clearly under pressure' and 'suffered from a high turnover of staff'.

The range of impacts cited by projects included the recruitment of volunteers, access to training, reaching new disabled children, new funding and assistance with advertising and promotion. And it enabled projects to learn from the experiences and perspectives of other organisations about working towards inclusion. As one project said:

Someone else's idea of inclusion makes you think wider and enables you to broaden your ideas.

Developing links also led to different experiences and perspectives. For example, while for some projects it resulted in the acquisition or hire of new, sometimes specialist, equipment, for one project it challenged its perception about whether this was necessary:

Working with them made us realise we didn't need lots of specialist equipment – just creative thinking.

Volunteers from both high schools and universities were said to have made a significant contribution to the work of projects:

Links with the local high school lead to some of their pupils becoming regular volunteers with the club, supporting younger pupils and playing/interacting with younger pupils.

The university has an organisation that provides volunteer placement opportunities for students. Through it we have had some wonderful volunteers who have been a real asset to the project.

Links with organisations in both the statutory and voluntary sectors led to new training opportunities. Access to training was said to have enhanced the awareness and capacity of projects in relation to inclusive practice:

Our links with another children's organisation has meant that we were able to access their inclusive training course. This training greatly increased our ability to provide successful and worthwhile inclusive creative art and play sessions for children across the city.

Early training was very important. Access to good quality courses from the Early Years Partnership proved essential.

In some cases links led to projects attending external training, while in others they enabled projects to bring external providers into the project:

Close liaisons with a play scheme enabled us to attend their training which included a lot of inclusive, ideas, games and activities. This enhanced play workers' awareness of inclusion.

Using three providers for our training sessions enabled us to offer a broad and effective range of training on inclusive play.

Projects provided various examples of the way in which working with other organisations had enabled them to reach new disabled children. In some case this was via new referrals whilst in others it emanated from identifying need or gaining access to parents:

The inclusive play co-ordination has enabled us to identify disabled children who are not accessing any play provision, and thus work towards providing support for these children.

The connection with a disability information service for children enabled workers to reach over 99 new families and talk face to face to a large number of parents about the project. This made it far easier to publicise the project and to introduce new children to the play provision.

One project highlighted the way in which collaborating with an organisation had facilitated cultural inclusion:

The Asian Disability Network provides the project with referrals from communities that are often more difficult to reach. It also helps overcome language barriers, raises cultural awareness and facilitates the building of trust between the Play partnership and the families.

Projects provided a range of examples of the way in which links forged with other organisations had led to new funding opportunities. These emerged from links with both the statutory and voluntary sectors:

A childcare organisation has recognised that the facility is need in the area and so have commenced funding for two extra days a week. This may produce more children as people have the option to use us four days a week.

Having established ourselves as a respected child care provider, we were approached by the local council with the offer of funding to run an inclusive play scheme at Easter 2005 and Summer 2005.

5.5 Difficulties providing inclusive play

We asked projects whether they had experienced difficulties in providing inclusive play. Table 10 shows their responses. Nineteen projects (30 per cent of those responding) said they had been able to overcome the difficulties they had experienced, while 33 projects said that they had been partially able to overcome them.

Type of difficulty	Number of projects	Percentage of projects
Access and transport	33	51%
Recruiting skilled staff	28	43%
Negative attitudes	25	39%
Building trust with parents/carers	20	31%
Reaching disabled children	10	15%

Reaching non-disabled children	9	14%
Communication issues	9	14%
Note: Missing cases=30 Source: Follow up questionnaire		

Transport was identified as a particular difficulty by some projects. Problems related both to the cost of private transport and the barriers encountered when using public transport:

Accessible transport is expensive and less available. Public transport is unreliable and takes a lot longer to get from A to B due to inaccessible stations or buses. Awareness of communication issues around non-verbal young people is poor, obscured signs, poor signs or no signs at all cause major problems.

A wide range of problems with recruiting skilled staff were referred to. These included receiving insufficient applications for posts and a lack of suitably qualified applicants. Concern was also expressed about the lack of available 'specialist' or 'special needs' experience or play workers with enough 'commitment' to inclusive play. Projects also reported difficulties recruiting and retaining staff because posts were part-time or short term:

There is a lack of skilled and experienced staff who are available for short term funded programmes.

The difficulty in recruiting and retaining staff is that it is part time, involves lots of anti-social hours, short term and extremely challenging because of these factors.

Projects reported a range of difficulties in relation to building trust with parents. Parents may have had negative experiences of mainstream provision in the past and remained attached to the notion of specialist provision. For example one project explained that it was difficult to persuade parents that their children could be adequately catered for:

The main difficulty we encountered at the beginning of the project was parents and carers anxiety. We found that parents were concerned we wouldn't be able to 'cope' with their young person.

Other difficulties encountered included obtaining sufficient information from parents and a reluctance for parents to withdraw from the project even when their children's confidence and self-esteem appeared to increase.

Training was seen as a vital element in overcoming these difficulties and winning over parents to inclusive provision. While in some cases it was reported to have resulted in change, there was also recognition that progress towards inclusion took time.

Summary of key findings:

- The number of disabled children accessing play services increased during the Better Play funding.
- In the vast majority of projects play provision allowed disabled and non-disabled children to play together and interact with each other.
- Removing attitudinal and environmental barriers was identified by projects as important in supporting inclusive provision. Training, raised awareness and improved accessibility were also seen as key factors in supporting inclusive provision.
- The inclusive journey involved developing links with other play organisations, local authorities and disability organisations. Eighty five per cent of projects reported that the development of links had made an impact on their ability to provide inclusive play. The benefits of sustained links with other organisations included new training opportunities, being able to recruit volunteers and being able to attract disabled children new to the project.
- The main difficulties projects experienced when developing inclusive play services, were access and transport, recruiting skilled staff and attitudinal barriers.

6. Qualitative ‘closer look’ evaluation of eight play project

6.1 Context

The remaining chapters of the report will focus on the evaluation of eight play projects located all over England. The names of the projects involved with this ‘closer look’ evaluation have been changed in order ensure the anonymity of projects, their staff and any children and parents attending. A description of the services they provided are outlined below, these descriptions have not been altered except where this could compromise projects’ anonymity.

▪ The Inclusive Play Service, London

This project was run by an inner London local authority responsible for all children’s services including primary and secondary schools, special schools, early years and play services. The local authority used Better Play funding to employ three support workers in three existing after school clubs. The after school clubs operated from different primary schools that also offer breakfast clubs for children attending the school. Parents of non-disabled children paid a daily rate of approximately £5 for their children to attend the after school clubs. The three primary schools were selected because they have units for autistic children attached to the schools. These units operate during normal school hours and provide children on the autistic spectrum with segregated education. The additional support workers offered one-to-one support to selected children who attended the units, which allowed them to access mainstream play provision within the schools.

Children’s play either took place in the school hall or in the school playground. Inside children had access to table activities such as arts and crafts, as well as play facilitators like a dressing up box, toy cars, Lego, dolls and a sand box. Outside children used bicycles, scooters, the play structures or played ball games. More structured activities such as dancing, games and singing took place on a regular basis.

▪ Milner’s Community Centre, Midlands

Milner’s Community Centre is a multi-discipline community centre with a particular emphasis on lifelong learning and education. It serves a densely populated, inner-city area in the Midlands, with an 80-90 per cent Asian and Muslim population. The centre provides services for adults with mental health problems, a pensioners’ club, a pre-school and a range of other community services. The project sought to use Better Play funding to extend its existing mainstream holiday play provision to disabled children, as well as to develop a new inclusive Saturday club. Volunteers were recruited to work directly with disabled children and their families. The project adopted a ‘whole family’ approach and actively involved families with disabled children to engage with the project.

Depending on their age, children had access to a range of table activities, such a clay, woodwork, puppet making, sawing, paper mache and drawing. Children could also use the quite corners, read

books and play board games. While the community centre had access to an outdoor playground with a few fixed structures, outdoor playtime was limited to certain times.

- **Hamilton Community and Children’s Centre, London**

Hamilton Community and Children’s Centre is a newly refurbished building with an accessible outdoor adventure playground, sensory room, soft playroom and an inclusive IT suite. The community centre was set up as an inclusive facility that aimed to provide accessible and inclusive play facilities to all local children and their families. The centre is based within a mainly Asian community, with a lack of green spaces available typical to inner-city areas. Hamilton’s provided open access play sessions via its Sunday Fun days and holiday schemes, however, facilities were also available for rent to other community organisations on the basis that they worked towards becoming inclusive of all children. As a new organisation the Hamilton centre worked in partnership with a local specialist disability service that provided services such as short breaks and holiday play scheme to disabled children in the area.

In the playground children had access to swings, a small sandpit, tricycles and a wheelchair accessible climbing structure with nets. Inside children could do a few arts activities, use the home and book corner or relax on the sofas. The soft play area had padded walls and floor, with a little trampoline and a ‘bath’ of balls. Playworkers regularly facilitated group games, such as bowling, hockey or parachute either in- or outside.

- **Hip Hop Inclusive Play Project, South East**

Hip Hop has run inclusive play schemes and offered inclusion training for other play providers over the last ten years. The Better Play funding was used to start three new inclusive after school clubs in areas of a South Eastern city with limited play facilities for disabled children. The inclusive clubs ran on a weekly basis in three different rented venues. The project has recruited a number of volunteers and overall has a high child to adult ratio, although the project has experienced some staff changes and rotations during the funding period.

Depending on the location, children had access to various table activities, such as hat making, face painting and glitter drawing, in addition to play facilitators like dressing up box, water and indoor den building. Outdoor space was limited in one location, but children were able to play football, basketball and cricket, as well as go on trips to the local park.

- **The Play Rebels, South West**

Play workers from the education and youth team of a charitable environmental organisation used the Better Play funding to establish an open space play project on a housing estate in the South West. The ‘Play Rebels’ provided three sessions a week for children aged 5-16 years old and were based as much as possible in open public spaces and the Home Zone area of the estate. The project also recruited a number of volunteers. The Play Rebels was a child-centred open access project; hence no specific outreach work was carried out with families of disabled children.

Because the project was based outdoor there was no charge for the sessions and children could come and go as they pleased. One of the weekly sessions focused on a 're-cycle' project where young people repaired donated bicycles.

Besides the bicycle session, which focused on fixing old bikes, playworkers brought resources such as barbeques for cooking, games and a range of activities promoting environmental sustainability.

- **Sandstone Family Centre, North West**

The Sandstone play project was run by a mainstream community family centre which provided a range of playgroups and pre-school facilities for local children, as well as the local Sure Start services. The community centre has an outdoor playground, IT suite, and indoor play facilities. The project used Better Play funding to establish a staged approach to integrate mainstream and special needs groups. The three after school play sessions ran at different days and times in different venues; one specifically but not exclusively for disabled children in the family centre, and two mainstream sessions in a local primary school. The after school session for disabled children had a higher staff-child ratio, than the mainstream session and it also attracted a number of volunteers. A volunteer parent drove a minibus to and from the family centre's session, which enabled disabled children from further a field to attend the session. Outreach work was carried out with a parents' disability service and with local families with disabled children.

The children attending play sessions could get involved with arts activities, like painting, mosaic or making shakers. Some children would be on the playstation, listen to music or play board games, while outside children rode bicycles, played football or played on the adventure trail. At the community centre children also had access to the computer suite.

- **The County Youth Project, North East**

This project was run by an established youth service provider across several sites in neighbouring towns. These included a mainstream after school club run at a church hall adjacent to a middle school, and two youth groups for young people with 'special needs' at different community centres. One of these groups catered specifically for young people on the autistic spectrum, whilst the other catered for a young people with a range of learning difficulties. Better Play funding was initially targeted at bringing the mainstream after school club and the youth group for autistic young people together, with the aim of forming one group. However, part way through the funding period, the provider decided to switch funding from the youth group for young people on the autistic spectrum to the youth group for young people with learning difficulties.

Young people could play pool, playstation or watched DVDs, while others choose to do arts activities, such as card and bracelets making. Board games or cooking were regularly offered, as well as outdoor games.

- **The Environment for All Project, Yorkshire**

This project operated from a new purpose built environment centre on the outskirts of a large city, with both indoor and outdoor space and facilities. The play provision had a number of strands. The first involved running play activities with an environmental theme at a monthly wildlife club for disabled and non-disabled children. The second involved other play providers bringing children to the centre, while the third involved taking play provision to other play settings on an outreach basis. Better Play funding was used to fund a play worker's post to foster inclusion and to make adaptations to the centre.

Activities were organised along a structured timetable. The sessions offered outdoor activities which allowed children to interacting with their natural environment, such as pond dipping, hunting for bugs or making tree spirits. When indoors children did arts and craft activities like making butterflies or spiders. During breaks children could play football or use other play equipment.

7. Emerging models for the development and provision of inclusive play

During the course of this evaluation it became apparent that people involved in inclusive play referred to many different, and often conflicting, things when discussing inclusion. To investigate this further, all project staff involved in the 'closer look' evaluation were asked to clarify how they defined the concept of inclusion.

As with the overall evaluation, described earlier in this report, a single conclusive definition was not forthcoming. Many project workers highlighted that inclusion was about meeting all children's needs and not merely a few children's needs, while others mentioned that inclusion was specifically about including disabled children and young people. In some instances inclusion was as much about offering children from different ethnic groups access and opportunities to play together, as it was about disabled and non-disabled children interacting and building relationships. Openness and the willingness to accommodate everyone also featured highly.

It is not usually about the physical environment, although that is also very important. It is about the pace, you need a slow pace to include everyone, but that might hold back some who wants to go faster, [who are] impatient. Everyone has to be willing to accommodate, and I don't think we are that good at accommodating other people. You have to encourage an environment where everyone can get involved if they want to. *(Project trustee)*

For some projects it appeared crucial for inclusive play provision that disabled and non-disabled children were given the opportunity to play together. For others inclusion was more about extending provision and ensuring that disabled children had equal access to play opportunities, and that services were developed to meet gaps in provision for disabled children and young people. Another issue was whether enabling disabled children to access mainstream provision was inclusion or not. Some projects believed that when 'integrating' disabled children into mainstream settings, it was left up to the disabled child to 'fit in', rather than for the provision to meet all children's needs, including disabled children's. Other projects, however, defined precisely this approach as inclusion, because it gave disabled and non-disabled children the chance to build relationships and play together.

The Better Play programme used Alison John's definition of inclusive provision:

Provision that is open and accessible to all, and takes positive action in removing disabling barriers, so that disabled and non-disabled children can participate. *(Better Play application guidance notes)*

While this definition highlights that all children should have equal access and be able to participate equally, our evaluation revealed that the definition is subject to interpretation. It has been argued that projects are inclusive by virtue of extending

provision and by filling gaps in provision for disabled children³, while others have stressed that inclusive play happens when disabled and non-disabled children are playing together.

Consequently, projects adopted very different approaches to the development of 'inclusive' provision. Essentially the projects included in this evaluation took one of two approaches to inclusion. The first approach was to offer play provision to disabled and non-disabled children during the same session, so that children attended play sessions at the same time, on the same day and in the same setting. Within this 'provision together' approach, projects developed a number of different models in order to include and accommodate all children simultaneously.

The second approach was to offer disabled and non-disabled children separate play sessions that generally took place at different times and locations and on different days. This 'separate provision' approach initially aimed for a staged approach to 'integrate' separate groups of disabled and non-disabled children by the end of the funding period. While the majority of play projects adopted the 'provision together' approach, two projects adopted the 'separate provision' approach to inclusion.

As highlighted earlier, most projects adopted a trial and error approach to inclusion, during which learning and reflection played a major role in the process of developing inclusive play. Thus some projects embraced one or more models while others changed the way they worked during the funding period. However, to enable other play providers to utilise lessons learnt during the Better Play Programme the models and approaches to inclusion are discussed in more detail below.

7.1 'Separate' play provision

Two projects in this evaluation wanted to include disabled and non-disabled children by bringing new or existing groups together using a staged approach. One of these projects had run separate groups for several years, while the other project established a new group for disabled children and intended to integrate it with its existing mainstream after school clubs subsequently.

This approach presented projects with a number of issues, including the logistic problems of bringing groups together, as they often took place on different days and different times and venues. Many disabled children attended special schools outside their local community and hence returned home later than children attending local mainstream schools. One project also experienced an age issue as the young people in the specialist group were generally aged fifteen and over, while the mainstream group was for children aged 10-14. In addition to these logistical problems both projects reported that parents expressed scepticism and even outright opposition to change, as they valued what little provision there was available to their disabled children. As one project coordinator explained:

³ In 'Side by Side: guidelines for inclusive play' (2000), Kidsactive describes its approach to inclusion by highlighting that Kidsactive's adventure playgrounds cater primarily, but not exclusively, for disabled children whose needs are not met elsewhere. 'Starting from the recognition that disabled children have the same right to play as other children, the Kidsactive ethos is one of positive discrimination. The needs of disabled children come first, but we also encourage the inclusion of non disabled children' (2000, 21)

Parents were a little bit apprehensive about the coming together [of disabled and non-disabled children]. I suppose more so for the [young people with] special needs because the parents seem to have a lot more involvement with us, [...] because they bring them into the club and stuff like that. And they were quite, as I say nervous and 'Oh, what is that going to do and what are the intentions'. Because it's like 'Why do you need to do that, they are okay'. They were a little bit protective of their children in case, you know, in case they thought they was going to get called names or you know, not be allowed to join in and it may affect them. *(Project coordinator)*

A parent of a disabled young person at the same project explained that she valued specialist provision because she felt that it had actually enhanced her daughter's confidence:

At other groups she has been the only child with a disability. [Here] she doesn't feel threatened or feel she is the only one. She feels more part of the social structure. At other clubs she stuck out like a sore thumb. [Here] they all have problems. That helped her confidence. *(Parent of disabled young person)*

As a consequence of these issues, projects did not pursue the group 'integration' model, and although groups came together to do activities for special events, such as Christmas parties or for trips, the groups remained separate.

Although the two projects took the same approach to inclusion, they also differed significantly. One project sought funding to continue two existing and very successful clubs and due to lack of funding opportunities available, proposed to 'integrate' children and young people in order to meet funding criteria. However, the project also viewed inclusion as giving disabled children and young people equal access to the same activities and facilities as their non-disabled peers. Having identified a significant gap in provision for disabled young people, this became its main focus. The two groups did share occasional events and activities, and such joint events have reportedly been very positive experiences for all, with children coming together, mixing and enjoying themselves.

The other project had no experience of working with disabled children when they established its specialist group and while the two clubs came together only occasionally, the new club gave disabled children greater choices and opportunities to play. It has furthermore given the project valuable experience of working with disabled children, which has staff more confident in including individual disabled children in their other mainstream clubs.

However, both projects highlighted that there would always be a need for specialist services, and that having both specialist and accessible clubs within the same organisation offered children and parents additional choices.

There will always be a need for [specialist provision], if only as a stepping stone, you know particularly for parents who have had bad experiences in the past or never left their children anywhere before. *(Play coordinator)*

Projects offered some examples of how the availability of both types of provision had enabled them to better meet individual children's needs, for example by encouraging children to swap clubs. One boy who attended a mainstream after school club had, for example, become less aggressive and more confident since attending the special needs club, as more adult support was provided. Another disabled boy started attending the mainstream club with his friends, as a result of his parents leaving him independently for the first time at the special needs group.

While both these projects acknowledged the importance of children playing together and were working towards this aim, they also stressed that the 'separate provision' model did not allow this to happen within the given funding timeframe.

7.2 Provision 'together'

Six projects in this evaluation provided play opportunities for disabled and non-disabled children within the same session. The ways projects did this varied, and a number of different models were adapted. Some projects adopted one model, while others worked with more than one model in order to develop inclusive play.

7.2.1 Partnership working

A number of projects developed links with other service providers, disability organisations and referral units. Only one project (a new organisation specifically set up to provide inclusive play), worked directly in partnership with another organisation in terms of actual service delivery. This partnership was initially set up in such a manner that the organisations would pool their staff teams in order to run inclusive holiday schemes together. However, because of clashes between the team leaders and staff with different perspectives in relation to inclusion and play, the partnership came to an end after the first holiday scheme. As the project coordinator explained:

It's a general problem about working in partnership work [...] I think it's really, really important that everybody's views are taken on board from the beginning and everybody kind of signs up to it if you like from the initial stages [...] because every organisation has their own agenda in some way or another, ours was inclusion, the other organisation may not necessarily be inclusion, it was about providing specialist services ... very different philosophies. (*Project coordinator*)

The issue of how staff backgrounds and values impacted on children's play will be discussed at a later stage in this report. When asked what could have prevented this partnership breaking down, both organisations highlighted that more time was needed when setting up the play provision, to prepare workers and ensure that all staff worked towards common goals. Although the service provision altered significantly as a result of this split, the Better Play funded project was able to continue to deliver inclusive play sessions, while the partnership organisation continued to utilise the venue to provide specialist services for disabled children.

Other projects that did not form delivery partnerships, but still developed links with other organisations, generally found this useful. One mainstream project described the contact with a

disabled children's parent's group as especially useful, as parents were able to demystify some of the issues surrounding working with disabled children.

When we were starting to think about this project, it was all 'well, we need specialist people, we need specialist training, equipment' and we were speaking to a couple of [parents of disabled children] and they were like you are coming from all the wrong angles, you don't need all that, you don't need lots of specialist equipment, the attitude is far more important [...] So that was sort of an eye opener for us really [...] We shouldn't be looking at it to be all different, we should be adapting what we have got already. (*Play coordinator*)

So while partnership working with other organisations did provide projects with additional staff, access to disabled children's networks, it also offered projects the confidence to embark on inclusive journeys.

7.2.2 One-to-one support workers

One project employed specific support workers to work directly with disabled children, enabling them to access mainstream play provision. Although the project initially had some problems recruiting suitable support staff, offering one-to-one support was found to be a relatively easy and successful model for including disabled children in mainstream after school clubs. Disabled children were identified by special needs units located within the mainstream primary schools and the extra support children received enabled them to settle in at busy and noisy play settings. The fact that disabled children attended the same school, albeit within different classes, may have helped their inclusion, as another project working within school facilities highlighted that families often thought that only children attending the school could attend the after school club. This was seen to discourage local disabled children who attended special needs schools, from using the after school club.

The support workers generally saw their role as two-fold, mainly to ensure disabled children were safe and settled within the setting, but also to ensure that other children understood and respected the disabled children's needs and behaviour.

Because sometimes they [the disabled children] lash out and they [non-disabled children] don't understand why they're lashing out, so I basically explain to the other [children] how to treat them and don't pity them, because sometimes they do that and they don't like it. (*Support worker*)

However, while employed to assist identified disabled children, one-to-one workers were generally very aware of not interrupting disabled children's interaction with other children. One support worker described how she would withdraw if the child she was supporting did not require the support:

'f he is getting on with one of his peers and he's getting on well, I'm not going to stand there and interrupt that interaction, he's had one-to-one support all day [...] I will just put myself on the nearest activity to him, so I can still hear and see what's going on [...] the other kids don't get the impression I'm just there for Robert [name changed], I try quite hard to make sure they don't get that impression. (*Support worker*)

The fact that support workers were part of the playworker teams, rather than an external support worker working solely with the disabled child, also helped the inclusion process. The support workers were part of the play setting, non-disabled children knew them and they would help all children when needed.

The limited number of support workers inevitably gave only a limited number of disabled children the opportunity to attend. In one after school club the support worker enabled one child to access the play scheme five days a week, while in another setting five children came once a week each. While parents appreciated the opportunity for their child to play, it was recognised both by the project, and by parents and children that attending once a week was often not enough. However, without the additional support workers children were unable to attend after school clubs more often.

The experience of support workers and staff awareness of specific impairments appeared crucial to the ability of projects to accommodate disabled children's needs and behaviour. One mainstream project recruited volunteers to work directly with disabled children, in much the same way as described above. While this enabled a number of disabled children to utilise the play scheme, the volunteers on occasions seemed unable to understand and deal with disabled children's behaviour (e.g. refusing to stay indoors, running away or reacting aggressively towards other children and adults). This may be linked to the project's limited experience of working with disabled children, and consequently the lack of support offered by the project to both volunteers and staff.

7.2.3 New inclusive services

Two projects used the Better Play funding to set up new play sessions that were inclusive of all children from the outset. Both organisations were based on inclusive values and perceived themselves as neither mainstream nor specialist play providers. Before setting up services, both projects conducted extensive research into how other organisations had developed inclusive play. One project explored the numbers of disabled children and the play facilities available to them within different areas in order to identify gaps in provision.

Both projects were successful in attracting disabled children to their play sessions, but initially struggled to attract sufficient numbers of non-disabled children. One project highlighted that non-disabled children frequently had a range of different activities and clubs available to them, while there were a marked lack of services that cater for disabled children. However, it appeared that because projects assumed it would be harder to attract disabled children more emphasis was placed on outreach work with disabled children's organisations, networks and special schools.

Consequently, one project ran at half its capacity throughout the funding period, while the other project initially had a significantly higher number of disabled children attending.

While inclusion was the underlying principle for both projects, they recognised that inclusion could not be the only selling point to their users.

[Inclusion] is sort of the foundation, promoting inclusion that's great, but to the children 'what is inclusion?' You can't base an after school club on that notion. It can't ... It appeals to some parents, but not all, especially not the children. We want to engage with the children coming into our club and that's mainly through the programme, through the things that we do at the clubs. (*Play coordinator*)

Seeing inclusion as the foundation of their work enabled the projects to focus on the play opportunities that they offered disabled, as well as non-disabled children. Both projects were generally able to provide high quality play opportunities that were also inclusive.

Setting up new inclusive projects from nothing takes time, effort and resources. For both projects a considerable amount of time was taken building up strong and committed staff teams, writing policies and procedures, as well as establishing the play provision itself. For small organisations with only a limited number of fulltime staff, outreach work often become secondary to maintaining service provision. During the evaluation all projects highlighted the need request for longer term funding, but for projects setting up new inclusive services this was particularly prominent.

There is something about using a lot of effort publicising the clubs to [new] children if they will only exist for one more term. You have to be honest with the parents. (*Project coordinator*)

7.2.4 Open space play

One project in this evaluation was based on an open space or play ranger model. The idea behind play rangers is that playworkers bring play resources to places where children live or play, whether it's the local park, a sports field or the local housing estate. By having trained and experienced staff available in public spaces, parents and children felt safe and the project consequently enables children to play independently outside.

Prior to the project setting up, parents of local disabled children were consulted, many of whom showed an interest in the project. However, when parents learnt where playworkers would be located, many changed their minds. The location was a very disadvantaged housing estate with apparent high levels of criminality and drug and alcohol misuse amongst children and young people. However, the fact that the project was based outdoors, without the boundaries and perceived safety of a building, was also said to discourage parents of disabled children.

I think inclusion is really difficult, it is really difficult for open access provision to be fully inclusive, with parent's attitude and also because, with some [disabled children] it would be

really unsafe for them to be given free access and to come and go as they please.
(Playworker)

Project staff recognised that while they did not have any disabled children with physical impairments, they had a high number of children with special educational needs or children who had been permanently excluded from school. However, without a register the project was unable to record such data. The project had initially insisted on parents completing registrations forms. However playworkers found that parents in the local area overall were very disengaged from their children's lives and consequently few registration forms were returned. Because the project was based in public spaces playworkers had few sanctioning opportunities available and without completed registration forms the project had to rely on children telling them about their special needs.

7.2.5 Open access or pre-booked

Getting the balance of disabled children to non-disabled children right was an important issue for projects developing inclusive services. Projects within this programme generally aimed for no more than one disabled child to three non-disabled children. With any more, the needs of disabled children were seen to outweigh that of non-disabled children. For holiday schemes or other sessions where children were required to book in advance, projects were able to allocate places and hence have more control over the ratio of children. However, for projects offering open access play sessions where children dropped in without prior notification, projects had less control over the balance of disabled and non-disabled children. One project, for example, provided weekly open access sessions and found that they varied significantly over time, both in terms of disability, age range and number of children from minority ethnic communities attending. However, as the project pointed out because sessions were open access they were unable to turn anyone away.

Another project, which initially insisted that all children pre-booked weekly play sessions a term in advance, found that while this was readily accepted by disabled children and their parents, it wasn't by non-disabled children and their parents. Due to the lack of play schemes available to disabled children and because of their high care needs pre-booking were often standard among projects catering for disabled children. Non-disabled children, on the other hand, were generally only required to pre book certain activities, such as swimming lessons. As mainstream play sessions tend to be open access it was impossible for the play project to get non-disabled children to commit for a whole term ahead.

Summary of key findings:

- The definitions of inclusion used by projects commonly incorporated the themes of openness, accessibility or equality of opportunity, participation and child-centred focus.
- A single overarching definition of what is meant by 'inclusion' did not emerge during this evaluation. Asking projects to define inclusion generated a range of inter-locking concepts and characteristics, and sometimes highlighted contradictory approaches to inclusion. Projects described both 'separate provision' (which fills gaps and extends provision for

disabled children) and 'provision together' (which enable disabled and non-disabled children to play together), as inclusion.

- Inclusion is not something that a project commits itself to, introduces and which then remains static. Rather 'the act of including' is a dynamic process that changes continuously, certainly over the course of a funding period and sometimes between two play sessions. Projects might have begun with one model of inclusion, reviewed and learnt from their experiences, and developed their approach in order to meet the needs of individual children, best utilise staff skills and adapt to the limitations of their particular play setting.
- The fact that projects were committed to inclusion did not necessarily mean that disabled children and non-disabled children were playing together. The expertise and confidence of staff were seen to play an important role in supporting and facilitating inclusive play. Staff capacity and skill were required in relation to play in general and inclusive play in particular.
- The need for longer term funding was clear within all projects. The time consuming process, for example, of building trusting relationships with parents of disabled children, highlighted this need.
- Inclusion (playing together) should be the foundation of inclusive play provision but not the sole aim. In order to attract and maintain the involvement of disabled and non-disabled children projects have to provide high quality play opportunities that are also inclusive.
- Inclusion and play do not necessarily coincide (see model in introduction). Some projects provided high quality play, but were not inclusive (in terms of children playing in the same setting), while other projects were inclusive of disabled and non-disabled children, but did not necessarily enable them to 'play'. Others, which had experience and staff expertise in relation to both play *and* inclusion, were able to provide inclusive play.

8. Children's experiences: key findings from the 'Closer look' evaluation

For the purpose of this report the 'closer look' evaluation of eight play projects centred on four key themes, relating specifically to inclusion and play. This section will therefore focus on:

- Children's enjoyment of play
- Children's choice and control over their play
- Children's opportunities to experience risk, while remaining safe
- Children playing together and making friends

8.1 Children's enjoyment of play

Children's stimulation and enthusiasm about the play opportunities offered to them were observed by the researchers at all eight play projects. Examples of these observations include; an eager queue of children streaming into a project when it opened, children running between activities, red faced out of breath children returning from outdoors, children rushing to get limited play equipment such as scooters, children's smiling faces, frequent laughing and joking, and children not wanting to leave at the end of a session.

When children were asked what they thought about the play project they attended their replies were typically straightforward, for example, they liked it because they had fun there, because there were lots of things to do, or because they enjoyed playing there.

I like [the play scheme] because it's fun and we get to go outside. I like [the play scheme] because we make different kind of stuff. I like [the play scheme] because the teachers are nice. I like [the play scheme] because I enjoy [the play project]. *(Child's diary entry, next to a drawing of three girls with long hair skipping together)*

There's loads of stuff to do. It's better than watching TV all day. *(Child)*

You have fun. You can have a laugh. *(Child)*

I come here because I like after school club and it's fun. Another I went to was boring, I wasn't allowed to make [my] own sandwiches or play on my own and couldn't make a hide out. *(Child)*

The following provides one example of how one disabled boy, James [name changed], who attended an after school club once a week was able to communicate his views about the project through his actions.

James is wandering around the play scheme. The play coordinator says 'James has missed the bus again'. Someone phones James' mum and she arrives half an hour later to pick him

up. He cries out loudly when he has to leave, everyone looks up and one of the children says 'James doesn't want to go home. (*Observation notes*)

[James] brings himself in here every night because he wants to stay every night and we have to coax him out to the coach, the bus and give him some food to take on the bus to go home. (*Play coordinator*)

James would like to be at [play scheme] 24/7 so when his Mum comes for him at 6 o'clock [...] I have to lift him up and take him out in the road and say 'I am going home now [...] my car is down there' and he won't go, sometimes I have to sit in his Mum's car and climb through the other door. (*Support worker*)

Chantelle [girl attending play scheme] does the chatterbox game with James who has dressed up as a cook. James points to the colours and numbers on the chatterbox, when it comes to answering the question (what is your dream activity?), Chantelle suggests that he likes to play. James nods and repeats a sound that sounds like the word play. She seems quite caring and gentle with him. Chantelle moves on. (*Observation notes*).

Children also spoke positively of play projects as somewhere they could play with their friends, or that they liked playing with a particular member of staff. Unsurprisingly perhaps, when asked about their likes and dislikes children gave different responses, particularly in terms of their preferred play activities. If a play opportunity was offered at a project it was nearly always at least one child's favourite thing.

Whilst a high proportion of parents reported that their children were motivated about the play projects, this was particularly the case for parents of disabled children. Seventy nine per cent of parents of disabled children, who completed the parents' questionnaire, strongly agreed that their child looked forward to coming (95 percent either strongly agreed or agreed with this statement). Sixty four per cent of parents of non-disabled children strongly agreed that their child looked forward to coming (97 per cent either strongly agreed or agreed with this statement.) Only one of the 96 parents who answered the question said their child did not look forward to coming. Interviews with parents of disabled children further evidenced children's perceived excitement about the play projects:

He loves it, he wouldn't miss it, I think he has only ever missed it once when he wasn't well and he didn't want to miss it then (*Parent of disabled boy*)

My child always enjoys himself there. Although he can't speak he always points to the building when passing it and gets excited (*Parent of disabled boy*)

The majority of children could not think of anything they had found boring or didn't enjoy at their play project. However, a few children mentioned that they didn't like it when a playworker or volunteer they got on with no longer attended the project or if they had to share resources. A

couple of children said that they didn't like it when there was a lot of shouting in the session or if there were problems with other children's behaviour. As one child explained:

I don't like it cause it feels like school but I enjoy the games (*Child, diary entry*)

On the other hand another child had written:

It's like school but funnier. (*Children's wall display*)

Some children at the Hip Hop project said that they had not enjoyed working on an arts activity which had taken place over a number of sessions. At some projects a number of children also mentioned that they did not like that you had to pay to attend the project. Bullying was mentioned by a few children as something which they did not like, although only one incident of bullying was reported to the evaluators by a parent.

It was also noted at the Inclusive Play Service and the Hamilton's Community Centre that some children became tired and stopped engaging with play opportunities at the after school clubs and all day holiday schemes. Playworkers at the Inclusive Play Service reported that some children came to the session tired and didn't want to do anything. However, these playworkers further explained that after a rest and something to eat children actively engaged with playing and seeming to enjoy themselves at the project.

Summary of key findings:

- The vast majority (96 per cent) of parents reported that their child looked forward to coming to their play project. This was especially the case for parents of disabled children.
- Overall, disabled and non-disabled children showed that they found the play opportunities provided to be fun. A small number of children raised something they liked less about the play projects.

8.2 Children's choice and control over their play

All eight projects offered opportunities for children to exercise choice and control. However, the extent to which children were able to do this varied according to a number of factors such as the structure of the play sessions, the project's environment and resources, the behaviour of groups and staff approaches to intervention and disability.

8.2.1 Structuring

Three broad approaches to structuring sessions were identified at the eight projects which framed children's opportunities to exercise choice and control, see table below for an outline of these approaches. Projects with an educational background (i.e. those whose staff had educational training or who largely provided educational services to children) tended to have the more

structured approach outlined in description A in the table. Such projects offered children choice between fixed activities and often with a defined purpose. Projects with a background in play (e.g. had trained playworkers or a background in providing play projects to children) tended to have approaches to structuring sessions such as descriptions B and C in table 11, with children seen as 'in charge' of deciding what they played with and how. For example, at the County Youth project a boy was observed starting an activity, stopping to eat and drink, and then resuming it in his own time. A little while later he was observed leaving the activity unfinished and starting something new.

The eight projects described evolving approach to offering children's choice, in part dependent upon the children's response to planned and unplanned activities. One of the projects with an educational background reported that it had begun to give more time to 'free play' over time as staff felt more comfortable having parts of the session unplanned. Other projects reported the opposite. A project which ran play sessions in three different areas had introduced more structured activities at one group following problems with aggressive behaviour during unstructured activities. Children had been involved in choosing these new activities, such as dance lessons, and were given a timetable of what was planned for each session; the project hoped that eventually it would be able to offer more self-initiated play opportunities:

The young people are totally in control of it, coming up with ideas and that is great, there are times though when that is overstretching them and we have to put in ideas, and if we can pick that up at the right time and be able to fly the triggers that will get them going again, sometimes we miss them, sometimes we overload them and sometimes we get it right (*Project coordinator*)

Projects described organising more planned activities for a number of reasons; because the activity required preparation (for example cooking), to maintain children's safety (for example pond dipping), or because children had not responded positively to a 'blank sheet' approach of just providing resources. The benefits of unplanned or free play opportunities within sessions were also broadly recognised by workers though projects such as Milner's Community Centre described feeling uncomfortable with this approach or explained that it was not possible.

Table 11: Projects' approach to structuring play sessions

Structure of play project	Impact on play outcomes	Quote and play projects which broadly took this approach
A. Timetable of activities for each session, such as set refreshment breaks and times of indoor, outdoor, and free play. Activities usually led by workers, children choose between activities. Sessions may have a particular theme such as learning about the rainforest.	Children produced more products, for example coloured in butterflies. Children move less freely between activities.	<p><i>"It's free play but it's within certain boundaries because (it's) just a fact that you don't want them to... panic when there's no-one around or whatever so we do that."</i> (Project Coordinator)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Milner's Community Centre ▪ Environment for All Project
B. Outline plan for the session and a number of activities set up which may or may not be facilitated by a worker. There may be some structured time such as all children eating together but this is flexible depending on children's engagement.	Children leave more activities unfinished. Increased movement of children around space. Increased amount of child initiated play activities.	<p><i>"we do have a sort of a rough plan of the specific things that we want to do like cooking or things like that, but during the sessions there is no hard and fast way of ... (saying) this is what we're doing, and then we're doing that, so all the children are quite aware of all the equipment we have got you know, what sort of things that are available for them to do, and if its not out, they can ask, you know to get it out."</i> (Project Coordinator)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Hip Hop Inclusive Play Project ▪ Sandstone Play Project ▪ Inclusive Play Service ▪ County Youth Project
C. Some activities and resources set up by workers and left without workers facilitating. No timetable for the session, less planned activities and more flexibility to change planned activities.	Fewer products produced by children. A lot of free movement by children around the space. Children have greater access to a range of materials and resources. More child initiated play.	<p><i>"There are a lot of interactions as well but in a way that is unstructured and spontaneous. (It's) fluid transitional, watching them play games and keep going as long as everyone is happy."</i> (Project volunteer)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Hamilton Community and Children's Centre ▪ Play Rebels

Projects which had experience or extensive training in working with disabled children offered additional activities specifically for disabled children. For example, one project had provided a pretend bed for a disabled boy with communication difficulties following consultation with his mother. Other projects provided activities such as playing with water or playing with pasta in water. Disabled children seemed to enjoy such additional activities. Those projects which didn't have extensive training or experience of working with disabled children tended to expect disabled children to fit in with the mainstream activities, rather than provided additional or alternative activities that were inclusive of disabled children. This could result in disabled children being left out of activities and engaging only with an individual worker.

8.2.2 Children's involvement in planning play and decision making

Children were involved in project planning in a number of formal ways such as being asked to choose trips or being offered choices between activities. In addition projects carried out routine evaluation sessions with children about the activities provided often using creative approaches. These included a spider web of children's thoughts or by having a white board where children could write their suggestions at every session. However, for health and safety reasons there were some suggestions that projects weren't able to meet, such as skateboarding. Children's suggestions were very much valued by projects and if projects were unable to provide the resources that children wanted straightaway they generally used the information to plan for forthcoming sessions.

[The children] have had decisions made for them all day in school and when they come to after school it's somewhere where they can make their own decisions about how they are spending their time, so I think its got a really important part to play. *(Project coordinator)*

Projects also recognised the limitations of directly asking children what they wanted at the project. It was found to be more effective to enable children to make informal suggestions about what they wanted to do. Projects considered that this required workers to know children well and develop a rapport with them, although this was partly dependent on children attending regularly.

I think if it was too structured we wouldn't get the responses that we do, they wouldn't feel so free to give their ideas and offer their opinions if it was well 'lets all be silent and you tell me what you want and you tell me what you want' I don't think that would really work, I think it works because we can move around and we can actually talk to the children individually because we have that relationship with them and then what we hear we can note down and then we can act on it. *(Project worker)*

Children were not necessarily expected to communicate how they felt about play verbally; staff at all project's described knowing children's likes and dislikes by watching what they ran to or how they engaged with different play opportunities. This was particularly the case for disabled children with communication impairments. At a number of projects, playworkers had or were developing particular skills in children's communication methods, such as a support worker using Makaton to communicate with a disabled boy at the Inclusive Play Service, while at Hip Hop staff had learnt to

communicate with a disabled boy using his voice generated computer. The children's suggestions and staff observations were used in projects' debrief sessions to help plan for future activities.

In addition to this, the Hamilton centre had an inclusive focus group of disabled and non disabled children who regularly met to make decisions about the future of the project including, for example, interviewing new playworkers. However, the Sandstone project reported that short term funding had limited its ability to involve children in decision making, as it had to prepare the children for possible closure of the project, rather than raise their expectations about future activities which may not be able to take place.

8.2.3 Project resources and environment

All eight projects were keen to offer a range of play activities and types with a wide array of activities available including, art and craft play, role play, rough and tumble, junk modelling, messy play, activities which involved following instructions, singing, and outdoor play equipment. Activities were set up by playworkers during sessions in response to children's engagement and requests, and by introducing new things to the group. However, projects' ability to provide a 'flow' of play opportunities depended on them having a flexible approach, an appropriate level of staffing and adequate resources to keep some activities going for some children, as well as set up new activities for other children.

We are now aware that for one activity some children get bored very quickly and some want to continue doing it for a long time. We just need to ensure that we can accommodate this by having enough staff, lots of small activities/ play equipment set up already and have flexibility in what we do. (*Project evaluation report*)

Whilst it may seem contradictory to common perceptions about children's play, projects which used open public space (i.e. outdoor space which was not exclusively for the project's use such as a visit by Hip Hop to a local wild park or using outdoor space at Environment for All Project) also placed restrictions on children's choice and control. This was both for safety reasons such as keeping a group together before crossing a road, and because of the additional restrictions in such spaces, such as telling children not to pick flowers in parks. Such interventions were sometimes seen as frustrating restrictions by children, particularly when they may be familiar with the space outside of the play project, but staff considered them vital to maintaining their duty to keep children safe.

8.2.4 Staff interventions

Projects staffed by trained playworkers, such as Hip Hop or the Play Rebels, tended to intervene less often in children's play than those staffed by workers without a play background. Trained playworkers often spent the majority of play sessions providing resources, going round activities, and responding to children's individual requests for additional resources when needed.

If they [children] want us to help them do something or get something out we'll do that. We're [staff] just kind of props in a way (*Playworker*)

Playworkers considered the benefits of such an approach as resulting in more self-initiated play and treating children as the 'expert', for example, a child showing others including staff how to make a bracelet or leading a face painting activity. At such projects playworkers did generally not wish to intervene in children's creative play unless requested by children.

At projects such as Milner's Community Centre and Environment for All, which mainly provided staff-led activities, children were more likely to complete an activity and follow the playworkers' example or instructions. These projects might have been more concerned with the children being stimulated or producing a product, rather than extending children's choice and control over what, how and with whom they play:

[The children] need a bit more instruction of what to do and they like to be told you know, you can do this and you can do this and you can give them different alternatives and they can choose what they want to do (*Project coordinator*)

Whilst such projects offered fantastic learning opportunities and had skilled workers, there was less room within such planned timetables for child-initiated play.

In terms of staff ratio, projects with a high staff ratio such as Milner's Community Centre tended to be more successful in attracting disabled children. These projects were able to assign staff to support particular disabled children during sessions. Many parents of disabled children valued this individual attention that these projects gave their child and believed this to be essential to monitoring and supporting their child's choice at the project:

The love and attention Sarah [name changed] receives from the carer's. Sarah responds a lot better when she had proper one to one activities (*Parent of disabled child, questionnaire*)

However, during a number of play sessions that the researchers observed the number of adults equalled the number of children, because projects had had a 'low' turn out or parents stayed throughout the session. This undoubtedly had some influence on children's ability to make choices and initiate their own play including parents interfering in their own children's play. On the other hand some parents of disabled children explained that it was necessary for them to remain close by throughout the play session. While the high number of staff might have been due to fluctuating numbers of children attending the sessions, those projects which had established new play sessions such as Play Rebels and Hop Hop did seem to attract a lower number of children than their capacity and perhaps were taking time to establish themselves.

8.2.5 Parents' involvement in planning play and decision making

When establishing the inclusive play sessions all the projects had consulted with parents of disabled children about what the possible gaps in their children's play opportunities might be and how the service potentially could support their children. The parents of most disabled children referred to the play projects were also contacted prior to their child attending the project to plan appropriate support for that child in the session such as their likes and dislikes or particular support needs.

In the play sessions parents' involvement ranged from staying throughout the play session and being involved in play activities as at Environment for All and the Hamilton centre, to the Play Rebels that had very little contact with parents other than returning necessary consent forms for trips. Only one project, the Hamilton centre, had taken a formal approach to parents evaluating the play project, with a parent's board regularly meeting.

On the whole parents were satisfied with the opportunities that projects offered; 79 per cent of parents (96 answered the question) agreed that the projects provided stimulating play for their children. However, a few parents commented that they would like more feedback on what their child had done whilst at the project. One parent commented that they had not been informed about a bullying incident involving their child and suggested that the project keep a book to fill in the details of such incidents to share with parents.

Summary of key findings:

- All projects offered children opportunities to exercise some choice and control. However, the extent to which children were able to do this varied depending on the structure of the play sessions, the play environment and staff approaches to intervention.
- Projects with a largely educational background (educationally trained staff or who largely provided educational services) tended to adopt a more structured approach to activities, and offered fewer opportunities for free play.
- Projects with a playwork background (trained playworkers or with a background in providing play to children) tended to provide fewer structured activities, take a less structured approach and encouraged children to engage in free play.
- Projects that were successful in offering disabled children choice generally provide additional play resources, such as water and tricycles, specifically (although not exclusively) for disabled children.

8.3 Children's opportunities to experience risk, while remaining safe

Staff at all play projects were aware of health and safety issues and took active steps to prevent hazards and dangers to children. Such steps included carrying out risk assessments, conducting health and safety checks before each session, avoiding certain places that were perceived as dangerous (e.g. a polluted river) and by making alterations to the environment. The Hip Hop

project that utilised rented community venues for their after school clubs, for example, always erected a fence around the outdoor premises, preventing children from running into the road.

Besides the Hamilton centre, which had its building and playground especially designed as an inclusive facility, only one other project reported making specific physical alterations (the Environment for All project installed an accessible path and pond) in order to safely accommodate disabled children. Following best practice guidelines, all projects sought written consent from parents when going on day or residential trips, while the vast majority of projects kept registration forms for children and attendance registers. Projects were also observed bringing first aid kits on day trips. Setting and maintaining rules with children was also an important way to ensure that children were not put at risk while at the projects, something that will be discussed later.

Some concern was expressed by project coordinators and about children's safety and all took their responsibilities very seriously. Some projects also voiced their concerns about a 'blame culture', where staff could be held personally responsible for accidents or injuries children sustain while in their care, a trend which was perceived as growing. However, playworkers recognised that they could not and should not always stop children engaging in challenging play, as long as staff ensured that children did so within a safe environment.

Only one accident, where a child broke his collarbone slipping off a swing, was recorded during the evaluation period. This led to an intense discussion within the project and its management committee as to whether swings should be available at the project.

It highlighted the whole health and safety debate; 'Should the [Project] have a swing?' Well of course it should. It's a risk, but all children may fall off a swing. But the parent's worry, 'Has my child been beaten up', and staff worry, 'Could we have done anything?' Probably not, it was an autistic boy, so he didn't say anything when it happened, it wasn't until late in the day when his arm started hurting that they worked out how it might have happened
(Project trustee)

The vast majority of parents, who completed the parent's questionnaire or were interviewed for the evaluation (118 parents in total), felt that the projects were safe environments for their children. This is not surprising, as one would presume that parents who felt provisions were unsafe would avoid using the play setting. This was the case for Play Rebels that had found it difficult to attract disabled children to its sessions. Although parents had initially been positive about a new inclusive play project starting up, when they learnt the location of the project this interest quickly evaporated, as this open space location was perceived as unsafe. At other projects, a few parents did offer suggestions of how to improve project safety, with one parent suggesting using an ID code at pick up to ensure children weren't collected by strangers, while another would like the registration procedures improved. Nevertheless, overall parents felt assured about the safety of their children, a factor that parent said was linked to the friendliness and supportiveness of project staff.

A trusting relationship between staff and parents, while important to all parents, was particularly important to parents of disabled children. A number of parents explained that they had to feel

absolutely sure that staff was able to deal with their child's needs and behaviour before feeling comfortable and safe leaving them alone at the project.

[In the beginning] quite a few parents stayed throughout the session we were doing and sort of gradually, one by one, they trusted it and stopped coming ... I suppose its because they have seen it for themselves, that they trust us [...] it was a big step for some of them to actually take that step and leave [their disabled children], leave them with us. (*Play coordinator*)

Parents of disabled children at both 'separate' provision and provision 'together' projects explained that the projects had enabled greater independence for their children. For example, one mother at Environment for All explained that over time she had been able to leave her boy on his own at the project something which she had never been able to do at any other projects before. At the County Youth project, a mother explained:

We've never wanted her to be treated differently. But [difference between her and her non-disabled peers have] become more apparent lately. By not letting go we haven't given her the opportunities. Now we see that we need to let go. (*Parent of disabled child*)

Parents praised staff at most projects, by highlighting that staff were friendly and understanding, and able to deal with individual children's needs, such as a child disliking balloons or displaying unpredictable behaviour. One parent explained:

They treat her as we would. [...] They remember little things that the kids have said. They have an ongoing dialogue with them about family and other things. (*Parent of disabled child*)

8.3.1 Rules

Setting and enforcing certain rules was important to most projects, although staff generally pointed out that they aimed to keep rules to a minimum, by setting only a few basic ground rules for children and adults to follow.

It's trying to get away from school where you have a big long list of things that you have to stick to, but at the same time making sure everybody feels safe with it. (*Playworker*)

On the whole there was a consensus between children and playworkers about what rules applied at their projects. Staff mentioned rules like respecting each other, no bullying, no name calling and no physical violence. Children described the rules as no swearing, fighting, kicking, punching and shouting, no running inside, no sweets and to listen to staff. One child mentioned not being racist, while another said being kind to others and looking after equipment were rules at her play project. Only four children, in the 23 play sessions that the evaluators attended, said they did not know the rules of the project. More specifically there were rules that related only to the particular environment of one project, such as no swimming in the pond or no bike riding on the outdoor play structure.

The extent to which children were involved in developing the rules varied significantly depending on the project. When asked, children said they knew the rules either because they were told about them, because they had been told off or because they had attended the project for a long time. It was apparent that children attending play projects based in school facilities or where staff was associated with school, were more aware of the rules and generally saw school rules as play project rules, even when playworkers did not enforce specific school rules. This was also evident by children calling project workers for 'teachers', rather than playworkers or by their first name.

Children at all projects did, to different degrees, break project rules. Children were observed riding bikes on play structures, eating sweets and fighting with other children. At some projects, children's aggressive behaviour seemed to be a bigger problem than for other projects, with some playworkers describing children as 'bashing the hell out of each other' or 'kicking each other'. Consequently, stricter discipline was necessary at some projects, especially where a larger number of children attended independently of their parents. Such 'crowd control' methods, included lining children up before going outside or making children sit down for registration.

One community-based project pointed out that its attitude to discipline had initially been more relaxed, but when this had resulted in 'chaos and anarchy', the project had introduced stricter rules to ensure children were not hurt. A school-based project, which catered for up to 60 children daily, also used 'timeout' with children who were unruly and did not listen to adults' instructions. Striking a balance between the need to control children's behaviour and offering them opportunities to control their own play was something about which most projects had deliberated. One play coordinator highlighted that playing together within a play setting was something children had to learn and get used to.

Children that came in the beginning of the year was really, really naughty and wouldn't behave themselves, were continuously fighting and that, which have totally changed now, they don't do that anymore [...] new children when they first come to [the play scheme] you need that settling in period, where 'we don't have to listen to you, we [can] fight, we don't have to do that'. (*Play coordinator*)

Non-disabled children also had to learn and understand that while rules existed for all children, there were certain rules that staff did not always insist disabled children followed, such as 'no shouting'. At one project, a disabled boy was observed shouting loudly as his means of communicating. However, when a non-disabled boy also started shouting loudly, he was asked to quieten down by playworkers.

8.3.2 Testing boundaries and challenging activities

All eight projects involved in this evaluation were able to provide children with various opportunities to develop and extend their abilities and skills through play. The extent to which children were able to test boundaries and challenge themselves varied significantly depending on the structure of the project, the facilities available, staff training and the values of the project.

Challenges provided at projects included social (e.g. managing conflicts), physical (climbing trees) and cultural experiences (dressing up and cooking).

Allowing children to test boundaries, within a safe environment, was recognised by the majority of projects as a positive thing that helped children learn for themselves. However, attitudes towards boundary testing and risky play varied between the projects according to staff experiences, backgrounds and qualifications. Projects that employed staff with a playwork background were more likely to encourage and allow children to engage in challenging play, than projects that engaged staff with an educational background. Projects that were either educational by nature or employed educational orientated staff, tended to be more structured with planned and timetabled activities, and hence less flexible, offering fewer opportunities for self-initiated play. For example, at one project that regularly offered arts activities, staff would pre-cut shapes and material (e.g. for puppets) and remove scissors before the children arrived. This meant that children's initiative and creativity were significantly reduced and consequently they produced identical artwork.

The Hamilton centre, which had worked in partnership with a specialist provider for disabled children within in a play setting, also illustrated the tension between play and care in terms of allowing and encouraging disabled children to take risks. As one play coordinator explained:

The two [care and playwork] I think they can be combined, but in some ways they can be seen as opposite ends of the spectrum, because play is about enabling children to take risks in a safe environment, whereas the care workers have been used to providing care – a kind of 'no, you can't do that, you can't do that, you can't do that'. There are kind of tensions between the two because it's about striking that balance [...] because we feel children learn but you know it is not a risk as in a hazard, it's a risk that they may feel is something different and exciting, it's an opportunity because so many children with disabilities are not able to take those risks ... (*Play coordinator*)

The Environment for All project that offered environmental sessions to visiting groups also noticed that visiting staff, especially if working with disabled children, often did not appreciate that children were allowed and encouraged to engage in messy activities.

Children's behaviour, which may be considered wrong in other settings, is OK in ours; such as kicking and throwing leaves around, pulling at grass, making a mess and getting dirty. The experience we offer [at the project] is centred around personal discovery of the natural environment and getting dirty is all part of that. (*Evaluation report by inclusion coordinator*)

However, as the observation notes below reveal, disabled children who attended the project might have been censored by visiting workers who accompanied the children who failed to understand the value of sensory play:

Tom is playing with the soil. He repeatedly picks up dirt and rubs it in his hand, letting it slip between his fingers. His worker keeps telling him to stop and concentrate on the activity. (*Observation notes*)

Projects that either employed playworkers or were based on playwork values were more likely to highlight the importance of flexibility in relation to children's challenging play. Playwork staff often described how they would take a step back and allow children to make choices for themselves (e.g. Am I going to fall down and hurt myself if I climb any higher?), rather than making decisions for them. Playworkers might watch how a potential argument between two children developed rather than intervene straight away.

By standing back, staff enabled children to explore their own physical capacities and limitations, as well as the emotional impact of their actions on other people. One playworker offered an example of how, within a safe environment, this could benefit children. A little girl, who attended the project's special needs after school club, had continuously, week after week, tried to annoy and wind up other children in order for them to start an argument. One day she picked on a shy boy who instead of retaliating began to cry. According to the playworker, the girl knew and had been told many times not to pick on other children, but it was not until she saw the boy cry that she realised that her actions were hurting others, something which had been unintentional. As a result of not intervening immediately the girl had understood the effect of her behaviour on others, something that had not been achieved previously when playworkers had intervened.

Standing back was often described by playworkers as harder when disabled children were engaging in challenging activities, as some disabled children (e.g. those on the Autistic Spectrum) seemed to be less aware of danger or having no sense of danger (e.g. running into busy traffic). However, the majority of projects recognised that play sessions were often the only opportunity disabled children had to test boundaries and try new things, which made it even more important that they were given the opportunities.

You have to [stand back]. We've not got a lot of climbing equipment but they do crazy things [...] you're thinking what's going to happen, 'stop this, stop that' that's how you feel when they are doing these daring things [...] but you just give them the space ...

Interviewer: Why do you have to stand back?

Because once these kids have grown up and they've left school, they've not got someone there protecting them and I think you need to encourage them as much as possible to be independent. (*Support worker*)

To recognise when to intervene and when to stand back required the skill and sensitivity of an experienced playworker, in order for children to experience and explore risky play at their own pace, but still feeling supported in doing this. As Play Inc. points out 'adults should generally provide a reliable presence, which is unobtrusive but available to the children (Casey, 2004: 29)

When children were asked about their play project, many seemed to value the opportunity to be messy and do things that they are not allowed to do at home. Activities that children highlighted that they particularly enjoyed were having campfires, playing with cornflour and water, climbing frames, using tools for woodwork and outdoor play.

Play dough [is something new that I have done here]. Mum doesn't really let me. I play to messy, but I am allowed here ... and the climbing frame, because Mum doesn't let me climb. (*Girl at holiday scheme*)

[At the project you] can do what you're not really allowed to do at home, like messing around with tools. Make campfires which you're not allowed to do at home, unless you're are lucky and you can go camping [I come here because] its very enjoyable, can do what you want. Let off your leash. It's like you're a dog, you're on a leash all the time and all of a sudden you're free to do what you want. (*Girl attending open space*)

He loves it, he absolutely loves it [...], go outside, he loves it on the barrels outside and he loves to play on them. He is quite clean this week, he usually goes home absolutely covered in mud which he loves. (*Parent of disabled boy*)

In some cases children and young people did on occasions display very challenging behaviour that was unrelated to any disabilities or impairments. Such behaviour had a major impact on the enjoyment of other children and playworkers, as well as the generally atmosphere at the play setting. For the Play Rebels who operated in a particularly disadvantaged community, playworkers occasionally seemed very vulnerable to children and young people's aggressive behaviour.

The plan for today's activities was for the children to make a banner for tomorrow's [community] event. The playworkers get out paint and a white banner and puts in on the grass. It quickly turns into chaos. Some of the older boys grab the paint bottles and want to spray paint on each other. [After a while] one playworker collects the paint and puts it in her car which is parked on the side of the village green. One boy cycles over the banner a couple of times so that the wet paint is covered in dry grass. One of the little boys asks the playworker if he can have her car keys, a few children follow him and soon five children and young people are jumping on the bonnet of the car. The playworker has had enough and asks them to get off [...] after a while they seem to respect that and get off the car. The playworker gets into her car to move it. A little boy is hanging onto the door while it is moving. An older child pulls him off. Two little boys run after the car for a bit until they give up. (*Observation notes*)

The purpose of highlighting this example is to illustrate that project staff sometimes had to deal with challenging situations that most playworkers are not trained to and have experience of dealing with, and consequently may found themselves struggling to handle. Within the Play Rebels project, playworkers reported that the best method of dealing with such behaviour, in their open space setting, was to abandon the space and move on to another open space. Another project highlighted that it had been in situations where staff felt that without additional training on how to tackle aggressive and disruptive behaviour, they could not continue the service.

Summary of key findings:

- Staff at all projects were aware of health and safety issues and took active steps to prevent hazards and dangers to children, which included carrying out risk assessments, conducting safety checks before sessions and making alterations to the physical environment.
- While the vast majority of parents felt that projects were safe environments for their children, parents of disabled children have particular histories and experiences which need to be understood in order to build trusting relationships.
- A number of projects highlighted the inherited tension that exists between play and ‘care’, in terms of allowing disabled children to take risks.
- Attitudes towards balancing protection with challenging play varied between projects depending on staff experiences, background and qualifications. Projects that employed staff with a playwork background were more likely to encourage and allow children to engage in challenging play, than projects with an educational background.

8.4 Playing together

One of the main objectives for the third round Better Play funding was that by funding inclusive play projects the number of disabled and non-disabled children who play together would increase. Of the eight projects included in this ‘closer look’ evaluation five projects enabled disabled and non-disabled children to regularly attend play sessions together. The remaining three projects had either chosen the ‘separate provision’ approach (as described earlier) or did not have disabled children attending the open space project. However, within the projects that offered ‘provision together’ the extent to which children played together or alongside each other varied and was influenced by a number of factors, like individual children’s impairments, the project atmosphere, the resources available and project workers ability to facilitate social interaction.

Projects generally reported that disabled and non-disabled children mixed and played together. This was confirmed by project visits where children were observed playing and interacting, although some disabled children seemed to interact more with adults than other children. Projects that were flexible in their approach to play and provided a range of activities were more likely to successfully include disabled and non-disabled children in play, as the flexibility allowed children to opt in and out of games, activities and play if they felt like it. One boy on the Autistic Spectrum was, for example, observed withdrawing from a dancing game, but returning when the other children were playing parachute games.

Some projects offered resources and games that encouraged children to play together. A parachute, for example, allowed both very young children and children using wheelchairs to participate in social interactive games. Accessible double swings and tricycles also encouraged children to play together, while a bowling game with foam pins was observed to engage both disabled and non-disabled children.

A little boy [John who has special needs] is trying to cycle on a low hand-pedalled bike, he keeps rolling backwards into the wall, he is very determined and keeps going for a long

while, moving the bike away from the wall with his feet, but the ground is uneven so he can't cycle forward. After a while an older boy cycles pass, he signals to John if he wants to sit on the back of his tricycle, which John does. They ride back and forward in the playground a couple of times together. (*Observation notes*)

For some disabled children, especially those children with severe physical impairments and complex care needs, it was difficult to play alone or with other children. However, at the Hamilton centre the facilities available enabled disabled children with complex needs to enjoy sensory experiences. An eight year-old girl Asia [name changed] who attended their summer holiday scheme provides an illustrative example. Asia has complex communication and physical impairments. She was able to clap her hands, say her name and blow 'raspberry sounds', but she needed assistance to meet all her physical needs, such as eating and moving. While Asia was unable to play alone or together with other children, the project workers were able to offer stimulation by moving her between play resources like the sensory room, an accessible swing and by enabling her to be outside (which she apparently enjoyed), listen to music and touch toys. Staff reported that Asia communicated by crying when unhappy and by clapping her hands when content. On the day of the project visit Asia was observed clapping her hands and furthermore did not seem upset or bothered by the noises of other children playing. Project workers highlighted that one of the benefits for children like Asia attending the play scheme was the extra attention she received from project staff, which enabled her to benefit from sensory experiences.

However, the majority of children attending the play projects with less severe impairments and could generally play alone or together with other children when offered suitable play opportunities. Also at Hamilton Community and Children's Centre:

A playworker gets a tray of water for a disabled boy and they sit together. The boy is playing with a plastic snake in the water. The playworker gives him pasta shapes that dissolve in the water. The boy is playing very intensively with his hands in the water feeling the pasta shapes. Another boy joins them he is also playing with a plastic snake in the water and feeling the pasta. After about 10 minutes the tray falls on the floor and there is pasta and water all over the floor. The playworker doesn't seem to mind and just cleans it up [...] The boy's trousers are soaked and someone changes his clothes. (*Observation notes*)

While some children who did not know each other prior to meeting at the project would immediately play together, many playworkers highlighted that the longer children spent getting to know each other and the project the more likely they were to interact and play together. This was especially the case for disabled children, as here at Sandstone Family Centre:

You see them interacting much more with each other. That has happened over the past couple of months, they used to be here and be very happy and occupied, but singular, on their own, but now they are interacting a lot more with each other. They have become friends with each other (*Play coordinator*)

Regularly attending the same play scheme or after school club made children more familiar and confident with the other children, the play workers and the routine of the play setting, which

encouraged disabled and non-disabled children to play together. However, at one project the parent of a disabled child explained that the frequency of the provision (once a month) made it difficult for friendships to develop because each time could feel like the first time.

8.4.1 Meeting and making friends

The opportunity to play with friends and to make new friends was very important to children at projects involved in this evaluation. Many children said that they appreciated having a space where they could meet and be with their friends. This was especially the case in school-based projects where children attended the same school, but may have had limited opportunities to socialise and play with their friends during the day. Children who attended community-based projects were more likely to highlight that playing and meeting *new* friends were important to them.

The best bit about the club is meeting new people and talking to [name of playworker] about me being bullied at school. (*Child's diary entry*)

[I come here because] I wanted new friends. I've already made one. (*Child attending holiday scheme*)

Parents were asked whether their children had made any friends while attending the project. Overall 75 per cent of parents (100 parents answered the question) said their child had made friends. This percentage rose to 85 per cent for non-disabled children, but fell to 58 per cent for disabled children. One reason for this difference was that many parents of disabled children did not know or were unsure whether their child had made any friends or not.

While many parents and children said that children were meeting or making new friends, the evaluators were unable to clarify to what extent such friendships only exist within the play scheme or whether children also play together outside the project. A few parents of disabled children interviewed for the evaluation, said that their child did not see friends from the play project outside the play setting, mainly due to issues such as distance and time constraints. On the other hand, one mother explained that through the project her daughter had made a new friend with who she had started sharing a taxi to school. However, even where friendships were not sustained outside the play project, making connections and building relationships appeared to be crucial to the experience of inclusive play.

Inclusive play appeared to make children more aware of other children's needs. None of the projects reported any incidents of name calling, negative attitudes or bullying between disabled and non-disabled children. (At a few projects, such as Play Rebels and the mainstream after school club at Sandstone Family Centre, where no disabled children attended, a few non-disabled children were observed calling each other names and fighting). However, what some projects did report was that non-disabled children showed a curious interest in disabled children, which led them to ask questions like 'why can this boy not walk?' or 'what happened to him?' On such occasions, project staff were required to handle the situation sensitively, but also to answer any questions accurately. Talking openly about disabilities allowed children to develop tolerance of differences and to increase their considerations of other children's needs. One project highlighted that

although children were more aware of their differences, as a result of attending the same play scheme their awareness seemed more subconscious than conscious:

They are much more aware, but at the same time they're not aware [...] I mean they do take [the impairment] into account because they assist each other, but it seems to be much more subconscious than conscious in the way that they deal with each other. I think they are a lot more aware of people's differences, but without noticing they are actually different ... *(Play coordinator)*

A support worker with the Inclusive Play Service highlighted that the play scheme regularly organised for children to bring toys from home to the after school club. She highlighted that for the non-disabled children it had been an eye opener to see that John (name changed), a boy with special needs attending the after school club, had the same toys as them:

They [the non-disabled children] haven't seemed to appreciate he's going to have mainstream toys, the same toys as they've got [...] That just seemed to bring down loads of barriers [...] 'John's got that, I wonder if John got this game', its something for them to speak to him about that's not prompted. *(Support worker)*

The importance of mixing and learning about other children was something that many parents highlighted.

[...] although my child does not have a disability it is good for him to see children who have disabilities and to understand their difficulties. *(Parent of non-disabled child)*

[...] it's good for him to be with children that are normal. He spends all day at school with children with special needs. *(Parent of disabled child)*

Inclusive play provided children with opportunities to build relationships and make connections with other children.

Summary of key findings:

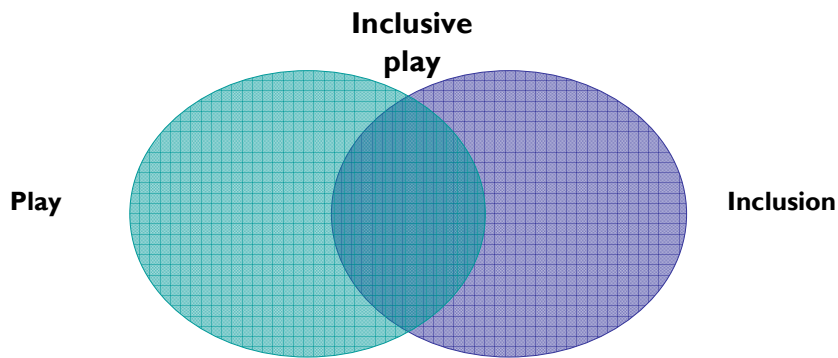
- The opportunity to play with friends and to making new friends was very important for children involved in this evaluation. Play projects offered opportunities for disabled children to play with and get to know children in their local community.
- Two projects in this evaluation adapted the 'separate provision' model. While this model did not encourage disabled and non-disabled children to play together, it did allow projects to extend provision and fill gaps by meeting the needs of disabled children, who would otherwise have had limited play opportunities.
- The extend to which children played together or alongside each other within the 'provision together' model, varied and was influenced by factors such as individual children's impairments, the project atmosphere, the facilities available and staff skills in facilitating children's interaction.

- Increased awareness and acceptance of different needs was clearly demonstrated by children and parents attending inclusive play projects.
- Projects that were flexible in their approach to play and provided a range of activities were more likely to successfully include disabled children and non-disabled children together in play.
- The longer disabled and non-disabled children spent getting to know each other and the project, the more likely they were to interact and play together.
- The evaluation was unable to examine the longer term impact of their experience of an inclusive play provision on children's friendships and relationships beyond the projects.

9. Concluding points

- A single overarching definition of what is meant by 'inclusion' did not emerge during this evaluation. Asking projects to define inclusion generated a range of inter-locking concepts and characteristics, and sometimes highlighted contradictory approaches to inclusion. Projects described both 'separate provision' (which fills gaps and extends provision for disabled children) and 'provision together' (which enable disabled and non-disabled children to play together), as inclusion. Further debate about how best to address the play needs of disabled children both within the play sector, and across the play and disability fields, is clearly required. It is hoped that this evaluation will encourage such.
- The number of disabled children accessing play services increased during the Better Play funding.
- The longer disabled and non-disabled children spent getting to know each other and the project, the more likely they were to interact and play together.
- The main difficulties projects experienced when developing inclusive play services, were access and transport, recruiting skilled staff and attitudinal barriers.
- The expertise and confidence of staff played an important role in supporting and facilitating inclusive play. The fact that projects were committed to inclusion did not necessarily mean that disabled children and non-disabled children played together, unless project workers were able to create a supportive atmosphere that encouraged interaction. Staff capacity and skill were required in relation to play in general and inclusive play in particular.
- The majority of projects provided services that allowed disabled and non-disabled children to interact with each other ('provision together'). In addition, 60 per cent of projects were successful in increasing the number of disabled and non-disabled children who played together.
- The background of projects (in terms of staff experiences and qualifications) affected projects approach to play. Projects with a largely educational background (educationally trained staff or who largely provided educational services) tended to adopt a more structured approach to activities, and offered fewer opportunities for free play. While projects with a playwork background (trained playworkers or with a background in providing play to children) tended to provide fewer structured activities, take a less structured approach and encouraged children to engage in free play.
- Attitudes towards balancing protection with challenging play varied between projects depending on staff experiences, background and qualifications. Projects that employed staff with a playwork background were more likely to encourage and allow children to engage in challenging play, than projects with an educational background.
- Projects that were flexible in their approach to play and provided a range of accessible activities were more likely to successfully include disabled children and non-disabled children together in play.

- Inclusion and play do not necessarily coincide. The projects funded during the Better Play programme third round included a multitude of organisations, such as leisure and community centres, disability and play organisations developing inclusive play. Consequently, the relationship between play and inclusion varied. Some projects provided high quality play, but were not inclusive (in terms of children playing together), while other projects were inclusive, but did not necessarily enable children to 'play'⁴. A few projects, which had experience and staff expertise in relation to both play *and* inclusion, were able to provide inclusive play.



⁴ 'Play is freely chosen, personally directed, intrinsically motivated behaviour that actively engages the child' (National Playing Fields Association, 2000: 6)

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Appendix A: Methods used with children

1. Methods used by evaluators

All group games and individual child engagement with researchers was optional and verbal consent was sort from the children before involving them in activities. The activities were generally recorded by the researcher taking notes.

Spinner Game

A circular 'spinner' was designed with an arrow in the centre which could be flicked. Five questions about the play project made up the various sections that the arrow could land on (for example, *something you like to do at the play group, something you've done that's new at the play group.*) The researcher either approached the children with the spinner while they were playing (where this would not stop the activity that children were taking part in), or arranged small groups of children who took turn in spinning the arrow and answering the questions. Children could spin as many times as they wished to. When a child wished to they could spin again rather than answer the question. At a number of play projects after being introduced by a researcher this activity was led by a child amongst their peers and the researcher noted responses.

Chatterbox

A chatterbox game (a folded piece of paper decorated with number and colours) was designed with eight possible questions for children to answer including for example: *'Tell me one thing about this place', 'What are the rules here?'* This method was also conducted in various ways at each project, including engaging with individual children during appropriate activities, carrying out the activity in small groups and children leading the activity with their peers whilst the researcher noted responses. At many projects a child would take over the activity and ask their peers questions, while the researcher took notes. Many children also began to produce and decorate their own chatterbox.

The chatterbox and the spinner game were very successful with children at most play sessions, as they were interactive, flexible and fun. The games could be conducted with individual or groups of children, indoor or ourdoor, and could be played while children engaged with, for example, arts activities. In terms of gathering data, the games essentially formed a five or eight questions interview.

Parachute Game

While a group of children stand in a circle holding the edges of a parachute the researcher said statements about their experiences at the play project such as *'I always have fun at the play project.'* The children who agreed with the statement were invited to run under the parachute and those that did not agree to hold of the parachute sides. The children were then asked why they agreed/didn't agree with the statement. This required one researcher to facilitate the group and one researcher to note down responses.

Acting out favourite activity

In a group children were asked to mime their favourite activity at the play project and show these to the other children. The other children had to try and guess what activity was being mimed. When the children had guessed the activity they were invited, if it was also their favourite activity or game, to sit next to the child miming. This required one researcher to facilitate the group and one researcher to note down responses.

Story Board

Using a large sheet of wallpaper and people/objects ready to stick on, children were asked to make up a story with the title 'The new boy's first day at [name of project]'. Five main headings were provided (e.g. *Who is the child? Where do they go at the project? What happens at the end of the play session?*). Children were asked to develop a story including these headings by writing, drawing, sticking pictures on or telling the researcher what to write. This method required one researcher to facilitate.

Helping Hands

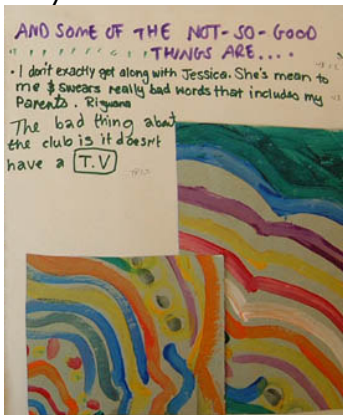
Children were asked to draw round their hand, then on each finger to put the name of someone who helps them to play at the project, starting with the most important. The children were then asked what the named people helps them with and why they are good at helping. This method enabled researchers to investigate children's familiarity and relationship with playworkers and other children. This method required one researcher to facilitate and take notes.

2. Methods used by projects

Activity record sheet

Playworkers were asked to fill out an activity record sheet after play sessions to give the researcher an overview of the variety of work undertaken by the project and to enable self evaluation. Playworkers answered questions, such as *Did you feel this activity was inclusive/accessible to all?* and *What feedback did you receive from children or parents in relation to activities or games that they had facilitated during the session.*

Diary/comment book



Projects were given a large sketch book for children and young people attending the project to use as a diary/comments book. Some projects invited children and parents to write in the book, while other projects stuck in photographs and examples of artwork done by children attending the play setting.

Cameras

Projects were given two disposable cameras for the children to take photos of things that they like and don't like so much about their project. The cameras were colour coded; the blue camera for photos of things the children like and the red camera for photos of things the children don't like so much. The intention was for playworkers or the evaluators to discuss the photographs with the children and producing a display with written explanations. However, due to a number of reasons, such as time constraints, different children attending than those had taken the photographs, this was a relatively unsuccessful method.

Friendship circles

The purpose of the friendship circles was to find out how children's relationships develop over time, while at the play project. Playworkers were asked to complete the circles with children at two different points in time and was meant for children to indicate who they currently consider important in their lives. (The child is in the centre, those people closest to them (really important) are named in the nearest circle, working out toward those people who are in their lives but are not so important in the largest circle). However, playworkers highlighted that the concept was often difficult for disabled and non-disabled children to understand, while others experienced that issues as children only attended for a short period, consequently none of the projects completed the circles twice with the same child.

